

THE ENDLESS JOURNEY: NARRATIVES OF MIGRANT TRAVEL FROM
CENTRAL AMERICA AND SOUTHERN MEXICO

by

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(Under the Direction of Nicolás Lucero)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines narratives about the experiences of Central American and southern Mexican migrant travelers going north to seek work or sanctuary in the United States. This study looks at how the multiple issues that migrant travelers face are narrated in memoirs and testimonial literature, novels, and films from Central American, Mexican, and Latinx authors. It looks at how the theories of travel literature can illuminate the specificity of migrant travel. There are key categories of travel narratives that must be identified and redefined to accommodate the distinctive characteristics of this type of travel. These include the chronotopes of the road, the crisis-laden threshold moments, the circularity and notion of homecoming implied in the structure of travel, the dynamics of gain and loss, and the reformulation of conventional ideas of landscape and narration. Additionally, the economics of travel must be adapted to account for a non-traditional social structure among the travelers. The questions posed in this analysis are highly relevant for not only the literature within this investigation, but as a lens for looking at similar narratives of migration trajectories in the literatures of the global south. The analysis in this study covers all or parts of multiple works. The primary novels

consist of: Mario Bencastro's *Odisea del Norte (Odyssey to the North)*; Juan B. Escobar Parada's *El viaje a la tierra prometida*; Graciela Limon's *The River Flows North*; Roberto Quesada's *Nunca entres por Miami (Never through Miami)*; and Luis Alberto Urrea's *Into the Beautiful North*. Films include: Pedro Ultreras's *La bestia = The Beast* and Gregory Nava's *El Norte*. The memoirs of Cedric Calderón, *Contrabando humano en las Californias* and *Contrabando humano en la frontera*, are also incorporated.

INDEX WORDS: Central America; Mexico; Travel in literature; Travel and migration; Border crossing; US-Mexico border region; Mexico-Guatemala border region; Death in literature; Deserts in literature; Rivers in literature; Homecoming; Chronotopes; Migration studies; Latinx Studies; Films; Novels; Memoirs

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2018

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December 2018

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to everyone who doubts: You *can* do it. It *is* worthwhile. Even if you are the only one who cares, *it matters*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the members of my dissertation committee for their guidance throughout my studies as both a masters and doctoral student in the department. Dr. Lesley Feracho has kindly served on the committees for both my M.A. thesis and this dissertation—thanks for all your yeoman duty. Dr. Dana Bultman, thanks for always reminding me to just write even when I thought I had no time to do it. To my major professor, Dr. Nicolás Lucero, thanks for suggesting that my class paper could be turned into a larger project. I sincerely appreciate for all your encouragement and guidance throughout this process. Finally, thanks to all of the committee members for their patience with me—know I’ve taken a long time!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW	1
Central American Migration - Early	3
Central American Migration - Modern	10
Why Look at Travel as the Theoretical Frame?	17
Other Theoretical Perspectives on Travel	26
Publication History of Narratives about Travel to the United States	34
Structure of This Study	46
2 DOORS, PASSPORTS, AND MONEY IN MIGRANT TRAVEL	
NARRATIVES: “EL TRUEQUE Y LA MOVIDA VAN UNIDAS”	49
Doors, Threshold Events, and the Psychology of the Migrant Traveler	51
History and Economy of Passports and Visas	66
Money, Papers, Anxiety, and Migrant Travel Narration	72
Money, Money Everywhere!	102
3 DESERTS, TUNNELS, RIVERS: THE LANDSCAPES OF CLANDESTINE	
CROSSING	108
Detours, Clandestinity, and the Importance of Travesía	113

	Ghosts in the Desert	116
	From Desert Death to Future Life: Pregnant Migrant Travelers	129
	If You Cannot Go Over, Go Under: Pipes and Tunnels	140
	Crossing, Re-Crossing, and Frustrating Double-Crossing: Rivers and Migrant Travelers.....	151
4	ENDINGS OF MIGRANT TRAVEL: UNCERTAINTY, CIRCULARITY, DEATH.....	167
	The Beast: Mexico’s Train of Death.....	168
	From Prison to Prison: Migration and the Circularity of Travel	173
	Detention as Kafkaesque Odyssey to Nowhere	184
	The Desert and the Wheel.....	208
	Ambiguous Homecomings and Endings.....	215
5	WHERE HAS TRAVEL TAKEN US? WHERE CAN WE GO FROM HERE?	222
	REFERENCES	235
	Works Cited	235
	Works Consulted.....	255

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: “America’s Killing Ground”	166

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The American Dream. The Promised Land. El norte! In 1931, James Adams described the lure of the United States as an “*American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (404, italics in original). The draw of the United States as a place of opportunity and advancement has been as strong for the peoples of Latin America as it has been for others around the world. In his 2011 study *Hispanic Immigrant Literature: El sueño del retorno*, Nicolás Kanellos wrote, “one of the most important themes in Hispanic literature is migration” (1). He concentrated on literature that recounts the life of the immigrant after arriving in the land of the American Dream. But then he revealed, “Unlike the literature of European immigrants to the United States, Hispanic immigrant literature generally does not support the myths of the American Dream and the melting pot” (7). As the subtitle of his analysis indicates, the dream of many Hispanic immigrants is to return to their places of origin.

Return is also a traditional component of literature about travel. Accounts by travelers tend to be composed after returning to the authors’ home countries, thus conveying the sense of a round-trip—a leaving and a returning. The characters in the literature of Kanellos’s study have only completed half of that journey. Indeed, he noted that there is an “underlying premise of immigrant literature: the return to the patria” (8). He emphasized that the authors of the works he defined as immigrant literature (9) wrote

in their native language (i.e., Spanish) in order to preserve the language, culture and “loyalty to the homeland” (8). The plan is always to return to the country of origin. The reality seems to be that the literature he discussed is about migratory people rather than true immigrants to the United States—they are not looking for permanent residence.¹

Another group of migratory people who have been portrayed as a major topic in the mass media over a number of years are undocumented Hispanic workers in the United States. Sergio Arau’s 2004 film *A Day Without a Mexican* demonstrated the assumption on the part of many North American officials, and much of the public at-large, that all undocumented Hispanics working in the United States are from Mexico. However, that belief is very far from the reality. (Part of the irony of this film is that not only are the disappearing “Mexicans” not just from Mexico, some are not even Hispanic!) Despite the ill-informed notions that the film satirizes, many undocumented workers come from far to the south of Mexico, including the countries of Central America and even South America. They journey for weeks and months to reach a place (El Norte!) where they have imagined opportunities that will improve their lives. It is the literature about the travels of this group of people that is the center of my study.

Unlike the literature in Kanellos’s investigation that addresses the myths and realities of the American Dream for Latinos in the United States, I will be analyzing narratives from the perspective of peoples’ experiences during their journeys to get to the United States—their stories as people on the road, as travelers, as migrants, not as immigrants. While there is always the hope of a return trip to their homelands, I am

¹ *New Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language* defines immigrant as “a person who migrates into a country of which he is not a native for permanent residence” (479), whereas a migrant is one who moves or shifts from one place to another, sometimes periodically (605).

distinguishing the type of travel in these narratives from traditional travel literature. These are stories that occur during what I am calling “migrant travel.” It is travel that often has a strong economic component that emerges as part of the narrative, even when economic gain is not the original reason the traveler is on the road. Even more than in conventional travel literature, money plays a prominent part in these travel tales—sometimes openly and sometimes not. Before beginning my examination of these narratives, providing some context for the motivations that have set thousands of people on the road to the north is in order. A brief summary of some of the history of Central American countries and their commercial and political interactions with the United States will illustrate the environment of the travelers before their journeys north—an environment spawned through a backdrop of displacement.

Central American Migration - Early.

The travelers whose narratives are basis for this study come from the region that formed the Kingdom of Guatemala during the Spanish colonial period. Lynn V. Foster furnishes a very clear map of this region in *A Brief History of Central America*, revealing an area that encompassed Chiapas and the southern Yucatan Peninsula in the south of modern-day Mexico to the southern border of today’s Costa Rica (70). I note this only to point out that the modern concept of Central America as a political region (i.e., the idea that Central America begins below the southern border of Mexico and ends at the southern border of the Isthmus of Panama) is somewhat different from this historical setting—the setting that corresponds to the homelands of the travelers that are in the narratives used in this study. The indigenous groups of northern Central America

(primarily the Maya, but also the Lenca and some minor communities, from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) are ethnically, culturally, and economically linked to those in southern Mexico, especially Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, and Quintana Roo (Foster 13-38²).

While it is not my intent to analyze the travel tales in this study from any specific indigenous point of view, it is my hypothesis that there are historical associations within these groups and this region that form the foundation for the routes that twentieth- and twenty-first-century travelers eventually take. A perusal of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures* brings to light the significant role that migration, travel, and economic exchange played in the cultural interactions of the peoples of Mesoamerica, even before contact with Europeans. Carlos Martínez Marín states, “Migrations in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica appear to have been innumerable and frequent” (305). Dana Leibsohn points out that these “ancestral migrations” are recorded in the *Annals* of the communities (18), while Robert S. Carlsen specifically discusses *The Annals of the Kaqchikels*, noting that while they have been in the highlands of Guatemala since the pre-Columbian era, “most scholars cite the Campeche/Tabasco region of Mexico as being the actual source” of this group (85). Carlsen’s observation is but one indication of the long history of movement of the populations within the region. There are, of course, other indigenous origin stories that relate the mythic beginnings of the peoples of

² See especially the map on page 14 of her work.

Mesoamerica, the most well known being the *Popol Vuh*³ and the references to Aztlán as the place of origin for the Nahua peoples⁴.

Additionally, these origin stories can be viewed from the perspective of an exodus—large numbers of people moving from one area to another. Michel Graulich likens the adventures of indigenous deities found in works such as the *Popul Vuh* of the Quiché Maya to the “wanderings of the Tolec, the Aztec-Mexica, or the Quiché from their lands of origin to the promised lands” (283). Dennis Tedlock notes that the Quiché are depicted in the *Popul Vuh* as the first humans, and draws attention to their travels between Copán (in northern Honduras) and the Yucatán Peninsula (22). This underscores the notion that human movement throughout the region has an extensive history.

Another indigenous work that records the myths and histories of the peoples of the historical Central America is the *Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, a series of texts that relay religious, literary, scientific and historical knowledge of the Maya of the Yucatán Peninsula (Paxton 190; *Heaven* 1). In the introduction to his translated and fully annotated version of the *Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, Munro S. Edmonson convincingly argues that one of the most important pieces the reader must understand about the histories included in the various *Books of Chilam Balam* are the political power struggles in play at the time Europeans arrived in the region. The Priest or Spokesman (*chilam*) of the Jaguar (*balam*) “was expected to hold office for a full *katun* [a period of 7,200 days or about 20 years], and it was competition for this position of power, prestige, and profit that the *katun* histories are all about,” the *katun* histories being part of the

³ See, for example, articles by Tedlock, León-Portilla, and Carlsen in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*.

⁴ See articles by Lint-Sagarena, López Austin, and Taggart in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*.

combined *Books of Chilam Balam* (Heaven 4-9). The victorious Chilam Balam would be able to extract tribute from other nobles and from communities in the form of goods and labor or services, but the peasantry might choose to flee or hide to escape such exploitation (Heaven 39⁵; see also Berdan). This clearly shows an economic association to the migrant travel of the period. Laura Caso Barrera also emphasizes this point when she writes of “la sobreexplotación de la mano de obra indígena a través de tributos, repartimientos, servicios personales y ‘limosnas,’ lo que la convirtió en la causa principal de la movilidad indígena” (“the overexploitation of indigenous workers through tributes, redistribution, personal services and ‘alms,’ was the main cause of indigenous mobility”; 124).⁶ Given this context, it becomes clear that, at the time the Europeans appeared, the peoples living in southern Mexico and Central America already were quite familiar with the need to move in order to avoid being entangled in the disputes among powerful individuals or being exploited by the victor.

Europeans arrived on the peninsula during the *katun* 11 Ahau, a period of war (Heaven 41), and in the *Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* are referred as *los dzules*, an Hispanicized version of the Mayan *tz’ulob*⁷, or foreigners. In 1964, Demetrio Sodi Morales condensed and translated the story of “Los dzules” from the section of the *Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* that Edmonson presents as chapter 27: “The War Indemnity” (Heaven 143-149). Read in isolation from the rest of the *Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, Sodi Morales’s Spanish translation regarding *los dzules* is somewhat

⁵ See the sections in the *Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* for “4 Ahau” that describe the people being scattered: “The Second Chronicle” (Heaven 56-59), and “The Ending of Tribute at Chichen Itza” (Heaven 224).

⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, all the English translations included in this study are mine.

⁷ For *dzules*, see Demetrio Sodi Morales. For *tz’ulob*, see Edmonson lines 1604 (Heaven 108) and 2671 (Heaven 143).

confusing given the Maya timeline: “Quince veintenas de años antes de la llegada de los dzules, los itzaes se despersaron” (“Fifteen score years before the arrival of the foreigners, the Itza were scattered”; 33). The arrival of the Spaniard in the peninsula is dated to 1541, but the “quince veintenas de años” refers to 1241, the date when many of the religious and ceremonial centers in Yucatán were abandoned by the Itza who were the dominant Maya group of the eastern part of the peninsula (Sodi Morales 33; *Heaven 2*). The Spanish translation goes on to indicate that the spirit of the Itza “no quiso a los dzules ni a su cristianismo” and that they would not pay tribute to the foreigners (“Did not want the foreigners or their Christianity”; Sodi Morales 34). As a result, everything that had been good was destroyed—“vinieron los dzules y todo lo deshicieron” (Sodi Morales 34). The Itza Maya obstinately reject Christianity and the rest of the Maya are disconnected from their former gods and cultural anchors as the Spanish despoil the region causing bitterness among the people (Sodi Morales 35). Sodi Morales presents this version as a lamentation over the extinction of the Maya culture (see his note 11, 34), but one must keep in mind the larger historical context.

Since Sodi Morales’s version of “Los dzules” stands in isolation from the rest of the *Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, it is not clear exactly who is writing this chronicle. Edmonson’s 1986 translation and analysis, however, gives details that help clarify the situation. As noted above, the Itza were from the eastern part of the peninsula, whereas the Xiu were in the west (*Heaven 2*). Also remembering that the *katun* associated with this tale, 11 Ahau, is a cycle of conflict and war among the Maya, Edmonson makes clear that it must be the Xiu who wrote this chronicle: “The Xiu saw prompt conversion [to Christianity] as a way of making the Spanish their allies against

the still pagan Itza” (*Heaven* 3). During the period the chronicle describes, the Itza were still in contention with the Xiu to hold the highest position of power, but the Itza resisted the foreign influences (*Heaven* 40-44). Placed in context with the rest of the *Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* as translated by Edmonson, the history of the persecution of the Maya by *los dzules* as presented by Sodi Morales becomes more of a tale about the internecine struggle for power and blame for the consequences when both sides lose to the more powerful foreigners, thus weakening the sense of mourning cultural loss.

According to Edmonson, the episode is a review of

the history of the Spanish conquest and demanding an end to the Spanish tribute in accordance with the treaty of 1543. The Spanish are blamed for tribute, hangings, plague, and the destruction of 13 cities [...]. The Itza are blamed for continuing to oppose Christianity, thus giving the Spanish a pretext for continuing to punish the innocent Xiu along with the guilty Itza. (*Heaven* 44)

One has to grant Sodi Morales some dispensation, however, given that he must have been working from a source other than the manuscript Edmonson used, which was only rediscovered in 1968 and now resides in the Princeton University Library (Edmonson 139).

The point of this rather extensive aside into indigenous Central American literature is twofold: first, the common people living in the area, both before the Spanish arrived and during the colonial period, were familiar with powerful people and groups competing for supremacy; and, second, one technique the commoners used to resist exploitative authority and to survive was to disperse. In other words, a moving away—a migration, an exodus—from dominant or especially oppressive agencies has a lengthy

history in Central America. It is clear that there is no easy generalization for the complexity of the power relationships that have governed the lives of the peoples in the region, both before and after the appearance of Europeans. Would “los dzules” have been able to obtain control over the region quite so quickly had they not found existing rifts among the ruling classes? How different or similar are the effects on the common people of the rivalries between centralized governing authorities (whether indigenous, national or foreign) and rural or peripheral groups? In other words, were colonial rulers in central Mexico (or Spain) inherently different from a local Chilam Balam? Has the spread of foreign influences and businesses in the region during modern times fundamentally changed the need for the people to flow from one region to another to avoid exploitation at the hands of rulers? The Spaniards arrived in an era of conflict. Periods of struggle and civil war recur throughout Central American history, with resultant dislocations of the residents. Given all of the above, there appears to be extensive historical evidence of movement and migration in the region. In this movement, the routes and paths are established that later wanderers take, especially modern travelers seeking a better life or a promised land. A comprehensive inquiry regarding the notion of displacement, as an essential element in the migrations described in the legends of the indigenous groups, would be a worthwhile future project. Additionally, more research into what happens when drug and human trafficking enter into the migratory model would support some of the themes that appear in the narratives included in this study.

Central American Migration - Modern.

Population movement in Central America during the colonial and early independence periods tended to be minimal. For example, in *The Contemporary History of Latin America*, Tulio Halperín Donghi noted the rural to urban migration in parts of Mexico where subsistence farmers were pushed off their properties to make way for the expansion of export crops such as sugar (9-10). Much of Central America is too mountainous for this type of agriculture. Given that the landscape was not suitable for the planting of cash crops, indigenous groups were able to remain on their lands. The situation changed after the middle of the nineteenth century, however, when investment in export commodities such as coffee and bananas shifted economic control of the land used for these products from local to foreign entities, many of which were based in the United States (158-159). This economic shift corresponded with increased North American political and diplomatic involvement in the region as well, especially with regard to shipping and transportation. Halperín Donghi points out that shipping magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt financed William Walker's invasion of Nicaragua in an attempt to dominate the transportation routes for people and goods between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.⁸ He goes on to say "these transitory meddlings were mere shadows of the sustained twentieth-century interventions that would make Central America a region only nominally independent of the United States" (143).⁹ While Halperín Donghi may

⁸ For more on William Walker, see Foster (167-168); Stephen Dando-Collins, *Tycoon's War*; José Dolores Gámez, *La guerra nacional*. For more on filibusters in general, see Charles H. Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny*.

⁹ For more information on the history and political situation in Central America during the nineteenth century, see the classic works by Lester D. Langley, *Struggle for the American Mediterranean*; and with Thomas Schoonover, *The Banana Men*. For a Central American perspective, see Víctor H. Acuña Ortega's *Centroamérica*.

characterize the actions of North American based businessmen as “transitory,” these agents were beginning to take advantage of the historical position of the United States as introduced in the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, laying the foundations for the future in Central America.

In the modern era, Manuel Angel Castillo of the Colegio de México has noted “[el] carácter histórico, básicamente intrarregional, de la movilidad poblacional de los nacionales de los países centroamericanos” (“the historical, basically intra-regional, character of population mobility among the citizens of Central American countries”; 27). Lisa García Bedolla, in her 2014 edition of *Latino Politics*, also indicates that historically “there has always been migration between the countries of Central America” (219), particularly in the Mayan areas of southern Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, harkening back to the pre-Columbian and early colonial periods described above. Seasonal migrant laborers freely moved about the region from post-independence until the unrest of the 1970s, leading to what García Bedolla describes as “both economic and political dislocations” and meaning that “the migrants were compelled to choose less traditional destinations” (219). In other words, the civil turmoil throughout Central America during that period brought about a significant shift in the destinations for migrant laborers seeking employment and safety. Castillo also looks at the various elements that at the end of the 1990s were at the core of “la movilidad extrarregional de los centroamericanos” (“the extra-regional mobility of Central Americans”; 27-28). The situation as presented by both Castillo and García Bedolla prompts the questions: what led to the unrest, and what were the new destinations?

Again, the answers to these questions have historical roots, found especially in the development and application of the Monroe Doctrine, which has been invoked repeatedly by the United States to intervene in the affairs of countries in the western hemisphere. William Walker's invasions of both Mexico and Nicaragua, while not officially sanctioned through the United States government, were inspired by the Doctrine. The actions of Theodore Roosevelt near the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century provide more key examples of United States interventions. As the Assistant Secretary of the Navy in 1897, Roosevelt pressed for United States involvement in Cuba to reinforce the Doctrine (Brands 310-312). As President in 1904, Roosevelt subsequently issued a statement before the U.S. Congress regarding troop deployments to enforce the Doctrine. This statement, which has become known as the Roosevelt Corollary, specifically mentions Panama as one location where the United States took steps to influence regional events. Within the context of the document, the step infers military participation, as is historically supported by the employment of the gunboat USS *Nashville* in the episode Roosevelt references. These early incidents begin to establish the pattern García Bedolla notes "would also have important effects on Central American migration patterns and on US immigration policy toward those migrants" during the second half of the twentieth century (204).

Military involvement in Central America was also directly related to the economic maneuverings in the region by United States businesses, similar to Vanderbilt funding Walker's invasion of Nicaragua. The U.S. military's protection of the economic interests of the North American-based United Fruit Company provides more examples of their intervention throughout the first half of the twentieth century. An example is when

the U.S. Marines sent by President Teddy Roosevelt landed in Honduras in 1907 to protect United Fruit's business interests during an attempted coup. Foster observes that "the U.S. intervened six times in Honduran political affairs" between 1911 and 1925, often as a result of rival banana companies instigating conflict to gain economic advantages (194). García Bedolla traces similar interventions in Guatemala on behalf of United Fruit beginning in 1904 (212-215). She draws attention to the fact that by 1944 United Fruit owned 42 percent of the land in Guatemala, and also owned all of the ports, thus controlling export tariffs (213). The concentration of property in foreign hands meant that by 1945 "only 10 percent of the country's land was available for 90 percent of the population to cultivate" (214). Exacerbating this situation was the fact that 85 percent of the land owned by United Fruit was left uncultivated, thus becoming the target of Guatemala's 1952 Agrarian Land Reform Law, which was designed to fulfill President Jacobo Arbenz's campaign promise "to redistribute the country's idle land" (Barry and Preusch 227).

It was evident that there would be severe negative impact for United Fruit through Guatemala's attempt at land reform legislation to ease landlessness among its population and to alleviate the country's economic dependency on foreign sources (Barry and Preusch 227). However, United Fruit had several friends highly placed in the United States government—friends who were prepared to intercede. García Bedolla draws a very clear picture of the Eisenhower administration's undisputable ties to the firm:

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had been a senior partner at Sullivan and Cromwell, which was United Fruit's law firm and its principal source of advice on foreign affairs. His brother Allen Dulles, the head of the CIA, served on

United Fruit's board of directors. John Moors Cabot, the assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, was the brother of Thomas Dudley Cabot, former President of United Fruit. Ed Whitman, the company's top public relations officer, was married to Ann Whitman, President Eisenhower's private secretary. (215)

Barry and Preusch not only corroborate the potential for high-level US intervention that ultimately led to the CIA financed coup of 1954 in Guatemala, they confirm what seems to be a quid pro quo coming from US involvement: "General Walter Bedell Smith, a trusted adviser of Eisenhower and former CIA director, oversaw the destabilization of the Arbenz administration and then later joined the board of United Fruit" (228). This one episode exposes only a fraction of the complicity that the United States government holds for helping to create the circumstances that would later lead so many Central Americans to take to the road seeking a more stable life.¹⁰

By the mid-twentieth century, Latin American military leaders began to see themselves as sentinels "against godless communism" to use Halperín Donghi's descriptive phrase (299). This was especially true in Central America given its proximity to Cuba, making the region a natural location for both pro- and anti-communist influences that affected the social and economic atmosphere of the times (Halperín Donghi 323; Foster 212-219). Barry and Preusch devote an entire chapter to the "Militarization of Central America" (83-123) by United States administrations from

¹⁰ Halperín Donghi describes the 1954 Guatemalan intervention "the continuation of a long story of rapacious aggression" (257). In order to fully understand the complex and intimate relationships among all of the players, I highly recommend a full reading of the section about Guatemala in Barry and Preusch. See also *The Declassified Eisenhower* by Blanche Wiesen Cook.

Kennedy to Reagan, which was a direct result of the Cuban Revolution. They outline the business advantages for the United States to sell arms and equipment to Central American regimes, as well as the specialized training Central American military leaders received from U.S. armed forces beginning in the mid-1940s through the 1980s (Barry and Preusch 85-95). While there is a significant body of work regarding the vile environment that grew out of the training Latin America leaders received at places such as the U.S. Army School of the Americas, Halperín Donghi points out that “the defenders of U.S. counterinsurgency training make the contrary claim that it taught alternatives to torture, and it is scarcely credible, at any rate, to regard the use of torture in Latin America as necessarily an exotic import” (298).¹¹ In other words, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the history of brutality by government forces in many Latin American countries prior to any training provided by the United States. A relevant example is the 1932 massacre of peasants in El Salvador. Known as *La Matanza*, the killings were carried out by the Salvadoran military in order to replace a liberally inclined president, Arturo Araujo, with the conservative general Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, who would preserve the land holdings of the fewer than fifty families controlling the country (García Bedolla 206-207). By supporting and arming such repressive regimes in Central America, the United States unequivocally contributed to the violence that began to spread throughout the region by the late 1960s.

Landless and unemployed or underemployed, masses of people in all of these countries moved to urban areas within Central America, increasing tensions that resulted in violent outbreaks within the cities and leading to ever more aggressive reactions from

¹¹ Among the best works on the School of the Americas is Lesley Gill’s 2004 title by the same name.

the militarized governments. The failure of the majority of Central American authorities to address the economic and social inequalities in the region led “massive numbers of Nicaraguans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans” to seek redress through revolution according to Foster (226). She further associates a U.S. contribution to the proliferating unrest: “As war enveloped Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, the U.S. made Honduras into its military headquarters and challenged the neutrality of Costa Rica. All of Central America would be caught up in a devastating vortex of war that persisted until the 1990s” (226). With the increasing violence in the region, the only escape route for both migrants and refugees fleeing the fighting was north to Mexico or the United States. Sarah J. Mahler observes that Mexico already had been a terminus for Central American migrants. She reveals the growth of legal Central American residents in Mexico increased from 14,000 in 1970s and 1980s to 59,000 by 1990. However, she also indicates that exact numbers are difficult to obtain and that information about the undocumented are undercounted (26-27). Mahler goes on to state that Mexico “is a major conduit for migrants heading to the United States and Canada” (27), noting that by the 1990s the United States was pressuring Mexico to bar the flow of these migrants. This pressure led to increasingly aggressive actions from corrupt sectors of Mexico’s police and military as is represented in some of the works included in this study. It also reveals the “double crossing” characteristic of the travelers in this literature: they must traverse the borders of both Mexico and the United States before they reach their goal.

Following the peace initiatives of the 1990s, many Central Americans returned to their home countries. Unfortunately, one of the legacies that they took with them was the gang association they or their children formed while living in the United States. Among

the most dangerous of these gangs is the Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS-13 or the Maras. Danny Pirtle asserts that the gang's origins start in El Salvador during the 1970s with the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation) group fighting against government troops. As Salvadorans fled to the United States, many ended up in Los Angeles, California, where they banded together to protect themselves from previously established gangs, forming "a *mara* or posse, which was composed of *salvatruchas* or 'street-tough Salvadorans,' becoming Mara Salvatrucha in the early 1980s" (478).¹² When United States officials began deporting convicted criminals during the 1990s, many MS-13 members were among them. The Maras and other gangster groups play a significant role, either directly in the action or as an impetus for Central American travelers to be on the road, in many of the migrant travel narratives.

Why Look at Travel as the Theoretical Frame?

One might well ask why look at this literature through the critical lens of travel. Tim Youngs in *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* provides one explanation when he writes, "Travelling is something we all do, on different scales, in one form or another. We all have stories of travel and they are of more than personal consequence" (1). It is this idea that the tales of travelers (as individuals or groups) have an impact on the wider human community that is foundational for the continuing relevance of literature featuring travel. Ironically, while the idea that traveling "is something we all do" is

¹² According to Tom Barker, "the number '13' shows allegiance to La Eme or the Mexican Mafia" (44). La Eme, the letter M, is the 13th letter of the alphabet, hence MS-13.

widely accepted, finding what exactly constitutes a “traveler” is elusive. What about the “traveler” is different from other people on the road?

In his essay “From Traveler to Tourist: The Lost Art of Travel,” Daniel Boorstin delves into how adventure has converted from a term that only referred to what happened to a traveling person by chance, to becoming a pre-designed commodity—“a contrived experience”—that is now an expected part of travel (78). He goes on to comment that few Americans (here he means from the United States of America) on the road are “travelers in the old sense of the word” (79). What is the “old sense” to which Boorstin refers? James Buzard in *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to Culture, 1800-1918*, hints at the essence of that old sense when he writes, “The traveller exhibits boldness and gritty endurance under all conditions” (2). He also specifies the relationship of “travel” to “travail” (2),¹³ then refers to the work of Boorstin and Paul Fussell’s *The Norton Book of Travel*, who both argue that the tourist is not a traveler since their experiences are too regulated (3). Buzard was clearly influenced by Boorstin’s etymology of travel:

The old English noun “travel” (in the sense of a journey) was originally the same word as “travail” (meaning “trouble,” “work,” or “torment”). And the word “travail,” in turn, seems to have been derived through the French, from a popular Latin or Common Romanitic word *trepalium*, which meant a three-staked instrument of torture. To journey—to “travail,” or (later) to travel—then was to

¹³ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* gives the etymology as coming from Middle English *travailen*, to toil, from Old French *travailler*, to travail (1366).

do something laborious or troublesome. The traveler was an active man at work.
(85)

James Clifford in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* has an essay, "Traveling Cultures," in which he writes, "The traveler, by definition, is someone who has the security and privilege to move about in relatively unconstrained ways" (34). Are the only defining characteristics of a traveler wealth and advantage? Buzard remarks on the "educative, acculturating function" of travel (6), and Youngs devotes a paragraph to how travel can broaden the mind of the traveler, but that it also reinforces cultural stereotypes and the perpetuation of "ethnocentrically superior attitudes" (12).

All of these writers spend some time distinguishing the true traveler from the mere tourist. Boorstin, for example, follows his explanation of "travel" by etymologically unpacking the word "tourist" and making it distinct from the word "traveler":

Our American dictionary now defines a tourist as "a person who makes a pleasure trip" or "a person who makes a tour, especially for pleasure." Significantly, too, the word "tour" in "tourist" was derived by back-formation from the Latin *tornus*, which in turn came from the Greek word for a tool describing a circle. The traveler, then, was working at something; the tourist was a pleasure-seeker. The traveler was active; he went strenuously in search of people, of adventure, of experience. The tourist is passive; he expects interesting things to happen to him. He goes "sight-seeing" (a word, by the way, which came in about the same time, with its first use recorded in 1847). He expects everything to be done to him and for him. (85)

Buzard nicely summarizes the etymological history that moved “tourist” (one who tours) from a neutral to a pejorative term, linking it to class privilege (1). To Buzard’s distinction that “the so-called traveller seeks authenticity through a difference from home” and will have a respect for those differences, Youngs responds that the texts of these “so-called” travelers often encouraged the residents of the countries visited to adopt “the lifestyle and values” of the traveler (60), thus undermining any authentic differentiation and any educational prospect that travel might provide.

The question remains as to how a “traveler” is different from an immigrant or a tourist or even a farmer going to market. All of these folks might keep some record of what happens (their adventures) while traveling: the farmer perhaps notes the differences in how much he earns when he sells in the Wednesday market in the village to the north versus the Saturday market in the city to the east; the tourist may be marking in a guidebook all the interesting sites visited; and the immigrant might compare the landscape in her new home to that of her native land. The migrant travelers in the narratives I am analyzing here are more akin to the traditional traveler than to the tourist (as these terms have been defined above), yet they still are a discernable category within the milieu of travel. Rather than being “in search of people, of adventure, of experience” as are Boorstin’s travelers, the migrant traveler is generally looking for security in the form of employment or safety. Their reasons for being on the road are not based on the choice to seek the unfamiliar, rather they fit Boorstin’s description of “[m]en who move because they are starved or frightened or oppressed [and] expect to be safer, better fed, and more free in the new place” (78). The traveler in the literature I am considering here will have something in common with all of these others on the road: the gritty,

adventurous traveler, the book-keeping farmer, the tourist, and the immigrant. Keep in mind that immigration is but one outcome of travel, therefore considering just the supposed target destination of travel would put an unnecessary limitation for deliberating about other outcomes of journeys.

While I am not looking at the specialty of immigration literature, I also should note that I am not necessarily looking at the genre considered as traditional travel literature or travel writing either. Youngs takes a very strict position concerning the definition of travel writing. He states, “travel writing consists of predominantly factual, first-person prose accounts of travels that have been undertaken by the author-narrator” (3). This hard line, however, is at variance with others who study travel writing. Youngs’ own earlier work with Peter Hulme “opted for a broad definition of travel writing” (*Cambridge Companion* 1). Peter Whitfield argues “travel writing has taken different forms in different ages, [...] but whose essential identity eludes final definition” (x). On one aspect of travel writing, however, there seems to be universal agreement: It was “created mainly by upper-class white men” (Zilcosky 9). This tradition contrasts with the works considered here in which the travelers are mostly working-class, non-Europeans, and often female.

Since I am not necessarily looking at the literature of traditional travelers or immigrants, what term could best be used to describe the people in the narratives I am including? The phrase most often associated with these travelers is “illegal immigrant.” I am specifically rejecting this term for two reasons: (1) the fact that immigration, and therefore being an immigrant, is not necessarily the reason these travelers are on the road;

(2) the often noted issue that activities, not people, may be illegal.¹⁴ Stephen Hiltner provides a good overview of several other terms that have been used in media coverage about people entering countries outside of the permitted channels. These terms include “unauthorized” and “undocumented,” but he notes that there are caveats for the use of either term, saying that undocumented “has a flavor of euphemism,” while unauthorized carries a “bureaucratic tone.” I have considered the expressions “clandestine” and “irregular” to style the traveling characters in these narratives, but this raises the same objection as “illegal” in that it describes the method of the activity rather than the people the characters represent. The plain term “traveler” might suffice for the characters, but is insufficient for distinguishing the literature about such travelers as I indicated above. These travelers are very clearly not tourists, thus eliminating that word. They are people on the move, which suggests the labels nomadic or diasporic. However, both of these expressions convey connotations unrelated to the travelers in my corpus. Diaspora retains a level of nostalgia for the homeland that is more closely related to the immigrant narratives included in Kanellos’s research discussed above. The concept of a nomadic traveler comes a little closer to the idea of one who travels a circuit, such as the temporary agricultural migrant workers in the United States or the former Bracero Program workers from Mexico. However, nomadic still maintains a more primitive or pastoral feel than would apply to many of the narratives from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These stories, though, do often emphasize the reasoning behind these transitory journeys, suggesting temporary migrant traveler as a useful phrase. Unfortunately, the temporary status often becomes permanent, either through an inability

¹⁴ See, for example, Paul Colford’s 2013 blog post for the Associated Press, and PICUM’s *Words Matter* website.

to return home due to socio-political circumstances, or due to the death of the traveler. Of course, there are also some of these migratory travelers who really do want to emigrate.

Having eliminated so many possible designations, I still must find an appropriate terminology to describe the characters and their activity. Consequently, I have settled on the terms “migrant travelers” and “migrant travel” to refer to the people and the type of travel undertaken in these narratives. The characters are migratory in their movement, which may be either circular or not, but they are not necessarily immigrants, as they may not intend to stay in the places to which they travel. As I suggested above, the migrant traveler has a hybrid quality that may combine a variety of traits drawn from the gritty and adventurous to the thrifty and economical. These travelers may have times of nostalgic associations to their homelands and instances of enlightening edification. They may boldly strike off on their own or be one of a group under another’s care.

Of course, these travelers are not the privileged individuals who partook in the conventional Grand Tour of Europe experience. Nevertheless, part of what is thought provoking about the narratives of these migrant travelers are the ways in which their stories parallel this type of planned travel, and the ways in which their tales diverge from it. All travelers must consider their mode of travel (by horse, by carriage, by foot, by train, by car, etc.), where they will stop to rest (inns, hotels, motels, homes of friends or acquaintances, tents, etc.) and refresh (taverns, restaurants, farms, carrying their own food, etc.), and where and how they will interact with people they meet along their routes (fellow travelers, taxi drivers, hoteliers, grocers, police, custom agents, etc.). These are the spaces and communities in which the events in the narratives of migrant travelers resemble those of typical travel tales. However, in the accounts of the migrant travelers I

am using in this study, there are significant differences from the usual Grand Tour style of travel. In most cases, the travelers will be undocumented with the result that their travel experiences possess a furtive and cautious quality not necessarily found in standard travel literature. The clandestine nature of migrant travel means they often must consort with criminals to obtain basic necessities during their trek. They are obliged to pay bribes to both their guides and/or to corrupt officials, leading to unexpected expenditures that cause them to have to borrow money from relatives or other travelers. The surreptitiousness that is an innate quality of migrant travel also causes constant deviations from their plans and routes. Such changes can produce (or sometimes prevent) sudden endings to their travel, leading to detention or death. Death on the Grand Tour was not unprecedented, but was very unlikely to be the result of the necessary avoidance of formal administrative control.

The narratives I will be discussing would not have appeared in Youngs' study, even had they fulfilled his narrow definition. He specifically "excludes oral narratives of travel and omits the unwritten stories of the impoverished and the persecuted whose journeys have a grim economic or political necessity" (11). Nevertheless, economic and political necessities are often the reasons migrant travelers are on the road. They do not have the privileges or the resources that afforded a leisurely journey for the writers of traditional travel literature. As a cynical twist, the privileges and resources that subsidized a Grand Tour style of travel undoubtedly were furnished through the labor of people similar to those who are now on treks due to need. Youngs does, however, raise the issue that there is a "connection between travel, empire, capitalism and racial ideologies" (9) all of which play into a study of travel. A particularly relevant example of this connection

is the 2008 edition of Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* in which she notes the "mass labor migration, from poor countries to richer ones and from country to city" (237).

Youngs, in another context, also comments on the multi-disciplinary scholarship that has "helped expose the ideological functions of travel narratives, especially in the ways that the texts construct 'race', gender, and landscape" (Hulme and Youngs, *Cambridge Companion* 8). John Zilcosky recognizes the "historical baggage" the term "travel" retains, and implies the use of supposedly more neutral terms such as "displacement" evade "politically aware, self-critical exploration" of the topic (9). James Clifford comments on the "historical taintedness" of the term "travel," noting "its associations with gendered, racial bodies, class privilege, specific means of conveyance, beaten paths, frontiers, documents, and the like" (39). He also finds that expressions such as displacement, migration, nomadism, and pilgrimage retain subtexts that inadvertently expose similar privileged and occasionally subversive associations for people on the move. He concludes, "There are, in any event, no neutral, uncontaminated terms or concepts." Examining travel as a medium for considering literature could be productive given the possibilities evident for a comparison of privileged versus non-privileged, European versus non-European, male versus female, and adult versus child perspectives that can be found in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century narratives of mobile communities in the Americas.

As with traditional travel literature, migrant travelers meet people along they way with whom they share experiences and exchange information. Some folks become traveling companions for all or parts of the journey, while others are just brief encounters

with individuals who then disappear from the tale. These meetings and exchanges at times seem insignificant to any particular narrative, but in the aggregate provide a window into the unpredictable and volatile quality of life on the road as a migrant traveler.

Other Theoretical Perspectives on Travel.

Lisa Colletta in her introduction to *The Legacy of the Grand Tour: New Essays on Travel Literature and Culture* comments on the long history of the journey as a literary topic (ix). Naturally, there is an equally long record of criticism about travel literature, which Colletta recognizes when she states that “the scholarship of travel literature is as capacious as the literary genre, and it often occurs as the subject of works from various theoretical perspectives” (x). There are several theoretical views that confirm the importance of applying a critical eye to journeys in narratives. Among these is the classic work of M. M. Bakhtin regarding how movement from one place to another—“the road” (*Dialogic* 98)—offers a specific structure to a narrative.¹⁵ Despite their age, Bakhtin’s commentaries still have good points to make about the organization of a narrative, especially with regard to the presentation of travel in both works of fiction and non-fiction. There are characteristic times and spaces during travel that allow for an examination of why the action, the characters, and the people they meet along the way are represented as they are in the text. Bakhtin gives “the name *chronotope* (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are

¹⁵ While Bakhtin’s original work was composed early in the twentieth century, factors such as being written in Russian, the disruptions of World War II, and the perils of the Stalin dictatorship contributed to it not being widely known until several decades later (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* xv).

artistically expressed in literature” (84). In other words, whatever happens to the characters in a narrative has both a length (time) and a location (space). As Bakhtin develops his argument regarding time in early European novels the significance of the chronotope of the road becomes apparent, especially “events [such] as meeting, separation, collision, escape and so forth” (120).

All of these are events that occur in the narratives I include in this study. Each chronotope presents obstacles and dangers, as well as opportunities and alternatives, for the migrant travelers. My intent here is to review Central American and southern Mexican narratives about migrant travel using some of travel writing’s major chronotopic elements. There are major chronotopic features taking place along the road that have great impact on the development of the storyline and that are productive for analyzing these narratives. What Bakhtin labels as a “threshold event” will guide the discussion regarding crossing of national borders or being stopped at documentation checkpoints. How one crosses the formal threshold, or avoids it, impacts the choices for transportation, the places where migrant travelers rest and refresh (sites that would correspond to hotels and restaurants in traditional travel literature), and who these travelers meet along the way. There are also particular topographies, especially rivers and deserts, comprising the thresholds for migrant travelers. All of these elements contribute to an essential scrutiny of the idea of what constitutes a journey’s end. The end of migrant travel is often ambiguous. Exactly when and where does the journey end? For some of the characters, the end of their journey is not the end of the travel narrative. Some people die along the way, yet those deaths usually have some bearing on the actions of other characters in any given tale. Even when the protagonists survive the trek, how do they know they have

reached the end of their journey, especially considering their often-irregular legal status? Given that detention is a very real possibility for these travelers, what role does jail play as a very specific chronotope in these narrations?

One of the ways to answer these questions is to look at them from the point of view of social anthropology. In “Traveling Cultures,” historian James Clifford questions some of the traditional methods of ethnographic or anthropologic observation of different cultures. He discusses the difficulties related to the distinctions between the observer and the observed (20), while also casting doubt on the validity of tying any culture to a specific location of observation (21-23). Consequently, the proposal surfaces to look at travel as an approach for contemplation of culture (24). This, of course, triggers a new set of problems, most significantly, when the racial and gender characteristics typically associated with travelers diverge from the norm of a Western European male. For example, sleeping accommodations in places such as hotels or motels (31-32) must be taken into account in a mixed group of male and female travelers. He poses one question that is intriguing to me and is relevant to the works included in my study: “What about all the travel that largely avoids the hotel, or motel, circuits? The travel encounters of someone moving from rural Guatemala or Mexico across the United States border” (33). These are not the “bourgeois travelers” that Clifford notes have a “host of servants, helpers, companions, guides, and bearers” (33). They are the people who would have been filling those roles.

Now there is a dilemma for Clifford. He asks, “Does the labor of these people count as ‘travel’? Clearly, a comparative cultural studies account would want to include them and their specific cosmopolitan viewpoints. But in order to do so, it would have to

thoroughly transform travel as a discourse and genre” (34). While I do not intend any comparative cultural study, I do intend to look at how the travel experiences of these lower and working class travelers differ from those of the aristocratic or bourgeois travelers who composed traditional travel narratives. Clifford’s question above is especially apt for the majority of the travelers in the narratives I have included: they are on the road specifically because it is their labor that they intend to sell at their destination. Clifford also seems to answer his own question when he notes that “travelers move about under strong cultural, political, and economic compulsions and that certain travelers are materially privileged, others oppressed. These specific circumstances are crucial determinations of the travel at issue” (35). He concludes that there is a need for better awareness about travel of what he refers to as “diaspora cultures” (36). I believe that my analysis of non-privileged migrant travel will be a step toward fulfilling this need.

Given the importance of the economic component underlying the reasons many of the travelers in my investigation are on the road, I am also applying the approach to travel provided by Georges Van Den Abbeele who suggests that travel is circular—one goes from a place called “home” and then returns (*Travel* xviii). As I noted above, however, return is not guaranteed due to the many dangers travelers encounter during a journey. There is also the possibility that a “homecoming” per se may happen in a location that is different from the point of origin of the journey—underscoring again the ambiguity of the concept of a journey’s end. Van Den Abbeele uses Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt’s 1765 article “Voyage” from the *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* to facilitate an analysis of the use of travel as a literary trope. Jaucourt

advances three categories of travel: grammar, commerce, and education (Van Den Abbeele *Travel* xiv-xv).

Van Den Abbeele discusses how these three form an economy of travel that express the possibilities of gain and loss as one moves away from and back to a starting point, or the “*oikos* (the Greek for ‘home’ from which is derived ‘economy’)” (*Travel* xviii). His insistence that “a home(land) must be posited from which one leaves on the journey and to which one hopes to return” underscores how an “economy of travel” must by definition be a circular journey (*Travel* xviii). He stresses that travel in general includes risks that in turn produce insecurity and anxiety (*Travel* xvi-xvii). It is possible to lose “not only one’s monetary assets but one’s very life or sanity” (*Travel* xvii). Other perils the travelers face in the narratives in my study are the possibility of abuse (especially sexual abuse), imprisonment, and/or deportation either to Mexico or to the country of origin (an acutely excruciating outcome for Central Americans in view of the distances they travel). All of these possible hazards produce very real apprehensions in each of these travelers, even in the best of circumstances.

The misgivings of migrant travelers clearly must be intensified when borders are encountered, especially if they lack official documents such as passports and visas. Encountering and crossing borders are central elements in all of the travel narratives included here. Consequently, the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza* are quite relevant. She remarks that the borderlands where she was raised are a “place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape” (19). Noting that these borderlands “are not particular to the Southwest,” she maintains that “dormant areas of consciousness” are

awakened through the uncomfortable interactions when two or more cultures bump into each other. Stressing the troubling aspects of border culture, Anzaldúa describes borders as being “set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*” (25, emphasis original). She goes on to differentiate the border (“a dividing line”) from the borderlands (“a vague and undetermined place [...] in a constant state of transition”). This distinction is remarkably important in relation to Central Americans considering that their movement north makes clear their status as outsiders even in Mexico where their expectation was for a familial reception. Their experiences in that country embody an extended transitional condition of the borderlands. In other words, all of Mexico is the borderlands for Central Americans. Finally, Anzaldúa gives a warning: “Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only ‘legitimate’ inhabitants are those in power” (25). Unfortunately, the powerful are often the perpetrators of the circumstances that set the travelers on the road in the first place.

These ideas blend well with the risks Van Den Abbeele associates as part of the economy of travel. Anzaldúa identifies the discomfort regarding “us” and “them” in the borderlands and the division between cultures that a border denotes, while Van Den Abbeele engages the notion of the power dynamics during travel, using the terms “same” and “other” with regard to people encountered during the journey (*Travel* xxv). He integrates the sense of home for the traveler when he comments about the perspectives for what establishes “same” (like the traveler) and “other” (not like the traveler), but does not consider what tensions might come from these distinctions when the traveler is culturally similar to the inhabitants of the regions traveled through. His point of reference for the traveler is “the white, the male, the European” (*Travel* xxv), but the travelers in

the works included here are mostly non-white and non-European, and often not male. They are traveling through regions of Central America and Mexico that are also predominantly non-white. It is not until the travelers reach the United States-Mexico border, Anzaldúa's traditional borderlands setting, where the customary clash of cultures is expected to occur. For the majority of the journey, however, the travelers are proceeding through territories that should be culturally familiar, yet are not, thus cultural clashes erupt in unexpected times and places. This reiterates my hypothesis that for Central Americans, the entire country of Mexico becomes a borderland in the sense posited by Anzaldúa. Which of the cultures, then, represents the "same," and which is the "other;" which is *us* and which is *them*?

An additional theoretical viewpoint that reinforces the lines of inquiry the amalgamation of Anzaldúa's and Van Den Abbeele's concepts raise can be found in the work of Mary Louise Pratt. Her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* introduces the term "'contact zone' [...] the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (8). All of the usual conditions Pratt lists would seem to inevitably lead to the prominent features that Anzaldúa discloses as central to her borderland home: hatred, anger, and exploitation. However, the "contact zone" where cultures come into conflict for the Central American traveler happens much farther south than Anzaldúa's homeland, and the exploitation begins much sooner than one might expect. Central Americans have to learn that they are "foreign" and "other" as soon as they enter Mexico—the "contact zone" for Central Americans begins at the southern Mexican

border, if not sooner, and continues into the United States. The language, foods and other cultural elements, especially in southern Mexico, should be similar to the home countries of the Central American travelers, but the connections are often just mismatched enough to be unnerving. If these travelers then find themselves under the control of guides, or *coyotes*, they often become isolated from anything that might be familiar. Once disconnected from customary settings, they become easy targets for exploitation and abuse. As a consequence, Mexico becomes a wide threshold to the United States.

One characteristic of a threshold, as I will discuss in a later chapter, is to serve as a barrier, which in turn slows or stops forward movement. Thus, when considering travel, one must take into account periods of immobility as well as mobility¹⁶—times when travelers are paused in their journeys. New theoretical perspectives that discuss immobility within mobility have appeared since the mid-2000s. In her 2005 article “Being En Route,” Susan Bibler Coutin notes that migrants “are defined by their mobility” (199). Yet examples she gleans from interviews with migrants presuppose immobility as well: hiding in compartments (197) or being smuggled in cars (199). Noelle Brigden and Cetta Mainwaring also explore the interaction of movement and stillness among migrants traveling clandestinely, noting that the periods of “stopping, waiting and containment” are expected during journeys that are inevitably fragmented (407, 415). However, they argue that the divisions of the long journey into “journeys within journeys” actually allows migrant travelers some agency that is not readily apparent if one only considers these individuals as victims of the whims of smugglers

¹⁶ Elana Zilberg’s discussion of the “dialectic of mobility and immobility” (3) is particularly relevant here given her study of the background to Salvadoran youth gangs and their flow between El Salvador and the United States.

(416). All of the travelers in the narratives studied here encounter intervals of immobility. Consequently, the concepts communicated in the “im/mobility” discourse are very important to my work.

Obviously, migrant travel can be assessed through a variety of methods given the range of theoretical viewpoints I have been discussing. The next question to address is when did the Central American and southern Mexican travel narratives begin to appear?

Publication History of Narratives about Travel to the United States.

During the last half of the twentieth century and the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century multiple novels and testimonial literature were published, highlighting the experiences of Latin Americans striving to grasp the American dream. Accounts of travel appear in various forms including written and oral testimonials, novels, films, and documentary works, both visual and oral. While the focus of works I will be including in my study center on the journeys of Central Americans and southern Mexicans as they attempt to reach this land of opportunities, I would like to acknowledge that the history of Mexicans and Mexican Americans is full of similar treks related to finding work. I will be referencing some of the literature that touches on the travel of these peoples because they pass through comparable territories. The experiences of Mexican American citizens of the United States as they travel through the agricultural circuit, for example, are depressingly similar to those of undocumented travelers and can provide another context for analysis about migrant travel.

Among the earliest works about Mexicans traveling to the United States to find work are by the Mexican author Luis Spota’s *Murieron a mitad del río* (1948) and

Mexican-American Emanuel J. Camarena's *Pancho: The Struggles of a Wetback in America* (1958). These two novels call attention to the lives and experiences of economic migrants, usually agricultural workers, from Mexico during the early twentieth century and are precursors to the titles I include in this study. As the title of Spota's novel indicates, dying in the middle of the river (in this case the Rio Bravo/Rio Grande between Texas and Mexico) is a very real possibility. The novel introduces many of the dilemmas migrant travelers encounter: mistreatment by both Mexicans and North Americans, robbery, severe injury, exposure to the elements, capture and detention by border patrols, and finally deportation. Camarena's novel, written in English, follows a similar pattern as Spota's. Both begin with a river crossing, the travelers find work, must continually try to evade capture, but detention eventually happens. The dream of a better life in the north is revealed to be nothing more than a fantasy by the end of both novels.

By 1976, Mexican American author Rolando Hinojosa was writing tales of *tejanos*, Mexican American descendants of the Mexicans that first settled what would eventually become Texas. Many of the characters in Hinojosa's fictional Texan county of Belken are migrant agricultural workers, whose experiences moving around the United States are akin to that of some of the travelers in the novels of Spota, Camarena, and others in this study. Sections of his *El condado de Belken: Klail City*, the 1994 revision of his *Klail City y sus alrededores* (1976) and *Generaciones y semblanzas* (1977), show that despite their legal status and citizenship, the Mexican American migrant workers in Hinojosa's works often have parallel experiences to those of the Central Americans and Mexicans in the novels I will be analyzing here.

Novels are not the only form in which the journey north is portrayed. Director Robert M. Young wrote and produced in 1977 a made-for-TV movie, *¡Alambrista!*, for the public television series from KCET, *Visions*. This is a tale of a Mexican farmer who goes north to find work that will pay better than the subsistence farming he does to try to feed his family. Film studies professor Charles Ramírez Berg wrote an insightful short history of *¡Alambrista!* He credits this piece with launching a decade of Chicano filmmaking that produced works such as Young's *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* and Gregory Nava's *El Norte* (which I will discuss later). It is noteworthy that Nava's film also has a television connection: 50 percent of the funding for the film came from the Public Broadcasting Service series *American Playhouse*. However, unlike *El Norte*, *¡Alambrista!* never had a national theatrical release and thus is much less well known (Ramírez Berg). Ramírez Berg's comments are based on a 2004 re-edited version. As with most of the works in this study, only the section the original broadcast version that concentrates on the journey to the United States is apropos to the topic. The 1977 version can be found in the University of Georgia Peabody Awards Archives.

The journey north often utilizes a *coyote*, someone who makes his or her living guiding others. Guatemalan Cedric Calderón R. first wrote of his journey north and how he eventually became a *coyote* in his 1978 autobiography *Contrabando humano en las Californias*. In 1983, a revised version appeared titled *Contrabando humano en la frontera: el sueño de los dólares: memorias de un coyote*, co-authored with journalist Héctor Gaitán. These two memoirs serve as models for events that transpire in most of the other works included here.

1983 also saw the release of Gregory Nava's film *El Norte*. This is the first film to highlight the underlying conditions in Guatemala (as well as other disrupted regions of Central America) that put thousands of people on the road north. The film has become a staple in high school Spanish courses. It tells the story of a brother and sister who flee their village to avoid persecution against the indigenous people there, and is divided into three parts, beginning in Guatemala and ending in the United States. The middle section, "Part Two: El coyote," is the most relevant for the study of one type of border crossing, but scenes at the end of the film are also significant for my work.

Helena María Viramontes included her short story "The Cariboo Cafe" in her collection *The Moths and Other Stories*, originally written in 1984 and published by Arte Público Press in 1985. It also has been included in multiple anthologies. The story highlights the constant vigilance of migrant travelers, who must maintain a minute-by-minute watchfulness in order to protect themselves from discovery and deportation. It is a particularly intriguing tale as the perspective shifts among the viewpoints of a child, a mother, and the owner of the cafe, all having demons they are battling.

While he focuses on Mexicans crossing the border into the United States, Ted Conover's 1987 *Coyotes: A Journey through the Secret World of America's Illegal Aliens* is the first book to apply a journalistic eye at the system of how undocumented people move to their destination. It is not one of the works I will be analyzing, but it provides context for this study.

There were several titles published during the 1990s that are applicable to the topic of travel, or that contain sections that are germane to the theme. Ramón "Tianguis" Pérez is an ethnic Zapotec from the Mexican state of Oaxaca. His *Diary of an*

Undocumented Immigrant (1991) is a testimonial of his travels. Oddly, the first version of his travels was a translation into English by Dick J. Reavis. It was only in 2003 that original Spanish account appeared titled *Diario de un mojado*. The book is divided into sections that reveal the author's route: "From Oaxaca to the Rio Grande," "From Houston to San Antonio," "From L.A to Oregon," and "Going Home." He notes that going north is customary in his village, Macuilianguis, where people have to emigrate to survive, tracing the tradition back to the 1940s when word of the *bracero* program reached them (*Diary* 12; *Diario* 6).

Costa Rican Miguel Salguero released the first edition of his novel *A la caza del coyote* in 1992 in Mexico, followed by a Costa Rican edition in 1993. The story revolves around how Rubier Barrantes, an orphan from the southern part of Costa Rica, would make 59 clandestine crossings into the United States, leading over 1,500 of his countrymen with him (1992, 18; 1993, 15).

Also appearing in 1993 was Mexican-American author Graciela Limon's first novel *In Search of Bernabé*. The novel was translated into Spanish and released in 1997. Set during the civil war years in El Salvador, the story is about two brothers, Lucio and Bernabé Delcano, fighting on opposite sides, and their mother (Luz) who is caught between them. While the bulk of the story is about the war, there are relevant parts of this novel that concentrate on the trip that Luz makes to the United States then back to El Salvador in her search for Bernabé.

Salvadoran author Mario Bencastro spent 1983 to 1998 writing *Odisea del norte*, a novel that spotlights multiple tales of Salvadorans who fled the war and ended up in various locations in the United States. The storylines jump among the viewpoints and

accounts of several characters, telling what they are doing to support and protect themselves within the United States, and reviewing their experiences along the road north. An English version of the novel was published by Arte Público Press in 1998 as *Odyssey to the North*, followed in 1999 by an edition in the original Spanish.

The first decade of the twenty-first century produced the majority of the works I will be using in this analysis. Mexican filmmaker Julio Aldana released his *Tres fronteras: cazadores de ilegales* in 2001. This is a politicized film with a strongly anti-Chicano angle, clearly critical of Latino Spanish-speaking U.S. Border Patrol agents. However, given that one of the undocumented travelers is a Salvadoran, the film fits the parameters for works that could be included in this study.

2002 was one of the most productive years for titles relevant to my topic. Honduran author Roberto Quesada's comic novel *Nunca entres por Miami* was published in Mexico in March. The English version *Never through Miami* was released in the United States later that year. Quesada takes a very different approach to the question of entering and staying in the United States than do many other authors. The main character is from the urban middle class as opposed to the agricultural or working classes. Also, he enters the United States openly, but overstays his visa, which is one of the principal ways migrant travelers fall into an illegal status. The author takes an unusually comic approach to this serious situation.

The novel that initiated this study also appeared in 2002—Salvadoran Juan B. Escobar Parada's *El viaje a la tierra prometida*. The story revolves around two women and two men who make the trip from El Salvador to the United States. These travelers represent young and old, male and female, middle class and poor, first-time travelers, and

veterans of successful and failed former ventures north. The novel also depicts the multiple obstacles placed in the path of people who would like to travel legally, but are prevented from doing so by bureaucratic policies.

Finally, in 2002 Alicia Alarcón, a Mexican journalist and radio personality in Southern California, published twenty-nine of the migration stories she had gathered through her radio program. While the majority of the tales in *La migra me hizo los mandados* are of travelers from Mexico, the collection also includes accounts of journeys from Peru, Colombia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador. An English version appeared in 2004 under the title *The Border Patrol Ate My Dust*.

As I indicated earlier, Mexico represents a double border-crossing encounter for Central Americans who must first get into Mexico crossing the border from Guatemala. They must then navigate through Mexico to the northern border and successfully cross into the United States. Two works relevant to this study were published in 2004 that examine vital issues that each of these borders pose for travelers. The novel *La Mara* by Mexican author Rafael Ramírez Heredia addresses the dangers posed to migrant travelers through Mexico by the Mara Salvatrucha gang. Most of the action takes place between Ciudad Tecún Umán (Guatemala) and Ciudad Hidalgo (Mexico) at the Suchiate River that divides the two countries, and is a major crossing point for Central Americans going north. The novel also highlights how corrupt government officials contribute to the perils travelers face. Screenwriter Diana Cardoso adapted the novel for the 2012 film *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas*, directed by Luis Mandoki.

The Devil's Highway: A True Story by Mexican-American author Luis Alberto Urrea is a journalistic recreation of the 1980 episode in which thirteen members of a

group of Salvadorans died in the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Pima County, Arizona after being abandoned by the *coyotes* leading them across the Sonoran Desert. This 2004 publication is the northern counterpart to *La Mara*, exposing the risks of endeavoring to cross border of Mexico into the United States.

In 2005, there appeared another novel and an account of the final tragedy that awaits some of the people who take to the road north. Honduran Marvin Moreno recounts the travel experiences of his countrymen in his novel *Al otro lado*. This novel is most valuable for the characteristic portrayal of the variety of transportation options open to migrant travelers, and how each possibility introduces shifting threats to survival and success. The theme of immobility through containment, and the associated dangers, is exemplified in the novel when some of the travelers are transported across the border into the United States hidden in a small compartment of a truck below tons of strawberries (Moreno 150-151). While this works out well for the characters in the novel, Jorge Ramos reports very different results of a similar method for covertly transporting migrants. In *Dying to Cross*, Ramos describes the events that led to the deaths of nineteen people trapped inside a trailer truck in 2003.

The great lie of the title of Chiapan author Hernán Becerra Pino's 2006 novel *La gran mentira* refers to the idea of Mexicans and Central Americans seeking an American dream in the United States according to Armando Alandís in his prologue to the novel (11). The majority of the novel is about the exploits and exploitation of Elpidio, a Honduran from San Pedro Sula, while he is in the United States. The first two chapters, however, tell of his travels north, and are the most relevant sections related to the theme of this study. A more extensive work about a Honduran traveling north is Sonia Nazario's

Enrique's Journey, the 2006 book that expanded a series of articles originally appearing in the *Los Angeles Times* during 2002. Enrique's story has come to represent the hundreds of children traveling north to be reunited with parents living and working in the United States. Nazario interviewed Enrique and recreated much of his trip north as she traveled on the top of the train known as "la bestia" that runs from Tapachula in Chiapas to San Luis Potosí, north of Mexico City. The 2014 edition includes the most recent data about the numbers of children on the road and more recent interviews with Enrique and his family members.

In 2007, Salvadoran Berne Ayalá published *Arizona Dreaming*. This novel is told from two perspectives: that of the travelers moving north from El Salvador and of the militia and U.S. Border Patrol members awaiting their arrival at the U.S.-Mexico border. Given that jail and death are two of the major dangers for the travelers, the intertwining of the perspectives from the north and from the south gives this novel an extraordinary viewpoint.

I mentioned above the train known as The Beast (la bestia) that has become one of the most traveled freight trains for migrants going north. In *Portadores de sueños* (2008), Guatemalan Manuel Fuentes highlights the dangers associated with travel on this train. The titles of chapters 8 and 9, respectively "El Tren de la Muerte" and "La Caída," reveal clear examples of the hazards travelers face. The title of this novel also alludes to a recurring theme among the novels in this study—the constant pull of the dream of a better life. Once travelers reach the northern part of Mexico, they must still find a way to cross into the United States. Mexican director Pedro Ultras's 2008 film *7 soles* looks at unauthorized border crossing from the perspective of a *coyote* that wants to quit taking

people across the desert to the United States. The film stresses the harsh conditions associated with the business of human trafficking.

The most prolific year for works that inform matters of travel was 2009. Graciela Limón published a second book that includes Central Americans traveling north. *The River Runs North* follows the stories of eight individuals and a guide crossing through the desert and into the United States. In the “Acknowledgments” for the novel, Limón credits John Annerino’s 1999 *Dead in Their Tracks* with inspiring the novel (v). Annerino’s book gives an extensive history of “el Camino del Diablo,” the Devil’s Highway that was introduced earlier in Luis Alberto Urrea’s book of the same name. Remarkably, Urrea also published a novel in 2009 that relates to one of the unintended consequences of these present-day travels. His *Into the Beautiful North* is about the journey of a young Mexican girl going north to seek the men from her village. The male portion her community had all gone to find work, but none had returned. Her trip is part of an effort to repopulate her community with men before her home disappears completely. Testimonial narratives appeared in chapter two of Lynnaire M. Sheridan’s “*I Know It’s Dangerous*”: *Why Mexicans Risk Their Lives to Cross the Border*. Through multiple interviews, she reconstructs twenty-five years of experience from four member of one family.

The other relevant works from 2009 are cinematic: a documentary and two feature films. Sonia Nazario’s *Los Angeles Times* articles about Enrique’s journey from Tegucigalpa, Honduras inspired Rebecca Cammisa’s documentary *Which Way Home*. She filmed several children ranging from nine to seventeen years old as they traveled from their homelands in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico in order to try to reach the United States. Trains and the impromptu shelters along the tracks are prominent

features of this film. Rigoberto Pérezcano directed the feature film *Norteado* about Andrés, a young man from Oaxaca who is trying to find family members who have gone north before him. The ending of this film in particular demonstrates the uncertainty of actually being able to ever cross the border. Finally, Cary Fukunaga's film *Sin nombre* traces Honduran teenager, Sayra, her father and her uncle as they cross Mexico on their way to join family members in New Jersey. On the train north, they encounter "El Casper," a Mara Salvatrucha gang member. After accidentally killing the head of the gang that tries to rape Sayra, El Casper has to flee the gang who chase him on his way north.

In 2010, Pedro Ultreras made a second film associated with Central Americans traveling through Mexico. His documentary *La bestia* confirms his growing awareness of the abuses Central Americans suffer at the hands of both Mexican officials and gangs such as the Zetas and the Maras during their journeys. In Omar Benel's article about the film, he compares it with Cary Fukunaga's *Sin nombre*, underscoring the Mara Salvatrucha gang connection. 2010 also included the publication of another work that highlighted the dangers of border crossings in the Arizona desert. In their *Crossing with the Virgin: Stories from the Migrant Trail*, Kathryn Ferguson, Norma A. Price, and Ted Parks gathered accounts from and about migrants found along U.S.-Mexico border by humanitarian groups such as No More Deaths and Samaritans. Ferguson would later publish *The Haunting of the Mexican Border: A Woman's Journey* (2015) in which she recalls some of her experiences with this project and where other relevant migrant narratives are reconstructed.

2011 saw the publication of *72 migrantes*, a photojournalistic accounting by seventy-two Mexican authors, one for each of the migrants from Mexico and Central America that were massacred on August 23, 2010 by the Zeta drug cartel in Tamaulipas. Known as the first massacre of San Fernando, the migrants, who had been traveling in a caravan of cars, were forced to stop by armed men. They were taken to a nearby ranch and shot in the head because they had no money to pay ransom and refused to work for the cartel. A second massacre occurred under similar circumstances in March of 2011. Many of the dead remain unidentified. These incidents draw attention to the continuing and increasing danger of migrant travel to the United States.

Diego Quemada-Díez's 2013 feature film *La jaula de oro* (The Golden Dream) tells of three Guatemalan teenagers (Sara, Juan, and Samuel) trying to go north to get out of their poverty stricken homeland. They meet a young Tzotil man (Chauk) in Chiapas, who joins their group. Their travels during the film reproduce many of the episodes migrant travelers endure including deportation to Guatemala, re-crossing into Mexico, traveling on the trains, and encounters with military personnel, traffickers of both drugs and people, and border vigilantes.

As a sophomore in high school, Virginia Hitchman interviewed sixteen migrants about their motivations and experiences crossing illegally into the United States. The transcripts of those interviews were first published in a limited bilingual Spanish and English version in 2014: *La Frontera: Stories of Undocumented Immigrants Crossing the Border*. A slightly modified second edition in 2015 followed this. Her introduction states, "My intension with this book is to shed light, to as large a community as possible, on the hardships and dangers that these immigrants endure while crossing the border and while

living here illegally” (2015, xiii). The questions she poses cover a range of topics that have bearing on the narratives in this study, including why people left their native lands, what happened to them while they were on the road, and what life is like with an undocumented status.

The 2015 anthropological study by Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, includes multiple testimonial narratives about migrants’ experiences. The section titled “Kangaroo Court” (110-114) is particularly relevant for current policies in court proceedings that result from detention of undocumented travelers.

I will not be analyzing all of the works that I have listed in this publication history. I am also aware that this inventory of relevant works is undoubtedly not complete. However, I believe that it provides an initial set of titles that could offer valuable opportunities for more extensive investigations into the variety of issues related to migrant travel.

Structure of This Study.

This chapter has furnished some historical background for the diverse pretexts that trigger migrant travel. In chapter two, I will be looking more closely at the specific chronotope of a threshold and the variety of ways it is manifested in narratives of migrant travel. Questions regarding what signify thresholds in travel and what a traveler might need in order to pass a threshold form the basis of my analysis of novels by Mario Bencastro (*Odisea del norte*), Juan B. Escobar Parada (*El viaje a la tierra prometida*), and Roberto Quesada (*Nunca entres por Miami*). I will also be considering the two

versions of Cedric Calderón's memoir *Contrabando humano en las Californias* and *Contrabando humano en la frontera: el sueño de los dólares*. In particular, I will be discussing how the ability or inability to obtain authoritative travel documents affects the storylines in these narratives.

The third chapter of this study will consider the topographies associated with the multiple international boundaries that migrant travelers traverse. As these voyagers are pushed away from authorized border-crossing points, dangerous sites such as rivers and deserts begin to play prominent roles in their movement. Escobar Parada's novel *El viaje a la tierra prometida* and Cedric Calderón's memoir *Contrabando humano en la frontera* will again provide relevant settings for the analysis of these locations. The novels of Graciela Limón (*The River Flows North*) Luis Alberto Urrea (*Into the Beautiful North*), Luis Spota (*Murieron a mitad del río*), and Berne Ayalá (*Arizona Dreaming*), as well as Gregory Nava's film *El Norte*, also include other scenes that impart thought-provoking examples.

The matter of a journey's end is the underlying question that will be addressed in chapter four. One's travel may end in various ways—some positive, some not. Among the more unpleasant endings are imprisonment or death, both of which are common in these stories. There is also the matter of how one knows that the journey has concluded and a home has been reached. Consequently, endings in migrant travel tend to have a quality of uncertainty about them. The ambiguities in some tales and the tragic terminations of others are explored in Mario Bencastro's *Odisea del norte*, Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey*, Pedro Ultras's documentary film *La Bestia*, Cedric Calderón's memoirs, Graciela Limón's and Luis Alberto Urrea's novels, and Gregory

Nava's film *El Norte*. Finally, in my concluding chapter, I will make some suggestions for expanding on the ideas I raise in this study.

CHAPTER 2

DOORS, PASSPORTS, AND MONEY IN MIGRANT TRAVEL NARRATIVES:

“EL TRUEQUE Y LA MOVIDA VAN UNIDAS”

There are strong economic issues at play in the narratives of migrant travel, even when economic gain is not the original reason the traveler is on the road. Migrant travelers may be fleeing politically or economically unstable regions, or they may be seeking employment in order to improve their own living situation or to send funds back to their communities to support family members. In any of these scenarios, money ends up playing a prominent part in the tales of travel, underlying and driving the plots in one way or another. I introduced in the first chapter M. M. Bakhtin’s concept of temporal-spatial events, the chronotopes, which are essential elements in narratives of travelers (*Dialogic* 84). One of the most important chronotopes for the characters in the works included in this study is the threshold and the events that transpire there. I will be developing a more complex argument regarding thresholds, but for now a straightforward way to think of a threshold is to consider it as a door that one must pass through. The key for migrant travelers to open the doors through which they must pass is by having official credentials, especially passports and visas. However, obtaining these documents always necessitates an economic outlay, an expense that the traveler may not be in a position to meet. This would seem to be an economic catch-22. How does trying to overcome the paradox of needing to spend money they do not have in order to be able to make money to survive appear in the narratives about migrant travelers?

This chapter endeavors to address that question. I will be expanding on Bakhtin's ideas about thresholds as they apply to the context of migrant travel. Specifically I will be looking at international borders and internal security checkpoints as the thresholds migrant travelers must cross or avoid—the doors they must pass in order to reach their goal of entering into the United States. I will also be analyzing how the issue of obtaining legal travel documents appears in a few narratives of migrant travel. In general, the narratives I have encountered rarely include information about official identification papers or travel documents such as passports and visas. The four exceptions included here are *Contrabando humano en las Californias*, *Contrabando humano en la frontera: el sueño de los dólares*, *El viaje a la tierra prometida*, and *Nunca entres por Miami*. The first two are versions of the memoir of Cedric Calderón, in which he tells of his time as a *coyote* (smuggler) on the U.S.-Mexico border. The third and fourth are novels by Salvadoran author Juan B. Escobar Parada and Honduran author Roberto Quesada, respectively. In all cases, the migrant travelers have or obtain passports and attempt to get valid visas for traveling in Mexico and the United States. All four also address the issue in the opening parts of the books—from the introduction to no later than chapter two. This placement conveys the significance of these documents, yet also raises the question of why they are so infrequently mentioned in other migrant travel narratives. In the four narratives, I will be looking at economic factors associated with acquiring these travel permits, how those factors are narrated, and how the protagonists act in response to obtaining or being denied valid travel credentials. What are the negotiations or deals that result from receiving or not receiving official visas, and how the storylines develop beyond those points are two of the questions I will be considering. Before delving into

the narratives, I would like to reflect more about thresholds, then, examine some of the history of passports and visas.

Doors, Threshold Events, and the Psychology of the Migrant Traveler.

What are thresholds and why are the events that transpire there so important in narrative? According to Eduard Vlasov's reading of Bakhtin, the chronotope of the threshold is "the chronotope of crisis and break in life" (45). Vlasov notes that Bakhtin was analyzing the works of Dostoevsky and considered that they functioned only within the spatial form of crisis time (47). Bakhtin was writing about locations that are turning points: "an unexpected turn of fate takes place, where decisions are made, where the forbidden line is overstepped, where one is renewed or perishes" (*Problems* 169).

Migrant travelers as represented by the characters in the novels included here repeatedly encounter large and small threshold events that pose predicaments that must be overcome, choices that must be made, and emotions that must be restrained. These are the moments of crisis in the narratives when the slightest lapse of psychological or emotional vigilance will result in disaster. Georges Van Den Abbeele, referencing Jaucourt, underscores the importance of risk and its associated anxiety during travel, especially the concern to prepare for death as an outcome of a journey (*Travel* xv-xvi). Expanding on the idea of loss and mortality he writes, "the possibility of there being no return is always implied in travel. Every voyage is potentially a voyage into exile" (*Travel* xvii). Apprehension builds as a voyager approaches Bakhtin's "forbidden line" because there is a very real possibility of perishing. To be halted at a threshold may not

just end a specific trip, or ruin hopes and dreams for the future, but might result in the death of the traveler.

As he further develops his argument regarding where these most critical defining moments occur, Bakhtin writes, “On the threshold and on the square the only time possible is *crisis time*” (*Problems* 169, italics in original). Setting the question of “the square,” it is clear that the threshold is a location where the “ideological and emotional states” of the characters correspond to “the point where the crisis and the climactic event take place” (Vlasov 47). While the idea of a climactic event seems to imply that a threshold experience would occur only late in a narrative, at the climax, a threshold could also be interpreted as more of a bridge between events in a story. Vlasov describes the “threshold chronotope” as “the place of conjoining of two different spaces, e.g., entrances, doorways, corridors, staircases, etc.” (47). In other words, the threshold is a chronotope that connects two circumstances in a tale. Bakhtin writes that Dostoevsky

concentrates action at *points of crisis, at turning points and catastrophes, [...]* and concentrates action in two ‘points’ only: on the *threshold* (in doorways, entrance ways, on staircases, in corridors, and so forth), where the crisis and the turning point occurs, or on the *public square*, whose substitute is usually the drawing room (the hall, the dining room), where the catastrophe, the scandal take place. (*Problems* 149, italics in original)

The traditional understanding of Bakhtin’s chronotopes separates his discussion of thresholds from his treatment of the road as a specific chronotope (*Dialogic* 98, 120).

However, I am proposing that the road itself is a form of corridor, and that it functions as a type of threshold passing the traveler from one turning point to the next, and as such is

a particular site of crisis. This will become clearer through my analysis below of the Salvadoran novel *El viaje a la tierra prometida*.

International borders and internal security checkpoints bear the most significant crisis times and turning points for migrant travelers, and as such are crucial thresholds. These are the doors that must be passed through or avoided by the migrant traveler. While the ports of entry at international borders remain fixed, internal security checkpoints move on a regular basis. Consequently, migrant travelers must remain constantly on guard in order to attempt to evade them or to bluff their way through. Tension and strain constantly adhere to migrant travelers as unforeseen checkpoints multiply and produce their own climactic events, taking a toll and pushing the psychological limits of the travelers. With this in mind, consider that another term for threshold is limit, indicating that a threshold is intrinsically a boundary, that it is liminal, from the Latin *limen*. A characteristic of thresholds, then, is its liminality as a transitory edge that must be crossed.

Much has been written about how the concept of the liminal and liminality entered into psychology and anthropology,¹⁷ and that “the study of liminality has become increasingly prevalent worldwide” (Folkart 34n16). Briefly, the psychological idea of the liminal as “the point of noticeable deviation from one state to another” first appeared in 1884 (Folkart 7). In 1909, the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep applied the term liminal to societal “rites of transition” (11). As Folkart describes Gennep’s proposal, “Liminality is the uncertain, transitional status at the crossroads of change between one state and another” (7). Gennep’s contribution, however, lay dormant for decades until Victor

¹⁷ See the “Delimiting the Liminal” (7-9) section of Folkart’s first chapter, and the works of Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra, among others.

Turner considered “the period of margin or ‘liminality’” from the perspective of a process in his 1964 essay “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*” and later published as a chapter in his *The Forest of Symbols* (Gennep 93, 94; Thomassen, “Thinking” 46). Folkart points out that “[Homi] Bhabha coins his famous term ‘hybridity’ from the ‘betwixt and between’ of liminality” and that Gloria Anzaldúa’s borderlands reveal their transitional and shifting status due to this broader application of the idea of the liminal (8). The migrant traveler has a hybrid identity, combining both their home identity and the persona they need to maintain while on the road. I have indicated that Anzaldúa’s work would be relevant with regard to the cultural clash the migrant traveler encounters upon entering into the threshold borderland of Mexico. Accordingly, from that hybridity migrant travelers carry liminal, transitioning identities throughout their journeys and are continually in a state of discomfort with the areas they cross.

Psychologically, traditional travelers and tourists are in less borderline circumstances than are migrant travelers. Traditional travelers and tourists intend to return to their stable and secure communities following their adventure away from home. Their identity is tightly established in their economic wellbeing. Migrant travelers may also be intending to return to their home environments, but their reasons for leaving in the first place are often because they live in less economically viable circumstances and in personally unsafe locations. They are not seeking an exciting activity, but improvement in their standard of living. Boorstin aptly describes the contrasts in the situation of these different travelers when he writes: “Men who move because they are starved or frightened or oppressed expect to be safer, better fed, and more free in the new place.

Men who live in a secure, rich, and decent society travel to escape boredom, to elude the familiar, and to discover the exotic” (78). Migrant travelers, unfortunately, often discover that the places they travel through or to are not safer and that they are not freer than they were at home. They have not transitioned to an improved condition, yet they no longer have the emotional support of their native community. In his analysis of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Bakhtin had considered the city of Petersburg to be “on the borderline between existence and nonexistence” (*Problems* 167). Extending the idea of his threshold chronotope to cover this type of borderline, it is not hard to see how it applies to the notion of the liminal, the “betwixt and between”, and the transitory in relation to the circumstances and identity of the migrant traveler seeking security, but never finding it.¹⁸

Identity for the traveler in these narratives is not only hybrid, but also fragmentary. Individual characters are introduced at a specific time in their lives, but the circumstances that led to that point may be vague or never explained. Consequently, the characters in these stories only know slices of information about each other, slivers that may lead to miscalculating possible reactions in any given situation. Each traveler’s identity is made of pieces from their backgrounds that connect or clash with other travelers and people they encounter in the areas through which they pass. Given that I am making the argument that all of Mexico constitutes the borderlands for Central Americans, keep in mind Anzaldúa’s definition of borderlands: “[they] are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch” (19).

¹⁸ Bhabha refers to this situation as the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications” (*Location* 5).

Central American and Mexican cultures are similar, but not the same—as such, the places in which they interact are borderlands, with all the dangers that implies. Vocabulary, for example, differs among the various Central American countries and can betray the migrant traveler as not belonging to a specified locale as he makes his way north. Guides give advice about words to avoid, facts to memorize, and clothes to wear in order to slip through the threshold that separates Central America from the United States—the country of Mexico. While it is not one of the works mentioned above that include information about legal travel documents, Salvadoran author Mario Bencastro’s novel *Odisea del norte* provides a good example of the instructions guides tell migrant travelers:

—Antes de salir les enseñaremos algunas cosas que deben tener presentes en todo el viaje.

—Les vamos a enseñar cómo defenderse en México, y a evitar decir ciertas palabras para que no los descubran.

—Es decir, tienen que empezar a pensar como mexicanos. ¿De acuerdo?

El grupo permanecía atento y en silencio; de repente a José se le ocurrió decir:

—Yo de México lo único que conozco son canciones rancheras.

Se oyeron risas nerviosas y algunos comentarios.

—Está bien. Quién sabe. Esas rancheras te pueden ser útiles en un momento determinado.

—¿Ustedes han visto películas mexicanas? —preguntó el lugar-teniente.

—Sí —contestaron algunos.

—Bien, pues de hoy en adelante tienen que hablar con ese acento, con ese cantadito con que hablan los mexicanos.

—Hay algunas palabras que no deben decirse. Por ejemplo, no hay que mencionar “pisto”.

—Tienen que saber la fecha de la independencia de México. El Himno Nacional y la historia de México en general. Todo esto se lo iremos enseñando en el camino y que no se les olvide. (*Odisea* 50-51)

“Before we leave, we’ll tell you some things you must remember for the whole trip.”

“We’re going to teach you how to protect yourselves in Mexico,” added the other. “And to avoid saying certain words that would give you away.”

“What I’m telling you is that you have to start thinking like Mexicans. Okay?”

The group remained silent, listening intently, but suddenly it occurred to José to say, “The only Mexican thing I know are *ranchera* songs.”

Nervous laughter and a few comments were heard.

“That’s okay,” said the guide. “Who knows? Those *rancheras* may come in real handy.”

“Have you all seen Mexican movies?” asked one of the guides.

“Yes,” some of them answered.

“Well, from now on you have to talk with that accent, that sing-song voice Mexicans speak with.”

“There are some Salvadoran words you should never say. For example, don’t say *pisto* when you’re talking about money.”

“You also have to know the date of Mexico’s Independence Day, the National Anthem and the history of Mexico in general. We’ll be teaching you all this during the trip, and you need to remember it.” (*Odyssey* 46-47, italics in original)¹⁹

In this example, the guides give instructions that are very specific for the groups of Salvadoran migrant travelers. Such coaching would be different for travelers from Guatemala or Honduras, for example. Here the travelers realize and admit that they know little about the cultural differences that distinguish them from the people with whom they are about to come in contact. They have to trust in the expertise of the guides.

In order to successfully move through Mexico, the travelers in these narratives must remember to present the false or assumed identity that their guides provide them. They also have to suppress the bits of their true identities as members of their home countries in Central America that could be revealed through inadvertent use of their natural vocabulary. The creation of this type of false identity is also portrayed in this section of Bencastro’s novel. The guides divide everyone into groups, placing each into a different city group such as Mérida or Jalisco. They give specific information for each town group so that they travelers can know how to answer if someone asks about their supposed hometowns. The guides are very clear that the Mexican migration officials know all the tricks and will ask misleading questions in order to trap the unwary. For example, if the traveler is pretending to be from Ciudad Juárez, the guide tells them:

¹⁹ All references and quotes are to the original Spanish edition, followed by the English translation: *Odyssey to the North*.

—Entonces les van a preguntar si conocen tal cantina, y los van a descubrir porque tal vez esa cantina no existe. Las más famosas de Ciudad Juárez son ‘El charro de la frontera’, ‘La princesa’, y ‘La cantinita’. Así que memoricen bien estos nombres. (*Odisea* 51)

“Then they’re going to ask you if you’ve been to such-and-such a bar, and they’re going to catch you because maybe the bar they name doesn’t even exist. The most famous bars in Ciudad Juárez are El Charro de la Frontera, La Princesa del Norte, and La Cantinita. So memorize those names.” (*Odyssey* 47)

Migrant travelers must quickly learn and keep track of all this new information in order to temporarily transition to their fictitious identities. They must also hide their own true identities during this transitory phase in order to successfully traverse the “borderlands” threshold of Mexico into the United States. At what point can the migrant traveler discard the assumed identity and reclaim his own, or, will the traveler’s identity stay in a state of flux similar to the borderlands through which she is passing?

Anzaldúa specifies that borderlands are “in a constant state of transition” (25) and therefore constantly changing. The shifting, transitional status of the borderlands contributes to the indeterminate ending for any traveler’s journey, putting him or her in a perpetual state of in-betweenness²⁰—always on a threshold to the future, away from the present and the past. The spatial and temporal characteristics of this psychological in-betweenness make it a chronotope within the chropotope of the threshold, contributing to the multiplicity of borders that must be crossed. The Central American travelers moving

²⁰ For the concept of “in-betweenness,” see John Alba Culter’s “Borders and Borderland Literature” in which he identifies a dominant motif of borderland literature as being a “subjective experience of in-betweenness” (160).

north across these multiplying borders become like Anzaldúa's turtle (43): wherever they go they carry their borders on their backs. Not only do borders multiply during the "state of transition" of in-betweenness, they also move along with the traveler as "mobile borders"²¹ that might never be crossed since they constantly reproduce and change.

While I have been discussing the shifting nature of borderlands as one aspect of a threshold for Central Americans, the concept of a threshold as a stationary limit is also important. For a suitable analysis of the narratives I am examining, I would like to contemplate an adaptation of Bakhtin's threshold chronotope. His thresholds are doorways and entranceways. The thresholds I am considering are official border checkpoints (whether at international borders or within national boundaries), as well as the natural features such as rivers and deserts that separate nations. One might think of these in the general sense such as a threshold of a house. This type of threshold is the boundary point where one enters or exits, generally through a marked access site—Bakhtin's door or my official border checkpoint. Svend Erik Larsen observes that "any given boundary shows the double face of Janus: it is always a boundary *between* and a boundary *to*" (98, italics in original). Consequently, the "*between* presents a possible obstacle, the *to* a possible opening—a boundary is a barrier or a gate" (Larsen 98, italics in original). Therefore, a threshold can represent an intrinsic barrier to movement, or it can be an aperture inviting entry; a space of prohibition or of welcoming. It also may be visible or invisible, solid or porous—properties that play a part in several narratives about migrant travel. The official checkpoints are visually identifiable, but natural landscapes

²¹ For the idea of "mobile borders," see Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary and Frédéric Giraut: "a growing number of scholars are confirming that the contemporary border can only be grasped through its portativity and a change of focus toward the individual" (1).

can hide the formally specified border. Where in the river is the actual boundary? When one looks across the desert, at what point does one country end and another begin? For land crossings, there is another element to consider: is the traversing done over the land, or under it? Tunnels and pipes hide the traveler from view and obscure the exact point at which he may cross the border. The most famous example of an unseen location marking the exact border crossing moment is found in Gregory Nava's *El Norte*. The brother and sister are crawling through the dark, rat-filled drainage tunnel from Mexico to the United States. They have no way of knowing the precise place where they cross the invisible international boundary. I will be analyzing this work and other examples of non-official border crossing sites in the next chapter. However, there are other obstacles to explore that migrant travelers face at the standard international threshold settings.

The international border ports of entry are the thresholds from one country to another. If these were to be compared to the example of a house, they would be the visible barriers of the threshold—the doors. Within the house, invisible thresholds might be archways dividing one room from another, for example, or a corridor or hallway such as Bakhtin uses. The visible barrier of a door at a threshold requires movement to be temporarily slowed, if not stopped entirely, until the door is opened and the threshold is crossed, or conversely, the door remains shut and crossing is denied. Internal security checkpoints also act as blockage sites that slow down the migrant traveler's progress, as would doors dividing one room in a house from another. The invisible barrier of an archway or a corridor may not have the same braking action, but crossing through it requires a certain resolve to reach a specific destination. There is an intentionality associated with crossing both visible and invisible thresholds. Normally, one does not

randomly wander in and out of houses or rooms. Instead, there is an underlying purpose: I am going outside because it is sunny; I am coming inside because it is cold; I am going down the staircase or through the hallway to go to the dining room. The migrant travelers in these narratives have the goal of crossing into the north, whether or not the actual threshold is visibly perceptible, and demonstrate resourcefulness to achieve their intended objective.

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threshold is visibly perceptible, and demonstrate resourcefulness to achieve their intended objective.

To successfully traverse the threshold of Mexico, migrant travelers must cross multiple international thresholds (borders), as well as pass through or avoid the internal thresholds found at the movable security checkpoints. At each of these locations, they are likely to participate in a threshold event that induces a crisis time. I am using the phrase “threshold event” to describe representative settings when characters have to pause and consider the situation and the consequences of proceeding across any given threshold (most notably international borders) before moving forward in their journeys. Yet, as Bakhtin has noted the threshold itself is a crisis time, often a split second in which a decision must be made—each decision marking a crossing point into the future. As such, these thresholds are pervasive, appearing everywhere, and reproducing along the route. Should the traveler accept the ride in the back of a truck or continue walking? Should he join a group or continue alone? Should she stay still or try to run if border patrol or bandits appear along the path? Every decision point bifurcates into separate outcomes: The walker is lost in the desert or arrives in Phoenix, while those who ride in the truck are apprehended by border agents or make it to San Diego; the group is attacked by bandits or successfully crosses the river, while the lone traveler drowns or escapes being targeted by gang members; the person who hides from authorities is captured or is able to sneak away, while runners escape or are surrounded by bandits. Each decision during these threshold events carries its own divergent future with its own new set of crisis times.

The physical exertion expended by migrant travelers while accomplishing their goal is accompanied by emotional and psychological dynamics at threshold events. They must consider the effort involved in overcoming negative forces that will play upon the psyche during the actual crossing of the various thresholds. The positive desire to cross to a new area (or a new life) often is diminished by fear and anxiety about some anticipated negative possibility that would result from crossing the threshold. The opening scene of Juan Escobar Parada's novel *El viaje a la tierra prometida* offers a good example of the angst migrant travelers suffer when contemplating making the trip north. Ana, one of four characters that travel together from El Salvador to the United States, meets with two friends, brothers Carlos and Roberto. They are meeting to see if Roberto can help her recover the payment she had made to Javier, a *coyote* who had not fulfilled his promise to take her all the way to the United States (10-11). During their discussion, Ana "Se llevó las manos al rostro, que revelaba cierta angustia, tomó aire y se sinceró, «Para ser franca —dijo— tengo miedo que me vuelva a ocurrir lo mismo o peor. Yo creo que no lo superaría» ("She put her hands to her face, which revealed a certain anguish, took a breath and became serious, 'To be frank —she said— I am afraid that the same or worse will happen to me again. I think I would not get over it"; 10). This passage is near the beginning of the story and placed in such a way that it seems Ana is referring to losing her money. Roberto interprets it that way as he reassures her that he will help her. However, Ana's fear is fixed on something else. She explains that the trip would have been as an undocumented person on foot through Mexico, which opens the conversation to the dangers of traveling without papers. A Central American assessment of those dangers is communicated in Roberto's thoughts: "pues ellos conocían por testimonios

que, en México, los ilegales —sobre todo los centroamericanos— sufrían en carne propia humillaciones, violaciones, asaltos, robos, e inclusive mutilaciones” (“well they knew from testimonies that, in Mexico, illegals —above all Central Americans— suffered in the flesh humiliations, rapes, assaults, robberies, and even mutilations”; 11). He comments “Lo peor [...] es que a nuestras mujeres las obligan a prostituirse y a endrogarse, y sólo Dios sabe a qué más” (“The worst thing [...] is that our women are forced to prostitute themselves and to use drugs, and only God knows what else”; 11). This background begins to hint at the basis for Ana’s fears. During her previous attempt to go north she had been abandoned by Javier to a Mexican guide at the Guatemala-Mexico border and had barely escaped a gang rape by some young Honduran Mara gangsters (13-16). Roberto’s thoughts about how Central Americans are treated are presented as an abstraction. For Ana, however, that abstraction almost became a reality. Given this history, her distress and reasonable fear to once again attempt to cross the threshold to the United States are very understated in the text.

As can be seen in Ana’s story, undesirable outcomes include the chance that the traveler might end by entering into a space where rape might occur, entering prison, or, worst of all, dying. Fear of the unknown can cause one to hesitate at a threshold. Had Ana hesitated when the opportunity came to slip away from a dangerous group, her story might well have ended in her death. Roberto had commented about the dangers Central American women faced in Mexico, but the text then continued: “En esa odisea, muchos dilataban más de un mes en atravesar el territorio, y algunos se desaparecían, se tropezaban con la muerte a manos de los malhechores o quedaban abandonados en el fatídico desierto” (“In that odyssey, many spend more than a month to cross the territory,

and some disappeared, encountered death at the hands of evildoers or were abandoned in the fateful desert”; 11-12). Many go, but only some are negatively affected. Why is there such trepidation when an adverse end is only a possibility and not necessarily a likely outcome? The work of Sigmund Freud helps explain that engaging in a prohibited activity (such as crossing into a forbidden space) can cause fear based on the dread related to the violation of a taboo.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud discusses how the Polynesian word “taboo” carries two opposing connotations: “on the one hand it means to us, sacred, consecrated : but on the other hand it means, uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean” (31). He goes on to write that “the concept of reserve inheres in taboo; taboo expresses itself essentially in prohibitions and restrictions” (32), and in “awe and aversion” (44). Thus every time travelers must cross a threshold to a space that is banned for them, anxiety creates a momentary hesitation. Unfortunately, each hesitation also tends to increase the possibility of a negative consequence as these moments allow time for bandits, gangs, or governmental authorities to intercept the travelers and prohibit crossing the threshold, or worse, enable a truly adverse crossing, such as into prison or death. Since traveling without benefit of authorized documents demonstrably places migrant travelers in a banned condition, why do it? What prevents the acquisition of valid passports and visas?

History and Economy of Passports and Visas.

The most unmistakable sites for threshold moments are when crossing international borders and other locations where travelers might be stopped for official review of documents. Checkpoints are crucial threshold chronotopes in this kind of travel

writing and fiction. Since most of the characters in the narratives I am considering will lack authorized paperwork, there are added layers to the decision processes they must make at these primary settings. For example, travelers may try to go through an official location using false or invalid documents, or they may try to circumvent or avoid the official spot altogether. Both of these methods for transiting the threshold present heightened risks that the travelers take during their journeys. Being caught without appropriate permission at an official threshold is a sure path toward detention, while using rivers, tunnels, or deserts to cross international borders or to avoid official checkpoints can lead to death in a variety of ways including drowning, dehydration, or encounters with dangerous snakes, bugs, animals, or humans. Therefore, the question emerges: what are the travails of travel without documentation or under false identity?

The work of Mary Louise Pratt helps provide answers to this question. Inherent in Pratt's "contact zone" are "conditions of coercion [and] radical inequality" (8). These conditions are exposed when marginal groups, such as Central American laboring or working class individuals, attempt to obtain passports and travel visas. There is radical inequality for Central Americans vis-à-vis the expectation to provide official records such as birth certificates. These documents are often unavailable due to the wars that repeatedly shattered Central American communities during the twentieth century. Thus, many of the people seeking to go north do not have the possibility of getting authorized credentials to travel. This leaves them no recourse but to travel without papers, or to use false identifications.

Leaving aside the problematic issue of acquiring a passport, there is also the underlying question about the purpose of a passport in and of itself. In his *Rights of*

Passage: The Passport in International Relations, Mark Salter offers some interesting background. He gives a broad history for keeping information about travelers. From the medieval doctrine of *ne exeat regno* that required the permission of the monarch before leaving one's native country through the privileges granted by the *Magna Carta* and later instruments of safe conduct (12-13) that led up to the modern passport regime as systematized following World War I, Salter reviews how the passport is used as a method of controlling mobility (26). He writes that the 1920 League of Nations Conference on Passports and Frontier Formalities included four justifications:

First, the passport regime was seen as a necessary security measure to prevent the influx of spies and malcontents. [...] Second, passports were seen as a way to control the refugee problem [...]. Third, passports and visas were seen as a way to regulate the size of the labor market and thus to regulate wages. Fourth, passports and border formalities helped regulate the spread of epidemics. (78)

While Salter is specifically discussing the European setting, it is not difficult to see how nations today would continue to approve several of these objectives, especially the regulation of refugees and their potential economic impact for receiving countries. It is also not difficult to see some of these objectives as coercive, especially with regard to regulating the movement of laborers and the payment of their wages. The role passports play in this particular "economy of travel," to use Van den Abeele's concept introduced in the first chapter,²² is far more dramatic than in other narratives of travel.

²² See pages 30-32.

Having or not having a passport accentuates both the economic and the coercive relationship that the individual has with governments. Salter underscores that it is the states' interests (not the individual's) that are central in the passport regime:

at its inception the European passport regime served several important governmental needs: nationalist, security, and economic. The control of persons shifts from personal to documentary examination, and marginal groups, which were already subject to greater state control in everyday practice, were subject to greater control at the border. Working and unmarried women, colonial subjects, criminals, prostitutes, and members of the lower classes were constrained far more than were middle-class envoys of business (whether merchants or consumers) and the upper-class envoys of the state. (85-86)

Persistent control of the marginal groups identified above is a recurring theme for Central Americans migrant travelers. Persistent control contributes to the "taintedness" of the term travel for Clifford.²³ He suggested that looking at travel literature featuring non-bourgeois voyagers would demonstrate "the evident fact the travelers move about under strong cultural, political and economic compulsions and that certain travelers are materially privileged, others oppressed" (35). Questioning the agency and mobility of certain laborers, he notes that we should not downplay

the extent to which the mobility is coerced, organized within regimes of dependent, highly disciplined labor. In a contemporary register, to think of cosmopolitan workers, and especially migrant labor, in metaphors of "travel" raises a complex set of problems. The political disciplines and economic pressures

²³ See chapter 1, page 25.

that control migrant-labor regimes pull very strongly against any overly sanguine view of the mobility of the poor, usually nonwhite people who *must* leave home in order to survive. (34, italics in original)

While countries historically have had many conditions for allowing entrance to their sovereign territories, the rigorous requirements faced by modern travelers entering into the United States derive from the exclusionary laws that began to appear in the 1880s to prevent Asian workers from entering (Van den Abbeele, “Tears” 239). Reinforcing the commercial core behind passports and visas previously introduced by Salter, Van den Abbeele points out the double standard in these laws: “Merchants, diplomats, and some other professionals were exempt and were allowed entry” (“Tears” 244). Then and now low-skilled, working-class travelers who lack capital are more likely to be denied entry to a country not their own, despite the reality that the economy of the receiving countries may depend upon those very workers. Migrant workers, who need to travel in order in order to achieve some level of economic sustainability, are prevented from doing to precisely what they need to do because they lack the financial capacity to acquire the requisite documentation. In other words, the poor first need money to obtain passports and visas in order to travel to locations where they can earn money to support themselves—an ironic economic loop.

Amitava Kumar expands on the class-based idea and exposes the differences status plays regarding passports when he writes, “For those who live in affluent countries, the passport is of use for international travel in connection with business or vacations. In poorer nations of the world, its necessity is tied to the need for finding employment” (20). He then makes clear that the passport is nothing without the visa, and that there are

criteria often used to deny visas, such as “skin color, ethnicity, looks, speech—and remarkably enough—fashion sense” (21). He references a United States State Department manual that at one time included a list of abbreviations to be used in the sorting (and possibly rejecting) of applications for visas: “RK=rich kid, LP=looks poor, TP=talks poor, LR=looks rough, TC=take care” (21). Some of the narratives I will be discussing later in this chapter have examples of how travelers are judged by their appearances and thus marked for control and domination. At the same time, the characters experience anxieties related to how they imagine themselves when confronted by this external scrutiny. Is the image the authorities attribute to the traveler the same as the one the traveler has of himself? What is the dialectic between the “I” (or the “Ideal-I”) of the migrant worker and “the other” that the traveler encounters among authority figures when trying to obtain or use a passport and visa (Lacan, “Mirror” 190)?

Finally, obtaining passports and visas is a financial burden for Central Americans and is disproportional to their abilities to pay. Two of the works in this study provide data that expose significant differences between what people from the United States would be expected to provide before traveling internationally versus the requirements placed on Central American migrant travelers. I will discuss these two narratives in the next section. Finally, there is another novel that reveals even a traveler who has all the appropriate paperwork can have misgivings. These three depictions are the only ones I have encountered thus far that include any treatment of the issues surrounding passports and visas for migrant travelers.

Money, Papers, Anxiety, and Migrant Travel Narration.

Two travel tales, one Guatemalan and one from El Salvador, illustrate the difficulties Central Americans confront when attempting to obtain legal travel documents. Juan B. Escobar Parada's novel *El viaje a la tierra prometida* is about a journey of a group of Salvadorans going to the United States. The other story is the autobiographical narrative of Guatemalan Cedric Calderón, which was published in two very different versions. Both Escobar Parada's novel and the second version of Cedric Calderón's memoir effectively demonstrate the explicit monetary prerequisites insisted on by the countries that would be supplying authorized travel visas. Before delving into the specifics of how each narrative portrays the topic of obtaining certified travel documents, however, some scrutiny of Calderón's works is in order.

The original version published in 1978, *Contrabando humano en las Californias*, contains more personal details of Cedric's life, but is a less concise narrative. The second version from 1983, *Contrabando humano en la frontera: el sueño de los dólares: memorias de un coyote*, was reworked by author and journalist Héctor Gaitán, and reads less like a chronicle and more like an adventure story. The later version includes more dialogue and has relevant events from his teenage years when Cedric Calderón made his first attempt to go north. Both versions²⁴ tell how Cedric ended up as a *coyote* moving people across the U.S.-Mexican border. While the time period for Cedric's activities is never specified, they probably occurred during the early 1970s. For the most part, he successfully maneuvers his way through the dangers of associating with underworld figures. His luck runs out, however, when he is picked up by the U.S. Border Patrol and

²⁴ I will reference sections in both versions, citing the original as "Californias" and the revision as "Frontera" for clarity.

sent back to Mexico (“Californias” 53-58; “Frontera” 47-53). Unfortunately, he is caught again (“Californias” 122-124; “Frontera” 116-118) and ends up in a series of California jails (“Californias” 125-141; “Frontera” 119-140). Once he is sent back to Mexico a second time, Cedric finds that the situation with his underworld associates has changed, which results in his going to prison in Tijuana (“Californias” 146-147; “Frontera” 142-143) and his eventual deportation to Guatemala (“Californias” 156; “Frontera” 152-153).

I have already noted James Clifford’s comment that “travelers move about under strong cultural, political and economic compulsions” (35) and that this idea is loosely connected with Georges Van Den Abbeele’s commentary on the “economy of travel.” The importance of economic issues in the narratives of Cedric Calderón’s life is visible in the titles of both versions. The realm of the financial is apparent through the use of the term *contrabando* (contraband—goods prohibited from import or export) to describe Cedric’s work with people in the northern Mexico borderlands. The second version carries an even stronger pecuniary connection with its subtitle “el sueño de los dólares”—the dream of dollars. The back cover of this second version completes the emphasis on money, describing the work as a story in which people are suffering to gather together enough money to stand and live decently, as each deserves.²⁵

The two versions of Cedric’s story begin at different times in his life and include different personal details, yet both versions begin with introductory comments that emphasize the economic basis for Cedric’s travel north. Alfredo Saavedra, in his

²⁵ “[M]uchos de nuestros hermanos están sufriendo en carne propia, la angustia y el dolor nacidos de necesidad y a veces la ilusión, de juntar unos cuantos dólares para situarse y vivir decorosamente, como todo hombre merece” (“Californias” back cover).

prologue to the first version, provides the socio-economic framework of the mid-1960s in Central America:

Cuando la corriente migratoria hacia los Estados Unidos tomó carácter de verdadera fiebre, hace unos quince años, nuestros compatriotas encontraron la manera, unos de resolver su problema de desempleo, fenómeno permanente en nuestro medio, otros la compensación del afán de aventura y algunos cuantos, la ocasión de dar satisfacción al desarraigo que tienen con su propia tierra.

When the migratory current to the United States took on the characteristic of a true fever, about fifteen years ago, our compatriots found the way, some to resolve their problem of unemployment, a permanent phenomenon in our midst, others to compensate their desire for adventure, and a few to satisfy the uprooted conditions of their own homeland. (“Californias” 19)

The region had seen an enormous increase in population since the 1950s, but the economy had not improved for the local populations, creating “an uprooted, underemployed, and hungry class” of people on the move (Foster 229-231). Saavedra continues, describing that traveling “a los Estados Unidos no ha sido para los inmigrantes latinoamericanos el reencuentro con Eldorado [sino] llegar por la vía más inmediata al país del tormento, de la desilusión y la derrota” (“to the United States has not been for Latin American immigrants a reunion with the Golden Land [but] an arrival by the most immediate route to a country of torment, of disillusion and defeat”; “Californias” 19).

Saavedra’s reference to the “verdadera fiebre” (true fever) that characterized the Central American movement to the north reminds the reader of the long history of Latin Americans questing for economic security and fortunes in North America. The California

Gold Rush of the mid-nineteenth century sparked gold fever around the world, including throughout Latin America. Among the examples of literature that reflects on the fervor of that historic episode are the memoirs of Vicente Pérez Rosales and the various versions of the life of Joaquín Murrieta.²⁶ The life of Pérez Rosales was an ebb and flow of political and economic ups and downs, so it is not surprising that he succumbed to the pull of the California gold fields as seen in his description of the phenomenon: “Pronto pepas de oro de una, de dos, de cuatro y hasta de seis libras circularon con la rapidez del rayo por todos los mercados de la tierra; y en todas partes resonó a un tiempo la alarmante corneta de reunión á la feria que ofrecía al arrojito y al trabajo, la envidiable esperanza de seguras y rápidas fortunas” (*Recuerdos* 270; “Nuggets weighing one, two, four, and even six pounds soon circulated with lightning speed through all the markets in the world; and everywhere was heard the call of the trumpet that summoned men to the feast offering to boldness and hard work the enviable hope of sure and instant fortune”; *Times* 215-216).²⁷ However, just as Saavedra remarks how the Golden Land proved to be a country of torment, of disillusion and defeat, many of the people drawn to the earlier version of Eldorado also encountered discrimination, persecution, and dissatisfaction. Pérez Rosales writes:

La mala voluntad del yanqui vulgar contra los hijos de otras naciones, y muy especialmente contra los chilenos, se había, pues, acentuado. Hacíanse un

²⁶ For more on Joaquín Murrieta, see Pablo Neruda’s *Fulgor y muerte de Joaquín Murieta: bandido chileno injusticiado en California el 23 de julio de 1853*; the Prologue and first chapter of Susan Lee Johnson’s *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush*; John Rollin Ridge’s *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit*.

²⁷ All references and quotes are to the original Spanish edition, *Recuerdos del pasado (1814-1860)*, followed by the English translation: *Times Gone By: Memoirs of a Man of Action*.

argumento sencillo y concluyente: el chileno era hijo de español, el español tenía sangre moro, luego el chileno debía ser por lo menos hotentote, ó muy piadosamente hablando, algo de muy semejante al humillado y tímido californés. Habíaseles indigestado el arrojo del chileno, que, sumiso en su país, deja de serlo en el extranjero, aunque sea ante una pistola encarnada al pecho, siempre que él pueda apoyar la mano sobre la empuñadura de su puñal. El chileno, por su parte, detestaba al yanqui, á quien calificaba de cobarde á cada rato, y esta mutua mala voluntad explica las sangrientas desgracias y las atrocidades que á cada paso presenciábamos en el país del oro y de las esperanzas. (*Recuerdos* 340)

The hostility of the common run of Yankee toward the sons of other nations, and most especially toward Chileans, had intensified. Their argument was simple and conclusive: the Chilean descended from the Spaniard, the Spaniard had Moorish blood, therefore the Chilean had to be at least a Hottentot or at best something very much like the timid and abased *Californio*. The boldness of the Chilean had stuck in their craw, because, though submissive in his own country, he is very different abroad, even with a pistol pointed at his breast, as long as his hand can reach the handle of his knife. The Chilean, in turn, detested the Yankee, whom he constantly declared a coward; this mutual hostility explains the bloody calamities and atrocities that we repeatedly witnessed in the land of gold and hope. (*Times* 272, italics in original)

It appears that the promised land (*la tierra prometida*), the Golden Land (*Eldorado*), the land of hope—all of the terms that have drawn migrant travelers to seek improved

economic circumstances and personal security—have a history that embitters and disillusion those who have set out for *el norte*.

In his introduction to the second version of Cedric’s tale, Héctor Gaitán expands on the theme of exploitation of the migrant travelers seeking the promise of prosperity in the north, writing “los que con sus dólares han humillado a los grupos hispanoamericanos que pensando encontrar un paraíso en ‘Las Californias’, han encontrado si no la miseria de su marginación, un estrellón en el muro intangible de la discriminación y explotación” (“Those, who with their dollars, have humiliated groups of Hispanic Americans who thought to find a paradise in ‘the Californias,’ have found, if not misery in their marginalization, a collision with an intangible wall of discrimination and exploitation”; “Frontera” [i]). Gaitán places particular emphasis on the practice of humiliating the foreigner by powerful entities. He chastises the media “que se ignora y sucumbe ante las grandes empresas noticiosas maniobradas precisamente por esos intereses que manejan a esa nación grande del norte, donde el dinero mueve montañas” (“that is ignored and succumbs before the big news companies that are precisely maneuvered by those interests that manage the great nation of the north, where money moves mountains”; “Frontera” [i]).

I would like to make one final observation about the two versions of Cedric’s story. It is unambiguous that Calderón wrote the original version. The later version, however, presents a more complicated authorship, and therefore a conundrum related to particulars in the accounts. The front cover and the spine of the second book depict Cedric Calderón R. as the author. The colophon also lists him as *autor*, or author (“Frontera” 156). The introductory comments indicate that the narrative is based off of a

live, un-taped television interview Gaitán did with Calderón about his original book (“Frontera” [i]). Gaitán subsequently writes that he did not see Cedric again, but was invited by Jesús Chico García to create “esta forma de entrevista novelada” (“Frontera” [ii])—a novelization of the interview. (Mr. García’s relationship to both Gaitán and Calderón is left as a mystery.) Gaitán also writes that he was left with the desire to transmit all that Calderón left unsaid and unwritten (“Frontera” [ii]).²⁸ Consequently, there are two narrative approaches to Cedric’s story: Cedric’s own prose description, which begins in Tijuana, at the US-Mexico border when he is in his twenties; and, Gaitán’s “novelization,” which begins in Guatemala City when Cedric is fourteen. Both versions have dialogue embedded in the text, but the novelized version utilizes the technique more extensively. Handling Cedric’s history through the use of dialogue is fundamentally fictive in any case. Cedric’s version would rely on his memory of conversations, while Gaitán’s version would be a recreation of his memory of an unrecorded interview. Neither of these techniques has the benefit of specific documentation to verify the exchanges. Both presentations describe Cedric’s attempt to obtain legal travel documents, but the original version simply tells of his frustrating encounter with bureaucratic protocol at the American Consulate in Tijuana (“Californias” 31, 33-34). Gaitán’s variant provides a specific monetary account that I can compare with the one found in Escobar Parada’s *El viaje a la tierra prometida*. It is the economic incentive behind the travel and the power over the travelers of authorized travel documents that are significant in these particular narratives. The interplay of money, passports, and visas influences the plots of these two narratives, especially during crisis

²⁸ “Me quedé con aquel deseo de haber dejado plasmado en un libro todo lo que Cedric [...] no dijo y dejó en el tintero” (“Frontera” [ii]).

threshold events. The following Guatemalan and Salvadoran narratives demonstrate an integral component in the development of the stories: the ability or inability to obtain legitimate authorization to cross international thresholds (borders).

Gaitán opens the story with Cedric’s first attempt that happened when he was fourteen—information that does not appear in the original version of Cedric’s memoir. The journalist then fills in the initial stages of Cedric’s second attempt to go north when he is eighteen. (Remember, Cedric’s own version of his life as a *coyote* begins when he is older and has already reached Tijuana.) Cedric goes to the American Consulate in Guatemala City to seek a tourist visa to enter the United States, but immediately is stymied by the requirements (13). He is asked if he has a bank account; if there is someone in the U.S. who will be responsible for him; if he is going only as a tourist, or if he intends to work. Most disturbing of all the questions, however, is whether or not he has at least \$2,000 for travel expenses. Central Americans often lack the obligatory bank account that the consulate official requires.²⁹ However, even with such an account, they would not normally have the more than \$2,000 for travel expenses in order to get a travel visa that the consulate demands of Cedric. He is frustrated about the enormous amount of money he must prove he has before he can travel legally. One must take into account that the average annual national income in Guatemala in 1970 (the approximate year of the event described) was \$350, so \$2,000 is over five times the national average annual salary. However, the situation would not be much better in 1978 (the publication date of Calderón’s original version of the story), when the national average was \$890. According

²⁹ According to a 2016 Inter-American Development Bank report by Liliana Rojas-Suárez, of the Central American countries, only in Costa Rica do over 50 percent of the adult population own bank accounts. In Nicaragua and Honduras, less than one third of adults have accounts (Introduction).

to these World Bank statistics, and assuming the \$2,000 requirement had not been increased, a Guatemalan traveling late in the 1970s still would need almost 2.25 times their annual income to qualify for a visa. It is immediately clear from these numbers that the conditions set for legal travel to the United States prohibit entry to those at the lower tier of the Central American economic ladder.

With or without legal passports and visa, migrant travel has a close association with the flow of money, as seen in the subtitle of Gaitán's version of Cedric Calderón's memoir: "El sueño de los dólares"—the dream of dollars. Cedric's first encounter once he arrives in Tijuana shows that bartering to cross the border is a standard practice in the region. As soon as he gets off the bus, he is approached by a man asking if he is headed to Los Angeles and indicates that a deal can be made (14). When he denies that this is his objective, the man moves on to ask others the same thing. Next, a taxi driver insinuates to Cedric that "la pasada" (the passage [across the border]) can be arranged (15). Cedric describes the situation as "el trueque y la movida van unidas en México"—bartering and movement go together in Mexico. Agreeing to meet with the taxi driver's contact, Cedric is asked immediately if he has family in the United State that is going to pay for the crossing, or if he has the funds with him (16). Within just three short pages at the very beginning of Cedric's journey, money is firmly established as an underlying force in his migrant travel tale. As his story unfolds, Cedric reveals more of the economic connections in migrant travel such as how police cooperation is bought through bribes (15, 35, 46) and that the sale of false documents and drugs (43, 44) are all part of the *coyote* system. This portion of Cedric's story also highlights a recurring theme among the

migrant travel narratives. Travel, especially under the conditions that these people face, is a series of negotiations, arbitrations, and concessions—some successful, some not.

As seen through Cedric's experience, procuring legitimate visas is outside of the resources of even most middle class travelers. This is reinforced in Escobar Parada's 2002 novel *El viaje a la tierra prometida*, which begins with the negative economic situation in El Salvador as a motivation for the travelers to leave their home country. There is no indication in the narrative about the specific timeframe of the story, so I am assuming that the setting is contemporary to the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Roberto (the leader) decides to help his brother Carlos and their friend Ana get to the northeastern United States to unite with family members—Carlos to be with his son who lives with his ex-wife, and Ana to join her children and grandchildren (1-2, 16-18). Both of them are in financial difficulties with no possibilities of economic improvement: due to an injury Carlos has been unemployed for months and Ana is almost bankrupt (16). In another parallel to Cedric's story, an example of the types of negotiations that occur in many of the migrant tales is included before the Salvadorans' journey even starts. In order to offset some of the costs of the trip, Roberto agrees to take a pregnant nineteen-year-old girl, Sofia, to her mother in Georgia (19-20). Money and the global economic context, as seen here, are vital parts of modern migrant travel.

Mary Louise Pratt, in her examination of modernity and neocolonialism, is emphatic on the point that neoliberal policies underlying globalization are responsible for the "mass labor migration, from poor countries to rich ones" in the 1980s and 1990s (237-238). The economic environment of Ana and Carlos in El Salvador is representative

of the conditions produced by the policies Pratt is discussing. While modernity was supposed to make a world where all countries would be equally developed, thus equally prosperous, that ideal has been abandoned under globalization (Pratt 238). She comments on the language used by the powerful to justify free trade and open markets, and then goes on to lay bare the results of these policies:

the reverse diaspora of people from ex-colonial countries to the cities of the ex-colonizers was mainly caused by multinational capitalism's latest scheme to maximize profits through indebtedness and low wages, both abroad and at home. Along with people, a vast and continuous inflow of wealth comes from the poor countries to the rich. (238)

In other words, along with the flow of money under free trade and open markets, comes a flow of labor that makes the products to be sold and traded. When laborers cannot earn enough to survive in their homelands, they will flow to where there is money to be made. Migrant travelers who are voyaging in order to sell their labor in a free and open market conform to Georges Van Den Abbeele's commentary regarding the commercial attributes of travel (*Travel* xvi). The labor of these travelers becomes the commodity, Van Den Abbeele's "thing" that is moved back and forth.

In the novel, Roberto, who had traveled in both Mexico and the United States before (17), tries to get legal travel permits from the American consulate, but finds similar financial requirements as Cedric Calderón did in Guatemala. An aggravated Roberto comments to his wife, "Los 'gringos' ponen cuanta traba se les ocurre con la intención ilógica de no autorizar le entrada legal a su país" ("Gringos put so many obstacles in the way that it seems like they have the illogical intention of not authorizing

legal entry to their country”; 22). The faulty logic of the authorities making it economically impossible for travelers to enter the United States legally is underscored when Roberto adds: “¿Acaso no se dan cuenta que de una u otra forma, la gente se va?” (“Perhaps they do not realize that one way or another, people will go?”). This evidently refers to the fact that people will go to great lengths to find a way to support themselves and also calls to mind Sir Thomas More’s famous chastisement in *Utopia* regarding governments that create thieves then punish them (36-37). Roberto’s point is that it is illogical to put so many impediments in the way of people who want to follow the laws, but who will circumvent arbitrary rules that prevent their own survival, regardless of the possible future punishment.

Josefina Ludmer would consider individuals acting in their own best interest, irrespective of any currently prevailing regulations, as applying “*laws other than that of the state*” (73, italics in original). The “state” (represented here by the consulate) has encoded “laws” (impermanent and arbitrary rules that can be changed) that are forcing migrant travelers into the position of engaging in what will be considered a crime by that very state. To rephrase More: what other thing do you do but make undocumented aliens who must engage in illegal acts and then punish them? There is also an inconsistency between the governmental view of the purposes of passports that Mark Salter highlighted—to control the movement of people and to regulate the labor market and wages (78)—and the view of the traveler who has been set on the road because of economic exigencies in their home countries. It underscores Amitava Kumar’s point that passports of citizens from poorer countries are directly related to the need for work (20). On the one hand, there is pressure to maintain low wages in order to maximize profits

(Pratt 238), yet on the other hand, people who are willing to work for wages considered low by United States standards are hindered from the movement north that could satisfy the first goal.³⁰ Roberto's view that there is an illogical process within the system seems to be well founded.

Roberto shows his wife a travel industry pamphlet that lists the costs for obtaining tickets and documents to go directly to the United States, which range from \$5,100 to \$6,000 per person (22-23). Looking again at information from the World Bank, the average annual national income in El Salvador during the late 1990s ranges from \$1,590 in 1995 to \$2,160 in 2000. This means that the costs would be two to almost four times the average income in the country. It is clear that the \$2,000 needed by Calderón in the 1970s and the \$5,100 minimum needed by each character in Escobar Parada's novel is severely out of proportion to their ability to pay. This illustrates once again the underlying economic problem of migrant travelers: they need money to pay for all the travel expenses in order to make money to support themselves and their families.

James Clifford suggests that looking at travel literature focusing on non-privileged travelers would demonstrate "the evident fact the travelers move about under strong cultural, political and economic compulsions and that certain travelers are materially privileged, others oppressed" (35). Most of the world undoubtedly would consider United States citizens to be materially privileged, but I can hardly imagine that in 1970 (the time frame for Cedric Calderón's travel) the United Kingdom would require

³⁰ Scholars who have debated the issues surrounding the impact of foreign migrant workers on wages in the United States include George J. Borjas in his *Immigration Economics* and *We Wanted Workers: Unraveling the Immigration Narrative*; and, Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone in their *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration*.

a citizen of the United States to prove that their savings account had \$26,800, or that the United States would require proof of a UK account of \$11,400, before granting visas. The amounts in the examples from the narratives above required by the American consulates in Guatemala and El Salvador are proportional to five times the national annual salary in the United States (\$5,360) and in the United Kingdom (\$2,280) in 1970. The \$2,000 required for a Guatemalan to travel to the United States in that same year is an even higher proportion at 5.7 times the national average annual salary. While Salter indicates that it is standard for a customs agent to verify the financial resources of a traveler entering a foreign country (129), requiring a bank account containing two to over five times a person's annual salary before granting a visa has every appearance of being oppressive. It also reinforces Salter's comments regarding governments' control over people (85). The state of affairs is even worse when one remembers that often the travelers in the narratives studied here are economically marginalized people seeking to improve their financial condition and are not likely to be earning a salary anywhere near the national average. Given these disproportionate and unrealistic economic requirements, Roberto's comment about the seeming intent to not authorize legal entry into the United States appears not only to be accurate, but something of an understatement (Escobar Parada 22).

This also provides some justification for the group's decision to circumvent the regulated process for obtaining visas, leading them into unsanctioned activities. Ludmer argues that economic injustice and abuse of power was a reasonable defense for murder by the gaucho Juan Moreira. The community standards were in conflict with the laws of the state, which drove him to make "*the passage from legality to illegality because of an*

injustice” (Ludmer 87, italics in original). The amount of money—outrageous in comparison to requirements in other parts of the world as shown above—mandated by the consulate in order to acquire a visa could easily be considered under the umbrella of economic injustice and abuse of power. Defying the unreasonable and unjust edict of the state consigns these travelers to the community of what Ludmer calls “heroic criminals” such as Moreira, Billy the Kid, and Jesse James. It also raises the question of whether this novel (and by extension all works about migrant travelers as I define them here) could be considered a subtle form of satire. Steven Weisenburger, in his discussion of degenerative satire, considers the delegitimizing role of satire to “subvert hierarchies of value” (3). By sidestepping (or ignoring entirely) the rules imposed by the state, migrant travelers subvert the state’s legitimacy through their supposed “crime” of rejecting or protesting against the norms of a society that is allowing an abuse of power through imposition of impossible economic requirements.³¹

This type of economic oppression is not limited to getting visas for the United States as Escobar Parada illustrates when Roberto tries to get permissions to enter Mexico. The Mexican Embassy indicates that in order to receive a visa there is a requirement for proof of a savings account that had been open for at least six months, with a balance of twenty thousand “colones” and proof of a monthly salary of eight thousand “colones” (23). Given the low percentage of Latin Americans that have bank accounts according to the Inter-American Development Bank study cited above, there is

³¹ According to Howard Zehr, “we need to realize that crime is inherently political. If crime often does imply a rejection of or a protest against society or its norms, then it is obviously a political act on the part of the offender” (144).

some irony in Mexico requiring proof of a savings account. In 2000,³² when the Salvadoran colón was equal to about \$0.11, this would have equaled \$2,200 in a savings account with a monthly salary of \$880, or an annual salary of \$10,560—4.8 times more than the average annual salary in El Salvador at the time. Roberto, Carlos, and Ana come from the middle class and would have had problems fulfilling these conditions; Sofía would never be able to do so. The description that Sofía would never be able to disguise her looks as a *campesina* (23) emphasizes that she is clearly a country girl who would not have access to that level of income. Consequently, Roberto seeks other means for getting travel documents: “La encrucijada lo obligó a buscar la visa fuera de la embajada, recurriendo nuevamente a los rotativos. Existían varias redes que [...] involucraban un par de empleados del consulado, ya que atrevidamente hacían hincapié en la autenticidad del visado” (“The impasse forced him to seek a visa outside the embassy, resorting again to the circulars. There were several networks that [...] involved a couple of employees from the consulate, who boldly emphasized the authenticity of the visa”; Escobar Parada 23). Given that the Mexican consulate is engaging in the same disproportionate pecuniary strategy for supplying visas as the American consulate, Roberto has to work outside of the state channels, reemphasizing Ludmer’s acknowledgement of other powers and laws to achieve goals (73). Sofía’s travel documents are purchased for \$900 and the others are able to get their stamps from Mexican consulate employees for free (23).

In time, Sofía’s questionable documents have consequences for the group, which finally leads them to begin avoiding official checkpoints while crossing Mexico.

Following one such episode, Carlos comments, “En esos momentos a uno lo hacen sentir

³² May 31, 2000 is the oldest date available for converting US dollars to Salvadoran colones (“Historical rates”).

como que ha cometido un delito y se está regateando la libertad” (“In these moments, one is made to feel as if he had committed a crime and are bargaining for freedom,” 84). The irony is that they are indeed committing a crime from the perspective of the state—they are traveling illegally in a foreign country. However, as seen from the perspective of the customary laws of the community such as Ludmer submits (87), these acts are heroic ways to realize their objectives rather than illegal behaviors. The characters find ways to work around the rules of society, which gives a picaresque quality to these narratives of migrant travel. However, the lack of moralizing within these narratives keeps them from being fully *pícaro*. Migrant travelers know the laws of the states, but they also know that those laws are both temporary social constructions and malleable—society’s stances on issues shift over time, and behaviors and actions that were criminal or legal in the past can change. The characters make use of formal written laws when they can, but apply common sense and community tradition when necessary. In the events that led up to Carlos’s comment, for example, Roberto presents himself to the authorities as a working father just trying to get home to his son (83), while Carlos, Ana, and Sofía pass themselves off as tourists with car trouble (75-78). In order to maneuver through the official channels, despite their extraordinary circumstances they present images of ordinary people. They show the authorities customary scenarios so that they will not be closely questioned—nothing to see here; nothing unusual.

The ease with which Central Americans normally travel within their home region is seen in the description of the group’s border crossing from El Salvador into Guatemala. The group’s first official threshold moment still causes some anxiety:

El edificio de aduanas y migración sobresalía en medio de típicas tiendas populares y bulliciosas ventas callejeras, situadas a uno y otro margen del río Paz, que divide a las dos naciones.

—Bueno, ya oyeron —les dijo Roberto— bajemos a hacer cola, esto es rutinario —agregó al notarles un tanto nerviosos.

The customs and migration building stood out amid typical popular shops and bustling street vendors, located on either side of the Paz River, which divides the two nations.

Well, you just heard —Roberto told them— let's go down to get in line, this is routine —he added noticing their nervousness. (29)

Roberto's previous experience traveling is reassuring, as is the confirmation that everything is routine when their documents are reviewed and stamped in less than one hour, and they are on their way again. In terms of a threshold, this entry is very much like that of a house—the group is stopped at the door (got off their bus at the immigration checkpoint), knocked on the door (turned over their documents), the door was opened (the documents were stamped), and they entered (got back on the bus and continued their journey). From the perspective of Bakhtin, this would be a renewal—a positive outcome following the threshold event. However, crossing this one threshold is just the beginning. As I indicated earlier in this chapter, threshold events multiply during the journey. There are many more thresholds and therefore more crisis points that the group will encounter as they move farther away from their home territory.

The threshold events begin to take on a Kafkaesque pattern of senselessness and helplessness as the group encounters representatives of the multiple governmental

agencies that control passage through Mexico.³³ Their journey becomes a series of crisis moments when they are not sure if the threshold will be opened or closed to them, or if a particular threshold must be avoided. After crossing Guatemala by bus without problems, the group becomes the focus of the immigration agent at the Mexican border (37). He immediately focuses on Sofía, asking how she got her visa. The question the agent asks is “¿Y, usted, cómo es que ha sacado la visa?” Since there is no specific guide to indicate an emphasis to the question, I have read it from two perspectives that a governmental bureaucrat might take: (1) And you, *how* is it that you got the visa?—inquiring into the process of getting the stamp; versus, (2) And you, how is it that *you* got the visa?—inquiring into how so obvious a country girl could have gotten the stamp. There is no indication at this point in the story that the agent thinks the visa is false, so either case provides some credibility for an assessment that the question is unwarranted, and thus an abuse of power. Given that there is no indication in the typography regarding emphasis, I have taken the more neutral first interpretation. However, Roberto’s reaction gives some credence to the possibility of the second reading. Sofía is frightened by the question and remains silent. Roberto intercedes, answering that it was from the Mexican consulate in El Salvador. As a result of his intercession, the agent turns his questions to Roberto, especially regarding his visa for travel to the United States (37-38). After taking the passports into the guardhouse, the agent returns and presses Roberto, asking if he is taking the rest of the group north. Roberto insists that only he is going to the United States after visiting the Mexican capital with the others. During the period that the

³³ The agencies include the “Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM)” (37), the “Procuraduría General de la República —PGR” (43), the “Policía Judicial Federal” (119), and the Mexican Army in the form of the “comandante militar” (119).

Mexican border agent was in the guardhouse, the group was worried and Ana had asked what would happen if the papers were not returned, but Roberto reassured the group that they should just stay calm (38). Smiling ironically, the agent returns the passports, lets the bus proceed, and the group is relieved. Nevertheless, they know that this is just the first of many checkpoints they will have to traverse, and they begin to realize that passing through Mexico will be neither easy nor agreeable, and that anything could happen (38). Again, there is a positive renewal of their journey after the threshold event, but only after an anxious period.

That incident was just the first in a series of nerve-wracking encounters the group has with Mexican authorities. After passing the night in Tapachula, the Salvadorans take an early morning bus toward Veracruz: “No habían transcurrido cinco minutos y apareció el primer obstáculo del día: un puesto del INM. De nuevo la atención de todos se concentró en las autoridades” (“Five minutes had not passed and the first obstacle of the day appeared: an INM post. Again everyone’s attention was focused on the authorities”; 43). Their travel day has hardly begun, yet they are immediately thrown into another threshold point where Sofía’s papers may be called into question. The entire sequence brings to light the heightening tension within the group in a very compact time frame.

Two agents get on the bus:

El más vivaracho se fijo en Sofía, que tenía una publicación encima de las piernas. Por descuido o nerviosismo no la estaba leyendo como le había exhortado Roberto. Procedió de la misma manera con ella y con Carlos. Sin medir palabras el agente se retiró.

A media hora de camino, surgió otro punto de control del INM, el cual pasaron —con el procedimiento de rigor— sin novedad.

Más adelante, los agentes de la Procuraduría General de la República —PGR— de la garita de Capetagua detuvieron al autobús, subiendo dos de ellos para la rutinaria inspección.

—Ahí vienen otra vez —dijo Roberto malhumorado—. Es la tercera vez que nos detienen. Prepárense, y usted Sofía, agarre la revista y lea, o por lo menos finja.

Uno de los agentes escudriñó meticulosamente a los pasajeros, pidió algunos los documentos, al azar y clavó su vidriosa vista en Sofía, soltando la trillada frase: «Su credencial».

The more vivacious one fixates on Sofía, who had a magazine on her legs. Because of carelessness or nervousness she was not reading it as Roberto had admonished her. He proceeded the same way [demanding their papers] with her and Carlos. Without mincing words the agent left.

Half an hour down the road, another INM control point emerged, which they passed —with rigorous process— without incident.

Later, agents of the Attorney General's Office of the Republic —PGR— stopped the bus at the post in Capetagua, two of them getting on for routine inspection.

There they come again —said Roberto grumpily—. It is the third time they have stopped us. Get ready, and you Sofía, grab the magazine and read, or at least pretend.

One of the agents meticulously scrutinized the passengers, asking some for documents, at random and nailed his glassy gaze on Sofía, issuing the hackneyed phrase: «Your credential». (43)

In this segment, there is little relief from the onslaught of official inspection: thirty minutes here, a little time there. While the group is able to move through each of the thresholds, it is clear that every stop is taking an emotional toll. Poor Sofía has to endure both the frightening attention of the Mexican officials and Roberto's anger as his annoyance increases with each successive stop and scrutiny of their travel documents.

There is, of course, cause for any fear and anxiety they might feel each time they will have to negotiate an official checkpoint given how Roberto acquired Sofía's documents. Her documents came from an "oficina de asesoramiento y para trámites de visa" ("counseling office for visa procedures"; 23), which seems to be somewhat informal if not completely unauthorized. Recall, also, that Mexican consulate employees who were working outside of the governmental bureaucracy provided the visas for Roberto, Carlos, and Ana. Just as acquiring all of the documents was part of the "economy of travel" for these characters, what happens next is typical of economic transactions for migrant travelers.

After demanding Sofía's documents, the PGR agent asks if she is traveling alone. Carlos responds that they are together. Sofía and Carlos are taken off the bus to a separate building, where the agent claims that Carlos's visa is false (44). False documents are among the issues that Mark Salter discusses regarding the control of people and the passport regime, especially with regard to spies and other undesirable people entering a nation's sovereign territory (33-39). While authorized documents are supposed to provide

some protection to the traveler, he notes that “travelers are subject to blackmail, harassment, and possibly violence” by terrorists (Salter 37). In the cases of Sofía and Carlos, however, the harassment is coming from state officials. Their passports and visas are supposed to open doors for them, yet here the documents are creating new barriers. Meanwhile, Ana and Roberto worry about what is happening: “El suspenso se hacía interminable” (“The suspense became interminable”; 44). Roberto says to Ana, “Aunque todo lo tenga legal [...] no se sabe lo que pueden hacer” (“Although everything is legal [...] you do not know what they can do” 45). Knowing that Roberto had been working the system in order to get the visas, one has to wonder how official they really are. Did the employees in the Mexican consulate in El Salvador really provide authenticated stamps? Roberto seems to believe they did. Overhearing, one of the Mexican passengers comments, “si el señor tiene sus papeles en regla, no hay motivo para que lo retengan más tiempo, ya lo van a soltar. Estos lo que quieren es ‘lana’” (“if the man has his papers in order, there is no reason for him to be detained any longer, they will let him go. What those guys want is ‘cash’”). His statement proves accurate.

During the interrogation, one of the agents tells Carlos that they suspect him of carrying drugs (46). Carlos counters that their possessions were X-rayed when they entered the country and if they want, the agents can search again. He eventually ends up paying a bribe of \$60 so they can leave (47). Instead of the travel documents opening the door for Carlos and Sofía to pass through the threshold, it is cash that acts as the passports and visas for them. When he returns to the bus, Carlos is angry because of the fright and the robbery he endured at the hands of the officials. Once he calms down, he comments about how odd it is that the agents always go directly to Sofía. Roberto

wonders aloud if it has something to do with her dress and demeanor. This seems to be an informal application of Kumar's "LP=looks poor" schema at play in the novel. However, Carlos thinks it may be that the agents are passing messages along so that they can clean them out of money, which may very well be the case.

Two checkpoints later, the whole scenario is repeated only with a bribe of \$120 (50). This short sequence during one day's travel shows the multiplicity of crisis moments that the group will face traversing the internal checkpoints just in Mexico. The openly dishonest actions of the authorities causes one of the Mexican passengers on the bus to comment about the principal causes of police attitudes toward migration in Mexico, "La ambición desmedida en la conquista del poder político y económico, exhibiendo una actitud prepotente y atemorizadora" ("Unbridled ambition in the pursuit of political and economic power, exhibiting an overbearing and frightening attitude"; 51). He continues that there is an attitude that corruption is so institutionalized it seems to be right and an obligation, and that there is no region of the world where you can save yourself from it.³⁴ Unfortunately for the Salvadorans, the economic privations in their home country forced them to go north to seek a better life. It also compelled them to bypass fully valid sources when arranging their travel. Now they are trapped in a system of economic exploitation brought on by the fact that they could not acquire legitimate travel documents.

This situation is directly tied to Clifford's perspective about the taintedness of travel, especially with regard to the agency and mobility of migrant-laborers and poor "nonwhite people who *must* leave home in order to survive" (34, italics in original).

³⁴ "La corrupción está tan institucionalizada, que pareciera ser un derecho y una obligación. Y ninguna región del mundo se salva" (51).

Sofía, Ana, and Carlos are all being propelled on their journeys due to the unsound economic and perilous social conditions in El Salvador. Carlos was injured on the job and has been out of work for two months, Ana is almost bankrupt, and 19-year-old Sofía is pregnant. They are all seeking to improve their futures. Sofia's aunt convinced Roberto to take Sofía to her mother in Georgia to avoid having a baby born into the continual poverty of the country (20). While not migrant labor in the organized sense that Clifford is using above, the three fit his condition of needing to "leave home in order to survive", hoping to find better living and working conditions, crossing Mexico in search of advancement. This also is clearly related to Van Den Abbeele's economy of travel. The other theoretical perspectives for this study also seem to be coming together in these threshold events. Bakhtin's threshold chronotope shows Anzaldúa's class and gender exploitation as the Mexican immigration agents consistently target the *campesina* Sofía. The coercion of Pratt's contact zone is apparent as government officials use their positions of authority to extract bribes from the travelers. This exchange of monies can also be seen as the downside of Van Den Abbeele's economic attribute of travel, especially migrant travel done in a clandestine fashion.

While the majority of the narratives I am studying here follow travelers going through Mexico, not all the trips north are made by land, or by using dubious travel documents. The opening chapter of Honduran author Roberto Quesada's novel *Nunca entres por Miami* illustrates the tensions and anxieties travelers experience even when they have all the appropriate documents. Elías Sandoval is an artist from Honduras, traveling to New York to deliver his sculpture, a bust of Francisco Morazán, a famous Honduran general who helped Central America gain independence from Spain during the

nineteenth century. Unfortunately, his flight from Honduras is not direct to New York, so he must go through customs in Miami, Florida before getting a connection to his destination. Even though Elías has a valid passport and visa, he does not have the required round trip ticket that would prove he intends to return to his home country (*Nunca* 13; *Never* 3).³⁵ Making matters worse, he only has \$80 in his pocket (*Nunca* 17; *Never* 7), which is clearly an inadequate amount of money to spend any length of time in New York City. All of the apprehensions associated with breaking a taboo play out in Elías’s mind as he waits his turn to go through customs at the Miami airport:

Tengo mis documentos en orden. Mi visa está clara, me parezco al de la foto, soy yo, sí, éste soy yo. Nada es falso. Todo lo mío es legal. Legal, ésa es la palabra que salva. Me preocupa más que nada este maldito renglón: ‘El hecho de poseer esta visa no le garantiza que usted puede entrar a los Estados Unidos.’ ¿Cuál sería la razón por la que no me dejarían entrar? Documentos en orden, carta de invitación. No tengo antecedentes penales en mi país ni en ningún otro. (*Nunca* 11)

My documents are in order, my visa is valid. I look like the person in the photograph—yes, it’s me, this is me. Nothing is fake, everything is legal. Legal, that is the word that saves. More than anything I am worried about this damned line. “Possession of this visa does not guarantee entry to the United States.” What reason would they have for not letting me enter? Documents in order, a letter of invitation. I have no criminal record in my country or any other one. (*Never* 1)

³⁵ All references and quotes are to the original Spanish edition, followed by the English translation: *Never through Miami*.

Elías's thoughts verge on obsession regarding proper paperwork, treating the passport and visa as fetishes.³⁶ A valid passport and visa become almost like protective amulets, providing the bearer a pledge between the countries issuing the documents: the person pictured in the passport is of good character, so the visa of the receiving country should be honored. Not only should the bearer of a valid passport and visa be able to enter into the United States, but also should be able to stay in the United States without fear of later deportation because of these all-important documents. However, the length of a visa varies depending on the purpose for which it was issued. While his documents are in order, Elías worries that their protective status will not have the power to produce his desire: entrance into the United States. Lacan's essays "Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis" and "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" give clues to Elías's obsessive behavior. He has knowledge about himself that Lacan might describe as "paranoiac" ("Aggressiveness" 91) that is producing guilt ("Aggressiveness" 95) regarding the object of his desire to enter into the United States. He knows that the "I" he is presenting to the customs agent is not a complete rendering of himself or his intentions, so he has "discordance with his own reality" ("Mirror" 191). Consequently, he has to continually reassure himself and reconfirm his own identity and status—"it's me, this is me. Nothing is fake, everything is legal." Yet he has no control over whether or not the customs agents will agree with his vision of himself as the person portrayed in the passport.

Elías has good reason to fret. According to Salter, the passport control area is a space that is "controlled and contained" (126) where "travelers are subjected to the

³⁶ See John T. Driscoll's article on "Fetishism" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* for a fuller discussion of the concept.

unlimited power of the state” (127). Since travelers have exited their own countries, but not yet entered into the destination country, they are in a type of no-man’s land—no longer subject to the laws of their home nations, but not yet under the protection of the nation of their destination.³⁷ Their status is that of neither citizen nor foreigner in this space. As Salter puts it: “the border becomes the only dangerous space where rights are abrogated. At the moment when foreigners are constituted as international actors by crossing borders and frontiers, the state moves to assert the dominance of its power” (129). However, this transitional space where passports are reviewed is both a space of hyper-control by the state asserting its power and a space of lawless anomie: the traveler has both exited the legal controls of their home countries, but not yet entered the control of the new country. Whatever norms they knew at home, may not necessarily apply where they are going. As Anzaldúa would say, it is “a vague and undetermined place” (25). Consequently, travelers “must feel the anxiety of being interrogated and potentially excluded in a display of the power of the state” (129). Elías’s thoughts reflect his turmoil in this liminal space:

El momento más difícil aseguran que es éste: pasar inmigración. Tengo todo en orden, no traigo aguacates ni gallinas ni perros ni mantequilla ni cajas de cartón ni nada que se prohíba pasar. ¿Este par de esculturas que cargo en la maleta han de causarme problema? (*Nunca* 12)

They say that the most difficult part is this: passing through customs. Everything is in order. I’m not bringing in any avocados or chickens or dogs or butter or

³⁷ While not related to migrant travel from Central America, the “no man’s land” experience is wonderfully portrayed in the 2004 film *The Terminal*.

cardboard boxes or anything that is not allowed. Will those two sculptures in my suitcase be a problem? (*Never 2*)

Elías is clearly in the liminal/transitional/uncertain status that Genep considered “the crossroads of change” and experiencing Culter’s state of “in-betweenness” placing him squarely in a “borderlands” situation. His identity is in doubt, or at the very least, in flux. He is an artist, yet the sensitivity of his artistic nature generates an internal dialog about his own self. He doubts himself and the product of his individuality when he questions whether or not the sculpture he has created will cause him any difficulties.

There is also in this passage the paradox of Elías’s own conflicted notion of how other people might view him, especially if the other person is from a developed country. He alludes to this external image of people from underdeveloped countries, especially Central American countries, when he notes that he is “not bringing in any avocados or chickens or dogs or butter or cardboard boxes.” He projects what he believes is an underlying idea held by sophisticates that people from less developed regions will automatically be rural bumpkins who carry their belongings in cardboard boxes instead of luggage, and who will bring their own food supplies in the form of animals and vegetables. Sofía, the country girl from the novel *El viaje a la tierra prometida*, would probably more closely fit this description were she traveling by herself. Both Sofía and Elías have anxious reactions during their international threshold events: Sofía, the *campesina*, freezes under stress, while Elías, the urbanite, thinks himself into a fit.

As the first chapter progresses, Elías is passed from custom agent to custom agent, while he continues to agonize about the amount of time, if any, he will be allowed to stay in the United States—two weeks (*Nunca 13; Never 3*) or one day (*Nunca 17*;

Never 7)? Given that he is a solidly middle-class person whose speech and appearance would mean he never would have been denied a tourist visa based on the U.S. State Department abbreviations listed above, his anxiety seems a bit exaggerated. However, these scenes are in the opening of the novel and his complete travel plans have not yet been revealed. Eventually, he is given permission to stay for six months on a temporary travel visa (*Nunca 22; Never 12*). As with many of the “undocumented” people now in the United States, Elías eventually overstays his approved visa period. The remainder of the novel tells of how he lives under this condition.

While Elías’s situation is representative of countless undocumented individuals in the United States, it is unique among the novels included in this study. There is a certain irony that the only two protagonists in the works included in this study who straightforwardly obtain legal visas are Elías (a sculptor who exaggerates his professional standing as an artist) and Roberto (who traveled to the United States before, but who has no desire to stay there). Both of these men are solidly middle-class in appearance and speech and neither would have been denied a tourist visa based on the U.S. State Department abbreviations discussed earlier. It is also important to stress that both of them apply for temporary travel visas rather than work or immigration visas. They are conventional travelers. Roberto has every intention of returning to his family in El Salvador, while Elías’s plan (if he really has one) is unclear.

Roberto’s border-crossing with a passport and visa is so unexceptional and routine that there is no mention of the event in *El viaje la tierra prometia*. After eleven days on the road, Roberto and his group finally reach Altar, Sonora, Mexico, located about sixty miles from the border with the United States. Believing that he has made

arrangements for the rest of the group, Roberto thinks that he will leave at sunset to head for Phoenix, crossing at the Nogales port of entry (125). However, the plans for his group fall apart and other measures have to be formulated. This situation is a threshold crisis event that develops directly from the moment Ana, Carlos, and Sofía are compelled to travel clandestinely without authorized documents. Roberto's bus to Phoenix arrives and he must leave his companions (140). The splitting of a group of travelers is not unusual, especially when traveling without papers. The next time Roberto appears in the story, he is in a room at a motel in Phoenix (152). There is no reference in the text regarding Roberto crossing the official threshold into the United States. How Ana, Carlos, and Sofía make the crossing into the United States will be covered in the next chapter where I will discuss more consequences of migrant travel along covert routes and the need to find unofficial thresholds into *el norte*.

Money, Money Everywhere!

So far I have been focusing on the economic issues surrounding acquiring valid travel documents (passports and visas) that appear in a small sample of narratives about Central American migrant travelers. However, beyond just the costs of acquiring these documents, there are other financial themes embedded in narratives of migrant travel. In *Ficciones del dinero, Argentina, 1890-2001*, Alejandra Laera discusses how “el dinero era el motor de la trama, lo que echaba a andar la historia, la matriz explicativa del relato” (“money was the engine of the plot, what set the story in motion, the explanatory matrix of the tale”; 13). Just as with the Argentine fiction that Laera analyzes in her study, there are indicators throughout the works I am investigating that mark the extent to

which economic topics sustain and propel these tales. I have already revealed the poor financial circumstances that surround Carlos and Ana. In Ana's case, her children had sent the funds (11), but those were spent on the unsuccessful attempt to go north. Her situation is described:

—La verdad es que necesito irme —dijo Ana—. Aquí estoy perdiendo el tiempo.

Tenía gastos fijos pero no ingresos. Lo más lamentable es que mantenía a sus “viejos” —como les decía cariñosamente— y se le estaba agotando la reserva de colones. «Con decirte que hasta las “maras” se aprovechan de uno», dijo amargada. Exigían un colón cada vez que los residentes entraban a la colonia, o de mala suerte se topaban con ellos en otro lugar donde tenían el control.

—The truth is that I need to go —said Ana—. Here I am losing time.

She had fixed expenses but no income. The saddest part was that she supported her “old folks” —as she lovingly called them— and her reserve of money was running out. «I tell you that even the “maras” take advantage of one», she said bitterly. They demanded a Colón [Salvadoran dollar] each time residents entered the neighborhood, or through bad luck you ran into them in another place where they had control. (17-18)

Through the context of Ana's circumstances, this passage discloses how money plays a part in putting migrant travelers on the road, and how it is coupled with anxiety before travel even begins.

Once on the road, migrant travelers often find out that the amount of money they had expected to pay along the way is not enough, as the Salvadoran group discovers. When they are in Veracruz, Roberto considers buying plane tickets to Hermosillo, but

realizes “con lo que disponían no era suficiente para tomar avión desde esa ciudad, y todavía quedarían ajustados en su presupuesto” (“what they had was not enough to take a plane from that city, and they would still be tight within their budget”; 57). After reaching Hermosillo, money is continuing to run short for the travelers: “El efectivo con que disponían no cubría el imprevisible servicio y la estancia en el hotel. Buscando la forma de estirar el capital, Roberto determinó hablarle a un pariente a EE UU para solicitarle prestado cuatrocientos dólares, computando era lo indispensable” (“The cash they had did not cover the unpredictable service and the stay in the hotel. Looking for a way to stretch capital, Roberto decided to speak to a relative in the US in order to borrow four hundred dollars, computing that was essential”; 65-66). Calculating the costs of migrant travel is problematic because the routes are variable and unpredictable. The Salvadorans had not expected to have to crisscross Mexico east and west as well as south to north. This episode is representative of another facet of migrant travel: borrowing and lending cash, usually more than once during a trip. The Salvadorans in this novel have to find extra funding on multiple occasions: before leaving Hermosillo, Ana borrows another \$1,100 dollars from her daughter (69) and another \$200 from her friend Sandy (71); when Carlos is stuck in Mexico, Ana convinces her son to lend \$1,000 (155).

However, it is not just the migrant travelers who face continually changing economic impacts related to this style of travel. The general Mexican population has also been affected by shift in the global marketplace as seen in an exchange between Roberto and a local taxi driver in Hermosillo. The driver tells Roberto that life is hard, noting that “[e]l estado de Sonora produce de todo: carne, mariscos, uva, cobre y otros productos. Pero casi todo se va para el Norte. Y lo que queda no es barato” (“the state of Sonora

produces everything: meat, seafood, grapes, copper and other products. But almost everything goes to the North. And what is left is not cheap"; 71). The driver goes on to tell Roberto about the high interest rates for buying a car and the bribes that have to be paid to officials to avoid being either ticketed or pressured for more money (72). Roberto finds himself thinking: "Se solidarizó con él, que también era víctima [...] de las autoridades, de los políticos y del gran capital" ("He sympathized with him, who was also a victim [...] of the authorities, politicians and big business"; 73).

Beyond the corruption that the Salvadorans had experienced first hand, and that was confirmed by the local taxi driver, Roberto observes that Hermosillo had become enmeshed in the economy of migrant travel:

Hermosillo se había convertido en un punto de tránsito para los nacionales y extranjeros que se dirigen a la tierra de sus sueños.

Una muestra fue la declaración de la recepcionista: «Aquí hemos tenido inquilinos del sur de México y Centroamérica. También de Colombia, Ecuador, Perú, China, y hasta de Europa Oriental».

Hermosillo had become a transit point for nationals and foreigners who were heading for the land of their dreams.

An example was the receptionist's statement: «Here we have had tenants from southern Mexico and Central America. Also from Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, China, and even Eastern Europe». (74)

A similar description is given later for the town of Altar near the US-Mexico border: "Por la afluencia parecía un lugar turístico, pero sin atractivo para divertirse. Más bien se había convertido en un 'puente de paso obligado' hacia la tierra de las oportunidades" ("By the

affluence it seemed a tourist place, but without attraction to have fun. Rather it became a ‘bridge of forced passage’ to the land of opportunities”; 101). As the days pass, the Salvadorans detect more signs of the influence of migrant economy of travel:

Les llamaba la atención el hecho de que un comedor de ese tipo [...] tuviera siempre una gran afluencia, algo muy difícil de igualar en cualquier región de Centroamérica.

Desde luego, se debía en gran parte al use del recurso monetario de los atormentados migrantes, sin ellos los otros no sostendrían ese nivel de prosperidad. En términos económicos, significaba una gran entrada.

They were struck by the fact that a diner of this type [...] always had such affluence, something very difficult to match in any region of Central America.

Of course, it was due in large part to the use of the monetary resources of the tormented migrants, without who the others would not sustain that level of prosperity. In economic terms, it meant a great income. (102)

Conversing with the owner of the eatery, Roberto discovers that he cooks 500-600 kilos of chicken every four days for the migrant travelers passing through the town: “Roberto dedujo que al micro empresario con facilidad le ingresaba una renta mensual promedio de cinco mil dólares americanos” (“Roberto deduced that the micro-entrepreneur could easily make an average monthly income of five thousand American dollars”; 103). These sequences show that the economy of travel is not associated only with the traveler, but also with all the places he or she travels through. Laera might consider it part of the explanatory matrix in the tales of migrant travelers.

In this chapter, I have discussed how money is foundational to migrant travelers who, in some cases, are seeking to improve their economic circumstances, or, in other cases, may be fleeing dangerous living conditions, or both as in the case of the Salvadoran Ana. I have also shown how the economy of travel is not just associated with the traveler, but likewise with the locations where travelers pass, drawing attention to the financial impact the business of migrant travel has on all parties concerned. I disclosed the exorbitant rates that are charged to migrant travelers who try to obtain legal travel documents, thus preventing them from being able to openly journey north. Having covered examples of the difficulties encountered by migrant travelers who have travel documents as they cross thresholds at official points of entry and other checkpoints, in the next chapter I will be examining traversing borders away from these locations. What happens to migrant travelers as they cross over rivers and deserts, or through tunnels?

CHAPTER 3

DESERTS, TUNNELS, RIVERS:

THE LANDSCAPES OF CLANDESTINE CROSSING

As I argued in the last chapter, the lack of documentation is an underlying theme in the narratives I am investigating. Among the consequences of this lack are the unexpected twists in plans for the journey. Georges Van Den Abbeele points out that Western literature is saturated with travel motifs and observes that these literary passages are often on “a prescribed pathway (typically straight and narrow)” (*Travel* xv). However, he goes on to affirm the opposite of that view when he remarks that during any voyage “something can always go wrong.” In other words, even the straight paths can be bumpy and irregular. Since Van Den Abbeele references the classic Odysseyan journey, I will note that the characters in the narratives included here also encounter deviations in their paths to their destinations. Just as Odysseus was blown off course, held captive, and loses his travel companions to death, the travelers in these works find that their original plans may go terribly awry, their pathways are not straight and narrow, they are often detained, and they may face their own deaths or the deaths of other travelers. These deviations are particularly fraught for migrant travelers, who may not necessarily have suitable identification or permission to proceed forward, and consequently they are commonly categorized as undesirable elements of society. As migrant travelers are pushed away from official thresholds and authorized borders crossing points into the dangerous and inhospitable spaces, their traversing of international boundaries becomes a

criminal act. Even with some appropriate credentials, these travelers may be shifted from their original courses to thresholds at unsanctioned sites, crossing at locations that include deserts, tunnels, and rivers. These are the crucial landscapes of clandestine crossing in narratives about modern migrant travelers.

Richard Bevis, in his *The Road to Egdon Heath: The Aesthetics of the Great in Nature*, provides an extensive model for how landscapes may be analyzed in multiple genres of literature “tracing the growth of a certain kind of aesthetic sensibility” (xiv). Pertinent to the works I am examining here, Bevis considers “great empty spaces” including mountains, seas, moors, wastelands, and deserts (xii-xiii). He links terms such as majestic and grand, which are normally associated with these vast spaces, with the notion of sublimity. Bevis comments, “[Edmund] Burke’s thesis³⁸ is that sublimity arouses deeper and larger emotions, including fear, than does beauty, which gives relatively shallow feelings of joy and pleasure” (5). The deep emotions of sublimity are evoked by the great barrens of the heathlands in Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*, the focus of Bevis’s study. He describes Hardy’s landscape of “the heath, as the natural embodiment of a primal fear” (7). Like the heath, deserts elicit elemental dread for those contemplating entering the vast wastelands. Bevis is looking at landscape from the romantic perspective of the nineteenth century, so it may seem somewhat out of place to approach late twentieth and early-twenty first century novels using such a point of view. However, my analysis of the opening paragraphs of Graciela Limón’s novel *The River Flows North* will show that vestiges of these sublime elements remain in at least one writer’s toolbox through the vocabulary she uses to describe the environment and

³⁸ Burke’s thesis is presented in his 1757 essay *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*.

how humans react to it. Other novels that include desert crossings evoke the landscape through the use of dialogue rather than imposing description, but are no less effective in conveying the emotional reactions of the characters to the setting. In most cases, migrant travelers in these tales will be on foot in the desert, rather than in vehicles, but either form of travel involves interaction with the harsh ecosystem of the barren region known for its lack of water, as well as extremes of heat and cold.

While he covers the vastness associated with oceans and seas, Bevis does not discuss other bodies of water such as rivers. However, these entities also conjure strong emotions for travelers. The Rio Grande/Río Bravo, for example, is an unpredictable participant in a migrant's journey and is approached with trepidation. This river can be so shallow that it is easy to wade across or so flooded that it sweeps away anything in its path. Floodwaters from storms miles away can suddenly overtake an unwary person crossing or near the river. The currents in deeper sections of the river are usually gentle near the shores, but are deceptively swift in the center, taxing even the strongest swimmers. Not only is the river a natural feature to be overcome during the journey, like the desert, it is not necessarily an empty space. There are inhabitants on both shores who contest the migrant travelers' passage through the region and across the river.

A map of Mexico shows that mountains, rivers, and deserts create its borders on the north and south. Because these are natural features rather than being created by humans, that they are considered to be boundaries between nations is an artificial construct. In the areas that are near the official ports of entry between Mexico and the United States, for example, the location of the border is clearly marked. In *The Fence and the River: Culture and Politics at the U.S.-Mexico Border*, Claire Fox comments about

how “the border fence has great symbolic currency” for people on both sides of the boundary (46). She also shows through photographs taken from Peter Goin’s *Tracing the Line: A Photographic Survey of the Mexican/American Border*, that the construction of a fence may show a tangible barrier, but it is also a permeable obstruction (Fox 49-52). For the migrant traveler who is forced away from the official thresholds that are designated by walls and fences to the more open spaces of rivers and deserts, the point at which one moves from one country to the next is a conjecture, infused with speculation about the future. Going past the imaginary frontier draws out both positive and negative anxiety: the eager hope for the future along with fear of the unknown. In the isolation of the wilderness, the migrant traveler has no indication where the line dividing Mexico and the United States is in the Chihuahuan or Sonoran Deserts, and thus no specific locus where uncertainties can be anchored and confronted. These travelers are not able to pinpoint the exact site where they achieved the fulfillment of their journey north—there is no symbolic culmination of their passage. This holds true for river crossings as well. When fording the Suchiate River between Guatemala and Mexico, or the Río Bravo/Rio Grande between Mexico and Texas, what spot in the river marks the entry point into Mexico or the United States?

The invisible lines created by natural features such as mountains, rivers or deserts separating countries still may have some slight man-made indication of where the partition exists. Goin’s photographs show barbed-wire fences like those used to contain cattle, as well as more substantial walls and chain-link fences. Historic photographs used by Fox show the border marked by nothing more than a wooden pole (73) or a trench with a line drawn on the photograph (78). She refers to these insubstantial markers as

sight gags stating “that photographers and correspondents felt obliged to impose the border by lines and labels [attesting] to how indistinguishable from one another the national territories actually appeared” (78). This kind of quip regarding imprecision of the border also appears in the narratives included in this study. At the beginning of Graciela Limón’s *The River Flows North*, the *coyote* Leonardo Cerda is asked about the location of the border. He replies, “Over there, on the other side of the road. [...] See where there’s only sand? Right there is a dry arroyo. That’s the line” (15). His potential customers are described as standing “on tiptoe, stretching their necks, pivoting heads, squinting eyes and trying desperately to make out the magic line. Beyond it the dream waited” (15-16). The magic lines that separate migrant travelers from their needs, goals, or dreams are barely detectable artificial dividers above ground and become even more imperceptible when they occur underground in tunnels or drainage pipes. Pipes and tunnels are specific passageways underneath the landscapes, allowing for unobserved entrance, but utilizing these unconventional thresholds intensifies the dangers for migrant travelers and emphasizes the clandestine nature of this type of journey.

Many of the migrant travelers in the narratives included in this study are diverted away from the official thresholds into both Mexico and the United States to regions where the landscapes conceal the national boundaries the travelers are traversing—into the deserts, the tunnels, and the rivers. I have selected distinctive passages from multiple novels that will illustrate the various landscapes travelers encounter, and how they overcome or succumb to the dangers they confront at these sites. The analysis of deserts will include sections from Graciela Limón’s *The River Flows North* (2009), Juan B. Escobar Parada’s *El viaje a la tierra prometida* (2002), and Luis Alberto Urrea’s *Into the*

Beautiful North (2009). The comparison between the experiences of the brother and sister in Gregory Nava's film *El Norte* (1983) and the group in *Into the Beautiful North* will constitute the bulk of the examination of tunnels. As boundaries, rivers bracket Mexico, and as borders they represent a particular site of double-crossing for some Central American migrant travelers traversing both the Río Suchiate in the south and the Río Bravo/Rio Grande in the north. The Suchiate River is the site of an important segment in *The River Flows North*, while crossing the Rio Grande is an opening scene in several novels including the 1948 Mexican classic *Murieron a mitad del río* by Luis Spota and Costa Rican novelist Miguel Salguero's *A la caza del coyote* (1992). A double-crossing of both rivers is portrayed in Salvadoran Berne Ayalá's novel *Arizona Dreaming* (2007) as his characters flee mob and criminal violence of El Salvador only to encounter a different type of gang at the US-Mexico border.

Detours, Clandestinity, and the Importance of Travesía.

Deserts and rivers are crucial landscapes for the migrant travelers who are deviated away from the routes they may have originally wanted to follow. Having been denied authorization to cross the threshold at the door of an official port of entry, they seek admission through unguarded regions. These spaces are not the usual locations that people visit. They are not along the roads and paths that most tourists travel. Adventure seekers sometimes may be found in these locations—camping in the desert or shooting the river rapids during flood season—but in general these are isolated, untrammelled landscapes. Normally these are areas to be avoided; but migrant travelers are in these locations specifically because they had to avoid the main roads and standard entry points!

The remoteness of the environments and the surreptitiousness associated with the use of these locations contribute to a notion of lawlessness and clandestinity linked with migrant travel. The press in the United States³⁹ has tended to call attention to a point of view highlighting criminality associated with these travelers, despite that fact that many are on the road for a variety of reasons, usually stemming from societal, political, and economic instabilities in their home regions. Modern migrant travelers, however, are rarely the perpetrators of any violence and are more likely to be the victims of crime as they are driven out of their homes. Recalling from the last chapter how Carlos commented on being made to feel as if he had committed a crime (Escobar Parada 84), these travelers are likely to feel the stigma of their situation as they are diverted into the desert and into circumstances outside of the law.

I am looking at how narratives about migrant travelers relate the traversal of the landscape from Central America across Mexico and into the United States. It seems only natural to consider the relationship that the terms “traverse” and “traversal” have to the Latin American use of the term *travesía* (which is normally associated with ocean crossings) and its application to crossing deserts and rivers. Linguist Amado Alonso explains how this term came to be used for terrestrial travel as well when he states:

como todos los expedicionarios pasaban por aquella experiencia de cuarenta o más días, he aquí bien concretamente cómo las experiencias de los hombre determinan el rumbo de su idioma, y por qué desde México a la Patagonia tienen

³⁹ Research in ProQuest’s database covering the *New York Times* from 2008 to 2018 associates the terms “illegal” and “alien” 883 times, while “illegal” and “migrant” are found in the same article 1,213 times, and “criminal” and “migrant” appear together 1,236 times as of July 2018.

tan extenso uso los que podríamos llamar marinerismos en tierra: [...] *travesía* ‘región vasta, desierta y sin agua’, ya documentado en la Argentina desde 1575. as all the expeditionaries went through that experience for forty or more days, here is precisely how the experiences of the men determine the course of their language, and why from Mexico to Patagonia they have such an extensive use of what we could call marinerisms on land: [...] crossing ‘vast region, deserted and without water’, already documented in Argentina by 1575. (73)

The application of maritime vocabulary to land-based imagery is hardly unique to the Spanish language, however. The expression prairie schooner was given to the wagons that crossed the Great Plains of North America because of their resemblance to the sailing ship called a schooner (Hill). Whether over sea or land, the crossing of these vast spaces was arduous and demanding.

Given the vast geographical distances in the Americas and how crossing them links the traveler to both starting point and destination, *travesía* also could conceivably be related to the notion of a threshold as I defined it in the last chapter. María Moliner, in the third edition of her *Diccionario de uso del español*, gives as the first definition of *travesía*: “Calle o camino estrecho o corto que une dos más importantes” (“Street or narrow or short road linking two [that are] more important”; vol. 2, 2942). If home is one important place and the destination is another, the connecting space in between is the *travesía* for the migrant traveler in these narratives. It is also somewhat paradoxical that one term can be applied to crossing both the vastness of Sonoran or Chihuahuan Deserts as well as navigating through short passageways, yet the narrative record includes both forms of *travesía*. With all of this in mind, there is validity for viewing the journeys of

migrant travelers from the Latin American perspective of *travesía* since in most cases they will be crossing both water and deserts under difficult and strenuous circumstances, and be traversing between two locations vital to their well being.

While I mentioned mountains as part of the natural barriers that supply the international boundary lines migrant travelers cross on their journeys north, my attention will be on the rivers and deserts as the landscapes most often depicted in these narratives. Deserts are often mistakenly viewed as dead and sterile. Consequently, this allows for reflecting on contrasts such as sterility versus fecundity. How are pregnancy and pregnant women portrayed in these narratives? If the desert is a dead zone, considering it as a graveyard opens the landscape for the possibility of it being a haunted location. What roles do ghosts play in migrant travel through the desert?

Ghosts in the Desert.

As I mentioned before, Richard Bevis investigated hundreds of works of world literature that described the vastness and isolation of lands that are considered deserts. The vocabulary in these literary works creates for the reader the landscapes through which the protagonists will move and reinforces the mental images the reader and the characters may already have of the terrain. Graciela Limón opens her novel *The River Flows North* with a description of the trail that leads through the Lechuguilla Desert section of the greater Sonora Desert where her novel is set:

Hot wind blows through that desert corridor and sweeps across miles of sand; it swirls dust devils beyond the horizon, and its fiery tongue licks cactus and ironwood trees nearly to the ground. Only the craggy mountains that rise from the

flat floor of the desert can withstand the blasts. They stand defiant, and even their names evoke fear: Gilas, Aguilas, Growlers and Mohawks. (1-2)

The connection to the vocabulary of romanticism is immediately apparent in the description of this “desert corridor” where the craggy mountains defiantly rise from the desert. They are imposing, awe-inspiring, and fearsome. She alludes to the inferno of hell with references to the hot winds, dust devils, and fiery tongues. This landscape is the unauthorized threshold through which the characters in this novel will enter into the United States. Straightaway Limón sets up a situation in which an epic struggle between nature and humans will transpire: How can mere mortals survive in such a hostile environment? The difficulty that the migrant travelers will face during the crossing is also immediately encoded. Walking will be difficult because of the sandy ground, and will be made even more unpleasant as sand is blown over their bodies and into their eyes. The expanse that the trail passes through is subtly referenced by the dust devils as they move out of sight “beyond the horizon.” The crushing heat of the region is underscored through the depiction that only the mountains are strong enough to withstand the fiery tongues of the hot winds that can subjugate even the plants that have adapted to arid regions—the cactus and the ironwood trees. This is an unmistakably formidable landscape, one that will require equal formidability of the people who will attempt to cross it.

Limón expands on the obstacles anyone crossing this area might encounter as she describes the saguaro cactus that

cling to the skirts of those mountain seeking shelter from the relentless sun. Like sentinels, arms stretched upward, they wait patiently for lost travelers to slink by, usually seeking the meager shade given off by their branches. And just as the

saguaro cactus seek the shade of the mountains, other life holds fast to them.

Slithery lizards creep in and out of crevices to avoid the dangerous rattler, and even the skittering scorpion. (2)

Snakes, lizards, and scorpions, as well as the thorns of the cactus and the relentless sun, all play their parts in the struggles anyone will face who journeys into this space. Even if they do not turn out to be lost travelers who become like the local fauna—skittering, slithering, creeping, and slinking—the potential for a painful experience and possible death for everyone entering this area is implied. Notably in these two passages only nature has been introduced; humans have not yet appeared, as such, but they do so in the anthropomorphism embedded in the descriptions. The mountains stand defiantly in their skirts, while the wind has tongues, and the saguaros are sentinels with raised arms. It is intriguing that the mountains are depicted as female wearing skirts. Could this infer that survival in the desert may require some feminine traits? When people are finally introduced into the story, there are certainly indications of gender tension.

Limón's novel was inspired by John Annerino's 1999 *Dead in Their Tracks: Crossing America's Desert Borderlands*, a chronicle about the history of death in this section of the Sonoran Desert in southern Arizona.⁴⁰ The region he describes is in the far southwest corner of the state stretching from Yuma, Arizona at the California border to Gila Bend, about one third of the way east across the state along Interstate 8, and down to the Mexican border on Arizona State Route 85 to Lukeville, Arizona and Sonoyta, Sonora, Mexico. Reaching Interstate 8, called *la Ocho* in Limón's novel (1), is the goal of migrant travelers, who hope to then catch rides to locations where work is available (2).

⁴⁰ Annerino has since updated this work. In 2009, he published *Dead in Their Tracks: Crossing America's Desert Borderlands in the New Era*.

This area has historical ties to Hispanic populations moving north from the colonial center of New Spain and includes the route first used by Spaniards in 1540 commonly known as El Camino del Diablo, or The Devil’s Highway (Annerino 4-5).⁴¹ The numerous maps Annerino supplies are extremely helpful for visualizing both the historical and the modern contexts of the terrain that Limón incorporates into the tales of river of modern migrants flowing north. The map titled “America’s Killing Ground” (Figure 1, see page 166)⁴² is particularly effective in exposing the extensive time frame, the multiplicity of forms in which death has occurred, and where the clusters of modern deaths are located.⁴³ With regard to Limón’s novel, notice on the map how the crosses indicating modern deaths are grouped close to Interstate 8—the “*la Ocho*” destination for the characters in *The River Flows North*. This is a clear indication that this desert in particular is likely to win in the battle between humans and nature.

Leonardo Cerda, the *tejano coyote* in Limón’s novel, is ostensibly the leader of the group. The travelers he is guiding are: Menda (Imelda) Fuentes who is fleeing war and domestic abuse in El Salvador; Don Julio Escalante and his grandson Manuelito who are going into the desert to find the body of his daughter Lucinda, Manuelito’s mother;

⁴¹ Luis Alberto Urrea, author of *Into the Beautiful North*, has also written about this region. His *The Devil’s Highway* recounts the story of twenty-six migrants who got lost crossing this area—only twelve survived.

⁴² “America’s Killing Ground” reprinted here with the permission of U of Arizona P.

⁴³ “America’s Killing Ground” is associated with a section of Annerino’s work titled “In Memoriam.” Both versions end the numbering of fatal sites at 177. The 2009 version provides several pages of updated statistics for both deaths during crossings and rescues by Border Patrol and humanitarian groups (136-169). He notes, “Since the U.S. Border Patrol launched Operation Gate Keeper in 1994, more than 5,067 known people have died crossing the U.S.-México border. (The documented border deaths and disappearances of more than 9,703 people are highlighted in this book.)” (169). Unfortunately, this count is already out of date and the numbers of dead and missing are increasing as immigration policies push migrants and refugees further into these dangerous regions.

Armando Guerrero who stole money from Mexican drug dealers and his running for his life; Doña Encarnación, an indigenous woman from Chiapas who is going to the desert to die in the land of her ancestors; Celia Vega who is going to look for work to support her daughter and husband who had lost his legs when he fell off a train as he went north looking for work; brothers Néstor (called Borrego) and Nicanor Osuna who, like Celia, are going north to seek work (7-14). The chapters covering each traveler's individual story are interspersed among the chapters describing the six days the group takes to cross the Lechuguilla Desert after they leave from La Joyita, a truck stop just south of the border in the state of Sonora.⁴⁴

Cerda is described as “a scrawny man with skinny legs and barely of medium height. His mahogany-colored skin was cracked by exposure to the desert sun, and his eyes were small and slanted; they looked out from behind high cheekbones with the caginess of a wolf” (6). Just as the natural features of the terrain were anthropomorphized using human expressions, Cerda is closely associated with the landscape through describing his skin as the color of wood and his gaze as wolfish. He attempts to establish himself as the alpha male for the group by belittling in some way each person as they introduce themselves. For example, he makes jokes at the expense of the two brothers, questioning whether they will be able to complete the journey since they are both so skinny (8). Cerda takes “time to ogle” Celia and “her prominent breasts” before she introduces herself, confirming his sexist mindset toward women (9). However, when it is Menda's turn, Cerda realizes his control of the migrants could be fragile: “His cunning

⁴⁴ According to “Border Routes across America's Killing Ground” (44-45) and “Desert Searches and Rescues in America's Killing Ground” (100-101), two maps in Annerino's *Dead in Their Tracks*, La Joyita is located just southwest of the water source “Tinajas Atlas,” which is marked on all the maps I reference from his study.

told him that the woman was strong, the type that was a leader, someone who would not eat up his words like the others. She could be trouble, his guts told him. He had experience with her kind, except that people of her sort were usually male” (10). Limón plays with gender stereotypes, having tough mountains wear skirts and giving women qualities supposedly only held by men. I will be discussing Menda’s story later in this chapter, as her tale is also relevant to river crossings, but she is the first to agree to work with Cerda, thus establishing herself as a leader in the group (17).

The first day of the trek opens as “the tiny group followed Leonardo Cerda north across the dry bed that marks the border between Mexico and the United States” (35). This brief extract reiterates the amorphous quality of international boundaries in these isolated, remote spaces. There is no marker beyond the imaginary line of the dry riverbed. Dryness and the lack of water at this beginning of the trek echoes the information Cerda had told the group the night before: “The trip will last three nights and three days. Take at least two gallons of water for each day, more if you can carry it” (14). When there are questions as to why it takes so long, Cerda tells them that walking through sand is slower and harder than walking on roads, and that the heat is also a factor that will slow the group (15). He lets them know they cannot travel at night because that is when the rattlesnakes come out. Cerda’s explanations to the group calls attention to the heat, the sand, and the dangerous wildlife, all of which reinforce the initial description of the desert found in the opening chapter of the novel. The author’s portrayal of the landscape is a detached, third person narration, while Cerda’s commentary is personal, based on his own experiences. Consequently, his words reaffirm at a first-hand, intimate level the image of the desert already before their eyes: the dry arroyo and sand that mark

the border near the truck stop, which is the only place of relative civilization in the area. The idea of leaving the relative safety of the truck stop is frightening: “The migrants grumbled at what he said. Each one looked around and then down at the dirt searching for the answer to the apprehension they felt deep in their bellies” (16).

The heat, the sand, the emptiness are repeatedly brought to mind as they move farther into the desert, especially when they encounter the first makeshift grave: “a burial place where rocks spelled out the name *Olga*; at its side there was a small cross. They all stood absorbed and frightened; no one spoke as they listened to what sounded like sighs carried by the wind that swept down the gloomy mountains” (39, italics are original).

Doña Encarnación, a member of the party who rarely speaks, exposes the primal fear of this moment, “Which one of us can imagine how many souls linger here, still waiting to reach their dream?” (39) As the work of John Annerino has established, there are thousands of dead in this region—the desert is a graveyard for these lost souls. The final resting place of some migrants like the fictional Olga are marked, but Annerino graphically describes the reality of the disappearances of numerous others lost along the way to what they dreamed would be their promised land. In his chapter titled “Seeing Ghosts,” he describes his training to spend time in the desert for rescue missions, running daily in the heat to build his endurance:

I run harder, trying to distance myself from the spirits. But what haunts me most is the image of eight Guatemalans disappearing. When their companions last saw them, they were foaming at the mouth, but trackers were forced to give up their search after monsoon rains erased all signs of their passing. Their ghost trail is followed a year later by the death march of eighteen other Guatemalans, including

men, women, and children, who also vanished. Yet, there is not word in the national press of the disappearance of eight people, or even eighteen. (106-107)

His commentary tells of people entering into an environment that is not hospitable to settlement. These are not deaths in a community or a village created in an arid landscape. The desert graves and sites of disappearance depicted in the work of Annerino and Limón are outside of settled areas, thus distinct from classics of literature and film such as Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* and Clint Eastwood's *High Plains Drifter*. As María del Pilar Blanco's analysis of these two works shows, the ghosts are found within the towns of Rulfo's Comala and Eastwood's Lago/Hell, rather than in uninhabited spaces (81-99). She describes these sites as "fictitious landscapes that undergo the repetition of life's unwinding through haunting" (82). Comala and Lago/Hell are settlements whose inhabitants need to answer and atone for their actions or inactions; the ghosts of Annerino and Limón do not. They are simply lost souls who have not yet found completion on the way to their final resting place.

Doña Encarnación is the spiritual heart of the group. When she introduced herself in La Joyita, she told them that she was "going to stay with the spirits of [her] ancestors," planning neither to go to "la Ocho" nor return from the trip (13). Cerda's response and subsequent reaction show that he is a somewhat conflicted character. His initial response is: "The spirits? Don't tell me you're one of those *locas* that believe in that shit?" (13). But this is immediately followed by him remembering the *curandera* of his youth, causing him to consider that perhaps "the old woman knew what she was talking about. Who could know the hundreds of fools that had perished out there in that inferno? And where else would those ghosts go? They probably just stuck around the desert pathways

moaning, sighing and scaring the hell out of the live ones” (13-14). Looking at this incident from a feminist perspective, Rosemary Jackson would point out that the patriarchal dominance in Western culture “prohibited from mainstream literature” any perspective that was not rationalistic, materialistic, or scientific (“Introduction” xvii). Cerda is instantly provoked into a masculine evaluation of Doña Encarnación as an old crazy woman because there is no room in the world for “anything not immediately knowable, for anything invisible, unseen, inexplicable” (Jackson, “Introduction” xvii). In her *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Jackson also notes that other “societies hold different beliefs from secular cultures as to what constitutes ‘reality’. Presentations of otherness are imagined and interpreted differently” (23). Cerda is forced to take into consideration his own experiences and his own culture that run counter to the predominant ethos of the society north of the border. His Hispanic heritage, which is non-dominant among the Western cultures that Jackson references, opens a door for other interpretations of reality. His many trips across the desert had been punctuated with enough odd sounds that he could not dismiss the possibility of ghosts (14)—ghosts that, of course, are “scaring the hell” out of people.

As Cerda realizes that his group is beginning to fall into a scared-as-hell state he intervenes: “Okay, okay everybody, that’s enough. I don’t want you to get nervous. These things happen all the time around here. Dead people are all over the place. We don’t see their bodies because the sand covers them up pretty quick” (40). His statements reinforce that the desert is a graveyard with dead people everywhere. This fantastic element in the narration can be related to Jackson’s assessment of fantasy literature: “The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made

invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’” (*Fantasy* 4). Quite literally, the dead of the desert are made silent, absent, covered over, and invisible by the blowing sand of this environment. Cerda goes on to tell the group, “When the next *compañeros* come around, nothing will be sticking up out of the sand” (40). In other words, even Olga’s name will have been erased by the time the next company of migrants passes through this stretch of desert. She will be totally obliterated from the world as if she had never existed, consumed by the landscape. Cerda’s declaration about the obliteration of Olga and her name can be viewed as a warning for any other body in the desert—a body can easily disappear in this environment. While not yet completely gone, the essence of Olga’s existence might remain only with this group of travelers, possibly the last ones to see her name in the desert. What will be her legacy without them? Cerda’s comment, therefore, could also be considered a premonition for the group about what might happen to them: they could die and vanish without a trace as certainly as Olga eventually will—and who will remember them?

The infernal heat and the wind combine to make Cerda’s earlier thoughts a presentiment as Doña Encarnación claims to have seen Olga: “She walked ahead of us for a long time, waved her arm and told us to follow her. She doesn’t want us to die. Look at her. She’s standing over there” (40). Jackson’s feminist analysis of ghosts again comes into play here. She explains that among early themes in women authors’ supernatural fiction is that of “women returning from the dead to correct social wrongs” (“Introduction” xxiii). Olga died in the desert as she was trying to reach a better life. There is no indication whether she was fleeing a violent living situation or merely trying to improve her economic wellbeing, but either case would fall under the rubric of social

wrongs that would cause her to return to her place of death. Jackson indicates that these early themes later develop into two threads: “female revenge and support of women in difficulty, defying the boundaries of death itself in order to identify and communicate with women” (“Introduction” xxiii). From Doña Encarnación’s interpretation that Olga waved for the group to follow because she did not want them to die, I conclude that Olga is following the second path: she is communicating with and supporting women in difficulty so that they will not meet her fate in the desert. Rather than a malevolent haunting of the group that would constitute a type of female revenge, Olga is taking on the role of a benevolent helper.

Olga’s gravesite, and consequently this whole desert that is full of dead people, is a spectral region or a paraxial area where an “imaginary world is neither entirely ‘real’ [...], nor entirely ‘unreal’” (Jackson, *Fantasy* 19). In Limón’s novel, the reality of the dead, represented by the crosses in Figure 1, are layered with and recreated in the unreality of the dead through Olga’s ghost. These migrant travelers are moving through a fictional world that is specifically and deliberately grounded in the real Lechuguilla Desert. Cerda gets the group moving again, but “none of them could forget Olga, left behind in her makeshift grave, and they imagined how painful her death must have been. Without admitting it, each one looked in every direction; they squinted their eyes expecting to see the woman’s spirit pointing the way to safety” as they continued on to the spot where they would spend the night (41). While unstated, it is clear that each character retains questions regarding their own mortality and wondering if he or she might end up in yet another marked (or unmarked) grave that will vanish into oblivion.

The story of Manuelito, Don Julio and Lucinda becomes intertwined with Doña Encarnación's visions when she claims the next morning that she had mistaken Olga for Lucinda (59). Don Julio's plan had always been to find the remains of Lucinda's body and return them home for burial (9-10). The trip for the old man and his grandson is not a *travesía*, but a *misión de recuperación*—a recovery mission that involves all of the hardships and anxieties of a crossing, but with a different objective. Manuelito is able to tell Cerda enough details about where his mother had died that the guide thinks he knows the place, which is not far from where they spend the night (58). Finding the body becomes a purpose for the group, filling them with “a renewed energy that kept them from remembering that they were tired, thirsty and nervous about the unplanned change” in the route north (62). These characters have already been diverted away from official entry points and have taken the risk of crossing into the United States along unfamiliar paths, and now they are being rerouted again. The innocuousness of this description draws attention away from the depth of anxiety that has to be running through the group. Are they going to the place of their own deaths? Will the apprehension break loose? If it does, what will be the snapping point?

When the group reaches the location that Cerda believes the boy was describing, Doña Encarnación declares, “Her bones are here” (63). First a shoe is found, then an arm bone, followed by more bits of clothing, other bones, and finally a skull (63-64). As each remnant is found, Don Julio puts it into a burlap bag (64-65). Manuelito and Don Julio, encouraged by Doña Encarnación, believe that they have recovered Lucinda, but Cerda keeps trying to remind them that there is no assurance that it is. The numbers of crosses and other symbols of historic deaths that litter the maps on the lining papers of the front

and back covers of John Annerino's *Dead in Their Tracks* attests to the hundreds of bodies the desert has consumed and consequently the numerous anonymous bones and other remains that could be found. Limón also affirms this in the opening description of the novel: "The dead outnumber those who have lived to tell what happens on that passage. So many migrants vanish without a trace, although a bone or a skull or a mangled shoe is sometime sighted" (2). But these bones and miscellanies of clothing also tell a tale. They are the remnants of "the tiny, fragile human body" as Walter Benjamin put it (84). Rather than the "full corporeality" of Benjamin's storyteller who passes on experience from "mouth to mouth," these fragments of the departed narrate the stories of dead travelers and have as much to say about their journeys as those who survived. The dead speak through these relics, but their tales tend to be fleeting (like Olga's name) and incomplete (bits of clothing), which may lead to erroneous conclusions. Even so, they transmit to the living the final stories of the dead as they passed. Despite the possibility that the remains are only a deceit of the desert's deadly environment, Don Julio's belief that he had found his daughter "gave each of them renewed hope" (66). Once they have found what they sought, Cerda cannot convince Manuelito and Don Julio to continue with the group. As the old man and the boy go back toward La Joyita, the rest watch as the two "slipped into the darkness; soon the two silhouettes vanished into the sighing wind" (67-68). Just as the wind opened this sequence, so it closes it, and two of the company merge with the landscape of the desert—forever lost in the crossing of the rest of the group. Theirs is a *travesía incompleta*.

From Desert Death to Future Life: Pregnant Migrant Travelers.

In Limon's novel as well as some other works in this study, the mindset about deserts as remote, hostile, and deadly environments is emphasized. However, some of these narratives also juxtapose this lethal (and possibly haunted) setting with the prospect of new life. An expectant woman can be a very practical person, knowing that a life other than her own is at stake. Just as the desert tends to reveal its thriving life forms in small, seemingly insignificant ways, there are two women in the stories I have chosen that also bestow valuable, but easily overlooked, assistance to and solidarity with the principal characters. One of them is Sofía, the pregnant teenager in Escobar Parada's novel *El viaje a la tierra prometida*. While her character is consistently portrayed as problematic due to her lack of sophistication and education, and because of her pregnancy, all of these liabilities eventually become assets.

Because the visas Ana, Sofía, Carlos, and Roberto were able to get in El Salvador cause them to have multiple threshold crisis moments as they passed through Mexico, they are often diverted away from a direct route north. Eventually, they find themselves in the border city of Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. Unfortunately, they have gotten caught up in the voracious tentacles of a group of gangsters (90-92). While Roberto meets with the leader, Bartolo, Ana speaks with some of Bartolo's other clients, discovering that they had tried unsuccessfully to cross the border seven times. During the last attempt, they had been attacked by a rival gang and were abandoned in the desert by Bartolo's guides (92-93). Ana recognizes that her age, Carlos's injured leg, and Sofía's pregnancy would work against them if they were in similar circumstances. Of all of these difficulties, the

pregnancy turns out to be the least problematic once they are able to extract themselves from Bartolo and his gang.

The Salvadorans take another detour in their trip, going west to Altar to follow their original plan to work with Roberto's contact from Veracruz, Antonio (94). Unfortunately, in Altar they discover that Antonio's plan for Carlos, Ana, and Sofia would be nearly impossible for Carlos: "El trayecto duraría tres días caminando. Eran muchos kilómetros de por medio en zona desértica" ("The journey would last three days walking. It was many miles through a desert area"; 104). Antonio thinks he might be able to use vehicles for part of the journey, thereby limiting the walk to ten or twelve miles (105). The narrative style of *El viaje a la tierra prometida* does not emphasize the description of the landscape as completely as was found in Limón's *The River Flows North*, but the terrain is similar. The main action in Limón's work is in an uninhabited territory, the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range, while the crossing the Salvadorans attempt in *El viaje a la tierra prometida* is through "la 'Reservación India Papago' en Arizona" ("the 'Papago Indian Reservation' in Arizona"; 139). This is the tribal land of the Tohono O'odham Nation covering approximately 4,400 square miles.

Carlos, Ana, and Sofia relinquish their autonomy and are now under the control of Antonio who is driving them from Altar to Sásabe where they will begin the cross-country trek into Arizona. Their experience crossing the Mexican desert and the northern border region is exemplary for these narratives. As a result of both prepaid bribes and demands for money on the spot, they pass multiple Mexican checkpoints on their way to Sásabe (137-138). Ana uses her wits and negotiating skills to get past one checkpoint by telling the officer that they are looking for Sofia's husband since she is so clearly

pregnant (137). Unlike the anticipation that her condition would be a burden, Sofía's pregnancy in this brief scene is turned into an asset to help the group navigate a tricky threshold moment on their way to the actual international border crossing.

In El Bajío, outside of Sásabe, the guides treat the trip north as routine, giving specific instructions to stay together in one line, not to speak, run if the group is discovered, and most importantly, conserve their water “porque en el desierto no hay” (“because in the desert there isn't any”; 140). But this journey is hardly in the category of a tourist trek as described by Buzard (4). Recalling how the darkness engulfed and hid Don Julio and Manuelito as they left the other travelers in *The River Flows North*, Escobar Parada similarly describes the migrants setting off with Ana, Sofía, and Carlos:

En la penumbra, las pequeñas mochilas, morrales y maletines, imitaban formas caprichosas al aferrarse a las manos o espaldas de sus dueños. Sus capacidades y sentidos se activaron al máximo, y poco a poco se adentraron en el inhumano desierto, esfumándose como sombras de la noche. El reseco ruido de sus pasos y el canturreo de los bichos nocturnos les harían compañía.

In the gloom, the little backpacks, rucksacks and briefcases, imitated whimsical shapes clinging to the hands or back of their owners. Their capabilities and senses were activated to the maximum, and little by little they entered the inhuman desert, disappearing like shadows of the night. The parched noise of their footsteps and the hum of nocturnal bugs would keep them company. (141)

These travelers are going where the tourist does not tread—disappearing from view into the desert just as Don Julio and his grandson did.

Plans quickly disintegrate in clandestine travel as Carlos discovers despite his best efforts. After three hours of walking, the leg injury that was the reason he had no work in El Salvador, prevents him from continuing with the group (141). He is not up to the “rigour and work” of the crossing.⁴⁵ Antonio advises Carlos to wait at least ten minutes so the group can get some distance away from where he is resting, then to walk to the road where the US border agents will find him and take him to Nogales (141-142). Unfortunately, there is an unexpected turn of fate at this threshold moment: “En el instante preciso que Carlos salía, apareció intempestivamente una patrulla fronteriza motorizada, y sin tientos le echó el guante, cual delincuente. En un pestañeo encendió las potentes luces que portan sobre el auto ‘todo terreno’, transmitió el mensaje a otras patrullas y arrancó la despiadada cacería” (“At the precise moment that Carlos was leaving, an untimely motorized border patrol appeared, and without feelings threw down the challenge, like a delinquent. In a blink, he lit the powerful light that ‘all terrain’ vehicles have, transmitted the message to other patrols and started the ruthless hunt”; 142). Unlike the natural night hunters that Limón portrays—the snakes and scorpions—Escobar Parada’s desert has the Border Patrol whose prey is the migrant traveler. The attempted escape of the migrants is described: “Los desesperados mortales, en su frenesí, se transformaban de ágiles gamos a estatuas humanas, arrojadas al azar por la fuerza de las circunstancias. El drama se repetía pertinazmente —al vaivén de sus temblorosas siluetas— hasta perderse en el insondable desierto” (“The desperate mortals, in their frenzy, are transformed from agile fallow deer to human statues, thrown at random by the force of circumstances. The drama is stubbornly repeated —to the swaying of their

⁴⁵ Subha Mukherji in her discussion about thresholds considers them “a place of rigour and work” (xxiii).

trembling silhouettes— until it is lost in the fathomless desert”; 143). The vastness of the desert becomes like the sea: fathomless.

Ana and Sofía run for more than an hour through the desert night with Antonio (143), but Carlos is captured. When they stop to rest, Ana is covered in the cactus thorns from the flight, causing her severe pain and an infection that would last for nearly three days (143-144). Even so, Ana’s immediate concern is for the pregnant Sofía:

«¿Te sientes bien de la barriga?», le dijo en voz baja. Ella le contestó afirmativamente y se puso de pie. «¡Vos si eres una gata de monte! —le dijo admirada—. Como si no estuvieras en esa estado delicado. Tu juventud y la vida que has tenido en el campo te están ayudando. No cabe duda». Sofía era fiel exponente de la madera con que estaba moldeada la mujer campesina: resistente y fortaleza.

«Do you feel good about your belly?», she said in a low voice. She answered affirmatively and stood up. «You are a wild cat! —she said admiringly—. As if you were not in that delicate state. Your youth and the life you have had in the country are helping you. There is no doubt.» Sofía was a true example of the wood with which peasant women was molded: tough and strong. (144)

There are clearly underlying class issues in Ana’s statement and the author’s description of the tough and strong *campesina*. Ana seems to be a bourgeois mouthpiece for the author, as he has her think and speak about how Sofía’s life in the country makes her so much better adapted to the hardships they are facing than is the urbanite Ana. The author, knowingly or not, is exhibiting a stereotypical masculine take on women as delicate entities. Granted, he is using the euphemism of delicate condition to refer to Sofía’s

pregnancy, but is reads problematically when juxtaposed to the emphasis on her tough and strong country nature—she is either delicate or hardy, but it is difficult to be both at once. That aside, the relevant point of the excerpt is the bonding and solidarity between the two women despite their class differences. The mother in Ana is concerned for the youthful Sofía and the child she is carrying, while Sofía demonstrates her innate strength, which in return is reassuring to Ana.

While this episode is relatively short in the novel, it is one of the few times that Sofía’s character is the focus of the action where she receives positive attention. Normally, her character is portrayed as something of a non-entity whose only purpose was to help finance the trip. The rest of the time she is simply going along with the decisions made by the others, or attracts negative attention through her lack of sophistication and education. In this scene, she is the hero in a non-heroic narrative. She is allowed to shine as if her fecund state is an antidote to the sterility of the desert through which the women are passing. Sofía is resilient and the life growing within her provides her with a motivation to resist succumbing to the difficulties that the desert landscape throws in her path.

As they continue the trek, an often-misunderstood property of the desert is revealed. Limón’s novel emphasized the brutal heat of the desert. However, that heat dissipates quickly during a desert night. Among the travelers “los efectos del frío comenzaron a sentirse, calando las inadecuadas vestiduras. La cabeza, manos y pies eran los más expuestos y los más delicados” (“the effects of the cold began to be felt, piercing the inadequate clothing. The head, hands and feet were the most exposed and the most delicate”; 144). Hypothermia caused by the cold is as common a form of injury and death

in the desert as is the hyperthermia caused by the overexposure to the sun. This is established in the story when the group comes across an improvised grave with three crosses. One of the guides says that is where a woman making the crossing with an infant and toddler died earlier that winter from the cold (145). He then points out that most guides refuse to take children, and that the little one that Antonio has with him is his problem, as well as old and pregnant women since they increase the danger for everyone in the group (145-146). In his statement, the guide also indicates that children, the elderly and the pregnant all pay more because of the danger they create. Fortunately, he had not noticed Sofia's belly, so she and Ana are able to complete the trip to Tucson without further problems or any added expense.

Sofía is not the only pregnant woman to be found in the narratives for this study. An initially anonymous woman makes a brief appearance in Luis Alberto Urrea's *Into the Beautiful North*. This witty novel is about a group of teens who are inspired by the film *The Magnificent Seven* to go north looking for men to repopulate their small Mexican fishing village. All of the men from their hometown had gone north to seek work, leaving the community vulnerable to subjugation by members of a drug cartel. Once the group reaches Tijuana, they encounter "the warrior Atómiko. King of the Hill. Baddest of the trash pickers" (121). He is a former Mexican army member who now makes his living sorting trash in the Tijuana dump. Atómiko arranges a connection for a *coyote* to take them through a break in the fence into the United States. The *coyote*'s instructions are direct and graphic:

Orale. Run straight across the migra road. Straight! And fast, cabrones! Do you hear? Keep low and run fast. Right across the road, through the bushes, is an

arroyo. I'll be down there. Don't jump on my head. But get down in there with me. We'll haul ass to the north—that's to the right, for you little girlies who don't know what direction you're going. Right. Pay attention. I don't have time to repeat this shit. To the right, run fifty yards, and we cut sharp left. Keep close enough to see the person in front, because if you get separated, you stay behind. There's junkies and monsters and rateros in there that'll cut off you legs and fuck you as you die. I'm not kidding you. (139-140)

Dialogue, heavily peppered with street vernacular in a combination of English, Spanish, and Spanglish, is a feature of this novel as this excerpt reveals. The way that Urrea alludes to the landscape is embedded in this dialogue, as opposed to the style employed by Limón that described the landscape in evocative, romantic terms. While not technically part of the Sonoran Desert region, the Tijuana area is known for its canyons, steep hills, and general rough terrain. Not as waterless as the true desert, it is still a semi-arid territory. This landscape is referenced above in the bushes and arroyo, both of which conceal numerous dangers. In this passage, the human predators—the junkies, monsters, and rateros—who are secreted among the undergrowth and in the folds of the land are emphasized over the natural dangers. These types of human predators are characters that regularly appear in the narratives of clandestine border crossings.

Urrea also uses third-person description to show how the landscape affects the characters as seen in the actual night crossing. This episode begins with the *coyote* sprinting toward the ditch:

And he was off.

Nayeli had to run to keep up. She clutched a tattered wad of tissue to her forehead with one hand and knocked branches out of her face with the other. Vampi yelped and trotted after her, and Yolo grabbed the back of Vampi's shirt to hang on. Vampi took the brunt of the whipping branches Nayeli charged through. She cried out a hundred times as she got smacked. She was alarmed to see a pregnant woman running beside her. Where did she come from? The woman held her belly up with both hands and charged ahead. Tacho was a few paces behind them all, watching the pale ghosts of the running girls. They seemed to vanish. He knew they'd found the left turn. He passed it, fumbled back, and heard them breaking through the bush in the dark. He never saw any gap. It was all just more shadows. Headlights suddenly cut across the valley from the road along the fence. Tacho plunged into the darkest clump of shadow and prayed he didn't step on a rattlesnake or fall into some pit of tarantulas. Atómiko had completely vanished.

(143-144)

Here, too, the landscape is not overtly emphasized, but is artfully inserted into the description. The group knows it is entering an uneven terrain that is sheltering multiple dangers. The bushes beat against them and make noise as they push through the undergrowth. Fear of encountering spiders and snakes along with the human predators they have already been warned about can only intensify the dread each of them is feeling as they interact with the vegetation and the terrain. Shadows hide the path and make the other members of the group seem like ghosts. Out of nowhere, the strange apparition of a pregnant woman materializes. She is holding her belly up, presenting the life within her

as if in defiance to the hardship of the dash through this harsh landscape, charging ahead of the others.

It is no wonder Vampi is alarmed. But this woman plays a crucial, yet practical part in the crossing that is similar to the role that Sofía had in Escobar Parada's novel:

Vampi was out of breath. “¡Ay, ay, ay!” she gasped as she ran. The ground was rough. They tripped, twisted their ankles. The pregnant woman suddenly grabbed Vampi and held her up. Vampi was startled at first, then leaned on the stronger, older woman. She might have been an angel. She might have been the wraith of a murdered paisana come from the shadows to save them. Vampi surrendered to her fate and ran. (144)

The steadying strength of the older, pregnant woman (who is later identified as Candelaria) reassures the teenaged Vampi just as Sofía comforted and encouraged Ana. Recalling that in Escobar Parada's novel there was the role reversal of the younger Sofía heartening the mature Ana, here the socially expected assignments are back in place as the older woman takes the younger girl under her care. The entire sequence also reinforces how minor characters that normally are secondary to the main story, can have an heroic effect in the narrative. Within the cast of migrant traveler tales, characters like Candelaria are almost subaltern in their subordination within the story, as they are even more marginal than the people who make up the principal group of travelers—a subaltern within a subaltern group. Regardless of her minority status, however, the episode is also noteworthy because it revisits and reimagines the positive quality of the female ghost who helps other women. Vampi's reference to Candelaria as a wraith helping them to

reach safety is reminiscent of the ghost of Don Julio's daughter Lucinda from Limón's novel.

Not only is Candelaria helpful, but she is practical, too, as seen when the *coyote* discovers her among his group hiding from the Border Patrol under a bridge:

"Who are you?" the coyote demanded.

The pregnant woman said, "Candelaria."

"You owe me money," he said.

"I have no money."

"What, do you think this is a Christian charity, morra? You think I do this for fun?"

"What are you going to do," Candelaria asked, "walk me back to the fence?"

(145)

Clearly Candelaria has the upper hand over the *coyote* since he is not going to take the chance of doing that. Once the danger of being spotted by the Border Patrol has passed, the group discovers that the *coyote* has disappeared (147). Candelaria continues to show her practical side when she tells the group they need to "Watch out for lights" (148) and "You should be quiet. You're not strolling in the park" (149). During the night, the Border Patrol members often wait by their vehicles until they hear people coming, then turn on their headlights catching the migrants in the bright lights as happened to Carlos in Escobar Parada's novel. They also use helicopters with searchlights that they sweep back and forth across the landscape. While they try to hide from the patrols, the group is eventually discovered when "the brutal glare of two headlights and a spotlight" blind them in their path (149). A helicopter also plays a role in the capture: "Its prop wash

knocked Nayeli into Yolo” (149). During this scene, the “terrible racket” and “deafening noise” of the helicopter is also stressed. The use of helicopters by the Border Patrol and their effect on migrant travelers is a recurring theme in these narratives. Nayeli and her friends are put on a bus to a processing center, along with the pregnant Candelaria: “Candelaria ended up several seats behind them, and they lost sight of her and did not find her again” (153). Having fulfilled her role of supportive solidarity with the girls, Candelaria disappears from the story at this point. Like Sofía, Candelaria has filled a cameo role that is symbolic during desert crossings. Through their pregnancies and pending motherhood, they remind both the reader and the other characters in the stories that the future is the impetus for the journeys, and the lives of their unborn children are a balance against the death that deserts often represent. They provide practical and encouraging assistance when the main characters are having moments of flagging spirits, exhibiting quiet yet heroic camaraderie with the other women travelers.

If You Cannot Go Over, Go Under: Pipes and Tunnels.

Crossing *over* the landscape is the most common mode of entering the United States. However, there is also the possibility of crossing the border *under* the land. Using this method undeniably adds another layer of clandestinity to a journey already beset with complicated circumstances. The use of clandestine methods to avoid official notice of one’s actions is not a recent invention as John Cawelti and Bruce Rosenberg point out in *The Spy Story*, citing the famous Trojan Horse as an early example (11). It is not just spy stories that employ concealment to obtain a goal, given that lovers, among others, may also resort to hiding their activities in order to achieve a desired objective: “the individual

is so deeply committed to some goal that he is prepared to step beyond the usual boundaries of action” (Cawelti and Rosenberg 12). They go on to conclude “clandestinity thus begins with a purpose requiring actions that must be kept secret because they transgress conventional, moral, or legal boundaries” (13). The migrant travelers who are stepping beyond, or in this case below, the boundary of the earth and the legal boundary of the international border may end up increasing their own anxiety because of the furtive nature and the uncertainty inherent in underground passage. Underneath the ground there is no way to tell exactly when one has crossed the border, so tension stays high as long as the traveler remains in a tunnel or pipe. In the use of tunnels and other underground passageways, these travelers are also engaging in what David Pike calls “a praxis of connections to a metaphysics of division” (75). In other words, the migrant travelers are using practical methods of maintaining the flow of people and commerce across the United States Mexico border region in opposition to (or in spite of) the mythology that this artificial dividing line separates people that “have nothing to do with each other” (Pike 74). As with the divisions that Pike highlights in Germany and other parts of the world, the peoples on both sides of these borders very definitely have something to do with each other.

Two of the narratives in my corpus make use of literal underground entry into the United States: Urrea’s *Into the Beautiful North* and Gregory Nava’s benchmark 1983 film *El Norte*. This film offers the alternative, but horrendous, option of using sewer drainage pipes to bypass any official notice. The detail of the passage going through the sewage system is particularly significant for the film as it correlates the action to the abject ending of the film. In “El Coyote,” part two of the film, brother and sister Enrique and

Rosa have reached Tijuana after fleeing the violence in Guatemala. Following a few mishaps in the unfamiliar city, Enrique is able to locate Raimundo Gutiérrez, a former *coyote*. Gutiérrez is an old friend of Ramón Muñoz, whom Rosa and Enrique know from Guatemala.⁴⁶ Raimundo is no longer a *coyote*, but because he owes much to Ramón, he agrees to take Enrique and Rosa across. The way through the mountains that he formerly used has become very hazardous, so Raimundo convinces Enrique to cross utilizing the old sewer tunnels that run from Tijuana north into the United States. He tells Enrique ahead of time that it is a horrible trip, especially because of the stench, but it is the safest way even though they will have to crawl on their hands and knees for miles in the dark. That evening Raimundo takes them to the entrance, gives them a flashlight, and assures them that he will meet them at the other end. Despite the factor of increased safety, this route has to be repulsive. Amplifying Julia Kristeva's ideas espoused in *Powers of Horror* surrounding elimination of bodily wastes (53), Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare comment on how personal abjection is intensified by excretions that "travel from inside to outside the body, thereby troubling any sense of having secure borders" between ourselves and others (2). Raimundo's way will put the siblings in close contact with the types of bodily fluids to which humans have the strongest aversion. Their outsides will be touching that which had been inside someone else, disrupting the boundary between themselves and others. Furthermore, their passage through the sewer pipe can be negatively interpreted as violating another type of border and as a parallel to the passage of their own waste through their own bodies. Some will judge them as if they are a pariah product just like their own eliminated waste.

⁴⁶ The employment of a chain of friends of friends, acquaintances of friends, et cetera, that help migrant travelers along their path is a frequent pattern in these narratives.

The tunnel is not a smooth concrete pipe, but is rusted, rippled metal. As Enrique and Rosa crawl along in the claustrophobic tube, their movement causes banging and clanging that echoes all around them, creating a deafening environment that adds a terrifying element to the darkness. Not only can they not see well, but they also cannot hear what is happening around them due to the noise of their own actions within the pipe. Their movement through the tunnel is intercut with scenes of a Border Patrol helicopter that takes off just as the sun is setting, nearly coinciding with the time they enter the drainage pipe. The whining sound of the helicopter blades as it flies over the countryside is juxtaposed to the clangor within the tunnel creating a sound barrage that heightens the tension for the audience, who are also in the dark environment of a movie theater.⁴⁷ The combination of a darkened theater and the onslaught of noise essentially put the audience inside the tunnel with Enrique and Rosa. While Raimundo had warned the pair that traveling through the mountains was hazardous, he had not explained why. The reason is successfully presented through the alternating scenes in the drainage pipe and in the mountains. The pervasive menace in the situation is also enhanced through the use of sound. Recall that the teenagers in Urrea's novel could not escape the lights and sound of the Border Patrol vehicles and helicopter. Nava sets this sequence to show that Enrique and Rosa (and the audience) cannot escape the terror of possible capture just because they have moved underground.

While moving underground may have helped avoid discovery by the Border Patrol, what Raimundo did not tell them was that the tunnel would be full of rats. Before

⁴⁷ In *Cinematic Portraits of Evil*, Esther Rowlands discusses how the use of echoing sound is particularly effective in cinematic portrayals of space in tunnels. The combination of sound with diverse camera angles accentuates the sense of claustrophobia, confinement, entrapment, and clandestinity in films (115).

Rosa and Enrique are able to reach the end of the tunnel they encounter a small army of rats that repeatedly bite them. Author and journalist Héctor Tobar calls this scene “a powerful metaphor for the dehumanization inflicted upon everyone who undertakes such a crossing” ([7]). This invasion of rats immediately brings a visceral reaction given the association of rats with pestilence dating back to Black Death of fourteenth century Europe, and the literary and cultural relationship of rats with horror.⁴⁸ There is a particular aesthetic of abjection that is brought to the forefront in this scene given the presentation of an idealized beauty in their pastoral homeland in the opening section of the film. Here Rosa and Enrique are confined within a sewer pipe, including not only the alarming noise, but inferring the accompanying stench of sewage. The scene is terrifying because of the closeness of the pipe, the darkness, and their screams of pain echoing through the tunnel. It is a scene of desolation, despair, and disgust, especially in contrast to the beauty of their home. Unfortunately, there is a narrative disconnect at this point in the film. While the visual technique of cutting between the helicopter search and the attack of the rats continues, there is never any indication of why the rats disappear from the tunnel. One can assume that this is a representation that time has passed, but one could also wonder why the rats would leave a ready source of food.

Enrique and Rosa struggle on until they see light, but soon realize that it is coming from the helicopter the audience has been seeing. They remain far enough inside the tunnel to avoid detection until the helicopter leaves. Within seconds, Raimundo appears. Enrique and Rosa look out over the lights of San Diego while Raimundo tells

⁴⁸ A small sampling of how rats have triggered terror in the reading and viewing public include Renfield’s obsession with rats in Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula*, the 1971 film *Willard* and its 1972 sequel *Ben*, and William Goldman’s “Rodents of Unusual Size” from his 1973 novel *The Princess Bride* and its 1987 film adaptation.

them that the rest of the way is easy and that they will be in Los Angeles the next day. As the night scene shifts to the Los Angeles area, music builds to a celebratory crescendo that lends credence to Raimundo's implication of a comfortable new life. Enrique and Rosa have fled arbitrary persecution in their homeland, endured the rigors of travel, and persisted past the disgusting abjectness of the sewage and the distressing encounter with the rats. The expectation, enhanced by the bright lights and hopeful music, is that the darkness of their suffering and wretchedness will be wiped away as they enter into a new life. However, this hopeful scenario is what Frank Kermode has described as a "falsification of one's expectation of the end" (18). While both Rosa and Enrique find work, it is unrewarding and thankless. The beautiful lights at the end of their journey through the pipe were an unfulfilled pledge. Not only is there no positive outcome as insinuated by the wonderfully illuminated city, but the brother and sister are metaphorically forever stuck in the sewer pipe, never really escaping the tunnel of rats. Despite the perception that they have traversed adversity to be in a Promised Land, the reality is that the tunnel is a non-crossing because their circumstances have not really improved. While no one is actively trying to kill them, they are humiliated at their places of employment—each of them has to flee from immigration raids at their respective jobs. For Rosa, her trip through the sewer pipe eventually leads her to death as she contracts murine typhus due to the attacks of the rats. Her death in the darkened hospital room with Enrique at her bedside is the ultimate peripeteia, or reversal of expectations. This leaves him alone, without any family, to debase and shove himself forward in the competition for strong-armed day laborers. The whole purpose of their journey has collapsed, disintegrating into an abject parody of life. The death and darkness of the hospital room

couples with the terror and murkiness in the sewer pipe to put the siblings on a path toward a black hole of obscurity and incomprehensibility. Why suffer the passage through a hole in the ground to become an anonymous cog, sweating in an unwelcoming land?

A hole in the ground also plays a part in the trip that Nayeli and her teenage friends make in Urrea's *Into the Beautiful North*. After several failed attempts to cross into the United States, the group is offered an opportunity to try a different approach. Wino, one of the Tijuana street people they have met, tells them "I'm going to take you to the hole" (176). This is a rather ominous statement, especially when he declares: "'Just remember one thing,' Wino said. 'You will forget you ever saw the hole. ¿Comprenden? Once you go through it, you were never there.' He sucked down the last of his cig. He studied the cherry at the tip. 'Most people? They stumble into the hole? They don't live to see another day'" (177). This commentary sets off the over-active imagination of Nayeli who had spent most of her time at home watching movies and videos. Just as the rats included in *El Norte* are a common horror icon, holes, pits, caves, catacombs—dark, confined, underground spaces—are classic images that induce terror. They also are often associated with death such as the mythology of Hades, Greek god of the dead, whose realm was the underworld. Entering the underworld is entering into death as Wino's comment indicates. The dead are Hades subjects who he forbids to leave. Therefore, entering "the hole" suggests never exiting it.

Nayeli's passionate engagement with popular sensationalized media and culture is an impetus behind many of her decisions throughout the novel. What she thinks she knows from having read magazines and having watched films and online videos mediates

her vision of the world. The following passage shows her reaction based on what she had learned from these possibly questionable sources. As the girls approach the location of “the hole,” the implications of their decision begin: “Nayeli was tense. The girls apparently hadn’t taken note of the isolated nature of this nasty little clot of ruin. They could be on their way to being raped and killed. They could be kidnapped and forced into sexual slavery. They could be filmed being killed; she had seen stories about this in *¡Alarma!*”⁴⁹ (178-179). She is not reassured when she realizes that a heavily armed Tijuana police officer sees them, but casually dismisses their presence (179). It is never made clear why the officer is in the vicinity, but the implication is that he may be paid to not see activities in the area. Wino leads the group into a local car repair shop: “The door slammed back down behind them. Black Glocks in belts, small machine guns in hands” (179). Nayeli’s worst fears seem about to become reality. The description in this section mimics the popular culture presentation of human trafficking of naïve teenage girls—association with unknown acquaintances, an isolated location, a possibly corrupted police force, and heavily armed strangers. However, this situation is another examples of Kermode’s reversal of expectations. As Nayeli and her friends are led through the shop, they realize that it is a marijuana storehouse. The unidentified man in charge tells them “If Wino wasn’t my nephew, you’d be lying out in the street right now. We move product in the hole, not bodies!” (180). The mysterious hole turns out to be a drug-running tunnel.

Tunnels naturally fit into Cawelti and Rosenberg’s world of espionage, but they also note how “clandestinity has always been an important part of war, politics, and

⁴⁹ *¡Alarma!* was a Mexican magazine published at intervals from 1963 to 2014. It was known for its graphic portrayals and gruesome photographs of traffic accidents and murder victims. Examples can be seen in Bernardo Loyola’s reporting on Vice Broadcasting System, an online television network.

commerce” (11). What could be more suitable to a clandestine economy than a drug-running tunnel? Urrea acknowledges the commercial connection in the exchange between Atómiko and Wino’s uncle: “‘Sweet!’ [Atómiko] said. ‘I could make a million dollars with a tunnel like this!’ The man in the running suit came down behind them and said, ‘That’s all? A million?’” (181). Wino’s uncle clearly indicates that the tunnel’s economic impact is worth more and that Atómiko is thinking on a very small scale. It is also apparent from the whole exchange that, while smuggling material items fits into their code of ethics, Wino’s uncle and his companions are not in the business of smuggling people and are not really happy to be making this exception. Nayeli asks what would happen if the group got caught: “‘We have a burglar alarm.’ The man in the running suit laughed. ‘And we blow the tunnel on this end and drive away.’ [...] ‘But, you know,’ the man said, it’s a lot of money. ¿Me entiendes? There’s people who know about us over there. God willing, our little donations are enough for them to protect us” (181). While there is no trace in this exchange about “little donations” for people on the Mexican side of the tunnel, one cannot help but recall the heavily armed police officer Nayeli saw when they arrived. The combination of smuggling drugs, underground passage, and bribery points to this episode being the most overtly clandestine during the girls’ journey north.

Nayeli is not just relieved to find out that they are not about to be trafficked, but, once she and her friends see it, they are familiar with the setting:

He threw back a trapdoor. He reached into the shadows and flicked on a light switch.

“Welcome,” he said.

Wino winked and started down the ladder.

The girls recognized it at once. They had seen this in the Cine Pedro Infante, during one of García-García's endless Steve McQueen film festivals. It was the dirt tunnel from *The Great Escape*; it was strung with electric lights on drooping power lines, and the floor was flat and well trampled. (180-181)

There is the slight similarity here to Enrique and Rosa traversing the border in *El norte* as the girls are moving underground to avoid official notice, but the contrasts are more pronounced. Wino's uncle says of the tunnel "It runs for over half a mile. Right across the border. Right under the noses of the migra" (181). He reassures the girls that there are neither rats nor bats in the tunnel as they "entered the hole, but it was fairly comfortable. Nobody had to crawl. It was well lit, and hard to believe. Nayeli imagined the Border Patrol trucks driving above her head as she walked" (182). Unlike the dark, rat-infested sewer pipes that Enrique and Rosa pass through in *El Norte*, the teenagers are using a well-prepared route, however illicit it might be. Nevertheless, there is also a contrast to the girls' recognition as the tunnel from *The Great Escape*. While that tunnel did have lights, the tunnel itself was very narrow and short. The prisoners moved on a low wooden trolley with barely a few inches above their heads, and they sometimes had to crawl through the cramped space. There is a discernable disconnect between the representation of the drug-running tunnel and the girls' perspective of a world based on popular cultural images.

Another parallel between the two versions of underground migrant border traversal can be found in the timing of the action. In both tales, the groups enter the passageways while there is still daylight and exit late at night. The Guatemalan siblings

are met by a beautiful array of city lights, but the Mexican group has a different experience. After waiting at the end of the tunnel, another trapdoor opens and they climb out of the tunnel into a storeroom of a drapery shop. They are directed toward a garage where a delivery van is waiting and “were startled to see, through the one small window in the garage’s side door, that it was dark outside” (183-184). However, the time of night is where the similarities end. The group gets into the van and the driver “grabbed a leather strap, and slid the door down with a loud crash. They were thrown into darkness” as the van drives away (184). Rather than an open, hopeful environment that Nava’s film provided for Enrique and Rosa through the bright lights and uplifting music, Nayeli and her friends are in a dark, closed box without any idea where they are or where they are going. Their future is unclear. They have crossed over (or in this case, through) a threshold to the unknown.

This is not the end of their story, however; it is just the end of the underground section. A tunnel could be described as a confined space having an entrance and an exit that are connect by a passageway. However, for Nayeli and her friends, even though the tunnel has ended—they entered, traversed the passageway, and exited—they are still confined. As such, being inside the box of the van, still under the control of the gang, could be considered to be part of a larger tunnel, or as a continuation of the drug-running tunnel. The movement of their bodies through the smuggling system is equivalent to the movement of the drugs, despite Wino’s uncle’s statement that the gang moves “product in the hole, not bodies” (180). The teenagers are dehumanized and commodified in this process, even though they are not made as wretched as Enrique and Rosa were while crawling through the sewer pipe and fighting off rats. Inside the box, the teens experience

the passage of the vehicle just as if they were objects tumbling and flowing through a tube. In the dark, they feel the motion and acceleration when the van starts, as well as the turns to the right and left, and fall over when it stops (184). Eventually, the van ride ends, at which point the driver orders them out into the darkness of the night in an unknown location. They have been liberated from the extended tunnel, but are still in a dubious situation in an unfamiliar city. To put the scene in Kristevan terms, they have passed through the entrails of the drug-runners' system and been excreted out into a foreign world. They may not be as abject as Enrique and Rosa, but, then again, their story is comic, not tragic.

Crossing, Re-Crossing, and Frustrating Double-Crossing: Rivers and Migrant Travelers.

Rivers, like tunnels, have a structure that contains the flow of material from one end to the other. Part of this structure is made up of the sides of the tunnel or the edges of the river. As opposed only moving along the length of a tunnel, however, one may also cross a river from side to side, or edge to edge, giving rivers a provocative status in the sense of a *travesía*. Is the traversal *across* the flow of the current, or *with it* along the river? Referencing the trends in the hemispheric economy Graciela Limón writes “the flow of people moves to where the jobs await” (2). The very title of her novel, *The River Flows North*, would seem to indicate that traversing means going where the current determines. However, migrant travelers, especially those from Central America, are likely to encounter situations when they must make river crossings from edge to edge during their journeys, rather than just be carried with the stream. These crossings are rarely simple movements from one side to the other because the currents in the rivers can

influence the speed and direction of the passage. Mexico is bracketed by the Río Suchiate at the southwestern boundary with Guatemala, the Salinas and Usumacinta rivers in the southeastern Mexico/northwestern Guatemalan borders, and the Rio Grande/Río Bravo that divides northern Mexico from Texas. Farther south, travelers may have to cross one or more of the rivers that divide the Central American countries. Among them are the Río Coco between Nicaragua and Honduras, and the three rivers that divide Honduras from El Salvador: the Goascorán, the Lempa, and most importantly for this study, the Sumpul. The migrant travel narratives in this study tend to include crossings at Río Suchiate and Rio Grande/Río Bravo because most of the stories originate in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico, but Río Sumpul plays a crucial role for one of the characters already introduced in this study.

Menda, from Limón's novel, was described as a leader of the group crossing the desert. However, she was not always the strong individual who is the first to haggle with the *coyote* to lead them across the Lechuguilla Desert. The chapter that tells her story (18-34) introduces her as a young girl and is typical of survivors from the Central American conflicts during the second half of the twentieth century—conflicts that put so many of the migrant travelers on the road. Originally from El Salvador, she is the only member of her family who survives the massacre at the Río Sumpul on May 14, 1980.⁵⁰ She describes how the “war went on year after year. It devastated El Salvador from top to bottom, leaving behind a trail of death, misery and countless broken women left to care for fatherless babies” (18). With little hope of relief as rebels fought with government

⁵⁰ For other literary works about this incident see Elsie B.C. Rivas Gómez's *Swimming in El Río Sumpul*, Mercedes Durand's poem “Réquiem para el Sumpul,” and criticism by Adrian Taylor Kane.

soldiers, it is no wonder common people sought refuge in other countries. While fleeing the fighting, villagers tried to cross the Sumpul River into the relative safety of Honduras, but were blocked by the military and slaughtered with machine guns: “Killing us was easy for them because they had machine guns and rifles, even helicopters that came at us from above like giant flying scorpions” (19). The use of helicopters to hunt or, as in this case, herd migrant travelers seems to be pervasive in the literature. Recall that the characters in both Urrea’s novel and Nava’s film went underground to avoid the dangers posed by helicopters. Limón’s simile of the helicopters as “giant flying scorpions” bonds the mechanical to the natural world and ties them to the landscape, but in a terrifying style. Just as rats are a standard cinematic horror trope, oversized insects are typical of post-apocalyptic literature and films.⁵¹ In Menda’s world, there are oversized mechanical insects (the helicopters) and the sting of the scorpion is transformed into the deadly puncture of the bullets being shot from them.

Menda is only sixteen at the time she sees her family annihilated: “Among the victims was my baby sister who was hit by several bullets all at once. I saw when her little body was torn out of my mamá’s arms. It happened so fast that my mother didn’t feel when it happened” (19). She then describes her own experience as she is swept along by the flow of historical events:

I tried to reach mamá, but it was impossible because I was pressed underwater and carried downriver by the many bodies. When I was able to push myself above the water, mamá and papá had disappeared. [...] Waves of terrified people

⁵¹ The threat of nuclear war in the 1950s was an inspiration for filmmakers around the world to make films about giant insects, including *The Deadly Mantis* (1957), *Damnation Alley* (1977), and *Centipede* (2004), to name just a few.

dragged me toward the edge of the river until we were on the other side in Honduras. [...] I remember that I was lost, cold and hungry as I moved from one cluster of people to another, begging for morsels of food and drink. I answered questions that might tell people who I was and where I was going. (19)

Menda's verbal movement from the formal "mother" that a young woman might use to the childlike "mamá" and "papá" exposes the level of fear she is experiencing. Her home, in the forms of her parents and sibling, is destroyed in front of her. Not only does she suffer the trauma of this destruction, the press of bodies in the water that threaten to sweep her away—the living among the dead—multiplies the devastation. The distress of the situation, being lost, cold, and hungry, causes her to lose herself so that she no longer knows who she is or where she is going. The emotional currents created by the war are as powerful as the elemental flow of the water, indiscriminately carrying Menda along.

Menda survives her unintentional border crossing from El Salvador into Honduras, but she is now a refugee without a defined future. It is clear from the excerpt above that she had no papers that could prove her identity or her nationality, and thus no way of later being able to move about legally. Possibly her parents might have had her birth certificate, but it is also probable that any sort of documents were left behind in the confusion of escaping the fighting, or would have been destroyed in the tumult of the river crossing. When she later returns to El Salvador, fleeing an abusive husband, and considers going north to the United States for sanctuary, she worries: "And what about the crossing? Everyone knew how dangerous it was to pass through that border without documents" (31-32). The initial dreadful river crossing to escape civil war creates all of the parameters for her eventual trek into the desert. It also provides her with the fortitude

to survive that terrible crossing and drag another soul to safety, just as she was dragged from the river.

Graciela Limón's description in *The River Flows North* of Menda's crossing of the Río Sumpul was especially grim due to the war, but any surreptitious river crossings can be treacherous. In the memoir *Contrabando humano en la frontera*, Héctor Gaitán describes the future *coyote* Cedric Calderón's first trip north with his friend Adelfo. Both boys were in their early teens, which means that the timeframe is probably sometime in the mid-1960s, given that the bulk of the memoir for Cedric's life as a *coyote* probably takes place in the early 1970s. Having run away from their homes in Guatemala City, they find themselves in Tecún Umán, the center of Ayutla, a municipality on the Guatemalan side of the Río Suchiate that forms the border with Mexico. The boys naively began their trip unprepared for the expenses they would face. By six that evening, they realized that they needed to look for somewhere relatively safe to sleep, but they were already running out of cash because "el dinero ahorrado y lo poco que consiguieron con los amigos ya se lo habían gastado en el pasaje desde Guatemala y en algunas comidas" ("the money [they had] saved and the little they got from their friends had already been spent on the passage from Guatemala [City] and some meals"; 3). This brief passage reinforces my earlier commentary on the economics of migrant travel and emphasizes the point that these travelers are rarely aware of how much their travels will cost. When they seek shelter at the local church, the priest tells them they should return home to avoid the dangers of the area: "Ningún comprenda. [...] ¿Saben a lo que se exponen pasando la frontera? Allí pueden quedar bien muertos tiroteados o ahogados por las corrientes del río" ("Neither of you understands. [...] Do you know what you will be

exposed to crossing the border? There you can be either shot dead or drowned by the river currents”; 4). The priest refuses to help them since they will not go home, leaving them at the mercy of any street thugs or swindlers who might be in the vicinity.

Cedric and Adolfo end up meeting Pascual Frutos, a local of the region (it is unclear whether he is Mexican or Guatemalan) who helps the boys cross the river. Frutos is described as “enjuto, curtido por el sol costeño y con todas las características del clásico contrabandista de frontera” (“lean, tanned by the coastal sun and with all the characteristics of a classic border smuggler”; 6). Given their lack of ready cash, Frutos agrees to get them across the river in exchange for Cedric’s watch and some of their spare clothes (7). Not only do the boys have to survive the river’s strong currents, they must avoid the Mexican authorities once they reach the other side. Frutos gets them in the middle of the night so that they can cross the river during the guard change at 3:00 in the morning (8). Cedric begins to learn some of the tricks of a *coyote* when Frutos informs the boys that they must put “sus ropas en una bolsa plástica [...] porque se mojarían y al encontrarlos mojados las autoridades inmediatamente deducirían que eran ‘gachucos’” (“their clothes in a plastic bag [...] because they would get wet and when they found them wet the authorities would immediately deduce that they were ‘gachucos’ [wetbacks]”; 9).

About an hour before Frutos returns for the boys, it had begun to rain, which causes the river to rise (8-9). Neither boy knew how to swim well and both were nervous about the water with good reason. The description of their crossing begins:

Se lanzaron al agua los tres; las bolsas plásticas con la ropa dieron la impresión de inflarse más y, gracias a Dios, aquello sirvió de salvavidas; ya los pies de Cedric

no tocaban fondo. Frutos, con una destreza increíble sin hacer mayor ruido, únicamente sacaba la cabeza y avanzaba en diagonal para que la corriente le sacaba al otro lado sin mayor esfuerzo, pero la corriente no respetaba héroes en aquellos momentos y a cada momento venía más fuerte. En un instante entre las tumultuosas aguas del río, el cuerpo de Pascual avanzó en forma desmedida, daba la impresión que la corriente lo arrastraba río abajo. Adelso gritó desesperado al verse a media corriente sin el auxilio de nadie, Cedric flotaba aferrado a las bolsas plásticas. Por un momento en tal desesperación salió la cabeza de Pascual, que iba muy adelante de los muchachos ...

The three of them jumped into the water; the plastic bags with the clothes gave the impression of inflating more and, thank God, that served as a lifesaver; already Cedric's feet no longer touched bottom. Frutos, with incredible dexterity without making more noise, only stuck out his head and moved diagonally so that the current would take him to the other side without much effort, but the current did not respect heroes in those moments and in each moment became stronger. In an instant among the tumultuous waters of the river, Pascual's body advanced excessively, giving the impression that the current was dragging him downstream. Adelso shouted desperate at seeing himself in the middle of the current without help from anyone, Cedric floated clinging to the plastic bags. For a moment in that desperation, appeared the head of Pascual, who was far ahead of the boys ...

(9)

Notwithstanding Pascual Frutos's plan to put the movement of the river to good use aiding their crossing, the strength of the current almost proves disastrous. Frutos is able to

grab both boys before they were swept completely away and the three are able to make it to the shore on the Mexican side of the river with the help of a “corriente providencial [que] los sacó del vaivén peligroso para lanzarlos hasta la otra orilla” (“providential current [that] pulled them out of the dangerous swirl pushing them toward the other shore”; 10). However, just getting to the shore does not ensure safe passage across the river. Having avoided drowning in the river, they next must get away from the riverbank and avoid being seen by the Mexican border guards who would not hesitate to shoot anyone with the audacity to penetrate Mexican territory (11). Not only were the boys subjected to the fickle flow of the river’s currents, but they also faced a similar possibility of being shot by government authorities just as in Menda’s story. The only difference is that Menda was an unwilling participant in that episode, while Cedric and Adeldo chose their course.

Violence and repulsing people using rivers to cross borders is a long-established and recurring theme as revealed by Luis Spota’s 1948 novel *Murieron a mitad del río*, the river being the Rio Grande/Río Bravo. Claire Fox draws attention to this assessment when she writes, “As Mexico’s first World War II-era bracero novel, Spota’s work established some conventions that have endured in Mexican popular fiction and movies about illegal border crossing” (103). One of the narrative conventions that Fox highlights is beginning the story with a river crossing. It is a convention that goes beyond Mexican popular culture as seen in Héctor Gaitán’s version of Cedric Calderón’s memoir with its river crossing very early in the account, and Miguel Salgero’s novel *A la caza del coyote* also following this pattern. Fox analyzes this novel from sociological perspective and raises several important issues in the narrative that corroborate the economic concerns I

discussed earlier. I, however, am examining only the sections of this prototypical story that relate to the narratives concerning migrant travel.

Spota's novel opens with José Paván and his friends Luis and Lupe attempting to cross the Rio Grande/Río Bravo between Matamoros, Tamaulipas and Brownsville, Texas during March when the currents are still cold (22). Beyond the discomfort of the frigid water, the three are also trying to avoid the searchlights and shots of the patrols (17-19). This opening sequence provides one of the best descriptions of the ambiguous yet critical nature of this form of crossing into the United States:

Supo Paván que estaban a mitad del río. Lo supo porque recordó que el bajo de arena marcaba la frontera —la mitad final de México y la mitad inicial de Estados Unidos. Lo había visto durante horas, hasta que oscureció por completo, la tarde anterior. Ya sus pies, ahora, no se apoyaban en su país. Ya aquella no era el agua de su río. Eran barro y agua, y también peligro, extranjeros, diferentes. Porque ya no estaban en éste sino del otro lado, experimentó un gran pellizco de miedo; supo del riesgo de ser un *mojado*, un inmigrante ilegal. Un hombre fuera de la ley americana, pero dentro de la muerte de las pistolas americanas —o de los rifles. Fue por ello que comenzó a sufrir realmente, con los miedos del otro que habían desencadenado los disparos cuando mediaba esa minúscula raya geográfica, enorme de momento en sus ciento cincuenta metros de corriente.

Paván knew they were in the middle of the river. He knew it because he remembered that the sand bottom marked the border —the final half of Mexico and the initial half of the United States. He had looked at it for hours, until it was completely dark, the previous afternoon. His feet, now, no longer were in contact

with his country. That was not the water of his river anymore. They were mud and water, and also danger, foreign, different. Because they were not on this one but on the other side, he experiences a great pinch of fear; he knew the risk of being a *wetback*,⁵² an illegal migrant. A man outside the American law, but inside the death from American pistols —or from rifles. That is why he began to really suffer, with the fears of the other that the shooting had triggered when they crossed that tiny geographic line, huge at the moment in its hundred and fifty meters of current. (20-21, italics in original)

Paván imagines the border as a miniscule geographic line in the middle of the river, an edge, yet still so enormous with its one hundred fifty meter width. This boundary line is also invisible being under the water and in the dark. Not only is the dividing line between Mexico and the United States imperceptible, it is also malleable—indefinite and changeable given its association with sand, which could easily shift because of the river’s currents. He had spent the afternoon looking at the bit of sand in the river that marks the crossover point from one country to the other, yet it still seems to be something of a shock to him when he reaches and moves past it. He now feels alienated from the very river he is crossing. He is in strange waters, no longer his own, and they combine with the mud to become a dangerous, foreign element as if it were all working against him to prevent him from reaching his goal. Finally, there are the gunshots that had been fired before he reached the sandy area. He knows the group is being hunted and that the people

⁵² It is ironic that this common, negative slang term was first used in print in a 1920 *New York Times* article praising the “industrious, simple-minded agricultural people [from Mexico] looking for work” in the labor-starved farms of the United States (Breitigam XX6). This article emphasizes the positive economic impact of these laborers for the U.S., but is suffused with the racially biased rhetoric of the period.

trying to prevent his entry will not hesitate to shoot again, especially given the group's unauthorized status. They are outside of the law and therefore also outside of its protection.

This is just the first of several crossings the group of Mexicans make during the course of the novel. Claire Fox points out that not only does Spota's work begin with a river crossing, but it also ends with one (103). Paván's final crossing back into Mexico is described: "¡A mitad del río, nuevamente!" ("In the middle of the river, again!"; 260). This could be considered a type of double crossing, the return that completes his voyage, yet it is also frustrating since his trip is described as a "fracaso"—a failure (261). According to Fox the novel illustrates "the idea that all struggle to improve one's lot in life is futile" (103). It is natural homecoming for a Mexican traveler who only has to cross one river border in the journey. There is, however, another type of double river crossing—the one that Central Americans make when they pass over both the Río Suchiate at the southern border of Mexico *and* the Rio Grande/ Río Bravo at the northern one as seen in Berne Ayalá's 2007 novel *Arizona Dreaming*.

Ayalá's novel has a complex network of characters that include local law enforcement, FBI and Border Patrol agents, a newspaper reporter, and vigilantes of the Minuteman Project along the US-Mexico border, and the Coyote, a street vendor (Laura Magdalena), former military special-forces (Morgan), an undercover agent from the CIA or DEA (Mr. Robinson), and gang members (including Snoopy and Tootsie) in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico. The story moves back and forth between the group moving north from El Salvador and the factions at the northern Mexican border. There are multiple complications related to making connections with people who will help the

travelers or avoiding factions determined to stop or exploit them as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Las informaciones recibidas por el Coyote esa misma noche fueron desalentadoras. Las autoridades migratorias habían intervenido su flete de pasajeros, algunos habían sido detenidos en Tapachula, otro grupo había sido asaltado por la migra al norte de Piedras Negras, la avanzadilla que pasaba por Guerrero fue asaltada por un grupo de sicarios del cartel de la droga, y de Tijuana le comunicaban que no podían recibirle ningún vuelo de charter [sic] desde el aeropuerto de Tapachula porque órdenes superiores habían cancelado todos los favores hasta nuevo aviso. Eso significaba que la ruta del pacífico estaba cerrada. The information received by Coyote that night was discouraging. The immigration authorities had intercepted their cargo of passengers, some had been arrested in Tapachula, another group had been assaulted by immigration north of Piedras Negras, the advanced guard that passed through Guerrero was assaulted by a group of hit men from the drug cartel, and from Tijuana they communicated that they could not receive any charter flight out of the Tapachula airport because orders from higher up had cancelled all favors until further notice. That meant that the Pacific route was closed. (Ayalá 136)

The group from El Salvador has made it as far Malacatán, Guatemala (a city north of Ayuntla/Tecún Umán, the official port of entry between Guatemala and Mexico), but are stuck there because of cancelled favors (or bribes), migration raids and cartel attacks on Coyote's network of smuggling routes. The excerpt shows how the business of moving people north had expanded since the late 1960s when the Guatemalan boys Cedric and

Adelso swam across Río Suchiate into Mexico. It also sets the stage for the bustling commercial scene on this river that opens the next chapter in the group's journey north:

A la orilla de Guatemala se arremolinan los triciclos de carga armados con aluminio y madera, donde igual viajan personas o mercancías. Los bultos y cajas repletas de bebidas, galletas, perfumes, cremas para la piel, frutsis, y otras baratijas, son puestos en las balsas armadas con tablas y tubos de llantas para tractor. Un medio de transporte para el cual no haya más frontera que la del río ni más precio que el que se debe pagar por llegar a cualquiera de los dos orillas.

Los militares mexicanos conversan con los aldeanos y toda clase de piratas que sin permiso alguno van o vienen como hormigas trayendo de todo y llevando personas.

On the Guatemalan shore swarm cargo tricycles covered with aluminum and wood, where people or merchandise travel equally. Bundles and boxes full of drinks, cookies, perfumes, skin creams, Frutsis,⁵³ and other trinkets, are put on rafts made with boards and inner tubes for tractor tires. A means of transportation for which there is no more border than the river and no more price than what you have to pay to get to either of the two banks.

The Mexican military men talk with the villagers and all kinds of pirates who, without any permission, go or come like ants bringing everything and carrying people. (153)

Rather than surreptitiously swimming as Cedric and Adelso did, there is now so much commerce between Mexico and Guatemala that migrant travelers can ride to the shore in

⁵³ Fruiti is a brand of Mexican soft drink popular throughout Central America.

pedicabs, then be ferried across the Suchiate on rafts, all under the uncaring eyes of the authorities. People have become just another type of merchandise to move across the river, an excellent portrayal of which is shown in the 2012 film *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas*, as the teenaged Sabina is moved back and forth between brothels in Mexico and Guatemala.⁵⁴

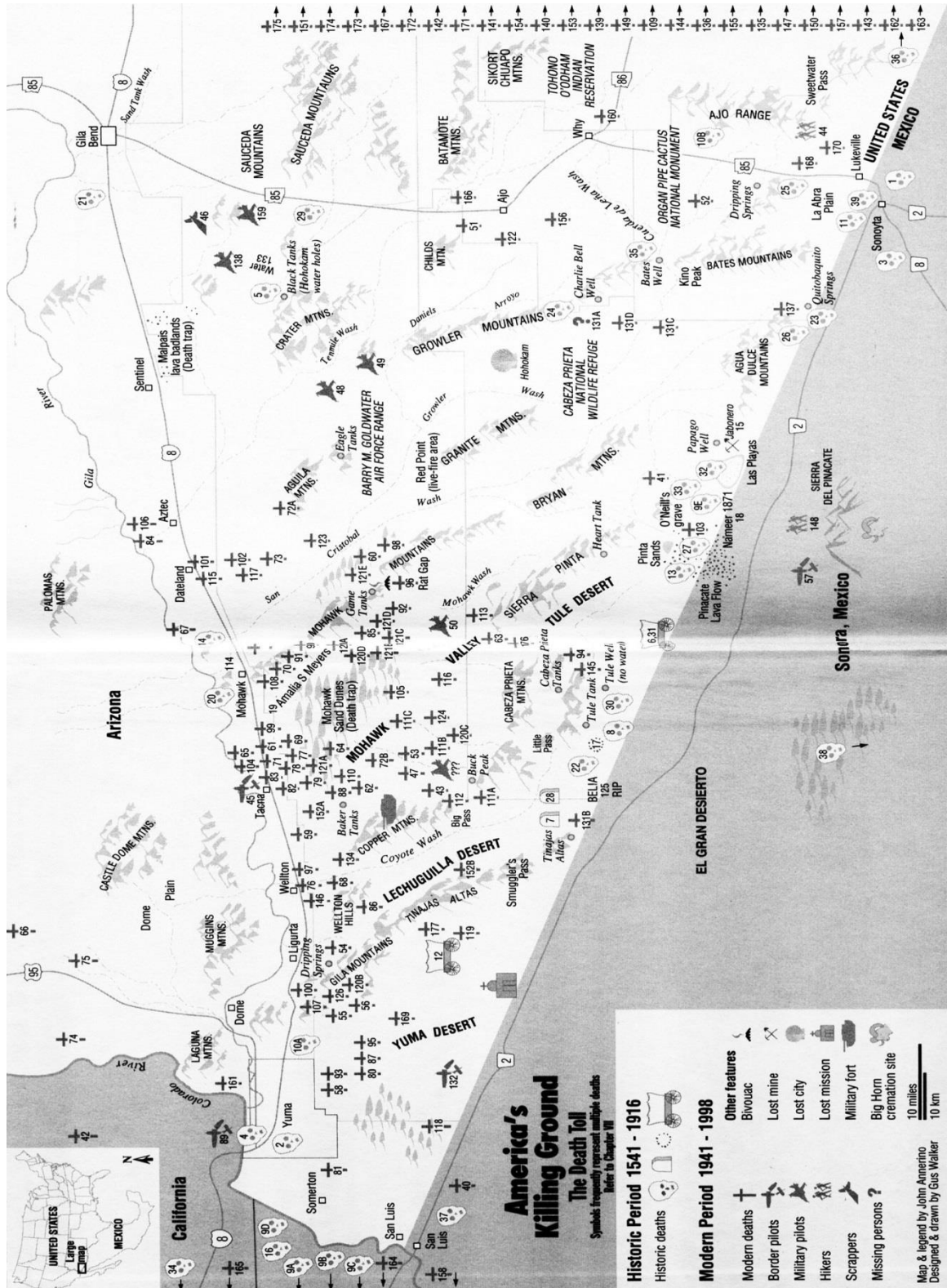
Ayala uses this description to underscore the flow of humanity moving through the region and to emphasize the level of corruption present in every level of the community. The scenes he describes are merely stage dressing for the negotiations in which the smugglers engage with each other and with dishonest officials. Ultimately his characters do not use the rafts to cross into Mexico. Instead, the group is driven to the border crossing where the customs agent arranges for their papers to appear legal while the smugglers forge new alliances, and then they proceed north by car (164-166).

The intricate networks of trusted allies and adversaries to evade causes difficulties for the group as it heads north, but they eventually reach Nuevo Laredo in northern Tamaulipas (311). The description of the group trying to cross the Rio Grande/Río Bravo gives a vivid picture of the differences that migrant travelers now face as compared to Spota's 1948 novel. While Paván and his friends were shot at from the northern shore, the group from El Salvador must also contend with gangs and drug cartels on the Mexican side. As they approach the river, they come upon four bodies: "uno era el de una mujer sin zapatos y sin ropas, estaba en posición decúbito lateral derecho; una enorme cicatriz le surcaba por la espalda, los otros tres también estaban desnudos y con iguales señas horripilantes, dos sin ojos" ("one was that of a woman without shoes y without

⁵⁴ The film is based on the 2004 novel *La Mara* by Mexican author Rafael Ramírez Heredia.

clothes, she was in a position lying on her right side; an enormous scar ran down her back, the others were also naked and with the same gruesome signs, two without eyes”; 319). El Kaibil, their new ally from the river crossing into Mexico, tells them that it was done by “Frankenstein; así les llamaba él a los traficantes de órganos, conocidos como Los Doctores” (“Frankenstein; that is what he called the organ traffickers, known as The Doctors”; 319). These unfortunates had been victims of one of the many dangerous gangs that now inhabit both sides of the river. The scene also recalls the words of the guide to Nayeli and her friends about “junkies, monsters and rateros” (Urrea 140). As the Salvadorans approach the river, a gun battle starts from an unknown source. The result of this frustrated attempt at the northern border river crossing is that several of the group members are killed and the rest turn back, deciding that the Laredo region is not going to be a successful area for entering into the United States (320-327).

The landscapes travelers cross over, under, or through—the deserts, tunnels, and rivers encountered during their passage—all play meaningful parts in narratives of migrant travel. As people are denied access to licit forms of travel documents and methods, and are pushed away from the standard routes used by sanctioned businesses and agencies, the paths they must take can lead them into particularly risky territories, where the terrain and its inhabitants can be equally dangerous. On a positive note, these stories also illustrate how females tend to show compassion and cooperate among themselves as a support system for surviving in these landscapes. Unfortunately, traversing these sites may also lead migrant travelers into uncertain culminations to their journeys.



“America’s Killing Ground” Figure 1

CHAPTER 4

ENDINGS OF MIGRANT TRAVEL: UNCERTAINTY, CIRCULARITY, DEATH

All travelers tend to have one essential question: “Will I get *back* home? Will I get home?” This calls attention to an inherent uncertainty in any type of travel. The migrant traveler, however, must factor in the additional question: “Will I get *there*?” The doubt underlying this question is compounded by the knowledge that confinement due to multiple causes may be part of the travel experience, which leads to another question: “Will I get *out*?” Georges Van Den Abbeele’s positing of travel as circular—going away from and returning to a homeland—and its economic consequences in terms of profit and loss is particularly significant with regard to how migrant travel may end (*Travel* 101). The return is not guaranteed, and the loss can be more than monetary. As he points out in his introduction, “if there is an insecurity or anxiety associated with travel, it is that insecurity associated with the menace of irreparable loss” (*Travel* xvii). From losing one’s way or economic assets to losing sanity or life itself, he writes that “every voyage is potentially a voyage into exile,” a voyage of no return. Migrant travelers lack permission to be outside of their native countries, which leads them into environs that are usually dangerous and often deadly. Consequently, the conclusions to their journeying may be tragically sudden or heartbreakingly indeterminate.

Travel may abruptly end in several ways—the two most serious endings being arrest and detention by border patrols or other law enforcement agencies leading to deportation, and death due to a variety of causes. Both of these possibilities occur in

narratives of migrant travel. Deportation can be a partial completion of the circle depending on to where the traveler is deported—to their homeland or to some other country. However, if reaching the United States is the goal, deportation to any location is not the completion of travel that the migrant wants. Mario Bencastro's novel *Odisea del norte* and its English translation *Odyssey to the North* are exemplary with regard to detention of migrant travelers and the negative effects of deportation that may result in the death of the deportee. Even if eventual return to the homeland is part of the plan, the completion of Van Den Abbeele's circle is not necessarily common in the narratives of the modern migrant traveler. The end of this type of travel often entails loss of some variety ranging from loss of purpose, family, or identity, to loss of any possibility to return, including the loss of life. Among the possibilities that lead to death are the trains that run from Tapachula near the Guatemala border to San Luis Potosí, north of Mexico City.

The Beast: Mexico's Train of Death.

Georges Van Den Abbeele writes about the “anxiety of death” during travel and that it “is the voyage of no return” (*Travel* xvi, 24). After providing several travel related euphemisms for death, such as passing away or departing, he continues, “the image of death as a voyage must inevitably coincide with an understanding of travel as containing within itself the possibility of death.” He concludes, “Travel is deadly, and to be feared to the extent that it raises the possibility of there being no return.” His commentary confirms that travelers regularly have faced and contended with the likelihood of dying away from their homelands. For the Central American traveler, one of the most well known

prospects for confronting death and the possibility of never returning is found riding the freight trains in Mexico. This route is so thoroughly recognized for its dangers that Guatemalan author Manuel Fuentes devotes a short chapter in his novel *Portadores de Sueños* (Dream Carriers) to “El Tren de la Muerte”—The train of death (77-81). The loss of migrants’ lives along these tracks is so pervasive the train is considered to be an animal that devours the humans that dare to board it, and has become known as *La Bestia*—The Beast.

Trains have been part of the travel industry since Thomas Cook arranged his first excursions in England in the 1840s (Boorstin 87). For Mexico, trains have had a volatile history in modernization and the movement of people, with advocates both for and against the question of how helpful rail transportation has been for the country.⁵⁵ There is a significant difference, however, between the passenger trains Cook was using and the freight and round-topped fuel cars that make up the Beast. While the travelers may be going north to sell their labor as a commodity, transporting themselves on the outside of train designed for goods to be carried on the inside exposes the people to multiple dangers. Hazards come in many forms: the elements, gangs, and even the movement of the train itself. Nevertheless, for migrants willing to confront the risks associated with *La Bestia*, the system of trains can speed them toward their goal, taking them almost two-thirds of the way across Mexico toward the border towns of Laredo, Texas and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico.

⁵⁵ John H. Coatsworth argued in *Growth against Development* for the economic improvements Mexico achieved through the expansion of rail service, while in *A Social History of Mexico’s Railroads*, Teresa Van Hoy noted how “railroads served the elites at the expense of the poor” (xvii). In *The Civilizing Machine*, Michael Matthews looked to literature of the period for contrasting views, pointing to two poems published in 1894 that take opposing sides regarding any progressive features of railroads (1-2).

Sonia Nazario spread awareness in the United States about these trains in a series of articles that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* from September 29, 2002 to October 7, 2002. She later turned her experiences into *Enrique's Journey*, an investigative biography and reconstruction of 17-year-old Enrique's trip from Tegucigalpa, Honduras to the United States to find his mother. In the prologue to her book, Nazario describes her research to recreate the trips children were making on the trains. Incidents that she survived while traveling parallel the experiences of migrants traveling north on the trains:

For months, as I traveled in Enrique's footsteps, I lived with the near-constant danger of being beaten, robbed, or raped. Once, as I rode on top of a fuel car on a rainy night with lightning, a tree branch hit me squarely in the face. It sent me sprawling backward. I was able to grab a guardrail and keep from stumbling off the top of the train. On that same ride, I later learned, a child had been plucked off the fuel tanker car behind mine by a branch. His train companions did not know if he was dead or alive. (*Enrique's* xx)

Not knowing one's own travel destiny or the outcomes of the trips taken by friends, family members, and companions met along the way are emblematic of migrant travel. Those who utilize the train system in Mexico increase the possibilities of both being separated from a friend during the trip and of never discovering when, how, or where their journey concluded. Among the other discomforts Nazario discusses when using *la bestia* is having to go for hours unable to access a bathroom, the intense heat and cold, and the variety of weather conditions including rain and hail (*Enrique's* xxii). Stressing the differences between her travels and those of the migrants, Nazario notes that at the end of the day, she could use her credit card to get a motel room where she could shower

and recover. Clearly, Nazario recognizes and appreciates her privileged position as a reporter. While she is observing and recording important elements about the travel experiences of people seeking employment opportunities or attempting to reunite with family members, she is not actually a member of the community. In this respect, she is much more like a traditional traveler who is venturing into an arena outside of the world of her social class.

Exposure to the elements and the perils of being a type of stowaway riding on *la bestia* have not been deterrents to desperate people looking for economic survival or fleeing violence, however. Nazario's research and fieldwork about traveling along the train routes was done in 2000. Her work has inspired others to explore the narratives associated with the train of death. In 2009, Rebecca Cammisa filmed a documentary for HBO, *Which Way Home*, about children who travel north using the train system. The feature film by Cary Fukunaga, *Sin Nombre* (Nameless), was also released that year, and focused on the gangs, particularly the Maras, that prey on the migrants using the train system. Mexican filmmaker Pedro Ultras released his documentary *La Bestia* in 2012, highlighting that nothing about the train journey had improved since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Among the migrants Ultras interviews is Juan C. Matamoros from Honduras who talks about the assaults on the trains, and that people are thrown off if they try to defend themselves. Juan concludes that travelers either let the attackers rob them or are killed (*La Bestia* 00:14:10-20). The train itself is also a source of death or mutilation. Honduran José C. Guardado tells of falling asleep on the top of the train and falling off. As a result, his hand was severed (*La Bestia* 00:14:54-00:15:07). Several other similar

tales are included in the section of the documentary filmed at a shelter in Tapachula for victims of train accidents (*La Bestia* 00:22:07-00:23:56).

Nazario's close encounter with the tree branch is only one type of problem that nature throws in the path of train riders. Ultreras films a group of Salvadorans as they are swarmed by bees and stung multiple times (*La Bestia* 00:23:57). Rape is a common occurrence for women traveling on the Death Train as heard in the story of Clara Tucpensamiento from Guatemala (*La Bestia* 00:58:40-01:00:03). She and her brother Noé had been traveling with a group that included four women. When robbers assaulted their group, she was the victim of rape after the attackers discovered that she was not carrying any money. The end of this interview includes the statement, "After Nogales, nothing was known about Noé and his sister Clara. Whether the[y] made it to the U.S.A. or were deported back to Guatemala is unknown" (*La Bestia* 01:00:03).⁵⁶ The unknown fate of Clara and her brother is typical of the interwoven stories that make up migrant travel—they are filled with unresolved pieces of people's lives. The protagonists in these narratives rarely know whether or not people they have met along the way reach their destinations in the United States, or if they ever make it back home. There is a tragic absurdity that so much doubt and ambiguity surrounds the possibility of reaching the destination even though travelers are using a form of transportation that cannot deviate from the set path created by the rails. The expectation of a safe arrival that train travel should guarantee is destabilized through these fragmentary interactions among the migrants. Contrary to the ideals of modernity and progress that underlie an

⁵⁶ This statement is from the English subtitles.

interconnected system of trains, the stories exchanged among these travelers relay a state of perpetual uncertainty.

From Prison to Prison: Migration and the Circularity of Travel.

Although there may be loss of life during a journey, there are always two underlying components of a travel narrative: some one (or some thing) must survive to relate the story of the voyage, and there is some one to read or hear it (Benjamin 84-85). Letters, diaries, or novels that include the experiences of the journey imply that the traveler has returned in some fashion or that there are people in the homeland who will receive the letters or for whom the details were recorded in journals and stories. In two novels, *Into the Beautiful North* and *El viaje a la tierra prometida*, and in the two versions of Cedric Calderón's memoir, *Contrabando humano en las Californias* and *Contrabando humano en la frontera*, at least one of the travelers returns to the starting point, where they serve as witness to the events in the narrative, including the stories of loss. In the case of Cedric's memoir, the return to his native land is at best bittersweet.

When considering detention, it is natural to think of official arrest and incarceration. However, confinement for migrant travelers may begin before they have any interaction with police or other official agencies. As Brigden and Mainwaring point out, "Migrants who travel with large-scale smuggling operations often endure extremely cramped conditions in 'safe houses', as they wait for the next segment of the journey. These stays may last from a few hours to months" (418). *Coyotes* and other traffickers gather small groups and individuals together in safe locations such as private homes or designated hotels or motels before moving people along the route north. These gatherings

could be considered as “mini-confinements” given that the migrants are usually prevented or at least discouraged from going outside the rooms where they are sheltered. These stops are not endings *per se*, but part of what Brigden and Mainwaring call “matryoshka journeys” or “journeys within journeys” (415-416). Like matryoska, the Russian nesting dolls, “migration journeys become a nested series of adventures and concealment strategies” (Brigden and Mainwaring 416), meaning that these temporary confinements are just steps along the way toward the end, whatever that ending might be. However, they are not necessarily positive experiences as “migrants may be held captive against their will, fed poorly, physically abused, or subject to unwanted contract renegotiations with their smugglers” (Brigden and Mainwaring 418). Rather than the movement a traditional traveler would experience going from hotel to hotel, they become more like moving from prison to prison. Consequently, the question of “will I get out” of such temporary confinement is key. The story told by José, a Honduran that Roberto, Carlos, and Ana meet at a café during their journey in *El viaje a la tierra prometida*, is illustrative of the mobile/immobile, adventure/confinement progression of migrant travel.

José was among twelve Hondurans that a *coyote* was guiding north: “En la frontera Guatemala-México, los encerraron en un mesón donde se retrasaron cerca de un mes” (“On the Guatemala-Mexico frontier, they locked them in an inn where they were delayed about a month” 121). When he is asked why they stayed so long, he replies that there were two other groups from El Salvador that had not yet arrived. Once these two bands arrive, the larger company begins to move north. At one point along the route, sixty-eight people are put into a container transporting bananas: “Los pusieron tan pegados que no se podían mover. A no ser por el aire acondicionado del contenedor,

hubieran muerto asfixiados. El viaje duró tres días y dos noches” (“They were so close that they could not move. If not for the air conditioning in the container, they would have died asphyxiated. The trip lasted three days and two nights”; 122). After that, they were held again in Mexico City for another month. Once the group is moving north again, they are intercepted by Mexican police, “Los detuvieron y los trasladaron a una cárcel de migración de no sabía dónde” (“They were arrested and transferred to an immigration jail in an unknown location”; 122). José was released following a series of bribes arranged by his sister in the United States (123). This anecdote typifies one form of prison-to-prison circularity found in migrant travel narratives, regardless that the imprisonment is unofficial.

There are other consequences to remaining too long under these forms of informal control as Alberto, a fellow Salvadoran, relates to Roberto. Alberto had been looking for his sister Reina for six months since his mother sent her north. He discovers that in Tapachula “la tenían empleada en un prostíbulo” (“they had her employed in a brothel”; 131). The group Reina was traveling with had been attacked by gang members who repeatedly raped all the women. After the gang left, Mexican migration officials detained the group. Rather than helping the migrants, however, they separated the men, deporting them to Guatemala, and the women “las colocaron en diferentes burdeles” (“they placed them in different bordellos”; 131). Reina’s imprisonment went from unofficial to official and from bad to worse.

The accounts from José and Alberto serve several purposes in the narrative. The first is to show that the smugglers are as likely as law enforcement officials to keep the migrants sequestered as in José’s story. In this case, there is both the confinement at an

inn and some other type of safe house along the route, as well as the restraint during transportation from one location to another. The second is to underscore the corruption among some of the Mexican enforcement members. Finally, it is an acknowledgement of the major impact some of the minor characters actually have in travel narratives. These are the casual characters the main protagonists encounter in their journeys. During such chance meetings, stories like the ones above are exchanged. The nesting of the tales of these secondary persons within the bigger narrative builds up a plurality or a collective of accounts that turns the larger story from being the singular relation of individual travel into a saga of migrant traveler movement. They open the story to multiple viewpoints and experiences. These stories can give the main characters vital information about what they might come across on the road, or they might provide explanations or supporting evidence about a particular situation the characters encounter. In the case of José's story, his experience validates that of the main characters whose progress north has been stymied through repeated postponements by the guides they have hired. Alberto's story is a cautionary one and reinforces Ana's account to Roberto and Carlos of the rape attempt she escaped during her first effort to go to the United States.

This novel also makes reference to another form of detention on the part of the smuggling system—there is no release from the *coyotes'* control until payment is completed. After Ana, Sofía and the rest of the migrant travelers have successfully crossed the desert, the *coyote* uses his cell phone to contact the drivers of four mini vans (149). The group is driven to a safe house in the Tucson area. In Phoenix, Roberto anxiously awaits information about the group (152). Once he receives the phone call from Ana, he heads to the motel to retrieve them:

Tenía que actuar rápido, y para eso, una vez cerciorado de que las dos estaban saludables, localizó a la madre de Sofía, ella le remitiría el dinero pendiente. Con eso se liquidaría la cuenta de mil dólares a Antonio, y con el resto se cubriría el viaje a su distante domicilio. En cuanto a Ana, su hijo menor Francisco le giraría lo indispensable.

Liquidaba la transacción, salieron los tres disparados al motel en que se hospedaba Roberto.

He had to act fast, and for that, once satisfied that they were both healthy, he located Sofía's mother, she would remit the outstanding money. With that the one thousand dollar balance to Antonio would be liquidated, and the rest would cover the trip to his distant home. As for Ana, her youngest son Francisco would send her what was necessary.

The transaction completed, the three left like shots for the motel where Roberto was staying. (153)

Given the story he had heard from Alberto, Roberto knew he had to fulfill the payment for Ana and Sofía in order to obtain their release from the smugglers' custody as soon as possible. He does not want there to be any possibility that they could suffer the fate of Reina during their stay with the *coyote's* associates. It also buttresses the economic characteristic found throughout the novel—movement of migrant travelers is just like any other business, and the participants who make it happen expect to be paid, preferably promptly.

The stories that are embedded within the larger tale of Roberto, Ana, Carlos, and Sofía tend to break up their narrative thread and fragment their own tale. Yet the nested

experiences of other travelers show discernable patterns that repeat and that the protagonists also face: starting then stopping, movement followed by immobility, going forward only to have to retreat or be redirected—the “matryoshka journeys” of migrants. These patterns tend to make this type of narrative be non-linear, especially if the story is viewed as accounts of non-movement—detention within movement or movement that goes from one prison environment to another—travel as a prison-to-prison event.

The business of moving people across the Mexico-United States border, and the consequences of engaging in that business, is the foundation of Cedric Calderón’s two memoirs: *Contrabando humano en la frontera* and *Contrabando humano en las Californias*.⁵⁷ In the second version, the future *coyote* professes “Quién lo imaginaría, más tarde; yo, Cedric Calderón Rivas, sería uno de los más famosos coyotes de aquellos lares. Jamás imaginé también conocer las cárceles y todo aquel proceso donde el vicio y el contrabando humano van paralelos” (“Who would imagined it, later; I, Cedric Calderón Rivas, would be one of the most famous *coyotes* in those parts. I also never imagined knowing the prisons and all that process where vice and human trafficking go hand in hand”; “Frontera” 14). This boastful, yet simple statement of his activities and their consequences while in the business of moving migrants has a more complicated reality, which leads to incarceration, as seen in his introduction to the original version:

Fueron varios años los que viví como enganchador de braceros o coyote, describiéndoles lo mejor de mis aventuras emocionantemente vividas en carne propia por un compatriota escritor latinoamericano.

⁵⁷ See chapter 2 for an explanation of the different versions of Cedric Calderón’s story.

Empezando de simple contacto de la gente con los jefes mafiosos, hasta llegar a ser un consumado y efectivo jefe, respetado entre la organización del hampa. Reclamado por las autoridades federales migratorias de ambos países, más adelante capturado y prisionero en las cárceles seguras y modernas del estado de california; el conocido corralón de chulavista, el de riverside, el lúgubre, ardiente y caluroso corralón de el centro en calexico frontera con mexicalli, por delitos de migración. En lo que respecta a prisiones del condado: “*Imperial County Jail*”, “*Los Angeles County Jail*”. Y la colosal prisión federal más moderna del estado: “*Metropolitan Correctional Center*”. Situada en san diego donde viví un lamentable accidente al escapar del valle imperial. Finalmente quedaron grabados en la computadora: mis antecedentes, ficha, huellas y fotos, un completo record archivado. Teniendo compañeros vecinos de celda tan famosos como el guerrillero filipino Marcelo, la militante del ejército de liberación simboinés, la estrambótica archimillonaria Hearst; infinidad de contrabandistas considerados como “peces gordos”, por la policía de narcóticos; polleros y traficantes conocidos internacionalmente; así también personas que su único delito fue pasar la garita de inspección aduanal con un documento falso; otros, reincidentes que fueron detenidos en ocasiones anteriores y encerrados, ignorando que el procesamiento de huellas recabadas a computación es infalible, aunque usen nombres supuestos.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ I have intentionally left the spelling, capitalization and punctuation as Calderón published it in order to maintain the spirit of his work. These are normalized in the translation.

I lived for several years as a *bracero* contractor or *coyote*, describing the best of the thrilling adventures that I personally lived through to a compatriot Latin American writer.

Starting from simple contact with people whose bosses were mafia, up to being an accomplished and effective leader, respected among the underworld organization. Claimed by federal immigration authorities of both countries, [I was] later captured and imprisoned in the safe and modern prisons of the state of California; the well-known detention center of Chula Vista, the one in Riverside, the depressing, intense and hot penal complex in the center of Calexico across the border from Mexicali, for migration crimes. With regard to country prisons [I was at]: “Imperial County Jail,” “Los Angeles County Jail.” And the most modern, colossal federal prison in the state: “Metropolitan Correctional Center.” I stayed in San Diego after I had an unfortunate accident while escaping [the prison] in Imperial Valley. Finally, recorded in the computer: my background, file, fingerprints and photos, a complete record archived. [I had] cellmates [such as] the famous Filipino guerrilla Marcelo, the militant [Patty Hearst] of the Symbionese Liberation Army, estranged [daughter] of billionaire Hearst; countless smugglers considered “big shots” by the narcotics police; internationally known smugglers and traffickers; there were also people whose only crime was to pass through a customs inspection booth with a false document; others, recidivists who were arrested on previous occasions and locked up, ignoring that processing of fingerprints stored in the computer is infallible, even if they use assumed names. (“Californias” 25-26)

This extended quote shows that not only do the criminal organizers of human trafficking end up in high security jails, but migrant travelers may also be in the same place. Beyond that, however, it is a remarkable manifestation of the author himself, providing insight to how he sees himself. Cedric gives the list of jails where he was imprisoned the way an academic would enumerate degrees—they are the cache that lend authority to his narrative. He is writing from the position of the expert whose authenticity comes from having lived “en carne propia” (“in his own flesh”) through the incidents he recounts. He points with pride to the fact that there is a record in the computer archives of the prison to show not only was he there, but that he was there with people, such as Patty Hearst, whose actions merited public notice. Through the chronicling of his life as a *coyote* and a respected leader in the underworld who did his time in jail, he modifies his criminality into a condition whereupon he can proclaim himself a true Latin American author! What a surprising and bold construction of his authorities and the consequences of his activities. He turns this potentially unfortunate ending into an asset that offsets the failure of his travels and his eventual deportations from the United States to Mexico, and later from Mexico to Guatemala.

It is particularly important to call attention to the fact that this quote comes from a work published in 1978, and describes people and actions from over forty years in the past—Patty Hearst was in the San Diego Metropolitan Correctional Center in 1976 (“Patty” 3). This establishes that migrant travelers looking to improve their economic situation or fleeing violence in their native lands, whose only “crime” might be crossing into the United States with false papers, or no papers at all, have been incarcerated with hardened criminals for decades. Cedric’s listing of county jails along with state-run

prisons also correlates to the information at the website for the Immigration Detention Justice Center that continues to record county jails across the country as locations where migrant travelers are held prior to deportation proceedings. His description of the state-owned facilities as being safe and modern is also significant when juxtaposed to the circumstances in 2018 when multiple for-profit corporations are contracting with the United States government to provide locations for detained migrant travelers (Hesson and Morgan).⁵⁹. Cedric's experience following an accident that almost cost him his hand is part of the reason he considered the state prisons safe and modern. He undergoes surgery and recovery in a clean and sunny hospital before he is returned to the main prison area ("Californias" 132-134). His observation, however, could be considered along side any nineteenth-century traveler's commentary as a discourse on the divergent modernity of the United States versus Latin America. He is in prison! Yet he takes into account the differences among institutions for incarceration in diverse countries. Another factor that contributes to Cedric's positive view of United States jails as being safe and modern may well come from the contrast of his experience while in the custody of Mexican authorities.

Once Cedric is deported from the United States to Mexico, his life changes drastically. His former smuggling rivals denounce him for using falsified Mexican documents and he is turned over to the authorities ("Californias" 146-147). Despite his brief period of freedom, Cedric's journey at this point in his memoir is really another

⁵⁹ Ted Hesson and Wesley Morgan in their 2018 *Politico* article "Feds Don't Have Enough Beds for Migrant Families" mention the conditions in private detention centers in Texas such as South Texas Family Residential Center (owned by CoreCivic) and Karnes County Residential Center (owned by the GEO Group). In general, the narratives in my corpus focus on adults, but I believe the issues associated with the detention of families and children will appear in future narratives.

version of travel from prison to prison. In Cedric's case, unlike the stories like that of José or Ana and Sofía, he is moving between official, state-run jails. The living conditions in the cell that held thirty-three people is described: "tenía cuatro metros de ancho por cuatro de largo e igual de altura; cubierta por gruesos y oxidados barrotes de hierro; el mobiliario interior compuesto de tres camastros de cada lado, soldados en metal uno sobre el otro, un alegre y rústico recipiente en medio de la celda ponía el 'toque' de inmundicia sirviendo de letrina" ("it was four meters wide by four meters long and equal in height; covered by thick and rusty iron bars; the furniture included three bunks on each side, welded metal one on top of the other, a cheerful and rustic container in the middle of the cell put the 'touch' of filth serving as a latrine"; "Californias" 148-149). In his introductory comments, Cedric alludes to the fact that he was in the same prison in San Diego as Patty Hearst, but that did not mean he was in the same cell or cellblock.⁶⁰ In the Mexican jail, however, he discovers "hombres y mujeres encerrados en las mismas celdas" ("men and women locked in the same cells"; "Californias" 150). Many of the women picked up by border patrol have already been raped before arriving at the jail, often by the very agents or police who are putting them in detention, but the living conditions that Cedric describes only serve to increase their bitter circumstances.

⁶⁰ Cyndi Banks in her *Women in Prison: A Reference Handbook* states "from the time that imprisonment as a sanction was introduced in the colonies until the 1870s, all women prisoners were housed with men within the same prison complex" (1). She goes on to note that reformers from 1870 to 1900 advocated for "the separation of women prisoners from male prisoners" (8). Despite the reform movement, however, the first all female prison was not constructed in California until 1933 (Banks 25). Nicole Hahn Rafter in *Partial Justice: Women, Prisons, and Social Control* indicates that during the 1980s "the precept that women should be held in entirely separate institutions is still followed," but that only 74 percent of prisons excluded men entirely (184).

Eventually Cedric is moved to a jail in Mexico City (“Californias” 156), and finally deported back to Guatemala (“Californias” 160).

The circle of Cedric’s journey is quite different than what he may have anticipated. The purpose of his travel was to improve the economic circumstances that prevailed in his home (his *oikos*). But as Van Den Abbeele has pointed out “economy is precisely that which conceptually stops or puts an end to the voyage by assigning it a beginning and an end in the form of the *oikos*” (xvii). Cedric returns to his starting point, after traveling from prison to prison, not any better off than when he left. One could say his economy has actually declined since he now has a criminal record in two different countries. It is not surprising that his return is filled “con infinidad de amargas experiencias” (“with countless bitter experiences”; “Californias 160). The later edition of the memoir expresses Cedric’s reflection about his exploits even more directly: “Centro América, Guatemala, de donde nunca debí haber salido” (“Central America, Guatemala, where I never should have left”; “Frontera” 153). This statement evokes an image of his journey as a circularity that has entrapped him in a deception of advancement—an improvement that was never possible, so he should have never left.

Detention as Kafkaesque Odyssey to Nowhere.

The theme of jails and detention often appears in narratives of migrant travelers. I have already mentioned José’s story of his arrest by Mexican police in Escobar Parada’s *El viaje a la tierra prometida*. Berne Ayalá in *Arizona Dreaming* also has one of his characters allude to the potential for undocumented travelers to end up imprisoned along the road: “Bueno, quiero decirte algo, el viaje es duro; de pronto el Coyote se detuvo y

pensó en la dificultades del camino, pero evitó hacer mayores comentarios para no asustar mucho a su potencial pollo, no hizo más que una conclusión: En el mejor de los casos te podés quedar guardado algunos meses en una cárcel de México” (“Well, I want to tell you something, the trip is hard; suddenly the Coyote stopped and thought about the difficulties of the road, but he avoided making more comments so as not to scare his potential client, he only made one conclusion: In the best of cases you can be saved some months in a prison in Mexico”; 9). While there are multiple other references to jails and prisons in novels that include migrant travel, one of the best presentations of both detention by immigration authorities and the judicial process that leads to deportation is found in Salvadoran author Mario Bencastro’s *Odisea del norte* and its English translation *Odyssey to the North*. This novel has a complicated structure that traces the journey of several Salvadorans north to the United States as they flee the violence of the civil war. The disjointed chronology of the storyline and the shifting perspectives depicted serve to accentuate the fragmentation of the characters lives as they are dislodged from their homeland and relocated to an unfamiliar and disorienting new existence. Bencastro’s choice of the term odyssey in the title of his novel substantiates José Emilio Burucúa’s thesis in his *El mito de Ulises en el mundo moderno*. Following William B. Stanford’s example in *The Ulysses Theme*, Burucúa discusses how the story of Ulysses in the *Odyssey* has been adopted in various arts and adapted throughout the ages. In his analysis of twentieth-century works, Burucúa states that they contribute to opening “la posibilidad de que Ulises sea un nuevo tipo para la humanidad no europea. Sobre todo para la humanidad migrante” (“the possibility that Ulysses is a new type for non-European humanity. Above all for migrant humanity”; 198). Migrant travelers often

replicate Ulysses' wanderings as he tried to reach his home: they are redirected in the journeys; they frequently assume identities different than their own; and, they repeatedly endure periods of captivity. With regard to this last element of the Odysseyan tale, the experiences of Bencastro's two of the characters, Calixto and Teresa, are noteworthy.

Before looking at the specifics about Calixto and Teresa, a few words about the complexities of this novel might be helpful. This work includes vignettes, newspaper clippings, dialogues, and courtroom transcripts, presented in non-chronological order. In the 2002 interview with Edward Waters Hood, Bencastro explained how his background as a painter influenced his technical choices when writing: "Las historias paralelas, la estructuración, la disciplina casi geométrica, todas esas cosas aprendí de la pintura. Uno de los períodos de la pintura que más me entusiasmó fue el cubismo; y cierto período del cubismo aspiraba a mostrar un objeto desde muchos ángulos a un mismo tiempo" (567; "The parallel histories, the structuring, the almost geometric discipline, all these things I learned from painting. One of the periods of painting that I was most excited about was Cubism; and a certain period of Cubism aspired to show an object from many angles at the same time"). He goes on to say that he wanted to show the reader the kaleidoscope of different perspectives related to Salvadoran immigration. In a separate interview, Rhina Toruña-Haensly asked Bencastro about the complicated structure of *Odisea al norte*. He replied that he used the mixture of newspaper articles, dialogue, and documents as a way to create a balance of fiction and history because "one never knows when fiction becomes reality and things that have actually happened seem more fictitious than fiction itself"

(“Mario” 10-11).⁶¹ He played with this mixture and balance by providing both actual and fictional documentation.⁶²

One of the ways Bencastro exposes the medley of viewpoints is through intertwining the stories of multiple people using a mixture of methods for delivering the information. Calixto, who seems to be the main character, had to flee El Salvador after being falsely accused of anti-government activities (*Odisea/Odyssey* 10-11). He travels north with a group that includes an unnamed soldier. A newspaper article included in the novel calls him “Soldier X,” a former member of the military death squads fleeing both the military and the guerrillas (*Odisea* 127-128; *Odyssey* 123-124). Combining this article with Teresa’s court transcripts the reader discovers that the soldier is Teresa’s husband. Finally, there is a series of letters among various guerrillas that offer an additional outlook about the state of affairs in Central America in general. These letters, which may or may not be real, seem almost random because there is no indication of any association of the correspondents to the other characters in the novel. While Bencastro is highlighting the disruptions caused by the war in El Salvador, the guerrillas could as easily be from Guatemala as from El Salvador given the political situation in the region at the time the novel is set.

⁶¹ Toruña-Haensly’s interview is in a bilingual work: *Crossing Cultures: Hispanic Authors and the Challenges They Overcame in the United States*. The Spanish version of this quote appears on page 114: “a veces no se sabe si lo ficticio es real, porque los hechos reales parecen más ficticios que la misma ficción”.

⁶² His “Author’s Note” states, “With the exception of the content of some newspaper articles, any similarity to actual events, places, or people (living or dead) is coincidental” (*Odyssey*; “A excepción del contenido de algunos de los artículos periodísticos, cualquier semejanza con sucesos, lugares, y personas reales, vivas o fallecidas, es pura coincidencia” *Odisea* “Aclaración”).

Calixto's story of crossing the border into the United States begins near Ciudad Juárez in Mexico. After wading across the Rio Grande/Río Bravo and running through part of the desert outside of El Paso, Calixto and fourteen others in his group are packed into a minibus, which heads toward Silver City, New Mexico (*Odisea* 119-121; *Odyssey* 115-117). However, their progress into the United States is short lived: "A cinco horas de la frontera, dos horas después de que habían atravesado Silver City, fueron interceptados por un carro-patrulla" (*Odisea* 129; "Five hours from the border, two hours after going through Silver City, the travelers were intercepted by a patrol car" *Odyssey* 125). After chasing the minibus into the desert, the Border Patrol finally captures them. Everyone is handcuffed and loaded into a van and driven to near where they started in Texas. Along with other migrants apprehended during the night, they are put on buses and taken to the detention center known as El Corralón in El Paso. In only nineteen hours, Calixto has circled back to where he first entered the United States (*Odisea* 129-130; *Odyssey* 125-126). Revisiting the idea of mobility and immobility, this part of Calixto's "odyssey" appears to be travel that is in reality going nowhere. In spite of the hours spent moving from Ciudad Juárez into the United States, Calixto's only progress is to have moved from one side of the border to the other. However, he is now in a condition of being thoroughly immobilized by imprisonment. His time has been spent cycling back to where he first entered the country.

The group is processed into the system creating the records for each person that was similarly described in Cedric's memoir: "En El Corralón los viajeros fueron fotografiados y fichados. En esa oportunidad les permitieron hacer una llamada por teléfono a algún familiar of amigo. Les hicieron firmar documentos muchos de los cuales

no entendieron. Luego los internaron en la prisión regular” (*Odisea* 130; “In El Corralón the travelers were photographed and information taken for files. At that time they were given the opportunity to make a telephone call to a relative or friend. They were forced to sign documents, many of which they did not understand. Then they were transferred to the main prison” *Odyssey* 126). Just as with Cedric’s memoir, juxtaposing this brief passage about signing perplexing documents with 2018 news items, such as Samantha Schmidt’s article in *The Washington Post* regarding parents’ unknowingly signing away their rights to be with their children in detention, shows that the practice of incarcerating migrants without full due legal process is hardly new. The end of this novel includes the dates during which it was written confirming that such procedures were incorporated into the treatment of migrants at least twenty years ago: “Julio 1983-Noviembre 1998” (*Odisea* 195; “July 1983-May1998”⁶³ *Odyssey* 192). These travelers, like the Ulysses of Romare Bearden, are navigating the tricky path between two worlds—their homelands “y la América de los dolores y las desventuras” (“and the America of sorrows and misfortune”; Burucúa 184).

The entrance to jail is just the beginning of a confusing process, however. Over the course of several short, non-chronological chapters, Calixto and the other members of his group are introduced to an immigration attorney (*Odisea* 136-137; *Odyssey* 133-134), learn the routine schedule of the prison (*Odisea* 143-144; *Odyssey* 140-141), and encounter prison gangs and the problems they cause (*Odisea* 155-158, 167-168; *Odyssey* 153-156, 165-166). The uncertainty of their situation is aptly summarized at the end of

⁶³ The English version was published in 1998 while the Spanish one appeared in 1999, which might explain why the Spanish version has one extra chapter and why these dates are different.

the chapter that outlines the daily schedule: “Nadie sabía cuánto tiempo permanecería en la prisión. Dependía de muchos factores: de los abogados, del dinero que disponían los familiares para pagar la fianza, y de la suerte del prisionero” (*Odisea* 144; “No one knew how long they would have to remain in the prison. Their length of stay depended on many factors: the attorneys, the money their relatives had available for bond, and the luck of the prisoner” *Odyssey* 141). Notwithstanding that a detainee has the chance to make a telephone call after being arrested, there is nevertheless confusion over whether an inmate’s relatives even know he or she is in jail as revealed in this scene when a prisoner is about to be released:

Esto desataba una andanada de felicitaciones y, en cosa de segundos, muchos escribían con premura un nombre y un número de teléfono, y le entregaban el papel al que se iba, poniendo en él todas las esperanzas de libertad. Tal forma era, a veces, la única posibilidad de que los familiares o amigos del detenido supieran que se encontraba en aquella cárcel. (*Odisea* 174)

This would set off a round of congratulations and, in a matter of seconds, many inmates would hastily write down names and telephone numbers which they would give to the one who was leaving, entrusting to him all their hopes of being released. This was at time the only possibility that the friends and relatives of a detainee would find out he was in that jail. (*Odyssey* 172)

As in the original Greek *Odyssey*, the migrant travelers have to maintain hope that they will be released from their captivity, but it also parallels the difficulties the Greeks had communicating their whereabouts during the journey. Traditionally, a traveler would send letters that kept the people in the homeland informed of their circumstances. During

the Greek war, Penelope would have been receiving information about Ulysses and the other Greeks because she was the one at home who knew they were traveling. Of course, once the rest of the Greeks arrived home, the questions for Penelope become “Where is Ulysses and what happened to him?” In the modern scenario, the Central Americans are in the position of any traveling Trojans. Their homelands are the war-torn locations that have been destabilized. As a consequence, their relatives who might have known they were traveling probably have been displaced. Who, then, do you contact, and how?

The jail scene above subtly shows that just being able to make a phone call does not ensure that detainees would have been able to contact anyone who could help them. There is no guarantee that the phone number was still in use or that the call went through to the right person. There is also no assurance that any message left by the migrant was understood or passed along. Being released from detention is related to the question of who knows that a person is traveling. Is there someone within the United States who is expecting the person to arrive, such as Sofía’s mother in *El viaje a la tierra prometida*? Or is the traveler like Calixto who only has family members back in El Salvador that know he is on the road? Given the instability of his homeland, would those family members still be where he could contact them? He would not have had anyone within the United States with whom he could communicate regarding his detention, and no way to contact his family in El Salvador. Any message he might be able to send out from the jail would be as random and uncertain in its arrival as having tossed into the sea a bottle with a note. Quite clearly, when one flees from a war zone such as Calixto had to do from El Salvador, communicating with loved ones who were left behind becomes complicated.

For the group in El Corralón, the telephone becomes a substitute for letters. Letters, however, can also go astray or convey ill-fated news.

As I mentioned earlier, *Odisea del norte* includes a series of four letters between guerrillas in the resistance. Two of them are lovers, but neither seems to be associated with the group that includes Calixto. One element about these letters that is noteworthy stems from the detail that the correspondents are people on the move due to their clandestine activities. The letters are coded disguising the names of the correspondents as in the first letter from “La Montaña” (The Mountain) to his lover in the United States: “en el sagrado momento en que escogimos nuestros nombres Tzu-Nihá y Tzi-Vihán en memoria de nuestros antepasados mayas” (*Odisea* 123; “the sacred moment when we chose our names Tzu-Nihá and Tzi-Vihán⁶⁴ in memory of our Mayan ancestors” *Odyssey* 119). While they have taken on supposedly Mayan *noms de guerre/noms de plume* and claim Mayan ancestry, there is not really any evidence regarding their nationality or location—“the mountain” could be anywhere in Central America and thus be a gesture of solidarity to the struggles all indigenous groups were embroiled in at the time. What is

⁶⁴ The Mayan language family is very diverse with thirty-one distinct languages (Campbell and Kaufman 187). However the language groups barely dip into modern El Salvador, where Pipil (a form of Nahuatl) was spoken but is now almost extinct (Campbell 1-2). According to Harri Kettunen and Christophe Helmke the glyph “tzu” means dog (10), and also appear as *tzul* and *tz’i’*, both also meaning dog (127). The other parts of the names do not seem to have any direct connection to a Maya word. This was also corroborated by indigenous literatures scholar Gloria Chacon in an e-mail exchange: “Based on my knowledge of K’iche’, I would say that at least the first names refer to dogs. One is Tzu which comes from the glyphic writing (the classical period) to refer to domestic dogs. The second one also refers to dog Tzi but it is a day in the Mayan calendar. Perhaps, the author is taking liberties with the names. The term ‘ha’ used to be an earlier spelling for ja meaning water. So the name can be a composite of names. [...] My sense is that they are phonetic spellings that may or may not have real meaning.” I am indebted to both Dra. Chacon and Dra. Sarah Buck Kachaluba who facilitated this correspondence.

clearly represented through these letters, though, is the political clandestinity in which the correspondents are engaged and the marked instability in the homeland as seen in the closing of his letter. In order to protect his whereabouts, Tzi-Vihán writes, “Escríbeme a la dirección convenida” (*Odisea* 124; “Write to me at the agreed-upon address” *Odyssey* 120). There is no exact address or person specified so there could be no repercussions if the letter fell into the wrong hands. Tzu-Nihá responds telling him a few details about her trip north and the difficulties she is having adapting to the new environment and language (*Odisea* 138; *Odyssey* 135). Unfortunately, the letter she receives in reply is from an anonymous comrade telling her that Tzi-Vihán has fallen in battle (*Odisea* 159-160; *Odyssey* 157-158). The final letter is from Tzu-Nihá to the dead Tzi-Vihán telling him she is breaking her promise and returning to their unnamed homeland in order to continue the struggle (*Odisea* 183-184; *Odyssey* 181).

While Tzu-Nihá is returning to her country with the purpose of continuing the political crusade, she also has every expectation, even hope, of dying. As with Calixto’s brief time between crossing the Rio Grande at El Paso then being returned to El Paso to be put in jail, these letters also document a journey that is cycling back around to immobility, but her lack of movement will be through death rather than prison. Counter to the expected question of “will the traveler survive,” this series of letters presents the journey as life preserving, while the homeland is where death is encountered, or sought as with Tzu-Nihá. Even without returning to their homelands, the multiple fragments build one upon the other to form a narrative of travel akin to immobility. For example, two of Calixto’s friends, Toño and José, go north in order to try to find work (*Odisea* 29-32; *Odyssey* 25-29). The three of them end up living on Mount Pleasant street in Washington

D.C., however, a riot breaks out following a misunderstanding with the police (*Odisea* 73-75; *Odyssey* 69-72). One of their neighbors declares, “Como si estuviéramos en El Salvador” (*Odisea* 96; “It’s like being in El Salvador” *Odyssey* 93). Calixto and his friends had fled El Salvador to get away from the violence that made working impossible, only to find themselves in the middle of a similar situation in a foreign country—a battle zone where un- or under-employed people become the victims. Any upward social mobility one might have predicted as a result of their travel has been nullified. Their travel appears to be a motionless cycle of poverty, bad communication, and violence regardless of the dwelling site. They are not moving up, moving forward, or moving away from violence.

Communication with the homeland and the possible ramifications of any interaction with family and friends who remain there are also alluded to in Bencastro’s novel. There are eight scenes that cover courtroom proceedings surrounding the possible deportation of Teresa, one of the migrants captured with Calixto. Unlike Calixto’s story, Teresa’s experiences with the immigration court seem to be reported in chronological order even though the chapters are intermingled within the larger narrative. All of these chapters are written as if they are the court reporter’s transcripts of the dialogue among the participants in the proceedings. The use of dialogue gives readers a sense of immediacy, placing them within the framework of the action—as if they were part of the events as they unfold. It also puts the reader in a state of involuntary complicity with the bureaucracy that maneuvers Teresa toward her eventual unfortunate ending. While the procedures in the courtroom scenes appear to be legal, whether they lead to justice is

open to interpretation. As virtual participants in the trial, readers are contaminated by the machinations that lead to Teresa's demise.

I find it significant that some of the dialogue in the Spanish version (which was published second) does not correspond to the English version that was published first.⁶⁵ While both versions demonstrate the position of the judicial system, I consider that the Spanish version of the following scene undermines the reality of the migrant's experience, given that it eliminates the reason why Teresa lacks documents. In so doing it debases her humanity and coincidentally dismisses her ability and right to seek asylum—a right that does not require a visa. At this point in the timeline, Teresa does not have legal representation. The scene begins with the Judge verifying that Teresa does not speak English and acknowledges the Spanish-speaking interpreter, then moves into the court proceedings:

Juez: Bien. Esta es una audiencia de deportación. La ley establece que usted puede ser deportada porque entró en este país sin inspección, sin documentos legales; y yo voy a determinar si usted debe o no ser deportada. En esta audiencia usted tiene el derecho de ...

Teresa: ¿Qué quiere decir “sin inspección”?

Juez: ¿Sin qué?

Teresa: Inspección.

Juez: A usted se le acusa de haber pasado a escondidas la frontera. ¿Tenía visa para entrar en los Estados Unidos?

⁶⁵ The various interviews and critiques of Bencastro's novel that I have reviewed have not addressed the issue of the differences between the English and the Spanish versions. See interviews by Rhina Toruño-Haensly, Consuelo Hernández, and Edward Waters Hood, as well as articles by Toruño-Haensly, Arturo Arias, and Oriel María Siu.

Teresa: No.

Juez: Cuando usted llegó a este país, ¿no tenía permiso, verdad?

Teresa: No.

Juez: Pues, ¿cómo entró si no tenía permiso?

Teresa: A escondidas.

Juez: De eso exactamente se le acusa, de entrar sin permiso, y de eso se trata esta audiencia. (*Odisea 41*)

The Spanish version above strictly focuses on Teresa's method of entering the United States. The English version provides more details regarding her mindset:

Judge: Very well. This is a deportation hearing. The law establishes that you are deportable because you entered this country without inspection and without legal documents. I'm going to determine if you should be deported or not. In this hearing you have the right to ...

Teresa: What does "without inspection" mean?

Judge: Without what?

Teresa: Inspection.

Judge: You are being accused of sneaking across the border, without papers or permission.

Teresa: Yes, I ... Yes, I entered without papers because they took them away from me.

Judge: Did you have a visa to enter the United States?

Teresa: No.

Judge: Where are your papers?

Teresa: Some men with big knives stole everything we had, our money too.

Judge: Where?

Teresa: In Tapachula.

Judge: Tapachula, is that in Mexico or Guatemala?

Teresa: Mexico.

Judge: When you arrived in this country, you had no papers. Is that correct?

Teresa: By then I didn't have them anymore.

Judge: Well, how did you enter if you didn't have papers?

Teresa: By sneaking across.

Judge: That is exactly what you are being accused of, of entering without papers, and that is what this hearing is about. (*Odyssey* 37-38; emphasis added)

I have not found any discussion regarding the reasons why the author made the two versions different, thus leaving the issue open for speculation. It is possible that the English-only reader would not find Teresa's character sympathetic without some additional information about her situation. In order for her persona to gain a deeper sense of commiseration in an English-speaking readership, she is portrayed more as a victim than as a person who trespasses the law. While Teresa has indeed broken laws by entering the United States without benefit of a passport or visa, laws vary over time and can be modified or reversed. There is also a perspective that separates state laws from cultural or community laws. Josefina Ludmer has famously written in *The Corpus Delicti*, there are "laws other than that of the state" (73, italics in original), for example, laws of friendship or laws of survival. From the standpoint of the common law of people who may not trust governments, for example, breaking a mutable paper law is not a big deal—falling into a

less important category of personal regulation such as jaywalking. The cultural injustice that created the situation requiring Teresa to sneak across the border would not need to be explained to a Spanish speaker who would be more familiar with how community standards come into conflict with arbitrarily developed laws. Making Teresa more sympathetic would make her less believable in a Spanish version. The criminalization of her undocumented status is emphasized in the Spanish version, while her victimization is underscored in the English. How to interpret the differences and their significance comes down to a question of the reader's ethical judgment and cultural background.

In her article about migrant Salvadoran identity, Linda Craft makes a brief reference to the proceedings against Teresa as “tedious and intimidating” (156). Not only are the scenes in the courtroom mind-numbingly daunting for Teresa, but also it is very evident that the judge is speaking in a different code than she is, leading to dialogue that has the potential to be endless. Clearly the position of the court it is the lack of authorized documentation and not entering through an official entry port that are the most significant issues related to the determination for deportation.⁶⁶ However, for Teresa, the very fact that she originally had documents is important—at least in the English version. There are linguistic codes within the dialogue working counter-point to each other. On the one hand, this is an example of the polyphonic way Bencastro uses partial sentences and interruptions to show that the discourse on migration is a patchwork of different points of view and highlights different attitudes readers may bring to the topic. The non-Spanish-speaking judge has a very specific legal terminology and wording that he is obligated to

⁶⁶ Chapter four of Kairos G. Llobrera's 2013 dissertation “The Predicament of Illegality: Undocumented Aliens in Contemporary American Immigration Fiction,” extensively covers the issues of immigrants' perspectives of themselves versus the perspectives of the “regime of law” and “the nation of laws” (220-262).

follow. For example, when he states that she came into the country “without inspection.” This technical jargon makes it complicated for Teresa to fully comprehend his questions. When she asks what he means, the judge deflects her inquiry and never answers her question. Instead, he shifts his response to focus on a different part of the charges against her, thus facilitating the examination process to the advantage of the court. Changing the subject also has the advantage of distracting Teresa from taking charge of her own defense and pursuing her question. On the other hand, not including data in the English version that helps establish Teresa’s personal code of ethics works to undermine the strength of Teresa’s position and contributes to a lack of genuine communication between her and the judge. Each person is trying to convey distinct but clashing considerations that would affect the outcome of the proceedings. For Teresa in the English version, the “why” she has no documentation is of primary significance as evidence for her clandestine crossing into the United States. For the court in both versions, only the “what” (the fact that she lacks documents and crossed the border outside of the port of entry) is acceptable support for a decision. The court’s position is emphasized in the Spanish version that eliminates the judge questioning Teresa about having no papers. In that version, the end result of sneaking across without paperwork is the only substantial factor to be considered. The English version, however, shows Teresa’s perspective that it is just as meaningful that she started out with documents, regardless that she had not yet gotten a visa—after all, having documents means that there is always the possibility of obtaining a visa. This version also aligns with migrant travelers’ experiences of being exploited or robbed during their journeys, the details of which are probably unnecessary in the Spanish version. This courtroom scene is completed after the judge tells Teresa that

she can request political asylum and seek legal counsel, then he sets a time and date for her case to be continued (*Odisea* 42-43; *Odyssey* 38-39).

In the next six court appearances, Teresa attempts to complete all of the required forms (*Odisea* 58-59; *Odyssey* 54-55) and, with the help of an attorney, to answer questions explaining her circumstances (*Odisea* 81-84, 104-107, 131-133, 145-148, and 161-164; *Odyssey* 78-81, 100-103, 127-130, 142-146, and 159-162). The scenes in the courtroom when an attorney finally represents Teresa are revealing. Her attorney, Ms. Smith, has had less than a week to review Teresa's application for asylum given that she only received the documents Friday before the trial (*Odisea* 81; *Odyssey* 78). However, in that short time, she notices that the application is incomplete and that the State Department's opinion about the application is simply a form letter "que no trata los hechos específicos del caso de la acusada" (*Odisea* 82; "which does not address the specific facts of the respondent's case" *Odyssey* 79). Over the attorney's objections, the judge admits the State Department's letter that is an opinion without any consideration of Teresa's specific life and experiences. The detail that information specific to Teresa's case is subtle and easily overlooked but is a key factor for deciding her case. It also brings to mind my earlier concern about the variations between the English and Spanish versions of Teresa's first court appearance, in which part of her personal experience is represented differently. Teresa's personal details are among the elements that distinguish whether the court decision is just or not.

In the rest of this section and the next (*Odisea* 83-84, 104-106; *Odyssey* 80-81, 100-103), Ms. Smith attempts to establish that Teresa meets the requirement from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to request asylum. She

needs to have a “well-founded fear of persecution” (UNHCR 3). The line of reasoning leads to this interaction between the judge and Ms. Smith:

Juez: Bien, un momento. Señora Smith, no sé si estamos viendo hoy el caso de ella o de su esposo, pero estamos muy lejos del punto central. Me gustaría saber por qué ella tiene miedo de ser perseguida en El Salvador; y todavía no encuentro la razón. Después de quince minutos de preguntas no hay nada más que el hecho de que los guerrilleros una vez amenazaron que se él no salía del ejército, sería asesinado. El sabía que iría a prisión y todo lo demás pero ... esta audiencia o trata sobre el caso de él sino sobre el caso de ella.

Abogada: Sí, señor juez, eso es verdad. ¿Puedo ofrecerle una alternativa de prueba?

Juez: Por favor.

Abogada: Las dos bases principales del caso de ella son la ayuda proveída a los guerrilleros y esencialmente el caso de su esposo. Y hasta el punto de que sí la afecte a ella, nos gustaría poder presentar pruebas sobre eso. La preocupación de su esposo en cuanto al servicio militar, ya que aparentemente él era muy estimado y muy hábil cuando estaba en el ejército, es que iban a seguir interesados en él y que si lo encontraban otra vez, su preocupación es que los guerrilleros creerían que él se había entregado voluntariamente a los militares y que entonces los guerrilleros tomarían represalias en contra de Teresa. (*Odisea* 106)

Judge: Very well, just a moment. Ms. Smith, I don't know if we're hearing her case today, or her husband's, but we're far from the central point. I would like to know why she is afraid of being persecuted in El Salvador, and I have not yet

found the reason. After fifteen minutes of questioning there is nothing more than the fact that the guerrillas once threatened that if he didn't leave the army, he would be killed. He knew that he would go to prison and all the rest, but ... this hearing is not about his case but about hers.

Ms. Smith: Yes, Your Honor, that is true. May I make an offer of proof?

Judge: Please.

Ms. Smith: The two main bases of her case are the assistance provided to the guerrillas and essentially her husband's case. And to the extent that it affects her, we would like to be able to present evidence on it. Her husband's concern with regard to the military, since apparently he was very much respected and very skilled when he was in the army, is that they were going to continue to be interested in him and that, if they found him again, his fear is that the guerrillas would believe he had surrendered voluntarily to the military and then the guerrillas would take reprisals against Teresa. (*Odyssey* 102)

The claim of fear is based on Teresa's husband's military background and probable retaliation against the family if she returns to El Salvador. The attorney for the United States and the judge both keep questioning the relevance of the husband's situation to Teresa's case as seen in the rest of this episode in the court:

Juez: ¿Sucedió algo así?

Abogada: No, el esposo se fue ...

Juez: Quiero decir, a ella ...

Abogada: No.

Juez: Entonces estamos hablando de su miedo y sus especulaciones sobre un evento que puede o no haber ocurrido. Por lo que entiendo, ese evento no ocurrió.

Abogada: Correcto. Estamos tratando sobre su miedo de regresar a su país.

Juez: Es su miedo. Miedo subjetivo. Usted sabe, su miedo subjetivo no tiene nada que ver, a menos que pueda demostrar que ella tenía hechos objetivos para articular el miedo subjetivo ...

Abogada: Correcto. Es verdad que hasta ese punto es el caso de él y los hechos objetivos son la amenaza de que matarían a su familia, y de esa manera afecta a Teresa.

Juez: Bien, permitiré que ofrezca pruebas del hecho que los militares o los guerrilleros iban a matar a su familia, o ni siquiera matar a su familia, que iban a hacerle daño a ella como miembro de esa familia. Si puede demostrar eso, bien; pero si no, voy a tener que prohibir esa línea de preguntas. (*Odisea* 106-107)

Judge: Did anything like that happen?

Ms. Smith; No, the husband left ...

Judge: I mean, to her ...

Ms. Smith: No.

Judge: Then we are dealing with her fear and her speculations about an event which may or may not have happened. From what I understand, that event did not occur.

Ms. Smith: Correct. We're dealing with her fear of returning to her country.

Judge: It's her fear. Subjective fear. You know her subjective fear is irrelevant unless you can show that she has objective facts to substantiate the subjective fear ...

Ms. Smith: Correct. It's true that up to this point it is his case and the objective facts are the threat that they would kill his family, and in that way it affects Teresa.

Judge: Fine, I will allow you to offer evidence on the fact that the military or the guerrillas were going to kill his family, or not even kill his family, that they were going to harm her as a member of that family. If you can show that, fine; but if not, I'm going to have to prohibit that entire line of questioning. (*Odyssey* 102-103)

This exchange exposes the bureaucratic contortions of language within the legal system, giving this event a Kafkaesque texture within the novel. The use of everyday language for very specific and complex official interpretations of the law helps put the reader in the position of the character who has to be in a state of confusion regarding the seemingly incomprehensible specificity of this jargon. A facet of this conversation that is not readily apparent in either the English or the Spanish versions of this novel is that Teresa's confusion would be compounded by the fact that her attorney and the judge would be speaking in English, which is not her native language. If she understands the discussion at all, it would be at a rudimentary level of the vocabulary, not at the specialized application that the judge is using. How is Teresa (or the ordinary reader) supposed to know what "subjective" means in relation to her fear or what constitutes an "objective fact" about that fear? She and any other migrant fleeing the upheavals at that time in Central America

only know the fear of dying at the hands of either government forces or revolutionaries after years of living through civil war. While reading these courtroom transcripts might be “tedious,” their purpose is to be “intimidating” and to underscore the intimidation the court system uses throughout these proceedings. Furthermore, the completely disconnected and insensitive manner in which people without any similar experiences dissect her fears seems to be calculatingly cruel. She is compelled to tell her life story to people who through legal technicalities have distanced themselves from her feelings, and then dismiss those feelings as irrelevant to the proceedings in order to deny her request for asylum.

In an attempt to establish the basis of Teresa’s fear, her lawyer questions her about family who might still be in El Salvador (*Odisea* 132; *Odyssey* 128). Teresa testifies that there are several relatives, but that she has not received any letters from them in more than six months, and that there is no one else she can write to for information about the situation in her home country. This, of course, is more cause for her fear since she has no idea what has happened to them and no way of contacting them. During this section of testimony the only time the judge asks for clarification is when Teresa mentions Benjamin Hill, a Mexican border patrol check point near Nogales (*Odisea* 132-133; *Odyssey* 129). It is apparent that the judge is distancing himself from any personal details of Teresa’s life and journey, and focusing solely on specifiable details. He shows no interest in the fate of Teresa’s family in El Salvador, but seizes on a particular place that can be identified on a map. Oriol María Siu observes the judge “is entirely unaware of the political situation of war in El Salvador” (96). I am in agreement with Siu that this is one reason he is quite incapable of determining “that there is sufficient cause to believe

that if deported, she would be killed.” Given that the judge has disassociated himself from Teresa as a person, the objectivity that should be in play for an impartial officer of the court is obscured by his lack of awareness regarding the situation in El Salvador and by his selectivity regarding the applicable facts of the case. Siu refers to this process that erases Teresa’s life experiences and the consequences of so doing as “subjective discardability” (97). She is shed of her human subjectivity and her reality is denied and rejected by a system that sees her as an expendable entity.

When the trial attorney takes over the questioning, he moves the issue from Teresa’s fear of death to her ability to earn more in the United States than she could in her homeland. As a field worker in El Salvador she would earn about a dollar a day (*Odisea* 161; *Odyssey* 159), but working in the United States she was being paid \$3.35 per hour (*Odisea* 162; *Odyssey* 160). Just as the judge in Teresa’s original court session transferred the focus of the case to the court’s advantage, the trial attorney is attempting to alter Teresa’s reasons for entering the United States: rather than seeking political asylum, she is seeking better wages. The judge rules that the economic issues are not relevant to the case, but that since Teresa herself was never specifically threatened, she does not meet the standard to receive asylum (*Odisea* 177-178; *Odyssey* 175-176). Bencastro has the judge quote specifically from the United Nations’ *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* requirement to be eligible for refugee status of a well-founded fear of persecution based on “race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion” (*Odyssey* 175; UNHCR 3; “raza, religión, nacionalidad, membrecía en un grupo social específico u opinión político” *Odisea* 177). These are the same arguments that are being used by United States authorities in 2018 to

turn away Central Americans fleeing gang violence and domestic abuse. They are interpreting the *Convention and Protocol* in the strictest fashion—that fear of gang violence and domestic abuse are not related to race, religion, or political or social standing, and therefore do not qualify an individual or family for the refugee status upon which asylum could be granted.

As a result of Teresa being denied asylum, she must voluntarily leave the United States within thirty-one days or be officially deported, even though she retains her right to appeal the decision (*Odisea* 178-179; *Odyssey* 176-177). Bencastro includes two chapters that appear as news articles. The second of these is presented as being from *La Tribuna* in San Salvador and dated October 14, 1986. It indicates that the body of Teresa de Jesús Delgado, recently deported from the United States, was found near Cantón El Jocote, San Miguel (*Odisea* 191; *Odyssey* 188). This is where Teresa had told the court that her grandmother lived (*Odisea* 146; *Odyssey* 143). The final line of the article reads: “Se cree que fue asesinada por represalias políticas” (“It is believed that her death was due to political retaliation”). The Central American periodical noticeably features the political threat that had been disregarded by the judge in Teresa’s asylum hearing. The other article is from a fictitious news source and appearing a little more than a month later. Titled “Soldado X: Fugitivo e Indocumentado” (*Odisea* 127-128; “Soldier X: Undocumented Fugitive” *Odyssey* 123-124), the article gives all of the same details that Teresa provided the court regarding her husband, his military training, and their reasons for fleeing El Salvador. “Soldier X” indicates that he had tried to post bond for his wife in El Paso where they both had been in detention, but that she had already been deported. He reflects on his situation in the closing statement of the article regarding his asylum

application: “Si regreso a mi país correré la misma suerte de mi esposa, pues tanto la guerrilla como mis antiguos colegas de los escuadrones seguramente tratarán de eliminarme” (*Odisea* 128; “If I return to my country I would meet the same fate as my wife, since the guerrillas as well as my former colleagues in the death squads would certainly try to eliminate me” *Odyssey* 124). The journey for Teresa and her husband is a Kafkaesque study in endless, nonsensical bureaucracy, miscommunication, and isolation. While Teresa’s physical death occurs after her bureaucratically manipulated deportation, the death of her identity as a person actually occurs in the courtroom through the incessant techniques surrounding the legal jargon used in the hearings. Her deportation becomes a fatal homecoming of ultimate loss. Throughout the journey north, any reference to the character that is Teresa’s husband is only as a “soldado” or “soldier” (*Odisea* 79; *Odyssey* 77). Called Soldado or Soldier X in *The Los Angeles Watch* article (*Odisea* 127-128; *Odyssey* 123-124), he has lost his identity as well as his family, and is nothing more than a cipher in the system that may or may not grant him the asylum it denied his wife.

The Desert and the Wheel.

From the tales I have discussed so far it is clear that death travels with migrants. Teresa meets her death when she was deported back to El Salvador, and her husband is trying to avoid the same fate. Tzu-Nihá returns to that country in order to seek a revolutionary death that will reunite her with her lover. I have also introduced another character who journeys in order to be reunited with the dead: Doña Encarnación in *The River Flows North* tells the *coyote* Cerda that she is going north into the desert “to stay

with the spirits” of her ancestors (13). In the beginning of her individual tale, she identifies herself as belonging “to the Lacandona people” who are part of the Mayans in the Chiapas region of Mexico (90-91).⁶⁷ As she finishes her story, she describes the unusual cycle that completes her homeward journey:

I remembered that our ancestors had also migrated ages ago, but at that time their movement was downward from their northern desert world. It was a time when they journeyed south to dwell in the jungles and mountain regions of Mexico, and even farther away, where they have dwelt until this time. Now we, their children, were returning to the place of our ancestors’ beginnings. I saw that the river of our lives had reversed its course and that it now flowed back to its original source because it is natural to return to where one begins. (101)

Doña Encarnación is completing a much larger circle in terms of migrant travel as she closes a multi-generational loop.⁶⁸ The Lacandón Maya that Doña Encarnación claims as her people seem to have emerged as a group from various rebellious communities in the early Spanish colonial period (Eroza Solana 7) and were probably strongly affected by contact with the Aztec and other Nahuatl peoples of Central Mexico (Thompson 19). All of these groups have similar origin stories and the interconnecting influences help to explain the linking of the Maya in southern Mexico to the northern border region with the United States that some consider to be their common birthplace: Aztlán (Lint-Sagarena 73). Doña Encarnación’s journey also symbolizes a fundamental element in the Mayan perspective of the world—“the wheel [...] as an image of the great round of time”

⁶⁷ For more about the Lacandón people and the circumstances that displaced many of them, see Brian Gollnick’s *Reinventing the Lacandón*.

⁶⁸ See pages 4-5 in my introductory chapter for more about the migratory patterns of indigenous peoples in Central America.

(Balderston 76). She is cycling around to the “original source” of her culture in the “natural” philosophical logic of her Mayan ancestors.

While closing the cycle of this great wheel of time may seem natural to Doña Encarnación, J. Eric Thompson has noted the profound cultural differences of the Maya: “There are other aspects of the Maya philosophy of time, such as the strange failure to distinguish between past and future [...]. What had gone before and what lay ahead were blended in a way that is baffling to our western minds” (14). In the blending of timelines, the Mayan perspective of non-linear chronology seems to be reflected in the structure of Limón’s novel, which intermingles the present with the past through each character’s individual story. This commingling could be considered what Miguel León-Portilla calls “the cyclic reality of time” (13). Each character’s past cycles elements into the action of the present time of the story, which in turn contributes to the outcome of each one’s future.

The final paragraph of Doña Encarnación’s individual story connects her to the larger community of travelers and sets the stage for her own completion of the wheel in the great round of time:

I neared my final destination where I joined a group of migrants on the verge of crossing El Gran Desierto. I did not know their names, but I recognized the expression on their faces. There was sadness because something had uprooted them, yet there was also hope that a new life waited for them. It was a place called La Joyita. (101)

While Doña Encarnación inserts herself into the group who are preparing to cross the Great Desert to a new life, she is preparing for the crossing of what Georges Van Den

Abbeele calls “the great *voyage*” into death (xv, italics in original). She is following the great wheel of her culture and is psychologically prepared to end where her people began. I have already discussed the desert from the perspective of a landscape of tragedy during travel, but for Doña Encarnación it is the destination of her journey. She is being reunited with her larger community, returning to her ancestors and where they began. The combination in this quote of sadness and hope is also reflected in her own fate. There is always sadness at a time of death—sadness regarding a young life cut short or because of missing a loved one who has had a long life—but Doña Encarnación also sees the hope of future generations while she joins the greater family of her forebears. Her depiction of the river of migrants is a very optimistic one, underscoring the expectations of new beginnings, highlighted by the life-giving metaphor of water found in her reference to the flow of a river. The group is setting out from La Joyita, the little gem in the desert, but the shining promise for the future that this name could represent, turns into a mirage of the dreams of several of her companions.

Ironically, the chapter that tells the story of Doña Encarnación’s life occurs after she has been swept away in a sand storm (82-85). She had been the spiritual center of the migrants. Losing her puts several of the group into a panic (85-86). This is compounded by the fact that one of the travelers, Armando Guerrero, had forced at gunpoint their guide, Cerda, to abandon the group while they had slept the night before the storm (102). Guerrero had been running from a drug cartel and now he has also betrayed his fellow travelers. However, he is hardy alone in clashing with his community. The stories of each of the other characters show that all are in conflict with society in some way or another.

As such, they form a community of their own. With the departure of Guerrero and Cerda, the community begins to break down.

The novel splits into parallel storylines that follow the tragic fates of each group. Guerrero had stolen money from a drug cartel and knew he was marked for death in Mexico (75-77). That his greed is stronger than any sense of self-preservation is revealed at the point Cerda realizes Guerrero has been carrying a suitcase filled with the money rather than any water (107). When Cerda refuses to share his water because there is not enough for both of them, Guerrero becomes enraged, shooting Cerda just before the sand storm engulfs the two of them (108). While Guerrero survives the storm, his lack of water and knowledge of how to survive in the desert eventually combine to kill him. He begins to hallucinate and doesn't see the rattlesnake that bites him (112). The brutal reality of death in the desert also holds a bitter twist for the greedy drug smuggler:

Armando Guerrero did not realize it, but he died just on the other side of the same saguaro cactus that sheltered Cerda's body. He had trekked hours convinced that he had reached Ligurta, but he had unknowingly gone a full circle and returned to the place where he had abandoned Leonardo Cerda, *el coyote*, who could have saved him. (113, italics in original)

While Doña Encarnación had intentionally sought death to complete the turn of the wheel of her people, Guerrero cycles around to his own death precisely because he rejects his place within the community that took him in.

Meanwhile, Menda tries to rally the remaining members of the group by reminding them that Doña Encarnación had come to the desert to reunite with her ancestors and that she “was out there and that she was looking over them. Menda knew

also that the old woman was not alone. Alongside her were the ones she had come to meet” (89). She uses both faith in an afterlife and traditional respect for community elders to maintain hope within the group. The next morning, Menda harries the dispirited group into movement, talking “as she struggled to give her companions confidence although she, too, was close to losing hope. She was afraid that they were losing the will to continue, but she made up her mind that she would not let them give up” (127-128). Taking up the mantle of spiritual leader that was lost with Doña Encarnación, Menda is trying to maintain the small community despite the tragedies that they have already endured. She is also incorporating the Mayan concept that community is more important than the individual. Isolation from the community leads to death of the individual, but death of the community ultimately leads to annihilation of everything.⁶⁹

Just as the group had come across the grave of Olga, they now encounter another horrific incident—an abandoned van that had been blown across the desert. Even though they know they are in serious danger due to their lack of water and exhaustion, they realize how much worse it could be. However, they are unprepared for what they find once they pry open the locked door at the back of the vehicle:

At first it was nearly impossible to tell how many corpses were there because they were tangled, and all that could be made out were legs entwined with arms; heads dangle grotesquely under and over torsos. Those bodies were desiccated, but not yet skeletons. What used to be faces were now skulls covered by blackened, dried-out skin, teeth protruded in a horrified grin. (132-133)

⁶⁹ See Daniel Balderston’s analysis of Tzinacán in Jorge Luis Borges’s story “La escritura del dios” (78-80), especially “power [...] is useless without [...] the community” (78-79).

Recall that Menda, Nicanor, Borrego, and Celia had helped Don Julio and Manuelito unearth the bones of Lucinda, so encountering the dead is not necessarily shocking for them. Nevertheless, Lucinda's body had no flesh left and the bones had been somewhat scattered. In this scene, the full experience of the ghastly death of the victims inside the van is exposed in grim detail. Worse yet, when they try to give the dead some dignity by covering their nakedness, they discover that the bodies are so fused together they could only be separated by breaking the bones (134-135). Their remorse and terror begins to break the small will to live that has kept the group going as they all succumb to sobs and retching (135).

Georges Van Den Abbeele has emphasized that "travel is deadly" (*Travel* 24), but in this case, death is collective rather than individual. When Doña Encarnación was lost to the group, there was stress and anxiety among the travelers. Encountering such a horrific collective death is a catastrophe for the travelers. Their individual fear of death is compounded by this example of an entire community—that could easily be *their* community—essentially vanishing. There is no one among the dead in the van to tell their stories; Menda's group realizes that it is likely none of them may survive, either. The novel seems to be developing along these catastrophic lines as Nicanor wanders off (136), then Celia dies (149). When Borrego and Menda find Nicanor's body where he had hanged himself (156), she literally must drag Borrego away toward a small hill, telling him that his brother is "standing there with Celia and Doña Encarnación" (171).

The hill turns out to be the embankment for *la Ocho*, Interstate 8, the road they had been moving toward since they left La Joyita (171-172). Menda and Borrego are found at the side of the road and loaded into the back of a truck and driven to Ligurta (173-175).

As Menda drifts in and out of consciousness, “vivid images appeared behind her eyelids almost immediately. One by one her *compañeros* reappeared just as alive as they had been on that distant autumn morning when they stood around Leonardo Cerda” (176). While it is definite that death claimed Celia, Nicanor, Cerda, Guerrero, and probably Doña Encarnación, the end of the novel leaves the fates of Borrego, Menda, Don Julio, and Manuelito as vague speculation. Don Julio and Manuelito had turned back for the Mexican border after retrieving the bones of Lucinda, so there is the possibility that they make it back to their village. However, both are included in Menda’s hallucination of her *compañeros* who have come back to life, giving the impression that they, too, have died. Borrego and Menda are being transported to a clinic, but their rescuers comment that “they might not make it” and “they’re half dead already” leaving the possibility that either or both of them might die before they reach the clinic (175). Certainty and uncertainty are entrenched in the “visions” at the beginning and end of the trek through the desert. The flow through the visions of characters living and dead also reflects the great wheel and the essential Mayan questions: What is a real ending? What is the reality of time?

Ambiguous Homecomings and Endings.

Recalling that Ulysses has been posited as a model for the modern-day migrant traveler (Burucúa 198), there must also be some comparison to the ancient wanderer’s return to his home—his *oikos*, as Van den Abbeele puts it (*Travel* xviii). However Van den Abbeele also makes the case that “the home that one leaves is not the same as that to which one returns” (*Travel* xix). Ulysses, for example, found his home overrun with men,

eating his food, drinking his wine, and attempting to seduce his wife. This is hardly an ideal situation and readily shows that circumstances were much changed in his absence. His home, however, would be different in any case simply due to the time he as spent away. Neither Ulysses nor his wife Penelope would have remained unchanged in the twenty years of his absence. Indeed, the dynamics of the family unit was radically different given that the infant son he left at the start of his journey was a man when he returned. While Ulysses's return reunited the family in the place where the journey began, each member of the family is altered from whom they were when Ulysses left. For the modern traveler, members of family units are decidedly more mobile and "home" has become a fluid concept that encourages a rethinking and reassessment. If "home" is not a fixed location where the family stays, what is it? If it is a particular spot, how is the idea of "family" transformed through the mobility of modern travelers?

Unlike the Greek story in which the traveler returns to a specific location where family members have remained, the travel narratives in this study focus on characters and individuals who are traveling to reunite with or to find family members who are away from a permanent residence. *Enrique's Journey* follows the trail of a boy searching for his mother. In *El viaje a la tierra prometida*, Ana, Carlos, and Sofía are all traveling to reunite with family members working in another country. The *oikos* is no longer a fixed location; it is now mobile. The topography of travel has been inverted, so that the fundamental anxiety in the narrative is no longer "Will I reach home? Will my loved ones still be there and still be alive? Will it or I be so changed as to be unrecognizable?" The traveler's fear now is "Does an *oikos* even exist? Is there any home at all? If there is, how will I know when I have found it? Will I have a family or will my family be reunited in

the new home?” These are the questions underlying the structure of the search for home in narratives of migrant travel. Nayeli’s search in Luis Alberto Urrea’s *Into the Beautiful North* offers a thought-provoking angle on these questions.

At the beginning of the tale, Nayeli was a young woman a year out of high school, wanting to go to the United States “to find her father, who had left and never come back. He traded his family for a job, and then stopped writing or sending money” (8-9). Her father, along with the rest of the men from her town, had gone north seeking employment in order to support family members who had stayed behind. For the town of Tres Camarones, the ones left behind were old women and young girls. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for the financial support from the person who left to dwindle over time, or for contact with family members to be broken. The postcard that her father had sent from Kankakee, Illinois, is Nayeli’s only lead to her father’s whereabouts (47). When members of the Sinaloa drug cartel take over her town Nayeli and her friends are sent north to find the men and bring them back (57-63). She finally arrives in Kankakee where the local librarian and a Mexican American detective help her locate a person they think might be her father (318-320). As she nears the house where her father might be living, a truck passes her and stops:

The door opened and a pudgy woman in yellow stretch pants crawled out of the passenger’s side. She reached into the back—there were more seats back there. She unbuckled a toddler from a car seat and hefted him onto her hip. Nayeli could hear her voice but not what she was saying. She hurried, hoping to ask her if she knew Papá.

The driver got out on his side. He slammed the door and came around to the woman's side. He wore a straw cowboy hat and boots and tight jeans. Nayeli stopped where she was.

Don Pepe.

"Papá?" she murmured. (322-323)

Nayeli had succeeded in finding her father, but the outcome of that search was not what she expected. Not only does she discover that her father has completely abandoned his family in Mexico and started a new one in the United States, he does not even recognize her when he looks in her direction: "There were no words to begin to describe what she felt" (323). Her quest to reunite her family and to repopulate her hometown appears to have failed. Coming to terms with the situation, Nayeli "reached into her back pocket, withdrew the postcard. She smoothed it carefully. She tucked it under his windshield wiper. Nayeli walked away" (324). There would be no homecoming for Don Pepe in Mexico and Nayeli's return would not be what she had envisioned. When she returns to her hometown, she is only accompanied by one of her friends, Tacho, and Atómiko, the former member of the Mexican army that she met in the dumps of Tijuana. Despite not succeeding in filling the town with men, Nayeli still appears to have triumphed as the closing line of the novel reads: "Now the women of Tres Camarones were smiling" (338). Nayeli and Tacho seem to be the only travelers that had ever returned.

Another type of homecoming is one that does not cycle back to the point of origin and becomes a problematic ending. In the film *El Norte*, the homeland is presented as an idealized vision despite the fact that the travelers had to flee from it in order to save their lives. The idea of a home is vital to Rosa, as she lies in the hospital desperately ill from

the rat bites she got crawling through the sewer tunnels to get into the United States. The entire hospital sequence is about five minutes long (02:06:00-02:11:00) in the chapter fittingly called “We have no home.” Rosa is alone and falls into a fevered sleep, but when she wakes up her brother Enrique is sitting by her side. She tells him of her dream in which she was alone in their village and was afraid he would never return for her. He reassures her that of course he is there since she is his only family member. She talks about how difficult it is in the United States and that they are not free to live. As she weakens from her illness, finding a home becomes an obsession: “En nuestra tierra, no hay lugar para nosotros. Nos quieren matar. No hay lugar allí para nosotros. En México solo hay pobreza. Tampoco hay lugar para nosotros. Es que, en el norte no somos aceptados, pues. Cuando vamos a encontrar un lugar, Enrique. Tal vez solo muertos encontremos un lugarcito” (“In our own land, we have no home. They want to kill us. There’s no home for us there. In Mexico there is only poverty. We can’t make a home there either. And here in the north, we aren’t accepted. When will we find a home, Enrique? Maybe when we die we’ll find a home”⁷⁰). Enrique tries to encourage her by talking about some day going back to their village where everyone will envy them for their wealth. He ends, “Lo importante es no perder la fe” (“The important thing is not to lose faith”). Unfortunately, Rosa dies as he is talking. While Rosa may have found her home in death, Enrique is left alone. He cannot return, and as Rosa indicated, he is not accepted in the United States. His only recourse is to continue to struggle to support himself through hard labor knowing that he is denied a homecoming.

⁷⁰ The translations are from the English subtitles.

I have already discussed the ambiguous homecoming for Don Julio and Manuelito in *The River Flows North*, but that is not the only open-ended conclusion among the narratives in this study. Rigoberto Perrezcano's film *Norteado* also has remarkable slant with regard to the completion of migrant travel. Andrés travels from the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca to Tijuana in search of family members. After several unsuccessful border crossings attempts, he befriends two women who run a small store. While the majority of the film is about their relationship, the final scenes are germane to the question of equivocal endings in migrant travel. One of the people Andrés meets through his friendship with the grocery store owners is an upholsterer. He convinces him to build a stuffed lounge chair around him. The final scene of the film shows the chair in the back of a pickup truck as it enters one of the long lines of other vehicles from Tijuana approaching the San Ysidro official port of entry. According to the United States General Services Administration website, the San Ysidro Land Port of Entry is "the busiest land border crossing in the Western Hemisphere [...] processing an average of 70,000 northbound vehicle passengers" per day. Andrés is taking the calculated risk that being inside the chair, thus being hidden in plain sight, will ensure that his clandestine crossing is undetected among the thousands of other pieces of merchandise that cross at this particularly active entry point. If he succeeds, he will become one of the migrant travelers who must remain constantly vigilant in order to evade capture and deportation given that he will not have any approved documents. His failure could be as simple as being detected by electronic surveillance or dogs, or as horrific as suffocating from the heat and lack of air inside the chair. His success or failure, however, is left as an open question.

Finally, the last chapter of Mario Bencastro's chronologically complicated novel *Odisea del norte* ends with an analepsis that accentuates the bewildering and fractured life of a migrant traveler. Calixto and several of his companions have been released from El Corralón, the detention center near El Paso and have flown to Washington D.C. As Calixto and his friends take a taxi into the city, he closes his eyes and thinks about his family in El Salvador: "Abrió los ojos y, ante su cansada vista, apareció la carretera junto al ancho río Potomac que separaba Virginia de Washington. Las borrosas imágenes del barrio se resistían a abandonar sus memoria" (*Odisea* 195; "He opened his eyes and before his weary gaze stretched the highway along the Potomac River that separated Virginia from Washington. The blurred images of home refused to leave his memory" *Odyssey* 192). While this might seem like nothing more than a nostalgic flashback moment concluding the novel, in the chronology of Calixto's storyline, the event this passage describes is sometime in the middle of his tale. Due to the division of his story into non-chronological segments that are interspersed with chapters about other characters, the conclusion of Calixto's journey is lost in the novel, disappearing among the other fragmented histories. Does he really have any form of homecoming or reunification with his family? There are indications that he is sending funds back to his wife in El Salvador (*Odisea* 85-86; *Odyssey* 82-83), but there is no discussion about his returning or attempting to bring them to the United States. The reader never really knows what finally happens to Calixto, but the novel ends with him. There is no clear indication which scene set in the Washington D.C. area is the last one in his journey, consequently, his story and his travels become endless—an incomplete character contemplating a homeland that may or may not still exist for him.

CHAPTER 5

WHERE HAS TRAVEL TAKEN US? WHERE CAN WE GO FROM HERE?

Stories of people on the road, tales of the journeyer, the voyager, the story-teller who returns to tell of the adventure—these are the foundation for this study. Just as Virginia Hitchman explained in her introduction to *La Frontera: Stories of Undocumented Immigrants Crossing the Border*, my purpose here has been to help improve the understanding about the motivations that lead people to leave their homelands without benefit of permissions or authorizations. In order to accomplish this, I have been considering the narratives of a specific group of travelers: men, women, and children from Central America and the southern regions of Mexico. These are people who were set on their journeys for multiple reasons. Some are escaping wars or other violent situations—Enrique and Rosa in Gregory Nava’s film *El Norte* are fleeing ethnic genocide in Guatemala and the characters in *Osidea del norte*, Mario Bencastro’s novel, are evading the civil war in El Salvador, while Menda Fuentes in Graciela Limón’s novel, *The River Flows North*, is escaping from both war and an abusive husband. Limón also includes characters seeking to economically improve their lives through opportunities not available in their homelands such as Celia Vega and the Osuna brothers, Borrego and Nicanor. Enrique, in Sonia Nazario’s *Enrique’s Journey*, is looking for his mother who went north when he was a small boy, while Carlos, Ana, and Sofía from Juan B. Escobar Parada’s novel *El viaje a la tierra prometida* are going to reunite with family members already in the United States. Carlos’s bother, Roberto, admits to following a sense of

adventurism when he agrees to lead the group, as does Cedric Calderón in his memoirs *Contrabando humano en la Californias* and *Contrabando humano en la frontera: sueño de los dólares*. These examples are drawn from only a few of the multiple narratives I included here. None of the people or characters in these works fit into the classical definition of a *traveler*: “someone who has the security and privilege to move about in relatively unconstrained ways” (Clifford 34). Additionally, their freedom of movement is usually severely constrained and they are rarely secure. Even without conforming to the standard expectations of the travel literature genre, the lens of travel has provided an approach to the consideration of these texts that is both valuable and rigorous.

When I began this project, it seemed as if there were relatively few works that would be about round-trip travel from the regions of Central America and southern Mexico. The return to home was often a stumbling block. However, once I opened the notion of travel to two modifications, more writings fit into the corpus. The first modification was to include travel that did not complete the traditional circle, but where returning home had been the intention of the traveler. This meant I could include works in which the traveler was prevented going home such as the brother and sister, Enrique and Rosa, in Gregory Nava’s film *El Norte* who could not return to their village due to the war in Guatemala. In other works, a traveler reconceptualized the idea of what constitutes the return to home, such as Doña Encarnación’s return to the source of her ancestors in Graciela Limón’s novel *The River Flows North*, or Ana, Carlos, and Sofía who reunited with family members in the United States thus creating new homes. The second adjustment was to consider just the parts of the narratives that discussed travel, even if the majority of the story took place in one location. One such work is the 2009

film *Norteado* that has very little movement, but provides a thought-provoking ending. While thus far I have identified thirty-seven works that include some narrative descriptions of Central American and Mexican migrant travel, I believe there are more to be discovered, especially if the works of non-Latinx authors are included. Examples include the following novels: Byron Park's *Araceli the Refugee: An Immigration Novel* (2000), *Walk to Freedom* by John Terry Wende and *The Devil's Hawk* by Ray Sipherd, both published in 2002, and David Corbett's 2010 publication *Do They Know I'm Running?*

For the analysis, I began with M. M. Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope—the time-space where crises occur in narratives—applying it to the various thresholds migrant travelers must cross. These thresholds include both international borders and internal security checkpoints in Mexico and the United States. In these tales, the most crisis-inducing element in the negotiation of travel thresholds stems from the travelers' lack of authorized documentation—passports and visas. The inability to acquire these all-important papers lies at the heart of these narratives and is the least understood piece behind of this type of migrant travel. Those who condemn the undocumented for crossing borders without appropriate passports and visas have very little grasp of the disproportionate cost to Central Americans of obtaining these credentials. The assumption seems to be that an undocumented traveler is obviously criminally motivated. However, these narratives often show that some attempt was made to travel in a licit fashion, and that the clandestine nature of undocumented travel is born from the unreasonable requirements for getting approved visas from either Mexico or the United States. More intensive scrutiny for references to passports and visas within literature that

includes sections about travel could be beneficial. Where are these discussions in the narratives? What are the implications if they are not discussed? What are the core assumptions of the author and the reader about legally authorized travel? How does having or not having travel documents drive the story? In most of the works I included here, the lack of approved travel authorizations propel the migrants to dangerous, even deadly regions in order to cross international borders.

The economic issues that prevent the characters in these tales from acquiring legal travel documents are also closely tied to their motivation to travel in many of the stories. Cedric Calderón's memoirs tell of his life as a *coyote*, but he originally left Guatemala to seek legitimate work. Carlos and Ana in *El viaje a la tierra prometida* both have had trouble finding employment in El Salvador. The teenagers in Luis Alberto Urrea's novel *Into the Beautiful North* are on the road because all the men in their village have gone north seeking jobs in the United States. Money plays a pivotal role in narratives of migrant travel. Not only are there characters seeking economic improvement, but financial issues also emerge throughout the stories even when the travelers are on the road due to war or other violence. *Coyotes* must be paid to guide the travelers; corrupt officials, military, and police must be bribed; food, transportation, and housing must be purchased. There is an irony in the commercial impact that poor, undocumented travelers have on the communities that they enrich as they pass through on the way north. More analysis would be worthwhile showing how money as motivation and as an economic hardship appears in similar travel narratives.

The dangers of border crossing areas are related to their topographies given that the landscapes that form the boundaries are usually rivers and deserts. The United States-

Mexico border region, especially the Rio Grande/Río Bravo boundary between Mexico and Texas, has appeared in migrant travel narratives for decades, as evidenced by Luis Spota's 1948 novel *Murieron a mitad del río* and Emanuel J. Camarena's 1958 *Pancho: The Struggles of a Wetback in America*. This river divides the two countries for 1,255 miles from the Gulf of Mexico to near the twin cities of El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. The El Paso-Juárez area is often the location for border crossings in these narratives. However, there are also close to 700 miles of mostly desert or semi-arid environments that separate Mexico and the United States from El Paso-Juárez to the west coasts of southern California and Baja California, Mexico. As I discussed, these landscapes play an important role in the narratives of migrant travel as the journeyers have been impelled through the years to seek more and more risky and less scrutinized entry points into the United States. There is a century-old paradox associated with the laborers using clandestine routes into the United States as Gerald B. Breitigam's 1920 *New York Times* article "Welcomed Mexican Invasion: Thousands of Families Crossing the Border to Till the Soil and Otherwise Build Up the Southwest" explains. He describes how the agricultural industry in the southwest border region expanded due to these migrant laborers while farms in the rest of the country were struggling with labor shortages as the youth of the heartlands went to the cities for higher wages and better opportunities. This very early article shows that the demand for manual workers in the United States has long been an incentive for people in Mexico and even further south that are seeking employment. Breitigam also notes that the primary times for crossing this border is from late December through the end of March—a timetable that is obliquely referenced in both the opening of Limón's *The River Flows North* and the diary-like dates

that mark the chapters in Escobar Parada's *El viaje a la tierra prometida*. Both of these works provide examples of what Breitigam does not discuss, and that is still sometimes overlooked: the dangers associated with crossing during these months. The temperatures in the desert areas of the border fluctuate between extremes of hot and cold leading to death as portrayed in those novels. The risk of drowning is often present at the Rio Grande/Río Bravo as seen in Luis Spota's novel *Murieron a mitad del río*. The water flow of this river fluctuates during this period from low enough for an adult to wade across in December to full flood stage in the late spring, and flash flooding due to storms miles upstream is always a possibility. The descriptions of the landscapes the migrants must traverse provide essential contexts for their experiences.

For Central Americans, border crossings are doubled since they are traversing both the southern as well as the northern boundaries of Mexico. If Mexico is considered through the lens of Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands of hatred, anger, and exploitation, the entire country is one extended frontier that Central Americans must survive traversing in order to reach their goals. The dangers associated with clandestine river crossings begin at the Río Suchiate where it forms the boundary between Mexico and Guatemala as described in the second version of Cedric Calderón's memoir. His story opens with the youthful Cedric and his friend Adeldo swimming across the Suchiate. Both of them would have drowned without the help of a local *coyote*, Pascual Frutos. This opening corresponds with Claire Fox's recognition of a pattern set in Spota's novel—a dangerous river crossing that almost ends the migrant laborer's journey. With this model in mind, there is one question that could be pursued for future research: Is there a model for stories about desert crossings by migrant travelers? The novels I included tended to draw

attention to the issue that migrants usually travel across the desert in groups and that often one or more of the party succumb to the rigors of that trek. A more comprehensive examination of the tales of desert crossings might reveal a pattern similar to Fox's study of river crossings and a prototype story such as she found with Spota's novel.

Because of the often-fatal consequences of these dangerous border-crossing sites, I looked at ghosts and ghostly references in the narratives. My discussion was primarily related to narratives set in the desert given the standard concept that wastelands are dead regions. However, a search for indications of ghosts, spirits, or apparitions at the rivers crossing sites might be worthwhile, especially given the history and significance of legends such as *La Llorona* in Mexico, *La Sayona* in Venezuela, and similar folktales in other parts of the world. While this line of folklore focuses on the malevolent facet of ghostly figures, the specters in the stories I considered followed the more positive path outlined by Rosemary Jackson. They helped women survive and worked to correct social wrongs. Among the ghost-like figures was the cameo appearance of Candelario in Urrea's *Into the Beautiful North*. She not only helps the teenagers survive a dash across the border, she also serves as one of two examples I considered regarding minor characters whose sturdy resilience is beneficial in the storyline. The other character is Sofía in Escobar Parada's *El viaje a la tierra prometida*. Both of these characters are pregnant and show their strengths while in a desert setting—juxtaposing their life force to the supposed dead zone of a wasteland. Identifying and rescuing other secondary characters from being overlooked as seemingly unimportant travel companions in travel narratives is another area of investigation that could be expanded.

The deadliness of travel, its inherent uncertainty, and the questions of how and when a journey ends are the basis of the last portion of my study. The possibility of returning home has always been open to doubt for travelers, but the undocumented migrant laborer faces a multitude of complications that increase the chances that a traditional homecoming might not be likely. I have already mentioned the deadly topographies these travelers are pushed to cross—the rivers and deserts—but there is also a technological wonder that could also kill them during their journeys. *La bestia*, the “beast” or “train of death” that many migrants attempt to use to speed north through Mexico is as much of an obstacle and as an aid in their travels. Trains appear in many of the travel narratives of Central American migrants. If this form of travel is included in the trip north, travelers face hazards posed by the elements, corrupt government officials at all levels, and gang members that use the railways as hunting grounds for theft and trafficking. Surviving this form of travel, however, may only lead to another impediment to travel—the possibility of capture and detention.

For undocumented travelers, being held captive does not necessarily mean being in law enforcement’s custody. I discussed the matter of travelers temporarily giving up their freedom to *coyotes* in order to facilitate faster movement toward their goals, but that can also turn into more a permanent captivity, such as sex trafficking, by either the *coyote* or corrupt officials that supposedly free the migrants from their guides. There is also the possibility of being captured by border patrols and spending time in jails in Mexico or the United States. Cedric’s memoir, for example, showed how he ended up in a cycle of movement from prison to prison after being caught at an internal border checkpoint in the United States. Official detention and subsequent court appearances also form a thematic

line in these narratives. When the traveler does not understand the language of the country where the trial is held, the process can be confusing and seem endless as seen in Teresa's story from Mario Bencastro's *Odisea del norte*. Not only does she not understand English, the court proceedings seem to be designed for her to fail in her plea for asylum. Since requests by refugees for sanctuary are proliferating all over the globe, it would be intriguing to find out if there are other Kafkaesque treatments of asylum-seekers in novels and testimonial literatures from other parts of the world.

The final matter I considered was whether travel ever ends for an undocumented person who may be stuck in one country because returning to a homeland is impossible. How does one find a home when everywhere the traveler goes she or he only finds poverty or distrust? Rosa asks this of her brother Enrique in Nava's film *El Norte*. Calixto and his fellow Salvadorans, in Bencastro's novel *Odisea del norte*, are constantly vigilant in order to avoid capture that may lead to deportation. Consequently, they cannot be considered "home" given their heightened state of anxiety due to their illicit status. Calixto, whose own ending in the novel is lost somewhere in the middle making him the quintessential model of uncertainty, embodies the fragmented lives of these representative characters.

A comprehensive history is needed of Central American travel writing similar to Thea Pitman's *Mexican Travel Writing*. There are two works that are a beginning to fill this need: J. Manuel Gómez's 2013 *Viajes coloniales por América Central: continuidades y rupturas*, and a 2016 compilation of nineteenth century articles *América Central en la mirada extranjera: exploradores y viajeros entre 1845-1898: textos traducidos del idioma inglés y alemán al español*. Both of these work focus on the writings of people

visiting Central America. To the best of my knowledge, however, there is no study of traditional travel writings by Central Americans, leaving this an open field of research. A history of this sort would help to locate and contrast Central American migrant travel writing in a broader tradition of travel writing, particularly to Mexico and the United States.

As Mary Louis Pratt observed in *Imperial Eyes*, travel writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was framed within the paradigm of scientific knowledge. *The Beaten Track* by James Buzard established that tourism was a broad model for travel writing since the end of the nineteenth century. Since the end of the twentieth century, migration and displacement seem to be the more meaningful concepts for travel narratives. Across the global south there are volatile conditions that are putting people on the road looking for safety because they are fleeing civil unrest or because they are seeking to improve their economic circumstances. The unpredictable political situations and erratic economies in some parts of the world are contributing to the change in migration patterns across the globe. Given this state of affairs, it seems reasonable to believe that migrant travel stories will proliferate. The issues and questions I raised in my analysis of narratives from and about southern Mexico and Central America could easily be applied to the accounts of men, women, and children from Africa and the Middle East who are seeking refuge in Europe and other parts of the world. Also, the instability in Venezuela during the past few years has been creating travel and border problems in South America that parallel the difficulties in Mexico and the United States that appear in the narratives highlighted in my study.

People seeking safe and stable environments in which to live normally try to unite with family members living where these conditions prevail. This often means going to the United States or Europe. However, the isolationist tendencies in both of these regions are placing barriers on familial reunification. It is my hope that exposure to histories that establish the reasons *why* people are on the move, reveal the circumstances surrounding *how* they are provoked into what may become an abandonment of their homelands, and bring to light the *particulars* of this type of travel will initiate a curiosity to discover more accurate information about migrants. At present, discussion points in some media sources surrounding this issue are overly simplified, or even distorted. Based on the exponential increase of pertinent narratives since I began my research, I believe continued considered and methodical analyses of these types of stories are more relevant than ever.

There are also historical comparisons that could be made between the tales that cover the circumstances of migrant agricultural workers in the United States and the conditions of migrant laborers from Latin America and the Caribbean. As I noted in my introductory chapter, the stories in Mexican American author Rolando Hinojosa's series set in the fictional Belken County, Texas provide a starting point for such an analysis. The characters in these tales, despite being U.S. citizens, face many of the same hardships and obstacles that undocumented migrants confront as they travel through the yearly harvest cycle. Studying other migrant labor stories from the Caribbean, and from Puerto Rico in particular given its peculiar status with the United States, could prove to be a fruitful line of inquiry. Is there the same pattern of endlessness in the narratives of these migrant travelers within the United States once they have crossed the border that was exposed in the tales of Central Americans?

While I included some discussion about travel companions, both friends traveling together and people who are met along the way, this group of characters merits a deeper examination. Not only are they characters that are often overlooked, they represent a collective aspect of travel that deserves some attention. These tales are not just individual stories; they nest within each other creating a larger singularity that exposes a movement. An examination of the differing dynamics in stories of friends traveling together versus stories of strangers that meet on the road would be of interest. The ways in which people support or obstruct the migrant traveler reflect a larger societal perception of their value. This also opens the possibility to examine what these narratives tell and do not tell. Atómiko from Luis Alberto's Urrea's *Into the Beautiful North* is a good example. How did he come to be a trash picker in the Tijuana dumps, and how is he representative (or not) of the other people living in the landfill? The society at large would surely consider garbage pickers living among the rubbish to be valueless, yet some of these characters are the most helpful to the teenagers during their time in Tijuana. Considering other characters like Atómiko in a more systematic examination of travel companions could render new findings in these kinds of narratives.

The teens in Urrea's novel and the several women I discussed from other works are only a few of the types that now populate migrant travel stories. Lone women, women with children, and unaccompanied children are among the travelers that began to appear in narratives in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While I touched on these tales, there is more work to be done investigating the special circumstances surrounding their travels. Sonia Nazario's investigative reporting in *Enrique's Journey* brought to light both the matters of women traveling north to seek employment and the

complications this causes when those women have had to leave behind children.

Discovering and examining other narratives that encompass these types of characters would be valuable. Establishing a more accurate timeline about when women and children traveling alone began and when their stories about such travel started to appear would also be useful. Given the situation of the last few years regarding migrants with children crossing into the United States only to end up in detention centers, I have no doubts that the experiences of these people will make it into some form of narrative, whether as testimonial literature or fictional accounts, that will provide valuable additions to the body of migrant travel-related literature.

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