



## THE “WOUND” METAPHOR IN THE BORDER NARRATIVES OF ANA CASTILLO AND GRACIELA LIMÓN

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### KEY WORDS

*US-Mexico border  
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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the manifestations of the wound metaphor in two Mexican- American border novels: "The Guardians" (2007) by Ana Castillo and "The River Flows North" by Graciela Limón (2009). This will be done by analyzing the metaphor as tackled in Gloria Anzaldúa's "Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza" (1987) and Carlos Fuentes's "La Frontera de Cristal" (1995) then examining the detrimental impact of the border on characters that are affected by whether through attempting to cross to the United States, crossing back to Mexico, or living in border towns.*

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## Introduction

The term “borderlands” was first coined by Herbert Eugene Bolton as part of his analysis of the history of the United States and the entire hemisphere. For him, the difference between borders and borderlands was that while the former is a demarcated line, the latter is a liminal space that is not determined by national frontiers. While Bolton remains a controversial historian, who has at times been perceived as a colonial apologist, his theories can be credited for the initiation of what is now known as border studies, which deal with the border as a political institution and examine the social phenomena with which it is associated. The border in this case becomes a fluid space that affects and is affected by individuals, communities, policies, and balances of power. This is the same perspective adopted by border fiction, which mainly deals with borderlands despite the major role played by physical borders. While the process of border crossing is always involved in one way or another, the main focus is on the connotations of inhabiting borderlands, that is the humanitarian, social, and cultural impact of being directly or indirectly associated with the border. As Claudia Sadowski-Smith notes, border fiction is about the relationship between human beings and the landscape of which they are part, the landscape, in this case, being the border: “border fiction asserts that a particular place is as much affected by human projection and representation as people and communities are affected by the landscape” (2008: 2).

In addition to examining the interaction between border territories and their inhabitants, border fiction places this interaction within a broader framework that underlines the role of globalization, neo-liberal policies, and free trade agreements in defining it. This particularly applies to fiction written about the border between the United States and Mexico and links this fiction to Bolton’s view about the role of borderlands in shaping the history of the Western hemisphere. Literary texts about the US-Mexico border, therefore, do not only depict the impact of crossing the border or being part of a border community, but also link this impact to

the history of US-Mexican relations, the repercussions of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), contemporary manifestations of US imperialism, and the issue of undocumented immigration. In doing so, border fiction underlines the shift in the representation of the border from a refuge to a menace and the subsequent trauma suffered by individuals, communities, and border towns.

## The “open wound”

The US-Mexico border acquires its specificity from a number of factors, on top of which is its full embodiment of the complex nature of borders in general, which was lucidly underlined by Susan Stanford Friedman:

Borders fix, demarcate; but they are themselves imaginary, fluid, always in the process of changing. Borders promise safety, security, a sense of being ‘at home’; borders also enforce exclusions, the state of being alien, foreign, and homeless. Borders materialize the Law, policing separations; but as such, they are always being crossed, transgressed, subverted. Borders are used to exercise power over others, but also to empower survival against a dominant force. They regulate migration, movement, travel – the flows of people, goods, ideas, and cultural formations of all kinds. As such, they undermine regulatory practices by fostering intercultural encounters and the concomitant production of syncretic heterogeneities and hybridities. (2002: 4)

While the above-mentioned characteristics can apply to several international borders, the US-Mexico border is particularly distinguished with the historical context in which it was demarcated and the role it has played in shaping a distinct culture that gradually came to define the relationship between the two countries. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican American war, resulted in the annexation by the United States of almost half Mexican territories, hence creating a new border that rendered Mexicans who stayed in their lands American citizens overnight and forced those who wished to remain in Mexico to move further south. The treaty initiated the association of the border with the trauma of loss, one that continued through modern times not only as the

main component of Mexican collective memory but also as it became representative of a contemporary site of suffering.

Gloria Anzaldúa describes the US-Mexico border as “una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again” (1987: 25). The metaphor she uses refers to an ongoing pain that can be traced back to the physical rupture that took place with the division of Mexican territories and continues to affect Mexicans in different ways, both physical and psychological. Anzaldúa, in fact, cites examples of violations that have been taking place at the border since the annexation, whether by individuals such as vigilantes or by the US government through a series of procedures that had a detrimental effect on Mexicans and the Mexican economy. The violent verbs Anzaldúa uses to describe the wound and its aftermath are quite telling: “Con el destierro y el exilo fuimos desuñados, destroncados, destripados—we were jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled” (197: 7). Cherrie Moraga similarly likens loss of Mexican territory to a wound: “...the loss of half our territory to the U.S. with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848... a collective wound we remember as a people” (152). By “people” Moraga does not only refer to Mexicans but also Chicanos/as of whose memory the wound also remains an integral part. In his novel *La Frontera de Cristal*, Carlos Fuentes also compares the border to a bleeding wound and a sick body:

Soño con la frontera y la vio como una enorme herida sangrante, un cuerpo enfermo, incierto de salud, mudo ante sus propios males, al filo del grito, desconcertado por sus fidelidades, y golpeado, finalmente, por la insensibilidad, la demagogia y la corrupción politicas [He dreamt of the border and saw it as an enormous bloody wound, a sickly body, mute in the face of its vices, on the verge of screaming, torn by its loyalties, and beaten, finally, by political cruelty, demagoguery, and corruption] (1993: 92).

For Fuentes, the border is portrayed as helpless in the face of the different ailments with which it is plagued, including political ones such as demagoguery and corruption. In *The Land of*

*Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, Jason De Leon uses the wound metaphor to describe the trauma of crossing the border from Mexico to the United States, one which does not only affect individuals involved in the crossing process or their next of kin, but entire communities that are in one way or another linked to the border: “... painful story [that] lies open like an unhealable wound” (2015: 289).

While the literary depiction of the US-Mexico border goes as far back as the signing of the treaty, a remarkable shift took place with the emergence of texts that came to be called “post-Gatekeeper border narratives.” This category refers to texts written after the launch in 1994 of Operation Gatekeeper in California to signal the beginning of the heavy policing of the US-Mexico border as a means of countering what was referred to in the populist discourse as “the Mexican takeover.” This was followed by a number of similar operations across the border including Operation Safeguard in 1995 in Arizona and Operation Río Grande in 1997 in Texas as well as other more local operations such as Operation Blockade in 1993 in El Paso, Texas and which later expanded into Operation Hold the Line. Those operations promoted nipping undocumented immigration in the bud so that instead of finding and deporting immigrants who have already entered the US, unauthorized entries are intercepted at the border. The post-Gatekeeper era is defined by the drastic changes it introduced to both the concept of the border and the process of crossing. In addition to preventing potential immigrants from crossing, hence turning the border from a gateway to a barrier, the operations also managed to alter the very concept of the border as it acquired a menacing aura and became permanently associated with loss, death, and trauma.

According to Peter Andreas, endowing the border with a different image was one of the main objectives of the operations:

The unprecedented expansion of border policing, I argued, has ultimately been less about achieving the States’ instrumental goal of deterring illegal border crossers and more about politically recrafting the image of the border (2009: 85).

One of the major changes that characterized the post-Gatekeeper era was the rerouting of border crossings. Safe crossing points, located in populated areas and around urban centers, were placed under tight security and constant surveillance, hence forcing immigrants to opt for the more dangerous routes: "The 'territorial denial' strategies embodied by Operation Gatekeeper and similar operations in the Southwest would discourage many immigrants from crossing into more urbanized zones" and "would push immigrants into mountain and desert areas... with often deadly consequences" (Nevins, 2008: 116). Tereza M. Szeghi also comments on the role of the new procedures in rendering the crossing much more hazardous and less likely to be completed safely:

because the safest and therefore most popular paths for crossing are highly monitored, migrants have begun crossing in sections of the border where the extremes of climate render arriving in the United States alive quite difficult. Further, gangs that bridge the border (and who exert more power in some sections than the authorities of either nation) have identified business opportunities and charge migrants' exorbitant fees for allegedly safe passage (2018: 410-411).

Post- Gatekeeper narratives tackle that transformation of the border crossing into a precarious, in many cases deadly, process, hence focusing on the dangers immigrants face not only because of the harsh terrains they venture into, but also as a result of the violations to which they are exposed whether by border patrols, coyotes, or traffickers in addition to the psychological impact of the crossing on all individuals and/or communities involved. Marta Caminero-Santangelo comments on this new focus in border narratives:

Since the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper in 1994, Latino/a writing has been marked by a profound shift in attention and sensibility in reaction to the multifaceted nature of the crisis of escalating immigration enforcement—a crisis including deaths at the border (as well as rape, dismemberment, and other life-threatening hazards), familial separations due to deportation, labor exploitation, and human trafficking, and a generalized culture of anxiety (2016: 27).

The trauma associated with border crossing in the post-Gatekeeper era constitutes another stage through which the historic wound goes as the dividing line between the US and Mexico continues to be a source of loss, pain, and disillusionment. In addition to the historical, cultural, and political specificity of the US-Mexico border, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as a form of wound:

Trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell of us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available (1996: 4).

Ana Castillo's *The Guardians* (2007) and Graciela Limón's *The River Flows North* (2009) are arguably among the most typical examples of post-Gatekeeper border narratives. The two novels, in which the US-Mexico border is both theme and setting, tackle the experience of crossing and its traumatic impact on both the personal and the communal levels. While Limón focuses on the crossing process itself through a group of migrants who pay a coyote to guide them through the Sonoran Desert, Castillo deals with the effect of border crossings on the community whose members die or disappear in the process. Both novels complement each other in the way they highlight how the trauma does not only affect people who take part in the actual crossing but shatters families who lose their loved ones and disrupts border communities that deal with death and disappearance on a regular basis. The trauma is, therefore, physical with the migrants having to face the most inhumane conditions as they attempt to cross and psychological with survivors of the crossing and families/ communities of the dead/ disappeared having to deal with the aftermath. The two novels together can be seen as an in-depth analysis of the border "wound" from different angles as well as an attempt at humanizing the victims who are reduced to numbers in reports and the news. Both texts are, in fact, a literary elaboration on Anzaldúa's statement on the experience of crossing: "Maldito fue el día/ que me atreví a cruzar" (1987: 143). They, in other words, reflect the calamities associated with the trip to "el otro lado," a term that has acquired a sinister meaning, the other side being the

afterlife that is totally opposed to the initial optimistic one, the other side being the start of a better life.

Castillo lists the different dangers to which migrants are exposed and which makes surviving the crossing process a major challenge. The examples she provides through Regina, the protagonist whose brother disappears while crossing and his wife is killed for her organs by gangs that control the border, offer a vivid portrayal of the suffering of the victims’ families, especially when unable to determine the fate of their loved ones and the general state of fear that grips the community affected by the disappearances. Regina’s enumeration of all the possible calamities that could befall people who cross not only mirrors her apprehensions over her brother’s fate, the trauma of her sister-in-law’s brutal murder, and the impact of both on her nephew but also constitutes her contemplation of the impact of crossings on the border town in which she lives and which is constantly hit by the repercussions:

You are at the mercy of everything known to mankind and nature. There is the harsh weather and land, the river and desert. The night is and is not your friend. It provides coolness and darkness to allow you to move. But you can get lost, you can freeze, you can get robbed or kidnapped, you can drown in el río. You can fall into a ravine, get bitten by a snake, a tarantula, a bat, or something else. The brutal sun comes with day and anything can happen to you that happens at night but you can also dehydrate, burn, be more easily detected by patrols and thieves. Bandits could kill you as easily as rob you of not just your life’s savings but that of your whole familia... if you are a pollo smuggled with others in an enclosed truck you could die of suffocation. Whatever happens to men... is worse for women. (2007: 117)

Castillo uses the term “pollo,” Spanish for “chicken,” to particularly refer to one of the deadliest methods used for illegally crossing the border, which is packing a van or a truck with the largest number of immigrants so that they end up looking like chicken locked up in a coop. This method, in which smugglers are referred to as “polleros,” or a person who grows and sells

chicken, is particularly linked to the post-Gatekeeper era since it is used to denote crossing through the most dangerous paths with the most treacherous of climates as opposed to earlier times when the process mainly involved river crossing (Spener, 2009: 12). While river crossing immigrants were referred to as “wetbacks,” still a derogatory designation, the term “pollo” involves a total dehumanization of the immigrants who cross through the desert, reveals the humiliation they encounter, and underlines the magnitude of the trauma suffered by their families/communities.

Limón also lists the dangers that range from extreme weather conditions to interception by vigilantes or border security. In most cases, she notes, surviving the crossing is the least likely scenario:

The dead outnumber those who have lived to tell what happened on that passage. So many migrants vanish without a trace, although a bone or a skull or a mangled shoe is sometimes sighted. Most likely it will be an empty plastic jug that is seen skittering across the sand. Yet despite so much danger, human migrations go on... They change routes, crisscross, and retrace their steps, because of the danger of being discovered by la Migra... or worse... vigilantes. (2009: 2)

Since Limón focuses on the trauma of crossing the Sonoran Desert, the desert becomes the main source of danger as well as the reason why most of the migrants in the novel die before arriving at the other side: “The *pinche* desert swallows up a body like it does a small snail or a splinter of wood” (2009: 48). In fact, most of the dangers cited by Castillo materialize in the crossing process depicted by Limón.

Through tackling the trauma associated with the border from different perspectives, both Castillo and Limón argue against the de-contextualization of border casualties where supporters of border policing claim that the border is deadly by nature, hence disregarding the human factor. The novels refute claims that the border as a geographical site is solely responsible for the tragedies of migrants. Despite the fact that several natural factors contribute to increasing the possibility of death at the border,



human agency in its different forms is held accountable for most of those tragedies:

Metaphors of the border as a Bermuda Triangle, as a sinister and 'swallowing' earth, or as itself some kind of afterlife, risk precisely this sort of de-contextualization. If death attaches 'naturally' to the border, then human-made policies and practices are off the hook (Caminero-Santangelo, 2016: 68-69).

This de-contextualization, or territoriality as Joseph Nevins refers to it, "helps to obfuscate social relations between controlled and controller by ascribing these relations to territory, and thus away from the human agency" (2008: 183), hence overlooking the conceptual significance of the border as a site of political hegemony where the balance of power between the parties on both sides is far from equal.

Human contribution is mainly manifested in two parties, each of which targets the migrants: border patrols, called *La Migra* by Mexicans, and coyotes, human smugglers that help migrants navigate their way through the desert and other rough terrains. Castillo highlights the fact that in the post-Gatekeeper era, it was impossible to cross without a coyote: "If you wanted to cross, you had to pay somebody" (2007: 116). Leonardo Cerda, the coyote in *The River Flows North*, admits to having abandoned migrants to their death in the middle of the desert: "I took their money anyway. Sometimes I lied to them, and lots of times I walked out on them" (2009: 125). Limón notes that warnings given to migrants are always of humans rather than natural conditions: "Only words of warning linger: ¡Cuidate de la Migra! ¡Cuidate del coyote! ¡Cuidate del narcotraficante! ¡Cuidate... cuidate...!" (2009: 3) In fact, border police and coyotes are closely related since it is the heavy presence of the first that led to the emergence of the second. It is, therefore, quite misleading to portray one of the two as the immediate villain. In *The Guardians*, Miguel, who helps Regina to find her brother and whose wife disappears at the border, mentions the role played by vigilantes, who set up an office for their group Minutemen in the town and whose presence, overlooked by the police, constituted a grave danger for migrants:

The Minutemen believe that the Border Patrol isn't doing its job. The organization claims to be just 'concerned citizens.' They wouldn't try to apprehend anybody they spotted crossing illegally, just report them. But when you start taking the law into your hands, you best believe you are going to get lunatics in the bunch who'll do whatever they get into their heads (2007: 123).

The human factor is also manifested in the policies that drive migrants to the US in the first place. Miguel slams the double standards with which the US handles illegal crossing. He explains that most drugs coming from Mexico enter the US through its southern border and all arms used by Mexican drug lords are provided by the US. Meanwhile, only migrants who try to cross in an attempt to improve their conditions are targeted. "How long can the United States contain what its vices and counterproductive prohibitions have wrought?" he wonders (Castillo, 2007: 151). In addition to turning a blind eye to drug and human smugglers, those vices include other practices that harmed the Mexican people such as NAFTA and the construction of maquilas across the border. Vanessa de Veritch Woodside underlines the role of globalization and neo-liberal policies, which she argues constitute "the global forces that foster Mexican movement northward" (2012: 114). While not overlooking natural conditions that contribute to the fatality of the crossing process, which are particularly highlighted in Limón's text, both writers focus on the role played by human agency in perpetuating the wound with which the border is identified and which takes both physical and psychological forms.

The physical wound is depicted as the immediate effect of the border crossing process and the most conspicuous evidence of the violations to which migrants are exposed during this process. The impact of that wound is rendered more poignant as both writers tackle the tragedy of unidentified casualties, nameless migrants who die at the border and are treated as one anonymous mass. The trip Gabo makes to the morgue in Juárez to look for his father's body underlines the plight of those migrants who not only lose their lives, but also lose the right to recognition and, consequently, their families' ability to know the truth: "That day at the

morgue... los muertos were out in the open like gruesome wares at a Mercado—all waiting for someone to come and give them names. In some cases, even faces” (Castillo, 2007: 143). The van abandoned in the Sonoran desert and the description of the corpses inside it, a typical case of “pollos,” seem to complement the morgue scene as another indication of the fate encountered by another group of migrants who are likely to remain unknown:

Because the vehicle had landed on its side bodies were crammed to one side, piled on top of one another.... 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 dangled 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. (Limón, 2009: 132-133)

In both descriptions, the bodies are stripped of their humanity and treated, instead, as nameless objects, hence creating a double violation, one in which death is combined with anonymity. Caminero-Santangelo highlights the dehumanization implied in this anonymity:

To be a body without a name is to be not even human—to have lost the claim to a social identity that matters. The text’s repetition of nameless and unidentified bodies signals a larger, collective anxiety (2016: 72).

While the “text” here refers to *The Guardians*, Caminero-Santangelo’s words also apply to *The River Flows North*, which mainly focuses on “all the nameless people that had perished in that wasteland” (Limón, 2009: 157). The “collective anxiety” Caminero-Santangelo mentions is related to the impact of the physical wound on both the victims and their families/communities, the first feeling the anxiety of not being recognized and given a proper burial when they die and the second feeling the anxiety of never knowing the destiny of their loved ones.

Both Castillo and Limón give unidentified migrants, always reduced to numbers, faces and names through telling the stories behind the collective wound and breathing life into each

individual wound as every victim is given a voice and each story complements the others so that together they provide a holistic vision of the border crossing trauma. Through Rafa’s disappearance, its effect on his family and the border community, and the earlier death of his wife, Castillo tells the story of thousands who are traumatized, whether directly or indirectly, by the process of border crossing. Rafa, Tereza M. Szeghi argues, represents all immigrants who go through a similar experience: “Castillo presents Rafa as representative of the many undocumented migrant workers who face violence, disappearance, and death when trying to cross into the United States” (2018: 405). When Regina is asked to identify Rafa’s body, she makes this link: “Maybe it wasn’t even him. It could have been any undocumented man caught up in the evils of border crossing” (Castillo, 2007: 207). Rafa’s wife Ximena is also a representative of women who are victims of organ harvesting while crossing the border, another type of wound that constitutes the peak of violation undocumented immigrants, especially women, are subjected to; “Three days later the bodies of four women were found out there in that heat by the Border Patrol. All four had been mutilated for their organs. One of them was Ximena” (Castillo, 2007: 7). Similarly, Limón “tries to restore dignity and identity to the vast number of faceless migrants who are daily in the news” (Elisa Bordin, 2011: 218) by focusing on the hardships through which the group goes while trying to cross the border. Members of this group are given the dignity of which owners of the bodies in the van were stripped, hence rendering the first a spokesperson for the second and providing an insight into the suffering of the unknown group, which must have gone through a similar experience. Through being fully humanized, characters in the novel not only tell their own stories, but also those of the victims in the van.

As part of her attempt at humanizing the entire border crossing experience and examining the different facets of this experience, Limón did not only focus on the immigrants but also allowed the coyote, Leonardo Cerda, to tell his story. While coyotes naturally feature in Castillo’s novel, the story is never narrated from

their point of view and their presence is mainly felt through the impact they have on victims and the community. Limón's choice could be attributed to the fact that the novel details the actual crossing, which is not the case with Castillo. Doing this, Limón manages to capture the complexity of such a character and the way the violations he commits against immigrants are normalized and, in fact, become one of the requirements of the job. While Cerda does not actually kill any of the immigrants in the novel unlike the coyotes in Castillo's text, he admits, rather casually, to other crimes and his indifference towards them as he prioritizes money over the immigrants' safety. For Limón, the coyote is an integral part of the process and of the trauma with which it is attached and the wounds this process causes cannot be fully grasped without gaining an insight into the character of the main perpetrator of such wound in addition to underlining the impact of his actions as Castillo does.

While the physical wounds sustained by those who cross the border have a detrimental effect on both the victims and their communities, the psychological wound resulting from the loss of loved ones, a communal feeling of violation, and a general state of insecurity not only impacts the immediate sufferers but also extends across generations to create a collective trauma that becomes an integral part of the crossing experience. The shift from literal to figurative wound is highlighted through Anzaldúa's use of physical images to underline the intensity of the cultural trauma the US-Mexico border constitutes:

1,950 mile-long open wound  
dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,  
running down the length of my body,  
staking fence rods in my flesh  
Splits me splits me  
*Me raja me raja.* (1987: 2)

Anzaldúa likens the damage the border inflicts to actual wounds tearing through her body. The "split" she and her people suffer from is both physical and psychological since entire cities and communities were literally divided in

two with the demarcation of the new border and an entire culture was subsequently shattered. Cassie Premo Steele notes that "the border as literal wound becomes the border as figural wound in Anzaldúa's text. Both the border and the Borderlands are wounds" (200: 51). The historic wound that Anzaldúa and Steele refer to is perpetuated by frequent crossings that seem to reenact the original tragedy and keep the wound unhealed as Castillo and Limón demonstrate.

The sign posted at the humanitarian office Regina visits in Juárez as she continues the search for her missing brother reveals the way the psychological wound linked to border crossing has become part and parcel of Mexican culture: "La búsqueda de un sueño americano puede ser tu peor pesadilla [The search for an American dream can turn into your worst nightmare" (Castillo, 2007: 115). The sign highlights how the border is automatically linked to tragedy and never to success or fulfillment as immigrants believe and the fact that this is the office where families look for members missing while crossing serves as a poignant materialization of that warning. It, therefore, sums up an ominous legacy that while originally linked to a particular event in history continues to haunt the present, hence creating an ongoing trauma and keeping the wound open. Limón underlines this continuity as she comments on the unending cycle those who cross go through as they turn from aspiring immigrants into ghosts that haunt the desert:

Who could count 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 lived ones (2009: 13-14).

The link between the living and the dead is also shown when Don Julio Escalante embarks on a dangerous trip across the desert to look for the remains of his daughter Lucinda by tracking the path she took when she attempted to cross the border months earlier. The same applies to the link between Regina and Rafa in *The Guardians* for it is through her that his story is known and his disappearance is placed at the center of events even though his crossing experience is not actually narrated. Through



having the living Regina speak of the dead Rafa, Castillo tackles the legacy of the border by focusing on the way the border turns the lives of border communities and families of victims upside down. This is particularly reflected in the impact of the disappearance on Rafa’s son Gabo:

It isn’t as if Gabo himself hasn’t noticed. I heard him crying into his pillow one night. He probably envisions his father being killed by a coyote and left in the desert-like what happened to his mother (Castillo, 2007: 12).

In both cases, the bequest of the psychological wound is underlined even if not in the same way. Limón demonstrates how the trauma of crossing is inherited across generations so that even hopeful migrants are pre-traumatized by the fate of their predecessors and view the desert they are trying to cross as ominous and haunted by the ghosts of all those who died while making the same attempt. This bequest is almost literal in Castillo’s text as Gabo inherits his parents’ trauma and Regina inherits that of her brother and sister-in-law. That is why De Leon’s choice of “the land of open graves” is arguably the most accurate description of the fatality associated with border crossing zones.

While death at the border is naturally the worst fear of both those who cross and their families and communities, Castillo lays more emphasis on the trauma of disappearing at the border, which is at times depicted as more traumatic due to lack of closure: “The borderlands have become like the Bermuda Triangle. Sooner or later everyone knows someone who’s dropped outta sight” (Castillo, 2007: 132). Caminero-Santangelo argues that disappearance has become an integral part of Mexican and Mexican-American identity and that while it is a source of trauma, it is also a source of solidarity, which becomes obvious in Castillo’s text:

In Castillo’s *The Guardians*, Mexican and Mexican American characters are assuredly traumatized by loss and disappearance; however, they are bound together by those disappearances and the search for missing ones (2016: 102).

That is why border disappearances constitute the collective wound shared by all members of the community who are directly or indirectly affected. In fact, Castillo demonstrates how disappearances are disruptive of the community as a whole regardless of who disappears. While Limón focuses on border deaths, the impact of disappearances is seen with many of the characters. Don Julio Escalante’s determination to find his daughter’s body is an attempt to seek the kind of closure that disappearance does not provide: “We lost contact. There wasn’t a word from her, or about her” (Limón, 2009: 53). Using “we,” Escalante demonstrated how one person’s disappearance is a family/community trauma. This could be linked to the function of disappearance in Latin American collective memory. Disappearance is appropriated from the Latin American context as it once again becomes the center of a new trauma linked this time to immigration. The ominous connotations of disappearance in Latin American dictatorships are echoed in border crossings making the violence to which crossers are subjected equivalent to that of state terrorism. In both Latin American dictatorships and border crossings, disappearance almost always means death in case a closure takes place and is considered as such when the person is never found.

Tereza M. Szeghi links border deaths to martyrdom and particularly applies this to the case of Gabo who dies because of rather than at the border. While Gabo does not make the actual crossing, he grows up to the trauma of border crossing after his mother dies and his father disappears. He is, therefore, not a victim of the border per se, but rather of borderlands for he pays the price of being part of a border community, hence the bearer of the wound legacy. Szeghi argues that while martyrdom is always linked to bringing about change, Gabo’s was in vain. Not only is Gabo unable to save his father, but he is also killed by a gangster, Tiny Tears, who does not even remember killing him because she was on a lot of drugs when she did and who he has been trying to protect from the gang. Gabo might have died for a cause, but his death does not change anything:

Ultimately Gabo becomes a martyr to the borderlands and a powerful symbol of the costs of borderlands violence. Yet there is a senseless emptiness in his martyrdom that aligns with the bleak view Castillo offers of life along the US- Mexico border... Castillo does not allow readers the small measure of relief or hope that might come with seeing Gabo's death as bringing about a more just world, as is traditionally the case with martyrdom. (2018: 417)

Gabo's death refutes claims about the border being a natural death zone and rather lays the blame on the different parties vying to control the border be they la Migra or the coyotes, the whole structure around the border that is. His father, too, dies in the same context and not while crossing. In fact, Rafa survives crossing several times before he is held hostage by the gang in the house where he eventually dies.

Gabo's innocence, saintly character, and the fact that he dies while trying to save his father set him apart from other characters who die while trying to cross. However, Gabo and his parents as well as the crossers in Limón's text, both the main characters and the bodies in the van, are more of sacrifices that the border, like some overbearing deity, seems to demand. The border, in this sense, thrives on the blood of the open wound, and the more lives it claims the more powerful and formidable it becomes. Border crossing could also be seen as a form of self-sacrifice in which crossers pay with their lives in case of failure and willingly agree to engage in such dangerous ritual.

In all cases, the border, by virtue of the violence it has become associated with, becomes a site of constant, and at many times mortal, conflict, a "battlefield" as Theresa Delgadillo notes: "No longer simply a marker between nations, the border exists as a battlefield" (2011: 616). This conflict, in which crossers fight against forces of nature, border patrols, coyotes, and/or vigilantes, is almost always resolved in favor of the latter. Even those who make it have to deal with the trauma of crossing, which is demonstrated in the case of Menda Fuentes and Borrego Osuna, the only two survivors in Limón's text who see all their companions perish in the desert. It is, in fact, through survivors that the legacy of the wound is passed on. The same applies to Regina, who not only survives her

brother, sister-in-law, and nephew but also raises the child of the girl who kills the latter, hence is constantly reminded of the actual wound she caused him when she stabbed him with a shard of glass and the psychological wound of losing him in addition to the collective wound from which all those affected by border crossings suffer. The wound is, therefore, not only sustained by the direct victims, but also by those linked in one way or another to the process of crossing and who might also become victims of the border even if they survive the actual process. The border, hence, becomes a destructive force in its capacity as a site of oppression through which unbalanced power relations are allowed to persist and as an imperious manifestation of political prowess.

## Conclusion

While *The Guardians* and *The River Flows North* are part of a long-standing literary canon that has for decades depicted the reasons, repercussions, and contexts of crossing the US-Mexico border, they acquire a specificity that is mainly associated with the timing of their release. As previously mentioned, the two novels represent an era that witnessed a remarkable shift in US border policies, hence saw the transformation of the crossing experience into one where survival is almost always unlikely. In choosing to focus on the experience of undocumented immigration in the post-Gatekeeper era, Castillo and Limón give voice to the victims of new enforcements as part of an attempt to subvert the official narrative that portrays immigrants as a threat to US national security while overlooking the role played by the militarization of the border. They, therefore, create what Nancy Fraser calls "subaltern counterpublics," in which groups that are not allowed to speak for themselves acquire a voice to subvert hegemonic narratives. In a context where citizenship or "legal" status becomes a prerequisite for participation in the public sphere, the stories of undocumented immigrants are always suppressed, overlooked, or challenged. The idea of "illegality" is in itself disputed in the texts since immigrants are given the voice of which they were robbed by virtue of being "illegal." Through bringing those stories to the light, Castillo and Limón examine the

complexity of the border crossing process to challenge the simplistic rhetoric adopted by the mainstream not only through underlining the impact of this process on immigrants and their communities but also by looking into the role of neoliberal policies and global capitalism in initiating such a crisis in the first place.

While the accounts offered by Castillo and Limón about undocumented immigrants are fictional, they are all inspired by actual traumas to which those immigrants are exposed. The novels, therefore, also play the role of “testimonios” not only through documenting trauma but also through empowering victims. Since testimonies are not expected to only bear witness to trauma, but also to instigate action, the two novels can be seen as a form of activism since while providing a literary depiction of the repercussions of border crossing in the post-Gatekeeper era, they also alert readers to the resulting humanitarian crisis and the urgency of reconsidering the current rhetoric on border

control and refuting hegemonic concepts of security and nationhood. In fact, the counter-narratives offered in the two novels constitute the initiation of this process since immigrants retrieve the human attributes they are stripped of when perceived as an invading mass and are, instead, portrayed as products of a system, led by the US, that pushes citizens of underprivileged communities in developing countries to risk their lives in the hope of overcoming the injustices this system brings upon them. Through writing from this angle, Castillo and Limón not only capture the complexity of the border crossing process and take part in redefining what a border means, but they also take an ethical stand where they declare solidarity with undocumented immigrants and communities affected by their plight whether through their first-hand experience or through inheriting the collective trauma associated with crossing and/or living by the border.

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