

Introduction

I walk through the hole in the fence
To the other side.

.....

Beneath the iron sky
Mexican children kick their soccer ball across,
Run after it, entering the U.S.

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 1987

The border patrol, she thought, and she tried to remember which side she
was on and which side of the wire mesh she was safe in.

Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, 1995

The borderlands have become like the Bermuda Triangle. Sooner or later
everyone knows someone who's dropped outta sight.

Ana Castillo, *The Guardians*, 2007

We tend to think of the border today as “written in stone,” metaphorically if not literally. But in fact that stone has become reified over time in the public mind and in public discourse, from something resembling Gloria Anzaldúa’s representation of flux and permeability to the rigid ideological barrier that it is now. How did we get from there to here—from Anzaldúa’s version of an artificial borderline effortlessly defied to Ana Castillo’s vision of the borderlands as a menacing death zone almost mythological in its proportions? Anzaldúa’s border was simultaneously a dividing line and a crossing point, a line drawn in the sand that her own images of fluid movement back and forth across borders flouted and attempted to erase.¹ A *Los Angeles Times* article in 2004 recalled in a similar vein: “For years, Calexico and Mexicali seemed like one city. The chain-link fence

between the two was so flimsy that people would pull it aside and walk into the United States. Agents were often nowhere to be seen, and immigrants could easily cross the border” (Marosi, qtd. in Nevins, *Dying* 116). But by 2014, according to *USA Today*, even though \$126 million had been spent on border enforcement and security in the previous decade alone, and then–Homeland Security secretary Janet Napolitano reported to Congress that the border was more secure than it had ever been, any serious talk of comprehensive immigration reform was invariably accompanied by the rhetoric of securing the border *first* (Ortega and Kelly), as though the border were an actual physical structure with leaks or holes that needed, at all costs, to be made impermeable. And increasingly, fiction and nonfiction written on *this* side of the U.S.-Mexico border detailed a litany of deaths and disappearances by those who did, in fact, try to cross: “Many travelers have disappeared and never been heard from again” (Bencastro 29). It is worth interrogating the developments that, over three decades, gave shape to this changing border landscape.

The Gatekeeper Era: Enforcement and the Immigration Debates

Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* was published on the heels of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), passed under President Ronald Reagan, which made it illegal for employers to knowingly hire undocumented immigrants. Anzaldúa decried, “It is illegal for Mexicans to work without green cards . . . big farming combines, farm bosses and smugglers who bring them in make money off the wetbacks’ labor—they don’t have to pay federal minimum wages or ensure adequate housing or sanitary conditions” (34). IRCA also notoriously granted “amnesty” to approximately three million immigrants already present in the United States.² The conflicting mandates—for legalization and for increasing enforcement—created a profound paradox with long-lasting effects (Kanström 95–96). In the immediate wake of the amnesty bill, however, anti-immigrant rhetoric temporarily receded into the background, though it would begin to rise anew in the early 1990s, as numbers of apprehensions of illegal crossings rose once again and as the 1992 election approached (Ellingwood 25; Nevins, *Dying* 106; Chavez, *Covering* 132–34; Andreas 39).³

According to Joseph Nevins, an ongoing economic recession in the early 1990s, a renewed rise in unauthorized crossings, and some high-profile incidents involving undocumented immigrants worked in tandem

to fuel the flames of anti-immigrant sentiment and rhetoric. Republicans saw the anti-immigrant platform as an opportunity to distinguish themselves from Democrats in the presidential elections of 1992 and 1996 and the congressional elections of 1994. Indeed, the anti-immigrant platform was a centerpiece of California governor Pete Wilson's bid for reelection in 1994, and California simultaneously considered passage of Proposition 187, the "Save Our State" initiative, a ballot measure that sought a hard line against illegal immigration (Nevins, *Dying* 105–8; *Operation Gatekeeper* 84–92). Several observers credit the Proposition 187 campaign and Wilson's own dramatic advertisements, depicting unauthorized migrants as an infestation and menace ("They keep coming"), with the successful turnaround of Wilson's reelection campaign (Ellingwood 31; Andreas 87).

The heated rhetoric escalated. A letter in the *New York Times* warned, "By flooding the state with 2 million illegal aliens to date, and increasing that figure each of the following ten years," Mexicans in the state could become a majority, vote to secede from the United States, and become part of Mexico (qtd. in Ellingwood 30)—the infamous threat of the "Mexican takeover" corresponding to the warlike metaphor of the "invasion" of Mexican immigrants, now packaged as a phenomenon that could in fact lead to a loss of national sovereignty to a foreign power. Leo Chavez has documented that a flurry of popular news magazine covers featured immigration as a prominent topic in the years leading up to and including 1994, suggesting that immigration was once again a "hot-button political issue" (135). Some of these covers were decidedly "alarmist" in nature—for instance, the *Newsweek* cover in 1993 that depicted a drowning Statue of Liberty, surrounded by rickety wooden boats filled, presumably, with immigrants, and a headline that read "60% of Americans Say Immigration Is 'Bad for the Country'" (Chavez, *Covering Immigration* 162). A member of the organization STOP-IT (Stop the Out-of-Control Problems of Immigration Today), was quoted in a 1993 article in the *Progressive* as saying, "Just by being here they are criminals. We believe we're being invaded and we're out to stop it. . . . American citizens don't like some of the neighborhoods . . . being taken over by illegals. . . . I have to stop our members from taking up weapons. . . . White American citizens got guns to fight back against the illegal aliens and the criminals." A member of Light Up the Border raised the possibility of a "border war," adding, "We're very serious about our sovereignty here and our families" (Conniff 26, 29; qtd. in *Covering Immigration* 166). Undocumented immigrants were portrayed as by

definition “criminals” as well as enemy aliens threatening both a national takeover and the destruction of American “families.” *Forbes* senior editor Peter Brimelow’s book *Alien Nation* was hailed by *Newsweek* as “one of the most widely discussed books of 1995” (Adler). Brimelow argued that recent immigration numbers were unprecedented and constituted a distinct threat to the United States both culturally and in terms of its national sovereignty. He singled out Latinos as constituting a “strange anti-nation inside the United States” and warned of the dire consequences of “Any change in the racial balance . . . of the American nation,” advocating a dramatic decrease or perhaps a temporary halt in legal immigration and a full-scale effort—amounting to a “second Operation Wetback”—to stop illegal immigration (218, 259–64).⁴ Several commentators homed in on Brimelow’s overtly and unapologetically racist arguments as particularly incendiary.⁵

In 1993, in an effort to preempt Republicans from gaining too much political traction from the issue of “cracking down” on undocumented immigration, the Clinton administration announced in a news conference a “strong and clear message: We will make it tougher for illegal aliens to get into our country” (Andreas 89). In 1994, Operation Gatekeeper was launched at the San Diego border with Mexico—modeled on a much more local effort, Operation Blockade, implemented in 1993 at the El Paso border by its border patrol chief, Silvestre Reyes (Ellingwood 32; Nevins, *Dying* 107–8). The plan was part of a larger national strategy to beef up policing at the border in order to make it much more difficult for migrants to pass through heavily trafficked crossing points. The year 1995 saw the initiation of Operation Safeguard at the Nogales, Arizona, crossing point; in 1997 Operation Río Grande was launched in Texas. Operation Gatekeeper and Operation Hold-the-Line were also expanded in 1996–97 to cover more territory. As Peter Andreas writes in *Border Games*, “The unprecedented expansion of border policing . . . has ultimately been less about achieving the stated instrumental goal of deterring illegal border crossers and more about politically recrafting the image of the border and symbolically reaffirming the state’s territorial authority” (85). The border was being reified into an “imaginary” line with real material gravity, whose crossing signaled criminal and life-threatening trespass.

As some scholars have pointed out, the implementation of Gatekeeper tactics occurred at the same time as the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); that is, boundary enforcement

increased just as the promoted “free” flow of goods and commerce across borders made it likely that migration flows north would correspondingly increase. Indeed, some have speculated, Gatekeeper could be interpreted as a preemptive response to this very possibility.⁶ U.S. officials “predicted that the ‘territorial denial’ strategies embodied by Operation Gatekeeper and similar operations in the Southwest would . . . push migrants into mountain and desert areas where they would make a rational cost-benefit analysis in the face of adverse conditions and decide to give up and return home” (Nevins, *Dying* 116). However, Gatekeeper and similar border enforcement strategies also had a strong rhetorical effect; they reified the nation-state boundary as an imaginary line meant to be impermeable, inviolable—to demarcate clearly who did and didn’t belong in the nation. Néstor Rodríguez has argued persuasively that while national borders exist legally and politically, the symbolic meanings they acquire are constructed over time and through particular practices (223). Gatekeeper and similar efforts constituted precisely such practices, and ensured that national unbelonging would be, for the foreseeable future, metonymically linked with what lay outside the “gate.” Those who crossed this line could now be positioned, within U.S. discourse, not just as unauthorized crossers but as enemy aliens, as threats to the nation itself.

The Human Costs of Enforcement

With the advent of the Gatekeeper era, deaths of migrants attempting to cross the border through difficult and hazardous terrain escalated dramatically (Eschbach et al. 430–31; Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper* 124–25, 144, 146). No More Deaths, a humanitarian aid organization with the mission of preventing migrant deaths due to environmental factors in the Arizona Sonora Desert, was founded in 2004. Longtime NMD volunteers have a standard stock of stories about victims of border crossing. In Warsaw Canyon, a “stretcher” made of belts and branches was used by a migrant group in the summer of 2005 to carry a woman who could no longer walk to reach medical assistance; she died despite their efforts. A marker by a creek bed in the desert near Arivaca signals the place where a fourteen-year-old Salvadoran girl, Josseline Jamileth Hernández Quinteros, died in February 2008. (Her body was found by No More Deaths volunteers.) In the summer of 2008, NMD volunteers came upon a migrant by the side of the road who had been lost in the desert for three days, abandoned by

his group, and without food or water. In his disoriented state, he asked the volunteers if they were angels, *angelitos*. Without their assistance, the man would almost certainly have died. (Caminero-Santangelo, “Responding” 113–14).

Other developments in immigration policy, enforcement, and legislation set the stage for other kinds of trauma quite far from the deadly border region. In 1996, Congress passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA). Under the provisions of this new law, deportations became mandatory in cases involving aggravated felony, even if the conviction had happened before the law’s passage (Golash-Boza, *Due Process Denied* 27). For mixed status families, the law was, in its own way, deadly. The law’s removal of judicial review of case sentencing made it impossible to argue for leniency on the grounds of subsequent rehabilitation (a judge could not take into consideration, for instance, that a particular offense may have taken place decades ago and that the offender had been a teenager at the time) or of long-standing and deep-rooted family ties or contributions to the community since the time of the offense. In practice, those caught in the net of IIRIRA enforcement were at times ripped from spouses and children to be returned to countries they barely remembered. Children were left without a parent and provider (Golash-Boza, *Due Process* 27–28, 30–34).

With the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, any possibility for easing of the vitriolic anti-immigrant rhetoric—or a loosening of restrictions—disappeared. “Securing our borders” acquired the status of an antiterrorist mantra, even though none of the terrorists involved in 9/11 had entered the United States illegally, nor had they entered through the land “border” with Mexico (Doland). Budget appropriations for all activities related to border control rose sharply (Migration Policy Institute 2, 4). In 2005, the U.S. Congress debated HR 4437, the Sensenbrenner Bill—a piece of anti-immigrant legislation that many immigrants and immigrant rights supporters saw as draconian because it would have made unauthorized presence in the United States a felony subject to imprisonment; it would arguably also have criminalized humanitarian or charitable assistance to the undocumented (Johnson and Hing 100; O’Rourke 201–4, 207–8). The bill sparked outrage among immigrant and Latino/a communities and prompted the largest nationwide immigrant rights protests in history in spring 2006, with hundreds of thousands of people in Chicago, Los Angeles, and other cities marching in support of immigrants (Johnson and

Hing 99). The New Sanctuary Movement (NSM), an interfaith, nationwide coalition of churches and synagogues modeled somewhat loosely on the 1980s Sanctuary Movement, was launched in May 2007.⁷ It constituted another response to the escalating pitch of rhetoric marked by the Sensenbrenner Bill. The movement attempted to address what participants now perceived as a grave humanitarian crisis: the separation of families through detention and deportation (Caminero-Santangelo, “The Voice”).

The Literary Response

This sketch of roughly two decades of developments in immigration legislation and enforcement, as well as of escalating and vitriolic rhetoric and the efforts of an emerging immigrant rights movement to counter it, goes some way toward explaining why Latino/a writers in the United States increasingly turned their attention to the topic of the undocumented in the years following the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper and IIRIRA. The “unauthorized” journey north, along with accompanying issues of deaths and disappearances during border crossings, the threat of deportation once in the United States, familial separation, and the existential trauma of being “illegal,” became a focus of a flurry of books published in the 1990s and early 2000s by U.S. Latino/as as well as by some non-Latino/as. Among these are works of narrative journalism including *Dead in Their Tracks: Crossing America’s Desert Borderlands* (1999) by John Annerino; *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* (2001) by Rubén Martínez; *The Devil’s Highway* (2004) by Luis Alberto Urrea; *Dying to Cross: The Worst Immigrant Tragedy in American History* (2005) by Jorge Ramos; and *Enrique’s Journey* (2007) by Sonya Nazario. In addition to journalistic accounts, there are memoirs and oral histories recounted by the undocumented, including *Diary of an Undocumented Immigrant* (1991, published in the original Spanish as *Diario de un Mojado* in 2003) by Ramón “Tianguis” Pérez and *Undocumented in L.A.* (1997) by Diana Walta Hart. Shorter life narrative fragments published in collections include *La migra me hizo los mandados* [2002] (translated as *The Border Patrol Ate My Dust*, 2004) edited by Alicia Alarcón; *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives* (2008) edited by Peter Orner; *Underground Undergrads: UCLA Undocumented Immigrant Students Speak Out* (2008) published by the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education and