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**The Lost Ones:  
Post-Gatekeeper U.S. Latina Fiction and the Construction of Cultural Trauma**  
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When violence and state repression in El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s caused large numbers of deaths and "disappearances" and a new wave of immigration to the United States, Latina writers in the U.S., including Demetria Martínez, Helena María Viramontes, Sandra Benítez, Carole Fernández, and Graciela Limón, responded by writing fiction which told the story of these political crises for U.S. audiences. (Rodríguez 2001; Lyon-Johnson 2005). Their Central Americanist fictions depicted characters who had lost loved ones, often without full knowledge of their fates, to death squads and terror tactics. The characters sometimes traveled North across the U.S. border, and back again, in search of the "disappeared" ones; the migrant flow northward invoked the complicity of the U.S. in the political situation of the "home" country, suggesting the ways in which the disappearances had transnational causes.

With the advent of Operation Hold-the-Line (1993) and Operation Gatekeeper (1994), however, and the much stricter border security—and attendant dangers of border crossing—that these measures entailed, the meaning of "disappearance" in U.S. Latina fiction expanded to take into account this added manifestation of disappearance. In these narratives, the U.S.-Mexican border *itself*, as constructed by nation-state imperatives, was increasingly the cause of "disappearances."

By 2000 the death-toll related to Gatekeeper enforcement strategies had risen to six hundred in Southern California alone (Nevins, 2002, 146)—and this does not count the deaths in the Arizona desert. The United States Government Accountability Office (2006) reports that border crossing deaths as a whole more than doubled between 1995 and 2005, although that increase was not accompanied by a corresponding rise in illegal entries; more than three-fourths of the increase can be attributed to deaths in the desert at the Arizona-Sonora border. Joseph Nevins and Bill Ong Hing, among others, have argued forcefully that immigration enforcement policies have some moral responsibility in this crisis: “By knowingly ‘forcing’ people to cross risky terrain, the INS is contributing to the numerous deaths that have resulted” (Nevins, 2002, 145; see also Hing, 2004, 202-4). The border zone is now itself the landscape—Nevins calls it a “landscape of death” (p. 144)—within which loved ones can be lost, never to be found again.

The border as a landscape of death and disappearance is the subject of several Chicana novels of the early 2000s that I am calling “post-Gatekeeper fiction,”<sup>1</sup> including Ana Castillo’s *The Guardians* (2007), Reyna Grande’s *Across a Hundred Mountains* (2006), and Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005).<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I argue that such Chicana texts are

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<sup>1</sup> I am not using the term in a strictly temporal sense (i.e. any novels published since 1994); rather, I use it more narrowly to refer to fiction that substantially reflects the changed circumstances of the post-Gatekeeper landscape at the border.

<sup>2</sup> María Amparo Escandón’s *Esperanza’s Box of Saints* (1999) also involves a search for a “disappeared” daughter that takes her mother across the border and back, bringing up some of the difficulties of border-crossing and conditions at the border, although as it turns out, the daughter died of natural causes in Mexico. Anglo-American author Susan Straight’s *Highwire Moon* (2001)

increasingly oriented toward testimony not against U.S. foreign policy's implications abroad, but against U.S. immigration and border policies at home which ignore the realities of labor needs and the effects of NAFTA on immigration flows, and which have steep human costs. I will first address the novels of Castillo and Grande, which focus specifically on stories of loved ones who have gone missing during unauthorized journeys across the U.S.-Mexican border, arguing that these texts construct migrant disappearances as a new form of cultural trauma. I will then turn to Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood*, which connects issues of unauthorized immigration to a somewhat different trauma: the unsolved murders of women in Ciudad Juárez since 1993. While Grande's novel is relatively silent on the attribution of responsibility for disappearances at the border, the novels by Castillo and Gaspar de Alba, I argue, implicate U.S. economic policies and racial hegemonies in a larger landscape of border deaths.

### **Dead Bodies and Absent Bodies**

Kelli Lyon-Johnson, writing about Latina literature that represents Central American crises of earlier decades, notes that "The dead body is a political body" (Lyon-Johnson, 2005, 208). Katherine Verdery has also argued, in a different context, that dead bodies can function as powerful political symbols, especially in times of transformation, in part because of their very materiality. "Corpses," Verdery observes, "suggest the lived lives of complex human beings"; "their corporeality makes them important means of *localizing* a claim" (Verdery, 1999, 27-8).<sup>3</sup>

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powerfully imagines familial separation and loss at the border, as a mother is forcibly deported without her infant daughter.

<sup>3</sup> Verdery's specific focus is the political transformations of the former Soviet bloc. She notes, however, that the materiality of corpses has also been important to Central American

And as Guillermo Irizarry has posited, “Representations of cadavers in U.S. Latino cultural products disrupt . . . hegemonic conceptualizations of Latinos . . . and broad production and consumption of cultural commodities in the United States. . . . [T]he corpse evinces a disruptive effect because it pauses the uncomplicated consumption of Latino cultural products” (Irizarry, 2007, 109, 111). Non-fictional, journalistic accounts of the deaths of border crossers, such as Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*, Jorge Ramos's *Dying to Cross*, and John Annerino's *Dead in Their Tracks*, use corpses in precisely this way, emphasizing the dead migrant body as focal point for the tragedy of the border. By focusing on the body's agonizing torment, these writers shift the issue to the deaths of human beings rather than the legality or illegality of immigration—reconstructing the meaning of specific dead bodies. Thus Urrea spends many pages graphically recounting the body's breakdown in deaths by dehydration and hyperthermia (Urrea, 2004, 120-29); John Annerino opts in *Dead in their Tracks* (1999) for the visual technique of including photographs of migrant corpses found in the desert. These books use the “dead body” or cadaver as a material manifestation of a tragic confluence of economic and political factors—one which most assuredly “interrupts” the easy assimilation of the “Latino” as commodity (in the manner of Taco Bell or Jennifer Lopez) with a much more problematic narrative in which Latin American immigrants die because there is no room in the construction of post-9/11 border security and national imperatives to accommodate them.

The post-Gatekeeper literature of the “border disappeared” which I examine in this essay also employs corpses as a focal point for critiques of border policy and conditions. However, this literature also turns increasingly to the trope of the *absent* body of the lost one. Unlike the nameless

cadavers shown in the photographs of *Dead in Their Tracks*, post-Gatekeeper Chicana fiction has, as its strongest visual analogy, the shrines dedicated to lost loved ones that can now be found in the Arizona desert—the person is remembered, but the body itself is removed from view. The shrines still serve the function of a localized claim, but they emphasize the radical unknowability of loss and absence, rather than material presence. The novels render this region as a highly politicized geographical zone where many bodies are simply never found, their very lack pointing to the deeply inhumane nature of policies that cause human beings to vanish.

### **The “Disappearing” Border and Cultural Trauma**

In representing the reverberations of border disappearances for families and communities, Chicana writers have begun to construct this ongoing “event” as a form of cultural trauma. At a cultural and collective level, Jeffrey C. Alexander writes, trauma is not “inherent” in events but is, rather, a “socially mediated attribution” (Alexander, 2004, 8). Certain events, but not others, will become widely represented (and thus regarded) as inflicting cultural trauma. Alexander explains that

[People engage in] symbolic representations—characterizations—of ongoing social events, past, present, and future. They broadcast these representations as members of a social group. These group representations can be seen as “claims” about the shape of social reality, its causes, and the responsibilities for action such causes imply. The cultural construction of trauma begins with such a claim . . . to some fundamental injury, . . . a narrative about a horribly destructive social process, and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution. (p. 11)

Neil Smelser elaborates that, to become established as a cultural trauma, a historical event (or

sequence of events) must meet certain criteria: “It must be remembered, or made to be remembered. Furthermore, the memory must be made culturally relevant . . . .Finally, the memory must be associated with a strong negative affect” (Smelser, 2004, 36).

In Chicana post-Gatekeeper novels of the disappeared, “el otro lado” becomes an almost obsessive metonym for death itself, so closely associated have the two ideas become in the minds of migrants and their families and communities. If, as Sandra K. Soto contends, the border is “a discursive space that only becomes cemented as real in our imaginations through the repetition of the things we do in relation to it and the things we say about it” (Soto, 2007, 430), then it is arguable that these writers’ representations contribute to a new “cementing” of the border as a space inextricably associated with death and loss. In *Desert Blood*, a character who finds herself in Juárez looks toward El Paso, on “the other side of the river” and thinks to herself, “Made sense that this place was called the Elysian Fields, the name in Greek mythology for heaven, which was just another place for the dead” (Gaspar de Alba, 2005, 270). Reyna Grande’s dedication to her novel *Across a Hundred Mountains* refers to “El Otro Lado” (all words capitalized) in terms of death—“to those who have perished trying to get to El Otro Lado.” This novel’s main character, Juana, is “afraid of dying while attempting to cross the border . . . [because] One never knew if they’d live to see El Otro Lado” (Grande, 2006, 205). Juana’s father’s grave, as the novel’s opening establishes, is not an actual gravesite, but “The U.S. border” (p. 1), which has itself become a mass gravesite. The dual meanings of crossing to the other side evolve from here. Juana’s father, Miguel García, has heard from a friend who “has written to me from the other side” about a world with “riches unheard of, streets that never end, and buildings that nearly reach the sky” (p. 27). To the humble García family that lives in a frequently flooded shack in Guerrero, Mexico, the images might as

well be of paradise as of the United States.

The title of Grande's novel is itself another metonym for "El Otro Lado," in both its senses. When Juana's father, referred to as "Apá" throughout the story, is about to leave her, she asks, "Is El Otro Lado far away, Apá?" and he responds, "I won't be that far from you. When you feel that you need to talk to your Apá, just look toward the mountains, and the wind will carry your words to me" (p. 29). The advice to his daughter, which suggests prayer to a departed loved one rather than communication between two living beings, proves prophetic, since Apá, as it turns out, never makes it past the U.S. border but dies trying to cross—though no one in the family knows this for decades. Much later, Juana sets off across the mountains in search of her father, but is told by Doña Martina, a family friend, "But your father is not on the other side of the mountains. . . . [he] is very, very far away"; Doña Martina then goes on to show Juana, on a map, how far the Mexican state of Guerrero is from the U.S. border. Juana thinks to herself that "what Doña Martina said was true. Apá was not on the other side of these mountains. And in order to find him, she would have to cross not just these mountains, but perhaps a hundred more" (p. 106). While the sense of geographical distance separating Juana from her father works on a literal level with the characters' understanding that he is in the U.S., "very far away," it acquires a figurative resonance with the as yet unrevealed truth that he is, in reality, farther away than any distance that can be traveled spatially. Although one character cavalierly suggests that it is not too hard to get to "El Otro Lado"—"it's a lot of walking, but walking never killed anyone" (p. 113)—the novel's figurative scaffolding is meant to suggest precisely how walking to el otro lado kills plenty of people; the journey is a metaphorical death, because it is increasingly an actual one.

Ana Castillo's novel *The Guardians* goes even further, making explicit the new, dual

meaning that “el otro lado” has acquired. This novel tells the intertwined stories of an undocumented, teenaged boy, Gabo, whose father Rafa has “disappeared” in the border region; his aunt and primary caregiver, Regina (who has legalized status); a Chicano schoolteacher, Miguel, who helps them search for their missing family member; and Miguel’s aged Mexican-American grandfather, “el Abuelo Milton,” who represents the novel’s keeper of memory and border history. Regina, Gabo’s aunt, clarifies that when she uses the phrase “the other side,” “By that I mean here and across the border in México and I mean this life and whatever’s on the Other Side” (Castillo, 2007, 27). Regina’s self-conscious elaboration suggests the ways that the two meanings have become increasingly one in Chicana narratives of border-crossing; to cross the border Northward inevitably carries with it the risk of death. Indeed, later in the novel crossing to “the other side” *from* the U.S. also becomes metonymically associated with death. Miguel’s ex-wife, who does volunteer work in Mexico (but lives in the U.S.), disappears herself, apparently in the act of crossing over (p.185).

In the novels of border disappearance, it is the border zone itself that is the new killing fields, the site and in some sense the *source* of the disappearance. “El Abuelo Milton,” Miguel’s grandfather in *The Guardians*, notes, “The borderlands have become like the Bermuda Triangle. Sooner or later everyone knows someone who’s dropped outa sight” (p. 132); in *Desert Blood* the border is referred to as a “deathbed” (p. 7). The sentiment is also conveyed in *Across a Hundred Mountains*, through the random appearance of dead bodies along Juana’s trek northward through Mexico to cross the border. Near Tijuana, a five year old boy dies on the bus next to his mother, who keeps urging “we’re almost there” (p. 145); is “there,” the final destination, the border or the afterlife? Later, as Juana and the group led by her coyote try to hide from la migra in the desert, she

notes that “a dead man lay on the ground a few meters away from them” (p. 209). No context for this body is ever provided; he is simply a synecdoche for the anonymous dead bodies in the desert. Earlier, referring to Apá’s disappearance, Juana’s grandmother had noted prophetically, “It is as if the earth has swallowed him” (p. 61).<sup>4</sup> In fact, the border has.

It is worth noting that some critics have, in fact, cautioned against the attribution of deaths to *the border* itself. Soto, for instance takes issue with certain representations of the border as deadly, such as Charles Bowden’s essay “While You Were Sleeping,” originally published in *Harper’s* in 1996. Soto wryly observes that “fatality does not happen in Bowden’s Juárez; it is Juárez” (Soto, 2007, 424). Bowden’s photographs of border casualties, Soto argues, are decontextualized and detached from a larger “systemic critique” of the operations of global capitalism which lay the conditions for violence in Juárez (p. 427). Out of context, the border as a death zone may become fodder for alarmist anti-immigration rhetoric insisting that “we” cannot allow such disorder and violence to enter “our” boundaries. Like Soto, Joseph Nevins has cautioned against attribution of instrumentality to the territory of the border itself: “Territoriality helps to obfuscate social relations between controlled and controller by ascribing these relations to territory, and thus away from human agency” (Nevins, 2002, 147-48). 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 decontextualization. If death attaches “naturally” to the border, then human-made policies and practices are off the hook. As we will see, the novels of Castillo and Gaspar de Alba, in particular, struggle against this sort of metaphorical decontextualization,

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<sup>4</sup> The grandmother’s words are an obvious allusion to a literary ancestry, reminding readers of course of Tomás Rivera’s short story cycle of migrant workers, *Y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra*.

acquainting unversed readers with a long, enmeshed history of immigration policies, foreign policies, domestic racism, and border security which come together as contributing factors in border deaths.

### **Collective Trauma and the Absent Body**

In *Migrant Imaginaries*, Alicia Schmidt Camacho discusses the “national trauma of emigration, in which kinship ties must extend beyond the nation-space in order for the family to remain intact” (Schmidt Camacho, 2008, 34). The “trauma” of emigration is compounded and magnified, however, when the family does *not* remain intact because migration produces death and disappearance. Schmidt Camacho writes of the relatively new phenomenon of the posting on Mexican consulate websites of pictures and descriptions of the border “disappeared”:

Family photographs, passport pictures, and identification cards posted to sites. . . adopt both the form of official immigration documents and more personal narratives to describe the disappeared. . . . The interrupted biographies of the disappeared represent a rupture . . . for sending families and towns. For the bereft, not knowing whether the missing person is alive or dead disrupts the narrative of transnational community . . . (p. 310)

When the disappeared lose the intimate connection between physical body and larger “narratives” of identity, including familial as well as communal or regional identity, the result, constructed through “narratives” of loss that foreground interruptions, breaks, and ruptures, is a *larger collective trauma*, wherein the community’s identity is also destabilized.

The question of what the border disappearances of loved ones do to a sense of collective and individual “identity” is brought up repeatedly in the post-Gatekeeper novels of disappearance; generally however, the instability of identity is underscored not by the materiality of found bodies

but by the *absence* of bodies to even attempt to “identify.” The absence of (the crucial) bodies—even more than the presence of unidentified bodies—introduces an unknowability of the fate of loved ones that repeatedly shakes the very grounds of identity. Further, the new literary and cultural manifestations of disappearance as a cultural trauma bear a marked distinction from the perhaps more familiar history of Latin American political “disappearances,” despite their similarities in other ways. For while the loved ones of those who have been “disappeared” by state forces know, at least on a general level, who is to blame (hence the attribution of responsibility by such groups as Comadres in El Salvador or Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina), the nature of border disappearance is such as to render causes and explanatory narratives more uncertain, and thus more profoundly disruptive to the family structure, as we shall see.

This issue is the crux of Grande’s *Across a Hundred Mountains*, in which the father’s disappearance literally fragments the identities of all his family members, who cannot comprehend his silence and fear that he has abandoned them. Because he neither sends money nor communicates with his family from beyond “El Otro Lado,” Amá is forced into prostitution with the sinister Don Elías. Instead of referring to her as “Señora García,” the town now calls her “Don Elías’s puta”; and when her personal tragedy drives her to alcoholism, her former identity is increasingly effaced: “Everyone in town had started calling Amá La Borracha, the drunk. She was no longer Doña Lupe, or la señora García” (p. 121). Textually the erasure of Amá’s sense of self is formally completed through a scene in which Juana comes across “a woman” lying drunkenly on the ground. The “woman” is referred to only by this noun throughout a long descriptive passage, as well as by a passerby who warns Juana away from “That crazy woman”—until, at chapter’s close, it is Juana herself who grants her recognition (since the narrator does not), picking her up and saying

“Let’s go home, Amá” (p. 124). At a formal level, Amá’s identity has been so affected—we might even say traumatized—by her husband’s unexplained absence that the text itself can no longer recognize her. Only Juana is willing to suggest that this (new) person shares some continuity with the mother that was.

The driving conflict in *Across a Hundred Mountains* is that Juana’s own identity has been fractured by her father’s disappearance. After he leaves, both Juana and Amá repeat insistently to themselves that “*Apá would never forget her. He would never abandon us*” as a way of countering an opposing narrative in which they are increasingly constructed by their community as “the forgotten women, the abandoned women” (p. 37). Elzbieta Sklodowska, interestingly here, has drawn upon Steven Marcus’s discussion of Freud in a discussion of Latin American *testimonio* that also has clear implications for what we may call here testimonial-like novels of the disappeared: “when Freud specifies what it is that is wrong with his patient’s stories, ‘the difficulties are in the first instance formal shortcomings of *narrative*: the connections . . . [are] obscured and unclear,” the timelines confused. Marcus reminds us that “Among various types of narrative insufficiency, . . . Freud lists ‘amnesias and paramnesias of several kinds and various other means of severing connections and altering chronologies’ ” (Skłodowska, 1996, 91; Marcus, 1983, 162-63, qtd. in Skłodowska). It is precisely such narrative insufficiencies and apparent amnesias that structure *Across a Hundred Mountains*. Narratively, *Across a Hundred Mountains* juxtaposes two alternating points of view (recounted in limited 3<sup>rd</sup> person): Juana as a offline young child and Adelina, a much older woman coming from the United States to Mexico in search of her own father. It is only near the novel’s conclusion that it is revealed that “Adelina” is actually the adult Juana, who has literally changed her identity by stealing the identity of another woman (the “real”

Adelina, who is murdered by her boyfriend / pimp on the Mexican side of the border) so that she might come to Los Angeles to continue her search for her father. The “real” Adelina, when she finally appears in the text, tells Juana “I’m from El Otro Lado, as you call it” (p. 175), once again underscoring the metonymical association of El Otro Lado with death, since this Adelina’s voice is heard—as it turns out—from across the grave. Juana’s adoption of the identity of the murdered Adelina is foreshadowed in a scene that echoes Lacan’s “mirror stage,” that formative moment of infant identity formation; but in this re-visiting of the mirror stage, a coherent sense of self is not found, but lost: “Juana looked into the mirror, watching herself turn into a stranger” (p. 184). She then turns “away from her image in the mirror and instead looked into [the real] Adelina’s green eyes,” anticipating the moment when she will come to see herself *as* Adelina, the “stranger” in the mirror (p. 184).

As with Amá’s textual re-inscription as “the woman,” the narrative refers to the adult Juana as “Adelina” throughout, even when characters from Juana’s childhood life recognize her as “Juana,” suggesting through this formal technique the irretrievable fragmentation of Juana’s identity in the wake of her father’s disappearance. (In a symbolic underscoring of the novel’s theme of mis-taken identity, at one point, police officers who wrongly believe that Juana has stolen a wallet grab for her, saying, “We’ve got you now, girl,” while Juana screams in response, “you’ve made a mistake!” [pp. 168-69]). Even Amá, when Adelina / Juana returns near the novel’s conclusion, cannot recognize her daughter—“You aren’t my Juana”—although the woman referred to by the narrator as Adelina insists repeatedly, “ ‘I’m Juana. Your daughter.’ . . . She wanted so desperately for her mother to see her, to see Juana” (p. 232). To not be able to recognize Juana *as her daughter* is to not be able to recognize the *relatedness* that stitches them together as a family.

Even (perhaps especially) the identity of Apá's unborn son is cast into doubt and confusion by his absence. The boy, named "Miguelito" after his father, is assumed by all except Amá herself to be the child of Don Elías, who eventually kidnaps him with his wife, and renames him José Alberto. At the news of his baptism, with his "new" parents and under his new name, Juana thinks to herself, "*His name is Miguel García . . . Miguel García. Miguelito García. My brother*" (p. 137), trying rhetorically to re-stabilize both his identity and his relatedness through compulsive repetition. When Adelina reappears after many years' absence and by chance meets her brother (who now bears a striking resemblance to his real father), he has no idea who he "really" is, or that Adelina is actually his sister. The havoc rendered by disappearance is conveyed in Adelina's lament about "Not knowing who you are, where you came from, or the people you loved and who loved you" (p. 171). The "not knowing" of familial disappearance attacks the core of a sense of identity; to not know "who loved you" is intimately linked with "not knowing who you are," rendering the familial story uncertain and unreliable. In other words, the father's disappearance indeed interrupts the narrative of family history, replacing it with a different narrative that constitutes both family and community in markedly dissimilar ways. (Notably, Apá's leavetaking a year earlier is described in terms of the absence of *stories*—Juana asks him for a story because "She knew this would be the last story he told her before he left" [p. 33].)

The multiple ways in which familial and collective identity has been disrupted by the father's disappearance are the novel's most pressing theme, and the restoration of a narrative that will recognize both familial and communal bonds provides the frame of the novel. *Across a Hundred Mountains* opens with the adult Adelina insisting that she be shown what could be her father's bones, demanding, "I have to know . . . For nineteen years I have not known what

happened to my father. You have no idea what it's like to live like that—not to know" (p. 3). Confirmation of her father's body beneath the "grave" of the border will resolve "not knowing" into identity. Finding his bones at the border, Adelina insists that she "will take him with me, even if I have to carry his bones on my back" (p. 2), a passage which suggests the degree to which finding her father's physical body (and thus learning the history of his absence) might potentially heal the wounds to collective identity by restoring a larger narrative of self and family. When Adelina subsequently returns to her mother with the bones, the family is symbolically reunited—and both Adelina and José Alberto are addressed by their "real" names (although the narrative voice continues to call them Adelina and José Alberto).

The way in which family serves as a synecdoche for a larger communal and collective disruption is, further, conveyed through the family's references to Juana's "inheritance": a set of wedding dishes given to her parents which, according to her mother, "*gave me and your father good luck . . . We've had a good marriage*" (p. 254). But when Apá's absence destroys the family, Amá goes on a rampage, breaking each of the plates into "a hundred pieces" until only one plate, "the only plate left of her inheritance," remains (p. 73-74). The familial story has been fractured, but the "hundred pieces" stand for a much larger fractured story. In one scene in the novel, Adelina meets Miguel García, a man tracked down by a private detective she has hired to search for her father. This Miguel García lost his memory in an accident soon after arrival in Watsonville, so he does not know whom he might have left behind—who might have been affected by his own disappearance. Meeting this Miguel García, Adelina "knew what [he] wanted of her. He wanted his identity back. He wanted all those forgotten years back. He wanted to remember, to be able to look in the mirror and know where his roots were" (p. 172). Like her own family, Miguel García wants

the narrative of his history restored into coherence. When Adelina must tell him that he is not, in fact, her father, “She saw his body tremble, *saw his hopes shatter*, saw Gloria [his new wife] wrap her arms around him, as if *trying to hold the pieces together*” (p. 172; emphasis mine). The metaphorical resonance of the image, linking this Miguel’s story to a larger fractured “inheritance,” underscores the ways in which border disappearances are a collective ill that fragments communal identity.

A remarkably similar trauma narrative is played out in Castillo’s *The Guardians*. The characters in this novel represent a range of legal statuses and immigrant arrivals: from el Abuelo Milton, the Mexican-American with a long memory of racism, discrimination, and the building of the border, to Miguel, the radicalized Chicano professor, to Regina, the military widow with legalized status, to her nephew Gabo, who remains undocumented. Because *all* the characters participate in the search for Gabo's lost father Rafa, Castillo suggests that the search is a communal and collective one. Regina, the central protagonist whose brother has disappeared while crossing the border, tells readers that

I’d rather be pricked by a thousand thorns than have to think about what my little brother may have endured. The fact is, however, that I don’t know what exactly he had to endure. Sometimes I like to think he is back in Chihuahua with a pregnant wife and that we just never heard from him because he became too selfish and didn’t care about Gabo no more or his past life with Ximena. (p. 12)

Though Regina claims that she “likes to think” this (because it opens up the possibility that her brother is still alive, that he has not crossed over to *el otro lado* in either of its senses), it is clear from the narrative she projects that this prospect is not at all desirable. The alternative story that

Regina resorts to telling of her brother's disappearance interrupts any narrative of family or communal connectedness or responsibility that would anchor Gabo, her nephew, in a comprehensible identity. As Schmidt Camacho discusses of missing migrants, "Familial dislocation, occurring across national boundaries, puts children's identities . . . in crisis." Schmidt Camacho suggests that the phenomenon of migrant disappearances reveals the "profoundly unsettling ways" in which "kinship cannot mitigate against loss" (Schmidt Camacho, 2008, 312). Regina recognizes at the novel's conclusion that, whatever she may have *thought* she would like to think, "the worst part was over, the not knowing" (p. 207). And Gabo himself socially disintegrates under the pressure of losing his father: he sleepwalks, his grades dip, and he begins to associate with known drug traffickers on the (at face value) highly improbable chance that they might lead him somehow to his father. The diagnosis from the doctor that Regina consults is that Gabo is under stress from "possibly losing a second parent"; Regina comments, "that's not just stress, that's trauma" (p. 122). Finally, Gabo dons a monk's garb and begins to preach publically, in a prophetic tone that makes no social sense and is incomprehensible to those around him. Weirdly, in the final chapters Miguel is referring to him as "Gabe" at some points and as "Gabo" at others (e.g. pp. 168-69), even though he is addressed as "Gabe" nowhere else in the novel--suggesting an irretrievably fragmented identity.

### **Dismembered Bodies**

While the absent body plays a role in Gaspar de Alba's border mystery *Desert Blood* as well--the protagonist Ivon's sister Irene is abducted and "disappeared" while playing in the Rio Grande--this text, more than those by Castillo and Grande, represents collective trauma through a focus on dismembered (but physically present) bodies. The narrative is strewn with the gruesome

images of multiple tortured and mutilated bodies, beginning with the murdered body of a pregnant *maquila* worker, whose baby Ivon was returning to El Paso (where she was raised) to adopt. Ivon learns about the Juárez murders for the first time as she reads a magazine during her flight to El Paso, and immediately feels guilty for her ignorance about the dire situation at the border that she considers her “home.” The fact that Ivon’s short visit to the border of her childhood is immediately marked by not one but two “lost” ones that afflict her own family suggests the degree to which—while not threatening a familial narrative history in quite the same way as Castillo’s or Grande’s texts—this narrative, too, constructs border disappearance as a cultural trauma with communal implications. Ivon must be made aware of her former blissful obliviousness and must, further, come to recognize the bonds of relatedness that bind her to the women being violated.

Ivon's desperate search for her pulls her to participate in a “*rastreo*,” or search for bodies to find those of the missing in the desert (pp. 23-24). The *rastreo* conveys the urgency felt by family and community members to convert the missing and absent body to an identified body through the materiality of the corpse. On the *rastreo*, Ivon’s companions do, in fact, discover a dead body, which is presented in graphic detail: “The eyes were gone. The face was completely bloated and purple, facial features erased, blistered skin crusted with sand and blood and maggots. . . . A thick black rope burn ran across the neck and teeth marks covered the chest. The bra was pushed up over the breasts. Worms oozed over the torn nipple of the left breast” (p. 246). The corpse is indeed so unidentifiable that Ivon must ask them to examine its tongue to see if it bears a post, since her sister has a pierced tongue; after checking, the coroner's assistant notes that “The tongue was either bitten off or eaten away” (p. 246). The emphasis throughout this description on the corpse's physicality underscores the violence done to its humanity—a violence conveyed, above all, by the stripping

away of all identity markers, including facial features and even the tongue, instrument of speech. Relieved that the dead body turns out not to be her sister, Ivon nevertheless comments, “She's someone else's sister, . . . someone else's daughter” (p. 249). (In an earlier scene, Ivon's cousin William, who reluctantly helps her to search for Irene, lashes out, “She's your sister, not mine.” Ivon retorts, “hey, if it's not your sister, it's not your problem, right?”) To imagine the dead corpse in a web of familial and communal relations is to reinvest it with its social meaning—indeed, with its *humanity*. To see it as only an anonymous and unidentified corpse, by contrast, would allow Ivon (and us) to regard the body as without social meaning, to bracket the crimes done to *this* body, and every other for which we lack context.

As with the ghostly figure of *Beloved* in Toni Morrison's novel by that name, however, the wounded, fragmented, and dismembered body in the post-*Gatekeeper* narratives represents much more than one individual's traumatic response to disappearance. In Castillo's *The Guardians*, the loss of the missing family member is sometimes analogized through the figure of *someone else's* wounded or amputated body, which alludes to the loved one's missing / absent body. Miguel, contemplating the failed search for Gabo's father, must acknowledge that “Rafa is only one among hundreds every year disappearing or finally turning up dead because of heat and dehydration in the desert or foul play at the hands of coyotes. These days all I can see in my mind's eye lately is that skeleton mother with three fingers that Gabe and my grandpa saw at the city morgue in J-Town” (p. 148). As in the genre of *testimonio*, Rafa's disappearance is made to serve a synecdochic effect; it is not the story of one lost individual but the story of “hundreds every year”; in this passage, that synecdoche is then visually and viscerally figured in the anonymous body with missing fingers. Likewise, Regina, recollecting a doctor's warning that her mother's leg would have to be

amputated, clearly comes to view that existential moment for its metaphorical value: “I’ve been thinking about that lately. About losing a part of yourself. But even after they cut off your leg you can still talk to people. You can tell them how you feel about them. You can live without half a leg” (p. 137). The phrasing is clearly evocative of the loss that *cannot* be mitigated against—the missing *individuals*. As in *Beloved*, the body has become the figure for the larger communal body; the dis-membered body then suggests the fear of the community’s fragmentation (Caminero-Santangelo, 1998, 156), a fear only mitigated by the relationships and connections that remain (“you can still talk to people”).

Ironically, the post-Gatekeeper Chicana narratives I examine here inevitably compensate for the radical instability of *not knowing*, by ultimately all revealing the fates of the “disappeared” ones, as though the sense of trauma produced by radical and unresolved disappearance must be delimited and contained, even as the collective trauma itself is narratively constructed. Thus in *The Guardians*, the lost father Rafa’s dead body is finally found in a coyote’s El Paso home; in *Across a Hundred Mountains* Juana / Adelina eventually finds, and properly buries, the dead bones of her father; in *Desert Blood*, Ivon’s sister is also found, raped and tortured, but alive.

### **Border Testimony**

Let me return now to the issue of what Alexander has called “the attribution of responsibility” in cultural trauma. This is a point emphasized by Neil Smelser:

“A historical memory is established as a national trauma for which the society has to be held in some way responsible . . . [In cultural trauma], the assignment of responsibility is salient. Who is at fault? Some hated group in our midst? Conspirators? Political leaders? The military? Capitalists? A foreign power? We ourselves as a group or nation?” (Smelser, 2004, 38, 52).

Earlier I suggested that the border itself becomes figured as a grounds of death, but as we saw, this representation bears the danger of attributing responsibility to mere territoriality. This is actually a suggestion that these texts actively resist. They do in fact suggest that it is “we ourselves as a group or nation,” in a generalized sense, that is responsible for the current crisis; but they are further quite specific and explicit in their attributions of responsibility. El Abuelo Milton points out the hypocrisy in an immigration enforcement policy that has varied with changing labor needs; during the Great Depression, migrants “weren’t allowed to cross over precisely ’cause there was no work. Now, during the chile harvest season, La Migra turns a blind eye at all the men that come to be picked up” (p. 132). Yet despite pressing demands for labor, our immigration policies “force people to crawl on their bellies for a chance to make it” (p. 4).

Expanding the meanings and resonance of the term “disappearance” from its context within Latin American state repression, Castillo writes that at the border it is “crooked coyotes who disappear people” (p. 58), a phrasing that makes use of the *transitive* form of the verb “disappear” that became common usage in Latin American political conflicts. At the same time, the emphasis on human smugglers as the “culprit” in border deaths and disappearances potentially serves to obscure the complicity of what Nevins calls “boundary policing” *itself* in the escalating fatality count (Nevins, 2002, 67, 145-46), a point also forcefully made by Bill Ong Hing, who points out that border security measures have in fact contributed to the growing trade in human smuggling (Hing, 2004, 196). The limitation of blame to the coyotes is one that *The Guardians* persistently pushes against; while the coyotes do indeed turn out to be the most immediate villains, Castillo’s larger, contextualized narrative is about the historical factors that have given the coyotes their power. The “coyotes and narcos own the desert now” (p. 4), Regina tells readers at the novel’s

opening; but the drug traffic across the border is fueled by U.S. demand (p. 151), and the drug smugglers have gone into the business of human trafficking thanks to the more militarized border enforcement strategy which has made the human smuggling market increasingly lucrative: “What has happened is that migrants are having to try more often to get across without being apprehended, and are using different routes to do so, which are more dangerous . . . . [T]he only reason [Rafa] needed a coyote was that was the law of the land now. If you wanted to cross, you had to pay *somebody*” (p. 116). In *The Guardians*, Regina insists that imagining a solution to the problem of border deaths would require a comprehensive understanding of many interlocked causes: “What if . . . no money could be made on killing undocumented people for their organs? What if this country accepted outright that it needed the cheap labor from the south and opened up the border? And people didn’t like drugs so that trying to sell them would be pointless?” (p. 29).

The pinpointing of U.S. policy is also the final word, so to speak, of Gaspar de Alba’s amateur-detective mystery *Desert Blood*. The mystery’s concern at the level of plot is to reveal who is killing the women of Juárez with impunity; Gaspar de Alba provides a fictional answer to this mystery by imagining an internet snuff pornography site that abducts the women and then kills them on camera. But behind this mystery is another, which is perhaps Gaspar de Alba’s more pressing social concern: how are these crimes allowed to continue unsolved? How is it that not more attention and resources have been devoted to finding the perpetrators? How—as she puts it explicitly in her introductory “disclaimer,” “is it “possible for such crimes to take place with impunity” (p. v)? Ultimately, the novel departs from the detective genre formula, in which the satisfactory conclusion is the revelation of individual perpetrators (Adams, 2007, 266). As the central character and situational “detective,” Ivon, ruminates near the novel’s conclusion, “This

wasn't a case of 'whodunit,' but rather of who was allowing these crimes to happen? Whose *interests* were being served?" (p. 335; emphasis added).

To answer this question, Gaspar de Alba examines the economic interests of U.S. companies running *maquiladoras* at the U.S. Mexican border. The gruesome image of "American pennies" found inside the bodies of several of the female victims during autopsies invokes the larger complicity of the United States in these border crimes: "It's like Abe Lincoln's been shoved down her throat," a character says of one of the murdered women (pp. 251-52). Free trade benefits U.S. corporations by providing cheap labor; but these "pennies saved" are symbolically held accountable for the lives of the vulnerable *maquila* workers—whether or not the *maquilas* are directly responsible for the murders.

Economic interests, further, work *in conjunction with* the cultural and racial imperatives of a hegemonic Anglo-American culture threatened by the encroaching "brown tide" (Santa Ana, 2002) of Mexican and Central American immigration. As Gaspar de Alba's proxy detective Ivon slowly pieces together the puzzle, she thinks to herself:

NAFTA's brought thousands of poor, brown, fertile female bodies to the border to work at a *maquiladora*. . . . Not all of them will get jobs. . . . *What to do with all these fertile brown female bodies on the border?* . . . What happens if they cross over? More illegal Mexican women in El Paso means more legal brown babies. Who wants more brown babies as legal citizens of the Promised Land? . . . Although we love having all that surplus labor to exploit, once it becomes reproductive rather than just productive, it stops being profitable. How do we continue to make a profit from these women's bodies and also curtail the threat of their reproductive power? (p. 332)

The business interests of U.S. corporations require cheap labor but *not* the demands of pregnancy-related medical care or maternity leave (so that, in Gaspar de Alba's Juárez, women laborers' reproductive capacity at the maquiladoras is heavily monitored [p. 331]). The cultural imperatives of the hegemonic nation require, at the same time, that surplus labor (especially with a reproductive capacity) *not* flow Northward. As Leo Chavez has written, anti-immigration sentiment is constructed through images which suggest the threat of an "insidious invasion" that includes, among other things, "the capacity of the invaders to reproduce themselves" (Chavez, 2001, 233). In Gaspar de Alba's fictional theory of the Juárez murders, the rape and dismembering of women's bodies serves a terrorist function to *keep* them from crossing the border illegally, thus directly linking the Juárez murders to the issues of dangerous, unauthorized crossings that are the main focus of Castillo's and Grande's novels. The illicit trade in human bodies serving U.S. interests is represented in *Desert Blood* as variegated and multiple—from exploited labor and the unauthorized (but implicitly and sometimes explicitly solicited) travel of workers' bodies, to the sex industry (prostitution, pornography, and sexual slavery), to the black market sale of murdered women's organs to feed a transplant industry in the U.S. in which the undocumented are perceived as illegitimate benefactors (Chavez, 2008, 113-31). (In Castillo's *The Guardians*, similarly, Gabo's mother is one of the murdered women of Juárez, killed for her organs.)

Meanwhile, NAFTA's implementation is accompanied by an astronomical increase the budget for Border Patrol (Gaspar de Alba, 2005, 330), which is in turn justified by new border enforcement strategies such as Gatekeeper and Hold-the-Line. *Desert Blood's* resolution of the crime of border deaths, then, is a "bilateral assembly line of perpetrators" that extends far beyond the specific violence done to the women of Juárez: "from the actual agents of the crime to the law

enforcement agents on both sides of the border to the agents that made binational immigration policy and trade agreements” (p. 335). To truly resolve these border crimes, we would have to address “the profit reaped by the handiwork of [all] the perpetrators” (p. 335).

## **Conclusion**

Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann have postulated that “the common history a group claims” is often deployed as one of the “symbolic elements that may be viewed as emblematic of peoplehood” (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998, 19). While the trauma of border disappearances is portrayed in the texts I have examined as fracturing community, it is arguable that the *narration* of ongoing trauma simultaneously constitutes the community that is its subject. In Castillo’s *The Guardians*, Mexican and Mexican American characters are assuredly traumatized by loss and disappearance; simultaneously however they are bound together by those disappearances and the search for the missing lost ones. Precisely because trauma is shown to impact each character in a range of ethno-national subject positions, “the group” is constituted *through* the reverberations of trauma, even as it is ostensibly fractured by them. That is to say, Castillo’s narrative *constructs* Mexican and Mexican American identity as a communal one through a complex “shared history” that includes dispossession, discrimination, exploited labor, *and* current disappearances at the border—much in the same manner that African American collective identity has been constructed in the U.S. largely through a shared history of diaspora, slavery, and Jim Crow segregation laws. Grande’s *Across a Hundred Mountains*, similarly, suggests the ways in which recent Mexican immigrants (like Juana) and U.S. Latinos (like Juana’s romantic interest, Sebastian, and his family) are stitenuously together in a fragile solidarity that might come to imagine and represent itself as an ethnic “family,” collectively healing cultural rifts caused by impoverishment, dislocation, and

migration.<sup>5</sup> Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood*, likewise, ends with a trans-border image of familial healing: Ivon's affectionate words: "*¡Qué familia!*" (p. 341), spoken as she surveys an extended family consisting of, among others, her rescued sister, her lesbian partner, and their soon-to-be-adopted son, Jorgito, claimed from the border's jaws of death. In this fiercely oppositional and anti-heteronormative novel, the concluding trope of family, envisioned as flexible and heterogeneous, becomes provocatively suggestive of a larger border solidarity. In all of these post-Gatekeeper Latina narratives, then, trauma is paradoxically both destructive and constitutive, a threat to communal identity and a symbolic element of communal identity that makes powerful social justice claims, underscoring yet again the ways in which the stories we tell about ourselves continue to define—and in the process to construct—who we are.

**8112 words**

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<sup>5</sup> Cornell and Douglas Hartmann note that, in its representation and popular understanding, "Ethnicity is family writ very large indeed" (20).

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