

"In the desert, we are all illegal aliens":
Border Confluences and Border Wars in
Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*

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Abstract

In May 2001, a traveling party of 26 Mexican citizens tried to cross the Arizonan desert in order to enter the United States illegally. Their attempt turned into a front-page news event after 14 died and 12 barely made it across the border due to Border Patrol intervention. Against the background of consistent tightening of anti-immigration laws in the United States, my essay aims to examine the manner in which Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway: A True Story* (2004) reenacts the group's journey from Mexico through the "vast trickery of sand" to the United States in a rather poetic and mythical rendition of the travel north. Written to include multiple perspectives (of the immigrants and their coyotes, the immigration authorities, Border Patrol agents, high officials on both sides of the border), Urrea's account, I argue, stands witness to and casts light on the often invisible plight of those attempting illegal passage to the United States across the desert. It thus humanizes the otherwise dry statistics of immigration control by focusing on the everyday realities of human-smuggling operations and their economic and social consequences in the borderland region. At the same time, my paper highlights the impact of the Wellton 26 case on the (re)negotiation of identity politics and death politics at the US-Mexican border.

Keywords: US-Mexico border, desert, illegal immigrants, militarization of the borders, death, bearing witness

The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta*
where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.
(Anzaldúa 3)