

The Metalanguage of Border Crossing: The Deconstruction of Myth in Yuri Herrera's *Signs Preceding the End of the World*

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Abstract: This paper argues that Yuri Herrera's *Signs Preceding the End of the World* subverts US-centric discourses on border crossing by exposing them as artificial myths. Suspending said myths by superimposing an alternative mythical dimension rooted in Aztec cosmology and narratives about the descent into the underworld, the novel instead fosters a form of 'alternative knowledge' in which the liminal state of border-crossing bodies becomes detached from the negative stigma of hegemonic US-centric discourse. The ensuing study's main analysis aims to detail how the novel's narrative structure of descent reimagines the experiences of unauthorized border crossing as a mythical and transformative journey of self-discovery.

We who didn't come by boat, who dirty up your doorsteps with our dust, who break your barbed wire. We who come to take your jobs, who dream of wiping your shit, who long to work all hours. We who fill your shiny clean streets with the smell of food, who brought you violence you'd never known, who deliver your dope, who deserve to be chained by neck and feet. We who are happy to die for you, what else could we do? We, the ones who are waiting for who knows what. We, the dark, the short, the greasy, the shifty, the fat, the anemic. We the barbarians.

—Yuri Herrera, *Signs Preceding the End of the World* (99-100)

Mythical renditions and notions of 'the border' have undoubtedly played a decisive role in shaping a distinct US American identity by stimulating a shared sense of self and Other. Arguing accordingly, Pete Mitchell speculates that since the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the US-Mexican border might very well be the "most mythologized in the world." Scholars of US history will find that imaginations of the western border region as a site of conflict between 'civilization' and an ostensibly ever-encroaching 'wilderness' have

not only nourished a sustained interest in Western fictions but also helped to legitimize national myths such as ‘Manifest Destiny’ and the ‘American Frontier’—the latter of which is designated by Frederick Jackson Turner in his 1893 ‘Frontier thesis’ as the cradle of American democracy. Many of these mythical renditions seem to share a common understanding of ‘the American’ as the force of good within a hostile environment of savage Otherness. Characterizations of the ethnic Other—a designated role discursively forced upon Native Americans and Mexican people—not only served as a foil for American exceptionalism but also proliferated the stigmatization of Native American and Mexican identities.

Today, we can still find remnants of such discursive paradigms in sensationalist reports on the state of the US-Mexican border, which frequently seem to conflate Mexican identity with “the quintessential image of the illegal alien” (Gurman 376). As Gurman delineates, viewing Mexican and, more broadly speaking, Latinx identities as inherently criminal entities and threats to the US public has subsequently helped to burgeon border security “into an ideology and sacrosanct principle of US politics.” This rests on linking “[t]he twin projects of securing the border and enforcing crime” (381). As a result, ‘crimmigration’ emerges as a particularly dominant theme in discursive representations of the border region.

Hence, holds Mitchell, it is not surprising that much of contemporary Anglophone border fiction draws on “a rich haul of narco-trafficking thrillers, neo-Westerns, pornographic news reports and big chewy macho novels about violence.” Most detrimentally, however, many of the border fictions we have been consuming “actually pullulate with the kinds of fear, hatred, desire and disgust surrounding the Other that, as good post-colonialists, we’re supposed to find embarrassing.” It thus appears that border fiction as a cultural genre strongly relies on a set of recurring themes that is fundamentally harmful in its depiction of the Mexican Other. Accordingly, it seems that particularly generic fictional narratives about the border are, in fact, “as much a part of that border’s malign machinery of terror and exclusion as the fences, the helicopters, the bureaucracy and the border patrols” (Mitchell). How, then, does one narrate the border region without perpetuating the destructive stereotypes that foster the marginalization of those experiencing the realities of life at the border?

Setting much of his writing in the ambiguous spaces of the US-Mexican border region and the criminal underworld frequently associated with it, Mexican author Yuri Herrera’s prose complicates US-centric perspectives on the border through what could be viewed as a project of elaborate defamiliarization. Subverting the hegemonic dominance of the US over border discourses, Herrera’s position as a Mexican author who narrates border realities through the eyes of Mexican subjects serves as the first instance of defamiliarization. Against the backdrop of a cultural genre largely dominated by US-centric biases on the border’s purported state of

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savagery, reading border experiences from the perspective of the Other inevitably expands the genre's capacity to accommodate more diverse non-American voices. Furthermore, Herrera, who earned both his Master's degree and PhD at universities in the US and currently holds a teaching position at Tulane University in New Orleans, himself appears to be a product of the cultural hybridity that suffers under the stigmatization of migrant bodies in the US.

What sets Herrera's work apart from other Spanish writing whose translations succeeded on the international market is its refusal to cater to ravening appetites for brutal crime fictions and the generic tropes that typically undergird them. While Mitchell points out that much of the "success" of a translated work "has something to do with its receptivity to those tropes," he maintains that Herrera's writing subverts rigid conceptualizations of identity and nationality. He achieves this by embracing cultural hybridity and the subjects' "struggle to hold on to a version of themselves that preceded their border crossing." In staying clear of simply reworking tried and tested tropes of generic border fiction, Herrera moves beyond the genre of so-called 'narco literature' by constructing "a new space in which the border is not between two distinct geographical areas, between two countries, but rather between reality and myth" (Rioseco).

Myth, as it were, denotes the second order of meaning that objects acquire within cultures that "seek to make their own norms seem fact of nature" (Culler 24). Myths alter the meaning of objects in an effort to align them with particular narratives and ideologies. According to Barthes, myths ultimately have less to do with the physical object of their message but rather with the way in which that message is conveyed in discourse (107). Herrera's work effectively defamiliarizes readers with preconceived notions of the border by avoiding the common tropes of narco literature and instead drawing on alternative mythologies. In so doing, his work gives new meaning to subjects which have been presented in ways that would support 'crimmigration' narratives in US-centered border discourse.

A prime example of such defamiliarization is Lisa Dillman's 2015 translation of Herrera's *Signs Preceding the End of the World*,¹ first published in 2009 as *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo*. It tells the story of a young Mexican woman's journey across the border and into the US. While allegorical allusions to the border literature lexicon of drugs, violence, and illegal immigration may fulfill corresponding narrative expectations superficially, Rioseco points out that Herrera's novel never actually uses words like 'narcotráfico,' 'cartel,' 'Mexico,' and 'United States.' Instead, Rioseco posits that in its construction of a fable that narrates without naming, Herrera's *Signs* transforms the border, illegal immigration, and drug trafficking into secondary elements of a mythical journey that has its roots in pre-Columbian Aztec cosmology. Moreover, the novel's protagonist Makina's

1 Hereafter referred to as *Signs*.

search for her brother and journey to the US reworks generic US-centered narrative constructions which depict the border area and Mexico as sites of moral savagery and figurative hell. Mitchell, for instance, postulates that by instead telling the story of a Mexican subject on her way north, *Signs* effectively presents “a reversed version of the initiation into violence and danger that usually marks the trip south in Anglo border fictions.” This paper takes up Mitchell’s postulation and argues that by suspending generic border tropes and instead superimposing on them mythical imaginations of a figurative descent into the underworld, *Signs* ultimately counters US-centric discourses that view Mexico and its border as sites of moral decay.

The following article attempts to deconstruct the mythical space of the underworld that the structure of *Signs* invokes and to outline how an emerging metalanguage subverts US-centric border etymology. As a point of departure, this article expands on Rioseco’s detailed sketch of the ways in which the novel superimposes references to pre-Columbian Aztec mythology onto the spectacle of border crossing. Metalanguage here refers to Barthes’s conception of the “second language, *in which* one speaks about the first” (114). This paper then sets out to investigate how *Signs* characterizes the spectacle of border crossing not in US-centric political terms but instead by depicting it as a figurative descent into the underworld.

Adopting a structuralist perspective on the novel’s narrative construction, the following analysis explores how Makina’s journey across the border employs a narrative structure that serves as a breeding ground for what Foucault once termed “the insurrection of subjugated knowledges” or what Linda Alcoff called “a knowledge claim” that “disrupts the dominant discourse’s drive for hegemony” (qtd. in Hewett 53, 52). This paper thus views Herrera’s *Signs* as a site of struggle—a type of battleground on which migrant identities are renegotiated in terms other than those of dominant US ‘crimmigration’ discourses. Ultimately, *Signs* subverts US-centric discourses on border crossing by exposing them as artificial myths. The novel fosters an alternative knowledge in which the liminal state of border-crossing bodies becomes detached from the negative stigma of hegemonic US-centric discourse by defamiliarizing readers with Western border epistemologies and instead narrating the spectacle of border crossing through a narrative structure of descent. Following a brief synopsis of the novel’s plot, the article’s main analysis sets out to detail how the novel’s narrative structure of descent reimagines the experiences of unauthorized border crossing as a mythical and transformative journey of self-discovery.

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THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As touched upon earlier, US-centric discourse regarding the US border with Mexico have had lasting effects on the formation of Mexican identities. The conflation of criminal law enforcement and border security has fostered the emergence of what Susan Bibler Coutin terms 'crimmigration'—a "convergence between immigration and criminal justice policies [that] extends the logic of mass incarceration policies to immigrant populations" (qtd. in Gurman 385). Such developments, to a substantial degree, were nurtured by ambiguous political initiatives such as the Bush administration's 2005 policy to make unauthorized border crossing a felony, which in turn further obscured the distinction between criminals and those persecuted by the US deportation system (387). Conceived in this semantic union of criminality and immigration, the US-Mexican border area subsequently proliferated into an increasingly deterritorialized ideology, which Gurman characterizes as "a potentially limitless zone of racial profiling, legitimated by a combination of biological and behavioral definitions of race and nation as well as race- and class-inflected behavioral theories of crime" (385). The border, then, seems no longer a physical boundary one crosses, but rather constitutes a rigid identity marker that is fused with normative expectations of behavior and deviance.

In tandem with intensified efforts to extend the policing of immigration into the rest of the US inner territory, agencies, such as the notoriously rigorous Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), trap immigrating bodies in a state of 'in-betweenness.' For those arriving in the US, the once static physical border now ubiquitously defines their identity. They are trapped in a state that perpetually marks them as somehow different and that bars them from ever fully 'belonging' to US society. Moreover, their criminal status marks them deviant in their home countries as well as in the US, which forcefully disrupts their sense of self and belonging.

Viewing border crossers' figurative inability to 'amalgamate' into US society stands in stark contrast to the so-called 'myth of the melting pot' whose manifestation

more than any other foundational myth evokes a vision of national unity and cohesion through participation in a harmonious, quasi-organic community that offers prospective members a second chance and a new beginning and molds them into a new 'race,' a new people. (Paul 258)

An illustration of this myth put to action can be seen in former President Barack Obama's jubilant pledge that "[t]hat's the promise of this country, that anyone can write the next chapter in our story. It doesn't matter where you come from . . . in embracing America, you can become American" (qtd. in Gurman 371). Obama's

statement tellingly resembles what Heike Paul recognizes as the melting pot's most dominant version, a myth which

envisions the US in a state of perpetual change and transformation that is partly assimilation, partly regeneration, and partly emergence, and emphasizes the continuous integration of difference experienced by both immigrant and longer-established sections of the population. (258-59)

The melting pot myth thereby imagines the US as a dynamic construct—a space that is always 'becoming' and never arriving.

It furthermore seems that discourses on immigration are particularly prone to mythical 'narrativization' because evocations to certain myths appear to mobilize distinct political responses. While, for instance, Trump's conservative 'America First' ideology and myth of the deviant immigrant heralded a sweeping political and cultural separation from other nations and a shifting emphasis onto US domestic interests and international austerity, Obama's evocation of the melting pot myth supported a political narrative that purportedly envisioned change through social reforms in domestic policy and transnational cooperation. Embedded in both administrations' domestic and foreign policy narratives, questions of inclusion, exclusion, and US identity at large were discursively negotiated through the mobilization of powerful myths.

Thus, myths can fulfill the strategic role of mediating national identities. David Adams Leeming, in supporting such a perspective on the national importance of myths, furthermore maintains that "a myth is first of all a narrative, a story that is of deep importance to a particular group of people—a family, a clan, a tribe, a religion, a nation" (1). Put another way, myths provide a pattern through which members of a given community conceive of their collective identity and make sense of experiences through "metaphors or allegories that help humans feel related to the universe, or that unite individuals as a group" (1). Myths, hence, are powerful vehicles in the formation of identities and stereotypes. Kwame Anthony Appiah holds that identities are negotiated through labels and stereotypes designed to distinguish between "those who share our identities and those who don't, the insiders and the outsiders" (31). Conclusively, myths play a decisive role in mediating who can be viewed as belonging to a collective in-group.

To put this into perspective, Trump's insistence on the mythical status of illegal immigrants as deviant felons reinforces negative stereotypes of Mexican and Latinx identities at large and, thereby, gives normative significance to White Anglo-American identity. Trump's pernicious rhetoric conflates US-centric perceptions of Mexican identity with notions of deviance and fosters a space in which Mexican bodies are invariably merged with the undesirable Other. In doing so, Trump effectively collapses the boundaries between the ambiguous realities of life at/with

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the border and the myth of the border-crossing delinquent. Furthermore, making Mexican identity signify deviance fosters an alternative mode of signification through which marginalization becomes the default mode of speaking about migrants' identities. Such a view ultimately corresponds with Barthes's concept of 'metalanguage.' Barthes holds that "[t]he mythical signification [...] is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated" (124) and thereby defined by its intention. Trump's and Obama's employments of myths in discourses on immigration present two distinct metalanguage paradigms that purport antithetical representations of US and Mexican identities and have little in common apart from their US-centric perspectives.

Departing from such unilateral US-centric views on Mexican identities, Herrera's *Signs* suspends hegemonic border discourses by narrating the spectacle of border crossing through the eyes of Mexican subjects. This allows the novel to confront oppressive "narratives" that "attempt to essentialize ethnicity" and "homogenized 'right way[s]' of group belonging," which are often "reflect[ed] [in] hegemonic discourses of identity politics" (Hoewer 11). A structuralist inquiry into how *Signs* mobilizes alternative mythologies that effectively defamiliarize readers with preconceived notions of the border region places the novel into an analytical environment that allows for recognizing hegemonic discourses on the US-Mexican border for what they are: artificial myths shaped by "careful ideological stage-managing" (Buchanan 342). Put more concisely, recognizing the mythical nature of Herrera's characterization of the border exposes the ways in which popular border fictions mobilize powerful mythologies that support dominant US ideologies about immigration. Viewing *Signs* as a critique of the biases that foster harmful representations of immigrants' identities presents a means of subverting Western epistemologies and promotes what Robert J. C. Young refers to as "insurgent knowledges that come from the subaltern, the dispossessed, and seek to change the terms and values under which we all live" (20). In doing so, Herrera's novel gives new meaning to the US-Mexican border as a mythical place of transformation.

Expanding on this, this paper pursues a similar analytical trajectory to Cordelia Barrera. In her research, Barrera contextualizes *Signs* within cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa's work on alternative hidden knowledges within the self and their radical potential to dethrone privileged Western epistemologies' position as dominant reality and status quo (478). However, while Barrera outlines the many ways in which *Signs* calls upon indigenous Mexican symbolism and mythology to defamiliarize and resist US hegemonic border discourses, the following analysis takes a broader view on the novel's narrative structure of descent. Whereas Barrera locates the novel's subversive potential in its specifically native Mexican mythical origin, this paper will instead delineate the ways in which *Signs* subverts hegemonic border discourses by employing a narrative structure that also adheres to Western

conceptualizations of mythical descent into the underworld. Such an approach ultimately shows that Herrera's novel, in fact, employs a two-pronged approach to subversion. On the one hand, it draws on non-Western epistemologies, while on the other hand, it utilizes the collective memory and historic imagination of both Western and non-Western narratives of descent to renegotiate the meaning of border crossing. At last, this approach is meant to cater to Barthes's view that analyzing myth "is the only effective way for an intellectual to take political action" (qtd. in Culler 29). Emphasizing the constructedness of border discourses is then meant to destabilize the harmful mechanisms through which border-crossing bodies suffer stigmatization and exclusion.

REIMAGING BORDER CROSSING AS 'KATABASIS'

The following section delineates how *Signs*'s narrative structure of descent—or 'katabatic structure'—gives new meaning to the experiences of unauthorized immigrants who cross the border into the US. As stated earlier, this perspective seeks to analyze how Herrera's novel confronts hegemonic discourses which presently hold captive the identities of subjects of illicit border crossing.

In its most literal reading, *Signs* tells the story of Makina, a young woman who runs the local switchboard of a tiny, nameless village in what is meant to be present-day Mexico. After Makina is tasked by her mother Cora to deliver a message to her missing brother, who never returned from a trip to a place in the North (which presumably indicates the US), she consults three underworld bosses to help her cross the border. The three bosses, Mr. Double-U, Mr. Aitch, and Mr. Q., each promise assistance in transporting her across the border under the condition that she deliver a suspicious package to Mr. P., a fourth boss who would be expecting her and the package in the US. Traveling north, Makina meets Chucho, the contact person charged with helping her cross the river that separates the US and Mexico. Upon crossing the allegorical Rio Grande, Chucho is forced to stay behind and distract approaching border enforcement officers. Again left to her own devices, Makina makes her way through mountainous terrain, small towns, and cities, until she eventually finds her brother. Having originally made his way up north in the false hope of inheriting land, her brother had since enlisted into the US Army as part of a scheme to obtain American citizenship. Unable to convince her brother to return home with her, Makina runs into Chucho again, who now arranges for her to get American identification papers that would allow her to remain in the US as well.

Mitchell tellingly describes Lisa Dillman's translation of Herrera's prose to be packing "a fractal complexity into its furiously concentrated sentences." While Dillman, in the "Translator's Note," discusses the difficulties of retaining Herrera's "elegantly spare," non-standard mixture of both high and low registers, she

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additionally remarks on further preparing for the job by both reading about Aztec mythology as well as *Alice in Wonderland* and Dante's 'circles of hell' in his fourteenth-century poem *Divine Comedy* (110). As Barrera rightly points out, Dillman thus seems to emphasize the novel's multicultural polysemic nature, as its figurative descent into the underworld presents "a mixture of registers from the Western canon and Aztec mythology" (480). Such complexity not only proves Herrera's mastery as a storyteller but furthermore highlights the ways in which *Signs* interweaves both Western and non-Western underworld fictions in order to construct a mythical space that gives new meaning to the spectacle of border crossing.

Much in line with Hemingway's spare yet profound prose, most of Herrera's allusions to a figurative descent into the underworld lie submerged below the lines of the actual written word. Such an approach to writing, which is frequently likened to an iceberg because only a fraction of it is visible at first sight, operates on the premise "of revealing through concealing" (Giger qtd. in Kwam 779). The iceberg theory then suggests that the deeper meaning of some writing emerges only through indirect statements made by the author and, therefore, needs to be deduced rather than looked for on the surface (Kwam 779). The first indication of a larger narrative underlying the plot of *Signs* becomes apparent in its chapter structure. Rioseco points out how each of the novel's nine chapters corresponds to one of the nine stages of descent into the underworld of Mictlān in Aztec mythology. However, while Rioseco meticulously outlines how each chapter addresses one of the nine obstacles, which dead souls need to overcome in order to arrive in Mictlān, this present study is more interested in analyzing how such substructures alter the meaning of the events that are being narrated—in other words, how those events acquire what semioticians like Barthes would term their 'second-order meaning.'

Scholars of ancient mythology compiled so-called 'descent stories' into a canon of 'katabatic' narratives. Katabasis, derived from the Greek term for 'going down,' refers to the metaphoric journey of a living person into the underworld and the subsequent return of that person "more or less unscathed" (Falconer 2). Moreover, such katabatic narratives conform to largely generic plot conventions that focus on the hero's "transformative passage, the destruction and rebirth of the self through an encounter with the absolute Other" (1). Katabasis, hence, holds as its core tenet the hero's transformation and subsequently fortified sense of selfhood. Recontextualizing such notions of figuratively 'coming into one's own' within US-centric discourses disrupts dominant narratives that accentuate the purported deviance of anyone who illegally crosses the border.

Most katabatic narratives conform to what Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin labeled 'chronotopes'—the "distinctive representations of time and space and the human image within that timescape" (Falconer 42). The chronotopes of

katabatic narratives can be broadly illustrated through several generic images and motifs. Deconstructing how *Signs* employs these katabatic chronotope features will delineate how the novel mythically reimagines unauthorized immigrants' experiences and thereby breaks the stigma that is so often attached to them in US-centric discourses. Katabatic narratives usually require "a person lost" and "a guide from the otherworld sent to recover the person lost" (43nn1-2). In *Signs*, Makina is sent to recover her brother, who appears to have gone missing in the US. The fact that such a narrative setup presents the US as the figurative hell or underworld into which Makina needs to descend already introduces a rather subversive perspective that very much stands in opposition to the US-centric myth of the 'City upon a Hill' that represents the nation and its imagined community as a utopian space of second chances. Katabatic narratives furthermore typically expose heroes to "a series of initiatory rites," which are often accompanied by "the discovery of a talisman" (43nn3-4). In *Signs*, Makina's initiation consists of successively meeting Mr. Double-U, Mr. Aitch, and Mr. Q, who promise to help her cross the border into the US. The figurative talisman that ensures her safe journey consists of the suspicious package, which she is expected to deliver to the other side. While regular consumers of 'narco fiction' and its representation of the US-Mexican border area will likely identify this package as containing an illegal substance of some sort, reading *Signs* through the lens of katabasis gives new meaning to it by presenting it as a mythical means to facilitate the hero's journey.

Such a metaphor ultimately challenges the assumption that illicit border crossers are criminals by default and characterizes the frequently made connection of illegal immigration and crime as an undesired but inevitable vehicle for transporting individuals across the border. Makina's successful journey to the US, as well as her previous life in the village, very much depend on staying on good terms with the narco syndicates that effectively govern the social spaces she inhabits. Accordingly, the creed by which she operates demands that "[y]ou don't lift other people's petticoats. You don't stop to wonder about other people's business. You don't decide which messages to deliver and which to let rot" (18). In the novel, Makina is thus not characterized as a criminal herself but is forced to depend on the criminal infrastructures that permeate both physical and social spaces around her.

After that, katabatic narratives envision a "threshold crossing" into hell followed by "a river crossing," with "flocks of damned souls crowding the shore" (Falconer 43nn5-7). The figurative threshold Makina must cross on her journey to the US consists of her traveling through Mexico City, which in the novel is referred to as "the Big Chilango" (25). Choosing to obscure the name of Mexico's capital by referring to 'chilango,' the colloquial name of its native inhabitants (Real Academia Española), further contributes to the departure from traditional US-centric narratives and, additionally, situates Makina's journey in the mythic

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reinterpretation and subsequent reclaiming of Mexican identities. Dillman's decision not to change this as well as other Spanish colloquialisms in her translation further underscores how *Signs* narrates the tale of a border crossing through an exclusively Mexican perspective.

Makina moves cautiously through the mythical Big Chilango because she does not want "to leave her mark" on the place (25). Ultimately, the Big Chilango is imagined as a mythical place of which

she told herself repeatedly that she couldn't get lost, and by lost she meant not a detour or a sidetrack but lost for real, lost forever in the hills of hills cementing the horizon; or lost in the awe of all the living flesh that had built and paid for palaces. (25)

Moving through the Big Chilango then epitomizes a threshold between Makina's former life and an entirely new self that would no longer be interested in the quest of finding her brother. It further presents a threshold between the known and unknown—places such as Makina's village and those she has not yet mapped and is uncertain about. Moving through the unknown therefore feels dreamlike and unreal, as

Makina could never be sure of what she'd dreamed, in the same way that she couldn't be sure a place was where the map said it was until she'd gotten there, but she had the feeling she'd dreamed of lost cities: literally, lost cities inside other lost cities, all ambulating over an impenetrable surface. (32-33)

The unknown, for Makina, is a lost, empty, and homogeneous space, bare of meaning to her. In view of the novel's mythical reinterpretation of immigration narratives, this threshold between the known and unknown constitutes a space that strips those who move through it of their sense of belonging to a particular place. By extension, individuals who cross through this space assume the identity of the 'border crosser' not at the physical frontier but as soon as they decide to leave behind the places they know.

Moreover, *Signs* envisions the archetypal katabatic river crossing through the junction of the quite literal riverbed between Mexico and its northern neighbor. Standing in for the Rio Grande, which serves as a natural frontier between several larger towns on both sides of the border, the omission of the river's name, once again, obscures references to what Trump, in a 2019 address, described as the site of "a growing humanitarian and security crisis" (qtd. in Martinez). The novel's katabatic narrative structure thereby evokes a new mythical meaning for the place of the physical border and thus effectively reclaims agency in its representation and ultimate signification. Similarly, the people who arrive in those southern border towns are not presented as criminals but instead as a crowd of 'lost souls,' waiting to

move on to a different life, stripped of who they were before and now reduced to waiting for an opportune moment for someone to come and help them cross the border with the US. *Signs* highlights these people's transitional states by describing the crowded hotel in which they stay in hope of imminent transfer to the US. Makina's lodging is described as "a very sizable room with fifteen or twenty bunks on which were piled people of many tongues: girls, families, old folks, and, more than anything else, lone men, some of them still boys" (34). *Signs* imagines those who come and lie in wait at the border as remnants of who they were before and amalgamated into a homogeneous flock of 'damned souls'—damned for a life in the US in which they will likely never overcome the stigma of illegal immigration.

After crossing into the inner circles of hell, heroes of katabatic narratives are traditionally confronted with "a bad-tempered ferryman" before traveling through hell until they find the lost person, upon which they inevitably "encounter [...] the demonic Other" (Falconer 43 nn 8, 16). While US-centric border discourse finds these three images in the criminal networks that smuggle people across the border, *Signs* locates them in those Anglo-Americans who either themselves immediately profit from illicit immigration or in those who make it their life's goal to enforce laws that make immigrants' experiences in the US into a figurative 'hell.' Accordingly, it is not Chucho, the cartel's handyman tasked with smuggling Makina into the US, but an American rancher who fits the bill of the bad-tempered ferryman. Much like the mythical ferryman who feels betrayed by the hero's illicit entry into the underworld, the rancher in *Signs* seeks restitution for being slighted in his own business of transporting immigrants across the border. Chucho explains this to Makina by telling her that "not only is our rancher here a patriot but he's got his own lil undercover business, like it's not so much he's bothered bout us not having papers as he is bout us muscling in on his act" (47-48). As the first person she meets on US soil, the encounter with the rancher foreshadows how Makina will from thereon be viewed and treated in the US—that is as the personification of the Other. The 'patriot,' a self-declared gatekeeper of his nation, chooses who enters and who remains among the figurative flock of damned souls on the other side of the river's shore. Such a perspective on US involvement in the proliferation of unauthorized immigration further challenges border discourses that make illicit border crossing out to be a one-dimensional problem with its roots outside of the US. The katabatic narrative structure of *Signs* instead emphasizes the utter ambiguity of the US-Mexican border and the extent to which those seeking to cross the border are often exploited and capitalized upon even by those who claim to not want them in their country. Thus, *Signs* does not simply depict US citizens living on the border as victims of immigration-related violence, but instead makes them out to be complicit, figurative ferrymen, who facilitate the transport of those lost souls who have left behind their lives and are now waiting to proceed into a figurative hell.

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As is customary for katabatic narratives, Makina eventually finds her brother. However, the ensuing “encounter with the demonic Other (usually Dis/Hades, Satan or some other manifestation of abjection, terror or despair)” (Falconer 43n16), whom she would need to defeat to retrieve her brother, is unsuccessful and Makina is unable to convince him to return to Mexico with her. The way that *Signs* envisions this demonic encounter is quite telling in that the ‘demonic Other’ manifests itself not in a kind of physical abomination but, instead, as the very idea of ‘Americanness.’ Makina’s brother, who had assumed the identity of a young American man who enlisted in the Army but would then not commit to actually being dispatched, is now a soldier in the very service of the figurative hell from which Makina was sent to retrieve him. Her brother remains unwilling to return to Mexico because he had “already fought for these people. There must be something they fight so hard for” (93). The ‘demonic Other’ then reveals itself as the ‘myth of Americanness’—the popular mythical belief that there must be something inherently sublime that binds all American people into an imagined community.

Accordingly, viewing the US as an underworld-like space ultimately means that the US is not reigned by some type of demonic ruler but, instead, by the specter of ‘American exceptionalism.’ Moreover, the concept of American exceptionalism has “been used in very unspecific ways to claim American superiority vis-à-vis non-Americans and to legitimate American hegemony outside of the US” while simultaneously “convey[ing] notions of uniqueness and predestination” (Paul 14). The narrative structure of *Signs* then challenges the ideology of such exceptionalism in that it characterizes it as a component of its mythical katabasis and renders it a mythical artifact in the process. Unmasking the ideology of American exceptionalism as a myth thus confronts the hegemonic modes of representation through which the US defines itself in opposition to other nations and peoples.

FRAMING ILLICIT IMMIGRATION AS A RITE OF PASSAGE AND SUBVERSIVE BORDER GNOSIS

Katabatic narratives ultimately require a return to the surface of some kind, but it does not necessarily need to be the hero who returns (Falconer 45). In the novel, it is Chucho who returns to Mexico, while Makina remains in the US with her new American identity. As Falconer lays out, “the narrative dynamic of katabasis consists of three movements: a descent, an inversion or turning upside down at a zero point and a return to the surface of some kind” (45). While descent and return in *Signs*’s katabatic narrative arc have been established through Makina’s journey into the US and Chucho’s return home, the process of inversion remains to be explored. Inversion in katabasis traditionally signals the hinging point from which the hero no longer descends deeper into the underworld and typically features a moment of ‘conversion’ in which the hero’s “old self is enfolded into [a] new” (46).

Katabatic narratives, therefore, emphasize the hero's transformation into a new self, which typically takes place at the deepest point of hell where the hero's encounter with the demonic Other accelerates the former's transition. This encounter then frames the very moment of conversion and presents the climax of the katabatic experience.

The katabatic narrative structure of *Signs* imagines the illicit crossing into the US as a sort of transformative journey to self-hood. This, for instance, becomes apparent when looking at both the novel's very first and last words. The novel begins Makina's journey with her thinking, "I'm dead" (ii), and ends with her coming to terms with not going back to Mexico. More precisely,

she stopped feeling the weight of uncertainty and guilt; she thought back to her people as though recalling the contours of a lovely landscape that was now fading away: the Village, the Little Town, the Big Chilango, all those colors, and she saw that what was happening was not a cataclysm; she understood with all of her body and all of her memory, she truly understood, and when everything in the world fell silent finally said to herself *I'm ready*. (107; emphasis added)

Makina's former self—as well as her memories of the people and places she knew—shifts out of focus and is overlaid by a new identity. The moment that sets off this mythic conversion can be traced back to Makina's encounter with her brother, who, as a member of the US Army, has turned into an allegory of the demonic Other, shaped by the myth of American exceptionalism. Makina, who was originally tasked to deliver a letter to her brother, does not hand over that letter, which is very much unlike her, given that she worked as a messenger back home. While in Mexico she abided by the creed of always discretely delivering and never discriminating between messages, she now even opens and reads the letter she was sent to deliver. Makina's principles then appear to have been inverted, thus signaling a conversion of her character. Her decision not to deliver the letter and to remain in the US ultimately marks the transformation of her identity.

Makina's journey to the US can thus be viewed as a 'rite of passage' into this new identity. Much like katabasis, rites-of-passage rituals possess three distinct dynamic moments, namely the phases of "separation, margin, [...] and aggregation" (Turner 94). The state of separation offers great resemblance to the katabatic moment of descent, as both frame the event of exiting a familiar cultural space. Likewise, the state of aggregation seems rather like the katabatic return to the surface in that both mark the successful transformation of the individual identity. It is therefore the in-between state of margin or 'liminality' that describes the conversion moment in which liminal identities belong to no larger identity category. Such a perspective on liminality further serves as a productive lens for reviewing hegemonic border discourses because it examines the ambiguous state of people's condition who

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“elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (Turner 95). While liminality was originally thought of not as a distinct state but rather as a temporary transitional phase in between two states of belonging, scholars such as Victor Turner argue that the transitional qualities of the “betwixt and between” have today consolidated into defined and institutionalized states themselves (107).

Relating this back to discourses on unauthorized border crossing, it seems that illegal immigrants enter a permanent state of liminality once they land on US soil as they become branded as deviant felons who do not belong to an imagined American community. *Signs* presents the state of terminal liminality through its depiction of the ‘flock of damned souls’ who, bereft of their individual identities, merge into a homogeneous mass of people, damned to forever be viewed as the Other in US society. Makina additionally meets an old man who, also not native to the US, explains to her the basics of baseball. The exchange that follows this conversation is very much emblematic of the permanent liminality that immigrant identities are frequently forced to assume. Upon asking if he liked baseball, the old man retorts: “Tsk, me, I’m just passing through.” However, when Makina then inquires how long he had been there, the man lets her know: “Going on fifty years ... Here we are” (60). The encounter with the old man, hence, epitomizes this permanent state of liminality and shows how illicit immigrants’ identities never figuratively terminate their rites of passage, rendering them forever excluded from the state of aggregation in the imagined cultural unity of the US.

Signs’s framing of immigration narratives as a mythical rite of passage ultimately departs from US-centric discourses that characterize illegal immigrants as the deviant Other and, instead, imagines their experiences through an alternative knowledge paradigm that places immigration narratives into a discourse of ‘plurinationality’ that “calls into question the colonial and exclusionary character of the uninational” (Walsh 62). Moreover, presenting such narratives of transition through a mythical metalanguage rooted in Aztec mythology subverts US-centric immigration discourses by suspending them in favor of an alternative ‘border gnosis.’ In his seminal book *Local Histories/Global Designs*, Walter D. Mignolo designates ‘gnosis’—“etymologically [...] related to *gnosko*, which in ancient Greek means ‘to know’”—as ‘alternative knowledges,’ as the site of insurrection against colonial modes of knowledge production; “knowledge from a subaltern perspective [that is] conceived from the exterior borders of the modern/colonial world system” (11). By superimposing on hegemonic US-centric discourses an alternative mythological level of signification (i.e., border gnosis), *Signs* thus critically reflects on those harmful modes of representation that dominate discourses on border enforcement and foster negative stereotypes about Mexican and Latinx identities.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, an analysis of the narrative structure of ‘descent into the underworld’ in Yuri Herrera’s *Signs Preceding the End of the World* shows how the novel renegotiates the space of the border region and gives new meaning to the experience of unauthorized immigration. Defamiliarizing and reimagining these experiences through the mythical metalanguage of katabasis gives new meaning to the tremendous and often dangerous challenges border crossers are subjected to. It also confronts hegemonic border discourses that hold captive the identities of illicit border crossers through negative representations of deviance.

The narrative structure of *Signs* furthermore challenges the ideology of American exceptionalism by exposing it as an artificial myth in its own right. Unmasking American exceptionalism as a myth by implementing it into an alternative border mythology in which notions of ‘Americanness’ are depicted as the allegorical demonic Other confronts the hegemonic modes of representation through which the US defines itself in opposition to other nations and peoples.

All in all, this paper argues that *Signs*’s framing of immigration as a mythical rite of passage ultimately challenges US-centric border discourses that define illegal immigrants as the deviant Other and reimagines their experiences through an ‘alternative knowledge’ of the border space that suspends negative stereotypes by imbuing it with new meaning. Thus, border-crossing bodies become detached from the negative stigma of hegemonic discourse. Put more concisely, *Signs* subverts US-centric discourses on border crossing by exposing them as artificial myths, defamiliarizing readers with Western border epistemologies and instead narrating the spectacle of border crossing through a narrative structure of descent.

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