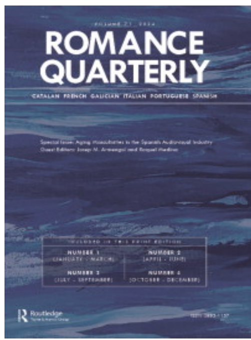

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The Walking Woman: Border Representation Beyond Hybridity in Yuri Herrera's *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo*

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ABSTRACT
In this article, I follow the footsteps of Makina, protagonist of Yuri Herrera's 2009 *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo*. In line with existing criticism on the text, I frame her migratory voyage as a form of pilgrimage. Departing from other readings of the novel, I center the protagonist's embodied experience through her journey, tracing her corporeal sensations in order to understand the border itself as a living geography traversed by vital bodies. Walking emerges as a dominant trope in Herrera's text, as the narration returns repeatedly to the protagonist's determined footsteps. By understanding Makina's journey as a pilgrimage, I reconcile the ways in which she simultaneously occupies a material and a spiritual realm. As an inherent element of pilgrimage, Makina undergoes a painful loss of identity, but also demonstrates her capacity for change by rendering her subjectivity fluid. This constructs the border itself as a liminal zone, a space in flux. As a walking woman, Makina offers a framework of border representation that moves beyond and answers the limitations of existing conceptual models of the border that emphasize multiculturalism and hybridity. Reading the border through the trope of walking, I argue, points to the political potential of migrants to rewrite current border reality.

KEYWORDS
Border representation; pilgrimage; migrant; walking

A migrant's body was found in the Río Grande in August 2023, caught in a deadly string of bright orange buoys. The 1,000-foot chain of floating barriers, linked by serrated saw blades and supporting an underwater mesh net, was erected in the river between Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras in July 2023, in a common crossing area shallow enough for migrants to walk through, but where many are often swept into the water by currents. The installation formed part of Texas Governor Greg Abbott's Operation Lone Star, launched in 2021 and including the deployment of state troopers, National Guard members, shipping containers, and concertina wire to deter migrants from crossing the border. The buoys sparked protests from the Mexican government and migrant advocates and became a site of struggle over state versus federal authority. A spokesman for Abbott and the director of the Texas Department of Public Safety denied responsibility for the body trapped in the barriers, refusing to acknowledge the intentionally violent design of the installation. When questioned about the barriers, state officials deploy an abstract discourse of the threat of migrant invasion that is oddly disconnected from the bodily harm that the deterrent architecture is designed to inflict. The conceptual frameworks utilized to characterize lives and initiatives at the U.S.-Mexico border matter because they allow us to account for the violence against migrants' bodies or, in Abbott's case, to ignore it. The theoretical border framework popularized in the 1990s, which celebrates the border as a site of hybridity and multicultural

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exchange, falls short of enabling us to comprehend the body caught in these buoys, the physical reality of the victim's journey, or the power imbalance between the forces deploying and navigating these structures. The brutality of this architecture requires a framework that can account for its violence and that centers the physical experiences of migrants themselves.

In this article, I propose a border framework that centers migrants' bodies, by following the footsteps of Makina, protagonist of Herrera's 2009 *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo*. In line with existing criticism on the text, I frame her migratory journey as a form of pilgrimage. Expanding on others' readings of the novel, I center the protagonist's embodied experience through her journey, tracing her corporeal sensations in order to understand the border itself as a living geography traversed by vital bodies. Walking emerges as a dominant trope in Herrera's text, as the narration returns repeatedly to the protagonist's determined footsteps. By understanding Makina's walking as a pilgrimage, I reconcile the ways in which she simultaneously occupies a material and a spiritual realm. By focusing on a young, brown woman's experience of moving through space, I highlight the ways in which all subjects in motion are marked by race and gender. As an inherent element of pilgrimage, Makina undergoes a painful loss of identity, through this process demonstrating the fluidity of her subjectivity. This constructs the border itself as a liminal zone, a space in continual flux. As a walking woman, Makina offers a framework of border representation that moves beyond the limitations of existing representational models and emphasizes the political potential of migrants' movement.

Herrera's *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* traces the journey of a female protagonist who walks across the Mexico-U.S. border. Along with *Trabajos del reino* (2004) and *La transmigración de los cuerpos* (2013), the concise novel, translated into English by Lisa Dillman in 2015, forms what the author loosely considers a trilogy (Body).[1] The book exists simultaneously on two planes: Makina's body traverses the material reality of the militarized border infrastructure and at the same time enters a spiritual world. The text narrates the young woman's contemporary border-crossing journey as a symbolic descent into the nine mythic levels of the Aztec underworld, Mictlán, each of which corresponds to one of the nine chapters of the text.

The novel opens with death, or the illusion of death, when the earth opens under Makina's feet: "Estoy muerta, se dijo Makina cuando todas las cosas respingaron … el suelo se abrió bajo sus pies: se tragó al hombre, y con él un auto y un perro, todo el oxígeno a su alrededor y hasta los gritos de los transeúntes" (Herrera 11). From that point forward, the border between the real and the mythical continues to blur.[2] The beginning of Makina's journey toward the U.S., also the start of her descent into the Pre-Colombian underworld, begins with her possible death. Readers do not know with certainty if she has narrowly escaped a sink hole or lies buried under the earth. Carlos Yushimito del Valle notes that the novel's early engagement with death "empuja a la dislocación de un plano de la realidad hacia otro más bien propio del mito o de la fantasía" (70). It is Makina's journey into and through death that allows the text to represent the border region simultaneously on two planes, one material and one mythic.

Makina operates the only telephone in her town, where she acts as a translator between cultural codes and between "lengua," "lengua latina," and "gabacho" (Herrera 19). It is her skill with languages that facilitates her mobility. Her role as a bridge between cultures and languages becomes evident when her mother sends her north to deliver a message to her brother, who crossed the border years earlier in search of a homeland, driven by rumors of territory that his father had left in his name.[3] She visits the crime boss Señor Dobleú to request assistance with the journey north, and agrees to carry an unspecified package across the border for him. In the second chapter, or level of Mictlán, she treads softly—"plantaba el pie suavecito"—through el Gran Chilango, Mexico City (27). On a bus northward, she defends herself against sexual harassment, then endures a tumultuous border crossing by water with the coyote Chucho. Makina walks through the heat of the desert in the third chapter and is grazed by a bullet when fleeing a police officer and vigilante rancher. In the fourth, she crosses a mountain by foot, enters and

walks throughout a dispersed U.S. city, and delivers the package to Señor Pe in a baseball stadium rendezvous. "Sigió caminando" in the fifth chapter, in search of her brother's land (75). Lips split, palms cracked, she follows direction after direction to suburb after suburb, through a territory of cars and languages that she does not recognize, arriving finally to an empty lot of vacant promises: "cuando llegó y divisó lo que buscaba aquello era una pura oquedad" (78). In the sixth, after endlessly traversing the city, she procures an address for her brother from an old woman in a restaurant. In the corresponding mansion, a man tells her that the family her brother worked for had moved to another continent, but directs her toward an army base, where their son remains. At the base in the seventh chapter, she encounters the specter of her lost brother, living under the name of an Anglo teenager. Walking with her, he recounts how a U.S. family paid him to assume the identity of their son who had enlisted in the army. When her brother returns from the war he fought in the young man's place, the family fails to pay the promised money, but leaves him with the new identity. Having fought for the U.S., Makina's brother informs her that a return to Mexico has become impossible, leaving her broken hearted and the purpose of her journey unfulfilled. In the eighth chapter, she is corralled outside the army barracks by a police officer who is rounding up and disciplining migrants. She stuns him into releasing them all with the power of an impromptu poem, in which she claims, on behalf of migrants: "Nosotros somos los culpables… Nosotros los oscuros, los chaparros, los grasientos, los mustios, los obesos, los anémicos. Nosotros, los bárbaros" (109–110). When, in the final chapter, she resumes walking, her guide Chucho reappears, directing her toward a spiral staircase that leads to a strange, scentless underground room, where a tall, thin man gives her a file with a new identity, "con otro nombre y otra ciudad de nacimiento. Su foto, nuevos números, nuevo oficio, nuevo hogar" (118–119).

The entire book is marked by walking. While she travels by bus and subway northward through Mexico and within Mexico City, her walking begins in earnest at the border itself, marking the territory as a zone of walkers. Makina navigates the U.S.-underworld by foot; the narrative returns over and over to her steps, positioning her act of walking as integral to her journey. Alone, with others, processing, searching, or fleeing: her default mode is walking. Her walking form is more definitive and persistent than any verbal expression: "ya no le pudieron decir nada porque ella había echado a andar de nuevo y sólo alcanzaron a divisar su silueta recortada contra el sol" (111). Each chapter features the image of Makina's walking body in motion.

Makina walks with determination through violent obstacles and restrictive systems. The novel showcases the extensive nature of border militarization, through the diffuse but constant presence of hostile officers, vigilantes, and military operations. Despite the harm and loss that she endures, she models the insistent movement of migrants who, despite the fortification of border walls and deployment of sensors, helicopters, and officers, continue to cross the border. Her continued movement demonstrates the penetrability of this infrastructure. Makina first shows this fortitude when, at a checkpoint of sorts, a guard tries to impede her access to Señor Dobleú, and she "no se detuvo," walking forwards toward her goal despite his threatening presence (Herrera 13). When, in the run-in with police and a vigilante, she is hit in the ribs by a bullet, "continuó moviéndose pero había perdido la orientación … echó a correr, con armas y cabrones a ambos lados. Escuchó a sus espaldas que le ordenaban Parese, échase al suelo, pero no se dio media vuelta" (54). Despite injury, dislocation, and direct orders to halt, she continues placing one foot ahead of the other with resolute mobility. Makina's movement constructs the border as a zone of intense physical experiences and encounters with violence.

Beyond Hybridity

Due to its failure to account for violence, power imbalances, and embodied experiences, the border framework of hybridity has run its course. Néstor García Canclini's celebratory 1990

declaration of the U.S.-Mexico border as a hybrid culture, while offering an enduringly attractive interpretive trope, also sparked decades of conflict about the framework most suited to represent border reality (Canclini 293). Beyond Canclini, the primary proponents of hybridity theory that emerged in the triumphal 1990s climate are Homo Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, and Paul Gilroy (Gilroy).[4] In 2018, Heriberto Yépez declared that "[e]n la actualidad se ha hecho evidente el agotamiento de dicho giro hibridista" (975). Yépez reminds us that the framework of postmodern hybridity is structurally inseparable from colonialism, as he links the explosion of academic and artistic interest in the U.S.-Mexico border in the 1990s, and its exultant fascination with hybridity and multiculturalism, with the 1992 quincentennial celebration of Spanish arrival and the 1994 implementation of NAFTA (977). He labels the ensuing depoliticized theoretical framework the "happy hybrid," or "la fusión o mezcla entre culturas, donde las tensiones, fricciones, fallas, contradicciones, desigualdades, fisiones e incompatibilidades se relajaban … la teoría de lo fronterizo como híbrido enfatizaba la fusión y convertía la asimetría violenta en mezcla posmoderna" (976).[5] Hybridity's framing of border reality as a harmonious, creative exchange between equals prompted both its lasting popularity and theoretical tensions.[6]

Ignacio Sánchez Prado points to the inability of the concept of hybridity to narrate contemporary border reality. Space thought of "desde una concepción cuasi-turística de lo híbrido," he argues, leads to a crisis of representation at the border, due to the incapacity of the vocabulary of hybridity to capture the experiences of loss and violence that make up the territory (Sánchez Prado 47–49). He turns to contemporary northern Mexican authors who represent the geopolitical state of the border through constantly disappearing referents, or "un espacio definido por su evanescencia" (46). For him, the border is a space now best represented by dissolution and continual displacement. In an area populated by the physical traces of constantly displaced migrants, Yépez, too, points to the vanishing of concrete referents, a "pulverización" or "vaporización" of the Other, that leaves a spectral aura or ethereal remains (982). He maintains that "el hibridismo está siendo sustituido por otro modelo, una especie de rudología fronteriza: un discurso ya no centrado en la exaltación y catalogación de cruces o mezclas de imaginarios, materialidades e identidades sino en la administración de ruinas o residuos de los otros" (Yépez 975). His proposal of ruin or trace as a border trope that is replacing hybridity exemplifies the shift in tone in the field of border studies, from the 1990s celebration of multiculturalism to post-2008 efforts to articulate the reality of violence in the region. The shift that he indicates, from identity and materiality to ruin and residue, points to another long-standing tension in border representation, which has tended to position critics in the U.S. and Mexico at odds with each other.

Following the allure of the hybridity trope, theorists incorporated into academic discourse of the global North have overwhelmingly conceptualized the border in metaphorical terms.[7] In contrast, numerous Mexican scholars have prioritized the articulation of the border as a physical rather than an abstract space, emphasizing that not all artistic production from the area shares the hybrid, deterritorialized character suggested by theorists of hybridity.[8] Debra Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba have critiqued postmodern border theories that too-neatly turn the border into a metaphor, erasing physical reality, or the physical experiences of border residents, artists, and migrants (Castillo and Córdoba 6). Many northern Mexican authors narrate the border as a physical space rather than a cultural abstraction. For example, Daniel Sada, Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, and Ricardo Elizondo emphasize the material conditions and geography of physical space in northern Mexico, while Rosario Sanmiguel and Rosina Conde narrate the border in terse realistic prose to depict the harsh lived reality of border crossers and dwellers and the physicality of their encounters with the wall and surveillance system. Narratives of migration, both fictional and testimonial, share an intense materiality and lack of metaphor.[9]

While the border representational frameworks of displacement and trace that Yépez and Sánchez Prado identify do offer a corrective to the neocolonial pitfalls of hybridity, what they do not capture is the persistent physicality of life at the border. In reading the border as a collection

of residue and ruins, they correctly identify its landscape of violence, the loss of life or the ephemera that remain after acts of corporeal destruction. However, the border is not only a territory of evanescent ghosts and dissipating referents. It is also a living geography. Any representational framework capable of capturing contemporary border reality must center the body.

I propose a new border trope, a verb rather than a static concept: to walk. By reading the U.S.-Mexico border as a space defined by the bodies that move through it, we can understand the region as vitally connected to others, in terms that move beyond the conceptual. The act of walking accounts for the region's living presence and its displacement.[10] The tracing of migrants' nomadic trajectories encompasses their agency and resilience as well as acts of violence against them. According to Mabel Moraña, the subject of the migrant undermines the state construction and operation of the border: "El sujeto migrante es ajeno a la lógica del Poder … pone en cuestión la utilidad y sentido de frontera, su legitimidad" (464, 449). It is through the movement of this subject's body that we can identify asymmetric power relations, as the "cuerpo [del migrante] es el lugar de encuentro de fuerzas que se activan en todas direcciones" (Moraña 461). The migrant subject's act of walking thus offers a productive trope for reading the border. I turn to theorizations of pilgrimage to conceptualize border reality with a new representational framework that moves beyond hybridity and that reconciles historical tensions in border studies between the metaphorical and the material.

Pilgrimage: From Physicality to Spirituality

Critical readings of Yuri Herrera's 2009 *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* repeatedly frame the protagonist's migratory journey as a pilgrimage. A reviewer introduces, "a pilgrim named Makina," *while a critic describes the character's* "errática peregrinación" *and another reader details* "la naturaleza peregrina de su empresa" (Body, Navarro Pastor 97, Uribe 27). Mario Jimenez-Chacon argues that "la trayectoria de Makina debe leerse como una forma de migración y, simultáneamente, como un trayecto sagrado: un peregrinaje" (36). Cordelia Barrera describes Makina's journey as a "pilgrimage laden with the imagery of those who search via walking" (477). Pilgrimage is intensely physical, yet what is not directly addressed in these readings of the novel is the nomadic protagonist's bodily experience. Critics tend to focus on the conceptual elements of pilgrimage rather than on the centrality of the character's body to her border crossing. Christopher Uribe limits his discussion of violence in the text to discursive or ideological harm, without addressing the vulnerability of the migrant's body (27). Martin Lombardo and Yushimito del Valle both read the text within a biopolitical framework, acknowledging "el frágil cuerpo migrante," yet their focus is not the lived, embodied experience of the migrant in motion (Yushimito del Valle 68).[11] By attending to the bodily experience of Herrera's protagonist, we can understand the critical potential of reading the border through the trope of walking.

Pilgrimage begins through material experience and moves beyond it. By moving a subject toward a horizon, walking makes present worlds beyond those immediately visible. Theorists of pilgrimage explore how the act of walking grounds the body spatially and moves it past its physical circumstances. Rebecca Solnit explains that "The pilgrimage is one of the basic modes of walking, walking in search of something intangible" (Solnit 45). *Peregrinus*, the root of pilgrim, means foreigner, exile, or stranger. A pilgrim, then, like a migrant, is a person who searches through walking, "one who is not at home where he is walking" (Gros 107). Simon Coleman and John Elsner examine prolonged physical movement as what distinguishes pilgrimage from other rituals and argue that all global religions incorporate a version of pilgrimage (Coleman and Elsner).[12] Through its continuous searching toward an experience beyond the immediate, walking becomes a transformative act.

By grounding the body in intense sensation, walking can move subjects beyond material experience onto a distinct plane of experience. Walking links physical and transcendent

experience; its spatial movement propels toward a distinct experience: "Walking returns the body to its original limits again, to something supple, sensitive, and vulnerable, but walking itself extends into the world" (Solnit 29). Walkers move forward physically in space and time, and also, through this movement, can access a realm that transcends physical experience. In traditions of pilgrimage, the physical suffering of walking functions as a means of moving beyond the physical, to access divine presence: "asceticism and physical exertion are almost universally understood as means of spiritual development" (Solnit 46). Pilgrimage depends on the notion that the divine can be accessed through the material, "that there is a geography of spiritual power" (Solnit 50). Those who search for spiritual experience through pilgrimage use the material in order to surpass it.

Walking can make the sacred present. "'The sacred' is always socially constructed," and is a variable, shifting referent (Badone and Roseman 26). I use the term broadly to refer to experiences that occur beyond the tangible physical realm. Pilgrimage and continuous, immersive walking can operate as facets of the same phenomenon: journeys that result in a transcendent experience or contact with a world that is not materially present. While some critics argue for a more rigid, solely sacred definition of pilgrimage, my analysis aligns with that of Ellen Badone, who argues for a broad interpretive pilgrimage framework that includes any journey that features a transcendent experience.[13] The continuous movement of the body across the earth facilitates a particular intensity of presence, in which the perception of time and space becomes altered, and the walker becomes able to dwell in that which is not purely physical. By acting out a search through the body, pilgrims undergo transformation, as they relate to geography as "spiritualized" (Solnit 50). Through the repeated ritual of footsteps' contact with the earth, walkers "access eternity," or step outside of an everyday relationship to their geography and temporality to enter a distinct spatial-temporal experience (Gros 82).[14] Reading the border through the lens of pilgrimage allows us to prioritize migrants' physical experience and at the same time account for discourses beyond the physical. Pilgrimage is a productive trope for approaching Herrera's novel because the text, like pilgrimage itself, encompasses both a physical and a spiritual realm.

From the moment the earth opens under Makina's feet with the opening words of the novel, "[e]stoy muerta," her journey bridges the contemporary Mexico-U.S. borderlands and the underworld of Mictlán (Herrera 11). Frédéric Gros notes that the departure of medieval pilgrims was treated "like a small death," as they left behind their previous lives and selves (111). Makina's story merges with an alternative plane of existence through her opening encounter with death, just as early pilgrims opened to transcendent experience by leaving all they knew. In her analysis of the novel, Ivonne Sánchez Becerril identifies the parallels between the novel's mythic and contemporary narratives (Sánchez Becerril). She distinguishes the spiritual figures from Mictlán in the *Codex Vaticanus* and in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España* that correspond to the characters in Herrera's text, arguing that spiritual doubles match each character and space of the text.[15] She identifies the three powerful men that Makina goes to for assistance with her journey as Nahuatl deities that appear in accounts of the Aztec underworld. Makina goes in search "del Señor Dobleú—Tláloc—del Señor Hache—Huitzilopochtli—y de del Señor Q—Quetzalcóatl," sacred figures reimagined as crime lords (Becerril 110-11). Each of the nine chapters in the novel corresponds to a level of the Aztec underworld. As Makina descends further into her journey, deeper into her physical exhaustion and bodily pain, she also moves more deeply into a mythic experience. Becerril explores the links between each chapter and its Pre-Colombian corollary. For example, she classifies the first chapter, "La Tierra" which depicts Makina's departure northward, as Mictlán's first level, Tlalticpac; chapter seven, "El lugar donde son comidos los corazones de la gente," occupies a military base in the contemporary narrative, Teyollocualoyan in the mythic one. The spiritual aspects of Makina's journey realm are thus intertwined inextricably with the mundane.

In order to access this spiritual world, pilgrimage first foregrounds the physical. Gros describes walking as a "repeated enlacement with the earth" that makes him increasingly aware of the weight and capacities of his body (185). "Walking," he explains, "is to experience gravity at every step, the inexorable attraction of the earth's mass" (186). Walking facilitates a heightened experience of sensory awareness, a presence that takes time to establish. In traditions of pilgrimage, the physicality of walking is key. The hardship and fatigue of the repeated, sustained effort of walking enact a process of purification. In writings on pilgrimage, feet are a focal point of suffering. The material experience of pilgrimage gives it meaning. Solnit conceptualizes the body as an active subject in motion, the site of sensation and physical experience rather than abstract theorization. "When corporeality gets mobile," she notes, "it walks" (27). The primacy of this corporeality is clear in Makina's journey into Mictlán.

As she walks, Makina details her sensations, and the hardships of her journey become clear through physical details: "Siguió caminando según le habían indicado unos paisanos gabachos con los que habló, y conforme avanzaba el cielo se ponía más rojo y el aire comenzaba a helarse. Tenía los labios partidos y las palmas de las manos se resquebrajaban" (Herrera 75). Herrera recreates migrants' physical vulnerability, through Makina's experiences of a dangerous river crossing, dehydration and exhaustion trekking through the desert, an armed attack from a vigilante, and an aggressive confrontation with a police officer. Makina endures extreme physical danger and harm, making visible the harsh material reality that migrants who travel on foot often bear in crossing the border. Herrera describes Makina's physical experience of crossing the frigid river with Chucho in vivid terms: "De súbito el mundo se volvió gélido y verdoso y se pobló de invisibles monstruos de agua que la arrancaban de la balsa de caucho; intentó bracear, pateó lo que fuera que la secuestraba pero no conseguía ubicar de qué lado estaba la superficie" (42–43). She crosses successfully only to later, in an encounter with a border vigilante, sustain a bullet wound. By subjecting his protagonist to this physical suffering, Herrera highlights the material conditions that exist in real life at the U.S.-Mexico border, and also evokes the element of corporeal hardship that is essential to pilgrimage.

Critics agree that Makina's journey uniquely merges the physical and the spiritual. Jimenez-Chacon argues that "En *Señales* lo material y lo espiritual no se estorban, sino que se entretejen, cohabitan, desembocando en la misma sustancia narrativa," while Nathan Richardson maintains that the text's "ultimate border is much more than the physical *frontera*. Its words and its protagonist … do indeed point we readers beyond" (Jimenez-Chacon 37, Richardson 21). It is Makina's meditative footsteps, her consistent onward trudging, that enables readers to share in her bodily experience and to reach beyond it. Reading Makina's journey as a pilgrimage establishes continuity between the intensity of her physical sensations and the mythic nature of her descent into the abstract underworld. Her act of walking merges the physical and the conceptual realms. This, in turn, allows us to read the border itself as neither solely metaphorical nor material, but, like Makina's experience, simultaneously both.

When Makina thinks that she has at last found the object of her search—her brother—she has an experience of surpassing the physical. Address in hand, "Makina voló; literalmente sentía que sus pies no tocaban el piso, que flotaría tijereteando las piernas hasta encontrar a su hermano y que lo devolvería a casa sin volver a poner pie en tierra extraña" (Herrera 85). When she finally locates her brother on a military base, she does not recognize "al espectro que tenía enfrente" (96). Makina understands that the brother she knew no longer exists, after having found no traction in his family land claim and gone to war in the Anglo teenager's stead. "La aparición" that she has found will never return to Mexico (96).[16] Realizing the failure of her own journey, Makina finds comfort in the act of walking. The physicality of the movement, the grounding of her body's rhythm in interaction with the earth, seems to affirm her existence, within her disorienting, dislocating migratory experience and loss of her brother.

> No podía detenerse, debía seguir caminando aunque no supiera cómo iba a regresar. Era el ritmo, era su cuerpo sin lastre, era el leve sonido de su resuello lo que la impulsaba. Apuró el paso … y al andar sus pies—pat, pat, pat—dejaban huella sobre la tierra. La tarde se nubló hasta que fue imposible ver más allá del paso siguiente, sin embargo Makina no se detuvo: caminó rápidamente—pat, pat, pat—. (Herrera 115)

Through this repeated material contact with the ground—pat, pat, pat—Makina enters an experience of elevated corporeal sensation. It is this final, intensely physical walk that leads Makina to the final level of Mictlán, where the mythic and the mundane increasingly blend, becoming indistinguishable. The dream-like territory that she enters in the final chapter heightens both her physical sensations and her awareness of moving beyond corporeal reality. Herrera describes the space as simultaneously tangible and abstract: "concreto y distante, algo irreal pero vivido" (118). Makina accesses this plane through total immersion in the ongoing exertion of walking. The concentrated materiality of her movement transfers her onto a different plane and into a transcendent space. Makina departs from physical reality when she descends into an odorless underground room that echoes with the sound of running water, the deepest level of Mictlán. The primacy of her physical experience subsides, as she realizes that "hacía mucho no se había bañado, y sin embargo no estaba sucia ni olía mal—no olía a nada" (118). Her body becomes secondary to the encounter in the cavern. It is a space filled with people smoking but no smoke, where a man gives her a file with an entirely new identity.

Pilgrimage: The Transformation of Identity

The stakes of walking are not equal for all pilgrims, but rather are shaped by internal and externally visible signs of identity. Female walkers, especially those excluded from the protections of citizenship, face distinctly gendered obstacles to their mobility. As a result, women who walk must display more determination than most male walkers are ever required to exhibit. Recent decades have seen a feminization of migration, as women now account for 48 percent of Mexican immigrants (Oliveira).[17] Women are walking across the border in large numbers and face particular dangers and challenges on their journeys.[18]

Makina's body remains explicitly marked—as a young, brown migrant woman—as she walks through border space. Makina is aware that she lives and moves "en un mundo de hombres" (Herrera 28). She notes the urgency of teaching her younger sister how to survive in an environment where men regard her as sexually available. When men harass Makina in the line for the bus, she stays alert: "Makina no estaba acostumbrada a esas cosas. No que no las hubiera padecido, es que no se había permitido acostumbrarse" (32). When a man touches her thigh on the bus, she forces his finger backwards, sending him wounded to the back of the vehicle. Makina moves with force through the restrictions imposed on her as a walking woman. Ana Pellicer Vázquez directly considers the gendered nature of Makina's experience. She notes that through her journey, the character subverts stereotypes of victimhood and establishes herself as "un personaje libre, activo, con agencia y con propuestas de cambio. Es, además, una mujer consciente (Pellicer Vázquez 160). By gendering his walker female, Herrera reenvisions walking as an expression of women's social and cultural mobility.

Most writing on walking approaches the topic through a male lens and does not account for the difficulties of walking while female. In his theorization of the wandering figure of the urban flaneur, for example, Walter Benjamin assumes a default masculine subject walking in public space. He uses a grammatically masculine term to describe the figure, erasing female walkers even on the level of linguistic feasibility.[19] In his 2014 T*he Philosophy of Walking*, Frederic Gros automatically genders his walker male in his recounting of the work of the great walking intellectuals, from Socrates to Thoreau, all male.[20] The experience of walking through Herrera's novel alongside Makina pushes readers to imagine other bodies, to inhabit subjectivities that necessitate a reevaluation of this tradition.

In addition to gender, a walker's ethnicity and citizenship status impact the context and conditions of what it means for them to move. Centering migrants' physical experiences necessitates taking into account the ways in which the external signifiers of their bodies are not neutral, but rather shape their experience of walking. Reading the border through the lens of walking pushes us to consider the ways in which all walkers are gendered, racialized, and classed subjects. Models of hybridity tend to obscure these differences through the celebration of cultural blending, while walking as a border trope invites readers to consider the ways in which every body is marked by intersecting identities that shape their experience of moving through space.

Migrants, like pilgrims, are transformed through their walking. Loss is an inherent part of their journeys. In leaving behind all they know, they experience the loss of aspects of their past selves, while taking on complex new identities that cannot be reduced to a narrative of hybridity. Hybridity as a border model is primarily focused on the production of new cultural expressions. In celebrating the creative outcomes of cultural blending, it does not account for the pain of loss or provide space for mourning. Thomas Nail maintains that "[t]he gains of migration are always a risk, while the process itself is always some kind of loss" (Nail 2). He describes the figure of the migrant not as a fixed identity but as a "mobile social position" that entails an experience of expulsion from the established social order (235). "The migrant," he argues, "does not simply change place but also changes status" (14). In her exploration of pilgrimage as a space of liminality, Solnit similarly argues that pilgrims share the experience of being "stripped of status and authority, removed from a social structure" (51). This altered social status requires a recognition of loss and redefinition of self.

Identity loss preoccupies Makina throughout her journey. "No podía perderse," she tells herself (27). She wants to return home as quickly as possible, so that she does not end up like a friend who "se mantuvo lejos demasiado tiempo, tal vez un día de más o una hora de más, en todo casa bastante tiempo de más como para que le pasara que cuando volvió todo seguía igual pero ya todo era otra cosa" (21). Untethered from her stable social status as community translator, she is ultimately unable to remain unchanged by her journey. Sánchez Becerril aptly points out that Herrera's novel "postula la imposibilidad del regreso al lugar de origen, en el que el origen denota tiempo e identidad, no espacio" (112). Both Makina and her brother do in fact lose themselves through their border crossings, taking on entirely new identities.

On the final level of Mictlán, as she examines the folder that contains her new identitarian trappings, Makina describes her transformation in violent terms, as a painful loss: "Ahí estaba ella, con otro nombre y otra ciudad de nacimiento. Su foto, nuevos números, nuevo oficio, nuevo hogar. Me han desollado, musitó" (Herrera 118–119). She has been skinned. She describes the alteration of her identity as irreversible, visceral, and corporeal. The concept of hybridity, with its focus on cultural blending, falls short of accounting for the physicality, the pain, and the loss she endures through her journey. The framework of pilgrimage, in contrast, emphasizes physical suffering and the transformation of identity.

Walking makes identity more malleable. Through its inherent loss and renegotiation of self, the journey of the pilgrim or the migrant deconstructs fixed identities. Pilgrimage scholars Victor and Edith Turner "talk about pilgrimage as a liminal state—a state of being between one's past and future identities and thus outside the established order, in a state of possibility" (Turner and Turner; Solnit 51). Pilgrims dwell in between departure and arrival, in a state of ongoing change. On their way to elsewhere, walkers are by nature fluid. Gros writes about the fluidity of identity that walking facilitates: "The freedom in walking lies in not being anyone" (7). "By walking," he argues, "you escape from the very idea of identity, the temptation to be someone, to have a name and a history" (6). When Makina sheds her name and history, on the final plane of her pilgrimage, her body remains marked in racialized and gendered ways, but her identitarian flexibility suggests a border mobility that eludes rigid categories of identity.

The liminality of pilgrimage situates the walker in limbo between life and death. If a pilgrimage begins "like a small death," in moving beyond the immediately present world, walking occasions a "utopia of rebirth" (Gros 111, 122). As a walking figure, Makina blurs the line between life and death. Richardson describes her as "dead in life, alive in death," and maintains that "we may read Makina's descent to be as much a death as a rebirth" (18, 20). Throughout the novel, signs of life and death blend together. When trekking through the desert, she thinks it must be a good omen to see a pregnant woman resting under a tree, "[p]ero conforme se acercaban discernió los rasgos de la gente, que no era mujer; ni era la suya panza de embarazo; era un pobre infeliz hinchado de putrefacción al que los zopilotes ya le habían comido los ojos y la lengua" (Herrera 48). As a border trope, walking, a mobile state of continual transition, accommodates this ambiguity. The framework of walking uniquely constructs the border as a zone of violence, death, and loss coexisting alongside vitality and survival.

Herrera declines to resolve Makina's story, ensuring that through the last lines of the book, she continues to inhabit the liminality and ambiguity of the pilgrim. On the final page of the novel, he describes Makina's acceptance of the changes wrought though her pilgrimage as an embodied, physical experience. She understands the irreversibility of her transformation with all of her body: "entendió que todo lo que le sucedía no era un cataclismo; lo comprendió con todo el cuerpo y con toda su memoria, lo comprendió de verdad y finalmente se dijo Estoy lista cuando todas las cosas del mundo se quedaron en silencio" (119). This could be the protagonist's death, her rebirth, a dream, or the end of the world. Or, perhaps, Makina dies in the sinkhole on the first page, as she imagines, and her entire journey is a posthumous one. The lingering question—"So has Makina been reborn through immigration to the North, or is she to the contrary, ironically, dead?"—is one that strategically evades an answer (Richardson 18). In refusing to explicitly define Makina's fate, or to distinguish physical reality from Aztec underworld, or even life from death, Herrera converts Makina herself into a fluid referent that readers cannot entirely follow. Pilgrimage is the conceptual framework able to reconcile this ambiguity, by allowing the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual, and between life and death, to merge.

Crossed by such fluid subjects, the landscape of the border is constituted, in Herrera's hands, as similarly fluid. Elizabeth Grosz argues that walkers and the environments that they inhabit mutually shape one another (Grosz 90). Traversed by pilgrims, Herrera's setting becomes "a singular space defined as neither destination nor dwelling but as … permanent movement" (Rioseco). Drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of nepantla "a Nahuatl word meaning *tierra entre medio*, or the 'space between worlds,'" Barrera identifies Makina "[a]s a border dweller [who] exists in a liminal, borderlands space in a 'constant state of transition'" (479). Through their liminal journeys, pilgrims inhabit and contribute to the shaping of "unstable, transitional landscapes lacking clear boundaries" (Barrera 479). The ambiguity of Herrera's language and characters constructs the border as an unstable landscape of change, unmoored from fixity.[21] Lombardo notes that Herrera's chapter titles, such as "El pasadero de agua" and "El lugar donde el viento corta como una navaja," refer to transitional sites that emphasize elements in perpetual movement: "Todos hacen referencia al lugar fronterizo y dan cuenta así́ de cierta imposibilidad de terminar de cruzar la frontera: por más que Makina o su hermano se instalen del otro lado, nunca dejarán de estar en ese borde, en ese umbral" (Lombardo 205). Richardson maintains that, by continually inhabiting "frontier zones," the novel suggests "the impossibility of abode" and "resist[s] the human impulse to place-making" (13). Through Makina's persistent footsteps, Herrera represents the border itself as a landscape always in flux.

Conclusion: The Stakes of Creative Walking

The allure of the hybrid border framework persists, as shown by critics' continued interpretation of Herrera's text as a hybrid cultural product. Jimenez-Chacon argues that Herrera "noveliza la

idea del tercer espacio propuesta por Bhabha, framing the border "no como un monolito cultural inmutable, sino como un territorio que facilita el mestizaje cultural" (40). Sara Carini draws on Canclini to explore border identities in Herrera's writing as hybrid and transcultural (Carini 19). In his analysis of the novel, Santiago Navarro Pastor references Canclini's description of the border as "uno de los mayores laboratorios de la posmodernidad" and emphasizes the "generación de nuevas identidades" (118). Richardson describes Makina as a mechanized, partial character, "an incipient if not fully-formed citizen of the hybrid" (20). In their characterization of the border as a space of cultural blending and the production of new hybrid forms, these critics are not wrong. However, reliance on the framework of hybridity limits the possibilities for reading Herrera's work and conceals the political potential of the figure of the migrant.

Notions of hybridity cannot, like Herrera's narration, depict the complex border realities or subjects that simultaneously encompass the immediacy of bodily experience and the sacred, conceptual realms beyond it. Herrera's writing represents loss, violence, and survival, both physical and abstract, in a way that celebratory models of multiculturalism cannot account for. In a time when political rhetoric and militarized intervention storms the borderlands, the model of hybridity remains incongruously depoliticized. In his critique of what he calls the "happy hybrid" model, Yépez notes that hybridity frames border reality as a harmonious, creative exchange between equals, obscuring the violence and the drastic imbalances of power that characterize the region. Hybridity is a primarily additive model, concerned with the new outcomes of cultural forms in contact. Through this lens, the personhood and lived experiences of border subjects become secondary, and the violence that they endure becomes concealed. More conceptual than corporeal, hybridity tends to ignore the physicality of embodied border subjects, both the harm they endure and the strength that they demonstrate. While Yépez's proposed border trope of ruin, trace, or bodily remains does account for the violence that Makina and other border crossers experience, it does not capture their resilience.

The pilgrim Makina constructs the border with the path she treads with her body. By walking, she positions readers within her harsh lived experience, and pushes them to consider what it means to move through the world in a racialized and gendered body. They share in the bodily harm she endures and in her persistent motion. Simultaneously, she moves readers beyond the physical realm. The border she traverses is at once material and metaphorical, of this world and another. She reveals structures of power, such as the U.S. military industry and the web of Mexican crime bosses, that highlight her own positionality in relationship to border forces. Through her irreversible journey, Makina loses herself, painfully shedding stable markers of identity to enter a state of liminality that in turn constitutes the border itself as a fluid zone.

Approaching the border as a space constructed through the movement of pilgrims centers migrants' embodied experiences and establishes a framework that more comprehensively accommodates the border's inherent ambiguity, fluidity, and oppositions. The border read through the trope of walking is one that unites the primacy of migrants' physical experience with transcendent or metaphorical knowledge, and that can simultaneously account for violence, identitarian and bodily loss, and vitally moving bodies. To write and read the border through the trope of walking means to relate to the region as a living, mobile geography, a zone traversed by vital forces and in relationship with other points of departure. Crucially, framing the border as a region of walkers demands that we center their bodies. The narration of migrants' embodied experiences offers a point of sensorial connection with readers, revealing the living stakes of a region that is often referred to in abstract, dehumanized terms in political rhetoric. Attending to the positionality and subjectivities of the bodies that move through the landscape necessitates an identification of the unequal power relations that emerge in many border encounters. Centering walkers' bodies means accounting for violence against them, but also highlighting their survival and resilience. Border pilgrims are vulnerable, but they also persist. Walking is a form of continual change, of always moving toward a new state.

As a border trope, it asks us to fully embrace fluidity, to frame the border as a landscape and assemblage of subjects in flux. This opens the field to engagement with discourses of identity that move beyond fixed labels, remaining open to continual alteration. A border of walkers is a space structured by mobility rather than fixity.

Walking is generative. It constitutes a creative act that accommodates nuance and centers the subject's body and agency, unlike models of hybridity. Michel de Certeau examines walking and writing as parallel acts of realizing space (De Certeau 104). He describes a particular "rhetoric of walking," envisioning the city as a "space of enunciation" or "an urban text [where walkers] write" (158; 93). Herrera blends the acts of walking and writing throughout the novel through the use of the term "jarchar." He uses the verb colloquially, as a movement verb that refers to acts of walking, leaving, and crossing. The door that Makina passes through to enter the final level of Mictlán is marked with the word "jarchar." The term originates in literature: *jarchas* were vernacular Mozarabic verses tagged onto longer Arabic or Hebrew poems in Al-Andalus, as transitions that moved texts forward, or as textual bridges between languages (Dillman 112). Herrera's inventive, idiomatic appropriation of the early poetic form to refer to acts of walking positions physical movement as an act of creation. In translating "jarchar" as "to verse," Dillman highlights the similarities between writing and walking, and suggests the potential of acts of movement to rewrite reality. Makina's particular aptitude with language positions her as a skilled walker. By merging the walking body with the written word through his reinvention of "jarchar," Herrera establishes intimacy between language and bodily movement and emphasizes the creativity and agency of the figure of the migrant.

Through the determination of Makina's footsteps, Herrera evokes the potential of border walkers to rewrite current border reality. The political stakes of the conceptual frameworks used to discuss the border become evident through the obfuscation of state violence in political rhetoric and action. For example, as part of Texas Governor Abbott's Operation Lone Star, the Texas Department of Public Safety claimed control over Shelby Park, a common site of Río Grande border crossings near Eagle Pass, in early January 2024. They erected concertina wire and fencing to close off access to the public and to Border Patrol agents. Texas troopers barred federal agents from entering the area to provide aid to migrants in distress, resulting in the drowning deaths of a mother and her two children on January 13, 2024. State officials responded to the incident only in terms of the illegality of the migrants' actions and the conflict over jurisdiction. That same week, Abbott suggested in a radio interview that the only reason that he was not condoning the shooting of migrants was because it was illegal.[22] Despite his responsibility for infrastructure and actions resulting in migrants' deaths, he deploys a conceptual framework that constructs himself and other state actors as blameless in the violence they enact and incite. Their border framework obscures the bodily integrity and humanity of the subjects they harm, while at the same time constructing migrants' presence as a threat to national sovereignty. In recognizing the damage wrought by this framing of the border in political discourse, those performing critical analysis of the border and its cultural products in the academic sphere have a responsibility to implement a counter-framework that highlights and deciphers this violence, and to abstain from employing border tropes, such as that of hybridity, that further conceal violence or the lived experiences of migrants.

The forces behind the militarization of the border remain invested in the myth of a nation capable of being sealed. The logic of the wall is one of fixity. Walkers threaten the underpinnings of border security, in revealing the ultimate porosity of the nation and mutability of the borderlands. It is the migrant subject's persistent movement that positions them as "ajeno a la lógica del Poder" (Moraña 464). A conceptual border framework that prioritizes the mobility of migrants positions them as creative forces, not solely as victims of state violence, and centers their agency, resourcefulness, and vitality.

Notes

1. In an interview, Herrera states: "these books can be considered a trilogy, but only in terms of the presence of certain topics, certain ways of using of the language … the protagonists in all three novels are what I would call 'border characters.'" (Body).
2. Herrera's avoidance of proper nouns further blurs the distinctions between the mythic and contemporary realms, maintaining a critical ambiguity in setting. Although readers can situate themselves in the border region by inference, he does not refer to cities in Mexico or the U.S., nor the levels of Mictlán, by name, untethering the narrative from concrete referents in this world or any other. He explains in an interview that before writing he makes "lists of words that [he] won't use … that has to do with the need to avoid cliches, to not repeat certain predigested concepts in place of problems or emotions that are much more complex than those concepts" (Figueroa and Stefkova).
3. The brother's pursuit of a mythologized homeland evokes Chicano nationalist's belief in Aztlán as the spiritual homeland of Mexican-Americans, located in the U.S. Southwest.
4. These postcolonial theorists all address processes of identity formation through difference. In *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Gilroy centers the transatlantic slave trade as the basis for his new model of diasporic existence, which privileges hybridity. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha 1994) theorizes the mutual construction of subjectivities within a colonial framework, in the contradictory and ambivalent contact zone that he labels the Third Space. Stuart Hall, in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Hall and de Gay), examines the diasporic cultural identity in the context of the Caribbean, and maintains that Black diasporic identity goes through a process of constant reinvention through encounters with difference. In *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography* (1996), Spivak emphasizes the heterogeneity of the subaltern subject within the reality of ongoing colonial processes (Spivak).
5. Canclini's understanding of processes of hybridization has evolved over the years, as he notes in a 2009 interview that hybridity needs "to be articulated along with concepts of contradiction and inequality … it is not enough to look at what can be fused together: we must also consider what is left out, other processes of contradiction and of conflict" (Montezemolo740). His later comments and new introduction to the 2001 version of *Hybrid Cultures* suggest a desire to merge the notion of hybridity with material conditions of inequality, but other critics maintain that border studies needs to move beyond the concept.
6. While Canclini modified his conceptualization of hybridity years after the publication of *Culturas híbridas*, the concept of the border as a hybrid culture had already solidified in the public imaginary. "La teoría hibridista fue atractiva por su simultáneo festejo del mercado y la diferencia," making it difficult to move beyond (Yépez 979).
7. Theorists who, following Canclini, tended to celebrate hybridity and develop the idea of a conceptual border as a metaphor for identity formation include Walter Mignolo, Homi Bhabha, Renato Rosaldo, Emily Hicks, and others.
8. These include Gabriel Trujillo, Humberto Félix Berumen, Sergio Gómez Montero, and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba. Northern Mexican author Rosina Conde chose to leave the Taller de Arte Fronterizo organized by Guillermo Gómez-Peña because she found herself being forced into a hybrid aesthetic that did not represent her reality: "They wanted to turn us into pseudo-Chicanos/as, or into a fronterizo/a that did not represent us" (Castillo 13).
9. Notable examples include Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*, which relates the deaths of fourteen men trying to cross the border into the southern Arizona desert in 2001, and details the corporeal processes through which the human body fails when severely dehydrated and overheated (Urrea). Margaret Regan's *The Death of Josseline* travels to a morgue to count the distressing details of migrants' corpses (Regan). In *The Border Patrol Ate My Dust*, Alicia Alarcón collects the testimonies of border crossers, whose stories of walking, running, and hiding share a material immediacy (Alarcón).
10. The living geography of the borderlands is made up of both human and non-human bodies in motion. The border subject not only walks; it also slithers; it blows, flows, crawls, flies, and pollinates.
11. Both critics frame their analysis of Makina's pilgrimage through readings of Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), in which he identifies the construction of the illegal subject, excluded from basic rights and treated as disposable by the state.
12. While some pilgrimage studies scholars such as Greeley and Badone argue for a broad understanding of pilgrimage as physical movement paired with transcendent experience, others have more rigid guidelines for the concept. Scholars agree that pilgrimage traditionally has four purposes for communicating with the divine: to demonstrate faith, to do penance, to request assistance, and to give thanks for a past favor granted (Gros 111).
13. Peter Jan Margry cautions against broadening the term, classifying "secular pilgrimage" as an "oxymoron or contradiction in terms" (Margry 14). He defines pilgrimage as journeys with spiritual inspiration, and the desire to "seek a transcendental encounter with a specific cult object" (36). He admits, though, that

religious journeys can happen outside of institutional religion; people can have spiritual encounters with secular places or objects.

14. Gros suggests that the act of walking exists outside of everyday perception of time and routine: “When you walk, the world has neither present nor future: nothing but the cycle of mornings and evenings” (84). Later, he argues that walking enables an experience that exists outside of time, or in opposition to it: “Walking makes time reversible” (128). Gros notes, for example, the experiences of Tibetan monks, who experience a “hallucinatory trance state produced by the repetition of [their] tread” (216).
15. Santiago Navarro Pastór, Edgardo Iniquez, and Ian Almond also examine these connections (Almond).
16. When Makina asks why her brother will not return, he responds: “No, ya no. Ya peleé por esta gente. Debe de haber algo por lo que pelean tanto. Por eso me quedé en el ejército, mientras averiguo de qué se trata” (103). His own motivations and sense of belonging have become subsumed by U.S. nationalism and the military industry.
17. Internal northward migration of young Mexican women also grew enormously as the maquiladora industry exploded throughout the 1990s, targeting young women for essentialized traits such as submissiveness and dexterity. Cordelia Barrera notes that Makina’s name evokes the maquila industry: “the name ‘Makina’ alludes to border maquilas to suggest her gendered and racialized position as a working body that produces capital” (477).
18. Sexual violence against female migrants is so common that contraception is seen as an essential tool for travelling with a coyote (Falcón 204).
19. Janet Wolff responds to the default masculinity of bodies in public space, using feminist sociology to account for women’s experience of modernity and the segregation of the sexes (Wolff).
20. While historically, most writing on walking has been approached through a male perspective, recent years have seen a notable rise in U.S. publications that feature female walkers. Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012) details a young woman’s journey of healing through solo hiking over one thousand miles. Ben Montgomery’s *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk* (2014) is a biography of a woman in her 60s who hiked the entire Appalachian Trail three times in the 1950s. Shelley Armitage’s *Walking the Llano: A Texas Memoir of Place* (2016) is an eco-memoir that details the author’s rediscovery of the land of West Texas, in which she links the acts of walking, writing, and listening to the land. Kerry Andrews’ *Wanderers: A History of Women Walking* (2020) tells the history of ten women across the past three centuries who have defined themselves through their walking, while Annabel Abbs’ *Windswept: Walking the Paths of Trailblazing Women* (2021) combines memoir and inquiry into creative women throughout history who have found their voices through walking.
21. The border region is also home to permanent residents who are not migrants. While their motions are more limited in scope, a critical framework that attends to their embodied experiences consistently positions the border region as one of fluidity.
22. Abbott’s comment was: “The only thing we are not doing is we’re not shooting people who come across the border, because, of course, the Biden administration would charge us with murder” (Gamboa).

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