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On the Nature of the Border: Trash Thresholds in Luis Alberto Urrea's *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*

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ABSTRACT: In this essay, I undertake an analysis of Luis Alberto Urrea's non-fiction book *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* (1996), which portrays a community of trash pickers and orphans in Tijuana at a moment in which the effects of NAFTA and an increasingly militarized approach to policing the US-Mexico border were taking shape. My engagement with the text combines close reading with concepts from both ecocriticism and biopolitics in order to tease out the way in which Urrea's vignettes trouble received notions of progress, freedom, and containment. By considering the book's deployment of two descriptive techniques for rendering the garbage dump and other spaces—one, a technique I call "time-lapse description" and the other, the insistent use of lists—I propose that the border zone that Urrea depicts is a space from which to think through the troubling and mutually-imbricated environmental, political, and economic crises that are paradoxically exceptional and exemplary of the current order of things.

KEYWORDS: Luis Alberto Urrea, border, trash, discard studies, ecocriticism

Luis Alberto Urrea's 1996 non-fiction book *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* chronicles the writer's time spent working with communities in and around Tijuana throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, a moment in which the NAFTA-era conceptualization of the US-Mexico border was taking shape.[1] In broad terms, the view of the border that emerges in this moment is undergirded by a central paradox: on the one hand, it is a conceptualization of the border as a space of unlimited freedom from economic and environmental regulatory restraints; on the other, it becomes an increasingly regimented, militarized space designed to curtail human freedom through the harsh regulation of the movement of racialized bodies (bodies that, it is important to note, move in pursuit of various forms of freedom that do not seem to be covered by the "free" in "free trade," like freedom from violence, oppression, and poverty).[2] Urrea approaches this space from an equally paradoxical position that highlights the intersection of a number of thresholds. As a Mexican-American, his approach to writing about the border and the community of people from Tijuana he portrays constantly negotiates the difference between being Mexican and being American, speaking Spanish and speaking English, observing a community and its space from a distance and immersing himself in that community and its space. He writes from an unstable position that is simultaneously apart from his object of representation and a part of it. In this sense, *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* is both a meditation on many different instantiations of the threshold and a text that comes into being at the point at which those thresholds converge.

Many of the episodes that comprise Urrea's book are centered on a community of trash pickers in a dump (or *dompe*, as Urrea calls it throughout the book) in Tijuana, and in this essay, I would like to reflect on various moments in these vignettes that allow us to think through the troubling and mutually-imbricated environmental, political, and economic crises that are paradoxically exceptional and exemplary of the current order of things. First, I will elaborate on the notion of the threshold and its relationship to trash in order to consider the way that Urrea posits the border and the *dompe* as threshold spaces whose logic is inscribed in his writing through descriptive techniques that simultaneously suggest convergence and divergence, containment and overflow. From there, I will consider a few of Urrea's descriptive passages as a way of teasing out the material implications of the trash and trash spaces he portrays in his book. In the end, Urrea's mindfulness of materiality and space allows us to see the border area he portrays not as a site of underdevelopment striving to catch up to the economic, social, and ecological standards of the global North, but rather as an environment that is perfectly natural given the neoliberal logic applied to manage it.

Trash and the Threshold

At a basic level, the production of trash is a function of the decision to include material objects in or exclude them from socially-constructed categories of usefulness and value. All individuals and social groups produce trash, but the specific quality and quantity of a given society's garbage, along with its waste management practices, depend on complex social, economic, affective, and material factors. In his classic study *Rubbish Theory*, Michael Thompson notes as much, framing trash as a conceptual device for mediating our understanding of the back-and-forth journeys that all objects

are susceptible to making between states of high and low (or no) value. In effect, whether or not something is trash can only be determined by examining the socio-material processes that underlie the way individuals and groups relate to the material objects that surround them. What is more, the relationships between humans and material objects are prone to shift over time and space. Our conviction that one man's trash is another man's treasure is clichéd but nonetheless true. But notions of shifting value are not sufficient to understand trash. Questions of space and social structure are critical to appreciating the true import of the conceptual and material weight of trash in our world. Where do we put trash and what are the social and environmental effects of the siting of waste? What concepts can help us appreciate the stakes at play for human and nonhuman bodies that live in constant contact with trash?

Such questions have no simple answers, but thinking through them is key to understanding the interwoven environmental, economic, and social problems to which contemporary waste management practices contribute and that Urrea attempts to capture in his book. For at least the last twenty-five years, scholars from fields ranging from history and philosophy to environmental science and anthropology have paid increasing attention to what societies do with their waste and how waste and waste management affect specific communities. In addition to Thompson's aforementioned study of waste through notions of economic value, approaches to these questions over the last few decades include both wide-ranging ones, like Greg Kennedy's theorization of trash as an ontological problem arising from human beings' unsettled relationship with nature or Gay Hawkins's treatment of waste practices as central to constructing new ethical and political frameworks, and more granular analyses of specific contexts, such as Kathleen Millar's ethnography of a Brazilian dump that uses the work people do with trash to call into question normative notions of garbage, wage labor, and informality.[3] At the same time, cultural texts like *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* that tackle the representation of waste and waste management have become increasingly common and have generated a great deal of critical attention from scholars who bring to bear the analytical and theoretical tools of their disciplines in a number of exciting, illuminating approaches that can be seen as part of the the recent push to widen the scope of ecocriticism beyond nature writing and schematic dualisms, like nature/culture or city/country.[4] Given the way that Urrea highlights the problem of trash as equal parts ecological and social and frames it within issues related to the border, I see great value in contributing to those considerations of the cultural valences of waste by reading his book alongside the concept of the threshold, in particular as it is developed in the thought of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben.

For Agamben, the threshold is a fundamental textual and conceptual device that points toward both the positive and negative potential of limits (McLoughlin 189). In works like *Homo Sacer*, *State of Exception*, and *The Open*, he thinks through the threshold in a way that makes apparent the connection between the logic of exclusion and the materialization of power in and through the body. While he does not address issues of waste and disposal in his work, his thinking sheds light on the way trash is produced and people are rendered as trash because it underscores the ease with which bodies—human and nonhuman alike—can be transferred between states of value. In *The Coming Community*, Agamben considers the import of the threshold more explicitly: "The outside is not another space that resides beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives it access" (67). In underscoring linkage, not division, as the fundamental feature of the threshold, that space, which seems to mark the limit between two things is not "another thing with respect to the limit; it is, so to speak, the experience of the limit itself" (68). And the gesture of exclusion, exception, or disposal is essential to establishing the link between what occupies the space on either side of the threshold; that gesture is, in a sense, the very thing that constitutes the threshold as such. As Daniel McLoughlin puts it, for Agamben, the logic of the threshold "is not one of opposition, but of abandonment, in which the outside is included through its exclusion. This means that the threshold is a space where inside and outside enter into a zone of indistinction" (191).

I am struck by the resonance between the logic underlying Agamben's conceptualization of the threshold and the schema we employ to distinguish between useful and useless material objects, or rather, things worth keeping and things that are trash. Even the lexical choices he makes in naming the actions that constitute the threshold—he speaks of abandonment and exclusion—call to mind the act of disposal, the gesture that turns a thing into trash. More to the point, the threshold shows us how things that are opposed to one another, and therefore seem to be disconnected, are in fact inextricably connected via the act of exclusion itself. In other words, the concept of the threshold reminds us that things do not belong to a given category thanks to some inherent quality; rather, the categories in which they are included (or from which they are excluded) are a function of the ceaselessly updated mechanism of exclusion. In much the same way, the production and naming of trash is an effect of systems of classification that are dynamic and open-ended (Hawkins 2-3). It is important to recall that, for Agamben, the threshold is a zone of indistinction, a space in which the precise difference or border between things (inside and outside or political life and bare life, for example) is impossible to identify (McLoughlin 191). This type of indeterminacy is also a basic characteristic of trash. On a purely material level, the decay processes to which trash is prone often obscure the previous identity of a discarded object, a difficulty that is only compounded by garbage dumps, where discards are grouped into a "mountain of indistinguishable stuff that is in its own way affirmed by a resolute dismissal" (Scanlan 14). Trash is the material manifestation of the indistinction of the threshold, the in-between that signals the experience of the limit itself. As John Scanlan puts it, "Between something and nothing; between whole and part; between the body as source of unique being and

the universal matter of the garbaged self. This stateless condition of being one thing and then another (or even being at any time *neither one thing nor another*) symbolizes garbage" (53, emphasis in the original).

From the outset of *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*, Urrea posits his own split identity (as a Mexican, as an American, as a Mexican-American) and his childhood in Tijuana and San Diego as occurring in liminal zones or thresholds between different cultural, affective, and geographic categories. For him, the border is a barbed-wire fence that neatly bisects his heart (4), a phenomenon that simultaneously gathers him into and excludes him from multiple political and social categories and serves as the basis for the voice he cultivates in his writing. Beyond grounding his own subjectivity in this sort of in-between space, he continually highlights the tension between Tijuana's supposed location on a series of cultural, geographical, economic, and temporal peripheries and its centrality in his own life and the lives of the people he portrays in his book and, most importantly, as a key space for understanding the way the world works under the sway of neoliberalism. These tensions and contradictions are neatly translated into temporal terms, as in when Urrea declares, "It is still 1896 in Tijuana. And it is also 2025" (6). This kind of hyperbolic impossibility—a moment simply cannot pertain to both the 19th and 21st centuries—gives expression to an unsettling truth: the present, which is the threshold between the past and future, contains both within it. Such a notion sheds light on Urrea's observations from what he calls the "*basura* fault line," another instantiation of the threshold (41). A passage describing the evolution of the *dompe* reads:

> Once a gaping Grand Canyon, it gradually filled with the endless glacier of trash until it rose, rose, swelling like a filling belly. The canyon filled and formed a flat plain, and the plain began to grow in bulldozed ramps, layers, sections, battlements. New American Garbology affected the basic Mexican nature of the place. From a disorderly sprawl of *basura* to a kind of Tower of Babel of refuse.
>
> Still, the poor Mexicans, transformed now by NAFTA into a kind of squadron of human tractors, made their way through the dump, lifting, sifting, bagging, hauling, carting, plucking, cutting, recycling. The original *dompe* rules, a set of ordinances that sprang up organically from the people who have to work in the garbage, prevailed. (40-41)

The dump is a liminal space of encounter for a number of opposing notions: the hollow canyon meets the swollen mountain of garbage, horizontality entwines with verticality, neoliberal technification confronts working human bodies that use age-old techniques, Spanish and English and the waste they name meld into a discursive Tower of Babel and a material tower of trash.

The conjunction of space and time that Urrea depicts is an attempt to capture the impossible: to pin down the in-betweenness of the threshold, the liminal quality of both the border environment in general and the trash dump to which he constantly returns throughout the book. In addition to approaching this task through the themes of the border, trash, and trash work, his efforts to think in and with the threshold are inscribed in the formal elements of which he makes use. Two such formal elements strike me as especially apt at inscribing the logic of the threshold in Urrea's text: first, the way he tends to depict spaces by contrasting their past and present states, a mode that I call time-lapse description; and second, the proliferation of lists throughout the book, a type of recurring compulsion to enumerate that opens up a space for reflecting on the way the book enacts the discursive and material significance of trash. We glimpse both elements in the passage cited above. The dump's present state is inscribed in a longer timeline: the mounds of trash used to be a canyon in the distant past. This difference over time sets the stage for the rest of the description, which unfolds as a series of contrasting elements that exist in a state of ambiguous tension in the material and social practices of the landfill. And those practices are presented in clipped fashion, as a list of activities that proliferate much like the detritus that fills the space.

Approaching the Threshold: Time-Lapse Description

In order to unpack the way that the book's descriptions of space engage with the passage of time and induce reflection on the threshold, I would like to focus on three descriptive passages, all of which I will quote at length to give a clear idea of the elements at play in Urrea's prose: first, the area surrounding his boyhood home; second, some of Tijuana's *maquiladoras* and their environs; and third, the *dompe*. All of them exemplify the discursive move that I am calling time-lapse description and signal the threshold nature of the spaces Urrea portrays.

In the first few pages of the book, Urrea gives the following description of his childhood home:

> My first home, where I stumbled into life and first greeted that astonishment of daylight, was on a hill above Tijuana. The house to the east was already giving way to gravity on the day I was born: it slumped downhill, a wooden trapezoid rushing slowly into the dry arroyo beneath our yards. In the shadow of this woozy building, bananas and pomegranates grew. The poor boys and I scrabbled in the dirt and grit of our street throwing wooden tops to spin in the dust, herding amazingly huge red ants and pillbugs back and forth between the stones, and ambushing each other with bright pink and yellow squirt guns bought at the corner *botica* for the change left over from the kilo of tortillas we were sent to buy each afternoon.

> And today, these many years later, the house next door has settled like a deck of weathered cards. The banana trees are dead and gone. Little boys like me, however, still play on the hillside. These boys have seen things that we did not even dream of. They have watched Desert Storm, Waco, Beirut, Panama, Rwanda, Bosnia, Colosio, the assassination of the Mexican bishop, Israel's *intifada*, Rodney King, the L.A. riots, Oklahoma City, the Chiapas revolt, the Million Man March, the white Ford Bronco, even the autopsy of a reported UFO pilot—all on *gringo* television, spilling south over the edges of the border as Tijuana's sewage rushes north. (4-5)

The area of Tijuana where the author grew up functions, in this description, as a metonymy of the border itself, and Urrea uses the effects on that space wrought by the passage of time along with his own position as an observer seemingly caught between past and present to signal some of the cultural, material, and environmental implications of the border's liminal position.

The clear visual analog to the shift from one paragraph of this passage to the next—the ground covered between "where I stumbled into life" and "these many years later"—is time-lapse photography, a technique that collapses different moments in time into one act of perception. This is precisely what Urrea manages to do with narrative prose in this passage. And he uses his discursive position on the threshold between past and present to foreground other fractures that structure the experience of the border. The house that shifts from being a rickety trapezoid to a jumbled mess of boards underscores the precarity of the built environment. And just as this image suggests the transience of human shelters, the fate of the fruit trees ("dead and gone") and the disappearance of insect life from one paragraph to the next raises the specter of environmental degradation that is much more explicit elsewhere in the book. Even the main element of similitude that manifests itself on either side of the "before" and "after" that structure Urrea's description—the neighborhood boys playing on the hillside—is subject to the fracture brought about by the passage of time. The change in forms of social relations and technology that is condensed into the shift from playing with wooden tops and plastic squirt guns to receiving the incessant barrage of television airwaves does more than signal the outsized importance of *gringo* media in a globalized world. It also underscores the tension between the neoliberal imperative to generate homogenized experiences and points of reference and the particular experience of living in an economically and environmentally precarious situation on the US-Mexico border in the 1990s. In this sense, the final image of the description is especially potent. The place Urrea evokes is located at the crossroads of two different pipelines of waste: the waves of decontextualized news stories (note how the list format unmoors the events from specific historical contexts, rendering them akin to white noise) that flow south and the sewage that flows north.

If Urrea uses the routines and spaces of childhood to consider the role of media in shaping the experience of life on the border, he turns to the *maquiladora* in his contemplation of the impact of neoliberalism on the environment and the lives of workers. In a key passage, he writes:

> All around the former dump [...] are the empty shells of future *maquiladoras* [...] The *maquis* are waiting for NAFTA to get rolling. So far, the most obvious NAFTA action in Tijuana—still hidden from plain sight—is the purchase of the new *dompe* by Americans. The *San Diego Reader* reports the amazing news that the Texans who now run the dump plan to make $9 million a year. This figure would be so unbelievable to the garbage-pickers wandering through the heaps like droids, recycling bottles, aluminum, plastic, copper, glass, that they would laugh in your face if you told them [...]
>
> *Maquis*, of course, are binational or multinational factories, they sit on their bulldozed hills like raw-concrete forts, and the huts of the peasants ring their walls. Some of them have Japanese names on them, some of them have American names. All along Tijuana's new high-tech highway, el Periférico, you can see them up there, receding into the hazy distance. Headstones for the graveyard of American union labor.
>
> Negra [one of the main people Urrea follows in the book] had a job at Imperial Toys for a while. It was a thrill—no more toil in the trash. Besides, her huge pregnant belly limited her severely in her ability to do stoop-work [...] At Imperial, she was earning a few cents an hour, but all she had to do was stand in one place on the assembly line. Fourteen hours a day. She was allowed two bathroom breaks, she says. She had to eat lunch standing up. When she tired, eight months pregnant now, and sat down after becoming dizzy, she was fired and thrown out.
>
> Interestingly enough, in its rush to prepare for great profits and an industrial rebirth, Tijuana wildly bulldozed and built, scraped hilltops into canyons and threw roads and factories and warehouses and living quarters together. The utopian workers' condos at the foot of Negra's hill are now, a few years down the line, collapsing. Floors come apart and pancake down on each other. Squatters live in them, their laundry flapping out the windows like curtains. And the raw hills, left unlandscaped and unplanted, came down in the floods and swept into the city, carrying off victims, burying streets and neighborhoods, and costing unreported fortunes to clean up. (25-26)

Compared to the description of Urrea's childhood home, this one approaches the passage of time in a less orderly but perhaps more suggestive way, especially in light of the notion of the threshold.

The anecdote about Negra's stint in a toy factory aside, the paragraphs that attempt to evoke an image of *maquiladoras* in the reader's mind seem designed to obscure any neat delineation of temporality. Grammatically speaking, the generalized use of verbs in the present tense make it seem clear that Urrea is describing these factories and their environs as he sees them in his present moment: the empty shells *are* found around the former dump, they *are* binational factories that *sit* on bulldozed hills from where you *can see* the new highway, some of them *are now collapsing*. However, other elements destabilize that perspective from the present by gesturing toward both the past and the future. At certain moments, all three temporal planes appear at once, as is the case in the opening sentence of the description: the building project Urrea is looking at portends what is to come ("empty shells of future *maquiladoras*"), but it is centered around the *former* dump, a vestige from the past that will never really go away. The future and past also collapse into the present in the way Urrea describes the Periférico as a high-tech highway that we could imagine is supposed to pave the border region's way into the 21st century and whose landscape of hulking factories memorializes the now-defunct clout of union labor in the United States.

Besides these sentence-level moves that blur the temporal framework of the description, the way the passage is structured as a whole manages to highlight the threshold quality of this zone of the border by turning time on its head. As I have already noted, the *maquiladoras* themselves are patently being described as they are in the present, but that present is inflected in a way that orients it first toward the future, then toward the past. The first two paragraphs look toward the future: newly-constructed *maquiladoras* wait for NAFTA to ramp up, the owners of the new dump anticipate multimillion-dollar profits, Tijuana's industrial belt seems poised for technological development, and even trash pickers are portrayed as droids, robots from the future. The next paragraph is a jarring shift into the past tense that begins as a *maquiladora* success story and ends with the inhumane but predictable disposal of Urrea's friend Negra from the workforce, precipitated in part by the company's desire to increase efficiency through the regulation of the waste human bodies produce. Then, as the description of the zone for Tijuana's *maquiladoras* snaps back into focus in the passage's final paragraph, the image of squatters occupying collapsing housing for workers seems to suggest that the *maquiladoras* are the ruins of a past civilization. At the same time, this scene is redolent of a version of the future that fans of post-apocalyptic narratives easily recognize. But, on whole, this passage is not a description of the past or the future. It is a portrait of the present that, both formally and thematically, reflects the in-between, threshold quality of life under neoliberalism. In Urrea's telling, it is a present stuck between the ruins of the past and an increasingly uncertain future. By showing us the *maquiladora* in this way, he manages to critique the way the neoliberal present erodes the wellbeing of humans and the environment. The economic order that the *maquiladora* represents does not solve the problems of underdevelopment; instead, it lays waste to workers like Negra who cannot keep up with the unreasonable demands it makes on their bodies and leaves the landscape scarred in a way that augurs ever more precarious futures for those who live there.

The final time-lapse description I would like to consider shares more of a structural affinity with the descriptions of the dump and Urrea's old neighborhood that I cite above in the sense that it moves more clearly from past to present, transmitting the passage from one timeframe to another in a way that allows the reader to experience it in one act of perception. However, its portrayal of environmental degradation also chimes with the closing image of the passage on *maquiladoras*, which notes how the modifications made to the landscape so it could accommodate the presence of new factories and workers and the movement of consumer goods led to erosion and flooding. In line with such an appreciation of the ecological consequences of development, Urrea describes the *dompe* as follows:

> One end of the dump had been closed off by the new trash mountain. A small valley had been sealed at one end, where the runoff would have originally formed a nostalgic little waterfall into the little Edward Abbey desert canyon and run on to the sea. Deer would have frolicked at its base; jackrabbits, coyotes, foxes, hawks, owls, rattlesnakes, tarantulas, three kinds of daisies, locoweed, gourds, raccoons, lizards, tortoises, skunks, wild goats, cottonwoods, berries, grapes, small fish, crawdads, butterflies, pottery shards, arrowheads, lions, morning glories, corn, Queen Anne's lace, would have flourished along this glittering little creek. Now, however, the northern arm of the landfill had cut off the vale and the small bed of the waterway. The canyon itself, as we know, was long gone. Kotex, Keds, Kalimán comic books, and ketchup bottles frolicked there now. (44)

Here, Urrea writes a description of a key space in a way that invites the reader to stand beside him and take in a panorama of that space as it exists in the present. He begins by emphasizing how a natural feature of the landscape, the concavity of a valley through which a stream once ran, is now a depository of waste. Here culture and nature are interfaced with one another, and in this threshold zone waste management becomes a procedure for transforming one type of natural feature (an idyllic valley) into another (a mountain of trash).

In casting the erstwhile valley and the new mountain as "natural" features, I do not mean to suggest that they are not different from one another in ontological terms or with regard to the moral and ethical questions they raise. Rather, following the grain of Urrea's prose, it strikes me that both of the features that dominated this landscape at different moments were the result of a complex

series of material processes and networks. On balance, one of these series tended to perpetuate an abundance of life forms, while the other foreclosed most of them.

So while Urrea uses the same formal feature to evoke the material reality of both valley and mountain—the list, a feature whose deployment I consider further below—there is an important difference in tone between the two lists that underscores this gap in the potential for sustaining life. While contemplating the dump, Urrea begins to invoke the imagined pre-dump past of the space with a dose of ironic detachment. The preciosity of his adjectives (the "nostalgic" waterfall and the "Edward Abbey" canyon) and the almost saccharine-sweet verb "frolic" seem to be to a sort of defense mechanism for dealing with the overwhelming nature of the dump. But as the list of what Urrea imagines as the space's former inhabitants wears on, any sense of detachment fades under the sheer abundance and beauty of the biotic community that would have made a home there. And the return to the present reality of the dump snaps us out of this reverie, reinstating the previous ironic distance through the repetition of the verb "frolic" and the alliterative list of crass consumer products that have squeezed out other forms of life.

Like the other descriptive passages I analyze above, this description of the dump does more than round out a particular setting with details that help the reader imagine it. It also takes into account the temporal dimension of space, opening the present to the past in a consideration of what is lost and gained in the passage of time. All of these time-lapse descriptions operate under a similar logic: they collapse different moments in time into relatively brief descriptions of a given space in the present in order to highlight the way the past (and even the future) inhabits the present. In other words, the present, as Urrea portrays it, is a threshold, a zone that is, by definition, *not* the past and *not* the future but, paradoxically, is always intervened by both. Such a presentation of the threshold quality of the experience of time is especially significant given the equally notable threshold quality of the spaces Urrea describes: his old neighborhood, a space in between the domestic and public spheres; the *maquiladora*, an industrial space that blurs the lines between nation-states; and the garbage dump, a threshold between the useful and the useless, nature and culture, and a social limit zone.

Proliferating Thresholds: Lists

In order to round out this reflection on the way that the concept of the threshold is inscribed at a formal level in *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*, I would like to turn briefly to another feature of Urrea's prose that suffuses the text from beginning to end: the list. A cursory search of the book would yield at least a couple dozen examples of sentences shifting from relatively complex structures to the rote syntactical arrangement of nouns (or phrases functioning as nouns) following one after another in sequences of varying lengths (all of the time-lapse descriptions I quote above, for instance, have lists in them).

Why does Urrea turn to lists so readily throughout his book? More to the point, what interpretive possibilities does this reliance on lists open up? One answer has to do with the material reality that Urrea attempts to represent in his prose: trash itself. If trash can be thought of as a bunch of miscellaneous items gathered together and stored in a specific place (like a waste bin or a garbage dump), then the list offers itself as a useful linguistic analog for trying to capture in prose the experience of the spaces trash occupies. It comes as no surprise, then, that several of the book's lists can be found in passages related to the *dompe*. There are straightforward lists that rattle off the kinds of work that goes on there, noting how groups of trash pickers go "through the dump, lifting, sifting, bagging, hauling, carting, plucking, cutting, recycling" (40-41). Likewise, there are lists woven into passages that convey the glut of material in the dump and its troubling vitality, as when Urrea describes what he sees upon arriving at the dump on a windy day:

> And from the hill of trash, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of plastic bags—tan bags, blue bags, white supermarket bags, black trash bags, yellow bread wrappers and video store bags—along with long streamers of computer paper, sheets of notebook paper, newspapers open like wings, ribbons of toilet paper, tissues like dancing moths, even half-dead balloons, are caught in a backdraft and are rising and falling in vast slow waves behind the hill, slow motion, a ballet in the air of this parti-colored landscape, looking like special effects, like some art department's million-dollar creation, Lucifer's lava lamp, silent, ghostly, stately, for half a mile, turning in the air, rolling, looping. (49-50)

This single sentence extends the clipped rhythm of the easy-to-follow enumeration of types of bags and paper in the landfill into a more figurative, chaotic register that evokes an experience approaching the sublime in its melding of the aesthetic and the horrific. In this sense, the list is an ideal rhetorical tool for representing garbage. Beyond its potentially infinite capacity for growth through the accumulation of one element after another, a list's grammatical simplicity belies a tension between order and disorder, containment and overflow, that is strikingly similar to the anxieties and challenges that waste management raises. Urrea's description of the windswept landfill shows how easily order (both syntactical and material) can tip over into disorder.

However useful the list is as a way to approach representing spaces where trash accumulates, its importance in Urrea's portrayal of the "secret life of the Mexican Border"—as he puts it in the book's subtitle—goes beyond its mimetic function. Aside from cataloging trash and scavenging practices, lists appear throughout the book in passages related to economics, politics, agricultural products and

practices, consumer goods, news and other media, social practices, and more. For example, an extended reflection on Tijuana (and the border in general) toward the beginning of the book includes a vertiginous list of recent events of note. It begins with "NAFTA, for example; the astonishing Proposition 187; the rise of PAN and breakaway political movements; the surge in drug cartel shenanigans; the advent of Tijuana's spit-and-polish border cops, the Beta Group; various executions and shootouts; border closings, new fences, interdiction programs; amazing floods that ravaged downtown Tijuana," and continues with allusions to drought, economic and political woes, and racist tourists (8-9). Lines below this passage, the geography of the border itself is presented in the form of a list of cities: "Tijuana, Mexicali, Nogales, Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Juárez, Reynosa, Matamoros, and their various sister cities" (9). This is followed by a series of enumerations of the cultural and material practices and products that proliferate on the other side of the border, ranging from pop culture figures—"Starsky and Hutch, Mickey Mouse, Madonna, those buff lifeguards on *Baywatch*, Michael Jackson, Sharon Stone" (10)—to places to go and ways to get there—"elevators, escalators, sidewalks, bays, beaches, parks, buses, bicycles, cars, jets" (10)—and, finally, what we could call various and sundry items—"Kotex, sprinklers, floors, canned frijoles, Twinkies, Hulk Hogan, *Playboy*, three-ply scented toilet paper, rich motels, low riders" (10).

This portrayal of the cultural, political, and material reality of the border as a series of lists is overwhelming. Each element, whether it be a noteworthy news event, an icon of popular culture, or a disposable consumer good, troubles the reader by suggesting a network of referents that should provide explanation while simultaneously withholding that context. This is not to say that the lists do not make sense because they do; instead, what I am suggesting is that the sense they make relies on intuition instead of explanation. The very format of the list, with its flattening of grammatical complexity, refuses to make distinctions among the elements that constitute it and gives the impression that all those elements are interchangeable. What is more, the lists Urrea crafts in this extensive passage could conceivably stretch on interminably, but the exigencies of writing the story he wants to tell put a limit on such proliferation. The rhetorical effect of these lists, then, is to signal a series of thresholds: the limit space between allusion and explanation, specificity and homogeneity, proliferation and containment.

Elsewhere, Urrea narrates the arrival of a van full of charitable donations for the community of people living around the dump sent from the US side of the border. The van is full of canned food. As Urrea notes, "It's a strange mixture, and some of it will have to go to the pigs because nobody knows what to do with it" (173). The overwhelming constellation of cultural practices and objects that exemplify US culture and constitute its perverse allure is reduced to a mishmash of unwanted canned goods, castoffs sent south of the border like so much trash: "Veg-All. Creamed corn. Pear halves. Pumpkin pie filling. Pickled beets. Spam. Corned beef hash. Beefaroni. Tuna. Sauerkraut. Carnation condensed milk. Smoked oysters. Something without a label, flecked with rust. Alpo" (173). These goods, donated as an afterthought, as a way of disposing of useless pantry items, stand in sharp contrast with the contributions Mexican migrants make to the United States, which, once again, Urrea presents in a series of lists, noting that immigrants are the financial backbone of companies like "Dole, Green Giant, McDonald's, Stouffers, Burger King, the Octopus Car wash chain, Del Monte, Chicken of the Sea," and that their work includes "midnight shifts, front lawn raking, pool scrubbing, gas station back rooms, blue-jean stitching, TV assembly, athletic-shoe sole gluing, shit-taking, shit-scrubbing, shit-eating" (18). What is more, immigrants' financial contributions are enumerated in list fashion: "Gasoline, food, medicine, speeding tickets, alcohol, clothes, shoes, aspirin, used cars, English classes, community college textbooks, toothpaste, movies, used furniture, televisions, pets, pet food, underwear, pencils, gym clothes, school lunches, tampons, tobacco, bus fares, postage, hamburgers, Coca-Cola, bank accounts, credit cards, interest" (20). In addition to the rhetorical effects considered above, these lists throw into relief the social and material manifestations of the threshold that is the US-Mexico border. Instead of portraying the two nations as separate entities that happen to butt up against each other, they underscore the ways in which the United States' political, ideological, and discursive investment in constituting itself through the exclusion of Mexico and Mexicans betrays the essential role played by the latter in that process: not only does Mexico absorb material goods that are unwanted in the US, but it also plays a key role in building and maintaining the material conditions that make it possible for certain people in the US to decide to send their unwanted canned goods south of the border.

This rehashing of the lists that pop up across Urrea's book could continue, but the examples I give suffice to show that their function goes beyond an attempt to represent trash with language—although they certainly do just that. By using the same formal device to write about trash and trash dumps, current and historical events, popular culture, labor, food, the economy, and more, Urrea creates a rhetorical echo that resounds throughout the book. Given the centrality of the dump in the stories that Urrea tells and how well-suited the list is to representing the trash that fills that space, all of the other lists cannot help but remind the reader of the *dompe*. And this resonance is only strengthened when we take into account the list's formal ability to enact the concept of the threshold by highlighting its location between proliferation and containment, order and disorder, grammatical lack and referential excess. The result is an aesthetically and rhetorically effective rendering of the threshold quality of life on the border, both in and out of the dump.

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In emphasizing the formal techniques that Urrea deploys, I hope not to have lost sight of what is at stake in his attempt to capture the ex-

perience of life on the US-Mexico border at the dawn of the NAFTA era. It is, I think, a book that is more concerned with focusing the reader's attention on the ethical, political, economic, and ecological questions that the border region poses than foregrounding its own writerly qualities or rhetorical strategies. However, it is precisely those formal techniques that generate and sustain Urrea's complex approach to that experience of life. His time-lapse descriptions and proliferating lists compel us to reconsider the notion that the passage of time inevitably brings progress and show us how garbage and the way we deal with it are necessarily linked to other social, economic, cultural, and political phenomena. By thinking with the threshold, approaching the spaces of the border in a way that emphasizes their temporal in-betweenness, and suggesting that the limit quality of the garbage dump manifests itself in many other areas of life, Urrea does more than denounce the injustice that neoliberalism visits upon human communities. In a way that anticipates notions of capitalism as a strategy for organizing nature that have been developed in the quarter century since its publication, *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* portrays the advent of neoliberal economic policies as techniques for extracting value from the biotic communities that inhabit the border region until there is no value left and they can be cast aside like so much trash.[5]

The complex environmental stakes underlined in the book always seem to lead back to the dump, that ultimate threshold space that exists ambiguously in between past and future, nature and culture, life and death. In an especially horrific sequence, Urrea recounts how recent flooding had unearthed the remains of a number of children who had been buried next to the dump, creating a lake of sorts (this is the "lake of sleeping children" that gives the book its title). Such a scene is hard to stomach, but Urrea forces the reader to confront it and consider his or her own part in bringing it about when he says, "Swim in this lake for a minute [...] Jump in—you own it: it's Lake NAFTA" (46). A subsequent vignette in which he tells a story about the dump, opens with "Imagine this," (49), a command that invites us as readers to activate our imaginations; at the end of the episode, he concludes with the rhetorical question "Can you imagine such a scene?" (51) as a way of underscoring the generalized inability to imagine, understand, or identify with what has been told. This command and this question ("Imagine this…"; "Can you imagine such a scene?") are key rhetorical elements for framing all of the book's scenes of the *dompe* and its role in the life, economy, and nature of the border. In this sense, by simultaneously commanding us to enact our imaginative faculties and calling them into question, Urrea signals the representational limits of the scenes he narrates, his ability to narrate them, and our ability to perceive them. By the same token, however, it is only through attempting to tell the story (and listen to it) that we can glimpse the thresholds that bind us.

NOTES

[1] Born in Tijuana in 1955 and raised in both Mexico and the United States, Urrea is one of the most visible Mexican-American writers in the US literary sphere. The experience of the border and living between cultures that he portrays in *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* is a through line in all of his work, which is comprised of some 16 books of fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and memoir.

[2] Suffice it to say that the US-Mexico border has received a great deal of attention from academics, the media, and cultural agents; giving an adequate summary limited even to recent academic studies of the border is beyond the scope of this essay. However, I would direct readers' attention to two books that delve into the border's many paradoxes and tensions with great critical intelligence and explanatory aplomb. First, Claire F. Fox's *The Fence and the River* is a study that was undertaken in the years leading up to and just following implementation of NAFTA and therefore offers an analysis of border culture and politics from roughly the same moment as Urrea's book. Fox highlights contradictory discourses on freedom as they are registered in literature, cinema, photography, video, and performance art (including brief mentions of *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*) in order to show that "the border [...] must be understood as polyvalent, as a place where urban and rural, national and international spaces simultaneously coexist, often in complex and contradictory ways" (2-3). Additionally, in her analysis of the discourses evident in cultural production on the border, she does not lose sight of "the materiality of this 'constructed space' and the power it has to affect and structure the lives of those crossing it and divided by it" (14). A more recent book, Thomas Nail's *Theory of the Border*, underscores the tension between globalization's ideal of unfettered movement and the material constraints that border infrastructure—fences, walls, checkpoints, detention centers, biometric tools—places on bodies (1). Of particular relevance to the arguments I make in this essay is Nail's theorization of the "in-betweenness" of the border: it is a division that both separates and joins, a conceptual and physical space that simultaneously includes and excludes, and a geopolitical zone of relatively seamless continuity for some and stark division for others (2-5). The border is, in other words, a threshold.

[3] This is just to name a very few of the book-length studies on waste that have been published recently. Two excellent resources for tracking emerging developments on the study of waste are the Discard Studies website (Liboiron et al.) and the online interdisciplinary academic journal *Worldwide Waste*.

[4] The number of worthwhile contributions in this vein is far too great even to be able to give a representative sample here. Considering only book-length studies that focus on the representation of waste in the cultures of Spain and Latin America, interested readers should consult Gisela Heffes's *Políticas de la destrucción / Poéticas de la preservación*, Maite Zubiaurre's *Talking Trash: Cultural Uses of Waste*, and Samuel Amago's *Basura: Cultures of Waste in Contemporary Spain*. All of these works are exemplary of what Lawrence Buell calls the third wave of ecocriticism in that the discourses they engage with have clearly left behind the debates about the nature of nature that characterized early works of ecocriticism and instead take up the task of examining both human and nonhuman experience in environmental terms (21-22).

[5] Here I am thinking of the notion of the Capitalocene that environmental historian and historical geographer Jason W. Moore has advanced over the last several years. In particular, the arguments he sets forth in *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* (co-written with Raj Patel) about how capitalism depends on a cheap supply of nature, money, work, care, food, and lives, ring true in Urrea's portrayal of the way that the life of the border region is captured and put to work generating capital.

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