The Border: A Place of Contradictions

“These lands have always been here; the river of people has flowed for centuries. It is only the designation ‘border’ that is relatively new, and along with the term comes the life one lives in this ‘in-between world’ that makes us the ‘other,’ the marginalized. . .”

— Norma E. Cantu, professor of Latina/o literatures, Chicana/o literatures, border studies, folklore, women’s studies, creative writing, University of Texas at San Antonio.

A border is a literal and symbolic place where the laws, politics, values, and desires of two nations confront each other across a narrow line. The contrast often creates a third culture with its own languages, customs, and economies—the unique culture of the borderland.

The history of the U.S.–Mexico border begins with the European discovery and settlement of the New World. In pre-Columbian times the land on both sides was inhabited by people of many indigenous cultures who did not recognize a border. Over time, colonization, the Gold Rush, railroads, wars, immigration, NAFTA, drug trafficking, and many other events have shaped the culture and history of the border. Ironically, the U.S. Border Patrol was established in 1924 largely to stem the flow of Chinese immigrants illegally crossing the Mexican border to the U.S.

At the beginning of Into the Beautiful North, Nayeli and her companions experience the border as a threshold between the known and the unknown. Men in the novel, including Nayeli’s father, who have crossed the border have rarely or never been heard from again. Tales of hardship related to crossing and deportation are part of the lore and literature of their locale.

As Urrea’s novel illustrates, U.S. state and federal immigration laws affect millions of people in profound ways. Borders can serve as both physical and symbolic lines of demarcation, establishing stark lines of contrast between the people and nations they divide. Urrea’s characters bring a human face to illegal immigration, a topic that is frequently at the epicenter of political and social discourse between the U.S. and Mexico today.

Although many on both sides are drawn to the border for economic opportunity, it is also place of creativity and cultural opportunity, fostering the exchange of music and arts forms, new dialects, and culinary fusions. Urrea invites his readers to think of the border as more than a stark divide between nations—it is also the place where they blend.