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Crossing the Border into Poetry: Documenting the Undocumented and the Trauma of Migration in Javier Zamora's "Unaccompanied"

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Crossing the Border into Poetry: Documenting the Undocumented and the Trauma of Migration
in Javier Zamora's *Unaccompanied*

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

By
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Introduction

On a fall evening in a quaint brownstone at The Lillian Vernon Creative Writers House on New York University's campus, young poets and students, including myself, gathered to hear poet Javier Zamora, who was returning to his alma mater to read from his recent book of poetry, *Unaccompanied*, published in September of 2017. I and many eager MFA students sat close together in an intimate space and pulled out our notebooks in anticipation, but once he read the first lines of his poem "Abuelita Neli," we disregarded our notebooks for the higher pleasure of simply listening, being in the poem with him. "This is my 14th time pressing roses in fake passports" he began, "for each year I haven't climbed marañon trees." We were transfixed from the very start.

This is the first poem in the collection of *Unaccompanied*, which he dedicates to his grandmother. Immediately a collective understanding could be felt in the audience that this poetry is a deeply personal testimony of what it means to be undocumented in the United States. The timeliness of it was striking as well in the aftermath of President Trump's executive action to end Deferred Action for Early Childhood Arrivals (DACA) on September 5, 2017 and his campaign to use the Salvadoran gang MS13 to criminalize Central American immigrants and "sell draconian overhauls of Border issues" (Blitzer "Trump Uses"). As Zamora continued to read, the necessity of these poems at this political moment was made even clearer as they came to life in the room. These poems grapple with how to live with the precariousness of undocumented status and longing for a home that you cannot return to. Yet the political never overwhelmed the humanity of these poems and the joy of shaping language through the poetic form for those of us in the audience.

I was moved by the way in which Zamora's poems deal openly with his legal status as well as the scars from the trauma of crossing the border as a child, alone and without papers. At the age of nine Javier Zamora made the dangerous journey to join his young parents in California in 1999. They had fled their native land during the Salvadoran Civil War and paid a *coyote* to take their son across the border. He rode a bus from San Salvador to the Guatemala-Mexico border with his grandfather and then made the rest of the journey to the United States-Mexico border as an unaccompanied minor. This journey explains the title of the collection, *Unaccompanied*.

After the reading was over, I waited in line to speak with Zamora. When it was my turn, he signed my book, wrote a note of appreciation for supporting his poetry and agreed to answer some of my questions about his work via email. One of the first questions I asked him was how he separates his poetic voice from his personal voice because the poems of *Unaccompanied* are so autobiographical. He responded by saying that his poetic self is the one that he resists in the everyday. "My poems are based in the secrets and trauma I try to avoid in everyday conversation."¹ These secrets refer to his undocumented status and the trauma he suffered when he crossed the border. The poetic form allows him to access an experience that would otherwise remain unspoken or undocumented. This poetry is vulnerable in the way that it openly confronts immigration status, illuminating an experience that is so often cast in darkness.

To cross the border into poetry Zamora had to figure out how to deal with his trauma, how to confront the desert landscape of his crossing and the pain of being left behind by his parents at such a young age. These poems have to be personal and traumatic in order for him to gain some sort of control over his immigration status. Zamora told me via email that he "needed to be able to shape something. To mold it. To revise it. And to feel satisfied with it, and fast. I

¹ Email correspondence with Javier Zamora. See Appendix for full transcript of conversation.

needed this because of the hardships I was facing in my everyday life. I was undocumented.² I came from a working-class/poor family. When I started writing my family had lost everything in the housing crash. I needed to have control of something. Something immediate.” To be undocumented is to be without legal documentation that secures you a place in the country in which you reside. To be undocumented also means living with a constant fear of being deported or of someone you love being deported. In this project I often refer to the precariousness of immigration status to convey the experience of living with this uncertainty daily. It is by condensing his experience, shaping it, and revising the minutiae in a poem that he achieves some sort of control over his immigration status and the trauma of migration. He can have authority over words even if he cannot have that authority in official documents.

Zamora’s poetic self grapples with the difficulty of retracing traumatic memories as aspects of the journey itself come to him in flashes. In a *New Yorker* piece from September 19, 2017, Jonathan Blitzer writes that Zamora told him that a year before the book came out he was still dealing with what he called “a fifteen year playback.” It had been fifteen years since he crossed the border at age nine, and those memories were returning to him in fragments as he wrote the poems of *Unaccompanied*. Blitzer writes that “His memory was working on a delay. But it was something that he had learned to live with, even to harness. Some of his most specific and consequential memories were of things he’d forgotten” (“An Immigrant”). The poetic form allows him to harness the gaps or absences in his memory of his border crossing and even fill them. Cathy Caruth, one of the leading scholars of representations of trauma in literature, writes about the paradox of bearing witness to a violent event but being unable to know it in her essay “Traumatic Awakenings: Freud, Lacan, and the Ethics of Memory” (1996). I consider Zamora’s

² Though Zamora told me that while he was writing these poems he was undocumented, I do not know his current status.

“fifteen year playback” as an example of Caruth’s concept of “repetitive seeing” (91). She argues that “Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (91-92). Central to “repetitive seeing” is the delay of memory and the incomprehensibility of the experience (Caruth 92). For Zamora, the process of poetry making is a way of constantly re-seeing and revisiting sites of trauma through a circular way of viewing temporality.

Though the genre of *testimonio* is generally associated with prose, I use the term testimony in my project to articulate how Zamora’s poems serve as a means of documenting the experience of being undocumented and retracing personal, collective and projected memories of trauma. Caruth’s concept of “repetitive seeing” in the genre of *testimonio* informs how I read these poems that deal with remembering the trauma of the border crossing through a continual temporality.

The revision process in writing poetry is crucial for Zamora’s healing because he is able to revisit these sites of trauma and gain some sort of agency. Revision allows him to gain control of the haunting nature of “repetitive seeing” as he revisits it through language, molding words, shaping the body of a poem, and condensing the experience. When I asked him how he translates such deeply personal, traumatic experiences into poetry, he responded by highlighting how necessary the poetic process is for his healing:

In revision, the trauma becomes smaller. There’s joy in shaping it. In making smaller, literally, by cutting the unnecessary parts of the poem. So, the act of writing these traumatic poems down is necessary for my healing. The “translation” aspect of it is the remembering. Scientifically, we cannot remember the same thing twice, word for word, image for image, memory for memory. We create new neurons every time we recall a memory. Isn’t this translation? Isn’t this powerful as well? We can choose how to tell a story. I think these poems needed to be this traumatic.

Once Zamora gains agency through the revision process, this work becomes an act of resistance. To be able to choose how to tell a story, particularly for the undocumented migrant, who has been so marginalized, is a powerful form of resistance. These voices primarily exist in the shadows. The assumed fate of the undocumented person is to never truly verbalize their trauma, to never speak of the horrors they endured on the migrant trail. Zamora refuses to be silent and to live in the shadows.

By documenting himself through poetry, Zamora crafts his own poetics of resistance, a term that Chicano scholar and poet Alfred Arteaga writes about and embodies in his own work, *Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities* (1997). Arteaga writes that it is poetry, unlike prose, that illuminates the question of *how* one comes to be. Poetry emphasizes the way the Latino/a person understands his or her own identity. Arteaga notes, “Poetics in resistance juxtaposes alternate and competing means of conception. Narrative emphasizes the stuff of being; poetics the ways, or styles, of coming to be” (3). Zamora, I suggest, would agree that the process of poetry creates a unique space in which the Central American immigrant poet can capture the process through which he reclaims his identity and his trauma.

In this light, I also asked Zamora why poetry was the best medium for him to document the experience of his border crossing. I wondered if he had explored these themes in prose. He told me that prose simply takes longer. The sheer length rendered the content less immediate, less easily contained and malleable. Even though he worked on these poems over the course of many years, there is satisfaction in the immediacy of every revision. To contain meaning and emotion within such a small frame allows Zamora to use the poetic form as a means of understanding his trauma on his own terms and claiming agency in his life. The brevity of poetry

allows for Zamora to capture the fragmented nature of his memories of his crossing and his home and to shift between temporal modes to convey a more circular sense of time.

There is satisfaction in this poetry making for Zamora. Arteaga would agree that it is through the poetic mode that Latino and Chicano poets can respond to oppression and to the state of always being “foreign at home,” always “straddling a border” and “remaining always deportable” (4). Poetics of resistance, according to Arteaga, examines the power dynamics of competing ways of conceiving reality. Immigrant poets have constructed narratives that take possession of reality and write into the world an identity that has been largely erased or absent from the national literary and historical memory of the United States. Zamora specifically acknowledges his motivation to write poetry to represent the voice of the Central American immigrant that is often missing. Through our correspondence, Zamora told me he was frustrated that it was white Americans or Mexican Americans who dominated the conversation on immigration, those who had not been through it themselves. One of the most striking comments Zamora made, following Toni Morrison's advice to “write the book you want to read,” was that he wrote this book because there was no book like it when he was growing up. Though Zamora makes it clear that he writes for himself, he also writes for a Central American immigrant audience, one that is underrepresented in the literary world.

Zamora defines his work as immigrant poetics, but he also classifies it as nature poetry. He used to resist that term because of its white, Western history. It was reading Camille T. Dundy's anthology *Black Nature* that changed his mind; poets of color were producing work, in this nature poetry genre (email). Zamora's work luxuriates in the natural landscape of El Salvador and characterizes what it means to long for a home that you are prevented from returning to due to immigration status. In a profile in *The New York Times' Style Magazine* in

2017, “The Rooms Where Writers Work,” Zamora is one of the writers included. He is pictured at his home in San Rafael, California, looking out at the garden he and his father planted together, made up of unwanted plants his father gathered through his job as a landscaper. In the article, Zamora gives readers a window into his daily writing rituals. Being in nature, of course, is where he writes best: “In summer, I read on the bench outside to catch the breeze. More and more I’m hearing that there’s a lot of nature in my work. I think my affinity for it is a way of missing El Salvador. Growing up, we had lands with lots of animals and fruits and plants, and you could hear the waves crashing when you went to bed” (“Rooms Where”). Representing nostalgia for the natural landscape of home is essential for Zamora’s recovery mission. *Unaccompanied* captures this ache for a home that is not fully present in one’s memory and the cyclical nature of memory which continually brings him back to images of El Salvador.

Apart from the influence of nature, the act of documenting the undocumented serves a crucial role in Javier Zamora’s poetic project. Zamora places his biography at the center of his poetics such that his personal testimony of crossing the border as a child without papers becomes a form of documentation. Though this certainly does not stand in for the legal documentation he lacks, it is a way of grappling with this tenuous social position and gaining some form of agency. This process of documenting the undocumented is a refrain throughout *Unaccompanied*, as each section of poems is framed by selected lines in Spanish and English from Zamora’s favorite Salvadoran poet, Roque Dalton³ that refer to “*los eternos indocumentados*” or “the eternally undocumented.” *Unaccompanied* begins with lines from “Poema de amor” or “Poem of Love” in Spanish followed by their English translation. Zamora selects these lines to affirm that his poems

³ Dalton was also a journalist and political activist who joined the People’s Revolutionary Army in 1973, during the Salvadoran Civil War. For further information about Roque Dalton see “Revolutionary Endgame” pages 7-14 in Arturo Arias’ text *Taking Their Word: Literature and the Signs of Central America*. Also see “The Novel in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador” pages 61-71 in Linda J. Craft’s *Novels of Testimony and Resistance from Central America*.

honor the undocumented, "...The ones no one ever knows where they're from... the ones burned by bullets when they crossed the border...the eternally undocumented..." *Unaccompanied* is written for the countless undocumented migrants that have been burned by bullets when they crossed the border, those whose feet have bled from traversing the desert, those whose faces have blistered from exposure to the hot desert sun. These are migrants with unique and complex histories that have been forgotten, written out of history.

Zamora has us think of these lines of Dalton's poem as an ode to those who have suffered the trauma of the border crossing and have been condemned to a life in the shadows. This poetic project puts forth the voice of the undocumented, the ones no one ever knows where they're from. Dalton's "Poema de amor" concludes with a final elegy to "Los tristes más tristes del mundo, / mis compatriotas, / mis hermanos" —"the ones who are saddest in the world, / my compatriots, / my brothers" (Translation mine, 33-35). Zamora too is writing to honor brothers who have lived and died on the migrant trail, those he knew and those he did not. This poetry is written to document the trauma of the ones who are saddest in the world, the ones who remain unnamed.

This project asks what it means to cross the border into poetry. It begins by examining the poetics of the border. Just as Zamora crossed the border unaccompanied, referring to a space or status which is defined by negation: not accompanied, not legal, not a citizen, not American, the poems themselves occupy a space of negation. Their temporality is often unmoored to past, present or future as Zamora's status is also unfixed, placing him in a state of suspension. I often refer to this space in his poems as the "in between place." Zamora continually returns to the space of the border through a cyclical temporality. By focusing on his poems that deal with the experience of the border crossing in my first chapter, I argue that the border extends far beyond

its temporal and geographical parameters and therefore places Zamora in a state of suspension where he can never fully leave the border behind.

Moving in my second chapter to the final section of poems that focus on the poet's date of arrival in the U.S., I argue that the date of arrival for Zamora similarly becomes a component of his identity, and that the temporality of this day is also cyclical in that it never ends. In my final chapter, I focus on the poems of *Unaccompanied* that piece together or, in the language of anthropologist Sarah Coutin, "re/member" the El Salvador of the past through the perspective of being removed from that place and by accessing not only personal memory, but also collective, familial memory and imagined or projected memory. These poems document the undocumented, and I read them as testimonies of the precariousness of immigration status and how to piece together fragments of a home you are exiled from through multiple modes of remembering.

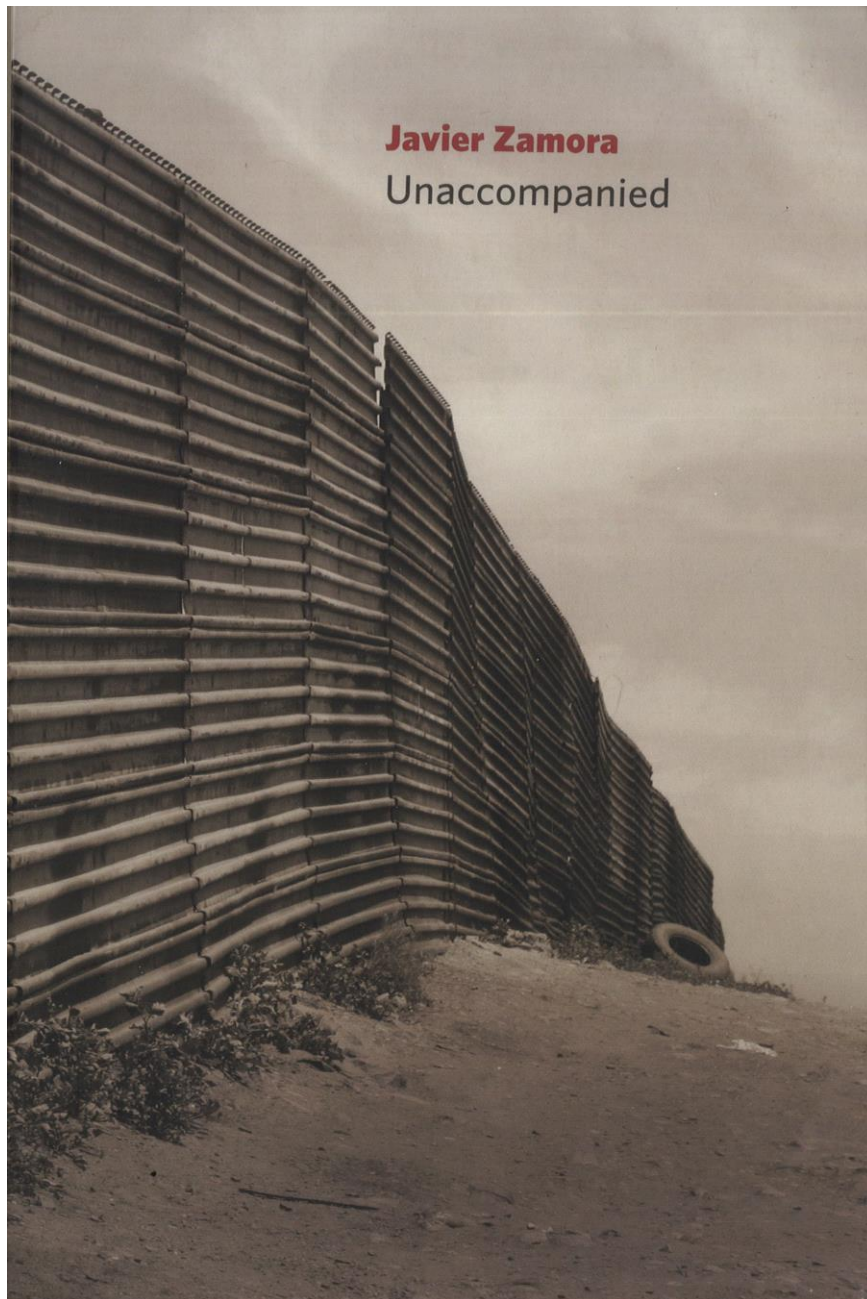
I put Zamora's poetry in conversation with anthropological texts such as *Exiled Home* by Susan Bibler Coutin and *The Land of Open Graves* by Jason De León. For my first chapter, I put *The Land of Open Graves*, a collection of testimonies of undocumented migrants along the migrant trail and photographs by Michael Wells that document the daily suffering and violence in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona, in conversation with Zamora's project. I use De León's anthropological analysis of the objects and bodies left behind in the desert as a lens through which to analyze the poems of *Unaccompanied* that deal directly with the suffering migrants endure crossing the Sonoran desert to demonstrate how Zamora similarly makes trauma visible and tangible. Both projects document pain that often remains undocumented, buried in the desert. *Exiled Home* provides the framework for my second and third chapters by looking at Zamora's work as a project to counter the trauma of migration and separation from homeland by reclaiming familial memory and piecing back together fragmented, personal memories of home.

I adopt Coutin's concept of "re/membering" to explain how a poetic project to retrace the footsteps of migration succeeds in putting back together a fractured identity and a shattered memory of home. I also employ Coutin's concept of nonlinear temporality as a means of accessing personal, collective, and imagined memory.

Chapter 1
**Poetry as Evidence of Trauma: Documenting the Scars of the Border Crossing
Through Circular Temporality**

“She closes her eyes. Where has she gone and what has she become? The blisters have healed, the bruises have faded, the evidence has vanished—everything dissolves like sugar in water. It’s easy to let that happen, so much easier to give in, to be who they want you to be: a thing that flares apart in the tumult, a thing that surrenders to the wind.”

-Cristina Henriquez, “Everything is Far From Here”



Before we even open Javier Zamora's *Unaccompanied*, we must confront the stark image of the border. The black and white photograph by Tomás Castelazo selected for the cover represents the iconic image of the wall along the U.S.-Mexico border receding into the distance. This wall does not look insurmountable; a slight opening forms where the boards don't quite meet. Though this wall is bendable and malleable, it is not easily so. This landscape is desolate, dry and uninviting. The human is strikingly absent here. A lone tire is cast off in the background, a remnant of a recent past and a reminder of the ghostly presence of those who have lost their lives in this desert landscape.

As the wall extends into the desert, its thin line disappears into the background. This image of the border gives the viewer the impression that it exists in a contained space with a clearly defined beginning and end. This image reinforces an idea of the border as having an obvious physical partition between past and present. In Javier Zamora's poetic representation of the border he complicates this notion. The border extends far beyond this thin line for Zamora. One does not simply cross over it; the border reaches far out into the undocumented migrant's life after his crossing. The poems of *Unaccompanied* deconstruct our way of conceiving of the border as a boundary that leaves the migrant on one side or the other. The border lives within him long after his crossing at age nine because he constantly relives the memory of it. Through the poetic form he crafts a temporal space that exists in a liminal world between flashes of memory and the present, creating the sense that the physical and mental trauma of the border crossing defies linear temporality.

Zamora returned as a young man to Tucson, Arizona, the place where he made his first attempt at crossing the border, to revisit the desert landscape that is so central to his poetic memory. "Saguaros," the second poem in the collection, was the result of that return. Saguaros

are arborescent cactus plants native to Mexico and the southwestern United States that can grow up to forty feet tall. Saguaros conjure images of the borderlands as they overwhelm the desert landscape between Mexico and the U.S.

The poem begins at dusk, in medias res, in the Sonoran desert as the speaker attempts to cross over to reunite with his parents in California. This is a landscape that is embedded in his memory with its lavender sky and barren land.

It was dusk for kilometers and bats in the lavender sky,
like spiders when a fly is caught, began to appear.
And there, not the promised land but barbwire and barbwire
with nothing growing under it (1-4).

There is treachery in this landscape: bats appear as spiders do when their prey is caught in their web, as *La Migra*, the immigration police, appears suddenly with little warning. The promised land is what many imagine the United States to be, a place of rebirth, a place of redemption. Zamora unmasks the illusion of the American dream that moves many people to immigrate. The speaker in the poem is haunted by the stark difference between the oppressive means through which the migrant must enter the U.S. and the fallacy of the utopian concept of the promised land.

By dispelling this idealistic conception of this territory and the U.S. as a promised land, Zamora makes a broader statement about the immigrant's idealistic and flawed conception of the American dream. The struggle to reach this promised land may not be worth it after all. Nothing grows here; there is only the reminder of barriers and lines that are dangerous to cross and barbed wire and barbed wire. This repetition emphasizes the endless nature of this crossing that does not offer new life or freedom as many may think. Barbed wire is another line associated with criminality that sets up a binary between the guilty and the innocent. In Gloria Anzaldúa's seminal book *Borderlands/ La Frontera: the New Mestiza* (1987) she theorizes that the binary of

the border inherently criminalizes migrants. She argues that “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge” (3). Though Anzaldúa’s reading of the border as a binary, narrow strip opposes Zamora’s conception of the border, it informs our understanding of the way in which border crossers are perceived. It is in Zamora’s repetition of barbed wire in the fourth line of “Saguaros” that suggests an inability to leave this status of criminality behind as it continues beyond the narrow, steep edge that Anzaldúa describes.

To transcend the barbed wire, the status of “illegal” or “criminal,” is evoked in the following lines of “Saguaros.” The temptation of flight can be felt as the speaker says, “I tried to fly that dusk/ after a bat said *la sangre del saguaro nos seduce*” (4-5). The appearance of bats in this poem not only suggests a menacing quality to the memory that unfolds but also reflects the one thing the speaker desperately wishes he could do but cannot: to fly over borders, to transcend the barbed wire. We can imagine a thirsty child looking up at these saguaros looming high above him and dreaming of flight, of cutting open the cactus for sustenance. These Spanish-speaking bats inspire the speaker to fly as they say, “the blood of the cactus seduces us.” Zamora switches between Spanish and English in order to convey a linguistic limbo as well as a physical and geographic limbo.

Then the poem shifts to the present moment and we zoom out from the childhood memory of crossing the desert. The speaker is haunted by memories of the thirst and hunger he experienced, but he also craves that landscape. In the present moment he returns to the site of his crossing, representing the cyclical nature of temporality. “Sometimes / I wake and my throat is dry, so I drive to botanical gardens / to search for red fruits at the top of saguaros, the ones / at dusk I threw rocks at for the sake of hunger” (5-8). This searching for the red fruits of the

saguaros continues far beyond childhood. The speaker is also searching for greater access to his past and his trauma. His throat is dry when he remembers the unbearable thirst he experienced, emphasizing a temporality which is not linear, but cyclical. Paradoxically, he can never find the saguaros “here,” where he resides now in the U.S. “These bats *speak English only*. / Sometimes in my car, that viscous red syrup / clings to my throat and I have to pull over—” (9-11). In this new landscape, the bats only speak English, but the memory of the crossing still lingers as a sticky, sanguine taste in the speaker’s mouth. These English-speaking bats are a reminder that though he is removed from the desert of his original crossing where the bats speak Spanish, this trauma is ever present in his body, revealing that the scars of the border crossing remain by constantly reliving the memories. This is a circular remembering that defies linear temporality. The desire to fly over the border is still visceral. It is as though the border crossing has never ended, as though the speaker is perpetually in this desert with a dry throat and an ache in his stomach.

The poem concludes by zooming back in to the scene of attempting to cross the border and to escape *La Migra*. Just as the speaker has reached the saguaros to satisfy his thirst and hunger, immigration police destroys this attempt at nourishment: “I also scraped needles first, then carved / those tall torsos for water, then spotlights drove me / and thirty others dashing into paloverdes” (12-14). To “carve” and “scrape” the “torsos” (12-13) of the cactus is to evoke the desperation of searching for water and to make tangible the sensation of thirst that is difficult to document as evidence of trauma. The poem ends with the image of immigration police, *La Migra*, surrounding a group of migrants and the sound of their empty bottles as they ran, “green-striped trucks surrounded us and our empty bottles/ rattled. When the trucks left, a cold cell swallowed us” (15-16). The cold cell refers to the *hieleras* or “ice boxes,” detention centers for

undocumented migrants known for their refrigerator-like temperatures and inhumane conditions (Luiselli, *Tell Me How* 21-22). It is uncertain if these migrants will be permitted to remain in the U.S. or be deported back. Zamora concludes the poem in this way to suggest that he is still emotionally, if not physically, stuck at this border crossing, detained in this in between space.

In “Sagueros,” Zamora not only explores the memory of crossing the border but also the way in which the speaker deals with these traumatic memories in the present. This trauma clings to his throat as the speaker remains perpetually in a middle place, somewhere in between the past and the present, somewhere between barbed wire and the “promised land.” Though the Zamora of the present is far removed from the site of his crossing, geographically and temporally, it continues to be a site of suffering for him as he emphasizes the sensation of the dryness that still lingers in his throat and the sound of the rattling of empty bottles ringing in his ears. Recollecting these sensations is to view the passing of time as cyclical rather than linear, representing trauma through Caruth’s concept of “repetitive seeing.”

Zamora memorializes his own border crossing through this poetic space which enables him to make the physical and mental suffering that is so often invisible tangible and visceral. He converts ephemeral sensations of his crossing such as thirst, hunger, and exhaustion into poetry to capture the trauma of the crossing that lingers and haunts his memories. The cyclical nature of how Zamora writes about the temporal serves as evidence of the trauma of his experience. Mirroring this desire to document the scars that remain long after the border crossing has ended, anthropologist and director of the Undocumented Migration Project, Jason De León makes concrete the realness of the trauma migrants experience in *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*. De León provides physical evidence that this journey extends far beyond the thin line of the border by recording stories and dialogues of undocumented migrants

crossing the Sonoran Desert and compiling photographs taken by Michael Wells. In his ethnographic and photographic study, De León, like Zamora, strives to make the invisible trauma of migrants visible.

In order to pinpoint evidence of trauma, De León employs the term *use wear* to attempt to capture some of the unseen pain that migrants endure. *Use wear* refers to modifications to objects that occur when people use them in various ways. De León utilizes two categories in this process of documentation: *wear patterns*, the result of an item's use in intended tasks and *modifications*, alterations that are made to objects to repair damage (181). De León crafts an archaeological and photographic record of the daily violence migrants experience as they walk across the Sonoran desert of Arizona. Both poetry and photography capture snapshots, documenting what is fleeting and unearthing memories buried in the desert. The person behind the camera bears witness to the visual degradation of those objects that serve as powerful testimonies of the brutal and aggressive nature of this migration. Zamora captures moments during his crossing that are transitory and fleeting, mirroring how De León employs the concept of *use wear* to make evidence of suffering more tangible and fixed.

De León memorializes the lost, treasured objects of migrants through the process of creating an archeological record through photography in order to unearth visual emblems that expose the trauma migrants experience but rarely disclose. These images just like Zamora's poetic images humanize an anonymous crossing. By tracking the fading traces of trauma through the items migrants leave behind unintentionally, De León uncovers love letters, battered, blood stained shoes, family photos, and pocket bibles that provide evidence of the desperate nature of the crossing where every personal belonging is sacred (170). In documenting these "residues of the past" the undocumented migrant's path, which is often cast in darkness and suspicion is

illuminated. The project of *The Land of Open Graves* just like the project of *Unaccompanied* documents what remains of a fragmented, violent journey, the residues of pain that never leave, but are suppressed and invisible to outside eyes.

Identifying physical suffering along the migrant trail presents a great challenge to the archeologist due to the ephemeral nature of its visible residue. Blood and vomit, for example, disintegrate, leaving little trace of the physical toll this journey takes on the individual. In order to visually represent the physical trauma of the crossing, *The Land of Open Graves* documents this pain through photographs of the beaten up shoes of someone who has fastened the separated sole with a bra strap (see figure 1) or through the image of a blistered, bandaged foot. Another photograph of a singular shoe, disintegrating and unearthed from the desert, is a haunting reminder of the absence of its owner (see figure 2). The questions are implicit in these images: is the wearer of this shoe still alive? Where are they now? The holes in a migrant's battered shoes demonstrate the physical trauma the wearer endured. A photograph memorializes signs of trauma that are difficult to document in a similar way that a poem can document the ephemeral traces of trauma through a circular temporality. These objects serve as testimonies of trauma, each one representing an individual narrative that would normally remain undocumented.



Fig. 1. Migrant shoes recovered in the Tumacácori Mountains. They have been repaired with a bra strap and cord to reattach the soles to the uppers. Photo by Michael Wells. (De Leon 181)

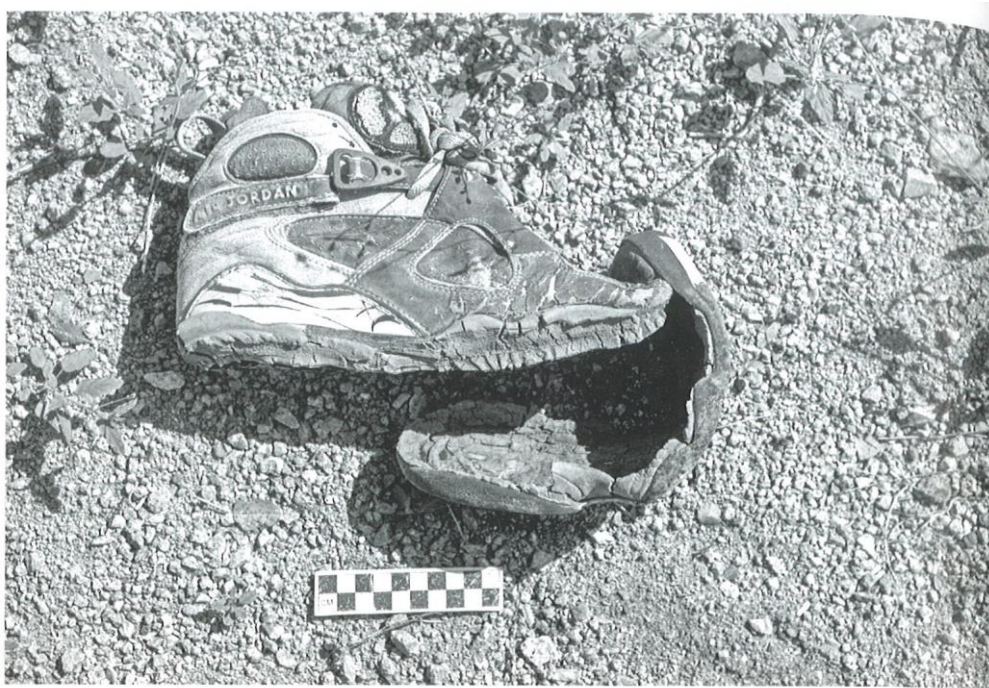


Fig. 2. Air Jordan, Sonoran Desert, July 2010. Photo by Michael Wells. (De Leon 272)

Javier Zamora's poetry is his own process of making emotional and physical trauma visible, especially the trauma that lives on within him long after the border crossing has ended. Both Zamora and De León reveal what is most unseen during this desert crossing: the thirst, exhaustion, the heat, and the psychological toll it takes. The photographic project and the poetic project strive to get at the realness and complexity of this crossing as well as to personalize it. In his introduction, De León describes that the migrants he interviewed always encouraged him to show their faces in his book because they wanted to document themselves, to insert faces and human stories into the immigration debate (19). De León writes, "The undocumented wanted you to see them as people. They wanted you to see what they go through and how the process of migration impacts their lives" (19). As Javier Zamora takes his readers on a poetic journey in which he documents the undocumented migrant's experience, De León takes his readers on an archaeological expedition to help them gain access to trauma of the borderlands that is rarely ever documented.

Even for migrants whose crossing was successful, they rarely ever speak of the trauma they have endured. Though the scars of this trauma are still present, to make them visible is to relive the trauma. Migrants' silence reveals an additional layer of difficulty in representing the reality of this trauma. "The act of remembering can conjure pain, fear, and despair," De León points out. "Among American families with undocumented members, it is not uncommon for the topic of their crossing to be a forbidden subject" (168). For Zamora the act of remembering conjures memories of fear and despair, but he translates this difficulty of remembering through the poetic form as a means of asserting some control over his tenuous status.

Both De León and Zamora subvert the notion that the undocumented migrant must deny his/her trauma. In Arturo Arias' essay "Central American-Americans? Latinos and Latin

American Subjectivities” he discusses the complex way in which Central American-Americans deal with the trauma of their migration and the difficulty of verbalizing the horrors they have faced. This is a population that has been condemned to forced exile due to the violence of their homelands. Central American-Americans’ trauma is multiplied two fold as they suffer trauma in their home countries and in the process of crossing the border (Arias 189). For this vulnerable group to “preserve itself,” Arias argues, they must deny their status as victims (189). By putting Arias’ essay in conversation with *Unaccompanied* and *The Land of Open Graves*, we can think of these texts as responding to the argument that the Central American-American identity is defined by its negation of trauma.

By distancing the self from a violent past, the Central American-American denies their origins and the trauma that formed them. By pretending this trauma did not happen to them and treating it as a source of shame, Arias writes, the Central American-American attempts to overcome the pain of their past by denying it (189). To transcend this pain is therefore impossible because it is fundamental to this Central American-American identity. It is a fractured identity as Central American-Americans “end up living not only between borders, but also between identities. Often in denial of their own being...” (Arias 189). Zamora’s expression of his conception of his own identity after his migration is the opposite of how Arias portrays the collective fractured nature of Central American-American identities shaped out of trauma. Zamora’s project is to return continually to the liminal space, to the site of his trauma and suffering in order to document himself and other undocumented migrants. Though his expression of his Salvadoran American identity is in between identities, he addresses the root of his trauma: crossing the border unaccompanied as a child. He does not deny his own being as Arias puts it;

he claims the origins of his duality and his fragmented self. De León similarly seeks to defy this fate that migrants are condemned to remain silent and ashamed about their trauma.

Central to subverting this shame surrounding the border crossing is documenting how the trauma extends far beyond the thin line of the border. Zamora continually crafts a poetic space in which the border crossing remains present, emphasizing a temporality that is circular rather than linear. As much as it is a site of violence, loss of childhood innocence, and a site of identity formation, the border crossing is also a source of strength. In his poem “To President-Elect,” Zamora writes a prose poem to Donald Trump before his inauguration. The poem takes the form of a letter to those in power who understand little about the horrors migrants face along this journey. Zamora writes in present tense, reliving the trauma of his migration and making visible what is rarely documented about the migrant’s relationship to the border. The poem begins:

There’s no fence, there’s a tunnel, there’s a hole in the wall, yes,
you think right now ¿no one is running? Then who is it that sweats
and shits their shit there for the cactus. We craved water; our piss
turned the brightest yellow—I am not the only nine-year-old
who has slipped my backpack under the ranchers’ fences. (1-5)

This landscape is aggressive and the conditions that men, women, and children live in as they make this crossing are unimaginable. The poem serves as an indictment of a system that devalues the lives of those who are poor and disenfranchised, the lives of children in particular, who like Zamora, are making this dangerous journey unaccompanied every day. These lines capture an unseen trauma that, like the photographs of *The Land of Open Graves*, document the hardships that are rarely verbalized or written down. To yearn for water, slipping under fences in the night, and performing basic human functions in the desert are snapshots of the trauma of the border crossing that is so difficult to make tangible.

As Zamora documents his memories of the crossing, the place of crossroads remains a space he keeps returning to, the precarious position in between his past and his future. The van that took him from the Sonoran desert in Arizona (the Devil's Highway) represents yet another stage of this journey and a traumatic moment that never leaves him. Inside it he continues to be in a state of limbo, in a vehicle representing yet another liminal place. He writes, "I'm still / in that van that picked us up from Devil's Highway" (5-6). A part of himself remains in the borderlands, stuck in the liminal space. To still be in that van long after the crossing has ended is also to view temporality as cyclical, to constantly be living in the present while returning to the past.

"To President-Elect" ends with the need to remind the President-elect of the countless people who have died along the journey. They are those "drybacks who ran with dogs / chasing after them," (8-9) writes Zamora. These dead migrants are unnamed and truly trapped in the borderlands; they return at night to speak to those who managed to survive. Zamora gives voice to the most voiceless people: the dead, undocumented migrants, imagining that the unnamed dead can speak to the living. Affectionately, they speak to him: "*Sobreviviste bicho, sobreviviste carnal*" (10). I would translate this as, "you survived bug, you survived brother." The use of nicknames establishes the reverence and affection with which we can imagine the dead migrants would speak to those who made it through the journey. Though the conventional translation of the Spanish verb *sobrevivir* is to survive, Zamora chooses to translate this as to "over-live." The speaker responds by saying "Yes, we over-lived" (10). To over-live is to experience too much for one lifetime. By giving the dead the power to inform the living that they have not only survived the brutal journey, but that they have lived too much for one human being, Zamora

captures an intimate understanding of trauma among those who have fought for survival in the borderlands.

Zamora's poetic expression of his migrant identity is not one of shame, nor is it one that rejects his status as victim. The border and the people of the borderlands remain central to his poetry long after his crossing. It is the site of his childhood trauma, but it is also where he claims power as a Salvadoran-American, as someone who lives perpetually in between worlds. By making visible the scars of the border crossing and bringing it out of the shadows, Zamora attempts to gain agency over his in between status.

In a poem eulogizing a fellow border crosser, Zamora continues to communicate what he means when he says the undocumented migrant "over-lives," providing an intimate window into this migrant experience. "Second Attempt Crossing" is a tribute to Chino, a Salvadoran youth fleeing the violence of the MS 13 gang only to be murdered by them when he reached the U.S. The poem begins in the middle, in the liminal space, in a desert "That didn't look like sand / and sand only" (1-2). This desert is a new kind of place. Not only is the speaker in the middle of a desert, he is also in the middle of shrubs. "In the middle of those acacias, whiptails, and coyotes, someone yelled / '¡La Migra!' and everyone ran" (3-4). This is a desert landscape in which bodies move rapidly but also must stop quickly and hide and wait. The acacias and whiptails conjure an image of stillness disrupted by the warning call of ¡La Migra! as people sprint away as fast as possible. The next image is of forty people packed tightly together, sleeping in a dried creek. Chino lies next to the speaker: "we turned to each other, / and you flew from my side in the dirt" (5-6). This sense of intimacy, to feel the absence of another's body next to you, reveals, like the photographs of *The Land of Open Graves*, the ghostliness of the absence of someone. The photograph of a shoe without its owner evokes a similar, eerie sensation of the absence of

the human. Both these lines and the photographs convey an unnatural separation that emphasizes the moments of violence that occur along the migrant trail. By recording absence we are reminded more viscerally of the brutality of this journey.

In a dialogue with Chino in the second person, the reader is automatically implicated in the conversation of the poem and emotionally connected to both speaker and subject. The speaker's relationship to Chino is evoked by the scene of a herd of people fleeing immigration police while Chino runs back, endangering himself to lift the speaker onto his shoulders: "Against the herd of legs, / you sprinted back toward me, / I jumped on your shoulders, / and we ran from the white trucks, then their guns" (9-12). This act of generosity and compassion reinforces the humanity of this experience, documenting the selflessness of this friendship. Next, the speaker yells out to Chino to protect him from La Migra: "I said freeze Chino, '¡para por favor!'" (13). Zamora transitions seamlessly from English to Spanish and situates the reader in a linguistic in between place where we are also between English and Spanish, mirroring the physical in between space the speaker inhabits.

Not only does Zamora capture the loving and human side of migration to counter the anonymous nature of this journey, but he also expresses the guilt and regret that come along with never having thanked the man who so compassionately protected him. Zamora writes "So I wouldn't touch their legs that kicked you, / you pushed me under your chest, / and I've never thanked you" (14-16). Tenderness is not often found on the migrant trail. To push someone under your chest as you are kicked reveals the violence and brutality migrants undergo when crossing the border. Zamora employs softer language to convey the tenderness of this act. The word "touch," in contrast to the unforgiving, impersonal nature of this experience, reminds us that there is still a possibility for human connection and to document a personal experience. As

De León's project reminds us of the faces, names, and treasured objects of migrants, this poem reminds us of the individual, human stories of migration.

This poem serves as an elegy to Chino, a farewell to a friend who experienced this shared trauma. Though he only knew him by Chino and never saw him after their paths diverged, this experience was one that would unite them:

Beautiful Chino—
 the only name I know to call you by—
 farewell your tattooed chest: the M,
 the S, the 13. Farewell
 the phone number you gave me
 when you went east to Virginia,
 and I went west to San Francisco. (17-23)

Chino's tattoo, an emblem of the criminal underworld of El Salvador that these two are fleeing from, reminds the reader that migration is rarely a choice, but rather a forced movement. The MS-13 gang, though originally founded in Los Angeles, California in the 1980s, had spread throughout the U.S. and Central America (Blitzer, "Trump Uses"). The text branded onto the bodies of countless Central Americans not only serves as an obvious emblem of their allegiance to the gang, but also as a visual marker of their initiation into a family, ruthless, but a family just the same. If we think of the letters MS and the number 13 as a text itself that documents Chino's identity, we can think of this poem that eulogizes the unnamed border crosser as a replacement for the gang symbol and as a way of rewriting and documenting his identity.

By the end of the poem we know that Chino and the speaker stayed in touch after they went their separate ways. Zamora concludes the poem by lovingly addressing Chino in second person:

You called twice a month,
 then your cousin said the gang you ran from
 in San Salvador
 found you in Alexandria. Farewell

your brown arms that shielded me then,
that shield me now, from La Migra. (24-29)

Zamora writes this tribute to Chino after the gang he ran from got retribution and he was killed. Given that this experience is often so anonymous, Zamora provides an intimate, sensitive portrait of a friendship formed out of traumatic circumstances. This poem's conversational tone gives the reader greater access to the familial bond that is formed between two migrants in the space of the borderlands. Even after his death, his brown arms shield him from much more than *La Migra*, the immigration police at the border. More broadly, they shield the speaker far into the future. This temporal circularity reinforces Zamora's sense of continually living in the space of the borderlands. We see how nonlinear remembering and inhabiting the in between space becomes a source of strength for Zamora.

This portrait of migration is one that is often suppressed, a voyage that migrants are often silent about. In this way, Zamora not only memorializes Chino, he also memorializes an experience of friendship that the borderlands gave him. Zamora not only demonstrates how powerfully the border crossing experience has remained present in his life, but he also makes visible the human aspects of this journey that are rarely ever documented.

Zamora permits his traumatic history to be central to his poetic self-expression. Rather than denying the violence of his border crossing, he confronts it as central to his identity. As he strikingly puts it in "To President-Elect," he is still in that van that took him from the devil's highway. The border for Zamora is a site of trauma that he is not ashamed of. De León's project similarly counteracts the shame surrounding the experiences of undocumented migrants. As Zamora crosses the border into poetry, the border remains ever present in his thinking about what it means to be displaced, torn from homeland, and separated from loved ones.

Even in Javier Zamora's poems that do not specifically discuss the process of the border crossing, the durability of the border remains central to his poetic memory. In his poem "Abuelita Neli," though not about the border crossing explicitly, the border and the circularity of time plays a central role in how he reflects on the inaccessibility of home. The border crossing does not represent an easy division between past and present. The trauma of the borderlands lives on for Zamora and it is through crossing the desert into poetry that he crafts a liminal space where he can access that trauma. Zamora brings the border experience out of the shadows and documents physical and mental evidence of trauma.

In a work of fiction author of *The Book of Unknown Americans*, Cristina Henríquez, articulates how evidence of trauma from the border crossing fades and the scars become invisible to outside eyes. In her short story, published in *The New Yorker* in 2017 "Everything is Far From Here," about a young woman who crosses the border and is separated from her young son along the way, she highlights what it means for the evidence of trauma from the migrant trail to disappear but for the scars to remain long after the crossing has ended. The story concludes poignantly: "The blisters have healed, the bruises have faded, the evidence has vanished—everything dissolves like sugar in water" (Henríquez, "Everything is Far"). Though the residue of violence disintegrates and "dissolves like sugar in water," the trauma remains as present as ever. The conclusion of Henríquez's work of fiction expresses what I argue Zamora and De León strive to document. Henríquez goes on to write that it is easy for the visible traces of trauma to disappear, "So much easier to give in, to be who they want you to be: a thing that flares apart in the tumult, a thing that surrenders to the wind" ("Everything is Far"). It is a poetic project like Zamora's or an anthropological project like De León's that defy this narrative of giving in and forgetting. The evidence of trauma may have vanished, but the trauma of the border crossing

extends far into the future, long after the physical crossing has ended, defying the linearity of time and documenting this trauma, refusing to surrender to the wind.

Chapter 2

Living in the Gap Between Leaving and Arriving

“Partir es morir un poco. Llegar nunca es llegar” — “To leave is to die a little. To arrive is never to arrive.”

-Immigrant’s Prayer

In the previous chapter we saw how for Zamora, the experience of the border crossing extends far into the future, long after the physical crossing has ended. In this chapter I argue that the experience of the border manifests as a way of being trapped between the action of leaving and arriving. In Javier Zamora’s *Unaccompanied*, as in the “Immigrant’s Prayer,” (Luiselli, *Tell Me How* 98) to leave is to die a little and to arrive is never to arrive. To live in this paradox is to always exist in between worlds. Balancing precariously between life and death, between leaving home and moving toward an unknown destination, the immigrant’s prayer, recited by countless undocumented migrants atop the freight trains of *La Bestia*,⁴ encapsulates an identity that Zamora represents in his poetics. This identity is one that exists somewhere between leaving and arriving. I argue that the action of arriving for Zamora is an action that does not end. He is perpetually in between place of origin and destination, just as he is perpetually in the space of the border crossing through a temporal circularity as I argued in the previous chapter. Zamora’s larger project is also to document the voices of the undocumented, writing in one of the poems that I will discuss later in this chapter, of his role as poet to document the real names of his undocumented family members when they themselves must identify themselves with false names.

⁴ *La Bestia* or “The Beast” refers to the freight trains that run from the Guatemala-Mexico border to the U.S. About half a million unaccompanied children ride the rails on top of *La Bestia* annually. It is a 1,450-mile journey that countless men, women, and children from Central America embark on. Many migrants are severely injured or killed by the monster that is *La Bestia* along the way. (Luiselli 98). For more extensive information refer to Oscar Martinez’s *The Beast*, pages 49-65.

June 10, 1999 marks the day when Zamora arrived in the U.S. after an eight-week journey through the desert as an unaccompanied minor. Though this day commemorates a joyful event, the reunification with his parents, it also represents a day of mourning. He mourns the loss of home but also must face the reality that he has arrived in a country where he is unwanted. June 10, 1999 is the title Zamora selected for the last cycle of poems in *Unaccompanied* in which he confronts the tension between the rupture of leaving home as a child and the legal barriers that prevent him from truly arriving and belonging.

All of the poems in this final section begin with the testimonial “I” followed by a period. By foregrounding the first person, Zamora puts forth a poetic testimony, documenting both himself and a larger, collective immigrant experience of being in between leaving and arriving. In some of the poems, Zamora shifts immediately from the first person to the second person frame. In the fifth poem, the self is split as the speaker is in dialogue with himself, frustrated that he is defined by the date of his arrival. “Javier here you go / about same shit / when will your status change / when will you stop / not being that June 10 / let it go man” (83, 1-6). Zamora expresses the precariousness and fear surrounding immigration status, of not knowing where you belong. The date of his arrival is a day that has no temporal end, which acts as an identity, a way of being. The speaker’s anger towards this way of defining oneself is evident and illuminates the difficulty of living daily in the border space, within the boundaries of this singular day. Just as the action of arriving continues, Zamora expands the temporal boundaries of this day to convey the ongoing state of being in between worlds. Just as the desert crossing extends far beyond the thin dividing line that is the geographical space of the border, June 10, 1999 stretches far beyond into the future. By employing the second person frame in this poem Zamora splits the self, expressing the duality of his identity.

As *Unaccompanied* provides a lens through which we can understand the in between space the undocumented person inhabits, Susan Bibler Coutin's book *Exiled Home* (2016) documents the experiences of Salvadoran children who migrated with their families to the United States during the Salvadoran Civil War from 1980 to 1992. In weaving together her own analysis and testimonies of Salvadoran immigrants, she explores the implications of what she refers to as "living in the gap." This term is especially relevant for Zamora's poetic project as it refers to the tenuous position the migrant occupies between estrangement from homeland and estrangement from the U.S. To "live in the gap" is to be between longing to return home and longing to belong. Coutin's discussion of what it means to "live in the gap" for many Salvadoran-American youths provides a crucial framework for understanding Zamora's poetic project.

These "gaps" are sites of trauma and violence resulting from civil war and economic conditions in the home country, the border crossing, as well as facing racism and anti-immigrant rhetoric and susceptibility to crime and poverty in the host country and uncertain immigration status (Coutin 56). Coutin discusses this idea of "living in the gap" as a new location that Salvadoran Americans inhabit due to being doubly exiled from place of origin and place of residence. Coutin argues:

To many, the nature of this location was not particularly clear, as the dismemberment brought about through the violence of the Salvadoran civil war, of emigrating, and of being denied full membership in the United States placed them in gaps or 'everyday ruptures' between El Salvador and the United States, law and illegality, protection and vulnerability, belonging and exclusion, and the many ethnic and racial categories that they encountered." (56)

These gaps are the result of separation from close family members at young ages as well as the unjust treatment they receive by the immigration system (Coutin 57). To live within the gap is, as Zamora puts it, to be that June 10, 1999, to be stuck between legality and illegality, between leaving and arriving. These everyday ruptures reinforce the undocumented immigrant's

suspended status and the precarious social position of being undocumented and prevented from belonging in the host country.

Javier Zamora's June 10, 1999 poems exemplify this experience of living in between, in the gap between worlds. The trauma of separation from his grandmother at age nine is the common thread that unites this poetic cycle. It is in the stark division, linguistic and geographical, that Zamora highlights the gravity of this separation. Continuing in second person the speaker reminds Zamora of the distance between himself and his grandmother:

This is not Abuelita
 who you couldn't call
 those eight weeks she lit a candle every night
 to light your path
 You can't even tell her la quiero
 la quiero mucho
 only here in a language she don't speak. (83, 7-14)

The temporality of these lines shifts from past to present; as a child he could not hear her voice during his border crossing nor can he be with her and speak with her in the present moment. We know that the candles his grandmother lights for him can only metaphorically keep him safe along the journey, reinforcing his grandmother's powerlessness to protect him physically and emphasizing the heartbreak of this separation. This rupture, as Coutin refers to the trauma of being torn from homeland and loved ones, (56) represents the way in which separation indelibly marks you and reinforces the extension of the border space. The merging of past and present reflects a temporality that is cyclical and that places the speaker perpetually in between past and present.

The violent rupture Salvadoran youths experience through migration to the U.S. can be counteracted by projects that do just what Zamora does. In Coutin's discussion of living in the gap, she highlights that where there are gaps there are also openings. These openings allow for

new possibilities within which creative and innovative spaces can develop (Coutin 57). Collective projects that focus on remembering the past as well as reclaiming it arise out of “living in the gap.” Coutin writes: “Thus, by living in the gap, Salvadoran youths do not eliminate disjuncture, rather they make something of it, they re/member, putting back together the families, nations, communities, and lives taken apart by trauma, war, the nation-state form, and global inequalities” (57). The violent dismemberment of leaving home at a young age is dealt with through this process of “re/membering” (207). The slash isolating “re” from the rest of the word “membering” emphasizes that piecing together a fractured, fading past is central to the process of remembering for undocumented immigrants who have suffered great trauma. Javier Zamora’s poetic project, I argue, is very much a process of “re/membering,” recovering flashes of memory through the poetic form and healing the trauma of being separated from home by reconstructing the broken pieces of identity. Central to this reconstruction or “re/membering” is adopting the voices of loved ones, as Zamora does in “Abuelita Says Goodbye” in order to heal from separation from homeland at such a young age.

Las despedidas (or goodbyes) are significant poetic moments in *Unaccompanied*. Zamora communicates this experience of never being able to truly arrive by expressing the act of leaving in such a way that it has no temporal end. Like the day of arrival, the day of departure extends far beyond its temporal borders. Referring to the day he had to leave home, Zamora writes:

I’ve carried this since that day,
I’m talking about the flor de izote in our fence
the one Abuelita plucked
mixed with eggs that dawn she was crying
I didn’t know why. (90, 17-21)

The goodbye is prolonged as he carries within him the white *flor de izote* of El Salvador.

Looking back on this moment retrospectively, as a child he did not understand his grandmother’s

tears. Zamora captures how this moment lingers into the future by employing the image of carrying the flower over the border as a tangible reminder of the roots that tether him to home. He is also able to better understand what it meant for his grandmother to be left behind.

In the poem, “Abuelita Says Goodbye,” rather than employing the first person, Zamora assumes the voice of his grandmother, savoring the sensations of this moment of goodbye. From the perspective of the older generation, Zamora expresses what is lost after migration and the anxiety on the part of the one who is left behind that they will disappear from the memory of their loved ones. The one who leaves also experiences the anxiety of having to fight not to forget. “Javercito, you’re leaving me tomorrow” says his grandmother. “When our tortilla-and-milk breaths will whisper / te amo. When I’ll pray the sun won’t devour / your northbound steps” (58, 1-4). By assuming his grandmother’s voice and imagining that her prayers shield him from the physical pain of the border crossing, Zamora claims some degree of agency after the trauma of this separation or rupture. The intimacy of these lines reveals the way in which Zamora reclaims fading memories of his grandmother and uses the past to give him strength in the present. The past continually informs the present in a circular way.

Abuelita Neli’s goodbye serves as a prayer for his return one day in the future. “Let your shadow return,” (10) she says. “Call me mamá, / not Abuelita” (11-12). Only his shadow can return because just like he can never truly arrive, he can never truly return. Perhaps only the shadow of who he was can return. After so much time has passed and he has made a life for himself in the U.S., he would be a specter to his grandmother, a shadow of the man he would have become had he stayed. As a parting gift she gives her grandson a conch shell to carry with him over the border. This shell is “swallowed with this delta’s waves and the sound of absorbing sand” she says (5-6). This treasured object is invested with magical properties and serves as a

reminder of the homeland that shaped him but also a constant physical reminder of his estrangement from it. His grandmother tells him to listen to that shell at the “shore of somewhere” when he arrives in the U.S. She has no connection to her grandson’s destination, no way of flying over the border to meet him there, but he can access the memory of her through this poetic image of listening to the conch shell and hearing the ocean sounds of home, the same sound his grandmother would hear. This prayer ends with his grandmother's tender, humble request: “Listen to this conch. / Don’t lose me” (17-18). Though the difficulty of obtaining a visa prevents his shadow from returning to his grandmother, the poetic image of being bound together through the ocean serves as a way to counter the trauma of separation. The shell is a metaphor for how the poetic mode allows for loved ones to be connected across borders. It is in conjuring the image of carrying yet another object of home over the border that Zamora is able to gain agency in the precarious position he inhabits as an undocumented person torn from homeland.

To deal with the tenuous position he inhabits between two worlds, stuck in the in between place, Zamora stretches the temporal boundaries of moments of goodbye and of the date of arrival just as he does through the sensations of crossing the desert as I argue in chapter 1. June 10, 1999 is not simply one day with a clear beginning and end for Zamora. It defines how he is treated in the U.S. and officially marks him as undocumented and a stranger in the place he resides. This date condemns him in some ways as an outsider. In this final cycle of “June 10, 1999” poems Zamora articulates the exterior barriers that prevent him from fully arriving and force him to live within the space of this date continually, once again expressing a nonlinear notion of time. “I wasn’t born here / I’ve always known this country wanted me dead” (87, 1-2). To be demonized and threatened by the country in which you sought refuge only increases the trauma two fold of the border crossing itself. Zamora also communicates the racism that

predominates the rhetoric surrounding immigration and the complex role of “living in the gap” between legality and illegality, between security and the unknown, as well as not being white enough to be accepted as American. Zamora writes “A white man passed a bill that wants me deported / wants my family deported” (87, 5-6). This illuminates the difficulty of fully arriving when you live within this fear that you or your loved ones could be sent back. The trauma of separation is continually made present in this way and there is no leaving it behind.

Zamora also captures what it is to live “in the gap” between vulnerability and protection, illegality and legality as Coutin puts it in *Exiled Home*. The everyday moments of going to the airport, of looking at signs along the drive, as well as the natural surroundings, are reminders that he is unwanted in this new home. “Driving to the airport today / the road the trees the signs the sky the cars the walls the lights / told me we want you / out out out out” (87, 9-12). Even the natural landscape is a reminder of his status and the way in which he is perpetually suspended within that date of arrival. Zamora is simultaneously in exile and at home. In Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/ La Frontera* (1987) she theorizes what it is to straddle the Texas-U.S.

Southwest/Mexican border, to be caught between two opposing worlds and to maintain a constantly shifting identity. The book’s chapter titled “*El Retorno*” or “the return” includes a poem that captures the duality of living within the border space. In “To Live in the Borderlands means you” one must reconcile opposing cultures and languages that are at war with one another (Anzaldúa 194). Anzaldúa’s poetry and prose switches from Spanish to English to capture what she calls the “language of the Borderlands” (Preface). She writes that “Cuando vives en la frontera” (When you live in the border) “people walk through you, the wind steals your voice... In the borderlands you are at home, a stranger” (12-13, 30). Though Zamora’s poetry demonstrates how the border is not binary, he does convey a parallel experience of living in a

space of estrangement, as a stranger at home, existing in limbo between leaving and arriving. As the wind robs the speaker of her voice, Zamora also captures a similar sentiment that to occupy this precarious position of being in between is to be disenfranchised. June 10, 1999 is a haunting reminder of the endless nature of the act of arriving. This date in Zamora's poems defies the linear temporality of past, present, and future because it represents an identity that is suspended in time between departure and arrival.

As the "Immigrant's Prayer" communicates, Zamora deals with what it means to leave a place behind knowing that you may not return for a long time, and when you do that your home country will only be a shadow of what it was before you left. In the poem "Vows," the speaker tries to convey what it means to lose the landscape of childhood though it is difficult to put into words: "What I mean is / I can never go back. Amor, know more than I love you / quite possibly I love the bay at low tide, / even possibly, mangrove roots with bright-orange crabs" (13-16). To leave a place you are so in love with and that has shaped you is to die a little as the "Immigrant's Prayer" reminds us. The pull of the tide of the beaches of home is strong, and though Zamora cannot return to this place, he cannot arrive in the U.S. either. This poem is a vow the speaker makes to a lost homeland. Vows are unbreakable promises, and Zamora can never sever the connection he has to his past. Due to his physical displacement, the only way he can fulfill this vow is by "re/membering" or piecing back together the landscape of home.

If you cannot return home physically, the poetic mode may be the only means through which you can heal from the rupture of being exiled from it. The speaker goes on to address his lover, saying "You can't know what it's like to have that place / disappear, those brown waves, those bright-orange crabs, / what I really mean when I say I can never go back" (69, 17-19). The only way to counteract the disappearance of this place is to poeticize the flashes of memory from

childhood. He creates a temporal space which allows him to document what it means for an undocumented person to “live in the gap” between leaving and arriving and between returning and remaining.

In the final poem of the June 10, 1999 cycle of *Unaccompanied*, Zamora shows that the poetic form is a work of documentation. He writes that as his undocumented family members work under false names and assume other identities to protect their status, he takes on the opposite role of writing their real names as an act of documentation. “Everyone’s working / Mom Dad Tía Lupe Tía Mali / working under different names / I sit here writing our names” (91, 32-45). Zamora’s poetic project brings these names into the light and out of the shadows, documenting how the trauma of crossing the border extends far beyond the desert crossing and the thin line of the border. Zamora demonstrates what it means to live “in the gap” between leaving part of oneself behind in one’s homeland and the ongoing nature of arriving in one’s new home.

This final poem concludes where we began in Zamora’s poem “Sagueros,” analyzed in chapter one. The trauma of the crossing can still be felt as the sensation of thirst still lingers, emphasizing a temporality that is cyclical, continually returning to the space of the border crossing. “My throat is dry,” he says “and sick and still / nothing has changed” (91, 39-41). Long after the crossing, he remains in the border space with a dry throat and an ache for home. This sense of being in the space of the border long after the date of arrival of June 10, 1999 and of having this date shape your identity is crafted through a temporality that is circular and merges the past with the present.

To frame this final cycle of poems Zamora includes a quote by Roque Dalton: “My country you don’t exist / you’re only a bad silhouette of mine.” For Zamora his home country

becomes a silhouette of him, not necessarily a bad one, but a place that is distant and comes to him through flashes of memory. Zamora views his own migrant identity as having a shadow self. To return home after so many years of separation is to be a shadow of the person you would have been had you stayed. It is through the poetic mode that Zamora captures the complexity of balancing between these shadow selves and “living in the gap” between legality and illegality. Zamora challenges the borders that divide the beginning of the crossing and the end, demonstrating that there is no end to this border space and that there is no definite beginning and end to arriving. *Unaccompanied* documents the undocumented by expressing the complexities of being trapped in between leaving and arriving.

Chapter 3

“Re/membering” Home: To Go Back and Return Through Poetry

“Just because you don’t remember a place doesn’t mean it’s not in you.”

-Abuela to Lola, Islandborn

The very first poem to appear in Javier Zamora’s collection *Unaccompanied*, “To Abuelita Neli,” serves as the book’s dedication to the poet’s grandmother. Zamora captures the experience of being undocumented through the paradoxical phrase, “Abuelita, I can’t go back *and* return” (6). This is the paradox of trying to belong when you don’t fit within the starkly defined borders of nationality. Going back and returning should mean the same thing, but it is by pairing these words together that distinguishes going back from returning. To go back refers to his native El Salvador and to return refers to his home in the U.S. In setting up a contrast between these alike words, Zamora conveys the experience of being in the paradoxical and precarious position between multiple homes.

Previous chapters have considered the endless nature of the border crossing and the way in which this traumatic event becomes a way of being. In this chapter, I suggest that, for Zamora, the act of poetry making is an effort to counter his status and an attempt at accessing El Salvador by recovering three types of memory: the personal, the collective, and the projected. By zooming in on snippets of childhood memory, familial memory, and imagined memory and by employing a cyclical temporal space within the poem, Zamora revives the El Salvador of his past which he is removed from. To continue to borrow Coutin’s terminology, the poem allows him to “re/member” his home, an attempt to heal the wound of being torn from home at a young age and to piece together memories of El Salvador that were before fractured or broken. This is also a process of forging a transnational identity that situates the poet at the center of the Americas

rather than conforming to the binary of the border. To be at the center means he is no longer located in one place or the other. This poetic project takes ownership of the in between or limbo space that undocumented immigrants inhabit and reconfigures linear notions of temporality by imagining the past through the lens of the present.

For Zamora, remembering childhood in El Salvador through the act of poetry making is an act of “stitching together spaces that have been forced apart,” as Coutin puts it (168). Zamora’s poems reimagine the El Salvador of his past as he accesses memory through the perspective of being removed or outside of that past. In citing Ruth Behar’s book *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks your Heart* Coutin highlights how memory is inherently a process of alteration. Behar writes that “memory is a sense of the other, a way of knowing” that always takes place elsewhere (81-82). Memories become more visible due to new circumstances. Therefore memory is an act of alteration, referencing French scholar Michel de Certeau’s discussion of memory in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, “Memory is played by circumstances, just as a piano is played by a musician and music emerges from it when its keys are touched by the hands. Memory is a sense of the other” (82). To remember is to modify the past; the quality of the music of the memory is brought out by the circumstances in which it is being remembered. When Javier Zamora “re/members” home through poetry, the musicality of the memory is determined by the present circumstance in which he is recounting it. The alienation he experiences from his native country forces him to remember from outside his home. The past is always “re/membered” in light of the present and with the perspective of being removed from home, enhancing the nostalgia with which memories of home are recounted.

As has been discussed throughout the project, Zamora’s temporal notion of the border defies linear time and instead expresses a repetitive or cyclical notion of time. Coutin’s

discussion of how Central American immigrant youths view temporality mirrors my analysis of Zamora's poetry in that she argues that "re/membering" challenges the limitations of linear notions of time (211). Through nostalgia, the experience of yearning for a home you are unable to return to, "a dialectic between the past and the present" forms that replaces the linearity of past, present, and future with a cyclical, repetitive notion of time (Coutin 211). Coutin theorizes what Zamora is poeticizing: "Unlike linear notions of time, re/membering populates the past with visitors from the present, enabling individuals to encounter shadow lives that might have been, alternative realities to which they could perhaps actually return, and futures that could yet be realized" (Coutin 212). Central to "re/membering" for Coutin and Zamora is being able to access the landscape and loved ones of a home you are displaced from through a repetitive and cyclical notion of remembering and documenting memories.

In another creative project of recovering memory, Dominican American author and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, Junot Díaz recently published the children's book, *Islandborn* (2018) in which a six year old afro-Dominican girl living in New York engages in her own recovery mission to piece together the landscape of her home. In school, which Díaz names "the school of faraway places," made up entirely of immigrant children, Lola is asked to draw a picture of her first home, but she cannot visualize it. We can imagine Zamora similarly sitting before a blank piece of paper struggling to put back together the fragmented memories of his first home. Lola engages in this process of "re/membering" by collecting stories from friends, family, and neighbors in her community of the natural landscape, tastes and smells of her island home. One of the people she goes to first is her *abuela* who resides in the U.S. and promptly reassures her that "Just because you don't remember a place doesn't mean it's not in you" (18). Lola sketches furiously as her grandmother describes what she remembers most about the island. "The

beaches, she exclaims, “Hija, our beaches are poetry.... You know when you hear your favorite poem? That’s how it is to be on our beaches. Fish jump from the waves into your lap, and at sunset sometimes the dolphins will come out of the water to bow good night” (19). Her grandmother’s memory of home becomes vivid for Lola and she adopts this collective, familial memory as her own, challenging the traditional boundaries and limitations of linear time. This is a cyclical way of remembering that, in the words of Coutin, “Populates the past with visitors from the present” (212). Lola visits the past through her *abuela*’s memories, presenting an experience that she can have access to. Zamora’s poetry seeks to fill a similar gap that Junot Díaz’s *Islandborn* does; to capture how essential this understanding of childhood home is for one’s sense of self, as well as to emphasize that the absence of memories of home does not determine one’s national identity. Both Díaz and Zamora express how the process of “re/membering” childhood home can be achieved by accessing collective memory through a temporality that defies a linear past and present. Beyond retracing personal memories, *Unaccompanied* also “re/members” through crafting a sense of collective poetic memory. Like Lola in Díaz’s *Islandborn*, the collective memory serves as a powerful tool to reclaim national identity despite the absence of personal memory and counters feelings of alienation to home country.

In his poetic imagining of home, Zamora is reflecting on El Salvador with the knowledge that he may never return due to his immigration status. Not only does the speaker’s immigration status prevent him from returning, but also the economic instability and violence of his home country reinforces the distance with which he must view that home. “Abuelita Neli” begins with the speaker marking time from when he left El Salvador. “This is my 14th time pressing roses in fake passports/ for each year I haven't climbed marañon trees” (1-2). This is a way of perceiving

time through negation. Rather than simply stating how long it has been since he has been able to return home, Zamora employs the image of pressing rose petals in passports as an annual ritual that represents every year he has been away from the marañon trees, giant cashew trees native to El Salvador, that he remembers from childhood. The speaker's conception of time is shaped by how long he has been separated from home. His sense of the temporal always goes back to the marañon trees of his childhood. The fake legal document, the passport itself, is a tangible reminder of the speaker's unauthorized status. Pressing rose petals suggests the reverence with which these documents are treated but also represents the act of mourning how the speaker's immigration status separates him from his grandmother and homeland.

"To Abuelita Neli" raises important questions about how undocumented immigrants hold onto the place that shaped them when they are unable to return to it. Zamora's poetry allows him to retrace his dreams of homeland, to piece together flashes of memories through a shifting temporality and fragmented memories. The poem unfolds as a dreamscape that is not rooted in a specific time and place, and lacking the factual detail of an autobiographical account. He continues: "There's no path to papers. I've got nothing left but dreams / where I'm: the parakeet nest on the flor de fuego, / the paper boats we made when streets flooded, / or toys I buried by the foxtail ferns (7-10). Zamora reveals flashes of childhood memory: the flor de fuego, sailing paper boats when the streets flooded, or playing in the foxtail ferns. These memories are incomplete, yet including them here represents an effort to "re/member" or piece together fragments of memories of homeland. All that many immigrant youths have of their past world is snippets of memory, dreams of their past selves.

Not only does the imagery of Zamora's poem blend past and present, but it also creates a hybrid language through the use of inverted Spanish punctuation, which reflects his dual homes.

“¿Do you know / the ferns I mean?” the speaker then asks his grandmother, “The ones we planted the first birthday / without my parents” (10-12). Marking time as a child in El Salvador by the absence of his parents, his memory of the ferns is characterized through the awareness that loved ones are absent. Mirroring the image of marking time by the years the speaker has not climbed marañón trees, the temporality of these lines is also cyclical and repetitive in that the passing of time is continuously framed by a longing for what he has been separated from.

These lines also reveal a stylistic choice that is unique to Zamora. He frequently adopts the inverted punctuation of Spanish into English lines of poetry. By creating a hybrid language through punctuation, Zamora preserves the flavor of Spanish in his English poetry. The inverted question mark at the start of the phrase provides a signal to the reader of what is to come, but also honors his upbringing. Through this choice, he captures the feeling of being stuck between place of origin and place of residence. The Spanish punctuation suggests a way of saying something, a way of asking a question that is infused with the mother language of the speaker. This fusion of English and Spanish through punctuation is emblematic of how Zamora conceives of himself and where he belongs. The dividing line between Spanish and English is blurred here, just as the border that separates him from El Salvador is not fixed and extends beyond the boundaries of geography. His English poetry is inflected with a way of speaking that is distinctly Spanish, allowing the poet to “fill in the gap” and reshape the “terrain on which belonging is determined,” (122) as Coutin puts it. This device redefines constructions of belonging and national identity by merging these two worlds, allowing them to exist together in the same line of poetry.

As he is in between nations, Zamora captures the experience of being unable to go back and return through the statement that he cannot be a citizen in either place; he cannot belong

anywhere in the traditional sense. “I’ll never be a citizen,” he exclaims, “I’ll never scrub clothes with pumice stones over the big cement tub / under the almond trees” (12-14). Zamora employs the word never here to convey his powerlessness to change his limbo status and to return home. It is through “re/membering” and cyclical temporality that he can access this shadow self of the past that scrubs clothes under the almond trees.

Just as Zamora is trying to determine where he fits between El Salvador and the U.S., contemporary Central American poet, Maya Chinchilla, suggests that the Central American-American exists in a central place at the heart of Central America and the U.S. (Coutin 122). In her poem “Central American American?” she asks: “When can we rest from running? / When will the explosions in my heart stop/ and show me where my home is? / Are there flowers on a volcano? / am I a CENTRAL / American? / Where is the center of America?” (32-38). Zamora also feels as though he is continually running and is similarly grappling with where he fits between El Salvador and the U.S. In Coutin’s discussion of this poem she asserts that being an undocumented Central American-American means existing at the center of America in a place that is constantly shifting but encompasses the “multiple homes through which Central Americans have passed” (122). To refer to this in between place as the “center” grounds the Central American-American in a more clearly defined place. This is a means through which one can transcend the limbo space by converting it into a central place of empowerment. Both poets are grappling with the way we conceive of national identity and attempt to construct new, transnational identities.

“Abuelita Neli” concludes with this question of being trapped in this state of ambiguity of not being American enough or Salvadoran enough. Ethnicity complicates the speaker’s ability to belong anywhere. On the one hand the speaker experiences the racism of the U.S. immigration

system but on the other is not accepted by Salvadorans who see him as Americanized and therefore white on the inside. Zamora explores how others impose their narratives upon him and force him to fit within this strict binary of national identity. The speaker's old friends deny his origins and perceive him as no longer belonging in their world:

Last time you called, you said
my old friends think that now I'm from some town
between this bay and our estero.
And that I'm a coconut:
brown on the outside, white inside. Abuelita, please
forgive me, but tell them they don't know shit. (14-18)

Racially, he is not considered to be either from Central America or from the United States. To his old friends from home, he no longer belongs in their ethnic group, yet his brown skin makes him an outsider and a threat in the U.S. He is perceived to be too brown for the U.S. and too white for El Salvador. Zamora asks how you can find a personal identity when you can never be fully accepted in your homeland or your new home. Through this comparison to the coconut, “brown on the outside but white on the inside,” Zamora captures the difficulty of belonging as he is trapped in the in between space.

It is striking that Zamora uses the word “shit” in a dialogue with his grandmother. He apologizes out of respect—“please forgive me”—but it is the only word he can use to capture just how wrong these old friends are. No one can decide for someone else where they are allowed to belong and which place they can call their home. Zamora makes a much larger statement about prevailing ideas about immigration in the U.S. Race has historically been a major force in excluding certain groups from citizenship and basic human rights. The speaker expresses his anger towards a broken immigration system that has the power to tell him where he does not belong. He is told he does not belong on either side, leaving him in a state of perpetual limbo and estrangement from his childhood home and adult home.

Throughout “To Abuelita Neli,” Zamora questions what it means to be stuck between borders, trapped between being considered an illegal resident in your host country and an outsider in your home country. Without a “path to papers,” the speaker can only access the *marañón* trees of his past and the memory of his grandmother planting ferns on his birthday through his imagination, the dreamscape of the past. The poem shifts to memories of the past through the lens of being exiled or separated from that experience. All other direct sensory experience is prohibited. Zamora’s poetry so moves us because we get the sense while reading it that this is a process of “re/membering” the past, reconstructing fading memories of his *abuelita* and the beauty of the landscape that shaped him. In “re/membering” Zamora crafts his own transnational identity that defies the rigid, binary boundaries of the border.

In many of the poems in *Unaccompanied* the speaker characterizes his memories of home through the lens of being legally prohibited from returning. It is by documenting his memories of home and capturing the experience of straddling two cultures that Zamora grapples with his precarious status as undocumented. His memory of his grandmother features prominently in other poems such as “Abuelita Says Goodbye” and “June 10, 1999” as a means of making her memory present despite physical separation. In “Montage with Mangoes, Volcano, and Flooded Streets,” Zamora revives his memory of his *abuelita* once again. In a collage of vivid images from the Salvadoran landscape that shaped his childhood, he constructs a temporal space that shifts between his past self and present self and imagines his parents’ childhood in relation to his own. This represents another feature of Zamora’s memory beyond the personal and collective, the projected memory of how Zamora imagines his parents experienced childhood in El Salvador. The poem begins with a memory of helping his *abuelita* pick *flor de izote*, a white blossom used in many Salvadoran dishes and the nation’s national flower. The *izote* flower

serves as another reminder of the taste of home. As we saw in one of Zamora's June 10, 1999 poems, the *izote* flower is a piece of home that he imagines himself carrying over the border as an emblem of who he left behind. The *izote* flower not only grows in El Salvador, but also in parts of California. In many ways the flower is emblematic of Zamora's hybrid, transnational identity and the way in which he, like the flower, takes root in two nations. By accessing the projected memories of his parents, Zamora recovers his own fragmented memories of home.

Temporally, the speaker is in dialogue with past and present, representing a circular temporality. By moving between his current life as an adult, memories of his childhood, and the projected or imagined memories of his parents as children, the speaker "re/members" the landscape of a home that he has long been physically removed from.

There's no way Mom, younger than I am now
and in California like I am now,
there's no way she knew my technique:
grab stalk and pull toward belly,
bowl between legs, petals like rice
from opened burlap. (4-9)

The explosion of the white *izote* flowers like rice falling out of a burlap sack connects the speaker to a time and place when his parents engaged in the same task. The preparing of food links him to his parents' past, stringing together memories across generations like a montage of remembrances that defy linear notions of temporality. Zamora crafts a narrative in which the memories of his parents mingle with his own, documenting a Central American identity.

By weaving a web of memories of his parents and family members, the speaker situates the reader in time in relation to how old his dad would have been in this imagined memory. It is through crafting this collective sense of familial memory, through the temporal dance between his parent's past and personal past, that Zamora "re/members" home and heals from the rupture of separation from his parents at such a young age. "I'm older than Dad then," (10) he says.

Time in this poem is circular as the speaker of the present moment imagines his father in his childhood while simultaneously remembering his own childhood:

For the longest time I wanted to throw rocks
at fruit bats, wanted to run
out of the kitchen to climb the big mango tree,
branch by branch, up six meters
to watch the volcano's peak fit my hand. (11-15)

As a child, this distance seems so insignificant and to be able to fit the volcano's peak in your hand is to think you can contain it and possess it. But the child-like wonder of this image fades. This journey to climb the mango trees of home is one that we understand can only exist within this poem. This longing for home, for the taste of mangoes, to run and climb marañon trees, is palpable and it is only in the poem that this dream can take shape, for the speaker cannot go back and return.

Lie to me. Say I can go back.
Say I've created smoke and no rain
It's almost twenty years and still
I can't keep mangoes from falling six meters down,
to where dogs lick what my aunts,
Mom, Dad, and I still cannot. (16-21)

After twenty years, he and his family still cannot return to those mango trees. There is an overwhelming sense of powerlessness in the imprisonment of immigration status. The speaker is incapable of preventing the mangoes from falling and splitting open on the ground for dogs to lick up just as he and his family are incapable of altering their status. Time passes by the absence or inability to taste those mangoes of home. This temporality is one that continually returns to an experience that is inaccessible as a way of living in the present and emphasizing how the longing to experience the landscape of home lingers on.

“Montage with Mangoes, Volcano, and Flooded Streets” strings together separate pasts and merges them into one collective experience of yearning for home. The act of writing the

poem is a way of soothing the aching desire to run and climb the mango trees of childhood, to document the process of piecing together a dismembered home. To read the poem provides a window into the process of “re/membering” as a collage of the three categories of memory: personal memory, collective, familial memory, and projected or imagined memory. These ways of “re/membering” all reflect a temporality that is nonlinear and cyclical that moves across generations.

In another effort to recover memory and to better understand why he was left behind by his parents as a child, Zamora writes a poem in which he assumes the voice of his father agonizing over his decision to leave his family for the U.S. Zamora imagines memories that he did not actually experience himself. This would be the third category of projected memory. The speaker of “Then, It Was So” is a young father, only 19 years old, who faces the choice to leave his wife and young son. Speaking directly to his wife he says:

To tell you I was leaving
 I waited and waited
 rethinking first sentences in my sleep,
 I didn't sleep
 and my heart was a watermelon
 split each night. Outside,
 3 a.m. was the same as bats
 and you were our kerosene lamp. (1-8)

Zamora also presents the voice of his father whose decision to migrate to the U.S. came at a very high cost. The intimacy here establishes the tone of a love poem. His father sees his wife as a kerosene lamp and the beaming light for their family. His heart is described as being like a massive watermelon that kept splitting over and over again. This makes the feeling of heartbreak so vivid, agonizing every night over how to form the words he will use to tell the woman he loves that he must leave.

This poetic rendering of his parents love story is an act of “re/membering” the past through the collective and projected modes of memory, piecing together imagined memories of the El Salvador of his parents’ generation. Zamora is documenting a time prior to migration and the turmoil of the Salvadoran Civil War. His young father says:

Amor, I thought it was something
we were in that day, hiding
from bullets in sugarcane, my chest
pressed against the gossamers
stuck to your thighs,
when stars swam inside you. (9-14)

While dodging bullets and living in constant fear, a beautiful romance is recounted despite such violence. Zamora imagines how his home in El Salvador was torn apart and how the El Salvador his parents remember is a war zone. This adds an additional level of alienation to homeland that Zamora seeks to heal by documenting the trauma of his parents and “re/membering” the landscape of home by imagining their memories. The intimacy of this image is striking. Their bodies, pressed together in a sugarcane field, protect one another. The new life swimming inside the woman like shining stars refers to pregnancy. These lines give us a devastating portrait of life before migration, of the circumstances that would force a father to leave so much love behind.

This is a testimony of migration that we rarely see. It is a portrait of the sacrifices that a father in this situation is forced to make. The poetic form allows Zamora to travel through time to access the memories of his father which he adopts as his own to better understand the home he was separated from at such a young age. It is in the process of not only piecing together his own personal memories, but also those of his parents that he fills the space between his past self and present self in an attempt to heal the rupture of being torn from home and loved ones. In assuming his father’s voice, Zamora conjures a projected, imaginary memory.

The last second has passed
and I can’t forget one centimeter.

To kiss each cheek,
 your lips your forehead.
 I miss our son. I miss the faint wick
 on his skin. How I held him
 and how I wanted to then, though
 I didn't wake him. (15-22)

The simplicity of Zamora's diction captures just how this forced migration disrupts what is most pure and untouchable in life. To kiss their cheeks, to hear his son's crying is the most basic right a father has in his life. It is the poetic form that can best grapple with the challenge of healing the wounds of estrangement and separation from home. This also describes how Zamora projects familial memory by expressing what he hopes his parents felt.

The poem concludes gently and succinctly: "It was so quiet when I started / counting the days / I wasn't woken by him" (27-29). "Then it Was So" conveys a sense of the temporal that is based on counting time by silence, the absence of the sound of a baby crying. To pass time by the absence of a loved one, one's native landscape, or the absence of legal documentation is a powerful refrain in Zamora's poetry. Much of Zamora's exploration in *Unaccompanied* involves grappling with his identity as undocumented, unaccompanied, and unable to go back and return. Responding to being in the in between space, Zamora reimagines his childhood memories and those of his parents in an effort to craft his own space in "the center" to redefine his national identity.

Not only does Zamora transform childhood memories into vivid sensual experiences, he also claims his parents' memories as his own and projects memories of how he hopes or imagines his parents felt in order to piece together his personal history. Poetry for Zamora is a process of recovering what has been lost, whether it be his own distant memories or the unwritten pasts of those who came before him. To have power over memory, to be able to reclaim the past, rewrite it, and make it present enables Zamora to attempt to counter his

precarious immigration status even though he cannot change it. By appropriating his father's voice and his memories, Zamora accesses memory to which he would not normally have access and reconstructs and "re/members" fragmented flashes of home. He crafts a central space for himself in the in between place through his cyclical notion of time and challenges how we construct national identity and our relationship to a home we have been exiled from.

When Javier Zamora returns to memories of El Salvador he reimagines the past and reshapes his relationship to home. In *Exiled Home*, Coutin describes what temporality means for the way in which undocumented Central American immigrants understand their national identity, their relationship to home and the U.S. Coutin writes that as migrant youth attempt to reconcile their transnational biographies with national histories and legal forms, they "re/member" the past and

Revisit the past in light of the presents that they inhabit and the futures that they seek to realize. According to linear notions of time, in which the past has already happened, such reworkings could appear fraudulent. Yet for interviewees, deepening and revising their understandings of the past can overcome silences, broaden the scope of relevance through which their biographies may have previously been interpreted, and counter other stories that, by either vilifying or glorifying immigrants, erase personhood." (168)

This is the very mission of Zamora's recollections of his past as he seeks to defy the migrant narrative that limits humanity and either demonizes or idealizes immigrants. It is in adopting collective memory and re-imagining the past through the eyes of the present self, that Zamora is able to overcome this silence surrounding the experiences of the undocumented in the U.S.

In reworking the past Zamora's poetic rendering of home is not rendered inauthentic. He reshapes the past in light of the present to make sense of being in the limbo place and to deal with the rupture of being torn from homeland. In the act of "re/membering" the day Zamora's father left for the U.S. in "How I learned to Walk," he pieces together snippets of memory and stories he has been told by others in an effort to heal the wound of separation at such a young

age. This is a recovery mission that adopts the myths about his father and reimagines them as truth, another form of projected memory. “When I clutch pillows, I think of him. If he sleeps / face down like I do. If he can tie strings / to the backs of dragonflies” (13-15). Zamora constructs his memory of his father out of absence, through how he imagines he would be, the way he sleeps, if he also played with dragonflies as a boy.

In an attempt to piece together the shattered memories of his father, Zamora imagines a narrative based on collective memory, the myths surrounding his father’s departure: “I’ve heard / of how I used to run to him. His hair still / smelling of fish, gasoline, and seaweed. It’s how / I learned to walk they say” (15-18). The story of how he learned to walk in the mythical, collective memory is transformed into a personal memory for him as he pieces together the fragments of his early memories of home and his father. “People say / somehow I walked across our cornfield / at dawn, a few steps behind. I must have seen him / get in that van. I was two. I sat behind a ceiba tree, / waiting. No one could find me” (21-25). This van refers to the speaker’s father’s process of migration that he himself grows up to experience too. The memory of the van becomes a shared memory of trauma that defies linear temporality. Zamora reveals the alternative ways in which we can “re/member” or reconstruct the past in order to grapple with the trauma of separation. Just as Coutin argues, to revise the past is not an act of fraudulence, but rather an attempt to expand definitions of self and transcend narratives of silence surrounding the undocumented.

The act of “re/membering” is not only to recollect individual memories, but also to access the collective, familial memory and the projected, imaginary memory. These three modes defy linear temporality and present a cyclical way of piecing back together fragments of a home you

cannot return to. The only way Zamora can go back and return is through this circular way of recollecting which encompasses personal, collective, and projected forms of “re/membering.”

Conclusion

“...The ones no one ever knows where they're from... the ones burned by bullets when they crossed the border...the eternally undocumented...”

“...los que nunca sabe nadie de dónde son...los que fueron cosidos a balazos al cruzar la frontera...los eternos indocumentados...”

-Roque Dalton, “Poema de amor”

Javier Zamora dedicates the poems of *Unaccompanied* to the countless undocumented immigrants who have been “burned by bullets when they crossed the border,” the ones whose names no one ever knows, those whose scars from trauma remain invisible to outside eyes. These poems are written for those whose stories remain unwritten. My project analyzes the ways in which the poems of *Unaccompanied* not only document the poet himself but also document a larger experience of collective trauma of the border crossing and what it means to live between worlds. Zamora’s project is unique in that he unmask a deeply personal journey that is generally cast in darkness of crossing the border and “living in the gap” as an undocumented person in the U.S.

In Salvadoran journalist Óscar Martínez’s book *The Beast*, a compelling account of riding the rails with undocumented Central American migrants and documenting their testimonies, he argues that many migrants are silent about what the border crossing is like because they must occupy the role of the heroic migrant. “In Central America we’ve forged an identity for the migrant that says that you go north to be a hero, you go to save your family” (273). The migrant’s journey to *el norte* is equated with the hero’s journey and part of this status of heroism is remaining silent about the violence and internal trauma they endured along the way. Zamora challenges this flawed notion of the migrant’s heroic journey that often prevents Central American immigrants from documenting their experiences.

Dialogues surrounding the border crossing often lack the first hand accounts of

undocumented people because of the taboo nature of this trauma. Another dimension to the challenge of documenting the experience of the undocumented migrant is that the label of “illegal alien” often condemns them to a life in the shadows. Martinez’s words inform how we read Zamora’s poetry as a migrant voice that seeks to subvert this identity of silence, forging a new identity for the undocumented migrant that is not limited or idealized. Zamora presents a vision of the migrant who is more complex and more human. By making tangible and visceral the brutality of the border crossing and expressing the way in which the border cannot be left behind, Zamora defies a narrative of shame and silence surrounding the undocumented immigrant's experience.

This work opens up many other avenues for undocumented youth to grapple with the precariousness of their status and their complex national identity through the poetic form or any number of creative projects. By “re/membering” the past and accessing personal, collective, and projected memory, Zamora situates the Central American-American at the center of the U.S. and Central America, affirming a transnational identity that defies borders through a circular notion of temporality. To be in this central place acknowledges the complexity of never leaving the border experience behind while simultaneously gaining some degree of agency over immigration status.

This project has larger implications for how voices like Zamora contribute to the larger immigration debate and challenge how it is often framed. In another recent text, Valeria Luiselli’s book *Tell Me How it Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*, is an indictment of how the United States deals with undocumented children, taking its title and its form from the intake questionnaire which determines if a child will receive sanctuary in the U.S. Luiselli advocates for these children by piecing together and writing down the stories of trauma that they recount.

Luiselli's task as a translator was to reconstruct the fragmented narratives Central American children remembered from their journeys across the border and their reasons for fleeing in order to help them obtain asylum in the U.S. Satirically, Luiselli articulates a racist mentality at the root of our immigration system which so often dehumanizes children in desperate need of refuge. She calls out the media and the countless white Americans who protest the arrival of refugee children, treating them as though their arrival were a "biblical plague:"

They will cover the face of the ground so that it cannot be seen—these menacing, coffee-colored boys and girls, with their obsidian hair and slant eyes. They will fall from the skies, on our cars, on our green lawns, on our heads, on our schools, on our Sundays. They will make a racket, they will bring chaos, their sickness, their dirt, their brownness. They will cloud the pretty views, they will fill the future with bad omens, they will fill our tongues with barbarisms. And if they are allowed to stay here they will—eventually—reproduce! (15)

Unveiling the racism behind anti-immigrant policies, the ending of DACA, the ridiculous suggestion of building a wall between Mexico and the U.S., it is startlingly clear that the current treatment of undocumented migrants from Latin America comes out of a campaign to exclude people based on race. We have to question why these Central American children are not treated more like children, why they are left in the "ice boxes" or *hieleras* in detention centers after being apprehended by Border Patrol for far longer than the legal limit of seventy-two hours without food and nowhere to sleep (Luiselli 21). Javier Zamora's *Unaccompanied* counteracts the harmful rhetoric that demonizes these unaccompanied children. This work makes the issue of undocumented immigration a human issue, one that unites everyone who picks up this book of poetry.

As Zamora told me, he wrote the book he wanted to read growing up. My project seeks to highlight the way in which the poems of *Unaccompanied* make it possible for readers to better understand what it is to live with the trauma of the violent border crossing, to live in the gap between leaving and arriving, to know what it is to live in the paradox of being unable to go back

and return, and to counter the precariousness of immigration status through the process of “re/membering” through personal, collective, and projected memory and a cyclical notion of temporality. To write a project on Zamora’s work has been exhilarating for me because it is as current and necessary as poetry can be. I have no doubt that *Unaccompanied* will inspire other voices to emerge from the shadows to “re/member” experiences of trauma and the landscape of home through creative projects as a way of gaining agency over immigration status and documenting the self.

Appendix

Transcript of email correspondence with Javier Zamora on November 18, 2017.

Reimann: Which contemporary poets would you align yourself with?

Zamora: Before I wanted to pursue an MFA, I was shaped by the poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa, Sharon Olds, and Charles Simic. Two of them wrote of war and the other about her family. Themes I wanted to explore. They just happened to teach in the same program. Louise Glück was also a big influence because of her syntax that is captivating. Rigoberto Gonzalez and Eduardo Corral have also been huge influences because of their work on the page, and their guidance off the page, they are my mentors.

R: How do you define your genre of poetry?

Z: If I were to define my “genre” in poetry, I would call it, immigrant poetics. Stylistically it’s lyrical and narrative-based because of the abovementioned influences. Some people have called it nature poetry. I resisted this term before (because of the predominantly white history of that term, but Camille T. Dungy’s anthology changed my mind). So I would also call my poetry, nature poetry.

R: How do you separate your poetic voice from your personal voice?

Z: My poetic voice is the voice I resist in the everyday. My poems are based in the secrets and trauma I try to avoid in everyday conversation. I am trying to get more of the joy I voice everyday into my poetry. I want to begin writing towards joy.

R: Some of the experiences you describe are traumatic. How do you express something so deeply personal? How do you translate childhood memories of your migration into poetry?

Z: I think translating is the right word here. The material for most of my poetry is based on trying to figure out how to heal from trauma. How to see it, name it, in order to change it, to mold it. I think revision is a crucial part of my process. In revision, the trauma becomes smaller. There’s joy in shaping it. In making smaller, literally, by cutting the unnecessary parts of the poem. So, the act of writing these traumatic poems down is necessary for my healing. The “translation” aspect of it, is the remembering. Scientifically, we cannot remember the same thing twice, word for word, image for image, memory for memory. We create new neurons every time we recall a memory. Isn’t this translation? Isn’t this powerful as well? We can choose how to tell a story. I think these poems needed to be this traumatic. I’m working on covering some of the same material (my fucked up childhood) but through a more joyful lens. Let’s see if I do it.

R: Why poetry? Why not prose?

Z: Like above, I needed to be able to shape something. To mold it. To revise it. And to feel satisfied with it, and fast. I needed this because of the hardships I was facing in my everyday life. I was undocumented. I come from a working-class/poor family. When I started writing. My family had lost everything in the housing crash. I needed to have control of something. Something immediate. Even though I kept on working on these drafts, on these poems, up until

publication of my book. After finishing a draft, you feel that satisfaction. I least I do. With prose. It takes longer. IT takes more time. There are literally more words. I tried to write prose. I think it didn't stick with me because of the length.

R: I am struck by your use of Spanish punctuation with English words and phrases. What is the function of this punctuation? Is it perhaps acting as a kind of border between Spanish and English?

Z: Ha! I like that you noticed this. It's a way for me to honor my upbringing. My native language. Also, I was annoyed that in English you don't get a warning on how to read a question or exclamation, you have to reread if you read it wrong the first time, it's like a surprise at the end of the sentence. In Spanish, you know what's coming. I think that's why I kept this punctuation in the English. To me, it adds feeling to the whole sentence. You begin to hear the question better, if you get a warning at the beginning of the sentence. At least I think you do. I do like what you say about it "acting like a border," though I didn't quite think of it this way. I think it also does do that, it's a sort of bridge between languages.

R: What audience are you writing for? Is it an American one or a uniquely immigrant one?

Z: Audience. Surprisingly, I haven't really thought of that. The poems read personal, and I think I was writing for myself. I wrote this book because there was no book like it when I was in HS. I wanted this before I knew who Toni Morrison was and her famous quote of "write the book you want to read." This really rang true for me. I was annoyed that it was white Americans or Mexican-Americans who were dominating the conversation regarding immigration. People that had not gone through it themselves. I know their voices are necessary at starting that conversation, but, as an educated immigrant, I felt like I could and wanted to say something. I wanted to add to that conversation. I wanted to also make Central Americans heard. The immigration conversation has been hugely moderated by Mexicans and influenced by Mexican voices. So I guess I'm writing for me, and who am I? A Central American immigrant. So that's my primary audience.

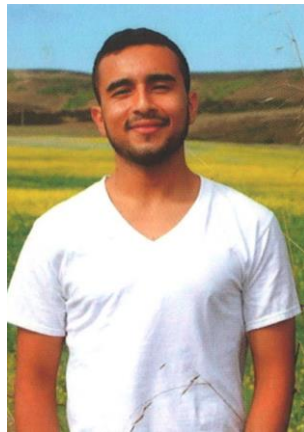


Photo of Author by Anna Ruth Zamora

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