

The Art of Un/Accompaniment: Salvadoran Child Refugee Narratives
in the Twenty-first Century

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At the time of this writing, Central American families and children continue to migrate *en masse* from the so-called Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) due to violence, state repression, insecurity, scarcity, climate change, and overall inhospitable living conditions in their home countries. In their 2015 book *Centro América en la mira: La migración en su relación con el desarrollo y las oportunidades para el cambio (Confronting the Challenges of Migration and Development in Central America)*, Manuel Orozco and Julia Yansura of the Washington, D.C.-based Inter-American Dialogue attribute mass migration from the region to the ever-increasing levels of social and political violence; high levels of socioeconomic and political insecurity; rise in organized and state crime; lack of employment and educational opportunities, especially for the youth; demand for labor in places like the United States; and, to some extent, the desire for family reunification (48).

In this context in the summer of 2014, approximately 68,000 unaccompanied child migrants made their way to the US-Mexico border to seek asylum and, in some cases, to join family members living in the United States (Kandel; Briggs). In response, the Obama administration proposed the Alliance for Prosperity (A4P) to promote development and securitization programs in Central America while at the same time enforcing more stringent asylum restrictions and detaining in-transit migrant families and children to await asylum proceedings at facilities across the border and beyond. During its time in power from 2017-2021, the Trump administration unequivocally imposed some of the most draconian US immigration policies to date,¹ leading to the closing of the US-Mexico border during the COVID-19 pandemic, the expansion of the wall, surveillance, and militarization along the border, and the separation of thousands of migrant families

¹ These included the Zero Tolerance Policy, criminalizing unauthorized border crossings into the US and separating children from families; the Remain in Mexico or Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), forcing migrants to remain in border towns in Mexico to await asylum court hearings; the Asylum Cooperative Agreements, requiring El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to serve as the “safe third country” for asylum applicants. Other measures included the Public Charge Rule, which was a failed attempt to restrict authorized immigrants from receiving public assistance while seeking permanent resident status and readjusting their immigration status; and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Title 42, which closed borders and denied entry of asylum seekers to the United States during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

and children within and outside of United States borders. In turn, the Biden administration challenged many of the former administration's immigration policies and even closed some of its detention centers. Like the Obama administration, Biden, too, offered a multi-year, four-billion-dollar aid economic package for Central America in June 2021, which promoted development, security, and the deterrence of migration (Ernst, Josh, Olson, Sample, and Zuniga; Kitroeff and Shear). However, given deteriorating socio-economic and political conditions in Central America, the number of accompanied and unaccompanied youth migrants coming to the United States continued to rise during the Biden administration and subsequently at the start of Trump's second term in office in 2025. In fact, according to the Council on Foreign Relations, "Immigration authorities encountered more than 152,000 unaccompanied minors at or near the US-Mexico border in fiscal year 2022 (FY2022), an all-time high" (Cheatham and Roy), with projections unclear during Trump's second term. Clearly, Central American migration, especially of accompanied and unaccompanied youths, continues to be an important issue for the United States.²

In his exposé of the first Trump-era border crisis, aptly titled *Separated: Inside an American Tragedy* (2020), investigative journalist Jacob Soboroff travelled the length of the border and talked to people on different sides of the fence in order to examine the horrors of the Zero Tolerance policy introduced by Trump in 2018, which separated accompanied child migrants from their families and took accompanied and unaccompanied child migrants alike into "government custody" in detention centers and facilities near the border and across the United States (xvii).³ Soboroff notes that by the time he published his book in 2020 more than 5,000 migrant children remained separated from their parents and families (xix). Indeed, the timeline of family separations in the United States dates back to the colonization of North America and the enslavement of Black people (Briggs) and stretches well into the present as migrants continue to flee inhospitable living conditions in their homelands, seek asylum in the United States, and suffer the

² See the U.S. Customs and Border Protections website for up-to-date numbers of "Southwest Land Border Encounters" with unaccompanied and accompanied youth migrants (U.S. Customs and Border Protection; American Immigration Lawyers Association).

³ It should be noted that during the so-called child migrant crisis in 2014 through the present, the 1997 Flores Settlement Agreement serves as the "nationwide policy for the detention, release and treatment of minors' in immigration custody" (Santamaría 1). The Flores Settlement Agreement, which provides "rules for the custody and care of accompanied minors" has had implications for the separation of "family units." Indeed, "the Flores Agreement does not establish any affirmative release rights for the parents of the minor. See Flores I, 828 F.3d at 908–09. But it requires the placement of minors in nonsecure, state-licensed facilities within days of apprehension, potentially leading to those minors' separation from family units that remain housed by immigration authorities. In certain extenuating circumstances, an extension of the transfer period for up to 20 days may be permissible...." (Santamaría 1).

consequences of US immigration policies, including the separation of families (Southern Poverty Law Center).

Drawing inspiration from the resilient and courageous migration stories of Central American families and children, particularly Javier Zamora's acclaimed collection of poetry, titled *Unaccompanied* (2017), this essay focuses on Salvadoran child migration and refugee literature in the twenty-first century. Specifically, I examine the spaces of un/accompaniment offered readers in Zamora's *Unaccompanied*, which recalls his own experiences as a child migrant, as well as Jorge Argueta's *Somos como las nubes / We Are Like the Clouds* (2016); *Caravan to the North: Misael's Long Walk* (2019); and *Jimena Pérez puede volar / Jimena Pérez Can Fly* (2019), books of poetry for children based on interviews with Salvadoran accompanied and unaccompanied child migrants. Part of a larger corpus of child migrant and refugee literature, Zamora's and Argueta's texts not only represent the migration and separation of unaccompanied and accompanied minors but moreover invite readers to accompany and bear witness to the root causes of migration in Central America, or in the words and practice of slain Archbishop Óscar A. Romero, "estar presente en este campo de la realidad" 'to be present in people's reality' by accompanying them (Romero 123-72, my translation). So too, scholars of American Studies, Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz, in "American Studies as Accompaniment," borrow "the term *accompaniment* from the social justice work of Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador during the 1970s" to advocate for academic scholarship that walks the talk of liberation, transformation, and social change (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 10). According to Tomlinson and Lipsitz, just as Romero moved away from more conservative readings of the gospel and views of society toward more progressive alignments with the oppressed of El Salvador and a liberationist option for the poor, accompaniment can "show scholars new ways of reading cultural and social texts they think they know well" and perhaps transform scholarship into "action," in this case advocating and working to change immigration policies on behalf of migrants (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 11, 13).

While practitioners of liberation theology, psychology, and other fields have long advocated for accompaniment as a practice of walking alongside those experiencing injustice, oppression, and calamity, witnessing (and sometimes joining) their struggles, and working toward social justice and transformation (Romero; Pope Francis; Watkins), Central American Studies scholar Leisy J. Abrego has further shown that research can be an act of accompaniment and transformation when it prioritizes the voices, needs, and struggles of the most disempowered, oppressed, and vulnerable in society. In "Research as Accompaniment: Reflections on Objectivity, Ethics, and Emotions," Abrego, channeling the life-work of Archbishop Romero, writes about her own work as a Salvadoran immigrant sociologist doing "embodied" research on and with

immigrant communities. She suggests that research of accompaniment with immigrants must foreground the “systemic, often legally condoned injustice” that produce migration in the first place (41). The accompanying researcher’s task is to help illuminate the structures that shape migration, the systems, like the law, that define it, and the stories of migrants who are “the experts of their own experiences” (45). As such, the accompanying researcher is entrusted with people’s stories, whether they be interviews in the social sciences or other forms of storytelling in the humanities. In this space of storytelling, a dialogic convergence is created in which migrants may “share and release some of the pain they carry” (47) and, if not immediately, “those who later read the words [...] [can] feel identified, even empowered by the stories” (48), enough so to be moved to create change in legislation or public opinion of migration. In this vein and in relation to the power of literature to move readers to change minds and hearts, especially in regard to migration policies, in this essay, I argue that Zamora’s and Argueta’s texts produce an affective-critical space for readers not only to accompany migrants through acts of reading but more importantly to question systems of power that produce the inhumane conditions for migrations and repressive immigration policies like those outlined previously.

While some scholars have examined the “narratives of unauthorized immigrants” linked to immigration policies (Caminero-Santangelo), others, in an effort to counter narratives that shame and blame parents for exposing their children to the perils of migration, have analyzed the strategic narratives of risk assessment that parents often engage in when they decide to migrate with their children or to send them unaccompanied (Galli). In alignment with evolving patterns of migration, thus, new genres and narratives of migration have emerged such as the testimonial poetry of (un)accompanied child migration analyzed herein as well as the “undocumemoir” associated with the “DACA-mented” (Arrizón-Palomera) and narratives of migrants with Temporary Protected Status (TPS) (American Immigration Council). Glenda Carpio has argued effectively for a “migrant aesthetics” grounded in a critique of the historical context of migration in the twenty-first century, which “ask[s] readers to *think* rather than just feel, to question the assumptions that they bring to texts about migration, and to examine their own investments in the larger forces that create migration” (4). As Regina Mills has further suggested, the embedded legacy of testimonio in this new Central American (child) refugee literature “centralize[s] the question of audience and illuminate[s] the struggle to get the Global North to listen and act” (541).⁴ Focusing on the historical context producing Salvadoran child migration and family separation and offering close readings of various poetic texts, this essay, with Carpio, Abrego, and others, asks readers to reflect on the testimonios of un/accompanied child migration

⁴ The testimonio in Latin America is a first-person narrative representing a collective experience, often produced in extreme conditions of war, violence, and trauma.

and to interrogate the systemic conditions for present-day migration and family separation. Read, in part, as literary documentation of un/accompanied migration, Argueta's and Zamora's poetic texts, in particular, challenge the long history and practice of what historian Laura Briggs calls the act of "taking children" in the United States, referring to the seizure of children from their families in different moments of US history.

Salvadoran Child Migration: A Brief Genealogy and An Ongoing Story

In *Taking Children: A History of American Terror*, Briggs argues that separated migrant children are part of a long history and legacy of "taking children" from their families in and by US institutions and state actors—from Black enslavement, Indian boarding schools, Japanese internment, mass incarceration of the poor, and the foster care system to immigrant repatriation programs such as Operation Wetback and transnational adoptions during the US supported dirty wars and armed conflicts in Latin American and elsewhere (2-6). According to Briggs, the separation and "taking [of] children of asylum seekers at the southwest border" is a "direct product of state repression" (2, 6). It is not surprising, then, that one of the Trump administration's early actions was to shut down the Central American Minors (CAM) Program in August of 2017. Created as an Obama initiative to handle the influx of unaccompanied alien children (UACs) in 2014,⁵ CAM permitted qualified, unmarried children under the age of 21 and certain family members living in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and fearing persecution "to apply for refugee status and possible resettlement in the United States" (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services). After taking office, the Biden administration reinstated and expanded CAM on March 10, 2021. However, during Trump's first presidency, the taking and separating of children from their families reached a fever pitch, especially as the border wall was expanded and new extreme immigration policies began to take effect. Egregious treatment of unaccompanied child migrants was reported throughout the Trump presidency (Kandel; Southern Poverty Law Center).

In this heightened context of fear, migration, and separation, it is telling that a new corpus of migration and refugee narratives in Spanish and English has emerged—one that ponders the trauma of family and un/accompanied child

⁵ The 1997 Flores Settlement Agreement "distinguishes arriving minors who are unaccompanied by immediate family—commonly known as *unaccompanied alien children* (UACs)—from those arriving as a family unit" (Santamaría 1). Moreover, "the Homeland Security Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-296, defines an *unaccompanied alien child* as one who (1) lacks lawful immigration status in the United States; (2) is under 18 years old; and (3) is either without a parent or legal guardian in the country or without a parent or legal guardian in the country who is available to provide care and physical custody" (Santamaría 1).

migration and separation. Starting with Sonia Nazario's exposé, *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with his Mother*, originally published in 2006 and based on her 2002 Pulitzer Prize winning series in the *Los Angeles Times*, the image of Central American unaccompanied child migrants begins to appear also in more popular texts, music, films, and documentaries such as *Innocent Voices* (2004); *Wetback: The Undocumented Documentary* (2005); *Which Way Home* (2009); *Sin Nombre (Nameless)* (2009); *La bestia (The Beast)* (2010); *María en tierra de nadie (María in No Man's Land)* (2011), among others. To date, literary texts in poetry and prose, some examined here, include Jorge Argueta's *Somos como las nubes / We Are Like the Clouds* (2016), *Caravan to the North: Misael's Long Walk* (2019), and *Jimena Pérez puede volar / Jimena Pérez Can Fly* (2019); Claudia Hernández's *El verbo J ('The J Verb')* (2018); Claudia D. Hernández's *Knitting the Fog* (2019); Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* (2019) and *Tell Me How It Ends: Essay in Forty Questions* (2017); and Javier Zamora's *Unaccompanied* (2017) as well as his memoir, *Solito* (2023), to name a few. A growing number of testimonios, oral histories, graphic novels, and hybrid texts about and by child and youth migrants includes collections like *Solito, Solita: Crossing Borders with Youth Refugees from Central America* (2019); *The Other Side: Stories of Central American Teen Refugees Who Dream of Crossing the Border* (2019); and *Hear My Voice / Escucha mi voz: The Testimonies of Children Detained at the Southern Border of the United States* (2021), among others.⁶

In *The Faraway Brothers: Two Young Migrants and the Making of An American Life* (2017), Lauren Markham tells the story of two "hermanos lejanos" 'faraway brothers,' Ernesto and Raúl, who are forced to flee their rural hometown in El Salvador because of the gang violence that has displaced many families across Central America, especially in recent decades (269). To survive, the brothers leave their town, borrow large sums of money to pay smugglers, and travel with coyotes and other migrants across multiple borders in Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States, along the way witnessing killings, kidnappings, rapes, and other acts of violence. Upon entering the United States, they spend months in detention, petition for asylum, work to pay their debt, and learn to navigate the legal and educational systems, all the while experiencing high levels of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) associated with the violence they had originally experienced in El Salvador and in their journey through Mexico, including witnessing the murder of fellow migrants by smugglers. Their status as unaccompanied alien children (UACs) subjects them to conditions of rightlessness, criminalization, and exploitation, as

⁶ See also Arturo Hernández-Sametier's *Shelter: Notes from a Detained Migrant Children's Facility* (2020); Latin American Youth Center's *Voces Sin Fronteras: Our Stories, Our Truths* (2018); Jacob Soboroff's *Separated: Inside an American Tragedy* (2020); and Lauren Markham's *The Far Away Brothers: Two Young Migrants and the Making of An American Life* (2017).

documented in great detail in Markham's book. Texts written by journalists like Markham and Soboroff, mentioned earlier, are examples of books produced by attorneys, legal aids, interpreters, educators, advocates, and other allies of child migrants, which document the perils of migration today. Markham asserts:

People migrate now for the same reason they always have: for survival. The United States can build a wall, dig a two-thousand-mile trench, patrol with drones and military-grade vehicles and machine guns, and put thousands more guards at the border. Desperate migrants will still find another way. They'll take to the sea, they'll stuff themselves into bags, they'll dig tunnels, they'll push into rougher and rougher territory. They'll send their children alone. (270)

In the eyes of most families facing conditions of extreme violence, poverty, and insecurity in Central America, sending children out of the country, often unaccompanied, is a way to ensure their survival, and to reverse, perhaps, what Lisa Marie Cacho calls the "social death" of particular subjects, such as (un/accompanied, undocumented) migrant youth, who are deemed rightless, criminal, and devalued in today's neoliberal regime.

In her book *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*, the basis for her novel *Lost Children Archive*, Mexican writer Valeria Luiselli reflects on her own experience serving as an interpreter for child migrants in court hearings and credible fear interviews (CFI) in New York City. She uses the structure of the forty CFI interview questions not only to illustrate the labyrinthine immigration court system, which child asylum seekers are forced to navigate after surviving perilous physical, emotional, and psychic journeys, but also to ponder the role and positionality of advocates and allies of migrants in the midst of one of the biggest humanitarian crises of the twenty-first century. In both her essay and novel, Luiselli represents, moreover, the plight of child migrants experiencing violence in their countries, migration, legal proceedings, and resettlement, as well as the ethical responsibility of caregivers, advocates, allies, and writers to tell the story of these migrants. In *Lost Children Archive*, the narrator acknowledges the limits of documenting (child) migrant stories and, perhaps, the impossibility of building an empathetic space for vicarious readers as she focalizes the story of unaccompanied migrant children crossing a wide expanse by imagining losing her own children in the desert. To be sure, writing and reading about the child migrant experience can never come close to the embodied experience of child migrants. In a sort of psychic and literary transference, the narrator-writers in both of Luiselli's texts must reckon with their privileged positions as upper middle-class, educated subjects and interpreters, who cannot fully tell the embodied story of child migrants

experiencing first-hand the trauma of un/accompanied migration as represented in the texts analyzed later in this essay.

Indeed, in *Migrant Aesthetics*, Carpio explains that migrant narratives created solely to elicit empathy rely on the “often unarticulated pleasures of consuming the lives of people who suffer” (12) and run the risk of using other’s pain and trauma to relieve us of our own role and complicity in larger narratives of global social injustice. To be sure, as consumers of these texts, readers participate in “the literary marketplace that peddles migrant suffering to prop up comforting myths” (235). For Carpio, reading narratives of un/accompanied child migration for empathy is not the same as thinking, working through, and acting critically to transform the conditions and our role in producing such migrations on a global scale. Instead, Carpio wants readers of these narratives to “probe the deep imperial roots of forced migration and pay testimony to the innumerable crimes and injustices committed against migrants” (235), thereby prompting readers “to examine their own investments in the larger forces that create migration” (4).⁷ Equipped with that critical knowledge, the accompanying reader and researcher, as Abrego suggests, would be moved to acknowledge our own complicity in structures of power and to work alongside migrants to question and challenge, if not to dismantle, the immigration apparatus and its dominant narratives through acts of accompaniment—including reading, writing, witnessing, and interpreting—that amplify lived migrant experiences (Abrego).⁸

In *Shelter: Notes from a Detained Migrant Children’s Facility* (2020), Arturo Hernández-Sametier provides readers with the space to think critically about child migration from the belly of the monster, so to speak, as he writes about his own experiences working as a counselor in an undisclosed detention center housing child migrants. In this text, he provides “fictional composites” of unaccompanied migrant children from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, India, and other countries, whom he counselled and processed at his detention site. In his first-person narrative, he describes the mental healthcare, legal aid, and educational services offered to the migrant children at government facilities. While maintaining that “shelters are not prisons,” he also explains how, after several attempted escapes by children, “the wall was fortified with netting, and youth workers [were] stationed at vulnerable points [...] and even in self-defense, we had to use the least violent response” (55). Hernández-Sametier, moreover, reports that personnel were trained to be on the lookout for “signs of escape interest,” especially by “run-risk” young detainees faking illnesses, lacking sponsors, and approaching the critical age of eighteen, when they might be deported back to their countries (56). And that was

⁷ Admittedly, Carpio and this writer have different readings of Valeria Luiselli’s work.

⁸ See Abrego for a thoughtful discussion of “academic accompaniment” (41), working toward the production of transformative “honest and ethical research” with vulnerable populations like undocumented migrants (40).

after they had endured perilous journeys across Mexico and been captured by border patrol agents, who first took them to the “small jails dotting the ocean-to-ocean border,” identified by migrants as the *hieleras* ‘freezers,’ “because of the concrete floors and unheated cells” (62). The “elastic,” “highly regulated youth shelters,” sometimes run by private contractors described by Hernández-Sametier, could “accommodate one hundred or five hundred clients,” if not more (62). As the first Trump administration implemented stricter restrictions, and the number of detained migrant youths increased, unaccompanied alien children (UACs) were relegated to improvised warehouses, military bases, and other sites with enclosures, or “cages” (66). Indeed, facilities housing migrant children have been called “baby jails,” whether using restraints, or not (Schrag; Terrio). Exposing the carceral practices of child migrant detention centers, Hernández-Sametier’s text does not permit readers a space of empathy for the counselor working in such facilities, but rather reveals their (our?) complicity in the policing and “jailing” of child migrants in such centers. His text, instead, allows readers to read between the lines and to think critically, as Carpio suggests, about the systemic conditions and outcomes of unaccompanied child migration and our own complicity (through silence) with an immigration system that “jails” children.

Meanwhile, other testimonial texts compile written and visual narratives produced by child migrants seeking refuge in the United States, for example: *Solito, Solita: Crossing Borders with Youth Refugees from Central America*; *The Other Side: Stories of Central American Teen Refugees Who Dream of Crossing the Border*; *Voces Sin Fronteras: Our Stories, Our Truth*; and *Hear My Voice / Escucha mi voz: The Testimonies of Children Detained at the Southern Border of the United States*. In the bilingual children’s book *Hear My Voice / Escucha mi voz*, Warren H. Binford (internationally recognized children’s rights scholar, advocate, and co-founder of Project Amplify) and Michael García Bochenek (Director of Human Rights Watch) collaborate with artists, faith leaders, community organizers, and others to create a book based on sworn testimonies from children detained in unsafe conditions at the Clint Border Patrol Facility and other sites (Project Amplify). *Hear My Voice* contains vivid illustrations by almost twenty international artists, accompanying the testimonies of children, who speak of being threatened to death in their countries, crossing the Rio Grande and vast deserts, becoming separated from parents, and being caged with up to three hundred others in tight, cold, unhygienic holding spaces with glaring lights, insufficient food, and inadequate medical attention. As one child states, “None of the adults takes care of us so we try to take care of each other” (Binford). With these words and the accompanying illustrations, readers are called to question the inhumanity of an immigration system that separates children and subjects them to what is essentially a type of incarceration.

In the section that follows, I discuss how Salvadoran writers Jorge Argueta and Javier Zamora recount the stories of un/accompanied and separated child migrants through what I call a poetics of un/accompaniment. Written primarily in verse, Argueta's and Zamora's texts invariably use the first-person voice, or the "lyric I," to compose a collective testimonio of child migration, in Argueta's case based on his interviews with in-transit child migrants and in Zamora's case drawing from his own personal experiences as an unaccompanied child migrant forced to leave El Salvador at the age of nine years old. The poems create a path of accompaniment of critical empathy for readers to follow literally and literarily the migratory routes of child migrants from their points of departure in their home countries to their destination at the US-Mexico border. It is in this process of accompaniment that readers are positioned, if not prodded, to question the conditions that produce child migration and the legal violence of migration policies, which shape the outcomes of arrival, detention, exclusion, and deportation, especially for women and children (Menjívar and Drysdale Walsh).

Of Clouds, Caravans, and Words (Jorge Argueta)

Jorge Argueta, a San Francisco Bay Area-based Salvadoran writer, produces primarily bilingual children's books. He is also the founder of the non-profit organization *La biblioteca de los sueños* 'The Library of Dreams,' which once provided children with books and safe reading spaces in the *barrio* of San Jacinto (San Salvador, the capital city of El Salvador), the city of Sonsonate, and the *mercado central* 'central market' in San Salvador. In his bilingual books titled *Somos como las nubes / We Are Like the Clouds*, *Jimena Pérez puede volar / Jimena Pérez Can Fly*, and *Caravan to the North: Misael's Long Walk*, Argueta employs poetry to represent the experiences of migrant children who are forced to leave their homelands and to travel to the United States. First, in *We Are Like the Clouds*, he traces the migratory route of children fleeing violence, beginning with their encounters with gang members in their hometowns. In the poem titled "El Palabrero" ("The Talker"), Argueta identifies "the boss [. . .] / who tells the gang, / Hit this one, hit that one." About this ominous presence, the poem's persona says: "Let's go, I say to my father. / Let's go, I say to my mother. / Let's go as far away as we can, / where those words / can't touch us" (7). In simple, child-like language, the poetic voice expresses the fear of being recruited by *el palabrero* 'gang leader.' In other poems, a collective persona, in testimonial fashion, recalls further encounters with "los pintados" 'the painted ones' with "hard eyes" ("La Campanera Neighborhood" 6); fleeing the *barrio*; leaving behind the flora and fauna of the country; and walking across rivers, deserts, and other terrain, while sleeping under the clouds, boarding trains, and finally coming upon the men in green at the border checkpoint. In "We Introduce Ourselves to the Border Patrol," the collective mass

arrives at the border to ask for asylum: “I’m from El Salvador. / I’m from Guatemala, / I’m from Nicaragua, / I’m from Honduras, / I’m from Mexico. / . . . Here in the desert / we are a huge family of stars” (19). The individual voices captured in this poem amplify the diversity of migrant children coming from different countries, all experiencing inhospitable conditions producing migration across the world.

Several poems in the collection voice the names, destinations, dreams, and prayers of the child migrants headed toward different sites of the Central American diaspora. Argueta’s collection ends with two poems: “Sueño” (“Dream”), in which child migrants dream of reuniting with their mother and father, somewhere between the United States and the home country; and “El vendedor de paletas” (“The Paleta Seller”), wherein a child migrant finds her / himself in a park in Los Angeles, marveling at “lemon and coconut popsicles of many colors” (25-26). Based on his own ethnographical research and interviews, Argueta’s poems and books for children not only tell the compelling stories of migrant children but also create spaces of accompaniment, wherein readers bear witness to the experiences of migrants and may be moved to take action and advocate for migrants as they are made privy to the voices, thoughts, and dreams of child migrant narrators (Argueta, Personal Communication).

In *Jimena Pérez puede volar / Jimena Pérez Can Fly*, Argueta tells the story of another young migrant, Jimena, from the barrio of San Jacinto, whose mother sells fruit in the *mercado* ‘marketplace.’ Based on the life of a ten-year old child, whom Argueta met at his mobile library within the marketplace, Jimena and her friends, too, are approached by people who attempt to recruit them into the gangs at school. Soon, Jimena and her mother begin their long walk to the United States, for “the fear / is like a scream / with thorns. It’s like when / you don’t have your papa or mama with you” (13). This book captures the fear of becoming unaccompanied as Jimena leaves her father in El Salvador to travel with her mother through Guatemala and Mexico: “We’re headed / toward a town where a train is waiting for us,” Jimena says, as she and her mother embark on the journey cut short when Jimena is separated from her mother and is taken unaccompanied by border agents to a detention center (20). Alone, she ponders “Where am I? / Who has me? / Where can this be? / Where did they take my mama?” (29). *Jimena Pérez Can Fly*, thus, narrates the process of a child becoming, or being forced by border patrol agents to become, an unaccompanied refugee minor as a result of the legal immigration regime of the United States discussed at the beginning of this essay. The book ends with Jimena, without her mother, now among other unaccompanied child migrants in the detention center, reaching out for one of the picture books in a crate, which allows her to dream of being back home at the San Jacinto market, where her story began.

In *Caravan to the North: Misael's Long Walk*, published in October 2019, Argueta tells the story of Misael Martínez, a composite, fictional boy whose family joins one of the caravans, walking 2,500 miles from El Salvador to Tijuana, México, only to be tear gassed at the closed border. Based on his interviews with families in the caravans leaving San Salvador in 2019 and 2020 (Argueta, Personal Communication), Argueta voices the boy's rationale for leaving his hometown with "the best corn and the best beans / in our Mother Earth" (Argueta *Caravan*,12). Misael explains, "we decided to leave / because you can't really live / in my village anymore. / There's no work. / There's no way to get by. / What there is, / is violence, gangs" (9). Yet as Misael's mother acknowledges with compassion, the gang members: "[are] kids / from poor families. / They're the poor / screwing the poor" (16). But the fear of violence is too great, and the family joins "a caravan / that's leaving / from San Salvador / We all say, 'Let's go'" (19). "Everyone says / they want to leave / for the same reasons: / The violence. / No work. / They've lost / hope" (26). Along the way, other caravan travelers chime in, creating a polyphonic stream-of-consciousness discourse: "I want to get my education and help / my parents"; "I want a better life"; "In the caravan / we help each other"; "We're like / birds looking for / a new dawn"; "I don't want to leave"; "I love El Salvador / But here / they don't love us. / We are poor"; "We're not criminals, we're migrants. / We just want to get to the North. / We want to work" (29-36, 94). In the end, after the caravan reaches the wall in Tijuana and is tear gassed, the boy recalls his dream: "I dreamed / the sweetest dream of all. / Instead of going to the North. / I went back to El Salvador" (109). Lines like these in the poem call on readers to assess the risks and challenges faced by migrants and to decide for themselves whether migrants are deserving of asylum or should be forced to return home to the conditions from which they flee. As Carpio suggests for the reading of her corpus of texts in *Migrant Aesthetics*, migrant texts like Argueta's use formal narrative strategies such as (child) focalization, first-person narration, imagery, and other poetic devices to make readers think about (as well as feel) what it might be like for children to leave their country and experience forced migration, detention, and separation (4).

On Being Separated and *Unaccompanied* (Javier Zamora)

In his acclaimed collection of poems, titled *Unaccompanied*, Javier Zamora writes about his own experience of migrating alone at an early age and its lasting traumatic effects on him. Zamora uses poetry to fill the void of family separation and personal psychic disintegration, as a means to survive and to make himself whole after becoming undocumented in the United States. In the opening poem "To Abuelita Neli," dedicated to his grandmother who took care of him when his parents left to the United States, Zamora's lyric I ponders his condition of unaccompaniment and unbelonging upon the election of President Obama. Zamora

recalls, “this is my 14th time pressing roses in fake passports / for each year I haven’t climbed marañon trees” (3). The persona in the poem feels that all that remains of El Salvador are memories, “nothing left but dreams” of “the parakeet nest on the flor del fuego, / the paper boats we made when streets flooded, / or toys I buried by the foxtail ferns” (3). The persona’s memories seem to lie suspended in a state of uncertainty about his permanent immigration status in the United States: “I can’t go back *and* return. / There’s no path to papers... I’ll never be a citizen. I’ll never / scrub clothes with pumice stones over the big cement tub / under the almond trees...” (3). His “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,” meditating on his state of in-betweenness and unbelonging between the San Francisco Bay Area, where he resides, and the *estero* ‘estuary’ of Jaltepec, where the river meets the ocean (3). Caught in this liminal diasporic space between the *estero* and the bay, Zamora’s persona reflects on the condition of undocumented and unaccompanied, that is, of sometimes having to lie “about the country where [he] was born” and the void that gives rise to Zamora’s poetic work (3). Zamora’s poetry functions, thus, as a strategy to fill in psychic gaps, heal old wounds, and ameliorate the trauma of migration and separation, especially as an unaccompanied child migrant.

Like the other works mentioned here, Zamora’s poetics of un/accompaniment gives voice to the trauma of migration and separation through the use of concrete, historical, and reference-based images and metaphors associated with the Central American *exteriorista* or concrete aesthetic of poets such as Ernesto Cardenal, Roque Dalton, and Claribel Alegría. In “Saguars,” while driving at dusk through the desert, the poetic voice recalls the sensation of “that viscous red syrup / [that] clings to my throat” and the images of “barbwire / with nothing growing under it,” “scraped needles,” “spotlights [that] drove me / and thirty others dashing into paloverdes,” and “green-striped trucks [that] surrounded us and our empty bottles / rattled...a cold cell swallowed us” (7). Sensorial, bodily memories of his border-crossing, all of these images take him back to the experience of crossing the border as an unaccompanied migrant child, as the poetic voice invokes the feel of his sticky throat, scraped skin, blinded eyes, and overwhelming fear of the men in green.

Other poems such as “Second Attempt Crossing” reproduce almost play-by-play the trauma of border crossing and the memory of comrades like Chino, the MS-13 migrant who “shielded” the child border-crosser with his body from the kicks and guns of border patrol agents (9-10). In “On a Dirt Road outside Oaxaca,” the persona in the poem further recalls the endless voyage through Mexico, hiding in “vans like matchsticks,” facing “the cops’ front-sights and barrels,” and hoping that “it’s gonna be just fine” (12). In successive poems, upon arrival and reunifying with his family, the speaker recounts his first days at school in the United States,

doing trauma-informed writing and drawing exercises with his counselors, which bring back stick-figure images of his grandmother making pupusas, people “running past cacti / from helicopters, running inside detention cells,” and corpses of dead men he knew (“from *The Book I Made with a Counselor My First Week of School*” 8). Capturing moments of his journey into adulthood, Zamora’s poems dwell in and on the past, gathering rage against a system that continues to cage, maim, and kill migrants like himself.

In “Cassette Tape,” as if on rewind, the lyric I persona in the poem recalls other memories of his border-crossing, “packed in boats,” “hiding in trailers,” running to trucks, and being robbed with “not one peso left / so we get desperate” (13). He is left wondering why “Mamá, you left me...Papá, you left me” (13), only years later to have him travel through the desert to reunite with them. In the end, the poem’s persona asks, “¿Does my country need more of us / to flee with nothing but a bag?” (14). The grammatical double interrogation marks from Spanish punctuate the speaker’s liminal double consciousness and accentuate his sense of separation, alienation, and unaccompaniment, living in-between homelands, cultures, and languages. At the end of the poem, there is resolution, as the persona reconciles with his mother while he listens to a lullaby she sings to the baby she takes care of. It is the lullaby that she never sang to him as a child because she was physically absent in his life, leaving him in his grandmother’s care. In the wake of that absence, she says to her son, “[I’m] sorry for leaving. I wish I could’ve taken you to music classes...” and he responds, “*Mom, you can sing to me now, / ... you can sing to me now*” (14).

Repeatedly, the child migrant in Zamora’s poems is haunted by the ghosts of El Salvador, represented by “black bags, more and more of us [forced to] leave,” “the war [that] has never stopped,” and the inability to “brush Abuelita’s hair, / wash her pots and pans” (“El Salvador” 11). Amid the pain expressed in the poems, there are also joyful moments of reunification with loved ones and of speaking truth to power, as in the poem “To President-Elect,” where the poetic voice recounts his flight through fences, walls, and other obstacles. For all his troubles, the poet has “over-lived” (survived) his passage through the desert (15). In the end, living between the memories of the *estero* (El Salvador) and the Bay Area (the United States), the poet reconciles with his existence of unbelonging and unaccompaniment. In “Pump Water from the Well,” he reclaims the *estero* and the mangroves of his childhood memories in another faraway location, and he says, “Don’t tell me I didn’t bring the estero up north where there’s none” (16). What Zamora does in *Unaccompanied* is bring his readers to the well, that is, to the well-spring of experiences that have shaped him, including the memories of his migration, separation, unbelonging, relocation, and recreation of himself in the North. In his memoir *Solito*, Zamora narrates in full detail the re/construction of (him)self, or rather, the fractured refugee subject that speaks through his collection

of poetry. In *Unaccompanied*, the poetic voice seeks to find and make a home and the self away from home.

Indeed, many of Zamora's poems in *Unaccompanied* are populated with images, sounds, and sensations of an imagined El Salvador, brimming with loved ones (*abuelita* 'grandma,' *abuelito* 'grandpa,' *tías* 'aunts,' and *primos* 'cousins'), flowing in the waters of the *estero de Jaltepec* ("Instructions for My Funeral" 17), and communing with the beloved flora and fauna of his homeland, all seeming to shield him from the ever-encroaching effects of trauma ("Montage with Mangoes, Volcano, and Flooded Streets" 18). The poem titled "The Pier of La Herradura" also brings back the ghost of "a child / hidden between the legs of a scarred man," perhaps, imagining an encounter between his migrant child self and the scarred man possibly his father or grandfather (21-22). Most assuredly, this poem represents the collective trauma of child migration and separation as further documented in a series of poems found in the midsection of Zamora's book ("How to Enlist" 24; "Documentary" 25; "ARENA" 26; "Don Chepe" 27; "Disappeared" 28; "Rooftop" 29; "This Was the Field" 30; "Politics" 31; "For Israel and María de los Ángeles" 34-37). Finally, in a poem aptly titled "Aftermath," the poetic voice stages an imaginary return to El Salvador and concludes: "Little has changed. Uniforms / aren't soldiers or guerrilleros— / they're tattoos or policemen. / Storks and pelicans have been spotted / deep in the estero like before / the bombs and there's talk crocodiles / are back ... See, little has changed" (32). Indeed, little has changed and migration from Central America and El Salvador continues and will continue in the twenty-first century. While the *estero* community successively experiences violence at the hands of landowners, soldiers, and gang members, now it faces the onslaught of new violence from a police force funded by the hemispheric securitization programs sponsored by the United States, as mentioned earlier. The poem suggests that as long as there is violence and intervention in El Salvador, the country will bleed migrants and refugees.

In the last section of *Unaccompanied*, Zamora returns to the *semilla* 'seed' of his grandmother's house with generations of family members, traditions, and demons, including his drunk, machete-wielding grandfather who exerts patriarchal violence on the women in the family ("I Don't Want to Speak of 'Don Chepe'" 43). Zamora speaks of the years that he lives in his grandparents' home in the *estero* ("How I Learned to Walk" 44; "Postpartum" 45; "Altercations" 51); the departure of his parents ("'Pónele Queso Bicho' Means Put Cheese on It Kid" 46-47; "Then, It Was So" 48-49; "Aubade" 54-55); and finally, his reunification with them in the San Francisco Bay Area ("Prayer" 56-57; "Abuelita Says Goodbye" 58). At the end of the poem "Prayer," the persona says, "On my last day of school, I'll tell / only my closest friends I'm flying / to where people drink cold milk, / put strawberries in their cereal, / I'll eat strawberries all the time / get so tall I'll start playing basketball" (56-57). His grandmother, on parting, quietly reminds him, "Don't lose

me” (58), foreshadowing his return to the homeland someday. The last part of the collection recounts, almost anti-climactically, Zamora’s arrival in the misty San Francisco Bay, his reunification with his parents, his integration into school, and his (then) unconsummated desire to find his way back to the *estero*, to his Abuelita, which he only fulfills in June 2018, when he finally qualifies for Temporary Protected Status and is able to visit El Salvador (NPR).

In one of his most powerful poems, “To President-Elect,” Zamora through first-person narration recounts the pain of migration and expresses solidarity with all un/accompanied child migrants crossing into the United States and across the world: “I am not the only nine-year old / who has slipped my backpack under the ranchers’ fences. I am still / in that van that picked us up from the ‘Devil’s Highway.’ The white van / honked three times, honks heard by German shepherds, helicopters, Migra trucks” (15). Further, he remembers the dead, whom he calls the “drybacks” who did not make it and who seem to haunt him, for “at night, they return / to say *sobreviviste bicho, sobreviviste carnal*. Yes, we over-lived” (15).⁹ Addressed to President-elect Donald J. Trump in 2016 as well as the people of the United States who refuse to acknowledge that refugees have a (credible fear) story to tell, Zamora’s poem serves as an indictment of the failed immigration system of the United States, forever waving the flag of the American dream before the world, yet denying immigrants and un/accompanied child migrants and other refugees safe passage across its borders.

Zamora’s and Argueta’s poems examined here cross countries and deserts to reach the North and provide first-person testimonial insights into the great migration of un/accompanied child migrants and refugees in the twenty-first century. Both poets document the stories of children who travel *solitos* ‘alone’ and unaccompanied through vast territories, exposing readers to their hemispheric and global plight. Part of the larger “migrant aesthetic” examined by Carpio and other critics of migration literature, these writers and poets demand that readers not only think deeply about the experiences endured by migrant families and children as they cross multiple borders from the South to seek safe haven in northern countries, but also prod readers to accompany them, side with them, and, if opting to advocate for migrants, work to challenge conditions and legislation that shape migration across the world. The works of Argueta, Zamora, and others serve as spaces and paths of accompaniment for readers to question why people cross vast territories and borders by foot, atop trains, and in caravans to reach the North and to propose

⁹ Structured as an apostrophe, “To President-Elect” is a rebuke to power structures that push children to migrate in order to survive. It is telling that the “drybacks,” or those who were unable to cross the river and died, remind the child migrant that he has survived, or over-lived (“sobreviviste”). Using the Salvadoran vernacular, the dead call the migrant child “bicho,” which is the colloquial term for boy in El Salvador, thus making it evident that this poem is explicitly about Salvadoran migration.

new solutions and alternatives to ameliorate the conditions at home and abroad that force people to migrate.

Conclusion

As discussed in this essay, the emergent literature and cultural imaginary associated with un/accompanied child migrants and refugees from northern Central America, especially El Salvador, bring to the fore the systemic, global conditions driving people to migrate from their home countries today and serve as testaments to struggles for representation, memory, voice, and visibility as migrants, refugees, and vulnerable groups. This essay, furthermore, posits that it is possible to read while thinking and feeling with migrant texts in order to question the systems that create the conditions and restrictions of migration today. The literature of migrant un/accompaniment examined here should make readers question why Central American, particularly Salvadoran children, women, and men, are pushed out of their homelands and forced to flee elsewhere, oftentimes *solitos* and *solitas*. Ultimately, this literature attempts to build a dialogic space for greater critical understanding and cognitive empathy for not only Central American migrants but also other global migrants facing great precarity and violence in their homelands and even greater violence migrating through vast territories. If anything, the literature of un/accompanied child migration teaches us to read with mind, heart, and soul.

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