Javier Zamora's *Unaccompanied*: Materiality, Citizenship and Salvadoran Identity

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Javier Zamora's *Unaccompanied* (2017) is an ensemble of testimonies from the poetic world of an author who had the extreme experience of crossing the border alone, when he was nine years old. A voice emerging from generations of diasporic Central Americans, his poetry collects and blends a multiplicity of signifiers from his personal transnational experience and evidence of the experience of others. He writes primarily in English with some Spanish words and phrases, and introduces us to the overlapping affects and material traces of the hazardous event of migration. He portrays the interstitial world of the border, a place where culture is hazy and blended, both Latin American and Anglo-American and somehow neither—because civilization is intentionally attenuated there, so that the hazards of nature can restrict and discourage human movement.

The collection of poems is organized around Zamora's autobiographical narrative of crossing the border and reuniting with his parents in the United States. He expresses the hopes and apprehensions associated with the adjustment to a new life, and fragmented signifiers from El Salvador that reinforce or contest his hybrid identity. But most importantly, this poetry attends to a materiality that impacts his experience of border crossing and his life in the United States. He expresses the human affect inspired by the hazardous and barren conditions of the desert, and the way that detritus and man-made materials, placed there by immigration authorities or by migrants themselves, are endowed with significance. This story opens a raw and sometimes surreal chronicle of the human and non-human world of the border, and attends to the tactile materiality of this journey in the desert, which is revealed not as ephemera but as a primary theme for thought and reflection.

Other times this materiality appears in documents, particularly the coveted documents by which the temporality of his legal state affects his identity. By doing so, Zamora shows the interconnectedness between abstract legal barriers and concrete natural barriers. How can we grasp the poetic migrant journey that Zamora lived in the desert and his subsequent life in the US? How does Zamora's book articulate, aesthetically and philosophically, the role of nature and immigration laws as a metonymic and concrete experience of Central Americans who arrive in the US? What are the Central American poetic traditions from which Zamora draws, and that help to describe this materiality? In this essay, we explore Jason De León's philosophical and sociological work and Cecilia Menjívar's writing on legal violence to provide some of the theoretical language to describe Zamora's poetic practice. De León advocates a viewpoint that de-centers human freedom and subjectivity and re-locates it in the natural systems in which humans live and work. Menjívar's "liminal legality" captures the legal exclusion that many immigrants like Zamora experience, as well as the potential to articulate aesthetically this ambiguous status.

In our reading, we situate Zamora's poetic method within the tradition of politicized Central American poetry, and particularly from principles of Ernesto Cardenal's exteriorism.

Zamora extends this descriptive method toward an understanding of the border as a complex political instrumentalizing of natural forces, in what De León describes as a *hybrid collectif. Unaccompanied* exposes how the border experience reveals truths about the non-human actors that impress themselves on our minds and bodies, and how an unstable legal position and convoluted legal documents can become poetic material to bring us toward greater awareness of the obstacles and violence that shape migrant lives.

Poetry of the Migrant Experience: Traces, Dialogues and Innovation

Before our analysis of Zamora's poetry, we will position his work within the Central American and US Central American literary traditions. Javier Zamora was born in El Salvador in 1990, and he is part of the growing and more visible community of Central American artists, particularly from the second generation and the "1.5" generation, in the US.[1] In addition to his poetry book, Zamora has published his poems in many US journals and anthologies including *The Wandering Song: Central American Writing in the United States* (2017), edited by Leticia Hernández-Linares, Rubén Martínez and Héctor Tóbar. Zamora has a forthcoming memoir, entitled *Solito* (2022), which could be seen as a companion piece to his poetry book, narrating in prose his odyssey across Guatemala, Mexico and the Sonoran desert.[2] As an unaccompanied migrant child, Zamora's narrative participates within a larger corpus of writings regarding this dangerous and intense experience lived by many Central Americans, captured in works such as: *Enrique's Journey* (*La travesía de Enrique*, 2006) by Sonia Nazario, *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* (*Central American Book Of The Dead*, 2018) by Balam Rodrigo, *The Lost Children Archive* (*Desierto sonoro*, 2019) by Valeria Luiselli, and *Caravaneros* (2020) by Douglas Oviedo.

Zamora's poetry is concrete, and its concreteness starts from the cover. The cover of *The Unaccompanied* depicts a white and black picture of a border wall by Tomás Castelazo, an illustration of the entwining of artificial structures and natural environment in a rural and lost topography. This image tells readers that the subject of the poems is the material experience of crossing. We might compare the image to Ana Teresa Fernández's performance *Erasing the border* (*Borrando la frontera*), in which she paints the border fence to match the blue sky, creating the illusion that the border is eliminated. Castelazo's photo also has a transgressive meaning, with different methods.[3] The photograph puts the rawness of the structure of the wall in our face, as a literal and rickety object that should not be forgotten since it produces artificial boundaries, creates negative alterity and inflicts militarist violence on the Central American bodies who try to cross it. This image powerfully conveys the terrain of Zamora's recollections.

We notice that Zamora's poetry depicts the Salvadoran migrant experience without emphasizing details about gender dynamics, particularly the distinct experience of women. In this sense, his narrative could be seen at first as part of a masculine-centric literature perspective; a tradition that, as Yajaira M. Padilla reminds us, leaves women's immigrant experience as secondary despite their pioneering role in migratory flows to the US (94-99). However, we also understand as readers that his point of enunciation is coming from a young man advocating for acknowledging the particular experience of unaccompanied children crossing the border. Immigrant women are not the main figures in the border-crossing in most of his poems, with the exception of "Deportation Letter," about his aunt crossing the Río Bravo to see her daughter. However, female figures like his grandma Abuelita Neli and his mother Pati are important interlocutors whose family bonds help the poetic I to interrogate his frustrations about his legal

limbo and his connection from to the past he left in El Salvador and the present in the US. As Mauricio Espinoza has argued, the first poem of the book, "To Abuelita Neli," which addresses his grandmother, is a prologue that provides a kind of compass regarding his relationship with maternal love, childhood and his country (65-69).

This book participates in the poetry produced by US Central Americans that collects and blends a multiplicity of signifiers from their personal and transnational histories. As noted by Arturo Arias, this new generation of poets challenges traditional and conventional forms of writing, drawing from heterogenous materials, such as interactive aspects, collages, visual materials, bilingual spoken dialects, among others (304-305). In the contemporary Salvadoran and Salvadoran-American literary scene, Zamora's poetry is in dialogue with other poets who reflect on violence, survival and family bonds in El Salvador, and how they mark their identities in the US; such as Alexandra Lytton Regalado's *Matria* (2014), Janel Pineda's *Lineage of Rain* (2021), and Yesika Salgado's poetic trilogy (*Corazón* 2017, *Tesoro* 2018, and *Hermosas* 2019). For the purposes of this essay, we focus on the tactility and incorporation of multiple signifiers from El Salvador and the US, dialoguing with the earlier exteriorist and conversational poetry movements in Central America, particularly the innovations of Ernesto Cardenal and Roque Dalton. Through Zamora's poetry as an illuminating example, we want to create connections, common routes and distinctions between the well-known committed poetry of wartime in the isthmus and the younger poetic generations of Central Americans, who live in the United States and deal with different mutations of violence (policing and racism).

Unaccompanied and the Poetry of the Central American Revolutions

In Central America, poetry has traditionally been understood to have political and philosophical importance. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Central American nations experienced the convulsions of revolutionary events, as popular organizations engaged in bloody insurrections against the corrupt and dictatorial client states of the United States. In Nicaragua, Ernesto Cardenal was among the most important and influential poets. A Catholic priest, Cardenal initially held a pacifist stance and tried to create a new type of community based on the founding principles of Christianity in Solentiname (Henighan 51). However, government repression led to him make common cause with the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), the group that waged guerrilla war in the jungles and countryside, struck government targets in the cities, and organized groups of workers and students in revolutionary cells (Henighan 353-370). Following the revolutionary victory of 1979, when the Somoza dictatorship was replaced by the FSLN, Cardenal served as minister of culture until 1987 (Henighan 53-56).

Cardenal had a distinct poetic method particularly inspired by Ezra Pound, as well as his own distinct political and theological commitments, including liberation theology.[4] In many of Cardenal's poems, he eschews the typical poetic approach of a lyrical expression of personal psychological interiority. Instead, his poems are descriptive, and he draws aesthetic inspiration from documentary cinema. For example, his poem "Zero Hour" ("Hora cero") strives to narrate Nicaraguan history, not from an autobiographical perspective but from the point of view of the masses (Henighan 66-81). His conceptual underpinnings come from historical materialism, as well as gospel teachings on the priority of the poor (Henighan 384). In other poems, such as the *Cosmic Canticle* (*Canto Cósmico* 1989), he writes highly ambitious poetic and religious reflections on the natural sciences, embracing the insights of physics, chemistry and biology in elucidating God's creation (Henighan 400-425).

While minister of culture, Cardenal directed poetry workshops in which ordinary people could participate (Henighan 53-54). The goal of these workshops was to encourage the creative expression of Nicaraguans, and to guide them to apply poetry to better understand their history and concrete circumstances. Cardenal articulated a series of principles meant to guide these poetic experiments. He called this formal approach "exteriorism," to distinguish it from the common tendency to directly ruminate on personal feelings, desires or fantasies (which would be "interiorist"). As described by the Nicaraguan poet: "Exteriorismo is a poetry created with images of the exterior world, the world we see and sense… Exteriorismo is an objective poetry: narrative and anecdote, made with elements of real life and with concrete things, with proper names and precise details, and exact data, statistics, facts and quotations" (Zimmerman x). Cardenal did not view exteriorism as a rejection of human personhood. To the contrary, he believed that a precise descriptive approach would better grasp the precision and uniqueness of personal experience and direct contemplative reflection.

While he does not cite Cardenal, Javier Zamora's poetic method is quite similar. He draws attention to the immediate surroundings of his crossing to the border and his abrupt arrival in the US, the people he met, the way they speak to him and treat him. Many of Zamora's poems have a documentary construction that emphasize the environment, objective facts and direct quotations in italics that create a vivid representation of his traumatic and intense experience. This is the case of his poem "Let Me Try Again" that captures a failed attempt by himself and other migrants to cross the border at the site of a ranch. It captures the time (early in the morning, 5am), the environment (trees, breeds of dogs at the ranch), condition (thirsty because of many days without water), and direct quotations (in English, Spanish and "pocho" Spanish) from their encounters with a white man and a migration officer. The poem comments on the dangers that migrants suffer, such as disappearance and death (his group passed from "forty people" to "four people"), and the vigilante violence exemplified by the white man who captures them with a gun and calls "La Migra" to apprehend them. In unexpected contrast to this, the migration officer shows certain signs of empathy, since his family came across the border too. We hear the migration officer speak to him and to us: "*buenas noches*/ and gave us pan dulce y chocolate. /[…] and told us/*next time, rest at least five days*,/*don't trust anyone calling themselves coyotes*,/*bring more tortillas, sardines, Alhambra*" (62).

These verses also document the material culture, such as the tools and food that migrants leave behind and the knowledge of these traces by Border Patrol agents. These embodied practices of border-crossers work to mutually shape identities of (non) citizenship in the Sonoran Desert (De León et al 448-449). Despite the dangers and failed attempts depicts in this poem, there is a subtext in the title and the conclusion of the poem that refers to the stoicism, drive of hope and strength for a better future that will make migrants "try again, and again, like everyone does" (62).

Zimmerman mentions that exteriorism was also influenced by a Salvadoran poet, Roque Dalton (xi). Dalton was a poet who underwent political education in Czechoslovakia and in Cuba. While he could have remained in Cuba as a respected poet, he felt compelled to return to El Salvador to participate directly in the revolutionary struggle of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). There, he was eventually murdered by a group of his own comrades, after a complex personal and political dispute, and his body was never found. It is not surprising, therefore, that Zamora takes epigraphs from Dalton from "Love Poem" ("Poema de amor") and "The Great Despair" ("El Gran Despecho") (Zamora 40, 78). These epigraphs recur as interruptions of the autobiographical narrative, while connecting Zamora across time with two of

Dalton's preoccupations: the precarious and nomadic condition of Salvadorans as "eternally undocumented" and the creation of an alternative model of patriotism. Zamora's poem "El Salvador" epitomizes the ambivalent relationship that he also has with his country. It starts with the hypothetic reflection of his return to El Salvador and its telluric personification as "beard of salt," "volcanic face" and "pumice breath." However, this image is suddenly overshadowed by the metastasis of violence and militarization: gangster violence and State violence (this continues today with Nayib Bukele's mano dura and state of exception).[5]

The poetic I says that the continuation of war, the migration and the death of fellow Salvadorans made it difficult to love his country. Zamora scornfully says "Stupid Salvador, you see our back bags, our empty homes, / our fear to say: *the war has never stopped*, and still you lie" (11). For us, these verses create connections with the metaphor of El Salvador as a dead body in war and postwar. Dalton, as the exemplary Salvadoran poet, is remembered by his absent body. Similarly, Zamora speaks of the vanishing immigrant body (returning in black bag or wearing black backpacks to risk their lives crossing the border). These lines also follow the steps of Dalton's criticism of the lies and fallacies that appears in official Salvadoran history. Dalton wrote a book titled *The Forbidden Stories of Tom Thumb* (*Historias prohibidas del pulgarcito* 1974), which revises the history of El Salvador to eliminate touristic, triumphal and idealized version of the country, while focusing with irony on the violence, war, criminality and exploitation of its history. In "El Salvador," Zamora has a similarly sarcastic perspective on his nation's past and present.

However, Dalton's poetic approach is less programmatic than Cardenal's. While his testimonial writing is a direct, historical, descriptive narrative, his poems are often lyrical and refer to images or abstractions in a manner that exteriorism would discourage. As a result, Dalton's epigraphs, although sharing similar values about their country and their people, provide a contrast to the highly concrete references that Zamora records. Zamora's poems grasp the real matter of the migrant's journey. For example, he especially writes of alimentary objects and the pressing hunger for their nourishment, the weeds and vegetation of the pathway, and the insects and butterflies that accompany him in poems such as "Saguaros," "Second Attempt Crossing," and "Let Me Try Again." This poetic approach attunes the reader to the ecological intertwining between the interior states of the mind and the exterior agents of the natural and technological world. In general, Zamora avoids metaphor and makes restrictive use of simile.

Zamora shares with Cardenal and Dalton the experience of a violent and inevitable struggle, one that is lethal for friends and family and potentially deadly for oneself. However, the experience of migration does not carry the promise of a liberatory transformation, like revolution; it is a goal-oriented project, to escape poverty and persecution, but results in a new identity that nonetheless remains indelibly marked by Central American experiences and realities. While Zamora's poetic method has strong affinities with exteriorism, the concepts and facts that his poetry creates are distinct from Cardenal's theological and materialist commitments. Because there is not the hope of a mass national transformation in which the last will be first, Zamora does not have the enormous historical and cosmic ambition of many of Cardenal's works or their telos of realizing the kingdom of heaven. Rather, Zamora's descriptive approach is tightly focused on sensory experiences and material traces of the border passage. His poems evoke the understanding of the border suggested by the research of Jason de León, who draws from contemporary French philosophy in order to comprehend it as a *hybrid collectif.*

Jason de León's Anthropological-Philosophical Approach to the Border: Hybrid Collectif in *Unaccompanied*

Jason de León is an anthropologist who has studied the experiences of border-crossing migrants, particularly in the Sonoran Desert, for many years. In his book, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, published in 2015, he argues that it is difficult to distinguish natural events from socio-political ones in this environment. De León recounts how, beginning in 1993, the Border Patrol adopted the approach of Prevention Through Deterrence, a set of protocols to minimize the ability to cross the border through inhabited areas and hence to necessitate that border crossings would become more common in the inhospitable environment of the desert (30-31). Hence, the complex natural aspects of the desert (flora and fauna, heat, sand, aridity, geology) all become weaponized to function as technologies of discouragement and harm that can kill migrants rather than allow them to find any refuge on US soil. De León believes that this environment requires recourse to new philosophical innovations, because the normal understanding of the distinction between natural dangers and political policies does not hold in this space; it would only produce misunderstandings of the social world that migrants actually inhabit.

De León describes the desert as a "wall of deterrence that is equal parts human, animal, plant, object, geography, temperature, and unknown" (39). He argues that understanding this myriad of complex elements requires that we re-think our concept of agency. In ordinary political theory, human beings have agency: a degree of freedom of choice and activity, so that an outcome can be discerned as the effect of someone with intent and responsibility. In the humanistic framework, we would see the migrants and the border patrol as the fundamental actors, and the desert as an inert terrain that is prior to politics. This depiction partly underlies the Prevention Through Deterrence strategy: The thesis is that migrants have the desire to unlawfully cross the border, while the border patrol wishes to enforce restrictions, and this straightforwardly indicates that less hospitable areas will be less conducive to crossings and hence act as a barrier. If migrants die of dehydration or heat and their bodies are devoured by birds, then this is a contingent accident of nature rather than a political execution. De León draws from Michel Callon and John Law, whose notion of *hybrid collectif* "posits that agency is an emergent property created by the interaction of many heterogenous components known as *actants*, sources of action that may be human or nonhuman" (39). In this viewpoint the horizon of possible occurrence is not best understood by the competing desires and goals of conscious humans, but rather diverse natural processes act in concert with human techniques and norms.

In the Central American context, Jorge E. Cuéllar dialogues with De León's view of nature as deterrent in the act of migration, but particularly in the case of river-borders in Mesoamerica, particularly the Suchiate River (Guatemala-Mexico) and Río Grande (US-Mexico). Cuéllar calls the natural bordering function in rivers as "ecologies of control," and he analyzes the predatory economic and environmental dimensions behind the act of crossing ("Waterproofing the State"). In contrast, De León focuses on the desert. Although De León and Zamora do not emphasize on the ecological effects on the ecosystems while crossing as Cuéllar does, all of them expose the challenges that extreme and surveilled landscapes produce on migrants' mobility, either in the desert or rivers.

Zamora captures the vulnerability, fragmentation and pain that migrants suffer crossing the border created by the *hybrid collectif* in the Sonoran Desert. For example, he depicts:

1) The disorientation created by the vast desert in verses such as: "In the middle of that desert that didn't look like sand/ and sand only" ("Second Attempt Crossing" 9), "we were lost and didn't know which star/was north what was east west" ("June 10, 1999" 80).
2) The role of the heat, in poems such as "June 10, 1999," which sometimes creates distorted perceptions between the non-human and the human; "the sun's heat *was* a reptile" (80), "she didn't know 110 degrees/when like Colorado River toads/we slid under bushes" (82).
3) The hostility of artificial elements, "barbwire and barbwire," alongside flora such as "saguaros," the tree-like cactus species, which work together to deter his survival and do not ameliorate his thirst nor hunger. In the poem by this name, the lyric subject searches "for red fruits at the top of the saguaros, the ones/ at dusk [he] threw rocks at for the sake of hunger" and "also scraped needles first, then carved/ those tall torsos for water" (7).
4) The raw materiality of the desert inflicting pain on Zamora's body, depicted in his poem "June 10, 1999," when he met his parents for the first time in the US. The poem says:

Mom didn't know

Dad didn't know

even if they'd run across fences before

they didn't see my knees

crashing into cactus needles

that night one shoe slipped off (82)

Zamora's body is marked by the experience of the desert, as if it is a sculpted memory. This means that even though Zamora-child has left the desert, the desert for Zamora-poet has not left him as a motive and as continuum in his present. For example, the aforementioned poem "Saguaros," in which the poetic I looks for the tree-like cactus fruits to mitigate his hunger and thirst presents two temporalities: the past experience in the desert, and his present in which thirst is associated with memoires of flora and the painful act of swallowing. The poem says "I wake and my throat is dry, so I drive to botanical gardens" (7). In the encounter with saguaros, we as readers understand that Zamora succeeds in eating the fruit; but it is a disgusting and disgorging experience that recurs from his memory: "Sometimes in my car, that viscous red syrup/clings to my throat and I have to pull over" (7).

Swallowing is also a metaphorical and literal experience of disposability and anonymity that migrants suffer by being "swallowed" by the militarized immigration machine of detention centers; the end of the poem declares that "a cold cell swallowed us" (7). In the poem, nature becomes technified into a surveillance mechanism, since the encounter with these trees due to thirst meant being captured by la Migra, the "green-striped trucks." At the end of the poem, there is a reference to "empty bottles," which are important signifiers of the material culture left by migrants. They are also symbols of human rights, because they provide insights what De León calls "the state of barelife when people die from a simple lack of water;" but, they also represent

the criminalization of migrant life and people who want to give them humanitarian aid (De León et al 462).[6] These bottles became desert fauna, rattles like the "rattlesnakes" because of their dominant presence, like animals in the desert. "Saguaros" remind us that border crossing is an assemblage of thirsty, heat, cactus fields, empty bottles and Migra trucks, pushing migrants' bodies to the limit.

Archival Violence and "Liminal Legality": Law as Raw Poetic Material

Archives comprise formal and informal records of the past, and these are socially essential to identity and community. Especially in post-war societies, like Central America, some scholars and artists have undertaken a revision and reconstruction of archives from the many years of war in the isthmus, in order to incorporate individuals and communities who were erased from them by the powerful authors who aimed to maintain their own legitimacy. From the diaspora, Zamora's poetry invokes similar echoes of contesting official archives. His poetry exposes US migratory policies as a repository of exclusion and inequality. In his poems, Zamora describes a corpus of material legal documents: passports, deportation letters, and visas that affects his social existence. For Diana Taylor, documents are enduring materials of "archival memory" which are in constant interaction with ephemeral repertoire or embodied practice (spoken language) and become sites of knowledge-making and transmission (19). Similarly, the body of law and documents become part of Zamora's history and "raw" materials for his poem. They also expose the incertitude of his legal status that is part of his existence and his relationship with his family.

Zamora's evocation of documents is in tune with the emergence in contemporary scholarship of studying identity documents as sites that expose complex power dynamics of inequality, exclusion, and sometimes subversion, between migrants and the state that receives them. For example, *Paper Trails: Migrants, Documents, and Legal Insecurity* (2020), edited by Sarah Horton and Josiah Heyman, examines what they call "bureaucratic inscription." This concept refers to the material dynamics by which the official bureaucratic system inscribes migrants: these inscriptions include documents (extensive paper trails), but also exceed writings into other forms of control such as fingerprints, retina scans, photos, voice and facial recognition (Horton 3-27). These bureaucratic inscriptions affect individual narratives of identities as they do to Zamora, and one aspect of the migrants' relationship with state bureaucracies in the south-to-north migration is that new immigration statuses are only temporary, so they extend the already "liminal" legal statuses (Horton 2).

Cecilia Menjívar's concept of "liminal legality" brings light to these legal ambiguous situations captured in the poems by Zamora. While studying Guatemalan and Salvadoran communities living in the United States, Menjívar conceptualizes this term referring to the ambiguous legal space, the in-between of moving in and out of temporary status (not fully documented or undocumented but often straddling both), that many Central Americans suffer at an extremely costly price (anxiety, money and accumulation of extensive bureaucratic process), and which permeates different aspects of their lives, including artistic expressions (1001-1008).

This grey area of Menjívar's conceptualization of documented and undocumented migration is particularly significant for Zamora's legal situation and a source of poetic inspiration when he wrote *Unaccompanied*. Fortunately, Zamora has currently a green card, but for many years he had a Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Salvadorans.[7] During the Trump administration, this status was in continual danger of revocation. In any case, the TPS has a finite character and is not intended to lead to citizenship ("Cómo ser residente"). The poem "June 10,

1999" takes its title from the date on which Zamora arrived to the US, and captures the liminal legality of the author. The poem has twelve sections, each one titled with the letter "I." These poems as a whole narrate Zamora's dangerous journey in the desert from getting lost, sick and thirsty, meeting his parents, leaving his grandmother in El Salvador, and his life in the US. He ironically describes this last period as *"Mi Vida Gringa,"* drawing on the unrealistic idea of the country created by movies and other media consumption and its contrast with his personal experience.

By reading these different vignettes, the "I" of the titles could be read as the English first person "I," in which Zamora, following a testimonial position, is telling us about his immigration story and why it is driven by humanitarian crisis. In one of the poems, he writes: "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). Zamora wrote the poem after the frustrating experience of denial in a USCIS office in San Francisco for an advance parole permit to get his already-approved EB-1 visa in El Salvador (*Unaccompanied Migrant Children* 3). He says:

> I like this title because as you can tell, even nineteen years after, I have to try jump through immigration's bureaucratic hoops in order to say, 'I exist, I matter. Look at all I've done. ….The poem, I think, is pretty self-explanatory…again and again I'm reminded of my status. Of my trauma. Of my second-class citizenship or lack of citizenship in this country… I hope my humanity is fully recognized soon (*Unaccompanied Migrant Children* 3).

The incorporation of legal documents as raw poetic materials for Zamora has distinct functions in the ways he experiences belonging and exclusion. They testify to the different application procedures (e.g. forms, fingerprints, and innumerable caveats and conditions), and all the different avenues to become permanent legal residents (applying for asylum, resorting to marriage or seeking legalization through work) that many Central Americans in the United States have undergone for over many decades (Menjívar 1000-1008). This never-ending situation in which many Central Americans live creates pessimism about the path to citizenship, and even what it means to be a citizen of the US.

In his poem "To Abuelita Neli," Zamora expresses this pessimism to his grandmother: "there is no path to papers. I've got nothing left but dreams […] I'll never be a citizen." (3) In "Citizenship," the poetic voice as a plural "we" observes a group of poor white homeless people looking for trashcans in the border. The undocumented witnesses question how is it possible that these homeless are US citizens; they do not have a problem interreacting with "white or brown" officers, but they live in extreme poverty. "We didn't know how they had ended up that way/ on *that* side," says the poem, expressing the contradictions of the different dimensions of citizenship in the US, in which legal status does not mean that you are politically and socially recognized (63).

Zamora's representations of documents also denounce the violence behind immigration laws and procedures, which includes the legal uncertainly and expectation of deportation at any moment. His poem "Deportation Letter" is dedicated to his cousin whose mother was deported. It says: "The words *Notice to Appear* flap like a monarch trapped in a puddle/ Translation: ten years in a cell cold enough to be named Hielera" (72). The metamorphosis of the legal document into a trapped "monarch butterfly," a symbol for migration and an icon used by many immigrant organizations, shows how deportation documents are punitive constructions that go against the intrinsic nature of migration, life and natural law. Documents materialize the fear, anxiety and

emotions surrounding them and the legal limbo they create. This legal nonexistence appears in "June 10, 1999:" "I wasn't born here/ I've always known this country wanted me dead/[...] A white man a white man a white man/ not the song I wanted to hear […] told me we want you out out out" (87).

In a more transgressive and subversive tone, Zamora's poem incorporates documents with the poetic gesture of eliminating them. Likewise, the elimination of documents indicates metonymically that borders should be eliminated. The idea of having papers or the lack of them does not define Zamora's humanity, nor other undocumented or legally liminal Central Americans. The poem "Cassette Tape" exemplifies this idea: "Mamá, marry for papers. Papá, marry for papers./[…] I won't marry for papers […] I will etch visas on toilet paper and throw them from a lighthouse" (13). Eliminating documents is also a common migrant practice to fight against State power arbitrariness and control by destroying passports and identification cards, since many Central Americans ditched these documents so if they were apprehended, they would be released into Mexico rather than go back to their countries (Horton 12).

The elimination of documents in Zamora also appears through the act of creating false or alternative documents. His poem "*from* The Book I made with a Counselor My First Week of School" deals with his meeting with a "gringo" counselor after his arrival to the US, and how Zamora-child contested this authority figure who wants to inscribe his traumatic experience. A position that his parents, especially his mom shares with him: "never tell them everything, but smile, always smile," she says (8). The poem includes the notes of the counselor such as *"Javier saw a dead coyote animal, which stank and had flies over it,"* but the poetic I never corrected the counselor nor even told his mother the real narrative (8). Zamora-child saw the dead body of a migrant smuggler, a coyote; "*no animal, I knew that man*" (8).

Conclusions

Javier Zamora's poems are among the most significant political interventions in contemporary US society, because the border is a crucial site where the gap between humanity and citizenship has lethal consequences. Formally speaking, he shows how his own identity is produced by artificial and arbitrary legal structures as well as profound experiences of risk and trauma that are partly effects of his own biological vulnerability and dependence on environmental factors, circumscribed and partly controlled by intentional state policies. In some ways this is a new type of poetry because while it is deeply personal, it is also unusually factual and concrete. For this reason, Zamora's poetry recounts a singular and unique experience, but also one that is linked to the struggles and hardships of many thousands of others. He practices a severe and austere method that is rooted in the Central American tradition that preceded him, but finds relevance and value in the new experience of exodus in the wake of the failed attempts at revolutionary transformation. It is a poetry that attends to the cold hard facts of experience; and, in doing so, reveals the pain and loss that the border inflicts.

Notes

[1] The 1.5 generation refers to people who arrived in the U.S as children or adolescents. They are not first generation, like their parents, nor second generation, and so their experience is quite unique and divided between two cultures.
[2] For more information about Zamora and his artistic projects, please visit his website at www.javierzamora.net.

[3] For more information about Fernández's project *Erasing the Border*, please visit her website at www.anateresafernandez.com.

[4] Liberation theology holds that contemporary societies are structured by social sin; political and economic institutions that impoverish and marginalize people. As a response, these theologians hold that Christians should align themselves with the poor, to share their experiences and to advocate their interests; they called this "the option of the poor." See Michael Löwy, *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America*, Verso, 1996.

[5] For more information about state violence and human rights abuses in El Salvador see Jorge E. Cuéllar's "No One is Safe in Bukele's Gang War," *NACLA*, June 23, 2022.

[6] The most famous case in the Sonoran Desert is Scott Warren, a geographer and volunteer from the humanitarian group "No More Deaths" who was charged for giving shelter, food, water and first aid to two undocumented immigrants. Fortunately, Warren was found not guilty of charges but his trial shows the government's zero tolerance and lack of human compassion towards migrants crossing the desert. For more information, see Jasmine Aguilera's "Humanitarian Scott Warren Found Not Guilty After Retrial for Helping Migrants at Mexican Border," *Times,* November 21, 2019.

[7] "TPS is a temporary immigration status created by Congress under the Immigration Act of 1990. Pursuant to the law, nationals of certain countries receive a protective status that prevents them from being removed to their native country. Conditions that give rise to TPS vary, but historically include armed conflict, environmental disaster, or other extraordinary conditions that prevent their safe removal." Currently, TPS is extended until December 31, 2022, for Salvadorans. For more information see "USCIS Announces TPS Updates" at *The National Law Review*, June 7, 2022.

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