

Undocutime
Containment, Coloniality, and Childhood in Javier
Zamora's Solito

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Although children have migrated as long as people have, the figure of the child migrant – in particular, the unaccompanied child migrant – has come to prominence in the Global North in the twenty-first century. Images and sounds of child migrants locked in cages in south Texas in 2018 were preceded by the “child migrant crisis of 2014,”¹ a spike in the number of unaccompanied minors, mostly from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, apprehended at the US-Mexico border. Reports of Ukrainian children deported to Russia and the deracination of roughly one million Palestinian children in Gaza followed.² From the Darién Gap to the Mediterranean Sea, migrant routes and international borders have turned into sites of “mass child abuse.”³ “[O]ur epoch,” literary and cultural theorist Claudia Milian observes, “is globally marked, in large scale, by the child migrant.”⁴

Along with the figure of the child migrant comes the child migrant story, a story about and often by a child migrant or a former child migrant. How is that story told? By whom and for whom? And what can the child migrant protagonist tell us about the social construction of childhood and the relationship of this category to the coloniality of migration in the Americas? By coloniality of migration, I refer to the enduring impact of colonialism – specifically, the political and economic asymmetries it has wrought – on the mobility and immobility of people in our world, particularly between the Global South and Global North.⁵

To address these questions, I turn to Javier Zamora's *Solito*. Published in 2022, on the heels of the aforementioned “child migrant crises” and in the midst of yet another “migrant crisis” at the US-Mexico border, this memoir recounts Zamora's journey at the age of nine from his hometown of San Luis La Herradura, El Salvador, to the United States. From April 6 until June 11, 1999, he traveled by boat, truck, bus, and foot some 2,500 miles with five other Salvadorans and their Mexican coyotes. All were strangers to him

before they set out. While his biological family had no idea where he was or even if he was dead or alive, three of his traveling companions, Patricia, Carla, and Chino, posed as his family and treated him as if he were kin. Zamora dedicates *Solito* to his “pretend”⁶ family and “all the immigrants”⁷ he met during his odyssey.

Solito has garnered praise because of its proximity to the undocumented, unaccompanied child migrant experience. Written primarily in English, Zamora’s memoir is part of a twenty-first-century boom in life writing by former undocumented migrants.⁸ However, unlike many other stories by writers who spent their childhood and/or adolescence undocumented in the United States, *Solito* is told from a small child’s perspective. Its narrator-protagonist goes by two names. His biological family calls him Javiercito, while his migrant family – Patricia, Carla, and Chino – know him as Chepito. In a 2023 interview, Zamora explained his reason for taking on Javiercito’s/Chepito’s point of view: “Perhaps by describing things as a child it will open hearts more so that they accept that we are human beings.”⁹ Put another way, *Solito*’s child narrator-protagonist is a specific kind of literary figure, summoned to humanize the dehumanized: to evoke compassion for migrants from an Anglophone readership.

Javiercito’s/Chepito’s perspective and voice make his juvenility palpable and render *Solito* what literary critic Ana Patricia Rodríguez terms an “embodied story.”¹⁰ Here is a boy who talks to his friends during recess about getting to the United States and “eating our first pepperoni pizza like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles” and “watching the new Star Wars inside a theater with air-conditioning.”¹¹ Yet what he does *not* talk about, the social and political context of his migration, says just as much as what he does talk about. As a reviewer points out, “Zamora does very little to situate his story within the context of the mass emigration of Salvadorans in the wake of the US-funded Salvadoran Civil War (1979–1992).”¹² And, despite dedicating his book to the migrants he met on his journey, Zamora does not “overtly connect his plight to that of the thousands of other unaccompanied child migrants who have arrived in the United States from Central America in recent decades.”¹³ When *Solito* begins, Javiercito/Chepito has no idea that he will become a *migrante*, a word with which he is not yet familiar and that he will soon come to understand as pejorative. Instead, he believes that he is about to embark on a “trip,” the innocuous – indeed, promising – word that opens chapter one: “*Trip*. My parents started using that word about a year ago – ‘one day, you’ll take a trip to be with us. Like an adventure. Like the one Simba goes on before he comes home.’”¹⁴ His understanding of migration as an adventure accentuates his naïveté and points to what he does not

know and cannot yet understand. “A child doesn’t understand what immigration is,” Zamora stressed in an interview, “you don’t understand how close to death you are.”¹⁵

At the same time that child migrants have been thrust into the media spotlight, a growing body of work in migration studies has approached hard international borders and the clandestine routes those borders force migrants to take as sites of “sanctioned maiming,” “attenuated life,” and “necropolitical abandonment.”¹⁶ As enduring symbols of vitality in literature and culture, children are supposed to be the antithesis of death. However, as the present essay shows, Javiercito’s/Chepito’s juvenility calls attention instead to the necropolitics of migration – in particular, to borders’ deadly forms of biopower¹⁷ – and to the “less-than-deadly aspects” that often structure captive waiting and psychological trauma.¹⁸ To highlight this critical contribution of his memoir, I study not only Zamora’s representation of his journey from El Salvador to the United States, but his descriptions of his body and language as well. I argue that efforts to contain this Salvadoran child physically, temporally, and linguistically bring into relief the coloniality of migration in the Americas – in particular, the United States’ expansion of its southern border and the specific role of youth in its extractive relationship to Latin America.

In what follows, I begin by outlining theories of containment as “a series of strategies that operate to disrupt and hinder migrants’ autonomous movements.”¹⁹ These strategies, however, are not simply spatial and physical; they are also linguistic, temporal, and psychic. Focusing on this multivalence alongside practices of deterrence and deferral, I show containment of migrants as a contemporary manifestation of a long colonial history. Then I turn to the role of containment – and the vitality that containment tries to capture and threatens to extinguish – in the unfolding of Javiercito’s/Chepito’s story in *Solito*.

Containment as a Hallmark of the US Immigration Apparatus

Migration has been essential to the United States’ growth as a settler colonial society. That said, not all migrants have been welcomed in the so-called nation of immigrants. Containment has long served as a tool for keeping those deemed undesirable at bay, from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to Migrant Protection Protocols, a program first introduced by the Trump Administration in 2018 that forces asylum seekers who arrive at the United States’ southern border to remain in Mexico for the duration of their immigration proceedings. In addition to being hemmed in by an

increase in border security measures, such as fences, ground sensors, and surveillance cameras, migrants are held captive by a bureaucratic wall. The “precarious states of indeterminate waiting” to which migrants are subject and the intentional manipulation of their time in order to produce or exacerbate harm is what anthropologist Carlos Martinez calls “necrotemporality.”²⁰ Drawing on this concept, I describe the prolonged waiting, permanent temporariness, enforced presentism, devaluation of time, and persistent patience of the undocumented as “undocutime” – a term that helps illuminate the different but intersecting temporal phenomena characterizing the enforced disposability of migrant lives.²¹

The terms *deterrence* and *deferral*, which point to spatial and physical as well as temporal containment, likewise help expose the logic and aims of US immigration policy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Introduced by US Customs and Border Protection in 1994, and probably impacting Javiercito’s/Chepito’s own route into the United States, Prevention Through Deterrence is a series of policies that has diverted undocumented migrants from erstwhile high-traffic points of entry, such as the area around San Diego, California, to more remote and dangerous segments of the US-Mexico border. Meanwhile, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) has granted certain undocumented migrants born on or after June 16, 1981, who have lived continuously in the United States since June 15, 2007, temporary permission to work and a temporary stay of deportation. Like the abortive Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, legislation that sought to provide undocumented migrants under a certain age with legal permanent residency or US citizenship, DACA is an executive order that has privileged youth. To qualify for DACA when it was introduced in 2012, a migrant had to have been under the age of thirty-one. More than a decade later, the DACAmended continue to wait for an adjustment of status or deportation. In the process of waiting, they defer – or submit – to the state. All the while, of course, they also age – thereby potentially aging out of the supposed privileges for which they first deferred. Similarly, since the DREAM Act’s introduction in the US Congress in 2001, the bill itself has been perpetually deferred: no version has ever passed. Consequently, many migrants who would have qualified for it have now aged out of it. Ironically, the older prospective DREAMers and the DACAmended grow, the further away they move from the possibility of an adjustment of status under youth-centric legislation and policy like the DREAM Act and DACA. Deferral thus acts as a mechanism of containment and potential expulsion. Just as geography, in the words of a former US Immigration and Naturalization Service commissioner, has been transformed into “an ally” of the US immigration apparatus, so, too,

has time.²² Deterrence and deferral thus comprise the spatial and temporal containment of migrant lives: the death-dealing mechanisms by which their lives are rendered perpetually vulnerable.

Containment and Vitality in *Solito*

Geography and time conspire against Javiercito/Chepito. The distance that separates him from his parents and his impatience to reunite with them are evident from the outset. When *Solito* opens, he has just turned nine and is living with his grandparents and aunt Mali in La Herradura, a rural fishing village. Don Dago, the stern, elusive, and inscrutable Mexican broker arranging his migration to the United States, has a “‘no one under ten’ rule.”²³ Foreshadowing and, at the same time, underestimating the “endurance test”²⁴ that is unauthorized overland and marine migration to the United States, Javiercito/Chepito insists that he is ready for the journey because he “can already jump the fence that separates [his grandparents’] house from the neighbors’ pretty fast. And it’s made of barbwire.” “I’ve never gotten hurt,” he boasts. “Not a single scratch.”²⁵ His apprehension of the geography of migration is both all too knowing, as he anticipates galvanized fencing, and all too limited, as he knows only the world of his yard.

Like so many other nine-year-olds, Javiercito/Chepito is cocky, naïve, insecure, curious, anxious, hopeful, self-conscious, courageous, and vulnerable at once. Beginning in the first chapter, the reader learns about his talents, liabilities, fears, and desires. He can jump the aforementioned fence and is the best student in his class, but he does not know how to swim and has yet to learn how to tie his shoes. Nor can he sleep through the night without wetting himself, a consequence of his mother’s departure to the United States when he was five. He is also “a good salesman; [he] learned from sitting on [his] Mom’s lap” when she worked as a street vendor in La Herradura. She sold “the best horchata, ensalada, marañón, and chan,” he boasts.²⁶ Above all, he admires his parents, misses them profoundly, and yearns to be with them. His desire is inherently and urgently spatial: to close the painful distance that separates them.

Zamora was born in 1990, in the midst of the Salvadoran civil war. In 1991, his father, the leftist head of a co-op, fled the country.²⁷ Three years later, Zamora’s mother availed herself of Don Dago’s services, entered the United States without papers near San Diego, and joined her husband in the San Francisco Bay Area. Zamora expected to follow in his parents’ footsteps – indeed, to retrace his mother’s by crossing the border near San

Diego – but had to remain with his grandparents and Mali in La Herradura until he was mature enough to make the journey. Javiercito's/Chepito's village has only one "pothole-filled asphalt road that ends at the pier," a concretization of the lack of mobility that forces many of its residents to emigrate.²⁸ The pocked road also contrasts sharply with the Golden Gate Bridge, "a huge bridge," the boy proclaims.²⁹ He cherishes a photo of his parents standing before the Bay Area landmark in which they embody the rights of mobility denied to the majority of people from the Global South.

Javiercito/Chepito dreads being stuck in La Herradura for the rest of his life, "selling pupusas to the same people Mom sold pupusas to."³⁰ He bemoans his hometown's poverty and the need for so many of its residents to leave, observing, "All my friends and I want to be with our parents, where everything is new, fresh, where garbage is collected by trucks, where water comes out of silver faucets, where it snows the whitest snow."³¹ His grandparents' house is cozy, but humble and cramped. The door to the bedroom that he shares with his twenty-three-year-old aunt is a "bedsheet hanging from a wire."³² Their room is so small, the smell of Mali's "pata chuca" (stinky feet) fills it when she removes her shoes after work every evening.³³ In contrast, he pictures "a huge door," along with a "huge TV," "a swimming pool, a lawn, fruit trees, a mini soccer field, [and] a white fence" at his parents' house in California.³⁴ At night, he lies next to Mali on her bed as she reports the day's *chambre* (gossip) and complains about "how bored" she is at work and the lack of viable suitors in their village.³⁵ The two of them "stare at the ceiling," a reminder that the house both envelops and traps them.³⁶ At bedtime, he wonders what kind of bed his parents sleep on. "¿Is it big? ¿Is it a waterbed like in the movies?" He imagines cuddling with them atop "[t]he comfiest white sheets" and beneath a mosquito net similar to the one that encloses his bed in La Herradura.³⁷

Javiercito's/Chepito's naïve questions and musings about his parents' lives in the United States accentuate his youth. Meanwhile, his language accentuates his Salvadoran-ness. While Zamora wrote his memoir in English, inverted question marks and exclamation points indicate that the narrator and other characters are speaking Spanish. More specifically, they are speaking Salvadoran Spanish, as Salvadoranisms, like *pata chuca*, *chambre*, and *vos* (you), and references to Salvadoran foods, such as pupusas (the national dish of El Salvador), chan (a drink made with lemon, strawberry, and chia seeds), and marañón (cashew), make patent. For instance, in anticipation of his move to the United States, Javiercito/Chepito tells his friends, "Fíjate vos [Yo, check it out], one day I'm taking a trip. Like a real-real game of hide-and-seek."³⁸

Before too long, Javiercito/Chepito finds himself in an all-too-real game of hide-and-seek as he traverses Mexico and the US-Mexico border as an unauthorized migrant. Yet, despite the perils he confronts, he retains a child's perspective. For example, he likens the small group of Salvadoran migrants with whom he travels to "the Power Rangers, Sailor Moon, or the kids with the rings that bring Captain Planet to life. We're a team. Our mission: get to La USA."³⁹ And he proudly keeps a checklist of firsts in his head. Before embarking on his journey, Javiercito/Chepito had never ventured farther than San Salvador. The house he grew up in lacked a bathroom and a phone. As he arrives in Guadalajara on May 1, 1999, he privately tallies his list of firsts: "Stay at a motel. Check. Use a fancy bathroom. Check. Shower with a showerhead. Check. Sleep in a two-story building. Check. Three-story building. Check. Stay at an apartamento. Check."⁴⁰ Migration expands his physical world and, at the same time, hems him in.

Javiercito's/Chepito's juvenility – his astonishment, fright, smallness, and vulnerability – are amplified when he is in grave danger. In a terrifying confrontation with Mexican soldiers at a checkpoint on the highway between Oaxaca and Mexico City, he and his companions – all Central Americans – are removed from a bus, verbally and physically assaulted, and robbed of their money. Lying face down on the hot pavement with his legs spread and his arms extended above his head, he pictures himself as

Superman. Like I'm flying. Like I'm Goku . . . I close my eyes and fly far far very far away from here. Above the clouds. I'm flying over mountains, over lakes, over cities, all the way to the Golden Gate. I can't hear anything, I'm in California – until a small, dirt-colored lizard is close to my face, tan like me, blending in perfectly with the ground.⁴¹

Javiercito/Chepito further removes himself mentally from the violent scene in which he is caught by imagining a conversation with the lizard, whom he names Paula. She assures him that "[e]verything is going to be okay."⁴² Similarly, weeks later, as he and his group make their way across the Sonoran Desert, he gives deceptively whimsical names, like "Lonelies," "Spikeys," and "Fuzzies," to the cactuses that pierce the migrants' flesh when they stumble into them.⁴³

The run-in with the Mexican soldiers and the trek across the desert underscore the migrants' physical captivity and vulnerability. In addition to providing a petrified nine-year-old with the opportunity for flight, however imaginary, Paula is a site of identification for Javiercito/Chepito. Facedown on the asphalt, the boy sees himself in the small,

brown lizard with “hands and legs sprawled like mine.”⁴⁴ Both are at risk of being crushed by The Boots, the name he gives the soldiers who torment him and his companions. Not unlike the guileless names he gives the barbed desert plants, his language cuts these men down to mere parts and takes away a bit of their power. But the abstractions of the synecdoche also bespeak the violence he is simultaneously enduring as he leaves his body behind to be a superhero talking to a lizard named Paula.

Javercito/Chepito admires Paula precisely because she is small and “blend[s] in perfectly with ground.”⁴⁵ To pass through Mexico and the Sonoran Desert, he and his compatriots must also blend in. Indeed, they must disappear as *migrantes*, a word he quickly deduces is derogatory, especially when preceded by *pinches*, the distinctly Mexican approximation of *fucking* or *damn* . Slogging unseen through the desert entails wearing all black, speed walking at night, and seeking cover when a Border Patrol helicopter sweeps in. Passing unnoticed through Mexico as an unauthorized Central American migrant is also extremely difficult. Prior to setting out, the Salvadorans memorize not only the name on the fake Mexican passport their coyote gives each of them, but a fictitious Guadalaran biography as well. Their performance as Mexicans hinges on a list of seemingly trivial imperatives, like knowing the number of soccer teams Guadalaran has in Liga Primera.

But if the knowledge required for passing as Mexican seems inconsequential, the consequences of even the most minor linguistic failure are not. Perceptive and impressionable, Javercito/Chepito pays close attention to his Mexican coyotes’ speech. He tries to copy their accents and to replace his Salvadoranisms with Mexicanisms. For example, he uses “[p]opote instead of *pajilla* [straw]. *Lana* instead of *pisto* [money]. *Carnal* instead of *chero* [buddy].” He vows, “When we land [in Mexico], I will be Mexican.”⁴⁶ However, signs of his linguistic foreignness percolate up and brand him an undocumented migrant. After ordering a soda at a taco stand in Mazatlán, for instance, he inadvertently asks for a *pajilla* instead of a *popote*. The taco vendor snaps, “Pinches mojados [damn wetbacks], learn to speak,” leaving Javercito/Chepito wondering, “¿Are we gonna be ok? ¿Is [the taco vendor] gonna call the cops? She knows we’re Salvadoran.” Then he lists epithets used in Salvadoran Spanish: “Guanacos [literally an animal from South America, a nickname for someone from El Salvador]. Cerotes [turds]. Majes [morons]. Chambrosos [gossips]. Chiflados [crazies]. Cachimbones [simpletons].” Salvadoranizing *nopal en la frente* (prickly pear on the forehead), a Mexican phrase used to underscore a person’s Mexican-ness, especially their indigeneity he is convinced that “[t]here’s a pupusa on our

foreheads.” The straw’s white wrapper becomes a manifestation of the shibboleth *pajilla*; it “glows too much in the dark – a bright sticker soldiers can see.”⁴⁷ As a historically central instrument of empire, language plays a significant role in the contemporary coloniality of migration in the Americas as another medium of containment and racialization by state governments.

Similarly, the farther north he travels, the more Javiercito’s/Chepito’s brown skin marks him as an outsider and an “indio,” a label his mother taught him to embrace, but that he comes to understand as a “bad word.”⁴⁸ He fears getting “caught because of [his] skin,” and “want[s] to blend in” like Paula.⁴⁹ However, on a bus in northern Mexico, he notices that “everyone around us is light-skinned.”⁵⁰ Later, as he makes his way across the Sonoran Desert, he likens himself and the other migrants to the brown, furtive deer they encounter and the brown lizards he spies “pretending to be rocks.”⁵¹ “It’s funny when [the lizards] run away, their small arms and legs paddling the dirt,” he observes. “They look like me when I slide under fences.”⁵²

Javiercito’s/Chepito’s self-comparison to a scurrying lizard “the color of dirt” testifies not only to his entrapment and desire to flee, but to the dehumanization he endures as a dark-skinned, unauthorized Salvadoran migrant in Mexico.⁵³ His need to distance himself from his homeland and the epithets he imagines the Mexican taco vendor hurling at him and his Salvadoran companions is more than a survival tactic; it is also evidence of his internalization of the racialization – namely, the anti-Indigenous and anti-migrant sentiment – to which he is subject. Early in their journey, a Mexican coyote issues both a warning and a threat to him and the other migrants when he tells them that their lives do not matter and that all of Mexico, essentially, is a pen in which they are trapped. “You’re pinches migrantes,” the coyote declares. “Locals can call the cops, who will take you, rob you, or kill you.”⁵⁴ *Solito* is riddled with insults, such as *pinches migrantes*, that speak to the migrants’ debasement. Yet it also offers a glimpse of Javiercito’s/Chepito’s growing self-contempt. His fantasy of the United States as a place of safety, order, and cleanliness – of white snow, white fences, and white bedsheets – contrasts with the danger, disorientation, dirt, and darkness of the migrant route. By the time he is captured by the US Border Patrol, he is so beaten down, he describes the detention facility as a zoo, the detainees as monkeys, and their cell as a “cage. This silent and stinky room.”⁵⁵

The odors that figure prominently in *Solito* point to the convergence of spatial and physical captivity with embodiment and racialization. The

Border Patrol officers' uniforms "are clean and green, their boots black and shiny."⁵⁶ One wears cologne that "smells like firewood mixed with cypress."⁵⁷ In contrast, Javiercito/Chepito is acutely aware of his own and the other migrants' stench. "I know I stink," he admits. "I want to shower."⁵⁸ Along with dirt and grease, the smells of illegality mark and effectively confine the migrants' bodies.

But these same odors also point beyond to their vitality – in particular, their abilities to taste and smell. After a tumultuous journey by boat along the Pacific coast of Guatemala and southern Mexico, the stench of gasoline permeates Javiercito's/Chepito's senses and flesh: "I can taste it. I can smell it on my skin . . . Gasoline in my hair, inside my fingernails, between my legs, in my shirt, my pants, my underwear. Or maybe the smell is trapped in my nose, on my tongue."⁵⁹ Later, the Sonoran Desert "clings" to him and the other migrants and leaves them reeking of "[d]irt. Cactus. Sweat. Brush. Rocks. Blood. Spilled tuna juice. Piss. All of it on our skin."⁶⁰ The listing that structures Javiercito's/Chepito's language has a poetic quality, an aliveness, even as it bears witness to the humiliation of being filthy and malodorous. To maintain a semblance of dignity and control, Patricia, the only woman in the small group with which he travels, compulsively cleans the cramped spaces to which she and the other migrants are confined. "She's the Tasmanian Devil," the boy observes, "folding blankets, grabbing the broom, throwing trash away, whispering to herself . . . 'We're mojados, but we're clean.'"⁶¹ Just as Javiercito/Chepito tries to scrub the Salvadoranisms from his vocabulary, Patricia tries to wipe away the markers of their inferior status in Mexico.

Javiercito/Chepito documents in vivid and excruciating detail the personal shame of his own embodiment – specifically, his growing body's uncontrollable excess, such as his "smelly feet,"⁶² "chubby chest," "flabby belly," and "thick legs";⁶³ the "trail of poop" he sometimes leaves on his underwear;⁶⁴ and the "thick layer of . . . white stuff that" covers his tongue and "makes [his] breath stink in the morning."⁶⁵ At night, when he shares a bed with Patricia and Carla, his "pretend" mother and sister, he worries, "¿What if, when I'm sleeping, I fart and I wake both of them? ¿What if I drool?"⁶⁶ He attempts to minimize his physicality, an impossible task for a growing child. In detention, he struggles to hold his urine in because he does not want to relieve himself in front of other people. When he sees an adult male detainee urinate at the communal toilet in their cell, he is horrified by his "thing – so big," language that evokes his vulnerability to violation as a child.⁶⁷ Javiercito/Chepito also struggles to hold his tears in. Except when one of the migrants in his group dupes him into looking for

“powdered gasoline,” slang for cigarettes, the boy recounts the myriad ways he has restrained himself: “I haven’t cried . . . I’ve been good. Didn’t cry when I saw the Mexican soldiers’ guns. Didn’t throw up on the boat. Didn’t complain we walked far.”⁶⁸ As he lists the moments of biting his tongue and suppressing his feelings, he also illuminates the ways in which restraining himself both physically and figuratively is part of the larger system of containment structuring the coloniality of migration.

Javercito/Chepito personally witnesses the dire costs of failing at self-containment. A migrant he dubs The Screaming Man embodies unrestrained physical and emotional excess during a twenty-two-hour boat ride from Guatemala to Mexico. The Screaming Man has a panic attack, hallucinates, and wails “like he’s a broken bone, like someone is beating him.”⁶⁹ After begging the coyotes to stop the boat, he squats over the side so he can defecate – literalizing his inability to contain himself – then falls into the water. After he is pulled back on board, he lies wet and whimpering on the deck, where Javercito/Chepito notices that The Screaming Man’s pants are halfway down and that “[i]t’s dark where his thingy should be.”⁷⁰ Unlike the man who urinates at the communal toilet in detention, The Screaming Man does not have a big and terrifying “thing.” Instead, there is a void where his diminutive “thingy” ought to be. Predictably, one of the coyotes mocks The Screaming Man as a “fucking pussy” and “a bitch.”⁷¹ Javercito/Chepito records but does not employ such misogynistic terms himself. Instead, he likens The Screaming Man to “a dead fish”: a horrifying figure for the state of mutilation and proximity to death that are one possible outcome of clandestine migration.⁷² But if Javercito/Chepito witnesses the death-like defeat of The Screaming Man, the boy himself does not die. Instead, he embodies a vitality that he is unable to stifle, despite his best efforts at embodying the work of containment instantiated and demanded by the state. As his two-week trip turns into a seven-week ordeal, his fingernails grow “thicker than crescent moons,” evidence of his body’s uncontrollable growth and the passage of time.⁷³ Despite the deadly forms of biopower that contain him on all sides, Javercito/Chepito endures. But he endures in a state of undocutime: the collective temporal assaults of prolonged and captive waiting and endless temporariness that characterize his existence as a migrant.

Undocutime and the Capture of Youth

Where other child migrant stories – for example, Valeria Luiselli’s 2019 novel, *Lost Children Archive*, and Marcelo Hernandez Castillo’s 2020

memoir, *Children of the Land* – bring undocutime into focus via scattered events and non-linear narratives, *Solito* does so as a linear chronology, a sequence of diaristic episodes, each with a date and location.⁷⁴ Yet undocutime is evident from the outset. Before leaving La Herradura, Javiercito/Chepito must wait for Don Dago to decide that he is big, strong, fast, and independent enough to withstand undocumented migration to the United States. Don Dago even inspects the boy's teeth to ensure that they will not pose any problems during the arduous journey. As they wait, Mali reminds Javiercito/Chepito to "be patient."⁷⁵ "Coyotes take their time," she assures him, "like tortoises."⁷⁶ Meanwhile, the boy watches her and his grandparents "wilt like ferns in Abuelita's garden when she doesn't water them."⁷⁷ So eager is he to depart, he "feel[s] the trip in the soles of [his] feet . . . and see[s] it in [his] dreams."⁷⁸ Yet his journey is one of fits and starts. He leaves, only to get stuck over and over again in hotel rooms, migrant shelters, and so-called safe houses.

Captivity in one such "safe house," a bare, oppressive, smoke-filled apartment on the outskirts of Guadalajara, brings undocutime into focus. Before being locked in, Javiercito/Chepito and his companions are told to "stay hidden."⁷⁹ They must keep the curtains closed and the lights off. To kill time, they "watch TV all day."⁸⁰ When there is nothing left to look at or listen to, Javiercito/Chepito smells his surroundings; he gets on his hands and knees and pretends to be a dog. "I just watch TV, eat bad food, sniff," he reports.⁸¹ He loses track of time, although a soccer game on TV signals that it is Sunday morning again. Between May 1 and May 21, the dates in this chronology of "eventlessness" are marked only with a question mark.⁸² At the beginning of their journey, Patricia crosses out the days on a calendar in anticipation of what she believes will be their imminent arrival in the United States. However, after being stuck in the "safe house" in Guadalajara, she and her daughter grow listless and despondent. They sleep all day while Javiercito/Chepito "count[s] the tiny hairs above their lips" and "listen[s] to their snores." Reminiscent of his evenings with Mali in La Herradura, Patricia and Carla "stare at the ceiling in silence" when they are awake.⁸³ Not unlike Abuelita's ferns, the migrants wilt during these weeks of uncertainty and paralysis.

Indoor spaces like the "safe house" do not offer Javiercito/Chepito and his companions shelter. Rather, they stifle them. Yet the vast outdoor spaces into which they are flung are also oppressive. Time stands still inside and flies by with terrifying speed outdoors. When the migrants head into the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Ocosingo, Guatemala, before dawn, the boat that carries them "jolts" as dark waves "crash against" it. The anti-nausea

pill a coyote gives Javiercito/Chepito does little to numb his senses. Rather, it heightens them: the boat's motor roars "*Rrrrrrrr*," "the stench of gasoline" and vomit fills his nostrils, the cold wind lashes his face and chest, and his bottom is repeatedly hurled into the air and against the hard bench on deck.⁸⁴ Unable to swim and terrified of both sharks and the dark, he is "very close to death on that boat."⁸⁵ Still, his senses of hearing, smell, and touch signal how very alive he is. They overwhelm him and leave him feeling "dizzy" and as if his head "is spinning."⁸⁶ Similarly, after a coyote gives Javiercito/Chepito an amphetamine so he can keep up with the group as they march across the Sonoran Desert, the boy's mind and heart race and he feels as if "[a]nts crawl inside [his] head" and his "eyes want to pop out."⁸⁷ Trapped, ironically, by the expansiveness of the desert and in his own growing body, he feels that he is about to burst. Yet Javiercito/Chepito survives the worst exigencies of undocutime – in large part because he is young and vital.

On June 11, 1999, more than nine weeks after leaving his home in El Salvador, Zamora reunited with his parents in Tucson, Arizona. Over the following nine years, he navigated life in the United States as an undocumented migrant. He learned English, graduated from college, earned an MFA in poetry, helped launch a campaign to eliminate the US citizenship requirement for literary prizes, published a volume of poetry, and garnered multiple accolades, among them, fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and Harvard University.⁸⁸ He also underwent decades of psychological therapy.⁸⁹ In 2018, US Citizenship and Immigration Services granted him an EB-1 visa.⁹⁰ Also known as an "Einstein" visa, this document is awarded to noncitizens with "extraordinary ability."⁹¹

Notwithstanding his special visa, Zamora is one of hundreds of thousands of bright, talented, hardworking, and overachieving undocumented migrants to come of age in the United States in the first decades of the twenty-first century. And while Zamora eventually naturalized as a US citizen, many of his youthful contemporaries – among them, DACA participants and prospective DREAMers – have continued to wait – for regularization, for reunion with loved ones, and for stability, certainty, acceptance, or deportation.⁹² Unlike migrants in detention, the DACAmented are not incarcerated. Still, at the time of this writing, they remain tethered to a system that monitors them closely, limits their movement, threatens to expel them, and denies them permanent legal status. Differences notwithstanding, both detained migrants and DACA participants are unfree: held captive by a migration apparatus organized around spatial/physical and

temporal forms of captivity. Moreover, the technologies of containment that underwrite this captivity operate “not through the logic of the border – demarcating, sealing, controlling, but rather through the expansive logic of the frontier.”⁹³ While the contemporary US government deploys the language of a so-called “border crisis,” it continues to develop the expansionist and extractive policies of an imperial nation bent on enlarging its territory and resources.

The United States’ past and present in Central America, the formal and informal labor compact between it and its Global South neighbors, and its outsize impact on migration policy in the Western Hemisphere and throughout the world – in particular, the effective extension of its southern border into and beyond Mexico – speak to this expansive logic of the US frontier. Zamora was part of an historical exodus compelled by US intervention in El Salvador. Likewise, his unanticipated rerouting from San Diego to Arizona was, in all likelihood, a consequence of Prevention Through Deterrence, a program that was put into place five years before he left La Herradura. These military events and government policies are both shaped by and continue to shape the ongoing coloniality of migration in the Americas.

In many ways, Javiercito/Chepito and other unaccompanied child migrants trouble the longstanding, asymmetrical relationship between the United States and Latin America, a relationship based on the extraction of labor and other resources and “colonial legacies of the construction of the racialized Other.”⁹⁴ Notwithstanding their debasement in popular and political discourse, migrants from Latin America have always had value to the US economy as cheap and/or disposable racialized workers. This was the case for Mexican braceros in the twentieth century and remains so for DACA participants, the majority of whom are Latinx.⁹⁵ But while braceros sold their arms, a metonym for their toiling bodies, DACA participants’ capital has been their youth. Like braceros before them, DACA participants have productive bodies. Along with deportability, fitness for labor – “unskilled” in the case of braceros and often “skilled” in the case of the DACAmended – characterizes both groups. In contrast, unaccompanied child migrants are not supposed to be fit for labor. As asylum seekers, historian Laura Briggs maintains, they are not “part of a labor migration” and “refuse . . . to just be the bodies that do hard, dirty jobs for starvation wages.”⁹⁶ Yet, as a 2023–24 *New York Times* investigation about child migrants toiling in factories and on construction sites has driven home, youth and vitality remain part of the US settler colony and racial capitalism.⁹⁷

In 1963, labor activist Henry Pope Anderson observed, “You rent a bracero for six weeks or six months, and if he gets damaged, you don’t care. You’ll never see him again. You get next year’s model – a newer, younger, healthier one.”⁹⁸ In the twenty-first century, child migrants are all “next year’s model.” Zamora’s story, while autobiographical, is thus by no means singular. If Javiercito’s/Chepito’s perspective and voice, by emphasizing his juvenility, bring needed attention to the plight of child migrants, this narrative quality is also the marker of his and other child migrants’ vitality and extractable value. Indeed, the intertwinement of child vulnerability and value continue to characterize the coloniality of migration in the Americas across the centuries. By telling the story of migration as an experience of spatial and temporal captivity, Zamora’s *Solito* points to yet another kind of extraction: the capture of youth itself from the undocumented, unaccompanied child migrant.

Notes

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2. United Nations, “World News in Brief: Nearly a Million Children Displaced in Gaza, Guatemala ‘Coups’ Concerns, ‘Enduring Menace’ of Genocide.” UN News, December 9, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/12/1144607>.
3. Thom Davies, Arshad Isakjee, and Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik, “The Politics of Injury: Debilitation and the Right to Maim at the EU Border,” *Geopolitics* 1–29 (2024): 12.
4. Claudia Milian, *LatinX* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 37.
5. Aníbal Quijano coined *coloniality* to shed light on the aftermath of “a process that began with the constitution of America and world capitalism as a Euro-centered colonial/modern world power. One of the foundations of that pattern of power was the social classification of the world population upon the base of the idea of race.” See Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentricism in Latin America,” *International Sociology* 15.2 (2000): 215. Building on Quijano’s work, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez defines coloniality of migration as the “conjuncture” of “colonial legacies of the construction of the racialized Other” and “migration control.” See Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, “The Coloniality of Migration and the ‘Refugee Crisis’: On the Asylum-Migration Nexus, the Transatlantic White European Settler Colonialism-Migration and Racial Capitalism,” *Refuge* 34.1 (2018): 17–18.
6. Javier Zamora, *Solito* (New York: Hogarth, 2022), 245.
7. Zamora, *Solito*, n.p.

8. Regarding the body of life writing by formerly undocumented migrants, see Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *Documenting the Undocumented: Latino/a Narratives and Social Justice in the Era of Operation Gatekeeper* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2016); Glenda R. Carpio, *Migrant Aesthetics: Contemporary Fiction, Global Migration, and the Limits of Empathy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023); Debbie M. Duarte, "How to Undocument a Narrative," *Public Books*, September 14, 2022, www.publicbooks.org/undocumented-immigrants-narratives/; Sujatha Fernandes, *Curated Stories: The Uses and Misuses of Storytelling* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Catherine S. Ramírez, "Undocutime: DREAMers, *Lost Children Archive*, and the Politics of Waiting and Storytelling in Twenty-first-century Migration Narratives," *Latino Studies* (2024): 533–51; and Ana Patricia Rodríguez, "The Art of (Un)Accompaniment: Salvadoran Child Refugee Narratives in the Twenty-first Century," *Studies in 20th and 21st Century Literature* 49.1 (2025): 1–21.
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11. Zamora, *Solito*, 4–5.
12. Julia G. Young, "A Boy at the Border," *Commonweal*, December 8, 2022, www.commonwealmagazine.org/solito-young-migration-children-border-el-salvador#:~:text=Zamora%20does%20very%20little%20to,that%20have%20plagued%20the%20country.
13. Young, "A Boy at the Border."
14. Zamora, *Solito*, 3 (italics original).
15. Linares, "'Migrant Children Survive the Horror'."
16. "Sanctioned maiming" and "attenuated life" are from Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 141 and 139. "Necropolitical abandonment" is from Davies, Isakjee, and Obradovic-Wochnik, "The Politics of Inquiry," 6.
17. Biopower, the management of bodies and populations and the wholesale elimination of life, does not just foster life. It also eliminates some lives in order to preserve others.
18. Davies, Isakjee, and Obradovic-Wochnik, "The Politics of Injury," 5.
19. Patrisia Macías Rojas and M. Tazzioli, "Detention/Confinement/Containment," *Politics and Space* 40.4 (2021): 70.
20. Carlos Martinez, "Waiting in Captivity: Slow Borders, Predatory Bureaucracies, and the Necrotemporality of Asylum Deterrence," *Refuge* 39.2 (2023): 2.
21. Ramírez, "Undocutime," 535.
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29. Zamora, *Solito*, 11.
30. Zamora, *Solito*, 10.
31. Zamora, *Solito*, 5.
32. Zamora, *Solito*, 7.
33. Zamora, *Solito*, 8.
34. Zamora, *Solito*, 4.
35. Zamora, *Solito*, 8.
36. Zamora, *Solito*, 10.
37. Zamora, *Solito*, 4.
38. Zamora, *Solito*, 4. I am grateful to Cecilia M. Rivas for helping me translate the Salvadoranisms in *Solito*.
39. Zamora, *Solito*, 82.
40. Zamora, *Solito*, 159.
41. Zamora, *Solito*, 125–6.
42. Zamora, *Solito*, 126.
43. Zamora, *Solito*, 304.
44. Zamora, *Solito*, 126.
45. Zamora, *Solito*,
46. Zamora, *Solito*, 93.
47. Zamora, *Solito*, 181.
48. Zamora, *Solito*, 126.
49. Zamora, *Solito*, 115.
50. Zamora, *Solito*, 188.
51. Zamora, *Solito*, 303.
52. Zamora, *Solito*, 304.
53. Zamora, *Solito*, 304.
54. Zamora, *Solito*, 110.
55. Zamora, *Solito*, 248.
56. Zamora, *Solito*, 248.
57. Zamora, *Solito*, 340.
58. Zamora, *Solito*, 255.
59. Zamora, *Solito*, 110.
60. Zamora, *Solito*, 248.
61. Zamora, *Solito*, 149.
62. Zamora, *Solito*, 141.
63. Zamora, *Solito*, 140.

64. Zamora, *Solito*, 143.
65. Zamora, *Solito*, 255.
66. Zamora, *Solito*, 142.
67. Zamora, *Solito*, 247–8.
68. Zamora, *Solito*, 166–7.
69. Zamora, *Solito*, 94.
70. Zamora, *Solito*, 97.
71. Zamora, *Solito*, 97.
72. Zamora, *Solito*, 98.
73. Zamora, *Solito*, 146.
74. See Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* (New York: Vintage Books, 2019) and Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, *Children of the Land: A Memoir* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2020).
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76. Zamora, *Solito*, 33.
77. Zamora, *Solito*, 35.
78. Zamora, *Solito*, 3.
79. Zamora, *Solito*, 162.
80. Zamora, *Solito*, 163.
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