BOOK REVIEW Solito: A Memoir by José Javier Zamora

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BOOK REVIEW


José Lara

Over the last ten years, numerous images of women, men, and unaccompanied children from Central America, detained at the US-Mexico border or placed in holding cells, have been disseminated widely in different media types. Unfortunately, many of those images were accompanied by misinformation and disinformation, which has intensified xenophobic attitudes, increased the number of false and racist narratives about immigrant populations taking jobs from US “White” Anglo Americans or “unlawfully” benefiting from US resources and social services, and has led to inhumane and malignant policies and laws, primarily supported by the reactionary right (Chomsky 2007). Two essential pieces of information have seldom emerged during discussions surrounding the increase of Central Americans migrating to the United States since the 1980s. The first is that the violence, political instability, and economic hardships these individuals are escaping from stem, in large part, from the long history of unauthorized US intervention and economic imperialism in that region (Chomsky 2012; Galeano and Belfrage 1997). The second is that these migrants can and should not be reduced to statistics or political pawns but should be treated with dignity and humanity, as every individual has their own migration story.

José Javier Zamora is one of the few Central American migrants whose first-hand account we are fortunate to have in print. Zamora is a Salvadoran writer and activist who became widely known with his book of poems, *Unaccompanied* (2017), where he described the challenges of living in the United States as an immigrant, the longing for his war-torn country of El Salvador, and some of the horrors he endured on his journey to the United States. Nevertheless, it is in Zamora’s coming-of-age narrative, *Solito: A Memoir* (2022), that we are privy to an array of episodic memories and intimate details of his nine-week migration from the rural town of San Luis La Herradura in El Salvador through Guatemala, México, and the US-México border until reuniting with his parents in the early summer of 1999. *Solito*, the male-gendered diminutive term for alone, is where Zamora expresses his truth of migrating as an unaccompanied nine-year-old child to “La USA,” as he often referred to the United States in his book.

As an immigrant from Central America myself, I was extremely eager to read this memoir. I can honestly say that I found myself immersed in Zamora’s story and impressed with his meticulous use of rich figurative language that elicited numerous emotions and reactions in me. However, I had a few reservations about writing a review and remaining as neutral as possible, especially since I had read a few commentaries that questioned the accuracy of Zamora’s memories, critiqued the repetitions and gaps in his account, and criticized his code-switching between English and Spanish and inclusion of Spanish words, phrases, and sentences.
in a book primarily written in English. But the reality is that I cannot remain neutral, nor do I agree with those criticisms. Memory is a complex process, even more so when it is tied to trauma such as the one experienced by Zamora. According to Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, an expert in trauma and memory, the precision and retention of our memories largely depend on how intense, meaningful, or threatening we perceive them to be. In addition, traumatic experiences are imprinted in one not as coherent, linear, or complete episodes but rather as fragmented parts (van der Kolk 2014, 177-78). Consequently, as indicated above, the criticisms are unwarranted, and the events narrated in Solito are the byproduct of Zamora’s sensory memory; it is how he experienced the world during those nine weeks. Zamora’s use of his native Spanish tongue, colloquial expressions, and references to Latin American telenovelas, musical groups, and singers makes his memoir more personal, unique, and reflective of his bilingual and bicultural identity. Many of those cultural references are part of my identity and very likely an aspect of the upbringing of other Latin American and Latinx people of our generation.

Zamora’s book includes numerous episodes of danger, fear, solitude, survival, and the stark contrast between expectation and reality. Chepito, or Zamora’s nine-year-old voice, describes how he and members of his makeshift family or “little fake family” (Patricia, Carla, Chino, and to a lesser extent, Chele) had to endure the harsh climate and environment of the coastal waters, mountains, and Sonoran Desert that left their bodies emotionally and physically scarred. He also emphasizes the fear he experienced when they were held at gunpoint by corrupt local Mexican policemen who robbed them of all their money; slid under or jumped over barbed-wired fences; and got caught and incarcerated by US patrol agents on their first attempt at crossing the US-Mexico border. The fear of dying and never again seeing his loved ones is also expressed by Zamora when he prays to Cadejo—a spirit guide in the shape of a dog that originates from Central American folklore—for protection. Zamora silently uttered, “Cadejo, cadejito. I don’t want to die” (110). In addition, Zamora explains how he quickly had to adapt to being alone once his grandfather left him in Guatemala under the care of a coyote (colloquial term for smuggler) and, in essence, mature so that he could survive and not be considered a nuisance or burden by others. Zamora mentions how he learned to clean up after himself, wash his underpants, remain silent, and overcome his fear of using a toilet. Another significant aspect of Zamora’s growth was discovering that prejudice existed among the Latin American community and was only exacerbated by the politics of immigration. Zamora learned about the challenges that came with being an undocumented immigrant, as locals often used the disparaging terms “mojados” (wetbacks), “ilegales” (illegals), and “pinches migrantes” (a vulgar expression for effing migrants) when referring to them.

Indeed, his voyage was filled with hardship and gut-wrenching moments, but it also included instances of tenderness, laughter, and unity. Zamora vividly described how truly happy they felt when they reached the beach and sea-port area of Acapulco and how he still remembers the smell and taste of the “oil and salt, sea and lime” and “potato chip consistency” of the fried fish they all enjoyed together (150). Also, the tacos he ate for the first time, and that according to him, were “the best thing ever… the best food in México” (180). Zamora also makes it a point to represent numerous humorous episodes, including those in which he smoked for the first time and “felt older,” like one of the guys (118); he and the others would practice or make attempts at speaking like Mexicans so that they could blend in; and those where they all laughed at their pronunciation of “Mexican” and English curse words. The compassion and warmth among the members of Zamora’s second family are palpable throughout most of the book—too many to list here, but I will say that whenever they felt alone, tired, or required any assistance, they were there for each other. That is why it was hard for Zamora (and me) to see them leave for Virginia when they finally crossed the US-Mexico border. It was the last time Zamora ever saw them.

Solito is a complex and rich immigration narrative from the perspective of a precocious nine-year-old who shares with his readers many of his memories and experiences of his journey from El Salvador to “el norte” (north). It is a memoir that one can approach in different ways. Still, it is best to let yourself be guided by Chepito’s voice so that you can walk in his shoes and realize that “every immigrant who has crossed, who has tried to, who is crossing right now, and who will keep trying” (381) is a human being worthy of compassion and respect and not a “threat” to this country. It is a one-of-a-kind “American” immigrant story.

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