

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:
MIGRANT POETS AMID THE MIRE
OF REPUBLICAN ANTINEPANTLA

DIEGO BÁEZ

Unaccompanied

Javier Zamora

Copper Canyon Press, 2017

88 pages; paperback, \$16.00

Cenzontle

Marcelo Hernandez Castillo

BOA Editions, 2018

112 pages; paperback, \$16.00

Documents

Jan-Henry Gray

BOA Editions, 2019

112 pages; paperback, \$17.00

On January 1, 2017—after a failed board game purveyor lost the popular vote in the U.S. Presidential election, but before that sad inauguration and the impassioned protests that followed—California became one of just a few states to offer sanctuary to undocumented persons with the passage of the Transparent Review of Unjust Transfers and Holds (TRUTH) Act. Ostensibly, the Act provides legal protections for persons before and during detention by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), including a provision that “requires a local legislative body to hold a community forum annually if local law enforcement allows ICE access to any individual.”¹ Due to California’s economic reliance on

1. ACLU of Southern California, “Dec. 4: Truth Act Forum - Orange County,” accessed July 13, 2019, <https://www.aclusocal.org/en/events/dec-4-truth-act-forum-orange-county>.

migrant laborers, it follows that the federal government's deportation apparatus would attempt to operate in tandem with municipal police in the region as often as possible, making these forums somewhat familiar affairs. At one such hearing convened in the waning days of June 2019, local father and farmworker Jose Bello used his two minutes of allotted time to recite a poem, "Dear America," which opens:

Our Administration has failed.
They pass laws against our people,
took away our rights and our freedom,
and still expect to be hailed?
¡Chales!

and continues:

Private prisons, political funding,
mass incarceration—
you make the connection.

I speak for the victims that pay for this scam.
Vietnamese. Jamaican. African. Cambodian.
Mexican. Salvadoran. On and on.
Together we stand.

and concludes:

Because at the end of the day,
I am you,
and you are me.
Together, we are.

Sincerely,
Those seeds you tried to bury.²

Thirty-six hours later, ICE agents arrested the poet at his home in Bakersfield, California. Upon booking at the Mesa Verde Processing Facility, but before his intake interview, Bello would have been provided with a consent form that explains the voluntary nature of the interview, and that he retains the right to remain silent. The presentation of this consent form itself is a result of the TRUTH Act, and the form is required to be translated into multiple languages, an odd instance of legally mandated multilingualism. It's not clear how ICE got word

2. Jose Bello, "Dear America," delivered at the TRUTH Act Forum in Bakersfield, CA, June 25, 2019, accessed July 12, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYIt-euHKuY>. I intend my line breaks approximate Bello's.

of Bello's performance. But because the TRUTH Act requires law enforcement to notify an individual if it also notifies ICE about a person's whereabouts—the law's third stipulation—and because Bello had been neither arrested nor charged with a crime in the day and a half since that fateful forum, it's virtually certain someone in attendance ratted out the poet. And so, even the well-meaning state completes its carceral circuit: a public event for soliciting community feedback results in the apprehension of a civilian resident.

If such close attention to but one state's legislation regarding undocumented immigrants seems belabored, it's worth noting that California's TRUTH Act was designed to empower and protect these individuals. The current Republican administration—the second of the twenty-first century whose Chief Executive failed to win over a majority of American voters—has at its disposal a frightening suite of tools for enacting maximum punishment against immigrant residents. Three major examples stand out from the coordinated campaign to criminalize brown and indigenous lives at the southern border. First, the administration attempted to enact travel bans against seven predominantly Muslim countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Sudan, Syria, and Somalia. Due to legal challenges from the courts, it took the failed steak purveyor three different executive actions to severely limit refugee admissions, revoke tens of thousands of existing visas, and detain hundreds of international travelers. Secondly, Republicans manufactured a human rights and public health crisis at the border by separating children from their families, submitting asylum seekers to overcrowded cages, and failing to provide supplies for adequate hygiene, including even toothbrushes and soap. Likewise, a morally reprehensible ethos has long festered among the ranks of Customs and Border Patrol agents, not only in the cases of heinous acts of rape and sexual abuse perpetrated against immigrant detainees, but also in the attitudes and beliefs of its operants, as evidenced by the recent revelations of grossly racist messages and memes in secret Facebook groups used by CBP officers.³

3. Jacob Soboroff and Julia Ainsley, "Migrant Kids in Overcrowded Border Station Allege Sex Assault, Retaliation from U.S. Agents," NBCNews.com, July 9, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/migrant-kids-overcrowded-arizona-border-station-allege-sex-assault-retaliation-n1027886>; Vanessa Romo, "Lawmakers Respond To 'Vile,' Secret Facebook Group Created By Border Patrol Agents," NPR, July 2, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/02/737930088/lawmakers-respond-to-vile-secret-facebook-group-created-by-border-patrol-agents>.

Finally, the Justice Department continues to exhibit a single-minded obsession with adding a citizenship question to the 2020 census, a move that threatens to skew demographic reporting and, ultimately, redraw congressional districts. It's as if today's Republican party knows it has no future of promise to offer young voters, and so must instead rely on gerrymandering to distort voter turnout.

Every one of these actions by the Republican-controlled state must be understood as instrumental to shaping the character of the nation, for that's exactly what's at stake. In its unabashed embrace of xenophobic, nativist, and authoritarian policies and practices, the Republican party seeks to cultivate a nationality that is proudly "unitedstatian," a term popularized by Daniel Borzutzky to emphasize the uniquely White, colonizing manifestations of capitalism within the U.S.⁴ This rigid image of a United States freed from invading brown bodies stands in direct opposition to the cultural identities and lived experiences of so many borderlands inhabitants. Indeed, one need look no further than to a mother of queer feminist theory to locate useful interpretations of this contested zone. In her oft-cited, groundbreaking, truly transformational work, Gloria E. Anzaldúa identifies borderlands (geographical, linguistic, gendered, etc.) with a Nahuatl concept called "nepantla," which means "tierra entre medio," or "the land in between." For Anzaldúa, borderlands are spaces of fluid possibility, flexible environments for experimentation and play, and decidedly necessary outlets borne of precarity. "Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries. Nepantla es tierra desconocida, and living in this liminal zone means being in a constant state of displacement."⁵ Republican antinepantla seeks instead to enforce static and predictable circumstances at the border, foreclosing the possibility of arrival, entry, and welcome passage. By deploying the state's most ruthless weapons against potential immigrants, this antinepantla seeks to contain the nation within a demographic identity of Whiteness.

4. Daniel Borzutzky, *The Performance of Becoming Human* (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Arts Press, 2016): 19.

5. Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "Preface: (Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces," in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, ed. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002): 1.

In light of such blatant, ongoing, unremitting attacks on the personhood and human dignity of migrant Americans, what is the role of art and artists, of poets and poetry? Perhaps it goes without saying that anything written since 2016 must be read against a backdrop of resurgent activism, much to the credit of what remains of an organized left in the U.S. And a handful of anthologies have surfaced in response, including *Resist Much / Obey Little: Inaugural Poems to the Resistance*, *Poems in the Aftermath: An Anthology from the 2016 Presidential Transition Period*, and *Misrepresented People: Poetic Responses to T****'s America*.⁶ But how can the publishing industry writ large, or at least that slim slice of wholly unprofitable ventures that promote themselves as contemporary poetry, resist enacting, reinforcing, and permitting the aggressions of a particularly insidious dominant culture?

One of the most successful challenges to this status quo emerged just before U.S. politics descended into its current, farcical hellscape. In 2015, poets Javier Zamora, Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, and Christopher Soto, a.k.a. "Loma," established the UndocuPoets campaign, which successfully petitioned ten prominent first-book prizes to drop citizenship requirements for eligibility. Additionally, Zamora, Castillo, and Loma have curated selections of poetry by undocumented writers, sponsored annual fellowships for emerging poets, spurred numerous editorials and commentary, and collectively received the Barnes & Noble Writers for Writers Award. The momentum of the UndocuPoets campaign warrants critical attention, not just for the courageous activism these poets are advancing, but for the merit of the work produced by its originators. Under review here are three recent titles by immigrant poets: *Unaccompanied*, by Javier Zamora; *Cenzontle*, by Marcelo Hernandez Castillo; and *Documents*, by Jan-Henry Gray. All are first books by Brown writers from Hispanicized countries who are affiliated with the UndocuPoets campaign. There

6. *Resist Much / Obey Little: Inaugural Poems to the Resistance*, eds. Michael Boughn et al (Brooklyn, NY: Dispatches Editions, 2017); *Poems in the Aftermath: An Anthology from the 2016 Presidential Transition Period*, ed. Michael Broder (Brooklyn, NY: Indolent Books, 2018); *Misrepresented People: Poetic Responses to T****'s America*, eds. María Isabel Alvarez and Dante Di Stefano (New York: New York Quarterly Books, 2018). I have altered the subtitle of *Misrepresented People* in order to omit a name that will not appear in this review essay.

are others, of course, many others, not all of whom can afford to publish their experiences in verse, or put into words the injustices they've experienced, or even begin to process the trauma their journeys have exacted. But we must look to those brave enough and able to share their perspectives, in order to promote a future inclusive of any migrant determined to participate in the strange experiment that is American democracy. Perhaps then it makes sense to begin with the realist lyrics of Javier Zamora.

Zamora's *Unaccompanied* derives its title from the fact that Zamora's parents migrated from El Salvador before he did—the poet then crossed the border on his own at nine years old. Contrary to what many newly arrived asylum seekers are experiencing today when crossing into the U.S., Zamora reunites with his family. Though an inversion of the current practice of separating children from their parents, the undertaking is no less harrowing. Not surprisingly, this journey defines the emotional core of *Unaccompanied*, through which Zamora confronts the circumstances of a new life while wrestling with memories of those he left behind. Indeed, memories of El Salvador flood the book's pages, and Zamora depicts the lush landscape of his hometown, La Herradura, in vibrant hues: volcano peaks on the horizon, groves of ceiba and mango trees, storks and pelicans hunting at the shore, fruit bats emerging at dusk, and brightly colored crabs scuttling into the Pacific. His "cratered-deforested homeland" (75) embodies an extended borderlands, and its verses recount the long transition into North American life. Zamora refracts the experience through multiple points of view: a speaker who has made this long migration, his mother and father, a tía left behind. The result is a multifaceted picture of a complicated and compelling journey that so many migrants undertake, whether atop *la bestia*, the infamous freight trains on which travelers risk life and limb to ride, or "packed in boats / twenty aboard, eighteen hours straight to Oaxaca" (13).

In passing through México, Zamora's speaker differentiates himself and his people from the Mexicans for whom so many Latinx folks are mistaken: "In our town, we'd never known Mexicans / besides the women and men in soap operas" (12). It's an important distinction, and an obvious one, except, of course, to the bankrupted real estate magnate residing in public housing at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, who not only fails to differentiate between migrants' countries of origin,

but also denies their humanity altogether.⁷ And yet, Zamora is quick to point out that, while extraordinary, his speaker's arduous experiences as an unaccompanied minor are not unique: "I am not the only nine-year-old / who has slipped my backpack under the ranchers' fences" (15). While it's a sad fact that scores of children attempt the crossing without their parents, it's also true that many migrants don't succeed on a first, or second, attempt.

In "Let Me Try Again," Zamora complicates the question of who is responsible for enforcing the limits of the state, when the speaker encounters a relatively forgiving but ultimately unrelenting Border Patrol officer who is Latino himself, but "who probably called himself Arizonan, // Hispanic at best, not Mejicano / like we called him":

Procedure says he should've taken us
back to the station,

checked our fingerprints,
etcétera.

He must've remembered his family
over the border,

or the border coming over them,
because he drove us to the border

and told us
next time, rest at least five days,

*don't trust anyone calling themselves coyotes,
bring more tortillas, sardines, Alhambra.* (62)

The border agent's identity serves a double role: he's portrayed as a Latino of questionable affinity ("Hispanic at best"), but also as a figure of shared heritage ("He must've remembered his family / over the border"). The speaker also alludes to the centuries-long history of unitedstian expansion ("the border / coming over them"), a political reality that forms a dark undercurrent of *Unaccompanied*.

7. Gregory Korte and Alan Gomez, "T**** Ramps Up Rhetoric on Undocumented Immigrants: 'These Aren't People. These Are Animals,'" USA Today, May 17, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/05/16/trump-immigrants-animals-mexico-democrats-sanctuary-cities/617252002/>.

If the emotional and psychic scars of grueling migration shape the cartography of Zamora's debut, their origins can be pinpointed to the history of U.S. military and political interventions that led to so much violence and unrest in Central America. "Disappeared" offers an incomplete list of the actors involved and instructs the reader to "[h]old these names responsible," including the CIA, Bush Sr., Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, and the School of the Americas, a notorious training academy where Central American militaries learned to kidnap, torture, and disappear opponents (28). The trainees appear in the memories of the speaker's father: "It was the first time a helicopter flew over our town. All we read and heard about were battles in Tecoluca, the islands, the capital, the volcanoes. I ran under the helicopter, it never landed—it just threw bodies onto the field. —Dad, age 11" (30). By including the father's point of view, Zamora illustrates one way in which the trauma of a family's migration begins generations back, how it infiltrates childhood at any age. And it's only in writing these stories that the poet and his family members—ancestors and descendants alike—can begin to heal. As Zamora writes elsewhere, "Before I had the tools (the pen and paper of poetry) to replay, analyze, revise the trauma my 'refugee story' embodied, I held all of that anger deep inside, believing that what I had been through could be forgotten, but trauma doesn't work that way."⁸ And yet, even after the separation, the journey, and eventual reunion, and even granting the necessity of emotional processing through language, the role of poet doesn't always measure up to parental expectations: "I was supposed to be a lawyer / businessman soccer player / Mom and Dad said / someone of value" (89). Instead, the poet can only document his family's profound transformation:

I sit here type it's Monday
 it's Tuesday it's Friday
 type *first day inside a plane I sat by the window*

everyone's working
 Mom Dad Tía Lupe Tía Mali
 working under different names
 I sit here writing our names (91)

8. Javier Zamora, "Foreword," in *Ink Knows No Borders: Poems of the Immigrant and Refugee Experience*, ed. Patrice Vecchione and Alyssa Raymond (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2019): paragraph 3.

By contrasting the deceptively simple practice of writing under one's own name against his family's laborious toiling under assumed identities, Zamora surfaces an irony in all of this: parents for whom the price of admission to El Norte means living in the shadows may grant their children the freedom to bear witness in lyric English, a language they likely never dreamed would document their legacy.

If Zamora's brutal realism renders the stark reality of a border crosser's plight in gripping detail, Marcelo Hernandez Castillo's first full-length collection, *Cenzontle*, is more delicate, gauzy, and tender, employing a softer, more sensual touch. However, like Zamora, Castillo builds lyrics around the nature of migrant labor—"For twelve hours I have picked / the same colored pepper" (22)—and laments the injustices borne by undocumented individuals, as in "Origin of Birds," which tallies the fatal toll that pesticides take on migrant farm workers: "It's in your blood / which means / it's all of you" (44). But where Zamora begins with facts and builds verses defined by their verticality, Castillo's style affords great spans of white space, and his lines luxuriate across the page, strewn about, or as if fragmented in the final gesture of a lovers' quarrel. Repetition of key images across the book, but also within poems ("The song becoming / the bird becoming / the song"), creates a series of refrains or choruses (51). This is fitting, since "Cenzontle," an abbreviation of "centzontlahtōleh," refers to North America's only mockingbird and translates literally from Nahuatl as "possessor of four hundred words." Certainly, the book's filled with songbirds and waterfowl, which often appear in gorgeous, visceral imagery—"Let this be the last time / a boy like me cuts himself open, // trying to find the swans / flapping their wings inside him" (34)—or profound punches to the gut: "The birds don't know it's not too late / to abandon their nests" (39). Castillo deploys timely feathered metaphors throughout the book, creating a lyrical aviary, one that engages as much as it protects. As with many of the migrant poets under discussion here, Castillo's relationship with home—what makes for one, who gets to call it one—proves complicated. "Sugar," about a father's rough love, captures the intensity of a volatile relationship:

My father's hands split peaches in half and fed me.

Mouth / and nail.

Salt and / a little piss.

Always the leather, always / my ass bleeding with welts—
my ass purple with love,

always / the belt
he called Daisy.
And I said *hello Daisy*, /
and she said *hello*. (35)

This paternal violence binds the speaker and his father in a toxic masculinity, one that confuses corporal punishment for care. As a result, the two emerge as two poles of a reciprocal relationship (“after it’s over, we / know we have both / become men. / Him for the / beating, / and me for / taking his / beating.”) who are also interchangeable, intermingled animals: “His hands were two doves / courting the / lamb which was also a dove / in its thrashing” (35–6). This is one of the book’s more powerful masculine transformations, an encounter that engenders these men, that provokes, incites, and arouses, by infusing violence with affection. Likewise, “Wetback” opens with a boy slinging a slur at the speaker, who responds with unexpected tenderness: “I opened his mouth and fed him a spoonful of honey. / / *I like the way you say ‘honey,’* he said” (31). This surprising sweetness belies the speaker’s aggressive gesture; such direct intimacy undercuts the hateful slur. From both instances—the physical discipline of the father, the verbal abuse from a boy—the speaker emerges into a new masculinity, and Castillo’s search for the right words to express desires that might be viewed as taboo, especially within macho Latinx cultures, adds another dimension to this immigrant poet’s experience and story. As Castillo explains in an interview, “I like the idea that this existence is unclassifiable from the point of view of a person who is bi-sexual, but who is also married. I’m trying to define for myself a specific kind of Queer identity that isn’t defined as easily as other identities that are Othered by the White supremacist, homophobic society at large.”⁹ Bisexual identity inhabits a borderlands between hetero- and homo- but, in loving and wedding a woman, Castillo acknowledges the contradictions between heteronormative conventions and transgressive desires.

9. “*Latina/o Poets on Liminal Spaces: A Conversation with Marcelo Hernández Castillo*,” by Natalie Scenters-Zapico, *The Best American Poetry* (blog), October 25, 2015, https://blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the_best_american_poetry/2015/10/latinao-poets-on-liminal-spaces-a-conversation-with-marcelo-hernandez-castillo-by-natalie-scenters-z.html.

In *Cenzontle*, Castillo's queering of immigrant identity shows up in delicately selected moments that are discreetly sexy ("I am lying on the floor / in a pair of blue panties / that I borrowed / without telling" (67)), curiously aloof ("What did I know about touching a man?" (70)), lustfully suggestive ("I've never made love to a man but I imagine" (79)), and unabashedly direct ("I think about the cock that's never been in my mouth" (62)). This soft eroticism, absent in Zamora and Gray, shimmers in the corners of Castillo's collection like gossamer, eventually gleaming back to its source. In "Miss Lonelyhearts," the speaker invokes his father's belt by name, the first makeshift implements that bred a nascent masochist: "Beat me the way our parents did. / Put your belt in my mouth. Call it *Daisy*. / I will eat it. / I will make it come back to life" (71). Without justifying his childhood beatings and without denying his desires, Castillo draws a line connecting his speaker's childhood experiences to his sexual preferences. This tether functions as a boundary, one that leaves additional family dynamics undefined because, unlike Zamora, Castillo leaves the question of how and when his family migrated a bit more ambiguous. In *Cenzontle*, migration occurs within the speaker's heart, between sexuality and gender, between lovers and spouses, and yes, between countries.

Castillo generates an unlikely exploration of the theme by imagining an "Immigration Interview with Jay Leno." The poem combines two interview formats that couldn't be more different: the intense, high-pressure, high-stakes interrogation conducted upon an immigrant's arrival, and the silly, low-stakes softballs lobbed to celebrities and stars by late night TV hosts. The respondent's answers may sound like whimsy and nonsense, which could deflate the imposing authority of the questionnaire, were the revelations less evocative of migrants' dire predicaments:

Is that really your name?

Yes, the clothes on the floor
blossomed like the orchards in spring.

Have you been here before?

There was a man who knew the way.
I put his fingers in my mouth
when he pointed in the direction of the sun.

Who are you wearing?

The woman gave birth in the dark.
I thought I felt hands where there were none.

Everyone dug a useless hole. (42)

Not every question is serious, and the responses can read as celebratory (clothing dispatched quickly in the bedroom before congress) or ominous (clothing abandoned by those seeking to flee), reiterating an uncomfortable ambiguity. The immigration interview, for anyone seeking to enter or renew their stay in the U.S., poses as both gateway and barrier, and Castillo's not the only migrant poet to confront the formal conventions and tireless inquisitions that comprise the unitedstatian immigration apparatus. A number of writers address the incessant questions posed both in austere back rooms at the Department of Homeland Security and on the streets in casual conversation (the indeterminably motivated, "Where are you from?" or the dreaded, "What are you?"), including one recipient of the inaugural UndocuPoets fellowship, Jan-Henry Gray.

Born in Quezon City, Phillipines, Gray immigrated to the U.S. at the age of six and grew up in Southern California, a self-proclaimed "queer undocumented Filipino," who perfected culinary skills by working in kitchens and learned to code-switch with other cooks. Gray's *Documents* chronicles the experiences of a young man who composes poetry in English, converses with shopkeepers in Spanish, and admits to ignorance in Tagalog. (One poem's title, "Hindi Ko Alam Ng Sasabihin Ko" (56) translates to, "I do not know what to say.") This particular trifecta of linguistic expression is unique to folks from the Philippines, given the island country's twice-colonized history—first by Spain, then by the U.S.—and Gray brings the full breadth of this verbal idiosyncrasy to the page.

A short poem, "On Translation," swiftly illustrates the power of using translation as a tool for interpreting the immigrant experience:

A tree's branch
breaks.

A falling branch is
a branch, not a twig
until it has fallen
and is *with-the-ground*.

There, the twig
is among other twigs.

Also there, it is near
the root of its tree. (39)

One way to read this poem sees the branch as a member of a community who falls away from a familiar place, only to land among loved ones, in perhaps a deeper relationship to home. Gray evokes emigration and expat communities without mentioning humans at all. Another way to read the poem might emphasize the act of transformation itself, that a thing (or person) in transit from a familiar perch soon finds itself among a strange new convening of once-similar, and now likewise-changed, things (or people). This is a key choice any migrant must make: how to build a new life while keeping connections to their country of origin alive.

For many migrants, a necessary component of this reworked relationship is the act of remittance, the sending of money or gifts from an expat back home, often by wire transfer or, more commonly today, via online app. This facet of immigrant life undergirds the work of every poet under discussion here, and Gray addresses it directly. Filipinos who return to the island country after living abroad are called “balikbayan.” Therefore, remittances arrive in balikbayan boxes, packages filled with treats and gifts that can be shipped home, but that often return with the traveler via air. Gray’s poem “Balikbayan” is an erasure of a Wikipedia entry, aligned neatly into a perfect square on the page. It concludes:

Returnees
are expected to bring home gifts to
family and friends—the practice of
pasalubong.¹ Work overseas as maids in
Saudi, in a brothel in Dubai, or nurses
in the States [citation needed] Ever
since Typhoon Ketsana (now ~~Haiyan~~
no Yolanda) and Homeland Security:
almost all shipments have been delayed.
(21)

Gray’s use of erasure alludes to the notion that one’s national and cultural identity may erode after time away, and that the substance of one’s self is a vulnerable commodity. The incorporation of bracketed notes, superscript numerals that lead nowhere and all the errata of a live wiki page are defining features of *Documents*. Throughout the book, Gray appropriates the paperwork endemic to any immigrant’s experience: the applications, notices, reports, and questionnaires that

simultaneously extend and obstruct the possibility for permanent or protected residency status. Gray co-opts the forms and language of administrative bureaucracy, often in the guise of instructional advice. "I-797-C" takes its title from one of several similarly numerated official documents (I797A, I797B, I797D, and so on), which the federal government uses to notify immigrants as to the progress of their application. Gray's poetic rendering of the form, which includes header and footer information to mimic validity, instructs an imagined applicant to wax sentimental when asked about marriage status: "don't mention citizenship / talk about love, how you got married for love" (19). Immigrants' romantic relationships will always be targeted by the suspicious state, paranoid as it is about marriages of convenience, chain migration, and the demographic doomsday posed by so-called "anchor babies." A later poem, "Answer No," contradicts this advice by serving as a kind of inventory or index, answering ostensibly serious questions ("Do you plan to practice polygamy in the U.S.?" (79)) with references to previous poems. In this way, Gray creates a self-contained archive, one that cross-references itself, but also points outward to the literary world. For instance, Gray includes quotes from *Somewhere Else*, by Matthew Shenoda, and *Giscome Road*, by C. S. Giscombe, but attributes the epigraphs only by ISBN number, requiring readers familiar with the numerical format to query Google to identify the sources. In this equalizing move, Gray demonstrates how even nonimmigrant poets can be identified by call number.

A notable exception of sorts to Gray's formal innovation occurs in "Exaqua," an extended section of the book, which consists of excerpts from an email conversation with poet Jennifer Chang, and proves to be a poignant deployment of prose. The speaker adopts the "[e]ssay as a way of breaking up the rest of the poems that / surround it. I wanted to offer a break, a reprieve. Freedom from forms" (69). Of course, the essay, as an established genre of literature, carries its own literary conventions, but the desire to break free of forms communicates both the author's urge to stray from the familiar restrictions poetry demands (line breaks, stanzas, syllabics, etc.) and the immigrant's desire to be done with the endless paperwork the state requires to authorize his existence. In the concluding pages of the book, Gray also plays with the formal conventions of the poetry collection per se, by titling a late poem "Acknowledgements," which subverts readers' expectations for

an ending. Instead of the typical list of publications where his poems have previously appeared, the speaker catalogs a dozen or so Filipino poets he admits to not having read (like Carlos Busan, José Rizal, Eileen Tabios, and Fatima Lim-Wilson) and includes a long quote by Barbara Jane Reyes about Filipinos in literature, which excoriates writers who fail to read their heritage (80). By juxtaposing an admission with an admonishment, Gray creates an ouroboros of self-aware shortcomings and solutions, challenging readers (who are likely to be poets themselves) to confront this question in their own literary practices.

If the personal is always political in poetry, then for immigrant, undocumented, asylum-seeking, and refugee poets, the political is immediately, urgently personal. All three poets considered here revel in the ambiguity, uncertainty, fluidity, and ultimate freedom that comes from entering the borderlands, the spirit of *nepantla*, however they choose to engage with it—whether it be Zamora’s vivid depictions of a literal overland migration, Castillo’s musical performance of gender and sexuality, or Gray’s playful manipulation of the state’s bureaucratic currency. It’s also worth noting the obvious: other migrant writers—such as Janine Joseph, Esther Lin, Ladan Osman, Frankie Concepcion, Sonia Guiñansaca, and many, many others—are doing the work, but—ironically, due to space constraints—could not be included here. They, too, should be read. But beyond this, what’s needed in addition to acknowledgement and critical appreciation is greater support for grassroots activist groups, such as Our Parents’ Bones, a philanthropic organization devoted to winning justice for the descendants of El Salvador’s disappeared; The Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), which is taxed to breaking under Republican abuse of a broken system; and the Illinois Coalition of Immigrant and Refugee Rights. Finally, while the Undocupoets’ campaign has achieved great progress against arbitrary restrictions that impede immigrant writers’ ability to publish, there’s more work to be done. Many poetry contests and prizes still require manuscripts be submitted in English, refuse translations, or caution against idiosyncratic or culturally common stylistic elements, like nonstandard capitalization, SMS language, and slang. These rules are as arbitrary as the borders of nation-states, and should be repealed. A publishing landscape that enacts oppressive customs of dominant culture is only a more erudite organ of the xenophobic state. Abolish borders; embrace the borderlands.