

Solito, Solita; Crossing Borders with Youth Refugees from Central America, Edited by Jonathan Freedman and Steven Mayers (Haymarket Books, 2019), \$19.95 CAD (Paperback), 300 pages, ISBN- 10: 1608466183

“Remember, remember always, that all of us, and you and I especially, are descended from immigrants” –Franklin D Roosevelt remarks to the Daughters of the American Revolution, 1938

Eighty-two years removed from FDR’s remarks to the Daughters of the American Revolution, we remain in a state of great uncertainty, closed borders, and a path foreword that remains both unknown for immigration and acceptance. *Solito, Solita*, translated as *Alone, Alone*, tells the stories of fifteen young people who have suffered and struggled in their quest towards a better existence in America, a land which promised hope and more importantly, survival. While the current US president has attempted to deny this existence, the stories of Soledad Castillo, Ernesto González, Noemie Tun, Isabel Vásquez, Danelia Silva, Adrià Cruz, Pedro Hernandez, Christian Molina, Jhony Chuc, Rosa Cuevas, Josué Nieves, Julio Zavala, Gabriel Méndez, Ismael Xol, and Itzel Tzab, seek to illustrate the *way* of immigration and to shed light on to those realities.

Containing interviews conducted between 2014 and 2018 and edited by Steven Mayers and Jonathan Freedman, *Solito, Solita* is not simply the stories of travel, migration, and challenge but of trauma. Reading the pages, one cannot help but be transported emotionally to the experiences that age and create everlasting impacts in the lives of these youth. Marked by the simple fact that they were simply born in different borders, the details within share the faces to the humanitarian crises being experienced. Envisioning a better future for the trauma experienced, the stories are meant to demonstrate that refugees are not only explained by their journey but of love, laughter, and joy. Emotions that unite the human spirit, these emotions are intended to show that the future can be better. A future can exist where children do not have to risk their lives in search of a better life that was not afforded to them due to the location of their birth.

At any given moment, thousands of children are trekking from Central America towards a new life. Taking buses, vans, trucks, and trains colloquially called *La Bestia* (The Beast), those who seek asylum are forced to take the two thousand plus mile trip to hopefully survive and turn themselves into authorities, in the hope of gaining asylum or escape and lead an underground life. A controversial topic, United States immigration has dominated elections, politics, and given rise to particular politicians to the White House in their attempt to put America first. Lost within this issue is causation for migration from Central America which was virtually non-existent before the 1980s. Leading back to the Cold War and its attempts to extend its sphere of influence, key interventionist practices by former administrations in Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras led to the rise of street gangs within those countries, street gangs which rose to hold international power through the gun and drug trades. The legacy of these interventionist practices continues to have devastating impacts on these societies forcing youth to abandon their homes or be recruited into multinational gang networks or worse accept fatal consequences¹.

The narrators of *Solito, Solita* share their hidden traumas, successes, challenges, and harrowing ordeals. Faced with experiences children their age nor any other age should ever have to undertake, the wisdom they share and their hope for a better tomorrow is meant to kick the vicious cycle so many like them face daily. Beaten by poverty, poor health, alcoholism, violence, and unstable homes that have become synonymous with the lives of those growing up in Central

¹ Estimated deaths in Central American civil wars: 140,000 in Guatemala, 70 000 in El Salvador, 60,000 in Nicaragua.

America's poorest neighbourhoods, these youth overcome their challenges in seeking a better life. For those youth growing up, the oasis presented by El Norte popularized and mythologized by popular media, tales, and the internet is an eternal flame of hope worth the potential consequence of death that comes with the journey to America².

Beginning with Soledad Castillo, a native of Tegucigalpa, Honduras who crossed the border at age 14, the scars on her legs reveal the incident of medical malpractice and abandonment, but the scars that are invisible from her journey reveal trauma that continues. A victim of physical and sexual abuse, the suicidal thoughts which accompany her journey see her overcome a life-threatening disease that was misdiagnosed and continued to worsen as the incorrect medication continued to cause damage to her body. Misdiagnosed with lupus, the poor standards of healthcare in Honduras precursors her journey to Guatemala and then the United States. Eventually settling in San Francisco, her journey details being crammed into a van with twenty-five others and being given a litre of water as she walked through the desert, her feet swelling with blisters. Eventually landing in San Francisco and struggling to pay her debts accrued from the journey, Soledad would strike a streak of luck and benefit from guardians in the foster care system. Finishing high school and enrolling in City College of San Francisco, she would go on to advocate for foster children's rights and earn her most prized possession, a United States of America passport.

The story of Josué Nieves who was sixteen years old when he began his journey from Puerto El Truiunfo, El Salvador details the bond between him and his father, his hero, who aided Josué in his journey towards Berkeley California. Fleeing gang violence who threatened to kill him and his family if he refused to join or pay renta, Josué's journey to America proved fatal for his family back home in El Salvador as both his father and uncle were killed as a result of the gang violence³. A delivery man with ambitions of owning his own trucking business, Nieves continues to chase his American Dream cheered on by the ghosts of his relatives who have succumbed to the violence which Nieves managed to escape.

Gabriel Méndez aged 15 at the time of crossing and also native to Tegucigalpa, Honduras like our first story of Soledad Castillo was sexually abused throughout his childhood and bullied for being homosexual. Gabriel would continue to defy all odds and become an advocate for LGBTQ youth throughout San Francisco. Living with his abusers in Honduras, Gabriel's trauma would continue to impact his life and others as his work to push children of sexual abuse to talk about their experiences continues. Going on to push his advocacy throughout his new community, he would eventually enroll at UC Berkeley and continue his participation in Capitol Hill and the US Supreme Court.

Interviewed while in transit on his journey, Jhony Chuc's story takes place in the middle of a dilemma. Unable to fund his way across the border with the help of coyotes, the option of carrying the backpack across the border as payment presents an appealing option. A member of the Indigenous people of Guatemala, Q'eqchi, his problems began when his father was found hanging in front of his girlfriend's house. Taking the journey multiple times, his latest journey is where the story takes place. Already having been deported before from Mexico City, the toll of taking this journey again adds to the desperation for a new life. Aged from the stress, his desire to not give up leaves the reader unaware of his outcome.

As Guatemala saw vicious massacres of its Mayan people in the 1980s by its military supported by the US government, the stories of those remaining with trauma saw many flee for a

² El Norte meaning the North is a colloquial term to reference the United States of America and beyond.

³ Renta is term used by gangs who extort citizens for payment in return for protection

better life. Noemi Tun, a teenager aged 16 at the time of crossing, who's family became involved in conflict due to those massacres is one such story. In the wake of violent attacks from strangers in villages opposite, Noemi was forced to flee and begin the journey with coyotes and eventually reunite with her Dad thanks to a program to reunite children with parents in the US. Unable to recognize her father at her arrival in Boston, Noemi continues her journey to seek citizenship.

The maras have caused irreparable harm in South and Central America, most notably in El Salvador⁴. For Isabel Vásquez that gang violence saw her sister get killed and her estranged husband become a member of the maras. When her sister left their town to seek employment due to the economic hardships faced in their district, Isabel never imagined that not only would her sister be murdered, but death threats for refusing to pay the maras would become her new reality. Crossing the border at age 29 alongside her daughter, Isabel was determined to escape El Salvador and her abusive husband. Attempting to rebuild a new life for herself and her daughter, her estranged husband remains in prison for extortion.

For those interviewed in transit, the uncertainty of what may come next serves as a reminder for those who don't have to migrate how fortunate their lives remain. Danelia Silva, a 25-years young mother of three who's boyfriend joined notorious international syndicate MS-13 the dream of safety and asylum seems so far when she is interviewed at the Mexico-US border. Abandoned by her coyote after paying him all her available funds, the mother hopes to be reunified with her parents in Texas. Few weeks after her interview Danelia, with the help of a local priest in Texas, can be reunified with her parents who agreed to help with her case. Her parents, undocumented migrants, and thus unable to help with her legal proceedings have helped her tremendously in raising her children. Her documented abuse at the hands of her boyfriend remains part of the ongoing evidence being used to seek asylum for her and her children.

The fifteen narratives selected in *Solito Solita* are honest, direct, and hold complexities, the politicization of immigration has failed to demonstrate. Seeking to fill the gaps of knowledge, dispel myths around immigration, and spurn the idea of an American Dream, the plight of these individuals although all unique shares a commonality that calls for all humanity to answer. The voices shared in these stories have been fact-checked for accuracy and detail the need to address one of the worst humanitarian crises our global community experiences every single day. Tied between all these stories are fountains of hope for a better life. As humanity, the stories of *Solito, Solita* ask us to do better. They ask us to not define ourselves by the border in which we live but the actions of our character. They ask us to not deprive humanity of the world but to welcome individuals and to provide basic safety and security. They ask us to share our cultures, values, and traditions. We need to do better as global citizens and to continue to give voice to the voiceless because everyone deserves a chance at a life lived without fear.

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⁴ A mara is a form of gang originating in the United States, which spread to Central American countries such as El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala