

**Karina Oliva Alvarado**

**On Salvadoran Diasporic Poetry: William Archila, Mario Escobar and Javier Zamora.**

**Interviews**

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The last few years saw the publication of two significant anthologies by Salvadoran and U.S. Central American diasporic poets. The bilingual anthology, *Theatre Under My Skin / Teatro Bajo Mi Piel* (2014), edited by Alexandra Lytton Regalado, Lucía Sola and Tania Pleitez Vela, represents a collection of Salvadoran work by poets from and in El Salvador, the United States, and other diasporic locations such as Canada. *The Wandering Song. Central American Writing in the United States* (2017), edited by Leticia Hernández Linares, Héctor Tobar and Rubén Martínez, was described by Luis Rodríguez (Chicano poet, novelist, and founder of Tia Chucha press) as “historical” at the time of its Southern California book release<sup>1</sup> because this is the first collection of poetry and fiction in the United States that fully features Central American writers from throughout the United States. These anthologies propose to house emerging and prominent poets for *Theatre Under My Skin*, from the El Salvador and its diasporas, and for *Wandering Song*, from U.S. Central American diasporas. U.S. Salvadoran poets are found in both collections. These include Quique Áviles, William Archila, Lorena Duarte, Mario A. Escobar, José B. González, Gabriela Poma Traynor, and Javier Zamora. The following interviews focus on William Archila (b.1968), Mario A. Escobar (b.1978), and Javier Zamora (b.1990), Salvadoran born poets living in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Beyond Baroque in Venice Beach, California, May 27, 2017.

All three poets had the experience of living in El Salvador as children. Though these writers were each born in a different decade, they all lived through the Salvadoran Civil War (1979-1992) and immigrated to the United States when their identities were still being formed. My interest in these poets is in seeing to what extent to which they have committed their creative expression as writers to the unique ways they articulate their identities as Salvadorans. My questions in these interviews reveal my interest in Archila, Escobar, and Zamora's intersectionalities as Salvadoran, immigrant, men, poets, Latinx in a U.S. context, and writers from a Salvadoran-U.S. diaspora. Intersectionality pinpoints their location of marginalization as individuals facing such institutions as higher education, language, gender, law and labor, as well as the identifications and disidentifications they may enact from these locations. Their responses to my questions help us to consider the challenges they have faced because of their historical experiences, and their overcoming of such adversity as living with memories of war and loss, alienation because of assimilation, and economic hardships and disenfranchisements because of their immigrant status. For example, Escobar and Zamora have been prevented from traveling because of their undocumented status. I infer that the inability to re-experience El Salvador at different ages or as adults creates an understanding of El Salvador from the vantage point of childhood, for Escobar as a preteen, and for Zamora as a child. Moreover, when there is continued loss, the issue of memory or how to remember a home of origin becomes persistent. The editors of *Theatre Under My Skin / Teatro Bajo Mi Piel* understand the persistence of remembrance by expanding the Salvadoran published anthology to include diasporic writers.

Tania Pleitez Vela explains the intention to represent "El Salvador, and all the other places of the imagination that branch from this country" (85) in *Theatre Under My Skin / Teatro Bajo Mi Piel*, an idea found in the book's organization. The anthology is divided into two sections that showcase nine Salvadoran poets writing in El Salvador and nine Salvadoran poets writing from the diasporas. The collection centers on communication by providing a translation of every poem

from Spanish to English and vice versa.<sup>2</sup> The translators are highly acclaimed scholars and bilingual poets. Editors Alexandra Lytton Regalado, Tania Pleitez Vela and Lucía de Sola admittedly, “thought it necessary to enlist many translators” to “give readers a way of engaging with the wide ranges of styles, textures, and forms presented in the collection” (93-94). Though the editors and translators’ intention was to remain “loyal to the voices of the poets, their style, and musicality” they nonetheless encountered a “vacuum [that] created the inevitable loss” found in translation. They concluded that these losses added rather than took away from the experience of the poem for readers (93). Moreover, the organization or juxtapositions of the two sections, gives readers another space to infer meaning. The Salvadoran-in-El Salvador section titled “Fobiápolis / Phobiapolis” suggests fear of the city or the nation-state, titled after Krisma Mancía’s poem by the same name which is about the death of the poetic narrator’s daughter. The section is diverse in theme and topic though most poems return to the embodied experience of space and location. The Salvadoran-in-Diaspora section is titled “Immigration Blues / Blues de Immigrante” after William Archila’s poem on immigrating to the United States. As stated, the organization of the two sections creates a space for readers to interpret the differences and similarities between the poets from El Salvador and the poets in the U.S. Broadly speaking, the U.S. American poets<sup>3</sup> reflect on questions of language, immigration, and belonging. The themes that connect the Salvadoran diasporic poets to El Salvador are their memories of war and home and reflections on their identities as immigrants.

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<sup>2</sup> The nine Salvadoran poets include René Rodas (translation by Keith Ekiss), Otoniel Guevara (translation by Alexandra Lytton Regalado), Susana Reyes (translation by Emma Trelles), Jorge Galán (translation by Alexandra Lytton Regalado), Roxana Méndez (translation by Daniel Bohnhorst), Krisma Mancía (translation by Jessica Rainey), Elena Salamanca (translation by Marianne Choquet), Vladimir Amaya (translation by Emma Trelles), and Mirosalva Rosales (translation by Jessica Rainey). Poet Quique Avilés translated his own work from English to Spanish in the section titled “Immigration Blues / Blues de Immigrante.” The nine poets in this section include José B. González (translation by Mauricio Espinoza), William Archila (translation by Sonia Ticas), Gabriela Poma Traynor (translation by Victor Hernández Cruz), Leticia Hernández Linares (translation by Betsabé García), Lorena Duarte (translation by Mauricio Espinoza), Mario Escobar (translation by Sonia Ticas), Elsie Rivas Gómez (translation by Betsabé García), and Javier Zamora (translation by Kiara Covarrubias and Javier Zamora).

<sup>3</sup> By U.S. American, I am not implying that the diasporic poets call themselves as such or identify as U.S. American. I use U.S. American in the absence of a translation for “estadounidense” which would translate to Unitedstatesian. Everyone from North, Central and South America are Americans. U.S.American, therefore, attempts to locate the poets in the United States without replicating the imperialistic use of American for people from the United States only.

The diasporic writers “speak out of the forced silences, internal splits, and memory gaps produced by their condition of diaspora” (Rodríguez, “Preliminary Words” 41), articulations found in *The Wandering Song. Central American Writing in the United States*. This collection includes poetry and short fiction in Spanish. It does not, however, offer translations. *Wandering Song* is expansive; it includes fiction, and features sixty-eight poets from the Nicaraguan, Panamanian, Guatemalan, Salvadoran, Maya, and Honduran diasporas in the United States. The co-editors, Leticia Hernández Linares, Rubén Martínez, and Héctor Tobar propose to intercede on the “shaky literary and historical ground” that U.S. Central Americans writers have occupied by showing the breadth and presence of these diasporic writers while also pushing against U.S. “anti-immigrant sentiment and xenophobic backlash” (10-11). Immigration, questions of home and familial/communal relationships and memory become the key organizational and conceptual motifs that connect these diverse diasporic writers. Moreover, all three poets speak of or use the term “trauma.”

Despite their differences, Archila, Escobar, and Zamora share in the need to heal from trauma. Each poet names trauma as a distinctive and compelling force in their work. For Escobar and Zamora, writing as healing includes giving voice to their experiences as undocumented migrants. As their individual interviews reveal, Escobar and Archila also name the state of exile as an imagined yet embodied space experienced in day-to-day as loss or alienation. In the following interview, Escobar reveals, “I think what shapes my poetry is a sense of exile and the injustices that immigrants are subject to.” The poets centralize the sense of loss as immigrants, as when, for example, Zamora explains “El Salvador is a prevalent theme in my poetry because I literally missed it to a hurt.” For Zamora, I infer, this is a continued “hurt” since as an undocumented migrant, he cannot return to El Salvador without jeopardizing his legalization status. As Archila names it, “This is what drives my poetry: the language of grief and mourning in the Salvadoran diaspora, the experience of war, immigration, and exile” (see Archila’s interview below). The following interviews reveal Archila, Escobar and Zamora’s passion for

poetry and the bittersweet love for their native country. The interviews reveal the poets' ardor for life, their capacity to dream and hope, and their attempts to move forward from the sense of loss.

My interview of Archila brings to light his publications from 2009, with *The Art of Exile*, to 2013, with *The Gravedigger's Archaeology*. With the publication of the two anthologies from Kalina and Tia Chucha Press, I decided to contact Archila, Escobar, and Zamora as other Salvadoran poets from California whom I have had the privilege to hear, invite as speakers to my classes, and whose work I have been following over my academic career. In the following interviews, I offer short introductions for each poet, but the weight of this essay is in the interviews themselves. What do these poets say about Salvadoran cultural and historical memory, immigration, war, and the art of poetry from the United States? As my colleagues and I proposed in the first U.S. anthology on U.S. Central American cultural production and memory, the anthologies published in 2017, "mark [. . .] a turning point in how Central America has been spoken for mainly through social science and political theory to bridge it with humanities and cultural approaches that bring to the fore our complexity, richness, beauty, and resiliency" (Alvarado, Estrada y Hernández 5). Central American ethnonational groups have historically been treated as silent or invisible populations to be spoken for or about by non-Central American experts (4-5).<sup>4</sup> By having the poets speak for themselves, I hope to centralize their own interpretations as Salvadoran immigrant male poets living in the U.S. whose lives remain shaped and influenced by their experiences in El Salvador. Lastly, I intend to follow up this interview with one that focuses on Salvadoran diasporic women poets, such as the phenomenal Leticia Hernández Linares, and Seattle Civic Poet (2015-2017) Claudia Castro Luna. While my initial focus is on U.S. Salvadoran poets, this interview is part of a larger project that highlights the poetry and literature of U.S. Central Americans. Though *Theatre Under My Skin / Teatro Bajo Mi Piel* and *The Wandering Song, Central American Writing in the United States* are a major step

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<sup>4</sup> See also my 2013 article in *Latino Studies* where I explore the representations and misrepresentations of Central Americans in the U.S. by Chicana novelists, poets, and filmmakers. I posit that U.S. Central Americans insist on telling their own stories and no longer function under the mechanisms of invisibility or silence.

forward in giving U.S. Central American writers visibility, we must continue to highlight the breadth, wisdom, and diversity of Central American writers from the U.S. diaspora.

### **William Archila's Burials and Excavations**

Archila was born in Santa Ana, El Salvador in 1968 and immigrated to the United States in 1980 at the age of twelve, at the the inception of the civil war. Like other Central American immigrants, much of his subjectivity was shaped in-exile as he negotiated the spatial and cultural space of a new country, but as experienced through an emotional map of El Salvador. For example, "Immigration Blues, 1980" which is part of the title of the Salvadoran diasporic section in *Theatre Under My Skin*, explains this experience as "I'm a man with black hair, raw accent, /... /... / a foreigner everywhere I go" (202). This experience includes both the self-consciousness of one's being perceived as an immigrant foreigner, and also the knowledge of the injustices immigrants face and try to evade, as when he states, "Say its name and their memories turn / to hiding on rooftops like a sharpshooter" ("Clandestine Territory" 208). Salvadoran immigrants with experiences of war arrive and re-experience a different type of war against migrants. Anti-immigrant policies and attitudes prevent migrants from forgetting the dangers or persecution of the past.

Archila experienced these challenges as trauma as he simultaneously became an active agent of voice. He contributes to Salvadoran, and U.S.American poetry, as he also contributes to local communities as an English teacher in a high school with a large U.S. Central American, Latinx, and immigrant populations connected to Little Central America. He earned an MFA at the University of Oregon. His poetry appears in literary journals including *AGNI*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Bilingual Review/Revista Bilingüe* among others. He is becoming the most acclaimed poet of the U.S. Salvadoran diaspora. His awards include the International Latino Book Award and Letras Latinas/Red Hen Poetry Prize. His work is so significant that the Library of Congress featured an

interview of him in their Spotlight on U.S. Hispanic Writers series.<sup>5</sup> My interview differs from the one found in the Library of Congress in that the following represents questions specifically engaged with Salvadoran cultural and historical memory and Archila's consideration of his poetic practices and poetic identity as a Salvadoran from the U.S. diaspora.

## **William Archila**

**Karina Oliva Alvarado: El Salvador is a prevalent theme in your poetry. Is this because your work and creative processes emerge from memory and experience?**

**William Archila:** Yes, I'm interested in the landscape of memory. My childhood and my country at war is what I know best. They have shaped my life as a writer.

These two events allow me to dialogue with my past ancestors, Salvadoran history in general. It is my attempt to reconstruct, in a poetic language, a country that has been in constant turmoil since its independence in 1821. My exploration of memory gives me the opportunity not only to focus on the civil war, but also touch on the remote past and the Salvadoran experience in historical terms. Through memory I try to create a ceremony or commemoration for the dead.

Of course, my memory is fragmented, but it is this fragmentation that brings focus to the work. It is in my work that I try to shape it. The landscape of memory is what I carry within me.

**K.O.A.: Are you also continuing the project of historicizing Salvadoran culture, a goal and belief practiced by such poets and writers such as Manlio Argueta?**

**W.A.:** Exile writers try to rebuild the homeland in their work. The condition of homelessness leads the exile to do such. It is the nature of the exile writer. In my work, I try to imagine a homeland and create a fiction out of my fragmented memory. In this sense, I think one can say I'm historicizing the Salvadoran culture. However, my work's focus is not mainly to express and preserve El Salvador's cultural identity, but also to write of the entire world as a foreign land. I want to embrace the humanity of the world. Let me explain by quoting Hugo of St.

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<sup>5</sup> <<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/hispanic-writers/william-archila.html>>.

Victor, a twelfth century monk from Saxony: “The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is a foreign land.” I’m still trying to embrace all the places of the world. I came across this quote when reading Erich Auerbach, the literary scholar. He cited this quote as a model for anyone wishing to transcend national or provincial limits.

**K.O.A.: What drives your poetry?**

**W.A.:** The civil war in El Salvador forced many families to flee and immigrate to the United States, leaving the same immigrants in a state of exile until the war ended in 1992. These three influential events have shaped me as a poet. The result has always been loss—loss of a place, family, friends and the self. This is what drives my poetry: the language of grief and mourning in the Salvadoran diaspora, the experience of war, immigration, and exile. I’m interested in reclaiming in my work that which once was lost.

**K.O.A.: To what extent does the immigrant and exile experience shape your work?**

**W.A.:** In November of 1980, I left my native country of El Salvador, a country with a long history of colonization and imperialist intervention. I was only twelve when I left the war that tore my country apart. Without having read enough Salvadoran history or completely having mastered the Spanish language, I arrived in Los Angeles, with many questions unanswered, conversations unfinished and young years of my life unfulfilled. I lost much of my national culture and Spanish language. I had to learn a new language and culture. I became part of the growing immigrant community. “Go back to your country” echoed throughout these years.

Twelve years later, a peace treaty was signed between the left and rightwing parties in El Salvador. I decided to go back hoping to find a home, but in my own native country, I was a foreigner, a stranger. I searched for something that no longer existed, a quality remembered from my childhood, a sense of belonging to a country and a language that had changed. I also had changed. I returned to Los Angeles feeling not quite at home. Here I realized that home is neither here nor there. However, the need for a sense of home as base, a source of identity, grew deep inside of me. I began to understand that homelessness and its loneliness is the identity of the exile



writer. And as an exile writer you try to rebuild your home in your work. Of course, you can never recreate your home. You create fictions, as Salman Rushdie says.

**K.O.A.: What are your poetic, literary and philosophical influences?**

**W.A.:** In the essay “Imaginary Homelands,” Salman Rushdie states, writers of his position, “exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back....” From this point of view, I reflect on the loss of a place: the homeland. I’m interested in El Salvador as an act of remembrance. I’m drawn to the complexities of loss in a displaced people, what has been lost in the homeland. For this reason, the genre of the elegy influences my work. However, Rushdie also argues that in our looking “back, we must also do so in the knowledge... that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions....” Therefore, in reclaiming my so-called homeland, I create a fiction out of my own diaspora. I’m absorbed with one’s past resurfacing in the new land, the reappearance of the loss of a friend, generation or place.

I’m also influenced by Pablo Neruda. From Neruda, I learned to take the pen and move it, run with it, like horses galloping through our continent of Latin America. I could remember the tree outside my window, the eggs from my mother’s store, the light bulb and the moon. I could go into the kitchen, look at the salt shaker, the pepper, oregano, smell the basil, and see how the olive oil runs. I could go outside, feel the cracks of the street, remember that small country of El Salvador. Under Neruda, I found other Latin American writers that have influenced me a great deal, either with their language or ideas: Roque Dalton, Claribel Alegría, Eduardo Galeano, César Vallejo, Gabriel García Márquez, and of course, the Spanish poets Federico García Lorca and Miguel Hernández. It was “Poet in New York” that brought me back to the States, and gave me the opportunity to reunite with an old friend: Whitman. Now I started paying attention to writers of the English language, like John Keats, John Milton and W. B. Yeats. Today I identify with great poets such as Philip Levine and Yusef Komunyakaa.

In an unsuspected way, there are other artists who have influenced my writing world. However, these are not writers, but musicians, mainly Jazz. I believe it’s the attitude Jazz

musicians had toward their music and the world around them: the way Miles Davis turned his back to his audience, or the fact that you can hear Charles Mingus holler throughout his recordings. To title his songs Cannonball Adderley used the jargon or slang out of the black neighborhoods of America. Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker brought a genuine, almost punk sensibility toward a traditional form of music. Benny Moré spent his life writing songs about his small island of Cuba. Antônio Carlos Jobim brought the music of Jazz and Samba together in a new rhythm. When John Coltrane played “Alabama” you could see the four little girls who died in a bombing of a Black church. Mainly, I think it’s the rhythms of this syncopated music that have influenced my writing so much. When I listen to Red Garland on the piano repeating a bar or two over and over again, I think to myself how can he top that line and reinvent himself, and amazingly enough, he does with so much originality that I want to recreate that movement and pace on the page.

**K.O.A.: Do politics have a place in poetry?**

**W.A.:** Poetry and politics is a tricky situation when it comes to poetic craft. The efforts of the poet are most noble, especially during times of war. However, in literature, like all art, a formal shape to the poem should be hammered into the text. This should be done out of respect for the subject, in the case of war, out of respect for the dead.

War allows us to examine what happens to language, how is language affected by a misfortune like war. Czeslaw Milosz suggests that everything, including language, returns to a simple function. Language recovers its simplest function which is communication. In this case, language is bound to depict the reality of war. Therefore, poems written before or during war tend to have a documentary feel to them. They become political pamphlets trying to push a particular methodology. At the moment of their birth, poems fulfill a very important function, but they don’t always reach a high artistic aesthetic. Thus, a notion of urgency is a rather popular tone of these poems. Poets have little time for editing, rewriting or building an iron-like form for their poems that will outlast the very writers themselves and the dead of their subject. Only a few show any familiarity with poetic craft. I’m thinking of Pablo Neruda’s “I’m Explaining a Few

Things” and Picasso's *Guernica* – both responses to the fascist regime during the Spanish civil war. It is only later, after the war, under the pressure of a strong need to find an expression that poetry begins to move away from the stylistic modes of writing common to war. Thus, one can say that although the war becomes an inspiration for poetry, it also diminishes the craft.

In this case, I believe politics have a place in poetry because it fulfills an essential function in a time of terror or natural catastrophe. The intentions of the writers are generous and noble. However, after the war or time of a collective despair, the poet needs time to meditate, to shape and bend his or her work into an iron-like form that will outlast the experience of the war. The artistic craft needs to break through the chaos of war and reflect the wisdom of poetry. If poetry arises out of the need to embrace humanity, then poets will leave political poetry aside and find a more perfect poetry that can last.

**K.O.A.: Can you expand on the significance of the classroom, and the teacher/student relationship?**

**W.A.:** I’m an English teacher in downtown Los Angeles. Teaching is my means of living, how I can afford a car and an apartment, how I can afford to be a poet. At first, I thought teaching was my punishment for not paying attention in class. In the classroom, I had to learn how to teach on my own, as well as deal with administration and the politics of the educational system. Then I learned to love teaching. I taught my students how to read and write poetry. Every semester I compiled a book of poetry written by students. I was young. I had a lot of energy, plus the school district back then gave teachers a lot more freedom in the curriculum. Many of my students won awards, two of them first and third place in a poetry contest for students sponsored by The Los Angeles Poetry Festival. I was very involved in their education. I would take them out on field trips all over the city: museums, cultural events, the theatre, and so on. These were the days before state standards. These early years were extremely difficult, but most importantly, essential in learning and establishing strong relationships with the immigrant communities from Mexico, Central America, China, Korea, even the Caribbean. Their experiences also reminded me and solidified my own experience as an immigrant student back in the 80’s when I had lost much of

my national culture and Spanish language. Like my students, I had to learn a new language and culture. I wanted to help them get through school without losing their identity and cultural heritage, but most importantly succeed in this society so they could become critical thinkers and responsible citizens to their communities. I wanted to empower them academically.

Today, much of this has changed. I'm older. I teach in a different school; the curriculum has become a scripted text. Teachers are told what to teach. There's no trust in teacher knowledge. The educational system wants to prepare students for college, but it doesn't take into account the students' socio-economics. Teacher salaries don't reflect today's standards of living, their benefits are in danger of disappearing, but the academic demands are greater. This puts a whole different spin in my classroom experience. My passion has diminished, but I do what I can with them academically. However, my relationship with students still remains one of the strongholds in my teaching career. They help me understand myself and the world around them.

**K.O.A.: When did you first realize you are a poet?**

**W.A.:** Like many young writers, I began writing long before I read any poetry that excited me. My writings were one-liners, verses or scribbles not meant to be taken seriously or even shared. Around the ages of fourteen or sixteen, I pursued this calling in secret without ever thinking of becoming a writer. I was writing for myself. In my college years, I read all the great monsters of the English language: Shakespeare, Milton, Joyce, Hemingway, Whitman, but none of these writers spoke to me, or should I say, I wasn't ready to listen. As an immigrant, the people around me were preoccupied with war, immigration, low-income jobs, and the constant feeling of being "the Other." It wasn't until I read "Howl" by Allen Ginsberg that I was dazzled to discover I was not the only young man who saw the best minds of his generation destroyed. This happened in 1992 when I decided to go back to El Salvador. I found a war-torn country full of poverty, death, silence, illiteracy and crime. All my friends and family members were gone, especially those destined to change a society. Here I began to write poems inspired by the voice of Ginsberg. From this group of poems, I realized I had a strong yearning for union with my country, my family, and other immigrants like me. The most interesting aspect in this period of

my writing was my need to write my thoughts, and the immediate satisfaction it gave me to put them to words, on the page. Within a few months of discovering Ginsberg, I found a more satisfying model: Pablo Neruda. I think this was the first time I realized I was consciously writing poems.

**K.O.A.: What is the role of the poet in the United States?**

**W.A.:** First of all, I think a poet should be a human being, someone who can be compassionate and be useful in the world. Then, I think the role of the poet is to communicate with others the importance of the unsaid, help the reader focus on experiences that are difficult to pin point and decipher. A poet's work should help people develop sensibility. It should be a warning that can tell a culture what has happened, what is happening and beginning to happen or will be happening.

In the United States, from what I understand, the poet's role has been relegated to aesthetics: the art of language, sounds, images and symbols. The final product can sometimes be obscure. I think it is a result of academia, which is all about power and ideology. I'm not too comfortable with this aspect of poetry because I did not start writing to impress others with what I can do with language. For me it came out of a necessity to be acknowledged as a human in a world that is slowly becoming less sensible. See, I believe the word can be a weapon and it can influence the reader into social change. However, I don't think that aesthetics should be completely ignored either. I believe there should be a balance between the two. As I said before, in literature, like all art, a formal shape to the poem should be hammered into the text so that it can outlive history and survive the changes of language. I know there's an opposition to poetry for social change. It is categorized as a limited and restricted way of looking at language. I think this a conservative way of looking at poetry. After all, conservative literature has a reason for being conservative. It cannot afford to denounce that which feeds it. So to me, the role of the poet is to help this globe become a better place. It's not an art for art's sake, but an art for the betterment of the world. It's about naming the truth. This is what I believe, but I don't denounce language poetry or any other type of poetry. I think the world of poetry is big enough for all

modes of writing. However, I do think there's a danger, when one type of poetry holds the reins of power and dictates over the rest. Poetry should be plural.

**K.O.A.: Have you ever encountered the challenge of belonging as an *Other Latino*, meaning, a Latino that does not easily fit into the predominant Latino cultures: Chicana/o, Puerto Rican or Cuban American? I'm thinking of Chicana/o or Cuban American anthologies, etc.**

**W.A.:** Yes, I have in certain social settings. As an immigrant of Central American descent, I'm a minority within a minority so this kind of set up is unavoidable. The Central American experience is often overshadowed by these other groups, which are considered minorities by the dominant culture. Thus, the Central American experience must be non-existent in the main stream. In regarding to Latino anthologies, I have also noticed that the focus is mostly on writers from the largest minority groups: Chicana/o, Puerto Rican or Cuban American. I hope it is because the editors haven't encountered a writer from Central America or South America writing in English. Myself, I haven't had the pleasure of being included in one these anthologies. I just started writing, but I do hope that when the opportunity comes it will be a welcoming one.

### **Mario Escobar's "Theater Under the Skin"**

Mario Escobar was born in 1978, and left El Salvador at the age of twelve in 1990. This means that Escobar lived through almost the entire civil war while in El Salvador. Escobar has spoken in public and in my classrooms (2017) on his unaccompanied migration as a child walking from El Salvador to the United States where he reunited with his mother. As a 1.5 youth,<sup>6</sup> he attended

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<sup>6</sup> 1.5 refers to children who received some schooling in their native countries, but immigrated to the U.S. by age fifteen, thus receiving at minimum three years of education in the U.S. The focus on education for the 1.5 generation stresses the function of school as an interpolating agent for the nation-state. Therefore, 1.5 youth have varying degrees of indoctrination (according to the age of the individual child or youth) into at least two national education systems. Acculturation and transculturation also tie into the 1.5 category in that depending on age, and the personal, familial and historical location of a child, the 1.5 people will display varying levels of maintenance of cultural practices and identifications to their native countries as compared to local and national practices of culture(s) in the United States.

California middle and high schools, and eventually graduated from UCLA with a degree in Spanish literature and Chicano studies. His studies culminated with a master's degree in Spanish literature from Arizona State University. Currently, he is a professor in the Department of Foreign Languages at L.A. Mission College. He authored *Gritos Interiores* (which he translated as *Cries from Within*) published by Cuzcatlán Press in 2005. He founded Izote Press and is a co-founder of the student organization IDEAS (Improving Dreams Education Access and Success) at UCLA which advocates for undocumented students. Escobar is a well-known and admired poet especially in Latina/o Los Angelino communities. For example, his poem "Brown Chronicles" was named one of Best Poems of 2014 by La Bloga On-line Floricanto, an online journal that continues to feature him. An undocumented migrant, he was granted asylum in 2006. His poems revisit trauma of war, especially as a child-soldier, and immigration.

The Salvadoran anthology, *Theatre Under My Skin* uses a line from Escobar's neomodernist poem, "Postwar Syndrome / El syndrome de la posguerra," as its title (Pleitez Vela 240). The theater to which he alludes are the memories of war contained within. This postwar trauma remains present to date and is the reason why Escobar offers "An Apology to My Children" in the *Wandering Song* anthology (Hernández Linares 158) as he struggles to remain present in his family's life. He explains, "I am not present / lost in the depth / of death" (158). Like Archila, Escobar writes *in memoriam* since this term means in memory of, and in tribute to the dead. Unlike Archila who offers first names of those he grieves for, Escobar shows a particular concern for the "Nameless" killed during the Salvadoran civil war (Hernández Linares 157).

Escobar's responses to the following questions are short and represent, in my view, his poetic style. His work is often slim and as he explains, "A lot of my writing was (and maybe still is) ambiguous but it is the best way for me to heal and remember." His work demonstrates therefore the ambiguities of loss in that loss is never definitive: it does not end with a gravestone or marker. Moreover, Escobar's response helps to consider the paradox of loss and memory in that to heal (from the lingering experience of trauma), the moment of loss must be remembered. Like Archila explained in his interview, "The role of the poet is to communicate with others the

importance of the unsaid, help the reader focus on experiences that are difficult to pin point and decipher.” Poetry, therefore, gives Escobar the form and language to articulate what cannot be articulated but does so through seeing all the ambiguities of life. Moreover, ambiguity is part of the structure of poetry. Escobar’s statement that poetry “is my preferred method for communicating” implies that Escobar seeks to communicate what would otherwise silence him. Hence, poetry remains the best form of communication for Escobar to describe and surpass the trauma of civil war, immigration, and persecution as undocumented and to gain agency and voice.

### **Mario Escobar**

**Karina Oliva Alvarado: El Salvador is a prevalent theme in your poetry. Is this because your work and creative processes emerge from memory and experience?**

**Mario Escobar:** I think that the ugly events of the past have had a subsequent effect in the processes of my writing. The past always penetrates and invades my present. I’ve been accused of being obsessed with the past but I don’t think it is a matter of fixation or wanting to return to the past to ritualized the experience. The aftermath of war is something we want to forget; we drop a veil with hopes of leaving behind violent and unpleasant memories. There are systems ready to discredit the narrative of those who have experienced the war. Traumatized minds are often seen as not credible enough to participate in historical dialogue. I use poetry as a medium. It is my preferred method for communicating. A lot of my writing was (and maybe still is) ambiguous but it is the best way for me to heal and remember. It pushes me to dig deeper into the historical narration and social conceptualization of our gente.

**K.O.A.: Are you also continuing the project of historicizing Salvadoran culture, a goal and belief practiced by such poets and writers such as Manlio Argueta?**

**M.E.:** I write to break the hierarchy of historical narratives, intervene in the social and political arena and, most importantly, to parcel out my cultural identity. Writing from this



perspective means, at least to me, transmitting and organizing territorial ties in an unwelcoming environment such as the USA, and defending my family oral history while rejecting the imposed silence of perpetrators. I like to think that my writing makes me a participating and speaking individual refusing to be a suffering muzzled being. This implies that my poetry is a constant participant in the distribution of visibility.

**K.O.A.: Can you expand on what you mean by perpetrators?**

**M.E.:** The only thing I can say is that when the war in El Salvador was over, many government officials from the ARENA decided that the violence of the past should not be publicly discussed. They refuse to acknowledge their violent actions. As long as they remain in power, living the life while the survivors remain imprisoned by their grief, everything remains the same. If no one is brought to justice and no one is held accountable, regret is an inaccessible emotion. Healing remains an unfinished project for most of the people. The wounds remain open. Some generals who had committed atrocities were given amnesty allowing for the past pain to remain active. Their single narrative and blatant disregard for minor narratives has held many victims hostage in a prison of silence. Right wings celebrate their actions by erecting monuments of the killers like Roberto D'Aubuisson who many right wings consider a hero. Such acts grant this perpetrator of violence immunity from any sort of punishment. Perpetrators are not just individuals, it is also the institutions, organizations and even the media that seek to discredit the people's narrative of the past.

**K.O.A.: What drives your poetry?**

**M.E.:** Making our history part of the kaleidoscopic of the trans-Salvadoran experience. HISTORY is perpetuated thru solemn commemorations, plaques, monuments, and colorful parades but our little history is reduced to just noise. So, what drives my poetry is the search for our own language, our own space in the blanket of the political struggle for memory. Things, ugly things, nasty things already happened and what is left is the interpretation of the past. I want my own interpretation to confront the different reconstructions of memory. I want my kids to access the past and become part of it and decide the contents for the reconstruction of “truth”.

**K.O.A.: To what extent does the immigrant and exile experience shape your work?**

**M.E.:** I think what shapes my poetry is a sense of exile and the injustices that immigrants are subject to. As a poet, you cannot stay silent. Every day, we have to grapple with significant changes, and the violent discourse of politicians lashing out against a very vulnerable sector of our society. The constant abuse of our gente brings out the feeling of alienation, of being the foreigner, a stranger unfit and not welcome. Being an immigrant myself, amplifies this feeling. For this reason, I am in touch with this reality.

**K.O.A.: What are your poetic, literary and philosophical influences?**

**M.E.:** That's always hard to answer. It's so hard picking just one. Enrique Lihn is probably one of my favorites but I also love Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Manuel Puig, Roberto Bolaño, Roque Dalton, and Mario Santiago Papasquiaro. These writers are engaged in cultural interpretation and historical criticism.

I love poets who are engaged with reality. I'll always be attracted to poets dealing with the concept of human experience, poets denouncing injustice. Those poets will always pull my heart strings. My philosophical influences I would say: Spinoza and Fiódor Dostoyevski.

**K.O.A.: Do politics have a place in poetry?**

**M.E.:** I think poetry has its own politics in the realm of interpretation. Poetry creates its own space and distributes meaning. Poetry is not engaged in the struggle of power or regulating the existence of human being. Poetry is there only to intervene.

**K.O.A.: Can you expand on the significance of the classroom, and the teacher/student relationship? Or can you expand on the significance of family or home as reflected in your poetry?**

**M.E.:** I know war trauma can disconnect you from relationships. As a young child in the war, my idea of safety was destroyed. This caused resentment towards my mother. The relationship with my mother is strained and broken by what is unspoken. Poetry offers me a unique format to communicate those feelings.

**K.O.A.: When did you first realize you are a poet?**

**M.E.:** I think I was 14 years old when I started writing.

**K.O.A.: What is the role of the poet in the United States?**

**M.E.:** Make the invisible visible. To intervene with actions and poetry where there is injustice. Reach people's heart and make them feel the vibrations of life. A poet should challenge people to imagine beyond their intimate circle and explore other's reality. Cry, love, laugh across the blanket of our collective experience. Let the poet be the guide.

**K.O.A.: Have you ever encountered the challenge of belonging as an *Other Latino*, meaning, a Latino that does not easily fit into the predominant Latino cultures: Chicana/o, Puerto Rican or Cuban American? I'm thinking of Chicana/o or Cuban American anthologies, etc.**

**M.E.:** I am fortunate enough to say that I've been welcome by Chicano/a poets. I am thankful to Francisco X Alarcon and Odilia Galvan Rodriguez for opening the space. By opening the space, they help to dismantle an unequal dialogue between those who have experienced political trauma and perpetrators.

### **Zamora's Self-in-memory as an Immigrant in the U.S.**

The youngest of these poets Javier Zamora was born in 1990, two years before the signing of the Salvadoran Peace Accords. Zamora immigrated at the young age of nine years. As reflected in his poems, however, much of his formative experience was shaped in El Salvador, but his memory of immigration to the U.S. implies two distinctive though connected experiences: the embodied experience of place, customs, and language, and the disembodied experience of these in context to U.S. neighborhoods, U.S. American customs, and English language. A Canto-Mundo Fellow,<sup>7</sup> Zamora was also a Bread Loaf recipient where he was named one of the Best New Poets of

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<sup>7</sup> A U.S. American literary organization, Canto Mundo was founded in 2009 to support Latino poets and poetry. It has become an important institution for emerging Latinx writers that includes a yearly conference, fellowship, and book award. Its book prize is associated with the University of Arkansas Press, notable for its publication of award-winning books of poetry.

2013.<sup>8</sup> He continues to be a recipient of numerous scholarships which include being named a 2016-2018 Wallace Stegner Fellow.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Zamora has participated in some of the most prestigious poetry programs in the country. His chapbook *Nine Immigrant Years*, won the 2011 Organic Weapon Arts Contest and was followed by the anticipated book of poems *Unaccompanied* (2017). Zamora's popularity and acclaimed poetry promise that he will continue to rise as a U.S. American, Latinx and U.S. Salvadoran poet.

While his work may not differ in terms of content to the foci of war, immigration, and home/land as found in the works by other U.S. Salvadoran poets, his work is exciting and new in style and language. The poem "Anthem," found in *Wandering Song*, opens by addressing a "*Cariño*"<sup>10</sup> who can be a reader, someone close to Zamora in El Salvador or the U.S., or Zamora himself insofar as its ambiguous address can signify an attempt to intimate closeness between immigrant and reader and it identifies the writer/reader experience as a type of crossing or migration also. Zamora draws the reader in to that which he holds dearly and yet remains a distant relationship. This desire is highlighted by the term *cariño*, which means *beloved* or *sweetheart*. "Anthem" plays between intimation and distance as when he states, "I want to mold what I cannot return to, / let me say / palm, coconuts on palms, water. Let me say / I know how to unsheathe husks to shut my thirst" (Hernández Linares 125). Zamora acknowledges the distinction between the attempt to recreate home from diaspora and even from age, as adult poets write in retrospect when writing about their childhoods. Zamora picks objects from memory that conjure up El Salvador for him as with, for example, the words "palm, coconuts on palm" (125) or the act of unsheathing cornhusks. However, "unsheathe husks to shut my thirst" suggest the immediate thirst as a poet in the U.S. trying to relive/relieve the past through memory. Hence, his poetry also builds on loss expressed as "Know that I can't find the boy I threw rocks at fruit bats with" (125) and violence, "Let me say / my poverty is a possum / skinned at the foot of fourteen

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<sup>8</sup> A program in Middlebury College in Vermont, the yearly conference is considered "the oldest and most prestigious writers' conference in the country" as Rebecca Mead called it in *The New Yorker*.

<sup>9</sup> Through the Creative Writing program at Stanford University, five poetry fellowships are given each year. Poets participate in a two-year program that includes a living stipend.

<sup>10</sup> As it is spelled and italicized in the poem.

families” (125). The fourteen families, of course, is an allusion to the infamous Salvadoran oligarchs said to control the fourteen departments (states) in El Salvador. Though clearly, Zamora left El Salvador at a very young age, his life in the United States influences his proclamation, “Everywhere is war” (“Pump Water from the Well” 126) because his statement comes from having lived through postwar El Salvador as a boy and from his experience as a writer looking out onto the world in the United States. By proclaiming that war is everywhere, Zamora dislodges the idea that El Salvador is defined by its civil war. Moreover, the line acknowledges the internal wars in the United States due to xenophobia and racism and abroad the United States in its past and present acts of imperialism through neoliberalist globalization. As the youngest poet who did not directly engage in war as did Escobar for example, Zamora extolls the most longing for El Salvador as when he states in “Instructions For My Funeral Means Estero de Jaltepec”: “Don’t you burn me in no steel furnace, burn me / in my Abuelita’s garden / and wrap me in blue – white – and – blue” (Pleitez Vela 256). The last line plays with the American flag often described as the red – white – and – blue, and rather than repeat the refrain, replaces it with the Salvadoran flag (blue – white – and – blue) and its connection for Zamora to his grandmother. I infer that his longing is shaped by the fact that he has not been able to return to El Salvador due to his immigration status. Like Archila and Escobar, Zamora’s answers reveal that he associates trauma not only with the Salvadoran civil war, but also with his experiences in the United States as an immigrant.

### **Javier Zamora**

**Karina Oliva Alvarado: El Salvador is a prevalent theme in your poetry. Is this because your work and creative processes emerge from memory and experience?**

**Javier Zamora:** El Salvador is a prevalent theme in my poetry because I literally missed it to a hurt. I still have not returned. It was hard for me to be an undocumented immigrant, to understand why I couldn’t return to my country, why other people could, why my parents left in the first

place, etc. I would say that more so than memory and experience, El Salvador is a theme in my poetry because of the trauma that surrounds it. My body remembers the trauma, it lives it, I also remember it. My grandparents who raised me after my parents left me behind, are still back there.

**K.O.A.: Are you also continuing the project of historicizing Salvadoran culture, a goal and belief practiced by such poets and writers such as Manlio Argueta?**

**J.Z.:** My poetry, thus far, has been more concentrated in historicizing my family's experience. Not so much an entire people's. I don't intend to speak for the "Salvadoran culture." But, I do realize that we are all political and historical beings. I can only speak to my own experience and my family's. It just so happens our experience is not that dissimilar to the experience of the more than one million Salvadoran refugees all over the world: one of forced immigration due to a civil war that continues to this day (it never ended).

**K.O.A.: What drives your poetry?**

**J.Z.:** Layer upon layer of trauma I'm trying to heal from. I want to write happy poems, poems of joyful drunkenness, not one mired in trauma. I believe one day I will. But for me, poetry has always been a place where I could tell my secrets. Poetry was the first place in which I "came out" as undocumented, as immigrant, where I was once again proud to be Salvadoran, where I began to question nationalism, US imperialism, etc. It gives me freedom to be heard. To be seen.

**K.O.A.: To what extent does the immigrant and exile experience shape your work?**

**J.Z.:** Perhaps I would not be a poet had I not left El Salvador. The more I contemplate this, the more I see its truth. There's a lot to be said about the access to education in El Salvador—or the lack thereof. In the US, even as an undocumented immigrant who did not qualify for any sort of financial aid, I was still admitted to UC Berkeley. It was difficult, but I had the choice of education. My father and mother were valedictorians in their high schools, yet, they did not have the transportation or financial means to attend university in the capital.

Also, in this country, there is poetry school, there is a "career-path" for poets. We can argue whether that is good or bad, but I see it as a means to eat. In El Salvador, there are no MFAs. No

arguments between MFA or POC, etc. I used to want to be a history major because there was not a history major in El Salvador until 2010 (?).

Besides these realities, it is safer in the US, to “contemplate” line breaks, form, etc. This guilt, that is based on my immigrant identity, definitely shapes my work 100%.

**K.O.A.: What are your poetic, literary and philosophical influences?**

**J.Z.:** My undergraduate thesis was an exploration of Roque Dalton’s influence in the student/artistic faction of the FMLN, the FAPU. The FAPU and the RN (it’s military counterpart) broke off from the ERP after Roque Dalton’s murder by a fellow guerrilla, Villalobos. I could tie my love for poetry and my leftist leanings in the same paper. I was grateful.

Besides Roque, Pablo Neruda (two figures that despised each other) is also a big influence. Through them, I found my way to Vallejo, Lorca, Huidobro, Parra, Saenz, Pizarnick, Eunice Odio, Bolaño, Zurita, etc. As you can see, I like the dark Chilean verses and how Chilean poetry changes continually. I’m particularly enjoying Alejandro Zambra’s poetry and prose.

Latin American poetry, maybe because of my immigrant background/bias, speaks to me the most. I gravitate towards it. All the Latin American poets and the teachers I’ve had continue to influence my work. Yusef Komunyakaa’s *Dien Cai Dau*, gave me the language to begin to talk about the Salvadoran Civil War. Sharon Old’s *Satan Says*, showed me I could be honest about my own family. These two books continue to have a profound influence on me. In the US, I would follow the confessional strand, through my teachers Sharon Olds, Yusef Komunyakaa, Charles Simic. I’ve been fortunate to be their student. As well as my hero, Louise Glück’s. The poetry of these four is what pulled me to poetry and continues to push me.

**K.O.A.: Do politics have a place in poetry?**

**J.Z.:** Always.

**K.O.A.: Can you expand on the significance of the classroom, and the teacher/student relationship? Or can you expand on the significance of family, or home, as reflected in your poetry?**

**J.Z.:** Unanswered.

**K.O.A.: When did you first realize you are a poet?**

**J.Z.:** I came through poetry by reading *20 Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, the bilingual edition. It was the first time I saw English and Spanish on the same page, as equals, side by side. This had a profound magical effect on me as a person. It was then I realized I liked poetry.

Ironically, Neruda made me google “Salvadoran poets,” and of course, the first to pop up was Roque Dalton. Reading his poetry, the plain-spokenness, the cursing, the Salvi lexicon, made me want to be write my own lines. After reading Roque, imitating him for a few months, I realized I wanted to be a poet.

**K.O.A.: What is the role of the poet in the United States?**

**J.Z.:** I recently read an interview of John Murillo, a poet I deeply admire. In it, he’s asked a similar question: how can poets promote social justice. Which I think is role of a poet.

John answers by quoting Whitman who says the job of the poet is to “cheer up the slaves and to horrify despots.” He also mentions Lucille Clifton who said that poets should “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” I agree with these, as did John. But John Murillo also questions the question itself. Poets are no different than anyone else. Everyone else is just as implicated to act and “do something” but that question is rarely asked of them. Here is his complete answer:

There is something I find problematic in the question itself, “What can poets do...?” There is tucked away in there this notion of poets as inherently better qualified—more articulate...and, therefore, more astute political sensibilities than the dumb and grunting masses who are unable to speak or do for themselves. No one ever asks, “What can garbage collectors do to promote social justice?” [...] A poet is no more or less a citizen than anyone else, has the same civic responsibilities as everyone else, and is no more or less qualified than anyone else to bring about change [...] Far too many poets take this “Voice of the Voiceless” business to heart and start thinking of themselves as some sort of saviors, prophets even. And there are others who write some politically charged verse, read said verse to loud applause, and think their work is done. No. And, no. (<http://cavecanempoets.org/dogbytes-interview-john-murillo/>).



**K.O.A.: Have you ever encountered the challenge of belonging as an *Other* Latino, meaning, a Latino that does not easily fit into the predominant Latino cultures: Chicana/o, Puerto Rican or Cuban American? I'm thinking of Chicana/o or Cuban American anthologies, etc.**

**J.Z.:** Always. In the late 90s, when I came to this country, everything was Mexican in California. In the 00's, still, and now. In college in the early 2010's, everything was Chicano then Chican@ then Xican@. When I went to the MFA in NYU, everything was Puerto Rican. Central Americans are not seen in the everyday and have just recently began to be seen in the literary world.

I'm grateful for the recent inclusion. What also lacks is the very real anti-Central American sentiment from other nationalities. I cannot speak to the East Coast realities, but in California, Mexicans picked on the Central American recent arrivals. By "picked" I mean anything from name-calling to getting jacked on the street. This is a very real animosity, one that is not as strong as the anti-Central American violence at the hands of Mexicans in Mexico, but violent nonetheless.

Our numbers are bigger than they were in the 90s. And they continue to get bigger; it's a product of displacement. Soon we will be hearing more Honduran, Guatemalan, Salvadoran voices than we currently have. It is important to speak towards the racial divides between Central Americans and Mexicans, because they are racial and not simply nationalist.

It is important that we are seen on the page, on the street, etc. It is important that we continue to dismantle nationalism, racism, and "Latinidad" because let's not forget Latino is not a race, which means colorism and the idea of the nation-state are tools we use to be racist toward one another.

## Poems of Healing and Celebration

“Truly *collective* traumas,” sociologist Piotr Sztompka explains, “appear only when people start to be aware of the common plight, perceive the similarity of their situation with that of others, define it as shared [...] coping methods” (160). All three poets reveal a humble undertaking as they write of their own experiences, as Zamora states, “I don’t intend to speak for “Salvadoran culture.” But, I do realize that we are all political and historical beings. I can only speak to my own experience and my family’s.” Escobar also implies a humility to his voice in his incapacity to speak for others. Cognizant of the dynamics of power that institutionalize hegemonic narratives over minority narratives, he asserts, “I like to think that my writing makes me a participating and speaking individual refusing to be a suffering muzzled being.” Poetry gives him voice and an entry into a larger discourse that otherwise silences him (or gives him that impression). Though these writers “realize that we are all political and historical beings” (Zamora), their responses also reveal a striving towards healing that speaks to universal human experience. As Archila affirms, “I think one can say I’m historicizing the Salvadoran culture. However, my work’s focus is not mainly to express and preserve El Salvador’s cultural identity, but also to write of the entire world as a foreign land. I want to embrace the humanity of the world.” This embrace comes when a poet, as Escobar explains, “challenge[s] people to imagine beyond their intimate circle and explore other’s reality.”

The stunning, beautiful, grieved, and exciting work of these poets exposes a collective trauma that returns to the Salvadoran civil war, and to the persecution, alienation, and loss that they experienced as (undocumented) immigrants. These experiences (war and immigration) are shared by many others within the U.S. Central American diasporas. Therefore, while their work does represent pain, mourning, longing, and trauma, their poems also create the opportunity for our diasporas to consider healing as individuals and as communities.

Zamora’s statement, “I want to write happy poems, poems of joyful drunkenness, not one mired in trauma” is also humorous. He reveals a truth for subjectivities that continue to deal with

the tragedies of the past and present. While our focus here has been trauma, I want to stress that these writers are not defined as such. Much of their work reveal a joy of life and language, implied for example in Zamora's sensuous and alliterative, "let me say / palm, coconuts on palms, water. Let me say / I know how to unsheathe husks to shut my thirst" (Hernández Linares 125), or when Archila considers the resiliency and persistence of the "Guayabera" (Hernández Linares 68). As part of the Salvadoran U.S. diaspora, these poets write emotionally complex poems that speak to the bittersweet taste of existence.

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