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Rebirth, Shapeshifting, and Activism in the Work of Latinx Undocupoets

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Abstract

This essay is an analysis of poetry written by Latinx Undocupoets in the United States. It focuses on three contemporary poets—Javier O. Huerta, Yosimar Reyes, and Javier Zamora. The author examines the way these poets navigate borderland identities by cultivating cultural mestizaje to advance a political project, where consciousness-raising and advocating for those who cross or are crossed by borders are the priorities. The author argues that three common themes related to transformation appear in the work of Undocupoets: rebirth, shapeshifting, and activism. These poets transform themselves and their communities by engaging in differential movement and relocating marginalized individuals and communities to positive social locations while portraying them in their full complexity—a postnationalist perspective that manifests itself in a borderlands framework. The author demonstrates how these writers formulate decolonial imaginaries and differential consciousness to relocate migrants and undocumented people to social locations that transcend the negative stereotypes that have historically shaped their identities and lived experiences. Through rebirth, shapeshifting, and activism, Undocupoets enact a form of agency and present new ways of seeing and understanding the migrant experience.

Keywords: Undocupoets; Latinx literature; borderlands; identity; immigration; mestizaje

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The representation of Latinx migrants in American poetry has a lengthy history. In *Latino Poetry: The Library of America Anthology*, Rigoberto González recognizes the historical and present-day impact of colonialism on Latinx poets and their work. He maintains that since the colonial era, poetry of the Americas has reflected an "enduring legacy of migration and exile and the search for new or second homes undertaken by so many Latinos" (González 2024, p. xxviii). González also points out that Latinx poets of the twentieth century engaged in various topics related to migration and identity: "belonging. . .nostalgia, pride, and dislocation" (p. xxviii). Chicanx and Latinx poets have continued to explore several topics related to migration and identity in their work, including borders, working conditions, racial discrimination, and human rights. As individuals who have historically experienced multiple forms of marginalization, several Chicanx and Latinx poets have created lyrics and narratives with a pro-immigrant sensibility with which many people can identify, regardless of their identities, histories, or migration stories.[1] For example, Jimmy Santiago Baca's (b. 1952) *Immigrants in Our Own Land & Selected Early Poems* (Baca 1977) documents and responds to common anti-immigrant rhetoric that has persisted in the United States for decades.[2] In 1994, Demetria Martínez's (b. 1960) mixed-genre novel *Mother Tongue*, which was followed by her collection of poetry, *Breathing between the Lines* (Martínez 1997), brought attention to the experiences of Salvadoran refugees who sought asylum in the United States.[3] Rigoberto González's (b. 1970) *So Often the Pitcher Goes to Water until It Breaks* (González 1999) contains several poems that honor the hard

work and lives of migrants.[4] Juan Felipe Herrera's (b. 1948) *187 Reasons Why Mexicanos Can't Cross the Border: Undocuments 1971–2007* (Herrera 2007) was a creative response to the anti-immigrant policies embedded in legislation passed in California in 1994, known as Proposition 187, and other anti-immigrant policies and rhetorics. Franscisco X. Alarcón's (1954–2016) collection, *Borderless Butterflies: Earth Haikus and Other Poems* (Alarcón 2014), uses the Monarch butterfly as a symbol of the beauty, strength, resilience, and migrations of people who cross or are crossed by borders. In addition to developing empathetic, pro-immigrant sensibilities, these writers prioritize humanity over capitalism; they advocate for the recognition of migrants first and foremost as human beings by telling migrant stories from a humanitarian perspective. These themes related to migration and identity remain present in the work of some contemporary Chicanx and Latinx poets; however, Undocupoets add new themes and discourses at the beginning of the twenty-first century.[5]

While the work of Baca, Martínez, González, Herrera, Alarcón, and others was paramount in developing a pro-immigrant sensibility and advocating for human rights for migrants, the work was not written by poets who had experience being undocumented immigrants themselves. William Orchard and Francisco Robles point out how recent scholarship in Latina/o/x literary studies locate NAFTA and 1 January 1994 as a possible marker of the beginning of Latina/o/x contemporary literature: "It marked a shift after which Latina/o/x literature understood precarity as a precondition and condition of migration and movement" (Orchard and Robles 2020, n.p.). They also claim that although Latina/o/x poets continue to encounter "gatekeepers who may misunderstand their work," they have also been "less encumbered by the imperatives of the market because there are now a larger range of venues"; the result has been an increased visibility in "experimental works that broaden our understandings of Latinidad" (n.p.). The work of Undocupoets broadens conceptions and understandings of Latinidad by presenting migrant subjects in their full complexity and humanity. They provide insight regarding the undocumented immigrant experience—including narratives that are told from the perspective of undocumented children—and integrate new themes, such as joy and agency. As agents of their own stories, Undocupoets play a vital role in relocating undocumented immigrants from marginalized transnational subjects to active agents who reconfigure immigrant narratives, rhetorics, and identities while advocating for human rights for all migrants.

This essay centers on poetry written by three contemporary poets: Javier O. Huerta (b. 1981), Yosimar Reyes (b. 1988), and Javier Zamora (b. 1990). These poets navigate borderland identities to cultivate a political project, where consciousness-raising and advocating for the lives and livelihoods of migrants and undocumented immigrants is accomplished through testimonios of first-hand accounts of crossing borders and living in the United States as undocumented individuals. The poets and the subjects in their poems possess complex hybrid identities that align with Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of *atravesados*—the "prohibited and forbidden" inhabitants of borders; "those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (p. 3). As *atravesados*, these poets represent an amalgamation of cultures and languages—hybrid identities rooted in a form of cultural mestizaje that produces new ways of being. Alicia Arrizón sees cultural mestizaje as a "unifying identity in Latin America and as a conceptual idea that helps map Latindad in the United States" (Arrizón 2006, p. 30). As migrant and border subjects, Undocupoets use cultural mestizaje to relay the stories of migrants and undocumented people living in the United States and construct new ways of seeing and understanding their experiences and identities. Undocupoets present first-person migration perspectives that serve as testimonios of the migrant experience, which also function to dismantle the subject–object duality, refashion the stereotypical representation of migrants, and make sense of the dichotomies that present themselves as migrants navigate the borderlands. Arrizón sees

dichotomies as sites where hybridization can facilitate new ways of imagining race and identity: "When we think of cultural mestizaje as an intercultural project, dichotomies. . .can be seen as the context that validates hybridization as the larger framework that imagines the sites of race" (Arrizón 2006, p. 30). I contend there are three common themes related to transformation that appear in the work of these Undocupoets that facilitate a radical political project and reconfiguration of stereotypical migration narratives and identities rooted in cultural mestizaje: rebirth, shapeshifting, and activism.

Javier O. Huerta, Yosimar Reyes, and Javier Zamora have played key roles in advancing the Undocupoets movement, not just through their poetry but also through their advocacy for, and support of, other migrants—undocumented and beyond. Undocupoets enact a form of agency and create counternarratives by integrating rebirth, shapeshifting, and activism in their work. These processes demonstrate how the poets transform themselves and others to reconfigure the power differential that typically exists between undocumented immigrants and the dominant culture in which they reside. As a body of testimonial literature, their work reveals the way migrant subjects cultivate, embody, and enact a mextizx, decolonial, and oppositional consciousness.

In *Literary (Re)Mappings: Autobiographical (Dis)Placements by Chicana Writers*, Norma Klahn demonstrates how several Chicana and Latina writers use fiction as a form of testimonial literature to tell their own personal stories: "In these autobiographical/testimonial fictions, the authors, chroniclers of their time, put on different masks. As historians, they unearth the past; as ethnographers, they describe and interpret cultural patterns; as linguists, they capture the language of their time/space" (Klahn 2003, p. 123). Undocupoets employ similar strategies to tell their own stories and those of other migrants and undocumented people. In a 2021 interview, Yosimar Reyes—a 2017 Undocupoets fellow—remarks, "We're always the subject of people's stories. . .I don't think it's ever occurred to people that we are also writers, thinkers, philosophers, and that we are actually the agents of our own stories" (Pineda 2021). As agents of their own stories, Undocupoets can be seen as the chroniclers, historians, ethnographers, linguists, and philosophers of the migrant experience. These poets cultivate hybrid mestizx identities to make meaning of the migrant experience and to create what Theresa Delgadillo calls "worlds of belonging": "Latinx, African American, and Latin American writers and performers seek to construct worlds of belonging in literature, film, and performance for both African diaspora subjects and new mestizx subjects" (Delgadillo 2024, p. 11). Rooted in Anzaldúa's notion of a "new mestiza consciousness," Delgadillo shows how texts produced by mestizx writers and artists "give expression to the specific colonial, imperial, and global conditions that shape cultural lives in particular historical moments to reveal the crucial and creative construction of diaspora and new mextizx subjectivities built on the recognition of radical relationality" (Delgadillo 2024, p. 12). The creation and use of the term *Undocupoets* itself signifies a radical relation between subjects, as well as a powerful resistance to the dominant culture. It can also be viewed as a way to transform the self into another Other, and as Rafael Pérez-Torres notes, "The transformation of self into another Other signifies a shifting of subjectivity" (Pérez-Torres 1995, p. 820). Like Anzaldúa, Pérez-Torres recognizes the way the borderlands, as liminal sites, produce and sometimes impose forms of transformation (820). Pérez-Torres highlights the way crossing borders replicate Anzaldúa's notions of mestizaje and mestiza consciousness: "The crossing from one node of power to another, the crossing from one state to another, and the crossing of borders replicate the crossing of race implicit in notions of mestizaje. Differential consciousness is *la conciencia de la mestiza*, a mestiza consciousness that moves among different worlds" (822).

Counternarratives, discourses, and strategies employed by Undocupoets are examples of the way minoritized subjects transform their identities, resist forms of oppression, and

develop a *differential consciousness*, which Chela Sandoval describes as "the meanings that lie in the zero degree of power" (Sandoval 2000, p. 146). They are intended to dismantle hierarchies and create alternative social locations that are rooted in agency and the active participation and relocation of the minoritized subject. As Sandoval explains, these strategies should be seen as a process and method for changing the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressors: "Differential oppositional movement can be thought of as a process through which the practices and procedures of the methodology of the oppressed are enacted" (81). For Sandoval, tactics of this nature are emancipatory and allow the subject to rework their "perception, consciousness, identity, and tactics in relation to power" (110). Undocupoets engage in differential oppositional movement as a liberatory device. By employing tactics related to rebirth, shapeshifting, and activism in their work, they create a unique mestizx identity and consciousness that empowers migrant and undocumented subjects.

1. On Crossing Borders and Being (Re)Born

Transformation is a common theme found in the work of Javier O. Huerta, Yosimar Reyes, and Javier Zamora, which takes place in many forms, such as changes in identity, relocating to a new geographical location, or reimagining social locations. These transformations can be seen as a form of cultural mestizaje as migrant subjects remake their identities based on their experiences and interactions in multiple contexts. One of the first significant transformations these poets portray in their work comes in the form of rebirth. When writing about the experience of migrants crossing borders, these poets often present them as a birth, coming into being, or the start of a new existence. For example, in *Some Clarifications y otros poemas* (Huerta 2007), Javier O. Huerta includes several poems that describe the experience of a child crossing the U.S.–Mexico border, as he did in 1981 when he was a child.[6] In *Toward a Portrait of the Undocumented*, the speaker marks the moment he crossed the border not as a rebirth, but as the day he is "born": "Pregnant with illegals, the Camaro/labors up the road; soon, I will be born" (6). The poem juxtaposes the child's life prior to crossing the border by underscoring his lack of agency due to the colonial effects of transnational subjectivity: "The economy is a puppeteer/manipulating my feet" (6). The contrast between his two lives is further demarcated by the use of parentheses to create a second inner voice and poetic "I"—transforming the protagonist to an entity that is bewildered by the new life and culture into which it has been born: "(Had you no life before this?)," "(Is your name perverse?)," and "(Who authored you?)" (6). As a disembodied voice, these questions reflect both a search for identity as well as an identity crisis precipitated by a diasporic existence. The moment is riddled by a discombobulation regarding how the young protagonist came into being and an attempt to make sense of the new world into which he was born.

In another poem, *El indocumentado le canta a México*, Huerta anthropomorphizes a vehicle transporting a hidden migrant in the trunk, transforming a Camaro into a pregnant woman, and portraying the experience of crossing the border as a mother giving birth. Here, I include the poem in its entirety to show how the motherhood and birthing metaphors are interlaced from beginning to end:

> Te niego:
> Cuando preguntan por mi madre
>
> les digo
> que mi camino ha sido el camino

de un huérfano,
que me desarrollé en el vientre

del Camaro,
que fui el feto acurrucado en la cajuela,

que cuando
llegó el parto y sus dolores

el motor
soltó gemidos

y se averió
que se abrió la cajuela y nací,

que hambriento
traté de mamar la tetilla

pero no
salió leche del mofle. (20)

In the poem, the speaker identifies himself as an orphan ("huérfano") and recognizes the Camaro as his mother. He imagines himself as a fetus curled up in the womb (trunk) of the car. The birth itself is filled with imagery and sounds that are typically associated with a mother giving birth—contractions ("dolores"), moans ("gemidos"), and the birth ("parto"). At the end of the poem, the newborn attempts to extract milk from the muffler of the vehicle, which becomes a substitute for a mother's breast. However, the lack of milk revealed by the last stanza adds an element of realism to the poem that disrupts the typical scenario one would associate with a mother giving birth to a child—elation, love, and nourishment, for example. Moreover, notions of birth and motherhood in the work of Undocupoets are often juxtaposed with inanimate objects, which render the child as nameless and countryless. Ana Castillo contends Chicana women are often "not considered to be, except marginally or stereotypically, United States citizens" (Castillo 1995, p. 35). Similarly, migrants, regardless of their immigration status, are stereotypically portrayed as noncitizens and people who do not belong in the United States. Nevertheless, as Anzaldúa suggests, the concomitant result of being without a country is that you can belong to many countries: "As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine" (80). Anzaldúa sees the creation of a new culture as a way of creating "a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet" (81). Through cultural mestizaje, Undocupoets create new stories and identities to navigate the borderlands and understand new ways of being and belonging in unfamiliar places.

In *Unaccompanied* (Zamora 2017), Javier Zamora also recounts the experiences of a young child crossing borders. Like Huerta, Zamora juxtaposes life before coming to the United States with a new life by constructing motherhood and birthing metaphors. One of the first ways he does this is by distinguishing between the child's "mother" in El Salvador and his actual mother and father who reside in the United States. Zamora's father left El Salvador for the United States when Zamora was only one, while his mother left when he was almost five. Zamora remained in El Salvador under the care of his grandparents.[7] He began his journey to the United States alone in 1999, when he was only nine years old.

Leaving El Salvador meant leaving an essential part of his identity behind—his childhood. In a 2023 interview, he explains, "I do want to emphasize that I stopped being a kid the moment that I left. I walked out of the door when I was nine years old, on April 6, 1999. The journey was a goodbye letter to my childhood" (Cuéllar 3).

In *Abuelita Says Goodbye*, Zamora integrates markers of his childhood, including his grandmother's use of his name in the diminutive to underscore her love for him and the intimate bonds between the two: "Javiercito, you're leaving me tomorrow/when our tortilla-and-milk breaths will whisper/te amo. When I'll pray the sun won't devour" (58). The use of "tortilla" and "milk"—staples that mothers use to nourish their children—underscore the central role his grandmother played in rearing him in the absence of his biological parents. The grandmother also becomes a symbol of motherhood and childhood for all who have had to leave the country, which is further solidified in the second stanza of the poem: "let your shadow return, alone, /or with sons, but soon. Call me Mamá, /not Abuelita. All my children" (58). The use of "shadow" simultaneously recognizes what the child is leaving behind and the impossibility of physically returning to his grandmother or his mother country as Javiercito. The specter of loss childhoods and transformation of the individual into something incarnate emphasizes the inevitable gulf that will be created between childhood and adulthood, and the growing distance between the protagonists. The scene also has La Llorona overtones, as the grandmother identifies herself as the mother of many children who have left the country. At the beginning of the second stanza she cries, "…I'm tired/of my children leaving…" (58). As Anzaldúa explains, "*La Llorona's* wailing in the night for her lost children has an echoing note in the wailing or mourning rites performed by women as they bid their sons, brothers, and husbands goodbye before they left to go to the 'flowery wars.' Wailing is the Indian, Mexican and Chicana woman's feeble protest when she has no other recourse" (33). This imagery can be considered a symbolic death, which simultaneously gives birth to a new identity and culture in another cultural context.

After a perilous journey from El Salvador to the U.S.–Mexico border and multiple attempts at crossing the desert with the assistance of smugglers ("coyotes"), Zamora and other migrants who traveled with him succeed in arriving at a stash house in Tucson, Arizona. For almost two months, neither his family in El Salvador nor his parents in the United States heard from Zamora or knew if he was safe or alive. His parents were finally able to retrieve him in Tucson on 10 June 1999, when the three flew together to his new home in San Rafael, California (Zamora 2023). Similar to the way Huerta uses the Camaro to distinguish between his life before and after crossing the border, Zamora uses his first plane ride to distinguish between his childhood in El Salvador and his new life in the United States. *June 10, 1999*—the final and longest poem in the collection—begins with the following verses: "first day inside a plane I sat by the window/like when I ride the bus/correction when I rode buses" (79). Zamora's journey was traumatic, and the trauma impacted him for several years: "when will you stop/not being that June 10/let it go man" (83). Poet Sheryl Luna describes how poetry can help individuals and communities heal from traumatic experiences: "the lyric can bring awareness of suffering and alleviate suffering…The transformative power of poetry can help people move beyond victimization to a place of pride, power, and agency" (Luna 2002, p. 51). Luna sees traumatic accounts that poets retell as "necessary political and personal acts of courage" (p. 51). For Zamora, 10 June was an end and a beginning—the end of one traumatic journey, and the beginning of another; the end of his childhood, and the beginning of his adulthood; both were fraught with traumas. In his description of the time he spent in Tucson in a "coyote warehouse" waiting for his parents to arrive, the child imagines his life in the United States as a movie comprised of images he was exposed to as a child in El Salvador:

I imagined a movie I wanted to see
Mi Vida Gringa

I was ready to be gringo
speak English
own a pool
Jeep convertible (85)

Notice the references to his imagined life in the United States are related to being an adult, and although he is only nine years old, he has been thrust into adulthood. His childhood is elusive, not only due to the lack of images of what life is like for children in the United States, but because his two-month journey as a child and diasporic conditions have forced him to become an adult before he is prepared to be one. These objects and the plane itself can be considered entities that give birth to a new mestizx identity that is also rendered nameless and countryless as Zamora attempts to adapt to life in a country where he does not yet feel a sense of belonging.

In *Doctor's Office First Week in This Country*, a child recounts the day he took his first shower in the United States. Although his father helps him learn how to use the shower, the child—an unnamed speaker who identifies as "an immigrant kid" in the second verse of the poem—struggles with the realization that he does not really know his father:

Father showed me the way to turn the knob that first day
how things worked

I hadn't seen him since I was one
I didn't *know him* know him (66)

Initially, the shower is a marker of difference between the child and his parents; he is unfamiliar with both. The child attempts to make sense of the new world his is inhabiting, where rituals and even the language used to describe them are different:

I'd never seen a "shower"
parents said it that way in English *chá-uer*

that first "shower"
my dirt drew a dark rim around the linoleum (67)

As a metaphor for rebirth, the shower washes away the child's past life and prepares him for his new life in the United States. The removal of dirt serves as a symbol of washing away his mother country and being reborn in the host country: "that first day after Sonoran Desert/I showered for hours when we got to parents' apartment" (66). The initial shower is a symbolic baptism into a new life, family, and culture—a remaking of identity through cultural mestizaje. Showers also serve as a source of healing; they eventually become a conduit for reconnecting with his biological parents by helping him to become whole again so that he can function as a new member of a family he must learn to live like and with:

I kept turning the wrong knob
even after Dad showed me

then Mom showed me
then we showered together

to make me comfortable with my own body again

with theirs
with anyone's (67)

Rebirth is also a theme in Yosimar Reyes' first collection of poetry, *for colored boys who speak softly*. . . (Reyes 2009). The poems in this collection juxtapose a loss of freedom with a form of incarceration in the United States that exists due to the forces of capitalism and its impact on transnational identities. Reyes utilizes cultural mestizaje and differential consciousness to advocate on behalf of migrants and undocumented people. Moreover, Reyes is openly gay and often explores gender, sexuality, and indigeneity in his poetry, thereby queering mestizaje. His work can be placed in the larger context of queer poetics, and more specifically Jotería poetics.[8] As Alicia Arrizón suggests, queering mestizaje can facilitate a political project and function as a formidable form of resistance: "The consideration of mestizaje, together with the queer configuration, replicate certain political initiatives, and in so doing transform normativity and hegemonic representation in various ways. . .marking a process of intervention through which identity categories are potential sites of resistance and contestation" (Arrizón 2006, p. 13). Reyes cultivates sites of resistance for multiply marginalized subjects. In *Dicen De Mí*, Reyes delineates between a time when Mexicans and Indigenous people were inhabitants of their own land and their present living and working conditions in the United States:

No recuerdan
That we have been here for centuries
That before their cities and factories
We used to be righteous
People of the land (11)

Compare the verses above with the following verses which appear two stanzas later:

They forget
that they have made us
Nothing more than hands
Erased minds and voice
Simple robots in a system
Where people turn profit (12)

The line break after "they have made us" positions the United States as the creator of an exploited class of people—the undocumented immigrant, the nonhuman subject. Moreover, in various poems Reyes interweaves the forces of capitalism, racism, and homophobia to emphasize how they work in tandem to further marginalize the Undocuqueer by subjecting them to a form of modern slavery.[9] In *Sometimes*. . ., Reyes writes, "People don't seem to understand that I am a walking slave/That I may not have chains around my feet/But I am not free" (5). For Reyes, the United States is what gave birth to undocumented and Undocuqueer people as multiply marginalized subjects:

I am everything you don't want to be in this country or any other
Rejected by my culture,
My family,
By everything that raised me,
By everything that gave birth to a poor, undocumented, Queer, *Mexicano*
I am all this and yet I am nothing (6)

Reyes was brought to the United States when he was three years old. He has little recollection of his childhood in Mexico (Reyes 2024, "*Spirit & Nation*"). In his poetry, Reyes

often uses the caged bird as a metaphor to describe what life in the United States is like for the undocumented and Undocuqueer; the symbolic cage in his work can be considered the entity that gives birth to a new mestizx identity. For example, in *TRE (My Revolutionary)*, he constructs the image of a caged bird incessantly singing:

> I will stay here
> In this cage, in this shitty city
>
> Singing and singing
> 'Till this system crumbles
> 'Till borders break (32)

However, the image of a caged bird continuing to sing despite the circumstances in which it finds itself also underscores the strength and beauty of Undocuqueer people—a reimagined subjectivity. As a metaphor for the poet's own voice and the voice of many immigrants, the incessant singing can be seen as a rallying cry or a rebellious act of joy. Regardless, both stand in direct opposition to the xenophobia, misogyny, and homophobia many immigrants experience. The identity of the bird itself is constructed through cultural mestizaje ("...a poor, undocumented, Queer, *Mexicano*"), which can be considered a form of rebirth, or the making of another Other. The bird's actions signify the manifestation of a mestizx consciousness; it proudly recognizes the disparate elements of its identity and continues to advocate for freedom and social justice. In *Lo Que Soy*, Reyes writes, "I am of destruction and reparations/of freedom in cages/*yo soy* the bird that still sings praises" (3). These verses reverse the colonial exchange that is stereotypically associated between the nation state and undocumented immigrants. Reyes relocates freedom from a physical state to a mental one by actively and loudly using his voice to call for social and economic justice.

2. Shapeshifting as a Form of Survival, a Way of Making Sense, and for Relocating Subjects

Yosimar Reyes' use of a caged bird and the birthing metaphors described in the work of all three poets are examples of another type of transformation that is evident in their work—shapeshifting. As Gloria Anzaldúa suggests with respect to mestiza identity and consciousness, "The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" (79). By sustaining contradictions and ambiguities, Anzaldúa claims the new mestiza "turns the ambivalence into something else...a third element...a new consciousness" (79). Anzaldúa also sees mestiza consciousness as a "continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm" (80). By using the caged bird imagery, Reyes' poetry embodies a new hybrid entity, a third psychic element that breaks down paradigms and facilitates a transformation and relocation of the subject to a new social location. *Lo Que Soy* ends with the following verses: "*te digo que tu odio me libera/por que mas* [sic] *que Joto enjaulado // ¡Soy el poder de la Conciencia!*" (3). The shapeshifting from a human to bird to caged bird to caged gay man ("Joto enjaulado") to the power of mestizx consciousness in the poem provide the subject with a way to cope with the social location in which he finds himself and a pathway to freedom. For Reyes, the free mind and spirit supersede the condition of being encaged. The poet transforms hate from a force of oppression to a source of freedom. The use of code-switching and Spanglish throughout the poem represents another type of shapeshifting and cultural mestizaje present in the work of all three poets; as they move from English to Spanish and vice versa, psychologies and identities also shift. Language primarily functions in the psychic realm, making it a powerful shapeshifting device used by all three poets that can be seen as a manifestation of mestizx consciousness. Furthermore, as Anzaldúa reminds us,

shapeshifting is rooted in Indigenous traditions: "The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a *nahual*, a shaman" (66).

In Javier Zamora's *On a Dirt Road outside Oaxaca*, the poet portrays a scene involving a child and other migrants who are forced to hide in a van in Mexico and wait until they can safely move again. The migrants shapeshift from humans to matchsticks in order to survive: "Never told us we'd hide in vans like matchsticks" (12). In the poem, the question of time and how long they will have to wait is a refrain that shifts the identity and voice of the subject asking and answering the questions. In the first two verses, the question "How long?" is answered by a speaker readers might assume to be the Mexican smuggler introduced in the first verse: "The Mexican never said how long" (12). However, later in the poem, this voice, which is identified by the use of italics, is associated with a brown lizard the young protagonist either imagines as real or is real. As a means of coping with the situation in which the child finds himself, he befriends the lizard, and they speak to one another: "Hola Paula. *Hola Javier*, she says. /We play the fence, a quick run, the van. . ." (12). In another scene, the child and the other migrants find themselves on the dirt, "like dogs showing nipples" (12). In the closing stanza, the voice transforms into a collective voice, signifying the voice of the lizard, Javier's alter ego, and the voice of the other migrants: "we say *it's gonna be alright*, /*it's gonna be just fine*—/my hands play with Paula" (12). This shapeshifting between the reality of what is transpiring and an imagined existence allows the child to cope with a dangerous and unfamiliar situation. Using triangulation to create a third psychic element, the child attempts to make sense of the situation and place himself in an alternate social location. In *Triangulations: Narrative Strategies for Navigating Latino Identity*, David J. Vázquez demonstrates how triangulation is often used in literary texts to "map alternative subject positions by documenting experiences that are illegible within systems of dichotomous categorical identity" (Vázquez 2011, p. 17). As a form of triangulation, shapeshifting can be seen as a way to cultivate a better understanding of, and reckoning with, the dichotomies that materialize in the borderlands; it is also used to reposition the subject. Moreover, this type of shapeshifting can be considered a form of cultural mestizaje if one considers that the subject not only becomes multiple entities, it simultaneously embodies all of them to create a new identity that resists fixed categories and remains in constant motion.

In an interview regarding his memoir *Solito*, Zamora comments on the way migration stories, especially when told by others, tend to "focus only on the worst day of somebody's life or the worst aspects of trauma" (Cuéllar 2023, n.p.). He underscores the importance of including what makes people human: "I hope that I have included moments of joy, of laughter, different complex moments that also occur during the act of surviving" (Cuéllar). He emphasizes the importance of being able to compartmentalize in order to survive, which can help individuals in unfathomable circumstances to be "superhuman": "Your brain is this wonderful machine that tricks you into looking at the bright side in order to take another step, live another day. That is my problem with. . .the cottage industry of migration books. Rarely do they really acknowledge and understand the beautiful phenomenon that is people, humans, being asked to be superhuman, to survive the unsurvivable" (Cuéllar). Acts of compartmentalization and joy in extenuating circumstances are intertwined in *On a Dirt Road outside Oaxaca* through the image of a child befriending and playing with the lizard, as well as the use of "horchata" as a cultural signifier. As something that is familiar to the child, the horchata becomes a conduit for creating a nonhuman friend and making a precarious situation bearable: "a small brown lizard licks horchata from my hand—/we're friends, we pick names for each other" (12).

Shapeshifting to survive, to make sense of a situation, and to relocate the subject is also a theme in Javier O. Huerta's poetry collection. One can consider Huerta's decision to tell his own story by integrating and conflating the stories and identities of many migrants and undocumented people as a form of shapeshifting and mestizaje itself. Names and voices are continually intertwined to create hybrid identities in constant flux. In *Toward a Portrait of the Undocumented*, the identity of the speaker transforms from heat, to shadow, to body snatcher, to trench coat, and to a document. Huerta's description of the physical experience of crossing the border is imbued with iterations of nonhuman entities and objects:

> I am the heat
> captured by infrared eyes.
> . . ..

activism" (Zebracki 2020, p. 132). Poets have a lengthy history of participating in forms of protest literature and public artivism. In *American Protest Literature*, Zoe Trodd claims that American protest literature begins in 1775 with a "bitter laughter; at the King" in Philip Freneau's (1752–1832) *To the Americans* (Trodd 2006, p. 3). Through the use of satire and colloquial language, the poem includes social commentary and calls for a revolution and war (3). John Stauffer defines protest literature as "the uses of language to transform the self and change society (Stauffer 2006, xii). In addition to facilitating social change, Stauffer contends that protest literature can help find "solutions to society's ills" (xii).

In *Artistic Citizenship: Artistry, Social Responsibility and Ethical Praxis*, David J. Elliot, et al. remind us that "All forms of art and art making—regardless of media or the particular 'messages' or meanings they embody or convey—are grounded in social endeavors and encounters" (Elliot et al. 2016, p. 5). They highlight the way the arts embody the personal and collective values and political and ideological beliefs of artists and thereby "involve a special kind of citizenship—civic responsibility" (p. 5). They also maintain that the arts "should be viewed, studied, and practiced as forms of *ethically guided citizenship*" (p. 6). Poets have a long history of participating in artistic endeavors with civic responsibility and ethically guided citizenship as motivating factors in creating and sharing their work, which is also evident in the work of Undocupoets. As activist poets, their work can be considered a form of protest literature, public artivism, and ethically guided citizenship that centers on highlighting the migrant experience, breaking down stereotypes, and advocating for social change; it builds on the work of the poets mentioned at the beginning of this essay—Jimmy Santiago Baca, Demetria Martínez, Juan Felipe Herrera, Rigoberto González, and Francisco X. Alarcón. Moreover, they continue a long tradition of protest poetry produced by Chicanx and Latinx poets in the United States, such as Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales' *I Am Joaquín* (Gonzales 1967) and others.[10]

In an unapologetic imitation of Tomaž Šalamun (1941–2014) and Walt Whitman's (1819–1892) celebrations of the self, Javier O. Huerta's *Es suficiente decirlo* employs the informal second-person point of view and imperative verb forms in Spanish to command the protagonist of his poem to come out of hiding and to be proud of who he is:

> Sal de la cajuela del Camaro.
> Sal de atrás del nopal.
> Sal de abajo de la cama.
> De hoy en adelante no tendrás que esconderte.
> De hoy en adelante te llamarás *Javier*.
> Es suficiente decirlo: *Javier*.
> Hay más música en ese nombre que en todas la operas y
> sinfonías
> De ti cantan todos [sic] las guitarras. (17)

Similar to Zamora's use of horchata, Huerta's poem is imbued with cultural signifiers that function as reminders of who the speaker is, where he comes from, and the beauty he embodies. His name itself becomes a bridge to a long history and generations of migrants. Through the use of shapeshifting, the speaker insists on not forgetting that "Javier" represents and embodies multiple mestizx identites: "Javier eres el puente por donde pasa toda la historia del hombre. /Eres la mujer que cruza parar trabajar de mesera en el otro lado, el niño que vende chicles, la niña que vende crucifijos…" (17). In this way, Javier's name, identity, and story represent countless stories of people who navigate the borderlands and embody an amalgamation of identities and cultures. The poet also highlights the beauty and humanity of all migrants using cultural signifiers and small acts of joy. For example, the last person on the list who "Javier" becomes is one who engages in

an act of joy and love, a portrait of humanity persisting in the wake of hardship: "el joven que va en su bicicleta para ir a besar a su novia" (17).

Like Zamora and Reyes, Huerta advocates for the recognition of the humanity in, and human rights for, all migrants—past, present, and future. The poets use differential movement to engage in activism by writing and sharing their work as Undocupoets. All three poets have been fierce advocates for migrants around the world, but they have been particularly invested in being a voice for undocumented people. They often use the poetic "I" as a collective voice that essentially tells the story of generations of migrants and undocumented people.

In *Let Me Try Again*, Javier Zamora begins the poem using the first-person point of view to recount an attempt the protagonist and other migrants make to cross the border via the desert. The poem shifts from the poetic "I" to a collective "We" to describe the experience of not just those crossing in this scene but of generations of migrants seeking a better life. Along with other migrants, the main protagonist gets caught trying to cross the border. However, one moment in particular is sprinkled with acts of kindness on the part of the "Hispanic" border patrol agent who greets them with a "buenas noches" and gives them "pan dulce y chocolate" (61). Instead of detaining the migrants, the border patrol agent drives them back to the border and empathically provides them with advice on how to cross the border safely and successfully: "*next time, rest at least five days, // don't trust anyone calling themselves coyotes, /bring more tortillas, sardines, Alhambra*" (62). This exchange erases the differences that are often made between citizens and noncitizens. Zamora dismantles the borders used to separate human beings by linking the border patrol agent to his ancestral past: "He must have remembered his family/over the border" (62). The last stanza of the poem evokes a long history of border crossers and similar exchanges: "He knew / we would try again/and again, /like everyone does" (62). In this way, Zamora advocates for the recognition of migration as a human experience with a lengthy history.

These techniques and perspectives are decolonial and postnationalist in nature; they move the conversation beyond a discussion of nationality by appealing to the prioritization of humanity and the employment of human agency; they also reflect a type of differential movement designed to dismantle hierarchies and inequities. Postnationalist perspectives disrupt the colonial impacts and confines of transnationalism, which typically position the migrant subject as disempowered and marginalized. In *Postnationalism in Chicana/o Literature and Culture*, Ellie D. Hernández claims that postnationalism functions as a critique of the way transnationalism affects the lives of immigrants: "Postnationalism, unlike transnationalism, questions the interests of colonizing conditions with the United States proper and questions the transnationalism that commerce imposes on people, such as the impact of immigration on people's lives and material needs" (Hernández 2009, p. 20). For Hernández, postnationalist discourses can dismantle the assumption that "minorities are always formed in direct opposition to majoritarian ideals" (186). As Undocupoets demonstrate in their work and deeds, undocumented immigrants have agency—they have a voice, power, lives, and identities of their own making. Many are also unabashedly unafraid to speak out and refuse to remain invisible. They engage in collective action designed to build community for other immigrants and undocumented people. Adelaida R. Del Castillo sees the use of strategies such as these by undocumented immigrants as indicative of *postnational citizenship*, which she describes as "the practice of creating community and the utilization of social rights in the host country" (Del Castillo 2020, p. 434). These ways of seeing and understanding "citizenship" erase borders and allow undocumented immigrants to engage in community building, advocacy, and social change.

Yosimar Reyes' collection ends with the title poem, *For Colored Boys Who Speak Softly*, where Reyes uses the first-person plural to tell a history of triumphs and tribulations for

young queer men of color, whom he describes and names as "colored boys who speak softly": "Centuries ago/We were/Shamans and Healers/Gifted warriors/Two-Spirited People" (37). This history is contrasted with the present-day reality of living in the United States and in a patriarchal, homophobic society: "And now we've become/nothing more than FAGS and QUEERS" (37). Reyes empowers queer men of color with soft voices by amplifying their collective voice. Together, they call for the prioritization of human rights; a fight against racism, misogyny, and homophobia; and the recognition of the beauty in all people of color: "We are people and with the people we stand/Breaking borders and stereotypes/Fighting" (38). In the final stanza of the poem, he uses capital letters to redirect the recipient of the epithets he cites earlier to defiantly call out the government for its actions and policies: "I will die in silence knowing/That the beauty in our color/Stands defiant to a racist, sexist, and homophobic GOVERNMENT!" (38). Using these strategies, Reyes resists the attempts by the United States government to make him silent and invisible. Moreover, similar to the way Philip Freneau's *To the Americans* was a call for a revolution in 1775, Reyes' work is a critique of the policies of the United States and a call for a seismic change in the way the country treats migrants, women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ community.

These activist poets have become vehement voices for migrants—documented and undocumented—not just through their poetry, but through their participation in various forums, such as social media and video projects. In 2017, Yosimar Reyes wrote *UndocuJoy: A Love Letter to My Undocumented People*, and in collaboration with Define American, created a video of the poem (Reyes 2017). The video contains touching scenes reflecting the beauty of undocumented people and the way they thrive despite being in a country that proclaims to not want them. Define American supports storytelling projects to help "humanize the immigrant narrative" (Define American 2025).[11] The video was posted and shared online, and it has since been viewed and shared by thousands.

As Stephen Santa-Ramírez and Kayon A. Hall contend in *UndocuJoy as Resistance: Beyond Gloom and Doom Narratives of Undocumented Collegians*, Reyes' poem identifies three main sources of UndocuJoy: community, family, and artistic expression (Santa-Ramírez and Hall 2023, p. 575). The poem begins with the verse, "I love my undocumented people", which becomes a refrain. Initially, the poem has a somber tone, highlighting daily challenges and injustices: "I love us because every day we wake up to a country that hates us" (Santa-Ramírez and Hall 2023, p. 572). However, by the end of the poem/video, the tone becomes upbeat and the verses are accompanied by images of individuals smiling and dancing:

> I love us.
> Because at the end of the day, somehow, we always manage to make something out of nothing.
> I love my undocumented people because being undocumented is not political.
> It is not physical.
> It is a condition created to keep us from smiling. But look at us, thriving.
> (Santa-Ramírez and Hall 2023, p. 572).

By showing and repeating unconditional love for undocumented people, Reyes prioritizes humanity and dignity. He draws on the individual and collective agency undocumented people have, despite their circumstances. The smiling and dancing are radical acts of joy that counteract the gloom and doom narratives and hateful rhetoric that often accompany migrant stories. As Santa-Ramírez and Hall suggest, "Stories of joy allow undocumented collegians to provide a counterstory that demonstrates the fullness of their lives and alerts researchers and practitioners of the need to position them as whole human beings" (586). Acts of joy and love, especially love of oneself, are also manifestations of a mestizx consciousness.

4. Conclusions

The transformative nature of the work of Undocupoets is multifaceted. As atravesados and inhabitants of the borderlands, these poets transform themselves and their communities by engaging in multiple forms of cultural mestizaje to create hybrid identities and empower the migrant subject. In this essay, I focused on how the poets use rebirth, shapeshifting, and activism in their work to create lyrics and narratives that refashion the stereotypical representation of migrants and undocumented people. As a form of testimonial literature, these poets draw on their own experiences to share migrant stories that present migrants first and foremost as human beings and secondly as active agents of their own lives and stories. These poets and the protagonists in their work cultivate mestizx identities and consciousness in order to partake in acts of differential movement and relocate migrants and undocumented people to new social locations. Their work can be seen as a radical political project that aims to integrate more diverse migrant narratives into the cultural fabric of the United States, while also raising questions about human rights, freedom, and citizenship.

Notably absent from this study is an examination of the work of Latinx Undocupoets who do not identify as males. I chose Huerta, Reyes, and Zamora because they have poetry collections that have been published. The dearth of poetry collections written by Latinx Undocupoets who identify as female, trans, or other genders raises many questions regarding visibility and publishing barriers that need to be addressed. Moreover, Huerta, Reyes, and Zamora are from the same generation; all three were born between 1980 and 1990. Future research might focus on Undocupoets who represent a wider array of genders, sexualities, ages, and nationalities to unearth new themes and voices that can help readers and the public better understand the experiences of Undocupoets in various cultural contexts and historical periods. Nevertheless, I surmise that the themes explored in this essay will also be evident in the work of other Undocupoets.

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Notes

1 Chicanx and Latinx people have historically been treated as immigrants in the United States even though the vast majority were born in the country and many families are comprised of U.S. citizens representing multiple generations; several families can trace their ancestry to the Southwest years before U.S. expansionism and the Mexican–American War (1846–1848).

2 See Baca's poem, *So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans*, as a good example of the way he advocates for immigrants to be recognized first and foremost as human beings (Baca 24).

3 As an immigrant rights activist, Demetria Martínez participated in the sanctuary movement for Salvadoran refugees and was indicted in a sanctuary case. Her poem, *Nativity: For Two Salvadoran Women, 1986–1987*, was used as part of the evidence to indict her (Valle 1988).

4 Although several poems in the collection can be considered pro-immigrant, *Perla at the Mexican Border Assembly Line of Dolls* (41) and *Penny Men* (43) are particularly powerful calls for recognizing migrants as human beings.

5 In 2015, the "Undocupoets Campaign" was co-founded by Marcelo Hernández Castillo, Christopher Soto, and Javier Zamora (Undocupoets n.d.). As a response to the forms of exclusion and discrimination they experienced as undocumented immigrants and poets, they created resources and pathways for Undocupoets to write and publish their work, including an Undocupoets

fellowship. Their work has since been supported by several grants, publishers, and programs. Hernández Castillo, Soto, and Zamora have all published collections of poetry and memoirs and inspired a new generation of poets and writers with an interest in redefining the narratives that have traditionally portrayed undocumented immigrant experiences and identities in limited and stereotypical ways.

6 In the foreword to the collection, Huerta comments on his intention to write poems that were "derived from another source other than himself" (vii). Although the poems in the collection are not autobiographical, they contain several aspects of his own life and experiences—crossing the border as a child, being undocumented in the United States, the use of his first name, and more. This strategy itself can be considered a form of mestizaje and shapeshifting. For more information on his own history and the poems in the collection, listen to his interview with Eric Ladau (Huerta 2008).

7 For more information on Javier Zamora's journey to the United States as a young child, see his memoir, *Solito*, Zamora (2023).

8 For more information on queer poetics and Jotería poetics, see (Pérez 2022).

9 Similar to the formation of "Undocupoets," the term "Undocuqueer" was adopted by a handful of LGBTQ+ undocumented immigrant activists at the turn of the twenty-first century as a form of empowerment. For a good example of the Undocuqueer movement as a form of public artivism, see the work of artist Julio Salgado online (www.juliosalgadoart.com).

10 During the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales' (1928–2005) epic poem *I Am Joaquín* (1967) served as a tool for education and inspiration. In addition to documenting a history that was not being taught in schools, the poem was a rallying cry for unity and social change. The poem was read and distributed in multiple forums—including as a film short produced by Luis Valdez in 1969—and is arguably the most important poem of the Chicano Movement.

11 Define American was founded in 2011 by José Antonio Vargas, an award-winning journalist, filmmaker, and producer who shares the experience of being an undocumented immigrant in the United States. For more information, visit their website (www.defineamerican.com).

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