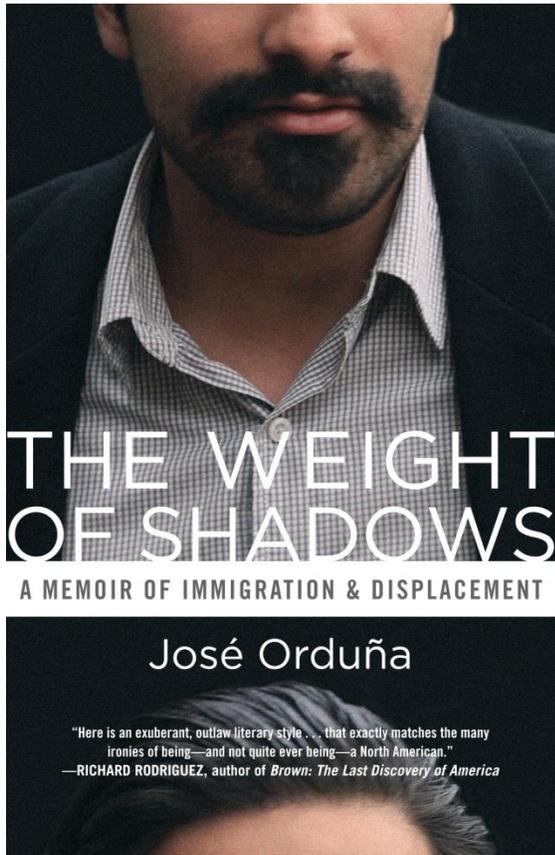


*The Weight of Shadows:
A Memoir of Immigration & Displacement*

By José Orduña



Contents

- *About the Book*
- *About the Author*
- *Praise and Reviews*
- *Questions for Discussion*

About the Book

José Orduña chronicles the process of becoming a North American citizen in a post 9/11 US, lyrically stitching his narrative, with the narratives of friends, loved ones, and people with whom he identifies. “A million differences cascade into each other,” observes his father in a letter to him on his first birthday. “You find yourself in a strange place and even you have become difficult to recognize.” It is a letter sent from the United States over 2000 miles away. Over a decade later, on the day of José’s high school entrance exam, his father drops him off in front of St. Ignatius College Prep, one of Chicago’s most prestigious high schools, which to his eye resembles a palace.

These kinds of intractable realities—rooted in the continuity of US Imperialism to Globalism—form the landscape of José’s daily experience, an experience he shares with millions. Here the geopolitical meets the quotidian. In one anecdote, José recalls how the only apartment his parents could rent was one that didn’t require signing a lease or running a credit check, the floors so crooked he once dropped an orange and watched it roll in six directions before settling in a corner.

In prose both luscious and biting, José describes the absurd feeling of being handed a piece of paper—his naturalization certificate—that certifies something he has always known: He has a right to be here. At the ceremony, he interrogates his own lack of gratitude as he watches the woman next to him weep while being sworn in as a citizen. What, he wonders, has she been through, to reach this point?

A trenchant exploration of race, class, and identity, *The Weight of Shadows* is a searing meditation on the meaning of “America,” and the nature of borders—political, linguistic, and cultural.

About the Author



José Orduña was born in Córdoba, Veracruz, and immigrated to Chicago when he was two. At nine, he and his parents traveled to Ciudad Juárez and filed for permanent residency under section 245(i) of the Immigration and Nationality Act. Having entered the US with a tourist visa, which had since expired, they were considered “removable aliens.” In July of 2011 José was sworn in as a citizen. In 2010, Orduña applied for naturalization, and in July of 2011 was sworn in as a citizen. He is a graduate of the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa and is active in Latin American solidarity.

Praise and Reviews

“José Orduña’s book violates—in a most exciting way—a number of literary borders: The political essay is enclosed within a novel; tough political observation is enlivened suddenly by a rush of metaphor or lush detail from the poet’s eye; finally humor and pathos meet on the page ‘without papers.’ Here is an exuberant, outlaw literary style that is the mix of several and that exactly matches the many ironies of being—and not quite ever being—a North American.”

-- Richard Rodriguez, author of *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*

“Orduña’s wonderfully wry, insightful, and beautiful debut is as deft as they come in nonfiction. *The Weight of Shadows* teeters on that dangerous nexus of race, class, and identity and ultimately coalesces into a meditation on the physical, psychic and aesthetic boundaries that taunt, challenge, and sometimes even inspire us all.”

--John D'Agata, author of *Halls of Fame: Essays*

"A beautifully written, insightful memoir that examines questions of citizenship and immigration with compassion, integrity, and fearlessness. *The Weight of Shadows* is an outstanding debut that instantly places Orduña among the ranks of literature’s best new talent."

--Jerald Walker, author of *Street Shadows: A Memoir of Race, Rebellion, and Redemption*

"In this timely and remarkably crafted work, Orduña skillfully weaves personal memoir with deeply researched facts to reveal the disquieting truths no citizen of conscience can afford to ignore. *The Weight of Shadows* awakens us to the privileges and burdens of Americanness and

the troubling and often-dehumanizing abuses suffered by those in the 'shadows.' "

--Shulem Deen, author of *All Who Go Do Not Return*

"A provocative and insightful work that is destined to introduce a new form to the world of creative non-fiction. Orduña essays us into a position of activism, documentation, and nuanced storytelling, opening new pathways toward understanding the repercussions of our immigration policies; a counter-narrative to our media-skewed perceptions of a human rights issue that has no border. Orduña's hybrid approach to narrative employs the urgency of fiction, an investigative, reportorial eye, and a sublime, bilingual lyricism. This memoir will no doubt be required reading for years to come."

--Willie Perdomo, author of *The Essential Hits of Shorty Bon Bon*

Questions for Discussion

1. Orduña begins Chapter 2 with a quote by Ronald Reagan about his administration's efforts to "humanely regain control of our borders." When was the last time you encountered such discrepancy between an official account and your own lived experience, and how did it alter your perspective toward subsequent official narratives?
2. How aware were you of the history of Mexican lynching throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? How about the Mexican Repatriation during the Great Depression? What does this say about the creation of history and the power dynamics it manipulates and conceals?
3. "There's no humane or ethical way to deny people who live in countries riddled with violence, poverty, and corruption the right to try to make a livable life in 'your' affluent country, even less so when 'your' country's government has been deeply involved in creating the conditions in which poverty, violence, and corruption invariably occur," writes Orduña. A case could be made for the United States' particular responsibility in the Latin American migration crisis based on, for instance, the history of its invasion of Mexico and annexation of half of Mexico's land as well as brutal U.S.- backed coups and

bloody regimes in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. After absorbing the historical facts disclosed in this book, would you be receptive to such a case?

4. The near-destruction of Orduña's family photos "represented the destruction of a reality," for "without the photos the particularities of our collective events would fade and continue to fade until perhaps the events themselves would be lost to oblivion." How do the dynamics revealed here play out in the entirety of the memoir? Through what mechanisms does the government attempt to ignore the particularities of the undocumented—to maintain their facelessness?
5. By contrast, Orduña tries to imagine the full personhood of those lost in the desert 'borderlands': "their name, the contours of their face, their favorite dish, if they had children, what music they listened to, the timbre of their voice, the cadence of their speech, the wounds they carry." How else does Orduña resist the anonymity of the undocumented promoted by the state?
6. When Orduña recounts his parents' lives, he refers to them not as 'mother' and 'father' but as 'Yoli' and 'Martin.' How might his status as the child of immigrants make him more disposed to conceive of and understand his parents (the conditions of their lives, their decisions) in their fullness, rather than simply in relation to himself?
7. At one point Orduña stops himself from asking Yoli whether or not she would make the choice to migrate if she had to do it over again but decides it is a "cruel and stupid question." What do you think he means by this? Have you found yourself in a similar position when confronting your family's past?
8. Orduña writes about the "deep abiding guilt" that he harbored growing up amidst his parents' sacrifices: "I didn't want to be able to understand so I avoided thinking about anything that might lead me toward feeling like it had all been for me." Have the pressures of your own family's sacrifices ever become too much for you to bear? Reflect

upon your understanding of and attitudes toward these in your youth and how these have developed as you have grown.

9. “I’d never felt as poor or as brown as I did against that kind of background,” Orduña writes of his first moments at St. Ignatius. How is Orduña’s opportunity to attend a private prep school saturated in ambivalence—and in what circumstances does this ambivalence reemerge throughout his journey?
10. “There’s no understanding,” writes Orduña of the grinding working-class existence his parents encountered across the border. “It just becomes the condition in which you live. There’s no time to reflect, or think about things going differently.” How might this aspect of the survival mode a working-class immigrant is thrust into be a double-edged sword? Do you find something particularly tragic about this fate?
11. Orduña writes poignantly about the dehumanization that accompanied his family’s exclusion from society. How might isolation from community and culture lead to estrangement from oneself?
12. Orduña describes the Des Moines landscape as he drives to the Department of Homeland Security for the recording of his biometrics: “the monstrous actuality of the landscape concealed by its absolute banality.” In what sense does such a description capture the political landscape of the undocumented immigrant’s experience and the institutional structures that decide her fate? It may be helpful here to take into consideration Hannah Arendt’s notion of the “banality of evil.”
13. “The categories of Mexican, immigrant, ‘illegal’ immigrant, and wetback get ground up together in the American consciousness... [an] intensification afforded by the language (legal, and common parlance, which often commingle) of legitimacy,” explains Orduña. What role does rhetoric play in the social and legal situation of the undocumented, and

how might it be used to work against this oppression?

14. How does Orduña bring out the irony and hidden assumptions and ideologies already present in official federal language around immigration (i.e. “alien”, “illegal”)? How do you read and respond to the metaphors he uses to capture his relationship with the United States federal government (abusive relationship, sick valentine/ love affair) and with his own shifting status?
15. A fellow volunteer with No More Deaths conveys to Orduña in the midst of Arizona’s deadly heat that “it’s not the desert that’s done all the killing.” How is the epidemic of desert deaths in the borderlands “murder without a murderer”? How does natural and institutional danger merge into a unified menace for migrants?
16. Orduña references works of visual art to more fully comprehend and reflect upon his social and political circumstances. Find copies of Remedios Varo’s *Fenomeno* and Andrea Mantenga’s *Adoration of the Magi* and consider the following: How does *Fenomeno* illuminate the situation of the undocumented? What does *Adoration of the Magi* reveal about power, where it comes from, who it serves, and how it’s sustained?
17. In the Philippines we see Orduña “glad... to be on this side of the global order, allowed to wallow in the spoils of democracy even though my passport is not yet blue.” How does Orduña’s trip to the Philippines fit into his larger narrative? In what ways does it paint a fuller picture of American empire, its winners and losers?
18. Orduña distressingly comes to perceive violence in his own language and culture—down to, he says, his genetics. How might one “[reconcile] loving oneself as a colonized person,” as Orduña must?
19. Orduña points out the limitations of mere awareness and empathy without action around problems of social injustice, spotlighting the substantive distance “between being

emotionally moved and actually moving.” How does this affect your relationship with the memoir and the challenges it presents?