SOLITO, SOLITA
CROSSING BORDERS WITH YOUTH REFUGEES FROM CENTRAL AMERICA

EDITED BY STEVEN MAYERS AND JONATHAN FREEDMAN
FOREWORD BY JAVIER ZAMORA
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We meet Soledad as a shy first-year student at the City College of San Francisco in the fall of 2014. A young refugee from Honduras, she is struggling to write an essay in Steven’s English class. He suggests she get help in Jonathan’s writing workshop. In the midst of a writing exercise, Soledad breaks down crying. “Are you okay?” Jonathan asks. She shakes her head and says, “My friend’s husband is putting me out on the street in two days.” Jonathan says, “Stop the exercise and write a letter to them.” After the workshop, Soledad leaves in tears, and Jonathan worries that she may become homeless.

A few months later, we ask Soledad to share her story. Flushed with pride, she ushers us into the new, one-bedroom student apartment near campus that she accessed through a housing lottery. The rent is subsidized as long as she maintains a 2.5 GPA.
It’s gray and overcast outdoors, but the apartment is bright with fresh flowers and shiny new furniture. “This was a gift from my Filipino coworkers at Round Table Pizza,” she says, patting a lucky bamboo plant. The white walls in her bedroom are freshly painted and undecorated. Soledad is backlit by the window as she talks, her face cast in shadows. When she comes to a painful incident in her story, she rolls up her pant cuffs to reveal scars on her legs. As a girl, Soledad was subjected to multiple instances of physical and sexual abuse, medical malpractice, and abandonment. Through her own will and the help of others, she has been able to both succeed in college and engage in legislative reforms to help other migrant children in the foster care system.

WHY AM I NOT DEAD INSTEAD OF MY GRANDMOTHER?

My mother had her first baby, my older sister, Angela, when she was about sixteen, and she was about nineteen when she had me. I was born on June 6, 1992, in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.¹ My parents broke up before I was born and they lived apart. We were really poor, the poorest family in our little neighborhood. My mother got together with Faustino, the man who would become my stepfather, who had two younger daughters. My father left for the United States when I was five. Faustino always liked my sister, but he never liked me. I never knew why. My mother was scared of him, because he drank a lot and was a violent guy. He used to hit my mom and throw chairs at her. He never had a stable job. My mom was really weak and never stood up for me. She let other people make decisions for her. It was my grandmother who always took care of me. I was named after her, Maria Soledad. She never liked my stepfather, so she always took me on the weekends so that my mom wouldn’t leave me alone with him.

I was ten when my grandma died. It was a shock. Some people said that she took medication that had expired, but nobody knows exactly what happened. When she was sick, she told my cousin to bring me to be with her in her house. She hugged me and died in my arms. After that I

¹. Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, is a city of approximately 1.2 million people. Soledad’s family lived in a remote area on the outskirts of the city.
didn’t have anybody there for me, and my life changed completely.

One day when I was twelve, my mom went into the city and stayed overnight. She left me with my stepfather and his daughters. I slept in a bed next to my little stepsisters, who were six and seven. Faustino got drunk that night, and he came over to my bed and touched me. I started yelling. My little sisters cried, “Oh, Papá, leave her alone, leave her alone!” They hit him, so he’d leave me alone. I ran out of the house. I didn’t take them with me because I was so scared. It was really late at night. I ran barefoot up the hill to his parents’ house, crying, screaming, and asking for help. One of his brothers opened the door. I said, “Faustino was touching me.” The brother brought me inside and told me, “Just go to sleep and we’ll talk in the morning.” I cried myself to sleep.

When my mom got there the next day, I was scared. I didn’t know what she would say. I told her about what Faustino had done to me, but she didn’t believe me. She tried to hit me. I left the house, crying to God, Why am I not dead instead of my grandmother?

When I came back to the house, my mother was packing all my clothes. She made all the plans without asking me. She sent me to another part of the city to work for relatives of my stepfather. I stayed with them and I cleaned their house, took care of two babies, washed clothes. I was their servant. They didn’t pay me, but they gave me food to eat. I was only twelve.

NOBODY WANTED ME

A month later, I woke up with a painful red swelling on my left ankle. I had a high, high fever. The bones throughout my body were hurting. The family I was staying with called my mom and told her I was sick. She didn’t come for three days. She only came to get me when I was really, really sick. She took me to the Hospital Escuela Universitario.2 I passed out on the way and woke up in a bed with curtains around me. The

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2. Hospital Escuela Universitario is a medical teaching hospital in Tegucigalpa.
nurses did blood tests and said I had dengue fever. But the same night, I got worse. I had terrible stomach pains, and I cried all night. Then the doctors changed my diagnosis to lupus.

The doctors gave me fifteen pills a day and blood transfusions. I lost my hair, and there were black blisters on my mouth. I had a lot of bruises on my body, and I was really weak. There were months when I didn’t even eat. My body was really skinny, like a skeleton. I was dying. My mom, little sisters, and aunt visited me, but most of the time I was alone. It was a really lonely hospital. I cried and cried.

After about five months, I was stable enough to leave the hospital. But the family I’d been staying with said, “Oh, we don’t want to take care of her because we know she’ll be dying in a few weeks. We don’t want to deal with that.” Because of the situation with my stepfather, my mother never asked me to come home. I no longer had my grandmother, and my mom didn’t believe me. I just wanted to die.

I went to my aunt Consuelo’s house in Tegucigalpa. She was my father’s sister, and she didn’t know me well. She lived with her husband and their baby girl. But she was the only one who said, “I’ll take care of her.” She was pregnant. But she’d go with me back to the hospital for checkups. She has a strong character. She always said, “You don’t have to be like your mom. You have to be strong.” She used bad words when she was mad. She called me stupid. But I think that even though she was really strict with me, she has been an important person in my life. Many little girls out on the street made fun of my swollen face, calling me “Bear Cheeks,” and throwing things at me. My aunt would say, “Don’t be stupid. You have to go out. This is nothing to be ashamed of!”

I was still taking fifteen pills a day, and my medicine became expensive. Consuelo and her husband had a furniture store in Tegucigalpa,

3. Dengue fever is a debilitating viral disease of the tropics, transmitted by mosquitoes, that causes sudden fever and acute pain in the joints.

4. Lupus is a chronic autoimmune disease that can damage skin, joints, and internal organs.
and they weren’t poor, but they weren’t rich either. Consuelo asked my father, who was in California, for money. He sent money every month. I was still really sick and I was getting worse again. Many days I wasn’t able to get out of bed, because my legs and feet weren’t functional anymore. I didn’t eat. Every night I went to bed wishing, Oh, I don’t want to wake up tomorrow. I don’t want to wake up.

A doctor came to the house for a checkup. I heard him and my aunt talking behind the door, and the doctor said, “Soledad has only two or three days left. If anyone wants to see her, they have to come quickly.” They never told me I was about to die. When Consuelo told my father on the phone that I was going to die, I overheard her. I was crying. But I’d been waiting for the day.

I woke up in the middle of the night and was determined to get out of bed. I went to take some of my niece’s wet cloth diapers, which had been drying near my bed on the ground floor, upstairs. I don’t know how I got up, but I pulled myself out of bed. I made it part of the way up the stairs, but I fell, hands first. I was bleeding a lot, but I didn’t feel pain. The stairs were cement and all the skin on my lower legs was torn off. I just felt cold, really cold. After quite a long time, my aunt heard me, came down the stairs, and asked, “Why are you up?” I said, “I was taking the baby’s diapers upstairs. I fell.”

My aunt called one of her employees from the furniture store to help. He rolled up my jeans and my skin just peeled off. My bone was sticking out of my leg. Then my aunt called her neighbor Lourdes, who had a car, to come and drive me to the Hospital Escuela.

When we got there, we had to wait. When the doctor finally came, he asked why I was big in my face but skinny. Lourdes said, “She has lupus.” His reaction was like, “I don’t want to touch her,” because maybe he thought lupus was contagious. He said, “The only option is to cut off her leg. It doesn’t make sense to keep the leg.” Lourdes said, “I don’t want her to be without her leg. If she needs to die, she needs to die with her

5. Lupus is not contagious.
two legs.” And so the doctor walked away.

Lourdes decided to take me to the private hospital, San Jorge, without asking anybody. She took me there and called my aunt Consuelo to explain. In the car on the way to the hospital, I was peeling the skin off my leg. I was numb. I didn’t care anymore. Cut off my leg. I will die. When I got to San Jorge the new doctor asked me why I was in that condition. I said, “Because I have lupus.” “Okay, let’s do surgery,” he said.

I think the surgery lasted five hours. When I woke up, my first thought was, So, do I have my leg or not? I had my leg! There were a lot of bandages, a lot of blood. My mom was there with my sister Angela, who I love so much. Angela started crying. The surgeon had pinned my broken leg bones together. After a blood test, the doctor said I didn’t have lupus. I was okay! Wrongly prescribed medications might have caused the symptoms of lupus. They may have mixed up my file with another patient who had lupus. But I believe I had lupus, and it was a miracle!

When I stopped taking the medicine, I started getting better. I went home to Aunt Consuelo’s and had to stay in bed for my leg to heal. After six months I started walking a little. My hair began to grow back. I was thirteen and a half. My mom and the rest of my family contacted my father because the surgery to save my life cost thousands of dollars. His job was collecting bottles on the street in Hayward, California.6 He ended up paying for all my surgeries and medications. Even though I didn’t grow up with him and had never lived with him, I think he was the one who helped me the most.

“CAN YOU TAKE ME TOO?”

After I got better, when I was about to turn fourteen, my father decided to return to Honduras to see me. I waited by the door for him, wondering, What will he look like? How will I feel after all these years? I hadn’t seen him since I was three or four. My only memory was as a little girl riding horses

6. Hayward is a city in Alameda County, in the East Bay of the San Francisco Bay Area.
with him when we visited his parents’ ranch in the south of Honduras.

My dad came in a car, and when he got out, I went and hugged him. He’s really short, like me. He cried when he saw me. I just felt happy. But I was mad at him because he had left me alone, you know? When my stepfather abused me, my father wasn’t there for me. But after seeing him and knowing he had helped me a lot with my medications and surgery, and knowing how hard he worked in order to pay for everything, I started feeling something for him. He stayed for about three months.

My father is a womanizer. He met a woman named Evita and decided to bring her back to the United States. I asked him, “Can you take me too?” At first he said no, but I explained to him that I didn’t have anything left there. I wanted to start a new life. So I convinced him, and he said yes.

I JUST REMEMBER THEIR HANDS

It took more than one month to get to the United States. The three of us left Honduras and went to Guatemala on the bus. My dad sat in the front seat, and I sat behind with other people. There were gangsters on board. First, one guy took out a gun, and then the other guys did too. They put a gun to my head, telling me to give them all my money. I didn’t have money, but they didn’t believe me. They took my pants off. I don’t remember their faces. I just remember their hands. I remember hands touching me all over my body, and I couldn’t say anything. At that time, I was fourteen.

The gangsters took money from my father, so we didn’t have enough money to eat for the rest of the trip. We stayed in Guatemala for one day and then got in a van to go to Mexico. We went from van to van. We had to lie down with many people, one on top of the other. The coyotes put cardboard on top of us so La Migra wouldn’t see us if they pulled us over. It was hard to breathe, and we didn’t eat either.\(^7\) They didn’t want to stop.

Then, we had to walk through the desert for seven hours to get to

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7. See glossary.
a ranch house. It was really hot in the Mexican desert. There were like twenty or twenty-five people in our group, with many people from China, from everywhere. The coyote gave each of us a liter of water and a can of beans. So we walked and walked. My shoes were really bad, so my feet were covered in blisters. We finished the water really fast. After that, we had to look for water, and we found a well. We stopped to rest in the middle of the night. The coyotes ordered all the women on one side and all the men on the other side. My father said, “No, they’re coming with me.” He didn’t want me or Evita to be separated from him. We ended up staying with my father. That night, one of the coyotes tried to abuse one of the girls. Then someone cried, “The police are coming!” You know, La Migra. We had to throw ourselves onto the ground, where there was a lot of cactus. My body was covered in cactus spines.

After being at the ranch house, we walked for three more days, I think. To be honest, my memory is really bad. Many people got lost, and some didn’t make it. The coyotes left an Asian girl on the ground to die. That was really sad. On the second day, I became too weak, so my father paid the coyotes extra for a little pill to give me energy. It was strong. It felt like I was starting from the beginning again.

Finally, we reached a house, somewhere in Texas, a really nice place. A guy with his wife and their little daughter lived there, and they spoke Spanish. We were really hungry, and they gave us food. They just told us, “Don’t go outside.”

After that, someone came in a van to take us from Texas to Sacramento. It was a long trip. They stopped to pick up other people at different houses, and the police stopped us twice. There was a hiding place under the floor where they put people in the van. There were air holes, but there were too many people. I was next to my father, and we were holding our arms in and we were curled up, and it was really hard to breathe. We had to stay quiet the whole time. They’d say, “Here come the police. Stay quiet, stay quiet!”
Solito, Solita Lesson Plan: Liberation

Time Needed: 3 class periods.

Materials:
- Full narrative of or suggested excerpts from Soledad Castillo in Solito, Solita:
  - “Why am I not dead instead of my grandma?” pp. 17-23
  - “No school, you have to work!” pp. 25-27
  - “Used clothes with holes in them” pp. 29-33
  - “We don’t choose our families” pp. 34-37
- Identity Reflection Worksheet
- NPR article: “Teachers’ Expectations Can Influence How Students Perform”
  - Suggested excerpt from article
  - Original text
- Pygmalion Effect diagram
  - Teacher reference on the Pygmalion Effect

Objective:
- Students will be able to define stereotype and analyze the effect of interpersonal and internalized stereotyping in their self-view.
- Students will be able to discuss and construct ways to liberate from stereotyping in their lives.

Related Core Curriculum Standards: RI.9-10.1, 2, 3; W.9-10.2-5, 10; SL.9-10.1, 6; L.9-10.2, 4, 6; RH.9-10.2, 4, 8; WHST.9-10.4, 5, 10.

Essential Question(s):
1. How do the beliefs of others affect how we see ourselves?
2. How do we liberate ourselves from society’s expectations?

Day One

Self-Evaluation (5 minutes)

Step 1: Give students an index card and ask them to describe themselves in 3-5 words. Make sure each student writes their name on the index card. When they are finished, collect all the cards.

Step 2: Ask each student to write their name on a blank sheet of paper and tape these up in the back of the classroom.
Soledad’s Excerpt (30 minutes)

**Step 1:** Read excerpts from Soledad Castillo’s narrative. As students are reading, have them highlight key sections that answer the following questions: *What does Soledad believe about herself? What actions reflect this belief? How do others impact Soledad, both negatively and positively?*

**Step 2:** As students are reading, ask them to go to the back of the classroom individually so they can have privacy and remain anonymous. Instruct each student to write one word that describes each person named on the paper. Remind students to be honest and kind.

Journal Write & Class Discussion (25 min)

**Step 1:** Pass each student’s paper with the comments from their classmates back to them. Give students a moment to look and see what others wrote.

**Step 2:** Pass back each student’s index card with their self-descriptions.

**Step 3:** Ask students to take time to reflect on the following prompts:
1) Do I see myself the same way others see me? What is similar? What is different?
2) Did any of your classmates’ responses surprise you? Why or why not?
3) Were you more positive or negative about yourself, compared to the responses you received?

**Step 4:** In a talking circle or whole class discussion, discuss the following questions:
1) Why is there a difference in how people see us versus who we really are?
2) What matters more: How others see you, or how you see yourself?
3) How does Soledad see herself? How does this affect her actions?
4) How do others in Soledad’s life support her? How does this affect her actions?

Day Two

Do Now (5 minutes)

**Step 1:** As a class, define the term “stereotype.”

**Step 2:** Have students fill out the [Identity Reflection](#) individually.

Decision Time (10 minutes)

*Trigger Warning: This may bring up feelings or memories for students depending on the questions. Please give students the option to sit out and just watch or to step out if they are feeling triggered.*

**Step 1:** Have all students stand up and move so there is an empty space in the middle of the room, bisected by a line taped to the floor. Designate one side as “AGREE” and the other as “DISAGREE”.

**Step 2:** Read a statement aloud and have students move to the side that corresponds with their experience. Once there, ask students to find a partner and share why they chose to be on that side. After partners have spoken, ask for a few students to speak out on what they discussed with their partners.
● I've had someone follow me in a store before.
● I don't have to worry about money.
● Someone has moved to not sit or walk near me.
● Most people assume I can speak English.
● I've had a stranger talk to me in a way that made me uncomfortable.
● Someone assumed that I was born outside of the US (even if it's true!).
● I trust the police.
● My family has different rules for me than my siblings/cousins of a different gender identity.
● My teachers believe in me.
● I worry about my weight sometimes.
● People assume that I am attracted to the other sex (even if it's true!).
● I've never had to wonder if I'll be able to get to where I want to go (e.g., into a building, up a flight of stairs, on a plane).

Step 3: Debrief the activity with students.
1) What emotions were brought up for you?
2) How do you think your answer would be different if your identity was different? (i.e., if you were a different race, sex, etc.)
3) How does stereotyping play a role in your experiences?

Expectations vs. Outcomes (15 minutes)

Step 1: Have students read the NPR article, “Teachers’ Expectations Can Influence How Students Perform.” As students read, ask them to highlight key passages that answer the focus questions:
1) What is the main idea of the article?
2) What information surprised you?

Step 2: Debrief answers with students. Pass out copies of the Pygmalion Effect diagram to students and explain the effect of expectations on self-belief.

Soledad’s Excerpt (20 minutes)

Continue reading from Soledad’s narrative. As students read, ask them to highlight key sections that help to answer the focus questions:
1) What connections can you make between Soledad’s experience and the article from NPR?
2) How did the expectations of others in Soledad’s life affect her?

Exit Ticket (5 min)

Ask students to respond to the following prompt:
1) Give one specific example of an expectation or stereotype that others had of you.
2) How do stereotypes or expectations affect people’s beliefs about themselves?
Day Three

Do Now (10 minutes)

**Step 1:** Hand each student a copy of this quote from Viktor E. Frankl: “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

For ELL/SpEd students, it may be helpful to allow them to preview the text in order to identify and define new vocabulary.

**Step 2:** Have students respond to the following questions:
1) In your own words, what is Frankl saying?
2) In the last class, we discussed the effects of expectations and stereotypes and self-belief. What would it mean to choose your response to a stereotype or expectation?

**Step 3:** Debrief responses with students.

Soledad’s Narrative (25 minutes)

**Step 1:** Finish reading Soledad’s narrative. As students read, ask them to highlight key sections that answer the focus questions:
1) What are the stereotypes or beliefs about immigrants that Soledad faces? How does she empower herself and others to overcome these challenges?
2) How does Soledad’s belief about herself change?

**Step 2:** Review responses with students. Define “self-defeating” and “self-empowering” actions. Give students an example using Soledad’s experience.

- Self-defeating: Meant to solve a problem but actually causing the same or another problem; causing more problems than it solves. Preventing yourself from doing or achieving something.
  - Soledad’s family expected her to die because of her illness → She wanted to die

- Self-empowering: Freeing yourself from what others believe of you by making positive choices for yourself. It requires believing in yourself.
  - There is a myth in the US that immigrants are bad people → Soledad worked to get an education in order to advocate for other foster youth and immigrants

**Step 3:** Discuss with students how it can be easy to find examples of how the support of others helped Soledad overcome her struggles, but Soledad’s inner strength should be acknowledged too. Have students work with a partner to skim through Soledad’s whole narrative (or the excerpts); you could also assign each pair a set of pages from Soledad’s narrative. Ask students to identify examples of how Soledad’s personal strengths helped her overcome the expectations put on her.

**Step 4:** Have each pair share out one example to the class. If other students did not identify that example, have them mark it in their books too.
Affinity Groups (20 minutes)

**Step 1:** Ask students to form small groups of 3–4 based on an affinity group (ethnicity, culture, sex, citizenship, language, etc.). In order to make sure there is a diversity of discussions, make sure there are only 1-2 groups of the same affinity. If there are too many of a particular group, challenge students to find a different part of their identity to form an affinity group around. This can be accomplished by creating posters with possible affinity groups and asking students to group themselves in that way. If a group organically forms around an identity that you hadn’t thought of, you can always create a new poster for them in the moment.

**Step 2:** In their affinity groups, ask students to appoint one person as the facilitator. The facilitator helps to lead the conversation and makes sure that everyone in the group has an equal chance to share. Give each facilitator a slip of paper with the prompt to begin their group’s discussion: *Identify a stereotype or expectation that they have all experienced.* Give students time to share within their group how they personally experienced that stereotype.

**Step 3:** Give each group a poster paper. On the paper, students write their affinity identifier (e.g. Latinx, Girls, Tagalog-speakers, Athletes, Queer) and the stereotype they experienced. Next, ask each group to create a T-chart and list examples of self-defeating and self-empowering actions.

**Step 4:**

Option 1: Have groups decide on a spokesperson. Each group’s spokesperson shares out their poster with their classmates.

Option 2: If you are concerned about certain groups of students holding larger shares of the emotional labor by teaching their peers, instead of sharing specifics about their group’s discussion, ask students to debrief the activity together: *What did they appreciate about speaking to others in an affinity group-only setting? What feelings came up? Why might it be important for people to have affinity spaces?*

Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

Pass back each student’s Do Now so they can review the Frankl quote. Students respond to the following questions:

1) What is a stereotype or expectation that others have of you?
2) What will be your response so that you can free yourself from this stereotype/expectation?

Possible Extension: Liberation Personal Narrative

Students can extend their understanding of the effect of stereotype and self-belief through a narrative writing assignment using the suggested writing prompt:

Describe an example of a stereotype that you have experienced. This can be a positive or negative stereotype. How has this stereotype impacted you, including your self-belief? How have or will you liberate yourself from society’s expectations? Why is it important (to you or your community) to do so?