

UNTHINKABLE STORIES: READING FOR JUSTICE IN
TESTIMONIAL MIGRATION NARRATIVES

by

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Unthinkable Stories: Reading for Justice in Testimonial Migration Narratives

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This thesis defines the literary genre of testimonio in the context of the United States/Mexico border and the humanitarian crisis of Central American migration in the last two decades. To explore questions of how testimonio operates to access truth, justice, and its ability to disrupt readers' understanding, I close read passages from two migration narratives: *Tell Me How it Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* by Valeria Luiselli and *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail* by Óscar Martínez. These two authors employ many different rhetorical strategies to advance the goals of their texts, but the ideas I focus on close reading include: the “unthinkable,” the concept of storytelling and narrativization, and the role of the author as a mediator of testimonio to their audience. There are many contradictions present in testimonio: the blurring between fact and fiction, the impossibility of objective retelling and resulting subjectivity of experience and the tension between the literary and the literal. I do not aim to resolve this tension; rather to dive into its complexity to recover sites of reading truth and justice in new ways.

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Introduction

This thesis aims to provide accessible definitions and explanations of what testimonio is, and context to situate the conversation of testimonial migration narratives at the US-Mexico border. The primary method used to conduct this thesis is close reading, or literary analysis, of two main texts: *Tell Me How it Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* by Valeria Luiselli and *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail* by Óscar Martínez. There are three sections of close reading for each text which develop their main ideas and rhetorical strategies. The stakes of reading testimonio are high, therefore by engaging with testimonio, the reader takes on a form of a responsibility. The goal of this thesis is to explore what kind of responsibility the reader has to the text. I argue that just reading practices are necessary to navigate testimonial literature and propose possible methods of reading for justice.

Defining Testimonio

John Beverley, a Latin Americanist who has published many works on testimonio and subaltern studies, cautions that “any attempt to specify a generic definition for [testimonio], as I do here, is at best provisional, and at worst repressive” (31). I echo that sentiment in this thesis, and thus begin by clarifying that testimonio is constantly evolving and being generated by a diverse array of people in many creative forms. Here, I seek to provide a provisional definition of testimonio, informed by its history, the work of scholars, and its place within Latin American literary discourse, which for the specific purposes of this thesis is confined to the narratives being generated by the Central American refugee crisis at the US-Mexico border and from it in the last two decades.

Testimonio is a form of collective storytelling—usually a first person narrative in which an individual is centered to represent a marginalized community—that shares the act of bearing

witness to institutional oppression through the recounting of memories and real events. In polyphonic testimonios, compilers gather and incorporate many voices, bringing together diverse perspectives to represent one issue. A politically motivated form born out of social struggles, testimonio provides access to wider scale storytelling for those otherwise barred from literary and political discourse. The word ‘testimonio’ signifies not only a literary genre, but the Spanish word for ‘testimony.’ In legal discourse, testimony is an oral or written statement sworn under oath as an attestation to the truth. To testify is the act of providing evidence and corroborating information, with the goal of finding out the truth and creating a more complete picture of what occurred. The end goal is usually to not only learn the truth of what happened but to determine if a crime was committed and resolve the case. Legal testimony and testimonio can, at times, coincide. For example, when Rigoberta Menchú, a testimonio speaker, and other activists called for former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt and seven other Guatemalan military leaders to be tried by the high court in Spain for genocide and war crimes: “In a historic move, CJA brought over 40 indigenous Guatemalans to Madrid to testify about the atrocities they faced, marking the first time a national court had heard evidence from Maya survivors on Guatemala’s ‘Silent Holocaust’” (The Center for Justice and Accountability). Although the case was eventually tried in court and Montt was found guilty, the verdict was overturned in Guatemala three days later. This is a moment where speakers of and those represented by testimonio move into the legal space of testifying in court. The Guatemalan Maya genocide, brought to international attention by Menchú’s testimonio, is brought to attention again, with another call to action, this time legal justice being sought against the perpetrators.¹ Another example is in *Tell Me How it Ends*, in which Luiselli volunteers as a court interpreter for unaccompanied migrants. Here, testimony

¹ For other sources see: Burt and Estrada, L.A. Times

operates in two ways: a basis to building a case for the childrens' right to stay in the US, and Luiselli's method of crafting a testimonio to share with the general public.

Although there are spaces where these two forms of testimony can overlap and inform one another, comparing the two demonstrates how testimonio operates differently. Whereas testimony in a legal context relies on the gathering of specific evidence in an attempt to uncover the truth, testimonio operates as a way to access truths that we may never be able to corroborate or prove, but that we should engage with and validate nonetheless. For example, In 1998, anthropology professor David Stoll attacked the veracity of several aspects of Menchú's testimonio, such as claiming that she was not actually present at her brother's murder. It is important to recognize the collective experiences of trauma that testimonio represents:

“[Testimonio] carries assumptions about the narrator's responsibility to offer a plural perspective on community events, and to take on the role of witness for those who might otherwise be endangered by taking that position themselves” (Gilmore 60). Testimonio is not engaged in compiling specific evidence to uncover exactly how events unfolded, but to recreate the act of witnessing for a reader, from the subjective perspective of the speaker. Testimonio can represent inaccessible truths that may not fit the form of legal testimony, but are worth listening to and can incite action.

Testimonio is a reflexive form. It is aware of the subjective nature of “truth,” memory, and retelling. Memories can be muddied, warped by trauma and the passing of time. The age of the speaker and the stakes of the telling can play a role in the impossibility, as we will see in *Tell Me How it Ends*. Testimonio's distinctions from legal testimony and the pursuit of a capital T “Truth” are a part of its strength as a form. There are different spaces for different kinds of testimony and retelling, and they can all be important and serve different purposes. This legal

pursuit of piecing together a complete truth or story is already legitimized, and we need to do the same with testimonial fiction—literary and artistic pursuits of storytelling and sharing subjective truths. Testimonio, on the other hand, recognizes that sometimes a story will never be complete and a resolution may never be known.

Additionally, given that testimonio is a form constituted by an unresolvable tension between the literal and the literary, its themes often turn on aspects of textuality that are unrepresentable, unspeakable and unthinkable. Variations of these words and related concepts frequently arise in testimonio literature and scholarship. *Keywords in Latina/o Studies* describes this quality of unspeakability in the testimonial subject, for example, as having been “placed in a ‘border’ condition between official or hegemonic discourses,” and their role as a speaker as an “act of ‘coming to voice,’ of truth-telling and ‘speaking back’ to the social powers that be in order to transform [their] unspeakable experience of trauma into consciousness, collective memory, political action, and theory” (Cruz-Malavé 228). Here, sharing the unspeakable is a site of transformation. Rather than the individual bearing the weight of their traumatic experiences alone, through their testimonio, speakers can craft and share unthinkable stories, a productive way of bringing awareness and fulfilling political goals. These stories are unspeakable, or unthinkable, on multiple levels. The sharing of the unspeakable on the part of the speaker recreates the experience, not only for themselves, but for the interviewer or person they are speaking to, and then again for the reader or audience. The content of these stories, the unthinkable experiences retold, are uncomfortable and painful for all involved, albeit with different stakes for each participant. Recounting traumatic experiences of rape, violence and exploitation are not only emotionally difficult and socially stigmatized, but compounded by the

marginalized position—or “border” condition—of the speaker, which in the context of migration narratives includes the vulnerability of impending legal status.

Testimonio’s Historical and Scholarly Context

Testimonio finds its roots in translations of oral histories, where speakers have recounted their experiences of their witnessing of events. For example, during the early Latin American colonial period, the Inca chronicler Garcilaso de la Vega “subtly revised Spanish historians’ versions of the conquest” with the oral narratives of his friends, relatives and Inca nobility in his 1609 *Comentarios reales* (Cruz-Malavé 228).² Beverley determines that although testimonio-like texts “have existed for a long time at the margin of literature,” testimonio “coalesced as a new narrative genre in the 1960s” alongside armed liberation struggles in Cuba and other Latin American countries (31). While first officially recognized as a literary genre in 1970 through its inception as a category in Cuba’s Casa de las Américas annual literary contest, testimonio is the coalescence of oral narrative and written literature. As a form, it bridges the gap between a functionally illiterate speaker and the literary canon. As the transference from oral to written narrative occurs, the repeated testimonio moves beyond the community in which the injustice occurs and into the broader public—a larger, potentially international community.

Scholarship in Latin American studies describes testimonio as a subaltern form that sits in the margins of canonical literary discourse, given that it is issued from marginalized subjects. John Beverley’s work defines testimonio as a genre and form, tracing its development in its historical and political contexts, and reading primary texts, particularly *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Rigoberta Menchú, one of the most well-known examples of a

² Known as “the Inca,” his father was a Spanish conquistador and his mother Inca royalty. He was born in Peru and then spent much of his life in Spain, known for his chronicles of Inca culture and history. (See: University of Notre Dame)

testimonio speaker, is a Mayan K'iche' Guatemalan rights activist who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 for her work. Her testimonio details her experience of the genocide of Maya communities during the civil war, including the violent deaths of her family members.

In “The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio,” Beverley describes testimonio as an “extraliterary or even antiliterary form of discourse,” suggesting that it challenges existing definitions of what is “literary” (42). He compares it to other literary forms in order to explain what makes testimonio unique, and to help define it. He often compares testimonio to the novel and autobiography, arguing that those forms differ in part due to their status as bourgeois or middle to upper-class narratives. Beverley and other scholars constantly center the speaker of testimonio, making it clear that it is their story rather than the person physically recording it for them. He considers one important aspect of testimonio to be “[t]he erasure of authorial presence,” instead referring to the person writing the testimonio as a recorder or compiler, rather than an author, of the work (Beverley 35). In his definition of testimonio, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé describes testimonio as “the result of a rhetorically mediated, negotiated collaboration” between the speaker and compiler (229). I find the word “mediated” to be helpful for understanding the role of the testimonial compiler, as they are essentially the mediator, or bridge, between the speaker and their audience. The compiler may be more or less present in the narrative depending on what strategies are used to tell the testimonio. For example, in Menchu’s testimonio, the editor/compiler Elisabeth Burgos-Debray introduces the text and provides explanation for her editing choices, but then her voice disappears from it as the rest is told in the first person, from Menchú’s perspective. However, there are different levels of mediation or “authorial presence.” Both Martínez and Luiselli are certainly the authors of their texts, but also reproduce the testimonial subjects’ telling of their stories in the first person.

In “The Real Thing,” Beverley uses “the Real,” “the colonial construction of an Other” and the idea of the subaltern to understand testimonio (132). He describes testimonio as being a way to share experiences through “the Lacanian notion of the Real as that which resists symbolization absolutely—the unrepresentable” (Beverley 129). The idea of representing “the unrepresentable” connects to my questions about the “unthinkable.” Beverley considers testimonio as “the Real, the voice of the body in pain” suggesting that the method of recreating the experience of witnessing events through sensory description can represent the otherwise unrepresentable (138). His ideas about the colonial Other pertain to the relationship between the speaker of testimonio, the subaltern, and the translator/compiler of testimonio, coming from a position of privilege, power and having a place within the institution. The subaltern, a term used in postcolonial studies, refers to those people and voices structurally subordinate and thus typically excluded from politics and culture. Beverley engages with Gayatri Spivak’s theories about subalternity and her question of “can the subaltern speak?” to which she responds with a resounding “no.” The idea is that by “allowing or enabling the subaltern to speak” they are inherently no longer subaltern, but have become an other. Beverley writes that “almost by definition the subaltern... is not, and cannot be, adequately represented in literature or the university; that literature and the university are among the institutional practices that create and sustain subalternity” (133). Subalternity is marked by institutions like literature and academia, and when engaging with texts by subaltern subjects, that difference should be recognized. He would rather that speakers of testimonio be “radical others” than subsumed into the institution.

In the book *Thresholds of Illiteracy: Theory, Latin America, and the Crisis of Resistance*, Abraham Acosta demonstrates the many tensions present in testimonio, writing that, “despite the immediacy of any cultural or historical context, testimonio is ultimately bound to an inextricable,

internal contradiction (the literal and the literary)” (Acosta 129). Testimonio contains the literal or the real, in the sense that it is documenting true events, but through that documentation as a text or work of literature, it becomes literary. Acosta debates Beverley’s argument in “The Real Thing” that “the moment of testimonio is over...the state of emergency has passed” (138). Although he states that testimonio will live on in some form, Beverley claims that its critical value “has been exhausted” and Acosta questions this shift, wondering what it means for the future of testimonio discourse after “its abandonment by North American Latinamericanists” (Acosta 122). This thesis also questions Beverley’s pronouncement that testimonio is over, when there is so much evidence of continued production of testimonio and its relevance. While it seems that Beverley is focused on a certain era of testimonio, testimonio is still in use today, and there is an ongoing state of emergency that necessitates it. In testimonio discourse, much of the research is focused on Rigoberta Menchú and other Latin American examples of testimonio. This is useful for understanding both the origins of testimonio and some of the factors that caused the current migrant crisis we have today (like U.S. involvement in Central America), but it is also important to consider testimonio currently emerging and demanding our attention.

US-Mexico Border History and Migration Context

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to define us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. (Anzaldúa 3)

In her landmark Chicana Feminist book *La Frontera/Borderlands: A New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa traces a thread through her childhood growing up near the US-Mexico border and its history to explore the idea of a border culture and identity. The border is an “unnatural

boundary,” an imaginary line drawn and enforced by those in power, but a line that can change; a space that can and has changed hands many times. The in-between space of the borderland, a place where two or more countries, cultures and languages converge, create “a shock culture, a border culture, a third country, a closed country” (Anzaldúa 11). I find it important to situate my brief history of the US-Mexico border within Anzaldúa’s border theory, as her definitions and personal connections to the border capture what I cannot—the liminal feeling it can produce for those living in or crossing through the borderlands.

The US-Mexico border is a space that has undergone many physical changes to which many different people have laid claim to. The rigidity and intended purposes of the border have changed, with increased attention, politicization and policing in recent years around what has historically been a shifting and fluid space. Before European contact, the land was indigenous peoples’ land. Many different indigenous tribes have called that land home, and continue to call it home to this day, with the added difficulties of restricted access to their land, restricted movement across the border and the ecological impacts and physical disruptions from border wall development and increased border militarization. According to the Alianza Indígena Sin Fronteras/Indigenous Alliance Without Borders, there are 17 tribal nations directly affected by the border, and “[a]pproximately seven Indigenous peoples and their homelands were divided by the historical establishment of the U.S.-Mexico international border—the Yaqui / Yoeme, the O’odham, the Cocopah / Cucapá, the Kumeyaay / Kumiai, the Pai, the Apaches, and the Kickapoo / Kikapú” (2).

There are many fictions in the American creation myth. Two important elements of this mythos include a vision of empty land for the taking which is justified by Manifest Destiny. Another is a romanticized ideological cornerstone of US acquisition of the borderlands and the

West. This also relates to an incomplete picture of what European colonization looked like in the Americas, and how different colonial practices and interactions led to the US-Mexico border as it exists today. A little-recognized aspect of US history is the influence of Spanish colonization. Some of the first European colonizers in today's US land were Spanish, starting with Juan Ponce de León in 1513; other Spanish conquistadors followed, including Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca in 1527, who was the first European to travel across North America and chronicle that experience. While undertaking their colonial project of the Americas, Spain's focus was resource extraction, while England's was settler colonialism. One aspect that characterizes Spanish colonization is the conversion of indigenous peoples to Catholicism. This, in part, led to closer and more legitimized contact between the Spanish and indigenous people, and the emergence of a mestizo population. On the other hand, the English valued white supremacy and were focused on the segregation and eventual eradication of the indigenous peoples. Both the US and Mexico are systemically racist countries, but with different racial makeups. These differences are important to consider as they affect the dynamics and rhetoric of these neighboring countries to this day. A majority white US with white supremacist values vs. a majority mestizo/mixed race Mexico leads to racist stereotyping of Mexicans and fuels that continued belief in white superiority. Using white superiority as justification for taking Mexican land and keeping Mexicans out of the US is a tactic used since the colonial period and first formulations of the border. That same racist rhetoric is used today as an easy way to deflect US issues and blame them on others—in this case, immigrants.

Today's borderlands, much of the south and southwest of the US, then became Spanish, a part of its colony New Spain, until Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821. After the US-Mexico war (1846-1848) concluded with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (February 2,

1848) Mexico ceded about half of its territory and much of its resource rich land, including present-day states California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, most of Arizona and Colorado, and parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming (González 81).

Recently, immigration has been reignited as a divisive issue, and the U.S.-Mexico border has become a talking point for polarizing political rhetoric. Normalized by growing nativist and anti-immigrant opinions after 9/11, this rhetoric is made most visible with Trump's plan to build a wall and his racist proselytizing during his 2016 presidential campaign. Many Americans are unaware of U.S. involvement in Central American countries, including economic, political and military influences: foreign investment, coups, banana republics, the School of the Americas (known as the school of the assassins, or essentially a dictator training program for deployment in Central America), gangs, increasing violence forcing many to flee... all of these influences are exacerbated by extreme poverty and the COVID-19 pandemic. The U.S./Mexico border's history is one of migration and cross-cultural exchange. However, the nature of that migration has changed. Previously typically temporary, it is now criminalized, families separated, and the subjecting people to inhumane conditions through incarceration in detention centers.

Analysis

Tell Me How it Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions by Valeria Luiselli

Introduction—Author Bio and Context

Born in Mexico City, Valeria Luiselli grew up moving around the world, including South Korea, South Africa and India, before returning to Mexico City as a young adult. She now lives in New York City. She is the author of five books, including both fiction and non-fiction, essays and novels. She has been nominated for and received a variety of prestigious literary awards and accomplishments such as being an Art for Justice Bearing Witness Fellow in 2018, which she

received for her work on mass incarceration, specifically in detention centers, a MacArthur Fellowship in 2019, and the Dublin Literary Award in 2021 (among others) for her most recent novel, *The Lost Children Archive* (2019). Luiselli's peripatetic upbringing and commitment to social justice puts her in a unique position to sift through complex issues of migration, language and translation (Goodman; Brockes).

Tell Me How it Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions was published in April 2017, just four months into Trump's presidency. Luiselli began volunteering with migrant children in 2015, at a time when the demand for bilingual lawyers and court interpreters grew due to the Obama administration's 2014 "rocket docket." Before the immigration crisis was declared in 2014, unaccompanied minors had about a year to secure legal representation; with the implementation of the priority juvenile docket, the children now only had 21 days. Luiselli refers to the priority juvenile docket as "the government's coldest, cruelest possible answer to the arrival of refugee children" and "a backdoor escape route to avoid dealing with an impending reality" (41). The docket led to children being deported at a much faster rate, some even before they could secure representation. 21 days is an intentionally short period of time, designed to combat the influx of child migrants by "removing" them as quickly as possible.

At the end of the text, Luiselli includes a personal reflection dated 2017, specifically on Trump's inauguration and the hopelessness she felt at that time. However, she includes the good with the bad, and also speaks about moments of hope and compassion, like progress made with her students and positive updates about Manu, one of the unaccompanied minors she interviewed and stayed in touch with. In this way, Luiselli does not offer any solid resolution (nor does she ever promise to), but she does narrativize a key period in the current US immigration crisis, and bridge the gap between two political administrative eras: Obama's priority juvenile docket that

led to so many deportations, to the overt racism and xenophobia of Trump. Although most of the writing in her book occurs under Obama, it seems that she felt the outrage and urgency of Trump's presidency as the moment that demanded that this book be made public.

Section 1—The Unthinkable

In *Tell Me How it Ends*, Valeria Luiselli recounts her experience volunteering as an interpreter for unaccompanied migrant children appealing for “some form of immigration relief”—asylum or special immigrant juvenile (SIJ) status—in federal immigration court (8). The interpreters “screen” the children using an intake questionnaire of 40 questions, translating the children's responses from Spanish to English and recording them, aiming to collect biographical information that lawyers can then use to determine whether the children are eligible for legal sanctuary, and if so what kind. SIJ status is obtained by a family court determining that the child is unable to be reunited with at least one of their parents due to “abuse, abandonment, neglect, or a similar basis under state law, and that reunification or return to their home country is not in their best interest” (Luiselli 60). Asylum can be obtained if proven that one is fleeing persecution, or has a fear of future persecution “based on their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, and/or association with a particular social group” (Luiselli 60). In addition to the difficult necessity of proving the persecution is due to one of these specific categories, asylum also means that these children can never return to their home countries without jeopardizing their U.S. immigration status. After conducting the questionnaire, the interpreters compile their notes and present them to lawyers, who strategize the best course of action (whether to seek asylum or SIJ status, or other less common forms of relief, and determine if there is enough evidence to make a case) and attempt to secure pro bono legal representation for the children. To be eligible for asylum or SIJ status, the children must prove that they are fleeing persecution by recounting

the harm they have experienced in their home countries and on their journey to the United States. Luiselli writes that “the unthinkable circumstances the children are fleeing [include] extreme violence, persecution and coercion by gangs, mental and physical abuse, forced labor, neglect, abandonment” (Luiselli 12). It is clear throughout the essay that the content of these children’s stories is dark, and detail experiences that no child should have to face—there is no better word to capture these stories than “unthinkable”—they resist logical explanation or understanding in one’s mind. Here, Luiselli chooses “unthinkable,” in other places it’s “unimaginable” (18). I want to focus on the idea of the unthinkable, and close read this concept, one that Luiselli continually refers to throughout the text.

While considering the idea of the unthinkable in the context of Luiselli’s text, I also want to consider the definition of the word and what it signifies when applied to the detainment of unaccompanied migrant children. Unthinkable is defined as a situation, event or idea being too unlikely or undesirable to be considered a possibility; something incapable of being conceived, imagined or framed by thought. Unthinkable events are out of the question, they are inconceivable. There is a sort of paradox in the use of the word unthinkable here, as it both encompasses experiences which are incredibly difficult to conceive of and should not be happening to human beings, but are in fact occurring. In this context of witnessing events that we know are wrong, “unthinkable” acts as a stand in for words like uncomfortable, painful and difficult, or other emotions and reactions like shame and disgust. Detaining children in frigid detention centers without access to basic necessities is “unthinkable”—but not only can we imagine this situation, it is happening. The “unthinkable” is a part of our lived reality. It is morally wrong to detain children, but it is an aspect of our society that we are aware of and desensitized to. Current mainstream modes of accessing truths and information about what is

occurring at the border are not working. We need not only objective evidence like statistics and images, but empathetic storytelling told with urgency. This is where testimonio comes in as a form with the ability to disrupt and trouble our understanding and acceptance of our current reality.

Section 2—Metaphor of the Story and Narrative Cohesion

Luiselli not only documents the complicated system that unaccompanied child migrants navigate, but also her experience of attempting to piece together the stories of children who themselves do not have the words or narrative cohesion to explain what they have experienced. Reflecting on how difficult this process is and returning to the “unthinkable,” she writes: “Telling stories doesn’t solve anything, doesn’t reassemble broken lives. But perhaps it is a way of understanding the unthinkable” (Luiselli 69). Here, she acknowledges that the harm these children have experienced can never be undone. Telling stories is not a solution, but it might be one of the few tools available to even begin addressing the problem. When faced with a problem as consuming and colossal as this one, the first step is listening, and remembering these stories. How can we expect children to recount these unthinkable experiences? In a way, this expectation itself is unthinkable. We are asking them to do the impossible. Another close reading of this text in the essay “Uncommonplaces of Rhetoric” explains it this way: “the problem is that the children must navigate an unnarrativizable rhetorical terrain to make a claim for legal sanctuary” (Cortez and Kennedy 98). The “unthinkable,” which the children are expected to recount as the grounds for their appeal, is not, and could never be, narrativizable.

Luiselli structures the essay by using the format of the intake questionnaire she asked child migrants during her time volunteering as a court interpreter. The book is organized to follow the journey that these children take on, while Luiselli compares it to her own complex

situation with trying to stay in the United States, as well as the questions her daughter asks her. The title is an echo of her own daughter's concern about the child migrants, wanting to know how their story ends, and Luiselli's response that she doesn't know. In addition to these parallels—between her and the child migrants' very different experiences navigating the legal system and between her children and the children she translates for—a theme of the book is the concept of a story. She constantly returns to the idea of story, narrative order, and the complexity of these children's stories. She introduces these ideas right away:

My task there is a simple one: I interview children, following the intake questionnaire, and then translate their stories from Spanish to English...

But nothing is ever that simple. I hear words, spoken in the mouths of children, threaded in complex narratives. They are delivered with hesitance, sometimes distrust, always with fear. I have to transform them into written words, succinct sentences, and barren terms.

The children's stories are always shuffled, stuttered, always shattered beyond the repair of a narrative order. The problem with trying to tell their story is that it has no beginning, no middle, and no end. (Luiselli 7)

In this passage, Luiselli considers "story" as its own entity, she centers the words that these children speak in order to highlight how insurmountable a task telling their story is. Throughout this passage, she uses repetition and alliteration. First, she describes the process that she has been tasked with: turning those hesitantly spoken words into "written words, succinct sentences, and barren terms." In this line, she uses alliterative phrases to show how her job is an attempt to make sense of the children's stories, straighten them out and order them neatly on the page. The following, non alliterative phrase, "barren terms" breaks this neatness and represents the reality of the often sad and disturbing content of the stories of what these children have survived. In the

following sentence alliteration and repetition stand out in the words “always shuffled, stuttered, always shattered,” in which she again characterizes the words themselves and the way that the children speak them. This emphasizes the second half of the sentence, that their stories are broken “beyond the repair of a narrative order.” In this line, the idea of narrative order is introduced as a concept that people generally value when it comes to storytelling, perhaps especially in the heightened stakes of a legal context like the ones these children are in. The word “repair” suggests that narrative order is a way of fixing a story, a necessary step to putting the pieces together and creating balance. The final sentence of the paragraph directly responds to this, explaining that for these children, narrative order is not possible: “The problem with trying to tell their story is that it has no beginning, no middle, and no end.” She uses the simple, familiar concept of stories and their typical narrative order and presents it in the context of these children’s stories: an impossible expectation. This reference to narrative order in the context of children’s stories also conjures the idea of the usual simplicity of children’s books or stories, with a beginning, middle, and an end—often marked by their recognizable transitions (once upon a time, one day, and then, the end)—that guarantees a neat resolution. This beacon of childhood innocence juxtaposed with the task of storytelling that these children face further shows the impossibility of their situations, and how truly fractured their stories are. This sentence is key to understanding Luiselli’s text and argument that the current system is failing children by forcing them to do the impossible. These kinds of unthinkable stories cannot be told in a traditional linear construction, and what hinges on these stories is a burden that no one, let alone children, should bear.

Luiselli charts the journey that migrant children take, describing how once they have crossed the border, the children know that their best chance for not only surviving the desert, but also being reunited with family members, is to turn themselves into the border patrol. She writes:

If the legal proceedings don't begin now, their fate will be to remain undocumented, like many of their parents or adult relatives already in the United States. Life as an undocumented migrant is perhaps not worse than the life they are fleeing, but it is certainly not a life that anyone wants. (Luiselli 21)

She chooses not to expand on the undocumented migrant experience, but instead lets the reader fill in the gaps/infer what that life might be like. Here, Luiselli pushes against commonplace understanding of migrants by making clear that child migrants are not undocumented and do not want to be. The government is aware of their presence in the U.S., and they have certain rights which are being denied.³

Section 3—The Role of the Author...Testimonio Mediated through Luiselli

While I seek to define and clarify what testimonio is, and what the texts I am analyzing are, I do not wish to limit them or suggest that they cannot be described in a variety of ways. *Tell Me How it Ends* does not package itself as testimonio, but rather as an essay. This self-definition is applicable, and I consider the text to be both personal and political essay, and testimonio. The way that rhetorical strategies are employed across testimonio are varied, and the role of the author/compiler/interviewer/transcriber is as well. I have started to think through different forms of testimonio as being mediated or unmediated in different ways. *Tell Me How it Ends* includes excerpts of testimonio (first person recounting of experiences, shared in interviews with Luiselli

³ As outlined in "The Rights of Children in the Immigration Process:" "(1) access to relief in full and fair immigration proceedings; (2) detention in the least restrictive and most humane settings possible; and (3) legal representation in their immigration proceedings" (ACLU 1).

and reproduced in her book) alongside Luiselli's explanation of the legal proceedings and parallels to her own children and experience acquiring a green card.

Luiselli often reflects on the difficulty of the interview process as being both emotionally taxing, requiring extreme attention to detail, and the need to break questions down in ways that children understand, and then piece their fragmented responses together into a story. In the midst of these reflections, Luiselli writes, "During the interviews, I sometimes note the children's answers in the first person and sometimes in the third" (62). What follows is sixteen lines of the children's answers, alternating between first and third person, at times feeling like a call and response, their contradictions and switchbacks creating a patchwork quilt, the bits and pieces forming a glimpse into a child migrant's common narrative. The middle lines of this section read:

He has not ever met his father.

Yes I have met my mother.

But she doesn't remember the last time she saw her.

He doesn't know if she abandoned him.

She sent money every month.

No, my father didn't send money at all. (Luiselli 62-63)

One aspect of the Central American refugee crisis that Luiselli is vocal about—both in *Tell Me How it Ends* and in interviews—is the shame that she feels as a Mexican hearing about the atrocities that migrants suffer while crossing through her home country. She introduces this shame with question seven, "Did anything happen on your trip to the U.S. that scared you or hurt you?" "[A]s a Mexican, this is the question I feel most ashamed of, because what happens to children during their journey through Mexico is always worse than what happens anywhere else"

(25). Following this sentence is the indented, stand alone sentence: “The numbers tell horror stories” (25). This is a fascinating line within an essay that continuously grapples with the impossible task of crafting narratives from unspeakable experiences. The numbers offer devastating stories of their own, ones that are also difficult to comprehend, not only because of the stark horrors they represent, but because of their unthinkable scale. She lists some of this data, including information on rapes, abductions, and deaths and disappearances, doing so by making each category its own paragraph introduced with a colon.

She makes it clear that this shame she feels should extend to all of us—Mexicans and Americans alike—that see the injustice occurring at the border and within our countries and choose to ignore it. She returns to the idea of statistical horror stories five pages later, with the hauntingly powerful paragraph:

Numbers and maps tell horror stories, but the stories of deepest horror are perhaps those for which there are no numbers, no maps, no possible accountability, no words ever written or spoken. And perhaps the only way to grant any justice—were that even possible—is by hearing and recording those stories over and over again so that they come back, always to haunt and shame us. Because being aware of what is happening in our era and choosing to do nothing about it has become unacceptable. Because we cannot allow ourselves to go on normalizing horror and violence. Because we can all be held accountable if something happens under our noses and we don’t even look. (Luiselli 30)

After following the original simple sentence with raw data, offered with little emotion or extra information; letting the numbers speak for themselves. Now, this sentence is expanded and made more complex in order to reflect how the stories behind those numbers, the ones that we never get to hear, are the most horrible of all. She suggests that potentially the only avenue for justice

is to listen and repeat the stories that it is possible to access. These stories should “haunt and shame us.” She states in bold, clear terms that everyone should be outraged by this, should reject it and want change. Looking away is no longer an option. It’s the least we can do to pay attention to this situation, read and listen to these testimonies. This violence and suffering should have no place in this world, should be something we actively reject and fight against. The first step is to look at the stories of this suffering, repeat and share them.

So far, I have argued that testimonio is a way of accessing different kinds of truth, and a way to tell unthinkable stories. In *Tell Me How it Ends*, Luiselli uses the metaphor of a story and the lack of resolution or narrative cohesion to work through the unnarrativizable stories that unaccompanied migrant children tell. While Luiselli’s text and Martínez’s *The Beast* are both focused on migrants’ reasons for leaving their home countries and their traumatic experiences on the way to the US, Luiselli’s also documents the difficulty of navigating the court process and the stories being generated in that physical space. By contrast, Martínez records stories in very different spaces along the migrant trail—in shelters, small towns, deserts, or atop the Beast itself. Another connection between the two texts, and the nature of testimonial migration narratives in general, is the lack of endings, resolution, the state of not knowing. Luiselli doesn’t know the fate of the children that she speaks with—will they be deported? Allowed to stay, living with family that they’ve likely never met or were too young to remember? Martínez is left wondering when he has to part ways with three migrant brothers, which he stays in touch over text message, and the messages abruptly stop. Have they been kidnapped? Killed? Luiselli and Martínez are not only interviewers or transcribers, they are emotionally invested in the lives of the people they connect with, which they then transmit those emotions—fear, anxiety, hope—to their readers. These forms of writing are not an objective report or cold form, they are injected with the

emotions of the participants—migrants, then writers, and finally, us, the audience, as we experience those same emotions. In this next section, I will analyze *The Beast*, specifically looking at how Martínez recreates violence, the metaphor of the Beast as an equalizer and access point, and Martínez’s role as an author. Through this analysis, I plan to argue that we as readers can engage in socially just reading practices.

The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail by Óscar Martínez

Introduction—Author Bio and Context

Óscar Martínez, a Salvadoran investigative journalist, is known for his contributions to El Faro, Latin America’s first online newspaper, of which he is currently the editor-in-chief. In addition to his reporting on migration, Martínez’s work includes gangs, government corruption, and linking the two, like in 2022 when he and his brother Carlos published a report on El Salvador’s president Nayib Bukele (Linthicum).

The Beast was originally published as a series of articles on El Faro over the course of two years, which Martínez then compiled and published as a complete text, originally in Spanish in 2010, and then an edition translated into English in 2013. The book is a collection/culmination of Martínez’s time spent traveling alongside and interviewing Central American migrants on their journeys through Mexico to the United States. The title is a reference to la bestia, the system of railroad tracks that cross Mexico and which many migrants dangerously ride to make their way north. *The Beast* was originally published in Spanish as *Los migrantes que no importan* (the migrants that don’t matter), which I bring attention to first to highlight that this is a work in translation of which I’ve only read the English edition, and to bring attention to that original title, which I think better captures Martínez’s message. Although la bestia is a central theme of the

text, which Martínez portrays as a metaphor or method of access to these stories, one of his main goals is to highlight how migrants are treated as subhuman.

Section 1—Graphic Descriptions of Violence

Martínez begins *The Beast* by refuting the idea that migration is a choice. Rather than “migrate,” he often uses the term “flee” or “escape” to impart the level of desperation that leads to people taking on the journey north. Migrants have many different reasons for leaving their home countries, and in reality, it's often the combination of different factors and an overall reduced quality of life and threat to their livelihood that forces people to flee. Although some migrants leave in search of better economic opportunities, or in general, “una vida mejor” (a better life), many are forced to leave due to the threat of encroaching violence, coming from outside sources like gangs, and even within their own home, from members of their family. Martínez shows the extreme violence that migrants face, first as a push factor that forces them to leave their homes, and then as a danger that they face once they begin their journey north. Both *Tell Me How it Ends* and *The Beast* reference the same statistic—8 in 10 women are raped on their journey through Mexico. Women are well aware of this before taking on the journey, and many try to physically prepare themselves by taking contraceptives, and mentally by accepting that it will most likely happen to them. There's even a name for this, the framing of sexual violence as a way to survive: *cuerpomático*, as in, the body as a sort of credit card; putting oneself through hell in one aspect in the hopes of increasing the chance of survival and safe passage in others. Martínez makes grim realities like this tangible to an unfamiliar audience through his direct descriptions of violence, which recreate the experience for the reader.

Violence as a Push Factor for Fleeing

The first chapter of the book, “On the Road: Oaxaca” follows the story of three Guatemalan brothers that Martínez travels with and gets to know: Auner, El Chele and Pitbull. After their mother, Doña Silvia, witnesses a drive-by shooting of two gang members, she fears for her and her family’s safety and warns her sons to leave town. Shortly after they do so, she is killed in front of her home. Martínez describes how the death of gang members came as a shock to Doña Silvia, as her neighborhood had always been a peaceful one where children could play safely, up until the recently encroaching violence. Martínez describes in detail both Doña Silvia’s experience of witnessing the murders, and her own murder, set off from the preceding text in a paragraph of its own:

Doña Silvia Yolanda Alvárez died aged forty-four from two gunshot wounds to the head, one through her forehead and the other through her left temple. The murderers were two men. The getaway vehicle was a bicycle: one man pedaling, the other riding the back pegs. They stopped in front of Doña Silvia’s store where she was washing silverware on the sidewalk next to her brother. The two men walked past the brother and surrounded Doña Silvia. Then each of them shot her in the head. (Martínez 17)

Martínez begins the passage by using Doña Silvia’s full name. By identifying her specifically with both name and age, he does not allow her to fade namelessly into a sea of violence. Noting her age not only adds specificity but adds to the senselessness of this tragedy. She could, and should, have gone on to live a long and full life. Instead of an anonymous victim, as is so often the case, it is “the murderers,” the “two men,” who remain anonymous. Their efficient brutality is reflected in his concise language and short sentences, from the description of the two gunshot wounds to their manner of transportation and lack of ceremony. At the point that he describes “the getaway vehicle” as being a bicycle, the reader’s feeling of absurdity and despair grows.

The two men shooting her at the same time feels like a show of strength, an intimidation tactic. The casual way that these men brush past her brother and openly murder Doña Silvia shows the power that these gangs hold, their untouchability. This was no clandestine operation, and there's no need to hide, as there will be no consequences. This brazen murder also likely serves as a threat to her brother, and anyone else who witnesses it. Doña Silvia posed no threat to the two men or the gang that they represent. Her death is unthinkable, and its description rocks a reader to their core. Through his sparse language, Martínez makes no attempt to glorify or even make sense of her death. There are no words that can make it right, so he presents it to us, so that we too may experience the emotions of anger and frustration that stem from the killing of an innocent person.

Violence on the Journey North

In chapter 10, "The Narco Demand: Sonora," Martínez writes about the hold the narcos have on Mexico, and how drug trafficking increases violence against migrants. Migrants are physically vulnerable as they are often traveling through unfamiliar territory with little support. Their undocumented status makes them nobody in the eyes of the law, so even if reports are filed it is very rare that cases are sustained and any legal justice or retribution arises from them. Large groups of migrants are often kidnapped by narcos, held captive, tortured and extorted for all the money they have, and then their family members often in the US are contacted and blackmailed for more money for their loved ones' release. Martínez describes one of these mass kidnappings, and the frustrating outcomes from it:

[T]here had been a mass kidnapping of 300 Mexican and Central American migrants.

They were holed up in a narco ranch not far from the border. Nobody except for the priest, Prisciliano Peraza, knew anything of their whereabouts. Prisciliano negotiated the

release of 120 migrants with an unnamed narco. Most of them were beaten black and blue and had had their ankles broken by a bat. “Of the rest of them,” the other 180, the priest later told me, “I don’t know a thing. They refused to give them up.” (Martínez 186)

This passage is difficult to contend with in different ways than some other descriptions of violence are in the book, due to its scale and the unknowability of many people’s fate. It is difficult to have an audience connect with numbers rather than names. Based on Martínez’s continual use and repetition of names throughout the text, it is clear that he values the importance of making names known, and how unnamed migrants are a commonplace that get ignored by authorities and the public. Here, he works to be as specific as possible while working with little information. In the absence of names of any of the victims or survivors, he centers another name, Prisciliano Peraza, the priest, which helps the reader by giving them an individual to focus on. Later, Martínez explains the priest’s role and the layer of protection his status affords him. Although narcos are fairly indiscriminate about killing people, priests that stay in line are exempt. “He can talk more than the rest, but he can’t cross the line” (Martínez 195). Father Peraza is untouchable within reason, as long as he minds his place and doesn’t say too much against the narcos, and has the ability to negotiate with them. However, he’s not all powerful, and if the narcos refuse to release all of the migrants, that’s that. Father Peraza takes whatever victories he can, and sees even one migrant released as progress. Peraza’s words, “I don’t know a thing” sums up the frustration of too many situations. This passage represents violence that is inaccessible, and through the representation of a lack of information, allows the reader to wonder, and exist in a space of not knowing what happened. The good outcome in this situation is survival, albeit with debilitating injuries from severe beatings and broken ankles. For the 180 others, who knows? In the following paragraph, Martínez writes, “Nobody filed a single report.

No official denouncement was made. And nobody ever learned the fate of the 180 left back at the ranch” (186). He brings us back to that number again, highlighting that 180 people can go missing without an official investigation, and that these mass atrocities are commonplace in Mexico.

Section 2—The Metaphor of the Beast

The best place to chat with a migrant is on top of the hurtling train. You’re considered an equal there. You’re in their territory, and have, by boarding the train, signed a pact of solidarity...The pact ends when you get off the train. And then you have another opportunity to sign again, to get back on the train or not. (Martínez 54)

Martínez has signed this pact of solidarity eight times. The Beast, as the title promises, is a key part of the book, and a sort of mediator for storytelling itself, between Martínez and the migrants he interviews. Here, the use of the word “pact” is apt, as it is a serious decision to board the Beast. The Beast is another danger that migrants face, the fast-moving train which has claimed the arms, legs and lives of countless migrants. Exhaustion setting in and causing one to slip, or a foot accidentally resting on the wrong spot, any tiny mistake can be fatal atop the Beast. Although Martínez is very clear that the journey is different for him than it is for the migrants, it is his commitment to face the same dangers of the train that allows him to form a bond with migrants and hear their stories, where he would likely not be able to gain their trust as quickly elsewhere. By extension, readers sign a pact with Martínez, to continue reading, and with the speaker as well, to listen to their story. The Beast, simultaneously a space for Martínez to form connections with migrants, and one of much trauma and tragedy, is an iconic aspect of the migrant experience which Martínez skillfully reproduces for the reader through the stories he hears riding on it, or about it, from those who have barely escaped the tracks with their lives.

While the danger of the train makes everyone equal, Martínez makes clear that he is not riding for the same reasons as the migrants—he is not fleeing. He recognizes his privilege as a journalist, and uses it to make stories that would otherwise go untold, known to people who could never fathom them.

One aspect of the Beast that Martínez shows in addition to it as an access point for him to speak with migrants and hear their stories, is the Beast as a space where rapid decision making is essential. He recreates that decision making and the many questions that flash through one's head through his conversations with Wilber, a twenty-year-old Honduran guide for the undocumented across Mexico. He first uses Wilber's own words to explain how to board the train, and describes his own first attempt, which Wilber instructed him through, which resulted in him being dragged by the train until some migrants hopped down to help detangle him. Wilber also describes the train's instantaneous mutilation, through the story of a man whose leg is severed by the train. He calmly explains that, "he had enough time to see his chopped leg, think about it, and then put his head under the next wheel (Martínez 52). This story is paralleled a few pages later by Jaime's harrowing journey through the desert after losing a leg to the beast (54-57). Although he survived, he warns migrants to rest and try to take their time, to avoid what happened to him. Martínez represents the horrifying duality of the Beast, as a space in which he can gain the trust of migrants and talk easily with them, but the stories he often hears are about the devastation the Beast that they ride wreaks.

Section 3—The Role of the Author...Testimonio Mediated through Martínez

Martínez often reflects on his experience traveling the migrant trail "without even a whiff of the fear that migrants breathe daily" due to his protected status as a journalist (35). He thinks about how his own death—a death that comes with a name—would register very differently with

authorities and the public than it would with the death of migrants. Martínez is transparent about how he interviews migrants:

The trick, we've learned, is to talk about the trail, let them know that you know something about it, know its secrets, its dangers, that you know about the train and where it stops. This trick is getting past the initial response—'No problems, man. All fine so far, thanks to God'—which is always false, and to persist until the migrant starts talking about what he or she has actually been through. (119)

Whereas Martínez represents the Beast as an infallible way to connect and speak easily with migrants, it does not always go that way elsewhere. He describes how some migrants distrust and fear questions, and get away from them as quickly as they can. For those that stick around but are hesitant to speak, he has a "trick," to first show a bit of his own knowledge of the trail, and to persist past the initial and "always false" response that everything is going fine. If he can get through this first interaction, he can begin to truly hear the person's story, and eventually weave it into the larger story he collects from all of the interviews.

Another experience that Martínez records is the attempt to piece together stories of those who have died a nameless death. Even without a known name, he will collect whatever stories of the missing and dead that he can: "What's left of her are the few scraps of stories from people who had met her on the trail" (Martínez 29). Throughout the text, Martínez shows the importance of names through their constant repetition. In the absence of names, there are stories, and he refuses to allow anyone's memory to be forgotten when there is a snippet available for him to record. In *The Beast*, Martínez uses his privilege as a journalist traveling the migrant trail as a way to access unthinkable stories that would otherwise be completely inaccessible to a larger audience.

He does this by reproducing graphic violence to elicit an emotional response from readers, requiring readers to suspend their assumptions and actively engage and participate with the text.

Conclusion

When imagining the possibilities for justice, there are many perspectives and potential routes to consider. Determining what justice should look like is an overwhelming task. The first place that one often goes is to big ideas such as legal restitution and policy change. But how can we hold perpetrators accountable when whole countries and systems are responsible? Or, as Luiselli states, when we are all complicit? Testimonial narratives are a resource for accessing migrants' perspectives and should be used to inform U.S. policy making decisions, and for holding individuals and governments accountable for their actions. I encourage seeking these forms of justice and systemic change. However, justice can and should start at the individual level with us, the reader. Traditional forms of justice, those pursued in legal testimony and court procedures, are often inaccessible for speakers of testimonio. In the absence of these traditional forms of justice, what kinds of justice can we as readers seek through testimonio, or how can we read for justice? A book that asks these questions, *Can Literature Promote Justice?*, states that "the speaker is in fact addressing the specific human being who is reading the text, that those readers...enjoy more power and privilege than most people in the world, and that such readers have both the capacity and the concomitant responsibility to act ethically on the knowledge of injustice" (Nance 160). This relates back to the idea of the three participants in testimonio: the speaker, the compiler, and the reader, each with a responsibility to fulfill. For the reader, this means actively reading and engaging with the text, and then going out to act. In the conversation about Central American migrants in relation to the U.S.-Mexico border, this means recognizing migrants as human beings with rights and fighting to uphold those rights, changing the negative language around this issue, and refusing to accept this as our reality.

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