Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies, 2022
Vol. 6, No. 1, 34-57

Speaking a Motherless Tongue: Translation as Decolonial Praxis in Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*

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This article analyzes Valeria Luiselli's translation and interpretation process as documented in her 2017 essay *Tell Me How It Ends*. I combine decolonial theory with the first-hand knowledge of translation theory and the praxis of interpretation professionals in the US to examine the humanitarian, trauma-related, affective, creative, political, and ethical challenges faced by immigration court interpreters. This study deepens the conversation about whether Indigenous undocumented immigrant children, as speakers of "motherless tongues," can evoke their own stories of suffering and survival in the screening process used to evaluate eligibility to apply for legal status in the US. The analysis unfolds in three sections where it: (1) contextualizes the idea of the "motherless tongue" in relation to the silenced condition of children from countries with legacies of colonialism and US militarism; (2) examines Luiselli's humanizing strategies that use translation to deter "legal violence"; and (3) presents a decolonial approach to translation, where the translator dismantles the violent logic behind the euphemisms used in migration law and contexts of war. Building on Luiselli's experiences, I extend the analysis to community-based translation efforts led by professional Indigenous interpreters, pointing to the urgency of rethinking the role of translation and bilingualism in the construction of views on international migration outside academia and immigration law.

Keywords: translation, court interpretation, decolonial praxis, asylum, migration, state-sanctioned violence

Este artículo analiza el proceso de traducción e interpretación de Valeria Luiselli documentado en su ensayo de 2017 *Tell Me How It Ends*. El autor combina la teoría decolonial con el conocimiento de primera mano de la teoría de la traducción y la praxis de los profesionales de la interpretación en los Estados Unidos para examinar los desafíos humanitarios relacionados con el trauma, los afectivos, creativos, políticos y éticos que enfrentan los intérpretes de la corte de inmigración. Este estudio profundiza la cuestión de si los niños

DOI: 10.23870/marlas.392

inmigrantes indocumentados indígenas, como hablantes de "lenguas sin madre", pueden evocar sus propias historias de sufrimiento y supervivencia en el proceso de selección utilizado para evaluar la elegibilidad para solicitar el estatus legal en los Estados Unidos. El análisis se desarrolla en tres secciones: (1) se contextualiza la idea de la "lengua sin madre" en relación con la condición silenciada de los niños de países con legados de colonialismo y militarismo estadounidense; (2) se examinan las estrategias humanizadoras de Luiselli que utilizan la traducción para diluir la "violencia legal"; y (3) se presenta un enfoque decolonial de la traducción, donde el traductor desmonta la lógica violenta detrás de los eufemismos utilizados en el derecho migratorio y en contextos de guerra. Sobre la base de las experiencias de Luiselli, extiendo el análisis a los esfuerzos de traducción comunitarios dirigidos por intérpretes indígenas profesionales, señalando la urgencia de repensar el papel de la traducción y el bilingüismo en la construcción de perspectivas sobre la migración internacional fuera de los recintos de la academia y del derecho de inmigración.

Palabras clave: traducción, interpretación jurídica, praxis decolonial, asilo, migración, violencia ejercida por el Estado

Introduction

Let us begin by acknowledging that there is no act of translation that does not to some extent also contain a simultaneous act of interpreting a humanity in need of being seen and heard. In this sense, translation is an act of aid. Depending on the location and role of translation in society, for example in the medical field or the legal realm, the translator-interpreter can search for a voice and connect empathetically with the condition being translated. In situations in which human life, justice, or freedom are at stake in words and testimonies, the interpreter may experience a transformative process that brings a hurtful past to a cohesive present. We are confronted with this critical social facet of translation in Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends*: *An Essay in Forty Questions* (2017a), a powerful and affecting account of a volunteer interpreter working at an immigration court, interviewing and interpreting unaccompanied undocumented children and youth seeking asylum in the United States. Through a visceral lens deployed in four strategical time-places, Luiselli reflects on the ongoing violence faced by children from the beginning of their migration journey atop the wagons of the cargo train *La Bestia* up to the moment when they must answer to a legal system that perpetuates their condition of vulnerability.

The forty questions asked in the screening interview, which greatly determine children's chances of obtaining legal representation, are the structural foundation of Luiselli's essay. In principle, the forty questions are used to evaluate the children's eligibility to receive asylum based on the type of suffering they have experienced.

Luiselli breaks down the language used in the forty questions to show a subtext that conveys the dehumanizing condition of Mexican, Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran children and juveniles pushed to an extreme state of uncertainty and violence. The forty questions are also windows into the history of the United States, a shared, painful part of history through which Luiselli travels to understand the strong nativist views instilled in the hearts and minds of many Americans.

The book does not intend to "give voice to the voiceless"; it is a genre-bending narrative essay that conjoins the author's experience with those of the children and juveniles, whose lives intertwined through the act of translation. Within the essay, Luiselli's testimony unpacks a shared situation of desperation, fear, and indignation—one that, as I propose here, reveals how the translator-interpreter must commit to finding ways of learning what it is like to be a child pushed to an extreme state of silence. This silence is related to trauma and to the fact that these children come from countries whose history, languages, and realities have been shaped by colonialism and, most recently, by US militarism.

The violent effects of colonial legacies and militarism impose a complex linguistic dynamic where the dominant language absorbs the local languages, shifting their status in society to what Don Mee Choi calls "motherless tongues" (2020). Choi's considerations are especially suited to tackle some of the dynamics inherent to migration across the continent because her analysis values the innate transformational power of bilingual peoples living in precarious conditions. This subaltern condition and linguistic dynamic are exacerbated when children migrate to the US and are expected to speak for themselves and tell their stories of fleeing violence. Considering the affective and humanizing effort that Luiselli deploys in her work as a volunteer translator, my intent is to unpack her implicit decolonial approach to strategies of listening, conversing, and note-taking to show how this allowed her to mitigate the arbitrary evaluation of suffering to which the children are subjected. Based on this sort of evaluation, immigration lawyers choose which children have higher chances of acquiring legal status based on the type of suffering they have endured and the resources available to prove they would be in danger if they were deported.

Through my analysis of *Tell Me How It Ends*, I will examine how Luiselli shows us that the translator can also destabilize order and express translation as a humanitarian act. In a strict sense, translation is only half of the work, the other half implies finding a way to advocate for the children within the confines of the immigration system. To take on this task, I will follow Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh's decolonial category of *thinking-doing* to approach Luiselli's translation and interpretation process (2018). In a translation context, thinking-doing means going beyond bridging ideas and messages and acting on them, resisting a paradigm of physical and

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psychological oppression. By acting on her indignation and the suffering she and the children share, Luiselli exposes the inhumane reality of the asylum-seeking process. By bringing to the fore contradictions in the concept of asylum, she politicizes the affective aspect of translation. This allows me to interpret Luiselli's testimonial footprint in her essay and then reflect on broader issues in translation in the context of Indigenous immigrants in the US through the testimony of professional Zapotec trilingual translator and political activist Odilia Romero and her experience resisting Spanish-centered translation efforts.

My analysis will entail the following three sections. First, I will contextualize and relate Don Mee Choi's idea of the "motherless tongue" (2020) to the acute silenced condition of children escaping from colonized countries with a US military presence, such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—the area known as the Northern Triangle. Through Choi's theoretical insight on what it means to be born into the task of translator, the section also explores the many levels of translation at work when speaking with children who abruptly begin to transverse two dominant languages. Secondly, I examine Luiselli's humanizing strategies for articulating children's narratives. This section delves into the particularities of how she approaches talking and listening to children and her transformation from a "screener" into a listener, facing the complexities of evaluating children's suffering and the threat of danger in a humanizing manner. I examine how the author deals with the linguistic and trauma-related issues inherent in speaking with minors whose first language might not be Spanish and who distrust the legal system. Luiselli's approach shows how the evaluation of suffering translates to the normalization of suffering itself. Furthermore, I examine how the state defines human suffering and how such evaluation implies the normalization of what is acceptable violence and what is not. I follow the work of sociologists Celia Menjívar and Leisy J. Abrego and their category of "legal violence" (2012). More than a legal term, the sociologists use this concept to show how the state prolongs the violence against immigrants within the immigration system and ultimately pushes them to an extended condition of illegality. At the same time, when analyzing the normalization of suffering, I explore the role of translation in the process of deconstructing violence in times of "crisis" and conflict.

The third section presents how Luiselli transforms and decolonizes the act of translation, affirming children's voices, places, histories, and feelings through a translation process that is very similar to the act of storytelling. This understanding of translation—that it includes a component of storytelling—allows us to think of the translator as a sort of coauthor of these children's stories. As we will see, the act of listening and talking allowed Luiselli to *grieve*—using Cristina Rivera Garza's concept of collective grief (2020a)—with the children as the normalization of xenophobia and discrimination wages war on them. However, my intent is to build on Luiselli's experiences of resistance and her humanizing of the interview (screening) process,

and then extend this conversation to the community efforts Indigenous interpreters are creating through translation to fight for human and language rights.

What Is a "Motherless Tongue," and Can It be Translated?

The testimonial aspect of *Tell Me How It Ends* can be analyzed as an insightful and valuable meditation on translation as decolonial praxis, in the sense that while Luiselli documents the challenges in articulating children's narratives, she simultaneously reveals how the experience transformed her views as a Mexican immigrant (also applying for "permanent resident" status in the US at the time), a mother, and a writer, and prompted her realization that the so-called immigration "crisis" should enrage all of us. Acknowledging her own privilege and legal boundaries, Luiselli acts on her affective and empirical knowledge to transform her work inside and outside of court.

In terms of decolonial praxis, Luiselli's experience can be understood through what Mignolo and Walsh describe as a disruptive act, which begins by understanding that no one escapes the power and control of modernity and coloniality (2018, 125). The more Luiselli understands how cryptic and dehumanizing the process of applying for asylum is, the more she is aware that she cannot manipulate the children's stories to maximize their chances of obtaining legal representation and that manipulating the information she translates would be unethical and a breach of her duties.[1] However, deciding to take a stand against the disenfranchising facets of this process, and acknowledging that she had to connect emotionally and intellectually with the children as much as possible to find valuable information that could tip the scales in their favor, presented the author with an opportunity to think from and within the crisis. Luiselli underlines that one of the biggest obstacles to speaking with the children was trying to articulate their succinct "yes," "no," or unintelligible answers. This has nothing to do with their developing intellectual ability but rather stems from the fact many could be suffering from trauma due to the high risks of sexual crimes and physical violence to which women and children are exposed while riding *La Bestia* or crossing the Mexican border.[2] According to decolonial trauma studies scholar Aytak Akbari-Divabar:

[1] In "*Los niños perdidos*, de Valeria Luiselli: el intérprete ante las vidas 'dignas de duelo,' " Ilse Logie challenges the criticism Luiselli received around the issue of representation. Logie maintains that the author should not be accused of neutrality when it comes to presenting her political view from a privileged standpoint (2020, 113–114). I would add that Luiselli, in effect, challenges her limitations as an interpreter, and her testimony conveys the violent logic and practices throughout the children's apprehension at the border and trial process. *Tell Me How It Ends* is not about searching for the voices of the subaltern or "speaking" for them, but critiquing the apparatus targeting immigration.

[2] In " 'Salía de uno y metí en otro': Exploring the Migration-Violence Nexus Among Central American Women," Laurie Cook Heffron investigates the transnational nature of the violence

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> The traumatized person usually lacks the language to describe what happened, because what happened is beyond words and expression. But this is not a question of the inexpressibility of trauma. A politically traumatized individual comes face to face with vulnerability of all forms, with the violability of structures that she felt could protect her against what she considered a threat. The definitions of external and internal, friend and enemy, protector and violator, all the binaries that her identity was built upon, have been destroyed. (2016, 126)

The first step in Luiselli's personal transformation was to change her perspective on what she believed interviewing and talking to a child should consist of. She had to find a way to emulate talking, imagining, remembering, listening, and narrating as a child would. After the traumatic journey, the children fell silent, so Luiselli had to break that barrier of insecurity and somehow gain their trust. This is the moment when she realized her training as a writer and literary scholar could be useful on a creative level, even in her work as a volunteer court interpreter. She needed to craft a conversational strategy that would be of service to the children, and not the other way around, or in Mignolo and Walsh's words, find/make a rupture, a crack, in the oppressive mechanism (2018, 83). Luiselli had to find ways of untangling the children's stories without triggering traumatic episodes and inflicting more pain on them. This single action is in itself decolonial because Luiselli locates a crack in the impersonal and inhumane way of evaluating suffering embedded in the evaluation questionnaire.

As an example of the insensitive and inconclusive nature of the evaluation process and Luiselli's work with it: a question like "Did anything happen on your trip to the U.S. that scared you or hurt you?" (2017a, 28) can induce a self-evaluation of worthiness in a child, meaning that children already could feel responsible for whatever happened to them in their home countries. Another example is question number eight: "Has anyone hurt, threatened, or frightened you since you came to the U.S.?" (28). After all, the tense climate that these children endure during their time in the "icebox"[3] or in the courts only intensifies the feeling of guilt, inadequacy,

experienced by women before, during, and after migration. This qualitative approach sheds light on the traumatic events many women face, especially horrific situations where they suffer and/or witness sexual violence. This testimony elucidates why many women of all ages do not speak against this violence or report it: "*I heard that they were raping the women on the other side of the river. When they had raped them, they would throw them back into the river and the women would start yelling, 'help me, they just raped me,' or 'I'm hurt.' And you had to walk away. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't do anything, not even complain*" (2019, 691).

[3] Detention centers where immigrants are held after being arrested at the US-Mexico border. The word "icebox" draws from the Immigration and Costumes Enforcement agency's name,

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and self-criminalization. A child could understand an ambiguous question like the one above as entrapment. We can imagine how children may feel about giving details or oversharing with someone they do not know and thinking that it could jeopardize their chances of getting asylum. As Akbari-Divabar notes, one of the consequences of trauma is the survivor's inability to trust any figure representative of the law, as the concept of trust itself ceases to hold value because all the social binaries have been corrupted during and after a traumatic episode (2016, 126).

Luiselli subverts the arbitrary process of evaluation and worthiness. She converses with the children seeking a sense of familiarity, taking notes, thinking out loud with her niece (also a volunteer), trying to make sense of the ambiguities in the children's testimonies, and then transcribing answers, thus countering the atmosphere of frigidity on which the immigration system thrives. This act of compassion, care, and community-building helps resist the cruel reality of children taking on the most powerful justice system in the world. Although Luiselli realizes she cannot legally help the children, she develops an affective connection with them because, through her voice as a translator, she is telling and partly experiencing their stories.

On top of the challenges of creating a safe atmosphere during the interview, there is also a highly technical issue related to language in Luiselli's essay. In principle, the children come from Spanish-speaking countries, but Spanish is not necessarily their first language. The immigration system sees the migration "crisis" from a hegemonic point of view, failing to acknowledge the cultural and linguistic diversity within each country. As Luiselli makes clear throughout her essay, she worked with Indigenous children whose mother tongue could have been any of the thirty-one languages of the Mayan family, which divides into five groups spoken throughout Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize, for example (Pérez Suárez 2004).[4] As we investigate the situation, new questions begin to surface: Were children from Indigenous communities assisted by translators specialized in their language? What is the protocol for determining the refugee's mother tongue? How did the attorneys' offices handle these cases with or without the help of nonprofit organizations? Luiselli postulates that this critical dimension can constitute a possible violation of children's human rights. The level of psychological stress and vulnerability is extremely

also known as ICE. Refugees call these detention centers *hieleras* (iceboxes) because of the cold temperatures kept inside the facilities.

[4]The Director of the Center for Mayan Studies at UNAM, Tomás Pérez Suárez, notes that approximately five million people speak a Mayan language. However, precise geographical statistics regarding the exact location of the speaker communities are extremely hard to determine due to the international migration patterns at the beginning of the twenty-first century (2004). Considering the new wave of children and juvenile migration, now more than ever there is an urgent need for studies on this matter through transnational perspectives.

concerning, and it pushes us to question whether these children are capable of speaking for themselves.

A perfect example of how hard it can be to communicate with a refugee child is documented in the "Guatemalan girls" interview:

> Why did you come to the United States?
> I don't know.
> How did you travel here?
> A man brought us.
> A coyote?
> No, a man.
> Was he nice to you?
> Yes, he was nice, I think.
> And where did you cross the border?
> I don't know.
> Texas? Arizona?
> Yes! Texas Arizona. (2017a, 56)

Here, Luiselli deconstructs the question in hopes of finding details that can help her map the girls' physical trajectory, but it almost seems as if the answers just mirror the questions. From this example, we can say that perhaps the girls are purposely trying to avoid giving any information out of fear or, like most children their age (five and seven), they cannot articulate exact geographical descriptions beyond their familiar places such as home or school.

From another perspective, any type of speech is mediated by historical factors when facing the legal system of a country that has strong military ties in your home country. Luiselli investigates the impact of US militarism in Central American countries, critiques the geopolitical landscape, and singles out the problems rooted in militarization such as guerrilla warfare, drug trafficking, gang violence, economic destabilization, and dispossession (2017a, 85–86). These have all spurred continuous massive migration over the last four decades. Even though her critique is centered on US militarism, she does not overlook the Mexican government's recent role in trying to stop immigrants from reaching the US-Mexico border (2017a, 79). The children escaping violence, in fact, had no voice in their own countries to begin with, that is, in their own mother tongues. We have to consider what it means to be born in a country where US militarism has impacted the political, economic, and political climate.

In her brief yet powerful essay, *Translation Is a Mode=Translation Is an Anti-neocolonial Mode* (2020), Don Mee Choi writes about South Korea's history with US

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militarism. Although militarism may be experienced differently in Korea and Central American countries, Choi's provocative reflection sheds new light on the role of translation and bilingualism in countries forced to deal with the presence of US militarism: "Korean and the English . . . are misaligned by neocolonial war, militarism, and neoliberal economy. The two languages have very little in common linguistically, yet they are of one tongue, almost. Because in a neocolonial zone, as Deleuze and Guattari have already noted, 'there is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language' " (4–5).

Choi's reflection reminds us that the silencing of peoples starts long before the migration journey, and that, for Guatemalan, Salvadoran, Honduran children, coming to the US means continuing to speak what, following Choi, we could characterize as "the dominant language," which for them is a language infused with violence pushed by gang power dynamics. For example, the word "ganga" is a US implant that connotes terror; it is a borrowed and hispanized version of "gang." "Ganga" can be understood as a transnational term, a word that reflects the deep ties of the US with countries that struggle with the constant deportation of gang members who continue to support international criminal organizations such as the MS-13. The children in *Tell Me How It Ends* are all too familiar with the word and how it translates into everyday terror, extortion, child labor, sexual and psychological violence, murder, and so on.

Thus, for Luiselli, acting on her indignation, incapacity, and shared suffering means picking up on how each representation of fear (individual and collective) is at work in the way children speak about their lives and the dangers and poverty that have become the norm for them. For Choi, understanding the role of the "dominant language" means confronting the truth that people who have suffered colonization, imperialism, and militarism are forced to perpetuate the "power takeover": "Therefore, even within my so-called mother tongue, I was already born with a tongue with a task to translate, but motherless, and expelled from power" (2020, 7). Although the contemporary "power takeover" in this hemisphere is somewhat similar to Korea's history, in the Americas it is comprised of two stages: first with the Spanish colonization—through religion and the Spanish language, then through US imperialism and militarism in the form of capitalism and "military aid," followed by new forms of violence that are still going on today. For Indigenous peoples especially, we can see clearly that translation has always been a means of survival, creating a double existence. The history of the Americas is one of translation. Even when trying to flee the language of violence—the power takeover—the migration journey leads to the main site of power: the US.

In a full circle, ironically, people continue to arrive at world's most influential site of translation. In Choi's words:

> No one is immune from the power takeover. . . . My tongue and your tongue are already an aggregate, a site of multiple and collective enunciation. "There is no individual enunciation" as Deleuze and Guattari have said. I say, we are all floaters, we are all motherless translators. . . . This is why I think "Translation is a mode=Translation is an anticolonial mode" is relevant to all of us translators, editors, and publishers whether we are from here or elsewhere, whether we are foreigners or not, whether we speak silence, foreign words, jibberish [sic], or English. (2020, 7–19)

Choi's reflection resonates with Luiselli's experience as a migrant writer, a foreigner, and most importantly as a translator. In so many ways, Luiselli realizes that she is not exempt from the sense of powerlessness. She, like the Korean poet, embraces the idea that we are all translators of silence, our own silence. But in the trenches of today's prolonged tactics of militarism-disguised-as-humanitarianism, the power takeover threatens the future of children and juveniles. We have, again, reached a low point where the most vulnerable among vulnerable human beings are now motherless in every sense. Many of these children do not know where their immediate family is, have no motherland, and no mother tongue. These children have walked into an acute state of human silence.

This is a sort of blueprint of Valeria Luiselli's descent into that state of silence. We are following her footsteps as she opens the doors to the hallways and courtrooms of the state. Her walking us through the forty questions presents us with her reflection, even with her privileges, on also being a "motherless translator" and not immune to the power takeover. In the sections to come, my intention is to examine how Luiselli resists silence, immerses herself in the world, imagery, sounds, fear, pain, and memory of the children she interviews.

Border, Court, Home, Community: Movement

Luiselli's upbringing is nomadic.[5] As the daughter of a Mexican diplomat, her sense of belonging is profoundly rooted in her bilingualism. Having developed an extended

[5] Luiselli's nomadic lifestyle and the cosmopolitan essence of her work have long ignited a polemic discussion among Mexican and US academies. In the article, "Towards a Transnational Criticism: Bridging the Mexico-US Divide on Valeria Luiselli," Cheyla Rose Samuelson examines the work of Mexican and US-based critics who debate the hyperbolic praise or criticism around the bilingual author. Samuelson's incisive analysis shows that Luiselli's binational personal and literary identity is grounded in a strategic knowledge of the role of translation in transnational literature (2020, 184). Like Samuelson, I maintain that Luiselli is an intriguing and innovative eclectic writer whose work examines the multifaceted and multinational cultural complexities thriving in the US.

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sense of place through Spanish and English, she uses her two tongues to transgress borders, migrating physically and creatively.[6] *Tell Me How It Ends* is an essay conceived in movement. Movement, for Luiselli, is part of the creative act, a way of knowing. We can detect this throughout the formation of the essay's voice. I call it a voice because, even though we are situated in the essay form, Luiselli goes back and forth between presenting the children's voices and her own testimony, creating in this movement a prosthetic voice. This ambivalent situation transforms Luiselli's testimony into the perspective of an essayist-character. Although, technically, the other voices in the book resemble those of real children, protecting their identities also transforms them into anonymous character-like voices. In an interview with Radmila Stefkova, Luiselli explains why she chose the essay form as the medium to approaching her experience as a witness-participant:

> I think people must know what's going on in the courts of the USA. Some people go through the news, but it's never a thorough coverage. I was actually writing a novel about a group of seven children riding aboard "La Bestia," the train that crosses all of Mexico. I realized it wasn't working because I was so full of rage and confusion and pain that the fiction was striving to give a political message. Fiction shouldn't do that. Fiction can become extremely political, it can even become an agent of political change, but I think a novelist can never have the intellectual arrogance to think that his or her work can or should be the center of political change, message or teaching. An essayist, on the other hand, can seriously aspire to inform and give an opinion based on a thorough research. (Luiselli 2017b)

Torn between writing a novel or making a more explicit political statement by writing an essay, Luiselli translated her experience into a more concrete form of action. This is a decisive turn in her creative process which demands starting a conversation from and within a variety of disciplines and foci. This is an important matter that shows the urgency of the migration crisis.

Tell Me How It Ends is slowly receiving the attention of scholars in a variety of disciplines. An example of this is the article "Translating nations in a global era: Valeria Luiselli's approach to the child migrant crisis," where Latinx studies scholar Macarena García-Avello explores how Luiselli's testimony conveys the impact of nativist views and practices among citizens across the US, and the inhumane reception of migration issues when it comes to immigrants from the Global South in

[6] Regarding an interview with Luiselli, Úrsula Fuentesberain writes: "Luiselli está convencida que el vaivén entre el inglés y el español le enseñó el oficio de la escritura, pero sobre todo el de la reescritura. 'Cuando escribes bilingüemente estás editándote continuamente' " (2016).

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contrast to those of European origin (2020). From an ecocritical approach, in "The Sounds of the Desert: *Lost Children Archive* by Valeria Luiselli" (2021), migration studies scholar Emily C. Vázquez Enríquez examines the colonization of the desert as portrayed in Luiselli's latest novel, a book also situated in the migration crisis.[7]

The book's interconnective essence is its strategical deployment throughout its four chapters: "Border," "Court," "Home," and "Community." Luiselli travels across the US in hopes of understanding the magnitude of the problem by situating it outside the courts, in the world. The family road trip in which she frames her thinking and testimony is her attempt at grasping the political and public climate mirroring the inhumane treatment of immigrant children. In other words, the road trip is a grounding experience in which Luiselli confirms that the public does not know what it is like to be an immigrant, that people with strong nativist views do, in fact, perceive the refugees as invaders and as a threat to American society. Border, court, home, and community are categories that function like a frame of reference that Luiselli saw written on a chalkboard and which she later transformed to better understand how the children continued their journey even after reaching US soil (2017a, 41). This was important for Luiselli because it helped her understand the role of each of those places in the children's legal journey, and it helped untangle the stories that seemed to overlap and end in the same horrible scenarios.

Another factor to consider in the evaluation of children's suffering is the need for framing the uniqueness of their stories. According to Luiselli, voicing similar stories posed a serious problem when it came to presenting each child's individual narrative. The forty questions created a funnel effect, thus replicating a series of similar, generic stories. Generic stories, in the eyes of the judge, were treated as nonurgent situations. In order to challenge this negative outcome, Luiselli visualized collecting more unique stories by subtly directing the conversation to the four place categories: border, court, home, and community. A perfect example of this strategy at work is shown through Manu López's story, the sixteen-year-old Honduran who was attempting to escape gang violence. Manu exemplifies the distrustful immigrant who kept to himself and assumed that he was to blame for his unworthiness to be helped. Luiselli walks the streets of Hempstead, Long Island, tracing Manu's footsteps looking for any clues that could make his case stronger:

[7] *Lost Children Archive* is the novel to which Luiselli refers in the Stefkova interview (Luiselli 2017b). Luiselli's experience as a court interpreter is documented and intertwined with translation and her work of fiction, and it is a significant creative factor in her evolution as an international writer that can be traced in the following order: "Tell Me How It Ends," a shorter version of the essay (2016a), *Los niños perdidos (Un ensayo en cuarenta preguntas)* (2016b), *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (2017a), *Lost Children Archive* (2019a), *Desierto sonoro*, her *Lost Children Archive* cotranslated with Daniel Saldaña (2019b).

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> Everything runs smoothly until the lawyers ask if Manu is still enrolled in school. He is, he says. He's at Hempstead High School. But he wants to leave as soon as possible. . . . They remind him that if he was to be considered for any type of formal relief, he has to be enrolled in school. . . . Hempstead High School, he tells us, is a hub for MS-13 and Barrio 18. I go cold at hearing this statement, which he delivers in the tone one might use to talk about items in the supermarket. . . . Manu has good reasons to be afraid. Members of Barrio 18 beat him up . . . [and] he is missing his two front teeth. . . . Between Hempstead and Tegucigalpa there is a long chain of causes and effects. Both cities can be drawn on the same map: the map of violence related to drug trafficking. (2017a, 81–83)

Luiselli builds on Manu's testimony of danger and maps out the circular effect of gang violence from which he cannot seem to escape even after crossing three international borders. It is through Manu's voice and his wounded body that we also learn part of his story. Even in Hempstead, Manu feels the need to keep moving. Here, the border, Hempstead (community), and the court are conjoined by Luiselli's questioning and research. She continues to walk at Manu's side.

When translating Manu's voice and helping to articulate his story, Luiselli tries evoking his path, presenting what he sees and how he sees it. This intimate stance in translation is what Mireille Gansel explores in her memoir *Translation as Transhumance* (2017), reflecting on how translation is an act of movement where the translator bridges places, searching for the languages and voices of those silenced by violence; in translating, one acquires a deep knowledge of the other (92). But even when a language or the ability to speak are stymied by terror and trauma, Gansel proposes that one of the tasks of translation is, precisely, to translate silence. Translation involves reviving the past and finding that which is unspoken. The act of translation transforms the translator into a nomadic figure who must roam the archives, the places of historical significance, in search of clues that will yield an experience where translation meets the traces of human trauma. This approach in no way aspires to cure trauma, but it is a way, as Gansel notes, to transit, to keep memory alive in transhumance.

Luiselli engages with translation in a very similar way. She engages with Manu's situation on a personal level, learns the history of Hempstead and Tegucigalpa, and gets to know his family history as it transforms through migration. She understands why Manu can speak so stoically about his friend's murder or about the constant threat of sexual violence against his two cousins, Marta and Patricia (aged nineteen and fourteen, respectively), and the need to flee Hempstead High. In the author's words: "If this book is a translation, it is not foreignizing language, but domesticizing

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it. It brings something that is apparently foreign so close to the reader that they can realize it is not a foreign problem, not a distant thing; it's something that's right here, in front of us and part of us" (Luiselli 2017b). Luiselli translates unspoken information hoping to make it *our* information too. This is precisely what terrifies and outrages Luiselli—the fact that most media outlets portray the violence and crisis solely as a Latin American problem, and thus, normalize how US citizens consume and, in the process, consent to refusing asylum. In a 2018 letter to the editors of *The New York Review of Books*, seventy-nine intellectuals, activists, artists, and scholars, including Luiselli, warned of the dehumanizing and traumatic conditions in which children were being kept in the detention centers in Tornillo, Texas:

> The workers at the Tornillo camp, which was expanded in September to a capacity of 3,800, say that the longer a child remains in custody, the more likely he or she is to become traumatized or enter a state of depression. There are strict rules at such facilities: "Do not misbehave. Do not sit on the floor. Do not share your food. Do not use nicknames. Do not touch another child, even if that child is your *hermanito* or *hermanita* [younger sibling]. Also, it is best not to cry. Doing so might hurt your case." Can we imagine our own children being forced to go without hugging or being hugged, or even touching or sharing with their little brothers or sisters? (Manguel et al. 2018).

This excerpt condemns the physical and psychological violence perpetrated at Tornillo a year after the publication of *Tell Me How It Ends*. The letter underscores the cruel treatment of the children's feelings and emotions, and how officers instill fear in the children for expressing what they feel and their suffering by telling them it "might hurt your case." I also quote the letter because it shows Luiselli's ongoing transformation, her movement toward understanding and translating her own experience. She is in search of others who think like her, people trying to make sense of why we are complicit with this type of violence.

Let me be clear. Like Mignolo and Walsh (2018), I also believe that decolonization is a long process that involves transforming one's space and actions. We should constantly defy the forces that keep us in order within the state, and this includes the manifestations and products of our work. Luiselli's book is an important radical stance on the task of the translator. While she could easily just have written and published her novel on the seven children riding atop *La Bestia*, she instead realized that she had an ethical and moral responsibility to do more for these children. In other words, Luiselli's essay is more than an insight into an inhumane immigration system. It also shows that the act of translating can play a transcendental role in building concrete human rights efforts, and this is precisely what makes *Tell Me How*

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It Ends a disruptive act. Luiselli challenges the status quo of legal translation and interpretation praxis.

The importance of translation and interpretation intensifies at a community level where struggles for language and human rights go hand in hand. Odilia Romero,[8] a lifelong trilingual Zapotec interpreter, offers this valuable testimony that sheds light on this particular aspect:

> I've been an interpreter since I was little. I have interpreted for my parents, my family and I also worked for the Court of Los Angeles, the Department of Children and Family Services, the LAPD, and many other government offices. My generation became politicized around language because we were aware that it was through our language that we grew organized. Language put us on track to fight for our rights, dignity, and equality. I educated myself and with my brothers and sisters we embraced our language and Indigenous migrants' rights as our life motto. Within this, and other political processes, various community interpreter groups were born among the Mayans of Guatemala and Mexico. All these groups went on to work for their communities and governmental and educational branches. . . . My work has allowed me to personally witness many injustices against members of my community, many of whom, for example, had their children taken away for not speaking Spanish. I've analyzed the code of ethics observed by interpreters into Spanish and the mistakes they made. My critique of the migrant organizations is they don't attend to Indigenous migrants, and they categorize them as "Latinos" and therefore impose Spanish as the hegemonic language. (2022)[9]

There is so much at stake, so much to learn from professionals like Romero. Interpreters like her bring to light that translation-interpretation is and will continue to be a determining factor in securing and assessing the protection of human rights for those who possess a motherless tongue. Romero's translation efforts are strong

[8] Former Director of the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB), Odilia Romero is a community-based organizer whose projects help Indigenous immigrants in Los Angeles. Her programming and advocacy include offering language workshops to LAPD staff so that they can detect Indigenous languages spoken in the area and seek translation support to avoid communication issues. Her current organization, CIELO, offers legal translation and interpretation services and organizes international translation conferences on the training of Indigenous translators across the Americas. "With CIELO's help, the L.A. County Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a motion aimed at helping the Department of Children and Family Services better identify and support Indigenous families" (Muñoz 2022). See https://mycielo.org/

[9] Translations mine here and throughout.

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decolonizing actions with respect to the problematic effects of *latininidad*. Her critique of coloniality, to use Aníbal Quijano's concept at work within interpretation networks and migrant organizations, is essential for challenging the silencing practices still present in humanitarian work. The issues related to political identities such as "Hispanic," "Latino," "Latinx" intersect with complex issues beyond cultural identity, since such hegemonic labels erase Indigenous and Black identities, and their languages.

In *Tell Me How It Ends* we are witnesses to a milestone in Luiselli's literary trajectory. We readers and critics are invited to engage with a meditation on the creative act concerning the triad of artist-artifact-audience. Following the experience recounted in the book, Luiselli wonders what writing and consuming books about matters of life-or-death—and passively accepting the condition of these children—says about a society. Rather than thinking of writing and literature as a means for exploring a phenomenon, Luiselli experiments with thinking-doing and how writing and translation can bring people closer to understanding their personal role in the situations that shape our indifference to violence and the suffering of others.

This puts Luiselli in direct conversation with Cristina Rivera Garza's concept of grieving (2020a). Rivera Garza's take on the transformative power of rage, pain, indignation, and suffering has at its core the acceptance that war is being waged on us (i.e., the Mexican state's war on drugs launched by Felipe Calderón in 2006). Grieving (*dolerse*), for Rivera Garza, means to openly accept our loss, our mourning, in ways so that even the dead, the silenced, the oppressed, the tortured, and the disappeared will speak through their remains (2020a, 9). At the same time, to grieve out loud means to grow in community, a community she envisions as one that overcomes a terror-induced paralysis. Writing, for Rivera Garza, is no longer a solitary act between a writer and the concept of fiction. To grieve through writing means writing in community *with* the voices, the bodies stranded in the desert, the victims of femicide; it means processing the audio-visual data, headlines, all the information, and even artifacts like unclaimed personal belongings at local morgues; it is writing *with* the voices and not "giving voice" (2020b, 43-44).

In Luiselli's essay we find the voices of children with motherless tongues, forty official questions, a poorly written police report, two little girls with phone numbers sewn on their dresses, Manu's missing front teeth—all part of collective rage, fear, indignation, and suffering. These are the undocumented and unwanted bodies and their artifacts that also tell the story of dispossession, loss, and pain. So when Cristina Rivera Garza confronts the question of whether writing can, in fact, be something that acts against fear, I would add that translation can also act against fear and indignation. Or, in the words of poet and translator Sawako Nakayasu: "Say let in the light a different light translation. Say take space make space translation. Say translation as breathing

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room, say translation as breath, say translation as extension of life" (2020, 10). Luiselli's translation space brings to the fore new challenges regarding the voices of children, and the need to expand new ways in which translation, as Nakayasu proposes, allows making room for vital issues trapped between international conflicts.

In the luminous and thought-provoking book, *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account* (2018), Mona Baker examines the function of translators and interpreters in contexts of conflict. Baker maintains that translation is always a central source for the dissemination of narratives that present and justify the need for conflict abroad, and for this reason, translators play a key role in putting forth the stories that the military and civilians need for accepting the sacrifice of human lives between peoples who speak different languages (2). On the other hand, Baker also evaluates the humanitarian potential of translation for resisting manipulated stories and complex euphemisms imbedded in the act of mediating information and military objectives (4). Luiselli and thousands of professional translators are directly involved in a conflict of biopolitics of international dimensions; we cannot overlook that these children are also affected by the violence created by the so-called Mexican war on drugs because they are exposed to Mexico's active measures to deter the flow of migration, contraband, and cartel violence. As noted by Luiselli, the Mexican state is responsible for reducing the flow of Central American immigrants as they pass through Mexico. In other words, the US exercises its international power (political and financial) over Mexico to "control" migration caused, in many ways, by the violence fueled by the flow of American firearms to Mexico and Central America (Luiselli 2017a, 84–85).

Beyond the metaphor of war and language, translator-interpreters are resisting with immigrants who, in so many linguistic, semantic, and discursive ways, are being cast and cast out as a threat to the United States. If euphemisms like "tour," "alien," "intervention," "military aid," "crisis," and xenophobic discourses push agendas of biopower, then the translation of those words can expose how they exercise violence and power over the bodies and territories on which they stand. As a dissident and humanizing figure, a translator can choose to unpack the true meaning of such words. It is a matter of choosing whether a reporter, scholar, journalist, or public intellectual wants to be an agent of pain or to help people understand the power of those words. This is the work of translation in the realm of media. At the end of the day, as Choi posits with her argument, in the condition of the "power takeover," we are all motherless translators (2020, 7). We are all translating what is being translated for us.

"Screening": Thinking-Doing-Translating

Luiselli describes the interview process as: "a screening, a term that is as cynical as it is appropriate: the child a reel of footage, the translator-interpreter an obsolete

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apparatus used to channel that footage, the legal system, itself too out, too filthy and tattered to allow any clarity, any question to detail. Stories often become generalized, distorted, appear out of focus" (2017a, 11). The framing of this scene, through a corrupted and barren representation of the art of cinema, is Luiselli's way of expressing how her duties could be understood as a way of deciding which lives are worth more than others. Because, like any other euphemism birthed by the state, words such as the ones mentioned are designed to cover up the violence underlying an act and its motive. The verb "to screen" means to determine the character and capacity of something. Here, Luiselli is asked to help decide who might be worth saving. However, a screen (the noun) is a thing designed to stop something from moving—a sort of net, a filter, a cage. The second usage of the word "screen" is what the system thrives on, replicating violence, and maintaining a process that ascribes responsibility to the refugees for their vulnerable condition over which they have no control. "To screen" also dehumanizes the very essence of language by making it seem as if translation and therefore language are just tools to communicate order, politics, and power. Luiselli rejects the idea of being a tool of control.

In this last section, my aim is to show how Valeria Luiselli acts on challenges that arise in the screening process. In *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli begins her strategy by organizing her own working process. In pragmatic terms, she learns that it is better to prepare notes, do research on migration and war, write keywords, and then distance herself from the conversation to make sense of the missing details, contradictions, ambiguities, and silences (2017a, 7–45). No different than drafting a poem or a short story, the work at this stage resonates highly with a hyphenated Valeria Luiselli: writer-scholar. She uses this step in the screening process to humanize the children's voices by communicating with them, intently listening and talking, and not rushing translation to fill out a questionnaire. Listening is, as Gansel insists, a tool of apprenticeship: "Translation, like practicing scales, learning to listen, that never-ending fine-tuning of nuance. Translation is the clay from which one fashions their own voice" (2017, 19). Let us remember that in a screening and application process, time works against the children. The screening process is designed so that the translator-interpreter plays into the rushing of things, thereby limiting direct and meaningful human contact between the children and the state.

On a broader scale, Luiselli tells us about the devastating effects of the Priority Juvenile Docket policy passed during the Barack Obama administration. This law reduced the time children had for finding legal representation (pro bono) from 365 to 21 days. The large volume of cases and the limited number of lawyers trained to handle them prevent many children from finding representation, and they thus end up getting deported (Luiselli 2017a, 39). This kind of governmental action is what sociologists Cecilia Menjívar and Leisy J. Abrego call "legal violence" (2012, 1383). Legal procedures like the Priority Juvenile Docket are violent measures because they

"seek to punish the behaviors of undocumented immigrants but at the same time push them to spaces outside of the law" (1385). The Juvenile Docket is yet another cage. Menjívar and Abrego would argue that this measure hurts the children both mentally and symbolically, given that the "legality" that the state bestows on these laws penetrates different levels of society. Thus, it is no surprise that US citizens see inhuman measures like the caging of children as morally correct.

Violence in the legal process is also exercised in the gap between law and language, which widens when it comes to Indigenous peoples. The effects of legal violence extend outside immigration law in ways that are, again, closely related to language and translation. Odilia Romero offers this example:

> When I started interpreting, I noticed how a defense attorney would impose a middle-class perspective on a Zapotec family who recreated a community-like lifestyle in a context of migration. At some point, the children's attorney argued the parents suffered from an intellectual disability and, therefore, could not comprehend what he [the lawyer] was telling the parents. That's when I decided to quit. I could not be complicit or impartial. I could not be in the middle of this, where a just due process was not being provided for this Zapotec family. (Romero 2022)

Romero's experience and some of the children's experiences unveil the status of certain languages when compared to others. Zapotec stands in an unequal position compared to Spanish. Similarly, Spanish does not stand equal to English in the US. These linguistic inequalities permeate all systems. Romero and Luiselli put this into focus. Furthermore, the defense attorney blamed the parents for communication problems. It is cruel, to say the least, to build a case based on intellectual limitations. This goes to show that Indigenous peoples, as speakers of motherless tongues, are kept out of and silenced on both sides of the law. It is a form of legal violence and gatekeeping. People need to know and understand the legal system they are facing and the arguments their lawyers will use in their defense. To avoid the harmful effects of the gatekeeping of information, Luiselli proceeded to do the screening by following this sequence: "The first task is to articulate the questions in a way the children will understand, as well as humanizing the legal jargon of the questions I must ask. I must translate for them how the legal system works too, why they are there. Translate so they don't feel like subjects flying around in this strange unknown space. It is not transcription. . . . It's a translation on many different levels" (Luiselli 2017b).

Central to Luiselli's humane approach to the screening process is her poetic sensibility that allows her to embody a voice and momentarily inhabit a place. She intertwines her reception of the children's answers with a classification of the events in relation

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to real places, creating a space where the children's suffering and journeys are acknowledged. This can be perceived in this fragment of the essay that reads like a litany:

> I crossed the border by foot.
> She swam across the river.
> He comes from San Pedro Sula.
> She comes from Tegucigalpa.
> She comes from Guatemala City.
> He has not ever met his father.
> Yes, I have met my mother.
> But she doesn't remember the last time she saw her.
> She doesn't know if she abandoned him.
> She sent money every month.
> No, my father didn't send money at all.
> I worked in the fields, ten or maybe fifteen hours a day.
> The Ms-13 shot my sister. She died.
> Yes, my uncle hit me often.
> No, my grandmother never hit us. (2017a, 62–63)

The first person prevails over the third person perspective toward the end. The list captures the intensity and angst found in prayer, combining the voice that prays with that of the subject being prayed for. This movement between perspectives and mapping of places is symbolic of Luiselli's empathetic performance of otherness. It is, in the words of Nakayasu, to "say I'm not here just to close the distance translation" (2020, 17). We can say that switching between the first- and third-person perspective reflects Luiselli's personal commitment to recreating spaces, places, memories that can perhaps bring a fragmented story into a powerful vivid testimony. The author momentarily personifies the "I" in an attempt to embody the other, trying to make sense of the succinct, painful images she collects. The first person allows her to imagine what the child saw and lived in a more detailed way. Then, the third-person perspective is deployed to mark distinctions, separate the stories, evoke the names and places that map difficult and painful memories of an uncomfortable past. It is an affective and creative effort to imagine the places traveled through and situate children's voices in them. The back-and-forth effect between the first and third perspectives can also be representative of Luiselli's own personal processing of the trauma, learning how to grieve with others.

Conclusion

In Luiselli's essay we experience thinking through translation and learn of the psychological and affective implications of helping others articulate their stories in

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the face of trauma, fear, and violence. Through the testimonies and first-hand knowledge of professionals like Romero, we learn that translation theory and praxis and decolonial praxis can be two inseparable conduits for social change. Romero's and Luiselli's experiences accentuate the urgent need to rethink and transform how people are trained in translation theory and practice, so that translators can be better prepared to communicate in a more humane way with people in situations where fear or trauma might interfere with their ability to speak freely. In this sense, court interpretation also means translating nonverbal ways of communication (or information), as we learned with the cases of Manu and the two Guatemalan sisters, to maximize the chances of people getting a fair trial.

In terms of Luiselli's writing, *Tell Me How It Ends* represents the author's deep reflection on what is means to be a bilingual and bicultural writer living in the US and refusing to distance herself from what is happening in Mexico and the hemisphere. Certainly, she is not the first writer to do so, nor will she be the last, but in Luiselli we can see more clearly that in her literary project translation works as a meditational space where the author reflects on how violence, silence, and other nonverbal ways of communicating are transforming what we understand as literary voice. Similarly to Cristina Rivera Garza, Luiselli pushes the boundaries of how the author appropriates the sounds, artifacts, images and even the voices and circumstances of others searching for the most profound sense of community in a globalized and hyper individualistically driven society.

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