Literatures of Immigration:

The Ethicality of Depicting Migrant Stories

by

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the tensions between fact and fiction—reportage, memoir and creative writing. It provides broad context and reconceptualizes the way that migrant narratives can be read and written. Through close-reading, interviews with journalists and authors, and transcribed conversations with migrants/refugees, it demonstrates the importance of storytelling at the border and anticipates more compassionate ways of telling stories. It weaves critical analysis of form with personal reporting and reflection. Ultimately, it reflects on what literary writing can learn from journalism. It invites readers to question what might make journalism about immigration more readable and honest.

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Chapter 1: Theory of Storytelling

Introduction

In 1966, journalist Gay Talese wrote a profile on Frank Sinatra that gripped national audiences by telling everyone that the singer had a cold. The *Esquire* sent Talese to Los Angeles to write about Sinatra, but Sinatra wouldn't do an interview with him (Talese was told by multiple people that Sinatra had a cold). Instead of getting discouraged, however, Talese proceeded with interviews. He met with people in Sinatra's orbit—his record company, his son, his bodyguard. From these conversations, he amassed various facts about Sinatra's character. Most importantly, however, he was told repeatedly that Sinatra did, in fact, have a cold, and that Sinatra was difficult to be around when he was sick (Talese). Talese was never able to interview Sinatra, but his piece—"Frank Sinatra Has a Cold"—is now touted as a pioneer work of "New Journalism," an American literary movement in the 1960s and '70s that pushed the boundaries of traditional journalism and non-fiction writing (Talese).

Talese describes his writing process as being part of an "autobiographical book" that he's constantly writing (Talese). He uses his voice to reflect his own concentrated listening and observing of the world around him. In a *Literary Hub* article published in December 2021, he writes that he's "far less interested in the exact words that c[ome] out of people's mouths than in the essence of their meaning" (Talese). Working on his project about Sinatra, Talese stayed in Los Angeles for weeks, and the budget of the final article was close to $5,000 (Talese). Talese never interviewed Sinatra, but by observing and listening at the edges of Sinatra's world, he was able to convey elements of Sinatra's personality that extended and superseded conventional journalism practices. Other literary writers with a background in journalism in this era followed suit—Hunter S. Thompson, Truman Capote, Joan Didion, among others (Lindley). They all

worked against traditional journalistic convention to provide creative interpretations of real life situations. These "genre-straddling" journalists broke boundaries, and opened up narrative methods to convey deeper human realities (Lindley). New Journalism allowed for the depiction of stories in ways that a conventional interview could not. It demonstrated just how much can be gained by watching and listening to the world (Talese).

Since the beginning of journalistic tradition, writers have struggled to work within the constraints of the field. Journalism is a form of storytelling. As such, it makes sense that it sometimes ventures into expository and aestheticized forms. There are things that can and can't be said in journalism, and things that can and can't be said in fiction (Lindley). Far before New Journalism, however, there have been questions about the contrast between fiction and non-fiction, and tension about the best way to present a picture of both individual human experiences and of the world. There is debate about what's real, what's truthful, and about how we read different types of narrative.

This thesis takes genre-straddling ideas of New Journalism to argue for the power of fluidity of form and reading across genre to depict other peoples' trauma and stories, specifically around immigration. As someone who has spent time volunteering at the U.S.-Mexico border and reading journalism and fiction about immigration, I'm particularly interested in the way that New Journalism practices straddle literary and memoir genres, and offer a meaningful way to depict social realities. The questions I pose, then, are equally related to memoir, fiction, and journalism. Though journalism isn't a literary genre, per say, I argue that it's important to think about it as such. Stories are the voices and personas of everyone around us.

In the following pages, I consider the ways that various writers work with the stories of others. My first chapter, "Journalism/Memoir Practices Surrounding Immigration," provides an

academic overview of common journalistic practices and then analyzes the way that two memoirs—*The Undocumented Americans* by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, and *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches From the American Border* by Francisco Cantú—use personal narrative to illuminate political realities about immigration. My second chapter, "Creative/Literary Practices Surrounding Immigration," delves into how creativity supplements non-fiction. I look at how two works of fiction and one work of poetry—*Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* by Yuri Herrera, *Lost Children Archive* by Valeria Luiselli, and *Unaccompanied* by Javier Zamora—allow for writers to communicate compelling information that strikes at universal themes. My final chapter, "Personal/Creative Transcripts," is a bare transcription of some of the nearly 100 interviews I conducted during my work at the border this summer and winter. This part of my thesis is a statement about the impossibility of ever fully encompassing a migrant's story, or understanding their trauma/grief. What lies at the heart of my work are first-person interviews—with journalists, authors, and migrants. These voices inform and shape my discussion and reflection about the ethics of representation.

Theories Surrounding Journalism, Memoir, and Fiction

Because journalism practices are dramatically shifting and changing, pieces like Talese's "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" are no longer feasible. The incredibly time-consuming and costly nature of his project would be unrealistic in modern journalistic spheres. What is emerging and continuing from New Journalism practices, however, is the genre of creative non-fiction—which pushes the boundaries of traditional quotation and interviewing, and veers into subjective reflection. Vivian Gornick—an essayist and memoirist who emerged in the 1960s and is known for combining personal and political realms of storytelling—coins the term "personal journalism" (Farber and Gornick 133). In "The Reliable Reporter and the Untrustworthy

Narrator," she writes that "the task of the non-fiction writer is the same as the task of the fiction writer" (268). She recognizes the inherent differences between non-fiction and fiction, but argues that "they are more similar than dissimilar in that both are concerned with trying to shape a piece of experience, tell a story, arrive at wisdom, arrive at some truth" (269). She touches on the way that political, personal, and metaphorical spheres interact and work off each other:

> It just seemed natural from the minute I sat down at the typewriter to use myself —that is, my own response to a circumstance or an event —as a means of interpretation, a way of making some larger sense of things. And, of course, it was at that time a shared instinct: many other writers felt similarly compelled. The personal had become political, and the headlines metaphorical. We all felt implicated. We all felt immediate experience signified. Wherever a writer looked there was a narrative line to be drawn from the political tale being told on a march, at a party, an encounter on the freeway (269).

There are dangers and risks with personal journalism. (When it first emerged, it received a significant amount of criticism.) Authors must maintain the right balance between themselves and their story. Journalistic writing can't devolve into personal reflection or overly romanticized prose. There should be some level of detachment when dealing with other peoples' experiences and issues, in order to commit a standard of sensitivity and care. Good writing, however, is honest, and honestly engages with the world. The reality of all writing is that it is a lens through which the world is filtered. The author *is* the story. Because the writing process involves reflecting and investigating world themes, there is power in the way that a writer's experience, personality, and perspective fuses to depict a reality (Gornick 277). I see merit in Gornick's assessment that writers of all forms are affected by their own experience of the world:

> The writer experiences something outside himself, but the way in which he experiences it becomes the subject as much as the thing being examined. This, in non-fiction as well as in fiction, is world revealed through self. The presence of the writer makes the essay literature. From journalism to the essay to the memoir: the trip being taken by a non-fiction writer deepens and turns ever more inward (277-278).

Above all, when dealing with traumatic realities like migration, the writer must be honest with the material they are dealing with and their positionality to it. In this vein, I am investigating what truths different ethically-committed forms of storytelling offer us. While no distinct form offers a truth, what do they each offer respectively and what do they offer when they are combined? First, how do we read journalism, what is lacking in these shorter narratives, and how can the traumatic experiences of others ever be adequately represented? Conversely, what does journalism offer? Then, how do we read memoir, and what does a personal account of a story tell us? What exists in fictionalized work about migration that might make migrant narratives more interesting, readable, and honest? Lastly, what are the ethical implications surrounding different types of truth about real events, and how do different kinds of narrative—fictional and non-fictional—enhance and inhibit our understandings?

What does journalism bring to the representation of migration, and what does it lack?

With a strict commitment to accuracy, journalism privileges facts, compromising a certain degree of emotion. In their book *The Elements of Journalism*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel identify ten essential journalistic practices. The first element they discuss is journalism's obligation to the truth. They write that, above all, it is a pursuit of "the truths which we can operate on a day-to-day basis" (Kovach & Rosenstiel 52). Journalists, they argue, rely on professional discipline to verify information (Kovach & Rosenstiel 52). However, because a

journalist must make decisions about what to and what not to include, he or she can never be completely objective, according to Walter Dean, the director of the Committee of Concerned Journalists (Walter).[1] What separates journalistic work from other forms of storytelling and communication is a discipline to accuracy—asking for all opinions, giving as much information on sources as possible, fact-checking, etc. Kovach and Rosenstiel stress the importance of journalism to disseminate information: “Out of necessity, citizens and societies depend on accurate and reliable accounts of events” (51). Though journalistic writing can never be *completely* objective, its *methods* are neutral (Walter). Kovach and Rostenstiel recognize that “truth” is convoluted and ill-defined, but argue that journalism gets the closest to presenting it:

> The truth is a complicated and sometimes contradictory phenomenon, but if it is seen as a process over time, journalism can get at it: first by stripping information of any attached misinformation, disinformation, or self-promoting bias and then by letting the community react in the sorting-out process that ensues. (54).

According to Miriam Jordan, a national correspondent for *The New York Times*, however, the average person reading the news on a daily basis doesn’t have an understanding of the complexities of migration. In an interview I conducted with her on November 4, 2021, she explained: “The average person consumes messages about immigration from news on television and online, which is typically gleaned quickly—because the immigration ‘problem,’ particularly at the border, as most people see it, is just the same or worse. That assumption hinders most people from actually paying attention to details or to being more curious about what is currently unfolding.” She suggested that a reader who wishes to get a full understanding of migration

[1] The Committee of Concerned Journalists (which started in the 1990s and dissolved in 2011) was a consortium of reporters, editors, producers, owners and publishers that facilitated a discussion among thousands of journalists about what they did, how they did it, and why it was important (Walter).

would benefit from reading in-depth pieces in national outlets like *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *ProPublica*, *The Atlantic*, and *New Yorker* (Jordan). There are several nonpartisan think tanks that regularly produce research and analysis on migration as well, including the Pew Research Center and Migration Policy Institute (Jordan).

Thomas E. Patterson discusses journalistic truth in his book *Informing the News: The Need for Knowledge-Based Journalism.* Patterson embraces knowledge as a tool of reporting—both *content* knowledge of the subject being reported on and *process* knowledge of how reporting methods affect impact. He writes that when journalists speak of the "truth" in news, they have one concept in mind—pure, hard facts (Patterson). Fact checkers, he claims, verify that sources are accurate and that details in the story actually happened, but they can never fully grasp whether the story is "true" in totality (Patterson). "A story can be accurate in its particulars—what was said, when and where it happened, who witnessed it, and so on—and yet falter as a whole," he argues (Patterson).

Journalism places a high imperative on facts, but in so doing, may lose sight of the emotional imperative that these types of stories necessitate. Journalism is storytelling within defined boundaries. Often, articles are written based on a few limited interactions with someone. Not every article can go deep into the root causes of immigration—people fleeing COVID-decimated economies, gang violence in countries run by corrupt leaders, climate crises. Also, because many Americans don't have the time or energy to read long, analytical stories, concise reporting is often demanded by editors (Jordan). Without full and analytical attention devoted to depicting emotional realities, how adequate are journalistic narratives for the purpose of representing the human experience? In her field, Miriam Jordan is a leading example of empathetic journalistic practices. She tries to elicit empathy while also staying neutral:

> My compassion undergirds every piece of enterprise reporting that I choose to do that tells the story of people. Words illicit sympathy, struggle tugs at the heartstring of readers. However, I am doing my job best if I am not appearing to take sides or pushing a view of the world… I believe in maintaining a certain distance and neutrality. Good pieces of journalism leave readers scratching their heads, trying to decide for themselves what is right or wrong, fair or not, realizing that nothing is black and white (Jordan).

Jordan's commitment to honesty—she doesn't misquote people, invent scenes, or forge extra characters—implies a certain selectivity of narrative. Reducing a person's story to words inherently robs it of nuance; those speaking may not even recognize the way that they appear on paper. Moving beyond non-fiction convention, however, is tricky. Non-fiction writers who divert their narratives to more creative paths must be extra careful not to disfigure, dismember, or re-shape their subjects' lives too much.

What does memoir bring to the representation of migration, and what does it lack?

In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network,* Caroline Levine writes that "no form, however seemingly powerful, causes, dominates, or organizes all others" (16). Similarly, in *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts, and the Power of Narrative*, Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis discuss the power of various forms of storytelling, analyzing contemporary literature and visual arts across various media (film, photography, performance). They write that narrative "is bound up with power," then reflect on how various types of storytelling portray different experiences of violence and trauma (2). According to them, there are "multiple ways in which contemporary arts engage with ethical issues as they work with, draw on and contribute to our historical and narrative imagination—to our existence as historical beings who are constituted in culturally mediated narrative webs" (2). In her analysis of form, Levine also delves into various

forms of literature—poetry, fiction, etc.—in conversation with one another, and argues that, "The form that best captures the experience of colliding forms is narrative" (19). She explains:

> What narrative form affords is a careful attention to the ways in which forms come together, and to what happens when and after they meet. Narratives are especially appealing for a skeptical formalist reader because they tend to present causality metonymically, through sequences of events, rather than by positing some originarv cause… Narratives are valuable heuristic forms, then, because they can set in motion multiple social forms and track them as they cooperate, come into conflict, and overlap, without positing an ultimate cause (Levin 19).

Memoir is a powerful method of narrative practice. A memoirist openly expresses how they engage with the world. Analyzing the memoir as form in "Mediated and Unmediated Access to the Past: Assessing the Memoir as Literary Genre," Jūra Avižienis argues that memoir is neither history nor memory, but rooted in both (39). Avižienis cites Marcus Billson and Francis Russell Hart, who critique memoir for its lack of methodological rigor and for inserting personal interpretation and fictionalization onto historical events. What is so powerful about memoir as a form of narrative is this very process: "Memoirs offer an alternative access and a unique opportunity for coming to terms with the past, whether personal or public/collective" (Avižienis 40). An element of fictionalization is necessary when memoirs try to "re-live the past," but Avižienis writes that, "Neither the historical text nor its narrator the historian seeks to create the illusion that it is the past; rather, it distances itself from the past, very clearly stating its situatedness in the present" (44). A memoirist's varying narration style—enacting events through personal interpretation—invites empathy from the reader. In contrast, a journalist is merely a

spectator to people and events. While there is an inherent feeling of exteriority in journalism, there is an inherent feeling of interiority that is created through memoir writing:

> The memoirist…represents the events from both within and without, as lived by herself in the first person (this is *her* legitimization—she was there; she witnessed the events first-hand) but also outside of the action—in the subsequent moment of writing. By inviting the reader to experience the actions along with her, she asks the reader to identify with her —both as protagonist-witness living the events and as narrator-spectator recalling and narrating them (Avižienis 46).

What does fiction bring to the representation of migration, and what does it lack?

Contemporary Mexican author Yuri Herrera addresses migrant narratives through literary writing, using fiction to talk about politics and history. His works are known for narrativizing resistance to state violence at the US-Mexico border and his poetic style brings out heartbreaking social realities that invite readers to reflect on the full migrant experience. He claims that all writers add something to the realities they depict, and therefore all writing is inherently political. In an interview I conducted with him on May 13, 2021, he elaborated:

> Literature is always adding something else to reality, not reflecting it. It includes emotions and reflections in its re-creation and re-representation of reality. If you agree on this, then every time you talk about reality—through science fiction or poetry—you're always somehow talking about real events in your life and in the world. And if you agree that it's not a mirror but a re-creation, then you're always putting something from yourself that is political. How do you put yourself in society? How do you understand gender? How do you understand power? Justice? Inequality?

Herrera said that writing allows him to understand “the complexity of emotions” and “the inner engines of the soul.” In *The Fiction of Relationship*, Arnold Weinstein emphasizes the role of fiction to demonstrate that the self is part of a larger world. He writes that “we read novels in order to see more…we achieve love and knowledge only by stretching the self, opening it to the world of others, establishing through our energy or our love or our life some link with those others” (307). It’s true that we live through our own perceptions. There is something powerful, then, in assuming the identity or bearing witness to the experience of the “other.” This is “how the self may apprehend—with joy or with misery, as heaven or as hell—the larger configuration of which it is a part; how the self goes about the world taking measure—of itself and of its world—finding what it can assimilate, what it must avoid, what it can invent” (308).

But how can it ever be possible to transform the grittiness of life into a made-up story? When can creating a fictionalized interpretation of an intense experience shift from well-intentioned to appropriative and extrapolating? Jeanne Cummins’ novel *American Dirt* falls into this category for many people. Published in 2019, *American Dirt* received backlash on Twitter and other social media platforms for being stereotypical and selfishly opportunistic. Jeanne Cummins herself is white, and the controversy around her book—about a Mexican woman who migrates across the country after her husband is killed by a cartel member—sparked nation-wide discussions about whose story should be told, and who can do the storytelling. To many, Cummins is capitalizing off of the trauma of an experience that isn’t her own. This perspective brings up important themes about the ethics of representation.

While there is a danger in creating fictional worlds to discuss deep political issues, fiction undeniably illuminates elements of the human experience that may otherwise remain in the dark. We learn from fiction—gaining strategies for how to live, and weighing and comparing our

decisions with the characters we grow attached to. In *Fictions of the Self, 1550-1800*, Arnold Weinstein writes that "fiction tells us about coping," and argues that self-realization is an inherent part of reading novels. Fiction provides a space to delve into the unsaid and uncensored elements of society (like the harshest realities of the migrant experience). It constantly surprises us, drags us around, and makes us think critically about the world and our place in it.

What are the ethical implications surrounding different types of truth about real events?

Storytelling matters because it provides a window into truth and can effect change. However, with power also comes responsibility. Its various forms—journalism, memoir and fiction—can be used or abused. Storytelling practices "may be the vehicle of simplifications, obfuscations, or plain lies that corrupt our moral standing" (Meretoja and Davis 1).

The aim of eliciting empathy can sometimes go too far. Herrera, when discussing his writing practices with me, stressed the importance of respecting certain boundaries in regards to storytelling: "I'm all for transparency and information, but it's not okay to treat other people's bodies as meat. That is pornography. Pornography of violence…As a writer, you can fill in the gaps, but you have to be humble enough to know when it's naive and pretentious to try to explain things that you simply cannot explain. You have to respect that." Herrera touches on the way that media practices profit off depictions of violence, which can appear strangely fascinating to certain audiences.[2]

Many literary theorists are skeptical of memoir as a method for conveying accuracy. In "Politics and Autobiography: Political Memoir as Polygenre," scholar George Egerton suggests that memoir has a tendency of combining history and fiction liberally, which can be dangerous.

[2] Ultimately, this thesis only scratches the surface of the danger of careless depictions of violence in the media. It examines only literary narratives and articles about immigration; it doesn't even begin to dive into the ways that digital broadcasting advances biases, or the effect that photos can have on how migrants are framed in the public eye (Farris and Mohamed).

Historians frequently critique this practice. Egerton writes: “If the elastic and expedient conception of truth exhibited by many memoirists suggests the appropriateness of fictional categories for appraisal, generally historians are reluctant to follow literary critics too far down this path” (237). According to his analysis, personal historiography can be prey to “distortions” (237), and “‘truthfulness’… however old fashioned, ultimately stands as a fundamental critical concern in the evaluation of memoirs” (237). Egerton argues that credibility of memoir is enhanced through writing that is supplemented with documentation. Memoirs composed “from reminiscence” (237), he says, cannot stand alone as credible records of a lived experience. There is a reason we have memoir and history as different forms. While memoir has historical elements to it, it is not *history* in the sense that historians define history.

In journalism, stricter methods and practices also have the ability to ethically intrude on someone else’s lived experience. While delivering “truth” is the ultimate goal for journalists, sometimes it can have unintended consequences or can be harmful to someone’s claim for protection, or asylum, in the United States. For example, Jordan said that many times parents cross the border with children and tell her that they came “por la necesidad” (for necessity) or “por la pobreza” (because of poverty). This explanation could potentially undermine their case later in front of an immigration judge (Jordan). Asylum-seekers must prove they are fleeing prosecution based on race, gender, political ideology, or being part of a designated group—not just because they want fuller lives with more economic opportunity (Resendiz).

Comparing journalism, memoir, and fiction allows for an understanding of how different kinds of narrative—fictional and non-fictional—enhance and inhibit our perspectives on immigration. Like Herrera, Meretoja and Davis begin their discussion with the acknowledgment that “there are no ethically neutral narratives” in storytelling practices (Meretoja and Davis 7). In

fact, narratives inform our understanding of ethics: “We may learn from literature and visual arts not only new perspectives on our ethical dilemmas but even new insights into what ethics means” (Meretoja and Davis 8). Writing about someone else’s lived experience, an author is intimately involved but unable to share in the complete narrative or story of the subject. And in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, storytelling about others holds even greater importance. The increased accessibility to information and dissemination of quick facts strengthens our responsibility and complicity in writing and reading narratives about people around us—understanding how words convey truths in the lives of real people.

Chapter 2: Journalism/Memoir Practices Surrounding Immigration

Introduction

Narratives that report and express truth using unconventional forms are able to capture different aspects of the migrant experience. Though stylistically different, the only way to get a full sense of the emotional and political nuance of migration is by reading various methods of truth and representation in conversation and association with each other. This chapter questions what it means to read journalism and memoir together, suggesting that reading across genres and combining genres—including genres that aren't literary—is a unique way of creating a more accurate and textured representation of the migrant experience.

First, I will provide an overview of common journalistic practices surrounding immigration, and then I will analyze two memoirs that creatively push the boundaries of non-fiction work—Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's 2020 *The Undocumented Americans* and Francisco Cantú's 2018 *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border*. These two memoirs work across genre, adding elements of creative storytelling to lived experience. Both are written by people directly influenced by and embedded in the immigration system, and based on the authors' own positionalities. Their fluidity of style becomes a vehicle for self-reflection, as opposed to an attempt to provide an accurate or compelling picture of an individual, or to shed light on someone else's experience and pain. Written by two very different actors in the immigration situation—an undocumented migrant woman and an ex-Border Patrol agent—comparing these two works with journalistic practices allows for an understanding of how putting together elements from creative writing and journalism brings a story to life. Reading the memoirs with journalistic critiques allows for an even stronger reflection about what is gained

through synthetic reading and writing about the institutional practices and failures of the U.S. immigration system.

Journalistic Practices

There is a connection between the empathy that migrant narratives elicit and resulting immigration reform. Though media portrayal of migrants isn't the principal influencer in legislative debates about immigration, it does play an important role in influencing public opinion and policy decisions (Suro 1). In a 2009 report by the Migrant Policy Institute, however, Roberto Suro writes about the failure of immigration journalism: "Deeply ingrained practices in American journalism have produced a narrative that conditions the public to associate immigration with illegality, crisis, controversy, and government failure" (Suro 1). Even with increased awareness about ethical reporting and storytelling in recent years, there is room for improvement.

In 2021, Internews released a study revealing shortcomings in U.S. immigration coverage, examining media from January 2017 to August 2020 (Gerson et al.). The research team looked at a total of 4,735 stories, which they deemed "the most impactful, visible, and accessible stories upholding journalistic values covering migration" (Gerson et al.). They found a number of issues: coverage mainly focused on storylines where migrants lacked agency, reporting overemphasized the border region instead of other states affected by immigration, a small number of authors reported on immigration, and national news outlets in major media centers dominated migrant narratives (Gerson et al.). Researchers point out that special news outlets and organizations have been created to report on other major issues—health care, education, criminal justice, gun violence, poverty—but not on immigration (Gerson et al.). To address these shortcomings, they suggest building stronger relationships with existing

community migrant-serving outlets, expanding coverage to include more humanizing stories, and creating global knowledge-sharing media networks across borders (Gerson et al.). As Internews argues, investing in journalism about immigration will only benefit U.S. citizens, by creating a pathway for robust and comprehensive policy solutions (Gerson et al.).

However, there is a difference between agenda setting and unbiased news reporting. According to director of the Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics Diana C. Mutz, most media content comes from political elites. Mutz writes: “In today’s more heavily partisan media climate, it seems less likely that a) all Americans get the same basic information about elite positions on issues from media, and b) that media passively relay information to their audiences without producing any independent impact on opinions” (Mutz 3). One story can be told in two ways and elicit very different responses. By giving certain news items more airtime, publications can create and maintain stereotypes.

In the case of immigration journalism, human interest narratives are often most common (Mutz 4). Mutz describes migrant narratives as being based on three things: where migrants came from and why they left, what happened to them along their journey, and what they hope will happen upon arriving at their destination (4). Individual narratives are the most effective way of producing emotions of empathy and concern, and when a narrative has an element of universality, it is even more effective: “Appeals using universal life experiences such as people’s roles as parents and children, difficulties providing for one’s family, etc., thus become very important to connecting people to immigrants’ experiences” (Mutz 6). In “Public Attitudes Toward Immigration,” Jens Hainmueller and Daniel J. Hopkins highlight this trend of the appeal for “universality,” writing that a video of a migrant speaking English with an accent created increased support for an undocumented individual’s pathway to citizenship, in contrast to an

English speaker with a non-native accent (Hainmueller and Hopkins). They write that this reaction is "likely because [the migrant's] effort to speak English triggers positive associations about immigrant assimilation" (Hainmueller and Hopkins). How the media portrays migrants, and which migrants they chose to portray, affects public opinion (Hainmueller and Hopkins).

Mutz points out that negative information sticks in peoples' brains more than positive information. She connects this to evolution, emphasizing how being able to react quickly to negatives in our environments used to be a biological strength. Negative discourse about immigration can be used to perpetuate anti-migrant sentiment, but it can also be used to generate sympathy (Mutz). By highlighting intense scenes of violence and trauma, journalists can connect with an innate part of the human conscience and more readily demonstrate the significance and urgency of the issues they're covering (Mutz). A study by The Migration Policy Institute seeks to answer this question of how and why migrant narratives take hold. One of its core eight findings is that both positive and negative narratives use a moral framework: "Both welcoming and restrictive narratives can be rooted in a view of what is right—for instance, calling for generosity or compassion toward refugees because of humanitarian values, or arguing for penalties for irregular or unauthorized immigrants because of a commitment to law and order" (Banulesco-Bogdan et al.). How can a journalist or publication separate political beliefs and personal ideologies from their writing? How can readers, then, distinguish when the media is providing unbiased news and information?

Julia Preston covered immigration for *The New York Times* for ten years and now works with *The Marshall Project*, a nonprofit news organization that covers the U.S. criminal justice system. She distinguishes between what a *journalist* is supposed to do for a migrant and what an *attorney/advocate* is supposed to do. In an interview I conducted with her on October 15, 2021,

she explained that the job of a journalist is to listen and to have an open mind about the migrant's experience:

> As a journalist, I have a responsibility to be very conscious of the story I'm trying to tell. I'm not trying to filter this story through my political beliefs or I'm not tailoring this story to the framework of law. I'm trying to make an assessment of what is the most important story—what people need to know and don't. Then, I'm trying to step back and just ask the questions that will make it most easy for the migrant to tell their story. What happened to them? What's on their mind? (Preston).

Like Jordan, Preston talked about what she often couldn't include when she was working with *The Times*. Because she was held to such strict word limitations and restrictions, she explained that a major part of her work was thinking about how she could "crystalize and synthesize" a person's story (Preston). She still maintains a strong commitment to finding the expressions in an interview that she "feel[s] are closest to the essence of their (the interviewee's) story" (Preston). She even describes the details that she can't include as "angels"—significant, compelling, revealing and moving parts of her narratives that she has to throw out. "I have a whole heaven full of angels of words that people said that I made a decision not to include in the story, sometimes with great reluctance," she said (Preston).

Since switching from *The New York Times* to work with *The Marshall Project* in 2016, Preston has fewer stories to write and more freedom as a result. This allows her to be intentional, and to expand on details. Still, she is wary of her own positionality and the risk of including too many details in a story (Preston). "Journalists have a huge responsibility to understand and think about how they are entering that situation, and how they can approach someone so that person can feel that they can express their story," she said. She describes the act of interviewing as "an

imperfect exercise” (Preston). When talking to migrants, Preston herself isn’t hungry, desperate, or afraid. She hasn’t spent time in custody. Her vulnerability in those moments, she said, is “negligible in comparison to the vulnerability to those migrants” (Preston). Holding such a powerful position while talking to migrant families and individuals, Preston tries to keep herself accountable. She avoids harm at all costs. Though she might have a specific vision or need for a story, she tries to not appropriate another person’s words (Preston). She thinks that silence is sometimes a more powerful means of respecting another person’s story. “I was willing to set some things aside that I really wanted to publish because I thought that it might not represent fairly what my experience is with that person,” she said (Preston).

In *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts, and the Power of Narrative*, Robert Eaglestone discusses the interrelationship between trauma, narrative, and ethics. He writes that there is an inherent connectedness in narratives about trauma. Narratives help us order and make sense of our lives. According to Eaglestone, “stories shape us and educate us in the virtues but also that we ‘project’ ourselves into our envisioned stories and so, as it were, let the stories shape our behavior and the kind of people we are” (Eaglestone 61). Journalism is not just informative—it can offer readers humanity, bind people together, and provide support and hope. Preston, for example, thinks the most gratifying part of her job is the hope that she gets from talking to people. “These are people who are motivated by hope,” she said. “They are driven by hope to do these things that you just can’t even imagine… so I get to talk to these folks and hear about the terrible things that have happened to them. But they shower you with optimism and hope, and it’s so inspiring” (Preston). Preston, in a way, learns and gains from the attitudes and perseverance of the people that she interviews. This just makes her want to work harder to help, she said. She writes to make the system better for the people that she interviews, partly because

they are driven and inspired by the prospect of a better future (Preston). Her words have some sway in shaping and forming that future.

What happens, however, under strict journalistic constraints? What is lacking in these types of journalistic practices? Monitoring the type of migrant story that is published is an important way to ensure balanced reporting. Stories would be enriched by focusing not just on simple facts—where migrants came from, what happened to them along their journey, and what they hope will happen upon arriving at their destination—but also on nuanced and systemic issues of education, housing, arts and religion. There is a need for stories that elicit empathy through negative rhetoric and violence, but also that demonstrate people in totality—examples of migrant artists, business men, doctors, and professionals. Stories should also include more context on the gendered, racialized, and economic histories that led up to existing border politics. If narratives are constructed on the basis that migration is a "problem" that needs to be fixed, migration becomes something to mitigate, as opposed to an opportunity that could open up possibility (Triandafyllidou 2). Additionally, instead of political elite journalists, there should be support for more working-class and migrant journalists.

In such a constrained field, there should be more experimentation with the possibility of combining journalism and more fluid, creative forms. Merretoja and Davis recognize this importance, writing that "intellectual work in the humanities and creative work in the arts both contribute to our faltering yet urgent ethical inquiries, despite and because of their variety and contradictions" (7). This chapter demonstrates that autobiographical narrators—both migrants and observers—can provide a truth that is animated by fiction memory. Thoughtful and reliable narrators depend on a readiness to enter a space where writers connect with their subjects in

unexpected ways. This connects narrators to their stories, and brings the harsh realities of the world to readers.

Memoir—The Undocumented Americans (Karla Cornejo Villavicencio—2020)

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio blends memoir and fiction. She infuses journalistic practices with prose, creating a captivating, emotional, and raw narrative that conveys the migrant experience from her eyes. When Villavicencio was 18 months old, her parents left her in Ecuador to go to the United States. She writes openly about how this affected her mental health as an adult, articulating the reality for thousands of young children who face the long-lasting effects of being separated from their parents due to harsh immigration policies. She describes them as an army of mutants: “We’ve all been changed by this monster, and our brains are forever changed, and we all have trees without branches in there, and what will happen to us? Who will we become? Who will take care of us?” (61).

Because of her close positionality and shared identities with the people that she talks to, Villavicencio is able to have conversations and convey truths that many wouldn’t be able to. Karla Cornejo Villavicencio’s background allows her to simultaneously empathize and relate to the migrant stories that she weaves together, while also articulating them with grace, ease, and visibility. Villavicencio was brought back to the United States when she was four or five years old. She was one of the first undocumented students to be accepted to Harvard University, where she wrote an article for the *Daily Beast* about her experience as an undocumented student. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the American Studies program at Yale.

Immigration journalist Caitlin Dickerson, also from *The New York Times,* writes about the irony of Villavicencio’s background, pointing out that Villavicencio represents a very small sampling of migrant children who are able to speak about their experiences (Dickerson 2020):

> It's odd that despite the ongoing upheaval over the future of the United States as a nation of immigrants, those whose livelihoods are being debated—as in, will they one day be granted a pathway to citizenship, or forced onto a plane with a one-way ticket out of the country—rarely have the opportunity to speak for themselves from a meaningful platform. Those who do get the chance are often expected to conform to liberal America's strict definition of brown perfection: always grateful, never entitled, burning the midnight oil to earn perfect grades that will get them into an elite college and, later, a prestigious yet morally laudable career path like medicine or public interest law, so they can one day repay their equally perfect parents who sacrificed everything to give them a better life in the United States. These young immigrants are, ahem, universally and exceptionally *articulate*.

As Dickerson argues, Villavicencio fits into this category. She's "made it" in a traditional sense—she's appeased her parents, she's gotten into the highest institutions, she's worked hard and seen her work pay off. Her story makes readers wonder about the ones who didn't get the chance, who didn't conform to "liberal America's strict definition of brown perfection." Still, for how much Villavicencio fits into the category of "brown perfection," she also defies it through the honesty of her prose. Because she is so open and honest about her own mental health struggles, her words lift out of the constraints of academic storytelling. She establishes a conversational tone with readers from the first page: "Because if you're going to write a book about undocumented immigrants in America, the story, the full story, you have to be a bit crazy" (XV).

In an 2020 interview with *Guernica,* Villavicencio says she has realized that popular migrant narratives as of late come from people who are grateful to America. She describes this as

a way to “change racist white people’s mind about us.” Villavicencio does what every migrant storyteller *should* do—she seeks to depict herself and others as complicated and imperfect. Her story is unconventional and messy. Villavicencio started her memoir as a method of protest, following the election of Trump: “I thought the moment called for a radical experiment in genre,” she writes. Villavicencio’s work pushes against genre by combining empathetic journalism practices with her own powerful and intimate personal narrative. By depicting various narratives through her own experience, she removes herself from the “hopeful” migrant narrative, because she finds this inaccurate. Villavicencio explains that she often asked herself while writing what it would look like if a “crazy person” was writing.

It's true that readers don’t see the lives of other migrants except through Villavicencio’s eyes, and playing with the boundaries of form makes it’s unclear whether or not her depiction of the migrants she talks to is accurate or ethical. She takes readers through New York, Miami, and Flint, Cleveland and New Haven, highlighting the hope and resilience of the migrant people that she meets—housekeepers, day laborers, and deliverymen. Combining a decade of her own reporting, she writes about the effects of 9/11 on undocumented Americans, a pharmacy in Miami where people without papers can buy prescription drugs, the Flint Water Crisis’ disproportionate effect on migrant communities, and more.

What makes these narratives stand out is her use of fictional prose. At one point, she creates a narrative from a story that she stumbles upon about Ubaldo Cruz Martinez, who suffers from alcoholism and died during Hurricane Sandy. She brings readers into the room to bear witness to his last moments of life, as he slouches in his basement and pets a small skinny squirrel.

> He knew he was not leaving this basement tonight. He couldn't get himself up anywhere. No one would want him. They'd given up on him long ago. He had kids in Mexico. They'd be orphans. His heart raced. His hands became moist. Stroking the squirrel kept him calm as the basement filled with water…He stroked the squirrel until the water got up to his shoulders and he treaded water. He held onto the shoe box above his head. No creature should have to die alone (Villavicencio 29).

This scene is made up. Villavicencio wasn't actually in the room with Martinez during his last moments of life, but it feels like she was. Martinez dies a slow death, all the while thinking of others—his children and the squirrel. Villavicencio doesn't have to include the small details with the squirrel, but in so doing, she creates irony. Martinez is doing the saving, but he's also the one who needs saving the most. It's a commentary on death and loneliness and selflessness.

Villavicencio explains that Martinez's friends all knew about his situation but "didn't really want to talk about him" (28), because they were too careful about their own reputations. They could sympathize with him, but were also embarrassed by him. Without this added scene, readers wouldn't get as clear of a sense of Martinez's narrative. Villavicencio could have written something like, "Ubaldo Cruz Martinez was intoxicated and drowned in his basement on the night of October 31," but instead she brings out his humanity, his care for other living creatures, his fear in those last moments. Still, Villavicencio didn't actually know him, doesn't actually know what was going on in his mind while he was dying, and couldn't actually talk to him to get a sense of what he was like. Thus, the ethicality of her storytelling practices are brought to question. What would Martinez say about what she had written if he had been alive?

Like Talese and other "New Journalists," Villavicencio follows journalistic practice by interviewing migrants and depicting their stories, but inserts her own creativity and poetics. She doesn't use real names of people, and she doesn't record them because she "did not want to intimidate [her] subjects" (XV). She discusses how her mastery of two languages allows her to do this more effectively. She translated interviews on the spot: "I approached translating the way a literary translator would approach translating a poem, not the way someone would approach translating a business letter" (XV). She writes that she hates the way that most journalists translate their Spanish-speaking interviewees; according to her, they "transliterate," and reduce their subjects' words to basic vocabulary. Villavicencio incorporates Spanish words throughout the text, often leaving them untranslated.

The power behind Villavicencio's narrative comes not from the details that she does or doesn't convey accurately, but rather how the people she writes about make her confront her own experience as an undocumented person. She struggles with being an outsider in the extreme situations that she puts herself in, but she also has a lot to share and impart from her own life. While reporting in Flint, Michigan, she writes that she's disgusted by her ability to feel like she was making any real difference with her words: "I'd drunk the social mobility Kool-Aid from college prep programs run by white people when I was in high school and didn't know how to reconcile all that with what I was seeing in Flint" (116). She also shares in their experience, writing openly about her own migrant experience: "It's the life I've led in America as a migrant, watching my parents pursue their dream in this country and then having to deal with its carcass, witnessing the crimes against migrants carried out by the U.S. government with my hands bound" (60).

Villavicencio uses her anger against systems in the United States that took away her own feelings of joy, safety and security. She channels it into the types of questions she asks her subjects, the way that she conveys their stories, and her pushing of the boundaries of form. Though not exhibiting the most standard journalistic practices, she practices empathy. She reflects on how she goes into conversations and how she can put people at ease while she speaks with them. In New York, working with migrants who helped with the cleanup after 9/11, she seeks universal ground—religion—to ask a man if God allows death for a reason (38). She is delicate in her approach, even with her parents. She says that she rarely speaks to them about their first days and weeks in New York: "I never press them for more details because I don't want to apply pressure on a bruise" (4). She knows when to draw the line and when her work will cause more harm than help.

Towards the end of the book, Villavicencio writes about how the Flint water poisoning will affect the health of a baby migrant girl, who is having seizures. She says that not knowing what the long-term effects of water poisoning will be is "torturous," both for the girl, her mom and the community. During this vignette, Villavicencio shifts into a run-on, fluid sentence, writing that, "They want us all dead, Latinxs, black people, they want us dead, and sometimes they'll slip something into our bloodstreams to kill us slowly and sometimes they'll shoot and shoot and shoot…" (114). The phrase "and shoot" is repeated for about half the page, leaving readers with pits in their stomachs. Right afterwards, she reminds readers that she is not a journalist: "Journalists are not allowed to get involved the way I have gotten involved. Journalists, to the best of my knowledge, do not try to change the outcome of their stories as crudely as I do. I send water. I fight with immigration lawyers. I raise money" (114).[3]

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[3] Similar to *The Undocumented Americans,* Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* toes the line between journalism and activism. She writes a reflective essay guided by the U.S. Citizenship and

Villavicencio makes a strong point here. *The Undocumented Americans* is as much a political statement as it is a journalistic attempt to portray stories.

Ultimately, Villavicencio's work provides an example of what it's like to tell a migrant story by mixing creative writing with strict journalistic form and practices. She combines memoir, interviews, creative nonfiction, and poetry to bring to light stories of love, family, and survival. To someone like Julia Preston of *The New York Times*, this is antithetical to the practice of ethical journalism, and it does make the reader wonder how her subjects feel about being depicted on the page. Instead of imparting facts, Villavicencio leaves it up to the reader to decide what is fact and what is fiction, and whether it makes a difference one way or the other.

By moving between genres, however, Villavicencio may provide a more nuanced sense of what it's like to be undocumented in America—living in fear of deportation, struggling to fit into the education system, navigating racial profiling and discrimination. Her narratives are striking. She doesn't sugarcoat, and in so doing, she slaps her audience in the face with the realities of the migrant experience in the United States. In line with Avižienis' theory of memoir, Villavicencio writes about the events from both within and without, as lived by herself in the first person and as an observer of other peoples' stories (Avižienis 46). She has witnessed and digested the events, but remains at a distance, writing and sharing both her story and the stories of people she interacts with. Her creative reflections and prose offer a form of truth and emotion that a standard article about her undocumented experience or the undocumented experiences of others would be less likely to achieve.

Immigration Services questionnaire for child refugees. She uses her experience coming to the United States to guide the narrative. It's a personal, political, and journalistic take on an intense experience. And though the children being interviewed are the primary narrators, Luiselli also shares personal narrative and experience (Embry).

Memoir—The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches From the American Border (Francisco Cantú—2018)

Francisco Cantú's memoir *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches From the American Border* also defies the boundaries of journalistic memoir—or complete accuracy/faithfulness to reporting and depiction of a life, defined by the Nieman Foundation (Weldon). He writes about the U.S-Mexico border, detailing his experience serving on the U.S. Border Patrol from 2008 to 2016. Cantú, a third-generation Mexican American, joined when he was 23. In his work, he doesn't perform a journalistic investigation on the Border Patrol, but rather describes his own slow grappling with the layered violence at the border and the harmful systems in which he finds himself directly implicated. Cantú's memoir, though expressive and creative, is not fictional to the degree that Villavicencio's is. This experience actually happened to him, but he shapes and selects the way in which he tells readers his reflections about it.

He invites sympathy from readers through honest depiction of his reckoning and trauma induced from working for the Border Patrol. Cantú joins the Border Patrol with the intention to help solve world problems. Having grown up in Arizona and studied International Relations in Washington, he moves to El Paso to be closer to real life problems: "I want to be outside. Not in a classroom, not in an office, not sitting at a computer, not staring at papers" (Cantú 23). His mother, a retired Park Service worker and the child of a Mexican migrant, is doubtful when he explains he wants to join the Border Patrol. She tells him that it's a "paramilitary police force" (Cantú 24), and warns that he is "stepping into a system, an institution with little regard for people" (Cantú 25). Her warnings foreshadow Cantu's internal reckoning and disillusion with the institutions of power that he steps into. In the epilogue, he echoes her sentiment of the inherent dehumanization in the U.S. Border Patrol: "Writing [*The Line Becomes a River*] was

also a way of charting my own involvement with an institution largely indifferent to human life, an opportunity to finally grapple with all the ways I had normalized the layered violence that is inseparable from border enforcement" (254).

Though slightly less journalistic in style than Villavicencio's *The Undocumented Americans* (there are less interviews with different migrants and more personal reflection/memoir), Cantú plays with the boundaries of personal narrative, research, historical narrative, and poetry to draw his readers in. By citing other journalists who have done work on the issues he discusses, he bolsters his own story with close research. He references writer Charles Bowden, who conducted interviews with a former *sicario* or cartel hitman (Cantú 124), as well as Sergio Gonález Rodriguéz's and Sandra Rodríguez Nieto's work covering murders and femicide in the state of Chihuahua (135-136). Alongside the journalistic anecdotes are references to historical writing about borderlands—Frank McLynn's writing about the Mexican Revolution (105) and Timothy Snyder's examination of borderlands between Germany and the Soviet Union during World War II (144). He pairs academic sections with poetry, directly citing work by Mexican poet Sara Uribe from *Antígona Gonzaléz*. The references contrast with his own personal narrative—adding both context and depth to his reflections on the injustice and embedded racism/violent system he depicts.

He writes a three-part narrative, distancing himself in each section from his work in the field. The first section gives readers an understanding of his work as an agent and a taste of his creeping feelings of discomfort with the violence he is forced to engage in on a daily basis. His tone is direct and matter-of-fact. He offers readers a basic portrayal of the type of individuals he interacts with—groups of people forced to drink filthy water from cattle tanks (Cantú 39), pregnant women (Cantú 39), men who have spent 48 hours in the desert without food or water

(Cantú 44), and more. He's deeply affected by what they've been through and how they deal with their traumas, describing how a nine- and ten-year-old girl are brought into a Border Patrol checkpoint and offered candy, but are unable to react: "One of the agents brought the girls a bag of Skittles, but even then they couldn't smile, they couldn't say thank you, they just stood there, looking at the candy with horror" (Cantú 51).

In this section, the duties of his job are simply tasks he must undertake. After seeing a man and his pregnant wife, he tells them that he has no choice but make an arrest: "I have to bring you in, I told him. It's my job" (Cantú 40). He is less sensitive about his word choice here, describing how on a different night, he arrests two men "walking aimlessly through the desert night" (Cantú 49). Later on, after his perspective on the Border Patrol shifts, he doesn't describe anyone crossing through the desert as "aimless." In this beginning section, his tasks are mechanical, and he renders the people he interacts with as barely human. But though he appears less tuned in to the nuances of power dynamics within the Border Patrol system than in later sections, Cantú is still honest with readers about his doubt of the Border Patrol agent position. He reflects on how he would describe his work to an outsider:

> There are days when I feel I am becoming good at what I do. And then I wonder, what does it mean to be good at this? I wonder sometimes how I might explain certain things, the sense in what we do when they run from us, scattering into the brush, leaving behind their water jugs and their backpacks full of food and clothes, how to explain what we do when we discover their lay-up spots stocked with water and stashed rations…but it's true that we slash their bottles and drain their water into the dry earth, that we dump their backpacks and pile their food and clothes to be crushed and pissed on and stepped over, strewn across the desert and set ablaze" (Cantú 33).

The visceral quality of his details is striking; he writes later that he has “visions of them [migrants] staggering through the desert” (Cantú 34) and “dying slowly as they look for some road, some village, some way out” (Cantú 34). He’s haunted by his work. Dead bodies appear in his dreams. He starts grinding his teeth. And yet, he’s unable to talk about it with his mom when he comes home for Christmas: “I was too exhausted to consider my passion or sense of purpose, too afraid to tell my mother about the dreams of dead bodies and crumbling teeth…about my hands shaking at the wheel” (Cantú 77). He bottles up his emotions, and they resurface in his dreams.

In section two, Cantú works his way up the ranks, advancing to work at a command center in Tucson. He’s happy to not have to work in the field, but now he has more time to ruminate on the implications of his past work. This part of the book is deeply personal, as Cantú unravels his ethical concerns with the Border Patrol practices. He mixes spirituality with storytelling, beginning with a description of a story with Saint Francis—his namesake. In it, a power-hungry wolf makes an agreement with the Saint to not kill any livestock or townspeople, in exchange for food from the residents of the town. The wolf is a recurring image in Cantú’s dreams, symbolizing a hunger for violence and the hope for an abatement of this violence. As Cantú internalizes the moral implications of his work, he flows into poetic narrative, repeating the phrase “I dream” (87-88). He dreams of teeth, jaws, and molars. It feels like he is becoming the wolf. Later, he dreams that he his attacking a group of migrants in the dessert with confidence: “I brandish my weapon, holding it in front of my face with both arms outstretched. I yell at them in Spanish to show me their hands, to sit the fuck down, to not even think about running” (Cantú 98). He takes on an alternate ego in his dreams—an unwavering Border-Patrol-agent-mixed-wolf.

The only time that he exhibits this type of bold behavior in real life occurs during the first section, when he shoots a bird (Cantú 75). Without hesitating, he fires at a little yellow bird that lands on his target stand. He walks over and picks it up, wondering where his impulse to kill came from: "I began to feel sick and wondered, for a brief moment, if I was going insane" (Cantú 75). Like the violent impulses he imagines from the wolf in his dreams, Cantú experiences a real violent impulse, and then doesn't quite know what to do with himself after he acts on it. Generally, he is able to set aside his real-life images from his nightmare scenarios. Reflecting on the violence in Juárez—the *sicarios*, military, police and rape—he uses a similar strategy: "To comfortably exist at its periphery, I found myself suspending knowledge and concern about what happened there, just as one sets aside images from a nightmare in order to move steadily through a new day" (Cantú 131). His dreams are so twisted and real-feeling, however, that sometimes this separation is hard. At the very end of the section, Cantú relays a dream where he shoots a man, "desperate for some element of control" (Cantú 159). When he wakes up, he weeps. He thinks about the wolf's peace agreement: "'Brother wolf,' I wish to say, 'I will make peace between us, O brother wolf.'" (Cantú 160).

Cantú begins the third section with an explanation of Carl Jung's analysis of the human psyche. According to Jung, in order to truly understand our inner-conscious, "'we have to expose ourselves to the animal impulses of the unconscious" (Cantú 165). He elaborates:

> When you dream of a savage bull, or lion, or a wolf… this means: it wants to come to you. You would like to split it off, you experience it as something alien—but it just becomes all the more dangerous. The urge of what had been split off to unite with you becomes all the stronger. The best stance would be: 'Please, come and devour me.' (Cantú 165).

In section three, Cantú is fully removed from the Border Patrol. He's enrolled in graduate school, and works at a coffee shop. However, the embedded violence of the institution that he worked within for four years hasn't left him. If anything, he reflects on it more, bringing in theorists like Jung. This is the most riveting part of Cantú's story. While working at a coffee shop, he meets an undocumented man named José, who is punished and not let back into the country after going to Mexico for his mother's funeral. For the first time in the narrative, someone whom Cantú knows and loves is apprehended by the Border Patrol. Nowhere in the story is the systematic violence of migration control policies and the effects on Cantú's own self-conception more apparent than in this section: "I realized too, that despite my small role within the system, despite hours of training and studying at the academy, I had little inkling of what happened to those I arrested after I turned over their paperwork and went home from my shift" (Cantú 185). Unlike Villavicencio, who depicts the struggles of many undocumented individuals, Cantú delves into the emotional effect of one man, José's, deportation on everyone he knows—his church members, his wife, his sons. Cantú does everything he can for José—driving his sons to visit him in prison and working with an immigration lawyer. In the book, he includes testimonial letters written from members of José's community, used at his ultimately unsuccessful trial. José's eldest son describes his father as his "best friend" and "the nicest guy I know," writing that "when we saw him at court…everyone started crying" (Cantú 218).

It's during this section where Cantú most seriously questions his positionality—his own empathy for people like José and how he can conceptualize this empathy with his decision to work for the Border Patrol. During José's trial, Cantú asks himself why he wants to help, and wonders if he is "merely being driven to make good for the lives [he] had sent back across the line, if [he] [i]s merely seeking to dole out some paltry reparation" (Cantú 206). Cantú doesn't

know what to do with the pain that he feels for José, pain he knows isn't his own to carry (Cantú 229). This is where his mother comes in, speaking about the dehumanizing and violent system that she warned about from the beginning—the system that makes him feel the need to bottle up his emotions and the system that gives him animalistic dreams and urges. She explains this to Cantú: "What I'm saying is that we learn violence by watching others, by seeing it enshrined in institutions. Then, even without choosing it, it becomes normal to us, it even becomes part of who we are" (Cantú 230).

Like Villavicencio's work, systemic violence is highlighted in Cantú's memoir through personal reflection. Cantú describes his fellow Border Patrol agents—where they come from, why they serve, how they act while on and off duty. They make obnoxious sex jokes to each other (Cantú 118) and treat migrants like animals. However, Cantú makes sure to give readers a sense of *why* most of them are there in the first place. One of Cantú's Border Patrol coworkers, Beto, explains: "Growing up outside El Paso, he said, it seemed like the only ones doing well were either getting paid by the cartels or getting paid to take them down" (Cantú 140). Coming from low-income border towns, Cantú says, a high-paying job as an official for the government is pretty appealing. Still, the culture is pervasive. Talking to an ex-coworker about José's situation, the Border Patrol officer says to Cantú off-handedly, "Shit, a few years out of the patrol and suddenly all your friends are mojados?" (Cantú 179). It's meant as a joke, but the bluntness of the comment establishes a distance between Cantú and his ex-officers. At the end, Cantú maintains this distance, writing from José's perspective to portray his persistence and commitment to getting across to his family: "They can take away my money, they can rob my family, they can lock me away, but I will keep coming back" (Cantú 242).

Cantú offers a message of resilience: “As obvious as it might seem, to truly and completely reject a culture of violence, to banish it from our hearts and souls, we must first fully refuse to participate in it, and refuse to partake in its normalization” (Cantú 268). In other words, if we want to see any dismantling of violent structures, we must become the wolf with Saint Francis. We must commit ourselves to a full rejection of violent practices. Cantú blends fiction with journalism, using stories like the wolf to advance his personal narrative. In the author’s note, he explains his reasoning: “While the book does offer contextual pieces of history and research, it does not attempt to make sense of the current political moment, nor does it endeavor to explain the politics that led to it—it seeks to function as literature rather than reportage, to resonate more deeply within the soul than in the mind” (Cantú 253).

All writing has some personal investment. What is so powerful and vulnerable about memoir writing—specifically the works of Cantú and Villavicencio—is how vulnerable and open they are about their own personal reflections about the migrant experience. They work hard to convey the terrible, complex, and sad realities of migration through their observations. Urgency and energy runs through their words. They take journalistic strategies—interviewing and telling others’ stories—a step further. Embarking on a dramatic literary leap, both writers pursue tangents that illuminate elements of the human condition. Their fluid techniques lay in opposition to tenets of journalism, but demonstrate the power of putting genre together to tell meaningful stories.

Chapter 3: Creative/Literary Practices Surrounding Immigration

Introduction

Writers write to inform, make an impact, share a story. In this chapter, I switch to the more creative sphere—comparing how different works of fiction bring up questions of authorship and agency. How do fiction and poetry allow for a better, or at least different, understanding of the border and the migrant experience? A fiction writer sets out to create fictional worlds that draw from the imagination. When writing fiction about migration, authors are still inventing circumstances, even if they are based off of real people or real events. While a memoir is actually based on events that have happened, fiction writing creates events. It is important to note, however—especially when dealing with fiction writing about the border—that fiction is not just purely made up or untrue. It holds truth in its own way, creatively riffing off of experiences or themes of displacement and violence that thousands of people share.

First, I will analyze Valeria Luiselli's novel *Lost Children Archive* and Yuri Herrera's *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo*. Both novels are about marginality and the borderlands region, but they are quite different in style. Luiselli writes in an analytical style, describing each moment as an outsider. She writes openly about her position of self as writer in relation to thoughtful statements about the child migrant experience. Herrera, in contrast, plays with elements of magical realism and myth to make a statement about the border as a laboratory for different linguistic/political practices and identities (Kim). After discussing the effective creative choices in these two works, I will turn to the use of poetry to depict the migrant story through Javier Zamora's 2017 collection *Unaccompanied*. Reading these three works together brings up questions about storytelling—specifically about how trauma, agency and storytelling are all interconnected when writing about the border creatively. Trauma must be handled delicately, but

there is immense strength in honest creative depictions of reality. Honesty and creativity are distinct, but work with and off of each other. Though not honest in that they are completely fact-based, creative writings offer a different honesty—a forum for depicting the connotative truths of the migrant experience.

Novel: Lost Children Archive (Valeria Luiselli—2019)

In her novel *Lost Children Archive*, Valeria Luiselli demonstrates a masterful interchange of fiction and nonfiction, showing readers how a creative depiction of the migrant child journey can leave readers feeling empathy in a way that journalism/memoir may fall short. In "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," author and scholar Suzanne Keene writes about the connection between storytelling and emotion. She argues that, "Novelists themselves often vouch for the centrality of empathy to novel reading and writing and express belief in narrative empathy's power to change the minds and lives of readers" (Keene 215). Luiselli harnesses empathy for migrants at the southern border by depicting tragic immigration experiences creatively. Ultimately, she brings texture to the material that allows for a more fleshed out understanding of forced migration. Her work differs from what a journalist might do, and though she sacrifices a certain degree of factuality, she plays with fictional and personal storytelling methods to provide a broader, more evocative representation of the migrant experience.

The narrator (supposedly a fictional Luiselli) details the imperfections in her personal relationship, as she drives from New York City to Arizona with her five-year-old daughter from a previous relationship and the ten-year-old son of her husband. Both she and her husband are working on documentary projects: she is researching and collecting data about lost migrant children, and he is writing about the "last Apaches" in Arizona. The road trip takes place in 2014, when large numbers of children were fleeing extreme poverty and violence in El Salvador,

Guatemala, and Honduras. Driving south, the family listens to incredibly sad news on the radio about children who don't make the dangerous journey to the United States. Luiselli builds her novel as an archive, playing with different ways to find substance in the place of their absence. She recognizes that the disappeared children's voices can never be fully captured, but builds a world around their stories with words and sounds. Contrasting the family road trip experience with the migrant experience, she raises questions about the ethics of representation. Though these transitory experiences are drastically different, Luiselli presents intimate experiences of motherhood that she attributes as common across contexts, as a way of inviting empathy for migrant families. Motherhood, the road trip and the narrator's self-reflection as she experiences the fragility of her own relationships become an entry point to reflecting on the migrant experience.

Fictionalizing such heavy experiences and themes in an imaginative way does raise questions, however. Is this Luiselli's story to tell? By publishing a novel about migration, is she imposing a certain interpretation on the suffering of others? What gives her the authority to use this material for public consumption? Will her narrative be productive for the children she writes about? The narrator asks herself these questions in her writing. Luiselli builds a fictional story, but continually digresses into short-hand, note-to-self reflections. She documents not only the stories of the lost children, but her process *documenting*. She is acutely aware of her positionality, and recognizes both the limitations and the narrative power she has to tell these stories. She invites readers to think through these ethical dilemmas with her. At a diner for example, while her daughter plays with crayons, she spirals into her concerns:

> Political concern: How can a radio documentary be useful in helping more undocumented children find asylum? Aesthetic problem: On the other hand, why should a sound piece,

or any other form of storytelling, for that matter, be a means to a specific end?...Constant concerns: Cultural appropriation, pissing all over someone else's toilet seat, who am I to tell this story, micromanaging identity politics, heavy-handedness, am I too angry, am I mentally colonized by Western-Saxon-white categories, what's the correct use of personal pronouns, go light on the adjectives, and oh, who gives a fuck how very whimsical phrasal verbs are? (79)

Lost Children Archive stands out, then, because of the narrator's self-reflective nature—and the wonder and fragile quality Luiselli harnesses as a mother, writer and storyteller. The narrator tells a story through both her own eyes and through the vulnerable eyes of her children. The beginning of the novel unwinds slowly. Luiselli includes a series of innocent questions from the young children: "What does 'refugee' mean, Mama? the girl asks from the back seat" (47). She uses her children's naïve inquiries to hone definitions and to bring clarity to terms that tend to circulate freely, but are rarely defined. She tells her daughter that "a refugee is someone who has to find a new home" (48). News from the border creeps into the car by way of radio segments, and it's clear that media outlets are having a heyday covering the migrant surge. The narrator turns up the volume whenever there is an update: "The broadcasters are calling it an immigration crisis…They are undocumented, they are illegals, they are aliens, some say" (Luiselli 39).

In tension with the intensely subjective perspective that the narrator presents, Luiselli doesn't give the first name of anyone in the family—calling her children "the girl" and "the boy"—but she weaves in names of migrants. This allows her to foreground the experiences of migrants and underplay that of the narrator. She scatters many names and narratives, but she does focus on one family—Manuela, the mother of one of her daughter's classmates, and

Manuela's two daughters. The narrator meets Manuela in New York and agrees to help translate her legal papers, but quickly becomes emotionally linked to her case. Due to a lack of food and resources, Manuela is forced to leave her daughters in their small town in Mexico. From the intimate and close setting of a car with two children, Luiselli evokes a mother's pain of a separated family: "The girls (Manuela's children) were growing up, talking to her on the telephone, hearing stories about snow falling, about big avenues, bridges, traffic jams, and, later, about their baby brother" (17).

Manuela invests in a coyote to bring her daughters across, sewing her phone number onto the collar of their dresses. Like many, her daughters' journey is unsuccessful. They are caught by the Border Patrol and brought to a detention center, where they are told their case is not "strong enough" (Luiselli 18). The narrator vows to help Manuela, leaving the courtroom in New York, and noticing the apathy of the world around her. Luiselli writes that "the city was buzzing, the buildings high and solid, the sky pristine blue, the sun bright—as if nothing catastrophic were happening" (19). She uses the contrast between the simplicity of the narrator's family life and the lives of people like Manuela to depict the need for more awareness about the structural inequalities that drive migrants here: "All those children were fleeing circumstances of unspeakable abuse and systematic violence, fleeing countries where gangs had become parastates, had usurped power and taken over the rule of law" (19).

While the narrator and her family watch the American landscape fold out in front of their Volvo wagon, drink gas station coffee, and debate what music to listen to, she gets a call from Manuela. Manuela reports that her two girls have disappeared while being transported from a detention center in New Mexico to one in Arizona. Luiselli tells readers this information in a

matter-of-fact way, reporting it as though it is another feature of the road-trip, along with the maps, books, and polaroid photos. She writes:

> What there was, between Arkansas and Oklahoma, was hours of tape and more hours of things not on tape. What there was, along the highways and across thunderstorms, was my husband, drinking his coffee silently or talking to the children as we drove…What there was, was Manuela's phone call, about her two girls, who were not there with her yet and who knows where they were (145).

The description of Manuela's missing children is startling. Added in with the mundane elements of the road trip, it creates an even greater sense of the void that Manuela experiences without her two girls. Luiselli's reflection of this emptiness leads her to reflect on the purpose of her writing. As she describes the chaos and history of desert that the narrator drives through—"tribes, families, people, all beautiful things falling apart, debris, dust, erasure"—she realizes that the story she feels most drawn to telling is "not that of the children in immigration courts," or "the children who arrive," but "those whose voices can no longer be heard because they are, possibly forever, lost" (146).

Perhaps the most effective creation of common ground in the novel is the love that the narrator bestows on her children and her own horror at the thought of losing them. Luiselli uses one of the most innate qualities in humans—attachment and protection of children—to relate to and portray the paralyzing fear that Manuela has when she finds out that her children have disappeared, though their experiences are otherwise quite different. Throughout the novel, the narrator's children grow on readers as their personalities come out. The boy's wittiness and protectiveness over his sister compliments the girl's curiosity and sweet humor. Occasionally, the narrator will look over her shoulder to check on them. She asks herself at one point what she

would do if she were in Manuela's situation: "What would we do if one of us simply disappeared? Beyond the immediate horror and fear, what concrete steps would we follow? Whom would we call? Where would we go?" (Luiselli 117). Manuela relates to the narrator that everyone "tells her to wait, be patient" (Luiselli 113), but when the narrator imagines the absence of her own children, she feels a frantic longing and deep sadness. She asks herself how anyone could possibly be "patient."

It's clear that the narrator believes in the power of the writing process to understand complicated human realities. In some ways, she does what this very thesis seeks to accomplish—she collects a wide range of works to tell her story, and emphasizes how important it is to read them in conversation with each other. She implicitly invites readers to sift through and make sense of sources with her. She is critical of sensationalized depictions of migrant stories, and careful to provide witness in a way that is authentic and thorough. As the narrator digests radio and journalistic media about migrants, she thinks about how word choice can be determining and surface-level. She reads a *New York Times* article that says migrant children come from "'mostly poor and violent towns' in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras" and she criticizes the "possible implications of that schematic way of mapping the origins of children who migrate to the United States" (Luiselli 50). She criticizes the question—"Why did you come to the United States?" (Luiselli 49)—for its simplicity:

> No one thinks of children arriving here now as refugees of a hemispheric war that extends, at least, from these very mountains, down across the country into the southern US and northern Mexican deserts, sweeping across the Mexican sierras, forests, and southern rain forests into Guatemala, into El Salvador, and all the way to the Celaque Mountains in Honduras. No one thinks of those children as consequences of a historical

war that goes back decades. Everyone keeps asking: Which war, where? Why are they here? Why did they come to the United Sates? What will we do with them? No one is asking: Why did they flee their homes? (Luiselli 51).

The stories on the news are both gruesome and fascinating, which Luiselli illustrates by describing various radio segments and the children's reaction to them. The family listens to an interview with a nine-year-old boy who lost his brother on *La Bestia*, the freight train that migrants use to get from Southern Mexico to the U.S. border when they can't afford a bus ticket or a smuggler. Luiselli writes that the young boy's voice is "breaking, hesitating, trembling" as he tells his story. The narrator turns it off half-way through and describes her visceral reaction to the segment: "I feel a dull, deep nausea—a physical reaction to the boy's story and his voice, but also to the way that the news coverage exploits sadness and desperation to give us its representation: tragedy" (Luiselli 73). Her children respond with a flood of questions. The atrocity of the young migrant's story is so far from their reality that it feels like a sick, twisted alternate world. Similarly, the "dull, deep nausea" that Luiselli writes about is the same nausea that readers likely experience in some of the scenes in the novel.

The difference between Luiselli's writing and journalistic takes on migrant stories is the intimate engagement Luiselli seeks between her own life and her subjects. Luiselli shifts the weight of the trauma and violence by continuing to revert to the narrative of her own family, as well as framing her story as a "compilation" of art, stories, and soundscapes. Luiselli writes a simultaneously gripping and relatable narrative by creating a bricolage of literary works, songs, photographs, brochures, sound clips and other media—fragments from Sontag, quotes from Gloria Anzaldúa and Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound's *Cantos,* Philip Glass songs, etc. In her works cited section, she writes: "I'm not interested in intertextuality as an outward, performative

gesture but as a method or procedure of composition" (258). Like Cantú in his memoir (but to a greater extent than Cantú), by referencing and gathering sources, she allows readers to become acutely aware of the research process. It feels like she is discovering new facets and dimensions about the migrant crisis as she is writing. She's unafraid to play with form, combining and probing into various literary techniques—lists, poetry, passages of fiction, autobiographical narratives, streams of consciousness, etc. In so doing, she makes us take a step back to reflect on the many different ways to tell someone else's story. Luiselli's first-person perspective combined with iterative references to migrant children narratives makes her novel carry a sense of necessity and urgency. It reminds us of the sheer number of child stories there are to tell and the importance of each one to fully capture the emotional weight of the children who have died trying to cross the border.

The narrator and her husband have seven "boxes" of archives and works that Luiselli recreates on the page. The narrator combs through them, taking out pieces of art and literature that will be useful to her: "I read and read, long sleepless nights reading about archive fevers, about rebuilding memory in diasporic narratives, about being lost in 'the ashes' of the archive" (Luiselli 23). While gathering elements, Luiselli adds pieces of her own fiction to the authors she cites. She makes up the title of a book—*Elegies for Lost Children*—by the fictional author Ella Camposanto. Luiselli's children like to fall asleep as Luiselli reads excerpts from it out loud. The elegies are vivid descriptions of children migrating by foot, by train, towards "bigger" and "brighter" cities and futures. The surreal nature of these excerpts compliments the essay style of Luiselli's work up to this point, and the childlike excitement that the boy and the girl exhibit enforces Luiselli's belief in the power of stories. The novel is so heartbreaking because it

highlights the small joys that emerge from the relationship between a child and a parent, making the possibility of a forced break in this relationship devastating.

The last section of the novel oscillates between narration by the boy and the narrator. This part of the novel is literally called “Reenactment,” because the boy is so affected and influenced by his mother’s goals in research that he decides to experiment with what it’s like to be a lost child himself, searching for Manuela’s two girls. The first scene that he describes is of his witnessing undocumented children boarding a plane. He says that “the lost children walked out of a hangar in a single line, and all of them were very quiet and looking down at their feet the way children look when they have to walk onto a stage and have stage fright, but of course much worse” (Luiselli 191). Again, Luiselli plays with proximity and perspective, depicting real child worries and anxieties in contrast with the migrant experience. How could stage fright compare to the fear of deportation? By inviting comfortable readers to imagine these two situations, Luiselli suggests that while an underlying feeling of fear is universal, the scale of the fear is incomparable. So while she questions readers’ ability to fully comprehend the suffering of refugees, she doesn’t shy away from connecting universal spheres of human experience like fear.

As they wander alone in the desert, the boy and the girl give us a taste of an experience that we often don’t think about. By using children who aren’t migrants to embody the migrant experience, Luiselli emphasizes what is common between familiar and unfamiliar narratives. How can one possibly understand the hardship or hopelessness that comes with being lost in a desert until it directly affects them or someone very close to them? At the very end of the novel, the narrator gets a call that Manuela’s daughters have been found dead in the desert. She is despondent: “For days Ma hardly spoke, didn’t get out of bed, took showers that lasted hours, and all the while, I wanted to tell her that maybe the girls who had been found were not her

friend's daughters, because I knew for a fact that many children had telephone numbers stitched on their clothes when they had to cross the desert" (Luiselli 349-350). Portraying different levels of proximity to various child disappearances, Luiselli argues that the level of empathy that one feels is based on relative distance to an atrocity: When the disappearance is a fleeting statistic on the news, her grief is muted. When it's her friend's children, it's heightened. But when it's her own children, however, she feels the most lost and desperate. She uses a fictional narrative to bridge this distance.

With so many threads, references and themes, Luiselli's work is scattered. What connects it, however, is the "inventory of echoes" (97) that she creates. The writing is vivid and thorough. It has a rapture to it, because of the way it draws readers in with sense. At the very beginning of the book, she includes a note from acoustemologist Steven Feld, describing his belief in the power of sound:

> I love the idea of an "inventory of echoes"—it so beautifully resounds the Bosovi dual power of forest agency, being at once acoustemic diagnostic of the h/wealth of a living world, and the "gone reflections/reverberations" of those who have "become" its birds by achieving death (Luiselli 97).

Luiselli begins an early section with a quote by composer R. Murray Schafer: "Hearing is a way of touching at a distance" (71). She uses sounds and songs to connect her characters with histories. At one point, the narrator makes a note to herself that she, "Must record a document that registers the soundmarks, traces, and echoes that lost children have left behind" (Luiselli 144). Her goal is to tell a story with empathy. While she makes readers question whether they can feel empathy as deeply for children who aren't their own, she also makes it clear that a major part of empathetic storytelling is careful listening. In an interview with poet Javier Zamora,

Luiselli explains that the echoes, birdsongs, and trains in her work are a conscious "revisionist impulse" (Zamora et al.). By paying attention to and bringing out sounds, she tells Zamora that she is "playing out history and maybe bringing that which is far away historically and peoples who are faraway and circumstances unreachable…intimately close" (Luiselli).

The narrator's children are reunited with their parents through the use of echoes, and the second to last box is full of various sounds—deserts, storms, insects, highways. Luiselli harnesses sound to achieve a full and robust reenactment of the lost child experience. She combines sounds with photographs and references—using different modes of storytelling to make readers question how they engage with the world. She delves into artistic realms that make us challenge how we think about present issues. Ultimately, she makes a powerful statement about how memories are archived and how we can fairly bear witness to and retell the political events around us. Her writing shows that literature has the capacity to fill in emotional gaps about politics, providing a fuller, more nuanced, and empathetic account of the migrant journey.

Myth and Fiction: Señales que precederán al fin del mundo (Yuri Herrera—2009)

In his novel *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo,* Yuri Herrera combines storytelling and myth to explore themes of migration, race, inequality, language, and borders. Harnessing elements of magical-realism, Herrera portrays distinct realities that extend further into fantasy than Luiselli's work. His novel starts in a small Mexican town, as Makina, the heroine of the novel, sets out to find her brother in the United States, who migrated a few years earlier to find land and opportunity. Herrera brings readers in through various twists and turns, revealing unsettling and haunting images of violence and the obstacles she encounters along the way. He transforms a realistic landscape and journey into a magical and mythical landscape. At the end,

Makina enters into a fantasy, descending into a room of smoke and mirrors. She literally loses her skin, embodying a full state of transformation.

Reading Herrera's novel from the perspective of myth, it's impossible to ignore the parallels that Herrera draws between Makina's character and the figure of La Malinche—the iconic mestizaje woman who translated between indigenous peoples and the Spanish colonizers (Candelaria 1980).[4] In Makina's town, she works as a telephone operator. She is the designated communicator and messenger, as she speaks not only Spanish and English, but also the local language of her town. Herrera writes: "Makina hablaba las tres, y en las tres sabia callarse" (Herrera 19). Because so much of Makina's story is written through subtle mythological allegory, Herrera works equally within what he says but also what he doesn't explicitly say to readers. He hides political realities about immigration underneath fictive narratives. This storytelling method opens an element of mystery, where readers are invited to create their own interpretation of events. Ultimately, there is so much that an outsider can only barely grasp about the migrant experience, and his implementation of mythology allows for readers to fill in the gaps.

In my interview with Herrera on May 13, 2021, I asked him to elaborate on his use of science fiction. He spoke about Ruy González de Clavijo's use of magic in *Embajada a tamorlán*:

> At one point, he [Clavijo] describes an animal with horns, the skin of a leopard, the feet of a horse, and a really long neck. I was so confused when I read it, but then I realized that this man was looking at a giraffe for the first time in his life! I think we can all take a lesson from the ambassador. We should all describe things as if we're looking at them for

[4] Read more about the symbolic meaning and importance of La Malinche in Candelaria's critical essay (see Works Cited).

the first time. This kind of surprise and amazement is what makes fiction good. Science fiction literalizes certain metaphors that we use to express our relation to objects. (Herrera)

Herrera's work is a "literature of gaps"—or a novel that doesn't explicitly tell readers political realities, but uses fantasy to do so (meaning readers can fill in spaces for themselves). An avid science fiction lover, Herrera blurs the line between fantasy and reality. He believes in the power of imagination to say relevant things about reality. Science fiction allows for him to talk about themes—violence along the border, assimilation, identity, and race—that may be hard to find the words for otherwise. In "Political Science and Political Fiction," James F. Davidson writes about the political potential of science fiction: "[The fiction writer] does select and pattern with a far greater freedom, and before a far wider and less uniform audience. Like the metaphysician who establishes his own terms and cannot be finally refuted in them, he creates a world 'beyond physics' which cannot be refuted" (859). Davidson is correct that the world is full of uncomfortable themes, but he, like Herrera, sees the merits of science fiction to establish a space to sit with the uncomfortability and to challenge it in a creative way.

At the beginning of the novel, Herrera lays out a series of rules that Makina abides by in order to gain the town's respect as their messenger. The first is: "Una es la Puerta, no la que cruza la Puerta" (Herrera 19). In many ways, Makina *is* a physical manifestation of the border. Even her name—"Makina"—holds significance, alluding to border *maquiladoras* or machines. *Maquiladoras* are cross-border manufacturing operations that give the United States advantage in a competitive global market (NPR 2011). They have access to a low-wage workforce, but can still deliver products to the United States (NPR 2011). Subtly alluding to this labor system, Herrera is making a statement about Makina, and about how her gendered and racialized position

fills the role of a body that produces capital (Barrera 477). In her essay "Utopic Dreaming on the Borderlands: An Anzaldúan Reading of Yuri Herrera's Signs Preceding the End of the World," Cordelia E. Barrera writes about embedded colonial narratives in Herrera's novel: "*Signs* embeds a colonialist historical reality that defamiliarizes via language and fantastical imagery to bring readers, by the novel's end, full circle to what is ostensibly the initial geographic landscape, superposed by a mythic realm far removed from the Real" (Barrera 477).

In recognizing how the mythic and the real realms operate off each other, Barrera's commentary touches on what makes Herrera's novel so moving. By telling Makina's story through myth and being unafraid of disturbing images of the Mexica underworld, Herrera reveals dimensions/aspects of the borderlands region in a way that can't be surmised from a media world that is controlled and regulated.[5] Though Herrera's text plays with reality—in many ways misrepresenting the migrant experience in terms of "factual accuracy"—the *misrepresentation* (or foray into fantasy/the magical) offers a more compassionate and empathetic way of understanding than political accuracy. Similar to Luiselli's creative undertaking of a political crisis moment, Herrera uses fiction to establish the horrors of the border region and the urgency for political action. Because Luiselli and Herrera write from a creative perspective, they can be more liberal and forceful in their rhetoric and empathy-grabbing techniques than a standard journalist might be.

The novel begins with a level of cognitive dissonance (Barrera 481), as the first line directly states that Makina is dead: "Estoy muerta, se dijo Makina cuando todas las cosas respingaron…" (Herrera 11). Throughout the novel, Herrera works along the boundaries of

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[5] According to ancient Aztec mythology, when someone died, they had to go through a journey of nine levels to arrive at Mictlán. The objective was to arrive with the gods of death. Once arrived, the soul would achieve eternal rest (*El Universal*).

real/imagined and of time/space. Makina must traverse through the nine Mexica underworlds (mirroring Herrera's nine chapters) to unite with her brother in the United States. Along the way, she experiences unimaginably scary moments. While crossing the Río Grande, she describes the world being "gélido y verdoso y so pobló de invisibles monstruoso de agua que la arrancaban de la balsa de caucho" (Herrera 42). The river takes on monstrous qualities. Herrera also plays with the boundaries of benign and grotesque realities. After Makina arrives, she sees what she thinks is a pregnant woman sitting under a tree but what is really "un pobre infelize hinchado de putrefacción al que los zopilotes ya le habían comido los ojos y la lengua" (Herrera 48). At one point, she is even shot in the side while running from the police.

Though her journey is arduous, Makina is a strong character. She is able to stand up for herself, to know how she should react and respond to different situations that would leave most people paralyzed. As she becomes more exhausted and beat down, she gains just a small understanding of the historical forces that pull her from every direction. Barrera analyzes Makina's journey in relation to Anzaldúan history, writing that her descent into the underworld is a metaphor for her "entering the serpent" (Barrera 482). In an interview with *Latin American Literature Today*, Herrera describes his decision to incorporate Mexica mythology into Makina's quest:

> This was one of my research projects during my doctorate at Berkeley, I talked to the few people who knew about the subject, I consulted the few extant sources and I found the description of the nine underworlds; there are very few divergences…Each one of these stages has a symbolic meaning that one might suspect, but whose exact significance cannot be defined. And that seemed to be part of the story's richness. What I tried to do was not to relive this, but to take this narrative as a found object and place it in a different

context to see how it would work. I thought of it as similar to something my father liked to do: go to an outdoor market, buy things, and put them to some other use in the house. This is something like that, it's a narrative that is mythological in its meaning, but I hope I somehow reactivated its utility (Herrera 2015).

Elizabeth Rodriguez Fielder uses the term *mythological realism* to describe the genre of *Señales*. She defines it as "a method that places contemporary migration in dialogue with ancient myths and forms of storytelling to create an uncanny juxtaposition in our modern age of surveillance and border security" (Fielder 333). Though never explicitly described or stated, the myths in *Señales* are insulated by the way the plot and language of the novel work together. Fielder also goes a step further, using the phrase *stowaway aesthetic* to encapsulate how myths operate in the text: "I use the word stowaway, and the term stowaway aesthetic, to describe both a method of storytelling (to stow away mythological references within the text) and an aesthetic in contemporary fiction about migration that draws attention to what is hidden or unsaid in narrative about refugees" (333). To "stow away," according to Fielder, is to find a space that exists between the documented/undocumented binary—a method of surviving and finding privacy. Makina's story exemplifies a path and world that exists beyond this binary.

Herrera continuously alludes to this state of being. Makina slides under the radar, traversing through space as she follows clues to find her brother. While moving through the United States, she notices the way that migrants operate and settle in the communities around her. She pays special attention to culture—food and language. After visiting restaurants, she makes note of the silent, undercover service workers that lurk in most every establishment: "Así que también visitó los restoranes, con la brevedad que exigía la inspeccíon de los gerentes que adivinaban Ésta no viene a consumer, y fue hasta el cuarto restorán que cayó en que también ahí

estaban, más armados que en ninguna otra parte, de cocineros o de ayudantes o de lavaplatos, gobernando la comida de los rumbos más estraviados" (Herrera 64).

Similar to finding a way to work in the food sector, Makina notes that migrants are also forced to find a happy medium with language—a method of coexistence.

> Pueden estar hablando en perfecta lengua latina y sin prevenir a nadie empiezan a hablar en perfecta lengua gabacha y así pueden mantenerse, entre cosa que se cree perfecta y cosa que se cree perfecta, transfigurándose entre dos animales hasta que por descuido o por clarísima intención de pronto dejan de alternar lenguas y hablan en esa otra. (Herrera 74).

Makina has a heightened awareness of how a pressure to settle into a new environment impacts migrants/refugees. The way she notices that people change during their migratory passage parallels the uncanny versions of people that the travelers in classic stories like Virgil's *The Aeneid* encounter (Fielder 338-339). Herrera makes a powerful statement about how these uncanny changes and transformations are a direct result of migration. Assimilation and loss of culture is an inevitable side effect of migration, but Herrera provides a strong example of identity loss through commentary on Makina's brother, who gave his identity to a white family to take the place of their son to fight overseas.

Her brother's story is a tragic example of how a culture/way of life has the power to completely alter someone to the point of being unrecognizable. Makina's brother came to the United States looking for land, but in an act of desperation, joins the military. His experience in the U.S. alters him so greatly that when he and Makina meet up for the first time in years, they barely recognize each other: "Ninguno de los dos reconoció de inmediato al espectro que tenía enfrente" (Herrera 96). Later, the audience learns that a white family has taken advantage of him,

making him copy the signature of their son—who he is pretending to be— and learning answers to tell officials. Herrera uses Makina's brother's change of demeanor to make a statement about power dynamics and race. Makina's brother doesn't change drastically because of mythical forces or even the migrant journey itself. Rather, a white family directly causes his extreme shift in character by perpetuating a system that profits off of inequality and vulnerability.

It's apt that Makina's brother loses agency and authority over his own body, willingly giving up his identity to assume the fake identity of a citizen. It represents a larger trend about immigration—that when migrant bodies cross into the U.S., they are systematically transformed and used. Herrera provides pointed statements about the migrant experience while simultaneously weaving in elements of plot. Makina's brother seems apathetic and unconcerned to see Makina, denigrating her to a distant and removed presence, instead of someone for whom he has deep levels of love and familiarity. He says off-handedly, "Creo que eso le pasa a todos que vienen, siguio, Ya se no olvidó a qué veníamos, pero se nos quedó el reflejo de actual como si estuviéramos ocultando un propósito" (Herrera 103).

Makina's brother walks away from her in an act that feels to her like a betrayal. She has put herself in dangerous situations, taken risks, and done everything in her power to reach him. Almost immediately after she does find him and he responds coldly, she undergoes her own formative transformation. The final chapter, titled "La Serpiente Que Aguardia," describes her change of consciousness. In Barrera's analysis, she acknowledges Gloría Anzaldúa's theory that snakes are "symbols 'of awakening consciousness—the potential of knowing within, an awareness and intelligence not grasped by logical thought'" (Barrera 484). In the final chapter, Makina reaches new levels of self-awareness and self-growth—an "awakening of

consciousness." She is only able to come to these realizations, however, after an interaction with her "snake"—who is an aggressive, berating cop.

The cop's behavior is out of line. He goes up to a group of migrants in a parking lot, and the first thing he says to them is, "Si quieren venir, se forman y piden permiso, si quieren ir al medico, se forman y piden permiso, si quieren dirigirme la puta palabra, se forman y piden permiso" (Herrera 107). After reprimanding an educated migrant man, the cop rips a page out of his journal and tells him to write. The man is so overcome with fear that he isn't able to, so Makina takes over. In this moment, it feels as though she is transcending into her new state of consciousness. By sticking up for her community, she is holding her ground and sticking up for herself. She writes a beautiful, flowing verse of ten lines in which she aligns herself with those who are denied legitimacy and basic human rights:

> Nosotros somos los culpables de esta destrucción, los que no hablamos su lengua ni sabemos estar en silencio. Los que no llegamos en barco, los que ensuciamos de polvo sus portales, los que rompemos sus alambradas. Los que venimos a quitarles el trabajo, los que aspiramos a limpiar su mierda. Los que llenamos de olor a comida sus calles tan limpias, los que les trajimos violencia que no conocían, los que transportamos sus remedios…Nosotros los oscuros, los chaparros, los grasientos, los mustios, los obesos, los anémicos. Nosotros, los bárbaros (Herrera 109-110).

Like many poetic digressions in *Señales*, these words deserve to be read and analyzed independently of the novel. They take ingrained societal misconceptions about migrants and lay them bare in a way that is simultaneously forceful and graceful. After reading Makina's words, the cop is left speechless, as are readers. Her words dissolve his rage and empty him of undue hatred. He speaks into his radio and leaves immediately. Once again, Makina's strength radiates,

surprising and intimidating those around her. The strength she exhibits in this moment propels her to take her final leap of faith into "the Underworld."

The final scene of the novel is full of mythical elements. It seems that the Underworld is a place where Makina is able to have complete clarity. She descends down a spiral staircase to a door. In direct opposition from the line from the beginning—"Una es la Puerta, no la que cruza la Puerta" (Herrera 19)—Makina engages in a clear act of crossing through the door. On the other side of the door, there is no sound besides "el enérgico de ríos subterráneos" (Herrera 118). She is handed a file with a new identity—new numbers, new trade, new home. After she loses her metaphorical skin, it seems that she is able to completely let go, to drop her old skin and sit at peace with her new state of being. She "dejó de setir la pesadez de la incertidumbre de la culpa," understanding that "lo que sucedía no era un cataclismo" (Herrera 119).

It is, in the end, a hopeful take on the migrant journey. She is able to look at and compartmentalize her past, undertaking a spiritual transition and moving forward. Barrera writes that "Makina's awakened consciousness positions her to direct others along similar paths of conocimiento" (489). She is, according to Barrera, aligned with the Mesoamerican "Flayed God"—Xipe Totec. In direct opposition with the cultural transformation of her brother, Makina embodies a physical "re-creation." Like her brother, she is "re-born" in the United States, but her "re-birth" still allows for continued growth. Her movement through the Underworld in chapter nine suggests how individual people like Makina can successfully operate as a link between worlds.

Herrera, like Luiselli, reminds us that there is room for individualism and strength, even in repressive structures that operate off of hierarchies of privilege. He constantly reminds readers, however, that this not an easy place to reach. Makina's spiritual journey is one of pain

and brutal paths of knowledge. Her intense story of pilgrimage reminds readers of the power of imagination and myth to convey important political realities and imbalances. Herrera defines this as collective ethics:

> A discussion that seems particularly relevant at present is how texts can intervene in the formation of a collective ethics. Literature cannot take full responsibility for creating good or bad men and women, but what it can do is give you the tools to make yourself into a conscious citizen…I think that's one of the greatest responsibilities and one of the greatest virtues of literature and of art in general: to find different ways to talk about this, so we as citizens don't depend exclusively on language provided by and for power and mass media (Herrera 2015).

Above the door that Makina crosses through is the word "jarchar" or "to verse." Herrera not only creates worlds through his writing, but also creates his own neologisms that give a sense of in-betweenness or unfamiliarity. As she crosses through the door, she can't remember how to say "verse" in any of her languages. She's at a juncture—in a state of liminality and transit. It's unsettling, but emphasizes the dualities at play in Herrera's work. The story tackles what exists at the juncture of Mexico and the United States, world and underworld, life and death, and myth and reality. The borderlands that Herrera creates is unusual, uncanny, and twisted, but he uses it as a place for new identities, linguistic practices, and hope.

Poetry—*Unaccompanied* (Javier Zamora—2017)

In *Unaccompanied*, Javier Zamora writes a series of poems to work through the trauma he experienced crossing the border as a child. Zamora provides an inside perspective on the unaccompanied experience. He came to California from El Salvador when he was nine years old, to meet up with his parents who had fled during the civil war. They paid a coyote to get him

across. He traveled with his grandfather through Guatemala and Mexico, then came to the United States alone. Reading *Unaccompanied* in conversation with *Lost Children Archive* and *Señales que Precederán al fin del mundo* allows for an understanding of how immediacy—quick and poignant lines that capture the story as the character moves through a scene—operate in texts about the border. All of these creative works use carefully crafted descriptions to export their readers into fantasy worlds that resemble the borderlands region. Readers must ask themselves if the horrifying worlds they are digesting on the page actually resemble the border. Zamora's short, to-the-point style of poetry allows him to document the undocumented experience in an evocative and forceful way. His vignettes are testimonies about the precariousness of life as a migrant that share a universal experience.

In "How Poetry Helps People to Live Their Lives," participant writers prepared statements before a show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia (Hass, Robert, et al.). W.S. Merwin writes about the visceral quality of poetry: "Poetry is physical. It enlists the participation of the senses, beginning with the sense of hearing, of vibration, and its pace derives from and attends the body's motions" (Gerson, Daniella et al. 32). Pace and physicality throb through Zamora's work. The visceral quality of Zamora's poems allows for concrete political statements about the fear of border crossing. Susan Stewart writes about the ability of poetry to compel and challenge us: "Poetry helps us to cross thresholds—to traverse the distance between speaker and listener, between the unconscious and the conscious, between the generations of the dead and our own… Poetry literally moves us and, in moving us, changes us in a conscious way" (Gerson, Daniella et al. 33). Zamora's poems are moving. Using metaphors and bright language, he writes about the haunting persistence of his memories from migrating as a young kid and the way in which his trauma from this experience is something he works through every day.

Zamora's poems are a form of personal memoir through poetry. He writes about events that happened to him when he was nine-years-old, and as such, his poems are memories. One of the first poems—"Saguaros"—is about the cacti that Zamora remembers seeing growing along the border. In an interview with *Slate,* Zamora comments on the element of truth in his poetry, specifically around the cacti he writes about in this poem:

> I've gone to the border, trying to see where exactly it was that I attempted to cross. I think I've narrowed it down to the area, and there are no saguaros there. They rarely grow along the border. In my memory, I'm like, "Oh, that did not happen factually, but it did feel like that emotionally" (Zamora 2020).

Zamora explains later that he would not have had as much leeway if he was writing in prose or another form. *Unaccompanied* is a series of *feelings*, exploring the gravity and weight of trauma that accompanies a border crossing. The poems are fluid and transitory, and as such, they almost feel like a perpetual border crossing. "Saguaros," for example, brilliantly depicts the enticement of life across the border. Zamora writes about the allure of flight: "I tried to fly that dusk / after a bat said *la sangre del saguaro nos seduce*" (7). Using the metaphor of a bat freely flying over the border contrasts with the reality of the barbwire fence and the border that has so permanently affected his experience in the United States.

Later, Zamora switches to present tense. He is back in the desert, describing himself as a little boy throwing rocks at the saguaros on the border "for the sake of hunger" (7). Readers get a sense of the feeling of desperation that haunts him on a daily basis. He writes that when he wakes up now and his throat is dry, he will "drive to the botanical gardens / to search for red fruits at the top of saguaros" (7). His mind latches onto the memory of the saguaros growing along the border, which creeps into his regular existence—simple things like going to the

botanical gardens. It's a statement about the constant lived trauma of being an unaccompanied minor, the memories that haunt him. Zamora wakes up still thinking about this experience, still reminiscing on the car that picked him up and brought him to the detention cell. The last line remains unresolved: "When the trucks left, a cold cell swallowed us" (7). This is appropriate, as Zamora himself is in a perpetual state of in-between. "Saguaros," though written from the present, is a reflection on how we process memories and trauma from the past.

However, even as *Unaccompanied* also depicts the horrendous living conditions and inherent traumas of crossing the border, Zamora uses his words as a form of resistance. As he deals with questions of identity and recounts details about his heritage, he demonstrates strength and pride in his status as a migrant. And by openly writing about the violence of the border crossing, he assumes it as part of his identity. Unlike Herrera or Luiselli, Zamora (like Villavicencio) has lived through the trauma that he writes about. This gives him the authority to depict his experience and represent his identity in the exact way that he chooses.

He isn't afraid to write directly about violence. In one particularly intense poem—"Dancing in Buses"—he transitions a seemingly playful and joyful scene of a group dancing in a bus, into a war zone. After instructing the people in the bus to "Pretend a boom box / blasts over your shoulder" (23) he writes about blasts of gunfire. Suddenly, the dancing switches to hiding: "Now, duck. They're shooting. Duck under the seat, and don't breath" (23). The contrast Zamora uses in his poems can be jarring. Utilizing the poetic form, he is able to achieve quick transitions that portray what it feels like to be inside a bus dancing when someone opens gunfire.

For the quickness and contrast of Zamora's text, however, he also integrates detail and nuance. He compares the dance moves on the bus, for example, to actions that migrants take every day. The movement of twisting hands is compared to "picking limes," looking left to

“balancing orange baskets,” bending down to “picking cotton,” straightening up to “dropping firewood” (23). He is intentional with how he embeds colonial/capitalist structures within narratives of migration. Describing his grandmother in a later poem, he writes that “her name means truth / in some language no one speaks” (42). He touches on assimilation and integration into dominant culture at the loss of his own, writing about his uncle: “He wasn’t a Zamora: a loudmouth, a drunk, a dumbfuck. / A thief, or a good-for-nothing, like the rest of us. / He was the first to finish dictionaries, first to approach gringos / And speak ‘inglish.’” (35). Zamora’s use of irony here—describing his family as a bunch of “good-for-nothing” thieves—makes readers reflect on the loss of culture/language, and the idea of what constitutes “desirable culture.” *Should* an English-speaking, dominant culture be desirable?

This back-and-forth between language and culture is the crux of Zamora’s poems. Though clearly integrated into the United States, Zamora consistently returns to memories of his life in El Salvador. His grandmother is a central figure to the text, as is the image of the “terracotta roof” (14) of his parents’ apartment. And while he finds cultural and familial strength in memories of El Salvador, he doesn’t shy away from describing it as poverty/war-stricken. In “Aftermath,” he writes about the “Bullet holes / in doors, we can see through you” (32). Influenced by gangs, this region is shrinking. There is “Graffiti / and old campaign posters taped / to the pier’s stores where tourists once bought / cocktails from yachts” (32).

As a young boy living in El Salvador, he dreams of what he will find in America. His voice captures what it’s like to be a child migrant, with hope for a better and more “promising” future. It’s clear that even now, years after, he still carries a bit of this scared, unsure child with him. In “Prayer,” he writes about the moments right before he leaves for the United States: “Diosito, I’ve been eating broccoli, / drinking all my milk so parents / think I’m big… I’m flying

/ to where people drink cold milk, / put strawberries in their cereal / I'll eat strawberries all the time / get so tall I'll start playing basketball" (57). Zamora creates evocative scenes—a basketball player, a bowl of cereal with strawberries—to demonstrate what the American dream visually and conceptually looks like for a child.

Zamora occupies a space between cultures, and between legality and illegality. Like Makina in *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* or the children in *Lost Children Archive,* he exists in a state of liminality—of transition from one culture and one place to the other. The last section, titled "June 10, 1999," the day he left for the United States, makes it feel like he is constantly in a state of arrival. Though he has settled and landed, he remains perpetually in motion. Because of the violence of where he is coming from, he has no choice but to continue forward. His last lines mirror the sensation he creates in "Saguaros": "the couch is soft / my throat is dry / and sick and still / nothing has changed" (91). His throat figuratively remains dry as a statement for how his migrant experience continues to shape his daily life.

The only way to counteract the deep missing and longing is through flashes of memory. In the very first poem, "To Abuelita Neli," he writes, "Abuelita, I can't go back *and* return" (3). It's true—he can't live in El Salvador and the United States. But he *can* use his memories of El Salvador to create a strong, grounded identity for himself as a migrant. Using the form of poetry to build a collection of memory fragments, he creates a world that is built from nostalgia. He writes fondly about climbing "marañón trees," then loses all sense of time: "There's no path to papers. I've got nothing left but dreams / where I'm: the parakeet nest on the flor de fuego / the paper boats we made when streets flooded, / or toys I buried by the foxtail ferns" (3). Zamora's poems are, in a way, a dreamscape, because dreams are all that he has left from his time in El Salvador.

His dreamscape is occupied by a degree of human dispensability. In “Let Me Try Again,” he writes about getting separated from a large group and then found by a Border Patrol officer. He doesn’t go into what happens to those that he is separated from, nor does he describe the people he with is in any sort of detail. Instead, using vague descriptions, he writes about what the officer tells the group: “*don’t trust anyone calling themselves coyotes, / bring more tortillas, sardines, Alhambra”* (62). This approach to telling such an intense experience—getting pulled over by the Border Patrol—feels procedural more than anything else. The officer simply gives the group logistical advice and then takes them back across. Zamora ends the poem with the lines: “He knew we would try again / and again, / like everyone does” (62). The assumed persistence to cross and the casual nature he tells them to re-try is a statement on the volume of crossings and the sheer number of people that share in the border crossing experience.

Ultimately, Zamora dedicates his poems to all undocumented people who similarly struggle to find a strong sense of identity within the space of the border. He quotes Roque Dalton—a famous Salvadoran poet—from “Poema de amor”: “the ones no one ever know where they’re from…the ones burned by bullets when they crossed the border…the eternally undocumented…” He writes in collective memory for all of those who haven’t written about their journeys to the United States. Using such vivid and carefully chosen images to make the brutality of the border crossing more tangible, his storytelling packs a punch. It’s a series of collected images of re/remembered memories. It’s raw, gripping, and emotional in a way that journalism and longer novels about the undocumented experience—*Lost Children Archive* or *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo*—aren’t.

It’s also deeply personal. Like Villavicencio, Zamora uses storytelling to gain agency over the migrant narrative. As he writes about it, he is able to concretize something that has

affected his daily life for a long time. By writing poetry, he allows for a full visceral understanding of the trauma and loss associated with migrating to a new country at a young age. Using vignettes and testimony, he makes the experience of being an unaccompanied minor a human issue, one that everyone who reads his words must confront. Vivian Gornick describes the way that a poet sees and responds to the world, in connection to memoir and fiction. She writes, "The memoirist actually has more in common with the poet than with the novelist. The novelist says, 'I see the world, and through my characters I will make sense of it.' The poet says, 'I see the world and through my own naked response I will make sense of it'" (276). Zamora sees the world and responds nakedly, stripping his memoir to evocative sentences.

Conclusion

Villavicencio's *Undocumented Americans* and Cantú's *The Line Becomes a River* both use their author's lived experience as insiders in the community to radically lean away from the realm of journalism. Neither Villavicencio or Cantú are taking all the liberties that creative writing allows, but their use of fluid form creates a devastating and honest portrayal of the effect of rigid policy on migrants who risk their lives trying to cross the border. Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*, in contrast, is a purely fictional work, but she uses an essayist voice to bring together different theorists and artifacts from the border. Herrera's *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* employs mythology to fill in gaps about truths that can be difficult to write about, and Zamoras' *Unaccompanied* uses poetry to establish agency and voice in the face of serious trauma.

Read in connection with journalistic practices, it's clear that there are certain truths that storytelling in creative forms convey emotionally that journalism can't. While there is also a certain dedication to the facts of events themselves in journalism that memoirs or fictional works

might not adhere to (obfuscated by poetry and other artistic forms of expression) there is power in authorial creativity to depict traumatic realities. Grounded in theory from New Journalism practices in the 60s and 70s, this thesis argues that the most moving stories are written by those who are trying to make political and social sense of real events by going beyond the confines of traditional journalism practices. Empathetic listening and storytelling in unconventional form can capture reality in an important and all-encompassing way.

Though Villavicencio's, Cantú's, Luiselli's, Herrera's and Zamora's works are all somewhat personal, they are intentional with the way that they depict the violence of other migrants, and, in some cases their own, experience. Only by simultaneously engaging in works like these in relation to journalistic practices can we begin to grasp the power of mixed narrative not only to shape and give order to the way that we think, but also to fairly represent real life situations. Ultimately, there is a distinction between journalism and creative forms of storytelling—creative non-fiction, literature, poetry. Though fiction and non-fiction are different, writers all have the same purpose: to create works that inform. After reading all of these works together and engaging in critical thought about form, there are still many unanswered questions about how different types of narratives centered on migration make us better listeners and thinkers, and how genres can and should be read together and combined in this sphere. Ultimately, however, we should stay open and engage with the variety of ways that realistic writers capture the truth of experiences, including when conventional journalistic formulas are broken for emotional effect. This is the future of effective literature and reportage around human rights issues that need documenting.

Chapter 4: Personal/Creative

Interview Questions

I spent my summer in 2021 and winter break in 2022 volunteering at the largest migrant/refugee shelter in the nation in El Paso, TX. We received hundreds of people every day—mostly from Central and South America—who shared stories of violence, abuse, trauma, and fear. For much of my time there, I was overwhelmed by the glaring inequalities that I witnessed and the intensity and volume of the stories I heard. I spent a lot of time thinking about ethical journalism practices, asking myself how I could ever even attempt to depict their stories for others to see and understand. Over the course of the summer and winter, I conducted nearly one hundred interviews with different migrants/refugees. I tried to ask questions that were wholistic instead of centered on their trauma experience—what gave them meaning, where they came from, and who they were before they arrived in the United States. In each interview, I tried to really sit back and listen, centering their words.

Below, I list the categorized questions I asked. In the next section, I provide the transcriptions of five interviews of varying lengths, with people from varying backgrounds. This is my journalistic attempt to give readers a glimpse of their stories and humanity, of which I only scratched the surface. I provide these transcripts in a very fluid form—in both Spanish and English—and am not offering commentary on their answers, in order to demonstrate the power of their words and the role and power of a journalist/writer to harness and convey truths from raw conversation.

Creation/Where Do You Come From:

- Who influenced you in your life? Mentor? Boss? Teacher?
- Where do you find meaning?
- What was your favorite thing to do as a child?
- What do you take solace in?
- What was your favorite job?

Reflective

- What are you most proud of?

Speculative

- What is God's most beautiful creation?
- What advice would you give me?
- What did you want to be when you were a kid?
- Do you think people are inherently good?

If You Could:

- If you could change the world in one way, what would it be?

Future:

- What do you miss from home?
- What gives you hope for the future?
- What was a good moment along your journey? What was a bad moment?
- How do you think your migrant experience has shaped your life?

Transcriptions

#3. Woman (age 40) – Honduras — Amputee, lost her arm in a gang fight where she also lost her husband, has a 15-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter.

Mi esposo es el mejor hombre que he conocido en mi vida. Es muy serio y cómico, pero también es muy respetuoso y comparte todo lo que tiene. Compre matas de plátano uno completo y comparte de todo. Y muy inteligente.

Él aprende a leer y escribir sin ir a escuela. No puede porque su mamá estaba enferma y él tenía a cuidarla. Era extremadamente bueno en matemáticas sin haber ido nunca a la escuela. Educó a nosotros de la mejor manera. En toda mi vida, solo lo vi llorar dos veces—la primera cuando murió su mamá; y la segunda cuando nació nuestra hija. Tuvimos una fiesta y bailamos mariachi toda la noche.

Encuentro significado en mi vida de mi. Lo que yo quiero ser.

Hasta los seis años, fue todo muy bonito. Después, todo cambió. Mi mamá se fue, y no sabíamos donde iba. Era una etapa muy difícil para mi. Es importante tener una madre a los seis años. Me hacía falte. Me lloraba porque no está.

Estoy orgullosa de varias cosas. De mis hijos. De me papá. De lo que me enseñó. Sigue en Honduras. Tengo seis hermanos.

Para mi, la creación más bella de Dios es el ser humano.

Si pudiera cambiar el mundo de una manera, eliminaría la violencia. Pero no puedo.

Ahora, nos vamos a Los Ángeles. Nos quedamos con mi tía. Espero tantas cosas. Tengo muchas planes. Pero sobre todo los planes, bueno, pienso en una cosa, Dios me ayude. Por muchos años, he querido tener un albergue—un centro de rehabilitación para mujeres amputadas. Siempre pienso en esto, porque las vea en la esquina, y mi corazón duele mucho cuando las vea. Dice que

deben existir en un lugar donde podemos ayudar. Necesitamos decirlas que valen mucho. Que tengan entender que ellas valen mucho. Siempre pensé en eso. Tengo mis hijos. Me gustaría enamorarme otra vez, pero mis hijos son mi prioridad.

En Honduras, estudió teología. Tenía mucha curiosidad. Cuando era pequeña, siempre preguntaba: "¿Por qué hacen esto? Por qué hacen esto?" Luego me convertí en mamá. Estaba estudiando, pero convertí en mamá y me detuve. Me fui de Honduras con ellos porque me cansada del violencia. Pasamos años en México.

En los Estados Unidos, quiero ir a las montañas, al campo, a la playa, a el paisaje.

Extraño a los tacos. Sé que hay tacos en los Estados Unidos, pero no son los mismos.

#6. Woman (age 23) — Mexico — Came to the U.S. to send money back to her struggling family and daughter.

Mi papá es bromista, divertido. Es increíble trabajador.

Cuando era niña, lo que más me gustaba hacer era hacer tortillas con mi abuela. Me gustaba cuidar de los hijos de mi tía, que vendrían a vender verduras.

Estoy más orgullosa de haber llegado hasta aquí. Es muy muy difícil. Por suerte, me hice buena amiga de una mujer y nos cuidamos una a la otra.

Lo más hermoso del mundo es que todavía tenemos el amor que Dios nos dio desde el principio.

Tengo una hija que todavía está en México. Me encantan los niños. Me muestran inocencia. No saben nada en su pequeño mundo. No saben la malicia de personas. Un niño siempre trae una risa.

Pienso que hay más buenos que malos. En mi camino, me encontré con más buenos que malos.

Su pudiera cambiar el mundo, ayudaría a los niños—todos los niños de la calle que no tienen hogar, ropa, comida, amor. Son el futuro de nuestro mundo.

Me voy a Luisiana. Espero conocer gente buena, espero trabajar, contribuir y trabajar para que puedo ayudar a mi familia. Mi esperanza es estar en una casa propia con mi hija.

Estoy muy agradecida por el albergue. Quiero volver a ayudar.

Mi experiencia migrante me ayuda madurar mucho, a valorar todas las cosas que mis papas me dieron. No lo había apreciado antes. Fueron los tres meses más duros de mi vida.

#33. Boy (age 19) — Haiti — Traveled through South America with his sister, but then was separated from her in detention.

Fui a Santiago, Chile en 2017 con mi Hermana. Salimos de Haití por varias razones, y vivimos/estudiamos en Chile. Viví allí por 2.5 años y aprendí a hablar español.

Mi familia es lo más importante en mi vida.

Si pudiera cambiar el mundo, elimínate drogas, pistolas, pandillas.

Pienso que hay más malas personas que buenas. De hecho, las personas malas de Haití mataron a mi mamá cuando tenía catorce años. Después de este incidente, me fui con mi hermana.

Me voy a Miami, pero mi hermana sigue detenida y no sé dónde está. La extraño. No sé qué hacer.

Viajé con ella por Sudamérica. Pasamos por Chile, Honduras, Colombia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Panamá, Perú. Bajamos en autobús. Caminamos en el país. A través de las ciudades y los bosques.

Pasamos seis días en una selva terrible. Hubo lluvia, y era bien peligrosa. No había nada de comer. Sobrevivieron, pero muchos se murieron también. Gracias a Dios no morimos.

En la selva también hay ladrones que te quitaron el dinero, la bolsa, comida.

Extraño a mi abuela, mi hermanito, y mis primos que me enseñaron todo.

Han pasado siete años desde que vi mi papa. Siete años.

#45. Girl (age 13) — Guatemala— Her mother was fleeing from an abusive husband and she also encountered abuse along the journey (I didn't include much of our conversation because she asked me not to).

Mi mamá me enseñó todo. Es amable, trabajadora, generosa, luchadora.

Encuentro significado en mi vida en Dios, en escuela, familia. Lo que más me gusta hacer es estudiar. Quiero ser doctora. No he ido a la escuela en dos años. Lo extraño.

Si pudiera cambiar el mundo, pediría menos maltrado a las mujeres. En el viaje, fuimos abusados por muchos hombres. Se acercan a nosotros, nos tocaron.

Nos robaron. No teníamos dinero para comprar un pañal. Pedimos dinero.

Viajando tanto, pasé más sufrimiento del que podría haber imaginado.

Si las personas pudieran tener mejores corazones, serían más humanas. No debería haber asesinatos.

#76. Man (age 21) — Venezuela — Fled his country because he was being persecuted by the government.

Cuando me siento triste, encuentro esperanza en Dios. También me encanta nadar. Me calma.

Soy ingeniero civil, y estoy orgulloso de mi trabajo. He trabajado muy duro.

Encuentro belleza en el mundo, en el paisaje. Me encantan los animales.

En Venezuela, soy ingeniero. Pero aquí, soy un inmigrante. Estoy ajustando. Todo lo que he trabajado ha cambiado.

Acabo de pasar dos semanas en el Centro de Procesamiento del Otero, en Nuevo México. Nos pusieron en habitaciones pequeñas y casi todos contrajeron COVID. Comimos burritos congelados para el almuerzo y la cena.

Fui aquí porque mi familia fue perseguida del gobierno. Dos de mis primos murieron en una redada gubernamental en 2018: "El Junquito". Formaban parte de un grupo rebelde que luchaba contra la corrupción dentro del Gobierno Bolivariano.

El presidente venezolano, Nicolás Maduro, ha sido profundamente criticado internacionalmente por su colaboración con bandas conocidas como Colectivos. Estas pandillas supervisan el comercio de cocaína a manos de funcionarios del gobierno, actos de extorsión y más.

Hace tres años, el grupo rebelde adoptó una postura pública contra el gobierno y fue atacado como resultado. Cinco hombres fueron asesinados y seis fueron arrestados. Una de las esposas del primo también murió. Estaba embarazada.

También fui a protestas contra el gobierno, pero me detuve después de que mis primos murieran.

Dejé el país porque estaba siendo buscado por el gobierno. No le dijera a nadie que me iba.

Extraño todo de mi casa. Mi vida, mi trabajo, mi novia.

Concluding words:

After one interview with a woman, she thanked me and started crying. We were eating dinner with another family and the mother of that family started crying too. I remember feeling my heart break, and reflecting on how wrong it felt that the smallest of kindnesses could bring people to tears. They weren't just saying thank you. They were in a type of trouble that I was not and will not ever be in. Talking to them, it began to feel like I had been lied to my whole life—that I had been told we were living in a world that was alright, but it is not alright because this is happening and will continue to keep happening.

I've only transcribed five of the nearly 100 interviews I conducted this summer and winter, but I will carry these conversations and their stories forward with me into my life and work.

This thesis is my attempt to wrap my head around and express the lived injustices that so many people feel every day. It isn't an attempt to tell all of the stories that I heard at the border, but rather to try to understand the most compassionate and honest ways to tell their stories.

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