

**‘An Elegant Surpassing of the Truth’: Interrogating Authenticity, Authorship and the
Production of Value in *The Story of My Teeth***

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Abstract:

Resulting from a collaboration with workers at the Jumex factory and responding to an exhibition at the Jumex art gallery, *La historia de mis dientes* [*The Story of my Teeth*] by Valeria Luiselli interrogates the ways in which stories can be used to market objects, places and people and the values attached to the names of authors and artists. Attention to the changes made to the text in the English translation highlights these central concerns, while analysis of the figure of Voragine, who writes the ‘dental autobiography’ of the novel’s protagonist, Highway, reveals a parody of the *testimonio*, a genre that derives its value primarily from its supposed authenticity.

Keywords: art markets, authenticity, authorship, names, Mexico, *testimonio*, translation, Valeria Luiselli, value

Valeria Luiselli (2015a: 182) describes *La historia de mis dientes* (2013), or *The Story of my Teeth* (2015) in English, as a ‘collective “novel-essay” about the production of value and meaning in contemporary art and literature’. As this article will explore, the label of ‘collective’ comes from how Luiselli involved workers at the Jumex juice factory in the writing of the book. Her insistence that the story is as much the factory workers’ as it is hers has been praised by critics, with Aaron Bady (2015) calling it ‘an implicit rebuke to the idea of isolated artistic genius’. Nonetheless, the novel remains recognisably part of Luiselli’s oeuvre, displaying the complex interweaving of narrative strands, preoccupations with place and identity, and interrogations of the uses and limits of language that define her work. Like the translator protagonists of *Los ingravidos* (2012) [*Faces in the Crowd* (2013)] and *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (2017),¹ the protagonist Highway and his apprentice/scribe Voragine are both mediators; Highway translates objects into stories in his auctions, while Voragine translates Highway’s life into a written narrative. In the process, both shape our opinions of the subjects of their narratives and the values we attribute to them. Both claim to offer authenticity, the *real* story of the objects being auctioned or of the auctioneer himself, but Luiselli undermines these claims through dramatic irony. In doing so, she interrogates claims to authenticity in art markets and publishing, in tourism and in commerce. Moreover, Eugenio di Stefano (2017: 149; 151) sees the fact that *The Story of my Teeth* itself is not a social realist style portrayal of the lives of the factory workers as a ‘disavowal of authenticity’ that functions to critique the co-option of authenticity in the ‘neoliberal cultural logic’. Emilio Sauri (2019) too analyses the coming together of art and commerce in the creative economy in his reading of *Teeth*, highlighting the paradox that an artist has to appear outside of the market to be marketable. In Luiselli’s work, these concerns about value are interlinked with an awareness of how certain names become imbued with value and used to sell books or artworks.² This

article will therefore analyse how Luiselli both highlights and challenges the values attributed to authors' names. In addition, it will demonstrate how Luiselli interrogates notions of authorship in the *testimonio*, a genre which derives its value primarily from its supposed authenticity.

Originally written and published in Spanish, *The Story of my Teeth* was re-written substantially during the process of translation into English, in which Luiselli worked closely with translator Christina MacSweeney. Significant changes have been made to the structure and content that reframe the entire narrative, making much more explicit the central messages of the book about the production of value through constructions of authenticity and the values attached to names.³ For example, whereas *La historia de mis dientes* has two epigraphs – one about death and teeth, and the other a line from Johnny Cash's song 'Highwayman' – *The Story of my Teeth* begins each chapter with epigraphs about proper names, from semioticians J. S. Mill, Gottlob Frege, Saul Kripke, David Lewis, David Kaplan and Bertrand Russell. It is significant that this revision followed Luiselli's translation work with refugee children, whose names held no value in the immigration system and who were dehumanised through the label of 'illegal immigrants'.⁴ This article therefore proposes a study of both the Spanish and the English version, with attention to what has been, in Highway's words, 'better *illuminated*' in the translation (Luiselli 2015a: 33): the ways in which stories can be used to market objects, places and people; the economic value attached to certain artists' names; and the ways in which 'authentic' voices are incorporated into literature through the genre of *testimonio*, and how these can be used to add value to a narrative,

The demand for authenticity in contemporary literary markets extends to writers themselves, who are marketed as representative of a distinct national identity. Valeria Luiselli has been touted as one of the leading contemporary Mexican authors. In 2015, for example, she was sent to the London Book Fair as a representative of Mexico, during the Mexico market-

focus as part of the year of British-Mexican collaboration, while *La historia de mis dientes* was published by Sexto Piso in Mexico in 2013 thanks to government sponsorship from the Ministry for Culture and the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes.⁵ Nonetheless, Luiselli is wary of overarching narratives of national identity. In an article against tendencies in new criticism in Mexico (Luiselli 2015b), she condemns the obsession with ‘the national’ and discourses of identity, which reduce writers to a handful of values that have little to do with literary qualities. Consequently, her work avoids totalizing narratives of identity. What we find in her writing, in Teresa González Arce’s (2016: 257) terms, ‘no son identidades acabadas y coherentes sino construcciones fragmentarias e incompletas’ [‘are not complete and coherent identities but fragmentary and incomplete constructions’].

Luiselli was born in Mexico but has lived a transnational life. At two years old, she moved to the United States, and has since lived in Costa Rica, South Korea, South Africa and India. She has subsequently moved back to the United States, where she completed a PhD at Columbia University. This transnational life has shaped her writing practice. Luiselli explains that as a child she felt her ‘language was imperfect, full of holes and gaps’ (Kabat 2014: 104), and began collecting words in books to control her self-consciousness. As a teenager, in India, she read Juan Rulfo, Gabriel García Márquez and Julio Cortázar, as well as classic Spanish authors such as Lope de Vega, and in this way ‘began to understand and feel [her]self to be part of a linguistic and literary tradition or community’ (Neyra 2015). This familiarity with the Spanish language literary tradition, as well as the urge to collect, is highly visible in the abundance of authors who make an appearance in *The Story of my Teeth*. Equally, Luiselli states that she is inspired by the English essay form in its ‘circling, entering, and leaving topics with fluency and humour’ (Neyra 2015), evidenced in the structure of this novel.

The Story of my Teeth is a genre-defying book. Reviewers and scholars have referred to it variously as a novel, an essay, autofiction and biofiction, or a mixture of them all. It is the

story of Gustavo Sánchez Sánchez, known as ‘Carretera’ in the Spanish, or ‘Highway’ in the English. In the first chapter, significantly called ‘The Story (Beginning, Middle, and End)’, Highway introduces himself, explains how he worked at the Jumex juice factory before becoming an auctioneer, and recounts his quest to replace his malformed teeth. This seemingly straightforward narrative is then progressively complicated by a series of chapters titled ‘The Hyperbolics’, ‘The Parabolics’, ‘The Circulars’, ‘The Allegorics’, and ‘The Elliptics’, in which we see Highway purport to sell the teeth of famous essayists throughout history, and later auction a collection of objects stolen from the Jumex Gallery through tangentially related stories. Throughout the novel, we see everyday characters – from the newspaper seller to the factory worker – given the names of real-life writers, including Rubén Darío, Julio Cortázar, Yuri Herrera and even Valeria Luiselli. This plot allows Luiselli to introduce interconnected questions about constructions of authenticity, the power of narrative to create value, and the special position afforded to writers. In addition, in chapter 4, ‘The Circulars’, we meet Voragine, a struggling writer who becomes Highway’s apprentice. As I will discuss later in this article, Voragine is revealed in ‘The Elliptics’ to have transcribed Highway’s narrative, in a parody of the *testimonio*.

The book began life when Magalí Arriola and Juan Gaitán, curators of the exhibition ‘El cazador y la fábrica’ [The Hunter and the Factory] at the Jumex Gallery, commissioned a piece by Luiselli for the exhibition catalogue. The gallery houses the largest private collection of contemporary art in Latin America and is funded by the profits of the Jumex juice factory. As Emilio Sauri (2019: 281-282) explores, the gallery tends to distance itself from the factory that funds it as this link to commerce is seen to be ‘bad taste’. Arriola and Gaitán put together the exhibition in response to questions about urban isolation and the separation of the gallery from its surrounding area (Gil 2014). However, they gave few clues to understanding the collected artworks. Liz Munsell (2013) describes:

Along the margins of the exhibition, viewers themselves lurch around as they search for the scarcely visible labels identifying the artworks. Intentional or not, this mindful pursuit instils a hope for new modes of spectatorship, turning the art voyeur into a cognizant agent.

Meaning making therefore became a collaboration between the artists, the curators, and the viewers, who had to tell themselves stories about what they saw, which is reflected in the stories Highway invents for each of the pieces in the exhibition within the novel. Luiselli agreed to write a piece for the exhibition on the condition that the workers of the juice factory could be involved in its creation. She insists, ‘Los obreros fueron fundamentales: escribí la primera versión con ellos, no sólo para ellos’ (Gil 2014) [‘The workers were fundamental: I wrote the first version with them, not just for them’]. As she explains in different ways in the afterwords to both the Spanish and English versions of the book, this was both a local and a transnational process; local in that a group of workers would meet regularly in the factory to read chapters sent to them by Luiselli, discuss them and give feedback based on their own experiences, but transnational because Luiselli was in New York at the time and would listen to the discussions as audio files emailed to her. Despite this insistence on the involvement of the workers, however, Eugenio di Stefano (2017) affirms that, in contrast to examples of Mexican proletarian writing from the 1930s, the novel is not pitched at workers beyond those directly involved in the writing process. He adds that ‘the emphasis on literary language, and even literary referents, work against not only an identification with workers of proletarian literature but also the immediacy between the subaltern and reader that marks the *testimonio*’ (Di Stefano, 2017: 149). Luiselli incorporates aspects of the lives of workers in this experimental novel not as a document of lived experience, but to raise questions about what we take to be an ‘authentic’ representation and the values attached to this.

Although not a straightforward realist portrayal of the workers, the novel is in part a celebration of the Jumex workers and their local area, Ecatepec de Morelos, on the outskirts of Mexico City. Because of his accent and mannerisms, in the Spanish version, Carretera has been described as a caricature of the ‘*chilango*’ (Castro 2017: 2), a resident of the Mexican capital. Despite his many flaws, readers are encouraged to view this picaresque character with affection. Similarly, Luiselli presents a ‘loving’ portrait of Ecatepec (Betancourt 2015). Search for Ecatepec online and you will find countless articles about how dangerous the city is, having been reported as one of the five cities in Mexico with the most murder investigations every year since December 2012, primarily a result of drug crimes.⁶ This side of the city, however, is absent from *The Story of my Teeth*. Luiselli (2015b) is critical of the obsession with the violent and the marginal – drug-trafficking, prostitution, and murder – in contemporary Mexican fiction, arguing that critics do not lead people to question or reflect on these issues, but rather celebrate them. By contrast, Luiselli gives us factory workers, newspaper sellers, and scrapyard owners, characters who are not usually present in international imaginaries of Mexico. There is an additional irony in the location of Highway’s house, on Calle Disneylandia, which further emphasises the distance between the international tourist destination that sells a fantasy and Highway’s forgotten neighbourhood. Ecatepec is far from the tourist sites of Mexico City, yet Highway insists to his protégé, Voragine, that tourists will come if he tells stories about the neighbourhood: ‘As soon as you’ve got those, there’ll be people flocking to them. Places and things are made up of stories’ (Luiselli 2015a: 101). Like many aspects of the book, this phrase from Highway simultaneously asserts that the everyday people and places of Ecatepec are worthy of as much attention as any famous person or landmark and underlines how contact with locals has been commodified for tourists seeking a more ‘authentic’ experience. The guided tour of Ecatepec is brought to life through the inclusion of images from Google Maps and photographs of local buildings, including the

exterior of the juice factory, in the final chapter of the Spanish, 'Paseo Circular' [Circular Route], and the penultimate chapter of the English, 'The Elliptics'. However, Luiselli warns attentive readers, in the Spanish version, that these photographs may not be all they seem, by crediting most of them to W.G. Sebald,⁷ the German writer famous for the mix of fact, recollection and fiction in his works and his use of photographs not to illustrate, but to problematize, his narratives. Sebald famously stated in a 1993 interview that 'People let themselves be convinced by a photograph' (Pate 2007: 106). The inclusion of the photographs in the novel can then be seen as another aspect of the novel through which Luiselli both offers authenticity (in this case a view of a real place distinct from both the touristic image of Mexico and the one common to the *narconovela*) and demonstrates how authenticity can be staged.

Producing value through stories and names

The Story of my Teeth revolves around Highway's ability to sell worthless objects, including his old rotten teeth, based on the stories he tells about them. This aspect of the book has been celebrated in English-language reviews. Manuel Betancourt (2015), for example, highlights that from the opening lines readers are 'alerted that the seemingly simple story of Highway's choppers [...] will be interwoven with a larger meditation on the arbitrary nature of language and the commodification of art'. The opening of *La historia de mis dientes* was more enigmatic, introducing the concept of radical recycling: 'Está es la historia de mis dientes. Es mi carta familiar a la posteridad, mi ensayo sobre los coleccionables y el reciclaje radical' [This is the story of my teeth. It is my letter to posterity, my essay on collectibles and radical recycling] (Luiselli 2013: 19). By contrast, the English version begins, 'This is the story of my teeth, and my treatise on collectibles and the variable value of objects' (Luiselli 2015a: 1). Although recycling can be interpreted as changing the value of an object, giving it a new worth in a

different context, the English version leaves no doubt that the novel is in dialogue with the rules of the market economy.⁸

Highway understands that authenticity sells, even when it is fabricated. When he holds an auction of his teeth to raise money for the local church, he invents origin stories for each one, imbuing them with a sense of place and time, despite having no documents of this provenance. In the English version, Highway explains that he will employ his own ‘hyperbolic’ auctioneering model:

As the great Quintilian had once said, by means of my hyperbolics, I could restore an object’s value through “an elegant surpassing of the truth”. This meant that the stories I would tell about the lots would all be based on facts that were, occasionally, exaggerated or, to put it another way, better *illuminated*. (Luiselli 2015a: 33)

Readers can appreciate the comic irony here that Highway’s ‘exaggerations’ are in fact outright lies. Whereas the provenance of these teeth – purportedly belonging to Petrarch, Rousseau and Virginia Wolf, among others – is left ambiguous in the Spanish version, in the English it is clearly stated that these are the teeth removed from his own mouth (34). This reinforces the message that the only value in these teeth derives from the story Highway is able to spin about them. As Marco Ramírez Rojas (2018) maintains, it is really Highway’s words that are for sale. Having linked Highway to the Jumex factory and gallery earlier in the book, Luiselli implies that the methods of cheeky auctioneer – inspired in part by Luiselli’s uncle who worked in the giant Central de Abastos market in Mexico City (englishpen1921 2015) – are not that different from those of international art dealers, only Highway is more honest about it.

While Mexican readers are likely to be aware of the two arms of Jumex, international readers may not be. Consequently, in the English version of the novel, when telling the story of his job as a factory watchman, Highway explains:

The factory produced juices. And the juices, in turn, produced art. That is to say, the juice sales funded the largest art collection in the continent. It was a good job to have since, although I was only in charge of guarding the factory entrance and was never allowed into the gallery where the art was shown, I was in a sense the gatekeeper of a collection of objects of real beauty and truth. (Luiselli 2015a: 6-7)

This speech makes a powerful statement about the inequality apparent at the Jumex site. As Luiselli stated in an interview, ‘There’s something disturbing about these workers’ labour in the juice factory subsidizing this big collection for the privileged consumption of art’ (Kabat 2014: 107). Luiselli questions the morality of spending fortunes on artworks, while workers are paid minimum wage to produce juice. The exhibition that inspired the novel, ‘The Hunter and the Factory’, was physically close to the workers, yet metaphorically very distant from them. The workings of the international art market, as exemplified in the exhibition, had no connection to their daily lives. Luiselli recounts that the workers’ discussions ‘usually revolved around the problem of what determines the value of the objects in Jumex’s galleries’ (Kabat 2014: 107), and Jorge Téllez (2016) notes that the lack of communication between the two worlds is at the heart of the novel. Galería Jumex’s success is a testament to what Yvette Sánchez (2016) calls the ‘boom’ in interest in Latin American art in international markets in the twenty-first century. While Sánchez argues that the values attached to Latin American art are constructed through international trends and markets, the incorporation of these artworks into Luiselli’s stories of everyday local people encourages readers not to forget what makes their acquisition possible.

Highway himself is directly exploited by the art community in the English version of the novel. Whereas Highway’s son is a private security guard at the Jumex Gallery in the Spanish (Luiselli, 2013: 48), in the English he ‘works as an art curator’ (Luiselli 2015a: 38). Thus, when he tricks Highway into bequeathing him all his possessions, this becomes an

appropriation by the art gallery. Highway's teeth then become one of the exhibits, 'arranged in a little pile, lit vertically from above, and placed on a white wooden pedestal' (115). His subsequent theft of objects from the gallery is therefore a justifiable retribution. It is this section of the novel where the most significant changes between the Spanish and English versions, in terms of questions about the values of art, can be seen. This part of the story had been part of a different chapter in the Spanish, narrated by Carretera's mentee. In the English, Highway gets to tell the story himself, albeit through Voragine's mediation, emphasizing the importance of these events to Highway's own understanding of his life. As revenge for being kidnapped, robbed and humiliated by his son, Highway goes to 'pick up and recycle some objects' (114) from the gallery, which he then plans to auction through a series of 'Allegorics of Ecatepec'. Highway's plan is to 'recycle our new collected objects by telling stories that used collected names of my friends and acquaintances from the neighbourhood' (115), that is, to use the local to bring meaning to objects which are otherwise incomprehensible. Through placing each stolen object within a story of local people, Highway affirms that these objects belong to the local community, whose labour made their purchase possible. In the English, unlike in the Spanish, the contents of the 'The Hunter and the Factory' exhibition are mentioned, earlier in the story, as Highway wanders about the gallery where he has been left by his son. He notices:

Placed in odd spots and in corners were a series of objects: a billboard featuring a horse inside a hotel room, a sleeping stuffed dog, a couple of plush rat and mouse costumes, a hairy prosthetic leg, a tiny baobab tree, a pile of whistles, a music score on a tripod, and a fake window consisting solely of light thrown onto the wall by halogen spotlights. (75)

This encourages readers to see each of the art-works to be sold in the 'Allegorics of Ecatepec' auction as the objects referred to previously. Moreover, whereas the Spanish simply gives the stories inspired by the objects, the English gives the artists' names, slightly altered: Doug

Sánchez Aitken, Olafur Sánchez Eliasson, Peter Sánchez Fischli, Damián Sánchez Ortega, Abraham Cruzvillegas Sánchez, Miguel Sánchez Calderón, Sam Sánchez Durant, Maurizio Sánchez Cattelan and Fernando Sánchez Ortega. Here we see the domestication of international artists and writers present throughout the novel, through which Highway claims these luminaries as his relatives. Highway and Voragine modify the names of the artists to avoid getting caught stealing, but Voragine fears that under a modified name the objects ‘will lose their value’ (116). This highlights how, as Sauri (2019: 283) argues, in the contemporary art market, ‘*Who the artist is* becomes as important [as], if not more important than, the work. Highway dismisses Voragine’s concerns, telling him to ‘shut up and write down’ his allegories (116), undermining the link between names and value. Nonetheless, the inclusion of the artists’ names in the English version does add new layers of meaning for those familiar with international art trends. For example, the story Highway invents to sell Sam Durant’s inverted baobab tree (126) is about a man trying to hang himself from a bonsai baobab. As well as referencing Alejandro Zambra’s celebrated novel *Bonsai* (2006), the story relates to the controversy over Durant’s 2012 piece ‘Scaffold’, a replica of a gallows on which 38 men from the Dakota tribe were executed in 1862. This supports the Di Stefano’s (2017) argument that the book is aimed less at the workers than at those familiar with or involved in the field of contemporary art. The English version accompanies each piece with a listings price in the millions of pesos, before Highway takes the lot to the scrapyard in exchange for 100 pesos (128), highlighting the absurd inflation of prices in the international art market.

Luiselli compares the inflation of the value of objects once placed in galleries to the inflation of the value of names once placed on the covers of books. In one of the most striking features of the novel, the names of numerous writers – from canonical to up-and-coming – have been given to characters including the police officers, the bus driver, and the newspaper vendor.

The way in which Luiselli uses these names as ‘readymades’ owes a clear debt to the work of European avant-garde artists, particularly Marcel Duchamp. She explains:

I use a lot of names of writers in Mexico City, as if they were found objects, and displace them to a foreign context – an old procedure in contemporary art that is maybe not so common in fiction. I take the names, empty them of content, and place them in the context of a story very different from their real one. (Kabat 2014: 107)

This use of authors’ names is noticeably different to the way in which Luiselli incorporates writers into *Los ingravidos* [*Faces in the Crowd*], where her ‘rewriting of [Mexican Modernist poet Gilberto Owen] is a way of paying homage to a forgotten figure’ (Booker 2017: 285). Luiselli insists that the inclusion of authors’ names in *Teeth* is not a mere homage (Gil 2014). Instead, critics have read this aspect of the book as Luiselli constructing a literary territory in which to place herself (Pape 2015: 193) or a map or personal encyclopaedia of her intellectual interests (Ramírez Rojas 2018: 345). While these are valid readings, I contend that through this innovative use of writers’ names Luiselli also interrogates the values attributed to the name of an author or artist, particularly the idea that an artist is somehow worth more than other people are. Ironically, this point was reinforced by critic Roberto Pliego’s review (2014), which objected to the use of writers’ names, suggesting writers are somehow sacred.⁹ This question is not just hypothetical for Luiselli. In *Tell Me How it Ends* (2017), she struggles with the fact that, because they are in the United States as professional writers, her and her husband, Álvaro Enrígue, receive better treatment and face an easier immigration process than the children for whom she interprets. In this respect, the addition of epigraphs from semioticians about proper names in the English version is particularly noteworthy. These include David Kaplan’s claim that ‘Names are a special kind of word, so special that some have thought them not to be part of language at all’ (111) and Bertrand Russell’s logical deduction that “‘The author of *Waverly*”

means nothing' (135). Both epigraphs urge readers to examine how and why we react to the use of authors' names in the text.

Exposing the limits of authenticity and authorship in *testimonio* and translations

Luiselli describes tape recording discussions and capturing the informal language of the workers, insisting that 'many of the stories told in this book come from workers' personal accounts' (2015a: 181). Although we can question how much of the book comes from the workers, and the extent to which they benefitted from the success of the novel, incorporating their input into a novel that also refers to canonical works of literature undermines distinctions between the different sources, asserting that one is no more valuable than the other. In this way, Luiselli demonstrates what Joanna Bartow (2005: 13) calls 'the political power and subversive potential of ceding published space to the "authentic" voices of marginalized groups'. However, this is not a straightforward process in *Teeth*.

By labelling the chapters with Highway's auctioning techniques, according to Marco Ramírez Rojas (2018: 338), Luiselli acknowledges a 'voluntad performativa de poner esta historia "a la venta"' [performative will to put this story up for sale]. As such, we can ask whether Luiselli is doing what Highway does, giving her product – that is, her novel – value by imbuing it with authenticity. I suggest that the insistence on the Jumex factory workers as the source of this narrative is a form of 'staged marginality', in Graham Huggan's (2001) terms. That is not to suggest that the workers were not important in the creation of this story, but that this emphasis on the authentic roots of the novel is a selling point for the book.¹⁰ It displays 'both resistance and adherence to the mechanisms of a global market' (Segnini 2017: 100),¹¹ in that it simultaneously gives space to voices that are rarely published and feeds the market for authenticity in literature. Moreover, I argue that Luiselli recognises this duality by parodying the *testimonio* in the form and content of the novel.

The Latin American *testimonio* genre reached its apogee in the 1980s and 1990s, with works such as *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* [I, Rigoberta Menchú] (1983), the account of a Guatemalan activist, transcribed by anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos. The *novela testimonial* [testimonial novel] has enjoyed enormous commercial success, and has become one of the genres most associated with Latin American writing, as well as the subject of intense academic debate.¹² Although *Teeth* contains too much invention to be called a *novela testimonial*, it clearly engages with many of the questions arising from the discussions about the genre that have taken place in the last three decades, in particular how the value of *testimonio* derives from its claims to authenticity.

Told in the first-person, the opening chapter, significantly called ‘The Story (Beginning, Middle, and End)’ purports to offer the truth of a life, which is then altered or undermined by the subsequent chapters. The first-person voice lends authority to the narrative, aiming to persuade readers that this is a genuine insight into marginality or exploitation (in this case, the inequality inherent in the Jumex organisation) from an eyewitness. John Beverley (2008: 572) contends that the first-person narrator in testimonial writing is ‘an “I” that demands to be recognised’, displaying ‘a desire not to be silenced or defeated’. Despite repeatedly claiming to be a modest man, Highway is a character who demands recognition, beginning his story with an account of his talents, which include counting to eight in Japanese, imitating Janis Joplin, and balancing an egg on its head like Columbus could, equating himself with one of the most significant figures in Latin American history through a trivial activity (Luiselli 2015a: 1). Notably, however, Highway does not claim recognition for himself as a representative of the marginalised and exploited. He does not recognise himself as such, at least not overtly, presenting himself instead as a successful auctioneer. It is left to readers to infer his exploitation from his narrative, especially from his comments about the juice factory, and the abuse he suffers at the hands of his son, as an embodiment the gallery.

Elzbieta Sklodowska (1982: 379) reminds us that a testimonial narrative is not a direct account of a lived experience, but distorted by memory and intention. Highway's bravado alerts readers from the start to take his account of his life with a large pinch of salt. This becomes increasingly clear as we learn about how he fabricates stories to add value to the objects he auctions, until finally the entire artifice is revealed when Highway's protégé, Voragine, takes over the narration at the end of the story and gives his own, contrasting, account of Highway's unhappy life of poverty and seclusion. By the end of the novel, we learn that the preceding chapters are the story Highway has told to Voragine, who takes the role of the testimonial transcriber within the text. In this way, the novel is an example of fiction that 'exaggerates the tensions present in the transcriber-informant relationship to such an extent that these texts serve as commentaries on testimonial paradoxes glossed over in the past' (Bartow 2005: 26). It is worth noting that in the Spanish, Carratera's protégé is called Beto Bálser, after the Swiss Modernist writer Robert Walser, who made his living in many menial assistant jobs. In the English, Voragine takes his name from the medieval chronicler, otherwise known as Jacopo de Fazio, whose most famous work was the compilation of the *Legenda Aurea*, which recounted the legendary lives of major saints. This change in name both reflects the greater emphasis on the character's role in crafting the story of Highway's life that reaches audiences and encourages readers to draw comparisons between Highway and these saints considered worthy of memorialisation. When Highway first meets Voragine, the young man states, 'I am a writer and a church tour guide in the city. I live by the latter and die by the former' (Luiselli 2015a: 94). Voragine reveals that writing is a painful struggle for him, that he is unable to write because he is 'terrified of irrelevance' (95). This implies that by helping Highway to share his story, Voragine also benefits, feeling like he is writing something worthwhile and more likely to appeal to readers. This exemplifies Joanna Bartow's (2005: 25) claim that a transcriber of *testimonio* identifying with an informant is a 'gesture of self-legitimation' producing a

‘vicarious identity’. Nonetheless, in *Teeth*, Highway reclaims his role as author. When Highway commissions Voragine to write his ‘dental autobiography’, Voragine replies, ‘It would be your biography not your autobiography’, and Highway counters, ‘It is my autobiography [...] because it is my story, and I will tell it, and you just transcribe’ (101-103). In this way, the novel questions the limits of authorship, further problematizing the value ascribed to the figure of the author.

Teeth also explores questions about the veracity of *testimonio* through Voragine. He transcribes these stories, knowing that they are lies, or ‘surpassing the truth’ (137), but excuses this because he comes to realise that exaggeration is a fundamental part of Highway’s character. Furthermore, the novel demonstrates how the transcriber creates a ‘reality effect’ by ‘edit[ing] and mak[ing] a story out of the narrator’s discourse’ (Beverley 2005: 574). Voragine recounts that he suggested a structure to Highway, ‘beginning, middle, end’ (114). This explains not only the title of the first chapter, but also Highway’s habit of signposting, repeating phrases such as ‘End of anecdote’. Such explicit evidence of the transcriber’s involvement in shaping the story urges readers to look for similar, though less obvious, techniques in testimonial writing. As the part of the novel supposedly narrated by Highway reaches its end, there is a short dialogue between Highway and Voragine (129), revealing that what has been presented as a monologue has in fact been shaped from a dialogue:

‘And I guess that we can now say that I lived happily thereafter, right Voragine?’

‘I guess so, Highway’.

‘So write that down and let’s go out to meet some ladies’. (129)

This exchange undermines the solemnity of the *testimonio*, as Highway is less interested in sharing his story than going out. Highway’s use of the trope of the happy ending more common to a fairy tale or romance, and Voragine’s acceptance of this trope, counters the false erasure of the transcriber in most testimonial narratives, again encouraging readers to look for the

transcriber and the narrative conventions behind the narrative voice in other texts. When writing the novel, Luiselli similarly revealed herself at the end of the process of recording the workers, sending them a recording of herself. She states, ‘I had been writing under the pseudonym of Gustavo Sánchez Sánchez and I thought it was important to close the circle of intimacy we had created by letting them hear my real voice’ (Luiselli 2015a: 181). This comment indicates Luiselli’s awareness of the power imbalances inherent in the informant/transcriber relationship.

As well as making visible the role of the transcriber in a *testimonio*, *The Story of my Teeth* also challenges the traditional invisibility of the translator. Lawrence Venuti (1995: 317) famously argued against this invisibility, stressing that translators must ‘work to revise the individualistic concept of authorship [...] by developing innovative translation practices in which their work becomes visible to readers’. Christina MacSweeney’s translation does just this, adding a new chapter called ‘The Chronologies’, which takes the form of a timeline detailing both events from Highway’s life story and an eclectic collection of trivia about the writers whose names appear in the novel. MacSweeney (2016) explains that she did not want ‘dry as dust translator’s notes’, so instead set out to provide information which could help orient Anglophone readers in a creative way. ‘The Chronologies’ is the most visible change to the book and the main one picked up on by English language critics, who have praised Luiselli for being ‘generous’ enough to share authorship with MacSweeney (Krusoe 2015), ironically reaffirming the exaltation of the author that the novel contests through its use of names and parody of the *testimonio*. MacSweeney (2016) noted that the chapter would be translated and included in the second Spanish addition, as well as being incorporated into translations of the book into various other languages. This case challenges set ideas about the source text as the original, and the translation as a subsidiary or inferior text, asserting that each version is instead a step in a continuing, collaborative process of creation. The fact that the English version is a

rewriting of the Spanish, which significantly alters the meaning and reception of the text, encourages us to question the validity of terms like original or fidelity. As Rebecca Walkowitz (2015: 45) argues, ‘Instead of asking about fidelity, whether the subsequent editions match the original, one might ask about innovation and about the various institutional and aesthetic frameworks that shape the work’s ongoing production’. In comparing the two texts, Jorge Téllez (2017) argues that ‘The Chronologics’ brings order, showing readers how the many names in the story are part of something bigger: ‘Se pasa entonces de lo arbitrario o aleatorio como defecto a la ilusión de arbitrariedad como efecto’ [‘In this way it moves from the arbitrary or random as a defect to the illusion of arbitrariness as an effect’]. I would dispute the idea that the names were simply random in the Spanish and that not providing further information on the people behind the names was a defect. As Sauri (2019: 287) maintains, the choice of objects – and by extension, names – is not accidental, making them ‘objects of interpretation’. Nonetheless, comparison of the two versions informs us about Luiselli’s evolving aesthetic and ideological concerns, as well as the expectations of different audiences. MacSweeney suggests that while Latin American writing ‘often uses narrative as a framework for expressing something else that the reader has to uncover for herself’, Anglophone audiences expect more clarity of meaning (Guaponne 2016).

When reading the English version of *The Story of my Teeth*, it is unclear what originates from the Jumex factory workers, from Valeria Luiselli or from Christina MacSweeney. This will only become further complicated as the English version informs new translations into other languages, responding to new contexts. On the one hand, this undermines the value placed on the author as the sole creator of an original work, mirroring the questioning of the value ascribed to authors’ names in the novel. On the other hand, the blurring of borders between the workers’ contributions and Luiselli’s own makes explicit the many tensions inherent in the

informant/transcriber relationship within the *testimonio* genre and the marketization of the ‘authentic’ narrative. This ambivalence is the defining characteristic of *The Story of my Teeth*, a novel that combines the local (the people, places and everyday stories of Ecatepec) and the international (canonical writers and global art markets), in defiance of what Luiselli (2015b) calls ‘la falsedad de la tentadora dicotomía entre lo cosmopolita y lo local’ [‘the false dichotomy between the cosmopolitan and the local’]. It is a novel with multiple implied audiences, which overlap in part: the workers, who are in on the joke about Jumex; literary tourists seeking an ‘authentic’ experience in Ecatepec, whose ideas about authenticity will be challenged; and those with wide-ranging knowledge about canonical and contemporary Latin American literature and international art markets, who will be encouraged to reassess the values they attribute to artworks, artists and writers.

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¹ See Sarah Booker (2017) and Ilse Logie (2020) for studies of the protagonists as mediators in these works.

² Sarah Booker (2017) demonstrates how similar preoccupations are present in *Los ingrátidos*. She maintains that Luiselli makes visible the politics of publication and how names that create literary prestige, as the narrator sells her own translation of Gilberto Owen's work through an apocryphal translation that she claims was by Louis Zukofsky, while her boss is searching for Latin American authors with any link to Bolaño.

³ Critics including Jorge Telléz (2016) and Emilio Sauri (2019) have noted that the Spanish and English versions are different books, but do not offer a sustained analysis of the differences.

⁴ In *Tell Me How it Ends* (2017), Luiselli recounts her experience as a volunteer translator in court proceedings for child refugees from Central America, or 'undocumented alien children' as they are called in official proceedings. In the essay, Luiselli considers the impact of linguistic choices, stressing the differences between 'illegal immigrants' and 'undocumented refugees' with regard to the sympathy each term provokes (44). She explains how, when filling in the screening form for undocumented children, she not only has to translate from Spanish to English, but also from lived experience to the terms that are most likely to win a court case. Ilse Logie (2020: 111) argues that the book demonstrates how 'la violencia empieza en el lenguaje' [violence begins in language].

⁵ See Sauri (2019).

⁶ See, for example, this analysis from *InsightCrime* (2017): <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/what-is-behind-the-violence-in-ecatepec-mexico-city-suburb/>

⁷ In the English version, these are attributed instead to Javier Rivero and El Perro, who, according to Luiselli's afterword, are members of the Jumex team who took photographs for her (181). A comparison between the Spanish and the English versions reveals the Anglo-Saxon preoccupation with copyright. Unlike the Spanish version, the English has two pages of credits, providing references for Highway's quotes (187-188).

⁸ Marco Ramírez Rojas (2018) argues convincingly that *La historia de mis dientes* reflects a transition from the tradition of Latin American fiction in dialogue with the legal archive to a fiction that explores the dynamics of the market.

⁹ Pliego (2014) writes, 'Es difícil mantener la serenidad cuando encontramos que un vecino se llama Julio Cortázar, el operador de pasteurización responde al nombre de Salvador Novo, el de servicio a clientes pasa por Joselito Vasconcelos' ['It's difficult to keep calm when we find a neighbour called Julio Cortázar, a pasteurization operator who responds to the name Salvador Novo, a customer service provider who goes by Joselito Vasconcelos']. His review argues that *La historia de mis dientes* is a waste of time, and that Luiselli is undeserving of the praise awarded to her. Lorena Amaro Castro (2017) and Jorge Téllez (2016) have both explored questions of reception, suggesting that U.S. critics were more receptive to this playful use of names than Mexican critics.

¹⁰ Critic Genna Riviaccio, for example, asserted that 'Luiselli's method has proved that the art [of novel writing] can be elevated to an even higher level when collaboration is involved', indicative of the attention the collaboration with the workers brought the novel.

¹¹ Segnini is discussing the paradox of Elena Ferrante's novels, which have won mass appeal precisely for their depictions of an 'authentic' Naples unlike that usually presented in literature and film.

¹² Most famously, American anthropologist David Stoll sparked controversy by claiming in his book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999) that Menchú's testimony was not valid as she did not personally experience some of the events she reported. This led to much debate about how *testimonio* uses a singular voice to represent the collective experience, and the extent to which a *testimonio* can be taken as true. See Beverley (2008).