



Why Author Valeria Luiselli's Art Reflects Real Life

"I think it's really important to be transparent about the place from which you write and the way that place determines your relationship to that which you write about," award-winning author of *Lost Children Archive* Valeria Luiselli tells Alicia in this provocative conversation about the meaning and limits of identity. Luiselli, a green card holder, fully recognizes she is "someone who has enormous privilege and therefore also enormous responsibility toward my community." That sense of duty compelled her to volunteer as a court translator for Central American children who were being processed as asylum seekers during the Obama administration. And it continues to help her interrogate her place in the world as an artist.

Alicia Menendez:

I first fell for Valeria Luiselli on the pages of her recent novel, *Lost Children Archives*, and I am not alone in recognizing her gifts. Valeria has won a MacArthur Genius award, two LA Times Book Prizes, and an American Book Award. She is a force. I fell for her again during our intimate conversation, where she liberated me from focusing on the plot of my life, gave me permission to have no fixed sense of self, and celebrated those of us who observe and write in order to connect to the world around us.

Valeria, I've been after you for the better part of a year, so thank you for finally acquiescing and making this work. I know you're busy.

Valeria Luiselli: Thank you so much for inviting me.

Menendez: You were born in Mexico City. When you're two, you began moving all around the world. First to Madison, Wisconsin, which is-

Luiselli: Weird.

Menendez: Yeah, and especially compared to Costa Rica, Korea, finally South Africa. Some people who move around a lot as kids say either that that allows them to be really forthcoming and make friends really easily, and I think for some people it forces them to recede into themselves. Which was it for you?

Luiselli: I think the latter, but more than in that dichotomy, I think I would say that moving around a lot forced me to become a good observer, right? Because when you move around a lot, especially as a kid, you have to understand the new codes of every society that you come into, and it's a matter of survival, understanding those codes well, so I more than just recede... I think I placed myself in the position of observer, and often in the position of observer that could go by a little bit unnoticed if that's what I needed. And I think that's still the space from which I write today.

Menendez: I think the sort of funny thing about our generation is that the one common thread is that so many of us identify as insider-outsiders, that in some way, we have traversed different spaces where we have needed to be able to do that type of observation and

shapeshifting. One of the things that I'm grappling with now in my thirties is that I feel that I spent so much of my youth doing what you just said, that I feel that I've arrived at my thirties without necessarily an entirely clear sense of who I am, because I've spent so much of my time shapeshifting.

Luiselli: But that's a good thing, right? I mean, that's a way of maintaining some kind of freedom, right? In a moment and in a society in which everything pushes for us to become a very fixed identity, and in a country like the US, where the notion of minority exists and is such an important part of cultural discourse, belonging to any group that is considered widely as a minority is also a way to be boxed into a niche and identity from which there's difficult freedom, right? You have to work hard to not lose your creative freedom if you are placed inside an identity, so not knowing, and allowing identity to continue to flow and change I think is really important.

Menendez: We're about like two and a half minutes in and I feel like you've already given me a great gift. I've been carrying that around as a weight.

Luiselli: That's all I had.

Menendez: Thank you. All right, and that was wonderful. Thank you for joining us. So, you're doing all of that moving around because your dad was a diplomat?

Luiselli: Not all the time. Yeah, that's kind of what someone printed one day.

Menendez: And now it's become your myth.

Luiselli: And now it's the only thing, and it kind of... I love my father, but it kind of annoys me that my life is explained through him. Because I also had a mother.

Menendez: More sympathetic I could not be. Go ahead.

Luiselli: We moved around for different reasons, sometimes because either my father or mother worked in NGOs, and then, yes, for a period in my life, for six years really of my life, he was a diplomat. First in South Korea, which was in the 1980s, which was when I was there, a country that felt very remote from Mexico. We were there for three years, and then in South Africa right after the 1994 elections.

Menendez: What a moment.

Luiselli: It was. It was the right moment, I think.

Menendez: Had your parents explained apartheid?

Luiselli: Yeah. Of course. And a lot. And I come from a family that is very political, and in which politics has always been discussed passionately.

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Menendez: What was it like then, several years later, to return to Mexico as a teen?

Luiselli: I always had a kind of Paradise Lost relationship with Mexico. It was a homeland where I hadn't grown up, and which I idealized, and I just thought everything, everything about it was so much better than any other place in the world.

Menendez: But then you go to school in India.

Luiselli: Yeah. I never quite... Every time I've moved back to Mexico, I realize that I am more foreigner there than ever and anywhere else. And I can't ever quite put roots down, even though my heart is very much rooted in Mexico. It's like I never learned to live in the country that was my own. I just don't know how to do that. I know how to be a foreigner fully, but not that other foreigner, which is to be a foreigner in your homeland.

So yeah, a little after I arrived in Mexico, I asked for a scholarship, and I was sent to India to a boarding school on this fellowship, this group of schools, wonderful group of schools called United World Colleges, and that's where I finished high school in Pune, near Pune.

Menendez: But then, as to put an exclamation point on the point you were just making, you returned to Mexico to, in your own words, become Mexican.

Luiselli: I really wanted to be a Chilanga again, so, and I really wanted to study among them. It was also a family thing. My sisters had gone to UNAM, and my father had gone to UNAM, and I wanted to be in that university.

Menendez: It is easy, given your success now, to imagine that your career has been nonstop momentum. But your first book, I believe it was, was rejected by several publishers.

Luiselli: Several is little. It's like by everyone.

Menendez: What kept you writing?

Luiselli: Well, it's the only thing I know how to do, and it's the only thing that I cannot not do and remain sane. I mean, that was a really contrived way of putting it. It's very clear to me that if I'm not writing, I feel like I'm not living, so I cannot let more than a few days pass without writing something, because then life starts to feel to me just like a repetition of calendar days. It's the only way in which I know how to observe, and therefore how to connect, how to connect to others, how to connect to the world around me, how to connect to the changing of the seasons, how to connect to the chaos of my experience and make sense of it. So, I cannot not do it.

Menendez: Did you always know that about yourself or was there a moment where you found that out to be true about yourself?

Luiselli: You know, I mean hindsight really rearranges things, so I'm not sure, but if I look back, it is clear to me that I was, from a very early age, finding in the space of writing a space in which to be. So, I remember playing at writing, where like I would just take a notebook before I knew how to write words and scribble until the notebook was finished. And I think that even now, when I find myself in a situation in which I feel foreign, or disconnected, or

de-rooted, deracinated, what I do, what I know how to do is to take out a notebook and put my pen down on it, and I immediately feel... This is gonna sound a bit esoteric, but I immediately feel like a rootedness in just that action.

So, I think I knew early on, or maybe I discovered early on something that I understood later, much later.

Menendez: You spend about 10 years reworking Sidewalks, is that right?

Luiselli: I started writing Sidewalks when I was in my early twenties, maybe 20 or 21, but I had no idea that I was writing a book. I was just writing stuff. And then eventually I understood that I was writing maybe essays, but they were like a series of essays, and they were all about literary urbanism and a coming of age essay somehow, and it took me five years or so to write that tiny book. I think I was learning how to write through writing it. But yeah, it wasn't really 10 years. It was about five years or so.

Menendez: Still a sizeable amount of time. I mean, have you-

Luiselli: For a book that slim. Yes, it is.

Menendez: Have you been allowed to take that much time with any project since?

Luiselli: Oh, that's as much time as I usually take.

Menendez: We talked with Christy Haubegger, who was the founder of Latina Magazine, and she'd gone on to become a film producer, and then an agent at CAA, and she talks a lot about professional metabolism, and how you have to know what sort of timeline you enjoy working on. That for some people, five years is a lifetime, and they would lose interest, and then for other people, that is exactly the right amount of time to sit.

Luiselli: I love that notion of metabolism. Absolutely. I think it's true, and for me, I've discovered with time, it's really important to spend a lot of time and have a lot of patience at the beginning of the projects that I undertake. I need to read a lot. I need to see a lot of concerts, and exhibitions, and write notes, and I need to just spend time thinking and not writing on the computer, and just allowing things to grow very slowly, and then after a year or two of doing that, if I am still enthusiastic, and the word really is enthusiastic, about the questions that I'm pursuing, then I know that I can continue.

Menendez: So, because I am both captivated by that idea, but also a pragmatist, how do you pay the bills while you're waiting for those ideas to hatch?

Luiselli: I teach, and I write articles here and there, and I was very lucky to receive a MacArthur grant.

Menendez: You're among the many geniuses we have spoken with.

Luiselli: So, that definitely has helped.

Menendez: Because I think if you don't have that, if you don't sort of have that piece tucked away, then the anxiety and the push to create something for the purpose of being able to be paid for that work becomes the driving motivation.

Luiselli: Which is perfectly fine, too. Right?

Menendez: Yeah.

Luiselli: I think trying to make a living, or simply exploring the human soul, are equally valid motivations, and there is an anxiety always. Whatever the drive, there's an anxiety of not being able to do it, or of producing something meaningless, of not being able to reach deep enough into one's self to actually produce something that's of any worth. And we have to work with that fear, right? Not against it. I think we have to work with fear.

Menendez: Was that particularly true for you when you were writing *Tell Me How It Ends*, or when you were writing *Lost Children Archives*? Because to some extent, it is someone else's story.

Luiselli: Yeah. Definitely. *Tell Me How It Ends*-

Menendez: Has a lot of your story.

Luiselli: Yeah, I mean my story is rather irrelevant in it. It's important that it's there, it was for me, because it was important for me that the reader knew where I was standing as a narrative voice in that, in the exhibition, in that way of denouncing what was happening in the immigration courts, right?

Menendez: Which, for someone who hasn't read, is from the vantage point of someone who will obtain legal status.

Luiselli: Exactly.

Menendez: And have a green card.

Luiselli: Exactly.

Menendez: So, it is interrogating that question of what it means to be an immigrant and what it means to have legal status, and the privilege that comes with that differentiation.

Luiselli: Absolutely, and I think it's really important to be transparent about the place from which you write, and the way that that place determines your relationship to that which you write about. I am a member of the Hispanic community, of the Latino community, but I am a member who came here by plane, and not by foot, and with a student visa, and who has enormous privilege, and therefore also enormous responsibility toward my community.

In this discussion about appropriation, and it's are we allowed to write about this or that, I personally think that writers should have the freedom, not only the freedom, but the responsibility to write about others, and otherness, and go beyond themselves. That is my stance, but I think that it has to be done sensibly, and with common sense, and with intelligence, and with transparency, as well, about the place that your gaze occupies.

Ad: *Hey, today I want to tell you about a new podcast I am loving. It's called Dear Young Rocker. Remember the 14-year-old version of you? Awkward, insecure, the weirdo in you, fiercely independent but longing to connect? In this narrative podcast, join host Chelsea Ursin as she relives her teen years. Struggling to feel cool enough to exist and finding a home in music.*

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Menendez: Both of the works that we're talking about come out of your experience translating for Central American migrant children. What prompted you to take on that role as a translator?

Luiselli: Well, I started translating in court. Not for literary reasons, but because I had finally understood after the mess and the chaos that the media created around the situation, I had finally understood that what really was happening was that the Obama Administration had declared all children coming in from Central America as part of a priority docket in court, and that that meant that now they only had, as previously they had an entire year to find a lawyer that would defend them from deportation, but now they only had 21 days. So, there was a national emergency, but the emergency was getting these kids representation, getting them lawyers.

Menendez: This is 2014? 2015?

Luiselli: This is 2014. The summer of 2014. The surge was... The high surge, the one that was I guess the catalyst for what was conceived as an immigration crisis, but it was called an immigration crisis from an institutional point of view and not from the point of view of children, that surge happened really between October 2013 and June 2014. About 60,000 children had come in alone, undocumented, and seeking asylum or other visas. And what was needed were people interviewing kids to screen them in court, and once they had been interviewed, getting that testimony into English, and into the hands of a lawyer who might decide to take on that story as a case to represent.

So, I became involved in that capacity, as someone who could translate from Spanish to English, and who could help find lawyers for all these children.

Menendez: I think it is one of those things you can read about, and then you can actually do, and see, and bear witness to, and it is fundamentally different when you are that close to it. And when it's not numbers and faceless people, but people who you know.

Luiselli: Yeah. Well, that's the reason I wrote *Tell Me How It Ends*, basically, and it was written in the spirit of denouncing what I was seeing in court, as you say, from a very short distance, and in a moment in America in which most people were I guess in a kind of voluntary ignorance about the atrocities happen under the Obama Administration, right? Because unfortunately, when we have a democrat in office, we feel like we can go to sleep for a while, but it's not the case. Right?

So, I wanted to write a book that would denounce what was happening. What the Obama Administration, knowingly or not, don't know, laid the groundwork for, or laid the ground for, is the mass incarceration of undocumented immigrants. During the Obama Administration, there were approximately 2,000 children in what are euphemistically called shelters but are in fact detention spaces. There were around 2,000 children. Now, there are 14,000 children, and the amount of contracts being made between the government and private industries, just for 2020, to build more detention spaces for kids, is really worrying. That is a direction in which we were moving, and mass incarceration has become the new normal in the context of undocumented immigration.

Menendez: I do want to tease apart a decision you made, because I think it is a decision that a lot of us who are both creative and interested in being an advocate struggle with, which is you had this core idea about writing about this experience, and in some ways, because you had started *Lost Children Archive* as a fictional project, you stepped away from it to just do an actual, not like... As you say, like a place for all your political rage, right? That you couldn't muddle one project with the other. They actually needed to be two separate projects. Can

you talk to me a little bit about that decision? Because I think that's a juncture people arrive at and don't know which way to go.

Luiselli: So, I think there's several important things I think there, like one is that I cannot ever choose a form before I understand exactly what I am exploring. So, I can never start a project saying, "This is going to be a novel with chapter one, chapter two, and chapter three." I mean, not only do I find that idea tremendously boring, but also impossible, because form needs to grow out of exploring your content, your archive. When I had the idea for Lost Children Archive, the original idea was really just to write about how we tell the story of the world to our children, and how they retell that story.

The core idea, the seed of the novel was really just about intergenerational storytelling. When I started working in court, six months later, perhaps, six months after I had begun thinking and making notes for Lost Children Archive, I was listening to all these testimonies of children talking about radical violence, brutal violence on the part of the state, brutal violence on the part of criminal gangs, brutal violence on the part of Mexican authorities with which they had to come into contact with when they were crossing Mexico, and then brutal institutional violence in the USA towards them, right? So, there were these stories that I could not digest or even... I could not keep them.

I had to do something, so I would write bits and pieces down when I got home, and they kind of became part of the novel until I said, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. This is all wrong, right? I can't just translate what I'm hearing in court to a slightly different version of it, and then call that fiction. What am I doing?" I mean, it was not doing any justice to the novel. The novel was this muddle of voices and things, but I was also not doing any justice to the situation by trying to fix it into this fictional narrative tissue, and then what, right? What was I doing? On both fronts. Nothing.

So, I stopped writing, and I wrote Tell Me How It Ends, a novel... A novel. I mean, Tell Me How It Ends, an essay which follows the logic of a screening questionnaire in court. And was able to just offer a very straightforward snapshot of what was happening institutionally, about the institutional violence exercised in the USA upon asylum-seeking children. And it was only after I did that that I was able to go back to the novel and not think of it as a means to an end, not impose a form on it, not impose it as a form on any material, but really just move around it in that world with much more freedom. So, basically that was how one project became two, and the reason why I think it could become two was that I had no fixed form yet. I just was exploring a set of questions, and material, a set of angers and frustrations, and eventually I understood that I needed two ways into similar, to this set of questions, right?

Menendez: Did you know when you were writing Lost Children that it was going to hit the nerve that it did?

Luiselli: I knew when I was writing Lost Children Archive that I was reaching a depth that I had not yet reached in my life with my work. I could feel that, but that didn't mean that I felt confident about the novel more generally. It just meant that while I was writing, I could feel something inside that I was going, and I was having to reach inside of me in a different way.

Menendez: Because it was uncomfortable?

Luiselli: Because it was painful, because it was scary, because it was... It moved fibers that I hadn't yet explored in me. It did feel like wringing my soul out at times, and there's always

insecurity, there's always fear. Again, not modesty, but actual fear, as Dorothea Lange says, right? I knew that I had gone deeper and I was happy about that. I needed to do that in my life, and yeah-

Menendez: You needed to do it in your life, or you needed to do it in your writing?

Luiselli: Both. They're the same thing.

Menendez: You now live in a house run by women. Yes? Is that right?

Luiselli: Yes.

Menendez: Your daughter. A niece.

Luiselli: She definitely runs the house. Yes.

Menendez: How do these strong women influence each other, and how do they influence you?

Luiselli: It's a beautiful question. I'm not sure how to answer it. I live in a house, indeed, with wonderful women. One of my nieces recently gave birth in the house to my grandniece, so she's no longer... This older niece is no longer living there, because she's just had her baby, so she lives with her partner, but they're coming and spending the weekend over, for example. She and the baby. That's four generations of women now. My mother moved in with me when I separated almost a couple of years ago, and my daughter, my niece, who's 17, and I'm in the process of adopting, that other older niece used to live there, and then friends that get divorced or separated, then they come and join for a while. Now I have a friend who moved in more permanently, as well.

So, yeah, we are a house of all women, and the dog, Lola, who is of course also a woman, and my grandniece, luckily and niece, we would have loved him if it had been a nephew, but we're very glad it's a niece. There is a sense of solidarity. There's an essay in which Ursula Le Guin says men or male solidarity, and the institutions that have come out of that kind of solidarity, is all about vertical power, vertical structure, so the church, universities, the military, actually every institution that still runs our life. Female solidarity, she says in that essay, is more fluid. It's more about systems of support, and a kind of solidarity that does not hinge upon this vertical structure, and I think that that has been an enormous discovery in our everyday lives, and the way that we offer each other support, and the way that we're there, and therefore the... I don't know. The much more healthy bonds between us, because there isn't this constant power struggle, but rather this system of fluid solidarity.

Menendez: Poor husband, he'll find his stuff on the curb tonight. Thank you so much, Valeria.

Luiselli: I'm so sorry.

Menendez: I'm like, "That sounds great!" Valeria, thank you so much.

Luiselli: Thank you so much.

Menendez: What a gift you are. Thank you.

Menendez: Thank you as always for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Cedric Wilson is our sound designer. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. Manuela Bedoya is our intern. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, and remember to subscribe or follow us on

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CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Why Author Valeria Luiselli's Art Reflects Real Life." *Latina to Latina*, Lantigua Williams & Co., March 30, 2020. LatinaToLatina.com

Produced by:

