Running head: Van Damme/BOOK REVIEW

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Book Review

On the Road with the Beast

Violence, Corruption, and Migration in Central America

by Ellen Van Damme

Óscar Martínez *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Train.*

London and New York: Verso, 2013.

Óscar Martínez *A History of Violence: Living and Dying in Central America.* London and

New York: Verso, 2016.

The Salvadoran journalist Óscar Martínez has published two books on his (field) experiences and investigations in Central America.¹ Both *The Beast* and *A History of Violence* deal with three recurrent topics: gang violence, organized crime, and migration. Although the history of gangs in Central America is debated, according to Cruz (2010) there were already youth gangs present in the region in the 1980s when some Central American countries were still at war. Because of the conflict, many people fled to the United States, and when the wars were over, in the 1990s, there were massive deportations. Subsequently, the Mara Salvatrucha and the Eighteenth Street Gang, composed of Latino migrants living in the United States who had felt the need to organize in order to protect themselves from other local gangs, transferred their gang culture to the local street gangs in Central America. Needless to say, crime and murder rates have risen in the region since the 1990s, and as a consequence people have started fleeing their country once more—this time not because of warfare in the conventional sense of the word but because of gang violence and a lack of employment. However, migrants are often repeatedly confronted with these issues on their way to the United States (Sandoval-García, 2017).

In *The Beast* Martinez travels from border town to border town with migrants and recounts the stories of those he meets. He talked to gang members, coyotes, police officers, civil servants, border patrol agents, migrants, and priests running migrant shelters on the trail to the North. He traveled on the migrant train known as the Beast [OK?] from Chiapas and Tabasco on the border with Guatemala to Tijuana in the west and Nuevo Laredo in the east, as well as all the other cities in between. Most of the migrants with whom he spoke did not really want to move to the United States, but they felt forced to by lack of employment/money and (gang) violence. They were looking for “a better life” (1) in the United States, but along the way they had to endure many forms of violence. Young women and men (many of them

minors) are the first victims of human trafficking and sexual abuse. Taking the Beast, for women, means facing odds of eight out of ten of being raped or suffering from some other form of sexual violence. Female migrants are viewed as second-class citizens (43), and rape and other forms of sexual abuse often go unreported. Although most women remain silent (see also Hume, 2009), the so-called bra tree (164) or rape tree (Preston, 2013) myth, in which rapists hang their victims' underwear on tree branches, makes it impossible to ignore what female migrants have to undergo on their way to "a better life."

Moreover, because of the widespread network of connections among traffickers and gang members from Nicaragua to Mexico, if one does not pay the migrant tax to Los Zetas in country A and flees to country B, another clique will catch him and make sure that he does not make the same mistake twice. Martínez observed that fleeing from traffickers and denouncing the crime often ended up with the police contacting Los Zetas or dropping the migrant off at the traffickers' safe house. It thus becomes clear that the issues Martínez raises can be understood only by looking at all the actors involved, including among others migrants, coyotes, cartel and gang members, and local police officers and civil servants.

"Every day Los Zetas and their allies kidnap tens of undocumented Central Americans, in the broad light of day, and the migrants are kept in safe houses which everybody, including the authorities, knows about" (92–93). Furthermore, there is a serious lack of accurate data on the region's migrants, migration routes, drug cartels, drug and human smuggling, homicides, and corruption. Notwithstanding the fact the U.S. border patrol's main target is drug smuggling, repression of narcos affects migrants almost equally harshly, since they use the same routes. Often, however, there is no evidence-based policy for dealing with the migrants, and when a migrant falls into the hands of bandits or gets caught in the middle of a shootout between two drug cartels he almost never reports the attack (150):

These bullet-riddled migrants don't have anything to do with the cartels or with their business. And yet they die like narcos, not like migrants. And if one of them makes it through alive, after witnessing a gun battle, they rarely file a report to explain that their dead friend abandoned in the empty desert wasn't a drug mule or a hit man, but just an unlucky migrant trying to get back to this family. That's because they're scared to talk.

While *The Beast* is divided into chapters by region, *A History of Violence* has three substantive parts. In the first part, "Emptiness," Martínez sets the scene of gangs, cliques, narcos, and their relationship with police officers, prosecutors, mayors, and other civil servants. In "Madness," the second part, the interplay among all these actors is brought to another level, but not to any clear-cut answer to the violence. According to El Niño (of the Hollywood Locos Salvatrucha clique, part of the Mara Salvatrucha), "There isn't even criminal logic to many of the murders in this country" (101). The only way out of this emptiness and madness is "Fleeing" (the title of the third part). Reading *A History of Violence*, you are drowned in poverty, misery, and impunity with no prospect of change. In the end, you ask yourself why one would not go on the road with the Beast. As Martínez puts it (189), "There are those who believe that in this corner of the world there's nothing left for them. There are those who are willing to launch themselves into a new inferno by crossing the border, by fleeing."

Although *A History of Violence* is more recent than *The Beast*, it would make sense to read it first, since it sets the stage for all the misery and violence that Central American migrants are fleeing. In Chapter 11 Martínez tells the story of a massacre of migrants on their way to the United States by Los Zetas, a direct link to *The Beast*. Notwithstanding the fact that young people are often attracted to a gang because of its perceived status and gang mythmaking (see, e.g., Van Hellemonst, 2012), Martínez shows that belonging to a gang may

have perceived advantages at first but after a while members end up either in prison, on the run, or dead. Gang life in Central America is more often than not a matter of protection, and (as shown in Chapter 10) even in prison civilian (nongang) inmates feel the need to organize as a gang to protect themselves from the other gangs. It is almost a commonplace that prison is a university of crime (see Beristain, 1986), and this is no less the case in Central America.

Furthermore, Martínez elucidates through his stories the deeply rooted cooperation between the so-called underworld (narco traffickers, gangs, and coyotes) and the upper world (law enforcement officers, politicians, and other civil servants). There is no doubt that the “symbiosis between crime and the state” (Chambliss, 2004: 243) or “the interface between legal and illegal actors” (Passas, 2002: 11) is ubiquitous in the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). This makes it hard for so-called good police officers to do their jobs without being killed, since many police officers readily accept bribes and put pressure on their colleagues to do so.

With *The Beast* and *A History of Violence*, Martínez’s main target group is U.S. politicians, policy makers, and other citizens more generally who do not know about the current situation of people in Central America and the reasons many make the risky decision to flee their countries. His books are a must-read for everyone who wants to grasp the push-and-pull factors of migration. To the reader who is looking for a clear solution to the crisis of migration, Martínez (xxi) replies, “It’s up to you. The solution is up to you. The crisis will be solved when people understand, and worsens when they don’t. It’s that simple. And it’s that complicated.”

Note

1. Martinez’s research, which included extensive stays in the field, where he conducted interviews and participant observation, could be described as a form of “ethnographic

journalism” (see Cramer and McDevitt, 2004). Given that he is a journalist and not an academic researcher, his books do not include comprehensive literature reviews or theoretical and methodological frameworks. This review will therefore focus not on the lack of a theoretical and methodological framework but on the gaps in academic knowledge and the potential for future research on the subject of organized crime, violence, corruption, and migration in Central America.

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