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Šimunović, Arijana

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Fiction as Counter-Discourse: Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* and the Rewriting of the Central American Migration Crisis

Arijana Šimunović

*To leave is to die a little.
To arrive is never to arrive.
MIGRANT PRAYER*

Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* (2019)

In a time of crisis, social distinctions arise not only on the basis of where we live, but also on the basis of how we move. The ongoing COVID-19 crisis – where one must remain at home and limit one's movements in order to protect communities from the virus – demonstrates this fact. Mobility has become a resource that is disproportionately distributed: some people have access to it and some people do not. Tim Cresswell, writing on this theme, argues that the way we experience mobility is informed by the narratives and meanings that surround it.¹ Immigration, for instance, has become a polarized issue in contemporary political discourse, as those in power advance negative stereotypes about migrants in order to uphold specific political agendas.² Maria C. Ledesma, likewise, posits the “[E]bolification of immigration reform,” a development which serves to perpetuate anti-immigrant sentiments and stereotypes.³ These political narratives come with specific uses of language, freighted with assumptions about the effects of migrant arrival in the receiving state. One such use of language is the term “illegal,” which in conservative political discourse is a noun rather

¹ Cresswell, *On the move*, 21-24.

² *Id.*

³ Ledesma, “Public Discourse versus Public Policy,” 58.

than an adjective, as in the usual sense — naming the immigrant as a criminal, as if an inherently morally delinquent person.⁴ Commenting on such words as “illegal,” philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler have argued that violence is embedded in language.⁵ This violence has the power to determine the public perception and fate of immigrants to the West from former colonies, and other diasporic subjects.

Against this background, Cresswell contends that social sciences, the law, and national governments generally attend to human mobility according to statistic and quantitative factors, asking questions such as: *how are people moving, where are they moving to, how many people are moving and how fast are they moving?*⁶ The arts and humanities, on the other hand, reject the technocratic “social science” approach to thinking about human mobility, being primarily engaged with the question of what movement means both to the people who are moving and to the people that are around them.⁶ Informed by these questions, I will consider in this article how literature responds to popular rhetoric related to migration. My key point of reference will be Valeria Luiselli’s *Lost Children Archive* (2019), which I understand as a *counter-discourse* to the established narratives surrounding migration movements.

In this article, I will analyze how *Lost Children Archive* deconstructs mainstream narratives around immigration by offering a counter-narrative. I will also examine how the novel critically reflects on the environments in which immigration processes take place. *Lost Children Archive* incorporates many travel-related intertextual and intermedial elements, which I will also consider. One intermedial element in *Lost Children Archive* is the text’s inclusion of work by the Mexican writer and photographer Juan Rulfo, who depicts the aridness and desolation of the Northern Mexican landscape. Rulfo’s work is of major interest to my analysis because it shows the difficulty of the migrant journey. In his work, the aridness of the landscape can be read as an allegory of United States immigration policy and as critique of its inhumanity. The dangerous road that migrants must take in order to reach the United

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See, for example, Derrida, “Shibboleth”; Butler, *Precarious Life*.

⁶ Cresswell, *On The Move*.

States, tragically, is merely a prelude to the dangerous road that begins upon crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.

The article will consider the relationship between fact and fiction, between intertextual and intermedial elements in Luiselli's novel *Lost Children Archive*, and how these elements offer a counter-narrative to the popular perceptions surrounding what in the United States has been called the "Central American migrant crisis." The first section of this article will address the relationship between mobility and mobility narratives in the post-industrial era. Following Cresswell, I will focus on migration from a perspective of human geography. The second section of this article will elaborate on Luiselli's intertextual and intermediated strategies that critically reflect on the space in which migration processes occur. Finally, the article will argue that literary works have a greater potential to promote empathy than mere facts and figures, reasserting the human dignity of the individuals who cross national borders.

Mobility and Narratives

By studying migration from a human geography perspective, we can recognize the complex power relations at play in debates surrounding immigration policy. As Sandra Ponzanesi emphasizes, colonial practices "did not stop with the end of empires but have been brought home, and made visible the racial nature of old national identities highlighting the multicultural rapture of the new."⁷ The legacies of colonial policy can be traced, for instance, in the ongoing Central American migration crisis. In his study of mobility as a right of citizenship, Cresswell compares United States migrant exclusion practices in the late nineteenth century to modern day practices, concluding that the method the United States government employs to make intelligible and respond to these individuals remains the same.⁸ His historical context is the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which forbade Chinese immigrants from entry to the United States after the government decided that arrival of Chinese laborers in the country "endanger[ed] the good order of certain localities within the territory."⁹

⁷ Ponzanesi, "Diasporic Subjects and Migration," 209.

⁸ Cresswell, *On the move*, 193.

⁹ *Id.* 159.

To be a citizen is, among other things, to be a bearer of rights. One of those rights in the context of the United States is the right to mobility. Moreover, mobility is included in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1949) as a universal right, which guarantees both movement within borders of each state and the rights to leave and return to a country. Yet the United States' detention of thousands of immigrants, including children, from the beginning of the migration crisis in 2014 until today demonstrates that mobility — supposedly a freedom that lies at the heart of some of the foundational ideologies of the modern world and the United States — serves to falsely perpetuate the idea of universality when actual state practice suggests otherwise.¹⁰

In popular culture, the iconography of the “American” as a practitioner of mobility has been played out repeatedly in novels, on film, and in music. The idea that everyone in the United States is a traveler is firmly established in the minds of many, being part of the myth of the nation as a country born out of immigration.¹¹ In *Lost Children Archive*, Luiselli critically reflects on this myth and its associated iconography by juxtaposing a narrative of the migration crisis with a narrative of a family road trip. She identifies traces inscribed in the landscape that evoke past atrocities such as the Indian Removal Act, envisioning their links to the ongoing migration crisis and its effects on the thousands of people crossing the border. In Luiselli's text, observations of the landscape play a crucial role in deconstructing the identity of modern American society. Her descriptions of landscape contain vivid imagery alluding to the struggles migrants face in their journeys north. Luiselli explains that her book is a road novel, but in reverse:

It is like retracing the path that has become iconic of the American road trip. To go through it is to undo the myth of liberation, of discovery, of reinvention. This myth is also based on a very false idea of history and that is that this country was invented in freedom with a creative spirit. That was at the expense of so many

¹⁰ *Id.* 162-166.

¹¹ *Id.* 193.

people. This novel dialogues with that myth and thinks about that group of people who are always marginalized, relegated, imprisoned, so that the white American dream is possible.¹²

While a reader of a novel addressing migration issues might expect a melodramatic firsthand narrative account of migrant-related sorrows, no such narrative is present in *Lost Children Archive*. Luiselli leaves the radio broadcasts that her characters listen to in their car, the human interactions they encounter during their trip, and the landscapes they pass through to speak for themselves. From America's liminal spaces — empty cities, vast deserts, police controls, Walgreens, and the Elvis Presley motel — Luiselli allows us to witness the creation of "otherness."

Landscape and myth

To distance oneself from a particular narrative and tell a story from a different point of view is to create an alternate archive.¹³ Blurring the line between fact and fiction in *Lost Children Archive*, Luiselli brings her life and work experiences as an immigrant and translator into a fictional scenario of a family road trip. The novel contains numerous intertextual, intermedial, and metafictional elements. Of particular relevance to my analysis is a meta-text called *Elegies for Lost Children*, which appears in the *Lost Children Archive* in fragments. Luiselli creates a fictitious author — a woman named Ella Camposanto — whose book-within-the-book introduces the reader to the journeys of unaccompanied minors migrating by foot and *La Bestia* from Central America to the USA.¹⁴ *The Elegies for Lost Children* functions as a metanarrative for *Lost Children Archive*. *Lost Children Archive* begins with a conventional American family

¹² Maristain, "Valeria Luiselli: Me interesa poquísimamente la autoficción."

¹³ I am aware of the theory surrounding the notion of archive, but this is beyond the scope of this article. For the theory on archive see *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1996) by Jacques Derrida, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (2001), by Carolyn Steedman.

¹⁴ Sp. *La Bestia* (eng. beast), also known as "The Train of Death," is a colloquial expression in Spanish for the train that helps the migrants to traverse the length of Mexico.

road trip, but ends up addressing the migration crisis when the narrator's children get lost in the desert and meet the lost children from the meta-text *The Elegies for Lost Children*. Their meeting space might be called the *borderlands*, which Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa conceptualizes as the landscape of the American Southwest where "two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch."¹⁵ Anzaldúa argues that the *borderlands* is not a comfortable territory to live in, as hatred, anger, and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape¹⁶. Furthermore, the *borderlands* is a place where "land and bodies blend in both metaphysical and real senses, in which perception and living cannot be distinguished so easily."¹⁷ When Anzaldúa refers to *borderlands* as a place of contradiction, she means that it is a place where life and death meet. This concept derives from an awareness that land resonates with the diasporic bodies that inhabit it.

Lost Children Archive complicates Anzaldúa's definition of the *borderlands*. The novel emphasizes how dominant cultural and economic institutions exploit the perilousness of border crossings as a means to control the movements of individuals. The novel portrays two journeys: a family leisure road trip through the American southwest, and unaccompanied minors traveling north. These two trips share a common setting. The main narrator's interpretations of what she sees on her road trip undermine her prior understanding of the territory that she is exploring, an understanding that had been based on the iconography that she had studied in her previous capacity as a documentarian. She reflects:

I know, as we drive through the long, lonely roads of this country — a landscape that I am seeing for the first time — that what I see is not quite what I see. What I see is what others have already documented: Ilf and Petrov, Robert Frank, Robert Adams, Walker Evans, Stephen Shore — the first road photographers and their pictures of road signs, stretches of vacant land,

¹⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 19-35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

cars, motels, diners, industrial repetition, all the ruins of early capitalism now engulfed by future ruins of late capitalism. When I see the people of this country, their vitality, their decadence, their loneliness, their desperate togetherness, I see the gaze of Emmet Gowin, Larry Clark, and Nan Goldin.¹⁸

The narrator finds the Southwestern terrain to be a desolate wasteland haunted by genocide and occupied only by border patrol agents and lonely locals. The last chapter of *Lost Children Archive*, entitled “Box VII,” reproduces the polaroid photos that the family takes along the journey. The photographs depict empty land, a few cowboys, a train, and a family on their last trip together.¹⁹ The narrative of *Lost Children Archive* parallels the story that is told wordlessly through these photographs. The photographs, just as does the metanarrative *Elegies for Lost Children*, visualize real migration routes.

In these photographs, the landscape is a metaphorical representation of hell. In fact, the novel makes an interesting intertextual reference to the work of Juan Rulfo, a writer who explicitly gives landscape imagery an infernal symbolization in *Pedro Páramo*. Aspects of the Mexican town of Comala, he writes, make it “el infierno mexicano” (“Mexican hell”). Travelers to this town descend into “el puro calor sin aire” (“suffocating heat without air”). The title of Rulfo’s work, moreover, contributes to this atmosphere. The Spanish word *páramo* translates as “wasteland,” implying that the novel is set in a wasteland. In *Lost Children Archive*, landscape is presented in the same manner as in *Pedro Páramo*. Like Rulfo, Luiselli often plays with language to provoke a reader’s visceral response. The surname of *Lost Children Archive*’s metanarrator, for example, is Camposanto. This word translates from the Spanish as cemetery.

Some believe that Juan Rulfo’s photographs are a kind of writing. But Rulfo himself explains that writing and photography are

¹⁸ Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive*, 102.

¹⁹ *Id.*, 353-376.

different worlds. For him, the only way to write is through imagination:

Para escribir tengo que imaginar. La realidad no me dice nada literariamente, aunque puede decírmelo fotográficamente. Admiro mucho a quienes pueden escribir acerca de lo que oyen y ven inmediatamente. Yo no puedo penetrar la realidad: es misteriosa.²⁰

Walter Benjamin argues that “a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye, if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man.”²¹ Accordingly, it seems that Luiselli, placing photographs on the last pages of *Lost Children Archive*, wants to offer a version of the novel’s narrative through images rather than words to express the wishes and needs of the dominant social strata, and to interpret real-life events in its own way. The photographs narrate the family’s road trip by capturing the landscape in which the two “trips” appearing in the novel are set. As she drives, the narrator describes the landscape through the lens of his father’s observations:

Now he was talking about this whirlpool of history, and erased lives, and was looking through the windshield at the curvy road ahead as we drove up a narrow mountain pass, where there were no green things growing, no trees, no bushes, nothing alive, only jagged rocks and trunks of trees split in half as if old gods with giant axes had got angry and chopped this part of the world apart. What happened here? ... Papa said: Genocide, exodus, diaspora, ethnic cleansing, that’s what happened.²²

²⁰ Goldáraz, “El fotógrafo Juan Rulfo.” My own translation to English: “In order to write, I have to imagine. Reality does not tell me anything through literature, although it can tell me things photographically. I admire those who can write about what they hear and see directly. I cannot penetrate reality: It is mysterious.”

²¹ Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 56.

²² Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive*, 215.

Examining the Rulfian landscape in conjunction with the photographs appearing in the last chapter of *Lost Children Archive* allows the observer to reflect on the empty landscape and abandoned life forms resulting from the “genocide, exodus, diaspora, ethnic cleansing” in the region.²³ In *The Ground of the Image* (2005), Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that “the country manifests itself as something based on belonging, but a belonging that can only come from one who ‘belongs’ insofar as, and because he is related to what he calls his ‘country.’”²⁴ Region or landscape, according to Nancy, provides an individual with a sense of belonging through personal attachment. Luiselli critically reflects on this attachment, exploring the forms of belonging and non-belonging that emerge when one’s setting is the *borderlands* and *cemetery*. Her portrait of the American wasteland is bleak: “Long straight roads, empty and monotonous”²⁵; and “chicken fences stretch out endless. Behind the fences are lonely ranches. Lonely people in those ranches, maybe.”²⁶ The photographs included in *Lost Children Archive* are similarly evocative. Their subject matter is the same as that of the narrative: the local people, children and the landscape. In this way, the photographs provide a visual counterpoint to the text. The narrative of these photographs, which runs parallel to the novel’s written narrative, deconstructs a key component of United States national identity: the belief in the freedom of the open road.

Reading Luiselli together with Rulfo’s photography, we can find an intersection of American and Mexican history inscribed in the landscape settings both of *Lost Children Archive* and Rulfo’s work. Luiselli recognizes that this landscape is the landscape of Apache history, and that it is the landscape of migration history. For her, this landscape demonstrates the false promise of mobility as a universal right in contemporary America. Rulfo’s photographs from Mexico are related to the photographs appearing in the *Lost Children Archive* chapter “Box VII” because a history of exclusion and forced exodus is embedded within both Mexican and United States cultures and landscapes. Luiselli’s photographs in particular

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, 59.

²⁵ Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive*, 158.

²⁶ *Id.* 113.

show a vision of the southwestern United States landscape, which demonstrates that the neocolonial legacy of U.S.-Mexican relations endures through an interconnection between universalism and the colonial imagination.

The landscapes in both Rulfo's and Luiselli's photography range from attractive mountains to dusty, desert expanses. In Luiselli's photographs, people are often sitting, climbing or walking along dusty desert paths. In the photographs appearing in the last section of the book, the chapter entitled "Box VII," we can observe parallels between the pictures of Luiselli (figures 1,3,5) and of Rulfo (figures 2,4,6).

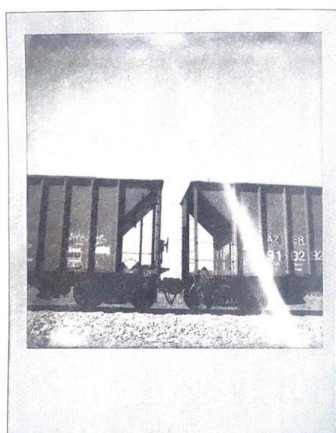


Figure 1: Valeria Luiselli
(in the chapter "Box VII")



Figure 2: Juan Rulfo (from the series
En los Ferrocarriles, property of Clara
Aparicio de Rulfo)



Figure 3: Valeria Luiselli
(in the chapter "Box VII")



Figure 4: Juan Rulfo (property of Clara
Aparicio de Rulfo)

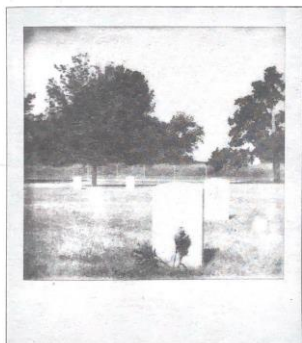


Figure 5: Valeria Luiselli (in the chapter “Box VII”)

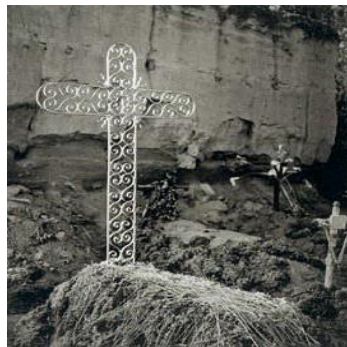


Figure 6: Juan Rulfo (property of Clara Aparicio de Rulfo)

In considering the relation between Rulfo’s novels and his photography, Bong Seo Yoon asks: “What does it mean to photograph? It is finishing a story, knowing how to interpret, knowing the language of an unknown story, imagining the poetic page necessary at that moment.”²⁷ In *Lost Children Archive*, Luiselli is concerned with these same capabilities. She attempts to create a comprehensive picture of the migration crisis by incorporating different intertextual and intermedial elements in the novel to elicit readers’ empathy for migrants, thus serving a counter-narrative to the conventional representation of the crisis.

Literary counter-narratives do not follow the strict rules of reasoning and argumentation, but allow for other ways of thinking about the world. They give access to the understanding of complex social problematics in a very different way than the domain of law. Legal scholars have also seen those possibilities of literature. In the work of legal scholar Amnon Reichman and philosopher Martha Nussbaum, for example, literature is often viewed as both inferior and superior, explains Frans-Willem Korsten when he analyzes how the field of law talks about the field of literature as the *Other*. It is viewed as inferior in the sense that it does not follow the strict rules of reasoning and argumentation, but it is seen as superior for “its capacity to make things imaginable, palpable, tangible and senseable

²⁷ Seo, “Juan Rulfo, escritor y fotógrafo: dos artes en conjunción.”

or in its potential to promote empathy or ethical behaviour.”²⁸ The law, in that view, implies “a field that feels cold and instrumental,” but literature “one that indulges in the warmth of understanding,” so Korsten argues.²⁹

Whereas Luiselli’s previous work, *The Essay in Forty Questions*, was a work of criticism, strictly concerned with questions relating to institutional frameworks, *Lost Children Archive* uses fiction to introduce the reader to the circumstances that lead migrants to want to cross the border and suffer the perils of migration. In short, it is a novel that documents the plight of migrant children in an unconventional manner contrary to the mainstream representation of immigrants as a threat to citizens of their receiving countries.

Conclusion

In *Lost Children Archive* we find two mediums in conjunction: image and text in a reciprocal relation. The photos, much like the narrative, give a wide-ranging view of a disturbing land. The photography captures the dryness and emptiness of the American southwest. But such emptiness does not necessarily suggest complete abandonment, because this landscape remains an area that is populated by individuals and nomads who sustain themselves on the borderline between docility and a perpetual state of inertia. These individuals become susceptible to believing in narratives and supporting policies about cross-border mobility result that in great hardships for migrants.

Drawing both from Nancy and Cresswell’s reflections on belonging and attachment to a place, we can see how migration in the modern Western world is seen as a threat, a disorder in the system. The migrant and the refugee have been inscribed with immoral intent, an inscription reflected in popular discourse and social practices. The suffering of these figures demonstrates that violence and exploitation, rather than freedom and liberty, are at the core of American history and experience.

²⁸ Korsten, *Art as an Interface*, 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Luiselli's strength in *Lost Children Archive* is her ability to narrate children's stories from different points of views that are in constant dialogue with other types of literature on mobility. She creates a sense of presence and immediacy in the story, which goes beyond US-Central American socio-cultural context. She incorporates photographs of a family road trip that do not simply depict a family road trip. Trapped in a desert wasteland, these migrants try to escape from their living nightmares. This way, Luiselli deconstructs the popular portrait of diasporic subjects as seekers of the American Dream. Both Luiselli's and Rulfo's portraits of the exteriority of the American space (or, as Anzaldúa would put it, the in-between space), eloquently demonstrate that crisis is rooted in power. One of Luiselli's characters describes the American situation in this way:

This whole country, Papa said, is an enormous cemetery, but only some people get proper graves, because most lives don't matter. Most lives get erased, lost in the whirlpool of trash we call history, he said.³⁰

The journey from Honduras to Mexico and all the way up to US-Mexican border is not only bumpy but insufferable. Moreover, it does not end at the border. Upon crossing this border, the obstacles created by United States' immigration law emerge. Mixing fact with fiction, *Lost Children Archive* invites the reader to reflect critically on the so-called immigration crisis and on the hate discourses that surround it. Luiselli depicts the *vacuity* of the American landscape through her telling of two journeys, generating an enriching alternative archive to the mainstream perspective.

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³⁰ Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive*, 215.

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