A Contra corriente
Una revista de estudios latinoamericanos

Vol. 20, Num. 2 (Winter 2023): 75-101

Care as Entropy in the Migration Writing of Valeria Luiselli

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Should I stay or should I go now?
If I go, there will be trouble
And if I stay it will be double
So come on and let me know

This indecision's bugging me (esta indecisión me molesta)
If you don't want me, set me free (si no me quieres, líbrame)
Exactly whom I'm supposed to be (dígame que tengo ser)
Don't you know which clothes even fit me? (no sabes que ropas me queda)
Come on and let me know (me tienes que decir)
Should I cool it or should I blow? (me debo ir o quedarme)

–The Clash, "Should I Stay or Should I Go"

In the fall of 2020, various media outlets revealed what many already suspected to be true. The administration of Donald Trump had intentionally detained and separated families to deter immigration. The cruelty of the process was documented in photos that circulated on social media of anguished children and parents, but the "slow violence," as theorized by Rob Nixon, that contributes to the child and family migrant crisis remains largely invisible. In his framework, environmental pollution, extractivism, the agroindustrial food system, dispossession, and life-threatening state oppressions and exclusions underpin an exploitative and uneven capitalist system that takes years, decades, if not centuries to detect, but which directly results in today's displacements

and migrations (2013a, 3, 9, 13). Our ever-decreasing attention spans, the rapid pace, and the spectral nature of contemporary media forms also favors visibly immediate violent events, rather than "postponed consequences" or "casualties" of simmering crises. Nixon (2013b) explains that these "slow catastrophes" make narrative and visual representation difficult, but nevertheless, writer-activists can serve as "go-betweens" or amplifiers of the social movements (mainly comprised of the dispossessed and the poor) to name this slow violence. What appears as a migration crisis, namely for families and children, can in fact be examined as the intersection between slow violence and forms of work—particularly the contradictions between reproductive labor (or the care work that humans do to stay alive) and contemporary systems of wage work.

Part of the slow violence that contributes to migration as a "wicked problem" are the simmering "crises of care," which have intensified since the 1970s, when social welfare states retracted globally.[1] Such crises refer to the fact that many, if not most, humans find it increasingly difficult to perform work for a wage that is high enough to cover the costs of also carrying out activities necessary to sustain human life, such as childcare, housework, or eldercare. However, such crises are not felt evenly, for they most deeply effect those families and children racialized by colonial capitalist systems of dispossession, labor, and environment-making.[2] Spatially displaced to the Global South, these crises have come to a head not only because they generate forced migration to the Global North, but also because there is a natural limit to increases in efficiency and productivity for reproductive labor (i.e., children cannot be cared for any faster, and migrant families have no one to watch their children if, or as, they migrate).

Valeria Luiselli's migration-themed 2017 essay, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions*, and her 2019 novel, *Lost Children Archive,* do the work of documenting and representing the elusive nature of slow violence. They also add an essential element

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[1] A "wicked problem" is one that resists any easy definition or solution and is often the symptom of deeper issues. See Rittel, H.W. and M.M. Webber (1973), "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning."

[2] I focus on families and children in this article primarily to interrogate the relationship between family, work, and childhood and the spectacular presence of family-centered images over the past ten years. While this is not to say that solo migrants are not equally squeezed by the global economic migration matrix, marginalized families of the Global South speak to a cycle of crisis in reproduction in which they must migrate to perform underpaid care work in the homes of (often white) middle and upper-class women either in their home countries and abroad, or in the meat packing plants of the American Midwest to ensure "cheap food" for the middle class. Such a regime only further exacerbates the crisis, since those of the Global South must also still work for a wage, but the world system dictates that it be a lower wage than their northern counterparts and that the state abandon any assistance to alleviate the many duties of reproductive labor for everyday people.

to our understanding of not just migration, but our modern world system, as seen in her portrayal of children, their play, and work in the context of family, including care work.[3] The title *Tell Me How it Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* is inspired by Luiselli's then-five-year-old daughter asking how migrants' stories end, and the forty questions immigration attorneys use to ask children about their experiences in their home countries, their journey north, and their detention in the United States. Likewise, Luiselli's works, the main topic of this article, center a fundamental aspect of reproductive labor as a survival mechanism: how the family unit and *work* are juxtaposed to childhood and *play*. Her essay introduced these themes—as well as anxieties about the ethics of documentation (both in narrative and of citizenship)—but the novel especially presents, I contend, the political possibility of care (also understood as reproductive labor) as the entropy of capitalism and its slow violence. The line between reproductive labor and productive labor under capitalism is inherently unstable, always thrown out of balance by the excessive human need to live, to be cared for, and to care for others. It is child's play that exposes the fallacy of capitalist work as a means of providing for the most vulnerable among us. In doing so, we are reminded of what Nixon calls the "environmentalism of the poor," in the way that children might envision sustainable futures (2013a, 4-6).

In the fictional *Lost Children Archive*, Luiselli tests the questions she had asked in her essay, by writing the breakdown of her autobiographically-inspired but fictional family of four against a careful attention to colonial and imperial history. The characters "Ma" and "Pa," both sound artists, decide to take one last trip from New York City down to the Southwest as a means of both putting off and defining the terms of their inevitable separation, since neither believe their marriage can withstand their individual artistic career aspirations. Ultimately, Ma plans to take the girl back to New York with her, after researching child detention and migration. Pa and "the boy" will stay for at least a year in Arizona to record the "echoes" of a canyon where Geronimo, "the last of the Apaches," once lived. But in the second half of the novel, a "game" the kids play takes over the narrative arc as they decide to actually become "lost children," a playful (but not always joyful) process that immerses the reader into the childlike production of how to narrate not just familial breakdown, but its relation to our past and present migratory political ecology and what it takes to survive within it.

[3] In October of 2019, Luiselli was named one of the McArthur geniuses. At thirty-seven years old, her accomplishments are impressive. She has published five books and many articles, has a Ph.D. in comparative literature from Columbia, and speaks several languages.

Luiselli's writing, a method which she makes quite clear is a form of documentation, stands out against the explosion of *narconovelas,* which cater to the desire of both domestic and international audiences to get an insider's view on the violence in Mexico and Central America that compels so many to flee. Luiselli thinks that the *narconovela* tends to be a kind of "torture porn" for profit.[4] At best, such works tend to belong to the "awareness" genre. Similar arguments might be made of the aforementioned images of children and families, such as the widely shared photo of Oscar Martínez Ramírez and his twenty-three-month old daughter Angie Valeria, lying drowned face down in the Rio Grande, still wrapped in her father's t-shirt with her arm draped over his neck. While awareness of, and empathy with, these horrors is unquestionably important, many rightly pointed out that the victims of borders are more than tragic photos, and began to commemorate the two in life, highlighting the care and protection that Oscar Martínez Ramírez tried to provide his daughter in life and death.

In what follows, I frame these crises of care through Nancy Fraser's (2016) idea of the boundary struggle to more fully account for how slow violence has unfolded. This describes the crisis of contradiction that is inherent to capitalism between production (activities that produce surplus value) and social reproduction (activities and institutions traditionally conceived as "outside" the circuit of capital but necessary to its continuance, which describe "carework").[5] I then turn more fully to Luiselli's writing and its exposure of centuries of slow violence, most often appearing as a reflection on colonialism in the (Mexican-)American West, as well as displacement inflicted precisely at the boundary between reproduction and production. Luiselli thus redresses what Nixon frames as a "reluctance to engage the environmental repercussions of American foreign policy" in environmental literary studies from a "post-colonial perspective"

[4] See Emma Brockes, (2019), "Valeria Luiselli: 'Children Chase After Life, Even if It Ends up Killing Them." The genre has also advanced academic debates about how to tell stories of crises marked by cartel-driven and extrajudicial violence, such as state-led disappearance of dissidents and genocide against indigenous peoples, often motivated by extractivism.

[5] At the most basic level, social reproduction and reproductive labor refer to the work humans do to keep themselves alive and care for themselves, their families, and their communities (broadly defined). Marx distinguished between production and reproduction. Marxist feminists like Silvia Federici and Leopoldini Fortunati, in turn, argued that reproductive labor should be accounted for in capitalist value calculations, however this question continues to generate much debate. In any case, I wish to redirect attention to the general problem of the boundary struggle between production and social reproduction as a dynamic relation rather than a static one. Fraser's (2018) inclusion of nature and anything that contributes to public institutions that mediate "social bonds" as social reproduction is noteworthy, including but not limited to things like, "schools…[p]laygrounds, community centers; hospitals and medical clinics are also sites of social reproduction."

(2013a, 13). I also expand the concept of boundary struggle by applying it to an analysis of the formal literary elements of Luiselli's work. I contend that by grappling with blurred artistic and literary genre boundaries, her work suggests that narrative might not only serve as a metaphor of porous borders, but also as a method to explore an alternative—via the revolutionary possibilities of childhood and care—to a colonial and capitalist world system that generates crises of care. Although neither the essay nor the novel are explicit works of eco-literature, the road trip form of both narratives allows Luiselli to account for the historical processes of race- and space-making, particularly as these colonial and environmental concepts register at the familial level and generate restrictive boundaries and borders of all kinds.

Luiselli and the Historical Boundaries of Social Reproduction

The theme of crises of care shapes Luiselli's essay and novel by placing them at the center of the immigration crisis, which raises questions related to how capitalism involves gender (production and reproduction), which are in dialogue with her political theorist contemporaries. For example, Fraser (2016) notes that capitalism *always* spurs a crisis of social reproduction and calls for a historicization of each moment and crisis-causing contradiction between production and reproduction. Prior to the nineteenth century, a majority of people tended to reproduce themselves autonomously, but then, as Fraser adds, "Casting social reproduction as the province of women within the private family, this [nineteenth century] regime elaborated the ideal of 'separate spheres' even as it deprived most people of the conditions needed to realize it" (25). The people deprived were the many women and children working in factories during early industrialization, but this harsh reality generated a backlash that manifested in the progressive era reform movements, including more radical movements (it is also during this time that socialism gained popularity in the U.S., as historian Greg Grandin describes). Luiselli engages this history as she includes documentation of orphan children being sent out west from New York City to work during the nineteenth-century social reform movement. Westward expansion and neocolonialism served as a "pressure valve release" of building class antagonism in the eastern U.S., according to Grandin (2019), as the U.S. government redistributed stolen indigenous land to White settler families and handed out massive corporate subsidies to railroad companies. The societal response to this inherent contradiction of capitalism (existing between the ideal of a nuclear family with separate gendered spheres and the inability to extend this ideal universally) was one of "social protection" and the "family wage." The welfare state

was extended and a single (usually masculine) earner's wage could provide for an entire family and thereby "protect" women and children from exploitative working conditions outside the home (Fraser 2016).

The family wage gave way to another watershed moment of capitalist crisis in the 1970s, most notably because many states, including the U.S. and Mexico, withdrew from their role in mediating the capitalist–labor relation, leaving the domains of education, healthcare, and childcare largely on worker's shoulders. In Luiselli's work, the 1970s and 1980s are conjured by punk rock, a genre which in many ways was a coming-to-terms with an emerging new order of state abandonment. For example, The Clash's "Straight to Hell" (1982b) appears in both her essay and the novel. The first stanza includes the line, "as railroad towns feel the steelmills rust . . . there ain't no need for ya / go straight to hell, boys . . .", thereby documenting the decline of industrial productivity in imperial centers that would leave many workers out to dry. Particularly through the theme of family, the song pairs this with the discrimination of Vietnamese immigrants, who were children fathered by U.S. soldiers. After exhausting Western and international "frontiers," Grandin (2019) notes that Vietnam was "the first frontier war that the U.S. lost," and so the representation of this moment via The Clash is instructive in the novel as an epochal shift.

Our current juncture—based on financialization and corporate debt—chips away at the autonomy of those on the other side of the U.S. border and provides little social welfare in its place. Fraser recognizes this and explains its environmental dimensions: "It is largely through debt, too, that peasants in the Global South are dispossessed by a new round of corporate land grabs, aimed at cornering supplies of energy, water, arable land, and 'carbon offsets'" (2016, 32). Luiselli represents unpaid debts in her work with brief, but incisive observations of the U.S. commercial agroindustrial system of the American West. The historically unprecedented productivity in the twentieth century that footed the bill for a more expansive welfare state was in part the result of the apex of the colonial/capitalist world system's unprecedented and "unpaid" exploitation of nature, understood to also include humans and their labor (Moore 2015). The bill, however, eventually came due, and beginning in the 1970s, such productivity began to stall and could no longer be revived, in part because by then there were few "new" resource frontiers (including land and people) to appropriate.[6] As wages have stagnated, precarious employment has grown, and holes

[6] Grandin (2019) explains that the post-Vietnam order marked a moment of increasing

in the state's social safety net grow bigger, workers (particularly racialized and gendered workers) increasingly have no way to pay for nor provide "care"—including, but not limited to, childcare, eldercare, healthcare, or putting food on the table (that is, the very activities of human safety and survival). This is what prompts people to leave in search of getting their needs met elsewhere, which is the same territory of the set of questions that Luiselli employs. This is visible in the text with passages where Luiselli provides the backstories of women and children and their decisions to stay or go, either together or apart.

Instead of (or, perhaps, in addition to) consumer debt, the Mexican state-capital nexus maintains control by violence against those "surplus populations" rendered disposable, so many of whom are migrants passing through, a concept impossible to separate from colonial racialization, in the name of securing circulation (Rivera Hernández 2020, 17).[7] For Central American women, this crisis is so great, that they simply cannot stay, even as dangerous as it is to go. In turn, their absence generates other crises of care. Migration, then, is also part of a racialized economy marked by *circulation* subject to violence rather than *production,* and is part of the state's retraction of social welfare and increased recourse to force as a means of social control.[8] Fraser's

misery of the general populace and has led to an inevitable "pressure cooker" effect that we must now confront once and for all, either through an authoritarian crack-down or the radical redistribution of wealth and rights (Grandin clearly advocates for the latter). Others who discuss the general crisis of capitalism in a post-1970s world order include Aaron Benanav and John Clegg, both members of the collective called Endnotes. They argue that Marx's immiseration thesis has ultimately proven true, and they attribute dismissal of Marx's formulation to the twentieth century's singular ability to achieve massive gains in productivity that only made the thesis appear inaccurate. However, these gains cannot be repeated, in a claim similar to Moore's (2015) argument, and thus today, immiseration, or the general breakdown between labor relations and capital, is in fact correct.

[7] Rivera Hernández (2020) names the racialized nature by framing the dispossessed, contained, and vulnerable as border crossers from Central America and marginalized parts of Mexico as "colonial transmigrants." The author also relates this dynamic to literature in Mexico and the capacity for resistance in the face of vulnerability. For colonial specters in the present, see also Joshua Clover (2016), *Riot, Strike, Riot*; Daniel Nemser (2018), "The Iberian Slave Trade and the Racialization of Freedom"; Ivonne del Valle (2015), "Mexico's Recolonization: Unrestrained Violence, Rule of Law and the Creation of a New Order"; and Brian Whitener (2016), *Crisis Cultures.*

[8] Mexico has not seen the extension of consumer debt on a scale comparable to that of a country like Brazil that helps stave off crises of care, since the Mexican financialized economy is particularly marked by circulation of goods and services rather than debt and industrial production. Whitener writes that, "These areas which turn from production onto circulation are also critical, because they have furthered the breakdown of the state mediation of the capital-labor relation. It is estimated that roughly 60 percent of economically active Mexicans are in the informal economy or exist on the fringes of the capitalist apparatus of production. These are individuals who do not benefit from many of the state mediations of the capital-labor relationship, including the minimum wage, standard workday, etc. The turns to drug logistics and migration have exacerbated this situation of state disintermediation, producing

(2016) historicized conception of "social reproduction regimes" and "boundary struggles" provides an essential tool to understand the present moment since the 1970s, characterized by mounting debts of slow violence and by the question of ending frontier logic used to relieve the "pressure cooker" effect as described by Grandin and Moore.

Finally, the implications of the U.S.-driven hemispheric War on Drugs, which occurred concurrently with the rise of financialization and the waning global Cold War order, are visible in Luiselli's road novel, as it traverses the consequences of colonial space and time. These shifts in world order led to wars in Latin America and mass incarceration in the U.S.[9] The U.S. Cold War and its subsequent War on Drugs has also obviously affected children and families.[10] Children sometimes travel with a parent, siblings, extended family members, or with other children, often funded by personal debt of family members. Sometimes these children were initially left in the home country to be cared for by networks of extended family, and now travel to reunite with parents or other family members. An increasing number of women and children also tend to work along the route in places like Tapachula, Chiapas, taking longer to reach

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arguably intensified, but certainly more visible, forms of unfree labor where force, domination, and exposure to death are the rules of the day" (2016, 120).

[9] There is not space here for the long and contentious history of the U.S.-Mexico border or U.S. intervention in Central America, but for the purpose of this essay, it must be noted that in response to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the U.S. and Mexican governments purposefully beefed up border security, knowing it would devastate the Mexican countryside. Today, the U.S. essentially has a domestic standing army along the border. Migration numbers are relatively stable, but what has increased is the number of families, women, and children migrating from the "Northern Triangle" region and the number of apprehensions and detentions. Increased border security has also led to more dangerous and deadly border crossing, as well as longer migrant stays (or permanent settlement) in the U.S. It should also be noted that the security industry is a lucrative one, and it becomes a feedback loop of violence. As Central American families fear for their lives, they flee with the help of "coyotes" or in Migrant Caravans, an act that some consider to be a form of resistance (See Frank-Vitale (2019) and Varela (2019)). Finally, the U.S. has funneled money and resources to the Mexican government so that it might enact similarly militarized border enforcement along the Mexico-Guatemala border.

[10] Due to U.S. policy in the 1980s, when the U.S. backed genocidal regimes in Central America, it refused to consider refugees as such. Under regimes of increased policing and incarceration, Latinx immigrants were imprisoned and formed gangs in U.S. prisons. Many were eventually deported, creating bilingual laborers for international cartels in societies decimated by civil war. Because of Mexico's long history with the U.S. and NAFTA, law and immigration status differs for Mexicans and Central Americans. Mexican immigrants often have more paths to residency or citizenship. This is not to say that the process is not unduly difficult or tragic, as Luiselli notes, since Mexican children can also be automatically deported without a trial. Migrants were not considered refugees until they were granted TPS, a political limbo created in the 1990s in response to the political, ecological, and economic crisis wrought by Hurricane Mitch. U.S. President Donald Trump has, among his many assaults on migrant protections, threatened to revoke TPS, even though it offers no path to citizenship. This economic and political history cannot be divorced from questions of circulation mentioned above.

their final destination. This prompts Amarela Varela (2018) to refer to Mexico as a "vertical border," and it is also suggestive of migration as a form of *stateless work* that is tied up with, rather than a precondition for, one's (in)ability to become a citizen-laborer at a final destination. In other cases, Guatemalan children work in temporary indentured servitude in Mexican agroindustrial farms (62). Men, too, increasingly migrate with children for whom they act as the guardians, whereas they used to migrate alone and toward specific job opportunities. Luiselli's literary depictions of children, which I now turn to in the next section, inhabit and work through this exact set of predicaments, and are perhaps her most important work because of their inventive ways of interrogating crises of care and the revolutionary possibilities of childhood and care.

Luiselli's Children, or Interpreting Work and Play

Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends* and *Lost Children Archive* offer arguments about social reproduction and the role of children. More specifically, Luiselli's work allows for an appreciation of the revolutionary possibilities of childhood as valuable in and of itself, unlike prior cultural depictions of childhood, which are limited by their use of children and childhood as a means of saying something about *adult* worlds or *lost* worlds.[11] As Susan Ferguson asserts, "children themselves help shape their own social reproduction as they constantly negotiate between their more expansive, playful subjectivities and the denial or repression of these, as they too struggle to reproduce themselves as capitalist subjects" (2017, 129). Luiselli examines this negotiation in both *Tell Me How it Ends* and *Lost Children Archive*, and the result is a narrative of deep historical accounting and political possibility. In other words, children are neither totally independent liberal subjects with free agency (worker-producers), nor are they entirely dependent victims (consumers). Ferguson conceptualizes this unique position and dynamic as follows:

> But the point is that *both dynamics* [capitalist work and revolutionary play] *can be found within schools and other such institutions precisely because the social reproduction of labor cannot be separated from the social reproduction of life and because children and*

[11] Childhood in Latin American cinema often falls into a few broad trends: 1) portrayals of children that are really about adult anxieties; 2) childhood or coming-of-age tales that serve a pedagogical function, where the viewers learn with the children, often about injustice; and 3) a specific romantic tendency that links children to the recovery of lost worlds, often because they are perceived as closer to nature and more naturally "authentic" or "unmediated." Some have said that child narrative forms an entire genre of Latin American film, and that they often have a political message. In Mexico, some classic examples include the original golden age melodrama *Nosotros los pobres* (Ismael Rodríguez, 1948), *Los olvidados* (Luis Buñuel, 1950), *El norte* (1983), and *Mi familia* (1995) (both directed by Gregory Nava).

> *childhoods are generally afforded a greater distance from the temporal and spatial compulsions of capitalist value creation (even as they are essential condition to its reproduction).* Children themselves are thus constantly negotiating between their more sensual, imaginative subjectivities and the denial or repression of these. (129, emphasis in original)

Ferguson goes on to say that "this negotiation is never resolved under capitalism. It cannot be resolved. But recognizing it is essential to understanding the nature of capitalist children and childhood and seeing capitalist children as producers—not just as consumers—of their world" (130). Luiselli's essay and novel explore how the condition of historicized childhoods challenge binaries inherent to late capitalism, such as adult/child, producer/reproducer, and subjects of either work/play.

One of the questions that pulses throughout Luiselli's works is whether or not her own children would survive the journey north, and her son starts to wonder the same thing in the novel. The narrative includes ample reflection on the degrees of distance from misery afforded to children, which is inherently a question of racialized (and thus differential) childhoods. The full weight of Luiselli's fiction is evident in a comparative analysis with her account in *Tell Me How It Ends.* The intake questionnaire is meant to determine whether or not the child or adolescent immigrant has a "good" case, which really means a personal backstory *so* bad that they can win in court.[12] In the following passage, Luiselli asks two Guatemalan sisters if they went to school pre-migration, and if not, about whether or not they worked. She explains at length how many of the children were too young to even understand the questions, such that the procedure of the questionnaire is rendered absurd:

> Twenty-three: Did you go to school in your country of origin?
> —No.
> Twenty-four: How old were you when you started going to school?
> —I didn't go to school.
> Twenty-five: when did you stop going to school?
> —I already told you, I never went!
> Twenty-six: Why? I didn't know how to ask questions twenty-seven, twenty-eight, and twenty-nine: "Did you work in your home country?"; "What sort of work did you do?"; "How many hours did you work each day?" But I knew I had to find a way…I reworded translated, interpreted:
> "What kinds of things did you do when you lived with your grandmother?
> —We played.
> But besides playing?
> —Nothing.

[12] Winning means the possibility of Temporary Protected Status (TPS), asylum, or for children, Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJ).

> Did you work?
> —Yes.
> What did you do?
> —I don't remember (2017a, 65).

The two girls do not even know the difference between work and play, and partly this is because they have not been taught or disciplined into the eight-hour working day, let alone a day divided into hours. It is doubtful that such young developing minds and restless bodies are even capable of fully grasping this distinction, no matter the discipline forced upon them. As Claudia Milian shows, Luiselli marks the girls' story in *Tell Me How It Ends* not by traditional markers of time, but

> by the number of borders they continue to cross in their coded, unchangeable dresses, a sort of borderlands uniform in this Mesoamerican space of "standard stranded time," as it were. They are "timed," as well, by their bodies—children's bodies keeping up with adult paces, a coyote's speed, moving forward—which assume, one can only speculate, a physical and psychological toll (2018, 19).

If children represent the blurred line between work and play, between production and social reproduction, and between a revolutionary subjectivity and a capitalist-disciplined one, then their foggy answers to the immigration questionnaire represent not the limits of the child, but those of the law and the boundaries it writes: real material boundaries, like borders, but also between the production and reproduction of boundary struggles. Yet children are far more than mere victims: they are "producers" of their world, and also of the "adult" world. While children must be cared for, they also define the terms by which they are cared for by adults. They also do the *work* of migration and answer for their family before the State (outside of the wage, but work nonetheless), as they produce narratives of their historical and political conditions (regardless of whether or not these are legible to the State). Furthermore, many children will do capitalist *work* for a wage once they are in the U.S., and in fact several coming-of-age migrant films do inscribe this becoming into one's marginalized class status as racialized workers (e.g. Inna Payán's 2016 film *La jaula de oro*).

The migrant child's ability to attain inclusive citizenship status is predicated on the contradictory unfolding of their translated life story, exemplified above.[13] These stories criminalize migrant children in the eyes of U.S. law, which could result in a permanent exclusion not just from citizenship, but also from legally recognized forms

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[13] In the Spanish version of the essay, Luiselli expands on the experience of the translator/interpreter just after the exchange above, frequently using the word *desdoblar* (to unfold) to describe how the question-and-answer process provokes other questions.

of wage work. Indeed, as Milian again writes, "'The LatinX child, targeted on the basis of racialized national identities,' is framed to articulate its own grounds of expulsion" (quoting Susan J. Terrio in Milian 2018, 18). Our understanding of the effects of the vacuum caused by community breakdown are balanced by Luiselli's explanation to the reader about how attaining SIJ works: at least one parent in the home country must have abandoned or abused the child and the child must have been subjected to exploitative conditions, such that "por ende no está en su mejor interés buscar un reencuentro con ese pariente" (Luiselli 2017b, loc. 692). But in the case above, the Guatemalan sisters had been given a loving home with their grandmother. If they had worked for a wage (and it is unclear whether or not they did), this could be grounds to claim exploitation. The girls' mother migrated without them when she was young, judging that to be the safer and more efficient option, until the grandmother herself could no longer care for them. Since migrating for the purpose of working (even if it is undocumented work) while leaving children behind is a sanctioned function of a capitalist world system, the law does not recognize it as legal "abandonment." Thus, the mother's abandonment does not meet the criteria required to attain SIJ. These girls have not legally experienced the trauma which is defined as expulsion from their own families. Being still juridically included in a family unit thus expels the Latinx child from life in the U.S., or perhaps life at all, but the same can be said for a racialized child working an "illicit" job. Illicit (and therefore informal, even if paid in a wage) work that is performed by, say, a twelve-year-old boy for a cartel, might be grounds for denial of asylum. Even if the girls met the qualifications, they would lack the ability to craft a strategic narrative due to their young age and the mediation of three languages (a Mayan language translated into Spanish and then into English). Nevertheless, they produce a narrative mediated by Luiselli that exposes the limits of the state as a mechanism for determining belonging or providing care (66).

Gravitational Pull, Chaos, and Capable Children

Family, in Luiselli's works, is described as less of an atomic and given nuclear force, and more like objects that may come in and out of orbit around a strong gravitational center, depending on its relative force. This perspective allows for her to explore just how capable children are in relation to their vulnerability, and how family, work, and play might all be reorganized toward ends that allow for more supportive care structures. The questionnaire structures the flow of the questions Luiselli asks and ruminates on, but the Spanish-language edition of *Tell Me How It Ends* includes

additional questions about the gravitational absence of the nuclear family and its relation to community: "¿Cómo se reorganizaron las vidas de los niños cuyos padres se fueron? ¿Se organizan en torno a esa ausencia—el núcleo hueco que dejan aún funcionando como centro gravitacional? ¿O buscan los niños otros centros en torno a los cuales gravitar? Si le quitas el sol al sistema solar, ¿hacia dónde se desplazan los planetas?" (2017b, loc. 617). She then wonders, specifically, if this means children start to look to gangs to replace this vacuum, or if they decide to follow their parents North: "¿tienen alguna oportunidad de encontrar, al final, una comunidad que los integre?" (2017b, loc. 621). This section does not appear the same way in the 2017 English version, but it does return in full force in the novel. Citing Anne Carson's "Reticent Sonnet," where she writes, "pronouns…are part of a system that argues with shadow," Ma thinks, "In any case, the question of how the final placement of all our pronouns would ultimately rearrange our lives and become our center of gravity. It became the dark, silent core around which all our thoughts and questions circulated" (Luiselli 2019, 27). In *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli highlights the links between language, translation, and the law and how they all have the power to define family, work, care, and ultimately, asylum. These are all tied to capitalist social constructions—one of which, *family*, becomes a framework to view the larger structure of the migration crisis.

Matters of slow violence, family, and boundary struggles are evident in the formal elements of the novel. The inventive structure of the novel includes many allusions and embedded historical, musical, and literary references that force the reader to reckon with a slower, longer history of systemic violence.[14] For example, the reader never finds out the character's given names, and their family-based referents shift depending on the perspective, allowing for a certain degree of universalization and historical reflection. Mostly narrated in the first person by the woman (Ma or Mama) during Part I, it switches to "the boy's" mirrored perspective of mostly the same events for the majority of Parts II, III, and IV. He makes for a fairly reliable narrator within his own understanding of events, but his ten years of age put him on the threshold between childhood and adolescence. The man is sometimes "my husband," sometimes "Pa," and is the biological father of the boy, while "Ma" is the biological mother of "the girl," who is five. As a blended family unit, no one bothers with the "step" prefix.

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[14] Luiselli has authored a prolific body of work, among which are earlier texts like *Sidewalks* (2013) that also demonstrate an interest in the question of play, albeit in different contexts. I chose to focus on her more recent political and migration focused writings, although certainly a study of her broader oeuvre would be fruitful for future work.

Formally, the novel's four parts are subdivided into chapters that alternate between the main narrative and the contents of seven different bankers' boxes. Boxes I-IV contain the father's research documents; Box V contains photos, notes, and quotes from scholarly texts, poems, and migrant death reports for the mother's project; and Boxes VI and VII are empty upon the children's request. These empty boxes clearly come to symbolize the archival process that the kids will carry out on the trip.[15] The first half of the novel is marked by a chronicling of their journey south, where Pa tells stories of the Apache and Ma listens to news coverage of the migration crisis. This is where the children scramble the archive and begin to meld the two histories into one, driving the action of the second half of the novel.

During the course of the road trip, the boy and the girl bond over David Bowie's "Space Oddity" (1969), a song about an astronaut who loses contact with ground control and floats away into space. This becomes a clear metaphor for the boy floating away from the girl as their family separates (the loss of gravitational pull). The boy begins to feel neglected and jealous that Ma spends more time thinking about the lost children because they are "braver and smarter" (Luiselli 2019, 238). Having conflated his mother and father's two projects about migration and the Apaches, he decides to rope his younger sister into a "game" where they reenact the journey of the "lost children"—an amalgamation of child migrants and the Eagle Warriors, a band of Apache children who, as his father told them, raided and lived autonomously. The goal is to get to Echo Canyon, where his father wants to record its soundscape, but they end up getting lost in the desert and spending a night with actual migrant children whom they find in an abandoned train car. The Bowie song also structures the last chapter, to which I turn momentarily, as the boy uses it to frame a final message to his sister, which in many ways is the product of certain contents of the boxes coming together and a documentation of the care he has provided for his sister over the course of their adventure or "game."

Luiselli's treatment of "capable children" returns as a, if not, *the* main theme of *Lost Children Archive,* and it defines a kind of formal literary boundary struggle in which the boy decides whether or not he is a "documentarian" or a "documentarist." The degree to which children need adult or social *care* is chronicled by the boy (and therefore

[15] The narrative is also often interrupted by a third account—a fictitious novel within the novel called *Elegies for Lost Children*—that the woman is reading about migration and that the boy also occasionally reads, indicated by subtitles such as "Fourth Elegy." Based on a medieval child migration but set in the twentieth century without geographic referent, it could be about Syria or Central America.

the novel), and it is an engagement with Ma's earlier declaration that, "I was a documentarist and he a Documentarian," explaining that she, a documentarist, is like a chemist, and Pa, a documentarian, is like a librarian (2019, 99). Her husband has a compulsion to document the soundscape of Gerónimo, his capture, and the actual echoes of the places where this history played out. Meanwhile, the woman's interest in the border crisis is summed up in her own narrative voice as a clash between her husband's interest in aesthetics versus her more pragmatic journalist's perspective of truth-telling (inflected by her experience in Mexico, where putting two facts together can cause the explosive reaction of assassination).

Ma and Pa's relationship is defined by wage work from beginning to end. Their jobs united them, which Ma mentions she took not exclusively because of her love of art, but for the health insurance, and after the project is over, the couple finds their social bond cannot endure different work circumstances that more fully reflect their individual desires. Of note, their creative work is still for a salary, and as such, might similarly blur boundaries between the ways in which art is often considered a labor of love or creative play that must also navigate the vicissitudes of the market. In the end, the boy has the last word on the question of documentation and family when he destroys the boundary between the two altogether, and one might say that the children in Luiselli's essay do this work, too. In this twist, Luiselli exemplifies how—because of children's liminal status materially and metaphorically, but particularly because they are always on the boundary between production and reproduction—children are telling, producing, and reproducing narratives that reveal the historical dynamics of the boundary struggle. At first the boy decides that "I'd become a documentarist and a documentarian . . ." and explains that "Pa is documentarist Ma is documentarian" (2019, 210). But he has mixed up who is who according to the explanation Ma has given many pages earlier. Halfway through the book, the Boy merges both and tells his parents that he is a "documentarianist." He says that they are "basically the same thing," but that both methods of documenting are necessary (suggesting that they are indeed different) (234).

The boy introduces a dialectical tension between forms of documentation. On the one hand, I argue that the formal question of documentation reveals the actual material boundary between social reproduction and capitalist labor, as well as the trouble of distinguishing just where the boundary falls (i.e., how to "account" for reproductive labor in the formulas of capitalist labor). On the other hand, it also illuminates literary structural boundary struggles between whether or not narrative can

be a tool to find an alternative to a colonial and capitalist world system that has produced an epochal crisis of care, and where children might intervene in the production of these narratives. If Ma is "like a chemist" and Pa is "like a librarian," then she creates and he archives, she produces and he reproduces (another playful inversion of typical gendered pronouns in the historical gendered spheres of labor and (re)production). This is supported by the subtitle for the section "*Homo Faber,*" or the idea that through tools, humans can manipulate and therefore dominate their destiny and the environment. This is a rather adept summation of capitalist modernity's instrumentalist ideology, the folly of which the novel lays bare. Such thinking has led to the mounting excesses and externalities (perhaps echoes) that haunt the world system. The boy subverts *Homo Faber* by using his blurry "documentarianist" methodology to document the child migrants in a way that Ma ultimately cannot. It is inseparable from his own borderline reality of being a subject who needs to be cared for, who does not totally determine his destiny nor his environment, but who is also capable of negotiating his own relationship to a capitalist world and all of its attendant cruelties and neglects. On a meta-level, we might also argue that Luiselli herself must resort to child's play and blurred boundaries to produce the novel itself (and again it is from her daughter that she takes the title for her essay *Tell Me How It Ends*).

The metafictional aspects of the novel further engage boundary struggles when Ma and the boy read a made-up book about migration called *The Elegies* together with *Lord of the Flies,* which prompts a discussion of what happens to children in the absence of adults. The boy asks Ma if the descent into chaos and cruelty would happen to him and his sister if they were left alone, which leads Luiselli to wonder if "all those books and stories devoted to adult-less children—books like *Peter Pan, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* that short story by García Márquez, 'Light Is Like Water,' and of course *Lord of the Flies*—are nothing but desperate attempts by adults to come to terms with childhood" (2019, 160). What exactly is it about childhood, though, that adults need to come to terms with? The answer comes earlier when read against a section two pages prior titled "Shadow Line," a possible second reference to Anne Carson's "Reticent Sonnet" about pronouns. Luiselli tries to define children's fearful tendencies (particularly of the dark and of shadows) and writes, "Our children's fear is a kind of entropy, forever destabilizing the very fragile equilibrium of the adult world." In other words, the contemporary preoccupation with childhood as its own ontological category is, at least in part, because "children's imaginations destabilize our adult sense of reality and force us to question the very grounds of that reality" (2019, 160). The reality that

is destabilized is the forced distinction between capitalist work and reproductive work, which includes but is not limited to comforting children after nightmares, providing a safe environment for play, and caring for them in the face of a world system not organized to prioritize life itself.

The conversation about *Lord of the Flies* further spirals into considerations of the state of nature, the social contract, and the absence of law, but in the end, Ma reassures the boy that he and his sister would not succumb to the mythic state of nature. This proves to be true. When the boy and his sister do get lost, their playful sensibilities—which are far from utopic, and exude both fear and imagination—allow them to form community and survive with other migrant children. The boy also takes on caregiving responsibilities for his younger sister, which itself is sometimes challenged by her younger, more childlike, and playful disposition. Far from suggesting that children's entropic fear contributes to a universalized chaos akin to the state of nature—a move that would be divorced from the material experience of historically defined childhoods—, the novel instead positions care (understood here as the whole of social reproduction) as the entropy of capitalism. The need to care for ourselves, for others, for the land, and for the water is a persistent imperative of life itself, regardless of whether or not such care work is mediated by the market. Care and play are also the entropy of the narrative itself, driving other possibilities to document the child migration crisis and imagine relationships to those excluded from traditional documentation (both legal and narrative). As they care for each other in order to survive and, in the boy's case, to document, the children produce historical understandings that intervene in dominant imperial and capitalist narratives of adults.

Lost Children's Play

As the children are wandering lost in the desert, Luiselli borrows from Juan Rulfo's 1955 masterpiece, the novel *Pedro Páramo,* to riff on two lines and adds in a third reference to Augusto Monterroso's famous microstory *El dinosaurio*. In short, the Rulfo references highlight that the absence of happy children playing is an indicator of a dysfunctional society unable to reproduce itself, while Monterroso's line adds in a dimension of playful agency of the children. Before analyzing both in more detail, it is necessary to recount their appearance and context within the novel. The first, "It was the hour of the day when in every little village children come out to play in the streets, filling the afternoon with their cries" (Rulfo [1955] 2002, 19), appears as Juan Preciado arrives in Comala to fulfill the wishes of his dying mother, only to find a literal ghost

town full of nothing but murmurs. In Luiselli's version, the boy and girl finally find the four "lost" (i.e., migrant) children in a ghost town in the American Southwest, itself a result of destructive capitalist and imperial boom and bust.[16] The boy and the girl are so deliriously hot, tired, thirsty, and hungry that they are depicted as suspended between a life and death state. Their thoughts and words are all a blur (a little like the murmurs that kill Juan Preciado in *Pedro Páramo*), but the girl swears she can hear other voices "like in a playground where many children gather to play." Eagles begin to circle overhead, reminding the children of the Apache stories about the child "Eagle Warriors" that their father had told them about. The girl then suggests they "pretend the eagles are kites and we have to follow them like when we follow a kite," "which was a brilliant idea," the boy explains, "so we did that, we started following them, clutching invisible holders, attached to invisible strings, and walked for a while like that . . . until suddenly, very suddenly, an abandoned train car was in front of us . . ." (Luiselli 2019, 328).[17] The boy documents the moment with a polaroid picture. The girl's playful instincts not only enable their survival, but the eagle subconsciously directs them toward their goal of finding the real "lost children."

All the children spend a night together in the train car and survive by following an eagle to its nest to take its eggs for food (not unlike how the girl used the eagle to find her way). After they all say goodnight to each other in the train car, the boy embarks on a pages-long, first-person, and unpunctuated stream of conscious narration that

[16] The motif of ghost towns in Luiselli seems to serve multiple functions. First, many ghost towns—abandoned mining or oil towns—are scattered throughout the United States. In the novel, there is a clear sense of how ghost towns are the product of a boom-and-bust cycle that readily abandons entire peoples and worlds when capital has "used up" the natural resources necessary to its growth. There is also abundant mention of general rural depopulation and decadence. Second, the family both listens to David Bowie and visits the town of Bowie. The town is still populated but very rural, and named after the now abandoned Fort Bowie in Southeast Arizona, which the family also plans to visit (and it is around here where the children are lost). U.S. troops launched campaigns against the Chiricahua Apache from Fort Bowie, culminating in the capture and forced relocation of Geronimo and the "last Apaches" to Alabama and Florida in 1886. The Fort was formally abandoned in 1894, its main purpose having been to steal native lands, thus tying in the theme of extractive abandonment and capitalist urbanization into joint imperial practices of plunder and genocide.

[17] In a Works Cited section at the end of the novel, Luiselli explains her literary allusions: ". . . the allusions need not be evident. I'm not interested in intertextuality as an outward, performative gesture but as a method or procedure of composition" (2019, 380). She notes that "One such thread alludes to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway,* wherein the technique of shifting narrative viewpoints via an object moving in the sky was, I believe, first invented. I repurpose the technique in point-of-view shifts that occur when the eyes of two characters "meet" in a single point in the sky, by looking at the same object: airplane, eagles, thunderclouds, or lighting" (379-80). The exchange above between the girl and the boy is one such example of Luiselli employing Woolf's technique.

then shifts to a third-person dream sequence as he falls asleep, mimicking the narrative style of the prior surreal out-of-body experience from when he and his sister marched through the desert. This boundary-less narrative voice explains that the boy has begun to cry himself to sleep because he feels so guilty for taking the eagle's eggs, whereas the migrant girl simply thanks the eagle and appears at ease with the sacrifice. Here, Luiselli tucks in the literary reference to Monterroso's *El Dinosaurio,* a *microcuento* that is nothing more than the line, "Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba ahí." A widely accepted interpretation of the story is that it refers to the decades-long "soft" authoritarian rule of the Mexican Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). If the story's original intent refers to the state, consider Luiselli's adaptation, refashioned as a bedtime story from the migrant girl to the younger children, "and when they woke up, the eagle was still there" (2019, 333). The substitution is clever and allows for various interpretations since the eagle is a national symbol appropriated from Indigenous cultures on both sides of the border. In some ways, the *microcuento* suggests that when the children awaken, the state-capital nexus will still be there, still pursuing and detaining migrant children.

Yet, in other ways, the boy suggests in the following pages that "the Eagle Warriors," whom the boy likens to the migrant children because of their bravery and relative independence, "had been with us all this time" (Luiselli 2019, 335). They are those who carry on a kind of quiet resistance and protection that subverts the power of the state through memories, echoes, and documentation. I interpret this as yet another oblique reference to the way that the rearrangement of the "traditional" family is marked precisely by systemic shifts in capitalism and social reproduction. This is demonstrated when that night the boy, "dreams he is the young Indian warrior girl called Lozen, who, one day when she'd just turned ten, climbed up one of the sacred mountains in Apacheria and stayed there alone for four days," where she acquired a special power to detect enemy threats, "and in his dream he was she, and she was leading her people away from a band of what could have been soldiers or paramilitaries dressed in nineteenth-century traditional bluecoats but holding wild guns, and huddling them all into an abandoned train car . . ." (334). Even though the children ate the eagle's eggs, effectively truncating the reproductive cycle of an endangered animal, the migrant girl assures the boy that the eagle, here read not as the state, but as the historical memory of Indigenous autonomy and resistance, is still here, even if only in echoes. Of course, this says nothing of the boy's dreamlike dissolution of his own gendered pronouns: i.e., "and in his dream he was she…" (334).

One might even ask if the novel as an object and project by Luiselli represents play, in so far as the author has taken to a more imaginative version of her earlier essay through fiction and the character of the boy. By abandoning prescribed gender and familial roles and the categories of documentation set out by his parents, the boy helps lead his sister through the desert while also heeding her playful yet bold Lozen-like intuition. Lozen is, in fact, a real historical figure who was said to possess the ability to sense her enemies' presence and location. She was a legendary Apache warrior and shrewd military strategist who protected women and children from Mexican and U.S. military incursions by leading them across hostile terrain, including Northern Mexico, the U.S. Southwest, and across the Rio Grande. Along with Gerónimo, Lozen was shipped to Florida by the U.S. government and held as a prisoner of war where she eventually died of tuberculosis. If his father operates within the aesthetic realm and his mother the pragmatic, the boy is then able to channel the colonial echoes into material action. He can harness both in a way that might, someday, generate new forms of conspiring with migrant children to cross the border and evade the oppressive state, or perhaps, affirm an autonomy from the state all together. Scott asserts that, "Play, along with two other major apparently purposeless human activities, sleeping and dreaming, turns out to be foundational, both socially and physically," and it is precisely through these "purposeless" activities that the boy initiates the climax of the story.

Arguably the resolution of the novel is when Ma and Pa find the boy and girl in Echo Canyon and locate each other first through echoes and then by their actual yelling voices. The euphoric experience of the echo, that the girl especially is still engaging in as a form of play, forms the boy's relation to his sister. This relation is ultimately marked precisely by his mediation of the political world of child migrants, the state, colonial violence, and an inventive—and possibly more just—documentation of a long sordid history of slow violence. The boy therefore becomes a writer-activist, inhabiting this liminality doubly as a child playing with methods of documentation. Whether intentional or not, Luiselli reincarnates but does not cite another Rulfo line that reads, "Yes, voices. And here, where the air was so rare, I heard them even stronger. They lay heavy inside me. I remembered what my mother had said: '*You will hear me better there. I will be closer to you. You will hear the voice of my memories stronger than the voice of my death—that is, if death ever had a voice*'" ([1955] 2002, 20). In the novel, the boy describes how he knew Ma and Pa would find them in Echo Canyon, and when they do all finally reunite there, the boy describes "thunderous feelings" upon hearing his parents' voices in echoes that were "loud and clear and familiar" (Luiselli 2019, 337). Again, the kids

arrive to a place that has clear historical echoes of a colonial and imperial past, but Echo Canyon also resonates as the familiar, quite literally.

Recent interpretations of *Pedro Páramo* highlight that Rulfo's masterpiece on the post-revolutionary Mexican state critiques the colonial and capitalist nexus of Mexico's ecological regimes. Mexico's history is one of exhausted resource frontiers and what Marx termed "metabolic rift," as Kerstin Oloff (2016) argues, caused by capitalism and predicated on gendered and racialized labor regimes. Not only are Comala's inhabitants all dead, but so is the land (*páramo* means wasteland). When Juan Preciado's mother asks him to return to Comala to hear her memories more clearly, she is also asking him to listen to the history of the land in his conversations with ghosts. Again, recalling Luiselli's reference to *Homo Faber*, in which humans come to dominate their environment through the use of tools, Scott writes that, "Scientific progress, many believed, had uncovered the laws of nature, and with them the means to solve the problems of subsistence, social organization, and institutional design on a scientific basis. As men became more rational and knowledgeable, science would tell us how we should live, and politics would no longer be necessary" (2012, xiii). Applying Scott's observations to Mexico, post-revolutionary technocrats and agronomists used "apolitical" and "rational" methods to transform the countryside in the well-documented history of the Green Revolution. In reality, the Green Revolution dazzled technologically but failed to "solve the problems of subsistence" and the eradicate the need for politics. As the countryside became increasingly hostile to small landholders despite the Mexican Revolution, migrants poured into Mexico City and across the Northern border. This history is intimately tied with the U.S.'s efforts to modernize agriculture in the southern U.S. and across the world, since it looked to Mexico largely as a laboratory.

Luiselli explicitly mentions more recent histories that are also examples of "slow violence," such as the civil wars and U.S. intervention in Central America, but she goes even deeper with the eco-historical regimes that have led to this point. Earlier, although they are but one or two lines, she focuses on the monocropped lands of the American Great Plains that are the counterpart to the Green Revolution in Mexico, describing them as:

> a landscape scarred by decades or maybe centuries of systematic agricultural aggression: fields sectioned into quadrangular grids, gang-raped by heavy machinery, bloated and modified seeds and injected with pesticides, where meager fruit trees bear robust, insipid fruit for export; fields corseted into a circumscription of grassy crop layers, in patterns resembling Dantesque hells,

> watered by central-pivot irrigation systems; and fields turned into non-fields, bearing the weight of cement, solar panels, tanks, and enormous windmills (2019, 177).

As in *Pedro Páramo*, Luiselli highlights the gendered regime in the historical metaphor of America as a raped woman, a subtle reference to primitive accumulation as the "corseted" (enclosed) fields in grid patterns. She ends with renewable energy technology that, as many did and still do apolitically claim, will save us from ourselves. While such technology might help to combat climate change, it alone is not enough to upend five hundred years of slow violence. The largely unspoken history of the Green Revolution that bubbles up through oblique references to *Pedro Páramo* in Luiselli's work is important because it is in the failure of the "Mexican Miracle" to solve hunger and transform the nation for all, and its simultaneous dispossession of peasants who depended on subsistence agriculture to live, that crises of care multiplied and migrated. Such crises only intensified as the decades wore on, and by the 1970s, had become all but solidified.

Conclusions

A world where children ultimately renegotiate relationships, be they familial, historical, or ecological, and where pronouns find new meaning as children demand to be cared for, would be a life-affirming system for children, as well as for the adults and environments surrounding them. Echo Canyon, like Comala, is where children go to hear the "voice of memories stronger" than the voice of death. It is also "where the last free peoples on the entire American continent lived before they had to surrender to the white-eyes," and so autonomy quietly runs through the whole novel (Luiselli 2019, 26). If the Apache were the last free nation, it is because they could still maintain ecological autonomy—nothing less than a more autonomous system of social reproduction that allowed them to survive for centuries despite attacks from the emerging U.S. and Mexican nation-states. In the same way that one cannot actually "go back" or historically recover "Apachería," we cannot document or hear stories that cannot be told by migrant children who either exist outside of official documentation or who have survived either by staying in their countries or going to the U.S. We might, however, as Ma realizes in the novel, be able to hear their echoes in others' narratives as we also seek to document the audible and visible trauma.

Luiselli, through her mirrored U.S./Mexican perspective on slow violence, resists a nationalist explanation in which discreet nation-states are to blame for imperial

or developmentalist impulses. Rather, she universally highlights the world system that includes Spanish colonialism and Mexican capitalist state-building alongside that of U.S. domination and empire. In other words, as some of Mexico's most astute social movements have declared, *fue el estado*,[18] understood here as both the particular Mexican state but also as every state, everywhere. Even though the state looms, and despite its best efforts to contain children in camps and detention centers—many of whom are still articulated to indigenous communities or hardly removed from violence and dispossession directed against their racialized ancestors—, the Mexican and U.S. states cannot stop the entropy that children and childhood, in their unique production of reproductive labor, introduce into our world. Dominated by a capitalist logic of rational progress that has exacted different, but no less violent, forms of domination for the last five hundred years, this system of personal, social, and ecological debt is clearly coming apart at the seams, accelerating since the 1970s. Despite this collapse, the *Lord of the Flies* question (what happens when you take away children's "center of gravity," understood perhaps as the *paterfamilia* or *patria*) is answered: the children do not fall into chaos or cruelty, they go on by relying on mutual aid and establishing connections through play.

It is really only through life-affirming play, rather than work, that the memory of autonomy, its erasure, and possibly its reconstitution might be imagined and narrativized to produce a new world system. On the one hand, as Kathi Weeks (2015) says, the struggle to work less and under less miserable conditions is a necessary and admirable goal, as a kind of "non reformist reform." Recalling that Scott (2012) asserts dreaming and playing as "purposeless" but also "foundational," and that the boy relies on both to survive, what is clear in Luiselli's novel is that a world in which children are deprived of free, open space to play, imagine, and experiment is a death world. Therefore, play, along with sleeping and dreaming, would be recognized for its essential role in sustaining life-giving socioeconomic structures. However, this essay hopes to have gone a step further, following Fraser (2016), in arguing for the ways that the boundary struggle as a necessary condition of capitalism is also the very point of entry

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[18] For example, Luiselli writes, "No one thinks of these children arriving here now as refugees of a hemispheric war that extends, at least, from these very mountains, down across the country into the southern U.S. and northern Mexican deserts, sweeping across the Mexican sierras, forests, and southern rain forests into Guatemala, into El Salvador, and all the way to the Celaque Mountains in Honduras" (2017a, 51). "Fue el estado" is the rallying cry of protests demanding that the missing forty-three *normalista* students of Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, México be returned alive ("vivos los queremos"). It also lives on in the *Ni Una Menos* feminist movement.

for revolutionary struggle. In what ways do reformist measures that seek to dignify care work also preserve the concept of work itself, as well as restrictive notions of family, instead of affirming revolutionary *life* first and foremost? How might family or "revolutionary motherhood" (Sierra Becerra 2020) be leveraged for revolutionary ends? And finally, what other categories and modes of being might the abolition of certain spheres allow?

The Clash's bilingual "Should I Stay or Should I Go" appears on their album *Combat Rock*, alongside the aforementioned immigration-themed "Straight to Hell," and while far from the heavy themes of asylum, war, and deindustrialization, the song still attests to the anguish wrought by someone else's indecision. The song and the somewhat strange Spanish lyrics are in fact the product of play and borders, since the song was spontaneously born out of The Clash's collaboration with the Texan musician Joe Ely, who has said that, "My Spanish was pretty much Tex-Mex, so it was not an accurate translation. But I guess it was meant to be sort of whimsical, because we didn't really translate verbatim" (Latinorebels.com). Artists from The Clash to Luiselli have documented our current predicament and the ways in which boundary struggles are defined and challenged by borders and frontiers. As so many decide whether or not to "stay or go," or wonder if Mexico or the United States will allow them to migrate, what is lost and gained in documentation, in translations of one form or another, requires play and whimsy, as well as dreaming, to forge paths of possibility that are still lifegiving. No essay, no novel, no song, and no theorist can declare just how to solve the crisis of capitalism and its attendant crises of care, but ultimately the boy in *Lost Children Archive* finds a way, via his own playful documentation methods, to care for his sister not just in the present but looking ahead to the future. What the boy remembers, via dream, play, and embodied experience, is his own autonomy and how it might be documented and enacted to care for those either temporarily or permanently without family, *patrón*, land, or state.

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