The Limits of Latinx Representation

*Carlos Alonso Nugent**

On a 2014 trip from her home in New York City to the southeast corner of Arizona, the Mexican-born writer Valeria Luiselli could not stop reading the reports: that year, US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) captured 80,000 unaccompanied child migrants, most of whom had come all the way from El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras. After her trip, Luiselli wanted to work with these children, so as a volunteer interpreter in New York's federal immigration court, she helped them complete the intake questionnaires that became the basis for their asylum applications. Up to that point, Luiselli had published primarily in Spanish, but as a result of her experiences, she wrote two books in English.[1] In *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (2017), she considered the hundreds of children she met in New York, focusing on the ways that they fit their specific stories into the impersonal questionnaires. Then, in *Lost Children Archive: A Novel* (2019), she turned to the thousands of others who never get to make their case to stay in our so-called democracy—those who are robbed, raped, kidnapped, or killed while traveling through Mexico; those who die of exposure in the Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts, or who drown in the Rio Grande; finally, those who disappear into a sprawling detention system.[2]

By subtitling her books "an essay" and "a novel," Luiselli intensified an inquiry into genre that dated to *La historia de mis dientes* (2013), which she had written in stages using feedback from Mexican factory workers. While making it clear that she was structuring her "essay" around the immigration court's "forty questions," Luiselli was less explicit about how her "novel" related to "lost children." The 400-page book begins by delineating four unnamed

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characters: a 30- to 40-year-old woman, her five-year-old daughter, her husband, and his ten-year-old son. After describing how the adults met while working on a "soundscape" of New York City, Luiselli sets up the central conflict: when the man announces that he is moving to Arizona to record "echoes" he associates with Apaches, the woman realizes that their relationship will soon end but still agrees to join him on his cross-country road trip so that she can study migration.

With the woman narrating the first half and the boy narrating the second half, the book fixates on the family members' flailing attempts to understand themselves, each other, the Apaches, and the migrants. In a paradigmatic passage, the woman begins by wondering, "how can a radio documentary be useful in helping more undocumented children find asylum?" Rather than resolving this "political concern," she raises an "aesthetic problem," and over the next 170 words, she adds a "professional hesitance," an "ethical question," a "pragmatic concern," and a "realistic concern." Across all these areas, the woman starts to see why it is hard for privileged people to tell "the children's stories"; more broadly, she senses how "in these times, a politicized issue is no longer a matter . . . for committed debate in the public arena but rather a bargaining chip that parties use frivolously in order to move their own agendas forward." These realizations lead her to pause her search for solutions to enumerate her ever more "constant concerns," from "cultural appropriation" and "micromanaging identity politics" to "what's the correct use of personal pronouns, go light on the adjectives, and oh, who gives a fuck how very whimsical phrasal verbs are?" (79).

Through this relentless self-reflexivity, *Lost Children Archive* calls attention to a crisis in the literary form we call "the novel" and the political form we call "democracy." As many scholars have argued, these forms had a crucial convergence in the late eighteenth century: while novels made it easier for subjects to identify as rational decision-makers in secular social worlds, democracy became these subjects' preferred way of imagining and institutionalizing political power.[3] To be sure, most early novels helped consolidate the middle and upper classes, but over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an increasing number tried to open democracy to the disenfranchised. Much as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) drew attention to violence against enslaved Blacks, and much as *The Jungle* (1906) exposed the exploitation of poor whites, many twenty-first-century texts have considered the challenges facing unauthorized migrants in the US–Mexico borderlands. Setting aside for a moment the ones that are based on their authors' personal experiences, these texts still fill several shelves: some are by established experts like Sonia Nazario, while others are by

emerging voices like Francisco Cantú; some are nonfictional narratives—Luis Alberto Urrea's 2004 Pulitzer Prize Finalist *The Devil's Highway*—while others are sensational novels—Jeanine Cummins's 2020 Oprah's Book Club selection *American Dirt* (2019). Despite their diversity, almost all these texts suffer from the same "problems" as Luiselli's protagonists. Since their authors have never crossed borders without papers, they risk "cultural appropriation." "Aesthetic[ally]," they struggle to show the scale of violence in Central America (which has the world's highest murder rates), Mexico (where tens of thousands of migrants have disappeared), or the borderlands (where thousands more have died). And "political[ly]," they have a hard time persuading publics to mobilize around these issues (79).

If these are the symptoms of a crisis in democracy and the novel, they are also part of a shift in "migrant imaginaries"—Alicia Schmidt Camacho's term for the "world-making aspirations of Mexican border crossers, whose mobility [has] changed the character of both U.S. and Mexican national life" (5). Throughout the twentieth century, migrant imaginaries flowed from many sources: as Schmidt Camacho shows, some were forged by unauthorized migrants such as María Guadalupe Torres Martínez (237–241), others were fashioned by US-born allies like Américo Paredes (40–49, 95–106), and still others were made by politically puzzling figures like Richard Rodriguez (193–232). In the twenty-first century, by contrast, migrant imaginaries have responded to increases in border-crossing and border-policing by developing in what I see as two divergent strands. In the first, currently and formerly undocumented writers have shared their experiences of moving to the US. Drawing on but also departing from the Latin American tradition of *testimonio*, these writers have spoken truth to power in part by insisting on the power of truth. Yet in the era of mass migration, the power of truth is increasingly under fire, so while Reyna Grande can cultivate common ground with other Mexicans, and while Javier Zamora can highlight the heritage of his fellow Salvadorans, no single person can speak for an impossibly diverse set of diasporas.

In a second strand, therefore, nonmigrant writers have investigated and/or invented scenarios that aim to illustrate deeper social dynamics. Whether citing facts or creating fictions, these writers have helped make migration more narratable. But ultimately, they have admitted (or, in Cummins's case, been forced to admit) that they cannot be the last word on gangs who rape and rob or on states that cage children. As a result of their respective limitations, then, both migrants and nonmigrants have struggled to represent the range of crimes committed not only under Donald Trump and George W. Bush, but also under Joe Biden, Barack Obama, and Bill Clinton.

And while the two groups of writers have managed to raise at least some of the sorely needed awareness, they have struggled to translate it into action: if Upton Sinclair famously "aimed at the public's heart, and by accident . . . hit it in the stomach," they have struggled to strike anything at all.

In this essay, I face the failures of awareness and action, examining how and why narratives about unauthorized migration have not changed—but might yet change—US democracy. Rather than the first two types of migrant imaginaries, I focus on a third strand, in which nonmigrants have stopped seeking to encapsulate the experience of migration and have started probing the problems inherent to such projects. This strand came to prominence in Yuri Herrera's *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* (2009), which uses phantasmagorical prose to explore migration's mythical dimensions. It then shifted into Marc Silver's *Who Is Dayani Cristal?* (2013), which analyzes its lead actor as he follows in a Honduran migrant's footsteps. It has culminated in *Lost Children Archive*, which tries to see—and see beyond—three limits of Latinx representation. Against a literary lineage that has prized complete portrayals of exemplary people and places, the novel demonstrates that completion and comprehension are often impossible. Similarly, amidst a culture industry that has come to the consensus that "representation matters," it explains why the category "Latinx" is usually inadequate to the diversity of migrant life. Finally, in a nation said to be a "representative democracy," it shows how divisions between citizens and migrants are untenable. While theorizing these limits, *Lost Children Archive* does not propound a particular political agenda: it considers the conditions under which such an agenda might become widely communicable. Replacing self-assurance with self-awareness, the novel lays foundations for futures in which citizens and migrants may meet on equal terms to expand those democracies that already exist and dream the democracies that might yet be.

1

Tell Me How It Ends and *Lost Children Archive* have all the trappings of US road literature—the dingy diners and cheap motels, the crackling radios and tattered maps. By gesturing toward this genre, the two texts highlight how their privileged protagonists differ from the racialized and proletarianized peoples who have traversed the US–Mexico borderlands since the War of 1846–48.[4] If we follow Mae Ngai's instructive point that these peoples have been both a "social reality and a legal impossibility" (4), we can break their story into four stages, each of which pairs a period of capitalist

attraction with one of state-sponsored repulsion. During the Gold Rush, migrants from as far as away as Chile and China provided much-needed labor, but once they were outnumbered by white miners, they faced various forms of violence. In the 1910s and 1920s, Mexicans fleeing their country's revolution fueled the borderlands' burgeoning agribusinesses, but in the 1930s many were deported to open jobs for Okies. At midcentury, the Bracero Program offered Mexicans exploitative work contracts in the US, and in the 1960s and 1970s, the system Ana Raquel Minian calls "circular migration" allowed movement between the two countries; however, in 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act turned the US into a "Jaula de Oro" (Cage of Gold) migrants were loath to leave. Finally, in the 1980s, US-sponsored civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala created millions of refugees, and in the 1990s, NAFTA's effects in Mexico created millions more; in response, federal agencies militarized San Diego–Tijuana, El Paso–Ciudad Juárez, and other populated areas, thereby forcing migrants to try crossing—and die crossing—the desert.[5]

Since *Tell Me How It Ends* and *Lost Children Archive* center this contemporary context, it is worth distinguishing that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, US elites dreamt of making the borderlands bloom, but in 1994, they reimagined the region as what Jason De León calls a "land of open graves." That year, federal agencies formalized "Prevention Through Deterrence," a policy whose stated aim was to "deter" migrants from leaving Mexico but whose actual effect was to displace migration into deadly environments. As these agencies leveraged the attacks of September 11 to spend billions of dollars on infrastructure, they made it so hard to cross the border that many migrants turned to smugglers. In conjunction with cartels that could operate with impunity after the escalation of the drug war in 2006, these smugglers created the "arterial border"—Wendy Vogt's term for the "highways, train routes, and network of shelters that traverse [Mexico] like arteries" (8), making up "a multilayered migration industry" (5). Intensifying the international border, this arterial border has taken on an all too predictable and all but incomprehensible brutality. Each year, global climate change and regional gang violence force hundreds of thousands to flee Central America. Yet, against the twinned borders, these refugees have little chance at finding refuge. Even if they make it through Mexico by riding atop the train they call La Bestia (The Beast), and even if they make it into the US by walking through scorching sun and 110-degree heat, they still encounter a government that denies them due process: under Operation Streamline, for instance, as many as 70 such refugees can be prosecuted simultaneously for the crime of seeking safety.

Insofar as *Tell Me How It Ends* is indeed "an essay," it is unsurprising that it illuminates the borderlands by furnishing readers with facts: among other things, it specifies the number of hours migrants can be held in cold cells known as "iceboxes" (up to 72) and the number of days they are allotted for starting asylum applications under the post-2014 "priority juvenile docket" (just 21). Although *Lost Children Archive* includes much of the same information, it is far more focused on ventriloquizing "voices," which in Mikhail Bakhtin's framework are "forms for conceptualizing the world in words . . . each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values" (291–2). Like the novels Bakhtin analyzed, *Lost Children Archive* metabolizes "a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems" (288), from generalizable "speech genres" (the mass media's sensationalism, the CBP's heartless legalese) to specific speech acts (David Bowie's "Space Oddity" [1969] or Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* [1899]). Unlike most of its predecessors, *Lost Children Archive* interrupts its narrators (the woman for pages 1–186 and 294–316, and the boy for 187–293 and 317–350) to shift into stand-alone sections, 15 of which reproduce chapters from an otherwise nonexistent book entitled *Elegies for Lost Children*, and seven of which list the contents of "banker's boxes" the family members fill with "letters, maps, photographs," and other media (23). In both respects, therefore, *Lost Children Archive* confirms Bakhtin's claim that "[t]he novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types . . . and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (262).[6]

To understand how *Lost Children Archive* uses its "voices," we can begin by reading another of the female narrator's metafictional meditations: "The story I have to record is not the story of the children who arrive, those who finally make it to their destinations and can tell their own story"; rather, it is "the one of the children who are missing, those whose voices can no longer be heard because they are, possibly forever, lost." Here the female narrator solidifies the shift in migrant imaginaries, and as she acknowledges that currently and formerly undocumented writers are "tell[ing] their own [stories]," she argues that nonmigrant writers "need" to do something different. Since she's "not sure how [she'll] do it" (146), the narrator takes her cue from "the boy and the girl," who call "child refugees . . . lost children." Adopting this term, the narrator sometimes resorts to an oracular style: "[T]hey are lost children. They are children who have lost the right to a childhood" (75). But for the most part, she subordinates her individual "voice" to the types of collective conversations that Bakhtin traces through novels: recognizing that countless "children" may "no longer be heard" because they have been "lost" to MS-13 attacks in Mexico or CBP raids in

the US, she still insists that nonmigrant writers must do their best to listen.

Although the narrator does not speak for Luiselli, she still articulates *Lost Children Archive*'s principal projects. With its many "voices," the novel ultimately explores some of the largest limits to democracy and Latinidad. At the outset, it examines three much more specific limits of (non)fictional narratives.

The first of these limits lies in the way that nonmigrants research migrants. Since Luiselli holds a PhD in Comparative Literature, her novel can portray the research process with comic precision. But even as it plays parodically with texts like "[Columbia University Professor] Brent Hayes Edwards's Working Bibliography" (252), *Lost Children Archive* undertakes a serious critique of the husband/father's "inventory of echoes." As narrators, the woman and the boy steer this project in interesting directions, linking the "removal" of Apaches in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s, to the "removal" of Indigenous and mixed-race migrants in the 2000s and 2010s (133, 270). In contrast, the husband/father typifies the settler scholars who disrespect Native cultures—and, by extension, the nonmigrant writers who misrepresent migrant communities. At a time when over 100,000 Apaches are enrolled eight federally recognized tribes, the husband/father still speaks in the "voice" of salvage anthropology, so when his son asks, "Why Apaches?," he says, "they were the last of something" (25). In his mistaken belief that Apacheria (a misspelling of "Apachería") is little more than a long-lost battlefield (not a site of ongoing conflict), he ignores the many books by Apaches, their close collaborators, and/or professional scholars, instead filling his "boxes" with the work of amateur military historian Edwin R. Sweeney. While conducting this shoddy research, he invents an "Apache game" in which settler "speech genres" drown out Indigenous "voices"—and in which "the US settler state" appropriates "a flattened vision of Indigenous life" (Stuelke 56).

If the husband/father highlights the limits of academic and artistic research, the rest of *Lost Children Archive* points to problems with (non)fictional narration. In many passages, the novel comments self-consciously on the US media's "Manichean representation of the world: patriots versus illegal aliens" (124). Even more often, the novel lets these media speak for themselves. "Bringing different languages into contact with one another" (Bakhtin 361), it interpolates newspaper articles (19–20, 50–51, 124) and radio broadcasts (19–20, 73, 175) that reduce migrants to racist clichés. Then, anticipating Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado's contention, it shows how nonmigrants' accounts of migration frequently end up "commodifying Mexico."

Like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *The Jungle*, most of these texts revolve around characters who stand in for larger communities: in the same way that the widely respected *Enrique's Journey* (2006) treats its eponymous protagonist as a perspective on Hondurans, the much-maligned *American Dirt* uses the fictional Lydia to promote sympathy with Mexicans. At times, *Lost Children Archive* appears to adopt this approach, so in New York, the female narrator befriends a migrant named Manuela, and during the road trip, she tries to get Manuela's daughters released from CBP custody (113). Yet at the very moment another text would finalize its "fictional object of empathy" (Sánchez Prado 379), *Lost Children Archive* takes a terrifying turn, disclosing that Manuela's "daughters had been found in the desert, but they weren't alive anymore" (349). With this brutal postmortem, Luiselli's novel makes it clear that exposés of unauthorized migration can distort the "children who are missing." Thus, the novel forces readers to recognize that narrative clarity is often impossible. Instead of sensationalizing suffering, it leaves them with the mute reality of death.[7]

As *Lost Children Archive* reckons with the risks of (mis)information and (mis)representation, it joins debates about the politics of publishing. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), Jürgen Habermas explained how novels and newspapers allowed eighteenth- and nineteenth-century publics to redefine themselves through "rational-critical debate" (1–56); he then argued that electronic media offered twentieth-century elites new ways of manipulating the masses, so that these media might lead to "refeudalization" (181–235). Since Habermas started his career at the peak of democracy's prestige, his ideas seemed overly pessimistic, but now that midcentury media have given way to Trump's tweets and other (anti)social media, predictions of feudalism, as opposed to fascism, seem cheerily optimistic.

In this context, *Lost Children Archive* articulates one last argument against making migrants into "material for media consumption" (96). In asking, "What for? So that others can listen to them and feel—pity? Feel—rage?," it consolidates a critique of what De León terms "immigration pornography" (5). Then, by adding that "no one decides to not go to work and start a hunger strike after listening to the radio in the morning" (96), it reveals a new stage in what Habermas calls society's "structural transformation." In *Lost Children Archive*, electronic media and (anti)social media erode the public sphere, even as they also proliferate mesmerizing, if mundane, private pleasures. Where Habermas saw "rational-critical subjects," Luiselli thus sees irrational and uncritical "[p]eople reading, sleeping, fucking, crying, watching television. People watching the news or reality shows, or perhaps just watching over

their lives." In this media environment, smart phones make ignorant readers, while the "news" is just another "reality show" (113). Across the Sonoran Desert, migrants die of dehydration; the rest of us watch the weather in our air-conditioned homes.

2

Mark McGurl has shown how creative writing programs press minoritized students to "find their voice." McGurl's argument applies to many migrants—at the University of Michigan, Marcelo Hernandez Castillo crafted poetry and prose about leaving Mexico—and nonmigrants—at the University of Arizona, Cantú honed stories about working in the CBP. But it does not hold for Luiselli, who resists searching for a singular "voice" (in McGurl's sense) so she can play with a "polyphony" of conflicting "voices" (in Bakhtin's sense). Through this strategy, Luiselli explains why narratives of unauthorized migration have often struggled to raise cultural awareness and overwhelmingly failed to produce political change. More ambitiously—and, perhaps as a result, more ambiguously—she convenes conversations about how such narratives might explode (rather than expand) democracy and Latinidad.

So as *Lost Children Archive* explores the limits of democratic novels, it advances arguments about democracy itself. In one passage, it laments how

> [n]o one thinks of the children arriving here and now as refugees of a hemispheric war that extends . . . into the southern US and northern Mexican deserts . . . across the Mexican sierras [and] forests . . . into Guatemala, into El Salvador, and all the way to the Celaque Mountains in Honduras." (51)

With this hemispheric perspective, *Lost Children Archive* undermines Benedict Anderson's well-known account of nations as "limited," describing instead how democratic societies exploit but then efface imperial peripheries. In so doing, the novel questions the commonsense claim that democracies are representative. Blending the best elements of the husband/father's sound project with a range of racialized literatures, *Lost Children Archive* suggests that the US has never truly represented "the people"; since it was carved out of stolen land and crafted through unfree labor, the nation has never treated Natives, Latinxs, Blacks, and Asians as full citizens. At the same time, *Lost Children Archive* shows how the US has often made these very peoples unrepresentable: whereas it once sent scalping

gangs after Indigenous people and lynch mobs after Black people, it now orders the CBP to terrorize Latinxs.

In making these arguments, *Lost Children Archive* also analyzes the limits of Latinidad. Much as it reveals rifts among political parts and wholes (are we *really* free to elect our representatives?), the novel critiques claims about marginalized communities in/and mass media (is it *actually* true that representation matters?). When exposés of migration act as if a single subject or small group can stand in for all migrants, they reinforce a widespread tendency to typologize Latinxs: thus, when Nazario explains why she chose Enrique over the many other "boys" she "scoped out," she ignores their qualitative differences to imagine a quantitatively "average child" (xviii). Taking issue with this tendency, *Lost Children Archive* uses what Valentina Montero Román calls "immigrant maximalism," insofar as it shows how conflicting constructions of race, Indigeneity, gender, and sexuality create "incommensura[ble]" Latinidades (186).

Consider the complex ways the novel characterizes the boy and the girl. From its first sentence (in which the female narrator sees these two sleeping with "[m]ouths open to the sun" [5]) to its last (in which the one reassures the other that if she ever "feel[s] lost" she can "remember [she's] not" [350]), *Lost Children Archive* imbues its youngest protagonists with an innocence all but inaccessible to child migrants. However, in making this innocence cherubic ("in their beds, they all sound warm and vulnerable, like a pack of sleeping wolves" [43]) and comedic ("the boy snored like a drunk man, and the girl's body released long, sonorous farts" [10]), *Lost Children Archive* does not simply repeat the now-common refrain that Latinidad misrepresents marginalized peoples. In addition, it proves that the catch-all category misrepresents privileged ones. By combining these critiques, Luiselli strengthens a growing sense that Latinidad "washes over . . . the struggles of those it supposedly incorporates" (Rodríguez 210).[8] And precisely because it perceives the problem with *x*-ing out differences among Latinxs, *Lost Children Archive* can become an *x*-ing point for dialogues among migrants and nonmigrants. Like the "X storehouse" that Claudia Milian fills with "X-rays," "Dos Equis lagers," and "other things" (10–11), the novel can leverage the limits of Latinx representation to open "limitless" possibilities (27).

To appreciate how Luiselli turns reductive *x*-ing outs into productive *x*-ing points, recall a scene from *Tell Me How It Ends* (23–24) that reappears in *Lost Children Archive* (129–130). In both books, the protagonists meet a CBP agent who is skeptical that they drove "all the way" to the borderlands "for *the inspiration*." In both books, they "know better than to contradict anyone who carries a

badge and a gun" and respond, "Yes, sir." Finally, in *Tell Me How It Ends*, they think to themselves that they "do not find inspiration here, but [they] find a country as beautiful as it is broken, and [they] are somehow now part of it, so [they] are also broken with it" (24). In this scene, the protagonists' ability to pass safely through CBP checkpoints creates an "incommensurability" with Latinxs who lack proper "passports." At the same time, their words about "a country as beautiful as it is broken" evokes a moment in a memoir of unauthorized migration: early in *The Distance Between Us* (2012), Reyna Grande remembers Mexico as "a place of broken beauty" (65); later, she shares her sister's sense of the US as "some kind of Hell in [a] strange place of broken beauty" (262); throughout, she sees "broken heart[s]" (116, 121, 261), "broken promises" (78), "broken relationships" (207), "broken [bones]" (43, 106, 253, 254, 255), "broken [objects]" (74, 79, 109, 181), "broken laws" (165), "broken up families" (144, 242), and other "broken" things. Expanding on Grande's "broken" imagery, Luiselli shows that acknowledging "incommensurability" need not stop the search for intimacy—and more abstractly, that recognizing "the limits of Latinx representation" need not preclude experiments in limitless reimagination.

Taking a term from *Lost Children Archive*'s "lexicon," I hear some of these experiments as "echoes." And since Luiselli's protagonists are sound artists, I will characterize the "echoes" in the context of a seminal piece of sound art: "I Am Sitting in a Room" (1969), in which Alvin Lucier explains that he is "recording the sound of his speaking voice and . . . play[ing] it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of [his] speech . . . is destroyed." Much as Lucier's piece invites listeners to investigate their sonic environments, Luiselli's novel encourages readers to wrestle with their social milieus. To some extent, both media emphasize site-specificity: if the former's increasingly intense "frequencies" demonstrate that Lucier is "sitting in a room different from the one [listeners] are in now," then the latter's progressively more problematic sound projects force readers to recognize how they differ from child migrants. But in the end, both media transmute specificity into generalizability: the former blends human signals and nonhuman noises in shimmering wall of sound, while the latter situates privileged protagonists and "lost children" in a single social world.

As much as anything else, this world consists of great gulfs, for in contrast to many novels in/of democracies, *Lost Children Archive* insists that sympathetic identification is not always possible. Precisely because it comprehends these gulfs, Luiselli's novel can listen for the resulting echoes—for the similarities that simultaneously divide and define migrants and nonmigrants. Sometimes, these

similarities are superficial, as when the boy likens himself to Manuela's children. Other times, the similarities are serious, as in the way both the mother and Manuela perceive Latinidad's problems. At all times, the similarities mark both presences and absences, the "deeper echoes of the things that were once there and were no longer" (326). Over the course of "I Am Sitting in a Room," the "sound of [Lucier's] speaking voice" becomes both more compelling and less coherent; likewise, in *Lost Children Archive*, the echoing experiences of migrants and nonmigrants speak loudest when they are hardest to hear.

3

The warrant for this special issue initially evoked a single, unambiguous story: while US democracy is increasingly vulnerable to various forms of violence (from the January 6 insurrection to the decades-long epidemic of police murder), it is also remarkably resilient (as shown in social movements like Black Lives Matter and #NODAPL). But rereading *Lost Children Archive*, this dual vulnerability and resiliency took on new meanings. Perhaps US democracy became resilient by pairing beautiful fantasies with brutal realities, like the dispossession of Natives, the enslavement of Blacks, and the exploitation of Latinxs. Perhaps US democracy remained resilient by preaching "inalienable rights" while also producing "illegal aliens." And perhaps US democracy now represents "the people" in part by perpetrating unrepresentable violence. I began this essay, therefore, in the belief that what Raymond Williams might call the "dominant" version of US democracy is resilient due to and not despite the violent insurrectionists, the violent police, and their enablers. And while writing about this dominant democracy, I felt the full force of Anderson's argument that "deep, horizontal comradeship . . . makes it possible . . . for so many millions of people" to "kill" and "die" (7).

As I complete my essay, I know that *Lost Children Archive* reveals the dominant version of US democracy in all its horrifying resilience—in its deep determination to defend citizens by destroying migrants, or in its ongoing project of fighting for freedom by caging children. But to quote Williams, I also know that "no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention" (125), and ultimately, that no dominant democracy ever eliminates all "emergent" alternatives. Facing both the fortified border and our fracturing migrant imaginaries, *Lost Children Archive* reenergizes the novel in/of democracy by reckoning with its limits. Although it acknowledges that currently

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and formerly undocumented writers are "tell[ing] their own [stories]," it submits that other writers have often failed to represent the borderlands fully. Complicating easy equivalences between social position and literary production, it then explains why both migrants and nonmigrants are failing to reduce—or even rally publics around—deportations and deaths. Along with *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo*, *Who Is Dayani Cristal?*, and other new nonmigrant media, *Lost Children Archive* thus stops trying to have the last word and starts cultivating deeply democratic (and deeply Bakhtinian) dialogues. Of course, it only incorporates so many "voices" and finally leaves us with little more than "echoes." But whereas many novels have enabled their readers to feel like they lived in democracies, *Lost Children Archive* confronts us with other ways of imagining and institutionalizing political life—and political death.

Ultimately, *Lost Children Archive* exposes the novel's many problems so that it can experiment with the remaining possibilities. In a passage that epitomizes this project, the female narrator observes that the boy had "listened to things, looked at them—really looked, focused, pondered—and little by little, his mind had arranged all the chaos around [the family] into a world" (185). When he becomes the narrator, he introduces readers to a version of the "lost children" at once hopelessly inaccurate and endlessly illuminating. Rather than translating any of his world into my own terms, I suggest that you explore it for yourself. You may find something other than the novel, something other than Latinidad, and something other than democracy.

Notes

1. This is an oversimplification. Although Luiselli began by writing a short version of *Tell Me How It Ends* for *Freeman's* (2016), she then rewrote it as *Los niños perdidos (Un ensayo en cuarenta preguntas)* (2016) before working with Lizzie Davis to translate it back into English (2017).

2. Luiselli's writing process plays a prominent role in both *Tell Me How It Ends* and *Lost Children Archive*. It also looms large in dozens of reviews and the first few academic analyses, such as Milian (35–56), Román, Stuelke, and David James, "Listening to the Refugee: Valeria Luiselli's Sentimental Activism," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2021, pp. 390–417.

3. Here I engage with Anderson, Habermas, and other foundational thinkers who have assembled this account of novels and democracies. I also build on the contemporary scholars who collaborated on "Is the Novel Democratic?," a special issue of *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2014.

4. As Stuelke shows, *Lost Children Archive* also "comments on and negates the husband's desire to reenact *On the Road*'s white masculine frontier politics" (57).

5. To break borderlands history into these four stages, I am drawing on far more sources than I can cite. In addition to Ngai and Minian, these include Vogt, De León, and Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (U of California P, 2010).

6. In my interpretation, *Lost Children Archive* draws on Bakhtin's beloved techniques to comment *on* democracy, but, following Nancy Ruttenburg, it may also obtain that such techniques can become their own experiments *in* democracy. See Ruttenburg, "Introduction: Is the Novel Democratic?," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2014.

7. I share James's sense that *Lost Children Archive* undertakes "a self-conscious examination of the politics of compassion," but I disagree that it "repurposes sentimental engagement" (391).

8. I became inspired to riff on "*x*-ing" while rereading both this article and Milian's *LatinX*.

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