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Extinction, Rememory and the Deadly Work of Capitalism in Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*

There are things that can only be understood retrospectively, when many years have passed and the story has ended. In the meantime, while the story continues, the only thing to do is tell it over and over again as it develops, bifurcates, knots around itself. And it must be told, because before anything can be understood, it has to be narrated many times, in many different words and from many different angles, by many different minds.
(Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*)

Wherever the Europeans had trod, death seems to pursue the aboriginal.
We may look to the wide extent of the Americas, Polynesia,
the Cape of Good Hope, and Australia, and we find the same result.
(Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle*)

Valeria Luiselli's 2019 novel, *Lost Children Archive*, attends to the inherited repressions, silences, and erasures around the official chronicling of the current migrant and refugee crisis on the Southwestern border between Mexico and the US and addresses these topics in original narrative format by creating a literary space of personal "re-memory" that situates that specific crisis in the longer, colonial geopolitical history of the United States. Resonating in the novel, fictional and nonfictional events, real and imagined books, actual and invented case studies, documents, maps, polaroids, soundtracks, audiobooks, recorded voices, radio-news, immaterial suggestions and literary citations engender a network of references out of which the novel's archive and its narrative lining emerge, generating a polymorphous, multi-genre, meta-narrative structure that organizes and keeps together multiple stories. Each story departs from the

main frame and develops around one or more thematic clusters, unfolding distinct tales by mixing different analogic media.

This strategy, I claim, suggests that at least one of the novel's projects is to both generate and collect, gather together and consign to posterity its own posthumous archive of "old" narrative techniques for connecting stories about the past that yield no archival record. By the same act and for purposes both aesthetic and ethical, the novel also attempts to retrieve the echoes of a past silenced by colonial violence in order to disclose its impact on today's patterns of human dislocation on the American continent, and to capture the soundscapes of the dead in the space they once inhabited "through their reverberations" in today's landscapes, in order to make their "absence audible" (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 98). By picking through the loom of a family plot that weaves together History and stories and reveals the entanglements of the past in the present – of the protagonists, of the nation, and of the environment – Luiselli not only probes the possibilities and limits of narrative consistency and history writing vis-à-vis the overlapping of multiple, irreducible temporalities engendered by the so-called "Columbian Exchange": she also implicitly raises the question of the contemporary value of literature as a technology for the production of fictional knowledge against the background of a dominant algorithmic or numerical *reason* that relies on the production and management of data for educational, governmental and societal purposes. I contend that the conspicuous investment the novel makes on old media in the context of the contemporary hegemony of digital communication and information systems should be understood – and this is my second claim – as the main index of the novel's discourse on literary narrative and on the status of the novel as a form vis-à-vis the proliferation of digital mediality in the twenty-first century. Engaging narratively what Julietta Singh calls the "ghost archive" – that unidentified "everything that keeps affecting us and affecting others through us" (96) while being forever out of reach – the novel institutes a conversation with many pasts that resists narrative closure, highlights the contested character of history, and rejects reductive forms of knowledge exclusively based on documents, monuments and data retrieval. In so doing, it underscores the irreducibility of phenomena as complex and interconnected as past colonial violence and contemporary

migration into the US to data-based forms of knowledge on which "algorithms of oppression" depend (McCarrol 708), and affirms instead the epistemological value performed by the literary imagination, and particularly through what Saidiya Hartman has called, in a different context, a "recombinant narrative" (12).[1]

Finally, the novel engages the contemporary migrant refugee crisis on the US-Mexico border as the long-term effect of settler colonialism at home and imperialist politics abroad, framing this double-faceted issue by connecting present and past detentions and deportations of native populations from the national archive. While, in the present, the novel incorporates official and fictional accounts of the removal of unaccompanied "alien" children who enter the United States across the Arizona-Mexico border by traversing the Sonora Desert,[2] its focus on the past is directed to the nineteenth-century removal of native populations from their land by the US Government. In this connection, I argue, the narrative centrality of the story of Geronimo and the deportation of Chiricahuas, "the last Apache leaders of the last free peoples on the American continent" (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 21), does not only powerfully work to discount and dismantle the myth of freedom as foundational to the ideology of the American experience; it also mirrors the pattern of incarceration, deportation, and death to which Indigenous populations on the American continent and in the US are still subjected.[3]

The continuous recursions the novel makes into native history suggest – and this is my final claim – that the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their ancestral land, and the ensuing record of dislocation and extinction forced upon them, is positioned as the foundational crime of conquest and colonization in its specific North American declination. The novel crucially frames such crimes as paradigmatic of the nation building process and as a parable of capitalist modernity in its deadly drive to accumulate by accelerating extinction at an unprecedented human-made rate.[4] This logic entered the continent with the so called "Columbian Exchange," simultaneously introducing early forms of colonial extractivism, land dispossession, and slavery, and a mode of production that, together with "the destruction of life-enabling commons in ancestral territories on the North American continent," was responsible for "an unprecedented

disruption and death of native populations and ecosystems" (Broswimmer 60). By framing the experience of loss on the geopolitical and affective terrain in which family history and colonial history stratify and sediment, the novel binds capitalism's narrative of modernity to its specific US declination, insisting on its racist, genocidal, depletive growth, thus prompting a reflection on capitalism's endless drive to accumulation as not only productive, but also – to use Justin McBrien's term – *necrotic* (116).[5]

By addressing the relation between past and present, older and younger storytellers, and original enunciation and citation in the form of re-enactment, the novel posits narrative as a technology for metabolizing the past through the ongoing iteration of previous stories by later ones, in a circuit of repetition without a terminal point where re-memory may trigger revision. In this sense, it establishes a recursive lexicon, a network of parallelisms, and a dense citational apparatus that resonates and bounces back and forth across several media, shaping the memory-scape of the novel as a claustrophobic, mirror-like *archive* suggestive of a view of history as a circuit of re-enactment, and of a notion of the historical "unconscious" as mediatic – or, in other words, as extraneous to personal, Oedipal conflicts and internal to an ecology of media. Thus, while the aim of using literature to expose the colonial legacy ingrained in the current discourse of illegal migrant children from the South as "disposable life" remains central to *Lost Children Archive*, no less important to the novel is a display of the hypermediality that constitutes not only the novel itself but its very relation to documentability, historical memory and political accountability.

Storytelling/Story Retelling

Lost Children Archive is the fictional account of the cross-country journey undertaken by a family of four unnamed characters across the US, from New York to Arizona. In New York, wife and husband work on projects based on presenting and documenting sound: the mother records vanishing languages and volunteers as translator for asylum-seekers' unaccompanied migrant children; the father works as a sound catcher, "sampling echoes, winds and birds" in the city sonicscape (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 99). The

husband/father embarks on the trip to pursue a project he himself defines as "an inventory of echoes" (21), a documentary soundscape about "the ghosts of Geronimo and the last Apaches" that will take him to the Chiricahua Mountains, in "the heart of Apacheria," where "the last free peoples on the entire American continent lived before they had to surrender to the white eyes" (26). The wife/mother follows along but is headed South in order to locate the daughters of Manuela, a Mexican woman she had met in New York and whose two migrant children are held in a migration detention facility somewhere in Arizona after having crossed the desert and the border.

Travelling with the family is a load of seven boxes containing "personal" items that each member of the family carries with them: "our archive – though it's optimistic to call our collected mess an archive – plus the empty boxes for the children's future archive" (42). The boxes host the rich bibliography Luiselli incorporates in the novel and provide the main narrative device around which the storytelling is organized; the other two being Ella Camposanto's *Elegies for the Lost Children*, the little book the mother reads to herself and to her son during the family trip, and a polaroid camera that the boy uses to create his own archive for the future.

The first part of the journey, told by the wife/mother, unfolds across the American landscape as the family navigates through a geography of decadent, abandoned, empty places that still preserve traces of their past, visiting national mythological landmarks, historical sites, and Indigenous territories. As the travelers approach the Southwest and get closer to their final destinations – the Apacheria and Echo Canyon (the father) and the Arizona Artesia Airport whence the UAC (Unaccompanied Alien Children) are deported back to their home countries (the mother) – the scenery changes dramatically, turning into an America, "bony, desolate and factual" (77). The second half of the novel starts where the first half ends, but instead of moving forward, it moves in circles and backward. Almost entirely told by the son to his little sister, it re-enacts the first section and mirrors it. Mixing factual and fictional registers, it tells the story of the brother and sister's escape into the desert, headed to *Echo Canyon* in search of Manuela's daughters and of the "lost children" from Camposanto's *Elegies for the Lost Children*. At the end of the novel the family is split: mother and

daughter fly back to New York, while father and son stay in the Southwest; we are informed that Manuela's daughters are found dead, and the boy's storytelling is revealed to be a recording he made on his mother's tape recorder in order to leave for his sister in the future a documentation, an account, and a story of the last time they were together as a family and of their experience as lost children.

If the aim of *Archive of Lost Children* is to make memorable in the present what has disappeared from historical accounts, then its methodology is not simply revisionist, but re-memorist. Affections and memories that the past carries into the present in the form of phenomenological disturbances, such as ghosts, literary suggestions, impressions belong here. This methodology Toni Morrison famously called "rememory": "Rememory as in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past" (324); rememory is a recursive return to memory that shapes both the narrative and its archival consciousness. Nested in the storytelling of both narrators, other stories circulate, among which the father's stories about Geronimo and the Chiricahua Apaches fulfill a crucial function, since they both supplement key information and exemplify a methodology of rememory in a non-linguistic medium. Rememory is a strategy of re-enactment, and by definition entails a creative work of the imagination performed here in opposition to the linearity of a discourse of history organized as data retrieval and management. It is a poetic act motivated by rethinking the past in the present from an archive that, in the case of the deported Chiricahua, works, to borrow from Hartman, as "a death sentence, a tomb" (2) that opens no window on the life of the missing and the disappeared. Historical understanding, as the mother's muses, requires, instead, "some kind of reenactment of the past, in its small, outward-branching, and often terrifying possibilities" (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 156). Hence her comments on her husband's project:

> I think I finally begun to understand. I think his plan is to record the sounds that now, in the present, travel through some of the same spaces where Geronimo and his people, in the past, once moved, walked, spoke, sang. He's somehow trying to capture their past presence in the world, and making it audible, despite their current absence, by sampling any echoes that still reverberate of them. When a bird sings or wind blows through the branches

> of cedars in the cemetery where Geronimo was buried, that bird and those branches illuminate an area of a map, a soundscape, in which Geronimo once was. The inventory of echoes was not a collection of sounds that have been lost – such a thing would in fact be impossible – but rather one of sounds that were present in the time of recording and that, when we listen to them, remind us of the ones that are lost. (141)

Both narrators engage with the problem of how to achieve consistency and readability from narrative fragments, explicitly giving voice to – the problem of how to navigate the gap between history, stories and archive, how to negotiate between aesthetic and documentary functions – each in their proper register. For instance, the boy's hermeneutic concerns are cast specifically as the archival tension between order and disorder, between signification and chaos, given that time and technology – reading – may obfuscate the logic of his carefully crafted archive. He frames this problematic concern in relation to the legacy he will leave to his little sister: "I thought about writing stuff down in a notebook for you to read one day, but you are a bad reader still, level A or B, still read everything backward or in a mess, and I have no idea when you'll finally learn to read properly, or if you ever will. So I decided to record sound instead. [...] So I made this recording and took all these pictures" (349).

The mother's pseudo-documentarian worries are focused, instead, on the principle of composition that organizes the scattered records of life and history toward meaning: "It comes to me that maybe, by shuffling around in my husband's boxes like this, once in a while, when he's not looking, and by trying to listen to all the sounds trapped in his archive, I might find a way into the exact story I need to document, the exact form it needs" (42). More directly, she is concerned about the relation between documenting and storytelling, and truth and meaning, and the proper way to inscribe the life of the "lost children" into a narrative that would not simply fix them once again as disposable life: "What does it mean to document something, an object, our lives, a story? I suppose that documenting things – through the lens of a camera, on paper, or with a sound recording device – is really only a way of contributing one more layer, something like soot, to all the things already sedimented in a collective understanding of the world" (55).[6] Finally, and more extensively, the mother's obsession with the

relation between writing as a documentary technology and writing as art, or between information and literature, is exposed in all its entanglements and left unresolved:

> Aesthetic problem: why should a sound piece, or any other form of storytelling, for that matter, be a means to a specific end? [...] Ethical concern: And why would I even think that I can or should make art with someone else's suffering? [...] Constant concerns: Cultural appropriation, pissing all over someone else's toilet seat, who am I to tell this story, micromanaging identity politics, heavy-handedness, am I too angry, am I mentally colonized by Western-Saxon-white categories, 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)

That the boy's concerns read as a re-inscription of the mother's documentarian and aesthetic preoccupations, but with the distance and difference marked by age and expectations, fulfill the logic of re-enactment and iteration explicitly presented as the poetic program of the novel, and are consistent with the epistemological machine of the stories and of History. The novel brings into focus, as announced early in the text, the fact that "[w]e tell them all the stories we are able to remember. Always, if we miss a part, confuse a detail, or if they notice any minimal variation to the version they remember, they interrupt, correct us, and demand that the story be told once more, properly this time. So we rewind the tape in our minds and play it again from the beginning" (8).

Such a rigorously organized structure suggests that the novel itself is conceived of as its own archive, and this effect is reinforced both by the incorporation in the main fiction of the entire *corpus* of polaroids taken by the boy along the journey and eventually stored in box #7, and by Ella Camposanto's *Elegies for the Lost Children,* a fiction within the fiction presented, elegy by elegy, as an allegory of reading, since reading here literally both "adds" something to writing – "a plenitude enriching another plenitude" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 145) – and supplements it. Also, and crucially, *Elegies* embodies Luiselli's literary and ethical response to the methodological question that the novel raises about the difference between information and literature, since it is the device that allows the author to bypass the risk of cultural appropriation by displacing the representation of

Manuela's lost children through the incorporation/invention of the children of the *Elegies* in their full, fictive reality as children. As the narrator puts it:

> The story I need to document is not that of the children in immigration courts [...] I am still not sure how I'll do it, but the story I need to tell is the one of the children who are missing, those whose voices can no longer be heard because they are, possibly forever, lost. Perhaps, like my husband, I am also chasing ghosts and echoes. Except mine are not in history books, and not in cemeteries. Where are, they – the lost children? And where are Manuela's two girls? [...] If I'm going to find anything, anyone, if I'm going to tell their story, I need to start looking somewhere else. (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 146)

Camposanto's *Elegies* are claimed to be based on the historical Children's Crusade involving tens of thousands of children who travelled alone across Europe in 1212. In this version, however, the crusade takes place "in what seems like a not-so-distant future in a region that can possibly be mapped back to North Africa, the Middle East, and southern Europe, or to Central and North America" (139). *Elegies* is the main "infra-text" of the novel. Incorporated in *Lost Children*'s multiple stories, it connects narrative segments by giving rise to a meta-historical "structure of replacements (*suppléances*) such that all presences will be supplements substituted for the absent origin, and all differences, within the system of presence, will be the irreducible effect of what remains *epekeina tes ousisa* (beyond beingness or presence)" (Derrida, *Dissemination* 167). The centrality of reading to the making of writing is established by placing *Elegies* as the central object of the reading/writing exchange between mother and son. The scene of reading is performed in the first part by the mother, who reads the little book first to herself and then to the boy, and in the second part it is re-enacted by the son, who reads first to himself and then to his little sister. As the boy recalls: "I was in control of the situation and proud to be able to follow a map as well as Mama did. Then I asked you if you wanted me to read you a bit from the story of the lost children, both because I really wanted to read to you but because I wanted to know what came next in the story" (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 263).

So framed, the invented book requires being seen as the fictional narrative that both sets the tone of the novel as elegiac and literalizes the

act of reading as a supplement to writing, as though to suggest that the force of the written word is a political and philosophical question in that it regards the very condition of what is written as a technology already open to and marked by contradictions and possibilities. Referring to the state of writing as "all that gives rise to an inscription" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 9), the logic of the supplement allows for the re-inscription of what is lost to the record of history in/through the work of rememory. Unscripted in maps, without place in the tomb of the historical archives, the disappeared are returned in this novel to shake the complacency of our present. The work of rememory/reenactment that connects the dots between the events of the present and the long history of US settler colonialism and imperialism, and both to the history of Atlantic capitalism, is the aesthetic and political task the documentarian mother-narrator sets for herself:

> No one thinks of the 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 US 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. No one thinks of those children as consequences of a historical war that goes back decades. (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 50-51)

By incorporating a novel within the novel and assigning it such centrality in the thematic and structural *mise-en-abyme* of the "main" novel and of its theoretical and poetic claims, Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* should be seen as an aesthetic-political statement about the full metabolization of twentieth-century literary theory in the twenty-first-century meta-historical novel, as the mother's states in one of her first, intimate encounters with *Elegies*:

> I read those first lines once, then twice – both times getting a little lost in the words and syntax. So I flip back a few pages, to the editor's foreword, which I'd left unfinished. I read the rest of the foreword, rushing over some parts and zooming in on some details here and there: the book is written in a series of numbered fragments, sixteen in total; each fragment is called an "elegy," and each elegy is partly composed using a series of quotes. Throughout the book, these quotes are borrowed from different writers. They are either

> "freely translated" by the author or "recombined" to the point that some are not traceable back to their original versions. In this first English edition (published in 2014), the translator has decided to translate all borrowed quotes directly from the author's Italian and not from the original sources. Once I reach the end of the foreword, I reread the first elegy to myself again, and then begin reading the second one, out loud and into my recorder. (143)

Bridging the story of Manuela's lost children with the radio news reports about the lost migrant children, the accounts and the photo of the Orphan Trains, the photo of "Geronimo and fellow prisoners on their way to Florida, September 10, 1886," *Elegies* surfaces as the creative filter through which events of the past are literally rememoried into the plot of *Lost Children Archive* as it unfolds to the end of the first part and is mirrored in the second, when brother and sister become "the lost children" by re-enacting the stories heard and by mirroring – in their own story – the stories of the seven children of the *Elegies*, until, eventually, the two narrative threads merge.

Lost Children Archive literalizes the notion of language as a technology for the production, storage, and reproduction of experience and the recursive articulations of memories and writings. It should be seen as a major contemporary literary work in which the technical, cognitive, social, and philosophical conditions of mass-mediality are fully presupposed and self-reflexively embodied as the novel's material infrastructure and "natural" environment. The novel's exposure of the media system on which it relies, of the conditions of signification it opens, and of the very possibilities of narrativity it defines is – in and of itself – a declaration that the narrative ecology of the novel as a form has always already been a media ecology in itself. In this connection, the novel can be seen as a sort of echo chamber in which narratives of all kind resonate ghost-like, flattening the difference between recorded and unrecorded voices, thereby validating the aesthetic project of the father as an echo-chaser. The novel can be seen – in a reversed synecdochic relation – as a kind of metaphoric Echo Canyon amplifying, re-enacting and recombining voices and signs from irreducible time-frames. As the son admits in the stream-of-consciousness section of his tale, when the pronominal voice shifts from second to first person:

> I wondered if we were hearing the sound of all the dead in the desert all the bones there, and remembered that time Papa had read us a story about a body some people found in a field and just left there, and the body in that story had got stuck to some part of my brain and kept coming back to me, because stories can do that, they stick in your head. (325)

The life story of Manuela's lost girls, together with the hundreds of stories of the migrant children broadcast by the radio, the elegies for the lost migrant children in Ella Camposanto's *Elegies* and the cemetery where the Apache native culture lies entombed, frame the novel's semantics of death, loss and disappearance further reinforced by its complex citational structure referred to a vast body of literature in which movement in space and time is bound to plots of death, catastrophe, violence, genocide and deportation. Together, Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* and the archive it engenders reverberate in the scene of American modernity as the scene of settler colonial violence and its long legacy. The literary macrotext that underlies Luiselli's novel brims with apocalyptic or dystopic stories featuring children as the signifiers of a dead end in human history, colonial violence and capitalism's deathmarch: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies,* whose incipits are played out over and over again in the family car, the father's story of the deportation of Geronimo and the extinction of the Apaches, the mother's story of the Abandoned Children of New York and the "Orphans Trains," the retrospective, singularized reconstruction of the nameless child, from his dusty remains soiling the mat of the Border Patrol station, all the way back to when he was alive in his village, to Camposanto's *Elegies for the Lost Children*, which is too close to our present to be offhandedly declassified as "fiction."

Disappearances: Relocations, Removals, Deportations

The same regressive disposition we have so far seen at work in the metafictional structure of the novel is also explicitly exposed in the novel's thematic engagement with its own archival commitments. In inscribing absences from the present and from the past, *Lost Children Archive* does

not only dwell on the tension between loss and preservation embodied by default in all archives; it also delivers several narratives of lost children, lost people, lost sounds, lost landscapes and lost species. In so doing, it encourages a wider investigation into the meaning of getting terminally lost, interrogating our conceptual preparedness for the prospect of extinction, to what it means to disappear as a species, to dis-imagine the future. By asking the question about disappearing and archiving, and by attending to the echoes and traces lost life leaves in its wake, the novel – I contend – leads to a consideration of the relation between disappearance, death and extinction as personal and collective facts, as events affecting us both as individuals in societies and as a species among other species. The novel works through this question by deconstructing the dichotomy between natives and aliens on which not only the definition of ab-original species and culture depend, but on which US citizenship and its derivate attribution of institutional status (refugee, migrant, illegal) are based. "Americans" in the novel are those reduced to the condition of aliens or condemned to extinction by an invasive European white presence whose infestation of native species with alien species was essential to colonization and to the success of the rapacious capitalism it unleashed. From its inception, capitalism as an extractive mode of production has coincided with the project of nation building and with a model of national sovereignty based on property rights, and accomplished through the expropriation of land, the extraction of resources, and the forced relocation or genocide of human and non-human native "species".[7] The US republic was from its birth the engine of primitive accumulation in expropriating Native land to sell to entrepreneurs in order to finance the government and its military institutions – the same institutions that carried out the expulsions, removals and massacres of native peoples and quelled the resistance of both natives and slaves (see Johnson). Parallel to the violent ecocide of the land that the indigenous agriculturalists had farmed for millennia, was the invasion of pests brought by the European settlers who colonized the environment by introducing profitable biomass that transformed native landscapes and pursued what Justin McBrien calls "the reciprocal transmutation of life into death and death into capital" (117). This process also entailed the extinguishing of cultures and languages "either through

force or assimilation," the extermination of peoples "either through labor or deliberate murder," the extinction of the earth "in the depletion of fossil fuels, rare earth minerals," through "deforestation, desertification", and through all those processes by means of which the "real subsumption of the earth by capital" is attempted, by a "capital ecology" constructed "through attempted erasure of existing ecologies – ecologies that include humans" (117). The novel registers and carefully evokes the long march of capitalism, settler colonialism, nation building and native disappearance as interconnected phenomena through observations scattered across the narrative as the American family crosses the American landscape, in a crescendo that peaks while driving through Indian territory. Pointing out the connection between expropriation, appropriation and annihilation, McBrien warns about the structural effects of capitalism, which "leaves in its wake the disappearance of species, languages, cultures, and peoples. It seeks the planned obsolescence of all life. Extinction lies at the heart of capitalist accumulation" (117).[8] The capitalist pressure on natural (indigenous) resources bound the process of domestic violation of ancestral land to extractive exploitation abroad, and is reiterated as the deep root and precondition of today's refugee crisis. As the mother observes while climbing a road across the Appalachian wasteland:

> The trees along the mountain path are covered in kudzu. We had passed acres of woodland blanketed in it on our way up toward this high valley, but only now do we see it clearly. […] kudzu was brought over from Japan in the nineteenth century, and the farmers were paid by the hour to plant it on harvested soil, in order to control erosion. They went overboard, though, and eventually kudzu spread across the fields, crept up the mountains, and climbed up all the trees. It blocks the sunlight and sucks out all the water from them. The trees have no defense mechanism. From the higher parts of the mountain road, the sight is terrifying: like cancerous marks, patches of yellowing treetops freckle the forests of Virginia.
>
> All those trees will die, asphyxiated, sucked dry by this bloody rootless creeper. (Luiselli, *Lost Children* 55)

The mother's descriptions of the American landscape as the car speeds southwest increasingly appears as a cartography of the violence settler

colonialism and its expansion into extractive capitalism brought on the land, and is explicitly observed on "the brutalized, almost lunar Oklahoma landscape" (140). The nexus between the beginning of the Sixth Mass Extinction and Columbus's disembarking on the island of La Hispaniola in 1492 is clear from the mere observation of the depleted American landscape:

> Looking out our windows at a landscape scarred by decades or maybe centuries of systematic agricultural aggression: fields sectioned into quadrangular grids, gang-raped by heavy machinery, bloated with 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. We're driving across a strip of land dotted with cylinders. (177)

In her attempts to expose the invisibility of the irremediably vanished, left behind and forgotten worlds, Luiselli voices the ghost-like presence of the missing Others by tracing links between the emptied out, extracted or desertified American land and its past inhabitants. The numerous broken, empty, decadent and yet oddly beautiful places the family sees during its journey across the American landscape still preserve the memory of their absent residents, as do cemeteries filled with named or nameless graves of unique extinct beings.[9] Getting deeper into the Southwest, the mother registers the desolation and bareness of an environment that looks as if all its natural, human and cultural resources have been exhausted, leaving behind only the wastes of abandoned buildings and the ghostly signs for places to evoke a world gone extinct: "Everything looks like it's been hollowed out and gutted from the inside out, and what remains are only words: names of things pointing towards a vacuum" (54).

Fully aware of the un-archivable presence of a world that has disappeared, the documentarist-husband collects the different silences the Chiricahuas left behind, and the traces of the shattered world they once inhabited. The boy, in turn, recalls the hopeless overtones of the father's narrative in his own re-enactment of the father's stories, expanding them in the description

of a landscape that is as barren, desertified and deadly as the stage of a Beckett drama on which ultimate questions are played out:

> This whole country, Papa said, is an enormous cemetery, but only some people get proper graves, because most lives don't matter. Most lives get erased, lost in the whirlpool of trash we call history, he said.
> […] Now he was talking about this whirlpool of history, and erased lives, and was looking through the windshield at the curvy road ahead as we drove up a narrow mountain pass, where there were no green things growing, no trees, no bushes, nothing alive, only jagged rocks and trunks of trees split in half as if old gods with giant axes had got angry and chopped this part of the world apart.
> What happened here? You even asked, looking out the window, though you didn't usually notice landscapes.
> Papa said: Genocide, exodus, diaspora, ethnic cleansing, that's what happened.
> Ma explained that there had probably been a recent forest fire.
> We were in New Mexico. Finally in Chiricahua Apache territory.
> (215)

The stories of the Mexican-American family's southbound trip and of the migrant children's northbound escape meet in Echo Canyon, a spot in the Arizona desert not far from the Caribbean crucible of the European colonization of the Americas. There, the unscripted archive of their entangled histories reverberates and echoes a history that no database can deliver, and reinscribes the unfinished work of capitalism in the US historical imagination. The novel *Lost Children Archive* rethinks the methodological, theoretical and material differences generative of textual discontinuities as the epistemological precondition for the emergence of a narrative form that explores the possibilities of rememory and engaged storytelling against the condemnation of the colonial archive while also contributing to the construction of a historical consciousness irreducible to archival retrieval and data mining. The aesthetic, non-argumentative structure of the text affords it the ample speculative freedom that it needs in order to show, rather than argue, the contours of its own political project: evoking the ghosts of the American environment and its narrative ecologies at a time in which the specters of colonial capitalism in the United States stand out in all their necrotic force.

Notes

[1] On the use of big data, AI and predictive algorithms for border patrolling and anti-immigration purposes see Azizi and Yektansani; McCarrol.

[2] For detailed, accurate figures, see Robertson.

[3] If they make it to the US side of the border, migrant children arrive traumatized, beaten, famished, abused and terrorized of what may await them there. But higher chances are that they die along the journey, lost in the desert, lost to anyone until their bones are identified. See the reports and maps in the website of the NGO *Humane Borders* (https://humaneborders.org/), particularly the project "Arizona Open GIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants" dedicated to raising awareness about migrant deaths and helping to provide closure through the identification of the deceased and the return of remains.

[4] See McBrien. On the relation between colonial conquest, the eradication and disappearance of natives and its literary representation, see Lifshey.

[5] For a historical account of the narrative of European and American modernity as an outcome of the dual process of expansion of the (North) Atlantic world and of capitalism, see Trouillot. Instantiating the modern world with the new, colonial order on/of the world, European capitalism brought up the Atlantic world together with modernity and coloniality, producing what Walter Mignolo has called the foundational "colonial difference" on which modernity instituted itself. Trouillot's reading dovetails with the analysis of modernity developed by decolonial critics such as Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Walter Mignolo, and Sylvia Winter. For a history of the relation of US extractive capitalism, national expansion, and the production of environmental degradation in the tropical world outside the US, see Tucker. The long-run history of the entanglements of capitalism and ecocide is also charted by Broswimmer; Dawson.

[6] The problem of turning documents into stories is also explicitly addressed by Luiselli in *Tell Me How It Ends*, the essay she wrote before *Lost Children Archive*, where she recounts her work with immigrant children filing for refugee status: "The problem with the children stories," she argues, "is that they are always shuffled, stuttered, always shattered beyond the repair of a narrative order. The problem with trying to tell their story is that it has no beginning, no middle, and no end" (7).

[7] For a biological account of the success of European transatlantic imperialism, see Crosby. On the settlers-colonial structural logic of elimination of the natives, and "destroy to replace," see Wolfe; on settlers colonialism and environmental injustice see Whyte.

[8] Ashley Dawson well synthesizes how capitalism is dependent on the environmental conditions of production that it degrades: "As a mode of production and a social system […] capitalism requires people to be destructive of the environment. Three destructive aspects of the capitalist system stand out when we view this system in relation to the extinction: 1) capitalism tends to degrade the conditions of its own production; 2) it must expand ceaselessly in order to survive; 3) it generates a chaotic world system, which in turn intensifies the extinction crisis" (61). For a specific history of American capitalism and the continuation of colonial and neocolonial policies toward Indigenous and First

Nations, see Fixico.

[9] As I am revising this essay, I read in a paper that the Cowessess First Nation in Canada says it has found 751 unmarked graves at the site of The Marieval Indian Residential School, a Roman Catholic Church establishment for indigenous children. in Saskatchewan. The piece of news follows by a few weeks the discovery of the remains of 215 children at a similar residential school in British Columbia.

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