



PROJECT MUSE®

The Field of Restricted Emotion: Empathy and Literary Value
in Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*

Pieter Vermeulen

Contemporary Literature, Volume 63, Number 1, Spring 2022, pp.
77-106 (Article)

Published by University of Wisconsin Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/902045>

🔗 For content related to this article

https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=902045

PIETER VERMEULEN

The Field of Restricted Emotion: Empathy and
Literary Value in Valeria Luiselli's
Lost Children Archive

Literary Matter Out of Place: *American Dirt* in the Literary Field

Jeanine Cummins's *American Dirt* was expected to become the publishing event of 2020—and it did, just not in the way Flatiron, the Macmillan imprint that published the book, had anticipated. Blurbed as “a *Grapes of Wrath* for our times” and picked for Oprah’s Book Club (which guarantees bestseller status), Cummins’s novel about a bilingual, college-educated bookshop owner and her son’s adventurous escape from a Mexican drug cartel became the object of a spectacular backlash. While few doubted Cummins’s good intentions, her own infelicitous description of her literary project as an effort to individualize migrants who are often perceived as “a sort of helpless, impoverished, faceless brown mass” (381) betrayed her default alignment with a white, liberal, American middle-class demographic (i.e., with those who congratulate themselves for *not* seeing migrants as a “faceless brown mass”). Parul Sehgal’s *New York Times* review found this lack of sensitivity reflected in the novel’s deplorable style, which instead of “individuat[ing] people” ends up “distort[ing]” them “by the stilted prose and characterizations” (Sehgal). It did not help that Cummins, even though she had officially “wished that someone slightly browner than [her] would write” her story (382), was found misrepresenting herself as “half Puerto-Rican” and boasting that she was married to a formerly undocumented immigrant (her husband is Irish) (Shapiro). That the promotional tour for the book used fake barbed wire—a reference to the illustration on the book cover—as table

decorations confirmed a widely shared sense that the book was fatally flawed by a lack of sensitivity and style.

The *American Dirt* controversy displays the tension between commercial and critical success in the domain of fiction in exceptionally stark terms. The critical outrage did little to discourage broad reading audiences: *American Dirt* spent thirty-six weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list; it was also the best-selling novel for adults in 2020 and more than earning out Cummins's seven-figure advance (Shapiro). In fact, several journalistic accounts of the affair note that the publisher's key mistake was that it mispositioned what is ultimately a work of commercial fiction, which typically escapes critical and political scrutiny, as a significant literary work (Miller). This miscategorization meant that its representation of the migration experience was scrutinized in terms of accuracy and sensitivity rather than consumed as the exotic backdrop of an entertaining thriller. By calling the book a work of literature, Macmillan, in the words of an industry insider, "invited in readers who are much more well versed in conversations about race and immigration" (qtd. in Shapiro). It is those readers who found the book wanting.

The terms in which those readers condemn *American Dirt* can point us to the categories through which the distinction between the literary and the nonliterary is being policed in the domain of contemporary fiction: the controversy forces gatekeepers of the literary field to make explicit the criteria that *American Dirt* fails to meet. This is especially significant when these reader-gatekeepers are themselves authors of literary fiction, as when 142 writers addressed an open letter to Oprah Winfrey to ask her to reconsider her nomination of *American Dirt*. Like the broader debate over the novel, the letter, which was published on the *LitHub* website, articulates the book's failure in terms that combine stylistic with ethical and, as we will see, affective evaluations. Cummins, the letter has it, failed "the writer's duty to imagine well, responsibly, and with complexity," and so, she failed her insufficiently researched subject matter (migrant experience, "Mexican life and culture" more generally). The letter addresses Oprah as a public figure, who shares this association between ethics and style: it calls her "a powerful force for good, a champion for justice, change, and literature" and "a public figure who believes in change and empathy." What emerges from

the letter is an implicit account of literature's value as composed of a particular literary style (self-reflexive, competently and carefully imagined), a particular ethics (answerable to the facts, intent on change), and a particular affective attitude (empathy). While this particular constellation of values is obviously not the only one that thrives in the contemporary literary field, it will be my argument that it has become a prominent one.

The notion of empathy might be the most surprising of these components. It is, after all, not obvious to condemn a novel like *American Dirt*, which, as its author has it, aims to present the experience of "singular individuals" in a way that "create[s] a pause where the reader may begin to individuate" for, of all things, a lack of empathy (Cummins 382). What is this, if not precisely a work that performs and invites empathy? The critical reception of the novel articulates a distinction between good and bad forms of empathy. It finds fault with Cummins's manipulation of empathy in two ways. First, Cummins has not *earned* the access she claims to the experience of migrants: the book, the letter says, has not been "effectively researched," and she has "failed to do the *work* of empathy" (Grady; emphasis added). Second, Cummins is taken to task for allowing her readers to substitute emotional release for real-world action. The novel is said to indulge in "trauma fetishization" and "sensationalization" ("Dear Oprah") and to provide "trauma porn that wears a social justice fig leaf" (Gurba). As it provides the spectacle of migrants' distress for emotive consumption by the reader, the novel lacks complexity and commitment to change. These are precisely the qualities that, in the terms of the open letter, would amount to the kind of empathy that befits serious literature. Rather than calling on readers to confront complex real-world problems, *American Dirt* provides them with an alibi to leave those unaddressed: it "give[s] a textural experience to people who need to feel something to avoid doing anything and from the safety of their chair" (Peña, qtd. in Bowles).

The difference between the literary field and the commercial field that emerges in this debate can no longer be captured through Pierre Bourdieu's classic distinction between the subfields of restricted and large-scale cultural production (Bourdieu). Under the influence of the ongoing conglomeration of publishing, the "literary

upmarket" segment has become a niche *within* the US field of commercial publishing (Sapiro 5, 14). This niche is mainly made up of prestigious imprints of the so-called Big Five publishers or major independent publishers, such as Grove Press and New Directions. This—rather than the domain of independent publishing, which is committed to prestige not profit (Sinykin 481–82)—is the field where the major names who signed the Oprah letter operate: writers like Rebecca Solnit, Namwali Serpell, Viet Thanh Nguyen, or Valeria Luiselli. This literary upmarket segment cannot be opposed to the commercial segment to which *American Dirt* belongs on the basis of a supposed disinterest in the bottom line. Indeed, Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*, which is at the heart of this essay, was also the object of a remarkably large advance. Because in the conglomerated US context, the domains of commercial and literary production are contiguous and occasionally leak into one another (as the miscategorization of *American Dirt* shows), the distinctiveness of a literary niche needs to be explicitly articulated. It is by looking at the way literary value is articulated in the peritexts, epitexts (back covers, blurbs, publisher websites, reviews, open letters), *and* the literary texts that make up that niche that we can track the constituents of contemporary literary value.

As the controversy over *American Dirt* intimates, and as the success of *Lost Children Archive* confirms, affective and ethical postures in general, and empathy specifically, are crucial components in the articulation of contemporary literary value. Nicholas Holm shows that cultural distinction is no longer mainly signaled through an aesthetic disposition focused on the appreciation of formal complexity and refinement but is increasingly being replaced by a "critical disposition" that signals cultural distinction by adopting an overtly critical and reflexive attitude to the way cultural products operate (Holm). I argue that one key strategy through which the agents and texts that make up the segment of literary upmarket literature distinguish themselves is by self-critically interrogating the unreflexive empathy they attribute to commercial literature (such as *American Dirt*) and replacing it with complex, self-reflexive, and even self-sabotaging empathy. What the abjection of *American Dirt* and the elevation of *Lost Children Archive* reveal, then, is a segment

of literature that is less a field of restricted production (a reality canceled by the economic realities of US publishing in which “aesthetic judgment isn’t removed from the marketplace but rather fully integrated within its functioning” [Konstantinou and Sinykin 233]) than a field of restricted emotion—a field in which blocked affective release qualifies as an index of literary value. Indeed, because the economic realities of US publishing have rendered the field of restricted production leaky and porous, affective and ethical dimensions have become increasingly important in bolstering literary distinction.

Valeria Luiselli’s oeuvre provides a particularly self-conscious negotiation of those parameters. Her first four books—published by independent publisher Coffee House Press in the United States as *Faces in the Crowd* (2012), *Sidewalks* (2013), *The Story of My Teeth* (2015), and *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017)—negotiate her position between Mexico (a country to which she, unlike Cummins, never claimed to fully belong) and New York (the place where she lives and the center of the global literary marketplace). Following Lee Konstantinou and Dan Sinykin’s recent observation that “the publishing field has become a key yet mundane interpretive horizon for twenty-first-century literature” (226), I argue that these works can be read as allegories of publishing: deeply concerned with their participation in delivery systems and networks of cultural and financial capital. *Lost Children Archive*, Luiselli’s first book with a Big Five publisher (Vintage, an imprint of Penguin Random House) and her first work originally published in English, is no longer marked by anxieties over its inclusion in the US literary field, as that inclusion has now been achieved.¹ This achievement is reflected in at least two of the work’s key features: its downplaying of the tension (so central to her earlier work) between Mexican and cosmopolitan identities and its investment in a particular *literary* form of empathetic feeling. This form of empathy shows itself to be aware of its own limitations. It carefully resists appropriating the experience of others, but at the same time, as David James shows, it refuses the facile cynical

1. *Tell Me How It Ends* was originally an essay written in English (and published in *Freeman’s* in 2016), but the expanded version was first published as a book in Spanish. The Anglophone edition features the original essay and translations of the new sections.

posture of refusing sentiment and compassion altogether and instead ventures “another, more productively self-scrutinizing level of emotional vivacity” (James 412)—an attenuated level that I analyze as a self-consciously minor affect.

Many critics have paired *Lost Children Archive* with *American Dirt*. Both novels, after all, are about migration from Middle America to the United States, and both focus on a mother fleeing a bad situation with her child(ren). Often, this juxtaposition (in such diverse places as *USA Today*, *Current Affairs*, the *Washington Post*, and many literary websites) takes the form of an advice to read Luiselli’s novel as a corrective to *American Dirt*. This recommendation also resonates with the novel’s celebration in the literary field: the *New York Times* selected it as one of its ten books of the year (“perhaps the most reliable gauge of the approbation of an author by the US literary establishment” [Pollack 346]), it made it to Barack Obama’s “Favorite Books of 2019” list, it was a finalist for a National Book Critics Circle Award, and it won the 2020 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction. This American consecration has set the tone for world literary celebration, most obviously in the novel winning the 2021 DUBLIN Literary Award. The point I want to make is that *Lost Children Archive* can be received as a culmination of the literary, not just because the way it deals with the same topic as Cummins is so different but also because its censoring of the empathy that works of commercial fiction exploit is a crucial aspect of what qualifies it as literary. David Kurnick remarked that both books are “animated by a strikingly congruent fantasy of heroic empathy,” but while *American Dirt* abandons itself to that fantasy, *Lost Children Archive*, we will see, is careful to mark that fantasy as, precisely, a fantasy. This means that this experience registers as a minor, complicated feeling rather than the cathartic emotion that *American Dirt* offers. If *American Dirt*, in Parul Sehgal’s words, “congratulat[es] us for caring,” *Lost Children Archive*, I argue, congratulates us for caring about the difficulty of caring. In the contemporary domain of US publishing, literary distinction is not a matter of aesthetic choices alone; for works, authors, critics, and readers, it is increasingly also a matter of assuming properly self-reflexive ethical and affective postures.

Autofictions, Archives, and Other Strategies against Empathy

Lost Children Archive not only is the first novel Luiselli wrote in English but also marks her work's alignment with the world of US publishing through its adoption of some of that field's key markers of literary prestige. Critics have remarked that in the United States, Luiselli's earlier work was rarely understood as part of "an ecosystem of Mexican literature that remains invisible to English-language readers and critics," most notably a longer tradition of explicitly cosmopolitan Mexican writing (Sánchez Prado, *Strategic* 4–5). At the same time, the fact that in Mexico Luiselli's earlier writing was often criticized as a form of "literatura light" pandering to commercial US tastes shows the relevance of the US publishing context for understanding those earlier works (Samuelson 182). In the Mexican literary field, the distinction between commercial writing and (often state-sponsored) high literature has been much more persistent than in the United States, to the extent that discussions of the relationship between art and commerce are practically taboo (Télez). That Luiselli is published in Mexico by the nonconglomerate but major and prestigious Sexto Piso intensifies these half-acknowledged anxieties over her work's alleged "connection to a certain kind of popular literature in the US" (Samuelson 182). Interestingly, the Mexican criticism of Luiselli's work has taken it to task for an all too unreflective deployment of empathy and emotionality ("una falta absoluta de reflexividad")—an assessment that correctly identifies a key concern of her work but does not take into account that Luiselli's complex engagement with empathy and affect is an index of her particular location in the US literary field (Emmelhainz). This US context is ineluctable for *Lost Children Archive*: the novel's adoption of two generic templates that have come to indicate literary prestige in the US literary world—autofiction and archive fiction—point to Luiselli's self-conscious attempt to negotiate a place for her work within the categories available for literary recognition in the US publishing sphere.² These generic choices, as I argue,

2. Roberto González Echevarría has influentially identified archival fiction as a key tradition in Latin American narrative (153). I elaborate below how the archival contexts with which Luiselli engages are different from those in which González Echevarría

reflect Luiselli's reluctant participation in a publishing ecosystem in which prestige and profit are deeply entwined. At the same time, they allow Luiselli to evoke, even while they resist, the sentimental strategies on which a commercial novel like Cummins's thrives.

Lost Children Archive tells the story of a woman who sets out with her husband, daughter, and stepson (her husband's son from a previous relationship) on a road trip from New York to Arizona and New Mexico. This region in the Southwest was once the homeland of the Apaches, on which the father is doing a research project and is also a key site in the mass migration of people from Central America's Northern Triangle along the Mesoamerican corridor. In the world of the novel, the migration crisis is not only ubiquitous in the news and on the car radio but also occupies the mind of the narrator, who in New York gets involved (as a translator) with the case of two Guatemalan girls, who, like thousands of unaccompanied and undocumented children, are detained on the Mexican border. The novel pointedly resists rendering the perspective of the migrant children directly, instead focusing on the narrator's dissatisfaction with, and feelings of guilt about, her inability to have a significant impact on the lives of the girls and the humanitarian crisis in general. The road trip, which sees the couple's relationship slowly disintegrate, takes the narrator from the bureaucratic center (New York) to the airport in Roswell, New Mexico, from which some of the deportations take place, only for her to be kept out by "a long wire mesh fence" (180). Not even her binoculars help the narrator see what is going on. At this point (around the middle of the novel), she gives the binoculars to her son, who narrates most of the rest of the novel to his stepsister. The overtly phantasmagoric nature of the blending of the boy's and the lost children's perspective only throws into further relief the imaginative disconnect that marks the first half of the novel (Stuelke 61). Empathetic connection is a fantasy embedded in a frame that is a sustained warning to the reader not to fall for that fantasy.

The first half of the novel is an update of the American genre of the road novel (key instances of which, such as *On the Road* and

is interested. For the fate of such Latin American archival fictions in a digital age, see Willem.

Lolita, are explicitly namedropped [Stuelke]), and it can easily be read as a work of autofiction: it reflects the author's own alienation and separation from her ex-partner, the Mexican novelist Álvaro Enrigue, and it is compulsively concerned with the narrator's anxieties about the ethics and politics of her own journalistic and artistic projects. Dan Sinykin argues that autofiction has emerged as a key genre through which contemporary American literature negotiates "the anxieties of authorship" (463). Autofiction, for Sinykin, "reflexively express[es] the institutional conditions of the conglomerate era" (474); writers who crave prestige need to accommodate the dictates of corporations whose drive for profit they might find problematic. Displaying a narrator who endlessly ponders the stakes of her journalistic and aesthetic practices—"How can a radio documentary be useful in helping more undocumented children find asylum? . . . isn't art for art's sake so often an absolute ridiculous display of intellectual arrogance? . . . Shouldn't I simply document . . .?" (79)—and who refuses to convert the experiences of migrant children into an easily consumable form, Luiselli's autofiction consists in the kind of meta-reflections that a book like *American Dirt* excises from the story and relegates to the author's afterword. In Luiselli, anxiety over literature's participation (and that of the people who produce and consume it) in a compromised socioeconomic system becomes the content of a novel that consistently reminds its readers to keep their emotive identification in check.

Lost Children Archive time and again makes its reflexive engagement with the economic realities of publishing explicit. Early in the novel, we learn that the protagonist and her husband met when they both signed up for a project "surveying the most linguistically diverse metropolis on the planet, and mapping the entirety of languages that its adults and children speak" (7)—a project that combines a commitment to documentation with unobjectionable multicultural liberal aspirations. The narrator, we read, was initially reluctant to participate, as the project was "in part funded by some huge multinational corporations," and its purpose was "somewhat tacky, megalomaniacal, possibly too didactic" (12). It is not hard to read this as an indirect reference to contemporary conglomerate publishing or to read the narrator's reluctant decision to sign up for economic reasons ("I had a little girl" [12–13]) as a reflection

of Luiselli's own hesitations about participating in an *American Dirt*-producing industry. Remarkably, the narrator's husband has no such qualms, as he seems to have eased from the language inventory project to a new project documenting the history of the Apaches.³ He is, in the novel's words, a "documentarian," who can simply continue to devote his life "to sampling echoes, winds, and birds," an enviably straightforward practice not caught up in the messy compromises with which the contemporary literary novelist is faced (99, 100). The narrator—an obvious stand-in for the novelist—sees herself as a "documentarist," a job she compares to that of a "chemist," who cannot avoid transforming the materials she collects and needs to find unglamorous "patchwork solutions" to get her story right (99). Unlike the documentarian, the documentarist always runs the moral risk of betraying the materials she works with and, in the case of the refugee crisis, "turn[ing] those children, their lives, into material for media consumption" (96).

If Luiselli's use of autofiction allows her to resist such betrayal, her mobilization of the form of the archive—a gesture familiar from the works of established contemporary writers such as Roberto Bolaño, Daša Drndić, and W. G. Sebald—further short-circuits the empathetic loop that would allow emotion to flow all too smoothly between author, subject, text, and reader. The family takes several boxes of archival material on the trip, and the novel reproduces (indexes of) their contents. Luiselli declines to transform this accumulation of lists, bibliographical references, notes, quotations, and Polaroids—that is, the record of her research for the novel—into a sweepingly imagined story. Instead, the archival materials intermittently occupy the foreground of the readers' attention. Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado notes that this decision to reproduce the archive resonates with developments in contemporary Mexican literature: Luiselli's decision to render "visible the mechanisms and sources of her work," he writes, "is a novelization of the forms of anti-utopia and anti-totality that rule contemporary Mexican writing" ("Signification" 84). Yet the particular way in which that resistance to utopia

3. To underscore this material's autofictional relation to the real world, it is relevant that since the trip recounted in the novel, Enrigue has published *Ahora me rindo y eso es todo* (2018), a novel about, among other things, the myth of the rebellious Apaches.

and totality is novelized takes a form that fits remarkably well with a kind of writing that has achieved critical success in the United States in recent years: the combination of autofiction and the inclusion of half-processed documents, theories, and texts that mark such critically celebrated works as Ben Lerner's *10:04*, Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick*, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, or Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*.

Importantly, the autofictional and the archival dimensions of the novel reinforce one another to convey how contemporary life is thoroughly mediated by documents and institutions. The novel foregrounds how material documents obstruct, even as they invite, access to the experience of distant others (the archival dimension); at the same time, it collapses the distinction between these documents and the real world (the autofictional dimension). In this way, it conveys the extent to which the life of "a middle-class person in a country haunted by long histories of anti-migrant violence and settler colonialism" (Sánchez Prado, "Signification" 84) is marked by texts, documents, archives, and records that mediate access to the experiences of less privileged people.

The first of the novel's four parts is entitled "Family Soundscapes," which, together with the novel's division in short entry-like units, foregrounds its status as itself an archive of family life. *Lost Children Archive* is, in Patricia Stuelke's words, "a novel that explicitly styles itself as an archive, and exposes novel writing as a curatorial practice of research and imagination" (44).⁴ Luiselli's narrator's anxious reflections on the ethics and aesthetics of documentation make the novel read like an exercise in data management—a form of data management that not only reflects the author's own extensive work researching the novel but also because it makes available so much half-filtered archive material, invites readers to perform their own (archival) work of selecting, ordering, and authenticating the information they are given to process. This open-endedness is reflected

4. As Tom Chadwick has shown, contemporary archive fiction has drifted away from the two forms that organized the relationship between literature and archive in previous decades: that of recovered history (which mines the archive to make the past available for empathetic identification) and that of historiographic metafiction (which declares the past inaccessible on principle) (Chadwick 169–72). In more recent archive fiction, acts of recording and documenting the past have become coextensive with the real world—a world that "consist[s] both of itself and its self-description, denotation, or registration" and in which notation *is* action (Seltzer 6).

in the absence of a definitive article in the novel's title; the book, this suggests, is not a fixed and finished collection but an open-ended repository primed for curation by the reader. The combination of auto- and archive fiction, then, brings author, text, and reader together in a world of data, information, and archives and at the same time assures that the experience of the undocumented children remains unavailable for unearned empathetic identification.

Lost Children Archive is an archive; it is a novel *about* the archive; and it is also a novel about the extent to which the lives of the people featured in the novel and the novel's intended readers are marked by the management of data, archives, and documents. One way the narrator manages the ethical urgency of the refugee crisis and the fate of the two Guatemalan girls is by converting them into an archival project that soon morphs into a meta-archival one. The narrator "amasse[s] a reasonable amount of well-filtered material that would help [her] understand how to document the children's crisis at the border" (24). She invokes the help of a Columbia professor—not one specializing in, for instance, immigration law but in "archival studies" (23). The books she collects help her "think about the whole project from a certain narrative distance" (24). The book does not offer the fullness of the imagined experience of strangers but a "sequence of interruptions, holes, missing parts, cut out from the moment in which the experience took place" (102). This sequence of absences characterizes the life of the narrator, lived at a remove from significant action and encounter. And because this sequence makes up the text of the novel, it also characterizes the experience of the reader reading the novel.

Luiselli's adoption of autofictional and archival modes reflects the entanglement of literary prestige and commercial profit in the literary upmarket segment. I do not mean to suggest that Luiselli's formal choices are inspired by an opportunistic desire for literary prestige. Indeed, these choices line up with the ethical commitments of the novel and its author, and her hesitation to too strongly identify with the lives of destitute migrants is as unsurprising as it is appropriate for the privileged daughter of a diplomat with a PhD from Columbia—that is, for someone whose experience of migration is radically different from that of the people implicated in the border crisis. For Luiselli, inevitable compromises with bureaucracy and the

market mark ethical and political action more generally, and recent readings of the novel have emphasized Luiselli's awareness of "her own authorial self-implication" in compromised humanitarian and capitalist regimes (James 406; also Stuelke). Before she published *Lost Children Archive*, Luiselli wrote about her experience as a volunteer translator with undocumented children in her *Tell Me How It Ends: Essay in Forty Questions* (whose original Spanish title is *Los niños perdidos*, which translates as "the lost children," underscoring the intimate link between the essay and the later novel). Luiselli's reflections are loosely organized around a list of forty questions that migrant children must answer to qualify for a case hearing. The book's back cover copy casts it as "an urgent appeal for humanity and compassion," and the critical reception of the book has amplified this understanding of it as a humanizing complement to the inhuman ways of bureaucracy. Critics have read it as dramatizing "the conflict between the rules of narrative and complex, unruly reality" (Popkin), "revitaliz[ing] the immigration questionnaire's purpose by attenuating its routineness with a focus on the uniqueness of the responses" (Milian 9), and (more critically) adopting a "non-position" that presents emotionally charged facts as readily available for affective uptake by the reader (Emmelhainz).⁵

These readings project a form of liberal sentimentality on the essay that misrepresents the essay's own misgivings about such humanist claims for the power of literature (misgivings about the political uses of literature that Luiselli has voiced explicitly in Spanish-language interviews, which remain unavailable in English [Emmelhainz]). The essay ends on the day when Donald Trump wins the election. Luiselli recounts how she approached a man on a train who is wearing a MAGA cap but does not manage to do more than "mumble . . . and stutter . . . a way-too-emotional sentence about empathy and social justice" (104). In the face of the MAGA Bro's dismissive laughter, she "took a seat and opened a book, forcing [her]self not to cry or look scared" (104). Empathy and literature are presented

5. Julio Enríquez-Ornelas goes so far as to criticize Luiselli for doing what the *American Dirt* controversy blamed Cummins for: borrowing the ethical allure from the suffering of people "Luiselli simply does not have access to" (129) in order to present herself as "a Mexican white savior" (141). I explain in the rest of this section how Luiselli's essay, contrary to Enríquez-Ornelas's argument, carefully refuses such pretenses.

here as similarly impotent, and they contrast with the direct political action of a group of Luiselli's students, who, "before [her] astonished—even disbelieving—eyes," manage to found a nonprofit that really makes a tangible difference in the lives of immigrants (96). The students are aware that offering relief requires collaborating with bureaucracy, so "they draft a constitution, appoint duties, and get the university's approval" (96). The essay makes it clear that it considers this a much more effective way of "transform[ing] emotional capital . . . into political capital" (94) than anything literature can offer. Crucially, the questionnaire around which the essay is organized is *not*, as one critic has it (and as most readings of the book assume) "asked by US Citizenship and Immigration Services" (Garcia-Avello 150). The intake questionnaire is in fact drawn up by nonprofits to gather and structure information, which "would channel children's cases as quickly as possible to legal representatives" and maximize their chances of getting a fair trial (41). *Tell Me How It Ends*, in other words, does not equate ethical action with resistance to bureaucracy—it is, after all, an account of Luiselli's active participation in the nonprofit's bureaucratic activities. Rather, it is deeply uncertain about the ethical and political uses of literature, as it is all too aware that literature, unlike the lawyers working for the nonprofit, lacks the power to "transform . . . a dead document into legal evidence" (81). An ethically attuned literature, then, will need to find a way to operate *within* the compromised realms of publishing and bureaucracy. *Lost Children Archive's* autofictional and archival impulses continue rather than resolve that uncertainty, and it does so in a literary upmarket context where such explicit irresoluteness counts as a marker of literary value.

Mexico, Minneapolis, New York: Trajectories of Values

A telling detail: *Lost Children Archive* features no italicized Spanish (a detail all the more telling when we note that *American Dirt* launches its first *abuela* on page 1 and its first *balón de fútbol* on page 2). The characters' names do not invite ethnic or cultural associations, as the novel withholds the names of the four central characters and only refers to them through their family relations (we only learn the characters' imaginary Apache names). Neither the narrative voice

nor the cultural frame of reference that the novel's archive provides foreground Luiselli's Mexican identity. Listing names ranging from André Gide and Ezra Pound to Rosalind Krauss, Susan Sontag, and Dubravka Ugrešić, the list contributes to the novel's bid for literary distinction by constructing a modernist genealogy and New York-consecrated affiliations. In *Tell Me How It Ends*, this identity is observed on exactly one occasion: when Luiselli and her family are traveling to the southern border, they "decide not to tell anyone on diners and gas stations that we are Mexican, just in case" (23). Withholding their Mexicanness is here a strategy to avoid racist nastiness. But what is it that *Lost Children Archive* wants to achieve by its decision *not* to mobilize its author's Mexican affiliation?

Crucially, while *Lost Children Archive's* attenuation of empathy is explicit—it is indeed, as I argue, the organizing conceit of the novel—its downplaying of Luiselli's Mexicanness is quieter; it is unthematized rather than renounced. It is commonplace that the promoting of books in the contemporary literary marketplace invariably emphasizes the autobiographical link between author and work—a link that often takes the form of emphasizing geographical markers. This tendency is obvious in, for instance, the twenty-first-century consecration of Roberto Bolaño, W. G. Sebald, or Karl Ove Knausgaard (to name three key examples of the literary upmarket segment), and it is so strong that it even asserts itself in the case of Elene Ferrante, where the lack of an authorial identity is compensated for by the insistence on Naples as the oeuvre's locale. In this context, where marketing forces relentlessly recuperate gaps, denials, and complexities, the only way for Luiselli to avoid being cast as (however reluctantly) Mexican is to refrain from thematizing her relationship to Mexico. Cheyla Rose Samuelson notes that "Luiselli's mexicanness is a negotiated one" (187), a negotiation in which the relationship to non-Mexican elements is always carefully calibrated. In *Lost Children Archive*, Luiselli has decided that the literary novel is not the place for such negotiation or, conversely, that such a negotiation would detract from its literariness.⁶

6. Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado has discussed the controversy over *American Dirt* and the increasing importance of an aspirational Latinx readership within the United States ("Commodifying"). This context makes the representation of Mexicanness an ever more

This constitutes a remarkable shift in Luiselli's oeuvre, as the negotiation of cultural identity and cosmopolitan connection were key concerns in her earlier works. These works were originally written in Spanish (except for the essay that formed the basis of *Tell Me How It Ends*) and were published in the United States by Coffee House Press, an independent publisher based in Minneapolis. In the US publishing ecosystem, such independent publishers play a key role in translating non-Anglophone works and discovering talent that often moves on to the big conglomerates (as happened with Luiselli). In absolute numbers, these presses consistently produce more translations than the Big Five combined (Marling 155), even if Amazon Crossing, Amazon's imprint for quality translated fiction, is increasingly outperforming them. Luiselli's early works are deeply concerned with the unpredictable ways in which symbolic capital can be converted into economic capital, and her concern with cultural authorization already bears the imprint of her attempt to negotiate the terms of the US publishing system (a fact not lost on critical Mexican reviewers, who already objected to her early work's proximity to American formats). In this ecosystem, independent publishers such as Coffee House, Deep Vellum, and Graywolf provide Latin American authors with opportunities to acquire symbolic capital without recourse to the traditional categories through which Latin American literature finds (always marked, always limited) recognition: Chicana, Latina, or magic realism, for instance (Sánchez Prado, "El efecto" 101–02). Through their direct engagement with the rules of entry for this ecosystem, Luiselli's early works reflect on their status, within the United States, as independently published works. This is not to say that these works are not *also* engaging with their Mexican publication contexts. As I note, with its independent status and strong distribution network, Luiselli's Mexican publisher Sexto Piso functions very much like a prominent independent publisher like Grove Press, New Directions, or, indeed, Coffee House.

From its titular reference to Ezra Pound, Luiselli's first novel *Faces in the Crowd* evokes a metropolitan, modernist, and ghostly context (only the last association is there in the Spanish title *Los ingrátidos*,

fraught and complex issue, which helps explain why a novelist like Luiselli increasingly sidesteps that issue.

which means “the weightless”). The novel moves between three narrators: a woman who lives with her family in a Mexico City apartment, a younger version of that woman living as a translator and publishing assistant in New York, and the Mexican poet Gilberto Owen living in New York (and later in Philadelphia) in the modernist period. While the female voices at times invite an autofictional reading, the structure of the novel is not nearly as stable as that provided by the autofictional frame in *Lost Children Archive*: the spectral logic dominates, and at times it seems like Owen and the women are (anachronistically) ghostwriting one another’s stories (136). The novel, in other words, evokes a liminal space, neither fully Mexican nor fully American, neither fully alive nor dead. The liminal act of literature is contrasted to the solid constructions of the older woman’s husband, who works as an architect (which also serves as a model and alternative for literature in Luiselli’s near-contemporaneous *Sidewalks*), and to Owen’s work as a diplomat, a function that, unlike literature, allows him to deliver writings with real-world consequences (86–87, 133). In an interview, Luiselli explained her interest in Owen by underlining that, because he left for America, “he became a ghostly figure in Mexico as well”; his ghostliness allows him—and, by implication, the different narrators of *Faces*—to avoid “belong[ing] entirely to existing cultural or social structures” (Chen).

The novel’s cosmopolitan posture resonates with Luiselli’s public persona. Cosmopolitan detachment is also a theme in her essay collection *Sidewalks (Papeles Falsos)*, where one essay (“Flying Home”) focuses on her inability to capture the substance of Mexico City (her attempt to write about the city, she notes, ended up as a book about “the impossibility of writing about Mexico City” [Reber]), and interviews and profiles rarely fail to mention her youth in South Africa, Costa Rica, South Korea, and India as the daughter of a diplomat. And while her decision to “adopt a cosmopolitan stance” can be seen as a strategy “to acquire cultural capital within [her] national tradition” (Sánchez Prado, *Strategic* 18–19), it is remarkable to what extent *Faces* already probes the conditions of entry into the US literary sphere.

The woman narrator works as a reader and translator for a literary press in New York, where it is her job to help the house capitalize on

the success of Bolaño and what it sees as an imminent new “Latin American boom” (15). She understands that “literary recognition” is “all a matter of rumor, a rumor that multiplies like a virus until it becomes a collective affinity” (35). She eventually manages to make Owen’s work go viral by spreading forged translations that, even when debunked, generate interest by publishers, magazines, and university archives (82–83).⁷ Crucially, this hype cycle is started by (falsely) associating Owen with a stand-in for modernist poet Louis Zukofsky. *Faces* ostensibly tries to perform the same trick—name-checking the likes of Ernest Hemingway, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and F. Scott Fitzgerald throughout (a practice that anticipates the lists and bibliographies in *Lost Children Archive*). Yet the novel’s lucid awareness of how the literary game is played is not reflected in an aesthetic that fits the literary upmarket niche. Instead, it performs a sort of eerily intellectual cross-cultural empathy rather than complicate empathy in the more tangible way *Lost Children Archive* will do.

Luiselli’s *Story of My Teeth* is equally concerned with the ways symbolic capital is generated. The book is a collaborative writing effort between Luiselli, the workers of the Jumex juice factory (which sponsors the Galería Jumex, a Mexican art gallery), and Luiselli’s English translator, who added a chapter of her own to the Spanish original. The book presents itself as a “collective ‘novel-essay’ about the production of value and meaning in contemporary art and literature” (182). This issue is pursued through the picaresque story of an auctioneer, who makes money selling his teeth by inventing tales of their supposed origin in the mouths of celebrities. The profits are ultimately reinvested in a new set of teeth for himself, made up of the teeth of Marilyn Monroe, or so he pretends to believe. The fairly basic economic takeaway seems to be that value and meaning are produced through storytelling (rather than through some supposed essential value). The novel seems to cheerfully embrace its own status as both commodity and artwork, and given the Mexican taboo on thematizing the link between art and commerce, this to a large extent explains the overwhelmingly negative reception of the

7. See Sánchez Prado, “El efecto” (99–101) for the crucial role that Luiselli’s own translator, Christina MacSweeney, has played in Luiselli’s consecration in the United States.

book in Mexico (Téllez). *The Story of My Teeth*, in other words, can be read as another reflection on the very US-centered theme of the politics and economics of independent publishing, freely circulating between cultures in the hope of accruing symbolic capital that provides a more stable footing in the literary sphere.

Such reflections on the circulation of cultural and economic capital are very different from the sustained reflection on compromise we find in *Lost Children Archive*—a difference that reflects the distinct position in the publishing field taken up by Coffee House and Penguin Random House. That distinction also asserts itself in the divergent way these works mobilize empathy: freely ventriloquizing a modernist poet in *Faces*; negotiating cultural distance and intimacy in *Sidewalks*; investing in fantasies of coeval authorship in *The Story of My Teeth*; and, in marked contrast, drastically curtailing feeling in *Lost Children Archive*. Sarah Booker has remarked that translators play a crucial mediating role in Luiselli's work: they act as "liminal and ephemeral characters that mediate cultural exchange" and highlight the "fragmentation and transformation of identity" (273). The translator as a figure of empathy is most apparent in *Tell Me How It Ends*, which is, after all, about Luiselli's work as a translator. But as I show, the essay is also deeply uncertain about the way empathy, literature, and translation (as an inevitably bureaucratic process) line up. Remarkably, even though *Lost Children Archive* processes the same real-life experience, the narrator's status as a translator is hardly thematized (17–18). Instead, she and her husband are presented as researchers, who record languages without necessarily understanding them. Translation, here, is no longer a figure for empathy or for the desire to enter the US literary field—if only, because for Luiselli, that access has now been achieved. Luiselli has successfully graduated from the field of translated Mexican literature to that of literary upmarket fiction—a field in which ethnic or cultural markers of difference can be replaced by other markers of distinction.

Hedged Empathy: *Lost Children Archive's* Second-Order Sentiment

Lost Children Archive's adoption of the templates of autofiction and archive fiction marks Luiselli's distance from publishing niches that

insist on the author's display—or, at least, explicit negotiation—of her ethnic and cultural affiliations and on facilitating the circulation of empathy between reader, author, and the world. That does not mean that *Lost Children Archive* refrains from exploring the affordances of compassion and affective relationality altogether. Indeed, as David James shows, the novel's critique of facile empathy and sentiment is folded into its self-conscious exploration (rather than glib condemnation) of "the formal agility and multivalency of sentimental writing" (394). After its first half carefully constructs and sustains the work's literary upmarket credentials, it shifts the narrative perspective to the narrator's stepson, who, inspired by stories about the child refugees, flees with his sister to encounter the two Guatemalan girls and the seven children-characters in *Elegies for Lost Children*, a (fictional) book based on the Children's Crusade that the narrator is reading and that the novel reproduces (139). The stepson and his stepsister enter the imaginative terrain from which the narrator finds herself excluded—the terrain where historical, economic, and cultural distinctions between different sets of children magically dissolves (a fantasy of the proximity between the child and the Indian rooted, as Patricia Stuelke shows, in the settler ideology the novel critiques [61]). Importantly, the first half of the novel explicitly frames this encounter between the refugee children, the fictional children in the *Elegies*, and the couple's own children as an illusory wish fulfillment. Reading the first two elegies aloud, the narrator hopes that her reading will allow her to figure out "the best way to tell the story of the other lost children, the ones arriving at the southern border," when she is suddenly interrupted by "the voices and footsteps of [her] own children coming from inside the cabin" (144). Later, she observes her own children, "one of whom [she] might soon lose, and both of whom are now always pretending to be lost children, having to run away" (172). The empathetic connection to otherness is only realized through the imaginative license that childhood and, as we will see, the specter of loss provide.

The critique of unfettered empathy in which the novel participates is common in critical discourse. Empathy has been criticized because it privileges cultural difference over economic inequality (Cronan; Michaels), too easily equates incompatible experiences (Cvetkovich), consolidates existing power hierarchies (Hemmings),

or bolsters rather than subverts neoliberal forms of subjectivity (Houser)—all elements that emerged in the backlash against *American Dirt*. Similar critiques have been launched in relation to sentimentalism, compassion, and humanitarianism, categories that David James explores in relation to Luiselli's novel (James). In her *New York Review of Books* essay "The Banality of Empathy," Namwali Serpell (one of the signatories of the Oprah letter) describes how calls for empathy typically situate the ethical potential of literature in how "the space between people 'dissolves'; the reader 'assimilates' the other into his or her mind. It's a kind of ghostly possession or occupation." Empathy offers an alibi to have feeling stand in for action. As Serpell has it, in terms that are all too applicable to the *American Dirt* case, it is "a gateway drug to white saviorism, with its familiar blend of propaganda, pornography, and paternalism. It's an emotional palliative that distracts us from real inequities, on the page and on screen, to say nothing of our actual lives" (Serpell).

It is one thing to dissect the baneful politics of literary empathy and sentiment. It is another to elevate the resistance to such empathy to an aesthetic program, although it is my argument that an important strand of literary upmarket fiction does precisely that. The case of Luiselli illustrates that, in the contemporary literary sphere, literary value can no longer be expressed only in terms of formal innovation or mastery; it is always yoked to contiguous value domains, such as those of ethics and affect. The need for such articulation can be explained by the particular nature of the US publishing field, where compromises between commerce and art define upmarket literary publishing (in contrast, as I note, to Mexican publishing). In this context, cultural capital does not accrue through tacit disavowals or overt dismissals of financial concerns but through canny and inevitably compromised articulations with different forms of (moral, affective, political,) capital. This means, for instance, that the achievements of consecrated authors such as Sebald, Bolaño, and Knausgaard tend to be formulated not only by celebrating their formal achievements but also by underscoring their work's serious concern with the ethically charged signifier of the Holocaust (Vermeulen). By coining the notion of the field of restricted emotion, I want to signal that one key ethical and affective attitude through

which the distinction between the literary and the nonliterary is fortified is one of hedged and self-reflexive empathy.

Serpell herself invokes Hannah Arendt's call to replace empathy and sentimentality with a form of "representative thinking" that, in Arendt's phrase, "trains one's imagination to go visiting": it is an imaginative effort to bracket one's own circumstances and imagine others that is yet careful to maintain "a measure of distance" rather than offer "an emotional mind-meld" (Serpell). Arendt is—together with Susan Sontag, Joan Didion, and others—one of the heroines of Deborah Nelson's *Tough Enough*, which traces a feminine ethos of unsentimentality in postwar American culture. These writers and thinkers are not, for all their cool and restraint, indifferent to suffering: they pay "attention to the same terrain as sentimental literature—painful reality, suffering, sufferers—but without emotional display" (5). In this way, they forge alternatives for "an ethical system that rests on empathy," as they call on audiences to face "the painfulness of reality without consolation, compensation, or communion with others" (9, 49).

Such a combination of moral seriousness and emotional censure has become a key marker of literary value—not only in critical discourse, as we have seen, but also in the formal choices of literary works themselves. In works like Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy and Katie Kitamura's *A Separation*, for instance, the deliberate refusal of empathy is a central feature of the forms they adopt. US reviews commend Nobel Prize winners like Patrick Modiano and Svetlana Alexievich for postures of unsentimental witness that refuse to aestheticize the horrors of history. In *Lost Children Archive*, the critique of empathy offers a variation on these strategies. It proposes a form of empathetic release that is framed as fantastic, and it furnishes an experience of identification with the suffering of others that is shadowed by the realization that such identification is impossible.⁸ Empathetic connection is a moment in an emotive scenario that is never stable enough to afford emotional release. As Serpell notes,

8. Even in the book's second half, access to the refugee children remains diffracted by the narrative perspective of the boy, who of course has no direct access to the suffering of children refugees. Here, my reading diverges from David James's interpretation of the novel, which sees the second half of the novel as overcoming the emotive and imaginative distance that marks its first half (401–02).

one problem with empathy is that it “often treats identification as a one-shot single move,” whereas identification can in fact “be disrupted, refused, changed over time” (Serpell and Tumarkin). *Lost Children Archive* offers what we can call a *disavowal* of empathy: a forthright acknowledgment that direct empathy is as impossible as it is undesirable and, in spite of that, a heavily hedged and self-sabotaging performance of it through the device of the vulnerable child. The rarefied affect the novel generates is not a cathartic and self-congratulatory feeling of empathy but rather the kind of awkward and minor affect that Sianne Ngai theorizes in her book *Ugly Feelings*. Ngai insists that the absence of strong emotions in a literary work does not imply that the work is totally affectless. Instead, this experience of absent emotion generates “a secondary feeling” (68), “a meta-feeling in which one feels confused about *what* one is feeling” (14; emphasis original). The utter strangeness of a torqued autofiction that bleeds into a children’s book adventure that combines contemporary refugees and medieval children crusaders preempts a strong and redemptive emotional identification. But it preempts it so ostentatiously that “the perception of an unfelt feeling produces a secondary, dysphoric emotion” (Ngai 83). It is this restricted emotion, I argue, that helps qualify Luiselli’s novel as a work of literary upmarket fiction.

Lost Children Archive explicitly reflects on literature’s power to generate such a weak emotion when the narrator is reading the journals of Susan Sontag—interestingly, one of the authors that inspires Deborah Nelson’s case for unsentimentality and also, like many of the sources the novel names in its archival lists, a clear indication of its adherence to a New York-centric aesthetic. For Nelson, Sontag’s “feeling management” is inspired by her insight that “emotions are only problematic insofar as they threaten agency, which they always do” (99). Luiselli’s narrator projects an equally circumspect ethics of reading. She notes that, rather than writing her own journal during the trip, her “journals are the things [she] underline[s] in books.” Such underlinings not only construct the self but also respond to a need to reconnect to the “afterglow,” the “powerful but fleeting emotion” that valuable writing generates (58). Rather than a transformative emotion, this generates a “strange, ephemeral afterglow,” “sudden, subtle, and possibly microchemical raptures”

that are “not necessarily illuminating” (59). This scene not only conveys the narrator’s gentle refusal to overidentify with Sontag but also points to the way the novel itself deals with minor feelings generated at a remove from decisive action. Its archiving of cherished texts, for instance, can count as a metaphorical form of underlining, of preserving minor after-affects.

The narrator later uses the Sontag book as an improvised black box where she develops the children’s Polaroid pictures. These pictures are marked by the same affect and temporality as Sontag’s journals: they generate an awkward affect because they point to their subjects’ finitude and present them as if “they are being remembered instead of photographed” (68). If, initially, this stark confrontation with the children’s finitude keeps the narrator from photographing them, from “turn[ing] this particular moment of [their] lives together into a document for a future archive” (60), she gradually accepts the ability of loss and finitude to create a weak, awkward, affective bond. Significantly, she later replaces Sontag’s journal with the *Elegies* as the black box for her children’s Polaroids. The *Elegies* is also an archive: it uses quotes “borrowed from different writers,” “freely translated” or “recombined” (143). The novel’s archival logic, then, also points to its own mode of feeling management: its operation of producing compromised affect rather than cathartic sentimental release, of surrendering strong identification without abandoning a weaker affective relationality.

The second half of the book provides a space in which “lost” children—missing refugee children, child crusaders from an earlier age, two middle-class kids who escape from their parents—can imaginatively encounter one another. The narrator, like the reader, is not part of this zone: the second half of the novel is emphatically shaped as a monologue addressed to the boy’s stepsister (192); narrator and reader at most *overhear* the story. It is only in this part that we read the twelve last elegies. Crucially, the stories of the refugees and the two children only merge *after* these elegies are finished; this merger constitutes an imagined supplement, not a metaleptic leap that magically blends across narrative levels and historical borders. As if to further dispel any illusion that this imaginative supplement generates a substantial empathetic experience, the story culminates in a place called Echo Canyon. That one of the words they shout

there is, precisely, “echo,” further illustrates literature’s status as a self-referential, self-reflexive domain rather than a conduit for the experience of others. And to underscore this analogy between landscape and literature, “Echo Canyon” is also the title of the culminating chapter, which consists of one uninterrupted twenty-page sentence. This device reflects the novel’s ambition to blend the experience of the two children, the two refugees, and the children in the *Elegies*. That it takes the form of the high-modernist trope of the culminating stream-of-consciousness underlines that this imaginative ambition goes together with the novel’s desire to be recognized for its literariness.

Even in the second half of the novel, then, there is no breakthrough to decisive actions and encounters. The novel uses the trope of “reenactment” to refer to the children’s imaginative work. When earlier in the novel they act like refugees (saying “they’re both so thirsty and so hungry it feels like hunger is ripping them apart”), the narrator dismisses their play by calling it “silly and frivolous,” “irresponsible and even dangerous.” She soon corrects herself, wondering that “maybe any understanding, especially historical understanding, requires some sort of reenactment of the past, in its small, outward-branching, and often terrifying possibilities” (155–56). If, as Nelson’s *Tough Enough* argues, there is a crucial tension between understanding and empathy, *Lost Children Archive* is emphatically a novel of understanding—in, for instance, the way it entangles the current border crisis with longer histories of violence against Indigenous communities and immigrants in the United States. Its carefully hedged inclusion of the children’s reenactment of the refugee experience is then a part of its feeling management and its ambition to convey historical understanding. The narrator notes that everything the children reenact in the back of the car “charges our world, if not with ‘meaning and emotion,’ with a weird electricity” (81)—a minor feeling that, even if it does not offer cathartic relief or save the narrator’s marriage, enables rather than replaces understanding.

The Realities of Publishing and the Compromises of Form

The *American Dirt* debacle showed that marketing a novel as serious fiction means it is expected to offer more than emotive relief and to

make “a contribution to a vital understanding” of the issue it engages (Miller). Cummins’s novel fails to live up to that expectation. Luiselli’s formal choices, in contrast—for autofiction, for archive fiction, and for an embedded fairy tale—guarantee that it will meet it. The book’s spectacular afterlife in criticism and the prize circuit has borne this out. This makes it both a significant literary achievement and a privileged work to trace the operation of value in the contemporary literary upmarket field.

I have argued that Luiselli’s decision to operate within a field of restricted emotion—a world of vocational uncertainty, of maps, documents, archives, and images rather than transformative encounters and experiences—is not only a way to shape her ethical commitments but also a crucial part of her effort to participate in a literary upmarket segment where emotive constraint is a key constituent of literary value. Participating in this segment has meant surrendering the negotiation of the tension between Luiselli’s Mexican and cosmopolitan affiliations that were crucial in her earlier works and that, as I have shown, deliberately reflected these works’ publication context by being published by the kind of independent publisher that, in the US literary ecosystem, often serves as an apprenticeship for imprints of major publishers. It has also meant designing literary strategies for blocking all too easy empathetic connections between author, text, audience, and the real world.

The default critical reception of *Lost Children Archive* has been consistently marked by admiration. Still, a number of prominent reviews, notably those by James Wood and Claire Messud, while duly noting the work’s literary merits, have registered dissatisfaction with the novel’s self-imposed imaginative constraints. Wood points to the examples of Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Go, Went, Gone* and Rachel Kushner’s *The Mars Room* to show that, contrary to what *Lost Children Archive* seems to believe, “the scrupulous realization of . . . otherness is compatible with original and serious fiction-making” (Wood), while Messud notes that the novel’s official point that imaginative transformation, “the passage of material through an imaginative crucible, and the creation of something new,” is no longer possible is belied by “Luiselli’s decision to write a novel at all” (Messud). The very intensity with which the embedded children’s story imagines the kind of emotive connections that the rest of the

novel proscribes seems to suggest that *Lost Children Archive* in some way shares these misgivings. This dissatisfaction is even registered on the novel's original back cover copy, where we read that "[t]he children travel with a coyote: a man who speaks to them roughly and frightens them"—a remarkably childish formulation that invites the potential reader of this novel to assume the position of a credulous child. But the advertisement soon corrects itself, promising "a masterful, multilayered novel of echoes and reflections"—reminding the intended reader that the adventure with the coyote is, precisely, an indulgence. This hesitation—between irony and belief, between metafiction and sincerity (Konstantinou 167–76)—has been a prime concern of serious American fiction since the unraveling of postmodernism. That such prominent gatekeepers of contemporary literary upmarket fiction—Wood, Messud, and, indeed, Luiselli—continue to interrogate the limitations and affordances of this settlement shows that literary value is in no way self-evident and is, rather, the object of constant negotiation. That *Lost Children Archive* so prominently elevates that negotiation and hesitation to its organizing principle is what makes it both an exemplary and an exceptional constituent of that field.

University of Leuven

WORKS CITED

- Booker, Sarah. "On Mediation and Fragmentation: The Translator in Valeria Luiselli's *Los ingrátidos*." *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2017, pp. 273–95.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Market of Symbolic Goods." *The Field of Cultural Production*, Columbia UP, 1993, pp. 112–41.
- Bowles, David. "Cummins' Non-Mexican Crap." *Medium.com*, 18 Jan. 2020. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.
- Chadwick, Tom. "'Documentary Evidence': Archival Agency in Hilary Mantel's *A Place of Greater Safety*." *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2020, pp. 165–81.
- Chen, Anelise. "Interview: Valeria Luiselli, Author of *Faces in the Crowd*." *Electric Literature*, 8 Dec. 2014. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.
- Cronan, Todd. "Art and Political Consequence: Brecht and the Problem of Affect." *Nonsite*, vol. 10, 2013. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.
- Cummins, Jeanine. *American Dirt*. Flatiron Books, 2020.

- Cvetkovich, Ann. "Depression is Ordinary: Public Feelings and Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*." *Feminist Theory*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2012, pp. 131–46.
- "Dear Oprah Winfrey: 142 Writers Ask You to Reconsider *American Dirt*." *LitHub*, 29 Jan. 2020. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.
- Emmelhainz, Irmgard. "Compromiso político, empatía y realismo neoliberal en *Carne y arena* de Alejandro González Iñárritu y en *Tell Me How It Ends* de Valeria Luiselli." *Campo de relámpagos*, 5 Nov. 2017. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.
- Enrígue, Álvaro. *Ahora me rindo y eso es todo*. Editorial Anagrama, 2018.
- Enríquez-Ornelas, Julio. "Troubling Border Representations in Mexican Cultural Studies and U.S. American Cultural Studies." *Prose Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2020, pp. 129–48.
- García-Avello, Macarena. "Translating Nations in a Global Era: Valeria Luiselli's Approach to the Child Migrant Crisis." *Prose Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2020, pp. 149–63.
- González Echevarría, Roberto. *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative*. Cambridge UP, 1990.
- Grady, Constance. "The Controversy over the New Immigration Novel *American Dirt*, Explained." *Vox.com*, 30 Jan. 2020. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.
- Gurba, Myriam. "Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature." *Tropics of Meta*, 12 Dec. 2019. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.
- Hemmings, Clare. *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Duke UP, 2010.
- Holm, Nicholas. "Critical Capital: Cultural Studies, the Critical Disposition and Critical Reading as Elite Practice." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 143–66.
- Houser, Tammy Amiel. "Zadie Smith's *NW*: Unsettling the Promise of Empathy." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 58, no. 1, spring 2017, pp. 116–48.
- James, David. "Listening to the Refugee: Valeria Luiselli's Sentimental Activism." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2021, pp. 390–417.
- Konstantinou, Lee. *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction*. Harvard UP, 2016.
- Konstantinou, Lee, and Dan Sinykin. "Literature and Publishing, 1945–2020." *American Literary History*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2021, pp. 225–43.
- Kurnick, David. "Books and Abandonment." *Public Books*, 5 Nov. 2020. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.
- Luiselli, Valeria. *Faces in the Crowd*. Granta, 2013.
- . *Lost Children Archive*. 4th Estate, 2019.
- . *Sidewalks*. Granta, 2013.
- . *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*. 4th Estate, 2017.
- . *The Story of My Teeth*. Coffee House, 2015.
- Marling, William. *Gatekeepers: The Emergence of World Literature and the 1960s*. Oxford UP, 2016.
- Messud, Claire. "At the Border of the Novel." *New York Review of Books*, 21 Mar. 2019. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.

- Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Beauty of a Social Problem*. U of Chicago P, 2015.
- Milian, Claudia. "Crisis Management and the LatinX Child." *English Language Notes*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2018, pp. 8–24.
- Miller, Laura. "Will the *American Dirt* Fiasco Change American Publishing?" *Slate*, 31 Jan. 2020. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.
- Nelson, Deborah. *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil*. U of Chicago P, 2017.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard UP, 2005.
- Pollack, Sarah. "Latin America Translated (Again): Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* in the United States." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 61, no. 3, 2009, pp. 346–65.
- Popkin, Nathaniel. "Translating This Broken World: How to Tell a Refugee's Story." *LitHub*, 26 Apr. 2017. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.
- Reber, Nichole. "Writing Yourself into the World: A Conversation with Valeria Luiselli." *World Literature Today*, Jan. 2016. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.
- Samuelson, Cheyla Rose. "Towards a Transnational Criticism: Bridging the Mexico-US Divide on Valeria Luiselli." *Chasqui*, vol. 49, no. 2, pp. 176–94.
- Sánchez Prado, Ignacio M. "Commodifying Mexico: On *American Dirt* and the Cultural Politics of a Manufactured Bestseller." *American Literary History*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 371–93.
- . "El efecto Luiselli: Notas sobre la nueva literatura mexicana y la lengua inglesa." *World Editors: Dynamics of Global Publishing and the Latin American Case between the Archive and the Digital Age*, edited by Gustavo Guerrero, Benjamin Loy, and Gesine Müller, De Gruyter, 2021, pp. 95–108.
- . "Signification and the Latin American Novel Form: Reflections after Fernanda Melchor, Ángel Rama, and Louis Hjelmslev." *Forma*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2020, pp. 63–97.
- . *Strategic Occidentalism: On Mexican Fiction, the Neoliberal Book Market, and the Question of World Literature*. Northwestern UP, 2018.
- Sapiro, Gisèle. "Translation and Symbolic Capital in the Era of Globalization: French Literature in the United States." *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2015, pp. 320–46.
- Sehgal, Parul. "A Mother and Son, Fleeing for Their Lives over Treacherous Terrain." *New York Times*, 17 Jan. 2020. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.
- Seltzer, Mark. *The Official World*. Duke UP, 2016.
- Serpell, Namwali. "The Banality of Empathy." *New York Review of Books*, 2 Mar. 2019. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.
- Serpell, Namwali, and Maria Tumarkin. "Unethical Reading and the Limits of Empathy." *Yale Review*, vol. 108, no. 4, 2020, pp. 192–207.
- Shapiro, Lila. "Blurbed to Death: How One of Publishing's Most Hyped Books Became Its Biggest Horror Story—And Still Ended Up a Best Seller." *Vulture*, 5 Jan. 2021. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.
- Sinykin, Dan. "The Conglomerate Era: Publishing, Authorship, and Literary Form, 1965–2007." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2017, pp. 462–91.

- Stuelke, Patricia. "Writing Refugee Crisis in the Age of Amazon: *Lost Children Archive's* Reenactment Play." *Genre*, vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 43–66.
- Télez, Jorge. "La otra historia de mis dientes." *Letras Libres*, 19 Feb. 2016. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.
- Vermeulen, Pieter. "New York, Capital of World Literature? On Holocaust Memory and World Literary Value." *Anglia*, vol. 135, no. 1, 2017, pp. 67–85.
- Willem, Bieke. "A 'New Continent of Data': Pola Oloixarac's *Dark Constellations* and the Latin American Jungle Novel." *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2020, pp. 129–45.
- Wood, James. "Writing about Writing about the Border Crisis." *New Yorker*, 28 Jan. 2019. Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.