Chasing After Life: Migrating Childhoods in Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*

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Abstract

This essay engages the border-crossing poetics of transnational migration through an engagement with Valeria Luiselli's fictional depictions of migrant children in her novel *Lost Children Archive*. Engaging the migrating and intertextual forum of children's witness and memory in the novel, I follow Luiselli's moving depiction of child migrants as wholly undocumented and lost people outside the adult world of articulation. I argue that Luiselli's novel documentation conjures up historical, contemporary, and autobiographical memories of migrant and displaced children comprising the colonial story of modernism. I consider children's articulations, construction and witness of migration through my readings of the stories of migrating childhood delivered by Luiselli's fictional depiction. I find, Luiselli's moving rendition of children's migration presents new challenges to educational and popular discourses of childhood, migration, and the responsibilities of the adult communities.

Keywords: Transnational migration, migrant children, autobiographical memories

Human migration is autobiographical as Hannah Arendt (1943) depicts in her sole autobiographical essay, *We Refugees*.

We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings. We left our relatives in Polish ghettos and our best friends have been killed in concentration camps, and that means the rupture of our private lives. (pp. 264-265)

Although the circumstances that force one to move off one's land differ, as Arendt (1943) shows, each of us migrants have a story to tell in and of every domain of human existence. The facts of exile become the fabric of our lives. Feelings of irreparable loss invade our insides. Stories of displacement are the textures of living we give ourselves and children to survive the ordinary and the unimaginable.

Every people, even those who claim original status to a place, are affected by local and global waves of migration. To express the disorienting effects of migration, we tell stories of who we were, we are, and we are becoming in real time and place. Children affected by migration begin to formulate these stories from before, during, and after their parents' flights from home and lands (Mishra Tarc, 2015). My family was the first in centuries, on both my paternal and maternal side, to be uprooted from their ancestral lands and traditions in West Bengal, India. The stories of my displacement preceded my birth. As children, my siblings and I pieced together the story of my

parents' departure through their expressions of hope and agony articulating their 'reasons' for leaving home. With little historical or factual information, we gleaned what happened to them through our imaginations. Speculative gleanings became the grounds for the stories we children of economic migrants told of our parents and our own lives.

Modern history finds children forcibly subject to migration by governments and families. Often overlooked, by scholars and historians alike, is the fact that Western modernity is instantiated by the mass and forcible movement of children (Dunne, 2006). Child and family displacement is a primary form of nation-building (Prout, 2011). Adults of the past and this century foreclose the fact that modernity coincides with and is traumatically marked by the global movement of millions of children forced by circumstance, war, settlement, or labor to be separated from their families and homelands (Briggs, 2016). Children's displacement, in many ways, exemplify the limits of humanity in what Toni Morrison (2019) describes as, "what adults do to children" (p. 43).

Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* puts children into history and back in the modern picture of humanity. In her first book, a collection of migrant children's interviews at the US border, *Tell me how it Ends*, Luiselli tells us:

Children chase after life, even if that chase might end up killing them. Children run and flee. They have an instinct for survival, perhaps, that allows them to endure almost anything just to make it to the other side of horror, whatever may be waiting there. (pp. 18-19)

The fictional novel, *Lost Children Archive* picks up where the real-life interviews end: as a moving depiction of children for centuries chasing after life despite all the adult world inflicts on them.

Luiselli's novel does not appropriate the actual history of real displaced children for adult purposes. The histories Luiselli offers are not official nor are they individual. Instead, the reconstructed childhoods are through the arduous and unthinkable journeys children are forced to make and endure without adult or parental protection. The speculative retelling is to give a sense that children are real people and that their struggles ought to be voiced and recorded as much as those of adults.

They had walked, and swam, and hidden, and run. They had boarded trains and spent nights sleepless atop gondolas, looking up at the barren godless sky. The trains, like beasts, drilled and scratched their way across jungles, across cities, across places difficult to name. Then, aboard this last train, they had come to this desert, where the incandescent light bent the sky into a full arch, and time had also, bent back on itself. Time, in the desert, was an ongoing present tense.

They wake.

They watch.

They listen.

They wait. (*LCA*, p. 312)

The portrait of children lost not only to human communities, but to time, their families, and social and political circumstance disorients and dislocates the reader. Throughout the novel, the reader is made to wonder, search out, and question: What children, and whose childhood is the novel recovering? Using the real and fictional re-documentation of records, the novel reads into the reader's sense of lost childhood, flashing by in migrations across time, resounding with forcible removal from family, community and loved ones. These speculative histories of lost children and childhoods impress on current generations in ways seen and unseen in our current time. Summoned by the novel, the reader's migrating childhood, overwhelmed by the memory of displacement, looms and festers and can interfere with our reading. And as the novel reads us, readers who were once children removed symbolically, culturally, or actually from our families, into remembering, we can feel migrating childhoods come to characterize the kinds of humans we once were, are and have become.

The plot of this auto-fiction, follows the "road trip" taken by two 'American' researchers from New York City to an unknown place in the Arizona desert where the US bleeds into Mexico. The zone of displacement at the arbitrary and fragile border of nations is also the place where childhood and adult interest meet and collide. Both adults are in search of lost histories of colonized peoples—the father seeks to retrieve soundscapes of erased American Indian tribes, and the mother, the stories of refugee children at the border. In the backseat of the car are the researchers' children referred to only as the boy and the girl. The boy is a child of the father's previous marriage, while the girl belongs to both. The children are in the age of latency, what Freud (1933/1965) termed the glorious period of childhood between 8-12 years where uninhibited learning makes a brief post-infancy appearance (p.110). No details of the family other than the relation are given and only through their present and fragile kinship ties. Much like the school curriculum, we have no access to their backstories as characters or a family—the only history given is of, and from, the fictional real-time of the novel.

The reader comes to know the family through its experiences of tensions and turmoil common to most. The family conflicts are of the parents, who are no longer the young lovers and thinkers they once were, beset with the rigors and responsibilities of family life. Consumed with the sense of urgency their working lives bring, the children are left to their own to make sense of the worlds they live. The children absorb their parents' affects and conflicts as they experience them as peripheral to the importance of their adult work and life. And yet, it is from the children's vantage point that clarity on the family story of migration is given to the reader, one that adults do not seem to see, hear, or understand in the piercing way that children observe, listen to, and articulate.

Following Luiselli's attuned depiction of the ideas, emotions, and expressions of children, my paper calls for a novel way of reading and engaging children's knowledge that can support the education of teachers and adults working with children. The memories of childhoods lost to settler and colonial decimation, slavery, world war, ethnic conflict, and genocides are caught between two centuries of traumatic history, barely accessible to this generation but also failed to be completely repressed (Malibou, 2012; Fenton 2018). This history of human harm continues to afflict, wound, and diminish humane consciousness in ways unseen but viciously enacted on the most vulnerable of earth's creatures, including our own young, and the earth itself. But most of all, in a practice of affective reading as hearing children's witness, I attend closely to Luiselli's summoning of lost and migrating childhoods. I include in this gathering and

collecting, the reader's, my own, memories. Through this aesthetically moving rendition of lost children, childhood is reconstructed from multiple sources: personal memory, historical memory, fiction and the 'real' present. I suggest in learning to read and provide a hearing of children's witness of the worlds they are made to inhabit and flee; adults may learn to take responsibility for the lives of this and our generation of migrating children.

Migrating Children: Centuries of Forcibly Removed, Displaced, and Exiled Children

Mass migration is endemic to our time-shifts, not only people, but worlds. The mass movement of people during the last and this century, brought about by colonial institutions, devastatingly devise borders and nation states that radically altered human understandings of the meanings of earth. In the modern telling of human history, earth is as property, as something men own (UN 2009). This distorting of the earth into property reorients personhood to citizenship and documentation, rather than temporary and unique inhabitants of land and planet, sharing it with other creatures and forms of life. The earth as owned, splinters our personhood, turns homelands into gated communities, sequesters our homes with closed doors keeping the world at bay. It separates parents from their children. It turns adults on our unaccompanied young. It causes us to pillage, 'settle,' and destroy the very ground meant to sustain the earth and all its creatures.

Modernity and colonialism, Walter Mignolo (2019) suggests, are twin pillars of Western civilizations. Through the novel, Luiselli reminds us of a third: the political and *educational* extraction, movement, removal and extinction of children of colonized people (Willinsky, 1998; Woolfe, 2006). Modernity removes and rips colonized children, psychosocially, politically, historically, and actually, from their parents through violent educational project with transgenerational effects (Brendan, 2019). Children experience maternal/familial separation, D. W. Winnicott (1965) reminds us, as a catastrophic event, one that initiates, on personal, historical, and social political registers, a total "loss of continuity of being" (p. 591). Without the potential of the significant other's inheritance of attachment, of love, Winnicott (1965) writes, "there is no continuity of being; instead the personality becomes built on the basis of reactions to environmental impingement" (p. 591). We need only to think of: Indigenous children taken from the land and their families and placed in residential schools; Black children enslaved and shipped across the Atlantic on boats; Jewish children subject to mass torture and orphaned after the Shoah, or British children sent alone by sea from the colonial empires to settle the colonies, to find generational evidence of the long-term and wounding effects family separation can have on new and each generation of a people (Morrison, 1983; Malabou 2012; Fenton 2019).

The histories of removal and dispersal of children from enslaved, colonized and nearly eradicated peoples has ongoing and transgenerational effect as Laura Briggs argues in her book, *Somebody's Children*. Residential and histories of enslavement deemed to be past, are mechanisms of modernism insidiously passed through the tearing apart and re-instituting of families, ties in the mold of white heteronormative kinship. If we open up the historical record, Briggs (2016) claims, "we find that the conditions under which Black and Native women in the United States and Latina American women lost their children into 'adoptions' [are] troubling" (p. 18), scare quotes added. Irreparable are the traumatic effects of loss of children for families, communities, and entire peoples. And as Briggs (2016) points out, the loss of children to vulnerability and extremity repeats in contemporary forms of forced family separation akin to those unthinkable ones carried

out by adult overseers of residential schools and enslavement. And like these histories, the present-day removals of children from their families speak little of what becomes of children adopted into white and middle-class families and society, and permanently removed from their own peoples. In a sense, the situation of the transnational adoptee gives researchers psychical access and pause when engaging the traumatic situations of children, at the borders, separated from their parents.

Children, as figures of existence, are often presented in education and critical scholarship as a-historical, a-political, singular and spectacular beings, rather than central to the political and social landscape of the time. White, educational or child-free scholars are most guilty of repeatedly refiguring children into objects of desire and/or study rather than people in their own right (See Edelman, 2004; Burman 2017). Modernity in the Americas, for example, could not be brought about without the global and forcible removal of Indigenous and Black children from their parents (Woolfe, 2006). Not only are children figures of adult desire and projection (Steedman, 1995), but adults use and exploit projections of children, the name of children, the labor of children, the thought of children, for their own personal and political ends.

Although erased, the transportation and labor of millions of displaced children plays a major role in the modern-making of the Americas. Patrick Woolfe (2006) points out a range of thinkers, including—“W. E. B. Dubois, Hannah Arendt and Aimé Césaire—have argued, some of the core features of modernity were pioneered in the colonies” (p. 34). Children seeking refuge, according to Luiselli, are a part and parcel of the settler colonial history of making way for and clearing and settling the land in the Americas. Or as Joshua Whitehead (2016) argues:

Filius nullius, or nobody’s child, intersects with the term, *terra nullius*, or nobody’s land in a way that inextricably links native land to the body. Thus, adopting the body is a means of adopting the land. And, moreover, acquiring Native babies became a means to acquiring land to secure settler colonialism and one’s own claim to their land. (n.p.)

The immense role of children in colonial projects globally have yet to be recognized, understood, documented and analyzed. This is partly because the lives of children are left out of adult theories of social and political life. As well, children are assimilated beyond recognition of their ancestors in adulthood. And, the intentional elimination of colonized children and women is buried in these erased historical accounts of their lives. As Nakano Glenn (2015) claims:

A little-known aspect of genocidal raids and warfare was the enslavement of indigenous survivors, particularly women and children. In colonial New England, the selling of Indian slaves on the international market in the Caribbean and South America helped defray the costs of the Powhatan Wars. Settler men spoke of their desire for Native American women whom they could use as domestic servants and sex slaves. (p. 58)

These domesticating histories of Indigenous and Black children, recorded in the Americas, coincide with their entries into public residential and segregated educational settings. Modern institutions of Western education consolidate the genocidal colonial projects determined to rid, enslave, and eliminate first and foreign people’s children from the land. And while the settler colonial histories of racism and genocide waged on Indigenous, Black and people of colour and their children, are distinct, as Nakano Glenn (2015) argues, “the structure of U.S. settler colonialism rests on social, economic, and political underpinnings that link racisms” (p. 63).

The migratory structure of modernism brought about by imperial occupation also rests on familial and educational underpinnings that link the childhoods of Indigenous, Black and people of color in the Americas. Without citation to these histories of Indigenous children and the descendants of slaves and indentured laborers, Luiselli's novel excavates childhoods taken, destroyed, and disappeared by imperial projects and from historical records. As she recovers the nameless histories of lost children in the "novel," we come to find that the displacement of children is not a new phenomenon although every generation presents it as such. We find these tiny displaced beings having the common feature of foreignness or strangeness bestowed onto them by the white man. And we learn, that for whatever reason, the situation of children seeking refuge with and without their parents, over generations, has failed to rouse the adult community to attention or action. Despite the adult communities, personal, political and scholarly investments in children, the suffering of children remains a non-event for leaders in every country of the world. Parents, overwhelmed by their own homesickness, can also be unaware or unconcerned with the emotional states of their own children who live on, in-between and at borders between homes. But all children, even children with parents and privilege, the author finds, are deeply affected by the situation of being a child subjected, perhaps even lost, to the affective demands of adults with no or little regard for their emergent personhood.

Recovering Childhood's Losses

For the past twenty years, my work as teacher, researcher, and mother has been lodged in-between this question of response and non-response of the adult community to the social and political violence capturing the lives of children. I have found the dead silence and utter helplessness held by adults towards the plight of children puzzling and alarming. "Children," Morrison (1983) claims, "are the most scorned people on earth" (p. 103). Here, she is not simply speaking about children's vulnerabilities to adult abuse. As persons in and of their own right, children's thoughts, feelings, and ideas on social and political life that concern and affect them are diminished, overlooked, or silenced.

Without historical, political or particular specificity, *Lost Children Archive* attempts to account for the stories of children separated from families. The stories of the children include: the mother's witness of her own children; the textual records of children of past migrations; the memories of two lost girl children the mother interviews in NYC; the news of children the family hears broadcasted on the radio. This affective exchange of official knowledge between children and parents, in the novel, illuminate the highly charged impact of lost children on both:

The only thing that parents can really give their children are the little knowledges: this is how you cut your own nails, this is the temperature of a real hug, this is how you untangle knots in your hair, this is how I love you. And what children give their parents, in return, is something less tangible but at the same time larger and more lasting, something like a drive to embrace life fully and understand it, on their behalf, so they can try to explain it to them, pass it down to them 'with acceptance and without rancor' as James Baldwin once wrote, but also with a certain rage and fierceness. Children force parents to go out looking for a specific pulse, a gaze, a rhythm, the right way of telling the story, knowing that stories don't fix anything or save anyone but maybe make the world both more complex and more tolerable. And sometimes, just sometimes, more beautiful. (*LCA*, pp. 185-186)

The stories of these countless, nameless children from different social and historical contexts blur into each other as Lusielli's novels assemble and recreate their journeys of migration on land, across deserts, from no man's land by foot, train to places where their dreams can come true.

Mouths open in the night, they sleep [...] From behind the rim of his blue cap, the man in charge counts them—six children, seven minus one. Boys, girls: lips chapped, cheeks cracked. They occupy the entire space there, stiff but warm, lined up like new corpses along the metal roof of the train gondola. (*LCA*, p. 314)

Throughout the novel, perilous, dangerous journeys taken to a new land by “somebody's children” are intertextually connected, yet depicted, without reference to history (Briggs, 2016). No contextualization of the children's arrivals without adult accompaniment to safe havens are given. Rather, these journeys make citation to the present-day situation of known and unknown children similarly rounded up by adults, mouths open, braving the elements, some disappearing the moment they arrive.

Luiselli's historical excavation is radically unlike other fact-finding missions that try to restore the person, the politics, or the past but instead invokes, in a sum, childhoods taken in and by colonial projects. The fragments she assembles and indexes, acts as an addendum to an untold and never-ending story archiving the ongoing situations of millions of children rounded up and trafficked, lost and found within the modern world of adults. The meta-story is of the ongoing exploitation of children in adult affairs without a care or thought given to their personhood. The first readers of their mother's piece-meal and recuperated history, are not academics or adult readers of newspapers, but the researcher's children privy to their parents' adult conversations on children, on migration, on history, on social and political life. And the children, it turns out, have their own thoughts and agency on children's matters of vital importance to them in the world. It is in fact the children that offer the mother the new category of children, “lost children,” instead of using the political word “refugee” circulated in the media.

Whenever the boy and girl talk about child refugees, I realize now, they call them ‘the lost children.’ I suppose the word ‘refugee’ is more difficult to remember. And even if the term ‘lost’ is not precise, in our intimate family lexicon, the refugees become known as the ‘lost children.’ And in a way, I guess they are lost children. They are children who have lost the right to a childhood. (*LCA*, p. 75)

Throughout the novel, the mother wrangles with the highly political term “refugee,” the only word she, the main protagonist, a documentarist has at her disposal to search for and re-find the lives of children massively arriving at the US border. It is a term she takes for granted until one day her daughter asks “from the backseat” of her mother's attention: “What does refugee mean, Mama?” in the curious way of all children (*LCA*, p. 47). And, as with all adults taken aback by a child's hard questions, the mother and researcher finds herself struggling to fashion a response.

A refugee is someone who has already arrived somewhere, in a foreign land, but must wait for an indefinite time before actually, fully having arrived. Refugees wait in detention centers, shelters, or camps; in federal custody and under the gaze of armed officials. They wait in long lines for lunches, for a bed to sleep in, wait with their hands raised to ask if they can use a bathroom. They wait to be let out, wait for a telephone call, for someone to claim or pick them up. And then there are refugees who are lucky enough

to be finally reunited with their families, living in a new home [...] They wait for their dignity to be restored. (*LCA*, pp. 48-49)

Choosing to “soften” these harsh details of a refugee child’s existence, the mother supposes she can just tell her: “A child refugee is someone who waits” but then decides to water down the facts of a child’s bare existence even more: “A refugee is someone who has to find a new home” (*LCA*, p. 49).

As Jacqueline Bhabha (2009) notes in her rights-based re-reading of Arendt’s essay, children are left out of history and the picture it paints of the refugee. As such, Arendt only makes mention of children through the autobiographical spectres of her own childhood held by the adult refugee. She assumes, because of its political categorization that a refugee can only be an adult, as children are protected by their parents. It is too much to think of children whose parents are killed or taken from them. And perhaps, this is why adults cannot think of adult-less children seeking refuge at all. But the assumption that all children find political protection living in a world of adults/parents do not align historically with the facts: for this and the last century, and particular in times of World War, *it has been the norm* for unaccompanied and parentless children to be unthinkable forced into exile, to seek refuge in strange lands. And as I write, children alone and accompanied are forcibly overseen by men and the border en masse (Bhabha, 2018). Their cruel detainment attests to the dire fact of children’s existence (with or without parents). And what is to become of all the children who are irreparably separated from their parents at the Mexico/US border? How do children make sense of the worst thing that every child imagines could happen to them: losing their parents and thus falling out of existence (Winnicott, 1965)?

Recovering Lost Childhoods: What Children Know

Lost Children Archive alerts readers that children presumed to be oblivious already know a thing or two about lost children. The fictional children are shown to be insatiably curious about their parents’ research of lost refugee children and Indigenous tribes. Under the influence of their parent-researcher discussions and positions, the children figure out how to make do with the bit and pieces of histories in which they are caught. As the children are steered into their parents’ adult projects that are not of their making, unwittingly, they become little researchers of their own, backseat drivers of and to their parents’ interests:

We realize that they have been listening, more attentively than we thought, to the stories of Chief Nana, Chief Loco, Chihuahua, Geronimo—the last of the free Chiricahua’s—as well as to the stories we are following on the news, about the child refugees at the border. But they combine the stories, confuse them. They come up with possible endings and counterfactual histories.

What if Geronimo had never surrendered to the white-eyes?

What if he’s won that war?

The lost children would be the rulers of Apacheria! (*LCA*, p. 75)

The children’s questions about their parents’ interests, the refugee children and the Apache tribes, are remarkably sophisticated. The parents are surprised with the knowledge their small children have acquired as they assume they are not listening to, or cannot understand, what they

say. But children hear and take in their parents' every word. Playfully experimenting with and mixing up the "learned" projects of the researcher parents, the children come to conclusions that open up other possibilities of and for history than those put forth by the fact-driven parents. They make links between mixed colonial histories demarcating the genocides committed against American Indians, the lost children seeking safety at the American border, and their own childhood wracked by their parents researching of these lost children (Rothberg, 2009). In their imaginative play with colonial stories, the children enact the multi-directions of historical violence that Michael Rothberg (2009) argues arises when we find ourselves unintentionally or deliberately implicated in and/or reckoning with traumatic past. Through their child's play with testimony, they become what he calls "implicated subjects" (Rothberg, 2014), those who partake in traumatic history without directly experiencing it.

The category of implicated subjects emerges in relation to both historical and contemporary scenarios of violence: that is, it describes the indirect responsibility of subjects situated at temporal or geographic distance from the production of social suffering. It helps direct our attention to the conditions of possibility of violence as well as its lingering impact and suggests new routes of opposition. Like the proximate term *complicity* (See Sanders), but with more conceptual flexibility, *implication* draws attention to how we are *entwined with and folded into* ("im-plied in") histories and situations that surpass our agency as individual subjects. (n.p.)

Children are yet-to-be implicated subjects for the ease in which they take on and, in their selves, histories of harm. The boy in the novel takes personally into his growing self the ghosts of lost children his mother researches, so much so, that they become re-enacted in fits of anxiety and questions to his mother filled with dread for his own child existence:

But what if also we were left alone, without you and Papa?

That would never happen.

But it happened to Manuela's two girls, he says. And now they're lost right?

How do you know about that? I ask him, perhaps naively.

I heard you talking to Pa about it. I wasn't spying. You always talk about it.

Well that won't happen to you. (*LCA*, p. 160)

But the boy knows all too well despite the mother's dismissals, and incapacity to hear, anything can happen to a child at any time. Unlike adults, children show little of the denials, fragilities, resistances, fury that adults show when asked to consider their historical or societal place in wrongdoing to others. Perhaps, their identifications with oppression are a part of the child's becoming human condition. Like other oppressed groups, children's lives are at the hands of another: parents and adults that make their lives possible and filled with suffering. Winnicott (1945) suggests that children identify with animal and human suffering because they have "felt it before" as a leading cause and condition of their existence. In a sense, children waver between two poles of implicatedness that Rothberg (2014) seeks to reckon within his posing of the implicated subject: precarity and complicity. As such, more than any other witness, children's testimony provide adults with an opportunity to observe:

how we are enmeshed in histories and actualities beyond our apparent and immediate reach, how we help produce history through impersonal participation rather than direct perpetration. It shifts attention to the other side of precariousness: to complicity and privilege. (n.p.)

Through the children's pretend and play timelines of past and present historical wrongs, the memory of historical traumas blend into each other, each impelling one to hear the other. Without equivocation, the reader feels the demands to and of implications the children make to the adults to find and make the links between the lost Indigenous peoples and the children separated from parents at the border, and their own situation, of being in the backseat of their parents' lives.

Unbeknownst to the parents, the children understand the implicit workings of colonial history inaccessible to adults and feel responsible (Phillips, 1994; Mishra Tarc, 2016). They hear history and fear for their and other children's lives. "What's going to happen?" the fictional children ask, is a question every child has asked their mother when put to sleep in dusty motel rooms filled with ghosts. When she replies, "Nothing will happen," the children do not believe her, their own mother: "They cannot sleep. They're scared. Can I chupe my thumb?", the girl child asks? (*LCA*, p. 159). The novel depicts children as riveted to particular valences of abusive power and adult's sexual, physical, and emotional expressions and acts of violence as a matter critical to their survival (Bruehl Young, 2012). Children, after all, as Elizabeth Young Bruehl argues in *Childism*, are the prototype and testing ground for brutal and violent subjugation of a people's original personhood. The reader gains a glimpse of the colonial violence children somehow know through the half-thoughts and questions they express in response to their parents' discussions of other children. The children's participation in their parents' world is the peripheral, yet focalizing, movement in the novel. In this most marginal sense, Luiselli's gripping telling of migrating childhoods, places children's knowledge at the center of the child refugee crisis. The novel implicates the reader as it describes the adult communities in centuries of incapacity to feel for and with the lives of real children with and to devastating effect.

Rejecting the news, the children, and particularly the boy child begins to strongly identify with the ghosts of children he has never met, except through the bombardment of daily reports circulating from the radio to him inside of the car. The stories of the 'lost children' begin to take their toll on the boy child as he begins to re-enact the scenes he hears on the news in pretend games with his sister in the car.

Whenever the boy starts pretending, in the backseat, that he and his sister have left us, run away, and that they're also lost children now travelling alone through a desert without adults, I want to stop him short. I want to tell them to stop playing this game. Tell them that their game is irresponsible and even dangerous. But I find no strong argument, no solid reasons to build a dike around their imagination. Maybe any understanding, especially historical understanding, requires some kind of re-enactment of the past, in its small, outward-branching, and often terrifying possibilities. He continues and I let him continue. He tells his sister that they're walking under the blazing sun, and she picks up his image, says:

We're walking in the deserts and it's like we're walking on the sun and not under it.

And soon we will die of thirst and hunger, he says.

Yes she replies and the beasts will eat us up unless we get to Echo Canyon soon. (*LCA*, p. 156)

The recurring and relentless scenes of lost children the researchers' children are made to bear witness is one iteration of the many taking place world-wide in torn apart nations: Sudan, Kenya, Iraq, Palestine, and Syria. Historically the scene is not new. Since the Second World War, unaccompanied children have been moved by and from their parents and homelands by train, ship, air and foot. Today, astonishing numbers (aprox. 30 million) of displaced and undocumented children fill our news feeds. And the situations of children made to face family separation, violence from strangers, and the trauma that ensues is not much different than those of the past. If, as Salman Rushdie (1985) declared, "the migrant is, perhaps, the central or defining figure of the twentieth century," the unaccompanied child migrant is the defining figure of ours. Though overwhelming, not much is said about children's situation of abject abandonment by the adult community at near crisis proportions. Children are bombarded with news of the suffering of their own kind, and yet there is no forum given to them to speak of it. It is difficult to know how to talk to children about children in circumstances of forced exile, displacement, and asylum when most adults act as if these children do not exist. And if one was to speak of lost children, what language would one use? What discourse, political or personal or some combination of both resonates with the particular sensitivities and social locations of children?

In Luiselli's telling the "responsible adult", in this case the mother, is put upon to give reasons for why children are unthinkable separated from their families to children. Consumed with self-importance and untold transferences to the plight of the migrant children she meets, she is unable to hear the child's distress with losing their families echoing in the son's witness to her work. These inaccessible feelings float through her son's understanding of how to respond to children that are irrecoverably lost—which is simple and devastating: to go find them himself and return them to their parents. Through the trip, the boy childishly conjures up his lost child rescue mission. Despite the clues he continually drops, the parents have no idea what he is up to. When the son, the child, informs the mother that documenting the lost children's existence is not enough she realizes, "He's right. What does it mean to document something, an object, our lives, a story? Still, she has no comprehension of what he is silently willing her to do: stop documenting and find the real, alive, lost children and return them to their parents" (p. 55).

Migrating Childhoods

As a child of immigrants, I can remember quite vividly the pull of possibility and despondency that marked by a displaced childhood. My siblings and I spent our summers outdoors, on our own, piecing together the problem of not knowing who or where we are. We gained lyrical bits and pieces of our historical past through my mother's musical recollections of her Bengal past, brought home to us in Canada, via songs of Tagore, muffled sobs in her bedroom, translucent sheets of paper floating in waves across the sea. While our mother read blue aerograms to us in a language we could not comprehend, we three pieced together a place and people we imagined we belonged to. And while we were physically safe, unlike so many other children in situations of migration and refuge, we felt like we too were seeking a form of asylum, constantly split between us and them, here and there, belonging and not belonging to a cold, hard place my father sent my mother and her children to live. These feelings of what I remember, knowing as a child, surfaced during my engagement with Valeria Luiselli's novel.

Childhoods migrating from everywhere and nowhere overwhelmed my reading, my real and imagined reckoning with the plight of children detained at borders and displaced from home. In its aesthetic of swirling histories, the novel reads us, travels within us, is addressed to us, adult children of immigrants and refugees.

At its core, human migration is a displacement from the inside out. Movement for survival seems so much easier for animals, rather than human children. Children, dependent on parents, are unable to find their way in the world until they become adults. In this sense, children are the sorriest case of refugees. Overlooked by both state and the family, children are not only paperless and stateless but homeless and without personhood.

When the news of children fleeing homelands worldwide began to hit global media twenty years ago, I was struck compulsively, as is the mother, to tune in:

Wherever I can find news of the situation at the border, I raise the volume and we all listen: hundreds of children arriving alone, every day, thousands every week. The broadcasters are calling it an immigration crisis. A mass influx of children, they call it, a sudden surge. They are undocumented, they are illegals, they are aliens, some say. They are refugees, legally entitled to protection, others argue [...] Everyone has an opinion on the issue. No one agrees on anything. (*LCA*, p. 39-40)

As I read these words, I can hear my mother's voice whisper: 'They are *children*,' as she did when we first met the gaunt and empty-eyed faces of Vietnamese children that survived a perilous trip by boat to Canada. Just *children*, she said holding my sister and I in her tight grip as her tremulous cries hit our evacuated chests. "No one agrees on anything" when it comes to refugee children, Luiselli writes, but I remember as a child that I agreed with my mother: I felt it was dead wrong for children to have suffered such a journey. Is it inevitable that a daughter of a forever-to-be displaced immigrant mother fall into the wide-eyes children unable to fully process the enormity of their situations? I remember my mother making us embrace emaciated, war-stricken children from a country I did not even know existed. I wondered what were they thinking? Did they even feel like children my mother said they were? Viewing these lost children, did my mother unthinkably wonder as the fictional mother does as I do now: "I wonder if they would survive in the hands of coyotes, and what would happen to them if they had to cross the desert alone? Were they to find themselves alone, would our own children survive?" (*LCA*, p. 117).

What does a child know of fleeing war on a boat with their mother in the dead of night?, I think, as I view the pictures of children arriving en masse at the shores of Lesbos, Greece. I know from my own history that children are simply glad not to be left alone and behind. This is a kind of knowledge worth studying I have come to learn, the child's knowledge of what it means to fight for existence, recognition, response at the earliest age. How then to account for these childhoods lost to unthinkable circumstances is the question that has haunted my scholarship for the past twenty years. It is one that I cannot conceive without falling back into my own childhood, marked by the inner struggle to live and survive a rupture that only children of internally displaced peoples, immigrants, migrants, refugees, are privy to. I strongly feel, without knowing for sure, the novelist driven by a similar compulsion to remember what must be forgotten, what is lost (mothers, family, history, homeland) in order to survive lost childhoods.

When I write of the children in my studies, stories of children I do not know and will never meet, I know I am partly writing for me. I am writing for my mother who I still do not know, barely out of childhood, forced to leave her tiny village. I am writing for all the childhoods erased by the feeling that they could never measure up to the images they are given of it in new countries composed of people who fear and do not love them. The blurring of interests, or ethics, of memories is common to those attempting to account for the existence of migrant children in ways that do justice to their lives. The study of children is fraught with adult politics that those deeply engaged in the endeavor often cannot acknowledge without succumbing to their own histories, desires, and wishes for childhoods long-lost.

At the end of the novel, the boy gives up on the adults, the politics, and their interests. He decides he will recover the lost children with his sister. In his zeal to right the wrongs done to children, the boy and the girl run away from the parents into the dangers of the Arizona desert. As they become lost themselves, the text cries out its horror and outrage in an unpunctuated 20-page single sentence. The child's unthinkable act howls through the reader's breathless reading for hope beyond hope: the adults will notice, the adults will care, the adults will do something, so the children will be found alive, unharmed, returned safe and sound to the mother's arms again. The pages run on and on as images of the narrator's lost boy and girl blur into the faces of hundreds of children dropped off, abandoned, and lost in the desert. Eventually the boy and girl are found but to no one's relief. After losing the children, the family is never the same.

Every removal of a child from their birthright and homeland displaces the child from herself and family. In the end, the novelist and the reader are left to reckon with who gets to really tell the story of what children lost to their family, their history, their world must endure. The mother decides it is the boy, it is the child's version of lost children that matters, the story she is unable to tell.

It's his version of the story that will outlive us; his version that will remain and be passed down. Not only his version of our story, of who we were as a family, but also his version of others' stories, like those of the lost children. He'd understood everything much better than I had, than the rest of us had. He'd listened to things, looked at them—really looked, focused, pondered—and little by little, his mind had arranged all the chaos around us into a world. (*LCA*, p. 185)

Through the harrowing road trip, the mother and the reader come to understand what the child's voluntary escape from the adults signifies: a chance to express his upset and those of lost children, with a threatening adult-world on his terms, in his way, in his words and actions. The story reminds us that giving children a hearing to the most brutal of man-made conditions can reorient ourselves to starting again in a different way. This is certainly true for the fictional family whose lives are irrevocably altered by the temporary loss of their children. And so it should be for all of us gripped in a moment marked by children's utter and senseless suffering at the borders of nations worldwide.

Forced migration, as heard and witnessed through the eyes and lives of children, can reset the clock on human history. Children's witness asks us to redress the lives of present children wracked by new forms of colonialism that are disparate, global, abstract, environmental and perhaps with the worst effects on the generations to come (Derrida, 2001; Appadurai, 2008). The novel suggests that redressing children's lives requires serious study of how the child is

historically used in colonial and adult political projects that do them and their worlds harm. And it asks all adults to hear children's witness of the worst worlds they live because, as the novel reminds us through the words of music composer, R. Murray Schafer, "hearing is a way of touching at a distance" (*LCA*, p. 71):

Listening to them now, I realize they are the ones telling the story of the lost children. They've been telling it along, over and over in the back of the car, for the past three weeks. But I hadn't listened to them carefully enough [...] Their voices, the only way to listen to voices that are not audible; children's voices, no longer audible, because those children are no longer here. I realize now, perhaps too late, that my children's backseat games and re-enactments were maybe the only way to really tell the story of the lost children, a story about children sent missing on their journeys North. (*LCA*, p. 180)

Studies of migrant children's knowledge disrupt the 'new' emergence of childhood studies as the "next" frontier of thought and knowledge. It intervenes with the idea that adult ideas, memory, and production ought to take precedent over what children in the backseat of adult affairs already know. When the children run away from their parents' road trip and research project, I felt the terror all parents feel at the thought of losing their children. The novelist deliberately aims the unthinkable loss of a child at the core of adult concerns for children: *Feel this. Take it deep inside your being. Remember this:* the terror of losing a child to strangers, to illness, to the elements, to danger, to death. Remember this *feeling* every time you hear about a child separated from their parents and abandoned in the desert of our humanity.

Through her lyrical summoning of undocumented and migrating childhoods, Valeria Luiselli majestically pieces together silenced histories of children and childhood grounding modern life and the psychologically xenophobic formation of Western institutions of family, law, political, social and education. She powerfully shows that fear and hatred of the stranger are the primary means to form, contain, control "other people's" children's lives and personhoods (Delpit, 1995). *Lost Children Archive* compels adult readers to dig deep into their memories of forced migration when acting for children today. For weeks after reading the novel, I dreamt of journeys taken by myself and my parents in search of and for the children we all once were. Memories of displacement from our homeland, my parents melancholic *desh*, I thought forgotten plagued my sleep. The stories of lost selves dredged up in and by Luiselli's novel are accompanied with the demand to redress histories of violence committed to and against children through adult conquest of the earth and each other. The role that other people's children play in oppressive power has yet to be recognized, borne witness to, heard, taken responsibility for, responded to and redressed. It is perhaps too late for my generation of adults born to parents who were only trying to survive the brutal conditions of forced migration that befell them to alter the course of this broken world. But it is not too late for our children: we, *once lost children*, must alter the course of history before it is too late, as the boy already knows in the novel, as every child knows all too well.

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