

Telling Stories That Never End: Valeria Luiselli, the Refugee Crisis at the US-Mexico Border, and the Big, Ambitious Archival Novel

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Mexican-born author Valeria Luiselli has published two projects focused on the twenty-first-century children's refugee crisis. The first, a book-length essay entitled *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions*, came out in 2017, and the second, a four-hundred-page novel called *Lost Children Archive*, was published in 2019. In interviews, Luiselli reveals that *Tell Me How It Ends* was supposed to be an addendum to *Lost Children Archive*, but she found herself unable to complete the novel until she published the essay on its own. The essay form, she says, was a more adequate “kind of vessel through which to express [her] political rage” (Berwick 2017). Despite this description, *Tell Me* contains an explanation for why Luiselli (2017: 96–97) might have felt the need to return to the novel:

While the story [of the refugee crisis] continues, the only thing to do is tell it over and over again as it develops, bifurcates, knots around itself. And it must be told, because before anything can be understood, it has to be narrated many times, in many different words and from many different angles, by many different minds.

Lost Children is another angle, a different narration. It is also a “big, ambitious novel,” one that mobilizes maximalist and encyclopedic narrative tendencies to confront the challenge of telling the knotty, bifurcating, ongoing story of the US-Mexico border crisis.

Scholarship has suggested that one of the strengths of encyclopedic fiction, one branch of the big, ambitious novel (BAN), is that it uses length and complexity to mimic “the nature of the encyclopedic enterprise itself—the audacious project of encompassing all that can be known within the covers of a book or

books” (Clark 1992: 95). To evoke the encyclopedic is to pursue a project of “tentacular ambition . . . to pin down an entire writhing culture” (Wood 2001). In this essay, I suggest that Luiselli’s novel offers us an opportunity to consider the archival as an alternative organizational principle for the BAN, one that offers a different historiography and an alternative epistemological orientation for the genre. A focus on the archival instead of the encyclopedic shifts attention from a pursuit of totality (and the inevitable limitations of such a project) to an exploration of the fragmented and recursive processes of constructing personal and historical memory. In this essay, I contend that Luiselli references the archive, instead of the encyclopedia, to represent the pervasive problems created by US racial construction—the subtle and not so subtle violences that resonate across time and space.¹ More specifically, I argue that the novel evokes the archive in its fragmentation, recombinant and recursive organization, and narrative multiplicity as a way to demonstrate the complexity and irreducibility of the refugee crisis and the constructions of Latinx difference that develop alongside it.²

The reference to the archive in *Lost Children Archive* reflects the novel’s thematic focus on the nature of documentation as well as its formal experimentation. Ostensibly the story of a family on an “American” road trip, the novel describes a journey in which the characters explore the intersections of the histories of the Apache—pushed westward by Anglo-American settler colonialism—and the migrations of the children of the twenty-first-century US-Mexico border crisis. Each of the family members on the trip—an unnamed woman, her husband, and their two children, a five-year-old girl and a ten-year-old boy—pursues a curation project, collecting materials in a set of bankers boxes housed in the trunk of the car. The novel recounts the different documentational techniques the family uses to compile their “archives” and describes how they tell distinct stories about the materials they collect. The proliferation of materials referenced in their boxes

1. Marco Codebó (2007: 14) positions archival/dossier fiction as a form that reflects the “interactive, relational narratives of the digital era.” In this essay, I offer another way of analyzing archival fiction by considering the genre in the context of feminist and critical race theory.

2. The terms *Latinx* and *people of color* refer to unstable constructions of identity that are complex and sometimes contradictory. Having said that, throughout this essay, I use the term *Latinx* when referring to a community of people who are of Latin American heritage. I also use it when I write about the ways Latinidad is constructed in the United States. For example, in this sentence, I use the term “Latinx difference” to signal a unique form of racial construction that Latin American people confront in the United States. I use the phrase “women and people of color” predominantly when I discuss or respond to scholarship that groups authors from historically marginalized communities together in order to explain their rarity in the history of the BAN.

and stories is mirrored at the level of form. *Lost Children* is an eclectic collection of narrative perspectives each of which provides a different approach to telling a story about “lost children.” Besides the boxed materials that appear within the text, there are two first-person character-narrators, a third-person narrator in a novel-within-the-novel called *Lost Children Elegies*, and a series of citations, epigraphs, and allusions that produce a network of multimedial intertexts with their own documentational authority. Comprising fragmented, episodic chunks of narration interspersed with nonnumbered pages detailing the contents of the boxes, the novel evokes the archive in its layered organization and myriad narrative documents.

Lost Children creates a feeling of capaciousness and density through techniques often associated with the BAN, but the impact of those techniques is different. Indebted to a history of feminist thought in which mastery and synthetic totality are not the goal, Karla Holloway (2017: 774) points out that “the search for wholeness is representative of the critical strategies of Western cultures. It represents a sensibility that privileges the recovery of an individual (and independent) text over its fragmented textural dimensions.” Luiselli’s novel mobilizes maximalist tools to represent the unending project of accounting for the systems of marginalization that play out in discussions of the Latin American refugee crisis. Analyzing BAN narrative strategies like polyphony, fragmentation, and centripetal connectivity in the context of feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theory demonstrates that these techniques are the provenance of women and people of color at least as much as they are the domain of the white men often associated with the form. The difference is in recognizing that ambition can mean attentiveness to “fragmented textural dimensions” instead of mastery and synthetic totality. The archival organization of *Lost Children* connects the big, ambitious novel to theories of archival recovery, maximalism, and historical revision developed in feminist and critical race theory—from Saidiya Hartman’s critical fabulation to Bharati Mukherjee’s maximalist immigrant novel. Following these connections demonstrates an alternative history of the genre—one that reaches back not to Charles Dickens but to George Eliot and María Amparo Ruiz de Burton and not to James Joyce but to Jovita González, Virginia Woolf, and Zora Neale Hurston.

In section 1 of this essay, I reroute conceptualizations of the “ambition” of BAN’s through a feminist and critical race reading of the form that refuses to reduce multiplicity in a pursuit of “mastery.” In section 2, I analyze Luiselli’s

thematic focus on archival curation as a means for exploring the relationship between racialization and archival precarity, and in section 3, I argue that the novel's formal evocation of the archive is a tool for confronting the challenges of telling a knotty, unending story of racialized removals. The final section of the essay is an analysis that demonstrates how two specific aspects of Luiselli's big, ambitious archival novel cultivate an account of the refugee crisis that has a complex, discordant, recombinant structure that resists synthesis or simplification.

1. On Ambition: Systems and Universal Truths

Encyclopedic, maximalist, mega, and systems novels are all sometimes discussed under the umbrella of the “big, ambitious novel,” but understanding what qualifies as a BAN is a complicated task. When James Wood (2000) coined the term to describe a genre of contemporary fiction, he did so by drawing parallels to the work of Charles Dickens, whose long novels he characterized as having the “ambition to describe all of society on its different levels.” Scholars who have sought to explain what is ambitious about encyclopedic, maximalist, mega, and systems novels often similarly define ambition in relation to scale. Stefano Ercolino (2012: 243), for example, argues that the length of BANs is a result of “their ambition to realize synthetic-totalizing representations of the world.” Similarly, in his history of the BAN, Mark Greif (2009: 29) contends that the ambition of 1970s mega-novels can be seen in the fact that their “ceaselessness of narration and proliferation of characters and plots revealed the domination of individual human lives by ‘systems’ with irresistible, superhuman logics: war in an age of technological rationality in *Gravity’s Rainbow* or money in an age of finance capital in *JR*.” Greif clarifies that

“big, ambitious” books are big, not merely as a matter of pages, but as a feeling of spread, multifariousness, or open-endedness. They feel stuffed, overfull, or total; they feel longer than their straightforward story would require, and bigger than other books of similar length or complexity of plot. The books seem to have an aspiration to depict a state of American or global society that goes beyond the microcosm of a single family or the allegorization of a single “problem” within the American scene. (27)

BANs encourage readers to see, and possibly confront, the various national and global systems in which they are imbricated. What is ambitious about them is that they use their size to “understand and represent huge cultural realities” and reflect “on some of the most pressing questions of our time” (Ercolino 2014: 5, 10).

Although these accounts share an understanding of the value of size in the BAN, there are differences in how they articulate a history of the form. While Wood ties it to Dickens, Ercolino (2014: 26) suggests that the encyclopedism of maximalist novels is “rooted in the origins and at the heart of modernity, a genre that begins its course with Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet* [and] passes through modernism and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.” For Greif (2009), the history of the BAN begins with two novels from the 1950s, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March*. These varied historical contexts emerge as disparate points of view because they attend to different qualities of the BAN. Dickens’s flat characters immersed in a web of connections speak to Wood’s conceptualization of “paranoid,” hysterical realism; the totalizing effects of Joyce’s representation of Dublin correspond to what Ercolino (2014: 26) describes as the BAN’s encyclopedism and diegetic exuberance; and the “interminability of narration” and “unending profligacy” (Greif 2009: 24) of Ellison and Bellow are Greif’s precursors to the BAN as “perpetual-motion machine” (Wood 2000).

Regardless of the history they describe, each of these accounts implies that there are very few women and people of color who have produced these kinds of big, ambitious novels. Despite the fact that Greif (2009: 28, 27) begins his analysis with novels that explore “race and the escape from history in *Invisible Man*, and race and upward mobility in *Augie March*,” he suggests that the BAN “passes back out of the hands of black and Jewish writers (and never passes into the hands of women writers), to be restored to practitioners who are white Protestant men (Pynchon, Gaddis).” Greif does not explicitly provide a logic for why this happens, but Ercolino (2014), who seeks to explain his analysis of a fairly homogenous set of maximalist authors, reaches back to the work of Tom LeClair (1989) to explain the dearth of women and people of color in its history.

LeClair’s monograph, published in 1989, argues that systems novels are texts that “master—comprehend, represent, and critique—the world, for the world, as systems theorists recognize, is largely composed of huge systems of information, both ideological and institutional, that exert power over individuals and their groups” (14). He contends that women and people of color are rarely included in this history because they have been “deprived of full participation in American life” and have subsequently been unable to access the “white male’s luxury of examining the whole of American or multinational culture from within, from the perspective of full membership” (29). Although he says he teaches authors like

Leslie Marmon Silko and Ishmael Reed as novelists that can critique a dominant culture and propose an alternative, he does not believe they produce texts that “master the power systems of America as thoroughly or profoundly as the books” he studies as systems novels (30).

LeClair suggests that women and people of color do not fit into his definition of mastery “at a formal or stylistic level,” because they write from an “outsider’s view” that is only “valuable to her or his group” (30). In his view, novels by historically marginalized authors are unable to do what systems novels do: “to solicit and transform the reader’s interests, to shift his or her attention from the personal and local to the communal and global” (3). Using Alice Walker as an example, he argues that though *The Color Purple* may be more “culturally significant to black women readers,” Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* “masters a set of global conditions that *The Color Purple* does not address, conditions and systems in which *all readers*—black or white, female or male, old or young—are imbricated” (3; emphasis added). Later he contends something similar about Toni Morrison, asserting that “Morrison does not examine how her people share with *all people* subjugation by various kinds of national and transnational power systems” (30; emphasis added). In both of these examples, the rationale for why the writing of Black women authors should not be considered in his analysis of mastery is that their work does not speak to systems that *all readers* experience.

LeClair’s arguments demonstrate the pervasive idea that writing by women and people of color is niche and thus unable to address issues that impact a global or national community. Though his monograph is now over a quarter century old, his arguments still circulate in discussions of the history of the BAN. Even as late as 2014, Stefano Ercolino’s (2014: 10) analysis of maximalist novels contends that though LeClair’s argument “can be debated . . . it is probably true.” The logic employed by Ercolino and LeClair implies that the reason for the scarcity of BAN’s by women and people of color is that historically marginalized people have not produced novels that seek to “understand and represent huge cultural realities” (LeClair 1989: 31). Claims like LeClair’s suggest that to write from a position of whiteness is to write from a position that is neutral and thus more readily “concerned with exerting influence over the culture as a whole rather than with finding a niche in the literary canon” (18). Such lines of argumentation also do not consider systems of racial and gender oppression as a part of the large cultural wholes that are of interest to BANs. When work by women or people of color is included in the history of the genre, it is often positioned as an exception,

a token, or, as is the case for Wood (2000), a convenient focalizer for a critique of the genre as a whole. In this essay, though, I argue that if ambition is the ability to “comprehend, represent, and critique the . . . huge systems of information, both ideological and institutional, that exert power over individuals and their groups,” then there are indisputably women and people of color who have used narrative ambitiously, particularly in their attempts to comprehend, represent, and critique racism, sexism, and colonialism—systems that both engender the capitalist and “technological rationality” often marked as the appropriate fodder of BANs and that impact *all* people across race, gender, ability, nationality, and sexuality.

2. On Archives: Who Gets Documented

In this section, I analyze Luiselli’s thematic interest in the archive in order to explain the ambition of her formal experimentation with BAN narrative techniques. The title of *Lost Children* marks it as an “archive” but within the context of the novel the meaning of that word is just as abstruse as it was when Jacques Derrida (1995: 90) suggested that “nothing is less clear . . . than the word ‘archive.’” Marlene Manoff (2004: 10) points out that an archive can be all of “the contents of museums, libraries, and archives and thus the entire extant historical record,” or it can be “a small subset of . . . material, typically a discrete collection of related . . . documents.” In the novel, the most prominent discussion of archives surrounds the seven bankers boxes the family has brought with them on their trip from New York City to Echo Canyon in Arizona’s Chiricahua Mountains. Four of the boxes belong to the husband, who is working on a soundscape project he describes as “an inventory of echoes” centered on “the ghosts of Geronimo and the Apaches” (Luiselli 2019: 21). One box belongs to the woman narrator and contains the materials for a sound project focused on the refugee crisis, a project she begins after working with a Mixteca woman named Manuela who is looking for her two daughters.³ The remaining two boxes are for each of the children to fill as they travel across the country. The characters collect photographs, maps, postcards, sound recordings, and notes as well as journals and books, and the woman narrator explicitly calls the boxes an archive, though she notes that it may be “optimistic to call [their] collected mess an archive” (42). The titular “archive”

3. Manuela’s daughters were denied asylum and disappeared while being transferred from a detention center.

of *Lost Children* could be the materials collected by the family, but it could also be the sum of the various documentations developed throughout the text. As I pointed out at the beginning of this essay, the novel itself is a “small subset of materials,” a repository of documents that draws attention to the silences and elisions of historical memory.

The proliferating archive(s) of *Lost Children* highlight the myopia of dominant historiography in ways that intersect with archival scholarship. The International Council on Archives defines archives as spaces that “constitute the memory of nations and of societies, shape their identity, and [serve as the] cornerstone of the information society” (quoted in Lazo 2010: 36). As Rodrigo Lazo explains, archives are “inextricable from the establishment of nation-states” (36). They reflect the way power dictates historical memory. Moreover, as Derrida’s (1995: 4) oft-cited footnote suggests, “There is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.” In both form and content, Luiselli’s novel considers this connection between archival construction, historical memory, and political power.

Long before we had theoretical frameworks for the correspondence between democratization and archival inclusion, women and people of color sought to correct their elision and misrepresentation in the national imaginary. In both fiction and nonfiction, women across racial and ethnic difference worked to address archival myopia through storytelling. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for example, authors as diverse as María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, George Eliot, Zora Neale Hurston, Ella Deloria, Virginia Woolf, Edith Eaton, Dorothy Richardson, and Jovita González wrote fiction that unsettled the construction of cultural and historical memory about their various communities.⁴ They experimented

4. There is, of course, a much more expansive genealogy of authors that could be mentioned here, but I have provided a few meaningful examples. Hurston dedicated her life to producing fiction, anthropology, and folklore that undermined eugenics science and complicated well-trodden racist and sexist stereotypes. Folklore scholar Jovita González produced fiction and nonfiction that revised Texas history as an Anglo invasion of the borderlands. Virginia Woolf wrote about women’s misrepresentation across genres. “Woman,” she wrote, “is all but absent from history,” the product of not having the material conditions to produce her own stories and histories: “In real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband” (Woolf 1929: 43). In recent years, authors from Julia Alvarez, Helena Maria Viramontes, and Ana Castillo to Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa and Carmen María Machado have built from this history, using literature to correct dominant historical narratives and revise national and cultural mythologies.

with stream of consciousness and free indirect discourse, with historical fiction, the short story, and the autofictional essay in ways that pushed back against histories that sought to exclude them. Indeed, many of the narrative qualities associated with the BAN—ambition, fragmentation, recursivity, interminable narration, and polyphony—can be seen in their work.

Lost Children undoubtedly deserves to be considered as part of a genealogy of texts that ameliorate the unheard accounts of historically marginalized communities, but it is also a novel that uses an evocation of the archive to highlight the conditions through which stories are repressed or erased in the first place. In the woman narrator's account (which takes up roughly the first half of the novel), the personal archive of the family becomes a space for considering the power-based distortions of dominant archives and notions of belonging. Her reflections on the photographs, maps, postcards, sound recordings, journals, and books of their collection create a foundation for imagining the utility of a proliferation of documentary techniques and archival constructions, an exigency to which the archival form of the novel responds.

Analyzing how the archive functions thematically in *Lost Children* is a useful way for understanding the significance of the novel's archival form. The woman's research highlights how the racialization of Latinx people results in their "removal" both from notions of citizenship and from historical archives. Describing one article that says Latinx refugees are from "mostly poor and violent towns," she argues that the subtext of this characterization is that refugee children come from a "barbaric reality" and are "most probably, not white" (Luiselli 2019: 50). Similarly, after encountering a piece that describes a "Biblical Plague" of "illegal aliens" carrying disease into the country, the woman contends that the article's portrayal supports a "convenient narrative" that Latinx people are a "barbaric periphery whose chaos and brownness threaten civilized white peace" (124). "Only such a narrative," she says, "can justify decades of dirty war, interventionist policies, and the overall delusion of moral and cultural superiority of the world's economic and military powers" (124).

For the woman narrator, media coverage that racializes Latinx refugees contributes to a national narrative that dictates who belongs in this country and whose stories are included in the archive of "American" history. Throughout the novel, she outlines a relationship between racialized "removals" and archival marginalization. For example, her box contains a loose note that posits euphemisms as a means for distorting historical records and obscuring histories of oppression:

Euphemisms hide, erase, coat.

Euphemisms lead us to tolerate the unacceptable. And, eventually, to forget. Against a Euphemism, remembrance. In order to not repeat. Remember terms and meanings. Their absurd disjointedness.

Term: *Our Peculiar Institution*. Meaning: slavery (Epitome of all euphemisms.)

Term: *Removal*. Meaning: expulsion and dispossession of people from their lands. . . .

Term: *Relocation*. Meaning: confining people in reservations.

Term: *Reservation*. Meaning: a wasteland, a sentence to perpetual poverty.

Term: *Removal*. Meaning: expulsion of people seeking refuge.

Term: *Undocumented*. Meaning: people who will be removed. (Luiselli 2019: 255–56)

The euphemisms listed here suggest that being removed from notions of belonging and citizenship also means geographical relocation and elision from the historical archive. The note marks euphemisms as a part of a process of marginalization that Natalia Molina (2018) calls “relational racism”: a mobilization of “racial scripts” that mark people as “other” through recurrent narratives of difference. Racial scripts designate certain communities as less intelligent, disease-ridden, and more prone to violence and hypersexuality in order to argue against their suffrage, citizenship, and humanity. The woman’s note draws attention to the fact that those ideas are “built into institutional structures and practices that form society’s ‘scaffolding,’ like laws and policies” (Molina 2018: 103) in ways that are then euphemistically effaced in historical record. Euphemisms reflect a mobilization of racial scripts that results in geographical relocation, removal from narratives of belonging, and disappearance from the archive of national history.⁵

The connection between racialized removal and documentational elision begins on the first pages of the novel and highlights the way the novel posits the need for recursive attention to archival absences. The text opens with a pair of epigraphs:

An archive presupposes an archivist, a hand that collects and classifies.
—Arlette Farge

5. Molina (2014: 5) points out that although racialized groups experience racism and discrimination in ways that “are varied and can pivot along lines of citizenship, class, language, gender, and sexuality,” racial scripts demonstrate that “society is predisposed (consciously or not) to utilize historical experience and stereotypes of past groups to define and circumscribe the place and role of future members of U.S. society” (16). A relational analysis attends to the ways racism connects people across disparate groups despite their different experiences of that system of oppression. Luiselli’s woman narrator highlights the ways relational racism has shaped the US-Mexico border crisis, but that does not mean that we should understand that process as erasing or minimizing the distinct and often uneven consequences of relational racism in the United States.

*To leave is to die a little.
To arrive is never to arrive.*
—Migrant prayer (Luiselli 2019: 3)

Framing the section titled “Relocations,” these excerpts serve as a provocation to consider the relocations and elisions of archival construction as resonant with the deportations and disappearances of migrants and refugees. Luiselli’s excision of two lines from the migrant’s prayer effaces the more religious meaning of the aggregate text in which migration is framed as a movement toward God. The decontextualized fragment suggests a less uplifting understanding of what it means to relocate: for refugees, movement from one place to another entails leaving a previous life with only a tenuous understanding of what it will mean to arrive in the United States. As the woman narrator describes it, 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 lunch, for a bed to sleep in, wait with their hands raised to ask if they can use the bathroom. . . . They wait for visas, documents, permission. (Luiselli 2019: 47–48)

And sometimes they never fully arrive. They become dots on the mortality maps that the woman collects in her box, arriving in the United States “officially” only when they have died.

The woman chooses to shift her attention to refugees who never “arrive” as a response to her concerns about archival precarity.⁶ In focusing on “the children who are missing, those whose voices can no longer be heard because they are, possibly forever, lost” (Luiselli 2019: 146), the woman’s research explores what Rodrigo Lazo (2010: 37–38) might characterize as migrant archives, archives that “reside in obscurity and are always at the edge of annihilation,” containing texts “that have not been written into the official spaces of archivization, even though they weave in and out of the buildings that house documents.” Working to account for people whose lives only become visible in the documents that record their disappearances and deaths means making visible the fact that those documents are “little more than a register of [their] encounter with power,” accounts that provide only “a meager sketch of [their] existence” (Hartman 2008:

6. It is also a reflection of her worries about how to create an ethical and meaningful account of the refugee crisis. Although she says that “a valuable archive of the refugee crisis would need to be composed, fundamentally, of a series of testimonies or oral histories that register their own voices telling their stories,” the woman narrator decides that she does not think it is right to turn the lives of child refugees “into material for media consumption” (Luiselli 2019: 96).

2).⁷ It means telling what Saidiya Hartman calls “impossible stories”—stories that pursue the “impossible goal [of] redressing the violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse” in the dominant archive by “embody[ing] life in words and at the same time respect[ing] what we cannot know” (2).

The first half of *Lost Children* follows the woman narrator’s anxious ruminations about how to create a process of remembrance that calls attention to the expulsion, dispossession, and violence that euphemisms and removals conceal. In the end, though, we never get an answer about the shape her final project takes. Instead, her recursive attention to the bankers box archives and the novel’s transition to a new character narrator indicate the text’s commitment to revision, recombination, and repetition as crucial tools for narrating impossible stories. In the second half of the novel, the boy takes narrative control, offering another account of the events of the road trip and highlighting the fact that the woman’s metadiscursive reflections on archival curation frame the novel’s formal experimentation with documentational accretion. In the next section of this essay, I outline the ways the novel’s archival form amplifies the processes of remembrance the woman narrator pursues so that, in both content and structure, the text insists on the importance of continuing to note when and where power produces erasure.

3. On Form: How to Tell Impossible Stories

As the woman narrator works to tell a story about refugees who never fully arrive, either in the archive or in the United States, her concerns about the best way to create a sound project are the means through which the novel articulates archival curation as its central formal innovation. The archive is repeatedly marked as a source of inspiration, a space comprising layered documents that enable myriad interpretations even as they produce inevitable elisions and a proliferation of

7. In her essay, “Venus in Two Acts,” Hartman (2008) describes how the archive of Atlantic slavery represents Venus. She contends that though “she is found everywhere in the Atlantic world” (1) no one “remembered her name or recorded the things she said, or observed that she refused to say anything at all” (2). Hartman reflects on power and documentation by paraphrasing ideas from Foucault’s essay “Lives of Infamous Men.” Foucault (2003: 284) focuses on texts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but Hartman builds from his argument that archive fragments “survive only from the clash with a power that wished only to annihilate them or at least to obliterate them.” Though Foucault is discussing a particular historical moment and form of documentation, Hartman’s work highlights the utility of understanding that the lives attached to archival documents “can no longer be separated out from the declamations, the tactical biases, the obligatory lies that power games and power relations presuppose” (Foucault 2003: 282).

echoes. Unlike a “proper story,” which, as Luiselli’s woman narrator understands it, must have “a beginning, a middle, and an end,” an archive is a repository that houses information that can be reorganized and shuffled into different arrangements. It has a different temporality because it can be added to and reorganized in ways that can alter salient themes and information.⁸

Lost Children’s discussions of the utility of archival curation play out in the novel’s organization. While “shuffling around” in the boxes in the back of the car, the woman narrator thinks that “by trying to listen to all the sounds trapped in the archive, [she] might find a way into the exact story [she] needs to document, the exact form it needs” (Luiselli 2019: 42).⁹ She believes that in “reading others’ words, inhabiting their minds for a while,” she might find an entry point into her own sound project (57). Sifting through the archive, though, also highlights for her “what any other mind might do with the same collection of bits and scraps, now temporarily archived in a given order in those boxes. How many possible combinations of all those documents were there? And what completely different stories would be told by their varying permutations, shufflings, and reorderings?” (57). The novel enacts its own shuffling and reordering by providing multiple accounts of the bankers box materials. The woman narrator provides one story about the trip and documents, and the boy contributes another. Moreover, the novel depicts the contents of the boxes in nonnarrative space, allowing for unnarrated details to circulate in conversation with the accounts given by the character narrators and authorizing alternative explanations of the projects and materials the characters discuss.

The fragmented construction of *Lost Children* allows for the possibility of imagining an archival fiction whose contents can be added to and reorganized. The novel comprises four main parts (“Family Soundscape,” “Reenactment,” “Apacheria,” and “Lost Children Archive”) that are each a combination of fragmented, episodic chunks of narration interspersed with nonnumbered pages that depict the contents of the bankers boxes. The first part of the novel, “Family Soundscape,” for example, breaks down in the following way:

8. Archives, as Codebó (2007: 9) points out, are collections of materials that allow researchers to “determine their own path of inquiry.”

9. Because the woman narrator and her husband are both working on sound projects, the novel’s exploration of the archive often uses language and conceptual tools from sound studies. For example, the woman narrator suggests that gaps and fragmentation in archives might be understood as “sound rubble, noise, and debris” (29). You can see more of how sound shapes the woman narrator’s conceptualization of the archive in some of the quotes recorded in section 3 of this essay. Though there is no room to expand here, this aspect of the novel would benefit from analysis in the context of theories of sound and the archive.

Relocations
 Box I
 Routes and Roots
 Box II
 Undocumented
 Box III
 Missing
 Box IV
 Removals

“Relocations,” which is about thirty pages long, has twenty-one episodic segments with subheadings like “Inventory,” “Itemization,” “Joint Filing,” “Foundational Myths,” “Mother Tongues,” “Time,” “Teeth,” and “Tongue Ties.” This segmentation continues throughout the novel, creating an abundance of narrative and nonnarrative documents that can be imagined as “a collection of bits and scraps” only “temporarily archived in a given order.” The sense that a reorganization of the pieces could provide a different permutation of the story is substantiated when subheadings and citations recirculate in different narrative accounts, deployed in different sequences and containing seemingly unrelated details. “Time” and “Teeth” from the woman’s account, for example, become “Time & Teeth” in the boy’s.

The novel’s form refuses to propose a stable story with a beginning, middle, and end. As Luiselli (2017: 97) notes in *Tell Me How It Ends*, the story of refugee children is one that needs to be retold “over and over again as it develops, bifurcates, knots around itself”; it is a story about ongoing systemic oppression that should be consistently revisited and revised from different perspectives and in different mediums to combat historical amnesia. As the woman narrator describes it, documentation—the process of accounting “for something, an object, our lives, or a story” through “the lens of a camera, on paper, or with a sound recording device”—is “only a way of contributing one more layer, something like soot, to all the things already sedimented in a collective understanding of the world” (Luiselli 2019: 55). In this context, the novel’s archival form can be imagined as a method for contributing to an accretion of meaning that develops through recursive attention—through relocations and shufflings.

The sedimentation of stories available within this archival novel, though, does not aim to “give voice” to those who are absent in the archive; the proliferation of narrative perspectives highlights instead of minimizes the absent stories

10. Hartman’s work is helpful in thinking about this strategy. She suggests that narratives that address inadequate archives aim “not to *give voice* . . . but rather to imagine what cannot be verified,

of refugees.¹⁰ Throughout her work, the woman narrator comes to believe that the only way to tell a story of the refugees who never “arrive” is to look for the reverberations, echoes, and resonances that their absences create. Reflecting on the research anthropologist Steven Feld did on the Bosavi of Papua New Guinea, the woman notes that echoes can be understood as “gone reverberations,” which are “an absence turned into presence; and, at the same time . . . a presence that [makes] an absence audible” (Luiselli 2019: 98). She comes to understand that she and her husband are working on similar projects, creating an “inventory of echoes” that are “not a collection of sounds that have been lost—such a thing would in fact be impossible—but rather one of sounds that were present in the time of recording and that, when we listen to them, remind us of the ones that are lost” (141). The woman narrator’s research highlights the missing narratives of the refugees by collecting material records that account for their absence.

Luiselli’s focus on archival curation as a means for telling a story about the refugee crisis can be positioned productively alongside scholarship in postcolonial, feminist, and critical race theory that has thought extensively about how to navigate the hole-riddled histories of marginalized groups. In her influential work on Black intimate life in the early twentieth century, Saidiya Hartman (2020) articulates the challenges historians face in navigating flawed archives. She contends that “every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor” (Hartman 2020: xiii). Hartman’s (2008: 12) method for intervening in this space is a practice of critical fabulation that can “say what resists being said” and create “a history of an unrecoverable past, . . . a narrative of what might have been or could have been . . . written with and against the archive.” Although narration can never “exceed the limits of the sayable dictated by the archive,” a process of critical fabulation demonstrates that documentation that relegates marginalized people to dots and blurbs can be “elaborate[d], augment[ed], [and] transpose[d]” (Hartman 2020: xiv).

While Luiselli’s big, ambitious archival novel is not what Hartman would

a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal death—and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance.” This work requires “listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives” (Hartman 2008: 12).

describe as critical fabulation, *Lost Children* is an analogous attempt at using narrative experimentation to tell an impossible story. Layering different documentation techniques and dispersing thematic threads through multiple controlling “archivists,” the novel suggests that the limitations of archival curation mandate recursivity as a strategy for narrating an ongoing story. This approach simultaneously highlights and ameliorates archival precarity. Moreover, it demonstrates how the echoes and reverberations of a recursive and referential narrative form can be made meaningful as spaces of remembrance.

The archival form Luiselli deploys to create a knotty, recursive process of remembrance resonates with discussions of memory and the archive in Chicana feminist studies. In discussing the absence of Chicana feminist genealogies, Maylei Blackwell (2011: 11) points out that “exclusionary historical narratives do not merely *represent* historical realities but help to produce those realities by enforcing the boundaries of legitimate political memory and the subjectivities they authorize.” Blackwell’s delineation of the fact that dominant archives produce the historical marginalization that they record highlights the constructedness of memory. Documentation does not just record what was or is there, it also creates structures for knowing that which was previously unknown and provides frameworks for what can be imagined and produced. Because of this, counterhistories and the pursuit of what she describes as “retrofitted memory” can offer new horizons of possibility (Blackwell 2011: 11).

In *Lost Children*, the process of remembrance the woman narrator discusses is attuned to the productive tension “between document and fabrication,” between a lived experience of the past and the documents that create their own memories (Luiselli 2019: 42). Echoes and reverberations are not a direct account of lived experience, but they provide what the woman narrator calls “borrowed memories” that can prevent historical amnesia. She describes one way to imagine a translation of story to shared, communal memory when she decides to read the experimental novel *Lost Children Elegies* aloud, noting that moving from “the ink lines of the page” to the sound of spoken words culminates in a conversion of “impressions, images, future borrowed memories” (144). Later, the boy describes another version of the impact of documentation when he narrates his experience photographing a plane of deported refugee children in this way: “As I tucked the picture back in between some pages toward the end of the book, I realized something important, which is this: that everything that happened after I took the pic-

ture was also inside it, even though no one could see it, except me when I looked at it, and maybe also you, in the future, when you look at it, even if you didn't even see the original moment with your own eyes" (200). The systems of remembrance that Luiselli and Blackwell describe highlight the constructed nature of personal and historical memory in ways that allow documents like photographs, historical accounts, and novels to function as tools for altering not just the way we view the past but the way we can experience the present and imagine the future. The act of documenting erasure, silence, and reverberation does not simply insert marginalized people into histories from which they have been effaced; instead, moving "within the gaps, interstices, silences, and crevices of the uneven narratives of domination" generates possibilities "for fracturing dominant narratives and creating spaces for new historical subjects to emerge" (Blackwell 2011: 2–3).

Like critical fabulations, retrofitted and borrowed memories highlight "the mechanics of erasure in historical writing" and "undermine, instead of replicate, the power relations and regimes of truth that hold these mechanics in place" (Blackwell 2011: 3, 4). But telling a story that highlights those systems of power means attending to the limitations of traditional narrative forms. As Emma Pérez (1999: xiv) points out, "The systems of thought which have patterned our social and political institutions, our universities, our archives, and our homes predispose us to a predictable beginning, middle, and end to untold stories." The only way to undermine the structures of thought inherent in dominant historiography—the only way to embrace what Pérez calls the "decolonial imaginary"—is to move away from that story form. In this context, Luiselli's use of BAN strategies that focus on "that which is different, fragmented, imagined, non-linear, non-teleological" (Pérez 1999: xiv) does not demonstrate an encyclopedic goal of making visible the "illusory basis of 'total knowledge'" (Herman 2010: 137) or the "ever more voluminous and unmanageable, information" of our contemporary moment (Letzler 2012: 8). Instead, the knotty, bifurcating form of Luiselli's BAN highlights the systems of power that decide whose knowledge and stories matter in the ongoing accretion of national and historical memory. Luiselli's mobilization of BAN techniques demonstrates what Blackwell (2011: 11) calls a process of "re-membling" and what Luiselli's (2019: 174) woman narrator describes as "re-cognizing," a system of remembrance that highlights alternative histories and the decolonial imaginaries that they might allow.

4. On Genre: The Affordances of Archival Fiction

Lost Children raises the issues of exclusion noted in archival discourse while also demonstrating how the gaps and silences of archives can generate echoes and resonances that might serve as a valuable account of the complexity of the refugee crisis and its documentation. In this section, I explore the affordances of the big, ambitious archival novel, developing, in particular, two meaningful contexts for the form: immigrant maximalism and archive fever.

Immigrant Maximalism

As I mentioned earlier, *Lost Children* is a novel that contains varied narrative perspectives and forms. The text has two first-person character narrators, a third-person narrator in an experimental novel-within-the-novel, images of documented materials, song transcripts, and numerous references and citations. In collecting these disparate texts, the archive of the novel complicates any singular account while also querying the values and limitations of different mediums, perspectives, and genres (sound vs. image vs. text, third-person vs. first-person narration, etc.). In a reading of BANs like Ercolino's (2012: 247), the polyphony of *Lost Children* might be understood as a tool for placing "every type of individual, or individualizing instance, in a subordinate position" in ways that evoke LeClair's (1989: 14) conceptualization of a world in which systems "exert power over individuals and their groups." But instead of a "hierarchically horizontal" organization that "demonstrates that it is not the single individual, or the single story, that matters . . . but rather a collective of characters and a plurality of stories" (Ercolino 2012: 246), the polyphony of *Lost Children* suggests the importance of each distinct individual story, especially those that are destroyed or silenced. Although *Lost Children* contains an abundance of narrative perspectives, the archival form does not create a totalizing representation in which everyone is dominated in a horizontal manner. Instead, the novel's organization suggests a more nuanced representation of systemic oppression, a response that is best understood in relationship to long-standing feminist theorizations of multiplicity and maximalism.

In 1988, Bharati Mukherjee argued that minimalism was a technique that was "designed to keep out anyone with too much story to tell" (28). She wanted immigrant novelists to embrace maximalism so they could fill the world with characters that were "bursting with stories, too many to begin telling" and char-

acters who had “lived through centuries of history in a single lifetime” (28). Mukherjee suggests that maximalism offers immigrant authors the space necessary to represent an endless proliferation of narratives that speak to “the biggest stories in recent American history” (28).

In the context of Mukherjee’s conceptualization of maximalism, the hypertrophy of a text like Luiselli’s speaks to the importance of what philosopher Maria Lugones (2010: 755) describes as the maintenance of “multiplicity at the point of reduction—not in maintaining a hybrid ‘product,’ which hides the colonial difference—in the tense workings of more than one logic, not to be synthesized but transcended.” Narrative proliferation maintains a multiplicity not to represent a synthetic totality but to highlight variegated stories and logics. Maximalist multiplicity can thus be understood in terms of Chela Sandoval’s (1991: 14) articulation of oppositional consciousness, a denial of “any one ideology as the final answer,” a representational technique that “posit[s] a tactical subjectivity with the capacity to recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted.” In this context, narrative profusion becomes a means for navigating the endlessly mutable systems of racial construction that maintain oppressive hierarchies.

In the work of an author like Luiselli, multiplicity and fragmentation do not create a “neutral diegetic organization” (Ercolino 2012: 246), and they do not suggest that all stories have the same weight within the context of the novel. One of the benefits of a heterogeneous, proliferating, hypertrophic archive is that it suggests that depicting “big cultural realities” that impact “everyone” does not mean that everyone’s story is the same under any given systemic logic or even under any given identity category. *Lost Children* highlights a distinction between the woman narrator—who is documented, racially ambiguous, and a part of the intellectual class—and the Latinx people who are most vulnerable to the immigration policies of the United States—people who are racialized because of their “barbaric” origins, skin color, language proficiency, class, or educational background. The novel tells us that the woman was born in Mexico (Luiselli 2019: 129) and that her grandmother was Hñāhñu (16), her father was a Mexican diplomat, and her mother was a part of a guerilla movement in southern Mexico (173), but we do not get an account of her relationship to the immigration system of the United States other than that she and her husband are able to show border patrol substantiating documentation. While the text notes her experiences of racialization in moments where responses to her accent and to her place of birth fall in a range between uncomfortable and threatening, those moments of discomfort and fear

are made meaningful through their alignment and divergence from the accounts she gives of the migrant crisis and its historical connection to other forms of racial violence.¹¹ *Lost Children* demonstrates that the construction of racial difference (through the explication of the category of “Latino/a/x”) can result in both the social censure and racial profiling that the family experiences and the disappearances, deportations, and deaths that the woman documents in her work. However, it also signals the incommensurability of those experiences.

The fragmentation and polyphony of Luiselli’s immigrant maximalist novel makes visible the varied ways racial construction impacts people across difference instead of suggesting that all individuals experience being subsumed in global and national systems in horizontally impactful ways. Formally, this plays out in the way narrative space is allocated throughout the text. The documents that are the only records of refugee arrival are hole-riddled maps and narrative fragments, while the stories collected by the woman and boy narrator—the texts that produce echoes and highlight refugee absence—are circulated, read, and cited repeatedly. That is, even though the archival form of the novel amends dominant, Anglo constructions of history that relegate refugees to the margins, the novel still represents the power distinctions that dictate who can and cannot create and maintain archives. There is no reduction of the uneven distributions of power (and thus narrative space) that correspond to racialized notions of citizenship and belonging. In *Lost Children*, the proliferation of accounts—its fragmentation and recursivity, its pursuit of myriad stories about lost children, and its inclusion of heterogeneous narrators and documentations—creates an immigrant maximalist archival novel that does not assert a unified experience of racialization in the United States or in the pursuit of citizenship.¹²

11. The woman says, for example, that “in a town called Loco,” she gets asked about her accent and place of birth, and when she answers the response is “just cold, dead silence, as if [she’s] confessed a sin” (Luiselli 2019: 129). She also describes nervousness when presenting passports to the border patrol (129) and fear when the family flees a man’s house in the borderlands (132). However, these incidents are held in tension with her description of the experiences of communities of Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous Latinx people. At a protest the woman narrator attends, the majority of people who have had family disappear during ICE raids are Afro-Indigenous Garifuna from Honduras (115). Likewise, the woman narrator’s work with Manuela, a Mixteca woman, is organized around trying to find her daughters. At the end of the novel, we learn that they are dead (349). Some reviewers have critiqued the ways the text marks similarities between the woman narrator’s children and Manuela’s, but, although the novel does explore this connection, I think there is value in an analysis that acknowledges the ways the archival form and thematic focus of the novel make visible the distinctions between the two families as well as their connections.

12. It seems important to note that the novel’s focus on echoes means that it does not center narratives by Black or Indigenous people, even when that might be expected (as with the husband’s

Not Paranoid or Hysterical, but Feverish

One of the unifying features attributed to big, ambitious novels is that they have a totalizing aim or a thematic arc that results in centripetal connectivity. As Wood describes it in his discussion of what he calls the hysterical realism of the BAN, “The different stories all intertwine, and double and triple on themselves. Characters are forever seeing connections and links and plots, and paranoid parallels.” For Wood (2000), “There is something essentially paranoid about the belief that everything is connected to everything else” in “an endless web.” Ercolino (2014: 250) elaborates on Wood’s argument, suggesting that the paranoid concerns of maximalist novels are “often a question of hypothetical threats” that are “impossible to demonstrate and at times absolutely implausible or ridiculous.”

To read the accretion of layered narrative arcs and documentary methods in *Lost Children* within the paradigm of paranoid connectivity would be a mistake because it would minimize the novel’s depiction of the recurrent patterns identifiable in histories of racial violence and refugee crises. The connections, links, and plots of this novel are not implausible or ridiculous. So, instead of a paranoid imagination, I would like to propose that this novel depicts a feverish one, overwhelmed and inundated by the project of remembering and recounting the histories of erasure and violence that connect to the story of child refugees. The webs of connection in this novel evoke how it feels to navigate an archive of the stories and histories, documentations and maps, ghosts and ephemera that dictate humanity and citizenship as well as presence and arrival in the United States.

Luiselli’s novel has a citational density and palimpsest-like organization that mirrors and expands, at the level of narrative form, the woman narrator’s experience of research and archival curation. The woman describes her archive as a “documental labyrinth of [her] own making” that culminates in “long sleepless nights reading about archive fevers, about rebuilding memory in diasporic narratives, about being lost in ‘the ashes’ of the archive” (Luiselli 2019: 23). The frenzy she feels as she negotiates the urgency of her pursuit alongside its enormity is palpable in the pacing of passages like the following one in which she describes her process:

echo inventory about Geronimo that is never transcribed within the novel and seems to only rarely involve interaction with Apache or Indigenous communities). The text does obliquely suggest anti-Indigeneity—the husband describes Geronimo as someone who “was Mexican by nationality but hated Mexicans . . . [because] Mexican soldiers had killed his three children, his mother, and his wife” (Luiselli 2019: 45)—but it does not substantively engage with those issues.

I pored over reports and articles about child refugees and tried to gather information on what was happening beyond the New York immigration court, at the border, in detention centers and shelters. I got in touch with lawyers, attended conferences of the New York City Bar Association, had private meetings with non-profit workers and community organizers. I collected loose notes, scraps, cutouts, quotes copied down on cards, letters, maps, photographs, lists of words, clippings, tape-recorded testimonies. (23)

The result of this research is the curation of her bankers box, a collection of “well-filtered material” that she hopes will help her “understand how to document the children’s crisis at the border” (24). She describes the contents of the box early on, saying,

I had a few photos, some legal papers, intake questionnaires used for court screenings, maps of migrant deaths in the southern deserts, and a folder with dozens of “Migrant Mortality Reports” printed from online search engines that locate the missing, which listed bodies found in those deserts, the possible cause of death, and their exact location. At the very top of the box, I placed a few books I’d read and thought would help me think about the whole project from a certain narrative distance: *The Gates of Paradise*, by Jersey Andrzejewski; *The Children’s Crusade*, by Marcel Schwob; *Belladonna*, by Daša Drndić; *Le Goût de l’archive*, by Arlette Farge; and a little red book I hadn’t read yet, called *Elegies for Lost Children*, by Ella Camposanto. (24)

The photos and papers referenced reappear later in the novel when they are recorded in the unnumbered pages that transpose the material contents of the woman’s box, Box V. The images and transcriptions included in the unnumbered section take the earlier references and expand on them. For example, when the woman narrates the contents of her box, she notes that there is a folder of migrant mortality reports. But when the box is documented as a part of the larger archival novel, the reports are transcribed, and the reader can see the information listed in each document. Box V also contains the photographs and loose notes both character narrators reference and produce.

The multiple accounts of the woman’s archive loop back to other sections of the text and contribute to the accumulative velocity and palimpsestic experience of the novel. For example, one of the authors listed in her archive is Arlette Farge, who is quoted in the opening epigraph I cited above: “An archive presupposes an archivist, a hand that collects and classifies.” Even materials that are not explicitly referential produce echoes and reverberations through a layering of the novel’s thematic curations. Three of the books referenced are allusions to experimental texts about children on dangerous journeys or memory and historical violence (*The Gates of Paradise*, by Jersey Andrzejewski; *The Children’s Crusade*, by Marcel Schwob; *Belladonna*, by Daša Drndić), and the final novel,

Lost Children Elegies, is a work of experimental fiction attributed to a fictionalized author named Ella Camposanto but actually written by Luiselli. *Elegies* is a story loosely based on a mythologized children's crusade in Europe in 1212 that is reimagined into "a not-so-distant future in a region that can possibly be mapped back to North Africa, the Middle East, and southern Europe, or to Central and North America" (Luiselli 2019: 139). In a footnote at the end of the novel, Luiselli tells the reader that "*The Elegies* are composed by means of a series of allusions to literary works that are about voyaging, journeying, migrating, etc.," (many of which are included in the family's bankers boxes) like Homer's *Odyssey*, *The Children's Crusade* by Marcel Schwob, *Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo, and *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. *Elegies* is thus, itself, "a repurpos[ing] and recomb[in]ation]" of rhythmic cadences, imagery, lexicon, and "words and word pairings" whose effect is to connect journeying to a descent into the underworld (380).¹³

The citations I outlined here are just a small portion of those included in the novel. There are six more bankers boxes transcribed; epigraphs that cite authors like Gloria Anzaldúa and Natalie Diaz as well as James Fenton and Virginia Woolf; folders that contain citations of scholars like Brent Hayes Edwards, Marisa Fuentes, Arjun Appadurai, and Frances Dolan; and narrative accounts of events that reference authors like William Golding, Ralph Ellison, and Jack Kerouac, photographers like Sally Mann, Emmet Gowin, Larry Clark, and Nan Goldin, and songs from Kendrick Lamar, Andrew Jackson Jihad, and Laurie Anderson. One could, of course, read without chasing the citations, but regardless of whether you choose to follow any of the references, the book immerses you in narrative patterns and layers that are difficult to ignore. Keeping track of the connections and resonances within the text is an overwhelming task, one that can produce a reading and research experience that mimics the woman narrator's. At one point, she describes her emotional response to her work on the trip, saying, "All I see in

13. This description is an expansion and echo of the woman narrator's description of *Elegies* earlier in the novel:

The book is written in a series of numbered fragments, sixteen in total; each fragment is called an "elegy," and each elegy is partly composed using a series of quotes. Throughout the book, these quotes are borrowed from different writers. They are either "freely translated" by the author or "recombined" to the point that some are not traceable back to their original versions. In this first English edition (published in 2014), the translator has decided to translate all borrowed quotes directly from the author's Italian and not from the original sources. (Luiselli 2019: 142–43)

hindsight is the chaos of history repeated, over and over, reenacted, reinterpreted, the world, its fucked-up heart palpitating underneath us, failing, messing up again and again as it winds its way around a sun. And in the middle of it all, tribes, families, people, all beautiful things falling apart, debris, dust, erasure” (Luiselli 2019: 146). The process of trying to create an archive that might explain and undermine the dominant narratives of the refugee crisis at the US-Mexico border is demoralizing. Her research demonstrates the pervasive systems of oppression that result in global migrant crises and lost children. To use the language of BAN scholarship, her archive makes visible “the huge cultural realities” that connect the US-Mexico border to the state of global society more broadly. And part of the ambition of this novel is that it demonstrates that accounting for that cultural reality, trying to archive everything from microaggressions to mortalities and intimate family histories to global crises, produces a feverish response.

The term *archive fever* comes from the translation of Derrida’s (1995: 12) conceptualization of *mal d’archive* as “archive fever.” Derrida suggests that archival “fever” or “evil” is the result of the contradiction between a conservation and destruction drive: “There would be no archival desire without the radical finitude, without the possibility of a forgetfulness” (19). To experience the “*mal*” of the archive means “to burn with a passion . . . never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right before it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there’s too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive” (91). There has been debate about the accuracy of translating *mal d’archive* as archive fever, and Derrida’s theories are more nuanced than these excerpted quotes suggest, but the tension between forgetfulness and remembrance and the description of the outcome of negotiating those irreconcilable aims is a productive one for the histories I have outlined in this essay. The feverish imagination of Luiselli’s archival novel is a response to how difficult it is to create flexible, responsive structures of remembrance, to how difficult it is to make visible the systems of othering that dictate who is forgotten.

5. On Conclusions: Stories That Never End

Marco Codebó (2007: 8–9) notes that “the paginated book, in its very essence, implies sequence. It respectfully but intentionally asks readers to follow the numeric order of its pages from the first to the last”; it implies the “beginning,

middle, and end” that the woman narrator describes as the format of a “proper story.” *Lost Children* is a paginated text, a document with a sequence, but it is also an archival fiction that encourages recursive attention, flipping back to previous sections, hunting for the documents in each box, and following the trails of extratextual information hinted at in the allusions and references. Ostensibly, the narrative of the text concludes with a transcribed sound “document” produced by the boy, but the final section in the archive of the book is actually a works cited in which Luiselli describes the sources she has used and the novel-within-a-novel she created. In that document, she explains, “The archive that sustains this novel is both an inherent and a visible part of the central narrative. In other words, references to sources—textual, musical, visual, or audio-visual—are not meant as side notes, or ornaments that decorate the story, but function as intralinear markers that point to the many voices in the conversation that the book sustains with the past” (Luiselli 2019: 379). As a whole, the works cited argues for the importance of reading *Lost Children* in circulation with other texts. It asks us to consider tracing the citations and reverberations that the novel develops and to imagine the archival novel as a strategic response, a reflexive form that encourages an ongoing process of “shufflings” and “reorderings.”

James Wood (2000) suggests that the length of BANs provokes “a soothing sense that it might never have to end, that another thousand or two thousand pages might easily be added,” but in Luiselli’s text that feeling of interminability is a judgment, a critique of an unending story of racial oppression to which “another thousand or two thousand pages might easily be added.” In *Lost Children Archive*, the woman narrator suggests that “stories don’t fix anything or save anyone” but they can “with a certain rage and fierceness” articulate “a specific pulse, a gaze, a rhythm, the right way of telling the story” that might “make the world both more complex and more tolerable” (Luiselli 2019: 185–86).

Luiselli’s big, ambitious archival novel does not seek to produce a totalizing-synthetic representation that “understand[s] and represent[s]” one of “the most pressing questions of our time” (Ercolino 2014: 5, 10) because as the woman narrator explains, understanding (like mastery) “has a passive connotation” (Luiselli 2019: 174).¹⁴ Instead, big, ambitious archival fiction is a space for “recognition,

14. The quote from *Tell Me* with which I began this essay suggests that “before anything can be understood, it has to be narrated many times,” so it seems that Luiselli revises the notion of “understanding” in *Tell Me* into a more recursive process of “re-cognizing” in *Lost Children*.

in the sense of *re-cognizing*, knowing again, for a second or third time, like an echo of knowledge” (174; emphasis added).¹⁵ Echoes are epistemological tools, and even though narrative form is contradictory, contested, and negotiated, an archival novel like this one, with its recursive, ambitious form, can highlight the absences of refugee voices, attend to the histories of violence that have led to their disappearance, and refuse to posit an answer to how the story ends if we have to keep telling it again and again.

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15. This quote is actually from a section about the woman narrator forgiving her mother for leaving their family to join the guerilla movement, but I like the idea of re-cognizing as a term for demonstrating how echoes might function as epistemological tools, and so I have adapted it here.

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