

Disappropriation and Composting in Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*

Rubén Peinado-Abarrio¹

Abstract. This article offers first a review of Cristina Rivera Garza's 'disappropriation' and Verónica Gerber Bicecci's 'compost writing' as useful categories for the analysis of recent works of fiction based on complexity and relationality. These two different but interrelated concepts are then applied to the study of Valeria Luiselli's first novel in English, *Lost Children Archive* (2019), a fragmentary text that manages to convey a sense of interconnection through its multi-layered analysis of border policies, forced migration, and environmental justice. Particular emphasis is laid on Luiselli's archival method, which contributes to the polyphonic impetus of the novel and presents the archive as a tool for resistance; her politics of quotation as developed in both textual and paratextual material, and the posthuman ethos that informs her work, advocating a nature-culture continuum in a constant movement towards a horizontal communication scheme.

Keywords: Complexity, Composting, Disappropriation, Posthumanism, Valeria Luiselli

[es] Desapropiación y compostaje en *Desierto sonoro*, de Valeria Luiselli

Resumen. Este artículo revisa, en primer lugar, la desapropiación de Cristina Rivera Garza y la escritura del compostaje de Verónica Gerber Bicecci como categorías analíticas útiles para una aproximación a obras de ficción recientes basadas en la complejidad y la relacionalidad. Estos conceptos se aplican a continuación al estudio de la primera novela en inglés de Valeria Luiselli, *Desierto sonoro* (2019), un texto fragmentario que logra transmitir un sentido de interconexión a través de su sofisticado análisis de las políticas de la frontera, la migración forzada, y la justicia medioambiental. En particular, se analiza el método del archivo desarrollado por Luiselli, que contribuye al impulso polifónico de la novela y presenta el archivo como herramienta de resistencia; su sistema de citas tanto en el material textual como paratextual, y el ethos posthumano visible en su obra, que propone un continuo entre naturaleza y cultura como parte de un movimiento constante en busca de esquemas de comunicación horizontales.

Palabras clave: Complejidad, Compostaje, desapropiación, posthumanismo, Valeria Luiselli

Contents: 1. Introduction. 2. Disappropriation and composting. 3. A fragmented archive of quotations. 4. A solidary archive of boxes. 5. A posthuman archive of more-than-human connections. 6. Conclusion: Representing complexity

How to cite this article: Peinado-Abarrio, Rubén. (2022). Disappropriation and Composting in Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*, in *Complutense Journal of English Studies* 30, 101-109.

1. Introduction

Agreeing with Suárez Lafuente (2018) that the artistic—and, in particular, the literary—medium provides the ideal space for the representation of the intersectional reality we inhabit, in this article I propose an approach to Mexican-born Valeria Luiselli's first novel in English, *Lost Children Archive* (2019), as a narrative of complexity. More specifically, I attempt to discuss the main techniques and methods employed by Luiselli to portray the shared responsibilities, vulnerabilities, and dependencies characteristic of the contemporary, as well as her response to these and other challenges.

Lost Children Archive presents a polyphonic, multi-layered analysis of border policies, forced migration, and land rights, offering the archive as tool for resistance and social justice. The plot revolves around a family of four. The mother—a journalist, and the homodiegetic narrator of most of the novel—and the father—"an acoustemologist and soundscape artist" (Luiselli 2019: 100)—are two unnamed documentary makers driving from New York to Arizona with her five-year-old daughter and his ten-year-old son. The wife plans to document the plight of refugee children who cross the Mexico-US border after fleeing the Northern Triangle

¹ Department of English and German Philology, University of Zaragoza

ORCID: orcid.org/0000-0002-8438-2637

Email: rpeinado@unizar.es

of Central America while her husband records an “inventory of echoes” (Luiselli 2019: 21): a sound project aimed at recovering the traces of the last free Apaches. As it is fitting for its subject matter, the novel constantly problematizes border-crossing, in-betweenness, and erasure, which makes it a good example of the narratives of fracture theorized by Rosa María Rodríguez Magda (2019: 26), i.e., those that expose the mechanisms of exclusion of present-day globalization. The “cross-temporal story of displacement” (Sabo 2020: 224) told in *Lost Children Archive* finds its formal reflection in a narrative that understands the novel, the essay, the memoir, and investigative journalism as porous forms in mutually enriching dialogue.

Mirroring the novel’s destabilization of the hierarchical distinction between peripheries and center, this article applies critical categories born outside the anglophone world and continental Europe to a literary work in English. Although I acknowledge my subject position as a scholar from (peripheral) Europe, teaching at a Spanish higher education institution, writing in English, I would like to contribute, if not to the South-South dialogue encouraged by Enrique Dussel (2013), at least to the “horizontal dialogues among different traditions of thought, as opposed to universalism”, called for by Onega and Ganteau (2020a: 7). Such horizontal dialogues, with their subsequent challenge of the hegemony of the Global North, are all the more adequate for the study of a novel which unwaveringly targets (neo)colonial relationships and practices, as well as the complicity of the US in the dispossession of peoples across the Western Hemisphere. My contention, with Dussel, is that avoiding transplanting critical categories and theoretical frameworks developed in US and Western European scholarship and criticism is a necessary step in the path towards developing a truly global dialogue (Dussel 2013: 3). As a consequence, my analysis of *Lost Children Archive* relies mainly—although not exclusively, since systematically excluding European and US knowledge would result in an unproductive fundamentalism (Dussel 2013: 15)—on two different but interrelated concepts, coined by two contemporary Latin American scholars and authors: Cristina Rivera Garza’s disappropriation and Verónica Gerber Bicecci’s composting.

2. Disappropriation and composting

Mexican author and professor, Cristina Rivera Garza (2013), coins the term ‘disappropriation’ to refer to a political operation and a category of analysis in her recent readings of English- and Spanish-language texts. Disappropriation is the writing practice that exposes the various modes of collective work which constitute a text. Drawing upon the work of Argentinean professor and literary critic, Josefina Ludmer (2009), who uses the label ‘postautonomous’ to account for the diasporic position—both inside and outside literature—of certain Latin American writing of the present, Rivera Garza privileges a kind of documentary writing based on the archive. Disappropriation envisions the future of literature as an extended acknowledgments page, making visible both writing as a material practice and as a communal practice, rejecting the prestige of the singular author in favor of a genealogy of exchange and sharing: “Writing is not the product of some inexplicable individual inspiration, but rather a form of material labor undertaken by concrete bodies in contact—tense, volatile, unresolved contact—with other bodies at specific times and in specific places” (Rivera Garza 2020: 109-110). As a consequence, reading becomes a productive and relational activity, a being-with-another in which the text is given new meanings.

Meanwhile, in her conceptualization of ‘composting of writing’, Mexican visual artist and writer, Verónica Gerber Bicecci (2020), uses the metaphor of domestic composting systems to account for what literature is in need of: an empathy-inducing process in which ideas, images, and words are composted as part of a collective practice, resulting in the erosion of the traditional authorial figure. Just like compost devices make us aware of the porousness of organic matter, compost writing interrogates a complex, heterogenous network of relations, where the origin of each constituent can be identified despite the constant problematization of which meaning is engendered by whom. Gerber Bicecci, whose approach to the literary act has found expression in novels such as *La compañía* (2019), conceives of writing as a generative power that embraces its contradictions instead of resorting to hybridity in order to transcend them. In composting, the influence of Rivera Garza—author of the curatorial text for her 2021 exhibition “Barefoot feet, the fields in them, I will feel the creditor of the land on my bare soles”—is visible, as well as Gerber Bicecci’s admiration for Donna Haraway, who, “philosophically and materially”, declares herself to be “a compostist”: “Critters—human and not—become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling” (2016: 97).

Needless to say, the choice of Rivera Garza and Gerber Bicecci as figures related to Luiselli is not arbitrary. For one thing, the connections between the three authors go beyond a shared nationality. Rivera Garza includes Luiselli in the new generation of planetary migrant Latin American authors, living in-between their native country and the United States and writing both in Spanish and English. Rivera Garza herself occupies a similar position, and she and Luiselli are singled out as the only Mexican authors in constant dialogue with US metafiction (Sánchez Prado 2021: 98); they are, after all, avant-garde writers willing to destabilize genre conventions and the identity of the literary ‘I’ (Télliez 2021). For their part, both Luiselli and Gerber Bicecci, who have been translated into English by Christina MacSweeney for Coffee House Press, are among a handful

of Mexican authors whose production reveals an interest in both literature and the visual arts (Sánchez Prado 2021: 98); they are at the forefront of a movement of works in Mexican literature where nonfiction material finds expression in myriad ways (Marcial Pérez 2019). Likewise, academic scholarship—fittingly, by Latin American scholars from US universities—is alert to the connections between Luiselli and Rivera Garza (Márquez 2018), and between Luiselli and Gerber Bicecci (Campisi 2020).

The rest of this article will be devoted to exploring how the concepts of disappropriation and composting can help us to identify and understand the strategies employed by Luiselli to convey a sense of complexity and interconnection. To do so, Luiselli's archival method is presented as the center of the analysis. For the sake of clarity, the study of the novel is divided into three main discussion points: first, Luiselli's politics of quotation; second, her use of boxes, and third, the posthuman nature-culture continuum established in her text.

3. A fragmented archive of quotations

The archive of the title can be read as a performative gesture: the novel itself is an archive, which produces a type of polyphony crucial for a novel so concerned with the issue of representation. The use of the archive as compositional method links the novel to “fieldwork literature” (Sabo 2020: 220) or “documentary writing” (Rivera Garza 2020: 142): writing that relies on the archive and resorts to the methods of the social sciences. As part of their interrogation of “literature's relation to empirical reality, knowledge and authorship”, these texts often have sociologists or journalists playing central roles, the difficulties faced during the research process is foregrounded, and original documents are inserted (Sabo 2020: 220). However, the truth of said documents is not taken for granted; rather, the information they contain is questioned, attacked, recontextualized, and transgressed (Rivera Garza 2020: 148). Luiselli's novel, which perfectly matches the features listed by Sabo and Rivera Garza, is also an exemplary representative of a trend of fragmentary fiction identified by critics and scholar in recent years.

Lost Children Archive takes the fragment—of differing lengths—as its basic unit of composition. For writer and editor Guy Patrick Cunningham, as the literary approach that most convincingly “captures the tension between ‘digital’ and ‘analog’ reading”, fragmentary writing “best fits our particular moment” (2012). Furthermore, as novelist Olivia Sudjic (2021) points out, “the dominant trend is to tell a story through fragments”, regardless of whether social media plays an actual role in the plot. These fragments may be “only a paragraph, or even one line, which of course makes social media comparison easy, while others may be the length of a blog” (Sudjic 2021). However, according to Ted Gioia, what distinguishes the new novel of the fragment from previous experimental modernist and postmodernist fiction is that it “is holistic and coalescent. It resists disunity, even as it appears to embody it” (2017). Despite its fractured look, it seeks “an exemplary wholeness” (Gioia 2017).

In *Lost Children Archive*, the text is divided into four parts, the first three of which are in turn neatly divided into sections, rarely longer than two pages. Instead of being preceded by a more traditional chapter title or number, these sections are introduced by their own header, usually a noun or a noun phrase, emulating a scholarly text. The choice of words strengthens the amalgamation of the literary with the scientific and academic, producing headers such as “INVENTORY”, “COVALENCE”, “PROCEDURES”, “ITEMIZATION”, “ACOUSTEMOLOGY”, “RHYTHM & METER”, “FOUNDATIONAL MYTHS”, or “NARRATIVE ARC” (Luiselli 2019: 7, 8, 17, 22, 39, 89, 197, 264).

Crucial to both the novel's structure and its fragmentary nature is Luiselli's system of citation of other authors, explained by her² in the “Works Cited (*Notes on Sources*)” section that closes the book. She acknowledges that *Lost Children Archive* is the result of a dialogue with a number of textual and nontextual sources: “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: 381). Such a declaration of principles links *Lost Children Archive* to what Michael David Lukas calls the “newly reinvigorated genre” of the “polyphonic novel”, able to “make music from the messy cacophony that is life in the 21st century” (2013). At the same time, Luiselli's words inevitably bring to mind the communal practice of writing theorized by Rivera Garza and embraced by compost writing, which privileges thinking through already existing texts over creating new ones (León 2020). Referencing and (re)writing materialize in “pieces as organisms that grow from the organisms we already know”, as Gerber Bicecci puts it (Campo and Gerber Bicecci 2020). Similarly, the idea of fragments preserving and acknowledging their place of enunciation—which, in *Lost Children Archive*,

² Even though the “Works Cited” is not signed, it may be safe to identify Valeria Luiselli herself—or, at least, Luiselli as implied author, in opposition to any other narrative voice—as the author of this paratext for a number of reasons: it appears after the Acknowledgements page, the comments on and explanations about the structure of the book included in it imply a figure outside the diegesis, its opening sentence makes reference to “my previous work” (Luiselli 2019: 381), and it ends with the following disclaimer: “To the best of my ability, I have quoted, cited, and referenced all works used for this novel—aside from the boxes, embeddings, retranslations, and repurposing of the literary works in the third-person narrative thread of the novel, which I cite above” (Luiselli 2019: 385).

any reader is allowed to identify thanks to the notes on sources—evokes Adrienne Rich’s politics of location (1984) and Donna Haraway’s situated knowledges (1988). In fact, Gerber Bicecci assigns great importance to the words of Haraway:

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (2016: 12)

Equally relevant for composting are the ideas of two of Haraway’s most distinguished followers, Jennifer Mae Hamilton and Astrida Neimanis: “We suggest that composting as practice demands that we pay attention to what goes into the compost bin”, that we “notice not only what is being transmogrified, but also under what conditions, why, and to what effect” (2018: 503). By sharing with the reader the origin of the material she uses, and by expounding on her use of it, Luiselli invites a reading of her work in terms of compost fiction.

In those cases in which sources are neither cited and quoted nor paraphrased and referenced, they are subtly alluded to—or “echoed”, in Luiselli’s words—, making the archive “both an inherent and a visible part of the central narrative” (2019: 381). One way or another, the use of sources has a double function: on the one hand, it acknowledges the plural origins of any creative process; on the other, it allows readers to trace the genealogy—or geology, or archaeology, in composting parlance—of origins and influences that predate the text. As Luiselli highlights: “I’m not interested in intertextuality as an outward, performative gesture but as a method or procedure of composition” (382). Due to their constant resorting to citation, the narrative voices in the novel are at the same time a reading voice and a writing voice. With reading exposed as a productive practice, the plurality and multiple subjectivity of texts is foregrounded, hammering another nail in the coffin of the author. The practices of quotation, embedding, and paraphrasing not only diminish the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction in the spirit of postautonomy, but also those between self and others, as structurally exemplified by the frequent lack of transition between referencing others—e.g. the fight of an Apache leader, the disappearance of two Mexican girls held in some unidentified detention center—, and telling the family’s own story—e.g. the estrangement of the marriage, the coming of age of the children.

Luiselli’s handling of sources reflects the changing role of the writer as described by Kenneth Goldsmith: “we’ve become master typists, exacting cut-and-pasters, and OCR demons. There’s nothing we love more than transcription; we find few things more satisfying than collation” (2011: 220). This new task, no longer generating but managing material and information, is performed in an environment that has blurred “the distinction between archivists, writers, producers, and consumers” (2011: 28). Luiselli’s belief in the “porous and ambivalent” (Wang 2019) form of the novel and her conviction that “thinking in terms of genre is not so fertile” (Leblanc 2019: 47) evoke Gerber Bicecci’s understanding of writing as a space where words, images, and other forms of communication can sprout again, where myriad voices, forms, and objects are summoned into a collective existence. Necessarily, this collective existence is far from homogeneous, which affects the form of the novel itself. Generic instability makes *Lost Children Archive* difficult to categorize. With its essay-like discussions on the work of documentarians and documentarists, or its journalistic investigation into the Hemispheric migrant crisis, it is a mutant object; even more than that, it exists, at the same time, inside and outside literature, much like the reality-fiction theorized by Ludmer.

Along with references to well-known sources by the likes of Jerzy Andrzejewski, Anne Carson, Juan Rulfo, or Susan Sontag, the novel is interspersed with the sixteen chapters that make up the fake book *Elegies for Lost Children*, by Ella Camposanto (Luiselli’s invention). This story, loosely based on the Medieval Children’s Crusade, mirrors the complexity of migration routes in the contemporary world, as it is set “in what seems like a not-so-distant future in a region that can possibly be mapped back to North Africa, the Middle East, and southern Europe, or to Central and North America” (Luiselli 2019: 139). Whether *Elegies for Lost Children* exists outside the world of this novel³ is a secondary issue; on the contrary, it is the subtle ways in which this fictitious source sheds light on the plight of refugees today, while reinforcing the lack of distinction between fiction and reality typical of postautonomous literature, that provide Luiselli’s politics of quotation with an extra layer of depth.

4. A solidary archive of boxes

The discussion of Luiselli’s employment of sources leads us to an exploration of her archival method as represented by her use of the boxes stacked inside the car’s trunk. These are both the family’s archive and the novel’s “fundamental ‘bibliography’” (Luiselli 2019: 381). They hold notebooks, books, CDs, tapes, brochures, maps, migrant mortality reports, loose notes, scraps, polaroids, and folders containing from

³ For the inadvertent reader, Luiselli explains in “Works Cited” that “the *Elegies* are composed by means of a series of allusions to literary works that are about voyages, journeying, migrating, etc.” (2019: 382).

facsimiles to musical scores and stereographs. Contemplating this variety and scope, Oana Sabo argues that Luiselli significantly expands the notion of the archive, which in the influential theories of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida was limited to the written word (Sabo 2020: 221). Furthermore, this variety of media points to the “refracting of voices” ambitioned by Luiselli (Leblanc 2019: 45), with which she avoids giving *carte blanche* to an authoritative narrator. Similarly, the epigraphs that, rather unusually for a novel, introduce the different sections of Part 1, hint at the breadth and scope of the citation system elaborated by Luiselli: from the French historian, Arlette Farge, to the Native American poet, Natalie Diaz; from the scholar of queer and Chicana cultural theory, Gloria Anzaldúa, to the Canadian music composer and environmentalist, Raymond Murray Shafer; from the quintessential modernist writer, Virginia Woolf, to an anonymous migrant prayer.

Boxes I through IV are the husband’s, and as such, the best opportunity given to the reader to hear him speak, besides the relatively small number of dialogues in which he is involved throughout the novel. Nonetheless, it is through him and his boxes that most of the voices of “the last free peoples on the American continent” (Luiselli 2019: 20) find expression in the novel. These include Chief Cochise, Geronimo, and the Chiricahuas, the main subjects of his ‘inventory of echoes’. Of particular relevance is the set of eight books included in his Box IV (Luiselli 2019: 148), which reads as a crash course in Native American culture, with an emphasis on Apache peoples, as many of the titles make clear: *Cochise*, *Chiricahua Apache Chief*, *From Cochise to Geronimo: The Chiricahua Apaches, 1874-1886*, and *Mangas Coloradas: Chief of the Chiricahua Apaches*, all of them by Edwin R. Sweeney; or *Geronimo: His Own Story. The Autobiography of a Great Patriot Warrior*, by Geronimo and S. M. Barrett.

Meanwhile, Box V, the one carried by the woman, obliquely tells the story of migrant children crossing the Mexico-US border. It contains a map, designed and distributed by Humane Borders, a non-profit corporation run by volunteers, which warns migrants of the dangers of crossing the desert on foot, and helps them locate water stations (Luiselli 2019: 243); the Migrant Mortality Reports of six children, ages 0 to 15, which aseptically offer the particulars of deaths along the migrant trail (Luiselli 2019: 244-249), and the picture of a plastic bag containing personal belongings—of which only a toothbrush, toothpaste, and a mobile phone are clearly discernible—, with the caption “Objects found on migrant trails in the desert, Pima County” (Luiselli 2019: 250). When compared with the fully referenced books by well-known authors carried by the family, these objects without owners remind us of the vulnerability of the border-crosser, while their material nature competes with “the hegemony of the virtual” in which we currently live, according to Rodríguez Magda (2019: 23).

Not only that: these personal effects bring back a previous passage in which the female narrator speculates about “the sudden melancholy” someone else’s belongings produce “in that person’s absence” (Luiselli 2019: 67). The referent, at that point, were the narrator’s sister’s banal pencils, clips, and Post-it notes the narrator went through in her drawer. Now, the possessions discussed being the last objects owned by the deceased, the melancholy turns tragic. This is the traumatic encounter with the historical document and the suppressed voices it awakens, in Rivera Garza’s formulation (2020: 139); an encounter with which Luiselli wishes to destabilize the act of reading itself:

having different bits and pieces of things in the novel—not just straightforward text but an image, the pictures at the end, the things in the archival boxes throughout the book, and particularly the migrant mortality reports—forces us as readers, I think, to not only stand differently, but to stop and wonder, ‘How do I read this?’ (Leblanc 2019: 47)

When such a challenge to literary expectations is introduced, there is no index of reality or fiction, and one approaches the postautonomous text “as if it were a piece of news” (Ludmer 2018). Likewise, in the composting practice of Gerber Bicecci, the exploration of archival material allows the writer to seek anachronistic, non-linear, and open connections in order to explore the limits of language (Castillo Morales 2021).

Box V also features loose notes devoted to exposing the hidden truth behind euphemisms such as “Removal” (“Meaning: expulsion and dispossession of people from their lands”, but also “expulsion of people seeking refuge”) (Luiselli 2019: 255, 256), “Our Peculiar Institution” (“Meaning: slavery. (Epitome of all euphemisms)”) (Luiselli 2019: 255), or “Reservation” (“Meaning: a wasteland, a sentence to perpetual poverty”) (Luiselli 2019: 256). These notes contribute to one of the motifs of the novel: the identification of Native American people and undocumented migrants as casualties of a centuries-old history of disenfranchisement and diaspora. In *Lost Children Archive*, the US territory becomes a palimpsest which reveals a genealogy of violence as the husband follows in the traces of the Apaches and the wife documents the arrival of children from Mexico and Central America. The public confrontation of violent histories that Michael Rothberg conceptualizes as ‘multidirectional memory’ provides a useful framework to better understand the “possibilities for unexpected forms of solidarity” produced by the negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing “that take place on a shared, but uneven terrain” (2014: 176)—in the case at hand, the contact points between Native American memory and identity, and traumatic experiences of migration in the American continent. In Luiselli’s novel, these two memories do not compete but collaborate to create more memory.

Nevertheless, some important differences between the two experiences, and the way husband and wife approach them, are evident. The man seems to be largely interested in Apache leaders (the name of one or more chiefs appears in half of the book titles, which are all either biographical or academic works). Conversely, the woman's box entries allude to anonymous migrants and the mundane objects which index their short-lived existence. When Rivera Garza connects the use of the archive in fiction with the goals and methods of social history—"the so-called bottom-up history" (2020: 135)—, as opposed to the 'Great Man' version of history based on the deeds of a single individual who 'makes History', she is to a significant extent making the same distinction that Luiselli establishes between the approach of wife and husband in her novel.

Just like the archive allows Gerber Bicecci to avoid the homogenizing effect of telling a story exclusively from a first or third person in her novel *La compañía* (Castillo Morales 2021), Rivera Garza, when confronted with a similar problem, identifies these solutions in her poetics of disappropriation: "Unlike the paternalistic 'giving voice to the voiceless' promoted by certain imperial subjectivities, and unlike the naïve putting-of-oneself into another's shoes, these writing practices incorporate those shoes and those others into the materiality of a text" (2020: 19-20). In a similar way, when faced with the ethical question she has her narrator ask herself ("why would I even think that I can or should make art with someone else's suffering?"), Luiselli (2019: 79), Luiselli seems to find in the archive the most honest way of circumventing the risk of appropriating the voice of the migrants.

5. A posthuman archive of more-than-human connections

The third and final discussion point addressed in this article is the human-nonhuman continuum. *Lost Children Archive* depicts the contemporary as a complex reality of networks where human and nonhuman, nature and technology, are interconnected. This posthuman connection echoes the transversal 'assemblage' of human and nonhuman actors theorized by Rosi Braidotti (2011: 159), as well as Donna Haraway's ideas of tentacularity, making-with, thinking-with, and becoming-with (2016). When applied to literature, the result is, in the words of Rivera Garza, a planetary writing that questions the universality of the global subject through the interconnection between body, community, and nature (2020: 21). In Luiselli's novel, examples range from the soundscape of New York City recorded by husband and wife when they worked for New York University's Center for Urban Science—whose samples include sounds from the subway, cash registers, Canada geese or underwater currents (Luiselli 2019: 6)—to the way the family collapse into the landscape as they drive through a highway storm:

Highway storms erase the illusory division between the landscape and you, the spectator; they thrust your observant eyes into what you observe. Even inside the hermetic space of the car, the wind blows right into your mind, through stunned eye sockets, clouds your judgment. The rain that falls down looks like it falls up. Thunder blasts so hard it reverberates inside your chest like a sudden uncontrollable anxiety. Lightning strikes so close you don't know if it comes from outside or from inside you, a sudden flash illuminating the world or the nervous mess in your brain, cell circuits igniting in incandescent ephemeral interactions. (Luiselli 2019: 153)

Few more powerful examples can be found in recent fiction of human characters becoming one with nature in a way that avoids the transcendental and emphasizes a purely posthuman vitalist materiality. The resulting sense of interconnection has as its ethical corollary the need to be accountable and avoid becoming just a disinterested bystander. As Judith Butler reminds us, "we are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us" (2005: 64); in other words, we are all "connected into one system, which makes us all interdependent, vulnerable and responsible for the Earth as an indivisible living community" (Onega and Ganteau 2020a: 12).

The indivisible living community becomes unexpectedly vivid when its tiniest animal members are brought to the fore. Thus, the wife peacefully reads Susan Sontag's journals as mosquitoes, beetles, white moths, small spiders, and fireflies subtly interact with her (Luiselli 2019: 58). Only a couple of days before this moment of serenity, during the last days of the family in New York City, their apartment filled with ants. The children found this event more exhilarating than abject, while the husband lectured on how ants are sacred in Hopi mythology (Luiselli 2019: 28). In passages like these, the novel vibrates with "the cosmic buzz of insects", an expression of "the multiplicity of possible worlds and their copresence within our humanized universe" (Braidotti 2011: 98, 102). When the female narrator remembers the work of her husband's mentors, acoustemologists Steven Feld and Murray Shafer, it is the sound of birds that carry special connotations. We learn that the Bosavi people of Papua New Guinea "understood birds as echoes or 'gone reverberations'—as absence turned into a presence; and, at the same time, as a presence that made an absence audible" (Luiselli 2019: 98). Memory finds a voice and ancestry resonates in the present thanks to the singing of the birds of the rain forest. The husband's 'inventory of echoes' draws upon this project, as the natural sounds of the present in

Geronimo's burial place—the birds singing, the wind blowing through the branches of cedar trees—illuminate Geronimo's past struggle (Luiselli 2019: 141). The being-with-another of the disappropriated text is fulfilled now, while the soundscape mapped by the husband is in itself an act of rewriting as Rivera Garza understands it, “invoking less the ghosts of the past than the continuities from the past that forge a practice of resistance to and contempt for the present” (2021).

As the excerpt of the highway storms shows, nonanimal elements play an important role in the posthuman landscape of the novel. The ecological concerns brought about by the contemplation of the result of systematic agricultural aggression echo well-established tropes of (feminist) ecocriticism: fields “gang-raped by heavy machinery, bloated with modified seeds and injected with pesticides”, “corseted into a circumscription of grassy crop layers, in patterns resembling Dantesque hells” (Luiselli 2019: 177). A different type of allusion is brought forth by the saguaros, a cactus species the name of which the daughter obsessively repeats “like she's discovered a new star or planet” as the family drives through Texas (Luiselli 2019: 154). Interestingly, Vázquez Enríquez (2021: 77) explains that the Tohono O'odham Nation regards saguaros as not simply a type of cactus but as people too. In this sense, these cacti represent for the Tohono O'odham of the Sonoran Desert very much what the Colorado River does for Mojave people in the poems of Natalie Diaz, one of the authors quoted in *Lost Children Archive's* epigraphs: “I carry a river. It is who I am: ‘Aha Makav. This is no metaphor./ When a Mojave says, *Inyech ‘Aha Makavch ithuum*, we are saying our name. We are telling a story of our existence. *The river runs through the middle of my body*” (2020: 49). This way, the hierarchical distinctions across planetary beings are rendered even more useless. Moreover, Vázquez Enríquez examines how, in the novel, humans and nonhumans are connected in a shared vulnerability: migrants die on the desert, which is in turn destroyed by patrolling strategies and technologies (2021: 76). With its use of the Desert Southwest, where time is “an ongoing present tense” (Luiselli 2019: 312), as a key element in the plot, *Lost Children Archive* exemplifies the writing understood by Ludmer as a force that fabricates present.

The box carried by the daughter, Box VI, provides a different illustration of the novel's posthuman approach. From a purely linguistic point of view, this box, which solely contains a catalogue of echoes accompanied by brief explanations, evokes Swedish poet Öyvind Fahlström's experiments with onomatopoeia.⁴ In many ways, these echoes reinforce the novel's rejection of dialectical oppositions such as human and nonhuman, or nature and technology. Thus, the most obvious highway (“Fffffffffffffhh, cars driving past on highways”) or train echoes (“Tractrtractrmmmmshhhhhh, train leaving station”) stand side by side with leaves (“Crrp, crrp, leaf crunching”), rock (“Silence”), and desert echoes (“Tsssss, fsssss, wind through saguaros”, Luiselli 2019: 343, 344). What is more, the fact that this five-year old is given a box of her own, and for that matter, the one that closes the narration along with her brother's box, proclaims the novel's reluctance to concede the primacy of the adult subject of humanism. Just like the migrant children undergo extreme experiences which bear little resemblance to any sugar-coated view of childhood, the son and daughter are treated by their parents “as our intellectual equals”, as “our life partners in conversation, fellow travelers in the storm with whom we strove constantly to find still waters” (Luiselli 2019: 91). This subversion of the family hierarchy represents one more subtle movement towards a horizontal communication scheme.

6. Conclusion: Representing complexity

In the main body of this article, the use of disappropriation and composting as categories of analysis has shed new light on Valeria Luiselli's search for relationality and complexity in *Lost Children Archive*. The different expressions of her archival method support the polyphonic impetus of the novel while challenging the supremacy of the human. Arguably, nowhere is Luiselli's wish to portray the complexity of the contemporary as evident as in “Echo Canyon”, one of the novel's final sections, which nicely captures the spirit of her approach. “Echo Canyon” consists of a single sentence, 19 pages long, connecting past, present, and future through multiperspectivity and the modernist technique of stream-of-consciousness. Although this section ostensibly narrates the encounter between the son, the daughter, and a group of migrant children in the desert, thanks to the constant changes of perspective it also manages to depict a network of violence touching upon the purely political—with references to Dick Cheney and George Bush's “Operation Jump Start”, a mission to enforce border security and build a border fence—or the bureaucratic—embodied by the office clerk “who is never late for work, and sips from reusable straws in order not to pollute, and sits up straight in front of the computer monitor” while she records data handed over by the patrol officers who find the bones and belongings of deceased migrants (Luiselli 2019: 343). Along with this, an imaginative recreation of the migrant children's strenuous journey across the desert is attempted. In this tour de force, the narrative morphs into what Deleuze and Guattari call a “collective assemblage of enunciation” (1987: 84), the kind of enunciation facilitated by free indirect discourse.

⁴ See Gerber Bicecci's essay “Onomatopoeia” in her *Mudanza* (2021).

“Echo Canyon” represents the culmination, on the one hand, of the novel’s constant, self-reflexive problematization of the danger of “a single voice forcing it all together into a clean narrative sequence” (Luiselli 2019: 96); and, on the other, of its examination of the refugee crisis as a Hemispheric issue, a transnational phenomenon that needs to be analyzed in connection with drug wars, gang violence, or arm trafficking across borders. From this perspective, a narrative of fracture emerges: one that favours complexity over totalization, and relies on a multiplicity of sources to build a sense of wholeness. This is the type of creative object that Canadian poet derek beaulieu seems to have in mind when he says: “Art is a conversation, not a patent office./ [...] If you don’t share you don’t exist” (2013: 3). Indeed, *Lost Children Archive* exists with singular power thanks to her author’s commitment to sharing ideas, dialoguing with her precursors and her contemporaries, renewing and producing the present.

References

- Aliaga-Lavrijsen, Jessica and José María Yebra-Pertusa, eds. (2019). *Transmodern Perspectives on Contemporary Literatures in English*. New York and London: Routledge.
- beaulieu, derek (2013). *Please, No More Poetry: The Poetry of derek beaulieu*. Selected with an Introduction by Kit Dobson. Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Braidotti, Rossi (2011). *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Butler, Judith (2005). *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Campisi, Nicolás (2020). *El retorno de lo contemporáneo: La novela latinoamericana en el fin de los tiempos*. [Doctoral dissertation, Brown University]. Brown University Repository. <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:dpwv5wq5/PDF/>
- Campo, Óscar Daniel and Verónica Gerber Bicecci (2020). The Process of Making Writings: A Conversation with Verónica Gerber Bicecci. *Latin American Literature Today* 1(16). <http://www.latinamericanliteraturetoday.org/en/2020/november/process-making-writings-conversation-ver%C3%B3nica-gerber-bicecci>
- Castillo Morales, Alexander (2021). Verónica Gerber: Escritura compostaje. *Temporales*, December 2021. <https://wp.nyu.edu/gsas-revistatemporales/veronica-gerber-escritura-compostaje/>
- Cunningham, Guy Patrick (2012). Fragmentary: Writing in a Digital Age. *The Millions*, January 24, 2012. <https://themillions.com/2012/01/fragmentary-writing-in-a-digital-age.html>
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translation and Foreword by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Diaz, Natalie (2020). *Postcolonial Love Poem*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Dussel, Enrique (2013). Agenda for a South-South Philosophical Dialogue. *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture* 17(1): 1-27. DOI: 10.13185/BU2013.17101
- Gerber Bicecci, Verónica (2020). Escrituras del compostaje. Cátedra Abierta UDP en Homenaje a Roberto Bolaño. November 26, 2020. <https://catedraabierta.udp.cl/invitado/veronica-gerber-bicecci/>
- Gerber Bicecci, Verónica (2021). *Mudanza*. Bilbao: Consonni.
- Gioia, Ted (2017). The Rise of the Fragmented Novel (An Essay in 26 Fragments). *Modern Literature*, November 4, 2017. <https://www.modernliterature.org/rise-fragmented-novel-essay-26-fragments-by-ted-gioia/>
- Goldsmith, Kenneth (2011). *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Guerrero, Gustavo, Benjamin Loy and Gesine Müller, eds. (2021). *World Editors: Dynamics of Global Publishing and the Latin American Case between the Archive and the Digital Age*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.
- Hamilton, Jennifer Mae and Astrida Neimanis (2018). Composting Feminisms and Environmental Humanities. *Environmental Humanities* 10(2): 501-527. DOI: 10.1215/22011919-7156859
- Haraway, Donna (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14(3): 575-599. DOI: 10.2307/3178066
- Haraway, Donna (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Leblanc, Lauren (2019). Angles of Experience: An Interview with Valeria Luiselli. *Poets & Writers Magazine*, March/April 2019: 40-47.
- León, Ana (2020). Verónica Gerber: ¿Alguien más ve lo que yo veo? *Noticias 22 Digital*, January 29, 2020. <https://noticias.canal22.org.mx/2020/01/29/alguien-mas-ve-lo-que-yo-veo/>
- Ludmer, Josefina (2009). Literaturas postautónomas 2.0. *Propuesta Educativa* 32: 41-45.
- Ludmer, Josefina (2018). After Literature. Translated by Shaj Mathew. *Mitos Magazine*. Vol. 2. September 26, 2018. <http://www.mitosmag.com/infideles/2018/9/26/postautonomous-literatures>
- Luiselli, Valeria (2019). *Lost Children Archive*. London: 4th Estate.
- Lukas, Michael David (2013). A Multiplicity of Voices: On the Polyphonic Novel. *The Millions*, February 15, 2013. <https://themillions.com/2013/02/a-multiplicity-of-voices-on-the-polyphonic-novel.html>

- Marcial Pérez, David (2019). Literatura mexicana a ras de suelo. *El País*, December 2, 2019. https://elpais.com/cultura/2019/12/01/actualidad/1575233887_633475.html
- Márquez, Alejandra (2018). Traces of Lesbianism in Cristina Rivera Garza's *La cresta de Ilión* (2002) and Valeria Luiselli's *Los ingravidos* (2011). *iMex Revista* 7(13): 60-72. DOI: 10.23692/iMex.13.4
- Onega, Susana and Jean-Michel Ganteau (2020a). Introduction: Transcending the Postmodern. In Onega, Susana and Jean-Michel Ganteau, eds., 1-19.
- Onega, Susana and Jean-Michel Ganteau, eds. (2020b). *Transcending the Postmodern: The Singular Response of Literature to the Transmodern Paradigm*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Rich, Adrienne (1984). Notes Toward a Politics of Location. In Rich, Adrienne, 220-231.
- Rich, Adrienne (1986). *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Rivera Garza, Cristina (2013). *Los muertos indóciles: Necroescrituras y desappropriación*. México, D. F.: Tusquets Editores México.
- Rivera Garza, Cristina (2020). *The Restless Dead: Necrowriting and Disappropriation*. Translated by Robin Myers. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Rivera Garza, Cristina (2021). Verónica Gerber Bicecci: Barefoot in the Field, I Will Feel the Creditor-Earth on my Naked Soles. Exhibition Text. *Proyectos Monclova*. <https://www.proyectosmonclova.com/exhibitions-gallery/barefoot-in-the-field-i-will-feel-the-creditor-earth-on-my-naked-soles>
- Rodríguez Magda, Rosa María (2019). The Crossroads of Transmodernity. Translated by Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen. In Aliaga-Lavrijsen, Jessica and José María Yebra-Pertusa, eds., 21-29.
- Rothberg, Michael (2014). Multidirectional Memory. *Témoigner: Entre histoire et mémoire* 119: 176. DOI: 10.4000/temoigner.1494
- Sabo, Oana (2020). Documenting the Undocumented: Valeria Luiselli's Refugee Children Archives. *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture* 11(2): 217-230. DOI: 10.1386/cjmc_00026_1
- Sánchez Prado, Ignacio (2021). El efecto Luiselli: Notas sobre la nueva literatura mexicana y la lengua inglesa. In Guerrero, Gustavo, Benjamin Loy and Gesine Müller, eds., 95-107.
- Suárez Lafuente, María Socorro (2018). Lectio magistralis: Espacios posthumanos: Sujetos nómades para la narrativa del siglo XXI. December 20, 2018. <https://canal.uned.es/video/5c1b8a23b111fed6d8b4568>
- Sudjic, Olivia (2021). Page Refresh: How the Internet Is Transforming the Novel. *The Guardian*, January 23, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jan/23/page-refresh-how-the-internet-is-transforming-the-novel>
- Téllez, Jorge (2021). Treinta años atrás: Entrevista a Cristina Rivera Garza. *Gatopardo*, September 30, 2021. <https://gatopardo.com/noticias-actuales/andamos-perras-andamos-diablas-entrevista-a-cristina-rivera-garza/>
- Vázquez Enríquez, Emily C. (2021). The Sounds of the Desert: *Lost Children Archive* by Valeria Luiselli. *Latin American Literary Review* 48(95): 75-84. DOI: 10.26824/lalr.193
- Wang, Mary (2019). Valeria Luiselli: 'There Are Always Fingerprints of the Archive in my Books'. *Guernica*, February 12, 2019. <https://www.guernicamag.com/miscellaneous-files-interview-valeria-luiselli/>