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Transnationality and Incorporation in the American Road: Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* (2019)

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Abstract: Often set in the mythical landscapes of the American West, the American road narrative conveys the promise of spatial and social mobility that characterize the American Dream and that are made possible by going on the road. Nevertheless, this idea of mobility has been reserved to traditional road heroes—white, heteronormative men—and systemically excluded minorities from accessing the road in the same terms. Consequently, this had an impact on how American road narratives written by and about minorities have been received and analyzed. This article aims to analyze the novel *Lost Children Archive* (2019), written by Mexican-American author Valeria Luiselli, therefore applying a transnational perspective to the American road narrative genre. Drawing on Ann Brigham's concept of incorporation, it aims to understand how this narrative is positioned in the matrix of the genre and how it is able to deconstruct the hegemonic discourses that shape it.

Introduction

The American road narrative genre is one of the most iconic and appreciated genres in American literature; its epitome, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), has been called "one of the great American novels" (Pynchon 7).[1] This genre reflects the role of the road in the formation of the United States as a country and of American identity and citizenship, and also its growing importance, especially after the introduction of the car. According to Marin Marilyn C. Wesley, the U.S. is a "nation on the move" (xii) and the road and the car have been facilitators and boosters of mobility.

American road narratives have echoed the promise of mobility that is inherent to the road. Mobility, be it spatial or social, is a quintessential American characteristic, expressed since the time the first settlers arrived in the Eastern shores of the future country and started to

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move West. This process was mythicized in Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis (1893), a work that helped to create the myth of the Frontier. Turner's thesis was widely popular and used as a framework for understanding American identity since it was presented, despite many contemporary scholars pointing out its faults and contradictions (Mondi 30; Deverell 35; Limerick 63; Armitage 9).

Turner's thesis pinpoints westward expansion as the crucial building block shaping the American national character. He portrays the landscape of the American West as the Promised Land where Americans could live in a pastoral utopia of abundance and prosperity. This indicated that the land West of the Western frontier was available for them to take, and that the clashes between "savagery" (commonly understood as Native American culture) and civilization (white settlers) were justified. Thus, westward mobility reaffirmed American Exceptionalism and confirmed Manifest Destiny: the belief that the U.S. "was created differently, developed differently, and thus has to be *understood* differently" (Shafer v) while the belief that Americans were entitled to the Promised Land, where they could live in a Western pastoral utopia would, in this way, fulfill the American Dream.

Roads were essential in facilitating westward expansion, thus contributing to the American Dream of spatial and social mobility. Indeed, within the American Road narrative, the road is often thought of as the new frontier: a place that offers opportunities for change and expansion, especially after the advent of the car. According to Rudolf Erben, "like the pioneers, the contemporary American reinvents himself on the road" (36), given that the automobile became a way to reopen the frontier declared closed by Turner, offering the promise of discovery that the pioneers had once experienced, as early automobile journeys mirrored their migrations routes. Also, more than the freedom of movement, there is an ontological freedom associated with the road, as its mythical character provides travelers with the opportunity to transgress the boundaries of the self.

In common road narratives, road heroes leave home in order to escape social order and/or to transform themselves. These heroes' journeys usually depict a white, male, Anglo-Saxon perspective of mobility, which relegates other social groups, such as women and African-American, to the background, denying them access to the promises of mobility and all that it encompasses. As explained by Alexandra Ganser, "social power relations have thus clearly shaped (auto)mobility as much as any other social practice" (16). The American road has been gendered masculine and marked by domestic/public and female/male dichotomies, where normative femininity is associated with the domestic realm/home and normative masculinity is associated with the public sphere/the road. This has produced spatial limitations

for women and has deemed the road unsafe and unfitting for them, creating obstacles and often punishing women who go on the road for their spatial transgression.

As space influences narratives and as these narratives have an impact on the lived realities of space, women have been relegated to the background, despite the publication of several American road narratives written by and about women, given that women have also been attracted to the promises offered by the road. Many of these narratives have contributed to or fallen into the same power structures that have kept women excluded from the literary canon of the American road narrative. Yet, at the same time, they have also confronted spatial limitations. Only by escaping the previously mentioned dichotomies can female authors and protagonists appropriate the road on their own terms. Ann Brigham proposes that we analyze road narratives through the lenses of incorporation, which she defines as a challenge to the simplistic view of mobility, given that it involves the pursuit of new avenues and opportunities for self-expression,

> a dynamic process of engagement … that counter understandings of mobility as an "either/or" proposition … Incorporation is not synonymous with seamless reattachment or reintegration into a preexisting world. Instead, incorporation is used to define a search for new spaces and options for subjectivity that will propel the traveler to a different location—whether that be spatial, intellectual, cultural, social, personal, or some combination thereof. (9)

This perspective focuses on shattering the constructed dichotomies and analyzing women's road journeys as complex and capable of offering new insights into the American road narrative genre. This article argues that *Lost Children Archive (LCA),* written by the Mexican-American author Valeria Luiselli[2] and published in 2019, is able to destabilize and question the discourses and structure of this genre, namely through its narrators, the portrayal of family separation, and through the character of the mother and the juxtaposition between her and the father. *LCA* is a book of fiction that picks up where Luiselli's previous book, *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017), left off.[3]

Lost Children Archive: Reimagining the American Road

Despite its similarities with reality, or rather inspired by them, *LCA* is a fictional narrative. The novel starts in New York, where a family of four—father, mother, a ten-year-old

boy and five-year old girl, who remain nameless throughout the book—goes on the road to the U.S.-Mexico border, for the parents to work on their professional projects that involve soundscape. The family's trip intersects with the telling of the story of refugee children who cross the border and the history of Geronimo and the Chiricahuas, the last Apache group that withstand both Mexican and American efforts of colonization.

First, it is important to address the fact that *LCA* is a narrative written by a Mexican author who lives in the U.S., where she has spent most of her adult life. More traditional road narrative scholars, such as Ronald Primeau, consider that only narratives written by American authors can be part of the American road narrative genre (1). Nevertheless, Ganser argues that narratives written by non-U.S. citizens should also be part of the genre (43). Likewise, scholars have emphasized the need to include Mexican authors when writing about the American West, given the fact that this physical and mythical space has influenced them, and still does, as much as it did American authors. Krista Comer adds that western American literature is "obsessed by borders and power and the violence of colonial desires" (206), which serve to exclude non-white authors. Cheyla R. Samuelson (2020) goes even further, arguing for a transnational approach to the American West, one that does not consider the nationality of the author. Both American road narratives and American West narratives, genres that are so intertwined that it is, at times, difficult to set them apart, are enriched by the contributions of non-U.S. authors, such as Luiselli, who can help reshape the genres to include intersectional perspectives and to mirror the experiences of the communities to which these authors belong, communities which have been systemically excluded.

To tell the story of the family's trip, *LCA* follows a fragmented structure and employs different points of view. Most of the story is narrated by the mother, who mainly tells the story of the family road trip, but towards the end of the novel, the boy takes over as the narrator. He tells the story from the future, recording his voice to recollect the adventure he and his sister had when running away from their parents. The public/private spatial dichotomy is questioned by placing not only a woman, but also a child, as the narrators, offering new protagonists in the narration of road stories. Additionally, there are excerpts of a fictitious book, *Elegies for Lost Children*, also Luiselli's creation. This book helps the reader to accompany the perspective of the migrant lost children, in their journey from Mexico to the border and through the Sonoran Desert. It renders visibility to their stories and sheds light on the disparity of situations between them and the children in the car.

Intertwined with the prose there is the description of the content of seven boxes with the belongings of the family, that range from books to migrant mortality reports. Nicólas

Campisi links the family's archive of boxes to a need of having something on the road that reminds them of home, "the idea of taking root while traveling, two seemingly opposing activities … become compatible through the figure of the archive" (37). Thus, this is one dimension where the novel contradicts traditional road narratives, where road protagonists leave everything that reminds them of home behind, in search for something new. On the contrary, in *LCA*, there is a physical collection of artifacts that connect the characters to their home and to their former unity as a family.

The reader learns, from the start, that the family is not a traditional one. As explained by the mother, "I'm a biological mother to one, a stepmother to the other, and a de facto mother in general to both of them. My husband is a father and a stepfather, to each one respectively, but also just a father" (Luiselli 6-7). Hence, the girl is the mother's biological daughter, while the boy is the father's biological son. It is also important to highlight that the mother is not American and it is hinted that she is from Mexico. The mother describes the family as a "tribe" that "became a family" (7). As explained by Heike Paul, the family has an important role in American society, ever since the creation of the country, being deeply connected to the process of nation building, "The family, both as a core institution and as a generalized code for intimacy and belonging, has a firm place in the American cultural imaginary. It appears as a guiding metaphor in foundational discourses of the U.S. and, time and again, serves as a dominant model to channel questions of citizenship, alongside real and imagined kinship. (139). Thus, presenting an atypical family, one composed by patchworks of previous families, can serve as a vehicle to counter hegemonic discourses on traditional American families. This is important in the context of the American road narrative genre, given that the family is usually an integral part of these narratives: it can be something that the road protagonist is trying to escape from, such as in *On the Road*, the reason that the protagonist went on the road, such as in William Least Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways* (1982), or even a burden the (female) road hero takes with her, as in Mona Simpson's *Anywhere but Here* (1986). In *LCA*, the family and family-related themes are central to the narrative and the road protagonists are both the mother and the boy. By presenting central figures that are uncommon in the context of the American road narrative, established practices of the genre are questioned.

At the beginning of the novel, we learn that the parents' marriage came to an end after the road trip. Framing the trip as a way of dealing with the family's separation connects *LCA* to Brigham's concept of incorporation: mobility is a dynamic process of engaging with social conflicts, in this case a divorce and the breakup of a family. Applying the lens of incorporation can be a way of approaching the power structures and discourses usually associated with the

white male canon of the American road narrative. It can also help destabilize the formula associated with the American road narrative—"preparation to departure, routing, decisions about goals and modes of transport, the arrival, return and reentry" (Primeau 1)—and consequent narration of the road story.

The novel places political issues in the realm of domesticity through the portrayal of family separation as not only a family or societal issue but a legal, bureaucratic, and political one. This family separation refers to the families that are divided at the border, when the children cross alone and the adults stay behind, but also to the divorce of the parents and consequent separation of their children. As explained by the mother in *LCA*, "beginnings, middles, and ends are only a matter of hindsight. If we are forced to produce a story in retrospect, our narrative wraps itself selectively around the elements that seem relevant, bypassing all others" (Luiselli 62). Additionally, by showing "how the sphere of the international is inseparable from the spaces of the domestic, which includes the nation and the home" (Kollin 306), Luiselli questions once again the public/private spatial dichotomy of road narratives.

Moreover, the novel compares and contrasts the wife and husband's approach to the road trip, highlighting how masculine tropes of the American road narrative genre are reflected in the husband's behavior—and problematizing them—and how the wife serves to counteract it. It starts with the desire to depart and go (south)west, which is motivated by the husband. The wife does not want to go and is only convinced when she meets Manuela, the mother of two migrant children whose whereabouts are unknown after crossing the border. Promising to help her, she decides to go on the road. The wife and the husband are also in dissonance in their approach to the pace of the travel: the husband wants them to move faster, to stop less and to shorten their stays—echoing the frenetic pace and speed of Kerouacian travels—while the wife enjoys "the slow speed on secondary roads across parks, the long stops in diners and motels" (Luiselli 116).

Moreover, the motivations behind the trip differ within the couple: the husband wants to go to the southern borderlands to set up "an inventory of echoes" of "the ghosts of Geronimo and the last Apache" (Luiselli 21). The fact that the sounds the husband wants to record are only echoes of the past creates a sense of recovery of a lost story but also of dissipation and immateriality, given that they will never be fully heard: he wants to create an archive in the present, using an archive of the past. On the other hand, the wife wants to look for Manuela's daughters, but also to document the issue of migrant children crossing the border and being deported, through soundscape. This leads the wife narrator to describe him as a documentarian,

while she is a documentarist. This means that the wife is more "like a chemist" (Luiselli 99), and the work she does is "… about not fucking it up, about getting the facts of the story as right as possible … (Luiselli 99), and the husband is more "like a librarian … an acoustemologist [sic] and soundscape artist" (Luiselli 99-100), transmitting here the sense that what she does appears to be more tangible, while the husband has more artistic approach to archive creation. The wife confesses that her husband looks down on her work, believing that she has a "lack of greater aesthetical principles" and "a blind obedience to funders and funding" (Luiselli 100), showing he sees her more like someone who just records sounds, instead of an artist who creates an aesthetic experience.

Thus, there is a major contrast between the husband and wife's approaches to documenting and archival creation and even some contempt shown towards the wife's vision of these practices. The novel then goes on hinting that this, as well as their approach to the road trip, is influenced by gender differences, which leads scholar Patricia Stuelke to point out the similarity between the father and *On the Road*'s Sal Paradise, "just as Sal flees bourgeois domesticity for the rejuvenating possibility of the road West, the family's road trip is precipitated by the husband's desire to flee his marriage for the Southwest" (55). Interestingly, one of the husband's boxes, Box III, contains *On the Road*, as well as what the mother describes as "an all-male compendium of 'going a journey,' conquering and colonizing: *Heart of Darkness, The Cantos, The Waste Land, Lord of the Flies, On the Road, 2666*, the Bible" (Luiselli 43). He also has academic papers and biographical works about the Apache leaders whose echoes he is going to record in his box. Contrastingly, the wife's box is composed mainly of objects that relate to the migrant children she is documenting: maps, mortality reports or photographs of objects that were found next to dead bodies in the desert. Rivera Garza considers that the archive in fiction can be used to tell the "so-called bottom-up history" (135) and Peinado-Abarrio states that *LCA* manages to do so thanks to the character of the mother (106). Contrarily to her husband, who wants to tell "the 'Great Man' version of the story based on the single individual 'who makes History'" (Peinado-Abarrio 106), she sheds a light on the migrants who have been rendered invisible and whose stories were left untold. The parents' discussion around the books in the husband's boxes helps to shed light on the differing views of the couple, and on how Luiselli uses the father as an archetype for the Kerouacian type of male road protagonist and the mother as its antithesis. The husband considers *On the Road* the "a perfect choice" for them to listen to during the trip, while the wife recalls that, while reading the book, as well as others by Kerouac, she thought of novels as "infinite bowl of lukewarm soup," stating that she would "rather listen to evangelical radio than to *On the Road*" (Luiselli

76-77). Moreover, she recalls that her sister, who is a literature teacher, "always says that Kerouac is like an enormous penis, pissing all over the USA. She thinks that his syntax reads like he's marking his territory, claiming inches by slamming verbs into sentences, filling up silences" (77). The imagery provoked by this passage associates Kerouac with territory-marking and also evokes the conquest of the American West. Kerouac, the hero of the American road narrative, who has taken the genre for himself, shaping it in a way that other authors must adhere to, has produced a mythical idea of the American West, through his writing, an idea that has shaped the way this space is generally perceived.

In fact, there are several instances were Luiselli hints to the reader that she is aware of the tropes of the American road narrative genre, such as when the mother-narrator sees a "father, daughter, no mother" family that reminds her "of something Jack Kerouac said about Americans: after seeing them, you end up finally not knowing any more whether a jukebox is sadder than a coffin. Though maybe Kerouac had said it of Robert Frank's pictures in his book *The Americans*, and not of Americans in general" (41). Through these witticisms, the author addresses some of the symbols of the American road narrative, showing that she is aware of their impact on the genre, while, at the same time, deconstructing the canonical place they occupy in these narratives. Another example of this approach is when the mother is looking at a photography book by Emmet Gowin, stating, "I still like him more than Robert Frank, Kerouac, and everyone else who has attempted to understand this landscape – perhaps because he takes his time looking at things instead of imposing a point of view on them" (Luiselli 87). This remark implies that Frank, Kerouac and other canonical figures of the American road tell their story according to their standpoint, which might not be suitable to paint a tentative full picture of the American road and, consequently, serves to augment its mythical nature. Frank's work, especially his *pièce de resistance*, *The Americans,* has been characterized by its immediacy and by the direct influence of Frank's vision of a certain scenery or subject. As put forward by Tod Papageorge, "the effect of Frank's pictures is inseparable from the direct, rapid voice that seems to inform them" (6). Contrastingly, Godwin's work has been characterized by a thoroughness and preparedness present in the photographs he took when documenting the Nevada Test Site, for example, or in the pictures he took of his wife, which "demand a slower process of looking and composing images" (Jain 2). This contrast brings back the wife and husband's approach to their work, as documentarist and documentarian, respectively.

Furthermore, *LCA* deconstructs the American road narrative genre through the mother's representational dilemma, as she is constantly questioning if she is the appropriate person to tell the story of the lost children to a wider audience, "Constant concerns: Cultural

appropriation, pissing all over someone else's toilet seat, who am I to tell this story, micromanaging identity politics, heavy-handedness, am I too angry, am I mentally colonized by Western-Saxon-white categories …?" (Luiselli 79). In classic road narratives, the journey often serves as a means of exploration, self-discovery, or the pursuit of freedom. By embedding the mother's ethical and representational dilemmas into the narrative, the novel pushes the readers to consider the implications of who gets to tell certain stories and how those stories are told. This introspection challenges the notion of the road as a space of simple discovery and freedom, instead presenting it as a site of moral and cultural complexity, which brings back Brigham's concept of incorporation. Likewise, this dilemma again showcases the mother's more cautious approach to the subjects being documented and the awareness she has of imposing her own perspectives onto others' experiences, which suggests a critical awareness of the power dynamics involved in storytelling.

In more than one instance, the mother acknowledges the major differences in the journey of her family and the journey of the migrant children. First, the direction of the family road trip is in the opposite direction from the migrant children—(south)west versus north—which attests how the U.S. territory is marked by spatial differences (Luiselli 47). Whereas for the family and for other legal travelers who go on the road, the final destination is the West, for migrant children the destination is always the North. Secondly, "they [migrant children] travel alone, on trains and on foot" (Luiselli 47), while the family travels by car, a symbol of (American) middle class comfort. In addition to this, "they [migrant children] travel without their fathers, without their mothers" (Luiselli 47), whereas the boy and the girl in the car are travelling with their parents. At the same time, the migrant children travel "without suitcases" (Luiselli 47), while the boy and the girl are allowed to have their own boxes to keep their belongings. The migrant children also travel "without passports" (Luiselli 47), while the family has passports, demonstrating that they have legal authorization to be mobile in the country. Moreover, the migrant children travel "always without maps" (Luiselli 47), whereas the family chooses not to follow the GPS as a form of symbolic protest. Finally, the migrant children "have to cross national borders, rivers, deserts, horrors. And those who finally arrive are placed in limbo, are told to wait" (Luiselli 47). This series of details exposes the reality that, in the end, the children, not knowing if they will be able to stay or will be deported, will probably not find the closure to their stories and situations that the family will, even if it is not a "happy" one—the parents' divorce and siblings' separation—a closure that American road narrative protagonists usually find.

Furthermore, the mother is in conflict over how to tell the story of migrant children to her own children (48), showing another layer regarding power dynamics in storytelling, one that is not only concerned with the present but also with the future, and about how next generations will perceive these stories. This is patent when she exposes some doubts about the children's games in the car, where they role-play as lost children and as Apache. She deems these games "as silly and frivolous" and "irresponsible and even dangerous" (155), given the children in the car have not experienced the adversities the lost children and the Apache have. At the same time, she considers that the children, through these games, have the possibility to reinvent their stories and create alternative endings, asking herself, "What if Geronimo had never surrendered to the white-eyes? What if he'd won the war? The lost children would be the rulers of Apacheria!" (75). For the mother, the children's games can put into question the history of the removal of Native Americans and the present-day plight of migrant children. According to Campisi, it is the children who can "reframe the present through the creation of new words and cosmogonic narratives" (44), having the presumptive power to deconstruct hegemonic discourses and appropriations of space. The mother realizes that history itself is characterized by reenactment, as she interconnects the predicaments of the Apache and of migrant children (Luiselli 146), underscoring the novel's exploration of how history is not just remembered and recorded, but actively reenacted, highlighting the ongoing struggle to confront and understand the recurring patterns of injustice and suffering that shape both the past and the present. This culminates with the mother concluding that "maybe any understanding, especially historical understanding, requires some kind of reenactment of the past" (Luiselli 155). Reenactment reveals the gaps and silences in the history of migrant children and Native Americans, while also addressing the selective and sometimes biased or unreliable representation of events. Nevertheless, it offers the opportunity to build or rebuild a more comprehensive archive of marginalized voices and overlooked experiences, allowing for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of history.

Conclusion

LCA offers a new approach to the American road narrative, one where the crimes of the past and present are exposed and unveiled by characters who were not considered part of the American road genre up until recently. By presenting the members of a "tribe" family as central figures, where the mother and the boy are the narrators, it destabilizes common practices of the genre, where the narrator is usually the white male protagonist. Another way the novel

questions the spatial order associated with American road narratives is by portraying family separation as a legal, bureaucratic, and political issue, and the road trip as a mechanism to deal with this event. When analyzing mobility as a process of engaging with social conflict and not as a process of breaking away from society, it is possible to engage with road novels through a different lens, one that is not marked by strict dichotomies such as public/private and male/female, and which can offer new hindsight on the genre, as proposed by Brigham.

LCA also counterpoints traditional American road narratives through the portrayal of the husband and the wife as opposites. The husband is heavily influenced by road archetypes: he uses the journey to end his marriage, while also feeling free to pursue his art on his own terms, and is concerned with telling a Great Man version of the story, in Peinado-Abarrio's phrasing. By contrast, the wife is concerned with getting the facts right, taking her time to document the journey and wants to tell the story of migrant children who have been rendered invisible. The wife also serves as a vessel to address the representational dilemma that is inherent to the novel: who can tell the story of migrant children? Is it appropriate for an upper-middle class legal citizen to be their voice? By constantly questioning and negotiating the different standpoints, *LCA* better positions itself to chronicle these (fictional) realities.

Thus, this novel's contribution to the genre allows readers and scholars to question the tropes associated with American road narratives and with the American West, as it uproots traditional readings of the genre. Given that the author, Valeria Luiselli, and the mother protagonist were not born in the United States, this article calls attention to the need to engage with transnational perspectives to the American road narrative genre, perspectives that focus on stories that reveal power structures and discourses of American exceptionalism and mythologized representations of the road and the people who get to be mobile in it.

[1] Despite *On the Road*'s undeniable influence in American literature, its conservative approach to themes such as gender, ethnicity and sexuality has been exposed by several scholars, such as Alexandra Ganser (2009).
[2] Valeria Luiselli is Mexican-born but has lived most of her adult life in the United States.
[3] *Tell Me How It Ends* is a book of non-fiction that depicts the experience of the author working as a translator for undocumented children who had crossed the U.S.-Mexico border.

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