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Listening to the Refugee: Valeria Luiselli's Sentimental Activism

David James

As takedowns go, it surely ranks among the most enduring, not to say vociferous. "Sentimentality" (12), declared James Baldwin in 1949, "the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the work of dishonesty, the inability to feel." More memorably still, he personifies this vice, offering a paratactic portrait that punchily itemizes the reprehensible ways in which "the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart." Far from being evidence of genuine compassion or solicitude, such exhibitions of sentiment are "always," in Baldwin's view, "the signal of secret and violent humanity, the mask of cruelty." This generalization springs, we recall, from an impatient appraisal of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which paves the way for his iconic clash with Richard Wright. Baldwin singles out Stowe's "self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality" (11) as the trademark of an "impassioned pamphleteer" (12) far removed from the "vast reality" of social inequity and racial persecution. Elevating opposition over artistry, such activist fiction is "badly written and wildly improbable," incapable of cultivating the "power of revelation" (13) that ought to be, Baldwin advises, the true "business of the novelist."

It is perhaps not unreasonable to ask who, exactly, is the sentimentalist here? What assumptions do we have to make in order to extrapolate a whole disposition (readers' alleged susceptibilities to false feeling) from a generic set of representational preoccupations (depictions of suffering and the poignancy they generate)? Baldwin's prosecution of the sentimental mode reminds us that in universalizing the deficiencies of notional audiences who are predisposed to a novel's emotional solicitations, we risk "denying," as Jerry W. Ward points out, "the importance

of the emotional pain and guilt readers actually experience" (176). In consequence, a "critical response" to protest novels that insists on the one-dimensionality of their sentimental operations along with the vapid pity they elicit can result in "a deformation of how they were actually read." The indictment of sentimentalism's supposed exaggeration of feeling into a condition of decontextualized, superficial generality potentially relies on an implicitly homogenous, historically hazy conception of how real-world readers absorb depictions of pain or injustice.[1] For is it really the case that those readers are so credulous as to give themselves uncritically over to "witnessing and identifying with pain" ("Poor Eliza" 645) while "consuming and deriving pleasure and moral self-satisfaction" from doing so, as Lauren Berlant claims in her seminal account of sentimentality's "unfinished business" (655)? Can we really be sure about what "a sentimental way of reading" might involve (652)—whether productively or detrimentally—for fiction-readers, in all their unfathomable diversity? And, in turn, how can we be certain that "the very emphasis on feeling" (664), which has been historically central to sentimental literature's radicalism, automatically "muffles the solutions it imagines?"

I raise these questions out of genuine curiosity, not out of some polemical desire to defend sentimental aesthetics. While I am interested in how we might recuperate the affordances of sentimental fiction by tracking their variety over time, I won't attempt to offer here another diachronic reassessment of sentimentalism across philosophical, scientific, or literary-cultural discourses, as historians of emotion, scholars of critical race studies, and feminist critics of nineteenth and twentieth-century literature have so compellingly done.[2] Reappraising the formal agility and multivalency of sentimental writing as it confronts the political needs of our current moment will, inevitably, be one burden of the coming discussion. But I hope to accomplish this by looking at a novel that, in effect, deliberately burdens itself with that very task, as it

repurposes sentimental engagement to stage a deeply self-conscious examination of the politics of compassion: Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*. Although Berlant argues that "sentimental politics are being performed whenever putatively suprapolitical affects or affect-saturated institutions (like the nation and the family) are proposed as universalist solutions to structural racial, sexual, or intercultural antagonism" ("Poor Eliza" 638), Luiselli refuses this generic panacea by focusing on a dissolving family who travel southwest, along a trajectory that perhaps knowingly mimics the US's own foundational violence of imperialist occupation and expansion. Today that route is bisected by an ongoing story of South-North migration, a story of displaced and unaccompanied children into whose suffering the family members are drawn. Their implication in the refugees' ongoing trauma is reciprocated by Luiselli's determination to implicate her readers. The very fact that "in order to benefit from the therapeutic promises of sentimental discourse you must imagine yourself with someone else's stress, pain, or humiliated identity" is one reason why thwarting our seamless "identification with alterity" (648) becomes so central, in Luiselli's practice, to a version of sentimentalism that probes without disqualifying its own traction. The scene is thereby set for the novel's performance of sentimental activism, a performance that prompts not only a reconsideration of sentimentalism's stylistic and ideological metabolism, but also a sober look at the yearning for consequentiality that humanitarian fiction shares with literary-critical practice at a time when the transformative impact of both has never seemed more uncertain.

While I am cautious about extrapolating too avidly the implications of a single novel in order to flag its topicality for critical method, my discussion nonetheless intersects with broader questions about the role of feeling in transnational activism that continue to warrant intersectional research. If, as feminist geographers like Rebecca Maria Torres have recently

argued, "emotions, affect, and subjectivities also matter" (17) as much as the traditionally "macro-scale" (18) objects of geopolitical inquiry, and if we still believe literary narratives can help to "elucidate how global forces create suffering that is embodied in individual experience" (17), then how might contemporary fiction furnish intimate epistemologies of precarity and chronic anguish in our convulsive present? How is the narration of suffering—of which the novel is historically such a connoisseur—retooled by stories of the "place-specific and embodied ways refugees, migrants and their families experience and negotiate power and place" (18)? And given the reproachful view critics have taken of identification, especially of the empathic kind—primarily because its "imaginative violations" (Cooke 18) allegedly "entice" readers into "a dangerous way of obliterating the differences to which we need to urgently attend for that imagining to take place"—how might we gauge the urgency and ethical permissibility of writing that explicitly reckons with the subjectivity of refugees without obscuring the systemic causes of their subjection?

Luiselli kindles these questions in usefully unorthodox terms because she is a writer for whom the banishment of identification in favor of hygienic detachment is not an option; for whom immersive, heart-rending scenes of abjection ought to amplify rather than dilute the reader's proclivity for protest; for whom the sentimental cultivation of fury is no distraction from political praxis; and for whom recasting the refugee crisis as a crisis of vandalized rights meshes with an examination of her responsibilities as a novelist with a passion for evoking migration's ravages with emphatic pathos. Of course, *Lost Children Archive* is arguably not in fact a novel of migration. Direct depictions of vulnerable refugees are reserved until so late in the narrative that their deferral, if anything, seems aptly to reflect the routine occlusion from public consciousness of populations enduring persecution and mass-displacement. Instead, for the most part, this is a

novel about the adequacy of bearing witness—however time-honored the ethical conundrums of doing so might appear in literary and cultural studies. More specifically, it shows how fiction can enter into dialogue with its readers in fathoming the translatability of outraged witnessing into substantive action.

When tuning in to that dialogue, it might be appealing to see Luiselli producing a sentimental version of what Joseph Slaughter calls "humanitarian reading" (90), even as she makes readers aware of the convenience of regarding "stories of suffering" as "primers" (92) for an "imaginative faculty" that affirms fiction's proficiency in "the training of our sympathetic moral imaginations." Slaughter warns that the problem with endorsing this prospect of literary "edification," as Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum have so influentially done, is that we assume descriptions of suffering people stripped of dignity will supply "a well-developed humanitarian sensibility" (104). To accomplish this self-development through sympathy is to prioritize "the cultivation of a *noblesse oblige* of the powerful (rights holders) towards the powerless (those who cannot enact their human rights)," but in such a way "that ultimately reconfirms the liberal reader as the primary and privileged subject of human rights and the benefactor of humanitarianism." However, it is precisely the privilege that underlies the instalment of sympathetic beneficence as a premise for humanitarian instruction that *Lost Children Archive* wants us to recognize. And, paradoxically, it is the sentimental mode which facilitates that recognition as the novel contemplates the perils of exercising compassion from a position of relative security and ethical superiority. To draw uncomfortable attention to this position as one that, potentially, is shared by writer, narrator, and reader alike, Luiselli often foregrounds the "sentimental scene where," as Berlant insists, "we presume emotional universality and an ethics of emotional intelligibility" as the setting most conducive to the

novel's self-scrutiny ("Structures of Unfeeling" 195). As a result, *Lost Children Archive* not only studies the credentials of the very activism it incites on behalf of the refugees who only partially enter its frame, but also invites readers who are vigilant toward sympathetic involvement to acknowledge how self-gratifying it can be to turn the spurning of such involvement into a critical virtue.

A Sad Story Close to Home

Luiselli presents us with both a "book and an archive of the book" ("There Are Always Fingerprints"). A crucial element of that archive is the novel's own interrupted genesis. Fleeing poverty, gang violence, and exploitation, surging numbers of child refugees arrived in 2014 at the US border, having made traumatizing journeys from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.[3] Luiselli began asking herself "how (the migrant) children of this generation were going to eventually tell this story, what were they going to say about this reality—that on the one hand was very real but on the other seemingly implausible—about thousands of children in a migratory limbo" ("'Lost Children' Author"). By the following year, Luiselli had embarked on her own attempt to convey this story in a novel that, in her words, soon became "a dumping ground for all my political rage and frustration and fear and sadness" ("Valeria Luiselli, Writer"). Unrelieved outrage and searing pathos had already been part of her day job as a volunteer interpreter for The Door, a non-profit organization assisting children who seek asylum in the US after surviving the brutal voyage through Mexico's network of freight trains grimly nicknamed La Bestia (the beast).[4] Fiction no longer seemed like a viable medium for the harrowing stories she was hearing and translating. Once detained by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, children face procedures that are all the more dehumanizing for being so bureaucratic.

Only if their cases are sufficiently "convincing" do they stand a chance of avoiding deportation. To write fiction in this context of pressing, daily injustice seemed unviable, in Luiselli's view: "I realized I wasn't doing any justice to the novel and I wasn't doing any justice to the situation." By abandoning a work that was becoming too raw with indignation, Luiselli acted on her belief that "remaining silent is not an option" ("What Right Do We Have"), as she would later put it: "to the contrary, it is important to denounce the things that we witness, especially if we are talking about constant political and institutional violence."

Having postponed the novel, Luiselli produced in its place a series of essays, *Tell Me How It Ends*, a tautly articulated volume structured according to US immigration's standard intake questionnaire. Born out of her experiences as a volunteer translator in a New York immigration court, the book interweaves those standard questions unaccompanied refugees have to answer with an account of a family road trip southward. At the time, Luiselli and her then-husband (Mexican novelist Álvaro Enrigue) were "waiting for our green cards to be either granted or denied." Amid this uncertainty, they decide to "drive from Harlem, New York, to a town in Cochise County, Arizona, near the U.S.-Mexico Border" (8). Along the way, they follow, on their car radio, "a sad story that hits so close to home and yet seems completely unimaginable, almost unreal: tens of thousands of children from Mexico and Central America have been detained at the border" (12). Later, after working with migrants in court, she learns that far from pursuing "the American Dream" they shared "the more modest aspiration to wake up from the nightmare into which they were born" (13). Children detained by Border Patrol officers can expect "verbal and physical mistreatment" (22), scant food, and barely any room to sleep. Compounding their abjection, they will likely be forced to endure the "inhumane conditions and frigid temperatures" of the so-called "icebox" environment of detention facilities,

which are "constantly blasted with gelid air as if to ensure that the foreign meat doesn't go bad too quickly." Luiselli itemizes these routine cruelties with a combination of denotative calm and uncompromising self-examination, which turns its sights on her relative freedom of movement through New Mexico toward Arizona. This freedom presents an ethical foil, emblematizing the family's privilege in comparison to children who've sought refuge from violence only to encounter yet more mistreatment at the border. As Luiselli's journey progresses, she recognizes "it becomes more and more difficult to ignore the uncomfortable irony of it: we are traveling in the direction opposite to the children whose stories we are now following so closely" (23).

This revelation is typical of instances where Luiselli's "vein of activist conviction" (7), as Mariano Siskind has observed, "is periodically interrupted and dislocated by the introduction of self-doubt, defeat and failure." Her next novel would reiterate this sense of artistic and ethical doubt, but as a reason for redeeming literature's capacity for "doing something about" the injustices afflicting child refugees (*Tell Me How It Ends* 95). Over the coming pages, I show how that redemptive impulse informs a self-consciously sentimental endeavor that appraises the political sufficiency of the very pathos it generates. As such, it recuperates the ability of fiction to compel us to listen to otherwise silenced and placeless selves in extremis, with the goal of provoking in readers not only compassion but also incensed opposition.

Lost Children Archive channels this self-inspecting mode of sentimentalism through its formal and thematic preoccupation with hearing echoes, traces, and resonances of the victims of a still-unfolding crisis, while posing the issue of how a novel might convey such suffering without generalizing migrants as helpless victims. As scholars in migration studies have warned, "victimisation removes political agency from the figure of the refugee by establishing a condition of political voicelessness" (Johnson 1028). Victimization tends only to be fortified by

representations of migrants that universalize their anguish through a "trauma discourse" (Sigona 372) that pathologizes the "experience of forced displacement." The reflexive manner in which Luiselli squares up to these representational dilemmas is a hallmark of what I call her sentimental activism. She not only solicits our sorrow, but also invites us into the text's own deliberative reflections on what that practice of emotive solicitation might ultimately achieve. In this instance, the sentimental activist's mission is twofold: to involve readers emotionally in the deprivations and atrocities suffered by refugees; yet also, amid that pathetic involvement, to reveal that by "abstracting displaced people's predicaments," as Nando Sigona observes, such emotive depictions can "ultimately lead to the silencing of refugees" while exacerbating the racialized othering of migration's agonies (370). By deliberately integrating this representational risk into some of *Lost Children Archive*'s most affecting episodes, Luiselli spotlights the potentially condescending abstractions and moral self-affirmations that lace the humanitarian sentiments her narrator so earnestly cultivates.

The novel's acute self-awareness about its own political mission is perhaps unsurprising given Luiselli misgivings toward "the *uses* of fiction" (qtd. in Emmelhainz).[5] Chiming with Baldwin's own critique of protest fiction's instrumentality, she argues that it is "difficult to write very well if you want to achieve a political result, a social reaction, or if you think that a novel will be useful and will change or improve something." Luiselli concedes that "a novel can change lots of things, one reader at a time, one mind at a time," but insists that "to write from the belief that one should or can do that is pure arrogance and intellectual vanity." Her case here against the narcissism of presupposing that creative work possesses consequential utility appears in *Lost Children Archive*: at one point, the narrator considers producing a "radio documentary" of the refugee crisis but questions the socio-political presumptions of such a documentary,

wondering whether it really will "be useful in helping more undocumented children find asylum" (79). She lightly reprimands herself for even raising the question: "I should know, by now, that instrumentalism, applied to any art form, is a way of guaranteeing really shitty results." To veto the ideological conscription of literature is a fitting credo for someone hyperalert to the "constant concerns" that keep "cultural appropriation" company, and who never conceals how harassed she feels by the question: "who am I to tell this story, micromanaging identity politics"?

It's a question that never entirely disrupts the reparative aspiration of *Tell Me How It Ends*, where Luiselli tries to give fervent voice to so many untold stories of asylum. For that reason, it may be worth disaggregating *Lost Children Archive* from the self-assurance of its nonfictional precursor in order to address it as a feistier creature than one might initially assume. Whereas Irmgard Emmelhainz reads *Tell Me How It Ends* as "capitalizing on emotionality to mobilize a 'political' message," *Lost Children Archive* takes a more troubled, self-inspecting approach to what interpersonal relationality means across age and cultural distance without ultimately muting compassion as an engine of aid. For all her worries about instrumentalizing transnational outrage in fiction, Luiselli evidently feels some kinship with Viet Thanh Nguyen's insistence that writing about refugees requires "conjur[ing] up the lives of others" in affecting terms, because "only through such acts of memory, imagination, and empathy can we grow our capacity to feel for others" (17). In the novel's determination to facilitate diegetic debates about the righteousness of these relational acts, we see the hallmark of a sentimental activist wrestling with her own response to a contemporary crisis for which awakening public conscience alone is not enough.

Chasing Echoes

Although *Tell Me How It Ends* had been the reason for *Lost Children Archive*'s six-month hiatus, it turned out to be Luiselli's catalyst. "I knew," she writes, drawing *Tell Me How It Ends* to a close, "that if I did not write this particular story, it would not have made sense to return to writing anything else" (98). Sensing that now a suitable "vehicle" ("There Are Always Fingerprints") had been found for her "political frustration and rage," she "could go back and continue writing something as porous and ambivalent as a novel." The opening part of *Lost Children Archive* is devoted to a family road trip through Arizona that closely resembles the 2014 excursion that occupied *Tell Me How It Ends*'s first chapter. In the novel's version of this journey, the couple are not writers but oral historians, whose marriage is unravelling on protracted, unspoken terms. Imminent separation is rehearsed in the couple's distinct aims: the husband, as a documentarian, hopes to capture the acoustic landscapes that had once belonged to the Chiricahua Apaches; the wife, considering herself to be more of documentarist, urgently wants to report on the plight of undocumented children at the border. Propelled by this humanitarian emergency, their trip lends political urgency and ethical obligation to the creative mission they share in recording soundscapes of the displaced. And precisely because marital fracture from the outset seems like the journey's destination, the couple have brought their children, who, as our narrator suspects, they will inevitably lose after separation drives the family apart. Midway through the novel, the ten-year-old son takes up the narrative reins. Shortly after, he and his stepsister become lost children themselves, following his impulsive decision to go in search of two girls who have recently disappeared between detention centers in New Mexico and Arizona. The girls' mother, Manuela, had been assisted back in New York by the wife in *Lost Children Archive* who was working (like Luiselli) as a translator in the immigration court. Manuela loses the case, but her daughters inexplicably go missing before they can be

deported, inducing her to hold out hope that they are making a perilous journey across the desert to reach her.

Echoes thereafter become the novel's binding tropological threads, threads that coil steadily closer to home for the narrator of *Lost Children Archive*. The mass-trauma of daily losses of migrant children making their way to the US-Mexico border is telescoped into the dread that Manuela now has to endure while awaiting news of her daughters. All the while, Luiselli holds in abeyance any graphic account of the migrants' devastations. For Siskind, this constitutes the "defining and most interesting aesthetico-political feature" (9) of a novel that seems to insist that it is "*not* about unaccompanied children lost in the Sonora desert, or about crossing Mexico from Central America aboard 'La Bestia,'" nor "about their mothers waiting for them or to receive notice their whereabouts, or about the interminable abuses they suffer." Rather, this is actually a story "about the unnamed narrator's middle class, privileged, professional" familial unit (and its growing disunity). *Lost Children Archive*'s "brilliant gambit" (11), in Siskind's view, lies in a decision to engage the refugee crisis from the perspective of intellectuals who are "haunted" by the equivocal practical ends of their burgeoning activism and "troubled by the impossibility of doing anything" efficacious with their "cosmopolitan ethical obligation towards others." Meanwhile, "migrants in general, the lost children in particular, are mere shadows, the striking presence of an absence."

However, that absence does not in fact last. Excerpts from a fictional volume entitled *Elegies for Lost Children*, which chronicles the traumatic journey of young migrants, shift the novel's pathetic axis away from the couple's impending disintegration. Written "over a span of several decades" (139) by the fictional Ella Camposanto, events in *Elegies for Lost Children* take "place 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." Scenes from this "little red book" increasingly punctuate the story of *Lost Children Archive*'s road trip, and as the narrator reads them aloud they prove all-consuming—not only for the narrator and her son, but also for Luiselli's reader. Lyrically descriptive yet unflinching in its portrayal of migrant children's terrors, Camposanto's book presents an activist incentive and an aesthetic challenge for Luiselli's narrator, as she resolves "to record the sound documentary about lost children using the *Elegies*" (140). With a renewed sense of her work's humanitarian implication, she begins a routine of recording episodes aloud. Compassionate involvement becomes enlaced with the political injunction to listen to a crisis that's systematically perpetuating traumas for the most vulnerable. In turn, she begins to see her husband's project of "chasing ghosts" in a new light, realizing that the "inventory of echoes" comprising his itinerant documentary "was 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).

Perhaps inevitably, the heart-snagging immediacy and proximity to migrant suffering in Camposanto's *Elegies for Lost Children* only serve to confirm the narrator's distance as a travelling spectator. As the privileged onlooker, she knows her involvement with this unending crisis will be temporary and epistemically partial—producing not so much "understanding" (174) as "an echo of knowledge," which at best "brings acknowledgment, and possibly forgiveness." Nowhere more conspicuously do we see this humbling sense of "recognition, in the sense of re-cognizing" (174) being played out than in *Lost Children Archive*'s self-aware use of narrative perspective. For it is there, as I will show, that the scrutiny of what it means to watch, listen to, and thereafter render lives caught in the convulsions of migration and probable deportation

becomes immanent to the novel's sentimental form. As she sorrowfully depicts the perspective of one refugee boy, soliciting our compassion while also limning pity's inadequacies, Luiselli assesses the legitimacy of evoking that pain in the first place—at once registering and reckoning with her insistence on "knowing from where one is writing, recognizing the limitations of the position that one occupies" ("What Right Do We Have"). The episode leads us to the crux of the risk *Lost Children Archive* knowingly runs across its sentimental venture of involving readers in envisioning the fears and devastating resilience of child refugees. Furthermore, Luiselli evidently wants the nature of that involvement to be not only emotional but also deliberative, enjoining us to reflect on how the novel isolates without resolving the principal "ethical concern" (79) that plagues and beguiles our narrator, namely, "why would I even think that I can or should make art with someone else's suffering?"

Asylum for Outrage?

Such self-incriminations linger. One sleepless night, the narrator admits her uncertainty over whether she would "ever be able to—or should—get as close as to [her] sources as possible" (96). This rumination on proximity precipitates blunt scrutinies of purpose: "Why? What for? So that others can listen to them and feel—pity? Feel—rage? And then do what?" As haunting as the lost voices whose traces she had set out to capture are, the conjoined problems of how close one should get to sources of suffering and what recording that suffering might then achieve unravel in a set-piece sequence of enraged witnessing in the finale to Part I. As the couple hears a radio report on child migrant deportation, the indications are that detainees will be flown out from an airport near Roswell, New Mexico. Listening to news of this outrage "now thrust[s]" (175) the narrator "back into the urgency of the world outside [her] car." Since the

children are from Central America, they should be eligible for a hearing, as "immigration law has it"; imminent "removal," therefore, "is illegal." Having "listen[ed] for any hint, any bit of information on exactly when and where the deportation will take place," the narrator decides to contact an immigration lawyer featured in the broadcast, while her "mind drifts to the lost children in the little red book, all walking alone, lost now and forgotten in history." In defiance of this mental picture of historical erasure, she speeds with the family to an airfield at Artesia from where the deportation plane will depart. Along the way, she realizes while "listening to them now" (180) that her own children "are the ones who are telling the story of the lost children. They've been telling it all along, over and over again in the back of the car, for the past three weeks. But I hadn't listened to them carefully enough." This regret at having been so inattentive is then transposed into more immediate and predictive feelings of doubt surrounding their documentary mission. When they approach the airfield's perimeter fence, her husband's boom mic now held up, the narrator begins to "wonder" (181) which "sounds" he is "capturing right now and which ones will be lost." Here the proximity of present participle and future tense grammatically instantiates the way their acoustic recordings combine the effort of encapsulation with the mournful anticipation of what will escape sonic inventory. This grammatical switch also parallels the dilemma of appalled spectators who are consumed in the moment but powerless to change what's about to happen. Outraged witnessing, as Luiselli will soon reveal, becomes an admission of what these intellectuals-turned-aspiring-activists cannot presently do to reverse the dire fortunes of a "line of small figures now stepping out of the hangar and onto the runway," figures who will be lost almost as soon as they are spotted (182).

But not entirely lost for the son who "suddenly" catches sight of them (182). He's the one who supplies the abstractness of "small figures" with a quantum of additional detail by

commanding the couple's attention ("Look over there!"), his "steady eyes" pinpointing what the narrator then notices for herself. The deportees "are all children. Girls, boys: one behind another, no backpacks, nothing. They march in single file, looking like they've surrendered, silent prisoners of some war they didn't even get to fight" (183). Although the children remain "but indistinguishable figures in the distance," as Siskind suggests, "Rorschach test figures whose historical and ethical meaning results only from what the narrator projects onto them" (13), Luiselli asks us to entertain the fraught viability of overcoming that distance. She accomplishes this, as I hope to reveal, by intensifying our recognition of the stakes of not feeling entirely in lockstep with her narrator's impassioned display of outrage—however warranted that shattering outburst is in response to callous injustice. Through this sense of affective dislocation, however, Luiselli paradoxically draws her reader closer to noticing how *Lost Children Archive*'s proactively self-critical form argues with the adequacy of humanitarian sentiment.

Too far away to be particularized, the refugees congregate into a spectacle of state-sanctioned atrocity, a spectacle that precipitates the narrator's outpouring of pity over a future that's being stolen from them as "they walk toward the plane that will take them back south" (182). Once again, the swift yet devastating modulation in tense here grammatically embodies the intolerability of what's being witnessed, reinforcing the pathos of observing how the very walk the children are presently compelled to perform ruthlessly commemorates the foreclosure of all those opportunities that could be open to them "if they hadn't gotten caught": "they probably would have gone to live with family, gone to school, playgrounds, parks. But instead, they'll be removed, relocated, erased, because there's no place for them in this vast empty country." Such emotive projections continue, as the narrator resolves to "snatch the binoculars back" from her son "and focus" (183). The more she focuses, the more intensely she tries to

bridge the spectatorial distance that separates her from the anonymous, barely legible deportees, eventually conjuring and inhabiting the perspective of a boy she longs to rescue. While her own son becomes increasingly impatient to use the binoculars again, she remains transfixed, committed to compressing space with her own compassionate voyeurism:

> It's my turn!
>
> Mirages rise from the hot pavement. An officer escorts the last child onto the airstair, a small boy, maybe five or six, sucking his thumb as he climbs into the plane, the officer closes the door after him.
>
> My turn to look, Ma.
>
> Wait, I say.
>
> I turn to check on the girl inside the car. She's asleep, thumb in her mouth, too. Inside the airplane, that boy will sit still in his seat, buckled up, and the air will be dry but cool. They boy will make an effort to stay awake while he waits for the departure, the way my daughter does, the way children his age do.
>
> Mama, he might think.
>
> But no one will answer.
>
> Mama! the boy says, tugging on my sleeve again.
>
> What is it? I reply, losing my patience.
>
> My binoculars!
>
> Just wait a second, I tell him sternly.
>
> Give them to me!

> I finally hand them over again, my hands shaking. He focuses calmly. (183)

One migrant child's "effort"—typified as the behavior of all children—is juxtaposed with the specific demands of a conspicuously more privileged boy, eager as he is to look again "calmly" while his mother dissolves into fury after the plane's "engines are switched on." Transposing the behavior of the children universalizes their intimate habits of resilience. If this insinuates a momentary obviation of difference—a strategy so potent in sentimental aesthetics, so controversial as a portal to solidarity—the effect is laid bare, though not entirely condemned. Speculating that the boy aboard the plane is no doubt behaving just "The way children his age do," the narrator alights on a phrase that feels, in its touching succinctness, consciously designed to conjure heart-breaking similarity, to equate the migrant boy with a child we might all know and long to protect. Yet this impression breaks off before her poignancy-tinged universalisms can escalate further. Soon the whole spell of intersubjective ingress is broken, when the plane "begins to maneuver" and the personnel standing by gratuitously "clap in unison." It is then that the register of self-composed, observational compassion gives way: from "some dark depth" of our narrator "a rage is unleashed—sudden, volcanic, and untamable," compelling her to "kick the mesh fence," "scream, kick again" and "hurl insults at the officers." The narrator finds herself suddenly held "tight" from behind by her husband; his effort to quell her outrage is "not an embrace but a containment"—a physical restraint that applies analogically to Luiselli's subsequent reining in of sentiment as the sequence progresses. After a paragraph break, the narrator starts to "regain control of [her] body" and our attention is redirected to her comparatively calm son who "is focusing on the plane through his binoculars." In his

composure, her husband becomes an adjudicator of sorts: the pivot on which this scene tilts from the onrush of "rage" toward a rumination on fury's practical ends. As she draws her reader's attention to the perils of reinforcing pity as the principal means by which literature helps us comprehend the violence endured by refugees, Luiselli remains watchful of the expectation that conveying the terror of unshielded actors will automatically convert sorrow into action. By these lights, the scene at once distills and dramatizes the migrant novel's very own sense of "containment" as a genre understandably seized by the instantiable hunger for a degree of real-world consequentiality that might fulfill its political desires.

Might this be one reason why the anonymous deportee aboard the plane is so fleetingly described, why his perspective is only momentarily evoked by a narrator who appears to know that such mental ventriloquy is ineffectual? It's as though Luiselli makes the formal manipulation of perspective metonymically acknowledge that across "the long history of sentimentalism," as Lyndsey Stonebridge reminds us, "there's always been a bit of bad faith in the idea that our generous feelings might make a difference to anybody other than ourselves" (*Writing and Righting* 29). Through its very structure, then, this episode exposes how fiction's facilitation of co-ontological intimacy—ushering the reader, in this case, into that boy's passenger seat—remains an unpredictable activator of insurgency.

As the plane leaves, the ensuing paragraph recenters on their son as the model observer he has just "calmly" (183) proved himself to be. He's therein appointed as the future archivist of a moment whose payload of lasting significance was temporarily lost on his documentarist parent who, in the epicenter of that moment, became overwhelmed by indignation. As his parent, the narrator has "an impulse to cover his eyes" (184); but she concedes that it is too late—and, in any case, he's too astute—for such superficial shielding. Given that "the binoculars have already

brought the world too close to him," she knows that "the world has already projected itself inside him." As such, he's appointed as the true anatomist of this "instant" (185), for it is "his version of the story" that "will outlive us," she avers: "his version that will remain and be passed down," including "his version of others' stories, like those of the lost children." Impeccably qualified for this role, he is celebrated for having "listened to things, looked at them—really looked, focused, pondered—and little by little, his mind had arranged all the chaos around us into a world." It's hard not to construe in this litany of aptitudes a set of goals that *Lost Children Archive* has already set for itself, as it strives to listen and look at the traumatic actuality of the refugee crisis so as to refute the reduction of refugees to statistics. Even as the refugees remained indiscernible as they walked toward the plane—viewed, as they so often are, from a distance that obscures their specificity, and that leaves us in a position of having to imaginatively project ourselves in duplicitous ways into a suffering that we cannot claim to envisage with any accuracy—this supremely attentive son hears what he is also watching with a poise that suggests he "understood everything much better . . . than the rest of us had."

Amid the celebration of his perceptiveness, however, there's something confessional about the momentary symmetry Luiselli insinuates between one departing boy and another. It is as though she discloses her own tussle with the proximity this encounter creates between the fleetingly imagined anguish of one refugee and the soon-to-be-lost step-child, who will become the future chronicler of this whole event as a turning point for the family. (Addressing his stepsister, he later recalls "the story of when we first saw some lost children boarding an airplane, and how it broke us all into pieces, especially Mama because all her life was, was looking for lost children" [349].) More disconcertingly still—which, in its tonally apt way, could be another facet of authorial confession—the episode culminates not with further thoughts on the

boy being flown away into guaranteed uncertainty and more existential pain, but with a lyrically uplifting rumination on the "little knowledges" (185) parents give children in exchange for the gift of "a drive to embrace life fully and understand it, on their behalf." In an effort to exert some control over the anticipation of retrospection, the narrator makes an idiomatically sentimental decision to ensure that in her son's memory there will be something to counterweigh the trauma of what he has witnessed. "All that's left for [her] to do," we're told, "is to make sure the sounds he records in his mind right now, the sounds that will overlay this instant that will always live inside him, are sounds that will assure him he was not alone that day" (184).

By memorializing the family's togetherness through an incident that offsets the very experience that will subsequently dissolve them "all into pieces" (349), the whole episode draws to a close with a tableau of mutually afforded plenitudes between narrating and nurturing. Having applauded her son's perspicacity as a listener, the narrator offers stirring generalities about the way children "force parents" (185) to seek "with a certain rage and fierceness" exactly "the right way of telling the story, knowing that stories don't fix anything or save anyone but maybe make the world both more complex and more tolerable" (185-86). Activators of storytelling's sentimental activism, children enable—demand—the transmutation of the worst life has to offer in a form that can be "sometimes, just sometimes, more beautiful" (186). What's unsettling is that this rousing endorsement of the "larger and more lasting" (185) prompt that children issue to their parents is itself only grasped by leaving behind the child refugee, at least in the mind's eye of Luiselli's narrator. The spectacle of a departing plane along with the rage it provokes resolves into a domestic epiphany freighted with metaphysical profundity, an epiphany that extracts from the appalling circumstances of deportation a sentimental promotion of storytelling as the "only way of finding clarity in hindsight" (186).

What critical work, then, is being performed here by juxtaposing a helpless refugee with the recognition of one's children as a vital aid in "looking for a specific pulse, a gaze, a rhythm, the right way of telling the story" (185), aside from highlighting the predictable chasm between privation and privilege? Does this contrast between the boys harbor its own revealing compensation, whereby the deported refugee, stripped of security, engenders the passionate recognition—belonging to the narrator yet hard to distinguish from Luiselli's commensurate belief in storytelling's exquisite alloy of "anger and clarity" ("Valeria Luiselli, Writer")—of how children can be so remarkably sage as to produce stories self-determination that make the world's harms "more tolerable" (186)? As I have tried to suggest, this uneasy colligation of two very different children brought within syntactic touching distance of each other ("Mama, he might think. / But no one will answer. / Mama! the boy says, tugging on my sleeve again" [183]) is something the novel announces as an opportunity for auditing the political merit of utilizing contrary lives to trigger empathic grief, while thereby monitoring the adequacy of literary humanitarianism. To do this, Luiselli makes no effort to disguise the sentimental logic by which the momentary legibility of one imperiled child's agony touches off a universalizing hypothesis about "what children give their parents" (185), even as an infinitely safer child suddenly becomes the redemptive source from which rehabilitative stories of "what we are seeing" flow.

Pretending to Listen

Perhaps I am imputing a measure of self-reflexivity to this novel's economy of motivational feeling that Luiselli does not in fact warrant. And maybe her apparently deliberate inspection of the sorrow of a privileged observer is tacitly self-serving. By presenting "middle-class characters" who, in David Kurnick's incisive reading, "inhabit a geopolitical crisis as a

kind of ethical thrill ride," does Luiselli not pre-empt her own entanglement in the intrusive vicariousness involved in depicting the inner strain of anxiety that refugees are forced to tolerate? By advertising her own authorial self-implication in this way, is she aiming to anticipate the critique of *Lost Children Archive*'s liability as a sentimental journey for Anglophone readers who long to listen closer (if also from a safe distance) to asylum's devastations? Is her narrative not especially well-equipped to supply what Kurnick calls that "fantasy of heroic empathy" uniting recent novels about Mexico aimed at a North American audience, as they "invite comfortable readers to imagine themselves in the situation"—as *Lost Children Archive*'s narrator repeatedly does—of "intensely vulnerable characters"?

These questions rebound in my essay's shadowing twin whose counterarguments haunt the present discussion. For I may well have been too inclined to give Luiselli the benefit of the doubt, as she mobilizes sentimental tropes while also artfully anticipating reservations about the privilege that underlies agonized witnessing with the moral self-interest emitted by displays of compassion. Poised to deny her this interpretive free-ride, my sibling article would no doubt be more circumspect toward *Lost Children Archive*'s tendency to impose ruminations about the "capacity to feel for others" (to recall Nguyen's perspective on the literature of refugee lives) so insistently on its readers in ways that may paradoxically impair the novel's capacity to demonstrate that interpersonal "sentiments, not even when ironically self-conscious about their own inadequacy, will never be enough" (Stonebridge, *Writing and Righting* 43). As it is, however, I am left with the hunch that a more permissive reading might still be worth pursuing. For I sense that Luiselli wants her readers to appreciate that she knows full well what the deficits of a sentimental reading of refugees might be; so much so, that she virtually interrupts our experience of a scene as pathetically upsetting as the one that unfolds at Artesia Airport, even

though it diegetically builds toward a set-piece exhibition of humanitarian outrage. If noticing, therefore, the proximity of this raw outburst to the narrator's consoling thoughts about the way stories make a wretched world more "complex" (185), "tolerable" (186), or even "beautiful," turns out to be discomforting, then that is precisely what Luiselli wants us to feel—imparting to the reader a modicum of her own scrupulous self-alertness. And if books themselves, as Kurnick astutely notes, "become an emblem" in *Lost Children Archive* "of the vertiginous distance separating the cruelty of the narrated events from the protagonist's perspective," while also serving as "emblems of the dream that the distance might be traversed," then the extent to which that traversal relies on a sentimental projection of solidarity is also the dilemma Luiselli invites us to eye with some caution.

To reflect back, then, on the emotional torque of the episode I read above, coiling, after empathy's obstruction, through impotent outrage and thereafter into a celebration of ameliorative storytelling, is to confront the propensity for sentimental identification to operate "as a compensation," in Rebecca Wanzo's words, "for the difficulty of actually effecting sustained political change" (111). At the same time, Luiselli implies that simply exposing and opposing the conventions of "affective piracy" (2-3) via which sentimental texts supposedly usurp, as Lynn Festra puts it, the interiority of subjects whose agony affirms the sympathetic reader's "humanity" is not inevitably meritorious (2). Instead of merely censuring sentiment, *Lost Children Archive* compels us to question whether "sentimental tropes" (55) necessarily conjure what Festa terms a "semblance of likeness while upholding forms of national, cultural, and economic difference" (51). However aware Luiselli is of the jeopardies of dissolving difference into identification, she doesn't appear satisfied with merely prosecuting them. Instead, they form part of a dialogue she establishes with readers about the hazards of simulating another's misery

in the hope of extending a humanitarian vocabulary in which emotions can coexist with, rather than obfuscate, our understanding of structural causes. By deliberating rather than invalidating vicarious involvement as just one ingredient of a furious longing to effectuate change, this dialogue seems crucial to a writer who "looks at Mexico from afar with pain and love" ("I Look at Mexico").

Before giving the impression that this is the apex of *Lost Children Archive*'s sentimental activism, I want to consider in closing a less visibly ostentatious instance where the novel both initiates and examines the solicitation of critical sympathy. Before we reach the novel's phantasmatic, extravagantly multi-perspectival "Echo Canyon" section, where the narration merges with the consciousnesses of refugee children surviving the desert, the boy's recitals of *Elegies for Lost Children* begin to occupy more and more diegetic space. Brining into distressing view the ravages of La Bestia, this moving text starts to steal the show. With a lyricism that counterpoints the lean, self-scrutinizing manner of his mother's narration, *Elegies for Lost Children* tracks child migrants subsisting aboard the train gondola in appalling conditions, while sharing strategies for coping with extreme trepidation. The structural placement of these excerpts is significant in itself: having primed the reader at the end of Part I (where the deportation plane leaves) to entertain with some circumspection the depiction of refugees suffering at a distance, Part III, "Apacheria" (where the "Dust Valleys" section is devoted to the last set of elegies), presents the reader with a more intimate sequence of desolation.

Among the group that *Elegies for Lost Children* follows, the eldest (known only as the sixth boy) makes an empathic effort to engage the younger children by "suggest[ing] a game" (305) that might allay the group's shared "terrors." The game involves repurposing an old cell phone, salvaged from "under a track in the last yard," as a potently sentimental prop. Although

its “glass is smashed like a window hit by a bird or a bullet,” the children are drawn to the scrap mobile as though the boy “were showing them a treasure found after a shipwreck.” Tatty yet talismanic, the phone concretizes the principal longing that each of these children harbors—the longing to hear from the families from whom they’ve been separated. And its aura aids the role play of pretending to “call someone,” before then pretending to listen. Initially, it takes the first girl

> a moment to understand what he’s suggesting. But when he repeats his words, she smiles, and nods, and looks around at all of them, one by one, her tired eyes suddenly looking enormous and ablaze. She stares back down at the phone in her hand, takes the collar of her shirt and stretches it outward, looking at something stitched in its inner folding. She pretends to dial a long number, and then holds the phone up tight to her ear.
>
> Yes? Hello? We’re on our way, Mama, don’t worry. We’ll be there soon. Yes, everything’s okay.
>
> The others observe, each understanding the rules of this new game at their own pace. The older girl quickly passes the telephone to her little sister and prompts her with a whisper to follow the game. The little one does. She dials a number—only three digits—noticing the embarrassing sand and soot deep under the nail of her index finger, knowing her grandmother would have scolded her if she saw her nails. She holds the phone up to her ear. (306)

In *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli asserts that child refugees “chase after life, even if that chase might end up killing them” (19), displaying “an instinct for survival, perhaps, that allows them to endure almost anything just to make it to the other side of horror, whatever may be waiting there for them” (19-20). Here, in this object exercise of dialing and listening, that survival instinct is affective rather than physical: not so much about the will “to chase a moving train” now (19), than about their willingness to imagine that they will be heard again. Each child simulates hope while also defying, through their touching determination to bring “the phone up tight” (*Lost Children Archive* 306), the foreknowledge that any solace this make-believe communication affords will dissipate as soon as the game ceases. Note the forking directions of that repeated present participle, looking. Keeping things open, in hopeful motion, the verb captures the way amelioration and devastation coexist in the girl’s anticipation of impersonating a conversation that has seemed chimerical for them all until now: in the first, adjectival instance, it refers to the swelling hope of her eyes “looking enormous and ablaze;” the second glance, by contrast, is directed at an altogether more desperate “something” that, despite the indistinctness of the pronoun, we know by now is the number her family will have stitched into her collar. Whatever uplift the enacted phone call offers has to surpass the anguished probability that her labelled contact details may never be used. As readers, we’re left with that anguish, as the consoling game carries on. Having watched how the prospect of listening to her mother rejuvenates the girl’s “tired eyes,” we are then faced with the appalling irony that for all this “looking,” no one with the power to alter this chronically intolerable reality is listening.

“Call someone,” suggests the older boy, gently setting the game in motion (306). And the fact that he has to issue this prompt at all is mortifying: it confronts us with the realization that child refugees have become accustomed to the likelihood that nobody will be there to receive

them. The scene thus emotionally delivers on Luiselli's suggestion in *Tell Me How It Ends*, that "the only way to grant any justice—were that even possible—is by hearing and recording those stories over and over again so that they come back, always, to haunt and shame us" (30). Positioning her reader as an intimate witness to a game designed to alleviate a form of suffering that "happens under our noses," Luiselli compels us to see that "being aware of what is happening in our era and choosing to do nothing about it has become unacceptable." This episode of improvisation with a broken phone—an episode that sentimentally braids play with survival—leads us to ask, how can we "allow ourselves to go on normalizing horror and violence" when children are having to adapt so relentlessly to those terrors themselves?

Looking, understanding, noticing, and knowing are touchstones from the passage above. Present participles such as these remain frequent if also unassuming agents of expressive possibility throughout *Lost Children Archive*. This grammatical unit of indefinitely ongoing action also carries a more politically pointed significance, correlating in its continuousness with the unremitting crisis of forced migration. And "while the story [of this crisis] continues," argues Luiselli (*Tell Me How It Ends* 96), "the only thing to do is tell it over and over again as it develops bifurcates, knots around itself" (96-97). Such is narration's obligation: she implies that declarations of writerly incapacity amount to a dereliction of duty. Capitulating to ineffability seems all but unconscionable. Instead, the trauma "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" (97). *Tell Me How It Ends*'s aspiration to encompass multiple perspectives is carried forward as a principle of *Elegies for Lost Children*'s polyphonic form, which strives to listen closer to the awful resilience of children who long to be heard, and who call attention to the power differentials intrinsic to our relational concern. In our privilege to

choose whether we listen to socially dislocated and systemically mistreated actors, we are reminded that the very pity that can motivate us to listen more proactively may reinscribe, in its gestural condescension, the inequalities that striate the experience of forced migration.

Evocative though the immediacy of this experience can be in her novel, Luiselli wants us to recognize that affect alone is by no means a solution to the imbalances that witnessing potentially underscores. In any case, solutions seem out of place in a narrative governed by incessant trauma. This condition is compounded by the way "time, in the desert, was an ongoing present tense" (*Lost Children Archive* 312), a temporal cage that's reinforced by the unending railroad, along which the child refugees are "caught in repetition, trapped in the circular rhythm of the train wheels, tucked under the umbrella of the invariable sky" (311). The novel's matrix of sonic motifs scarcely lets us forget the rebounding echo of that rhythm, whose only certainty—beyond the fact that this brutal voyage has of course yet to cease for so many—is that with each reverberation, something more of the originating utterance will be lost. Knowing this, Luiselli wants to keep the demands of the refugee's story alive, however inaudible their footsteps become amid the clamor of mainstream reporting. Rather than prematurely confine the ontology of those stories to an object of political knowledge, she models what it might mean to stay attuned to their visceral quiddity, just as the present participle attunes readers to the auditory vernaculars of Echo Canyon, where "the sound of the wind breathing, and the sound of space shifting" (327) eventually registers, "farther away, the sound of other footsteps" belonging to children who coincide with the narrator's own.

To be sure, it is tempting to see the contemporary refugee novel operating at its confrontational best when it distances itself from sentiment—when it no longer relies on the affective spectacle of forced migration to render "legible historical experiences that are still

unfolding" (Goyal 248). Yet as we have seen, Luiselli refuses to reward that inclination to regard sympathetic immersion as inimical to a robustly systemic knowledge of the racial violence that impedes migrant justice. Instead, she attempts to reverse the naturalization of refugee pain that renders "banal what must remain historical" (Goyal 241) with explicitly emotive strategies that allow us to reappraise sentimentalism's perceived habit of universalizing suffering. *Lost Children Archive* has taken the risk of foregoing for much of its plot what Yogita Goyal calls "the spectacular immediacy of traumatic images of refugees" (248), with the view to "giving them voice and subjectivity" only in reported episodes from a made-up compendium of elegies. But this deliberate move makes another, more productively self-scrutinizing level of emotional vivacity available—without discounting the politically fraught negotiation of distance this entails, and without simply reinstating a humanistic cultivation of empathic generosity that elides difference.

Given the wider pushback that transnational identification has received as part of contemporary literary and cultural studies' critique of sentimental humanitarianism, it can be helpful to consider a novelist who teases apart the ligatures that connect relational feeling with collective motivation without promoting the doctrine of affectual distantiation as an unimpeachable nostrum for readers susceptible to pathos.[6] By anatomizing her own sentimental activism in this way, Luiselli pursues "an important moral and political lesson" (*Placeless People* 13) of writers who contest what Lyndsey Stonebridge calls the conventional emotional grammar of the "humanitarian imagination" by revealing "that compassion, empathy, and pity do not stand outside the story of the modern refugee, but are fundamentally intrinsic to its unfolding—and ongoing—tragedy" (13-14).

And yet, this integration of emotion—not simply as an impulse, in Martha Nussbaum's

parlance, but as an appraisal of emotion with "evaluative content" (6)—into the way we understand how contemporary humanitarianism narrates unfinished stories of migration is only part of *Lost Children Archive*'s takeaway in the end. For there is one final twist in Luiselli's self-implicatory tale, one that asks us whether in fact the novel's manipulation of identification (in all its ethical contestability) and of compassion (in all its political insufficiency) affords criticism itself the opportunity to take a closer look at its own sentiments—and self-aggrandizements. It would be convenient to surmise that Luiselli exposes the "patronizing sense of moral superiority and cosmopolitan largesse" that, for Slaughter, suffuses privileged readers' "cultivated capacities for sentimental identification with the despised and oppressed" (105). But I sense that *Lost Children Archive* presses harder, never quite letting us ignore the fact that to arrogate to ourselves a sense of savvy immunity from the sentimental logic of humanitarian solicitude can be no less satisfying, especially if it consolidates the professional critic's own facility for withstanding the coercions of literary form in ways that general readers supposedly cannot. Just as "criticizing sentimentality for the homogenization that ignores real material difference is easy," as Wanzo has observed (111), so too does Luiselli rarely permit readers to find reassurance in rebuffing the compassion that arises from reading about children enduring familial loss, indignity, and the evisceration of protections. In essence, she produces a style of narrating the culpability of outraged observation that time and again locks horns with its own appropriacy as an "act of generous narrative imagining" (Slaughter 105), yet without sanctifying dispassion as the only artistically and critically acceptable antidote to the bewitchments of poignancy.

To say that *Lost Children Archive* thereby allegorizes literary studies' own recent methodological conflicts about whether it really does anything for the world would be a rather self-gratifying conclusion to reach. What could be more pleasing than watching our discipline's

condition being metonymized by a text that also amply repays our agonistic exertions? Nonetheless, we need not indulge that temptation to see something instructively commensurate between a writer who stages her own struggle to deglamorize the political leverage of literature by cross-examining the very sentimental activism she brings into being, and the robust—if also fretful—self-questioning that has come to inflect criticism's longing for a social footprint in the twenty-first century. So, how might we equate that sense of longing not with a melancholic acceptance of scholarship's limited instrumental impact, but rather with a willingness to replenish the conversation between fictional aesthetics and critical itineraries through the agential uncertainties and cultural jeopardies they share? A novel like *Lost Children Archive* might usefully sync with this temperament, an accommodating temperament that welcomes literary prototypes for affective relations and analytic dispositions whose real-world efficacy might not be appreciable in patently material terms. After all, if criticism's thirst for real-world intervention is a type of sentimental activism in its own right, there may still be things to learn from literature that fosters non-monumental ways of thinking about its agency.

Even so, while she enacts and contests what it means to listen in to the suffering of refugees, Luiselli refuses to give up on the idea that fiction is indispensable to illuminating realms of fear and routines of exclusion whose intolerability demands more than armchair gestures of transnational sympathy. By the same token, she also challenges us to decline the critical consolation of sacralizing phlegmatic detachment, since she never affords us the luxury of dismissing the possibility that fiction can electrify sorrow as a portal to other processes of seeing and acting. Liable though Luiselli is to being accused of teaching Anglophone readers about Central American trauma, she nonetheless leads us to wonder why a novel that leaves us meticulously uninvolved should make us any better at agitating for systemic change. In this

context, the “business of the novelist” (Baldwin 13) might be to show that structural explanation and affective participation needn’t be antithetical for the practice of testing representational forms that can do better justice to the migrant’s own perspective.

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Notes

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[1] This paradox not only haunts Baldwin's critique, but also some of contemporary criticism's most sophisticated frames for understanding the politics and poetics of affective forms. In Berlant's story of sentimentality's "unfinished business"—for which "Everybody's Protest Novel" provides a crucial sounding board—we're shown how "sentimental modes are tactically appropriated to produce political worlds and citizen-subjects who are regulated by the natural justice that is generated by suffering and trauma" ("Poor Eliza" 655). Instead of making us live with and comprehend the structural determinations of agony, argues Berlant, the sentimental text promises something more consolingly transformative: it offers us a "bargain" (664) that "has constantly involved substituting for representations of pain and violence representations of its sublime self-overcoming that end up, often perversely, producing pleasure." This discrepant sense of satisfaction amid our immersion in dramatized sorrow facilitates our "distraction" from suffering as well as from the prospect of a "better life" that sufferers about whom we read "ought to be able to imagine themselves having." For Berlant, such is the "too-quick gratification after the none-too-brief knowledge of pain" that readers of sentimental fiction can look forward to

(665). By anatomizing sentimentalism's manipulation of feeling in this way, there is perhaps a danger of reproducing the very tendency to universalize affective experience of which sentimental writing has so frequently—and somewhat predictably—been accused.

[2] See, for instance, the compelling reassessments of the critical urgency and aesthetic flexibility of the sentimental mode by scholars concerned with the affective and gendered geographies of nineteenth-century culture (Greyser), with irony, formal innovation, and women's authorship in American modernism (Mendelman), and with the political uses of emotive storytelling in African-American popular culture and media (Wanzo).

[3] As Sánchez observes, children and adolescents migrating "from Central America tend to experience similar traumatic events in their journey through Mexico to arrive to the US to those experienced at home. The traumatic events along the road includes physical assault, rape, hunger, theft, serious health problems, kidnapping, problems with the police, exploitation or abuse, separation of family members traveling, and serious accidents" (264).

[4] "Although only 14 percent of migrants travel by train," notes Albuja, "they constitute the most vulnerable group because they tend to be the poorest. . . . Youth, women and children who travel by train are especially vulnerable, particularly as sexual abuse of migrants is endemic: it has been estimated that six in every ten female migrants are subjected to some form of sexual abuse during their journey through Mexico" (118). Furthermore, Mexico's own "aggressive enforcement efforts, at the urging of the United States, have resulted in serious harm and human rights violations against migrants," Musalo and Lee point out: "intensified enforcement efforts have pushed migration routes through Mexico underground, making them deadlier as a result. In particular, as both private and public security officials began cracking down on migrants riding on

the top of trains, desperate migrants have resorted to harsher, more remote, and dangerous routes. Along these routes, criminal groups have subjected them to robbery, sexual assault, disappearances, kidnapping, torture, and murder—at times working in tandem or with the acquiescence of Mexican authorities" (150).

[5] My thanks to María del Pilar Blanco for providing the translation of Emmelhainz's essay.

[6] Pedwell has warned that "political discourses of cross-cultural empathy tend to alternate between the binary poles of a universalist rhetoric of emotion (which fails to account for contingent historical and contextual particularity in the production of affect) and a culturally essentialist view of feeling (which deterministically maps 'emotional difference' onto 'cultural difference')" (120).