
Infancy and Archive: Undoing Hegemonic History in Valeria Luiselli, Balam Rodrigo, and J. Michael Martinez

Infancia y archivo: deshaciendo la historia hegemónica en Valeria Luiselli, Balam Rodrigo y J. Michael Martinez

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Resumen: Este artículo analiza el uso del archivo en obras que representan las condiciones necropolíticas de las fronteras México-Guatemala y México-Estados Unidos a partir de la perspectiva de los niños migrantes. A través de lecturas de *Lost Children Archive* (2019) de Valeria Luiselli, *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* (2018) de Balam Rodrigo y *Museum of the Americas* (2018) de J. Michael Martinez, argumento que estos textos rechazan los mecanismos de saber imperial que han caracterizado a los archivos a lo largo de la historia, así como la noción de progreso o historia lineal al concebir la literatura como una práctica colaborativa entre las voces de los vivos y los muertos.

Palabras clave: archivo, niños migrantes, fronteras, necropolítica, escritura colaborativa

Abstract: This article analyzes the use of the archive in works that depict the necropolitical conditions of Mexico's southern and northern borderlands through the perspective of migrant children. Through readings of Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* (2019), Balam Rodrigo's *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* (2018), and J. Michael Martinez's *Museum of the Americas* (2018), I argue that these texts refuse the mechanisms of imperial knowledge that have characterized archives throughout history, as well as contest the notion of progress or linear history by conceiving literature as a collaborative practice between the voices of the living and the dead.

Keywords: Archive, Migrant Children, Borders, Necropolitics, Collaborative Writing

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This article examines a twofold use of the figure of the archive—archives of violence and the violence of the archive—in literature written in the wake of the detention of migrant children at Mexico’s southern and northern borderlands. Valeria Luiselli’s *Lost Children Archive* (2019) narrates the story of migrant children who are separated from their families at the U.S.-Mexico border by casting the novel as an archive of echoes of the repressed past, a bibliography of cultural artifacts that contest the imperial notion of progress, and a catalogue of pictures and textual vignettes that articulate the difficulties of raising a family and documenting the present at a time of global emergency. Written in the tradition of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, Balam Rodrigo’s poetry collection *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* (2018) repurposes Bartolomé de las Casas’ *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (1552) to reflect on the continuities and repetitions of the regimes of biopolitical and necropolitical control in the Americas, building a bridge between colonial violence against indigenous populations and the brutality exerted today against Central American migrants.¹ By combining the childhood photographs of his family archive with the restored voices of the disappeared, Rodrigo creates a portrait of the “worldless condition” (Hannah Arendt) of migrants out of the “escombros,” “ruinas,” and “fragmentos de azar” that remain of these shattered lives (66).² Finally, J. Michael Martinez’s book of poems *Museum of the Americas* (2018) dialogues with the tradition of casta paintings to create “archives of colored flesh, naked of nation,” an embodied archive of border crossings and resistance to anti-migrant sentiment (42). By establishing a link between the status of child migrants as non-citizens in Trump-era America and other landmark moments of U.S.-Mexico relations such as the drafting of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Martinez traces the “historical vanishings” that occurred throughout U.S. Latinx history. Through the use of Ariella Azoulay’s notion of “potential history,” Giorgio Agamben’s theorization of the “destruction of experience,” Hal Foster’s conceptualization of the “archival impulse” of contemporary art, and Cristina Rivera Garza’s concept of “necrowriting,” I argue that these texts

¹ I use the notion of “necropolitics” following its theorization by Achille Mbembe in *Necropolitics* (2019). Mbembe repurposes Foucault’s idea of “biopower,” which designates the capacity of the sovereign to exert power over one’s mortality, especially prominent in colonial societies, to refer to the contemporary “infrastructural warfare” that uses occupation, territorial fragmentation, bulldozing, and resource extraction to consider politics as a form of war (Mbembe 66). Sayak Valencia has reformulated Mbembe’s notion for the Mexican necropolitical situation through the concept of “capitalismo gore,” which refers to the “derramamiento de sangre explícito e injustificado (como el precio que paga el tercer mundo que se aferra a seguir las lógicas del capitalismo, cada vez más exigentes), al altísimo porcentaje de vísceras y desmembramientos, frecuentemente mezclados con el crimen organizado, el género y los usos predatorios de los cuerpos” (25).

² According to Arendt, the common world is the space in between people—the public realm—that is comprised by the “fabrications” of human beings such as the arts and the sciences, as well as the cities and institutions that keep communities together: “the common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our lifespan into past and future alike” (*The Human Condition* 55). On the contrary, wordlessness as a “political phenomenon” emerges when individuals are rendered superfluous by the sovereign state, which Arendt relates to the killing power of totalitarian movements (*The Human Condition* 54).

refuse the mechanisms of imperial knowledge that have characterized archives throughout history, as well as contest the notion of progress or linear history by conceiving literature as a collaborative practice between the voices of the living and the dead. Ultimately, I show how these literary works embody the idea of “reparation” in the double sense of the term –giving reparations in response to a history of colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberal capitalism, and re-pairing times, places, and cultural references in original ways– in order to lay bare the disasters of modernity.

Becoming a Specter: Valeria Luiselli’s *Lost Children Archive*

In *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (2017), Valeria Luiselli recounted the Kafkaian, unjust legal procedure that children who are detained at the border have to endure in the New York court of immigration. The essay adopts the form of the questions that these children are forced to answer, many times without the supervision of attorneys or legal guardians. The archival literary procedure of the 40 questions mimics and subverts the absurd bureaucracy that the U.S. federal judiciary uses to remove those who it deems noncitizens. Instead of using the mechanisms that the institutions of modern nations use to draft official histories, *Lost Children Archive* seeks to assemble an alternative catalogue of works, newspaper articles, and photographs that showcases the voices and life experiences of migrants, exiles, and refugees, as well as strategies that restore their erased histories. The novel narrates a road trip that a family –a father, a mother, and their two children: an adolescent boy and an infant girl who is just entering her childhood– undertakes from New York City to the U.S.-Mexico border, first narrated from the perspective of the mother and then in the voice of the teenage boy. But the family plot, as it becomes clear from the beginning, is thicker than it first appeared, because the girl is the narrator’s daughter and the boy her husband’s son: “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” (6-7). Their marriage is in a state of disrepair, which makes the journey oscillate between moments of origins –the beginning of a new century, the girl’s articulation of her first words, the boy’s newfound passion for taking photographs– and a time of endings, embodied not only by the seemingly inevitable rupture of the marriage, but also by the crumbling of American democracy as a result of the genocide that the U.S. government is perpetrating against Latin American immigrants at the southern border. Whereas the husband wants to travel to the southern borderlands to create “an inventory of echoes” of “the ghosts of Geronimo and the last Apaches” (21), the narrator is overtaken with an “archive fever” and intends to conduct research on the detainment and deportation of migrant children.

The novel takes the form of a portable archive that is assembled in seven boxes and that the family carries in the trunk of the car. The boxes interrupt the story in between chapters and suffuse it with the sense that the hand of the

author is carefully intervening in the construction of the narrative. *Lost Children Archive* is in tune with what Hal Foster describes as the archival impulse of contemporary works of art, which –unlike machinic processes and online databases– “are recalcitrantly material, fragmentary rather than fungible” and are “concerned less with absolute origins than with obscure traces, [...] drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects –in art and history alike– that might offer points of departure again” (5). The first boxes contain bibliographical references, compact discs, and clippings, but as the family approaches the border the archive expands to include migrant mortality reports, posters of the Orphan Train Movement of the beginning of the 20th century, photographs of the objects found on the migrant trail in the desert, or maps of the Humane Borders organization that signal specific points of the Sonoran Desert where there are water stations for migrants. The title of one of the chapters, “Routes and Roots,” may offer a glimpse into the novel’s poetics and politics of movement: the idea of taking root while traveling, two seemingly opposing activities that become compatible through the figure of the archive. The idea of a portable archive stands in contrast to the proliferation of borders in the contemporary period, especially after September 11, 2001, when the United States government, as Todd Miller has shown in *Empire of Borders* (2019), began to intervene in borders across various continents through a military-surveillance grid, and started to erect borders and surveillance systems in cyberspace and in space itself via satellites (8). In addition to building new futures by shedding light on the unrealized potential of the past, the notion of a portable, proliferating archive seeks to harness circulation and flow –which, according to Thomas Nail, is at the center of the concept of kinopolitics or the analysis of social motion (24)– and thus stand against the inhumane enforcement apparatus of the Border Patrol.

The structure of the novel points to an intergenerational transfer of knowledge, even though it is not a one-way, but a two-way process. As opposed to the idea of infancy as the silence of the subject, Luiselli shows that children are the creators of a rich family lexicon, as they inherit words from their parents and endow them with a new meaning (Agamben 54). On the other hand, the children have to run away from their parents in order to form their own point of view on a world that is always-already mediated by a series of discourses. In opposition to the news that they are receiving via radio about the migrant children, the children’s lexicon creates a new window into the reality of migration, because their words, according to their mother, “are the escape route out of family dramas, taking us to their strangely luminous underworld” (28). The second part of the novel demonstrates that the children are not as unattached to reality as their parents had assumed. The children are, as the mother declares, “our intellectual equals” and “our life partners in conversation” (91). The words that the children pronounce from the back of the car become progressively relevant as the parents realize that inventing words is a way of reenacting the lives and voices of the missing children. The neologisms –the echoes and traces of other words– that the children invent from the back of the car go on to become a clearer representation of the erased histories that the novel intends to rescue from the wreck-

age of history. The invented nature of the words that the children pronounce throughout the journey is an essential mechanism to disassemble the imperial archive by questioning the discourses that we use to narrate history and the ways in which we continue to reproduce imperial formations of power. “Apache was the wrong word, by the way,” says the boy in the second part of the novel. “It meant ‘enemy,’ and that’s what the Apaches’ enemies called them. The Apaches called themselves Nde, which just meant ‘the people’” (215). In *Lost Children Archive*, writing could be linked to the act of listening to the echoes of the past in nature and perceiving the specter of the *borrados*, which refers to a number of characters that have been relegated to the role of noncitizens in the telling of history.

The construction of a family lexicon through made up words is what makes the structure of *Lost Children Archive* resemble that of a cosmogonic or foundational narrative. The notion of “family lexicon” comes from the homonymous novel by Italian writer Natalia Ginzburg, which in turn inspired the coinage of the concept of *personajes secundarios* in the novels of Chilean writer Alejandro Zambra. Zambra’s novels are populated and often narrated by the children who grew up in Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship, had an incomplete access to this sociopolitical reality, and as adults have become interested in filling the gaps of their formative years. Whereas Zambra directly evokes Ginzburg’s work to refer to the generational lexicon of the children of post-dictatorship, Luiselli uses the term in the context of the harrowing humanitarian conditions of the U.S.-Mexico border, where the children who migrate on their own or accompanied by *coyotes* or *polleros*—the people who charge large sums of money in exchange for helping them cross illegally to the United States—are imprisoned at ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) detention centers. These inhumane conditions deteriorated considerably after the ascent of Donald Trump to the White House.

The image of the children speaking from the back seat of the car and intervening in the creation of the family lexicon recalls a number of contemporary Latin American works that revisit contexts of political violence from the perspective of children, from Zambra’s *Formas de volver a casa* to Inés Bortagaray’s *Prontos listos ya*.³ The structure of the novel, which shifts from the voice of the mother to that of the boy, captures the process through which the children discover novel ways of documenting the reality that surrounds them, not only through the invention of new words, but through the act of learning to take photographs. As the mother states at the beginning of the novel, “New families, like young nations after violent wars of independence or social revo-

³ The connections between Luiselli’s and Zambra’s work are too many to summarize in these pages. In addition to the image of the children travelling in the back seat of the car, they both introduce the figure of a stepparent. This figure comes to symbolize the importance of forging affective bonds and solidarity networks in moments of crisis. In Zambra’s latest novel, *Poeta chileno* (2020), a character who is a poet and stepfather to a child goes so far as to describe himself not only as a *padraastro*, but also as a *poetaastro* or step-poet. The word *poetaastro* usually refers to a bad or minor poet, but here also hints at the fragility and illegitimacy of the generation of post-dictatorship in Chile.

lutions, perhaps need to anchor their beginnings in a symbolic moment and nail that instant in time” (12). The idea that the new century, a moment in history in which we are experiencing an unprecedented sociopolitical and environmental crisis that is foreclosing the notion of the future, needs foundational myths to pave the way for the creation of a language that encompasses words from indigenous tongues or, as the mother refers to them, “more and more distant mother tongues” (13). The creation of this language restores a utopian horizon when the proliferation of “alternative facts” and the destruction of common worlds have given way to a dystopian present.⁴ The mention of the young nations of the Americas is noteworthy, because the projects of the parents intend to revisit the history of the United States and the border territories from the perspective of indigenous populations, making visible the hidden communities that existed outside of the modern nation and providing a new foundation to the writing of history after the turn of the millennium.

The drive to create an alternative archive of the U.S.-Mexico border and Apachería stems from the belief that the history that the narrator has inherited is filled with blank spaces, since most methods of writing history adhere to notions of causality and progress. In reconstructing history through the procedure of montage, the perspective of children, and the recovery of forgotten historical figures, *Lost Children Archive* should be placed alongside a recent wave of historiographical works centered around the secondary, invisible characters that lie dormant in the archives. One can mention the books of American writer Saidiya Hartman that revisit the lives of marginal characters and “minor figures,” such as queer African Americans, in order to question “the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor” (xviii). In Luiselli’s novel, these figures are literally minors, the children of migration or “lost children,” as the family refers to them throughout the trip: “in our intimate family lexicon, the refugees become known to us as ‘the lost children.’ And in a way, I guess, they are lost children. They are children who have lost the right to a childhood” (75). The expression “lost children” can be interpreted in a number of ways, taken as face value, it refers to the children who get lost in the migrant trail because of the dire material conditions that they face, but also to the historical figures whose voices never make it to the institutions who control the archive of the modern nation state.⁵ The archive of the lost children of contem-

⁴ The phrase “alternative facts” was used by Kellyanne Conway, counselor to President Donald Trump, to justify press secretary Sean Spicer’s false comments about the size of the crowds at Trump’s inauguration. The phrase became a cultural milestone for the emergence of a politics of post-truth—the shaping of public opinion through emotions rather than facts—during Trump’s administration. According to Lee McIntyre, “post-truth amounts to a form of political supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not. And this is a recipe for political domination” (13).

⁵ The Spanish version of *Tell Me How It Ends* is entitled *Los niños perdidos* (2016), a title that can be read as an allusion to J.M. Barry’s characters in *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up* (1904). In Barry’s play, the boys who escape the nurses’ supervision and are not claimed within seven days go to Neverland, a mythical island where children never grow up. In Luiselli’s necropolitical reformulation of Barry’s fictional universe, Neverland becomes the Sonoran Desert,

porary migration can be thought of as a call to devise a “potential history” –to borrow Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s term– that stands against the imperial archive, understood as “a regime based on the allocation of differential roles and places to masses of people who were supposed to be kept in their ‘right place’” (41). By constructing an archive of echoes between the forgotten massacres against the Apaches and the dystopian conditions that migrant children face at the border, Luiselli narrates a history of the United States, Mexico, and the territories that lie in-between from the perspective of the people who have been rendered noncitizens, making these forgotten figures the focus of an archaeological history of the present.

At the center of *Lost Children Archive* lies an impulse to create a transnational catalogue of references that will help the narrator elucidate ways to relate the murder of the Apaches and the dissolution of Apachería in the southwestern United States. It is a way of creating an archive of a common world shared by citizens from throughout the globe who have been dispossessed by sovereign powers. This archive includes the work of two writers from the old Yugoslavia, Daša Drndić and Dubravka Ugrešić, whose novels take the form of material inventories of newspaper articles, photographs, and little-known documents in order to reconstruct their devastated homelands and the everyday lives of characters who have been erased by History with a capital h. For instance, Ugrešić refers to an alternative form of remembering that she casts in opposition to official versions of history or the personal archive that is displayed in family albums. This third history is what Ugrešić calls “the intimate history of the everyday life we have lived” or “the archaeology of everyday life” (23). Ugrešić describes it as a form of *ostalga*, which usually refers to the nostalgia of certain aspects of everyday life in Communist East Germany, but that she associates with the need to continually create replicas of her former life in Eastern Europe. The same need to document the disappearance of a way of life is what drives the narrator of *Lost Children Archive* to create a “linguistic archaeology” through invented family words, which “allowed their imaginations to alchemize all our worry and sadness about the future into some sort of redeeming delirium” and that layer the world “in a palimpsest” (29). Luiselli’s cosmopolitan imagination comes to fruition through the invention of a fictional writer, Ella Camposanto, whose last name and the title of her novel –the apocryphal *Elegies for Lost Children*, whose chapters permeate Luiselli’s text– recalls the plight of Holocaust survivors, exiles from the Yugoslav wars, and the *camposantos*, or graveyards, in which victims from these conflicts have been buried.⁶ The deliberate transna-

and the nurses turn into the *coyotes* who assist the children on their journey northward. *Peter Pan* also serves as a point of reference for Luiselli in the representation of the migrant children as orphans of our necropolitical age.

⁶ The last name of Luiselli’s fictional author also recalls, as James Wood has pointed out in his review of the novel for *The New Yorker*, the title of W.G. Sebald’s last collection of essays, *Campo Santo* (“Writing About Writing”). Indeed, Sebald is an ever-present figure in *Lost Children Archive*, even if his work is not part of the narrator’s archive, because of the German writer’s obsession with the ruins of history, the persistence of spirit presences among human beings, the perusal of forgotten archives, and the figure of the writer as *flâneur*.

tional dimension of these references points to the effort of creating an alternative, nonimperial collection that connects seemingly disparate times and places, the living and the dead, in order to shed light on the epistemic violence that is usually associated with the act of assembling an archive.

The question of archaeology and the discovery of temporal palimpsests is essential to the novel's archival impulse. In Luiselli's novel the archive is not housed in an institution—like, for example, in Julián Herbert's *La casa del dolor ajeno* (2015), where the writer narrates a “small massacre” that occurred during the Mexican Revolution by entering the archives of the Museo de la Revolución in Torreón, Coahuila—⁷ but in the environment, out in the open. As Catherine Russell points out in *Archiveology*, “If the archaic definition of the archival is one of consignment, of entrusting to a kind of house arrest, in its modern form, the practice of archiving has become unhoused and destabilized, precisely because memory, recollection, and recall have themselves become challenges to the law of the institution” (100). In *Lost Children Archive*, there is not an institutional archive but the creation of a very idiosyncratic catalogue of references that the narrator displays from the outset, a road map that replaces the GPS device that the family leaves behind in New York City. But it is also a sensorial archive, one that requires the capture of sights and sounds and forces the adults—and, most importantly, the children—to go out into the desert. In part, this is why the children decide to escape their parents' supervision: to find out on their own the difference between a documentarist and a documentarian: “I didn't want to have to choose if I'd be a documentarian or a documentarist [...] I kept on thinking about that, about how to be both” (348-349).⁸ The reflections of the boy about the difference between a “documentarist” and a “documentarian” reveal many of the preoccupations of the novel, which is concerned with how to document the undocumented—not only the children that cross the desert, but the desert itself. The impossibility to capture the long scales in which the crimes against the Apaches and the migrant children have taken place is why the ecocritical figure of the desert acquires such relevance as the plot advances to its conclusion.

In *Lost Children Archive*, the desert is the actual repository where the echoes of the secondary characters of history—their life stories, remains, and posthumous biographies—can be found, restored, and projected into the future.

⁷ Other archival methods that Herbert employs in *La casa del dolor ajeno*, however, come closer to the narrative strategies of *Lost Children Archive*, such as the literal transcription of interviews with taxi drivers in the city of Torreón. The comparison between Luiselli and Herbert is relevant because both authors share a documentary aesthetics that oscillates between fiction and non-fiction, and that is used to narrate historical episodes that reveal the underside of the progressive, forward-looking history of the modern nation. For an analysis of Herbert's book as a counter-hegemonic narrative, see Sánchez Prado (“*La casa del dolor ajeno* de Julián Herbert”).

⁸ The phrase “how to be both” evokes the homonymous 2014 novel by the Scottish author Ali Smith, which is likewise divided between the voice of two narrators—a boy living in Cambridge, England in the 21st century and the Italian Renaissance painter Francesco del Cossa. In Smith's novel, the narrators are separated by more than five centuries, but both life stories—like the stories of the Apaches and the migrant children in *Lost Children Archive*—are connected by a series of echoes.

The desert is an assemblage or a palimpsest of nonhuman temporalities that has the power to erase human lives completely, which makes the search for the echoes and traces of these lives a way to appreciate the humanity that they have been deprived of by the sovereign state. The novel traces the parallels that exist between the United States Army that massacred the Apaches in the 19th century and the Border Patrol that detains, kills, or deports immigrants today. *Lost Children Archive* showcases the erasure of the faces, voices, and experiences that the modern nation state exercises upon indigenous communities and migrants through the violent act of naming, both in the case of the Apaches and the “illegal aliens” who cross the desert. Moreover, in the depiction of the desert as an environment that is populated by nonhuman entities (fossils, bone dust, and human remains) that have an agency of their own, *Lost Children Archive* enters into a direct dialogue with Jason de León’s *The Land of Open Graves* (2015), which exposes how the Border Patrol uses the desert as a weapon against migrants by casting it as a state of exception where the law is suspended (27). De León shows how through policies such as Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD) the Border Patrol is able to benefit from the adverse, hostile conditions of the Sonoran Desert, where the state can render the death of migrants as an “unintended consequence” of environmental exposure (35). For De León, the desert should be understood as “a hybrid collectif,” a term that he borrows from Michel Callon and John Law in order to describe the inextricable connections that exist between “humans, objects, minerals, environmental conditions, non-human animals” (40). “The desert is an enormous, motionless hourglass,” reads a fragment from the fictional novel by Ella Camposanto, “sand passing by in time detained” (305). The desert is an archive that stands against the linear time of Western civilizations, where the human subject is the centerpiece and the acts of destruction are concealed in the name of progress. By contrast, the desert reveals the natural history of destruction that underlies most written histories, serving as a counter-hegemonic archive that hides and discloses in equal measures the past that imperial institutions seek to relegate to oblivion.

The role of photography is key for understanding the question of documenting a present that is always receding out of sight without our noticing it, just like the “motionless hourglass” that is the desert. In the contemporary period—which the mother describes as an age of catastrophes, as the end of history as we know it, as a time that lacks a horizon of expectation—the role of the photographer suffers from the inability of knowing what to include inside the frame and what to leave out. For Barthes, photography is a “fugitive testimony” in a period in which we are “no longer able to conceive *duration*, affectively or symbolically” (93). If Barthes describes photographic cameras as “clocks for seeing,” in the present moment cameras are forced to capture a time out of joint, in which the line that unites past, present, and future is experienced as broken (15). Throughout the journey the boy is learning to take photographs with a Polaroid camera—which evokes the archaic methods of photographing that Barthes links to the figure of the clock—and all the pictures come out white, which leaves him wondering what it means to document and how to focus on what is

important. While the mother reflects on the role of documenting something for posterity when the future no longer holds promises of change, she comes to the conclusion that “maybe the boy’s frustration at not knowing what to take a picture of, or how to frame and focus the things he sees as we all sit inside the car, driving across this strange, beautiful, dark country, is simply a sign of how our ways of documenting the world have fallen short” (103). Perhaps the mother is not able to answer the boy’s question of what and how to document the present because the decision is the children’s and not hers to make, at a moment when the girl is leaving the wordless condition of infancy and the boy is developing a language of his own. Whereas Barthes describes the photograph as the “umbilical cord [that] links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze,” the children want to learn to take pictures in order to break the symbolic umbilical cord that unites them to their mother (81). It is no coincidence that the narrator refers to the concept of “rescue distance,” which comes from Samanta Schweblin’s novel *Distancia de rescate* (2014), to describe her continuous anxiety over the daughter’s safety. This could help explain why the children flee from their parents’ supervision and why Luiselli decides to narrate the second part of the novel from the perspective of the boy, who is speaking to a second person (“you”) that is both singular (the little girl) and plural (the readers of the novel).⁹

Much like in Luiselli’s novel *Los ingravidos* (2011) –in which the past infiltrates the present until they become indistinguishable from one another– as the family travels south the echoes of Apachería become intermingled with the human rights abuses against the migrant children. As the boy and the girl enter the desert on their own and Camposanto’s fictional elegies remind the reader about the “eternal present” of the landscape, the tutelary figure of *Lost Children Archive* –as Luiselli recognizes in the “Works Cited” section of the novel– is Rainer Maria Rilke, whose *Duino Elegies* represent the “void of experience” in which children, as the disinherited figures of the contemporary age, find themselves (Agamben 49). “Each torpid turn of the world has such disinherited ones,” says Rilke in the *Duino Elegies*, “to whom neither the past belongs, not yet what has nearly / arrived” (45). When the boy and the girl follow the steps of the lost children in the desert, they come face to face with the destruction of experience –as Agamben defines the inability to experience everyday life under contemporary conditions– of the modern nation state, which tears apart the bodies and the lives of those who do not fit into the imperial paradigm of progress. This is where Luiselli’s novel casts the language of children as the solution to the split between experience and knowledge, because it is in the realm of language where human beings are able to build an origin by appropriating the present that they have inherited. If the novel offers a sense of hope in the con-

⁹ The end of *Lost Children Archive* recalls the narrative arc of “Hoy temprano” (2001), a short story by Argentine author Pedro Mairal that belongs to the corpus of “literatura de los hijos” or “literature of the children.” The story narrates a family trip to a country house. While the narrator begins speaking as a child from the back seat, as the car approaches the house, he occupies first the front seat and then the driver’s seat. In the course of the journey, most of his life has gone by, he has become a father, and by the end he realizes that he still does not know how to get to his family’s country house.

struction of alternative futures, it is in the capacity of the children to reframe the present through the creation of new words and cosmogonic narratives. As the children approach the Sonoran Desert, the novel undergoes the same effect as the Polaroids during the process of developing –of becoming a specter– caught between light and darkness, between present and past. “Look,” says the little girl when looking at the photographs that the boy has taken throughout their trip, “everyone in these pictures is disappearing” (273). When the parents and the children reunite in Echo Canyon, the characters start playing hide-and-seek between different times and spaces, which is an act of turning a present that is experienced as an accumulation of disentangled events into a web of echoes in which the living and the dead become co-citizens and from which new futures can be envisaged.

Can the Photograph (and the Dead) Speak? Balam Rodrigo’s *Libro centroamericano de los muertos*

Balam Rodrigo’s *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* engages with the archive by rewriting Bartolomé de las Casas’ *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (1552) and painting a horrifying canvas of the violence against Central American migrants who inhabit a permanent zone of exception in their travels to the United States. The book is structured around sections that focus on the experience of migrants from specific countries –Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Mexico– and that are interrupted, in the same fashion as in Luiselli’s novel, by photographs from the poet’s family album that are reunited under the title “Álbum familiar centroamericano.” The book oscillates between the personal and the collective archive: the rewriting of Las Casas’ text through the use of mortality reports of migrants and the exact coordinates in which their remains are located, and the photographs in which the child poet is seen with members of his family and many of the migrants who stayed with them over the years. In these sections the poet gives a face and an experience to the anonymous migrants who populate the other poems of the book, with the intention of revisiting his childhood in Chiapas and reconstructing “los rostros de la infancia, / los de aquellos migrantes centroamericanos que vivieron, / comieron y soñaron entre los horcones de mi casa” (65). While the poet is able to recognize by name and personal features many of the people, especially the children, who stayed with his family on their way north, he acknowledges that the biographies of others have been lost to history. From the get-go the poet describes the book as a “poemario y palimpsesto fiel” (17), an image that conveys in a concise manner the literary procedure that the book erects as a response to the reality that it seeks to portray. In a harrowing context of necropolitical violence against immigrants, the image of the palimpsest refers both to the proliferation of mass graves and anonymous bodies that pile up on a daily basis throughout Central America and Mexico, as well as to the procedure of appropriation and rewriting of the canon that is at the center of Balam Rodrigo’s poetic intervention.

With its explicit reference to the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*—a funerary text written on papyrus around 50 BCE and describing a series of magic spells to assist people in their journeys through the underworld—Rodrigo’s *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* is a powerful addition to a growing number of texts that are using strategies of appropriation and communal writing in the face of violence against women, migrants, and the environment in Central America and Mexico.¹⁰ This type of literary writing falls under a category that Cristina Rivera Garza has famously termed “necroescrituras” or “necrowriting,” which privilege collective forms of belonging and writing in order to stand against the figure of the author as the sole proprietor of the text. Rivera Garza brings to the fore the concept of *comunalidad*—which she borrows from the Mixe writer Floriberto Díaz—in order to show that the strategies of necrowriting are attuned to the “lógicas del cuidado mutuo y a las prácticas del bien común que retan la naturalidad y la aparente inmanencia de los lenguajes del capitalismo globalizado” (19-20). This drive to create a collective language of mutual care is at the center of the procedure that Rivera Garza calls disappropriation, or *desapropiación*, and that she connects to contemporary documentary strategies that are subverting the traditional use of archival materials. Instead of reproducing the paradigm of the imperial archive, contemporary authors begin writing under the premise that the order of the archive is never neutral and that practices such as collecting, indexing, and cataloguing are enmeshed in processes of violence against the other. According to Azoulay, “The establishment of the archive as a neutral technology and state institution made it a model that the governed could use and other state apparatuses could imitate and adapt” (42). In this way, Rodrigo’s decision to rewrite Las Casas’ foundational text situates the vicious crimes that are occurring in contemporary Central America and Mexico in the long scales of imperial violence against indigenous communities, while simultaneously questioning the authority of the Spanish Dominican friar Las Casas and his use of imperial rhetorical devices.

Bartolomé de Las Casas’ *Brevísima* belongs to the literary tradition of the *relación*, texts of a juridical nature that sought to inform, affectively move, and force authorities to take a stance. The Dominican friar assembled a counter-archive of abuse, destruction, and the violation of human rights in the Americas. Moreover, Las Casas used repetition and excess as pedagogical tools to reflect on the unethical nature of the killing of indigenous communities. The objective was to produce an almost mystical suspension of disbelief and to move readers outside of themselves, showing them that the horror committed in the Americas

¹⁰ Some texts that have used strategies of necrowriting to depict the horrific and violent reality of contemporary Mexico include Julián Herbert’s *Álbum iscarote* (2013), Sara Uribe’s *Antígona González* (2016), and Verónica Gerber Bicecci’s *La Compañía* (2019). For a theorization of necrowriting, the necropolitical, and the question of the Mexican literary community vis-à-vis world literature, see Sánchez Prado (“Writing the Necropolitical”). A landmark text that is frequently cited in this tradition is Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* (1955), which Rodrigo rewrites when one of the migrant voices states, “Vine a este lugar porque me dijeron que acá murió mi padre” (28), replacing Rulfo’s Comala with the depiction of the Sonoran Desert as a necropolis filled with migrant bodies.

did not have any historical precedents. In reading Las Casas' account there is a sense that writing is not able to capture the cruelty of humankind, which is why hyperbole emerges as the privileged mode of communication. On the surface, this brief synopsis of Las Casas' *Brevísima* should suffice to understand why Rodrigo chose this particular text, out of the profuse colonial archive, to trace the continuities between the massacre of indigenous communities and the contemporary violence against Central American migrants. However, it is important to mention that Las Casas' account was written for the son of Carlos V, Felipe II, who was a child during the years of the writing and reception of the text, a fact that explains the simplicity of the language and the impactful images that Las Casas uses to represent the crimes against indigenous peoples. The fact that Las Casas wrote the *Brevísima* for a child is in keeping with Rodrigo's intention to revisit his childhood and the years of cohabitation with migrants from different parts of the Americas. Rodrigo uses the historical context and the narrative strategies of Las Casas' *Brevísima* to build a counter-hegemonic archive of contemporary necropolitical violence, when the child is no longer the receptacle of fantasies of progress, but the victim of harrowing violence that makes it impossible to conceive promising futures.

The pervasive violence of the migrant trail is captured in "Emigra el quetzal hacia la biosfera del volcán Tacaná," which appears in the section titled "De la provincia e reino de Guatemala." In this poem Rodrigo alternates reports of the migration of an endangered species, the quetzal, with the monologue of an indigenous person from the Mam people who describes himself as "el último indígena mam: / rastrojo de sílabas de miel sobre la lengua" (40). While the poem suggests that a range of environmental protection policies exist through agencies such as the Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas, it also charts the failure of institutions in Guatemala and Mexico to protect indigenous communities and migrants alike. The poet compares the vulnerability of these groups with the years of President Jorge Ubico Castañeda, the pro-Nazi Guatemalan dictator who gave large concessions to the extractive projects of the United Fruit Company and who, according to the poet, created a landscape of "tierra y carne arrasadas" (40). But the implications of this comparison between the quetzals, the migrants, and the indigenous peoples are more complex, because the quetzals, after all, have to flee to the highest altitudes of the Tacaná volcano to escape the constant hunting that is rendering them a near extinct species. Let us recall that the resplendent quetzal is the national bird of Guatemala, which imbues the poem with the image of an uninhabitable country that is slowly losing the very symbols that confer it a sense of unity. In an image that anticipates the possible outcome of the quetzals if they do not escape to the biosphere of the volcano, the poet describes the migrants as "pájaros despedazados" whose post-mortem biographies have to be reconstructed from the material remains (pieces of cloth, shoes, trousers, and shirts) that are spread through the "país completamente desmembrado" that is Mexico in the contemporary moment (41). As in Luiselli's description of the inability of the mother to reconcile the rescue distance, the poet uses the image of the "cordón umbilical" (41) to depict the

deadly trail of *La Bestia* and the fate of migrants throughout the Mexican territory, from the Suchiate River in the south to the Río Bravo in the north.

Libro centroamericano de los muertos builds a counter-hegemonic archive out of the ruins of utopian national projects by turning the language of the state and the official institutions against itself. In *Capitalismo gore*, Sayak Valencia has theorized the way in which capitalism has turned bodies into commodities and the accumulation of corpses into the most lucrative business of the globalized neoliberal market (26). “La historia contemporánea ya no se escribe desde los sobrevivientes,” writes Valencia, “sino desde el número de muertos” (30). *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* embodies Valencia’s assertion by giving voice to the corpses of children and adults that are scattered in different parts of the migrant trail, sometimes under the very rail line of *La Bestia* that was supposed to take them to a brighter future. The way in which the dreams of these migrants have been shattered by the necropolitical machine is felt in the dystopian quality of the language employed, such as in a poem narrated by an unnamed Salvadoran child. The anonymous poetic voice confesses that he is and always will be eleven years old, that his father was murdered by the members of a gang, that he fled his hometown of Soyapango with a fifteen-year-old friend, and that his dream was to become a soccer player. The harrowing quality of the poem becomes even more so in the stanza in which the poetic voice states that he will always wear a shirt with the number eleven stitched on his back, just like his idol the Salvadoran soccer player Mágico González did throughout his career. Moreover, the narrator uses the word “partido” to refer not to a soccer game, as the context might seem to suggest, but to the remains of the child’s body that have been collected and stored in plastic bags: “el número de bolsas en que guardaron, / todo partido, mi cuerpo” (52). This reversal turns the utopian dreams of the child into the dystopian nightmares of contemporary necropower—as Valencia, redefining the concept of necropolitics introduced by Achille Mbembe, calls the absolute disregard for life and the absence of a future when the power is controlled by organized crime, drug traffickers, and unscrupulous financial corporations. Rodrigo’s use of language throughout the book subverts the *status quo* by revealing the underside of the utopian discourses of globalization.

Other poems in the book display strategies of necrowriting by subverting the language of official communiqués and press releases about human rights abuses. In the section about Mexico, Rodrigo reproduces a newspaper article about the exoneration of seven state representatives of the National Institute of Migration (INM) who had been accused of kidnapping a bus filled with Central American immigrants, treating them like “mercancía” and handing them to Los Zetas, the Mexican criminal syndicate considered to be one of the most dangerous drug cartels in the world (119). However, the poet replaces the word “secuestro” (kidnapping) with “plagio” (plagiarism, though in some Latin American countries it may also refer to the act of kidnapping), playing with the ambiguity of both words and drawing a parallel between abducting people for ransom and appropriating the words of others. This ironic play on words that

recalls the grotesque descriptions of Las Casas' *Brevísima* seeks to denaturalize the hegemonic discourses that describe a present filled with heinous crimes as if they were everyday occurrences. In this way, it brings to our attention the fact that these abuses oftentimes never make it to the mainstream media outlets. Rodrigo's use of hyperbole is intended to shake Mexican citizens out of the dormancy that is caused by the daily bombardment of news about kidnappings and killings of Central American migrants.¹¹ Moreover, the comparison of writing with the act of kidnapping words from other cultural producers seeks to reveal what journalistic language usually conceals, bringing to the forefront the idea that words alone cannot express the hideous nature of these humanitarian crimes. In this same poem, the author appropriates dictionary definitions about state authorities such as the *migra*, which he describes as "agente del Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) cooptado por el crimen organizado" (120). In this case, the denaturalization of official language uncovers the truth about state representatives whose collaboration with organized crime is disguised under bureaucratic language.

Rodrigo's poetic approach to the necropolitical present could be linked to the method that Walter Benjamin described in "Experience and Poverty" as a "positive barbarism," which amounts to creating something new with the ruins of modernizing processes or starting "from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further" (732). While thinking about the impossibility of the soldiers who returned from World War I to relate their experiences in the battlefield and the suffocating amount of information of modern societies, Benjamin proposed to let the work of destruction speak for itself, instead of adopting strategies of construction that return to the great traditions of the past. "A total absence of illusion about the age," says Benjamin, "and at the same time an unlimited commitment to it" ("Experience and Poverty" 733). In *Libro centroamericano de los muertos*, listening to the voices of the dead and letting them speak from the mass graveyards or *tumbas clandestinas*—sometimes adopting a collective "we," other times giving voice to children whose corpses have been torn to pieces—lays bare the fabric of the modern nation as an irredeemable entity that is a massive cemetery: "este enorme jardín para los niños difuntos de Centroamérica, fértil camposanto llamado México" (115). The procedure of montage of dead voices and plagiarism of other sources is connected with the need to appropriate the concept of barbarism from the hands of the state and the paramilitary groups and use it as a strategy of resistance. In this sense, Rodrigo's decision to return to his childhood years can be explained as a way of depicting the poet as a child who plays with the montage of heterogeneous materials, reproduces quotes from the work of other authors without citing them—as Benjamin states in *The Arcades Project*, "the art of

¹¹ This procedure of hyperbolic writing has parallels with the gore writing strategies used by Antonio Ortuño in his novel *La fila india* (2013), about a social worker and her seven-year-old daughter who move to southeastern Mexico to work for an institution that defends the rights of Central American migrants. The explicit grotesque quality of certain scenes, especially in the killing of the migrants by members of gangs and cartels, seeks to wake metropolitan readers to the ordinary violence of Mexico's southern border.

citing without quotation marks” (458)— and reinvents language through playful combination. Like Benjamin’s materialist historian, Rodrigo’s poetic voice creates a portrait of the present with the refuse of history.

The same notion of a positive barbarism can be found in the sections that contain photographs of Rodrigo’s family album. Each photograph is accompanied by a poem in which the author tries to identify the pictured individuals, while at the same time speculating on their possible fates. The caption of the two photographs introduces an element that immediately seizes the reader’s attention, namely, the location in which these photographs were taken: “Villa de Comaltitlán, Chiapas, Centroamérica” (44, 128). The decision to displace the geographical location of Chiapas from Mexico to Central America not only points to its former status as a member of the Kingdom of Guatemala (or Capitanía General de Guatemala), but also speaks to another strategy of resistance: the appropriation of the cartographic drive of the nation and the description of a territory that is defined, not by a sociopolitical demarcation, but by the affective bonds between human beings. Moreover, the displacement—or deliberate misplacement— of Central America to Mexico restores the humanity of migrants who are treated like unwelcomed guests by the Mexican state and are often attacked by national guardsmen, especially since President Donald Trump took office and pressured Mexico into systematically containing mass migration. Whenever his memory fails, the poet has to reconstruct the biographies of these children based on the details of the photographs, not only returning to his childhood but also—as Barthes states in relation to the role of the spectator— becoming “a child—or a maniac; I dismiss all knowledge, all culture, I refuse to inherit anything from another eye than my own” (51). Each of the poems that accompany the photographs enact this refusal by using a detail to plunge headfirst into the past and reconstruct in detail the author’s relationship with the Central American children who stayed with his family. All of these literary techniques seek to humanize the migrants by highlighting the features that are left out of state reports and newspaper articles about Central American migration—how the children played soccer, how much they are terrified of the agents of the *migra*, or how they are oftentimes murdered for absurd reasons, such as changing a song in the jukebox of a tavern. In short, the photographs of Rodrigo’s family album provide a face to the disembodied voices that speak throughout the book, serving as an archive that counters the anonymity and detachment of state discourse.

Throughout Rodrigo’s *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* there are interspersed references to trees without branches, which the poet likens to the dismembered bodies of the migrants. At the same time, the trees might be the various nations that refuse to receive the children with open arms, rendering them “troncos incompletos de cadáveres, / reses perdidas y migrantes, hijos clandestinos / de países sin pájaros que viajan con los sueños enjaulados” (134). The reference to the country without birds recalls the earlier poem about the extinction of the quetzals, whereas the image of the “caged dreams” provides a chilling reminder of ICE’s policies to lock children in cages at U.S. border

facilities. The ecopoetic reference to the chopped-down branches and the endangered species are “las señales del fin del mundo, / los signos del abandono de Dios” (122) that the collective voice of the migrants had invoked in an earlier poem—and that recall Yuri Herrera’s dystopian portrait of migration in *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* (2009). Furthermore, the destruction of the branches of trees suggests that the modern nations of the Americas lack a relation to its genealogy and are unable to project themselves into the future, giving way to a continent without children. In *Libro centroamericano de los muertos*, Rodrigo produces a literal representation of a “México profundo,” borrowing the expression of Guillermo Bonfil Batalla’s influential ethnography and transposing it to the proliferation of mass graveyards in the necropolitical present.

The afterword of the book rewrites Las Casas’ plea to the readers at the end of the *Brevísima* to act in response to the gallery of atrocities that were being committed against indigenous peoples in the colonies. Rodrigo’s repetition of Las Casas’ testimony showcases the blatant continuities between these two historical periods, only separated by the introduction of new terms such as “crímenes de lesa humanidad” (137) or the passing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations. As in Luiselli’s *Lost Children Archive*, the “lenguas migratorias” (133) of the children might provide the only sense of hope in the midst of an apocalyptic landscape, as they are the only repositories of the destroyed worlds that the book describes in profuse detail. Whereas Las Casas’ text was addressed to colonial authorities who had the ability to challenge the legal systems that subdued indigenous communities in the Americas, Rodrigo’s appeal to the “muy alto e muy poderoso señor Lector” (137) of the book of poems is a commentary on poetry’s impossibility to enact world-changing measures in our necropolitical age. Even though he recognizes the limitations of the literary to change the material conditions of migrants, Rodrigo assembles an alternative archive of necropolitical horror that rejects the separation of past and present and brings to the fore other knowledges and temporalities that have been excluded from the formation of modern nation states. The fact that the poet has signed the book in San Cristóbal de las Casas, the city in the state of Chiapas whose name pays tribute to the Dominican friar, but also adds the alternative name Jovel—which in Tzotzil and Tzeltal, two Mayan languages spoken in the region, means “the place in the clouds”—casts indigenous languages as the remaining archives that refuse the mechanisms of appropriation and carelessness of the state killing machine.

Archives of Colored Flesh: J. Michael Martinez’s *Museum of the Americas*

J. Michael Martinez’s poetry collection *Museum of the Americas* is composed in the form of a Wunderkammer, or a cabinet of curiosities, the collections of objects that served as predecessors to modern museums and were intended to inspire spectators to draw analogies between disparate materials. The idea to structure the book in the form of a cabinet of curiosities is in tune with

its archaeological approach, whose aim is to show that the racism and anti-immigrant rhetoric that pervades U.S. politics and society today did not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, *Museum of the Americas* reveals that this racism is part of a centuries-long process that dates back to the *sistema de castas* (race/caste system) and the *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) of the colonial era, the “galleries of wonder” of 19th century American showmen such as P.T. Barnum, or the representational techniques of modern photographers such as Walter H. Horne who depicted the border territories as an accumulation of brown corpses. That Martínez adopts an archaeological approach is first suggested by the epigraph of the book, a quote by Walter Benjamin taken from *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (1928) about “the allegorical way of seeing,” the way in which the faces of the dead are able to convey the untimeliness of history –which, according to Benjamin, becomes “meaningful only in the stations of its decline” (*Origin* 174). The declining present that *Museum of the Americas* depicts without mentioning it is the United States of the Trump administration, where children are locked in cages at border facilities and immigrants are equated to “rapists” and “criminals.” Martínez employs the allegorical mode to examine an archive of historical materials that enables readers to trace back the origins of contemporary anti-immigrant sentiment to different periods and cultural artifacts: the tradition of casta paintings, postcards of executions at the border during the Mexican Revolution, or photographs of deformed black and brown individuals for the consumption of the white American public. Within the archive that the book compiles is the poet’s family album, which places his own body in relation with the others, living and dead, that the imperial gaze has excluded from the narrative of progress.

While using materials from the colonial archive such as casta paintings, Martínez disengages these documents from the hands of imperial institutions and shows that archivists can become active agents in the destruction of common worlds. In “Casta Paintings, An Erotics of Negation,” the poet uncovers how these portraits served as a taxonomy of mixed-race individuals and as legal documents that established one’s heredity, an obsession of Martínez at least since his previous, homonymous poetry collection, *Heredities* (2010). The poetic voice states that the casta pictorial genre represented *mestizos* not as “individuals but [as] specimens” (13) that were to be consumed voraciously by the white gaze, which took pleasure in the “kinky historiographical exhibitionism” of the racial other and in the “erotics of negation” of their own mixed ancestry (16). In this way, the poet questions the idea of *pureza de sangre* by writing words like “white” and “race” with quotation marks, showing that race, especially in the colonial period, was not only a question of whiteness, but was deeply embedded with national (Spanishness) and religious (Catholicism) categories. In *Genealogical Fictions* (2008), María Elena Martínez describes casta paintings and the investigation into one’s own lineage as the “archival practices” of the state, the church, and the Inquisition in colonial Mexico. Martínez asserts that casta paintings “produced and reproduced categories of identity based on ancestry linked to particular legal statuses” and that the maintenance of family status oftentimes

depended on falsified written genealogies or documents that certified purity of blood (6). However, as Iлона Katzew claims in her book-length study of the casta pictorial tradition, the terminological system of castas was filled with indeterminate racial categories such as *tente en el aire* (hold-yourself-suspended-in-mid-air) and *no te entiendo* (I-don't-understand-you), which conveyed the inconsistency of a system that was devised by the colonial elite to exert power on mixed-raced individuals (43-44). Throughout *Museum of the Americas*, Martínez is interested in the ambiguity of these racial categories as well as in vague markers of national belonging that were used by the United States to erase the bodies and histories of Latinx communities.

The poem that gives the book its title, “Museum of the Americas,” sheds light on how the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo –the document that put an end to the Mexican American War of 1846-1848– made Latinx identity a permanent process of becoming, a continuous search for identification when legal documents turn people into “foreigners unto themselves” (42).¹² According to Richard Griswold del Castillo in *The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: A Legacy of Conflict* –a book that Martínez quotes in one of the stanzas of the poem– the treaty paved the way for an unequal relationship between the United States and Mexico and led to conflicting interpretations of its provisions by U.S. and Mexican authorities as well as by Latinx activists in the following centuries (xii-xiii). Likewise, the poet points out that the ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo created an ambiguous legal territory through which future U.S. authorities were able to enact a “historical vanishing” of the Mexican and U.S. Latinx body politic, rendering migrants as bodies that belonged neither here nor there: “without boundaries” and “naked of nation” (42). Moreover, Martínez uses an object of historical significance for U.S.-Mexico relations (the prosthetic leg of General Antonio López de Santa Anna) as a synecdoche of the objectification of Mexican bodies. The poem begins by following the trajectory of Santa Anna’s leg as an object of imperial consumption and exhibitionism, notably by P.T. Barnum when he opened the American Museum in New York City in 1847. When exhibited in museums and county fairs, the leg came to symbolize, according to the poet, the migrant body as “a nationally unanchored art object,” “an art object of imperial fashioning” (37, 42). The end of the poem traces the travels of Santa Anna’s leg not just in space but in time, to our apocalyptic present of vicious rhetoric that casts immigrants as “illegal aliens,” “the undocumented,” or “noncitizens,” that is, as categories that erase their faces, stories, and life experiences.

One of the provisions of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that Martínez reinterprets in “Museum of the Americas” is the one contained in Article IX,

¹² In *Latinx: The New Force in American Politics and Culture* (2019), Ed Morales states that Latinx is an elastic category that defies simple definitions because it points to “a people that live in a world of many worlds, possessing an identity of multiple identities” (3). As opposed to terms such as Hispanics or Latinos, Latinx encompasses a range of gender-based, racial, and national identifications that provide an in-between space excluded by previous categories (4-5). For Morales, the process of creating mixed-raced identities can be traced back to the Mexican American War and the annexation of the Southwest territories to the United States in 1848 (5).

which stated that Mexicans were to be incorporated as U.S. nationals “at the proper time,” thus inhabiting a “mean time” of statelessness until the U.S. Congress dictated otherwise (190). The poem considers the ratification of the treaty as a watershed moment for the creation of hybrid identities, which in the United States, as opposed to Latin America, had not been highlighted in the media, cultural representations, or state discourse in previous decades. Whereas in colonial Latin America *mestizaje* or miscegenation was a fundamental notion imposed by the *sistema de castas* and promoted by casta paintings to regulate citizens and maintain the status quo, in the United States, Mexican Americans were forced to turn the “ontological vacuum” that they inhabited after the drafting of the treaty into a defining feature of their identities (*Museum* 40). Martínez traces the ways in which the U.S. government left Mexican American citizens “nationally unanchored” as a result of the color of their skin (41). By reinterpreting and rewriting historical documents such as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in the face of our necropolitical present, the poet is shedding new light on how Americans—as Laura E. Gómez asserts in *Manifest Destinies* (2007)—oftentimes ignore that it was their nation that attacked Mexico first, contradicting conventional American history books that teach about the “brave pioneers” who occupied the “frontier” through the fulfilment of a manifest destiny (where occupation and frontier mean “benign presence” instead of military campaign and war of aggression) (16). Additionally, by connecting casta paintings to the Mexican American war and then to the policies of the Trump administration, the poem shows how American law fundamentally created race, racial categories, and racial dynamics, and how it conceived of Mexican Americans as inferior human beings.

The most striking anecdote that Martínez uses to allegorize the situation of children at the U.S.-Mexico border is the infamous episode of Maximo and Bartola, the stage names of two Salvadoran siblings who suffered from cognitive developmental disability and were exhibited as wonders in the American Museum and other U.S. and European venues starting in the 1840s. The partnership of John Lloyd Stephens and P.T. Barnum, the explorer who supposedly took them to the United States and the showman who toured them around the country in his traveling circus, resonates with the post-truth politics and the sensationalist campaigns against the opposition that emerged in the United States under President Donald Trump. While Stephens was credited with discovering Mayan cultures and adopted the pseudonym of Pedro Velasquez to legitimize the theft of Central American children and Mayan cultural artifacts, Barnum was an entertainer whose commercial interests were his top priority, even at the expense of the people that he exhibited in his so-called “freak shows.” As a clear continuation of the racial politics of the casta pictorial tradition, the two siblings were labeled as “specimens” and “ethnological curiosities” and were used to prove the inferiority of the racial other (*Museum* 60, 62). Even though they were taken from the city of Usulután in El Salvador, Maximo and Bartola were advertised to American and European audiences as “the Aztec Children,” the last specimens of a nearly extinct race. Martínez traces a clear parallel between the U.S.

doctrine of manifest destiny –the right to expand American democracy to other parts of the continent– and the appropriation of individuals and cultures considered to be racially inferior. In this sense, *Museum of the Americas* adopts strategies of necrowriting through the disappropriation of historical documents and the conception of a dialectical understanding of history, narrating the ruinous American present through the erasure and plunder of the Latinx body politic.

Conclusions

Many of the children who feature in the three works that I analyzed above inhabit what Hannah Arendt has called a worldless condition, the loss of a shared world –“the withering away of everything *between us*”– that she aptly describes with the image of the desert, which recalls the U.S. federal border enforcement policy of using the Sonoran Desert as a weapon against migrants (*The Promise of Politics* 201). This worldlessness is a result of growing up in a historical period when the condition of being a child no longer holds promises of a bright future. Think of the lost children of Luiselli’s novel, the dead children speaking from the afterlife in Rodrigo’s poetry collection, or the Aztec Children of Martinez’s museum, whose only purpose in this world is to be consumed and fetishized by the white gaze. However, the archival impulse of all three texts suggests that there is a way out of this historical impasse that involves a slowing down of the course of progress, the critical elaboration of the past, and the exploration of its continuities with our necropolitical present. At the center of Azoulay’s notion of “potential history” lies the idea that in times of global emergency such as these, human beings “do not require more grandiose motions forward, but rather need slowed-down spaces for repairing, providing reparations, and reviving precolonial patterns and arrangements ungoverned by Man” (31). It is my contention that each of these literary works provides a space for reparations through the re-pairing of tradition and history, the suspension of the constant pursuit of the new, and the positing of a space of co-citizenship between the living and the dead that would enable the transmission of the past to the new generations. The archives that these writers put together do not follow the patterns of imperial institutions –the pillaging, cataloguing, and indexing that reproduces the linear temporality of progress– but are assembled with the playfulness of a small child. In repeating the past to explore its unrealized futures, the works of Luiselli, Rodrigo, and Martinez are constellations of historical materials in which the promise of the here and now suddenly flashes up before our eyes.

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