

The Sounds of the Desert: *Lost Children Archive* by Valeria Luiselli

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ABSTRACT: In the novel *Lost Children Archive* (2019) by Valeria Luiselli, sounds become narrative tools to underscore the political, historical, and ecological facets of the Desert Southwest. In this article, I contend that by attending to multiple temporalities, the novel addresses ongoing colonization processes that have taken place in the desert, draws attention to environmental challenges faced by the arid ecosystem, and memorializes its weaponization against migrants. To this end, I focus on the projects carried out by two of the protagonists, which are an inventory of echoes and a sound documentary. Whereas the former attempts to record what is left from the soundscape that surrounded the Chiricahua Apaches led by Geronimo, the latter focuses on the journey of refugee children in the context of the Mexico-US border. Thus, the novel offers a complex and multidimensional depiction of the biome, which is portrayed as a central device in border-control strategies, an ecosystem, and Native land.

KEY WORDS: Mexican Novel; Mexico-US Border; Refugee Children; Native Lands; Ecocriticism; Ecoacoustics.

In *Lost Children Archive* (2019), Mexican-born author Valeria Luiselli addresses various types of absences that revolve around the Desert Southwest. The narrative focuses on the journey of refugee children in the context of the Mexico-United States borderlands and on the history of Geronimo and the Chiricahuas, the last Apache group that resisted colonization from both sides of the border. Because of the centrality of the desert, the novel also underscores a set of environmental losses that are intertwined with the main narrative arcs. Through the representation of sounds, *Lost Children Archive* emphasizes that the desert(s)¹ of the southwest are ecosystems, Native lands, and central devices in border-control strategies.

The story begins with a New York-based family of four, whose names are never revealed and are known as the wife, the husband, the boy, and the girl. The family is getting ready for a road trip towards the Southwestern desert, where each parent will work on a sound project. Whereas the father wants to document what is left of the soundscape that surrounded the Chiricahuas' battle, the wife is interested in documenting the stories of the refugee children who have had to traverse the desert. However, the parents' endeavors cannot be completed as they imagined them. As has been noted in various reviews,² due to the impossibilities that follow each project, the novel speaks to the limits of archival and historical research. Through the pursuit of sounds that appear only in the elusive forms of echoes and reverberations, both projects turn the novel into an archive of what is missing, has been disregarded, or cannot be apprehended.

In the novel, the violence that often accompanies undocumented migration, which reaches its most brutal heights when it involves children, is addressed through the portrayal of the desert's participation in border-control strategies. Regarding that partici-

pation, in *The Land of Open Graves*, anthropologist Jason de León states: "the best and most lethal weapon the Border Patrol has is nature" (158). Said weaponization is central for developing the wife's project, a sound documentary about lost refugee children. Whereas initially, the wife plans to document the experiences of child refugees from their perspective (19-20), when this endeavor becomes unattainable, she decides to take a different direction: "The story I have to record is not the story of children who arrive, those who finally make it to their destinations and can tell their own story [...] The story I need to tell is the one of the children who are missing" (146). The absence of refugee children is highlighted by oral accounts, news transmitted by radio waves, and the reading out loud of a fictional novel about a group of children who are lost in the arid territory. All of them acoustic, those are the main channels through which the echoes of the refugee children's stories are incorporated into the novel and how the narrative underscores the danger posed by the desert.

While the weaponization of the desert against migrants haunts the entire narrative, the novel emphasizes the existence of a longer genealogy of violence perpetrated against Indigenous people in the same territory. Described as an "inventory of echoes," the father's project addresses the dispossession of Chiricahua Apaches from their land. In the words of Latin Americanist scholar Mariana Zinni, "[el padre] quiere reconstruir las presencias de los [Chiricahuas] a través de ecos y reverberaciones" (20). By recording an archive of the soundscape that surrounded the Chiricahuas' resistance, the father aims to reconstruct the echoes of their presence. Furthermore, through subtle references, the novel draws attention to ongoing forms of violence enacted against Native American people and their territory.

An important contrast between the wife's and the husband's projects is that whereas the former considers the deadly attributes of the desert, the latter speaks to its vulnerabilities. Sounds Studies scholar Alamo Farina recalls that a soundscape "is defined as the entire sonic energy produced by a landscape" (1). Since the soundscape that the father wants to record emanates from the desert, the project is focused on recording sounds made by nonhuman entities. As I argue in the following section, by doing this, the husband's recordings unveil biodiversity loss. In this way, through the inventory of echoes, the novel shows that sound can turn into a medium to assess environmental damage, which is why it can be understood as an *ecoacoustics* project: "ecoacoustics [is an emerging field] concerned with the study of environment pattern and changes through sound" (Barclay & Gifford 54). While both the inventory of echoes and the sound documentary highlight human absences, the former also traces the loss of nonhuman beings.

Given the mechanisms that provoked some of these losses, the story mobilizes certain aspects of the desert that situate it as what I term a border biome. Terrestrial and aquatic, biomes are large-scale ecosystems (Faber, Navarro et al. 2) characterized mainly by their climate, vegetation, and wildlife. In this sense, I understand border biomes as ecological communities that have been divided by national borders and that sometimes are also used as border markers. The lifeforms inhabiting these communities are often endangered by their proximity to the systems and structures that uphold territorial boundaries, such as walls, technology, and patrolling strategies, to name a few. At the same time and as portrayed in Luiselli's novel, because they tend to be inhospitable to humans, border biomes can be weaponized against the people who traverse them. Whereas the desert is the focus of this article, other examples of border biomes in Central and North America also include rivers and forests.³

Besides *Lost Children Archive*, more representations of the desert as a border biome can be found in literary works such as *The Devil's Highway* (Luis Alberto Urrea, 2004) and *The Line Becomes a River* (Francisco Cantu, 2018), or in the film *Desierto* (Jonás Cuarón, 2016). From various angles, these works denounce the cruelty and death generated by the weaponization of the desert and at the same time accentuate its ecological life and environmental vulnerabilities. Although Luiselli's novel situates the aforementioned amalgamation as a central element for the narrative, one of its main distinctions is that it addresses child migration, a topic that defines how the biome is portrayed. In addition, beyond depicting the desert as a border biome, *Lost Children Archive* stresses that the arid territory is Native land.

Echoes and Ecoacoustics

Geronimo, Chief Cochise, and the Chiricahuas, the most important figures in the husband's project, fought the last of the Apache Wars to keep their independence from the US government. As activist and historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz declares: "The longest military

counterinsurgency in US history was the war of the Apache Nation, 1850-86. Goyathlay, known as Geronimo, famously led the final decade of the Apaches resistance" (150). However, although they resisted for decades, as the historian asserts:

When Geronimo finally surrendered -he was never captured- the group numbered only thirty-eight, most of those women and children, with five thousand soldiers in pursuit, which meant that the insurgents had wide support both north and south of the recently drawn US-Mexico border. (150).

That is why the husband wants to go towards the desert. Particularly, he is interested in getting to the Chiricahua Mountains⁴, "where the last free peoples on the entire American continent lived before they had to surrender to the white eyes" (Luiselli 26). The husband sees the area not just as the scenery inhabited by the last independent Chiricahua Apaches but as the entity that continues to reproduce the waves of sound that followed them.

According to the wife, the inventory of echoes "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). Sound artist Brandon LaBelle defines echoes as acoustical manifestations that produce ruptures: "the ruptures performed by the echo unfix the temporality of sound to further the integral displacement sound comes to impart onto the senses. In doing so, the echo disorients and distracts; it wanders and returns in the same moment to confuse" (7). For LaBelle, whereas sounds maintain clear temporal linearity that follows an origin point and a horizon of receptors, because of the lingering effect of echoes, they can create a rupture between the past and the future, destabilizing the oscillation of time. Given this characteristic, it is telling that the husband calls his project an "inventory of echoes" instead of an inventory of sounds. However, most of the elements he records are not echoes in a literal sense, but a historical one. Moreover, the temporal disruption that they produce is the main element by which they can be considered echoes in the first place.

When the boy asks his father about the sounds he is trying to record, he replies: "Maybe the rain falling on this tin roof, some birds if we can, or maybe just insects buzzing" (96). These sounds can be considered echoes because even though they do not replicate the soundscape that surrounded Geronimo and the Chiricahuas, they repeat acoustic fragments that have survived from it, as the wife interprets: "his plan is to record the sounds that now, in the present, travel through some of the same spaces where Geronimo and other Apaches, in the past, once moved, walked, spoke, sang" (141). Thus, the reverberations created by wildlife and weather-based phenomena produce a sonorous bond that connects past and present realities. These sounds generate a rupture in the linear temporal logic, or in the words of LaBelle: "the echo diminishes orientation and spatial

clarity; it locates us in the threshold of the dead, as a voice without a body" (24). The lack of clarity is expressed in the novel when the narrator asserts that echoes can be understood "as absence turned into a presence, and, at the same time, as a presence that [makes] an absence audible" (Luiselli 98). By mapping and recording pieces that were part of the acoustic world of the last independent Chiricahua Apaches, the inventory of echoes turns into an artifact that brings back their presence by underscoring their absence. On this characteristic, the wife states:

He's somehow trying to capture [Geronimo and his group] past presence in the world, and making it audible, despite their current absence, by sampling any echoes that still reverberate of them. When a bird sings or wind blows through the branches of cedars [...] that bird and those branches illuminate an area of a map, a soundscape, in which Geronimo once was. (141)

The father's project intends to document the sounds of the desert as a method to seize the audible remnants of the last years of the Chiricahua rebellion. Because the acoustic ecology of the arid biome is central to this endeavor, the aural documentation turns into an ecoacoustics project. During the second part of the novel, when the narrative voice shifts from the wife to the boy, the latter recalls: "sometimes [the] inventories were just wind blowing and rain falling and cars passing" (203). Since the narrative makes evident that finding sounds of desert wildlife is not always an easy endeavor, the boy's recollection can be read in the context of the detrimental effects that climate change has on desert birds and other species (Albright et al). Furthermore, urbanization processes in the Sonoran Desert have caused the loss of land and biodiversity and have also provoked floods in the valleys, thus damaging the desert ecosystem (Steiner). Besides, border security measures such as the border wall have interrupted migratory corridors for wildlife, to name a few devastating effects⁵. Hence, although brief, the boy's elucidation can be read as an allusion to some of the most pressing environmental challenges endured by the arid biome.

Another element used to underscore the ecology of the desert is the repetition of the word *saguaro*. These cacti are vital for the desert ecosystem because multiple species depend on them for shelter and survival. With the repetitive mention of the cactus' name, the narrative once again gives prominence to the ecological life of the desert. The saguaros become audibly present during the road trip when the father asks the children to learn the names of various desert species: "my husband has given the children a catalog of plant species, and they have to memorize names of things, things like saguaro, difficult names like creosote, jojoba, mesquite tree" (153). Even though the children are challenged to learn several names, only one of them fully captures the attention of the girl.

Attracted to the word, the youngest child points at various plants and other objects, and indistinctly, she affirms that the

name of all those things is saguaro. When mentioned, the word dominates the narrative: "Saguaro! She says the word like she has discovered a new star or planet. But there are no saguaros here, not yet [...] She's not convinced and continues to count saguaros in the wet empty plains, but softly now, to herself" (154). Considering the context of the husband's project, the fact that the girl chooses that word to describe multiple things is significant. Because of the importance of the cacti to the Tohono O'odham' people, while the recorded sounds transmit fragments of the soundscape that surrounded the Chiricahua resistance, "remind[ing] us of the ones that are lost" (141), the vocalization of the word saguaro reminds us not just of those who are no longer here but also of the ones who still are⁶.

Given the clear separation between a historical and a present event, Luiselli's novel risks confining the Chiricahuas in particular, and Native Americans at large, to a motionless past. However, the incorporation of the word saguaro is a dangerously too subtle yet powerful reference to the ongoing struggles endured by Indigenous people. In the case of the novel, those struggles relate to the context of the Mexico-US border. Saguaros are ancient cacti indigenous to the Sonoran Desert and the Tohono O'odham, or Desert People, consider them sacred. Furthermore, for the Tohono O'odham Nation, saguaros are far more than just a type of cactus, they are people too.

The belief in the inner humanity of saguaros can be found in different creation stories. One of them is described by Tohono O'odham member Susie Ignacio Enos, which recounts the story of a girl who sank into the desert and was reborn as a saguaro. According to this version, in a prophecy, the father of the girl was told the following: "she will live forever to the end of times. She will be known by races of people from far and near. She will be queen of the Taw haw naw Juwut (desert lands). Generations of Aw'awtam will be saved from starvation because of her and her family" (Enos). Another creation story asserts that saguaros come from "the beads of sweat" of the brow of I'itoi, "Creator of the Desert People" (tohonochul.org). In this way, these narratives underscore certain elements by which saguaros are sacred to the Tohono O'odham people.

Living up to two hundred years and capable of growing almost 45 feet tall, the saguaro cacti participate in circuits of nourishment that affect both human and nonhuman entities. In an interview, Lois Liston, who is a Tohono O'odham citizen and a saguaro harvester, mentions that the tribe's calendar begins with the harvest of the saguaro's fruit. According to Liston, the community collects the fruit only after the animals who need it have eaten enough. In addition, the saguaros' fruit and seeds participate in complex pollination processes, which is why the cactus is central to the sustenance of the desert ecology (Cutler 40). Furthermore, when they die, they are used as building materials and tools, and their bodies feed the non-human dwellers of the desert.

Considering the cultural, historic, and environmental particularities of the saguaros, along with the context of the novel, the rep-

etition of their name acquires a profound meaning. It is notable that even though the girl mentions them multiple times, she does so while referring to other things. The saguaros are not physically present. Consequently, it is sound and not image what keeps their significance alive in the narrative. Every time the girl emits the word, the sound she generates takes over the narrative and becomes an overwhelming acoustic presence. The imaginative endeavor of the child underscores the evocative power of sound, which works as a nonmaterial device that transmits part of the knowledge and creativity of the Tohono O'odham.

Although saguaros are not an endangered species, their population is decreasing. Furthermore, their absence can be read in the context of the environmental destruction caused by border control measures. For instance, the construction of the border wall at Organ Pipe, which is a biosphere reserve located in southern Arizona, has produced deep damage to the desert ecology. In what concerns the saguaros, even though they are protected by the Native Plant Protection Act and are sacred beings to the Tohono O'odham Nation, several have been bulldozed, many of which were more than 100 years old and "older than the border itself" (Adler). Because of the environmental and cultural harm that it creates, the Tohono O'odham have fervently rejected the border wall. In 2017, they released a video titled "There is no O'odham Word for Wall," and a few years later, in 2020, they denounced the border wall construction as a desecration⁷.

Chickasaw Nation citizen and English professor Jodi Byrd states: "there is a long line of continuity between the past and the present that has not been disrupted despite the fact that the stories we tell may or may not acknowledge that continuity" (xiv). In the context of the US-Mexico border demarcation, it is possible to identify at least one example of said line. Historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz asserts: "the Apache resistance was not a military threat to the United States but rather a symbol of resistance and freedom. Herein lies the essence of counterinsurgency colonialist warfare: no resistance can be tolerated" (150). Through the dissolution of the Chiricahua resistance, the nation-state fulfilled its overwhelming effort to dominate the Apaches and to take full possession of the Indigenous territory. This was achieved through the forced removal of their land. Comparably, following this genealogy of violence, through the construction of the border wall, the same state has removed material symbols of the ancestral ties between the Tohono O'odham and the desert -and thus of their claim to their homeland-. In this case, the symbols are not just saguaros but also ancient burial sites that were devastated through warlike practices such as the detonation of explosives.⁸

The combination between the inventory of echoes and the constant repetition of the word *saguaro* work as a reminder of the vulnerability of the desert ecosystem. Whereas through ecoacoustics the father's project can identify biodiversity loss, it is through the sonorous incorporation of the sacred cacti that the story underscores the damage produced by border control strategies. The vio-

lence behind these strategies also shows how even though echoes can destabilize the temporal linearity—at the same time and precisely because of said destabilization—the narrative integrates a line of continuing forms of colonialism. In dialogue with the Chiricahua resistance, the audible presence of saguaros serves as a channel to identify ongoing colonial practices that deprive Indigenous people of "home, land, and sovereignty" (Byrd xxxiii) in an unrelenting cycle that includes past and current temporalities.

The Children

After meeting Manuela, the mother of two undocumented girls who were last seen in New Mexico, from where they were going to be sent to a detention center in Arizona, the wife finds a motive to accompany her husband from New York to the southwestern state. Besides wanting to find the girls, the wife wants to create a radio documentary addressing "the children's crisis at the border" (Luiselli 123). This project is framed by the waves of migrant children that have arrived at the Mexico-United States limit in the last years. In 2014, nearly 70 000 minors were apprehended at the border,⁹ and according to the Migration Policy Institute, in the 2018-2019 period, the number of migrant children exceeded the numbers seen in 2014. Many of them were traversing the desert without any family members. In Luiselli's novel, the narrator describes this mass migration as follows:

More than eighty thousand undocumented children from Mexico and the Northern Triangle, but mostly from the latter, had been detained at the US southern border in just the previous six or seven months. All those children were fleeing circumstances of unspeakable abuse and systematic violence. (19)

In 2014, refugee children's cases were made a priority for the immigration courts, an action that resulted in the prompt deportation of most of those kids. Then, between 2018 and 2019, thousands of children were detained in chain-link cages, many of them located in detention centers in the desert. This is the context surrounding the story of Manuela's missing daughters, and therefore the social and political frame for the wife's documentary project. To carry out this project, the wife seeks to gather information from oral sources. It is in a gas station where she overhears that a group of children are about to be deported.

Trying to find more information about the imminent deportation, the wife turns to the radio, where an immigration lawyer is being interviewed. After contacting the lawyer, the wife learns that the kids will be deported from an airport that is not too far from where the family is located. From this point, the protagonists focus on getting to the airport before the removal takes place. Because the main components to collect and generate information

are voices propagated by airwaves, sounds are once again situated as central elements for developing the story. In this way, whereas the nonhuman elements of the desert are the main source of information for the husband, the radio is situated as the main source of information for the wife's project, "we drive onward, southwest-bound, and listen to the news on the radio, news about all the children traveling north" (47). After hearing news with updates on the refugee children, the wife often records memos to catalog what she learns.

Considering that the novel is situated in the present time and that the protagonists have access to the Internet, it might seem strange that their most important source of information is the radio. Regarding this communication practice, Chicana/o studies scholar Dolores Casillas states: "radio is generally seen as an archaic medium: communication scholars often point to its use in post-socialist or developing countries but do not often address its role within immigrant or communities of color" (Kindle). Casillas refers to Spanish-language radio in the United States, and based on what the wife describes, the family is also listening to this type of radio: "How did you travel to the United States? The reporter asks. His voice calm and composed, the boy replies in Spanish, saying that he came in the Bestia. I translate his response to my husband" (73). Additionally, as Casillas asserts, Spanish radio programs tend to be dominated by immigration topics and often "rally in solidarity" with immigrants' civil rights.

However, even if not all the programming is in Spanish, the reason the wife chooses the radio as the main method to gather information might have to do with its immediacy. For Casillas, immediacy is a characteristic unique to the radio, which allows it to broadcast "live impulsive notices, with little to no trace of their existence." Since the wife is aware of the urgency of gathering information, particularly when she is trying to obtain the airport's location, this immediacy could be the reason she uses the radio as the primary source for her project.

Because the wife plays local radio stations while the entire family is in the car, she is not the only one listening to the reports about refugee children. Throughout the road trip, the siblings are learning about the waves of kids arriving at the border and about the Chiricahuas. At one point, they contend: "What if Geronimo had never surrendered to the white-eyes? –What if he'd won that war? –Then the lost children would be the rulers of Apacheria!" (75). This dynamic exchange shows how, in words of Gaëlle Le Calvez, "El viaje delata el hondo aburrimiento de los adultos -o su incapacidad para conectarse- en contraste con el juego y la vitalidad de una infancia protegida, a punto de ser vulnerada" (65-66). Whereas the adults grapple with their marriage, the children try to make sense of different realities with their imagination.

Still centered on a sonorous dimension but with an embodied component, the episodes that Luiselli considers "reenactments," make up another example through which the novel addresses absence, loss, and refiguration. Thinking about how to approach the

past, the narrator says: "Maybe any understanding, especially historical understanding, requires some kind of reenactment of the past, in its small, outward-branching, and often terrifying possibilities" (155-156). The reenactments are often performed by the children, who dramatize the stories they hear. In the aforementioned example, aware that Geronimo fought in the past, the boy and the girl imagine a different ending to his story, which in their imagination, would affect the story of the refugee children in the present time. Even though the siblings can differentiate between both temporalities, at the same time, because of the sense of immediacy that the radio produces, they articulate an instant solution for the challenges endured by the child refugees.

Two elements facilitate this conflation. Sound studies scholars Mark Grimshaw et al argue that "imagination is typically discussed in terms of image, as is clear from the root of the word itself" (2) and that sonic imagination is often disregarded. Because the siblings can articulate and reimagine both realities based on what they hear, they are constantly displaying and privileging sonic imagination. Therefore, sounds are the starting point for the imaginative conflation process. The other element is the arid biome. Since what the children hear takes place in the desert lands, it is easy for them to situate their imaginative articulations in the same space.

Another reenactment occurs when the siblings imagine and perform what it would be like to be lost in the desert: "The boy says they're both thirsty, lost and walking in the endless desert, says they're both so thirsty and so hungry it feels like hunger is ripping them apart, eating them from the inside, says that hardship and hopelessness are now overtaking them" (Luiselli 155). While up until this point no character had described the excruciating process of traversing the desert, for the kids, it is enough to know that the desert is the entity being traversed by those they call "the lost children" to imagine the harrowing experiences they endure.

Because the siblings are reenacting this narrative from a privileged position, the wife finds it problematic and frivolous. This critique mirrors the instances in which she reflects on the ethical issues behind her project. For example, thinking about the impact of her project, she states: "it doesn't seem right to turn those children, their lives, into material for media consumption" (96). To that, she adds: "And why would I even think that I can or should make art with someone else's suffering? [...] No one decides to not go to work and start a hunger strike after listening to the radio in the morning" (96). Although this premise is shared in the context of *Lost Children Archive's* fictional world, they reproduce the concerns of Luiselli about the ethical implications of her work.

Different from what the author does in *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017), a chronicle where she includes parts of migrant children's testimonies, in the novel, Luiselli eludes direct representations. Whereas *Tell Me How It Ends* reproduces the voices of several kids dealing with trauma and the threat of deportation, in the novel, she is addressing the ones who cannot be found: "I am still not sure how I'll do it, but the story I need to tell is the one of the children

[...] whose voices can no longer be heard because they are, possibly forever, lost. Perhaps, like my husband, I am also chasing ghosts and echoes" (145). In an interview with Lauren Leblanc, the author states: "[the story of migrant children] is not my story to tell" (44), which is part of the reason she uses fiction not as a way of solving the issues that are being addressed or of answering the questions that are being asked, "but [of] at least understanding how to phrase those questions" (45). Perhaps this is why, instead of directly narrating the journey that many children take to get to the border or across the desert, the author references it through narrative echoes.

In the words of Chicana author Stephanie Elizondo Griest, the narrative techniques that Luiselli uses to address the stories of the refugee children turn into "reverberations of their small but brave footsteps." These reverberations appear in various forms, which include the radio transmissions, the girl and the boy's reenactments, and an invented Italian novel titled "Elegies for Lost Children," which narrates the crusade of a group of children traveling alone through indeterminate lands. Written by fictional author Ella Camposanto and loosely based on the 1212 Children's Crusade (Luiselli 138), the novel tells the story of a group of children facing challenges strikingly similar to those faced by many migrant children:

Mouths open to the sky, they sleep. Boys, girls: lips chapped, cheeks cracked, for the wind whips day and night. They occupy the entire space there, stiff but warm, lined up like new corpses along the metal roof of the train gondola. From behind the rim of his blue cap, the man in charge counts them -six children; seven minus one. The train advances slowly along the racks parallel to an iron wall. Beyond, on both sides of the wall, the desert stretches out, identical. (142)

The first Elegy portrays the desert as a material and menacing presence waiting for the arrival of the children. The fictional novel does not need to describe the characteristics of this border biome to convey the danger it represents. After learning about its presence and attending to the context of the story, the reader can sense the precarious scenario that the children are about to encounter. Thus, "Elegies for the Lost Children" serves as a channel that presents more intense echoes of the desert. Likewise, the portrayal of the lost children from the Elegies along with the news that the family hears about the refugee children, produce intense reverberations of the real stories located behind them:

They travel, alone, on trains and on foot. They travel without their fathers, without their mothers, without their suitcases, without passports. Always without maps. They have to cross national borders, rivers, deserts, horrors. And those who finally arrive are placed in limbo, are told to wait. (47)

This quote is one of many examples where the narrative underscores the coexistence of divergent childhood experiences that arise from profound social and economic disparities. In the safety of their car, the wife's children hear the Elegies and listen to the news about refugee children. Because of this, one of the main conflicts of the narrator consists of determining how to explain the stories of the refugee children to the siblings. For example, during the radio interview with the boy who is narrating his journey in the Bestia, he mentions his little brother, who fell off the train and did not make it to the border. Just as the boy starts sharing the details behind the tragedy, the wife turns off the radio to prevent the siblings from hearing about it. In another instance, the girl asks her mom to explain the meaning of the word "refugee." In an interior monologue, the narrator describes refugees as people who have already arrived at their destination but remain trapped in the custody of the immigration system. Because of this, she wants to say that "a child refugee is someone who waits." However, she tells her daughter: "a refugee is someone who needs to find a new home" (48). These examples accentuate the wife's conflict to rationalize the suffering of other children to explain it to her own, and also the impossibility of that endeavor.

When the family finally gets to the airport, it is too late. The refugee children are boarding the plane. As soon as they see them, the wife contends: "they'll be removed, relocated, erased, because there's no place for them in this vast empty country" (182). Whereas the girl is asleep, once again confronted with the realization that she cannot hide or explain the extent of what is happening to the boy, the wife asks him to be the one to describe that moment. The boy narrates: "The spaceship is moving toward the runway [...] The astronauts are inside the ship now" (184). Knowing that it would be impossible to rationalize that deportation, the boy uses his imagination. However, as the wife explains, "he'd listened to things, looked at them -really looked, focused, pondered-" (185), and hence he is aware of the reality that lingers behind his story. This awareness changes the overall articulation of the last part of the story.

The previous scene also underscores how, besides the boy and the girl, the only other children that form part of the family's narrative dimension are absent or become absent. These are Manuela's daughters, the boy on the radio, and the group of refugee children from the airport. Mirroring the challenges faced by the characters, the author highlights the impossibility of narrating the suffering and hardship of the children she is addressing. Because of this, they appear through the reverberations of their stories, which take the form of radio waves, acoustic reenactments, the Elegies, and the sound and image of the airplane vanishing in the air. Since these reverberations refer to the unspeakable anguish endured by refugee children, in the words of Elizondo Griest, their stories turn into "haunting[s] that will forever echo in our bones." In the novel, these hauntings become the main driving force for the siblings' actions during the last part of the novel and the reason the desert gets fully

incorporated into the story through both its acoustic and material presence.

An Arid Weapon

After seeing the refugee children leave on the airplane, the boy decides to help find Manuela's daughters. At this point, the narrative voice shifts from the wife to the boy. The temporality is also different. The boy is telling the story in retrospective because he is recording his voice to share it with his sister when she is older. Carrying with them a few objects and the *Elegies*, the siblings leave their parents' side and walk towards the desert:

And south into the heart of light we walked [...] close together and quiet, like the lost children walked somewhere, too. Under the same sun maybe, though I kept feeling all the time that we were walking on the sun's surface and not under it, and I asked you, don't you feel like we are walking on the sun. (Luiselli 319)

That last sentence replicates the boy's words during their reenactment in the car where he stated: "We're walking in the desert and it's like we're walking on the sun and not under it" (156). Even though at that point the siblings had not experienced the effects of the desert on their bodies, its echoes, which they received via airwaves and speech, led them to create a vivid, immediate, intimate, and even painful response to the thought of the biome. Hence, without having been there, during the reenactment in the car the siblings produced an accurate physical and affective register of the desert. The arid biome emerges as an acoustic specter that adheres to the intellect and physical imagination of the children.

Writing about haunted landscapes, María del Pilar Blanco states: "haunting can take many forms: Alongside apparitions of supernatural shapes or beings that otherwise would be imperceptible, it can also mean the disquieting experience of sensing a collision of temporalities or spaces -an experience that is nevertheless riddled with doubt and uncertainty" (1). Following this understanding, the initial manifestations of the desert, which appear through oral stories, the radio, and the reenactments, produce an acoustic collision between the landscape and the siblings' imagination, which destabilizes their present and causes pain and confusion. However, when they finish their reenactments, turn off the radio, or when the projects of the parents are paused, not the acoustic but the material presence of the desert continues to loom over the lost children, as it is imagined in the *Elegies*:

They had walked, and swam, and hidden, and run. They had boarded trains and spent nights sleepless atop gondolas, looking up at the barren, godless sky. The trains, like beasts, drilled and scratched their way across jungles, across cities, across places difficult to name. Them,

aboard this last train, they had come to this desert, where the incandescent light bent the sky into a full arch, and time had also bent back on itself. Time, in the desert, was an ongoing present tense. (312)

Whereas up until before the family arrived at the airport, the danger associated with the desert had been transmitted through its acoustic shadow, when the siblings start their journey, said manifestation changes. Lost in the arid land, the boy and his sister endure some of the same precarity experienced by the lost children they seek. However, they are participating in another reenactment, one that is both verbal and physical. While it is clear that their journey does not compare to the one undertaken by refugee children, what this part of the narrative accomplishes is that it fully draws attention to the weaponization of the biome.

Jason de Leon contends: "in the Arizona desert nonhumans are major players without which [the] system of boundary enforcement could not exist" (61). This tactic responds to the Prevention Through Deterrence scheme, which was implemented in the 90s to close all urban access to the passage of undocumented migrants. Because of this, the anthropologist sustains: "it is obvious that Border Patrol expected the desert to inflict harm on migrants" (61). Dehydration, hypothermia, hyperthermia, sunstroke, and extreme exhaustion are among the deadly effects of the desert on the human body.³⁰ Given said effects, it is possible to draw clear parallels between the desert's weaponization against migrants and the unequal attacks by the Mexican and US armies against the Chiricahua Apaches: "The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo [...] stipulated that both parties were required to fight the "savage" Apaches" (Dunbar-Ortiz 150). The tremendous amount of force used to remove the Chiricahuas from their ancestral land in the southwest is different but parallel to the powerful use of the desert against migrants. In both scenarios, a brutal amount of force is implemented to remove, annihilate, and erase unwanted people.

Part of the desert's brutality is described by the boy: "the heat always getting heavier and the sun on our foreheads stinging us like a thousand yellow bees" (Luiselli 325). This is one example through which the boy articulates some of the desert's excruciating effects. Along with the reenactments and the *Elegies*, another instance by which the novel addresses the dire effects of the desert's weaponization is a folder with "dozens of 'Migrant Mortality Reports' printed from online search engines that locate the missing, which [list] the bodies found on those deserts, the possible cause of death, and their exact location" (23-24). Right before the siblings' departure, the novel incorporates a set of those reports, which include archival information about migrants whose ages ranged from 0 to 15 years old. Regarding the archival process, the wife asserts: "you whisper intuitions and thoughts into the emptiness, hoping to hear something back. And sometimes, just sometimes, an echo does indeed return, a real reverberation of something" (42). The reports operate as a medium to denounce the articulation of the desert as a lethal

weapon, and as a channel to keep present the reverberations of the stories they attempt to document.

Jason de Leon contends that documenting migrant mortality rates is extremely difficult because the desert is inhabited by scavengers that often participate in the erasure of the human remains (74). Concerning this, the boy recounts: "around us we heard too many sounds, strange sounds [...] like animals moving around us [...] and I wondered if we were hearing the sound of the dead in the desert, all the bones there" (Luiselli 324). This quote unveils the significance of the fictional author's last name. Camposanto translates to "cemetery," a characteristic that draws further attention to the desert's role in border-control strategies.

During his journey through the desert, the boy reads the stories of the lost children while he and his sister are also experiencing fear and uncertainty. This collation leads to the overlap of the fictional worlds: "we looked up at the thick clouds getting ready to burst into rain, and at the eagles above us, which are now flying in a perfect circle [...] under those clouds, and the four children see them too" (329). Towards the end, the siblings are unable to find the missing girls, and instead, when the fictional worlds collide, they find the lost children of the Elegies. While at the beginning of the novel-within-the-novel there were seven kids, when the boy and the girl found them, only four of them were left.

The collision of these worlds can be interpreted in various ways. For instance, by appearing in two narrative dimensions, the Elegies' survivors resist confinement, challenge narrow understandings, and rebel against established forms. However, the material refiguration of the lost children also underscores both the weaponization of the desert and the extent of the disconnection between the lived experiences that have stumbled upon each other. After spending one night together, the lost children part ways with the siblings: "where are the other four children I asked, and you said they had left, they'd left right before sunrise" (336). Whereas the boy and the girl are found by their parents, the refugee children leave and get lost again.

The Archives

Trying to capture part of the soundscape that surrounded the last of the Apache Wars, the inventory of echoes acquires an environmental angle. The husband wanted to record sounds produced by the desert ecology, and as the boy asserts, often the only sounds he found were those made by cars. That is one example of how the inventory of echoes unveils biodiversity loss. However, apart from the inventory of echoes, there are other moments at which the novel adopts environmental concerns. For instance, during the road trip, the wife states: "[we see] a landscape scarred by decades or maybe centuries of systematic agricultural aggression: fields sectioned into quadrangular grids, gang-raped by heavy machinery, bloated with modified seeds and injected with pesticides" (177). Another example of how the novel engages with environmental-based interests is

the inclusion of the ancient saguaros' name, which draws attention to the ecological life of the desert. Furthermore, the acoustic incorporation of the saguaros acts as a reminder of how the entanglement between the biome and a border demarcation has devastated central parts of the desert ecosystem.

The acoustic depiction of saguaros also gives prominence to the fight of the Tohono O'odham Nation against the wall,²¹ a reference that acquires a profound meaning when it is put into dialogue with the husband's project, which is focused on the Chiricahua Apache resistance.

Through these accounts, the novel incorporates what American Studies professor Jennifer Nez Denetdale (Diné) describes as "histories of violence [...] that have everything to do with the United States as a settler nation whose thirst for Indigenous lands and resources remains unabated" (112). In addition, the novel brings attention to processes of settler colonialism that have marked the Desert Southwest in particular, and the entire region at large: "Arizona, New Mexico, Sonora, Chihuahua [are] all beautiful names, but also names to name a past of injustice, genocide, exodus, war, and blood" (232). In the context of the Mexico-US borderlands, through sonorous references, the narrative highlights the continuation of past and present acts of violence committed against Native Americans and Native lands.

Sound is also central to the wife's project. Elements such as the radio news, oral histories, and the Elegies, which are often read out loud, generate an aural specter that carries echoes of the desert's weaponization. At the center of this project are the stories of refugee children. Although the sound documentary is seemingly detached from the inventory of echoes, they are strongly interrelated. As discussed above, both underscore different forms of dispossession and practices of colonialism. Moreover, the stories of the child refugees resonate with some of the experiences of Chiricahua Apache children. Similar to the detention of refugee kids, as Fort Sill Apache Tribal Chairman Jeff Haozous recalls, Chiricahua Apache children were also imprisoned and separated from their families²². This connection highlights the existence of a long-standing genealogy of children's incarceration and family separation.

The main method through which the narrative foregrounds the multitemporal and complex existence of the southwestern desert is sound. It is through the representations of sounds that the novel underscores the vitality of desert ecology, its vulnerabilities, and its participation in border-control schemes. In the narrative, said characteristics situate the desert as a border biome. Beyond this characterization, *Lost Children Archive* emphasizes that the territory upon which the Mexico-US border is built is Native land. Featuring echoes and acoustic waves, the narrative exposes various mechanisms of ongoing colonization, deterrence, and dispossession that revolve around the arid biome. Even though the archives created by the sound projects cannot recuperate what has been lost, destroyed, or obliterated, they defy silence and erasure by tracing the reverberating echoes of distant and immediate realities.

NOTES

¹The Desert Southwest includes parts of Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas, and it is composed of the Sonoran, Chihuahuan, and Mojave deserts. In addition, Nevada, the Great Basin, and the Colorado Plateau are sometimes considered part of it. Luiselli's novel revolves around the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts.

²For instance, in Dennis Zhou's "Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*," and in Powell's Picks Spotlight.

³Such as the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo between Mexico and the US, and the Selva El Petén between Mexico and Guatemala.

⁴Which are located between the Chihuahuan and the Sonoran deserts.

⁵Environmental activist Laiken Jordahl has followed closely the damage produced by the border wall.

⁶Besides the Tohono O'odham Nation, another tribe that has opposed the 2020 border wall construction is the Kumeyaay.

⁷As reported by Simone Romero for *The New York Times*.

⁸This was reported by several journalists, including Ryan Devereaux for *The Intercept*.

⁹This information was reported by Dara Lind in *Vox*.

¹⁰According to the Colibrí Center for Human Rights, since the late 90s more than 7500 people have perished in their attempt to cross the Mexico-US border, and over 4000 have been reported missing.

¹¹Haozous mentions that the Chiricahua children were sent to the Carlisle school in Pennsylvania, where they "were subjected to intense assimilation and indoctrination." The author recalls that in that school, many of the children got gravely ill and lost their lives.

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