Beyond Representation
Migrant Children Lost in the Violence of the Borderlands

Roger Bromley

This article begins with an examination of the increasing border enforcement and militarization of the US/Mexico border in recent years. This has led to the detention of thousands of migrants from, mainly, countries of the Northern Triangle. These migrations have been prompted by poverty, unemployment, gang wars, and environmental disasters. Among these migrants there has been a growing number of unaccompanied minors fleeing from exploitation and other dangers. A significant number of these children are sent to various states, where they wait, sometimes for years, for their asylum case to be heard. Others go missing. The main focus of the article is on these unaccompanied children, those who end up in immigration courts and those who are missing. Two texts by Valeria Luiselli are the subjects of analysis – one a non-fiction essay – *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017) – which is concerned with those children seeking asylum in the New York Immigration court; the other is a novel – *Lost Children Archive* (2019) which takes as its focus those children who are lost. Framed by a family story, both texts, in their different ways, treat the trauma of separation suffered by the children, in their countries of origin, on the perilous journey through Mexico, and in the United States. Common to both texts is the writer's struggle to find a language and form to express the unimaginable trauma suffered by these children. Taking its cue from Blanchot's *The Writing of Disaster* (1980), the analysis of both texts centres on the impossibility of writing about the experience of those "without language" but, nevertheless, having to settle for forms of approximation.

Keywords
Borders; Children; Representation; Asylum; Families.

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Introduction

> Every sphere of life has been penetrated by capital and subject to quantification. In this context, borders have become nothing other than the violence underlying our world's order, a war against mobility that is filling Europe with dead bodies and migrant camps (Mbembe 2019).

What Mbembe says about Europe and its war against mobility is no less true of the United States whose border with Mexico, since 1994 and more particularly in the past four years, has become a site of violence and the loss of life. These deaths are rarely the result of random accidents but because the US government has made laws regarding the mobility of people that consign certain groups of people to the category of "illegal". As a consequence, for people driven by drug wars, gang violence, failed harvests, environmental disasters and poverty to flee Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala (the so-called Northern Triangle), the border zone has become «a physical and political location where an individual's rights and protections under law can be stripped away» (De Leon 2015, 27).

The militarization of the US/Mexico border began in the 1990s. Of the 2,000 miles of territory stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico, 750 miles are currently "secured" by fences, barbed wire and sections of wall. Former President Trump, preoccupied with building an impenetrable wall to cover the whole border, declared the issue a "state of emergency" and attempted to raise millions of dollars for "his" wall. Figures vary but there were, approximately, 350 million legal crossings of the border each year, plus several million "illegal" crossings. The discourses around the border speak of keeping out drug cartels, people smugglers, and "illegal" migrants but the majority of those who cross without documents are those in flight from gang violence and poverty in Central America and/or are in search of reunification with families they are separated from. Threatening to cut off all aid to these countries – as

Trump did while describing them as the three Mexican countries (in April 2019) – was only likely to increase the volume of those seeking to emigrate, as has proved to be the case (see below).

Border enforcement and militarization has meant the employment of 16,000 border patrol agents in addition to the escalating costs of surveillance technologies. It was estimated that in 2019 more than $20 million were spent on border securitization and the figure has grown since then. Faced with the fact that 11 million undocumented migrants were living in the USA (2.5 million of them children), Trump pledged to deport them all and his rhetoric helped to develop a catch-all xenophobia, fear and anxiety, still very much apparent in the 2020 election and the 6 January (2021) attack on the Capitol. Early into Trump's presidency prototypes of his projected wall were constructed and displayed. As has often been said, this wall, like comparable others, has a performative function, a symbolic staging, or manifestation, of an exclusionary mentality. They are spectacles designed to demonstrate in physical form an ideological role of national sovereignty in the face of globalization and the perceived erosion of the nation-state. The militarization of the border – calculated to cost $60 billion over the next 25 years – is driving undocumented migrants eastwards and away from cities, so much so that is reckoned that 50% of all crossings now take place in the inhospitable terrain of Arizona where annual death rates are officially estimated to be 1500, a figure which is claimed, unofficially, to be a gross under-estimation.

It was estimated that, if then-current trends were to continue, one percent of the entire population of Guatemala and Honduras may be detained at the US/Mexico border in the fiscal year 2019/20. Hostile politicians see these people as drug carriers and criminals, whereas others realize they are driven from their homes by violence and poverty. What has been less commented upon, until recently, is that climate change has been a significant factor in producing the poverty and deep insecurity pushing people north. The World Bank has calculated that climate change could bring about the migration of at least 1.5 million from Central America and Mexico in the next 30 years, particularly from those areas – the so-called "dry corridor" – heavily

dependent on agriculture faced by droughts, failed harvests and global warming. It is widely acknowledged that it is in sub-Saharan Africa where the destabilizing effects of climate change are most visible and painful but it is now increasingly apparent that it is one of the major drivers behind forced migration throughout the global South.

In addition to outlining the current state of an ever-changing and volatile political crisis on the US/Mexico border, this article will examine two texts which deal with the crossing of the border, with a particular emphasis on the effect of detention, violence and the threat of deportation on unaccompanied minors (children under 18 years of age), thousands of whom attempt to cross the border each year (18, 723 arrivals at the border in March, 2021)[1]. Many of these children and young people are robbed, assaulted and raped, and even killed in the course of increasingly perilous journeys. As a result, the lives of those who do survive cannot be readily understood or represented. The latter part of this article will focus on this question of "unrepresentability", the ways in which these stories will not yield readily to a narrative order, and the gaps between language and not language, writing and not writing. The scandal of family separation (formally ended as a policy by Trump in 2018, but still continuing in some ways), the detention of unaccompanied minors, and the inhumanity of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement, set up in 2003) all featured in news headlines during the Trump administration. Although Biden is attempting to resolve some of these issues, the scale of the problem means it is too early to assess the effectiveness of these efforts. What the texts selected for analysis attempt to do is construct a series of representations which contribute towards an understanding of the ways in which young people navigate the precarious journey across borders and the US legal system. Forced into mobility/flight by the desperate situation in their countries of origin, the children then experience the constraints of arrested mobility once apprehended at the border – the forced immobility of detention, a labyrinthine immigration system, and months, sometimes years, of waiting to be "processed". This immobility took/takes many forms but includes

[1] For information about how child migrants are processed, see "What Happens When a Child Arrives at the Border?" https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/what-happens-when-a-child-arrives-at-the-u-s-border

waiting in Border Patrol stations, ICE detention centres, subcontracted facilities and jails, foster homes, and proceedings in state and federal courts. All of this can be, and is, quantified, in statistical form but what the texts try to do is give a subjective, narrative shape and order to these experiences, however resistant they might be to this. In answer to the question by a child in Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* (henceforth *LCA*), as to what is a refugee, the narrator answers: «A child refugee is someone who waits» (2019, 48). This waiting is not only the experience of the unaccompanied children but of refugees waiting at borders and detained in centres and camps in many parts of the world[2].

At a time of displacement in many parts of the world, this article will focus on the particular displacement generated by the militarization and criminalization of the USA/Mexico border, a border which, as many have said, penetrates deep into the sovereign territory of Mexico and even extends to some of its borders with central American territories. Each year many thousands of people travel backwards and forwards across the USA/Mexico and have done so for several decades. However, in the last thirty years, in particular since the early 1990s, this crossing has become increasingly difficult and dangerous as immigration has come to be seen, and is actively constructed, as a threat to the security of the USA. As Doreen Massey suggested, «place matters, and performances are most effective when they occur in particular symbolic locations» (quoted in Jones 2016, 175). The wall, or fence, on the USA/Mexico border is one such symbolic location and, in terms developed by Reece Jones, the barrier is a site for four performative acts, for the performance of separation, of territorial control, of identity, and of security: to deter and exclude.

In this article, the emphasis will be on the performance of "separation", of families from each other, of children from parents, and, above all, United States citizens from undocumented immigrants ("Megals", aliens). I shall look at the "architecture" of the border, its ever-increasing terrain, the technology of governance

[2] My recent book, *Narratives of Forced Mobility and Displacement in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (2021) goes into detail on the ways in which refugees and migrants are made to wait at borders, in detention centres, and in asylum reception buildings.

and surveillance operated by the Border Patrol, the culture (practices) of apprehension and deportation, the impact upon lives of unaccompanied children and young people, and the "archaeology" of death and disappearance. Apart from family reunion, the major "pull" factor for most people is the need for employment which fulfills the need in the USA for cheap labour. In earlier times, mobility was relatively easy but, increasingly, it is now characterized by immobility in the form of waiting to accumulate resources to meet the costs of "smugglers" (coyotes), slow and perilous journeys, periods of inactivity waiting to board a freight train, delays at the border if apprehended, and the reverse mobility of exclusion and deportation. Added to this is time spent waiting in migration centres in Mexico and/or in detention centres in the USA[3].

Later in this article, I will examine two texts which detail the fear and danger experienced by children and adults on "the migrant trail" – the risks of kidnap, rape, physical violence, dehydration, starvation and death – but, here, I will consider some of the recent figures which chart migration from the Northern Triangle – Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador – and Mexico itself. Apart from the physical dangers of migration, the other major risk is that of deportation from the US and Mexico. The fact that Mexico deports more people back to the Northern Triangle than does the US is a reflection of the pressure placed on Mexico by the US, mainly in the economic sphere – namely, the threat of a 5% tariff imposition on all goods in the USA from Mexico. From 2004 to 2018, Mexico deported 1.7 million Central Americans back to the Northern Triangle countries compared with 1.1 million deported by the US. The same was true of the period 2014 – 2018, the year in which Mexico deported nearly all of its Central American immigrants. In the period 2004 – 2018, Mexico deported 94% of its border apprehensions, while the US deported 1.1 million Central Americans of the 1.7 million apprehended (65%)[4].

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[3] *Facts and Figures: Deportations of Unaccompanied Migrant Children by the USA and Mexico* https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/06/facts-figures-deportations-children-usa-mexico.

[4] These figures are taken from the Pew Research Center, https://pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/12/migrant-apprehensions-and-deportations-increase-in-mexico-but-remain-below-recent-highs/.

Unemployment, climate change, poverty, abuse and gang violence drive those desperate enough to make the 5,000-kilometre journey to the US border. En route they face multiple hazards and upon arrival they experience the immobility mentioned earlier – waiting in shelters or *ad hoc* camps in border cities, the sites of drug wars and violence. One additional hazard is metering, the US government's limit on the numbers who can apply for asylum in one day. Of the 49,000 unaccompanied children detained at the US border in 2018, most were taken into foster care in Mexico or deported. Those permitted to make an asylum claim had an average waiting time of 12 weeks. Valeria Luiselli, in her "essay in forty questions", *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017, henceforth *TMHIE*), charts the bureaucratic nightmare suffered by the relatively few who do make it through to an asylum claim. In the Introduction to the book, Jon Lee Anderson says: «The children's stories are always shuffled, stuttered, always shattered beyond the repair of a narrative order. The problem with trying to tell their story is that it has no beginning, no middle, and no end» (2017, 2). In Luiselli's novel, *Lost Children Archive* (2019), she takes this phrase «beyond the repair of a narrative order» and uses it as a metaphor for the structure of the novel as a whole, a text haunted by the loss, or disappearance, of unaccompanied minors, a disaster, or trauma which defies the possibility of writing, of finding a language adequate to describe the "unscribable", beyond words.

As of November, 2019, it was calculated that undocumented migrants living in the US range from 10.5 million to 12 million, approximately 3.2% to 3.6% of the population. This has become a major source of political dispute since 2016. The figures are seen as an "undercount" mainly because of the obvious difficulty of determining who is, or isn't, undocumented. Despite protestations to the contrary, the figures show a decline and a considerable slowing down in the rate of annual increases, from the peak of 470,000 between 2000 and 2007, to 70,000 from 2010 to 2015. 6.4 million come, not surprisingly, from Mexico and Central America (approximately 60%). In terms of child migrants, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) was introduced by President Obama and it currently covers 800,000 undocumented migrants who arrived in the US before their 16th birthday and are

allowed to work while action on their immigration status is deferred for a renewable two-year period. Trump put a stop to any further applications, so the figure of 690,000 in the current programme will not change. As is well known, Trump regarded the border as unsecured, had made it a crime to cross the border without authorization, and considered all immigrants and refugees as either violent criminals or terrorists.

There seemed to be a "surge" of unauthorized migration into the US, with 132,887 migrants crossing the border "illegally" in May 2019. The reasons are not hard to find, with the countries of the Northern Triangle experiencing incomparable levels of poverty, depletion of agricultural land through lack of rain, and increasing gang violence. Drought in 2015 affected more than a million farmers in the Northern Triangle, plus Nicaragua, with a vast loss of crops and corn. With category 6 hurricanes predicted, temperatures rising above 50°C, and agricultural areas devastated, it is not surprising that, experts calculate, that close to 1% of the population of Guatemala and Honduras will attempt to immigrate to the US in 2019[5] (the figures I am using are taken mainly from the period covered by Luiselli's two texts).

In earlier years of the century, higher "undocumented" figures were recorded than today but, one significant difference, is the current demographic. Where once-unauthorized migrants were mostly male, today there are many more families and unaccompanied children. In the fiscal year of 2019, in the first eight months nearly 390,000 children and parents were apprehended at the border, with almost 96,000 unaccompanied children and family members apprehended in one month – May. This figure alone is close to the annual number of unauthorized migrant children attempting to cross in the peak years of the early part of this century. Claiming asylum is exceedingly difficult as Luiselli (2017) shows, with success rates as low as 10 or 15% for people from Northern Triangle countries.

The first half of 2019 saw a sharp rise in the number of families and children entering the US, which was brought about by the increase of "express route" buses

[5] For further details on the environmental situation in the Northern Triangle, see Todd Miller, *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration, and Homeland Security* (2017).

which can travel through Mexico in five or six days, thus avoiding the dangerous and exhausting journey on foot or by freight train, a growing sophistication in smuggling practices (a mode of entry used by the majority of immigrants), and the provision of temporary "humanitarian visas" to stay for 90 days in Mexico, made available by the government. This seems to have eased the crossing process for some, but most still travel on the extremely dangerous train, known as *La Bestia*. The perilous nature of this journey is shown graphically in the film, *Sin Nombre* (2009). As of June 2019, the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) claimed to have 19,000 people in custody, with gross overcrowding of facilities, and the virtual immobilising of people and vehicles at entry points with hours-long delays. As a consequence, many decide to attempt to cross "illegally" and are pushed out to remote areas of the desert which lead to disappearances, long-term injuries and deaths – documented in great, and tragic, detail by Jason de Leon (2015).

Perilous Journeys

In the fiscal year ending in September, 2019, 76,020 unaccompanied minors, most from the Northern Triangle countries, were apprehended by American immigration authorities, the highest ever recorded trying to cross the southwest border, an increase of more than 50% over the previous fiscal year. In the same 2019 fiscal year, the Mexico immigration enforcement agencies detained 40,500 unaccompanied, under age immigrants. This, of more than 115,000 apprehensions/detentions, is extraordinarily high, but what the statistics cannot reveal is the degree of trauma suffered by each individual child. The trauma begins in their country of origin in the form of hunger, poverty, domestic abuse (in some cases) and a prevailing culture of threat from gang violence, particularly directed towards the older teens, targeted as likely recruits. The more than 5,000-mile journey itself compounds the original trauma because of the need to travel on foot, sleep in inadequate and, often, dangerous places, and hitch rides on freight trains where they face the risk of kidnap, rape, gang violence, or possible mutilation or death. Those

that survive the journey through Mexico and reach the USA border, then face the trauma of waiting to be processed by immigration, waiting initially for sponsors (if they have no family in the USA), and then, if allowed to apply for asylum, the trauma of undergoing the rigorous immigration procedures, often without legal representation. Bearing in mind that 75-80% of unaccompanied minor arrivals are victims of human trafficking, then it is no surprise that these "unaccompanied alien children" (as defined by the Homeland Security Act) suffer extremes of mental ill-health. Apart from separation anxiety, loss, and, most probably, violence, the children are often placed in inhumane detention conditions. Those who do not have sponsors or are denied release to sponsors have to stay in the Office for Refugee Resettlement (ORR) custody system for the entire adjudication period which, because of pressures on immigration courts, can take up to, on average, almost two years.

Unaccompanied children have to navigate complex and adversarial immigration proceedings, often without legal counsel. In the fiscal year 2015, for example, 49% of unaccompanied children were subject to deportation, in 28% cases where they were represented, and in 77% of cases when they were without counsel, a staggering difference. All unaccompanied children should be covered by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights instruments but these seem to be honoured more in the breach than in the observance.

Apart from the statistical descriptions I have outlined, how can the trauma experienced by so many thousands of children be effectively represented without recourse to sentimentalism or exaggeration? This was the challenge posed by Valeria Luiselli in two recent works of non-fiction and fiction – *Tell Me How It Ends (*2017) and *Lost Children Archive* (2019). The latter was started before the former and was then put on hold because the author thought that the novel was developing into a polemic. The fact that she had to tackle the subject of trauma by two different literary resources (the essay and the novel) indicates an awareness of the inadequacy of language as a means of representation of that which exceeds the remit normally associated with writing. How is it possible to convince a skeptical public that most of those who attempt to cross the border are not the «criminals, drug dealers, and rapists» of

Trump's imagination, but that many of these are traumatized children fleeing from, and still living with horror: «children run and flee. They have an instinct for survival, perhaps, that allows them to endure almost anything just to make it to the other side of horror, whatever may be waiting there for them» (Luiselli, 2017, 4).

The challenge for the writer is, at one level, a formal one, how to move beyond the already known in order to develop a radical disruption of the expected or predictable, how to speak the unsayable, the unimaginable. In examining these two texts, I shall also be drawing upon Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980), which references the Shoah but through an analysis which has implications beyond this historic moment.

How, in other words, the writer asks is it possible to produce a narrative form which is beyond the repair of a narrative order? Luiselli adds:

> Numbers and maps tell stories, but the stories of deepest horror are perhaps those for which there are no numbers, no maps, no possible accountability, no words ever written or *spoken*. And perhaps the only way to grant any justice – were that even possible – is by hearing and recording those stories over and over again so that they come back, always, to haunt and shame us (2017, 29-30).

The opening of *Lost Children Archive* has the female narrator (known only as Ma) say:

> I don't know what my husband [Pa] and I will say to each of our children one day. I'm not sure which parts of our story we might each choose to pluck and edit out for them, and which ones we'll shuffle around and insert back in to produce a final version… But the children will ask, because ask is what children do. And we'll need to tell them a beginning, a middle and an end, we'll need to give them an answer, tell them a proper story (Luiselli 2019, 5).

This "proper story" is what the novel strives to produce and is linked to something in *Tell Me How It Ends* when the author's small daughter asks «what happens next?» and «Tell me how it ends» – two of the core expectations a child has of a "proper story" but which in both texts are unanswerable as incompleteness is the necessary condition of their narratives. The frame context of both books is a car journey; the writer, her husband, his son and her daughter take from New York city to Arizona, and there are a number of overlapping details and repetitions – a kind of

intertextual dialogue which addresses similar questions about the unaccompanied, or lost. Speaking of Blanchot, Jennifer Yusin says:

> To write is to engage the I in a relationship that affirms it as limited and constituted by its relationship to the other. "The language of writing" becomes a performance of the inherent failure of the I to tell the story of the disaster in the present (Yusin 2005, 140).

The limited nature of the "I", its inherent failure to tell the story of the disaster – the traumatic experience of the lost and detained children – is a feature of both texts, more particularly the novel which I shall return to. The "other" in the relationship is the children.

Working as a volunteer at the federal immigration court in New York City (from 2014 to 2015), Luiselli's role was to translate the intake questionnaire (of 40 questions) from Spanish into English for unaccompanied migrant children from Mexico and the Northern Triangle. From April, 2015 to August, 2015, 102,000 children were detained at the border, but only a small fraction of these ever reached immigration courts. Her two books on this topic most probably arose from a realization that translation is almost always an impossibility because no words can adequately represent the horrors experienced, in many cases, by the children on their 5000 km journey. Robbery, kidnapping, rape and physical injury were a common experience and it has been estimated that some 80% of women and girls who make the journey to the border have been raped. Add to this, the extreme discomfort and risk of travelling on the overcrowded freight trains from Mexico's southern Chiapas state. The two books are very different in form but they are based upon a similar theme which, as Luiselli says, needs to be recorded over and over again. Interestingly, *TMHIE* was originally called *Los Niños Perdidos* (Lost Children) in Spanish.

Tell Me How It Ends is, as I have said, an essay in forty questions, based on the questions asked of the children as part of the immigration process. Many of the questions defy simple answers. Luiselli says that her task is a simple one, that of interviewing children after the intake questionnaire, and translating their stories from Spanish to English. However, this is the point at which the simplicity of the task ends and «I hear words, spoken in the mouths of children, threaded in complex

narratives… delivered with hesitance, sometimes distrust, always with fear. I have to transform them into written words, succinct sentences, and barren terms» (Luiselli 2017, 7). This transformation defies a continuous or coherent narrative which is why both books are structured around disruptions, pauses, digressions, tangents and gaps. As well as translating the children's answers, Luiselli is trying to understand the immigration "crisis" in «its hemispheric proportions and historical roots» (ivi, 45). The early part of the text provides some of this context as the family drives through both historical and geographical spaces and times.

Something which Hannah Arendt says in *The Human Condition* is of relevance here: «A life without speech and without action… is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be human life because it is no longer lived among men» (1958, 176). Often the children are not without speech as such, but only in a language which is not that of the dominant society, or more importantly, not in a form deemed as "correct" in terms of legal discourse. Arendt goes on to say that one crucial form of response is the telling of stories, the ability to tell one's story, and to have one's story heard, constitutes "belonging" in human terms. In listening to, and translating/interpreting the stories of those fortunate enough to have legal representation, Luiselli helps to constitute a form of belonging, however rudimentary, among their new "community", a way of enabling the children, metaphorically, to re-enter "human life" and time, to staying alive, surviving. Having been detained for varying periods of time, the children are effectively held "outside the skin of language". What Luiselli did was: «I reworded, translated, interpreted» (ivi, 65).

The Impossibility of Writing

It is not only the children who are held "outside the skin of language" because the writer, herself, is, in a sense, in a similar situation. Not only does she have to find a language to represent the children in her role as translator, she also has the primary (or is it secondary) task of finding a narrative arc (arch) to give representational form to the framing essay which has to select, and distil, from a patchwork of experiences

and words, something resembling coherence. Even the "primary" narrative cannot fully contain what she wishes to communicate, hence the eight brief postscripts (a kind of after writing, or beyond writing perhaps) in which she summarizes events beyond the primary framework, not surplus but supplementary to – as if in recognition that the essay in 40 questions is not adequate, cannot reproduce the migrants' stories. The 40 questions demand answers, but those produced can only ever be partial, never ending because they only represent a beginning, the enigma of arrival, as Naipaul termed it. One little girl, in response to the question as to why she came to America, says she came because she wanted to arrive…

As a Mexican seeking a green card, Luiselli herself is part of what might be thought of as another form of screening, a film going on in the background as she listens to and attempts to decode the unimaginable, the unthinkable. The "credible fear" interview is part of US asylum law whereby a person who can establish a credible fear of fear of returning to their home country cannot be deported until the person's asylum case is processed, something which for small children is almost impossible to articulate. Credibility is the core characteristic of any asylum narrative, as the very process itself is predicated upon suspicion, disbelief, and doubt. Its foundation is a negative. Luiselli's very presence as a volunteer in such a procedure is, effectively, a challenge to the clichés and stereotypes, the media representations, of the asylum seeker. This is why she insists upon seeing the children, not just as unaccompanied minors, but as "refugees". The insistence is a refusal of the dominant narrative, as the whole book is a re-enactment of not just the children's traumatic journeys, but a contextualization – historical, political, sociological – of the so-called "refugee crisis", a crisis brought about by a "hemispheric war" in which the violence, poverty, and environmental damage in the Northern Triangle is traced back, causally, to the United States.

The immigration process faced by the children is partly anchored, or domesticated, by the writer's family's own application for residential status except that the questions asked of her family are trivial and, in a sense outdated (my own visa questions 50 years ago were not dissimilar) and incomparable with the range and

depth of the asylum interrogation. Nevertheless, the family story is a valuable counterpoint to that of the children not allowed to leave the country. Pending the outcome of the green card application, the family decides to leave New York and take a trip by car to Arizona on the US/Mexico border. In other words, they travel in the reverse direction to the children who have arrived in New York. I used the word "trip" deliberately, and mentioned the car, to emphasize the difference in scale from the journey of the unaccompanied minors. Another significant difference is that Luiselli's two children are also minors but accompanied. This magnifies the lack of safety and protection, the peril of the migrant children. Listening on the radio to news of the "refugee crisis" and, at one point, reading of the deportation of children as "aliens" from, of all places, Roswell, she gathers together material to amplify her own sketchy knowledge of the situation. This knowledge is not only empirical but also linguistic as she decodes the media discourse – where the children are seen as a biblical plague – and reflects on whether the reactions might have been different: «were all these children of a lighter color: of better, purer breeds and nationalities. Would they be treated more like people? More like children? We read the papers, listen to the radio, see photographs, and wonder» (ivi, 15). This speculative moment highlights one of the themes of my recent book: the "nativist" racialization, and "othering" of the less than human "non-white" (see Bromley 2021, chapter 1).

As part of her preparation for her volunteer role, Luiselli discovers more about the organization she is working with, the Immigrant Children Advocates' Relief Effort with the telling acronym ICARE, a coalition of seven non-profit organizations set up to respond to Obama's "priority juvenile docket" of 2014 which gave children seeking immigration relief twenty-one days to find a lawyer to represent their case, a dramatic change in timescale from the previous twelve months. "Priority" in this case was, effectively a punishment as deportation proceedings against unaccompanied minors were accelerated by 94 per cent. On the surface, it may have seemed progressive – to cut waiting times – but, as Luiselli says: «In legal terms, it was a kind of backdoor escape route to avoid dealing with impending reality suddenly knocking at the country's front doors» (ivi, 41).

Luiselli's niece accompanies her to the workplace and they come across a list of words on a chalkboard, divided into four categories: Border, Court, Home, Community, which she uses as chapters to organize the book. The words «were also a kind of scaffolding holding all of these broken stories together» (ivi, 42). Scaffolding is designed to be taken down when building repairs are completed but this will never be possible as the stories are permanently broken. This is one of several analogies she uses to try and articulate that which is beyond articulation – the trauma of migration in, through and to a hostile territory. Another formulation of this "impossibility" is that «The stories they tell me *bleed* into each other, get confused with one another, shuffle and mix. Maybe it's because, though each story is different, they all come together easily, pieces of a larger puzzle» (ivi, 50-51), but one destined never to be completed. The word "bleed", which I have italicized, is used metonymically for the whole trauma. The larger puzzle, in the sense of an enigma, is what the contextualization is designed to produce: «Each child comes from a different place, a separate life, a distinct set of experiences, but their stories usually follow the same predictable, fucked up plot» *(ibidem)*.

To counter this emotional generalization about predictability, in the sense of already being known (prior to writing, perhaps) she drills down to give examples of distinct sets of experience, in the form of Manu Lopez and his two cousins, as a means of nuancing the overall story. She details the story of Manu Lopez (a pseudonym) because it was a «story condensed in a very specific, material detail that has continued to haunt me» (ivi, 42). In a way, the whole essay is an attempt at condensation and the piece of paper which the boy presented at interview is itself a metonym of this process, with the writer searching for forms of substitution for what eludes representation. If Manu's experience is not necessarily typical, it is in many ways symptomatic of that suffered by so many others – «a road map of migration, a testimony of the five thousand miles it travelled inside a boy's pocket» (ivi, 43). The piece of paper is a police document which distils a common motive for migration – the boy (Manu) had witnessed the murder of his friend by a gang in his hometown in

Honduras. The paper is a police document confirming that this happened, evidence of his need to migrate out of "credible fear".

The interview with Manu prompts the writer to undertake research on the provenance and history of various gangs, with roots in the USA but "translated" to the Northern Triangle as many of those involved were deported from families originating in these countries. This "profiling" is frequently used in the book to give a historical and political dimension to the framework of interviews. In the "family" journey they are not only travelling through a geographical territory but also moving through time and history. At one point, they learn of children being deported by plane at an airport near Roswell, New Mexico, the place where conspiracy theorists believe aliens landed in 1954. The term "aliens" traces a continuum with the present day, as one of the many words used about the child migrants is "alien", the "other" from the "outer space" beyond the US's "identity border". History is also evoked by place when they are in Arizona and the father describes the US/Mexico wars of the early 19th century and recalls the Indian Removal Act of 1830 which used similar racialised terms to those in use today. So, if the interview questions have to be re-worded, translated, and interpreted, and are still not adequate but are unanswerable, the contextualization gives some kind of narrative which locates and widens the lens on the trauma of migration. Included in this "widening" are the civil wars in the Northern Triangle, backed and funded by the CIA and other agencies, with no accountability over accepted by the US government. In other words, to repeat a well-worn phrase: «we are here because you were there».

Beyond the trauma of separation, the abuses and threats of the journey within Mexico, there are also the crimes and ill-treatment suffered in US detention and custody. There are questions related to these in the intake questionnaire but, for understandable reasons they are even more unanswerable as vulnerable children are extremely wary of saying anything which might lead to deportation. They are similarly circumspect about questions relating to family members, either those left behind, who may have been a source of their initial trauma, as well as those in the US who might act as sponsors but who were undocumented. The time of which Luiselli is writing,

2014-15, saw over 10,000 children released to sponsors in Texas, almost 9,000 in California, and more than 8,000 in New York. From the many interviews she conducts in NYC, Luiselli, while recognizing the distinctiveness of each child's experience, traces a common trajectory – travelling with a coyote, crossing Mexico on *La Bestia*, seeking to avoid rapists, kidnappers, corrupt police and immigration officials, and the drug gangs. At the border, they usually turn themselves in to Border Patrol officers and begin the process which, in her cases, leads them to the federal immigration court in New York. If a child is Mexican they would not reach this stage as they are deportable as a "removable alien", often on the basis of an ironically named procedure of "voluntary return".

The granting of asylum is very limited in scope, based as it is on post-WWII and Cold War conditions which are inadequate for the circumstances of the 21st century and always difficult to demonstrate and determine. As I have shown elsewhere (Bromley 2021), credibility is a key issue and evidence is almost always treated with skepticism: «When children don't have enough battle wounds to show, they may not have any way to successfully defend their case and will most likely be "removed back to their home country"» (ivi, 61). In ways in which she historicizes other features of her volunteer experience, Luiselli opens out from specific instances to present a wider interpretation of the US legal system. In this way, the structure of the book becomes a kind of palimpsest, with the writing of the immediate trauma superimposed on earlier histories and legal procedures. Not only is the current writing a superimposition, it is also, as we are often reminded, only an approximation, something which is emphasized in particular when she interviews two young girls where she has to constantly find words and terms other than those used in the questions. But even then, «the girls were so young, and even if they had a story that secured legal intervention in their favor, they didn't know the words necessary to tell it. For children of that age, telling a story – in a second language, translated to a third – a round and convincing story… is practically impossible» (Luiselli 2017, 66). This returns us to a constant refrain, here and in *Lost Children Archive*, the impossibility of language in the face of trauma. This not only applies to the children but to the writer

herself, something brought home when interviewing one boy whose experience, as he related it, increased in its gravity to such an extent that «All too often I find myself not wanting to write any more, wanting to just sit there, quietly listening, wishing that the story I'm hearing had a better ending. I listen, hoping that the bullet shot at this boy's little brother had missed. But it didn't» (ivi, 69). Where the novelist has jurisdiction over the plot, the essayist doesn't. All she can produce is snapshots taken out of time.

In the latter stages of Chapter Three, Home, Luiselli returns to a story which has obsessed her – that of the 16-year-old Manu Lopez, whose best friend was shot by a gang, filling him with such fear that he did not attend his funeral. It takes her some time to establish any rapport with him and to elicit answers to the set questions. Manu and his female cousins all emigrate because their lives have been shadowed by the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs in Honduras. He attends high school in Hempstead, NYC where he finds the equivalent of both gangs in the high school which he wants to leave, but this would threaten his immigration application. Not surprisingly, Manu's story is confusing and fragmented, the very shape that would imperil his application which requires a "correct" story, one which matches the preconceptions of the court.

From Manu's story, Luiselli extrapolates the broader migration story of coyotes and *La Bestia*, the criminals and gangs confronted on the journey and an added dimension – the *Programa Frontera Sur*, funded by the USA and designed to prevent the immigration of Central American people through Mexico. Effectively, this pushed the border control from the Rio Grande on the US-Mexico border to the rivers on the Mexico-Guatemala border. Accompanying this shift was the proliferation of interior checkpoints and the panoply of technological surveillance in strategic locations of mobility – drones, security cameras, fences, floodlights, and private security teams.

They Have No Story

The challenge which Luiselli presented herself with was how to represent crisis or, more precisely, how to represent absence, loss, disappearance. How to produce a document to accompany the unaccompanied: the trauma of child migration which defies representation? How can a work of literature make representable subjects from those voices excluded from the national/nationalist script, in the form of a *witness,* or proxy, a position equivalent to a third party. Can a novel, or essay, ever be a testimony, or does this always contain a lacuna: «those who have not lived through the experience will never know, those who have will never tell, not really, not completely… the past belongs to the dead» (Wiesel 1975, 314). In similar vein, also writing of the Shoah, Primo Levi speaks of those – the drowned – the complete witnesses, as the rule, with the survivors as the exception, producing a discourse on behalf of third parties: the destruction brought to an end, he says, was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to describe his own death. We speak in their stead, by proxy or through metaphor. The value of survivor testimony, Agamben claims, lies in what it lacks: «something that cannot be borne witness to» (Agamben 2005, 13). *Lost Children Archive* bears witness to a missing testimony, bearing witness, that is, to the impossibility of bearing witness. The absence, the lack at the centre of the novel is, in a sense, the testimony of the lost children – lacking because of either linguistic or emotional capacity – *they have no story.* It is the healing power of story which Luiselli attempts to produce as the novel tries to enact the connection, the conversation between the missing and the living. In Agamben's terms: «this is why what is borne witness to cannot already be language or writing. It can only be something to which no one has borne witness – the sound that arises from the lacuna – the non-language to which language responds, in which language is born» (ivi, 38).

Sound plays an important part in the novel – the husband, an acoustemologist, is conducting a record of the Apache landscape through its sounds, whereas the wife has been documenting the 182 languages spoken in New York. As the couple's children are lost in the latter part of the novel, they try to use echoes to track their parents. The form of the novel partly takes shape around sound but also consists of

a compendium of cultural quotations, a collage (bricolage) of intertextualities which form part of its accumulation of evidence/witness/testimony drawn from texts which have wrestled with the lacuna – the non-language to which language responds. These texts/quotations occupy an explicit place in the novel's *archive* – they are not clues in a puzzle, or items to be decoded which will reveal answers. The archive is located in the boxes placed at the end of each chapter – newspaper cuttings, research material, miscellanies of books, CDs, recordings etc. The husband (Pa) has four boxes, Ma has one and each of the children has one. They contain those things which the narrative itself cannot contain but act, metaphorically, as footnotes, afterthoughts, overspill or interludes. The novel raises a series of questions about the adequacy of its own representational choices, a skepticism, or lack of trust, in terms posed by Levinas: «Language is in itself already skepticism», or, as Blanchot puts it: «To write is to be absolutely distrustful of writing, while entrusting oneself to it entirely». This paradox characterizes both of the Luiselli texts under discussion. The task she has set herself is to think our relation to the other, another "impossibility". As Bernard-Donals expresses it: «for Bataille and Levinas, the gift [is] the inexhaustible(infinite) demand of the other and of others». It is a demand which motivates Luiselli the volunteer/activist in *Tell Me How it Ends* and the novelist in *Lost Children Archive*. All the writer can do, in Blanchot's words, is «to keep watch over absent meaning» and, in this role, she/he is always at a distance, almost neutral.

Blanchot's *The Writing of Disaster* is concerned with the Shoah and, of course, the trauma of migrant children cannot be compared but there are aspects of his argument which, nevertheless, are apposite to this discussion of the essay and novel, and links to the earlier arguments of Agamben, Wiesel and Levi. Michael Bernard-Donals in his magisterial *The Rhetoric of Disaster and the Imperative of Writing* (2001; all further references in parenthesis will be to this article, unless otherwise stated)[6], refers to two injunctions related to the representation of the Shoah – either to burn it into memory so deeply so that it will never be repeated, or to resist the idolatry of representation

[6] The concluding sections of my article are heavily indebted to this article.

and to maintain silence. As Bernard-Donals says, «It is the impasse between speech and silence, memory and forgetting, that Blanchot calls the disaster of writing». (ivi, 73). It is this impasse, this lacuna which characterizes both Luiselli texts. To put it simply, how can writing ever fill this representational gap, other than through approximation. As Bernard-Donals goes on to say, it is this disaster -- in my terms, the trauma of lost or separated children – which Blanchot says confronts the "limit of writing", a limit that "de-scribes" or unwrites the object of writing. This is the aesthetic, formal and, ultimately, ethical question which shapes the novel – how can the writer dare to presume to reflect on traumatic events which «precede and interrupt the language of everyone who tries to find a name, or a narrative, with which to contain these events» (*ibidem*)? This partly explains why the few principal figures in the text (mother/wife, father/husband, son/stepson, daughter/stepdaughter) are unnamed, hence are both specific and generic, and why the narrative is structured around a series of interruptions, digressions, fragments, and interpellated texts. This is because the event – the lost children – both precedes and *exceeds* the writer's knowledge and understanding as it surpasses pre-existing forms and categories. This is the destabilizing limit which Blanchot describes. The writer/narrator is able to read about the children's migrant journey, listen to it on the radio, and draw upon the responses elicited from unaccompanied children working as a volunteer interpreter in the New York Immigration Court, but together these do not constitute knowledge as such, or anything that can be called an adequate record, in the absence of corroboration or evidence of credibility.

The fact, for example, that 80,000 unaccompanied migrant children attempted to cross the border in 2013/14 seems hard to believe, as do subsequent numbers, hence they seem «to leave a hole in the fabric of the narrative» (ivi, 75). Truth-telling, credibility in the asylum narrative (as perceived by immigration officials and judges) «depends on the discourse's ability to move an audience, to "see" an issue or an event that *exceeds language's ability to narrate it*» (ivi, 76, my italics). In other words, we are dealing with something indefinable which surpasses the contingencies of the specific language readily available. Excess is part of the novel's formal structure – its archival

presences, its literary allusions, its "overloaded" cultural repertoire. Luiselli is consciously probing the limits of representation, pushing at its boundaries, in order to reveal the gap between what has happened (the event or the experience) and what can be represented. This is why she "stops and starts", presents so many «intrusion[s] upon narrative» (ivi, 78) to *indicate* (but not represent) the experience that troubles representation. The mother/ narrator hands over the story of the lost children to her 10 year-old stepson, which constitutes the second half of the narrative as a whole, in order to "test" whether he can make present the absence at the core of the representations so far:

> Listening to them now, I realize they are the ones telling the story of the lost children. They've been telling it all along, over and over again, for the past three weeks. But I hadn't listened to them carefully enough… Their voices, the only way to listen to voices that are not audible; children's voices that are no longer audible, because those children are no longer here. I realize now… that my children's backseat games and reenactments were maybe the only way to really tell the story of the lost children, a story about children that went missing on their journeys north. Perhaps their voices were the only way to record the soundmarks, traces and echoes that lost children left behind (Luiselli 2019,180).

This links back to the point made earlier on by Jennifer Yusin: «This rupture between the I and experience emerges as the inherent failure of the I to tell about an event that it cannot tell» (2005, 135). This dilemma of representation dominated her previous book, *Tell Me How It Ends*, because she was confronted in her role as a volunteer interpreter with children whose trauma was *immediate*: «not only [does it] rule out all mediation: it is the infiniteness of a presence such that it can no longer be spoken of» (Bernard-Donals 2001, 77). As Cathy Caruth argues,

> What the witness sees isn't available to memory because seeing precedes the witness's ability to know what she sees. Once an experience occurs, it is forever lost, and it is at the point of 'losing what we have to say' that we speak. It is the point at which the event is lost that writing begins» (quoted in Bernard-Donals 2001, 77).

Caruth is talking about adults and the effects of what she describes can be multiplied many times over in the case of traumatized children, some as young as three, who may never get to speak. This is the burden/responsibility which Luiselli carries, the beginning of writing. Not only is this the dilemma of the adult asylum-

seeker but also the survivor of childhood abuse – the impossibility of "immediacy". It is not only the migrant children who are lost but what they have suffered.

Where a realist narrative presumes a certain transparency, a window onto verisimilitude, the trauma of loss «resists verisimilitude, the will to representation» (ivi, 80). The event itself – the actual or fictional loss or disappearance – that precedes the writing about it cannot be contained, or narrated, as it is irretrievable. This "disaster" is an effect of discourse that focuses the reader's attention on the impossibility of substituting oneself for the subject of the experience. The adult "I" of the novel cannot substitute herself for the children hence she transfers the narration to her stepson who, through his narrative (of he and his sister being lost) comes close to substituting himself for the subjects of loss. In fact, the whole of the second section of the novel could be described as substitutional or metonymic; the writing can only be indicative, however, rather than identificatory. The archive, interposed between chapters and meticulously listed, is a repository of texts and references which underpin and "precede" the narrative (literally) but even these, however ordered and alluded to in the writing can never approach the event itself, only ever offer metaphorical/figural approximations, traces left in the language of the narrative. What Luiselli is seeking to challenge, unsuccessfully, is what Blanchot claims is the position of the writer (the "I" narrator in the case of the novel) that «is annulled by the zero-point of language, the point at which the events [the lost children] become written and named and simultaneously – as they are written – dissolve as experiences» (ivi, 82). This is something powerfully demonstrated in *Tell Me How it Ends* where the experiences of the children resist language or representation and can only exist in a form of approximation through fallible interpretation. As Bernard-Donals says, «Writing – any writing – involves two moments which work against each other: the moment in which we create a name for the object and that in which the object itself, which becomes lost in the moment of writing, exerts a pressure upon the language of the name, or narrative of history» (*ibidem*).

The stepson's narrative is tonally and stylistically different from Ma's narrative which follows an almost documentary realist trajectory with sections and chapters

divided into descriptive items. The boy's story is more surreal, closer to fantasy in its mode of telling. One twenty-page sentence is indicative of this, a form of stream of consciousness. The boy repeats a lot of details from his mother's narrative – one story, in particular, which he considers obsesses her. This concerns a woman, Manuela, an undocumented migrant, met at a school parents' event in NYC. Manuela's two young daughters have been detained at the border and she enlists Ma's help in tracking them. The boy also detects the brittleness in his parents' relationship and is conscious that their arrival in Arizona may mark the end of the family unit, as his father is determined to stay there to complete his project. At one point, Ma has read to them from a book called *Elegies for Lost Children* by an Italian writer, Ella Campostino (actually Luiselli herself). Apart from this being an intertextual tribute to W.G. Sebald, it is also an example of Luiselli experimenting with another way of telling the story, which preoccupies her, using a pseudonym (a disguise) and trying other styles, other registers. The invented narrative is yet another attempt to render disaster into story, a form of subterfuge perhaps, a reflection and lament – an effort to defy the "incoherence" of narration: «the intention to write is shattered by the event's ability to elude writing. How is it possible to be anything but uncertain about the referent of the narrative itself?» (ivi, 83). Hence the repetitions, the insecurities, and the fragmentary and incomplete nature of both essay and novel, and the many-handed, multi-voiced narratives of the latter.

When the children run away and get lost – in an attempt perhaps to alert/alarm the parents in order to heal their rift - the characters in *Elegies* blend in with the boy and girl who then re-enact (the whole of Part Two is entitled "Reenactment") in imaginary terms, the perilous journey of the lost migrant children through the desert, including travelling on *La Bestia* with all its dangers, and avoiding Border patrol. The boy fantasizes that they will find Manuela's two daughters (we are told at one point they are deceased). He also makes an audio recording of their "adventure" as a way of creating a memory for his little sister when they are apart as her recall is likely to be partial. Their being "lost" is an act of empathy because, having left details of where they are going, their plight is fictitious, a facsimile of the story of the really lost

children. As of September, 2021, there were 300 children whose parents could not be located, five years after separation: «I think these 300 children, that the families of these 300 children, are not about some bureaucratic failure that happens all the time. That this is about deliberate cruelty. And I hope we do not lose sight of this years down the road» (Williams *et al.* 2021).

Both Luiselli texts are struggles with the unsayable: «Writing the disaster may indicate the event that ruptures narrative, but it doesn't build knowledge of it, and in fact works against knowledge's grain» (Bernard-Donals 2001, 87). The traumatic experiences of which she speaks are indicative of the intransigence of events to writing. These events are irrecuperable except through the fragmented and troubled narratives that fail to contain them, which is why Luiselli tries on and takes off different modes of writing in her search for the figural which can provide at least some access to the effects of trauma. As we have seen, this accessibility is at its most challenging in the case of damaged children. Writing is itself a form of displacement and even more so when the subject of the writing is displaced.

The impossibility of writing is expressed in the paradox that, «a rhetoric of disaster suggests that writing works against knowledge at the same time as it tries to inscribe it» (ivi, 91). As Luiselli puts it in *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017, 69): «Telling stories doesn't solve anything, doesn't reassemble broken lives. But perhaps it is a way of understanding the unthinkable. If a story haunts us, we keep telling it to ourselves, replaying it in silence».

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Biographical note

Roger Bromley is Emeritus Professor in Cultural Studies at the University of Nottingham, and was a Visiting Professor at Lancaster University until 2017. From 1966 to 2010, he taught in a number of British universities, and he has given guest lectures at universities in Padua, Milan, Puglia, Turin, Pisa, and Naples. He is the author of *Lost Narratives: Popular Fictions and Politics* (1988); *Narratives for a New Belonging: Diasporic Cultural Fictions* (2000), *From Alice to Buena Vista: the Cinema of Wim Wenders* (2001) and joint editor of four other books. His recent book, *Narratives of Forced Mobility and Displacement in Contemporary Literature and Culture* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in June, 2021.

rogbrom@yahoo.co.uk

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