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Undocutime: DREAMers, *Lost Children Archive*, and the politics of waiting and storytelling in twenty-first-century migration narratives

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Abstract
This essay introduces the concept of undocutime, the prolonged waiting, permanent temporariness, enforced presentism, devaluation of the time, and persistent patience of the undocumented, by bringing together Valeria Luiselli's 2019 novel, Lost Children Archive , and DREAMer narratives, stories by and about would-be beneficiaries of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. To bring undocutime into focus, the article locates DREAMer narratives and Luiselli's novel in the context of the twenty-first-century boom in child migrant stories, stories by or about a child migrant or former child migrant. This essay argues that, whereas many first-person stories by formerly undocumented child migrants adhere to a Bildung structure and offer closure and the authority of witness, Lost Children Archive uses layered narratives, nonnarrative forms, a nonlinear structure, and non-realism to tell a story about the contemporary child migrant crisis at the US-Mexico border in medias res. Via its content, form, and fictionality, Luiselli's novel brings into relief the paralysis of witnessing and the slow violence of undocutime.

Keywords Child migrant story · *Bildung* narrative · DREAMer narratives · Immobility · *Lost Children Archive* · Slow violence · Undocutime · Waiting · Witnessing

Undocutime: DREAMers, *Lost Children Archive* y la política de la espera y la narración en las narrativas migratorias del siglo XXI

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Resumen
Este ensayo presenta el concepto de undocutime (tiempo indocumentado), la espera prolongada, la temporalidad permanente, el presentismo forzado, la devaluación del tiempo y la paciencia persistente de los indocumentados, al reunir la novela de Valeria Luiselli de 2019, *Lost Children Archive*, y las narrativas DREAMers, historias de y sobre posibles beneficiarios de la legislación de Desarrollo, Ayuda y Educación para Menores Extranjeros (DREAM). Para enfocar undocutime, el artículo ubica las narrativas DREAMers y la novela de Luiselli en el contexto del auge del siglo XXI en las historias de niños migrantes, historias escritas por o sobre un niño migrante o ex niño migrante. Este ensayo sostiene que, mientras que muchas historias en primera persona de niños inmigrantes anteriormente indocumentados se adhieren a una estructura *Bildung* y ofrecen un cierre y la autoridad del testigo, *Lost Children Archive* utiliza narrativas superpuestas, formas no narrativas, una estructura no lineal y falta de realismo para contar una historia sobre la crisis contemporánea de niños migrantes en la frontera entre Estados Unidos y México in medias res. A través de su contenido, forma y ficcionalidad, la novela de Luiselli pone de relieve la parálisis del testimonio y la lenta violencia del undocutime.

Valeria Luiselli's 2019 novel, *Lost Children Archive*, chronicles a road trip. A family of four—father, mother, 10-year-old son, and 5-year-old daughter—drives from New York City to southeastern Arizona. As soon as they set off, the children begin to ask the child traveler's perennial question: Are we there yet? After passing through a tollbooth in Philadelphia, the girl repeats their question, but with a New Yorker's perspective: "How many blocks till we get all the way to the end?" Mama, the narrator, reflects, "We have to remind ourselves to be patient. We know … how confusing it must be to live in the timeless world of a 5 year-old: a world not without time, but with a surplus of it" (Luiselli 2019, pp. 14–15).

More than a road novel, *Lost Children Archive* is a story about migration (Stuelke 2021). As the family drives west, migrants make their way north. All head toward the US-Mexico border. In addition to following the girl and the boy as they travel from New York to Arizona, *Lost Children Archive* traces the journey of child migrants from Central America and Mexico to the United States. Luiselli's novel is thus also a child migrant story, a story about and often by a child migrant or a former child migrant.[1]

Children have migrated as long as people have (Bradford 2022; Brady 2022; Milian 2019). However, the child migrant story is a relatively new type of migration narrative, one that has received increasing attention since the introduction of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act in the US Congress in 2001, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, and the "child

[1] Child migrant (or migrant child) stories take myriad forms and circulate widely. Two examples include the MigrantChildStorytelling Project (2022; https://www.migrantchildstorytelling.org/) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' March 2014 report, *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection*.

migrant crisis of 2014," a spike in the number of unaccompanied minors, mostly from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, apprehended at the US-Mexico border (Lind 2014; Saldaña-Portillo 2019). Also known as a UAC, an "unaccompanied alien child," according to the US Department of Homeland Security, is a migrant who is under the age of eighteen who lacks "lawful immigration status" and "a parent or legal guardian" in the United States (Congressional Research Service 2021, p. 1).

As a child migrant story, *Lost Children Archive* is also about *im*mobility, about being stuck and waiting. A surplus of time, to paraphrase Luiselli, is often upheld as constitutive of childhood. According to sociologist Jens Qvortrup, "It is the fate of children to be waiting. They are waiting to become adults; to mature; to become competent; to get capabilities; to acquire rights; to become useful; to have a say in societal matters; to share resources" (Qvortrup 2004, p. 267). As stories by and about DREAMers underscore, waiting is also a condition of undocumented migrant life in the United States in the twenty-first century. Likewise, the US-Mexico border, where the family and child migrants in Luiselli's novel end up, is not merely a transit zone. Policies that immobilize migrants, such as Title 42 and Remain in Mexico, have shown that the border is a site of captivity as well (Martinez 2023). Pawns in what journalists and activists have dubbed "a political game of kick the can," migrants wait to depart and to arrive (Dallas Morning News 2019). They wait for papers, rights, reform, reunion, inclusion, and freedom.

I call what Luiselli describes as a surplus of time *undocutime*. Undocutime names and describes the prolonged waiting, permanent temporariness, enforced presentism, devaluation of the time, and persistent patience of the undocumented.[2] In conceptualizing undocutime, I draw from the diverse body of scholarship on temporality—specifically, slowness and waiting—in the humanities and social sciences, particularly in migration studies.[3] I am especially indebted to political scientist Elizabeth F. Cohen's insightful reflections on time and citizenship. In the United States, "the valuation of time by the state as a means of representing and commensurating politically important processes" is evident in voting (for example, at the age of eighteen), on Tax Day (April 15), and in the census (Cohen 2018, p. 27). More than mere duration, time can translate to assimilation and citizenship in what Cohen calls the "temporal rule of citizenship" or "jus temporis" (Cohen 2013, p. 54). Migrants can use time to their advantage, as the pro-migrant slogan, "Here to Stay," declares. However, "the unrewarded or undervalued time of political subjects" is also "the vehicle for their political domination" (Cohen 2018, p. 17). Just as terrain is weaponized in the management of migration (think, for example, of the deaths in the Sonoran Desert and the Mediterranean Sea), so, too, is time (Andersson 2014, p. 2).

This essay approaches DREAMer narratives and *Lost Children Archive* as an articulation (that is, the enunciation and linking) of the child migrant story and

[2] I take "permanent temporariness" from Bailey et al. 2002. "Enforced presentism" refers to the inability to plan due to a lack of certainty and stability (Guyer 2007).

[3] See, for example, Cwerner (2010), Andersson (2014), Griffiths (2014), Jacobsen et al. (2021), and Martinez (2023).

undocutime. To do so, I locate Luiselli's novel in the context of the boom in child migrant stories, in particular, stories by and about prospective DREAMers, since the early 2000s. Over the past decade, migration scholars have turned a sharp eye to what has come to be known as "the DREAMer narrative" (Nicholls 2013; Nicholls and Fiorito 2015; Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales 2020, p. 8). Paying close attention to protagonist, plot, and form, I study DREAMer narratives not only as a migration scholar, but as a literary critic and cultural studies scholar.

As I juxtapose DREAMer narratives and *Lost Children Archive*, I examine the "chronic condition" of undocumentedness in the United States in the twenty-first century (Berlant 2007, p. 763). The "ongoingness" (Berlant 2007, p. 759) of undocumentedness—by which I mean the perpetuation of illegality—is tantamount to what literary critic Rob Nixon calls, in the context of environmental catastrophe, "slow violence." He defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2011, p. 2). Although slow violence poses "representational challenges and imaginative dilemmas" (p. 11), Nixon sees political potential in creative work that helps us perceive and understand "the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects" (p. 3).

This essay examines the ways DREAMer narratives and *Lost Children Archive* confront the representational challenge and imaginative dilemma of undocutime. I begin with a discussion of DREAMer narratives and show how first-person accounts by undocumented or formerly undocumented youth bear both emotional heft and the authority of witness. So, too, does *Lost Children Archive*, the subject of the second half of this essay. Many DREAMer narratives are nonfiction and adhere to a *Bildung* structure as they recount the waiting and uncertainty that come with undocutime. Luiselli's novel takes a different form. Instead of presenting an authorial I, a clear and singular narrative trajectory, and closure, it offers multiple voices and perspectives, layered narratives, and a nonlinear structure organized around scattered events, ephemera, and photos to tell a story about the child migrant crisis in medias res. Via its content, form, and fictionality—its anonymous characters, nameless places, non-realism, and the fact that it is not a particular individual's truth claim—*Lost Children Archive* makes visible the paralysis of witnessing and the slow violence of undocutime.

Dominant and critical DREAMer narratives

There are just as many DREAMer narratives as there are DREAMers. However, as a public narrative, an autobiographical tale intended to shape public opinion and policy, the dominant or prevailing DREAMer narrative has offered a distinct protagonist and plot.[4] Barack Obama provided a sketch in a 2012 speech. DREAMers, he assured the US public, are "talented young people … who want to staff our labs,

[4] Also known as a "public story" and "story of self," the "public narrative" was developed by political strategist Marshall Ganz. See Narrative Arts (2022), Ganz (2022), and Preston (2012).

or start new businesses, or defend our country." They have "done everything right … studied hard, worked hard, maybe even graduated at the top of [their] class." Above all, DREAMers are innocent: "They were brought to this country by their parents—sometimes even as infants—and often have no idea that they're undocumented until they apply for a job or a driver's license, or a college scholarship" (White House Office of the Press Secretary 2012).

Walter J. Nicholls and Tara Fiorito have labeled the dominant DREAMer narrative's protagonist the "bounded Dreamer." Hallmarks include conformity, particularly to "*national* cultures and values," exceptionality, and innocence (Nicholls and Fiorito 2015, p. 87; emphasis original). Nicholls and Fiorito distinguish the bounded DREAMer from the "unbounded" or "dissident" DREAMer, a complex, intersectional subject that traverses multiple social "movements (undocumented immigrants, labor, community, LGBTQ, and so on)," thereby forging "new alliances" without necessarily adhering to and sometimes rejecting hegemonic values and expectations (Nicholls and Fiorito 2015, p. 89). Similarly, literary and film scholar Guadalupe Escobar refers to "self-representation by the (formerly) undocumented" that rejects "the myth of meritocracy" as the critical DREAMer memoir (Escobar 2023, p. 32).

While the figure of the DREAMer emerged in 2001, both dominant and critical DREAMer narratives are part of a long, rich tradition of migrant storytelling in the United States. This tradition includes works in various forms and languages—for example, the 220 poems written in Chinese from 1910 until 1940 on the barrack walls at the immigration station at Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. It also encompasses works by migrants who opted not to remain in what would become the United States, like the eighteenth-century English indentured servant William Moraley; by migrants who have been deported, such as the contributors to the dynamic digital project, Humanizing Deportation; and by migrants critical of capitalism and its entanglement with what is now known as the American dream, such as the Lithuanian-born, Jewish American socialist newspaper editor and novelist Abraham Cahan (1860–1951).[5]

Notwithstanding this diversity, the dominant pro-immigrant narrative in the United States emphasizes permanence, progress, and prosperity. According to political scientist Bonnie Honig, its hero is the "supercitizen immigrant": "the screen onto which we project our idealized selves. He works harder than we do, he values his family and community more actively than we do, and he also fulfills our liberal fantasy of membership by way of consent" (Honig 2001, pp. 77–78). Ultimately, the supercitizen immigrant achieves the American dream in the form of material wealth and social inclusion, thereby affirming that the United States is a just, egalitarian, and meritocratic nation of consenting immigrants.

The dominant DREAMer narrative was born of the DREAM Act, proposed legislation the name of which conjures the American dream. First introduced in Congress in 2001, the DREAM Act sought to offer legal permanent residency and, in some cases, US citizenship to undocumented migrants ranging in age from twelve

[5] Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation (2022), Moraley (1992), Humanizando la Deportación (2023), Irwin (2022), and Cahan (1993).

to thirty-five years who had been in the United States for at least five years; who had arrived in this country before the age of sixteen; who had graduated from high school or obtained a GED in the United States; and/or who had completed two years of US military service or college in the United States in good standing. There have been many versions of the DREAM Act. However, none have passed.

To compensate for Congress' intransigence, the Obama administration implemented Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012. DACA has provided certain undocumented migrants born after 16 June 1981 with permission to work and a stay of deportation. Yet, as the *defer* in DACA indicates, DACA participants wait for an adjustment of status or deportation. In the process of waiting, they defer (as in submit) to the state. Unlike some versions of the DREAM Act, DACA does not lead to US citizenship or legal permanent residency; it is a temporary status and is subject to termination. In 2022, US Citizenship and Immigration Services stopped accepting new DACA applications, thereby producing the DACA and post-DACA generations (Rodrigues 2023). Like epochs and waves (for example, first wave, second wave, Baby Boomer, Gen X, and so on), generations signal the passing of time.

The dominant DREAMer narrative emerged in the early years of the twenty-first century, a moment that witnessed what political scientist Sujatha Fernandes has termed the storytelling turn, "an emergent culture of storytelling that presents carefully curated narratives with predetermined storylines as a tool of philanthropy, statecraft, and advocacy" (Fernandes 2017, p. 2). For evidence of the storytelling turn, we may look to TED talks, podcasts, and social media. Embracing the LGBTQ+strategy of coming out, and inspired by the massive demonstrations in defense of migrant rights over 2006 and 2007, countless mostly young people have proclaimed that they are undocumented using social media, mainstream news outlets, online publications, and memoirs and poetry collections published by small, independent publishers and mainstream publishing houses alike.

Although the average age of DACA participants was twenty-nine in 2023, supporters of the DREAM Act have highlighted prospective DREAMers' youth (US Citizenship and Immigration Services 2023, p. 10). This emphasis has been strategic. Whereas migrants, especially economic and "illegal" ones, "are generally attributed with agency and cunning," children "are defined by their innocence and vulnerability" (Davidson 2011, p. 462). Innocence is a prevailing theme of the dominant DREAMer narrative (Caminero-Santangelo 2016, p. 229). The refrain has been that DREAMers find themselves in a situation not of their own making and to which they never consented (consent is another hallmark of adulthood). Therefore, they should not be punished for "the actions of their parents or … the inaction of politicians" (White House Office of the Press Secretary 2012). Put another way, DREAMers are passive and unknowing, qualities associated with children, not criminals.

The infantilization of undocumented migrants—their enforced temporal paralysis—is part of undocutime. For a glimpse of that immobility, we may look to *Comprehensive Immigration Reform: The Future of Undocumented Immigrant Students*. In this 2007 hearing, three would-be DREAMers, Marie Nazareth Gonzalez, Martine Mwanj Kalaw, and Tam Tran, testified before the United States House of Representatives Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security,

and International Law about the plight of undocumented students. At twenty-one, Gonzalez, a native of Costa Rica and college student in Missouri, was the youngest of the three witnesses. Still, she, Kalaw, and Tran were referred to as children, youngsters, and "the girls next door" (Subcommittee on Immigration 2007, p. 25). Lawmakers likened the young women to their own daughters, with one proposing to his colleagues that they "adopt the three of you here in this family" (p. 30).

Gonzalez's, Kalaw's, and Tran's testimonies make *The Future of Undocumented Immigrant Students* an early DREAMer narrative. Tran's story in particular suggests undocutime through her description of being stuck in what she called "immigration limbo" (Subcommittee on Immigration 2007, 15). The twenty-four-year-old daughter of Vietnamese refugees, UCLA alumna, and aspiring filmmaker reminded her audience that she was "an adult with a college degree" (p. 14), but her undocumented status prevented her from realizing her potential and working the full-time "adult job" for which she had been trained (p. 16). Without the DREAM Act, she had "to wait before [she could] become an accountable member of society" and "really grow up" (pp. 15–16). In 2010, at the age of twenty-seven, she was killed in a car accident (Wong and Ramos 2011). That same year, the DREAM Act died in the Senate. Had she lived long enough, Tran, in all likelihood, would have been one of the 830,000 DACAmented immigrants (US Citizenship and Immigration Services 2021). Whether or not she would have qualified for the DREAM Act is less clear. In 2018, she would have turned thirty-six, too old for some versions of the act.

As DREAMers wait indefinitely for regularization, they, like everyone else, age. Yet because the DREAM Act and DACA prize youth, a transitory stage in life and finite resource in a labor market dependent on vitality, DREAMers' protected status and value as youth diminish with the passing of time. This lends a sense of gravity to their situation: rather than earn citizenship via a clear probationary period, DREAMers and the DACAmented appear to move further away from the possibility of regularization as they grow older. The simultaneous lag and urgency they confront testify to the slow violence of undocutime.[6]

Not unlike Tran's testimony, twenty-first-century life writing by migrants who used to be undocumented recounts childhoods and young adulthoods marked by the slow violence of undocutime.[7] For example, in *Children of the Land*, Marcelo Hernandez Castillo writes of the permanent temporariness, enforced presentism, and prolonged waiting of his childhood. There was "no semblance of permanence," he recollects, because he and his family were "always moving" (Castillo 2020, p. 24). At the same time, they were stuck in a Kafkaesque bureaucracy in which they waited in government buildings, met with lawyers, tracked down and gathered documents, and "spent hours … combing through

[6] Dreamers' predicament is similar to that of "legal" or "documented" DREAMers, "children of nonimmigrant (i.e., temporary) workers who face the prospect of aging out of lawful status" (Congressional Research Service 2022). Also see Kavi (2022).

[7] The narratives I note are the tip of the iceberg. Other examples of narratives by formerly undocumented child migrants include Rosay (2007), Vargas (2011, 2018), Grande (2013, 2018), Zamora (2017, 2022), Lopez (2020), Villavicencio (2020). Also see Caminero-Santangelo (2016, 2018), Escobar (2023), and Nazario (2007).

legal blogs, articles, and official government websites" as they tried to adjust their status (p. 217). As a graduate student, Castillo resented the undergraduates for "their unpaid internships" and "summers abroad"—in other words, for their mobility and "bright futures" (p. 122).

Poverty, shame, dread, psychosomatic illness, and trauma also play a salient role in stories that reveal the slow violence of undocutime. Castillo, for example, attributes his temporary loss of sight as a 5-year-old to the stress he endured when he and his family crossed the US-Mexico border clandestinely. Similarly, in her memoir, *My (Underground) American Dream* (Arce 2016), Julissa Arce writes about the panic attacks, migraines, and debilitating fibromyalgia she suffered after she learned, at the age of fourteen, that she was undocumented. Alberto Ledesma links the twelve years he spent as an undocumented youth with the post-traumatic stress disorder he struggled with as an adult in his graphic memoir, *Diary of a Reluctant Dreamer* (Ledesma 2017). And, in *Beautiful Country* (2021), Qian Julie Wang recounts her first visit to the dentist after she regularizes. The dentist asks her if "anything extraordinary happened to leave" her teeth in such poor condition (Wang 2021, p. 293). Despite her newfound security, her teeth belie a childhood of deprivation.

Castillo, Arce, Ledesma, and Wang produced their memoirs not only with the benefit of hindsight, but also with the power and privilege of US citizenship. Stories by formerly undocumented child migrants who have grown up and obtained legal permanent residency or citizenship offer resolution, however fraught. To provide a snapshot: Wang naturalizes as a US citizen after her mother absconds with her to Canada, temporarily separating her from her father in New York City. Several years later, Wang returns to the United States with papers. She attends Swarthmore College and Yale Law School and becomes a successful attorney. In short, this formerly undocumented migrant achieves the American dream, but only by fleeing to Canada and coming back to the United States as a Canadian.

Metamorphosis is a defining feature of childhood and the celebrated "bootstraps" immigrant tale in the United States. Indeed, metamorphosis is evident in some twenty-first-century titles by formerly undocumented migrants. Take, for example, Arce's aforementioned *My (Underground) American Dream: My True Story as an Undocumented Immigrant Who Became a Wall Street Executive*; Alfredo Quiñones-Hinojosa's *Becoming Dr. Q: My Journey from Migrant Farm Worker to Brain Surgeon* (Quiñones-Hinojosa 2011); and Dan-el Padilla Peralta's *Undocumented: A Dominican Boy's Odyssey from Homeless Shelter to the Ivy League* (Peralta 2015). To varying degrees, all of the autobiographical works I discuss above criticize US immigration policy and the slow violence it inflicts on undocumented migrants. Furthermore, some denounce the ideology of deservingness that has permeated discourse on immigration reform in the United States (Alex 2020; Escobar 2023). Still, all are before-and-after stories whose protagonists go from undocumented to American. Their triumphant protagonists bear more than a little resemblance to Honig's supercitizen immigrant, and their *Bildung* stories echo the dominant, pro-immigrant narrative in the United States.

Lost Children Archive

Like the works I discuss above, *Lost Children Archive* is about is about mobility—in the form of travel, migration, and deportation—and immobility, physical and figurative alike. Yet unlike the aforementioned works, Luiselli's novel is not a memoir. That said, the line between it and her nonfiction publications, particularly *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (Luiselli 2017), is fuzzy. In fact, she wrote *Lost Children Archive* and *Tell Me How It Ends* at the same time, following a road trip with her then-husband and their two children from New York City to southern Arizona in the summer of 2014, a flashpoint in the child migrant catastrophe at the US-Mexico border (Brockes 2019). She based both *Tell Me How It Ends* and *Lost Children Archive* on real events. The former is a nonfiction essay in the first person. The latter has been called autobiographical fiction, metafiction, and, as I note above, a road novel (Phillips 2019; Meyer 2019). *Lost Children Archive* may also be read as a documentary novel, a mode of fictional discourse with a "specific and verifiable link to the historical world" and "truth-telling claims" (Foley 1986, p. 26). A fictional account of witnessing, it is "a novel about the adequacy of bearing witness" (James 2021, p. 393).

Lost Children Archive is also *Tell Me How It Ends'* fictional doppelganger. Mama, one of the former work's main characters and narrators, is a translator in the New York City immigration court. *Tell Me How It Ends* grows out of Luiselli's own experience as an interpreter in federal immigration court in New York City, where she began volunteering in 2015. She organized this slender book around the questionnaire the court had her translate for unaccompanied child migrants who were applying for asylum in the United States. Most of these children were from Central America; many were Indigenous. "My task … is simple," she explains. "I interview children, following the intake questionnaire, and then translate their stories from Spanish to English" (Luiselli 2017, p. 7). When requesting asylum, refugees must offer narratives that are, in the words of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "coherent and plausible" (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 1992, p. 33). However, the stories Luiselli's interviewees relate are so horrifying, they seem "completely unimaginable, almost unreal" (Luiselli 2017, p. 12). "With hesitance, sometimes distrust, always with fear," the children recount fleeing armed gangs, seeing friends and family members murdered, clinging to the train that carried them north, trekking across a punishing desert, and being locked up in frigid migrant detention centers. As former child migrant Dina Nayeri observes, stories, especially escape stories, "are everything" for refugees (Nayeri 2019, p. 6). When escape stories are accepted as truth, they can become the key to asylum, to life, instead of social or physical death. Even though Luiselli's interviewees "have enough battle wounds to show" (Luiselli 2017, p. 61), a requirement for being granted asylum, their "stories are always shuffled, stuttered, always shattered beyond the repair of a narrative order" (p. 7). "The problem with trying to tell their story," Luiselli laments, "is that it has no beginning, no middle, and no end" (p. 7).

Similarly, *Lost Children Archive* lacks a clear narrative order. It is not, to use Mama's words, "a proper story" (Luiselli 2019, p. 5). Yet it is a story about

storytelling. For example, when the girl draws four squares on a piece of paper and asks Mama to label them "Character," "Setting," Problem," and "Solution" so the girl can draw a story the way that she has been taught in school, Mama sneers, "Bad literary education begins too early and continues for way too long" (Luiselli 2019, p. 61). *Lost Children Archive* moves beyond the tidy story the immigration court's questionnaire demands and the before-and-after structure and truth claims of so many immigrant narratives to tell two layered stories at once. The first story is about a doomed marriage and a family's slow dissolution; the second is about the child migrant catastrophe. Where many child migrant stories are by child migrants or former child migrants—for example, Arce, Ledesma, Wang, and would-be DREAMers, such as Gonzalez, Kalaw, and Tran—Luiselli, the Ivy-educated daughter of a Mexican diplomat, is a "privileged immigrant" (Wood 2019). In *Lost Children Archive*, she does not write from the perspective of an undocumented child migrant. Rather, she approaches the subject of child migration obliquely. Her novel, she has insisted, is not "*about* immigration, but it's a novel *with* immigration" (Zamora 2019; emphasis original). Fitting for a novel about undocutime, migration emerges as a key theme slowly.

When it opens, *Lost Children Archive* appears to have little to do with migration. Mama, Papa, the girl, and the boy are leaving New York City and embarking on their journey. Papa, a sound documentarian, wants to go to Echo Canyon in southeastern Arizona to collect sounds for an ambiguous project on Apache ghosts. Mama, a self-described sound documentarist, is unsure what she will do on their road trip. Where Papa is interested in dead Apaches and Indian removal of the past, Mama realizes partway through their journey that she is on a quest for living Indigenous migrants at risk of deportation, a form of "Indian removal" in the present (Nugent 2023, p. 222). Although no one is willing to say it, the couple will break up when they reach their destination and Mama and the girl will return to New York City without Papa and the boy. *Lost Children Archive* is, thus, a tale of family separation. From the outset, its story about a family's crisis adumbrates its story about the child migrant crisis.

Just as the family's dissolution mirrors that of migrant families' separation at the US-Mexico border, the family's attrition—its paralysis in an overwhelming present and "absence of future"—mirrors undocutime (Luiselli 2019, p. 103). In a series of vignettes with titles like "Family Lexicon," "Family Plot," and "Foundational Myths," Mama tries to recount the family's story. "The children will ask, because ask is what children do. And [she and Papa will] need to tell them a beginning, a middle, and an end" (p. 5). However, she is unable to pinpoint when "the end of us" began (p. 62). Her friends pepper her with questions that call to mind the immigration court's questionnaire in *Tell Me How It Ends*: "What happened? They wanted a precise date: When did you realize, exactly? … They wanted an event. … They wanted reasons, motivations, and especially, they wanted a beginning: When, when exactly?" (p. 62). Mama thinks she recalls the undramatic and barely notable moment she realized she and Papa would break up: while shopping for groceries with him and their children shortly before their trip, she imagined "a future where our family was no longer a family of four" (p. 62). For Mama, Papa, the boy, and the girl, the "present … become[s] too overwhelming" once "the future has become unimaginable. And without future, time feels like only an accumulation" (p. 103).

Instead of adhering to a strict sequence of events—a plot, in other words—*Lost Children Archive* unfolds as an accumulation of lists, maps, photos, fragments of government reports, passages from books, and diaristic reflections as told by Mama and the boy. Mama narrates Parts I and III, and the boy narrates Parts II and IV. In another instance of doubling, their narratives echo one another. For example, most of the titles of the vignettes in the parts narrated by Mama are repeated in the same order in the parts narrated by the boy. However, their narratives offer different perspectives, often of the same things. This backtracking and retelling reflect the dual, braided stories that make up *Lost Children Archive*. They also lend a circularity and slowness to the novel—a slowness that gives form to the undocutime imposed on Manuela.

Manuela is not a major character, but she plays a catalytic role in *Lost Children Archive*. She is a Trique woman from Oaxaca whose daughters, ages eight and ten, are being held in a detention center for unaccompanied child migrants in New Mexico. Before leaving New York City, Mama translated legal documents from English to Spanish for her. While the family speeds past a soy field in Arkansas, she calls Mama to tell her that her daughters are missing. Separated from them by thousands of miles and not knowing their whereabouts, Manuela is trapped in an overwhelming present. "Everyone tells her to wait, be patient," but she is determined to find her children (Luiselli 2019, p. 113). She asks Mama to help her look for them and tells her that they are wearing matching dresses with her phone number sewn on the underside of the collar. *Lost Children Archive's* child migrant story comes to the fore when Mama resolves to look for the two girls.

Just as Manuela's daughters resemble twins in their matching dresses, Mama and Papa's children emerge as Manuela's daughters' doubles. As children are wont to do, the boy and the girl observe and listen during their road trip. In gas station convenience stores, they encounter talk about "alien kids" (Luiselli 2019, p. 154) and newspapers with headlines blaring, "Kids, a Biblical Plague" (p. 124). All the while, the radio fills their station wagon with reports about "a mass influx of children" at the border (p. 39). The boy and the girl begin to refer to the child migrants as "the lost children" (p. 75). To Mama's dismay, they devise a game in the backseat in which they pretend that "they're also lost children now, traveling alone through a desert, without adults" (p. 155).

The boy, the girl, and Manuela's daughters converge in *Elegies for Lost Children*. A text within a text, *Elegies* is a book that Mama and the boy read on their shared and separate journeys. The other books that Mama and Papa have brought with them are real—for example, Marcel Schwob's 1896 novella, *The Children's Crusade*. However, *Elegies* and its Italian author, Ella Camposanto, are Luiselli's inventions—fictions, in other words.

In an interview with Luiselli, Javier Zamora, a poet who has written about his own experience migrating from El Salvador to the United States as a nine-year-old unaccompanied migrant, describes *Elegies* as a "dark undercurrent" running through *Lost Children Archive* (Zamora 2019). *Elegies* recounts a harrowing journey north by a group of children and their smuggler. Like the other characters in *Lost Children Archive*, *Elegies'* characters are nameless; they are girl one, girl two, boy three, and so on. While the family in *Lost Children Archive* passes through clearly marked

places, such as Memphis and Truth or Consequences, the space Camposanto's children traverse is nameless. That said, it evokes northern Central America, Mexico, and the US-Mexico borderlands.

In an "unreal desert" riven by an "iron wall," the family's boy and girl encounter a group of four children who resemble Camposanto's characters and Manuela's daughters; two of these four children are sisters (Luiselli 2019, p. 315). Convinced that Papa is more interested in Apache ghosts, and Mama in Manuela's missing daughters, the boy and the girl have run away from their parents and become lost children themselves. In a quest that mirrors that of the children in *Elegies*, the boy and the girl make their way to Echo Canyon by train and by foot. They get lost in the desert, and, after wandering in what appear to be circles, they sink into a "kind of hopelessness that seems like it will never get repaired no matter what, because you're trapped in a circle, and all circles are endless, they go on forever" (Luiselli 2019, p. 319). However, their march comes to a sudden halt when they stumble across an abandoned train car. "How it had got there we had no idea," the boy remarks (p. 329). He tosses a rock into the train car and is surprised when it comes flying back at him. One of Camposanto's children and/or Manuela's daughters has thrown it back to him. In this instant, the family's, Manuela's daughters', and Camposanto's children's stories converge, and *Lost Children Archive's* multiple narrative streams and temporalities collide.

Like Lewis Carroll's looking glass, the train car functions both as a mirror and a portal to a parallel world. The boy reports that its "sliding doors were wide open on both sides so that when I stood in front of the train car, it looked like a window I was looking through from our side of the desert to the other side, which was exactly the same as ours" (Luiselli 2019, pp. 329–330). In the unreal desert and the boy's feverish stream-of-consciousness narration, *Lost Children Archive* seems to shift from autobiographical fiction or documentary novel to speculative fiction. What are an abandoned train car and a group of unsupervised children doing in a remote corner of a desert? Are they real, or are we readers privy to a flummoxed juvenile narrator's hallucination? Who are the four children the boy and the girl encounter inside the rusted gondola? Are any of them Manuela's daughters? Are they Camposanto's characters? Are *all* the children her characters? Like Manuela's daughters, two of the girls in *Elegies* are sisters wearing dresses with their mother's phone number sewn on the underside of the collar. Yet, as one sister informs Mama and Papa's boy, "many children who had to cross this desert had telephone numbers sewn by grandmothers or aunts or cousins on their collars or inside their pockets" (p. 334).

To be sure, the children's encounter with each other in the unreal desert is surreal. The boy's stream-of-consciousness narration makes it all the more disorienting for the reader. Yet what better way to relate the "completely unimaginable" and the "almost unreal," such as a circuitous search for ghosts and the fatal trek of a group of unaccompanied child migrants through a violent landscape? Wandering in "endless" circles in the unreal desert, the children find themselves in what literary and cultural critic Claudia Milian terms "standard stranded time," a concept akin to undocutime (Milian 2019, p. 52). Writing about Central American unaccompanied child migrants, she describes standard stranded time as a temporality in which "there is no punctual sense of clock and calendar time—no one knows the length

of this arduous and risky journey" (p. 52). Where so much life writing by formerly undocumented migrants offers realism and closure, however fraught, the children's unsettling encounter in the unreal desert underscores that, in stories about trauma and loss, "completion and comprehension are often impossible" (Nugent 2023, p. 219).

Lost Children Archive's fictionality and its nonreferentiality—its nameless places and characters and the fact that it is "about nobody in particular"—set it apart from the bulk of contemporary narratives about child migrants and prospective DREAMers, so many of which try to change hearts, minds, laws, and policies by asserting claims to truth and authenticity (Gallagher 2007, p. 341). However, as the DREAM Act's age attests—2021 marked the twentieth anniversary of its initial introduction in Congress—DREAMer narratives and other first-person accounts by child migrants, current and former alike, have not been able to bring about real change for the millions people who make their home in the United States without the state's authorization.

To be clear, I am not arguing that *Lost Children Archive* will succeed where DREAMer narratives have failed and transform US immigration policy. Rather, by rejecting conventional forms of witnessing—of "documentation, representation, and commemoration," to use Ann Cvetkovich's words—Luiselli's novel offers an alternative way of narrating the child migrant catastrophe in medias res (Cvetkovich 2003, p. 9). While this catastrophe is punctuated by spectacular and newsworthy events, like the 2014 child migrant crisis and the 2018 migrant caravan, it continues to unfold gradually and out of sight—for example, in courtrooms, detention facilities, and remote airports.

By showing readers such "sights unseen," *Lost Children Archive* also calls attention to another emblem of undocutime: the paralysis of witnessing. Mama confronts this paralysis when she and her family race to an airport in rural New Mexico after hearing that a group of unaccompanied child migrants is about to be deported from it. Standing behind a fence at the airport's edge, she peers through binoculars and sees "girls, boys: one behind another, no backpacks, nothing" on the distant tarmac (Luiselli 2019, p. 182). "Several officers march at their side, as if the children might try to escape now, as if they could" (p. 182). Mama frantically searches for Manuela's daughters among them. Then the plane departs, and she realizes there is nothing she can do to stop it. She hurls her body against the fence and insults at the officers, but "they can't hear [her] over the plane's engines" (p. 182). Papa wraps his arms around her, not in "an embrace, but a containment" (p. 182). Presaging the hopeless circles that the boy and the girl will wander in after they run away from their parents, the deportees are trapped by the officers and the fence encircling the airport, while Papa's arms encircle and immobilize Mama.

Like witnessing, telling a story is a form of agency. Yet, as DREAMers' public narratives and the failure to pass the DREAM Act remind us, the story and the act of telling it sometimes do little to change the status quo. "Stories don't fix anything or save anyone," Mama concedes (Luiselli 2019, p. 185). Along with her and the boy's narratives, the lists, maps, document fragments, and photos that make up *Lost Children Archive* record both the family's last days and the child migrant crisis. Akin to the jumbled stories the children tell Luiselli in *Tell Me How It Ends*, these partial

and nonnarrative forms archive violence, slow and spectacular alike. They are also bits of evidence that, when compiled as a story, however disorderly or incomplete, "subtract … the future from the past, the only way of finding clarity in hindsight" (p. 186). In other words, these partial and nonnarrative forms try to put the future in dialogue with the past in order to make sense of both.

As *Lost Children Archive* narrates the unresolved story about the ongoing child migrant crisis, it intertwines a story about child migrants with a story about a family's disintegration. Luiselli's unnamed family can be almost *any* American family, just as Camposanto's unnamed children can be anyone's children, including seemingly average American children like the boy and the girl. The commonalities between these two sets of children are evident in the openings of *Lost Children Archive* and *Elegies*. When the former opens, Mama is observing the boy and the girl as they nap in the car: "Mouths open to the sun, they sleep. Boy and girl, foreheads pearled with sweat, cheeks red and streaked white with dry spit" (Luiselli 2019, p. 5). Similarly, *Elegies* opens with a description of the child migrants sleeping: "Mouths open to the sky, they sleep. Boys, girls: lips chapped, cheeks cracked, for the wind whips day and night" (p. 142). Yet the differences between these two sets of children are equally striking. Safe and with their parents in their air-conditioned Volvo, the boy and the girl "occupy the entire space in the back of the car, spread out, limbs offering, heavy and placid" (p. 5). In contrast, Camposanto's children are "stiff but warm, lined up like new corpses along the metal roof of the train gondola" (p. 142). Mama reflects, as long as children like Manuela's and Camposanto's "are utterly foreign to us"—as long as they are "aliens," "illegals," and "UACs"—no one will recognize them "as refugees of a hemispheric war," as Indigenous in a settler colony, and as children, plain and simple (pp. 50–51).

Conclusion: minor threat

Both *Tell Me How It Ends* and *Lost Children Archive* consider the various ways the US media and US politicians dehumanize child migrants fleeing Central America and Mexico. In addition to being branded aliens, illegals, and UACs, the children are likened to "a biblical plague" that promises to bring "chaos," "sickness," "dirt," and "brownness. … If they are allowed to stay here they will—eventually—reproduce!" (Luiselli 2017, p. 15). For some Americans, these children are not children, but a ticking demographic timebomb that will defile what is supposed to be a white America.

What is more, Black and brown unaccompanied child migrants trouble the enduring formal and informal compact between the United States and its neighbors to the south. Reflecting on that relationship and the strategic use of the figure of the child migrant in the ongoing quest for immigration reform in the United States, historian Laura Briggs has observed:

> Some have argued that … it is easier to build sympathy for adorable children than, say, fighting for the admissibility of *chicas trans*, trans women, another group of people who died in alarming numbers in ICE detention in 2018 and

> 2019. Probably building sympathy for children is easier, but that does not make it unimportant. Children are not just the ultimate "good" immigrants; they are also a symbol that Central Americans are here to stay—not just a cheap labor force that can be made available to US agribusiness and the service industry. … This wave of children, accompanied and unaccompanied, came *not* as part of a labor migration, but as asylum seekers. They came here to stay, to refuse any longer to just be the bodies that do hard, dirty jobs for starvation wages. (Briggs 2020, pp. 177–178)

Briggs's remarks lay bare the utilitarian value of DREAMers, DACA participants, and economic migration in general. Unlike their more elderly parents or grandparents, DREAMers and the DACAmented are productive workers or future productive workers. Children, in contrast, are not yet workers, at least they are not supposed to be in the Global North, despite reports about the exploitation of child migrant laborers in the United States (Dreier 2023). Arriving with their full lives ahead of them, children embody the future—hence the threat Mexican and Central American child migrants pose to those who fear an irrevocable racial, cultural, and demographic transformation of the United States.

While the prevailing DREAMer narrative attempts to reproduce the dominant pro-immigrant narrative by invoking the American dream, *Lost Children Archive* stresses that the children fleeing Mexico and the Northern Triangle are not "looking for the American Dream, as the narrative usually goes" (Luiselli 2019, p. 19). Rather, these children are "merely looking for a way out of their daily nightmare" (p. 19). The prevailing DREAMer narrative also attempts to reproduce the narrative as it "usually goes" by emphasizing its protagonist's grit and deservingness. However, the reality of the DREAM Act—its paralysis and the prolongation of its not-yet-ness—is incommensurable with the dominant pro-immigrant narrative. Put another way, the dominant pro-immigrant narrative is a before-and-after story, one with a beginning, a middle, and an end. *Lost Children Archive*, in contrast, tells the story of migrants who disappear or die in transit and who, therefore, "never fully arrive" and for whom there is no happy ending (Román 2021, p. 178). More than twenty years after the introduction of the DREAM Act and more than ten years after DACA, there is still no "after" for DREAMers. As long as there is an absence of future, just slow violence and a surplus of time, new stories that apprehend undocutime must be told.

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