Echoes of Silence: Listening and Creating Echoes to Break the Archival Violence in *Lost Children Archive* by Valeria Luiselli

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Abstract

In *Lost Children Archive* (2019), Valeria Luiselli examines how lost, silenced, or forgotten voices can be preserved and understood. This essay argues that, through the stories of refugee children and Native Americans in the Mexico–United States borderland, the novel uses echo as a metaphor and method to create an archive of erased narratives. Echo serves as a means to connect with the past, expand archival possibilities, and reenact history, as it provides a profound approach to understanding intergenerational stories across time and space.

How do we listen to the stories and sounds that are lost and can no longer be heard? The voices that are erased from history, violently silenced, or left in distant places to be forgotten? And how do we understand, make sense of, and defy the archival gap ensued from this form of violence? In *Lost Children Archive* (2019), Valeria Luiselli explores these questions by focusing on the journey of refugee children in the context of the Mexico-United States borderland and on the last Apache group that resisted colonization within the same region. As the characters trace the stories of immigrant children and Native Americans together with the sounds that overlay the Southwest Desert, the novel displays various forms of building an archive and making sense of the stories made absent, disregarded, or lost. This essay argues that *Lost Children Archive* uses the phenomenon of echo as a key metaphor for and a method of producing, transmitting, and making sense of intergenerational stories. Echo is presented as a means of relating to the past in the present; a potential for creating, expanding, and transforming the archive; and a performance of reenactment that becomes an instrument for grasping historical connections.

Lost Children Archive revolves around a road trip from New York to Arizona taken by a family of four: unnamed mother, father, ten-year-old boy, and five-year-old girl. The parents—Ma and Pa as the children call them—first meet while working on a New York City soundscape project. The father, an acoustemologist and a soundscape artist, is interested in clusters of voices, footsteps, and nature sounds within the city, while the mother with her training in journalism, focuses on the stories told by children and adults and how they speak, pause, tell lies, pray, and breathe (Luiselli 13). Their differing approaches to archiving a soundscape eventually lead them to pursue separate projects, which causes problems in their marriage and drives them apart. The father becomes interested in Apaches and creates what he calls "inventory of echoes" by recording the soundscapes of the land where the last free Apaches and their leaders like Chief Cochise and Geronimo lived, fought, and died. As his project leads him to the Southwest Desert, the family embarks on a journey across the United States, which, they assume, will end in their separation. Meanwhile, the mother aims

to create a sound documentary of the stories of refugee children who cross the Mexico border and their court testimonies. She listens to the news, patrol officers and locals who talk aggressively and fearfully of immigrant children. What both parents aim to do in their separate projects is to understand and document the stories taking place in the same territory by listening to different sounds that overlay it. The novel demonstrates how two seemingly different projects on the southwest land of America echo one another. Pa's research on Apaches broadens the discussion of migration with critical questions on how the land is historically claimed or stolen, who protects it and from whom. Ma's project on the political violence on immigrant children echoes the violence inflicted on Native Americans. In this interconnectedness, they stop being isolated events in history and instead enrich the understanding of each other.

Emphasizing the past and ongoing colonial violence concentrated in the Southwest Desert, the narrative intertwines the journey of refugee children at the Mexico–United States borderlands with the history of Geronimo and the Chiricahua Apache, the last Indigenous group to resist colonization. In doing so, Luiselli underscores the problem of documentation, where historical events are often treated in isolation, and refugees and migrants are perceived as external threats by U.S. citizens. To illustrate, Ma references an article titled "Kids, a Biblical Plague" from *The Daily Gazette*, a local newspaper, which describes the children at the border and highlights certain statements: "Tens of thousands of children streaming from chaotic Central American nations to the U.S." and "this 60,000 to 90,000 illegal alien children mass […] carry with them viruses that we are not familiar with in the United States" (124). The language framing these children—foreign, illegal, diseased, and threatening—implies that they endanger the American way of life. Such documentation not only stigmatizes these children but also reduces them to problems to be managed through swift deportation, ignoring the deeper context of U.S. colonial legacies that have contributed to the very conditions forcing these children to flee their homes. Ma argues: "No one thinks of the children arriving here now as refugees of a hemispheric war that extends, at least,

from these very mountains, down across the country into the southern U.S. and northern Mexican deserts" (51). However, asking why these children flee would reveal a protracted conflict that continues through centuries of colonialism perpetuated by the nation-state in this territory. Jodi Byrd, a Chickasaw Nation citizen and English professor, addresses this issue, observing that "there is a long line of continuity between the past and the present that has not been disrupted, despite the fact that the stories we tell may or may not acknowledge that continuity" (xiv). Through the representation of two distinct projects on refugee children and Apache resistance that pursue sounds and echoes of silenced stories in the Southwest U.S., *Lost Children Archive* presents itself as "an archive of what is missing, has been disregarded, or cannot be apprehended" by (re)cognizing the continuity of past and present violence (Vázquez Enríquez 75).

In what follows, I will show how *Lost Children Archive* adopts recording, listening to, and creating echoes as historical and creative methods to understand continuing colonialism and to construct an archive of what is absent and silenced. First, I outline the theoretical framework around the concept of echo in sound studies and literature, and explain how it relates to the novel. Then, I present Pa's "inventory of echoes" in which he records the soundscape of the land where the last Apaches resisted, in order to understand echoes as a historical method to revive what has been lost. Second, I will explore how the novel illustrates that stories told today, in this case those about refugee children, serve as material for future generations to echo and build upon in their own narratives. Finally, through the reenactments of Ma and Pa's children who witness these projects in the backseat of the car, I will examine how their imaginary games, which echo the stories of lost children and Apache resistance, perform a (re)cognition of historical connections.

Inventory of Echoes: Building the Archive

Ella Finer, researcher of sonic cultures, writer and sound artist, explains that an "echo happens when a sound is reflected back towards its source after hitting a hard surface" (317). Environmental characteristics,

such as the distance of the surface and the type of material off which the sound is bouncing, influence the way we hear this reflected sound. Since an echo always returns a sound different from the original, it carries the traces of its travel through time and space. This journey, which imprints on the sound, is the reason why Mark M. Smith argues that "[a]n echo is nothing if not historical […] it is a faded facsimile of an original sound, a reflection of time passed" (55). Because of this reflection, echo becomes a critical historical method to explore the questions about how much we can recover and re-evaluate past moments, the relationship between the original occurrence and its archival reiteration, and the role of loss in historical understanding.

In a study that examines the use of echo techniques in early modern drama and poetry, Susan L. Anderson similarly argues that echo represents both distortion and adaptation, making it a useful metaphor for historical inquiry:

> Echo always already contains within it its implied originary instance which is, paradoxically, no longer present. It denotes what has already begun and is in the process of being lost, but is by definition what yet remains. Using echo as a historical methodology means acknowledging that we are in some sense participating in these repetitions and that we are always in medias res. (6)

According to her, echo highlights loss as an ongoing process rather than an absolute. It refers to an absence in the present while simultaneously making that absence audible. Echo demonstrates how the past is archived in the experience of the present while also highlighting the situatedness of the listener or archivist. Therefore, the focus on the event of loss makes echo a political historical tool that defies erasure and silencing.

In *Lost Children Archive*, Pa records the echoes of Apache resistance about which historian and activist Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz explains: "The longest military counterinsurgency in US history was the war on the Apache Nation, 1850-86. Goyathlay, known as Geronimo, famously led the final decade of Apache resistance" (150). Pa explains to the

children that he wants to go towards the desert and to the Chiricahua Mountains in the desert, "where the last free peoples on the entire American continent lived before they had to surrender to the white-eyes" (Luiselli 26). Once there, Pa records the sounds of the desert, birds, branches in the wind surrounding the graves and places where Geronimo and other Apaches once walked, sang, fought, and resisted. His project employs the concept of echo as a historical methodology, which Ma explains:

> He's somehow trying to capture their past presence in the world, and making it audible, despite their current absence, by sampling any echoes that still reverberate of them. […] The inventory of echoes was not a collection of sounds that have been lost—such a thing would in fact be impossible—but rather one of sounds that were present in the time of recording and that, when we listen to them, remind us of the ones that are lost. (141)

Echo offers itself as a momentary performance of the past in the present. However, this performance does not recreate the original sound exactly as it was uttered in the past but rather reveals how it lingers in the present. As an absent presence, echo carries what is previously uttered and lost into the moment of now, while always referring to its irrecoverable absence. For Pa, the area is not only a historical site that the last independent Apaches inhabited and where they were buried but also a vibrating entity that continues to produce the echoes of resistance.

Tracing the echoes of Apaches in the present soundscapes emphasizes the importance of how the subject is situated in time and space at the moment of recording. What Pa records is not the lost sounds of Geronimo but one of the sounds heard and recorded in the present which reminds of the ones that are lost and more importantly of the event of loss itself. Like Anderson's description, echo is not an identical repetition of a lost originary instance; it is a reinterpretation, a re-engagement with that original through an active remembrance. Dunbar-Ortiz further explains that "the Apache resistance was not a

military threat to the United States but rather a symbol of resistance and freedom. Herein lies the essence of counterinsurgent colonialist warfare: no resistance can be tolerated" (150). By integrating past colonial violence against the Apaches and the erasure of their resistance through the "inventory of echoes" of the Native Land, alongside contemporary violence of border control imposed on the Mexican refugees in the same area, the novel demonstrates how understanding and remembering the past enriches our comprehension of present-day violence.

Echoes in Play: Mimesis, (Re)enactment, and (Re)cognition

In addition to addressing how the past is archived in the present, the "inventory of echoes" further underlines that the sounds created and the words uttered in the present are potential materials for a future archive. The novel demonstrates that listening to sounds and echoes is not only a method for broader historical projects but also a practice of everyday life, which we use to construct our personal, private, and familial narratives. Observing how the sounds of their children fill and transform the heavy silence of their arguing parents, Ma notes:

> Conversations, in a family, become linguistic archaeology. They build the world we share, layer it in a palimpsest, give meaning to our present and future. The question is, when, in the future, we dig into our intimate archive, replay our family tape, will it amount to a story? A soundscape? Or will it all be sound rubble, noise, and debris? (Luiselli 29)

The novel suggests that each family creates its own myth and history out of their conversations and experiences which are stored in the memory. How we create narratives of our family and childhood is compared to the corporeal work of an archaeologist, where one brings to the surface what is buried underneath. However, archives are not necessarily meaningful in themselves. They become meaningful when someone builds a narrative and tells a story about them. Maaike Bleeker argues:

"historical research is not merely a matter of (re)discovering the past" as if it were preserved intact in an archive, "but [rather] of producing an understanding of the past based on active engagement with traces from the past" (216). In this sense, meaning is created by the acts of making sense, selecting the pieces that fit together, ordering them in importance, and forgetting what is subjectively not essential. Only then can rubble and noise amount to a meaningful story.

As the novel examines forms of dispossession and colonial practices in U.S. history through a family's journey, the process of building a narrative from archival materials extends beyond personal myth-making. It becomes a broader exploration of how individuals, specifically children, make sense of the world. Each character, with their unique engagement with the family archive, forms a slightly different version not only of the family's story but also of the sounds and stories that overlay the Southwest Desert. This diversity is symbolized by the boxes in the car, each assigned to a different member. Pa and Ma's boxes contain research materials: books on archiving, maps of Apache territories, accounts of child refugee journeys, media reports on the migration crisis, and official records of deaths. In contrast, the children's boxes begin empty, to be filled with objects collected along the way. In the first half of the novel, the focus is on Ma's and Pa's boxes and their understanding of the land according to their respective research. In the second half, when the boy takes over the narrative, the story shifts to the children's perspective, exploring how they interpret the harsh realities surrounding their journey. The novel consequently raises questions about how the children will engage with the news, their parents' projects and conflicts, stories of Apaches and refugee children, and what kind of story they will ultimately create from these materials. Through this narrative shift midway, *Lost Children Archive* passes the role of storyteller to a new generation whose version of the stories of lost children will echo, transform, and eventually outlive Ma's narrative.

In the backseat of the car, two children witness both of their parents' research and ask questions about Apaches and the child refugees at the border. They even come up with imaginary answers, such as: "What if Geronimo had never surrendered to the white-eyes? What if he'd won

that war? The lost children would be the rulers of Apacheria!" (Luiselli 75). Moreover, they start reenacting what they hear from their parents' stories: they pretend to be Apaches, cowboys, and cowgirls fighting with Border Control with arrows, imagining the possible outcomes of what might happen to children stuck at the border. They pretend to be the lost children in the desert and imagine how they would find their way like young Apache warriors. Ma observes:

> how their thoughts are filling our world, inside this car, filling it and blurring all its outlines with the same slow persistency of smoke expanding inside a small room. I don't know to what degree my husband and I have made our stories theirs; and they, their stories and backseat games, ours. Perhaps we mutually infect each other with our fears, obsessions, and expectations, as easily as we pass around a flu virus. (179)

The stories are infectious and the four people in the car are porous subjects, with the ideas and emotions of their inner worlds leaking out, affecting one another. Ma and Pa's stories and projects shape how children imagine, understand, and relate to the world. In return, children's games make the adults see things differently, think about the questions they wouldn't ask, hear the echoes of their stories, and listen to how they come out of children's imagination. Thus, *Lost Children Archive* demonstrates how the stories of the past do not remain in the archives of history as isolated objects to be studied and passively understood. Rather, the novel illustrates that the way these stories are told and remembered shapes the future comprehension of the world by the next generations. They leak into the cultural imagination through reverberations and echoes and inform the current perception of the world.

Pondering how children play imaginary games informed by the stories of Apaches and refugees, Ma notes: "Maybe any understanding, especially historical understanding, requires some kind of reenactment of the past, in its small, outward-branching, and often terrifying possibilities" (155). Through this statement, the novel presents the performance of reenactment as a means of engaging with the past with

the intent of making sense of it in the present. Explaining Katie King's argument in *Networked Reenactments: Stories Transdisciplinary Knowledges Tell*, Bleeker states that reenactment is "a perspective on newly emerging modes of distributed, embedded, and embodied recognition" (225). Reenactments do not merely mimic or replicate what we encounter, but they help us make sense of it from the perspective of our own bodies. They are ways of somatically exploring the past in the present, sparking, in Ma's words, a "recognition, in the sense of re-cognizing, knowing again, for a second or third time, like an echo of a knowledge, which brings acknowledgment" (Luiselli 174). Thus, the utilization of echo as a historical method to listen to past absence is elaborated. In Ma's reading of her children's games, reenactment becomes an embodied performance of echo where children imitate and transform the stories of Apache resistance and deportation of immigrants in order to make sense of their brutal consequences.

As she recognizes the power of children's games to echo her project, she figures out how to tell the story of lost children:

> Listening to them now, I realize they are the ones who are telling the story of the lost children. They've been telling it all along, over and over again in the back of the car [. . .] Perhaps my children's voices were like those bird songs that my husband […] record[ed] once, which function as echoes of people who have passed away. Their voices, the only way to listen to voices that are not audible; children's voices, 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 who 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. (180)

Here, her project becomes a combination of echo as utilized in her husband's inventory, and reenactment of her children as performed in

their imaginative games. The story Ma wants to tell is of the missing children who are not only lost in the desert but also missing from history as their voices cannot be heard. She listens to their absence through the echoes that reverberate around her children's stories.

The novel's most remarkable moment occurs when the boy decides to go to the desert with his sister to find the lost children that try to seek refuge in the U.S. They leave the parents sleeping and set out on a journey on foot. In the journey which makes their reenactment a reality, they try to navigate their way, protect themselves from dangerous people, find food and water, and survive. They become the lost children. Thus, the novel offers a possible answer to Ma's question of how to tell the stories of children whose voices are missing from history. Through the boy's and the girl's journey into the desert, the refugee children stop being an abstract entity, or undocumented lost bodies, dehumanized in their representation in the U.S. media.

Historian and scholar of Reenactment Studies, Alexander Cook explains that "projects [of] reenactment are not in any direct sense about the period or the events being reenacted. Rather they are about a modern set of activities that are inspired by an interest in the past. They are about placing modern individuals in dialogue with a historical imaginary" (494). Thus, through the reenactments of children with whom the reader forms an affective relation, the novel puts the reader in a dialogue with how the crisis of immigrant children lost in the desert and captured at the border exists in the historical imaginary. This imaginary is shaped by the novel's inclusion of official documents of the dead bodies found in the desert, discussions on media which either exploit the pain and desperation of children to represent a tragedy beyond resolution or frighten citizens about uncontrolled refugees crossing the borders to justify politics and practices of violence directed to these refugees. Adopting the activity of reenactment as "a narrative strategy and a research tool," Luiselli's fictional work is what Cook calls "investigative reenactment," since it aims "not to dramatize a past that is already known, but to learn something new about the past through the activity of reenactment itself and to communicate those findings to a wider audience" (487-488).

Conclusion

All in all, *Lost Children Archive* by Valeria Luiselli explores how to make sense of a crisis which seems too complex to comprehend, too painful to witness, too urgent to ignore. It illustrates that making sense of an event entails an active engagement with the archive. The novel intricately weaves the past and present acts of colonial violence through the motifs of sound, echo, and reenactment, exploring the ethical implications of archiving and listening. By documenting the intertwined histories of Apache resistance and the journey of the refugee children crossing the Mexican-U.S. border, Luiselli's narrative underscores the importance of recognizing historical continuities. As argued in this essay, Luiselli presents the phenomenon of echo and performance of reenactment as critical corporeal tools in understanding the past in the present, and perhaps more importantly, defying the erasure and silencing of the stories which are made absent, disregarded, or lost.

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Biography

Elif Kayahan holds a research master in Contemporary Literary Studies (Utrecht University) and two BAs in English Literature and Philosophy (Bogazici University). Her work focuses on rewriting the literary canon, creative criticism, and, more recently, exploring the intersection of sound studies and literature.