

LITERATURE, MOBILITY, AND THE ARCHIVE. NOTES TOWARDS THE DEFINITION OF A POETICS OF TRANSLATEDNESS IN VALERIA LUISELLI'S ŒUVRE

LITERATURA, MOBILIDADE E ARQUIVO. NOTAS PARA A DEFINIÇÃO DE UMA POÉTICA DA EXISTÊNCIA-EM-TRADUÇÃO NA OBRA DE VALERIA LUISELLI

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ABSTRACT

In 2019 Mexican-born Valeria Luiselli penned *Lost Children Archive*, which inaugurates her writing in English, and tells the interwoven stories of a blended family, as they take a road trip across America, and of the hardships of children travelling on foot to the US border. The narrative is a poetic representation of lives in transit, and mobility informs it semantically and structurally: it is organized in four parts, each divided into small sections and includes manifold documents. In the narrative, the notion and the experience of the archive are of great importance, emerging out of multiple displacements. This being-in-transit conjures up a literal – it discusses the movement of people –, and figurative – it embraces multiple entanglements, renouncing completeness – translatedness. While *Lost Children Archive* is a tour de force, and adds a layer of complexity to her writing, Luiselli's oeuvre, both in Spanish and in English, has always been characterized by an interpenetration of languages, texts, places, and people – a close-knit interweaving of trajectories and memories. This results in an understanding of literature as assemblage, a ground in which to tentatively document existence. As such, it lends itself to an examination of the ways translation shapes the literary in a post-colonial, global(ized) world.

Keywords: translatedness, archive, mobility, literature

RESUMO

Em 2019, a escritora mexicana Valeria Luiselli publicou *Lost Children Archive*, obra que inaugurou a sua produção em inglês e conta as histórias cruzadas de uma família recomposta, que atravessa de carro os Estados Unidos da América, e das crianças que se deslocam a pé da América Central para os EUA. A obra é uma representação poética de vidas em trânsito, com a mobilidade a dar forma à narrativa, tanto semântica como estruturalmente: o texto está organizado em quatro partes, cada uma dividida em pequenas secções, e incorpora documentos diversos. Este estar-em-trânsito evoca uma existência-em-tradução [*translatedness*] que é literal – discute o movimento de pessoas – e figurativa – inclui múltiplos cruzamentos e renuncia à completude. Embora *Lost Children Archive* seja um *tour de force* e acrescente uma camada de complexidade à sua escrita, a obra de Luiselli, em espanhol e em inglês, caracteriza-se pela interpenetração de línguas, textos, lugares e pessoas, numa imbricada confluência de trajetórias e memórias. Isto resulta num entendimento de literatura como um aglomerado de experiências, memórias, histórias e objetos – um lugar capaz de documentar tentativamente a existência humana. Como tal, presta-se a uma investigação sobre os modos como a tradução configura o literário num mundo global(izado) e pós-colonial.

Palavras-chave: existência-em-tradução [*translatedness*], arquivo, mobilidade, literatura

OF INTUITIONS AND EXPERIMENTATION

The invocation of ‘theory’ in the humanities, in historical and social studies, in the evaluation of literature and the arts, seems to me mendacious. The humanities are susceptible neither to crucial experiments nor to verification (except on a material, documentary level). Our responses to them are narratives of intuition. Steiner, 1997: 5

I will begin my reflection with two quotations I have been experimenting with for some time now – these excerpts somehow result from an intuition of what literature may do in the global contemporary, an intuition I have been trying to translate into a conceptual framework for the literary. Beginning with two quotations anticipates a three-fold gesture that inhabits this article: (a) it is a personal quirk of mine – like Walter Benjamin, I would like to write a book composed entirely of quotations; (b) it is an act of defiance in the face of the overpowering institution of “originality” as “origin”; and, most importantly, (c) it signals the multivocality of what is to come – I suggest that the act of (mis)quoting points to the collective, collaborative nature of knowledge. One writes, indeed, one speaks, *in the wake of* others and *for* others – it is this double movement of looking back and forward that I am interested in, and it is also in this constant flux that “translatedness”, the concept I will be discussing in the following pages, happens.

In Siri Hustvedt’s 2019 novel *What I Loved*, Matt, the narrator’s eleven-year-old son, expounds on the importance of positionality after attending a baseball game in the following manner:

I mean that because we were sitting where we were sitting tonight, we saw a game that was a little different from those guys with the beer next to us. It was the same game, but I could’ve noticed something those guys didn’t. And then I thought, if I was sitting over there, I’d see something else. And not just the game. I mean they saw me and I saw them, but I didn’t see myself and they didn’t see themselves. (...) And then I put that together with people thinking their zillions of thoughts – right now they’re out there thinking and thinking – I get this floaty feeling.” He paused. “On the way home in the car when we were all quiet, I thought about how everybody’s thoughts keep changing. The thoughts that people were having during the game turned into new thoughts when

we were in the car. That was then, but this is now, but then that now is gone, and there's a new now. Right now, I'm saying right now, but it's over before I've finished saying it. (Hustvedt, 2003: 129)

In the dialogue above, Matt underlines two aspects I will be returning to in my reflection: on the one hand, the materiality of the body and its constraints, which determines the ever-shifting “I” position and what can be seen from the standpoint of a particular body placed in time; and, on the other, the fleetingness of time, with the “now” always sliding imperceptibly into a “then”.

In a different context, although not in a dissimilar fashion, Karim Amir, the narrator of Hanif Kureishi's 1990 *The Buddha of Suburbia* reflects on positionality and its intricacies, as he opens his first-person narrative implicitly acknowledging that “identities are robustly plural” (Sen 2006: 19), and unequivocally touting that he results from a “new breed as it were” – a combination of geographies and legacies:

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care – Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. (Kureishi, 1990: 3)

While discussing, to some extent, the same phenomenon – what could be perhaps broadly described as the inescapability of deixis to human experience –, the two quotations point in different, but to me, complementary, directions. On the one hand, Hustvedt's excerpt emphasizes both the material constraints of the body –

human beings have bodies, and this physicality affects what they may see at a given point in time – and the inter-relatedness of the human condition: whereas the former highlights the essential situatedness of experience, the latter wagers on the possibility, and necessity, of translating that same experience. As the narrator's eleven-year-old Matt suggests, "I" and "you", as well as "now" and "then", are "[w]ords that wobble" (Hustvedt, 2006: 1), i.e., that depend on positionality – on who and when and where one exists. This positionality, however, is complicated by the realization that it is not fixed or stable or permanent, rather it changes, is contingent, unstable and relational: in conversation, the "I" becomes "you" or "he/she" and vice-versa, since in time the "now" very soon fades into "then". In turn, Kureishi's opening lines to *The Buddha of Suburbia* reflect upon the ways our present-day circumstances force the internalization of experience as translatedness: now "here" and "there" have ceased to be words that shift and wobble (Hustvedt, 2006: 1) according to subject positionality; "here" and "there" have become not disjunctive but complementary, powerful components of everyday experience to an ever increasing number of people, and conflate at the core of a complex self-perception. Put differently, this is what Rushdie has termed "the elsewhere-ness of existence" – the permanent condition (and awareness) of being translated.

Therefore, the two quotations express a keen awareness of deixis in the world we live in, i.e., of the mobility of experience and perception, which subsequently construes and shapes the literary gesture in unexpected ways, displacing self, language, and literature from strict national communities, and repositioning them in ever new constellations of experience that underscore the realization that translatedness inhabits their very nature.

This brief analysis of the two quotations may, thus, promote a tentative definition of the concept of "translatedness":

translatedness, noun, 1. the experience of being translated, of being in transit, homelessness; 2. living in translation; 3. the awareness of being translated; 4. writing in the style of translation itself.

TRANSLATEDNESS AS (LITERARY) EXPERIENCE

I feel more than ever that I am a writer without a definitive language, without origin, without definition. Whether it's an advantage or a disadvantage I wouldn't know.

Lahiri, 2016: 129-131

Jhumpa Lahiri's self-characterization and her indecision as to whether her "undefinedness", or, as she puts it, her "dual identity" is advantageous to her craft are key to the argument that translatedness may be at the root of what the literary is nowadays, since much of contemporary literature seems to be, to a great extent, as Reihardt Meyer-Kalkus notes, "an example of an odd placelessness and the dissociation between nativity and nationality (...) [that] characterizes the lives of many writers in today's world" (Greenblatt, 2010: 120). While the experience of "colonization, exile, emigration, wandering, contamination, and unintended consequences, along with the fierce compulsions of greed, longing, and restlessness" (*ibidem*: 2) shape our present-day world, cultural and linguistic mobility is not a new phenomenon. Languages move, translate, evolve, infiltrate and contaminate one another – contrary to popular belief, languages have never been pure, but are rather inhabited by movement, a process which involves manifold experiences of creating and carrying meaning and forms across, ranging from quotation to appropriation, via allusion, iteration, parody and *métissage*. To heterodoxically quote Yoko Tawada, languages are "similar to a web. The structure of a web gets denser when new

traits are incorporated. In this way, a new pattern is formed. There are more and more knots, tight and loose spots, irregularities, uncompleted corners, edges, holes, or superimposed layers” – for Tawada, this is “the multilingual web” (Tawada, 2003: 148), and I would argue that these knots, spots, irregularities, corners, edges, holes and layers are composed of diverse acts of visible and invisible, conscious and unconscious translation, understood in a broad sense. As Ariel Dorfman puts it, languages have always been:

maddeningly migrant, borrowing from here and there and everywhere, plundering and bringing home the most beautiful, the strangest, the most exciting objects, learning, taking words out on loan and returning them in a different wonderfully twisted and often funny guise, pawning those words, punning them, stealing them, renting them out, eating them, making love to them and spawning splendidly unrecognizable children. (Dorfman, 2003: 36)

Tawada’s concept of language as a web and Dorfman’s breathless description of how a given language travels and transforms attest to an understanding of language that embraces change, movement, translation, while eschewing notions of stability, purity, and the concomitant obsession with origins.

This translatedness, inherent to language, is further complicated in the realm of literature. Back in 1975, George Steiner rightly asserted that “the existence of art and literature, the reality of felt history in a community, depend on a never-ending, though often unconscious, act of internal translation. It is no overstatement to say that we possess civilization because we have learnt to translate out of time” (Steiner, 1992: 31) – this “never-ending, though often unconscious, act of internal translation” has evolved into what might be termed an externalization of long-standing practices, visibly shaping languages,

identities, geographies and literatures, and it materializes diversely in intertextuality, i.e., in the echoes and (ab)uses of languages and texts and motifs and resources, translation proper, appropriation of forms and poetics, etc.

Today, the inherent translatedness has been rendered more visible due to a myriad of phenomena [decolonization, globalization, faster communication and travel technology, the internet, etc.] which have led to the emergence of a different breed of writers who could not boast to be “immobile, one-place, one-language, one-culture writers” (Rushdie, 2012: 98). Instead, literature is, to a great extent, shaped by the experience of those who have ended up in a place that was not the place where they began (Rushdie, 2012: 53), and have become torn up from “all the traditional roots of the self” (*ibidem*): place, community, culture, and language.

The contemporary experience of “translatedness” in literature, i.e., the awareness of existing(-and-writing)-in-translation, arguably results from three aspects, which will be briefly discussed here. One common trait to all three, however, is the emergence, and inescapability, of plural worldviews. Set against various ideologies, and bigotries, of the Same, the present-day world appears as a compound of plural languages, multiple experiences and differences, and countless cultures – which often share the same territory, the same literature.

The three aspects under scrutiny here are:

1. LANGUAGE AS THE LANGUAGE OF THE OTHER

The first aspect to be taken into account is the idea, and the experience, of language. Present-day circumstances, which include mass migration, displacement and globalization, have potentially rendered obsolete or, at least, questionable, those traditional pillars upon which the interpretation of the literary event rested for over

two centuries in the Western world: the concepts of “originality”, “mother tongue” and “nationality” – all three somehow including an age-old preoccupation with origin and singularity. These concepts have been further questioned and destabilized by a contemporary understanding of language that insists that, while one speaks a language, one is also spoken by the language; and that the language one speaks is not, in any significant manner, one’s own. Here, Jacques Derrida’s discussion of monolingualism comes to mind:

I am monolingual. My monolingualism dwells, and I call it my dwelling; it feels like one to me, and I remain in it and inhabit it. It inhabits me. (...) Yet it will never be mine, this language, the only one I am thus destined to speak, as long as speech is possible for me in life and in death; you see, never will this language be mine. And, truth to tell, it never was. (Derrida, 1998: 1-2)

Both the impossibility of understanding language as one’s own and/or the existence in one person of more than one language question Romantic conceptions of the (in)famous maxim “one man, one nation, one language”, and, to a considerable extent, notions of “originality” and “singularity”, for experience has become ostensibly plural and unstable. Among the authors who could be quoted in this context, J.M. Coetzee’s reflection is a case in point:

I agree that one’s *Weltanschauung* is formed by the language that one speaks and writes most easily and, to a degree, thinks in. But it is not formed so deeply that one can never stand far enough outside that language to inspect it critically – particularly if one speaks or even just understands another language. That is why I say that it is possible to have a first language yet nonetheless not feel at home in it... (Coetzee and Auster, 2013: 72)

The linguistic homelessness in contemporary experience Coetzee refers to resonates with many other writers, including all the authors quoted here. The intricate relation to language is furthermore compounded by the complexity of the many entanglements of language and culture in one space, which tend to upset traditional categories and concepts, mixing traditions, voices and temporalities, which leads Mary Louise Pratt to speak of “contagion” and “infiltration”:

The multilingual person is not someone who translates constantly from one language or cultural system into another, though translation is something multilingual subjects are able to do if needed. To be multilingual is above all to live in more than one language, to be one for whom translation is unnecessary. The image for multilingualism is not translation, perhaps, but *desdoblamiento* (‘doubling’), a multiplying of the self. (Pratt, 2002: 35)

Unexpectedly, Pratt seems to resort to a narrow notion of “translation” at the end of her article “The Traffic in Meaning: Translation, Contagion, Infiltration”, because arguably “living in more than one language” always entails various degrees of “translatedness”, if not translation in a more literal (and visible) sense, and the inescapable experience of being translated requires constant effort, always commanding (self-)awareness as it is construed socially and symbolically in unmistakable terms – we can see an instance of this in *Lost Children Archive*: “I get asked about my accent and place of birth, and I say no, I was not born in this country, and when I say where I was born, I don’t even get a nod in return” (Luiselli, 2019: 129). Languages, accents, skin colour, gender – all comprise narratives that are “translated” into social and political frames and gestures.

Unlike translation, which is often reduced to a product – the translated text –, and as such is taken to be a mere mechanical act of repetition, of reproduction, the concept of translatedness, as understood here, assembles multiple practices and experiences, which pertain to language and literature, but also to the social and the political. It results both from the situatedness of experience and the possibility of making sense of it, as well as communicating this experience to others. We translate, and are translated, all the time – this was one of the most important [even if consistently forgotten] claims Friedrich Schleiermacher made in 1813 at the very beginning of his much-quoted essay “On the different methods of translating”: “Indeed, are we not often required to translate another’s speech for ourselves, even if he is our equal in all respects, but possesses a different frame of mind or feeling?” (Schleiermacher, 1992: 142). Since much of contemporary literature, at least in the Western hemisphere, seems to be intent on examining this aspect of human existence, reflection on the literary has to follow suit, and probe the ways in which literature is permeated and shaped by deixis and translatedness – I would argue that literary criticism might benefit from paying closer attention to the knots, spots, irregularities, corners, edges, holes and layers mentioned above. Using translatedness as a point of entry to interpretation may well uncover textual potentialities that would otherwise remain dormant. Examining these imperfect articulations will, I suggest, potentially lay bare an archive of movements, transits, echoes between languages and experiences. Contemporary literature plays an important role not only in documenting present-day challenges but also in displaying – perhaps even before consciousness – new modes of (re)conceiving the literary event (see Attridge, 2004), which has to rethink its ties to language as it is experienced contemporarily. Many are the writers currently reflecting on translation and how it

impacts their work [see Rushdie, 2010 (¹1981); Lahiri, 2016, 2022, among others] and/or actively promoting a displacement of the so-called “original” [see, for instance, Coetzee’s publication of *The Pole* initially in Spanish]. As Rebecca L. Walkowitz puts in the introduction to *Born Translated*, literary histories should also have to take translations into account, and, in doing so, challenge “dominant models of literary sequencing, in which circulation always trails production” and “recalculate the meanings of author and translation, original and derivation, native and foreign” (Walkowitz, 2017: 31).

All these instances point to the multiple entanglements of languages, texts and experiences. “I, he, we, they, she: pronouns shifted place constantly in our confused syntax, while we negotiated the terms of our relocation” – while Luiselli’s narrator in *Lost Children’s Archive* is referring to her family in this passage, the claim may well apply to a sense of having to translate oneself into ever different circumstances and contexts. Edward Said’s account of his own experience seems to sum up this experience of being translated in clear, though not uncontroversial ways, as the claim that everyone lives in a given language seems reductive in today’s translingual environments:

More interesting for me as author was the sense I had of trying always to translate experiences that I had not only in a remote environment but also in a different language. Everyone lives life in a given language; everyone’s experiences therefore are had, absorbed, and recalled in that language. (...)

Along with language, it is geography – especially in the displaced form of departures, arrivals, farewells, exile, nostalgia, homesickness, belonging, and travel itself – that is at the core of my memories of those early years. (Said, 2000 [¹1999]: xv-xvi)

Having briefly examined language, Said's excerpt leads this reflection on to the consideration of geography.

2. SPACE AND (UN)BELONGING

Yet the overriding sensation I had was of always being out of place. Said, 2000 [¹1999]: 3

The second consideration is the experience of space which has undergone a process of destabilization, with geographers insisting on "space as open, multiple and relational, unfinished and always becoming" (Massey, 2005: 59) – this conception implies a recognition that space itself is not a fixed and stable category, but is rather inhabited by an intrinsic translatedness of people, stories, languages, which further complicates notions of "singularity" and "authenticity" as markers of absolute originality: "The specifically spatial within time-space is produced by that – sometimes happenstance, sometimes not – arrangement-in-relation-to-each-other that is the result of there being a multiplicity of trajectories. In spatial configurations, otherwise unconnected narratives may be brought into contact, or previously connected ones may be wrenched apart" (*ibidem*, 111). Thus, space too is relational, transformed as it is by the people, voices, languages and stories that traverse it, and, in turn, also shaping the identities of those living or crossing it.

Thus, being-in-transit always already presupposes an etymological translatedness, which becomes invested with meanings, "infected" with different values, infiltrated with diverse worldviews. In *Sidewalks*, Luiselli argues that "an anatomist and a cartographer do the same thing: trace vaguely arbitrary frontiers in a body whose nature it is to resist determined borders, definitions and precise limits" (Luiselli, 2013: 22) – the analogy is striking, inasmuch as bodies and

territories are circumscribed, i.e., read as immutable singular units [originals?], by anatomists and cartographers who, following this view, would fix them according to a particular frame of reference. Thus, defined and “contained”, bodies and spaces give shape to “the stories we tell ourselves, not just those we explicitly tell other people, about the world(s) in which we live” (Baker, 2006: 19). Anatomy and cartography tend to re-present bodies and spaces in general ways. Bodies and spaces, however, are particular and resist normalization. As Rich has suggested in an essay entitled “Notes toward a politics of location”:

Perhaps we need a moratorium on saying “the body”. For it’s also possible to abstract “the” body. When I write “the body,” I see nothing in particular. To write “my body” plunges me into lived experience, particularity: I see scars, disfigurements, discolorations, damages, losses, as well as what pleases me. (...) To say “my body” reduces the temptation to grandiose assertions. (Rich, 2001: 67)

On the other hand, geographers like Doreen Massey have insisted that space results from “those complex mixtures of pre-planned spatiality and happenstance positionings-in-relation-to-each-other” (Massey, 2005: 116).

In this context, Valeria Luiselli’s writing can be interpreted as tentative, and plural, gestures at mapping out worlds (and bodies) which exist and resist external traditional maps because “[a] map, like a toy, is an analogy of a portion of the world made to the measure of the eye and hand. It is a fixed superimposition on a world in perpetual motion, made to the scale of the imagination: 1 cm = 1 km” (Luiselli, 2013: 26). In this sense, maps lie, or at least are just a plaything, circumscribing and not doing justice to the multiplicity of the world. This may be an additional reason

why migrant children travel without maps: “They travel, alone, on trains and on foot. They travel without their fathers, without their mothers, without suitcases, without passports. Always without maps” (Luiselli, 2019: 47) – for all their vulnerability, migrant children may thus embody the purest form of relation to space, and this renders their particular situation all the more tragic, as their relation of “without-ness” is, once they cross a border they need to disregard, immediately translated into a confinement “within”. This constriction of possibilities, the delimitation of borders, results in and is the result of maps. Literature, on the other hand, aims to complicate the map of the experiential. Writing, therefore, has a different impulse from cartography and anatomy: it aims to document and, by the same token, discuss, the world(s) we live in. As the narrator of *Lost Children Archive* formulates it: “We haven’t understood how space and time exist now, how we really experience them. And until we find a way to document them, we will not understand them” (Luiselli, 2019: 103). Rather than classify, literature aims to explore the territories of the human and to do justice to its complexities and opacities. No wonder, then, that the couple in the novel are documentarists or documentarians: “We’d say that I was a documentarist and he was a documentarian, which meant that I was more like a chemist and he was more like a librarian” (*ibidem*: 99). Whereas the narrator is after stories, her husband collects sounds. Both share, however, a compulsion to listen and assemble; stories in her case, sounds in his: “documenting just means to collect the present for posterity” (*ibidem*: 103).

Both the ability to listen and the relationality of space and identity and/or (un)belonging are thematised in many of Luiselli’s narratives for, as one of her characters in *The Story of My Teeth* puts it: “places and things are made up of stories” (Luiselli, 2015: 101). This may well be why her stories constitute a composite landscape, which very

often includes photographs, maps, handwritten materials, archival lists of music and books, and a wealth of intertextual conversations with a myriad of texts and authors. Thus inscribed with individual experience, places gain a scrapbook quality, as they are (over)written, and exist, in one's memory and imagination.

On the other hand, the author's fascination with the twin role of memory and imagination may explain why cemeteries figure so prominently in her fiction. Graveyards are, in Luiselli's fiction, the ultimate intertextual places – places where past and present conflate in the intricate entanglements of remembrance and fabulation. The narrator of *Faces in the Crowd* explicitly tells readers: "I liked cemeteries, parks, the roof terraces of buildings, but most of all cemeteries. In a way, I was living in a perpetual state of communion with the dead. (...) I had read Quevedo and internalized, like a prayer, perhaps too literally, the idea of living in conversation with the dead" (Luiselli, 2011: 10). *Sidewalks*, on the other hand, begins at a cemetery, and again the central idea revolves around the possibility of encountering and conversing with people who have preceded us – very often writers, painters and other artists: "Searching for a grave is, to some extent, like arranging to meet a stranger in a café, the lobby of a hotel or a public square, in that both activities engender the same way of being there and looking: at a given distance, every person could be the one waiting for us; every grave, the one we are searching for" (Luiselli, 2013: 9).

Cemeteries translate, and combine, different times and experiences, and thus become places where diverse forms of translatedness occur: "the more I listen to the stories he tells about this country's past, the more it seems like he's talking about the present" (Luiselli, 2019: 133) – while her husband is telling their children of Geronimo and the Indian Removal Act, the narrator is drawn by the similarity between what has happened then [1830] and

what is happening now, remarking on how “the word ‘removal’ is still used today as a euphemism for ‘deportation’” (*ibidem*). “Now” and “then”, “here” and “there” become entangled and are complicated in the interrelated stories of communities and individuals.

Spaces, such as cemeteries and cities, become repositories of memories, inscribed as they are with layers of meaning produced across time, but they are also steppingstones to the possibility of imagining a future. As such, spaces represent an analogous experience to literature, as they are both dialogical loci of (self-)recognition and (self-)questioning. This becomes unequivocal in a passage in *Sidewalks*, as both reading and visiting a city seem to be indebted to the experiences, memories and imaginings of the self in time.

Going back to a book is like returning to the cities we believe to be our own, but which, in reality, we’ve forgotten and been forgotten by. In a city – in a book – we vainly revisit passages, looking for nostalgias that no longer belong to us. Impossible to return to a place and find it as you left it – impossible to discover in a book exactly what you first read between the lines. We find, at best, fragments of objects among the debris, incomprehensible marginal notes that we have to decipher to make our own again. (Luiselli, 2013: 85)

3. THE RESONANCE BOX: LITERATURE AND THE ARCHIVE, OR LITERATURE AS ARCHIVE

I know, as we drive through the long, lonely roads of this country – a landscape that I am seeing for the first time – that what I see is not quite what I see. What I see is what others have already documented... Luiselli, 2019: 102

Although diverse, Luiselli’s fictional work has a common trait: narratives are broken into parts, small sections often (though not

always) bearing titles, usually composing a story that resists a seamless narration, true to what the narrator of *Lost Children Archive* propounds: “Beginnings, middles, and ends are only a matter of hindsight. If we are forced to produce a story in retrospect, our narrative wraps itself selectively around the elements that seem relevant, bypassing all the others” (*ibidem*: 62). This is further compounded by the above-mentioned inclusion of a luxuriant wealth of quotations, allusions, photographs, lists, references to books, photographers, painters and musicians. This scrapbook-like narrative mode is well in line with the stories and characters Luiselli is interested in, as they are all committed to creating different types of repositories of memories, stories, experiences, etc. Literature, then, becomes an immense archive of memories of literary and artistic spheres. Luiselli is, as the epigraph to this section unmistakably shows, writing in the wake of others, with cemeteries re-presenting, as briefly discussed above, a monument to what came before.

Understood as such, the literary becomes a site – *the* site, par excellence – where memory lives on, a site that tends, not unlike cemeteries in Luiselli’s work, to overturn [translate] chronology – in a way, Chronos is defeated by Janus,¹ as the narrative tends to amalgamate time, or rather to evince how the fabric of imagination and the work of memory work dialectically. Following this conception of the literary, literature is a *lieu of mémoire* – an imaginative record of human examination of existence. From *Faces in the Crowd* to *Lost Children Archive*, including *The Story of My Teeth* and *Sidewalks*, this is what every narrator does: he or she carries a story on the shoulders of

¹ This is true even of *The Story of My Teeth*, which includes a book (Book VII), called The Chronologic, which has been authored by Christina MacSweeney, the translator. Arguably, the very inclusion of a chronology points to the defeat of Chronos in the narrative, as this reveals a need for order on the part of the (English-speaking) reader.

stories, poems, photographs, music created by others and incorporated in the character's narration. Stories of stories of stories. In this sense, Luiselli's narratives are always meta-textual, as they perform what literature does by reflecting on the impact of literary texts.

The imbrication of literature and personal history is explicitly discussed by the female narrator of *Lost Children Archive* who says at some point: "I don't keep a journal. My journals are the things I underline in books. I would never lend a book to anyone after having read it" (Luiselli, 2019: 58). Identity gets translated into, is co-construed as a continuum of filters, voices, stories, ways of worldmaking. Again, the experience of the archive is of particular importance here. By means of documenting practices, the characters aim to make sense out of our experience of the coordinates of human existence:

Something changed in the world. Not too long ago, it changed, and we know it. We don't know how to explain it yet, but I think we all can feel it, somewhere deep in our gut or in our brain circuits. We feel time differently. No one has quite been able to capture what is happening or say why. Perhaps it's just an absence of future, because the present has become too overwhelming, so the future has become unimaginable. And without future, time feels like only an accumulation. (...) We haven't understood how space and time exist now, how we really experience them. And until we find a way to document them, we will not understand them. (*ibidem*: 103)

To document becomes both a necessity and an experiment in comprehension of who we are and how we have come to be what we are. Therefore, all narrators are assemblers of stories and/or of material things as containers of memory and disruptors of time. As we have seen, the adult characters in *Lost Children Archives* are professionally engaged in documenting sounds and stories – and

they have come up with different names for what they do, given their different approaches to documentation. Regardless of their differences in method, though, what they both do is an archeology of stories and/or sounds, in order both to preserve them and to render audible presences that would otherwise remain silenced.

These recordings intersect the voices from the past, recording the absent presence of vanquished historical figures, and those of children at the Mexican-American border, where they are being held in detention centers. The following quotation illustrates well the importance of this point.

I think I finally begin to understand. I think his [her husband's] plan is to record the sounds that now, in the present, travel through some of the same spaces where Geronimo and other Apaches, in the past, once moved, walked, spoke, sang. 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. When a bird sings or wind blows through the branches of cedars in the cemetery where Geronimo was buried, that bird and those branches illuminate an area of a map, a soundscape, in which Geronimo once was. 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. (*ibidem*: 141)

This reflection is, of course, reminiscent of Michel Foucault's discussion of the archive as the analysis of a "privileged region: at once close to us, and different from our present existence, it is the border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it in its otherness; it is that which, outside ourselves, delimits us" (Foucault, 1989: 147). However, the archive does not,

on Luiselli's terms, refer just to the past; it also commits to document the marginalized stories of the present. For Luiselli's characters, documenting is, therefore, a Janus-like activity, because collecting discursive practices, nature and city sounds, past and present stories shape the characters' worldview and what they actually see, as the epigraph to this section shows, rooting the "heres" in a sequence of "thens", but also imaginatively projecting a future – a future where the personal configurations may not be the same anymore. In *Lost Children Archive*, the archive points both to a co-presence of the present time and the past and to a future absence. Hence the narrator's answer to her ten-year-old son: "Documenting just means to collect the present for posterity" (*ibidem*: 103). Documenting, thus, brings to the fore anxieties about the nature and the experience of time. Arguably, documenting is another form of translatedness, as it attempts to come to terms with human experience and its finitude and translate it by accumulating evidence of silenced practices, languages and/or moments – it is again the question of raging against the fleetingness of the now by *re-membering* – in the senses of "recalling" and "reassembling" – lived experience:

Perhaps I should say that documenting is when you add thing plus light, light minus thing, photograph after photograph; or when you add sound, plus silence, minus sound, minus silence. What you have in the end, are all the moments that didn't form part of the actual experience. A sequence of interruptions, holes, missing parts, cut out from the moment in which the experience took place. Because experience, plus a document of the experience, is experience minus one. The strange thing is this: if, in the future one day, you add all those documents together again, what you have, all over again, is the experience. Or at least a version of the experience that replaces the lived experience, even if what you originally documented were the moments cut from it. (*ibidem*: 102)

TOWARDS A CONCLUSION?, OR LITERATURE AS RELINGO

*Without a homeland and without a true mother tongue, I
wander the world, even at my desk.*

Lahiri, 2016: 133

“I will find a book to (...) open and read. I need to think about my sound project, and reading others’ words, inhabiting their minds for a while, has always been an entry point to my own thoughts” (Luiselli, 2019: 57). When interpreting a text – translated or not –, the reader, as Luiselli’s first-person narrator, will have to come to terms with many possibilities of difference, as the literary work is often the site of multiple unbelongings: language – that “travail de déplacement qu’il [l’écrivain] exerce sur la langue” (Barthes, 1978: 17) –, “boundary-crossing” fictionalizing (Iser, 1990: 939), representation and translatedness, all point to the condition of a certain rootlessness inherent to language and fiction – reading fiction can perhaps be seen as an act of adjustment, relocation. That language can already be seen as an act of translation is clear from a number of examples in Luiselli’s work – I will quote just one: “Language breaches our direct relationship with the world and words are an attempt to cross the unbridgeable gap” (Luiselli, 2013: 62).

This, of course, follows from a conception of language, and consequently, of literature, as movement – a movement I have suggested we call “translatedness”. This translatedness results from the very possibility of translation and, in an important sense, it gambles on the possibility of knowledge, and self-knowledge, being construed only in relation to others – the existence of an “I” always predicates the presence of a “you”. It is this relation to others that speech, and indeed writing, enacts and that is highlighted when one takes the view that speaking is, in and of itself, already an act of translation.

Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved* and Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* showcase both the elusiveness of language and its embodiment in the experience of the self, as well as the relational nature of bodies and language. Again, deixis points to a perpetual negotiation of both position and meaning, and this negotiation is inherently a form of translatedness, both in the literal sense of "moving across space", and in the metaphorical sense of being able to recognize oneself only by means of the other.

In this vein, what I have been testing here is the possibility of understanding "translatedness" as a mode of both producing and reading the "literary event". In this light, concepts of "originality", "national literature", and "mother tongue" have been entirely reformulated, as instability is a feature of the literary, for literature is both an echo chamber and an experimental laboratory where language and texts resonate and are subject to appropriation.

Luiselli's narratives are a case in point, as they are inhabited by many voices, and are usually accompanied by countless acknowledgements, thereby revealing what Michael Ondaatje calls "the hidden presence of others in us" (2017: 27). Literature, thus, becomes a kind of *relingo* – "an emptiness, an absence", "a sort of depository for possibilities, a place that can be seized by the imagination and inhabited by our phantom-follies" (Luiselli, 2013: 74), a place of multiple translatednesses.

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