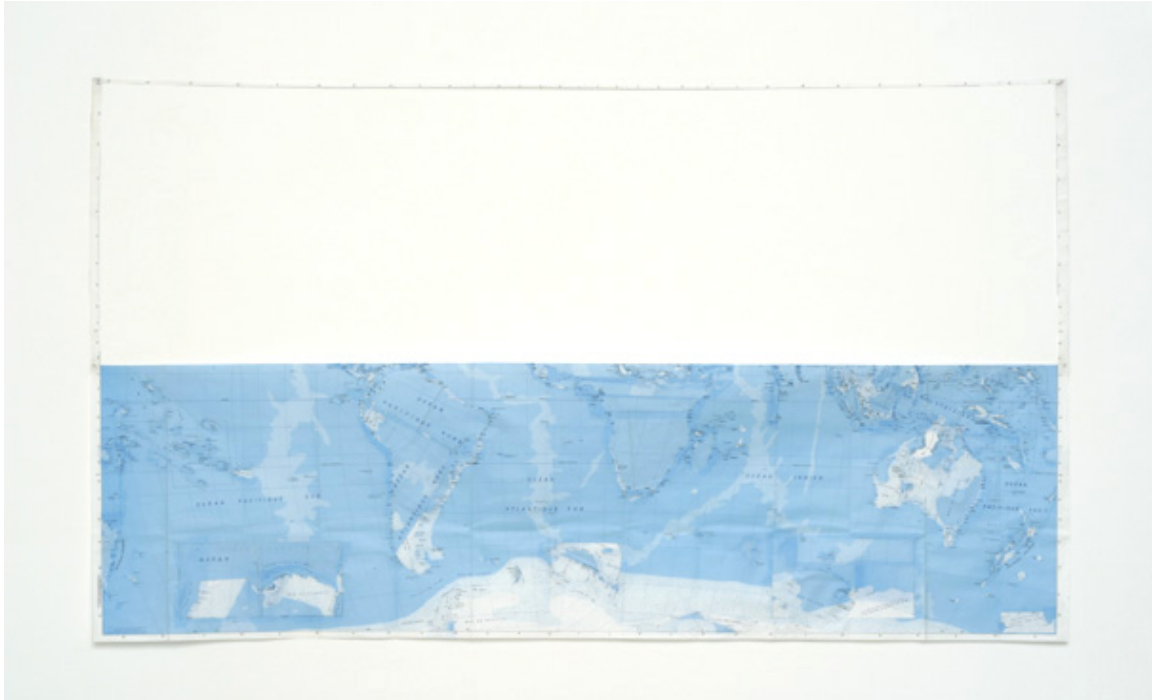


We in Space:
Wandering in the Work of Valeria Luiselli



Robbie Trocchia

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Vassar College

American Studies 302/303: Senior Project

Hua Hsu

Michael Joyce

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Introduction

I first came across the work of Valeria Luiselli in a seminar at the University of Buenos Aires entitled “Desarraigados,” or, Uprooted: The Poetics of Wandering in Contemporary Latin American Fiction and Art. My professor, Argentine critic and writer Graciela Speranza, recommended that I present on Luiselli’s novel Los ingravidos because it was set in New York and I was the only U.S.-American in the class. After thoroughly enjoying the novel as well as her other writing and successfully presenting my thoughts on it to the class, I returned to the U.S. and my second semester as a junior at Vassar with a newfound interest in the work that I had been exposed to in the seminar. When it was time to settle on a thesis topic, the answer somehow came to me (on February 2, 2013 at 10:05 pm according to a note on my iPhone): I could write on Valeria and her work. However, through months of thought and preparation, the question still remains: why Luiselli? Thinking back to my time in Buenos Aires, it is easy for me to respond by pointing to the incredible experience I had there and the personal, artistic, and academic interests that emerged as a result. Throughout the semester, Speranza’s seminar engaged me in my own experience as ‘uprooted,’ albeit an incredibly privileged experience of hypermobility and intellectual and cultural tourism. To put it simply, my semester abroad pushed me to reconsider my self in relation to citizenship and what it means to be a global citizen.

Theoretically speaking, Luiselli’s work is mainly concerned with space and people’s relations to space. The ideas that Luiselli is often working through in her writing have come to occupy my thoughts as well and I find that she is able to articulate her interest in space in a way that is not only illuminating both in the form and content of her

fiction but also in the mode of her writing. She figures herself within the larger context of an open world and its literary and philosophical traditions. Luiselli was born in Mexico City in 1983 and has lived in Costa Rica, Korea, South Africa, India, and Spain. She currently lives in Harlem, New York where she is completing a PhD in Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Understanding Luiselli's nomadic past sheds light on the mode of her writing as a traveling trajectory. That is, she puts ideas in motion as she walks through them. This is evident in the immediacy of her narration, in the way that she narrates a bike ride, for example, while expressing the meditative thoughts that accompany this narration/bike ride. Perhaps I can make this clearer by considering Luiselli's thoughts on the work of Harlem Renaissance poet Gilberto Owen. In her essay, "Gilberto Owen, narrator," Luiselli writes "[Owen] weaves together spaces with a compact stitching of images that succeed each other, never following a temporal law but generating a particular spatial logic." As she goes on to write, this spatial logic emerges from Owen's gaze. "We live in a time obsessed with the voice of the author. A writer dedicates all of their endeavor to this search for their own voice...why not instead, like Owen, cultivate the gaze?" In establishing this difference between the voice and the gaze, Luiselli seems to suggest that spatial logic is made perceptible through a gaze that *shows* and does not simply tell. Her writing is poetic in the truest sense of the word in that it pushes the frontiers of language in order to construct new ways of seeing and understanding the world.

Much of Luiselli's work is characterized by constant quotations of early twentieth century modernist writers and philosophers as she narrates/navigates, for example, a transatlantic journey or a walk down a city street. In this way, the content of her work is

often defined by literary allusion and philosophical meditations. She pulls small pieces from existing architectures of thought and places them in moving narrative or essayistic streams. I orient my project in a similar way by placing Luiselli alongside various other voices in ways that can create new understandings of the ideas found in her work. As I began writing, I found that this mode of writing could effectively function as my methodology in developing the form of my project. That being said, the content of my project does not focus exclusively on Luiselli's work but rather is be guided by her ideas. As Professor Speranza explained in my seminar at UBA, there has been much discussion and debate surrounding the political, social, and economic ramifications of globalization. Her intent in designing the class was to open up the question of the aesthetic in our contemporary experience of globalization. Luiselli, in representing the quintessential global citizen, also offers not only an aesthetic representation of reality but new ways of representing it. These new ways of representation respond to her experience of reality, one that is decidedly uprooted in the errant ways of a traveler in the world's neoliberal cities. Within the interpretive context of Luiselli's work, the working questions of my project entail an exploration of the tensions between the neoliberal agenda and what Doreen Massey has labeled "relational politics." Might the latter be capable of leveling a critique against neoliberal modes of valuation in holding other people, rather than our rights to property, as what is most important to us? If we understand neoliberalism in a certain sense as the triumph of language, how can we reject the language that is already in place in an attempt to break open new ways of thinking and writing about the world? Luiselli's writing often takes the form of a wayward trajectory and begs the question, aren't these the kinds of stories that we should be following, the ones that wander?

The essays included here explore related themes of space-making, walking/seeing/writing the city, the body, the home, notions of inside/outside and fiction/reality, and the experience of ‘rootlessness’ in the contemporary moment. Inspired by Luiselli, this project takes the form of wandering lines of thought that will converge and diverge like routes across a map. Although it was necessary that I select some sort of order in terms of the pieces of writing, the varying modes of language might be understood as the different scales of rolled-up maps, ranging from the breadth of the world map to the specificity of regional topographical maps. The first two essays include the voices of various thinkers and propose different ways of thinking about space in a hybrid of personal and political perspectives. The rest of the essays focus more on Luiselli’s body of work (including my translation of her short story “Fictio Legis”), putting her ideas in conversation with the writings of other contemporary writers and philosophers. Though the essays are numbered, they do not need to be read chronologically as each piece is meant to stand alone. Instead, I went about navigating the project in much the same way that the physical geography of a city settles in the consciousness of a new visitor, through surprising mental connections and exploration of unfamiliar terrain. I hope that the reader will find their way through it via a similarly stimulating wander.

I.

Maps (Borders/Fronteras)

One of my earliest memories of scholastic success took place at Tower Hill School in Red Bank, New Jersey where I attended pre-school. After being instructed on how to paint the inside of gift boxes, my teacher asked me if I had an idea about what I wanted to make. I responded, “the world.” However, at the time, I was still unable to properly pronounce my r’s and so the word came out as flat and muddled rather than round and clear and my teacher was initially unable to understand me. After finishing my project, I arrived at school a few days later to find that it was displayed in the school lobby with the title “The World” by Robbie Trocchia. The box was painted entirely black, like the universe, with an ovular earth in the middle, painted in varying colors to distinguish the countries from each other and land from water. Retrospectively, it becomes clear that I had already acquired, or rather had already become subject to, the practice and uses of visual language in regards to mapmaking. Although I wasn’t fully conscious of it, I knew that borders mark difference in space and that maps nakedly express those differences.

I thought back to this moment of pre-school pride while reading and thinking about maps, which have always fascinated me, and space, which I have been thinking about quite a bit as I begin to figure out how to theorize it. This entails thinking about the ways the world is rendered in a coherent and comprehensible picture, theoretically and aesthetically. The very notion of the world as something that can be mapped in its totality is both problematic and potentially productive in gaining insight about how our world works. These ideas, of course, stem from how I see the world and how this experience of

seeing has changed and developed over time. I remember the various maps of my elementary education that unrolled and would sometimes break in the process of rapidly rolling back up. Each map was a different picture of the world, the stereotypical Western-centric vision of a global north and south, with the Americas on the left side and the rest of the world laid out to the right, others were of a specific geographic region, or expressed the territorial borders of a particular historical period. There were often thin lines snaking across landscapes and many maps were color coded according to climatic conditions. One of my housemates has a topographical map of western Massachusetts and the upper Hudson Valley, providing a tactile pleasure in running one's fingers over the various mountainous areas of the region. Another way of seeing the world was provided to me during my first plane ride in 8th grade when my family and I flew to Orlando, Florida. I recall the experience of seeing the world from above as thrilling and utterly strange as what I could see of the U.S. seemed entirely detached from my own viewpoint; it was completely immobile to my gaze as I felt myself slowly move across the landscape. The slow unrolling of the world below me made the distance I was actually covering (and the velocity at which I was covering it) seem unbelievable. The fact that there were lives being lived below me was even harder to believe as I could barely make out signs of human existence. I remember wanting to know exactly where I was throughout the flight, what state was I above at that exact moment? From my viewpoint on the plane, there was no sign of boundaries between states, only a seemingly endless landscape. Today, I have maps in my hand, digitally rendered and capable of routing me anywhere on the planet. I use the Google Maps app to find my way in an unfamiliar city or to direct myself home when I am lost. When I click the small arrow

button, the map centers me with a pulsing blue dot that can even discern the direction I am facing. This map displays street names, landmarks, nearby green space – the sum of my local and global geography. It knows my world better than I do.

In her essay “Flying Home,” Luiselli writes “viewed from above, the world is immense but attainable, as if it were a map of itself, a lighter and more easily apprehended analogy.”ⁱ She begins the essay describing the development in air travel of maps that project the plane’s progress. Although her tone is amusing in dramatizing the torturous experience of watching the slow progress of the plane, she muses on the philosophical underpinnings of these spatial representations.

A map is a spatial abstraction; the imposition of a temporal dimension – whether in the form of a chronometer or a miniature plane that advances in a straight line across space – is in contradiction to its very purpose. As surfaces that by nature are immobile and frozen in time, maps don’t impose any limitations on the imagination of the person studying them. Only on a static, timeless surface can the mind roam freely.ⁱⁱ

Luiselli takes us into the Map Library in Mexico City where she searches for old maps detailing the delimitation of the Mexico-Guatemala border in 1882 by the Mexican Commission on Limits. Her interest in Mexico’s southern border reveals the arbitrary nature of delimiting national borders to begin with, a point that is made only more salient considering Mexico’s border with the United States. She compares a photograph of the members of the Commission on Limits to Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*, writing “an anatomist and a cartographer do the same thing: trace vaguely arbitrary frontiers on a body whose nature it is to resist determined borders, definitions and precise limits.”ⁱⁱⁱ The relationship she draws between the two professions also creates a dynamic connection between the body and space. The delimitation of borders creates not only an inside and an outside for the space itself but also for the bodies within that

space. Resisting the concretization of spatial limits is very much so a challenge to human bodies whose everyday existence entails the negotiation of space through walking, seeing, and perhaps writing the world they live in.

Walking/Seeing/Writing the City (New York City—Mexico City)

In “Walking in the City,” French theorist Michel de Certeau describes the experience of seeing New York City from the top of the World Trade Center. He makes a contrast: “Unlike Rome, New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future.”^{iv} de Certeau describes the power that such a viewpoint provides through being able to read the city and satiating the desire to see it all. If “the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more,”^v can we engage this viewpoint in a way that makes the knowledge it produces usable or is seeing the city merely a lust that we feel inclined to pursue? The concept of the “functionalist organization, by privileging progress (i.e., time), causes the condition of its own possibility – space itself – to be forgotten; space thus becomes the blind spot in a scientific and political technology... it is simultaneously the machinery and the hero of modernity.”^{vi} Space, therefore, is repositioned as that which makes possible the ‘smoothness’ of modern life, or the circumstances that effectively deflate the individual’s capacity to see the city. At the same time, this reconception of space has allowed for the erection of an all seeing power in the form of the world’s skyscrapers. de Certeau’s description of the viewpoint at the top of the World Trade Center is eerie as it is a viewpoint that was destroyed. As de Certeau meditates on the power of seeing that these tower provide, their absence is now filled by a memorial to those lost. But there

exists also a memorial of the attacks on the power that these twin towers represented globally, for they were in essence the bastion of neoliberal capitalism for all of the world to see. Their collapse created more than just an absence. It was a void that was charged with tension and a promise to rise up. The memorial ultimately was a hollowing out, a clean and flowing reminder of emptiness, a demand to see that where there was once something there is now nothing.

Mexico City, unlike New York, is not bounded by water but instead grew out of a valley where rivers no longer flow. Moreover, its process of urban capitalist growth resembles an infinite expansion outward instead of upward (due to the threat of earthquakes). For Luiselli, writing about Mexico City is an almost impossible task as it cannot be accomplished by walking it. The city, which has no reference point or sense of a center, is unlike other world cities in that it cannot be compared to “anything, except perhaps a stain, a trace, a distant memory of something else.”^{vii} Her essay is divided into small sections which are given the title of the rivers that once existed in the Valley of Mexico City but which have since dried up. In a sense, the form of the essay acts as a tribute to these formerly flowing and now absent physical landforms. “Over time they were drained or piped underground by idiotic, megalomaniac governments who somehow thought it was a good idea to suck the city dry. What were once expanses of water became avenues, car parks, vacant lots, undefined cement-clad stretches.”^{viii} The political undertones of Luiselli’s work surface for a moment, as space is understood as something that has been erased or tainted. Nothingness is imposed on space so that what was once flowing becomes literally static, fixed, dried up. Luiselli returns to her earlier point that an idea of Mexico City cannot be gathered from walking it.

The obvious inference of this would be that Mexico City has to be seen from above in order to be grasped in its totality. I've tried it. But the elevated section of the Periférico offers nothing more than a brief surfacing for air between our everyday clouts of suffocation. Flying over the city at night, one can perhaps, for a few minutes, see it anew. From far above, lights glimmer in the valley and it regains its liquid past: a lake overcrowded with fishing boats. And, on a clear day, from an airplane window, the city is almost comprehensible – a simpler representation of itself, to the scale of the human imagination. But as the airplane descends to earth, one discovers that the grid is floating on what seems to be an indeterminate stretch of grey water. The folds of the valley embody the threat of a wave of mercury which never quite breaks against the mountain range; the streets and avenues are petrified folds in an overflowing, ghostly lake.^{ix}

Upon landing in Mexico City, Luiselli writes, she often experiences a sensation of bodily resistance that manifests itself in a silent stream of tears. She concludes that “they are merely an expression of resistance to the descent to a future world which, as it draws closer, becomes once again immeasurable.”^x Perhaps neither sadness nor frustration, Luiselli’s tears might instead be a reaction to the physical experience of losing what is, for a few moments, measurable and knowable. As a writer, Luiselli looks to recreate these moments on the page; however, as she descends, what she sees from the airplane window becomes, once again, that which she sees on the sidewalk, a city that she can never fully understand. As de Certeau seems to argue, seeing is not necessarily knowing but, as in Luiselli’s case, feeling. She ends her essay with a list of the dried-up rivers of the Valley of Mexico City, describing the presence of their absence as existing only on the level of language in the form of “empty, arid words.”^{xi} Their presence on the page offers a sort of respite from their physical absence in the natural world; here they flow once more.

II.

The Roman Empire—Mexico City

In “Spatial Stories,” de Certeau describes the *fās* ritual which was carried out by the Roman Empire as its military, diplomats, or merchants set out into foreign territory. “The ritual was a procession with three centrifugal stages, the first within Roman territory but near the frontier, the second on the frontier, the third in foreign territory. The ritual action was carried out before every civil or military action because it is designed to *create the field* necessary for political or military activities.”^{xii} In this way, this ritual is a foundation through which space is enacted. As de Certeau goes on to claim, this founding can be understood as the function of the story. “It opens a legitimate *theater* for practical *actions*.”^{xiii} The procession forward, the process of making space, allows for the social practices that follow.

The *fās* ritual reveals a consciousness of space as possessed and not possessed, and the critical point where these two areas converge. The frontier functions as an ‘in-between, or the space between’ that does not belong to anyone. In fact, the lack of a possessor provides it with an ambiguity or an openness that can only be altered with the “transformation of the void into a plentitude, of the in-between into an established place...The Architect’s drive to cement up the picket fence, to fill in and build up ‘the space in-between,’ is also his illusion, for without knowing it he is working toward the political freezing of the place.”^{xiv} By creating borders, a here and a there, the place becomes limited by that which surrounds it. The making of boundaries creates the relation between what is inside and what is outside, the familiar and the foreign. And as de Certeau argues, the filling-in and building-up of space is a political act as it deprives

the formerly open space of its agency by defining what was previously undefined. That is, space becomes fixed in such a way that it becomes imbued with certain physical and symbolic values; it is usable beyond the mere fact of its existence. Moreover, the politicization of space creates a system of social relations and a conception of the ‘individual’ as valued by degrees of citizenship. In the context of the historical development of liberalism, the highest conception of the individual is the property-owning citizen. The most important freedom is the exclusive freedom of possessing something that is external to the human being. As the meaning of citizenship shifts through space and time, within the framework of liberalism (presently neoliberalism), this conception of the individual remains the same.

If on one end of the spectrum we have space as filled, built, politicized and valued (both in itself and through those who are included or excluded), on the other end of the spectrum we have empty non-spaces whose politicization and valuation are no less significant though they remain unclear. Emptiness is the subject of Luiselli’s essay “*Relingos: The Cartography of Empty Spaces*” which describes *relingos* as “urban absences” and “empty lots” in the contemporary city. As she writes, ‘on the Paseo de la Reforma, that grand avenue simulating the entrance to an imperial Mexico City that of course no longer exists, there’s a quadrangle of tiny absences, small plazas, where once there were things that are now only gaps.’^{xv} The inevitable forces of urban capitalist development created these purposeless absences through the construction of highly-valued properties around them. Through the bounding of space that is deemed valuable, these non-spaces emerge, around corners, behind, under, or between parts of the urban structure. Within the imaginary of the global city, these spaces exist all around us.

Luiselli even goes on to describe an old, abandoned library as an interior *relingo*, emptied of its contents but reused for various purposes. Perhaps we can understand *relingos* as a sort of frontier, a space without defined function or value that is surrounded by space that is effectively purposeful. Luiselli invokes Catalan architect Ignasi de Solà-Morales' concept of *terraines vagues* in relation to *relingos* as "an ambiguous space, a piece of waste ground without defined borders or limiting fences, a species of plot on the margins of metropolitan life, even if it is physically to be found in the very center of a city, at the junction of two main avenues, or under a newly built bridge."^{xvi} Luiselli goes on to claim the importance of these urban spaces as "an emptiness, an absence" in which the imagination and the mind can take up space. What Luiselli urges us to do in consideration of these abandoned spaces is exactly an attention to their lack, to what is not there but could be. She likens the making of these spaces to the process of "writing: drilling walls, breaking windows, blowing up buildings. Deep excavations to find – to find what? To find nothing. A writer is a person who distributes silences and empty spaces. Writing: making *relingos*."^{xvii} Her intention is to enact these spaces by empowering the language that is to be found in their nothingness. In reconsidering the title of Luiselli's essay, one might wonder about the possibility of mapping empty space. What exactly is there to spatially represent in what is decidedly non-space? If we understand neoliberal projects as the product of property developers that create *relingos*, Luiselli's work might be seen as an attempt to break open other spaces on the level of language, spaces that are otherwise inaccessible to our consciousnesses. She is asking us to revalue absences and rewrite existing architectures by blowing them to pieces. To mine what is already there in order to make space for something new to take root. Perhaps *relingos* could be made in

the same way that space is made through the Roman ritual procession, by a slow and conscious movement outward that does not neglect those “absences in the heart of the city.”^{xviii} If the enactment of empty space offers us the opening or creation of stories, what kinds of practical action can follow?

Global City: Mobility/Fixity, Public/Private, Flow/Friction, Freedoms/Flaws

As geographer Doreen Massey argues, within the present context of global capitalism, “neoliberalism in practice is *not* simply about mobility: it too requires some spatial fixes....here we have two apparently self-evident truths, a geography of borderlessness and mobility, and a geography of border discipline; two completely antinomic geographical imaginations of global space.” This formulation can be understood another way in Italian philosopher Domenico Losurdo’s designated binary of sacred space and profane space, which constitute the ideological foundation of liberalism.^{xix} Sacred space is reserved for the ‘community of the free’ whereas those outside are deemed ‘unfree’ in the profane space. The frontier of the sacred and profane spaces represents an unregulated zone in which the unfree attempt to enter the community of the free via vulnerable (and often forced) attempts at mobility for the sake of anticipated stability and security. “And so in this era of ‘globalization’ we have sniffer dogs to detect people hiding in the holds of boats, people dying in the attempt to cross frontiers, people precisely trying to ‘seek out the best opportunities.’” For them, space is a challenge that we often neglect to see.

In considering the “battles for ‘the purification of space,’” Massey calls attention to the politics of public and private in “the employment of security guards around the gated communities of the privileged, through controls over international migration or –

for these battles are not always about the powerful excluding the weak – through attempts to preserve groups which are socially marginalized.” People with these kinds of stories can be found in cities all over the world. As Massey argues, “the impetus to motion and mobility, for a space of flows, can only be achieved through the construction of (temporary, provisional) stabilizations. There is only ever, always, a negotiation (and a responsibility to negotiate) between conflicting tendencies. A restructuring of the geography of that simultaneity of stories-so-far.”^{xx} This notion of stories-so-far is helpful in thinking about the multiplicity of strands of personal histories, routes of geographical navigation, points of fixity, directions of mobility, and the borders and frontiers that separate stories from ever coming into contact. In an interview with the Argentine newspaper *La Nación*, Dutch-American sociologist Saskia Sassen describes the city of today as a “space of open combat,” which makes explicit the competing forces, tensions and frictions in our present condition of global capitalism. According to Sassen, “this is a time in which complex and open cities begin to suffer a bit of de-urbanization... There are many ways in which this happens. One is the privatization of spaces.”^{xxi} The system of social relations that privatization produces is one of increasing isolation from the people who live right next door. This vision of the individual as existing in the bubble of their gated homes, only interacting with the outside space of the public sphere in the comfort of their cars or the shopping mall, is all too familiar in the present day. According to Massey, this entails:

“a potential new dimension of gatedness. If the previously far really is getting too near for your comfort, if in your view the margins really are too much invading the center, then in addition to wielding the mechanisms of market forces and discrimination in reorganizing your location and choosing your neighbors you can now extricate yourself even more, by living at least some of your life in another purified space, on the Net.”^{xxii}

These methods of organization, what Sassen might call the tactics or strategies of open combat, are derived from the same conscious effort to procure one's own space in a world of increasing dispossession. The tendency to isolate oneself is expressed both in the physical reality of the global city and the individual's retreat to the computer screen in the privacy of their home.

In her conversation with writer Raquel San Martin of *La Nación*, Sassen describes the constant changes occurring in urban centers and the “very visible renovation if you look at new construction, but at the same time it makes invisible the social tragedy, of all those who were driven out of urban centers. The city becomes a heuristic space, but you have to work a bit to understand it.” Understanding the city as a space that can be learned from provides it with the structure of a story or narrative, whose past can literally be walked through even as its future is being constructed. Space as stimulating exploration and learning through an experience on the scale of the urban is a productive way of approaching the problems of today's cities. However, the city can also provide exploration and experimentation on the level of the individual. In her essay “What the Doorman Sees” which appeared in *The New York Times*, Luiselli points out that “there are no more ‘rear windows’; everything takes place inside the smaller, self-contained windows on our computer screens.”^{xxiii} In describing the lack of ‘real’ human contact that seems to characterize the contemporary urban experience, Luiselli brings our attention to the one exception: “the doormen who guard the buildings at night.”^{xxiv}

“These men are, no doubt, the modern version of oracles. They move in between spaces. They are neither on the street nor totally indoors, and thus they have the ability to view the world from the vantage point of a threshold. Standing at the foot of the steps in front of a building or sitting behind a counter in a lobby, a doorman is the last Cerberus, safeguarding the often fuzzy boundary between the public and the private.”^{xxv}

In much the same way that the urban fabric is a heuristic space, the special viewpoint of the doorman offers us yet another way of thinking about space: in relation to ourselves. As the doorman advises Luiselli, “don’t ever come back to sleep...the more nights you spend in other rooms – hotels, rented apartments, borrowed beds, sofas, shared spaces – the more you will get to know yourself.”^{xxvi} By promoting an actively untethered existence, the doorman offers an alternative approach that takes space as open and explorable. In advising one to ‘get lost’ in order to locate oneself, the doorman functions as a “true window...that merely widens space.”^{xxvii} It is this widening of space that opens one’s vision of the world around them, their relation to this world, and their conception of themselves within it. In attempting to conceptualize the reorganization of space and social relations within it, a more widened window is necessary to look out upon it. Luiselli’s philosophy provides a clear example of the significance of what Massey refers to as “chance encounters” in the context of our “throwntogetherness.” Massey’s keywords are really just a more collective-oriented way of understanding social relations, a perspective certainly shared by Luiselli’s doorman. For how are we to open ourselves to the world if not through connecting with the strangers that we pass on the sidewalk?

III.

The Body in Space

In “Joseph Brodsky’s Room and a Half,” Luiselli searches for the grave of the prolific Russian poet and essayist in the San Michele cemetery on an island in the Venetian Lagoon. She quotes Brodsky, “If there is an infinite aspect to space...it is not its expansion but its reduction. If only because the reduction of space, oddly enough, is always more coherent. It’s better structured and has more names: a cell, a closet, a grave.”^{xxviii} As the quote seems to suggest, the infinite nature of space seems to correspond to humanity’s increasingly reductive categorization of the spaces it inhabits. That is, humans seek to make their relation to space more easily comprehensible. According to Luiselli, “Brodsky recounts that the established norm for communal housing in the former Soviet Union was nine square meters per person.” Divided amongst his parents and himself, Brodsky’s family was provided a room and a half in total. In a fascinating example of human existence in relation to space, and specifically the relationship between the state and the individual, Luiselli draws out a brilliant connection between the communist limit on one’s claim to space and liberalism’s promise of open, privatizable space. Luiselli offers a metaphysical understanding of a lifetime as composed of the spaces that we occupy. She writes:

But perhaps a person only has two real residences: the childhood home and the grave. All the other spaces we inhabit are a mere grey spectrum of that first dwelling, a blurred succession of walls that finally resolves themselves into the crypt or the urn – the tiniest of the infinite divisions of space into which a human body can fit.^{xxix}

Luiselli does not invoke a metaphor here but instead a physical relationship between the human body and space, one that mirrors the theoretical reduction of space that she

describes earlier. The ephemerality of the spaces, physically and metaphorically, that exist between birth and death represents the contingent nature of human existence at any point along the timeline of one's life. As she muses on Brodsky's final resting place in Venice (he apparently once stated that he wished to be buried in the Massachusetts woods, others might argue that his body should have been returned to St. Petersburg), Luiselli writes, "if will and life are two things impossible to separate, so are death and chance."^{xxx} That being said, what can we make of the relation between the body and space in the context of larger forces, such as the state or (above all) death?

A World Map In Which We See... is an artistic and political project developed by Ashley Hunt that is described by Avery F. Gordon in *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*. The map traces not people or places but rather ideas and concepts that surround analyses of "contemporary modes of power and powerlessness, through which positions of wealth and privilege always exist in connection to the work or subordination of another."^{xxxi} As Gordon writes, "the map gorges on language, is satiated with concepts. It's hard to add more words: more words shrink in the face of it, mere fodder in the map's complex of lines and arrows...the map is unreadable as a whole. This is an artifact of the machine itself."^{xxxii} Hunt's project offers a map of contemporary capitalism that responds conceptually and reflects aesthetically the complexity of the situation itself. The chaotic cartographic representation, overflowing with words and ideas, is global in scope but intended to be applied locally. It is not fixed but remains contingent; its ideas are meant to continue flowing as they are worked through. Although this map should be understood as a call to action, it is important to realize that Hunt defers to the textual in attempting to conceptualize the body's relationship to space.

In Spaces of Hope, David Harvey explores discussions that center the body as a site of inquiry and “measure of all things...[in] how values and meanings are to be constructed and understood.”^{xxxiii} He highlights the significance of the porosity of the body in its relation to outside spatiotemporal frames and external processes. In opposition to Western conceptions of the body, Harvey argues for a relational understanding of the body; that is, the body exists only in its relation to other bodies and processes. The body, therefore, must negotiate the capitalist machine that Hunt sets out to map. On this, Harvey asks, “how can we measure anything outside of that deadly embrace of the machine as extension of our own body and body as extension of the machine?”^{xxxiv} Harvey does not neglect to express Marx’s conception of positionality in relation to capital circulation and accumulation. The question of “whose body” must be accounted for in discussions of class relations. The contingency of Hunt’s conceptual map is evident in the connection that Harvey establishes between the body and processes of globalization:

Spatiotemporality defined at one scale (that of ‘globalization’...) intersects with bodies that function at a much more localized scale. Translation across spatiotemporal scales is here accomplished by the intersection of two qualitatively different circulation processes, one of which is defined through the long historical geography of capital accumulation while the other depends upon the production and reproduction of the laboring body in a far more restricted space.^{xxxv}

In more material terms, Harvey seeks to establish a connection between the globalized products that we consume and the spaces through which exploited labor produces these products. In this sense, the capitalist prerogative of endless accumulation is made possible only through a specific set of relations in a local place. The body’s potentially fixed location within these local places is Harvey’s focus for, as he concludes, “the study

of the body has to be grounded in an understanding of real spatio-temporal relations.^{»xxxvi}
It is only in this way that the body's political potential can be truly activated.

Luiselli's short essay "Cement" speaks to the fixed location between the body and space, specifically in light of death (whose ultimacy of spatial fixity can also be understood as necessary to and a consequence of the social death that Harvey alludes to).

Luiselli writes:

A man was killed on the sidewalk, near the door of our building. A single bullet in the back – at waist level. The head fell first. A sharp crack of the skull on the concrete – the sidewalk still damp from the afternoon rain. The head doesn't break as easily as the thread that ties us: it remained intact – the hair gelled back – a perfect hairdo. The teeth – visible – protruding like those of a child with a slight mental retardation. The following day his outline appeared in white chalk on the asphalt. Did the hand of the person who skirted the coastline of his body tremble? The city, its sidewalks: an enormous blackboard – instead of numbers, we add up bodies.^{xxxvii}

In this piece, death is made real, not abstracted like the numbers that increasingly define our world. The fragility of the physical body functions as a metaphor that evokes not only the thin line between death and life, but also that which exists between "us" as living human beings. In other words, what ties me to you, and us from death, is more easily broken than our own bodies. The collective nature of the city becomes less an immaterial idea and more a lived reality where death (and the body of the other) are found right outside one's door. This inherent relationality is chillingly expressed in the act of outlining the body, whereby the connection between life and death is not merely present but specifically illustrated on the geography of a body that is forever fixed on the city's landscape. Luiselli beautifully creates an enumeration of scale in which the specificity of the body is described within the stark accumulative processes of the city. On a fundamental level, Luiselli's text, like Hunt's map, represents the body figuratively; the

body is posited textually within a system of symbolic relations – the state, the city, the sidewalk – and Hunt and Luiselli intend to leave room for contextualization. Ultimately they’re asking us, what does this mean for your body?

But bodies in space are also bodies in motion; as Tim Cresswell argues, “if movement is the dynamic equivalent of location, then mobility is the dynamic equivalent of *place*.”^{xxxviii} Luiselli offers us a mobile map of places in “Swings of Harlem,” a sort of visual essay included in the collection Where You Are. The piece maps the routes of Luiselli and her daughter Maia to various playgrounds in Harlem, using Polaroids that are geotagged to these specific locations on Google Maps with corresponding pieces of writing that are varying in length. The map is mobile in the sense that it can be navigated either by scrolling down the text and clicking on the location name above the Polaroid to find the location on the map or by clicking on the Polaroid image on the map to find the corresponding piece of text. In mapping these stories over the geography of the neighborhood, the everyday encounters that she records are spatialized both on the city’s landscape and in the imagination of the reader. Their experience of the space is individuated amongst various other trajectories and, consistent with Luiselli’s style of writing, these stories include her ruminations as she sits on a park bench or pushes Maia on the swing. The piece has the effect of creating what language overlays might look like, literally, next to a map. It produces the particular effect of centering the wandering of mother and daughter through the city, an isolated relationship that is almost like the feminine equivalent of Cormac McCarthy’s father-son post-apocalyptic journey in The Road except in this case, the setting is the late autumn landscape of New York City when

the sun hangs low. In the final piece of text, in Riverside Park at Riverside Drive & 116th St, Luiselli writes:

Along the streets of Harlem there are rectangles of earth cut into the asphalt, each with a small tree in the center. Things sprout or lie about around the tree. Sometimes flowers, almost always weeds, cigarette ends, litter, generalized debris. Coming out of the daycare, we find a dead rat in one of those miniature rectangular gardens. Maia stops and fixes her eyes on the corpse of the rat. Very serious, she whispers: Wake up, little mouse, it's wake-up time. Just that, two or three times. No reply from the rat. Then, offended by its indifference, she takes my hand and says He's not waking up Mamma, let's go swing. We go – slowly and in silence.^{xxxix}

Luiselli draws attention to what is discarded in the *relingos* of Harlem, a process of accumulated excess that mirrors the piling up of bodies in “Cement.” Death and the body are symbolically represented in the most intimate way they can be on the page, by coming into contact in space. By mapping the body's navigation of the city, Luiselli shows what is not necessarily representable on a map: the value of those small moments when we face death in the city and what we take from those moments when we walk away.

IV.

“Nosotros en el espacio”: Reflections on Luiselli’s *Faces in the Crowd*

Outside the undifferentiated forces roar; inside we are very private, very explicit, have a sense indeed, that it is here, in this little room, that we make whatever day of the week it may be. Friday or Saturday. A shell forms upon the soft soul, nacreous, shiny, upon which sensations tap their beaks in vain.

Virginia Woolf, The Waves

La Narradora: Feminine Interiority, Fiction, and Reality

The female narrator of Luiselli’s first novel Faces in the Crowd (originally published in Spanish as Los ingravidos) begins by distinguishing between her present life as a mother and wife in Mexico City and the life she led in New York City as a younger woman. In a decidedly feminine gesture, she unites writing (and her experience of time) to her own body.

When a person has lived alone for a long time, the only way to confirm that they still exist is to express activities and things in an easily shared syntax: this face, these bones that walk, this mouth, this hand that writes. Now I write at night, when the two children are asleep and it’s acceptable to smoke, drink, and let draughts in. Before, I used to write all the time, at any hour, because my body belonged to me. My legs were long, strong and slim. It was right to offer them: to whomever, to writing.^{xl}

The Woolfian and Dickinsonian elements of the narrator’s situation are present in her role as a housebound mother which leaves her “short of breath.”^{xli} She seeks to create a space of her own in the form of a novel, one in which her body is her own to offer.

Whereas her life in New York City is defined by sexual liberation and ephemeral friendships, in Mexico City she remains confined to her home, content with the ghostly presence she senses in the house. In response to her son’s question, “what are you

writing, Mama?” she responds, “a ghost story.” The entire novel comes to exist as a space of atemporality in which the narrator, like a ghost, shuttles back and forth across the spaces and times of her life. In New York, she begins to see the ghost of Gilberto Owen, the Mexican poet who lived there during the Harlem Renaissance. In her research, she comes across a note by Owen (others of which she begins to scatter across the narrative) in which he writes “I live at 63 Morningside Ave. There’s a plant pot in the right hand window that looks like a lamp.” After sneaking into Owen’s former building and spending a few hours on his roof, the narrator comes across a plant pot like the one described in his letter. She takes it but realizes that she is locked on the roof and must spend the night there. Her thoughts return to an idea in a book she once read by Saul Bellow “that the difference between being alive and being dead is just a matter of viewpoint: the living look from the center outwards, the dead from the periphery to some sort of center.”^{xlii} As the narrator goes on to claim, a person dies many deaths in the course of a lifetime. Following her night on the roof with Owen’s ghost, she begins to “live as inhabited by another possible life that wasn’t mine, but one which, simply by the use of imagination, I could give myself up to completely. I started looking inwards from the outside, from someplace to nowhere.”^{xliii}

Luiselli’s novel, however, remains within the nucleus of the family home which comes to function as the interior, both in its relation to the outside world and in the function of the body (the I) to its exterior elements. In one of her many notes regarding the metaphysical form of her novel, the narrator writes, “A dense, porous novel. Like a baby’s heart.”^{xliiv} The space she creates in her novel is detached from that of her home or her family but she herself is not separated. The experience of reading her thoughts is

rooted in the present tense of her process of writing them; one occasionally occupies the position of, or rather is occupied by, the presence of her husband who peers over her shoulder as she writes. She records their conversations: “I don’t like zombie films. Why did you write that I like zombie films? Because. Please, cut the zombies.”^{xlv} When I first come across Luiselli’s novel in a seminar at the University of Buenos Aires, it existed on the syllabus as our last assigned text under the heading “biografía apócrifa,” or apocryphal biography. The seemingly oxymoronic nature of this classification opens up the fissures between fiction and reality as the two come to merge in the narrator’s multiple space-times. The narrator creates a forged transcription of translations by Owen, as her obsession with the poet becomes “an elaborate lie, repeated to myself so often that it’s come to form part of my repertory of events, indistinguishable from any other memory.”^{xlvi} The narrator creates fictions of her past which upset her husband and is, in turn, upset by fictions she creates in her head about her husband, his past lovers, and his future business trip to Philadelphia. Internal ruptures emerge in these gaps between fiction and reality as the past, present, and future converge in the same temporal space. Amid the swirling whirlwind of the narrative, in a moment of unmoving meditation, she writes:

Leave a life. Blow everything up. No, not everything: blow up the square meter you occupy among people. Or better still: leave empty chairs at the tables you once shared with friends, not metaphorically, but really, leave a chair, become a gap for your friends, allow the circle of silence around you to swell and fill with speculation. What few people understand is that you leave one life to start another.^{xlvii}

Tension in the narrative, simmering at first, seems to boil over. Understood another way, perhaps as the narrator surmises, “while she is stringing the tale, the mesh of her immediate reality wears thin and breaks. The fiber of fiction begins to modify reality and

not vice versa, as it should be. Neither of the two can be sacrificed.^{»xlvi} The materiality of the two fill the space inside the novel, creating their own logic and order.

Owen: *Afantasmando* and Spatial Logics

On page 58, the voice of Gilberto Owen enters the narrative, out of the silence of the space, “This is how it starts: it all happened in another city and another life. It was the summer of 1928...(I would have liked to start the way Fitzgerald’s *The Crack-up* begins.)^{»xlix} As with the other literary allusions dotting the landscape of the novel, this parenthetical line can be traced back to a specific idea that holds relevance in Luiselli’s text; Fitzgerald’s novel, for example, begins: “Of course all life is a process of breaking down...^{»l} This notion takes the form of *afantasmando*, or the becoming of a ghost, of which the novel’s epigraph speaks: “Beware! If you play at ghosts, you become one” (an anonymous quote taken from *The Kabbalah*). Owen and, later, the narrator come to fear that they are becoming ghosts during their time in New York City, slowly disintegrating into nothingness. Owen even goes as far as to weigh himself every day in the subway station, where the two narrators begin to see each other. The subway comes to represent the spatial logic of the novel: “the subway, its multiple stops, its breakdowns, its sudden accelerations, its dark zones, could function as the space-time scheme for this other novel.”^{»li} In this way, the novel can be understood as being composed of spontaneous movements between various points under the map of a fixed narrative, like the routes of a subway. Although the narrative appears in fragments, the narrator insists “not a fragmented novel. A horizontal novel, narrated vertically.”^{»lii} This is how the spatial logic is generated, through a structure of various ‘horizontal’ sensations which pile up to create a vertical construction, much like Valéry’s thoughts on the “patient process of Nature...in

which a series of thin, transparent layers are placed one on top of the other.”^{liii} The various moments or reflections by the narrator continue this process of the construction of a gaze that is increasingly widened. The gaze is a window into the consciousnesses of the narrators whose shared fixation on the threat of becoming a ghost also reveal an attention to the process of becoming oneself, or the image of oneself. The apocryphal Owen writes, “I don’t know at what moment an inversion began to occur in the process that I imagined as linear and ascending, and which, in the end, turned out to be a sort of pitiless boomerang that flies back and knocks out your teeth, your enthusiasm and your balls.”^{liv} What comes down to a search for the meaning of life, the core that is at the center of it all, can also explain the narrator’s experience of increasing disillusionment (and ghost-becoming) in New York. “What I most liked about sleeping in other people’s beds was precisely that, waking up early, rushing out, buying a real newspaper, and reading in the sun.”^{lv} It is as if, after spending a night as a ghost in a stranger’s bed, she seeks to find herself once more, outside in full sunlight amongst a sea of strangers. But she has already become a ghost, her only escape after exposing her secret to her boss is to leave New York, and fiction breaks in on reality. The narrator’s husband leaves for Philadelphia and she reveals more lies about the characters she has created. But she holds onto some sense of reality, “the boy and the baby exist. A house exists, the creaking of the old floorboards, the internal shuddering of the things we own...My husband and I exist, though our existence is increasingly separate.”^{lvi} For Owen, whose deaths in Manhattan “were quick and had external causes...death in Philadelphia is approaching like a bedraggled cat, it rubs its dirty ass up against my lower leg, licks my hands, scratches my face, asks me for food; and I feed it.”^{lvii} The narrator, while detailing her

decision to leave New York because she'd "turned into a ghost," also relates the end of her relationship with her husband, the "strange peace, gathered from who knows what rotten gut. It was a single gesture that broke me – that finished breaking me: his cry of joy when he had closed the front door."^{lviii} While reliving her escape from a past place, she suffers the rootedness of her present space and the trajectory of a relationship that ends abruptly at a closed door. However, when the narrator reveals a couple of pages later that her husband did not, 'in reality,' leave her for Philadelphia, yet another plane of reality splinters off. What becomes clear is that Luiselli's intention is not to make distinctions between fiction and reality but rather to seek essential truths that, to invoke a spatial metaphor, lurk around the corner, out of sight.

As Owen's voice takes on a more prominent role in the narrative, so too does sight, or rather, blindness. Owen recounts his weekly interactions with a blind man named Homer who lives in a mansion in Harlem with his brother Langley. Homer claims to be able to see Owen and says that he is a ghost. At this point, the figure of the ghost seems to signify not only a break from chronological or teleological forms but also a potential for perceptual connection across boundaries of space or time and fiction or reality. That Homer claims to be able to "see" Owen is doubly ironic because, despite his blindness, ghosts are invisible. Homer's perception, however, is not lacking; on the contrary, it opens up a space in which the unseen can be felt. Later, when the brothers have died and the hoarded contents of their house are revealed to the public, Owen wonders if Langley "thought that by bringing examples of everyday objects to the house, his blind brother would be able to hold onto a notion of the things that foolishly supported the world: a fork, a radio, a rag doll. Maybe the successive addition of shadows

would end by shoring up the thing-in-itself.”^{lix} The game of hide and seek, which both narrators play with their children, becomes a metaphor for this search for the ‘thing-in-itself,’ the truth that lies in the shadows. Owen, as an older man living in Philadelphia, also begins to suffer from increasing blindness in a state of bodily decay. However, his various notes, dated from the late 1920’s while he was still in New York, express a different Owen: one who remained intellectually engaged with his experience there. In one particular note to Celestino Gorostiza on the 18th of September 1928, he writes:

The landscape and all my aspirations are vertical now. These men of the North, mystical, with not the least trace of eye-to-pore sensuality, are just poor musicians. We move around awake, in wide, real space. They in time. New York is a theory of a city built on the foundation of time alone. Manhattan is an hour, or a century, with the woodworm of the subways boring through it, eating it away, second by second.^{lx}

Despite the ambiguity of the referents in Owen’s note, it expresses certain ideas that enlightens both his own fictional work as well as Luiselli’s novel. For Owen, New York exists solely “on the foundation of time” in the sense that its inhabitants move through it according to temporal demands rather than spatial awareness. The subways, by rapidly moving New Yorkers through the dark underground of their city, effectively kills space by neglecting it in favor of time, a process described by de Certeau as the “forgetting” of space. In another way, as Luiselli writes in an essay entitled “Gilberto Owen, narrador,” Owen rejects the constraining logic of chronological order within a narrative space. “The strength of Owen’s gaze is in his ability to see between things. Owen does not see the successive moments that make up a scene but those brief spaces between one point and another, there the eye embeds.”^{lxi} In this way, Owen’s onset of blindness in Luiselli’s novel takes on an ironic tone because, for Owen, sight and memory are all that compose one’s world, in the spaces that we exist in and those we have existed in before. As

Luiselli argues, “there is no possible deception in the gaze. The voice can imitate, pretend, borrow. The gaze cannot, because the clarity and depth of vision are two impossible things to simulate.”^{lxii} Her writing on Owen proves to be more than just a thoughtful meditation on a writer she idolizes; indeed, Luiselli’s work becomes even clearer through understanding her interpretation of Owen. For Luiselli, Owen’s intelligence “is manifested in a sensual gaze, close to life, deeply personal...he observed things in the world with humor but not without tenderness, he always balanced two difficult elements: ‘hydrogen of intelligence and oxygen of life.’”^{lxiii} This last description could serve as an astute observation of Luiselli’s novel which also finds fertile ground in sensuously depicting the intimate and almost mundane details of everyday life. Hence the narrator’s depiction of her life as a housebound mother (the physical and metaphorical interior of the novel) and the quotidian interruptions that define her existence which she sets in writing.

Inside|Outside

Another moment of intersection between the two narrators occurs when Owen reads some notes he had scribbled down the night before: “the novel will be narrated in the first person, by ~~a tree~~ a woman with a brown face and dark shadows under her eyes, who has perhaps died. The first line will be these words by Emily Dickinson: ‘I heard a fly buzz when I died.’”^{lxiv} Although the reader is not aware of the literary allusion until this point, the novel begins with the narrator’s son waking her to tell her that the mosquitoes come from the shower. Like the allusion to Hemingway, Dickinson’s poem provides an alternate source of illumination for Luiselli’s text. Dickinson’s poem ends with the lines “With Blue – uncertain – stumbling Buzz - / Between the light – and me - /

And then the Windows failed – and then / I could not see to see - ^{»lxv} This final line seems to speak not necessarily to an inability to see but instead refers to the windows as the framing devices through which one becomes aware of the act of seeing itself. These various disruptions of the meaning of sight, specifically seeing outside, are meant to call into question conventional notions of inside and outside. Owen’s poem “Interior” ends with the lines “But children who solve quadratic equations commit suicide as soon as they get to be eighty years old, and that’s why we’d rather look at whatever comes in with the silence without naming it, and let everyone keep on claiming that two and two make four.”^{»lxvi} Owen employs mathematical logic to criticize the sense of pacifying order that is derived from it and the arbitrary nature of solutions that silently hide the “truth.” In relation to Woolf’s quote in the epigraph of this essay, inside and outside come to represent ways of being in, and understanding, the world. Owen, like Woolf, uses the spatial signifiers of inside and outside to illustrate the flows, or lack thereof, between the two. Silence plays an important role here in that, as the apocryphal Owen of Luiselli’s novel believes, “the Yankee’s greatest virtue – as I now know – is not saying anything; feeding the silence until the other person begins to dig himself a grave in the nearest cemetery, conscious of his inability to keep an appointment at five in the afternoon or to appreciate the joy of Sundays, to be a good sport at all times and so on.”^{»lxvii} A similar sentiment is echoed in Woolf’s quote which frames ‘the inside’ as the organizing life-force; whereas ‘the outside’ symbolizes more than just the ungraspable or inarticulable but also the unorganized, the illogical, that which we feel but cannot explain. As Woolf seems to argue, the outside seeks to break in on the inside or, vice versa, the interior needs to be broken open in order to let the outside in. Woolf, Owen, and Luiselli are all

working towards an irruption of the human consciousness, a destruction of logic and order so that humanity might begin to feel, rather than to simply strive toward knowing and naming. In the conclusion of Luiselli's novel, this intention takes the form of a physical disruption of reality as the narrator's house begins to tremble. Owen, meanwhile, locks himself in his apartment in Philadelphia, racing through thoughts about the novel he would like to write as he disappears completely. The final pages of Luiselli's novel become increasingly fantastical as one of Owen's suddenly-tailless cats appears in the narrator's patio, Owen sees Pound, Lorca, and Williams in his apartment and both he and the narrator begin hearing the loud din of cockroaches as they try to sleep. The two narrators become mere voices in the isolation of their homes, two spaces which ultimately collide within the space of the narrative; it is Owen's voice that ends the novel: "I don't want to hear anything, song of not seeing anything. Beside me, in the white darkness, I hear a soft laugh, the merry chortle of a baby. I feel the blazer that covers my eyes rising, the heat of the room entering and shaking my body, the excited voice of a little boy beating my face: Found!"^{lxviii}

The end of Luiselli's novel shatters entirely any semblance of spatial boundaries as the two intentionally-permeable existences of the narrators inevitably converge within the same narrative space. In terms of the relation between fiction and reality, Luiselli says that her novel is "a vehement defense of fiction - and of reality's vulnerability to becoming fictionalized."^{lxix} In the same interview, Luiselli discusses her interest on the plane of language when people become ghosts or disintegrate to the point of being mere voices. In this sense, Luiselli effectively drains all of the substance that supplies "the truth" in order to only hear the co-presence of these voices that appear to be echoes at the

end of the novel before they physically collide in a moment of bright whiteness.

Reconsidering Luiselli's concept of "relingos" in this light, the idea of writing as the creation of space, not to refill but to offer emptiness, becomes evermore salient. Luiselli does not look to provide an indisputable truth but rather a space to be occupied by the reader in which they can think and feel, a space that creates that unique moment which guarantees the existence of the novel itself.

V.

Translating Luiselli's "Fictio Legis"

Luiselli's short story "Fictio Legis" is grounded in the contained temporality of a transatlantic flight and develops as a sort of cinematic character study in which we learn about the people sitting behind the narrator in the same way (and same agonizing time frame) as the narrator herself. The roughly month-long process of translating the story made me particularly conscious of time as I was very much on the flight with the narrator during the course of her journey. The title refers to the Latin term for legal fiction, a fact presumed to be true in order to create the necessary structure for the implementation of a particular policy or for the sake of consistency or convenience. The analytical essay that follows the translation is concerned with Luiselli's particular use of language which seems to level a critique against language as deployed in legal structures and, specifically, the liberal institution of marriage.

Fictio Legis

By Valeria Luiselli

Translated from the Spanish by Robbie Trocchia

The Roman jurist Modestinus describes marriage as the eternal union between male and female – established in divine and human law. Lavish gifts from the female’s family necessarily accompany the celebration of the alliance. However, according to the law passed by Caesar Augustus, if the female is concatenated with a eunuch, her family is exempt from the costly dowry. In the opinion of the father of Tachi’s wife, the man that usurped the divine jewel of his crown was precisely a eunuch. In her father’s own words: a fucking fag. But in reality Tachi is just pale, short in stature, and a little melancholic. I note with certain anxiety the Y of a blue vein – that flows – generous with aristocratic blood – along his translucent neck with much albeit vain effort to raise his bag to deposit it in the overhead compartment of the aircraft – in aeronautic language – or a little above – as his wife would say – he has to come to the rescue and help with the things: Tachi, why do you always bring with you so many things?

The couple sat directly behind us. They click almost simultaneously the four metal buckles. She clicks a fifth buckle of a passenger seated opposite her – on the other side of the aisle.

The stewardess barely passes for the last time – an authoritarian Sevillian, a little overweight and definitely too old for braces – I undo my belt and I put my blanket on top of me.

In Mexico is this type of blanket called a blanket? – I ask my husband.

It is called a plane blanket – he responds.

The Sevillian stewardess announces the imminent departure. The flight will be 11 hours and 55 minutes – smoking is strictly prohibited even, or especially, in the bathrooms – we should turn off our electronic devices immediately.

Before shutting off my phone, I go on Instagram. The hipsters in Mexico City read Allen Ginsberg in editions that they bought secondhand – the world out there is better in here – they say *roommates* instead of *compañeros de piso* – they have “roommates” – light of the summer of 1968 – a world perpetuated – frozen – turned into *app* – but now nobody knows what stays outside and where is inside.

The plane advances heavily down the runway.

Tachi had had a moment of glory, we learn at hour zero of the flight, when the educational video about possible disasters begins. At twenty-three, he worked for six months in a radio booth. The emergency exits are on both sides – right – left. Not so much in the radio booth as close to it – more outside than inside – in support and production to be precise. It is important to put the oxygen mask on children after and never before putting it on oneself. But on one occasion he had interviewed a politician. It had not been really an interview – but almost, Tachi ensures. The cartoon continues with yellow inflatable slides, which have always aroused in me a desire for an unforeseen disaster to occur during the trip – a splash landing with a happy ending. Tachi had expressed his admiration and the politician – in return – his left shoulder. This same politician had been a delegate, deputy, secretary of state, governor of an important state, and nearly almost a presidential candidate. He didn’t remember then in which state he had governed – but he believed – he was almost certain – that it had been a very

prosperous state – beautiful – important. His wife agreed – but she also did not remember the name of the politician and much less the name of the state. We wish you a safe journey.

Which politician are they talking about? – my husband whispers, as he scans a Spanish magazine in the seat next to mine.

I don't know – I tell him – maybe Hank González.

Poor Spain – he sighs – turning the page – it is almost worse than Mexico.

Are you sure that they do not say blanket? I insist again.

In Mexico they say airplane blanket.

I turn to buckle up under the blanket – lest the Sevillian comes back and reprimands me.

Not that it mattered the name of the state nor of the politician, but the person who listens to Tachi's story is Hans, a passenger of some sixty-odd years – judging by the roughness and poise of his voice – who is sitting across the aisle, in the first seat of the terrible middle row. One should never sit in the middle row: if the plane crashes and you travel in this row it means certain death – you die crushed by the upper compartments packed with things – everyone knows it.

Tachi in the window – his wife – the corridor – and a passenger named Hans. Us two – I on the corridor, he the window – in the seats directly in front of the couple.

Hans confesses that he is not interested in the name of the politician in question, for politics seems vulgar and he has tried for a few years to not read the newspapers. She agrees. But Hans admits that the actor that tells us how to buckle our seatbelts could be a PRI politician.

Of the old PRI – he specifies – the good PRI: strong men with thick Spanish eyebrows – eyebrows in the style of President López Portillo – eyebrows of President López Mateos – but not of President Enrique Peña Nieto, who doesn't have eyebrows nor a National Project. Hans says this, he despises politics.

The plane turns heavily at the end of the runway – accelerates – and as if it didn't weigh a thing – I give my hand to my husband – it rises.

The hour is presented formally as 0:07: Tachi and Pau – Hans. Hans introduces himself as Swedish-Mexican, such that the impression of my husband and myself is that he is definitely Mexican. The compulsory question should have been why – how – was it that Tachi was named Tachi. But it was a difficult question to formulate for the Swedish-Mexican, who did not have a sense of humor. My husband turns to say to me:

This is how they say taxis in Barcelona: Tachi.

I laugh, I say to him that it is wrong to mock the poor Spanish in these times, but he stops me short:

It is definitely true, that it is how they say it.

The Sevillian apologizes on behalf of the airline for the passengers of Flight 401: the entertainment system is not working – I repeat again – I repeat – the entertainment system is not working. However, she tells us that passengers will be able to use the synchronized map that will detail the flight activity. After she repeats the same thing – but in English.

At hour 3:04: chicken or pasta. Chicken or pasta at 11:14 am, Spanish time. Altitude: 10,400 meters.

Ulpian states that there is a notable difference between the eunuchs who were castrated and those who were born without reproductive organs. In the first case, the law holds: the

female's family is exempt from the dowry. In the second, however, no. The eunuch of birth has an irrevocable right to the dowry.

The case, as we found out later from a comment by Tachi's wife – who was at 12:47 am, Spanish time, hour 4:37 of the flight, drinking her plastic cup of wine and whose name I find difficult to say without shuddering a little – Pau – was that he and she had just married, and that her father had not given them anything, not even help in setting up their new home. They had an apartment on Platón Street near the corner of Ejército Nacional. And now, in part because of the father, they were having difficulties and skimping on important details for the renovations of the house. No need to repeat the exact words that Tachi's wife used to say just this: skimp. The important thing is to say that for this reason they didn't know what to do with the kitchen. There, the reason for the trip to Spain. Hour 4:55. She wanted a predesigned kitchen, to save a little – but he, Tachi, preferred a kitchen made tailored to the needs of their future family. For this reason they traveled to Spain: there was IKEA there and she wanted “to see the kitchens in person.” Also, because they had miles and they had friends in Madrid.

The Swedish-Mexican, who confesses to not finishing any degree, is, decidedly, an expert in the history of design: The first predesigned kitchen, he says in complicity to Tachi's wife, was invented by a brilliant women: Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky. Judging by how he pronounces this name, it is clear that Hans speaks German fluently. My husband looks at me with a pout and his eyes squinting up – I pinch his shoulder, acknowledging this gesture that I know so well and which means: I could not give less of a fuck. Tachi's wife, however, was very interested by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky. She asks for more information. Her row mate gives it to her – in torrents – from one side of the aisle to the other.

Hans – hour 5:14. – hour 5:42 – she.

Under the shade of plastic, reaching an arm out through the space occupied my husband's body. The shining light of the Atlantic emphasizes the arched outline of the window. A twinge in my right eye warns me that this light is what sets off my migraines. I try to close my eyes. My husband reads – dozing against the newspaper – perhaps a primitive form of reading – and Tachi reads too. Hans asks him what he is reading. It is an action novel – he says – about the situation in Mexico. He says: An action novel with some sex on the situation in Mexico. I guess that deep down Tachi is right.

Hans, who is also an expert in literature, compares what Tachi says with the work of Kertész and the obligation to not remain silent in the face of horror, later he talks of “The horror, the horror!” by Conrad. Then, Dostoevsky, Beckett and later, even Plato – which certainly is the street where she lives, Hans says, condescendingly. She knows very well who Plato is.

I like all writers – but especially Plato – she declares. I especially like Plato – she extends the *O* with the affectation unique to well-bred Mexican girls.

Hans names and knows of many names. He approves of the fact that Mexican writers, all of them, speak of horror. It is our horror, our holocaust – he declares. It is our duty to speak of it with the instruments that we have. Hans thinks so. Tachi's wife, presumably, nods and raises her eyebrows. But neither of them says anything. As soon as she finds a gap in the conversation – she jumps – and asks Hans about the relation between the Frankfurt kitchens and those of Taylorism – this had interested her a lot and she would

like to know more about it. Maybe they can hire a master mason who can copy for them the design of Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's kitchens – with a slight *upgrade*.

I try to memorize this impossible name: Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky.

Maybe it was so – like the Frankfurt kitchens – the original kitchen of our rented apartment, on the top floor of a building on Revolución Avenue. It is a tiny space – this kitchen – and a little dark. It has one window that opens onto a T formed by two perpendicular streets, very narrow, crammed with formal and informal businesses. More – in quantity – informal than formal. This means that the street functions not as an exterior but as an interior – an eternal market, vertiginous, covered with pink and blue tarps – floors upholstered with gum, phlegm, seeds, butts, nails, hair, insects, 10 cent coins, vast archipelagos of cat and dog shit. Originally, when the streets that lined the building were indeed streets, the Hermitage building had a “porous” particularity – thus says a historic city guide – of opening private space to the outside – and vice versa. On the ground floor there were pharmacies, cafes, businesses. The first functionalist building in the city, the first project of a middle class that was fully modern and urban. We had – they had – we've all had – a project of happiness. We moved there recently married – very young – because a friend had told us that Tina Modotti had lived in this same building – although we later learned that it wasn't true – that Modotti had lived in a colonial house a few blocks away.

Hank González!, Tachi screams. Agonizing hour 6:57 of the flight. The conversation between his wife and Hans just opened a window to the exchange of e-mails and he has felt a twinge of anger or terror. They just registered Tachi's howl – Hank González! That was the name of the politician! – and they preferred to continue spelling their e-mail addresses. Hers: eternaldozing@hotmail.com. His – tremendous coincidences of this life: awakeasleep@hotmail.com.

It was Hank González – I say – gentle nudge – to my husband – asleep.

We also moved to Ermita because the first sound movie theater in the city opened there. And we liked this idea – living above a movie theater. There was a project there. It didn't matter that in reality this movie theater was for twenty years just for adults – that is to say, for decrepit fifty-year-olds and curious teenagers. It was a movie theater and this is what mattered – a movie theater integrated into the building but structurally separated from it by a kind of Schrödinger box. In other words, a hypothetical box, because while we cook above this movie theater the various actors and actresses have sex – like cats – together. Actually they don't have sex nor do we cook: they get heated up and we reheat – because in pornography there is no place for sex and in our kitchen there is no space for a stove. We do have a good microwave. This past year, as we heard the serial adventures of *Savage Cowboy* – a gringo who whips Mexicans in exchange for their Juanitos (what they call their members) – we invented Eggs Benedict tópergüer, or *tupperware*, according to preference. Professedly, we like them – even if they are made with mayonnaise and now my husband believes that I put too much mayonnaise on them.

Tachi's wife suggests to her fellow traveler that she show him the house plans – maybe he will think of better solutions than their's – which should be said to her husband in particular – but she doesn't say. My seat shakes slightly – handle of the woman who is now standing up to get her suitcase from a little above to share the house plans with the Swedish-Mexican, who to her seems entirely Swedish and only a little Mexican. She asks her husband to switch seats with Hans, because it will be cumbersome to study the house

plans from across the aisle – and they would annoy the passengers and miss stewardess will scold them, etc.

Tachi is reluctant – he never travels in the middle row, by now she should know.

It is for the sake of our cottage – she argues.

Hans moves over to the window – she needs to stay in the aisle because she cannot bear imagining the abyss that opens behind the plastic blinds. It seems perfect to Hans, because he likes nothing more than the window. In fact, if they let him seat there the rest of the flight he would be very grateful because nothing touches him more than to see the urban sprawl of Mexico City from the air, minutes before landing. It is so very similar to landing on water. The Swedish-Mexican shares with them a fact that he finds considers fascinating: the first map of Mexico City – all water – is in the library of Sweden.

Landing in Mexico City at night is like coming to rest on a blanket of stars – she offers, master of her own words.

Ulpian also spoke of the “right of the husband.” For him, if he discovers that his wife has committed adultery, he is urged to divorce her and it is recommended that he charge her. The only problematic case is that of the adulterous woman younger than 12 years, says the wise and cautious Roman, that a minor under the law represents an ambiguous instance. But she, Tachi’s wife, in spite of her voice like an anxious little bird, does not personify in reality the problematic case suggested by Ulpian.

Hans’ first recommendation, at hour 7:00 of the flight, is Charlotte Perriand’s dining room. Such a wide room requires a Perriand.

I try to read the first page of a novel by Martin Amis that I have chosen for the trip – as if I have ever managed to read more than two or three pages on a plane.

Neither is Tachi strained to safeguard the eternal character of his conjugal union at hour 7:04 of the flight – the time at which Hans already slipped into the matrimonial room and is suggesting that the south window of the room be expanded by a few centimeters and to use sliding windows.

The first lines of the novel are beautiful and a little sad. They speak of cities – cities at night – when couples sleep and some men – asleep – cry and say Nothing. I think of Martin Amis’ teeth. I look at my husband’s slightly open mouth. I think that I don’t know his teeth that well. Many years ago I had a partner who grinded his teeth while sleeping. Perriand’s dining room is a work of art, Hans ensures, while he reproduces it in a drawing. He grinds the tip of the pen against the paper – presumably the vomit bag in case of turbulence. The insistent gnashing of those teeth mid-dream gave me some anguish. Sometimes – actually – unjustifiably – that sound made me angry: it indicated, it seemed to me, that this man was really sleeping very far away from me. I woke him up to ask him if he felt good. Nothing, he said. Amis is right – they say Nothing. The decision is made: the dining room will be Perriand. I close the novel.

Hour 7:12 of the flight. Tachi announces that he’s going to the bathroom.

Yes – she says.

Hans offers her a mint – hour 7:13.

Yes – she says.

Tachi walks to the bathroom perhaps to wash his face, perhaps his teeth, perhaps to piss. Perhaps to cry. He’s going to undo his button and he’s going to drop his pants. So he was taught as a child. Perhaps he grew up surrounded by women who preferred clean toilet seats – no splashing. He learned to piss sitting down since he was young. He covers

the toilet seat with two strips of toilet paper and sits on them – both thighs dropping simultaneously on the bowl – for pressing the paper against the surface – which does not move a centimeter – so that his skin does not come into direct contact with a drop of urine. He pisses pushing down his member with the index, middle, and ring fingers. A few drops only – more out of courage than anything else.

While Tachi is washing his hands, Hans asks Tachi's wife why is it that her family disapproves of the marriage. She, for the first time, appears a little defensive. Her father does not disapprove – she ensures. It's only that Tachi and her father are not on good terms – so much so that her father hung up on her the last time they spoke, after telling her that her husband was a *pinche mayate*, a fucking fag. She confesses that she had to look up the word on the website of the Royal Spanish Academy. Between the two definitions – 1. beetles of different colors and regular flight; 2. A homosexual man – she knew that her father was referring to the second. But she prefers not to think about this. Better to talk about the bathroom: bathtub or shower?

Ulpian writes: “It is not intercourse but rather martial affection which constitutes marriage”.

Hans speaks, at hour 7:25, of his nephews. He is also not a father but a very good uncle, he assures her. He adores them. And he is also a godfather to a niece, the daughter of his sister, who lives in Connecticut.

She repeats: Connecticut.

I don't know where exactly Connecticut is – I think.

Where is Connecticut exactly? – she asks.

Hans says that it doesn't matter – that Connecticut is close enough to New York. Because every time that he goes to Connecticut, he takes a short trip to New York. He has friends there, in Brooklyn. She and Tachi are familiar with New York, they like Times Square. But Tachi doesn't like walking a lot – it tires him. She, on the other hand, loves walking. Hans also loves it. In fact, he walked El Camino de Santiago last year. She wishes to do this someday, but with Tachi it will be difficult. Hans ensures that there is nothing better than going to bed – naked – after a good bath and a glass of wine after a day full of walking through those landscapes.

Tachi returns from the bathroom. Hour 7:29. He doesn't sit – he prefers to walk a little along the length of the aisle to stretch “my little legs”.

7:30

7:31

7:32

Emperor Valerian wrote, at hour 7:33 of the flight, in the year 258 after the birth of Jesus Christ, that infamy surrounds the man who marries two women simultaneously. Not the case for Tachi. But he knows infamy – it palpates on his tongue – between his teeth – he has it between his legs.

7:34 hour of flight – 10,600 meters above sea level – time in the place of destination: 3:23 am.

I raise the armrest and place my head on my husband's lap – maybe to get some sleep. I feel, in the lobe of my right ear, the seam of his zipper – and on my cheek, the slight erection of the sleeping. I don't see it, but Tachi stands next to his seat, resting one hand on the back of my chair. He talks to his wife. She asks how he is. Good – he says – even though his legs hurt. She wants to know if her father's chauffeur will get them at the

airport. Of course – he says – that’s what the plan was. I cover myself with the blanket up to the forehead. I check: here my tongue – my first second and third molars – my cheek – the denim – the metallic highway of the zipper – the striped pattern of my panties – the warm tip of his member – the seat – the carpeting – the various layers of metal – the bowels of the aircraft – and then, 10,600 meters of emptiness between us and the surface of the sea.

And the white light – constant –the plane ripping like scissors ripping fabric.

For breakfast – hour 10:41 – there are eggs Benedict with a lot of mayonnaise. The Sevillian stewardess wakes me and I wake my husband. I am excited about the coincidence. He does not note it. I smile – yawning – rubbing my eyes energetically with the heels of my hands. We eat.

Why do you call yourself Tachi?, Hans asks – his mouth full of Benedicts – hour 10:43 – the hour of cruel questions.

Who is coming to get you at the airport? – my husband asks me.

I’m going to take a taxi – I respond. And you?

A friend is coming for me. If you want I’ll call you on Sunday and we can agree on a time so that you don’t have to be there when I come for my things on Monday.

Whatever – I say.

It is a nickname, Tachi says.

But why did you choose it? – Hans insists.

Too much mayonnaise – she interrupts. Both agree.

Just because – Tachi says. Because my name is Ignacio and my sister said it like this when we were children.

Ulpian indicates that three conditions must be met in order for a marriage to be considered legitimate: prior matrimony; the man has arrived at puberty and the woman is of an age to have sexual relations; there is the consent of both parties.

Hour 11:03. The Sevillian and another steward collect the trays.

Hour 11:17. The Sevillian collects the headphones, that almost no one opened. I pretend to have lost mine – which I kept in my pocket – just in case.

Hour 11:22. The descent begins.

Hour 11:30. Tachi does not want to land seated in the middle row. It scares him – he doesn’t like it – he insists. Hans offers to change places again. The city dawned rainy and cloudy so that the aerial view will not offer much anyway.

Hour. 11:45. Tachi and my husband look out the window in silence – the city covered with a thick cloud – milky.

The aircraft descends – touches ground – bounces slightly – grounding again – advances against its weight – gradually slowing – to a full stop.

On the Uses of Language in “Fictio Legis”

Daniel Saldaña París, who anthologized the collection of short stories in which “Fictio Legis” appears, writes in the prologue, “Valeria Luiselli forces the rhythm of prose to a unique degree through an unexpected use of punctuation. The sense of humor, acid, hides or contributes to delaying the central revelation of the story. It is a story of heartbreak told from a corner of the text, not the front.”^{lxx} While translating Saldaña París’ prologue to Un nuevo modo: Antología de narrativa mexicana actual, his remarks on Luiselli’s story did not initially make sense to me as I had not yet completed my translation of her story. The rhythm of the prose is indeed punctuated to a unique degree through Luiselli’s generous use of dashes throughout the narrative. This device functions in tandem with her intention to simultaneously narrate the flight’s journey, relate the conversation behind the narrator, and reflect on the idiosyncrasies of Roman law. The use of exaggerated punctuation and the consistent markers of the passage of time deliberately maps the flight in two ways: to express its unbearable length (as depicted by the small maps that detail the flight activity) and to slowly but surely reveal subtleties of the various characters on the flight, including the narrator herself. Language is deftly and concisely placed together such that the narration remains grounded in the present tense of the flight, even as the narrator ruminates on ideas outside of the immediate experience of being on the plane. This effect was especially pronounced for me as the process of translating, and thus fully understanding, Luiselli’s story was much longer than it would have been if I was reading and clearly understanding her story on a first read-through. In this way, the slow and deliberate revelation of the story matched my own restructuring and comprehension of it in English.

After the stewardess announces the flight time and standard takeoff procedures, the narrator writes:

Before shutting off my phone, I go on Instagram. The hipsters in Mexico City read Allen Ginsberg in editions that they bought secondhand – the world out there is better in here – they say *roommates* instead of *compañeros de piso* – they have “roommates” – light of the summer of 1968 – a world perpetuated – frozen – turned into *app* – but now nobody knows what stays outside and where is inside.

The sense of stasis expressed here reflects a residual political consciousness that, according to the narrator, keeps us in a perpetual state of uncertainty. Perhaps the moments rendered frozen by *apps* like Instagram only work to hold our past in its idealized form, which is achieved precisely through being captured. If “the world out there is better in here,” maybe the “inside” of our comfortable existences does not necessitate the creation of alternative visions for our world. Indeed, Tachi and Pau’s decision to go to Spain is based solely on their wish to go to IKEA and “see the kitchens in person.” Not only is their whimsical reason for travel permitted by their extreme privilege but they are representative of this present condition of globalization as a constant flow of financial capital around the world. Yet the narrator’s reflections on the contemporary moment remains an open-ended question; the future is in flux. Thus, her use of an ancient legal system is interesting as the language of law creates the lasting framework through which marriage is established. In the contemporary context, neoliberalism works through the use of this language. Success is predicated on following the rules: getting married, buying a house, having children. As the narrator reminisces about her and her husband’s first apartment, she offers a sense of the space that speaks to how it is experienced and what it might mean in a larger sense:

It has one window that opens onto a t formed by two perpendicular streets, very narrow, crammed with formal and informal businesses. More – in quantity – informal than formal. This means that the street functions not as an exterior but as an interior – an eternal market, vertiginous, covered with pink and blue tarps – floors upholstered with gum, phlegm, seeds, butts, nails, hair, insects, 10 cent coins, vast archipelagos of cat and dog shit. Originally, when the street that lined the building were indeed streets, the Hermitage building had a ‘porous’ particularity – thus says a historic city guide – of opening private space to the outside – and vice versa. On the ground floor there were pharmacies, cafes, businesses. The first functionalist building in the city, the first project of a middle class that was fully modern and urban. We had – they had – we’ve all had – a project of happiness.

The narrator’s description paints a portrait of a space that renders its local specificity in crude detail while also drawing a connection between an architectural principle and a socio-political shift toward modernity and urbanity. Yet one cannot quite determine the narrator’s tone in regards to the ‘project of happiness’: is she simply remarking on this historical trend or is she ironizing the collective (we, they, we all) pursuit of happiness?

The narrator continues, explaining why she and her husband decided to move to this particular neighborhood, and relates a humorous bit about living above an adult movie theater. The narration returns to the flight, where Pau has asked Tachi to switch places with Hans so she can show him the house plans. A single sentence effectively expresses the tension between the couple (“It is for the sake of our cottage”) and the ‘threat’ posed by Hans and his innocent pretensions becomes almost a joke for the reader. The narrator brings up a case addressed by Ulpian regarding the ‘right of the husband’ in the event of an adulterous wife. At this point, the use of Roman law no longer seems arbitrary although Luiselli’s intentions do not become immediately clear at any point in the story. It might be argued, however, that it functions, much like a legal fiction, as the scaffolding of the structure of the narrative. That is, although Roman law does not have any bearing

on the narrative content (indeed, the narrator notes that the words of these Romans are not actually relevant to Tachi or Pau), it recreates the formal framework through which marriage is established. What marriage actually looks like becomes the narrative arc of Luiselli's story. On the level of language, the use of Roman law seems to exist on a plane that is distinct from the dialogue or even the narrator's inner reflections. Its placement in the story, however, is intentional. That the narrator and the newly-married couple behind her are discussing their marital homes, the spatial constitution of their union, bears on the fact of language's role in Roman law and the dynamics it establishes between husband and wife. The law is upheld only because language makes it possible. Language ascertains that this law is the only way.

This triangle dynamic (pedantic and insufferable male figure, impressible wife who admires this male figure, and her emasculated and ignored husband) is not rare in recent narratives; Woody Allen's 2011 film *Midnight in Paris* comes to mind. Although we don't hear much from Tachi, he becomes the focus of the narrator's attention during his trip to the bathroom. She imagines:

Tachi walks to the bathroom perhaps to wash his face, perhaps his teeth, perhaps to piss. Perhaps to cry. He's going to undo his button and he's going to drop his pants. So he was taught as a child. Perhaps he grew up surrounded by women who preferred clean toilet seats – no splashing. He learned to piss sitting down since he was young. He covers the toilet seat with two strips of toilet paper and sits on them – both thighs dropping simultaneously on the bowl – for pressing the paper against the surface – which does not move a centimeter – so that his skin does not come into direct contact with a drop of urine. He pisses pushing down his member with the index, middle, and ring fingers. A few drops only – more out of courage than anything else.

Consistent with the rest of the story, this passage retains a sense of obliqueness. Whereas up until this point, our image of Tachi is overwhelmed by others (his wife, his father-in-

law, a Mexican politician, Hans), the narrator imagines him alone, feminized by sitting on the toilet seat. One can't help but think back to the earlier reference of castrated men but, as conferred by Roman law, there is a major difference between the man who is castrated without his consent and he who is born impotent. Tachi is neither; however, we are not quite sure what or who he is. The narrator takes the liberty of imagining his emasculated self, and the reader, like the narrator, can make certain inferences about his character through what is said about him. Outside of this, we have only our imagination. While Tachi is in the bathroom, Hans rudely asks Pau about why her family disapproves of their marriage. She becomes defensive and says that her father and Tachi are not on good terms. As the narrator notes in the first paragraph, Pau's father crudely refers to Tachi as a "fucking fag." She dismisses the conversation and returns to discussing her new home. The following line is a single quote by Ulpian: "It is not intercourse but rather marital affection which constitutes marriage." The difference between sexual desire and marital affection is duly noted, yet the narrator seems to be imposing her own idea of the couple's marriage in the void left open by a clearly uncomfortable wife. Tachi's impotence is further elaborated when Pau states that he "doesn't like walking a lot – it tires him" before he returns from the bathroom and paces up and down the aisle to stretch his legs. Minutes later, the narrator quotes Emperor Valerian in stating that "infamy surrounds the man who marries two women simultaneously;" however, this is "not the case for Tachi. But he knows infamy – it palpates on his tongue – between his teeth – he has it between his legs." Her certainty is almost off-putting – what exactly is the infamy on his tongue, his teeth and between his legs? Is she equating his emasculation with disgrace? The narrator says all of this before noting the hour of flight, the plane's

altitude, and the time in the place of destination. She records a short conversation between husband and wife before resting her head on her husband's lap to get some sleep.

I check: here my tongue - my first second and third molars – my cheek – the denim – the metallic highway of the zipper – the striped pattern of my panties – the warm tip of his member – the seat – the carpeting – the various layers of metal – the bowels of the aircraft – and then, 10,600 meters of emptiness between us and the surface of the sea. And the white light – constant – the plane ripping like scissors ripping fabric.

There is a certain disconnect between the narrator's certainty in regards to Tachi and her own self-awareness. Whereas she has much to say about the relationship behind her, there is little to be said about her relationship with her husband. She makes a comment earlier in the narrative after opening a novel by Martin Amis. She thinks of Amis' teeth then looks at her sleeping husband's slightly open mouth and realizes that she does not know his teeth well. Perhaps Luiselli's story looks to say something about intimacy and distance, and the dreadfully-modern experience of flying in a plane, unbearably close to other humans who we would like to think we know well when there is always more to know about those closest to us.

The narrative breaks to account for the narrator's sleep and resumes with breakfast at hour 10:41 of the flight. Without warning, the morning brings unexpected answers. Casually, we hear the conversation happening behind the narrator as her husband asks if she has a ride from the airport. After she answers that she will take a taxi, he suggests that they agree on a time so that the narrator doesn't "have to be there when I come for my things on Monday." Her response is a simple "whatever." This blow comes quickly and quietly, and might even require the reader to re-read the conversation, as I did several times. The revelation that the narrator is in the process of divorcing her

husband comes as a surprise before immediately causing the reader to reflect on everything they have just read. The narrator relates a final judgment by Ulpian, “that three conditions must be met in order for a marriage to be considered legitimate: prior matrimony; the man has arrived at puberty and the woman is of age to have sexual relations; there is the consent of both parties.” If and how the narrator’s marriage fails to meet these conditions is left unclear. The story concludes by marking the last hour of the flight and the corresponding landing procedures. The plane descends, lands, and comes to a full stop. The story ends. The penultimate sentence of the story, however, addresses the narrator’s soon-to-be-ex-husband and Tachi in the same line for the first and last time in the narrative: “Hour. 11:45. Tachi and my husband look out the window in silence – the city covered with a thick cloud – milky.” Although seemingly innocuous, the narrator’s observations of these two silent men seems to sum up the entirety of the narrative in a single image – that of silent, passive men looking out into nothingness. These final lines might be made more clear in returning to the part in the story when the narrator opens the Martin Amis’ novel and begins reading: “The first lines of the novel are beautiful and a little sad. They speak of cities – cities at night – when couples sleep and some men – asleep – cry and say Nothing.” Luiselli’s story ends in the morning, with a casually shocking revelation and two men, silently staring out the window at a city that is not quite visible. In a sense, the narrator might be understood as displacing the anger or sadness of her heartbreak onto this other couple. Or maybe they are merely occupying her attention for the duration of an excruciatingly long plane ride. What is most clear is that the narrator takes issue with saying nothing. Indeed few words are exchanged between her and her husband; most of the language surrounding their relationship is found in her

internal reflections or memories. Perhaps not enough words were said or maybe the wrong ones were chosen. Either way, we are not provided with a reason for the divorce but instead a narrative that seeks to say everything simultaneously without revealing that which the reader most wants to hear. As Saldaña París' spatial metaphor suggests, the narrator does not wish to be upfront. Instead, one must peer around her words to find some sort of truth in the story. What comes down to a short exchange of words changes everything for us, though many words pile up over the course of the journey. As our expectations of the story are called into question, the connection between language and the law resurfaces in a new light. The disintegration of a marriage mirrors a disintegration of language – in the story, language does not do what it is supposed to and we are left with the question, how might the failure of marriage mean a failure on the part of language? To trace this journey back and sift through all that was said (and not said) makes “Fictio Legis” a story that must be read twice, like a roundtrip flight with, perhaps, a more certain return.

VI.

Future Routes: Time and Value in *La historia de mis dientes*

A map of the world that does not include utopia is not worth glancing at.

Oscar Wilde

It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.

Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller"

Luiselli's most-recent novel, *La historia de mis dientes* (translated as "The story of my teeth," though an English translation is forthcoming), was the product of a collaboration with Colección Jumex, a contemporary art collection based in Mexico City. Luiselli wrote her novel in tandem with the thoughts and criticisms of Jumex laborers who met at the end of the work day to read and discuss the novel. Book I of the novel's six parts assumes the standard narrative arc of beginning, middle, end. The narrator, Gustavo Sánchez Sánchez, otherwise known as Carretera (highway), begins his story by proclaiming: "I am the best auctioneer in the world. But nobody knows this because I am a restrained man... This is the story of my teeth. It is my personal letter to posterity, my essay on collectibles and radical recycling." From the beginning, the narrator occupies the standpoint of a storyteller relating past experiences for the sake of future readers to come. But the introduction also contains an element of the significance of time and value in the story. The narrator introduces himself as an auctioneer, one who facilitates value-making in the moment, and, as we learn early on in his story, his ultimate goal in life is to redo his teeth. The epigraph to the story reads, "every tooth in the head of a man is more valuable than a diamond," a position that Carretera would surely concede. This comparison between teeth and diamonds points to the embodied relationship between ephemerality and permanence which is also echoed in the anonymous epigraph of the

novel, “Death will come and you will have your teeth” – here, the idea of human life as a matter of duration is disrupted. While death means an end to life, it does not mean the end of the human body. As with the items he auctions, the value of Carretera’s teeth does not dissipate but rather increases with time. His reason for writing his dental autobiography is perhaps “nothing else but a struggle against the power of time”^{lxxi} and the omnipresent threat of death. Thematically, destiny is figured in Carretera’s vision of the future and the associated image of fortune cookie-epigraphs which precede each section. Fundamentally, destiny presupposes the fact of futurity and faith in good fortune, experiences which are embodied despite being anticipatory. Using Carretera as a vehicle, Luiselli’s work can be understood as leveling a critique against modernist temporal conceptions of value on the same plane as José Muñoz’s queer analysis in Cruising

Utopia:

The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity. Both the ornamental and the quotidian can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness. Turning to the aesthetic in the case of queerness is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations... Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality and concrete possibility for another world.^{lxxii}

Ultimately, Carretera’s story functions as a rejection of the present in favor of a new world picture, one that frames the future as open in its repurposing of history for the sake of posterity.

Carretera goes on to relate the early years of his adult life, including his education, his first job, and subsequent vocational ascension in the standard form of a story of upward mobility, much like the rags-to-riches narrative. While working as a security guard at a juice factory, he successfully deals with a panic situation, is

reevaluated by his superiors and promoted to Crisis Management of Personnel. He believes his success and good fortune to be a result of his restraint, “a quality that few appreciate and all need to learn.”^{lxxiii} Restraint and its antithesis, excess, form an embodied contradiction within Carretera who proclaims himself to be a restrained man while also subscribing to an exacerbated sense of vanity in his life goal of having perfect teeth. Carretera’s excesses are also present in his attitude of disposability toward the people in his life – he marries his wife, has his son Ratzinger (who he later abandons), divorces, marries another woman, divorces her, marries another, and the cycle continues as he experiences success as an auctioneer and his wealth and collection of objects grows. Meanwhile, Carretera develops the conceptual details of his allegoric technique. After finally understanding a line oft-repeated by his instructor of auctioneering, maestro Oklahoma, “We auctioneers are mere salaried heralds between the paradise and hell of supply and demand,” Carretera sets out to reform the art of auctioneering. Understanding himself as exclusively a conduit of value-making within the capitalist system, he declares, “I was not a vile seller of objects but, above all, a lover and collector of good stories.” In this way, his allegoric approach to auctioneering does not value objects but rather the stories that bestow value and importance on them. Book I ends with Carretera’s discovery of Marilyn Monroe’s dentures in Miami and his subsequent return to Mexico where the teeth are surgically implanted in his mouth. Value becomes embodied in Carretera whose destiny of having the perfect teeth is finally fulfilled.

Carretera’s moment comes at the beginning of Book II, *Parabolics*, when a priest asks him to save the church from the destructive forces of capitalism. With this auction, Carretera puts to use his allegoric method in auctioning off the teeth of literary figures,

ranging in quantity and quality from the mouths of Plato, Rousseau, Woolf, Borges, and a few other famous essayists. Carretera auctions the teeth like any other object, describing the present condition of the teeth and relating a particular story about them, some of which come off as hilariously pseudo-factual. The value of eternity is reified when Carretera states, “I want to urge those who buy them, bring them to your houses, and treasure them for *per secula seculorum*. That is, for forever.” As auctioned items, these literary figures obtain value as being possessed through the ages. Like the relation between the body and value, the value of literature is called into question in considering the modes of valuation that outlive even death. Ultimately, Luiselli is writing about the human condition in rethinking how we value what we have inherited. She asks, what do we want to keep? Carretera goes on to warn his audience, “if these relics do not find an owner by the end of the day, they will be sold abroad. And this is the last thing we need: that the little we have be taken away by the others.”^{lxxiv} Politically contextualized, there emerges in Carretera’s words a sense of what is at stake for Mexico in the present. To neglect to see the political is, in the words of Fredric Jameson, “a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life.” Behind Carretera’s words, then, is a recognition that what is ours is what defines us and to lose that is to lose value. In another sense, Luiselli believes that “literature is traversed as we know by vanity, an element that has become an epidemic that has infected most authors. Vanity is a machine that devours everything and whose fuel contributes in bulk to the publishing market.” In fueling the fire, vanity invades in the same pervasive spread as capitalism. The religious context of Carretera’s auction provides a slyly satirical space for considering the two opposing forces in tension here, the ‘purity’ of literary creation and

the vane excess of capitalist proliferation and history's leftovers. Perhaps finding value in what's left is more of a challenge than an accession.

Value can be understood in multiple ways: the exchange- or use-value of economic language or Benjamin's notion of usefulness in "every real story." For Benjamin, our decreasing ability to exchange stories can be attributed in large part to the fact that "the communicability of experience is decreasing...the art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out."^{lxxv} Benjamin goes on to posit that storytelling is endangered by the proliferation of information, the value of which "does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time."^{lxxvi} The logic of value operates in the same manner: it is preserved, increased even, with the passage of time and does not have an expiration date. As storyteller, Carretera specifically addresses future audiences in an attempt to ensure that his story will indeed live on. Benjamin quotes Valéry in arguing that "the decline of the idea of eternity coincided with the increasing aversion to sustained effort" in regards to storytelling. Whereas dying was once a public process, Benjamin maintains that "in the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living."^{lxxvii} Carretera's auction of deceased literary figures is ironic in that it summons the dead, not through their literary accomplishments, but through a description of their physical appearances. The ultimate irony occurs when Carretera proclaims, "I am the unrivaled Carretera. And I am my teeth"^{lxxviii} before offering himself up for auction. In a truly embodied gesture of selling

out, Carretera exposes himself to an external value judgment – one that is, in the end, determined by his son Ratzinger who purchases his neglectful father for a mere 100 Mexican pesos.

Book III, *Hyperbolics*, is a nightmarish account of Carretera's "torture" by Ratzinger, when he wakes up and realizes that Marilyn's dentures have been removed from his mouth. The title of this part of the book might also be interpreted as an exaggerated use of language in that the entire scene is a frustrating conversation in which Carretera is finally faced with the consequences of having abandoned his only son. When he looks up to survey the room he is sequestered in, he realizes that he is surrounded by frightening images of clowns – his worst fear. He is reminded of something his cousin Juan Pablo Sánchez Sartre once said, "that hell was us."^{lxxix} He considers this for a moment, surmising that perhaps those we fear most are what constitute our personal hell. After a confusing and cryptic conversation with the clown-images, the clown harshly asks, "do you not realize that you have nothing to offer?...and that the schism between the perception you have of yourself and the perception that others have of you is infinite and irreconcilable?" Carretera responds, "maybe," to which the clown says, "If you cross the limit of eccentricity...what is on the other side is clownery: you are a clown." The clown asks that Carretera retrieve a few books for him and, after waiting for another humiliating response from the clowns, Carretera asks his son, "what can I offer you?" to which his son responds "nothing." Finally, he agrees to a glass of water and Carretera gets up to leave. He thinks, "my uncle Fredo Sánchez Dostoievski was right when he said that the insult, after all, was a purification of the soul." He leaves, having faced the major

wrongdoing of his adult life, and feels cleansed of it by the cruel words of his son, language that initially devalues him but “purifies” him as a result.

Book IV, *Elliptics*, begins with Carretera in a euphoric state of mind. He borrows a bicycle from a friend in order to find his dentures then stops at a snack bar where he finds himself in a chance encounter with a young man named Beto. Beto tells Carretera that he is planning a tour of *relingos*, which he describes as a “tour of holes...wastelands, spaces without an owner nor a fixed use.”^{lxxx} Carretera asks him what he does, and Beto responds that he is a writer and a tour guide but tells Carretera that is terrified of irrelevance: “There are too many things...there are too many books, too many opinions. Anything that I do will only add to the pile of garbage that everyone is leaving” to which Carretera responds, “That’s why I’m an auctioneer...I’m like the picker of your garbage. But with pedigree. I purge, I find. I aromatize, clean and disinfect. Then, I recycle.”^{lxxxi} Carretera recommends to Beto that he tell stories of the neighborhood, “when there are stories, there will be people who come to hear them...first I need you to write my story, the story of my teeth. I will tell it to you, you will write it, later you will publish it in a magazine so that the world knows me.”^{lxxxii} The two leave together and the conversation ends; Carretera writes, “as my uncle Ludwig Sánchez Wittgenstein said, “the world is everything that happens and what cannot be spoken must be silent.” In this way, the title of the section becomes clear: elliptical language is relieved of irrelevant matter. Carretera finds in Beto a mentee to whom he can tell the stories of the neighborhood so that they can be shared and valued by the world.

Book V, *Allegorics* (Notes for a tour of epigones), is narrated by Beto as he tells Carretera’s story in his own words, relating their experience together and the end of

Carretera's life. Epigones refers to followers or disciples and stems from the Greek word 'epigonos,' meaning born after. The title seems to refer to a generational following, or a perhaps more positive relationship between Carretera and posterity (considering his failed relationship with his son). Beto writes, "These final notes... have the double purpose of recounting the final months of our hero and to outline the route of what will be Tour Carretera – the first tour of the great relingo of Ecatepec."^{lxxxiii} Beto's photographer friend, Winifredo G. Sebald, takes photos of the places that Carretera frequented throughout his life, all of which are spaces that will be on the future tour. This final section contains references to images that will follow in the last part of the book. Beto describes Carretera's final auction which is titled, "Allegoric of the people and places in my neighborhood," a successful auction that Beto attributes to "the fact that it proposes to recycle local histories of people in the neighborhood, all of whom are present at the event."^{lxxxiv} In this way, Carretera's life is valued by Beto through its relation to the familiar spaces of his neighborhood. According to Carretera, "the allegorics are... 'the post-capitalist auctions of radical recycling that would save the world from its condition as a dumpster of history.'^{lxxxv} The present condition of the world is characterized as a receptacle of the excess that is history. This sense of over-accumulation necessitates, according to Carretera, a careful selection of items from this pile. Objects in themselves, however, do not suffice; instead, Carretera proposes that these objects are imbued with value or significance through the stories that surround them. These stories, then, are the focus of his particular form of auctioneering. It might be said that Carretera seeks to replace the object's aura, the very thing which Benjamin signaled had disappeared in the advent of mechanical reproduction. In this way, Carretera's project of radical recycling

takes post-capitalism not as the next progression of stages but rather a move toward what gave objects value in the first place: the stories around them. His auctions, therefore, are a mediated exchange, another form of storytelling.

The ten allegories of Carretera's final auction are expressed in the form of short stories that include various contemporary writers based in Mexico City, placed here in quotidian roles of the local neighborhood (bus driver, police officer, neighbor). In an interview about her book, Luiselli states that La historia de mis dientes is a book of "literary maps, that sort of mocks this idea of literary generation, putting them all on the same plane. Julio Cortázar coexists with Joselito Vasconcelos. In Latin America or in the Spanish language we carry a sense of responsibility for tradition...what interested me was breaking with this linear idea of generations that succeed each other." In doing this, Luiselli attempts to decontextualize these writers by placing them in this literary world as characters that appear randomly, threaded into the narrative with their own stories. By placing literary figures on the same plane, Luiselli strips them of their exalted position as distinguished writers and places them, literally, in the same neighborhood. It is in this space that their interactions create stories. What Carretera auctions are not necessarily objects but images and stories including "Two Whistles of Police in Transit," "Veronica's Prosthetic-Leg," or "Stuffed Dog of a Lady Victim of Something or Someone." The final auctioned item is "Quintilian's Fortune Cookies" in which Carretera relates an encounter between Guillermo Fadanelli and Pablo Duarte in which the two open fortune cookies. Fadanelli's fortune cookie comes from Benjamin's essay "On the Concept of History" in which he writes:

This is how one imagines the Angel of History. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one

single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. This hurricane is what we call progress.^{lxxxvi}

Duarte's fortune cookie simply reads, "Life will smile at you" and the allegorics end. The juxtaposition between Benjamin's concept of history, which seems to echo Carretera's conception of the present condition of the world, and Duarte's simple and sunny fortune is ironic in its combination of high- and low-brow text. This might be understood as the intention of Luiselli's entire novel, as a universal expression of the human condition on the grand scale of its most complex and simplest forms – longing, happiness, tenderness, ruthlessness – and a meditation on the interrelations between past, present, and future. Book VI, Circular Walk, contains images culled from GoogleMaps and other selected images taken by the fictitious Sebald and include quotes from various cultural figures. Their meanings are "mobilized" in their connection to the images themselves and the text of the preceding chapter that references these images. Carretera's tour, spatialized in these images, offers a future utopia that revalues the past precisely in finding what it has to offer to the future. There exists in these images, however, an absence of Carretera's body; it is as if he has just left the frame. Although these spaces are somehow made more "real" in being mapped, the image of the body and its value remains out of the picture. Yet, for Carretera, these images represent "the great relingo of Ecatepec," an emptiness that offers space for bodies to fill, to create their own stories, to value forever. Like a map, they are open for the imagination to explore, to treasure, and to always return to.

Conclusion: Desarraigados/Uprooted

Since the inception of my project, I have pondered the ways to go about discussing not only Luiselli's work but the figure that she represents. In the context of my seminar at the University of Buenos Aires, reading her work made complete sense: she is uprooted in the purest sense of the word. As the child of a diplomat, she has lived in many places all over the world and, as an adult, she lives in New York City, the most uprooted of global cities in terms of foreign-born populations. And as demonstrated by her work, this subject position lends itself to the creation of fictional work in which, borrowing Benjamin's depiction of the work of Nikolai Leskov, "[her] tracks are frequently evident."^{lxxxvii} That is, the reader assumes the privileged position of Luiselli's movement through space, in Venice, Mexico, New York, and beyond. Considering both Luiselli's mobility and her status as a global citizen and artist, what exactly does her writing offer? Although her work varies in thematic and technical elements, her two novels and short story, for example, express a theoretical position that breaks with logic and order by using language to signal its own limits. In her seminal text Flexible Citizenship, Aihwa Ong argues:

Globalization has greatly blurred the distinction between Americans and foreign-born immigrants or newcomers who invest, work, and live in this country. The key issue, perhaps is not language or real estate; rather, it is how the arrival of affluent immigrants challenges white Americans' understanding of themselves as privileged American natives who should take no back seat to foreigners...But will the accumulation of cultural, and not just economic, capital by these well-heeled immigrants change such nativist perceptions?^{lxxxviii}

Ong's concept of flexible citizenship, which claims that people choose their citizenship on economic grounds rather than political ones, underlines a need for an alternative collective response to the globalizing forces of capitalism which so ferociously figure

human beings as mere tools of the economy. While I have sought to reconcile Luiselli's position with that of the Mexican migrants whose citizenship in the U.S. is impelled by economic need, perhaps the difference between these two embodied experiences need not be ignored but instead understood as a co-constitutive system of relations. In "Latino/a America: A Geophilosophy for Wanderers," Alejandro de Acosta considers Pedro Lasch's *Latino/a America* project; he writes:

Perhaps an outmoded sense of reason, corresponding to maps with geopolitical boundaries, corresponding to economic destinies, is indeed lost...[Lasch's] maps suggest dispersal and difference (to each his or her own map), with the possibility of a conversation from margin to margin. ("What happened to yours?"). In short, the possibility, born from the wanderings of Latinos and Latinas across the continent, of reason freed from the centralized authority of those who determine what it is to reason, to make sense, to have an identity or lose it.

Lasch's maps seem to work in the same way as Luiselli's fiction, through a "valorization of a mobile mediation, a constant wandering across endless corporeal and geographical territories...adequate to this new and liberated use of reason."^{lxxxix} Reason, understood in this way, is co-constitutive as it grows through this openness in the intersection of trajectories and chance encounters. Indeed, the potential conversations and possibilities for a relational approach to space are endless. Luiselli speaks to a universal sense of citizenship in "Permanent Residence," the concluding essay of *Sidewalks*, where we find her ill in Venice:

Nothing was further from the truth, in my life at least, than the metaphor of literature as a habitable place or permanent dwelling. At best, the books I read were much like certain hotel rooms in to which we enter, exhausted, at midnight and from which we are expelled at midday – or vice versa, as had happened to me on this occasion in Venice. The thought of dying on a bench reading Brodsky was romantic. But books don't give us a mattress to sleep on, a shower with hot water, or relief from real pain.^{xc}

In Venice, Luiselli is not only confronted with her own bodily limitations but also the place of literature in her life. At our most desperate moments, of what use is a book? She decides to phone a friend who suggests she use her Italian passport to register as a citizen of Venice in order to get a medical card. She is given a tax code and the two declare themselves to be living in legal cohabitation. In addition to these somehow-legitimate but still-unbelievable feats of bureaucratic navigation, Luiselli “was able to witness an invisible city, probably in danger of extinction: the empty, damp, silent Venice of government offices.”^{xcii} Having used her mobility as an official citizen to visit a doctor who is able to cure her, she ends her essay in consideration of the false roots she incidentally lays down in Venice.

I...now have the joy of being an official resident of one of the most literary of cities, though neither through the blessing of a graceful pen nor the fidelity of the muses. And, worse still, not even through the sweat of my brow and fist...But, in fact, it comforts me to think that if I die before my time, at least I'll have taken up false permanent residence in the Most Serene Republic of Venice, and will thus be able to fulfill my wish to be buried in some *relingo*, perhaps not far from Joseph Brodsky, in the commoners' section of the cemetery of San Michele.^{xciii}

Luiselli ends her essay with the image of death, not in its most morose form but rather a humorous musing of the final resting place as a *relingo*, without purpose or use except to provide space. But she remains uprooted in the world, alive enough to continue onward where temporary residences await, both in books still unread and spaces still unseen.

Notes

- ⁱ Valeria Luiselli, *Sidewalks* (London: Granta, 2013), 23.
- ⁱⁱ Luiselli, 19.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Luiselli, 22.
- ^{iv} Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91.
- ^v de Certeau, 92.
- ^{vi} de, Certeau, 95.
- ^{vii} Luiselli, 28.
- ^{viii} Luiselli, 26-7.
- ^{ix} Luiselli, 28-9.
- ^x Luiselli, 30.
- ^{xi} Luiselli, 30.
- ^{xii} de Certeau, 124.
- ^{xiii} de Certeau, 125.
- ^{xiv} de Certeau, 127.
- ^{xv} Luiselli, 72.
- ^{xvi} Luiselli, 72.
- ^{xvii} Luiselli, 78.
- ^{xviii} Luiselli, 77.
- ^{xix} Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (London: Verso, 2011).
- ^{xx} Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005), 95-6.
- ^{xxi} Raquel San Martin, "La ciudad es hoy un espacio de combate abierto," *La Nación*, August 17, 2012.
- ^{xxii} Massey, 95.
- ^{xxiii} Valeria Luiselli, "What the Doorman Sees," *The New York Times*, May 15, 2009.
- ^{xxiv} *The New York Times*, Aug. 15, 2009.
- ^{xxv} *The New York Times*, Aug. 15, 2009.
- ^{xxvi} *The New York Times*, Aug. 15, 2009.
- ^{xxvii} *The New York Times*, Aug. 15, 2009.
- ^{xxviii} Luiselli, 12.
- ^{xxix} Luiselli, 13.
- ^{xxx} Luiselli, 10.
- ^{xxxi} Ashley Hunt, Lize Mogel and Alexis Bhagat, *An Atlas of Radical Cartography* (Los Angeles: Journal of Aesthetics and Protest Press, 2007), 145.
- ^{xxxii} Avery F. Gordon, "
- ^{xxxiii} David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 98.
- ^{xxxiv} Harvey, 101.
- ^{xxxv} Harvey, 109.
- ^{xxxvi} Harvey, 130.
- ^{xxxvii} Luiselli, 55.
- ^{xxxviii} Tim Cresswell, *On The Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.
- ^{xxxix} Valeria Luiselli, *Swings of Harlem* (London: Visual Editions, 2013).

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- xl Valeria Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd* (London: Granta, 2012), 1
- xli Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 4.
- xlii Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 23-4.
- xliii Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 24.
- xliv Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 28.
- xlv Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 35.
- xlvi Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 47.
- xlvii Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 54.
- xlviii Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 58.
- xliv Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 58-9.
- l F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-up* (New York: New Directions, 1945), 1.
- li Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 60.
- lii Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 70.
- liii Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller"
- liv Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 73.
- lv Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 73.
- lvi Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 78-9.
- lvii Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 76.
- lviii Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 81.
- lix Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 100.
- lx Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 121.
- lxi Valeria Luiselli, "Gilberto Owen, narrador," *Letras Libres*, Jan. 2009.
- lxii Luiselli.
- lxiii Luiselli.
- lxiv Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 112.
- lxv Emily Dickinson, "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died – (591)."
- lxvi Gilberto Owen, "Interior."
- lxvii Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 85.
- lxviii Luiselli, *Faces in the Crowd*, 148.
- lxix Valeria Luiselli, "Todos morimos de algún modo muchas veces," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDedWAMePgg>.
- lxx Daniel Saldaña París, *Un nuevo modo: Antología de narrativa mexicana actual* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2012), 14.
- lxxi Benjamin, The Storyteller, 9.
- lxxii José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.
- lxxiii Luiselli, *La historia de mis dientes* (Mexico City: Sexto Piso, 2013), 25.
- lxxiv Luiselli, *La historia de mis dientes*, 51.
- lxxv Benjamin, The Storyteller, 5.
- lxxvi Benjamin, 5.
- lxxvii Benjamin, 6.
- lxxviii Luiselli, 64.
- lxxix Luiselli, 78.
- lxxx Luiselli, 93.
- lxxxi Luiselli, 94-5.

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- lxxxii Luiselli, 97.
lxxxiii Luiselli, 107.
lxxxiv Luiselli, 121.
lxxxv Luiselli, 121.
lxxxvi Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History"
lxxxvii Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 5.
lxxxviii Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*
(Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).
lxxxix Alejandro de Acosta, *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*, 76.
xc Luiselli, *Sidewalks*, 107.
xci Luiselli, *Sidewalks*, 108.
xci Luiselli, *Sidewalks*, 110.

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