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Data: 06/01/2026 23:03:49

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Sabrina Meyer

University of Münster
s_meye49@uni-muenster.de
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2889-5727

Using Children's Voices to Represent Border Losses – The Construction of Childhood in Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*[*]

Abstract. Valeria Luiselli's novel *Lost Children Archive* reveals the challenge of telling the stories of migrant children who get lost in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands without appropriating their trauma or forcing the narrative into a coherent shape that is easily accessible to a supposedly empathetic reader. Published in 2019, following a period of intense media coverage caused by the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy and in response to the 2014 childhood immigration crisis during the Obama presidency, the text forms an emotionally complex critique of the cultural construction of childhood in legal framings and media representations of unaccompanied minors at the U.S.-Mexico border. I argue that Luiselli's exceptional way of incorporating children into her narrative and the way she creates a strong resemblance between the depicted children in the narrator's family and migrant children who get lost in the Sonoran Desert, forms a compelling critique of binary constructions of childhood in the social imaginary, especially through common media representations. Informed by the field of childhood study, I contend that Luiselli carefully constructs a delicate narrative of childhood between infantilization and adultification. By using the narrator's own children and the negotiation of their roles and status within the family as a point of reference and resemblance to the lost children at the border, Luiselli acknowledges the tension between treating children as innocent, dependent and helpless and the danger of adultifying them, thereby forming distinct implications on migrant children's political and social status as well as a critical commentary on their depiction in mainstream media representations.

Keywords: Migrant children, unaccompanied minors, childhood studies, immigration literature, adultification, infantilization

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Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 06/01/2026 23:03:49

Introduction

Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* was published in response to a rapidly increasing number of unaccompanied minors arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border during the child migrant crisis since 2014. President Trump's current politics of exclusion and defamation, including fast and uncompromising deportation and the attempt to cut funding for legal aid for unaccompanied minors (Romero, La. 2025), which specifically targets these children under the pretext of protection, shows that the reality of the child migrant crisis still constitutes an unresolved problem that the U.S. government is neither able to handle humanely nor to take the needs of the different affected individuals into consideration. The public discourse on childhood migration, shaped by, inter alia, common media representations, reveals a tension between infantilization and adultification. This tension suspends migrant children in an ongoing continuum between dependant children in need of care and protection and fully responsible adults. Moreover, the migrant children are confronted with an immigration system that racializes them and leads to their "dehumanisation as criminals and contaminants and a refusal of their childhood, innocence, and vulnerability that renders them devalued and disposable" (Torres et al. 2022, 5).

In the novel, Mexican-American author Valeria Luiselli attempts to narrate the stories of the children who have been affected by this crisis because their voices are fundamentally underrepresented in the discourse of U.S. immigration. Following the narrator's family during a road trip through the Southwest of the United States, the reader does not only witness the family's own challenges and struggles in navigating a withering marriage and a complex patchwork family dynamic, but also the narrator's highly self-reflective and critical voice attempting to tell the stories of countless unaccompanied minors at the U.S.-Mexican border.

I argue that Luiselli's exceptional way of incorporating children into her narrative and the way she creates a strong resemblance between the depicted children in the narrator's family and migrant children[1] who get lost in the Sonoran Desert, form an apparent critique of binary constructions of migrant childhood in legal framings and common media representations. Informed by the research field of childhood studies, I claim that Luiselli offers an alternative construction of childhood and the individual children depicted in the novel. The depicted tension between infantilization and adultification within the narrator's family equals typical constructions of migrant childhood, forms distinct implications on migrant children's political and social status and provides a critical commentary on their depiction in mainstream media representations.

[1] Luiselli foregrounds the forced nature of the lost children's reason for migration, thus defining them as child refugees. However, discussing the larger discourse on child migration, I settled on the term "migrant" to refer to the lost children, aware of the fact that the terms "refugee" and "migrant" should not be used interchangeably.

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 06/01/2026 23:03:49

Childhood Studies and Binary Representations of Immigrant Children

The field of childhood studies developed out of a need in the humanities to consider children and children's perspectives in the production of knowledge and norms in national, social, ethnic or political realms. Childhood studies seek to deconstruct the predominant assumption in the humanities that adulthood is associated with autonomy, authority, and independence, while childhood is necessarily defined in contrast (Duane 2013, 3). In the words of two of the founders of this field, Allison James and Alan Prout, "childhood and children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, and not just in respect to their social construction by adults" (2015, 4). James and Prout also contend that children should not be restricted to the position of passive bystanders in the social sphere but rather be "actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live" (James and Prout 2015, 4).

Childhood studies call for the implementation of childhood as a category of social analysis. However, scholars are aware of the intersectional character of these categories. Barrie Thorne notes that many researchers within the field have challenged "the universalizing, essentialist and linear assumptions […] driven by biological images of growth and, all too often, embedding western, middle class assumptions about the contexts in which children grow up" (2007, 150). Therefore, childhood should not be viewed as an isolated occurrence but must be understood as socially constructed in interchange with other categories like race, gender, class or ethnicity for example. Consequently, childhood is not a universal and essentialist phenomenon but rather an individual process, dependant on several intersectional factors, which becomes even more precarious and challenging in the case of immigrant childhood (Wall 2023, 2). Especially in regard of assumptions about the perceived innocence of childhood and demand for protection, processes of racialization lead to "a gap between the cultural exaltation of children as a protected class on the one hand and the detention and deportation rhetoric […] on the other hand" (Lu. Romero, 2022, 1670).

Scholars from the field have also questioned the prevalent understanding of childhood as a temporary stage of human development that individuals need to outgrow in order to become fully active parts of society. Anna Mae Duane (2013, 5–6) describes that childhood is often understood as an incomplete developmental stage in which "the child, […], may have the potential for future rational autonomy, but […] must undergo rigorous training to overcome their current state of incompleteness." Jeanette Sundhall (2017, 165) even extends this argument to children's status as human beings: "Adulthood is so fundamental to being seen as a full human that we view it as natural that children are considered not yet fully human." The understanding of children as under-developed members of society in constant need of care, support and protection constructs minors as passive recipients of adult norms and in a constant state of dependency.

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 06/01/2026 23:03:49

The aforementioned state of dependency becomes especially precarious in the context of child-centered jurisprudence, because as Annette Ruth Appell (2013, 30–31) explains, it results in the reinforcement of power relations that reproduce harmful notions of poverty, wealth and race. Jurisprudence understands children as individuals in a developmental state marked by a constant demand for "basic care and education – nutrition, school, and protection from their physical, emotional, and cognitive vulnerabilities" with the ultimate goal of maturing into an accountable adult (Appell 2013, 31). This infantilization in jurisprudence denies children a "direct political voice" and makes their status within society dependent on professionals who assess their developmental stage (Appell 2013, 31–32).

This is particularly true for constructions of childhood in the context of immigration jurisprudence. In her analysis of the treatment of sexually exploited minors, Priscilla A. Ocen (2015, 1594) claims that children of color exist "at the margins of childhood", where they are denied full societal participation due to their status as children, whilst simultaneously "being excluded from the protective constructions of childhood." Laila Hlass (2020, 205) applies this concept of "liminal childhood" (Ocen 2015, 1593) to migrant children and explains that the immigration law constructs children always in relation to and dependent on adults while simultaneously adultifying them by "ignoring youth-related vulnerabilities throughout the spectrum of enforcement and adjudication proceedings." Furthermore, she states that this adultification does, however, not result in children having equal rights as adults (Hlass 2020, 207). She explains that "[p]ractices and actions of decisionmakers, advocates and parents often erase children's voices in immigration legal proceedings" and therefore also infantilizes them (Hlass 2020, 208). In accordance with that, Catherine Kannam (2023, 216) labels the possibilities for children to manage the complex procedures of the immigration system "ill-defined and fraught at their core". Immigration jurisprudence seems to infantilize migrant children by restricting their agency and societal participation, while at the same time adultifying them and stripping away their legal rights. In other words, children end up caught between the restrictive rights of childhood and the responsibilities and expectations of adulthood.

This binary construction of childhood is also present in mainstream media depictions of childhood migration. In their study about media representations of unaccompanied minors arriving in the UK, Rachel Rosen and Sarah Crafter (2018, 71) note that especially before the arrival, most of the collected articles depict unaccompanied minors in a supposedly sympathetic and compassionate way, foregrounding their vulnerability and dependency in need of rescue. After the arrival and confronted with the actual challenge of accommodation and integration, a change in the way tabloids engaged with the topic is noticeable and, as they describe it, a switch from a "humanitarian frame to a primarily ontological frame" occurs (Rosen and Crafter 2018, 73). The children are then predominantly described in close proximity to criminals and their actual status as children is questioned increasingly (Rosen and Crafter 2018, 73). This effect is also noticeable in a study by Daysi Ximena Diaz-Strong , Ivón Padilla-Rodríguez and Stephanie

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 06/01/2026 23:03:49

Torres (2023, 435), which is concerned with the inadequacy of this binary construction of immigrant children "sandwiched between infantilization and adultification". They describe that in dominant portrayals of childhood migration, the children are constructed as either "defenceless victims" without agency or as "agential enough to commit fraud" (Diaz-Strong, Padilla-Rodriguez and Torres 2023, 424). This distinct depiction of migrant children in mainstream media does not come without implications. In his analysis of anti-immigrant protestor's quotes in news articles, Luis Romero (2022, 1675) notes: "Understanding how unaccompanied minors were portrayed during the 2014 protests, then, provides insights into attitudes and subsequent policy surrounding immigrant children". In other words, the construction of, at the same time infantilized and adultified, migrant children in diverse media outlets has distinct implications on migrant children's lived realities.

Hence, the child as "deeply narrativized subject," to use Duane's (2013, 4) words, is socially constructed through the different narratives that are being formed about and around it. To understand the implications of these constructions of childhood, it is crucial to take a closer look at the existing narratives about it. Narratives that are formed through the circulating media representations of the crisis, but also narratives like the reconsideration of an important piece of migrant literature like Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*.

Childhood in *Lost Children Archive*

Valeria Luiselli's novel carefully balances several precarious themes. It is set during the peak of the U.S. child migrant crisis. The word "crisis" in this context requires careful consideration because it comes with specific political implications. Giorgio Agamben explains that a so-called "state of exception" (1998, 18–21) is a state in which the sovereign, due to a potential emergency or crisis is able to suspend certain laws, which allows to reduce the rights of people and deprive them of their political status. In this regard, the "permanent crisis mode" (Stone 2025) president Trump declares might also be an attempt to use emergency regulations to enforce a distinct political agenda. However, as Joseph Masco states, a crisis is also "an affect-generating idiom, one that seeks to mobilize radical endangerment to foment collective attention and action" (2017, 65). Given this definition, *Lost Children Archive* is indeed concerned with a humanitarian crisis but focuses on the detrimental impact on the affected children.

The novel tells a young family's story of a road trip through the United States. The parents, who are not named but only addressed as "Mama" and "Papa," each work on specific artistic and activist projects throughout the trip. The father is collecting material for a sound documentary about the historical traces of the Chiricahua groups and their last leader Geronimo. The mother is searching for the daughters of an undocumented migrant woman named Manuela, whom she met during her work as a volun-

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 06/01/2026 23:03:49

teer translator and whose daughters got lost after running away from a detention center, whilst simultaneously investigating the stories of other lost children.

Acknowledging Luiselli's archive as an important factor, I am interested in how Luiselli pays attention to the ambiguous reality of migrant children caught between the definition of innocent and dependent infantilized migrants and adultified children embodying agency and independence. I argue that Luiselli uses the narrator's own children and the negotiation of their roles within the family as a point of resemblance to common conflictive depictions of migrant children in jurisprudence and mainstream media.

Luiselli acknowledges the racializing effect of the depiction of unaccompanied minors in media outlets as "utterly foreign", "com[ing] from a barbaric reality" and "also, most probably, not white" (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 50). Further the narrator criticizes a distinct newspaper article that states that "[a] United States policy allows Mexican minors caught crossing the border to be sent back quickly" (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 50). In response the narrator states that "[n]o one thinks of those children as consequences of a historical war that goes back decades" (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 51). She foregrounds the fact that migrant children are constructed as racialized others and as problems that need to be solved.

The question that possesses an almost ghostly presence throughout the entire novel is how to tell the traumatic stories of these children without taking away their voices and appropriating their narratives. *Lost Children Archive* identifies the problem of the necessity to pay attention to the especially underrepresented perspectives of migrant children while avoiding to limit their identities to outlets for cathartic empathy on the side of the reader (Sabo 2020, 218; Vermeulen 2023, 88; Stuelke 2021, 43). These stories are particularly difficult to tell, because the stories almost always entail complex traumas and the reality of these traumatic experiences too often evades linguistic representation (Bromley 2020, 4).

Many scholars who have analyzed the novel identified Luiselli's use of archival techniques in her storytelling as a way to give a voice and narrative space to the lost children whose stories otherwise might be lost forever (Román 2021, 168; Sabo 2020, 218; Vermeulen 2023, 86; Stuelke 2021, 44). Through the use of many different fragments like radio interviews, descriptions of sound samples, maps, death reports or the references to various cultural and literal works, Luiselli attempts to let the lost children's voices echo through the narrative (Sabo 2020, 218; Román 2021, 170). Because the children are not able to speak for themselves and tell their own story, Luiselli creates a space that depicts particularly the children's absences. The fragmentation created by the intervention of the archival material into the main narrative, foregrounds the fact that properly representing the lost children's stories and retrieving their actual voices is impossible. Moreover, the switch between the narration of the mother and the narration of the son in the second half of the novel further scrutinizes the depicted binary between infantilization and adultification in the discourse on childhood immigration. The boy's narration retells the events from a shifted point of view. In the context of the novel's considerations about the restrictions of migrant childhood and migrant children's assumed lack of agency,

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 06/01/2026 23:03:49

switching from an adult narrator to a child, seems like a deliberate counteraction of that power dynamic. Even if the comparison of the boy with the lost children surely lacks in accuracy considering privileges, the author is able to provide an additional positionality to the narration using the boy as a narrator.

Taking a closer look at the description of the narrator's own two children, also nameless and only referred to as "the boy" and "the girl," it becomes apparent that the narrator seems to have a differing expectation of children's behaviour and their capacities and limits. Rather than understanding children as intellectually subordinate to adults, she considers them as capable and equal agents:

> I suppose that after listening to her, we both decided, even though we never really spoke about it, that we should treat our own children not as lesser recipients to whom we, adults, had to impart our higher knowledge of the world, always in small, sugarcoated doses, but as our intellectual equals. (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 91)

Similar to common approaches in childhood studies, the narrator shows a clear understanding of her children as intellectual agents at eye level. In the light of this alternative perception of children, the decision of the parents to allow them to listen to the audiobook of *Lord of the Flies* in the car, which is clearly "no fairytale, no sugarcoated portrait of childhood," does not come as a surprise to the reader (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 77). Under traditional family circumstances, this endeavor to entertain the children during a long road trip may seem irritating, if not inappropriate. Indeed, the choice of the audiobook does not stay unchallenged. The girl seems to be overwhelmed with the content of the story and not capable to handle the violence, let alone understand any of the implications of the work. As a reaction to her complaint, the mother reflects upon the children's level of comprehension and the limits of her educational approach:

> I wonder at times if the children are indeed getting any of it, or if they're even supposed to get it. Perhaps we expose them to too much – too much world. And perhaps we expect too much from them, expect them to understand things that they are maybe not ready to. (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 90)

This consideration suggests that the narrator is aware of the fact that the construction of the children as equal counterparts does not always empower and enable them but potentially also leads to a certain degree of adultification.

This fine line between adultification and a more child-considerate approach becomes one of the most dominant areas of tension within the novel. The behavior and reactions of the five-year-old girl and the ten-year-old boy seem to reflect this tension between adultification and infantilization as well. In numerous instances, the hierarchical line between adulthood and childhood grows increasingly indistinct. The girl, for example, interrupts a dispute between her parents "with the resolve of her suddenly civilized annoyance" by addressing both of her parents distinctly and ordering:

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 06/01/2026 23:03:49

> Now, Papa. I think it's time you smoked another one of your little sticks. And you, Mama, you just need to focus on your map and on your radio. Okay? Both of you just have to look at the bigger picture now. (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 49–50)

Suggesting to look at the bigger picture after her parents quarrel about her father's driving certainly misses the point, but it shows a certain capability to resolve tension and manage a conflict situation that seems unusual for a girl her age. The girl here steps into a position that is normally occupied by adults, but her almost precocious intervention changes traditional parent-child dynamics and makes her parents' argument appear immature and in need of management.

Another conflict situation shows a similar potential in the boy. After his parents' decision to continue the drive against the children's wish, the boy shows his disappointment:

> Sounding like a 1950s suburban housewife, the boy tells us that we're always "putting work before family." When he's older, I tell him, he'll understand that the two things are inseparable. He rolls his eyes, tells me I'm predictable and self-involved – two adjectives I've never heard him use before. (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 64)

In this instance, the boy's accusation, specifically his choice of words, seems so misplaced and untypical for a ten-year-old child that even his mother acts surprised and ultimately wishes for him to "be normal, be happy, be a child" (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 65).

In addition to that, a large part of the novel is narrated exclusively by the mother and consequently from the adult perspective. As Stephen M. Park (2023, 61) argues, this strong focus on the mother's perspective and her self-reflective narrative mode takes up so much space that it becomes "impossible to tell the children's stories." Beyond doubt, the focus on the mother's perspective occupies a lot of narrative space in the novel, but this distinct perspective provides a highly self-reflective and critical insight that demands accountability and actively avoids exciting a purely sentimental response in the reader. The narrator clearly states her anger and implies that sentiment alone is an insufficient reaction to the crisis:

> Why? What for? So that others can listen to them and feel – pity? Feel – rage? And then do what? No one decides to not go to work and start a hunger strike after listening to the radio in the morning. Everyone continues with their normal live, no matter the severity of the news they hear, unless the severity concerns weather. (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 96)

She adopts an extremely critical, almost cynical, stance that clearly emphasizes the discrepancy between being emotionally moved and taking action.

Moreover, her narrative style allows for a specific contrast to enfold between her narration and the following part of the novel that is almost entirely narrated through the perspective of her son. As Jaseel and Rashmi Gaur (2023, 504) argue, "[i]n contrast to his mother's anxious and uncertain tone in the first half, the boy's narration

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 06/01/2026 23:03:49

consistently exudes optimism, curiosity, and a willingness to explore all imaginative solutions and alternative outcomes." Although this is certainly true for large parts of his narration, there are also more serious, almost desperate undertones in other parts of it. As Chinmaya Lal Thakur (2022, 229) notes, "[e]ven when the boy tells the story in the second half of the novel, the narrative does not provide any sense of calm, relief, or comfort to its readers." His reflection about his mother's behavior after hearing news about the migrant children exemplifies this well:

> I wanted to remind her that even though those children are lost, we were there, right there next to her. And it made me wonder, what if we got lost, would she then finally pay attention to us? But I knew that thought was immature, and also I never knew what the words were to tell her I was angry, so I kept quiet and you kept quiet and we all listened either to her stories or just to the silence in the car, which was maybe worse. (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 208)

This instance functions as the starting point for his idea to search for Manuela's lost daughters in the desert. Although Park (2023, 63) interpretes the boy's attempt as a "cry for parental attention, […] set against his mother's affective engagement with Central America migrants," it also shows agency and responsibility for the realities of less privileged children. In the example above, the boy is quick in reflecting his own emotions which leads him to choose the supposedly mature option of behavior. Thus, the boy's narration resembles "a curious blend of childlike playfulness and adult sophistication" (Jaseel and Gaur 2023, 504). This constant tension between childish innocence and mature reflection that the children embody, I argue, is a result of Luiselli's careful construction of childhood in the midst of a distinct tension between innocence and agency, between dependency and responsibility.

The parents seem to foreground their children's supposedly equal status, but there are still a number of situations described in the novel in which the children are infantilized and denied any rights of participation whatsoever. The narration of the boy reveals the following example:

> Ma was looking at her big map and asked if we wanted to stop in the next town, called La Luz, or if we wanted to drive all the way to a town farther away, called Truth or Consequences. You and I voted two against two to drive only to the next town, La Luz. So it was decided: we would drive to Truth or Consequences. When I complained, Pa said those were the rules and that was called democracy. (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 195).

Even though the mother attempts to give them a choice, it becomes clear that the votes of the different family members are not counted equally. The almost sarcastic remark that this is called democracy reveals that the children's voices do not have the same worth, if any worth, in an actual political context, similar to migrant children who are denied a "direct political voice" (Appell 2013, 31–32). Luiselli constructs the rights and agency of

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 06/01/2026 23:03:49

the narrator's children very cautiously, reflecting and implicitly commenting on a larger political context. A context that turns out to be especially precarious for migrant children.

The children's interventions in the mother's narration in the first half of the novel and the switch to the boy as a second narrator, form a space to consider a different construction of childhood that allows for the children's views and needs to be accounted for. It offers the possibility to regard children as active participants of a societal discourse. Through the incorporation of the narrator's children's voices, Luiselli opens up an imaginary dialogue about what children are potentially capable of and therefore suggests a reconsideration of an understanding of childhood, which traditionally refuses agency and rights of migrant children in particular. On the other hand, a lot of the described situations do not reflect the parents' attempt at equality and leaves the children caught between infantilization and adultification. If we read this tension as representative of the social and political construction of migrant children, this entanglement denotes more severe consequences and the capability and capacity of the children are not framed as a possibility for exerting agency but rather as an absolute necessity to survive.

Resemblance and Re-enactment of the Voices of the Lost

Given the examined construction of the narrator's own two children, the way the novel compares and sometimes even contrasts the boy and the girl with the lost children offers an interesting consideration of the political demands of unaccompanied minors. A strong impression of resemblance is formed by the narrator herself:

> I look back at our own children, asleep in the backseat. I hear them breathe, and I wonder. I wonder if they would survive in the hands of coyotes, and what would happen to them if they had to cross the desert on their own. Were they to find themselves alone, would our own children survive? (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 117)

As Park (2023, 59) notes, this example simultaneously creates familiar "parental empathy" and contrasts the narrator's children in a privileged position of safety to the precarious reality of the children at the border. Luiselli constructs a resemblance between the children to allow for a specific kind of empathy because "only when unaccompanied children are recognizable as being like my children […] I can extend them compassion and then work towards justice for them (Park 2023, 59). Even though Luiselli cautiously reflects on this kind of empathy building, the resemblance between the children that is established in this example is undeniable.

The most obvious way of forming this resemblance between the narrative of the boy and the lost children's narratives is the interlacing between the boy's narration with the meta-fictional narration of *Elegies for Lost Children.* The narrative by the fictional author Ella Camposanto draws inspiration from the Children's Crusade, a medi-

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 06/01/2026 23:03:49

eval religious movement in which a large group of European children set out to peacefully missionize but were exploited and often died on their journey to the Holy Land. This historical reference shows an "uncanny resonance" between the children of the Crusade, and the children who get lost at the U.S. Mexico border (Thakur 2022, 225). During the boy's narration, the story of the children from Camposanto's text gradually merges with the story of the boy.

Moreover, Luiselli emphasizes their resemblance by letting them use a variation of almost identical questions. In the beginning of the novel the narrator's children ask in the car: "How much more? How much longer? When will we get there?" (Luiselli [2019] 2020,14–15). The third elegy of Camposanto's text begins with: "When will we get there? How much longer? When can we stop to rest?" (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 163). The children in the last example do not dare to ask their questions out aloud, but the construction of the questions that concern the children suggest a strong similarity.

Furthermore, the resemblance between the lost children and the boy and the girl is strongly emphasized by the boy himself. Stating that by getting lost in the desert, his "Ma would start thinking of [them] the way she thought of […] the lost children" and "if [they] too were lost children, [they] would have to be found again," the boy starts to identify with his idea of the lost children (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 238). This sense of identification with the other children possibly grows the strongest in the chapter "Echo Canyon," which is a roughly 20-page-long sentence, portraying the narrator's children's state of despair, sadness, exhaustion and loneliness. Over and over the boy describes how they walk the same way as the lost children do, how they see the same things, or how they hear the same sounds (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 319–20). This chapter has its climax in the children actually meeting the imaginative lost children in the desert (Luiselli [2019] 2020, 330). As Sunčica Klaas (2023, 335) states, "the novel initiates here a series of echoes, bringing the children from different fictional levels closer and closer together, until they finally meet in a limitless, that is, flowing textual landscape unpunctured by periods." This way, the differences between the boy and the girl and the imaginative lost children from Camposanto's narrative become increasingly indistinct. The treatment of the narrator's children should not be understood as having the same serious implications as the traumatic experiences migrant children have to face, but rather as a reveal of the tendency to suspend children in a precarious state between adultification and infantilization, with responsibilities of adulthood but without the according rights and agency. This distinct construction of childhood lays bare the dehumanizing and impossible expectations that migrant children are confronted with by the U.S. immigration discourse.

Conclusion

Through the emphasis of the similarity between the children, Luiselli opens up the narrative space for imagining the stories of these lost children. Considering her distinct construction of childhood, caught between infantilization and adultification,

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 06/01/2026 23:03:49

and the resemblance between the children, Luiselli builds a narrative that allows for a representation of the precarity of migrant children's liminal state to resonate without appropriating their voices. The strong resemblance between the two children of the narrator and the lost children allows the reader to reconsider migrant children's perspectives on the crisis at the border. A political environment that makes children need to flee their homes and forces them to take on such a devastating journey across the U.S.-Mexico border leaves little to no room for any other interpretation of childhood and migrant children than as adultified individuals. However, migrant children facing the immigration system of the United States are also infantilized because the related agency and rights for adults do not apply. Unfortunately neither does a functional care system for children.

Luiselli uses the construction of the narrator's children and especially the closeness and empathy that is evoked through the boy's narration to carve out the precarious liminal position of unaccompanied minors at the border. Just like the boy and the girl, they are trapped between two different constructions of their subjectification. By using the two children as resemblances of the lost children, Luiselli allows for a specific kind of empathy-building towards children that display a complexity of character that stays unmatched by any consideration of the immigration system or legal or media representations. This way, she discloses and criticizes the racialized and misanthropic logic of the U.S. American immigration discourse, which continuously endangers the lives of unaccompanied minors.

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