

Modern Odyssey To Death: The Train and the Tragedy of Immigration*

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◆ ABSTRACT

This article analyzed the ways in which the representation of death due to the operation of trains changes in response to three periods that marked large fluctuations in immigration flows from Mexico and Central America. It aims to reveal that the violence of the train that causes immediate or consequential death of the migrants can also be approached from the perspective of mobility, identity, and speed. In this study, the contradictory experiences with trains that go against their nature and purpose are transformed into the violence of the train, which recurs throughout many historical periods. The three works studied in this article, such as *Norte* by Edmundo Paz Soldán and *Lost Children Archive* by Valeria Luiselli, and the movie 'Alambrista' by Robert Young, reveal how trains as a space along with the rail tracks demonstrate the biological power of the state and the capitalistic logic of accumulation through exploit, repression, mobility, and speed. Each work revealed how the free mobility was ironically cooperative with the violence of forced migration and how a slow mode of freight train, rather than a fast vehicle, was paradoxically beneficial in an economy of exploitation. Ultimately, this study examined how the voices of the authors deepened the madness, imprisonment, vulnerability, and insecurity, expanding them to a more existential level, making the train journeys resemble a modern odyssey to death.

Key Words : Immigration, Freight Train, *Norte*, *Lost Children Archive*, 'Alambrista'

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I . Introduction

The visual images of railways in literature and movies, as well as the media, depicting Mexican and Central American immigration, carry a strong connotation of misfortune or tragedy. In particular, the violence on trains carrying Central American immigrants through Mexico over the past decade has been frequently brought to the fore in the media, highlighting the impression that the railways are violent.

This article analyzes the ways in which the representation of death due to the operation of trains changes in response to three periods that mark large fluctuations in immigration flows, such as the 1920s and 30s, in which there was a large inflow and outflow of Mexican workers; the 1970s and 80s, in which the circulation of undocumented immigrants was relatively uninhibited; and the current time of refugee crisis, since the 2010s. Focusing on two novels, *Norte* by Edmundo Paz Soldán and *Lost Children Archive* by Valeria Luiselli, and the movie *Alambrista* by Robert Young, in which the authors engage in the re-appropriation of (semi) real-life migrants to have their work take on testimonial significance, this study examines how vulnerable and atypical immigrants resist the traumatic experiences that originate from the power of the transportation system by creating artistic, frantic, or imaginative expressions as a gesture of resistance.

In the three works discussed, the depiction of railroad and freight trains transporting immigrants is connected to the actual or symbolic death of the protagonists. The ways in which the authors unveil the nature of railways, the protagonists' dependence on it for mobility, and their sensory reactions to it, be they submissive or subversive, have to do with the fact that they are tied up with tragic endings such as death,

incarceration, insanity, or deprivation of humanity. Since death caused by a train explicitly represents a source of social pain, anxiety, and tragedy, the way in which death is represented has a metonymic characteristic that penetrates core problems of Mexican and Central American immigration. In addition, the authors develop a new critical vocabulary around trains to reveal how the problems of railway construction, repatriation, undocumented immigration, and the humanitarian crisis are deeply related to the ways of economic accumulation and expulsion. Thus, the representation of deaths caused by trains can offer a key to deciphering these problems because the narratives articulate the concepts of discrimination, exclusion, and exploitation of migrants in a figurative and connotative way.

This study aims at revealing that the violence of the train that causes immediate or consequential death of the migrants can also be approached from the perspective of mobility, uniformity, and speed. The contradictory experiences with trains in the works discussed that go against their nature and purpose are transformed into the violence of the train, which recurs throughout many historical moments. The three works studied in this article reveal how trains as a space along with the rail tracks demonstrate the biological power of the state and the capitalistic logic of accumulation through repression and mobility, and speed. Each work reveals how the free mobility is ironically cooperative with the violence of forced migration and how a slow mode of freight train, rather than a fast vehicle, is paradoxically beneficial in an economy of exploitation. The works examine the dangers and threats associated with the utility of trains manifested in different ways at each point of the migration history.

This study also discusses how tragic deaths caused by forced

displacement in a broader sense enacted by the trains are repeated or worsened over generations. Thus, it reveals that the train journey represented in the works can be regarded as a modern odyssey towards death, which signifies a will to resist disappearance into oblivion and to document the existence of each immigrant as a historical being as well.

II. Regularity of the track as an artistic expression and symptom of insanity

The psychological and mental violence that trains inflict in *Norte* (2011) by Edmundo Paz Soldán can be attributed to the identity of the rail tracks. The novel deals with the stories of three protagonists who are seemingly unrelated, yet soon revealed to be inextricably intertwined through the themes of madness and confinement. The real characters behind the story are a bracero worker in the 1920s and a Mexican serial killer crossing the US-Mexico border in the 1980s. Determining whether the trains and railroad tracks, repeatedly drawn by one of *Norte's* protagonists, Martín Ramírez, symbolize emotional attachment and artistic dominance of the motif or embody the inevitable suffering of labor of railroad workers is crucial to understanding what his death in the US territory signifies. The symbolic death due to the pathological effects of confinement and insanity illuminates the tragic moments in the Mexican immigration history.

Since the 19th century, the effect of the advent and the mobility of trains has been the opposite of the wonders associated with the arrival and the territorial expansion of modernity for people with Mexican

heritage. Unlike the actual deaths mentioned in this article, trains in the mid-19th century brought for them a metaphoric death of becoming second-class citizens. The construction of railroads across the country caused the economic collapse and the social isolation of the Mexicans, creating the popular image of a “dirty, sick Greaser” (López 170). Marissa López describes *The Squatter and the Don* (1885) by María Amparo Luiz de Burton, which deals with the decline and the adaptation of the landed Mexican descendants of Alta California as sentimental railroad fiction. Rather than highlighting the “segregation, corporate angst, and technical wonder” that “characterize the bulk of Nineteenth-century railroad fiction,” the novel reveals emotional estrangement and social displacement by the interplay of trains and the feelings of bodies originating from “the physical experience of riding trains” (López 173).

With Martín, *Norte* presents a narrative on the theme of mental illness set in the 1920s and 30s, depicting a painter with artistic genius who crosses the border to work as a railroad bracero, that is, traquero. In order to understand the labor scene where the real painter Martín Ramírez worked as a traquero, it is necessary to refer to *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, known to be the first Chicano novel. The novel portrays the suffering, racism, and exploitation in the system of the traquería, where the author himself worked, in a satirical and realistic style of a chronicle (Lee 2017:123). An immigrant labor contractor in *The Adventures of Don Chipote* explains the railway labor to his compatriots from Mexico at an inn in El Paso as: “The hotel’s clientele (or whatever you want to call it), were all Mexican-men who had worked six months on the traquería and were en route to their native homes carrying a few crumpled-up dollars which they had saved after a great deal of sacrifice” (45); “These people, like all Mexicans who were in search of

work, have received infinite humiliations at the hands of foremen and have even served as slaves to blacks, who, in order to keep the railroad companies happy and to maintain their employment, make our compatriots work like animals or worse” (51). The main protagonist, Don Chipote, works on the ‘Santa Fe Railroad’ in Arizona, where he suffers a severe ankle injury due to a manager’s malicious mistreatment, though he pretends it was a mistake, and is later hospitalized at a Los Angeles hospital. This scene is based on the author’s autobiographical experiences, and it helps the reader understand the background of Martín Ramírez’s migration, labor, and unemployment in *Norte*. Likewise, there is a scene in which Martín confesses the difficulties and the sufferings of railroad labor in the novel: “The train, it had to be built. The rails, the tracks, the cross-ties. The steel, the wood, the sweat in the afternoons under the scorching sun out there in the desert and in El Picacho. Sometimes his whole body hurt, though not like now, and accidents had happened, once a steel beam fell on his leg and he limped for a spell…” (145).

The novel follows generally known biographical details of Ramírez, who, after working in Arizona in the 1920s, eventually lost his job and was detained as a homeless person at a park in Los Angeles. Instead of being repatriated, he ends up in a psychiatric hospital on account of schizophrenia and aphasia. The motifs that repeatedly run through his paintings are railroads and tunnels, which can be read as concrete visual representations of the alienation, memory, and solitude that make up his life. The simplified image of trains and rail tracks manifested through psychosis and confinement visually testify to the dissociation between the physical and mental dislocation he experienced, and the reality in which he was forced to be situated. The madness and confinement

primarily resulting from rail labor bring him death in the sense of complete disconnection from reality.

In the novel, Martín crosses the boundaries between rationality and irrationality, narrating the historical anecdote of Mexican immigration by recalling why he had no choice but to come to the United States as a *traquero*. By recounting Martín's memories of the suffering felt on being forced to leave his own country for another, the author shows that it is the very sense of "being expelled" that led to Martín's delusion. The author describes the absurd yet fundamental anxiety that causes Martín to attribute leaving his own country and living in another one to the existence of borders and trains.

Leaving one's place on earth is a cruel experience. People should be allowed to stay at home...But if that's the case, then how come trains exist? Or borders. Or countries. Aha, Martín, you haven't thought it through enough. If you had to choose, would you prefer a world with or without trains? (77).

As if to accurately understand the historical situation, Martín also argues that the Mexicans who served as railroad workers were the real players who created the American cities by laying down the rail tracks.

The tracks were all they needed; so he'd come around and lay them. Then overnight, pop! There they were, ready for the train to come. The train created them. The railroad workers brought the trains, and the trains brought the cities. So it was partly his own doing that they were there in the first place (28).

Paz Soldán depicts how Martín gradually enters into the world of

irrationality, by listing out segmental words that are not understandable. While his abnormal attachment to painting is dramatized by the narration through his fragmented language, the author obscures the boundary between whether this fragmentation is due to aphasia or the willingness to reject language.

Given that trains are symbolic death-making and life-extending themes for the artist, the author creates an imaginary scene in which Martín reproduces the remembered images of his own free will as if every brushstroke was an expression of his calculated judgment and clear intention (174). Thus, just as the real-life artist's work is evaluated as art by memory, the author presents Martín's madness as if it were not something pathological but intentional by transforming speechlessness and language disorder into ambiguity that cannot be exactly distinguished. The repeated items and patterns in the paintings of Martín's real-life model, Ramírez, can be interpreted as his artistic style, but in another sense, as a counterargument to the intensity of the railroad labor. Above all, the geometric patterns of repeated shell patterns remind us of the tracks. His work looks more like that of a realist than a non-abstractionist when placed alongside old pictures of the Santa Fe railroad that ran through Arizona in the 20s, or the construction project of a large-scale waterway in Los Angeles, where he most likely worked. Thus, the image of tracks and tunnels weighing down on his mental world allows sufficient plausibility to be interpreted as a cry against the intensity of labor (Lee 2017: 120).

In this context, Ramírez's obsessive clinging to the same pattern beyond rational explanation can be interpreted as his expression of mental weakness, disruption, or entrenched memory, as well as his artistic sublimation of a worker's physical and mental exploitation by railroad

construction and repair work. It can be said that simplified railway and tunnel motifs form the basis of Ramírez's aesthetics, at the same time, they also symbolically attest to his understanding of the rise of capitalism in the United States. The repeated linearity of the tracks can be deciphered in a double way. The train "has the openness to run freely on the plane opened by itself, and at the same time does not hide the identity that violently regulates everything that blocks the expansion of the plane" (Ko Mi-sook 69). Thus, Ramírez's artistic "art nouveau" style reflects not only the aesthetics of moderation resulting from repetition, but also the violent regulation imposed by uniformity. In other words, the rail tracks in his paintings show a flat, straight-line mechanical regularity, that acts like an inexorable destructive force removing the obstacles preventing the train's progress, and at the same time, depict an inescapable cycle of identity (Lee 2017:122).

Congruent with my own understanding about Ramírez's paintings, Paz Soldán also portrays Martín's obsession with the same theme, while insinuating that he may have been under pressure from his own inner self and his patron-professor to change his theme or subject. Nevertheless, the author shows that his artistic characterization does not change even when he dies in disconnection and loneliness. Martín is never free from the image of a train, as shown by the question "shadows stole across the windows. Was it a train? He closed his eyes" (251), and his paintings repeat the same image as if it were a predestined demand, because the pressure of the repeatability and uniformity of the railroad captivates his unconscious world.

Trains coming and going, endless tracks that criss-crossed the hills.
Cars, trucks, and wagons driving through tunnels, lightning bolts

everywhere. Diagonal lines, vertical lines, horizontal lines. Undulating wave after wave, enough to make you dizzy, bottomless black on white paper, softer black on brown paper. He liked to create mood, symmetry. (154)

Norte serves the purpose of recording the influence of aesthetic rebellion of lives that “are lost in the immensity of the US” as the author explains himself. Paz Soldán demonstrates that Martín’s art must be reassessed through the motive and process of creating his own *Norte*, as revealed through the artistic recreation of symmetry. The artistic style and structural characteristics that the author defines as symmetry can be compared to what I understand as identity. According to the author’s interpretation, it is through Martín’s attachment to symmetry that he acquires the authority to reproduce the world in his own way by shifting the center of perception from the space of railways and hospitals to the white plane of paper. Martín’s madness is presented as a selective decision or a willful isolation in the same way in which the alleged symmetry is presented as an aesthetic rebellion in the author’s fictional construction of the artist’s inner world. This implies that the painter produces a reconstructed history and highly calculated aesthetics independent of irrationality and disconnection from reality, indicative of artistic sublimation that makes his suffering aesthetically salient instead of just dwindling in symbolic death from the violence of overwhelming labor. The author makes us realize that the train and rail track motifs used by the artist are both the cause and the result. They signify the artist’s sacrifice and the ability to overcome by reconstructing the fictional world of schizophrenia that mixes memory and the will to survive.

As we will see in the next chapter, the violence of regularity and

uniformity enforced by trains subsequently turns into violence caused by mobility.

III. Mobility as a conduit for disillusionment and madness

The mobility of trains in relation to immigration can be distinguished by whether they are used willingly or forcibly. During the economic development in the American Southwest, railroads served as a physical conduit for Mexican workers to move to find jobs in the country. By the time of the Great Depression in the 1930s, however, railroads acquired the image of a means of forced displacement. The trains used for repatriation carry a visual resonance of poverty, involuntary movement, and the forced deployment of Mexicans, as the description of the “train of misery” suggests. Laura Gutiérrez (2020) explains how the repatriated were stranded in towns and cities along railway routes in northern Mexico. However, as the demand for workers increases again due to World War II, Mexican immigrants who wanted to come to the United States, whether contracted or illegal, had to rely on the mobility of railroads again. Records and photos of bracero workers traveling to the processing center using freight trains in the 1950s tell the same story: “Braceros also traveled by freight train from the Monterrey Processing Center, Mexico to the Mexico-U.S. border at Hidalgo. By train, the 150-mile journey took eight hours.”¹⁾

A new type of tragedy created by this mobility is revealed through

1) <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/1356>

another protagonist in *Norte*, Jesús.²⁾ However, in this case, Jesús does not cross the border for labor; thus, the trains he uses deviate from the typical route. Jesús uses the railway as an exceptionally extreme means to challenge and overthrow the American Dream, in the sense that illegal but free movement by train provides him with an opportunity to commit crimes and be a fanatic.

Before we analyze the tragedy of Jesús in the 80s and 90s, the 1977 film *Alambrista* can be discussed to highlight the protagonist's disillusionment with the American Dream. It can help us examine how the death of undocumented immigrants in the 70s caused by the mobility of trains is cinematically represented. *Alambrista* tells the story of an undocumented worker who gradually and voluntarily transgresses moral and cultural mores in the process of finding a better-paying job and having an affair by chance. The cinematic scene of tragic death on the train hints at the disintegration of his original dream to support his family, while at the same time foreshadowing disenchantment with reality and the future of migrant workers, the two most important messages conveyed by the film. The main characters, Roberto and Joe, travel by freight train to a neighboring city in search of work. They lay boards between two long steel bars connected to the bottom of the cargo and lie face down toward the rail track. As the train speeds up, the entire screen shows a rapid flow of track lines along the railroad, with cheerful music playing. When the train stops, Roberto turns his head sideways to find, to his shock, an empty space under the bottom of the train. The

2) The real-life inspiration for the character of Jesús was Angel Maturino Reséndiz, a Mexican criminal known in the media by the nickname "the Railroad Killer," because his murder sites were near a railroad track. From 1990 onwards, he cruelly killed more than 15 women who were moving on freight trains between the United States and Mexico.

dynamic that the fast movement and cheerful music create indicates a betrayal of a hopeful future. The instantaneous tragic death serves as a warning that the protagonist would not be able to escape from the life of an uprooted worker and is destined to continue working under harsh conditions. Joe's death portrayed in *Alambrista* in 1977 is not much different from the title of an article of *Washington Post* in 1987, "18 Mexicans Found Dead in Boxcar"(Maraniss 1987). As such, freight trains are a common means of transportation for undocumented immigrants, but they have only been changed to freight trucks, whose mobility increases the magnitude of tragic death due to asphyxiation.

In the film's narrative, after Joe's disappearance on rail track, the immigrant workers' innocence, family ethics, and dreams for a better future begin to crack. The misfortune also results in Roberto's disillusioned awakening to the miserable death that he will inherit from his father, another undocumented worker. At the end of the movie, while harvesting at a farm, Roberto unexpectedly encounters his father who went to *Norte* and never returned, only to find that his existence is nothing but the corpse of a poor worker who left behind only a shabby bag.

In *Norte*, the tragedy of life becoming worse over generations is gradually reinforced. Personal suffering evolves into a crime targeting others, and the victim is transformed into a psychopathic social monster. Born in 1969, Jesús transforms the American railway, which had traumatized *Norte's* immigrants, into a means of revenge. Paz Soldán clearly states that "Jesús took advantage of his work to explore the country" (96), connecting the mobility of trains with exploitative values and the release of desire through a forbidden ride; "Back on the train, in a boxcar carrying metal containers that stank of piss, he felt that high

again, the dizzy freedom that comes from being on the move. He realized he was rolling toward a bright future” (84). In literary works dealing with crimes on trains, the elements of confined space and unavoidability create an atmosphere of fear; however, in *Norte*, the train becomes the only space in which the human emotions of a single precarious migrant are expressed, where he is not a horrendous criminal. The freedom and the anticipation of the future felt by Jesús, the passenger on the freight train, is expressed as a vertigo arising from precariousness. Thus, the author reappropriates dizziness, a description that has been employed in textual representations in connection with the modernity of the train to insinuatingly contrast the tranquility of the cargo with Jesús’s anxiety.

For Mexican immigrants, railways were the primary means to access the economy of survival, as well as the site of labor and transportation of goods and personnel. However, Jesús manages to prolong an insecure life in the face of imminent judicial punishment and identity detection, deftly bypassing the blind spots of sovereignty and imperfect surveillance by counting on the mobility of trains. The author hints at the freedom he might have enjoyed on the train that liberated him, the loneliness he might have felt since it was still a train of death, and the anxiety that he wouldn’t be protected from the state power (Lee 2017: 127). As described, “the train lurched forward. Jesús had missed this ritual of being on the tracks. He stretched out on the wagon’s creak floor and tried to catch a little shuteye. He’d figure out how to get to Albuquerque in a while” (172). His crimes and mental illness gradually deteriorate, with his changing sentiments ostensibly displaying attunement with the mobility of the train.

He'd tried so desperately to grab on to something, set down some roots, but the itch to get back on the road was inexorable. Nothing else gave that same wild thrill as crossing the river, jumping a freight train, stretching out on the floor of an empty car or sticking his head out an open door, awash in the coolness of the breeze on his cheeks and the sweaty shirt that stuck to his body... (243-44).

As it is often discussed in literary analysis, the world coming in through the windows is an important variable in interpreting the cognitive and sensory changes caused by trains. However, windowless freight trains only indicate the physical trajectory of immigrants, and are mostly projected as outdated threats far away from material development and as a historical reality irrelevant to human perception.

Paz Soldán shows that Jesús's distorted desires and disillusionment with the execution of abnormal national/transnational power led him to exploit *Norte* as a space for crime.

He could come and go as he pleased, as if this whole gigantic territory belonged to him alone. He knew how to get around: his size made him more agile than them. He had fake social security cards he'd bought from the coyotes, stolen driver's licenses, even cards for libraries and gym memberships. He knew their weaknesses: there were guns everywhere; violence was an everyday affair. Like in Mexico, but different. The police and the law enforcement didn't function there; here they tried, but whenever a sexier crime came along they'd get distracted and forget (212).

The mobility allows him to only leave traces of a crime behind. In Mexico, on the other hand, wearing masks of disguised identities, he maintains psychological equanimity to find the motivation to commit

new crimes. In *Norte*, the trains' mobility is no less than a means of executing dual identity and embodying the fugitive's life, allowing schizophrenia and violence to be manifested, and aggravating them further. Therefore, it is through his rejection of or rebellion against judicial governance that Jesús's disillusionment with the American Dream is more clearly visualized.

Jesús's distorted religious views in prison reveal the symptoms of mental illness. He fills out his notes with terrible illustrations of the murder to record his crime. Ironically, even the name Jesús reflects he mistook himself for Jesus (Jesús: Jesus in Spanish) and acts as if he were writing a book of revelation. His apocalyptic book is written in the form of a letter dedicated to his sister, María Luisa, whose figure acts as a trigger for him to murder other women. The final letter gives another existential meaning to the train, when Jesús proclaims with a messianic vision, "I'm in a non-return train heading for death. I can't get off here, but I'll be back after I die" (278). Jesús recognizes the train as a conduit for death and resurrection, and as a means of punishment and revenge. Jesús obtains an eerie sharpness of reason that penetrates the situation through strong self-protection and imagination. Rather than simply accusing the harsh enforcement of power on illegal residents who have deviated from the normality of society, the author pays attention to the excess of reaction that such immigrants create under these circumstances, while themselves suffering from mental disorders, schizophrenia, or a physical separation from society.

Norte insinuates that something unconventional and subverting the existing norms is generated and represented because of the twisted desire for resistance that is facilitated by mobility. Further, this deviant and destructive desire is stimulated by the cracks in control unwillingly

caused by madness and confinement. That is, mobility causes extreme abnormality and illegality to be discharged and to be amplified, yet it also becomes the only possible response and means of rebellion for those who are under state management/control, but do not fully conform to the category of victims. The novel demonstrates that despite different motives, suffering and social penalties, they confront the same tragic fate that repeatedly overwhelms several generations of immigrants from Mexico.

IV. Velocity leading to exploitation and tragic death

Over the past decade or so, the Mexican freight train, called *La Bestia* (the beast), has become a symbol of migration trauma. Since *La Bestia* has appeared frequently in the media, many analyses have been conducted on the intimate relationship between the slow speed of freight trains and the operation of the exploitative economy. Together with her non-fiction *Tell Me How It Ends*, Valeria Luiselli's novel, *Lost Children Archive* also deals with the same railway, opening a new horizon in *testimonio* literature by depicting the suffering and the death of unaccompanied migrant children from Central America in a realistic and fantastic narrative mode.

In the novel, Luiselli's literary strategy aims to fulfill her ethical responsibility to make children refugees visible, but also avoid hyper-visibility by combining the anecdotes from her real and fictionalized road trips.³⁾ The travel narrative of *Elegies for Lost Children*, is thus

3) <https://electricliterature.com/valeria-luisellis-lost-children-archive-is-a-road-trip-nov>

framed within the novel *Lost Children Archive*, and the two works run parallel (hereafter referred to as *Elegies* and *Archive*, respectively), eventually to be intertwined and melted into one story in the end. The author calls for a deep understanding and ethical awareness of the humanitarian crisis through the story of the migrant children who travel on a train easily identified as La Bestia. She also includes other lesser-known stories about trains that were used in the past for the forced displacement of indigenous peoples and orphans to emphasize themes of social exclusion and historical elimination of the misfit, the marginalized, and other races. Luiselli makes it clear that as with these displaced people, the same thing is happening to the children who will be “removed, relocated, erased, because there’s no place for them in this vast empty country” (182), for whom she is now archiving their existence in the form of fiction.

These trains with multilayered meanings in the novel serve to highlight forced mobility rather than voluntary movement. Therefore, the migrant train represented in *Elegies* is initially portrayed as a means of transport to reach an unknown world, but is gradually transformed into an allusive place for forced migration and exploitation. However, in order to secure the depth and sympathetic resonance of a testimony while deploying literary imagination and freedom in the face of overwhelming tragic reality, the violence committed on the train, especially the killing of a child by a guide, is not explicitly nor dramatically portrayed, as it is in many other literary works. The narrative is ambiguous about why the children have to travel by train or why they risk their lives. Instead, the story is told as if they had to leave the village to fulfill an invisible

command or because of an inexplicable will to arrive somewhere. According to the author, this is partly because the novel is true to the literary tradition of the travel narrative, which has an atmosphere of existential exploration and mythological fantasy.

The children in *Elegies* are easily reminiscent of underage immigrants from Central America. Three of the seven children disappear halfway through the journey, dying in accidents typical to the migration process in the journey across the border and the desert. The death of the first child in the ninth elegy comes after struggle with fear of the movement and speed of the freight train. In this chapter, seven children board the train following the command of a man who appears to be a coyote.

So at the sound of the third siren, they'd stood still, feeling the hot gravel below them, trying not to think, not to remember, not to pray. But time passed quicker than their minds could wonder or flake, and so did the train. (284)

In Mexico, migrants take trains without knowing exactly where they are headed, so they have to change trains halfway through to reach the border. Since the train only slows down without stopping completely, migrants must detect a moment in which their body feels attuned to the rhythm of the running machine and jump on while avoiding the risk of being sucked into the railroad tracks and losing a leg or even the whole body. As opposed to literary studies on the development of trains, where an unusual sensory and cognitive acceptance due to reduced space-time was a key topic, an important issue for discussing *La Bestia* is the intuitive sensing and bodily measurement of the speed of the train. According to Oscar Martínez, slow speed⁴⁾ is essential for many actors in the immigration business to take advantage of *La Bestia*. Martínez

shows how the illegal market is formed and operated around migrant trains in his essay *La Bestia*, a testimonial text about his autobiographical experiences. Martínez's writings allow us to understand the paradox of train speed in the sense that deceleration is controlled in favor of exploitation and deprivation. The multiple velocities that are felt to be at work in his chronicles account for the fact that “the speed of capital (in the form of companies moving commodities in the trains) intersects with the speed of organized crime colliding with and determining the migrant’s movement” (Chinchilla 64-65).

Strangely enough, the biggest boy in *Elegies*, or the seventh child, suddenly shows unexpected hesitation at the very moment when such agility and concentration are required. He does not move to spit out aloud the English words written on the outer wall of the train.

He was sure he would not make it, but suddenly, like a bird spreading out its new wings, he opened his arms outward, Plates, Container, Special Break Beam, Carrier Net, 20 Feet Container Limit, and then grasped and gripped a bar, flung closer, Special Break Beam, Next Load, felt a push on the bottom of his right sit bone, Any Load, Break Beam, Container Guide, and pulled himself inward, pulled hard against an unexpected kind of centrifugal force, thinking and no longer speaking the last spotted words: Remove All. (285)

In response to the coyote’s instructions to get all the children aboard the train, the seventh child’s articulating the words one by one seems

4) Paul Virilio analyzes the relationship between the speed of modern technology and the way in which national/imperial powers are exercised. Through his theory, it is possible to understand more clearly the fact that speed control ability and bio-political power are closely intertwined with each other.

to be an allusive attempt to avoid the forced fate that is ahead of him. The words on the train that appear to be a “strange and beautiful book” (285) in the eyes of the child clearly remind him of the original use and destination of transportation. It is not clearly mentioned whether his reaction stems from resistance to psychological oppression or hesitation due to the fearsome reality. However, the subversive yet enigmatic behavior of the child not only means that he makes unconscious reaction to escape from the threat of irresistible violence that awaits him, but also hints at the fact that he acknowledges the existence of the migration industry, which regards the migrant as a moving commodity, and expresses defiance against such harshness and injustice. The tension between the child and the coyote, which continues after this scene, dramatically shows the confrontation between the victims of violence and the perpetrators of the crime, like a literary testimony.

The man in charge becomes furious about the possibility that he almost missed the train because the seventh child was deliberately dragging his feet. He struggles to board the train and then describes how he would kill the child.

He'd squeeze all the smart words out of his mouth, then cut his tongue off; he'd force him to see nightmares with his sharp little eyes, then scoop them out of their sockets; with his bare hands, he'd arrange the boy's nimble bones and derange his pretty face until there was nothing recognizable left of him. (286)

This imaginary scene hints at the possible reasons and ways in which some of the children on the train died, although it does not attest to the fact that the body of the migrant is an item to be bartered, or the speed of the train makes it a prey for cartels and police organizations as

explicitly as Oscar Martínez's essay or Sayak Valencia's book on gore capitalism. However, the author clearly indicates that the train is literally a moving space of violence (25), resulting in the children's disappearance on the way.

Although the above scene faithfully reflects the reality of the La Bestia, the boy's disappearance, which is not explicitly mentioned, makes the reader imagine a scene even more brutal. This is because the man's murder of the child takes place immediately after the scene in which the child prays for him not to miss the train. There is a shift in the novel's narrative at this point and the framed novel continues from Chapter 11 after skipping one chapter. It shows six children continuing their journey in silence with only the sound of the wind, without mentioning the seventh child or his disappearance; "They are silent, the six children, more silent than usual. Locked up in their terrors, the six" (305). It is narrated as if the children are passing through a huge, motionless space-time zone, bordering on resignation or conformity.

The death of the child is left to our imagination. The fact that Luiselli skipped over it is a testament to the fact that it is difficult to convey such tragedy in words. The deleted chapter itself is a testimony to the tragic death of the child by 'imagined empathy.' In many works depicting La Bestia, the interrelatedness between the train and assault, rape, and murder is more apparent and conspicuous because of the journalistic approach to violence and human damage. However, Luiselli's train mostly implies the untranslatability using words so that the empathetic intervention and ethical engagement can be better evoked. As the following single line weighs heavy with meaning: "six children in total, seven minus one. Boys, girls: lips chapped, cheeks cracked" (314). The plight of the children is presented in ways similar to that of the

protagonists of the canonical travel narratives such as those by Homer, Pound, or Rulfo. The author explains in the appendix to the book that she intended to emulate the expressions from these texts, and the movement of the train is portrayed as if it were a real beast transcending the passage of time and blurring the border between voyage and transit. As the author explains, such literary effects are created using intertextuality and parodies (Lee 2020:286). In addition, representing the current death as inevitable, the author allows the reader to imagine situations that are unexpressed in language, thereby transforming the journey on the train into a modern odyssey, which also explores the existential hardship beyond the crisis and anxiety arising from the vulnerable condition of the migrants.

The child's death cannot be understood without desperation and defenselessness, as an escape from something, or an expulsion by someone. In *Expulsions*, Saskia Sassen explains that the more fundamental reason for these deaths is the operation of expulsion capitalism. The expulsions, driven by advanced economies, sophisticated technologies, and globalized capitalism push people to the periphery of this system as refugees, through forced migration, exclusion, and detention. More and more people are at risk of being removed from the system due to an expulsion more severe than internal social exclusion. The train is a mechanism to visualize expulsion capitalism at work. Sassen(2017) points out that language is not equipped to capture the movements of people on the edges of the system where people suffer from not only civil war and violence in Central America but also inequality in habitus.⁵⁾ The disappearance of the child from the train in *Archive* plays a role in

5) https://www.huffpost.com/entry/landgrabs-central-america_b_586bf1a6e4b0eb58648abe1f

revealing such invisible violence by relying on the language of the travel narrative. Luiselli talks about the children's disappearance as if narrating a sad fairy tale about a journey in which the plight, devastation, and abandonment of human life are a part of the story. Regarding the situation in which the children are being "expelled, not left," the author clearly reveals that the anger of the coyote that provokes him to take a child's life is one of the reasons for the disappearance of the people on the system's edge.

The child's momentary reaction to the presence and the speed of the train can be interpreted as a penetrating scene that addresses the core of the problems of child refugees. The decrepit train, which is slow, easy to climb, but terrifying, and suitable for looting in case of an accident, represents migrants who are struggling with vulnerability and illegality, but are definitely self-adaptive and willing to survive. Instead of explicitly addressing journalistic and critical judgments, the author uses the language of travel narratives and expresses both resistant gestures against death and critical voices against violence. In order for their disappearance to be remembered and recorded as part of the history of migration, Luiselli deploys a resistant voice and bodily expression as a political subject, not simply representing the image of being sacrificed by train violence, but also understanding, recognizing, and documenting these unrepresented children through literary exploration and imaginative engagement.

V. Conclusion

The paradoxical effect stemming from regularity, mobility, and the

speed of trains emphasized in this essay are inconsistent with their original purpose and assumed character. Contrary to the well-known discussion about the relationship between the development of transportation and the new reactions of the human sensorium, the fact is that the migrant train discussed here have nothing to do with these sensory changes reveals an ironic and tragic reality. The implications of repetition, stagnation, and decline inherent in the image of trains that run counter to the flow of time and social change explain the tragic disappearance of these unwritten/unvoiced people in Mexican and Central American immigration history. The protagonists move by trains that allow them to survive, but force them to suffer from displacement, schizophrenia, and finally tragic death. Despite different motives, suffering, and social penalties, they confront a similar tragic fate that repeatedly overwhelms generations of immigrants from Latin America. The voices of the authors deepen the madness, imprisonment, and vulnerability expanding them to a more existential level, making the train journeys resemble a modern odyssey for death.

This study examines the metaphorical ways in which the railroad represents the tragedy or misfortune of immigration. Railways act as oppressive restraints resulting from regularity and uniformity rather than psychological and sentimental liberation, which has been made possible by the expansion or reduction of time and space brought about by modernity. The mobility of railways is also used as a medium to bring disillusionment with the American dream or to amplify abnormal deviations, rather than freedom or accumulation through connections. Finally, the speed of railways becomes a means of deprivation and exploitation, rather than a future and vision, and a symbol of collusion with criminal organizations.

The similarity between trains carrying workers in Bracero in the 1950s and freight trains carrying migrants from Central America in the 2010s is linked to the core of immigration conflicts, which serves to refute the claims of (neo)liberalist capitalism for mutual benefit and possibility of progress. The repeated appearance of migrants on freight trains is indicative of stagnant times and repeated generational fates. It is more a state of regression than stagnation. The railways represent the persistent suffering and the environment of migrants who remain unchanged in the face of generational changes.

The main characters in the works all have fathers who never return. Ramírez dies in a mental hospital and becomes a father himself who never returns, and Roberto's father in *Alambrista*, who could be the generation after Ramírez, dies in an American field without returning to Mexico. Jesús's father is also out of touch and lost. As he states, "And Papá? What had become of him? Maybe he's in a different prison in this country that's as wide as it is foreign" (114). Their fathers have all disappeared from somewhere in the United States. Their movements through freight trains, which become more and more dangerous and desperate than their previous versions, indicate that the future of immigrants is bound to result in a tragic ending, that is, there is never a step forward in their fates. While Ramírez dies of natural causes after confinement out of solitude and betrayal, Jesús faces an imposed death by execution after committing violence. In other words, the next generation faces an even worse fate. The father's generation ends up at a hospital that creates mental confinement and the later generation ends up in a prison where physical confinement is enforced; therefore, the degree of violence, oppression, and discipline strengthens.

The fact that La Bestia has frequently appeared in novels and movies

since the 2010s is deeply related to the cause of immigration and the changes in the composition of immigrants. Since the growth rate of immigrants from Mexico has declined, it is predicted that the mass immigration originating from this country, as a result, will not exist anymore. This means that the majority of people who illegally cross the US-Mexico border have to make additional journeys through Mexico, not as economic migrants but refugees. Many child refugees are traversing unaccompanied by adults, and the premise of the absence of fathers is already implied in Luiselli's Archive. In other words, the only people who move on trains and become lost on the way are children who ironically need the exclusion of the father figure for a better chance to apply for asylum. Drawing on the train's retrograding mobility and inadequate operation, the works allow for the precarious immigration movements characterized by uncertain survival, sacrifice of unexpected/unwanted adoption, and objects of exploration to be heard as a wake-up call for global progress in deprivation beyond American society.

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❖ 국문초록

죽음을 향한 모던 오디세이: 열차와 이민의 비극

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본고에서는 미국의 멕시코와 중앙아메리카 이민사에서 큰 변화를 드러낸 세 번의 기간, 즉, 1930년대 송환 시대, 브라세로 종료 이후, 2010년대의 난민 위기 시기에 화물 열차로 인한 죽음과 그 재현 방식이 어떻게 변화하는지 분석한다. 열차는 이주자에게 실제적이지아 은유적인 죽음을 초래한다. 이런 위험을 열차의 동일성, 이동성, 속도의 관점에서 접근해 보고자 한다. 근대성의 도구이자 상징이었던 기차는 이민자들에게 상실과 환멸의 기제로 다가온다. 엄격한 동일성, 자유로운 이동, 빠른 속도가 만드는 문명의 편리함과는 별개로 열차는 폭력적이고 착취적인 방식으로 이용되며, 이는 세대를 달리하는 역사적 시기에 반복해서 일어난다. 이 글에서 다루는 세 작품, 에드문도 파스 솔단의 『노르테 Norte』, 발레리아 루이셀리의 『잃어버린 아이들을 위한 아카이브 *Lost Children Archive*』와 로버트 영의 <알람브리스타 *Alambrista*>는, 기차와 철도가 국가의 생명 정치의 권력과 자본주의의 축적 논리를 어떻게 행사하는지 시각적으로 보여준다. 각 작품은 이동성의 개념을 통해 강제성이라는 아이러니를 드러낸다. 또한 느린 속도가 파생하는 폭력성을 부각함으로써 화물 열차라는 낙후된 수단이 착취 경제에 이롭다는 모순적 현실을 보여준다. 이 작품들은 폭력에 노출된 이민자들의 광기와 감금, 취약성과 불안함을 실존적 차원으로 확장함으로써 기차를 통한 이주 과정의 내러티브가 죽음을 향한 모던 오디세이로 읽히도록 만든다.

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