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The Orange Tree and Postcritique in Valeria Luiselli's *Los ingravidos*

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Abstract

This essay proposes that Valeria Luiselli's *Los ingravidos* rethinks modes of critical reading in the twenty-first century, arguing that the writer trains her reader in a mode of reading which anticipates Rita Felski's opposition to critique, relishing acceptance and deference over suspicion and interrogation. By focusing on Luiselli's intervention into readerly practice in this way, the essay moves beyond stringent national and historicist frameworks which often risk obscuring that novelist's experimental forms and avant-garde project.

Keywords

Valeria Luiselli – experimental form – reading – surface

Valeria Luiselli's *Los ingravidos* (2011) [*Faces in the Crowd*] is almost not a novel. One critic describes it as a series of “vignettes” (Raynor 2021: 99), registering its appearance on the page as prose fragments separated by asterisks that tap out an interruptive beat. The segmentation permits the juxtaposition of forms (imagined or real dialogue sits beside transcriptions of research Post-it notes) and of temporalities (Federico García Lorca rubs shoulders with a publishing house's translation editor called White). Motifs such as piles of newspapers, an orange tree, the game of hide-and-seek, Philadelphia, the shuttling of a subway train, earthquake aftershocks, and cockroaches reappear in dif-

ferent historical moments and in relation to different characters. As Luiselli “mingl[es] her narrative settings” (Raynor 2021: 111) through these objects, she replaces the novel’s logical flow with coincidence, accident, and even impossibility.

As these motifs reappear throughout the novel, they invite reinterpretation by those who encounter them within the fiction. As each of these characters—whether a poet, a child learning to read, or a professional translator, like the narrator herself—is engaged in the processes of literary creation and reception, the motifs become objects to be read. I argue in this essay that Luiselli’s defiance of novelistic formal expectations through these unstable motifs can be understood as an attempt to train her reader in a receptive and responsive mode of reading: training offered through both representations *of* and effects *on* readers. I focalise my analysis through one particular object from the list: an orange tree in a pot patterned with “oval-shaped green flames” (Luiselli 2012: 22). Not only does the object return at multiple significant moments in the narrative, but it is also both highly specific in its pot’s decoration and subject to natural temporality as the tree grows and dies, ensuring that the presence of two identical objects across the narratives is almost impossible. These qualities make the orange tree’s reappearance particularly experimental (compared to, say, a spoken phrase that might more reasonably echo across space and time) and thus offers it as a compelling example for my argument.

The training of the reader is an important element in Luiselli’s *Los ingravidos* and poses a challenge to Rita Felski’s account of the problems with (“the limits of”) critique, in which that critic exposes a “militant” or suspicious approach that imagines reading as digging into a text to find “a repressed or otherwise obscured reality” (Felski 2015: 53–54). Published four years before Felski’s ground-breaking work, *Los ingravidos* emerges as an avant-garde project in that prefix’s most literal sense. My essay will consider the ways in which Luiselli’s manipulations of the novel form (her literary experiments) speak to a wider preoccupation with redefining literary-critical practice (her avant-garde project). Luiselli uses *Los ingravidos* to initiate her audience into a mode of reading which thinks with or even defers to the text, coming to conclusions collaboratively or sympathetically rather than with the interrogator’s edge of suspicion. This is a reading practice that aligns with methods proposed in the postcritique decades by Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, Heather Love, Doug Battersby or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, some of whom I will engage with more fully later in this essay. By providing such a method within a fictional text and experimenting with the novel form, Luiselli shapes a subtle and productive contribution to the Felskian case which has often been dismissed as broad-brush or lacking in nuance.

Implicit in this account of readerly training is Joseph North's "concise political history" of literary studies, and his distinction between two kinds of literary studies professionals in the 1970s. There are those, he proposes, who see literature as a means by which to "analyse culture", and those who model it as "an opportunity [to] intervene" into that culture (North 2017: 1–2). By suggesting that Luiselli's novel outlines its own literary-critical theory of reading, I argue that she harnesses this second capacity of the literary to explore how experimental form might effect as well as represent a new and unusual mode of reading. If David James writes of B.S. Johnson's *Albert Angelo* that the novelist, through his typographical experiments, "formulates a model of creative reading" (one which suspends existing habits and practices) by "[c]onscripting [readers] into participative forms of engagement" (James 2007: 28, 32), my analysis of Luiselli goes further, suggesting that she trains her reader in a specific mode of reading through her presentation of the orange tree motif. *Los ingravidos*—disruptive, interruptive, and fragmentary in its form—is both conscious of and strives towards the possibility of cultural intervention through literature.

In this essay, I argue that Luiselli's experimentation with readerly practice, through her use of motifs such as the orange tree in its pot, defies the reductive nationalist frameworks often applied to her work. See, for example, Mina Holland's *Guardian* review, which begins by stating that "Latin American fiction has long distorted the real and the imagined, leaving readers unsure of where one ends and the other begins", as if this declaration of national novelistic genre will immediately explain Luiselli's work; she ends, triumphantly, by distinguishing *Los ingravidos* from "most Latin American fiction" (Holland 2012). Hector Tobar, writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, similarly evokes linguistic canon: "New York, that city of bohemian encounters, has a special place in the history of Spanish-language literature" (Tobar 2014). Review after review mentions Luiselli's upbringing in South Africa and South Korea, desperately trying to align the spaces of her biography with those of her novel. Conscious of the value of critical work that seeks to understand texts within their particular geographical, social and political contexts—and compelled by analysis that reads Luiselli alongside Cristina Rivera Garza's experiments with new media, or as an afterlife of Carlos Fuentes's *Aura*, or as a continuation of Josefina Vicéns's metafictional work, *El libro vacío*—my essay nonetheless explores an alternative approach to the stringently historicist-nationalist frameworks imposed upon this twenty-first-century novelist. By focusing on the formal experimental subtleties of Luiselli's work, highlighting that resistance to novelistic tradition which I evoked in my opening paragraph, I consider *Los ingravidos* as a novel committed to an avant-garde project inherited from writers such

as B.S. Johnson and his late twentieth-century contemporaries, rather than a specifically Mexican or Mexican-American novel.¹

1 Reading Represented

During one of her researching days, the narrator encounters the letters of Gilberto Owen, whose presence and afterlives will propel both her life and Luiselli's novel. She reads these sentences: "I live at 63 Morningside Ave. There's a plant pot in the right hand window that looks like a lamp. It's got oval-shaped green flames ..." (Luiselli 2012: 22). The narrator's response is immediate. Realising the address is nearby, she leaves her research work without a backwards glance and heads to the address that Owen mentions, sits on the roof and reads the volume of his poetry and letters, *Obras*. She is driven by an obsessive curiosity and a kind of superstition, which draws her to that poet's spaces of creation. But this curiosity goes unnamed in the novel, and the narrator is quick to admit that "[n]othing happened"—that the translator's visit does not initiate some spark of inspiration or spiritual convenience between past and present. Only after "a few hours" does she discover the plant pot and the withered tree inside it, accidentally, while she is looking for somewhere to put her cigarette butts: "I stood up, looking for somewhere to get rid of my handful of cigarette ends. In a corner of the terrace there was a plant pot and I went across to bury them in it. I sat down on a stack of newspapers someone had tied up with string, as if for recycling, and dug a hole" (Luiselli 2012: 23). The "plant pot" is here merely a container for the dregs of enjoyment: a convenient presence valued only in terms of its use to the narrator. It does not even get total narrative attention during that action, as Luiselli asserts another symbol: a pile of newspapers that offers a bulk of reading material and catalyses a series of questions. Why are there so many? Why have they been discarded? Who has tied them together so neatly? In this vignette, the plant pot is incidental, as Luiselli's syntax refuses to attach any meaning to it.

The narrator's explicit response to recognising the pot is fraught with similar refusal. She insists on the object's impossibility, that it could not be the

1 My approach shares an impetus with that of the editors of *A History of Mexican Literature*, as they defend the organisation of the volume, aiming to "resis[t] a narrative that understands literary history as a progression strictly parallel to cultural history" and highlighting instead the dialogic networks of literary production, which may or may not "intersect with the political sphere" (see Nogar, Sánchez Prado and Serra 2016: 5). It is Luiselli's position within the progression of literary history that my essay seeks to exhibit.

exact one that Owen writes about, but she is nevertheless overtaken by some sense of its weightiness: “but it was, I thought, some kind of signal, the signal I’d been waiting for” (Luiselli 2012: 23). Luiselli describes the narrator’s emotional response: “I was overtaken by that same excitement babies display when they confirm their existence in a mirror” (Luiselli 2012: 23). “[E]xcitement” is the key word here, as it prioritises the narrator’s affect, so that the sign she perceives becomes an entirely personal one. If this is not a factual interaction with Owen’s ghosts, because she realises that the pot cannot really be his, at least it is an emotional one. The comparison to a baby, evoking Lacan’s mirror-stage, emphasises the purity of the “excitement” portrayed, as if it is an emotion unscathed by adult cynicism or the complexities of context, and thus the headiness of the narrator’s first reaction to the letter is reproduced here. As Luiselli’s sentences lead a reader through the narrator’s interpretation of the plant pot symbol, then, they reveal affect rising to the surface of an inattention to symbolism. The novelist depicts a mode of reading which prioritises individual, unmediated, childish aesthetic response above complex, contextualised understanding.

Owen’s own response to the object, elsewhere in the novel, can be similarly characterised by this unfocused emotionality. When the orange tree in the pot dies, Owen experiences an overflow of emotion: “[i]ts sudden, absolute death made me so sad, seemed so prophetic in its way” (Luiselli 2012: 108). Again, the feeling “sad” is prioritised, stated before the arguably more obvious symbolic reading of the dead tree as prophecy. Earlier, Owen describes (in Luiselli’s Spanish) that “*escribía cartas*” in the shadow of the orange tree, a line which the English translator Christina MacSweeney imbues with tenderness, translating it as “I used to write love letters” (Luiselli 2011: 93; Luiselli 2012: 90). This “love” context is not explicitly present in Luiselli’s Spanish, and thus MacSweeney’s adjectival addition seems to respond to the novel’s association of object and feeling, albeit as a general swirling together of the two, rather than a direct scrutiny or immediate engagement. That is, by page 90 (of the English edition), the affective is so cemented as the privileged response to the orange tree and its pot that MacSweeney’s translation must stretch the literal meaning to establish a connection between the object and the character’s emotion.²

As they consider, interpret, and respond to the decorative pot and its orange tree, then, the narrator and Owen enact a particular kind of reading. Luiselli

2 I am justified in the subtlety I attribute to MacSweeney’s translation here by accounts of her close relationship with Luiselli during the translation process. As Nathan Scott McNamara paraphrases in a 2018 interview on their collaborations, sometimes “Luiselli uses the translation to make revisions to the original” (McNamara 2018).

presents this readerly mode as one interested in affective rather than philosophical meaning, and one defying commitment to an inflated, symbolic interpretation, in which the tree might stand, say, for the flowering of creativity, and its death for the pessimism of decaying genius. The pot reappears throughout the novel, both in the narrator's narrative in twenty-first-century New York, and Owen's in the same city early in the twentieth century, and thus it might have symbolised the transcendence of the poetic vision (I will explore this recurrence in the second half of the essay). Luiselli insists on diffusing this reading. She replaces it with an instinctive, perhaps less trained mode, which responds according to immediate affect. This mode of reading anticipates, in contemporary critical theory, Susan Sontag's concept of the "erotics of art" (see Sontag 1966: 5, 6, 14), or Felski's work on attachment in *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020). The latter calls for the critic to engage with subjective responses to the text, rather than viewing emotion as "the antithesis of criticism"; she revels in "feeling as a precipitous derailing of thought" (Felski 2020: 126). If not quite a "derailing", what Luiselli presents through her depictions of the narrator and Owen's affective responses to the orange tree and its pot certainly constitutes a displacement or a de-prioritisation of thought, as a reader's role gains significance from the emotions it gleans from an object rather than from either a philosophical or a factual meaning.

Finding the pot and dead tree on the roof of Owen's old building, the narrator takes it home. There, its framing function is initiated: "I made notes on yellow Post-its and when I got back to my apartment, propped them on the branches of the dead tree, so as not to forget, so as to return some day and organize them" (Luiselli 2012: 36). The repetition of "so as to" (*para* in the Spanish) emphasises the object as a facilitator of action, and the lack of romance in the verb "*colocaba*" (Luiselli 2011: 43), which MacSweeney captures with the lightly plosive, matter-of-fact "propped", emphasises the pot and tree in relation to the narrator's use of it. There is a mundaneness about this image which is corroborated by the later description of Moby using the tree as a hatstand (Luiselli 2012: 38), but there is also something skeletal in the bareness of the branches. They frame, support, sustain the written words on the narrator's Post-its, just as, perhaps, the recurrent image of tree and pot sustains the prose of Luiselli's novel, helping it to move between centuries and cities.

What this image of the branches and Post-its evokes too, however, is a collaboration between object and character: between the aesthetic item and its reader. The Post-its become a garish substitution for leaves, as if the narrator's notes are reviving it, gradually, balancing out the branches' service to her research with her participation in that object's own processes. Reading becomes an act of collaboration rather than simply reception, here, just as it

does for a reader of *Tristram Shandy* on that famous blank page which invites a reader to fill the space with her own concept of womanly beauty (Sterne 1996: 326). Luiselli's presented mode of participatory reading seems to approach Northrop Frye's conception of books as "a picnic to which the author brings the words and the reader the meaning" (Frye 1969: 427), rephrased by Wolfgang Iser as a kind of textual flimsiness, in which "literary texts initiate 'performances' of meaning rather than actually formulating meanings themselves" (Iser 1978: 27). Iser's comment resonates with the deadness of Luiselli's orange tree, which, no longer growing, cannot offer its own meaning but must be shaped into significance and performance by the narrator's yellow Post-its.

2 Reading Invited

In each of these presentations of the reading figure in her encounter with the tree and its pot, then, Luiselli displays a privileging of reception, whether as collaborator or as container of affect, and prioritises emotional response to the novel as meriting critical attention. Yet my analysis here has focused on each response to the object within the novel as a distinct episode. In reality, Luiselli's novel is a maze of voices and motifs. It begins with the single voice of the narrator, who describes both her present family life in Mexico City, and her past youth as a translator in New York. Other voices join the primary narrator, not announcing themselves completely but "fold[ing] out of a single voice" (Booker 2017: 274), as Sarah K. Booker puts it: there is the metafictional commentator, who reflects on the process of novelistic creation, and the voice of Owen, split into two, describing his younger and older selves.

There is a semblance of authorial guidance when Owen's voice first appears, as Luiselli declares: "[t]his is how it all starts: it all happened in another city and another life" (Luiselli 2012: 58). The directness of the Spanish infinitive "*empezar*" (Luiselli 2011: 64), which MacSweeney registers in the wholehearted, repeated "all", is relieving to a reader, as it gives her hope that she might be led through the complex web of voices that is beginning to unfold. This hope is short-lived, however, as the novel spirals into an interweaving of narrations that never announce their perspective. A reader encounters the voice of a divorced husband spending single weekend days with his children and turning up to his ex-wife's parties as an outsider: this could be Owen, or it could be the original narrator's husband, for whom she begins to write a story of marital boredom and betrayal which a reader cannot pinpoint as truth or fiction. (Does he really write letters to his ex-girlfriend in Philadelphia?) On the same page the reader encounters, Owen's reading with Z (Joshua Zvorsky), his

wondering about poisoning the cats which keep coming to his house, the original narrator's games of hide-and-seek as she writes, and a description of a day out with his children by another version of Owen (Luiselli 2012: 100–101). By holding these scenes so closely together, and sustaining each for such a short amount of time, Luiselli denies the reader any chance to get accustomed to a particular voice. She does not have time to work out who is speaking before another asterisk arrives, and a new speaker enters. Her experience must be characterised by uncertainty and irresolution effected by the novel's vignette form.

The motif of the orange tree sometimes connects these disparate scenes. At first, it is found by the narrator on a roof and installed as a framework for her research on Owen, until she moves house and tries to take the tree to the poet's grave in Philadelphia, but ends up leaving it on her sister's doorstep instead. Then its past is told through the passages of Owen's narration, as he writes beneath it and eventually takes it to the roof when it dies. A few pages later, Owen trips over the pot as he stumbles about in the dark in a wealthy street in New York; he takes it home (his motivation is practical, so that he does not leave a mess) and discovers that the pot is exactly like the one he discarded. Later, in a different context altogether, he walks across the roof of his building and sees that the pot is missing. Owen finds it at the narrator's sister's doorstep and realizes that the pot is missing from the roof because the narrator has taken it home. But the narratives take place nearly a century apart, so that sequence of events is chronologically impossible. Meanwhile, the narrator's son, in the strand of narration which depicts her family life, makes up a strange joke about the tree, despite never having seen it, and thus Luiselli incorporates it into the novel as a tonal quality and an imaginary touchstone, as well as a physical object.

As it recurs, impossibly, across different temporalities and in different cities, the orange tree highlights the novel's experimental treatment of time and space. For Raynor, the first moment when the narrator takes the tree from the roof of Owen's old building "marks an important rupture in the boundaries of representation in the novel—fictional and real, dead and alive, material and immaterial", as it creates "an impossible contact zone" (Raynor 2021: 105). Thus she engages with the object as enacting in microcosmic form the temporal and spatial manipulations of Luiselli's text: as signifying not only thematically but also structurally, or metafictionally. The critic goes on: "while the reader and the translator herself are aware of the absurdity of the idea that the tree could have belonged to Owen, they gleefully surrender their disbelief in order to open up further possibilities of contact between the translator and her quarry" (Raynor 2021: 105). The reader that Raynor imagines is fully com-

mitted to her reading experience: there is a violence to the total resignation of “surrender”, and “gleefully” rings with adverbial decisiveness.

Yet this mode of reading cannot necessarily be expected: would a reader who is used to encountering a realist novel, or at least to following one single perspective through a plot, really so easily give herself over to Luiselli’s radical experiments? Would she not ask whether both pots are real, and thus become trapped in that “absurdity” that Raynor is so quick to move through? Would her response not be dominated by that “hesitation” which Tzvetan Todorov theorises as the appropriate reaction to literature that walks the line between the magical and the real (Todorov 1973: 33)? I contend that the solution to this problem, and the answer to these questions, lies in Luiselli’s use of the orange tree motif to train her reader in a mode that shakes off the shackles of realist tradition and takes experiment in its stride. By describing the object in such vivid detail when it first appears, including the specificities of its colours and patterning, the novelist imbues it with a certain concreteness, contrasting with the ephemerality of the swirling voices, which are somehow ghostly and imaginary in their impossible combination and constant temporal shifting.³ As such, the object becomes a support for a reader, as she can trace its presence through the confusion and feel a sense of consistency amongst the constant and unexplained change. As the pot remains unscathed through these different temporalities (the tree dies, but still remains in skeletal form), it both corroborates this reassurance and raises questions about the impossibility of such transcendence. The two prompted feelings do not cancel one another out, however, but the reassurance makes the reader more willing to sit within the impossibility. She does not completely give in to a magical explanation—that the pot simultaneously exists everywhere and in every time—but neither does she run away screaming. She accepts the pot’s movement.

This acceptance is modelled within the novel itself. After the family move house, the narrator sticks the Post-its to the wall, and describes the way in which others encounter them: “the boy is learning to read and spends hours by the wall trying to find some meaning in those Post-its. He doesn’t ask me questions. My husband, on the other hand, wants to know everything” (Luiselli

3 Carolyn Wolfenzon is preoccupied by the figure of the ghost in *Los ingrátidos*, paying particular attention to the Ezra Pound poem that resounds through the novel and the ephemeral glimpses of faces on the Metro which motivate sections of both the original narrator’s and Owen’s narration (see Wolfenzon 2020: 67–108). Regina Cardoso Nelky writes about ghosts and duality in Luiselli’s novel, too, in Nelky 2014.

2012: 36). Here are two modes of reading. The first, that of the narrator's son, attempts and errs, accepts failure, and refuses the granting of a single authorial answer. The second, represented by her husband, interrogates, wonders, and cannot settle for not knowing. The husband's questions appear over and over in the novel, wanting to unpick details of the narrator's past life, or to work out whether certain plot points really happened. His inquiries create a disjuncture with the narrator's matter-of-fact prose style, as in the novel's opening pages, which describe the narrator's relationship with Moby: "[s]ometimes, on Sundays, we made love" (Luiselli 2012: 8). The plural "on Sundays" deflates the significance of the event by denying specificity, and the three-clause structure provides the sentence with a closure that does not permit further questioning. That same style recurs throughout the novel, and particularly in this opening, as the narrator describes the pieces of furniture in her New York flat and the expiry time of her "wine [...], bread, lettuce, cheese, whisky and coffee, in that order" (Luiselli 2012: 3). Luiselli's narrator establishes these descriptions as fixed, almost uninteresting, and not worthy of readerly excavation. In that passage about Moby, the next section seems off-beat, then, when the husband asks who Moby is. The narrator responds: "[n]obody, I say. Moby is a character" (Luiselli 2012: 3). The narrator's husband is unable to read unquestioningly, and to juggle the novel's fictional-autobiographical experiments. Through this juxtaposition which exposes the narrator's husband for his misunderstanding the text, I suggest, Luiselli holds up the literal, interrogative reader as a model of how *not* to read. Rather than excavating the words, then, a reader should relish their surface, however contradictory or unknowable, adopting this acceptance of surface as an affective and ethical stance, which will allow her to navigate this experimental fiction.

My vocabulary here deliberately evokes work by Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best on "surface reading", a mode of reading that rejects symptomatic or paranoid reading's insistence on excavating a text's hidden depths, and instead works with what can be read on the surface. Early in that essay, the critics declare that "[a] surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*", relishing openness that grabs the attention (Marcus and Best 2009: 9). Certainly the garish colours of Owen's plant pot register this insistence; as they recur through time and space, they demand that a reader experience them rather than interpret them. Drawing on theories of reading by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Timothy Bewes and Jane Gallop, Marcus and Best wonder about the possibility of reading that "involves accepting texts, deferring to them instead of using them as objects" (Marcus and Best 2009: 9). Deference is the only option that Luiselli leaves her reader, faced with these indistinguishable voices and impossible threads of connection backwards and

forwards in time. There is a certain modesty to these theorists' description, here, and I argue that it is this sense of acceptance as a way of managing powerlessness that characterises a reader's only possible response to Luiselli's novel.

In the novel's final pages, Luiselli inserts a section of prose which bizarrely confirms this de-prioritisation of the reader in deference to the object. It reads:

One day the narrator of this novel finds a pot with a dead tree on her doorstep and brings it inside. She waters it but it never really revives. She begins to write about what that plant sees from a corner of one of the rooms. The plant will start to impose itself on the voice of the narrator until completely taking it over. The dead tree narrates from a corner, to one side of the front door, from where the kitchen, the small lounge and part of the bedroom can be seen. It likes watching the woman get undressed at night in her bedroom before going to the bathroom to brush her teeth: it watches the tangled trail of her pubis as she passes, then it studies the shape of her ass as she returns to the bedroom.

LUISELLI 2012: 139

Object becomes narrator; narrator becomes object. The noun "shape" and the repetition of the verb "see" create a tone of dehumanising scrutiny, in which the dead tree in its pot begins to read the narrator, instead of the other way round. I suggest that this strange section shows Luiselli exploring the extremes of a deferential "surface reading", as the narrator defers to the text so much that it takes over the narrative. Perhaps Luiselli means this as a warning about the mode of reading that she suggests throughout the novel—but there is a tonelessness to the straightforward sentences here, which unfold with mundane details about the layout of rooms in her apartment and carry no sense of revelation in their strangeness. Perhaps she is simply presenting another piece of experimental narrative which invites the reader to look at rather than look through.

As the analysis has shown, there is a conflict between the reading acted out within Luiselli's text, and the reading demanded of and by it. While Luiselli *represents* an aesthetic appreciation that privileges readerly affect and participation, she *invites* a mode of reading which is more modest, deferring to the text and accepting what it offers on the surface, rather than suspiciously seeking to expose what lies beneath its façade. Perhaps this double vision arises out of a difference between the characters' and a reader's encounters with the tree and its pot. The narrator's and Owen's experience of the tree and its pot have finite limits. When the original narrator leaves the pot on her sister's doorstep, it leaves her life forever; when Owen deposits it on the roof of his

building, its narrative ends, as far as he is concerned. The narrator can hang Post-its on the branches of the dead tree because it has become her object to be defined and interpreted, and that past possible life, as Owen's tree, has ended. Luiselli's reader, by contrast, has to combine the historical and contemporary narratives. In doing so, she realizes that they do not and cannot fit together without a disruption of space and time, and thus the work of reading demanded of her becomes unusual and difficult. She becomes conscious that Luiselli does not only depict the action of reading but also intervenes into it, to use North's vocabulary, training a reader to be accepting, receptive, and sympathetic.

As she becomes aware of this tension between presentation and intervention, and of the different modes of reading that emerge from each of them, Luiselli's reader begins to understand the novel as a metafictional commentary. Through *Los ingravidos*, Luiselli offers an analysis of and a solution to problems in contemporary critical reading which anticipates Felski's work in *The Limits of Critique*, but also explores the capacity of experimental forms to produce and reshape, as well as reflect and represent, cultural reception through reading. My reading of this experiment offers an alternative portrait of Luiselli not as a strictly Mexican-American novelist, but as an avant-garde one, in conversation with the theory and practice of postcritique in the twenty-first century.

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