Notes on the Family Separation Narrative in American Literature: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and *Lost Children Archive*

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I.

The family, both as a core institution and as a generalized code for intimacy and belonging, has a firm place in the American cultural imaginary. It appears as a guiding metaphor in foundational discourses of the United States and, time and again, serves as a dominant model to channel questions of citizenship, alongside real and imagined kinship. As an "affect saturated" (Berlant) institution, the family (in its various shapes and forms) has also become the site and the vehicle of social and political change. At the same time, throughout US history, the integrity of families has often been threatened and violated by the state and its institutions. In particular, non-white families have been subjected to violent regimes of racialized bondage and displacement. Laura Briggs has documented the history of such separations in her book *Taking Children: A History of American Terror* (2020).

In US literature, issues of family separation are at the center of a sentimental tradition that has long combined aesthetic education and political critique. Based on religious, civil religious, or secular normative underpinnings, the American novel offers affectively powerful plots of family separation that, on the one hand, create moral outrage about acts of violation, while, on the other hand, reflect critically on the sup-

posed sanctity of the (nuclear) family as being the fundamental social unit. In what follows, I discuss the family separation narrative as a literary formula heavily invested in sentimental tropes.[1] As case studies, I draw on the controversial reform novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by the white author Harriet Beecher Stowe, the slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs, and the more recent text *Lost Children Archive* (2019) by Mexican American writer Valeria Luiselli. All three, I suggest, affectively interpellate their audience and aim at eliciting the preferred feelings (in analogy to Stuart Hall's "preferred readings") of sympathy and fellow empathy; however, while Stowe's text uses the sentimental as an affective narrative strategy to erase difference/alterity, by offering the suffering black subject for identification to a white readership, Jacobs's narrative points to the limits of the resources that the sentimental affords an enslaved mother. Luiselli's novel, in turn, uses representational strategies that preclude easy identification of any kind but engages with the subjectivity of the child in its own right, conveying the affective precariousness of all social ties.

Winfried Fluck has convincingly argued that the Anglo-American sentimental novel (as it was developed in the late 18th and early 19th century) has allowed for specific subject positions to emerge and become the object of empathy: the (fallen) woman, the (abused) child, the (enslaved) black subject. Often, generative sentimental plots aimed at fellow-feeling address the family as the site of both dysfunction and restoration and reveal the conditional and limited autonomy of individual subjects and the importance of social relations. Not surprisingly, narratives of family separation often dramatize social and political injustices and thereby create "affective counterpublics" (Warner) by writ-

1 Prior to the emergence of the American novel, Abraham Van Engen identifies the family separation theme in the Puritan archive in texts such as Mary Rowlandson's "captivity narrative" (Van Engen 179). The early American novel takes up and amalgamates earlier literary forms, such as the captivity narrative or the slave narrative. Richard Slotkin and others have pointed out that the slave narrative, in many ways, may be seen as an ideological reconfiguration of the captivity narrative (Slotkin 167).

ing 'along the grain' of normative kinship regimes.[2] The latter often figure prominently, as they serve to de-legitimize practices that run counter to the integrity of families and to the ethos of an individualism that is stripped of any concern with the common good. At the same time, the very notion of what constitutes kinship and 'a family' is also addressed and deepened—in and beyond emotional scenes of family separation and reunion.

II.

Certainly, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe stands out in the sentimental archive of the 19th century as a novel that is as successful as it is controversial (cf. Paul). The author felt prompted to write it after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Arguing against the institution of slavery in her text, Stowe has, at the same time, created some of the most powerful and harmful stereotypes about African Americans (cf. Fiedler), for instance, in the figure of Tom. In the beginning, Stowe's novel appeals to its audience by introducing Haley as the most unsympathetic slave trader and exposing his ruthless business scheme in his conversation with Shelby, a financially troubled plantation owner in Kentucky. The child at risk in Stowe's novel is little Harry, the son of Eliza, an enslaved woman in the Shelby household. Readers encounter him in the first chapter of the novel, in a sequence reminiscent of a scene from a minstrel show of the kind that were already spectacularly popular at the time in the North. Harry is playing to Shelby's exhortations, who asks him to perform dances and comical postures (3). Quickly, he is taken away by Eliza, his mother, who experiences discomfort at his exposure in front of the slave trader and at Haley's voyeurism. Following this comic relief for the white men, the maternal melodrama sets in as Eliza learns about the plan to sell Harry to

2 The phrase "along the grain" has famously been used by Laura Ann Stoler in her work about the colonial archive. In my usage, it refers to the ambivalence of gendered and racialized representations of kinship in the sentimental text.

Haley, leaving her with no other option but to flee with her son to the North, in order to avoid their separation and to keep him safe. Whereas the title figure of the novel, the slave Tom, is sold to Haley and taken away (he will be brought further to the South and eventually die at the hands of a slave owner), Eliza and Harry become fugitives. Among the most iconic scenes from the book, even though it is only a brief sequence in the narrative, is Eliza stepping on ice floes, carrying her child across the Ohio River to escape her followers and their bloodhounds to the other side, the North. Here, she is helped by several women, among them Mary Bird, a senator's wife, and Rachel Halliday, a Quaker woman. Stowe's heroization of mothers is almost boundless. Throughout the novel, Stowe parades a whole typology of mothers in front of her readers, mostly good, one bad.[3] In her concluding remarks, Stowe's sentimental reasoning takes no excuses from her audience: "But, what can any individual do? Of that, every individual can judge. There is one thing that every individual can do, - they can see to it that *they feel right*" (385, emphasis in the original). It is in the last pages that Stowe seeks to mobilize her (at the time, mostly white and female) readers as an "affective counterpublic" (Warner) by calling on them to empathize and engage in acts of civil protest and disobedience to end slavery.

One stark point of criticism against Stowe's novel concerns its channeling of a black discursivity and its successful fictionalizing of experiences of African Americans as enslaved subjects (Reed).[4] The author disclosed her sources in *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) to defend her representation of the institution of slavery against her critics. These sources were mostly witness accounts and texts by African American authors, often former slaves themselves. And yet, it was the authority

3 Marie St. Clare certainly figures prominently in the novel as the negative prototype of being self-absorbed and lacking empathy.

4 According to sources, Josiah Henson was the model for Stowe's Tom-figure, and he owned this circumstance in his own autobiography. Twentieth-century postmodern African American novelist Ishmael Reed has criticized Stowe and even wrote *Flight to Canada* to mock Stowe for stealing the stories from her enslaved African American contemporaries, turning them into profit.

and the voice of white evangelical womanhood, Stowe's, that, at least for some time, appropriated them and seemed to drown out all of them. In 1861, ten years later, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, a slave narrative by Harriet Jacobs, would tell a different story about an enslaved woman successfully escaping from the South with her two children, a story that revealed the ambivalences of motherhood within the institution of slavery. In order to fend off her master's sexual advances, the protagonist of Jacobs's narrative, a mother of a girl and a boy, orchestrates an escape while hiding away in the tiny attic of her grandmother's home on the plantation grounds. Her grandmother is not enslaved, she is free, and she takes care of the children as much as she is allowed to. From the attic, the "loophole of retreat" (173), where Jacobs's narrator hides for years, she can stay somewhat connected with her children in a one-sided way and watch them grow up without ever being seen by them. It is the omnipresent threat of a physical family separation that reveals the perverseness of the system of slavery and which forces Jacobs to take such drastic measures. Only after many years, when the search for her has finally abated, does she make her move, managing to escape with her children to the North. Jacobs's story is obviously sentimental in many respects (cf. Nudelman); yet, she also challenges the normative ideal of the dominant white and middle-class sentimental discourse of her time—often epitomized in a woman's piety and purity—carving out a discursive space for her own experience as an enslaved subject and unwed mother. Consequently, the closure of Jacobs's text resists the pull of respectable domesticity often championed in 19th-century sentimental writing, in favor of sticking to her narrative of emancipation from coercive institutions of all kinds, when she quips: "Reader, my story ends with freedom, not marriage" (302). Hence, Jacobs's *Incidents* speaks back to Stowe's earlier text (and to those of other white female abolitionists, such as Lydia Maria Child, who wrote the introduction). It also anticipates future negotiations of the sentimental in literary texts that continue to produce and reflect on scenes of female suffering, while being less and less invested in resolving them by way of rehabilitating 'the family' according to a normative heteropatriarchal ideal. Considering this, Jacobs' text can be perceived as reprioritizing the so-called cardi-

nal virtues of 19th-century womanhood by placing motherhood ahead of all other normative ideals, such as female purity, piety, and submissiveness.

III.

The legacy of 19th-century abolitionist writing and anti-slavery prose, both autobiography and fiction, can presently be found in contemporary texts that focus not on the Ohio River, as the border between North and South in the US, but further South, on the partially walled US-Mexico border.[5] This space has become the site of a highly militarized border regime and systematic family separations during the Trump presidency, preceded by a decade of deportations throughout the Obama presidencies. A whole range of new texts, again both fictional and non-fictional, addresses the precariousness and subjection of those seeking refuge in the US, among them Diane Winger's *No Direction Home* (2018), Javier Zamora's *Unaccompanied* (2017), Jacob Soboroff's *Separated: Inside an American Tragedy* (2020), as well as the works by Valeria Luiselli: *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017) and *Lost Children Archive*.

Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* is a road novel that takes us from New York City to the Southwest borderlands. Four people are in the car, a married couple (man and woman) and two children (boy and girl, 10 and 5 years old). Together they make up a patchwork family, as the woman, and first person-narrator, is the girl's mother, and the man is the boy's father. All of them remain nameless. The adults in the

5 Across time, more manifestations of the American family separation narrative come to mind than can be addressed in the space of this essay. In the first half of the 20th century, family separation, as part of schemes of colonization and cultural destruction, has been prominently addressed by Native American writers who chronicle the missionary school education, the disruption of indigenous families, and the coercive practices of adoption. For an overview, see Amelia V. Katansky's *Learning to Write 'Indian': The Boarding School Experience in Native American Literature* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005).

car have work projects in the Southwest; the man is researching Native American stories and sounds of the Southwest, in the context of a history of "Indian removal;" the woman is planning a journalistic piece on the deportation of children, another kind of "removal" (Bahadur), and she is also looking for two lost girls about whose whereabouts an acquaintance has asked her to inquire, two of the "lost children."[6] The theme of family separation plays out on two levels in the text. On one level, the border regime and its policy of deportation and family separation are closely observed and documented by the narrator.[7] On another level, it is their own family which is about to fall apart. After a key scene in the novel, in which she and the children witness the deportation of undocumented children being put on a plane (182), the focalization shifts to the boy. He and the girl will eventually run away to look for the two lost girls, the lost children—and in doing so, they will become lost children themselves (237). Contrary to Stowe's and Jacobs's narratives, Luiselli's novel also imagines the subjectivity of the child, the boy. Yet, what the boy identifies as a redemptive, sacrificial move to save the integrity of their own family unit almost ends fatally. The boy and the girl are discovered after days of wandering, but their rescue cannot prevent the break-up of their family, which ultimately also leads to the separation of the siblings.

The novel is experimental in many ways and would hardly be described as a straightforward sentimental text that follows the narrative pattern established in the past. Its postmodern narration and (at times somewhat heavy-handed) intellectual sophistication, in fact, aim at deconstructing any romanticized idea of familial bliss; Susan Sontag is quoted time and again, to provide critical commentary, for in-

6 The itinerary in the novel—toward the South and the Southern border of the nation—reverses the direction the immigrants take while walking toward "El Norte."

7 Luiselli began her novel in 2014, and her border tale refers to the deportations during the Obama administration, preceding the harsh measures enforced by his successor.

stance about marriage: "Marriage is based on the principle of inertia" (59). "Inertia" and a road trip do not go well together, and the domestic space has been pretty much dissolved for the time being. Yet, even as the narrative seems to defy sentimental expectations on the reader's side, deconstructing sentimental conventions, for instance, by refusing to give names to its characters, hence leaving not only them in a state of unclaimed vagueness but also their social relations in a generic limbo, its style is nevertheless emotionally charged and evocative in its minimalism. While it is trying to refuse the sentimental, Luiselli's complex novel, with its political critique about conditions at the border, does mobilize emotional responses to the suffering of the children (those children we have come to know, those we see from afar, and others we later learn about). Whether the author is asking her readers like Stowe and others to "feel right," or refuses to do so in any direct way, the sentimental code ultimately elicits empathy and moral outrage and thus affectively mobilizes readers to become politically engaged.

IV.

The family separation narrative appears—in one form or another—in every epoch of American literary history and has a firm place in the transhistorical archive of sentimental writing. Such narratives focus on the violent disruption of the closest social relations, and often, these disruptions are predicated on issues of political and social injustice in a context that has long considered and articulated national politics in the semantics of familial relations and vice versa. The texts briefly discussed here are but three examples. Whereas in the 19th century, writing in the sentimental mode aimed at the institution of slavery, in the 21st century, a similar attempt at abolitionism has turned to other institutions: "Abolish ICE" (ICE: Immigration and Customs Enforcement) was one of the slogans reiterated in the political sphere of activism and protest when Luiselli's book came out, along with #FamiliesBelongTogether. The quests for the well-being of families follow different routes and take different shapes—from Stowe's domestic ideal to Jacobs's ma-

trilineal model, to Luiselli's notion of a much more temporary and fragile social entity, disrupted by both external and internal forces. Family separation narratives negotiate the conditional autonomy of individuals amidst fundamental/existential social relations; they address responsibilities of care; and they question the terms of 'belonging' in various kinship models. Thus, their criticisms are ambivalent or may even be explicitly double-voiced: against institutional politics (such as the separation policies of the state) and hegemonic ideals of the (nuclear) family, and in favor of *Families We Choose* (as in the programmatic title of Kath Weston's book). In this two-pronged manner, the family separation narrative has become an ever more complex form of "affective worldmaking" (Breger) in the sentimental mode.

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