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Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

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Faces in the Crowd: Valeria Luiselli's Haunted Times and Places

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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Faces in the Crowd (*Los ingrávidos*, literally "The Weightless," 2011) consists of fragments that do not quite make up a novel, as any effort to tell a coherent story is continually interrupted by other stories, other possible novels.

Perhaps the book in fact excessively contains more than one novel—two, or even three or more of them.

There is the story of a woman writing a book, in Mexico City.

There is the story of a woman writing a book, in Mexico City.

There are her recollections (maybe, inventions) of her time in New York City.

And she writes about another writer, drawn from the Mexican literary tradition, who is likewise looking back at his time in New York, conjuring up a past when everything seemed new, but also perhaps coming up with the story of the woman who is writing about him.

Time and causality start to warp or bend as what seems solid quietly comes to be seen as permeable if you look at it from the right direction, or from many directions at once.

“What’s your book about, Mama?
It’s a ghost story.
Is it frightening?
No, but it’s a bit sad.
Why? Because the ghosts are dead?
No, they’re not dead.
Then they’re not very ghosty.
No, they’re not ghosts.” (13-14)

Its characters are tied very concretely to material things, from flower pots to subway cars, office chairs to poetry books.

Yet all these things are on the move,
in a novel that is perpetually, but
discontinuously, in transit and translation,
a work in progress that is written or
rewritten even as we read it.

FOLDING TIME

A woman is writing a book.

A woman is writing a book.

Perhaps the woman is Valeria Luiselli,
as the book she is writing could be
the book we are reading.

Or perhaps only part of what we are reading is the book she is writing.

Or perhaps only part of what we are reading is the book she is writing.

This part could be the story of her as a younger woman, before husband and children.

“It all began in another city and another life. [. . .] I was young, had strong, thin legs. [. . .] I worked as a reader and a translator in a small publishing house dedicated to rescuing ‘foreign gems.’” (1)

“I left my apartment, bundled up in my gray tights and the red coat with enormous pockets.” (16)

“We like to think that in this house there’s a ghost living with us and watching us.” (6)

“Novels need a sustained breath.” (4)

“Novels need a sustained breath.” (4)

“A dense, porous novel.
Like a baby’s heart.” (28)

The book she is writing becomes a series of fragments that switch between past and present, North and South, writing and the scene of writing.

“My husband reads some of this and asks who Moby is. Nobody, I say. Moby is a character.” (8)

“Did you use to sleep with women?” (39)

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“Why did you write
that I like zombie films?” (35)

“Did you use to sleep with women?” (39)

“Why did you write
that I like zombie films?” (35)

“You wrote that I’d gone to Philadelphia.
Why?” (85)

“It’s all fiction, I tell him, but he doesn’t believe me” (57).

“It’s all fiction, I tell him, but he doesn’t believe me” (57).

As readers, we are not sure whether to believe her, either.

This is a novel that dissolves boundaries, including that between fact and fiction.

There is at least one other novel in *Faces in the Crowd*.

There is at least one other novel
in *Faces in the Crowd*.

“The novel, the other one,
is called *Philadelphia*.” (58)

She is increasingly obsessed with Owen, tracking down the places he used to live, and sometimes she imagines she sees him on a passing train in the subway.

She also starts to research his life, taking notes from his correspondence that are included in the book we are reading.

This book that, many years later, she is writing (perhaps) is narrated from Owen's perspective, at the end of his life, overweight and almost blind, living in Philadelphia, as he reflects back on his New York days.

Owen also tells us that he keeps seeing a woman on the subway, a woman with a dark face and a red coat who, at least once, is apparently reading a book called *Obras*.

“There are three cats that appeared out of the blue one day. And a ghost, or several ghosts, also appeared.” (66)

“I know I want it to be a novel set
both in Mexico, in an old house in the
capital, and in the New York of my youth.
All the characters are dead, but
they don’t know it.” (135)

“The narrator of the novel should be [. . .]
a woman who remains eternally locked up
in her house, or in a subway carriage, it
makes no difference which, talking with her
ghosts and trying to piece together
a series of broken thoughts.” (137)

“The novel will be related in the first person by ~~a tree~~ a woman with a brown face and dark shadows under her eyes, who has perhaps died.” (111)

“Salvador told me that there’s a young writer in Mexico doing something similar. The bastard went and stole my great idea.” (135)

Is this stolen book, then, the one that
we are reading? A book anticipated
by a fictionalized version of Gilberto Owen
as imagined by a narrator
he planned to invent?

Though there is quite a lot of metafictional reflection in the novel, at other points it is left to the reader to make connections between incidents and objects that may otherwise go un-noticed.

The woman narrator mentions her red coat in passing a few times early on (2, 16, 18, 19).

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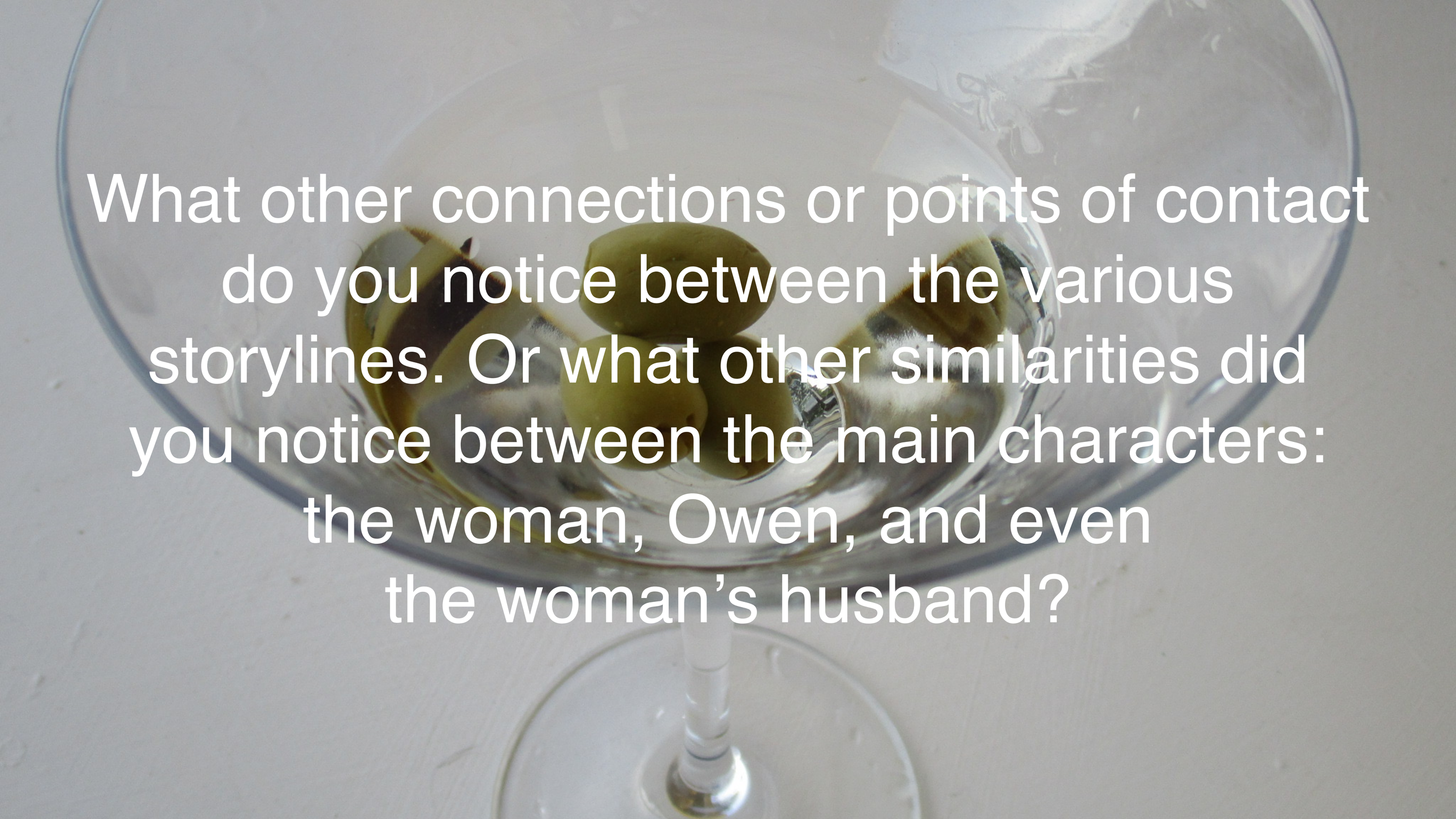
her red coat in passing a few times early on
(2, 16, 18, 19).

But by the time Owen says that
the woman he has seen on the subway is
“always wearing a red coat” (89),
we may well have forgotten the fact.

What other connections or points of contact do you notice between the various storylines. Or what other similarities did you notice between the main characters: the woman, Owen, and even the woman’s husband?



What other connections or points of contact do you notice between the various storylines. Or what other similarities did you notice between the main characters: the woman, Owen, and even the woman’s husband?

“Throughout *Los ingrávidos*, temporalities overlap as these two chronologically disparate narratives unfold and collide.” (Cecily Raynor)

Both the woman narrator’s and Owen’s narratives are in part exercises in memory.

But they are also interested in anticipation
or premonition, in what is to happen
in the near or far future.

“The baby doesn’t say anything, but one day she’s going to say Pa-pa.” (5)

“The baby doesn’t say anything, but one day she’s going to say Pa-pa.” (5)

“Pa-pa says the baby” (66)

“What’s happening [. . .] is that you can remember the future too.” (88)

“I eat very well and am an inconjugatable tense, the future pluperfect.” (96).

It is in this paradoxical, apparently ungrammatical, temporality that this novel is written.

It is in this paradoxical, apparently ungrammatical, temporality that this novel is written.

Or perhaps all novels.

“If you dedicate your life to writing novels, you’re dedicating yourself to folding time.” (115)

“My husband doesn’t read anything
I write anymore, it no longer matters to him,
it no longer matters. I don’t think he cares
the least bit about Owen, this Owen,
who is perhaps his future ghost in
Philadelphia, his future life.” (117)

In the novel, time folds back on itself
but also forward, enabling points of contact
and contiguity between past, present,
and future.

BURROWING THROUGH SPACE

Faces in the Crowd is concerned also with spatial orientation and reorientation.

Faces in the Crowd is concerned also with spatial orientation and reorientation.

Indeed, time is as much as anything a matter of configuring space,
of facing in the right direction.

“I once read in a book by Saul Bellow that the difference between being alive and being dead is just a matter of viewpoint: the living look from the center outward, the dead from the periphery to some sort of center.” (23)

This begs the question of where exactly center and periphery are to be located.

Is Mexico City then the periphery?

“He hated New York and was, in fact, on the margins of all that.” (44)

At the center but on the periphery at the same time, Owen occupies the viewpoints of the dead and the living alike, looking both inward and outward.

Something similar is true of the woman narrator, both in her doubled temporality and in her job as reader and translator seeking to legitimate Latin American authors in the light of North American cultural priorities

“White was sure that, following Bolaño’s success in the American market some five years before, there would be another Latin American boom.” (15)

Where you are from counts,
as does where you are now, and
which way you are looking.

It is not just a matter of looking inward or outward.

It is not just a matter of looking inward or outward.

It is also a question of viewing things from below or above!

“New York has to be seen from the viewpoint of the subway. The flat horizontal perspective vanishes in there. A bulky landscape begins, with the double depth, or what they call the fourth dimension, of time.” (37)

“Luiselli’s novel functions as a repetition of previous descents into the subway as a haunted underworld or alienating rational space.” (Emma Eldelin)

Just as an archaeologist digs down to see the past, so Luiselli (or her narrator) is less interested in skyscrapers than in buried tunnels and underground platforms, in what subtends the glitz up above.

The narrator is dissatisfied with any single perspective.

“A horizontal novel, told vertically. A novel that has to be told from the outside in order to be read from within.” (61)

“A horizontal novel, told vertically. A novel that has to be told from the outside in order to be read from within.” (61)

“Not a fragmented novel. A horizontal novel, narrated vertically.” (69)

“A vertical novel told horizontally. A story that has to be seen from below, like Manhattan from the subway.” (122)

“A vertical novel told horizontally. A story that has to be seen from below, like Manhattan from the subway.” (122)

“Or a horizontal novel, told vertically. A horizontal vertigo.” (126)

This is still an unfinished novel,
a work in progress.

This book’s writers are not only writing,
but also rewriting.

“He slid down until he felt the concrete caress of the ground on his ass. He took out a notebook and began to write. That same night, in a diner in the south of the city, he completed a poem of over three hundred lines.” (14)

“After a month of work, removing everything extraneous, only two poignant lines survived, comparing faces in the crowd to petals on a dark bough.” (14)

“Manhattan has to be seen from the subway, she said [. . .]. The people who see it from above, from the Woolworth Building, don’t see anything, they live in a mock-up of the city.” (121)

In later reworking this statement,
Owen is both stealing it and translating it,
refining it, making it literary.

Seeing from below allows us to trace the roots of such phrases, among the sex workers and (elsewhere) elderly retirees or eccentric hoarders who also inhabit the city.

Or perhaps these are not such much roots
as subterranean pathways, linguistic
and cognitive traffic that seldom
sees the light of day.

This is a novel that is both in transit and in translation.

“Luiselli’s characters can be said to challenge a ‘cardinal rule of subway etiquette’ that ‘thou shalt not make eye contact.’” (Emma Eldenin)

“Public spaces, such as streets and subway stations, became inhabitable as I assigned them some value and imprinted an experience on them. [. . .] The entrance to the subway at 116th Street was Emily Dickinson’s.” (17)

“The subway, its multiple stops, its breakdowns, its sudden accelerations, its dark zones, could function as the space-time scheme for this other novel.” (60)

What is envisaged is not untrammeled flow,
but stops and starts, breakdowns
and recoveries, that are
essential to the process.

“If you read the novel like you see
Manhattan from the subway,
each fragment becomes a station
and each white space a part of the
network of tubes that connects them.”
(Maria Pape)

The novel never stops still, but is in perpetual if discontinuous motion.

“There is a section in *Faces in the Crowd* [. . .] that my Italian translator, Elisa Tramontin, came up with. She produced such a good translation of it in Italian that I changed the original after her input, and so all the other translations followed her version instead of my ‘original.’”
(Valeria Luiselli)

“**Federico (in Spanish)**
In this kitchen insane:
‘Hoover us [. . .]’

“**Federico (in Spanish)**
In this kitchen insane:
‘Hoover us [. . .]’

Me (in English)
This, itching is saying,
‘behoover us [. . .].’” (113)

Translation is also creative movement,
a chance to look at things from above
or below, from inside or outside,
without ever pretending to encompass
or exhaust the whole.

“They write you a horribly boring novel in which each line is there for an ultimate reason: everything links up, there are no loose ends.” (124)

“I know I need to generate a structure full of holes so that I can always find a place for myself on the page, inhabit it.” (10)

It is perforated and pockmarked by craters and tunnels, passageways and fissures that funnel crowds through past, present, and future, bringing the instant in contact with eternity.

MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”

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