

Multimodal Archives and Metamodern Narratives: Exploring the Archival Turn in the 21st Century

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Abstract

An archival turn has recently been noted in twenty-first-century literature, as the construction of the archive has become central to the narrative of many acclaimed works of fiction (Chadwick, Collins). This turn goes beyond a thematic concern with the archive to include the visual insertion of archival material, such as photographs, documents, and other clippings, into the narrative discourse (Davis; Ivansson and Gibbons). This article addresses the convergence of this latest archival turn with metamodernism as an influential cultural mode by analysing how contemporary multimodal archival fiction's interest in the archive compares with and expands on earlier modernist and postmodernist engagements with the archive as well as its critiques. I propose that multimodal archival fiction offers a new, complementary perspective to previous accounts of metamodern culture's concern with historicity, depth, and sincerity. By analysing Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*, James Elkins' *Weak in Comparison to Dreams*, and Catherine Lacey's *Biography of X* as metamodern archival fiction, I show how contemporary archival fiction's multimodal, stylistic, and thematic engagement with the archive not only returns to but expands on modernist and postmodern aesthetic strategies and concerns with history, authenticity, and identity.

Keywords

Archival Fiction; Multimodality; Archival Poetics; Contemporary Fiction; Metamodernism.

Introduction

From the development of the modern archive to the present day, there have been dramatic transformations in the methods of storing, recording, and organising knowledge through the advancement of new archival technology, evolving from typewriters to smartphones. As Derrida points out, “what is no longer archived the same way is no longer lived the same way” (18); archival technologies construct and shape the archive and, consequently, our experience of past and present. With the recent digital revolution, the archive today has shifted from being a predominantly physical place-bound institution comprised of artefacts, books, and paper records to now, instead, “consist of streams of data invading our work and private lives” (Manoff 391). Furthermore, an archival turn has recently been noted in contemporary literature, as the construction of the archive has become central to the narrative of many acclaimed works of fiction (Chadwick; Collins; Davis; Ivansson and Gibbons). As Jim Collins points out, in recent novels published on the cusp of the 2020s, “reading and writing are inseparable from the assemblage and curation” (220). However, as I have argued elsewhere, importantly, “the current archival turn in contemporary literature is also visual and material,” with the inclusion of archival materials such as photographs, documents, and other clippings (Ivansson and Gibbons, 101; see also Davis).

The recent archival concern in contemporary fiction can be elucidated further when contextualised by the long tradition of literary and artistic engagements with the archive, from the modern archive’s institutionalisation in the 1880s, and the modernist and postmodernist cultural modes of the 1900s, to today’s digital age. Marco Codebò, establishes the history of the archival novel by tracing the genre from Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) via works by Alessandro Manzoni (1840), Honoré de Balzac (1829–48), Gustave Flaubert (1881), and Georges Perec (1978) to Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988). He defines it as “a fictional genre where the narrative stores records, bureaucratic writing informs language, and the archive functions as a semiotic frame that structures the text’s content and meaning” (13). In contrast to Codebò’s concern with the bureaucratic archive, my definition of contemporary archival fiction extends to address the visual and thematic act of collecting and constructing a fictional archive within the novel’s narrative discourse, be it public or private (Ivansson). Due to the dawn of the digital age, Codebò dismisses the future of the archival novel, arguing that “the bureaucratic archive reached its technological sunset with the advent of the digital database in the 1970s” (17). He posits that the rise of digital databases alongside the waning of traditional paper archives has created a disconnect between the documentary foundation of the novel and the sophisticated technology employed for the management and distribution of knowledge. Instead, despite this technological development, or perhaps because of it, I connect the recent archival turn in contemporary fiction with the “rise of the multimodal novel” at the turn of the millennium (Hallet). Multimodal fiction refers to novels that, while still relying on verbal text, incorporate a variety of semiotic modes, like graphics, images, documents, and clippings, as well as the use of colour, typography and layout design in ways which carry narrative meaning (Hallet; Gibbons *Multimodality*). The increase in multimodal fiction at the beginning of the twenty-first century is often described

as influenced by a fear of the death of the printed novel due to the rapid development of digital technology (Hayles; Pressman; Gibbons *Multimodality*). However, this worry instead led fiction writers to explore “literary strategies that reaffirm the novel as a book itself” (Gibbons 15), often emphasising the printed page’s power as a multimedia format connected to digital technologies (Pressman). Furthermore, the opportunities available through digital technology, such as design and word processing software, allowed writers to become designers of their fictional texts (Hallet). I view archival fiction as a sub-genre of multimodal literature, denoting novels that demonstrate a visual and thematic concern with the archive by including fictional and factual archival material and sources; implement archival methods and principles of organisation; and explore archival themes, such as fragmentation and ontological ambiguity (Ivansson). Taken together, these features of contemporary multimodal archival fiction result in the presentation of an archive within the novel’s narrative discourse, which positions the reader as an active archival researcher within a fictional archive (Ivansson). Works of multimodal archival fiction published since the early 2000s include, for example, Barbara Hodgson’s *Hippolyte’s Island* (2001), Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), D.A. Stern’s *Shadows in the Asylum: The Case Files of Dr. Charles Marsh* (2006), J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst’s *S.* (2013), Shelley Jackson and Zachary Thomas Dodson’s *Riddance* (2018), and the novels analysed in this article: Valeria Luiselli’s *Lost Children Archive* (2019), James Elkins’ *Weak in Comparison to Dreams* (2023), and Catherine Lacey’s *Biography of X* (2023). Considering this selected corpus, I suggest that contemporary multimodal archival fiction can be understood as a reconfiguration of earlier forms of the archival novel responding to the digital and cultural context at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

To further explore the visual inclusion of archival documents in contemporary fiction and their structural and thematic engagement with the archive, I have expanded on Rebecca Macmillan’s and Brian Davis’ term, “archival poetics.” Macmillan uses the term to capture how, in multimodal lyric poetry, visual and structural engagement with the archive “presses us to consider the contents collected and to notice the process of collection,” inviting “association between materials without the claim of complete or definite representation” (201). Davis utilises it to discuss “multimodal book archives,” which he describes as an experimental genre of contemporary literature in which the narrative is constructed “through the collection and representation of reproduced texts and other artefacts, in which the book-object is presented as a container for preserving and transmitting textual artefacts” (84-85). Utilising a broader—yet more specific—definition of archival poetics, together with Alison Gibbons, I have proposed that “archival poetics encompasses a radical evocation of archival organisation, through the inclusion of lists, inventories, storage, indexes, and methods of cataloguing; typical archival features such as fragmentation, referentiality, order and disorder; and explicit thematisation of the power dynamics connected with selection processes” (101). This definition of archival poetics thus combines both formal features reminiscent of physical and digital archives, while raising questions about the role of the archive and archival practices in both public and private spheres, as well as its role in preserving the past as well as the present.

However, in this article, I am not interested in how archival poetics manifest in contemporary multimodal archival fiction in isolation, but rather, I align myself with scholars of archival art, such as Hal Foster, Sven Spieker, and Ernst van Alphen, who argue that the “archival impulse” (Foster, 3) is not solely a postmodern or millennial phenomenon, but, as I outline in the following section, one that can be traced throughout the twentieth century via modernism to present day metamodernism. Situating contemporary multimodal archival fiction within this broader historical and aesthetic context, I analyse Valeria Luiselli’s *Lost Children Archive*, James Elkins’ *Weak in Comparison to Dreams*, and Catherine Lacey’s *Biography of X* as metamodern archival fiction. I propose that these novels’ multimodal, stylistic, and thematic engagement with the archive not only reactivates but expands on modernist and postmodernist strategies, and critiques of the archive in ways that feed into metamodern concerns with historicity, depth, and sincerity, exploring contemporary tensions between the public and the private archive, objective and subjective knowledge and experience, and questions about how we understand ourselves and our world today through archival poetics.

Modern/Postmodern/Metamodern Archival Poetics

The turn of the millennium, which I have previously pinpointed as the beginning of the recent archival turn in multimodal literature above, has also been identified as the emergence of the aesthetics of metamodernism. Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen introduce the term to refer to “a structure of feeling that emerges from, and reacts to, the postmodern as much as it is a cultural logic that corresponds to today’s stage of global capitalism” (5). Whilst postmodernism—through the prefix ‘post’—suggests a rupture from modernism, they posit that the prefix ‘meta-’ (which refers to both *with* or *among*, as well as *between* and *after*) describes the more complex relationship between the past and the future exemplified in contemporary Western European and Northern American literature which borrows strategies from both postmodern, modernist, realist as well as earlier aesthetic forms (van den Akker et al. 9, e.g. see also James, *Modernist Futures*; van den Akker, “Whatever Works”; James and Seshagiri, “Metamodernism”; Pressman, *Digital Modernism*). Van den Akker and Vermeulen describe metamodern aesthetics as “the upcycling of past styles, conventions and techniques” (10), which, in contrast to postmodernism’s recycling of culture through parody and pastiche, adds new value to an old form. In their analysis of autofiction and true crime documentaries as metamodern genres, Gibbons, van den Akker, and Vermeulen demonstrate how postmodern strategies—previously associated with what Marie-Laure Ryan describes as “a ‘crisis’ of the dichotomy between fact and fiction” (Ryan 165; qtd. in Gibbons et al. 174), and referred to, as the “doctrine of panfictionality,” (165)—are now employed to generate a reality-effect, or “new depthiness” (Vermeulen “The New ‘Depthiness’”, “Metamodern Depth”), in contrast to what Fredric Jameson called the “new depthlessness” of postmodernism (“The Cultural Logic). “Depthiness,” according to Gibbons, van den Akker, and Vermeulen, “designates a renewed need or wish to experience the world as possessing depth, as real, even amidst a lingering postmodernist scepticism of such an attempt” (174). These strategies include self-referentially, drawing attention to the text as a fictional construct; imitating and fictionalising techniques

of non-fiction; creating “obvious intra-textual clashes between fictional and non-fictional ontologies” (175); and making it impossible for readers to “decipher the referential or fictional status of a narrative’s storyworlds” (175). Simply put, “postmodernist devices are put to new use, reterritorialised” (Gibbons et al. 173). In contrast to postmodernism, metamodernist and post-postmodernist aesthetics have been described as striving to “reconnect with something beyond representation, something extralinguistic, something real” (McLaughlin 213). Although they continue to use metafictional or self-reflective strategies, they attempt to “write through them” (McLaughlin 215) to represent the world and connect with, rather than to play with or ridicule their readers through language games.

Similarly, David James emphasises that contemporary writers use modernist strategies as a homage to the past whilst simultaneously exploring their formal and critical potential to address social and political issues, such as “racial, sexual, and social identification or injustice” (*Modernist Futures* 4). James demonstrates how novelists, like J. M. Coetzee, Ian McEwan, and Toni Morrison, build on modernism’s experimentation with representing mental experiences and consciousness to show how “mental experiences are shaped by material circumstances, how protagonists’ psychological states adapt to and are mutually pervaded by the social realms they navigate” (9). Hence, they implement features from the modernist novel to connect their characters’ internal and external worlds. Whereas, thus far, I have addressed how postmodern and modernist aesthetics permeate contemporary metamodern fiction in general, as my concern is with how archival poetics can be traced through modern, postmodern and metamodern culture, an aspect not previously addressed concerning metamodern aesthetics, I will now sketch out what modern and postmodern artistic concerns with and what conceptions of the ‘modern archive’ entail, before embarking on my analysis of metamodern archival fiction.

Although archives and their practices date back to ancient times, the term ‘modern archive’ refers to archives shaped by the archival theory introduced in the wake of the French Revolution and cemented through *The Dutch Manual: Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, published in 1898 (Muller et al.; cf. Codebò 13). Simultaneously, the Industrial Revolution marked a time when bureaucratic organisation replaced face-to-face interactions as people moved from the country to the city (Spieker 5). James Beniger refers to this period spanning from the 1880s to the 1930s as the “control revolution”; a control that was made possible due to the new archival technology of the time, including storage systems, like index cards and office equipment such as typewriters, carbon paper, stenography, and the telegraph. Together, these tools contributed to the bureaucratisation of everyday life and influenced modernist art practices, particularly through an interest in collecting, automatic writing, photography, and visual and literary collages. Foster neatly describes archival art as art that “not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private” (5).¹ As I will demonstrate in the following section, this applies to modernist and postmodernist engagements with the archive.

Especially within the Surrealist and Dadaist movements, artists began to utilise archival methods of organisation to critique the archive. Sven Spieker connects “early surrealism’s infatuation with card indexes and other office technology,” like lists, protocols, letters, and memos, with “its ambition to assemble an archive of unconscious facts” (88). He explains that “surrealism appeared to be interested exclusively in extreme phenomena that defy the archive and the ambition to record” (Spieker 88) whilst simultaneously registering and archiving strong emotions like shock, ecstasy, and delirium. French Surrealists even set up the *Bureau de Recherches Surréalistes* (Office of Surrealist Research) in Paris, which went beyond documenting the work of its members to “collect data that would help elucidate the workings of the unconscious by collecting written transcripts of unconscious dreams and other material” (Spieker 94). Exploring the unconscious was a way of redocumenting the self. One of the surrealists’ methods was automatic writing as a means not to depict reality, but to “reveal the subliminal principles of its temporal and spatial organisation” (Spieker 89). Automatic writing sessions captured “events of whose existence the writing subject never knew about but that nevertheless have been filed away in the archive of the unconscious” (Spieker 96). Spieker explains that “to the surrealists, the typewriter was much more than a machine that mechanized the production and archivization of symbols; its accelerated beat embodied the shock-like rhythm of life itself, a pulse well below the threshold of consciousness” (89–91). Hence, the typewriter both documented and represented the new tempo of the modern world and the people in it.

Beyond the work of the surrealists, van Alphen traces the “emergence of the archival impulse” (21) in modern and contemporary art further back, to the invention of photography in 1826 and its subsequent growing popularity. According to Susan Sontag, “the industrialization of photography permitted its rapid absorption into rational—that is, bureaucratic—ways of running society” (21). Documents become valid only once they have “a photograph-token of a citizen’s face” (Sontag 22) affixed to them. However, “the archival promise” of photographs was quickly “frustrated” by the lexical instability of photographs as well as “the sheer quantity of images” (Sekula 17). Similarly, van Alphen addresses this double-sided relationship between the archive and photography, arguing, firstly, that photographs themselves need archival organization due to their indexical multiplicity and extreme volume, and secondly, that “the photographic image itself can be seen as an archival record,” one that is “inherently unstable” (21–22, 27). This is because “once severed from their referents they can always be read differently” (van Alphen 27), opening them up to multiple readings and interpretations. Hence, whilst photography became an influential tool for documenting reality, the photograph on its own undermines its documentary power by being context-dependent, as it can easily be reframed based on the spatial and verbal context in which it is placed.

Another modernist engagement with the archive, also emphasising context dependency, is the use of collage, fragmentation, and intertextuality in both visual and verbal art. Graham Allen notes that modernist painting that implements ‘found material’ creates intertextuality between the included objects. This is particularly evident in the collage art of Cubist painters like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque (Drăg). As Wojciech Drăg explains, collages

combine seemingly disjointed elements and fragments, such as photographs, clippings, and artefacts, often juxtaposed to create tensions. These elements, according to Drag, are often ready-made, meaning they are real, often mass-produced images or texts. In literary collage, “the ready-made usually takes the form of an unintegrated and often unacknowledged quotation or a photograph” (Drag 11). This account aligns with Lance Olsen’s description of collage fiction as a form of textual appropriation, exemplified by writers such as T.S. Eliot and William S Burroughs, who were “cutting up previous texts to create new ones” (Olsen, “Notes” 187; qtd. in Drag, 11). Underscoring that intertextuality is both a modernist and postmodernist practice, Linda Hutcheon differentiates between the two by describing Eliot’s quoting of Dante or Virgil in *The Waste Land* as “a kind of wishful call to continuity beneath the fragmented echoing” (*Poetics* 11), whereas, in postmodern parody, it is often used to create an “ironic discontinuity” (11). Hence, intertextuality can both draw attention to the continuity of texts by claiming a lineage between them or be used to create parody which draws attention to the fact that, despite the modernist mantra, nothing is new. Regardless of its use, intertextuality underscores that no text exists in a vacuum but rather in a complex sociohistorical context. Furthermore, I propose that the intertextual collages can construct archives by foregrounding other texts and establishing connections between the new and the old, the past and present, whether to evoke modernist nostalgia or to offer a postmodern critique of the past.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, postmodernist thinkers interrogated the role of the archive as the “rise of computerized society” (Lyotard 3) marked a change in how knowledge was organised and interpreted, challenging overarching narratives and exposing the contingency of historical records (Hutcheon, *Poetics*; *Politics*). Furthermore, the postmodern critique brought on a shift from viewing archival records as products of administration to acknowledging them as active agents in forming and influencing human memory (Cook). This was also reflected in postmodern historiographic metafiction that questioned the archive by revealing how history is mediated through archival materials that are vulnerable to manipulation and reinterpretation (Hutcheon, *Politics*). Hutcheon (*Poetics*) emphasises that historiographic metafiction is an important part of the postmodern theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs. Whilst both historical fiction and historiographic metafiction incorporate historical data into the narrative, historical fiction weaves it into the text, rendering it invisible, whereas, in historiographic metafiction, “more often, the process of attempting to assimilate is what is foregrounded” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 114). Hence, “the metafictional self-reflexivity of postmodern novels ... poses that ontological join as a problem: how do we know the past? What do (what can) we know of it now?” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 114–15). Hence, although historiographic metafiction engages with the archive, it does not offer a nostalgic return to the past but rather emphasises that there is no singular true past to return to. Instead, historiographic metafiction foregrounds the role of the archive in postmodern culture as a place where knowledge is produced rather than stored (Stoler).

Sketched out together, modernist and postmodernist artistic engagements with the archive reveal how the archive has figured beyond its role as a public institution to offer artists and writers new ways to address their own internal (conscious/unconscious) archived

self and reflect on how the public archive shapes our understanding of past and present. Additionally, questions raised in the postmodern critique of the archive remain valid in the twenty-first century as we have fully entered “the post-digital age” (Cramer) where archives have not only been digitised but engulfed by Artificial Intelligence, which severs information from its original source. As mentioned in the introduction, the archive today is no longer a place-bound institution, but rather, as Tom Chadwick and Pieter Vermeulen highlight, we are all archivists documenting our lives with our smartphone cameras, email archives, and chat history, and perhaps most pervasively, the data traces we leave behind every time we engage online. The control revolution Beniger described has now intensified to new extremes. Simultaneously, questions about the distinction between fact and fiction infiltrate both digital and political domains, manifesting in phenomena such as ‘fake news’ and ‘deepfakes.’ Clearly, the postmodern rejection of historiography and epistemological and ontological certainty is not magically resolved in metamodern art and culture. Therefore, this socio-cultural and technological context offers a particularly fruitful backdrop for exploring how archival poetics are implemented in contemporary archival fiction.

Metamodern Archival Fiction

After briefly outlining the history of the modern archive in modernist and postmodern artistic engagements, I now turn to address how these conceptions linger and even flourish in contemporary archival fiction, suggesting that this genre offers a new, complementary perspective to previous accounts of metamodern aesthetics. Across my three case studies, I analyse contemporary archival fiction’s multimodal, stylistic, and thematic archival poetics, and demonstrate how metamodern archival fiction *upcycles* modernist and postmodern archival poetics through their play with intertextuality and referentiality to blur lines between reality and fiction and capture the fluid nature of identity and the archived self.

Lost Children Archive: An Intertextual Archive

Luiselli’s novel, *Lost Children Archive*, is a travelogue of a family’s final road trip together across the United States, from New York City to Arizona. The novel includes collected material from the parents’ separate research projects as soundscape artists, as well as the wife’s son’s photographic archive of the family’s trip, and the husband’s daughter’s box of (typed-out) sounds. The wife’s project focuses on the 2014 “child refugee crisis” (Luiselli 23) at the U.S.-Mexican border; meanwhile, the husband’s interest lies in the historical displacement of the Apache Warriors, due to the 1830 Indian Removal Act. Beyond permeating the narrative text verbally, the parents’ research is included visually in the novel through seven box-chapters that collate inventory lists, newspaper clippings, maps, and Polaroid photographs. The boxes are the most experimental and multimodal feature of Luiselli’s novel, and it is via these that the reader is positioned to explore the family’s personal and professional archive. The visual presentation of the boxes distinctly differentiates the Box-chapters from the novel’s narrative text by presenting a title page stating “BOX” followed by a number between I-VII, which is surrounded by a thin black border following the outline of the page. The full-page rectangular frame creates

a simplistic yet iconic visual representation of a box within the pages of the novel. This visual representation merges further with the materiality of the novel's codex as each BOX-title page is placed on the right-hand side of the page-spread and thus functions as a lid/page which the reader needs to lift/turn to open the box and reveal its content. In this way, the reader is positioned to actively engage with the family members' personal archives. The inside of the boxes is structured as inventories with lists dividing items into categories, such as notebooks, books, and, for example, a folder with "facsimile copies, clippings, and scraps" (Luiselli 34). This structure thus suggests an underlying archival principle of organisation, which, according to van Alphen (2014), is what differentiates storage boxes from archival boxes. The visual presentation of the boxes, together with their archival structure, creates a multimodal archival poetics which draws attention to the act of collecting and organising the family's personal and professional items.

As a multi-award-winning novel, *Lost Children Archive*'s archival format and its ethical, socio-political, and ecological concerns have attracted substantial scholarly criticism (e.g. Cho; Ivansson & Gibbons; Ivansson; James, "Listening"; Mantzaris; Stuelke; Vermeulen, "The Field of Restricted Emotion"). However, Luiselli's modernist strategies have mainly been emphasised by Vermeulen, who traces the aesthetics across her novels, and Thomas Mantzaris, who addresses the fragmented nature of the novel's archival composition. Beyond highlighting the novel's archival structure, the inventories of books in the Box-chapters also establish an inter-textual network by listing works by, for example, André Gide, Ezra Pound, Rosalind Krauss, Susan Sontag, and Dubravka Ugrešić. According to P. Vermeulen, this contributes "to the novel's bid for literary distinction by constructing a modernist genealogy and New York-consecrated affiliations" (92). Hence, it constructs continuity between Luiselli's novel and other prominent works and authors. Furthermore, Luiselli engages with other modernist strategies that complement her archival poetics. For example, the "Echo Canyon" chapter consists of 20 pages of an unpunctuated fluid stream-of-consciousness sentence that switches between narrative levels and character perspectives, utilising Virginia Woolf's aeroplane device used in *Mrs Dalloway*. Luiselli describes this as a technique for "point-of-view shifts that occur when the eyes of two characters 'meet' in a single point of the sky, by looking at the same object" (Luiselli 382). The "Echo Canyon"-chapter is narrated by the wife's son through second-person address to the husband's daughter as the two children have run away together to the desert to find the "lost children" (321) that they have read about in the embedded fictional novel, *Elegies for Lost Children* by the fictional author Ella Camposanto. Instead of looking up to the sky for an aeroplane, the two children spot a group of eagles:

I can see the birds, too, flying around the clouds, and you asked me if I thought those birds were the eagles, so I looked through my binoculars and then said yes of course they are, those are the eagles, *the same eagles the lost children now see as they walk north into the desert plain*, beating muscled wings, threading in and out of black thunderclouds, they see them with their bare eyes, the five of them, as they walk onward. (Luiselli 321; my emphasis)

The birds, first seen by the son, then the daughter, and finally by the five lost children, here serve as a point-of-view shift that changes the narration from second-person to third-person and subtly shifts the focalization to the group of lost children. Before the “Echo Canyon” chapter, the world of the lost children was only accessed through 11 excerpts presented in stand-alone paragraphs within Luiselli’s novel, which positioned the reader to read these alongside the mother and son. However, as I have argued elsewhere, through this pointing up towards the eagles, the novel culminates with a merger of the two texts, where neither the worlds nor words of Luiselli’s and Camposanto’s novels are kept distinct (Ivansson). Instead, the two groups of children communicate and share storyworld space within the Echo Canyon.

This merger is then amplified once more as Luiselli reveals that “the *Elegies* are composed by means of a series of allusions to literary works that are about voyages, journeying, migrating, etc.” (382). Whilst not quoting these works directly, Luiselli constructs a complex intertextual archive, which underscores her novel’s thematic concern with migration across space and time. Texts written by European modernists, such as Pound, Conrad, and Eliot, are intertwined with later works of Mexican writers like Augusto Monterroso and Juan Rulfo and repurposed to tell the stories of South American child migrants crossing into the United States on top of gondolas in “a not-so-distant future” (Luiselli 138). In her works cited list at the end of the novel, Luiselli comments on her practice of creating literary allusions, borrowing, and altering citations as a method that does not need to be evident to the reader. She explains that she “is not interested in intertextuality as an outward, performative gesture but as a method or procedure of composition” (Luiselli 382). Luiselli’s fusing of textual fragments traces back to, what James describes as “an effort made most iconic by Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, ‘to create meaning from the flux and fragments of an atomized contemporary world’, as Leonard Wilcox puts it, ‘to pierce the veil, to reveal underlying truth’” (James, 13; cf. Wilcox, 348). Instead of critiquing the Eurocentric modernist aesthetics present in Pound, Conrad, and Elliot’s work, she, to borrow Van den Akker and Vermeulen’s term, *upcycles* their texts both as a creative practice and to historicise the child migration crisis. By combining overt intertextuality—through the inventory lists of books read by the parents—with more covert allusions and paraphrased quotations within the text, Luiselli engages with both modernist and postmodernist approaches to intertextuality. She does this both by drawing explicit attention to the texts that have shaped the parents’ view of the world and by weaving those texts directly into the narrative discourse itself. By combining these approaches, Luiselli’s intertextual archive anchors itself in literary history whilst also connecting historical Western experiences of migration with the 2014 child refugee crisis at the U.S border. Furthermore, in alignment with James’ argument about the modernist concern with how mental experiences are tied to material circumstances, Luiselli’s use of stream of consciousness in the “Echo Canyon” chapter ties the children’s mental experiences and their metaleptic meeting with the lost children, together with the texts and books consumed by their parents. Hence, in this way, the listed texts and the intertextual composition of *Lost Children Archive* underscore the historical and textual context in which we, and the children, exist. Whilst this composition could be read as a quintessentially postmodern gesture drawing attention to the constructed nature of texts, I propose that the

metaleptic merger also suggests the potential of texts to bridge time and space, and to position both the children and the reader to experience the world from a different perspective through the new use of the old words of modernist writers, drawing attention to experiences of migration, and shedding light on the lived experience of refugee children in America today. As such, Luiselli's use of intertextuality in *Lost Children Archive* aligns with the metamodernist quest for 'depthiness' and truth beyond the text.

Weak in Comparison to Dreams: A Surrealist Photographic Archive

Elkins' novel, *Weak in Comparison to Dreams*, is self-reflexively presented as a manuscript composed by the protagonist, Dr Samuel Emmer, a microbiologist from Guelph, Canada, who is unexpectedly appointed by the city's Zoo Feasibility Committee to visit zoos across the world to gather information on stereotypical behaviour among caged animals. The novel opens with Emmer declaring that a narrative format is no longer available to him: "That winter ruined any hope I had of experiencing my life as a story" (Elkins, *Weak* 15). He explains that "that winter tore me from myself and pushed me into a world of dreams" (Elkins, *Weak* 15). Faced with the fear of losing himself, the narrator declares he "wants to write this book" (Elkins, *Weak* 15). The following almost 500 pages are Emmer's manuscript narrating the days and nights leading up to his entering in a fugue state, driving off into the Canadian wilderness. The final section of the novel is written by Emmer 30 years later, at the age of 90, as he has rediscovered the manuscript and rereads it, but struggles to connect to his younger self. In "Notes," the older Emmer reflects on how the manuscript is as if written by another person; similarly, the younger Emmer describes the experiences of his younger self, as a child, as belonging to a different person, to whom he refers as Sam. The initial manuscript and the "Notes" section thus function as two different documents capturing the protagonist at two distinct moments of his life. The division between the two sections underscores Emmer's initial rejection of conceptualising his life as a continuous story; instead, the format available to him is an archival collection of moments, documents, diagrams, and images. This combination of narrative and archival material reflects the surrealist's engagement with archival modes, to "establish an archive not of history but of its rupture, not of narrative but of its other" (Spieker 96). The rupture in Elkins' novel is between the past and present protagonist, whose life cannot be conceptualised as a consistent narrative, but only as archival snapshots which capture the person in a present moment. As such, Elkins' archival poetics demonstrates a return to the surrealists' exploration of archiving the moment and the momentary self.

Elkins, professor of art history, has a special interest in experimental writing with images, and the practice of incorporating photographs, charts, diagrams, and sheet music into the narrative discourse. He describes the inclusion of visual material as occasionally presenting material which has been gathered or created by the characters, mixed with "other passages when the main narrator imagines them and we [the readers] see them on the page" (Elkins, "Writing" 114). Both types of presentations can be understood as moments of what Gibbons calls "doubly deictic subjectivity" (*Multimodality* 80), meaning when a reader and a character's perspectives align, and readers are positioned to see what the character/narrator sees. How-

ever, a significant aspect of Elkins' novel is how fluid the materiality of the inserted visuals is, as documents are occasionally presented as material artefacts and in other moments, immaterial images of the narrator's imagination. By immaterial images, I refer to the visual inclusion of photographs of dreams in the twelve dream chapters, which alternate with the chapters describing Emmer's daily zoo visits. Narrated by Emmer, the dream chapters follow the development of him driving through unpopulated landscapes, which eventually catch fire and burn to a cinder. In each dream chapter, the page is divided equally between text and image, showing first a black-and-white photograph followed by narrative text. The equal division of text and image suggests that each semiotic mode is equally important for the narrative. The "First Dream" (Elkins, *Weak* 31) includes a horizontal photograph depicting a grassland with tall, wild-growing grass in the foreground and sporadic trees in the background. The photograph includes no identifiable features revealing the exact geographic location where it was taken. Hence, it has no explicit referential relationship with a place in the actual world; however, in the narrative text, Emmer connects the landscape with a location from his childhood. He describes this first dream as images projected onto his eyes:

That night I slept a strange, illuminated sleep. I watched, enchanted, as my mind showed me images. Pictures shone on my closed eyes, gleamed in my imagination. Clearly, I thought, as my bemused sleeping mind contemplated the images that kept arriving, this is from my childhood. Somewhere near Watkins, New York, nearly forty years ago. (Elkins, *Weak* 31)

The description of the images being displayed to the dreamer by his mind positions him as a passive onlooker: dreaming is like watching a film. Furthermore, the verbal reference to the specific image on the page: "this is from my childhood" (Elkins, *Weak* 31) both acknowledges that the reader is presented with a specific image out of the many shown to Emmer, yet the geographical and temporal reference to the real world remains vague pointing to "Somewhere near Watkins, New York, nearly forty years ago" (Elkins, *Weak* 31). Hence, as van Alphen emphasises, once the photograph is severed from its original context, its referential status is unstable. Whilst van Alphen describes this as an inherent issue with photographs as archives, Elkins' inclusion of dream photographs also adheres to the metamodern concern with complicating the referential or fictional status of elements within narrative storyworlds (Gibbons et al.). Although the text invites readers to interpret the photograph as depicting Emmer's childhood in Watkins, neither the photograph nor the text offers a way to confirm this relationship. The photograph's indexical multiplicity is further underscored by the fact that visuals experienced by our dreaming minds cannot be photographically reproduced. Hence, the reader might consider that the photograph is not an actual representation of *exactly* what the dreaming Emmer sees, but rather a picture taken "somewhere near Watkins" in a different context. This positions the reader in a state of flux, toggling between understanding the photograph as representing their own actual world and/or a fictional dream world.

Independent of the reader's interpretation of the referential status of the photograph, the included dream photographs create a juxtaposition between the materiality of photo-

graphs as real physical artefacts and their visual representation of the protagonist's dream content, which is only visually available within the protagonist's own mind. To clarify this, I draw on the picture theorist W.J.T. Mitchell's distinction between images and pictures. He categorises pictures as concrete objects and images as virtual and explains that the distinction between the two is "the difference between a deliberate act of representation ('to picture or depict') and a less voluntary, perhaps even passive or automatic act ('to image or imagine')" (4, fn. 5). Sara Tanderup Linkis makes this distinction more explicit by elaborating that "while 'images' are immaterial, virtual, and easily move between media, pictures are understood to be embodied images, manifestations of the image that depend on the concrete material, context in which they are presented" (44-45). Hence, the terms images and pictures capture, what so far, I have described as material or immaterial images, meaning how or if an image is contained in a medium. Elkins' presentation of dream photographs plays with this distinction by visually depicting mental images—imaginings—through the material form of photographs that we usually understand as indexically grounded in the real world. Thus, applying Mitchell's distinction between images and pictures, readers might on their initial encounter interpret the dream photographs as images, hence imaginings, rather than physical, material pictures. In this way, Elkins plays with archival poetics by collecting uncollectable images and incorporating them into the narrative discourse as if they were material objects. As such, he makes the character's internal life physically present on the page in a way that echoes how the surrealists turned to documentary methods to capture the unconscious.

The dream photographs are later, in the "Notes" section of the novel, revealed to have been collected by Emmer while collating his manuscript, thus confirming the photographs' material existence within the storyworld. Despite this, their material and referential ambiguity enhances the surrealist, dream-like quality of the dream chapters, which depict how Emmer's world falls apart following his divorce and his increasing estrangement from his daughter, all while travelling around observing animals in cages. The photographs of increasingly burning landscapes symbolise Emmer's waking life, as he states that the dream world "was ruined. Just like the other one" (411). Dreaming becomes Emmer's way of distancing himself from his real life, in which he feels disconnected from his family. Along with documents and diagrams of the caged animals' repetitive movements, the dream chapters represent Emmer's inner mental struggle in a multimodal manner. Consequently, Elkins' archival poetics juxtaposes the materiality of the archive with the immateriality of the mind's mental workings and imaginings. In this way, Elkins builds on modernist—and specifically surrealist—engagements with the archive to visually redocument the protagonist's self and inner struggles. While the novel's photographic archive of dreams explores a very different documentary method from the surrealists' use of the typewriter, it still shares a similar aim of their automatic writing, namely, to document and archive the unconscious. However, in a metamodernist context, the inclusion of the photographs also underlines the medium's failure to reliably reference a place either in the real world or in the protagonist's dream world.

Biography of X: A Counterfactual Archive

Lacey's novel *Biography of X* plays with the non-fictional format of the biography genre by nesting a book-within-the-book. Whilst the book cover clearly states Lacey as the author, followed by nine pages fading from black to white, the book reveals a second title page, listing the same publisher, Granta, but a different author: C.M. LUCCA. The page spreads fading from black to white are reminiscent of a cinematic fading to an opening or closing scene, which appears both at the beginning and end of the novel. These fading pages embed the nested narrative visually within Lacey's novel, and create an initial deictic push, which pushes the reader into an embedded narrative, a biography written not by Lacey but by the protagonist and widow of the visual artist X. This nesting of the biography marks the starting point where the blurring of the genre boundaries, characteristic of both archival and metamodern fiction, begin. Despite X's widow's original reluctance to turn her wife's life into "a historical object" (Lacey 11), she is taunted to write the biography to rectify the inaccuracies in another biography released shortly after X's death. The novel then follows C.M.'s quest to get to know who her wife actually was, both before and during their marriage, tracing her origin story beyond the wall of the Southern territory.

The ontological blurring of Lacey's novel becomes even more complex as the biographical narrative unfolds in a United States of America which has been divided into three territories after the so-called "Great Disunion" (Lacey 53) between 1945 and 1996. *Biography of X* thus situates itself in the genre of counterfactual historical fiction, offering an alternative political path for Post-World War II America, which echoes the division between East and West Germany with the American twist of Christian conservatism. The narrator explains that the most definite division was between the Northern and Southern Territories, marked by a physical wall. While the Northern Territory was led by a socialist capitalist party under the leadership of Emma Goldman—a real historical figure and anarchist activist—the South was ruled by a theocracy based on Christian values and gender roles. As Riyukta Raghunath emphasises, the fictionality of counterfactual historical fiction is complicated due to the genre's construction of "fictional worlds whose histories contradict the history of our world" (60). "Such texts," she explains, "are set within a familiar historical period and include popular historical figures within a fictional context" (Raghunath 60) that resembles the reader's own world. Like the works of counterfactual historical fiction analysed by Raghunath, Lacey also includes photographs to blur the fictionality and ontological relationship between the fictional and actual world. However, interestingly, the image chosen to represent the fictional border division between the three territories of the United States is a nighttime satellite photograph. The caption reads: "Image; Satellite photograph of the Northern, Western, and Southern Territories, 1993" (Lacey 53). The dark photograph shows the shape of the U.S territory through its lit-up lights. Hence, borders are not visible on satellite images, nor is the described wall between the north and the south visible in the nighttime photograph. The photograph, therefore, appears as a factual satellite photograph of U.S territory rather than of the divided nation within the novel. This ambiguity opens the question of whether the borders of concern in Lacey's novel are, in fact, ideological and socioeconomic rather than geographical. Especially as the counterfactual

narrative splitting of the North and the South as progressive versus conservative could be interpreted as representing the current political polarisation in the country today.

Despite the novel's politically divided setting, at its heart is not the political situation at large, but the question of identity. In contrast to Elkins' novel, where the archive becomes representative of how personhood cannot be accurately traced across time in a narrative format, Lacey's narrator turns to the archive to find and reconstruct her spouse, having to come to terms with the impossibility of knowing someone else fully. Similarly, to Emmer, she too rejects a pure narrative format, explaining that: "I know now a person always exceeds and resists the limits of a story about them . . . People are, it seems, too complicated to sit still inside a narrative, but that hasn't stopped anyone from trying, desperately trying, to compact a life into pages" (Lacey 33). The archival poetics of Lucca's biography of her wife, thus, suggest that an archival—rather than a narrative—structure is needed to grasp the complexity of X's life and personas. Beyond the multimodal inclusion of archival material and photographs, the biography's chapter structure is non-linear, organised around people's accounts of X's life, specific events, or places rather than chronological time. This offers snapshots of periods of X's life rather than a continuous story, and amplifies her obsession with creating new personas based on the social context in which she was currently. Hence, in contrast to Emmer's identity changing over time, the artist X actively changes and creates new personas as part of her artistic oeuvre. As she accesses fragments of her wife's life through other people's stories, C.M. begins to question if she ever knew X's true self at all.

Additionally, beyond political historical figures like Emma Goldman and Franklin Roosevelt, the novel includes cultural figures, such as David Bowie, Susan Sontag, Nathalie Léger, and RuPaul. Lacey interweaves these contemporary thinkers with X's work and, similarly to Luiselli, constructs an intertextual network of altered quotations from their work and interviews filtered in through quotes, letters, and newspaper texts, creating a cultural backdrop for the novel. This intertextual weave presents a detailed, yet distorted picture of New York in the 1990s. As in Luiselli's novel, as well as other works of archival fiction, such as Barbara Hodgson's *Hippolyte's Island* and Leanne Shapton's *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion, and Jewelry*, a network of intertextuality is often constructed to ground the fictional world within the readers' actual world and thus cross the ontological boundary between the two. In Lacey's novel, this relationship is made even more complex as real people's quotes are altered or anachronistically included in the novel. This means that, despite X dying in 1996 according to the biography, she is positioned in a context of texts that she would not have had access to. For example, the novel mentions a quote from RuPaul—"You're born naked and the rest is drag" (Lacey 39)—as influential in X's work in the 1980s, although RuPaul did not utter those words until an interview in 2004 (Theophano; Lacey 379). Hence, while Lacey's novel, like Luiselli's, uses text fragments to situate the narrative within its broader historical context, Lacey's anachronistic intertextual weave creates an impossible archive, one that highlights the constructed nature of texts by refusing to let the novel's historical setting dictate which sources are included. Although this intertextual play might read as a postmodern gesture

towards “depthlessness,” the novel’s complex intertextual network also invites the protagonist and the reader to make connections with texts that highlight the complexity of identity in a divided United States. By rejecting a historically accurate timeline for its citations, Lacey’s novel foregrounds its fictionality and asserts the freedom of (counterfactual) historical fiction to draw on knowledge from across eras. Ultimately, the novel suggests that identity struggles transcend historical boundaries and remain relevant. As my analysis of the archival poetics of *Biography of X* has shown, through her complex intertextual network and inclusion of ontologically ambiguous photography, like *Lost Children Archive* and *Weak in Comparison to Dreams*, Lacey’s novel includes archival modes and motifs that draw attention to the novel’s complicated relationship with the private and public archive, and to the actual, historical and fictional world.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article has mapped significant aspects of modernist and postmodernist artistic engagement with the archive in the twentieth century to explore how these conceptions feature in contemporary archival fiction and can be understood in relation to twenty-first-century metamodernism. As my analysis of three works of contemporary archival fiction has demonstrated, metamodernist engagement with the archive echoes and expands on modernist and postmodernist concerns with authenticity, truth-value, consciousness, and identity by drawing on archival poetics, such as the inclusion of archival material, like photographs, and other textual sources, as well as archival methods of organisation, fragmentation and intertextuality. In the analysed works, this is particularly obvious through their use of intertextuality to position the texts in a historical context and their exploration of the referential instability of photography. Taken together, these novels demonstrate how metamodern archival fiction upcycles modernist and postmodernist archival poetics to explore contemporary tensions between fact and fiction, past and present, and the fluid nature of identity and the archived self. Metamodern archival poetics thus reflect a literary interest in crafting narratives from visual and verbal collected fragments that, together, reveal something more authentic than the sum of their parts.

Expanding since the turn of the millennium, the archival turn in contemporary fiction not only exemplifies how digital technology allows writers to more easily incorporate visual semiotic modes and material into their narrative texts, but it also captures an interest in combining narrative and archival methods of documentation and organisation. Furthermore, in contrast to the digital setting in which these works are produced, their inclusion of archival material into the novel’s physical codices also suggests a nostalgic turn to the pre-digital archive. Whilst the archival material itself might be digitally sourced and manipulated, the narration often describes it as material objects, handled and touched by the protagonists. In this sense, archival poetics may be understood as a counterpoint to the hyper-digitised age we currently inhabit.

Notes

¹See Sara Callahan's monograph *Art + Archive, Understanding the Archival Turn in Contemporary Art* for an extensive review of archival art and how the archive has figured in the artworld since the twentieth century.

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