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Towards a cosmopolitanism of loss: an essay about the end of the world

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.

E.B., Brazilian Poet

One of the most felicitous effects of the recent world literary and cosmopolitan turns for the field of Latin American literary and cultural studies (or rather, the attention to minoritized, vernacular, strategic forms of cosmopolitanism in the region) is the opening of a discursive space set on destabilizing the Latin Americanist ideology of the Latin American critical tradition; that is, a rather refreshing critical discourse set against the particularistic, identitarian and provincial cultural politics of the scholarly field dedicated to the study of the over-signified cultural void that we are used to tagging with Latin American signifiers. Against the reproduction of overdetermined historicist interpretations of our objects of study, sustained by a militant desire to affirm the exceptionalist, differential nature of Latin American culture, this world literary/cosmopolitan turn has re-opened a comparative critical practice that has always been active in the field in spite of programmatic attempts to marginalize it since, say, the 1970s (and when I say *comparative*, I am thinking of the dislocation of sameness in relation to its constitutive instability and to the contingent

Note: This essay is an attempt to present some of the main argumentative lines of a book manuscript I am working on with a tentative title that includes formulations in English like “the end of the world” and ideas in Spanish like “crisis y dislocaciones de esto que ya no es mundo” that I’m not sure how to translate. I presented ideas about the end of the world in talks at the Freie Universität Berlin, the Universidad Nacional de Rosario, the Universidad de San Martín, the University of Colorado at Boulder, the University of California at Riverside, Yale University, Universität zu Köln, SUNY Buffalo and University of Leeds. I want to thank Catarina von Wedemeyer, Joachim Küpper, Judith Podlubne, Sandra Contreras, Gonzalo Aguilar, Mónica Szurmuk, Leila Gómez, Marta Hernández Salván, Jacques Lezra, Noël Vallis, Aníbal González Pérez, Gesine Müller, Justin Read and Daniel Hartley for their very generous invitations, and to the friends, colleagues and students present at these presentations for helping me work through some of these notions. I also want to thank Anna White-Nockleby and Lucas Cuatrecasas for their intelligent comments and suggestions, and the students in my doctoral seminar, “The non-cosmopolitan and the post-global: worlds of destitution in literature, film and theory”, particularly, Ignacio Azcueta, Matylda Figlerowicz, José de León González, Lucas Mertehikian, Rodrigo del Río Joglar, Isaac Magaña Cantón and Mauro Lazarovich.

nature of its order and formation). A comparative critical practice, that is, capable of estranging those objects that would now be seen as incommensurable with the idea of Latin America, of a dislocating non-Latin Americanist critical discourse enunciated from the cracks of Latin America's split cultural body; a critical practice in which particularistic and identitarian predicates – whether national, regional, ethnic or political – are dissolved as a result of a new awareness of the irreducible singularity and contingency of the signifying structures that frame our approaches to these *less-than-Latin American* objects of study. But even if this is certainly a productive first step towards the decentering of the discipline's particularistic self-commodification, it depends on a supposedly stable notion of "world" that the experience of crisis that defines and overwhelms the present in 2017 seem to be undoing.

This essay is an attempt to rethink, revise, fold, twist, dislocate, and reconceptualize the notion of cosmopolitanism during a historical juncture defined by the total collapse of the imaginary function assigned to the world by the experience of the world that was central to the discourse of cosmopolitanism – the world understood as the symbolic structure that used to sustain humanistic imaginaries of universal emancipation, equality and justice. Well, the world today can no longer fulfill the role of a feasible signifying horizon for cultural and aesthetic forms of cosmopolitan agency. So, what is the ethico-political potential today of a cosmopolitanism without world? Is an expansive, euphoric concept of cosmopolitanism understood as the desire to expand one's own subjectivity until making it coincide with the totality of the known and unknown universe still useful to address the overwhelming experience of loss that defines the very contemporary sense of crisis that I am calling here the experience of the end of the world?

In *Cosmopolitan Desires* I proposed a notion of cosmopolitanism as *deseo de mundo* that I feel needs to be revisited in light of the crisis of the idea of the world we are living through. There, in my book, I described *deseo de mundo* or *desire for the world* as the aesthetico-political differential structure of marginal cosmopolitanisms in regard to universalist discourses articulated in hegemonic contexts of enunciation. But an idea of cosmopolitanism that focuses in on those relational imaginaries that produced, posited and affirmed worlds (imaginaries defined by their drive to world the world, a notion that Djelal Kadir and Pheng Cheah draw from Heidegger's *Being and Time*), and which either are things of the past or have taken a backseat to more urgent and traumatic modes of displacement and global loss, seems less than compelling in the present historical context. Today we need an understanding of cosmopolitanism that reckons with the experience of the *unworlding* of the world, the displacement of the very stable notion of world as globe produced by hegemonic

discourses of cosmopolitanism and financial and consumerist globalization. The conceptualization of this experience of *unworlding* has the potential to reveal the phantasmatic nature of the world as the affective structure that can no longer ground a desire for universal belonging characteristic of modern forms of cosmopolitanism since Kant's classic texts, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose" (1784) and "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch" (1795) (Kant 1991). This *unworlding* points to the historical breakdown of the conventional conception of Kantian cosmopolitanism, understood as the rational obligation to concern oneself with the good of others regardless of our distance from them, an obligation that depends on the presupposition of an abstract, transparent and unobstructed universal surface across which this moral duty is felt and eventually realized.

But in spite of the need of a concept that underscores the experience of the *unworlding* of the world as the evidence of the insurmountable, geometrical/Euclidean gap between global embodiments of haves and have-nots that continues to haunt cosmopolitan imaginaries, there is a feature of Kantian cosmopolitanism that I am not ready to let go of: the ethical and political will to suspend the gap between the marginal and the metropolitan (and vice-versa); to transform actual and symbolic distance and hierarchical asymmetry into affective proximity; and to do everything possible to preserve the horizon of unconditional cosmopolitan hospitality even when (or particularly when) the productive nature of its impossibility seems to be utterly neutralized. In other words, I am not ready to let go of the cosmopolitan dream in spite of all evidence pointing to its concrete, historical failures and manifest impossibility. Perhaps I should qualify this confession: I can live with my own inability to forsake cosmopolitanism as a horizon for cultural and political agency as long as we recognize its empirical shortcomings, and we are diligently willing to come up with a necessarily revised and dislocated version of Kant's ethico-political concept, as well as of the notion of "world" that can be drawn from it. Universalist, world-affirming, ethico-political notions of cosmopolitanism are still useful when trying to describe and analyze modernist cosmopolitan formations and practices emerging precisely from their own contingent attempts to posit a world in which they could inscribe their modernist cosmopolitan aesthetic projects and subjectivities. In this context, "world" should be understood, not only as the geospheric cultural-political territory whose function was to negate the national determination of local forms of agency, but perhaps most importantly, "world" named the modern and modernist symbolic structure that supported humanist discourses of universal emancipation through global connections, translations, interactions, displacements and exchanges; "world" as the symbolic realm where demands of justice, emancipation and universal inclusion (whether political, cultural and/or aesthetic) were meant to be actualized.

There is no better example of the production of the world in modernity/modernism, of the conceptualization of modernity as a process of *worlding* and world-making than the famous closing lines of Marx and Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: "Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working Men of All Countries, Unite!" (Marx/Engels 1979 [1848]: 500). Marx and Engels's call for the proletarian collective subjectivity to conquer the world, to be the world, to make it their own, in other words, to universalize their cultural and socio-economic particularity until it becomes identical with the totality of the world, expresses an incredible confidence in the potential of these collective subjects (first the bourgeoisie, now in 1847, the proletariat) to accomplish this task. But even more meaningful in the context of the argument I want to present in this essay is the fact that they invest the world (the world as it exists, along with the world the proletariat will create once it unites, conquers, and succeeds in creating a global social totality without internal differentiations and antagonisms) with sacred humanistic, emancipatory meaning; they transform the world into the only surface where emancipation can take place. Gaining the world, conquering it is the condition of possibility of Marx and Engels' cosmopolitan/internationalist actualization of universal justice.

Obviously, it is quite difficult to replicate Marx's confidence today, when workers, or rather precarious, vulnerable working men and women (who can no longer aspire to the subjectivity Marx called *worker*), are not in the process of gaining and conquering the world. Instead, they seem to be losing it – to be losing the structural grounds that gave meaning to work, leisure, family and a sense of futurity –, and seem to be doomed to modes of errancy on large and small scales, even when they appear to be standing still in one place. Marx and Engels' world no longer exists. The world, as the signifier that names the desire for an impossible but operative universal reconciliation, no longer exists. And the notion of cosmopolitanism we are in a position to articulate today, the *less-than-cosmopolitan* notion of cosmopolitanism that contemporary culture can afford today, does *not* produce worlds, is *not* driven by world-making, world-affirming desires, and in fact should be activated to work in the opposite direction: signifying the generalized sense of loss that defines the present historical juncture, specifically, the experience of losing the world that Marx and Engels identified as the battlefield of the emancipation to come.

An anachronistic notion of cosmopolitanism designed for a time when modern actors operated under the presumption that they had "a world to win" is not useful today. It does not interrogate displacements and traumatic losses we cannot fully understand, or begin to mourn and overcome; the painful sensation of the loss of the world we are experiencing today – the overwhelming impression,

over the last few years, that we are living through the end of the world: the displacement of 67.75 million refugees, migrants, stateless and forcibly displaced persons (the largest number registered in history [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Statistical Yearbook 2016]) as a result of environmental catastrophes, food shortages, political instability and economic hardship caused by a climate change crisis which seems to have reached a point of irreversibility, and by small and large-scale perpetual wars and terror; children forcibly separated from their immigrant families and kept in wire cages within detention areas policed by the security forces of the same liberal-democratic societies that lay claim to the global right to determine the meaning and scope of human rights and humanitarianism; the horrifying intensification of the military, economic and symbolic violence the Israeli state exerts over Palestinian people; the organization of state and privately funded death squadrons and militias to illegally repress social movements and assassinate their leaders across Latin America, Africa, China, Russia, Eastern Europe and Turkey; the structural unwillingness of conservative *and* leftist (leftist-in-name-only) governments to reduce poverty and socio-economic inequalities, and to conceive policy addressing it in the context of larger patterns of global inequality; the demented and theatrical degradation or deliberate demolition of republican democratic institutionalism across the Western hemisphere; the crisis or death of Europe as a project of political and cultural reorientation of the American global hegemony; the radicalization of financial capital's global sovereignty with the consequent need of new, increasingly creative modes of domination, and exploitation to attempt to secure the appropriation of surplus value, which nevertheless cannot be institutionally stabilized. Daily interactions and news from afar confront us with the faces of millions in pain, who are not living, but barely surviving this end of the world, swept over by a very real sense that "things fall apart and the center cannot hold"¹ (Yeats 1922). And even those of us whose lives are quite comfortable (comfortable *and* alienated: comfortably numb) are affected by a sense of dispossession, destitution, and disbelonging. This experience is very different from that of refugees and migrants but nevertheless, we feel lost in the world and are marked by this structural sense of loss (the loss of the conditions of enunciation that used to make possible the articulation of the dream, or the illusion, of universal emancipation), by no longer having a world, or a parcel of the world to call home, *no se puede hacer pie*, the experience of being in mid-air right after the rug has been pulled out from under

¹ I am fully aware of the liberal-leftist or democratic-socialist melancholic nostalgia at stake in the sense of loss and crisis that this list transpires. I am not entirely uncomfortable with this moment of *méconnaissance*.

our feet like Wile E. Coyote in the Warner Brothers' cartoons, when he is chasing the roadrunner and continues to run beyond the cliff, there is a moment, right before he realizes he is in mid-air, when he continues to run, when he is still going through the running motions, right before he looks down and realizes that nothing will prevent his fall. I believe this describes our present situation quite cogently: there no longer is a world under our feet.²

² The end of the world does not only evince the obsolescence of the concepts of cosmopolitanism and globalization as differently oriented modes of progressive liberal utopias, but the same happens with world literature at least in relation to the common structure of its latest reinvention over the past 15 or 20 years in texts authored by very influential figures like Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, David Damrosch, and Gayatri Spivak (among others); a scholarly practice that depended on an affirmative notion of the world as grounds for cosmopolitan cultural exchanges and translations that set the foundation for a universal (intellectual) community to come based on justice and equality, or for the capitalistic extraction of surplus literary and economic value and for the commodification of style, ideas and subject positions. This particular understanding of world literature is untenable in the face of the end of the world: it has exhausted its ability to account for relevant contemporary engagements with the present state of the (non)world. We will continue to see a proliferation of new case studies abounding in sociologies of markets and circulation, which may have merit in their contribution of new examples of the epiphenomenon, but will nevertheless confirm through their methodological repetitiveness the end of world literature as we have known it since the turn of the 21st century. But I want to be very clear: I am not advocating the abandonment of the notion and scholarly practice of world literature; on the contrary, I believe it still holds an enormous potential if we reinvent it. Since Goethe, world literature has always been a project bent on making literature speak to the political crises of the times, so the end of the world makes it impossible to continue to talk about world literature the way we did when the world still existed in the affirmative terms I just explained. Just as with cosmopolitanism and globalization, I think it is imperative to reconceptualize the meaning and scope of world literature in relation to the experience of the loss of the world. In a very recent and very lucid essay titled, "Corpse Narratives and the Teleology of World Literary History", Héctor Hoyos already points in this direction. He diagnoses a crisis of political (or extra-disciplinary) purpose in the discourse of world literature when constituted around the notion of circulation, which yields more circulation, and "then the self-fulfilling prophecy is complete. In other words, autotelic axiology and virtuoso exhibitions of connoisseurship replace discussions about finality" (Hoyos 2017: 66). Instead he proposes a world literature oriented by a search for justice. Writing on "The Part About the Crimes" in Bolaño's 2666, and reflecting on the commotion, "moral outrage, guilt by omission, morbid fascination, disgust, and anesthesia" the reader experiment when reading about the *femicidios* in Santa Teresa, he proposes that "the section's embeddedness within the novel provides an illustration of what it might mean to bank the future of World Literature on a search for justice, always the more pressing concern than global literary historiography" (Hoyos 2017: 72). And he makes a call for a world literature that looks beyond a merely disciplinary and institutional horizon ("whether the expansion of the novel form across the continents or the transcultural resonances of epic", (Hoyos 2017: 73): when "six women are assassinated in Mexico every day, which is already a staggering statistic,

With the idea of the end of the world I am not proposing an abstract, trans-historical conceptualization of a vaguely universal contemporary experience of loss. And, of course, I am cognizant of the fact that there have been *other* ends of the world, that the constitutive instability of modernity has often been codified as a recursive end of the world; that in previous historical conjunctures, the relation of different social subjectivities to the structural trauma that provoked their dislocation has also been understood as *an* end of the world; and that for those who suffer, it always feels like the end of the world. The meaning of the experience of the end of the world I am trying to think through is not exhausted by “the gravity and irreversibility of the present environmental crisis” and “the vertiginous sensation of incompatibility – perhaps even incompossibility – between the human and the world”, and more generally, by the recognition of “the face of the intrusion into our histories of a kind of transcendence that we will never again be able not to take into account: the cataclysmic horizon defined by anthropogenic global warming” (Viveiros de Castro/Danowski 2017: 1, 3, 109). I would like to propose that the historical (rather than biospheric) specificity of the experience of the end of the world today can be understood looking into the structural universality of its traumatic determination or, to put it differently, as the symbolic closure of the horizon of universal justice and emancipation that had defined the modern/modernist relationship between cosmopolitan politics and culture. Throughout modernity (because the notion I am working on has nothing to do with medieval Christian Millennialists or Biblical apocalypticism), the end of the world was a very real but strictly localized experience of the End Times that resulted from particular conditions of exploitation which were represented *as* universal. In other words, the signifying order structured around previous experiences of the end of the world was believed to be universal because of the forcefulness of the historical experience that dislocated it (the provincialized geographies of world wars might illustrate this point³ but there always was an “outside” of those ends of the world, a global or symbolic *place* beyond trauma, where redemption and

but the phenomenon is much larger worldwide: according to the UN, Mexico ranks sixteenth in femicides... Why shouldn't literary scholars, then, engage with something as significant, prevalent, rhizomatic, and urgent? One *blasé* answer would be: because we are not activists, journalists, criminologists, or forensic detectives. Neither is Bolaño, but he assimilates all four discourses to a significant extent, both in the research behind the novel and in the writing itself. Without ceasing to be a work of literary art, however narrowly we wish to construe one, *2666* stretches the limits of the form so as to rub against those other domains. The forensic hermeneutics in the passage above is a case in point: in a *mise en abyme*, coroners ‘read’ cadaveric fauna for clues, while readers do the same” (Hoyos 2017: 73–74).

³ See my essay “War” (Siskind 2016).

emancipation continued to be part of the horizon of expectations, regardless of the likelihood of their actualization. The representation of such an “outside” depended on the belief that politics and culture were to be understood as sites and practices capable of restituting and repairing the world in ruins that cosmopolitans still posited as the necessary grounds for the realization of universal justice, redemption – the end of suffering. And this meant that the experience of the end of the world always had to be symbolized against the horizon of its own negation.⁴ Today there is nothing outside the end of the world. The dialectical negation that used to be there for us to make sense of an alternative, a future, a just and emancipated world, does not seem to be available anymore. Not one person or collective is capable of representing itself beyond the imaginary or real impending threat constitutive of the experience of the end of the world.⁵ And even Capital articulates its own structuring function in direct

⁴ This is obviously the case with dialectical (or rather, post-dialectical) notions of the End of History, like Francis Fukuyama’s neoliberal/Straussian translation of Hegel’s philosophy of history in 1989 when, after the electoral triumph of Solidarnost in Poland and right before the Fall of the Berlin Wall, he declared the end of the dialectical conflict between Communism and Capitalism, with Western liberal democracy as the most perfect form of governmentality, and Capitalism as an economic system identical with Hegel’s universality of Reason. It goes without saying that the contemporary traumatic end of the world I am proposing to think through supposes, among other ends, the destabilization of Fukuyama’s post-historical neoliberal order (albeit, not in any revolutionary, emancipatory sense).

⁵ This points precisely to a very important difference that I would like to highlight between my notion of *the end of the world*, and the way Slavoj Žižek characterizes the present as “the End Times” in his book *Living in the End Times* (the present of 2010, but it seems legitimate to extend his argument to 2017). For him, the sign of the times is the terminal crisis of capitalism; he writes that today “apocalypse is at the gates” (Žižek 2010: 315), explains that the nature of these apocalyptic days is directly marked by the fact that “the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point” (Žižek 2010: x), and proceeds to detail its effects: ecological crisis, biogenetic revolution, struggles over raw materials, food and water, and the growth of social divisions and exclusions. Of course, for him no crisis should go to waste, and he sees the End Times we’re living through as an opportunity (Lenin’s dictum, *the worse, the better*), and ends the book championing the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the answer to the absence of an “emancipatory politics” today. The dictatorship of the proletariat is his solution to the need for constant “pressure exerted on by the people’s mobilization and self-organization”, a non-populist constant mobilization of the *plebs* without “the unity involved in the populist notion of the the People” (Žižek 2010: 393). And that is why he proposes we should read *Living in the End Times* as “a book of struggle... against those in power in general, against their authority, against the global order and the ideological mystification that sustains it” (Žižek 2010: xv). I strongly disagree with Žižek’s Leninist optimism (*the worse, the better* – which he reiterated in 2016 when he declared that a defeat of Hillary Clinton during the 2016 US presidential elections would be desirable since it would accelerate the demise of the neoliberal world order) and his hopeful affirmation of a post-liberal, post-capitalist and

relation to it, simultaneously as causing and being endangered by the end of the world.⁶

As opposed to the late 1990s, when Hardt and Negri were inspired by the anti-globalization movement to posit the multitude as a new unmediated, immanent, nomadic, subjectivity whose antagonistic force would eventually dislocate the social order of Empire/Globalization in a true revolutionary event, today there are no collective subjects invested with such redemptive potential. Emancipation and universal justice are not in the cards for those whose singularity is defined by the impossibility of dwelling in precarious territorial formations that no longer amount to what we used to call “world”; a landscape of ruins where being and dwelling – what Heidegger terms *real, essential dwelling* in his essay “Building Dwelling Thinking” – have become impossible. What looks like the terminal crisis of the symbolic order that used to shape the

politically mobilized world after the Apocalypse we are experiencing today. It is undeniable that *the end of the world* is tangled up in the crisis of global capitalism, deepened by the inability of capital to reinvent itself this time around, but the experience of the end of the world that I am trying to conceptualize here lies outside of the possibility of reintroducing any form of social antagonism that may restart the engine of a dialectical philosophy of history with its promises of a transcendence, a redemption, a reconciliation, an emancipation or a revolution to come. This is what I find inconceivable today for those subjects constituted through the experience of the end of the world, and for those of us thinking about it, writing about it.

⁶ In an essay published by *New Left Review* in 2014, “How Will Capitalism End?”, the German Marxist economic and sociologist Wolfgang Streeck analyzes the economic transformations after the financial crisis of 2008 that indicate that what we are living through is not just another crisis of capitalism’s “cyclical movements or random shocks, after which capitalist economies can move into a new equilibrium, at least temporarily”, crises which are “in fact required for its longer-term health”. On the contrary, he points out that “what we are seeing today, however, appears in retrospect to be a continuous process of gradual decay, protracted but apparently all the more inexorable”. He points out that: “Steady growth, sound money and a modicum of social equity, spreading some of the benefits of capitalism to those without capital, were long considered prerequisites for a capitalist political economy to command the legitimacy it needs. What must be most alarming from this perspective is that the three critical trends I have mentioned may be mutually reinforcing. There is mounting evidence that increasing inequality may be one of the causes of declining growth, as inequality both impedes improvements in productivity and weakens demand. Low growth, in turn, reinforces inequality by intensifying distributional conflict, making concessions to the poor more costly for the rich... Furthermore, rising debt, while failing to halt the decline of economic growth, compounds inequality through the structural changes associated with financialization – which in turn aimed to compensate wage earners and consumers for the growing income inequality caused by stagnant wages and cutbacks in public services”. As a result, he concludes that “assuming that ever lower growth, ever higher inequality and ever rising debt are not indefinitely sustainable, and may together issue in a crisis that is systemic in nature – one whose character we have difficulty imagining” (Streeck 2014: 37–38).

possibility of belonging and of home (as well as of the libidinal kind of displacements we have understood for over two modern centuries under different cosmopolitan rubrics), sheds light on the privileged, dislocated (non)subjectivity at the center of the end of the world. It is a subjective form that cannot be easily identified even when glimpsing its contours against the backlight of the differential surplus that results from the interplay of signifiers trying and failing to name the forcibly displaced, the migrant, the homeless, the hopelessly errant and the refugee. Because the vanishing precariousness of this (non)subjective figure results from a devastating violence that, at the same time, shapes and undoes its particularity, it cannot be apprehended or read by any kind of redemptive eschatology, whether cosmopolitan or *global-from-below* (and even less so, national-popular or subalternist). It is a (non)subject whose displacement no longer points to any kind of cosmopolitan *jouissance* but to the traumatic impossibility of dwelling as the overdetermined contemporary condition of the end of the world; dwelling is impossible for everyone everywhere, no matter the bodily or world-historical scale of the experience of dislocation. And this is true of the lived experience of generalized loss, even when not everyone is equally affected by this structural undoing of the world and its symbolic horizons; because we are not all refugees, homeless, forcefully displaced, errant or migrant individuals. No, of course not.⁷ But the end of the world, the widespread experience of being in the process of losing the world, renders visible the refugee, the migrant, the displaced in us, in those of us who are ostensibly not refugees or forcefully displaced persons. I am thinking of *the refugee in us* like Julia Kristeva's *foreigner in us*, which is her way of conceptualizing the presence of the stranger, the migrant as a figure of our own split subjectivity, as "the hidden face of our own identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder... The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners not amenable to bonds and communities"⁸ (Kristeva 1991: 1).

⁷ Of course we are not all refugees, among other things because close to 80% of refugees are women and children. And the latest data published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2017 state that people of concern (this includes, not only refugees, but also asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, returned refugees and IDPs, stateless persons and others of concern) are female or male under the age of 18 out of a total of 67,689,992, which represents 33% (*United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Statistical Yearbook 2016*). I want to thank Jacqueline Bhabha for helping me locate these figures.

⁸ With the idea of the foreigner in us, Kristeva brilliantly translates the dislocating opacity of the Freudian unconscious into geopolitical, societal terms in order to intervene in recent (and not so recent) polemics about immigration in France – and not exclusively in France,

At this point, it is indispensable that I state as clearly as I can that, in this essay, I am not dealing with the actual, historical experiences of refugees, migrants, forcefully displaced or homeless people. I have nothing to say about these very real historical subjects, about their very real losses and their very real wounded bodies; they remain unthinkable to me, to someone like me, someone whose experience of loss and of a world in ruins has absolutely nothing in common with the dispossession that constitutes the traumatic specificity of their subjectivities. It is rather an essay about the traces of those experiences that we call art and literature. And perhaps more importantly, it is about some of the idiosyncratic ways in which those of us who care about art and literature attend to these forms as symbolic sites in order to try and fail to understand the end of the world (and to extract the surplus of discursive enjoyment that is characteristic of our trade); it is about our reaction to an experience of the end of the world that is and is not *our* end of the world; and it is about what we (as professors, students, intellectuals, writers, artists) can and can no longer do about the end of the world through art as mediation, now that the historical horizon that signified the possibility of emancipation has vanished, and ethico-political commitments are barely more than the narcissistic symptomatology of our Facebook existences. In other words, it is a text that poses an honest and open-ended question about whether all we can do is mourn the loss of the world and nothing more, and approaching art as the site where we can engage in the labor of mourning – albeit a melancholic mode of mourning (I will develop this proposal further in the postscript to this essay).

The ghostly subjects of the end of the world (the *legion of wandering orphans* as Bolaño calls them in “El ojo Silva”, the short story that I will analyze here) are at the center of many of the most interesting contemporary narratives whose aesthetic contribution consists of a programmatic drive to dislocate the possibility of their own Latin American, national, or generally identitarian reterritorializations. They narrate the trajectories of characters (or pseudo-characters, undone characters, merely scribbled and blurred characters, sub-defined characters, and so on) who venture out into a decomposing world that can barely support their hyperlocal or global displacements. They explore the tension between the experience of losing the world and a *less-than-cosmopolitan* stubbornness not to let go of the world, or whatever is left of its symbolic potential to signify global displacements inscribed against the background of a universalist emancipation to come. They are

obviously: her discourse targets fascist-chauvinistic arguments from reactionaries across the globe, from Brexit and the US/Mexican, Ethiopian/Kenyan, Venezuelan/Colombian and Syrian/Turkish borders to xenophobic policies and everyday attitudes across Europe, Palestine, Pakistan, South Sudan, Uganda and beyond.

narratives disrupted by the loss of cosmopolitanism, by a cosmopolitanism of loss that tries to name the melancholic limit of mourning, of letting go of the signifying horizon that no longer is. I am thinking of narratives by Roberto Bolaño, João Gilberto Noll, César Aira, Chico Buarque, Guadalupe Nettel, Mario Bellatin, Lina Meruane, Sergio Chejfec, Eduardo Halfon, Mike Wilson, Yuri Herrera, Edgardo Cozarinsky, and perhaps only a few others that I may not know of (certainly not many, at least when it comes to literary works of aesthetic significance). Regardless of their plots, of whether they narrate a wide variety of forced and traumatic displacements (although they often do), the formal features of these narratives haunt the worldliness of the world. They shake up the structures that once sustained the fiction of the world as a totality of modern/modernist meaning, and the politically effective fantasy of universal inclusion implied in the obsolete notion of world-citizenship. These narratives hesitantly trace the cultural shape of a non-world marked by the decomposition of particular languages and identities that used to be stable, or at least more stable – or perhaps they were never stable; but even if they were always rickety, they were certainly cultural-politically effective, which is no longer the case. In this sense – and in order to reconfigure these narratives as sites that work through the different ways in which the end of the world is experienced, resisted and survived – it is important, not so much to *de-Latin Americanize* them (if it were still possible to characterize them at all as Latin American narratives) but to *de-inscribe* them from a naturalized, zombie-like Latin American cultural-historical hermeneutical frame, because there is nothing particularly, *exceptionally* Latin American about the end of the world even if the way in which it is processed is certainly marked by the specificity of local historical formations, imaginaries and aesthetic traditions.⁹

Roberto Bolaño in particular is, in my view, the topographical writer of the traumatic wound that unworlds the world. My argument is structured around a reading of his short story “El ojo Silva” (“Mauricio [‘The Eye’] Silva”) but I could have written this essay on Bolaño’s most remarkable novel, *Los detectives salvajes*, or *Estrella distante*, or on specific sections of 2666.¹⁰ Like these novels,

⁹ When I write that there is nothing *exceptionally* Latin American about the end of the world, I am referring to the exceptionalism that is constitutive of every identitarian, particularistic discourse – in this case the discourse of Latin Americanism. The end of the world is legible from a Latin Americanist perspective because it would be immediately reduced to a *moment* (in the Hegelian sense) of the region’s or a particular nation’s cultural history, it would serve to reinforce an identitarian landscape, rather than repurposing the symbolic ruins of a Latin Americanism that today only serve conservative and regressive functions.

¹⁰ In his essay “Politics and Ethics in Latin America: On Roberto Bolaño”, Juan E. De Castro reads Bolaño’s novel *Amuleto* very much along the lines of what I am proposing in this essay, as a Latin American articulation of Rancière’s understanding of literature as a site of resistance

“El ojo Silva” deals with dislocated, broken down, displaced, errant subjects marked by different iterations of the end of the world, and generally fulfills what Bolaño declared to be the ethical function of poetic discourse: “saber meter la cabeza en lo oscuro, saber saltar al vacío, saber que la literatura básicamente es un oficio peligroso. Correr por el borde del precipicio” (Bolaño 2002: 211).¹¹

“El ojo Silva” begins with two friends reacquainting themselves with each other in Berlin, late at night, in a park. Both of them are Chilean expatriates and have been roaming the surface of the planet, lost and restless, moving from Latin America to Europe, travelling across Africa and South Asia for the previous twenty-five years. One of them is the narrator, whose identity is not revealed to us but we can safely assume it is, as is usually the case, a character/first person narrator named Bolaño, or Belano, or simply B. He is passing through Berlin to launch the German translation of his most recent novel.¹² The other is Mauricio Silva who goes by the nickname “El Ojo” because of his work as a photojournalist.¹³ The narrator sees El Ojo sitting on a bench; they had not seen each other in over two decades, but when El Ojo read about the narrator’s presence in the city, he looked him up and decided to wait for him in front of his hotel. It takes a few seconds for the narrator to recognize him, but immediately afterwards they go on to spend the night in bars drinking whisky and beer, catching up, immersed in a

and mourning of the promise of emancipation that is lost to modern alienation, lies and state crimes. For De Castro, the global success of Bolaño is due, not to his novels’ “supreme artistic achievement”, but to the fact that they mourn and estrange through specifically Latin American aesthetic operations “the infinite crime that always turns emancipation into lies” and the “topics and moods characteristic of much contemporary [Western] literature resides” (De Castro 2017: 75).

¹¹ Along these same lines, Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott characterizes Bolaño’s fictional universe as “one deep nightmare crossed by war and violence”, marked by “the exhaustion of the modern articulation between literature and the public space of reading that granted to it a particular social function (illustration, education, moral exemplification, etc.)”. As a result of this loss of literature’s function and capacity to “illuminate, represent and/or de-familiarize everyday life” and of its inability to constitute itself as a space for “the salvation of humankind”, all that is left is what Villalobos-Ruminott calls the “co-belonging” or “coexistence between literature and horror” (Villalobos-Ruminott 2009: 193–195).

¹² The writing and publication dates of “El ojo Silva” coincide with Bolaño’s world tour of sorts to promote the launching of *Los detectives salvajes*. Even though the German translation appeared in 2002, Bolaño had been invited to universities and cultural centers around Europe since 1998 to talk about the novel that had won the Anagrama Prize that same year.

¹³ Héctor Hoyos reads in the combination of Silva’s nickname and character a raunchy double entendre: “the title itself is a saucy joke, alluding to the ‘whistling eye’, or a farting anus. True to form, the subject of the story is darkly scatological” (2016: 252).

conversation that soon turns evocative and melancholic. On their way back to the hotel, they sit down on the same bench where they had met hours earlier, and El Ojo begins to tell him “la historia que el destino o el azar lo obligaba a contarme” (Bolaño 2001: 16).

This short story presents an exceptional feature in relation to the entire corpus of Bolaño's narratives. In his most powerful novels and short stories, his literature is constructed around an ethico-political-poetic trauma historically situated in Latin America, Spain and Western Europe; that is, regardless of where the plots are staged, their traumatic core is inscribed in a predictable transatlantic geographical formation. But in “El ojo Silva”, Bolaño displaces the action to India: “No sé a qué ciudad llegó El Ojo, tal vez Bombay, Calcutta, tal vez Benarés o Madrás, recuerdo que se lo pregunté y que él ignoró mi pregunta” (Bolaño 2001: 17). There, in this unnamed city in India, Silva is going to rescue two boys (one of them not yet seven years old, the other ten) from a clandestine and labyrinthine brothel where the youngest one is about to be castrated in a religious ritual in preparation for a festival where a young eunuch is offered to the gods and his body incarnates the spirit of a deity whose name Silva wants to forget: “una fiesta bárbara, prohibida por las leyes de la república india, pero que se sigue celebrando” (Bolaño 2001: 19). The eldest boy had been castrated years before and is now a sex slave offered up for the pleasure of tourists.

Silva is the subject of a double dislocation, as a Leftist activist who was forced out of Chile by Pinochet's coup d'état on September 11, 1973, and as a homosexual marginalized and bullied by his homophobic fellow Chilean Leftist émigrés in Mexico, his first destination after escaping Chile. He left Mexico for Paris, Milan, Berlin and freelance jobs that took him around the world, never again at home anywhere. And that's how he arrives in India to do a conventional, predictable photo reportage that he describes to the narrator as a glossy magazine piece in between Marguerite Duras' *India Song* and Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*.

Structurally, “El ojo Silva” is a framed narrative with the episode of the rescue of the castrated children at its center. The text frames this moment of failed Kantian cosmopolitan justice (I will come back to this) with a narrative of the meeting of Silva and the narrator, but this frame is in turn itself framed by a larger, generational context of the original, apparently fully Latin American, traumatic wound that is reduplicated in the irreparably wounded world of Bolaño's textual creations. This larger frame is made explicit in all its overdetermining power from the very beginning, in the opening paragraph of the short story:

Lo que son las cosas, Mauricio Silva, llamado el Ojo, siempre intentó escapar de la violencia aun a riesgo de ser considerado un cobarde, pero de la violencia, de la verdadera violencia, no se puede escapar, al menos no nosotros, los nacidos en Latinoamérica en la década del cincuenta, los que rondábamos los veinte años cuando murió Salvador Allende. (Bolaño 2001: 11)

And then:

En enero de 1974, cuatro meses después del golpe de Estado, el Ojo Silva se marchó de Chile. Primero estuvo en Buenos Aires, luego los malos vientos que soplaban en la vecina república lo llevaron a México en donde vivió un par de años y en donde lo conocí. (2001: 11)

Later he recounts the night before El Ojo's flight from Mexico:

Recuerdo que terminamos despoticando contra la izquierda chilena y que en algún momento yo brindé por los luchadores chilenos errantes, una fracción numerosa de los luchadores latinoamericanos errantes, entelequia compuesta de huérfanos que, como su nombre indica, erraban por el ancho mundo ofreciendo sus servicios al mejor postor, que casi siempre, por lo demás, era el peor. Pero después de reírnos el Ojo dijo que la violencia no era cosa suya. Tuya sí, me dijo con una tristeza que entonces no entendí, pero no mía. Detesto la violencia. (2001: 13–14)

There is much to unpack here, but I want to concentrate on a problem that is central to my analysis of the short story: the need to dislocate the reading of what appears to be a Latin American reterritorialization of the question of structural violence in the opening pages. That is, I would like to read “El Ojo Silva” against the tendency to posit “la violencia, la verdadera [de la que] no se puede escapar” (Bolaño 2001: 11), here and in Bolaño’s fictional project at large, as a particularly Latin American epiphenomenon, as a Latin American destiny (just as in Borges’ “Poema conjectural” where the violent resolution of social antagonism is a “destino sudamericano”), which because of its historically situated nature, supposedly follows Silva and the narrator wherever they go. I believe this is not the way in which metaphysical and historical forms of violence are articulated in Bolaño’s writing, where inescapable violence is a structural condition of the non-world they fail to inhabit; it is symptomatic of what I am calling the end of the world and what Bolaño often calls “el mal”, whether it is found in Chile, in Mexico City, in the fictionalization of Juárez that is Santa Teresa, in Luanda, Kigali, Monrovia and the Liberian jungle where Belano may have died (in *Los detectives salvajes*) or in dark, abject corners of an unnamed Indian city, “Bombay maybe, or Calcutta, perhaps Benares or Madras” (Bolaño 2006: 112), or in any other place – because the particular instantiations of violence matter less, significantly less, than its structural, constitutive universal

function.¹⁴ According to this interpretation, Pinochet's coup d'état in 1973 (as well as the assassination of president Salvador Allende and its long-lasting murderous and impoverishing effects) is merely one of the Latin American instantiations of the violence these characters cannot escape; an important local instance to be sure, because it overdetermines the way in which Silva and the narrator perceive world-ending violence wherever they look, but nevertheless a particular iteration of a general condition. And this may explain the displacement of the traumatic wound that in the rest of Bolaño's narrative is articulated locally in Latin America or Europe to an unspecified Indian city. Because "India" is not India, that is, Silva's trip is not really to the Indian subcontinent; India is merely the signifier of an experience that lies outside the confines of Latin America and Europe, a marker that signifies exteriority in regards to what is known or is thought to be known (because in Bolaño, it is not knowledge that mediates the characters' relation to the world, but intense poetic and erotic experience). It is the intentionally unspecified name of an elsewhere that requires a lack of geocultural specificity in order to fulfill its

¹⁴ In his excellent monograph on Bolaño, *La modernidad insufrible*, Oswaldo Zavala analyzes the representation of violence and evil in Bolaño as the result of a dialectics between abstract, metaphysical universality and concrete, historically-determined Latin American particularity: "Bolaño transita de una noción vaga y ahistórica del mal hacia la materialidad específica de una violencia con coordenadas políticas, culturales y económicas precisas que alcanzan su forma más depurada en 2666 [...] Aunque el sentido de la violencia en cada coyuntura funciona evidentemente dentro de un contexto global, Bolaño las explora al mismo tiempo a un nivel local inmediato [...] Contra una noción ontológica del mal despovista de significado político e histórico, la obra de Bolaño revela la contundencia material de la violencia sistémica occidental en determinados espacios y tiempos latinoamericanos. Sólo así puede comprenderse la muy subrayada afirmación de un personaje en 'La parte de Fate' sobre los crímenes de Santa Teresa: 'Nadie presta atención a estos asesinatos, pero en ellos se esconde el secreto del mundo' (2666, 439). Como núcleo trascendental del sistema de violencia occidental moderno, ese secreto no será del todo develado, sino apenas periféricamente dilucidado" (Zavala 2015: 154–155). I believe my disagreement with Zavala's cogently articulated dialectical characterization of evil and violence that results in a Santa Teresa as a space of particularized universality lies in a question of emphasis. While he sees 2666 as the endpoint of a Latin Americanist teleology that ends with a concrete actualization of metaphysics, I do not believe Bolaño fits well in this Hegelian mold. In fact, I see Bolaño travelling in the opposite direction moved by a highly metaphysical drive: from a self-referential and autobiographical (Chilean, Mexican, Latin American) understanding of evil, to the postulation of the (global, universal, metaphysical) posing of an inescapable nature of violence – not from his first texts to 2666, but within each of them, and I think this is particularly true of 2666 and "El Ojo Silva": a credible juxtaposition of Santa Teresa and the unnamed Village in the Indian rural countryside produces and effect of mutual displacement, illuminates the way in which Bolaño dislocates them as landscapes of inescapable violence.

narrative purpose – to underscore the universality of violence as the unifying constitutive condition of the end of the world.¹⁵

There is something else: as the negation of the predictable transatlantic, Euro-Latin American geographical formation and the modern/modernist itineraries and experiences of displacement that corresponded to them, Bolaño's "India" produces a cartography of displacement structured not around the anachronistic figure of the exiled, but the orphan: "luchadores latinoamericanos errantes, entelequia compuesta de huérfanos", or in Chris Andrews' translation of the short story, "the wandering fighters of Chile...", a legion of orphans, who, as the name suggests, wander the face of the earth" (Bolaño 2006: 108–109). Wandering orphans – fighters, yes, but most strikingly, orphans, wandering orphans. The fact that these dispersed and disunited world-wanderers without a world (a collective that includes Silva and the narrator himself as metonymic figures of the end of the world) are represented as orphans accounts for a particular form of loss and of being lost in the world: the orphan nature of their global dislocation.¹⁶ I insist: at stake here is not the notion of exile that is so frequently invoked when reading global

¹⁵ Three final comments on the displacement of the plot to an imaginary location outside of the usual Latin American and European landscapes of Bolaño's narrative: 1) Ignacio López-Vicuña writes that the choice of India as the background for the story of Silva's cosmopolitan/non-cosmopolitan transformation has to be read in relation to a crisis of representation, realism, and in general, of the ability of literary language to produce referential knowledge at the turn of the twentieth century (López-Vicuña 2012: 85). 2) Ignacio López-Calvo reads the Indian setting in continuity with postdictatorial, post-testimonial Chilean and Latin American conditions of enunciation: "The Eye's adventures in India are nothing but a desperate continuation of the same pursuit of justice for which his nonconformist generation had lost its youth. An omnipresent sense of melancholy and ontological failure seems to overwhelm The Eye, the narrator and, by extension, their implied author" (López-Calvo 2015: 40). I agree completely with López-Calvo's characterization of the melancholia and sense of failure that overwhelms the fictional universe of Bolaño's characters, however, I choose to read this melancholia not as marked by the traumatic experience of the dictatorship and subsequent exile (although, of course, their traces are omnipresent in Bolaño's literature), but as anticipating subjectivities and affects that were already being formed during the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s; that is, I read the short story not in relation to the traces of the past it undoubtedly contains, but to the emerging changes of a symbolic field of signification to come. And finally, 3) the fact that in this short story India is not actually India precludes, in my opinion, the possibility of reading "El ojo Silva" in relation to the concepts of Global South and South-South forms of solidarity.

¹⁶ The equation of the figure of orphanhood with their "being lost" in the world can be traced at different turns of Bolaño's literature. Perhaps the most conspicuous one is found in *Los detectives salvajes*: Juan García Madero, one of three main characters in the first and third parts of the novel, reveals in the first page of the first part ("Mexicanos perdidos en México") that he is an orphan (Bolaño 1998: 13). In the second part of the novel, Auxilio Lacouture (the central character of the novel *Amuleto*, which expands on this episode of *Los detectives salvajes*), declares herself to be

displacements in Bolaño's literature. Or rather Bolaño's narrative, perhaps more than any other literary project of the 1990s (that is, *more than* Alberto Fuguet's and Sergio Gómez's *McOndo* for instance) signifies the transition away from a post-dictatorial understanding of global displacements, from the figure of the exiled to that of the wandering orphan without a world, a transition inscribed in a necessary historical change in our hermeneutical relation to the world of Bolaño in 2018.¹⁷ The signifying field of exile depended on the enduring presence of different imaginaries of home, even when the illusion of a possible homecoming was indefinitely postponed (Said 2000: 179, 181, 184–185). But in Bolaño's end of the world, the idea of home has vanished from the symbolic horizon, and the absence of an *oikos* that used to organize the economy of global displacements in the age of travel and of exilic diasporas (Van Den Abbeele 1991: xviii) is crucial to understanding the hopeless restlessness with which Bolaño's characters move from one place to another. Settling down, making a new home for themselves, is either inconceivable or taboo, and when characters like El Ojo Silva believe themselves to be safe and at home, Bolaño's poetic structure punishes with devastating consequences.¹⁸ As opposed to exile, orphanhood is not a reversible condition, and the

the mother of Mexican poetry, in charge of all the orphaned poets that live in the margins of the city. Finally, there are many figurations of this in every single part of 2666.

17 In essays, journalistic pieces, novels and short stories, Bolaño has written extensively on exile and literature both in general and autobiographical terms. He oscillates between two positions. On the one hand, he writes about abstract and markedly aesthetic understandings of exile: he refers to it as literature *tout court*, and as the truth of literature, because for him the writer's homeland is his library ("Literatura y exilio" and "Exiliados"), often stressing the impossibility of a return or of homecoming ("Fragmentos de un regreso al país natal", "El pasillo sin salida aparente", and "Una proposición modesta"). On the other hand, when he writes about his own experience and his contacts with other émigrés, he adopts a caustic tone, and discards exile as a notion that might hold a hint of aesthetic potential: "yo no creo en el exilio, sobre todo no creo en el exilio cuando esta palabra va junto a la palabra literatura" from "Literatura y exilio" (Bolaño 2004b: 40); and "por el aire de Europa suena una cantinela y es la cantinela del dolor de los exiliados, una música hecha de quejas y lamentaciones y una nostalgia difícilmente inteligible. ¿Se puede tener nostalgia por la tierra en la que uno estuvo a punto de morir? ¿Se puede tener nostalgia de la pobreza, de la intolerancia, de la prepotencia, de la injusticia?" (Bolaño 2004b: 43). What is clear in all of this essays, articles and marginalia is that he does not consider the experience of exile an adequate hermeneutic frame for his narrative.

18 In "El Ojo Silva' de Roberto Bolaño, o la ética arrraigada de un cosmopolita", María Luisa Fischer also discards the notion of exile as a framework in which to read global displacement in Bolaño because "implica el deseo de retorno a una patria o un lugar de origen, lo que está por completo ausente en el diseño y sentido de sus relatos" (Fischer 2013: 41). I agree with her doing away with the category of exile, but I fail to see characters defined by their belonging (which she calls "arraigo"), or desiring a return to their origins (they are way smarter and more cynical than that), home even if it is structurally lacking in the narrative.

dispossession of the symbolic inscription that a father/mother or a home may have given the orphan, turns him/her (together with other subjective figures marked by loss like the homeless, the refugee and the mourner) into effective catachrestic figures of the end of the world.¹⁹

These subjectivities – paradoxically defined by the experience of what was lost, what is ruined and impossible to repair or to reaffirm, and therefore, tragically unable to reinscribe themselves, to *hacer pie* – are fundamental for a conceptualization of a cosmopolitanism of loss incapable of positing itself against the backdrop of positive universal demands. As a result of the historical closure of the possibility of acting in correspondence with the presupposition of a universal ethical debt which is constitutive of the Kantian subject, Bolaño's characters are failed, abject, blind cosmopolitans, and their cosmopolitan orphanhood makes them subjects of a universal form of disbelonging which renders visible the generalized condition of the end of the world. Neither particular nor universal, their non-universality is actualized in the *impossibility of acting in the name of justice anywhere*. In “El Ojo Silva”, the failure of cosmopolitanism is fully visible when Silva rescues the youngest child who is about to be castrated:

pudo ver los instrumentos quirúrgicos con que el niño iba a ser castrado aquella madrugada o la siguiente, en cualquier caso el niño había llegado, pudo entender, aquel mismo día al templo o al burdel, una medida preventiva, una medida higiénica, y había comido bien, como si ya encarnara al dios, aunque lo que el Ojo vio fue un niño que lloraba medio dormido y medio despierto, y también vio la mirada medio divertida y medio aterrorizada del niño castrado que no se despegaba de su lado. (Bolaño 2001: 21–22)

The sight of the youngest child about to be sacrificed in a religious ritual shakes him up, the imminence of violence, the violence he himself cannot escape is about to befall the child; he recognizes something familiar in the scene; he is interpellated and is moved to act, driven not by a preconceived plan but by a willful, eminently moral, demand for justice: “en mi interior lo único que hacía era maquinar. No un plan, no una forma vaga de justicia, sino una voluntad

¹⁹ Carlos M. Amador's points in this direction in his book *Ethics and Literature in Chile, Argentina and Paraguay, 1970–2000. From the Singular to the Specific*, in which he opposes two mechanisms of national or communal subjectification and exclusion: structural, relational specificity (historical, local/global) and singularity or immanent, substantial expression/existence that excludes difference “by the imposition of a positively marked differentiation from *all*” (Amador 2016: 147–148). In the final chapter, titled “Roberto Bolaño's Specific Exiles”, he sees Bolaño's writing as the production of *the specific* through his understanding of “literature and reading as a global system of displacements” (2016: 148), and Bolaño's nomadic travellers as “a way out of the trap of the *singular* that is part of the exile's desire for home” (2016: 148–149).

[...] el Ojo intentó sin gran convicción el diálogo, el soborno, la amenaza. Lo único cierto es que hubo violencia y poco después dejó atrás las calles de aquel barrio como si estuviera soñando y transpirando a mares” (Bolaño 2001: 21–22). And they escape, all three of them: “El resto, más que una historia o un argumento, es un itinerario” (Bolaño 2001: 22). El Ojo Silva takes the kids as far as he can, first to his hotel where he packs a suitcase, they take a taxi to the nearest town where they get on a bus, and then another bus, and then a train, and yet another bus, and another a taxi. They hitchhike until they finally get to a small, poor village whose name and location Silva (again) does not know, “una aldea en alguna parte de la India” (Bolaño 2001: 23), where they rent a house, and decide to settle down, to rest, and to live as a family. It appears that Silva has broken the spell, that he has found a way out of the violence he cannot escape. He has rescued the children and given them a place in the world. And he saves them in the most Kantian of manners: in the name of universal, morally inflected justice, but also in the name of love – the kind of love that lies at the center of a particularly Christian, gendered notion of cosmopolitan piety. Indeed, there is a crucial supplement that I have yet to include in my analysis of his redemptive rescue mission. If El Ojo Silva shares with the children their orphanhood, in order to save them, he becomes their mother, or rather, *a* mother: “Y entonces el Ojo se convirtió en otra cosa, aunque la palabra que él empleó no fue ‘otra cosa’ sino ‘madre’. Dijo madre y suspiró. Por fin. Madre” (Bolaño 2001: 22).

As a cosmopolitan orphan, when he becomes identical with his self-assigned role of maternal savior, Silva acts in the name of universal justice and love, saving the children from ritualistic mutilation and sexual exploitation, redeeming and delivering them from their subaltern sexual commodification, and in the process, rescues himself from the historical and metaphysical violence that has condemned him to homelessness, traumatic wandering and displaced orphanhood. Aside from its Christian overtones, this role is most clearly a gendered enactment of a restorative notion of cosmopolitanism; the egregiously conventional figure of the mother defined by her home-like womb restitutes love and justice in the form of cosmopolitan reparation for Silva, the children and all the dislocated, homeless orphans scarred by the experience of the impossibility of dwelling. Had this been the ending of the short-story, Bolaño’s cosmopolitanism would be squarely Kantian, *fueron felices y comieron perdices*. Of course, this being a Bolaño narrative, this form of restorative, repairing cosmopolitan universality (as well as the idealization of the figure of the mother) is doomed from the beginning. The closing pages of the text will return Silva and the children to the bleak, violent world they cannot escape.

After Silva and the children settle in the unnamed village (that reduplicates the negation of known and particular geographies that I discussed earlier in

relation to the signifier “India”), they live a brief but intense pastoral bliss: El Ojo becomes a farmer, and he teaches English and math to his sons and other kids in the village; the three of them are happy, the kids play with friends all day and manage to bring food home for Silva to cook, “A veces los veía detener los juegos y caminar por el campo como si de pronto se hubieran vuelto sonámbulos. Los llamaba a gritos. A veces los niños fingían no oírlo y seguían caminando hasta perderse. Otras veces volvían la cabeza y le sonreían” (Bolaño 2001: 23).

But this apparently joyous, repaired and self-reconciled existence ends suddenly when the children die. The short-story does not explain how they die, or prepare the reader for their death. They just die – suddenly, in two lines, as if they were meant to die and the short-story summarily forces the fulfillment of their destiny: “Después llegó la enfermedad a la aldea y los niños murieron. Yo también quería morirme, dijo el Ojo, pero no tuve esa suerte” (Bolaño 2001: 24). I do not know a reader of this short story who was not shocked when he or she reached this anti-climactic sentence recounting the children’s swift, arbitrary death soon after being freed from sexual slavery and having their life extended. We do not know whether this is the way El Ojo Silva related this tragic turn of events to the narrator, or whether it was the narrator who decided to tell it in this succinct, shocking manner, devoid of any affect whatsoever, to the point at which one does not know whether he suffers from a psychopathic form of detachment. Or perhaps the formalist gesture of this alarming, straightforward, factual and exceptional sentence (*‘Then the disease came to the village and the boys died.’*) is a punctum of sorts that concentrates the reader’s ethico-aesthetic attention on the signifying limits of language under traumatic conditions of loss. In *The body in pain*, Elaine Scarry explains that for those in pain the world cease to exist: “The presence of pain is the absence of world... Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject” (Scarry 1985: 35). If the end of the world is the world-historical condition of enunciation of the entire short story (and, I would argue, of Bolaño’s literature at large), the unspeakable pain of the children’s unexpected death breaks down Silva’s world and displaces the linguistic possibility of, perhaps, accounting for its undoing, a dislocation that is reduplicated every time the story of their sudden passing is told by Silva and retold by the narrator. Because pain (physical or otherwise) is the experience of subjective dislocation that binds together Silva and the narrator in the end of the world; they share pain, over-determined, structural pain that they experience all over again every time they are faced with particular, contingent painful circumstances; they share pain and the experience of losing the world, because those who lost the world are

together in loss, they are lost together.²⁰ And that is how the short story ends, with El Ojo Silva crying inconsolably:

Aquella noche, cuando volvió a su hotel, sin poder dejar de llorar por sus hijos muertos, por los niños castrados que él no había conocido, por su juventud perdida, por todos los jóvenes que ya no eran jóvenes y por los jóvenes que murieron jóvenes, por los que lucharon por Salvador Allende y por los que tuvieron miedo de luchar por Salvador Allende, llamó a su amigo francés, que ahora vivía con un antiguo levantador de pesas búlgaro, y le pidió que le enviara un billete de avión y algo de dinero para pagar el hotel. Y su amigo francés le dijo que sí, que por supuesto, que lo haría de inmediato, y también le dijo ¿qué es ese ruido?, ¿estás llorando?, y el Ojo dijo que sí, que no podía dejar de llorar, que no sabía qué le pasaba, que llevaba horas llorando. Y su amigo francés le dijo que se calmara. Y El Ojo se rió sin dejar de llorar y dijo que eso haría y colgó el teléfono. Y luego siguió llorando sin parar. (Bolaño 2001: 25)

Cosmopolitan agency reduced to tears, to a sorrowful weeping about what is lost and cannot be redeemed, restituted or repaired. Silva does not cry *only* about the tragic and sudden death of the children, or about his being lost *God-knows-where* in need of rescue (from his friend in Paris, by anybody); he cries and cannot stop crying because the death of the children rendered visible the end of the world as a structural condition, because he cannot be saved even if his friend sends him the ticket to fly back to Europe – no one can be saved because violence is inescapable.²¹ The non-

20 In this sense, I couldn't agree more with Juan E. De Castro when he points out that Bolaño's "novels imply that we have always been living in a post-catastrophic moonscape [...] His work is the perfect expression of our time when we have discovered that we are living after the catastrophe but cannot imagine a way out" (De Castro 2017: 76). Similarly, Edmundo Paz Soldán identifies an apocalyptic aesthetic or ethics of the representation of horror and violence in Bolaño, particularly in novels like *Estrella distante* and *Nocturno de Chile* and links it to a very specific geocultural postdictatorial South American determination of Bolaño's novels: "el imaginario apocalíptico el único que hace justicia a la América Latina de los años setenta" (Paz Soldán 2008: 13). However, in a second movement, Paz Soldán admits that the originality and interest of 2666 resides precisely in the fact that "La parte de los crímenes" "generaliza al siglo XX, al mundo, a la condición humana" (Paz Soldán 2008: 18) this localized, South American apocalyptic ethics of representation.

21 In his essay "Dimensiones de una escritura horroris/zada" (2015), Benjamin Loy has lucidly analyzed the abundance of crying and laughing in Bolaño's literature as a function of the crisis of language and its failure to signify, and as the characters' loss of control over their own bodies, that is, as the death of the subject's sovereignty. Also see Ignacio Echevarría, who has famously characterized Bolaño's writing as "una épica de la tristeza", a notion he sees at work with particular intensity in "El Ojo Silva" and the never-ending crying that closes the short story: "como si en ese llanto se escondiera el enigma de [la] belleza inexplicable y de [la] desesperación [de su escritura]" (Echevarría 2002: 194).

cosmopolitan concept in the title to this essay, precisely, tries to name this universalization of loss that is constitutive of the experience of the displacement of refugees, migrants, the homeless and the errant orphans for whom there no longer is a world underfoot and who can only afford to dwell in the time and place of their own dislocation.

Postscript

One of the purposes of this essay is to wrestle with some of the following questions: what is the place of literature and the arts within the discursive field that symbolizes the experience of the end of the world today? Is there something, anything at all, that literature and the arts, along with those of us who care about them, who dedicate a significant part of our lives to thinking through them, to teaching them, and who generally feel at home with them can do to disrupt the contemporary structural condition that I am calling the end of the world? Are our discursive practices and the symbolic surfaces we work with compatible with a transformative notion of political agency oriented by notions of universal justice and reparation, or by the will to alleviate the suffering of those who are harmed as the end of the world unfolds? What I am trying to ask (today, in November 2017, discouraged and immensely saddened by the state of suffering we see on a daily basis, nearby and far away) is whether there is something we can do about the end of the world other than offering the discursive spaces we inhabit (our pedagogical, critical and aesthetic practices) as sites of mourning.

To be perfectly clear, I am not asking about the legitimacy of engaging the end of the world politically, of inscribing ourselves within collective demands or mobilizations to dislocate it, or of representing in political terms the wide variety of imaginary and symbolic processes through which our subjectivation occurs. My questions are about the political specificity of our humanities-bound discursive practices, about the efficacy of literature and the arts, and about their dubious potential today to constitute themselves as effective sites of political resistance and contestation. I am asking about the incommensurable and frustrating gap that separates our aesthetic and critical tools from the task at hand. In the face of a proliferation of research and publication projects whose political horizon is defined by the narcissistic and self-affirming performance of an identitarian and moralistic political pretense, I am trying to address the disjunction between aesthetics and politics that seems to be constitutive of the intellectual experience of the end of the world, and that our critical practices fail time and time again to mediate. That is, I am trying to interrogate a very real, overwhelming sense of political futility

that permeates the artistic and academic realms today. Of course, this does not mean we should not continue furthering the understanding of the social, cultural and aesthetic formations we study, and of the theoretical concepts that reveal overlooked dimensions in them, as well as set in motion new critical imaginaries that illuminate past, present and emerging modes of existence. And no one should underestimate the scholarly and pedagogical contributions of the humanities as a collective enterprise of interpretation, narration and conceptual creation, nor should anyone minimize their effects beyond the classroom or the page (whether paper or digital). But it would be good not to kid ourselves about their potential to be translated into political practices capable of disrupting the symbolic and material structures of the end of the world and the pervasive sense of loss it effects. I am not arguing in favor of depoliticizing our pedagogical and research agendas, not in the least; and nor am I denying the immanent political forces at work in our discursive fields, producing and undoing hegemonic consensuses. But the notion that we are effectively politicizing our *shtick* because of our materialist analytical frame – either because we visibilize marginalized cultural formations and subjectivities as well as the social relations that result in their exploitation, or because we engage in postcolonial or decolonial forms of epistemic disobedience (often organized around the recognition and reproduction of previously constituted cultural-political identities), or because of *any* other hermeneutic approach believed to be more or less immediately political – depends on an excessive and ostensibly voluntaristic self-representation of the role humanistic research and aesthetic sensibility have in public debates today. And so, we are faced with a wide variety of research and publishing agendas articulated around an implicit conviction that *there is* in fact something we can do to interrupt the end of the world; that *there are* ways to align our critical practices with a transformative conception of politics, that the kind of deliberate demarcation of a *committed* place of enunciation that was possible *then* is still possible *now*. Personally, today, in November 2017 (and who knows what is going to happen in 2020 or 2021 or 2037), I find it impossible to inhabit such a place of enunciation, even when it is argued with intelligent and sophisticated theoretical arguments displayed to try to sustain a belief in Messianic forms of justice meant to activate the political potential of the present understood as a “single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage”²² (Benjamin 2007: 257). I truly believe there is very little we can do with art and literature about the end of the world. And I know my argument is dreadfully

²² In “A la pinche modernidad”: Literary form and the End of History in Roberto Bolaño’s *Los detectives salvajes*” (2010), Emilio Sauri concludes his lucid reading of Bolaño’s novel pointing to a passage where one of the novel’s main characters summarizes the poetic enterprise of the *real visceralistas* group invoking the quote I just have brought up from Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on

pessimistic – I write this hesitantly, well aware of the internal contradiction I feel, and frightened by the possibility of finding tomorrow that the despair and hopelessness that my argument evinces has crystallized into a reactionary position of passive resignation. This generalized feeling of *gloom and doom* that saturates our relation to the present, this grief, and this woeful paralysis need to be recognized and worked through. We should *stay with it*, even when (or especially when) this experience of the end of the world cannot be easily politicized without resorting to old conceptions of the political that have already proven ineffective. To get back to the questions that open this postscript, I would like to suggest the possibility of considering literature and the arts (and the very specific kind of discursive attention we pay to them) as sites where we find ways to mourn the loss of the world, of the imaginary structure of an impossibly universal, emancipated community to come that we now know is lost forever; mourning without closure, that is, a melancholic kind of mourning which cannot withdraw the libido from the vanished object because losing the world (losing the very structure of political utopianism) is not the kind of loss that can be overcome.

In “Mourning and Melancholia” (1915–1917), Freud describes mourning as the process through which one accepts the loss of the loved object.²³ While his

the Philosophy of History”. In a conversation with García Madero, Lima explains that “los actuales real visceralistas caminaban hacia atrás... De espaldas, mirando un punto pero alejándose de él, en línea recta hacia lo desconocido” (Bolaño 1998: 17). Sauri explains that like just Benjamin’s angel of history, Bolaño’s visceral realists bear witness to modernity as catastrophe, “but while the messianism of the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ could still envision a future capable of redeeming the past, *Los detectives salvajes* everywhere points to nothing more than the foreclosure of any possibility as such. Whereas the modernisms of both Benjamin and generations of Latin American writers and critics had previously conceived the literary as an opening onto the future, Bolaño’s novel signals the end of this particular aesthetic ideology, if only to suggest that history must now be found beyond it” (Sauri 2010: 431). I see my argument advancing in the same direction as Sauri’s conclusion: that Bolaño’s novels thematize a catastrophe and an experience of loss (of the world, of the horizon of emancipation and redemption) that places literature *más allá o más acá* of the political, of the site we used to invest with different degrees of efficacy to disrupt and redirect the catastrophe and reimagine the future.

23 There is an important tradition of literary criticism and theory that has interpreted cultural and aesthetic formations that engage in the labor of mourning, or that enable it (for recent particularly remarkable examples, see the works of Judith Butler, Wendy Brown, Jodi Dean, Rebecca Comay, Alessia Ricciardi, Laura Wittman, and Enzo Traversa, among many others). In Latin American criticism, there are many great examples. Perhaps the most important ones are Alberto Moreiras’ *Tercer espacio: literatura y duelo en América Latina*, Idelber Avelar’s *The Untimely Present: Post-dictatorial Latin American Literature and the Task of Mourning*, and Julio Premat’s *La dicha de Saturno. Escritura y melancolía en la obra de Juan José Saer*. Moreiras’s concept of mourning is constitutive of literature and writing in general because “la escritura es una forma de pagar una deuda de vida o consumar un duelo, y que por lo tanto la

characterization of the mourner shows excessive confidence in his/her ability to successfully labor through the transition from grief to an effective displacement of libido onto a new loved object, he defines the melancholic in purely negative terms as the flip-side of the successful mourner, incapable of grieving, an unredeemable narcissist who cannot escape the identification of the lost object with the moral and libidinal deficiencies of his/her own ego – melancholia as “an aberrant form of mourning” (Butler 1997: 167).²⁴ Freud admits to being puzzled by the nature of the melancholic’s inhibition (“we cannot see what it is

escritura inscribe, antes que nada o después de todo, la problemática inacabable de una mimesis sin final, [...] [el] duelo por el objeto perdido ontologocéntrico mismo” (Moreiras 1999: 4, 12). Similarly, for Premat, literature is but the institutionalization of writing as an attempt to work through one’s own mortality: “se escribe contra la muerte y dentro de un proceso de duelo y de elaboración de la muerte; o mejor dicho, sobre, desde y a pesar de la muerte, en una lógica paradójica que corresponde con lo inaprensible de este caso, noción o frontera” (Premat 2002: 44). Avelar’s use of Freud’s concepts is deliberately historical; in the context of his argument mourning and melancholia conceptualize the ways in which Argentine, Brazilian and Chilean novelists have dealt during the 1980s with a traumatic nature of their immediate past, at the same time, denouncing the impossibility of successfully letting go of the past in order to join in the euphoria of neoliberal capital, and the inscription of a tension in the present between a restitutive form of remembrance and a Nietzschean active forgetfulness that opens a horizon of contingent and undefined futurity. My argument in this postscript is, obviously, greatly indebted to the argument of Avelar’s book.

24 Freud is certainly unfair towards the melancholic when he qualifies the nature of his/her loss as merely ideal, confused about the identity of a loss inscribed in the realm of the unconscious, as opposed to the real, absolute loss of the mourner who has managed to symbolize it (Freud 1957 [1917]: 245). In an essay on Bolaño’s *Estrella distante* and *La literatura nazi en América*, Gareth Williams sees (following Freud’s negative/binaristic definition of melancholia) Bolaño’s narrative trapped in a melancholic paralysis that forecloses the possibility of proposing a different kind of politics, an *other* politics, and instead is stuck with a Schmittean partition of the social field that reduces the political to the mirror image of the trenches of friend and enemy. After reading Williams’ essay several times, it is difficult to have a clear sense of the name and features of the kind of deconstructive, non-melancholic politics that Bolaño’s Schmittean notion of the political forestalls, except when he writes at the very end of the essay that “for there to be freedom he [Bolaño] would have had to engage actively in the narrative deconstruction of the inherited trenches and fortifications of the friend/enemy divide, rather than recurring to tis melancholic reassembly time and time again” (Williams 2009: 139). Even though I agree with Williams when he sees Bolaño’s characters immersed in melancholia, the mournful-melancholic subjectivity of Silva, the narrator and the “legion of wandering orphans” is of a different sort than that produced by a Schmittean politics of the friend/enemy divide. What is at stake in my reading of “El Ojo Silva” (and I believe that is the case as well of *Los detectives salvajes* and 2666) is the impossibility of a political way out of the end of the world, nothing can save the characters from the experience of the end of the world (including politics of course, Schmitt or no Schmitt).

that is absorbing him so entirely”), and explains that as a result he/she suffers “an extraordinary diminution in his self regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (Freud 1957 [1917]: 245). So, in relation to my argument about the present moment being defined by an experience of having lost the world, and about the ways in which art and literature work through that experience, it is notable that the most interesting contemporary *less-than-cosmopolitan* art and literature – and Bolaño’s narratives in particular – inhabit the gap between and within mourning’s impoverished world, and melancholia’s *melée* in which loss of world and of self-esteem are muddled together. Beyond the need to consider the specificity of these concepts in clinical contexts, and the historical differences between 1917 and 2017, it is apparent that we must come up with new, less binary conceptualizations of mourning and melancholia.²⁵ We need a concept of mourning that helps us stay with our loss when there is no promise of resolution, or safe passage to a purportedly self-reconciled, post-traumatic place where our libidinal reinvestment is supposed to reinstitute the world. And we need a not-so-melancholic concept of melancholia that acknowledges the traumatic sadness that mourning paradoxically represses when rushing forward towards the goal-line of detachment from the lost object to redistribute libido and move on. Melancholia as the internal boundary renders impossible the closure mourning is after exposing mourning-as-such (or mournful closure) as a willful form of false consciousness. But if melancholia foregrounds the fact that loss is insurmountable (as well as a certain confusion and ambivalence about what exactly has been lost), mourning is the force that demands us to work through it, to avoid surrendering, because as Derrida writes in *Specters of Marx*, the work of mourning is “not one kind of work among others. It is work itself, work in general, the trait by means of which one ought perhaps to reconsider the very concept of production” (Derrida 1994: 97). So, yes, mourning *and also* melancholia – in spite of Freud’s hierarchical organization of his definition of each of the concepts. My point is that, fundamental as the concept and labor of mourning are, melancholia should not be put down and pathologized to the extent that it is by Freud. To understand our place of enunciation in the context of the end of the world, we need them

²⁵ To be perfectly clear, Freud’s binaristic, brusque differentiation of melancholia as the pathologic underside of the painful but ultimately successful labor of mourning might be correct and productive in clinical contexts – after all, depression is real and has to be effectively diagnosed and treated. My proposal for a less binaristic account of mourning and melancholia is for our poststructuralist humanities inquiries, which are informed, to a large extent by the double dimension and tension of psychoanalytic writing, between clinical reflection and speculative thought, inaugurated by Freud himself.

both, and we need to leave behind the binary, anti-dialectical logic of Freud's foundational essay. Because an understanding of mourning less confident in its ability to get us over loss, together with a not-so-melancholic notion of melancholia may allow us to see how the decision to *stay with it*, to be utterly depressed with what goes on in the world today, to deliberately decelerate normatively disciplinary or *immediately* political responses to this generalized experience of crisis might in fact open the possibility (maybe, maybe not) of differently politicizing the mournful melancholic relation that binds us to the ruins of the world we lost and everything that is gone with it.

At the same time as we mobilize (in spite of our doubts about the efficacy of our public demonstrations) against the most flagrant contemporary forms of abuse, exploitation and dehumanization, and in support of heroic lawyers, physicians, social workers, grassroots organizers and others who rush to shores and borders to help out migrants arriving in poor health, separated from their children, being inhumanely detained or thrown into concentration camps, as humanists (*qua* humanists), we should *also* clear up space for melancholic engagements with the end of the world – we should think through the shadows that haunt the failure and impossibility of radical projects of universal justice and inclusion by making room in our humanistic discourses for *less-than-cosmopolitan*, melancholic stances. Because perhaps our particular responsibility as humanists is to insist to audiences within and outside the humanities that we ought to be depressed (and even paralyzed) about what goes on; that before attempting to get over it by politicizing and instrumentalizing our pain, our outrage and our tears, a mournful melancholic engagement with the end of the world might be the only way to fully absorb, to really take in, the gravity and scale of hurt that surrounds us, and hopefully affect the political subjectivation we engage in next. Hopefully, but who knows.

And this is where texts like Bolaño's "El Ojo Silva" come to our aid. Just like dreams, the literature and the arts we need displace the unbearable sense of loss and the inescapable violence that define our present, and provide us with a surface where we may try to articulate, in the idiosyncratic syntax of our critical desires, the urgency of confronting an end of the world that might just never end.

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