1 Approaching the Post-Global (from Latin American Perspectives)
During the post-global period of the past decade, the optimistic paradigm of globality, which had found its cultural-theory counterpart in new universalist and cosmopolitan discourses, was superseded once and for all. We have seen a growing exhaustion of the global project, compounded by experiences of multidimensional crises (Siskind 2019). Epidemics and pandemics, armed conflicts, and new waves of refugees and migration have all contributed to this, as have global phenomena of alienation and the ecological repercussions of human life and economic activity—repercussions that can no longer be ignored. The latest voices in the debate are now tackling these problems and asking whether the concept of world literature has in fact been overly complicit in globalization’s political and economic dynamics. If so, these scholars argue, the concept itself is a dead end.

This essay will consider literary portrayals in order to show how the exhaustion of the global project has been reflected in Latin American literary production from the post-global period of the past decade. What notions of globality, and especially of exhaustion and new creation, have been developing within it? How can these trends be viewed in the context of the ongoing debate around world literature? I would like to address these questions in reference to four literary examples: the novel La transmigración de los cuerpos (2013) by the Mexican writer Yuri Herrera (translated into English as The Transmigration of Bodies, 2016); the short story El jardinero nocturno from the collection Un verdor terrible (2020a) by the Chilean Benjamín Labatut (translated into English as When We Cease to Understand the World, 2020b); the novel Las constelaciones oscuras (2015) by the Argentine author Pola Oloixarac (translated into English as Dark Constellations, 2019); and the novel Los cuerpos del verano (2019) by Martín Felipe Castagnet, also from Argentina, (translated into English as Bodies of Summer, 2017). All these works explore the theme of world creation/exhaustion by proceeding from narrative premises that involve epidemic experiences and/or dynamics of creation and exhaustion in increasingly digitalized worlds.

This ties into questions of how today’s Latin American literatures are canonized as world literature (Müller 2020; Guerrero et al. 2020; Sánchez Prado 2021).
However, I will not take this occasion to discuss market-oriented approaches or the market metaphor that has been inscribed in the debate around world literature. Rather, I will draw on processes of “worlding”, a perspective Pheng Cheah (2016) introduced to this discussion. Especially during periods when political parties and decision-makers are rather bewildered by worldwide developments – as we have observed at various junctures of the global COVID-19 pandemic – and when capitalist structures and processes of globalization have been the targets of mounting criticism, while global asymmetries are ever more visible and glaring, there is substantial interest in literary texts that present new options for “world” creation. The current upheavals of 2020–21 have offered a fresh context for framing literary writing as an ethical-political force in a world to be created anew.

**World Exhaustion/Creation**

Against the backdrop of this debate over world literature and the conceptual problems it raises, this essay locates the notion of “world creation/exhaustion” through the viewpoint of Latin American studies. This notion holds three distinct layers of meaning:

1. In one sense, it denotes the exhaustion of globalization practices and the ways they are addressed in contemporary literary texts. Although the current phenomena of exhaustion and disillusionment can be traced further back, the 2008 financial and economic crisis can be seen as the turning point of an “exhausted globalization”: the crisis “was interpreted simultaneously as a disaster of society and a distension of the political possibilities because its cause lay in an economic system that, molded by globalization, had fallen out of step with the standards of humanity” (Hüther et al. 2019: 8). Seen through the lenses of economics and the social sciences, the notion of an exhaustion of the current phase of globalization provides a unique entry point for envisioning a future form of globalization that is truly inclusive. Within cultural studies, we can liken the concept of exhaustion to the exhaustion of globalization postulated by economists (Hüther et al. 2019): a dynamic within which to identify central sets of intersecting questions. This also implies that even with a (nearly) unabated outward velocity, or even in the absence of structural changes, processes of growth and/or entanglement can “run out”. This “vacancy”, which will require more precise elaboration, increasingly serves in literature and film as a void in which new (world) creations emerge in an era lacking grand narratives.
Ultimately, the impression that the trends are changing course partly results from a sense that the various narratives about the increasingly overt global problems and asymmetries can no longer be strung together into a consistent story or systemic narrative (Tally 2019).

2. In a second, meta-linguistic sense, the concept of world creation/exhaustion also encompasses the exhaustion of theory about global processes, an exhaustion that goes hand in hand with real-world practices. The interplay between global development and theoretical production has developed to a point at which the notion of “world” is increasingly exhausted, although processes of “worlding” in literature are still being assigned meaning. Cheah (2016) reframes world literature on two levels. On one level, he argues that the very model of a capitalist market that girdles the whole globe yet obstructs worldwide community is countered by a model of the world derived from the narrative literature of the post-colonial South. On another level, he famously asserts that literature should be understood as a world-making activity.

3. The third dimension of the exhaustion concept pertains to the exhaustion of the earth’s resources, which conversely exposes the problems with the “world” concept, as regions are unevenly responsible for and affected by it. The Latin American region is prototypical of this starkly apparent asymmetry. That is especially true of the concept of “exhaustion”, which could scarcely have been deployed in any non-negative sense given modernity’s logics of acceleration and growth (Rosa 2013). And this is precisely an area where current trends in Latin American literary production come into play, as they envision alternative imaginaries of the global beyond an acceleration dogma that is no longer economically, ecologically, or socially sustainable. Meanwhile, recent reactionary anti-globalist currents have provoked the question of how else such alternative perceptions of the world can be characterized, instead, using a dialectic of exhaustion and new creation that might also be politically progressive.

In that sense, the concept of world creation/exhaustion is deliberately framed as ambivalent. Invariably, the dynamic of exhaustion is also countered by a trend of creatively harnessing world creation processes; their potential to imagine new worlds that move between global and local spheres plays out particularly in literary and cultural production. Along these lines, Anna Katharina Schaffner points to the inherent link between creation and exhaustion in her genealogical study Exhaustion: A History (2016), which focuses on individual and collective states of human exhaustion. She stresses the importance of fictionalized exhaustion scenarios to help us grasp the phenomenon while also
highlighting literature’s power to create anew: “Fictions [dealing with exhaustion] also form culture – they do not just mirror certain historical dynamics, values, and medical paradigms but also help to create, to complicate, and to question them” (Schaffner 2016: 14). She also introduces a further aspect that, in my view, is another core prerequisite for any analysis of the concept of exhaustion: the transdisciplinary perspective. Schaffner is principally referring to the socio-historical, medical, and aesthetic meanings whose effects intersect here. My own broader definition of world creation/exhaustion, which I alluded to earlier, also incorporates dimensions of economics, ecology, technology, and cultural theory.

**Digitalization/Pandemic**

In the context of current phenomena of world creation/exhaustion, I would like to single out two aspects and illuminate them – separately and in their entanglements – via the examples of post-global Latin American literature listed above: digitalization and pandemics. After all, the question of how digital revolution is connected to post-global ideas of the world took on a fresh urgency and topicality during the world coronavirus shutdown, when personal, social, and professional activities were relegated to digital spaces to an unprecedented degree, further blurring the lines between disparate realms of human life under the umbrella of digital ubiquity. Experiences of digitality are invariably and fundamentally shaped by the force with which the digital penetrates virtually every aspect of human life, as well as by its ambiguous utility, which combines productive world creation with new phenomena of affective alienation and exploitation (Staab 2019; Nassehi 2019). The possibilities of endless connection and new community are juxtaposed against experiences of emotional exhaustion and overload. Yet at the same time, globalized experiences of contamination present a crisis for imaginaries of an infinitely extensible world that can be limitlessly connected. Latin America, past and present, serves once again as a paradigmatic space of experience and observation in reference to epidemics, as portrayed by numerous texts of post-global literature since 2008. These epidemic fictions are not always based on factual history, although the AIDS pandemic did inspire an entire genre of such “viral” writings (Meruane 2014).

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1 “In order properly to understand the many historical transformations of the idea of exhaustion, an interdisciplinary view that considers medical, sociohistorical, and aesthetic developments as interconnected process is essential” (Schaffner 2016: 14).
Rather, epidemics frequently function as allegorical pretexts for portraying experiences of world exhaustion. In terms of genre, these same experiences of utter insecurity caused by contaminated existence have sparked a renaissance of utopian, dystopian, and science fiction.

These writings invariably also address the violation of established borders of humanness in the domains of trans and post-humanism as they inspect the opacity and transgressive tendencies of new biological and technological phenomena on a narrative level. Here, literature exposes the tension between world creation, in the sense of new ways of enacting contemporary life in the digital realm, and phenomena of large-scale world exhaustion, extending as far as the breakdown of mental health through media consumption, which must always also be inextricably considered “world consumption” in the context of a global public. Along the way, literature itself has been transformed by medial changes. Simultaneously, it serves as a medium for reflecting on these transformation processes. This is especially true in Latin America, where literature “over the last decade [...] has sought to reveal the modes through which Latin American society participates in the spread of ubiquitous technological flows, confronting and sometimes overcoming the social barriers that technology establishes” (Gentic/Bush 2016: 12–13). The depth and breadth of these creative responses will be visible as we consider four literary examples of very recent Latin American literatures that deal with world creation/exhaustion in epidemic and/or digital contexts.

**Yuri Herrera, *La transmigración de los cuerpos* (2013)**

Herrera’s *La transmigración de los cuerpos* (2013) confronts us with experiences of world exhaustion, as we encounter a seemingly post-apocalyptic world in which the residents of an outwardly desolate metropolis are all quarantined at home due to an epidemic. The novel’s setting is marked by violence and prostitution and can be read as a staging of the capitalist market in its problematic legal and illegal dimensions. Various interpreters of the novel, such as Betina Keizman (2019) and Eduardo Becerra (2016), have pointed to the problematic production and power mechanisms of a neoliberal economic system that characterizes the exhausted society in the novel. Becerra asserts that in contemporary Latin American literature, this system is often portrayed in terms of the tensions between surplus and scarcity. In Herrera’s book, infection and disease present the critical points of departure for the plot, which navigates questions
of control over life and death, body and immunity, and state and para-state control structures (Keizman 2019: 171–72). The novel opens with a concrete experience of deficiency and exhaustion on the part of the main character, El Alfaqueque:

A scurvy thirst awoke him and he got up to get a glass of water, but the tap was dry and all that trickled out was a thin stream of dank air. Eyeing the third of mezcal on the table with venom, he got the feeling it was going to be an awful day. He had no way of knowing it already was, had been for hours, truly awful, much more awful than the private little inferno he’d built himself on booze. (Herrera 2016: Ch. 1)

And so the novel begins. Soon, after El Alfaqueque goes out into the street on that ungodly day, the narrator states:

What worried him most was not knowing what to fear; he was used to fending off the unexpected, but even the unexpected had its limits; you could trust that when you opened the door every morning the world wouldn’t be emptied of people. This, though, was like falling asleep in an elevator and waking up with the doors open on a floor you never knew existed. (Herrera 2016: Ch. 1)

This new space the novel introduces is one of world creation/exhaustion: a hollowed-out world dominated by violence and death, as demonstrated by the subplot of Herrera’s main character arranging an exchange of two corpses. Through the epidemic that shapes his narrative space, Herrera creates a moment of stagnation in the unnamed Mexican metropolis, which is otherwise a loud and lively underworld. His narrative is set in an atmosphere of deathly silence: the populace is frightened, and the streets have grown vacant ever since the news spread of a virus that causes the infected to cough blood before meeting a swift death. Because the pathogen can be transmitted not only from human to human, but also via a specific insect vector, many residents have stopped leaving home entirely. Only at the end of the novel is a treatment announced that renders the virus survivable, and people begin to relax again. During the course of the novel, however, Herrera’s protagonist is one of the few people still moving around the city: whether to arrange his business and negotiate “deals” between various criminal parties, such as the titular exchange of dead bodies, or to hunt for an open pharmacy where he can buy condoms and pursue a love affair with his neighbor La Tres Veces Rubia.

The city’s nightmarish atmosphere often verges on the surreal (Herrera 2013: 9, 96); terror casts real experience in an even starker light. However, humorous elements too continually color the epidemic’s portrayal. In the end, El Alfaqueque only gains the affections of his love interest, La Tres Veces Rubia, who had previously paid him no attention, due to the unusual circumstances of her self-isolation.
As both the love story and Alfaqueque’s business dealings progress, the unique silence pervades the city (Herrera 2013: 10, 38, 82). There is not even the slightest breeze, and only near the end of the narrative, with the conclusion of the (temporary) state of emergency, does a storm arrive. The silence is so utter and so eschatological that even the soapbox preacher at the nearby park, who normally proclaims the end of the world, is struck speechless:

There were a few people out and about, but more like ephemeral grubs than lords of the land. A few in cars with the windows rolled up. In a park three blocks away, the man who used to predict the end of days, now alone, in silence, thrown off. A guy in a white robe crossing the street with quick steps. And pharmacies, two-bit pharmacies, open. (Herrera 2016: Ch. 2)

Nevertheless, the motif of the epidemic is used to depict not only ubiquitous death, fear, and silence, but also a special intensity of life that can only develop in such an emergency. A prime example is the love affair with La Tres Veces Rubia, “a burning miracle of flesh” (Herrera 2016: Ch. 4), which occurs during this stagnant period. Another is the protagonist’s encounter with a group of men at a strip club. In violation of the usually fixed, unspoken hierarchy between paying johns and female sex workers, many men are now sleeping on or under the tables (“like really sleeping, not booze-induced sleeping”, Herrera 2016: Ch. 4), while others are just chatting with the prostitutes, leaving out the usual condescending sexualized gestures: “They haven’t been out for days, he heard Óscar say behind him. Claim it’s too dangerous but if you ask me, this is their chance of a lifetime” (Herrera 2016: Ch. 4).

The government barely plays any role anymore under these circumstances in which life is exhausted and created anew. At one point, an official announcement arrives about the general situation, which it claims will soon normalize (“everything would be back to normal any minute now, that it was essential to exercise extreme caution but not to panic”, Herrera 2016: Ch. 2), a message that seems almost grotesque considering the novel’s plot. Life in this post-apocalyptic place strikes readers as anything but normal. El Alfaqueque takes the message as “a reassuring little pat on the head to say Any silence is purely coincidental” (Herrera 2016: Ch. 2). Meanwhile, Soifer (2019: 38) interprets this message as the state’s concession that it lacks solutions. The government cannot combat the emergency with anything beyond that “pat on the head”, as it has lost control of the situation. The only appearance by representatives of the state, Soifer points out, is when the protagonist encounters a soldier who is enforcing the quarantine rules. Overall, the state clearly can no longer guarantee its citizens’ safety and, following neoliberal principals, is now only protecting the workings of the market and entrusting all other domains to its logic.
In terms of this narrative space beyond the scope of state structures, *La transmigración de los cuerpos* (2013) is in line with Herreras’s earlier novels, especially *Trabajos del reino* (2004) and *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* (2009) (Soifer 2019: 34). All three works are connected by the guiding metaphor of *transmigración*, which in Spanish can refer to both human migration and the transmigration of souls. In *Trabajos del reino*, Keizman (2019: 172) identifies the protagonist’s *transmigración* to become an artist and poet in the framework of a drug cartel while in *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo*, the *transmigración* represents an explicit exchange of bodies and identities. In *La transmigración de los cuerpos*, bodies become commodities and death creates work in an omnipresent fight for survival, as the life-threatening ramifications of modern post-global society become tangible.

Overall, we can observe that Herrera’s novel portrays the neoliberal and post-global society as the root cause of an exhausted world in the realms of the professional, the social community, and the sovereignty of citizens, placing a particular emphasis on the debasement of humanity and the human body. At the same time – and this is equally central to dynamics of exhaustion and new creation – the novel also makes reference to new spaces and dynamics that only emerge as a result of the emergency and that particularly shape the characters’ sexual and emotional experiences. The text can be interpreted as a global Latin American novel – fully in line with Hoyos’s (2015) definition – that depicts Mexican themes of violence and death in the context of governmental and paragovernmental power structures and then expands these structures beyond local contexts to symbolize the exhausting experience of the post-global period. Literary scholars (including Becerra 2016) have read Herrera’s novel as an example of the rise of apocalyptic dystopias in Latin America, whose skepticism they attribute to the manifold socio-cultural and economic crisis of post-global society.

**Benjamín Labatut, “El jardinero nocturno” (2020)**

In “El jardinero nocturno”, the Chilean author Benjamín Labatut also employs dystopian elements within a setting that otherwise resembles real-world experiences and also contains nonfictional episodes from the history of science. The text is set in a Chilean mountain village, which is left unnamed. The opening of

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2 Labatut was born in Rotterdam in 1980 as the son of a diplomat and grew up in various places (The Hague, Buenos Aires, and Lima); he has lived permanently in Chile since 1994.
this text, which concludes his book *El verdor terrible* (published in 2020), likewise confronts the reader with a menacing situation:

> It is a vegetable plague, spreading from tree to tree. Unstoppable, invisible, a hidden rot, unseeing, unseen by the eyes of the world. Was it born of the deep dark earth? Was it brought to the surface by the mouths of the tiniest creatures? A fungus, perhaps? No, it travels faster than spores, it breeds inside tree roots, buried in their wooden hearts. An ancient, crawling evil. Kill it. Kill it with fire. Light it up and watch it burn, torch all those sickly beeches, firs and giant oaks that have stood the test of time, douse their trunks wounded from a thousand insect bites. Dying now, diseased and dying, dead as they stand. Let it burn and watch the flames reach up to the sky, for left alone it will consume the world, feeding on the death of others, nurtured by all the green grass turned grey. Quiet now, listen. Listen to it grow. (Labatut 2020b: Part I)

Labatut presents an apocalyptic scenario: an unknown blight has been attacking tree roots and spreading rapidly. Centuries-old trees fall victim to it, and their trunks are eaten by pests. A voice sounds an appeal to stop the plague by fire in order to prevent “an ancient, crawling evil” from destroying the larger world, but foremost what is left of natural vegetation. The same text, which is divided into isolated episodes revolving around the narrator’s encounters with the “night gardener”, later mentions a fire that has almost entirely burned down an old-growth forest near the village. A connection is implied between the opening sequence and this fire, but it is left vague.

Given the ambiguity of portrayals of world exhaustion/creation – vacillating between destruction and new creation – Labatut’s text ought to be read in the context of the larger volume in which it appears. As a book, *El verdor terrible* (2020a) is formally difficult to classify. Some critics have called it a “novel”, others a collection of standalone short stories, some of which have essayistic aspects. Labatut combines lucid scientific history with mellifluous yet precise language and fictional elements in a successful aesthetic response to the question of the knowledge’s limits. Here, literature contextualizes the boundaries and ambiguities of scientific knowledge in order, ultimately, to convey the incomprehensible, destructive, and sometimes even bizarre facets of scientific progress. With examples spanning from the chemist Fritz Haber to the mathematician Alexander Grothendieck to Heisenberg and Schrödinger, Labatut shows how scientists push thought to the very edge. The novel is suffused with the idea that there is no such thing as purely beneficial progress, and that even the most magnificent inventions hold the potential to harm humanity. “El jardinero nocturo” exhibits

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3 Adrian Nathan West’s English translation, titled *When We Cease to Understand the World*, was shortlisted for the International Booker Prize 2021, which dramatically increased the text’s circulation.
that same ambivalent dynamic. The preceding chapters in the volume include detailed, factual accounts of the research of various scientists whom the night gardener then mentions to the narrator. Some important background behind the events of “El jardinero nocturno” can be found in the third chapter of the volume, “El corazón del corazón”, which describes some of the context around Alexander Grothendieck’s withdrawal from mathematics. This chapter discusses the ecological catastrophe that Grothendieck predicted for humanity alongside his idea that some outside creature, which he called le rêveur and eventually equated with God, spoke to him in his dreams. Some readers might hear echoes of this in the enigmatic voice that warns of global destruction in the opening of “El jardinero nocturno”.

On an evening walk with his dog in the remote Chilean mountain village, which is only inhabited in summertime, the narrator meets the title character, a man who only gardens at night out of consideration for the plants, which are sleeping then – as though anesthetized – and therefore cannot feel their transplantation. Labatut’s narrative centers on brief, individual episodes surrounding the narrator’s acquaintanceship with the night gardener and the latter’s stories of clashes between nature and science. For example, during a walk in the woods, the narrator and his seven-year-old daughter stumble upon two dead dogs. All signs point to poisoning as their cause of death: “there are many deadly chemicals used for gardening, and there are many wonderful gardens in this place” (Labatut 2020b: Part III). The lushness of the many beautiful, well-kept gardens is inextricably linked with this lethal substance, an ambivalent episode straddling creation and destruction that typifies Labatut’s perspective.

Frustrated with the poor growth in his garden, the narrator reaches out to the night gardener, who previously told him the history of fertilizer during one of their encounters. The German chemist Fritz Haber, the inventor of modern nitrogen fertilizer, was also the first person to invent a weapon of mass destruction, chlorine gas, which was deployed in the First World War. Paradoxically, his fertilizer – which the press called “Bread from the Air” because it harnessed airborne nitrogen – also saved hundreds of millions of people from starvation. The side effect of which, in turn, is today’s overpopulation and the risk of exhausting the earth’s resources.

In the final episode, the night gardener tells his own story. Formerly a mathematician, he was beginning a promising career when he learned about fellow mathematician Alexander Grothendieck. Grothendieck had revolutionized geometry in the 1960s, but at age 40, at the height of his international success, he abruptly quit mathematics for a life of solitude in the Pyrenees. The night gardener followed in Grothendieck’s footsteps, reacting to family and health problems but also to the insight that mathematics – not the atom bomb, computers,
biological warfare, or climate change – would change the world forever. Indeed, he believed that mathematical insights would transform the planet “to the point where, in a couple of decades at most, we would simply not be able to grasp what being human really meant” (Labatut 2020b: Part VI). He gives the example of quantum mechanics, which has vastly reshaped contemporary human life through the experience of accelerating digitalization (the internet, mobile phones, computers with artificial intelligence). Yet already there was no human left, he said, who truly understood quantum mechanics or could fully explain its workings (Labatut 2020a: 209). According to the narrator, these pessimistic visions of the future led the night gardener to devote himself to his garden and abandon science.

Labatut takes this characterization of modern science, according to which the proliferation of mathematical knowledge has surpassed human comprehension and ultimately defied it – even inverted it to a certain degree – and juxtaposes a parallel description of a natural phenomenon in which exuberant fertility foreshadows death. As the two men look at the oldest tree in the narrator’s garden, a lemon tree, the night gardener tells him about lemon trees’ brilliant, wasteful, and tragic fates:

When they come to the end of their life cycle, they put out a final, massive crop of lemons. In their last spring their flowers bud and blossom in enormous bunches and fill the air with a smell so sweet that it stings your nostrils from two blocks away; then their fruits ripen all at once, whole limbs break off due to their excessive weight, and after a few weeks the ground is covered with rotting lemons. It is a strange sight, he said, to see such exuberance before death. (Labatut 2020b: Part VI)

Here, fruitfulness takes on a monstrous quality; vitality and bounty constitute nothing but the excess that precedes death. However, there is no accurate way to identify that moment of self-destruction. In this case, someone would have to bring themselves to chop down the lemon tree and determine its age by the rings of its trunk. Because neither the narrator nor the night gardener is prepared to do so, the timing of the tree’s imminent exhaustion remains uncertain.


Pola Oloixarac’s novel *Las constelaciones oscuras* (2015) portrays the dynamics of creation and exhaustion in a fictional digitalized world that is being reshaped by at least three major pioneering projects: efforts to process data inside living tissue; the development of an artificial immune system for the entire earth’s surface, intended to prevent the spread of epidemics; and an endeavor to process and manipulate huge quantities of data about humanities’ genetic
material. Bieke Willem has asserted that the rise and fall of the “Stromatolithon project” in the novel, a gigantic archive of digital and genetic data, should be read as “archival fiction” as laid out in Roberto González Echevarría’s Myth and Archive (1990): “The novel not only confers a central place to the archive in its plot but also calls attention to the power relations inherent in the process of collecting and accessing data” (Willem 2020: 132). From that perspective, creation in the novel should always be viewed in the context of these power relations. That former employees of the project, Cassio and Piera, hack the archive at the end of the novel to make it publicly accessible is also central to this reading. The novel takes place in three different, interwoven temporal layers, and alternately describes the late nineteenth century research expeditions of the botanist Niklas Bruun, who is obsessed with hybrid life forms, and the coming-of-age story of the hacker Cassio from his birth in 1982 to his earliest hacking attempts to his final public hack in 2024, mentioned above, in which he is assisted by the ambitious young biologist Piera.

As dynamics of creation and exhaustion in fictionalized digital worlds go, Las constelaciones oscuras is very condensed: on a multitude of levels here, creation is inconceivable without exhaustion and vice versa. For example, the subject of the exhaustion of scientific paradigms has led to radical new creations in the Anthropocene. As early as the late nineteenth century, Niklas Bruun thought the days of Darwin’s evolutionary theory were numbered and advocated a new understanding of evolution based on species’ mutual contamination and hybridization:

He was sure that evolution à la Darwinienne was on its last legs, and in the new classification system that he was designing, certain species fit inside others; they invaded one another, arriving at a matrix of forms that couldn’t be reduced to the issue of mere survival, much less that of generations (an idea he found repugnant). Evolutionary change, he believed, happened much more quickly – within the lifespan of a single individual. Rather than waiting for reproductive cycles to silently select useful features, it occurred via mimesis, and as the result of unexpected contact. (Oloixarac 2019: “Cassio”)

In 2024, when this evolutionary step indeed occurs in Oloixarac’s fiction, as a result of the merger of technology and biology – the author invokes the “apocalyptic trajectory of the Anthropocene” (2019, “Cassio”) – the event is twofold. First, the Stromatolithon project has the ability to process unlimited amounts of

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4 In regard to Oloixarac’s novel, see also Jobst Welge’s chapter in this volume, which analyzes how the novel stages the blurring of the traditional division between human and natural history.

5 This has a historical precursor in the project to regionally reorganize the genetic data of the Latin American continent (LATAM), which had originated around the end of the military dictatorship in Argentina.
data thanks to quantum computing, and it pairs this ability with total digital access to information from human DNA samples. Second, this evolutionary step happens within the person of Cassio, who deliberately infects himself with a computer virus and becomes a hybrid life form. Oloixarac emphasizes this double manifestation of fundamental upheavals in several passages of the novel: “One movement works as the surface, where visible change occurs; the other movement is the structure, hidden beneath the flow of mortal life” (Oloixarac 2019: “Cassio”). On the concrete level in which Cassio himself transgresses the boundary to post-humanness, the concept of virus is central as an intersection between biology and digitality. The experiment at the end of the novel is Piera’s first time working with a computer virus, and simultaneously it deploys the first biological virus Cassio has ever programmed. Upon being injected with the virus, Cassio ceases to be human and his inner workings merge with a machine. For the first time, the programmer Cassio is not only a virus’s creator but also its vector. After the injection, Cassio loses consciousness. This can be read as another aspect of an exhaustion that pervades all creative impulses and projects in the novel and is indeed inescapably inscribed in them.

Within the Stromatolithon project, it is a matter of changing the deep structure of human forms of existence, or, as Oloixarac describes them elsewhere in the original Spanish edition, sintáctica del orden futuro (literally “syntax of the future order”, Oloixarac 2015: 88). This project amounts to no less than a new world vision represented by the enormous continent of data, which can be manipulated by both biological knowledge and the knowledge of data processing. The objective is “to geolocalize the specificity of their persons, to re-create their vital trajectories on the world’s newly unfolded map” (Oloixarac 2019: “Piera”). The result is a sort of digital doubling of reality. By combining digitally documented and genetic biographies, the “cloud of information” becomes “the densest possible definition of inhabited territory” (Oloixarac 2019: “Piera”). With his hack at the end of the novel, Cassio destroys the nearly absurd concentration of power and the astronomical monetary value generated by such all-encompassing access to information and replaces it with a decentralized digital knowledge structure.

The subjects of the plague and the excess preceding death, discussed earlier in reference to Labatut, are also present in Pola Oloixarac’s work, albeit in quite a different guise. One day, Cassio meets the “Resistance”: two young women named Noelia and Ailín who believe that the earth is increasingly defending itself against humans’ behavior and will cast them off sooner or later. They give the example of a mountain climber who got lost and was devoured by rats, part of a growing plague. Both women paint their faces with black-and-white stripes to evade the facial recognition of the omnipresent cameras in
public space. Cassio dismisses these measures, believing that the only way to escape surveillance is to transform into another species.

He goes to the mountains himself, where he can hear the rats squeaking in the dark. Every twenty-five years, the massive blossoms of a native species of bamboo (*Chusquea culeou*) attract swarms of rats, on which the plant has an aphrodisiac effect. In a stone hut on a peak, the other members of the Stromatolithon project are already awaiting Cassio. They spread “bit codes” around the hut as bait and then activate them. When the rats ingest the codes, the fluid enters their bodies, causing the animals first to lose their sense of direction and then to turn bluish-green, like stellar nebulae, and finally die.

It is in reference to these stellar images that Max, the director of the Stromatolithon project – who is wearing the black-and-white face paint of the Resistance on this special occasion – invokes the title’s *constelaciones oscuras*:

> We have to understand these things as dark constellations – that’s what the Incas called them. They organized the sky in terms of the dark regions between stars, the interior shapes with bright perimeters. But what creates space for meaning isn’t the bright dots or the presence of light – for dark constellations, the light is the noise. What matters is the darkness. (Oloixarac 2019: “Piera”)

This passage calls to mind Giorgio Agamben’s definition of the contemporary, which itself makes repeated references to the night sky and emphasizes the dark areas over the bright stars, before concluding:

> The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are obscure. The contemporary is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present. (Agamben 2009: 44)

As the second attribute of the contemporary, Agamben stresses the bravery it takes to behold the darkness, a bravery that Cassio also shows within this fiction when he uses his own body as a scientific experiment, initiating the creation of a new hybrid species.

**Martín Castagnet, *Los cuerpos del verano* (2016)**

Martín Castagnet’s novel *Los cuerpos del verano*, which is also deeply preoccupied with digital worlds, can be read as a laconic sci-fi vision of the endgame of exhaustion. What if human consciousness could be posthumously uploaded to the internet, where it would either continue living alongside other human souls or else be “burned” onto a new body like a rewritable CD?
In this exploration of the transcendence of human mortality in a digital world, the book plays with the ambivalence of world creation/exhaustion in a temporally unspecified future and an unnamed city. That the people who are thus living on in new bodies require a permanently connected battery can be interpreted as a metaphor for the ambivalence always embedded in such fantasies of creation and exhaustion. The novel describes how the character of Ramiro Olivaires, known as Rama, returns to a body and re-integrates into society and the real world:

It’s good to have a body again, even if it’s the body of a fat woman that no one else wanted. It’s nice to be able to stroll down the sidewalk and feel the texture of the world. I like to cough until I’m hoarse and inhale the smell of the used clothes in my bedroom. (Castagnet 2017: Part 1.1)

That is the opening of Castagnet’s novel. Since his death, his narrator Rama has spent almost a century living only in digital form – as a mutable human soul. He has returned to his old house and to daily life with his original family, but not to his previous body: instead, he has been reborn as an older, short, and heavyset woman plugged into a battery. Our narrator character is trying to get his bearings and often mentions how different things were “in his time”, a time that stretches far beyond readers’ own experiential horizons in terms of digital capabilities.

In his own time, Rama was one of the first in his country who could choose an afterlife on the internet, an option that was not yet available when his parents died. Whereas earlier generations once viewed the printing press and medicine as game-changing boons to humanity, the corresponding innovations in the novel’s era are the “state of flotation” (“estado de flotación”) on the internet and the ability to recycle a body after a person’s death. Death still exists but no longer concludes a human life. Instead, it is possible to go on existing afterwards in digital or analog form, and thus to prolong human life – if not always in the real world, then at least in the digital one. To enter this state, an individual’s brain activity first needs to be stored in digital form so that it can be preserved. After death, the human soul can be transferred to another human body, akin to “burning” a CD (quemar un cuerpo). When the protagonist died, he was put in the digital “state of flotation”; “migrating” to another body was not yet possible at that time.

The digital state of flotation – a reference to a genre of Japanese art whose name means “pictures of the floating world” – has its own temporal framework. Time is no longer measured in hours or days but in online messages, a flood of data and communications in which the dead float. Not only can they spend time with relatives, friends, and colleagues in digital places called “nodes”, and even meet new people there, but their relatives in the physical world can now stay in contact with the “dead”. For example, after returning to the real world, the
protagonist communicates with his daughter Vera, who has already died, on an almost daily basis.

In the present day of the novel, most people prefer to switch bodies after death. Those who opt merely for an internet-based afterlife are in the minority. Another even smaller minority keeps their old bodies and does not replace them after death; this group is scorned by most of society and labeled “pachamas”, a word derived from the Indian caste system.

In the novel, Castagnet finds metaphors for contemporary lived experience, an approach that he would take in another direction in his next novel, *Los mantras modernos* (2017). Therein, facing the total exhaustion of the world, humanity has delegated all the work of communication and prediction to technology. Meanwhile, some have gained a new ability: to disappear voluntarily (*desaparecer voluntariamente*), in other words, to radically withdraw from everyday life. This is an exhausted world in which people cultivate new capabilities but are permanently searching for one another.

**Conclusion**

The literary portrayals of exhaustion and new creation demonstrate a profound understanding of what we term (post-)global lived experience, particularly in terms of ambivalently shown pandemic/epidemic and digital worlds. In grappling with the current realities of the post-global period, the four authors discussed here pursued four distinct paths for investigating the relationship between reality and fiction in their texts and for reflecting upon the contemporary experience of world creation in an imaginary space. The transdisciplinary dimension of the notion of exhaustion lies at the core of analyzing all these texts. In addition to medical, aesthetic, and technological meanings, my analysis of Herrera’s and Labatut’s works has particularly shown the relevance of complex dimensions pertaining to economics, ecology, and the history of science.

Whereas Herrera makes particular use of dystopian plot points – such as the specific circumstances of the epidemic that have emptied out his fictional city – the impression of dystopia, of an unsalvageable future peering back at us, is also evident in Labatut’s use of language and especially rhythm. “El jardínerno nocturno” takes a step away from the factual, scientific realm to show the ambivalence of the history of science in images that are at once horrifying and poetic, and thus all the more tangible.

The fiction of Oloixarac and finally Castagnet likewise re-examines the relationship between reality and fiction by reflecting intensified contemporary realities
in their fictional worlds. Over the course of the novel, Oloixarac’s narrative extends into a future that transcends the readers’ temporal horizons, raising questions about humanity’s future and about digital opportunities and threats. In Castagnet’s book, we find an even farther-reaching detachment from the actual strictures of our contemporary life. A particularly memorable image is that of a person who, having cheated death, must always carry around a battery to persist in the increasingly digitized experiential realms of life, learning, and work.

All these different portrayals of the ambivalence of exhaustion and creation should be treated as methods for keeping alive “the worlding force”, to quote Pheng Cheah’s “Working Hypotheses for Interpreting Postcolonial World Literature” (2016: 210). Fiction opens up ambivalent, dynamic, and complex spaces that also always involve aspects of contemporary vacancy, stagnation, or imminent exhaustion.

In these portrayals of globality, exhaustion, and fresh creation in the literatures of the post-global period, and with a view to the ongoing debate over world literature, we can observe a highly productive artistic confrontation with pandemic and digital realities in imagined spaces. This can also serve as a model outside of Latin America, renewing our perspective on the possibilities of “world literature” in the post-global period beyond asymmetrical constellations of power. Especially given current reactionary anti-globalist trends, such alternative perceptions of the world are enormously valuable. We are seeing a new potential for multipolar dynamics by which the literary work appears as a paradoxical representation of worlds that are exhausted and yet in the midst of renewal.

Works Cited


