Pourquoi ne cesse-t-il pas d’écrire?
Maurice Blanchot

Amid a global pandemic, unprecedented environmental catastrophes, egregious military occupations, an increasing number of forced displacements, femicides and genocides, rampant socioeconomic inequalities, and an ongoing wave of massive layoffs (including the closure of entire humanities departments), Blanchot’s question returns with the wit of a provocation, if not with the weight of an accusation: Why don’t we just stop writing? Why, exactly, among the rubble of a planet in ruins?

This question is urgent and deceivingly plain. We are now self-evidently no longer in a position where our responses can delight in their own overstatements about the “disruptive agency” of literature and the “political power” of literary studies. The very fact that our impotence has become self-evident – in the twofold sense of “flagrant to everyone” and “clear to us” – should give us pause. How many red flags have we mistaken for red herrings along the way? How long have we been taking for granted the significance of our jobs quite solitarily? A tentative answer: at least twenty-seven years.

In 1994, within the framework of the so-called Science Wars (1994–2000) that would climax with the Sokal Affair, biologist Paul R. Gross and mathematician

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1 See Blanchot (1955: 20).
2 In 1996, physicist Alan Sokal “intentionally wrote [an] article so that any competent physicist or mathematician (or undergraduate physics or math major) would realize that it is a spoof [. . .] the editors of Social Text felt comfortable publishing [this] article on quantum physics without bothering to consult anyone knowledgeable in the subject” (Sokal 1996: n.p.). According to Sokal, while his method was satirical, his motivation was “utterly serious”. To his mind, Social Text’s acceptance of his article “exemplifie[d] the intellectual arrogance of Theory – postmodernist literary theory, that is – carried to its logical extreme. No wonder they didn’t bother to consult a physicist. If all is discourse and ‘text,’ then knowledge of the real world is superfluous” (Sokal 1996: n.p.). Curiously, this concern towards an overbroad notion of “text” was voiced within the humanities at least a decade prior to The Sokal Hoax. Take, for instance, analytic philosopher Richard Shusterman’s words from 1986: “Radical philosophical
Norman Levitt published their best-selling *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science*. Although Gross and Levitt’s main thesis is rehearsed, stated, and rehashed many times throughout the volume, the following passage discloses the book’s agenda with particular candor:

The humanities, as traditionally understood, are indispensable to our civilization. [. . .] The indispensability of professional academic humanists, on the other hand, is a less certain proposition. Scientists are deeply cultured people, in the best and most honorable sense. [. . .] The range of knowledge of music, art, history, philosophy, and literature to be found in a random sample of scientists is, we know from long experience, extensive. As humanists, scientists are autodidacts. One obvious consequence of this fact is to undercut the argument that traditional humanities departments [. . .] are indispensable. (Gross/Levitt 1994: 243)

Irrespective of the heated discussions held in the context of the Science Wars, at the heart of whose “hard” side were precisely Gross, Levitt, and Sokal, few scholars on the “soft” side took this assault on their disciplines seriously enough to think that it could pose a real threat to the humanities’ existence. At most, the problem that the Sokal Hoax in particular was presenting seemed to be about a specific way of doing humanistic scholarship, not about the pertinence of the field as such. Yet, Sokal’s provocation – overtly inspired by the reading of Gross and Levitt – hit the core rather than the “mantle” of humanistic research. To the still-incalculable benefit of contemporary neoliberal academia, in the mid-1990s there were influential spokespeople sufficiently confident to state (to put in writing): “We can have humanism without the humanities. Are humanities scholars even capable of giving a well-construed reason why universities still need them?”

This was almost three decades ago. Already then, the question of whether the humanities had the right to exist was posable, and in fact openly posed in the public sphere, with much resonance. The deadlock that our departments are presently experiencing may be new in its implications, but its roots (at least its epistemological ones) predate both the COVID-19 crisis and the 2008 socio-economic collapse. If we are just now beginning to witness the resurfacing and the consequences of questionings such as Sokal, Levitt, and Gross’s, it is not because their stances have been dismantled along the road, but because they were simply put in reserve: pre-served for a better (or a worse) time.

deconstructors [. . .] are abolitionist Unionists who work to break down the distinctions between literature, criticism, and philosophy [by] treating all three as forms of what we would call ‘writing’, a general, undifferentiated, and thus unprivileging textuality [. . .] Rejecting these distinctions, however, seems only to lead us to a much wider and pernicious essentialism, an engulfing and unstructured monism of expression or textuality” (Shusterman 1986: 22–31).

Exemplary minimizations of The Hoax’s consequences are Derrida (1997) and Latour (1997).
Now is that time. Now is the time when decades-long suspicions towards the humanities are being harnessed to shrink and shut entire university departments with unsettling ease. Coupled with the open cynicism and the entrepreneurial drive of both alt-right politics and institutional corporatism, epistemological slander becomes combustible. It is hence feasible that at present – as much as in the 1980s and 1990s – giving good reasons for the pertinence of our work will not suffice. But it is also the case that today, more patently than ever, it is impossible for us to keep doing business as usual.

Latin Americanists foresaw the possibility of our current deadlock. Mariano Siskind in particular cautioned us against doing-business-as-usual in “Towards a Cosmopolitanism of Loss”. In what remains one of the most compelling and heartbreaking essays of the decade, Siskind prompted us to stop working under the often-shared assumption that humanistic research and aesthetic sensibility have an immediately relevant and politically disruptive role in public debates. “The notion that we are effectively politicizing our shtick because of our materialist analytical frame”, writes the critic, “depends on an excessive and ostensibly voluntaristic self-representation of the role that humanistic research and aesthetic sensibility have in public debates today [. . .] I truly believe there is very little we can do with art and literature” (Siskind 2019: 228; my emphasis).

There is, I think, an indispensable double gesture contained in this passage: a compound generosity that allows us to think both retro and prospectively. On the one hand, Siskind’s words are soberly oracular – the accuracy of their vision urges us to retroactively revise the style, the consistency, and the impact of our previous work. On the other hand, the critic’s argument does not point to the irreversibility of our discipline’s impotence, but to the potency afforded by the very little we can still do from our epistemological and institutional standpoints. When considering the full gamut of this “very little”, Siskind proposes “offering the discursive spaces we inhabit (our pedagogical, critical and aesthetic practices) as sites of [not-so-melancholic] mourning” (Siskind 2019: 227). My intervention –

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4 It is key to note how Siskind’s proposal differs from superficially similar positions on the state of the art and the role of literary criticism. Indeed, a decade before the publication of “Towards a Cosmopolitanism of Loss” (2019), Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus were already warning literary scholars against the tendency “to equate their work with political activism” and were correspondingly asking the question of “why literary criticism matters if it is not political activism by another name” (Best/Marcus 2009: 2). Furthermore, Best and Marcus were advocating for a criticism whose role would be “a relatively modest one” (Best/Marcus 2009: 11). Still, these scholars’ counterproposal to the state of the art of the discipline was to displace its epistemological focus from “symptomatic reading” to “surface reading” (Best/Marcus 2009: 1–13). What was being questioned then was not whether literary scholars should keep doing business-as-usual, but how business-as-usual should be conducted. Siskind’s proposal thus
meant as an addition rather than a criticism towards Siskind’s proposal – posits that opportunities may lie not only in the opening of spaces, but also in the carving out of times.

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Let me elaborate by recapping and expanding Blanchot’s initial question: “Pourquoi ne cesse-t-il pas d’écrire?”, asks the essayist. “Pourquoi ne cesse-t-elles pas d’écrire?”, could be asked about us. Why don’t we stop writing precisely now? Why do we insist? Why do we, literary scholars or literary-scholars-to-be, insist not only upon writing, but upon writing about writing?

Conveniently enough, I see a possible response hidden in my last extended formulation – a formulation that, also conveniently, refers to what literary scholars do. Through the phrasing “why do we keep writing about writing”, I seem to be exploiting the homophony inherent in the term “writing” to refer to two different signifieds: first, an act of ongoing, continuous, or recurrent inscription (“why do we keep writing . . .”); secondly, a corpus of already written pieces (“. . . about writing”). A common-sense interpretation of my phrase, which would also entail a general understanding and a questioning of our job, would thus be: “Why do we keep writing about the written, about written pieces of literature”? This inquiry sounds quite pertinent and descriptive. Indeed, most of the effort of twentieth and twenty-first century literary criticism has been directed to the study of writing as corpus: we read, theorize, examine, and build our analyses upon writing as always-already-the-(a)-crafted-(piece). In other words, we begin already in the space of writing, we focus on the extension of the already written.

differs from Marcus and Best’s position not solely for its content, but also for the level at which he considers the discussion should be held. Not only is the critic’s stance more modest in that it implies its own self-criticism, but it also operates at a more fundamental level. To be clear: Siskind’s effort is not oriented towards favoring an epistemological agenda within an already functioning field but aimed at advancing structural questions about the field’s very dynamics and raison d’être. Finally, one additional – hopefully self-explanatory – remark: the fact that Siskind’s proposal engages with the role of the critic as professor (as docente) makes all the difference.

5 Needless to say that some of us, especially literary-scholars-to-be, keep writing about writing because we cannot economically afford to stop. Writing is, after or above all, part of our job description. My inquiries do not ignore that not all literary scholars are in the same position when it comes to writing, writing about writing, or writing about writing about writing. From my precarious vantage point, I wish to find more consistent ways of elucidating and explaining the relevance of our work (both to ourselves and to others). We may find an explanation behind the work we already do; we may need to change the ontological and epistemological understanding of our job before we find a sufficiently robust answer for our times.
But what about the time of writing? What about the meantime when writing is still in the process of its own spacing, of its making room for itself and of making itself a room for us to explore, to dwell, and to inhabit? What if, in the formulation “why keep writing about writing”, the first and the second occurrence of the term were to mean the same? What if both occurrences of “writing” were to refer to the process of inscription as it progressively unravels? Could there be an underexplored possibility in the examination of writing in its undetermined, gradual deployment? My tentative answer is: “yes”! To justify my confidence and to show the modest though real potential of considering (the) penning (as) process, I propose to examine two twenty-first century Latin American novels that, within their already written spaces, stage writing as spacing. Put it simply, these novels feature scenes of writing as it gradually, continuously unfolds in time.

The first piece that I wish to explore is Rodrigo Hasbún’s *El lugar del cuerpo* (2018 [2007]). The book is centered on Elena, an elderly Latin American writer based in the United States who, upon the imminence of her death, decides to recount her life story. At first, this project seems to be about healing the wounds caused by a single event: Elena’s rape by her brother at the age of seven. From that moment on, and regardless of the character’s prolific career and affective (after)life in the United States, it seems that her whole sense of worldliness has irreversibly crumbled: Elena’s is, indeed, the experience of the errant orphan “for whom no longer is a world underfoot and who can only afford to dwell in the time and place of [her] own dislocation” (Siskind 2019: 227). There is no personal, local, national, or universal signifying frame that could possibly substantiate the character’s actions: the horizon of homeliness seems as alien to her as the horizon of her (or a) self.

And yet, amidst her corroded sense of world, within this permanent state of unworldliness, something is still worth pursuing. Elena’s words: “Desarrollo, continuidad. No me importan. Con tal de lograr una textura, aire, color [. . .] Pero es

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6 I use the concept of “world” as Heidegger characterizes it in “The Origin of the Work of Art”, as that which “structures and simultaneously gathers around itself the unity of paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire for the human being the shape of its destiny. The all-governing expanse of these open relations is the world of this historical people” (Heidegger 2002 [1950]: 21). This concept of world is not incompatible with Mariano Siskind’s historicized understanding of the term as “the symbolic structure that used to sustain humanistic imaginaries of universal emancipation, equality and justice” (Siskind 2019: 206). In the context of this essay, to “lose one’s own sense of worldliness” entails both partaking in the corrosion of humanistic horizons of universal emancipation and experiencing the untying of knots that used to gather and hold a particular community together.
escribir o colgarse. Es escribir o cruzar la calle justo cuando pasa el bus. Es escribir o que el filo de un cuchillo se abra paso” (Hasbún 2018 [2007]: 83; emphasis in the original). As we can infer from this excerpt, writing is, for the character, quite literally vital. It is that which inscribes a dividing line between living and dying. Furthermore, writerly exercises seem here to serve as redeeming forms of suturing or, at least, as therapeutic modes of confronting the trauma of rape in such manner that unrepairable pain does not lead to suicide.

The identification of writing with a therapeutic tool may be a comforting – that is, a conclusive – interpretation. However, this thesis does not hold once we read the above-cited passage in concert with other scenes of writing featured in the novel. I take the following episode to be particularly revealing, but there are many:

Yo en esta sala, sintiendo este frío, recordando estas cosas, intentando escribir este libro. Movimientos secretos del alma atribulada. Alma es una palabra que usa por primera vez. Sonríe después de teclearla. Realmente me estoy haciendo vieja, escribe, sus dedos delicados pero firmes sosteniendo un ritmo constante, como de disparo de ametralladora [. . .] Una tiene que disfrutar lo que va saliendo mientras va saliendo, escribe Elena, los dedos delicados pero firmes sosteniendo un ruido constante, como de disparos de ametralladora, y yo a estas alturas del párrafo he dejado de hacerlo. Luego mira hacia la ventana y se queda quieta durante varios minutos. (Hasbún 2018 [2007]: 68–69)

In this scene, writing emerges as a rather ambivalent, unpredictable practice: the exercise starts off with a dry enumeration of facts, only to move on to the rather grandiloquent expression “movimientos secretos del alma atribulada”, a phrase whose unexpected inclusion of the word “alma” surprises Elena herself and makes her burst into laughter. This laughter is soon followed by a bitter reflection (“realmente me estoy haciendo vieja”), which is in turn succeeded by the playful orchestration of the character’s fingers as she tries to keep the same constant rhythm, a rhythm that is itself disturbing, as it resembles the cadence of a machine gun. Finally, and without any solution of continuity, Elena devotes herself to staring at the window, her thoughts remaining inaccessible to the reader.

The fluctuating plasticity, the pliancy of this writerly process – its making room for the dry, the bitter, the risible, the unexpected, and the pleasurable – does not contradict but surely complicates the hypothesis suggested by the first passage. What the second excerpt and similar ones disclose is that, if the writerly praxis seems to Elena to be a lifesaver, it is not necessarily because it is always therapeutic or cathartic, but chiefly because writing opens a rather safe space of unpredictability. The very engagement with the texture of language, with the materiality of the computer, with the temperature in the room, with the salience of the bright window, this alternating interaction with the ecology
of beings and events co-present in the moment of drafting (and afforded by that moment) – the entire dynamic guarantees that, at the very least, while writing is in place, life will not be subjected to traumatic predictability.

The writing process thus introduces the possibility of novelty into the homogeneity of a time that is otherwise lived as bare and unbearable pain. In other words, writing, in its own processual seriality, exteriority, and open-endedness, in the differences sprouting from its very form of reiteration, unparalyzes an experience of time caught in the repetition of the same. Hence, what we find in this scene are two temporal experiences of reiteration: that of the time of writing (which affords difference throughout its unbounded openness, porousness, and exteriorization) and that of the replay of the scene of rape (which amounts to a self-identical and thus increasingly asphyxiating form of repetition).

The twofold account of temporality displayed in Elena’s scene has, I argue, philosophico-practical implications. These implications go against and simultaneously complement late-twentieth and twenty-first-century characterizations of the act of inscription. What Hasbún’s novel affords in its depiction of the writerly process is a viewpoint complementary to the now too-well-established association between writing and dying. Indeed, it may be the case that, as twentieth-century thinkers have taught us well, “absence”, “destruction”, and “loss” are inherent in any writerly practice, but insofar as it remains a process (and for as long as such process involves a human) writing is of the living. It

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7 Reflections on the relationship between writing, loss, and death constitute the bulk of The Space of Literature (1955), even if Blanchot sides with the non-side of “the neutral”. The very first page of Barthes’s iconoclast “The Death of the Author” already involves the affirmation: “The author enters his own death, writing begins” (1977: 142). Giorgio Agamben’s Language and Death (1982) surveys the relationship between language, being(s), negativity, and death in Western philosophy and poetry. Although the “paradigma deconstructivo” has been closely associated with an “énfasis excesivo en la muerte” (Esposito paraphrased by Moreiras 2019: 136), Derrida himself does not subscribe to characterizations of writing as either pure life or its complete exhaustion (1998 [1967]: 17). Still, the critique of “the metaphysics of presence” implies a corrective emphasis on non-presence understood as a necessary condition of possibility for all modes and activities of archi-écriture, including writing and speaking. I propose a reemphasis on vitality that takes Derrida’s lessons as a premise. In this vein, my focus on (alphabetic) writing-as-spacing could be read as an instance of Derrida’s twofold conceptualization of “différer”. According to the theorist, “Différer in [one] sense is to temporize, to take recourse, consciously or unconsciously, in the temporal and temporizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfillment of ‘desire’ or ‘will’ [. . .] this temporization is also temporalization and spacing, the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time [. . .] The other sense of différer is the more common and identifiable one: to be not identical, to be other, discernible” (Derrida 1982: 8). If I depart from Derrida’s viewpoint in my analyses, it is not only to place particular emphasis on the vital dimension of arche-writing, but also to
necessitates life even if it is traversed by the trails of death. And this lively, not necessarily vitalist but vital condition of the operation of writing, this process that in its exteriorized materiality is open to and opens the possibility of the unpredictable, of an unpredictable that does not come from sudden “unmediated inspiration” but from embodied compenetration, this more-than-human experience of extimacy makes all the difference to a character trapped in a growingly introspective, baleful form of monotony.

The above would be too grand to be my last words. They would stand too close to an overstatement to fulfill the promise of Siskind’s “very little . . .”. As I am determined to keep that promise, I wish to briefly examine an additional scenario—a scene where the stakes accorded to the decision of writing or not writing are lower than in Hasbún’s novel. Ultimately, what I must prove is that writerly exercises also afford intriguing possibilities to those whose lives are not in immediate danger.

This is the case of the characters featured in Conceição Evaristo’s novella “Sabela” (2016). In this piece, a community based in an unspecified area of Brazil retells the story of a flood that, years before, almost obliterated their village. The book is thus composed of diverse accounts of the same event, all collected orally, and then put in writing by the novella’s eponymous protagonist. In the beginning, what the character aims to craft is a narrative as close to the actual event of the flood as possible. Since the only version Sabela has heard over the years is the one she has co-crafted in dialogue with her Mamãe, the daughter decides to ask other members of the community for their versions. “[P]ara um melhor entendimento do que foi a chuva”, she explains, “não carece da escuta de outras falas. Quem sabe se ajuntando pedaços de falas [. . .] não poderia eu chegar a uma narração mais próxima do realmente acontecido. Digo mais próxima, porque penso que diante de certos acontecimentos, a palavra é muda” (Evaristo 2016: 86).

As this passage already suggests, Sabela’s initial presupposition is that—although the event is itself unspeakable, constitutively unsurmountable—the weaving of different narratives will allow the community to get a more cohesive sense of what happened. Yet, as the character engages in an enterprise that demands “transcribing” the cadence and the specificity of the experience of others in their own terms, she finds herself writing sentences such as: “falo do prazer que o dilúvio me causou” (Evaristo 2016: 97), “[d]ebaixo das chuvas, eu examine the distinct historical role that voice and the written letter have played (and still play) in more-than-Western or non-Western societies.
me sentia limpa e igual a todos” (Evaristo 2016: 96), “das chuvas me encanta o mistério” (Evaristo 2016: 102), and “eu não temi nada, estávamos numa prazer-oza brincadeira, cada qual se molhava e molhava o outro” (Evaristo 2016: 91). Immediately after recording accounts on this joyful note, Sabela would find herself inscribing: “O que mais vi foi uma correnteza de naúfragos [. . .] Não esqueço também que as águas me levaram mamãe [. . .] Quando me equilibrei e olhei para traz, ainda vi parte da sua mão, no esforço do nado o do nada, como se estivesse dizendo adeus” (Evaristo 2016: 91–92).

A surprising, rather uncomfortable contrast thus emerges from the tension between Sabela’s initial conceptualization of the flood as a solemnly unsurmountable event, and the complex, intermittently playful, often self-contradictory experiences that are revealed to her through aurality and inscription. In the end, the protagonist cannot but conclude that “muitos se perderam, mas muitos se encontraram nas e pelas águas” (Evaristo 2016: 76) – many died, but many found each other amidst turbulent waters. A structure of worlding crumbled while emerging senses of worldliness surged out of this communal experience.

To be sure, Evaristo’s story does not aestheticize the deadly aftermath of the flood nor environmental catastrophe; on the contrary, there are many instances where coloniality, territorial occupation, modern extractivism, and long-term capitalistic resource mining are contested by the story’s narrating voices (Evaristo 2016: 67, 70, 77). However, the novella is simultaneously invested in showcasing the irreducibility of experience to any hygienic, aprioristic, and uniform moral standard. As soon as it gives itself to the processes of remembrance, of externalization, of dialogic exchange, of unraveling, experience (both personal and collective) proves to be thornier, muddier, far less cohesive, and thus harder to convey than expected. From the perspective of Sabela, different vivências appear in all their convolutedness and unpredictability first in the process of listening and, more nuancedly, in the process of writing– a process that goes from the drafting of her first notes to the “curatorial” practices of reviewing, contrasting, and interlacing all recorded narratives in a single text.

The fact that the convolutedness of experiences seems to appear more intricately during the writing process prompts questions that, despite falling outside the scope of this essay, are worth noting. First, what is the historical standing of writing vis-à-vis speech in this community? When the protagonist concludes that “palavra alguma, seja ela falada, escrita, consagrada, repudiada, inventada, nada diz todo” (Evaristo 2016: 104), what is at stake? Is there a supplementariness, a tension, or a confrontation between writerly and oral (and between official and extra-official) accounts of communal experience? What is Sabela’s status such that she may self-appoint to write on behalf of the collective? What is the relationship
between words, bodies, and water in the context of this flood? Given that the story recounts the event in detail, including the deaths of those que se perderam nas e pelas águas, what can be inferred from the ones who got to live? Is there a criterion that can be retroactively retrieved and that separates deceased from survivors? To borrow Samir Sellami’s delicate phrasing: what can we derive from the “I can breathe [again]” that happens only for few after the flood and that functions as a condition of possibility for Sabela’s plural-though-partial story?

That these questions make us uncomfortable is salutary. As it happens with Hasbún’s work, Evaristo’s piece does not allow for the reduction of her protagonist to a one-dimensional archetype (be it that of the heroine or the anti heroine). Concomitantly, the story prevents us from identifying writing with a cathartic, comforting or conclusive activity. Once again, writerly unfolding is deployed as an interval where open-ended, unsettling, and porous encounters emerge. By displaying these encounters as inherent in any writerly praxis, Evaristo’s work also replaces the public image of literature as a self-enclosed, unmediated activity with a kinetic, thickly mediated characterization of composition: insofar as writing happens in life, it cannot but engage in porous rapports involving human and non-human agents. Finally, Sabela’s penning process implies, as much as Elena’s, an exercise in attentiveness to one’s own body and to others’ presences: in Hasbún’s story, these others are non-human; in Evaristo’s flood narrative, manifold human and non-human embroilments come about.

This anthropodecentric and dynamic characterization of the writerly practice, already present in Hasbún’s work and richly expanded by Evaristo’s piece, bears new theoretico-practical fruits. First and foremost, we gain an increasing awareness of the transformations that the representation of writing has undergone in the Latin American tradition. As I elaborate elsewhere, processual depictions of writing can already be found in mid nineteenth-century novels, and their presence becomes increasingly prominent in mid twentieth-century meta-literary works. However, the emphasis on the enmeshment between human and

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8 In Samir Sellami’s “The Poetics of Respiration”, an unpublished manuscript, the critic reflects on whether “we are hearing a potential shift in our political discourses from Logos to pneuma tou stomatos and from the demand ‘listen to me’ to the statement ‘I can’t breathe’”. Further studies may disclose unexpected links between Dézafi’s “frightening world where suffocation is the rule and breathing almost a miracle” (Sellami) and Sabela’s intermittent characterization of the flood as a “sufocamento da chuva” (Evaristo 2016: 80).

9 My dissertation-in-progress examines representations of the act of writing in the Latin American novel from the nineteenth to the early-twentieth centuries, with a particular emphasis on temporality.
non-human bodies, the complication of the status of writing vis-à-vis speech, and the focus on attentiveness and patience as values—all these seem to be peculiar to the twenty-first century.

I am currently working on ratifying (or regretting having proposed) this hypothesis on representations of writing in the Latin American novel. In the meantime, let us focus on the one fruit that is within reach, and allow me to recapitulate for the final harvest: This is a devastating historical moment for and beyond our field.

In this peculiar context where, in Mark Fisher’s auspiciously borrowed words, “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (Fisher 2009: 2), practices that lend themselves to modest surprises, to patient attentiveness, to reflection and exchange, to unexpected results, to no results at all! Practices just like writing are most welcome. Crucially, though, in order for these praxes to remain safe modes of unpredictability, their processual, mercurial, and porous unfolding needs to occur not in continuity, but in responsible (and sometimes inevitable) discontinuity with politics.

These writerly events, as displayed in Hasbún and Evaristo’s works, would be an occasion of what Alberto Moreiras dubs “infrapolitics”: a spacetime where thought and perception can exist on the sidelines of a dialectical circularity between “politics” and “life” whereby everything, absolutely everything, is either...

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10 I am here referring to the threefold Heideggerian-Siskindian-planetary sense of term “world”.

11 According to Fisher, the phrase was first attributed to Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson (Fisher 2009: 2). To my knowledge, the idea first appeared in print in Jameson’s The Seeds of Time (1994). The “Introduction” reads: “It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism” (Jameson 1994: xii). That these words have begun to widely resonate with humanists fifteen years after their coinage may be another testament to our belatedness.

12 Although Moreiras uses the spatial metaphors of “la dimensión infrapolítica” (Moreiras 2019: 37) and “la región infrapolítica” (Moreiras 2019: 32), the infrapolitical enterprise (Moreiras 2019: 41) – as an always-ongoing adventure in thought/being at the margins of the circularity between life and politics – presupposes at least two kinds of temporality: a) a factic temporality (i.e., the time of existence where infrapolitics amounts to an ontological imperative, to the fact that life and politics are de facto non-coextensive) and a reflective temporality (i.e., all instances of explicit recognition and harnessing of infrapolitical facticity as an existential imperative, as that which does not let existence be reduced to the either-or of life and politics). The active carving out of writerly moments would be a case of reflective infrapolitics carried out within the inevitable constraints of factic time; writerly moments as such, though constrained by the imperatives of factic time, may combine different sorts of reflective experiences of temporality (some of which might be infrapolitical).
political or apolitical. As Moreiras’s himself puts it, if we accept that there is nothing but life and politics, bare existence or political subjectivation, then “no hay salida, solo la aceptación mansa de una dialéctica [vida-política] que se mueve hacia la asimilación total, que es también la total transparencia [...] equivalencia plena y total disponibilidad, continuo ilimitado: vida y política [...] Y lo que se ha excluido es la posibilidad de dar un paso atrás para buscar un lugar de acogida” (Moreiras 2019: 29).

I cannot in good faith promise that all non-instrumental writerly practices will be homely places (“lugares de acogida”), but I am confident enough to suggest that many of them will stand as relatively safe spacetimes to rehearse avenues of thought that may only make themselves available through an open, attentive, patient, and hopefully collaborative process of inscription. Maybe, for us who are passionate about doing, studying, and teaching literature, for us who, for better or worse, have placed a bet on language and are still stubbornly betting on it, a question to add to our critical repertoire could be what kinds of under-explored writing and after-writing experiences we can assemble, bring to bear, put to work, and socialize? In other words: what kinds of writerly intervals can we carve out during those pockets of weekly time that we share with our peers and students—those pockets which are the only mode of “very little” that we definitely have (for now)? Which specific, untried, unorthodox strategies can we still put at others’ disposal, perhaps because we wish to help them mourn, perhaps because writing allows precisely for that which we cannot predict?

As I hope to have shown with my analyses of Hasbún and Evaristo’s scenes, our search for writerly praxes need not start from scratch: we may begin by (re) turning to Latin American literature for ideas.

**Works Cited**


