INTRODUCTION

THE RETURN OF THE CONTEMPORARY

> I am only the imaginary contemporary of my own present: contemporary of its languages, its utopias, its systems (i.e., of its fictions), in short, of its mythology or of its philosophy but not of its history, of which I inhabit only the shimmering reflection: the *phantasmagoria*.
>
> **—Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes***

> The idea that a writer should be contemporaneous is itself modern, but I should say it belongs more to journalism than to literature. No real writer ever tried to be contemporary.
>
> **—Jorge Luis Borges, *Borges on Writing***

> It takes just one awful second, I often think, and an entire epoch passes.
>
> **—W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn***

A massive weather event hits Argentina at the turn of the millennium, transforming Buenos Aires into a desert and causing time to move backward. The event is called *la intemperie*, a noun without an exact English equivalent that could be translated as "the great outdoors." Argentina ceases to exist and its citizens are left out in the open, without institutions that protect them from the violent attack against the modern social contract. La intemperie is an event characteristic of the twenty-first century, when our different crises (social, economic, political, and environmental) cannot be considered isolated phenomena. Told in Pedro Mairal's 2005 novel *El año del desierto* (The year of the desert), the story of Buenos Aires turned desert embodies the setbacks that Latin American societies experienced following the embrace of neoliberalism, whose origins in Augusto Pinochet's Chile (1973–1990) united the "shock therapy" of economic austerity with a militarized state that used torture and disappearance as technologies of repression.[1] "In 2001 the curtain fell and reality became clear," Mairal remarked about the socioeconomic crisis that shook Argentina after the neoliberal re-

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forms of the previous decade. "We had lived under the illusion that we were in the first world. The stories of deterioration accelerated. Everything ended up breaking down."[2] While the novel's protagonist travels to the past and loses her rights as a human being and a woman, Mairal rewrites the most important landmarks of Latin American literature to make sense of a rapidly deteriorating present and the vanishing of a future. *El año del desierto* represents how Latin American novels of the twenty-first century conceive the contemporary as a paradoxical temporality. While social time harkens back to the origins of humanity, writers work with the ruins of modern history and literature to imagine alternatives to our neoliberal end times.

In this book I analyze a series of turn-of-the-twenty-first-century Latin American novels that enable us to frame the continuous search for names, aesthetic genres, and temporal models upon which our era is built. Although it seems evident that literature has always been contemporary with its times, it is essential to acknowledge that, beginning some decades ago (a critical moment that scholars have traced to the end of the Cold War and the turn of the millennium), the grand narratives of modernity have perished along with the notion of a stable future. Meanwhile, postmodernism still gave in to the category of the modern. The postmodern strategies of pastiche, citation, or reevaluation of the past have become inoperative in representing our era of apocalyptic catastrophes. Although postmodernists denounced literature's implication with power through narrative self-consciousness, their critique of representation still promoted the reader's moral and political indifference toward the value of truth.[3]

More than a style or the death of style as such, the contemporary is a renewed inclination toward the present, a need to formulate the question about what it means to live under conditions of global emergency at a time when humanity has jeopardized its survival as a species. That contemporaneity is the privileged mode of twenty-first-century aesthetic searches is not to say that these searches reproduce the contingency or temporal homogeneity promoted in societies under neoliberalism. It means, on the contrary, that writers respond to neoliberal conditions by proposing new temporal orientations. The return to the past is the most distinct aesthetic and political device of the literatures of the present; authors work with remains, material traces, and residual objects to weave new filiations and invent original genealogies after the arrival of the end times. Introducing fractures in the linear conception of time, the contemporary is also co-temporality, the coexistence of various times and places, and the possibility of a collective dwelling in the face of an unprecedented temporal crisis.

In this book I address the question of what it means to be contemporary when the present is felt like a succession of apocalyptic catastrophes. I consider the contemporary to be a time of impassioned reflection concerning

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our current moment of crisis and I track the different ways in which Latin American writers are resisting the neoliberal present through post-national returns to the foundation of modern nation-states, ecocritical returns to the sustainable knowledge of Indigenous communities, archival returns to the sites of slavery and the cultural practices of Afro-Latin Americans, traumatic or post-traumatic returns to the last state-sponsored military dictatorships, and post-historical returns to a time when it was still possible to build utopian visions of the future. These aesthetic and political returns show us that modernity, understood as progress or telos, is no longer helpful when we are describing the essence of the contemporary world and its models of time. For these Latin American writers, returning to the past serves as a strategy of resistance to the generalized and omnipresent sense of crisis that shuts down all possibilities of critical thinking and utopian desires of change. Some of the twenty-first-century novelists I examine in this book put forward archeological returns to the past to cast the present against the grain, understanding that it is through anachronism that we can arrive at an antidote to the tyrannical here and now of neoliberal societies.[4] Other novels plunge into the future and return to the present with invaluable information about what our world can become or with the desire to create something new when history appears to have ended.

The present that these fictions oppose is traversed by the main symptoms of the contemporary crisis of time: presentism, temporal acceleration, programmed obsolescence, amnesia, and the mediatization of culture. François Hartog coined the term "presentism" to refer to this time of memory and debt, daily forgetfulness, uncertainty, and simulacra that is dictated by life under late-stage capitalism.[5] Unlike the futurism that characterized the political projects and artistic expressions throughout much of the twentieth century, presentism is aligned with the feeling that, no matter how hard we try to project ourselves into the future or immerse ourselves in the past, there is no way to flee the confines of the present. According to Paolo Virno, the world today is unfolding under the sign of déjà vu: no activities are worthwhile because they all seem to have been extracted from a script that is familiar to the point of exhaustion.[6] The present turns in on itself and surrenders to the reign of the immediate, the fleeting, and the ephemeral, to the rapid obsolescence of technological artifacts and the tyranny of neoliberal time. On the other hand, these writers are creating untimely presents: presents overloaded with time that—by shattering the chronological order, gathering scattered fragments, and exposing the noncontemporary—turn the aesthetic form into a logbook of unprecedented orientations, where it becomes possible to lament melancholically over what has been lost or to restore forgotten trajectories, which transform the present into a material that can be transmitted to new generations.[7]

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How are Latin American writers resisting the time out of time of contemporary societies? In the chapters of this book I approach the question of the contemporary from the aesthetic, temporal, and sociopolitical imaginaries through which Latin American authors are narrating our neoliberal end times: socioeconomic meltdown, ecological apocalypse, memory or postmemory, the cosmopolitanism of migrants and political exiles, and the failed emancipation of Black Latin Americans. In each chapter I examine the work of two authors from different parts of the region. Through their mutual dialogue I demonstrate that the contemporary is a battle over this century's historical identity, which becomes visible when the voices of a multiplicity of actors are heard on a global scale or, in this case, on a hemispheric one. I examine works by Pedro Mairal, Rita Indiana Hernández, Samanta Schweblin, Guadalupe Nettel, Juan Cárdenas, Itamar Vieira Junior, Julián Fuks, Verónica Gerber Bicecci, Valeria Luiselli, and Alejandro Zambra. These authors use the strategy of temporal return as the privileged device to open historical becoming to the possibility of conceiving other worlds and other circulations of meaning. Returning does not mean repeating specific moments of the past but, rather, producing a brief appearance that brings with it the promise of a different future—a future that is always on the verge of ensuing. Returning is, in other words, a way of politicizing the present, an aesthetic and political mechanism to combat the advent of the end times and the sense of impotence that neoliberal measures have brought as an intrinsic part of their structure of feeling.

These writers bring to light issues linked to the effects of Latin America's inscription on the global economy. The type of crisis that emerges in these turn-of-the-century novels such as economic recession or global warming replaced the post-dictatorship testimonial poetics, which focused on the restitution of justice, the battle against oblivion, and human rights abuses. The unstable formal conditions of these works are a direct response to the neoliberal precariousness of Latin American societies, in which large sectors of the population fell into unemployment and were left out of social protection networks. Unlike the totalizing ambition of post-dictatorship cultural production or long-range aesthetic projects such as Roberto Bolaño's, the works of these writers are short novels or novellas that are inserted into a literary market opened by authors such as César Aira and Mario Bellatin since the 1980s. For instance, the novels of Alejandro Zambra and Valeria Luiselli contradict and correct themselves as they go along, reflecting the experience of the present as a precarious and transitional period. A sense of erasure prevails in relation to their aesthetic procedures and to the interchangeable names of their characters. As one of the characters in Alejandro Zambra's *Bonsái* (2006; trans. 2008 as *Bonsai*) says about the novel of the same title that he is writing: "Practically nothing happens in *Bonsai*. There's

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enough plot for a two-page story, and maybe not even a good one."[8] The creation of a pruning procedure gives rise to works in which not a single word seems to be left over, whose precarious texture summons us to meditate urgently on the contemporary and the worlds to come. These are literatures that, like the temporal models of the new millennium, are in a state of sketch, calling the reading public to move the words from one side to the other, as if they alone could not account for the time out of time of present-day societies.

These aesthetic-political concerns also appear in Anglophone novels by authors such as Tom McCarthy and Ben Lerner. These novels are populated by precarious characters who walk through big cities in search of moments of communion with other citizens and with forgotten voices from the past and who continually question the possibility of having "a profound experience of art" amid the omnipresent crisis of the contemporary world.[9] U., the narrator of McCarthy's *Satin Island*, is an ethnographer who works for a corporation on a tentacular project (a Big Report on our times) that compiles all the information available on the web about every aspect of contemporary life. Immersed in a 24/7 temporality and surrounded by screens, U.—a figure of return whose name implicitly refers to the reader (you) and the U-turn—develops his own field of study, the anthropology of the contemporary. He seeks to dissociate the notion of epoch from the traditional division between historical periods and return it to its original meaning: "a place from which one looks at things."[10] The same stance of distancing from the contemporary appears in Lerner's *The Topeka School*, a novel that returns to the 1990s, in which he weaves a prehistory of the present of Donald Trump's presidency. Against the backdrop of global warming, post-truth politics, and xenophobic and racist policies against migrants, Lerner delineates the discourse on the end of history as a fantasy of white liberal technocrats. Literary practice becomes a search for temporal models that resist the irreversible race of progress and the teleological conception of history, because, as one of the characters says, "history [is] not over but paused."[11]

Similarly, the novelists I analyze in this book create aesthetic devices to capture the present and open future horizons when causal relations between temporal orders have become excessively blurred. Unlike these works of world literature, however, these fictions pose their version of the crisis and form a communal map of Latin America, where neoliberal measures of privatization, free-market capitalism, and austerity have led with a great impetus to a decomposition of the social fabric. These authors imagine Latin America as a web of continental concerns about large-scale extractivism, the battle of the feminist movement against patriarchy, and the void that the new generations feel in relation to a violent past they did not experience and which therefore never ceases to pass.

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In the first decades of the twenty-first century, Latin American literature has become fertile ground for dialogues and critical interventions between authors from different parts of the continent that would lose much of their symbolic force if they were analyzed from a national or subcontinental perspective. After all, critical vocabularies are formed collectively, as is reflected in several of the terms that appear repeatedly throughout this study: intemperie (meaning "to be out in the open, at the mercy of the elements"), "secondary characters," and "literature of the children." These visions show the dialogic matrix of the contemporary moment and the attempts made by Latin American authors to draw a collective map of our situation of global crisis or emergency. The recent critical adoption of the concept of world literature in the field of Latin Americanism is indicative of the interest in forming a transnational canon that transcends Cold War geopolitical binarism and center–periphery relations.[12] I will not overlook that many of the dialogues between these Latin American authors come from the circuits established by the cultural field: book fairs, independent publishers, literary magazines, and creative writing workshops. However, the focus of this book will be on temporal imaginaries and the existence of various contemporaneities lying at the heart of the contemporary. In this sense, as Terry Smith points out, *con tempus* refers to the multiplicity of relations between being and time that exist in the same historical period, so that the contemporary, under our current geopolitical conditions, must be thought of as a series of simultaneous temporalities.[13] Besides inhabiting the same epoch, these writers share a distrust of a homogeneous temporality marked by the global circuits of capital: the diachronic temporality of progress as accumulation and improvement.

LITERATURE IN THE EXPANDED FIELD

One of the decisive characteristics of the literatures of the present is their capacity to cross the borders between aesthetic fields and posit a third space that conceives the literary as an interdisciplinary practice.[14] It is a matter of knotting a new "in-between" and enabling other forms of hearing and visibility of the common that make the contemporary a time of collective participation in the reconfiguration of the public scene.[15] By incorporating various aesthetic fields into their making, these writers aim to build a collective present at a time when acceleration, discontinuity, and fetishistic obsession with the past prevent the critical elaboration of a shared experience. These novels travel along the edges of generic conventions to confront a time when our historical experience has been suspended. In this sense, the tendency of these Latin American authors to use procedures of contemporary art gives way to open-ended works that, instead of promoting passive contemplation on the part of the reader spectators, summon them to collaborate actively

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in the construction of meaning. While rejoicing in the assembly of formats coming from diverse arts and in the conversation with figures of the artistic tradition, these writers destabilize the position of the authorial subject to activate a collective presence that, through its impersonal character, counteracts the neoliberal exaltation of the individual self.

Mexican writer Verónica Gerber Bicecci describes herself as a "visual artist who writes." In *Conjunto vacío* (2015; trans. 2018 as *Empty Set*), her first novel, she introduces Venn diagrams and visual schemes to refer to the formation of emotional ties between the children of political exiles of the Southern Cone's last dictatorial regimes. When the characters in *Conjunto vacío* visit a contemporary art museum, the narrator does not limit herself to duplicating in writing the abstract artworks of Ulises Carrión, Mirtha Dermisache, or Marcel Broodthaers but, rather, draws her own version of the paintings on display, blurring the boundaries between original and copy, between literature and the plastic arts. Like the trajectory of the artists whom she analyzes in the essays of *Mudanza*, Gerber Bicecci inscribes literature in the realm of words and the "expanded field" of actions, propitiating a displacement "from page to body, from word to space, to place; from sentence to event, to action; from novel to staged life."[16] In Julián Fuks's *A resistência* (2015; trans. 2019 as *Resistance*), the narrator visits museums of memory and carefully examines photographs and identity cards of disappeared persons. For Fuks, the active contemplation of these photographs becomes fundamental in the exercise of questioning the supposed neutrality of the representational technologies of the last military dictatorship in Argentina, which conceal the state's responsibility for the disappearance of citizens and show that photography helped to legitimize the structures of military power. Other novels, such as Rita Indiana's *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015; trans. 2018 as *Tentacle*), narrate the formation of aesthetic projects in which literature intersects with conceptual art, participatory art, and electronic music. One of the characters in *La mucama de Omicunlé* is a DJ who delineates the writer as a collector of common production and a programmer of the artistic tradition.

In this sense, most of these works respond directly to theorizations of the contemporary arts, such as those of French curator Nicolas Bourriaud. Bourriaud has coined a series of terms that account for these shifts in turn-of-the-century aesthetic practices: "relational aesthetics," "postproduction," "exform," and "radicant." The concept of relational aesthetics points to the need to reflect on the artistic manifestations of a present characterized by the fall of the modern project of emancipation and the urgency to propose new models of "possible universes."[17] The exform conceives aesthetics as "the site where border negotiations unfold between what is rejected and what is admitted, products and waste."[18] Whereas postproduction recon-

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figures the idea of tradition no longer as "a museum containing works that must be cited or 'surpassed,'" radicant aesthetics sets "one's roots in motion, staging them in heterogeneous contexts and formats."[19] The term "altermodernity" encompasses all the above. Bourriaud defines altermodernity as a period in which thinkers acknowledge that modernization has become inseparable from colonial and imperial enterprises.[20] Mairal's *El año del desierto*, for example, rewinds Argentinean history and rewrites the fundamental milestones of its literary tradition within the framework of the precarious economies and barter clubs that emerged after the 2001 crisis, making the writer a "semionaut" who invents "protocols of use for all existing modes of representation and all formal structures."[21] In Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* (2014; trans. 2017 as *Fever Dream*), the characters' conversation in the context of pesticide poisoning questions the readers and establishes an "unlimited discussion" that gives rise to "the collective elaboration of meaning."[22]

Other contemporary works expand the book into different formats. These works take to the streets, reconfigure public space, situate themselves in the museum, and establish democratic ties with other institutions (the factory, the publishing house, the theater). *La historia de mis dientes* (2013; trans. 2015 as *The Story of My Teeth*) by Valeria Luiselli—one of the authors whose work I study in the following pages—belongs to the format that Lionel Ruffel has called "exhibited literature," which transcends the modern paradigm of the book and produces new interventions within the cultural industry. In the contemporary moment, according to Ruffel, publishing has become both an action and a practice, returning the word to its original meaning: "making public."[23] *La historia de mis dientes* was commissioned by the Fundación/Colección Jumex for the catalog of an exhibition entitled "The Hunter and the Factory" (by curators Magalí Arriola and Juan Gaitán). The writing of the novel followed a specific procedure. Under the pseudonym Gustavo Sánchez Sánchez, which is also the name of the novel's protagonist, Luiselli sent the chapters to a reading group made up of workers at the Jumex juice factory (located in the municipality of Ecatepec de Morelos). The workers provided Luiselli with ideas for writing the next installment and photographs that were part of the novel's final section. The first version of the work appeared in the bilingual Spanish-English exhibition catalog under the title "La historia contemporánea de mis dientes y algunas parabólicas sin moraleja" ("The Contemporary Story of My Teeth and Some Parabolas without a Moral") and only later in book form (published by Sexto Piso in Mexico and Spain). However, the book as a format also becomes an unstable object, since the English version of the novel, translated by Christina MacSweeney, presents several differences with the two Spanish editions. Among them, there is a change in the quotations

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that precede each chapter and in the characters' names—references to well-known figures of the Mexican and world literary tradition.

Through these points of contact between art and literature, aesthetics and politics, in this book I trace how twenty-first-century writers are devising strategies of resistance to the referential void that materialized after the fall of genealogies and grand narratives. It is no coincidence that the contemporary as an aesthetic category—a marker of contemporary art museums—emerged following the Second World War. During the war, humanity witnessed events that forever altered the traditional conception of the work of art as a critique of the outrages of capitalism and a vehicle for utopian change. History was no longer a process directed toward the emancipation of human societies.[24]

In the post-1945 world, the new generations had to appropriate the traumatic history of their ancestors to access a legacy they inherited incompletely. This predicament was similar to the one faced by the children of the disappeared and political exiles after the last South American dictatorships. Contemporary artists have become increasingly aware of their limitations in effecting radical changes in the social fabric, which does not mean that their works have ceased to serve as a platform for reflection on the ontology of the present. Andrea Giunta points out that contemporary art has begun to return to the past critically, not as a "naïve, pastiche operation" but as "a return that involves criticizing postwar society and convoking new publics."[25] This attempt to appeal to a more significant number of people is at the core of the notion of an expanded field. Like participatory aesthetics, as theorized by Claire Bishop, contemporary artists "engage in dialogue and creative negotiation with other people: technicians, fabricators, curators, public bodies, other artists, intellectuals, participants, and so on."[26] The elaboration of the present is the domain of a set of actors: the contemporary becomes a world of contrasts, contradictions, and antinomies that cannot be described by universal generalizations.[27] These novels of the expanded field remind us that there is no longer a single contemporaneity but various simultaneous ones.

LITERATURES OF THE PRESENT

I argue that the historicity of the literatures of the present is to be found in anachronisms and nonlinear temporalities. The notion of "timeliness" that contemporary writers work with is not equivalent to the presentism prevailing under capitalist conditions, as in the fashion industry's cycles of novelty and obsolescence. Paradoxically, literature becomes contemporary by returning to specific moments, artifacts, or figures that demand their place in our present. These novels are prophecies in reverse, because insofar as they make it possible to illuminate the blind spots of our inheritance they open

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possibilities for transmitting part of a lost heritage. The contemporary is a historical investigation into the different temporalities that are part and parcel of our time. Like any question about the links between past and present, the contemporary derives from a discontinuous and asynchronous notion of history. As opposed to chronological conceptions of time, the question of the contemporary assumes the coexistence of different temporalities in any given historical moment: a condition that distinguishes each present from other present moments of the past and that summons critics, historians, and thinkers from various disciplines to unravel these temporal orders.[28] The contemporary implies the development of a historical consciousness about events, places, and figures that haunt the present and destabilize it. These events include the acts of barbarism at the heart of Latin American nation-building projects and the conception of land as *terra nullius*, which served as justification for neoextractivism. Instead of undertaking returns that foreclose our capacity to act, Latin American authors capture the energies that coexist within the contemporary: anachronism, heterochrony, and survival of the past. In the face of a future that is increasingly closed in on itself, contemporary writers establish new circulations of meaning, form a historical consciousness of our times, and participate in the collective elaboration of the present.

Just as these authors imagine literatures in the plural, in the following study I insist that, if the contemporary is to be conceived as a montage of latencies and discontinuities, then history must be considered a choral discipline representing events in their plurality. This notion of historical knowledge as a site of temporal complexity comes from the work of Reinhart Koselleck, for whom historical episodes accumulate at different speeds and form temporal sediments, never a singular history. Koselleck contests the tendency of historians to create teleological versions of history and to draw a picture of time inherited from the Enlightenment: the model of a single history, history as an arrow pointing forward or as *magistra vitae* (a lesson for the future). In contrast, Koselleck argues for finding "possible histories" at the center of historical becoming and conceiving "a multilayered theory of time."[29] The authors studied here resist the presentism of contemporary societies by capturing a plurality of histories. In some novels they bring to the fore anonymous lives and secondary characters. In others they uncover minor events, temporal imaginaries, and memory sites located on the flipside of the neoliberal present. In most of them, they juxtapose heterogeneous temporalities that break away from traditional notions of linearity and teleology. Representations of grand narratives have given way to portraits of anonymous lives, buried histories, and the minute details of everyday life. Writers weave filiations with forgotten artists, not with influential figures. These are some of the strategies through which Latin

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American authors at the beginning of the new century imagine alternative presents, glimpsing in the montage of genealogical causalities the emergence of other histories and other possible kinds of literature.

I will outline three facets of the work with temporality carried out by these novelists: (1) the debates about our neoliberal end times, (2) the deliberate use of anachronism, and (3) the question of what is contemporary. The concept of the end times captures the difficulties that contemporary writers face when situating the present in continuity with past and future eras. As a result of the inadequacy of linear history and representational forms, these authors resort to anachronism and return to the past to slow down history and open up the possibility of extracting knowledge from it. In this way, they reconfigure debates about what is contemporary in societies where the present follows the dynamics of capital and the rhythms of nonstop productivity.

NEOLIBERAL END TIMES

Neoliberalism is traditionally defined as "a political order" that champions economic measures such as free trade, deregulation, and the privatization of state institutions.[30] Historians have traced its origins back to the interwar years in Vienna, where two economists—Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises—advocated for the freedom of market forces to develop without regulatory control.[31] Latin American histories of neoliberalism begin with the work of the economists who studied at the University of Chicago under Hayek and Milton Friedman, known popularly as the Chicago Boys. Friedman and his disciples would go on to shape the economic program of Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship, which ruled in Chile from 1973 to 1990 and applied a "shock treatment" that left Chileans scrambling to adjust to a profoundly unequal capitalist model.[32] Latin America thus became a laboratory of neoliberal policies whose consequences continue to be felt today, especially in Chile, where the constitution promulgated by the Pinochet regime in 1980 is still in effect despite recent attempts by the people to rewrite its fundamental clauses.[33] Following massive protests in 2019, Chileans voted to draft a new constitution to undo the neoliberal measures of the Pinochet regime and to acknowledge the rights of people who are invisible to the state.

In Latin America, free market capitalism and the repressive techniques of dictatorships went hand in hand, so long as we understand both as analogous forms of shock therapy that dispossessed citizens of their human rights. The rise of neoliberalism came with full force in the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of former communist nations to the reign of capitalist economics. It did not matter that dictatorships like Pinochet's were no longer in power. Both Chile's problematic transition to

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democracy (with the first democratic government partly made up of former Pinochet officials) and Argentina's embrace of corporate politics (followed by the pardons granted by President Carlos Saúl Menem to former military commanders) confirmed that previous forms of economic and political violence continued under the sign of the neoliberal market. In Mexico, the Zapatista uprising in the Lacandon jungle of Chiapas, in response to the passing of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), became a symbol of resistance to the empty promises of neoliberalism and globalization. It remains to be seen whether the neoliberal order has come to an end with the Great Recession of 2007–2008, the rise of new right-wing politicians such as Bolsonaro and Trump, or the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its confirmation that governments are the only institutions capable of mitigating our socioeconomic and epidemiological crises.[34]

In this book I conceive the neoliberal era as a historical period characterized by a series of returns and setbacks in the modern conception of time as progress.[35] Instead of taking 1989 as the historical marker of our globalized era, I take the year 2001, considering that, in Latin America, this was a year in which the dreams of economic freedom, social mobility, and cultural exchange symbolized by globalization crumbled through the advent of a temporality of crisis.[36] In Argentina, the 2001 economic meltdown meant that large swaths of the population fell into unemployment or underemployment. The turn of the millennium marked our realization of the emergence of a planetary temporality: the time of the Anthropocene.[37] Suddenly, stories of dispossession surfaced in the press, returning us to a time before the nation-state was defined as the guarantor of collective futures. I take my cue from Mary Louise Pratt, who refers to these recycled archives through the notion of "demodernization": the spectral reemergence of the narratives of the castaway, the captive, and the slave ship, not as "dramas of triumphal homecoming but [as] tragedies of no return."[38] Demodernization results from neoliberalism's erosion of education, health care, and transportation systems due to austerity and privatization measures. The nation-state stops being an inclusive actor since its democratic networks do not apply equally to all citizens. As a response to these setbacks that deprived people of their most basic human rights, I argue that post-2001 Latin American novels use the strategy of temporal return to politicize the twenty-first-century present, exploring the roots of these interlocking crises in the long-term temporality of environmental devastation and the short-term temporality of dictatorial violence.

In the first part I explore neoliberal rationality's roots in modern nation-building projects, which failed to create policies of belonging and inclusivity. I am inspired by the temporal setbacks of novels such as Mairal's *El año del desierto*, which narrates the 2001 socioeconomic crisis by rewinding the

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nation's history from the present to the colonial era, its female protagonist growing old while losing her constitutional rights. The novelist stages the temporality of neoliberal reversal through the erosion of the democratic networks of the nation-state, the transformation of the individual into an entrepreneur (or *homo economicus*) and of the proletariat into the precariat.[39]

However, by rewriting important milestones of Argentinean history and culture in light of the temporality of crisis, Mairal posits the strategy of return as a recycling of the collective dreams of emancipation, opening the present to a new sense of futurity. Other writers share this critical strategy by throwing into relief the conditions of social inequality amplified during the neoliberal era, such as the persisting bonds of slavery suffered by Black farmworkers or the commodification of women's bodies in parallel with the exploitation of natural landscapes. Instead of merely pointing out the continuities between the colonial era, the nineteenth-century past, and the neoliberal present, Latin American writers combine different periods in a non-hierarchical manner to create a new image of history. In this way, their narrative art is influenced by the temporal elasticity of Afro-diasporic religious practices and the emergence of alternative systems to capitalism such as recycling and barter economies.

The second part is centered on the last military dictatorships' lingering effects on the generation of writers who grew up during this period or following their country's transition to democracy. By foregrounding the figure of children who came of age during times of social, political, and environmental unrest, these authors explore the role of memory in second-generation exiles or the sons and daughters of political activists. I argue that the writers of this new generation use the figure of children to appropriate the traumatic history of their predecessors and to access an incomplete past. The narrator of Julián Fuks's *A resistência* grew up in Brazil because his parents managed to escape Argentina's dictatorial regime. He asks himself whether he inherited their exile and can also be called a political refugee. Inheritance also comes to the fore in a chapter about the notion of literature after the end of history. Instead of giving in to the depoliticized temporality of the end of history, which heralded worldwide acceptance of liberal democracy and market economy following the demise of communism, I argue that the writers in this group represent the past not as a mere repetition but as a critical rearrangement that showcases its gaps and absences.

The concept of return underscores the combination of heterogeneous temporalities as a literary strategy that is necessary for critically elaborating the present. As a direct response to the reemergence of repressed moments in the continent's history (what Pratt calls the return of the monsters), Latin American writers travel back in time in order to understand the incomplete-

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ness of the present and the waning of the future, to make sense of the crisis of historical transmission, and to fill in the gaps of a partial inheritance.[40] In doing so, they reformulate the temporal models of literature in the new century. As citizens of Latin American countries during neoliberalism's attack on the modern social contract, the writers discussed here perceive themselves as orphans of history and victims of the temporal dispossession of contemporary societies, which according to Jacques Rancière, create "a hierarchy of temporalities . . . [a] distance between those who live in the time of knowledge that delivers justice and those who live in the time of ignorance and error."[41] By combining short-term and long-term temporalities, these writers reveal an unconscious of the contemporary and posit the manipulation of time as the only hermeneutical tool that can undermine the highly unequal world created in the wake of neoliberalism.

IN PRAISE ON ANACHRONISM

Hannah Arendt's *Between Past and Future* (1954) is a fundamental book for the prehistory of the contemporary. Arendt's book inaugurated the post-1945 present as a period of in-betweenness—a gap between past and future that throws individuals into a battlefield between antagonistic forces. Drawing on an aphorism by René Char ("Our inheritance was left to us by no testament"), Arendt examines the wasted possibilities of the French Resistance to establish a "public space" in which freedom predominated, a "treasure" that members of these movements had discovered and possessed for a brief period but did not know how to pass on to new generations.[42] Arendt reflected on the European postwar present through a parable by Kafka, "He," which tells the story of a man who feels threatened by two enemies: a past that has not lost its relevance and a future that unfolds before him an infinite range of possibilities and expectations. In Kafka's parable, becoming "an umpire" of the present would consist of extracting from the gap a latent truth, creating the conditions of possibility for thinking about the contemporary.

Since the turn of the century, contemporaneity has come to be experienced as a multiplicity of simultaneous times. French theorist Georges Didi-Huberman has developed a philosophy of heterochrony and anachronism to think about art history in a nonlinear manner.[43] In his works he pays attention to the assemblages of heterogeneous temporalities constituting all images since these "are bearers of survivals . . . essentially montages of heterogeneous meanings and temporalities."[44] Didi-Huberman dismisses the debates on the end of history and the end of art—which, according to him, "are crude and ill-conceived"—since they follow synchronic and non-dialectical temporal models, overlooking the cracks, the dislocations, and the interstices in which images are inserted.[45] In other words, these

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debates disregard the idea that an artist can set himself up against his own epoch through temporal manipulations that seek to reveal "an unconscious of history."[46]

In *The Surviving Image* (2018), Didi-Huberman exemplifies this anachronistic art historical model through the work of Aby Warburg, who, in his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, complexified the temporality of images via a conception of history as survival (*Nachleben*). The Atlas was a constellation of images of Antiquity randomly arranged by Warburg to activate the imagination and perception of viewers, an encyclopedic project based on an impure model of time and images. This project made any attempt at periodization impossible and deconstructed linear history by blurring the boundaries between before and after.[47] Through a reading of Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* vis-à-vis Walter Benjamin's theories on the dialectical image, Didi-Huberman derives a philosophy of history in which the artist is in charge of revealing the discontinuities of historical discourse, of producing a model of time as a hieroglyphic with layers of archaeological density, and above all, of creating an interval in which the latencies, residues, and impurities of historical time can be perceived. The notion of return that I use in this book owes much to what Didi-Huberman calls "the tempo of the *revenances*," the temporality of "ideas which return, except that they never return completely, a circumstance which constantly incites him to make renewed attempts."[48] Instead of reproducing the presentist obsession of contemporary societies, the novels I study in the following pages work with dialectical images that engage readers in the search for future perspectives when a sense of apathy characteristic of the post-historical era still prevails.[49]

In Latin America, Josefina Ludmer has insistently considered contemporary literature a sphere replete with anachronisms and temporal cracks. In *Aquí América Latina* (2010) she interrogates in depth the methodological resources that literary critics have at their disposal to produce histories of contemporary literature. Attentive to the need to adopt dialectical paradigms of history in an era of presentist organization, Ludmer chooses the model of speculation because, faced with a "new world" that forces us to change "the molds, genres, and species" we use to apprehend it, this model offers us access to "the factory of reality."[50] The neologism "realidadficción" (reality fiction) that Ludmer uses throughout the book conveys the interweaving between the public and private spheres, literary and aesthetic genres, and categories such as author and style. For Ludmer, this intertwining between different orders constitutes a "cognitive map" of the contemporary.[51]

Despite reflecting extensively on the notion of post-autonomous literatures, critics have neglected Ludmer's insights in the first section of her book, where she deals with the question of temporal perception in times

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of crisis. In "Buenos Aires año 2000: el diario sabático," Ludmer traces the symptoms of temporal disorientation and the mutations of the cultural landscape after the failure of the neoliberal modernizations that defined the 1990s throughout the continent and particularly in Argentina: a sense of "temporal lacuna," of "the beginning of the end," as "the present is memory and déjà vu: a duplication of the past."[52] Ludmer's encounters with a group of Argentinean writers convince her that, in the face of this apocalyptic panorama of presentism, museification of memory, and de-temporalization of the present, literature has the necessary tools to think against the grain, return to the past, and ensure the transmission of a heritage that was experienced as a void. These conceptions of a paradoxical, outdated, and untimely contemporaneity are at the heart of the strategies of critical return that I propose in my reading of the literatures of the present.

NEW JOURNEYS TO THE SEED

The writers studied here are not the first to return to critical moments in Latin American history and literature in order to confront the archive's voids and absences. They are not even the first to describe themselves as orphans of the literary tradition.[53] In *Myth and Archive* (1990), Roberto González Echevarría examined the modern Latin American novel's recycling of the continent's foundational narratives. According to him, novelists such as Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel García Márquez disassembled the scientific constructs culled in the nineteenth century and the colonial period to create "a form of the beginning," a new starting point for the Latin American novel. "The Archive is an image of the end of time. . . . The Archive is apocalyptic, it is like a time capsule launched into infinity, but without the hope of reaching eternity."[54]

González Echevarría's definition of the archive resonates with the task facing contemporary writers after the end of the modern understanding of history as progress or telos. For these authors, contemporaneity derives from their attempts to reconstruct history after the end of historicity and the fall of modernity's grand narratives. As opposed to the modern Latin American novel, contemporary works do not feature "oracular figures" or "living archives," either because these figures have perished alongside modernity's utopian discourses (think of the victims of the last military dictatorships who cannot testify to political catastrophe) or because these works attempt to make sense of large-scale phenomena such as climate change.[55] More than an archivist, the writer becomes a figure of the bricoleur, the DJ, or the pirate who traffics with heterogeneous sources from the literary tradition and recycles discontinuous moments of the continent's past.

Latin American writers conjure the region's forgotten past through the figure of the specter. Spectrality plays a central part in discussions of the

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contemporary because, according to Ruffel, it questions linear history and conceives the present as "a resurgence of the past of the *longue durée*."[56] María del Pilar Blanco argues that haunting is not always linked to the logic of trauma and mourning but, more extensively, to the "anxiety surrounding the possible shape and location of the events of an *after*-life."[57] Contemporary novelists depict an extended present haunted by various repressed moments from Latin American history, including the colonial period, the nation-building past, and the recent military dictatorships. Some works, such as Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate*, return to many of these periods simultaneously: the present of environmental contamination brings back the past of demographic whitening and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo's searching for their disappeared children during the last dictatorship. Sometimes, narrative strategies evoke Carpentier's 1944 short story "Viaje a la semilla," which adopts a regressive structure to contrast the chronological time of white Europeans with the mythical time of Afro-Cuban religions.

By embracing the end of modernity's grand narratives and conceiving history as incomplete, writers conjure suppressed historical moments and activate political possibilities that have remained dormant in the past. Other contemporary works, such as Valeria Luiselli's *Los ingrávidos* (2011; trans. 2014 as *Faces in the Crowd*) search for the ghosts of the avant-garde in order to find minor cultural materials and forgotten artistic trajectories, blurring the boundaries between original and copy. These aesthetic returns seek to combat the condition that Borges described in "La biblioteca de Babel" (1941) as the burden of written culture: "The certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms."[58] For these writers, being contemporary means finding collaborators among history's silent witnesses, conjuring their shadows to create a new ethics of representation: although it is impossible to fully depict this repressed history, it is the writer's task to show how it continues to haunt our twenty-first-century present.

Insofar as they return to foundational moments in the continent's history, these writers seek to express their discontent with the status quo rather than to escape the confines of the neoliberal present. Although we live in a culture in which the hypertrophy of memory produces nostalgic pictures of the past, I argue that literature can revisit history as an active rebuttal of market-driven discourses hailing the promises of the future. As Svetlana Boym demonstrates when setting the opposition between restorative and reflective nostalgia, there are ways of returning to the past that foreclose its multiple meanings (which she links to nationalist returns to the homeland) and others that capture its cracks and imperfections. "Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past," Boym observes, "while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time."[59] Latin American

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writers assemble fragmentary constellations to point to the discontinuities between past and present and make history susceptible to further elaboration. The narrator of Luiselli's *Los ingrávidos* explains the novel's fragmentary and ghostly structure: "What's happening is that you can remember the future too."[60] The rest of the authors I study share this belief in the capacity of memory discourses to rescue the past and imagine a different future, conjugating the previous century's obsession with the future and our fixation with the past to reformulate the needs of the present.[61]

In addition to conjuring the figure of the specter, these writers turn to the metaphor of plants to find new foundational roots for history and literature in the new century. As Lesley Wylie observes, plants have played a significant role in Latin American culture so long as they "articulate submerged histories, often at variance with those expressed by the central narrative." Patrícia Vieira also highlights the need to hear plants speak through their inscription in cultural texts, a practice she calls *phytographia* or the "encounter between writings on plants and the writing *of* plants."[62] Some contemporary novels dramatize the foundational violence of Latin American nations through emblematic plants like the *ombú* in Argentina and the ceiba in the Dominican Republic. Mairal's *El año del desierto* and Indiana's *La mucama de Omicunlé* travel back to the roots of the modern nation to reveal the erasure of Black and Indigenous cultural histories. The plant horror in Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* shows that the agricultural model based on soybean production has not brought progress and modernization for the Argentine countryside as the foundational fathers envisioned but, rather, regressions to the premodern past. Juan Cárdenas's *Elástico de sombra* (Shadow games, 2020) and Itamar Vieira Junior's *Torto arado* (2019; trans. 2023 as *Crooked Plow*) are plantation novels that link the act of writing with knotting, invoking the origins of storytelling in women's oral narratives and calling readers to unravel the nation's memory knots.

Other works foreground the portable plants of the globalized world, such as the bonsai in Zambra's eponymous novel and an unnamed dry tree in Luiselli's *Los ingrávidos*. As Cristina Rivera Garza observes in *Autobiografía del algodón* (2020), which mixes her family's past in the United States–Mexico borderlands with the *longue durée* of the cotton plantations in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas where her ancestors once worked: "A book is a form of return: a refamiliarization and a reparation."[63] Contemporary writers take up the call to narrate the present in the deep time of the planet's history or across the artificial borders of modern nation-states. They conceive nonlinear histories of Latin American nations, restoring the broken continuity between past and present in times of generalized oblivion and forgetfulness.

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WHAT IS THE CONTEMPORARY?

After all, what do we talk about when we talk about the contemporary? Critics have approached the concept from multiple perspectives that account for the temporal models of twenty-first-century literature. Julio Premat has written extensively on the subject, focusing on narrative beginnings and the question of origins as well as on the outdatedness, anachronisms, and resistances of contemporary literature.[64] Premat's *Non nova sed nove* (2018) is particularly revealing of the vocabulary used in debates on the contemporary, insofar as it shows the recurrence of aesthetic terminology and temporal imaginaries that were already present in the work of authors such as Borges and Barthes (the inscription in the contemporary via "an exteriority, a differentiation, a distance, as the only ways to think about it and to participate in it").[65] In *Cronografías* (2017), Graciela Speranza refers to the "time without time" in which contemporary artworks are inscribed. Speranza shows that the artistic imagination is a laboratory of original articulations of pasts, presents, and futures, "configurations still inaccessible to other languages."[66]

In one of the most comprehensive studies about this concept, *Brouhaha: Worlds of the Contemporary* (2017), Lionel Ruffel makes an archaeology of "the worlds of the contemporary," which comprises debates about historicity, the mediatized experience of time, the multitude, the spatial turn, publishing circuits, and artistic sites. Sarah Brouillette, Mathias Nilges, and Emilio Sauri opt for the term "the global contemporary," referring to non-contemporaneous positions that counter the "neoliberal now" across the globe.[67] In line with these critics, I conceive of the contemporary as a notion that questions the uniformity of temporal becoming under capitalist conditions, emphasizing the anachronisms and counter rhythms that detach us from the perpetual present of neoliberal politics.[68]

The debate on the contemporary gained new momentum after the publication of an essay by Giorgio Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?" in 2007. Agamben's essay establishes a direct dialogue with Friedrich Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* (1876), especially with its second chapter, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in which Nietzsche argues that an age oversaturated with history results in servility and the inability of people to build their own future.[69] For Agamben, therefore, someone becomes contemporary when they relate to the present in an untimely manner, against the grain of the dominant discourse. A contemporary is an anachronistic person who arrives "too early" or "too late."[70] Absolute coincidence with the present is tantamount to the critical incapacity to perceive it, even more so when it unfolds according to the presentist dynamics of contemporary societies that Hartog diagnoses. A skeptical distance is

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necessary to establish a genuine relationship with the present. By reading Osip Mandelstam's poem "The Century," Agamben derives the hypothesis that "the contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness." Agamben borrows this metaphor from the neurophysiology of vision in order to claim that the contemporary is "he who knows how to see that darkness, he who is in a position to write by dipping his pen in the darkness of the present."[71] Other concepts such as Benjamin's dialectical image, Michel Foucault's archeology of knowledge, and Fredric Jameson's archeology of the future underlay this idea of the contemporary.[72]

Despite its significance in spearheading discussions about the arts of the present, Agamben's conception of the contemporary lacks a historical and geopolitical dimension. The prophetic character of the text stems from its overdependence on metaphors rather than on concrete readings of historical events or artistic literary artifacts. Agamben evades the question of the ethical-political ramifications of what is contemporary in the twenty-first century, especially under the current conditions of temporal crisis, when the links between past, present, and future have become extremely fragile.

Moreover, it remains to be asked what Nietzsche's meditation has to say to us today when we experience the sense that "one is a latecomer and epigone" and that we have fallen prey to an impulse to archive every action we take (the antiquarian subject, Nietzsche remarks, possesses "a blind rage for collecting").[73] In the absence of grand narratives and the suspension of historical consciousness, people are prone to invent new genealogies in "an attempt to give oneself, as it were a posteriori, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate."[74] Contemporary writers are responding to the collecting fervor of the times through fragmentary books resembling the present of the early twenty-first century, which unfolds in the form of a spiral: the sensation that it renews itself and begins again in ever shorter cycles. These are novels of beginnings, tentative approximations, and open-ended forms susceptible to further elaboration. Rather than delineating the contours of a definitive plot, these novels make the hypothetical a central part of the contemporary. Instead of concealing the archive, they unfold as an accumulation of fragments that display its precariousness.

LATIN AMERICAN INSCRIPTIONS

The publication of three books on the contemporary in Latin America proves that it did not take long for the debate spearheaded by Agamben to spread beyond disciplinary boundaries. The first of these, *Moderno/Contemporáneo: un debate de horizontes*, is a volume edited by a group of art

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historians and published in 2008 by Colombia's Universidad de Antioquia. In the introduction, the editors ask whether the contemporary is perhaps "a historiographical concept (like 'Baroque' or 'Renaissance') with methodological implications" and whether it is "more flexible and useful than 'postmodern,' used to characterize a kind of overcoming of modernity."[75] The second book, *¿Qué es lo contemporáneo? Actualidad, tiempo histórico, utopías del presente*, is a compilation of critical essays edited by Chilean historian Miguel Valderrama and published by Ediciones Universidad Finis Terrae in Santiago, Chile, in 2011. As in the art historians' volume, the debate on the contemporary becomes a critique of the present as a homogeneous time and a call to conceive it as "a mosaic, a kaleidoscope of deferred times."[76] The third book, *Indiccionario de lo contemporáneo*, appeared in 2018 in Editora UFMG, the press of Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (Brazil) and in 2020 in EME Editorial (Argentina). The notion of the contemporary as a communal and intermittent period is reflected in the book's structure. The authors recognize that knowledge production is an inherently collaborative endeavor and embrace possible contradictions between the chapters. For the authors, the contemporary is a choral experience of the present through aesthetic practices that privilege ideas such as anonymity and the multitude.[77]

The volume edited by Héctor Hoyos and Marília Librandi-Rocha in the March 2014 issue of the *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, "Theories of the Contemporary in South America," addresses the question of the contemporary in the context of debates on Latin American literary production, the teaching of twenty-first-century literature in academic institutions, and the insertion of discussions on the contemporary in the field of world literature. In the volume's introduction, the editors point out that the contemporary, "as a critical category and an object of study," is often overlooked in academic discussions, despite the fact that numerous institutions offer courses with the term "contemporary" in their educational programs. While English seems to be the language of the contemporary, as the English-speaking translation market shapes the maps of world literature, Hoyos and Librandi-Rocha argue for a transnational or multidirectional model that conceives the contemporary through the dialogue between different localities.[78]

I seek to join this chorus of voices through a hemispheric model of literary analysis. I recognize the plurality of perspectives and locations of the contemporary and, therefore, oppose the idea that history has come to an end and that humanity is a homogeneous whole moving in the same temporal direction. My task has been to sharpen my ear so that the novels themselves dictate the terms of the debate and the conversation with voices from across Latin America. In my approach to the concept of the contemporary through discussions about our neoliberal end times, I seek to show how lit-

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erature, in an age of systematic attacks on the modern social contract, offers points of connection between an unfinished past and a potential future.

In the structure of this book I seek to reflect the optical model of a kaleidoscope, that childhood object in which Benjamin saw a figure of the dialectic. For him, the kaleidoscope emerges as a temporal paradigm during periods when the connections between past, present, and future are blurred and when it becomes necessary to interrogate the structures of historical time.[79] Philosopher Ernst Bloch described the interwar years as a "kaleidoscopic period," during which artists become assemblers capable of configuring new formations from different temporal strata.[80] Through the kaleidoscope we can glimpse new arrangements and alter the chains that link historical events. In the early years of the millennium, the writers I study here acquire a glimpse of the imagination, improvisation, and ingenuity with which children combine images in a non-hierarchical way, creating relationships that escape any linear or teleological ordering. Although in each chapter I deal comparatively with the work of two Latin American writers, readers are invited to establish their own connections between authors, works, and ideas to form a dialectical image of the contemporary.

The book is divided into two sections: "Deep Histories of the Present" and "Returns of History and Memory." The focus of the first section is on novels in which our contemporary crisis of time is framed within national histories of resource extraction dating back to the nineteenth century and the colonial period. In chapter 1, "The Return of Nature: The Novel of the Crisis," I examine *El año del desierto* by Argentinean writer Pedro Mairal and *La mucama de Omicunlé* by Dominican writer Rita Indiana. Mairal uses a strategy of literary recycling and evokes the work of the *cartoneros*—the waste pickers who came to prominence in the wake of the 2001 financial meltdown—to travel back in time throughout Argentinean history and to rewrite the literary mediations that shaped the imaginaries of the modern nation. Indiana resorts to the temporality of Afro-Caribbean rituals and queer subjects to create a seamless collaboration between the sixteenth and the twenty-first centuries. Both writers propose relational alternatives to Western binaries through a dynamic conception of the relationship between the human and nonhuman (the human body as an entity that is always already entwined with the natural world) and the creative process (tradition as a network of cooperation between artists rather than a line of predecessors and heirs).

In chapter 2, "A Toxic History of the Present: The Novel of Ecohorror," I analyze Argentinean writer Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* and Mexican writer Guadalupe Nettel's *El huésped* (The host, 2006), considering the temporality of climate change and ecological crisis. Both authors

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conjure up apocalyptic scenarios through returns to repressed moments in the history of their respective nations: the civilizing fantasies of nineteenth-century Argentinean politicians and the sustainable project of Indigenous communities in Mexico-Tenochtitlan. By theorizing what I call "ecohorror," an aesthetic category that builds bridges between literature and ethics via the role of negative emotions such as anxiety and disgust, I argue that Schweblin and Nettel repurpose the form of the novel to remain attentive to the dizzying temporality of the Anthropocene. Whereas Schweblin puts together a suspenseful dialogue that imitates the effects of pesticide poisoning and builds parallels between the novel and other aesthetic genres, Nettel recycles the gothic tradition of the parasite or the body-taken-over to reflect on the biotechnological intervention in peoples' lives. Both novels serve as a platform from which to reflect on large-scale processes of ecological decay, weaving connections between local and planetary conditions.

In chapter 3, "The Contemporary Plantation: Memories of Slavery and the Oral History Novel," I read Brazilian writer Itamar Vieira Junior's *Torto arado* and Colombian writer Juan Cárdenas's *Elástico de sombra* as novels concerning the persistence of the bonds of slavery for Black plantation workers. I argue that both authors destabilize the privileging of the written over the oral by rescuing oral history archives of the African diaspora and little-known cultural practices such as the syncretic religion of Jarê in northeastern Brazil and the Afro-Colombian martial art known as *grima* practiced in the country's Cauca region. Beginning with Sylvia Wynter's argument that the novel developed alongside the market economy, in this chapter I chart how contemporary writers undermine the novel's historical implication with the capitalist system (and, therefore, with the plantation economy) by incorporating the oral tradition of Afro-Latin American populations. Both Vieira Junior and Cárdenas engage with the Black Atlantic oral history archive—the myths, jokes, proverbs, and folktales that enslaved peoples brought from Africa aboard the slave ships—to endow our neoliberal present with ancestral temporalities. Both authors reproduce the temporal elasticity of Afro-Caribbean syncretic practices by introducing the perspective of nonhuman deities who speak against the destruction of Black bodies and territories.

In the second section, "Returns of History and Memory," I study the so-called literature of the children, novels about recent Latin American history written by authors who grew up during the last military dictatorships and the subsequent neoliberal democracies and who inherited an incomplete picture of the present. In chapter 4, "The Children Return: The Novel of Postmemory," I consider the figure of the children of political exiles of the last Southern Cone dictatorships through readings of *A resistência* by Brazilian writer Julián Fuks and *Conjunto vacío* by Mexican writer Veróni-

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ca Gerber Bicecci. In these novels, the notion of return acquires a spatio-temporal dimension, reflecting the geographical dislocations and aesthetic quests of a generation whose access to the past is mediated by documents, objects, and photographs from family and state archives. The narrators in both novels are children of political activists who grew up in Brazil and Mexico and who return to their parents' home country of Argentina in order to investigate their recent family histories. Whereas the narrator of *A resistência* questions the supposed neutrality of the representational technologies of the last military dictatorship, such as the state ID of the *desaparecidos* (disappeared), Gerber Bicecci's alter ego in *Conjunto vacío* represents the names of the characters through Venn diagrams that dramatize the formation of affective bonds between the children of political exiles. Thus, both authors resist the waning of affect in the neoliberal era by forming alternative communities to the family and the nation-state.

In chapter 5, "Ways of Being Contemporary: The Novel after the End of History," I continue to think about the literature of children through the analysis of *Los ingrávidos* by Mexican writer Valeria Luiselli and *Bonsái* by Chilean writer Alejandro Zambra. Against the eclipse of the notion of the future, Luiselli and Zambra delve into family genealogies and literary traditions to activate a historical perspective on the present and to imagine potential horizons. In this chapter, I foreground theorizations about the end of history to show how writers like Luiselli and Zambra are conceiving the end as the urgent need to reassemble the competing temporalities of the new century, not as a déjà-vu of previous eras that prevents transformative action in the present. Although contemporary societies alternate between amnesia and the desire to remember each moment of the past, Luiselli and Zambra focus on characters who experience the past as an unsolvable mystery, reproducing this ontological instability in the precarious subjectivities of their characters and the fragmented condition of the novel form. My aim is to examine a series of turn-of-the-century novels in which our present is defamiliarized through fractures in the linear conception of time. In doing so, I find that these novels reach the critical distance required by any attempt to seize historical knowledge.

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