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Protagonists of Latin American Futures

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“Perhaps it is time to overcome hope. [W]e must do something much harder: create/fight even without hope. It’s not hope that will mend the gashes in Brazil but our ability to take on conflict even when we know we’re going to lose. Or fight even when the cause is lost. Do without believing. Do out of an ethical imperative.”

Eliane Brum 2019

While a call to overcome hope may seem a desolate outlook on futures – Latin American or otherwise – it certainly raises urgent questions about how we envision our repertoires of acting, thinking and creating in the here and now. What ethical imperative emerges from the ostensibly devastating effects of climate change? How do we counter neo-fascist violence and attempts to bring about a durable subversion of liberal democratic institutions? How do we build new forms of solidarity facing an enduring post-pandemic health crisis? Should we “panic”, as Greta Thunberg and other youth activists suggest? And most importantly: Who are “we”?

In the absence of a coherent and convincing narrative of hope, new

protagonists and their solidly responsible forms of imagining and struggling for livable futures enter the stages of parliaments, social media platforms and public spaces in cities around the world. It is precisely such spirit of collective solidarity, facing multiple crises at once, that links indigenous struggles over land and environment with the young people of the climate strike movement, as Brum has it, the “first generation without hope.” This leads to the overarching question of this theme issue: Who are the protagonists of Latin American futures? Who is imagining, writing, narrating such futures – how, when and where?

In this CROLAR theme issue, we map protagonists of Latin American futures, both human and non-human, looking at the ways in which they act, create, and think futures. By suggesting to imagine futures beyond hope, contributors challenge the idea of a controllable, fixable future. As exemplified by CEPAL’s most recent publication entitled *Construir un nuevo futuro: una recuperación transformadora con igualdad y sostenibilidad* (CEPAL 2020), future thinking is all too often, and influentially, reduced to technocratic

attempts that confine futures through techniques such as modelling, forecasting, scenarios, trend analysis, and a quasi-worship for big data, indices, and algorithms. But what if quantification and calculation, embedded in institutionalized supranational governance, has failed to raise crucial questions? And, in order to prevent a more radical, collective panic, has performed a solutionism that sustains the very structures of global capitalism, extractivism and other forms of exploitation?

Our intervention seeks to listen to some of the perhaps less prominent protagonists in and from Latin America and elsewhere. By mapping these protagonists, we see this issue in line with ongoing feminist, indigenous and subaltern perspectives and social struggles (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo 2017, Hanson 2020, Misoczky et al. 2020). Mapping protagonists, to be certain, is not an approach for reading Latin America as a coherent atlas, but for grasping the divergent, radically different and unexpected takes on possible or impossible futures and alternative projects. Rather than essentializing “the” Latin American experience, writings on and from the region serve the authors in this volume as a specific lens to look at and reflect upon desirable or undesirable global conditions (Jelin et al. 2017).

Mapping the protagonists of the future is thus a spatial and temporal project. As the collected contributions here demonstrate, a proposal to look beyond hope, universality, and linear progress

urges to integrate critical views on present social, political and cultural conjunctures, bearing their historical conditions and past and present struggles in mind.

Mapping Protagonists of Latin American Futures

Mapping the protagonists of Latin American futures present in recent literature is the underlying logic that ties all 14 contributions in this theme issue together. These protagonists are both human and non-human — and they inevitably act from positions of power, which strongly influences the kinds of futures they strive for and work on.

Through book reviews, interviews, essays and research notes the authors reflect on Latin American’s possible futures without neglecting its entanglements with global issues and the contemporary challenges such as climate change, health crises, the latently or openly destructive exploitation of both ecosystems and the futures of local communities, or a global resurgence of the far right.

The book reviews section has a total of six contributions including one review essay and captures a diverse set of human and non-human protagonists. From somewhat “classical” future drivers such as environmental activists, citizens and governors, the reviews highlight contradictions and fictions between citizens and algorithms, as well as between technological and rural rhythms. The section also reviews how activists, social movements and NGOs act as

protagonists that stand up against neo-feudal structures, and finally discusses graphic novels as arenas of reflection on human-machine relations.

In his review article, **Gerónimo Barrera de la Torre** revises three books on neo-extractivism in Latin America by Alexander Dunlap, Macarena Gómez-Barris and Maristella Svampa, and summarizes that “futures [...] have been built on the basis of extractivism, subject to the ideologies of progress and post-neoliberalism.” In this sense, futures clash with the historical pasts as these have oppressed alternative economic projects under a developmental paradigm. Opposing this apocalyptic and tragic end, alternative perspectives are grounded in decolonial theories, feminisms from the South and anarchism. Through de la Torre’s essay we learn that the protagonists of alternative futures of extractivism can be inhabitants of villages, organizations and artists.

If history and memory can help to identify remaining structures of the past in the present, the capacity to learn from one’s own story may be a way to overcome them. This is what Claudia López — the first female and openly LGBT mayor of Bogota, Colombia — proposes in her monography *Adiós a las Farc ¿Y ahora qué?* reviewed by **Anderson Sandoval**. In this contribution, Sandoval presents the impact, the limits, but also the strengths of López’ proposal for tackling the armed conflict in Colombia and highlights some important lessons for building the country’s future as a post-conflict state. The protagonists of such a future are not only the governors who

have to learn from past choices, or even the law itself; in order to bring peace to the region, the active participation of citizens is also fundamental.

Camila Costa’s review of *Ciudadanos reemplazados por algoritmos* (2020), by Argentinian anthropologist Eduardo Canclini, raises the seemingly binary question of whether digital areas are really a place where citizenship is being exercised, or if algorithms are replacing humans. Costa’s revision emphasizes that human beings can be protagonists of their future in the age of algorithms when we endorse not only the changes and problems, but also the potentialities introduced by technology into our daily lives.

Olaf Kaltmeier in *Refeudalisierung und Rechtsruck* (2019), reviewed by **Rodrigo Aldeia Duarte**, draws parallels between feudal and today’s societies. With more historical continuity than rupture, contemporary global refeudalization encompasses the economic, political and social domains. Duarte shows how the author, in dialogue with Colin Crouch, Sighard Neckel and Zygmunt Bauman identifies dimensions of a global refeudalization and its specific configuration in contemporary Latin America. Duarte remarks that the emphasis on Latin American colonial heritage raises the question of whether instead of refeudalization, Kaltmeier is observing a sort of “neo-feudal structure” that has never been overcome since colonization. Where Kaltmeier ascribes importance to the opposition to a refeudalization of

political and economic structures, we can identify activists, social movements and NGOs as influential protagonists in such entangled histories of exploitation.

Diana Hernández Suárez argues in her review of Fernanda Melchor's *Temporada de huracanes* that the author draws on the concept of carnivalization. In this review article, Suárez traces a parallel between the "carnavalesque, scandalous and extravagant" and "profanation, with the destruction of the traditional norms that governed the rural environment of Mexico" caused by the arrival of technological development in small villages. Different types of historical archives, such as photographs and chronicles in local tabloids, come together in the creation of this fictional world depicted by Melchor. Suárez reading of Melchor's work suggests that technological changes, in this case caused by the oil industry, may act as protagonists in literary fiction. If "reality" can serve as inspiration, and as a tool to denounce social problems, in the hands of writers, maybe literature can serve to imagine the future more clearly.

In her review of *Posthumanism and the Graphic Novel in Latin America* by Edward King and Joanna Page, **Beate Möller** highlights the unique quality of this edited volume: The first to trace post-anthropocentric perspectives in Latin American graphic fiction. It could be argued that ever since Hector G. Oesterheld's towering 1957 *El Eternauta* (first translation to German published no earlier than 2016), Latin American graphic novels have served as protagonists of other pasts, presents

and futures, providing a bustling forum for reflection and critical commentary on human-machine relations, contested territories and the pluriverse.

In the Classics Revisited section, **Erick Limas** seeks out the Waterhouses, computer hackers from Neal Stephenson's classic 1999 novel *Cryptonomicon*, for whom future is a matter of creative disassembly and reassembly. Current blockchain technologies have a role to play here, and could potentially take the form of a commons, the author argues. Such techniques of navigating futures are relevant for sustenance and perhaps even survival, or as Limas has it, "we are all somehow hackers and cryptographers: we go through life trying to hack the system to find the best way to perform our duties/ functions." Indeed, futures are opened up by alluding to hacking in a "classic" sense, as set out in the 1986 *Hacker Manifesto*.

The three research notes again reflect a full bandwidth of future-making protagonists, from people active in the independent movie scene, via the activists acting as spokespersons of a river, to the clocks and concepts of time shaping daily routines.

In **Renata Melo's** research note on the film collectives in Baixada Fluminense, a region located in Rio de Janeiro's periphery, it is possible to see how the COVID-19 pandemic accentuated virtual sociability and how the internet became a way out to continue the struggle in approaching the world's peripheries despite the social distance imposed by the pandemic in a context of unequal access to technology. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, the

author shows that just like she had to adapt her own research from the “real world to the web” due the current health crisis, the filmmakers and actors of the independent movie scene of Baixada had to make use of inventiveness to keep working and fighting to become protagonists of their own story.

Human and non-human come together as protagonists in the analysis of los voceros (spokespersons) of the Atrato river in Colombia, a group of activists who literally and legally give voice and represent the river’s rights as well as their own interests as members of communities living from and along the Cuenca Basin. As **Elizabeth Gallon Droste** points out in her research note, with the recognition of the Atrato river as a legal subject as well as the constitution of local communities as spokespersons of the river, an opening was created for the emergence of new transitions where multiple protagonists and temporalities coexist.

Ricardo Uribe’s research note explores the existence of multiple temporalities within a universal time and revisits the paradigms of relative, subjective, and social time. He traces how time and clocks became key protagonists in organizing human routines and conviviality over the centuries. Uribe argues that as we move to seeing unpredictability and planning, subjective and universal time as being complementary instead of being exclusive binaries, we broaden and complexify our understanding of time and its dynamics.

This issue’s Intervention revises neofascism as an authoritarian ideology

which projects a bleak future. Along with the thesis of a singular path and future to human societies, the second cornerstone of the modern paradigm is the idea of a sense of history that always moves in the direction of “progress.” Yet, examples like the rise of neofascism in democratic and contemporary societies, as pointed out by Jason Stanley in *How fascism works* (**Renato Vicentini** and **Vinicius Carvalho da Silva**), suggest that fascism is one of the other sides of modernity. By reading Brazil’s present tragedy under a right-wing government through the lens of a history-informed structure of fascism’s building blocks, the authors warn us that Brazil’s future projects may re-export hate, violence and social fragmentation over most of the region. Nevertheless, the authors end in a hopeful prospect on the enduring protagonists of an alternative medium-term future, with reference to the latest election results in Bolivia and Argentina, and emancipatory movements raising their voices in Chile.

In the interview section, we present three conversations, first with cultural anthropologist **Arjun Appadurai**, Professor at New York University and the Hertie School in Berlin; secondly with **Malka Older**, sociologist, writer, and aid worker, currently a Faculty Associate at Arizona State University’s School for the Future of Innovation and Society and Associate Researcher at Sciences Po, in Paris; and **Austin Zeiderman**, anthropologist and Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Environment at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Working

with different sources and theories, and having a diverse background, these three academics share an interest in exploring, imagining and creating futures through research, activism, literature and in collaboration with international organizations and NGOs.

We navigate into “the not yet known” with Arjun Appadurai, in a conversation with **Elis de Aquino** and **Luis Kliche**. Facing the rise of the far right and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, Appadurai states that research and speculation are prolific ways to pave the way to the future. Some of the many challenges we face as a society and as social scientists are to strengthen our theoretical and methodological tools, inside and outside academia and beyond the occidental model of knowledge. But maybe, as Appadurai suggests, the most important challenge is the democratization of the right to research. A broadened definition of research can empower ordinary, subaltern and vulnerable people all around the world to exercise their voice and to become protagonists of the future.

Against an atrocious backdrop of femicides, climate crisis, authoritarianism and pandemics, one might be tempted to ask whether we are living in a global dystopia. Yes and no says speculative fiction author Malka Older in an interview conducted by **Anke Schwarz**. In *Science Fiction or Speculative Fiction*, protagonists of global futures feature prominently. In Older’s cyberpunk novels of the *Centenal Cycle*, one such protagonist is *Information*. This system of global micro-democracy governs through a virtually augmented

reality platform based on visual implants and with full data access for everybody. In this world of micro-territories and citizens, but mostly beyond nation states, futures are typically approached under the “safe” cover of live feeds and contextual data provided by ever-present Information. What could go wrong? (Spoiler alert: A lot, as it turns out.)

Leaving behind speculation, dystopia and fiction, Austin Zeiderman, in conversation with **Frank Müller**, offers a genealogical analysis of how cities, as built and defensible structures and centers of political and economic power, have co-developed along the rationalities of security governance. Beginning with colonization, Zeiderman argues that we need to revise historians’ views on how the hope for a better future has, throughout history, mobilized the trope of a security politics that deepened the rural-urban divide. Governments and influential intellectuals have until today pursued projects of discriminatory and often marginalizing processes of othering along that spatial divide. Despite the prevalent dystopian trend, we must, however, see to that uncertainties and the lack of stable homes in particular can also be energizing social struggles and contestations.

As this theme issue hopes to illustrate, rather than sticking to the late 20th-century trope of “no future,” a multitude of human and non-human protagonists are and have been busy imagining, narrating, writing or otherwise creating Latin American futures. Their maps of the future are inevitably informed by past and

present social struggles. In that sense, “the” future may actually be over, to be replaced by a multiplicity of futures, voices and new protagonists.

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