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Those Who Re(count) Matter: Fiction and Testimonial in Emiliano Monge's *Las tierras arrasadas*

Las tierras arrasadas *ejemplifica la contribución que hace la forma literaria a la representación de la violencia sufrida por migrantes centroamericanos en México y de las historias que cuentan. Mi análisis compara la incorporación de testimonios de migrantes actuales con las palabras asociadas con el personaje de Merolico, un migrante ficticio que décadas atrás cometía atrocidades en una contrainsurgencia centroamericana innominada. La novela sitúa la crisis migratoria en un contexto hemisférico que elucida una economía que mercantiliza absolutamente al ser humano. Concluyo que la estructura intertextual de* Tierras *subvierte formas de temporalidad y subjetividad que sostienen tal tipo de economía.*

Palabras clave: *ficción mexicana, migrantes centroamericanos en México, forma literaria, intertextualidad, necroescritura*

Las tierras arrasadas *exemplifies the contribution that literary form makes to representations of the violence Central American migrants suffer in Mexican territory and of the stories they tell. My analysis compares the incorporation of actual migrants' testimonials with the words associated with Merolico, a fictional migrant who, decades earlier, committed atrocities in an unnamed Central American counterinsurgency. The novel situates the migration crisis in a hemispheric context that elucidates an economy that depends upon the absolute commodification of human beings. I conclude that the intertextual structure of* Tierras *undermines forms of temporality and subjectivity that sustain such an economy.*

Keywords: *Mexican fiction, Central American migrants in Mexico, literary form, intertextuality, necrowriting*

Emiliano Monge combines fact and fiction deliberately and clearly in his 2015 novel *Las tierras arrasadas*. Intertextuality is also plain to see. Some literary allusions are easy to decipher, such as a nod to Shakespeare when a character kills himself because he believes, wrongly, that his lover has died. Another is identified in a "Nota" at the end of the book: "Todas las cursivas

que aparecen en esta novela pertenecen a la *Divina comedia* o son citas tomadas de diversos testimonios de migrantes centroamericanos, en busca de los Estados Unidos de América" (Monge, *Tierras* 342).[1] The note also identifies several organizations that gathered and made available these testimonials, including Mexico's Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos and Amnesty International. When he credits his sources Monge not only emphasizes migrants' suffering, connoted by an association with a Renaissance depiction of Hell, but also their survival, demonstrated by the fact that they have been able to share their stories. The paratext also accentuates the limits of the text's creative autonomy. By turning back toward the text in the form of explaining some of its content, and by turning away from the text in the form of encouraging readers to continue learning about Central American migrants' journeys through Mexico, the paratext signals the text's dependence upon other sources. It also urges Monge's readers to read beyond the pages he has written and to place his novel in dialogue with other texts. The limits to the novel's autonomy also reveal themselves in the way *Tierras* incorporates testimonials, especially when it presents them alongside the voice of Merolico, a fictional witness who plays a privileged role in structuring the novel and a character of particular importance for my analysis. The limits to creative autonomy signaled by the paratext and the intersection of fiction and testimonial within the novel's pages demonstrate that a skillful manipulation of literary form is uniquely suited to confront the epistemological dangers inherent in autonomous and foundational claims to representation, either factual or fictional. Primary among such dangers is the objectification of others, which is also the condition and result of human trafficking, the novel's principal theme.

An economic cycle organizes the novel's plot, which begins and ends with the story of two teenage boys, or "chicos de la selva," as the narrator calls them. *Tierras* centers around a spiral of human commerce that entraps some of its characters and provides others with new opportunities. However, it is clear that these opportunities are steps in a process that will destroy those who have benefited from them when others, in turn, take their places. Merolico, a palm reader and soothsayer, if not a quack, as his name would suggest, has been kidnapped along with several other migrants just after crossing Mexico's southern border. The group finds itself at the disposal of a trafficking business that assesses and counts units of human merchandise. Two of its associates and arguably the novel's main characters, Estela and Epitafio, kidnap and sell migrants. The *chicos de la selva* guide Merolico and the other migrants through the jungle toward a clearing. There, Estela and Epitafio kidnap the migrants and pay the boys for their services. Estela and Epitafio then head off separately on circuitous

journeys in order to sell the migrants into slavery. Along the way, Merolico reads the palms of the migrants who, like himself, are forced to travel with Estela. He assures them, falsely, that they will arrive safely in the United States. (Adding to the fatal truth behind Merolico's assurance, its falseness appropriate to his name, is the fact that almost all of the characters' names, and not just Estela and Epitafio, are associated with death.) Meanwhile, soldiers, police officers, fellow traffickers, and the traffickers' ringleader, El Padre Nicho, are plotting to do away with Estela and Epitafio and divide their managerial positions and related profits among themselves. After selling the migrants to Estela and Epitafio, the boys return to the village of Toneé, where they lure a new group of migrants while selling to them the belongings they have stolen from the previous group. Epitafio and Estela dream of leaving the circle and living together elsewhere, but they both suffer violent fates, which allude to events in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Epitafio steps in front of a speeding truck when his employee Sepelio lies and says that El Padre Nicho has killed Estela. Estela cuts out her own eyes when she learns of Epitafio's death. These intertexts highlight both Monge's plot device of portraying Epitafio and Estela as star-crossed lovers and his thematic emphasis on the consequences and ironies involved in acknowledging the truth. For his part, Merolico commits suicide by setting himself on fire after facing ugly facts about his own past. The murder of the *chicos de la selva* at the hands of traffickers who are presumably those who betrayed Epitafio and Estela closes the circle, and the novel's narrative concludes in the same jungle clearing where it began.

The trafficking in human beings, including Merolico, who tells stories, introduces the double valence of the Spanish verb *contar*, which, it is helpful to explain briefly, is featured in the title of another text by Monge, his 2018 autofiction *No contar todo*. This work foregrounds Monge's commitment to understanding how stories are structured and relevant beyond their immediate context. It consists of interviews with his family members, which initiate discussions about personal and collective histories, including the Student Movement of 1968 and rural insurgency. Monge's title signals the limits of what people are able or willing to say. It also suggests a contradiction within the word *contar*, which in Spanish means both to count and recount, or narrate. One cannot list or enumerate everything; nor can everything possibly matter, or count, when selecting what to include in a book. In its depiction of the trafficking of migrants, *Tierras* navigates both sides of *contar*, first by showing how counting people makes them matter less, and second through its particular way of recounting their stories. In her analysis of Monge's novel, which she places appropriately within the context

of the devaluation of human life exacerbated by former president Felipe Calderón's declaration of war on narcotrafficking, Alina Peña Iguarán describes the violence actual migrants suffer, as part of "un sistema de despojo y acumulación que mercantiliza la vida hasta sus últimos latidos" (140).[2] On the one hand, Monge's novel illustrates the gravity of this commodification and portrays who benefits from it by graphically depicting violent acts and by making the perpetrators of those acts into protagonists and other principal characters. On the other hand, the novel resists the strictly transactional nature of counting human lives by showing how making people matter relies on telling, or recounting, their stories. Storytelling makes them count. *Tierras* demonstrates that if a fictional text insists that those who are counted also matter, then literary storytelling matters as well.

Monge's novel presents human trafficking as an economy that strives for and relies upon the total exchangeability of human lives and a flat temporality in which the past is integrated smoothly into the present and made irrelevant. My analysis emphasizes how the novel's textual materiality challenges these economically motivated conditions, goals, and consequences. I develop a critical understanding of textual materiality by combining close readings of selected passages from *Tierras* and an engagement with relevant theoretical concepts. Chief among these are the relation between money and fiction that Ricardo Piglia calls *desrealización*, Cristina Rivera Garza's formulation of *necroescritura* and *desapropiación*, and Julia Kristeva's discussion of intertextuality and transposition. Kristeva's work strengthens Rivera Garza's anti-foundational stance. Especially pertinent is the way Kristeva explains how the allegedly autonomous speaking subject relies upon the objectification of others in order to found a self-sufficient representation, the independence of which is illusory. *Tierras* makes visible and critiques the relationship between such an objectification and a capitalist teleology that facilitates and relies upon the equalization of human beings and commercial goods. The narrative temporality associated with this economic reasoning comes to the fore in an episode in Monge's novel about being buried alive, which I interpret in relation to Peter Brooks's reading of a Balzac novella that also features a live burial. This comparison strengthens my contention that the particularly co-dependent and anti-foundational combination of testimonial and fiction in *Tierras* shows how neither fiction nor testimonial can tell a complete story. Even though testimonial and fiction reveal each other's limits, I conclude that only fiction can reveal both its own representational limits and those of a truth-based genre like testimonial.

A circular structure and descriptions of human suffering are appropriate for a novel whose primary intertext, as identified by its author, is *The Inferno*.[3] Characters with the names Epitafio, Estela, Nicho, and Sepelio travel through places called El Llano de Silencio, El Infierno, and Sombras de Agua, adding to the novel's overall sense of peril and desolation. Further evidence of the importance of Dante's work as an intertext is the fact that Epitafio transports a group of the kidnapped migrants he and Estela traffic in a truck called Minos. In *The Inferno*, Minos, judge of the underworld, surprised to see the living, warns Dante that it might be harder to get out of Hell than it is to enter:

"O you who come to this abode of pain,"
said Minos when he saw me, pausing
in the exercise of his high office,
"beware how you come in and whom you trust.
Don't let the easy entrance fool you." (5.16-20)[4]

In Dante's text Minos distributes sinners to the various circles of Hell (5.7-15). In Monge's text Minos the truck distributes migrants to various hellish fates. Minos's warning to Dante applies to the migrants in Monge's novel who enter Mexico and whose trust is quickly betrayed by their guides.

An indication that some migrants are more similar to Dante than to the dead inhabitants of Hell is that the testimonials attest to the survival of those who tell them, to the fact that their lives precede and continue beyond the fiction the novel creates. The reader and the migrants thus encounter one another in a text that is more about the perpetrators of violence than those who suffer at their hands, a fact that, as Marissa Gálvez Cuen observes, makes *Tierras* stand out among recent texts about migration in Mexico. The focus on traffickers foregrounds the novel's critique of the economy that dehumanizes migrants; and, as Gálvez Cuen writes, it places migrants in a position apart from the main plot and its central characters: "las voces de los migrantes se ven enmarcadas y reproducidas, mas no representadas" (15). Gálvez Cuen emphasizes the boundary that separates the migrants' voices from the words and actions of the novel's other characters. My analysis of Merolico, a character insufficiently studied in scholarship on Monge's novel, emphasizes the blurring of these boundaries.

Emily Celeste Vázquez-Enríquez analyzes another boundary in Monge's novel, between human and non-human. Referring to the place where the *chicos de la selva* gather the migrants they lead to kidnappers, she explains how this boundary is determined by the trafficking economy: "De tal modo, en la plaza de Toneé los migrantes todavía son reconocidos como seres

humanos, principalmente por su capacidad adquisitiva. Sin embargo, una vez internados en la selva quienes fueron clientes se convierten en mercancía" (9). The precarity evinced in the suddenness with which one goes from being consumer to consumed goods attests to what Piglia has argued is the fundamental relation between money and fiction: both rely on an abstraction that he calls *desrealización*. Writing about Roberto Arlt, Piglia concludes that money "es la ficción misma porque siempre desrealiza el mundo: primero, porque para poder tenerlo hay que inventar, falsificar, estafar, "hacer ficción" y a la vez porque enriquecerse es siempre la ilusión … que se construye a partir de todo lo que se podrá tener *en* el dinero" ("Ficción" 25). In the extremely asymmetrical economy of human trafficking that Monge's novel portrays, *desrealización* places in the most danger those who most need a basis for hope. Migrants who seek a better life in the US, a life that is largely unreal for many of those characterized in *Tierras*, are also made unreal and dehumanized by the trafficking economy and the lies that lured them into it.

The relation between fiction and economics is the focus of a different essay by Piglia that associates the *serie negra* or thriller genre with capitalism: "el único enigma que proponen – y nunca resuelven – las novelas de la serie negra es el de las relaciones capitalistas" ("Sobre" 70). Though not strictly speaking a crime novel, or even a thriller – there is no detective or even a bad cop who still solves the crime, let alone a return to a peaceful order – Monge's text is about capitalism and crime. Its own *desrealización*, its fiction, is about the profound *desrealización* that both conditions and results from the crime of human trafficking. Monge's novel shows how this crime is part of an economy that benefits those for whom migrants' plights and the causes of their home countries' instability do not count. The most clearly developed example of such a cause in *Tierras* is the aftermath of Cold War counterinsurgency, which Merolico embodies. The false assurances Merolico performs through his palm readings raise the question of fiction's role in deciphering and intervening against the crime of human trafficking, its historical context, and its economic foundations. The response *Tierras* offers to this question, especially through the characterization of Merolico, is to reject the kind of foundational logic based on subjective autonomy that would presuppose a single storyteller's authority in narrating experience and fostering order. In Monge's novel this rejection also shows how the density of literary form can resist equivalency and exchange, which are processes fundamental to sustaining capitalism's dehumanizing spiral movement.

Tierras develops a poetics that resists foundational logic, including the logic of capitalism, through its incorporation of intertextual and

documentary referents. The novel demonstrates plainly the specificity of such a poetics because it exemplifies how literary form helps a text appropriate for itself a field of interrelated epistemologies that manifests the paradoxical and variable composition and potentiality of anti-foundational representation. The topic of textual appropriation reveals a point of contact between *Tierras* and *necroescritura* and *desapropiación*, concepts central to recent developments in Mexican literary criticism and historiography. Rivera Garza has defined "necroescritura" as writing undertaken in "condiciones de extrema mortandad" (225). She also proposes that this type of writing is characterized by a poetics of "desapropiación," or a "poética … sin propiedad, o retando constantemente el concepto y la práctica de la propiedad, pero en una interdependencia mutua con respecto al lenguaje" (233). Adding to the qualities that associate it with *necroescritura*, Monge's text, like Sara Uribe's *Antígona González* (2012), includes a paratext that identifies the sources it engages with.[5] The acknowledgment of others' language exemplifies a resistance to appropriation, and, in Rivera Garza's terms, recognizes textual interdependence. Rivera Garza criticizes a writing practice that appropriates and assimilates difference, an "apropiacionismo" that has contributed to, "la tachadura de autorías subalternas y al reencumbramiento del escritor profesional como sampleador de fragmentos de otros" (260). Monge's novel employs a strategy similar to Rivera Garza's *desapropiación* because it identifies clearly its intertexts and, through the figure of Merolico especially, it places its fiction in relation to the testimonial voices of others.

Oswaldo Zavala also foregrounds the politics of fictional texts' employment or manipulation of external referents. His analysis of the narconarrative genre warns readers and critics against dangerous disengagements from uncomfortable realities: "most narconarratives propagate an illusory enemy that the Mexican state relies upon in order to legitimize its actions in the drug war" ("Imagining" 357). By contrast, texts Zavala considers exceptional adopt "non-literary elements" in a way that "construct[s] in turn a literary space in which a critical dissection of those referents becomes a constitutive condition of each narrative project" (356). Zavala also proposes that a work's literariness, its "lasting impact on the literary canon," lies less in "its formal elements" than in its "political critique of hegemonic positions inscribed in" what he calls the "drug war archive" (356).[6] In contrast to Zavala's argument, I propose that considering and interpreting form is essential for understanding a novel's political critique. Therefore, my analysis of *Tierras* looks less at the particular decision of incorporating documentary sources than at the way a strategy of

desapropiación guides and is guided by characterization, structure, and language. *Tierras* underscores the singular importance of literary form through its figuration of Merolico, a character connected not only to the fictional migrants kidnapped along with him but also to the testimonials of actual migrants that Monge's novel incorporates.

The textual materiality of Monge's novel plays an important role in showing how literary form can foster critical ways of thinking about the experiences of migrants in Mexico and contribute to contemporary scholarship about Mexican literature. Viktor Shklovsky places different materials, or ideas, in formal relationship with one another when he writes, "The ideas contained in a text are material, their relationship is form" (qtd. in Berlina 19). If a novel's ideas themselves are about a formal relationship, such as that between fiction and testimonial, then these relationships also become textual material. Monge's novel crystallizes material and formal relationships in the character of Merolico, a migrant set apart from most other migrants in *Tierras* because his past is revealed to the reader and because, like only one other migrant, Mausoleo, there is a chapter dedicated to his story. Merolico was a soldier and a paramilitary fighter in an unnamed Central American country, probably Guatemala or El Salvador. He thus exemplifies the way Monge's novel places the present crisis of violence against migrants within the broader historical and hemispheric context of the US national-security doctrine and the related Cold War counterinsurgencies in Central America.[7]

The historical arc Merolico represents does not, however, propose the simple validity of an extratextual hermeneutic founded in an earlier historical moment. Instead, it complicates historical context by repeating instances of the interruption of that context. This interruption characterizes Merolico's role during the period comprising the novel's main plot, which spans little more than one day. Merolico reads other kidnapped migrants' palms and reassures them they will survive and reach the lives they desire in the US. His palmistry establishes a joint between the novel's fictional narrative and its incorporation of testimonials from actual migrants who have survived an experience of kidnapping in Mexico. Merolico's readings stand out clearly at a material textual level because they interrupt the narrative and because they are set off in roman type and their margins are differentiated as well. Their typography distinguishes them from the testimonials Monge incorporates into his novel, which are also at different margins but typeset in italics. Merolico's first reading includes the image of a hinge, a concrete material reference to the formal relationship that the novel eventually develops between his words and the migrants' words. He says, "será toda esta tristeza apenas un recuerdo… una bisagra entre una y

otra vida" (Monge, *Tierras* 117). Merolico describes a transition from the hell of being kidnapped to a future that relegates that hell to a memory in a moment of false assurance that gives validity to his name, an epithet the narrator has given him, and which connotes someone who may have actual curative powers but who could also be untrustworthy. The deceptive potential of Merolico's intended assistance suggests that time does not simply move from sadness to its memory, and that the past neither stays put nor explains the present as if it preceded it in a clear relation of cause and effect.

Scherezada López Marroquín describes the terrible bind in which such a false assurance places women who are trafficked in Mexico, a topic especially relevant to the novel because the female migrant characters in it suffer sexual abuse the male characters do not. In reference to what survivors say about their captivity, López Marroquín writes, "Varios testimonios de mujeres rescatadas coinciden en describir esta vida como si hubieran estado en un submundo paralelo al mundo que se conoce como 'real'" (172). This sense of separation between the so-called real world and the *submundo*, however, is impossible to sustain. López Marroquín continues, "las mujeres son ultrajadas por personas del submundo de la trata, y además son abusadas por los clientes, por hombres del mundo al que pertenecían" (172). Though Merolico presents to his listeners the idea that a transition away from the *submundo* is viable, Monge's novel, in correspondence with what López Marroquín observes, does not reproduce the illusion that one life and another could be that separate. The way in which Monge's novel deals with this actual epistemological consequence of trauma is to foreground the *submundo* and emphasize how it structures the "real" world. Through its poetics and its emphasis on traffickers and their economic production, *Tierras* negates the fictional and ideological sleight of hand that could posit a real world that is not also part of the *submundo*. Merolico sustains this illusion while he is a soothsayer. When, near the end of his life, he confronts his past roles in counterinsurgency, he recognizes that he has never really been able to reassure anyone, not even himself. The transitional temporality he invented to assuage the fears of his fellow migrants is a fiction.

Proposing that his and the other migrants' confinement be a hinge between one life and another, Merolico's first palm reading desires a separation from the real world and the *submundo*. It also presents hope as the result of a transaction, of trading the bad present for a better future. This transactional temporality is revealed as deceitful and vacuous in the only passage in the novel that places one of Merolico's palm readings directly alongside a migrant's testimonial. Estela has left the trucks behind in her

escape from the traffickers plotting against her and Epitafio. The testimonial reflects this by opening with, "*'Ya nos dejaron aquí solas…' repetía y repetía la señora… 'no vendrán más a buscarnos… quizá lo hemos conseguido…' insistía e insistía la vieja esa… luego dijo… 'libres a pesar de ser unas violadas… libres para volvernos al camino… para seguir hacia delante'*" (Monge, *Tierras* 221). The testimonial is followed by Merolico's words, which present a typical love story whose cruel foolishness in the face of the previous testimonial highlights the emptiness of Merolico's readings: "Te esperan el amor y la pasión… hay para ti un hombre rubio y alto … tu mano no puede mentirme… saldrás de aquí a salvo" (221).[8] The only direct juxtaposition of an actual migrant's testimonial with the fictional Merolico's words highlights the latter's disingenuousness and powerlessness. The extremely clear depiction of falsehood defines a liminal aspect of this palm reading related to content. It is also a liminal reading because of its contribution to the novel's textual materiality: it is the only reading to coincide on the page with a testimonial, and it is the last reading of another's palms Merolico performs before his death.

The plotline that culminates in Merolico's death is associated with a live burial, and in it the novel combines the poetics that negate the viability of the separation between the *submundo* and the real world with its depiction of Merolico's realization that the transitional temporality he evokes to assuage the migrants' fears is as false for them as it is for himself. Merolico emerges from one *submundo* into another when he survives the massacre of his fellow captives caught in the crossfire between, first, Estela and her henchmen, and second, those in her circle of traffickers bent on removing her from power. Estela's enemies include soldiers and police, the only representatives of the state in the novel. After the gunfight, Merolico is "el único ser vivo que no ha alcanzado el fuego" (Monge, *Tierras* 230). And, the narrator continues, "se ha salvado al caer bajo los cuerpos mutilados y ser por éstos sepultado" (230). This reference to being buried alive appears again when Merolico is uncovered at his point of sale to Teñido and Encanecido, who run a junkyard known as El Infierno that has recently also become a site of the dismembering and disposing of bodies. In an unusual use of the future tense that presents the episode being narrated as outstripping the characters' abilities to understand what is going on, the narrator describes the discovery of Merolico by those who will sell and buy him: "viene un cuerpo entero y asombrosamente vivo y negociarán luego el valor de Merolico" (237). The migrants' entrance into the hell traversed by Epitafio's truck Minos and Estela's convoy represents a collective live burial. Merolico's unlikely survival becomes an example of a live burial made salient in a scene in which characters mount a clear defense of market

economics, which emphasizes the importance of adaptation to avoid being cheated or losing one's business altogether. Explaining their success in corporate language, Encanecido says to Merolico, "Diversificamos pues el giro… además de desmontar hoy desmembramos … o te adaptas o alguien más lo hace y te chinga" (246). Making clear that they still take apart cars in addition to the bodies that form the newer part of their business plan, Teñido says, "tan importante es hoy la carne como el fierro" (246). Dehumanization, violence, service to state officials and other criminals, and the destruction of evidence converge at El Infierno in the equalization of taking apart cars and dismembering corpses, of treating flesh and iron as equally valuable commodities.

In the chapter dedicated to the end of Merolico's story, "*Segundo intermedio*: Volverán la luz y el fuego," Teñido and Encanecido explain to Merolico that "[t]odo el mundo se acostumbra" (Monge, *Tierras* 245) to the kind of work they are obliging him to do, dismembering and incinerating corpses. Merolico does not allow himself to become accustomed to it, and he kills himself instead. The chapter's title refers to the return, in the form of memories, of Merolico's days as a soldier and a paramilitary fighter. It also alludes to Merolico's self-immolation. Before he begins his first and last job at El Infierno, Merolico spits up bile, the price he pays for his false prophesies: "el jugo amargo que revuelve sus entrañas y que sube por su esófago, hasta dar con la minúscula iglesia que es su boca de adivino" (245). Shortly after Teñido and Encanecido have explained to Merolico that these days they dismember (*desmembrar*) as well as remove bones (*deshuesar*), Merolico acknowledges that he deceived the other migrants: "Yo les mentí a todos éstos" (247). Ignoring what Merolico has just said, Encanecido responds, "mucho hablar y nada estar haciendo" (247). Soon Merolico's actions will speak loudly to Teñido and Encanecido, but the thoughts that motivate those actions are concealed from everyone but Merolico, the narrator, and the reader. Only the narrator's words describe how Merolico returns to his past, and no other character learns of that past. This is an example of the way *Tierras* privileges fiction and the reader's encounter with it.

Taking Encanecido's emphasis on action to heart, and grateful for the fact that he is no longer with El Topo and El Tampón, those who sold him to the brothers, Merolico says to himself, in a phrase only the narrator discerns: "No les puedo quedar mal a estos cabrones, repite Merolico en su silencio" (Monge, *Tierras* 249). The same sentence continues in the typically fluid fashion of Monge's style: "y al hacerlo por fin echa a andar sus piernas nuevamente rumbo a la pila de cadáveres y restos" (249). In this sentence "hacerlo" refers to "repite … en su silencio," to repeating something in

silence. Even unspoken words become actions in Monge's novel's incarnation of language's materiality. Merolico's actions are then interrupted by another's words. In the following sentence – which refers to the migrants as the "sinDios," one of many compound descriptions used to identify them throughout the novel, and to Merolico as the "más viejo" among them – the narrator explains how Teñido's voice returns Merolico to his past:

> Justo antes de que alce el machete, sin embargo, estalla la voz de Teñido en la distancia y lo que logran sus palabras, más que acicatearlo, es entumir de nueva cuenta al más viejo de entre todos los sinDios: ¡apúrate con eso que queremos ver que acabes! El grito de Teñido ha hecho, además, que los perros transmuten sus ladridos en aullidos y éstos, sus aullidos, han devuelto a Merolico a aquellos años en que fuera él un soldado. (249)

Monge's text returns to the contexts of abuses that, as part of US-sponsored counterinsurgency during the Cold War, have resulted in and exacerbated the conditions that have forced migrants to risk their lives on the journey north for decades: inequality, injustice, corruption, extreme poverty, war, torture, mass rape, genocide, and transnational economies of violence. The transition from the human's shout to the dogs' howls establishes a temporal continuity incomprehensible to Encanecido and Teñido, who "se descubren extrañados" (249). Because he is immersed in that continuity, Merolico no longer hears the words of his captors: "no está Merolico ya escuchando: más que aquellos años en que fuera él un soldado está ahora mismo reviviendo aquellos otros en que hubo de sumarse él a los paras, esos años que pasó pues destrozando poblaciones" (249). Then Merolico reads his own palms. In a sentence that traverses and incarnates an intermediate space of *desrealización*, a sentence composed of words the narrator identifies neither as spoken nor just thought, and which employs the ellipses frequently used in the novel to intensify a sense of intermediacy, Merolico's final reading tells him the truth about temporality:

> Me lo dijeron claro a mí mis manos… el pasado está esperando siempre allí adelante, declara Merolico y al hacerlo vuelve a reírse a carcajadas: es el sonido de sus propias carcajadas, entonces, el que destierra al más viejo de entre todos los sinnombre de su ensueño y lo trae de nuevo hasta El Infierno. (249)

This temporal compression and reversal reaches the limits of speech, causing laughter to produce a return like the dogs' howls did just before.

The return is to El Infierno, which the novel now inscribes into the broader context of US hemispheric influence.

The following paragraph continues this climactic epistemological moment, in which animal sounds, human shouts, and disembodied laughter bring a character to the limits of what his sole subjectivity could ever comprehend. Divisions along time, between past and future, and along a transaction, between debt and repayment, are blurred by spatiotemporal collapse and made to seem inexpressible – even though they are inscribed in letters and words on the page – through the continuing emphasis on laughter:

> El gritar de Merolico pone a los perros todavía más ansiosos y sus aullidos se convierten en chillidos: escuchando este concierto, el hombre que intentó pagarle al mundo los pedazos que arrancara del destino imaginándose futuros, vuelve a detenerse y también vuelve a hundirse en la selva que divide en dos las tierras arrasadas. Antes, sin embargo, de que vuelvan esos años consumidos a atraparlo lo espabila el eco de una risa atronadora que no sabe aún que es la suya. (Monge, *Tierras* 250)

This passage condenses the novel's sustained resistance to a single and autonomous foundation for meaning because it splits representation in two. It describes Merolico's separation from himself in the form of a laugh he does not recognize as his own; and it employs metafiction, presenting *Las tierras arrasadas* as a way of framing "las tierras arrasadas." Merolico recognizes that his own hell is largely defined by his inability to pay back the violence done to pieces from a timeline in a paradoxically future moment, a timeline in which the past is always "esperando allí adelante." The novel presents Merolico's moment of recognition as an absolute obstacle to processes of exchange and equivalency. It produces no comprehension, no justification, and no repayment. Instead, as the description of Merolico's suicide shows, reason and laughter highlight a present moment that cannot be digested by capitalist teleology. Merolico sets himself on fire just after the following phrase: "Está todo aquí conmigo… mi pasado, mi presente y mi futuro, razona riéndose el más viejo de entre todos los sinDios" (252). The owners of El Infierno don't get it: "¿Qué chingado estás haciendo?, aúlla Encanecido al mismo tiempo que Teñido brama: ¿puta mierda… qué te pasa?" (252). Merolico recognizes the hellish hemispheric conditions that have led to the establishment of this particular corner of El Infierno. One of those conditions is the economic equalization of all human activity to the point of state complicity with and transnational profiting from and indifference to the total commodification of the human body. Appropriately,

therefore, Merolico's story ends in a typical example of Monge's novel's dark and insightful humor. Outraged, Encanecido and Teñido yell at Merolico's corpse: "¿qué chingado estás haciendo… qué no ves que nos costaste?" (252).

Merolico disrupts the transactional order of El Infierno by destroying himself in a moment of recognition that capitalist teleology, exemplified by Encanecido and Teñido's transactional logic, cannot absorb. However, at the level of textual materiality, Merolico's words seem to persist after his death and to combine more intensely than before with the migrants' testimonials. Before his death, Merolico's words, set apart in roman type, appear ten times over a span of one hundred pages in the middle of the novel. The longest gaps between migrants' testimonials in the novel appear at either end of Merolico's first and final enunciation. During and after the section in which Merolico reads others' palms, the migrants' testimonials are also less frequent than they are before his words first appear. After Merolico's final reading, there are six testimonials. Before his first reading there are twenty-three. Only two of the six testimonials after Merolico's final reading appear on their own. The other four are integrated into or juxtaposed directly alongside offset texts that use roman type. These four examples of roman type are not logically attributable to Merolico because he has died by the time they appear on the page. They are, however, logically examples of fictionalization.

The interplay of Merolico's, migrants', and then fictional, unattributed words with different margins and in roman type is the set of material relations that structures the novel's resistant poetics, which demand the acknowledgment of the functioning together of the real world and the *submundo*, and which do not allow either fiction or testimonial to claim representational autonomy. The shifting frequency of and connections among Merolico's palm readings and actual migrants' words demonstrate, furthermore, that fictional and testimonial discourses function more closely together as the novel's plot and its textual materiality evolve. Quotations in roman type are initially associated exclusively with Merolico. After his death they appear integrated into or alongside offset quotations from migrants' testimonials, always in italics, as if his voice had infused theirs. By this time, however, Merolico's voice has been radically altered by the subjective, temporal, and metafictional divisions that coincide with the moment he reads his own palm and learns that temporality does not move as if in an exchange between past and future. He learns, on the contrary, that the past also lies in wait in the future. This signals a change in Merolico's consciousness that also explains how the roman lines that appear after his death are no longer false assurances. Instead, they move from observations about what is happening to the migrants during the novel's plot to

descriptions of their pasts and aspirations that are much more realistic and aware of time's overlapping layers than Merolico's soothsaying was.

Three of the four passages that combine roman and italic type and that follow Merolico's death include three different uses of the verb *contar*: to tell stories, to matter in the sense of being relied upon, and to enumerate. All four include actual testimonials that explain why their speakers are making the journey north. Those that include *contar* employ that verb in relation to the journey. The first two times the two types of quotations appear together, the roman-type lines correspond clearly with an action in the novel. In the third and fourth such passages they do not. This difference suggests that the migrants whose testimonials appear near the novel's end are moving away from the brutal spiral that Monge's fiction traces, a line of flight emerging from within the text and enabled in part by Merolico's moment of self-recognition.

The first passage after Merolico's death that combines roman and italic type that is set apart is also the first of only two passages in the novel that incorporates the two kinds of type into the same paragraph. (The block citation below provides a helpful visual example of this textual arrangement.) The other three passages that combine roman and italic (including the one before Merolico's death) present paragraphs in one kind of type separately from those in the other. The first passage that follows Merolico's death hints at the role he played as storyteller when he was still alive. It opens by referring to a collision between Minos and a calf on the highway:

> Puta madre… qué ha pasado… ya ha pasado… cómo mierdas… qué ha sido eso… no fue nada… ya no es nada… mejor sigue… eso es… sigue contando… *estoy haciendo yo este viaje… tenía allá una familia… no quería yo hacerlo… me sacaron de mi casa… me mataron mi familia… yo allá no tengo ya nada… por eso estoy haciendo el viaje.* (Monge, *Tierras* 271)

The character who asks another to keep speaking ("sigue contando"), written in roman type above, has, typographically, adopted Merolico's position. Until this passage roman type was exclusively attributed to Merolico. This passage also includes a significant content-related change. Merolico always spoke. By contrast, the character associated with roman type in this passage is listening and asking another to keep speaking. The voice of the other belongs to an actual migrant who has survived and made a testimonial. As with the other three passages that combine roman and italic type as the novel's end approaches, the testimonial in this one refers to the journey north.

The second juxtaposition of italic and roman type occurs when Sepelio, a coworker who betrays Epitafio, bangs on Minos's trailer: "*Yo me fui porque ya todos se habían ido…* […] *no me quedaba pues ya nada… ni las voces de las gentes…* […] ¿por qué tocan… por qué de nuevo… vendrán seguro ahora por otro… a ver a cuál escogen ahora?" (Monge, *Tierras* 280). In relation to the previous passage, this one reverses the order of testimonial, in italics, and fictional voice, in roman, as if the survivor's words still risked sinking back into the novel's largely hopeless tale, a sensation reinforced by the content, which alludes to being sold into slavery. The migrants in Epitafio's truck are still alive, unlike those killed (with the exception of Merolico) when Estela's convoy was ambushed. Also still alive are those who belong to the new group of migrants following the *chicos de la selva* into the jungle. A set of five quotations that are set apart by different margins and inserted into their story follows a pattern. The first is in roman, the next three are in italics, and the fifth is in roman. The second testimonial in this set, in italics, uses the verb *contar* to describe a man's desire to see the friends who wait for him in the US: "*ellos me tienen ahí contado*" (303). He matters because others are counting on his safe arrival, which is anything but guaranteed. In this passage the novel's Merolico-inspired fictional testimonials, the first and last of the five and in roman, frame the actual testimonials, the middle three and in italics, giving another visual portrayal of testimonials that are caught within the fiction, and thus also of migrants struggling to escape the novel's story.

The final offset quotations in the novel present a trio, with the roman-type example in the middle, this time reversing the framing of the previous example, and reinforcing the idea that the voices of the migrants are loosening the grip of the engulfing spiral that the novel embodies. The first offset text, a testimonial, speaks of a third trip north, and of kidnapping and rape. The second, fictional, speaks of a migrant's first trip: "Para mí era la primera… no lo había… no quería yo ni siquiera hacer el viaje… … me fui quedando hasta que ya no había nadie … nomás silencio y viento mudo… hasta las moscas se callaron" (Monge, *Tierras* 314). The third of this trio and final offset text in the novel is a testimonial that recounts multiple trips, an experience that one migrant has shared with many others, whose numerous trips north are recounted in several testimonials throughout the novel. The final testimonial reads:

Ya ni las cuento… no sé ni cuántas… la última fue hace mucho tiempo… unos nueve años… ya había llegado… allí ya estaba hasta con casa… con un trabajo y una casa… pero vinieron los migrones a los campos y agarraron ahí parejo… y de regreso que el

sueñito se ha acabado… pero aquí vengo… en otra vuelta… ¿qué otra cosa voy a hacer si no intentarlo… si no seguirle? (314)

On the one hand, this testimonial corresponds with the repetition the novel itself enacts: the betrayal of migrants in the jungle clearing, which appears twice. The novel's first line, "También sucede por el día, pero esta vez es por la noche" (13), becomes clearly the opening edge of an encircled field upon reading the novel's final line: "también sucede por la noche, pero esta vez es por el día" (341). Nights and days follow one another, as do the kidnappings. On the other hand, the final testimonial emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between counting and recounting. The speaker no longer counts how many trips it has been while also recounting that instance of no longer counting in the context of and as a prologue to repetition ("otra vuelta"), persistence, and necessity. Counting has become meaningless; recounting is vital, for the speaker and for the novel that recounts migrants' countless tales. The fact that the final offset passage is a testimonial suggests the possibility of escaping the novel's encircled field, an escape made possible through the same novel's evolving combination of fictional and truth-based discourse.

The textual materiality that comprises *Tierras* manifests itself in the formal relations among fiction, testimonial, and intertexts. This materiality leads me to propose that Monge's novel makes visible a complementary relationship between Rivera Garza's *necroescritura* and an earlier examination of intertextuality, Kristeva's explanation of the anti-foundational function of what she calls transposition. For Kristeva, poetic language subverts authorized subjectivity when it highlights the process by which this subjectivity is posited, which is a process of separation that denotes and objectifies the other through enunciation. She writes, "modern poetic language goes further than any classical mimesis – whether theatrical or novelistic – because it attacks not only denotation (the positing of the object) but meaning (the positing of the enunciating subject) as well" (Kristeva 58). The foundation from which an object is named becomes anti-foundational through a critique of the subject's separation from that object. Kristeva calls this separation "thetic," a process that relies upon denotation, "understood as the subject's ability to separate himself from the ecosystem into which he was fused, so that, as a result of this separation, he may designate it" (52). Poetic language is anti-foundational when it subverts the authorized separation of the subject from the object.

Kristeva defines transposition as "the *passage from one sign system to another*" (59) that also "involves an altering of the thetic *position* – the destruction of the old position and the formation of a new one" (59). Monge's

novel's materiality and Rivera Garza's concept of *desapropiación* are critical, multiform, and anti-foundational, and thus similar to Kristeva's description of signifying practice as transposition. Kristeva writes, "If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an inter-textuality), one then understands that its 'place' of enunciation and its denoted 'object' are never singular, complete, and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated" (60). Monge's novel develops a critical poetics that creates an anti-foundational field of knowledge and practices through its materialization of the formal relations among different themes, primarily the transactions of human trafficking and the topics of storytelling and soothsaying associated with Merolico. The novel also makes transposition visible through its intertextual form, especially the way it incorporates actual migrants' testimonials in relation to Merolico's words.

Referring to Kristeva's transposition as a way of explaining how *Tierras* combines fiction and testimonial emphasizes the novel's anti-foundational way of producing meaning. Its place of enunciation is conditioned by the tension Kristeva associates with the "transgression of the thetic" (58), which performs two complementary operations. First, it calls attention to the boundary by which meaning is produced through denotation and enunciation. Second, it refuses to cede to the referential side of that boundary the status of an origin or an absolute truth. The textual assignation to something on the other side of the text is a foundational paradox acknowledged by Kristeva's semiotics. What her work critiques is the suppression of that paradox in the form of the projecting of a unified subject guaranteed by discourses of truth (58). Especially relevant to Monge's novel's portrayal of the dehumanization of migrants is Kristeva's conclusion that to present literary representation as something that emerges from a self-authorized, autonomous origin is to reproduce a hegemonic symbolic fiction that conceals the objectification of others.

Monge's novel deliberately troubles such a fiction. The materiality of this troubling takes on the valence of depth in the face of the *tierras arrasadas*, the razed lands of the novel's title. The title is a metonym for the flattening out of human experience that results from the transformation of human beings into commercial objects. The novel's textual depth also confronts a lack of temporal depth, which is characterized by the absence of guiding narratives such as national sovereignty, modernity, or the formation of a people. John Kraniauskas associates this absence with what he calls "Neoliberal 'Primitive' Accumulation," which designates "the paradoxical fact that 'originary' or 'primitive' accumulation is a continuous presupposition, rather than one that comes to an end" (210). If this proposal

holds true, Kraniauskas continues, then "one of its effects … is to detach the idea of 'originary' accumulation from the kind of historicist 'transitional' narratives criticized by subalternist writers … as well as to foreground the violence of modernizing and developmentalist re-ordering when it is imposed" (210). In his work on contemporary Mexican literary texts that incorporate non-fiction sources,[9] Roberto Cruz Arzabal shares with Kraniauskas a challenge to temporal linearity. Kraniauskas emphasizes the illusory character of progress, and Cruz Arzabal associates *necroescritura* with repetition. The texts the latter analyzes become "espacios de mediación en los que el pasado reaparece en la materialidad como efecto de los mecanismos de cita y el montaje" (81). Monge's novel also incorporates documentary sources in a way that combines the materiality of textual junctures with a material return of the past to the narrative's present. By doing so *Tierras* lays bare the impossibility or disingenuousness of what what Kraniauskas calls "'transitional' narratives."

The live burial in Monge's novel is a materially significant return of the past whose transactional nature is featured and critiqued in the setting of El Infierno, where Merolico destroys himself and thus ruins Teñido and Encanecido's most recent acquisition of objectified human capital. The economic temporality at play in Merolico's survival of a live burial finds a significant predecessor in Honoré de Balzac's *Le Colonel Chabert*.[10] In his analysis of Balzac's novella, Brooks argues that the value of storytelling stages the transference of the past to the present in a way that reveals the limits of that transference. *Chabert* recounts the tale of an officer in Napoleon's army believed dead but who returns and finds himself obligated to tell his own story in order to prove who he is and claim his inheritance. Brooks proposes that Balzac's novella is less the story of "one narrative contract" and more "the story of the contractuality of narrative" (109). He elaborates by explaining how the fictional text in general, and not just Balzac's novella in specific, speaks "of the investments of desire on the part of both addresser and addressee, author and reader" and being "a place of rhetorical exchange or transaction" (Brooks 109). This strongly temporalized narrative process, Brooks concludes, desires the "working toward the recovery of the past as past, syntactically complete and reconciled within the present" (110). The contractuality of narrative figured in Merolico demonstrates the impossibility of integrating the present and past in a reconciled way (much as in Balzac's novella, in which Chabert's efforts fail). Merolico also shows how this failure of reconciliation marks the anti-foundational nature of a textual materiality that resists a smooth temporal and narrative transaction.

Monge's novel's anti-foundational place of enunciation emerges clearly and multiplies at the numerous limits, both thematic and formal, that configure Merolico's story. Merolico commits extreme acts of violence while a soldier and a paramilitary. He presents a horizon of hope, albeit false, for his fellow migrants. He survives a massacre and being buried alive by corpses. He ends his own life by setting himself on fire. His words, thoughts, silences, and actions function at the limits of one another, demarcating clearly, and only as the invention inherent to fiction could construct, what he, other characters, the narrator, and the reader can and cannot know. Furthermore, laughter and dogs' howls place his words and thoughts in stark relief. The mimesis that makes his characterization possible verifies the limits of thetic denotation, or the subjective enunciation that demands the objectification of and separation from the other. These denotative limits are established more broadly by the novel's paratextual acknowledgment of its reliance upon *The Divine Comedy* and migrants' testimonials. *Tierras* calls attention to the danger of insisting upon autonomous foundational claims by embodying the way fiction exposes the objectifying violence that sustains the illusion of the independent subject. The gradual intertwining of fiction and testimonial that occurs after Merolico's death represents the possible basis for an enunciation that neither objectifies the other nor insists upon the fictions of the autonomous, verifiable subject, even the testimonial subject, and that subject's words. *Las tierras arrasadas* demonstrates fiction's unique ability to trouble both fact and fiction, to rely on each to unsettle the other, and to rely on neither to tell the whole story.

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NOTES

1 The inclusion of the word "América" in Monge's paratext is redundant. Because it is excessive in relation to what it denotes, the word is ironic, almost sarcastic, and its use leaves room for pointing out the duplicity of the American dream, idealized by migrants as a goal but with brutal realities behind its facade. The word "América" also underscores the hemispheric role the US plays in the novel, identified most clearly in references to Cold War counterinsurgency and its lasting consequences.

2 Peña Iguarán's text also provides a well-researched summary of the levels of violence Mexico has suffered since Calderón's so-called war on drugs (138-39), which, as Peña Iguarán writes, "reactivó e intensificó la militarización de México" (138).

3 An earlier novel about migration, Yuri Herrera's *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* (2009), also incorporates *The Divine Comedy* into its structure and thematics. Canonical texts inform other recent Mexican works about migration and border violence as well. Examples include the eponymous *Antígona González*, by Sara Uribe, and Jorge Volpi's *Las elegidas* (2015), which draws upon Homer's *Odyssey*.

4 Quotations from this work are by canto and line number.

5 See Tamara Williams for an analysis of *Antígona González* that focuses on similar paratexts and that also explains how Uribe disappropriates her own text in more economic terms, thereby performing a process that Rivera Garza's concept of *desapropiación* lays out as critically important.

6 Zavala's work insightfully insists on analyzing narconarrative texts and related forms of cultural production in the discursive context of the "drug war archive," which consists of "government documents, journalistic news stories, testimonials, police and military reports, analyses by human rights organizations, narcocorridos, films, [and] websites" ("Imagining" 356).

7 See Zavala for a good overview of the US's national-security discourse in the long range, from the 1940s ("Fictions" 227-28), through Reagan ("Fictions" 235), to the "Mérida Initiative," the latter supporting Calderón's so-called war on drugs and a recent manifestation of national-security discourse ("Fictions" 235-36).

8 Here and below the ellipses separated by spaces on both sides identify text I have omitted from quotations. This is to distinguish my omissions from the ellipses connected to a word that appear as such in the novel.

9 The texts Cruz Arzabal analyzes are *Antígona González* and *La sodomía en la Nueva España* (2010) by Luis Felipe Fabre.

10 Originally published in 1832 as *La Transaction*, the novella that Balzac definitively titled *Le Colonel Chabert* in 1844, was revised extensively over several years. See Alexander Fischler (66).

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