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Towards A Decolonial Latin America: Identity, Difference and Solidarity in Augusto Monterroso's (Very) Short Prose

Fragmentaria y modesta, la obra de Augusto Monterroso no ha recibido la misma atención que la de sus amigos Juan Rulfo y Julio Cortázar. Sin embargo, su escritura ofrece perspectivas originales sobre temas culturales que siguen siendo de gran relevancia en la actualidad, incluidos los de la identidad y la diferencia latinoamericanas. A partir de un diálogo entre su narrativa breve (1959-98), la teoría decolonial de Mignolo y la crítica del regionalismo de Moreiras, este artículo sostiene que la estética breve de Monterroso anticipa las políticas de la (des)colonialidad y de la representación que no se consolidarían en el mundo académico hasta el siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: *Augusto Monterroso, América Latina, identidad, representación, solidaridad*

Fragmentary and modest, Augusto Monterroso's work has not received the same attention as that of his friends Juan Rulfo and Julio Cortázar. Yet his writing offers original perspectives on major cultural issues that remain relevant to the present day, including that of Latin American identity and difference. Engaging with Mignolo's decolonial theory and Moreiras's critique of regionalism through close readings Monterroso's short prose (1959-98), this paper argues that it is precisely the use of a fragmentary aesthetics that allows Monterroso to anticipate the politics of (de)coloniality and representation that would only come to crystallize in academia in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *Augusto Monterroso, Latin America, identity, representation, solidarity*

While preparing this article in the midst of an alarming rise in populist authoritarianisms across the world, as emblematized in the Americas by the likes of Donald Trump in the United States, Javier Milei in Argentina, and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, I read Chris Hayes' Guardian Long Read article

"The Loudest Megaphone: How Trump Mastered Our New Attention Age." To understand the decline of democracy and democratic discourse in the present, Hayes brings the reader's attention back to an argument developed in an essay by George Saunders in the context of post-9/11 USA, one encapsulated in a prescient thought experiment:

> Imagine, Saunders says, being at a cocktail party, with the normal give-and-take of conversation between generally genial, informed people. And then "a guy walks in with a megaphone. He's not the smartest person at the party, or the most experienced, or the most articulate. But he's got that megaphone." The man begins to offer his opinions and soon creates his own conversational gravity: everyone is reacting to whatever he's saying. This, Saunders contends, quickly ruins the party. And if you have a particularly empty-minded Megaphone Guy, you get a discourse that's not just stupid but that makes everyone in the room stupider as well: "Let's say he hasn't carefully considered the things he's saying. He's basically just blurting things out. And even with the megaphone, he has to shout a little to be heard, which limits the complexity of what he can say." … Yes, Saunders wrote that in 2007, and yes, it sounds uncannily like the spoken patter of a certain US president, doesn't it? But Saunders' critique runs deeper than the insidious triviality and loudness of major TV news. He's making the case that the sophistication of our thinking is determined to a large degree by the sophistication of the language we hear used to describe our world. (Hayes 2025)

The texts and contexts examined in the present article – the literary work of Central American writer Augusto Monterroso, who wrote principally in the twentieth century – are altogether different from that addressed by Saunders. Monterroso, who was born in Tegucigalpa in 1921, and died in Mexico City in 2003, belonged (largely) to a pre-social-media, pre-Twitter, pre-Trump age in which authoritarianisms and their dominant discourses tended to be built on silences – on the restriction and censoring of information – than on deafeningly high volumes and communicational excess. My contention, however, is that a return to Monterroso's (very) short prose, and his biting literary humor, offer a uniquely satirical lens through which to examine the simplistic, emotionally charged, post-Truth rhetoric that, in the present day, threatens the foundations of deliberative, representative democracies across the world. Going back to Monterroso's cutting brevity, we may find not only an artistic antidote to the deafening megaphones of the political present, but also a set of vital intellectual-ethical tools for navigating and challenging the prevailing currents of authoritarian discourse and power.

MONTERROSO'S SHARP, CUTTING FRAGMENTS

In Latin American literary studies, Augusto Monterroso is famously less famous than he deserves to be. One of the founders of the slippery, hybrid

subgenre of the *microcuento* in Mexico and the Americas, his legacy lives on today in a number of forms of very short prose that seek to insinuate themselves into everyday life: from Chile's *Santiago en 100 Palabras* project (see Schwartz 05-19), which invites ordinary people to contribute microtales of up to 100 words to tell *their* story of Santiago – a public writing program that has morphed from print to digital form and generated over a million exemplars of flash fiction[1] – to the *tuiteratura* written and promoted by Mexican authors such as Mauricio Montiel Figueiras and Alberto Chimal (see Gatica Cote 1-14). These microforms, in one way or another, continue to dissolve the boundaries between life and fiction, and thanks to their modest formats, propose forms of solidarity – between writers and readers, publishers and public – that are often beyond the reach of longer forms. Since 2001, for example, *Santiago en 100 Palabras* gives ordinary people the chance to contribute actively to the imaginary of Santiago de Chile's cityscape through texts that can be written and read on the tube, the bus or the train as part of a daily commute to work; and during the 2020-2021 phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, Chimal and his wife, writer Raquel Castro, used their YouTube channel @AlbertoyRaquelMX to offer free daily readings of literary texts to people in quarantine (Campos). The emphasis on community, participation and *solidarity*, indeed, is a fundamental aspect of microfiction, as suggested by Chimal's distillation of *tuiteratura* to five key elements:

1. La escritura y la lectura comunales.
2. La interacción instantánea y diversa.
3. La mutación de géneros preexistentes.
4. La aparición de prácticas nuevas.
5. La erosión de los conceptos del texto definitivo y de la permanencia. (Chimal, 158-60)

Community, commonality and, by extension, solidarity (1), through interaction (2), constant generic mutation (3), innovation (4) and indeterminacy (5) are seen by Chimal as essential components of a genre in perpetual movement, the same fleetingness that underpins Monterroso's short and very short fiction and which in fact gives its name to one of his most hybrid and fragmentary short prose collections, *Movimiento perpetuo* (1972).

Below, I expand on Chimal's theory and praxis of very short prose through a broader exploration of the connection between the questions of representation, identity/difference, solidarity and coloniality across Monterroso's writing and thinking. The aim is to provide a better understanding of how his literary production between the 1950s and 1990s anticipated subsequent developments in Latin American writing and

thinking – literary, critical and theoretical – in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Among these I consider a variety of fields, groups and networks (in and beyond academia) such as Latin American cultural studies, the *grupo modernidad/colonialidad* and, more recently, decolonial feminism and its many networks, including the *Red de Feminismos Descoloniales* (2008-present). At the core of all of these lies a mission to rethink and remake Latin America by interrogating what Latin America means, what being Latin American means, what writing Latin America means.[2]

These questions lead us in turn to the concept of community (and who is included/excluded from it in Latin America) and, by extension, to the pitfalls of solidarity in the region – especially when that solidarity comes from "outside." As Monterroso's writing demonstrates, solidarity is often expressed and distributed through hierarchical colonial binaries of race and class – rich to poor, white to brown, "First" World to "Third" World – and in ways that undermine any real possibility of community or collectivity. In taking this wide-angle view of Monterroso's work, I seek to offer an alternative, literary perspective on some of the contemporary issues of identity, representation, and solidarity in a postcolonial world, where the complexities of "solidarity" are perhaps best illustrated by the circulation of global waste through our supposed "solidarity economy": the piles of e-trash accumulating in Africa and the piles of discarded clothes piling up in Chile's Atacama desert.

In this broad-based theoretical approach to Monterroso's work, I am guided by the following research questions: How can Latin America's identity discourses, within a postcolonial context, sustain themselves while doing justice the region's diversity and plurality? How can the region's cultural differences be preserved and represented without reducing Latin American identity to cultural and colonial stereotypes that are in turn liable to commodification? How can Latin America's unique stories be told without suppressing the very particularities that constitute the region's differences? In order to address these questions, I explore the intersections between Monterroso's reflections on culture and the Latin American authors with whom he aligns himself in his ever-more self-reflexive writing: Jorge Luis Borges, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Juan Rulfo and Juan Carlos Onetti, among others, whose literary creations, reflections, and provocations, as we shall see, bring to the table questions which would later become known as "decolonial" politics. In turn, I bring these literary resonances into contemporary perspective by engaging with Monterroso's literary work through twenty-first-century theoretical lenses: principally the decolonial thought of Walter Mignolo and the deconstructive perspectives on Latin American identity offered by Alberto Moreiras in *The Exhaustion of Difference*.

In doing so, I build on the postcolonial and decolonial approaches to Monterroso's writing that have begun to emerge over the last decade, in particular with recent publications by An Van Hecke and D.A. Wood; a body of work to which I began to contribute in a prior article (Bell, "Autoconciencia" 175-192). I seek to provide a more holistic picture than has been achieved so far by exploring questions of identity and difference across Monterroso's oeuvre from his first short story collection *Obras completas (y otros cuentos)* (1959), through his hybrid collections of fables, stories and fragments *La oveja negra y demás fábulas* (1969), and the *Tríptico* (1995) that brings together *Movimiento perpetuo* (1972), *La palabra mágica* (1983) and *La letra e: fragmentos de un diario* (1987) through to one of his final collections, *La vaca* (1998). In line with Monterroso's own fragmentary and ludic aesthetics, which lies at the center of this paper, the works are not addressed chronologically but rather thematically in order to address the different ways in which the writer tackles key concepts surrounding Latin American identity.

I begin by exploring the ways in which Monterroso's writing satirizes attempts – from inside and outside Latin America – to categorize, reduce, and commodify the region's cultural identity through colonial discursive frameworks, nationalistic discourses, commercial enterprises and academic discourses. I then build on the thorny question of solidarity, exploring the ways in which Monterroso's work anticipates what Moreiras sees as an alternative, nonrepresentational solidarity "with the residual voices, or silences, of Latin American alterity" (37) which might resist incorporating Latin American difference into universal (colonial, European or hegemonic) knowledge. Finally, I argue that Monterroso posits an approach to culture that locates itself with and *as* the excess, the evasive epistemological element that always-already escapes the grasp of representation: fleeting moments, affective intensities, singular creative impulses, all of which constitute residues that evade identitarian discourses.

My contention is that it is precisely his art of brevity – and with it, his cutting humor and his aesthetics of the fragment, of the *remainder* – that allows Monterroso to open cracks in hegemonic discourses of cultural identity and representation. Whether considered as modern forms such as short stories or prose poems, or classical forms like fables or allegories, his fragmentary texts are invariably structured around the very element that defies categorization: the element perhaps best described as lived experience, emotionally encountered and directly felt. This vital experience that both fuels and thwarts Monterroso's writing produces meaning not by covering up but by revealing, among other things: the irreducible gap between meaning as it is established and meaning as it is lived and therefore transformed; a crack in hegemonic discourse (be it that of the Nation or that of the Market) through which plural stories can escape and multiply; the

stories told and renewed every day by ordinary people. It is this crack, as we shall see, that prevents any closure by producing perpetual movement, constant creativity and infinite thought, paving the way for a decolonial writing able to tackle universal culture with joyful irreverence (Borges, "El escritor argentino").

IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE IN LATIN AMERICAN CULTURE

Prior scholarship has explored Monterroso's disruptive engagement with dualistic thinking in his *cuentos* (Bell, *Short Story* 10-54). In this first section, I explore the specific ethical and political dimensions this takes on in the postcolonial context in which Monterroso situates his writing and thinking, and the ways in which it anticipates the decolonial thinking of the Coloniality/Modernity group that would begin to emerge in the late 1990s with leading thinkers including Enrique Dussel, Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, and Arturo Escobar.

Let's begin with the hybrid story-essay "Poesía quechua," from his 1983 collection *La palabra mágica*. Here, Monterroso unmasks the colonial hierarchical vision that polarizes Latin American culture according to categories of race and class through the dualities of *indio*/*culto*, traditional/modern, barbaric/civilized. He reflects ironically on the way in which Indigenous artifacts are judged not on their inherent qualities but rather on the colonial assumption that they are made by "seres inferiores a hombres," by "subhombres" (*Tríptico* 195-96). The praise of an Indigenous Brazilian song by the sixteenth-century French philosopher Michel de Montaigne is shown to be symptomatic of such Manichean thought: "no … tiene nada de bárbara"; "se asemeja a las de Anacreonte"; "las palabras terminan de un modo semejante a las de la lengua griega" (195).

For An Van Hecke, this passage demonstrates Montaigne's "genuine admiration for the literature of the New World" and Monterroso's search for "signs in which Third World authors were not seen as monkeys anymore, nor as irrational or infantile beings, but respected as writers at the same level as First World authors" (128). I read the essay as a satirical denunciation of the ethnocentric belief in the superiority of one way – the European way – of viewing the world. By judging the Indigenous artwork from a Western worldview that considers itself the only legitimate mode of perception, Montaigne falls into the trap of Eurocentrism, in which cultural production from the colonized world, its valorization as "art," has to be legimitized through comparison with European art, and therefore through colonial criteria, tastes, styles, and paradigms.

The reference to his "tolerancia para sus congéneres de no importaba qué cultura" thus becomes deeply ironic (Van Hecke, "Augusto Monterroso" 195): of course, the culture of authors and artists *does matter*, and, especially so in postcolonial contexts; the culture from which a work of art originates

profoundly impacts on the way it is judged, valued, and circulated. Furthermore, by stating that "ya son pocos … los que aún hacen estas comparaciones entre poesías indias y cultas para convertir en aceptables las primeras" (196), and thus reaffirming "lo indio" and "lo culto" as distinct, hierarchical categories, Monterroso undermines the possibility of considering Indigenous poetry "según sus valores esenciales" (195-96). The condition of that possibility, he intimates, is the rejection of the very colonial frameworks that underpin the Eurocentric gaze, which reduces Indigenous people to the status of nonhumans, i.e., subhumans.

Monterroso thus identifies and critiques, within the specific realm of literature and literary criticism, the ontological parting line that Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh in much broader geopolitical terms refer to as "colonial differences" (155), the hierarchies between European subjects and non-European objects (Quijano 168–178; Mignolo, *Darker Side* 16-18), which from the sixteenth century onwards provided a racialized foundation for the "idea of Latin America":

> La categorización racial no consiste simplemente en decir "eres negro o indio, por lo tanto, eres inferior," sino en decir "no eres como yo, por lo tanto, eres inferior," designación que en la escala cristiana de la humanidad incluía a los indios americanos y los negros africanos. (Mignolo, *La idea* 13)

This hierarchical Eurocentric perspective stands in sharp contrast with Indigenous cosmogonies, ontologies, and thought systems. As the Aymara thinker Marcelo Fernández Osco explains, Indigenous cultures are underpinned by an entirely different episteme and world view

> that structures socio-political relations and practices according to a model of horizontal solidarity rather than a vertical chain of command characteristic of the modern state. This form of solidarity is inclusive not only of humans but also of non-humans (i.e., the so-called natural and cosmological world). The main site and source of these practices is the *ayllu*, which although debilitated in its territorial reach, still embodies a promising perspective for life. (Fernández Osco 28)

Monterroso, without engaging directly with Indigenous politics, social movements or Aymara epistemes based on kinship relations or kin-based communities (*ayllu*), uses literary satire to open a window through which his reader might discover alternative ways of knowing and understanding the world and its inhabitants, human, or other-than-human. By denouncing the Eurocentric gaze, he interrogates what Latin American culture is and *for whom*.

In *Tradition and Modernity in Spanish American Literature*, Adam Sharman – without engaging explicitly with decolonial theory – argues that "what is perceived as cultural superiority is expressed hyperbolically as the

absolute opposition between culture and nonculture itself" (33). Such absolutization is captured with sharp focus in a single, parodic image in "Memoria de Luis Cardoza y Aragón": the illusion of contemporary Central American writers – of which Monterroso, born in Honduras, is one – writing "con plumas que se quitaban de la cabeza" (Monterroso, *La vaca* 65). This is the perfect image of the "either/or" view of culture (and humans), one which is forcefully present in the two antagonistic castes of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's 1845 biographical essay *Facundo o civilización y barbarie*. Monterroso mocks the false perception of a simple choice between two distinct categories of human being: civilization and barbarism, quill in hand or feather on head, *culto* or *indio*, modernity or tradition. Insisting on the undecidability of any cultural position, Monterroso expands the legacy of Borgesian thinking of the sort expounded in "Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva" (Borges, *El Aleph*, 55-62). It is only by embracing the inevitable interchangeability and interpenetration between cultural categories, he suggests, that we can decouple culture from its polarizing, absolutizing bounds.

Monterroso's denunciation and dismantling of abusive dualistic thought becomes an important component of a necessarily fragmentary, literary theory of Latin American culture that emerges throughout his work. In "Es igual," the polarization of culture according to a single factor – wealth – is rebuked:

> Los problemas del escritor no son siempre, como a veces se quiere pensar, de desarrollo o subdesarrollo del país en que uno vive, de riqueza o de pobreza. En países pobres o ricos, ¿en qué condiciones escribieron sus obras Dostoievski, Vallejo, Laxness, Quiroga, Thomas, Neruda, Joyce, Bloy, Arlt, Martí? (Monterroso, *Tríptico* 37)

Here, Monterroso attempts to free the writer from the need to represent his country according to absolute evaluative categories: European/Latin American, developed/underdeveloped, rich/poor. Such colonial dualities, Monterroso implies, deny the particularity of the writer's own experience, and, therefore, the multiplicity of difference, the infinity of singularities that defies incorporation into fixed racial, ethnic or economic groups. His refusal to order this deliberately arbitrary collection of individual writers according to their respective nationalities (and corresponding levels of wealth/development) reflects his view of the irreducibility of individual experience, and the consequent banality of national discourses. By formulating an open question rather than listing particular writers and their corresponding living conditions, he underlines the undecidability of the human condition. By pluralizing humanity into singular human experiences, Monterroso questions the possibility of engaging unproblematically with "la Humanidad" in the singular (37).

It is arguably the same irreducibility that prompts Julio Cortázar to open *Rayuela* (1963) with the following epigraph from Jacques Vaché's *Carta a André Breton*: "Rien ne vous tue un homme comme d'être obligé de représenter un pays" (13). Singularity and particularity – those aspects that constitute an individual's experience – are annihilated by socio-economic generalizations. Instead of forcing the singular into the general, Monterroso and Cortázar imply, literature should center around the excess that cannot be represented by discourses of national identity/difference. Monterroso's title thus gains significance. To attempt to represent one's country through a bifocal lens is paradoxically to stifle one's own particularity and turn difference into *indifference*, one meaning of the idiom "es igual."

Yet Monterroso's concern is not only with the *personal* self-destructive tendencies of the nationalist writer whose sole problem is to write "the country in which he lives." It is also with the *structural* destructive effects of such cultural specificity, of such nationalist obsessions, on the Latin America epistemic object itself. In "Memoria de Luis Cardoza y Aragón," Monterroso praises Miguel Ángel Asturias and Enrique Gómez Carrillo for sweeping away the cobwebs of academicism weaved by "los enemigos de toda lengua extranjera … autocomplacidos en su lucha contra los 'galicismos mentales', como llamaban a cualquier forma de liberación" (*La vaca*, 65). Nationalist critics, Monterroso signals, prevent liberation in their restriction of Latin America to national discourses and ethnic themes. As indicated by the syntactical connection between the adjective "mental" and the noun "liberación," freedom is inextricably tied to the freedom of thought and knowledge. Emancipation for the Latin American writer, then, consists of decentring Latin American identitarian discourses, in expanding thought beyond geographical boundaries. The key for Monterroso is not to deny or to escape from Western structures, but rather to engage critically with them. This is why he praises Rubén Darío for "looting" European poetry (65): in so doing, Darío reverses the processes of the abusive universalism denounced in "Es igual"; rather than allowing his particularity to be subsumed into his country (and worse, into the universal abstract measures of wealth or development), he liberates his writing by reappropriating "universal" culture for the construction of something new: Latin American *modernismo*.

It is unsurprising, then, that Monterroso aligns himself with Borges, known for his staunch opposition to narrow patriotic nationalism. In "*In illo tempore*," for instance, Monterroso pokes fun at Borges's critics:

> Son aquellos que enamorados de la selva americana (que no conocen) creen ver en aquel que no se recrea describiendo la presumible belleza selvática, las tediosas fiebres brasileñas o la deplorable sequía del agro mexicano, un enemigo de lo que con modestia llaman "su" América. ¡Como si la selva o el desierto no fueran, menos que temas literarios, objetos de pesadumbre! (*Tríptico* 209-10)

The ironic term "enamorado" reveals the fetishistic nature of nationalist attempts to differentiate the Latin American epistemic object through reductive commonplaces, a reminder of Borges's famous essay "El escritor argentino y la tradición," where he defends himself against critics who see his cosmopolitan writing as a denial of the Latin American difference. In this essay, Borges quotes Edward Gibbon's observation that the Koran, the Arabic book *par excellence,* contains no camels, indicating that the Latin American writer, in order to be Latin American, need not restrict him or herself to an impoverished, reductive "color local" ("El escritor argentino" 132). Monterroso's insistence on the "tedium" of the Latin American rainforest and desert – perhaps a poke at the *novela de la tierra* – reflects Borges' argument that what is perceived as local color is not worthy of representation, because it is a mere commonplace. Furthermore, the biting, parenthetical qualification "que no conocen" suggests that the nationalist writer, by viewing his fatherland from a foreigner's perspective, displays as much ignorance and distance as the tourist who comes to Latin America in search of exotic "color local." For Borges, "el culto argentino del color local es un reciente culto europeo que los nacionalistas deberían rechazar por foráneo" (132). The fundamental paradox of nationalism is that it is – and can only be – founded on an outsider's idea of the nation.

In "El humor de Tolstoi," Monterroso refers directly to Borges's essay in his humorous observation that an academic he met gave herself the name Alexandra to provide a "pincelada de color local" (*La vaca* 52). "Color local" is equated with false identity, indicating the deception on which localist identity discourses are built. Monterroso thus echoes Borges' assertion that "no podemos concretarnos a lo argentino para ser argentinos" because "ser argentino es una mera afección, una máscara" ("El escritor argentino" 137). The name Alexandra is a supreme example of such an affectation, such a mask.

Similarly, in "La exportación de cerebros," Monterroso denounces the "Benefactores de la Cultura, que convierten a los talentos de la localidad en monumentos nacionales incapaces de decir una frase o dos que no se parezcan peligrosamente al lugar común" (*Obras completas* 51). Again, the transmutation of local culture into a national monument causes those very eccentricities that prompted the localistic discourse in the first place to be flattened out into the language of commonplace. By trying to protect national culture, these seeming benefactors stifle creative thought. In this vein, the humorous proposition on which this story is based — "lo único positivo que los gobiernos dictatoriales de Hispanoamérica han hecho por esta región es expulsar cerebros" (51) – gains significance. Monterroso's provocative observation (based on the examples of Joyce, Martí, and Rubén Darío among others) that by escaping his country, the author can be of greater service to his country, underlines the need for culture to travel

beyond national boundaries. Otherwise, the thinking heads of local talent are reduced to thoughtless deadheads "capable only of spurting commonplaces."

It is precisely the reduction of heads to deadheads that Monterroso explores in his most anthologized work, "Míster Taylor." This short story from his 1960 collection *Obras completas (y otros cuentos)* satirizes the exploitation of "color local" by foreign markets that play on the Orientalizing tendencies of the modern consumer. Mr. Taylor is the North American businessman responsible for turning Indigenous severed heads into a product for export, a fictional take on a real practice that became common in the mid-twentieth century when Westerners came into contact with the Shuar people from Ecuador and Peru, whose customs included the preparation of severed shrunken heads – *tsantsa* – for purposes of trophy, ritual, trade (Steel 753). The commodification of the "cabezas humanas reducidas en escala industrial" is a hyperbolic representation of a culture's reduction to its stereotyped image (Monterroso, *Obras completas* 12), as reflected linguistically by the diminutive suffix of the "cabecitas hispanoamericanas" (17). The ending of the tale shows the genocidal potential of such cultural exploitation: North American demand for the little heads literally crushes and wipes out the Indigenous population.

This is not a unilateral condemnation of cultural exploitation by the West, however. The locals are shown to be complicit in their exploitation by selling themselves to the exploiter: "'*Buy head? Money, money*'," the *nativo* exclaims, as he literally throws himself at Mr. Taylor (10), humorously anticipating the kind of cultural practice later denounced by Néstor García Canclini in his discussion on the culture industry and illustrated by the slogan "sea auténtico y ganará más" (218). "Míster Taylor" is a satirical dramatization of the way in which such supposed cultural authenticity has the unintended impact of annihilating Latin American culture by turning it into a (colonial) museum object or exploiting it for commercial gain. As Fuguet would later suggest in his critique of magical realism, ironically retitled "magical neoliberalism," export markets that sell Latin American difference contribute to the exoticization and exploitation of the region's culture. Fuguet's insistence that "Latin America is not cute" is thus anticipated by Monterroso in his satire of the cute little heads sold to Orientalizing foreigners: severed heads that represent not Indigenous barbarism but rather colonial appropriation and "capitalistic expansion (that) goes with violence, physical as well as epistemic" (Mignolo, *Geopolitics* 76).

SOLIDARITY OR A "DELUDED ORIENTALISM OF THE HEART"?

In addition to cultural exploitation, I read "Míster Taylor" as a satire of cultural representation, in particular that of institutional forms of cultural

representation practiced by academics as well as politicians and entrepreneurs. Indeed, Mr. Taylor is characterized – mockingly, of course – as an intellectual or anthropologist prone to profound "reflexiones filosóficas" about the Amazonian culture he has encountered and who "en Boston había logrado las mejores notas con un ensayo sobre Joseph Henry Silliman" (*Obras completas* 12). More particularly, it might be read as a warning to future Latin Americanist scholars about the traps of regionalism.

In *The Exhaustion of Difference*, Alberto Moreiras argues that Latin Americanism, as a discipline dedicated to cultural criticism and the representation of a particular region, is paradoxically self-destructive. "As an epistemic machine in charge of representing the Latin American difference," Latin Americanism seeks its own destruction by releasing and integrating its particular knowledge into "the final, apocalyptic integration universal knowledge" (Moreiras 32-33). Arguably, the apocalyptic effect of the attempt to represent difference is anticipated by Monterroso in his dramatization of the subsumption of the Latin American head – containing particular Latin American cultural knowledge – by the global market. Through exoticized representation, the Latin American episteme is reduced to a commodifiable product, a literal deadhead that can be incorporated into the universal – read, colonial – epistemic grid. It is the damaging, totalizing ideology of cultural difference – which decolonial scholars would later theorize in terms of the "colonial difference" (Mignolo, *Geopolitics* 57-96) – that Monterroso attempts to shatter by questioning certain forms of solidarity based on delusional dualities: giving/taking, needed/needy, rich/poor.

In "El centenario" and "Primera Dama," also from *Obras completas*, false solidarity leads to the commodification, fetishization and politicization of the "charity case." "El centenario" has as its protagonist a giant whose freakish stature makes him into a walking spectacle, a lure of otherness viewed by the spectator just like the images of *Vogue*. The public pays to see him: his servant "recibía en su sombrero las monedas" donated by "las almas sentimentales" (Monterroso, *Obras completas* 114). The adjective "sentimental" indicates that their charity is founded on what Moreiras terms a "deluded orientalism of the heart" (31), the sentimental Orientalism provoked by the human's desire for absolute otherness. By allowing the giant's difference to be fetishized, commercialized, and sold, the family causes his (literal) downfall, enacted in the final, melodramatic scene: he dies as he reaches down to pick up the "centenario," the valuable gold coin that celebrates the centennial of Mexico's Independence that gives the story its name. Again, Monterroso highlights a certain paradox: the fetishization of alterity leads to the erasure of difference.

"Primera Dama," a satirical tale about a fundraising event for poor malnourished school children, belies false solidarity yet more vehemently.

The director's hyperbolic assertion that the event is motivated "por un alto espíritu de solidaridad humana" is ridiculed by Monterroso (*Obras completas* 46): such solidarity is an empty gesture that masks multiple forms of self-service. Again, the charitable intentions of the First Lady, who insists on her burning (and extremely condescending) desire to help the "pobrecitos" (52), anticipate Moreira's concept of the "deluded orientalism of the heart," shown by her condescending thought of the "pobrecitos" (41). Her selfless charity disguises a desire for self-publicity, as shown by her internal exclamation, "'qué bueno […] que haya esa oportunidad"' (41). Charity is therefore seen to obey the logic of instrumentalization and hegemony. Indeed, the director asserts that the United States, the "nación que con justicia podíamos llamar despensa del mundo," has promised to "sacrifice" powdered milk (47). This donation ironically constitutes a means of maintaining power over the subcontinent, whose subaltern position with respect to its northern neighbor is sustained by the fantasy of complete dependence on the "world's larder."

It is no coincidence that, in both "El centenario" and "Primera Dama," false solidarity is linked with patriotic nationalism. In the former, it is one of Porfirio Díaz's "esbirros" who throws the coin to the giant "en medio de su rastrero entusiasmo patriótico" (Monterroso, *Obras completas* 116). In the latter, it is the government's desire to promote "los altos destinos de la patria" that induces it to provide financial backing for the charity project (46). Monterroso's cynical attitude toward such selfish displays of patriotism indicates the need to re-think solidarity beyond reductive nationalisms and nationalist reductions that sand out particularities by fetishizing difference, and, in the particular context of Latin American Cultural Studies, to constantly question who we are representing in our work, and, crucially, *who we are doing it for*.

FLIES, TRANSLATION, AND PERPETUAL MOVEMENT AS "DELINKING"

The question of Latin American cultural identity is revealed by Monterroso to be extremely problematic, a cesspool of paradoxes and aporia: representing identity causes the reduction, and consequent annihilation, of the epistemic object; but representing difference runs the risk of over-stating, caricaturing or absolutizing otherness, dissolving concrete objects into exchangeable and thus exploitable commodity-values. How, then, should Latin America be approached to prevent folding it back into intrinsically self-defeating identity configurations? How to avoid false solidarity? How to resist absorption of Latin American particularities into universal (that is, colonial) knowledge and culture?

In the following section, I argue that Monterroso seeks answers to these questions through the literary form and practice of the *excess*. Materialized in the figure of the fly that swarms around his collage work *Movimiento*

perpetuo (1972) – in the essay that opens the collection and in the quotations with which it is peppered – the excess is the gap in the hermeneutic circle which undermines the self-identity of the cognitive object; it is the lowest common denominator that supports and undermines our representations of the world; it is the element that belongs everywhere and nowhere at the same time. As we have seen, the exclusive discourse of identity/difference represses that particularity, smothering it under an ideological mask.

Against a colonial difference based on dualities and hierarchies, Monterroso proposes an alternative way of thinking Latin American culture, one articulated through the excess that cannot be captured or represented and that sets off constant disarticulations of identity and difference. As I demonstrate below, Monterroso's highly self-referential work implicitly paves the way for this mode of thinking: the resistance against the adoption, or internalization, of the subaltern position is a form of resistance against cultural commodification, against the First Lady or the Mr. Taylor whose shadows are projected across Monterroso's work. By allying himself with the tiny excess that opens up cracks between included and excluded, interior and exterior, Monterroso resists the processes of absorption and incorporation, and thus exploitation and colonization, of alternative modes of thinking, knowing and being.

The intertextual flies that swarm around *Movimiento perpetuo* are paradigmatic of the contamination between inside and outside that threatens any fixed cultural frame, able as they are to cross national borders and fly over oceans (Bell, *Short Story* 114-29). The collection includes excerpts of texts by authors from different Spanish-speaking countries: Spain (Benito Jerónimo Feijóo), Mexico (Rubén Bonifaz Nuño), and Chile (Pablo Neruda), as well as translations of fragments from different languages, including French (Blaise Pascal, Jean Jaurès, Jules Renard, Marcel Proust, Paul Éluard), German (Meister Eckhart, Brothers Grimm), British (W.B. Yeats, Rupert Brook, T.S. Eliot) and Quechua (anonymous, see *Tríptico* 131). The quotations thus share the quality of the flies from Guillaume Apollinaire's *Bestiaire* (1911):

Nuestras moscas saben canciones
que en Noruega les enseñaron
las moscas gánicas que son
las blancas diosas de la nieve. (qtd. in Monterroso, *Tríptico* 114)

Through translation and reappropriation, Monterroso transplants the intertextual flies from their original cultural context, transforming the original text and setting in motion another chain of resignification processes that Mignolo calls "delinking" (*Delinking* 449–514): the process of severing

Latin America's languages, knowledges and cultures from their European bounds through acts of "epistemic disobedience" (*Disobedience* 10).

Maddeningly untamable, Monterroso's fly can be likened to Borges's "El Zahir," the exchangeable symbol that adopts different forms in different cultural contexts:

> En Buenos Aires el Zahir es una moneda común de veinte centavos ... (En Guzerat, a fines del siglo XVIII, un tigre fue Zahir; en Java, un ciego de la mezquita de Surakarta, a quien lapidaron los fieles; en Persia, un astrolabio que Nadir Shah hizo arrojar al fondo del mar ...; en la aljama de Córdoba, según Zotenberg, una veta en el mármol de uno de los mil doscientos pilares ...). (*El Aleph* 103)

Borges paints a vivid, detailed picture of the interplay between the universality of the coin, the symbol of common exchange *par excellence*, and its infinite particularities. These are displayed by the list of different animals, people or things (a tiger, a blind man, an astrolabe, a vein of marble in a column), combined with disparate times and places. As the narrator later affirms, "no había criatura en el orbe que no propendiera a Zaheer, pero ... el Todomisericordioso no deja que dos cosas lo sean a un tiempo, ya que una sola puede fascinar muchedumbres" (111). The same duality is true of Monterroso's fly: it is at once universal, a common creature that is capable of representing anything for anyone, and singular, preserving its particularity even as every reinscription revives its meaning.

This logic of ever-unfolding singularity underpins Monterroso's writing. In "Entre la niebla y el aire impuro," Asturias is praised for opening Latin American culture up to "otros pueblos [que] ven en *El señor presidente* algo de su propia imagen, y lo traducen" (*Tríptico* 10). This is because the translations and re-readings allow the text to exceed its original context: "como ocurre con los buenos libros, los nuevos lectores y los nuevos acontecimientos lo mejoran" (10). Translation, transmission, and transculturation thus emancipate culture from the imaginary prison walls of identity, from the delusions of specificity. By advocating the free movement of culture through the metaphorical body of the fly, Monterroso evokes the spirit of Pierre Menard, whose "fragmentario Quijote … es más sutil que el de Cervantes" (51). Because of the law of iterability, no context is exhaustive; everything can be reinscribed in a different context; every re-writing enriches the "original" text, adding layers of meaning and subtlety. As Sharman insists in his defence of this Derridean (but also Borgesian) concept, "this is not to deny the importance of the context of enunciation; it is to query its originality" (59). In its insistence that "every fly has *always* been seen," "Las moscas" reveals the falsity of originality, the impossibility of the "never-before-seen" and therefore a view of meaning as inherently "disobedient," already-already "delinked" from a single power or culture.

In Borges' "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*," the narrator – the literary critic – praises the fragmentary nature of Menard's *Quijote*, implying that its minute proportions add to its achievement. This logic of the fragment pervades Monterroso's entire corpus and is crucial to his modest recasting of the problem of Latin American culture and identity. *La letra e*, for instance, is avowedly formed by gathering disparate notes scribbled on "cuadernos, pedazos de papel, programas de teatro, cuentas de hoteles y hasta billetes de tren" (*Tríptico* 229). The characters of one story from *La letra e* – the eponymous maids from "Las criadas" – might in this sense be regarded as a metatextual representation of the Monterrosian writer:

> [Leen] en los restos de las tazas de café o de las copas de vino, en las colillas, o sencillamente introduciendo sus miradas furtivas … debajo de las almohadas, o recogiendo los pedacitos de los papeles rotos y el eco de nuestros pleitos. (*Tríptico* 91)

Their territory, their reality and their understanding, is built around the minimal remainder, the insignificant left-over, the faint echo. Like Rubén Darío, the Monterrosian maid steals from her masters and uses her acquisitions as the basis of her own imaginings. As shown by her "caja de Nescafé o de Kellog's [sic] llena de ropa y de peines y de mínimos espejos" (91), she is the Arltian thief, encroaching on the territory of others and repossessing its treasures. An allegory for the Latin American writer working both within and against Western paradigms – ideological "brands" represented here by Nescafé and Kellogg's –, the maid is not devoured by her mistress's house but rather becomes the devourer of its by-products.

Monterroso's texts, like the symbolic maid, appropriate bits and pieces from other cultures in order to produce liberating reconfigurations. Most notably in *La oveja negra y demás fábulas*, Monterroso plays the culture game against its Western legislators. The entire collection is an affirmation of the Borgesian idea that "podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin supersticiones, con una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene, consecuencias afortunadas" ("El escritor argentino" 136). By appropriating and transforming Greek myths and French fables, Monterroso disrupts the "essential unity" of all knowledge once and for all, showing knowledge to be essentially fragmented and incomplete: colonial closure is undermined as he delinks European myths from their "original" contexts – which are revealed to be distinctly *un*original (see Bell, "Autoconciencia").

"La tela de Penélope, o quién engaña a quién," for example, is an irreverent reappropriation of Homer's *Odyssey*. In Monterroso's fragmentary version, Penelope's weaving and unweaving is not an

exemplary manifestation of loyalty but rather a way of keeping Ulysses at bay while she "[coquetea] con sus pretendientes" (*La oveja*, 21). As its title infers, the original tale, seen from a different angle, acquires brand new meaning; the supplementation of one version with another is a process that opens a finite myth to infinite different permutations. Monterroso's irreverence toward Western culture – and more particularly, ancient Greek epic poetry – allows him to form what Claude Lévi-Strauss in the context of his discussion on myth terms a "bricolage" (16), the combination and reconfiguration of fragments from a pre-existing signifying code. For Lévi-Strauss, this is a perpetually creative act: "the 'bricoleur' may not ever complete his purpose but he always puts something of himself into it" (21). Two related elements emerge here: incompletion and singularity. The process of bricolage, of cobbling fragments together, is inherently open-ended, an open-endedness that derives precisely from the fact that the bricoleur is investing the objects with his own life, with singular feelings and personal experiences. In this case, it is Monterroso's witty spark that infuses the Ulysses myth with a renewed vitality: the vitality of laughter.

From this perspective, it could be argued that life itself (as it is experienced directly and gutturally) is the principal force that drives Monterroso's fiction forward through the perpetual movement of signification and resignification, contextualization and recontextualization. In "Entre la niebla y el aire impuro," Monterroso allies himself with Asturias, whose *El señor presidente* he lauds for its concern with "los sentimientos más bajos, por decirlo de algún modo, de los seres marginados o más notoriamente humanos" (*Tríptico* 191). Here, Monterroso points to an important aspect of what I am calling the *excess*: it is at once constitutive of all human experience ("lowest," "most human") and excluded ("marginal," outside representation, whether political or literary). But this is not an attempt by Monterroso to isolate and *identify* a "marginal subject": he links marginality with humanity, that which unites all human beings. And base feelings – the feelings of all human beings – necessarily exceed representation. So too does the past, hence Asturias's work is described as an engagement with "aquel pasado que nosotros, provistos quizá de otros antenas, no alcanzamos a percibir" (187). By forcing us to accept both the present and the past as unreachable, ungraspable, Asturias presents us with inaccessibility as such, thus thwarting the processes of commodification, Orientalism and fetishization.

This brings us back to the questions of representation and solidarity. How might Latin American writers – and writers on Latin America – represent Latin America *decolonially*, in a way that is not totalizing, not exoticizing and not exploitative? How can writers construct narratives *with or through,* rather than on, Latin American difference? Further clues emerge in Monterroso's characterization of Asturias and, in particular, of his

relationship with Latin America's pre-Columbian past. Asturias, Monterroso insists, does not seek to speak *on behalf* of Latin America's lost ancient civilizations, to "hablar por [sus] palabras y [su] sangre" as Neruda does in *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* (Neruda, *Canto general* 36). Indeed, Monterroso may be referring to Neruda's prophetic claims in his ironic assertion that Asturias is able to "percibir con la plenitud con que el poeta lo hace en comunicación directa con las piedras, los árboles, los rumores de un mundo perdido" (*Tríptico* 187). Asturias makes no claim to a privileged access to a "lost world." Instead of appropriating, and therefore reducing and distorting, the past, Asturias presents it as unpresentable, understands it as incomprehensible. This is why Monterroso praises Asturias for the very unintelligibility for which he was originally criticized: his use of "localismos difíciles de comprender" and "expresiones ininteligibles" preserve the secret of the past; he does not familiarize the unfamiliar but rather presents it as such; he maintains an ambiguous position between fog and smog (10). As Monterroso implies, Asturias knows that representing a culture involves acknowledging the unknowable, the unshareable, anticipating the "secret" that Rigoberta Menchú preserves in her famous *testimonio*: on the one hand, her *testimonio* is an act of solidarity *par excellence*, a solidarity with "all poor Guatemalans"; on the other hand, her narrative concludes with a negation of common knowledge through the *secret*:

> Todavía sigo ocultando mi identidad como indígena. Sigo ocultando lo que yo considero que nadie sabe, ni siquiera un antropólogo, ni un intelectual, por más que tenga muchos libros, no saben distinguir todos nuestros secretos. (Burgos 271)

As Sharman argues in his discussion of artistic production in the context of modern markets, "the counterpublic [art] is more public than the public sphere [the market]" because publicizing a secret entails running the risk of "presenting the secret as a thesis, of making the secret conform to a program" (46). For Monterroso, the short story form is a privileged literary means of resisting appropriation, evading rationalization and preserving cultural secrets. As Eagleton explains, the short story is able to deal with the unfathomable in a way that the novel is not: "since realism is a chronically naturalizing mode, it is hard for it to cope with the ineffable or unfathomable, given those built-in mechanisms which offer to transmute all of this into the assuringly familiar" (Eagleton, *Heathcliff* 150).

In Moreiras's terms, Monterroso's aesthetics of brevity, or fragmentary fiction, is a mode of nonrepresentational solidarity "with the residual voices, or silences, of Latin American alterity" (Moreira, *The Exhaustion* 37): at its heart lies a mystery that always-already evades representation. And Monterroso, ahead of the game as ever, anticipates the pitfalls of this alternative Latin Americanist discourse. "Las criadas" can be read as a self-

deflating, self-doubting parody of the very space his fiction inhabits: a strange, obscure and undecidable space represented by "la recámara de contornos vagamente irreales" (*Tríptico* 91). The maids, "fantasmas de una raza extinguida," are non-synchronicities, the remainders from a different temporality, one which is now inaccessible to the reader (91). Yet as living bodies rather than disembodied spectres, they are subject to the narrator's "orientalism of the heart": "Amo a las criadas […]," the narrator affirms, betraying the same exploitative tendencies as the brothers who stroke the maids' hair and rape them at night (91). Monterroso thus pre-empts Moreiras's concern that "there is a risk that this solidarity [with the residual voices], in the context of globalization, becomes an orientalist poetics of the residually singular," of "the obscurely, if beautifully, archaic" (*The Exhaustion*, 37). The maid, shrouded in her darkened room, is the perfect image of this Orientalist poetics.

Monterroso's work seeks a mode of solidarity with the spectral remainder that avoids the reincorporation of that vanishing excess into an identity-formation position (the poor, the needy, the subaltern) that renders it liable to exploitation. This mode is exemplified by the maids themselves, in their own form of what we might term "decolonial solidarity": it is their territory of secrets, remainders, and echoes (examined above) that allows them to acquire "un conocimiento más profundo de los seres humanos, de la comprensión y la solidaridad" (*Tríptico* 91). The seemingly tautological assertion of a "deeper knowledge of understanding" provides further insight into Monterroso's ethics of decolonial solidarity. For Monterroso, a deeper understanding is an understanding beyond understanding; an understanding that is not cognitive, but affective; one that lies in the ineffable realm of empathy with the other and the other-than-human. A discontinuity thus emerges between the narrator's solidarity with the maids and the maids' solidarity with the remainder. Whereas the narrator's solidarity with the maids is an ultimately fetishistic exploitation of their beautiful bodies, the maids' solidarity is with the fragmentary, the residual, the hidden: echoes, dust, secrets.

THE AESTHETICS OF BREVITY AND AN ETHICS OF RESIDUALITY

Throughout his work, Monterroso aligns himself with fleeting figures, human or other-than-human, the maid or the fly. His writing is centered around the inherently evasive elements of human experience, the fleeting feelings, sensations, and affects that constitute the present moment. In this final section, I argue that his ethics of decolonial solidarity are inextricable from the aesthetics of the (very) short story and the corresponding experience of brevity.

In the self-reflexive essay-story "La vaca," Monterroso ponders the genesis of this piece of writing, born from the fleeting image of a dead cow

from a train window: "mi visión de una vaca muerta … convertida en ese momento para mí en símbolo" (*La vaca* 14). The temporal marker, "ese momento," fixes the origins of the tale in the single, fleeting vision; the repeated pronouns, "my" and "me," anchor it in a personal and particular experience. As Nadine Gordimer observes, "short story writers see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing we can be sure of: the present moment" ("The Flash" 264). They aim not for truth, but for a moment of truth; not for general experience, conceptually created, but for *an* experience, directly and emotionally encountered. The Baudelarian lightning strike in the darkness, the sudden illumination within obscurity is the constitutive core of Monterroso's aesthetics: the core that allows his stories to renew themselves perpetually.

The fleeting moment, according to Monterroso, is at the heart of Onetti's aesthetics: "como Juan Carlos Onetti es sabio, sabe que no sabe y por eso sus cuentos son insondables y como seres vivos" (*La vaca* 125). Monterroso aligns himself with Onetti in his concern with that which resists incorporation into knowledge. Onetti's fidelity to the unfathomable reflects his loyalty to lived experience, of life itself. His tales, therefore, appeal to "lo que llamamos cerebro (palabra horrible) o, mejor, a lo que antes se decía sin vergüenza el corazón o el alma" (126). By overturning the Cartesian *cogito* on which colonial hierarchies and differences were (and are still being) constructed, and allowing the cognitive to emerge from the affective and vice versa, Onetti's tales acquire the vitality of "seres vivos" and remain with the reader, contemporaneously, within the realm of (rational) thought and (embodied) experience.

This aesthetics of the unfathomable excess – of the ever-evasive lived experience – might be seen as an anticipation of Moreiras' concept of a "second Latin Americanism" proposed by Moreiras, a cultural discourse that understands itself as an

> epistemic social practice of nonrepresentational solidarity with singular claims originating within whatever in Latin American societies still remains in a position of vestigial or residual exteriority, that is, whatever actively refuses to interiorize its subalternization with respect to the global system. (33)

Defined by Monterroso as "unfathomable," Onetti's short stories might also be defined in the terms used by Moreiras: an approach to Latin American culture that sees its object as a "singularity that remains, residually" (38). And this aesthetics of residual singularity arguably offers Monterroso a model on which to base his ethics of decolonial solidarity, which stands strong in what Moreiras describes as a "position of vestigial or residual exteriority" (33), actively resisting incorporation into a Eurocentric, colonial

system of thinking, knowing and being that John Law succinctly terms a "one-world world" (126).

Another master of brevity from whom Monterroso develops his own aesthetic and ethical *ars narrativa* is Juan Rulfo, whose friendship with Monterroso was consolidated through their contemporaneous work at the Instituto Nacional Indigenista in the 1960s.[3] In "Los fantasmas de Rulfo," Monterroso argues that his friend's writing operates through the aesthetics of the "estremecimiento," the shiver or shudder that allows the author not to present his ghosts to his reader, but rather to make the reader feel their absent-presence: his "camino propio y singular" into the land of specters is one of intimate affects rather than common concepts (*La vaca* 89). His reticent prose blocks any domesticating, instrumentalizing intentions by refusing to publicize the secret, by respecting its inherent privacy.

Later in the same collection, Monterroso presents "Premio Juan Rulfo," an essayistic story about the Rulfo Prize for Mexican literature. This prize, that unites authors through a symbolic, monetary award, is treated ironically by Monterroso as a negation of all that Rulfo represents: it strangles his ghosts by placing the unexchangeable within a sphere of exchanges; it kills the secret by seeking to publicize the prize-winning authors. Yet it is also a possible mode of solidarity. Ambiguity remains here, through a tension between seriousness and irony: Monterroso's affirmation that "me gusta pensar que este premio es también de ellos y para [los fantasmas de Rulfo]" (131) appears to reflect the First Lady's self-serving delusion that she is "helping" the "poor little" school children; but it may also point to the idea of writing *for and with* the unassimilable excess. Indeed, Rulfo's solidarity with the ghosts is achieved through his unity with them: "forma un gran todo con desmemoriado Continente" (10-1).

Here, a unified identity is constituted not by excluding the excess, but rather by including the spectral remainder – though crucially, not incorporating it through representation. This form of identification is reflected in a metatextual scene in the same story: "el dulce acento brasileño de Nélida [Piñón] nos hacía sentirnos vivamente unidos a la gran literatura de su país" (134). Here is a direct, vital, emotional identification of the listeners with Piñón's literary/cultural community through the affect produced by the sensual musicality of her voice. Monterroso thus points toward the nature of his own aesthetics: it is not solely the words on the page that matter, but also that which exceeds those words; it is their performance, their effect, and the "estremecimiento" these create.

The fake solidarity condemned in "Primera Dama," "El centenario" and "Las criadas" is thus counterbalanced by this alternative mode of solidarity. These can, in turn, be regarded as two different approaches toward the Latin American epistemic object: the first turns it into a museum object by exoticizing its difference, while the second allies itself with that which

necessarily exceeds the museum display; the first is representational, the second is non-representational and affective; the first forces its object to internalize its subalternity, while the latter is concerned with the singular secrets which remain outside any identity position. Whereas the first Latin Americanism, as Moreiras indicates, destroys its object by releasing it into the universal knowledge, the second Latin Americanism disperses it by revealing the fallacy of any such universality: knowledge is necessarily fragmented and incomplete; it is in perpetual movement. Monterroso thereby resists the total narrativization of Latin America by disrupting the essentially unifying tendencies of cultural nationalism: the role of art, he conjectures, is to open cracks in all epistemic contexts (local, national or universal), cracks that allow perpetual creativity and alternative imaginings; cracks that open doors into the pluriverse.

(IN)CONCLUSION

Radically ambiguous, plural, and open-ended, Monterroso's short prose resists any fixed conclusions. The impossibility of closure is highlighted by Monterroso himself in the final story of *Movimiento perpetuo*, one that he jokingly calls an "advertencia final" (*Tríptico* 133). In a final Cortazarian twist, Monterroso declares that the work could now be read backwards, "en un movimiento de regreso tan vano e irracional como el emprendido por el lector para llegar hasta aquí" (133). Like the collection itself, which according to Monterroso can be flipped around, this seemingly negative statement has a positive underside: it is a celebration of futility and irrationality, a denial of the need for purposes, reasons and justifications. Monterroso thereby encourages the reader to revel in the ludic element that fuels the defining instability and irreverence of his profoundly decolonial corpus that, at every twist and turn, interrogates fixed categories, breaks down hierarchies and finds new meanings in the margins of representation and representability. This "final warning" is paradoxically a warning against finality; the ending is merely the first square in an endless game: the challenge of decolonial thought.

An opening onto different possible alternatives of thinking and being – alternatives to the colonial episteme that in turn underpin a "coloniality of being" (Maldonado-Torres 2007) – underlies and destabilizes Monterroso's work. Building on the legacies of some of Latin America's foremost short fiction masters, including Borges, Cortázar, Onetti, Rulfo, and Rosario Castellanos, Monterroso encourages his reader on a quest for alternative ways of approaching the ever-shifting question of Latin American cultural identity.

This quest could be extended in many directions, literary, aesthetic, social, and political. On the one hand, for the study of twentieth-century Latin American literature, the above readings of Monterroso's proto-

decolonial oeuvre may open up new approaches not only to the work of dislocated Honduran-Guatemalan-Mexican *bricoleur*, but also to the literary production of other members of his intellectual and affective networks, which include not only Cortázar and Rulfo (see Bell, *Short Story* 4-0), but also his friend Rosario Castellanos and literary admirers like Carlos Montemayor. Indeed, as we have seen, Monterroso's writing of the vanishing excess, and its implications for decolonial thinking and being, is best read through its echoes with his affective, as well as literary networks: with the residual and the ghostly remainders that haunt the work of Rulfo, with its search for a different kind of solidarity with historically-oppressed Indigenous communities like Castellanos (Bell, "Figuraciones" 35-39), or with the insurgency novels of Montemayor, a writer who dedicated his life and work to Mexico's Indigenous struggles and the reduction of racial and cultural inequalities.

On the other hand – and to return to my prologue –, for an understanding of contemporary world politics, the above analysis could be taken as a point of departure to put the "loudest megaphone" theory into a much longer historical perspective. Perhaps the most important message that can be gleaned from listening to the very quiet work of Monterroso is that the new authoritarianisms and the way they dominate by drowning out the voices of others is not so much a twenty-first-century phenomenon born of the Information Age, the Internet, and social media, but rather an extension of the "one-world world"-ism that was set in motion with the European Conquest of the Americas and that has extended to the present in multiple forms of coloniality.

The value of Monterroso's work, as I have argued, lies in the way it opens gaps and cracks in the cultural edifice of coloniality to leave room for alternative imaginings, singular desires, and constant creativity. Hence the primacy of the fragment – or rather the accumulation of fragments – in his literary production: perpetual movement of meaning emerges not from brand new insights born *ex nihilo*, but from fleeting encounters between different realities: between the maid and the Kellogg's cereal box; between the cow and the train; between the Borgesian Zahir and the Monterrosian fly. These unsettling encounters, these creative impulses are best described as affective intensities, Onettian "shudders" that cannot be represented or categorized and thus resist appropriation, homogenization and universalization. Monterroso, in a sense, asks the reader to understand difference – to relate to the other – through the eye of a needle: not by searching for the absolute otherness that lies beneath the "danza de polvo y moscas" (*Tríptico* 122), but rather by embracing and participating in that infinite, swirling dance.

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NOTES

1 'Qué es Santiago en 100 palabras', Fundación Plagio. https://www.santiagoen100palabras.cl/web/

2 These questions, of course, have long loomed large in Latin America's ample literary-political terrain particularly since Independence, including in early discussions around Ariel and Calibán by Uruguayan politician and essayist José Enrique Rodó and Cuban writer and activist Roberto Fernández Retamar, and in the essays of Pedro Henríquez Ureña.

3 The irony of this is not lost on me, given the highly colonial agenda of the INI that has often been regarded "como punta de lanza de un proyecto de colonialismo interno dedicado a aculturar a los pueblos indígenas y a desestructurar sus órdenes internos" (Caballero, n.p.). Ironies and contradictions, though, are the stuff of life, as Monterroso's work demonstrates.

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