

## SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS, DECOLONIALITY AND PLURIVERSAL THINKING IN AUGUSTO MONTERROSO'S LITERARY PRODUCTION

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**Abstract:** Eurocentrism, coloniality and race have been largely absent from the small body of scholarship dedicated to the Guatemalan writer Augusto Monterroso. Analyzing his literary production from *La oveja negra* (1969) to *La vaca* (1995), I make the case for reading behind the scenes of Monterroso's short narrative into a much more ambitious literary-political project that anticipates what Quijano, Mignolo, Escobar and others would later term "decoloniality". Through critique of cultural distinction, irreverence towards knowledge production, and self-reflexive satire that turns him as (white male) author into the butt of his own jokes, Monterroso uses his tiny tales to open cracks in colonial knowledge through which the reader might glimpse the pluriverse.

**Keywords:** Augusto Monterroso; short narrative; self-consciousness; decoloniality; pluriverse

## AUTOCONCIENCIA, DECOLONIALIDAD Y PENSAMIENTO PLURIVERSAL EN LA PRODUCCIÓN LITERARIA DE AUGUSTO MONTERROSO

**Resumen:** El eurocentrismo, la colonialidad y la raza resultan en gran medida ausentes del escaso corpus de estudios dedicado al escritor guatemalteco Augusto Monterroso. Analizando su producción literaria desde *La oveja negra* (1969) hasta *La vaca* (1995), propongo leer entre las líneas de la narrativa breve de Monterroso para vislumbrar un proyecto literario-político mucho más ambicioso que anticipa lo que Quijano, Mignolo, Escobar y otros denominarían más tarde la "decolonialidad". A través de la crítica a la distinción cultural, la irreverencia hacia la producción del conocimiento y la sátira autorreflexiva que lo convierte en el blanco (juego de palabras intencionado) de sus propias bromas, Monterroso utiliza sus microcuentos para abrir grietas en el saber colonial a través de las cuales el lector pueda vislumbrar el pluriverso.

**Palabras clave:** Augusto Monterroso; narrativa breve; autoconciencia; decolonialidad; pluriverso

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En un lejano país existió hace muchos años una Oveja negra. Fue fusilada.  
Un siglo después, el rebaño arrepentido le levantó una estatua ecuestre que quedó muy bien en el parque.

Así, en lo sucesivo, cada vez que aparecían ovejas negras eran rápidamente pasadas por las armas [fusiladas] para que las futuras generaciones de ovejas comunes y corrientes pudieran ejercitarse también en la escultura. (Monterroso, 1969)

It is hard to read this piece of biting dark humour, the satirical microfable “La oveja negra” by Guatemalan writer Augusto Monterroso published in the homonymous 1969 collection *La oveja negra (y otras fábulas)*, without recurring to the lens of race which has plagued Latin America since the Conquest. In particular, we might think of Guatemala’s legacy of racist persecution and ideology of *blancura* that dates back to the era of colonization (Martínez-Salazar, 2014), but extends painfully and violently across the twentieth century, especially since the 1960s and the US-led consumerism which led to “un ulterior blanqueamiento de la clase dominante, que limpiaba su sangre mestiza a través de la compra de comida procesada y de coches norteamericanos” (Craveri, 2018). It might even be read as a pithy prediction of what would become, over Guatemala’s long bloody Civil War (1960-1996), a genocide—its so-called Silent Holocaust—perpetrated by a series of dictators culminating in General Efraín Ríos Montt’s rise to power through a coup in March 1982 and the “scorched earth” operation against the country’s Ixil Maya population.

Yet race is strangely absent from the relatively small body of literature on the writing of Augusto Monterroso, a writer known principally for his shortest short story, the famous one-liner “El dinosaurio”. In her discussion of *La oveja negra*, Lia Ogno hints at the issue of race and the (de)construction of the racialized “other” without naming it:

Monterroso aboga por un pensamiento de la diferencia, un pensamiento liberado de sus prejuicios; pretende un nuevo espacio, un nuevo orden, no para colocar en él nuevos valores, sino para que permita la coexistencia pacífica y respetuosa de las diferencias. Este nuevo espacio [es...] un mundo plural. (1995, 153)

In *El dinosaurio sigue allí: arte y política en Monterroso*, Gloria Estela González Zenteno insists on the political element of Monterroso’s *oeuvre*, one that she locates in Monterroso’s intellectual and self-reflexive aesthetic:

Para ir a la raíz del pensamiento de resistencia es necesario estudiarlo, cumpla o no con todos los requisitos de una definición, en especial el de ser literatura de los grupos subalternos, ya que la categoría de grupo subalterno, en el sentido de raza o condición social, es demasiado vaga y problemática en América Latina, donde el color de la piel no garantiza el respeto a los derechos humanos. (González Zenteno, 2004: 26)

Yet while she downplays the role played by issues of race, subalternity and indigeneity in Monterroso’s fiction, she does make the case that Monterroso contributes to a broader decolonization of Latin American literature (2004: 199). His work, she argues, decolonizes “las representaciones estereotípicas” on the one hand and avoids “la pos-colonización crítica de nuestra literatura buscada por el espectro de aquellos que nos dicen lo que debería ser «políticamente correcto»” on the other (2004: 21). González Zenteno’s decolonial reading is linked to a Foucauldian reading of Monterroso’s work as a literary exercise at the intersection

between discourse, power and politics, and as an alternative contribution to Latin American resistance literature (Harlow, 1987) that is both outside the centres of political power and outside the sphere of socio-political referentiality (González Zenteno, 2004: 32-33).

Where race has been discussed more explicitly, it has been in relation to “Mr. Taylor”, a satirical story that stands as an overt critique of racist consumerism and the genocidal character of late capitalism. McQuillan (2017) draws on María Lugones’s notion of the “coloniality of gender”—and her consequent insistence on the intersection of racial, patriarchal, and economic hierarchies (2007)—and Graham Huggan’s notion of the “postcolonial exotic” (2001) to argue that while Monterroso critiques the “consumption of «exotic» bodies, those of «the other,» a process that Monterroso blames on imperialist and neocolonialist countries that maintain this system of consumption”, the final scene offers the possibility of resistance, whereby a “previously marginalized character”—“the anonymous, indigenous character”—sends Mr. Taylor’s head to his own uncle, a “last stand against neocolonial exploitation that threatens their culture” (McQuillan, 2017).

Albeit fleetingly, scholars have also related his work to postcolonial theory, but without bringing the discussion back to the central question of race. An Van Hecke (2010: 531) suggests stories like “El eclipse”, “Sinfonía concluida”, “América Central”, “La exportación de cerebros”, “Dejar de ser mono” and “Poesía quechua” could be read through a postcolonial lens, where postcolonialism is defined, following Alfonso de Toro, as “un fenómeno discursivo estratégico” in which “se trata a la vez de una reescritura del discurso del centro y además de una reescritura del discurso de la periferia, de un «contra- discurso» como discurso subversivo, de reflexión y de tipo crítico, creativo, híbrido, heterogéneo” (Toro, 1999: 33-34). Alejandro Ramírez Lámbarry (2019), similarly, connects the shock of civilizations depicted in the pithy, satirical short story “El eclipse” with the postcolonial theory development by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), that “con una sensibilidad profética, Monterroso se adelantó más de diez años a la crítica poscolonial”.

In what follows, I build on the work of Ramírez Lámbarry and Van Hecke but follow McQuillan in approaching Monterroso’s *oeuvre* through a decolonial lens. Decoloniality, crucially, is distinctive for its rootedness in Latin America as well as for its roots in grassroots, Indigenous movements. While postcolonialism, a largely Anglophone and academic theory, primarily focuses on the cultural and literary critique of colonialism and its aftermath, decoloniality is a theoretical framework that goes beyond analyzing colonial legacies and aims to actively dismantle colonial structures of power, advocating for the recognition of diverse knowledges and building epistemological shifts into everyday practices. My argument builds on two key concepts: the “colonial difference” (Mignolo, 2002a), and the “pluriverse” (Cadena—Blaser, 2018; Escobar, 2018; Reiter, 2018). For Mignolo, the making of “colonial difference(s)” is linked to the construction of the “modern/colonial world-system” in conjunction with “the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit”:

The colonial difference, in short, refers to the changing faces of colonial differences throughout the history of the modern/colonial world-system and brings to the foreground the planetary dimension of human history silenced by discourses centering on modernity, postmodernity, and Western civilization. (2002a: 61-62)

In other words, the colonial difference is used to conceptualize the ways colonialism has produced and maintained distinctions and hierarchies between different groups of people, leading to highly imbalanced power relations in which the White (male) European is always at the top. It encompasses various aspects, including cultural, economic, political, and epistemic dimensions, and involves a binary thinking that divides the world into opposite pairs—self and Other, civilized and barbaric—that are imposed on colonized societies to serve the discourses and meet the needs of dominant (European) powers.

The concept of the “pluriverse” derives from a decolonial praxis that represents a shift away from the singular, binary, Eurocentric worldview associated with this “colonial difference” toward a recognition and celebration of the multiplicity of ways of being, knowing, and organizing societies. It was first advanced as a guiding principle by the Zapatistas, now famous worldwide for their struggle to build “un mundo en que quepan muchos mundos” (1996),<sup>1</sup> but it also resonates through the work of Indigenous activists and social movements from Andean countries like Bolivia, Peru and Colombia, to the Mesoamerican of Guatemala and Mexico.<sup>2</sup> More recently, it has been taken on and developed conceptually by decolonial scholars such as Arturo Escobar (2018) and Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser (2018). A fundamental aspect of the broader decolonial project aimed at addressing historical injustices and creating more equitable and inclusive futures, the concept of “pluriversality” builds on a wide range of tools—some philosophical, others more creative or even ludic—from epistemic pluralism, alternative transitions and autonomous “designs for the pluriverse” (Escobar, 2018).

In this paper, I align myself with Ramírez Lámbarry for whom “la selva del imaginario literario Monterroso” includes “el activismo político, la utopía y la indignación contra un hecho concreto” (2014: 542). I make the case that Monterroso’s work from the 1960s onwards contributes to an emerging decolonial/pluriversal thinking in two main ways: first, by proposing a highly self-conscious critique of (Eurocentric, racist and classist) hierarchies, distinctions and privileges within the realms of literature, culture and society; second, by demonstrating—through practice—the role of literature and culture in constructing a modest yet disruptive literary pluriverse. In spite of his oft-cited timidity (Noguerol Jiménez, 2015), Monterroso’s writing is characterized by a “pensamiento de la diferencia” (Ogno, 1995), which in turn reflects his own attempts to “live fearlessly with and within difference,” to use an expression often used by feminists from the Global South (Milczarek-Desai, 2002). What follows sheds new light on

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<sup>1</sup> One of the first publications of this now famous phrase is in the “Quinta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona” (1998), available at Enlace Zapatista, <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx>. As for Monterroso’s concrete links with the Zapatistas, Ramírez Lámbarry (2014) interrogates Monterroso’s apparent silence in relation to the Zapatista uprising of 1994, pondering on whether this lack of protest was for lack of interest (unlikely, he argues) or for legal reasons (related to a nineteenth-century law that means that “un extranjero incómodo en México no puede defenderse si el Ejecutivo decide, un buen día, expulsarlo” (2014: 533). “Podríamos suponer”, he advances, “que Chiapas no era de su interés, a pesar de ser un estado vecino a Guatemala y que Monterroso confundió el agradecimiento a su país de acogida con un excesivo respeto. Si en medio siglo en el cual México había recibido a varios exiliados nadie había protestado, ¿por qué iba a ser él el primero? Pero estas son sólo suposiciones; es imposible responder de manera categórica a ninguna de ellas porque, hasta ahora, no existe ningún documento o testimonio que respalde una opinión” (2014: 534).

<sup>2</sup> See particularly Raúl Zibechi (2000), *La mirada horizontal: Movimientos sociales y emancipación* (Quito: Abya-Yala) and *Territorios en resistencia: Cartografía política de las periferias urbanas latinoamericanas* (Buenos Aires: Lavaca); Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2020, translated by Molly Geidel), *Ch’ixinakax utxiwa: On Practices and Discourses of Decolonization* (Cambridge: Polity Press); Arturo Escobar (2008), *Territories of Difference: Place-Movements-Life-Redes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

Monterroso's literary and political fearlessness: his development of what Arturo Escobar terms "an ethical and political practice of alterity that involves a deep concern for social justice, the radical equality of all beings, and nonhierarchy" (2018: xvi). In order to do so, I explore the shadows and spectres of race and class that lie not so much within in his work—as they do in texts ranging from his early short stories like "Mr. Taylor", "Primera dama" and "El eclipse" to a later story-essay "Poesía quechua" (Van Hecke, 2010; Ramírez Lámbarry, 2019)—but rather behind it. His short narrative, I argue, might be considered a particular mode of small-scale yet wide-angled, disruptive, decolonial thinking that uses critical self-reflection to make visible the minute cracks in the masks worn by the privileged minority world in order to unveil marginal perspectives and tell alternative stories of the majority world (Alam, 2008).

### Contexts: Monterroso and the Margins

Marginality and alterity are a feature of the content and form of Monterroso's writing, and has also come to characterize its fate in the Latin American canon. His work is spectrally absent from most anthologies of Latin American short stories. This absence either betrays a deep misunderstanding of, or (perhaps unwittingly) manifests a certain loyalty to, his literary spirit.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, to consider him unworthy, lacking, or failing to reach the mark, is to overlook his relevance to contemporary Latin American literary debates concerning local, national and global culture. On the other hand, to appreciate that his work's disjointed, disordered, messy quality evades any neat categorization and classification, is to pay tribute to his writing, which resists order, hierarchy and power. "Como una bola de fuego [...] cuyo centro está en todas partes y su circunferencia en ninguna"—words used by Monterroso to describe the work of his compatriot, Luis Cardoza y Aragón (1998: 69)—Monterroso's work belongs simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, in the discernible centre and the indiscernible peripheries, in the lowest and the highest frequencies. Because its only consistency is inconsistency, its Borgesian flame is deeply ungrounded and ungroundable. As suggested by the title of one of his works, *Movimiento perpetuo*, it is ever changing, different at every turn, unrelentingly plural.

Spanning the 1950s to the 1990s, his work constitutes an active engagement with the ever-changing socio-economic context which shapes his own life. Ramírez Lámbarry, in his brilliant biography of Monterroso (2019), points out that from his (relatively safe) base in Mexico, Monterroso felt free to "intervenir en la política de otros países". His texts are born from his lived experiences, perhaps most significantly in the context of this article (yet not often overtly), the experience of conflict, violence and exile from Guatemala in the 1940s:

El medio y la época en que me formé, la Guatemala de los últimos treinta y los primeros cuarenta, del dictador Jorge Ubico y sus catorce años de despotismo no ilustrado, y de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, contribuyeron sin duda a que actualmente piense como pienso y responda al momento presente en la forma que lo hago. (cited in Noguero Jimémez, 1995: 37)

Residually yet forcefully present throughout his fiction are the traces of authoritarian politics, culture and thinking, as are the dark marks of Guatemala's 20<sup>th</sup> century history of dictatorship, brutal repression, and what would later give way to the genocide—the so-called Silent

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<sup>3</sup> Monterroso is included in only nineteen out of a total of one thousand three hundred and two anthologies of the Latin American short story surveyed by Daniel Balderston (1992).

Holocaust—of its Indigenous populations led by successive US-backed military governments in the 1980s: European colonization, US imperialism and enduring coloniality.<sup>4</sup>

Yet unlike the Boom literature that has formed a central axis for the reading of Latin American literature born from the 1960s and 1970s, Monterroso's writing is not the fruit of any grand literary-experimental project, any transcendental attempt to encompass the dialectics of self/other, inside/outside, local/cosmopolitan, traditional/modern, or reality/fiction. On the contrary, modesty is the defining feature of his work, whose "característica modestia [...] casi parece colocarlo por naturaleza en los márgenes del mundo literario" (Augustín, 2015). This aspect of his work appears to extend from the same modesty that, as his friends and critics so often observed, characterized him as a person (Durand, 1995). As Javier Cercas Rueda (2003) writes in his obituary of Augusto Monterroso,

El escritor guatemalteco era pequeño y tímido, afable y generoso, parco y certero en el hablar, modesto y falto de vanidad como pocas veces se ha visto en un autor, de un humor tan inteligente y contagioso y de una lucidez tan intuitiva que muchos escritores buscaban su trato y le tenían por maestro.

The sum of humble, discreet, intimate and self-reflexive experiences and thoughts, his writing exploits the creative space that lies between falsely universalized binarisms, displacing and disrupting the logic through which European universality has been constructed since the colonization of the Americas. The centrality of binary oppositions to the philosophy and practice of Colonization has been discussed and denounced at length by decolonial scholars:

The enduring enchantment of binary oppositions seems to be related to the enduring image of a European civilization and of European history told from the perspective of Europe itself. Europe is not only the center (that is, the center of space and the point of arrival in time) but also has the epistemic privilege of being the center of enunciation. (Mignolo, 2002b: 938)

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui—who critiques Mignolo for his appropriation, from his privileged status as a tenured Ivy League Professor, of decolonial praxis by Indigenous activists—moves beyond Mignolo's critique of Western "enchantment" underpinned by binary thinking, offering as an alternative the Aymara concept of *ch'ixi*, "of something that is and is not at the same time":

It is the logic of the included third. A *ch'ixi* color gray is white but is not white at the same time; it is both white and its opposite, black. The *ch'ixi* stone, therefore, is hidden in the bosom of mythical animals like the serpent, the lizard, the spider, or the frog; *ch'ixi* animals belong to time immemorial, to *jaya mara*, *aymara*, to times of differentiation, when animals spoke with humans. The potential of undifferentiation is what joins opposites. And so as *allqamari* combines black and white in symmetrical perfection, *ch'ixi* combines the Indian world and its opposite without ever mixing them. (Cusicanqui, 2012: 105)

Below, I explore how Monterroso gestures towards the "potential of undifferentiation" through a playful disruption of binaries, in which he—as the self-conscious author—plays the role of the "included third", the disruptive element that simply does not fit: the grey or "*ch'ixi*" sheep

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<sup>4</sup> See Alejandro Ramírez Lámbarry's *Augusto Monterroso, en busca del dinosaurio* (2019) for a brilliant and fascinating biography of Augusto Monterroso, which includes a detailed account of his lived experience of Latin America's twentieth-century history in Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico (part I).

that is and is not black and white at the same. Constantly self-questioning, his incandescent wit lights up tiny cracks in consensual reality, crevices in which his literary fireball burns, composing by decomposing, constructing by deconstructing.

In order to account for the development of his increasingly self-reflexive writing, I examine a range of his works, spanning from *La oveja negra* (1969) and *Movimiento perpetuo* (1972) to his final collection *La vaca* (1998). As I argue, Monterroso plays with the categories of educated/uneducated, legitimate/vulgar, elite/popular—increasingly challenged from the 1960s by theorists from Bourdieu and Raymond Williams to Latin American cultural critics like García Canclini, Beatriz Sarlo and Carlos Monsiváis—to open cracks in Eurocentric, colonized culture from his seemingly peripheral Central American perspective, showing it to belong to a communal space rather than an exclusive, autonomous realm.

### **Beyond literary games: metafiction and decoloniality**

Monterroso's fiction is immanently ludic. Playing within the realm of literature and art, he constantly asks questions regarding culture, its location, its producers, its legislators and its distinctions. In this section, though, I argue that the game of culture practiced by Monterroso goes beyond Brian Stonehill's definition of metafiction as an "essentially ludic art form" (Stonehill, 1988: 13). Though his art of brevity is certainly metafictional in many ways—particularly through the technique of self-parody and skepticism concerning the satirical efficacy of language (Elias, 2011)—its game is deadly serious: it is the dangerous, slippery and often deadly game of culture itself. Below, I bring Monterroso's work into dialogue with two thinkers—Pierre Bourdieu and Santiago Castro-Gómez—and their shared concern with the power of cultural capital in creating distinctions, hierarchies and therefore exclusion and marginalization. For Bourdieu, the inexorable division of society into socio-cultural categories of distinction is a curse: "there is no way out of the game of culture" (1989: 12). Yet in Monterroso's work, this curse becomes a blessing: for him, "there is no way out of culture" because nothing, nobody is excluded from the cultural domain; which means that *included thirds*, *fourths* or even *fifths* are constantly threatening to transgress its boundaries, disrupt its hierarchies, challenge the "colonial difference", and infiltrate themselves in its exclusion zones. Monterroso plays the game of culture by subverting its rules, by showing the slipperiness of socio-cultural categories, by loosening the overdetermined connection between education, wealth and "good taste". This, as we shall see, is a highly political literary game that liberates culture from its elitist, colonial (racist, classist and sexist) bounds, from the stifling strictures of academicism and from the exclusive walls of Ángel Rama's "ciudad letrada" (1984).

In the texts that follow, Monterroso plays with the categories of educated/uneducated, cultured/popular, good taste/bad taste studied by Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1989), in which cultural capital is shown to play a central role in relations of power, "providing the means for a non-economic form of domination and hierarchy, as classes distinguish themselves through taste" (Gaventa, 2003: 6). According to Bourdieu, different "zones of taste [...] roughly correspond to educational levels and social classes": legitimate taste is "is highest in those fractions of the dominant class that are richest in educational capital", while popular taste is most frequent among the working classes (1989: 16). Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and

“distinction” would become an important cornerstone of Castro-Gómez’s critique of colonialism, racism and the ideology of European (white) supremacy:

La blancura, como diría Bourdieu, era un capital cultural que permitía a las elites criollas diferenciarse socialmente de otros grupos y legitimar su dominio sobre ellos en términos de distinción. La blancura era, pues, primordialmente un estilo de vida demostrado públicamente por los estratos más altos de la sociedad y deseado por todos los demás grupos sociales. [...] El capital simbólico de la blancura se hacía patente mediante la ostentación de signos exteriores que debían ser exhibidos públicamente y que “demostraban” públicamente la categoría social y étnica de quien los llevaba. (Castro-Gómez, 2005: 71, 84)

In the hybrid story-essays analyzed below, I reveal how Monterroso dissolves the cultural hierarchies of high/low and elite/vulgar, placing himself in his writings as a disruptive force, a self-conscious element that problematizes the very possibility “distinction”, whether it applies to culture, education, class or race.

I begin with “Ganar la calle”, a parody of the attempt to categorize cultural production into tight interpretative corsets. The protagonist’s ridiculous idea is to promote direct competition between artists by a system of rewards/punishments for good/bad literary production: the addition/subtraction of blocks from the street that bears his name. This would, of course, depend on an absolute standardization of measurement: the need to evaluate everything along the same line is born out of the attitude that regards “las fuerzas del Bien y del Mal” as absolute opposites “en perpetua pugna” (1995: 101). The image of a street divided between two “extremo[s] contrario[s] de la misma avenida” is the perfect representation of the conceptual narrow-mindedness that obliterates the complex combination of affects that constitute the aesthetic experience. Monterroso’s satirical bite is therefore directed toward the self-legitimizing (white) cultural elite that, propping up and perpetuating the “colonial difference” (Mignolo, 2002a), considers itself able to judge the artwork from a position of superiority. In Sarlo’s terms, he debunks the view of the “intellectual as sovereign legislator or as all-too-lonely prophet” (2001: 7). By ridiculing the commission that the protagonist proposes to set up, a commission with its own standards of measurement, with fixed notions of what constitutes a “good” work of art, Monterroso satirizes the legitimacy of the “sovereign (colonial) legislator”. Through this absurd game of winning/losing streets, this battle between cultural winners/losers, Monterroso satirizes what Bourdieu would term the “game of culture”: it is against this game of distinctions, divisions and classifications that Monterroso wages his own battle, creates his own game; a battle against fixed categories, simplistic binaries, a playful provocation that engages the reader in the search for a standpoint from which to view culture critically; an incentive to decolonize culture, society and thought.

Elsewhere, Monterroso’s satire of cultural sovereignty is connected more directly to European (white) supremacy. “Mi relación más que ingenua con el latín” is a self-conscious satirical essay-story that unmasks the delusions of grandeur that sustain the European-centred cultural elite and pokes fun at the ostentatious use of Latin, one of the languages that has been used by European colonizers as part of the project of conquest and domination since the

fifteenth century.<sup>5</sup> In this pithy text, Stendhal’s concept of the “happy few” is satirized: Monterroso’s avowedly scant knowledge of Latin allows him, along with the other “*happy few*”, to discover “lo mal hablado que podían ser los clásicos”; to discover, not a “higher” language, but rather a vulgar expression, notably the phrase “«no haré ruidosamente mis necesidades» en las afueras de tu templo” (1998: 84). In this vein, he ridicules the cultural elite, showing the “colonial difference” (Mignolo, 2002a) to be a mere mask, which is worn—in Monterroso’s life time as in colonial times—to “perform” the *distinction* of the cultural elite. Bakhtinian delight in the bodily dismantles two forms of authority: that of God in the original Classical intertext; and that of the intellectual in Monterroso’s story.

The carnivalization of culture dismantles what Raymond Williams terms the “Cambridge teashop” conception of culture (1997: 6). Indeed, the students, “alarde[ando] de latinistas” (1998: 85), perform precisely in the way which Williams observes in the Cambridge teashop, where culture amounts to “the emphatically visible sign of a special kind of people” who “showed you they had it” (1997: 7). Monterroso places this display of “high culture” in a workers’ restaurant in Guatemala City in which Monterroso—who was indeed born into a poor family, was self-educated and in his youth often went hungry—and his friend eat their humble lunch:

Pedíamos en voz alta un sandwich de queso y una cerveza de esta manera:  
—*Ego volo manducare panem cum cáseo et potare cereviciam frigidam*, y el mesero, que ya nos había oído aquello muchas veces, nos traía resignado el humilde pan con queso y la cerveza frígida. (Monterroso, 1998: 85)

This self-reflexive juxtaposition of humility and ostentatiousness allows Monterroso not only to ridicule the distinction of the “special kind of people”, but also to emphasize the carnivalistic nature of culture as a set of masks that can be adopted, a set of roles that can be performed—or “demonstrated publicly”, to use Castro-Gómez’s terminology (2005: 84)—but can also therefore be transformed. It is, in fact, by unmasking the carnivalistic figures of high culture—by making himself the butt of the joke—that Monterroso dismantles the foundations of these Eurocentric epistemic, linguistic and cultural and distinctions.

In another self-reflective story-essay entitled “Influencias”, aesthetic influences are pluralized as Monterroso questions the possibility of pinning one’s artistic influences down to a single great author. Though it might flatter one’s ego to declare to an enquiring journalist that one’s principal influences are the (European canon of) Melville, Swift or Cervantes, Monterroso reflects, the reality is that “un escritor está recibiendo influencias cada día y cada minuto, y si es listo se va dejando alimentar hasta por aquellos en apariencia menos significativos” (1998: 44). The artwork is therefore shown to be made up of the stuff of life, the material of experiential singularities. Monterroso celebrates irreducibility in his assertion that the three authors he might cite as influences are “tres locos diferentes, y el que los lee y los sigue, otro” (1998: 44). Here Monterroso explicitly plays with the number three—the influence of three European authors he is required by journalists to come up with in order to classify his work within the (colonial) canon: first, he disrupts the number three by insisting on an infinity of indeterminate everyday

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<sup>5</sup> The term “Latin America” was coined by Napoleon III and his side-kick Felix Belly in the mid-19th century to refer to regions in the Americas that were ruled by the Spanish, Portuguese, and (crucially for the French colonial project) French empires (Gobat, 2013).

influences that have little to do with literary influences, canonical or otherwise; second, he does so by supplementing these three “locos” with an *included fourth*: himself. Every artwork, he concludes, constitutes not a great triumph but a “minúsculo salto en el vacío” (1998: 46) and each of these “tiny leaps” are themselves enjoyed and savoured, like “un pequeño terrón de azúcar” that slowly dissolves on the palate (1998: 46). Because the artist’s “nourishment” is the food of life—its minimal achievements, its basic pleasures, its seemingly insignificant events—the artwork is irreducible to neat cultural categories and patterns, numbers or binaries.

The link between literature, (bodily) pleasure and sensoriality recurs in the metafictional story “La vaca”, in which Monterroso is reproached by a friend for admitting that his image of the cow in “Vaca” was influenced by Leopoldo Alas: how could he claim to have been influenced by an “escritor tan malo” (1998: 15)? He retorts that Alas’ tale constituted not an aesthetic, formal influence, but rather a sentimental one that taught him how to “sentir” (1998: 15). Monterroso thus defies the highbrow view of art, the cultural snobbery displayed by his colleague, but also the Cartesian body/mind dialectic which as Castro Gómez argues in his *Crítica de la Razón Latinoamericana* inaugurates modernity and the binary thinking that underpin the “colonial difference”:

Detrás del ego cogito cartesiano, con el que se inaugura la modernidad, se halla oculto un logocentrismo por el cual el sujeto ilustrado se diviniza, convirtiéndose en una especie de demiurgo capaz de constituir el mundo de los objetos. El ego cogito moderno deviene así en voluntad de poder: “Yo pienso” equivale a “Yo quiero” y a “Yo conquisto”. (Castro-Gómez, 1996: 39)

Against the logocentrism that underpins modernity/coloniality, Monterroso includes himself and his feelings—his “sentir”—in his “pensamiento de la diferencia” (Ogno, 1995); a thinking that arguably disrupt the “colonial difference” and inaugurate a decolonial plurality. His words open up to different worlds—to the “muchos mundos” augured by the Zapatistas (1998)—through a writing and thinking practice that incorporates different experiential levels, interweaving “bad taste” with “high literature”, undermining his own cultural capital but also producing cracks in the “colonialidad del saber” in/on/about Latin America (Lander—Castro-Gómez, 2000).

Monterroso’s ludic reflection on the European canon returns in “William Shakespeare” (1995: 207-208), a supposed translation of the seventeenth-century biography of William Shakespeare by John Aubrey in *Brief lives: chiefly of contemporaries*. In this Borgesian “translation”, Monterroso performs playfully with the mask of John Aubrey, observing that Shakespeare—the canonical (European) writer *par excellence*—was a butcher’s son and worked in a butcher’s shop (like Monterroso himself), “pero que cuando mataba un ternero lo hacía con gran estilo y pronunciaba un discurso” (1995: 207). On the one hand, this is a light-hearted joke: the hyperbolic term “gran estilo” parodies the notion that great writers are distinguished from the common herd by a different, higher relation to everyday life belonging to the “happy few”. On the other hand, it is a serious disruption of style and taste, Bourdieusian distinction and literary Eurocentrism: Shakespeare’s life, as told by English writer Aubrey, is in turn reappropriated irreverently by Monterroso, thus setting up a chain of disruptions that unlink cultural aristocracy from its colonial moorings.

Such notions of cultural aristocracy are effectively debunked throughout this playful biography: one of Shakespeare's epitaphs, the biographer recounts, was composed in an inn where "un tal Combes" died a sudden death and was taken to be buried (1995: 207). A further important element—chance, serendipity, contingency—is added to Monterroso's decolonial thinking: it is not a higher calling, a predestined fate that underpins Shakespeare's writing, but rather a series of chance encounters and experiences. This relates to Foucault's concept of genealogy as a process of "localizar los accidentes, las mínimas desviaciones, los errores, las faltas de apreciación, los malos cálculos que han dado nacimiento a lo que existe y es válido para nosotros" (Foucault, 1992: 27), and Castro-Gómez's corresponding insistence on Latin American thought in terms of "las rupturas, los vacíos, las fisuras y las líneas de fuga presentes en la historia":

Detrás de las máscaras totalizantes del "sujeto latinoamericano" (Roig) [...] se encuentran preocupaciones muchísimo menos heroicas y profanas: las de una multiplicidad de sujetos híbridos que elaboran estrategias orales de resistencia para transitar las contingencias del presente. Mostrar esos espacios de heterogeneidad es, por tanto, la tarea de la genealogía, en contraposición a los grandes metarrelatos elaborados por la filosofía latinoamericana de la historia. (Castro-Gómez, 1996: 116-117)

Monterroso, against the totalizing metanarratives constructed by his literary contemporaries—especially those of the Boom writers that include his friend Julio Cortázar—offers a minute, irreverent, disruptive view of *the* canonical writer, William Shakespeare, through a much less heroic lens, drawing on oral histories, gossip and anecdote. In doing so, he opens cracks in the dominant (literary) historical discourse that allows the reader to see through the colonial ramparts of the lettered city.

### **(Extra)ordinary tales: opening other worlds, celebrating other meanings**

This fragmentation of history, genealogy, power, authority and distinction recurs throughout Monterroso's writings. In "Memoria de Luis Cardoza y Aragón", the eponymous author is progressively brought down from his sacred heights. At the beginning of the story, the great writer appears to occupy a sphere of his own, shrouded in an air of mystery: from far away, Monterroso affirms, he is seen as "un ser misterioso y de lucidez diabólica, capaz de aplastarlo a uno con una sola frase" (1998: 61). His aura is that of a legendary figure with quasi-supernatural power. Yet throughout the story, this aura is punctured, as he is literally brought down into the common space in which Monterroso and Luis meet: "la cantina El Puerto de Cádiz, cercana al lugar en que [...] contribuía a hacer el suplemento cultural del periódico *El nacional*" (1998: 62). Again, culture is opened up into the communal space of the canteen, thus preempting Raymond Williams' vindication that "culture is ordinary" (1997: 6): culture is literally the supplement—the *included third*—of the communal sphere that feeds it; it is the element that always-already undermines the "colonial difference" (Mignolo, 2002a).

As ever in Monterroso's ever-questioning, self-reflexive writing, however, a certain paradox emerges. On the one hand, Cardoza y Aragón's aura, one created by sacred distance, seems to dissolve as Monterroso meet the human being, Luis. On the other hand, Monterroso affirms that "aun teniéndolo al lado, sigue siendo su leyenda" (1998: 64-65). This is perhaps

because his power comes not from an aura of inaccessibility and exclusivity, but rather from the excessive quality of his art that “desborda” all norms, its status as an “universo distinto”, a “cosa aparte” (1998: 67), an alternative (literary) world that gestures to—and creates the narrative for—a (real) pluriverse (Reiter, 2018). This explains why his work is seen by Monterroso as “una bola de fuego [...] cuyo centro está en todas partes y su circunferencia en ninguna” (1998: 69): it is common, belonging to “our universe”, but also excessive, reaching out into pluriverse.

Monterroso’s alignment with Cardoza y Aragón says much about his own work. Art, for Monterroso, is at once common and uncommon; it belongs simultaneously to everybody and nobody; its centre is everywhere, while its peripheries are nowhere, opening up into other worlds, cracks in the wall through which one can glimpse the pluriverse (Reiter, 2018; Escobar, 2018). The metaphor of the wall and the crack is not my own: it is that of the Zapatistas. In “El muro y la grieta”, Subcomandante Insurgente Galeano argues that is “desde abajo” that “otro mundo” freed from the shackles of European domination may be constructed from the fragments of (colonial) history:

Como zapatistas que somos, nuestra memoria también se asoma a lo que viene. Señala fechas y lugares. Si no hay un punto geográfico para ese mañana, empezamos a juntar ramitas, piedritas, jirones de ropa y carne, huesos y barro, e iniciamos la construcción de un islote, o más bien, de una barca plantada en medio del mañana, ahí donde ahora sólo se vislumbra una tormenta. Y si no hay una hora, un día, una semana, un mes, un año en el calendario conocido, pues empezamos a reunir fracciones de segundos, minutos apenas, y los vamos colando por las grietas que abrimos en el muro de la historia. Y si no hay grieta, bueno, pues a hacerla arañando, mordiendo, pateando, golpeando con manos y cabeza, con el cuerpo entero hasta conseguir hacerle a la historia esa herida que somos. (EZLN 2015)

In this final section, I argue that such fragments of the past, the present and the future—Galeano’s twigs, pebbles, shreds of clothes and flesh—are transformed in Monterroso’s literary-social-political writings into provocative prose, tiny tales and funny fables; that the “few minutes” or even “fractions of seconds” are those taken to read his microfiction; and that he manages to make cracks in the “wall of history”—the history of colonial and capitalist modernity—by means of pithy, paradoxical and poignant writings that shake his readers out of the seeming comfort of received wisdom, commonplace thinking, or in decolonial terms, the dominant “universal” knowledge that constitutes our “one-world world” (Law—Mol, 1995).

Monterroso’s marginal literary production is arguably true to this logic, one demonstrated most overtly in the figure of the fly in *Movimiento perpetuo*. In “Las moscas” (1995: 25), Monterroso reflects on the simultaneous invasive/evasive quality of flies, which are everywhere—“donde uno pone el ojo encuentra la mosca”—yet always escape our grasp, as “las vicarias de alguien innombrable, [...] lo que nosotros no nos atrevemos a conocer”. Likewise, in “Tú dile a Sarabia” (1995: 67-8), the fly is “común y corriente”, yet also “una manchita del tamaño de un avión lejanísimo”, the miniature stain of the excess. In this respect, I partially disagree with Juan Villoro’s assessment that “a Monterroso le interesan las bestias normales”, that “el animal monterrosiano carece de toda singularidad intrínseca”, and that it is “lo contrario a la esquiva mariposa siberiana” (2000: 34). The complexity of the paradoxical Monterrosian animal, I would argue, is its ambivalent “greyness”; like the “included third” of

the Aymara Ch'ixi, its rarity emerges from its normality, its singularity from its universality, its evasiveness from its invasiveness.

Moreover, as I have discussed elsewhere (Bell, 2014), *Movimiento perpetuo* offers a collection of literary fly quotations, transforming the humble fly into a metonym for the epistemic fragment capable of destabilizing hegemonic discourse and power; able to get through the tiniest cracks and carry cultural meaning into different territories, other worlds. While the fly is intrinsically common—a shared literary motif that unites the authors—it is also uncommon, transformed into a singular symbol by each author. In this way, Monterroso's fly can be likened to Borges' "Zahir", the exchangeable symbol of the coin, which is able to adopt different forms in different times and places: it becomes a tiger, an astrolabe, the bottom of a well, and a vein of marble in a column (1969: 133). In "El zahir", Borges underlines the interplay between particularity and universality: "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" (1969: 143-134). The same interplay is true of Monterroso's symbolic fly: it is universal, capable of representing anything; yet at the same time it preserves its singularity even as every reinscription revives its meaning. Because of its excessive, elusive quality, the symbol defies the ascription of fixed meaning and can therefore undergo endless epistemological transformations.

What is important for the purposes of the present essay, though, is the connection between the pluralization of narrative, knowledge and epistemology that Mignolo terms "epistemic disobedience" (2009) and self-reflective metafiction. To return to where we started, *La Oveja negra (y demás fábulas)*, Monterroso's fables make it clear that the writer—as the creator of stories, the fashioner of fables, the teller of tales—has a key role to play in unmasking the "colonial difference" (2002a) and imagining a pluriverse. This is particularly clear in "El salvador recurrente":

En la Selva se sabe, o debería saberse, que ha habido infinitos Cristos, antes y después de Cristo./ Cada vez que uno muere nace inmediatamente otro que predica siempre lo mismo que su antecesor y es recibido de acuerdo con las ideas imperantes en el momento de su llegada, y jamás comprendido./ Adopta diferentes nombres y puede pertenecer a cualquier raza, país, e incluso religión, porque no tiene religión./ En todas las épocas son rechazados; en ocasiones, las más gloriosas, por la violencia, ya sea en forma de cruz, de hoguera, de horca o de bala. [...] Lo que más temen es morir demasiado viejos, ya sin predicar ni esforzarse en enseñar nada a quienes ni lo desean ni lo merecen; abrumados porque saben que como ellos en su oportunidad, alguien, en alguna parte, espera ansioso el instante de su muerte para salir al mundo y comenzar de nuevo. (Monterroso, 1998: 53).

As Kleveland argues (2009: 150), this fable "cuestiona el calendario del mundo cristiano como punto de partida para nuestra historia y la posición del cristianismo en la cultura occidental" and produces "la desacralización de la figura de Jesús de Nazaret". The recurrent saviour, like the Monterrosian fly, is profoundly anti-universal: he/she/they is "received in accordance with ideas prevailing at the time of their arrival", taking on different meanings and functions in different contexts. This Christ "takes on different names and can belong to any race, country, or even religion": he—or rather they—are multi-racial and indeed, thanks to the ambiguity of Spanish grammar, not necessarily male. The explicit mention of race, here, places us squarely

within an emerging decolonial thinking and provides a powerful illustration of a shift from the “colonial difference” to decolonial plurality.

This becomes even more explicit in Monterroso’s linking of the saviour (rebelliously decapitalized and therefore pluralized) with a plural, marginalized other: “In all ages they are outcasts”. Whereas Kleveland argues that “ni siquiera se le considera suficientemente importante [al salvador/Cristo] como para escribir su nombre con mayúscula” (2009: 150), I would suggest, rather, that the decapitalized, desacralized and decolonized christ is paramount to Monterroso’s writing-thinking. It is by pluralizing the sacred that the fable, as part of Monterroso’s broader “pensamiento de la diferencia” (Ogno, 1995) opens onto a literary pluriverse. In this sense, I would also partially disagree with González Zenteno’s reading of Monterroso’s work in stark contrast with subaltern literature (2004: 26). It is undoubtedly true that his writing is a far cry from testimonial literature and other more overtly political forms of “literature comprometida” (Aguila—Castellanos, 2002). However, in Grosfoguel’s terms, it stands firmly on the southern side of the “North-South” divide and adopts “an epistemic perspective from the subaltern side of the colonial difference” (2002: 203). Ultimately, through a poetics of suggestion, suspension and inconclusion, Monterroso creates a literary world in which multiple worlds are glimpsed, and in which the reader, like the “cristo” of this tale, anxiously awaits the end of the story to “salir al mundo y comenzar de nuevo” (Monterroso, 1998: 53).

### **Inconclusions: towards decolonial reflexivity**

To conclude in Monterrosian fashion, I turn to a final essay-story: “El otro aleph” (1998), in which the writer plays once more with his Borgesian legacy, this time by engaging with the Argentine writer’s seminal story “El Aleph”. In the latter, Borges uses the mathematical concept of an aleph, a fixed point from which the totality of all points can be glimpsed from all angles, to present the reader with a paradox; if it contains all points, the aleph must also contain itself, leading to a situation of infinite regress: “vi el aleph, desde todos los puntos, vi en el aleph la tierra, y en la tierra otra vez el aleph y en el aleph la tierra” (Borges, 1969: 214). In a story that has been read as a critique of totalitarianism (Kadir, 2004), Borges thereby makes a mockery of Carlos Argentino Daneri’s attempt to (literally) grasp this totality by seizing the aleph: “Es mío, es mío” (1969: 209). Borges thus offers an allegory of the dangers of total knowledge and authoritarian power, while also undermining its possibility: in its infinity and plurality, knowledge paradoxically defeats any possibility of totalization or unification.

In “El otro aleph”, Monterroso takes Borges’s parody one step further by playing with the narrator’s provocative suggestion that “hay (o que hubo) otro Aleph” (1969: 217). The Guatemalan writer, still guided by his life-long “pensamiento de la diferencia” (Ogno, 1995), pluralizes the aleph *ad absurdum* by quoting various textual examples that locate it in birds’ eyes, human brains and an “espejo adivinatorio azteca” (1998: 112-114). The inclusion of an Aztec scrying mirror in his supplementation of Borges’s original tale is significant: the pre-colonial, pre-Hispanic, pre-Columbian here dislodges Eurocentric knowledge, which “has been plainly unable to catch, even to grasp [the] originality and specificity of what we now call Latin America” (Quijano, 2000: 215). Recalling the pluralization of Christ in his fable “El salvador recurrente”, here Monterroso brings one-world perspectives—whether that of European

colonizers or any other “total” knowledge—face-to-face with their impossibility, as the single totality of *universalism* shatters into the multiplicity of the *pluriverse*.

For Monterroso, though, this pluralization cannot be separated from that afforded by self-conscious literary production: from self-reflexivity, self-questioning, self-critique. Always with his trademark modesty, humility and self-deflating humour, his oeuvre anticipates what decolonial scholars in the social sciences have come to term “decolonial reflexivity”—the need to “turn the decolonial gaze towards ourselves” (Moosavi, 2023), the writers or researchers or educators in order to avoid falling into the same traps of colonial thinking, doing, and being that we are critiquing. By including in his social critique, parody and satire his own propensity, for example, to show off by speaking Latin, flatter himself about his European literary precursors, or seek out *every fly quotation ever written*, Monterroso ensures that he as the writer is never above his subject matter. The perpetual movement of his work, indeed, comes precisely from its messy, lived and living quality, from its emergence from the stuff of life itself, in real time and *in media res* (Bell, 2014). And it is through this irreducible multiplicity, this constantly growing network of specificities—experiences, relations, perspectives, thoughts, knowledges—that Monterroso’s self-conscious narrative offers glimpses into the pluriverse.

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