

# Flash Fiction of the Latin/o Americas. Another Approach

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## Abstract:

This essay focuses on how a select few flash fictions are built by Latino authors and consumed by readers (Latino and otherwise) who share a common, deep ancestral evolution that has led to the growing of some fundamental cognitive and emotive biological mechanisms. It therefore turns to the insights offered by the research in the brain sciences and cognitive developmental psychology as well as to a specific analysis of several U.S. Latino flash fictions. In each flash fiction we shall see how these authors use language, narrative technique, and imagination to give in a few brushstrokes a representation of the full range of human emotions, moral dilemmas, and cognitive capabilities. Aldama opens the essay with the discussion of Monterroso's *El dinosaurio* as a primer of sorts to indicate what happens when readers encounter Latino narrative fiction generally and Latino short short fiction (flash fiction) specifically. While he focuses on the flash fiction created by U.S. Latinos, much of what he discusses below can reveal much about what readers do generally when they encounter narrative fiction. This could be seen in the short short format other than Latino flash fictions such as those from China known as "smoke-long stories" or from Japan known as "palm-of-the-hand stories". But it also applies more globally to any and all kinds of narrative fiction —novels, comic books, and films and from all over the planet. That is, the exploration of Latino authored flash fiction can and does reveal much about how such all variety of narrative fiction blueprints trigger and then guide a complex array of our mind/brain's sense-making faculties.

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## 1. Overview

The writing of this essay for the symposium “Latin American Cultural Studies in the 21st Century/*Los estudios culturales latinoamericanos en el siglo XXI*” and then for *alter/nativas* brought into sharp focus what I have sensed for some time now. That today there is room at the robust and large table for all variety of approaches to the study of cultural phenomena we identify on the vertical axis of the Latin/o Americas. In literature departments there was a time when sides were taken —cultural versus literary studies— and arguably for good reason. Those at the avant-garde of Latin/o American cultural studies held the sense that literary studies writ large had become too isolated from contextual concerns, so they aimed singularly to put context into play. The literary scholars regrouped and pulled back. And never the twain should meet, or so it seemed. The symposium and then the invitation to write this essay for *alter/nativas* prove otherwise.

There is a slight additional complication to this picture. This inglorious moment of division in the study of cultural phenomena of the Latin Americas seemed to overshadow those seeking to study the literature of Latinos. That is, there has *not* been a moment in the history of Latino studies where scholars have felt free to study the large body of literature by and about U.S. Latinos (Mexican American, Cuban American, Puerto Rican American, Dominican American, and Central and South American émigré authors) *as literature*. As a result of the more politically charged literature that characterized the Latino literary renaissance of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the body of scholarship that began to grow during this period was largely anchored to questions that revolved around political issues: what it was like to be a Latino living in a prejudiced mainstream U.S. The interpreting of Latino literature as the expression of a unique identity and political position (Latinos versus mainstream, for instance) continued to gain momentum in the 1980s with the rise to prominence of Latina feminist authors and scholars. Over time, the interpreting of Latino/a literature as socio-political document became the only approach for its teaching.

Today, we look back and see that we may have left out other important options, including the teaching of Latino literature (political in content, or otherwise) as *shaped* by a complex array of formal tools such as: the stylistic device of Spanish/English code-switching; the careful interplay of story and plot; the speeding up or slowing down of narrative time in short (short) or long fictional formats; the expanding or shrinking of narrative space; the use of different

types of voice (serious, ironic, humorous, for instance) and perspective (from inside to outside the story); the use in poetry of free-verse and traditional verse forms such as the sonnet, villanelle, and pantoum, for instance.

I have dedicated much of my teaching, research, and writing to the answering of several foundational and interlocking questions concerning Latino literature. Why are we attracted to Latino fiction generally? Why do we like the work of some Latino creators —and not others? How does it come about that Latino narrative fiction in all its guises refers in one degree or another to the real world but at the same time is patently not duplicating “real life”? What mind/brain mechanisms are involved in the making and consuming of narrative fiction? In short: How does Latino narrative fiction work and why do we spend our time engaged with it?

I began to formally seek answers to such questions in the writing of my first book, *Postethnic Narrative Criticism* (2003), and its unofficial theoretical sequels: *Brown on Brown: Chicano Representations of Gender, Sexuality, and Ethnicity* (2005) and *A User's Guide to Postcolonial and Latino Borderland Fiction* (2009). This work culminated in the writing of *The Routledge Concise History of Latino/a Literature* (2012). In these books and the others I have since published on film and other narrative formats, I have turned to context, but a context in the sense of how emotive and cognitive mechanisms are involved in the creator's making and the audience's consuming of Latino literature. I've found useful the incorporation of advances made in the cognitive sciences and socio-neurobiology. This along with tools from narrative theory have allowed me to explore and analyze how various Latino narrative fiction recipes (what I call “blueprints” elsewhere) trigger and guide our interpreting, imagining, and feeling mechanisms of readers. While such an approach might have been looked at with apprehensive eyes a decade ago, today I find myself sitting at a table where cultural and literary scholars alike can promote the health of one another. I sit at a table where we can offer our students and other scholars different options to enrich an understanding of the making and consuming of the cultural phenomena we identify as Latino literature. To this end, I would like to invite you, the reader, on a short journey in the way I might approach the object: Latino flash fiction, and its making and consuming.

## 2. A Case of the Flash Fiction

“*When he awoke, the dinosaur was still there*”, opens and closes Augusto Monterroso’s famous *short* short story. This one line contains all that is necessary for the reader to make *sense* of the *as a story* that plots an event in time and space. It does so by fulfilling more than the basics typically identified as constituting a narrative: “the representation of an event or a series of events” (Abbott, 2008:13). There is an event recounted, but it is told from the position of a third-person narrator *observing* this event at the moment of its happening. That is, the story contains a temporal (“he awoke”) and spatial (“the dinosaur was still there”) dimension of the story proper *as well as* the temporal and spatial dimension of the narrator observing (necessarily from a point in time and space). Of course, Monterroso is well aware of the fact that in language time and space are necessarily present, but that in the making of his *short* short fiction he can manipulate the different degrees in which the reader feels this presence; the different degrees the reader must fill in this time/space presence. Here, the time-space markers of the story are sufficiently amorphous as to require a heavy working of the reader’s sense making (or semantic) mechanisms that include memory, relevancy, segmentation, and gap filling functions. With the careful choice of event and a few deliberately chosen details, the story blueprint triggers then guides how these functions operate in the reader’s encounter.

We follow Monterroso’s lead step by step, univocally, and where there are gaps in the text or the representation we use that singularly human faculty, identified by Karl Popper’s general method of *conjectures and refutations* and by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), the founder of Pragmatism, as one part of a tripartite structure to the scientific method:

- the abductive part is concerned with the original generation and recommendation of explanatory hypotheses;
- the deductive part is concerned with the logical elaboration of the hypotheses;
- and the inductive part has to do with the confirmation or falsification of the hypotheses by present and future experience.

In the scientific procedure as a whole the abductive operations are primordial, since they generate the hypotheses or conjectures pertaining to the series or sets of possible and plausible explanations of the phenomena under consideration. In this light, I fill out the concepts with some of the following additional details:

- *Abduction* is in essence a creative ability to imagine plausible connections between disparate events and possible relations as eventual causal regularities. Peirce thought it was based in our biology and had an adaptive value as a mental process that established hypotheses and proposed various paths along which the empirical exploration and understanding of reality may most fruitfully proceed. In abduction we not only formulate hypotheses, we choose among them in what amounts to a sort of cost-benefit evaluation.
- *Deduction* is a different kind of creative mechanism. It involves the logical analysis of the conjectures furnished by the abductive process in order to make each one of them as distinct, complete, and consistent as possible. It aims also to derive from those conjectures the pertinent predictions or retrodictions (inferences from the known present to the unknown future or past) which could be used as tests and therefore also as a means to establish the truth value (true or false) of the hypotheses.
- *Induction* is the final stage, where the hypotheses offered by the abductive procedure and refined by deduction are submitted to empirical confirmation or falsification. Here the creative process is further harnessed and the speculative flight of scientific imagination becomes even more attached to experience, both present and future.

We can think of these three processes as the unified mechanism of all thought and reasoning in all endeavors and walks of life. Thus, in “Art and Neuroscience”, Jean-Pierre Changeux insists that “(a) painting offers a plurality of meaning and is coded in many ways” (1994:191). He further argues that the act of viewing the painting becomes a recreation, in the process of which the hypotheses brought forth by the painting are put to the test. They echo each other and are preserved, or, if they are not, they are either corrected or discarded. Shapes, images and clues suggest meanings that, in some cases, may not have been part of the artist’s intentions and simply originate in the viewer’s long-term memory, resulting from personal experiences. The painting affects this stock of unconscious memories and brings them to the surface by focusing the viewer’s attention on the compartment of conscious short-term memory. An imaginary dialogue starts with the painting. It becomes a “shared dream” (Changeux, 1994:191).

I underline that Changeux does not think that painting as mimesis has aesthetic import because it lacks power over the imagination. This points to a subtle difference between science and art: “Whereas the scientific concept is possessed of a

*precise meaning and aims from the start at universality, the work of art, because of its power of evocation, opens out on a plurality of intellectual speculations in which subjectivity and individual experience play a major role*" (191-192). But this distinction does not imply a romantic stand. We see this later, when Changeux remarks that "*viewing a painting involves the highest of functions in the hierarchy of the brain, that of reason*" (192), adding that artistic representation involves also emotion and desire. He writes: "*A painting is likely to affect us because it echoes hypotheses that have to do with its meaning, but above all because it echoes the hypotheses concerning pleasure that anyone can formulate inwardly, conscious or not, and that can be called desires*" (192).



We read Monterroso's *short* short story, or flash fiction *avant la lettre* and see the several creative functions come into play. First, Monterroso's decision to begin and end his story is already a form of selecting in and out information; it is a form of cutting that only includes the information he wants his readers to parse, or segment into units of meaning. The bits of information allow us to initially ask and answer: who,

what, where? The mention of "he" (this pronoun is unspecified in the Spanish original) could be human, or not. Yet the addition of the word "awoke" guides the reader to make the educated guess that this entity is an organic creature (as opposed to a rock, say) of a size large enough (as opposed to an amoeba, say) to have activities such as sleeping. If we imagine this "he" to be a human, then additional meaning making activities must kick in. Most readers would know that even proto-humans did not exist during the time of the dinosaurs. Along this line of thinking, the reader might continue to make sense by imagining that possibly this human entity (if indeed we settle on human as the "he" mentioned) has been transported back in time. And, then there is the making sense of the problem of the narrating entity. Then, the reader must make sense of the existence of a narrating presence that observes and recounts the event, adding another layer of anachrony for readers to puzzle out. Monterroso chooses just how his readers will experience his deliberately chosen bits of information

and how the presentation of this information (blueprint) guides the reader's subsequent segmentation and meaning making faculties.

I open with this discussion of Monterroso's story as a primer of sorts to indicate with broad brushstrokes what happens when readers encounter Latino narrative fiction generally and Latino *short* short fiction (flash fiction) specifically. This said, while I focus on the flash fiction created by U.S. Latinos, much of what I will discuss below can reveal much about what readers do generally when they encounter narrative fiction. This could in the *short* short story format other than Latino flash fictions such as those from China known as "smoke-long stories" or from Japan known as "palm-of-the-hand stories". But it also applies more globally to any and all kinds of narrative fiction —novels, comic books, and films— and from all over the planet. That is, the exploration of Latino authored flash fiction can and does reveal much about how such all variety of narrative fiction blueprints trigger and then guide a complex array of our mind/brain's sense-making faculties.

These mind/brain's sense-making faculties are not special to the act of reading flash fictions or narrative fiction generally *per se*. They operate in all of our everyday sense-making activities, communications, and interactions. Day to day life would be impossible without the operation of foundational faculties such as, for instance: memory encoding (long-term and working), segmentivity (sensory and linguistic experience in meaningful units), relevancy and gap filling ("he awoke" is enough information for us to fill in the gaps as above), recursion (anticipate and imagine infinite number of counterfactual future possibilities), among others. It is just that the author of a given flash fiction creates a concise blueprint that manipulates these operations.

Readers who encounter such flash fictions experience the pleasure of such deliberate and conspicuous manipulations of these everyday cognitive operations. We smile after deeply experiencing Monterroso's one-sentence story. We also ask: Why write about this subject and why write it this way and not otherwise? Why write this story in this concise format and not another? What impact has this produced in me —in my thoughts and feelings? And, finally, did the parts add up to a total experience of a unified aesthetic effort? For this reason, this essay will consider centrally the mental faculties involved in the creating of stories in this format (author), the blueprint constructed by the author for others to follow (flash fiction), and the mental faculties involved in the reconstruction or recreating of the story from the blueprint (reader).

This contribution to the issue of *alter/nativas* focuses on how a select few flash fictions are built by Latino authors and consumed by readers (Latino and otherwise) who share a common, deep ancestral evolution that has led to the growing of some fundamental cognitive and emotive biological mechanisms. The essay will therefore turn to the insights offered by the research in the brain sciences and cognitive developmental psychology as well as to a specific analysis of several U.S. Latino flash fictions. In each flash fiction we shall see how these authors use language, narrative technique, and imagination to give in a few brush-strokes a representation of the full range of human emotions, moral dilemmas, and cognitive capabilities.

While the writing of flash fiction (sometimes also known as *microrrelato* or micro fiction) by U.S. Latino authors is rather recent, the short story and *short short story* tradition have a long history in Latin American letters. Indeed, in their “Editors’ Note” to *Sudden Fiction Latino* Robert Shapard (2010), James Thomas, and author and editor Ray Gonzalez deliberately include U.S. Latino flash fiction alongside present and past practitioners of the form from Latin America to show “how the short-short form transcends borders and that Latin American literature’s influence continues, even as Latinos create their own literary traditions” (14). And, indeed the products themselves lend to authority to such cross-pollinations. We see in the authors I focus on —Sandra Cisneros, Junot Díaz, Helena María Viramontes, and Alberto Ríos— and many others the sensibility expressed by Jorge Luis Borges already in 1944 in *Ficciones*: this concise story format could offer authors a fresh, vital alternative to the onerous and baggy monster of the novel.

We see in each of the Latino authors explored here a use of the *short short story* format to quickly and intensively draw readers into storyworlds filled with all variety of social types, experiences, situations, thoughts and feelings. Because they demand a great concentration of narrative devices and plot to hit their target (their intended effect on the reader) with as few means and as quickly as possible, flash fictions possess the capacity to evince in a few pages worldviews and moral options. In nearly a blink of an eye, the reader can experience a fictional world inhabited by all variety of characters depicted with all variety of psychological complexity and immersed in all variety of moral dilemmas. We see here and elsewhere how Latino authors of flash fiction can use this format to envelope and even stylistically reproduce all variety of disciplines: philosophical meditation, physics, biology, journalism, you name it. In Latino flash fictions we see a Borgesian affirmation of the creative possibilities

of short fiction writing in the making of stories that satisfy our fascination with the life of the mind.

### 3. Initial Identifications

Just as our many cultural making activities generally (and naturally) spin out all variety of interpretative frameworks, so too do we see this with the creating of flash fictions<sup>1</sup>. Many former and current interpreters of flash fiction seek various means to understand its form and content from identifying of measure (word count and page numbers, for instance) to formulating a specificity of psychological effect. In 1992, for instance, James Thomas coined the term “flash fiction” to identify the boundaries of measure of this *short* short story format as not the novel, novella, or short story.

Along the same lines, others have variously called them “dribbles”, “quick fiction”, “fast fiction”, or “napkin fiction”. Others have sought to validate flash fiction as a legitimate narrative fiction format by tracing its genealogical roots; some have identified Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* as its progenitor. Others offer initial formulations of how the constraint of so few words (some cap this at 250) lends itself to a gestaltic perceptual experience with a resultant intensive psychological impact. For the co-editors Robert Shapard and James Thomas the little “amount of ink on the page” (13) means that the story can be apprehended in its totality both in mind of the writer and subsequently in the mind of the reader. Indeed, Ray Gonzalez chooses to capture this sense of the immediacy of emotive impact by calling it “sudden fiction” (14). While Tara Masih (2009) also takes a stab at identifying formal elements such as word count (25-1,000), characterization, and plot (conflict and resolution), Masih ultimately concludes: “a flash fiction is simply a story in miniature, a work of art carved on a grain of rice —something of import to the artist or writer that is confined and reduced, either by design or outcome, into a small square space using the structural devices of prose line and paragraph form with the purpose of creating an intense, emotional impact” (xi). One way or another, what these interpreters try to put their finger on is how authors of flash fiction use language and form (from where to cut into and out of a paragraph to point of view and order of temporality, for instance) within a perceptually small apprehen-

1 Our species makes material culture (everything made by humans and existing as objects); it makes intellectual culture (from flash fictions to mathematical equations —everything made by humans existing as products of reasoning, the emotions and the imagination); and it makes interpretations of this culture (all hermeneutical efforts to assign meaning to material and intellectual culture and to assess their value or importance to humankind).

ded unit (Masih's "small square", say) to engage anew their readers' meaning making faculties —and the subsequent experience of this meaning making.

In many ways, such interpreters of flash fiction are attempting to identify what Edgar Allan Poe formulated of the prose tale in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1842 published *Twice-Told Tales* he reflects on how the author's careful design of the story within the conceit of concision can leave "*in the mind of him who contemplates it (...) a sense of the fullest satisfaction*" (1880:637). That is, the words, sentences, and paragraphs (units of meaning) along with the way these units of meaning are conveyed, should add up to a unity of atmosphere (emotive and cognitive) —a "unity of effect" (633), in Poe's words. With few of these units of meaning inked on the page, the flash fiction should achieve a flash or sudden, new *psychological-aesthetic* effect on the reader. That is, Poe forcefully insists (and this less so with the recent interpreters mentioned above) that in the *short* short story format there must be a careful selection of words as well as shaping devices such as syntax as well as storytelling devices such as point of view and temporal order that are generated by the author's aesthetic goals and aspirations.

#### 4. Brain Matters

With all that goes into the making and consuming of flash fictions (and narrative fiction generally) we can consider it a particularized expression of our integrated cognitive and emotive systems. These systems *grosso modo* are at once independent and dependent in their function —and this because of our long evolution as at once social and biological creatures.

When babies arrive in the world, they do so with a rather developed emotion system and rather undeveloped cognitive or reason system already in place. They cry when hungry or neglected and smile and coo when touched and fed. During this early period, the social (generally) offers a space of comfort and inhibition (the parent acts as a surrogate reason system, say) so the infant can grow his or her reason system and all its associative mechanisms that include the recursive capacity, memory and language function, causal and counterfactual mapping of the social and physical world, among many others. In time the emotion and reason system become at once separate and unified in their balanced, healthy functioning. Children begin to *think* about the emotions they experience; they ponder, assess, and modify their actions —even in ways that run counter to their reflex emotions. They imagine and work through in

their minds possible and probabilistic outcomes to actions and actually do the work to modify their environments and/or their expectations. They grow the capacity to create new maps that allow them to consider new possibilities and formulate plans with probabilistic outcomes for what their situation will be in the world in the future.

Within this snapshot of our development (authors, readers, and all others on the planet), we develop other crucial mental mechanisms such as the capacity of relevance and gap filling. This allows us to identify what is relevant and not in any given context or situation (fictional or otherwise) that guides how we fill in gaps of information. For instance, while information comes at us often at rates much higher than we can encode for processing and retrieval that leaves necessarily a gap between the rate of transmission of information and our processing, our gap filling capacity allows us to experience ourselves and the world in a rather continuous and seamless fashion. And, when one or the other of these mechanisms (and the many other interrelated brain functions) is not working in this usual way, the imagination (a property of these faculties) fails.

Without the knowledge of science that we have today, Borges puts at center stage these foundational properties of the mind in the creating of his character Ireneo Funes in his short story, "Funes the Memorious" (1944). Before Borges began the work of imagining then writing the story, Funes did not exist. Borges created the story by building it, so to speak. That is, he exercised his counterfactual capacity to imagine then anticipate the future, both of which are related to the brain mechanism we call the recursive faculty. He then chooses to create the character Funes and invest him an infinitely capacious memory. But Borges likes his ironies and paradoxes. So, he creates Funes with a prodigious memory, but without the mental faculties to do anything with it. Rather, because he lacks the mental mechanisms of relevance (select in and out information) and gap filling (feeling of continuity of experience past, present, and future), he lacks the capacity to exercise counterfactual thinking, to generalize and abstract—to imagine and act on this imagination. He has no means of knowing how to select information relevant to a situation. He has no mental means for knowing how to eliminate information. He has no means of being able to demarcate the boundaries between units of information. He lacks the capacity to cut into the continuum of reality and therefore will never be able to make sense of his experience of reality. He has no way of encoding information and therefore lacks the decrease predictive errors in his actions. He is and always will be (as a fictional character) a mountain of unparseable,

unencodable information<sup>2</sup>. To put it more in the terms of this essay, if Funes were to try his hand at writing a first line of a flash fiction, he would not have the capacity (nor interest for that matter) to make a first cut into the miasmic mass of information stored in his brain. There would be nothing identifiable for him to select into (and out); there would be no gaps to be filled (either by inference, deduction, and/or abduction) because all would be relevant.

Borges, of course, seeks to tickle the reader's brain with this story —especially readers like myself who fantasize about what we could do with such a prodigious memory. Nonetheless, Borges's Funes does portray what neuroscience shows: not only are our theory of relevance and gap filling capacities necessary for our *active* existence and our *active* imagining in the world, but both are very much related to our capacity to segment all aspects of reality —from communicating to pouring a cup of tea or opening a box of cereal, to imagining then writing a flash fiction story<sup>3</sup>. Where the author chooses to begin and end the story as well as the choice of how the story is told (what I call the generative device of the discourse operator elsewhere) are all results of this segmentation capacity that allow the author to organize information into units of meaning. With a willfulness of aesthetic intent, these can add up to a blueprint that the reader can parse, make sense of, and even experience reality anew.

The tools these authors use in the crafting of their fictions is also possible because of these many interrelated mind/brain mechanisms. I mentioned in passing above recursion. This is found in many of the capacities and activities such as theory of mind, theory of time, and the theory of tool making —whether it be tools for making an arrow to hunt or the devices used to give shape to a flash fiction. It is a central operator in language, counting, and theory of mind. Given that our brain is multifunctional, working at once in concentrated topological locations (modules) and networked (the neurons connect among one another to establish more or less durable and long term connections), this recursive capacity is linked to our capacity to segment, gap fill, and make meaning all of which interface with our memory function and express themselves in our capacities to create fiction making tools, among other things, and to

2 Advances in the neurosciences indicate that memory function is linked to the hippocampus that is at the end of the neural pathway that processes sensory information. In the neural networking of the brain, it appears that the synaptic activity of neurons that link perception and memory create the abstract encoding used to store memories; hence, we tend to remember concepts and forget irrelevant details. When these neurons are missing or less developed, our ability to generate abstractions is limited, leading to pathologies such as autism or characters like Funes.

3 The research conducted by Jeffrey Zacks shows that when one reads a story one constructs a simulation of the events described and then event segmentation operates on the resulting representations just as if they came from perception. It also demonstrates that when we read about particular changes in a narrated situation selective brain activity is identified in regions associated with processing those changes in perception and action. When readers read that a character interacted with a new object, they selectively activated brain regions associated with dominant-hand grasping.

engage with the products of these tools. While some animals make tools what is unique to humans is that we not only make tools, but we make tools *in order to make tools*. That is, we use recursive capacity in our tool making, including those tools we use in the making of flash fiction.

Latino authors of flash fiction use their recursive tool making capacities to make fiction—to make the tool or operator of discourse to give shape to the story. These tools include all of Dorrit Cohn's (1999) signposts of fictionality, Gerald Prince's (1982) narrator-narratee constructions, the different instruments of analysis identified by Gérard Genette such as frequency, mode, and duration, along with many others. This operator is constantly giving shape and acting on the story element and giving it a potentially infinite number of shapes. This operation—the discourse operation on the story operator—is of course an application of recursive thinking. The discourse operator operates in a recursive manner. This is what makes it so distinctively and powerfully creative.

When a Latino author of flash fiction formulates a story, even before applying the story to the discourse operator, the story can appear in many guises. That is, already the formulation of a story requires a certain amount of creativity. But this creativity is more in the guise of iteration than it is in the guise of recursion. Whatever creative aspects there are in a story they don't match at all—not even by far—the creative potential of discourse where discourse *does* operate fully in the recursive mode. For instance, the discourse operator could give shape to a story by using the second person as with Díaz's "Alma" or shape a story by using a judgmental third person narrator intermixed with free indirect discourse as in Viramontes's "Miss Clairol", to mention but a few of the many possibilities. In this sense, these Latino authors use tools created to give shape to the boundless creativity of language that operates itself on the principle of recursion. The tool of the discourse operator gives shape to the planned, constructed, and predetermined blueprint. Stated otherwise, the thematics, the scenery, passage of time—all this is shape. And all this shaping is built into the story by what I call elsewhere the "generative operator of discourse" that would include such devices as point of view, temporal play, syntax placement, and so on. In other words, what attracts readers to characters and to flash fictions like those of Díaz and Viramontes is not the story *per se*. They are attracted to *how* the story is told. (It might be true that the number of stories that can be told amount to only a handful or so, but because of the generative property of narrative fiction we have an infinite number of iterations.) Latino authors, then, use the tool of the discourse operator to give shape to their

stories —and with an ideal reader in mind. That is, they use this tool minted out of our recursive capacity to give shape to a blueprint that will guide the reader's parsing into units (segmenting) and meaning making (semanticizing) of the respective flash fiction. As seen with the Borges story this can create in the reader the phenomenon of estrangement as linked to perception, thought and feeling.

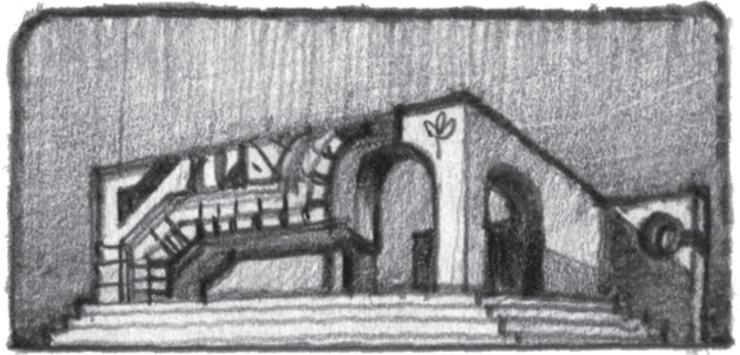
## 5. Building Blocks of Reality

As neurosociological creatures, Latino authors of flash fiction exercise all of the above capacities to fully explore the world *as it is* and the way(s) it *might be* as expressed in fictional form. They spend their time directing these interrelated mind/brain mechanisms with the specific aim of making flash fictions. They decide what to keep and what to delete in their work, even those items that appear to be unplanned, unforeseen, unwilled in the text. They decide how the selected information will be shaped into the global and final version of the work. They decide where this information will be placed, how it will be shaped, and how it will fit organically together to make a *unified impression*. All this creativity and innovation that involves all these interrelated brain faculties are a very deliberate reconstruction —a very deliberate use of the imagination— in the reorganizing of the building blocks of reality to make something new —the flash fiction artifact<sup>4</sup>. They can *make new* by employing specific devices under the impulse of what I have called elsewhere in my work, the *will to style*: the deliberate use of all mental faculties to forge something new according to skill, imagination, and responsibility to subject matter. It's this will to style — an artificial product, a product of the imagination— that allows them to make a compelling story.

Take the case of Sandra Cisneros and her flash fiction, "Pilón". Stripped down this is simply a story of a woman (the narrator) looking back nostalgically at a time of her childhood —a time before she first got her period. However, Cisneros carefully selects in (and out) information, event, and characterization to give new shape to these building blocks from reality in ways that guide the reader to experience them with new, fresh senses, thoughts, and feelings. Cisneros chooses to include a small epigraph that explains what a *pilón* is: that little something a Mexican grocer puts into your bag, token of apprecia-

4 Keep in mind that even the use of flash fiction as a format can become a mechanical application —a new form of habituation. The innovation that surprised and gave great satisfaction and pleasure to readers —that gave beauty— turned into a cookie cutter, a new form of habituation, from which boredom and the destruction of any aesthetic relation ensue.

tion for your patronage. This doesn't only help the reader (non-Spanish speaker) make meaning of a particular word, but it also orientates the way the reader will segment the story proper. Whatever unfolds will be like a little gift from the narrator/character to the reader/listener of the story



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for their continued patronage; their reading of this story (and by extension possibly the reading of Cisneros the author generally) that will have a pay off if they continue to its end.

Cisneros sets up the story initially with the expectation that the reader will, like those mentioned in the opening paragraph of the story proper, encounter characters or a character who is grieving over the loss “of a father, a beloved, a child whom God ran away with” (147). However, Cisneros deliberately misdirects; she provides information that orientates the readers sense-making processes (relevancy, segmentivity, working memory encoding, gap filling and the like), only to take them in another direction. The narrator/character doesn't recall the tragedy of a lost loved one, but rather the loss of the innocence of childhood as a girl as it interweaves with and through a sense of loss of one's homeland. By the fourth very short paragraph, the narrator/character turns her gaze to the past, making this shift clear: “How before my body wasn't my body. I didn't have a body. I was a being as close to a spirit as a spirit. I was a ball of light floating across the planet. I mean the me I was before puberty, that red Rio Bravo you have to carry yourself over” (148). The series of sentences that move from identifying childhood as a girl in contradistinction to adulthood as a woman (narrating present), there is a simultaneous move that flows from possibilities of movement and existence to the heaviness of body and place.

Indeed, Cisneros's “flash fiction” selects details and way of presenting these details by this narrator/character as a way to orientate the reader's meaning-making mechanisms; we gap-fill based on our processes of induction, deduction, and abduction. The reader, for instance, does not need to know explicitly that the narrator/character is talking about a time before and after the arrival of her menstrual period nor that this narrator/character went from experiencing

movement freely to being rooted in place. The mention of “red Rio Bravo” and having “to carry yourself over” are enough detail for the reader to imagine this. In the next very short paragraph Cisneros chooses to select for her narrator/character to relay details such as “*girls somewhere between the ages of, say, eight and puberty, girls forget they have bodies*” (148). And chooses to have the character/narrator relay her own sense of this moment: “*She doesn’t look in mirrors. She isn’t aware of being watched. Not aware of her body causing men to look at her yet. There isn’t the sense of the female body’s volatility, its rude weight, the nuisance of dragging it about. There isn’t the world to bully you with it, bludgeon you, condemn you to a life sentence of fear*” (148). The narrator/character provides this information for the reader to feel (and perhaps remember) what it is like to be both a pre-pubescent girl and then a woman burdened by a body that is weighed down by gender expectation and corporeality; the details direct the reader’s gap filling processes to fill in a larger picture: a patriarchal society that turns the accident of birth (as girl or boy) into a particular merit and demerit. As a girl, she is weightless and free; as a woman she is watched, bullied, bludgeoned, fearful. The reader gap-fills a larger context—a society that transforms a young girl’s pleasure (aesthetic, even) in her sense of self as unbounded and “happiest” into an adult full of self-doubt and fear. In a three short, staccato like sentence paragraph follows and Cisneros reminds the reader of the parallel movement they are to make in their minds between this crossing over into womanhood and national belonging: “*Then that red Rubicon. The never going back there. To that country I mean*” (148).

Cisneros picks this up once again at the end by having her narrator/character reflect: “*And I don’t know how it is with anyone else, but for me these things, that song, that time, that place, are all bound together in a country I am homesick for, that doesn’t exist anymore. That never existed. A country I invented. Like all emigrants caught between here and there*” (149). The information directs the reader to imagine both the loss of girlhood and homeland (Mexico). At the same time, the narrator/character doesn’t give into a clichéd sentiment. Rather, she sees clearly that her childhood and homeland are places she can never return to. Once these borders have been crossed, transformation happens to the one crossing and to those left behind.

The way Cisneros chooses to segment her story—from the story selected to the words to the cuts from one paragraph to another—to infuse it with a patterning of movement, with some sentences moving forward that give the feeling of taking one step forward and two steps back (“How before my body wasn’t my body”) that ultimately invites the reader to see, feel, and think about

what it means to come of age as a Latina who experiences the border crossing from girlhood to womanhood and country of origin (Mexico) to host country (U.S.) as one and the same.

Junot Díaz's "Alma" is a radical departure from Cisneros—in form and content. As I mentioned already, Díaz chooses to use the second person address in the present tense to give shape to his story—a story that follows lives of two sexually active, early twentysomethings. Díaz chooses to invent a narrator who feels very proximate to the unnamed male character. He chooses to open the story with the narrator addressing this character: "*You have a girlfriend named Alma, who has a long tender horse neck and a big Dominican ass that seems to exist in a fourth dimension beyond jeans. An ass that could drag the moon out of orbit*" (39). As a rather infrequently used form, the second person address as discourse operator that give shape to the story works to orient the reader's perspective on the content in a specific way. It is an intrusive, constantly present narrating voice that is at once directly connected to the characters and events of the story and side-ways or tangentially connected to the reader. It is as if the reader is overhearing someone tell another person what and how they act and think—who they are.

Indeed, for the reader, the second person voice and overall ironic tone convey a kind of behaviorist (in the sense of B.F. Skinner) point of view; it doesn't offer much depth to even the male character that it seems to know most about: "*Alma is slender as a reed, you a steroid-addicted block; Alma loves driving, you books*" (40). It offers little insight into, for instance, what makes a person like Alma be a person like Alma with no sexual hang-ups. Nor do we have any insight into how a relationship between two healthy, mutually attracted young people actually develops. All of this adds to the overall unity of vision of the story: young, college-aged hormone-driven adults simply *are*. Díaz's narrator speaks and thinks things that many dare not think or speak in public. The narrator mentions how "*when you see her on the street, flaunting, flaunting, you know exactly what every nigger that walks is thinking*" (40) and how "*on your first date she asked you if you wanted to come on her tits or her face*" (41). Díaz adds to this no-holds-barred, politically incorrect sensibility the element of code switching: the use of Spanish slang such as "*pópola*" and "*muñeca*" (41), for instance. The narrator also moves between a colloquial and more formal English usage: "baby's beshatted diaper" and "be-nuttled condom" (42) appear alongside words like "pelagic" (41), "incontrovertible" (41), "prevaricating" (41), and "dissembling face" (42), for instance. The different formal and content ingredients add up to an author who seeks in this flash fiction to present a unified aesthetic

that *makes new*<sup>5</sup> the reader's experience of those building blocks of reality that cluster around the well-known theme of the failed romance<sup>6</sup>.

In her story "Miss Clairol" Helena María Viramontes chooses to select in (and out) and reorganize those building blocks taken from reality that gravitate around mother/daughter relationships. Stripped down, this is simply a story about the day in the life of a young, working single mother and her pre-pubescent daughter. She chooses to cut into such a reality sometime in the past (Jackie Gleason's dancing girls and shark-finned Dodge are mentioned) and for just a day. She chooses a third-person narrator (with occasional shifts to free indirect discourse) as the lens through which the reader looks through. It opens with the mother Arlene and daughter Champ at Kmart picking out make up for Arlene's date. Viramontes creates a narrator who is at once all-seeing and all-judging. Here and elsewhere the narrator judges Arlene. She spits out gum, wears clothes that are too tight, and doesn't really listen to her daughter. She's depicted as a mother who is totally self-centered; when she asks her daughter a question, she's clearly not interested in the answer. And, the narrator makes it clear that this mother fails to notice her daughter's own issues and anxieties expressed in her nail biting: Champ has "*stubby nails, chewed and gnawed*" (101). When Arlene readies for her date, the narrator remarks: "*The dress fits too tight. Her plump arms squeeze through, her hips breathe in and hold their breath, the seams do all they can to keep the body contained*" (102). Viramontes's blueprint also plays up and judges negatively Arlene's fantasy of her self as young and lithe who will be swept off her feet by a romantic lover—for her date, she imagines her "*satinklike*" chiffon dress as "*crinkled sounds of elegance*" (102)—and her actual reality: single mom working at factory. As she clips her nylons to her girdle, the narrator remarks: "*She feels good thinking about the way he will unsnap her nylons, and she will unroll them slowly, point her toes when she does*" (104). The narrator describes her as at once a princess being romanced and also sexy—slowly unrolling and pointing toes.

As the narrative unfolds, Viramontes selects other details that would heighten reader's sense of this disparity between fantasy and reality—but with a new

5 The modernist endless search to "make it new" in writing, music, painting, was the fight against habituation. More precisely formulated by Victor Shklovsky (1991) as enstrangement, one makes new by using tools of the discourse operator to reorient our sense of an object. This can be the result of creating something new—a different sort or kind of object (in this case, a flash fiction) that will in its turn create a new kind of relationship with the subject, a new aesthetic relation with the subject (the audience or readers).

6 Díaz's unified aesthetic, for instance, uses Spanish slang in such a way that it not only invests the story its Latinness, but we see in the careful choice of the words that he is choosing them for the way they sound as well as mean. That is, he doesn't just code switching to give it its Latino flavor and to propel the story forward, but also does this to make the reading of the story an aesthetic experience.

twist. Arlene is not lost to this difference. She knows the difference and willfully engages it. The narrator mentions how Arlene intends to tell Champ one day a made up version of how she lost her virginity: “*How she closed her eyes and wondered what to expect, or how the penis was the softest skin she had ever felt against her, how it tickled her, searched for a place to connect*” (105). She intends to tell her this, more romantic version and not the truth: “*her first fuck was a guy named Puppet who ejaculated prematurely, at the sight of her apricot vagina, so plump and fuzzy*” (105).

At first glance, we see Viramontes inventing a narrator who judges Arlene as a bad mother, uncouth, and someone who is out of step with reality. While this narrator is certainly judgmental, Viramontes includes shaping tools such as free indirect discourse that guide the reader to fill in and imagine a little more beyond the surface of the story. The reader, for instance, is guided to imagine Arlene as a woman who had an unplanned daughter before she was able to fully explore her own self, independent from others. And, we learn through this device of free indirect discourse of Champ’s exploratory way of seeing things that is less reliant on the mother figure. She imagines plastic eyelashes as “*insects on display*” (101) and finds pleasure in her own daydreams.

Alberto Ríos also chooses to slice into reality to depict a relationship in the making of his story, “Back of My Own Head in a Crowd”. However, the details he chooses guide the reader to gap fill another kind of story—a story that centers on a relationship between a widower and her husband via the objects they shared while together. Ríos chooses to invent a first person narrator who opens the story thus: “*My husband Adolfo is gone*” (61). The reader doesn’t know why. There isn’t sufficient information. Then narrator follows with: “*They have stolen him from me, and there is no news*” (61). The reader is given enough information now to begin to make sense of the story. “*Stolen*” and “*no news*” in a Latin American context: the reader gap fills the most likely context. The husband is a political *desaparecido*, and most likely dead. The narrator then adds: “*He has been inside me for so many years that when they took him, they took me as well*” (61). In a flash, the blueprint is doing something new. This is at once the story of loss and a meditation on how the self (wife) and the other (husband) form a unit in a dialectical relationship, where one cannot exist without the other. Not that the husband is gone, she sees herself in every object she encounters in their home. She remarks, “*Because I’ve been in so much of this kitchen, so much of it as well is in me*” (61).

Ríos selects in just the right amount of detail for the reader to make sense of all this. She, the narrator, sees herself in all these objects because her all senses were educated by this kitchen and her particular individual actions and activities within this kitchen. Ríos chooses to have her continue to talk about objects as if they are not separate from her sense of self: *“I’m in the long silver of the chrome handle on the front of the refrigerator. I have seen myself inside the handle many times, but this feels like something more, something different. This feels not simply like I’m seeing myself, but that I’m seeing as well all the times I’ve seen myself”* (61). Ríos selects in details to direct the reader to imagine this sense of fragmentation of self that happens simultaneous with the breaking up of one’s sense of their world. Through the eyes of the widow the reader experiences the self and the world literally crumbling. And, we see how these objects trigger multiple layers of reflexivity because of her memory function—a memory of that which is outside of herself, the objects in the kitchen. She muses: *“It’s like there’s two of me at the moment, or three, or four. I see myself suddenly all the times I’ve reached for a bowl from the cupboard”* (61). The details here guide the reader to contemplate just how memory of the outside world is also memory of the self. The reader is guided to reflect on how memory establishes relationships of continuity between the self (subject) and other (objects) in the way we use these objects in our daily activities. The recalling of objects and their use is also a way of defining the memory of your self *as a self*. And, the reader is guided to contemplate the tremendous feat of the imagination. The widow reflects: *“since I see myself since it’s possible for me now to see myself, since I am in so many places now that I look, I can imagine myself out there as well, outside this house. I’m walking and I see that looks like the back of my own head in a crowd”* (61). In her mind’s eye she can see herself from behind. And then she remarks, *“I am so much of the crowd that I am the crowd. And we are walking where I am walking. This makes me feel stronger, but only because I can’t help it. I feel too weak to stop myself from feeling stronger”* (62). The reader is encouraged once again to consider the identification of all humans as belonging to the same species. Latino or whatever else may differentiate us, we all belong to the same species.

Ríos chooses to bring the story to a close with her reflecting on not just yet another object that had come to define her with her husband, but how they defined it: *“That clock. It is a beast itself with an electrical tail that kept us up in the beginning when we first brought it home, but which then came part of us, me and Adolfo. We shared that pulse and this kitchen, and our story in this world. We shared one life. All of us and all of this”* (61). The details allow the reader to have this strong sense of how man-made and natural objects define us to the extent that

we define those objects. In the final lines of the story this relationship takes an ominous turn. She remarks: “*That animal in the clock is alive. I know what this means, what it has to mean. Know what I have to do*” (62). Again, Ríos selects the right and adequate information for the reader to the following make sense: The widower’s talk of time is the marking of a beginning and an end; it always marks a beginning and an end in everyday normal life where all activities are inscribed in time and all life is time-bound. When Ríos brings the story to an end, time erupts briskly as a beast —as the “*animal in the clock is alive*” (62). And the details that have filled out the story up till now lead the reader to one conclusion. The time has arrived for suicide.

Ríos offers readers a blueprint that guides their inference and gap filling processes. It also shows just how flash fiction can be a vehicle for formulating metaphysical concepts such as:

- The ontological concept of the relationship between self and other.
- How the self is made by the other in as much as other makes the self.
- How it is impossible to separate, or classify, or understand the self without doing the same of the other, because the self makes the self and the other just as the other makes the self.
- How objects *determine who you are by the way you use them*; how the use of objects in turn reflect a continuity of time and self in their activation of our memory.
- How the imagination is formed; how it doesn’t and cannot exist in a void.
- How the imagination has to be anchored in material reality, even though material reality is transcended by imagination.
- How the imagination is always *about something*.
- How there are no images, no imagination without content.
- How consciousness is always conscious of something.
- How a turn of events can shake deeply our sense of self (and other) in the world to such a degree that the only way to attain meaning is in death.

In Ríos’s two-page flash fiction story the reader explores some of the most fundamental categories in ontology (metaphysics) —and without the technical words and argumentation seen in a philosophical treatise. The reader experiences a journey of deep ontological meditation set in motion by the first-person narration of a woman who feels the deep pain of losing her husband.

Ríos's willful use of the generative device of the discourse (narrative shaping tools) creates a combination of estrangement (his choice investing the widower with such metaphors, images, reflections and not, say, a philosopher) and proximity (the narrative's appealing style). At first, the reader experiences the shock of *non-recognition*. That is, Ríos's choice of shaping devices makes for a story that is somewhat difficult to parse in order for us to *make sense*. However, the story is written so exquisitely that we return to it again and again until it *makes sense*. The pay off: the reader learns how to follow its blueprint: from the filling in of gap of the repressive, fascist regime elided to the widow's felt sorrow to the self/other dialectic to the role played by *time* as a milieu in which the self grows then grows together with an other, and that has a beginning and middle and end.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

I hope that this short exploration of a *short* short narrative form will cement the sense in all of us sitting around the grand table of Latin/o American studies that this can be an option to approach cultural phenomena such as literature. Of course, this is but one possibility in the smorgasbord of approaches. It is one that I happen to have a particular affinity for and interest in building, refuting, and refining. There are many others as the essays in this issue of *alternativas* evinces.

I end by remarking on a few observations offered in the above approach to the study of flash fiction, or *microrrelatos*. Their making requires the massive work of the author's disciplining of the imagination within the constraint of the concision of form. Authors like Cisneros, Viramontes, Díaz, and Ríos fix themselves the goal to discipline their imagination according to the aims and purposes of the story. These authors apply the interrelated mind/brain faculties mentioned above to bring into existence a *new* product in the world that aims to have a unified aesthetic impact on the reader. Cisneros, Viramontes, Díaz, and Ríos use specific narrative devices to create stories that make constantly *new* the readers perceptual, cognitive, and emotive experience. Finally, as I hope this short journey has shown, Latino flash fiction is the result of the willful expression of and engagement with our (authors and readers) socio-biologically grown emotion/cognitive systems to *recreate* the real experiences of Latinos living in a contemporary U.S.

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