

EL MICRORRELATO: FLASH FICTION AND THE NEUROHUMANITIES

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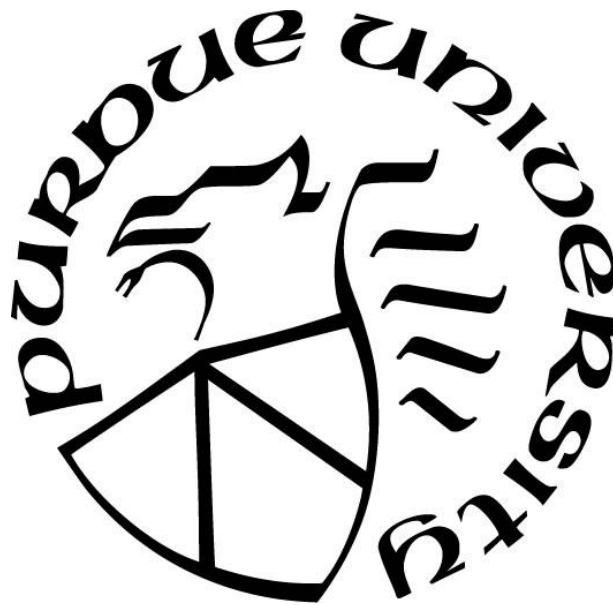
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Para Ignacio.

*Caminando despreocupados por Malasaña, vimos en un escaparate el siguiente verso breve que
tanto nos ha inspirado durante estos años:*

*“Algún día diré
Que no fue fácil, pero lo logré.”*

Una vez más, debido principalmente a tu ánimo constante, digo “lo logré.”

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation defends the *microrrelato*, an extremely brief work of narrative fiction, as the “fourth narrative genre,” as informed by research in embodied cognitive science, often referred to as the field of “neurohumanities.” The hallmark brevity of the *microrrelato* means that the literary perception of the text—and the creation of an imagined story world—is highly influenceable by its context, though the traditional literary criticism often published regarding the *microrrelato* does not seem to defend its distinction. I offer a reexamination of the *microrrelato* by defining it using a radial-structure conceptualization as informed by research from cognitive science on prototypes to inform a more comprehensive approach to defining the *microrrelato* and its relationship to other narrative, fictional, and literary forms. By looking at the prototypical conceptualization of the *microrrelato* through the lens of the neurohumanities, its distinction as its own category of narrative prose becomes clearer. Whereas the vast majority of research in the neurohumanities uses larger works of literature as summative case studies, very little has yet been applied to such short, “sudden” pieces of narrative fiction. It is through this examination that I demonstrate that fictional texts do not need to be extensive in order to afford the realization of cognitive processes in readers that construct imagined story worlds or afford them enriched narrative experience. The brevity or “suddenness” of the *microrrelato* is precisely what affords the reader the opportunity to do so. Furthermore, by applying empirical research from the field of neurohumanities, including data that I have collected, to the *microrrelato*, this dissertation also provides insight into the nature of fiction and the act of reading itself.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Walking along the streets of central Madrid, Spain, one could dine in a bar called “El dinosaurio todavía estaba allí.” One could also purchase books there, or coffee, or attend literary readings all at the same location; the owner of the bar states that “Somos ese lugar donde puedes venir a tomar un café, a leer, a escuchar poesía, a reír, a ligar, a comer, a cenar y a soñar. / Somos una librería, un café y un gastrobar. Todo en uno. Todo en un mismo corazón.” The locale has three pillars of their business: *librería*, focusing on independent publishers, poetry, short stories, and literary events; *gastrobar*, featuring a short menu of specialized Spanish dishes named after literary references; and *café*, providing a “lugar de calma en el medio del ruido” (*El dinosaurio todavía estaba allí*).

Patrons, employees, and passersby are likely to recognize the name of the bar and identify it as a reference to Augusto Monterroso’s very short story, or *microrrelato*, titled “El dinosaurio”:

Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí. (73)

This is the complete reproduction of the original text; nothing was omitted, and nothing is missing from the original text either. The title itself takes up over 22% of all text, and yet this piece of literature is clearly more than the sum of its nine words. It provokes the imagination, perhaps inspires curiosity, and even seems to present a fantastic contradiction. Just like the bar/bookshop/café/literary event venue in Madrid, this *microrrelato* is much more than its single-faceted appearance.

This bar is not the only reference to brief literary works in Madrid. Commuters throughout the capital city might notice bits of poetry, excerpts from short stories, *microrrelatos*, and more posted throughout the interior of the Madrid Metro, city busses, and other forms of public

transportation in order to give passengers something light to read and consider during their commute. This is due to the *Libros a la Calle* campaign organized by the *Asociación de Editores Madrid*. In their own words,

Cada vagón de metro o de tren, cada autobús, puede ser un lugar en el que encontrarnos con la literatura, tomar contacto con autores, personajes y géneros desconocidos, o volver a recordar obras que leímos hace años. Para los primeros, la curiosidad está creada y para los segundos, la sugerencia está hecha. (“Libros a la calle”)

Despite the actively moving lifestyle of contemporary Madrid, the physical environment presents ample opportunities for literary curiosity in public spaces; for *Libros a la Calle*, it is no longer a question of asking people to sit down and read for several hours, but rather a matter of offering an invitation to pursue one’s literary curiosity at their own leisure, reminding commuters of the rich history of Spanish and Hispanic literature. The campaign posts literary excerpts from several genres, including “narrativa, humor, poesía, ensayo, libros de viaje, filosofía, teatro, historia, textos didácticos... una selección de textos elegidos con mucho cariño” (“Libros a la calle”). These posters also include a QR code for travelers to scan with their smartphone’s camera, which will direct them (via the Internet) to more information about the work and the author. Although the QR codes are relatively new, this campaign has been sharing small pieces of literature with *madrileños* for over twenty years.

Working alongside *Libros a la Calle*, the Metro of Madrid has its own free library system located at certain underground metro stations with the intention of helping its passengers pass the time with a few good paragraphs, according to their website:

Los bibliómetros son módulos instalados en algunas estaciones del Metro con un fondo de más de 1.300 títulos diferentes que incluye las principales y más representativas obras de la literatura española y universal. Esta colección se incrementa periódicamente con las últimas novedades editoriales. Las novedades se acompañan de una Guía de Lectura que está a disposición de los usuarios. Los títulos se pueden consultar en las pantallas táctiles instaladas en los bibliómetros y en el catálogo. (“Bibliómetro”)

Although the *Bibliómetro* and *Libros a la Calle* have been active installments in the city for the last couple of decades, they are by no means the first or oldest instance of incorporating small works of literature into the physical environment of Madrid. Not far to the north of the “El dinosaurio” bar, the Lettered Neighborhood or *El barrio de las letras* is an informal name given to a small district where Golden Age writers Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Quevedo, and others resided at one point. Many of the old corrals—which set the precedent for modern theater design in Europe—were located in this neighborhood as well, including *El Corral del Príncipe*, which has undergone renovations and expansions since its introduction in the sixteenth century to become the prestigious *Teatro Español*, still producing some of the best performances of Spanish theater today, four hundred years later. To honor the rich literary history so intimate with this neighborhood, some of the pedestrian streets themselves are adorned with quotes from the famous works of Golden Age writers, fittingly embossed in gold-colored letters. The same neighborhood is also the setting of many works of fiction, including Ramón del Valle Inclán’s well known work *Luces de Bohemia*, the epitome of the brief theatrical genre of his own invention called *esperpento*, where plaques on the façade of some buildings draw attention to those sites as places explored by these fictional characters.

Small pieces of literature occupy a plethora of physical spaces in Madrid. It is almost more difficult *not* to read Spanish literature than it is to pick up a book and read it. It seems, however, that these small pieces of literature are all anyone has time for: books in the metro help commuters pass the time between destinations, but they are not provided with the understanding that travelers on the Metro will spend hours sitting on Line 6 every day. They are distractions, brief escapes to get commuters through the few minutes between Metro stops.

Imagination, affect, theory of mind, and more are all brought together—woven together—in the reader’s mind during the act of reading, even in these brief instances throughout a commuter. This is, in fact, the Latin origin of the word “context”: *comtexere*, to weave together. The experience of literariness, fictionality, and narrativity afforded by reading a *microrrelato* is principally this context reflected back to each particular reader. Continuing the metaphor of *comtexere*, the experience of reading is effectively the creation of a tapestry of who an individual is: everything they know—consciously and unconsciously—is presented in a specific pattern that is unique to each reader, though shaped by a shared cultural understanding of what a tapestry should be.

One of the endeavors of this dissertation seeks to address the tapestry of the individual reader. Obviously, being a reader implies there is a text to read, but that also means that a text is being read by a particular reader, and just as every reader is a different human being with different experiences, memories, and cognitive faculties to call upon, each text affords a different narrative experience to those readers. Put more elegantly, Jerome Bruner asks in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*,

Once we have characterized a text in terms of its structure, its historical context, its linguistic form, its genre, its multiple levels of meaning, and the rest, we may still

wish to discover how and in what ways the text affects the reader and, indeed, what produces such effects on the reader as do occur. What makes great stories reverberate with such liveliness in our ordinarily mundane minds? What gives great fiction its power: what in the text and what in the reader? (4)

In Western culture, there has always been an intimate, conscious relationship between the human mind, the human body, and the act of reading. It is a curious concept in the abstract: a physical manifestation of icons representing sounds that represent real world meanings; meanings that affect change in the reader and in the world. In 1879, for example, M. Javal published in *Annales d'Oculistique* three reasons one may experience “reading fatigue”: “(1) the constant tension of accommodation, (2) the constant fixation of the eyes, and (3) the fact that books are written in black characters on white ground” (cited in “Quarterly Summary” 531). The author continues to explain that the eye is physiologically prepared to see colors and that font size of the text being read should correspond with both age and reading level in order to prevent myopia. The act of reading, it was determined, has physiological consequences that can be explained by the visual physicality of the text itself. Per Javal, reading causes physiologically observable fatigue due to the physical nature of the text.

One hundred fifty years later, what can be said of the very short pieces of literature embedded throughout Madrid? These are works of literature that are suddenly presented, decontextualized, to their unexpected readers, offering brief moments of literature to distract readers and help them pass the time. Reading just a few paragraphs on the Metro can certainly help seven minutes fly by much quicker, whether or not the commuter continues to read at home later. These moments of literature, however, are not necessarily *microrrelatos* similar to “El dinosaurio.”

The latter is the complete work; what is often posted in the Metro or embedded in the streets are fragments, excerpts, passages, and quotes of much larger works.

The concept of reading in a flash or “all at once” is markedly different than longer narrative forms. In *Flash Fiction*, Thomas et al. “present stories that could be read without turning a page... we called them ‘flash’ fiction because there would be no enforced pause in the reader's concentration, no break in the field of vision. They would be apprehended ‘all at once’” (*Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories* 12). The suddenness of reading is temporally as short as the text's physical extension, but that does not mean that it involves the reader's mind any less intensely. The brevity of the *microrrelato* is its hallmark to be certain, and it can be considered a type of flash fiction; reading one is a phenomenologically different experience than reading a novel or a short story, though the idea of brevity in the progression of Western literature is certainly not new. Edgar Allan Poe also insisted in brevity as fundamental to short stories, though for him, it was a question of reading in one sitting; flash fiction is a matter of reading almost at a glance, possibly even accidentally.

The Spanish *microrrelato* exists in its current form due largely to innovative writers from Latin America, inspired by a long line of literary tradition. Uruguayan writer Horacio Quiroga is well known in the Hispanic literary circles as a writer of short stories—including the *cuento corto*, or “short-short story,” during the 19th century. During his literary career he published his now-famous “Decálogo del perfecto cuentista.”¹ While in the 21st century his works would hardly be considered MR as scholars currently understand them, his short-short stories continue to be influential Latin American literary canon of the early 20th Century. Many of Quiroga's works are

¹ See Appendix for complete copy of the Quiroga's *Decálogo del perfecto cuentista*.

evocative of similar imagery and affect as the stories of Edgar Allan Poe, whom Quiroga confessed to admiring and intentionally evoking in his writing. Poe had also written a several “rules” of writing, though they were never formally published as a concrete decalogue; following in his muse’s footsteps, Quiroga’s “Decálogo” lists ten rules for writing the perfect short story. Of particular interest in the evolution of what would eventually become the contemporary *microrrelato*, rules V through VIII stand out:

V. No empieces a escribir sin saber desde la primera palabra adónde vas. En un cuento bien logrado, las tres primeras líneas tienen casi la misma importancia de las tres últimas....

VI. Si quieres expresar con exactitud esta circunstancia: “Desde el río soplaba el viento frío,” no hay en lengua humana más palabras que las apuntadas para expresarla. Una vez dueño de tus palabras, no te preocupes de observar si son entre sí consonantes o asonantes.

VII. No adjetives sin necesidad. Inútiles serán cuantas colas de color adhieras a un sustantivo débil. Si hallas el que es preciso, él solo tendrá un color incomparable. Pero hay que hallarlo,

VIII. Toma a tus personajes de la mano y llévalos firmemente hasta el final, sin ver otra cosa que el camino que les trazaste. No te distraigas viendo tú lo que ellos pueden o no les importa ver. No abuses del lector. Un cuento es una novela depurada de ripios. Ten esto por una verdad absoluta, aunque no lo sea.

Many of the modernist, avant-garde, and Boom writers in Latin America continued with this tradition of shrinkage, breaking down the established traditions of narrative literature being

long, congruous texts, and instead offering fragmented, often disorienting literature. Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* is an excellent example of the reduction of a literary unit—a chapter, or even a paragraph—and reorganizing the literary work, disorienting the reader with a multitude of interruptions caused by the need to turn pages forward and backward to jump to different points in the novel (therein lies the “rayuela,” meaning “hopscotch”) in order to read it. These texts, however, are not *microrrelatos*, but rather novels and short stories built with smaller discursive elements. Their influence of these challenges to tradition are present in the *microrrelato* today, presenting what seems to be just the climax of some story that the reader never quite gets to read.

Many scholars of the *microrrelato* argue that it is the genre of the twenty-first century. Indeed, Guillermo Siles details the development of this apparently new genre throughout the latter half of the twentieth century as a separation from other forms coinciding with the globalization of Latin American cultures in the final decades of the twentieth century (63). This globalization implied more cultural import and export between Europe and Latin America. Though it is fair to say that the Spanish *microrrelato* would not exist today as it does without inspiration from the innovative works of Latin American writers of the last hundred years, Andres-Suárez points out that “la progresiva intensificación de la brevedad fue un proceso general de la narrativa breve occidental iniciado en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX así como una de las constantes de la evolución del cuento a lo largo de su historia” (31). This is demonstrated in Latin American and Spanish writers alike: the short story became increasingly short, coinciding in part with Modernism to be certain, though not limited to that time period, discursive or thematic elements, or geographies. Quiroga's short stories were considerably shorter than his predecessors', though his works cannot be considered *microrrelato* given the length, detail, and “completeness” of the stories

compared to the *microrrelato* today. In Spain, similar observations can be made in the works of Ramón Gómez de la Serna and Juan Ramón Jiménez.

This dissertation examines the *comtextere* of the *microrrelato*: the 21st century reader living in a digital age, the cognitive faculties that make reading these short pieces of fiction possible, and the insights into cognition and education that can be gained from a deeper appreciation for the *microrrelato* as its own narrative genre, distinct from the novel, novella, and short story.

The first chapter of this dissertation dialogues with current scholarship on the *microrrelato* to support a definition of the form as a very brief work of fictional narrative that is autonomous from the novel, novella, and the short story. I present a discussion of the most common characteristics, demonstrating that the *microrrelato* is an eclectic, hybrid genre that tests the limits of narrativity, brevity, and fictionality. One of the major critiques against the form's autonomy is that the literary criticism and scholarship surrounding the *microrrelato* is no different than what could be said of a short story. This chapter concludes by acknowledging this criticism as fair assuming it remains subject to purely hermeneutical, traditional literary criticism, though insight from research in the cognitive and neurosciences regarding the nature of fiction provide useful tools for literary analysis that are better able to distinguish the *microrrelato*, highlighting the importance of the context of the reader-text interaction.

The second chapter presents an overview of recent developments in human cognition research as it applies to defining the mind, body, and context of a reader. I demonstrate that the act of reading is enactive, perceptual, and contextualized: the reader accesses varying amounts of individual and shared cultural memory in order to comprehend a literary text and make meaning. The *microrrelato* is no exception, and in fact relies very heavily on underlying conceptual

metaphors, conceptual blending, and more—in effect, accessing a “literary” mode of thinking—when reading a *microrrelato*. This is activated in the reader by the context in which the *microrrelato* is presented.

The third chapter addresses the recurrence of scholars of the *microrrelato* crediting the fast-paced contemporary lifestyle of Western societies for its success. Some, including Patricia Esteban Erlés, directly credit Facebook for publication and getting into contact with the illustrator. However, a historical overview of brief literature and the act of reading demonstrates that the *microrrelato* is in itself nothing new; what is new, however, is the growth of intentional interest in publishing books of *microrrelato*. Social media platforms afford writers a place to publish brief works, and the nature of the social network interface easily affords readers to consume one after another, but the possibilities of reading literature in the 21st century is not nearly as different from previous centuries as is commonly discussed. Essentially, contemporary lifestyles affords readers different opportunities to read, but that does not mean the *microrrelato* itself is necessarily a product of the current times. Ever since humans have learned to communicate, we have been telling extremely brief fictional stories.

In the fourth chapter, I demonstrate that the *microrrelato* serves as a useful tool for incorporating fiction into everyday life, particularly in contemporary Western society, in which time is perceived as an increasingly valuable commodity. A growing body of research indicates that prolonged exposure to fiction is correlated with its readers holding more pro-social attitudes. There is a dearth in research pertaining to these effects when the literature is in a second language, and the genre of said fiction is highly debated. Because the *microrrelato* is so short, the context of the *microrrelato*’s presentation to the reader matters more than it would for longer narrative genres. Its reliance on the context of its presentation thus distinguishes it from those same genres, although

it still shows potential for literary “merit.” Here, I present my empirical data demonstrating both the cognitive possibilities the *microrrelato* affords to readers—given the right context—and an increase in empathetic expressions throughout an Introduction to Hispanic Literature course for undergraduate students by using a *microrrelato* as a tool of measurement.

CHAPTER 2. WHAT IS A *MICRORRELATO*?

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Lauro Zavala suggests that if the *lingua franca* of the novel towards the end of the 19th Century is French, and that of the more traditional short story of the early 20th century English, then that of the *microrrelato*—that fictional prose toying with the margins of narrative literature—belongs to the Spanish-language writers around the globe (6). In an attempt to describe the *microrrelato* (referred to as “MR” in singular and plural, except where necessary), many scholars refer to this craft as its own genre, distinct from the novel, novella, and short story. Indeed, Javier Perucho argues that “el microrrelato no es un ‘subgénero’; es un género literario en sí mismo” (14).

Guillermo Siles repeatedly refers to the form as the “fourth narrative genre” in his book *El microrrelato hispanoamericano: La formación de un género en el siglo XX*. Lucy Bell notes in *The Latin American Short Story at its Limits: Fragmentation, Hybridity and Intermediality* that both Siles and Zavala emphatically assert that the *microrrelato* is indeed a new form altogether, one that was formed in the 20th century and that is uniquely autonomous from the short story. That said, Siles also explores the MR not only as an autonomous genre, but one that is inherently “sostiene el carácter transgenérico” (Siles 12). Because it is a form that is inspired by a wide range of literary devices and practices, the MR can assimilate to a wide variety of genres—poetry, drama, etc.—as part of its defining characteristics.

This defense of the MR as a genre proper is not without critics. David Roas, among others, negates the independence of the MR as its own narrative genre and insists that it is a variant, albeit a salient one, of the short story (47). Roas points out that that the aspects of the MR that are often used in discussions of the form in defense of its autonomy are actually indistinct from the

characteristics in the story: these aspects are narrativity and fictionality; brevity; unity of conception and reception; intensity of effect; and economy, condensation and rigor (52). These same parameters are used to distinguish the short story from the novel, for example, and therefore cannot be used to distinguish the MR from the short story, concluding that the so-called MR are merely short stories at the most extreme end of the genre's spectrum.

Regardless of its classification, a necessary first step in discussing the MR is attempting to define it, though this is as challenging to define as any literary genre, subgenre, or variation. The brevity of the MR, for example, is indeed salient; but I argue that it is because of its shockingly limited extension as perceived by the reader that is what truly distinguishes it from the short story. The tools for analysis provided by the field of cognitive science approaches to literature allow for a shift in the definition of the MR away from a purely hermeneutical, isolated definition towards a new one centered on the reader-text interface. Indeed, as one attempts to define any entity by certain characteristics, several exceptions inevitably arise. I will first discuss currently accepted theories in an attempt to classify it, including certain critiques of those definitions. I demonstrate that current the classifications, while useful for what they are, are essentially lacking the extratextual elements provided by the context of both text and reader, thereby fulfilling one of the goals set forth in the introduction to the present dissertation. If the MR is truly the fourth narrative genre, the currently accepted characterizations set forth by scholars are lacking a specific distinction from the short story. I believe that a cognitive dimension is necessary in discussing its nuanced distinction from the latter which has been overlooked: how does the reader's mind interact with such short fiction, and how is this different than in other cases? This difference is the defining characteristic between the MR and other forms of literary prose that I emphasize here and in the following chapters.

2.2 WHAT IS A MICRORRELATO?

2.2.1 Nomenclature

The need to name something is part of human nature: names help us classify, categorize, analyze, judge, describe, and discuss. I do not use the term MR casually here, but intentionally. In English, terms such as including sudden fiction, flash fiction, short shorts, short-short stories, micro fiction, and more make appearances throughout literary criticism, conferences, awards, and publications; however, as mentioned above, the literary phenomenon that is the MR is indeed very different from the English-language meanings and representations of what is supposedly the same genre.

For the purpose of the current work it is important to delve into a discussion of the nature of a MR and its debatable autonomy as “the fourth narrative genre” or as a particularly salient subgenre. In order to attempt a foray into the territory of unifying traits, subgroups, differences, and missing information, it is necessary to establish a common terminology to be used throughout this dissertation. Different scholars prefer different terms for the form for various reasons, though the present dissertation is more concerned with the reading of the MR itself as a sociocognitive phenomenon as opposed to the nuances of its nomenclature.

Ángeles Encinar and Carmen Valcárcel ask readers of their contemporary anthology, *Más por menos: Antología de microrrelatos hispánicos actuales*, why it is always necessary to begin with the nomenclature of this literary phenomenon in any discussion of such:

¿Somos demasiado iconoclastas si afirmamos, ya desde el principio, que nos parece bien la mayoría de los múltiples términos, en muchos casos insólitas originales creaciones léxicas, con los que se designa esta modalidad genérica de extraordinaria concisión narrativa: minificción, minicuento, microrrelato, microficción, ficción

súbita, nanoficción, cuento muy breve, brevísimo o hiperbreve, relato ultracorto—
mínimo, minaturesco, cuántico, liliputiense, ascético, pigmeo, gnómico—,
textículo, descuento o cuentín, entre otros? (11)

This list of names is certainly incomplete—even in current discussions, there are many more in use, yet many of them appear to refer to the same entity. There are several cases, of course, where critics distinguish between these different terms in a seemingly futile attempt at super-categorization. Notably, Lauro Zavala utilizes the term *minificción* as a catch-all in order to “hacer referencia simultáneamente a minicuentos (de carácter narrativo y estructura tradicional) y microrrelatos (de naturaleza híbrida y estructura poco convencional)” (6). For him, a *microrrelato* is a different phenomenon than the *minificción*, but the former is an example of the latter. To answer the editors’ original question, no, they are not too iconoclastic; while the terminology has been just as varied as the texts themselves, they affirm that the terms *minicuento*, *microrrelato*, and *minificción* are encompassing enough that scholars throughout the Spanish-language editorials would be able to mutually understand what exactly we are all talking about in contemporary discussions.

Irene Andres-Suárez and Antonio Rivas discuss some of these names and point out that while many of these terms are used interchangeable in Latin American counties, there is nonetheless a general preference for and mutual understanding of the term *microrrelato* (Andres-Suárez and Rivas 17). For them, the *microrrelato* is the “texto literario ficcional en prosa, articulado en torno a los principios básicos de brevedad, narratividad y calidad literaria,” again pointing out that the names themselves are directly alluding to the brevity of the form (18–19). Andres-Suárez later defines the structure of the MR as “un texto literario en prosa, articulado en torno a dos principios básicos: hiperbrevedad y narratividad,” insisting that to achieve this

literariness, it must also “contarnos una historia, porque no hay microrrelato sin un sujeto actor y sin una acción sustentada en un conflicto y en un cambio de situación y de tiempo, aunque sean mínimos” (Andres-Suárez 22).

As of July 2019, a search in all of the databases of the MLA International Bibliography (results since the year 1926) yields 152 results for *microrrelato* (and its antiquated, hyphenated spelling, *micro-relato*) but only 63 for *minificción* and 20 for *minicuento*. The earliest record of *microrrelato* appears in the year 1981 (spelled *micro-relato*), whereas there is no record of *minificción* until 1992 and *minicuento* until 1993. This proportion holds true in producing results limited to the year 2019 alone: the MLA International Bibliography yields only two references to “microrrelato”, and zero references to either *minicuento* or *minificción*. Of course, this does not indicate definition necessarily, though it is indicative of the extensive use of *microrrelato*. While the distinction between the terms is only a decade older than the scholarly recognition of the form, the term *microrrelato* is nonetheless the most frequently used.

The other terms are often used interchangeably whereas other scholars may distinguish between them, and although a lack of consistent nomenclature presents certain challenges in scholarship, what unifies these names is their reference to both its inherent “story-ness” and minimal length. I therefore use the term *microrrelato* as an encompassing term for all of these very brief narrative works of literary or genre fiction, both for its nuanced differences from other terms as well as its commonness throughout the scholarship on the matter. Thus, *microrrelato* will be used throughout this dissertation.

2.2.2 Radial Definition

The definition offered by Andres-Suárez is the most standard definition used throughout most scholarship on the MR. However, I suggest a more flexible one that will be used throughout this dissertation: a MR as a complete work of narrative fiction that is extremely brief in length drawing principally on narrative prose traditions. The MR may be presented to the reader in a dialogue form, or even in what appears to be verse. However, as much as it may approach theatrical and poetic form, the MR does not stray from its focus on being *read* as a work of fiction, as opposed to being heard, viewed, performed, or pronounced, although these are also possibilities. That said, it is important to reiterate early on that this is a very hybrid form of narrative fiction; at times, it can seem indistinguishable from very short poetry in prose, jokes, *greguerías*, aphorisms, and more.

This is the definition of an idealized, prototypical MR. George Lakoff presents in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* an overview of research on “prototypes” in cognitive science demonstrating that any given concept may be thought of as categorical, related radially to a central prototype:

The category *mother*...is structured radially with respect to a number of its subcategories: there is a *central* subcategory, defined by a cluster of converging cognitive models (the birth model, the nurturance model, etc.); in addition, there are *noncentral extensions* which are not specialized instances of the central subcategory, but are rather variants of it (*adoptive mother, birth mother, foster mother, surrogate mother*, etc.) These variants are not generated from the central model by general rules; instead, they are extended by convention and must be learned one by one. The central model determines the possibilities for extensions,

together with the possible relations between the central model and the extension models. (91, emphasis in original)

Lakoff suggest that categories be thought of as flexible, dynamic, concentric circles radiating out from a conceptualized prototype. Howard Mancing clarifies this research, emphasizing the contextualized and dynamic nature of categories in his proposal for a conceptualization of prototypical genres as applied to Cervantes's *Novelas ejemplares* by using an illustration: when one is asked to think of a bird, they are likely to think of a robin-, sparrow-, or pigeon-like bird before thinking of an ostrich or penguin ("Prototypes" 131). Of course, as Mancing points out, if this person lives near water or in Antarctica, they may be more likely to think of a penguin or a pelican before thinking about a robin. Similarly, one who is reading a fantastic novel may be more likely to think of a phoenix before a real bird. Each of them may also reside in other categories: a phoenix is a *fantastic animal*, an ostrich and a penguin are both *flightless animals*, but so is a moose, even though it is not a bird.

As is demonstrated in this chapter, many examples of what scholars and authors consider to be a MR vary greatly in length, may appear theatrical, poetic, or even lack conjugated verbs. These can be understood as variants of the prototypical MR—examples that radiate away from the concentric circle toward other genres, forms, or categories—but can nonetheless still be considered MRs much in the same way that an ostrich, a phoenix, a penguin, and a pelican are all examples of birds. Because Monterroso's "El dinosaurio" is the most-cited example of a MR, I suggest it be considered prototypical, or at least as close to prototypical as possible, of the concept of the MR.

However, as specific examples "radiate" away from this prototypical epicenter, they simultaneously approach another category altogether. A MR that becomes a little too long may be perceived as more of a short story rather than a MR, for example. It is important to underline the

contextualized, situated perception of the categories: just as someone in Antarctica may think of a penguin before thinking of a robin, any given reader may perceive a certain text as more of a prose poem than a MR, for example.

2.2.3 Radial characterization of the *microrrelato*

In order to illustrate this “radial definition,” in a similar manner to Lagmanovich’s *El microrrelato hispanoamericano*, it would be prudent to first observe, albeit superficially, a few examples. After presenting them, I will provide preliminary observations and refer back to them as I expand on certain aspects throughout the subsequent sections.

Scholars of the MR will note that its creation and popularity, undoubtedly inspired by *avant garde* literature of the early 20th century, began its appearances as a unique literary phenomenon in Latin America. The first example presented here was written by Honduran writer Augusto Monterroso and originally published in 1953 in *Obras completas (y otros cuentos)*. As Lagmanovich and others confirm, “El dinosaurio” is perhaps the most discussed *microrrelato* in the academic realm, and clearly resides at the extreme limits of the genre in its length (*El microrrelato hispanoamericano* 20). It is thus fitting to begin this discussion with the most celebrated of MR:

“El dinosaurio”

Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí. (73)

An early observation of this exemplary MR is that the subject of the verb *despertar* is left to the reader’s imagination: it is conjugated for the third person singular, indicating *he*, *she*, singular *they*, *it*, or any number of singular agents. There is also no narrative context whatsoever: the reader has no idea who (or what) woke up, where, why, or when. The story suddenly begins *in medias res*

and, just as abruptly, seems to stop there too. This MR will be used as a point of reference for many discussions throughout this dissertation.

A contemporary writer of MR in Spain is Patricia Esteban Erlés. Her recent publication *Casa de Muñecas* (2011),² illustrated by Sara Morante, is an anthology of gothic, sinister or otherwise uncanny MR that are organized thematically as pertaining to the different rooms of a doll house. The following example is taken from the section titled *Cocina*:

“Carne fresca”

Me gusta abrir el frigorífico y que tú estés ahí. (104)

Once again, this MR pushes the limits of what can be considered narrative due to its brevity; however, it is difficult for the reader to deny a sensation of cannibalism, dark humor, or an air of sinister intentions somehow conveyed in those twelve words (title included). It is also a simple task to relate this to the prototypical concept of an MR when comparing this to “El dinosaurio.”

Post-boom Argentinian novelist Luisa Valenzuela has also added to this narrative corpus throughout the years. Encinar and Valcárcel note that for Valenzuela, “un microrrelato puede ser como el agua que se nos escurre entre los dedos. Mejor dicho, es lo que queda: esa humedad y el recuerdo que en ella late como un pasaje hacia lo intuido. Algo se pudo pescar al vuelo, y ese algo ya no está pero queda el vuelo” (20). An example of Valenzuela’s work published in the collection *Juego de villanos* is as follows:

² The author explains in an interview that the capitalization of the word *muñecas* in the title is intentional because they are characters and proper nouns throughout the work (Garrido).

“La pérdida de amor”

Mi antiguo enamorado me tenía entre algodones y azúcar y siempre repetía que yo era la más dulce; era su bombón de chocolate, su caramelo masticable. Por desgracia una creciente diabetes lo obligó a apartarse de mi lado.

La separación me agrió a tal punto el carácter que a mi nuevo pretendiente le produje acidez. Ahora a ninguno le resulto apetecible. Muy a mi pesar tendré que alejarme de esta secta de caníbales entre los cuales me sentía muy querida si bien algo diezmada. (83)

While this example is notably longer than twelve words, it is nonetheless markedly shorter than what the average reader, whether casual or academic, would call a “short story.” There are two paragraphs, each consisting of only two or three complete sentences, offering a somewhat symmetrical structure: the first part appears to use amorous language related to sweetness and food, but ends with a play on meaning. The second half continues with the *LOVER IS A FRUIT* metaphor, but with a darker turn: there’s acidity, fermentation, and cannibalism, perhaps taking the metaphor into a more violent space than the norm. This is an excellent example of a MR radiating away from the prototypical epicenter towards a “short story” category by merit of its length.

It seems obvious to point out, but the most agreed upon hallmark of the MR among scholars is without a doubt its brevity. However, as Lagmanovich asserts, it is more a matter of concision than simply of brevity: the term “concision” implies brevity to be certain, but also encompasses a semantic richness. For him, the process of writing a MR is one in which authors

...disminuyen toda descripción hasta convertirla en insinuación; eliminan las digresiones, evitando cualquier tramo—cualquier desvío—que no implique un

avance o progreso en la acción. Es un proceso que, observado históricamente, puede resultar alucinante. Si antes llamábamos “narrativa brevísima” a un relato de cuatro o cinco páginas, hoy sólo aplicamos este nombre a una pieza de narrativa de cuatro o cinco párrafos, luego nos centramos en los dos párrafos, en el párrafo único, y en unas cuantas líneas. El caso extremo lo proporcionan aquellos que escriben los textos que llamo “híperbreves”: composiciones de una o dos líneas de extensión. (“Algunas Reiteraciones” 89)

Esteban Erlés expressed a very similar process in crafting her own:

El microrrelato es todo un reto para mí. Cuando tienes más espacio para contar, entonces puedes crecer y extenderte en palabras y temática, pero cuando la historia pretendes que sea muy corta, tienes que llevar a cabo un proceso de jibarización, de esencialización de lo que quieres contar. El microrrelato es como la habitación de una casa de muñecas, donde hay de todo lo que encontrarías en una de verdad, pero a escala reducida. (Garrido)

Her emphasis on *esencialización* is a common perception of the art of writing MR. Brevity is fundamental, but a *concise* brevity, a few words rich in narrative, literary, or fictional meaning, is what seems to define this trait.

These MR exercise a wide range of literary devices: the story may begin *in medias res*, or perhaps make explicit references to other works or authors. The title itself is on occasion longer than the text, but often plays a fundamental role in the literary experience of the text. Titles are also expert examples of wordplay and linguistic mastery, a further-reduced version of the MR itself. In the following sections, these concepts will be discussed in detail as they pertain to radial conceptualization of the MR presented here.

2.3 “Minidecalogues” and Other Characteristics

As mentioned above, the most unifying characteristic of this narrative corpus is its brevity. This is observed before the reader even begins to read: Monterroso’s “El dinosaurio” is first preceded by a title page in the middle of the collection of MR, and the new reader is undoubtedly surprised upon turning the page to only see one line of text. It is in this visual modality that the reader first encounters a MR, not in the textual modality, and perhaps it is the reason that the vast majority of the aforementioned denominations of this literary manifestation allude to the brevity. The excess of blankness on the page is visually salient, particularly in those readers more accustomed to reading larger texts.

As eye-catching as these stories may seem, they are obviously much more than their size. I would argue that focusing on their brevity occludes the most intriguing element of the term, which is the story, since “microrrelato” roughly translates to “micro-story.” These texts are not just brief: they afford complex stories to the reader despite their brief narration. They create entire worlds, transport readers to fantastical situations, provoke and stir emotions, and remain with the reader well after having read them. Recall Valenzuela’s description: these MR are like the water left on your hands after running them under water, reminders that they were once wet; these are minuscule windows allowing the reader to glance into entire worlds; they are flirtations or hints of something magical or mysterious on the next page that the reader never quite manages to find in its entirety.

If one were to remove an individual rock from a mountain, it would continue to be a mountain. If this process is repeated enough times, at what point is it no longer a mountain but a large hill? The same metaphor may be applied to fiction, whose limits have been tested and redefined throughout history. This is no more salient than in the MR. They are literary and fictional in the many ways that a novel or short story may be. Their brevity is a visual and temporal qualifier

to be certain, though the content of the MR demonstrates significantly more: the brevity does not restrict its narrativity or fictionality in the sense that it hinders the reader from engaging with the text or imagining a story world where social minds may interact, but rather, it enables the perception of narrativity and fictionality in a way that is different than more traditional forms.³ As Brevity is a debatable and relative term: it is not just that the story is brief, but that it is very exact in its concise wording; it is also brief because the reader is familiar with longer works. Every single element is fundamental to the narrative experience, from the title to the last period (or absence of punctuation altogether) at the end of the narrative. Because the concepts of brevity and concision are so dynamic, an individual reader's categorization of any given text as "brief" or "concise" differs from circumstance to circumstance.

Recall the discussion of Quiroga's "Decálogo del perfecto cuentista" in Chapter 1. Following this literary tradition, Javier Perucho's edited collection *El cuento jíbaro. Antología del microrrelato mexicano*, first published in 2006, contains a section titled "Filosofías de composición: Decálogos del microrrelato." Perucho notes that these collected decalogues composed by authors of MR (as opposed to non-practicing scholars) "son necesarias para emprender cualquier estudio o aprendizaje del cuento breve" (116). These decalogues are perhaps a "nod" to the Quiroga's *Decálogo*, as well as others', following in the footsteps of the unique art of the Latin American short story. Of the many decalogues in this collection, perhaps the most intriguing is that by Raúl Renán:

"Minidecálogo de la ley del microrrelato"

³ See Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion on the reader's perception of fiction.

1. Todo es *incipit*.
2. Omnipersonaje.
3. Esencia de la esencia.
4. Nadanécdota.
5. Tensión contención.
6. Candado verbal.
7. Honduración.
8. Instantaniedad.
9. Amoral.
10. Vida *in nucce*. (121)

It is worth noting that this “minidecalogue” itself follows its own rules: it serves as both a didactic guide for the craft as well as an example of the genre according to its own parameters. Some words are invented by the author yet convey their meaning just as precisely as any other string of words might do. This is may be considered a comical reappropriation of Quiroga’s “Decálogo,” exaggerating Quiroga’s stance on avoiding unnecessary adjectives: here, the neologisms not only avoid unnecessary adjectives, but also question the necessity of nouns, verbs, and prepositions.

However, while only consisting of twenty-five words (title included), its brevity is not the only quality of note. This relates to the prototypical concept of the MR, but not nearly as strongly as “Carne fresca”—it is more distal because of its numbered, list-like structure. There does not seem to be any narration whatsoever, and yet it is included in a collection of MR and presented as such, alongside hundreds of other examples more proximal to the prototype. A traditional, rigid definition like the one proposed by Andres-Suárez would certainly not account for this particular

MR, but the radial conceptualization I propose here *could*—depending on the reader’s own categorization.

Juan Armando Epple also addresses the importance of inspiration and literary tradition in such a small textual space in his edited collection titled *MicroQuijotes*. On the basis of ideas proffered by Lagmanovich and Zavala, briefly discusses several characteristics of a MR in *MicroQuijotes*: extreme narrative condensation; the fragmentation of the narrative unit; its open structure; reliance on intertextuality; its transgeneric nature; and a predilection for parodying or presenting themes in irony (9–10). Francisca Noguerol, in the prologue of Obligado’s second edited collection, discusses a few prominent characteristics as well: fantasy, terror, image, poetry, metafictional and linguistic games, and compromise.

In the following sections I discuss several of these traits, with more examples, of the MR. These are among the most commonly discussed elements, characteristics, or features of the form that appear in literary criticism today. It is worth pointing out early, however, that David Roas’s observation still seems to hold true: none of these characteristics are true of all MR, and none of these are sufficient enough to truly distinguish the form from the more traditional short story.

2.3.1 Fractality and fragmentation

A common metaphor for the MR is that of snow. When it snows, the ground is covered in white, frozen water. This snowfall consists of snowflakes, which are still considered snow. A closer look reveals fractal formations branching out of a central frozen formation. Each of these fractal branches, upon an even closer examination, also have their own branches, and so on. The water is still frozen in these branches upon branches upon branches.

Similarly, the novel is traditionally divided into chapters. These chapters often consist of a number of paragraphs. These paragraphs typically consist of multiple sentences, and each of these

sentences are understandable in the order they are printed due to the context of the content. If we assume this novel is fictional and narrative, then any given chapter of that novel must also be fictional and narrative, albeit shorter. If this is accepted, then it can also be understood that the paragraphs are also fictional and narrative, even though they are even smaller. If so, many of the sentences may also be considered fictional and narrative, but not all—many sentences may be purely descriptive, for example, and are not necessarily fictional out of the context of the larger paragraph. The smaller the text becomes, the more difficult it becomes to identify it as fictional or narrative.

Lauro Zavala explores this gray area, noting that it is increasingly common for a reader to experience multiple narrative types within a single volume; a reader may read the volume either simultaneously or alternatively as a novel, a series of short stories, or a cycle of *minificciones* (7). The fractal nature of this style of literature allows these possibilities. This is not unique to the MR to be certain, but it does serve to underscore that a MR can easily be considered literary fiction under the assumption that a work of literary fiction consists of immeasurable “pieces” of literary fiction.

Returning for a moment to Quiroga, his short story “El almohadón de pluma” narrates the events of a newly married man who watches his wife slowly die of some unknown ailment, despite a doctor’s best attempts. She is increasingly fatigued and eventually unable to leave her bed, where she eventually dies. Upon removing her body, a massive parasitic insect is discovered in her down pillow, which had apparently been sucking the blood out from her each time she laid down. This *cuento* begins with the chilling sentence: “Su luna de miel fue un largo escalofrío” (45).

As ominous as the first sentence is, it is not a MR because it is the first sentence in a longer story. Isolated, separated from the rest of the story, this sentence could indeed *become* a MR on its

own, but this would require that the reader not be familiar with the source or know that the text is incomplete. While a story can be increasingly broken into smaller and smaller fragments, they do not constitute a MR specifically because there is more to the text. A MR has no other text, it does not belong to any larger story produced by its author. This also demonstrates the roots MR finds in *avant garde* literature, by which I mean a MR can appear to be a fragment of text, but it differs from *avant garde* in that it does not relate directly or indirectly to any other fragments or overarching story. It is not part of a series of fragments or a fragmented story in any way; a MR is the entire, unfragmented text.

2.3.2 The Title

Despite its brevity, the MR must technically have a beginning and an end in some form. The title of a MR often constitutes a unique narrative element. It serves as a primer for the reader against which to compare the body of the text itself, sometimes even providing an extratextual element of insight to an otherwise inscrutable or confusing MR. Consider the example cited above by Patricia Esteban Erlés, “Carne fresca.” Without the implication of fresh meat (which, in Spanish, is the same word as “flesh,”), the MR may not have such a morbid, slightly sinister reception; this seems to indicate that the interlocutor *is* the fresh meat.

The title may also play an opposing role to the overall “tone” of the story, juxtaposing different meanings or connotations to give the MR a final “twist” or invite the reader to react a certain way. Consider the following by Andrés Neumán, which he dedicated to Fernando Iwasaki⁴:

⁴ Fernando Iwasaki is a writer from Perú who has published a series of books, short stories, and MR. His book *Ajuar funerario* is a collection of horror-themed MR, the longest of which does not exceed a few short paragraphs.

“Novela de terror”

Me desperté recién afeitado.

The body of the MR only has four words, and the title consists of one less. The title and dedication to Iwasaki prime the reader for a horror story, only to find a very underwhelming sentence. The title, though, indicates that what is about to be read is going to be terrifying, and the reader’s imagination is then able to piece together the title with the text in order to create narrative meaning: why did the first-person narrator wake up clean shaven? Because this is supposedly a scary story, it implies that the narrator did not intend to wake up in this condition. Perhaps the reader has no memory of what he was doing just before this moment, and is afraid of what he did during this fugue state. Or perhaps the narrator is a dog, who awoke to find his fur gone, and is terrified of what is about to happen.

Taken to its extreme, Mexican writer Guillermo Samperio has also published several MR among other poetry, children’s literature, short stories, and more:

“El fantasma”

This is humorous take on the importance of the title and the extreme brevity of the MR. The reader is presented with the title above an entirely blank page, alluding to the invisibility, or perhaps to the nonexistence, of ghosts. Just as a ghost has no body, this MR also has no “body” of text. This leaves any alleged “story” up to the reader’s imagination: there is a story there, but it is invisible like the ghost.

2.3.3 The End

Just as the title of the MR can provide an important clue for making literary meaning of the text, so too can the final line of the work. Much like the punchline of a joke, the last line of a MR can also give meaning to the text, open it up further, or radically change the narrator's perspective relative to the reader by playing with a reader's expectations.

Consider the following by Spanish writer José María Merino, published originally in his literary books *El libro de las horas contadas*:

“El otro sueño”

Cuando desperté, me rodeaban mi padre, mi madre, mi suegro, mi suegra, Luisín,
Elenita, Andrés y Matilde.

—Te habías dormido —me dijo Andrés.

—Pues sí. Y soñé mucho —repuse.

—¿Qué soñaste?

Entonces comprendí dónde me encontraba.

^s I am hesitant to refer to this book as a novel, collection, or anthology: it is an eclectic publication of short stories and MR that more or less revolve around a single character, each of which questions what the “real” story is. For example, the first story describes an event from the perspective of this character; in the story following this, it is revealed in a conversation with the character's wife that the first story was actually part of a fictional novel that the character is writing, and the “true” events did not occur the way he wrote them. In the third story, a supernatural ball of light comes to the man and inspires him to title the book “El libro de las horas contadas,” thereby adding an incredible metafictional element to the stories. The fourth section is actually a series of fantastic MR that are inspired by, derived from, or pertaining to different aspects within this same ambiguous story world. The book continues for several more sections with often contradictory short stories and MR, but a more detailed discussion of the MR, metafiction, and the short story in this particular context is beyond the scope of the present research.

—Que estaba vivo —contesté, al fin. (El libro 88)

The title and word choice throughout the text all lead the reader to assume that the narrator is alive —there is no reason to believe otherwise until the very last line, when the narrator comments that he had dreamt he was alive. This final sentence reframes the entire text, thereby allowing for the reader’s mind to reimagine the entire situation. Of course, many films, novels, short stories, theatrical productions and more often incorporate surprise endings—a satisfying conclusion to everything would make for a very boring literary cannon in contemporary Western cannon.⁶

2.3.4 Intertextuality

Epplé has published a great deal on the MR as well, including two anthologies of the genre collected by writers on both sides of the Atlantic during over the last century or so with a uniting theme: *Don Quijote*. Fittingly, the anthologies are titled *MicroQuijotes* and *MicroQuijotes 2*, respectively. In discussing the continuous web of precursors, inspirations and literary influences, he notes that *Don Quijote* is “la obra clásica que ha concitado la mayor atención contemporánea como narrativa maestra,” and that “[u]no de los géneros que ha canalizado con mayor soltura este vínculo dialogante con el *Quijote* es, tanto en Latinoamérica como en España, el relato breve y la minificción” (7–8).

For the MR, however, the role of intertextuality (whether this is a reference to *Don Quijote*, the Bible, or any other text) is of greater significance here than it might be in a larger work of fiction: these highly concentrated stories often depend entirely on other narratives that the reader

⁶ Director M. Night Shyamalan is well known for directing films that almost exclusively have surprise endings

is familiar with in order to make literary meaning. Many writers dedicate certain MR to other authors of MR in which the text makes a direct or implied reference to a specific MR of that author. For example, Patricia Esteban Erlés's *Casa de Muñecas*, an entire section of the collection consists of a series of MR in homage to different writers. One of them, dedicated to Monterroso, tells of a narrator who regrets having purchased a dinosaur as a pet, which also serves to contextualize Monterroso's MR.

2.3.5 Imagination

Clara Obligada begins her first collection of MR with a quote by Augusto Monterroso: "Lo cierto es que el escritor de brevedades nada anhela más en el mundo que escribir interminablemente largos textos, largos textos en los que la imaginación no tenga que trabajar" (11). Despite their brevity, writers of MR may well spend a surprising amount of time writing them. Imagination is an obvious component of any text, fictional or otherwise, yet with the MR its importance is more salient.

The imaginative element of literature has long been discussed, though in this dissertation, I am more concerned with the cognitive implications of imagination as it pertains to the MR: the "mental faculty or...an interrelated set of mental capacities and activities concerned with modeling entities and events that are not immediately present to perception and that may or may not have counterparts in the lived word" (Richardson 225). When reading, a text may afford the reader the chance to imagine what the text is narrating to varying degrees. This is not limited to simply visualizing, but readers are able to imagine the feeling, texture or weight of an object in the story; the sound of a particular character's voice, particularly as compared to another character's; and so on. Fascinatingly, as Alan Richardson points out, we are able to imagine things that we have never perceived, including "a solid apple made of cool, lambent flames" (225).

The MR may ask the reader to imagine a great deal, provoking or inviting the imagination to construct fantastic worlds of impossibilities. To be certain, this is not unique of the MR nor of literature in general; the ability to evoke such creations in the reader's mind in very few words, however, is. The MR gives the reader just enough textual information to trigger an apparently infinite array of imagined possibilities: because these texts minimize narration, this leaves the story world's creation almost entirely up to the reader in a way that a longer form cannot do.

Fittingly, consider this MR José María Merino published in *El libro de las horas contadas*:
“Imaginación y realidad”

Le dije al zambuliano que su llegada a la Tierra había despertado en mí ideas para muchos cuentos.

—Escríbelos—repuso. No olvides que, cuando la imaginación se materializa de alguna manera, pasa a formar parte de la realidad.

En aquel mismo momento se me ocurrió algo importante y urgente. Saqué mi libreta del bolsillo y escribí:

Los zambulianos no existen

Sin embargo, mi interlocutor no desapareció. (*El libro* 143)

The narrator here is speaking to an extraterrestrial being called “zambuliano.” This is a nonsense word, though linguistically accurate, and implies there is a place not on Earth, perhaps called “Zambul” or perhaps “Zambulia,” where some intelligent creature has come to Earth, learned Spanish (if it didn't already know it), and was in a conversation with a writer. There is no

description of the *zambuliano*, but a reader is free to imagine one however they want: what matters is that one exists.

This metafictional MR lends itself to a discussion of the illustrative of the power of imagination within not only fiction, but the MR itself. The narrator, who is an author of short stories, has been told by an extraterrestrial that once something that has been imagined, it is part of reality; however, the narrator is unsuccessful at what appears to be an attempt to erase the *zambuliano* from existence by unimagining it. Without getting into the philosophies of phenomenology, we are able to imagine nearly anything—even a *zambuliano*—as Richardson pointed out. Reading this MR, each reader will have their own imagined version of what this *zambuliano* could look like, sound like, and behave. Alternatively, the reader may not even imagine a *zambuliano* at all,⁷ and instead focus on the philosophical implications of unimagining something from existence.

Regardless, a MR is short enough to afford different readers such a vast number of imaginations that nearly anything can be done to the text and it will still be “right.” A longer form, such as the short story, continuously adds guidelines to a reader’s imagination, whether it is in a character’s actions, a description of events, or a dialogue. Recall that each word of a MR is a very precise, exact choice, because it cannot afford to be anything less. A setting does not need to be established for the MR to have a setting at all; instead, it may rely entirely on the imagination of the reader to contextualize the story within the newly imagined story world.

⁷ Not everyone is able to imagine to the same “intensity,” and the same text may not afford every reader the same world to imagine—many people may be unable to imagine smells, tastes, faces, or even bodies. The cognition of imagination is discussed throughout the next chapter, along with neurodiversity.

2.4 Interaction with Other Genres: What a *Microrrelato* Is Not

Time is a valuable commodity in Western society. Cultural artifacts—including artistic and literary expressions—adapt to reflect, react to, and shape sociocultural norms and values. What has not been analyzed in the present discussion are other literary and artistic forms undergoing a similar miniaturization as prose. Namely, “microtheater” or *microteatro* is another literary phenomenon that cannot go unmentioned in this dissertation. There exists a plethora of options for spectators to attend *microteatro* events: the transatlantic organization Microteatro por Dinero hosts a variety of performances in Madrid, Guadalajara, Lima, Miami and several more cities around the globe. Per their website, the idea is that 15 spectators can enjoy 15 minutes of a theatrical performance in a space limited to 15 square meters, and each performance is repeated up to seven times per day (“Microteatro Madrid”).

At the risk of limiting myself by measuring fiction in terms of time spent engaging with a literary work, *microteatro* is not the same as a MR. They both without a doubt fit the common narrative of being products of the same time-conscious culture, but I do not believe it a difficult argument to say that experiencing fifteen minutes of a theatrical performance in a small space is phenomenologically different than reading “Carne fresca.” An important qualifier that has yet to be explicitly discussed is that a MR is generally written with the intention to be read, whereas not all literary forms are. Poetry can be read or heard, and dramatic works are to be performed and

observed,⁸ whereas the MR in its current manifestation can only truly prosper when it is read.⁹ The difference here is just as Howard Mancing argues in that a theatrical work is meant to be seen, not read (Mancing, “See the Play, Read the Book”). At the risk of assuming authorial intent, I do not believe MR are intended to be performed and observed, but rather read in the same fashion as other works of narrative prose.

That said, let us recall the “transgénero” or transgeneric nature of the MR proposed by Siles and Armando Eppe, respectively. There are several instances of MR that seem to approach this theater-like hybrid. Javier Tomeo’s collection *Historias mínimas* is an exemplary case that presents MR in dialogue form. At first glance, they seem to be dramatic scripts. Observe the following example:

Mujer tejiendo junto a la ventana. Inesperadamente entra en la habitación un NIÑO, sosteniendo algo en el hueco de la mano.

NINO. Madre, mira que te traigo.

MADRE. ¿Qué me traes?

NINO. Una luz.

MADRE. ¿Dónde estaba?

⁸ One could argue that dramatic works could be read; it is true that the script is printed and legible, but the *dramatic work* itself is the observable performance, not just the script.

⁹ Very brief fiction certainly does not need to be written and read, but can be spoken and heard. This is not the same as the current understanding of a *microrrelato*, however. Refer to Chapter 3 for a more in-depth discussion of the history of brief fiction from an evolutionary perspective.

NINO. En la charca, debajo de la luna.

MADRE. ¿Te vio alguien cómo la cogías?

NINO. No, nadie.

MADRE. Anda, préndamela pues en el pelo.

Pausa. EL NIÑO se alza sobre la punta de los pies y prende la luz en el cabello de la MADRE. Por un instante, la MADRE deja de tejer y sonrío.

This has the exact format of a theatrical script. There are annotations denoting the description of a scene or actions of characters in italicized font both at the beginning and end of the dialogue; all dialogue is strictly presented without narration or indication of *how* a character said something; the characters names “Niño” and “Madre” are generalized and capitalized in the annotations.

However, this is a MR, and not an example of *microteatro* or very brief theater; this is not to be performed by actors, but rather imagined by a reader. I do not think it too iconoclastic to say, particularly to those familiar with Spanish literature, that while this collection is presented in a script-like format it is not theatrical but simply another case of dialogued prose, much like *La Celestina* by Fernando de Rojas or Miguel de Unamuno’s *Niebla*. Much like these works, this collection of MR by Javier Tomeo constitutes but one example of countless that seem to approach, borrow from, or derive themselves from other genres. A fundamental part of many MR is its hybrid nature to be certain, but that is not to say that all MR conform to this hybridity.

Similarly, many MR insist on blurring the distinctions made between poetry and prose. In much the same manner, *micropoesía* is distinct from MR in its literary realization, and the distinction becomes extraordinarily blurred between very brief prose poetry and the MR. Whereas

poetry traditionally distinguishes itself from prose largely from its inherent musicality, rhythm, intonation, or other flourishes, it is generally accepted as a literary form drawing from these traditions of enunciation, performance, and printed, visual form. While both poetry and MR may emphasize form, *micropoesía* does not need to have a narrative element in the same way that MR typically does. Nuria Amat is an accomplished writer in many genres, including narrative, poetry, and the MR. Consider the following:

“Las seis historias más tristes”

Siempre hay una historia que contar más triste que la tuya. Por ejemplo:

Que una madre viva la muerte de alguno de sus hijos.

Que un hijito pierda a su madre.

Que un hombre deje a una mujer por otro hombre.

Que un hombre deje a una mujer.

Que una mujer deje a un hombre.

Que tú me dejes.

In form, this MR may be indistinguishable from prose poetry. Each sentence of the MR begins on a new line, and it could be argued that the anaphoric repetition of “que” gives a certain rhythm or musicality to the text. Each individual line affords the reader to construct a narrative, but the framing of these lines as one story indicates a shared narrative between them, something the narrator has experienced and wishes to express to their *narratario*. Scholars of poetry in prose often find similar difficulties in distinguishing the genre from the MR. Jesse Fernández, in his

attempt at classifying prose poetry in *El poema en prosa en Hispanoamérica*, asks if prose poetry “debe ubicarse junto a otras manifestaciones literarias mucho más abiertas o ‘fluctuantes,’ como lo sería la crónica, el ensayo lírico, la impresión de arte, la viñeta y aun el ‘minicuento,’ de más reciente clasificación” rather than as a separate category of poetry based on traditional forms, such as the eclogue or ballad (24). Though this was published in 1994, shortly after the term “microrrelato” started appearing in formal scholarship, it was already classified as a relatively new literary phenomenon defined by its fluidity and resistance to classification. However, a prose poem does not need to be brief nor narrative: while all brief narrative and literary texts certainly are not MR, all MR are very brief, literary, narrative texts of fictional prose. A very brief poem in prose, if also narrative and fictional, could thus be considered a MR as well.

This is precisely why a radial definition is necessary for the categorization of the MR. Recall that as any given example becomes less and less similar—more distal—to the prototype, it also approaches another category altogether. “Las seis historias más tristes” is an example that could comfortably reside in an overlapping space between a prototypical prose poem and a MR.

Context is the ultimate distinguishing element between these narrative forms and in distinguishing nonfiction from fiction because this type of situated categorization is flexible, dynamic, and circumstantial. As I will demonstrate in the Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, the perception of a text can change depending on the context of reading it. Ultimately, the MR cited above by Nuria Amat is a *microrrelato* and not *micropoesía* in prose by merit of it being placed within an anthology of MR after being called a MR by its author, though it is also an excellent example of how the two genres can perfectly overlap. This does not take away from its inherent transgeneric qualities, though this text was not necessarily intended to be read in an academic work. Similarly, the Tomeo’s *Historias mínimas* provide a script for extremely brief theatrical, film, or animation

productions, and there is nothing stopping anyone from carrying out these artistic expressions of the MR, but in doing so, the result would no longer be a MR. A MR certainly could be read out loud, and in fact, many MR depend on linguistic games or emphasize their somewhat lyrical form, but performing a MR is a performance, not an expression of narrative prose.

Consider, too, the following MR by the Spanish writer Gabriel de Biurrun:

“Receta”

Tome unas zapatillas deportivas del número 32.

Introduzca algo de arena en su interior.

Inclínese ante el retrete y vacíe allí la arena de las zapatillas.

Escuche.

Es un ruido de bambú hueco entrechocando, de Campanilla volando en Guatemala,
de balbuceo de flauta, de pompas en los labios.

Así suenan los recuerdos de un hijo muerto. (245)

This is a MR presented as if it were a recipe. Obviously, a reader would understand that this is not related to food; but the imperative form of the verbs starting the first four lines is reminiscent of a standard recipe written in prose. In addition to this MR being published in an anthology of MR and on the author’s own website under the category “Microrrelatos,” the play on form allows for a literary reception of the text. The structure—each new phrase beginning on a new line— and overall “literariness” of this MR, underscored by the final line of the “recipe,” also lends itself to the realm of very short prose poetry.

Depending on the context in which a MR is presented to a reader, a MR may be indistinguishable from many other genres or literary forms, including poetry in prose, narrative jokes, *greguerías*, and more. This is because they very often overlap entirely: a MR may also include a joke, aphorism, or fable—or may consist of one entirely—just as a phoenix is both in a *bird* category and a *fantastic animal* category. Similarly, if presented in the necessary context, any of these other forms could also be a MR. The MR as an autonomous narrative prose genre is eclectic and multifaceted in its literary inspiration, but regardless of the blurred lines, all MR afford the reader the opportunity to construct a narrative in their imagination, due in part to their specific presentation by the authors and publishers. What is afforded to the reader by the text is malleable between contexts, allowing for the plurality of definitions, categorizations, or perceptions of these very brief works of fiction. This is discussed in greater detail in the following two chapters.

2.5 Concision, Fictionality, and Narrativity Revisited

Of the criticism discussed above, I would argue that these traits hold certain commonalities described in detail by Lagmanovich in *El microrrelato hispanoamericano* as well as those proposed by Irene Andres-Suárez and Antonio Rivas in *La era de la brevedad*. To summarize, one could say that these traits are specific manifestations of the same underlying parameters: a brief literary text in prose that is fictional, narrative, and concise. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of a MR that does not hold true to those parameters. This “micro-definition” is just as permissive of all of these traits as it is problematic in its own terms. As such, they are the parameters that are most discussed in this section and the basis for my discussion of the MR. I realize of course that this seems broad, but to borrow from Esteban Erlés, an “essentialization” of the nature of MR is

necessary to this discussion which allows me to simultaneously encompass a variety of subgroups, subgenres, variations, and exceptions.

The concept of fictionality does not receive much attention among scholars, though it is important to analyze for the present discussion. However, as Siles points out, it is important to note that not all works of literature are fictional (26), though I assert there that all MR are fictional. Part of this discussion requires asking how such a small text can be perceived as fictional by the reader. What about a string of ten words is able to transport the reader and evoke imagination in a similar way as *Don Quijote*? Once again, this comes down to sociocognitive context: a reader of a MR is expecting the work to be fiction, which has primed their mind to imagine a story world.

2.5.1 Narrativity

At first glance, the narrative aspect of the MR may appear to be the most obvious and therefore the easiest to overlook, particularly for those scholars who assume that a MR is just a sub-genre or variation of a short story. Narration does not imply literariness nor fictionality, but it is difficult to conceive of fictional literature or fiction that does not afford any sort of narrative. At the risk of entering into structuralism, though, a discussion of the narrativity as it relates to the MR is important as a useful distinguishing trait from other forms.

In her publication *Narrative Form*, Suzanne Keen describes narrative as “a time-bound linear form that can be heard, watched, or read” (16). Every word of this description is heavily tied to endless scholarship and academic research, but it serves as a useable definition for the present study because it permits the flexibility necessary for the radial, categorical understanding of a fictional text presented here. As discussed in Chapter 1, cultural artifacts are reshaped and redefined throughout time as cultural values and perceptions shift; narrative literary prose is no exception, and the MR can be reduced to so few words that it forces critics to reevaluate of the

idea of what narration is or could be, thus opening the possibility for narrative to mean something that is heard or seen in addition to read.

Narrative is not the form of the story, nor the discourse of the text's context, but rather, narrative is the *telling* of the events. It is curious to note Keen's subtle reference to the MR in discussing narrative literary prose:

Although the minimalist short short story of barely a paragraph and the 900-page novel share many traits, their radically different lengths condition the way they are written, read, criticized, and theorized. Indeed, the historical, material, and cultural conditions surrounding the production of a narrative often have profound effects on its presentation: the form in which it comes to the reader. (18)

The MR, what Keen refers to as a "minimalist short short story," does indeed share many traits with the longer forms. Though again, it is not enough to define a MR as its own genre based solely on the length. Otherwise, this discussion falls into the same trap Roas describes in the shortcomings of MR scholarship: that there is no literary criticism that can be done on the MR that cannot be performed on the short story as well.

Barbara Tversky, in discussing time and space and its relationship with narrative structure, explains that the human brain "configures objects into scenes and actions into events," leading to a minimalist definition of narrative being "a representation of at least two events with temporal ordering between them" (Tversky 380). She defines an event as any action performed on or with any object, both of which are understood in their most generic meanings. This cognitive definition of narrative couples well with Lagmanovich's description of narrativity in extremely brief fiction trending towards this minimalist structure.

While it is true that many MR are often a paragraph or two in length, which therefore provide ample text for narrating any events, what does this say about these “hyperbrief” examples of the MR? It is only by examining the narrativity of the works found in margins of this genre that a distinction can be found that separates the MR from the short story. Let us consider the above-cited “Carne fresca.” The narrator wastes no time in descriptions, but instead focuses on the two actions connected by the conjunction “y”: the opening of the refrigerator and the physical space of the interlocutor being “allí.” In this *microrrelato*, there are three objects: 1) the narrator, whose agency is realized in opening 2) the refrigerator, which is containing 3) the interlocutor, which (or who?) is actively observed after the specific action of opening a refrigerator. Opening the refrigerator is a physical, temporal process that moves through space and time; at first, the presence of the “fresh meat” is not revealed and does not exist until the refrigerator is opened. That the “fresh meat” is there is entirely dependent upon first opening the refrigerator. This complies with Tversky’s minimalist description of narration, as there is a temporal ordering of events. Per Tversky, the segmentation of time through events is constructed by objects in space (384). We cognitively segment time into events based on objects, our perspective of the objects, and actions performed by, with, or on said objects., and therefore exemplifying this minimal idea of narrativity.

However, this is not explicit in the text. This is an imagined narrative, one built by the reader’s mind, and is not actually *narrated* by the text itself. This MR has just enough words to afford the reader the opportunity to create the narrative: someone opening the fridge and being glad to see whatever or whoever is within, the reasons and consequences of which are left entirely to the reader’s own imagination, no longer guided by the text. In fact, the text simply says that the narrator *likes* opening the fridge, not that a fridge is actually opened—the imagined narrative itself is not even occurring within the MR, but within the mind of the first-person narrator: the reader

has direct access to the thoughts of some fictional mind, and it is *that* mind that is first imagined. For the narrative to exist in the reader's mind, the reader must first project a mind into some fictional narrator, and this narrator must also imagine the events. Thus, one who reads this text and constructs this narrative, the reader imagines someone imagining an event. This extra level of embeddedness—of an imagination within an imagination—may be entirely unnoticed, and all of this is an incredibly complex cognitive phenomenon that happens extremely easily and unwillingly by the reader.

2.5.2 Brevity or Concision

As Lagmanovich puts it, brevity is what “primero produjo desconcierto, y de allí, admiración” by both readers and writers of the craft. It is without a doubt the most salient characteristic and it is this reason, among others, that they have drawn so much scholarly attention in recent years. Its brevity stands out in the midst of a sociocultural climate of instantaneity. In Western culture, time is an increasingly valuable commodity; it is not enough to drive fifteen minutes to work, but people may also listen to a podcast or a playlist crafted specifically for driving; read a book while on the train or bus; check social media updates in the waiting room; hold conversations over text message or Whatsapp rather than speak over the phone; and so on. It makes sense that MR, for their extreme brevity, quick legibility and therefore the ease with which they can be shared on different platforms, would experience a boom in production and in readership.¹⁰ As Lagmanovich puts it,

¹⁰ Chapter 4 of the present dissertation discusses the sociocultural climate of the 21st century reader and the role of social media in the development, sharing, and readership of the *microrrelato*.

Si la velocidad y la falta de tiempo son características de la sociedad contemporánea, tendrán mayor éxito aquellos textos literarios que exijan menor tiempo para su lectura; de ahí la preferencia por las formas breves, en novelas, cuentos, obras teatrales, realizaciones cinematográficas, composiciones musicales...En este panorama de general achicamiento de extensiones que antes no constituían un problema a resolver parecen insertarse los microrrelatos. (“Algunas Reiteraciones” 92)

In discussions of brevity, there are practitioners and scholars of the MR around the world who insist on numerical limitations when it comes to measuring fiction. In 1982, one of the first American forays into the discussion of the extremely brief literary prose was published by Irving and Ilana Wiener Howe in *Short Shorts*. These “short shorts,” as he calls them, have an upward limit of 2500 words and are “suggested” to be around 1500 words (x). Shortly after in 1986, Robert Shapard and James Thomas published *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories*. Shapard begins this anthology with a discussion of the works that are “so unlike the modern notion of story” (xi). This collection contains stories that range from one to five pages long. Not long after, Thomas et al. published a similar anthology in 1992 titled *Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories* in which they insist that 250 words is the minimum word count for a flash fiction (which they distinguish from “sudden fiction,” which is about a thousand words longer) (*Flash Fiction* 12).

While this “new form” of short stories was garnishing attention in English-speaking North America, it was also receiving scholarly discussion in the Spanish-speaking editorials around the globe. An obvious difference is that the parameters described above are considerably longer than the MR cited here, the longest of which does not even reach half a page in length, and the shortest is only ten words (including the title). Dolores Koch’s oft-cited 1986 doctoral dissertation also

addresses this new form as one of the first critical analyses to use the term “micro-relato” (Perucho 13). In this dissertation, published at the same time as Shapard and Thomas’s collection, Koch identifies the limit of the “*micro-relato*” as roughly 350 words (4). Already in these early scholarly descriptions of the MR there are notable discrepancies between the English- and Spanish-language scholars regarding the classification of what constitutes “short” short stories.

Again, “brief” is a very relative, situated, dynamic term. Recall that Quiroga confesses in his decalogue that Poe is one of his literary “masters” and the perfect writer should believe in a master “como en Dios mismo” (See Appendix). Of note here are the formal aspects, which include such guidelines as precision of words and avoiding unnecessary adjectives. Poe insisted on a short story being able to be read in one sitting, saying that

We allude to the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal. The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length, for reasons already stated in substance. As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from totality (229).

In 2019, it is almost an absurd task to ask of a non-professional reader in Western society to casually read a single short story that would take nearly two hours to complete, which also roughly equates to the length of a feature film. But even a few short decades after Poe, Quiroga seems to have taken Poe’s concept of the “totality” that Poe describes¹¹ a step further by reducing the narration as much as possible, writing short stories that are notably shorter. For example, Poe’s

¹¹ Poe discusses the importance of the “single effect” or “totality,” which is the distinction between a “tale” (short story) and a novel. To paraphrase, the short is written to be read in its entirety in one sitting. The reader experiences the entire tale at once; there are no pauses and interruptions in the act of reading which would distract the reader from experiencing the narrative (Poe).

“The Tell-Tale Heart” is roughly 2200 words, “The Pit and the Pendulum” exceeds 6100, and “The Fall of the House of Usher” reaches 7200 yet all are considered to be short stories; a few decades later, Quiroga’s celebrated short stories “La gallina degollada,” “El almohadón de pluma,” and “El vampiro” are roughly 2400, 1200, and 900 words, respectively, earning Quiroga the name of writer of the “relato breve,” “cuento corto,” or “minificción”—readers’ situated perception of these texts categorized them as very brief, particularly compared to the “short story,” demonstrative a radial categorization of the short story.

Arriving in the 20th century, there is clearly a shift in the perception of brevity, for example, when Carlos Fuentes’s *Aura*, published in 1962, is considered a novella at just over 11,000 words—only a few hundred more than what would have been considered a short story in Poe’s time. The relationship between a prototypical short story and a prototypical novella became increasingly distal. Lagmanovich also points out the ambiguity of the idea, saying that a reader will almost inevitably perform a “casi instintiva, casi subconsciente” comparison of the MR with what they are already familiar with (“Extrema Brevedad” 1). Fernando Valls, in his introduction to *Mar de pirañas: nuevas voces del microrrelato español*, also observed that in the 21st century, “los lectores cuentan ya con una cierta tradición, y los escritores con modelos en los que apoyarse y de los que poder partir” (9). The wordcount and apparent brevity of a MR extension is inherently a comparative, fluid size that has been constantly reduced over the last few decades, evolving the short-short story so much that it can be considered its own autonomous form. It is intuitively brief to the reader and the writer because it is very clearly much shorter than a short story, one of the qualities (though of course, not the *only* quality) that distinguishes it from its older forms.

I believe that any attempt to concretely quantify the concept of brevity as it applies to a MR is largely futile; as Lagmanovich points out, what was considered a brief text 100 years ago

is very different than what a reader today would perceive as “brief.” (“Algunas Reiteraciones” 90). The more nuanced version of brevity as a relative, context-specific quality of the MR that I present here—not a specifically quantified or measured definition, as is often the case in MR scholarship—is a necessary addition to this discussion.

As mentioned, others do not necessarily discuss brevity itself, as salient as it is. Lagmanovich himself also insists on the term “concision” in discussing the intentionally short nature of a MR. He argues that

...especificar que el microrrelato es una forma brevísima no equivale a decir que la brevedad sea su único rasgo pertinente. Escribir textos brevísimos no es lo mismo que escribir microrrelatos. Dicho de otra forma: no todos los textos brevísimos son microrrelatos (pueden ser cuentos breves, pueden ser aforismos, pueden ser ensayos minúsculos y tantas otras cosas), pero todos los microrrelatos son brevísimos. (“Algunas Reiteraciones” 91)

The distinction that Lagmanovich makes highlights the need to consider elements other than measuring quantities in discussing what exactly makes a MR so short. While the extreme brevity of the form is not debatable, it is not what truly distinguishes the MR from other forms, which may also be extremely brief. While the debate continues regarding the nuances of “brevity,” it is largely agreed upon that “El dinosaurio” is on the shortest end of the spectrum. There is still more to the short story than its wordcount, however. The key to its brevity, per current scholars, is not necessarily in its extension but rather in the economic, succinct, and concise way the form uses its limited space.

However, as Roas underscores, concise and economic use of literary language is certainly not unique to the MR. In simply discussing its brevity, it could be argued that a short story is

significantly and measurably shorter than a novel; the brevity of both the MR and the short story limit the narration, anecdotal possibilities, descriptions, and psychological development of characters.

2.5.3 Fictionality

Curiously, while most scholars of the MR seem to agree that they are indeed fictional texts, only a handful of them approach any sort of definition, distinction, or discussion of what exactly it means to be on the margins of fictionality. This may be because, as Blakey Vermeule points out, “[s]ince the eighteenth century, fiction has become narrowly linked to narrative” (13). Most scholars seem to focus on these narrative aspects or formal margins (i.e. brevity, extension, and aesthetic of the ellipsis) rather than on what makes these truly fictional.

Lagmanovich argues that the essence of the MR seems to be in its concise *fictionality*, which works together with the fundamental narrativity and literariness to holistically create this narrative genre (“Algunas Reiteraciones” 20). In fact, he uses the term *minificción* and *microrrelato* interchangeably; recall that Ángeles Encinar and Carmen Valcárcel, as well as most scholars agree that the diverse nomenclature consists of several more or less equally valid names for this piece of literature despite a general tendency toward “microrrelato.” The very first line of his highly-cited *El microrrelato hispanoamericano* is “[p]ocos son los libros que se han publicado sobre los fundamentos teóricos de la minificción,” thereby simultaneously addressing the dearth of research while at the same time ontologically confusing *minificción* and the “microrrelato” title of the book.

In addressing this matter, Andres-Suárez does not include “fictionality” in her definition of the MR; in fact, she distinguishes the MR from *minificción*. For her, while both allude to literary brevity, a MR can be narrative without necessarily referencing an imagined world (20). For her,

...para que un anunciado pueda ser considerado como ficcional, debe cumplir con los requisitos siguientes: o bien alude a un mundo referencial que no existe en el mundo real efectivo (como es el caso de la literatura fantástica, o de las fábulas y bestiarios que presentan animales imaginarios) o bien alude a un mundo referencial cuyos enunciados no son verificables empíricamente porque remiten a acciones y a personajes imaginarios....[L]a literatura crea mundos ficticios con autonomía propia, lo que equivale a decir que la obra literaria no es imitación de la realidad, sino creación de la realidad. (19–20)

Fiction has traditionally been shown to reference its own world with its own rules and laws, and this world is created by the reader as they read. A MR does not need to necessarily comply with either of those requisites in order to maintain its narrativity and its literariness. An example that Andres-Suárez provides is the case of the bestiary: an entry in a bestiary, as poetic or narrative as it may seem, does not in itself suspend any referentiality to the real world, and yet it may be considered a MR in that it is narrating a brief story. At first glance this is an adequate definition of fiction's distinction and its role within the space of the MR.

The emphatic distinction that Andres-Suárez underlines between these two terms thus appears moot in light of some scholars, though not without merit. In the above-cited MR, this definition seems possible to maintain for now. In *El dinosaurio*, one could imagine an empirically verifiable account of an entity awakening to find a dinosaur: this could be a child in her bedroom waking up to see her stuffed dinosaur, thus rendering this MR as literary, narrative, and concise, but potentially nonfictional: this could have been an event that actually occurred. This could also be understood in a more fictional sense: another dinosaur woke up to find their fellow dinosaur nearby. In this case, this is not an empirically verifiable event because it involves a time period in

which humans did not exist (and is thus an imagined world for the human reader) and assumes mental states about another animal.

However, I do not believe this to be the case. One does not generally pick up a book of short stories and assume any one of them is going to be nonfiction. One assumes the fictionality of short stories when they are presented with them. As noted above, *El dinosaurio* was first published in a collection of short stories by Augusto Monterroso titled “Obras completos y más cuentos,” an explicit allusion to the short story aspect. This is the shortest work in the collection and the reader arrives at this place after several pages of other short stories. From a simply hermeneutical perspective, it is much more likely that the reader of “*El dinosaurio*” is imagining something fantastical, fictional, and otherwise empirically unverifiable.

The same logic could also be applied to “*Carne fresca*.” The fact that the narrator is using the second person informal vocative “*tú*,” could be understood in a completely rational world and reference true events: after a long day, it is possible that one could go home after a long day and utter to themselves: “I like opening the fridge and that you’re there,” referring to a steak that has been marinating all day. Another explanation is that the narrator is glad to see a decapitated human head in their fridge or prisoner of some kind (either dead or alive)—again empirically possible, but significantly less likely. This MR is in the middle of a collection of sinister MR that all evoke images of the gothic, of violence, of vindicated femininity and of impossible events and characters.

Of the MR cited at the beginning of this chapter, perhaps Luisa Valenzuela’s MR “*La pérdida de amor*” is the only example of this elusive literary-but-nonfictional case. The narrator describes her relationships with men nearly exclusively with gastronomic vocabulary, and thus the heavily metaphorical nature of this brief account evokes a literary understanding of it. The reader is left to decipher the constant barrage of metaphors: the “sweet” terms of endearment,

stereotypical of romantic representations; the growing “diabetes” of her lover may refer to a growing resentment; her new “acidity,” taken metaphorically, could be newfound cynicism and a “bitter” attitude toward relationships. By all standards, this is an entirely possible account of a woman who was emotionally hurt in a relationship and has since developed a negative attitude towards new relationships.

The constant use of gastronomy-related metaphors in such a brief space, however, seems to possibly indicate something slightly more fantastic in nature. The MR takes a slightly dark, violent turn as the narrator says that “[m]uy a mi pesar tendré que alejarme de esta secta de caníbales entre los cuales me sentía muy querida si bien algo diezmada.” If the metaphors at first sounded “sweet” in a caring sense, the “acidity” of the narrator remains in that same space: A RELATIONSHIP IS AN EDIBLE THING.¹² What once was sweet is now acidic, sour, unpleasant. Until this point, the metaphors are within the realm of common discourse. It is not until the narrator decides she needs to leave the cannibalistic cult does the metaphor seem to be carried a bit too far—the relationship expands from simply being an edible thing to A RELATIONSHIP IS AN ACT OF CONSUMPTION.

This is all still an acceptable, empirically provable account of a human being. Its emphasis on metaphors undoubtedly warrants its literary perception, and by no means do I imply that the use metaphor is indicative of fictionality. But once again, this MR has been taken out of its context for the purpose of the present dissertation; in this case, it comes from the anthology *Juego de*

¹² Here and throughout this dissertation, these “conceptual metaphors” are printed in small caps for two principle reasons: to better distinguish visually them from quotes or titles, and to follow the tradition of typing conceptual metaphors this way as presented originally by Lakoff and Johnson (*Metaphors We Live By*). Note, too, the difficulty of describing a character without the continued use of metaphors (“bitter,” “sweet,” and more). The following chapter details the conceptual metaphor in the context of the neurohumanities in more detail.

villanos, which contains a wide variety of MR that are either explicitly fantastic (for example, involving vampires) or may straddle this fine line between what is literary-and-fictional and what is literary-and-non-fictional. It is entirely possible for a reader to happen upon this brief text and imagine a fantastic situation in which a woman is being physically consumed; it is also likely that a reader will imagine both a fantastic version of this story as well as decipher the metaphors to create a more “acceptable” meaning, but that does not imply that the fantastic version of this story does not exist in the reader’s mind as well, implying that this MR is just as fictional as it is nonfictional. Thus, Andres-Suárez’s distinction between what is literary and what is fictional remains unconvincing in the discussion of MR.

Let us now examine another MR by the same author in the same collection:

“Narcisa”

Como quién mira por la ventana del bar, miro la ventana. El tipo que me ve afuera entra para interpelarme.

—Me gustás.

—Lo mismo digo.

—¿Yo también te gusto?

—Nada de eso, me gusto yo. Me estaba mirando en el reflejo. (68)

Within this text, there are very few literary metaphors to reference. This is by all standards a very normal, albeit humorous, conversation. The dialogue is natural and nothing “stands out” to the reader in the same way that “La pérdida de amor” accomplishes. Looking back at the characterizations mentioned above, we recall the importance of the title. In this case, “Narcisa” is

the only instance of intertextuality: this is of course referencing Narcissus, the mythological hunter who was so beautiful and obsessed with his own beauty that he fell in love with his reflection in a pool and drowned. “Narcisa” is thus a female-gendered form of the name “Narciso” in Spanish, and as the title of a MR is fundamental for its comprehension, the reader realizes that the narrator is very fond of herself by the end of this brief text.

One can be *narcissistic* in non-fictional, empirically evident situations, thus rendering this a very manageable reference. The reader does not necessarily need to evoke fantastic imagination; it is an entirely plausible situation and does not necessarily take place in an autonomous world governed by its own rules. This MR does in fact seem to satisfy the current distinction between what is micro-literary and micro-fictional, but this distinction still seems unsatisfactory: if in truth the author created this situation or was inspired in some spark in imagination to write this MR, the case could still be argued that the referent and these two characters are entirely fictitious.

As theoretically possible as this situation is, who are the characters? It seems as though the narrator is equally unaware of the man who enters. As is common among MR, there is no conclusion; the final line of dialogue is also the final line of the narrative and no resolution exists. Blakely Vermeule argues that because these are characters that the reader will never meet, they are fictitious characters. Though she admits her definition “stretches things,” Vermeule explains in the preface of *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* that a professional NBA player is no more real to her than Sherlock Holmes because she will never meet either of them or have any influence over their lives whatsoever, and they are therefore equally fictional (xi).

Cohn develops this theory of the distinction of fiction presented in her eponymous book, *The Distinction of Fiction*, a bit further: because it requires the suspension of referentiality, fiction allows for the presentation of other consciousnesses or mental states. This is a much more

encompassing definition of fiction. This is what allows Vermeule's concept of "fictional" characters to include real flesh-and-blood people, but people that she will never meet. These are people that exist in a reader's mind, in tabloids, in reality television programs. One could watch several series of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, follow Kim Kardashian West on Internet tabloids, know what she had for dinner last night through social media, discuss her marriage with performer Kanye West and their interactions with the Trump administration—and never have a single real-life interaction with her. For those that will never meet Kim in person, Kim is a fictional character because they have just as much control over her life as they do over Don Quijote or Sherlock Holmes. In the mind of the observer, there is no difference, per Vermeule.

While Vermeule presents a much more radical phenomenological approach to fiction, I do not believe this to be as problematic as it may seem at first. Vermeule argues that what has been missing in these conversations on the distinction of fiction is the cognitive dimension, and I agree. It seems that another theory of fiction, or perhaps a shifted perspective of the current theories, is necessary to account for these brief literary texts to reexamine this potential distinction that some scholars seem to make regarding the fictionality of the MR. This cognitive dimension that Vermeule observes is missing in these discussions is the basis of the following chapter and discussed in great detail. Furthermore, observe the recurring issue that Roas emphasizes: these discussions of fictionality are by no means limited to the MR. Here, I have discussed this form in relation with fictionality, but that is not to be confused with discussing their fictionality as distinction from other works of fiction. Vermeule and Cohn both direct their discussions towards works of fiction that are considerably larger than half a page—ranging in size from tabloid magazine articles to classic novels.

Her interpretation of modern theory from the likes of Dorrit Cohn and Catherine Gallagher is that “all fiction requires that some ordinary sense of reference be suspended,” but that such a simplified definition “has its roiling edges” (13). If this general distinction of fiction is accepted, the MR of a woman watching herself in the reflection of a window is just as fictional as *Harry Potter*. However, a facet of Cohn’s theory is that not only is referentiality suspended, but additionally, fiction allows for the presentation of minds.

To address the concern Roas presents, let us reconsider “El dinosaurio.” As one of the most celebrated examples of the MR in the Spanish language, its place among anthologies of MR is not questioned, regardless of the classification of the MR as a sub-genre or specific hybrid form of the short story or as an autonomous form altogether. There are no minds presented in the text whatsoever. Someone or something awoke, and a dinosaur was still there—where? Who or what awoke? Not only are there no clearly defined characters, but there is also no real sense of agency: notice that *despertó* does not include the reflexive pronoun, and therefore the subject of the verb did not necessarily wake itself up. The reader has no way of knowing if the dinosaur has conscious thought, is alive, or what the relationship is (if any) it has with the waking entity. There is also no indication that whatever entity *despertó* has any awareness of the fact that the dinosaur is still there; the dinosaur’s presence and the awoken state of the unnamed entity are not explicitly connected at all. Its fictionality may rely solely on the suspension of some unspecified referentiality rather than on the presentation of minds.

Nevertheless, a fictional text may afford the reader the opportunity to create minds, even where none is explicitly presented. A MR does not *need* to explicitly provide any minds or characters whatsoever, but rather, may rely on the reader to create any and all minds, despite its ephemerality. While a mind in a short story may interact, move, evolve, or observe the story world

as indicated by the text (or afforded to the reader by the text), the MR may reduce itself entirely to the affordance of a mind in an story world afforded to the reader, rather than actually present character or narration of any event. The presentation of “El dinosaruio” as a work of fiction, embedded in the middle of a collection of short stories, specifically invites the reader to imagine a story world: the preterit verb *despertó* interrupts the imperfect verb *estaba*, affording the reader the opportunity to associate both the waking entity and the dinosaur’s presence. The reader, having experienced waking up in their own life, is easily able to empathize with this nameless entity and catch a brief glimpse into the story world in which a dinosaur is *todavía* there—subtly indicating its presence to what could be imagined as shock, concern, or disbelief of the recently awoken mind. There are no minds actually presented in the text, but these nine words afford the reader to project a consciousness onto the subject of the verb *despertó*, and perceive the dinosaur through that consciousness, not the reader’s own. Furthermore, the grammatical association between *despertó* and *estaba*, two phrases separated only by a comma, affords the reader to create a narrative in their imagination: someone awoke and *perceived* that the dinosaur was still there. This is then what allows a reader’s empathetic imagination to decide if the perceiver was shocked, concerned, or in disbelief—affective or cognitive states of mind that are not presented in the text at all. This concretizes the fictionality and narrativity of this MR in every sense discussed by these scholars while noticeably distinguishing it from longer prose forms.

2.6 Conclusion

As I have occasionally insinuated to it above, the currently accepted theoretical frameworks, definitions, and theories drafted by the scholars cited have all overlooked the context of the actual act of reading a MR. By context, I am referring to the physical environment, the sociocultural

context, and most importantly, the reader's own mind. While Roas is certainly correct in pointing out that scholarly discussions of the MR do not generally distinguish the form as an autonomous craft despite being discussed as such, there is still an undeniable phenomenological difference between reading "Carne fresca" and "The Tell-Tale Heart." I argue that this difference is due to the intersectional nature of context.

Recall that the word *context* comes from the Latin *comtexere*, meaning "to weave together." In this sense, I begin to approach my own definition of context and thus its implications for the MR. A reader exists in a specific sociocultural, historical, economic setting; the reader has very specific experiences, memories, desires, capacities and perceptions; this constitutes the reader's *context*, where all of these details, both specific and general, are woven together in the reader's mind in the situated act of reading.

I argue that the hallmark brevity of the prototypical MR distinguishes it from the short story because of its intentional abruptness, which affords the reader the chance to construct an imagined story world that relies on their own individual circumstances more so than a longer work of fiction. The reader is, as Lagmanovich claims, intrinsically or instinctively comparing the work to other literary forms they are familiar with. This may be on a conscious or unconscious level. The surprising shortness—even for the reader familiar with the MR—is what separates this form from others. Similarly, the narrativity of the MR has been reduced to near nothingness: on some occasions, there are as few as one or two events. The MR therefore relies on the reader in order to create a story in a way that a larger work, even a marginally larger work, due to its brevity while still affording the reader the opportunity to create an imagined story world. Often, the reader is left to create consciousnesses, including mental states, to construct a narrative and a mind in the reader's own imagination.

As I demonstrate in the following chapter, current research in the neuro- and cognitive sciences provide unique perspectives to the nature of fiction and the act of reading. It is in these theories that the somewhat vague distinction of the MR—both as an autonomous literary form, as opposed to a salient variation of the short story, and as a work of fiction, rather than nonfiction—becomes more concretized. By looking at the prototypical conceptualization of a MR through the lense of the neurohumanities, its distinction as its own category of narrative prose becomes clearer; by the same token, the MR's brevity affords scholars unique insights into the nature of fiction, as explored in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3. NEUROHUMANITIES AND THE *MICRORRELATO*

3.1 Introduction

Regarding the act of reading a MR, Andres-Suárez insists that it “requiere un lector con un estado mental particular, dispuesto a rellenar por su cuenta los vacíos de información propios de un texto de esta naturaleza” (24). She continues to say that because of the way the MR employs the ellipses, thus depending so much on the reader’s own mind to fill these gaps, the fundamental difference between a MR and a short story is not a quantitative, but qualitative. In Western culture, there has always been an intimate relationship between the human mind, the human body, and the act of reading. It is a curious concept in the abstract: a physical manifestation of icons representing sounds of a language that represent real world meanings; meanings that affect change in both the reader and in the world, but it is certainly not new.

In 2018, the PMLA published an article by M. Katherine Hayles in which the author distinguishes between human readers and machine readers. She argues that the majority of scholarly research on readers assumes the reader is human, and largely ignores what it means to the human when a machine is reading, stating that “the reading done by machine algorithms differs significantly from human reading” (1226). In the case of the ebook, for example, textual information is propagated between the reader and the artificial intelligence within the device itself: the reader engages with the textual meaning, whereas the algorithms are able to predict how long it will take the reader to finish the book, how much is left to read, and present this paratextual information to the reader alongside the literary text. Machines can also learn to categorize information “reading” texts throughout the internet, citing the case of a system called Never-Ending Language Learning (NELL). Per Hayles, this system was created by humans and first

introduced to a set number of categories and sites of texts, and the system was able to correctly place 242,000 facts into categories (*x* is a type of *y*) with seventy-four percent accuracy after just sixty-seven days (1226). As of December 4, 2019, this number is at 2,810,379 facts (*Read the Web*).

NELL now actively publishes new facts on Twitter in order to recruit public opinion regarding its conclusions. A recent tweet reads “True or False? “school golf” is a #Sport” and allows readers to open a link to provide input in addition to commenting or retweeting (@cmunell, “School Golf”). While this seems somewhat humorous and nonsensical, the categorizations being made are not necessarily without any awareness of their implications. A tweet earlier that same day asked Twitter users if ““third-grade students’ is a #victim” (@cmunell, “Third-Grade”). A victim of what is left for the readers of the tweet to imagine. Grammatical errors aside, to a human reader at the time this tweet was published, this may seem to be an incredibly insensitive question to ask to the public at a time when active shooter drills are becoming commonplace in elementary schools, not to mention the nuanced significance of a word as complex as “victim.”

This is because NELL is not reading. Contrary to Hayles’s methodology, the assumption that readers are human is a correct one to make. All who read are human.¹³ A machine such as NELL can certainly categorize information, and a Kindle has no problem with basic mathematical

¹³ Not to be confused with “all humans read,” of course. Literacy rates, education, and ages aside, neurological differences leading to diverse sensory perceptions and cognitive faculties also contribute to a significant human population who does not read. The point expressed here is that if a text is being read, it is being read exclusively by a human. Reading is exclusive to humans, but the ability to read is not part of the definition of humanity.

formulae that provide paratextual information to the human reading the ebook,¹⁴ but neither NELL nor the Kindle is *reading* the ebook. This information is abstract and nonsignificant; the categorization performed by NELL is decontextualized from all meaning and assumes a starkly structuralist view of language and human forms of expression, which is what allows it to arrive at these occasionally odd conclusions. This is certainly not to say that humans cannot arrive at incorrect conclusions, but as humans, our conclusions are informed by our cognitive faculties that allow us to remain contextualized—this includes calling forth conscious and nonconscious information, nuances, imagination, and more. Computers help humans achieve incredible goals, but it is not by comprehending or contextualizing the text in the same way that a human does. A computer cannot do so because it does not have a human body, and therefore cannot cognize in relation to our shared the world—shared between humans and humans, as well as between computers and humans—in the same way.

Scholars of Spanish literature know that all roads lead to Miguel de Cervantes's iconic *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* (*DQ*) in which the eponymous character works to physically embody the fictional errant knights he reads about in his books of chivalry. Cervantes's prologue presents a request to the reader: that we feel free to judge the book however each of us sees fit, Cervantes himself claiming to be fully aware of its flaws. The author then continues to

¹⁴ This is very simple math: for example, if it takes a reader an average of 1 minute to read 0.75 pages, it would take them 533 minutes (nearly 9 hours) to read 400 pages at the same rate. Of course, few people are physically able to actually read for that amount of time at a perfectly constant speed. This rate is therefore updated and recalculated with each “turn of the page” on an ebook to take into consideration the reader's average across the pages, amount of text on the page, and more.

critique other authors' practices and literary traditions (the kind of books Don Quixote [DQ] would have read), then presents the novel simply as "una invectiva contra los libros de caballerías."¹⁵

In the very beginning of Part I, the hidalgo Alonso Quijano famously spends so much time reading these poorly-written books that he quite literally loses his mind:

En resolución, él se enfrascó tanto en su lectura, que se le pasaban las noches leyendo de claro en claro, y los días de turbio en turbio; y así, del poco dormir y del mucho leer se le secó el cerebro de manera, que vino a perder el juicio. Llenósele la fantasía de todo aquello que leía en los libros, así de encantamientos como de pendencias, batallas, desafíos, heridas, requiebros, amores, tormentas y disparates imposibles; y *asentósele de tal modo en la imaginación que era verdad toda aquella máquina de aquellas soñadas invenciones que leía, que para él no había otra historia más cierta en el mundo.* (Chapter 1, emphasis mine)

His mind—the mind of a hidalgo living in La Mancha, at the time—was significantly altered by his engagement with fiction. The narrator informs the reader that his mind dries up and his sanity disappears, only to be replaced by the adventures in the books he consumed. As he reads, his reality is transformed because he is also transformed: the fictitious people, places, and events of knight errantry became very real to him. He then in turn changes his own physical existence in the world by deciding to don his great-grandfather's armor and sally out into the world as a knight errant, a changed man both inside and out, all because of engaging extensively with fictional works of popular literature. It is worth noting as well that he not only discussed these

¹⁵ Clearly, four hundred years of scholarship on *DQ* indicate that the novel is much more than this simple pretense.

books with the priest and barber of his town, but that he had his own doubts and disbeliefs about what he read, momentarily aware of their fantastic nature: “no estaba muy bien con las heridas que don Belianís daba y recibía, porque se imaginaba que, por grandes maestros que le hubiesen curado, no dejaría de tener el rostro y todo el cuerpo lleno de cicatrices y señales.”

The reader is given a very brief glimpse into Alonso Quijano’s mind before becoming DQ. While reading, his own mind couldn’t help but to imagine his heroes as scarred from all their battles. In his imagination, DQ was able to empathize with these fictional characters and make assumptions about their corporeal experiences in these fictional worlds, because DQ himself lives in a physical world and has a human body as well. He can project embodied consciousness onto these fictional characters because his own consciousness is embodied. Cervantes masterfully expresses—albeit satirically in the case of *DQ*—the crux of the current chapter. The act of reading cannot be separated from the reader’s mind, and the mind cannot be separated from the reader’s body, and the reader’s body cannot be separated from its sociocultural, physical contexts—to speak of one is to speak of all. The act of reading is an embodied experience that involves an array of cognitive faculties working together, all informed and shaped by the reader’s own corporeal experience in a shared cultural reality, which is in turn affected itself by these same cognitive faculties. The imaginative tapestry of knight errantry in Spain that DQ wove was a product of who he was as a man of La Mancha, the fantastic adventures written in the books he read and the interaction of his own cognitive faculties.

This is because, as Mancing has stated, “there is no thought without a body; all cognition is embodied” (“Embodied Cognitive Science and the Study of Literature” 29). The context of the reader is fundamental to the act of reading. By context, I am including all sociocultural, geographic, temporal, cognitive, and intellectual factors of the reader’s identity.

3.2 The Mind-Body in its Context

Cartesian dualism suggests that the mind and the body are separate faculties of our own identities, both physically and metaphorically; logic and emotion are often depicted as competing forces in literature. Indeed, the triumph of feeling over logic, of love over law, and the power of emotion during the Romantic period in Spain's literary history was a reaction to the Enlightenment's insistence that logic, light, and sanity triumph over humanity's emotions, viewed then as a weakness.

This dualism, by definition, supposes a total binary between emotion and reason, between the mind and the body. To again differentiate humans from computers, we do not consist of these stark binaries. Antonio Damasio demonstrates in *Descartes' Error* that the human ability to reason and to emote are in fact each influenced by the other in such a way that neither can be totally isolated from the other without great sacrifice. Damasio presents exemplary cases of individuals who have experienced neurological trauma to the brain and exhibit curious social behaviors: in the case of his patient Elliot,¹⁶ he was no longer able to experience emotion. While his intelligence had not been altered and his performance on specific tasks remained above par, he was unable to make decisions or to plan for the immediate or distant future; Elliot needed to be prompted to change from task to task (such as when to get ready for work, when to leave, etc.) and his concentration either shifted too frequently or not enough (39–42).

Damasio offers an understanding of the relationship between the brain body relationship, defining the two as the nervous system and the body proper (excluding nerves), respectively (86).

¹⁶ Damasio changed the patient's name for his protection.

This relationship is multidirectional and codependent, and can be summarized by the following principles:

- 1) Nearly every part of the body, every muscle, joint, and internal organ, can send signals to the brain via the peripheral nerves [...].
- 2) Chemical substances arising from body activity can reach the brain via the bloodstream and influence the brain's operation either directly or by activating special brain sites [...].
- 3) In the opposite direction, the brain can act, through nerves, on all parts of the body [...].
- 4) The brain also acts on the body by manufacturing or ordering the manufacture of chemical substances released in the bloodstream, among them hormones, transmitters, and modulators. (88)

The signals sent from the body to the brain are often the result of environmental interactions, though they can just as easily be due to internal interactions. This can be nearly anything, ranging from temperature to stress induced by driving in traffic, and can be conscious and nonconscious.

This is not the same as a mind, however, and is arguably one of the fundamental differences between the human being and other species. As Damasio points out, even the simplest of organisms reacts to stimuli from its environment, thus exhibiting behavior (89). Moving up the evolutionary hierarchy, these reactions to stimuli require increasing amount of intermediation and processing, eventually leading to thoughts, the ability to cognize, and the mind. This indissociable brain-body relationship is true of all organisms with a nervous system, but that is not to say that all organisms with a brain-body complex have a mind. All entities with a mind are centered upon biological

organisms, which therefore excludes current technological triumphs in artificial intelligence and machine learning from the brain-body implicitness of “thought.” Damasio continues to discuss patients with various brain or body trauma that demonstrate this interconnectedness. Essentially, emotion and feeling are just as important to rationality as rationality is to emotion and feeling. This is Descartes’s error: the dualism between mind and body, between feeling and thinking, is not a clear-cut dichotomy. To have a mind is to be both neurological and corporeal; cognition is biological as much as it is abstract in the form of images (visual, auditory, etc.), symbols, and more. Mancing’s phrasing summarizes it best: “the mind *is* what the brain *does*” (“Embodied Cognitive Science and the Study of Literature” 40).

Damasio’s approach to human cognition is very body centric. Extending this even further by decentralizing the body slightly, Merlin Donald presents in *A Mind So Rare* the case for cognition being distributed between the human and their environment. It is not just a simple question of the physical and temporal configuration,¹⁷ but the person’s incontrovertible connection to the culture-based society in which this person exists:

[H]umans link with a vast and diverse cultural matrix in early infancy and profit from the rich storehouses of knowledge and skill that they have accumulated in our cultural memory over many millennia. Since cultural knowledge accumulates rapidly, there can be dramatic differences between human cultures. Our dependency on culture is very deep and extends to the very existence of certain kinds of symbolic representation and thought. (150)

¹⁷ Recall Bakhtin’s discussions of the chronotope

This dependency is acquired in our infancy but reinforced throughout an individual's lifetime. I want to emphasize the idea of the human mind's dependence upon *cultural memory*. In discussing language, Donald cites Saussure in his observations about language being "the product of circular interactions between two or more brains" (150), noting that from an evolutionary perspective, the concept of symbols evolved in human culture "to mediate transactions between brains, rather than to serve as an internal thought code for individual brains" (150).

Our very consciousness, argues Donald, is fundamentally social. We have individual thoughts and can think quietly to ourselves in any language we know, but that language is inherently a social symbol that was taught to the thinker, acquired from culture and internalized. The human mind, our consciousness and our cognition, is extended beyond the limits of our own body by incorporating this cultural memory into its very formation: "awareness may be physically confined by its embodiment, but it dissolves, on the one hand, into the infinite inner spaces of the brain, and, on the other, into a rapidly expanding cultural universe." This is precisely the difference between human minds and other organisms that can be said to have a mind—while we have access to this cultural memory of discoveries and beliefs (individual memories from interactions with the environment, language, religion, the number zero, etc.), other organisms certainly may cognize, but do not have access to stories passed down by generations, or to architecture based on long-since discovered theories of physics, or taught practices due to any beliefs in abstract or non-present entities.¹⁸

¹⁸ Curiously, elephants have been shown to display an uncanny ability to pass down information from the matriarchal leader to the next generation of her followers; her memories are communicated to the rest of the herd, ranging from identities of over one hundred other elephants to specific sources of nourishment, and in some cases, humans who have helped her in the past. See Garstrang, Michael. *Elephant Sense and Sensibility*, Academic Press, 2015.

Soviet psychologist A.M. Leont'ev also extended the definition of the brain-body complex as informed by Vgotskian theories of psychology, which resonate well with Damasio's emphasis on cultural memory, considering tools in a person's environment that help mediate activity. Per Leont'ev, humans physically incorporate objects into our consciousness as we work toward any given goal: these "functional systems" (also referred to as "functional organs" by some) are mind, body, and tool (physical or abstract) working in unison as a subject performs any given activity toward a goal (Leont'ev). Phil Turner later clarifies this definition as "functionally integrated, goal-oriented, configurations of internal and external resources" (36). These "internal" and "external" resources include anything from physical tools or objects to such cognitive faculties as cultural knowledge, learned skills, and more.

An example may be a human wearing contact lenses. The lenses mediate between the subject (the human) and the goal (visual perception) by helping the object perform the activity necessary (to see). The contact lenses work in unison with the physical body (by directing light through the eyeball), the external environment (by refracting incoming light to specific angles), thus affecting cognitive faculties (image formation by the optic nerve) and perception. The human and the contact lenses form a functional organ or system in their unison, and unless the individual is not accustomed to wearing contacts or there are other foreign particles that land in their eye, the human will go about their day entirely unaware of the silicone hydrogels on their eyeballs.

This theory of the functional organ is not radically different from Andy Clark's and David Chalmers's presentation of the extended mind: we are able to form "coupled systems" with our physical environment to help us cognize, forming temporary but important cognitive systems. The use of the components of the environment are fundamental to our cognition, so much so that "if we remove the external component the system's behavioural competence will drop, just as we

would if we removed part of its brain” (9). For Clark and Chalmers, this “external component” may also include one’s own embodied cognitive faculties, including memory, or using one’s fingers to count objects. They provide the example of a man who wants to go to a museum but has a poor memory: by using his notebook, which has the address of the museum, he is able to recall that information by physically interacting with the book. To them, this is the same as another woman who has an excellent memory and does not need to write down the address. In both cases, a person is relying on external information (neither of them created or invented the address of the museum, it already existed in the real world) and were able to recall that information, albeit by different means.

Similarly, Kirsh and Maglio argue for an extended theory of epistemic actions. Epistemic actions are those we perform on an object not with the specific purpose of achieving any given goal (as opposed to Leont’ev), but rather to improve our cognitive performance—our “mental computation,” as they referred to it in 1994—in order to achieve said goal (513–14). They provide the example of people playing Tetris, the popular game in which a player must rotate and translate left or right falling geometric shapes so that they fit among the shapes that have already fallen. They found that players who tended to move the piece to the extreme left or right border of the screen only to move it back toward the center as it falls outperformed those who did not: the epistemic action, which takes more time to perform (and thus heightens the pressure of the timed game), actually enables players to make better predictions about how to strategically place each falling piece. The same could be said of anyone who has used a digital calculator in recent decades: even though we may only need to press the *clear* button once or twice, many of us may incessantly press the button countless times before performing new calculations, or perhaps many might tap a pencil on a desktop while thinking. It is again observed that physical objects in the environment

form part of our embodied cognition; it is our body that is interacting physically with the world in order to cognize in some way.

It should also be made clear that while an individual exists in any given environment, not only is the environment being used by that individual for the purpose of cognition (intentionally or not), that individual is also influencing the same environment. This is a fully bidirectional interaction. Simplistically, by using one's hands to help count coins, those coins can then be used in a socioeconomic transaction; manipulating the Tetris pieces is the goal of the game, and the epistemic actions performed by the player help raise their score, which can then have competitive implications for other players; both the woman with good memory and the man with poor memory are increasing the attendance at a museum, which entails its own social consequences; using a calculator to do math both drains the calculator battery and accomplishes mathematical tasks for the benefit of the user; and so on. The person and their sociocultural and physical environments are just as indissociably linked as the mind and body.

An obvious, though noteworthy, assumption is that in order for the body to cognize using the physical environment, it must, by at least one modality, be able to perceive it. Ken Pepper draws on Merleau-Ponty's concept of body schema, which Pepper defines as the "integrated system of pre-reflective bodily capacities that structure perceptual experience" (60). Pepper recalls the Gibsonian notion of perception being "animal relative" (60) demonstrating that physical objects can be incorporated into an individual's body schema that in turn affect in some way the world is perceived, and that this incorporation may be different from individual to individual. Just as a human may see a chair as something to sit on, a cat might perceive it as something to scratch. Gibson notes that once one learns to juggle, they begin to perceive certain objects with the potential to be juggled. By affecting the perception of an environment, which is an established part of a

person's mind through their physical body, this affects the way the same individual is able to cognize. The aforementioned example of the contact lens, comfortably unnoticed by the longtime user, is incorporated into the wearer's body schema and physically allows them to visually perceive the world, and therefore interact with it differently than if they removed the contact lenses. The classic example discussed in terms of body schema is that of a blind man expertly using a walking stick: the stick is an extension of the man's body, and it is a tool used to perceive the environment in a way that a seeing person cannot. Similarly, for those of us who drive, we might even say such things as "*I'm speeding,*" "*she almost hit me,*" "*he crashed into them,*" when in fact we are actually referring to the *car* that is speeding or crashing into other cars. The car is an extension of its driver and is referred to metaphorically as the self.

Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Valera demonstrate that "every act of knowing brings forth a world" (26) and that cognition is a biological phenomenon just as much as psychological because, similar to Donald's argument, our embodied consciousness is rooted in our sociocultural coexistences. Per Maturana and Valera, all organisms undergo a process of self-creation or *autopoiesis* in that their very biological existence is simultaneously a product of internal and external processes. A tree will grow to any given height given its physical access to light, water, nutrients, etc., but a genetically identical tree planted nearby will not grow to be a physical copy of the first given its differences in access to the same resources; the first tree might cast a shadow upon the second, thereby affecting the physical environment and thus the growth of the second tree while nonetheless growing and prospering itself.

The possibilities for autopoiesis increase further along the evolutionary chain. A *moving* organism, one with a nervous system, is able to interact with these internal and external processes on a more complex, even intentional, level: a tree cannot uproot itself and move to an area with

more resources, but a fish can swim toward food, a lion can learn to hunt, and a primate can participate in social behaviors that affect both the group and the individual. All the while, however, the organism is also affecting its environment, with or without a nervous system: a tree draws water out of the ground and its roots stabilize the earth; animals eat other plants or animals, affecting population and the food chain; humans have learned to appropriate physical objects from our environment and design tools, which can then be used to interact with the environment in an entirely new way than before—cognitively coupling with the tool and changing the perceived affordances available.

Importantly, as Pepper and others note, familiarity with the tool is fundamental to its incorporation into one's body schema. The very first time someone tries on a pair of contact lenses, their presence is noticeably uncomfortable, and the world cannot be immediately perceived in the same way as one who has been wearing contacts for two decades. When one is learning to drive, the car is an overwhelming machine of stimuli that the learner is in the process of internalizing; the expert driver thinks less consciously about shifting gears or using turn signals than one who is learning. This is not due to brain-bodies being fundamentally different, but rather to a difference in the environmental perception as shaped by whether or not these tools are incorporated into the user's body schema.

It can be surmised then that the human mind consists of the body proper, the nervous system, the individual's physical context and environment, and the culture that is forming and being formed by the individual. These are all indissociable from each other, and to discuss one is to imply all. The mind extends beyond the physical boundaries of a human body, and because any discussion of the mind is also a discussion of human embodiment, our concept of body must therefore also extend beyond these same physical limitations. Tools, defined in the physical and

abstract sense, become temporarily or permanently part of an individual's cognitive state for any given activity, conscious or nonconscious, intentional or otherwise.

Walking sticks and contact lenses aside, what happens when someone is reading a fantasy novel or watching an action thriller? If a reader is holding a printed novel, for example, that reader is more than “just” a human holding a book. When DQ picked up a novel, his thoughts and imagination were transported to the world his mind created upon perceiving the printed letters as his physical world made its way into the background of his imaginative foreground. His ideas of reality had changed, and his imagining of these fictional events as true created a change in his perspective. DQ was then able to perceive the entire world around him very differently than everyone else, even though the physical environment was the same. The windmills afforded DQ the opportunity to see giants whereas they did not provide the same affordance to Sancho Panza, whose perception of the world was not shaped by the same imagination as his master's (at first).

Though not referencing DQ, Holland says of literature that “when we ‘lose ourselves’ in a work of literature or art...the boundary between us and the work of art disintegrates in two ways: from us to the work of art; from work of art to us” (42). The boundary we intuitively perceive as where the body ends and the rest of the world begins is all but erased. Drawing from these in the cognitive and neurosciences, Holland continues to explain that the phenomenon of reading literature is biological and psychological marvel. He outlines four important pillars of this experience: the first is that “we lose the experience of our own bodies. We become unaware that we are sitting in an armchair with the light coming over our left shoulder” (45). We can become so immersed in the comprehension of the reading, that the actual physicality of reading fades into the background as our body's senses attune to our imagination more than whatever our hands are doing at the time. Victor Nell discusses this in great detail in *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of*

Reading for Pleasure. He summarizes this particular phenomenon—that of losing oneself—saying that:

Reading changes the focus of attention from self to environment. Because of the heavy demands reading makes on conscious attention, the reader is effectively shielded from other demands, whether internal or external. At the same time, the intense attention brought to bear by the entranced reader may have the effect of transfiguring both book and reader. (9)

Second, by extension of the first, the book no longer becomes something “out there” in the world, but rather “we are perceiving the book or play as an object...separate from our own bodies. We think of it as happening neither ‘in here’ nor ‘out there,’ but somehow ‘in the world of the story’” (46). Entire worlds are created, complete pocket universes that are neither in our physical world nor entirely in our own mind that blur the distinction between where a reader’s body ends and the rest of the world begins. The third pillar of the phenomenon of reading literature, per Holland, is the sense that the book “feels like a dream” (46) in that we simply believe the events are occurring. Generally, one does not doubt the probabilities or the actions or events taking place in fiction: Holland says that “one accepts the reality of Hobbits [...]. We accept in *The Arabian Nights* genies with magical powers popping out of bottles and in *Harry Potter* an airborne field hockey game” (46). Lastly, Holland notes that just as in dreams, we can physically feel fear, loss, happiness, and more—our emotions “believe” the events of the story are real even though our higher reasoning tells us otherwise (46).

I argue that these four phenomena that occur while engaging with narrative fiction are explained by a preemptive phenomenon: readers project embodied consciousness onto fictional characters as guided by the text. Our own consciousness is embodied, which allows us to project

embodied Bakhtinian-style consciousnesses onto the characters. As a reader or viewer of works of fiction, the story introduces us to different characters, and we are able to assign to each of them their own conscious mind and attribute underlying mental states to them all. Every character has their own unique intentions, and as readers or viewers, fiction affords us the opportunity to observe how these individual social minds interact with one another. We can distinguish between each character's perspectives of their situation, their beliefs about each other, and their development and personal growth as if they were real, living beings in our world.

To say that our consciousness is embodied is to note the physical, fleshy framework through which humans perceive the world. As mentioned, we have an innate sense of where our bodies end and the rest of the world begins; to project this same embodied consciousness on another character is what allows us to assume their perspective, using our theory of mind faculties to perceive their underlying mental states. We are thus able to empathize with these nonexistent characters, and it is this empathy that allows us to feel what they feel, understand what they understand, and know what they know, all the while distinguishing between each and every character as well as our own personal perspectives. Lisa Zunshine points out in *Getting Inside Your Head* that this is indeed what makes fiction possible: readers, narrators, and characters are constantly trying to figure out, hide, or change what everyone knows about one another; fiction often embeds these underlying mental states within others' mental states. In the previous chapter, a discussion of Cohn's view—that fiction is the only genre that can reliably narrate what any given character is thinking—assumes there is always a narrator to tell the reader what any given character is thinking.

However, in the case of MR, this is clearly not the case. Recall “El dinosaurio”—the text narrates that an entity awakens, and a dinosaur is still “there” (wherever “there” might be). Yet,

decades of commentary on this simple text, discussions of its fantastic nature and its possible imaginative explanations all require the critic to project a consciousness onto some imagined character who awakens. A common reading of this text is that someone wakes up who had been dreaming of a dinosaur, only to find that the dinosaur has somehow followed the dreamer into the real, waking world. This reading requires the projection of an embodied consciousness—as readers, we know what it is like to sleep and to dream; we are able to imagine (theorize) what the character must think when seeing that the dreamed dinosaur is “still there,” accessing the shared cultural knowledge that what we dream should disappear upon awakening. Our imagination creates a consciousness, albeit one-dimensional, that nevertheless allows for our theory of mind to provide insight into this nonexistent, yet embodied, perspective.

Returning to the example of DQ’s reading from earlier in this chapter, it is no surprise that his only doubts about the fantastic adventures from the novels regard his heroes’ bodies: he projects an embodied consciousness on these fictional people and knows (or imagines he knows, which comes to be the same thing) what it must physically feel like to have survived so many battles, and his imagination doesn’t allow for any representation of them that doesn’t include scars, despite no references to lasting wounds within the novels themselves.

All of this to say that act of reading is perceptual, enactive, cognitive, and physical, and it is certainly neither mechanical nor algorithmic. It is the embodiment of the “functional organ,” the “extended mind,” the “body schema,” the “structural coupling,” or even the “cognitive-assemblage.” At their root, these are all the same theories: a person’s mind is contextualized in their body, consciousness, cognition, and environment. The reader’s mind is extended by the physical form of holding the book, indicating consciously or unconsciously how “long” or “dense”

the story might be.¹⁹ Their eyes perceive the words, and their nervous system reacts to this physical perception by recognizing icons and drawing up meanings connected (or disconnected) to the reader's shared and individual memory. Cognitively, a reader is linked, coupled, or otherwise bonded to the imagined projections of the story world, guided by the text, dialogue, or images, in order to create a narrative experience. Literature in all its forms (print, digital, auditory, etc.) can be successfully bonded with an individual on a physiological, neurological, and cognitive level, allowing a space for the projection of an embodied consciousness.

It is also necessary to point out that any given reader may experience any amount—including none—of these phenomena, and each of them to any degree. It is not a given that a reader of a prototypical MR will *necessarily* feel transported and lose themselves—in fact, this may be quite challenging, given the extremely short nature of the text, for example. There simply might not be enough time for the reader to get “lost” in a text; perhaps there are unfamiliar words that break affordance of transportation; the text might appear too boring, offensive, or unrealistic to a specific reader, who will not accept any part of the fictional, dreamlike logic. Again, it is important to stress the contextualized, situated act of reading—all readers are different, and every act of reading is an unrepeatable occurrence, even in the case of re-reading.

¹⁹ This is considered paratextual information—or information about the story, not the story itself.

3.3 Cognition and the Microrrelato

3.3.1 Conceptual Metaphor

One of the direct consequences of embodied cognition is the perception and propagation of our shared cultural reality, the iterations of which are represented in cultural discourses, practices, and artifacts, including artistic and narrative creations. This is clearly observed in the conceptual metaphor. Cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson first presented this idea in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*. They suggest that our perception of the world around us, the very way we think and are able to cognize, is largely metaphoric. Lakoff and Johnson note that this is much more than “poetic flourish” and is in fact the way we interact with the world: “the essence of metaphor is *understanding and experiencing* one thing in terms of another” (5).

We have bodies that exist in certain space and time, and in the evolutionary rise of human cognition and consciousness, the development of metaphoric cognition is more “economic” than having separate representations, systems, and modes for every phenomenon. Lakoff and Johnson initiate their discussion of the conceptual metaphor by asking readers to consider the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR: linguistically, we discuss arguments using war terminology: we can *win* an argument, *counter* an *attack*, be *defeated* or *lose*, become *defensive*, and more. This is an example of a systematic conceptual metaphor: concept *x* is thought of in terms of system *y*. Though there are other categories discussed, including orientational metaphors and container metaphors, the underlying idea is the same: *x* (the target domain) is thought of, discussed, and experienced in terms of *y* (the source domain).

Consider the emergence of modern cognition in early humans. One can easily imagine an early human being beginning to cognize and associating “up” with “good”—one that is on their

feet is more likely ready to hunt, fight, flee, mate, or any number of advantageous actions; similarly, one lying on the ground is more likely to be asleep, dead, sick, injured, young, or otherwise at a general disadvantage. By the same token, a high vantage point is preferable to a lower, more defenseless one. These correlations between UP IS GOOD and DOWN IS BAD are consequences of our experience in the world, but then proceed to shape our reality once perceived. In many Western religions, for example, it is not a coincidence that heaven, Mount Olympus, transcendence, and other divine phenomena are associated with UP, whereas hell, the grave, the Underworld, and death are associated with DOWN. Linguistically, we might say in English that “He’s *down* on his luck,” “She’s *fallen* ill,” “they *lifted* my spirits,” or “I’m *on top of the world*,” based on the same underlying conceptual metaphor UP IS GOOD, DOWN IS BAD. Note too that the words *superior* and *inferior* both literally refer to vertical orientations as well as degrees of quality.

These conceptual metaphors are both *shaping* and *being shaped* by our shared sociocultural memory. Fiction is an excellent platform to propagate these underlying metaphors, whose reception is then reaffirming of the existing metaphors that are accessible, whether consciously or unconsciously, by the reader. These conceptual metaphors may also combine in the creation or expression of a new sociocultural phenomenon or relevant topic. Recall the discussion of cultural-literary movements in the first chapter, including *El Siglo de las Luces / la Ilustración*, the Enlightenment, and more—time periods characterized by the favoring of reason and knowledge over “blind” belief in myths, “indiscernible” emotions, and when the most absurd events took place in the dark. The metaphor KNOWING IS LIGHT, UNKNOWNING IS DARKNESS is also represented linguistically and otherwise: terms such as “to enlighten; to be left in the dark; I *see* what you mean; to obscure,” or in Spanish, “aclarar, dejar claro; ocultar; iluminar; ya veo,” and more readily come to mind, indicating a shared cultural perception in many modern Western cultures of these

underlying conceptual metaphors. Today, children are afraid of the monster under the bed or in the closet: dark places that remain unknown and unseen until a night light is turned on. Bodo Winter observes in “Horror Movies and the Cognitive Ecology of Primary Metaphors” that in the case of horror films, scary things tend to come from below, and the worst of the terrors often take place at night or in a dark space (Winter).

In the case of the MR, these brief texts may play with these conceptual metaphors. Recall Luisa Valenzuela’s “La pérdida de amor” discussed briefly in the previous chapter. Here, the metaphor A RELATIONSHIP IS AN EDIBLE THING can be observed as an iteration of a shared cultural reality: discussions of sweetness, bitterness, and other flavor profiles are associated with a relationship because, according to Lakoff and Johnson’s metaphor theory, the abstract idea of a relationship is cognized as a more concrete, edible thing. Unlike in longer works of fiction, in a MR such as this, conceptual metaphors may draw more attention to themselves as a particular literary flourish in order to provide insight into its fictionality or allude to a fantastic nature, not unlike what some poetry might do (recall the hybrid nature of the form). Here, the narrator also concretizes the metaphor A LOVER IS A SWEET FOOD, such as a fruit, allowing for a literary game between the abstract concept of amorous descriptors and the physical taste of a sour or bitter food. The first sentence begins with a simple metaphoric comparison, saying that “yo era la más dulce; era su bombón de chocolate, su caramelo masticable,” implying a happy, amorous relationship. Here, the metaphor remains largely in the abstract: there is nothing particularly fantastic about calling a lover “dulce” or “bombón de chocolate” outside of enamored language between partners.

The literary game begins when the metaphor is taken “too far” in the second sentence: the narrator’s lover was forced to leave her due to his growing diabetes. Here, the metaphor begins to stretch outside of cultural expectations, although it still relies on the same underlying metaphor:

the target domain (the narrator) is still conceptualized in terms of the source domain (a sweet food). As the story continues onto the next line, the metaphor is carried even further by drawing on additional information from the source domain: the separation *soured* the narrator so much that she turned *acidic*; in the end, the narrator decides to separate herself from “esta secta de caníbales” in order to save herself. The MR relies heavily on the shared culture knowledge of fruit: eating sweet fruit, letting it rot or spoil, or producing cider, vinegar, or wine; and while the reader might not have experience as a farmer, they are still able to access this cultural information and maintain the metaphor A LOVER IS A SWEET FOOD because the relationship between the source and target domains has not been broken. It is, in fact, the insistence on not breaking this underlying metaphor that the work takes on a more metaphorical or allegorical appearance, alluding to both toxic or unhealthy relationships just as much as cannibalism, perhaps solidifying its stance as a work of fiction to the reader.

These conceptual metaphors do not need to be the basis of every MR, of course. They are an underlying part of human experiences, and are also presented as a naturally occurring mode expression. More than one can be used, often interchangeably when referring to the same concept. Consider a MR by Spanish writer Alfonso Sastre:

“El enfermo”

No comprendo este nuevo síntoma de mi enfermedad. He perdido por completo la vista y tengo la asfixiante sensación de estar encerrado.

No sé cuántas horas (o días) habré estado sin sentido.

Lo último que recuerdo es el brillo de una lamparilla y un rumor de sollozos en el cuarto.

Ahora quisiera decir a todos que he vuelto en mí; pero he perdido, aparte del habla, también todo movimiento salvo el del brazo derecho, que, al moverme, tropieza con algo que debe de ser la pared de la habitación pero que, por causa de la perturbación de la sensibilidad que sufro, a mí me parece como una tabla. También experimento extrañas sensaciones, como un perfume de flores que parece ascender desde mis pies. Son penosos fenómenos que, evidentemente, confirman la extrema gravedad de mi estado. (199)

In this MR, the metaphor AN SENSE IS AN OBJECT is subtly expressed throughout the brief text. Notice that the narrator does not say that he is no longer able to speak or move, but that he *lost* his speech, most of his movement, and his sight; similarly, the metaphor A FEELING IS AN EXPERIENCE is used: he has the *asphyxiating* sensation that he is enclosed, and he *experiences* the smell of flowers.

3.3.2 Conceptual Blending

Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner offer a more integrative approach to creativity in cognition in *The Way We Think*. For them, it is not a simple, unidirectional movement from a source domain of experience to a target domain, but rather, the blending of mental spaces, or “small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk” that are “connected to long-term schematic knowledge” (40). I offer an understanding of this “long-term schematic knowledge” as parts of the shared cultural knowledge discussed throughout this dissertation. For Fauconnier and Turner, these mental spaces superimpose upon each other in order to generate a new concept, and this new, blended space the basis for imaginative or creative thought.

Consider the following statement as an illustration of conceptual blending: “I’m a morning person, but my brother is a night owl who loves his third shift job; if I were my brother, I would be miserable.” Pragmatically, the phrase itself makes sense to most readers: the speaker is imagining himself working a third shift job, and knows that he would hate it. This is not what the phrase is expressing literally, however: if, indeed, the speaker *were* his brother, he would be happy at the third shift job because his brother is. This is a blend or superimposition of the two concepts in different “mental spaces.” The speaker, who prefers mornings, is in one space; his brother, who happily works at night, is in the other space: these two concepts are blended in order to selectively combine different aspects from the two spaces in order to create a new space where a new, imagined phenomenon occurs: the speaker being unhappy working at night. Though this distinction between different mental spaces and the new blended space might seem tedious to discuss, it is precisely because of these quick, seamless conceptual and metaphorical blends that a great number of MR can be perceived as fictional texts, affording the reader the opportunity to engage in an enriching narrative experience and activating imaginative modes of narrative thought.

In the MR “El enfermo” quoted above, the reader may reach the conclusion that the protagonist has been buried alive. In one mental space, there exists the concept of a sick patient; this activates any schema or associations the reader might have when reading the word “enfermo” in the title,²⁰ then further activated as the narrator begins to list specific “symptoms.” The patient’s experience of a total loss of sight, general immobility, the smell of flowers, the asphyxiating sensation of being enclosed, and the memory of “un rumor de sollozos,” occupy another mental space—one that a reader may recognize not as medical symptoms, as the narrator seems to believe,

²⁰ Recall the importance of the title in creating meaning in *microrrelatos* discussed in the previous chapter.

but something else altogether: a funeral. The two mental spaces—a living man and a funerary experience—can blend to create a new concept that is not explicit in the text itself: the narrator was buried alive and does not know it.

In this same MR, notice that the narrator seems to be entirely unaware of having been buried. It begins with “no *comprendo* este nuevo síntoma” (emphasis mine), explicitly stating immediately to the reader that the narrator is confused about something. A reader’s theory of mind is able to separate between what they know and this narrator, keeping track of these differences throughout the progression of this very brief text. It is not a terribly difficult conclusion to reach in saying that the narrator does not seem to realize that he has been buried alive: he believes he is still sick, which means he believes he is alive (for one cannot be sick if one is not alive), as is made evident to the reader by the narrator’s description of being in a coffin is interpreted as new symptoms. Though it may seem tedious to tease apart these minute details, it is in fact because of these details that a reader’s embodied theory of mind is able to empathize with the narrator, view his perspective and beliefs, and then return to the reader’s own reality in order to make literary meaning.

3.3.3 Transportation, Immersion, and Imagination

When one is reading a novel, watching a film or attending a dramatic production, there is a sense of losing oneself: a reader or spectator may momentarily forget about the chair they are sitting in, the smell of coffee or popcorn, and even the notion of time. DQ reads all day and night; he is so fully captivated by what his imagination is creating that he is seemingly unaware of the biological function of sleep or the concept of time. As readers engage with fiction, our embodied perception of the world around us fades quietly into the background of our consciousness while the events taking place in the story world make their way into the attentive foreground.

Worth noting, then, is that reading literature is, at least in part, a decision: we choose to focus our attention on the events in the story world at first, deciding consciously or unconsciously to pick up the book, turn on Netflix, or sit in the theater. Once ready to begin reading, the reader has already determined that the events occurring there are more important than in those here in the real world. Though nonexistent, the people, places, and events presented in this fictional narrative require top-down attention more than the feeling of the weight of the book, the temperature in the room, or the current real-world time, and thus the physical world around the reader is increasingly unnoticed.

This is discussed in detail as “the transportation metaphor” in Richard Gerrig’s book, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*. Gerrig refers to this experience of transportation in what he coins as participatory responses, or p-responses. These are named so because participation is required from the part of the reader: the reader must decide to engage with the text in order to feel transported and lose oneself in a good book. Curiously, one can even be transported back to places and events that have already been experienced: one who rereads a book or rewatches a film is able to experience this transportation or narrative immersion again.

All of this, of course, implies the caveat that the book is worth reading and that nothing distracting is occurring in our real world. As I mentioned, our perception of our reality makes its way to the background of our consciousness, but any changes in our actual environment can easily snap us back to reality. The bottom-up processes that guide our attention are on standby to transport us back to our place of origin should any new stimuli present itself.

This experience does not need to be prolonged, but rather, it can be an ephemeral trip to the narrative world. The MR is not exempt from affording readers the opportunity for narrative

immersion. The MR's brevity does not afford the complex construction of a story world in the same way that a longer text would; continuing with the transportation metaphor, this narrative experience may be comparable to the experience of sticking one's head out of a door and glimpsing a story world, only to jump back inside almost immediately, left with their thoughts about what little they just witnessed. This is in line with Valenzuela's metaphoric description of the MR: water left on your hands, reminders that they were once wet. Indeed, Gerrig suggests that even a single word is enough to afford mental transportation in discussing a brief exchange between two characters in Peter Smith's novel *Make-Believe Ballrooms*:

Even had Mary-Ann's reply been limited to simply "Texas," she would have given readers the opportunity to be mentally transported to Texas. If we define the experience of narrative worlds with respect to an endpoint (the operation of whatever set of mental processes transports the reader) rather than with respect to a starting point (a text with some formal features), we can see that no a priori limits can be put on the types of language structures that might prompt the construction of narrative worlds. If Mary-Ann's rich evocation of Texas transports readers to Texas, then it matters little that the utterance "Texas" looks nothing like a formal narrative. (4)

Reading a single word is sufficient to begin the imaginative process. Of course, reading the word "Texas" alone will not transport a reader to the Lone Star State for very long; rather, it affords the reader the opportunity to think, consciously or unconsciously, about everything they know about Texas.

3.3.4 Believing and Disbelieving

This enriched narrative experience is not exclusive to the actual act of reading: there is always a moment when the book must close, the film ends, or the final curtain draws to a close and the reader or viewer is brought back to reality. The story ends, and so must the reader's transportation. An important aspect of the narrative experience is also the act of *coming away* from the text, not just the transportation or immersion in the fictional story. David Olson notes in *The World On Paper* that:

There is nothing in the fiction to indicate that the account is not factually correct.

Fiction remains allegorical in the sense that the reader comes away thinking he or she has learned something about reality but the reader knows that, counter to its appearance, it is not a factual narrative report. (229)

Similarly, Gerrig points out that while reading a novel, it is in coming away from the novel that the reader stops believing. I could read *DQ* and learn a great deal about Spanish culture and society in the year 1605, but doubt that DQ himself ever actually existed, or that there ever was a land-bound isle called Barataria that Sancho Panza was able to govern.

That said, while one is engaged with the narrative, the reader is able to follow the flow of the fictional story world and believe, following what Norman Holland calls "dream logic" (68). The reader is guided along through the unwritten rules of the fictional universe that the story has created, unquestioningly, until the narrative experience ends. This could be because the reader has reached the end of the text, something from the real world has snapped them back to reality, or something within the fictional universe has broken its own rules, ceasing the illusion of transportation as the story world collapses upon itself. Consider, for example, Spider-Man: readers of the graphic novel have no issue with him swinging from a web or having incredible strength—

as spiders do—but were Peter Parker to begin laying eggs—also as spiders do—readers would likely question the quality of the graphic novel.

Another example to consider is the following by Spanish artist and writer Ángel Guache:

“La ascensión (o un cuento triste)”

Era un niño flaco, feo, huérfano, solitario: el más triste de los niños. Su primera alegría, una vez reunidos todos sus ahorros—fruto de privaciones y esfuerzos—, fue comprarse unos grandes globos de colores en la feria, el día de la fiesta de la ciudad. Y, esbozando una sonrisa—gesto impropio en el muchacho—, comenzó a ascender lentamente hasta que, cuando ya estaba casi a la altura de las nubes más bajas, unos cuervos picotearon los globos, haciéndolos estallar. (310)

This MR also presents a nuanced fantastical setting. In the story world created by the reader as afforded by the text, it is entirely possible for a boy to buy enough balloons to happily float up to the clouds. This is a possibility in the fictional pocket universe created between the reader and the text: in the real world, there is an understanding that balloons are able to float, and there are countless examples of zeppelins, dirigibles, hot air balloons and more. A reader’s embodied perspective of this new narrative world informs the reader that this is a somewhat fantastical or magical place: the amount of balloons at a small town’s festival (assuming, because they are being sold at the festival, they are average-sized helium-filled balloons) would be astronomical in order to support the weight of a human child, yet the narration continues and does not draw attention to its own fantastical nature. This allows the reader to assume that the balloons are indeed capable of carrying a child to the clouds within the context of this fictional universe, thereby establishing the underlying, unwritten rules of the fantastic nature of this story world. Because it is understood, then, that the boy is floating up to the clouds *because* of the balloons—it is not a coincidence that

the boy has balloons and also happens to be floating—his death is an inevitable consequence of the balloons bursting when pecked at by the crows. This follows the perceived rules of this fictional story world while simultaneously relying on the reader’s embodied cognition—knowing implicitly that objects fall through space, and falling from the clouds is not a graceful experience for a human boy.

The perception of the unwritten rules of this fictional universe is made possible by the constant back-and-forth between the text and the reader. The cognitive bond created between a reader’s mind-body and the text afford the reader the understanding that the boy will fall. This is, indeed, “un cuento triste.” Consistent with the idea of conceptual metaphors underlying expressions and perceptions of the world, both real and imagined, the vertical conceptual metaphors UP IS GOOD, DOWN IS BAD are evident in this MR. These metaphoric expressions and perceptions are accessed by the reader through their shared sociocultural memory. In the case of “La ascención,” the boy’s first instance of happiness came with him literally floating upward into the clouds, demonstrating that UP IS GOOD. However, as is the case with such orientational metaphors, down *must* be bad—he leaves the earth below him, the locus of his unhappiness, where he was “flaco, feo, huérfano, solitario: el más triste de los niños” (310). This underlying conceptual metaphor is maintained throughout the brief text: once the crows burst the balloons, the reader may assume that this implies the child will fall, presumably to his death. Though this is not explicit, it is implied by merit of his happiness depending on his physical ascension with the aid of the balloons. Furthermore, the crows—often considered symbols of death—appear at a very specific moment in the boy’s journey: “cuando ya estaba casi a la altura de las nubes *más bajas*” (emphasis mine). Even though the boy is high in the sky, “up” and “down” are still relative terms; the “bad”

still presents itself in the lowest parts of the clouds, again reaffirming this vertical spectrum of good and bad.

The title itself is a play on this conceptual metaphor: “La ascensión,” referring to the boy’s upward journey, is juxtaposed with “un cuento triste,” which serves as both title and description of the text. This clash of UP IS GOOD, DOWN IS BAD within the title affords the reader the chance to access sociocultural memory, consciously or otherwise, before the rest of the narrative begins. Recall the discussion of the importance of the title in making meaning in the previous chapter.

3.4 Contextualizing Cognition and *Microrrelatos* in Space and Time

I draw the “sociocultural memory” concept from Vygotskian psychology and Bakhtin’s idea of the “chronotope” to discuss two fundamental pillars of sociocultural memory: 1) every reader exists at the intersection of specific spatial and temporal determinations, which are simultaneously subjective and abstract, and 2) the work being read was produced at different spatial and temporal determinations, and 3) . These determinations are typically shared by large communities of people, thus influencing the creation of a shared culture, though they can also be unique to the individual. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this could be as basic and widespread as the concept of the number zero, introduced to early European arithmetic by Arabic mathematicians. In most cultures today, it would be difficult for a society to function properly without calculations using a zero (consider binary code, which relies on the digits 1 and 0, as the basis of modern computing).

Access to sociocultural memory varies between individuals and can change with time. As mentioned, may MR depend quite heavily on intertextual references. Without at least being familiar with the work being directly referenced, the reader will miss certain “deeper” facets of the narrative and engage with the text entirely differently. Sociocultural memory changes throughout

time, even within the same culture. In Medieval and Renaissance Spain, for example, terms of endearment that appear throughout literature included “mis entrañas” and “mis ojos,” demonstrating an underlying conceptual metaphor: a lover is a part of one’s own body, an immutable part of the self. This is also reflected in using the verb *ser* to describe marital status: “ser casado/a.” Being married was an intrinsic part of oneself by using the verb “ser,” which is the more permanent, unchanging meaning of “to be” in English. Compare with today, where the verb “estar” is used: “estar casado/a,” using the more temporary, mutable verb. Marriage is no longer culturally perceived as an intrinsic part of one’s identity, but rather a current state of existence—one wasn’t born married, and between the concepts of “’til death do us part” and divorce, one will not be married forever. Metaphors such as A LOVER IS A FRUIT makes more sense in this case. It is not part of the self, and a fruit could be replaced by another one.

3.5 Conclusion: A Note on Neurodiversity

Until recent years, neurodiversity has been a topic that has not received proper attention by many academic disciplines. Indeed, in an attempt to reconcile the fields of disability studies and cognitive approaches to humanities, both Ralph James Savarse and Lisa Zunshine admit the common errors of these respective fields in mishandling autism (Savarese and Zunshine). Essentially, in the earlier years of cognitive approaches to the humanities, theory of mind and complex mental states were said to be what makes us humans. Recall the discussion of algorithms “reading” compared to humans reading at the beginning of the first chapter. However, the same critics that proffered complex mental states as a feature of humanity also defined theory of mind as, more or less, “the thing that autistics cannot do.” This is, of course, a largely dehumanizing

claim to make: to be human is to have a theory of mind, and if people with autism lack the ability to attribute complex mental states to others, then by the transitive property, autistics are not human.

This is an error that has been quickly rectified by scholars in the humanities and social sciences alike. The conversation between Savarese and Zunshine details the rectification of these errors in “The Critic as Neurocosmopolite: Or, What Cognitive Approaches to Literature can Learn from Disability Studies.” Humanity consists of a wide range of neurological and cognitive variances; until now, this entire chapter has detailed the narrative immersion experience from a neurotypical perspective. Differences in neurology between individuals can accordingly result in different perceptions of shared cultural reality. Savarese cites recent research in autism, for example, to demonstrate that individuals on the autism spectrum should not be considered as having “less” of any certain cognitive faculty, but that each neurotype—the neurotypical as well as the wide range within the neurodiverse—are each equipped with different cognitive strengths and weaknesses. It is not a hierarchical matter, and so to say that any given way of engaging with fiction is *the* way that people engage with fiction is exclusive of and condescending toward alternative experiences; this requires a “denaturalization, even a dethronement, of privileged neurotypicality” (20). To underscore this idea, Zunshine remarks that when an individual with autism is “able” to produce a work of literature in what is perceived by critics to be in a neurotypical way, they are often referred to as an “exceptional” autistic; however, nobody seems to say that Shakespeare was an exceptional neurotypical.

That said, there are many ways to engage with short narrative fiction. A MR is so short that it relies heavily on a reader accessing sociocultural memory in order to make narrative “sense.” In many cases, it could be argued that a larger text provides a reader with autoreferential contexts: a traditional novel, for example, may use a variety of literary devices and narrative techniques to

establish a setting in which the events take place; background information can inform a character's worldview and, using their theory of mind, a reader can follow all of the characters' interactions with one another. A MR is simply too short to directly provide all of that information in the same way that a novel, or even a short story, is capable of doing.

Because the MR relies so heavily on the sociocultural memory shared between author and reader, there is an inherent openness to its interpretation. The narrative experience with a MR varies drastically from individual to individual, and it is entirely within the reader's contextualized mind that the story world is able to be developed. The MR therefore distinguishes itself from other genres due to its unique dependence on the reader's own *comtextere*: familiarity with other works of literature, underlying conceptual metaphors, personal experience with any utterance (such as "Texas,"), physical location of the MR, and many more.

CHAPTER 4. CONTEXTUALIZING THE *MICRORRELATO* IN THE 21ST CENTURY

4.1 Towards Brevity in the 21st Century

In the last two or three decades, as writers and readers alike begin to take increasing notice of the MR, there is also a prolific assumption that this form exists because of the instantaneous nature of contemporary Western culture. The “intensificación de la brevedad” in the West is easily observed today. Readers’ attentions are brief because our attention is constantly being demanded by so many other parts of our environment: emails, text messages, social media notifications, billboards, radio ads, commercial breaks in podcasts or in free music streaming services, short YouTube videos (monetized by ads), and countless more. The MR “fits” into readers’ lives because our attention is constantly shifting from one thing to another.

Indeed, in an interview with Elda Peralta in 1989, Monterroso explains that

Mi preferencia por la brevedad se debe únicamente a la pereza y a la idea de que entre más largo y abundante escriba me leerán menos. Yo quisiera escribir mucho todos los días, pero el sentimiento de la inutilidad o de la inferioridad ante lo que debe de estar haciendo mi vecino me lo impiden. (cited in Siles 122)

Though humorous, Monterroso’s reference to his own laziness and that of his readers indicates the cultural perception of a disinterest in spending time reading: if Monterroso were to write larger texts, he fears that his readers would be less likely to read them. This perspective is not unique to Monterroso; Lagmanovich shares the observation that “si la velocidad y la falta de tiempo son características de la sociedad contemporánea, tendrán mayor éxito aquellos textos literarios que exijan menor tiempo para su lectura” (“Algunas Reiteraciones” 92).

It is impossible to discuss cultural artefacts in the context of contemporary Western culture without a discussion of the role of the internet on the re-elaboration of said artifacts. Many aspects of culture have undergone a process of shrinkage in order to “fit in” with the digital age.²¹ This includes written literature, yielding the MR, but it also includes other cultural artifacts just as much. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud indicates that comics can be defined as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). He goes on to imply that comics is perhaps one of the oldest forms of narrative: sequential images (pictorial and iconographic) being used to convey meaning to viewers dates back to the earliest records of human activity found to date. This has always existed in various forms and in various media: tomb walls, pottery, papyrus, scrolls, murals, graphic novels, and more demonstrate the variety permitted by this definition. It is also safe to say that the internet has allowed for yet another transformation of this ancient form: the meme. Internet memes often assume the same format of intentional, sequential images to convey information or aesthetic meaning to the viewer, but in a highly condensed form, often including the juxtaposition of at least two “pictorial and other images.”

By the same token, film has undergone a dramatic transformation since its conception just over a century ago. Curiously, film has been developed along many paths very quickly as a medium for storytelling, and the earliest films were also noticeably shorter than today’s blockbuster or feature film. Regarding Spanish film, consider Buñuel’s well-known 1929 film *Un chien andalou*, with a running time of approximately 21 minutes. This is a salient example of an artistic, *avant*

²¹ Notice the difficulty of discussing time without using spatial metaphors. The underlying metaphor TIME IS SPACE is easily observed

garde film, and although technological possibilities may have had a larger role in limiting the length of some films, *Un chien andalou* coexisted with longer and shorter films. Both the long and short films persist today, but technologies advances have allowed for more diverse filmmaking opportunities. With the arrival of the internet, online streaming services were quick to arise, affording more independent creators a digital space for creation, publication, and diffusion of their work. Flooxer, the online video streaming platform belonging to Spain's Atresmedia, hosts many original videos. *Paquita Salas*, a successful, award-winning web series that is now produced by Netflix Spain, is an example of the commercial and popular success that these platforms can afford to lower-budget film directors, writers, and actors.

Film has also been reduced even further: Vine was a platform owned by Twitter on which users could upload and share videos lasting no longer than 7 seconds. Despite these very quick videos, many content creators have received popular recognition and become professional singers, models, actors, and television or internet personalities after having been “discovered” on the platform.

These examples of film, video, and graphic narrative are only a few sources of this type of “jibarización,” to use Esteban's words, of storytelling in the digital age. The role of Twitter itself cannot be underestimated in particular. Apart from bots publishing the way NELL was described in the previous chapter, the platform can be used in countless ways. (In)famously, Alexander Acimen and Emmett Rensin published hundreds of tweets that were eventually published into the book *Twitterature* in 2009. Supposedly, the project “provides everything you need to master the literature of the civilised world, while relieving you of the burdensome task of reading it.” (Aciman and Rensin). This goal is achieved through the reinterpretation of literary works that are well known in the English-speaking world—Shakespeare, Austen, and even Dan Brown—entirely on

Twitter using internet slang. To provide an example, in the retelling of the entire Harry Potter series, one early tweet reads “OMG Hogwarts OMG I have two friends OMG magic OMG the Slytherins are Nazis OMG there is an EVIL WIZARD out to get me” (@AcimanandRensin).

The multifaceted arrogance of assuming that these tweets can give readers what they need to “master the literature of the civilised world” aside—and the racist perspective that the supposedly “civilised world” only seems to include nearly exclusively English-language literature (none have Spanish origins, but there are a limited number of French, Russian, German, and Latin origins; nothing representative of Africa, Asia, South America, or other European countries)²²—it is representative of a specific sector of social media users who are familiar enough with the primary texts to appreciate the humor behind the tweets. What I wish to emphasize here is the idea that Twitter relieves readers of the “burdensome task” of actually reading the literature the authors sarcastically summarize—it propagates the notion that reading literature is a time-consuming task that does not have a place in contemporary lifestyle, while simultaneously offering social media as an alternative. According to the authors, Twitterature “has refined to its purest form the instant-publishing, short-attention-span, all-digital-all-the-time, self important [sic] age of info-deluge” (quoted in Lollini and Rosenberg 117).

The idea that reading literature is a “burdensome task” for today’s readers is not entirely new. Mariusz Pisarski points out that readers today are very different than in the past, saying that they

are also players, viewers and users surrounded by self-broadcasting and instant-messaging devices. They spend their time in augmented and virtual worlds

²² Perhaps as a consequence of the “leyenda negra.”

delivered by home entertainment, and literature is just a fraction of the available spectrum. In order to survive, literature need strategies attuned to those used by the social media and game industry behemoths, or at least closely observe those niche artistic and literary communities who try to relate to the habits of a contemporary audience and reflect it at the level of form and expression. (41)

It is unquestionable, per Pisarki, that modern computing has had an evolutionary-level impact on literature, but also notes that this is in itself not a new phenomenon: the radio and cinematography were just as quick to entangle themselves with literary works in the 20th century as computers have at the turn of the 21st. Just as film provided new opportunities for literary expression, disbursement, and social involvement compared to the radio, the internet has afforded new possibilities for literature as well.

Social media has unquestionably played a role in the creation, distribution, and readership of the MR. Esteban Erles's *Casa de Muñecas* is dedicated to Facebook "por todo lo que le debe este libro" (n.p.). In an interview with *Culturamas*, an online periodical presenting art, literature, film, comics, and more, Esteban Erlés admits that the collection of MR published in *Casa de Muñecas* came from her own drafts that she published on Facebook. The social media giant also served as the first point of communication between the author and the illustrator, Sara Morante (Garrido).

Émilie Delafosse points out that Valls' print anthology of MR, *Velas al viento*, consists of MR that were previously published on his own blog *La nave de los locos*, and that Valls himself has said that the MR has found its natural habitat online (70). I find the wording of this concept very useful for the present discussion: the MR *has found* its natural habitat online, implying that it

existed elsewhere before. The first MR were written well before the advent of digital texts, but it is online where the form has truly been able to flourish as a literary genre.

It is because of the internet that, according to Andres-Suárez, “el microrrelato se ha convertido en el género emblemático del siglo XXI” (21) and that in the 21st century, the MR is growing exponentially (66). She observes that there are generally two groups of MR writers in Spain: those whose literary work was generally produced in the 20th century, and younger writers whose careers are more centered on contemporary production. In the younger group of Spanish MR writers, the internet has had a profound impact:

Educados en la era del ciberespacio y de Internet, los escritores nacidos entre 1960 y 1975 han convertido la globosfera en un espacio privilegiado para difundir sus textos y conectar con el lector; además, integran con naturalidad en sus microrrelatos el mundo de la imagen: del cine, de la televisión..., así como las nuevas tecnologías, las cuales no sólo han revolucionado las relaciones sociales y acabado con la idea de una realidad supuestamente objetivo, sino que han terminado afectando a su escritura tanto desde el punto de vista temático...como formal. (88–89)

This is to be expected. Throughout the history of literature, people write about what they know, live, and dream. As new technologies affect our sociocultural environment, it is natural for writers to incorporate these elements in their works. Recall that Andres-Suárez argues that a reader needs to have a certain mental state in order to be able to read the MR and fill in the rest of the story. These younger writers frequently reference pop culture, social media, and more in their MR; a reader must also be familiar with these references in order to make meaning. The shared cultural memory between reader and writer (discussed in the previous chapter) is then limited to those

familiar with certain technologies just as it is to those familiar with intertextual references (discussed in chapter 2).

Consider, for example, Raúl Sánchez Quiles. He has worked as a journalist, photographer, and writer, and according to his blog, “en una época donde triunfa lo audiovisual y el tiempo es un bien escaso, los microrrelatos actualizan la tradición del cuento y ofrecen grandes historias en sólo unos segundos de lectura” (“Hiperbreves”). Here, he expresses the shared concern that people simply do not have the time to read literature. One of his MR is as follows:

“RIP en RED”²³

La noche se convirtió en día y el día en noche, los minutos se empastaron con las horas y el tiempo se detuvo. Frente a la pantalla, fuiste perdiendo fuerza hasta que no pudiste comer ni levantarte. Te lo hacías todo encima y encima del teclado dormías. No hizo falta que tu cuerpo desprendiera el olor de la putrefacción, los bomberos echaron la puerta abajo exactamente al tercer día de tu muerte. Nadie te echó físicamente de menos, pero 1.000 personas se temieron lo peor cuando tu magnífico blog dejó de actualizarse. (“RIP en RED” 299)

Thematically, this somber MR contemporizes the ageless notion of a writer pouring their own life into their published works. The narrator describes how “you” (the reader, the *narratario*, or the interlocutor) died as you lived: in front of the screen and on the keyboard. According to the narrator, the *narratario*’s life seems to have been almost entirely digital: they have died, and yet it wasn’t

²³ Notice the anglicism “RIP” as part of the title. An influx of English language has increasingly infiltrated Spanish popular culture (and language) by means of contemporary film and internet in recent decades, particularly salient in cases where Spanish terms already exist for what is being replaced by English.

the smell of their rotting body or physical absence that brought attention to the death, but rather, it was purely their lack of online activity. It was the thousand people who feared the worst when the blog was no longer updated. It was a life lived almost entirely digitally: almost, because clearly the blogger had a biological body. Notice that even this digital life was still based on an embodied cognition. The blog, though a digital interface, no longer continues without the body who updated it nor the embodied readers who followed it, and who reached the conclusion that the *narratario* must have died. Using theory of mind, the reader of this MR assumes that the blog's readers are the ones who must have alerted the authorities to check in on the deceased writer.

4.2 Time for Reading in the 21st Century

This commonly held belief among writers of the MR—that we have no time for long books in the 21st century—is much more complex than it appears, and it is certainly not limited to only writers' perspectives. It assumes two very paradoxical perspectives or common adages in popular Western discourse: the first being that “kids today are lazy/have it too easy with this readily accessible technology,” often referring to smart devices and the internet; and the second being that “life was easier back then,” referring to previous generations not having the stress that accompanies contemporary lifestyle. I emphasize that these are ageless assumptions because Western literature constantly demonstrates both of these philosophies. Even DQ, in Chapter 3 of Part I, dreams of the past “dichosa edad, dichoso siglo” in which his feats would have been recognized and honored.

More importantly, the idea that people today have less time to read or are too distracted to read an entire novel is largely a myth as well. Leah Price, author of the 2019 book *What We Talk*

About When We Talk About Books, says in an interview that there was no real golden age of undistracted reading:

In the digital age we think of someone reading a printed book curled up in bed or sprawled under a tree, reading for pleasure, probably some classic work of imaginative literature. But for most of the history of printed books, that kind of reading has been distinctly in the minority. If you asked people in Britain or in the US a generation ago what book they had in their house, the most common answers would have been a Bible and a telephone book. So when we blame the absence of printed books for the distraction and the impatience and superficiality of the digital world, it's unfair. We're comparing an ideal scenario of print reading with a more realistic assessment of digital reading. We kid ourselves if we think that the presence of printed books would magically make us more attentive and more focused. (Price, *The Myth*)

The image of the golden age reader persists, and it is an image that sells very well: in the interview, Sameer points out that on Instagram and other social media, there are often photos of people in what appears to be very comfortable “nests” of blankets, books, tea, and perhaps a window or cat nearby. Similarly, as Price points out icon for Amazon Kindle is the silhouette of a person reading (presumably a Kindle device) under a tree. The application updated in 2017 for iOS and Android devices, changing the icon slightly: rather than a child sitting under a tree, the tree has been removed, and a starry night is shown (see Figure 1 below). Because stars can be seen in this new icon, this indicates that whoever is supposedly reading is doing so at night. Regardless, both of these icons represent a magical allure to readers of fiction, but it is also an impossible depiction of any actual readers: there are no sources of light except for the stars, and that wouldn't be enough

to read a print novel; because most ebook devices, including the Kindle devices, now include backlights, this gives the impression that the romanticized image of reading under the stars can *finally* be realized. In fact, it could even be considered a very literally quixotic depiction: someone is so engrossed in literature that they are spending all night reading, having lost track of time altogether.



Figure 1. Amazon Kindle icons depict a child-like person reading at night. The updated version of the app icon (right) was released for iOS and Android devices in 2017, but the earlier version is still easily recognizable and prevalent. (Bishop)

In her book,²⁴ Price demonstrates that the printed book has undergone several changes in cultural value over time: before paper and the printing press, the book was something to be revered, not handled by everyone; when books became commonplace, cabinetmakers and architects alike prepared living spaces for the enduring presence and commonality of books in everyone's homes. In the 1930s in the United States, for example, many new houses were constructed with built-in bookcases as part of the interior structure of the building itself. Now that the medium of storytelling is becoming increasingly digital and the meaning of "book" is shifting away from an exclusively

²⁴ Perhaps ironically, all references that I make to this book are from my copy of the digital Apple Books version available for Apple devices.

paper-bound definition, the printed book is once again being revered in contemporary Western cultures (Price, *What we talk about*). Demonstrating her point, she cites a YouTube video in which the video creator physically cuts up a book in order to make a decorative box; many of the comments were negative and in the vein of “I feel like I’m watching a murder” (Price, *What we talk about*). This is a marked difference, per Price, from how books were treated in recent centuries: useful pages were torn out, margins were constantly marked up by readers, and in some cases, the binding was undone then redone in order to rearrange the pages altogether. This also demonstrates that the *aesthetic* of reading today is more palatable to many people today than actually reading—why does a decorative box need to be made of a book rather than wood (or any other material for that matter)? From there, it is easy to fall into the trap of assuming, as so many do, that the “death of the book” is an inevitable outcome of the digital age.

This narrative of the ideal reader is pervasive in capitalism, between what Price refers to as “Bookstagram”—scantly-clad models posing with books who are often on the payroll of publishing houses—and what many of us are guilty of: buying books we likely will not read. Says price,

...[Y]ou can—and probably do—buy books without ever ending up reading them.

Like an exercise bike rusting in the basement, a book gathering dust testifies to good intentions...a book sitting unread on the shelf is also like an unopened bottle of designer bubble bath. Just as Jacuzzis attract homebuyers whose long hours at work preclude the self-indulgent soaks that they pictured while touring open houses, so a book makes its buyer feel guilty for not spending time where she has already spent money. (*What we talk about*)

There is a guilt that permeates the home of someone who owns books they do not read because in the 21st century, we are constantly bombarded with the aesthetic of reading, leading to a feeling of not having enough time to read, guilt for buying books that will not be read, and despair over the state of the book in contemporary society.

This is all based on a widely assumed myth. Throughout history, most people did not have ample amounts of time to spend reading books. Distraction from reading is not a novel aspect of the 21st century—the manner in which we are distracted (via notifications, for example) is new, but the ability to be easily distracted or having our attention drawn elsewhere is part of being human. Recall from the previous chapter the discussion of attention in reading: bottom-up processing is on standby, ready to call our attention to any new stimuli. This type of cognition is nothing new, and it could be argued that this is perhaps the most ancient, primal cognitive faculty available to humans. The dings, bells, and flashes of color signally digital notifications on smartphones, for example, take advantage of this bottom-up processing, and it is unquestionable that contemporary society is oversaturated with these attention-grabbing ploys. The internet receives an unfairly disproportionate share of the blame for the supposed “death” of the book, though, and it is what writers of the MR blame for the success of bite-sized narratives. If anything, it could be said that the internet makes stories more accessible to the masses, and thus we are collectively reading more—in fact, Price points out that in the US, print books have sold at a fairly steady rate over the last several years in addition to ebooks.

In *Distraction: Problems of Attention in Eighteenth-Century Literature*, Natalie Philips says that “an ever-present an unavoidable consequence of our fast-paced contemporary world, distraction is cast as a (if not *the*) mental state of modernity” (1), going on to say that this assumption implies that previous generations must have necessarily been more attentive, given

that they did not experience distraction this way. She demonstrates that a brief foray into literary history proves otherwise, stating that during the Enlightenment period, the discussion of “reading taps a tradition that stretches back to *Don Quixote* (1605-1615), whose main character is so absorbed in romances that it distorts his perception of everyday life” (3). She goes on to deconstruct the paradox created between Enlightenment idea of “focus” being the true mark of education and mental training, and the human brain being physically incapable of maintaining absolute focus, particularly for any extended period of time.

In Spanish literature, distraction while reading is so common that it occasionally portrayed as apathy. The novels of Benito Perez Galdós, perhaps the most well-known author of realism in Spain, famously wrote a multitude of long novels. A contemporary of Galdós, Leopoldo Alas (published under the name Clarín) published a review of one of Galdós’s *Fortunata y Jacinta* (1887) in *El Globo* in a formal letter addressed to the author, saying that:

Fortunata y Jacinta tiene un gran defecto para España: sus cuatro tomos. Hace días un revistero francés decía que en Italia se lee poco ... porque hace casi siempre buen tiempo. Tiene razón, aunque no ha descubierto nada.

Soy menos partidario que mi amigo Pompeyo Gener de buscar en causas étnicas y climatológicas el fundamento de casi todo; pero reconozco que el sol es el enemigo de la literatura y un protector de la política y de los toros. Salir a la calle a hablar mal del Gobierno o a ver matar a Frascuelo, es más fácil y más agradable, y hasta más higiénico, valga la verdad, que quedarse en casa leyendo, en mala postura probablemente, con respiración difícil y en un ambiente impuro. En España, la mayor parte del pueblo no tiene más habitación bien ventilada ... que la calle. En fin, somos unos filósofos peripatéticos, sin filosofía. Aristóteles meditaba paseando;

nosotros paseamos sin meditar: ésa es la única diferencia entre esta España y aquella Grecia.

Pues bien: los cuatro tomos de *Fortunata* tienen ya un defecto en ser cuatro. Si los críticos se dignaran hablar del libro, vería usted cómo eso era lo primero que decían.

O nos trae usted el cielo de Londres o escribe menos largo; o quita usted el sol, o quita tomos. (quoted in Caudet 67)

Indeed, the massive novel presents about three hundred ninety-six thousand words to his faithful readers.²⁵ Clarín makes a somewhat ironic observation, being an established writer of very long novels and political propaganda himself, that Spain is at a climatological disadvantage when it comes to literature: it is too sunny to read, implying that the only way people would read is if there were nothing better to do than being inside. Reading is for rainy days, according to Clarín, not for days better spent at sporting events or complaining about the government with other citizens. Essentially, Clarín suggests that Spaniards simply have better things to do than read. It was not purely a matter of access to literature that kept people from being bookworms, but rather, an interest in nearly anything else that kept people too occupied to sit down indoors long enough to want to read.

Roughly seventy years prior to Galdós's novels, Mariano José de Larra, under the name Fígaro, published *artículos* that heavily critiqued the traditions and lifestyle of Spaniards in his time through satirical conversations that the narrator (Larra) claims to have overheard or people

²⁵ Calculated from the digital copy available on the Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes website: <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/nd/ark:/59851/bmcgq6v4>

he allegedly interviewed. In “La educación de entonces,” originally published on January 5, 1834 in *La revista Española*, Larra overhears a conversation in which two gentlemen lament that there are too many new “ideítas de quita y pon” (418) and miss the “tiempos aquellos” where things were easier—that is to say, the same ageless woe of wishing to return to a simpler time in the past.²⁶ They also both mention that they used to read more than people of the day, and that what they read was always “healthy,” implying that contemporary readers not only read less, but what they read was unhealthy. Here, Larra uses the conversation of these two gentlemen to illustrate a Spain that refuses to adapt to change and modernity, a cultural resistance to accept that things are no longer the way they used to be—not very different from contemporary conversations.

In “La vida de Madrid,” another well-known article published originally in *El observador* on December 12, 1834, in which he satirizes Madrid’s youth by publishing a fictional conversation he had with a young man who has “más doblones que ideas” (466). Larra reflects on the state of the world, essentially saying that everyone plays the hand they are dealt in life to the best of their ability; the problem is that in Madrid, according to Larra, nobody is living up to their potential: this representative youth says that unlike the journalist Larra, he doesn’t write anything, except to place an order for fine clothing. Humorously, he states that he does not like to sleep in, and prefers getting up early: there are days when at ten in the morning, the youth is already up and about. Regarding his reading habits, he says

²⁶ Specifically, what these gentlemen claim they miss are abusive parents, learning only Latin (as opposed to French, English, Italian, and even mathematics), marriage as a contractual agreement rather than an act of love, and other very outdated ideals. Larra is not only critiquing the resistance to change, but the way some older Spaniards seem to cling to outdated lifestyles that have no place in a Spain that is struggling to move towards modernity in the early 19th century.

Si a esas horas [10am] ha aparecido ya algún periódico, me lo entra mi criado, después de haberle ojeado él: tiendo la vista por encima; leo los [sic] partes, que se me figura siempre haberlos leído ya; todos me suenan a lo mismo; entra otro, lo cojo, y es la segunda edición del primero. Los periódicos son como los jóvenes de Madrid, no se diferencian sino en nombre. (467)

The young man continues to describe his vagrant day, moving from house to house where everyone speaks ill about everyone else, buying cigarettes and coffee with his friends, and maybe taking his horse for a ride. He describes his day as very busy, all the while never learning anything or adding to society in any meaningful way.

Perhaps his most famous article, Larra's "Vuelva usted mañana" was published in *El pobrecito hablador* on January 14, 1835. This article heavily criticizes the *pereza* that permeates Spanish societies. Here, Larra tells of a Frenchman who comes to Spain looking to confirm some legal documents in order to invest in a business opportunity. He arrives planning to spend fifteen days in Spain, half of which he expects to have plenty of free time. Larra laughs at his plan, jokingly saying that he'll invite the visitor to dinner in fifteen months, since he would still be in Spain trying to take care of a seemingly basic task. Sure enough, countless obstacles impede the Frenchman from completing the task: the civil servants take frequent smoke breaks; businessmen are out of town to see the bulls; everyone is taking a nap; and more. In the end, the Frenchman leaves after his request was denied, six months to the day of his arrival.

Though the critique here is of the inefficiency of Spain compared to other countries, I want to draw attention to the constant work the French traveler must do. His original plan of fifteen days included vacation time; in his six months there, he didn't appear to have any days off whatsoever. He spent every day dealing with seamstresses, shoemakers, lawyers, translators, civil servants,

genealogists, and more. Once his stay in Spain seemed like it was going to last longer than he anticipated, he says that “necesitaba dinero diariamente para comer, con la mayor urgencia; sin embargo, nunca encontraba momento oportuno para trabajar” (324). He was constantly distracted, dragged across town from business to business, all to complete what he thought would be a simple task. His constant movement throughout the city is in stark contrast to how Larra describes Spaniards: “no comerán por no llevar la comida a la boca” (324).

There is a desire that Larra presents throughout his articles for people to educate themselves and rejuvenate a nation full of seemingly lazy people who cannot be bothered to read more than the newspaper article titles. Overall, Larra’s observations of the Spanish capital are indicative of his frustration: Spaniards do not seem to be living up to their potential, because they are apparently so engrossed in their daily lives and too stubborn to want to change. Though extremely harsh, these articles reflect his perception of Spanish culture. Price points out that historically, it is not necessarily due to a lack of *access* to books that people have not read, it is a lack of time and even interest. The literate, privileged Madrid population had ample access to literature and all the money to spend on books, but chose to spend their time differently: they were extremely busy and distracted, although apparently unproductive, and their many activities did not include reading. Though satirical here, Larra’s critique of certain lifestyles Madrid come from his daily interactions with and observations of the citizens of the capital. The historical, factual degree of truth to these observations, or their accuracy in portraying Spanish ways of living, is certainly up for debate; but what cannot be denied is Larra’s *perception* of this reality of Spain.

Even in the context of DQ, two centuries prior to Larra’s articles, the act of reading all day and night was strange. Being an old hidalgo, DQ was extremely privileged in his ability to have so much leisure time, and even then, to spend it all on reading books. The extended period of time

reading popular literature was what drove him to insanity: he did nothing *but* read. In Chapter 5, the priest and barber discuss the hidalgo's books and decide which ones to burn and which are worth saving. Notably, the priest recommends saving *La Diana* by Jorge Montemayor, often considered the first pastoral novel in the Spanish language, because he does not see any harm in DQ imagining a life as a happy farmer living away from urban life. The implication of the very existence of a pastoral novel is that of urban escapism: living in a society with bureaucracy, laws, social contracts, and contemporary stresses would all be resolved if one could simply leave it all behind to look after sheep (notably without actually doing any real work involved in livestock) and enjoy the sound of a babbling brook nearby while falling in love. This is of course a very romanticized depiction of rural living, but is nonetheless indicative of a (wealthy, educated, privileged) population of Spain that dreams of "simpler times," an implicit comparison between the imagined ease of rural living and the hectic, stressful urban reality.

All of this to say that the idea that people do not read as much as they used to is largely a myth, a common narrative heard in households, in literature, in advertisements, and on social media, and it has persisted in Western culture for centuries now. While there are obviously exceptions—DQ aside, literary scholarship is a self-selecting field of bibliophiles—the "norm" has never been for large populations of any given society to spend ample leisure time reading. It is a mark of extreme privilege to be able to do so—not just the money to buy the books, but the money to have the *time* to read the books, as well as interest in spending that time reading.

However, the intersection of time, money, and literature in Spain has a particularly salient facet: for years, novels and other books were not often sold as the bound copies that appear on shelves in retail stores today. Since the 18th century, they were often published in *tomos* or *entregas*—small parts of the novel, issues, tomes, sections of chapters, etc.—and Spaniards were

able to purchase a subscription to a novel before the entire work was even written. In fact, in 1790, there was a considerable increase in the publicity of books in the *Gaceta de Madrid* and the *Diario de Madrid* newspapers, which themselves had wide readership. These advertisements often promoted the book itself with little or no mention of the author or translator, but rather, a brief description of the book itself and where to purchase it. To provide an example, the following was published in the *Gaceta de Madrid* on December 13, 1796:

Fin funesto de la infidelidad: novela moral traducida del inglés, que presenta un ejemplo de las desgracias acaecidas a dos honrados y dichosos esposos por apartarse un momento solo de la senda de la virtud. Se hallará a 2 reales en las librerías de Castillo, frente a San Felipe, y en el puesto de Cerro, calle de Alcalá.
(García Garrosa 23)

María Jesús García Garrosa points out that these two newspapers were particularly successful in advertising book sales because they reached the provincial areas of Madrid as well, expanding the base of potential readers far beyond word of mouth or physical advertisements in the streets alone. Additionally, many of the books that were published by parts—whether they were encyclopedias, novels, or more—were sold in the form of subscriptions. These subscriptions were often publicized as being cheaper to the buyer in the long run—after all the parts were received—than buying each part individually (García Garrosa 25).

These subscriptions to the published parts of printed books lasted well into the 20th century in Spain and was a commonly understood and accepted part of book commerce. Returning briefly to Valle-Inclán's *Luces de Bohemia*, observe the following interaction in the end of the second scene in a bookstore between the daughter of a doorwoman, the protagonist Max Estrella, his friend Don Latino, and the bookkeeper Zaratustra:

(Asoma la chica de una portera.-Trenza en perico, caídas calcetas, cara de hambre.)

LA CHICA.- ¿Ha salido esta semana, entrega d'El Hijo de la Difunta?

ZARATUSTRA.- Se está repartiendo.

LA CHICA.- ¿Sabe usted, si al fin se casa Alfredo?

DON GAY.- ¿Tú qué deseas, pimpollo?

LA CHICA.- A mí plin. Es Doña Loreta la del coronel, quien lo pregunta.

ZARATUSTRA.- Niña, dile a esa señora, que es un secreto lo que hacen los personajes de las novelas. Sobre todo en punto de muertes y casamientos.

MAX.- Zaratustra, ándate con cuidado que te lo van a preguntar de Real Orden.

ZARATUSTRA.- Estaría bueno que se divulgase el misterio. Pues no habría novela.

(Escapa la chica salvando los charcos con sus patas de caña. El Peregrino Ilusionado, en un rincón conferencia con Zaratustra. Máximo Estrella y Don Latino, se orientan a la taberna de Pica Lagartos, que tiene su clásico laurel en la calle de la Montera.) (Valle-Inclán)

As it can be observed, Larra's satirical observations aside, that Spaniards are not historically uninterested in reading necessarily, but rather, the literate members of society were accustomed to reading small parts of literature at a time. Even Galdós's *Fortunata y Jacinta*, today published as either one or physical books, was originally presented to readers in four physical *tomos*.

Bibliophiles aside, very few people sat down to read the eighty-thousand word novel in its entirety—it was read in parts, and each of those parts were also read in smaller fragments according to each person’s individual schedule and interest.

Returning to the observations of MR scholars and writers—namely, that the MR is successful today specifically because of our fast-paced contemporary lifestyle in the digital age does not leave us time for books—this is not entirely true. This assumes the myth of the ideal reader of the past, who would supposedly love nothing more than to spend all their time reading long novels. People have always been distracted, and there has always been more work to do than leisure, except for the very privileged.

Valls’s observation, that the MR has found its natural habitat on the internet, must be reemphasized, and a nuanced interpretation is necessary. The MR is observably flourishing now more than it ever has, notably on online or digital platforms, but it is not directly due to people not having any interest in reading longer works than previous generations supposedly did; it is more of a matter of the internet being the proper platform for its distribution. The MR “fits” in the small moments of time we do have, but these small moments of time between tasks are not as new as they seem. The difference now is that these small moments of leisure can be filled with digital interactions that occupy no additional physical space. The internet has changed the affordances available to readers and writers alike: the MR flourishes today because the internet affords writers and readers the opportunity to create, distribute, and read at much more convenient moments throughout one’s day, requiring much less effort than searching for a physical book and carrying it around all day.

It could be argued that these discussions of literature in the digital age are more matters of content and media, not of genre; fictional stories have always existed, but it is the medium through

which the stories are told that has evolved. From the oral tradition, to stages, to papyrus, to lecterns, to print, to radio and film, modern computing offers at minimum a new medium on which to tell stories. This does not make them any more or less fictional or narrative, and they can certainly vary by length. By recognizing that the MR is not a *product* of the digital age, but rather a form that is able to flourish for the first time, greatly opens the perspective of what classifies as a MR. It is a genre that has always existed. The very first stories told must have inherently been short, and the hybridity of the MR as an “official” genre lends itself to a vast array of historical manifestations. Could a parable from the Bible not be considered a MR, for example? They are brief, fictional works of narrative prose—didactic, yes, but the hybrid nature of the MR certainly lends itself to a didactic intent just as a modernist’s “art for art’s sake” intent.

What is new is the academic and popular attention the MR receives, which lends itself to part of its own definition. If short works of fiction have always existed, part of the definition of the MR must also be the attention it receives as a new phenomenon, when in fact it is quite old. A more accurate definition, albeit somewhat tongue-in-cheek, might be “a brief work of literary prose fiction that draws attention to itself as being a brief work of literary prose fiction.” Part of what makes a MR its own genre is simply saying “this is different than the short story.”

4.3 Conclusion: The internet as the *microrrelato*’s new home

To assume that the digital age is to blame for the lack of interest in reading large works of fiction, thus creating a space for reduced expressions such as the MR, is not entirely accurate. In looking back at the narratives cited above, people read literature; they did not read *long* literature, but literate people always had access to things to be read. Clarín’s critique of *Fortunata and Jacinta* was purely its length—no other formal or discursive aspects were mentioned. It was a

matter of not wanting to spend countless hours with what would eventually be called the “burdensome task” of reading large books. The caricature of a student that Larra’s articles satirize did not read the content of the newspapers, just brief parts of them—while it can easily be said that he seems to have learned nothing of them, he does nonetheless take the time to read bits of journalism, albeit superficially, when he clearly has no need to do so.

Small moments of narrative engagement have always been part of the lifestyles of literate societies. The internet is a new scapegoat for the “death of the book,” but it is not responsible for the creation of MR. Recall from Chapter 3 the discussion of affordances and learning—once someone learns to juggle, they begin to perceive objects in their environment as able to be juggled. The MR has found its home on the Internet because of what it affords readers and writers. The reader’s socio-physical and cognitive contexts have changed drastically with the introduction of the internet, particularly salient with social media, which afford writers and readers an entirely different experience with the brief fictional narratives that have always formed part of human culture. Commonplace and frequent interactions with social media, for example, afford writers the tools to compose and share these brief narratives; similarly, they afford readers a convenient platform on which to read.

It is incontrovertible that the Internet and contemporary lifestyle play an important role in the newfound academic and popular attention the MR receives, it should not be confused with creating the MR. Brief literature has always existed, and Spanish literature has a long history of examples. The internet age has afforded the form the opportunity to flourish more than it has before to be certain, and this flourishing has enabled a rapid growth, but contemporary lifestyles should not be credited with birthing this form as is often assumed.

CHAPTER 5. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

5.1 Introduction

In institutions of higher education throughout much of North America and Europe, academic humanities programs are under varying degrees of threat as resources are diverted towards STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) careers. Easterlin's own publication on the biological function of literature, cited in the previous chapter, is in fact a plea to reason specifically defending the value of humanities scholarship in this context. There is a collective push for empirical, tangible, and profitable outcomes from a liberal arts education in order to "keep up" with STEM fields. This is not new, though in recent years, academics have answered this metaphorical call to arms and have applied the scientific method to scholarship in the humanities.

Scholars and practitioners have long known the value of the humanities. In a 1923 interview with *The Arts*, a New York based art periodical, Spanish painter Pablo Picasso is quoted as saying that "we all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth" (315). Fiction can be understood similarly: as Merino puts it, fiction is a re-elaboration of our reality. If the definition of the MR as a brief, literary work of narrative fiction is accepted, it can be assumed that the MR must also be a re-elaboration, albeit microscopic, of a shared cultural reality. It can therefore be studied, read, written, shared, and discussed in the real world just as much as in the literature or second language (L2) classroom in much the same way as other forms of literature. Similarly, it can be subjected to the same analyses, discussions, and literary criticisms of other forms, many of which were discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. The cognitive possibilities discussed in Chapter 3 are not without empirical merit in larger works of fiction and, as Easterlin points out, art serves a biological function. I argue that the MR is not exempt from these claims, helping to

serve the same biological functions and take advantage of the same cognitive faculties as larger works of fiction, although there is a dearth of attention given to empirical cognitive research as it relates directly to the MR. In this chapter, I demonstrate that the MR is capable of inciting imagination and ephemeral transportation to a narrative world through research that I collected in undergraduate classrooms.

5.2 Theoretical Framework: Fiction on the Mind

One of the most well-known outcomes of a liberal arts education is that students tend to be better equipped to think critically about the world around them. Lifelong readers of literature, and fictional literature in particular, have been shown to hold more egalitarian and pro-social attitudes and behaviors. Keith Oatley puts it simply: “Fiction is the simulation of selves in interaction. People who read it improve their understanding of others. This effect is especially marked with literary fiction, which also enables people to change themselves” (618). Drawing from some of the same theories outlined in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, Oatley argues that fiction allows a cognitive space for a reader to “interact” with other selves—other consciousnesses, as Bakhtin might say—and achieve new insights, assume different perspectives, and come into contact with situations that readers might not otherwise encounter.

Because fiction presents these minds, a reader’s theory of mind faculties are often able to keep track of each character’s interactions with other characters: a reader learns to momentarily assume another perspective to understand why any given character might do or say whatever it is they said or did. The idea is that over time, readers will have practiced assuming these different perspectives so much, and will have experienced unfamiliar or uncommon situations so regularly that cognitively, they are more prepared for these situations in real life contexts. David Kidd and

Emanuele Castano conducted a frequently cited study, published in 2013, in which they demonstrate an correlation between having read literary fiction and having greater theory of mind capabilities. Per Kidd and Castano, this is because

[j]ust as in real life, the worlds of literary fiction are replete with complicated individuals whose inner lives are rarely easily discerned but warrant exploration. The worlds of fiction, though, pose fewer risks than the real world, and they present opportunities to consider the experiences of others without facing the potentially threatening consequences of that engagement. More critically, whereas many of our mundane social experiences may be scripted by convention and informed by stereotypes, those presented in literary fiction often disrupt our expectations. Readers of literary fiction must draw on more flexible interpretive resources to infer the feelings and thoughts of characters. (378)

Because fiction is a simulation of social minds, or a *reelaboración* of a shared cultural reality, fiction affords readers the opportunity to improve their own theory of mind faculties by putting them to practice with projected embodied consciousnesses. This is occasionally referred to as the “Social Improvement Hypothesis,” by Oatley, Zunshine, and others, although I prefer to call it the Social Awareness Hypothesis.²⁷ The hypothesis is that honing one’s theory of mind faculties through fiction translates to being more socially aware in the real world, meaning these sharpened skills are put to practice; due to the greater ability to understand others’ underlying mental states, this would hypothetically lead to being a more empathetic person.

²⁷ An increase in empathetic faculties does not inherently mean that society will improve; see Breithaupt, Fritz. *The Dark Sides of Empathy*, Cornell UP, 2019.

This remains a hypothesis, and not a theory, due to a correlation being insufficient evidence for a causal relationship. These tests are often based on the Author Recognition Test (ART) to determine a lifetime of exposure to fiction—participants are given an exceedingly long list of names of published authors, as well as invented names, and asked to identify which authors they are familiar with. Per Kidd and Castano, a high ART score is one in which many authors were recognized, and very little nonauthors were mis-recognized as authors; the theory behind this test is that one who is well-read will have been exposed to a greater number of works and recognize more authors' names, whereas someone who has not read as much will have a harder time distinguishing. However, this test certainly has its limits: participants with different backgrounds may be more or less familiar with any of the authors presented on the ART, particularly in the case of people not familiar with anglo-centric literature (recall the discussion of *Twitterature* in the previous chapter). Furthermore, this only indicates exposure to literature, and does not take into account any differences between knowing who an author is and having read any amount of their work. Someone might know who Cervantes is without having read *DQ*; similarly, they may have read *DQ*, but none of his other novels. A name sounding authorial does not seem to be an efficient marker for being well-read.

In fact, it is debated whether engagement with literature actually causes an increase in empathetic ability in readers over time, or if people who are already predisposed to empathy are also more likely to read fiction, presumably because their ease of empathetic cognition enables an easier (though stimulating) narrative experience. These correlations between testing high on the ART and the ability to do well on a variety of empathy tests lacks more definitive data. That said, it is nonetheless a landmark first step into giving humanities scholarship the type of data that is

valued in a STEM-driven society, and it opens the door for a variety research. The data presented in this chapter seeks to address this lack of a causal relationship.

The concept that fiction is a simulation or re-elaboration of reality has been demonstrated in a number of empirical studies as well. There are observable differences in brain activity that occur when reading fiction versus nonfiction texts. Altmann et al., for example, note that a text itself does not necessarily need to indicate to the reader that it is fictional for it to be considered fictional, echoing Searle in saying that there is nothing semantical or formal about a work of fiction itself that says “I am fictional” (22). In their study, participants were asked to read 80 very short texts while undergoing an fMRI in order to observe brain activity. Half of these texts were entirely invented by the researchers using very neutral language, and the other half were adaptations of “negatively valanced plots” taken from a game, such as those found in crime novels or news stories. The participants involved were not familiar with the source material before the study started. Before reading each text, the word “real” or “invented” was displayed on a screen before being replaced by the text.

By presenting a story as either “real” or “invented” (i.e. nonfiction and fiction), readers’ minds were demonstrably more primed for different cognitive tasks. Overall, their results demonstrate that reading the texts activated readers’ imaginations, but very differently: when a reader believed the text was “real,” there was greater activity in the parts of their brains associated with information gathering, recollection, and an ordering of events, similar to what would happen when reading a newspaper; when the reader believed the text was fictional, brain activity was observed in regions associated with attention, pain perception, emotion, and prediction or evaluation of future events. Their findings support the idea that fiction is a simulation of social

interactions, in which readers are primed for empathy and wondering “what’s going to happen next?”

There are two remarkable aspects to their findings, the foremost being the purpose of their study: texts do not need to be *actual* pieces of fiction, but rather what matters is that the reader *believes* the text is fiction. Furthermore, even though this was not the focus of their study, participants read eighty texts ranging from 41-57 words long (the median length was 48 words). In fact, the authors refer to the texts as “micro-narratives” on one occasion, though it does not appear to be an intentional use of the word referring to the MR as it is discussed here, but simply an indication of their very short length. Participants read very short works of narrative fiction—they read MR.

This adds another nuance to the working definition of a MR presented here: not only are they brief works of fictional prose by merit of the detailed literary analyses the text can provide to scholars and readers, but also simply because authors and scholars *refer* to them as brief works as fictional prose. These are works of fiction because their writers say so, and they are long enough to activate observable differences in the reader’s mind when the reader knows—or believes, which is the same thing—that they are reading fiction.

5.3 Introduction to Hispanic Literature: Research Questions

Given that the MR can be cognitively perceived as a work of narrative fiction, as Altmann et al. demonstrate, more research can be done with the MR regarding the Social Awareness Hypothesis. Just as the internet affords MR a place to thrive, the MR provides researchers in the humanities another tool to analyze changes in readers. Another issue is that most of the research on the correlation between social or empathetic awareness and exposure to literature tend to focus

on readers who read in their native language. What about people who read literature in a language they are learning? The new language presents a more difficult barrier to overcome, and thus students must fluctuate more between the potential for an immersive experience, looking up words, rereading something for it to make sense, or decide to skip it parts of it altogether. This certainly risks missing important narrative details, thereby breaking the simulation and not practicing any social interaction in the fictional space.

However, if it can be safely assumed that an outcome of any literature course is to teach students to think critically about the world around them by means of understanding other geographies, languages, people, and culture (which is to say, a simulation of social minds, a re-elaboration of reality, a work of fiction), that goal is even more salient in the L2 literature classroom. If that is the case, then considering the Social Awareness Hypothesis, students who enroll in an L2 literature course may demonstrate more empathetic ability upon completion of the course than they did initially. Indeed, I hypothesized that students would demonstrate more awareness of underlying mental states at the end of the semester than at the beginning as indicated by an increased use of metacognitive vocabulary, embedded mental states, and imagined conjecture about the story world when presented with a text.

5.3.1 Methodology

To test these hypotheses, data was collected from three different sections of a standard undergraduate Introduction to Hispanic Literature course. Each section was taught by a different professor, and although the course goals are the same, each individual professor was free to teach according to their own style. They were not instructed or expected to make any modifications to their course with the exception of providing five minutes for students to complete the activity

outlined below at the beginning of the semester and again at the end. The professors were also at liberty to modify their own syllabus and course material as they saw fit; not all professors assigned the exact same reading material to all of their students, but all material was appropriate for the students' level of Spanish, maintained the same expected academic rigor, and it aligned with the common course goals.

This course was chosen not only because it requires an upper intermediate level of Spanish, but because the course is also an introduction to the study of literature, and thus resides at the intersection of second language learning and the Social Awareness Hypothesis. All students present on the first and last days of class were asked to participate as part of the course, although there was no penalty for not completing the task, nor were there any academic, monetary, or other incentives offered. Students were presented with instructions in Spanish to read a MR by Argentinian writer Adolfo Bioy Casares and to describe the main character. The MR was described as a “texto breve de ficción” for two principle reasons: it avoids confusion or misunderstandings by avoiding the presentation of unfamiliar vocabulary, and it indicates to the students that what they are about to read is fictional, drawing from the conclusions offered by Altmann et al. No other instructions were given. Students repeated this activity at the end of the semester after reading the same MR:

“Una vida”

La cocinera dijo que no se casó porque no tuvo tiempo. Cuando era joven trabajaba con una familia que le permitía salir dos horas cada quince días. Esas dos horas las empleaba en ir en el tranvía 38, hasta la casa de unos parientes, a ver si habían llegado cartas de España, y volver en el tranvía 38.

This text was chosen for its brevity, consisting of only sixty words (including the title). The language appears to be simple enough to be understood by intermediate Spanish students. It is also a MR that may provoke an affective, empathetic response in the reader—recall Gerrig’s *p-response*—in that an empathetic reader may be able to identify the cook’s perspective. Importantly, this text has no instance of an embedded mental state, nor does it have any metacognitive, affective, or descriptive vocabulary. This avoids the text directly guiding readers to empathetic conclusions (i.e., “the text says she feels sad”), but rather, a text void of this language should afford readers the chance to empathize for themselves (i.e. “I think she must feel sad”).

A total of 55 students completed the entry task (Set A), but only 41 completed the exit task (Set B). Despite the instructions and text being presented in Spanish and the professors only speaking Spanish to their students, one student completed the entry task in English. This was not included in the analysis, which therefore included 54 entries in Set A and 41 in Set B. The analysis was designed to detail the changes in students’ descriptions of the main character of the text (understood to be the cook) between the beginning and the end of the semester. Data from each section was identified with a number (1, 2, and 3, respectively) as well as a letter indicating its set (A or B). Results were drawn from comparing two sets of the same section (i.e. 1A and 1B) as well as all sections between both sets (1A, 2A, 3A and 1B, 2B, 3B). In other words, each individual section was analyzed for any changes at the end of the semester, as well as overall changes across all sections at the end of the semester. Students’ responses were coded in order to quantify them for analysis according to the parameters outlined below.

5.3.2 Parameters

Nine parameters were used to code student responses: wordcount, overall metacognitive vocabulary, first-person metacognitive vocabulary, affective descriptors, comparisons, complete

phrases, highest level of embedded mental states, misspellings, and conjectures. These nine parameters were then used in a variety of statistical analyses presented in the following section.

The wordcount parameter is the total number of words or numbers as separated by a space or punctuation. Metacognitive vocabulary includes any verb or noun such as “creo,” “pensamientos,” and more; additionally, of that vocabulary, any first-person references were also counted as indicative of the students’ own metacognition. Affective descriptors include any emotions or states, the most common of which was found to be “triste.” Recall that none of these were present in the original text; any instance of mentioning a character’s or one’s own emotions or *p-responses* here can be considered a sign of empathy or imagination.

The comparisons parameter is a broad category including any comparisons to anything outside of the text itself; this includes referring to other literary works or comparing the character to a real-world example. Any instances of connecting the MR to phenomena outside of the text can be considered indicative of the reader accessing shared sociocultural memory, individual memory, or otherwise thinking critically about the text.

The number of complete phases refers to the number of phrases separated by a final punctuation mark: a period, question mark, or exclamation point; this is because not all students included a conjugated verb in each complete phrase, and so did not write in what is considered a grammatically full sentence in Spanish. These phrases are nonetheless insightful to the present study.

Students’ responses were combed for instances of levels of embedded mental states. In each response that included at least one instance, only the highest level was recorded. For example, a student’s response that includes “Yo creo que...ella quiere estar con su familia” was given a score of two: being with her family is embedded within the cook’s mind (“ella quiere”), and her

wish is embedded within the reader's mind ("Yo *creo*"). A response such as "Ella trata de escapar de la situación" was given a score of one, because her escaping is embedded within her intent ("ella *trata de*"). A response such as "Ella trabaja mucho y no tiene tiempo libre" was given a score of zero because nothing about this is embedded within anyone's mental states. This parameter is limited to the highest level of embedded states present, rather than instances of embedment, because the purpose of the present study is to determine whether or not there is an observable difference in awareness of mental states: any presence and level of any embedment between Set A and Set B is of greater interest than comparing differences in the frequency of embedding mental states within individual responses. Furthermore, very few students had multiple instances of embedment within a single response, and any resulting calculations would prove statistically insignificant.

Any word with any number of typographic errors is considered a single misspelling. This includes a missing or extra accent mark or tilde; extra, missing, or incorrect letters; an incorrect verb tense; incorrect verb (i.e. *ser/estar*); using a word in English for not knowing the word in Spanish; using a false cognate; incorrect gender or number agreement; incorrect, missing, or extra pronoun; and more. Some words written included various errors, but each individual word contributed a maximum of one point in this parameter.

The conjecture parameter encompasses any assumption, guess, question, or comment pertaining to any phenomena within the story world that is not explicit in the text. For example, many students commented that the cook was poor, or she was sending money to her family, or she had immigrated from Spain; these are assumptions not explicitly made by the text, but rather, they are indications of the students' imagination actively building the story world that the text has afforded them to create.

5.3.3 Results

A full copy of the results is presented in Appendix 2; the most pertinent results are discussed in this section. A total of 54 responses were analyzed in Set A and 41 from Set B. Across all sections, students in Set A averaged 46.1 words per response, whereas in Set B, they averaged 55.8 word per response. In Set A and Set B, these responses averaged 3.5 and 3.9 complete phrases, respectively.

A relatively small decrease in the frequency of metacognitive vocabulary compared to total words used was observed, dropping by 0.28% from 3.77% to 3.49% between Set A and B, respectively. The same was observed per phrase: in Set A, 49.21% of all phrases contained a metacognitive word, whereas in Set B, metacognitive vocabulary was found in 49.69% of phrases, increasing by 0.48%. These changes account for less than a half percent of difference, and because of the small pool size, these results are considered negligible. Of that metacognitive vocabulary, however, there was a marked change in the use of first-person metacognitive words, decreasing by 7.26% between Set A and Set B from 39.36% of all metacognitive vocabulary to 32.10%, respectively.

The responses were coded to indicate the highest level of embedded mental states. In Set A, at least one instance of embedment was observed in an average of 9.95% of all phrases. In Set B, 14.72% of phrases had at least one instance of embedding a mental state, increasing by 4.78%. Furthermore, none of the responses in Set A surpassed the first level of embedment (i.e. “*ella quiere* estar con su familia”), whereas four student responses in Set B reached a second level (i.e. “Yo *pienso* que *ella quiere* estar con su familia”). The frequency of the first level of embedment decreased by 0.13% from Set A to Set B (from 9.95% to 9.82%, respectively), and can be

considered a negligible difference. Of the phrases with instances of embedment in Set B, 16.67% were second level.

In general, a noticeable increase in the frequency of conjectures per phrase was observed between both sets. Sections 1 and 2 increased by 48.69% (40.96% to 89.66%) and 23.14% (29.03% to 52.17%) respectively, and although section 3 only increased by 2.78%, this is due to a very high frequency of conjectures: on average, 100% of responses from Section 3 included at least one conjecture in Set A, and 102.78% in Set B. That is to say, there were on average one or more conjectures per phrase in both Set A and Set B for Section 3, whereas in Section 1 and Section 2, there was roughly one conjecture per two sentences. Overall, however, a marked increase of 25.38% was observed between both Sets of conjectures per phrase.

Very few comparisons were observed across all Sections and Sets. Section 1 presented no comparisons in either set. In Section 2, an increase of 2.24% in frequency of comparisons per sentence was observed from Set A (6.45%) to Set B (8.70%). Section 3 yielded a similar result, increasing from 0% to 2.78% in frequency from Set A to B. Overall, a general increase in frequency by 2.20% of conjectures per phrase was observed.

5.3.4 Discussion

Common observations across the three sections indicate that any differences in teaching style and variations in course material is negligible, although as observed above (and in the Appendix), some differences between sections were noted. It should be noted that pedagogical differences were not the only variables unaccounted for: sections varied in class size, location, time of meeting, and meeting days.

In the case of levels of embedment, the sentences were much more likely to include embedded mental states at the end of the semester than at the beginning. This is in support of the

general hypothesis: students would demonstrate more empathetic responses after sixteen weeks of studying literature than at the beginning. There were no instances of a second-level embedment in Set A, but there were four in Set B. Furthermore, although the frequency of phrases including any instance of embedment did not noticeably change, there was a marked increase in the likelihood of that instance being a second level.

An obvious critique of this study is that it does not control for specific levels of Spanish language mastery. There is no distinction made between any heritage/native speakers of Spanish or students who are new learners. In order for students to enroll in the course, they must first meet minimum language requirements, but students are welcome to enroll in this course who exceed the minimum. Indeed, for some students, this may be their first course in Spanish outside of a typical language classroom, whereas this may not be the case for others. Indeed, it is possible that a factor in obtaining these positive results is one of the underlying course outcomes: students are generally expected to improve their mastery of the Spanish language in an L2 classroom. It could be argued that students' responses, despite generally being shorter, were also semantically richer after having developed a wider range of vocabulary.

To test this, a follow-up analysis was performed in which the frequency of all words in each section and in each set was compared. After correcting for misspellings, the common prepositions, articles, and conjunctions were excluded from analysis in order to focus on pertinent vocabulary. However, in observing the frequency of the most commonly used vocabulary across Set A and Set B, there was very little variation in words accounting for at least one percent of all words used.

This follow-up analysis was taken a step further. The corpus was combed for words unique to each set: in the case of adjectives, variations in gender and number were removed (i.e. if “rojo”

appeared in Set A and “rojas” in Set B, both words were removed); similarly, nouns varying in number were removed, as were adverb/adjective variations (i.e. “injustamente” in Set A and “injusto” in Set B). However, different conjugations of verbs (i.e. “creo” in Set A and “cree” in Set B) were not removed as they may be more indicative of a students’ use of more complex sentence structures. Different categories of words that share a common semantic origin were also counted. For example, “amar,” “amoroso,” and “amante” are a verb, an adjective, and a noun, respectively, and they are semantically different enough to be considered a unique word. The purpose of this second round of applying a vocabulary filter is to center the focus of the comparison on words that are entirely unique to each set. Removing these words and their variants that were present in both sets, this leaves 245 words unique to Set A and 198 words unique to Set B. This is to say that of all of the different words used in Set A, 49.6% did not appear in students’ responses at the end of the semester; similarly, 44.6% of the different words present in Set B were not used in the beginning of the semester.

Although the most common words between both sets were very similar, this difference in words unique to each set could indicate that students were, in fact, better able to express their thoughts in Spanish at the end of the semester. However, this does not demonstrate that it is due to their improved levels of Spanish that they were better able to express their empathy for the cook in the MR; this is demonstrative only that students at the end of the semester were more precise in their writing, given that the relative amounts of unique words were similar despite a noticeable decrease in words written when compared to the beginning. This is *how* they wrote; *what* they wrote is of more interest in the present study. It can be observed that students’ performance at the end of the semester demonstrates more expressiveness in Spanish, that added expressiveness also seems to correlate with an increase in awareness of a fictional character’s mental state.

Future iterations of this research may consider students in a similar course of another language (i.e. French or German) in addition to English. A comparable course in English given to native speakers of English, while it might include a course outcome of enriching students' vocabulary, removes the expectation and cognitive demand of performing these tasks in a second language and could serve as a control group against which to compare any changes observed in the second language courses. Alternatively, students could read the original text in Spanish and respond in English; this may give students the opportunity to express themselves better and avoid the issues of fluency in the target language. Similarly, this study does not account for any undergraduate students who have experience studying literature (i.e. from high school or other university coursework) or programs of study.

5.4 Conclusion

The MR's unique form at the intersections of brevity, narrativity, and fictionality lend itself to a variety of practical and theoretical uses. Regardless of the outcome, both before and after the semester, these sixty words contained no references to any mental states whatsoever. However, in every class, students were still able to empathize and perceive the world through her eyes. They improved at the end of the semester, but even at the beginning, the mere presentation of this text afforded students the opportunity to construct a story world in their imagination (to different degrees, of course). Students were presented with a MR and it has been empirically demonstrated that they were able to imagine affect, which is what the Altman study suggests occurs in their mind to begin with.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION: THE *COMTEXERE* OF THE *MICRORRELATO*

This dissertation began with a discussion of the MR “El dinosaurio,” which has, since its publication, incited a surge in creating, sharing, discussing, reading, and writing about the form. It seems appropriate to conclude with a discussion of one more example by Merino as illustrative and summative of my arguments:

“Agujero negro”

El hombre pasea por la playa solitaria y encuentra, depositada en la orilla por las olas, una botella de cristal negro, con una señal muy extraña impresa en su tapón. Mientras lo desenrosca, el hombre piensa en sus lecturas de niño: el genio cautivo, los mensajes de náufragos. Abierta, la botella inicia una violentísima inhalación que aspira todo lo que la rodea, el hombre, la playa, las montañas, los pueblos, el mar, los veleros, las islas, el cielo, las nubes, el planeta, el sistema solar, la Vía Láctea, las galaxias. En pocos instantes, el universo entero ha quedado encerrado dentro de la botella. El movimiento ha sido tan brusco que se me ha caído la pluma de la mano y han quedado descolocados todos mis papeles. Recupero la pluma, ordeno los folios, empiezo a escribir otra vez la historia del hombre que pasea por la playa solitaria. (“La ascensión” 356)

As is common in the literature published by Merino, there is an unclear separation between the “reality” of the narrator and the fictional world of the characters. This MR begins with the story of a man walking on a beach: already, the reader is afforded the opportunity to transport themselves to the same beach and assume a physical position somewhere there in order to observe the man.

While reading this, I immediately imagined myself at eye level with the man who was walking toward me, the waves of the ocean to my right (to his left); any other readers may have entirely different imagined scenarios, and they are all equally valid because the text does not offer any other clues as to where the reader should be situated during this narrative immersion.

Immediately, the man finds a mysterious bottle on the shore. Immediately, the man thinks of what he remembers from the books and stories he read when he was younger about genies and shipwrecks. Readers of this MR may be familiar with similar tales of secret messages locked in bottles, of pirates or stranded survivors on an abandoned island. Already, the reader is accessing a sociocultural memory shared by the reader, Merino, and this fictional character: familiarity with stories of shipwrecks and genies is a requisite for understanding *why* the character had those thoughts—they are not questioned by the reader of the MR who is also familiar with these stories, but rather, the reader may seamlessly begin to share the character's same thoughts. The stories the character was familiar with in his own past have come to the surface in his mind, informing his perception of the bottle on the ground; he did not think of an apothecary, or nail polish, or tabasco sauce, or any other number of things that might be associated with a bottle. The context of finding the bottle on the beach evoked memories specific to literature he was familiar with, fictional settings in which some characters must have happened upon mysterious bottles as integral parts of that story world; there is no indication that this man walking on the beach has ever encountered a mysterious bottle before in his reality, but it can be said that he has encountered mysterious bottles in fictional settings—which may in fact be just about the same thing.

The reader of this MR might be just as surprised as the character when, upon opening the bottle, the entire universe is consumed. Suddenly, the title makes sense: a black hole is an area in spacetime with such a strong gravitational field that nothing, not even light, can escape its pull.

The character's entire existence is sucked into the mysterious bottle. Again, at least a vague familiarity of a black hole—not difficult to achieve given their presence in popular Western films, novels, series, and other cultural expressions—is required for the title to make sense, which has already primed the reader to expect something potentially cosmic in the story.

The narrator of the MR suddenly interjects in the first person, saying that this event was so quick that he dropped the *pluma* and the pages were shuffled. Though a sudden, unexpected comment by the narrator, the reader of the MR begins to blend two concepts: a man whose universe was sucked into a bottle, and a writer who needed to reorganize the pages and start the story over. The man on the beach was a story that the narrator was writing, and the mysterious bottle must have been a bottle of ink that had spilled across the pages, “consuming” everything that was written. Here, Merino creates a jarring shift in understanding the “reality” of the story world: it is not the man on the beach, but a writer who needs to rewrite the story of a man on the beach.

The narrator's use of the word *pluma* for his writing utensil is one single utterance that evokes the imagery of a bottle of ink. In many Latin American countries, the word *pluma* is often the word of choice for any given ink pen, such as a Bic. In Spain, however, this type of contemporary ink pen is usually referred to as *bolígrafo*. *Pluma* is a much older word for “pen” because it also means “feather,” referring to an antiquated quill. Merino, being Spanish, wrote for Spanish readers; the nuanced difference between *pluma* and *bolígrafo* may immediately evoke the Golden-Age-esque imagery of a writer poring over manuscripts, a quill in hand, ready to dip in a bottle of black ink.

Two distinct moments of transportation to a story world have occurred: first to the beach with the man, then to wherever the writer/narrator of that story is residing, cleaning up spilled ink—but they were each very short trips, and each reader's imagination will have crafted different

story worlds. The extreme brevity affords more opportunities for the readers' own *comtexere* to build up the story world and create a narrative experience unique to each of them.

A very brief work of narrative fiction is incredibly complex despite its brevity, and it depends entirely on the *comtexere* of the human who reads it. The writer and reader of a MR both exist in a specific time, space, and culture at the time of writing and reading, united by an underlying shared sociocultural memory. These may be very similar times, spaces, and cultures, and yet there are still individual differences to consider. The MR lends itself to scholars as an excellent tool to gain further insights into the nature of fiction itself. When the commuters and pedestrians of Madrid come across brief instances of fiction, regardless of their origin or fragmented presentation, they still afford these sudden readers a chance to create brief moments of narrative engagement: reminders of story worlds left unexplored.

In Chapter 2, I briefly mentioned that a MR is generally *written* or *printed* work of narrative fiction in the sense that it is meant to be read (as opposed to performed, for example). For as long as humans as a species have had a sense of communication, brief fictional narratives have been present. In a keynote presentation for Fundación Juan March in January 2016, Merino describes how fiction “inventó al ser humano” : stories about the world around us were not made up because people were just bored, but rather, the stories gave meaning to the world around us, thereby giving us meaning as well (*La ficción*). Per Merino, the ability to “reelaborar la realidad”—his definition of fiction—is what truly separated us as a species from our simian ancestors. We could tell stories as a way to explain the world around us—why it rains, how fire exists, and more.

Nancy Easterlin proposes a similar argument as an understanding of the external mind hypothesis as informed by current theories of evolution. Per Easterlin, the majority of theorists agree that art—which necessarily includes literature and fiction - and the “prehistory of aesthetics”

must have had an evolutionary purpose: in terms of resources (physical, cognitive, temporal, etc.), art is very costly. Easterlin demonstrates that” The arts, in all their diversity of forms, are not mere ornaments braided into the evolution of human culture. Rather, they are a central feature of the psychological forces propelling its development” (663). Art is the human-created expression of any phenomenon, and these expressions are cognitively rich. This allows for a cognitive offload—the early humans could express semiotically rich ideas in single artifacts, whether this is a specific adornment to be worn, body or wall painting, or stories about danger or weather events. By offloading these meanings, thoughts, and ideas to a space physically outside the body, this allowed for their social manipulation: they can be shared; elaborated on; developed; used to teach, inform, or warn; and countless other possibilities.

The MR is no exception to this concept. Its marked brevity affords readers the opportunity to imagine story worlds based almost entirely on their own imagination, drawing from personal experiences, and paratextual information. These imagined story worlds offer places for readers to access shared cultural memory and to experiences otherwise impossible situations. The MR as an autonomous narrative prose genre is eclectic and multifaceted in its literary inspiration, but regardless of the blurred lines, all MR afford the reader the opportunity to construct a narrative in their imagination, due in part to their specific presentation by the authors and publishers. What is afforded to the reader by the text is malleable between contexts, allowing for the plurality of definitions, categorizations, or perceptions of these very brief works of fiction.

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APPENDIX A. RESULTS FROM DATA COLLECTION

Table 1. Instances of Levels of Embedded Mental States

Comparisons: Instances of Individual Level Counts		
Data set	1HLE	2HLE
1a	3	0
1b	4	1
Change	1	1
2a	11	0
2b	8	3
Change	-3	3
3a	5	0
3b	4	0
Change	-1	0
Overall A	19	0
Overall B	16	4
Overall Change	-3	4

Table 2. Comparison of Highest levels of Embedment.

Comparisons: Instances of Individual Level Counts Per Sentence		
Data set	1HLE	2HLE
1a	3.61%	0.00%
1b	6.90%	1.72%
Change	3.28%	1.72%
2a	17.74%	0.00%
2b	11.59%	4.35%
Change	-6.15%	4.35%
3a	10.87%	0.00%
3b	11.11%	0.00%
Change	0.24%	0.00%
Overall A	9.95%	0.00%
Overall B	9.82%	16.67%
Overall Change	-0.13%	16.67%

Table 3. Conjectures per phrase.

Data set	Per Phrase
1a	40.96%
1b	89.66%
Change	48.69%
2a	29.03%
2b	52.17%
Change	23.14%
3a	100.00%
3b	102.78%
Change	2.78%
Overall A	51.31%
Overall B	76.69%
Overall Change	25.38%

Table 4. Comparisons per phrase.

Data set	Per Phrase
1a	0.00%
1b	0.00%
Change	0.00%
2a	6.45%
2b	8.70%
Change	2.24%
3a	0.00%
3b	2.78%
Change	2.78%
Overall A	2.09%
Overall B	4.29%
Overall Change	2.20%

Table 5. Instances of Metacognitive Vocabulary

	Total Metacog	Per Wordcount	Phrases Per Metacog
1a	32	3.00%	38.55%
1b	25	2.96%	43.10%
Change	-7	-0.04%	4.55%

2a	39	4.96%	62.90%
2b	43	4.51%	62.32%
Change	4	-0.45%	-0.58%
3a	23	3.58%	50.00%
3b	13	2.49%	36.11%
Change	-10	-1.09%	-13.89%
Overall A	94	3.77%	49.21%
Overall B	81	3.49%	49.69%
Overall Change	-13	-0.28%	0.48%

Table 6. Instances of 1st Person Metacognitive Vocabulary

	1st Person Metacog	Per Wordcount	Per Phrase
1a	11	1.03%	13.25%
1b	4	0.47%	66.67%
Change	-7	-0.56%	53.41%
2a	22	2.80%	35.48%
2b	21	2.20%	30.43%
Change	-1	-0.60%	-5.05%
3a	4	0.62%	8.70%
3b	1	0.19%	2.78%
Change	-3	-0.43%	-5.92%
Overall A	37	1.48%	19.37%
Overall B	26	1.12%	15.95%
Overall Change	-11	-0.36%	-3.42%

Table 7. Comparison of the Frequency of Most common Words

Entry Word	Entry Count	Entry Freq.	Exit Word	Exit Count	Exit Freq.
es	86	5.13%	es	92.00	6.3%
su	59	3.52%	su	71.00	4.8%
tiene	45	2.68%	familia	49.00	3.3%
familia	43	2.57%	tiene	41.00	2.8%
tiempo	37	2.21%	tiempo	37.00	2.5%
muy	34	2.03%	cocinera	33.00	2.2%
cocinera	33	1.97%	vida	33.00	2.2%
vida	32	1.91%	mucho	33.00	2.2%
personaje	31	1.85%	muy	25.00	1.7%
mucho	25	1.49%	se	23.00	1.6%
esta	24	1.43%	horas	20.00	1.4%
sus	22	1.31%	dos	14.00	1.0%
España	18	1.07%	dos	13.00	0.9%
más	17	1.01%	esta	13.00	0.9%
trabaja	17	1.01%	persona	13.00	0.9%
trabajar	16	0.95%	puede	13.00	0.9%
parientes	15	0.89%	si	13.00	0.9%
texto	15	0.89%	trabaja	13.00	0.9%
trabajo	15	0.89%	trabajo	13.00	0.9%

APPENDIX B. DECÁLOGO DEL PERFECTO CUENTISTA

- I. Cree en un maestro -Poe, Maupassant, Kipling, Chejov- como en Dios mismo.
- II. Cree que su arte es una cima inaccesible. No sueñes en domarla. Cuando puedas hacerlo, lo conseguirás sin saberlo tú mismo.
- III. Resiste cuanto puedas a la imitación, pero imita si el influjo es demasiado fuerte. Más que ninguna otra cosa, el desarrollo de la personalidad es una larga paciencia
- IV. Ten fe ciega no en tu capacidad para el triunfo, sino en el ardor con que lo deseas. Ama a tu arte como a tu novia, dándole todo tu corazón.
- V. No empieces a escribir sin saber desde la primera palabra adónde vas. En un cuento bien logrado, las tres primeras líneas tienen casi la importancia de las tres últimas.
- VI. Si quieres expresar con exactitud esta circunstancia: “Desde el río soplaba el viento frío”, no hay en lengua humana más palabras que las apuntadas para expresarla. Una vez dueño de tus palabras, no te preocupes de observar si son entre sí consonantes o asonantes.
- VII. No adjetives sin necesidad. Inútiles serán cuantas colas de color adhieras a un sustantivo débil. Si hallas el que es preciso, él solo tendrá un color incomparable. Pero hay que hallarlo.
- VIII. Toma a tus personajes de la mano y llévalos firmemente hasta el final, sin ver otra cosa que el camino que les trazaste. No te distraigas viendo tú lo que ellos no pueden o no les importa ver. No abuses del lector. Un cuento es una novela depurada de ripios. Ten esto por una verdad absoluta, aunque no lo sea.

- IX. No escribas bajo el imperio de la emoción. Déjala morir, y evócala luego. Si eres capaz entonces de revivirla tal cual fue, has llegado en arte a la mitad del camino
- X. No pienses en tus amigos al escribir, ni en la impresión que hará tu historia. Cuenta como si tu relato no tuviera interés más que para el pequeño ambiente de tus personajes, de los que pudiste haber sido uno. No de otro modo se obtiene la vida del cuento.