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Literary Fiction Under Coloniality and the Relief of Meditation in Guadalupe Nettel's *Desupés del invierno*, Carla Faesler's *Formol* and Laía Jufresa's 'La pierna era nuestro altar'

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The present article fosters a dialogue among multiple currents of literary research. Disability scholars such as Garland-Thomson, Davis, and Mitchell and Snyder, have famously explored the literary conventions of normativity. Their queries on normates and statistical averages, form a parallel line of thought with Moretti's (2007) 'distant reading' of the novel. These two distinct pathways- distant reading and disability- lead to the same questioning of the accepted aesthetics of rationality, which of course interests scholars of Anthropocene. An environmental thinker of the stature of Ghosh (2016) has already taken up Moretti's observations, and the present article places that engagement into a still richer context, with decolonial thinkers such as Grech, Maldonado-Torres, and Mignolo. This broad juxtaposition of thinkers, indicates that disability thought already prepares the environmentally conscious imagination to reach for alternatives to ableist and colonial readings. The principles of this wide-ranging theoretical dialogue are then put to the test with examples drawn from three Mexican writers' fiction. The novels *Formol* (2014) by Carla Faesler (b. 1967) and *Despúes del invierno* (2014) by Guadalupe Nettel (b. 1973), along with the short story 'La pierna era nuestro altar' from *El esquinista* (2014) by Laia Jufresa (1983), review colonial habits using the aesthetic of realism and end up in familiar disenchantment that forestalls the possibility of an alternative. Nevertheless, these texts manage to interrupt their conventional fictions in the realist mode for moments of mindfulness. These pauses from accepted reasoning suggest an alternative style of cogitation, against the assumptions of the 'normate,' that may support Felski's and Latour's calls for a turn away from disenchantment. The article concludes that literary fiction might begin to listen to its own science and contemplate environmental disaster through a more mindful mode of poetic thought, a perceptive thinking that does not automatically accept the conventions established for the rational as the only 'realistic' aesthetic. The breaks or 'breathers' from the conventions of rationality included in these three contemporary fictions point the way toward a permissible mode of well-being in accordance with decolonial goals. Even if such mindful writing does not ultimately take hold in literary fiction, it may still aid critics in reassessing the tendency of the normate to cast itself as a superior kind of victim.

Keywords: Mexico; Disability; Decolonial; Women writers; Anthropocene; Environment

Introduction

In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh observes that critically admired fiction, labeled *literary fiction*, contributes little to the conversation on our looming planetary environmental

crisis. For thought on the scale and futurity of the Anthropocene, the reader must turn not to prize-winning 'serious' novels, but to the lowly genre of science fiction. 'Indeed', Ghosh (2016:7) writes, 'it could even be said that fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously by serious literary journals'. Those journals respect a narrow range of novelistic norms- a topic that greatly interests disability scholars. Ghosh directs us toward the realization that an aura of scientifically-backed rationality, coaches an impression of realism in literary fiction; that sophisticated literature lacks insight because it designs a science that does not listen to itself. I refer to the seemingly scientific and rational aesthetic of literary fiction that shuns the unpredictable. In order to build on that idea and bridge thought on disability and the decolonial exposure of colonialiality, I contemplate talented Mexican writers' characters who can pass for 'normates' in the novels *Formol* (2014) by Carla Faesler (b. 1967) and *Después del invierno* (2014) by Guadalupe Nettel (b. 1973), as well as the short story 'La pierna era nuestro altar' (2014) by Laía Jufresa (b. 1983).

Any number of figures from the two novels could serve my purposes because, like Jufresa's anonymous narrator-protagonist, the characters flirt with dropping out of productive society, though in the end they manage no more than a disenchanted recommitment to a sense of belonging within the colonialist order. A quick plot review reveals the simple narrative arcs in these tales. Here, I present thumbnail sketches of the main plot developments. *Después del invierno* has Nettel's Claudio remain in a sexual relationship with the older Ruth, despite a brief fling with co-protagonist Claudia; Claudio loses his leg in the Boston marathon bombing and appreciates Ruth's help as he recovers. Faesler's *Formol* portrays a Mexico-City based family as guardians of the heart of the last Aztec sacrifice; after Larca's mother dies due to unspecified illness and her boyfriend disappears due to a murky context of violence, Larca and her father turn over the preserved heart to a lab. In 'La pierna era nuestro altar', Jufresa's narrator saves money by visiting a pool during its cheapest hours. Despite the unfamiliar attractions of, for example, a prosthetic leg that one swimmer leaves at the side of the pool, the protagonist becomes disillusioned with the midday crowd and renounces the leisurely schedule for a regular job.

As norm-establishing characters, Nettel's Claudio, Faesler's Larca, and Jufresa's protagonist set up glimpses for the reader of something like another way when they suspend judgmental narrative. That mental respite is known outside literary fiction as mindfulness, a secular meditative practice that combats depressive thought patterns (Hofmann et al., 2010). These pauses from the narrative norm seem to me a condition that complements the decolonial effort of exposing coloniality, since the latter, as disability scholars have argued, determines verisimilitude (the 'average' or 'real') in literary fiction; mindfulness can aid the effort to reveal believable plots as an aesthetic effect.

Faesler, Jufresa, and Nettel are excellent students of empire, thanks to their residences abroad. Nettel spent formative time in France as an adolescent and as a university student. Faesler completed advanced university studies in France. Jufresa currently lives in Germany.

This knowledge allows them to engage an aesthetic reminiscent of Rebecca Walkowitz's catchy title on world literature, *Born Translated*. The Mexican authors' shared command of European culture and imperial languages, including French and English, trains them in polyglot literary traditions of the sort that inform Walkowitz's (2015:4) examined texts, which were '*written for translation*, in the hope of being translated, but […] also often *written as translations*, pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they have, in fact, been composed' (emphasis in original). In addition to allowing characters or narrators the habit of selecting foreign terms for certain words, the three Mexican authors also set fiction in world-renowned sites of translation. Faesler's use of Mexico City compares to Nettel's urban settings of New York and Paris, though Jufresa beats them at this game by presenting a generically westernized urban space of an indoor swimming pool.

Nettel's *Después del invierno*, underscores the matter of translation so vehemently that I review her plot in greater detail now with stress on the relevant languages. Claudio exercises professional skills as a translator and editor of Spanish, French, and English. He works in New York where he dates a wealthy English-speaking designer named Ruth Perelman, who speaks less fluent French than him and takes him on a business trip to Paris. There, Claudio reunites with Cuban friend Haydée and meets Mexican literature grad student Cecilia Rangel. The latter, except for a fling with Claudio that has her travel to New York, centers her life in France on an Italian bookstore worker named Tom, who spent formative years in New York. Illnesses also unite these figures. Cecilia, Claudio, and Ruth all wrestle with depression, and (wouldn't you know it?) the contrastingly upbeat Tom dies after missing the window of opportunity for an organ transplant. Disenchantment supports Nettel's evenness of tone that comes off as polished.

The same tone of disenchantment, though with perhaps more linguistic experimentation and thus slightly less polished consistency, characterizes Faesler's and Jufresa's knowing narrative voices. Such sophistication seems to demand cynicism, a wearily judgmental stance that poses the focalizing character as a norm-setting 'standard bearer,' so to speak. To ground this idea, I cite Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's (1997:8) definition of her neologism: 'The term *normate* usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them'. The callous observation of disability places the normate's views in parallel to discriminations familiar from coloniality, but it cannot be said that normates are simply colonizers. No neat binary relegates disability only to the colonized. Shaun Grech (2015:11) has already explained that the normate colonizer represents both categories in the binary, both the beneficiary of ableism *and* of the disabled body, because the colonized (here, black) body is imagined as physically stronger, though lacking in the colonizers' 'intellectual ability, discipline, perseverance and purity of spirit'. For the Latin American context, concepts of purity and *mestizaje* dominate the confused categories.

According to Gabriela Raquel Ríos's (2016) concise review of *mestizaje* as a keyword in decolonial efforts, 'mixed blood' is incorrectly considered a solution to racist ideals of purity. Against the usual assumptions of Latinx and Latin American studies, Ríos (2016: 120) protests that *mestizaje*, 'rather than exploding the logics of purity,' ends up reifying notions such as race, 'because it relies on "pure" subjects that then "mix" to create the mixed "mestiza consciousness" that is ultimately superior to its "parts"'. Purity contributes to the 'other' in the binary of functional *mestizaje*, which- to take a page from the disability studies canon- comes to offer a kind of averageness or the literary 'real'. The fact that binaries of abled and disabled are already scrambled under coloniality, shows that decolonial aesthetics can hardly hope to combat the illogic of purity with anything so convenient as a solution. The decolonial merely helps us view willful ignorance and contradictory normative customs. Or, as Ríos (2016:117) puts it, 'the decolonial does not seek to resist or undo colonial (knowledge) designs so much as it seeks to expose or make visible the designs that have been subjugated by the colonial matrix of power'. The reader, impatient for solutions, risks seeking precisely the sort of norm-reinstating narrative arc that feeds the literary novel, and that disability scholars have studied so carefully. Decolonial studies appropriately follows disability studies in questioning the normative plot arc that moves an (allegedly) abnormal situation into a (supposedly) normal one.

To review the logic thus far, I am affirming that for literary critics, decolonial aesthetics are compatible with the aims of disability studies thinkers. The polished cosmopolitan style of prestigious literary fiction, anchored in disenchantment, steadily admires cynical, if not outright depressed viewpoints, and does not necessarily marshal the disruption of disability as a denunciation of coloniality. At this point, I should mention that Ghosh picks up Franco Moretti's (2013:79) celebration of narrative 'filler' as the key innovation of the genre of the novel. Through computer-facilitated analysis of large samples, Moretti's study ironically finds the *literary* aspect of the literary novel to contain, not the broadest scale, nor the most unexpected events- though these absent qualities would be ideal for grappling with subjects like the human-led changes of the Anthropocene. Rather, the literary novel prefers a more modest dimension of detail-obsessed quotidian prose. The stability of this newly *prosaic* novelistic prose, pleases its audience, because the fictionalized routine of everyday life through filler, as quoted by Ghosh (2016:19), and argued originally by Moretti (2013:81), is '*compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life*'. This narrative regularity, as Ghosh (2016:21) observes, declares nature both tamed and boring.

Though one could imagine that disability might somehow be used as a way to remind readers that nature is, in fact, neither tame nor dull, the literary fiction at present requires instances of disability to harmonize with filler, so as to keep a reliable tone and remain believable. That is, novelized disability must match the small-scale predictions of the normate, which not only expects a natural environment to remain tame enough to ignore but also- as per Grech's (2015) observations- tends to occupy both poles of the disability spectrum. The normate

under coloniality is pure *and* a victim; superior *and* weak; category-defying *and* the upholder of binary boundaries. These tensions help to maintain the novel reader's focus on everyday doings of individuals, rather than on suppressed elements such as the fate of the planet.

The aesthetic need to remain unaware of larger realms, perhaps explains the proclivity of characters in the aforementioned Mexican texts to abuse, without challenging verisimilitude, pills or alcohol. The act and resulting tone of sedation is entirely compatible with narrative filler, thanks to the latter's lulling rhythms and narrowed horizon of awareness. The theme of artificial sedation proves especially prominent among secondary characters in Nettel's and Faesler's novels, perhaps because Jufresa's story does not have word count to spare. Disability studies encourages us to note the intertwined theme of the sedated character and technique of the sedated (e.g. disenchanted) narrative as not necessarily connected to the *rational*. Despite our habit of accepting the literary novel as the *real*, there is no reason other than literary custom to perceive depressed cynicism and its heightened perception of stability as *normal*.

Allow me to back up for a moment and support these observations. Note that disability studies supply an answer to Ghosh's (2016:19) query about the timing of filler: 'Why should the rhetoric of the everyday appear at exactly the time when a regime of statistics, ruled by ideas of probability and improbability, was beginning to give new shapes to society?'. An answer already appears in fundamental work by disability scholars Mitchell and Snyder (2000:64), with their breathless leap from nineteenth-century claims of normalcy to an enduring love of mathematical probabilities: 'And the Victorian era gave rise to the study of medical pathology and the use of statistical norms that began the process of sorting physical anomalies into taxonomic catalogues of deviancy'. Later scholarship dates this mutual influence of statistics and the literary normative still earlier, but the principle holds for prose by Nettel, Faesler, and Jufresa: disability is meant to seem believable in their fiction because it appears to remain within the norms of statistical probability.

A pioneering observation that develops Mitchell and Snyder's ideas, appears with Lennard Davis's (2002) view of verisimilitude in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel, as a depiction of the symbolic *average*. To wit, Davis (2002:93) ventures, 'It is no coincidence that for the next hundred years or more, bourgeois society spent much of its culturally productive time trying to find out exactly what average meant'. In other words, fiction helped to define a sense of reality on the basis of statistically defined notions of normativity. Scholars continue to expand the dates of the literature-and-statistical overlap. Moving forward, Kathleen Woodward (2009:199) takes up the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century cultural reliance on statistics as a secular moral force, and observes that the language of epidemiology, with its calculations of medical risk, comes to guide difficult decision making. In the other direction, backwards in time, Ato Quayson (2007:22) extends Lennard Davis's ideas from the essay 'Who Put the *The* in The Novel?' and argues 'the near universality of such plots' that restore normalcy, circulated long before the development of

the novel. Quayson (2007:22) therefore determines the relevance to *all* literary texts of 'the plot of social deformation as it is tied to some form of physical or mental deformation'.

Given this enormous swath of human time, it would seem that disability itself does not set up the limited narrative conditions that block literary fiction from apprehending the Anthropocene. Rather, more contemporary literary tradition differs in aesthetic: the way disability is apprehended through implicit statistical information and how those statistics come to coach expectations regarding the normal, that is, the narrative filler. Statistics inform expectations regarding not just the normative, but what is to be taken for coherent logic, the *rational* under conditions of coloniality. To the extent that novelistic characters expect to move in a more or less predictable, more or less rational world, they quite studiously ignore the larger implications of their times, which is an irrational act. *Characters so rational they're crazy*, might be one way to summarize the paradoxical extreme of this willed folly.

Returning to the plot of Nettel's *Después del invierno* (after winter), I note that because any unpredicted turn of events needs to fit into the stable weave of the filler, Nettel strives to soften the onset of disability in an otherwise jarring climax of sorts near the conclusion, when the bombing at the Boston marathon irreparably damages runner Claudio's leg. Nettel accomplishes this smoothing over by limiting Claudio's ability to change. In accordance with his measured, rational values, he never reconsiders the reason for his initial attraction to his girlfriend, namely Ruth's subdued mood, induced by prescription drugs. Claudio fetishizes muted emotion to the degree of fantasizing about becoming a robot. When the moment for greater insight arrives, Nettel (2011:265) has Claudio muster only irony upon examining how that android fantasy has strangely come true, thanks to his post-bombing prosthetic leg: 'Con amargura, admiré la sofisticación tecnológica de mi pierna y recordé que tiempo atrás había sido expulsado de un restaurant por gritar que quería ser un robot' (With bitterness, I admired the technological sophistication of my leg and remembered that some time ago I had been expelled from a restaurant for screaming that I wanted to be a robot). Claudio learns little from the brush with unpredictability. He cannot change his tone. Throughout his story, Claudio remains a normate, the standard against which he measures other characters, despite his status as a victim.

Unrepentant self-attributed superiority, even in the face of a potential lesson in humility, also concerns Jufresa's 'La pierna era nuestro altar' (The leg was out altar), where the normate narrator and protagonist abandons the midday swimming pool with its community of mostly elderly women, and some eccentric men, after the 'prophet' of the pool, an aged woman with cataracts, fails the role the normate assigned her. The term *crusade* appears- ambivalently given that the narrator switches the references immediately, from the grandiose crusade to mere competition. Speaking about the expertly graceful Asian male who vists the midday pool with the less fit female swimmers, Jufresa's (2014:13) narrator observes, 'Todos le envidiábamos en secreto, al señor chino, su rigor, y si nuestra pequeña comunidad hubiera iniciado algún tipo de cruzada, alguna competencia con un club vecino, por ejemplo, ese

hombre hubiera sido nuestro elegido, nuestro enviado-en-representación' (We all secretly envied the Chinese gentleman, his rigor, and if our small community would have started some kind of crusade, some competition with a neighboring club, for example, that man would have been our chosen one, our envoy-in-representation). As noted, the protagonist renounces this allegory of her own design for her peers at the pool after an old woman, the alleged prophet, does not recognize the protagonist once the latter wears a new swimsuit. This deception delivered by a supposedly gifted seer, provides the last straw: the disenchanted normate leaves the pool for the disenchanted normative schedule of the work world.

The pool as a break from filler and a launching platform for the possible space of the epic, complete with a transcendental crusade that the normate imagines- only briefly and in inner narrative—as a unifying cause, proves just another fantasy. Jufresa (2014: 16) allows cynicism to win, in a seemingly instantaneous insight: 'De pronto, las viejas me resultaron pesadas, el chino pretencioso y el entrenador irresponsable' (Suddenly, the old women turned out to be heavy, the Chinese pretentious and the trainer irresponsible). Jufresa's (2014:11) normate language reveals coloniality: the generically Asian man remains, perhaps erroneously, 'Chinese', stripped of the prefacing 'señor chino' (Chinese gentleman), the initially curious 'viejitas' (old ladies) have become unlikable and full-sized 'viejas' (old women) and the music-loving trainer who leaves all to their freedom is negligent. Of course, this disenchanted 'insight' is not really so sudden but present all along, as evinced by the paucity of imagination required to set up the crusade allegory in the first place. In the same pattern of minimal growth achieved by Nettel's Claudio, Jufresa's (2014:12) protagonist rethinks the use of one's swimmer's prosthetic leg as a fetishized object, 'our altar'. Jufresa's (2014:16) previous vision of the prosthetic leg as a fallen sequoia- 'la pierna provocaba la misma reverencia que inspiran las secuoyas caídas' (the leg caused the same reverence inspired by fallen redwood)- failed to install the epic time of thousands-year-old trees into the day-to-day routine of filler. But the protagonist as normate, was not much interested in the grand vision anyway; like Claudio's need for predictable calm, Jufresa's protagonist mainly pursued interpretive control over the other characters in her story.

There is no better excuse for limiting the horizon of inquiry than maintenance of indoor routines, an activity facilitated by the pleasure that literary fiction takes in bureaucracy. The bureaucratic pleasure available in the illusions of predictable filler- which might punningly be called the *paperwork* of the novel- anticipates the failed alternative of Jufresa's pool. In fact, the workings of bureaucracy appear in the story. The pool management updates technologies and in the process finally spells Jufresa's protagonist's name correctly, which only thickens the disillusion. No new identity is to be had, after all, and the predictable logic of filler will win out. Why does Jufresa's protagonist attempt to escape the lull of filler with the also fraught technique of allegory, instead of striking out for a less colonial solution? I suggest the limited imagination responds to the need for verisimilitude.

Yet another incomplete moment of insight, of only *normative* insight we might say, takes place in Faesler's *Formol*, where the mother character, named Febe, suffers an unnamed ailment for which she takes pills. Febe's substance dependence is- forgive the obviousness- so *dependable* that the narrator never bothers to specify the problem requiring the medicine nor the type of pill. Faesler's (2014:134) narrator simply judges the mother character negatively for her unthinking escape into mindless, and not mindful, existence: 'Febe, por su parte, como un microbio indiferente, sigue instalada en el celofán burbujeante de sus pastillas como mejor ruta para no llegar jamás a su destino' (Febe, for her part, like an indifferent microbe, remains stuck in the bubbly cellophane of her pills as the best route to never reach her destination). In her role as normate, Larca, the daughter and protagonist, seems distant from her mother, as hinted by the lack of detail and emotion surrounding Febe's condition and swift death. Larca and her father Celso (Febe's husband), mark Febe's suddenly fatal disability calmly, by ridding themselves of a key family possession, the preserved heart of the last human Aztec sacrifice, kept in a jar of formaldehyde.

I present that last detail with the same business-as-usual tone that Faesler favors; she never fully commits to the genre of fantasy. Thus, it is never completely clear that we are to believe without reservations this tale of the preserved organ; even Larca and Celso have their doubts. The narrative, nonetheless, traces straight-faced the history of the heart across the centuries of New Spain and Mexico. Of course, Faesler never presents something like the Anthropocene in full extension, probably because she ultimately decides in favor of the genre of the literary novel. Faesler does, however, include a passage that laments the melting snow on the side of the volcano Iztaccíhuatl where the heart was first buried, and thus *Formol* can admit knowledge of climate change. The germane passage, located in the third of the fifteen intercalated chapters all labeled with the non-accumulating '0' heading, addresses Moctezuma and compares the Conquest that vanquished him with the impending environmental change, which Faesler (2014:50) marks with the absence of snow on the volcanos: 'Tu mundo fue arrasado por una cultura muy diferente a la tuya, el mío por una cultura sin rival. Desde aquí los volcanes ya sin nieve dan miedo. Son la visión de los bergantines que se acercan a las costas de Veracruz. Son el comienzo del fin de una era, de una época, de una civilización' (Your world was wiped out by a culture very different to yours, mine by a culture without rival. From here, the volcanoes already without snow, are scary. They are the vision of the brigantines that approach the coasts of Veracruz. They are the beginning of the end of an era, of a period, of a civilization). Faesler can fit Moctezuma into the literary enterprise of coloniality, because the Aztec empire had already subjugated neighboring tribes. Moctezuma already comprises a normate victim, Faesler's novel explains, and the narrator will share his status and then some due to the coming climate calamity.

Like Jufresa's and Nettel's polyglot habits and global settings, Faesler throws in an English-language term here or a French phrase there. Her most interesting gesture, however, is a nod toward the lingering existence of Náhuatl, particularly as applicable to a profession that no longer exists. The graniceros, quiapequis, tiemperos, and claclasquis, according to Faesler's

(2014:67) novel, can also be called 'o tlamasques o aureros o teotlazquis,' and receive a convenient definition: 'o sea de las personas escogidas por el rayo para ocuparse del tiempo y que frecuentan esas ermitas' (that is of the people chosen by the lightning to take care of time and who frequent those hermitages). The shamanistic way of reading the weather, connotes the theme of superstition: under coloniality, excessive respect for the workings of the natural world reads as unsophisticated, irrational, and not scientific. Faesler's main delight in the list of synonyms, seems to be a collector's appreciation of the words themselves, because from any other angle this alternative is, to date, unworkable in the literary novel.

In the literary novel, myth- if it is to be rendered as sophisticated- ends up a kind of filler too, of a piece with the familiar 'realistic' pessimism of literary fiction. An excellent example of this trick appears with Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (One hundred years of solitude) (1967). There, ice emerges in the tropics through a magical seeming science of refrigeration in a scene that climate change thinkers may want to ponder. Disability scholars have examined the novel and taken interest in the ending. On the matter of the final destruction in *Cien años de soledad*, Antebi and Jörgensen (2016:12-13) note how disability, represented 'through the figure of a human infant with a pig's tail, the last of his lineage, who is ultimately devoured by ants,' supports Quayson's (2007) aesthetic nervousness, or the undetermined prosthesis, as an instrument of 'the continuous, self-reflexive unraveling of the narrative project.' That undetermined prosthetic relates to the scrambled binary of disability under coloniality; of course the prosthetic is undetermined and the narrative project unravels if the normate is at once abled and disabled.

The mesmerizing filler that goes nowhere in *Cien años de soledad* also signals the unimaginative nature of purity in *mestizaje*. As the family interbreeds, there emerges a child so distilled, so refined, that he changes the expression of the genes. The strangeness of this conclusion at first seems to buck the expected rationality, but the trick of García Márquez's use of a newly novelistic myth is not so much to include the irrational, as it is to ignore its craziness. García Márquez works at converting irrational myth into rational filler until the apocalypse pardons the exhausted prosaic imagination, even though the normate has ventured no further than the already established victimhood. Purity is no solution because it forces the end of the story.

Faesler's *Formol* takes that lesson, because the safely hopeless outcome of *mestizaje* in the literary novel, explains the initial attraction and final renunciation of the preserved heart. The relic of the heart constitutes a useless would-be solution of (indigenous) genetic purity. By the end of the novel, Faesler's characters cannot find anything better to do with the heart than surrender it to an unnamed man in a white coat and the deep-freezer of the scientific laboratory where he works. Such purity belongs in sterile conditions, connoted by the very stability of the formaldehyde that lends its name to the novel, and Larca and Celso leave the lab without asking for tests or other scientific data. Exploratory, self-questioning science does not actually listen to itself in the literary novel, because the literary genre cannot take aboard

the truly unpredictable and remain even-toned and rational-seeming.

As the inheritor of this tradition of insisting on the aesthetics of the rational even in the face of its insufficiency, Faesler's Larca writes on a notepad, reproduced in chapter 21, the quandary of the fantastical but not-really-desirable alternative, given the constraints of the literary novel. In Faesler's (2014:135) dueling views, summarized as proposals A and B, the first statement articulates Larca's 'irrational' belief that it would have been better if Mexica culture had not been 'destroyed', while the juxtaposed opposing opinion summarizes Larca's 'rational' belief that she owes her rights as an individual and all the good ('lo bueno') in her life to the replacement of Mexica culture with the European. The framework of rationality comes from coloniality and thus necessarily ends up supporting it, even in the midst of a self-critique.

How to imagine a novelistic decolonial alternative that would have the characters recognize and separate from the lull of rational filler, without actually exiting the genre of the literary novel and entering something like science fiction? In pursuit of the answer, during an interview, I (Hind, 2013:335) asked Guadalupe Nettel why Mexican women writers largely avoid writing science fiction, and she replied, laughing: 'Para escribir ciencia-ficción se necesita estar un poco enterado de la ciencia' (To write science-fiction you need to be a little aware of science). I like the joke, but I don't take the bait. Nettel's sophistication in languages and global capitals hints that her art, like that by Jufresa and Faesler, is, in fact, 'un poco enterado de la ciencia'. The implications of Nettel's joke suggest that one can know history without knowing science, and that only science fiction treats the future, while literary fiction treats the past, which is cognizant of coloniality in history though unaware of science. Now, *that* strains credulity.

A time in history when the scientific and historical text formed one and the same narrative appears as recently as the era of the conquest and early New Spain. Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) returns to that moment and helpfully juxtaposes two mindsets of coloniality, the *ego conquiro* and the *ego cogito*. The entrepreneur-conquerors' belief in their own racial superiority fueled the European-based philosophers' belief in the superiority of the western, rational mind, which oddly enough, would go on to support Grech's (2015) observed normate-as-victim paradigm. Regarding Maldonado-Torres's (2007) speculated interplay between the *ego conquiro* and the *ego cogito*, I add to his observations by recalling that the period's historical fantasy was largely taken as realist fiction. The genre of interest is the *probanza de mérito* (proof of merit), which as historian Matthew Restall (2003:12) reminds us, sought to inform the European monarch of Conquest deeds and served as a request for due compensation. Restall's *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (2003:12) warn of narrative tics begun in Hernán Cortés's famous letters, 'in effect a series of *probanzas*,' that erased the contributions of the Conquistadors' allies, namely 'Africans and native allies' and favored instead the literary creation of 'bold and self-sacrificing individuals;' Cortés's text brilliantly promoted this notion of individual achievement, 'and it sold so well in at least five languages,

that the crown banned the *cartas* lest the conqueror's cult status become a political threat'.

As usual, when thinking about coloniality, something of a paradox emerges here. Around this time in literary history, as Moretti's (2013) study also notes, the genre of the epic begins to give way to genre of the novel, and fantastically 'abnormal' if not outright 'heroic' feats start to seem prosaic enough to be believable. At the least, heroics take place before a humdrum backdrop of the predictable; the mythologies of *graniceros*, *quiapequis*, *tiemperos*, *claclasquis*, *tlamasques*, *aureros*, or *teotlazquis* fall out of fashion as they are determined to be the irrational practices of fetishists. Filler, with its norms supported by statistics, comes to the fore; science wins without actually claiming to do so, because science and scientists are not really the theme of the novel, but rather its aesthetic: rationality and predictability in the guise of filler. It becomes to seem logical that the hero would give way to the bureaucrat, in a literary convention that Cortés himself helped to found.

Cortés's paradoxically workaday heroic methods thus take advantage of the indigenous lack of the proper stylistics; those epic myths are too irrational to please an audience learning to love the novel. This framing of figures like Cortés as normate enough to be taken at their word- though as Restall's scholarship shows, liars from the start- helps to explain the not-knowing knowingness of literary fiction like Faesler's *Formol*, which supposedly is not sufficiently aware of science to present something like a timely alternative or to react with greater alarm to the surrounding climatological peril. Nettel's and Jufresa's narratives refuse scientific knowledge to the extent that the pressing environmental topic of our day never even appears. It seems that the literary novel cannot know its own science if the latter transgresses a feeling of statistical familiarity compatible with bureaucratic and urban experiences. Given the ultimately resolute climatological naïveté of the literary novel, imagining its enlightenment seems an unlikely plot twist. However, moments of mindfulness in each of the three narratives of interest here do manage to break with the filler and the normalcy arc. I briefly examine these moments in each of the texts in turn.

Carla Faesler's *Formol*

Larca ends the novel in a plane, leaving Mexico City for parts unknown, which begs the question of what might count as a logical act under times of radical climate uncertainty. Setting aside the irrational act of widening her carbon footprint, Larca does hit upon a respite. *Formol* concludes with meditation. On the takeoff, Larca finds herself mindlessly sinking into suspension, that is, her inner sinking is countered by the rising plane. That bird's-eye external view, coupled with suspended rational thought and heightened inner surveillance, facilitates a sudden consciousness of the planet as a collective home and of humans as scaled smaller than the genre of the novel might typically admit. This awareness emerges in a fragment that Faesler (2014:192) voices through a collective *nosotros* (us): 'Un mecerse enfrascados en el agua de sal que nos conserva y sentir esa humedad que nos satura' (A

rocking, wrapped up in the salt water that preserves us and feel that humidity which saturates us). The next sentence- the last of the novel- imagines this meditative state as static: 'En ese estado formol, Larca se impregnó profundo, cerró los ojos y se dejó hundir' (In that formaldehyde state, Larca soaked deep, closed her eyes and let herself sink). As a symbol, formaldehyde signals the reader to expect only preserved, even timeless, material; after all, the chemical works to stop change. Thus, alongside the constant distractions of filler that the literary novel cultivates, Faesler includes flashes of concentration in the odd moment, a 'formaldehyde state' that points beyond itself to the very act of paying attention, not as a normate, but as a nonjudgmental observer.

Another meditative moment occurs from Faesler's (2014:10) first chapter, when as a little girl Larca leaves a hallway, stirring dust motes that only readers and a narrator appreciate: 'la luz del sol que cae sobre la duela exhibe con sus haces radiantes el esplendor de la pequeña tormenta de polvo que el vuelo de su falda ha desatado. Pero Celso y Pedro no pueden ver el luminoso rastro porque nunca se han dado el tiempo para observar las cosas bellas y únicas que suceden entre conos de resplandor y un puñado de partículas' (the light of the sun that falls on the stave exhibits with its radiant beams the splendor of the small dust storm that the flight of her skirt has set off. But Celso and Pedro cannot see the luminous trail because they have never taken the time to observe the beautiful and unique things that happen between cones of brightness and a handful of particles). The dust suspended momentarily in the sunlight facilitates a point of meditation, not as a solution, but as a moment worthy of observation in itself. This mindfulness may combat the habit in the literary novel of showing how characters exacerbate normate victimhood by imitating patterns of depressed thought and indulging in chemical sedatives. Faesler's alternative here, the suspension of the narrative arc in favor of simple detachment, may supply the qualities of mind that would facilitate the decolonial attitude as described by Maldonado-Torres (2007:262), namely that of wonder, alongside detachment, responsibility, and empathy. Wonder rejects the depression that is dominant under the aesthetics of coloniality and that may even normativize the condition of depressed people as the only intelligent option. It would be difficult to sustain a posture of wonder and also remain a cynical normate, proud of being the victim of dubious successes.

Though she shows instances of mindfulness, Faesler never gives instructions on how to achieve a meditative moment. *Formol* (2014:127) does, however, press the known bounds of empires, when Celso, Larca's father (2014:167-168), spins a list of fantastical geographies in imitation not of a cynical normate, but of a deceased showman named Orendain, who advertised the attractions of the heart to a would-be paying audience in terms of a cosmopolitan mythology:

> Se trata [el corazón] de una historia más conmovedora que la mismísima leyenda de la Santa Cruz, el Santo Grial o la Sábana Santa. Más fuerte que el mito del tesoro de Moctezuma, que El Dorado, que la busca del Arca de la Alianza o la tumba de Cuauhtémoc. Un misterio más profundo que el origen de Quetzalcóatl o la

> construcción de las pirámides de Egipto, más enigmático que la Atlántida o el triángulo de las Bermudas, más inescrutable que las cabezas reducidas de los selváticos jíbaros, los hombres blancos de Nubia o el ya famoso eslabón perdido tan de moda en nuestros días.
>
> It is [the heart] of a story more moving than the very legend of the Holy Cross, the Holy Grail or the Holy Shroud. Stronger than the myth of Moctezuma's treasure, El Dorado, than the search for the Ark of the Covenant or the tomb of Cuauhtémoc. A mystery deeper than the origin of Quetzalcoatl or the construction of the pyramids of Egypt, more enigmatic than Atlantis or the Bermuda triangle, more inscrutable than the shrunken heads of the Jivaro, the white men of Nubia or the already famous missing link so fashionable in our day

The list of world mysteries, places Mexico within a chronology that acknowledges a longer extension of time and place than literary fiction often permits. The challenge of writing for a larger scope is that criticism is not set up to praise texts that strain against the unquestioned rationalities of coloniality, even by the innocuous method of blending various cultural systems of myth and equalizing western with pre-Columbian geographies.

Laia Jufresa's *'La pierna era nuestro altar'*

Like Faesler's gesture of relinquishing the heart to the lab, Jufresa's cynical protagonist flatly renounces the allegory of community. The last line of Jufresa's 'La pierna era nuestro altar' (2014:16) only ambivalently closes the effort to imagine an alternative: 'Con mi sueldo de ahora podría permitirme las clases de más temprano, pero a esa hora la gente no cree en nada' (With my current salary, I could afford the earlier classes, but at that time people do not believe in anything.). Nostalgia for belief in 'our altar,' that prosthetic leg that for an instant pointed to something closer to a geological time span, keeps the protagonist from fully joining the non-believing individualists during the more expensive pool hours. If the protagonist doesn't believe, as quitting the cheaper midday pool indicates, and if the protagonist doesn't *not* believe, as refusing to join the morning agnostics suggests, the character seems to have retained something from simply having exercised. I propose that the novice swimmer may have learned to meditate, which gave her breathing room in her reasoning process, that exhausting role of normate.

The rhythm of swimming in Jufresa's 'La pierna era nuestro altar' puts the narrative on pause. The moments of mindfulness in the pool appear in the second paragraph as an explicit contrast to productive activities outside the pool. While others subject to the schedule of coloniality fantasize about a lunch break, or play the role of student, the protagonist can slip out of that routine of filler and concentrate on the movement in the water. Jufresa (2014:11)

writes, 'yo me sumergía; […] yo pataleaba; […] yo respiraba cada una, dos, tres brazadas' (I submerged myself; [...] I kicked; [...] I breathed every one, two, three strokes). In this same key second paragraph, Jufresa (2014:11) expresses the moments of meditation through onomatopoeia: 'Mientras los engranes del mundo aceitaban el progreso de quién sabe qué ambiciones, yo nadaba en círculos: splash, slurp, bocanada' (While the gears of the world oiled the progress of who knows what ambitions, I swam in circles: splash, slurp, puff). Jufresa goes so far as to avoid conjugated verbs for the description of this meditative practice, which complements the interval (the 'breather' we could call it) on hold from the literary narrative structures of filler and the turning point that will pivot toward greater resignation and disenchantment. The intellectual goal of meditation is not to organize experience, but simply to watch it, non-judgmentally: 'splash, slurp, bocanada' and repeat. Jufresa's protagonist rarely engages this mode when not actually swimming, as represented by her tendency to engage judgmental allegory.

The place where that allegory never convinces the protagonist herself, centers on the unnamed fat woman at the pool who is always identified as such. She refuses to swim and instead soaks herself on the pool stairs, a vantage point from which she delivers vague advice on swimming technique. The fat woman disrupts even the allegorical pattern that the protagonist attempts to instill, because this resolute *ex*-swimmer has no rational role in any of the normate's structures of coloniality, whether manifest or allegorically latent. The woman's unrepentant fatness, in the protagonist's ableist eyes, becomes a kind of disqualifying characteristic, even in a fantasy realm, and thus this fat woman supplies the hinge between the protagonist's would-be enchantment at the pool and the postponed disenchantment outside it. The fat woman operates according to a different kind of rationality and defies the protagonist's colonial imagination. Fat is just fat, and the fat woman does her own bidding, which seems pointless. The fat woman needs nothing from Jufresa's would-be colonizer protagonist, and the protagonist cannot learn from her example. Due to the protagonist's normate limitations, she winds up a victim after all, trapped in her inability to dream beyond coloniality.

Guadalupe Nettel's *Después del invierno*

Nettel's novel changes the topic only slightly: disability in the form of addiction and depression supplies both the glue that holds together the characters' social networks and gives them, on an individual basis, the glimpse of the tantalizing possibility of 'dropping out' of productive society. Nettel creates a cast in desperate need of mindfulness, as not even the false escape of allegory entertains her sophisticated world travelers. Claudio already knows the allegorical meaning of love interest Cecilia's name, and yet he is no more sophisticated than a Greek tragic hero when it comes to predicting his own fate with her. Nettel's Claudio narrates (2011:129), 'La condición del enamoramiento es, según dicen, la incapacidad de ver, y si el nombre de esa mujer significa 'ceguera', sólo podía ser la que proviene del

deslumbramiento' (The condition of falling in love is, according to what they say, the inability to see, and if the name of that woman means 'blindness', it could only be that which comes from the glare). The overdetermined symbolic order holds no mystery: Claudio already knows his and Cecilia's limitations, although he manages to refuse this knowledge. Thanks to his handy miscalculation of his own ignorance and another's graces, he mistakes Cecilia's poverty for asceticism. For her part, Cecilia misunderstands Claudio because he fails to acknowledge that he is already dating Ruth- and Cecilia never asks questions.

The inevitability of disenchantment characterizes all Claudio's romantic relationships; Susana, Ruth, and Cecilia exhibit signs of depression, with Susana having gone to the lengths of actually committing suicide. Even Claudio's platonic friend, the Cuban transplant to Paris Haydée, seems to wrestle with something like depression, in view of her alcohol dependence. The problem causes a lesion on Haydée's liver, although characters never comment on the severity of that illness. Once Haydée's liver recovers, it goes right back to filtering the character's excessive drinking, and on a subsequent night out with Cecilia, Haydée falls down a flight of stairs and damages an ankle. Haydée's ultimate ability to stop drinking materializes with her pregnancy, and a depressed Cecilia ends up moving in with Haydée and her partner once the baby is born.

Regarding the case of Nettel's (2011: 51) heavily medicated Ruth, I have already mentioned that Claudio likes the emotional barrier that her drugged state imposes, which mirrors something like his own impassivity: 'Bendita sea la barrera que me mantiene seco, impermeable a las emociones' (Blessed be the barrier that keeps me dry, impervious to emotions). The alternative mood seems naïve, and Nettel is careful to describe Tom's Sicilian relatives' joy from a distance. That is, when Cecilia's boyfriend Tom is dying and his Sicilian relatives gather around his deathbed at the hospital, they celebrate his life by singing in dialect and help to soothe Cecilia. The latter comments on that reprieve from sadness, perhaps so effective in part because she cannot understand the words; as Nettel (2011: 245) has Cecilia explain, 'Aunque no hablábamos el siciliano, todos entramos en esa alegría semejante a un trance' (Although we did not speak sicilian, we all enter into that joy similar to a trance). The trance recalls the state that meditators sometimes achieve by chanting. After this brief consolation, Cecilia returns to depression, despite this glimpse of 'another way'.

Ultimately, Nettel hints that misery is a condition of coloniality. After suffering Tom's death, Cecilia remains in Paris and finds that she finally shares the French outlook that had initially bothered her. As Nettel's character (2011: 255-256) specifies, 'Muchas de esas actitudes que me habían escandalizado tanto al llegar, me resultaban ahora justificadas. Yo misma formaba parte de las hordas de neuróticas y esquizofrénicos, que espantan a los turistas, pero me daba lo mismo' (Many of those attitudes that had scandalized me so much when I arrived, now seemed to me justified. I myself was part of the hordes of neurotics and schizophrenics, that scare tourists, but I did not care). This newly adapted unhappiness is not to say that Cecilia was content in her native Oaxaca; on the contrary, she was a disaffected Goth whose misery

motivated her father to accept gladly her international relocation. Parisian unhappiness is nevertheless different from Oaxacan disenchantment in this novel, perhaps because here, Oaxacans imagine Parisians to be happier and the discovery otherwise proves disconcerting.

A similar predicament within an escapable colonial order, *even in communist Cuba*, drives Claudio who, as I said, in Nettel's (2011:199) narrative longs to become a robot. Whether under communism or capitalism, coloniality holds steady for normate Claudio, and his imperious perspective insists on a miserable superiority. As Nettel's Claudio (2011:18) haughtily declares, 'pocas personas son realmente pensantes, autónomas, sensibles, independientes como yo' (few people are really thinking, autonomous, sensitive, independependent as me). As a colonized person who believes himself to be the colonizer- in fact, an accomplished seducer of women-Claudio contradictorily prioritizes his concern for maintaining purity in the midst of mixing with others. Nettel (2011:18) has Claudio muse: '¿Cómo evitar mezclarme, corromperme?' (How to avoid mixing, corrupt myself). One grab for purity leads him to the previously mentioned desire to become a robot. The ultimate science fantasy of becoming a robot is also the ultimate literary fiction fulfillment of a character becoming a predictable succession of filler moments.

I want to wrap up by commenting on the activity of criticism as prejudiced specifically against happy endings, and possibly happiness in general. To extrapolate from Walter Mignolo's (2007:472) observations, he might remind us that within the logic of coloniality, 'naïve' tales such as epics and myths constitute the invented notion of tradition, precisely in order to propose the modernity of the contrasting mode. If as Mignolo (2007:466) states, 'There is no modernity without coloniality,' it would seem that coloniality expresses the narrative art of modernity through systematized aesthetics that imitate mentally ill thought patterns, especially depression. This idea contains a warning about literary fiction as admirably depressed narrative: it may respond to the fact that literary criticism prefers 'a spirit of disenchantment' as Rita Felski (2015:2) might put it. This disenchantment is nowhere so palpable as at an academic conference where the very mention of 'happiness studies' incites literary scholars' apparently automatic question: 'Have you read Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*?' Berlant (2011:2) argues that optimism becomes cruel 'when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation'. Could this perpetrator include critique itself? Berlant's (2011:3) list of the contemporary fantasies of cruel optimism, include 'upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy'. Wellbeing is conjured from this list as a kind of capacity for naïve belief. Berlant's example of disenchantment rhetoric forms its own self-perpetuating spell, rather than an opening for the decolonial.

The decolonial does require some room for positive belief. The challenge is to rethink criticism, not from depression but from an open mind, a beginner's mind, the self-knowingly credulous mind. As Felski warns, our negative habits are no insight at all. Felski (2015:114) laments the academic fashion of writing from the perspective of a detective who begins a

crime investigation already with the solution in hand, and who insists on framing the justification for that blame in negative terms: '[O]ur detective skills are less impressive than we think: we uncover the guilt that we imputed at the very start'. Under coloniality, belief in disenchantment is as credulous as belief in the enchanted. Either way, the normate ends up the (superior) victim. Meditation might supply a way out of the willing ignorance of the contingent nature of an aesthetic of rationality, which is perhaps as much as the decolonial can hope for. This break for breath, promises a means of reassessment. Criticism might do well to return to the basics, which will require-possibly- that we renounce our own normate habits of playing superior victims. Such hope requires risk. Felski dares to look like a happy reader when she seconds Bruno Latour's (2004:247) celebrated call for change, stated in his famous article: 'The practical problem we face […] is to associate the word *criticism* with a whole set of new positive metaphors'. Is criticism ready to renounce the *ego deprimido*?

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