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# *Microcuentos*

## *Very Short Latin American Fiction In and For Pandemic Times*

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### Abstract

This article brings attention to a form of narrative fiction that has engaged with the Covid-19 outbreak by embracing social media. *Microcuentos*, a form of very brief short stories usually referred to as flash fiction in English, have widely circulated across Latin America through digital platforms *in* pandemic times. But more than simply thriving in a context of globally spread fear, death, and isolation, I argue that – in the 2020s – *microcuentos* are uniquely suited *for* pandemic times. By combining narrative intensity condensed in a structurally limited wordcount with social media's capacity to circulate swiftly and widely, writers of *microcuentos* across the region have been exceptionally capable of responding to the crisis as it is happening. The case of the Latin American *microcuento* in the time of Covid-19 invites us to question the hegemony of the novel while rethinking the meanings of World Literature in a pandemic and post-pandemic world.

### Keywords

Covid-19 literature – pandemic writing – *microcuento* – Latin American world literature

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Tiny in their habitual environment, they can reach enormous proportions under certain conditions.

HORACIO QUIROGA, *The Feather Pillow*

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In the late 1980s, John Beverly posed a question that seems uncannily adequate in the 2020s: “are there experiences in the world today that would be betrayed or misrepresented by the forms of literature as we know it?” (Beverly 12). His focus, back then, was to shed light on a type of narrative text that in Latin America has come to be widely known as *testimonio*. In this narrative genre, a narrator – who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events recounted – tells in the first person their “life” story or significant life experience. Beyond representing the uniqueness of an individual self, the particularity of a *testimonio* is that it stands for the experience of a community. In her widely known *testimonio*, for instance, the Guatemalan indigenous leader Rigoberta Menchú claims that her story is the story of all poor Guatemalans, that her personal experience is the reality of a whole people (1). Connecting *testimonios* with the movements for national liberation and cultural radicalism of the 1960s, Beverly proposed that they comprised a new form of cultural and literary expression, one that implied a radical break with the novel and with literary fictionality (24). Novels and short stories, he argued, were incapable of adequately embodying the social forces behind these struggles. *Testimonios*, on the other hand, were born out of them and were uniquely able to flesh them out on the page.

In the context of the Covid-19 crisis, Beverly’s point about the inadequacy of certain literary forms to express social and cultural realities, and the need for finding ones better suited for the particularities of the present, deserves new attention. This is certainly not the first pandemic the world has experienced. Yet part of its unprecedented nature comes to light when it is considered in conjunction with the level of global connectivity that characterises the 2020s. Social media is a crucial component of this connectivity. By October 2021, for instance, more than 4.5 billion people were using social media worldwide (Kepios). With more than 57 percent of the total global population on Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, WeChat or some other similar digital outlet, an ever-growing mass of digital content related to the pandemic is vigorously developing online. Every day, millions around the world

are posting, liking, tweeting, snapping and sharing about Covid-19 to the point that “it is not surprising” how the significant amount of information received through social media platforms affects how people perceive and cope with it (Cuello-García, Pérez-Gaxiola, and van Amelsvoort 198). Never before have we been able to experience – and interact with – worldwide illness, death, suffering and globally spread fear *in real time*. And once again, one must wonder: how adequate are existing literary forms, like the short story or the novel, for representing the present? Could the pandemic give rise to new forms of literature? Or, at the very least, could it prompt us to consider alternative forms of World Literature?

The present article addresses these questions by placing the focus on Latin America. My purpose here is to bring attention to a form of narrative fiction that, precisely by embracing social media, has been able to engage with the Covid-19 outbreak. *Microcuentos*, a form of very brief short stories usually referred to as flash fiction in English, have widely circulated across Latin America through digital platforms *in* pandemic times. They have contributed to creating a body of writing derived from – and in dialogue with – the isolation, self-distancing measures, xenophobia, violence, illness and death that the region has experienced during Covid-19; a body of writing that has been and continues taking shape in Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and other social media outlets (Medina Cordova 108). But more than simply thriving in Latin America during pandemic times, I argue that, in the early 2020s, *microcuentos* are uniquely suited *for* pandemic times. By combining narrative intensity condensed in a structurally limited wordcount with social media’s capacity to circulate swiftly and widely, writers of *microcuentos* across the region have been exceptionally capable of responding to the crisis as it is happening, when the emotional challenges brought about by the pandemic are live and creative responses are needed the most.

Based on the work of Andrés Neuman and other authors who have explored its logic and history, in this article, I first discuss what makes a *microcuento* to define it as a fiction genre that – having enjoyed a particularly rich development in twentieth-century Latin America – remains intimately linked to the region. Second, I examine three examples of Latin American writers who responded to Covid-19 by combining *microcuentos* with the dissemination potential of social media. The authors selected are Jorge F. Hernández (Mexico, 1962), who published a “cuentínimo” (tiny story) daily from March to May 2020 on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter; Ángela Arboleda (Ecuador, 1969), who in the same period started a series of night-time tales to narrate orally, record and circulate as voice-notes over WhatsApp while she was quarantined in Guayaquil; and Guillermo Martínez (Argentina, 1962), the creator of a project inviting Argen-

tine writers and their audiences to create stories collectively via Twitter as they were all experiencing self-isolation. Considering these literary projects in the context of Covid-19, I propose that they demonstrate the particular adequacy of the *microcuento* as a literary form *in* and *for* pandemic times Latin America.

The third and final section of this article revises the implications of my discussion for the study of World Literature. The *microcuentos* considered here have circumvented publishing houses' editorial processes by taking over social media, where they have been able to circulate widely beyond their linguistic and cultural territories. While I acknowledge that this is hardly a new phenomenon, my argument is that, by embodying the particularities of the present, *microcuentos* have proven to be uniquely suited for responding to and engaging with worldwide events. Thereby, I argue, they become an immediate literary form that questions the centrality of the time-consuming novel, the preferred object of study of literary enquiries concerned with the representation of the world as a whole. The case of the Latin American *microcuento* in the time of Covid-19, I conclude, signals a need for rethinking the meanings of World Literature in a pandemic and post-pandemic world. As a literary form able to respond to world events in real time, the *microcuento* has the potential to transform our understanding of global literary circulation and invite us to reconsider the cartographies of World Literature.

## 1 Revealing without Unveiling

There is no single definition regarding what a *microcuento* is. Since the second half of the twentieth century, however, Spanish-American literature writers and scholars have contributed to outlining its structural characteristics. In this context, the most noticeable feature of a *microcuento* is, of course, its brevity. As the prefix *micro* suggests, it is a form of very short fiction. The meaning of "very short", nonetheless, is a recurrent point of debate. As David Lagmanovich has rightly pointed out, while it is true that we are dealing with a fiction genre in which brevity is a compulsory condition, we cannot ignore that the criteria to determine what counts as "brief" or "extensive" may vary according to historical and cultural milieus (Lagmanovich 86). Therefore, it is unsurprising that there is a general disagreement over the maximum length of a *microcuento*. In this regard, some critics have argued that it should not exceed specific wordcounts (250 words, for example), while others have opted for counting printed pages, widely disagreeing on whether they should be limited to less than one or two.

Considering that length alone is not enough to define what makes a *microcuento*, critics have also examined how it differs from the "traditional" short

story. In this area, Dolores Koch has posited that the former lacks introduction, anecdote or action; it lacks developed characters, ending point and “true” resolution, suggesting that the absence of these elements sets it apart from the realm of the short story (123). The Argentinean writer Andrés Neuman, who has not only written about the genre but has practised it, takes Koch’s idea further to argue that when it comes to *microcuentos*, it is not simply about dismantling the introduction-body-resolution structure, but rather to make it no longer clear what the introduction is, what the body is, and if there is a resolution (144). Among many others, Neuman has noted the *microcuento*’s proximity with prose poetry and other literary genres, arguing that it is a “hybrid” yet identifiable form of fiction. To identify a *microcuento*, Lagmanovich proposes to look for a combination of three essential features: brevity, narrativity and fictionality.

If it shows brevity and narrativity, but the events referred are not fictional, it may be a journalistic text more concerned about what happened than about what could happen, some type of instruction manual or any other variety of writing whose focus is the factual, not the fictional. We can also find, and often do, texts that are narrative and fictional, but not short, and that leads them to another province of the narrative, such as the short story or the *nouvelle*. On the other hand, gnomic writing, which generates aphorisms, sayings and related expressions, has an eminent brevity but practically none of the other two conditions. And it almost goes without saying that the existence of just one of those features is not enough.

88, my translation

Without any pretension of providing a conclusive definition, in this article, the term *microcuento* refers to a very short narrative fiction that differs from the traditional short story in its open, fragmentary and suggestive nature. Borrowing from Neuman and Lagmanovich, what I mean here is that while a short story might unveil an enigma, a *microcuento* would only reveal the existence of such enigma (Neuman 145). What the text leaves unsaid, therefore, plays a role more relevant to the story than what the text does disclose. This limited structure makes the characters that populate micro-fictions purposely underdeveloped, transforming them, their contexts and the outcomes of the events in which they are involved into blank canvases for readers to fill by themselves.

My insistence on using the term *microcuento* rather than opting for its possible English translation – flash fiction – is a means of stressing the genre’s relationship with Spanish-American literature. In this regard, some critics have

posited that its foundations are to be found in the work of late nineteenth century Latin American modernist writers, like the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (Fonseca 283). In contrast, others have stressed that reducing the length of a story can hardly be considered a regionally exclusive development. On the latter side of the argument, Lagmanovich names Ernest Hemingway, Frank Kafka and István Örkény as masters of conciseness to argue that very short narrative fiction has not only emerged in the work of Hispanic writers (86). Not being a literary phenomenon exclusive or original to Latin America, however, does not tarnish the special connection this genre has with the region, where a particularly rich evolution can be mapped out throughout the twentieth century. In this period, a wide array of Latin American authors has cultivated the *microcuento*. Beyond Darío, Guillermo Siles mentions Leopoldo Lugones (Argentina, 1874–1938), Macedonio Fernández (Argentina, 1874–1952), Julio Torri (Mexico, 1889–1970) and Vicente Huidrobo (Chile, 1893–1948) among the precursors of a genre that, since the 1950s, has been further developed by the likes of Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar until forming a body of work of “immense quantity” and “unquestionable quality” (149).

Despite the considerable number of writers who have contributed to developing the *microcuento* in Latin America, some names recur in the scholarship. Virgilio Piñera (Cuba, 1912–1979), Juan José Arreola (Mexico, 1918–2001) and Augusto Monterroso (Guatemala, 1921–2003) are three of them. Neuman proposes that, having devoted a good amount of their work to intensifying brevity and to shortening the limits of the short story, few authors have specialised in the writing of *microcuentos* like them (145). Monterroso is recognised for creating what Umberto Eco once called “the shortest novel ever written in the world” (3). Although one must contest Eco’s label – it is not a “novel”, which is precisely the story’s appeal – the point gets across. The full text of the *microcuento* in question, *The Dinosaur*, as well as its English translation, fit in little more than a single line: “Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí” (When he/she woke up, the dinosaur was still there) (Monterroso 67). Since its original publication in 1959, Monterroso’s *The Dinosaur* has been analysed from widely different perspectives and methodological approaches. Lauro Zavala, for example, has discussed each of its seven “elements”, proposing a word-by-word linguistic analysis where he looks at the combination of adverbs, verbs and nouns to explore how each contributes to creating different possible readings (Zavala 42). In this sense, the general understanding of the text highlights its openness. Who is the character who has woken up? What happened before his/her waking up? Why is there a dinosaur? Why was it there before the character’s slumber? What will happen? Where are they? These are some of the questions the story purposely leaves unanswered to reveal – without unveiling – an enigma.

Similar to Monterroso, Arreola embodies a process of literary experimentation concerned with reducing narrative fiction to its shortest possible written outcome. That is to say, a literature concerned with tasking readers with the fleshing out of a story whose fictional core is only suggested to them. Writers, Arreola believed, tend to provide too many details when their function should be restricted to “poner en marcha el pensamiento ajeno a través de la sugestión adecuada” (start off the reader’s thinking through the appropriate suggestion) (Peri Rossi 27). Although significantly longer than Monterroso’s *The Dinosaur*, Piñera’s *Insomnia* (1946) works brilliantly in those lines:

The man goes to bed early. He can’t fall asleep. He tosses and turns, of course, in bed. He gets tangled up in the sheets. He lights a cigarette. He reads a little. He turns out the light again. But he can’t sleep. At three in the morning, he gets up. He wakes up his friend next door and confides that he can’t sleep. He asks for advice. The friend advises him to take a short walk to tire himself out and then, right away, to drink a cup of linden tea and turn out the light. He does all that. Yet he is unable to fall asleep. He gets up again. This time he goes to see a doctor. As is always the case, the doctor talks a lot, but the man still doesn’t fall asleep. At six in the morning, he loads a revolver and blows his brains out. The man is dead but hasn’t been able to fall asleep. *Insomnia* is a very persistent thing.

91, my translation

*Insomnia*, Neuman notes, is one of those tales that “keep us awake” (151). It does so by hinting at the existence of a broader story which the reader needs to figure out alone. In a similar way, Piñera, Arreola and Monterroso do not account for the complete picture of the Latin American *microcuento*, which is, in any case, not the purpose of this article. Yet, their work illustrates the form, principles and logics of the genre, bearing testimony to its rich development in twentieth century Spanish-American literature.

## 2 Covid-19, in (Very) Short (Fiction)

With some of the highest Covid-19 death rates in the world, Latin America’s pandemic experience has been described as a “humanitarian crisis” (The Lancet 1463). Stories, as it is expected, have emerged in this context. But unlike other instances when crises have formed the backdrop to literary creation, this time, social media has enabled authors to articulate literary responses to the health emergency as it is happening (Medina Cordova 108). Through



this medium, writers across Latin America have engaged their work with the unprecedented reality motivated by Covid-19 while experiencing it alongside their audiences. As a form of narrative fiction structurally short, able to thrive in the limited wordcounts of social media platforms, *microcuentos* have been at the centre of this phenomenon. In this section, I overview the work of three Latin American authors who have contributed to a growing online archive of literary responses to the pandemic. Their work suggests the existence of a broader picture where a literary corpus in dialogue with the pandemic is developing beyond traditional formats. In this light, and going back to Beverly's point, the *microcuentos* I analyse here elude betraying or misrepresenting the pandemic. On the contrary, they embody the immediateness and the collectiveness with which the pandemic is experienced and narrated worldwide.

Fiction that responds to the Covid-19 crisis need not be explicitly about it, as the work of Jorge F. Hernández shows. While confined in his Madrid residence, during the first wave of the pandemic and early lockdowns in Europe, the Mexican writer started the series *Cuentínimos para la cuarentena* (Tiny Stories for the Quarantine). For this project, Hernández published a *microcuento* daily – from 17 March 2020 to 31 May 2020 – on the social media accounts of the Cultural Institute of Mexico in Spain. The stories appeared on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, where they were posted as short videos (less than 3 minutes) featuring a montage of Hernández's voice narrating the text over an illustration. The *cuentínimos* rely on their brevity and constitute “possible seeds” for longer stories (Hernández “Cuentínimos para la cuarentena”). They are, indeed, micro windows into fictional tales about a wide variety of topics, from everyday scenes that could happen “in any office in the world” to a casual sexual encounter with an undead Ingrid Bergman. The Covid-19 outbreak that motivated their creation is referenced in some of the stories. *Campanitas tubulares* (Little Tubular Bells), shared on 27 May 2020, for example, introduces a socially distanced exorcism, while *Aplauso del balcón* (Balcony Applause), from 7 April 2020, celebrates health care workers around the world. The majority of the stories, however, do not address the pandemic directly.

The *cuentínimos* series is self-consciously inscribed in the Latin American tradition of very short narrative fiction previously discussed. Hernández's stories not only follow the structural principles of the *microcuento*; they also pay homage to figures commonly associated with its development in the region. The publications of 25 March and 13 May bear dedicatory descriptions to Augusto Monterroso and Juan José Arreola, respectively. In a similar one-line style to *The Dinosaur*, the full text of *La fatiga* (The Fatigue) – the story honouring Monterroso – reads: “Luego de doce horas en vuelo, el viejo cerró su libro y se bajó de la hamaca” (After twelve hours in flight, the old man closed his

book and got out of the hammock) (Hernández “Un cuentínimo”). While more extended, the piece for Arreola – *Escribiendo* (Writing) – also presents an open, fragmentary and suggestive nature by implying that Arreola has kept on writing even after his death. Asked about these and other authors who appeared referenced in his series, Hernández has explained that his work is a tribute to fascinating writers but also to the “spark of instant literature” (Mendoza Lemus). “Instant”, in this case, relates to the brevity of the stories but also their immediate circulation, made possible by social media.

Their online presence has allowed Hernández’s *microcuentos* to travel across national borders easily. As they were first posted by the Cultural Institute of Mexico in Spain, their audience was primarily a mixture of readers in Spain and Mexico, that is, the followers of the institution on its social media channels, potentially reaching more than 12,000 people on Facebook only. Hernández also shared the stories on his personal accounts, engaging directly with a readership base following him and his work online. The “sharing” function of social media platforms enabled the possibility of even further dissemination, while mass media outlets like the newspapers *Milenio* (Mexico) and *Página 12* (Argentina) also published the stories on their websites. Originally posted with the hashtag #YoMeQuedoEnCasa (I stay at home), the purpose of widespread digital circulation was motivating self-isolation to stop the spread of the virus while, at the same time, “accompanying” readers in their Covid-19 home confinements, wherever they might be around the world (Hernández “Un cuentínimo”).

Ángela Arboleda’s work echoes the desire to use literature and social media as companionship during the lockdowns motivated by the pandemic. In March 2020, as she was quarantined in Ecuador’s business capital, Guayaquil, Arboleda started narrating *microcuentos* of her creation and distributing them among her contacts as WhatsApp voice-notes. She shared a total of 18 nighttime tales, which comprise the *Sueños súbditos* (Subordinate Dreams) series, now fully available on YouTube. The first recording announces the project’s aim, as the author finishes the narration by saying that the story is a “gift” to others to try helping them “sleep better” (Arboleda “Sueños súbditos 1”). The idea, Arboleda explains, was born out of her experience with insomnia and unrest during mandatory self-isolation; *Sueños súbditos* was, therefore, her literary response to the crisis, a response that, she hoped, would help others in similar circumstances (El Universo). By taking advantage of the instantaneity and wide circulation capabilities of WhatsApp messages, which once received can be easily forwarded, the series addresses the emotional toll of the pandemic on individuals and communities in Ecuador and beyond. As her digital *microcuentos* are able to travel widely in a time when home confinement has

exposed millions worldwide to sleep disruption, increasing daytime stress, anxiety and levels of depression, Arboleda's audience is not limited to her hometown.

*Sueños súbditos* embodies a literary dialogue with the feelings of isolation, fear and anxiety inspired worldwide by the pandemic. Thematically, the stories suggest fictional universes of violence and loss. The series' sixth *microcuento*, for instance, reads in full: "Le prometieron que volvería cubierto de gloria. Y entre lágrimas, lo dejó partir. Vete, Mambrú, le dijo la triste madre a su único hijo" (They promised her that he would return covered with glory. In tears, she let him leave. Go, Mambrú, the sad mother told her only son) (Arboleda "Sueños súbditos 6"). This and Arboleda's other stories started circulating during the first peak of deaths in Guayaquil, in March, i.e., in the same month the World Health Organisation officially declared the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak a pandemic. As such, in *Sueños súbditos*, the *microcuento* became a real time contribution to social and personal wellbeing, one form of literature that addressed these needs and was available immediately in a time when innovative solutions to the emotional challenges brought about by the pandemic were sorely needed.

Circulating *microcuentos* via WhatsApp voice-notes highlights how smartphones can create intimate experiences between authors and audiences. Arboleda has mentioned that, as she was sending out the *Sueños súbditos* recordings, she imagined "climbing up to the person's ear" to whisper the story through the voice-note (El Universo). Creating an alternative form of engagement between the writer and the reader, as in Arboleda's proposal, resonates with the aims of Guillermo Martínez's project during the pandemic. By the end of March 2020, the Argentine novelist announced on Twitter that he and some of his "writer friends" were organising sessions of "simultaneous" short story writing to get through some of the "difficult" days in lockdown (Infobae). The idea, he explained, was for authors and their followers to build collaborative short stories in Twitter threads. Each participant was to write the beginning of a fictional story in a tweet mentioning Martínez's username (@leoysubrayo); Martínez would reply with another tweet continuing the plot, thereby producing a back-and-forth exchange between author and follower until the former decided to finish the story by signalling "the end". In this fashion, from 23 to 25 March, Martínez cowrote sixteen Twitter stories. The number grew the following days after other Argentine writers – including Claudia Piñeiro (1960) and Enzo Maqueira (1977) – joined the exercise.

Although Martínez's project was primarily a game, the resulting texts are examples of very short, open, fragmentary and suggestive narrative fiction that bears testimony to the reality that writers and audiences were experiencing at

the time of writing. While participating in the project did not require engagement with specific topics, isolation, death, fear and the need for human contact are some common concerns underlying its stories, as illustrated in this final tweet of a thread led by Claudia Piñeiro (@ClaudiaPineiro):

I knocked. Someone opened the door. I went in. There was a queue of socially distanced people. The first person climbed a stage, said a name and a hologram of the named person appeared before they melted into a hug. I knew exactly whose name I would give.

My translation

Martínez's project opened an unusual opportunity for readers to collaborate with "professional" writers. It enabled both parties to take part in a creative process where they could use writing to channel concerns stemming from a common ground of experience, that is, a shared and unprecedented historical context shaped by Covid-19. As such context is not exclusive to Argentina or Latin America, the use of social media amplified the reach and appeal of the exercise. In this sense, participants could be anywhere where access to Twitter was possible. Cultural and linguistic territories became blurred as the stories could circulate in their original Spanish and, simultaneously, in translation. Powered by Google Translate, Twitter offers translations of tweets in languages different from the language used by default in the device of the user reading them. As such, people not familiar with Spanish could easily change the tweets forming the stories of Martínez's project into their preferred languages by clicking on the translate option, which appears automatically below each tweet.

While it is true that machine translation can be inaccurate, the quality of the translation is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>1</sup> My point here is that, in Martínez's "simultaneous" short story writing sessions, Twitter automatic translation allowed the stories to traverse diverse cultural and linguistic territo-

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1 It is worth pointing out that machine translation is rapidly improving and can already produce remarkable results when it comes to conveying meaning. The question remains, however, if machines could ever translate works of literature, which are much more than just about meaning. Among others, Duncan Large has addressed the issue in his provocatively titled article "Could Google Translate Shakespeare?", where he refers to an experiment in translating a dozen novels from English to Catalan, in which "in the case of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* the result was adjudged by native speakers to be equal in quality to the published human-produced translation 34% of the time" (97). Large suggests that, as machines approach human semantic competence, human translators need to move in other more creative directions.

ries, giving readers throughout the experience of being able to witness and to join, if they wished, a conversation about a contemporaneous reality shared worldwide. In this way, writers and readers engaged in a literary exercise that pour globally shared fears about the pandemic into narrative fiction. And the *microcuento* was the form used to embody such narrative fiction.

### 3 The Question of World Literature

The use of social media to write and disseminate short fiction is far from being a new phenomenon. In this regard, Mariusz Pisarski argues that – for the past fifteen years – platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have made significant impacts on reading and writing: “the author is giving way to algorithms and bots; readers have turned into self-broadcasters with all the multimedia tools of their smartphones in their pockets” (47). What is different now is the intersection of this phenomenon with the current public health crisis. It is in this unprecedented context of globally spread fear, death and isolation where the works of Arboleda, Hernández and Martínez operate. Their projects contribute to the narration of the pandemic from Latin America and help shape the ways of seeing and understanding the local, national and global contexts of Covid-19. At the same time, they illustrate the *microcuento*'s capacity to take part in this signification process in a way inaccessible for other forms of narrative fiction. The structural brevity of the *microcuento* makes it ideal for circulating via social media *in* pandemic times. Its capacity to integrate with social media for engaging in real time with an ongoing reality experienced worldwide, at the same time, makes the *microcuento* a literary form ideally suited *for* pandemic times.

The discussion of the *microcuento in* and *for* pandemic times is particularly interesting for the study of World Literature, especially if we consider World Literature to be a concept that refers to “literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (Damrosch 4). The *microcuentos* I discuss here traverse cultural and linguistic boundaries, that is, they meet one critical standard for considering the worldly currency of a literary work. At the level of form, however, they pose a challenge for this way of defining World Literature, which Mariano Siskind proposes to understand as “an attempt to conceptualize the global ubiquity of the novel since the mid-twentieth century” (338). Siskind's explanation highlights that, when it is thought of in relation to texts that circulate transnationally, the notion of World Literature remains mainly connected to one favourite object of analysis: the novel. Despite their structural differences with the novel, the *microcuentos*

by Hernández, Arboleda and Martínez take over social media to “enter” into the sphere of World Literature by being “read as literature” while circulating out “into a broader world” beyond its point of origin (Damrosch 6).

In the time of Covid-19, *microcuentos* also challenge the centrality of the novel when put in contact with other frameworks for defining the meanings of World Literature. Pheng Cheah, whose work steps away from taking literature as an object of exchange and circulation, proposes an alternative approach by referring to World Literature as “literature that is an active power in the making of worlds” (2). He defines “world” not only as a spatio-geographical entity but also as “an ongoing dynamic process of becoming”, something that is continually being made and remade (42). Although Cheah argues that narrative has the closest affinity to this process of worldmaking, his study on postcolonial literatures focuses exclusively on novels. The *microcuentos* I discuss here also play a role in the ongoing creation of the world: their immediacy makes them capable of informing and inhabiting the ways in which societies articulate their collective and subjective responses to Covid-19. In this sense, they “enhance our sense of (being a part of) humanity” (Cheah 44). A humanity – one may add – affected by the same ongoing crisis, even when its impacts are unequally distributed.

As fiction in and for pandemic times, the case of the Latin American *microcuento* signals a need to reconsider forms of World Literature by looking beyond the hegemonic territory of the novel. In this sense, and considering it a literary form that comes from to the so-called peripheries of the world-system, its study builds on Efraín Kristal’s early call for arguing: “In favour of a view of world literature in which the novel is not necessarily the privileged genre for understanding literary developments of social importance in the periphery; in which the West does not have a monopoly over the creation of forms that count” (Kristal 73).

Kristal’s remarks are even more pertinent in our present-day predicaments. Providing an example of Beverly’s still relevant point about the inadequacy of certain literary forms to express social and cultural realities, the novel is unable to respond to worldwide events as they are happening. Writing novels take time; publishing, translating and circulating them takes time. As such, its adequacy for enunciating and representing the particularities of the Covid-19 world needs to be brought into question, so we can focus on finding literary forms better suited for the particularities of the present. In the 2020s, literature that circulates beyond cultural and linguistic territories, as well as literature capable of engaging in worldmaking, can happen in real time, without the need of waiting for the editorial processes of traditional publishing and printing houses. Combined with social media, *microcuentos* can circulate and

help us imagine the world in and after the pandemic. They constitute a literary form that, in the current crisis, invites us to rethink our understanding of global literary circulation and to reconsider the cartographies of World Literature to include much more than printed novels. Considering their invitation, however, also means addressing and overcoming the “perceived second-class status of electronic publishing” (Dietz 8). In this sense, I conclude by echoing Pisarski’s call for acknowledging that, in a time when Twitter and Facebook are turning out to be a natural course for literary production, “our understanding of what literature and literariness are needs to change accordingly” (48). Even more so during and after Covid-19.

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