McOndo, Magical Neoliberalism and Latin American Identity

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I begin this chapter with an anecdote told by Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez in their 1996 collection of stories, McOndo: A young Latin American writer obtains a scholarship to participate in an International Writer’s Workshop at a well-known university in the United States. Upon arrival he notes that in the US ‘lo latino está hot’ (anything latino is considered hot stuff) and that the Spanish departments and literary supplements ‘están embalados con el tema’ (are feverishly climbing onto this bandwagon) (Fuguet and Gómez, 1996: 9). So great is the craze that, on hearing that three young Latin American writers have been spotted wandering around the campus only a few blocks away from his office, the editor of a prestigious journal hurriedly arranges a literary lunch-party for them with the aim of putting together a special number dedicated to the latino phenomenon. Cool, the writers think, we’re going to get published in America (and in English!), and for the simple reason that we’re latinos who write in Spanish and were born in Latin America. Yet the editor and the three young writers are soon disappointed. Come the end of the semester, the editor rejects two of the three submissions, complaining, to the writers’ dismay and disbelief, not that they lack verisimilitude, but that they lack any trace of ‘magical realism’, and that they could have been written anywhere in the First World (Fuguet and Gómez, 1996: 9–10).

This anecdote should alert us to the currency of ‘Magical Realism’ both within commercial and academic circuits where the label functions simultaneously as a positive marker of essentialised difference and as the yardstick against which the novelty of more recent Latin American writing is—by way of a curiously enduring litotes—negatively defined. As Stephen Hart and Wen-Chin Ouyang note, since 1925, when Franz Roh coined the term ‘Magischer Realismus’ to denote a post-Expressionist aesthetic, and since its political reinscription by the Boom in the 1960s, magical realism has become globalised to the point that it now represents, in Homi K. Bhabha’s words, ‘the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world’ (quoted in Hart

1 This is my liberal rendition of the editors’ anecdote. The translations are mine.
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and Ouyang, 2005: 1). Yet whilst in texts like Gabriel García Márquez’s Cien años de soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude) (1967) or Alejo Carpentier’s El reino de este mundo (The Kingdom of this World) (1949, 1990), magical realism’s disjunctive clash of worldviews challenged the metropolis’s ability to read and master the (post)colonial periphery, under the more fluid conditions of global movement and exchange described by Fuguet and Gómez, magical realism’s globalisation as a postcolonial aesthetic at times clashes head-on with its value as an international commodity, and with the effect that the legibility of contemporary Latin American culture is rendered all the more complex.

Fuguet and Gómez relate this issue of legibility to Latin America’s troubled contemporaneity in a globalised world in which the experience of postcolonialism is increasingly overlaid with the more uncanny experience of the post-national. After their disheartening desencuentro, the authors are tempted to conclude that Latin America was perhaps just an invention of North American Spanish departments (‘un invento de los departamentos de español de las universidades norteamericanas’): ‘Salimos a conquistar McOndo y sólo descubrimos Macondo […] Los árboles de la selva no nos dejaban ver la punta de los rascacielos’ (We left to conquer McOndo but all we found was Macondo […] The trees of the jungle prevented us from seeing the tips of the skyscrapers) (1996: 12). Thus, in an ironic twist on what the postmodern anthropologist, Johannes Fabian terms ‘the denial of coevalness’ central to colonial knowledge-power,2 the authors show how the popularity of a genre hailed as the hallmark of the postcolonial now prevents them from expressing the transformations of their postcolonial status under the conditions of late capitalism and globalisation. The collection produced in the light of this desencuentro aggressively sets out to correct this problem, and does so in its iconoclastic identification of a Latin America that they satirically term ‘McOndo’. Before I offer an assessment of what is at stake in this gesture, it is necessary to pay attention to the terms in which it is made.

In an implicit resolution of the debates sparked off in the 1970s over the Boom’s claims to literary autonomy,3 Fuguet and Gómez joke that McOndo’s proximity to its antecedent and homonym, ‘Macondo’, can be found in its status as a marketing label or ‘marca registrada’ (1996: 15). This contention highlights the fact that writers searching for individual and collective expression must, if they are to achieve success, learn to negotiate

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a global print economy that relentlessly transforms cultural capital into its libidinal and economic correlates. Yet the motivations behind *McOndo* are not only economic, but also aesthetic and ethical. Fuguet and Gómez make a claim for a new, ‘virtual’ realism that will give a picture of the transformations brought about by neoliberalism in the 1990s. ‘McOndo’, they write,

is just as Latin American and magical (exotic) as the real Macondo (which, at the end of the day, is not real but virtual). Our McOndo is bigger, more overpopulated and polluted; it has motorways, metrotatic systems, cable-TV and shanties. In McOndo there are MacDonald’s, Mac computers and condominiums, as well as five-star hotels and gigantic malls built on laundered money.

Such a picture signals both the positive and negative effects of globalisation in Latin America. With flows of legitimate and illegitimate capital and commodities crossing increasingly volatile national borders, grand continental oppositions between First and Third Worlds are reproduced locally, and the view of Latin America as a kind of living museum of folklore has become obsolete. Yet McOndo is still far from constituting a homogenised ‘McWorld’ (*pace* Barber, 1995), as intimated by the juxtaposition of cable-TV and shanties, illicitly built five-star hotels and the realities of massive overpopulation.

Symptomatic of the aforementioned transformations of culture and society in neoliberal conditions is the fact that the stories in *McOndo* concentrate on private and individual, as opposed to collective, realities. Fuguet and Gómez present this fact – the fact that ‘el gran tema de la identidad latinoamericana (¿quién somos?) pareció dejar paso al tema de la identidad personal (¿quién soy?)’ [the grand theme of Latin American identity (who are we?) seemed to give way to the theme of personal identity (who am I?)] – as a symptom of what they call ‘la fiebre privatizadora mundial’ (the world-wide privatisation fever) (1996: 13). Gone are the days, they add, when ‘la disyuntiva del escritor joven estaba entre tomar el lápiz o la carabina, ahora parece que lo más angustiante para escribir es elegir entre Windows 95 o Macintosh’ (the writer’s dilemma lay in having to choose between the pen and the rifle; now it seems the writer’s greatest worry is the choice between Windows 95 and Macintosh). Neoliberal privatisation, one might glean from these
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remarks, seems to have emerged triumphant at the ‘end’ of Latin American history. These comments are in part offered tongue-in-cheek, and Fuguet and Gómez remind us that ‘el nombre [...] McOndo es, claro, un chiste, una sátira, una talla’ (the name [...] McOndo is, of course, a joke, a satire, a leg-pull) (1996: 15). In a later article, ‘Magical Neoliberalism’, Fuguet even offers something of a mea culpa, re-appraising these early remarks as ‘a defensive and somewhat adolescent response to the user-friendly magical-realism software that politically correct writers were using to spin tales that would give world audiences exactly what they expected’ (2001: 69).

Nonetheless, beneath this provocative identification of Latin America with ‘MacDonald’s, Macs and Condos’, a more sincere expression of frustration can be heard. This brings me to the collection’s ethical premise, which consists of a renewed defence of Latin American cultural hybridity over and against the exoticist abstractions produced by the market and the foundationalist narratives produced by traditional literary nationalisms. To deny such hybridity, they argue, is tantamount to a denial of Latin American identity:

Temerle a la cultura bastard a es negar nuestro propio mestizaje. Latinoamerica es el teatro Colón de Buenos Aires y Machu Picchu, ‘Siempre en Domingo’ y Magneto, Soda Stereo y Verónica Castro, Lucho Gatica, Gardel y Cantinflas, el Festival de Viña y el Festival de Cine de La Habana, es Puig y Cortázar, Onetti y Corín Tellado, la revista Vuelta y los tabloides sensacionalistas. [...] Vender un continente rural cuando, la verdad de las cosas, es urbano [...] nos parece aberrante, cómodo e inmoral. (1996: 15–16)

To fear a bastardised culture is to deny our particular mestizaje. Latin America is Buenos Aires’s Teatro Colón and Machu Picchu, ‘Siempre en Domingo’ and Magneto, Soda Stereo and Verónica Castro, Lucho Gatica, Gardel, Cantinflas, the Viña Festival and the Havana Film Festival, it is Puig and Cortázar, Onetti and Corín Tellado, Vuelta and the sensationalist tabloids [...] To sell a rural continent which in actual fact is urban [...] to us seems wrong, facile and immoral.

This claim to hybridity can be located within a discursive tradition that dates back at least as far as Roberto Fernández Retamar’s Calibán (1971), if not to Jorge Luis Borges’ ‘El escritor argentino y la tradición’ (‘The Argentine Writer and Tradition’) ([1951] 1999a), or even to foundational essays like José Martí’s ‘Nuestra América’ (‘Our America’) ([1891] 1979) and Simón Bolívar’s ‘Carta de Jamaica’ (‘Letter from Jamaica’) ([1815] 1969). Like these, it stresses the plurality of origins, ascribes positive value to what is ‘bastardised’, and unravels immanent universality in the crude admixture of particulars. However, what
is not clear is how such hybridity differs from its earlier formulations – how it sheds light on the inception of neoliberalism in contemporary Latin America or how neoliberalism recasts such foundational hybridity. Neither does it tell us what is at stake, under neoliberal conditions, in the equation of hybridity with Latin American identity.

A response to these questions is best formulated through a reading of this collection’s overarching engagement with popular culture and mass consumption. In *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis* (2001), Francine Masiello notes the pivotal role played by the construction of popular subjects in intellectual debates about how local conditions are experienced under the weight of global cartographies. Latin American intellectuals have, since the 1970s, frequently turned the popular subject into a source of redemptive potential that could restore dignity to Latin America’s status as a ‘peripheral’ culture. From Fernández Retamar’s inversion of intellectual ‘Arielismo’ in the championing of ‘Calibán’ (1971), through Ángel Rama’s celebration of the challenge posed to ‘la ciudad letrada’ (lettered city) by ‘la ciudad real’ (real city) (1984), to Cornejo Polar’s insistence on the heterogeneity of Andean culture ‘as crucial to the construction of a vision of Latin America’ (Masiello, 2001: 29), popular subjects ‘offered symbolic capital to intellectuals [that] allowed them to speak of their own dilemmas vis-à-vis the state’ (2001: 29). Under neoliberal conditions, however, ‘the popular subject often comes to be named as an embarrassing anachronism [and] the tie between intellectuals and the masses […] appears irremediably severed’ (2001: 23).

Now, notes Masiello, celebrations of subaltern struggle have been replaced by discourses that define equality in terms of access to a consumer-based civil sphere, whilst a return to aesthetics as part of efforts to counterbalance intellectual marginalisation, displaces endeavours to forge forms of union between popular and intellectual spheres. Beatriz Sarlo’s interest in the ‘poor-man’s know-how’ (see Sarlo, 1992), for example, was displaced by her renewed faith in political parties and a critique of the impoverishing effects of industrial mechanisation on national intellectual life (Masiello, 2001: 31).4 One finds a similar scepticism towards subaltern struggle in Néstor García Canclini’s *Culturas híbridas* (*Hybrid Cultures*) (1989) and *Consumidores y ciudadanos* (*Consumers and Citizens*) (1995), which determine citizenship according to varying degrees of consumption. ‘In our current fin de siglo’, Masiello writes, as if ‘announcing a supposed end of history, critics tend to situate one another as fallen heroes expelled from paradise, exiled from the universe of modernist values that once confirmed their voice and place’

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4 Here Masiello is referring to Sarlo’s works *Escenas de la vida posmoderna* (1994) and *La máquina cultural* (1998).
Against these prognoses – and despite their apparent seduction by the view of NAFTA as a stepping-stone to the ‘end of history’ – the authors in *McOndo* show, much as Masiello has done in her own work, how when approached from popular perspectives, neoliberalism may entail neither an impoverishment of popular creativity nor a homogenisation of cultural identity, but something quite different.

The first, and most striking, thing about *McOndo* is the ordering of its seventeen stories by nation. In the introduction, Fuguet and Gómez state their desire to ‘borrar las fronteras que hicieron de esta antología no sólo una recopilación sino un viaje de descubrimiento y conquista’ (blur the frontiers that made this anthology not only a compilation but also a voyage of discovery and conquest) (1996: 11). Such a desire is given expression through the formulation of what Fuguet calls ‘a certain new Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) sensibility’ (2001: 68). He envisions this sensibility as the sensibility of a future in which ‘borders will be even less explicit and influences will become so global that a new type of artist will evolve who will not be the nowhere man but, on the contrary, the here-and-now man’. He adds that such a ‘sensibility-to-be’ is less about nationality and more about empathy. Instead of trying to capture the essence of a village to show us the world, these new global souls are trying to understand the essence of our world and, thus, helping us deconstruct and, more important, care about, ourselves. (2001: 68)

The centrality accorded to the nation in *McOndo*’s structuring nonetheless suggests that, in spite of these predictions, the nation will not give in under the pressure exerted by the global without first generating resistance. Yet in line with Fuguet’s view that McOndo’s ‘walkman morality’ is ‘post-everything: post-modernism, post-yuppie, post-communism, post-babyboom, post-ozone layer’ (Fuguet and Gómez, 1996: 10), it seems more likely that the national will wither to the status of a mere backdrop for such ‘posts’, giving way to a vision of the McOndo village that is altogether more post-national in nature.

Fuguet’s conjugation of a global ‘empathy’ with a local ‘here-and-now’ that lies beneath (or above) the national, resonates with Arjun Appadurai’s view that the interactive nature of today’s ethnoscapes,5 and ‘the loosening of

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5 By ‘ethnoscape’, Appadurai means ‘the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature
the holds between people, wealth, and territories[,] fundamentally alter[s] the basis of cultural reproduction’ (Appadurai, 1996: 48–49). Rather than treating the local as a solid ‘bedrock, untouched by rumours of the world at large’ (1996: 63), cultural studies in a global era should instead, for Appadurai, chart the re-production of local identities as they register the implosion of global processes that leapfrog the mediations of the nation state. This implosion of the global into the local is sustained by a number of correlate processes, which include (i) the ever more fluid movement of mechanical and informational technology across previously impervious national borders; (ii) the hyper-accelerated daily transactions of ‘megamonies’ through currency markets, stock exchanges and speculation; and (iii) the creation of ‘mediascapes’ that refract these disjunctures by offering – to publics whose access to digital and electronic media increases on a daily basis – repertoires of images and narratives that allow scripts to be formed ‘of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places’ (1996: 35). Crucially, while these processes are all interlinked, the relationship between them is ‘disjunctive and profoundly unstable because each [... ] is subject to its own constraints and incentives’ (1996: 35).

A point of departure for examining McOndo’s introjection of said processes, and the effects they have on its configuration of identitarian narratives, is Fuguet’s story, ‘La verdad o las consecuencias’ (‘Truth or Consequences’) (Fuguet and Gómez, 1996: 109–132). This story tells of a cartographer’s search for selfhood in New Mexico after a marital breakdown in his native Chile. Here the breakdown of such affective bonds provides a cipher for the destabilisation of the determinism that frames identity as a passive product of place. Pablo’s inability to consolidate lasting ties with others – his inability to assume the truth or its consequences – is related to his inability to live in any other time frame than the instant, the present without future: ‘Quizás ahí estuvo su error: Pablo nunca planeó nada y ahora está pagando el costo de haber vivido siempre en el presente’ (Perhaps that was where he’d gone wrong: Pablo never planned anything and now he is paying the price of having always lived in the present) (1996: 113). Living in the present is a symptom of his subjection to the ephemerality of the commodity (he eats at service stations, and prefers listening to the radio to buying his own cassettes), and may also explain his abandonment of literary studies for studies in cartography, a choice that reinforces his disdain for (con)sequential thought and his subjection to the depthless, two-dimensional abstractions of the image.

of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to hitherto unprecedented degree’ (1996: 33).
Pablo’s view that ‘los Estados Unidos le [habían] colonizado su inconsciente’ (the United States [had] colonised his unconscious) (1996: 110), may tempt us further to read the dissolution of his affective ties in Chile (and indeed, his decision to travel north) as symptoms of a transformation of primal affiliations by the realm of the simulacrum that moves on an axis running from North to South. Pablo at first supports this reading. When his brand-new car begins to smell of sweat he is haunted by Chile and the thought of empanadas (pies). He also prefers American hotels to their Chilean counterparts: motels connoted with infidelity and quick, illicit sex. Yet if in the American desert all that is solid melts into the simulacrum (Truth or Consequences, the village in New Mexico where Pablo ends up, was so named after an American game-show of the same name),6 Chile has already succumbed to a similar fate, having been turned into a virtual scenography for the enactment of New Age fantasies peddled by the BBC and the Discovery channel. The image of Pablo consuming these images in the communal sitting-room of a backpacker’s lodge in Tucson is important as it confirms Appadurai’s observation that

As Turkish guest workers in Germany watch Turkish films in their German flats […] and as Pakistani cabdrivers in Chicago listen to cassettes of sermons recorded in mosques in Pakistan or Iran, we see moving images meet deterritorialized viewers. These create diasporic public spheres, phenomena that confound theories that depend on the continued salience of the nation-state as the key arbiter of important social changes. (1996: 4)

As Appadurai notes, when today’s migrations are accompanied by flows of mass-mediated images, these ‘diasporic spheres’ create ‘a new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities’ (1996: 4). Yet as we shall see, the global fabric of this destabilisation of subjectivities is far from being isotropic.

The story, as I have discussed it so far, seems to suggest that the collapse of the real into the simulacrum (catalysed by flows of mass-media images from North to South) is a universal process. However, a trip to the US–Mexican border fundamentally alters such a view. When entering El Paso on the train, Pablo is tempted, by the sight of a crowd of cronies gawping in horror at ‘el espectáculo del Tercer Mundo acechando a tan pocos metros’ (the spectacle of the Third World lying in wait only a few metres away) (Fuguet and Gómez, 1996: 120), to imagine this scene transposed onto his native Santiago, ‘como

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6 Pablo’s vision of the desert is very close to Jean Baudrillard’s in America (1988).
si Santiago fuera dos países [...]. A un lado del Mapocho, Estados Unidos. Al otro, México. La Vega es Ciudad Juárez y Providencia es USA’ (as if Santiago were two countries [...]. On one side of the Mapocho, the United States. On the other, Mexico. La Vega is Ciudad Juárez and Providencia is USA) (1996: 120). The analogy, of course, fails. When Adrián, a latino companion, suggests they cross the bridge to the other side (only two minutes away), Pablo is shocked by the reality of ‘another world’ upon which he, as a self-defined latino, has no purchase at all. Adrián points out that they had to get off ‘el circuito para gringos’ (the gringo trail) (1996: 121), but the trip to a grimy bar only confirms Pablo’s inability to transcend his gringo perspective. Having been confronted with the sight of a stripper putting broken bottles up her vagina, and having emptied two bottles of tequila (which, like a gringo, he confuses with mezcal), Pablo urges Adrián that they should return to ‘civilisation’ (1996: 123). It is at points such as these where Fuguet’s notion regarding the ‘deconstructive’ effects of globalisation on Latin American identity starts to become clearer.

The deconstruction of national identity is more apparent when the aforementioned clash of First and Third worlds is experienced locally. A Chilean may have to travel to the US to experience a shock encounter with the Third World,7 but in Santiago Gamboa’s ‘La vida está llena de cosas así’ (‘Life is full of these things’) (Fuguet and Gómez, 1996: 181–189), it seems that in cities like Bogota, people risk (even if they disavow) encounters like these on a more daily basis. In this story, Clarita, from the upper middle-class district of northern Bogota, tries to piece together a traumatic encounter with her psychoanalyst. Having knocked a homeless man off his motorcycle, she rushes him to a clinic, where she is denied access for not having a credit card. When she drives the man to the city centre she finds herself in the infernal ‘Calle del Cartucho’ (‘Bullet Street’ in popular mythology), whereupon her car is hijacked by a group of men with a pregnant beggar. Before they reach the state-run hospital, the man has an epileptic attack, the beggar starts to give birth and Clarita loses consciousness. As well as signalling the city’s internal reproduction of First World–Third World divisions, this trajectory takes us into the realm of ‘negative’ globalisation noted by Castells when he writes that

7 Fuguet, of course, does not suggest that such encounters differ so greatly according to nation. In Mala onda (1991) his character, Matías Vicuña, ends up in a similarly ‘other-worldly’ part of Santiago when, having run away from home, he travels by bus around the city. Yet, the encounter is perhaps less shocking and accidental as it is experienced through the eyes of the would-be anti-hero, who models his life on that of Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye ([1951] 1958).
there is more than inequality and poverty in this process of social restructuring. There is also exclusion of people and territories which, from the perspective of dominant interests in global, informational capitalism, shift to a position of structural irrelevance. This widespread, multiform process of social exclusion leads to the constitution of what I call [...] the black holes of informational capitalism [...] regions of society from which, statistically speaking, there is no escape from the pain and destruction inflicted on the human condition for those who, in one way or another, enter these social landscapes. (1998: 162; emphasis in the original)

Thus it is notable that Clarita’s journey – significantly from North to South – is figured as a journey from a hyper-mediated middle-class world, where access to the shopping mall or country club serves as an index of citizenship, to something more akin to a ‘dark continent’, where people’s citizenship is all the more fragile. Again, the otherness of this ‘black hole’ is gendered feminine when it is condensed in the abject image of the beggar-woman’s gaping, bloody, vagina.

The telling of this story as a psychoanalytic session signals that Clarita’s trauma derives not only from her experience of a world whose insertion in circuits of exchange and consumption is starkly asymmetrical to that of her own, but also from the shattering of the phantasmatic support that sustains her desire. When not at home or out window-shopping in Unicentro ‘a ver si ya trajeron ese famoso juego de sapo electrónico que tanto anuncian’ (to see if that famous electronic frog game, so heavily publicised, had arrived) (1996: 81), Clarita spends time with Carlos, her boyfriend of lower social standing. ‘[S]us amigas tenían razón: Carlos era un poco vulgar. Pero la excitaba, todavía tenía adentro su olor’ (‘Her friends were right’, she thinks, ‘Carlos was a little vulgar. But he turned her on; she was still carrying his smell inside her’) (1996: 81). When the Other’s otherness is mediated televisually, as it is in her cushioned middle-class world – she admits knowing most other parts of the city only ‘de haberlos visto en televisión’ (from having seen them on television) (1996: 86) – the desire for otherness is safe as it is coextensive with the desire for other libidinally-mediated commodities.

Yet when the proximity of the Other’s desire appears without the prosthetic support of the image (when the hijackers make her sit on the homeless man’s lap, she faints when she thinks he is becoming erect), reality takes on the appearance of a bad trip: ‘Yo vi la escena como si no fueran mis ojos’ (I saw this

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8 The electronic ‘juego de sapo’ typifies, in this instance, the digitisation of foundational motifs (the Incan game of ‘Sapu’), and their transformation into commodities.
scene as if through someone else’s eyes) (1996: 87). Moreover, when Clarita realises that the hard object is in fact a gun, the Other’s desire – his attempt to escape from this ‘black hole’ – is translated back into the murderous desire for capital – the man, we learn, was a sicario (paid assassin) who had been hired to kill her friend’s father. Finally, if in this story the replacement of the policeman by the psychoanalyst as mediator of Clarita’s grievances stands as a synecdoche for the nation-state’s waning performativity as arbiter of the social tensions produced by the uneven inception of global processes, in other stories, such tensions appear to lack even such basic mediation.

As Appadurai notes under the heading ‘The Work of Reproduction in an Age of Mechanical Art’, in global circumstances one can no longer assume the sort of ‘transgenerational stability of knowledge’ once presupposed by theories that sought to account for the reproduction of small identitarian groups (1996: 43). The absence, in McOndo, of any engagement with the theme of cultural reproduction amongst indigenous or other ethnic groups, may be an occasion for concern amongst foreign-language students, but many of its stories signal the pressure exerted by neoliberalism on other related transgenerational knowledge-systems, particularly those aimed at reproducing more elementary social units (such as lovers or families). Edmundo Paz-Soldán’s ‘Amor a distancia’ (‘Long-distance love’) (Fuguet and Gómez, 1996: 73–78), for example, shows how, in Appadurai’s words, ‘global labour diasporas involve immense strains on marriages in general and on women in particular’ (Appadurai, 1996: 44). If love, according to a cliché, is ‘esas minucias que nos pasan mientras estamos ocupados haciendo o diciendo cosas importantes’ (all the little things that we share when doing, or talking, about more important things) (Fuguet and Gómez, 1996: 73), then ‘long-distance love’ takes on the quality of an oxymoron. This is the tragedy of Paz-Soldán’s story, where a young Bolivian studying in Berkeley – most likely to get an underpaid academic job back home – writes a letter to his lover Viviana (which he will never post), recounting details of all his infidelities. The narrator tells her (us) that when, at a party, he joyfully manages to ‘olvidar el allá y el futuro, los diversos territorios y tiempos en que uno habita en una relación a distancia’ (forget all about back there and the future, the different territories and time-frames that one inhabits in a long-distance relationship, and concentrate on the here and the now) (1996: 74), he is immediately plagued by guilt. Such a sentiment occurs precisely because it challenges the knowledge he has inherited from his family about relationships:

Para alguien que nunca dudó de ninguno de los mitos que generaciones pasadas nos legaron acerca del amor esa verdad [el hecho de que yo lo pueda pasar bien sin ti] produce angustia y amargura: porque uno
cree literalmente en los mitos y cuando descubre el amor, piensa que es cierto, uno no puede vivir sin el ser amado, sin ese ser al lado hay insomnios continuos y una desgarrada [...] desesperación. (1996: 74)

For someone who never doubted any of the myths about love bequeathed to us by previous generations, this truth [the fact that I can enjoy myself without you] creates disquiet and bitterness: because you take those myths literally and when you discover love you think, it’s true, you cannot live without your loved one, without your loved one at your side you experience continual insomnia and searing [...] desperation.

Such guilt leads the narrator to question whether true love is in fact possible, and to build a relationship in parallel with another student on the campus. The transformation of a long-distance love relationship into a threesome here (in Colombia, the popular adage is ‘long-distance love, happy the four of us’) offers yet another cipher for the ways in which, even the most apparently sacred bonds underpinning affective ties to place, dissolve to reveal a plurality of globally disseminated forces in play.

In Sergio Gómez’s ‘Extrañas costumbres orales’ (‘Strange oral Customs’) (Fuguet and Gómez, 1996: 133–151), we see a similar deconstruction of the mechanisms aimed at reproducing the habitus, but this time within the realm of the jet-setting upper class Chilean youth. Gómez mocks a quasi-tribalist discourse of moral and cultural ‘purity’ by showing how the characters who utter such a thing are in fact caught up in a circuit characterised by the circulation of commodities across borders that renders such claims impure. Hence, while the title instils expectations of oral storytelling in us, what we get is instead a narrative where premodern orality (the traditional mode of reproduction for group identity) is replaced by its postmodern counterparts in casual sex and conspicuous consumption. After Charito and Seba’s wedding, Florita and Silvio – who have not been invited to the reception – go to Silvio’s apartment to gossip over a drink. Their conversation concerns Charito’s reasons for getting married, but is also punctuated by small talk about the threats posed to personal health by certain products – Flora refuses coffee, linking it to Alzheimer’s ‘de lo que murió rita heyguor’ (which is what rita heyguor died of) (1996: 134); Silvio likes cocktails, which he has learnt to make like ‘ton cruis en [Cocktail] (ton cruis in [Cocktail]) (138). Here, reflexive consumption – significantly mediated by the cinema – constitutes the basis of a class sodality that distinguishes Florita and Silvio from an urban mass perceived as immoral and insalubrious. Yet in their unwitting creolisation of foreign terms – ‘microgüey’ (135), ‘yeremy airon’ (136), ‘milchetic’ (140), ‘greis keli’ (141), ‘topgan’, ‘amar charif’ (146) –, and misapplication of cultural references (Flora thinks Lisbon is in Africa, Silvio confuses Sigmund
Freud with Hermann Hesse [147]), we see the corruption of any claim to purity.

Moreover, in the playful slippage that the story enacts between different notions of orality, a more disturbing connection emerges between consumption and corruption. Silvio recounts how Charito had received a blood transfusion from her father, who later died of AIDS, but adds that she had married Seba out of love. Flora disagrees, conjecturing that Charito had married Seba to avenge a lesbian lover: her Bulgarian dance instructor, Irina Borisov, who looks like ‘isidora dancan’ (144). Silvio defends Charito’s ‘normality’ by recalling how he had had anal sex with her at a party, an interpretation of her sexuality that Flora again rejects, this time recounting how she had had cunnilingus with Charito. These details add depth to the adage, quoted by Silvio, ‘Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres’ (a man is known by the company he keeps) (137), and suggest that in a neoliberal era identity is not only defined by the others with whom we keep company, but also by the more unknowable Other that leaves its spectral trace on the products and bodies we consume.

One might object that by aligning the deregulated flow of commodities with the propagation of diseases like AIDS, these stories partake of the language of political paranoia that expresses distrust of a multicultural, pluralist world, especially so when both are figured in terms of the uncanny eruption of things ‘foreign’ into the putatively ‘untainted’ sanctuaries of home and nation. Yet it would be unfair to make this argument in relation to McOndo, where the treatment of AIDS does not advocate a militarist defence of the national from the threat posed by imagined ‘primitive’ foreign bodies, but points instead to its symptomaticity of postmodern processes. In fact, McOndo’s message seems to be that it is no longer either possible or desirable simply to opt out of the globalisation of consumer tastes and relations that characterise our everyday experience.

In David Toscana’s ‘La noche de una vida difícil’ (‘The night of a difficult life’) (Fuguet and Gómez, 1996: 201–213) – the story of erstwhile rock-star, Roberto, of Los Bribones, and his attempts to make ends meet – Roberto is chided by his fellow band-members for ‘prostituting’ the band into doing cover-versions of hits by The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin and Dire Straits. Roberto too had once confidently refused to pander to market tastes, defiantly resolving never to lower himself to playing Tex-Mex,

[inventario que sirve para cantar en español y cobrar en dólares a la chicaniza; basurero artístico donde caben los gordos, los feos, los cacarizos],

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9 See Sontag (1988), who addresses the metaphors surrounding AIDS in media and political discourse.
todos los que nunca fueron aceptados dentro del rock; música para baile [...] para quinceañera que no fue a la escuela; pasatiempo predilecto de la gente que se cree sofisticada porque compra su ropa en Wal-Mart. (1996: 212)

an invention designed to be sung in Spanish, and paid for in dollars by Chicano plebs; an artistic rubbish-heap where all the fat, ugly, spotty ones never accepted by the rock world end up; dancing music for [...] fifteen-year old girls who never went to school; favourite pastime for people who think they’re sophisticated because they buy their clothes at Wal-Mart.

Yet such artistic freedom was only possible thanks to state funding aimed at building a national rock-music industry. With the denationalisation of the music industry, Roberto now has to accept that the only way to survive as a musician is to form mergers with other small enterprises. If in Latin America, as Carlos Monsiváis writes, ‘sin mayor oposición, la televisión privada decide por cuenta de naciones y sociedades el significado de lo aburrido y lo entretenido’ (private television stands almost unopposed in deciding on behalf of whole nations and societies the meaning of what is boring and what is entertaining) (2000: 214; my translation), survival entails negotiating the tastes and trends increasingly shaped by globalised media. Thus, when the band object to the owner of a restaurant asking them not to play rock music, they are replaced by a pianist who will run a quiz in which members of the clientèle can win a free salad or pudding if they can correctly identify the theme tunes of television programmes like Ironside and Bugs Bunny. This last example perhaps paints a dreary picture for young Latin American artists searching for individual and collective expression in today’s neoliberal circumstances. Yet by way of a conclusion, I would argue that one way of tempering such pessimism, and of giving a new interpretation of Fuguet’s and Gómez’s defence of cultural hybridity in McOndo, can be found in the irreverent attitude that many of the collection’s stories adopt towards the nexuses between consumption, imitation and identity. To explore these links further will also allow us to make more sense of what is at stake in the passage from ‘magical realism’ to ‘magical neoliberalism’.

The complexity of these links becomes most clear in Martín Rejtman’s striking story, ‘Mi estado físico’ (‘My state of body’) (Fuguet and Gómez, 1996: 61–69), which documents a dizzying set of exchanges between young characters who spend their time hanging around in shopping malls in Buenos Aires. Here the narrator takes his car to a garage to be repaired, telling us: ‘Ya no me queda nada [...] . El perro lo regalé cuando me mudé al departamento, que es alquilado, y mi novia me dejó hace tres semanas por mi mejor amigo’ (I’ve got
nothing else left in my possession [. . .]. I gave my dog away when I moved into the flat, which is rented, and my girlfriend left me three weeks ago for my best friend) (1996: 61). On returning from the garage, he places the mechanic’s receipt in a frame once occupied by the photo of his ex-girlfriend, Laura. He then rings his ‘ex-best friend’, Leandro, to ask if he can borrow a video recording of a gym programme the latter has recorded from cable-TV. They meet at a video-bar before going to McDonald’s. Here the narrator encounters Lisa, who looks similar to Laura and who is searching for an ex-boyfriend last seen in the restaurant’s toilets. Later, having watched Laura practise her scales at home, the narrator visits Lisa, who is working out to Leandro’s fitness programme. Lisa invites him to join her and lends him a pair of shorts belonging to Aníbal, her ex. Having collected his car from the mechanic (who tells him the receipt was unnecessary), he goes on a date with Lisa. Before they kiss, he warns her, ‘lo único que tengo es un coche. Mi novia me dejó por mi mejor amigo y el apartamento en que vivo es alquilado’ (All I have is a car. My girlfriend left me for my best friend, and the flat I live in is rented) (1996: 69).

This story ostensibly asks us to read these exchanges in terms of the homogenisation of identity brought about by unbridled consumerism, and as symptoms of the alienation brought about when people and bodies circulate as freely as other commodities. In this picture, lovers are swapped like any other commodities, and subjects literally have to ‘sell’ themselves on the basis of their exchange value in order to secure relationships with others. However, although Rejtman does not portray his characters as free agents, he does show how consumption is subject to a range of different modalities, which include selectivity, irony and even outright indifference. It is significant, for example, that the narrator prefers a vegetarian diet over the menus offered by McDonald’s, and that when he sits with Leandro in the video-bar, the music videos of Genesis and Dire Straits make him feel like vomiting. It is also significant that when they go to a disco, the doorman lets them in without paying, that when he wanders around shops he rarely buys anything, and that when he shuts himself up to enjoy some ‘zapping’, he gets bored, musing that, ‘a pesar de que [sus padres] tienen cable no hay nada’ (although [his parents] have cable-TV, there is nothing worth watching) (1996: 68). When Lisa goes to the cinema, the auditorium is half empty and the experience of watching the film does not constitute consumption at all, rather its opposite, and she too feels like vomiting. Finally, and most significantly, most products and commodities consumed in this story are either borrowed, or are scavenged, and are not paid for. Such scenarios therefore suggest that the bright lights of the consumer metropolis in fact provide a thin veil that masks forms of exchange that are, in fact, more primitive.

In so many foundational Latin American works, cultural identity has been framed as the result of alternately passive or irreverent forms of imitation and
consumption of foreign models and ideas. For aesthetes such as José Enrique Rodó ([1900] 1991), the imitation of North American materialism ran the risk of producing a total ‘de-Latinisation’ of Latin America’s unique ‘spirit’ – an argument contradicted by the author’s exhortation to ‘the youth of America’ to imitate Hellenic cultural paradigms. For others, Borges in particular, such imitation is always irreverent, and allows a chiasmic resignification of local by universal themes, and vice-versa (‘The Argentine Writer and Tradition’, 1999a: 420–427). For Fernández Retamar (1971), the mimetic inscription of colonial power is positively flawed in so far as peripheral utterances in the master’s language are often ‘cannibalistic’ and fork-tongued, if not acts of overt warfare in which, to borrow from Homi K. Bhabha’s words on the ambivalence of colonial mimesis, mimicry becomes mockery as it is ‘threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double’ (1994: 86). The appropriation of the coloniser’s language in such a scenario functions like Caliban’s transformation of Prospero’s language into a means of cursing the master. Such paradigms remind us that there is no acculturation without a difference. Yet they start to look conspicuously anachronistic when, in relation to the complex, globalised circuits explored by works like *McOndo*, they continue to construe the big Other, against which the little Latin American other defines itself, as an identifiable metropolitan master.

As shown by the stories in *McOndo*, with the increasing implosion of the global into the local, characters encounter situations that, as well as being undoubtedly ‘postcolonial’, also characterise an epoch in which, to cite García Canclini’s unique allegory of globalisation, ‘David no sabe donde está Goliath’ (David does not know where to locate Goliath). As García Canclini explains,

durante la época del imperialismo se podía experimentar el síndrome de David frente a Goliat, pero se sabía que el Goliat político estaba en parte en la capital del propio país, en parte en Washington o en Londres, el Goliat comunicacional en Hollywood [...]. Hoy cada uno se disemina en treinta escenarios, con ágil ductilidad para deslizarse de un país a otro, de una cultura a muchas, entre las redes de un mercado polymorfo. (1999: 27)

in the age of imperialism one may have felt like David facing Goliath, but one knew that the political Goliath was partly in one’s own capital city and partly in Washington or London, or in the communicational Goliath of Hollywood [...]. Today each of these is disseminated in thirty different scenarios, and can slide with agile ductility from one country to another, from one culture to many others, among the networks of a polymorphous market. (My translation)
As García Canclini insists, this slippery dissemination of power makes it impossible to posit a clear-cut opposition between globalisation and the defence of identity. It also strengthens Appadurai’s view that today’s global cultural economy is a ‘complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre–periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centres and peripheries)’ (1996: 32). Yet Appadurai’s addendum, ‘Nor is it susceptible to simple models of […] consumers and producers’ (1996: 32), should lead us to question the fetishisation of production and consumption within this picture. As so many of the stories in *McOndo* show, as well as reproducing symbolic forms of violence such as racism and class exclusion, the inception of neoliberalism in Latin America may also transform traditional patterns of production and consumption. However, in the final analysis, it may also provide something of a hollow armature, or mask, for other forms of exchange and interaction that are altogether more *sui generis*. 