

The Human Animal in Cortázar's "Axolotl"

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Abstract

Rejecting rationality, space, and linear time, Julio Cortázar's "Axolotl" is an ecocritical text that problematizes humancentric logic and refutes coloniality. Cortázar crafts uncertainty through ambiguity and constructs a shifting narrative for both the human (man) and non-human (axolotl) Latin American exiles in this posthumanistic short story that resolutely resists colonial ways of thinking and knowing.

Keywords: *Julio Cortázar; posthumanism; decoloniality; ecocriticism; Latin American literature*

Introduction

In Julio Cortázar's short story "Axolotl" (*first published in Final del juego*, 1956), a man becomes obsessed with visiting the axolotls in an aquarium. This man examines minutely the nature of his attraction to the axolotls with such singular determination that his obsession generates a transcendent transformation. Ambiguously, we are never told the man's name. We do not know if he is young or old. Cortázar layers his story with ambivalence by omitting all biographical information pertaining to his narrator, and by the conclusion of the story, this anonymous man is a divided self.

Decolonial theorists characterize duplexity as an intrinsic feature of Western epistemology, a way of thinking deeply embedded in Christianity and a critical component of coloniality. A decolonial reading of "Axolotl" might argue the story is burdened with Cartesian duality: European/Indian, France/Argentina, West/Latin America, I/them, human/axolotl, inside/outside (Knight and Krull, 1973: 491). Such a reading would position Cortázar's story well within a European tradition of thinking, knowing, and cultural production, what decolonial theorist Aníbal Quijano might call "cultural colonization by Europe" (Quijano, 2007: 170). I propose "Axolotl" in fact refutes colonial modernity by challenging temporality, space, and rationality.

Latin American literature is an axis point for problems presented by modernity. I speak namely of pluralism, humanism, culture, identity, historicity, and coloniality. Though literature is a lens for examining the complex interconnectedness of these issues, literature also poses difficulties for decolonial theorists. In "Nuestra América," José Martí confronts the totalizing effect of universalism by critiquing "the imported forms and ideas" that shape Latin American cultural production (Martí, 2002: 292). Building on Martí's work, decolonial theorists view novels and short stories—modes of narrative storytelling and products of Enlightenment

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thought—as Western literary forms generated from “the colonial machinery” of modernity (Legrás, 2016: 21). In his seminal essay “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” Quijano describes the brutal physical violence and “cultural repression” of coloniality as a crucible from which the “cultural complex known as European modernity/rationality” is produced and by which “the European paradigm of rational knowledge” is unceasingly generated (Quijano, 2007: 169-172). This cultural complex is centered in the classical tradition of humanism. The influence of Western epistemologies and ontologies forcibly imposed on Latin America during the period of colonial conquest proliferate modernity. Literary production is a mode by which European rationality is perpetuated. Literary works that borrow Western epistemology continuously represent Latin America as “other” in the binary of Western/other, civilized/barbarian (Quijano 177).

What Quijano and others, notably Walter Dignolo, have called for is an “epistemological decolonization,” a new way of thinking that challenges rationality (Quijano, 2007: 176-177). Crucial to Dignolo’s theory is his concept of delinking from European modes of thinking. Because much of Latin American literature is a product of Eurocentrism, decolonial theorists cast doubt on its ability to critique modernity without merely replicating the logic of modernity (Legrás, 2016: 20). As editors Juan G. Ramos and Tara Daly point out in the introduction to their book *Decolonial Approaches to Latin American Literatures and Cultures*, some decolonial theorists are deeply suspicious and critical of “literature’s ‘impure’ nature, which is to say its transcultural aspects that attempt to translate local experience into the universal language of modernity,” writing that this “is perhaps part of why some decolonialists and its detractors avoid engaging with literary genres” (Ramos and Daly, 2016: xviii). However, this entrenched suspicion of Western literary forms masks the imbrication of literature, resistance, and subversion and art’s ability to respond to power. Ramos and Daly note:

If Europe violently imposed languages (oral and written), the very conception of literature (as knowledge), and particular articulations of culture onto the Americas, fully rejecting historically, politically, racially, culturally informed and nuanced analyses of languages, literatures, and cultures simply because they are Eurocentric in origin all too readily plays into the logic of exclusion enacted through the diverse modalities of coloniality that Europe envisioned and instituted. Leaving these categories unquestioned in an examination of the *longue durée* of Latin America’s colonial, post-colonial, and neocolonial literary and cultural production assumes a facile and untroubled acceptance of a fixed and linear framing of literatures and cultures in the Americas. (Ramos and Daly, 2016: xvii-xviii)

Given literature’s “impure nature,” how, then, can a short story written by an Argentinian author and set in Paris perform a critique of modernity? In this paper, I suggest Cortázar reframes this question by representing and recasting otherness and by rejecting Eurocentric logic. A fundamental technique Cortázar uses to reject rationality is imbuing his story with ambiguity. Employing ambiguity to obscure essential information, such as the narrator’s nationality nor occupation, Cortázar sets the stage for a fictional sleight of hand where everything may be equally true or untrue. This technique opens up a space for the reader to interpret the text.

Ambivalence saturates “Axolotl” to such a degree that the piece operates simultaneously on at least two levels, as a story of a man’s extreme fascination told in a realistic mode of



storytelling and as a surrealist transference of identity and being. Cortázar slips seamlessly between these two modes of storytelling, and it is only when the reader confronts shifts in time and pronoun usage that she is jolted out of one reality and into the other, only to be returned again in a feedback loop to the reality/unreality dialectic, a sustained fluctuation that is a quintessential hallmark of narrative ambiguity. The fluctuation of reality and unreality serves to underscore the unknowability that lies at the heart of the story, and it also draws attention to mimesis, demanding the reader ask the question “what does it matter which of the two narrative planes is ‘real’ when we know they are both fiction?” (Prieto, 1998: 81) Cortázar creates ambivalence in “Axolotl” through these momentary shifts and slips in both time and pronoun usage. He flags his challenge to temporality in the short story’s opening salvo:

There was a time when I thought a great deal about the axolotls. I went to see them in the aquarium at the Jardín des Plantes and stayed for hours watching them, observing their immobility, their faint movements. Now I am an axolotl. (Cortázar, 1967: 3)

“Time” is referenced directly in the story’s first sentence, framed in the past tense, leading the reader to presume the story is being told from a point in time somewhere beyond the events recounted, and in the span of this brief paragraph the reader is also presented with the word “now.” The assumption of time having two points of reference, past and present, is thus established, though by no means does time provide readers of “Axolotl” with an anchor, for, just as this semblance of a chronology is established, we are confronted by the stark statement that the once-human narrator is now a salamander, dispelling any hope of certainty at all. Manipulating the reader’s perception of time is a theme in much of Cortázar’s work.

The story proceeds to recount the narrator’s initial discovery of the axolotls and his growing fascination, utilizing the first person and the past tense until the closing of the fifth paragraph, a long passage of dense text without breaks that is rich with tension as the sentences build, leading to the final two sentences of the passage, which describe the motionless axolotls’ passivity in their glass tank. Suddenly, without warning, the tense shifts from the past to the present.

Once in a while a foot would barely move, I saw the diminutive toes poise mildly on the moss. It’s that we don’t enjoy moving a lot, and the tank is so cramped—we barely move in any direction and we’re hitting one of the others with our tail or our head—difficulties arise, fights, tiredness. The time feels like it’s less if we stay quietly. (Cortázar, 1967: 5)

Cortázar thrusts the reader into the mind of the man through the narrator’s use of the first-person voice, then, defying rationality, uses the same narrative technique to transfer sentience to the man-as-axolotl, separating the “he” who is now the axolotl from the “he” who walks out of the aquarium to perhaps write this story. Cortázar’s pronouns reject normalizing and time is again referenced directly, though by no means does the reader glean a clear sense of the passage of time. The narrator’s ambiguous use of the word “time” obfuscates rather than illuminates. The next paragraph shifts seamlessly back to the first-person human narrator examining “them” in “their quietness” (Cortázar, 1967: 5). The pronouns flow between the polarities of I/we, they/them, he/me and the tense shifts once again smoothly from present to past.

The narrator's enthrallment by the axolotls reaches its totality in the moment he realizes he is an axolotl. The final two paragraphs repeat the overlapping pronouns as the narrator slips between "he" and "I," and it is at this point, very near the end, that the fluctuation between the pronouns collapses in the moment "the bridges were broken between him and me" (Cortázar, 1967: 9). The story concludes with the transference of he/me and we/us complete:

I think that at the beginning I was capable of returning to him in a certain way—ah, only in a certain way—and of keeping awake his desire to know us better. I am an axolotl for good now, and if I think like a man it's only because every axolotl thinks like a man inside his rosy stone semblance. I believe that all this succeeded in communicating something to him in those first days, when I was still he. (Cortázar, 1967: 9)

"Axolotl" is bookended by the "now," which is repeated in the first and last paragraphs of the story. It is a term both universal and specific and a word implicitly charged with ambiguity. The hereness of "now" is forever lapsing into the past as time moves forward. The "now" is always immediate yet generalizing, personal yet universal. It refers ambiguously to the present "now" and to the timeless "now." Frederick Jameson points out William Faulkner's persistent use of "now" throughout his own fiction as a "gesture out of time" (Jameson, 1991: 133). Jameson writes: "the extraordinary function of the Faulknerian 'now,' which (generally accompanied by the past tense) shifts gears from the traumatic present of the obsessive memory in the past, across the listeners' situation, to the present of the Faulknerian sentences in our own reading time" (Jameson, 1991: 133). But Cortázar is not performing a pastiche or parody of memory and time, rather, he is manipulating the reader's sense of temporality and the reality/unreality of time within the narrative. We are left to ask how much time has passed between this narrative "now" and the narrator's metamorphosis. The question is unanswerable. Temporality in "Axolotl" is explicitly referenced and explicitly refuted.

Scholars Monique Roelofs and Norman S. Holland identify a pattern of temporal obfuscation and manipulation in Cortázar's writing. They write:

The unsettling of temporal organization interarticulates with an overhaul of distinctions between modernity and the archaic . . . a temporal juggling . . . that dislocates realist visual, narrative, and conceptual orders. Opening up a space for surprise and shock within schemes of marketable aesthetic meaning, Cortázar puts to work as a decolonizing register a form of temporal disruption." (Roelofs and Holland, 2015: 161)

Crucially, Cortázar's treatment of time colludes with his handling of space, which, like time, is fluid in "Axolotl." Roelofs and Holland convincingly argue that "temporal disjunction" in Cortázar's fiction "asserts a breakdown in rationality" and I argue so, too, does the separation between the outside world and the inner space of the aquarium deny rationality (Roelofs and Holland, 2015: 159). At the onset of the narrator's obsession, he leans against the prison-like bars that separate the aquarium's tank from the spectator. He watches "the sheet of glass" behind which the clustered axolotls with "little pink Aztec faces" wait in suspended time (Cortázar, 1967: 4). They stare back impassively, "their heads against the glass" (Cortázar, 1967: 4). The narrator acknowledges: "Obscurely I seemed to understand their secret will, to abolish space and time with an indifferent immobility" (Cortázar, 1967: 5-6). The glass that divides the space between the outside and the inside of the tank is the site of a transference



of consciousness, being, and understanding. “Glass” is referenced ten times in the story and three occurrences are located within this passage, when the narrator’s obsession grows to overshadow his rationality. The first two references are to the glass walls of the tank, while the third refers to the axolotl’s “milky glass” bodies, like those of “Chinese figurines,” and together the three repeated terms create also a semantic field of transparency and fragility (Cortázar, 1967: 5). Moreover, the word “tank” is repeated ten times in the story. The tank is the axolotls’ coffin-like prison in which the Mexican salamanders are held captive in the Paris aquarium. The narrator senses that the axolotls’ only form of resistance to their imprisonment is to obliterate space and time, a rejection that reflects Cortázar’s denial of rationality.

The narrator resists the transparent division between man and axolotl, free and captive, outside and inside, timeless and timebound, pressing his face to the tank and tapping his finger on the glass. The axolotls are “suffering” in “stifled pain” and “stiff torment at the bottom of the tank,” staring blankly with their “gold” eyes that are both “witnesses” and “judges” to the history of coloniality in Latin America (Cortázar, 1967: 7-8). When the moment of transference arrives, outside/inside fluctuate and converge as the narrator confesses “I saw my face against the glass, I saw it on the outside of the tank, I saw it on the other side of the glass” (Cortázar, 1967: 8). This moment challenges the reader’s interpretation of the story by rejecting logic and it also emphasizes the divide between “outside” and “other,” colonizer and colonized. Cortázar makes otherness explicit by repeating “outside” four times within a span of eight sentences at this crucial conjunction within the story. Significantly, “inside” appears only once in the story, at the conclusion, when the narrator is an axolotl who “thinks like a man inside his rosy stone semblance,” existing on the inside of the tank and within the mind of the colonized (Cortázar, 1967: 9). A close reading of “Axolotl” reveals a stark confrontation between two worlds, one inside the prison of the tank, one outside.

Linked with the story’s temporal and spatial fluidity are references to thinking, knowing, and understanding.

Only one thing was strange: to go on thinking as usual, to know. To realize that was, for the first moment, like the horror of a man buried alive awaking to his fate. Outside, my face came close to the glass again, I saw my mouth, the lips compressed with the effort of understanding the axolotls. I was an axolotl and now I knew instantly that no understanding was possible. He was outside the aquarium, his thinking was a thinking outside the tank. (Cortázar, 1967: 8)

Highlighting the nuance between epistemology on the inside of the tank and marking it as distinctly incompatible with epistemology outside the tank implicitly draws a divide between these two distinct ways of knowing. Further, no “understanding” is possible between these two ways of thinking, only a connection that for one remains in memory and for the other gradually fades from memory. If the way of knowing and thinking as an axolotl-man is possible on the outside, the narrator suggests the only way is through the unconscious mind, which transforms memory and history into story. Meanwhile, on the inside of the tank, the narrator is left with only his half-human thoughts, unable to escape. The narrator says, “Since the only thing I do is think, I could think about him a lot,” but the man’s way of thinking and the axolotl’s ways of thinking are not the same (Cortázar, 1967: 9). The pronouns once again fluctuate between “I” and “him,” rejecting stylistically the rules of pronoun usage and language (Roelofs and Holland, 2015: 159, 160). After the metamorphosis, the transformed

axolotl-man is consumed by the “mystery” of being human in the world outside the tank (Cortázar, 1967: 9).

Critic Brett Levinson argues that though we are never explicitly told the narrator’s origins, “Axolotl” is a story about Latin America (Levinson, 1994: 11). Levinson views the transparent yet unbreakable division between the confines of the glass tank and the outside world and the “he” and the “I” of the story as representative of the West and Latin America. Crucial to Levinson’s reading of “Axolotl” is that “the person, having lost touch with his/her otherness, forgets it, and begins to feel at home while inside foreign constructs” (Levinson, 1994: 11). Another point Levinson is keen to make is that the axolotl is the man’s other, and the story questions Western modernity, a rejection represented by the transference between the man and his other. The temporal, spatial, and linguistic shifts and slips within the story work in concert thematically to create ambiguity and reject rationality. Levinson argues the transformation at the heart of “Axolotl” is essential to understanding Cortázar’s conceptualization of Latin American identity. Roelofs and Holland agree and assert that the temporal fluctuations in Cortázar’s work underscore the confrontation between the Old World and the New. They point to the metamorphosis of “Axolotl” as emblematic of this epistemological confrontation, “where an ostensibly contemporaneous character turns into a figure of the primitive,” at the moment the man becomes an axolotl with a distinctly Aztec face (Roelofs and Holland, 2015: 161).

The ambiguity Cortázar crafts throughout his story has one final surprise. At the conclusion of “Axolotl,” two stories emerge, the one we’re reading, and the one that is being written. Both, of course, are fictions, but how are we to interpret them? Are we to believe the narrator becomes an axolotl or are we to believe the man has suffered a mental breakdown? The answer is yes and no and perhaps. Cortázar’s use of ambiguity creates a text that is open to the reader’s experience, a text that is open to interpretation. To accept the narrator of “Axolotl” indeed metamorphosizes into a Mexican salamander is to reject logic and rationality. To deduce the man is insane is contrary to the story’s conclusion. Caught in the dilemma of the impossibility of believing either beckons the reader to draw her own conclusion. The meaning of the story depends on the experience of the reader in the act of reading.

In *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson defines ambiguity broadly as a situation in which “one thing is said to be like another, and they have several different properties in virtue of which they are alike” (Empson, 1955: 2). As a way of prefacing his exploration, Empson makes clear that context is imperative and “the fundamental situation, whether it deserves to be called ambiguous or not, is that a word or a grammatical structure is effective in several ways at once” (Empson, 1955: 2). In a literary text, ambiguity is a technique that generates mystery, and mystery feeds the curiosity that fuels the reader’s search for knowledge and meaning. Crucially, the way ambiguity can operate in in a work of fiction is to force the reader to decide how (or whether) the story resolves ambivalence. Ambiguity, therefore, places a demand on the reader.

In her essay “The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” Flannery O’Connor characterizes modernism as the introduction of a type of writing that is autonomous and self-reliant. The writer she identifies most strongly with this modernist shift is Henry James, who “began to tell his story in a different way,” one “through the minds and eyes of the characters themselves,” while the author disappears “behind the scenes, apparently disinterested” (O’Connor, 199: 74).



Modernism, she writes, is exemplified by a style of writing where the work “must be very much a self-contained dramatic unit” that “must carry its meaning inside it” and the chief characteristic embodied therein is “the disappearance from it of the author” (O’Connor, 1969: 74-75). “Axolotl” emerges at the moment of modernism’s eclipse. The story’s publication in 1956 predicts a cultural and critical shift embodied by Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” (1967). In his essay, Barthes disposes with authorial intention, and, with it, much of New Criticism. As a principle of openness, ambiguity in postmodern literary works resists interpretation. Such a sense of postmodern ambiguity is what allows the text to exist as a multitude of different writings across time and cultures. For Barthes, ambiguity is the infinitude of all meaning and all writing. But what happens when literature resists interpretation, when a writer deliberately frustrates what Wayne Booth calls the “pursuit of ‘truth,’ but a truth so diverse and unpin-downable that no truth emerges” (Booth, 1998: 360)? What becomes of the reader’s investigation of a such a text? In an open text, ambiguity demands the reader endlessly pose the question of meaning. Intention is supplanted by experience, and experience is unique to each reader. Openness forces the reader into producing the meaning of the novel.

Ambiguity in “Axolotl” works throughout the story on two levels, mirroring the I/he, man/axolotl, inside/outside, European/Latin American duplexities. Cortázar’s use of ambiguity allows an interrogation of imperialism, and opens the text to the reader, adding another dichotomy to its dualities: open/closed. By refusing to dispel the ambiguity or close the text, Cortázar refuses rationality, modernity, and Western epistemology. Ambiguity in “Axolotl” demands that we as readers confront political and ethical considerations. What would the implications be if instead the story concluded in a straightforward and logical manner, perhaps with the narrator waking from a nightmare to find the world restored around him? To wake the narrator from a nightmare would mean closing the text to the reader and insisting there is no mystery for the reader to solve. Instead, the story’s ambiguity challenges readers to interpret the meaning of the metamorphosis. “Axolotl” concludes with the “mysterious humanity” the “mysterious humanity” of the new-made man (Cortázar, 1967: 6). Cortázar chooses to allow his reader to decide who is the animal and who is the human and the unanswered question he poses puts forward a predicament in his posthumanistic story: Who are we if not human, if not animal?

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