

**ANA MARÍA SHUA AND THE SHAPING OF A PLANETARY REPUBLIC OF *FLASH* FICTION  
STORYTELLING**

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As happens quite often in the Anglophone literary academy we know little about the important innovations taking place within the Hispanophone Americas. And, within Hispanophone literary studies, certain genres, formats, and persons (male) tend to be favored over others. This is to say, the following interview with Argentine polymath Ana María Shua (known by many as the “Queen of Microfiction”) stands as a multi-pronged corrective that puts the spotlight on a greatly creative Latina author and on her significance as one of the most prolific and talented creators of microfictions, very short stories or flash fictions.

Born in Buenos Aires in 1951 to a Polish-Jewish mother and Jewish-Moroccan Lebanese father, Shua’s life was variously impacted by the different administrations in power in Argentina during the middle- to end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; for instance, the iron rule of Juan Domingo Perón from 1946-1955 (and then again from 1973-1974) along with various military appointed presidents that followed made life so difficult for people that many were either forced into exile or left the country. One of the greatest poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and Cervantes Prize winner, Juan Gelman, suffered all variety of insufferable indignities at the hand of the different military juntas. For instance, in 1976 he was forced into exile the same year of

the disappearance (two of 30, 000 *desaparecidos*) and murder of his son Marcelo and his pregnant daughter-in-law, Maria Claudia; their new born daughter was given to a pro-government family in Uruguay.

Shua's journey to become a creative writer began early. By age 10 she had already created a lengthy collection of poetry and by middle adolescence she published an award-winning book of poetry, *El Sol y Yo* (1967). As an adult, while Shua earned a living as *an advertising copywriter and journalist*, it wasn't long before she was able to earn a living on the writing of fiction alone. We see in her award-winning novel, *Soy paciente* (1976; translated into English by David William Foster and published in 1997) and in all the fiction that she has since published her taking subject matter that is as wide ranging as the human condition itself. This includes the delicate foray into danger zones such as Argentina's violent period known as the Dirty War (approximately 1974-1983). For instance, in her story "La columna vertebral" ("The Spinal Column") the plot unfolds in and around a surgery practiced on a patient's broken back; the fragmented body stands in as a part for the whole of all those tortured and maimed under the military junta's murderous knife. It includes the topic of memory as shaped by an individual, the family, and the nation—a nation that betrays the actual memory experienced by its people.

Shua chooses to reconstruct in whispers her sociopolitical scene, but also so much more. Nothing is off limits for her, and this extends to the format she chooses to convey her stories. She has authored screenplays, children's books (13 no less), short stories, erotica, and poetry. She has also written influential essays for periodicals, such as the daily *El País*, published in Spain and widely read in Latin America. All in all, Shua has published over 80 books in all variety of formats and genres. Her international award winning books have been published across the

globe and translated into languages such as *English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Dutch, Swedish, Korean, Japanese, Icelandic, Bulgarian, and Serbian*.

Shua is one of the world's most accomplished and acclaimed flash fiction writers. We see this first in her publication of *La sueñera* in 1984 and then non-stop with collections such as *Casa de Geishas* (1992) and *Fenómenos de circo* (2011; published in English as *Without a Net, Hanging Loose Press, 2012*). Several such collections have been published in Madrid in one volume, *Cazadores de Letras* (2009). In her flash fictions we see a creative talent who seeks constantly challenges of form and content. Shua is the product of her time and place; in her flash fictions we hear idioms specific to a Buenos Aires *argentinidad* (Argentine-ness), for instance. Yet, she's restless, carefully crafting flash fictional worlds that transcend time and place. She never accepts the inertia formulaic solutions and representations. In her flash fictions we travel from the mundane to the metaphysical, from the ugly to the sublime. We are made privy to the power play within family units and between lovers. In her collection *Microfictions*, for instance, we encounter inanimate objects like blow dryers with interior states—a refrigerator that softly purrs at night “in heat for its mate” and a statue that “smiles impassively, somewhat amazed as she admires the perfection of the sculptor, her creation”. She wraps language around her finger (every word counts) to offer her readers a penetrating look into what makes us tick—and what makes reality glisten. Whether her characters are old, young, women, men, animals, objects and the like, she invests them with complex thinking, desiring, and dreaming subjectivities. Shua's incisive quick visions—gestalts—make constantly *new* our experience of the world. It is from the Americas and with Shua's flash fictions at the vanguard that we see the radical transformation of our planetary republic of letters.

**Frederick Luis Aldama (FLA):** Since the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the *short* short story has flourished without interruption in Latin America. So much so that some of its practitioners are internationally recognized as undisputed masters who have introduced important innovations in matters of form and content. Yet, in the US this seems to be a rather recent phenomena. Do you think there's something in the soil south of the US/Mexico border that leads more authors to this format?

**Ana María Shua (AMS):** Could be. We should begin by recognizing that all genres are shorter in Spanish. We still have very few those long-size novels, more than a thousand pages. These are much more common in the Anglo literary tradition. And we would never call “short-story” (but *nouvelle*) a text over forty pages, a normal length for a short story in English.

So, if everything is shorter in Spanish, why not the short-short stories? There are important exceptions, of course, like one of my much admired science fiction writers of the '50s, Frederick Brown, who invented and developed the “super short story”. The first “sudden fiction” anthology I read, edited by Robert Shapard, chose stories that would have been just regular short stories in Spanish, 4-5 pages. But I admit that the genre has developed in Latin America much more than in Spain, so there must be something in our soil that others don't have.

Remember it is not only the short-short story —or *short-shorties*— but also the regular short story that is more important in Latin America than across oceans (Europe) and northern borders (the US). Keep in mind, however, that *short-shorties* have more readers in Spain, where two or three publishers could specialize in the genre. In Latin America most of the flash fiction

books have been paid by the authors. I think I could have never published my flash fiction with big publishers if I hadn't been a successful novelist.

**FLA:** In the US, venues for publishing flash fiction (and even the longer short story) are limited to academic publications and reviews. In Latin America flash fiction seems to reach audiences through mainstream magazines and newspaper supplements. Might you speculate as to why?

**AMS:** How I wish it were so! No, unfortunately this paradise does not exist. Flash fiction has very few readers in Latin America. If it is published once and then (not that much) by regular magazines and newspapers, it is mainly because it is much easier to design a page with many short-short stories than with a longer one. But very few commercial or independent publishers dare to publish flash fiction because the regular reader still rejects the genre.

**FLA:** You create in many different genres. What does flash fiction offer that poetry or the novel or any other of the many genres you work in *not* offer?

**AMS:** The flash fiction genre allows me to concentrate the maximum possible meaning in the minimum possible signifier, and I love this. It has strong links with poetry and it is narrative at the same time. It has everything in such a short length! It is a great pleasure for me to transform an idea —a stone, say— into a brilliant gem in a single day. And if everything fails, if the stone cannot be made into a jewel, I can throw it away in a few hours, instead of suffering for years as happens with writing a novel.

Today's poetry is too mysterious for me. It is too hermetic. At times my flash fictions can seem difficult to read, but they always provide the necessary keys to unlock their respective meanings.

**FLA:** What comes to mind when you read: "Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí"?

**AMS:** Nothing. And it is not Monterroso's fault. Some famous sentences, stories, and poems have been repeated so many times that their meaning fades away. They mean nothing. You must make a real effort to remember how you felt the first time you read them.

**FLA:** Clearly, Monterroso's an influence on your work. . . and Borges, Kafka, and Poe. Others?

**AMS:** Henry Michaux has been very important for me, with his *Voyage en Grande Garabagne*. (I think the book has not been entirely translated into English; there is only an anthology of his works titled, *Darkness Moves*.) Michaux was considered a poet but I find his work absolutely narrative. He would have been a flash fiction author today. And there is Italo Calvino of course, with his *Invisible Cities*. And in the early '70s I found *El cuento*, a great Mexican magazine that published only short stories and a lot of flash fiction. Before I began to write my own flash fiction, I could read there all the Latin American authors that were writing short *short* stories in those days. Beside, we have a strong tradition of flash fiction in Argentinean literature: Borges, Bioy Casares, Cortázar, Denevi, and Blaisten, among others.

**FLA:** Can you talk about how flash fiction (and fiction generally and in all its guises including of the *Hola* magazine variety) grows from our existence as social creatures intrigued and fascinated by how authors like yourself represent the life of the mind in ways that satisfy the reader's hunger for knowledge of other human beings, their minds, and therefore their stories.

**AMS:** Human beings are curious animals... This is not only about flash fiction. What is literature? How can you explain it? Why do writers write? Why do readers read? It is not enough to know. We want to understand. If knowing and knowledge were our main and only concern, art would have never come to exist. We would have science and maybe journalism... But we are not satisfied with simple information about what happened. We need more than an anecdote. We

need a story that gives shape and meaning to the confusing chaos of life. Our minds need an order that does not exist in real life.

**FLA:** Several of your stories foreground our hunger for fiction

**AMS:** Well, yes, all of them I hope. I try to catch pieces from the chaos of reality and shape them in the small and fake and necessary cosmos of fiction.

**FLA:** A slippery fish, many have tried to wrangle with the term flash fiction, or *short* short story—or short-*shorties* as you call them above. Some have theorized its uniqueness as a form or genre in terms of length, content, style, for instance. It continues to elude, or does it?

**AMS:** Once again, I hope it does! Flash fiction can be defined as a *narrative text* no more than 25 lines long. Okay, but then we might ask, what is narrative? Floods of ink have been wasted trying to define this word.

Flash fiction, or the short *short* story is like a small country that shares borders with many others: poetry, short story, joke, aphorism, thoughts...It is a tricky genre that loves to play right on the border. Sometimes people ask me how can they know when they are reading a flash fiction. It is simple: if it looks like a joke, it is a joke. If it looks like poetry, it is poetry. If you are not sure about what is it, then it is a flash fiction.

**FLA:** Clearly, with 25 lines or less of narrative text flash fictions demand a great concentration of narrative devices and plot to hit their target (their intended effect on us readers) with as few means and as quickly as possible.

**AMS:** Oh yes, and it demands a great concentration from the reader too. It is a very demanding genre! It is this concentration of narrative devices that I love most. That is why when writing flash fiction you have to count on the reader's knowledge to fill in the gaps. Just like in martial arts, where you use the strength of your opponent to knock him down, the short *short* story uses what the reader knows to complete its meaning.

**FLA:** It would seem that the brevity of detail provided in flash fictions would demand more filling in of gaps of information. However, the careful choice of a pronoun, verb, noun, comma and so on *can* and *does* direct our minds to *fill* in and *give shape* to something quite specific, including its respective literary genre (fantastic, magical realism, conventional realism) itself.

**AMS:** Of course. All the clues must be there. This is not poetry. Sometimes the literary genre is not so specific. Flash fiction is a hybrid being. It's difficult to classify. In such a short amount of words, each one has to be very carefully chosen. Each word carries such a heavy weight. Each word should help direct your mind to the meaning. In the end, however, I let the reader choose the literary genre...

**FLA:** Some of your very short flash fictions such as your two sentence "Blacaman and Koringa" or one line "Night Sounds" create events (or series of events) that are by definition happenings *in* time that alter a particular state of things. They are quick but they nonetheless establish a before and after. They exist *in* time and space.

**AMS:** I think you found at last a good definition for "narrative". Yes, it doesn't matter how short a short story is, it must contain a happening in time that alters the state of things. This is the only way to tell a story. Besides, you should know that Blacaman and Koringa existed too, they were real people. You can see Koringa on YouTube. It's obvious that the crocodile is pretending.

**FLA:** Your flash fictions possess the capacity to demonstrate in a few pages multiple worldviews and many different moral options.

**AMS:** Shortness is not an excuse to *not* present complexity. A flash fiction must possess all the capacities of good literature, even in a few words. Just as you can choose to describe a single minute in a thousand pages in novel you can tell the whole story of the universe in one line in a flash fiction. I used to think that the only thing flash fiction *couldn't do* was to develop characters and their psychology—until I read Robert Hass's "A story about the body". I know Hass is considered a poet, but that story is absolutely narrative. In no more than twenty lines it goes really deep into the characters' personalities and minds whereby we witness tremendous character development and change. It is a great chef d'oeuvre. Interestingly, this is also a good example of how the Anglo short *short* story tradition differs from that of the Spanish Latin Americas. The Anglo tradition is much more realistic.

**FLA:** In some of your flash fictions you choose to have readers reflect on our universal capacity to imagine and play?

**AMS:** I love to play with words and meanings and to make somersaults with them. In the encounter with my fictions, I would like my readers to *experience* more than just reflection. I would hope they trigger in the readers their own capacity to imagine and play with all the possibilities of language.

**FLA:** Flash fictions can do as much as any other written fictional genre in satisfying our basic hunger for stories about other people and their lives (internal and external). . .

**AMS:** Of course! All the stories are about other people, and more than that, they are written by other people so we can see the world through their eyes. It is not only what the story *tells* but the *way* it is told what make us experience a kind of soul transmigration.

**FLA:** Your flash fictions demand that readers explore attentively the kinds of emotion and cognitive webs presented in all variety of social encounters that you choose to bring to high relief. Your story “Memory Loss” comes readily to mind. Flash fiction seems especially suited to this kind of quick, deep exploration of emotion and thought.

**AMS:** I think the main wonder of this genre is that you can do anything you want with it. You can go from almost anecdotes like Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano’s fictions to almost poetry like in many Borges’ short *shorties*. You can choose to be philosophical and poetic at the same time as with Kafka. You can use it in a minimalist realistic way, like Lydia Davis does. You can go for the fantastic and absurd as I usually do. In all of these genres it can offer, at the same time, a deep exploration of emotion and thought. Or, at least they should offer this possibility.

**FLA:** In many of your flash fictions we see the skillful wedding of the fiction to philosophy, physics, biology, journalism and other disciplines in a feast and celebration of hybrid and interdisciplinary forms. No subject is off limits for you. No subject is alien in your flash fictions. . .

**AMS:** Thank you! But I must recognize that realism is very difficult for me when I write flash fiction. Maybe because fantastic literature is so “normal” for us. In Latin America and all my masters have practiced it. That is why I’m so interested in the Anglo flash fiction. It appears to deal with characters and situations and those unique moments of revelation —those small epiphanies that happen in real life. I think the evolution of the genre will come from the

intertwining of different currents and traditions, as always happens. We Latin American authors have a lot to learn from US American authors.

**FLA:** I teach your flash fictions to my students. They have the time to read and re-read several times over while having lunch, on the bus, in line at the financial aid office or at the gym. They are at first startled when they see how little they have to read. Then they realize that we can easily spend a couple of hours on one of your flash fiction stories discussing content (plot and character, action, emotions, world view, and time-space, for instance) and craft (narrative devices like focalization, characterization, mind-reading and speech and thought presentation, style, rhythm, for example). Sometimes less is more. . .

**AMS:** Less is always more in terms of perfection. A novel can have its ups and downs. A flash fiction must be absolutely perfect...or be deleted. The same happens to poetry. I never think in terms of content and craft, of course. The idea is born already shaped, I should think as much as anyone else if I want to define and describe plot, action, or narrative devices...

**FLA:** While the novel still carries more heft in the academy, I've gone against the grain. I stopped teaching novels altogether. When I teach literature I only teach flash fiction and short stories. I find that by teaching a handful of *short* short stories I can expose the students to a wide range of styles, contents, and perspectives. The immersion in a variety of styles and storytelling modes that you use (detective, noir, horror, science fiction, erotica, historical, political, and philosophical genres and themes, as well as realist, naturalist or fantastic modes, among others) give students a quite comprehensive view of the world of fiction and its theoretical and factual interpretations.

**AMS:** I agree, of course. But I think each genre has its specialties. I love novels too, in fact I have written six novels (four of them have been published in English and I just finished the last one). If you want to go really deep and develop characters along a story, if you have a hunger for testing your time and world, if you want to make remarks and/or critiques on society, then the novel is your genre. If you cherish language and literature over everything else—if you love wit, you care for the sound of words as much as for their meaning, you like to play with genres and cross every possible border—then you'll go for flash fiction instead.

**FLA:** There are more US Latinos publishing flash fiction today than in earlier decades. I think of Judith Ortiz Cofer, Virgil Suarez, Juan Felipe Herrera, Ana Castillo, Luis Urrea, and others. I wonder if our shared history of agitated political and social conditions for Latino subjects north and south of the US/Mexico border might lead us to this format for storytelling.

**AMS:** I don't think so. I feel sometimes literary tradition is more important than social conditions. And I am sure that the US Latinos are aware of the rich and old Mexican *tradición* of flash fiction. Mexico had one of the first flash fiction masters, Julio Torri (1889-1970), and it was one of the poles that developed flash fiction in Latin America in the '50s when Borges and Bioy Casares were creating *short* short stories in Argentina while Arreola and Monterroso were choosing the same creative path in Mexico. Today, flash fiction has spread all over Latin America and Spain. Lydia Davis, among others, has shown how this can be done well in English. The question would be, then, why *wouldn't* US Latinos choose to write flash fictions?

**FLA:** What's your experience creating and consuming of fiction? Is narrative fiction bound by national borders —or does it transcend borders?

**AMS:** Both are true. Narrative fiction is bound by national borders ... and sometimes it transcends them. But I would like to talk about literary borders. The genre borders of flash fiction are as arbitrary as national borders. As a reader, I could like all kind of short texts and I don't care about the name. What if it is prose poetry, microfiction, thoughts or any other thing? There are so many wonderfully impossible ways to classify books! "Opium" by Cocteau, for example, is a rare wonder. Who cares if you are in Venezuela, Brazil, Peru or Colombia when you are in the middle of Amazonian rainforest?

**FLA:** In several of your flash fictions you swiftly build an ethics system that creates a complex series of tensions and that also importantly give the story its specific aesthetic effect.

**AMS:** Ethics and aesthetics are just the same in art; or at least they are integrated in a complex way. Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote in the XIII century that beauty is the radiance of truth. Of course he was referring to Divine Truth but we now know that there is an actual literary truth that cannot be disturbed. We use the word "false" or "fake" with all its ethical content to despise a work that tries to be art and is not.

**FLA:** Your flash fictions reframe and make interesting experiences, people, and environments anchored to the real world. At the same time, you remind your readers that fiction is categorically different to real life.

**AMS:** You are right, I don't believe in the laws of authenticity. I love to break them. Flash fiction is the best genre to show how you can change the meaning of a story that comes from the real world just with a language somersault. I love to make the reader believe what I am telling and, at the same time, make him always remember he is reading. In fact, in my last novel I attached

a kind of a diary, letting the reader know where I got the raw materials of the story and what I did to them.

**FLA:** World literature is filled with a handful of similar themes, many of which you choose to include in your flash fiction. Perhaps, then, what gives your flash fictions their amazing variety and abundance is *more* their formal elements than their content. That is, you use formal devices to transform your chosen subject matter into an aesthetic object that brings the reader to this subject matter *in new ways*.

**AMS:** Once again, you uncovered my tricks! As much as I love to find new, never told before stories, what I actually do is choose the most conventional, well-known topics then turn them upside down and add a new twist. Variety is my device. Each of my texts must startle the reader one way or another. I think that is one of the tasks literature must accomplish: to never let the reader feel really comfortable.

**FLA:** But content can also *make new* our perception of the world. I think of stories like “Hair Dryer” . . .

**AMS:** That’s exactly what I was trying to explain. Flash fiction should always betray the reader’s expectations.

**FLA:** While we recognize all the actions and objects in your flash fictions, you take us places that defy the laws that govern our *actual* experience (physical and also ethical) of reality. For instance, in “Peeling Carrots” the narrator’s blood (“drops of tar”) create a hole that looks into a room below where a university meeting takes place.

**AMS:** Our actual experience is so tricky. Maybe this is what I want to express with all my literature. How you can never rely in the so-called reality. The world is an absurd place where our mind roams always in search of a meaning that is not there.

**FLA:** Unlike the novel, say, my sense is that the quickness of the beginning, middle, and end of your flash fictions demand readers to look carefully at how each sentence is itself a beginning, middle, and end.

**AMS:** I've never believed in beginnings, middles, and ends —not even in regular short stories or in novels. Those are geographical sections of a text and not necessarily literary parts. Mexican author Guillermo Samperio's "Ghost" is the shortest flash fiction I know of. The title is "Ghost" and the rest of the page is blank. Where is the beginning? Where is the middle or the end?

I must say that I don't really like those very short flash fictions that are almost all wit and nothing else. I prefer the longer ones with something to bite at and chew on.

**FLA:** Your ends come so quickly, forcing readers tend to loop back to the beginning to re-read the beginning and then the whole with a new perspective. In this sense, they create mini-feedback loops that only end when the reader decides to move on to the next story.

**AMS:** And this is why flash fiction reading is so tiring. It demands the full attention of the reader. A small distraction can ruin the whole experience. Short short stories are elusive, polysemic texts. They demand to be read more than once.

**FLA:** With *Quick Fix* you chose to include both the Spanish and English versions of your flash fictions —and also include illustrations.

**AMS:** Authors don't always *choose* the way their work is published. *Quick Fix* is an anthology of my work edited by the translator and editor Rhonda Buchanan. She and the publisher decided it

was going to be a bilingual book with illustrations and it was Buchanan who chose Lucy Mistratov to make them. I love the result. It couldn't be better. I wish the rest of my books could be published in the same way.

**FLA:** You write in Spanish and work with translators such as Steven J. Stewart, David William Foster, and Rhonda Dahl Buchanan. Clearly, a one-to-one translation from Spanish to English does not work. What does make for a good translation of your work?

**AMS:** A one-to-one translation from Spanish to English never works with literature. Tell that to Google translator! But I admit that the short short story is much more difficult to translate than longer fiction. The problems are similar to those with the translation of poetry. You have to betray to be faithful.

A good translation must bring to the reader not only the meaning of the text, but also to its music —its rhythms. Sound is very important in my flash fiction. The translator should refrain from the need to explain the text. The translator should guard the mystery, the polysemic games, to show the clues to understanding without revealing everything. While I rely on the good English of the translators, because I can read English I can comment, correct or explain if there is something my translators did not understand.