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## **The Politics of Poetics: Latin American Testimonial Literature and the Casa de las Américas Literary Prize (1970-1975)<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Casa de las Américas is a prestigious cultural institution founded in 1959 in connection with the Cuban Revolution. Its annual literary prize was established simultaneously, and in 1970 a prize category in the genre of testimonial literature was introduced in response to the increasing political intervention in cultural matters at that time. In order to assess how testimonial literature was conceptualised aesthetically and politically in the early history of its institutionalisation in Latin America, this article examines the metadiscourses surrounding the installation of the prize category 'testimony', focusing on the juries' proceedings from the first quinquennial of the award (1970-1975), which are read in light of the ongoing debates during the sixties and seventies on the relationship between poetics and politics. Furthermore, the winning texts from the first quinquennial of the award will be examined in order to respond to questions arising from the reading of the juries' minutes.

# **The Politics of Poetics: Latin American Testimonial Literature and the Casa de las Américas Literary Prize (1970-1975)**

Anna Forné

## **Introduction**

Casa de las Américas is a cultural institution founded in 1959 in connection with the Cuban Revolution in order to 'strengthen the bonds between Latin American and Caribbean artists and writers, and distribute their work throughout the length and breadth of the continent and even the world'.<sup>2</sup> With the mission to disseminate Latin American leftist culture and endorse the new artistic forms envisioned by the revolution, Casa de las Américas set up its own publishing house, research departments and journals. It soon gained prestige among Latin American intellectuals, primarily as a result of its prestigious annual literary prize, which was established the same year the institution was created in order to legitimize revolutionary literary aesthetics. In 1970, testimonial literature was included among the prize categories, alongside the conventional literary genres initially awarded: poetry, short stories, the novel, play scripts and essays. The impact of Casa de las Américas, particularly its journal on the literature in Latin America from the 1960s, is well established.<sup>3</sup> However, the influence of its literary prize on the formation and conceptualisation of the genre of testimonial literature is a largely unexplored area despite the general interest in the cultural

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<sup>2</sup> Roberto Fernández Retamar, 'Treinta Años de La Casa de Las Américas', *Estudios Avanzados*, 3.5 (1989), p. 69. All translations belong to the author unless otherwise indicated. Original: 'estrechar los vínculos entre los artistas y escritores latinoamericanos y caribeños, y difundir sus obras a lo largo y ancho del Continente, y aún del mundo'.

<sup>3</sup> Carmen Ochando Aymerich, *La memoria en el espejo: aproximación a la escritura testimonial* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1998); Claudia Gilman, 'Casa de Las Américas (1960-1971): Un Esplendor En Dos Tiempos', in *Historia de Los Intelectuales En América Latina. II. Los Avatares de La 'Ciudad Letrada' En El Siglo XX*, ed. by Carlos Altamirano, II (Madrid; Buenos Aires: Katz, 2010), pp. 285-98; Claudia Gilman, *Entre la pluma y el fusil: debates y dilemas del escritor revolucionario en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2012); Nadia Lie, *Transición y transacción: la revista cubana Casa de las Américas, 1960-1976* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996); Juan Carlos Quintero Herencia, *Fulguración Del Espacio: Letras e Imaginario Institucional de La Revolución Cubana (1960-1971)* (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo, 2002); Judith A. Weiss, *Casa de Las Américas: An Intellectual Review in the Cuban Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C. : Madrid: Estudios de Hispanófila, 1977).

politics of the period and much theorising on the genre of Latin American testimonial literature in general. According to Victoria García, author of 'Testimonio Literario Latinoamericano: Una Reconsideración Histórica Del Género', the canonical definitions of the genre do not reflect the variety of texts that were defined as testimonial by Casa de las Américas at the time of the genre's institutionalisation. She also points out the absence of an analysis of the texts awarded by Casa de las Américas in the predominant critical accounts:

[T]he definition of the genre established as canonical by the critics [...] does not conform to the diversity of texts that at the moment of its institutionalisation as a genre covered the notion of testimonial literature. Something similar happens to the texts awarded in the category of testimony by Casa de las Américas, whose fundamental participation in the institutionalisation of the genre, as observed by the critics, has not corresponded with an analysis of the works whose canonisation la Casa tried to promote with the prize.<sup>4</sup>

In order to reassess how testimonial literature was conceptualised aesthetically and politically in the early history of its institutionalisation in Latin America, this article examines the metadiscourses surrounding the installation of the prize category 'testimony', focusing on the juries' proceedings from the first quinquennial of the award (1970-1975), which are read in light of the ongoing debates during the sixties and seventies on the relationship between poetics and politics. Furthermore, the winning texts from the first quinquennial of the award will be examined in response to questions arising from the reading of the juries' minutes.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Testimonio Literario Latinoamericano: Una Reconsideración Histórica Del Género', *Exlibris*, 1.1 (2012), pp. 373-74. Original: '[L]a definición del género establecida como canónica por la crítica [...] no se adecua a la diversidad de textos que contemporáneamente a su institucionalización como género recubría la noción de literature testimonial. [...] Algo similar ocurre con los textos premiados en la categoría testimonio de Casa de las Américas, cuya fundamental participación en la institucionalización del género, observada por la crítica, no ha sido el correlato de un análisis de las obras cuya canonización, con las galardones, la Casa buscaba promover.'

## Revolutionary Aesthetics

In the first decade of the Cuban Revolution, there was a general congruence between the political and cultural vanguards in Cuba, as in the rest of Latin America. Experimentation in artistic language was appreciated as an integral part of social revolution, so cultural vanguards were, by definition, revolutionary. Consequently, there are numerous examples of significant intellectuals and militants who criticized the idea of social realism as the paradigmatic genre for poetic revolution, promoting instead formal experimentation and aesthetic autonomy.<sup>5</sup> As Ana Longoni shows in *Vanguardia y revolución* (2014), at the time, the concept of avant-garde was perceived in an anachronistic way, without reference to the conventional division between realism and abstraction. Instead, Longoni points out, the concept was used as an umbrella which comprehended everything to be defended as a position of value.<sup>6</sup> However, as Claudia Gilman (2012) has shown in her extensive study on the figure of the revolutionary writer in Latin America, the congruence between the artistic and political vanguards only lasted for a decade in revolutionary Cuba. Around 1968, Gilman argues, the tensions between the requirements for communicative efficacy and the conflicting wish for a revolutionary (that is, experimental) aesthetic intensified, as did the opposition between the need to democratise culture and the urge to alter it towards new unconventional forms of expression. At this point, claims Gilman, anti-intellectualism became hegemonic in Cuba, and as a consequence art became political in a way that left no room for formal, avant-garde experiments.<sup>7</sup>

The introduction of a prize category in testimonial literature in 1970 occurred at a time of increasing political intervention in cultural matters in Cuba. It was an important departure from the earlier characteristics of the aesthetic expression of the political ideals of the revolution, which Fidel Castro described in his speeches given at the First Congress of Writers and Artists in Cuba in 1961<sup>8</sup> as well as in his well-known 'Words to the Intellectuals',<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the debates between Julio Cortázar, Óscar Collazos and Mario Vargas Llosa included in *Literatura en la revolución y revolución en la literatura (polémica)*, (México: Siglo XXI, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Ana Longoni, *Vanguardia y revolución: arte e izquierdas en la Argentina de los sesenta-setenta* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 2014), p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Gilman, *Entre la pluma y el fusil*, pp. 335–38.

<sup>8</sup> 'Discurso Pronunciado Por El Comandante Fidel Castro Ruiz, Primer Ministro Del Gobierno Revolucionario, En La Clausura Del Primer Congreso de Escritores y Artistas Efectuada En El Teatro

presented at the National Library after a series of meetings with Cuban intellectuals in the month of June in 1961. It was believed that the Revolution called for novel literary forms that could capture the specificities of the new political reality, as well as its historical background. However, the opinions on how this was to be achieved diverged, and so did the interpretations of Fidel Castro's famous statement on cultural politics and on intellectual and creative autonomy, which in 1961 initially declared that 'within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing.'<sup>10</sup> A consequence of the changed political landscape at the turn of the decade, the official views on the relationship between poetics and politics moved towards more unilateral and orthodox positions.

By the end of the 1960s, the revolutionary process in Cuba was contained due to contra-revolutionary activities and the American trade sanctions, which caused political and economic difficulties that directly affected the cultural area. The polemics around the imprisonment of the Cuban writer Heberto Padilla in 1971 is often cited as a turning point. In 1968, Padilla was awarded the national poetry prize for a collection entitled *Fuera del Juego* [Out of the Game], which the authorities considered contra-revolutionary. Padilla was subsequently placed under house arrest. In 1971, when the period known as the Grey Quinquennial started – which was characterized by a severe political climate of control and censorship – Padilla was imprisoned. He was later forced to make a public confession before the Writer's Union (UNEAC) acknowledging contra-revolutionary activities, whereupon a group of 62 internationally-renowned intellectuals including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Susan Sontag and Mario Vargas Llosa, signed a protest letter retracting their support for the Cuban Revolution.

Around the turn of the decade was also when Casa de las Américas was forced to comply with constraints imposed by the political leadership, which meant that the freedom to independently speak about and explore the relationship between literature and revolution was restricted. Comparing Fidel Castro's speech at the First Congress of Writers

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'Chaplin' El 22 de Agosto 1961', 1961

<<http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1961/esp/f220861e.html>> [accessed 19 May 2016].

<sup>9</sup> 'Palabras a Los Intelectuales', 1961

<<http://www.min.cult.cu/loader.php?sec=historia&cont=palabrasalosintelectuales>> [accessed 2 May 2017].

<sup>10</sup> 'Discurso Pronunciado Por El Comandante Fidel Castro Ruiz, Primer Ministro Del Gobierno Revolucionario, En La Clausura Del Primer Congreso de Escritores y Artistas Efectuada En El Teatro 'Chaplin' El 22 de Agosto 1961'. Original: 'dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución; nada'.

and Artists in Cuba in 1961 to the one he gave at the closure of the First National Conference on Education and Culture in 1971 (which was a response to the polemics around the 'Padilla Affair'), there was a radical change concerning artistic freedom. In 1971, the political and educative utility of culture clearly prevails over artistic autonomy and creativity:

Because independently of a more or less technical level of writing, more or less imagination, as revolutionaries we value cultural works according to the values they carry with them for the people. [...] Our valuation is political. There cannot be aesthetic value without human content.<sup>11</sup>

From this point, the value of an artistic work was, according to the politico-cultural agenda, exclusively understood in terms of its message and its communicative abilities. These same views of the literary text as an ideological manifestation and a socio-political instrument of documentation of the present, motivated the inclusion of testimonial literature among the prize categories of the Casa de la Américas literary award. The criteria for selection in the call for nominations in 1970 highlighted that:

The testimonial books should document, in a direct form, an aspect of the Latin American or Caribbean reality. A direct source is considered to be knowledge of the event by the author, or the collection by him of stories or evidence obtained from the protagonists or ideal witness.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Fidel Castro, 'Discurso Pronunciado Por El Comandante Fidel Castro Ruz, Primer Secretario Del Comité Central Del Partido Comunista de Cuba y Primer Ministro Del Gobierno Revolucionario, En La Clausura Del Primer Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura, Efectuado En El Teatro de La Ctc, El 30 de Abril de 1971', 1971<<http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1971/esp/f300471e.html>> [accessed 4 May 2016]. Original: 'Porque independientemente de más o menos nivel técnico para escribir, más o menos imaginación, nosotros como revolucionarios valoramos las obras culturales en función de los valores que entrañen para el pueblo. [...] Nuestra valoración es política. No puede haber valor estético sin contenido humano'.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in: Carmen Ochando Aymerich, *La memoria en el espejo: aproximación a la escritura testimonial* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1998), p. 32. Original: 'Los libros de testimonio documentarán, de forma directa, un aspecto de la realidad latinoamericana o caribeña. Se entiende por fuente directa el conocimiento de los hechos por el autor, o la recopilación por éste, de relatos o constancias obtenidas de los protagonistas o testigos idóneos'.

Hence, the pragmatic value of literary discourse was of prime consideration when Casa de las Américas in 1970 decided to include testimonial literature as one of the categories of its literary prize.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, in the first call for nominations in this specific category, documentation, reality and immediacy were essential requirements.<sup>14</sup>

### **A new kind of literature**

In 1970, the Uruguayan journalist María Esther Gilio won the Casa de las Américas Prize in the category of testimony with *La guerrilla tupamara* (The Tupamaros Guerrilla).<sup>15</sup> The book is a compilation of reportages previously published in the important leftist Uruguayan weekly magazine *Marcha*, and they were motivated by the need to understand the consequences of the social and economic crisis in Uruguay at the time – a country which, during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was known as ‘America’s Switzerland’. The title of the book refers to the appearance of an urban guerrilla in Uruguay in the 1960s which, according to Gilio, seemed an inexplicable phenomenon to most Latin Americans as well as to most Uruguayan citizens. In the introductory chapter of the book Gilio declares:

The emergence of an armed focus in this country is remarkable, not expected by the left, nor by the right and not explainable by the liberal schemes of the past, translated into phrases such as ‘Uruguay, Switzerland of America’, ‘Uruguay, portrait of a democracy’ [...] However, when the accelerated transformations undergone in the last two decades are analysed carefully, the emergence of the guerrilla group can be explained.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ángel Rama, ‘Conversación En Torno Al Testimonio’, *Casa de Las Américas*, XXXVI.200 (1995), pp. 122–24 (pp. 122–23).

<sup>14</sup> Ochando Aymerich, p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> María Esther Gilio, *La guerrilla tupamara*. (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1970).

<sup>16</sup> Gilio, p. 11. Original: ‘El hecho de que haya aparecido un foco armado en este país ha resultado insólito, no esperado ni por la izquierda ni por la derecha y no explicable por lo esquemas liberales del pasado, traducidos en frases como «Uruguay, la Suiza de América», «Uruguay, retrato de una democracia» ... Sin embargo, cuando se analizan detenidamente las aceleradas transformaciones sufridas en las dos últimas décadas, resulta explicable la aparición del foco.’



The title of Gilio's book is *The Tupamaros Guerrilla*, referring to the urban guerrilla also known as MLN-T, the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional-Tupamaros (Tupamaros National Liberation Movement), which was active in Uruguay in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the majority of the book consists of articles describing how the Uruguayan state disregarded its duties due to the economic crisis and how this gave rise to an armed guerrilla. It includes features on the precarious living conditions of institutionalized children, inmates, and people with psychiatric disorders, as well as elderly people with a state pension being their only income. Furthermore, Gilio interviews construction workers who have emigrated to Buenos Aires to pursue better living conditions, and the meat workers on strike in 1968 and 1969. After having mapped out the current socio-economic situation in Uruguay in the 1960s does Gilio come to the point with a chapter called, 'What are the Tupamaros to you?' in which she interviews people in the rural zone of Maldonado, close to Montevideo, in order to record their opinions on the latest actions of the urban guerrilla. Only in the final section called, 'We Have Said It Is Enough', is the testimony exclusively dedicated to the Tupamaros guerrilla. First, Gilio describes their taking of the city of Pando on October 8, 1969, on the anniversary of the death of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. This is followed by interviews with some of the guerrilla members who participated in the military action in Pando.

A significant part of Gilio's book consists of detailed descriptions of the places she visits and the living conditions of her informants, together with the conversations she has with them. The author-narrator-journalist is thus omnipresent in all of the testimonies, both as an eyewitness and as an interlocutor. According to statements in the testimonies, these dialogues are direct transcriptions of the interviews. This immediacy was described by the jury as being one of the most important assets of Gilio's book, along with its dramatic qualities and the exposure of socio-political, topical issues. In the jury's minutes, it is stated that the average quality of the works presented for the first Casa de las Américas Prize in the category of testimony was extraordinary, and that 'This high level forced the jury to carefully weigh the literary merits, the current relevance of the subject and the political and social importance of the work'.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, the testimonial literature defined by Casa de las

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<sup>17</sup> 'Actas Del Premio Casa de Las Américas', 1970, *Archivo de la Casa de las Américas*. These documents belong to the Archives of Casa de las Américas. Original: 'Este alto nivel obligó al jurado a sopesar minuciosamente los méritos literarios, la actualidad del tema y la trascendencia política y social de los trabajos'.

Américas in 1970 combines poetics and politics in a way that stretched conventional categorizations and allowed several layers of expression.

In what follows, I will briefly explore aspects of the dramatic and literary qualities of Gilio's work in order to identify the specific qualities in testimonial literature that characterize an accomplished blend of literary style and urgent political matters. In particular, it is the reportage on the psychiatric hospital of Colonia Etchepare, with the subtitle 'The Most Dreaded Hell', that stands out for its pathos and literariness. In this section of *La guerrilla tupamara*, the narration opens with a graphic description of the setting which, like the other settings in the book, is powerfully evocative. Aside from the vivid descriptions of the scenery, in this part of Gilio's book, the metanarrative elements are distinctive as being a literary enhancement of journalistic material, which recalls narrative journalism. Inspirational examples at the time include *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote or, in the Latin American sphere, the writings of Argentinian Rodolfo Walsh and Mexican Ricardo Pozas (both of whom were members of the Casa de las Américas jury in 1970).<sup>18</sup> In a much-quoted passage, Norman Sims maintains that narrative journalism 'demands immersion in complex, difficult subjects. The voice of the writer surfaces to show that an author is at work. Authority shows thorough'.<sup>19</sup> As a matter of fact, it is the presence of the voice of the author which, in Gilio's text, is the narrative technique that stylistically brings reportage into the realm of literature. As stated in *The living handbook of narratology*, metanarrative comments refer to the narrator's reflections upon the act of narration and are not exclusive to fiction. On the contrary, self-reflexive narrative passages may reinforce the illusion of authenticity without destroying the aesthetic effect, which is exactly what happens in *La guerrilla tupamara*:

Metanarrative passages need not destroy aesthetic illusion, but may also contribute to substantiating the illusion of authenticity that a narrative seeks to create. It is precisely the concept of narratorial illusionism, suggesting the

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<sup>18</sup> Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood a True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences* (New York: Random House, 1965); Rodolfo J Walsh, *Operación masacre*. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Sigla, 1957); Ricardo Pozas, *Juan Pérez Jolote: biografía de un tzotzil*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1952).

<sup>19</sup> Norman Sims, 'The Literary Journalists', in *The Literary Journalists* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), p. 2.

presence of a speaker or narrator, that illustrates that metanarrative expressions can serve to create a different type of illusion by accentuating the act of narration, thus triggering a different strategy of naturalization [...]<sup>20</sup>

In the series of reportages included in *La guerrilla tupamara*, the voice of the author-narrator is clearly distinguishable, as an interviewer as well as in the metatextual commentaries inserted throughout the text. On the one hand, the working processes and methods of verification are described, and on the other, the sensory impressions and feelings of the author-narrator are depicted:

I took my notebook and wrote: 'Heart breaking cries, the guardian does not seem frightened or moved.' At that moment, I realized that I myself was not at all frightened and scarcely moved. I thought that this is probably what is often called 'professional deformation.' The pressing desire to convey everything with the utmost truth was transforming me into a mix of camera and recorder. The screams intensified.<sup>21</sup>

In *La guerrilla tupamara*, the emergence of the narrator by means of the self-reflexive commentaries clearly intensifies the illusion of immediacy and of the author-narrator being present in the setting described. Thus, self-referential narrative techniques contribute to the dramatic effect of Gilio's testimony. In one sense, the quoted paragraph demonstrates the ambiguity of the testimonial genre in that it demands objectivity and verifiability, secured by thoroughly describing the working methods (which in this case are even enacted by the author-narrator), yet it is constructed around the subjectivity of the author-narrator. The

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<sup>20</sup> Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning, 'Metanarration and Metafiction', *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, 2012  
<[http://wikis.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Metanarration\\_and\\_Metafiction](http://wikis.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Metanarration_and_Metafiction)> [accessed 1 September 2017].

<sup>21</sup> Gilio, p. 44. Original: 'Tomé mi cuaderno y anoté: «Gritos desgarradores, el guardián no parece asustado o conmovido». En ese momento me di cuenta de que yo misma no estaba nada asustada y apenas conmovida. Pensé que es seguramente a eso que se suele llamar «deformación profesional». El acuciante deseo de transmitirlo todo con la máxima veracidad me estaba transformando en una mezcla de máquina fotográfica con grabador. Los gritos se intensificaban.'

self-referential comments support the illusion of authenticity while exploring the borders of literariness.

The central plot of the book is the story of Pando's takeover by the MLN-Tupamaros in October 1969 and this chronicle is also based on journalistic material compiled by the author. The notable difference here is the increasing identification between the voice of the journalist and her choir of informants, which at times seem indistinguishable. The story opens with a first-person narration in which the narrator observes her co-travellers on the bus to Pando: 'At ten in the morning, Antonio and I got on the bus. It was almost empty but we still preferred the long rear seat'.<sup>22</sup> While in the previous reportages the distinction between the voice of the author-narrator and the informants is unmistakable, in this piece it is not clear whether the narrative 'I' is identical to the name that features on the cover of the book, or if it is the narrator of a testimony given to Gilio by one of the participants in the takeover of Pando. This ambiguity between the voice of the author-narrator and the voices of the informants contrasts with the illusion created earlier by the emergence of the author-narrator. In this case, the author as journalist dissolves in favour of the chorus of voices of the informants. At the same time, this blending of voices signals the author's identification and sympathy with the story being told. However, despite this momentary narrative ambiguity, the veracity and validity of the account is reinforced by means of a map of the centre of Pando inserted in the book, the insertion of explanatory footnotes, and by way of the intermittent incorporation of transcribed dialogues between the narrative fragments. In this way, the aestheticization of the material, which bestows the testimony with the desired literary quality, is contained and counterbalanced by the highlighting of different documentary aspects. In view of this, it could be argued that it is the recurrent narrative dramatization of the gathered documentary materials, as well as the self-reflexive features, that transforms Gilio's text from a report into a new kind of literary work: testimonial literature.

After no prize was awarded in 1971, in 1972 the prize was given to Marcio Moreira Alves for *Un grano de mostaza (El despertar de la Revolución Brasileña)* [A grain of mustard. (The awakening of the Brazilian Revolution)]. The members of the jury highlight the superior literary quality of the winner, in combination with its non-fictionality:

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<sup>22</sup> Gilio, p. 129. Original: 'A las diez de la mañana, Antonio y yo subimos al ómnibus. Estaba casi vacío pero igual preferimos el asiento largo del fondo.'

- 2) A work that lives its own life and in which the subject is treated with breadth and depth, destined to last more than the brief existence of the purely journalistic work and, because of that, requires a superior literary quality.
- 3) A work true to reality that approaches and discards fiction, which constitutes one of the elements of narrative creation, as in the novel and the short story.<sup>23</sup>

In these two paragraphs, the testimonial genre is defined negatively. On the one hand, it is in opposition to the journalistic discourse that it is supposed to exceed by virtue of its literary quality. On the other hand, the required literariness is not to be achieved by fictionalizing the work since it is required that the testimony identifies fiction only to eliminate it. In this case, fiction is defined as the opposite of truth because it renders something invented, while literariness is associated with the formal properties of the testimony. In this respect, fiction is a moral rather than an aesthetic category since it refers to a difference between truth and falsehood, while literariness only refers to the formal-aesthetic qualities of the text. On the basis of these negations it is possible to argue that even though the socio-political criticism is crucial, literary quality is also central and can only be understood as formal aspects of the work, which would not affect the veracity or authenticity of the content but only embellish and improve the form. For what does it otherwise mean when the jury of 1972 emphasises the 'relevant literary beauty' next to the 'objective style' of that year's winner?

Like María Esther Gilio, Márcio Moreira Alves was a recognized journalist at the time of winning the Casa de las Américas Prize in the category of testimony in 1972. Before going into exile, first in Chile and later in France, Moreira Alves was a member of the Brazilian Parliament, which was closed in December 1968. Earlier that year, the Parliament refused to deprive Moreira Alves of his impunity when the military wanted to prosecute him over a speech he had delivered in which he denounced political violence by the military and the police, and called for a boycott of the military parades during 'Semana da Pátria' (National

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<sup>23</sup> 'Actas Del Premio Casa de Las Américas', 1972, *Archivo de la Casa de las Américas*. Original: '2º) Una obra que viva por sí misma y donde la temática esté tratada con amplitud y profundidad, y destinada a perdurar más allá de la existencia efímera de los trabajos puramente periodísticos y que, por eso mismo, exige una superior calidad literaria. 3º) Una obra fiel a la realidad que enfoca y que descarta la ficción, que constituye uno de los elementos de la creación narrativa, como la novela y el cuento.'

Week). Finally, on December 11, 1968, the members of Parliament voted on the request of extradition, refusing it. In retaliation, the government ordered the closure of the Parliament, and Moreira Alves went into exile.

In terms of genre, Moreira Alves's testimony could be considered to be his intellectual autobiography or memoir because it tells the story of his personal awakening in relation to the 'awakening of the Brazilian Revolution', which is the subtitle of the work. In this regard, *Un grano de mostaza* is, on the one hand, the intellectual autobiography of a young Brazilian, a member of the country's old ruling oligarchy, who 'betrays' his social class and becomes a revolutionary. On the other hand, the testimony contains a detailed denunciation of Brazil's socio-economic and political system. Both stories run parallel in the book, and there is no ambiguity regarding the narrative perspective or the identity of the narrator. The opening chapter describes a pivotal event in Brazil's history when Moreira Alves's speech brought about the closure of the Parliament. On this subject, personal and public history are indistinguishable, and both reach a turning point by the end of 1968:

The brief period of congruence between my life and the political life of Brazil ends at three in the afternoon on December 12, 1968, when three hundred parliamentarians applauded their own boldness to bring to a close the long years of humiliation at the hands of the military.<sup>24</sup>

The objectivity of Moreira Alves's testimony, commended by the jury, is to be found both in the extensive depiction of Brazil's socio-economic and political life, as well as in the autobiographical pieces which narrate the personal development of the author-narrator during a process of getting to know himself in relation to the structural problems of his country:

The process of political radicalization, which I had gone through since the seizure of power by the military four years earlier, had been essentially intuitive and

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<sup>24</sup> Moreira Alves, *Un grano de mostaza: el despertar de la Revolución brasileña* (La Habana: Casa de Las Américas, 1972), p. 20. Original: 'El fugaz período de coincidencia entre mi vida y la vida política del Brasil se cierra a las tres de la tarde del 12 de diciembre de 1968, cuando trescientos parlamentarios aplaudieron en su propia temeridad por concluir los largos años de humillación en manos de los militares.'

intellectual. I did not reach a revolutionary stance through suffering the harsh humiliations that so often accompany the lot of workers and peasants. On the contrary: political radicalization had given meaning to my life [...]<sup>25</sup>

In one sense, in Moreira Alves's testimony it is impossible to separate the individual history from the collective, and in this respect the 'relevant literary beauty' of the text noted by the jury is to be found evenly throughout the text. In comparison with Gilio's work, Moreira Alves's text is closer to a conventional intellectual autobiography since it does not incorporate a chorus of different voices, and the textual structure does not expose ambiguities caused by self-reflection or changes of perspective.

In the minutes of the jury of 1973, the requirement for a literary style disappears and again the principal consideration is the documentation of the revolutionary struggle by means of the collection of immediate testimonies. *Los subversivos* [The Subversives] by Antonio Caso opens with the kind of paratextual presentation (here even called 'Indispensable introduction') that later on would be one of the principal characteristics of Latin American testimonial literature, in which the author establishes the context by indicating what type of text the reader has in front of him/her: 'This book simply contains a series of testimonial stories. The testimonies were narrated by Brazilian urban guerrilla members [...] the testimonies only express the individual opinion of their authors.'<sup>26</sup> However, emphasizes Caso, the testimonies are told only to shed light on the historical truth without wanting to impose any judgement. Apart from the introduction, a short epilogue, a final chapter called 'Approximation to Brazil', and the documentary annexes, the winner in the category of testimony in 1973 does not show any authorial intervention in the testimonies, and it could, therefore, be argued that Caso's text is not a narrative account but rather a raw compilation of directly transcribed testimonies. However, in the minutes, the

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<sup>25</sup> Moreira Alves, p. 14. Original: 'El proceso de radicalización política, que yo había recorrido desde la toma del poder por los militares cuatro años atrás, había sido esencialmente intuitivo e intelectual. No había llegado a posiciones revolucionarias a través del sufrimiento, de las duras humillaciones que tantas veces acompañan las opciones de obreros y campesinos. Al contrario: la radicalización política había dado un sentido a mi vida [...]'.  
<sup>26</sup> Antonio Caso, *Los Subversivos* (La Habana: Casa de las Americas, 1973), p. 11. Original: 'Este libro contiene, simplemente, una serie de relatos testimoniales. Los testimonios fueron narrados por guerrilleros urbanos brasileños [...] los testimonios solo expresan la opinión individual de sus autores.'

jury highlights not only the accomplished structure and method of the winner, but also the emotional tension that some of the testimonial voices transmit. In this case, dramatic tension is created not by means of deliberate literary strategies as in *La guerrilla tupamara*, but as the result of the extraordinary stories told by Caso's informants in a colloquial and sometimes even humoristic way.

Personal accounts return as a decisive consideration according to the jury's minutes in 1974, when the Peruvian journalist Hugo Neira wins with *Huillca: Habla un campesino peruano* [Huillca: A Peruvian Farmer Speaks]. Again, the emotional effect on the reader is pivotal. What was original on this occasion was something that a decade later would become the dominant characteristic of Latin American testimonial literature: the subaltern perspective, which gives voice to a marginalized subject through the mediation of a solidary intellectual. The jury stated: 'The author, Hugo Neira Samanez, has managed to capture the testimony of a contemporary who is the custodian of vivid traditions, and he himself has served as a vehicle of expression for those who, for linguistic or other reasons, generally do not have the opportunity to receive it.'<sup>27</sup> Just as Rigoberta Menchu's internationally celebrated testimony *I Rigoberta Menchú* (which won the prize in 1983)<sup>28</sup> underwent a stylistic revision by the Venezuelan journalist Elizabeth Burgos Debray, Huillca's testimony was improved on the recommendation of the jury, who proposed a linguistic and stylistic revision (to be carried out by an author-mediator) before publication. In this testimony, as in the canonical testimonies of, for example, Rigoberta Menchú and Domitila Barrios, the autoethnographic voice is transmitted through a mediator.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the Quechua is translated and transcribed into Spanish, keeping some stylistic and syntactic traits of the original voice. The orality of the story is also conveyed in the laconic and repetitive narrative style. That is to say, the interventions of the intermediary never become explicit and are only made textually visible by means of paratextual elements: a prologue, the chapter headings and the explanatory footnotes. Some critics have suggested that the text of Huillca's testimony is

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<sup>27</sup> 'Actas Del Premio Casa de Las Américas', 1974', *Archivo de la Casa de las Américas*. Original: 'El autor, Hugo Neira Samanez, ha tenido el mérito de captar el testimonio de un contemporáneo que es depositario de tradiciones vivas, y el mismo ha servido de vehículo de expresión para quienes, por razones de idioma y de otro tipo, no tienen generalmente oportunidad de recibirlo.'

<sup>28</sup> Rigoberta Menchú and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (Guatemala: Arcoiris, 1983); Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, trans. by Ann Wright (London: Verso, 1984).

<sup>29</sup> Domitila Barrios de Chungara, *Si Me Permiten Hablar ...*, (México: Siglo XXI, 1978).



subjected to an ideological manipulation that in the long run reduces the cultural authenticity of the autoethnographic discourse.<sup>30</sup> They argue that, despite the textual invisibility of the authorial intermediary, it nevertheless leaves an evident political imprint that manipulates and misrepresents the original story. The critics referred to here seem to have read the text of Neira / Huilca in light of the conventions of the Latin American *indigenista* narrative, which places the individual, linguistic, mythical and cultural dimension above the collective, epic and transcultural, which usually are understood as typical elements of the testimonial genre.<sup>31</sup> Maria Teresa Grillo discusses this point of view, concluding that in Huilca's testimony these two aspects – collective political militancy and subjective cultural presence – overlap.<sup>32</sup> Hence, it would be possible to assume that the textualization of Huilca's oral testimony takes a form that surpasses the conventional binary structure of the canonical *indigenista* narrative which, as Huyatán Martínez points out, was always deeply disconnected from its referent and its specific expressive forms. According to Huyatán Martínez, this characteristic split of *indigenista* literature was not solved until the anthropological methodology was combined with literary writing, giving rise to the genre of testimonial literature.<sup>33</sup> However, in *Huilca* the intellectual commitment surpasses and erases any artistic gesture on the part of the journalist, who primarily conveys the

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<sup>30</sup> Juan Zevallos Aguilar, 'From Representation to Self-Representation: Life Stories, Testimonios, and Autoethnographies in Spanish America', *Latin American Indian Literatures Journal*, 20.1 (2004), p. 22; Jesús Díaz Caballero, 'Para una lectura del etno-testimonio peruano de los años setenta', in *Asedios a la heterogeneidad cultural: libro de homenaje a Antonio Cornejo Polar*, ed. by José Antonio Mazzotti and U. Juan Zevallos Aguilar (Philadelphia: Asociación Internacional de Peruanistas, 1996), pp. 341–42.

<sup>31</sup> In *The Andes Imagined: Indigenismo, Society and Modernity* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), p. 1., Jorge Coronado gives the following explanation of the Indigenista movement that emerges in the early twentieth century in Latin America: 'As a constellation of extremely varied practices, including painting, photography, literature, and literary and cultural criticism, as well as diverse government policies, indigenismo endeavored to vindicate the area's indigenous peoples after centuries of abuse and marginalization. [...] Without exception, the discourses that sought to articulate this reconfiguration all constructed particular versions of the indio and of indigenous culture. As a result, the indio, represented by other's projections, became a critical component of the new configurations of Andean society and culture that these practices imagined.'

<sup>32</sup> María Teresa Grillo Arbulú, 'Rutas Textuales de La Exclusión : Raza y Etnicidad En Textos de Enunciación Andina Del Perú Colonial y Republicano' (University of British Columbia, 2013), (p. 213) <<http://oatd.org/oatd/record?record=handle%5C%3A2429%5C%2F45330>> [accessed October 7 2015].

<sup>33</sup> Eduardo Huaytán Martínez, 'Indigenismo, Antropología y Testimonio En El Perú. Rupturas, Ampliaciones y Plataformas de Representación', *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, Año XL. 80 (2014), p. 311.

information on the union struggle of Saturnino Huillca, narrated in the present tense by the informant. In this regard, the book awarded the Casa de las Américas Prize in the category of testimony in 1974 did not adopt a complex literary form. Consequently, *Huillca* does not display the characteristics that Huaytán Martínez ascribes to the Peruvian testimony of the 70s, which according to him belongs in the field of literature. Perhaps it is symptomatic that, when the politicization of the culture during the Grey Quinquennial was at its peak, the award-winning text in 1974 did not respond directly to the original criterion of literary quality. Unlike in Gilio's case, Neira's interventions in the testimony are not visible beyond some deictic markers; that is, it seems as if Huillca speaks. Consequently, the putting into a discourse of Saturnino Huillca's testimony does not confer literariness, nor does the oral character of the narrative seem to facilitate an *indigenista* reading of the text because of the demythification of the referent. In addition, the lack of ideological distance between informant and intermediary seems to preclude the insertion of this text into the Peruvian national canon. In this respect, *Huillca: a Peruvian peasant* would comply with the core criteria of testimonial literature as it was conceptualized by Casa de las Américas, though it would be excluded from other literary series at the international, continental and national levels.

In the minutes of 1975, we again encounter a contradictory statement when the jury simultaneously commends both literariness and the documentation of the events: 'The grounds for the jury to make its decision were based on the just level of literary adaption of the testimonial genre, as well as the important information the book offers [...]'.<sup>34</sup> What does this literary adaptation consist of in *Aquí se habla de combatientes y bandidos* [Here we talk about fighters and bandits] by Raúl González de Cascorro, and in what ways does the authorial presence or contention condition the relationship between documentation and literariness?

Roberto González Echevarría observes that the making of this documentary novel was no different to making the journalistic text, and he points out that in fact several of the authors of the early testimonials were journalists by profession. In his analysis of *Aquí se habla de combatientes y bandidos*, González Echevarría highlights the fragmentation of the story, which is structured in short pieces that each correspond to the testimony of an

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<sup>34</sup> 'Actas Del Premio Casa de Las Américas', 1975, *Archivo de la Casa de las Américas*.

informant. According to González Echevarría, authorial containment is a characteristic aspect of the genre since it is through the unlimited and uninterrupted flow of testimonial voices that the text generates an illusion of reality:

The core of the book consists of a series of brief statements by those involved. There is no clear plot line and no narrator: each utterance is preceded, as in a play, by the name of the participant. There is at the end a list of names that is very much like the cast in the program for a play. As in *Ulysses* the reader is able to reconstruct the sequence of events only as he or she learns to recognize each 'voice.' The book is a gallery of voices that, true to the title, talk about the confrontation between '*combatientes*' and '*bandidos*'. The action exists as in a pure present (*aquí*), the pure presence of theatrical performance, without protagonist and without the centering figure of the narrator. The insistence on speech underscores the desire for immediacy and presentness: the absence of an articulate narrative discourse emphasizes the illusion that this is unmediated action before writing.<sup>35</sup>

In the testimonies brought together in a fragmented way in *Aquí se habla de combatientes y bandidos*, the voice of the writer dissolves, which makes this testimony similar in style to the winner of 1972 – *Los subversivos* by Antonio Caso – which also consists of individual voices, albeit less fragmented. In both cases, I would argue, like González Echevarría, that these testimonies could be read as theatrical performances which primarily aim for an illusion of reality and for political resonance, giving prominence to the documentary aspects of the genre. In these testimonial texts, immediate action and a collective voice prevails over contemplation and self-reflexivity.

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<sup>35</sup> Roberto González Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), p. 116. Original: 'Los argumentos del jurado para otorgar su decisión estuvieron sustentados en el justo nivel de adecuación literaria dentro del género testimonial, así como por la importante información que el libro ofrece [...]'.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, during the first five years of the Casa de las Américas Prize in the category of testimony there is a constant vacillation regarding the characteristics of the genre. In relation to the thematic aspect of documentation of the revolutionary struggles emerges the idea that the aesthetic elaboration of the documentary materials determines the difference between a journalistic account and the new genre of testimonial literature, as well as the difference between testimony and fiction. It seems that even though political regulation from 1970 required transparent commitment, intellectuals and writers continuously tried to find new ways to protect literature as an art-form, even within the boundaries of the testimonial genre, and in consonance with the revolutionary ideals. The institutionalization of testimonial literature as a prize category in 1970 can thus be understood as an aesthetic-political solution to the long-discussed conflict between artistic practice and political action because it formulates different solutions to the question of how intellectuals can participate in revolution and what the social and political role of the writer can be. In this regard, testimonial literature could be conceived of as a new kind of literature which, in its beginnings, encompassed a variety of forms which differed most notably regarding the level of intervention of the author and the scale of self-reflexivity.

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