

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Reflections on the Testimonial Genre and Casa de las Américas' Literary Award (1970–2017)

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In this article, I look into how the conceptualization of the testimonial genre has changed over time in response to different historical, political and cultural circumstances: that is, how it has been conceived by different actors – writers, intellectuals, politicians and critics – in the literary field. I focus on two key moments, and to begin with, I consider the institutionalization of the genre in the 1970s by means of Casa de las Américas' literary award. This moment is examined in relation to the specific political situation in Cuba at that time, as well as with regard to the then lively cultural debate on literature and politics. Secondly, I reflect on how the testimonial genre was reconceptualized around the turn of the millennium as a response to the need to rethink the Revolution in the wake of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. I argue that the narrative of political revindication and the popular-subaltern modes, in vogue in the 70s and 80s, have been replaced by subjective-memorial accounts narrated by those who fifty years ago developed the ideals of the revolutionary movements.

**Keywords:** Testimony; literary award; Cuba; Casa de las Américas; Revolution; cultural politics

Literature is a protagonist in this drama of loss and dislocation not only because it articulated the utopian but also because it implicated its demise.  
Jean Franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City* (2002, 1)

## Introduction

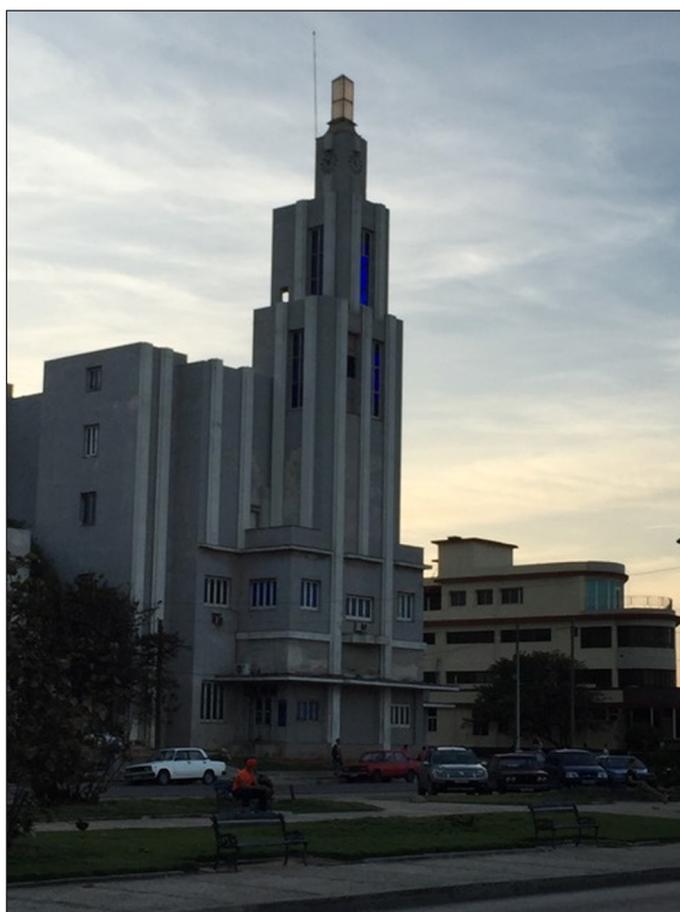
Located by the Malecón in the neighbourhood of El Vedado in Havana, the building that houses the prestigious cultural institution Casa de las Américas cannot go unnoticed.<sup>1</sup> Founded in connection with the Cuban Revolution in 1959 with the purpose of strengthening relations between Latin American and Caribbean artists and writers, and distribute their work, under the auspices of Haydee Santamaría, Casa de las Américas set up its own publishing house, research departments and journals. In a short time, the institution gained prestige among Latin American intellectuals and the building with its peculiar architecture became a symbol of the new Latin American culture sprung from the Revolution (**Figure 1**). At least, so was the case until the Padilla affair in 1971.<sup>2</sup> Casa de las Américas' annual literary prize, inaugurated already in 1959, promptly gained international prestige, and in 1970 the novel genre of testimony was featured amongst the conventional literary genres originally awarded. Since then, the prize for the best testimonial text has been awarded on twenty-four occasions, most recently in 2017.

In this article, I will look into how the conceptualization of the genre has changed over time in response to different historical, political and cultural circumstances: that is, how it has been conceived by different actors –writers, intellectuals, politicians and critics – in the literary field. In this brief overview I will focus on two key moments: to begin with I will consider the institutionalization of the genre in the 1970s, which will be examined in relation to the specific political situation in Cuba at that time, as well as with regard to the then lively cultural debate on literature and politics. Secondly, I will reflect on how the testimonial genre was reconceptualized around the turn of the millennium as a response to the need to rethink the Revolution in the wake of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc.

To date, the role of Casa de las Américas in the process of forming and institutionalizing the testimonial genre has been mentioned only tangentially in a handful of studies. For instance, Elzbieta Sklodowska (1992: 56) points out in her influential work that there is a general critical consensus that the description of the testimonial genre formulated

<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by *Riksbankens Jubileumsfond*. Reference number: P15-0416:1.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Croce 2006.



**Figure 1:** The building of Casa de las Américas. Photo: Anna Forné.

in 1970 on the occasion of Casa de las Américas' first literary award in that category functions as the official birth certificate of genre, but that the institution never formulated a stable and operational generic definition. On the contrary, states Sklodowska, Casa de las Américas instead distorted the notion of 'novela-testimonio' launched a few years earlier by Miguel Barnet in relation to the publication of *Biografía de un cimarrón* (*Biography of a Runaway Slave*) in 1966. More recently, Casa de las Américas' *testimonio* prize has been discussed by Victoria García, who in a series of articles has highlighted the connections established in the 1960s and 70s between the new social and political significance given to intellectual labour, the ideation of an independent and common Latin American culture and the construction and systematization of a regional literature. On a regular basis literary scholars have associated these Latin Americanist efforts with the 'new Latin American novel' and the *Boom*, while García further observes that the testimonial genre is also to be understood as an expression of these efforts to conceive an independent Latin American cultural field which concerned writers, intellectuals and social scientists at the time (2013: 369). Despite the peak in testimonial studies in the 1980s, Victoria García further contends that the discussion of the genre's characteristics as well as that of its output are still not settled. On the contrary, she maintains that the canonical definition proposed by John Beverley in 1991 – 'By *testimonio* I understand a novel or novella-length narrative told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real-life protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts' (1991: 2) – cannot be applied to the diversity of texts the notion of testimonial literature referred to at the time of its institutionalization and, more importantly, it does not take into consideration the texts given the Casa de las Américas' award in that specific category (2012: 373–74). Moreover, the fundamental link between the foundation of the testimonial genre and a specific politico-aesthetic discursivity, created in order to disseminate the revolutionary imaginary, seems to escape many critical accounts in favour of an all-embracing subaltern perspective. In this respect, García (2014: 67) maintains that the emergence of the testimonial genre and its institutionalization by means of the creation of a literary prize in that category by Casa de las Américas accounts for what she calls the 'model role' of the literary production of the period, which aspired to associate literature and politics as a social practice.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the conversation on the history of the award in the specific category of testimony, maintained by Jorge Forné, Luisa Campuzano, Víctor Casaus, Jaime Blanes and Victoria García (2015), is illuminating, since it covers the tensions and negotiations that took place in the politicized literary field in which the testimonial genre emerged as a promising although diverse solution.

<sup>3</sup> See also Forné 2018a, 2015, 2014.

The generic indetermination of *testimonio* still persists and over the decades the testimonial genre has been reshaped and renegotiated according to the various assessments made by the juries of Casa de las Américas' literary prize, as they have offered their interpretations of *testimonio*. In the same way, the existing theories and critical accounts of the testimonial genre emphasize that the heterogeneity of the texts that could be grouped under the heading of testimony makes a solid and unique categorization difficult.<sup>4</sup> Ever since the implementation of testimony as a prize category of Casas de las Américas' literary award, the discursive paradigms as well as the codes of interpretation have evolved over time, adjusting to changing politico-aesthetic conventions, demands and expectations. While Casa de las Américas still awards a prize in the category of testimony, in the Global North the field of studies on testimony was soon saturated and by the middle of the 1990s the critic and theoretician *par excellence* of the testimonial genre – John Beverley – announced the death of testimony as an innovative aesthetic form and an urgent channel for the revolutionary movements: 'Detached from these contexts, it loses its special aesthetic and ideological power, and runs the risk of becoming a new form of *costumbrismo*, the Spanish term for "local-color" writing' (1996: 281). This sudden demise of the genre as an innovative and radical ideo-aesthetic narrative form nevertheless seems rather biased in view of the fact that the production of testimonies continued and continues to prosper in Latin America. What did indeed vanish momentarily was the critical activity concerning the genre carried out in the most prestigious academic institutions of the North, where the academic left expressed a need to rethink its appropriations of the testimonial genre. Apart from paradigmatic political changes around 1990 (the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991), which had an effect on the academic left, the change of perspective towards a postcolonial epistemology in the late 80s altered the critical panorama, as Georg M. Gugelberger underscores in his introduction to the critical anthology – *The Real Thing* – that came to mark a before and after in testimonial critique. 'When the margin moves to the center and loses its counterhegemonic quality a different assessment is required' (1996: 1), Gugelberger stated, asking what are the implications when transgression becomes institutionalized, sanctioned and canonized, that is, when, in Marxist terms, the product turns into a commodity (1996: 12). What is remarkable is that among the critical accounts in *The Real Thing* and other paradigmatic publications on the testimonial series published during this period of time,<sup>5</sup> none of them takes into account the role of Casa de las Américas in discussing and denouncing the institutionalization and canonization of the genre as a consequence of its alleged decease. On the contrary, the insertion into the canonical Eurocentric repertoire of a marginalized, peripheral discourse is considered in entirely negative terms of betrayal and colonization:

What are "we" to do in "the teaching machine", we who came from the intrinsic study of literature and moved toward a liberating discourse, from there even moved "against literature", once we became aware of the implications of what we had fought for originally (namely, the expansion of the canon, introduction of marginal discourse, interest in minority, Third World, and postcolonial literatures, feminisms and marxisms)? Has the struggle been to achieve merely another list of required readings? [...] Needless to say, the first thing is to stay alert, the second is to historicize rather than interpret. We need to show in testimonial discourse specifically, as in Third World literature and minority discourse in general, how this movement from an authentic margin has been betrayed by inclusion in the Western canon, which can be considered yet another form of colonization. (Gugelberger 1996: 12–13)

Indeed, this reticence to permit peripheral voices to be usurped in a universalizing and hegemonic system that wipes out idiosyncrasies and differences echoes some of the more recent critiques the concept of World Literature has received from postcolonial critics. With regard to this debate, Jorge Locane (2019: 9) underlines that even though the pretension is that the conceptualization of World Literature has a global projection, it responds to present time, local, although hegemonic, interests: 'Through this lens, World Literature, as a category of transcendence of the local, can only be imagined from a locus of enunciation sufficiently dominant to be able to detach from its local roots and project itself onto distant imaginaries'.<sup>6</sup> In relation to the scant international impact (that is, beyond Latin America) of Casa de las Américas' literary award, it is important to emphasize that the canonization on a more global level of a limited selection of testimonies, carried out principally by North American academics, has led to a truncated idea of the existing generic variations and to an excessive reduction not only of the object of study but also of the horizons of expectations and the

<sup>4</sup> For instance, in the special issue of *Kamchatka* devoted to the testimonial genre, Jaume Peris Blanes and Gema Palazón Sáez (2015) observe that the historical and situated character of *testimonio* impedes a unique and solid definition and they underscore that because of this it is important to 'denaturalize' the consolidated ideas of the genre and propose new readings that depart from every specific text and its context.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. *Testimonio y literatura* (1986), edited by René Jara and Hernán Vidal, and the dossiers edited by Georg Gugelberger and Michael Kearny in *Latin American Perspectives* (1991), as well as the thematic issue of *Revista de crítica literaria latinoamericana* (1992) edited by John Beverley and Hugo Achugar.

<sup>6</sup> My translation of: 'Percibida desde esta óptica, la literatura mundial, en tanto categoría de trascendencia de lo local, solo puede ser imaginada desde un locus de enunciación lo suficientemente dominante como para lograr despegarse de su arraigo local y proyectarse sobre imaginarios distantes'.

possible readings. The exclusion from the testimonial canon of a series of testimonial texts which did not reflect the theoretical and ideological presuppositions established by the critics and academics in the Global North in the 1980s certainly led to a potent hypercanonization of a few texts. Among these, two winners of the Casa de las Américas' award stand out as the only ones awarded by the Cuban institution that have actually had an international impact: *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde* (1982) by Omar Cabezas and *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983) by Rigoberta Menchú. The reasons for this may be several, but it is undoubtedly significant that both texts won the prize at this specific moment, that is, simultaneously with the greatest testimonial effervescence in the North American critical and theoretical field and, above all, that they both respond to the central concerns and expectations of the solidary leftist intellectuals of the moment.

### The Symbolic Demands of the Revolution

The enterprise to institutionalize a properly revolutionary genre by means of Casa de las Américas' literary prize presupposes the introduction of a series of new criteria, norms and values into the Latin American cultural field since, as James E. English observes (2005: 7), cultural awards set up an external imposition of values and valuation. The prestige or value of an award is not only economical but also participates in an ambiguous logic which concedes autonomous aesthetic and symbolic value while simultaneously being involved in a system of production and exchange. In the case of the prize in the category of testimony, the symbolic and political values completely overshadow the economic aspects. That is, when creating the *premio testimonio*, the Cuban institution made use of its cultural and intellectual renown in order to promote and habilitate a strongly politicized new narrative form. The creation of a prize in this category is particularly interesting because it coincides with the 'mundialization' of Latin American literature initiated in the 1960s; however, unlike the new Latin American novels (the *Boom*), very few of the texts awarded the Casa de las Américas' prize have been translated, and consequently they barely circulate beyond their original linguistic and cultural borders, which cancels out the possibility of them acquiring additional value in the global literary field. Interestingly enough, at the time when Casa de las Américas was created as a means to distribute Latin American culture all over the world, some of the most influential intellectuals, such as Roberto Fernández Retamar, questioned the idea of a universal or global literature proposing instead a decolonized, properly Latin American literary theory (Fernández Retamar [1975] 1995). Indeed, along with the debates on the role of the intellectual and the tensions between the political and the aesthetic in the creative arts, the intellectual discussions of the 1960s are torn between the idea of an autochthonous decolonized Latin American culture and the need to distribute Latin American culture around the world.

Beyond the thematic and ideological issues covered in the testimonies awarded the Casa de las Américas' prize, looking into the major conflicts around which the intellectual debates gravitated during the 1960s and the 1970s – the roles of literature and of the intellectual in society – can help us gain a better understanding of the underlying reasons for the creation of the award in Cuba in 1970. In *Tumbas sin sosiego*, Rafael Rojas (2006: 196–98) refers to five main polemics on intellectual politics maintained in Cuba from the 1960s until the 1980s, and resumes the discussion into three main positions: a) the intellectual who defended a national and cosmopolitan socialist culture, with some autonomy towards the political center of power; b) the bureaucrats and theoreticians of culture, advocates of social realism and orthodox Soviet Marxism; c) the politicians and intellectuals who, while not supporting Soviet orthodoxy, aimed for an aesthetic realism supposed to satisfy the symbolic demands of the Revolution. Rojas concludes that after a brief predominance of the second group, the third one takes the lead in important cultural institutions such as Casa de las Américas, ICAIC,<sup>7</sup> eventually also controlling the Ministry of Culture, as well as the UNEAC.<sup>8</sup> On this subject, it is possible to read Jean Franco's description of the homonymous journal of *Casa de las Américas* as a synecdoche of the response of an important branch of Cuban intellectuals – the third group referred to above – to the debates on literature, politics and society taking place in the 1960s and 1970s. The institutionalization of the testimonial genre can be understood as a part of this intellectual and cultural stance:

Attractively illustrated, *Casa de las Américas* responded to the long-standing dream of the avant-garde to close the gap between life and art and to foster intellectual commitment to the cause of emancipation; it situated Latin America as an ally of other Third World nations in the struggle against imperialism. It represented a new cultural geography, one whose center had drastically shifted from Europe. (2002: 45)

As Rojas underlines, the literary mode initially promoted in Cuba was an *aesthetic realism* which, in contrast to Soviet Socialist Realism, did not completely rule out formal experimentation. In the minutes of the juries from the first five years of the testimonial awards, the quest for equilibrium between content and form, urgent subject matters and an elaborated literary style, is prominent and constant (Forné 2018a). This search for an *aesthetic realism* that could combine aesthetic and political vanguardism seems to be put on hold around 1971 when the *grey quinquennium* begins, a

<sup>7</sup> Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos, that is, The Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry.

<sup>8</sup> La Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, that is, The National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba.

period which Ambrosio Fornet (2007: 15) has called the phase of the ukases, when cultural life turned into a wasteland due to political restrictions. However, a close reading of the testimonies given the award between 1970 and 1975 shows something different. Even though they cannot be described as experimental, the concern for literariness is paramount (Forné 2018a: 48). Jean Franco, on her part, claims that, at first, the discordancy was obfuscated by means of the initial polysemy of the word 'revolution', although increasingly the cultural and artistic meaning that equated revolutionary with new and experimental would fall short because of the limited acceptance of the literary avant-garde by UNEAC: 'The fine line between letting a thousand flowers bloom and weed-eradication (*sic!*) was about to be crossed' (2002: 92). In the same vein, Claudia Gilman (2012: 335–38) maintains that when the Revolution was a decade old the increasing anti-intellectualism left little space for aesthetic innovation and unconventional art forms. At this moment, the balance turned in favour of a literature of the Revolution instead of a revolutionary literature, to paraphrase the title of Julio Cortázar's contribution to the well-known debate that he maintained with Óscar Collazos (1970) on the role of literature in society, published by the Uruguayan weekly magazine *Marcha* in 1969. In the words of Jean Franco (2002: 98), artistic autonomy was replaced with a discourse of responsibility. Franco concludes: 'That pragmatism triumphed over good intentions can be attributed to the *realpolitik* of the Cold War. Political expediency was cast as "revolutionary," as became clear in polemical exchanges over literature and revolution...' (2002: 99).

The institutionalization of the testimonial genre in 1970 by means of a literary prize was a way of formalizing and politically sanctioning a literary modality, projected as specific to the Revolution, with a series of evaluative criteria which proposed to equilibrate the aesthetic-literary and the political. It was believed that the Revolution called for novel literary forms that could capture the specificities of the new political reality, documenting revolutionary struggle, as well as recording its historical background of colonialism and postcolonial dependence. Likewise, in the construction of the revolutionary socio-cultural imaginary the ethnographic testimonies played an important part in a homogenizing, modernizing cultural discourse, launched within the framework of the Cuban Revolution.<sup>9</sup> As Jean Franco states in *The Decline and Fall of The Lettered City*: '...if "demystification," "engagement," and "liberation" were key words of the early 1960s, so was "modernization," in which project art and literature became pioneers' (2002: 5). In many ways, the *testimonio* is an ideo-aesthetic artefact employed in the symbolic construction of the new decolonized and modernized citizenship, imagined and projected by the revolution. According to Ariana Hernandez-Reguant (2005: 284–85), the new global role of Cuba after the Revolution required a representation of the country as a homogeneous nation, and in order to fulfil this national ideology a revolutionary discourse, which erased all internal differences, such as race, class, sex or generation, was created. In this framework, popular culture was conceived in ethnographic terms as folkloric manifestations that enriched the nation but that needed a scientific approach. Hernandez-Reguant argues that musicologists, ethnographers and folklorists were turned into 'the guardians of the nation's purity' (2005: 293) as they were put to the task of evaluating the authenticity and revolutionary character of different popular artistic expressions and of 'filtering' the popular voices in order to make them accessible to the urban and educated public. This is also the formula of the testimonies awarded the Casa de las Américas' prize, which prevalingly display a tension between the figure of the author – an intellectual researcher, modern and cosmopolite, usually a white male – and another figure who is peripheral, and whose mediated voice represents that of the masses, the people. That is, at the same time as the testimonial series is a channel of communication for different marginalized discourses, the strong presence of an author-researcher whose surname is found on the book cover, and who is also the recipient of the literary prize from Casa de las Américas, is undeniable. In this way, the testimonial genre in the format endorsed by Casa de las Américas intervenes in the construction of the New Man, but it also takes on the decolonizing and historicizing challenge set out by Fernández Retamar, who proclaimed in *Caliban* that to 'assume our condition as Caliban means to rethink our history from the other side, from the other protagonist' (1979: 37).<sup>10</sup> An aspect that is nonetheless absent during the first years of the Revolution is the kind of self-critical discourse to be found in the Global North regarding the 'usurpation' and integration of the marginalized other into the Western canon. Jean Franco ironically observes that *Caliban* seems to have inspired a 'salutary stimulus to self-criticism' in 'some U.S. dissidents who were seeking redemption for the imperialist sins of their own country' (2002: 107–108), but very few Latin American intellectuals (male, white) seem to have managed to arrive at that kind of reading. Not until 1991, when Marcos Pellegrini's *Wadubari* won the testimony prize, is a decolonial perspective to be found among the testimonies awarded the Casa de las Américas' prize.

The *testimonio* prize was created as an initiative of the juries in the 1960s, who had noticed that an increasing number of texts sent to the annual literary award of Casa de las Américas could not be accommodated within conventional generic patterns (Rama et al. 1995). However, while the *testimonio* prize is still awarded, although not on an annual basis, according to Luisa Campuzano (2015: 210) no one in Cuba under the age of 60 years has ever written a testimony. According to Campuzano, the substantial institutionalization of the genre, has closed the path for the younger generations in Cuba, who gives preference to aesthetic autonomy. As a matter of fact, of the 24 winners of the *premio testimonio*, only seven are Cuban.

<sup>9</sup> As discussed in Forné 2018a, 2018b, 2015, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> My translation of: 'Asumir nuestra condición de Calibán implica repensar nuestra historia desde el otro lado, desde el otro protagonista...'. First published in *Casa de las Américas* (1971).

### A New Era: Post 2000

By the turn of the century, when political changes on an international scale brought about a need to rethink the Revolution, its imaginary as well as its narratives, the 'testimony' category of the Casa de las Américas literary prize was renamed 'testimonial literature', a change that, besides mirroring internal socio-cultural changes, coincides with a new peak in testimonial narratives in Latin America, simultaneous with the international memory boom and the subjective turn in the cultural field. Indeed, at the turn of the century the somewhat indistinct but nevertheless conventional boundaries of the testimonial genre (always thought of as an authentic, objective and veridic account of an actual historical event) have been extended, starting to rest on other ideas of the limits and possibilities of narrative representation, as well as on new ideas of the role of the intellectual and of ways of making politics through literature. Since the beginning of the new millennium the testimonial genre has changed its course, abandoning the objective and urgent register by which it was originally characterized, in favour of a narrative tilted towards the subjectivity of the author-narrator, who no longer observes reality in a distanced manner but participates in the unfolding of the story. In this regard, the passage from testimony to testimonial literature would imply an abandonment of the objective and observational point of view in support of a subjective and involved gaze, that reflects the changed role of the intellectual, whose locus of enunciation – central to the configurations of the testimonial genre – is dislocated.

In 'La crítica bicéfala: Un nuevo desafío', published in *La Gaceta de Cuba* in 2002, Ambrosio Fornet discusses the reformulation of the canon that occurred in Cuba at this time, pointing out that during the *Special Period* the sudden socio-economic and political changes had the same effects on the imaginaries and symbolic expressions as the Revolution once had, only that 'Then we won and now we had lost' (2002: 20).<sup>11</sup> In the same vein, Jean Franco observes that 'Cuba has gone from representing the revolutionary vanguard to evoking nostalgia' (2002: 108). In his article, Fornet draws a panorama of the Cuban literary field post-89, highlighting a move from the public and collective to the private and individual, accompanied with an extreme discursive aestheticism (2002: 22). According to Fornet, the profound social changes that took place as a consequence of the collapse of the socialist bloc obliged members of the generation of the Revolution 'still submerged in the teleological dream of the best of worlds [...] to abruptly wake up and face the nightmare of reality' (2002: 20).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this disenchantment occurs simultaneously in other literatures in the continent, a tendency that Ana María Amar Sánchez describes as 'narratives of defeat', filled with beaten heroes and antiheroes who all deal with loss and failure, embracing them as a political and ethical position:

The "rest", what is left of wars, revolutions, defeated historical projects, includes the losers, different kinds of losers who drag with themselves the pain, the memory, the necessity to overcome oblivion or to find shelter in it, the capacity of resistance or of adaptation to the conditions imposed by the winner [...] this situation demands the subject to make a decision, in order to maintain the memory of what happened and his own identity. (2010: 27)<sup>13</sup>

All of the six texts that have received the award since 2000 in the category *testimonio* demonstrate that the testimonial genre has changed, because they are all highly subjective and retrospective and could be labelled narratives of memory, defeat and loss, more than of victory, hope, commitment and responsibility. I argue that this abandonment of an objective and prospective gaze, typical of the earlier testimonies, testifies to the ambiguities of political writing in general, and specifically calls attention to the malleability of testimony. Today the narrative of political revindication and the popular-subaltern modes, in vogue in the 70s and 80s, have been replaced by the subjective-memorial accounts narrated by those who fifty years ago developed the ideals of the revolutionary movements. In this regard, the testimonial texts awarded the Casa de las Américas' prize post-2000 participate in the narratives of defeat outlined by Amar Sánchez, and they also contain a more personal and at times even experimental mode of writing characteristic of this epoch's subjective turn. For instance, in *Mañana es lejos. Memorias verdes de los años rabiosos* (2009) Argentinean writer Eduardo Rosenzvaig narrates in innovative and defiant ways personal memories of political violence, just as does Edda Fabbri, who, in *Oblivion* (2007), elaborates on her memories of her years as a political prisoner during the dictatorship in Uruguay. An implicated and situated although personal and auto-reflexive reporting authorial voice can be found in *La isla de Morgan* (2003) by the Colombian journalist Alejandro Castaño Hoyos, as well as in the last winner of the prize in 2017, *Lloverá siempre. Las vidas de María Esther Gilio*, by the Argentinean journalist Liliana Villanueva.

<sup>11</sup> My translation of: 'Entonces nos había tocado ganar y ahora nos tocaba perder'.

<sup>12</sup> My translation of: 'sumergidos en el sueño teleológico del mejor de los mundos [...] a despertar abruptamente y encarar la pesadilla de la realidad'.

<sup>13</sup> My translation of: 'El "resto", lo que queda de las guerras, revoluciones, proyectos históricos derrotados, incluye a los perdedores, a diferentes tipos de perdedores que arrastran consigo el dolor, la memoria, la necesidad de vencer el olvido o de refugiarse en él, la capacidad de resistencia o de adaptación a las condiciones impuestas por el vencedor. [...] esa situación que exige una toma de decisión del sujeto, para sostener la memoria de lo ocurrido y la propia identidad'.

Apart from a renewed conception of the role of the intellectual that arose around 1990, the literary field has drastically changed, as Jorge J. Locane outlines in *De la literatura latinoamericana a la literatura (latinoamericana) mundial* (2019). Departing from the division between commercial and cultural publishing houses that Ángel Rama proposed in *Más allá del boom*, arguing that the second category was decisive for the international circulation of Latin American literature during the 1960s and 1970s, Locane explores the actual state of the literary field. In his account from 1981 Rama wished to question the idea of the *Boom* as a solely commercial phenomenon and to emphasize the importance and impact of the cultural publishing houses and the literary value given to the texts by them. Locane emphasizes that this 'editorial logic' with an intellectual editor (such as Carlos Barral of Seix Barral) now lingers in the past as the symbol of an epoch that since the 1990s has been replaced by the logic of large transnational multimedia groups with an aggressive editorial marketing agenda. In this new scenario, the small cultural publishing houses are usurped, and the ones that are not disappear from the market. This change is not only nominal or administrative, but results in a complete change of logic with regard to the international production and reception of literature. In this regard, Locane questions whether it is possible to comprehend the contemporary international literary field in Bourdieuan terms as a dispute between the heteronomous and the autonomous, and he even contends that at present principles like 'art for art's sake' and 'engagement' sound, if not ridiculous, at least anachronistic (2019: 25–26). That is, the scenario is quite different now in comparison to the way the literary field operated a few decades ago; the most significant and decisive changes took place in the 1990s when the Latin American publishing industry was 'colonized' by transnational multimedia companies and started to respond only to the heteronomous logic, which means that the former differences between the book market and the literary field nowadays are negligible. There are exceptions, Locane stresses, but from the perspective of a new world literature the small, independent actors rarely have a real impact, as the cultural publishing houses had before this development, as did those that turned Latin American literature into a Boom in the 1960s. Smaller independent publishing houses still operate and function as a 'dynamizing principle', but only on a local scale, and in this way an autonomous conception of literature is still upheld and promoted, even though it does not seem to be able to interfere anymore with the forces of the dominant heteronomous market monopoly (Locane 2019: 29–34).

The role of Casa de las Américas and its literary prize has definitely changed in step with the rapid transformations of the international literary field, a direct consequence of the expansion and increase of transnational corporations in the global economy since 1989. While the institution was an internationally recognized cultural and intellectual centre during its first decade, its influence soon diminished, even though its cultural activities are substantial and abundant still today. The fact is that due to the workings of the literary field the winning texts barely circulate outside Cuba, unless they are re-published by other publishing houses. For example, the testimonial texts of Edda Fabbri and Liliana Villanueva have both recently been re-published by two independent publishers in Uruguay (Ediciones del Caballo Perdido and Criatura Editora) and in this way two marginal voices who have been awarded the testimonial prize of Casa de las Américas are recognized in the local national literary field, in this case in Uruguay. The hypercanonization that led to Rigoberta Menchu's testimony being moved from the margin to the centre, however, seems a very remote possibility today. In any case, the autonomous forces of the literary field are still functioning, but operate in increasingly centripetal circles (Locane 2019: 26), reorienting the cultural and aesthetic production of today's intellectuals. The testimonial genre may have perished as a new narrative variety in the way it was originally conceptualized, but it is constantly reshaping itself, finding new ways to continue being a dissenting voice that resists the centrifugal forces of the commercial, heteronomous literary field.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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