2010 Susan L. Greenberg Prize
IALJS–5 Conference
Roehampton University
London, U.K.
20–22 May 2010

Latin America's Own "New Journalism"

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Latin American narrative journalism during the 1950s–1970s developed for very different reasons from the Anglo–American "New Journalism" of the period.

During a period of approximately twenty years, from about 1955 to 1975, one can detect in Latin and Anglo America two parallel literary journalisms that emerged as powerful and efficient ways to register the vertiginous social, political, and economic transformations taking place on both sides of the Río Grande. Among the more notable authors of such work in the United States have been, of course, Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, and Norman Mailer. Among those in Latin America have been Gabriel García Márquez, Rodolfo Walsh, and Miguel Barnet. Both groups produced some of the most compelling narrative nonfiction in their respective languages, and were in the avant garde of the nonfiction movement worldwide at this time.

But even though they all resorted to similar techniques and devices of the kind we associate with literary journalism (scenic construction, full dialogue transcription, and a unified point of view, for example), the political and cultural contexts in which they wrote their stories were very different, which in turn resulted in differences in the nature and scope of their narrative projects. In that vein, the divide between democracy and authoritarianism north and south of the Río Grande can explain some of the narrative and

reportorial choices made by these authors who are regarded as among the most representative and distinguished writers of the form.

Cultural and Social Similarities

It would be an understatement to say that the 1960s witnessed cultural, social, and political extremes in the United States. That is because these were alternatively the suburban years and the Vietnam War years, as well as the years of counterculture and the years of the rise of Barry Goldwater conservatism. At some publications in the United States, the 1960s were also the time for a "new journalism" in reaction against print journalism as conventionally practiced. The causes of the New Journalism were many, not the least those momentous changes and events of the 1960s. Society developed a need, as John Hollowell has said, for narratives more "closely attuned to the altered nature of reality in America than the conventional realistic novel."[1] Similarly, the growth of broadcasting also changed the equation, when first radio and then television became the media of choice to satisfy the increasing demand for breaking news. Moreover, this was a time of increasing literacy as reflected in rising college enrollment and book publication,[2] the result a more knowledgeable public eager to gain access to alternative forms of written journalism that could better explain the vertiginous events around them. A consequence of these various factors, then, was the narrative journalism known as the New Journalism,[3] the genre adopted during this period by Mailer, Capote, and Wolfe in the attempt to account for the new social realities.

Similarly, the 1950s–1970s in Latin America were also years of change, significant among them political. As Arturo Valenzuela, citing David Scott Palmer, notes: "between 1930 and 1980, the thirty-seven countries that make up Latin America underwent 277 changes of government, 104 of which (or 37.5 percent) took place via military coup."[4] Under authoritarian rule most of these countries underwent either severe censorship, or a substantial restriction of their freedom of speech.[5]

At the same time, many of the positive advances witnessed in the United States were also happening in Latin America, moving at exponential speed. Between 1961 and 1970 the number of Latin Americans reading newspapers, and owning radio receivers and television sets tripled. During those years, the theoretical and political interest of Latin American governments in building and improving the mass media also grew exponentially as these knowledge networks fostered literacy and economic development. One result is that between 1960 and 1970 the illiteracy rate declined among those in the region aged fifteen to nineteen years of age from 25 percent to 16.6 percent. College

enrollment similarly grew. Between 1960 and 1975, according to UNESCO, higher education enrollment in Argentina grew from 11.3 percent to 28 percent; in Cuba from 3 percent to 9 percent; in Colombia from 1.7 percent to 8.4 percent; and in Peru from 3.6 percent to 22.8 percent. By 1979, Rama and Tedesco noted: "[enrollment] has been so large that a crisis developed in the functions traditionally assigned to the university by the social system."[6]

The growth in college enrollment, literacy levels, and media exposure resulted in the development of a critical mass of new readers who would encourage and benefit from the Latin American literary boom that included new literary and journalistic forms.[7]

But such changes, while somewhat equivalent to those happening in the United States, were part of a very particular social, political, and cultural context; a context that shaped Latin America's narrative journalism in a very unique way.

Emergence of a Program to Develop a New Social Literature

If the Vietnam War was one salient point in the constitution of the Anglo-American New Journalism, the Cuban Revolution in 1959 had at least an equivalent if not larger role in the development and institutionalization of an existing tradition of Latin American literary journalism.[8] A militant nonfiction in Latin America can be traced back at least to 1845, when Argentine writer and politician Domingo Sarmiento wrote his masterpiece, *Facundo.*[9] Since then, the genre has evolved into many different forms, including that of the *testimonio,* which bears some similarities to what today we call literary or narrative journalism. Starting in the 1950s it would evolve on different political lines as reflected in the work of two of our canonical writers, Gabriel García Márquez in his *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor,* and Rodolfo Walsh in his *Operación Masacre,* both of which will be examined more closely later. Works such as these provided, in turn, models that would be elevated after the Cuban Revolution and throughout Latin America as exemplars. The direct result of the revolution was the systematization and consolidation of the *political testimonio,* a literary genre in Latin American circles that has a clear example in Miguel Barnet's *Cimarrón*, published in 1966, which will also be examined later.

Such a systemization and consolidation was the project of Casa de las Américas. Through this official organization—and its award—the Cuban government aimed at rewarding different artistic expressions no matter how experimental, insomuch as they "depicted the Latin American problems."[10] Already a few months after the revolution, both the Cuban government and Casa de las Américas had become important nodes of intercommunication between European and Hispano-American writers:

> Through the bimonthly *Revista of the Casa de las Americas* which was founded in 1960, congresses, literary prizes, printings of the works of the younger novelists less known internationally, and printings of critical collections, a valuable continental, ideological coherence and revolutionary literary expectations evolved. Furthermore, this example of cultural openness influenced other magazines (*Marcha* in Montevideo, *Primera Plana* in Buenos Aires, *Siempre* in Mexico, *El Nacional* in Caracas), and publishing houses on the continent, which adopted the same systems of interrelation and information"[11]

Such a cultural milieu would influence the evolution of *testimonio*. Casa de las Américas promoted and gave cohesiveness to a series of until then uncoordinated efforts towards the development of a purely Latin American literature; a literature mainly anchored in a social reality, popular and broadly distributed through cheap editions, newspapers, and magazines; a literature whose narratives referred to, were written by, or were directly related to the middle and lower classes. This programmatic effort linked in most cases to liberal and progressive movements in the region, was sealed in the definition of testimonial literature produced by the Instituto Cubano de Literatura y Lingüística (the Cuban Institute of Literature and Linguistics):

> Testimonial literature must document some aspect of Latin American or Caribbean reality from a direct source. A direct source is understood as knowledge of the facts by their author and his or her compilation of narratives or evidence obtained from the individuals involved or qualified witnesses. In both cases reliable documentation, written or graphic, is indispensable. The form is at the author's discretion. But literary quality is also indispensable. . . . In testimonial literature the biography of one or many subjects of research must be placed within a social context, be tightly connected to it, typify a collective phenomenon, a class phenomenon, an epoch, a process (a dynamic) or a non-process (a stagnation, an arrest) of the society as a whole, or of a characteristic group or stratum, insomuch as this phenomenon is current, actual, in the Latin American agenda.[12]

At a time when many governments in the region undertook efforts to foster scientific and artistic depiction, description, and analysis of the national realities as a priority in order to assess Latin America's potential for development, testimonial narratives were key to crystallizing these efforts throughout the continent, while re-politicizing the literary practice.

Latin American writers, journalists, and intellectuals such as Argentines Julio Cortázar, Rodolfo Walsh, and Juan Gelman; Uruguayan Mario Benedetti; Colombian Gabriel García Márquez; Mexican Carlos Fuentes; Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa; Cubans Alejo Carpentier, Miguel Barnet and Guillermo Cabrera Infante; but also many Europeans such as the French Régis Debray, Roger Callois, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir; the

German Günter Grass; and the Italian Italo Calvino; among many others, all interacted and voiced their opinions about the role of literature, intellectuals, testimonial narratives, and politics through Casa de las Américas, especially in the early years after the Cuban Revolution.[13] And although a good number of them parted ways with the forum in the early 1970s after the radicalization of the Castro regime—in particular after the jailing of poet Heberto Padilla in 1971—the institute and the award have remained a beacon for Latin American writers until today.[14]

The prize was first awarded in 1960 (in 2010 it celebrated its fiftieth anniversary), although initially the category for *testimonio* was not included. But because of the award the influence of Casa de las Américas spread among Latin American intellectuals. "For the young back then, and this is still current nowadays, such distinction operated as a springboard to public and supra-regional life," noted Chilean author Antonio Skármeta.[15]

In 1970 Casa de las Américas incorporated *testimonio* as an award category and *testimonio* was finally institutionalized. That year, too, Guatemalan writer Manuel Galich suggested Walsh as the head of the nonfiction evaluation committee. Walsh, an Argentine journalist and writer, and already among the most respected on the continent since the publication of his nonfiction work *Operación Masacre* in 1957, immediately accepted the proposal, and continued to contribute to Casa de las Américas until his assassination in 1977. "This is the first legitimation act for an extremely effective means for popular communication," wrote Walsh in his acceptance letter.[16]

The incorporation of this award category provided a Latin American answer to the controversial question about the role of intellectuals in politically loaded times, a question that had festered ever since it was raised in *Les Temps Modernes* by Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus almost twenty years before.[17]

Nonfiction as a Non-programmatic Institution in the U.S.

Narrative journalism had long occupied a tenuous place in American literary and journalistic culture. That is reflected in the fact that it wasn't until 1962 that Columbia University's Pulitzer Prize committee included the General Nonfiction category for a book. While not all general nonfiction is necessarily narrative or literary journalism, nonetheless examples have been awarded the prize.[18] Similarly, the National Book Award, a prize "by writers to writers," which is sponsored by members of the publishing industry, was inaugurated in 1950, but its nonfiction category wasn't incorporated until 1984.[19] And again, not all of the awardees can be considered literary journalism.

One of the most significant differences between Anglo and Latin

American narrative nonfiction, then, was that in the United States no single entity developed the institutional authority to delimit the boundaries of nonfiction, or had the clout to set general guidelines for the genre. More broadly, in the words of Nick Nuttall, there was a lack of "cultural consensus" at the time as reflected in the controversy that swirled around whether the New Journalism could be journalism, much less literature. Not even during the New Journalism's peak of popularity, perhaps best reflected in the publication of Tom Wolfe's manifesto "The New Journalism" in 1973, was there consensus on what the principles of this literary form were.[20]

This—again in the words of Nick Nuttall—"taxonomical uncertainty," in the Anglo-American tradition, which has led to a substantial number of exegetical efforts to disentangle the nature of the genre, has at the same time nurtured the plurality of forms and efforts by leaving the field open to experimentation with reportorial and narrative techniques. In contrast, the Latin American nonfiction tradition, especially after the programmatic definition offered by the Cuban Institute of Literature and Linguistics in 1970, and the admission of the Casa de las Américas nonfiction award as a stepping stone for this type of narrative in the region, has arguably not enjoyed the same levels of openness and freedom.[21]

The Authorial Stance

But another perhaps more important difference between these two forms is authorial stance. In North American narrative nonfiction, authors, protagonists, narrators, and observers tend to converge in one central figure. And, although many authors prefer the third person as a way to avoid questions in regards to the factuality of their reportage, these accounts also display clear signs and markers of the voice of a distinctive narrator-author. This can be detected in three examples by our canonical American authors: *In Cold Blood* by Capote, *Armies of the Night* by Mailer, and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* by Wolfe. Even the absence of the "I" in their works is, as Ronald Weber pointed out, "a matter of appearance," since the presence of the writer was distinctly reflected in the recreation of events through the writer's selection and arrangement of the material.[22] So even though Truman Capote wrote *In Cold Blood* in the third person, his subjectivity is reflected in the details he selected. Moreover, he gave credit to the first-person approach:

> Ordinarily, the reporter has to use himself as a character, an eye-witness observer to retain credibility. But I felt that it was essential to the seemingly detached tone of that book [*In Cold Blood*] that the author should be absent.[23]

Perhaps an inflection point between Capote's third-person voice and first-person-centered narratives was Mailer's "strictly personal approach"—as he defined it—in *The Armies of the Night,* which is about the 1967 protest march at the Pentagon. Because the subtitle—*History as a Novel. The Novel as History*—invokes the "novel," it serves as a kind of indirect homage to Capote's nonfiction. But Mailer did not directly resort to the first person, either, opting for a more unconventional approach. "He used the unusual device of becoming a character in the story but not the 'I' character. Mailer is the protagonist produced by Mailer the omniscient narrator."[24]

Even though Mailer opted for the third person in *Armies of the Night*, he acknowledged that a novelistic first-person approach was in order when some level of intimacy was required; or, to put it in his own words, when the writer needed to *correct* some of the inaccuracies generated by the imperfect tools used to record and write "History."[25] The focus on the self was not, in that sense, just a way to show Mailer's involvement and participation in the protest against the Vietnam War, but also and especially a way to help the readers learn about the march through the author's own eyes, feelings, and particularly through his own biases. By entering into Mailer's point of view, the readers of his nonfiction would also gain access to a vantage point to watch the march.

Thus, through direct observation and personal narrative methods, both Mailer and Capote seemed to fuse, at the highest level, "the roles of observer and maker."[26]

Another case of subjective reporting is, without a doubt, Wolfe's 1968 *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, which trails the activities of novelist Ken Kesey and a group of followers known as the Merry Pranksters through their psychedelic journey across the United States. Wolfe uses the first person throughout a substantial part of his book, but he opts for the third person in some instances during the central part of the account in which he did not directly take part in the Pranksters's activities.[27]

Moreover, one of the most distinctive devices that Wolfe used to convey a sense of personal authenticity was "a kind of stream of consciousness that attempts to recreate from within the mental atmosphere of people and events"[28] Although at times very effective, this device has made critics like Weber himself question Wolfe's reportorial factuality. The device, intended to expand on, and reveal the characters's psyche and emotions, ended up creating a centripetal force around the narrative "I." "It is Wolfe's frantic imagination as affected by Kesey and Pranksters [sic] that is the book's most attractive feature."[29]

In that sense, and although some of the best American New Journalism

followed Capote's lead using the third person viewpoint, nonetheless, those efforts—along with, of course, those utilizing the more conventional "I"—clearly placed the emphasis on personal narrative even if the "I" was unstated, thus emphasizing the authorial stance in accounting for an actual event.

This point could be easily connected to one of the most curious effects of these narratives in American culture during the 1960s. While focusing on the personality of the narrator-character, nonfiction novels turned their authors into instant media stars. Through their participant-observer role, new journalists also became the spokespersons for the peculiar events they had witnessed and written about.[30] The "star reporter" status turned these journalists into the avant garde, the guides and gurus of a generation "through regions of contemporary hell."[31]

Latin America's Distance from the Personal Voice

None of this could have happened to Latin American nonfiction authors for at least two reasons: the first, contextual, the second, clearly, ideological. And it is in this second aspect that we will be able to detect Casa de las Americas's imprint on the genre.

First, and perhaps all too obviously, the United States enjoyed throughout the twentieth century a democratic stability that Latin America lacked. While there may have been historical parallels Latin America had to endure major disruptions to the basic democratic order on a scale that the United States did not experience. After all, the United States has never experienced a coup resulting in a dictatorship. If these political upheavals had an impact on the region's fictional narratives (as authors like Sarlo, Larsen, and Masiello have noted) they had an even larger impact on documentary and political forms like *testimonio*.[32]

Second, Latin American nonfiction was imbued from the start with a Progressive teleology. It was a central mandate of the genre to focus on the objects of reportage, and not on the reporters, in order to contribute to social advancement on different fronts. Authors, and sometimes even the protagonists of these narratives, assumed a secondary role, subordinated to class and national interests. In that sense, the main characters of Latin American nonfiction tended to fulfill a symbolic function, and their narratives were very much allegorical. An example of the social-political role that nonfiction had in Latin America was shown by García Márquez's publicized decision in 1974 not to write any more fiction so long as General Augusto Pinochet ruled Chile.[33] Thus García Márquez expressed a connection between nonfiction and political compromise that for a long time had been a common understanding for Latin American writers.

In terms of the authorial stance of Latin American writers in their narrative nonfiction, neither García Márquez, nor Walsh and Barnet became characters in their stories—much less the central figures. And when they actually did play a role, their intervention was generally limited to a few marginal, para-textual references, incorporated sometimes decades after publication, as even a casual review of their work will reveal.

Contributing to this relative lack of authorial presence is the fact that much Latin American nonfiction during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was written in concealment. Often at the time of either reporting or publication, Latin American authors were prosecuted, silenced, ostracized, exiled, and even abducted and killed by the military governments in the region. One could reasonably speculate that such systematic persecution was a valid reason for the lack of an explicit authorial stance in their nonfiction.

The result is that most Latin American nonfiction written during those years followed the omniscient narrator approach, creating a privileged but distant narrative figure separated from the real physical author. This buffer or safety zone between the narrator and the author on the one hand, and between the author and the object of his or her narration on the other, added to the para-textual concealment of the authorial figure. The result has been a significant structural difference between Latin American and Anglo-American nonfiction.

Latin American Nonfiction and the Concealed Narrator

When in 1955 the future Nobel laureate García Márquez wrote *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*, originally a consecutive fourteen-day series of installments in the Colombian newspaper *El Espectador*, his life was immediately under threat from the Colombian military government of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla. The threat "would almost cost my life," wrote García Márquez, in a prologue added to the story when it was first published as a book in 1970.[34]

The piece, written in the first person from the point of view of twenty-year-old-sailor Luis Alejandro Velasco, and originally signed by Velasco as author, told the story of how the young man survived ten days adrift in the Caribbean Sea. The Colombian government had originally blamed a tropical storm for an incident involving one of its vessels and the death of several sailors. But García Márquez' piece unveiled an official coverup of the events surrounding the wreckage, and put the government in an embarrassing spotlight. The deaths of seven sailors and Velasco's ten days adrift had, in fact, been caused by overweight contraband poorly distributed and inadequately lashed down on the deck, plus a number of other questionable practices customary for the Colombian navy of the day.

As García Márquez recalled in the 1987 prologue to the book version, "the dictatorship took heat and orchestrated a series of drastic retaliations which would end a few months later with the closing of the newspaper."[35] A few months after being the object of blackmail attempts and several threats on his life, the author was in exile in Paris.[36]

Like García Márquez' story, Walsh's 1957 *Operación Masacre* can also be read as a literary journalistic proof of the corruption and violence of the military governments in the region. Walsh's has been characterized as possibly one of the most authentic examples of "documentary narrative" in Latin America.[37] In the words of famed Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama, *Operación Masacre* was "the first political testimony in Latin America."[38]

In *Operación Masacre* Walsh investigated the summary execution of a group of Peronist sympathizers in an open field fifty kilometers south of Buenos Aires in June of 1956. After martial law was declared, the Argentine federal police captured a group of men that had supposedly been plotting against the regime of General Francisco Lonardi to reinstate deposed democratic president Juan Perón. Without a trial, the group was transported to the field and executed, but approximately a half dozen men either escaped in the dark or survived the executioners's volley of shots. Under the imminent threat created by an increasingly inquisitive and violent sequel of military dictatorships, Walsh identified, located, and interviewed the survivors, consulted an array of institutional and media sources, and pieced all the evidence together. Finally, he published the evidence of the illegal executions. The account appeared first between January and June 1957 as a series of articles in the magazines *Revolución Nacional* and *Mayoría*. The completed project appeared as a book in 1958, with subsequent editions until its fourth and last in 1972.

In the 1972 prologue to *Operación Masacre* written a few years before his death, Walsh gave an account of what his life was like during the investigation that led to his masterpiece.

> The long night of June 9th comes back to me, for the second time it takes me away from the 'supple, tranquil seasons.' Now, for almost a year I won't think of anything else, I will abandon my house and my job, I will be called Francisco Freyre, I will carry a false ID under that name, a friend will lend me a house in Tigre, during two months I will live in a freezing shack in Merlo, I will carry a gun, and at every moment the figures in that drama will come back to me obsessively: Livraga, covered in blood, walking along that unending alley through which he escaped death, and the other guy who saved himself by running across the fields, dodging the bullets, and the others who saved themselves without him knowing, and those who did not make it at all.[39]

On March 25, 1977, a military task force finally caught up with Walsh and gunned him down in La Plata.

When the first article of the series appeared in *Revolución Nacional,* a small magazine which, in Walsh's own words, was a "trembling bunch of yellow sheets of paper," it was unsigned: "[The story] comes out unsigned, with a terrible layout, with the titles changed, but it finally comes out" said Walsh in 1972.[40] This is an indication of Walsh's need to remain anonymous, to stay under the radar of the military regime.

In the 1972 prologue to the book, Walsh alluded—without naming him—to Luis Cerrutti Costa, the only editor who agreed to publish the piece under a suggestive headline: "I was summarily executed as well."[41] About him, Walsh wrote: ". . . I find a man who will dare publish it. Trembling and sweating, because he is no movie hero, but simply a man who dares, and that is much more than a movie hero."[42] In the account he also recalled the passivity and indifference with which the story was received by the mainstream media, and the sense of journalistic urgency that, despite all that indifference, made him carry along with the research and publication of the piece.

> I thought I was running a race against time. That any minute a newspaper was going to send a dozen reporters and photographers [to cover the story] just like in the movies. . . . After twelve years you can check out the newspapers of that time and this story did not exist for them at all.[43]

As David Foster argues, reporting in repressive societies creates a number of hurdles not only in terms of the investigative process that nonfiction requires, but also and especially in terms of the "authorial stance towards one's material."[44] Both García Márquez's and Walsh's examples demonstrate the extent to which a politically repressive environment can condition not only the making but also the fabric of a nonfiction narrative, and they both present the basic structural and narrative characteristics that the Instituto Cubano de Literatura y Lingüística would use a few years later to elaborate its definition of *testimonio*.

The Intrinsically Aesthetic Purpose

There is no doubt that *Operación Masacre* and *Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* both, at least in their structural externals, bear a strong resemblance to the Anglo American New Journalism. However, in terms of their motivation, it would be difficult to prove that these narratives were written for *intrinsically aesthetic purposes*. Both García Márquez's and Walsh's stories have an unambiguous political undertone given the historical context. They both transpire a sense of journalistic urgency, and humane disgust for the aberrations committed by the authoritarian regimes in their countries. In

that sense, both authors in their narratives express deep political concern for the dilemmas rooted in Latin America's political instability, and they both display a moral vision that aims towards democratic restoration in the region.

This anti-authoritarian undertone not only gives these stories a clear ethical imprint, but also makes them politically motivated, much more so than those motivated solely by aesthetic considerations and perceptions. At the same time, as Walsh observed during an interview with Argentine novelist Ricardo Piglia in January 1973: "[E]vidently, political denouncement translated into the art of the novel becomes innocuous. It doesn't bother anyone at all, meaning that it becomes sacralized as art."[45] During the exchange, Walsh argued against the traditional fictional novel—which he defined as an obsolete bourgeois form—in favor of more politically influenced narratives such as *testimonio*, which he thought were more in tune with Latin American reality.

It is clear that Barnet's *Cimarrón* (*The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*) aimed in that political direction. Published in 1966 by the Instituto de Etnología y Folklore (Institute of Ethnology and Folklore) in Havana, the book had a clear political subtext: "the documentation of both the authentic folk culture of Cuba that the revolution sought to recover, and the deplorable human conditions that justify the revolution and its subsequent programs."[46] The book is written in the first person in the voice of 104-year-old Esteban Montejo, a slave during the Spanish colonial period who hurled a stone at a slave driver and then fled into the mountains to live in isolation—and safety. The narrative tells the story of how Montejo came back to civilization to become a wage-earning peon, and finally, due to the dismal condition of life under capitalism, joined the Cuban Revolution, of which—mainly thanks to Barnet—he became a symbol.

Barnet was aware of the impact that Montejo's story would have on the political image of the Cuban revolution. In a preface to the book, included in its 1987 edition, Barnet cited American anthropologist Oscar Lewis, author of the groundbreaking testimonial book *The Children of Sánchez*: "I think that I have proven that the lives of those men who belong to what Oscar Lewis called the culture of poverty don't always lack the will of being, or of a historical conscience. And when they are anchored in the feelings of marginality, the flames of those lives show us the path to the future."[47] Through the reconstruction of Montejo's troubles and tribulations, Barnet made an attempt to draw the portrait of a whole class and, eventually, of a whole nation, as well as the path for its liberation through the communist revolution.

Montejo's narrative became a literary benchmark in Castro's Cuba, and, moreover, a part of the literary canon of the Cuban revolution, immediately gaining acclaim as a cornerstone for Latin American testimonial literature. The framing of Montejo's story as an autobiography (and, again, originally signed by Montejo as the coauthor) put in parallel the lives of the slaves in the Spanish colony and the lives of the working classes under capitalism. But also, and by contrast, it projected into the future the qualities and possibilities of a life under the new communist regime.[48] The dual political-artistic nature of the work was noted by English writer Graham Greene in the prologue to the book's first edition: "There wasn't a book like this before, and it is quite improbable it will be repeated."[49] Of course, what Greene was detecting was in fact the crystallization of an already established literary trend that had started in Latin America almost a decade before, one that resulted in *testimonio* finally being institutionalized. As Foster also notes:

> Montejo's symbolic status as a rebel against the institution of slavery, his participation in the struggle for Cuban independence, his membership in the Cuban Socialist Party, and, above all, his representations of the solidarity first of the black ethnic minority all attests to values promoted by the official mythopoesis of the Castro government.[50]

In order to develop the twofold nature of his nonfiction—political and aesthetic—Barnet resorted to a particular strategy: he positioned himself as a mere scribe of Montejo's story, giving "voice to the voiceless" slave. The absence of Barnet as a narrator in *Cimarrón* also created a rather seamless interplay between autobiographical documentary and social narrative, reflecting yet another dimension to the Latin American genre, one that at least this writer is not aware of in Anglo American narrative nonfiction.

Like García Márquez and Walsh, Barnet chose his subject not only for his particularities, but mainly for its emblematic qualities. *Cimarrón* aimed at describing a common Cuban experience or, in Barnet's own words, it aimed at becoming a "sounding board for the collective memory of my country."[51] In a similar vein, many Latin American narrative nonfictions sought to describe those communal experiences, delineating and projecting through allegorical resonances the historical-dialectical development of the Latin American State. This narrative direction, in part a byproduct of the intellectual debate conducted through *Casa de las Américas* greatly differed from the seeming "atypicality" or individualism of the characters and stories portrayed by American narrative nonfiction dedicated, at least in appearance, to art for art's sake.

The political context created a shared communal setting for Latin American nonfiction. It was the backdrop for a collective experience that

had to be rebuilt, restored, and reincorporated into the official records. The nonfiction novel in Latin America emerged precisely as the means to recreate a political memory that had been challenged, silenced, annulled, and often times deleted from the official records by authoritarian governments.

The recreation of this memory couldn't possibly stay separated from politics, and this is in part the reason why literature and political action were so profoundly interconnected in the region during those years. But however strong, this relationship still had its limits. As Barnet wrote in his 1987 prologue to *Cimarrón*, nonfiction narratives couldn't generally offer much more than a synthesis of some of the aspects of the Latin American problem. "Social solutions—he added—are the mandatory duty of politicians."[52]

The Matrix of Proximity

As noted, a particularity of Anglo American narrative nonfiction is that he writer is personally invested in the events he is narrating. And this personal investment is most efficiently displayed in an individual authorial voice, whether in third person or first person. James Agee, in his *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, describes the author's personal participation in the following:

> George Gudger is a man, et cetera. But obviously, in the effort to tell of him (by example) as truthfully as I can, I am limited. I know him only so far as I know him, and only in those terms in which I know him; and that depends as fully on who I am as on who he is.[53]

While Agee wrote his own work in the first person, what he said could also be said of those American authors who chose the third person: The physical, temporal, and personal contiguity between the author and the events he narrates, his subjects and stories, creates a kind of *metonymical* narrative axis. Or, in other words, the authors gain authority, knowledge, and command over their topics and subjects due to their proximity to them.[54] By such proximity, they can say: *I see this, I am here, I know this*. In that vein, the Anglo American tradition of narrative nonfiction becomes an experiential record of the particularities of time and space, as seen, suffered, and enjoyed by its direct witnesses.

In the Latin American nonfiction tradition, although some components remain the same as in the Anglo American, the narrative matrix is substantially different. As marginal counterbalances of an official, hegemonic narrative, these texts strive from the outset to show themselves free from subjectivity as much as possible. The clearest example is Walsh's *Operación Masacre*, where the *impersonal dominance* the narrator exerts over the different points of view

makes them converge univocally in one conclusion: the government has committed a crime against its citizens.

In that sense, it would be accurate to say that Latin American nonfiction writers operate under a premise of maintaining the appearance of a lack of contiguity between their personal experiences and the topics they write about. And even when they sometimes resort to the first person, their narratives gravitate back towards a politically *metaphorical* axis, using their factual stories on an allegorical level. They say: *this story actually happened, but from the outset this is its meaning in the present context*. Latin American nonfiction thus works as an allegorical account of the present through the narration of past or remote events.

Of course, the fact that the construction of nonfiction narratives in the Anglo American tradition gravitates around a metonymical axis does not prevent their achieving metaphorical status. But these metaphors always arise from the author's proximity to the subject and the event. And the reverse can be valid for Latin American literary journalism narratives, which can and does seek out metonymy, but a metonymy foreordained to gravitate around a metaphorical axis, meaning an intentional allegory.

Conclusion

Despite similarities between Anglo American and Latin American nonfiction, there remain a number of structural differences rooted in the origins of the two narrative forms. Of course both resort to similar literary techniques, as noted at the outset. However, there is a general contextual and ideological substrata that creates structural disparities between both traditions.

Because of the forum firmly established in *Casa de las Américas*, and because in Latin America the sphere of culture and the sphere of politics are not so clearly separated, narrative nonfiction in the region has had a political-programmatic quality that Anglo-American nonfiction has lacked. Institutionalized and legitimized by progressive and socialist governments, and especially by the Cuban Revolution, Latin American testimonial literature has consolidated, especially since the late 1950s and until the early 1980s, its political finality, and could not be analyzed in solely artistic terms. To do so would fail to acknowledge the cultural place it occupies in the Latin American experience. In that direction, it could also be argued that in Latin America narrative nonfiction was born in a context of a strong governmental push towards modernization, and since its inception has developed ancillary to and supporting of politics. As authoritarian governments spread across the continent, the efforts to develop this form of nonfiction were often persecuted, thus assuring its politicization. It was due to the authoritarian

advent that testimonial narratives could only turn in a more politically metaphorical direction.

Latin American nonfiction, therefore, oscillates between the "official story" of the regime, which is a false account, and the seemingly "fictionalized" account of a story that contradicts the official statements in unveiling a different "truth" of what happened. It stands to reason that as long as they remain marginal, Latin American narrative nonfiction accounts were tolerated by the authoritarian power. But when these stories started to gain popularity, and their power to negate the official narratives increases, both the stories and their authors started to suffer persecution. Such nonfiction narrativists in Latin America then had to resort, again, to more overtly allegorical accounts in order to portray current social conditions without unduly exposing themselves to persecution.

Moreover, if Latin American nonfiction can be characterized as a form parallel and supporting of politics, Anglo American nonfiction could be characterized as subject to the needs and pressures of the market. The New Journalism in the United States was the result of multiple vertiginous changes in society, and the subsequent need to track and narrate these changes in a new way. As Hollowell notes in his analysis of Capote's *In Cold Blood*, such nonfiction still claimed to be an artistic form, with the appearance of a seemingly intrinsic artistic motivation.[55]

Testimonial literature, on the other hand, has been from its inception, and especially since the 1950s, a moral-political literary form with a very limited teleology: Just like the contraband that caused the damage to the ship and the loss of life in García Márquez's story, one of the central values of these narrative types in Latin America, these journalistic "contraband truths" in the words of David William Foster, was to contribute towards the wrecking of the authoritarian state in Latin America.

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Endnotes

[1] John Hollowell, *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 14–15.

[2] David Abrahamson, *Magazine-Made America: The Cultural Transformation of the Post War Periodical* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1996), 11–17.

[3] Following multiple authors who have attempted to define narrative nonfiction or literary journalism, and differentiate it from other forms of nonfiction such as memoirs, ethnographies, history and certain forms of essay, we will consider literary journalism as a type of referential narrative prose whose protagonists, characters, and situations have documented existence in the real world; whose focus is generally a current event; a narrative that develops an authorial voice and pays especial attention to style, and whose main purpose is both literary and referential. Of course, this is only a point of departure, a working definition that will help me better understand the differences between literary journalism as it exists in the United States and in Latin America. For some of these ideas see Mas'ud Zavarzadeh. *The Mythopoetic Reality: The Postwar Nonfiction American Novel* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 50–67; John Hollowell, *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 21–47, Ronald Weber, *The Literature of Fact* (Ohio University Press: Athens, 1980), 1–4; and Norman Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007) 1–24.

[4] David Scott Palmer, "Peru: Collectively Defending Democracy in the Western Hemisphere" in Tom Farer, ed. *Beyond Sovereignty: Collectively Defending Democracy in the Americas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 258; quoted in Arturo Valenzuela, "Latin American Presidencies Interrupted," *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 4 (October 2004): 5. In the online version of this paper, a corrections section indicates that Valenzuela incorrectly stated the number of countries included in the sample in David Scott Palmer's study. These countries were twenty instead of thirty–seven. "Due to an editorial oversight, Arturo Valenzuela's article 'Presidencies Interrupted' (October 2004) incorrectly stated the number of countries included in the sample in David Scott Palmer's study on military coups in Latin America from 1930 to 1980 (p. 5). The correct number is 20." In *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 4 (October 2004): 183.

[5] Although there are not definite numbers about the books that were censored during the period in Latin America, there are some striking hints of how censorship operated in different countries in the region. According to Francine Masiello, in Argentina there were at least 242 rock songs that were banned from the airwaves. "In consequence, musicians had to exert a tight control over the metaphoric shiftings in their lyrics." Francine Masiello, "La Argentina durante el Proceso: las Múltiples Resistencias de la Cultura," in *Ficción y Política. La Narrativa Argentina durante el Proceso Militar* (Buenos Aires: Alianza, 1987), 11–29.

[6] For these numbers see UNESCO, *Mass Media in the Developing Countries: A Unesco Report to the United Nations* (1961), 24–28; John McNelly, "Mass Communication and the Climate for Modernization in Latin America," *Journal of Inter-American Studies*,

8.3 (July 1966): 345–57; Germán Rama and Juan Carlos Tedesco, "Education and Development in Latin America (1950–1975)," *International Review of Education*, 25, no. 2/3, (Jubilee Number, 1979): 187–211.

[7] Roberto Ferro, "La literatura en el banquillo. Walsh y la fuerza del testimonio." In *Historia Crítica de la Literatura Argentina,* ed. by Noé Jitrik and Susana Cella (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1999), 125–45.

[8] Like any comparison, this one is arbitrary, although it can be justified. It is true that, for instance, the Civil Rights Movement was also a hallmark of the 1960s in the United States. However, it could easily be argued that it was the Vietnam War—and its multiple consequences—that originated the most relevant literary journalism in America during the 1960s (Norman Mailer's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Armies of the Night*, and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* are just two examples). The second term of the comparison has left out Argentina's Revolución Libertadora of 1955 and the Chilean coup, equally important for the development of nonfiction in Latin America. These events, however, didn't have the relevance of the Cuban Revolution on the consolidation of nonfiction in the region, primarily because it was Casa de las Américas, an institution created by the revolutionary Cuban government, that formalized *testimonio* and revitalized the interest in nonfiction throughout Latin America.

[9] A narrative work of the most unorthodox nonfiction, *Facundo* is the first major piece in the convoluted puzzle of Latin American literature, and has been described by Aníbal González as the cornerstone of Latin American journalism and by Roberto González Echevarría as "the most important book written by a Latin American in any discipline or genre." See Aníbal González, *Journalism and the Development of Spanish American Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 41; Roberto González Echevarría, "*Facundo*: An Introduction." In Domingo Sarmiento, *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1–15.

[10] *Diccionario de la Literatura Cubana* s.v. "Testimonio." (1984), 1904–05.

[11] Janina Montero, "Observations on the Hispanic American Novel and Its Public," *Latin American Literary Review*, 6, no. 11 (Fall–Winter, 1977): 6–7.

[12] See note 10 above. The word *testimonio* in Spanish means to bear truthful witness, as John Beverley explains in *Testimonio on the Politics of Truth*. And although its unofficial slogan "to give a voice to the voiceless" is sometimes used to define the genre in the United States, this idea is more metaphorical than literal. The narrators or main characters of *testimonio* are not, by definition, illiterates who require the intervention of a scribe to put their words in paper. As Beverley also explains, *testimonial* narratives are geared to "adequately represent" different types of "alternative social subjects." The question of alternativity (who *is* alternative and who *isn't*) can only be answered considering the political context. Translation of this fragment is mine. Also see John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 3.

[13] Carlos Montaner, "The Cuban Revolution and Its Acolytes," *Society* 31, no. 5 (July 1994): 74–79.

[14] See Neil Larsen, "The 'Boom' Novel and the Cold War in Latin America," *Modern Fiction Studies* 38, no. 3 (Autumn, 1992): 771–83. The similarities between testimonial literature and the reportage tradition of the international proletarian writer's movement are sometimes striking, but that examination is beyond the focus of this article.

[15] Ana Ramb, "Premio Casa de las Américas, 50 años de Luz." *Eco Alternativo,* http://www.redeco.com.ar/nv/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2608&Itemid=143 (2009): 2.

[16] Ibid., 3.

[17] The Cultural Congress in 1968 "would devote many sessions to the role of the intellectual, stressing the need to heal the breach between the cultural avantgarde and the revolutionary vanguard." Jean Franco, "From Modernization to Resistance: Latin American Literature 1959–1976," *Latin American Perspectives* 5, no. 1, Culture in the Age of Mass Media (Winter, 1978): 77–97.

[18] Two examples of Pulitzer Prize winning narrative journalism are Norman Mailer's 1967 *Armies of the Night* and Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson's 1989 *And Their Children After Them*. However, the majority of the prizes were conferred to essayistic books like Douglas R. Hofstadter's 1980's *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, or historical-essayistic such as Richard Rhodes's 1988 *The Making of the Atomic Bomb.* See Pulitzer Prizes, General Nonfiction, <http://www.pulitzer.org/bycat/General-Nonfiction>.

[19] National Book Award official web page:<http://www.nationalbook.org/aboutus_history.html>.

[20] "When Truman Capote first considered eliding these genres by writing a nonfiction novel, there was no 'cultural consensus' he could call on and, therefore, no pre-existing criteria to guide him in relation to form, style or subject matter. To that extent, as noted by Tom Wolfe, Capote was a pioneer." Nick Nuttall, "Cold–blooded Journalism," in *The Journalistic Imagination: Literary Journalists from Defoe to Capote and Carter*, ed. Richard Keeble and Sharon Wheeler (London: Routledge), 131–43. Also see Hollowell: "Although Wolfe dates the beginnings of the new journalism in the sixties, fictional techniques are apparent in the magazine articles of the forties and fifties" (36–37).

[21] For the notion of "taxonomical uncertainty," see Nuttall, 131.

[22] The absence of an "I" created what Weber defined as the "recording angel" effect (73–88).

[23] Truman Capote, *Music for Chameleons* (New York: Random House, 1980), xv–xvi.

[24] Nuttall, 138–39.

[25] "More than one historian has found a way through chains of false fact. No, the difficulty is that the history is interior—no documents can give sufficient intimation: the novel must replace history at precisely that point where experience is sufficiently emotional, spiritual, psychical, moral, existential, or supernatural to expose the fact that the historian in pursuing the experience would be obliged to quit the clearly demarcated limits of historic inquiry." See Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel. The Novel as History* (New York: Signet Books, 1968), 284.

[26] Weber, 50.

[27] Weber, 98–99.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Weber, 101. Zavarzadeh describes the "centrifugal energies of reality and the centripetal forces of fiction" to define the tension at the core of the nonfiction novel. 226.

[30] Hollowell, 49–62.

[31] Hollowell, 15, 48–62.

[32] "Confronted with a reality that was difficult to grasp, because many of its meanings remained hidden, there was an oblique attempt (and not only because of censorship) of the literary field to place itself in a meaningful connection with the present, and to start trying to make sense of a chaotic mass of experiences separated from their collective meaning." Beatriz Sarlo, "Política, Ideología y Figuración Literaria," *Ficción y Política: La Narrativa Argentina durante el Proceso Militar* (Buenos Aires: Alianza, 1987), 30–59, translation from Spanish is mine. Neil Larsen, "The 'Boom' Novel and the Cold War in Latin America," *Modern Fiction Studies* 38.3 (Autumn, 1992): 776–77; Francine Masiello, "La Argentina durante el Proceso: Las Múltiples Resistencias de la Cultura," *Ficción y Política. La Narrativa Argentina durante el Proceso Militar* (Buenos Aires: Alianza, 1987), 11–29.

[33] Gerald Martin, "On Dictatorship and Rhetoric in Latin American Writing: A Counter–Proposal," *Latin American Research Review* 17, no. 3 (1982): 217.

[34] Gabriel García Márquez, *Relato de un náufrago* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1987), 8. Translation from Spanish is mine.

[35] Ibid., 7–13

[36] Ibid., 12.

[37] David W. Foster, "Latin American Documentary Narrative" *PMLA* 99, no. 1 (January 1984): 42–55.

[38] "Published almost ten years before Truman Capote's much touted 'nonfictional novel' *In Cold Blood*, *Operación Masacre* anticipates the techniques credited to Capote." In Foster, 42–43.

[39] Rodolfo Walsh, *Operación Masacre* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de La Flor, 1972), 11–12. Translations from *Operación Masacre* are mine.

[40] Walsh, 13–14

[41] From the Spanish "Yo también fui fusilado." Translation is mine. Roberto Ferro, "La literatura en el banquillo. Walsh y la fuerza del testimonio." In *Historia Crítica de la Literatura Argentina,* ed. Noé Jitrik and Susana Cella (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1999), 130–31.

[42] Walsh, 13.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Foster, 42–43.

[45] Ricardo Piglia, "Rodolfo Walsh," *Grandes Entrevistas de la Historia Argentina,* ed. Saítta Silvia and Luis Alberto Romero (Buenos Aires: Punto de Lectura, 1998), 392–405. Translation from Spanish is mine.

[46] Foster, 51.

[47] Miguel Barnet, *Cimarrón* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Sol, 1966), 214–15. Translation from Spanish is mine.

[48] The book was first published under the name *Biografía de un Cimarrón,* or *Biography of a Runaway Slave* in 1966. Its title later mutated into *Autobiografía de un Cimarrón* or, *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, and finally to *Cimarrón*. These mutations speak in part of the evolution in the perception of testimonial narratives in Cuba and Latin America, and were the consequence of the broader debate about the documental possibilities open to nonfiction. I may refer to this topic in future articles.

[49] Barnet, 210. Translation from Spanish is mine.

[50] Foster, 51–52.

[51] Barnet, 212–15. Translation from Spanish is mine.

[52] Ibid., 214.

[53] James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1960), 211.

[54] For a detailed explanation of the different semiotic displacements involved in a metaphor and a metonymy I draw from Eliseo Verón, *La sémiosis sociale. Fragments d'une théorie de la discursivité* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1988). Verón compares with succinct clarity Saussure's, Peirce's and Frege's theories of sign, and their notions of metaphorical and metonymical constructions..

[55] Hollowell, 83.