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“Parody and *Testimonio* in Horacio Castellanos Moya’s *Insensatez* and *El Asco*”

This presentation explores two contemporary Central American fictions, *Insensatez* (2004) and *El asco* (1996), to see them as a sort of savage postmodern parody of the classic *testimonio*. In Central America, the *testimonio* emerged as a genre in the eighties during the civil wars, reflecting on the injustices suffered by indigenous people, the struggles of *campesinos* and the working class to attain their rights. With this struggle for equality they aimed to achieve a better society once the wars ended. These narratives differed from the others as they were not represented by upper-class authors; they expressed the subaltern struggle, their participation and their resistance in the revolution. Further, John Beverley in his article “The Margin at the Center” defines *testimonio* (canonized as a genre) as a narrative “told in the first person [...] who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts.” (31) *Testimonio* is considered to be ‘true’, ‘authentic’ and ‘factual’; thus, distinguishing it from fiction or texts with literary elements.

Nevertheless, with the end of the civil wars and dictatorships we have also allegedly witnessed the end of *testimonio* as a genre; John Beverley stated: “the moment of *testimonio* is over.” (“The Real Thing”, 77) However, *testimonio* as a *mode* of reading literature, (that existed even before it was classified as a genre), which was thought to be over, shows spark of its presence in contemporary Central American fiction. I argue that *testimonio* is a perception that can exist at any time and era and can once more become a voice against injustice in Central American society today. Thus, today’s Central American fictions can be read as *testimonio* and hence its existence as a *reading* strategy is still present now. Of course, there are differences between the two periods

(during the civil wars and after the peace agreement), and their associated texts. Contemporary fiction does not simply imitate the earlier form of reading; it outlines a critique even as it emphasizes a continuity with the past. As Linda Hutcheon explains: "[p]ostmodern parody is a kind of contesting revision or rereading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representations of history. This paradoxical conviction of the remoteness of the past and the need to deal with it in the present has been called the 'allegorical impulse' of postmodernism [. . .]. I would simply call it parody." (*The Politics of Postmodernism*, 91) Can we, perhaps, then see these new fictions in terms of parody and call them postmodern? I will explore two Central American texts by Horacio Castellanos Moya – *El Asco* and *Insensatez* - to examine the presence of *testimonio* as a reading strategy in contemporary times, and how they challenge the rigid line drawn between fact and fiction which was one of the important characteristics of differentiating *testimonio* from literature.

*El asco* (1996) consists of a monologue by a character named Edgardo Vega, who conveys his frustration and hatred towards El Salvador to his friend Moya, who is also the text's compiler. Vega is a Canadian citizen, who lives in Montreal and is a Professor of History of Art at McGill University. He travels to San Salvador to attend his mother's funeral and to claim his part of the property that she has bequeathed. During the visit, he meets Moya in a bar and complains about the country. Meanwhile, *Insensatez* (2004), is narrated in the first person by a nameless narrator in a nameless country, a reporter from El Salvador who had to leave his country after writing a controversial article about its president. He is offered a job by his friend Erick whom he had met in Mexico during his exile, where Erick was completing his postgraduate studies. Erick offers him the job of compiling and editing *testimonios* written by indigenous people, as part of a project conducted by the Catholic Church.

These texts reveal the reality of post-war disillusion. They have elements that defined *testimonio* as a genre – the key factors that not only separated the genre from other literary forms but also created controversy around the genre – yet they make us to think whether *testimonio* as a reading strategy is over or does it exist in the current time. *Insensatez*, for instance, presents many true incidents with a fictional coating. Though the name of the country where the narrative is set is not mentioned in the text, there are ample clues to show that it is Guatemala. For example, the narrator talks about the Kaqchikel indigenous people, he mentions the ethnicity Mam and also refers to General Otto Pérez Molina in the text, albeit disguised under the name of Octavio Pérez Mena.<sup>1</sup> The narrator indicates: “el teniente Octavio Pérez Mena de aquella época que con el paso del tiempo se convertiría en el jefe de Inteligencia del ejército, que la tortura es la medida de la inteligencia en los militares, y que ahora, diecisiete años después, era un respetable general que se paseaba orgulloso y ufano por esta misma ciudad.”(*Insensatez*, 109)

Further, he mentions the name of Ríos Montt when the civil registrar of a village called Tototocapan was brutally killed by authorities for refusing to handover the list of dead people of the village. The authority needed it to “revivirlos y que pudieran votar a favor del partido del general Ríos Montt.” (*Insensatez*, 72) In an interview, when asked about the connection between the names in the book and real life, Castellanos Moya answered: “También ahí hay una referencia a otro, Francisco Ortega Menaldo. Eran los dos jefes de inteligencia más famosos, formados en Israel y en Estados Unidos. Son tipos muy listos, no son los típicos matarifes. Es una sociedad muy jodida la guatemalteca.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the *testimonio* of the indigenous people that the protagonist

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<sup>1</sup>Otto Perez Molina was an officer in the Guatemalan army who directed the Kaibiles, a military unit known for their brutality, and he has been the President in Guatemala from 2012. In *Página 12* (<http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/libros/10-5031-2013-05-20.html>) the autor mentions “Octavio Pérez Mena, nombre de ficción que remite a otro real: Otto Pérez Molina, actual presidente de Guatemala, signado durante el juicio como coordinador de la represión en aquellos años, a partir de varios testimonios e investigaciones.”

<sup>2</sup><http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/libros/10-5031-2013-05-20.html>

is compiling in the text is set against the report *Guatemala nunca más* (1998), as Alexandra Ortiz Wallner reveals: "El informe *Guatemala Nunca más* (1998), que recopila testimonios de los sobrevivientes de las masacres sufridas por los pueblos indígenas en Guatemala, fue presentado oficialmente al público en Guatemala el 24 de abril de 1998 en una ceremonia presidida por monseñor Juan Gerardi. [...] Este informe ha sido identificado como el intertexto más importante de la novela de Castellanos Moya." (*El arte de ficcionar: la novela contemporánea en Centroamérica*," 152) These examples demonstrate that though it is a fictional tale, it has factual relevance like classic *testimonios* as they were traditionally read. The narrative is based on true events and real people of Guatemala.

In *El asco*, the conflict between fact and fiction can be demonstrated through the similarity between the character and compiler Moya on the one hand, and the author Horacio Castellanos Moya on the other. The relationship between the compiler and the author raises an important question – whether Moya the compiler and Moya the author are the same person – that brings into focus the role of the witness and the compiler in a reading of *testimonio*. The primary resemblance between both the Moyas is that they both are writers. The other similarity is that the compiler Moya is also from Tegucigalpa, like the real writer. For instance, Vega comments to his friend Moya: "Vos naciste en Tegucigalpa, Moya, y te pasaste los diez años de la Guerra en México, por eso no entiendo qué haces aquí." (*El asco*, 25-26) This relation between the Moyas brings the link between fact and fiction to the fore. The facts of Moya the writer are related to the fictional character in the text. This forces the reader to ask: is reading *testimonio* therefore truly factual and against fiction, or, is the line between the two blurred?

Another example from the same text is about the narrator/protagonist or witness, Edgardo Vega. The identification of this narrator is ambivalent, which the text makes clear from the start,

in the book's "Advertencia" or warning. The author says: "Edgardo – Vega, el personaje central de este relato, existe: reside en Montreal bajo un nombre distinto – un nombre sajón que tampoco es Thomas Bernhard.<sup>3</sup> Me comunicó sus opiniones seguramente con mayor énfasis y descarnado del que contienen en este texto. Quise suavizar aquellos puntos de vista que hubieran escandalizado a ciertos lectores." (*El asco: Thomas Bernhard en El Salvador*, 11) *El asco* plays with the concept of truth and fiction, such that on the one hand it can be read as a fictional text but on the other it claims to be a "truthful" story narrated and compiled by real people. Alexandra Ortiz Wallner observes that the "Advertencia" "ironiza la situación narrador/testimoniante-autor/recopilador al prevenir al lector." (*El arte de ficcionar: la novela contemporánea en Centroamérica*, 138-139) She further adds that "de esta manera queda planteada la ambigüedad de la narración en tanto que declarar la "verdad" sobre lo que el lector está a punto de leer es, a la vez, un desenmascaramiento de la confección ficcional-literaria." (*El arte de ficcionar: la novela contemporánea en Centroamérica*, 138-139) Megan Thornton emphasizes the importance of Bernhard's writing style as adapted by Castellanos Moya to bring to attention the overlapping of literature and *testimonio*, authentic and inauthentic, fact and fiction. She writes that "the reference to Bernhard is central to this performativity, for Bernhard also mixed autobiographical elements and real-life characters and experiences with creative inventions, blurring the line between fact and fiction." ("A Postwar Perversion of *Testimonio*", 210) Thornton points out that Vega's "cynical attitude parodies the *testimonio*'s perceived idealism and optimism." ("A Postwar Perversion of *Testimonio*", 209) The concept of fact and fiction, so vital in the classic testimonial genre, is challenged here, and at the same time *El asco* demonstrates the importance of reading *testimonio* in contemporary times.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Bernhard was a postmodern Austrian author who was known for his harsh criticism of Austrian society.

In *Insensatez*, too, one can notice similarities with previous testimonial readings, in that it is based on many real and factual events; yet it creates a hybrid discourse between the narrative told by the main protagonist which is a "fiction" (though it mentions names of some people and tribes who really exist), and the narratives of the *testimonio* which should be read as "fact." *Insensatez* mixes and juxtaposes the narration and challenges the traditional norms of the *testimonio* within the western canon. The text is narrated mostly in the first person, but readers are also aware that phrases from the *testimonios* he is reading have impacted the narrator throughout the story. These phrases interrupt the narration from time to time and more so as the plot develops. Gradually a connection evolves between the protagonist and his work, it does not matter whether the voice is of the narrator or from the *testimonios* that he is compiling. As Ileana Rodríguez describes: "A medida que el narrador-editor avanza en las correcciones del texto de la verdad para lo cual lo han empleado, el poder literario del texto va fomentando el terror en él mismo, que ya no es capaz de distinguir entre texto y contexto, ficción y realidad" ("Estéticas de esperanza, memoria y desencanto", 34). Also, the act of compilation of *testimonios* in a fictional context is itself a challenge to the earlier readings. *Insensatez* challenges the dichotomy of fact and fiction as a basis to judge tales of injustices and oppression. It asks: What if these factual characteristics of testimonial readings are challenged? Will a text still be considered as *testimonio* or will it cease to be *testimonio*? In other words, it parodies such techniques on which the testimonial genre was established.

Thus, these fictions, on the one hand question the canonization of *testimonio* as a genre by subverting its key aspects, and on the other, they also question the hope to build a just society in the wake of a violent civil war. For the social circumstances of these countries did not change much in the post-war environment. Violence, oppression and injustice are still features of today's

Central American countries, and this is reflected in their literature; as such, these texts can be approached as *testimonio*. Yet, they differ in many ways and challenge the generic definition of *testimonio* as understood by most North American scholars. Thus, reading contemporary fiction as *testimonio* raises questions about such definitions and casts doubts over whether narratives that were considered *testimonios* contributed to peace and equality in Central American countries. Did those aspects that distinguish *testimonio* in opposition to the hegemonic forms of literature succeed, or did they deter art from exploring other possibilities of expression? I propose this (questioning and critiquing) strategy as parody – they parody the *testimonio* as a genre. Seeing these texts in terms of parody helps in constructing a relation with the past; reflects on the historical aspects, shows a continuity and also serves as a source of comparison between the past and the present.

Parody, as Linda Hutcheon explains, is not only a means of ridicule but also a way to critique the background text against which the contemporary fiction has been set. However, parody does not simply set two texts against each other that interrelate in a certain way, rather the kind of parody Hutcheon is talking about is “an integrated structural modeling process of revising, replaying, inverting and ‘trans-contextualizing’ previous works of art.” (*A Theory of Parody*, 11) It is not an imitation of the past but the creation of a new model; it gives a new meaning to the later text, it is complex and incorporates a critical reflection. Difference and distanciation are the two important characteristics of parody. Parody is doubly coded – it sets itself on the past model as the background but at the same time critiques and subverts the same model. Thus, parody relates the past and the present and emphasizes the connection and continuation between the two; if that link breaks then *testimonio* as a reading strategy will be over as it happened earlier with the genre. The contemporary reading sets itself against the traditional readings of the nineties and subverts

the generic aspects that defined and restricted the narrative style within the western canon. Reading contemporary fictions as *testimonio* can challenge the concept of the genre as it emerged in the eighties on the one hand and, on the other, can adapt its style to address the region's current social and political situation and insist on bringing back to life the *testimonio* which was considered dead. However, one of the criteria to interpret a particular fiction as a parody to the past literary form can only be understood as parody if the reader recognizes it. As Hutcheon says "while parody offers a much more limited and controlled version of this activation of the past by giving it a new and often ironic context, it makes similar demands upon the reader, but these demands are more on his or her knowledge and recollection than on his or her openness to play." (*A Theory of Parody* 05). Thus, the reader needs to have knowledge of the background text that has been parodied. We understand that *El asco* and *Insensatez* can be decoded as parody only when we as readers can set them against the earlier narratives that were defined as *testimonio* and observe the various changes, dialogues and challenges that the contemporary texts posit to them. Thus, the present day fictions emphasize the need to know and acknowledge the past but, as I have already mentioned, not nostalgically, but rather through critical reflection.



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