

# Mexican Working-Class Literature, or The Work of Literature in Mexico

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Working-class literature has never had a wide audience in Mexico, always overshadowed by other types of literature, such as the novel of the Mexican Revolution, the regionalist novel, and the indigenous novel. Nevertheless, there is no better place, as this chapter will suggest, to consider the status of literature and its relationship to history and ideology than from the genre of work and the worker. Approaching working-class literature as an evolving genre in relation to different modernization projects, this chapter will map out similarities and point to differences between various labor literatures—including proletarian literature in the 1930s, the testimonio (a new type first-person documentary genre) in the 1960s, and the literatures of the early 2000s—in order to argue ultimately that the genre provides a privileged space to think about labor and exploitation in Mexico.<sup>1</sup>

For this same reason, this chapter also argues for a reconsideration of literature (rather than of the life of workers) within this tradition of Mexican working-class literature. Throughout the century, working-class literature has emphasized the idea of authenticity of a group (e.g. proletariat, subaltern) often at the expense of literature. This can be seen, for example, when Peter Hitchcock notes that “[i]t is better that the literature of labor be barely ‘literature’ than for it to be barely ‘labor’” (1989, p. 7). With this in mind, the last section of this chapter will focus on two contemporary novels that challenge the idea of authenticity—especially visible in theoretical accounts of the testimonio—by insisting instead on literary form. This stress on literary form,

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however, will not mean a shift away from anti-capitalist criticism, but rather an opportunity to reengage with it. As such, this chapter contends that a newfound concern with literary form emerges as a space to critique exploitation and neoliberalism in Mexico today.

### **The Mexican Revolution: The Creation of a New State**

In 1910, Mexico became the center of revolutionary politics in Latin America. The Mexican Revolution, the first great revolution of the twentieth century, ended the thirty-five-year dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. During Díaz's reign [*el Porfiriato*], the country had experienced relative stability and large economic growth, although at great social cost. As Mexico sought to modernize a largely feudal system, Díaz ordered the construction of highways, railroads, and telegraph lines, all of which facilitated communication and movement of commerce, arguably strengthening the country's industrial capabilities. To achieve this objective, however, he welcomed foreign investments in Mexico, which also succeeded in reviving the mining industries and oil fields. Díaz governed, nonetheless, with an iron fist, permitting almost no political dissent and proving that, while Mexico had taken important steps toward modernization, it was still far from being a democracy. Furthermore, this economic growth did very little to improve the lives of the majority of Mexicans. Indeed, the situation during *el Porfiriato* only worsened the living conditions for many, as indigenous communal lands were privatized and sold to *terratenientes*, wealthy landowners often linked to Díaz. Modernization, in short, benefitted a small group of Mexicans at the expense of Mexico's poor.

The Mexican Revolution emerged as response to these political and economic failures. Although marked by confusion and crisis, especially during the 1920s and 1930s, the Revolution took crucial steps to ameliorate the lives of Mexicans. For instance, the Revolution proposed radical agrarian reforms, the banishment of the Catholic Church from state politics, the expropriation of foreign properties (including oil companies such as Standard Oil and Royal Dutch Shell), and the push for indigenous and mestizo rights denied since colonial times. It also pushed for massive educational

reforms, as the Secretary of Public Education, José Vasconcelos, set out to build new schools, many in rural areas where poor children, primarily indigenous or mestizo, could receive an education and “mix” with criollos, the children of European descent. This type of “racial mixing” would be central to Mexico’s new national identity, or what Vasconcelos called “La raza cósmica” [“the cosmic race”].<sup>2</sup>

Art played a crucial role in defining this new national moment, as it sought to reflect and teach Mexicans these revolutionary ideals. For this reason, Vasconcelos promoted the works of the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, David Álvaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco, who were now commissioned to create their artwork in public buildings, including the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria. These works spoke to many of the Revolution’s concerns, such as a reclaiming of pre-Columbian indigenous cultures, the condemnation of bourgeois decadence, and the fight for workers’ rights. The impact of the Revolution, however, did not look the same across all art forms. In fact, within the literary field, literature in the first fifteen years after the Revolution remained mired in outdated nineteenth-century forms. Latin American *modernismo*, highly influenced by French symbolism and the Parnassian school of poets, continued to be the predominant style. Realism also had a solid literary foothold in Mexico, which began with the first Latin American novel, Fernández de Lizardi’s Mexican picaresque novel *El periquillo sarniento* [*The Mangy Parrot*] (1825).<sup>3</sup> Informed by romanticism and naturalism, however, the early twentieth-century Mexican novel still reflected the “bourgeois morals and virtues” that had defined the years of Díaz’s dictatorship (Plaskacz, 1980, p. 269).<sup>4</sup> What was needed was a national literature, which, much like Mexican muralism, would mark this new revolutionary moment.

For many literary critics and writers, the absence of a literature of the Revolution was both disconcerting and surprising, sparking national debates like *La polémica de 1925*. This polemic revolved around two literary groups: a cosmopolitan group of universalists, called “the Contemporaneos,” and the avant-garde, politically-charged “Stridentists”. The Stridentists often accused the Contemporaneos of being disconnected from national concerns

and producing “effeminate” literature that looked more European than Mexican (Negrín, 1995, p. 152).<sup>5</sup> Mexico needed, instead, a “virile” and socially committed literature that represented the Revolution (Negrín, 1995, p. 152). For example, in 1924 Julio Jiménez Reuda laments that “It seems very strange to me that after fourteen years of revolution there has not appeared a work of poetry, prose or tragedy, whether it captures the agitations of the people in this period of bloody civil war or passionate rivalries between different interests... [Instead] [i]n half the time, Russia has created considerable works of combative or simple aesthetic expression” (Pereira, 2000, p.383). Reference to the USSR should not be surprising, since it not only had experienced its own revolution in 1917 but also had followed, as Katerina Clark’s contribution to this collection shows, this political revolution with a productive aesthetic revolution ultimately consolidated in the official state style of socialist realism, a genre that reflected the ideals of the Bolshevik revolution. As we will examine further in this chapter, the USSR would be a point of reference during the 1920s and 1930s in Mexico, especially for proletarian writers who sought to create a truly revolutionary literature.<sup>6</sup>

For now, however, it is important to note that from this 1925 polemic, *la novela de la Revolución* [*The Novel of the Revolution*] finally emerged with the so-called discovery of Mariano Azuela’s *Los de abajo* [*The Underdogs*] (1915), a “virile” realist novel that was critical of the Mexican Revolution.<sup>7</sup> Over the next thirty years, hundreds of revolutionary novels would be published. These novels tended to represent political and social turbulence, violence, and the overall tragedy of war.<sup>8</sup> These novels also discussed, and at times criticized, the lack of political objectives of the Revolution. As one character in *Los de abajo* comments, “You ask me why I am still a rebel? Well, the revolution is like a hurricane: if you’re in it, you’re not a man . . . you’re a leaf, a dead leaf, blown by the wind” (Azuela, 2011, p. 115). There was much to criticize about the Revolution, especially during the 1920s since it had failed to make good on any of its promises—land reform, indigenous rights, and a more inclusive democracy. The novel of the Revolution sought to capture this growing disillusionment. Proletarian literature, as we will see, sought to move beyond it.

## Proletarian Literature, 1920s and 1930s

Unlike those who were penning revolutionary novels, authors from (or sympathetic with) the proletarian sector of Mexican society were less disillusioned with the Revolution. Indeed, while novels of the Revolution sought to capture and criticize the Revolution, these working-class artists, who were heavily influenced by the Bolshevik revolution, saw these failures as building blocks toward a radical social revolution. In the 1920s, proletarian writers such as Lorenzo Turrent Rozas, José Mancisidor, and Francisco Sarquis created a literature that was less about the failures of the Mexican Revolution than about a more just and egalitarian society that might be attainable after the Mexican Revolution.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, as the case in countries such as Finland, United States, and Russia, these artists were not always from a working-class background. Nevertheless, they shared a similar objective, insofar as they were not interested in exculpation or even in grieving the past but working toward a classless society. In this way, they criticized the novel of the Revolution (and *Los de abajo* in particular) as too restricted in its vision and not sufficiently transformative. They also interpreted the novel's pessimism as a result of Azuela's inability to grasp the true magnitude the Revolution (Plaskacz, 1980, p. 276). Although these proletarian authors also believed that the Revolution had failed in many short-term practical issues, they were convinced that it had set in motion a monumental political shift that would bring about a radical reorganization of the social structure. As such, unlike the novels of the Revolution, proletarian novels were "optimistic" because they proposed "solutions and a new reality that does not exist" (Ortega, 2008, p. 89).

Proletarian literature was as much a response to the defeatist politics of the novel of the Revolution as it was to the Mexican avant-garde, who shared similar political ideals with proletarian writers.<sup>10</sup> The most significant avant-garde group, Stridentists (1921–1927), who were led by Germán List Arzubide and Manuel Maples Arce, were ideologically aligned with the Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>11</sup> But like similar debates between the Futurists and the Traditionalists that took place in the USSR, proletarian writers in Mexico saw the experimental style of the avant-garde as a

way of excluding workers and indigenous people (Soto, 1929, p. 329). Avant-garde writing was too abstract, complex, and convoluted. Furthermore, professional writers wrote avant-garde literature, which served as another form of exclusion, since they could not truly capture the worker's background and experience. In short, what was needed was a more direct and authentic form of literature that not only reflected the lives of these workers, but also was written by them.

The same concern was voiced by Turrent Rozas whose collection of short stories, *Hacia una literatura proletaria* [*Toward a Proletarian Literature*] (1932), gathered seven writers (some were non-professional) to write proletarian short stories that revealed the everyday reality and political objectives of these workers. For Turrent Rozas, the collection—and proletarian literature more generally—was positioned as a third way that moved beyond this “false dichotomy” between the universalist Contemporaneos and the nationalist Stridentists (1932, p. 7). Instead, he advocated that we “encounter a new literary expression. An expression that does not correspond to the ideology of either the universalists or the nationalists” (Turrent Rozas, 1932, p. 7). In other words, Turrent Rozas viewed this literary expression as not only providing a “global vision of the functioning of capital” but also marking an “incipient communist culture” (Negrín, 1995, pp. 155, 157).

These short stories share both a political vision and many of the same formal characteristics. All the texts, for example, have an omniscient third-person narrator. Some of the narratives deal with the tumultuous relationships between factory workers and their bosses and the events that arise because of this relationship, including strikes. Other stories in the collection take place in the countryside, away from the cities and factories. This should not be surprising since the Mexican Revolution was primarily an agrarian conflict and was fought mainly by and, nominally, for peasants. The objective of the collection, in part, is to unite these two sectors of Mexican society—the urban proletariat working in factories and the agrarian peasantry toiling in rural farms. According to the critic Bertín Ortega, this proletarian project signals “the need to reorganize the country that goes hand in hand

with the need to educate them, and for these radical writers, the need to politicize them, to teach the workers and peasants the possibilities of organization; and also to leave open the possibilities of a social revolution” (2008, p. 144). In short, the collection functions to represent the worker’s reality and serves as a didactic tool for workers to achieve class consciousness.

During the 1930s, numerous Mexican proletarian texts were published, including Mancisidor’s novel *La asonada* [*The Riot*] (1931) and *La ciudad roja* [*The Red City*] (1932); Francisco Sarquis’s *Mezclilla* [*Denim*] (1933); Eduardo J. Correa’s *La comunista de los ojos café* [*The Communist with Brown Eyes*] (1933); Miguel Bustos Cerecedo’s *Un sindicato escolar. Novela corta infantil* [*A School Union: A Brief Children’s Novel*] (1936); Raúl Carrancá y Trujillo’s *¡Camaradas!* [*Comrades!*] (1936); Enrique Othón Díaz’s *Protesta* [*Protest*] (1937); Fortino Lopez R. *Amaneceres* [*Sunrises*] (1937); Mario Pavón Flores’ “El entierro” [“The burial”] and “Los gusanos rojos,” [*Red Worms*] (1943, written in 1935); and Jesús Guerrero’s *Los olvidados* [*The Forgotten Ones*] (1944).<sup>12</sup> While this increase reflects an overall upswing in proletarian publications in countries such as Sweden, Finland, and the United States, it should also be considered in relation to the progressive politics of Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), who finally implemented some of the more radical political projects that previous presidents had only talked about. These projects included large land and educational reforms, as well as the nationalization of the railroad system. Cárdenas also reinstated the Communist Party after it had been made illegal in 1929.<sup>13</sup> His most significant project was nationalizing the oil industry in 1938 (PEMEX), effectively kicking Standard Oil and Royal Dutch Shell out of Mexico.

Thus, proletarian literature reflected the progressive politics of the period in Mexico, which included a critique of bourgeois culture, even bourgeois literature. Like in Sweden, in Mexico there was not a systematic attempt to abandon literature completely, or even thoroughly question literature’s status, which is a more visible objective, as we will see later in the 1960s with the Latin American testimonio genre.<sup>14</sup> Turrent Rozas, for example, suggests that “the idea is not to destroy blindly bourgeois literature,

but rather to take advantage and adapt it” (1932, p. 18). This commitment to literature also means that proletarian writers were willing to experiment with forms, which as Michael Denning notes, is also visible in proletarian literature in the United States during the 1930s (2004, p. 121). In his contribution to this collection, Benjamin Balthaser signals that US criticism has attempted to treat working-class literature within a very narrow framework, which often comes at the expense of a fuller understanding of its complexity. In Mexico, this complexity has often been ignored by those who criticized proletarian literature as too schematic and ideological, or closer to political manifestos than to art. This is precisely Juan Uribe-Echeverri’s criticism *La novela de la revolución mexicana* [*The Novel of the Mexican Revolution*] (1936) when he wonders why write fiction, when “one can write a good essay, or technical article about this material (1936, p. 77). But this type of criticism simplified the genre.

One of the more experimental texts of this period is Gustavo Ortiz Hernán’s *Chimeneas* [*Smokestacks*] (1937).<sup>15</sup> In 1930, the novel had won the award for best revolutionary novel in a competition organized by the newspaper *El nacional* [*The National*]. The story takes place during the first years of the Revolution and centers on the proletarianization of Germán Gutiérrez who goes from being a factory bureaucrat to actively supporting his fellow factory workers as they strike. The strike fails, but the events motivate Gutiérrez to join Zapata’s revolutionary troops in the South of Mexico, where he fights and ultimately dies.

*Chimeneas* departs from other proletarian literature more in style than in content. Ortiz Hernán, who once belonged to the shortly-lived Agorismo avant-garde movement (1929–1930), deploys a collage style that inserts political documents, such as the Mexican President Venustiano Carranza’s 1917 land decree, as well as diagrams, drawings, and experimental photography by the famous avant-garde photographer Agustín Jiménez. The novel also openly produces a commentary on film and the work of Charlie Chaplin, in particular. In this way, unlike many of the proletarian novels that attempted to mirror society, *Chimeneas* makes its literary status visible through its experimentation. For Ortiz Hernán, however, this commitment to literary form does not make

the novel any less political. According to this proletarian writer, both avant-garde's "pure art" and proletarian literature's "socialized art" are politically productive:<sup>16</sup>

Pure art and socialized art are an exact reflection of battling forces within the economic and social field. Both interpret life in their own distinct way . . . Pure art responds to an economic and social past that is being eradicated, while the collective art attentively keeps an eye on the new panoramas. (Carranza, 2010, p. 123)

Both "pure art" and "socialized art" are aesthetic tools for aesthetic interpretation, and political mobilization. Proletarian literature in Mexico, in other words, did incorporate different styles and aesthetic elements in order to achieve its objectives. Literature was never rejected but always understood as part of the proletarian project.

As Ortiz Hernán also makes clear, these movements are responses to the "economic and social field" (Carranza, 2010, p. 123). By the 1940s, Cárdenas' progressive term had ended and hope for a more radical revolutionary state had ended as well.<sup>17</sup> Tellingly, a slow-down could be seen in proletarian literature, as publications began to diminish and as other genres began to articulate and define the Mexican imaginary. Unlike in Sweden and Russia, where working-class literature had a wide audience and was regarded as a site of national literature (see Clark and Nilsson in this collection), in Mexico, this genre had never been widely read even in its heyday—a point that has also been understood in relation to a Mexican modernization project. Indeed, proletarian writers in Mexico believed that the Mexican Revolution would bring about advancements for proletarians and a true revolution; nevertheless, it remained the fact that industrial development in Mexico still lagged behind Europe and the United States. What this means is that part of the reason why proletarian literature ends can be attributed to the lack of a strong working-class movement and class consciousness (Plaskacz, 1980, p. 276). Ortiz Hernán voices a similar concern with he argues that proletarian literature can only emerge from the unity between workers and peasants, from "the classist organization of workers, sustained in its principles by dialectic materialism" (1937, p. 10). The (rise)

and closure of proletarian literature, for these critics, rested more on historical developments.

But the end of the proletarian project does not mean that the representation of workers disappears, much less representations of exploitation and capital. Nor does it mean a closure of literature, or an ends of literature. That is, while the closure of proletarian literature reflected a political failure, it was never imagined as an aesthetic one. As Ortega suggests “[proletarian literature’s] possibilities were closed, left partially abandoned within the current genres of Mexican literature that have favored the novel of the Mexican Revolution and Indigenous Novel as a national literary expression” (2008, p.18). The shift from proletarian literature to what Ortega had noted as “other genres” affirms that proletarian literature always considered itself to be literature. This will represent a marked difference with what happens in the 1960s, when literature comes to be understood as a reactionary force that must be eradicated.

For now, however, it should be noted that in the 1940s and 1950s, social criticism literature continues in novels by non-working class authors, such as Héctor Raúl Almanza’s *Huelga blanca* [*White Strike*] (1945), Elvira de la Mora’s *Tierra de hombre* [*Land of Men*] (1946) and Roberto Blanco Moheno’s *Cuando Cárdenas nos dio la tierra* [*When Cárdenas Gave Us the Land*] (1952). The most important texts in this period are Juan Rulfo’s *El llano en llamas* [*The Plain in Flames*] (1953), José Revueltas’s *Los días terrenales* [*The Terrestrial Days*] (1949), *Ensayo sobre un proletariado sin cabeza* [*Essay about a Headless Proletariat*] (1962), and *El apando* [*The Thief*] (1969). Later still, other socially committed novels appear like Gerardo Cornejo’s *La sierra y el viento* [*The Mountain and the Winds*] (1977) and Agustín Ramos’s *La gran cruzada* [*The Great Crusda*] (1992).

The majority of political writing beginning in the 1940s, however, signaled a turn away from the working-class realism of the 1930s. Instead, there were indigenous-themed novels that combined nationalism and naturalism in order to idealize indigenous and mestizos. These novels include Ricardo Pozas’ *Juan Pérez Jolote* (1952); Carlo Antonio Castro’s *Los hombres verdaderos* [*True Men*] (1959), Rosario Castellano’s *Oficio de tinieblas*

[*The Book of Lamentations*] (1962), Francisco Rojas González's *Lola Casanova* (1947), Carlos Fuentes' *La región más transparente* [*Where the Air is Clear*] (1958). There is Rulfo's so-called "mystical" novel *Pedro Páramo* (1953) that served as a critical predecessor to the magical realist texts of the 1960s (Plaskacz, 1980, p. 277). There was also the cosmopolitan poetry of Octavio Paz and his political essays that sought to locate a true Mexican identity in *Laberinto de la soledad* [*The Labyrinth of Solitude*] (1950). And there is the aforementioned novels of the Revolution and novels that directly responded to the novels of the Revolution, such as Agustín Yáñez's *Al filo del agua* [*On the Edge of the Storm*] (1947). All these texts focused on the question of the nation, especially the problem of indigenous and mestizo people and the inability of the Mexican Revolution to make good on its promises. In fact, such concerns with the failures of the Revolution would persist throughout the twentieth century.

### **A Political Reawakening, an Aesthetic Revolution: The Testimonio, 1960s-1980s**

By the 1940s, Mexico found itself electing more conservative PRI, *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* [*The Institutional Revolutionary Party*] leaders, who slowly rolled back Cárdenas's more progressive projects. Toward the end of the 1950s, however, social revolution was again on the political horizon, motivated by events that were taking place in Cuba. The 1959 Cuban Revolution signals a monumental political shift for the Western hemisphere. Guerrilla movements, inspired by Cuban *foquismo* soon began emerging across Latin America, even in Mexico. These guerrilla activities imagined a socialist revolution sparking with a small group and spreading like wildfire, eventually overthrowing bourgeois states and replacing them with communist ones. The Cuban Revolution brought Marxism once again to the forefront of Latin American politics; it did not, however, follow the traditional Soviet model of the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, the Cuban Revolution, and the movements motivated by it, sought to break with the type of orthodox Soviet doctrine "whereby the task of the Communist party was to work within the political process and to

organize an avant-garde of the urban proletariat until objective conditions for revolution were ‘ripe’” (Colás, 1994, p. 67). This turn away from unions and proletariats from a certain theoretical position reflected Latin America’s geopolitical conditions much better, since these same sectors were never as strong as they were in industrialized USSR, Sweden, or Germany. In Mexico the significance of the Cuban Revolution could be seen in the newly-formed guerrilla movements like *El partido de los pobres* [The Party of the Poor] in the state of Guerrero during the 1960s and 1970s. But perhaps the most important events centered on the student movements throughout the second-half of the 1960s, culminating with the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968 (see below).

The 1959 Cuban Revolution also changed working-class literature in ways that are still visible today. Although during the 1960s concerns about workers’ exploitation and class conflict continued to be prevalent, they soon were overshadowed by a form of cultural criticism often aligned with the New Left. As we will see, this turn toward identities, decolonialism, subalternity, and civil rights often would come at the expense of class critique. For now, however, it is crucial to signal that two major aesthetic responses emerged in the 1960s: The first (the so-called “Boom” literature) might be considered as more experimental in style; the other (the testimonial narrative) was more realist, even documentary, and overtly political. The experimental Boom writers—Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, José Donoso, Mario Vargas Llosa—supported the Cuban revolution; nevertheless, their innovative style had, in some sense, represented a return to avant-garde movements of the 1920s. For this reason Boom literature receives the same criticism for its stylistic exclusion of the underclass.<sup>18</sup> Fuentes is the best representative of this Boom generation in Mexico. His most famous novel, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* [*The Death of Artemio Cruz*] (1963), retells the failures of Mexico and the Mexican Revolution specifically, through the life of a Mexican revolutionary, Artemio Cruz.

Testimonial literature can also be understood as a return to the proletarian literature of the 1930s, defining itself as a realist style that seeks to document and capture the reality of subalterns. But, as we will see, the emphasis will no longer be on labor and the

worker, as was the case with the working-class literature of the 1930s. The origins of the testimonio form begin in Cuba with the Cuban Revolution, and the form testifies to a monumental revolutionary change that is taking place in Cuba. The foundational text is Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un Cimarrón* [*Biography of a Runaway Slave*] (1968), which receives the first testimonio award by Casa de las Americas in 1970. But there are other testimonios of equal significance: Roqué Dalton's *Miguel Mármol y los sucesos de 1932 en El Salvador* [*Miguel Marmol and the Events of 1932 in El Salvador*] (1972), and perhaps the most famous *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* [*I, Rigoberta Menchú, an Indian Woman in Guatemala*] (1982). Indeed, during the 1970s and 1980s, testimonios like Menchú's become one of the principal mediums to denounce human rights abuses involving torture and disappearances, which were taking place in Central America and the Southern Cone. These later texts, including Hernán Valdez's *Tejas Verdes* [*Diary of a Chilean Concentration Camp*] (1974), Jacobo Timerman's *Preso sin nombre, celda sin número* [*Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number*] (1982), Alicia Partnoy's *Escuelita* [*The Little School House*] (1986), seek less to document and to teach than to position the reader as a witness who shares the pain of traumatic events with its victims. For now, we should add that, like proletarian literature, testimonios are simple, straightforward narratives, and their "authentic" voice functions as an urgent call to mitigate a political injustice. Sometimes nonprofessional writers pen these narratives, but more often, ethnographers interview people and edit their narratives.

In Mexico, the most famous testimonio is Elena Poniatowska's *La noche de Tlatelolco: Testimonios de la historia oral* [*Massacre in Mexico*] (1971), which deals with the events that surround the student protests in 1968 in the Plaza of Three Cultures in Mexico City. These mostly middle-class students were protesting authoritarian tendencies within PRI, including the state's control of unions and workers' rights. With tensions mounting, and the impending summer Olympics only days away—the first held in a developing country—the Mexican government massacred over 200 students on the night of October 2nd. The government, however, quickly

disposed of these bodies, and even today there is no official count of how many were killed. As such, the oral histories found in *La noche de Tlatelolco* serve not only as a testimony to these events but also as a call to justice.

Before *La noche de Tlatelolco*, Poniatowska had published *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* [*Here's to You, Jesusa*] (1969), a testimonial novel that is closer in content to the proletarian narratives of the 1930s. The story centers on the life of a laundress Josefina Bórquez, named Jesusa Palancares in the novel, who Poniatowska had interviewed for a year. The novel speaks to Palancares's isolation and struggles which included first fighting in the Mexican Revolution and then becoming a factory worker and later a servant. For Poniatowska, it is a story of so many excluded, the marginalized in Mexico.

There is, as already noted, an anthropological aspect to the testimonio, and its origins begin with anthropologists doing field work. Poniatowska, for example, worked with Oscar Lewis when writing his *The Children of Sanchez* (1961). But even before Poniatowska, we can see this influence in Ricardo Pozas' aforementioned novel *Juan Pérez Jolote* (1948), who was himself an anthropologist. Yet, for the testimonio critic John Beverley, it is important to distinguish this "new form" from ethnographic fieldwork (2004, p. 40). In fieldwork, subalterns function as a passive "native informant" (Ibid., p. 40); the testimonio, instead, sees the subaltern as a politically-charged subject whose real, popular voice directly testifies not only to injustices, but to the radical historical changes taking place. This point can be read as a modification of an earlier proletarian ethos that sought to give workers more political agency. As Elsi Hyttinen and Kati Launis point out in this collection, this was also the case in Finland, where working-class writers "re-wrote" earlier realist depictions of the poor as "submissive people" as "defiant citizens".

Although the testimonio is clearly a literary genre, many testimonio scholars, like Beverley, have imagined the testimonio as creating a radical "break" with literature (Ibid., p. 43). As I have shown, although critical of literature, early proletarian literature in Mexico did not necessarily problematize the ontological status

of literature. Testimonio scholars, instead, argue that there has to be an ontological difference between the literature and the testimonio, which is not just categorical but, also and more importantly, political. As Magnus Nilsson astutely notes in his analysis of Swedish literature, much of this tendency can be attributed to the New Left and its systematic critique of literature. Existing literature is deemed bourgeois, effectively rendering literature's status politically irrelevant, even reactionary (2014, p. 81).<sup>19</sup> What this means in Mexico is that there must be a complete rejection of literature—even Boom literature, despite their authors shared ideological commitments—since literature is always considered a bourgeois form, regardless of the author's intention, political content, or even the individual reader's interpretation. As such, the testimonio is defined as extraliterary, or antiliterary, and is theorized as a rupture with literature, representation, intent, and interpretation. From this position, the emergence of the testimonio is imagined not as replacing another genre, but rather as announcing a new political form as well as an end of literature.

This ontological distinction between the testimonio and literature has been posed in different ways. Beverley, for example, argues that unlike documentary fiction and autobiography, in the testimonio “the narrative ‘I’ has the status of what linguists call a shifter—a linguistic function that can be assumed indiscriminately by anyone” (Beverley, 2004, p. 40). In other words, the testimonio, unlike (proletarian) literature, must be considered a collective endeavor. It is also essential, according to these scholars, that these collective subaltern voices be understood more as reality than as representations of reality; that is, they be considered authentic. For example, George Yúdice notes that the testimonio is “an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (eg. war, oppression, revolution, etc.)” and that “the speaker does not speak for or represent a community but rather performs an act of identity-formation that is simultaneously personal and collective (1996, p. 42). The subaltern voice, for Yúdice, is treated like an “authentic” emanation of the subject. What is more, for Yúdice, where other literatures (even proletarian literature) are representative, the testimonio is

an “authentic narrative” that “performs” (Beverley, 2004, pp. 44, 42). The testimonio, as such, produces a different political effect on the reader, who suddenly is regarded less as a reader than as a witness—a witness who now feels the pain of the horrific events. On this account, there is no aesthetic interpretation, or if there is (as we saw above) this is not what is political about the testimonio. Indeed, aesthetic meaning and interpretation is aligned with bourgeois politics. In this way, the political effectiveness of the testimonio is found in the redescription of meaning and interpretation into effects, experience and real life.

Like proletarian literature, history informs not simply the testimonial form but its political and theoretical potential. For testimonio critics, the testimonio is an embodiment of a transition to a more just, inclusive society, where the marginalized would be incorporated into a larger political project. Beverley ends his 1989 essay, “Margin at the Center,” by famously noting that:

If the novel had a special relationship with humanism and the rise of the European bourgeoisie, testimonio is by contrast a new form of narrative literature in which we can at the same time witness and be a part of the culture of international proletarian/popular-democratic subject in its ascendancy. (2004, p. 43)

This was, as he later explains, a way of hedging his bets on Marxism, as he strongly believed events, such as the Sandinista revolutionary victory in 1979, were a clear sign of better days to come. He was, of course, mistaken. The same year in which his essay was published, the Berlin Wall would come down; and two years later, the Cold War would officially be over. Democratic liberalism had apparently won, and socialism had failed. Ideologically, nothing, as Francis Fukuyama would famously declare, would compete with liberalism again. But the writing was on the wall long before 1989. As it turns out, the 1980s had brought about an ever-growing expansion of capital. Mexico was at the forefront of this global project, as the 1982 Mexican debt crisis would radically change how debt was managed internationally. Structural changes were implemented to make free trade possible, quickly dismantling many of the international safety nets that had previously existed. By 1991, the “end of history” had arrived. And

by 1995, Beverley unsurprisingly would declare that the radical potential of the testimonio had become less so, and the form, like literature before it, had now become exhausted.

At this point, it is important to summarize the similarities and differences between proletarian literature and the testimonio narrative. Theories surrounding both proletarian literature and testimonial literature understand that their respective forms emerge from historical and political developments. They are products of history and politics. Both genres also lean heavily on the question of authenticity. That is, they both imagine that a more authentic, real account of the worker or subaltern is indicative of a political shift toward a better politics.<sup>20</sup> The testimonio, however, goes a step further as it promotes the idea of bearing witness, where it is imagined that by feeling the pain of the other, or by seeing the world through an other's worldview, a better world can be achieved. It imagines, in other words, that empathizing or identifying with the poor or "proletarian/popular-democratic subject" serves as a critique of the structure of exploitation.<sup>21</sup>

This last point begins to make visible the political differences between proletarian literature and the testimonio. Unlike proletarian literature, the testimonio—especially in these later testimonial narratives—rarely produces a critique of exploitation. Instead, the testimonio (and its critics) replace structural accounts of the capitalist system with accounts of torture, pain, and abuses, or with a firm commitment to an authentic identitarian positions.<sup>22</sup> If for Gramsci the subaltern was a code word for the proletariat, for testimonial scholars, it clearly is not.

In fact, for these scholars, the subaltern could be queer, black, white, indigenous, disabled, migrant, rich, or poor. This does not mean that the subaltern could not also be understood as exploited. But what makes him or her essential for these testimonio scholars is that he is an authentic witness who is discriminated against for who he is, which need not (and often does not) serve as a structural critique of capitalism. On the contrary, an emphasis on discrimination often obscures class critique insofar as it insists that we imagine political conflict as a difference between those who are included or excluded from the market rather than a critique a system of exploitation that creates a gap between rich and poor.

The difference is that where a critique of exploitation is meant to lessen or eliminate this gap, a critique of discrimination is meant to change the identity of the people on top, while keeping the economic gap in place.<sup>23</sup> By imagining that identity is the primary conflict, the testimonio is committed less to eliminating poverty than to imagining the poor as an excluded group that needs to be included into the market. In this way, where proletarian literature's content sought to critique, or even undercut, the capitalist system, the testimonio is much more interested modifying this system to make it more "humane," while retaining its essential exploitative characteristics. In short, the testimonio becomes a mechanism to reinscribe exploitation as discrimination.

The most important aesthetic difference between Mexican proletarian literature and the testimonio is that while both are suspicious of literature, the testimonio is entirely invested in disavowing representation, literature, and aesthetic autonomy. As we suggested above, unlike proletarian literature, which did still maintain a commitment to literature and representation, the testimonio critic sees the testimonio less as representation than as reality. In so doing, it eliminates the division between art and life. It's for this reason that it also makes sense to understand the testimonio in relation less to proletarian literature than to postmodernism, which seeks to blur the lines between reality and fiction. For this reason, although it does share with United States and European postmodern texts the tendency to dismantle the idea of literature as an autonomous sphere. It also insists on imagining the world through the lens of identity rather than of exploitation.<sup>24</sup> The testimonio, ultimately, represents a version of this postmodern idea as it undercuts the question of fiction by emphasizing identities and reality. In short, for these postmodern scholars, there is no longer a space for fiction.

### **The Work of Literature at the End of History, 1990s-2000s**

Thus, the story of Mexican working-class literature throughout the century can be told in two important ways: The first is the evacuation of a normative working-class project that was representative

of proletarian fiction of the 1930s and its replacement with identitarian narratives of the 1960s-1980s. That is, narratives of labor and exploitation are substituted by narratives about discrimination and exclusion. The second is the evacuation of the aesthetic object until it supposedly disappears with the testimonio. This evacuation of the aesthetic continues today. The so-called exhaustion of literature (already announced by the testimonio scholars) is most visible today in the claim that literature is no different from other commodities, and readers are no different than consumers. The question of the artist, artwork, and the reader are rendered irrelevant.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, Latin Americanists, such as Jon Beasley Murray and Nestor García Canclini, suggest that there is no difference between art and nonart precisely because of their undifferentiated status as commodities. For these critics, everything (including literature) is a commodity. This does not mean that literature doesn't have value, but it does mean that its value always seems to be in relation to the constant recognition of art as a commodity. As such, we can observe not only that labor thematically is no longer articulated as an anti-capitalist ideology, but also that an aesthetic space from which anti-capitalist projects were once formulated has been eliminated. Indeed, the force of Mexican proletarian literature in the 1930s, in part, served as a claim toward an aesthetic world from which a series of political projects were proposed, imagined, revealed, and disseminated, in theory, to everyone. It was within this aesthetic world, at least as it was theorized by proletarian writers and critics, that the plight of workers could be represented in a way that was unlike other mediums and forms. Today literature, rather than a space to imagine a better world, serves primarily as a space of recognition of capital. Literature, according to these critics, functions only to reveal its commodity form.<sup>26</sup>

I would like to conclude by proposing a brief reading of two Mexican novels that attempt not only to distance themselves from these accounts of the art commodity but, also, to reengage with the question of labor by insisting on their status as literature. This project is at the center of Valeria Luiselli's *Historia de mis dientes* [*Story of My Teeth*] (2013). The story is about

Gustavo Sánchez-Sánchez, alias *Carretera* [*Highway*], a security guard at a juice factory, who turns into the self-described “best auctioneer in the world” (2013, p. 5). The narrative spans his entire life and includes outrageous episodes of auctioning famous people’s teeth—such as Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and G.K. Chesterton—through what he calls parabolic method of inventing stories to sell these objects. Highway retells stories of family members, friends, and associates, such as Julio Cortázar, Marcelo Sánchez Proust, Winifredo G. Sebald, Juan Gabriel Vázquez, Juan Villalobos, Lina Meruane and even Valeria Luiselli, the author herself. With his success as an auctioneer, and the money from his famed auctions, the toothless Highway is able to buy Marilyn Monroe’s teeth, which are surgically implanted into his mouth and later removed and stolen by his son. The first part of the novel is told through the eyes of our dishonest hero and reminds readers of the picaresque novels that mark the origins of Mexican literary history. The second part of the story is told by his biographer, another narrator, Jacobo de Voraigne, who provides a more omniscient perspective of Highway’s life and his death, echoing a more traditional, realist narrative style.

*Historia de mis dientes* is both experimental and entirely absurd. Nevertheless, there is an aspect of the novel that does remind us of the proletarian project of the 1930s. The real-life origins of Luiselli’s novel begin with Jumex, the biggest juice producer in Mexico. Along with its juice factory, Jumex has a world-class museum, and Luiselli was asked to write something for one of the museum’s exhibits. As Luiselli has suggested in interviews, these two worlds—the Jumex factory and the museum—have always been treated as separate entities and, for this project, she proposes to join them together by directly involving the workers at the plant. In order to realize this project, Luiselli would send weekly installments to a reading group of factory workers who would, in turn, comment, add stories and anecdotes, and return audio files back to her in New York, where she lives. The author would base her next installment on these comments. And this process would continue until the novel was complete. Undoubtedly, this project, in part, recalls Maxim Gorky’s *Istoriia fabrik i zavodov*, or *Istoriia zavodov*) [*The History of the Factories*], established by the decree

of October 1931. As Clark notes about Gorky's project in her contribution to this collection: "These histories were to be collectively written but largely comprise individual autobiographical accounts by workers of their time at the given factory or construction site; all the members of a given factory were to be, potentially, involved in writing them."

On the one hand, Luiselli's desire to engage workers (as workers) reminds us of proletarian writings of the past. On the other, this engagement is noticeably a frustrated one (as was Gorky's project, as Clark describes). At the most basic level, the publication of the novel is a result of a form of patronage, financed by a major multinational corporation to promote one of their cultural endeavors. Furthermore, *Historia de mis dientes* departs from the standard proletarian narrative that attempts to create a clear prose and a direct political message of class struggle. Luiselli's narrative is nonlinear and convoluted and, undoubtedly, is in constant conversation with literature and literary figures. Indeed, at times, one cannot help but think the novel as an inside joke from which these factory workers are meant to be excluded. When Luiselli is asked, however, if she had thought about writing in a clearer style for the workers, she responds that it would be "silly" to attempt to do so. Instead, her primary concern regarding style is to "write something that pulls them in and entertains them after a day's work at the factory. And that's a big challenge, to not lose their attention, to keep them interested and motivated so they would still come to sessions every week" ("Sink"). These explanations clearly diverge from proletarian literature, which is understood as a didactic tool to assist workers in developing political awareness, not in being entertained. In *Historia de mis dientes*, Luiselli's primary interest is that workers are entertained so they keep attending the sessions. There is no concern that they gain some form of class consciousness. What is more, this project in no way is meant for other workers outside of this project—which is just to say that the objective of entertaining these workers is so she can finish writing her novel.

It would be error, however, to deem *Historia de mis dientes* an apolitical (or a reactionary) novel because of this inauthentic account of workers, especially when considering that the authenticity of the worker, or the subaltern, does not necessarily produce a

better politics. As we already noted, there is a deep compatibility between identitarianism and neoliberalism. Instead, this disavowal of authenticity marks Luiselli's first intervention on a predominant postmodern vision, especially visible in the testimonio. For Luiselli, the interest in workers is less a question of authenticity (or even recognition) than in creating artwork that distances itself from the idea of sharing an authentic experience with workers. Luiselli wants to create a work of art that is art (a project that points to its autonomy) but still holds a relationship to workers from within the text. From this position, the emphasis on literary language, and even literary referents, work against not only an identification with workers of proletarian literature but also the immediacy between the subaltern and reader that marks the testimonio.

For Luiselli, this commitment to the literary does not mean a return to art for art's sake. Instead, it is on behalf of literature where we find the most visible engagement with politics in the novel. Highway is "a lover and collector of good stories, which is the only honest way of modifying the value of an object" (Luiselli, 2013, p. 23). There is obviously an unethical dimension here. He creates fantastical stories to get people to buy anything and everything. But this is less a question of morality or ethics than a question of the present-day relationship between aesthetics and commodities. Or said differently, it is an attempt to find meaning beyond the commodity form. As the narrator Jacobo de Voraigue explains, the culmination of Highway's job as an auctioneer is his "famous allegoric method," a kind of "postcapitalist, radical recycling," in which no objects are sold. Rather, "value and meaning" are found in the stories themselves (Luiselli, 2013, p. 125). He hopes this will "save the world from its existential condition as the garbage can of history" (Luiselli, 2013, p. 125). In other words, he seeks to establish a postcapitalist project, in which, if literature is not outside of the commodity, it is, at least, understood as different from nonaesthetic objects. As I argue below, this is politically relevant, in relation to a contemporary neoliberal world that insists on dedifferentiated commodities and meaning.

Luiselli writes that *Historia de mis dientes* was inspired by both nineteenth-century literary installments, as well as the Cuban practice of cigar reading, in which people would read novels to

cigar factory workers to help them pass the time as they worked. Nevertheless, what is striking about the text is that it is filled with drawings and photographs that seek to ground the project in a social referent. In turn, this also reminds us of the experimental elements of the proletarian novels of the 1930s (especially the work of Hernán Ortiz's *Chimeneas*), which incorporated photos and drawings, accentuating its aesthetic status as art. The project is a reminder that Mexican working-class literature, first and foremost, is art; and more importantly, this does not make their projects any less political. On the contrary, as Ortiz Hernán noted when discussing the difference between "pure poetry" of avant-garde literature of the Stridentist or the "socialized art" of proletarian literature, they are both "an exact reflection of battling forces within the economic and social field" (Carranza, 2010, p. 123). To be sure, very few today think that the avant-garde or realism can do what it promised in the past, but this doesn't mean that literature does not still provide some type of vantage point to gauge the "economic and social field" (Carranza, 2010, p. 123).<sup>27</sup>

It is from this position that we may consider recent Mexican novels that return to modernist artists as characters and modernist experimental forms in their narrative structure. Nicolás Cabral's *Catálogo de formas* [*Catalogue of Forms*] (2014) is loosely based on the life of the Mexican modernist architect and painter, Juan O'Gorman, and the various leftist artists who knew him, including Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Conlon Nancarrow. This interest in modernism can easily be read as nostalgia, and yet it does seem as if there is something more at stake than simply repetition and surface. The novel spans the life of this artist—from his functionalist beginnings in the 1920s to his endorsement of a more organic style in the 1950s. But for Cabral, this exploration into O'Gorman's life functions less to highlight a past style than to find an aesthetic space that is not "born of exploitation" (Cabral, 2014, p. 61), a desire of "abstracting forms" to "banish" bourgeois history (Ibid., p. 45). Much like the story of proletarian literature, this project leads to a closure, and ultimately to the architect's madness and death. But what remains are his works of art which allow us not only to "retrace the exhaustion of Mexican modernism's utopian promise" but to imagine literature's relationship

to the structure that continues to demand exploitation today (Di Stefano and Sauri, 2015, p. 155).

I would like to end this chapter by insisting that Luiselli's and Cabral's novels are not returns to either proletarian literature of the 1930s or the more recent testimonial narrative. More specifically, these are not "authentic narratives" that capture the real lives of workers or subalterns (Yúdice, 1996, p. 44). Instead, *Historia de mis dientes* and *Catálogo de formas* point to how the assertion of literature today serves as a rejection of not only authenticity, but also the idea that there is nothing beyond the commodity form. In other words, these novels function as a critique of contemporary neoliberal cultural logic. At the same time, these works offer the opportunity to revisit working-class theory and criticism. As such, we are once again reminded, as the proletarian writer Ortiz Hernán stresses, that all works of art "have class meanings and a high ability to become instruments of revolutionary struggle" (Carranza, 2010, p. 123). In the face of the commodification of everything—or at least the idea that capital is everything—the question of meaning becomes a space in which we can think beyond commodities and capitalism, a space where questions of labor and exploitation that have long been left in the garbage can of history can perhaps return. Finally, by insisting on this aesthetic space, this chapter has also sought to show how Mexican literature intersects with other national literatures, affirming that the definition of working-class literature continues to evolve as the national is imagined in relation to the global.

## Notes

1. My interest in working-class literature is not necessarily located in the belief that this genre, in itself, is more political than others; rather, it is the belief that this genre provides a space from which the limits of the aesthetic must be explored in relation to politics. For this reason, I subscribe to Magnus Nilsson's definition that working-class literature "is not constructed around some stylistic or ideological essence, but is instead made up of literary texts, which, at different times, for different reason, and in different sites, have been defined as working-class literature" (2014, p.24).

2. This cosmic identity—and the Revolution more generally—inspired many Mexicans; but it also inspired many foreigners to come to Mexico. Beginning in the 1920s, Mexico became the home of many Leftist political exiles, such as the Peruvian politician Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, Spanish film director Luis Buñuel, Nicaraguan revolutionary Augusto César Sandino, and Spanish novelist Max Aub. Perhaps, the most notorious leftist exile was Leon Trotsky, famously assassinated in his home in Mexico City by Ramón Mercader. Much later, the Cuban revolutionaries Fidel and Raul Castro would arrive, followed by Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez.

3. Other realist novels followed, including Emilio Rabasa's series *Novelas mexicanas* [*Mexican Novels*] (1887–1888), Rafael Delgado's *Los parientes ricos* [*Wealthy Relatives*] (1903), and José López Portillo's *La parcela* [*The Plot of Land*] (1904). Social protest literature was also quite visible, such as Ricardo Flores Magón's short stories, Federico Gamboa's *Santa* (1903), and *La llaga* [*The Wound*] (1913), and Gregorio López y Fuentes *El indio* [*The Indian*] (1923).

4. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.

5. Of course, the Stridentists were themselves highly influenced by the latest European avant-gardes, including Italian Futurism, Russian Constructivism, and Spanish Ultraísmo.

6. It should also not be surprising to find, for example, that aesthetic criticism in the Soviet Union looked to Mexico as a point of comparison. In 1960, to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Latin American independence, two books of literary criticism were published in the USSR: The first, *La literatura latinoamericana en la imprenta rusa* [*Latin American Literature in Print in Russia*], was more bibliographical, covering literature across Latin America. The second, *La novela realista mexicana* [*The Mexican Realist Novel*], edited by V.N. Kuteishchikova, was a collection of articles on literary criticism and focused on realism in Mexico. For discussion of Soviet interest in Mexican literature, see Plaskacz.

7. *Los de abajo* was published in 1915, but very few knew about the novel. During the 1925 polemic, the writer Francisco Montarde rediscovered the novel. Today it is regarded as the first and most important novel of the Revolution.

8. For a comprehensive analysis of the novel of the Revolution, see Dessau.

9. See Mancisidor for a discussion on the importance of the Bolshevik revolution. Lorenzo Turrent Rozas also notes that the “referent of proletarian literature must be found in the USSR” (1932, p.7).

10. As is the case in Finland, Sweden, and Russia, the first manifestations of working-class literature in Mexico are found in poetry. Indeed, already in the early 1920s there was a handful of Mexican poets who understood themselves as very much in favor these revolutionary politics. These poets include Carlos Gutiérrez Cruz’s *Sangre roja* [Red Blood] (1924) and Miguel Bustos Cerecedo’s *Revolución* [Revolution] (1932). For a history of Revolutionary poetry in Mexico see, Katharina Niemeyer. As Elsi Hyttinen and Kati Launis write in this collection, theater in Finland provided an opportunity for working-class writers to produce plays, and audience members to attend them since they did not require as much time as reading novels. In Mexico, this political form of theatre was visible with the productions of *El Grupo de los siete*, The Group of Seven.

11. The most important Strident work is Maple Arce’s *Vrbe. Súperpoema bolchevique en 5 cantos* [Metropolis] (1924), which was translated into English by John Dos Passos.

12. According to Victor Díaz Arciniegas, the primary characteristics of these proletarian narratives, are: (1) the depiction of the marginalization and exploitation of the working class; (2) the expression of a need to organize workers and unions; and (3) the representation of the organization of strikes as a tool to fight against the bourgeoisie (1979, pp. 6–8). We can add to this list that none of the novels are Bildungsromane, and love stories typically play minor roles; they also renounce “a model of individualism” in favor of vision of the collective (Ortega, 2008, p.144).

13. Moreover, Cárdenas’ party, *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR), often used terminology like “class exploiter,” “class warfare,” “Mexican socialism” “dictatorship of the proletariat” “decomposition of capitalism” (Ortega, 2008, p.24).

14. Some testimonio scholars have rejected the idea of ‘genre’ because it gestures toward representation and literature. Even though this essay attempts to lay out this anti-literary testimonio project, it does

not endorse it. In other words, and against these testimonio scholars, the testimonio is a genre and literature.

15. Along with *Chimineas*, novels such as *La ciudad roja* [*The Red City*], *Protesta* [*Protest*], and *Comaradas* [*Comrades!*], incorporated avant-garde elements (Ortega, 2008, p.144).

16. These avant-garde groups sought to create a form of abstract poetry—what they called “poesia pura” [“pure poetry”], which was stripped of metaphor loaded with bourgeois ideology.

17. But there were also evident signs during Cárdenas’ presidency that if the proletarian writers wanted a true revolution, he was not going to give it to them. For example, while he did legalize the Communist Party, he undermined unions and worker’s autonomy and rights. Ortega notes that Cárdenas was responsible for the creation of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), making the state responsible for workers, and thus, severely limiting workers’ negotiating power (2008, p. 101). He also sought to separate factory and agrarian workers in order to control both. He endorsed Manuel Ávila Camacho—a more conservative, pro-clerical leader—as his presidential successor instead of Francisco Múgica, who was considered the social conscience of Cardenismo.

18. Vargas Llosa would famously stop supporting the Cuban Revolution after the Padilla affair in 1971.

19. We can see this concern when literary critic Angel Rama in 1982 criticized the Latin American social novel of the 1930s for passively accepting these ideological constructs (qtd. in Ortega, 2008, p.44).

20. This authentic narrative can also be found in accounts of working-class literature in Russia. In Clark’s contribution to this collection, she notes that Gorky urges that his readers consider when reading these working-class writers “that I am talking not of talented people, not of art, but of the truth, about life, and above all about those who are capable of action, upbeat and can love what is eternally alive and all that is growing and noble – human.” Despite the claim that what these workers write is not “art,” this commitment to describing their background seems to be a justification for the (lack) of literary quality, and not a complete rejection of literature or representation. Indeed, as Clark’s chapter also notes, Gorky spent much of his time trying to turn workers into better writers.

21. Nilsson and Lennon are exactly right when they note that “While certainly invaluable attempts to give voice to the forgotten, if working-class literature is only viewed through this lens of ‘authenticity’ rather than aesthetic formulations, working-class literature may become centrally concerned about subjects rather than the processes of class formation and struggle” (2016, p. 53).

22. For a discussion on the redescription of structural critique into identification and empathy, see my chapter “Remembering Pain in Uruguay.” For an analysis on the question of exploitation in Latin American literature, see Di Stefano and Sauri’s “Making it Visible,” (2014).

23. Within the North American context, see Michaels’ *The Trouble with Diversity* (2006).

24. In the 1980s and 1990s, these postmodern characteristics can be seen in the work of Mexican writers Luis Arturo Ramos, María Luisa Puga, Brianda Domecq, Ignacio Solares, Cristina Rivera Garza, Julieta Campos, and Carmen Boullosa.

25. On the question of the commodification of literature, see Brown (2012).

26. There is another version of this exhaustion of literature argument when literature is treated as an inadequate technology to document abuses. By emphasizing this utilitarian function, literature’s importance wanes in the face of other technologies, such as digital cameras and the internet. With this in mind, we should consider the importance of the most politically-charged novels that are emerging today in Mexico, especially those testimonios about maquiladoras and femicide, such as Carmen Galán Benitez’s *Tierra marchita* [*Withered Land*](2002), or narcoliterature such as Yuri Herrera’s *Trabajos del reino* [*Kingdom Cons*] (2004), Juan Pablo Villalobos’ *Fiesta en la madriguera* [*Down the Rabbit Hole*] (2011), or even novels on Zapatistas such as Paco Ignacio Taibo and Subcomandante Marcos’ *Muertos incómodos* [*The Uncomfortable Dead*] (2004). All these texts, in one way or another, point to the crisis of capital in Mexico, how it infiltrates every aspect of their (and our) lives. But they also live in a world in which literature as a mechanism to both mirror or expose reality (for example, the plight of workers) survives and competes amongst other technologies.

27. For an account on the political irrelevance of realism and avant-garde literature in Latin America today, see Ludmer.

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