The Latin American Publishing Circuit in the 21st Century: Following the Trajectory of César Aira

• María Belén Riveiro University of Buenos Aires

Abstract: This essay poses a question about the identity of Latin American literature in the 21st century. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Latin America Boom received recognition both locally and internationally, becoming the dominant means of defining Latin American literature up to the present. This essay explores new ways to understand this notion of Latin America in the literary scene. The case of the Argentine writer César Aira is relevant for analyzing alternative publishing circuits that connect various points of the region. These publishing houses foster a defiant way of establishing the value of literature.

Keywords: Latin American literature, publishing houses, César Aira, international literary geography

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1. Latin American Literature in Dispute

Gabriel García Márquez's ... *In Evil Hour* (1962), recipient of the Premio Esso de Novela, is a provincial chronicle á la Faulkner, but written in Hemingway's style. This is a dry narration, with very modest surrealist elements, presenting a pleasant reading experience in spite of the hints of programmatic "Latin Americanism," the excess of characters, and the ultimate allegoric intention.¹ (Aira, *Diccionario* 232)

The 1960s and 1970s were a prosperous period for literary production by Latin American writers. The so-called Latin America Boom encompassed works from numerous authors of the region who received recognition both locally and internationally. Understanding the production of writers and intellectuals from those years, such as the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez or the Argentine Julio Cortázar, requires us to cross national borders to consider Latin America as a whole. The region formed the identity which marked family-ties between these authors and the background against which debates took place.

Latin American writers of the Boom shared a "doble aspiración" ("two-fold aspiration") meaning "aspiración revolucionaria y aspiración experimental" ("a revolutionary aspiration and an experimental aspiration"; Gilman 313). Literary innovations involved a political dimension, which defined the key tropes of Latin American culture from the 1960s and 1970s. This particular notion transcended the abovementioned period and, in the transnational literary space, the Latin American Boom "achieved international recognition" (Casanova 325), and the term coined to define its style, "magical realism," "was to become in effect the generative formula of all Latin American literature from the 1960s on" (222).

In the 1990s, the Chilean writer Alberto Fuguet related that when discussing a short story of his at a workshop at the University of Iowa the professor "really enjoyed my work, but somehow, she felt, it lacked 'magical realism.'" The text was eventually rejected because "the story I had written could easily have taken place right here, in America, they said" (web). Fuguet later on prepared an anthology of Latin American writers entitled *McOndo* because "unlike the ethereal world of García Márquez's imaginary Macondo, my own world is something much closer to what I call 'McOndo'—a world of McDonald's, Macintoshes and condos" (web).

The influence of the Latin American Boom may be traced up to the present. The cover of one of the translations into German of a novel by César Aira, the writer this essay will focus on, characterizes this Argentine author as a "Wie Márquez auf LSD" ("García Márquez on LSD"). The weight of this particular notion feels heavier when considering the fact that Aira has constantly distanced himself from the tradition of the Latin American Boom. He has even bluntly affirmed that the Latin American Boom has only produced "autores importantes" ("important authors"), meaning authors that can no longer be considered writers, because they have become "un funcionario del sentido común" ("bureaucrats of common sense"; Aira, "Los simulacros" 80). Similar remarks abound in Aira's Dictionary of Latin American Authors (Diccionario de autores latinoamericanos) regarding authors related to the Latin American Boom. The definition of Latin America provided by Aira in the warning introducing the dictionary lacks any social or political connotations usually ascribed to the Boom. Aira explains that the adjective Latin American of the title of the dictionary just refers "a la presencia de autores brasileños, ya que no he tenido oportunidad de cultivar las letras no hispánicas del Caribe y las Guayanas, ignorancia que extiendo a las lenguas indígenas" ("exclusively to the presence of Brazilian writers, given that I did not have the chance to cultivate the non-Hispanic languages from the Caribbean and The Guianas, ignorance that also encompasses indigenous languages"; 7).

This essay will focus on Aira's literary works to reflect upon recent meanings that dispute the definition of Latin American literature. The case of Aira becomes particularly relevant for exploring this issue given the growing recognition his works have gained and the privileged position of his books in the Latin American literary scene of the late 20th century and the early 21st century. Aira has received several national and international awards throughout the years: the prize Roger Callois awarded in 2014 in France, the Premio Iberoamericano de Narrativa Manuel Rojas in 2016 in Chile, and the Formentor Prize in 2021 in Spain. Aira has also been translated in nearly forty countries and to twenty-five languages amounting to more than one hundred translated books. Not only critics and academics but also publishing houses have found an outstanding value in Aira's literature. Three different publishing houses have created collections dedicated solely to Aira's books. Emecé created in 2011 the Biblioteca de César Aira; Literatura Random House presented its Biblioteca de César Aira in 2015; and in 2019 the small Argentinean publishing house Blatt & Ríos announced their own Biblioteca de César Aira.

Multinational conglomerates, such as Penguin House Mondadori and the Planeta media group, have enabled Aira's work to enter the international circuit by publishing it simultaneously in Argentina and in Spain, a key market for Hispanic literature. Nonetheless, these publishing corporations, while owning small national presses in numerous countries, are not focused on encouraging the international circulation of the authors in their catalogues but on building collections of national literatures that can be found in each country and not in the linguistic regions where they belong. During the 1990s and the early years of the 21st century, most Latin American countries experienced a "wave of mergers and acquisitions" (Thompson 116) that have shaped their publishing fields, a process which has fragmented the region into national markets isolated from one another.

The study of Aira's literature allows us to explore publishing circuits alternative to the dominant logic marked by the "concentración extraordinaria de la industria editorial" ("extraordinary concentration of the publishing industry") leading to the fact that "el negocio de libros se ha convertido en un gran negocio, incorporado a la industria del espectáculo" ("the industry of books has become a big business, incorporated to show business"; Escalante Gonzalbo 9). Aira's novels and essays may be found in presses that are part of multinational conglomerates as well as in small publishing houses whose catalogues are only distributed nationally. Therefore, the present text will delve into the Latin American circuit of publishing houses, following Aira's publishing trajectory, which might allow us to study new meanings relating to Latin American literature.

2. Aira in Latin America

After all, it was no different than what happened when the critics and professors who were attending the conference found it difficult to say where the man ended and his books began; for them, too, all of it was "Carlos Fuentes." I saw it with the clarity of the noonday sun: the silk cell contained the DNA of the worm that had produced it, and the cloning machine, functioning perfectly, had done nothing more than decode and recode the information, with the results we were now witnessing. The blue monsters were nothing more nor less than silkworm clones, and if they had been magnified to that absurd size it was simply because I had set the cloning machine to run in "genius" mode. Under other circumstances I would have smiled with melancholic irony upon seeing to what awkward and destructive gigantism literary greatness could be reduced when it was passed through the weave and warp of life. (Aira, *The Literary Congress* 65)²

The Mexican writer Hernán Lara Zavala, when working as a publisher at the Department of Literature of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, perceived that the Latin American narrative scene seemed to have been detained in the past. Therefore, Lara Zavala created the collection *International Hopscotch (Rayuela Internacional)*, referring to the novel *Rayuela* by Julio Cortázar—a renowned book from the 1960s literary boom—with the aim of updating Latin American literary production. One of the books in this collection was *The Crying (El llanto)* of Aira, originally published two years prior by Beatriz Viterbo Editora, a small publishing house founded in the Argentine province of Santa Fe. Along with the reprint of *Ghosts (Los fantamas)* in the Fondo Editorial Fundarte (Alcaldía of Caracas, Venezuela), *The Crying* became the first book by Aira to be edited outside Argentina.

The abovementioned publishing houses are both state-owned. Likewise, in 1997 the Fundación Casa de las Letras Mariano Picón Salas from the University of the Andes (Mérida, Venezuela) published the first edition of *Literary Conference (El congreso de literatura)*, one of the most translated and reprinted titles of Aira. In this novel, the main character intends to conquer the world by growing

an army of Carlos Fuentes' clones. Carlos Fuentes, a key figure of Latin American literature, had also included Aira as a character of one of his novels set in 2020 (originally published in 2003): "César Aira is, after all, the first Argentinian to receive the Nobel Prize" (111).

The state-owned publishing houses of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, of the Alcaldía of Caracas, and of the University of the Andes were some of the first to enable the early circulation of Aira's work in Latin America. Years later, another similar press, meaning that it belongs to a university, took another risk. In this case, the risk consisted of publishing the first edition of a particular book of Aira. This was not a novel, for which Aira is most acknowledged, but a collection of essays: *Continuation of Diverse Ideas (Continuación de ideas diversas*).

Apart from this group of presses related to universities or the state, Aira has also been published in Latin America by privately owned publishing houses with a deep-rooted and prestigious tradition of editing innovative literature. In 1996, the novel *How I Became a Nun (Cómo me hice monja)* appeared in Mexico's Joaquín Mortiz press. This press was established in 1962 with the aim to build a prestigious literary catalogue. Joaquín Mortiz could not survive as an independent press, so it was incorporated into the Planeta Group in 1985. The clashes between the commercial logic that rules multinational groups and the long-term investments in experimental and foreign literature that the press traditionally made led to the resignation in 1995 of its director, Aurora Díez-Canedo, daughter of the founder.

Another Mexican publishing house, Era, which was born contemporaneously with Joaquín Mortiz, also published Aira's books. The first two reprints—The Serpent (La serpiente) and The *Two Clowns (Los dos payasos)*—appeared in 2001, and since then, in Mexico, Era has been the only publisher that reprints books by Aira. In 2003, Era published the first edition of *The Spring Princess* (La princesa primavera). Between 2001 and 2018 Era published thirteen titles by Aira. In contrast to Joaquín Mortiz, Era remained independent during the years of concentration of the publishing field. However, the press did transform its profile. The original catalogue was aimed at incorporating the oeuvre of left-wing and socially engaged intellectuals, which drew them closer to the literature of the Latin American Boom (for instance, Era published in 1961 No One Writes to the Colonel [El coronel no tiene quien le escriba] by García Márquez, and in 1962 Aura by Fuentes). In the 1990s, the writer Marcelo Uribe became the editor at Era and introduced some changes, such as the incorporation of Aira's books into the catalogue, distancing itself from the Latin America Boom. The original profile of the press related to left-wing politics and the genre of essays, a characteristic that reveals the influence of the Spanish Republicans who had arrived in various countries of Latin America after the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and founded numerous presses. In the 1990s, this notion of autonomy became restricted to a struggle for independence in the literary world, fostering contacts with other recently founded small publishing houses from all over Latin America such as the Argentine Beatriz Viterbo or the Chilean LOM.

The publishing house LOM, born in 1990, published *The Serpent* and *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter (Un episodio en la vida del pintor viajero)*. Along with Era, Trilce (Uruguay), and Txalaparta (Spain), LOM created in 1998 the network "Editores Independientes" by which they cooperated to arrange joint publications. *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter* was a joint publication between Era and LOM. Contemporaneously, a press in Colombia, Brevedad, set up in 2000, had as one of its first titles *Duchamp in Mexico and the Infinite (Duchamp en México y El Infinito)* by Aira. In fact, the name of the press, Brevedad (Brevity), was chosen given one of the characteristics of Aira's books: they are usually very brief: most of them do not amount to more than one hundred pages.

Era and LOM participated in the Primer Encuentro de Editores Independientes de América Latina, which was held in 2000. Discussions among publishers revolved around the notion of Latin America and, particularly, independence in the publishing arena. The conference took place during the III Salón del Libro Iberomaericano in Spain, sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank, UNESCO, the Organization of Ibero-American States, and the Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer Pour Le Progrès De L'homme. Various publishers from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, and Venezuela attended the meeting. One of the presses that participated was the Argentine Beatriz Viterbo. The publishers at Beatriz Viterbo commented, in tune with the abovementioned viewpoint of the Mexican publisher Lara Zavala, that readers and professors alike would have to struggle to "conocer algo de la literatura de América Latina que no esté incluido en los cánones del boom" ("learn about Latin American literature that is not included in the canon of the boom") or to "acceder a los libros publicados en cualquier país del continente en los últimos veinte años" ("gain access to books published in countries of this continent in the last twenty years"; Astutti and Contreras 776). This panorama encouraged Beatriz Viterbo to foster relations with publishers from the region. In fact, this Argentine press, which has in its catalogue twenty-one books by Aira, more than most publishers, encouraged the introduction of Aira's literary texts to a new generation of publishing houses. Beatriz Viterbo, for instance, put Aira in contact with Estruendomudo (founded in Peru in 2004) during their visit to the Feria Internacional del Libro de Buenos Aires. Similarly, Turbina, founded in Ecuador in 2016, might have come into contact with Aira through Alberto Giordano, a professor and critic close to the publishers of Beatriz Viterbo, who published with Turbina his book of essays in the format of a diary in 2017 titled *Tiempo* de la convalecencia. Giordano is also a member of the editorial board of Papéis Selvagens, a Brazilian publishing house that translated a collection of Aira's essays in 2017 (Continuation of Diverse Ideas [Continuação de ideias diversas]).

In 2001, a book by Aira was translated into Portuguese and published in Brazil for the first time. The case of Brazil entails certain specific characteristics that differentiates it in comparison to the publishing fields of other Latin American countries given the linguistic differences. Consequently, publishing a book by a Latin American author in Brazil requires the mediation of a translator. Besides, publishing houses that incorporate literature written in foreign languages usually specialize in that type of book. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this essay, the mention of novels of Aira published in Brazil is appropriate given that between 2001 and 2020 thirteen of his books have been translated. Moreover, the publishing houses bear similarities to the rest of the presses being considered.

The Brazilian publishing house Iluminuras published *The Wicker Trumpet (A Trombeta De Vime)* in 2001. Editora Nova Fronteira published *The Nights of Flores (As Noites De Flores)* in 2006 (later on, in this press appeared *Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter [Um Acontecimento Na Vida Do Pintor-Viajante]* coupled with *The Nights of Flores* in 2007). Arte & Letra Editora translated a collection of unpublished essays titled *Little Manual of Procedures (Pequeno Manual De Procedimentos)* in 2007. Cultura e Barbárie published *New Impressions of Petit Maroc (Nouvelles impressions du Petit Maroc)* in 2011 (and *Raymond Roussel: A Unified Key [Raymond Roussel: a chave unificada]* in 2016, *Three Histories from Pringles [Três lendas pringlenses]* in 2016, *In Havana [Em Havana]* in 2017, *Picasso* in 2018, and *Musical Brushstrokes [Pinceladas musicais]* in 2020). Dantes Editora released *Haikus* in 2012. Papéis Selvagens translated the essays of *Continuation of Diverse Ideas* in 2017. In Editorial Micronotas appeared the novel *Dante and Reina (Dante y Reina)* in 2020. Most of these publishing houses are very young: Arte & Letra Editora was founded in 2001,

Cultura e Barbárie in 2009, Rafael Copetti Editor in 2014, Papéis Salvagens in 2016, and Editora Micronotas in 2017.

During the first and second decades of the 21st century, Aira's books may also be found in the lists of other publishing houses of Latin America. In 2005, *Ema, the Captive (Ema, la cautiva)* appeared in the catalogue of El Otro El Mismo in Venezuela (which also published *Literary Conference* in 2007). Aira also chose to publish the first edition of *God's Tea Party (El té de Dios)* in a Guatemalan press named Mata-Mata Ediciones. In 2013, the Peruvian press Estruendomudo released *I was a Married Woman (Yo era una mujer casada)*. Hueders, in Chile, published two first editions of Aira's books: *Acts of Charity (Actos de caridad)* in 2014, and *Eternal Youth (Eterna juventud)* in 2017. Also, in Chile in 2018, the press Tajamar reprinted the abovementioned *Dictionary of Latin American Authors* and in 2019 Cuneta incorporated to its catalogue *Acts of Charity (Un filósofo)*. Lastly, 2019 was the first time when a book by Aira appeared in Ecuador: *Yo era una chica moderna* (Editorial Turbina).

These presses share some similar characteristics. Firstly, they are all very young. El otro el mismo was founded in 2001; Tajamar in 2002; Estruendomudo in 2004; Mata-mata ediciones in 2008; Cuneta in 2009; Hueders in 2010; and Editorial Turbina in 2016. Secondly, their structures are national and small; in most cases they count only one staff member. Therefore, interpersonal relations are vital to build the catalogues and to foster links between various points of the Latin American literary geography. Thirdly, the focus of these publishers shifted. In the 1980s and 1990s, many publishers were interested in genres related to the social sciences and political essays, in tune with the context of revision fostered by the democratization processes restored after the dictatorships that Latin American countries suffered in the 1970s. By the late 1990s and early years of the 21st century the focus of publishers shifted towards literature.

While these publishers distribute their books nationally, given the fragmentation of the Latin American publishing, most of them act collectively, which enables them to foster contacts with other organizations in other regions; namely, the Chilean Cooperativa Editores de la Furia, and the Red Peruana de Editores. Along with these institutions, individual initiatives are key to creating networks among national literatures in Latin America. When studying the case of Aira, one may find the literary and publishing militant practices of Francisco Garamona. This Argentine poet founded a publishing house called Mansalva in 2005 with a novel by Aira titled *The Little Buddhist Monk (El pequeño monje budista)*. The books of Mansalva were distributed in Chile through the small book distribution business Catapulta libros, owned by Galo Ghigliotto, the publisher of Cuneta. Through their relation, Aira became an author of the catalogue of Cuneta. Likewise, in Guatemala, Garamona had published a book of poems in Mata-mata Ediciones that later on published a novel by Aira. These individual and interpersonal efforts are vital in connecting various publishing points of the Latin American Region.

3. Latin American Literature from the Viewpoint of Publishing Houses

Imagine one of those people who don't think, a man whose only activity is reading novels, which for him is a purely pleasurable activity, and requires not the slightest intellectual effort; it's simply a matter of letting the pleasure of reading carry him along. Suddenly, some gesture or sentence, not to speak of a "thought," reveals that he is a philosopher in spite of himself. Where did he get that knowledge? From pleasure? From novels? An absurd supposition, given his reading material (if he read Thomas Mann, at least, it might be a different story). Knowledge

comes through the novels, of course, but not really from them. They are not the ground; you couldn't expect them to be. They're suspended in the void, like everything else. But there they are, they exist: you can't say that it's a complete void. (With television, the argument would be harder to sustain). (Aira, *Ghosts* 87)

The Latin America Boom novels blended both of the "dos valores supremos de la intelectualidad crítica en la época: la aspiración social y el impulso hacia lo nuevo" ("supreme values of the critical intellectuals of those years: social aspiration and the impulse towards novelty"; Gilman 310). In this literary phenomenon, publishing houses played a main role by "descubrir nuevos valores, prestándoles su ayuda para acercarlos al público" ("discovering new values, and aiding them to reach readers"; Rama 68). Publishing houses embodied the values of "responsabilidad cultural" ("cultural responsibility"; 67) and "autonomía editorial" ("publishing autonomy"; 68) when giving way to the emergence of the Latin America Boom.

In the 1960s and 1970s, publishing houses participated in the definition of the notion of Latin American literature, yet this ideal transcended the publishing dimension to encompass political, intellectual and literary discussions. In the aftermath of the military dictatorships of the 1970s and the repression and censorship suffered by writers and intellectuals, the notion of Latin American literature that survived remained closely related to the Latin America Boom, which became the international hegemonic image of the literature produced in this region.

So where can we nowadays find the new Latin American Literature? Recent studies suggest a distinction is necessary between the Latin American Literature produced in Europe and that produced in Latin America. The former is defined particularly in Spain by the "industria internacional para ser incorporada a la litereratura mundial" ("international industry to be incorporated into world literature"; Locane 48). The latter is defined by the "precariedad material relativa que, no obstante o justamente por ello, favorecen el desarrollo de formas estéticas y alternativas" ("relative materially precarious conditions which, in spite of them or precisely because of them, foster defiant and alternative aesthetics"; 48). This essay has discussed this latter definition , along with Latin American Literature defined by its "especificidad microterriorial" ("micro-territorial specificity"; 168) and its resistance to international circulation. The researcher may find other analytical tools to construe meanings surrounding current Latin American Literature.

This essay, following the trajectory of Aira, has traced a Latin American circuit that connects the catalogues of various publishing houses from numerous countries within the region. These presses hold different values, autonomy, independence or bibliodiversity, but share an effort to include authors from various countries within the region and the intention to build networks with fellow publishing houses.

Authors from these Latin American presses, such as Aira, might not advocate for a Latin American identity (quite the contrary). Latin American institutions (such as periodicals and financing organisms) might no longer exist nor maintain the vitality they had in the past. Regardless, the Latin American identity in literature may be found in the circuit traced by various publishing houses. These undertake the initiative to build catalogues with authors from various countries within the region. They foster the collaberation with their Latin American colleagues. They have revived the tradition of the 1960s and 1970s of resistance against dominant commercial logics and the bet towards upholding literary value through the notion of autonomy to build a prestigious and innovative catalogue and to determine a particular way of publishing.

Uribe, a publisher from Era, described a grim scenario in 2005 during the Frankfurt Book Fair in which

the logic of globalization and savage capitalism has led to a dead end for authors (who see their books disappear), for publishers (who see their catalogues lose much of their diversity and richness), for bookstores (which cannot keep valuable back-list titles in stock), for readers (who cannot find anything but the newest and generally blandest titles) and, ultimately, for culture (now conceived as what the marked decides in the recent weeks). (web)

Given this diagnosis, Uribe proposed to focus on

"a wider readership of its authors beyond our frontiers" and related that "thanks to encounters in book fairs with other independent publishers we have managed to form a network called precisely Editores Independientes [...] to export each other's catalogues in the best possible way within the Spanish-language area." (web)

These circuits are vital given the background against which they build their own proposals. The dominant logic is marked by the widening of the "distancia que separa al gran público" ("distance from the public"; Escalante Gonzalbo 9), and by the crucial fact that "lo que está en juego es el valor simbólico de la literatura" ("what is at stake is the symbolic value of literature"; 47). Small publishers, who are willing to resist these currents, value Aira not only for his innovative literature but also because he grants visibility and prestige to their catalogue, enabling the incorporation of numerous other foreign writers. As Álvaro Lasso, the publisher of Estruendomudo, has commented: "Ya con Aira en el catálogo, todo fue más fácil. A partir de 2009 se sumaron libros de Samanta Schweblin, Edmundo Paz Soldán, Dani Umpi, Álvaro Bisama, Fabián Casas, Washington Cucurto, Mayra Santos Febres, Aurora Venturini y Pola Oloixarac" ("Having Aira in our catalogue simplifies everything. Since 2009, we have included books by Samanta Schweblin, Edmundo Paz Soldán, Dani Umpi, Álvaro Bisama, Fabián Casas, Aurora Venturini, and Pola Oloixarac"; qtd. in Zúñiga web). In these circumstances, the most productive contribution Aira makes, in these efforts to resist the crisis in literary value, is to bolster the belief in literature:

Which might make you wonder if the prodigious bother of it all—which technological advances have exacerbated if anything—isn't actually an essential part of cinema's charm, since, paradoxically, it gives everyone access to movie-making, in the form of pure daydreaming. It's the same in the other arts, to a greater or lesser extent. And yet it is possible to imagine an art in which the limitations of reality would be minimized, in which the made and the unmade would be indistinct, an art that would be instantaneously real, without ghosts. And perhaps that art exists, under the name of literature. (Aira, *Ghosts* 38)

Notes

Original text: Gabriel García Márquez...La Mala Hora (1962), ganadora del Premio Esso de novela, es una crónica pueblerina a la Faulkner, pero escrita en el estilo de Hemingway. Es un relato seco, con muy discretos atisbos surrealistas, de lectura agradable pese a un asomo de "latinoamericanismo" programático, al exceso de personajes, y a su intención en

última instancia alegórica.

2. The quotations from César Aira's novels that introduce each subtitle pertain to some of his most frequently reprinted books in Latin American publishing houses. The English translations are published by New Directions (New York).

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