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The new Latin American journalistic *crónica*, emotions and hidden signs of reality

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Abstract

Latin America journalism, throughout history, has been snugly knitted to the rich literature tradition of the region. In the 19th century – the century of the de-colonisation struggle with the Spanish crown – Latin American writers began experimenting with hybrid forms of narrative. It was a quest for new ways of story telling; a hybrid form – the *crónica* – where story telling became a parallel journey taken by *the* novelist impatient to engage his or her writing with the new post colonial conditions. Since these early days, the *crónica* – or the chronicle – was embraced with aesthetic commitment and ideological conviction by some of the most celebrated novelists in the region. In the *crónica* – paraphrasing Cuban poet Alejo Carpentier – the journalist and the novelist turn out to be the same person.

The exponents of the new crop of Latin American journalistic *crónica* – the central theme of this paper – could well be described as a post-literary boom generation of writers who – like their predecessors of the 19th century – are impatient to engage their writing with the 21st century post dictatorship conditions.

The new *cronistas* don't discard any stories, as long as they are part of the Latin American realism, in the sense of Zola's realism instead of García Márquez's magic realism. All of these stories have three literary nexuses; they read as fiction, they are true tales and they are overpoweringly socially progressive. This paper seeks to review, examine and perhaps propose pointers toward the conceptualization of the *crónica*, as a literary long form of journalism that has a distinctive Latin American diacritic, form and social undertaking.

The *crónica*, an inevitable permeability between journalism and literature

The porosity of Latin America journalism and literature has been well documented. With the exception of a few novelists – fiction writers – the great majority of Latin American writers have worked as journalists (Rodó, 2009). And it is from the crop of this imaginative porosity that the *crónica* – with its verifiable hybridity and dialectically demolishing of orthodox journalism – has bred and grown.

It is the place where – paraphrasing Cuban poet Alejo Carpentier in the *crónica* – the journalist and the novelist turn out to be the same person (Cancio Isla, 2010) As Vivaldi points out, journalist-writer; or writer journalist is undistinguishable as long as the 'literary dignity' of the story is preserved (1986, p.24). In the *crónica* – understood as a tension between fiction and non-fiction – the *cronista's* writing technique is in permanent negotiation.

The residence of the *crónica* is *en la tierra* – residence on Earth, rephrasing Neruda's poem – where the actuality,

the journalistic referentiality and the poetry of language mix (Rotker, 1992). For Mexico's Juan Rulfo, an historical figure of the Latin American *crónica modernista* and indeed literature, the fundamental characteristic of the journalistic *crónica* is to create images that will concede readers the ability to evoke reality (Rulfo, 2009).

Argentina's Leila Guerriero is nowadays one of the most recognised names in the Latin American *crónica*, a towering female figure in the realm of literary journalism or reportage – a synonym the author of this paper thinks can be applied to the *crónica*. Guerriero, author of the 2005 *Los suicidas del fin del mundo* among numerous books of *crónicas*, defines the genre as a 'gaze, a look at something that not everybody is able to perceive, the certitude that something is being narrated' (2010, p.3) and indeed the certitude that the way of telling a story 'is something that matters', as she points out (2010, p.2).

The literary complexity of the *crónica* is Mexico's Carlos Monsiváis' point of departure for his understanding of the genre as reconstruction of events and people; a reconstruction where the urgency to inform seems less important than the form and style (Egan, 2001). Chillón, on the other hand, defines the genre as having a promiscuous liaison between literature and journalism (1999). Flirting with the concept of explanatory journalism, Martínez Albertos considers the *crónica* as a journalistic interpretation of an event that is real and truthful (1983) and for Leñero and Marín it is the fundamental journalistic genre of Latin American journalism (1986).

For Martín Caparrós – a representative of the new generation of Latin American *cronistas* – 'the allure of a good *crónica* consists of making the reader absorbed by an issue that didn't attract him or her in the first place' (Caparrós, 2012). Additionally, Caparrós gives the *crónica* an ethical and social dimension – the task to give voice to the voiceless. Spanish scholar and journalist Antonio Cuartero Naranjo (2014) preserves the traditional role of the journalistic text– news construction and news dissemination – but he also adds the traditional tools handled by fiction novelists, such as structure, ambiance, tones, dialogues or scenes – to tell a story.

Reynolds defines the *crónica* as a 'brief text that is bound up with journalistic forms of authorship – the "reporter," the "foreign correspondent"' (Conway, 2012) as well as with different types of printing, such as newspapers, literary magazines and books. Reynolds speaks about the *crónica* as an expression of 'aesthetic journalism' (2012), and for Bernal and Chillón, it is a genre where the *cronista* flees from the 'stereotyped language' of journalism (1985, p.93).

Mexico's Juan Villoro is also a member of the new wave of the Latin American *crónica*. And he has come up with perhaps one of the most titillating definitions of this genre. He called it the '*ornitorrinco*' of prose (2006). The *crónica* is, he argues, like the Australian semi-aquatic egg-laying mammal whose anatomy was so unusual that it was thought that somebody had sewn a duck's beak onto the body of a beaver-like animal. The Latin American *crónica* looks like a genre sown onto its hybridity with the subjectivity of the novel, the truthfulness of reportage and the *mise-en-scène* of a theatre play.

The new generation of *cronistas* – and this will be examined a bit later in this paper – are the direct progeny of late 20th century Latin American literary *crónica*. However, between the new and the old there is a generation gap. It is a gap marked by the late 1960s and late 1990s wave of US sponsored military dictatorships. In two – and in some cases three – decades of historical darkness, the journalistic *crónica* capitulated to the urgency of the days, to the daily denouncing of deaths, human rights abuses and exile by the pro-democracy media. Apart from a few expressions of *crónica*, these are years marked by the alternative media's struggle for democracy. In response the new generation of *cronistas* – post late 1990s – were forced to lift their gaze higher up the barren and bloody period of military dictatorships to find 'somebody to learn from'. The literary mentorship was found then in the likes of Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, Mexicans Elena Poniatowska and Carlos Monsiváis or Argentineans Tomás Eloy Martínez or Rodolfo Walsh.

Fundamental to all of their stories – and others who not mentioned due to space requirements – was the narrative style and the political lucidity of their work. Their canonical texts, such as Eloy Martínez's *The Passion According to Trelew* (2009) or García Márquez's *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* (1989) – reflects the evolution of the *crónica modernista* to a pivotal position in the pantheon of the modern Latin American narrative. But it was the *crónica* of Mexico's Monsiváis that reflected better than anybody else the cataclysmic changes of Latin America *crónica* in the second half of the 20th century.

Monsiváis was the historical and lubricating literary hinge that kept the old and the new tightly connected. His sensibility – embraced by the new generation of *cronistas* – is ideologically and aesthetically reflected in his profile, for example, of boxer Julio César Chávez and the impact of the bolero, a Cuban music genre intimately connected to Argentina's tango through their nostalgic lyric and melancholic style (1995). The work of Monsiváis exposes the fugacity of journalistic events and people.

A *crónica* is a true tale, Gabriel García Márquez once said. García Márquez's celebration of the discourse between journalism and literature was well reflected when he commented that after 30 years, he had discovered that novelists tend to forget that the best literary formula is always the truth. And this was indeed the literary

formula García Márquez relied upon to reconstruct – as a young reporter in the Barraquilla press, Colombia – a crime news story of a newlywed couple's first night. The man rejects the woman when he discovers she was not a virgin. The dishonoured woman goes back home in shame, a shame that his brother cannot tolerate and proceeds to murder her sister's husband.

García Márquez reported – as a weekly *crónica* – this tragic event of 1951. It was a *crónica* where some of the facts were altered but the accuracy remained. This *crónica* – the basis of García Márquez' novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (2003) – is paradigmatic insofar it established a literary discourse, as Rotker (2000) argues – that paved the way to a *modernista* view of reality), a reality that remained in the readers' consciousness and memory in contrast to the shortened longevity suffered by traditional journalism. And it is perhaps this literary longevity that makes us contemplate – as Conway writes in his review of Reynolds' *The Spanish American Crónica Modernista* – that the:

“ ...*crónica* is a textual kaleidoscope for understanding not only *modernismo* but also the very crisis of modernity, a kind of spiritual unmooring of the subject in a world of acceleration, mechanization and materialism (2013, pp. 51-52). ”

A glance at the seeds of the Latin America *crónica*

The foundational nature of the Latin American *crónica* as a hybrid genre developed at the end of the 19th century. Despite its rich tradition, it was a besmirched genre in the eyes of the exponents of traditional, formalized and normalized literature. And there was a sense that journalism and literature were as close as the devil is to holy water. It was an epoch when Latin American *modernism* began taking its first steps and there was a sense of leaving Latin America's discovery and colonial past behind to rest in peace.

It was Gabriel García Márquez on December 8, 1982 – at the reception of his Nobel Prize for literature in Oslo – that reminded us that the history of Latin America was first written and told by *cronistas*. They were not historians. In his speech, García Márquez referred to Antonio Pigafetta, a Florentine scholar and navigator who accompanied Magallanes on his first trip around the world. In his stint around America, Pigafetta left, as García Márquez put it, an accurate *crónica* that reads as an adventure of the imagination (1982).

The contemporary Latin American *crónica* – the one that makes a comeback in the period of post-dictatorship transition to democracy – seem to still have an umbilical cord to the *modernistas* of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Nicaraguans Rubén Darío and Cuban José Martí are the emblematic *cronistas* of Latin American modernity – and of the Latin American *crónica* (Rotker, 2005).

It would be, however, an act of historical unfairness not to mention the likes of Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, Julián del Casal, José Enrique Rodó and Enrique Gómez Carrillo. They are the most recognizable *cronistas* of the Latin American *modernismo*. And they are also the Latin American versions of the *flâneur*, the prototype of the employee-writer who is paid to inform and entertain (Buck-Morss, 2015). From Darío in Argentina's *La Nación*, Gutiérrez Nájera in Mexico's *El Nacional* or Martí in Venezuela's *La Opinión Nacional de Caracas*, they chronicled the streets of Latin American *modernismo*. They scattered the seeds of a journalistic genre underpinned in its narrative and themes by the tools and techniques of literature. In the *crónica modernista*, the emphasis was on the poetic and humoristic accent.

Reynolds (2012) observes the journalistic form of these *cronistas* – better known as poets – was not only intrinsically linked to the development of modernism, but they also reflected in their *crónicas* the crisis of the period, a late 19th and early 20th centuries problematised by the rapid process of mechanization and materialism. These are some of the accents that one might be able to observe among the majority of the works of *cronistas* of the early 21st century – the desire to echo and epitomize the very crisis of Latin American post-military dictatorship. This was a crisis with a familiar name, the *desencanto* (Zerán, 1999). The *desencanto* – a term to describe the disenchantment of the civil society with the democratic governments that emerged post-military dictatorships – turned into a recurrent story theme among contemporary *cronistas*.

To clarify, however, while the contemporary crisis of Latin America – corruption, poverty, rampant criminality, impunity and a deep democratic deficit – can be seen in the work of the new generation of *cronistas*, they are largely not what could be described as *militant* writers. They are not in the sense of the militant *crónica* that could be traced back, for example, to Argentina's Domingo Sarmiento memorable 1845 *Facundo* (1998). The *crónica* of Sarmiento – like those produced in the 1950s and 1960s by the likes of Argentina's Rodolfo Walsh – was a journalism bursting in 'political urgency', social demand and condemnation. It was a militant and partisan *crónica*.

The politicisation of the *crónica*, however, as Mahieux reminds us, is better reflected by the emergence of testimonial narratives, as was the case of Mexico's Elena Poniatowska and Carlos Monsiváis (2011). And perhaps it was Rodolfo Walsh in his 1957 masterpiece *Operation Massacre*, that the process of politicisation of

the *crónica* was firmly established. Walsh's opus resorts to literary tools to uncover an event that the official version attempted to hide. And this is indeed an act of political resistance.

Rodolfo Walsh's 1957 *Operation Massacre* is an undisputable landmark in the Latin American militant journalistic *crónica* of the 1950s and 1960. A crime story that reads like a crime fiction novel 'synthesized the most hard-hitting journalism with literature of the highest caliber. His example of adeptness and dignity in literary reportage lives on beyond his death at the hands of a military dictatorship (Galeano: 2013).

On the night of June 9, 1956 the police rounded up a group of friends who had gathered to listen a boxing match. The police thought there were members of a radical political movement – they were not. After being taken away, the police proceed to execute them. Six of them managed to escape perhaps due to their quick reactions and the poor aim of the police. Walsh's narrative is profoundly political and his empathy bleeds into solidarity (Phelan, 2013).

The explosion of the militant *crónica* was indeed a manifestation of the political effervescence and turmoil of the 1960s, highly moulded by the Cold War and the Cuban Revolution. It was also a period of dramatic decline in illiteracy among the urban and rural poor, an act of social change indebted to the critical pedagogy movement of Paulo Freire (2000). It is also important to mention the role played by Casa de las Américas, an organization founded by the Cuban Government in April 1959. As Calvi points out:

“ Casa de las Américas promoted and gave cohesiveness to a series of until then uncoordinated efforts towards the development of a purely Latin American literature; a literature mainly anchored in social reality' (2010, p. 66). ”

All of this – in one way or another – is behind the explosion of the literary and intellectual boom of the 1960s.

A central figure of this literary boom was indeed Gabriel García Márquez. As a writer at ease with literature and journalism, García Márquez' *Story of a shipwrecked sailor* became a significant instant in the *crónica* of the period. And it was also the beginning of the long affairs of García Márquez with this genre. *Story of a shipwrecked sailor* was originally published as 14 consecutive daily instalments in the Colombian newspaper *El Espectador* in 1955. It was later published as a book in 1970.

In 1974, four years after the publication of *Story of a shipwrecked sailor* the Latin American journalistic *crónica* reached a climax with Tomás Eloy Martínez's 1989 *The Passion according to Trelew*. This journalistic opus – a mix of factual and fictional elements – is an account of a massacre of left wing militants at a jail in the south of Argentina. Reflecting on his work in a speech at the 1997 Sociedad Interamericana de la Prensa (Interamerican Society of the Press), Eloy Martínez pointed his finger to the printed press' survival – a major theme in contemporary journalism (2010).

The formula for its survival, he said then, is to tell stories by reporters who are also storytellers. Eloy Martínez died of cancer in 2014 at the age of 75. In a thoughtful obituary, *The Guardian* described him as 'one of the most innovative journalists and novelists of his generation' (2010). Tomás Eloy Martínez was unwavering when he said the *crónica* was the *fundamental* Argentinean literary genre. It is a genre that was fundamental to the writing of, among others, Julio Cortázar with his *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos*; Jorge Luis Borge's *Historia universal de la infamia y otras inquisiciones* or Lucio V. Mansilla's *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles*.

Latin American modern-day *crónica* & *cronistas*

It would be unwise to suggest that with the death of Tomás Eloy Martínez, the ideologically charged militant and partisan *crónica* also died. Traces of the militant *crónica* can still be seen. It is, however, a *crónica* less attached to the old ideological paradigms and more engaged with the demand aspirations, concerns – and even the literary ludic cravings – of *sociedad civil* (civic society). This is a society that emerged as product of the post-military democratic *desencanto*, the disillusionment.

There is a sense that in recent years, the new generation of *cronistas* has formed part of a rearguard action in response to the disappointing democratic systems – and the economic model – that emerged at the end of the 1990s. They are young, contemporary *cronistas* who write – as Tirzo (2013) suggests – in a time of deep crisis for journalism and profound changes to journalists' work.

Despite the traumas caused by the military dictatorships that ruled most of the region from the 1970s until the end of the 1990s that are not yet healed due to the prevailing reign of impunity, the new *crónica* appeals to an audience more concerned with micro demands and validations.

The current crop belongs to the generation born in the midst of the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s. Some were called *the children of Pinochet*, in the case of Chile. They have been influenced by the

post-dictatorship aesthetic, new technologies, music and cinema. The revival of this genre is due – in large part – ‘to the social sensibility and the civic and ethical commitment shown on Latin America by many journalists’ (Chillón, 1999).

The modern-day Latin American *crónica* is fundamentally connected to the neoliberal crisis and transformations experienced in the post-1990s democracies. It is a neoliberal system inherited from, and left in place by, the post-military democratic regimes – a time where social activities have been reduced to market practices (García Canclini, 2000). It is in this new post-dictatorship scenario – and already in the mid of the 21st century – that two major anthologies dedicated to the best of the contemporary Latin American *crónica* were published in 2012. These publications showed a renewed interest in the genre, both from practitioners and readers alike.

In his *Antología de crónica latinoamericana actual* (‘Anthology of current Latin American *crónica*’), published by Alfaguara, Colombian journalist Darío Jaramillo Agudelo points out that ‘the journalistic *crónica* is today the most popular reading and its prose is the best expression of the Latin American narrative.’ The anthology of Jaramillo Agudelo was soon followed by *Mejor que ficción* (Anagrama, 2012) – *Better than fiction* – a journalistic *opus* of *crónicas* compiled by Spanish journalist and writer Jordi Carrión.

Writing in Argentina’s newspaper *La Nación*, Leonardo Tarifeño (2012) points out that these anthologies are connected by the subjectivity of the journalistic approach and by bringing to the centre the news landscape the margins of society. The publication of these two anthologies has been described by some literary sectors as the emergence of a new Latin American writing boom, a post-magical realism fiction movement deeply attached to the reality of a region that seems to be in a permanent process of encounters and disruptions.

One could argue that these two major publications – a showcase of the best *crónica* in Latin America – reflect something already insinuated – the *crónica* is a well-established journalist genre in Latin America that has re-emerged with new vitality from the ashes left by the *cronistas* of the mid 20th century. In their respective anthologies Jaramillo Agudelo and Jordi Carrión brought together the best Latin American exponents of the *crónica*. From their singular and individual experiences – some are more concerned with style and tone and others with a strong sense of a social and political mission – the new *cronistas* construct a personal reflection over reality and transform the invisible social actor into a visible one.

Style – rather than common themes – is the key feature of the stories assembled by Jaramillo Agudelo and Jordi Carrión. These are journalists whose main fear is to be tedious writers. This is indeed a reflection of their professional upbringing. They come from dailies, a fast news environment that compels them to manage a precise, direct and attention-grabbing narrative. They are writers *certain* that the reality of contemporary Latin America can be told by the *crónica* and only by the *crónica*.

The key challenge of the genre is to marry entertainment with the symbolic power that readers have traditionally found in fictional stories and tales. It is, one could argue, an aesthetic and narrative task in transforming the factuality of a story into symbolic non-material prose. The contemporary *cronistas* – the new exponents of the hybrid literary journalism – have managed to ‘do’ literature without resorting to fiction. Without the urgency of the news cycle, they are immersed – using the first person – into the realities they observe and live.

Viviane Mahieux (2011) points out that the *crónica* has become the place of public intellectuals who – from the perspective of their different milieus – seek to do what the precursors of the genre previously attempted – to represent reality. Mahieux accentuates the work of Chile’s Pedro Lemebel. Lemebel, who died in 2015, was a solitary voice of Chile’s *crónica* gay. He acted – as Monsiváis did in the second half of the 20th century – as a literary hinge between the horrors of the dictatorship and the *desencanto* of the democracy. In doing so, as Salcedo Ramos (2013) argues, he is one of the fundamental literary scaffolds of the new generation.

Also fundamental to the new *crónica* is the work done by the Fundación por el Nuevo Periodismo, (New Journalism Foundation). If Casa de las Américas (House of the Americas) was vital in the development of the mid-20th century *crónica*, in the last two decades the Fundación has become the fundamental institutional *alma mater* of the new crop of *cronistas*. Established by García Márquez in 1994, the Fundación was the creative reply of the Colombian writer to, as described by García Márquez, the banalization of journalism.

Based in the Colombia city of Cartagena, the Fundación was conceived as a mentoring place for the new exponents of the Latin American *crónica*. As Jaime Abello, the current director of the Fundación, points out, García Márquez sought ways to give back to journalists the desire to tell good stories and, along the way, keep hold of the elusive and unrestrained contemporary reader. The Director of Mexico’s *El Economista*, Luis Miguel González, points out ‘the foundation had profoundly marked thousands of Latin American reporters’ (Crúz: 2014); and for Guillermo Osorio, *cronista* and Mexican editor, the initiative of García Márquez has produced a network of *cronistas* who can be considered the best in Spanish language journalism (Crúz, 2014).

In addition, the Foundation has redirected the gaze of the next generation of *cronistas* from European and US journalism to Latin America. Since it was set up, the Foundation has mentored some of the most notable names

of the recent Latin American *crónica*, such as Leila Guerriero, Alberto Salcedo Ramos, Josefina Licitra, Martín Caparros, Julio Villanueva Chang, Christian Alarcón and Héctor Feliciano, just to name a few. These are *cronistas* who have challenged the neoliberal paradigm applied to journalism in the 1980s and 1990s.

It seems Latin American *cronistas* of the 21st century have found ways to compete with the moving image of the 24/7 news channel. It is a generation that seeks to rupture the hegemony of traditional journalism – a journalism anesthetised by the sameness. As Bernabé (2006) suggests, these are writers who, in their *crónicas*, threaten a society run by indifference, consummation and social uniformity.

The post-dictatorship *desencanto* and the social transversal reivindications or demands at the dawn of the 21st century – from the right to water, to the legalisation of the marihuana; from students' demands for better education, to gay rights – becomes the fertilizer of a crop of young, outraged and intellectually fearless *cronistas*. They are mostly freed from the ideological and partisan straps of the past. Since a *crónica* can be about any imaginable subject, the non-conformist, and at times random, stories speak of a new crop finally able to move beyond the central themes of the previous period – human rights abuses, torture, disappearance, democracy, and freedom of the press among others. And it is in this sense perhaps that the current *crónicas* are less overtly militantly political than the previous generation, even through they are overtly engaged and critical.

The new crop seems to have found the *leit motiv* – in plural – to make visible the invisible actors and events of the modern 'social reality of Latin America' (Falbo, 2007). They are *crónicas* that – as Poblete suggests (2009) – are enticed by the crisis and the neoliberal transformations of the region's economy and society. It narrates the 'dark side of things' (Rivas, 1998, p.23). As Calvi observes in his excellent article on the 'new journalism in Latin America', 'the main characters of Latin American nonfiction tended to fulfill a symbolic function, and their narratives were very much allegorical' (2010, p.70). And rightly he gives to this genre a 'socio-political role'. The common experiences of the daily-life life, the stories of common men and women – physically unconnected – takes shape as an imagined community, as suggested by Anderson (1983), playing a social political act.

Argentina's Robert Herrscher (2012) regards the new Latin American *crónica* as the literature of the poor. Herrscher argues the *crónica* is where *el pueblo* (the people) – understood as social and political category – can access to the best existing literature in Argentina. These are stories located at the margins of society, they are subjective observations and at the same time they meet the key requirement of journalism; they are accurate. Carlos Monsiváis recognized the fibre that unified the aspirations of the new emerging *cronistas*. They are less anxious to meet the demands of traditional commercial journalism and – instead – they are in pursuit of the best method of telling a story (1998).

Indeed this doesn't mean they neglect *the story*. On the contrary, they are in a permanent search for stories able to appeal to a fragmented audience. The national stories became regional and the nation becomes one individual. Or as Salcedo Ramos suggests – the aim is to narrate the particular to interpret the universal (2013). It is the individual tale suggested by Lyotard (1979) as a reaction to the great narratives as a strategy to mend the social connections shattered in the epoch of the *desencanto*.

The individual story able to tell – as Borges once suggested – the story of the humanity seems to be the demand of these new *cronistas* – capturing a fragment of reality, as hinted by Bernabé (2006, p.11). Paraphrasing Hayden White (1987) – these are stories with a non-conclusive end where things are not resolved. One could be tempted to suggest this is a metaphor of the Latin American reality, unresolved, unending and incomprehensible.

This is the kind of narrative that seeks to describe, explain and problematize the communal experiences of the Latin American historicity. It reflects a counter-hegemonic and fragmented thematic that provides a sense of heterogeneity in the commonality of realities. It is narrative with a sense of marginality and with a fundamental mandate; to counterbalance an official, mainstream and hegemonic narrative. In light of this, the *crónica* post-neoliberal model – and catastrophes – became an act of intervention. In a performative sense, the *crónica* has an ethical appeal, an appeal seeking the encounter between the reader and the invisible event and individual (Bernabé, 2006)

And they are not all the time 'noble individuals'. Frequently they belong to the the deviant fringes of society. Some of the most powerful pieces of *crónicas* have been about those at the margins of the law – drug lords, gang leaders and other deviant characters that fascinate these modern *cronistas* and readers alike. They are also moved by the incomprehension of the post-dictatorship Latin America milieu, a milieu wonderfully articulated by Carlos Monsiváis's aphorism 'Either I don't understand what is happening or what I understand has already happened' (Loaeza, 2011). And while he was referring to the perplexities of the modern Mexican society, it is also pertinent to the south of Monsiváis' country.

I would posit that one reason why the *crónicas* of those on the margins of the law have a strong resonance in the popular classes is that these characters represent a mirror image of the institutionalised criminality of the governing elites, the systematic robbing of public assets by those in power. These stories also implicitly or

explicitly address the complicity of the elites with crime, and the often dysfunctionality and complicity of the judicial system.

The *crónica* is political writing and *cronistas* assume this with a sense of mysticism. The core and the margins are turned upside down – or perhaps it is better to say that the *margin* (al) is brought to the centre. It is a mutiny against traditional journalism that tells the stories of the few to the many. In this act of political rebellion, the *crónica* seeks to tell the story of the many – the *majority* – and to rescue them from oblivion. And perhaps one should pause to also point out that the modern *crónica* has reinstated once again the notion of the *testimonio*.

And despite this attempt to tell the story *de los abajo* – those from below – there is also a call for examining the action of the few – at the top of the social scale as perpetrators of the misery of the many. In this thematic shift, the *cronistas* enter into the world of the powerful politicians or financial speculators, as it is the case of Hernán Iglesias in his potent piece of journalism, *Golden Boys* (2011). It is a story of Argentinean financiers who became wealthy speculating in Wall Street while the country was financially falling apart.

This thematic shift – as Iglesias did – has its risks though. One could argue the *crónica* is a genre able to upset the establishment. While those down below don't have the resources to challenge a story that might aggravate them, those higher in the social scale can. As Mexico's Alma Guillermo Prieto warns us, it is less risky to write about the poor than the rich (Núñez: 2009). Writing the stories of the rich and powerful can be very costly; the writers' wallet or their life.

And perhaps there is nothing new here. After all it was back in 1980 that García Márquez wrote in the prologue to his *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* that this story 'would cost my life'. In this story he had challenged the official version of the government. Indeed, Rodolfo Walsh paid with his life. The publication of his *Operation Massacre* – mentioned earlier – also is a case of a narrative that challenged the official story. On March 25, 1977, a military task force finally caught up with Walsh and gunned him down in La Plata.

Pablo Calvi doesn't refer to physical security of the *cronistas* writing stories able to upset the elite but rather to the 'passivity and indifference with which the story was received by the mainstream media' (2010, p.73). And despite this passivity and indifference – and indeed despite these *cronistas* belonging to the cultural industry of the region – they don't avoid the frontal clash with those who financially control the mass media. As Calvi (2010) said, this is a crop that despite all that indifference, they plough along with their stories.

The themes of privatisation of violence and the otherness have taken a central stage among the new crop of *cronistas*. In books, literary journalism magazines, in online sites and in some weekend newspapers magazines, violence is confronted head on and connected to *la inseguridad ciudadana* (citizens' insecurity), another major theme of the contemporary Latin America *crónica*. One of the most notable exponents of the *crónica* of violence is Mexico's Fabrizio Jaramillo Mejía Madrid.

Mejía Madrid Jaramillo Madrid is a peripatetic writer when it comes to publications. His work is widely published in Mexico's newspapers and magazines and also in some of the most important publications in the region. His work is deeply marked by the realities of Mexico, a country that seems unable to shake off the shackles of violence. Deeply moving, gory and poetic and at the same time a reflection of this violence can be read in his piece 2007 *Salida de emergencia* (*Emergency exit*).

Teatro del Crimen, Theatre of the Crime.

As modern representatives of the heroic reporter, Latin American *cronistas* take a close up look – simultaneously deep and panoramic – of the drug war in Mexico, the forced diaspora of minors from Central America to the US, the *campesinos* confronting water privatization, and structural issues that keep the region on its knees, corruption, impunity and inequality.

The *otherness* – the other central theme in some of the recent *crónicas* – points toward the bizarre. The whacky – from the large number of Uruguayan children who are named Hitler, to a magician who lost his arms – abounds. Reality, and the cornucopia of events that converge into its own construction, is the place where the *cronistas* converge. And indeed humor is also very much part of the themes these new *cronistas* attempt to craft in their writings. It is very often an uncanny and off-the-wall humour, such as the stories about Albinos living in the Patagonia. They are stories that incite the sensual aestheticism of the *cronistas* and readers alike.

The historic visibility of people and events – the reality – is achieved by the use of personal styles and indeed by the use of the first person – a personal approach that helps to narrow the gap between the writer and the reader. Narrowing the space between readers and writers is a key aspect of the new *crónica*. This is an undertaking that brings into the front – and reinvestigates – the subjectivity of the writer. And there is a sense of moral obligation that suggests the *cronistas* are moved by an ethical dimension. As the heirs of Tomás Eloy Martínez, they have taken seriously the suggestions of the Argentinean writer to whom the journalist was a 'voice that thinks, acknowledges emotions and the hidden tensions of reality' (Goyes, 2006).

Argentina's Leila Guerriero is one of the most potent voices of the genre in Latin America. Her vast journalistic work reflects the literary obligation the *crónica* has – posed by Eloy Martínez – of disrupting and descentering. In her work she is not concerned with capturing a news story, but instead to capture the historical moment through non-historic agents. Violence against women – a major social crisis in the region – is captured in a horrific story of a young raped girl who at the moment of giving birth stabs the newborn. And it is through the *crónica* of a group of women who sell beauty products that Leila Guerriero examines the individualistic self-made doctrine of neoliberalism, an economic model that has brought about abject poverty and massive inequality.

Guerriero – like many of the modern Latin American *cronistas* – explores a wider angle. It is not a crime story as told by a newspaper crime reporter, it is a story of patriarchy. It becomes a Latin American story of family abuse and domestic violence. And it is told through the voice of an ordinary person, the kind of person often neglected by traditional journalism. For the new *cronistas* the larger story is told by the intimate stories of the mundane individual. Or as Jorge Carrión suggests, the *cronista* works against the official version, the media release and against the 'simplicity' of any nature (2012, p.19).

The early *crónica* circulated mainly in newspapers. However, newspapers – as Leila Guerriero (2012) suggests – are not the best place to write *crónica*. The greater visibility of the *crónica* and the focus on political and social events shaping the recent history of Latin America, has allowed the circulation of books that frequently have become bestsellers. The relationship of the new *cronistas* with established publications is characterized by the absence of contractual demands. The work of Fabrizio Jaramillo Madir, for example, can be found in the excellent Mexican magazine *Proceso*; but he also can be found in the cultural pages of the daily *La Reforma*. In his peripatetic experience as a *cronista*, his work can also be found in *Letras Libres* and *Chilango*.

While some of these writers are regular names in these publications, the great majority of them are in permanent search for new publication platforms. Many are self-published. And it is also true that the Latin America *crónica* has established at present its own publishing universe. The network of magazines is vast and at the same time dynamic. They are publications that appeal to the world of ideas, aestheticism and analysis. They are independent publications established by journalists with the assistance of daring entrepreneurs who are more concerned with the editorial line rather than the commercial demands.

And indeed, publications come and go. Some stay longer. Some are short-lived. A few are published online and a few can be considered consolidated hard copy publications. As Alonso (2007) points out these magazines are not a great business, however, they have survived thanks to a risky editorial approach.

The Colombian magazine *Gatopardo* is without any doubt one of the main platforms for the modern Latin American *crónica*. *Gatopardo* is among the first Latin American magazine entirely dedicated to the *crónica*. Published first in 2002 it defines itself – and here there is no lack of humility – as the most influential magazine in Latin America. It has, according to the magazine, 190,000 subscriptions.

“ It is a publication where reality is reflected in a different manner by reducing the distance between the narrator, the stories and readers (González Quintero et al, 2013). ”

El Malpensante was born in 1996 in Colombia and Peru's *Etiqueta Negra* was established in 2002 by *cronista* Julio Villanueva Chang. *Etiqueta Negra* plays an important place in the magazines of *crónica(s)*. Published in Peru, Chile and Panama, the magazine defines itself as a publication for the 'absent-minded'. Some are published digitally and in hard copy, while others are just in digital format. While both magazines were highly influenced by *The New Yorker*, *Esquire* and *Atlantic Monthly*, they have a strong Latin American flavour. The network of publications also includes *Soho* (Colombia), *Lamujerdemivida* and *Orsái* (Argentina), *Frontera D* (Spain), *Pie izquierdo* (Bolivia), *Marcapasos* (Venezuela), *Letras Libres* (México), *The Clinic* (Chile).

Books of *crónicas* are the great news story of both the Latin American and Spanish publishing industries. As they are long texts – as Cuartero Naranjo (2014) suggests – they are perfectly adapted to the book format. And it is in Argentina, a country with a strong tradition in well-researched and stylistically attractive *crónica*, that books of journalism by journalists are financially underpinning the 'political economy' of the local publishing industry. In the cash registers of Latin American bookstores the *crónica* – in book form – has long displaced fiction.

And these are books that, in the same tradition of newspaper or magazine articles, are framed around the fundamental social and political realities. In Argentina, for example, during the government of Carlos Saul Menem, the production of *crónicas* examining corruption, the decisive characteristic of this government, grew at a fast pace.

There are also those who, at high financial risk, have been publishing their work in book form. Such is the case of Rocio Montes. A Chilean journalist, Montes is the co-author with Nancy Castillo of the best selling book *Hijas de General: la Historia que cruza a Bachelet y Matthei* (Editorial Catalonia 2013). Montes and Castillo, who

believes the *crónica* helps to understand the world, explore the fate of two women, Michelle Bachelet, the Chilean president of two terms and daughter of Air Force General Alberto Bachelet – assassinated by the military dictatorship of Pinochet (1973-1989) – and Evelyn Matthei, a right wing politician and the daughter of Air Force General Fernando Matthei, a member of the Pinochet military junta. In *The New Yorker*, John Lee Anderson described the *crónica* as heartrending and as exemplary for the history of Chile (2013).

The boom in number, and financial success, of books dedicated to the *crónica* has encouraged publishing houses to develop collections dedicated to the genre. This is the case of Santillana that has created the collection *Aguilar*; Random House with *Debate* and Anageamawith *Crónicas*. In 2006, Planeta publishing house established the award Crónica Planeta and Seix Barral in partnership with the Foundation for New Journalism.

Conclusion

There is a sense of reluctance in calling the *crónica* a new Latin America 'boom', but certainly it seems to be one of the newest trends in the region's rich journalistic tradition. The *crónica* is today one of the most exciting writing journeys undertaken by what can be described as the post-dictatorship writers. One of the most powerful dimensions of the *crónica* is its pan-Latin Americanism: it flourishes throughout Latin America.

In an era of 'media decadence' (Keane, 2013), the *crónica* has not only challenged the hegemonic forms of journalism, but it also has given a new dimension to Latin American non-fiction writing. The modern *crónica* in Latin America operates mainly outside the boundaries of commercial journalism and in fact tends to disrupt the official story conveyed by the hegemonic news media. The *crónica* is a transgressor, and by tackling the social tensions in modern Latin America, it brings to the public sphere subaltern actors, events, places and ideas.

The Latin American contemporary *crónica* addresses very troubling and unresolved issues in society, such as violence, exclusion, corruption and impunity. It does this in ways that resonate with readers as they can deeply identify with these issues. In the context of the crisis of traditional journalism, the *crónica* is not only vital because it addresses issues unresolved in the post-dictatorship period, but also because it gives voice to the disappointment and disenchantment with so-called leftist governments in the post-dictatorship era and, in particular, their concessions and complicity with neoliberalism and authoritarianism.

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