

BOOK REVIEW

ANNA MARIA KARCEWSKA¹

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University of Białystok, Poland

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7487-7807>

*Latin American
Documentary Narratives.
The Intersections
of Storytelling and
Journalism in
Contemporary Literature*
by Liliana Chávez Díaz,
Bloomsbury Publishing,
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The Mexican journalist Juan Villoro claims that the Latin American chronicle (*crónica*) is the platypus of prose. Similarly to the platypus that brings to mind various species (a duck, an otter, a beaver) and remains outside one rigid category, the chronicle, which resembles different genres, is in fact a genre of its own. Like the novel, it narrativizes the world of characters, creates an illusion of life, and transports the reader to the centre of events; like the short story, it compresses a dramatic sense into a short space,

¹ Address for correspondence: University of Białystok, Faculty of Philology, Centre for Literary Studies, Pl. NZS 1, 15-420 Białystok, Poland. E-mail: a.karczevska@uwb.edu.pl

thus implying that reality is meaningful and speaks a language of its own; like the interview, it contains dialogues; like the modern theatre-play, it reorders spatial and temporal elements of the plot-line; like the Greco-Latin theatre-play, it features a polyphony of witnesses (acting like a kind of chorus); like the essay, it puts forward strong opinions; and like the autobiography, it is informed by memorial tonality and a first-person perspective. The catalogue of influences can be extended almost *ad infinitum* (Villoro 2016: n.p.). The Venezuelan journalist Boris Muñoz maintains that if the chronicle is like a platypus, reporters are more like bats, because despite being mammals like most land animals, they fly. To fly, in this figurative sense, means to use the language to give writing a certain verbal aestheticism and a use of the imagination that makes it literary (Muñoz 2012: 630).

In the 19th century, Latin American writers began experimenting with hybrid forms of narrative. It was a quest for new ways of storytelling, for a hybrid form, in which, according to Anibal Gonzales and Alejo Carpentier, the journalist and the novelist became the same person. In Latin American culture there is no clear definition of the chronicle. Alberto Fuguet, a Chilean writer, admits that he does not know what a chronicle is, and that he fails to distinguish between journalism and fiction when it comes to writing, because they represent the same “gaze” (Aguilar 2010: 159). What is more, the chronicle is not the only genre practiced by Latin American journalists. As Mark Kramer says, “the genre of telling true stories goes by many names” (Kramer & Call 2007: xv). Chronicle (*crónica*), reportage (*reportaje*), interview (*entrevista*), *testimonio*, creative nonfiction, to name but a few, all these occupy an in-between space stretching from journalism to fiction, and all of them can be called the platypuses of prose, or better, as Liliana Chávez Díaz proposes, “Latin American documentary narratives”.

Liliana Chávez Díaz, who specializes in contemporary Latin American narrative, and who has been a cultural and investigative journalist, in her recently published book *Latin American Documentary Narratives. The Intersections of Storytelling and Journalism in Contemporary Literature* ventures into complex terrain to contribute to our understanding of various hybrid journalistic genres (such as *testimonio*, *crónica*, new journalism, literary reportage, non-fiction). She decides to give them one common name: “Latin American documentary narratives” in the face of their hybridity and fluid boundaries, and explores them as a Latin American cultural phenomenon.

Chapter 1 constitutes a historical overview of *testimonio*, *crónica* and literary journalism, and discusses their stylistical differences. The question that arises is why the author presents only three of the hybrid journalistic genres practiced in Latin America and does not take part in the discussion on the differences between *reportaje*, *crónica*, *entrevista*, and *noticia*, and does not present their history as was the case with *testimonio*, *crónica* and literary journalism. The author briefly mentions *reportaje* and *crónica* (79), and interview and news (112), and returns to them later, in Chapter 6. However, it is

unclear why she does not give them more attention in Chapter 1, which was supposed to constitute “a historical overview of diverse genres” (8). Such prominent journalists as Germán Castro Caycedo, Juan José Hoyos and Daniel Samper Pizano², who discussed the complexities of history and the nomenclature of the aforementioned genres, are not even mentioned in Chávez’s book. However, once Chávez moves to the analysis of the primary texts, *Latin American Documentary Narratives* shines. In Chapter 1 the author also proposes a new reading of “documentary narratives”, which concentrates on the process of production, style of writing, ethical approach, and the encounter of the journalists with their informants.

In Chapter 2 Chávez concentrates on two works: Gabriel García Márquez’s *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*³ (1955) and Rodolfo Walsh’s *Operation Massacre*⁴ (1957), which are credited as the first major non-fiction novels of investigative journalism and antecedents of contemporary documentary narratives. Chávez undertakes their detailed analysis.

Chapter 3 focuses on the life stories and works of Elena Poniatowska and Carlos Monsiváis, who is one of the founding fathers of Latin American narrative journalism in the twenty-first century. Chávez analyses the works of these two chroniclers of Mexico City. The chapter describes their different worldviews, styles, methodology, their emotional commitment to their work, and the representation of ‘others’.

In Chapter 4 Chávez examines the narratives of Argentinian writer Tomás Eloy Martínez and the history behind them, and proposes a palimpsestic reading of Martínez’s various works and visions of Juan Perón (Peronist cycle). At a time when the Argentine press was in crisis, journalists disappeared, and Perón maintained state censorship, Martínez believed that to write about Argentinian reality one had to resort to fiction, which, following William Faulkner’s idea, was far “more true” than any kind of journalism (qtd in Thompson 1979: 106). However, journalists have given testimony to life in Latin America, perhaps more vivid and more complex than the novel. And

2 For further discussion, see, for example: Juan José Hoyos. 2009. *La pasión de contar: el periodismo narrativo en Colombia, 1638-2000*, Medellín: Ediciones Hombre Nuevo; Daniel Samper Pizano. 2004. *Antología de grandes reportajes colombianos*. Bogotá: Aguilar.

3 The author of *Latin American Documentary Narratives* used the original titles of these works in Spanish. The full title is *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor: Who Drifted on a Liferaft for Ten Days Without Food or Water, Was Proclaimed a National Hero, Kissed by Beauty Queens, Made Rich Through Publicity, and was Then Spurned by the Government and Forgotten for All Time*. First English language edition: 1986, translated by Randolph Hogan.

4 First English language edition: 2013, translated by Daniella Gitlin.

although their texts often read like good novels, they are about facts. Their language springs from urgency, from necessity, and achieves a total representation of life.

Chapter 5 concentrates on social and environmental issues in the works of the Mexican Juan Villoro and the Argentinian Martín Caparrós, who, according to Chávez, are “two of the best chroniclers in contemporary Latin America” (2022: 135). Chávez analyses the research methods and literary devices used by these chroniclers in their respective works *The Fear in the Mirror. A Chronicle of the Earthquake in Chile* (2010) and *A Moon. A Hypertravel Diary* (2009), which were born out of their private writing and recount dramatic experiences in Chile, in the case of Villoro, and in different parts of the world in the case of Caparro’s work.

The presence of violence in the history of Latin America has been continuous and has manifested itself in different ways. Violence is now recognized as a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon that permeates the core of many Latin American societies, and is also interlinked with an extremely high incidence of insecurity and fear. The different manifestations of violence contrast, overlap and intertwine with each other to form a very complex layering of multiple practices. In recent decades, Latin America has also produced the highest rates of urbanization, poverty and exclusion, and it has definitely been a place where being a journalist has often been a dangerous profession (Moser & McIlwaine 2004: 41). Chapter 6 analyses what Chávez calls “documentary metafiction”, life stories of violence published by such authors as Leila Guerriero (Argentina), Cristian Alarcón (Chile), Arturo Fontaine Talavera (Chile) and Santiago Roncagliolo (Peru). The author examines the ways they represent ‘others’ in times of violent oppressive regimes and social crisis, and the relationship between the journalists and their sources.

Appendix to the book consists of transcripts of interviews Chávez conducted with Elena Poniatowska, Leila Guerriero, Christian Alarcón, Arturo Fontaine, Santiago Roncagliolo, Francisco Goldman, Martín Caparrós, and Juan Villoro. It seems unclear why Francisco Goldman is on the list of the interviewed journalists. He is a US novelist and journalist who covered the wars in Central America and wrote a nonfiction account of the assassination of a Guatemalan Catholic Bishop in a 2007 book *The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed the Bishop?*, but he writes in English. Shouldn’t his journalism be analysed in the context of American journalism?

Although Chávez’s analysis of different journalistic genres remains at times unclear, and becomes foggier in an international context (new journalism, *reportaż zaan-gażowany*, literary reportage, *periodismo narrativo*, etc.), the book’s strength lies in the brilliant reading of the corpus of the texts. Chávez’s work is an important study of the Latin American hybrid journalistic narratives, the platypuses of prose. It is important also from the perspective of postcolonial trauma narratives as Chávez analyses the texts

which show interest in the experiences and sufferings of those belonging to non-Western cultures (see: Craps 2013).

Journalism is a profession at the service of the right to know, and the documentary narratives analysed in Chávez's book give voice to those who have suffered. They draw attention to exploitation and injustice, and describe the reality that might otherwise be unknown. Victims have a right to tell their own stories, and they have a right to be recognized as legitimate sources of truth. Storytelling and "narrative truth" contribute to "the process of reconciliation by giving voice to individual subjective experiences" (Borraine 2002: 152). It is also a way "to speak for others and to others" (Felman 1995: 14). Bhabha claims that the right to narrate means the right to be heard, to be recognized and represented, and continues that:

The arts and humanities contribute to the process of cultural translation by propagating and protecting what I call the "right to narrate"—the authority to tell stories, recount or recast histories that create the web of social life and change the direction of its flow. The right to narrate is not simply a linguistic act; it is also a metaphor for the fundamental human interest in freedom itself, the right to be heard—to be recognized and represented. (Bhabha 2014: n.p.)

Such a view was propagated in the 1980s by the law and literature movement, and the legal storytelling movement. In the 1990s, they tried to converge studies of legal and witness testimony into a storytelling imperative, and they entered into dialogue with Latin American *testimonio* and trauma studies (Stone Peters 2012: 20-21). Engaged storytelling has the capacity to illuminate history, time, and experience through narratives that invite listeners to find their respective places within these stories, and to actively move beyond them. Stories, to use Hayden White's thought, translate knowing into telling. They allow for coherence, integrity, fullness and closure, especially in the case of trauma experience. Stories transmit messages, impose a meaning on the events, and help survivors of trauma make sense of their experiences. Stories and storytelling are central to human experience and understanding. Liliana Chávez Díaz's book is dedicated to it, and it also opens a lively international discussion about the many facets of Latin American documentary narratives. Among the points in discussions are the parallels between Latin American documentary narratives and their North American cousin. In the period of the 1950s-1970s there were two parallel literary journalisms in Latin and Anglo America. Both registered the social, political, and economic transformations that were occurring on both continents. Among the more notable authors of such journalism in the United States were Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Jimmy Breslin and John Sack. Among those in Latin America were Gabriel García Márquez, Rodolfo Walsh, and Miguel Barnet. Both groups produced some of the most

compelling narrative nonfiction in their respective languages. But although their style of writing and the techniques they used were similar (recording everyday details, detailed descriptions, scene-by-scene construction, for example), the political and cultural contexts in which they wrote their stories were very different, and that is why their narrative projects were different in scope and nature (Calvi 2010: 63-64).

The book also opens a discussion about the representation of the Other, truth-telling, and shows that more research in this area is needed, including the documentary narratives from other countries in Latin America. Chávez shows her readers that documentary narratives form a group of interrelated genres with fluid boundaries and flimsy barriers. They are also related to others, such as travel literature, memoirs, historical and ethnographic essays, and fictional or semi-fictional literature. To show that Chávez entered murky waters in taking up the topic of documentary narratives, suffice it to quote Darío Jaramillo Agudelo about Villoro's definition of the platypus of prose: "the platypus is much more platypus than the one Villoro saw as a platypus"⁵ (Jaramillo Agudelo 2012: 16). The topic is a challenging one but the author coped with the matter extremely well, and her book is a vital contribution to the field. *Latin American Documentary Narratives*, despite the aforementioned minor shortcomings, is an obligatory read for anyone interested in the subject, and gives its readers many jumping-off points from which to immerse themselves in this field of inquiry.

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5 "[...] el ornitorrinco es mucho más ornitorrinco que lo que le vio Villoro de ornitorrinco"

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Anna Maria Karczewska is an Assistant Professor in the Centre for Literary Studies at the University of Białystok, Poland. She is a graduate in English and Spanish Philology. She has a Ph.D. in cultural studies from the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw. Her current research interests revolve around Latin American culture and Latin American literature.