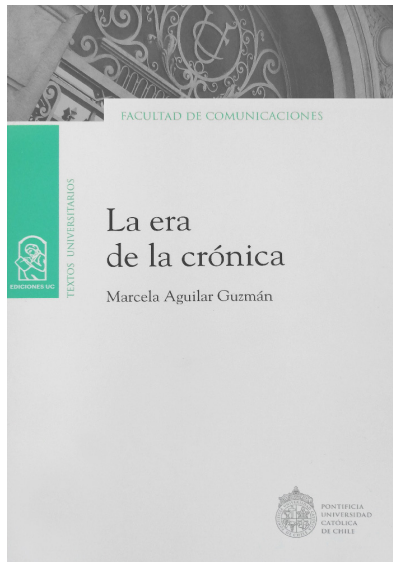


The Age of Chronicles

Marcela Aguilar Guzmán. (2019). *La Era de la Crónica*. Santiago, Chile: Ediciones UC. 175 páginas. ISBN 978-956-14-2436-4



What is time? Where is the gap, in fiction or reality? How far do words go? Do stories in some fashion move us, touch us closely, build pressure, or destabilize power, arrogance, discover frontiers or create new ones? So how far do words take us? As my reading of this book progresses it becomes increasingly impossible to ignore the buzzing hornet Javier Darío Restrepo, a Master of the Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano Foundation (today known as the Gabo Foundation), was talking about. That hornet and the din it makes, masked by letters and ventured risk, research, ethics put to the test, a touch of epic and a pinch of failure, Susana Rotker appears in equal measure on every page. Aguilar has taken up again and again a thread that, after the death of the Venezuelan author, was pulled out of the rennet (*La invención de la crónica*, 1992).

It is in the above manner that the read intersects with chronicles out of India, and parallels with more modern chroniclers that made the attempt to narrate and depict the “Other” America, like those such as José Martí or Rubén Darío. From there the next steps take us to Alma Guillermoprieto, Carlos Monsiváis, Elena Poniatowska, to name just three who, from Mexico, have given us a key part of understanding Latin America. The Age of Chronicles by Marcela Aguilar is based on the stories and biographies of authors of the present, readily identifiable in the “unlivable” experiences their lives unfold in, or in the wellbeing of affluence glimpsed furtively in the pieces gleaned from the frontiers of power.

Texts and contexts are moved along with Aguilar, shifting from a point on a pendular swing in which the construction of Latin American subjectivity, particularly herein, seems to generate a performative act. This act faces off with innumerable social, historical and cultural conditions that pressure the writers and the subjects of their writing. This study does not intend to add still more layers of analysis, but rather to head toward untangling the skein of creating literature from a journalistic perspective. And she does so with surgical precision, without excessively jeopardizing acute political views on representation and what it implies. The book then acts as an extended map, rolled out on a flat table, that presumes the existence of deep and profound continents in which each cartographical point generates its own authorship at its own scale.

From the introduction all objectives are made clear, because what is immediately apparent is a strategy to banish the idea that the chronicle is nothing more than a minor genre. If anything, the opposite is true, it is a formula, a practice, routine, a way of

life in storytelling. They are the stories of long histories, riotous in their account of abandonment, burning hope, of dystopian metropolises, escape points, rousing ovations to power and in contempt of power. With the previous the author proposes searching for the events that breed historicity between essays, prologues, columns and interviews.

So much has been written on the chronicle in recent years (maybe not quite at the level of Rotker), that Aguilar looks for clues to build maps on a scale of her own, articulating her reflections with the discursive materiality that manifests in so many bodies of work, divergencies, exiles, popular celebrations, crime, political challenges and above all “politics” and written rhetoric. The polis and the manner in which they are inhabited are a constant in this cultural industry, which magazines like the temporarily suspended Peruvian publication *Etiqueta Negra* and others have earmarked as a sign of the times. “So, is there any distinctive hallmark trait in the new Latin American chronicle? Or has its media visibility been due to something other than the text itself?” (p.18). Aguilar poses the previous question to continue introducing in this readers’ read, or even to those that have barely glanced at the printed pages or distilled digital output of Leila Guerriero, Martín Caparrós, Alberto Salcedo Ramos, Josefina Licitra, Juan Pablo Meneses, Gabriela Wiener, Julio Villanueva Chang, Cristian Alarcón, Juan Villoro, Daniel Titingier, Alberto Fuguet, Juan Cristóbal Peña, Marcela Turati and Rodrigo Fluxá. They are the landmarks in Aguilar’s mapped landscape, leaving out dozens of other voices that, a little further removed from center, run on a path of lesser media attention.

In the first chapter Aguilar establishes a starting point in history, a

quick start that nonetheless moves on multiple levels, creating spatial motion between the Indian Chronicles of the “Conquista” of the XIX and XX centuries, and the current chronicles, linked to the new American Journalism, Latin American literary journalism and the spaces they are produced in (media such as *El Faro* or *Anfibia* are essential as is the Gabo Foundation – the new but failed boom? – *The New Yorker* or *Gatopardo*), circulation and consumption (dispersed, fragmented and neoliberal audiences).

In regards to the previous, the author establishes the following for the current state of affairs,

it is difficult to define the Latin American chronicle given that it has scattered into multiple lines, from the more contemplative such as the work of Roberto Merino or Francisco Mouat in Chile, to the investigative journalism of Juan Cristobal Peña or Javier Rebolledo, also in Chile. If the modernist chronicle is defined to a significant extent by the supportive medium; the newspaper and magazine (two forms of printed media that reached enormous levels of circulation and influence in the first half of the XX century), the contemporary chronicle is published in scant printed media that have, additionally, lost circulation and influence since the information first began distribution on digital platforms (p.37).

“Who talks and whose voice speaks out in the chronicle?” is the title of the second chapter, a central space in which I’m sure journalism students are grateful. To an extent it becomes a form of manual that dissects fragments to hit upon the characteristics of the times (music relates to the disposition of words), the point of

view and the construction process, where voices are both the shape and underlying skeletal structure. The textual analysis method sustains the thesis that frames this study. It is, as mentioned in the book “the dialogical dimension of text as first presented by Bajtin in 1956: no chronicle is written in a vacuum, and every chronicle responds to a previous text and one can recognize the dialogue, despite there being decades or even centuries between one statement and another, between a question and an answer”. A notable mention from Aguilar bringing Bajtin into the picture.

“What does the chronicle relate?” is the opening line for the book’s third chapter. It is perhaps the hub around which the rest of the book revolves. Here the literature makes it possible to really dig into each point of the map, to dig right down to the underlying motives (according to Frenzel). Each approach begins from pieces of stories, and the findings lose none of the appeal, mainly due to a reversal of sort, where interior becomes exterior (public and private interact to create a tension possessed of a degree of humor, sarcasm, fondness, structures with which to track emerging, dominant and residual traits in a current context). There is no rhetoric, and some depth is lacking in power and politics, the unlivable, in the treatise of “Amazonas y heroínas”; “Añoranza de países lejanos”; “Arcadía y el salvaje noble”; “Bajada al infierno”; “Bandido justo, rebelde”; “Codicia, avaricia; sed de oro, avidez de dinero”; “Emigrante, emigración, ídolo lejano recuperado”; “Ermitaño, estrafalario”; “Tiranía, tiranicidio, traidor”; “Vida deseada y maldita en una isla”. Motives that leave no space for extremities or fracture.

And it’s from this point on where the question of Historicity once again opens up for dialogue and becomes a

segue to the fourth chapter: “What do they say about the chronicle?”. Its hybrid nature (Villoro called it the duck-billed platypus of prose) is central to the analysis of those that scrutinize the chronicle form. “Truth” is also at its core, because there is no room for opportunism as Aguilar quite adeptly demonstrates in citing Rosanna Reguillo; here there certainly is an extremeness when it comes to analyzing certain texts under the prism of the resistance to domestication. In this chapter the author describes and gives color to the map of those that analyze the texts as though they were spectral, ephemeral places that play home to hegemonic discourse, or that which argues the “paradigm of conflict”. It is in this place where the “truth” of testimony that speaks to oppression as a central location for staging images, a collage, printing exploded forms and paths of acquiring knowledge and structures for sentiment outside the spaces regulated by the center and the fringes of quotidian life.

Lastly, and continuing with the thesis structure, the author leads us to conclusions in the fifth chapter: “What are we talking about when we talk about the chronicle (a reflection on genres)”. In epilogue form the last section articulates from the perspective of cultural studies, and there is greater density in her own analysis, which gives meaning to the path taken from a panoramic outlook, manual format and thesis structure. It is a form of theoretical framework put on its head with authors like Todorov, Bajtin, Verón, Tesche and Foucault, supporting a dialogue with the preceding materiality. A framework for interpretation necessary to reinstalling the chronicle as a space in which, like others, the world of meanings is the ultimate prize.

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