

INTRODUCTION

On May 15, 2017, when I was about to finish the first draft of this book, Javier Valdez was shot to death in his native Culiacán. He was the sixth journalist killed in Mexico that year but would not be the last. His death came as a shock to the journalistic community because until then his reputation and broad recognition nationally and internationally seemed to be a shield for journalists like him. His assassination proved them wrong: when it comes to reporting on local violence, no one is safe in Mexico.

When I got the news of his death, I thought that all I had written had become meaningless, that no matter how sophisticated my argument or indeed any argument about the risks journalists run, when facing an assassination like his, words fail. But, as Eve Sedgwick said, “Obsessions are our most durable forms of cultural capital,” and mine regarding the hardships of journalists’ lives and those of their loved ones were still there. Valdez was the first journalist whose work I (ever) analyzed, and from him I learned about the need to understand the conditions under which journalists do their job. I remember, now in disbelief, when I saw him in Mexico City in 2009, days after a bomb had exploded in the offices of the weekly *Riodoce*, the publication he cofounded and where he worked until the day he was killed. He was still shaking in panic. Eight years passed before his assassination. Eight years during which he lived in fear.

Even if my book is not enough to change the fear with which many journalists in the region live and work, this book might (I hope) give them some comfort, not so much for its arguments but mostly because it is a product of care—even if that care appears in the intangible form of an intellectual approach that seeks to understand their ordeal.

Our projects have their own genetic histories. They are the product of our academic trajectories, our intellectual curiosity, and—I believe—a certain fate traced by what we've read, a few unforeseen events, and personal encounters with people who may have changed the path of our research. Javier Valdez might have planted the seeds of the questions raised in this book, perhaps subtly already present in my previous book about the representation of drug trafficking, *Narrating Narcos*. It was also while I was writing that book that the Chilean-Argentine journalist Cristian Alarcón invited me to participate in two workshops he organized with the Fundación Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano (FNPI). The first one was in Mexico City in 2009 (where I saw Javier Valdez again); it was a meeting Alarcón organized to facilitate a dialogue between scholars and journalists who study and cover violence in Latin America. The second was in Buenos Aires in 2011 and followed the format of the workshops organized by the FNPI, in which young reporters arrive with the draft of a story and many questions about how to transform it into a *crónica*.¹ These two events were defining moments that have guided the reflections exposed here; they enabled me to be part of the dynamics of the FNPI and meet journalists from all over the region.

In the first meeting I heard journalists speaking candidly about the risks and challenges of their profession. They shared experiences about the complications faced when dealing with police corruption, the emotional pressure of listening to people who are searching for their loved ones with no support or attention from authorities, the courage needed to understand the complex manifestations of resilience, and the self-restraint needed to write objectively about the cruelty displayed in the many forms of killing. In the second meeting, I heard about the struggles they experienced when writing. I cannot adequately express what a humbling experience it was to witness their excruciating search for words to describe the suffering they witness as they listen to victims' voices and report them without obliterating or embellishing their words. It was likewise humbling to learn about the limited or nonexistent support they receive from the institutions for which they work. During those meetings it became clear to me that the human drama of violence and trauma was not only miles away in the streets where those journalists met the subjects of their stories—it was also there, at the Museo Rufino Tamayo in Mexico City and at the Universidad Nacional San Martín in Buenos Aires, where the meetings took place. I knew that if I wanted to analyze their work, I had to understand their world from within.

Journalism is the main (if not the only) channel through which we learn about the region's most pressing problems, and it is through journalistic works that we are politically challenged, intellectually engaged, and affectively moved.² Even in an age of “fake news” and dramatic technological changes, Michael Taussig's idea that the main way we learn about our “cultures of terror” is through the words of others is still valid. It is precisely because we live in the era of fake news that we have to better understand the risks journalists face, because they are greater than ever. We also need to consider the way technology has redefined the craft of written journalism.

While my goal is to include in the analysis all these elements, the object of this study is very specific. This book focuses on *crónicas* reporting on social suffering, violent events, and trauma. Since writing about these topics demands much physical and emotional energy, as well as a considerable intellectual investment, I am interested in reading these *crónicas* not only as written texts but mainly as cultural phenomena; I want to see what lies before, after, and *in between* the process of their production. Most analyses of violence focus either on the violent events themselves or on the way in which such events are represented. There are not many works that show the material conditions in which journalists work, the demands (and changes) within the journalistic field of production, and the emotional challenges journalists face when writing about violence, suffering, and trauma. I explore this universe. To that end, I carried out fieldwork in Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico. I conducted extensive interviews with five journalists, I did participant observation, and in most cases I became the journalist's shadow. During this process I realized that, although their work describes massacres, forced disappearances, migratory experiences, physical aggressions, assassinations, stories of corruption, the effects of impunity, and so on, what drives the creation and shapes the form of these narratives are the journalists' affective responses to the events they describe and the people with whom they speak: their feelings of empathy, solidarity, compassion, indignation, frustration, and rage and their attachment to the subjects of their stories. Their *crónicas* are motivated by a profound commitment to promoting social justice.³ These values define the *crónicas* analyzed here; although they may not necessarily be articulated in their texts, my aim is to make them visible.

Many of the arguments raised in this book are in direct dialogue with recent works from the field of media and communication studies, especially those focusing on the new challenges journalists face around the world. But

most of the works I came across, especially those about Latin American journalism, offer either a quantitative analysis or a sociological perspective of the changes that journalism has gone through in recent decades. The contribution of this book to that field is a close reading of the crónicas together with an ethnographic account of what journalists experience on the ground.⁴

The aim of this analysis, however, is not only to understand the complexities of the journalists' culture. I want to read their narratives while having a broad picture of what defines them and how were they produced. As a literary critic, I place narrative at the core of my work. Sometimes my own descriptions and narrative style exceed traditional literary or ethnographic analyses, as I try to give more nuanced depictions of the journalists' work and emotions.

Replicating the methodology used in my previous book, I borrow Bourdieu's notion of "radical contextualization" as laid out in his *Practical Reasons*. That notion combines analyses of the immanent elements of the text (form, style, and structure) with its exogenous elements (the trajectory of the writer, that writer's symbolic capital). I consider cultural context, the set of rules that defines how a work is to be produced, the way journalists negotiate how they will represent the reality they've witnessed, and the place they occupy in their respective fields of production.⁵ To make this point clear, I borrow Rodney Benson and Eric Neveu's straightforward description of Bourdieu's concept of the field: "Bourdieu's field theory follows from Weber and Durkheim in portraying modernity as a process of differentiation into semiautonomous and increasingly specialized spheres of action (e.g., fields of politics, economics, religion, cultural production). Both within and among these spheres—or fields—relations of power fundamentally structure human action" (2–3). Understanding journalists' actions within the field includes paying attention to the institutional support they receive (if any) and the parameters within which their work is judged and recognized. The analysis also incorporates descriptions of the journalists' working routines, as well as the pressures and rigors imposed on them by a rapidly changing profession.⁶

During a panel discussion at the 2009 FNPI meeting in Mexico City, journalists talked about the need to learn a strategy to "administrate fear." This (I learned) does not mean to control fear. It means to learn how to work *with* fear, following one's intuition when it is time to leave the scene of a crime or to stop pursuing the thread of a story, as well as knowing what information should be omitted when writing a crónica. This quasi-instinctive relationship with the

dangers imposed by the profession is a demand that plays a key role in Latin American journalists' work, and many times this is a matter of life and death. The expression "administration of fear" was also a euphemism to describe traumatic working conditions. Thus, a radical contextualization of the works I examine includes an exploration of the journalists' feelings: the emotional strains when writing under threat and in contexts of extreme violence.⁷ The aim of making these emotions and feelings objects of study and inquiry is also to understand them as possible catalysts for political action (Cvetkovich, *Depression 2–6*).⁸

Some scholars could argue that incorporating analyses of the journalists' feelings and emotional involvement with the people they write about or with the topic of their story goes against the claim of objectivity that, though controversial, remains at the center of the journalistic *doxa*.⁹ I am not going to delve into this controversy, but in this book, drawing upon Cathy Caruth's ideas, I argue that "the inner link between the experience of trauma and its theory or between the language of survivors and the language of theoretical description, need not imply a lack of objectivity of truth, but the very possibility of speaking from within a crisis that cannot simply be known or assimilated" (117). Thus, I suggest that analyzing journalists' material working conditions and their emotional and affective investment in the stories they tell is an objective way of exploring the ethical challenges of writing about trauma and social suffering.

I use the expression "social suffering" in the broad sense that the sociologist Eva Illouz does in her studies of love. Illouz moves beyond the classic notion articulated by anthropologists (social suffering produced by forms of structural violence) to emphasize its cultural dimension and its manifestation in emotions such as "anxiety, feelings of worthlessness, or depression, all embedded in ordinary life and ordinary relationships" (15).¹⁰ In a similar vein, when the literary critic and activist Ann Cvetkovich studies the cultural dimension of trauma, rather than the pathology defined by medical discourse, she analyzes the evident traces of trauma in the ways it is "connected to the texture of everyday experience" (*Archive 4*). This broad approach to trauma studies enables her to pay attention not only to the experiences of victims but also to those who (like journalists) "stand in the vicinity of trauma and thus are marked by it" (4). Trauma, for Cvetkovich, is a point of entry "into a vast archive of feelings, the many forms of love, rage, intimacy, grief, shame, and more" (7). Illouz and Cvetkovich explore how emotions—as a constitutive

part of our everyday lives—are registered, culturally codified, manifested, and brought into the public sphere.

When I say that my analysis includes observations of journalists' emotions and feelings, I am interested neither in emphasizing the subjective perspective of the journalists nor in conducting a psychoanalytic study of their narratives. I follow Illouz's and Cvetkovich's ideas on the cultural ways these emotions are codified. I include biographic information on each author and excerpts of our interviews, both to show how they negotiate those emotions when representing the pain of others and to consider the circumstances—personal and professional—under which they write. As will be shown, these crónicas are narratives of collective feelings of fear, frustration, and suffering, and in that sense they are evidence of our “trauma cultures” (Cvetkovich, *Archive* 10). As written texts, however, they are also enactments of trauma, because writing about the pain of others means to deal—in socially and professionally accepted ways—with feelings of anxiety, stress, depression, and the most ambivalent forms of attachment. As I heard journalists say, *writing is also a way of overcoming fear or administrating it.*

But writing has its own obstacles. When describing the everyday lives of people affected by violence, journalists are ensnared in the difficulties of writing compelling, informative, and empathic stories while giving adequate voice to the human experiences they describe. They are challenged by the constant risk of transforming empathy into condescension, of making misery sound like lack of dignity, of transforming suffering into a spectacle, of reducing the victim to a stereotype, or of making denunciations appear as self-promotion. While cronistas face these challenges as an inherent aspect of their profession, they also experience them in individual and particular ways that are the product of the place they occupy in the journalistic field of production and the transformation of crónica as genre. To better understand these trends, it is necessary to go over the main historical points related to the production of crónicas and the changes that have defined the field of journalistic production in recent decades.

Some Thoughts about the Field

In the modern history of Latin American written culture, the crónica has been considered both a literary genre and a high-end journalistic narrative defined by its aesthetic component. The crónica, however, has evolved throughout

the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, and some of the works analyzed in this book may not completely fall under this rather broad description of the genre. As shown in the chapters of this book, Patricia Nieto's works have a clearly defined aesthetic component, while Sandra Rodríguez Nieto's story is a traditional example of investigative reporting. The works of Daniela Rea, Marcela Turati, and María Eugenia Ludueña would stand somewhere in the middle. This variety of styles raises some questions that merit consideration: How are we to define the differences? Or how is it that these forms of writing have (or have not) become different genres within the literary or the journalistic field of production? Do journalists and literary critics agree in the way they conceive and define these works?

In his book about watchdog journalism, or investigative reporting, Silvio Waisbord states that such reporting "addresses (but not necessarily explores) moral transgressions: but it does not monopolize journalism's treatment of moral issues" (xviii). I would argue here that *crónicas* are texts that explore moral transgressions, so the questions raised above go beyond the mere classification of texts.

Waisbord states that the development of investigative reporting has to be understood in the specific context in which professional journalism emerged and evolved, and he argues that since the nineteenth century South American journalism has been defined by partisan views.¹¹ In many cases it has even been thought of as a way of doing politics by other means. Journalism in this region has followed the French model, which has historically privileged a *periodismo de opinión* (journalism of opinion), in contrast to the US model, which has traditionally praised itself for its independence from politics and the state. This independence was articulated through ideas of objectivity and impartiality, with the set goal of giving information, or facts, over opinion. The development of this model was possible because of the expansion of markets in the United States and its large consumer class. In contrast, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the consumer class in South America was relatively small; even in larger and more affluent countries such as Brazil and Argentina readership was limited and levels of literacy were low.

After World War II, the US model became more influential throughout the Americas. With the expansion of local markets, each country incorporated aspects of this model at its own pace (Waisbord 10). Nevertheless, Waisbord argues, South American journalism has never been completely autonomous because it has always been tied to political and economic interests. This

explains why he emphasizes the need to give a contextual account of “*how* reporters expose wrongdoing and whether they prioritize or, conversely, eschew journalistic facts” (xix; emphasis added).¹² For Waisbord, Rodolfo Walsh’s work is an extraordinary example of investigative reporting taken to the extreme: “Two features are particularly striking in Walsh’s work: non-fiction writing that wove real events [journalism] into a fictional narrative [literature] and the concept that journalism necessarily was committed to specific political causes” (30). He continues, “Unlike the traditional ‘journalism of opinion’ that was driven by journalists’ beliefs rather than ‘journalistic facts,’ Walsh’s *accusations* drew from [his] extensive collection of information” (30; emphasis added). Walsh’s extraordinary skill in combining literature and facts—narrative and information—offers a great example of the *crónica* as a genre with one foot in the description of the real and the other in the literary value of such description. He is certainly one of the most prominent journalists of the second half of the twentieth century, and his work offers the best example of the close relationship between literature and journalism in the region. Literary and cultural critic Aníbal González, who has paid close attention to this relationship, sees the dependency of journalism, whether on partisan views or on the state, as the weaknesses that at times have forced Spanish American fiction writers “to assume greater documentary and political burdens” (13).¹³ This pressure on writers made literature borrow the language and even the responsibilities of journalism.

The relationship between literature and journalism must be traced all the way back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at the dawn of the autonomization of the modern Latin American literary field. This process was heavily dependent on the development of the *crónica* as a hybrid genre, as Julio Ramos, Susana Rotker (*La invención*), and, in the Mexican case, Anadeli Bencomo (*Voces y voceros*), Ignacio Corona and Beth Jörgensen, and Jörgensen (*Contemporary Mexican*) have explained.¹⁴ With the development of technology, specifically from the arrival of the telegraph in Latin America through the mid- to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (depending on the country), writers had the opportunity to publish their *crónicas* in newspapers on the other side of the continent and across the ocean. They could thus make a living with their writing—transforming writing, for the first time in the history of the region, into a profession.¹⁵

One of the defining features of these early *crónicas* was their explicit description of sudden changes in the uneven process of modernization

occurring in the region's most important cities—something that remained an important trait of the genre in the decades that followed. The literary critic Viviane Mahieux has noticed that *cronistas* in the 1920s and 1930s were as preoccupied with describing everyday life as they were with the promotion of the literary style of their texts. She argues that the combination of information and style not only created a particular aesthetic but also allowed *crónicas* to have an impact on the lives and tastes of readers. She mentions two defining elements of the *crónicas*: the self-conscious literary style and the presence of a first-person narrator who leads the reader to better understand their shared reality. This identification between reader and writer rendered the *crónica* more authentic and demonstrates how it was framed by the signature of the *cronista*.

Mahieux refers to this phenomenon by describing *cronistas* as “accessible intellectuals,” a notion that combines the idea of “*accessibility* (a versatile public persona that appeals to a broad audience) with *intellect* (literary and artistic knowledge)” (6). While a seductive term, “accessible intellectual” suggests a transparent relationship between the *cronistas* and their readers. This relationship is in fact not transparent or direct; it is mediated by editors, bosses, editorial lines, reviewers, newspapers, and so on, in addition to the rules and demands established in the field of production. *Cronistas* fulfill these demands to be able to publish, to be paid, and to consecrate themselves in the profession. These are some of the constraints that define their jobs, define the field in which they are actors (to use Bourdieu's term), and, most importantly, define the writer-reader relationship. Mahieux's idea of the accessible intellectual, however, points to something that has strong repercussions in *crónicas* written in later decades, which is the construction of authorship.

It has not been an easy alliance: journalism enabled writers to become autonomous writers and make a living from their profession, but, as Aníbal González points out, this has been a double-edged sword. Sometimes journalism imposed “serious inherent constraints on their literary work. One such constraint is journalism's demotion of the ‘author’ to mere transcriber, a *redactor de noticias* (in the eloquent Spanish phrase)” (14). The distinction González makes refers to journalism as a discourse committed to delivering information and facts—in which case the name of the journalist does not matter—and it gives the reporter a place similar to that of the scientist in the sense that Foucault describes: “Their membership in a systematic ensemble, and not the reference to the individual who produced them [truths], stood as

their guarantee. The author's function faded away" ("What Is an Author?" 213). Although published several decades later, the *crónica* *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* is a great example for illustrating González's point.

The *crónica* appeared originally in *El Espectador* on April 15, 1955. It tells the story of Luis Alejandro Velasco, the only survivor of the sinking of a Colombian navy vessel in the Caribbean Sea. The authorities' official version was that a storm hit the vessel when it was crossing from Alabama to Cartagena, resulting in the death of seven sailors. A month later, however, when Velasco was declared a national hero and everybody believed the story of the storm, *El Espectador* made public for the first time Velasco's personal version, which contradicted the initial report of events. Velasco explained that the Colombian ship was overweight, as it was carrying appliances from the United States to Colombia, which caused the accident that killed his fellow crew members. The *crónica* was published in segments over fourteen consecutive days, and Velasco signed it. It was a big success. *El Espectador* increased its sales dramatically, and on April 26 it announced the publication of the entire text in a special supplement. When announcing the publication of the supplement, the newspaper stated that "as advisor to the *author*, the newspaper designated one of its most experienced and *skilled reporters*, Gabriel García Márquez, *who guided* Luis Alejandro Velasco *in organizing and presenting the events*" (emphasis added).¹⁶

As a piece of watchdog journalism, the story brought to light the corruption of the Colombian government, and the newspaper had Velasco sign the story because his name would render it more "authentic."¹⁷ The effects of this publication were felt immediately: Velasco was kicked out of the navy, the newspaper sent García Márquez to Paris to protect him from possible retaliation by the authorities, and *El Espectador* was eventually shut down because of the story, as well as other political tensions between it and the authoritarian regime of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla.¹⁸ The success of the story, however, was the product of García Márquez's meticulous literary re-creation of Velasco's sensations and physical challenges while spending nine days alone on the open sea. His superb style invites readers and critics to think about this story as something more than a piece of watchdog journalism.¹⁹ While the literary reconstruction of Velasco's adventure in a first-person narrative highlights its authenticity, its realism is the product of refined literary skill. The story is an excellent example of the intersection between journalism and literature, and since Velasco did not write the piece, the example also posits the question of the role of the author and the representation of the real.²⁰

The controversies surrounding *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* echo many of the debates regarding the role of the author in testimonial writing. I will not reproduce those debates at length, but since testimonial writing and crónicas have been compared by several of the most renowned critics, it seems necessary to indicate some of the differences between these two genres. George Yúdice called testimonial narrative a form of “new journalism” (“*Testimonio*” 46) and commended the authenticity of the genre: “Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history” (44). John Beverley, for his part, wrote, “By testimony I mean a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, *told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narrative is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience*” (24–25; emphasis added). Despite the similarities to crónicas, there are two important differences between *testimonios* and crónicas. First, the *testimonio* developed as a challenge to the literary institution (Arias), while the crónica is a genre that helped constitute the modern Latin American literary field (Yúdice, “*Testimonio*”; Beverley; Ramos; Rotker, *La invención*). Second, in the *testimonio* there is a self-effacement of the writer in order to render the story more authentic, as *The Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor* illustrates, whereas the crónica has been defined by the strong presence of the author (Mahieux). Either way, one of the most important things to understand is that each genre demands recognition in specific historical contexts. If, as critics have claimed, testimonial writing was the genre that defined Latin America’s transition to democracy, I would argue that the contemporary crónica (and especially urban crónicas dealing with social suffering) is the genre that has defined Latin American neoliberal expansion.²¹ I say this not only because of what they describe but also because cronistas have had to redefine their role.

The Journalist as an Author

In 1970, fifteen years after the initial publication of *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* and when García Márquez was already a famous author, his crónica was published as a book and signed by him.²² Foucault’s description of the role of the author seems adequate to explain this change: “The author’s name performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts,

define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others” (“What Is an Author?,” 210). García Márquez was the first one to notice the importance of his signature and was not comfortable with it. In the prologue to the first edition of the book he writes, “I have not reread this story in fifteen years. It seems worthy of publication, but I have never quite understood the usefulness of publishing it. I find it depressing *that the publishers are not so much interested in the merit of the story as in the name of the author, which, much to my sorrow, is also that of a fashionable writer*” (ix; emphasis added). He recognizes the literary merit of the story (“worthy of publication”), but he also notes that the relevance and impact that it had in the 1950s had vanished. The value of the story had changed. The transformation of the story from a journalistic piece into a literary one was not immanent. *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* was no longer judged by the set of conventions and rules of the journalistic field. In its book format it was read as a literary work, one whose value lay in (1) its structure (it had a beginning and an end), (2) an experience that is considered literary, and (3) the signature of one of the most notable Spanish-language authors.²³ The editors were not concerned with the authenticity of the story because they judged it from the “doxa” of the literary field.²⁴

Pierre Bourdieu describes the literary (artistic) field as the only one in which, in addition to their work, artists have to create the “belief” in the artistic value attributed to their work, “that is, the recognition of artistic legitimacy. This is inseparable from the production of the artist or the writer as artist or writer [author], in other words, as a creator of value” (*Field* 164).²⁵ The production of belief is a process in which the conventions change over time, and it takes several elements and actors in the field to make it happen.²⁶ In the example mentioned above, García Márquez’s extraordinary success and his position as a consecrated author made *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* a literary piece worthy of publication. When published as a book, the story did not change—the words were exactly the same as those published in the newspaper—but the importance of García Márquez’s signature meant that it had to be read in a different way.²⁷

García Márquez’s exceptionality makes it difficult to apply the same criteria we use in reading his work to contemporary cronistas, but *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* is a clear example of the differences and commonalities between fiction and nonfiction. The example also proves Aníbal González’s argument that “at a given point in time, certain modes of discourse have been accepted as ‘journalistic’ whereas others are considered fictional. . . . [T]heir

aims are virtually opposite—journalism seeks to communicate verifiable facts, narrative fiction seeks to organize facts into aesthetically coherent wholes” (12). The differences that González describes with precision are contingent, I would add, to the historical tensions between the journalistic and the literary fields of production.

In recent decades, we have witnessed a strong tendency among journalists, editors, and critics to emphasize the status of journalists as authors. They have insisted that contemporary journalists are producing the best prose in the region, suggesting that the age of “fiction” is coming to an end.²⁸ The celebration of the abundance of crónicas and the proliferation of journalists as outstanding authors has even been compared to the boom of Latin American literature of the 1960s (Tarifeño). In the early 2010s, two of the most important Spanish publishing houses released volumes of Latin American crónicas. Alfaguara published *Lo mejor de la crónica latinoamericana* (The best of Latin American chronicles), edited by Darío Jaramillo Agudelo, and Anagrama published *Mejor que la ficción* (Better than fiction), edited by Jorge Carrión (notice the title of the volume).²⁹ In the introduction to his collection Jaramillo Agudelo writes, “The journalistic crónica is the most passionate text and the best-written prose produced in Latin America today. Without denying that there are good novels being published, and without making a requiem for fiction as a genre, a reader looking for engaging and entertaining material that would speak about the strange worlds that exist right in front of him, a reader looking for works written by those who take care not to bore, that reader is on the right path if he reads a contemporary Latin American chronicle” (11).³⁰ Jaramillo Agudelo links contemporary crónicas with surprise and entertainment, a claim that stands closer to an advertisement than to a literary consideration of the works.

Leila Guerriero, a cronista who has become one of the prominent faces promoting the literary value of crónicas, has written a review of these anthologies for *El País* and argues that never before has Latin America promoted such texts.³¹ I quote Guerriero’s initial paragraph:

If naming an event, a thing, or phenomenon is bringing that event, that thing, that phenomenon into the world, then there was a time in which nothing that exists existed. There was a time, not that far away—1996, 1997—in which there were no so-called “Latin American cronistas” (no magazines that published them, no anthologies that collected their work), and

the word “crónica” was used, in Latin American countries, to name different things—urgent dispatches, crime news, columns—but few or none would designate what we understand it as today: *nonfiction stories that require long field work and are narrated using the formal resources of fiction writing*. (emphasis added)³²

To state that crónicas and cronistas are newcomers to the field of literary production, as well as to say that a genre that combines lengthy fieldwork with resources of fiction writing is a novelty, seems to be a deliberate move to *rebrand* these texts and the practices that have defined them. This strategy has a direct effect on the literary and the journalistic fields of production, or, in other words, it shows a different kind of tension between the fields. If the writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries delved into journalism as a way of professionalizing their literary production, it seems that contemporary journalists delve into the literary field as a survival strategy. Crónicas have *always* been thought of as hybrid texts in which narration and information meet, and the cronista/journalist has always been subjected to scrutiny from both the journalistic and the literary fields. What we witness now, however, is that the actors from both fields seek to redefine these texts and the practices that create them, pointing to a shift within the fields of production and thus establishing new rules of the game. Alfaguara’s and Anagrama’s publications are strategic moves to rebrand crónicas, and Guerriero’s article is a way of rendering visibility to *some* of the cronistas and outlets that are part of the consecrating spaces for these cronistas. The article (and the anthologies) are giving them a distinctive place in both the journalistic and the literary fields of production. Guerriero constructs a view, or what could be called a “principle of vision” (to use Bourdieu’s expression), to establish who the journalists that have been successfully recognized as authors are and in which outlets they have published.³³ It could even be argued that the emphasis with which journalists articulate the need to be recognized within the literary field has to be understood in relation to the formulation of the “belief” in their work as a form of art. This means that they accept a *new* set of rules to have their work recognized and legitimated.

But let’s make no mistake: the creation of belief is a process demanding the participation of several actors in the field, and the claim of authorship should not be taken as a homogeneous phenomenon, nor should it be taken for granted that the journalist’s signature is valued equally everywhere. This

is something that has to be understood in light of the political, economic, and technological changes that had affected the profession. It is important to remember that in the 1990s, when regional authoritarian regimes came to an end, there was a proliferation of organizations that articulated and defended human rights. This period was also characterized by a massive process of privatization of state-owned companies, which resulted in the subsequent shrinking of the state apparatus and deregulation of the economy, which in turn gave way to the formation of strong actors in the market.³⁴ The upswing in neoliberal policies modified the face of journalism, and conglomerates took hold of newspapers and media outlets that previously had been held by smaller or family-owned businesses. Among the changes experienced was also a different manner of delivering news, one that would fit into easily (and globally) recognized language conventions.³⁵ The idea of journalists as authors can be understood as the product of these changes, but it should be seen as an uneven and heterogeneous process that began decades ago and that is the result of technological changes and the transformation of traditional journalistic institutions.³⁶

Gabriel García Márquez was likely not the first to notice how these neoliberal developments affected media production, its distribution, and especially how those changes affected written journalism in the region. He might not have been the first to realize that the craft he so much loved was in danger of extinction, but he was certainly one of the first ones to do something dramatic about it.³⁷ When he created the FNPI in 1994, his goals were to enable journalists to improve their writing skills and strengthen a space of critical thinking that he considered to be disappearing. After their experiences at the FNPI workshops, a young generation of journalists wanted to write *crónicas* rather than more traditional forms of journalism, so they left the newsrooms.³⁸ Among those young reporters were Patricia Nieto, Cristian Alarcón, Juanita León, Julio Villanueva Chang, María Eugenia Ludueña, and Marcela Turati, and others, coming from various Latin American countries. These are some of the leading figures in the transformation of contemporary (written) journalism in their countries. The teachers who conducted those first workshops were Alma Guillermoprieto, Tomás Eloy Martínez, Ryszard Kapuscinski, and García Márquez himself. Latin American written journalism was experiencing a turn that perhaps not even the first generation of students and teachers of the FNPI's workshops could have imagined.³⁹ The initial work with written journalism is evidence of this turn, as shown in a book in which the memories

of some of the most important workshops are collected to commemorate the FNPI's twentieth anniversary.⁴⁰

Two years after the FNPI's establishment, García Márquez articulated the need to think about written journalism in new terms, and in his famous speech "The Best Job in the World," he asserted that "written journalism is a literary genre."⁴¹ We know that the seed of this assertion had been present since the beginning of the century, before the publication of his work on the sailor's shipwreck. It was there before Rodolfo Walsh and Elena Poniatowska; before Jaime Sáenz and Carlos Monsiváis; before Tomás Eloy Martínez and Pedro Lemebel; before Juan José Hoyos and Germán Castro Caicedo; before Martín Caparrós and María Moreno; before Juan Villoro and Alma Guillermoprieto; and before so many men and women from Mexico to Chile, from those living in the United States to the ones residing in Argentina, and all the way back in time to Roberto Arlt, Salvador Novo, Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, José Martí, and Rubén Darío (and the list could go on and on). But while all those cronistas were part of a natural flora in the field of Latin American letters, the new cronistas are the products of a deliberate act of sowing and careful harvesting. Among this new generation of cronistas, García Márquez himself promoted "belief" in them as authors.

Technology and social media have been big boosters. The FNPI provided cronistas with training, but technology facilitated the creation of a network throughout the region. First, it was the proliferation of blogs that enabled many *talleristas* (workshop participants) to create their own space of authorship, then connect with each other via social media, and thereby create networks. Never before could a journalist from a small newspaper in San Salvador share a creative space with peers in Lima, Medellín, Caracas, Guayaquil, Buenos Aires, Cali, Piura, Córdoba, and so on. The intensity of the experiences at the workshops extended in a way back to their hometowns when participants, having befriended fellow talleristas, would share their work and spread the word on their research, accomplishments, and publications and thus cause them to begin to be recognized by peers all over the Spanish-speaking world. It could be stated, paraphrasing the popular Spanish saying "dios los hace y ellos se juntan" (God makes them and they get together), that Gabriel García Márquez made them and technology put them together. After the workshops, participant journalists from across countries and generations would recognize their fellow journalists' work. They would share the links among their friends, and the recognition of their work—especially the construction of "belief" in

the value of their work—would take a new form and would spread in ways that go beyond the traditional venues described by Bourdieu.

Forms of Publication

During the 1990s, new forms of publication also came to light.⁴² One of the most innovative and paradigmatic examples is *Gatopardo*. In 1996, Rafael Molano and Miguel Silva launched the first magazine that sought to give cronistas from all over Latin America the space to publish long crónicas in a way that was no longer possible in newspapers. While local magazines with specific editorial projects have always existed throughout the region, the originality of *Gatopardo* was its geographical target: they wanted to attract cronistas from all over the region. They paid established cronistas significant sums of money to enhance the reputation of the magazine. Following the US model, they wanted *Gatopardo* to be the Latin American version of the *New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, or *Rolling Stone*. The editors even mentioned the American journalists who founded the New Journalism as the predecessors of the Latin American cronistas.⁴³ While this rhetoric worked to create a momentum for the magazine's launching, in historical and literary terms such an assertion is far from accurate.⁴⁴

Gatopardo did not survive in Colombia. It was impossible to sustain such a project with such economic investment in a region where journalism was still a heteronomous field and where the market remained limited. The idea of a regional magazine, however, survived and the trademark was kept. *Gatopardo* was relaunched in Mexico City in 2006 with Guillermo Osorno as its editor in chief. This time the magazine had a more realistic approach to the contributors' honoraria, and Osorno expanded the idea of Latin American cronistas as heirs of the American New Journalism. Again, it was as an editorial move that explicitly sought to present journalists as global authors and crónicas as innovative literary texts that could reach broader audiences.⁴⁵

Crónicas were thriving, there were more publications than ever, and the editorial industry's promotion gave them a new impulse. The workshops organized by the FNPI as well as the journalists' own networking created momentum. In 2012, the FNPI launched a new slogan to introduce younger cronistas (many of whom collaborated on the edited volumes published in 2011 in Spain), in a meeting called Nuevos Cronistas de Indias. The meeting was a preamble to the first year of the FNPI awards, initiated in 2013. Those invited were consecrated

cronista Elena Poniatowska and those who had directed workshops for the FNPI, such as Martín Caparrós, Cristian Alarcón, Juan Villoro, and a select group of cronistas under the age of thirty-five. The name of the meeting suggested the celebration of a long Latin American tradition that stretched all the way back to colonial times (the meeting took place on Columbus Day, October 2012). This time, the rhetoric presenting cronistas suggested an inward turn; it was a celebration of the craft of storytelling as a treasure always carried within. It was an introspective look into the region's literary tradition, not only to pay tribute to the *modernistas* of the turn of the century but mainly to recognize cronistas such as Guamán Poma de Ayala and Bernal Díaz del Castillo as founders of a genre born in response to the region's miseries in the colonial era.

In an article for *El Nacional* celebrating the meeting, Sergio Ramírez, one of the FNPI executive committee members, writes, "At the meeting journalists and writers convened who *turned the crónica into an art* in all imaginable topics: organized crime, drug trafficking, forced migrations, urban dwelling, marginality, prostitution, gangs, soccer, boxing, the life that beats under the fingers that type, which reveal splendor and misery with each keystroke" (emphasis added).⁴⁶ The celebration of cronistas and their work is not based on the "rules" of a field that seeks to give a "legitimate vision of the social world" (Bourdieu, "Political" 36) but on the artistic value of the pieces. The public is persuaded to read these works in a different way: while crónicas are stories of real events, they should mainly be read as entertaining literary works (similar to the way Darío Jaramillo Agudelo suggests in the introduction to the edited volume mentioned above). In other words, crónicas as journalistic discourse are no longer weighted in contrast to the discourse of the political field, which was the case for crónicas such as *Operación Masacre*, *La noche de Tlatelolco*, *La pasión según Trelew*, and even the newspaper version of *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*. Now, as Ramírez suggests, we are dealing with narratives that are forms of art. It could easily be argued that their value is measured against criteria from the literary field.⁴⁷ The significant weight of crónicas written by Walsh, Poniatowska, Martínez, and so many others was such that they challenged official and "indisputable" so-called truths, and when those works were published, there was no debate on whether the journalists were "authors" or not. Certainly, something in the way we read crónicas today has changed.⁴⁸

As stated before, I do believe that the work of many contemporary cronistas is driven by the pursuit of justice. The issue here, however, is not their intention but the way in which their work is promoted and how the genre is

redefined in that promotion. Newspaper articles, as well as the prologues to edited volumes, publicize the journalists' work, emphasizing that—through writing—any topic could be transformed into an enjoyable form of art. Without a place in traditional media (newspapers, magazines, etc.), journalists are not able to continue working as they formerly did. They have to look for alternative ways to write, to publish, and to be recognized. One of their challenges is to transform everyday things into good stories. Such is the suggestion of Julio Villanueva Chang's writing workshop, *De cerca nada es normal*. A workshop that he has conducted in several countries, its name (meaning, Up close nothing is normal) denotes the cronistas' task of transforming the "normal" into something exceptional. One could even say that within the new market, cronistas have to demonstrate their craft by making stories precisely about topics that are often not pleasant to read about.

But there are cronistas who stand on the other side of the aisle and who criticize the commodification of Latin American realities via (what runs the risk of becoming) a kind of cheap sensationalism that sells itself as "aesthetic realism" to a market hungry for thrills:

To refer to "crónicas" rather than "journalism" at present is a market ploy that sanctions an approach to the Third World demanding "narco realism" in place of "magical realism." Today Remedios, la Bella would be a drug mule. And behind this is the eternal genre [and gender] policing that forever seeks to regulate what's what in order to impose "order"—as if a transgender woman were a novel and a [cisgender] woman were a work of nonfiction. The majority of today's so-called cronistas exploit the genre to perform intimist investigations, un-rigorous and employing a strategic realism, whose appalling quality at times reaches the level of garbage. "Cronista" should be a political self-appointment with a certain legacy of dedication to the people, a person who takes the testimony of the oppressed majorities and renders it visible and conceivable, not an indentikit to fit into the box of a potential market. (Moreno qtd. in Masi)⁴⁹

María Moreno's diatribe reminds us that when looking critically at the cultural industry's promotion of crónicas (publications, reviews, book launchings, prizes, etc.), we are no longer looking at the relationship between journalism and politics but at the relationship between journalism and its forms of consumption.⁵⁰ This different framing goes hand in hand with the idea of the

emergence of the journalist as an author. Foucault claims, “The coming into being of the notion of ‘author’ constitutes the privileged moment of *individualization* in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences” (“What Is an Author?” 205). To understand the claims of authorship among journalists we should dig into the reasons—and the implications—for this process of individuation within the journalistic field. It is a process that should be looked at with suspicion, because in many cases it is a product of the lack of support from traditional journalistic institutions.

The Loneliness of the Journalist

The optimistic idea of the journalist as an author is also one of the most disheartening ones. Most of the journalists I talked to informally, as well as the ones I interviewed for this book, spoke about the need to publish a book, as this has increasingly become a requirement of consecration and legitimation in the profession.⁵¹ It is also true, as many of them stated, that a story told in a book-length format enables them to explain the complexities of an event that, at first sight, might seem a simple or a recurrent product of structural violence (poverty, marginality, domestic or drug-related violence, etc.) but that, when explored more carefully, evidences a chain of intricacies that are hard to describe in a short *crónica*. But in order to complete a book, these journalists need to have *operated* like artists—working during their free time in most cases and paying out of their own pockets the costs of transportation, lodging, and food while doing research. This lack of financial and institutional support extends to the writing stage. All the journalists interviewed finished their first books by working after hours and on weekends. The economic burdens are not minor in a field of production in which freelancing is a defining trend.

The shift toward a claim of authorship shows that many journalists are no longer linked to newspapers or other traditional media outlets. There are many who work on a freelance basis and have to promote their work—publishing it in different outlets or online platforms—relying on alternative (literary) institutions and agents that would recognize and consecrate their work.⁵² They are forced to be more creative when doing their job, a phenomenon that I like to call the “loneliness of the journalist.” The need to be recognized as authors, however, is only part of this phenomenon. Another major part is the evident lack of support from the institutions for which they work. The most obvious

and perhaps best-known example that depicts the loneliness of the journalist is the story of Carmen Aristegui and her team on the publication of “La casa blanca de Peña Nieto.” On November 9, 2014, the website *Aristeguinoticias.com*, the Univision TV network, and the magazine *Proceso* published the story, revealing that Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto owned a \$7 million house erected by the company that won the public contract to build a railroad in the State of Mexico, when Peña Nieto was its governor. It was the biggest case of corruption the media had ever documented in the country. Aristegui, then anchor of the highest-ranking radio newsroom, was not allowed to broadcast news of the scandal from the radio station owned by the MVS group, where she worked. When she published it through other outlets, MVS fired the team of journalists who worked with her and who had conducted the research for the report. Aristegui resigned from the radio station and then faced ongoing litigation against her by her former bosses.

In July 2016, Random House–Mondadori published a book called *La casa blanca de Peña Nieto* for which Aristegui wrote the prologue. MVS sued Random House, demanding that the publishing house remove the prologue from the book. MVS also sued Aristegui on the grounds of her “excess of freedom of speech.” The suit even demands that the journalist recuse herself from talking about the issue in the future. The move was a clear attempt to divide and conquer. MVS wanted to strain the relationship between the publishing company and Aristegui, the same way it wanted to strain her relationship with her team of journalists who worked with her in MVS, by firing them but not firing her when the news of the Casa blanca scandal was first published. Random House stood by Aristegui and refused to cave in to MVS demands. The case shows how the publishing company, not the media outlet, defended the journalists’ rights.

This story is well known both inside and outside the country, for Carmen Aristegui is one of Mexico’s most prominent journalists and occupies an important position in the global journalistic field. She edits and hosts a highly rated program on CNN in Spanish. Her situation gives only a glimpse of what Mexican economic and political powers are ready to do to silence journalists, even prominent ones such as Aristegui.⁵³ The journalists who work in other states and who do not have Aristegui’s visibility are killed. Mexico is the most dangerous country for journalists in the Western Hemisphere. Since the year 2000, more than 120 journalists have been assassinated, 48 of those journalists were killed from 2012 to 2018, and 98 percent of these crimes remain

unprosecuted. These numbers do not include threats and disappearances, nor do they include instances of physical and psychological abuse.⁵⁴

There are other examples that speak about the loneliness of journalists who might not be as well known but also show the magnitude of this experience. Mexico's Laura Castellanos, a freelance reporter who writes for *El Universal*, won the National Prize for reporting in 2016 with a crónica based on the massacre of Apatzingán, where, according to the authorities, sixteen people were killed and several others injured, allegedly in crossfire. In her story, Castellanos proves with testimonies from local residents and survivors that the Mexican army was responsible for the massacre and that the casualties were not the result of crossfire. When she received the prize, she denounced the fact that the newspaper had refused to publish her piece due to "political and electoral reasons."⁵⁵ To have her story published, Castellanos had to look for alternative outlets. Her urge to have the story circulate was not only to let the general public know what really happened in Apatzingán but also and primarily to protect her informants. The perpetrators knew the identities of the massacre survivors who had talked to the journalists, and they could easily retaliate. Having the perpetrators exposed is a way (though not always a successful one) to protect the survivors. Castellanos finally had her story published on *Aristeguinoticias.com*, in *Proceso*, and on Univision. The three platforms edited the piece to fit their respective formats.

It is very important to understand the scope of journalists' responsibility when covering events such as this one. Their responsibility lies not only in disclosing the truth; it is also related to the safety of the informants. Publishing the story is a matter of life or death, and—as this case shows—the impact of publication on the victims and their situation has become a personal burden that the journalist carries by herself.⁵⁶ The loneliness of the journalist means that her employers no longer support her, so this solitude is decidedly not metaphorical.

When explaining the process by which the website *72migrantes.com* was created, Alma Guillermprieto also referred to the lack of support from traditional media outlets as one of the factors forcing journalists to work as artists.⁵⁷ "We have to take on the role of artists," she stated. "That is to say, the risk of being a journalist is the risk of being an artist. We have to design our own projects. Carry them out in any way possible, assuming individually the risks and get the financial support, from who knows where. This is half of the future ahead of us. The other half is the hope for the consolidation of some media, media with commitment and historical vision."⁵⁸

Guillermoprieto articulates very well the changes in the field and the new challenges journalists face. She also mentions that with a new set of rules defining the profession, journalists also have to be more careful, because traditional institutions do not back them up anymore.

Not all these changes are framed in a negative way. For Juanita León, for example, “[t]he future of journalism is going to be guided by art and technology more than it is today. That is why I think that the life of the journalist is going to be similar to that of the artist—a person who is going to need a patron, a person who is going to work alone and whose value is going to be centered on her originality and her talent, more than her belonging to an organization.”⁵⁹ León, founder of the Colombian site *lasillavacia.com*, is herself a good example of what she describes.

While it can be argued that the changes and advances in technology have led journalists to produce amazing products and innovative news sites, for journalists working in more precarious conditions or in small cities in countries with high levels of violence, the trend also comes at a high cost.⁶⁰ The lack of institutional support has put journalists who write about issues such as state corruption, drug trafficking, gang-related violence, forced disappearances, impunity, and so forth in a more vulnerable situation. It has also put in danger those journalists writing about the suffering of others.