Two Centuries of Latin America's Revolutionary Dialogue

Latin American Adventures in Literary Journalism
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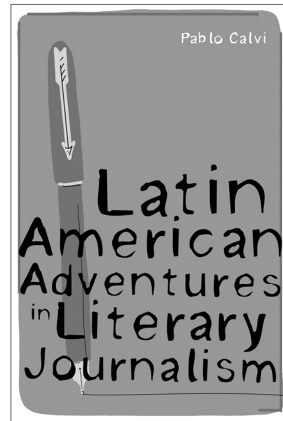

This colorful book, both in cover design and content, is as enlightening as it is revealing, and well nestled within the Pittsburgh University Press series, Illuminations: Cultural Formations of the Americas. The publisher's website describes the series as having its genesis in a Walter Benjamin notion, defining illumination as "that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to someone singled out by history at a moment of danger." And danger is certainly woven throughout the literary history presented here—indeed, perhaps initiating and shaping it. It is at this intersection of "danger" and literary journalism that Pablo Calvi demonstrates the growth of a particular canon as inevitable for democratic and republican freedoms—a far more colorful, organic, and imperative origin than the erstwhile privilege within which most other Western canons evolved. Playing out in Latin America throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a more palpable and vibrant demonstration of the roles of democracy and market capitalism on the evolution of differentiated evocations of worldwide journalism.

Latin America is huge: thirty-three countries and fifteen dependencies stretching from the United States–Mexico border to the tip of South America. Including parts of the Caribbean, it covers about thirteen percent of earth's land surface, much lying within the Southern Hemisphere. According to the United Nations, there are 653 million people living in Latin America. In reality, Latin America refers to all those countries in the region once claimed as part of the Spanish, Portuguese, or French empires—colonized and, in many regions, oppressed. And in the context of this book, that is important. For what predominates as an overarching theme of this text is these nations' struggle for independence and the links of this struggle to journalism and literary journalism, harnessed for political, cultural, social, historical, and geographical freedoms. Indeed, Calvi tags this struggle as a "revolutionary dialogue" (9) that underpins the success of multiple battles for democracy and independence within the region. Calvi writes of the text's provenance: "In its inception, this book was conceived as an attempt to understand the role of journalism—literary journalism in

particular—in the historical processes that gave rise to the idea of Latin America and its nations" (4). As an elegantly written and rational mapping of political and literary histories of the regions throughout a 130-year span, he succeeds.

The text covers the emergence and importance of journalism and literary journalism from the 1840s to the end of the Cuban Revolution in 1958, and through the Cold War to the 1960s. It is divided into three sections, bookended by an incisive, scholarly introduction (3–15) and conclusion (226–29). There are wide-ranging footnotes throughout the chapters, with a comprehensive notes section (231–49) and extensive bibliography (251–68). But it is Calvi's carefully crafted narrative, weaving together the words and aspirations, achievements, and leadership of eight extraordinary Latin American writers that makes a substantial, and important contribution to Western-leaning knowledge of literary journalism. The writers Calvi discusses here are: Francisco Bilbao, Domingo Sarmiento, and José Martí (Part 1, In-Forming the New Publics); Juan José de Soiza Reilly, Roberto Alt, and Jorge Luis Borges (Part 2, Leveling the Playing Field); and Rodolfo Walsh and Gabriel García Márquez (Part 3, Bottom-Up Journalism).

The book begins with an 1844 trial in Santiago, twenty-six years after Chile gained independence from Spain. After 300 years of Spanish colonial rule, the trial centered on a thirty-four-page "tirade against Spain's religious monarchy, along with its morals, uses, and the ideas it had infused into Chilean society during colonial times" (19–20). This "tirade" was written by a young Chilean journalist, Francisco Bilbao, and began what Calvi calls "one of the most talked about events in the subcontinent" (19). Bilbao was tried for blasphemy, immorality, and sedition. In his article, published in *El Crepúsculo*, he writes: ". . . see that multitude of old men and Spaniards who flood the camp, and tell me if you do not see the pulse of ancient Spain come back to life" (26). News of the contents of his article and trial "spread like wildfire" in the region and Bilbao became a "celebrity, a modern romantic martyr and hero, and the first victim of political censorship in postcolonial Chile" (31). Disruptions and protests against the government escalated. Calvi writes that Bilbao's defense and public reaction to his trial were "the first public acts in support of a liberal Latin American press, the first moves toward the affirmation of freedom of speech." He argues these were also the first steps toward strengthening "democracy and a free market society in the region" (33), as the civic response and reaction to Bilbao's treatment was not what was expected by the ruling conservative class.

The chapter on Argentinian Domingo Sarmiento is steeped in a history of Latin America pertinent to the growth of the region's press. Sarmiento's role in establishing periodicals (some short-lived), his political writings, and his rise to power as the seventh president of Argentina (1868–74), are the stuff of legend. Regarded as an intellectual, his capacity to travel and compare other countries and continents to the *caudillo* (military or political leaders) and their power, which he despised in his own country, drove him to lobby for the modernization of the train, postal, and education systems throughout the region. During his various exiles in Chile, he wrote the famed *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* (1845), regarded then (and today) as a foundational literary journalism text. More than most, Sarmiento understood the power

of the press, and through his editorships and writings, worked ceaselessly to garner readership to enlighten and inform. He used hyperbole and exaggeration throughout his texts in a bid to create a political following, but Calvi explains that these two literary techniques should be understood "not only as purely narrative devices but also . . . as mechanisms that connect Sarmiento's nonfiction with his extraliterary goals. . . . Sarmiento knew that aspiration drives behavior" (47–48). A powerful and influential man, Sarmiento's legacy was tarnished by "his consistent degradation of the indigenous peoples of the Americas and the racist undercurrent in his work" (67), a behavioral motif common contemporaneously in other colonial parts of the world.

The final chapter in Part 1 focuses on Cuban journalist and poet José Martí, regarded a Cuban national hero for his writings and his ceaseless mission toward Cuban self-government. Martí targeted Spanish colonial regulation and was ever wary of U.S. expansionism in the region. Travelling widely, Martí was "not strictly a reporter but rather a foreign correspondent . . . in more than one way, Martí was using the news" (73) to make his audience politically aware. Much of his work was direct translation, mostly not attributed, of articles from the U.S. newspapers; these "have become a sore point" for many "purists" (75). Caring more for the political and social impact of his words, Martí embellished, enhanced, condensed, and appropriated his translations. Calvi writes that Martí's "value of authenticity was neither precious nor rigid, and he seemed to subordinate it to his need for effectiveness and efficiency of message" (75).

Part 2 centers on Argentinian writers Juan José de Soiza Reilly, Roberto Alt, and Jorge Luis Borges. Soiza Reilly, born to a Portuguese father and an Irish mother, became "one of the first best-selling mass journalists in Latin America" (111). Coming from a relatively poor background, first in Uruguay, then Buenos Aires, his writing is even more astounding for cultivating an expanding middle-class. He "professionalized his literary journalism, perfecting genres such as the interview and *crónica* to a point where they became new forms of mass literature" (112). It was near the turn of the century, and Argentina was positioned, through its rich resources, to enter the global trade market. It was also a time when the "political press model" was giving way to "a modern, information-based press" (115). This in turn led to the growing popularity of mass magazines such as *Caras y Caretas*. Soiza Reilly made a name for himself by "revealing the dark side of Buenos Aires's modernity . . . for the first time in Latin America, a journalist used the mass media as a lens through which to see the world" (128). And interestingly, in 1909, Soiza Reilly in an interview talks about journalism as an "art . . . an art that has its heroes and victims . . . I am talking . . . about literary journalism" (143).

Roberto Arlt was also born to immigrant parents, his father Polish and his mother Italian. Born in Buenos Aires, he wrote novels and a semi-autobiographical work, was a staff writer for the evening *Crítica*, as well as author of a stream of columns between 1928 and 1942 for *El Mundo*, the Buenos Aires daily. "Arlt was," Calvi writes, "in more ways than one, a cultural reformer and an infiltrator" (146) . . . . "[His] effort was like a taxonomist, and through literary journalism he succeeded in painting modern Buenos Aires in its unique and strange colors" (147). And like Arlt,

Jorge Luis Borges became *best* known for his novels but worked as a journalist for many years when "the boom of the new press and the popularity of the tabloids gave [him] room for literary experimentation, at a time when the avant-gardes used journalism as a medium" (147). Using "irony, contextual interpretation, antiphrasis, and humor," Borges "built complicity with his readers" using them as a "sounding board" (147). Here Calvi explains that while Arlt studied the city and its people in all walks of life, Borges gave his readership a view of the world, but together, "the journalists of the new mass press contributed to turning the writer's adventure into an adventure *with* readers by sharing one of the rarest experiences in the new urban world: intimacy. Intimacy helped bring a previously top-down approach to literature—educating the public—to eye level . . . integrating the public into the democratic game" (147, emphasis in the original).

In Part 3, Calvi turns to authors Rodolfo Walsh and Gabriel García Márquez. In a precursor to the twenty-first century's *fake news* trope, Walsh writes of "an avalanche of information garbage" emanating from wire services in the 1950s and '60s—twice announcing the death of then–Cuban guerrilla leader Fidel Castro, for example. Cuban revolutionaries realized that "information balance" (182) was key at this time, and so Prensa Latina, the first Latin American News Agency was born, its home base, Havana. García Márquez wrote from Colombia and Rodolfo Walsh from Argentina. A portion of this chapter—the circumstances of Walsh's cracking a CIA code that implicitly played a role in the CIA's failed 1961 military invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs—reads like a good crime/war thriller. This chapter also discusses "testimonial literature" (186), citing Walsh's text *Operación Masacre* (1957; *Operation Massacre*, English translation, 2013) and García Márquez's *Relato de un Náufrago* (1970; *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*, English translation, 1986), as exemplars of literary journalism. Both texts originally appeared as installments and, Calvi argues, have "strong links between Latin American and the Anglo-American literary journalism traditions" (186).

One observation here is the dearth, or rather, non-existence of written female (and non-binary) voices in Latin America throughout this time. In his introduction, Calvi tells us that this lack of female voice cannot be ignored but "should be accounted for as one of the main conditions imposed by the period it describes and attempts to understand" (4). And, in his conclusion, Calvi describes the field as "predominantly male and white" (228), and this as an "intellectual chauvinism" (229). He remedies this with mention of contemporary female and non-binary journalists in the late twentieth, early twenty-first centuries: Elena Poniatowska (Mexico), the late Pedro Lemebel (Chile), Leila Guerriero (Argentina), and Gabriela Wiener (Peru)—sounding a warning to scholars to accept and critique these writings equitably. And, in a footnote, Calvi writes: "Mahieux (2011) has recently incorporated female authors and nonbinary approaches into the list of *cronistas*." Mahieux cites Alfonsina Storni and Salvador Novo as, according to Calvi, "two interesting voices who, by their sheer existence, expand the scope of the period, though they certainly do not challenge its most dominant aspects as a whole" (249n1).

Latin America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was like a con-

glomeration of perfect storms raging through its land mass: rebellion against colonial rule, oppression, and conservatism; subsequent attempts to dismantle the colonial model and integrate modernity; seeking autonomy, republicanism, and democracy, sometimes with success, only to revert to authoritarianism and despotism again; reaching for market capitalism; and ubiquitous Indigenous issues, mostly poorly and brutally mismanaged, similar to other First Nations around the world. The region was in a state of flux and a veritable battleground at times. But Calvi argues that beating at its heart was the growth of the journalistic voice as a source of information and influence. Particularly pertaining to literary journalism throughout these centuries, Calvi writes of a canon different from the growth of Anglo-American canons. He writes of a different practice, of a different technique, of a different cultural understanding of literary journalism:

> Due to institutional instability . . . but also to literary tradition and literary history . . . it has evolved as an allegorical account of the present—a narrative form that could either be read as richly riddled with political undercurrents or interpreted plainly as a novelized historical record. . . . Justice, truth, freedom, and the public good have been . . . some of the forces behind literary journalism in Latin America, either floating on the narrative surface of its texts or palpitating beneath the heavy waves of rhetoric and a—more or less—oblique approach to facts. (228)

The allusion to a "novelized historical account" seems a considered and early version of contemporary discussions and debates within the Anglo-American field—the softening of boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, particularly within the literary journalism sub-genre of memoir.

Written vividly, this deeply researched text of meta-literary journalism acts as a bridge, or rather, an invitation, for practitioners, scholars, and students to shrug off the Anglo-American-centric impetus of studies in this field and mine the rich and courageous historical writings from their Latin American antecedents. There is much to learn from canons of other languages, and here Calvi presents a gift, an analytical and hybrid text, rigorous in its research and robust in its arguments, enticing us to wander beyond the comfort of our own cultures and ease.