

Viviane Mahieux (2011)

**Urban Chroniclers in Modern Latin America: The Shared Intimacy of Everyday Life**

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By the 1920s, many Latin American cities were well into an epoch of dramatic change marked by economic modernization, rapid industrialization and urban growth. In *Urban Chroniclers in Modern Latin America*, Viviane Mahieux provides a compelling account of the transformation of the *crónica urbana* within this historical context by examining the writings of five chroniclers: Roberto Arlt and Alfonsina Storni in Buenos Aires; Salvador Novo and Cube Bonifant in Mexico City; and Mário de Andrade in São Paulo. The Latin American *crónica*, or chronicle, is defined as “a somewhat unstructured genre that combines literary aestheticism with journalistic form” (1).

The book is grounded within the leading scholarship on the subject, underscored by the works of Aníbal Gonzalez, Julio Ramos and Susana Rotker. However, Mahieux sharpens the focus of the chroniclers during the under-investigated period of the 1920s and early 1930s, to demonstrate how this literary-journalistic genre took new forms and played a decisive role in the configuration of Latin American literary modernity. By analyzing chroniclers in a

period “when modernizing media and avant-garde movements dramatically changed how writers and consumers thought about literature” (3-4), this research contributes to the existing literature as it explains the manner in which the chronicle secured such an important position in contemporary Latin America.

More specifically, the author argues that the chroniclers’ shifting relationship to media and literary culture resulted in greater accessibility to the public, the rise of which corresponded with the growth of mass-circulation newspapers at the turn of the century. The chronicle of the 1920s and 1930s helped shape modern urban culture by reflecting on everyday city life, which demanded and allowed for a rearticulating of ideas, values, and imaginings in an increasingly modern world. The tension between cosmopolitanism and nationalism and the interplay between gender, class and the chronicle are major themes explored throughout this study.

With regard to methodology, Mahieux relies on a “dual reading of the chronicle” (7)

approaching the genre in a literary manner (e.g. tropes and style) while also considering the chronicle's context of production and reception. The lucid synthesis of literature-journalism and the particular circumstances of each city is one of the most persuasive aspects of this book.

The first chapter explores the early trajectory of the chronicle (considered a dying form in the late nineteenth century) and reveals chroniclers' concerns with modernity. For Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, who wrote in the 1870s–1890s, the arrival of the telegraph symbolized the threat technological development posed to his profession. After all, what would be the need for a leisurely and intimate newspaper column when new technologies allowed for speedy news reports? Similarly, the likes of Rubén Darío, José Martí, and other *modernistas* shared broader concerns about modernity. In the context of an increasingly technological world that potentially required the subjugation of art for commercial concerns, the chronicler would now have to adapt to a larger, more diverse, and (perhaps) less educated audience. Eventually, new media helped usher in “a more flexible repositioning of the genre as part of daily practice—both of reading and of writing—that shaped the chronicler's role as a cultural mediator” (8). Writers reinvented themselves as “accessible intellectuals” (23), in their efforts to adapt to a genre that was becoming a mix of art and markets.

The next two chapters discuss how Roberto Arlt and Mário de Andrade traversed notions of cultural citizenship, urban and national identities, and traditionalism during an

era of massive European immigration and economic prosperity in Buenos Aires and São Paulo. Through an analysis of Arlt's *Aguafuertes porteñas*, published in *El Mundo* in Buenos Aires, Mahieux reveals how the chronicler simultaneously witnessed and fomented urban change as rapid population growth altered the cultural and social role of the city's newspapers. For example, in writing about the changing cityscape from a perspective understood by his lower and middle class readers, Arlt provided an aesthetic value to the street culture described in his columns, thus validating them as sources of literary worth. Similarly, Andrade's chronicle *Táxi* in São Paulo, demonstrates the role the chronicler played as “an intellectual agent of movement” with the ability to “make cultural experiences accessible to a reading public” (91-92). Andrade's interest in Brazilian nationalism highlights some of the limitations of the chronicle beyond the city, as his writings were unable to closely link the urban identity in São Paulo with broader national imaginings in other regions of Brazil.

Chapter four discusses Salvador Novo's articles in the weekly magazine *El Universal Ilustrado* during the early 1920s. Like his contemporaries in Buenos Aires and São Paulo, Novo's chronicles reflected an interest in writing about mundane and lighthearted subjects in Mexico City's daily life. In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, the literature proposed by intellectuals and the government was “often defined in sexually charged terms” (100). In this context, literature that evaded “masculine” post-revolutionary social or political matters, like Novo's, was dismissed as effeminate

and outside the intellectual mainstream. Despite this outsider status, Novo found and generated cultural significance in the growing commercial media, eventually achieving prominence as public figure “by transforming himself into a protagonist of his own texts” (124) and thus becoming an essential part of the urban consumer culture.

In chapter five, Mahieux emphasizes the relationship between gender and the chronicle by analyzing the works of Alfonsina Storni in Buenos Aires and Cube Bonifant in Mexico City. As chroniclers, both female authors forged public personas as intellectuals, complicated categorizations of modern femininity in patriarchal societies, and like Arlt, Andrade and Novo, also contested class-based social hierarchies. Moreover, that Storni and Bonifant needed to enter the workforce (as chroniclers), like many of their female readers, reveals much about the period. In sum, this final chapter examines the “role women were playing in modern life and, in turn, the effect that modernity was having on women” (126).

*Urban Chroniclers* is clearly a product of extensive archival research and carefully considered secondary sources, ideal for graduate and advanced undergraduate students seeking a nuanced understanding of Latin American literature, society and history. Nevertheless, the biographical background on the chroniclers discussed is often limited; as such, additional information on the authors would enhance the reader’s interests and serve as a richer source of reference.

By the end of the twentieth century the genre had achieved a respectable standing in society, exemplified by the likes of Carlos Monsiváis, Elena Poniatowska and María Moreno. Change, and the anxieties and opportunities that it generated, is one common thread throughout the book’s narrative. It is then fitting that the author concludes by prompting the reader to consider how the shift to the Internet and “increasingly virtual” communities from print newspapers and urban communities may present new opportunities and challenges for the chronicler.