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Author:

[Ortigas, José Ramón](#)

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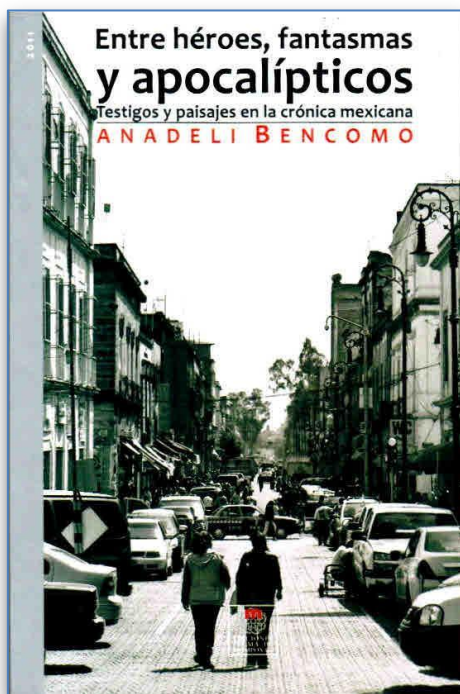
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RESEÑA

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THE DEATH of Carlos Monsiváis, one of Mexico's preeminent *cronistas*, in 2010 at the age of seventy-two has quite expectedly and justifiably prompted much reflection regarding not only his extensive and signally influential *oeuvre* but also regarding the genre of the *crónica* itself. Anadeli Bencomo, one of Mexico and the United States' leading critical voices in the field, with one book and dozens of published articles on the subject to her credit, now offers the *crónica* scholar and interested reader alike a collection of essays that trace the evolution of the genre in recent years. The pieces collected here, with the exception of the first and last essays, "Paseo por la crónica mexicana" and "Cronistas itinerantes: notas sobre Alma Guillermoprieto, Luis Arturo Ramos y Juan Villoro", respectively, have all previously appeared elsewhere. Published as a collected volume for the first time only eleven months after the passing of Monsiváis, Bencomo here nuances the arguments she elaborates in her previous work on the *crónica*, *Voces y voceros de la megalópolis: La crónica periodístico-literaria en México* (2002). Because of this, it is most instructive to revisit the ideas and conclusions in *Voces y voceros de la megalópolis* before undertaking a review of *Entre héroes, fantasmas y apocalípticos*.

In *Voces y voceros de la megalópolis*, Bencomo considers how the work of three Mexican *cronistas*, Monsiváis, Poniatowska, and José Joaquín Blanco, both envisions and records the changing urban landscape of the Mexican capital at the end of the twentieth century, a postmodern megalopolis increasingly representative of mass society (16-18). Central to her analysis is the concept of the *flâneur*.

Following Walter Benjamin, Bencomo considers the itinerant wanderer as the figure capable of freely inhabiting and commenting on varied urban spaces. The chaotic essence of the ever-expanding megalopolis requires the presence of the *flâneur* as an “intermediary-interpreter” who can “decipher and organize” (15) its disorder. Bencomo revisits the concept of the *flâneur* in *Entre héroes, fantasmas y apocalípticos*.

The unprecedented paradigm figured by the megalopolis requires a new means of literary representation. Bencomo posits the contemporary *crónica* as the literary genre best suited to portray this emergent, massified urban space. She reaches this conclusion principally as a result of the *crónica*'s hybrid nature. Due to its liminal contacts with other genres, particularly journalism and the essay, and the influence of the social sciences (sociology, anthropology and cultural studies), the contemporary *crónica* is the genre best suited to reflect the urban realities of the megalopolis (18). Having reached this conclusion, Bencomo does, however, bemoan the state of the genre at the end of the decade of the 1980s. According to Bencomo, the *crónica* as practiced in Mexico from 1968 to 1990 reached its zenith during the 1970s, the historical moment in which the genre's ability to raise consciousness and effect a social critique was most strongly felt. The aftermath of the 1985 earthquake that devastated Mexico City saw a resurgence of this style of *crónica* but its revival was to be short-lived. In concluding *Voces y voceros*, Bencomo maintains that a new type of Mexican *crónica*, one that de-emphasizes its politico-journalistic component to instead fulfill society's voyeuristic need to see itself reflected in the discourses of mass media (a need emblematic, according to Bencomo, of the postmodern condition), had, by the second half of the 1990s, supplanted the journalistic-literary *crónica* of the 1968-1990 tradition (194-95; 198).

With *Voces y voceros*, Bencomo describes the changes that the *crónica* had undergone by the end of the millennium as a result of the urban massification concomitant with the rise of the megalopolis. The five essays that comprise *Entre héroes, fantasmas y apocalípticos* describe the evolution of the genre in the intervening decade since the publication of that first volume. By considering authors who approach the genre from varied perspectives and who employ it to achieve unique ends, she is able to trace that evolution and situate the *crónica* in the present historical moment, one which finds Mexico assailed by an unprecedented wave of brutality, from the femicides of Ciudad Juárez to the escalating narco-violence. The third and fourth essays in the collection, “Violencia crónica o crónica de violencia: José Duque y Rossana Reguillo” and “Los relatos de violencia en Sergio González Ro-

dríguez”, deal directly with this topic. The essay that opens the volume, “Paseo por la crónica mexicana”, considers one of the traditional charges of the genre, “the account of the metropolis and its constant restructurings” (15). The second chapter focuses on the work of Monsiváis, especially as it relates to that urban description, paying close attention to its hybridization between *crónica* and essay. Having described in chapters three and four how the problems of present-day Mexico are represented in the modern *crónica*, Bencomo, utilizing Reguillo’s concept of *ciudadanos N* (a generalized vision of the citizen common to all societies), maintains that since these problems are becoming increasingly endemic in cities the world over, the *crónica* speaks to a global citizenry. She closes the volume by considering this globalizing perspective of the genre through the *crónicas de viaje* of Alma Guillermoprieto, Luis Arturo Ramos, and Juan Villoro.

In the essay that leads the collection, “Paseo por la crónica mexicana”, Bencomo traces two parallel trajectories, a literal examination of the changes experienced by Mexico City in recent times and a figurative analysis of the evolution of the *crónica* that describes them. Bencomo analyzes the historical antecedents of the contemporary urban *crónica*, from the 19th century *costumbrista* profiles of Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, Amado Nervo and Luis González Urbina to the early and mid-20th century works, including those of Salvador Novo, in which the *flâneur* figures prominently. Common to these urban *crónicas* is the description of the wandering perambulations citizens would undertake along the main avenues of the city. Those strolls would expose the wanderer to the diverse objects available for his consumption behind the shop windows that lined the most famous boulevards. According to Bencomo, the association between the urban stroll and consumerism is one of the central themes of the post-revolutionary Mexican *crónica* (22). Beginning in the 1970s however, this positive association, emblematic of the city’s desire to emerge as a cosmopolitan metropolis, assumes a more negative connotation. Now, instead of strolling along the avenues, the citizenry mills around crowded streets, the shop windows that once enticed now mock those unable to enjoy the wares encased behind them, and the open, public park is replaced by the enclosed shopping mall as emblem of the urban landscape. The recent *crónicas* of Blanco and Monsiváis depict this transformation, reflective of a global modern society with which readers the world over can identify. By the 1980s, the *crónica*, as a result of the influence of the then emergent field of cultural studies, became more inclusive of traditionally marginalized voices and began to display “a civic optimism that denoted its affiliation with modern narratives” (34). Bencomo closes the chapter by examining the

anticrónica of writers such as Fabrizio Mejía Madrid that, in recent years, has attempted to describe the apocalyptic chaos of the modern megalopolis that the traditional *crónica* is no longer capable of representing. In this way, the *anticrónica* figuratively breaks the traditionally symbiotic relationship between the metropolis and the *crónica* that has, until now, served to portray it (40).

In the second essay in the collection, “Carlos Monsiváis: discurso a dos voces”, Bencomo analyzes *No sin nosotros. Los días del terremoto (1985-2005)*, a re-edition of Monsiváis’s *crónica*, “Los días del terremoto”, which first appeared as part of *Entrada libre. Crónicas de la sociedad que se organiza* in 1987. The new volume includes the original *crónica* as well as a lengthy introductory essay written by Monsiváis. Bencomo examines the contrast between *crónica* and essay in the Monsiváis canon and proposes several reasons that attempt to explain why Monsiváis’s later writings tilt toward the latter. She prefaces her examination by commenting the *crónica*’s descriptive and synchronic nature in comparison to the essay’s interpretive and diachronic intentions (46). Bencomo maintains that these two complementary objectives can be discerned in the re-edition in the *crónica*’s discussion of the more immediate, spatially and temporally constrained communal triumphs witnessed after the 1985 earthquake and in the essay’s more abstract consideration of the moment in a broader historical and civic context (48).

In the latter half of the chapter Bencomo argues, “El Monsiváis cronista de los 70, 80 y 90, cede ahora paso al ensayista que encontramos en sus más recientes escritos” (50) [The *cronista* Monsiváis of the 70s, 80s, and 90s now gives way to the essayist we encounter in his most recent writings] and offers her explanation for this shift. The change, according to Bencomo, is partly due to the momentous defeat of the PRI in the presidential elections of 2000, the culmination of the party’s decline precipitated by the aftereffects of the 1985 earthquake. Bencomo proposes that a description of the political climate of the moment, marked by the collapse of long-held convictions and the emergence of novel ideas, calls for the expository function to which the essay is better suited. Finally, Monsiváis, according to Bencomo, intentionally elects the essay as a preface because it serves to both catalog and lend coherence to the *crónica* (54).

“Violencia crónica o crónica de violencia: José Duque y Rossana Reguillo” considers the work of the Venezuelan journalist and Mexican anthropologist, respectively, in contrast to the *nota roja*, the often provocative and graphic record of crime and violence which appears in many Mexican newspapers. Bencomo argues that a feature common to the work of these two otherwise disparate

writers and which distinguishes their *crónicas* from the genre of the *nota* is that they exhibit the author function. Whereas the *nota roja* is defined teleologically by the themes it portrays, the work of Duque and Reguillo is recognized foremost as coming from established authorities in the field; a fact that allows their work to transcend generic limitations (67). Duque's work straddles the boundary between the sensationalism of the *nota roja* and the denunciatory social critique of the journalistic-literary *crónica*. In the case of Reguillo, given her training in the social sciences, her *crónicas* display the marked influence of academic discourse. The transgeneric character of Duque's and Reguillo's writing, based in part on the journalistic mandate of recording and communicating factual events, allows them to inscribe in their depictions of violence alternate perspectives which subtly but effectively encourage the reader's suspicions and prompt him or her to question established social institutions (71). The targets of this suspicion are oftentimes a corrupt police force, the abusive legal apparatus, and the mass media that trades in apocalyptic visions of metropolitan violence (83).

A central idea in Bencomo's discussion of the three works she analyzes in "Los relatos de violencia de Sergio González Rodríguez" is that both official discourse and the mass media, fixated on violence statistics that lack historical or political content, are not adequate spaces to discuss critically the problem of violence in Mexico; the task has instead fallen to alternate discourses, primarily cultural studies (89). Bencomo argues that because the violence that ravages Mexico defies description, González Rodríguez must resort to varied generic discourses in an attempt to depict the inefable. The three works she examines in this chapter, *Huesos en el desierto* (2002), *El vuelo* (2008), and *El hombre sin cabeza* (2009), utilize a combination of the *crónica*, investigative journalism, *testimonio*, fictional prose, essay, and autobiography (90). The multiplicity of generic voices at once reflects the chaotic illogic of violence and coalesces to form a "heterogeneous textual fabric" (91). One aspect of the *crónica* as practiced by González Rodríguez that distinguishes it from the *crónica* in the Monsiváis-Poniatowska tradition of the 1970s and 1980s is that, in accordance with one of the principal missions of cultural studies, it is concerned with a marginalized subset of society, the women of Ciudad Juárez as victims of violence, and the global social forces that allow their exploitation, instead of, as is the case in the traditional *crónica*, with "presenting an alternative model to the official nationalism of the PRI" (93). According to Bencomo, González Rodríguez's narrative marks a turning point in Mexican cultural studies because he considers narco-violence and its effects not as an exclusively

Mexican national phenomenon but instead as one shaped by the globalizing forces that affect all of society in the twenty-first century (106, 108).

The turn toward a global perspective that the work of González Rodríguez presupposes leads Bencomo to examine the *crónica de viaje* in the last chapter, “Cronistas itinerantes: notas sobre Alma Guillermoprieto, Luis Arturo Ramos y Juan Villoro”. The wandering *cronista* matches one of three models: the correspondent, the tourist, and the traveler. All are related to the figure of the *flâneur* but with a crucial distinction: whereas Benjamin’s archetype narrates the social landscape of which he forms part and with which he is intimately familiar, the voyager describes locations heretofore unknown to him (115). The complication that the latter encounters, and which Bencomo sees in the work of Guillermoprieto, is that, especially when writing for a public also unfamiliar with the subject, it is all too easy to engage in facile stereotypes and essentialisms which yield simulacra instead of insightful, faithful representations.

Voces y voceros and *Entre héroes, fantasmas y apocalípticos* together describe the multitudinous voices that the contemporary *crónica* expresses. The notable achievement of Bencomo’s work in these two volumes is her expansive theoretical analysis of the genre and her examination of the varied external influences that shape it in the new millennium. Her thoughtful investigation is a welcomed contribution to the field of *crónica* studies that can only help to situate the genre in its rightfully privileged place among Latin American letters.

JOSÉ RAMÓN ORTIGAS
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS