



**CRÔNICAS AND CRÓNICAS:
MACHADO DE ASSIS, JOSÉ
MARTÍ, AND THE ORIGINS
OF THE LATIN AMERICAN
CHRONICLE**

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Este ensaio explora as origens da crônica latino-americana, tomando em conta os diversos fatores socioeconômicos que deram o impulso para o desenvolvimento deste gênero híbrido. O objetivo é desmentir a noção segundo a qual a crônica se limita só ao Brasil ou só à Hispano-América e demonstrar que é um fenômeno latino-americano que surgiu em espanhol e em português aproximadamente na mesma época. Depois de clarificar o termo *crônica* e explicar as perspectivas hispano-americana e brasileira, segue-se uma análise comparando um texto de Machado de Assis com outro de José Martí. Embora Machado de Assis seja mais conhecido como romancista e Martí como poeta, eles foram dois dos primeiros cronistas da América Latina e as suas escrituras refletem tanto as características mais importantes da crônica quanto a grande variedade de estilos, temas e perspectivas que se encontram no gênero. Espera-se que este ensaio contribua para o esclarecimento da história da literatura latino-americana em ambos lados da fronteira lingüística entre o português e o espanhol.

Susana Rotker's invaluable *La invención de la crónica*, one of the most comprehensive studies published on the origins of the Latin American chronicle, makes no mention of Brazil or of Brazilian chroniclers. Meanwhile, literary critic Richard Preto-Rodas refers to the chronicle as a "truly Brazilian literary genre" (549). The two contrasting points of view on the relation between the chronicle, the literary traditions of Spanish America, and those of Brazil reflect a common disconnect in Latin American literary studies. Are we talking about the same kind of chronicle? Is this a case of nationalistic or cultural arrogance? Will determining on which side of the Spanish / Portuguese linguistic divide the chronicle first emerged help us to better understand its importance throughout Latin America? The first task will be to consider different types of chronicles and clarify exactly what we are talking about. That will be followed by a historical contextualization of the genre in question. Finally, through a comparative analysis of two chronicles written by José Martí and Machado de Assis, it will be argued that the chronicle is an inherently heterogeneous and evolving genre. Like modernity itself, it spread quickly across national and linguistic barriers in Latin America and is closely associated with the newspaper. The ultimate intention of this study is to shed light on the ways in which the chronicle established new lines of communication between readers and writers of diverse backgrounds.

The word *crónica* / *crônica* like *chronique* in French, *chronicle* in English and similar variations in other languages, stems from the Greek word for time, *khronos*. The chronicle, in its traditional definition, refers to a written account of historical events that is considered to be objective. It is a historical genre that, during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, consisted of texts written in Latin and then in different vernacular tongues including French, Portuguese, and Spanish. But these texts, such as the thirteenth-century *Primera Crónica General de España*, the *Chronica del Rei D. João* (1443), and countless other medieval and colonial Latin American chronicles, are only remotely related to what is known as the chronicle today in Latin America. Now, the chronicle more commonly refers to the hybrid writing form born in the nineteenth-century newspaper that mixes journalism with different genres and literary

techniques. It is this type of chronicle that is of interest for this study.¹

Critics have been quick to point out ways in which chronicles capture particular moments in time and express important details of culture and everyday life in a particular city or country. Yet, they have been reluctant to see how this literary genre crosses national and linguistic boundaries in Latin America. Generally speaking, critics of Brazilian literature argue that the chronicle emerged out of Brazilian Romanticism in the early to mid nineteenth century, and evolved along with the newspaper in the late 1800s, remaining a particularly Brazilian phenomenon. Meanwhile, critics of Spanish American literature assert that the chronicle was an invention of the Spanish American *modernistas* and therefore has nothing to do with Brazil. Afrânio Coutinho, arguing the Brazilian point of view, insists that Portuguese was the only language in which the word for chronicle lost its connotation as a historical genre. "Esse sentido permaneceu nos vários idiomas europeus modernos, menos o português. Em inglês, francês, espanhol, italiano, a palavra só tem este sentido: *crônica* é um gênero histórico" (*Raúl Pompéia* 14). Conversely, most studies of the chronicle in Spanish America fail to mention Brazil at all. While this is certainly not the only example of a surprising lack of parallels drawn between Brazil and the rest of Latin America in literary studies, it is remarkable how critics have repeatedly failed to make any connection *whatsoever* between the Brazilian chronicle and the Spanish American chronicle when, in fact, we are talking about the *same* chronicle: not the historiographical chronicle but rather the journalistic chronicle as it has evolved throughout Latin America on both sides of the Spanish / Portuguese linguistic divide.

Precursors to the Latin American chronicle can be found in French and English journalistic traditions. The most notable is the nineteenth-century French *feuilleton*, which designated a particular place in the newspaper dedicated to entertainment. It was the only place in the newspaper for such frivolous things as jokes, recipes, and beauty tips (Meyer 96). A wide variety of curious facts and miscellanea not considered important enough to be fit into other sections of the newspaper could be printed there. The first formal

chronicles appeared in France in the early 1850s under the title "Chroniques de Paris" in the newspaper *Le Figaro*, although precursors to those chronicles can be found in English writings of local customs of the early eighteenth century (González 64).²

In the physical space of the newspaper and the aesthetic space that was created between journalism and literature in nineteenth-century Latin America emerged the chronicle. Julio Ramos discusses the importance of institutional supports in the foundation of literary discourse in Europe, noting that, through education and the publishing market, there flourished a will to autonomy in literature (80). In Latin America, where there was no comparable publishing market in the nineteenth century, "this development was again uneven, limiting the will to autonomy in literature and promoting the dependency of literature on other institutions" (Ramos 80). The nineteenth-century Latin American chronicle then, in the *feuilleton* tradition, was intricately linked to the newspaper. In fact, the chronicle was the place for literature in the newspaper. But more importantly, continues Ramos, "it was from this section of the newspaper that literature began to insistently announce the project of autonomy—its institutional utopia, to use an oxymoron" (188). Writers throughout Latin America adopted the French *chronique* and adapted it to the context of their rapidly modernizing societies. Not surprisingly, this first occurred in urban centers where there was a wide circulation of newspapers, such as Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, and Caracas. Among the first Latin American chroniclers that identified themselves as such are Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera (Mexico), José Martí (Cuba), Rubén Darío (Nicaragua), Machado de Assis (Brazil), and Raúl Pompéia (Brazil). They were influenced not only by the French and English presses, but also the North American press, which included small newspapers that spoke to the working class and to immigrants.

Coutinho argues that the transformation of the historiographical chronicle into the journalistic chronicle occurred as a result of and along with the development of the daily press in Brazil: "O desenvolvimento da imprensa diária seria a causa imediata da mudança, operada no século XIX, instalando a segunda fase da evolução do gênero" (*Raúl Pompéia* 15). Meanwhile, in Spanish the chronicle is

thought of as a product of the 1880s and the Spanish American *modernistas*. These writers utilized the chronicle to develop the "nueva prosa" of Spanish-American *modernismo*. The notion that the Spanish American *modernistas* mimicked the bourgeois lifestyle they supposedly rejected by isolating themselves in an ivory tower in search of the sublime and the uncontaminated has long been discredited. Art and literature were by no means separated in Latin America in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, cultural production was in some ways destined for the elite. In this sense, the chronicle played a key role. While many Latin American writers reached only a small social elite through their poetry, they reached a much larger reading public via the newspaper. "Así, de no haber sido por el espacio que ocuparon con sus crónicas en los periódicos," notes Rotker, "se hubieran limitado a producir para la elite. Las crónicas abrieron una brecha clave en el esquema de producción y recepción, una ruptura con lo que parecía destinado al placer y el lujo exclusivamente" (65). The medium of the newspaper required these artists, working as chroniclers, to reflect on everyday concerns. Furthermore, the genre of the chronicle allowed them the possibility for new forms of expression.

While the daily newspaper was the immediate cause of the emergence of the chronicle in its new form, the larger picture is the creation of an autonomous sphere for literature, the professionalization of the writer, and a peripheral modernity in relation to Europe. These phenomena affected Brazil and Spanish America in similar ways. Furthermore, there are clearly chronicles in both Spanish and Portuguese. It follows to ask, then, how important it really is to establish whether the chronicle first appeared in Brazil or in Spanish America. Perhaps Machado de Assis best explained the origin of the chronicle in his appropriately titled 1877 chronicle, "O nascimento da crônica":

"Não posso dizer positivamente em que ano nasceu a crônica; mas há toda a probabilidade de crer que foi coetânea das primeiras duas vizinhas. Essas vizinhas, entre o jantar e a merenda, sentaram-se à porta, para debicar os sucessos do dia (...) Eis a origem da crônica." (14)

The Latin American chronicle is a hybrid genre that borrows from a number of literary genres and writing forms. The ways in which it mixes literary techniques and genres make it somewhat difficult to define, prompting Aníbal González to ask: "¿cómo empezar a definir un género en prosa que parece caracterizarse por su indefinición?" (61). Coutinho describes the chronicle as "... a small piece in prose, of a free nature, in a colloquial style, brought on by the observation of everyday or weekly events, reflected through an artistic temperament" (*Introduction* 251). This general description of the genre avoids the common pitfalls of attempting to list the specific literary criteria that constitute a chronicle.³

A brief comparison of two nineteenth-century chronicles, Machado de Assis's "Antropofagia" and José Martí's "Un viaje a México," will demonstrate many of the characteristics of the Latin American chronicle and will further demonstrate why the Spanish American *modernista* chronicle ought not be seen as anything less than intimately related to the Brazilian chronicle.

In 1888 American painter Francis Hopkinson Smith traveled to Mexico to paint charming scenes of different Mexican cities. Clearly concerned with images he found appealing to the senses, such as colonial ruins and downtrodden indigenous peasants with smiling faces, he made little effort to understand the rapidly modernizing Mexico. His memoir, *A White Umbrella in Mexico*, was published in 1889. Martí used this memoir as a backdrop for his chronicle "Un viaje a México," published the same year for the Argentine newspaper *La Nación*. In the chronicle, Martí delves precisely into the areas of Mexican society that Hopkinson Smith omitted in his memoir.

On the one hand, Martí criticizes the author for writing such a book: "Calla lo que no debe, y juzga a medias lo que no ha logrado entender bien" (335). But he is quick to temper his criticism with gentle forgiveness for a well-intentioned foreigner by asking, "¿quién se enoja con un extranjero bien criado porque al empezar a hacer pininos en la lengua les cambie los acentos a las palabras?" (335).

Throughout the chronicle Martí highlights everything modern and changing in Mexico by focusing on what Hopkinson Smith either intentionally or unwittingly overlooked:

"Él fue a México para ver hermosuras y vejece pintorescas, la calle donde crece la yerba, el muro donde se aloja el lagarto místico, el indio hierático y cortés, la iglesia polvorienta, descascarada, dormida, el celaje carmesí y el suntuoso horizonte. En México no visita los talleres, donde el mexicano inventa máquinas, sino los paseos, donde un caballero de mano de mujer para de una lazada el caballo huido." (337)

The Mexico the reader sees is a Mexico filtered first through the paintings and memoir of a foreigner and then through the writing of Martí. The result is not a distorted or hazy vision but rather a multi-faceted one, as if enhanced by the refracted light of a prism. Without denying the beauty in the things seen by Hopkinson Smith, Martí casts his gaze towards the future, further distancing himself from the painter: "No fue Hopkinson-Smith a México a ver lo que se levanta, sino lo que muere; no visitó las escuelas, sino las sacristías, ni estudió instituciones, sino cuadros" (336). Martí sees the kernels of a new nation, "...la nación a quien no ha dado aún bastante sosiego la fortuna para convertir el veneno heredado en savia trabajadora, y despertar de su espanto a la gran raza dormida" (336).

Machado de Assis begins his satirical chronicle "Antropofagia," published in 1895 for the *Gazeta de Notícias* in Rio de Janeiro, by referring to the recent news of the hanging of an English professor in Guinea for the alleged crime of cannibalism. The news of this hanging was presented to the reading public by way of a telegram published in the newspaper. Like Martí, Machado's primary focus is on what is absent from the original source: "A descrição do ato faria arrepiar as carnes, mas os telegramas não descrevem nada, e o professor foi pendurado fora da nossa vista" (115). This slight against the telegram echoes a similar sentiment expressed by Guitierrez Nájera: "El telegrama no tiene literatura, ni gramática, ni ortografía. Es brutal" (55). Chroniclers sought to distance themselves as much as possible from what they considered mere journalistic reporting. The telegram is the medium through which news is transmitted but, for Machado, it is insufficient. His role as a chronicler, then, is to make sense of the fragments, as González succinctly explains:

“Como el filólogo, el *chroniqueur* sopesa, evalúa, enjuicia y, sobre todo, estructura, la masa caótica de información que se recibe en ‘el centro’. Podríamos decir que el *chroniqueur* realiza una minuciosa ‘arqueología del presente’, reconstituyendo, representando y exhumando el acontecimiento del *detritus* que lo envuelve. Sin embargo, a diferencia del filólogo, el *chroniqueur* se concentra en la *petite histoire*, en ‘le mouvement contemporain’, y no aspira a narrar los grandes eventos políticos o sociales (guerras, revoluciones), para los cuales hay otras secciones en el periódico.” (74)

Machado is concerned with that which the telegram does not explain: the reasons behind the hanging of the English professor. The lines between fact and fiction are intentionally blurred from the beginning, which clearly distances the chronicler from the reporter. “Demais, pode ser que o professor quisesse explicar aos ouvintes o que era canibalismo, cientificamente falando” (116), suggests Machado. Such phrases as “pode ser que quisesse” leave little doubt that there is a high level of speculation in the chronicle and, at the same time, lead the reader into doubting the objectiveness of the original news.

Machado soon moves on to the more important issue of civilization itself. Did the English professor commit acts of cannibalism merely to demonstrate what it was and thereby give the people a lesson in civilization? Or, is this case further proof that societies are becoming less civilized? “Foi o amor ao ensino, a dedicação à ciência, a nobre missão do progresso e da cultura? Ou estaremos vendo os primeiros sinais de um terrível e próximo retrocesso?” (116).

The chronicle stems from Romanticism in its subjectivity and its reaction against objective aesthetics such as Naturalism. This subjective nature of the chronicle is apparent in Machado’s use of the first person: “Dizem que comeu algumas crianças. Compreendo que o matassem por isso” (116). Although Martí avoids the first person in “El viaje a México,” he is no less objective than Machado when talking about Hopkinson Smith’s book: “Este libro no es mucho” (335).

Martí’s and Machado’s writings demonstrate the overtly subjective nature of the chronicle accompanied by frequent references to the outside world. There has prevailed over time a tendency to view a text’s literary value as proportional to its referentiality: the more factual a text is, the less literary it is thought to be. The chronicle contradicts this notion. Rotker correctly argues that the frequent external references do not necessarily place the chronicle within the boundaries of literature or within those of journalism:

“El criterio de factualidad no debe incluir ni excluir a la crónica de la literatura o del periodismo. Lo que sí era y es un requisito de la crónica es su alta referencialidad – aunque esté expresada por un sujeto literario – y la temporalidad (la actualidad).” (111)

Chroniclers assume the right to use facts however they see fit. As Margarida de Souza Neves notes, the chronicle, both reflecting and shaping public opinion, functions as an “agência de conformação da opinião pública” (90).

One of the most identifiable characteristics of the chronicle is its contemporaneity. Pertaining to the present place and time, chronicles deal with a wide range of issues including language, technology, social problems, racial problems, fashion, art, literature, politics, law, crime, and poverty. As we have seen, Martí and Machado demonstrate this contemporaneity by basing their writings on current events published in books and newspapers. Furthermore, they represent very different styles. Martí’s style in “El viaje a México” is that of a poetic visionary. He draws the reader to that which the painter Hopkinson Smith failed to see: “No ve el indio médico, el indio pintor, el indio comerciante, el indio juez, el indio presidente, el indio triunfante, el indio libre...” (337). Machado, on the other hand, chooses satire for this chronicle, bringing not a tale of savage African cannibals preying on a civilized Englishman but rather just the opposite: an English professor who eats African children one by one in the name of science. The difference in style between Martí and Machado reflects the wide range of styles employed by chroniclers, which includes irony, satire, metaphor, monologue, dialogue, and paraphrase.

Until about the time of Martí and Machado, the newspaper had been mainly a means of distribution for writing. By the 1880s, however, journalism was being increasingly aligned with the notion of objective facts, whereas literature was becoming largely separated from the notion of truth and relegated to a secondary field. But chroniclers refused to see their art reduced to either its market value or something to be merely consumed by the elite during leisure time. While forced to accept their compromised positions as wage-earning specialists, they often used their art in subversive ways. As Benjamin explains in his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the doctrine of art for art's sake "gave rise to what might be called a negative theology in the form of the idea of "pure" art, which not only denied any social function of art but also any categorizing by subject matter" (224). Many chroniclers of the early twentieth century attempted to retain something that was being lost in the creation of an autonomous space for literature. As art became increasingly depoliticized, writers became increasingly alienated from society. Andreas Huyssen notes that, "Throughout the 19th century the idea of the avantgarde remained linked to political radicalism" (5). The historical vanguard maintained somewhat of a balance between art and politics. This balance was eventually lost in the twentieth century, as the artistic vanguard largely separated itself from the political vanguard. Art either became subordinate to politics, or else it became depoliticized due to the rise of the culture industry. Many late nineteenth and early twentieth century Latin American chroniclers, writing before the rise of the culture industry, rejected the depoliticization of their art, and thus fought for what Huyssen calls the "legitimate place of a cultural avantgarde" (15). Without subordinating their art to politics and without accepting the doctrine of art for art's sake, they strove to maintain a precarious balance between art and politics. The at least partial success of these chroniclers in bringing about meaningful change in their societies had much to do with their strong sense of solidarity with the masses and with their optimism for a better future. Not surprisingly, they often envisioned a future for Latin America that went well beyond national borders. Highlighting this sentiment of overcoming linguistic and national borders through solidarity with the masses is the

Brazilian chronicler João do Rio in 1917:

"Sou brasileiro. Mas, depois de ser brasileiro sou sul-americano, crente no ideal do maravilhoso futuro da America Iberica... A Argentina dá-nos o exemplo do trabalho como o Brasil mostra a consciencia da obra a realizar. Mas ha tanto que fazer no Brasil, tanto ainda a crear na Argentina como em todos os outros paizes sul-americanos, que qualquer idéa de competição momentanea é uma criminosa infantilidade inútil..." (65-66)⁴

As we have mentioned, critics of Brazilian literature such as Preto-Rodas and Coutinho argue that the chronicle emerged out of Brazilian Romanticism in the early to mid nineteenth century, evolving along with the newspaper in the late 1800s and remaining a particularly Brazilian phenomenon. Meanwhile, critics of Spanish American literature such as Rotker and González insist that the chronicle was an invention of the Spanish American *modernistas*, having nothing to do with Brazil. Each perspective is true to some extent but in the end fails to fully explain the origins of the Latin American chronicle by not acknowledging the other. It is true that the chronicle provided the space in which the "nueva prosa" of the Spanish-American *modernistas* could develop and further served as a vehicle through which names of authors and interpretations of ideas and works could be disseminated. It is also true that the chronicle in Brazil came out of Romanticism in the nineteenth century and evolved along with the newspaper in the late 1800s. Recognizing the many parallels between Brazil and Spanish-speaking America will allow us to better understand literary trends in Latin America.

The chronicle is a crossroads of many different techniques and styles. Furthermore, it is emblematic of modern culture in that it looks for meaning in the fragments rather than attempting to construct a whole. In "Viaje a México," Martí ponders the fragmentary nature of modernity while contemplating different kinds of books: "Hay libros semejantes a los pantalones que suele usar el pueblo español, en que están compuestos con retazos de pantalones que fueron, zurcidos en la hora de la necesidad, para que hagan

oficio de tela corrida" (335). Such is the chronicle too: fragments through which the chronicler and the reader alike look for coherence. The chronicle "...subdivide la progresión temporal en una multitud de instantes discretos," explains González, "en una pululación de eventos que es necesario historiar, fijar dentro de una trama que es a la vez temporal y narrativa" (73). Ephemeral yet enduring, quotidian yet profound, the Latin American chronicle continues to challenge our notions about literature.

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Footnotes:

¹ While the English word *chronicle* is perhaps a misleading translation of the word *crônica / crônica* in the Latin American context, we use it here to avoid having to choose between *crónica*, as it is written in Spanish, and *crônica*, as it is written in Brazilian Portuguese.

² In *La crônica modernista hispanoamericana*, Aníbal González attributes the precursor of the French *chronique* to the English writers Addison and Steele who began writing articles on local customs around 1711 (64). He goes on to attribute the earliest French *chroniques* known as such to Auguste Villemot (73).

³ In "Um Gênero Brasileiro: A Crônica," Paulo Rónai attempts to determine the rules by which the chronicle must adhere. While offering some insight as to the importance of the chronicle as a literary genre, he describes it in terms that are far too limiting. For example, he claims that a chronicle is necessarily one to two pages and no more (155). While *most* chronicles do not go beyond two pages, many do. Raul Pompéia even referred to his long work of fiction *O Ateneu* (1888) as a chronicle, having written it day by day for the *Gazeta de Notícias*. Rónai makes other claims that hold true for many chronicles, but should not be stated as rules by which the chronicle must adhere, such as the chronicle "não admite a tensão dramática" (155) and is "necessariamente metropolitana, mais particularmente carioca" (155).

³ The original orthography has been carefully maintained in this citation.

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