

Insights on Contemporary Latin American Documentary Narratives: The Writers and Their Work

Latin American Documentary Narratives: The Intersections of Storytelling and Journalism in Contemporary Literature

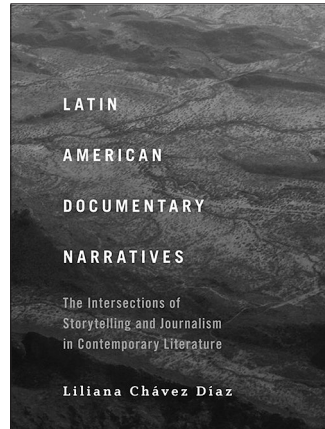
by Liliana Chávez Díaz. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. Photos. References. Index. Hardcover, 290 pp., USD\$108. Paperback, USD\$35.95 Ebook, USD\$35.95

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The need to recognize different manifestations of literary journalism and to expand the scholarly work beyond the anglophone world, stressed at the beginning of the twenty-first century, seems still very real. *Latin American Documentary Narratives: The Intersections of Storytelling and Journalism in Contemporary Literature* undeniably fulfills this demand and places selected Latin American non-fiction narratives not only within the global history of literary journalism but also engages in current debates on world literature.

Liliana Chávez Díaz, a Mexican scholar, journalist, and author of *Viajar sola. Identidad y experiencia de viaje en autoras hispanoamericanas* (Women travelling alone. Identity and travel experience by Hispanic American authors) (Edicions Universitat Barcelona, 2020), focuses in *Latin American Documentary Narratives* on “a marginal documentary trend that has formed its own alternative storytelling history and imaginaries at the margins of other more globally visible Latin American worlds” (1). She names this trend “documentary narrative” and discusses it through many examples, taking the reader on a fascinating journey through investigative and literary works of Gabriel García Márquez, Rodolfo Walsh, Carlos Monsiváis, Elena Poniatowska, Juan Villoro, Martín Caparrós, Santiago Roncagliolo, Leila Guerriero, Arturo Fontaine Talavera, Cristian Alarcón, and Francisco Goldman.

According to Chávez Díaz, documentary narratives are a means of exploring the encounter with the other and, as such, could be read as performative speech acts, in which different worldviews clash. The book thus presents a quite innovative approach. Instead of placing Latin American documentary narratives on a more popular intersection of fact and fiction or journalism and literature, as used by other scholars in the discipline, the author opts for the intersection of storytelling and



journalism. She argues that the storyteller is an essential figure through which true stories reconstruct reality and that “Even since the turn of the twenty-first century, in Latin America it is still possible to find [Walter] Benjamin’s storyteller disguised as a *flâneur*, a chronicler or *cronista*” (4).

Díaz explains that while journalists in other parts of the globe are safe enough to introduce first-person narration, the political situation in Latin America makes it difficult to write openly. She clarifies:

[T]he Latin American writer cannot aim to tell the truth of others without risking censorship, or even death. These writers therefore speak from the position of someone who, in order to tell the story of others, must tell their own story too. In contrast with authors publishing abroad, such as Goldman, Latin American writers need to include themselves in the narrative, for being a witness can supplement a lack of official information, or of a trustworthy legal process. This might explain why these authors are more concerned with modes of telling the truth that entail fewer risks, than with delivering ‘objective’ information. (33)

Chávez Díaz’s initial thesis is that “whereas in Europe the novel was born as a popular, mass form of entertainment that aimed to reflect the everyday life of common people, in Latin America this form, like any other literary genre, was produced and consumed by the elites. In their emergence from popular culture, documentary narratives—while not as openly popular—might be seen as an alternative way of revealing the diversity of voices and identities within the masses, a way that allows these voices to speak from their own position of diversity” (43). And although this statement could be considered quite controversial, the author’s analysis of selected Latin American documentary narratives gives evidence that the value and importance of documentary narratives go beyond their “literary” style, as those real stories in a metafictional format cross the limits of conventional media and offer an ethical and aesthetic response to the problem of truth and communication.

The book is structured in three parts, titled “Courage,” “Belonging,” and “Listening.” In the first, the author offers a historical overview of *crónica* (chronicle), literary journalism, and *testimonio* (testimony), proposing a new reading of two stories of survivors, namely Gabriel García Márquez’s *Relato de un naufrago* (The story of a shipwrecked sailor) and Rodolfo Walsh’s *Operación Masacre* (Operation massacre), which represent two different approaches to the task of journalism under censorship and show the complex relationship between the journalist-narrator and his sources.

In the second part, Díaz analyzes writers from the 1970s through the 1980s who are considered founders of the contemporary Latin American chronicle. On the one hand, she examines the work of chroniclers of Mexico City: Elena Poniatowska and Carlos Monsiváis, paying attention to their methodology and how they mediated between the elites and the people. On the other hand, she analyzes the multiple versions of Juan Perón’s story, as depicted by Tomás Eloy Martínez, exploring his research process—again in a context of censorship—and the ways in which storytelling can be used, both in fiction and nonfiction, to reconstruct historical events.

Part three focuses on the second group of writers, from the 1990s to 2000s, who search for new methods in research and narration. First, Díaz compares Martín

Caparrós's *Una luna. Diario de hiperviaje* (A moon. A hypertravel diary) with Juan Villoro's 8.8 *El miedo en el espejo. Una crónica del terremoto en Chile* (8.8 The fear in the mirror: A chronicle of the earthquake in Chile), paying special attention to their different investigative processes and employed literary devices and how social and environmental problems can be approached through dialogue with others. Then, she focuses on the work of the latest generation of Latin American authors who are working on testimonial-based stories and explores their use of metafiction as narrative strategy. While analyzing *Cuando me muera quiero que me toquen cumbia* (Dance for me when I die) by Cristian Alarcón; *Los suicidas del fin del mundo. Crónica de un pueblo patagónico* (The suicidal ones at the end of the world: Chronicle of a Patagonian town) by Leila Guerriero; *La cuarta espada. La historia de Abimael Guzmán y Sendero Luminoso* (The fourth sword. The story of Abimael Guzmán and the shining path) by Santiago Roncagliolo; and a novel, *La vida doble* (The double life: A novel) by Arturo Fontaine, Chávez Díaz shows how those contemporary documentary narrators are, in fact, a blend of two figures: the storyteller and the professional listener, and how Latin American documentary narratives shift from the representation of the other to the representation of the author's self-transformation after having encountered the other.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews carried out by the author with Cristian Alarcón, Arturo Fontaine, Martín Caparrós, Leila Guerriero, Elena Poniatowska, Juan Villoro, Santiago Roncagliolo, and Francisco Goldman, are found in the appendix, and add another layer of information. Arranged in three thematic sets, the interviews give insights into the beginnings of the literary and journalistic careers of eight authors and their investigative and creative processes. The interviews also shed some extra light on the kind of work Chávez Díaz was interested in analyzing. They not only complement the theoretical work she has carried out as a meticulous scholar and researcher but also demonstrate Chávez Díaz's ability to listen, dialogue with, and extract the essence. *Latin American Documentary Narratives* is thus polyphonic and dialogical in its nature. Not only does the author quote her sources, but documentary narratives result from different dialogues: the source with the writer, the writer with the reader, and journalism with literature. Not to mention that works she analyses (often in comparison) also enter into the kind of dialogue.

Another particularly interesting aspect of this book is the employed hybrid methodology, with textual analysis, a sociological approach, fieldwork undertaken in Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Spain, and participant observation, all of which make her research quintessentially multidisciplinary: literary, journalistic, but also anthropological.

If Pablo Calvi's *Latin American Adventures in Literary Journalism* (2019) was searching for historical roots of Latin American literary journalism, Liliana Chávez Díaz in this work moves toward contemporary documentary narratives, analyzing them from the perspective of a literary scholar (as she self-describes). And although she doesn't take a historical approach, the structure of her book allows us to trace chapter by chapter the evolution of this documentary mode.

All in all, it is a fascinating reading of Latin American documentary narratives, which offers valuable insight into the art and craft of the chosen Latin American storytellers (although I am not completely sure all the aforementioned authors would be happy with that term). However, I believe the employed category of storytelling is particularly important as it places literary journalism in another dimension, showing Latin American documentary narratives as cultural texts and underlining their indisputable literary and cultural value.