

## LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

# Falling into Silence: or, The Reach and Limits of Reporting Horror in Patricia Nieto's Work

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Based on a case study of Colombian journalist Patricia Nieto, who has written extensively about Colombia's armed conflict, this article offers a new approach to understanding demands on journalists and challenges that face them when covering the effects of violence and trauma. The analysis focuses on the prologues Nieto wrote for the edited volumes of testimonies that she and her students put together. The books were product of a collective endeavor by which Nieto and her students guided and helped victims and survivors of violence to write their own stories. In the prologues to these volumes, Nieto's reflections place politics and aesthetics close together in discussing the act of writing as the search for an inner voice to reconstruct the events that transformed someone into a victim. To understand the process of working with the victims, the article combines textual analysis and ethnographic fieldwork. It analyzes Nieto's professional trajectory and her position in the local field of journalistic production, considering her emotional and ethical quest when covering her country's armed conflict.

Con el análisis del trabajo de Patricia Nieto, quien ha escrito profusamente sobre el conflicto armado en Colombia, este artículo procura entender las demandas y los retos que enfrentan los periodistas que escriben sobre los efectos de la violencia y el trauma. El análisis se centra en los prólogos que Nieto escribió para tres antologías de testimonios de las víctimas que ella y sus estudiantes editaron. Las antologías son fruto de un emprendimiento colectivo en el que Nieto y sus estudiantes sirvieron de guías y ayudaron a las víctimas y sobrevivientes de la violencia a escribir sus historias. En los prólogos a estos volúmenes, Nieto vincula la política con la indagación estética y habla de la escritura como la búsqueda de una voz personal, con la que el narrador cuenta el evento que lo transformó en víctima del conflicto. Para entender este proceso, este ensayo combina el análisis textual con observaciones etnográficas sobre el trabajo de Nieto, incorpora, datos de su trayectoria profesional y su posición en el campo cultural local. Así mismo, ofrece observaciones sobre las demandas emocionales y éticas que definen el trabajo de la cronista.

In 1998, the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) put bombs on an oil pipe and a gas pipe in the region of Segovia, a mining zone in the state of Antioquia. The oil went downhill and spread into the Pocuné River. The gas formed a cloud and moved through the atmosphere until it reached the town of Machuca. It came in contact with the flame of a candle, or a furnace, or a match, and at midnight it exploded, leaving eighty-five people burnt and a population of survivors in a state of shock.<sup>1</sup>

These are the words of Patricia Nieto, a Colombian journalist who has written about the country's armed conflict for over twenty years. Following a long tradition of *cronistas*<sup>2</sup> whose work has generated often critical and/or unofficial political narratives (Walsh 1957; Poniatowska 1971; Salazar 1991), contemporary cronistas like Nieto write about the region's most pressing problems, giving account of the new forms of

<sup>1</sup> All translations are mine, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> I prefer the words *cronista* (over "journalist") and *crónica* (over "nonfiction work") to keep their meaning within the Latin American literary tradition.

violence that have emerged (Rotker et al. 2000; Polit Dueñas and Rueda 2011; Auyero, Bourgois, and Scheper-Hughes 2015). Topics range from the structure and operation of illicit and informal markets to the dynamics of armed conflicts and state repression (Osorno 2013; Hacher 2011; Rodríguez Nieto 2012); and from the sources and effects of police brutality and forced disappearances (Alarcón 2004; Turati 2011, 2015a, 2015b; Rea 2015) to the manifold forms of interpersonal violence at the urban margins (Alarcón 2010).

Writing about these issues, however, has come at a high price. During the past two decades journalists have increasingly endured diverse types of physical aggression, from routine intimidation to kidnappings and death. According to Reporters Without Borders (2014), 201 journalists have been killed in four Latin American countries since 2000.<sup>3</sup> These figures do not include the even higher incidence of personal threats and attacks on the facilities where they work (newspaper headquarters, radio stations, etc.). This reality makes Latin America one of the most dangerous regions for professional journalists, and it poses new challenges to the ways in which we (should) read their works. The purpose of my research is to overcome some of these challenges.

I analyze the work of several cronistas who write about social suffering, armed conflict, and other forms of violence by combining a close reading of their texts with observations of their working conditions and lived experiences. To this end, with a methodology that I developed in my previous work (Polit Dueñas 2013), and following Bourdieu's idea of the "radical contextualization" of the work (1991, 1993, 2004),<sup>4</sup> I trace the journalists' professional trajectories and the place(s) they occupy in the local cultural fields of cultural production. In addition, I borrow ideas on the transmission of affect (Brennan 2004; Cvetkovich 2008) and dig into the emotional tolls journalists pay when writing about violence. This dual approach enables readers to understand these *crónicas* as both evidence and enactments (or in other words, part of the repertoire and repositories of an archive) of our "culture of trauma" (Taylor 2003; Cvetkovich 2008).<sup>5</sup>

In this article I focus on the work of Medellín journalist Patricia Nieto, who began her career when Pablo Escobar unleashed terrorist attacks in the main cities in Colombia. Although her case belongs to a specific time in the history of Medellín, a study of her trajectory and work offers insightful perspectives on the practical and ethical challenges journalists face when covering violence, and sheds new light on the reach and limitations of their work.

This analysis borrows from Bourdieu and some of his followers' ideas on field studies (Bourdieu 2004; Benson and Neveu 2004): "To speak of the field is to name this microcosm, which is also a social universe, but a social universe freed from a certain number of the constraints that characterize the encompassing social universe, a universe that is somewhat apart, endowed with its own laws, its own *nomos*, its own law of functioning, without being completely independent of the external laws" (Bourdieu 2004, 33). However, it is not my intention to arrive at conclusive notions about the field of journalism in Medellín, Colombia, where Patricia Nieto lives and works, or about the field of Latin American journalism as a whole. Rather, my aim is to understand how journalists like Nieto have struggled to legitimize their voices and the voices of those who appear in their stories within their local fields.

To unearth this struggle I explore the choices Nieto made within her local field of journalistic production and how she positioned herself in that microcosm. I understand that while some of her choices were conscious (the search for funding, the topics she choose to write about, the writing style), others are unconscious and are more difficult to identify, as they are structured by the local and global demands of production and consumption (i.e., the cultural industry). A close observation of these elements enables us to better understand the objective conditions of possibility that shaped Nieto's trajectory, the tendencies in her discourse, the stories she tells, as well as the contribution of her *crónicas* to our overall understanding of the situation of the victims of the armed conflict in Antioquia.

<sup>3</sup> These numbers have increased since I wrote the first version of this article. In Mexico alone in 2017, 8 journalists have been killed. On February 24, 2015, the PGR (Procuraduría General de la República) reported that, in the previous fifteen years, 103 journalists were killed in Mexico and 25 disappeared (Becerril and Ballinas 2015). Rubén Espinoza's assassination in a middle-class neighborhood in Mexico City on July 31, 2015, marked a turning point for journalists all over the country and showed the vulnerability they experience even in places that were considered "safe," like Mexico City.

<sup>4</sup> My broader project includes analyses of the works of Marcela Turati, Daniela Rea, and Sandra Rodríguez Nieto in Mexico.

<sup>5</sup> I use the term "culture of violence," following Cvetkovich, in order to emphasize the set of shared values and losses, grief, and forms of mourning that constitute an archive of feelings of these sorts. This concept enables me to understand in a broader sense the archive of narratives of violence and common trauma.

## Methodology and Topic

To complete the research for this paper, I traveled to Medellín in August 2014 to observe Nieto working on her current project, conducting workshops organized by the municipality of Medellín, and teaching at the University of Antioquia. I traveled with her to rural areas of the province and to the outskirts of the city, where we visited some of the *desplazados* (displaced residents) who appear in her crónicas. The recollection of the event in Machuca came out during one of many in-depth interviews I conducted with her, in which she shared the story of her trajectory as a journalist, including several salient memories of her career as a reporter as well as her current experience as a university professor.

Instead of reading from Nieto's individual work (which merits its own essay), in this article I focus on the prologues she wrote for three books that she put together with her students and the victims of the armed conflict. By their nature and composition, these books constitute a great example of both evidence—they are *testimonios*—as well as enactments (they are products of collective processes of remembering and performative acts of writing) of Medellín's culture of trauma.

In journalistic jargon the word *testimonio* refers to an account of a personal experience, mainly gathered and organized by a journalist through interviews, and it could appear in a crónica.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, for Latin American literary critics, *testimonio* is a genre that incited a heated debate that was a central concern in the field almost two decades ago.<sup>7</sup> While I will not expand on the complexity and scope of this debate, it is worth mentioning some of the ideas expressed. Cultural critics George Yúdice and John Beverly recognize the porosity of the genre,<sup>8</sup> but they state that *testimonio*'s main contribution to the field of literary and cultural studies resides precisely in that it challenges the literary institution (or the “master narrative,” in Yúdice's terms). For them, neither an individual's aesthetic search nor the place of the author of the *testimonio* are relevant in its study. *Testimonios* are discourses whose significance resides in their authenticity and their effective exposition of the political struggle of an underprivileged collectivity (Beverly 1996; Yúdice 1996).

Nieto, as we will see, proposes that the *testimonios* gathered in these volumes have a political impact only in relation to the aesthetic search of each author and the individual name attached to each text. In other words, she sees the victims as authors.<sup>9</sup> This is what makes these narratives worthy. This new take on *testimonio* presents a radical change of perspective that will be explained in the contexts of the contemporary production of crónicas, Nieto's particular trajectory, and the specific moment of Colombian history.

The books I refer to in this essay are *Jamás olvidaré tu nombre* (2006), *El cielo no me abandona* (2007), and *Donde pisé aún crece la hierba* (2010). Each of them is a collection of stories written by the victims themselves, with the participation and coaching of Nieto and her students. In the prologues Nieto writes for each volume she exposes her own view of the genre (crónica) and explains her vision of writing about trauma. These prologues present her ethical stance as a journalist in Colombia and demonstrate her contribution to the discourses of history and memory about the local armed conflict.

For the purpose of this work I see Nieto both as an author and as a representative of the local field of journalistic production (Bourdieu 2004, 41–42). Attributing this double position to her allows me to examine the objective conditions of possibility of these anthologies as the result of Nieto's position-taking in the local field as well as the journalist's trajectory in Medellín. The objective of this approach is to acutely understand the production of crónicas in times of conflict.

<sup>6</sup> The definitions of the genre have changed in time and contexts. Journalists consider Poniatowska's *La noche de Tlatelolco* a crónica, while it is read as a book of *testimonios* by literary critics. Patricia Lara's *Las mujeres en la guerra* (2010), a book based on *testimonios*, won the Premio Planeta for journalism in 2010. The works of sociologist Alfredo Molano (1990, 1996, 2001), are also based on *testimonios*. Critics refer to the work of Nobel Laureate Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl* (2005) (which has a similar structure of *La noche de Tlatelolco*) as a book of oral histories and monologues.

<sup>7</sup> The debate began after the publication of *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (Burgos 1983). See also Arturo Arias (2001). I propose to understand the genres (*testimonio* and *crónica*) within the broader contexts of the fields of production and consumption.

<sup>8</sup> “*Testimonio* may include, but is not subscribed under, any of the following textual categories, some of which are conventionally considered literature, others not: autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, *novela-testimonio*, nonfiction novel, or ‘factographic literature’” (Beverly 1996, 24–25). For Yúdice, *testimonios* could be considered as a form of “new journalism.” (1996, 46). Since this work focuses on the work of journalists, I follow their use of the term.

<sup>9</sup> Let us consider Foucault's definition of an author: “The coming into being of the notion of ‘author’ constitutes the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences” (Foucault 1998, 205).

## Before and After the Silence of Machuca

A daughter of two schoolteachers from Sonsón, a small town in rural Antioquia, Nieto finished high school with a major in education (*normalista*). But instead of becoming a rural teacher like her mother and father, she moved to Medellín to pursue her education in communications at the University of Antioquia, where she is currently a faculty member.<sup>10</sup> She took her first job at the beginning of the 1990s at a local newspaper. This is how she remembers that time:

Those were the tough years when [Pablo] Escobar had the city under siege. My first time covering violence was when Escobar put a bomb at the entrance of a concert arena. At the end of the show, when people were leaving, the bomb exploded and killed dozens of people.

In the newspaper there were moments like this one, when the whole staff wrote about violence. Now, let me explain this. If you have, say, twenty journalists, three cover sports and three cover economy—these guys are never removed from their duties in Colombian newspapers—the rest are responsible for covering the cultural, the political, the social, the environment beats, etc. If there is an event like the explosion of a bomb that kills dozens of civilians and the whole city is in crisis, all the journalists in the newspaper have to cover the event. We all become police beat reporters.

Journalists covering the police beat are usually best prepared to deal with scenes of violence (at least in terms of knowing personal security strategies), and are accustomed to working under severe stress. In times of armed conflicts, all the staff is forced to cover violent events and reporters have to improvise. “Only the police beat reporters went to the crime scenes or where the attacks took place. The youngest ones, like me, were sent to get additional information, like going to the morgue to identify bodies. But all of us did our job with high levels of adrenaline.”

Nieto’s recollections of those years when Pablo Escobar unleashed terrorist attacks in Medellín (and in other cities in Colombia), and when she began her career as a reporter, are traumatic. Her description of Medellín in the early 1990s is similar to what we hear nowadays in the case of Mexican journalists: the violence and the chaos generated by violence transform the journalists who used to cover the social, health, and education beats into war reporters.<sup>11</sup>

After her experience with the newspaper, Nieto switched jobs and moved to a cultural magazine. Working for this publication, she recalls, was like living in another universe. The magazine came out once a month and it was dedicated to covering topics related to art, music, society, and even public personalities’ profiles. “This job was more related to the ways in which you tell stories about a city.” At the magazine she had more time to write and do research for her stories. She even remembered having conversations with her editors regarding the composition of each piece. The slower pace of reporting was not related to any change in Medellín’s situation. “The violence in the city was still rampant. We had to close our office a couple of times after receiving threats that Pablo Escobar sent to us personally from jail, via fax.”

By 1998, when the attack on Machuca took place, Nieto had left the magazine and was working with a group of social scientists from the university on a study about violence in Antioquia. When the news about the bomb explosions broke, Nieto asked her boss to buy her a plane ticket. She wanted to tell that story, and off she went.

We were at Nieto’s apartment in a middle-class building complex in Medellín; the recollection of Machuca’s disgraceful attack came to her mind when I invited her to think of a story about which she could not write. Hidden (or not so hidden) in my question was the need to hear from her—a journalist who had written extensively about violence—a story that has turned out to be *unsayable*. The search for the unsayable was my way of making Nieto elaborate on the ethical quest of her own work, and reflect upon the weight of her words when representing the suffering of others.<sup>12</sup>

Her immediate answer had to do with the horror she witnessed at the poor, small village of Machuca. “The scene, the trace of the fire, the smell of the burnt bodies. The bodies were still there!” But as her narrative

<sup>10</sup> Nieto received her PhD from the School of Communications at the Universidad Nacional in La Plata, Argentina.

<sup>11</sup> Information gathered in interviews with Marcela Turati, Sandra Rodríguez Nieto, and Daniela Rea during fieldwork conducted in Mexico City in March 2015. While the situation in their country has transformed them into war reporters, each of them said that they have had little or no support from their employers, let alone from the local authorities.

<sup>12</sup> The idea is taken from Giorgio Agamben in his reflections about Primo Levi. Agamben explains that the testimonies of Auschwitz’s survivors have lacunae, or things that could not be said. This is, in Agamben’s argument, where the ethical quest of “the remains of Auschwitz lies” (1996, 10); “que se abandonen algunas palabras y otras sean comprendidas de modo diverso. Quizá este es un modo —quizá el único modo posible— *de escuchar lo no dicho*” (10, my emphasis).

progressed, other actors appeared in the story, making it evident that the severity of her experience was also the product of a profound ethical and professional dilemma. Nieto's lack of words and her difficulty in writing about the episode were related not only to the horror itself. Her silence was a product of the place she occupied as a journalist in the middle of that chaos, and her relationships with the other actors who were present: the victims and the journalists who went to cover the story.

### The Two Machucas

Machuca is a small village divided by a road. To get there Nieto took a plane, then a bus, and finally rode a motorcycle, as the explosions had destroyed all access roads. Most of the townspeople were sheltered at the local church, either because their houses were destroyed or because they were too afraid to sleep in their homes. She joined them during the three nights of her stay:

I recorded several interviews that are there [she pointed with her chin to a corner where a plastic box lay on the floor]. I thought those stories were going to be in *Llanto en el paraíso*,<sup>13</sup> but after all these years I have not been able to write. When I came back from Machuca and listened to the stories, I realized—or supposed—that the people who talked to me did not know what they were saying. They were still in a state of shock. I thought, “this person does not know what he is saying. If these persons read my crónica a year from now, they will say that these are not their testimonios because they are delirious.”<sup>14</sup>

Machuca is a town of miners where there is a lot of gambling and prostitution. Because of this, people interpreted the explosion as a punishment for their sins or a sign of the apocalypse. “Perhaps it was a mistake due to my youth, my lack of understanding, or my limited training, but I couldn't write about it,” Nieto confessed as if her silence would represent a failure in her profession.

Then there was the other Machuca. This part of the story Nieto recalled with equal bewilderment. During the time she stayed in the town, she witnessed how other journalists did their work. “They got there by helicopter. They asked three questions, took some images, and left. I remember a TV crew got there, they made macabre jokes about the scene, the bodies; then they went to the local grocery store and bought everything: water, potato chips, sausages, beer. When they left in the late afternoon, there was nothing to eat in the town. Nothing.”

### Falling into Silence

“Silence can be either the outside of language or a position inside language, a state of noiselessness or wordlessness. Falling silent is, however, not a state but an event. It is the significance of the event that I will try to understand and think through in the present essay,” writes Shoshana Felman in her celebrated article “Benjamin's Silence” (1999, 203). She is concerned with the nature of the historical events that provoked such silence, something so horrible that prevents the speaker from referring to it even through testimony. Felman thus analyzes two of Walter Benjamin's most important essays, “The Story Teller” (1936) and “Thesis on the Philosophy of History” (1940), as evidence of the German philosopher's falling into silence. The first essay deals with the silence that the war brought to literature: “It has become impossible to tell a story” (Felman 1999, 205); the second one addresses the silence that the war brought to history as a result of a “radical displacement of our frames of references” (ibid., 208). Both articles deal with war, and in Felman's reading, as she announces at the beginning of the essay, the issue at stake is the event of a culture that has become silent.

While Felman's reading of Benjamin shows how violence presented a challenge to literary and historical discourses, I would like to take a different approach to explain Nieto's falling into silence. Instead of focusing on the nature of violence and war, I want to focus on Nieto's realization of the place she occupied in the scene described in Machuca. I want to explore her lack of words in relation to Bourdieu's definition of language as “the exemplary formal mechanism whose generative capacities are without limits. There is nothing that cannot be said and it is possible to say nothing” (1991, 41). In this rather practical and even optimistic definition of language, Bourdieu hints at its relational character. To refer to something as

<sup>13</sup> *Llanto en el paraíso* is one of Nieto's books of crónicas (Nieto 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Notice the use of the word *testimonios* to refer to the information gathered through interviews and the word *crónica* to refer to the final work that includes them.

unsayable is to attribute to words a power of their own, as if language were an autonomous object.<sup>15</sup> The power of words comes from the authority bestowed upon the person who enunciates them: “The power of words resides in the fact that they are not pronounced on behalf of the person who is only the ‘carrier’ of these words: the authorized spokesperson is only able to use words to act on other agents and, through their action, on things themselves, because his speech concentrates within it the accumulated symbolic capital of the group which has delegated him and which he is the *authorized representative*” (Bourdieu 1991, 111; original emphasis).

In the scene that Nieto recalls in Machuca, we are dealing with the particular situation of a journalist whose job is to report and inform. Her struggle is to articulate the events within the specific language used by journalists. This field of production, we should remember (together with the social sciences and the political fields), “lays claim to the imposition of the *legitimate vision* of the social world” (Bourdieu 2004, 36; my emphasis). In other words, journalists should not fall into silence because for them, silence is a failure.

It is at this crossroads that I interpret Nieto’s falling into silence. I don’t explain her lack of words as a (mechanical) result of the chaotic reality (*horrorism*)<sup>16</sup> she witnesses in Machuca and to which she couldn’t confer any order. I understand her silence in relation to the actors in the scene, both the victims, with whom she relates with guilt because she cannot represent them, and the journalists reporting on the events, with whom she cannot identify either. The distance she wants to establish from those journalists covering Machuca defines her own position-taking within the field.

Nieto had to search for her own place—with respect to the victims and to her fellow journalists—to tell a story about Machuca. But she was competing in the business of giving a legitimate vision of what had happened with professionals working for newspapers and TV stations that reported with images about the carnage. Let’s remember that at that time Nieto was still rather young and did not have the symbolic capital to win that competition. (“Perhaps it was a mistake due to my youth, my lack of understanding, or my limited training, but I couldn’t write about it.”) She didn’t even have a journalist credential to be in Machuca. As she would remind me over the course of our conversation, “I only asked my boss to pay for my ticket. I did the rest on my own and when I got there and said that I was a journalist, I couldn’t even show a credential or answer which media I was working for.”

I included the description of Machuca because it is what the journalist recalled when I asked her about a story that she couldn’t tell. For Nieto, Machuca is the paradigm of the unsayable. I have interpreted Nieto’s silence as position-taking in the local journalistic field of production, but this cannot be fully understood without also acknowledging the ethical dimension of her silence.

For analytical purposes, let’s divide the event of Machuca into two moments. The first represents Nieto’s recognition of the vulnerability of the victims who survived the explosion. The second is her recognition of the survivors’ vulnerability in relation to the journalists who came to tell their story. In that second moment, Nieto also faces her own vulnerability because, although she does not recognize her work as the same as that of her fellow professionals, she cannot redeem the victims from the stories those journalists would tell about them (or the jokes they made about the dead bodies, or their abusive consumption of the food at the local grocery). She cannot tell the story from the victim’s point of view, as she is not, in Levi’s terms, a privileged witness, nor could she give a more sympathetic version of the events, one that could actually show their distress and fears. Falling into silence is also the recognition of her own vulnerability.

Our physical and bodily vulnerability, wrote Judith Butler in her reflections about the US reaction to the 9/11 attacks, could be what defines our human condition, understood as our relation to the other. The consciousness of our vulnerability could be transformed into the collective responsibility for the vulnerability of the others (Butler 2006, 10–49).<sup>17</sup> While I certainly do not think that this is always the case, that is, that our grief brings a sense of collective responsibility for the vulnerability of others, I do think that that is what happened to Nieto in Machuca. Understanding vulnerability, in this specific sense, allows us to

<sup>15</sup> Primo Levi’s notion of “privileged witness” may serve to exemplify the importance of this concept when we face the extreme situation of representing the pain of others. For Levi, the privileged witnesses were those who could no longer speak, the ones who experienced the horror, the fallen or the dead ones. Those are the only ones whose testimony would have a *general meaning* (2005, 481). His humble recognition of not being one of them is also the recognition of a place occupied within a system of signification, or his own way of articulating his survivor’s guilt.

<sup>16</sup> The word *horrorism* was coined by Italian scholar Adriana Cavarero (2009) in her insightful reflection about the new ways we have to talk about contemporary forms of violence.

<sup>17</sup> It should be stressed that Butler is not only writing about 9/11 but also, and most importantly, about the way in which the US reacted to those attacks, overcoming grief by taking action—in this case, going to war. That is what incites her ethical reflection. There is a similar structure to the story told by Nieto; she reacted not only to the horror of Machuca but also to the reaction of others (the journalists) in front of that horror.

define Nieto's silence as her ethical stand in the face of these events in addition to taking a position within the field, as stated before.

### The Outside Elements

By 1998, Nieto had already participated in two writing workshops organized by the recently established FNPI (Fundación Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano), founded in 1994 by Gabriel García Márquez.<sup>18</sup> The effects that the Fundación had among young journalists were immediately felt in the Colombian field of written journalism. As Javier Darío Restrepo, one of Colombia's most respected journalists, former TV anchor, and part of the first generation of instructors for the FNPI told me, "At the end of the nineties, we conducted a study to evaluate the impact the Fundación had. The study showed a deep impact mainly felt in the reporting rooms. There were no journalists there. They all had left."<sup>19</sup> Nieto, who overheard Restrepo's comments, told me that she was one of those reporters who left the reporting rooms. "I already knew that I wanted to do another kind of journalism."

Nieto is among the new generation of cronistas in Latin America who write about social conflicts, violence, and marginality in a new way. They describe their work as investigative journalism (or narrative journalism) and state that while their writing is committed to reporting the real, they use the tools of fiction to tell their stories. An analysis of the current transformations of the field of journalism and the production of crónicas in Latin America exceeds the scope of this paper, but it is important to understand that Nieto is not alone in her search for new methods of doing journalism and innovative ways of writing. She belongs to a generation of journalists who need to redefine their place within their field.<sup>20</sup>

There is yet another very important element that must be mentioned to understand the possibility of Nieto's current work. A couple of years after she joined the University of Antioquia, Medellín's public policies toward culture changed dramatically. Sergio Fajardo became Medellín's mayor in 2003, and his cultural policies showed his commitment to resisting the violence that had killed so many people over the past decades. The municipality's political approach sought to integrate poor neighborhoods with the rest of the city through the construction of new means of transportation, the creation of modern public libraries in those neighborhoods, and the improvement of local recreational spaces. Most of all, 40 percent of the city budget was used to invest in education and other areas of culture (Romero 2007). From the outset, the Medellín of the beginning of this century was an outstanding example of what Yúdice describes as the expediency of culture: "Culture [is] increasingly wielded as a resource for both sociopolitical and economic amelioration" (2003, 9).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Gabriel García Márquez noticed the changes in the journalistic field of production and the lack of opportunity and space that cronistas had in the neoliberal and market-oriented organization of the media. This is one of the reasons he wanted to train journalists in the craft of writing. Jaime Abello, director of the FNPI, describes García Márquez's goals with these words: "Lo novedoso para Gabo de su iniciativa de la FNPI consistía en promover, desde una institución imparcial e independiente, un proyecto educativo internacional enfocado a la reflexión, los debates y la experimentación de laboratorio sobre el oficio que tanto quería. Sus preocupaciones eran no solo las de un amante y profesional del periodismo, comprometido con su rescate y avance, sino también las de un ciudadano alarmado que veía en el deterioro de la calidad informativa una amenaza para la democracia" (Abello Banfi 2012, 466, my emphasis). (The novelty of Gabo's initiative with the FNPI, was the promotion of an international educational project, focused on self-reflection, debates, and experimental work in the craft he so much loved, from an impartial and independent institution. His preoccupations were not only those of a lover of journalism and a professional seeking to rescue journalism to improve it, but also those of a citizen who was alarmed by the worsening in the quality of information, and saw that as a threat to democracy.) García Márquez himself conducted the first writing workshop Nieto attended.

<sup>19</sup> Javier Darío Restrepo, personal communication with the author during a conversation in Jericó, Antioquia, August 2014.

<sup>20</sup> While there are many Colombian journalists who have written about the armed conflict (Patricia Lara, Alonso Salazar, Juan José Hoyos, Arturo Álape, Ricardo Aricapa, to mention a few), their work—either because they belong to another generation or because the position they occupy in the local field—does not belong to the self-acclaimed boom of crónicas in the region. To understand the definition of the field given by journalists themselves and the situation of the self-named Nuevos Cronistas de Indias, see Guerrero (2012). See also the introduction to *Antología de la crónica latinoamericana actual* by Darío Jaramillo Agudelo (2012) and the introduction to *Mejor que la ficción* (notice the title) by Jorge Carrión (2012). These articles show the changes in the forms of producing and reading crónicas, the impact of the FNPI, as well as the changes in the cultural industry (publishing houses, proliferation of specialized magazines for publication of crónicas, prices, etc.) that have enhanced the idea of the cronista as an author and the consideration of crónicas as the best "literary" works produced in the region. All these texts prove the fact that journalists (and the cultural industry that supports them) seek to have their work recognized by the literary institution.

<sup>21</sup> I am not saying that it is an integrated city. Like most Latin American metropolises, Medellín's expensive neighborhoods and luxurious malls contrast with the surrounding impoverished *comunas*. However, during the fieldwork I conducted for my previous work (2013), I met several writers, photographers, cultural promoters, journalists, social scientists, local intellectuals, political activists, and even bohemians who have contributed to the idea that culture is a means to transform Medellín and make it a more inclusive city.

Currently, Nieto remains a journalist, but she makes her living as a university professor, a position that grants her autonomy with respect to the local journalistic field.<sup>22</sup> She has flexibility to choose the topics she writes about and has developed a very personal style when representing the victims of the armed conflict. As will be shown in the following pages, she emphasizes the victims' personal search for an aesthetic expression as the possibility to accede to justice and heal the wounds. That search for poetic beauty resonates with the changes in the field of production of crónicas.

We could state that the characteristics of the books Nieto and her team put together, and the choice of the voices (the victims) that narrate the stories, have roots in Nieto's sensitivity toward the suffering of others, the changes in the field of production of crónicas, her own trajectory in the profession, and the fact that as a professor, she depends less on the traditional means of recognition within the journalistic field of production (i.e., a story published in the first page of a newspaper; a journalistic prize, etc.) and does not receive a salary from a media outlet. These books were made possible by cultural policies in the city of Medellín at the turn of the century. These are all elements that contextualize these works.

## Prologues

The three prologues<sup>23</sup> analyzed here introduce books edited by Nieto with the support of the city of Medellín.<sup>24</sup> These collective works are the product of workshops Nieto conducted with her students at the University of Antioquia, and with the authors of the texts included in each volume. Nieto and her students walked around neighborhoods searching for possible contributors. They visited neighborhood associations, churches, schools, health centers, and so on. She guided her students to facilitate the writing process of the identified victims.<sup>25</sup> All the crónicas included in these volumes are written by victims of the Colombian armed conflict, and all of them are signed by the victims with their real names. In sum, they are the authors of testimonies in which they tell their personal stories.<sup>26</sup>

The process was long. Nieto conducted an initial workshop, and the students would follow up each week over a period of four to six months. During this time the short testimony of a victim would be transformed into a story of ten to fifteen pages. For example, a sentence telling the story of the victim's displacement, Nieto explains, like, "I had a nice house in the country until uniformed military men came, attacked us, and made us leave," would become a full description of the time that preceded the attack, the testimony of the traumatic event, and the way in which the author currently deals with this past. It would turn into a personal narrative. To produce such texts, students would ask the person to describe in detail his or her house, what kind of produce she grew, which animals the family had, the work they did on the land. The homework assigned to the narrators every week was to expand, little by little, the description of the setting, the atmosphere, and the activities of their former lives. Then they would do the same with the violent event that changed that life forever. In the process of bringing the sensory world into their writing, always with the help of the student who would be asking questions, writing itself became a conscious act that empowered them, not only because they were able to articulate in their own words how they had become victims of the conflict, but also because in articulating that painful story in a particular way (caring for the form of the story), writing was liberating. This is how one of the victims begins her testimony: "I take my place slowly. I have a pen and a simple notebook in which I want my thoughts, my recollections, my feelings to flow

<sup>22</sup> "For a journalist, the degree of autonomy will depend on one's position in the journalistic field, which means, for example, on one's authority. So one can establish indices of autonomy, which, it can be assumed, would enable one to predict the way that agents will behave, particularly in their capacity to resist the imposition of the state or the economy. Freedom is not a property that falls from the sky; it has its degrees, which depend on the position occupied in the social game" (Bourdieu 2004, 44).

<sup>23</sup> Prologues in the Latin American literary tradition have had an important role in the definition of canons and the description of what is "art." They have guided in specific ways how to read the texts of an author or a movement. This was evident at the turn of the century, when the literary field was gaining autonomy from the political field, and writers defined their own work in relation to their journalistic writing (although now we are witnessing an opposite move: journalists claiming to be literary figures). Prologues are descriptive as well as prescriptive texts. I read Nieto's prologues considering this double function. For studies about crónicas, Modernism, and the prologues published at the turn of the century, see especially Rotker (1992) and Ramos (1989).

<sup>24</sup> These books were published under the administration of Alonso Salazar, mayor of Medellín after Sergio Fajardo, who continued Fajardo's cultural policies. The volumes have had several print runs and are distributed widely at city and school events.

<sup>25</sup> "Identified victim" is the phrase Nieto used during interviews to explain how they get to know the contributors for the books. She talked to local priests and leaders to arrange meetings with people who had suffered from the armed conflict and who were willing to tell their stories.

<sup>26</sup> Nieto states that she follows the method suggested by Ruth Sautu, in which each actor has to be placed in the specific historical and geographic context and, from then and there, she/he will elaborate the plot of his/her own narrative, *La reconstrucción de la sociedad a partir del testimonio de los actores*. No further information about the book is given.



and narrate in order the experiences of a harrowing pain, as is the loss of a first son, who was abducted, disappeared, and killed in captivity" (Orozco 2007, 19).

The first book, *Jamás olvidaré tu nombre*, presents twenty stories of people from Medellín's shantytowns (*comunas*). Each crónica ends with a one-paragraph profile of the author, provided by the student who served as facilitator. The final experience of this anthology was a public reading in one of the city's main squares during the local poetry festival. The authors themselves, the facilitators, and Nieto, as well as local political authorities and celebrities, conducted public readings of the texts. In this public forum the shared stories were embraced by the audience, and this recognition of the victims was also a public acknowledgment that the human dilemmas caused by the armed conflict belong to each and every citizen of Medellín.

The second book, *El cielo no me abandona*, includes fifty-seven stories of victims, mostly middle-class professionals and housewives who are survivors of torture or kidnappings, or have a relative who is either disappeared or was injured by an armed group. The last book collects stories of nineteen victims who were injured when crossing minefields.

The testimonies gathered in these volumes are stories of "horrorism" that constitute Colombia's long history of armed conflict and that have given shape to a local culture of violence. At the same time, the books themselves are proofs of resilience and strength. They are products of the excruciating processes by which each of the victims was guided, helped, and encouraged to put his or her personal narrative together. The books are proofs of human solidarity, bonding, and communal work.

The first prologue begins: "*Jamás olvidaré tu nombre* is a confession, a lament, and a chant. Twenty voices are heard in the following pages, united by the common circumstance of living in Medellín, with the pains that the armed conflict have left them, and feeling that writing is a repairing balm and a tool against oblivion" (9). Nieto describes the way in which the book was composed and the process by which the authors share the stories "that transformed them into victims." She prizes the authenticity of the voices "that form a chant" (9) and briefly describes the rites of passage through which the authors learned "a craft that requires a good quill as much as consciousness of one's own existence" (9). The word "victim" is a complex one in this context. To understand oneself as a victim means to understand one's fate within the structures of the country's armed conflict—that is to say, to understand the loss of a loved one or the loss of the land as a product of the war. This consciousness does not appear immediately after suffering a violent attack. Machuca is a great example of how some people affected by violence tend to describe a violent event as a product of God's punishment or bad luck. When victims understand their fate as a result of a collective problem, they don't feel embarrassed to talk about what happened. Their claim for recognition as victims of the armed conflict would eventually lead them to claim restitution. This, however, is an individual process (of self-recognition), enabled in this case by writing. Writing empowered the individuals and helped them see themselves as citizens.<sup>27</sup> In Nieto's words, writing should not be taken as the painful process of reconstructing the story of victimhood, but rather as the search for that inner voice required to become a writer. Only finding that voice would transform the act of writing into a "balm and a tool against oblivion." In suggesting that we read these stories as a chant, Nieto guides our reading through the paths of each author's search for his or her own voice, and makes it clear that discovering this inner voice is the way to really understand the phenomenon of the war, the processes by which these people became victims, and ultimately the ways through which the act of storytelling is only possible in the search for beauty in the composition of words. Only the latter would result in a healing process. The emphasis on the pursuit of beauty in this self-discovery is what Nieto wants us to find through our reading.<sup>28</sup>

If the first book is compared to a chant, the second is described as a patch of colors, "a rainbow in which each author shines according to the light added to his/her words" (*El cielo*, 10). Again, there is an analogy with another form of art to highlight the beauty of the works. While classical trauma studies agree on the need to tell the story as the way to overcoming it (Freud 1949; Herman 1992; Shay 1995), Nieto does not emphasize this pragmatic side of the storytelling. Rather, she focuses on the importance of finding that inner voice that makes each story beautiful and unique. The rest, she says, will come. That "rest" is not a "surplus" value of the stories, as she states in the prologue to the second volume: "I refer . . . to the moment

<sup>27</sup> Nieto discussed how in the comunas, where she began working, people would not dare to talk about what made them move to live there. They would feel embarrassed to mention their tragedy, even though many of their neighbors were from the same town or the same region where they came from.

<sup>28</sup> Nieto does not expand on her conception of aesthetics; however, Yúdice's approach seems to be pertinent in this context: "It is a way of using narrative discourse whose function is not solely pragmatic (that is, for the purposes of self-defense and survival) but just as significantly aesthetic (insofar as the subjects of the testimonial discourse rework their identity through the aesthetic), though that aesthetic does not usually correspond to the definitions of the literary as legitimized by dominant educational, publishing, and professional institutions" (Yúdice 1996, 46).

that follows that epiphany, to simply celebrate the birth of an inner voice with the same grandeur that we celebrate the unloading of the final period of a story" (*El cielo*, 9).

The emergence of the inner voice comes hand in hand with the name of the author who signs each story, when he or she becomes an author. The disclosure of the narrator's identity in a country in which the armed conflict is far from over (despite the decree of the Ley de Justicia y Paz in 2005, and the several moments of demobilizations of armed actors through Colombian history), makes it evident that Nieto's view of an aesthetic search is also the construction of a strong political statement.<sup>29</sup>

Alfredo Molano, Alonso Salazar, and Patricia Lara have worked on crónicas about the Colombian conflict, changing the names of the characters of their stories to protect them from possible retaliation. Nieto has worked to make the storytellers of these volumes embrace the need to say who they are and sometimes even to say the names of their aggressors. Certainly the context in which several of these crónicas were published is not the same; writing in 1990, when violence was at its peak and there were several armed groups involved in the conflict (paramilitary, army, drug traffickers, and guerrillas), was not equivalent to writing in 2006, when things were slightly better. But the sense of risk was far from over.<sup>30</sup>

Contributors to the second volume are professionals and middle-class housewives. Surprisingly, however, Nieto told me in our conversations that it was more difficult to coach these people in the writing process. The prologue to this volume is more assertive, not only with respect to what she thinks is the writing process—"once the writers reach that state of intimacy necessary to listen to themselves" (*El cielo*, 9)—but also in terms of the political drive of the project. "The pedagogical process described above presumes the acceptance of the fact that *El cielo no me abandona* is a polyphony, a collective book where each individual stands out for the brightness of his or her voice and responds to his or her story as a political testimony and an aesthetic production" (13).

What is new in this volume is that each story includes a scene in which the writer portrays her or himself at the moment of writing, describing that intimacy of putting their story on paper. In this prologue Nieto delineates her views on the writing process: "each time one of them would approach me with flashing eyes and a calm smile, I understood that she had experienced the writer's moment of epiphany, the most important of the creative process" (9). Again, what Nieto celebrates is the birth of that inner voice: "A text marks the difference between those writers who fill in pages without uncovering their selves and the writers who leave on the paper that intangible essence that rests in their soul" (11). More than a romantic claim, this, again, is a reminder that there is no political testimony without aesthetic search. While the former would contemplate all the texts as equal in the horror they describe, it is the latter that renders the voice of each author unique. In other words, when writing, the authors will go back to their texts to read them aloud and search for the perfect word that better describes what they want to say. That process establishes a distance between them and the traumatic event they describe; that distance does not erase the mark of the trauma but renders powerful the voice of the one who suffers from it. The writing process makes them stronger.

The third book, *Donde pisé aún crece la hierba*, is a collection of testimonies of victims who accidentally crossed a minefield and were left mutilated: "These stories seem to be bare flesh because they were bravely written by subjects who live the fullness of their wounds. That fullness, as the highest level of suffering, leads them into the most recondite part of their being in search of their human dignity, the only belonging left to them" (viii). Most of the narrators are humble peasants who, in the course of their daily routines, were caught in the explosion of a mine. In this book Nieto states the name she gave to the series of workshops that gave birth to these books, "From Their Own Handwriting."

Here she confesses:

Conversations with the protagonists of these stories led me to conclude that they did not identify themselves with the journalists' narratives. That is to say, they felt they were not listened to by journalists, and they showed preoccupation for the social effects those incomplete stories could have, so they would put some distance between themselves and the media, which was the only means they had to be recognized, and they would shut down into the intimacy of their domestic lives, waiting for something supernatural to happen and change their present. (*Donde pisé aún crece la hierba*, ix)

<sup>29</sup> For an analysis of the concealment of identity in testimonies, see Rueda (2009). For an analysis of the tensions between artistic testimonies and the discourse of law, see Rueda (2011).

<sup>30</sup> Since I began my research for this article and the time of its publication, Colombia when through the signing of the Peace Accord, a plebiscite to approve it, the disapproval of the Accord as it was written, and, after some modifications to the main text, its final approval by Congress in December 2016.

The gap between their stories and the journalists' versions may be interpreted as a matter of language. "The competence adequate to produce sentences that are likely to be listened to likely to be recognized as acceptable in all the situations in which there is occasion to speak" (Bourdieu 1991, 55). That competence that the journalists may have, however, was not representing them. Those were neither their voices, nor their stories. This does not mean that they did not have the capacity to speak, which is "part of our biological heritage" (ibid., 55), but rather that the legitimate competence of the journalistic language was not theirs. They knew that they did not have such a command of language, but neither did the journalists when they told their stories. What made them different was experience.

This is when Nieto's intervention becomes interesting. Her role as a journalist, then, is not to teach them how to speak but to help them, even to train them, in order to write about their experiences with the legitimate competence of a narrative that has a beginning, middle, and end. By facilitating the victims' processes of telling their stories, she has also helped them embrace their condition as citizens who demand restitution and justice, facing a state that usually refers to them as helpless victims. The legitimate language of storytelling, then, is a step closer to what the state considers the legitimate language of memory and justice. To go back to Felman's reflection on Benjamin, the writing process of the victims brings literature and history back to words. This transformation also implies that the place Nieto occupies as a journalist, as the one who delivers the story, has also changed.

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