VIOLENCE IN UNCERTAIN TERMS: ANECDOTE AND ANONYMITY IN THE NEW MEXICAN CHRONICLE

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La historia es una voz llena de timbres
y de acentos de gente anónima.

—Alfredo Molano, *Del Llano llano*

IN the early years of the 21st century, the *crónica* has been able to cement important forums for its own region-wide dissemination, as exemplified by the relatively recent emergence of *Etiqueta Negra*, *El Malpensante*, and *Gatopardo*. The success of these and other ventures has contributed to what many have called the "boom" of the Spanish American chronicle. As with the 1960s boom in Latin American fiction, this term above all designates the genre's commercial viability within an increasingly globalized literary market. If the boom of the chronicle is a twenty-first-century phenomenon deeply entwined with the economic and cultural processes of globalization, in Mexico it has also been accompanied and partially shaped by the intensification of the drug war. In the last decade, news reports coming out of Mexico have disseminated grisly tales of violence among warring drug cartels; of violence inflicted upon rural and urban populations as a result of these conflicts; and of the equally ruthless violence that the Mexican military and police forces have perpetrated against civilians in their efforts to root out the drug trade by brute force. Since 2006, the year that Felipe Calderón initiated a formal military campaign to combat the *narco*, Mexican journalism has transmitted the

image of a state in crisis, a landscape gripped by violence, a population caught in the crossfire of an anti-narcotics war in which state and criminal elements have become difficult to distinguish. Such an image participates in one of the byproducts of the *auge de la crónica*, namely the facile identification of Latin America with a few marketable commonplaces, among which Julio Villanueva Chang names "corrupción, guerra, narcotráfico y miseria" 'corruption, war, drug trafficking, and destitution' as the most visible ones (604). This article aims to offer an assessment of the twenty-first-century Mexican chronicle against the background of the patterns of violence emerging around the illicit narcotics industry. For the relationship between the chronicle and drug-related violence is not merely circumstantial, nor solely a question of *content*: the material necessities surrounding any attempts at journalistic coverage of the drug war have forced chroniclers into strategies that leave a perceptible imprint on the *form* of the chronicle. In the work of the Culiacán-based journalist Javier Valdez, I argue, these formal innovations allow for an epistemological intervention that transcends the mystifying tendencies of mainstream journalistic discourse on the drug war.

The contours of these innovations become palpable when we examine the ways that contemporary chronicles of violence constitute their basic object of narration—the event and its unfolding across a particular temporality. This approach will, I think, allow us to avoid the theoretical quagmire that has repeatedly complicated scholarly attempts to arrive at a descriptive definition of the chronicle along the journalism/literature dichotomy. Rather than thinking of the chronicle as either journalism or literature, or as both, I propose thinking of the chronicle according to its classical description: as a referential genre that narrates the passage of time. This formulation, the one most insisted upon by the late Mexican journalist Vicente Leñero, and which re-establishes the genre's links to the historiographical chronicle, will not be a definition so much as a working model from which individual examples will deviate.[1] The interest of the

[1] In a 2002 anthology of texts theorizing the Mexican chronicle, editors Ignacio Corona and Beth E. Jörgensen asked Juan Villoro, the chronicler José Joaquín Blanco, and Vicente Leñero to respond to a survey about what the chronicle meant in contemporary Mexico. In a rather cantankerous response, Leñero avows his irritation with what he views as the loosening of the definition of the *crónica*, a form which he himself defines very narrowly: "The chronicle is

chronicle as a multifaceted, living genre lies in examining the ways that particular chronicles reimagine what it means to narrate an event.

What *does* it mean for a chronicle to narrate an event? What constitutes and delimits the event that will serve as the object of narration? Whereas the primary aim of the news report is ostensibly to inform the reader about events, the chronicle does not concern itself exclusively with informing. To be sure, the contemporary Spanish American chronicle conceives itself as a writerly practice on the margins of journalism. The Peruvian chronicler Julio Villanueva Chang, founder and editor of *Etiqueta Negra,* takes up Walter Benjamin's distinction between "stories" and "information" as the *cri de coeur* of the chronicle: "Más que dar noticias, una buena crónica transmite una experiencia" 'More than relaying news, a good chronicle transmits an experience'(587).[2] What is more, he adds, "gran parte de su trabajo consiste en ordenar y dar sentido a una memoria" 'a big part of [the chronicle's] work is to give order and meaning to a memory'(593). The chronicle transcends the news in the sense that it does not simply relay a sequence of moments in time, of memories. Its task lies in a synthesis or thinking-through of past events capable of endowing that past with the meaning of a lived experience. The proper object of the chronicle, then, is not the event as given—the news item predetermined as such—but the event refined into a lived, subjective experience that can be felt as such by the reader. Villanueva's statements, which echo and expand upon Carlos Monsiváis's definition of the genre, not only articulate a specific methodology and narratological aim for the crónica; they also have a wide reach, in view of his influence on one of the most important spaces for the dissemination of the genre. But if his comments provide insight into how the chronicler works his "angle"—insight that Leñero only hints at—another established chronicler offers us some preliminary reflections on the question of the "event."

The Argentinian Martín Caparrós, who has published in *Etiqueta Negra* and directs regular journalism workshops for the Fundación del Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano (FNPI), has written that the chronicle

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a journalistic and literary genre. . . . Its principal objective is to narrate an event . . . from the most frivolous one to the most polemical and transcendent" (63). Rather conservative in this sense, Leñero vehemently affirms the grounding of the chronicle in the *temporality of the event*.

[2] All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

operates from a position of resistance to informational discourse. In a 2007 conference, he insists on what he deems the *political* significance of this resistance: "La información . . . consiste en decirle a muchísima gente qué le pasa a muy poca: la que tiene poder. . . . que lo que debe importarle es lo que les pasa a ésos. La información postula (impone) . . . un modelo de mundo en el que importan esos pocos" 'Information . . . consists of telling many, many people what is happening to a small few: those who hold power. . . . that what should matter to them is what happens to those [few]. Information postulates (imposes) . . . a model of the world in which those few matter' ("Por la crónica" 610). Here, the attempt to take distance from information-driven journalism does not call for a retreat into the privileged space of literature, as the *modernista* chronicle once did. Rather, in the legacy of Monsiváis, or of the Colombian Alfredo Molano, the chronicle constitutes its own sphere through a centripetal narrative that insists on its aloofness from power. This posture of distance from official narratives implies a democratizing project with special implications on the attempt to narrate drug cartel-related violence.

Caparrós elaborates on the strictures of typical news discourse: "El que no es rico o famoso o rico y famoso . . . tiene, para salir en los papeles, la única opción de la catástrofe: distintas formas de muerte. Sin desastre, la mayoría de la población no puede (no debe) ser noticia" 'For whoever isn't rich or famous or rich and famous . . . the sole option for being in the papers is catastrophe: different forms of death. Without a disaster, most of the population cannot (must not) be news' (610). Whereas the news demands a body count in order to impart eventfulness to the everyman's experience, the chronicle pushes against the edges of journalism's object of knowledge by insisting on the importance of ordinary people and the things that happen in their everyday lives. Of course, the chronicle's traditional preoccupation with representing the everyday lives of common people is no secret, and moreover accounts for the genre's frequent association with "cultural" journalism. Yet the interest of Caparrós's statement lies in its conception of journalism a discursive formation that sets limits not only on what may be said, but on who and what is worthy of being known (i.e., newsworthy) and written about. Journalism produces objects that possess epistemological weight. For Caparrós and others, the chronicle's task is not simply to transcend information, but to destabilize the very basis of what it means to know something about the world and

what happens in it. In practice, this orientation means that, if the events called "news" are readily constituted by the mechanisms and demands of the news industry, the chronicle must continually reformulate which persons and events are newsworthy.

If we keep an eye on Leñero's definition of the chronicle as the genre that narrates the passage of an event in time, then it turns out that Caparrós's statement hits upon a central problem of the twenty-first-century Mexican chronicle. Because over the last decade, thousands upon thousands of Mexicans have become newsworthy precisely because they have suffered terrible, violent deaths. Turf wars, massacres, summary executions, clandestine graves, mass disappearances, mutilated bodies on display, and the excesses of a heavily militarized government response to the surfeit of violence—all of these topics have taken hold of newspaper headlines throughout Mexico, and all have become commonplaces of the national discourse.

The material conditions surrounding the *guerra del narco* have put the chronicle into a compromising position. On the one hand, how can the *crónica* continue to hold itself at the margins of journalism? How is the chronicle to reformulate what is newsworthy when the newsworthy events are preponderantly linked to unspeakable death and violence? Surely the chronicle cannot avoid narrating a phenomenon that has altered so many lives and so thoroughly gripped the national imagination. The question, then, is *how* to narrate the conflict and its social repercussions. How can the chronicle avoid the crass sensationalism of the traditional *nota roja* while not shying away from a depiction of the horrors that have suffused the everyday lives of so many tens of thousands? How can it challenge the informative demands of standard journalism when, in a country where most crimes go unprosecuted, information is precisely what is sorely needed, and when public calls for justice are routinely suppressed by those who hold (licit or illicit) power? How can it counter official narratives of the conflict disseminated by the mainstream press? In a more pragmatic vein, how can the chronicle adhere to its dual task of making events and making them known, when doing so could mean physical peril for both the writer and those whom she writes about?

ANECDOTE AND ANONYMITY

In a 2011 blog post for the *Gatopardo* website, the Mexican chronicler Emiliano Ruiz Parra examines what he views as the recent resurgence of the *crónica roja* or the crime chronicle in Mexico. His answer to the above questions might be summed up in one word: narration. He writes:

> La explosión de la violencia actual ha avivado el surgimiento de una crónica en la que el narco empieza a disolverse como materia periodística y se convierte en narrativa. Los datos duros dan paso a las historias; los nombres se difuminan para convertirse en personajes y las declaraciones se sustituyen por los diálogos (The current explosion of violence has quickened the emergence of a chronicle in which the *narco* begins to dissolve as a journalistic topic and becomes narrative. Hard facts give way to stories; names fade away into characters, and statements are substituted by dialogues). ("El regreso" n.p.)

Ruiz describes a situation in which the *narco* becomes such a pervasive social presence that it ceases to emerge as information, as mere series of facts, and begins to call out for expression in the register of narrative, with everything that narration entails: plot, characterization, dialogue—in short, the anecdote deployed with dramatic effect. At the level of fiction, this phenomenon has attained a high degree of visibility in the work of Élmer Mendoza and others working on what some dub the "narconovela."[3] Journalism, however, participates by necessity in the logic of referential narrative; the events it reports on must be fundamentally verifiable. This requirement is at odds with the tendency to narrativize, a tension no doubt rooted in the old conceptual opposition between journalism and literature

[3] In a 2005 issue of *Letras Libres*, the Mexican literary critic Rafael Lemus offered a polemically dismissive appraisal of such narratives. In her 2011 book on narratives of narco trafficking, however, Gabriela Polit Dueñas questions the critical value of this term by warning that "narco trafficking cannot be conceived exclusively as either a paradigm of production or as a label for easy marketing" (3-5).

that emerges almost as soon as the mass press does.[4]

Narrative journalism, however, is not the whole story here. In the work of Alejandro Almazán and Javier Valdez Cárdenas, two chroniclers of the *narco*, Ruiz identifies what he elsewhere calls "formas tangenciales de escribir" 'tangential forms of writing,' which are characterized by the journalist's recourse to *anonymity* ("La voz" 223). This tendency amounts to self-censorship, a strategy born out of the material conditions of reporting on the sphere of the illicit narcotics trade, which make it a real danger to name names: "En la censura, la crónica del narco se tuvo que deshacer de los ropajes formales del periodismo y ha ido adquiriendo más la forma del cuento que de la crónica" 'In censorship, the chronicle of the drug trade was obliged to discard the formal external garb of journalism and has begun increasingly to take on the form of the short story rather than that of the chronicle' ("El regreso").

Torn off from any firm grounding in verifiable information—primarily by foregoing the use of proper names—and increasingly reliant on anecdotal narration, the crime chronicle begins to drift more definitively into the realm of the fictive. Would not such a move be, in some sense, a fuller realization of the *crónica*, which, as we saw, holds itself aloof from the informative demands of mainstream journalism? Ruiz betrays a certain unease in this regard when he says that the *narco* disintegrates as "materia periodística," which he straightaway opposes to "narrativa." In one sense, the *crónica del narco* is no longer dealing with mere facts, the raw matter of journalism; in another sense, the *crónica del narco*, unmoored from any structure of verifiability, is no longer the stuff of journalism. In this regard, the sociologist Fernando Escalante alludes to the problematic status of anonymity for journalism when he highlights the frequent failure of Mexican journalists to critically evaluate their sources

[4] Julio Ramos and Susana Rotker have adeptly demonstrated the dialectical nature of this opposition, likewise at work in Benjamin's distinction between information and storytelling (see "The Storyteller" and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire"). Tom Wolfe describes the early institutional resistance faced by practitioners of the more recent New Journalism as rooted in an *a priori* exclusion of journalism from literature (see Introduction to *The New Journalism*). To a large extent, the "nuevo periodismo" of the FNPI will continue the task of interrogating this binary. At the heart of the matter is the much older opposition between truth and rhetoric.

(Carreño 283; 286-287). His statements bring to mind the highly regarded piece "Entrevista con un Zeta" (*Gatopardo*, Oct. 2013) by Diego Enrique Osorno and John Lee Anderson, in which an anonymous *sicario* discusses his work for the Zetas cartel. Although verifiable in theory, the subject's account of his specific crimes is beyond any practicable verification. This lack becomes problematic insofar as the piece participates in the voyeuristic mythification of the *sicario* without shedding light, nor transforming the conversation, on the phenomenon of drug-related violence as such. Osorno's prefatory remark for the piece reads: "[E]xiste un momento en el que aparece . . . una pista importante, y en lugar de darla a conocer debes . . . quedarte callado por cuestiones tácticas. Una crónica también es un juego estratégico" 'There is a moment where an important clue emerges, and instead of making it known you must . . . be silent for tactical reasons. A chronicle is also a game of strategy.' (n.p.) This statement certainly gestures toward some of the ways in which anonymity and the suppression of other identifiable details might be employed in the service of a politicized practice of journalism. The text of "Entrevista con un Zeta" does not, lamentably, embody this potential. If the *crónica del narco* is indeed a game of strategy, its tactics must not only concern the representation of its subject matter, but must also respond to the conditions that shape it.

Ruiz's description of the *crónica del narco* echoes specific aspects of Roland Barthes's well-known discussion of the *fait divers*, the short, miscellany news item found as filler in many dailies. In the context of journalism, the *fait divers* appears to be the form of anecdote and anonymity par excellence. What, for Barthes, typifies the *fait divers* is its almost complete self-sufficiency or self-referentiality as a story. Its effectiveness comes from its anecdotal structure, which plays with the rules of causality in specific ways that cause astonishment, e.g.: "Un Anglais s'engage dans la Légion: il ne voulait pas passer Noël avec sa belle mère" 'An Englishman enlists in the army: he didn't want to spend Christmas with his mother-in-law' (193). What emerges from the *fait divers* is accordingly "une zone ambiguë *où l'événement est pleinement vécu comme un signe dont le contenu est cependant incertain*" 'an ambiguous zone *where the event is fully lived as a sign whose content is however uncertain*' (196, emphasis in original). Barthes's analysis illuminates some aspects of the new *crónica* insofar as it highlights the emphasis on

particularity latent in any anecdotal narrative by virtue of its abbreviated structure. The anecdote is capable of showcasing an absolute, decontextualized specificity, thereby imbuing any event with an epistemological weight independent of its potential for being assimilated reductively into a wider context. Narrative form in itself thus becomes an epistemological intervention.

For the contemporary crime chronicle in Mexico, however, the reduction of the event-referent to self-sufficient sign would constitute an ethical failure, a missed opportunity to construct an understanding of how incidents of everyday violence derive meaning from (and simultaneously give meaning to) a wider network of social relations; it would become what Ignacio Corona calls the "violent journalism" of mainstream Mexican media (106). Indeed, it is most often the mainstream press that disseminates decontextualized news bits resembling *faits divers*. One of the most visible commonplaces of Mexican journalism since 2005 has been the image of the *capo* or cartel head in handcuffs, guarded by a contingent of anonymous, hooded security personnel, being paraded in front a throng of reporters and TV cameras. Scenes such as this exemplify the typically decontextualizing journalistic coverage of the *narco.* Of course, these scenes are always self-sufficient signs: a federal prosecutor may offer a few self-congratulatory words concerning the circumstances and import of the *capo's* arrest, but context is scant. What will happen to this *capo?* What happened to the one captured last month? How many of these arrests lead to prosecution? Will these arrests bring a discernible change to the structures sustaining the illicit drug trade? How do these developments affect the federal anti-narcotics strategy? These are questions to which no arrest, nor any *fait divers*, can give a real answer. At best, such a scene, torn from a structuring context, is subsumed into broad narratives already in circulation: the capture of a cartel figurehead presented without context easily becomes a grand event, a watershed victory in the ongoing (and therefore timeless and de-historicized) struggle between federal armed forces and a great social evil.

If the apparent severance of the *fait divers* from any structuring context presents a problem for its inclusion in a politicized, interventionist journalistic practice, this shortcoming can be traced to the perceived deficiencies of anecdotes as such. The anecdote, after all, is a dodgy genre: it is often fragmentary, always brief, seldom verifiable, and rarely

published. The term "anecdote" is derived from the late Greek coinage *anekdota*, literally meaning "not given out"; its precise sense is best understood through the Latin calque *inedita*, which yields Spanish *inédito* and reveals the original concept of the anecdote as a story that has not (yet) been given out to the public. The anecdote's power thus lies in its giving out what has hitherto been kept private; it is the narrative form of the secret par excellence. Lionel Gossman notes that, by late antiquity, the term *anekdota* had come to refer explicitly to the idea of a secret history, but also to the notion of a "petty counter-history" largely unverifiable owing to its origins in hearsay (152-54). For the historiographical tradition, the unverifiable and unclassifiable item of miscellany cannot be taken seriously. To be sure, such skepticism toward anecdotal knowledge has a visible legacy in contemporary historiography and, by extension, in other referential forms of narrative from which journalism ultimately derives its paradigms of facticity and verifiability.[5]

In his critique of the Mexican media's decontextualized coverage of the *narco*, Fernando Escalante echoes Villanueva's statements on the chronicle as an intervention into knowledge, by insisting: "El trabajo periodístico, de crónicas y reportajes, tiene el propósito de poner en contexto lo que sucede, para que sea posible entender lo que sea como parte de la sociedad" 'The work of journalism, of chronicles and reportage, has the purpose of putting what happens in context, so as to make it possible to understand any given thing as part of society' (Carreño 287). Escalante's formulation, to a large extent accurate, nonetheless hints at an additional problem latent in anecdotal narrative. Whether or not they lapse into the territory of the solipsistic *fait divers*, anecdotes tend, by virtue of their abbreviated form, to emphasize the particular. Nevertheless, the empirical particularity enshrined in the anecdote—the singular event, the unique experience—is persistently at risk of disappearing under the weight of context (i.e. through absorption into a totalizing narrative). To see how this happens, it is useful to consider the uses of the anecdote within the framework of historiography, which, like journalism, has ambivalent ties to both facticity and narrative. In discussing the use of anecdotes as examples, Gossman notes that the exemplary anecdote has a long tradition in historiography, usually taking the shape of a brief story taken from a

[5] See Kalifa 132-33.

memoir or diary and meant to illustrate and reinforce a broader historical narrative. Gossman argues that "the individual incident enshrined in the anecdote came to be more like a symptom . . ." (156), which amounts to saying that the anecdote was presented as a manifestation of the wider historical explanation under discussion, and therefore as a narrative subservient to the primacy of History. Hence comes what Gossman considers the most common kind of anecdote: the one presented with the purpose of "depicting the social relations of a particular moment," (157)—in other words, anecdotes as illustrations of the zeitgeist, or anecdotes "as parts of a whole, from which they derive their meaning and which they in turn epitomize" (161). His discussion points to the process through which the predominance of History over the anecdote diminishes the empirical character of anecdotal narrative and the particularity of the source—namely, the eyewitness and his or her experience. Anecdotal evidence in historical narratives is often recycled and, because it is a narrative intended to serve or point to a meaning outside of itself; its status as lived experience is attenuated. If historiography reads the anecdote without regard to the witness-utterer, the witness is, in a sense, dispossessed of his anecdote—his story is disseminated and re-inscribed into a general narrative without any regard to the one who has lived it, without any regard to the temporality of the everyday. To be sure, this approach gives almost complete primacy to history over what Joel Fineman calls "the experience of history" (63), namely the temporality of everyday life to which anecdotes typically attest and from which they derive their impact as stories.

In many ways, this problem once again underscores the unavoidable anchoring of the chronicle in referentiality, in its link to the identifiable referent or proper name. Caparrós and Villanueva Chang have already attested to the presence of an epistemological project in the genre: to construe new objects worthy of knowledge and make them known through narration. In a piece on women assassins in Ciudad Juárez, Alejandro Almazán poignantly illustrates the way in which *narco*-violence poses a threat to memory and justice: "Marta y un grupo de pistoleros levantan a una soplona en el centro de Ciudad Juárez. . . . olvidarán pronto el crimen, porque en Juárez, y todo México, no sólo se borra la vida, también la memoria, y quienes recuerdan no salen vivos de la historia" 'Marta and a group of gunmen pick up a snitch in downtown Juárez. . . . they will soon forget the crime, because in Juárez, and all of Mexico, not

just life but also memory is erased, and those who remember do not make it out of the story alive' (18).[6] In a climate permeated by violence and the fear of violence, the order of the day is oblivion: those who speak out against violence are silenced; bereaved families are intimidated from seeking out justice; government officials are dissuaded from carrying out justice; newspapers shirk their duty to report and investigate crimes in good faith. Throughout statements and interviews in which many chroniclers of the *narco* discuss their craft, the consensus is at the only public discourse allowed surrounding the *narco* conflict is that of general, reductive rhetoric.[7]

In the context of the official versions emitted by the authorities, this rhetoric amounts to praising the successes of the militarized anti-narcotics campaign and minimizing the staggering number of deaths as collateral damage, or as desirable insofar as the losses are on the side of the cartels. In the domain of the press, this rhetoric amounts to an adherence to press-release journalism, which neither investigates nor verifies but instead only transmits press releases from the authorities, or to the exclusive discussion of numbers (i.e. so many dead, so many wounded, so many arrests, so many tons of narcotics seized, so many soldiers deployed). It likewise amounts to the mercenary, graphic sensationalism of the *notas rojas* filling the crime tabloids, which, as Gabriela Polit Dueñas argues, directly serve the official narrative by stripping victims of their subjectivity and turning their bodies into "the direct object of this massive reproduction of the dead that the society must see so that the 'war against narcos' can be effective" (84). Thus the mainstream press has seemingly surrendered to the logic guiding the mechanisms of violence, according to which, as Almazán demonstrates, to divulge the particularities of any single incident is to risk death. And yet this apparent surrender is not always a matter of professional or ethical failings in Mexican journalism, nor a straightforward legacy of the venality that has historically plagued Mexico's news industry.[8] It is also the result of a reign of terror: the act of hiding these particularities, of pointing no fingers and naming no names, often obeys a desire to protect

[6] This chronicle was originally published in the February 2011 issue of *Gatopardo.*

[7] Consonant views are expressed by many of the contributors in the Bosch and Meneses anthologies.

[8] See Lawson, chapters 3 and 4.

the lives of the journalist, her sources, her colleagues, and the victimized families of the deceased from the threat of real, physical harm at the hands of the drug trafficking syndicates. In the reading that follows, I will illustrate the way in which the work of the chronicler Javier Valdez has negotiated the ethical injunction to hide identifying information, while at the same time resisting some of the pitfalls of reporting on drug-related violence.

Ruiz's description of the new tendencies in the crime chronicle makes direct mention of Valdez's work in the column "Malayerba," which appears in the regional Mexican weekly *Riodoce,* a paper Valdez himself helped to found in 2003 in the Mexican state of Sinaloa. As this state has historically been a hotbed of activity related to the illicit drug trade, *Riodoce* has been at the forefront of journalistic efforts to cover the conflicts emerging out of the trade, and its courageous staff has been subject to repeated threats
and physical attacks throughout the paper's years of operation. To conclude the discussion I have developed in this article, I will examine "Malayerba," which is very different from all of the other material appearing in *Ríodoce* in that it exploits anonymity at practically all levels of narrative. In an interview for *Gatopardo* magazine's podcast, Valdez affirms:

> Malayerba es una forma de renegar de este tratamiento de publicar números. Malayerba publica historias de personas . . . de cómo el narco salpica nuestra vida cotidiana. Está con nosotros todos los días, en la banqueta, en la casa, en el trabajo, en la escuela. ("Lejos" n.p.)

Malayerba is a way to reject the approach of publishing numbers. Malayerba publishes stories about people . . . about how the drug trade bespatters our everyday lives. It is with us every day, on the sidewalk, at home, at work, at school' (n.p.) Valdez's chronicles accordingly attempt to tell a different story about the drug trade through a focus on the particular rather than the impersonal, numerically-oriented reporting style predominant in the press. The pieces convey anecdotes of everyday life in the midst of the drug trade's grip on the region, anecdotes that have reached the author through word-of-mouth or through other news outlets.

But no names are named in Valdez's anecdotal chronicles. They leave all individuals shrouded in anonymity. As such, these pieces represent Valdez's attempt to "disfrazar la información, contarla de otra

manera, con otros recursos que te puede dar la literatura narrativa" 'disguise information, to tell it another way, with other resources such as narrative literature can provide' (n.p.) And yet what is primarily at stake in Valdez is not, as Ruiz suggests, only a matter of literary devices. The "Malayerba" chronicles make clear the extent to which the turn to anonymity is a necessity born out of the conditions of conflict in which these texts are produced and disseminated. As Valdez tells Gabriela Polit Dueñas: "The stories of *Malayerba* are real; although I have seen them, I disguise them to throw people off, for my safety and that of the person who tells them to me" (qtd in Polit 82). Amid the intensified climate of violence and impunity in Sinaloa, especially during the presidency of Felipe Calderón, journalists had to be acutely sensitive to the potentially dangerous consequences of any information that they might choose to make public. The concealment of sources is a common protective measure in journalistic coverage of sensitive or potentially volatile situations, Valdez's chronicles in fact deploy this necessary anonymity in atypical ways. Valdez takes anonymity beyond the omission of names: in his chronicles, narrated events take on a fuzzy temporality. Just as they omit proper names, they also omit specific temporal indicators: the reader never has a clear idea of precisely when in time a given event has unfolded. The anonymity pervading these tales has a destabilizing effect upon their referential status: deprived of verifiability, the events that these chronicles report take on the inflections of hearsay, or even those of urban legend.

Nevertheless, this procedure responds to a demand originating as much from the conditions of production as from the very referent: there is an absolute need to protect the actors in these stories from the physical violence to which they might be subject should their identities be revealed. In other words, Valdez's chronicles must be sensitive to the real dangers of informing on activities pertaining to the *narco* or, for that matter, to a corrupt state apparatus whose interests are often barely distinguishable from those of the crime syndicates. To proceed otherwise—to publish identifiable names and facts—would make both the journalist and his source into targets for the sort of brutal retaliatory violence with which the staff writers of *Riodoce*—and their journalist colleagues throughout Mexico—are sadly all too familiar.[9] Accordingly, even as these chronicles

[9] In 2009, this violence took the form of a grenade attack on *Riodoce*'s offices in Culiacán. For an account of this attack, and of recurrent ruses on the

seem to shed their referential status, the enforced secrecy of their origin links them structurally to the veiled referent. This negative or uncertain referentiality finds formal expression precisely in the temporal and spatial indeterminacy of the events related in "Malayerba." Throughout these pieces, Valdez explores the temporality of everyday life, of lived lives in which time is not always experienced linearly and in an easily apprehensible manner. Specific, identifiable locations are largely omitted as well. Practically the only proper nouns visible in "Malayerba" pertain to a public and mostly urban geography: street names, neighborhoods, roads, squares, government buildings. These few names all converge into the one proper noun suffusing all of these stories: Sinaloa, conceived not just as a geographical and political entity, but also as a historical one. This convergence is only one side of the recurrent oscillation in these chronicles between the particular and the general, between event and context, that the ethical injunction to anonymity makes possible.

To demonstrate the engagement with a contextualized knowledge in pieces as fragmentary and anecdotal as those making up Valdez's work, it is important to understand the significance of the title of his column and book. The title "Malayerba" is an altered spelling of the compound term *mala yerba,* a collective singular denoting "weeds" and sometimes serving as slang for cannabis, as the English term does. The title takes on particular significance in the context of the state of Sinaloa, whose economy is heavily agricultural, with many of its inhabitants eking out a living from the small and large-scale cultivation of produce. Historically, Sinaloa has also been an important center of illicit cultivation as one of the largest producers of poppy flowers (from which opiates can be derived), and marijuana is likewise grown extensively within the state.[10] Valdez's use of the term *malayerba* could certainly evoke either of these criminalized crops, but against the backdrop of agricultural life, it necessarily evokes the undesired plant strain that threatens to ruin the harvest, to decimate one's livelihood as it sprouts and thrives surreptitiously. In common speech, *mala yerba* also refers to a person inherently inclined toward acting maliciously or causing harm, in this sense closely approximating the English idiom "bad

part of the Sinaloan state government aimed at stifling the circulation of the paper, see Polit Dueñas, 80-82.

[10] See Luis Astorga, *El Siglo de las drogas.*

seed." The metaphor is closely associated with the proverb "Mala yerba nunca muere" ("A weed never dies"), a well-worn phrase alluding to the pertinacity of those who would cause harm and destruction in our lives, and to their continual re-emergence against all our efforts to eradicate them.

Despite its apparent equivalence to "evildoer," however, the concept of *mala yerba* retains a collective, cumulative sense: what is harmful to the crop is not the presence of any single plant, but rather the speed and tenacity with which a plant and others of its kind can propagate themselves in large numbers over a wide terrain. Thus, although the term *mala yerba* constructs evil as a distinct ontological category—a given agent is *mala yerba* by nature—it is also premised on a material "evil" that operates collectively, that transcends the actions of any single agent. In light of these connotations, the "Malayerba" series emerges as an attempt to understand the effects of the illicit narcotics industry on everyday life in Sinaloa from the level of the particular, while at the same time transcending the particular to reach toward the structural. Indeed, despite their personal-anecdotal bent, the chronicles of "Malayerba" are in line with the shift in crime reporting that Monsiváis detects as beginning in the 1980s: "As crime stories increasingly focus their attention on the relationship between national security and crime (between impunity and violence), readers are confronted more and more with the rudiments of sociology and political science, rather than with the 'magic of crime'" ("Red News" 161). As such, the "Malayerba" chronicles exceed the limits of the anecdotal *fait divers*, which so often draws its effect solely from the spectacle of crime.[11] Rather, as I have already suggested, their effect stems from their deployment of anonymity, from their recourse to the secrecy of the anecdote in its classical form.

What is more, their regular, weekly circulation in a Sinaloan paper weaves them into the flow of public discourse in the region, giving rise to a kind of knowledge that participates in both information and rumor. When, in 2010, Valdez compiles selected pieces from his column into a book titled *Malayerba*, Carlos Monsiváis's prologue describes the collection as Valdez's single "gran crónica fragmentada" 'great, fragmented chronicle' (*Malayerba* 11). This description already reveals something

[11] See Kalifa, Chapter 6. Kalifa establishes the *fait divers* as an important site for the construction of the category of criminality in France.

novel at work, something that disrupts the typically uneasy marriage between the anecdotal fragment and ordered, referential narrative. Out of a series of small events involving nameless characters—a firefight at a local mall, a security guard's run-in with a cartel goon, a cocaine delivery intercepted in the dead of night—Valdez is able to construct a narrative of long duration concerning the drug trade in Sinaloa: stories of the everyday that produce history out of the everyday. In the next and final section of this discussion, I will offer a reading of select moments from the brief chronicles gathered in the 2010 volume *Malayerba*. This analysis will offer a synthesis of the ways that anonymity and anecdotal narrative disrupt the typical journalistic construction of the event as both factual and linear, and of the consequences of this disruption for understanding the chronicle as a type of writing that intervenes into public knowledge via private stories. In contrast to Maurice Blanchot's concept of *parole quotidienne* or "everyday speech," which posits that the anecdote in circulation is excluded *a priori* from the ordered discourse of written narrative, Valdez's work in *Malayerba* deploys the uncertainty and incoherence of anecdotal knowledge, at the level of both form and content, in order to chronicle the conditions of violence that impose a climate of epistemological uncertainty over everyday life in Sinaloa.

MALAYERBA

The chronicle "El paquetito" ("The Little Package") begins with a wishful imperative: "Aviéntame un paquetito, avioncito" 'Throw me a little package, little airplane' (196). Here the narrator channels a nameless deer hunter stalking his prey on a hillside under cover of night. This activity, we learn, is his livelihood, and he has been at it long enough to observe that his hunting ground is a designated drop point for covert aerial drug deliveries. The particulars of this traffic are, however, shrouded in mystery to him. But then comes the anecdote's interest, namely its ostensible singularity as a narratable event: "Pero esa avioneta era distinta. Le guiñó el ojo desde lejos. Y le pidió, casi a rezos, que le aventara uno de esos paquetitos con varios kilos de mota" 'But this plane was different. It winked at him from afar. And he asked it, near prayer, to hurl him one of those little packages containing several kilos of weed' (196). The aleatory nature of good timing, of being in the right place at the right time, now meets up

with a certain sense of good fortune, of being granted a coveted favor almost construed as a *divine* favor from an amorphous, ubiquitous drug smuggling apparatus.[12] The wink is framed as an omen that special forces are at work in this scenario. As so often in these chronicles, the switch from the imperfect to the preterite tense indicates that something singular and noteworthy is taking, or has begun to take, place. And behold—the hunter is ostensibly rewarded with an object dropped in the distance, which he retrieves, and which turns out to be a brick of cocaine.

The anecdote now moves swiftly along in paratactically organized, preterite-dominant sentences. The hunter returns to his town loaded with money and begins to spend it conspicuously. Just as quickly, a new element appears to disrupt this unexpected good fortune, as the hunter finds himself under the conspicuous surveillance of two mysterious men. Soon, federal agents are likewise looking into the matter, asking questions of the townspeople familiar with the hunter. Another narrative shift occurs as the narrator, in free indirect style, channels the hunter's attempt to take stock of the situation: "Por esos rumbos era cosa de todos los días escuchar motores de aviones. La gente sabía que detrás de los cerros . . . cargaban las naves. Se abastecían de combustible y entregaban mercancía. Era historia contada" 'Around those parts, hearing plane engines was an everyday affair. People knew that, behind the hills . . . planes would load. They would stock up on fuel and deliver merchandise. It was a oft-told tale' (197). Despite its anecdotal form, this particular story is inscribed into a wider oral narrative, a network of rumors that, in spite of their radical unverifiability, of their unstable referentiality, nonetheless transmit functional, albeit dispersed and uncertain, information. This quasi-information—the unverified certainty among the general population of Sinaloa that the drug trade "is with us every day," to use Valdez's own words—in turn gives shape to an observable discursive reality with which bodies must contend. In this specific case, rumor makes possible the get-

[12] This image evokes, albeit obliquely, the name Amado Carrillo Fuentes (1956-1997). Although once the head of the so-called Juárez cartel, which did *not* operate in Sinaloa, he became infamous throughout Mexico for his extensive network of covert air drops, which won him the pseudo-religious moniker "El Señor de los Cielos" ("The Lord of the Heavens"). The drug trafficking syndicate known as the Sinaloa cartel has also been known to rely on aerial deliveries; see Keefe.

rich-quick narrative so typical of *narco* lore, onto which subjects may readily inscribe their own desires. Yet this narrative can just as quickly give way to sharp reversals of fortune and thereby become expressive of the generalized experience of terror that infuses everyday life for so many Sinaloans. Tensions once again rise in this chronicle as local rumor begins effecting an operation of public scrutiny over the hunter: "Los mitotes sobre su repentina fortuna estaban en bocas y oídos de todos. Las habladas crecían" 'The hubbub over his sudden fortune was in every mouth, in every ear. The talk was growing' (197). Taken literally, these sentences do not convey a self-evident meaning; their meaning for the narrative lies in the tension that they create beyond the scope of their signification. And they create this effect by pointing toward the social, discursive process always at work in rumor. The word on the street is more than just a vessel that disseminates (and distorts) information. It might be better conceived as a choral unconscious that reads or registers bits of information as signs, weaving these data together into meaningful knowledge—to wit, into stories. The hunter's neighbors see the signs—a new four-by-four, expensive clothes—and are already at work, collectively, on a conclusion, an explanation, a narrative concerning his new economic status. Once again, the "historia contada" surrounding the drug trade provides a serviceable template for the construction of collective knowledge, and it seems to be only a matter of time before someone informs the hunter's pursuers of the foregone conclusion: that the hunter is a drug dealer.

The hunter, too, knows where this story goes, and he frets. The narrator, in turn, voices his panicked thought process, which frantically stitches together a series of undesirable events: "Y luego esos dos que le ponían cola y que ya no pasaban desapercibidos. Y los de la pegerre. Y a lo mejor al rato vienen más. Y hasta los soldados. Y va a ser un desmadre todo esto. Y tendré un broncón" 'And then those two guys tailing him and no longer going unnoticed. And the feds. And maybe more coming later. And soldiers, even. And all of this is going to be a shit-show. And I'll have a huge problem' (197-98). It is easy for the hunter to fill in the rest of the story, a familiar and practically self-generating pattern expressible in the most rudimentary paratactic narrative: the package of cocaine will bring problems, possibly life-threatening ones. What had unfolded as a narrative of past events now becomes imbued with fatality, with the sense of a future peril that looms ever nearer. This futurity stems from the predictability of

the story in question, and therefore also from its repeatability: once again, we find ourselves at the limit of the Aristotelian dichotomy between history as what *has* happened and poetry (or fiction) as what *could* happen. The word on the street, this anecdotal text suggests, generates social narratives out of the empirical observations circulating in collective memory. In this way, collective recollections of the past may come to function as projections of future possibilities. What results is an experience of both past and future through narratives unmoored from any ethics of verifiability, but not from their referential functions. Thus the story of the deer hunter comes across as an anecdote that has reached Valdez through mysterious channels, and whose source he may only obliquely reveal through a dedication line at the beginning of the text: "Para El Sinaloa."

Despite the historical link between anecdotal narrative and the moral tale, however (the Christian parable, the fable, the *exemplum*, to name a few), anecdotal chronicles of crime offer neither models of behavior for the reader to imitate, nor moral lessons for the reader to follow. Although some of Valdez's chronicles do take on a cautionary bent—for instance, the reader may be less inclined to drive around Culiacán after hours—they are not premised on any moral injunction or call to specific action. Their prime function is mimetic and affective, which is to say that they are representations of everyday life that elicit emotion, much as, to return to Aristotle, the function of Athenian tragedy is premised on the arousal of pity and fear. Along these lines, the chronicle of the deer hunter certainly seems poised to take shape as the story of a tragic reversal originating in a single, fatal misstep; but it does not ultimately do this. The hunter's anxious imaginings give way to a sudden, revelatory interjection: "Mejor no me lo avientes, avioncito" 'Better yet, don't throw it to me, little airplane' (198). At once, the reader is led back to the suppliant imperative with which this piece opens, except that it now appears in the negative. This shift negates all the events narrated since that beginning, revealing them to have been, in their entirety, products of the hunter's flight of fancy and thus, in relation to the *factual* parameters of this chronicle, fictions. A brief, exhilarating moment of contact with the extraordinary, brought to life in its potentiality, is suddenly foreclosed, and the action of the chronicle returns to the realm of the everyday: "Y despertó: regresó a casa con las manos vacías, abrazando su 30-30" 'And he awoke: he went home empty-handed, clutching his 30-30 rifle' (198). In

one sense, then, this piece narrates a sequence of incidents that did not happen, but that *could* have happened. In another sense, this piece reports on a sequence of virtual occurrences: the true story of one man's elaborate dream. In a rather more definitive sense, it narrates one coherent event: a deer hunter dreams about a fortune normally beyond his reach and is relieved upon waking to find that his everyday remains exactly as it was, marked by the same uneventful empty-handedness, the same material want.

At a readily visible level, "El paquetito" demonstrates the way in which patterns of desire are channeled around patterns of exclusion. In the context of rural Sinaloa, hunting may provide a means of subsistence, but it can offer no promise of social mobility. Such a promise is, for the most part, reserved for professions linked to mass-market ventures participating in the globalizing economy, i.e. the wider capitalist apparatus and its growth sectors. Historical structures of inequality in the Mexican countryside, particularly as they pertain to wealth distribution and access to education, effectively exclude large swaths of the rural populace from entry into these growth sectors. Proponents of drug-policy reform within Mexico, while denouncing the federal government's militarized "drug war" approach, might place emphasis on the role of these basic inequalities in feeding the growth of the drug trade. This illicit industry, after all, is nothing if not a growth sector; in spite of its position outside the law, it relies for its own stability on the financial sector, to which it is wedded by virtue of the need to launder its vast profits.[13] The result is that working for the *narco* is, for many of Mexico's poor youth, one of the most visible means of entry into the global economy and of upward mobility. Valdez is not the sole chronicler whose work brings the structural context of the drug trade light: an emphatic depiction of this context is one of the unifying concerns of the *cronistas del narco mexicano* whom the Chilean journalist Juan Pablo Meneses brings together in his 2012 anthology, among them Marcela Turati, Alejandro Almazán, Daniela Rea, and Luis Guillermo Hernández, all chroniclers who have made a name for themselves in the last decade writing about drug-related violence in the Mexican provinces. Like these chroniclers, Valdez sets out to counteract the mainstream journalistic coverage of drug-related violence, which generally fails to think about the

[13] See Mares, chapter 6; see also Burnett.

narcotraficante as anything but a malicious criminal element to be captured or plainly eradicated: *yerba mala.* For the *cronistas del narco*, this task entails telling the stories of individual victims and assassins alike, and thereby bringing them out of the numerical insignificance to which the press continually relegates them.[14] In the case of the criminal, these stories tend to dispel the notion of evil intent, instead opting to highlight the systemic factors that frequently drive individuals to turn to criminal activity as a means of survival, or the cultural currents that allow them to view human life as disposable.[15]

Valdez's work certainly contributes to this burgeoning counter-narrative, but its recourse to anonymity goes beyond any of the preventive strategies deployed by others covering the *narco*. In the aforementioned piece by Almazán, the journalist offers a sketch of several women assassins working, or having worked, for the *narco,* with some of them already serving prison terms. Despite omitting or changing all of their names, however, the piece refers insistently to these particular individuals and the specificity of their experiences. This procedure, although it may provide a useful perspective on hidden aspects of the illicit narcotics industry, nevertheless runs into the ethical quandary of protecting victimizers from prosecution for the sake of informing.[16] In Valdez's anecdotal chronicles, by contrast, there is a persistent slippage from the particular into the general. The figure of the hunter in "El paquetito" retains its referential function insofar as the story is situated within a journalistic practice. At the same time, however, the complete absence of proper names, combined with the paucity of temporal or geographical indicators, ends up having an abstracting effect upon what is framed as a singular story: the hunter

[14] Although Turati and Rea both employ pseudonyms to protect the subjects of their stories, it is interesting that they see their approach as centered on "combatir . . . el anonimato oficial de las víctimas" 'combatting the official anonymity of the victims' (8).

[15] See Meneses's anthology, which includes brief interviews with the aforementioned writers on covering the *narco.*

[16] Having co-taught a journalism workshop for the FNPI, Polit Dueñas observes that "journalists also struggle to portray young narcos without stigmatizing poverty and without justifying their deeds with the recurring litany that becoming narcos is the only way these youths can escape from deprivation and their lack of opportunities" (175)

becomes a rural everyman who, like many a law-abiding reader, is susceptible to being tempted, albeit idly and noncommittally, by the promise of lavish living so central to the mythology of organized crime. In further contrast to Almazán's piece, then, Valdez's chronicle tells the story of one man's temptation in order to tell the story of everyone.

In "Noches y balas" ("Nights and bullets"), Valdez exploits the structure of exemplarity latent in the anecdote to the point that this chronicle becomes an allegory of the collective experience of violence. In the Las Quintas neighborhood of Culiacán, an unnamed woman spends a restless night, now tossing and turning, now dozing, now peering through her window to observe two other women engaged in a heated street argument that devolves into a firefight. Before this scene even unfolds, however, the narrator establishes that what he is about to tell is representative of a broad present, of an everyday temporality: "Lo que pasa en Las Quintas se queda en Las Quintas. O sea que no se publica en los diarios" 'What happens in Las Quintas stays in Las Quintas. Meaning it isn't published in the papers' (193). I will return to the issue of media silence, but first I want to comment on the narrative logic of this opening line. It establishes, through a habitual present tense, the general obfuscation of information as a premise to the kind of violence to which Culiacán is continuously subject. The expression is not without a sense of irony: in contrast to the now ubiquitous catchphrase through which Las Vegas has been marketed as a haven of hedonism, the opening line of this chronicle has the weight of law for the city of Culiacán. And this law has its subjects, one of whom Valdez immediately introduces: "Lo tiene claro. Y procura no espantarse, sino aceptarlo. Pero le cuesta, le cuesta trabajo" 'She's well aware of it. And she takes care not to be frightened, but rather to accept it. But it's really hard work for her' (193). These opening lines, through the common use of the present tense, establish a link between the general and the particular in which the latter takes on the force of exemplarity, of representativity. Yet owing to the anonymity of this exemplary anecdote, the specificity of the circumstances that it describes easily erodes. What results is the account of a particular experience that persistently opens out onto the general, and therefore a story with which readers may identify.

This movement from the general to the particular is at work in the anecdote itself. The unofficial law of discretion, a prohibition on talking about what happens, also has a force on the interiority of experience.

Valdez's narrator reveals that the unnamed woman can typically hear everything that happens outside her window, and that her reaction has a pattern: "Levanta la cabeza. No cree lo que oye. Abre los ojos y no cree lo que ve" (193). The inhabitant of Culiacán is obliged not only to be discreet, but also to take on a complete epistemological distance from what goes on in the streets. In this case, the unnamed woman perceives but does not believe what she sees, not because she is simply shocked, but because to believe something is to establish knowledge of it, and to know the wrong thing is dangerous—such are the workings of an illicit, ubiquitous drug trade. Out of this enforced uncertainty comes a posture of apathy and indifference among the general population, a normalization of violence here allegorized in the woman's constant attempts to sleep through the nightly sounds of street violence. Tossing and turning mirrors the contortions of a conscience intent on oblivion: "Se mueve de nuevo y acomoda su humanidad" 'She moves again, adjusting her humanness' (193). As the chronicle finally comes to the story of one particular night, the force of the general law is in no way diminished: "Ella las vio y no lo creyó. Las oyó claramente. Tampoco lo creyó" 'She saw the women and didn't believe it. She heard them clearly. Still she didn't believe it' (194). An echo of the earlier allusion to incredulity, the narration now shifts into the preterite: what was first formulated as a general, habitual reality now takes shape as a particular, finite event. Yet just as this chronicle gradually moves toward constructing the story of that particular event, its protagonist is already at work effacing that particularity. The woman's momentary interest in the developments outside her window quickly give way to tedium, and as she returns to bed, the text reveals a fragment of her thoughts: "espero que recojan los cuerpos antes de que me levante" 'I hope they pick up the bodies before I get up' (194). If this desire to have the bodies disappear is an expression of the need to take distance from the facts, the need to disavow knowledge of violence, it also raises a pertinent question: who, precisely, is going to take away these bodies? On the one hand, the question evokes a complacent citizenry ready to let the justice system do its work behind closed doors, to allow the crime inquiry to fizzle away inside the bureaucratic machinery, as happens with the majority of murder cases in Mexico. On the other hand, the question points to a citizenry that has internalized the logic of the drug cartels. Just as the cartel assassins work to hide these bodies out of sight, the chance witness works

to avert her gaze, to avoid taking on the status of an eyewitness who might account for the lives of the disappeared.

Valdez's narration suggests that this aversion to seeing, knowing, and telling, is one of the habitual survival tactics of a population whose everyday lives are infused with the threat of violence; accordingly, this chronicle will tell the story of how stories are untold *en tiempos de narco*. Valdez writes: "Deseó tener blindada la ventana, la sábana, el camisón, la vida" 'She wished she could bulletproof her window, her bedsheet, her nightgown, her life.'(195). Her retreat from the window, from the possibility of gazing out onto public space, is also a retreat from participation in the construction of public knowledge and into a fantasy of private safety. This withdrawal is not, however, absolute. On the following morning, the woman succumbs to a persistent curiosity: "no logró resignarse" 'she couldn't resign herself' (195), we learn, to the city's efficacy in keeping its secrets, in erasing its own memory. Peering out onto the street, she finds a litter of bullet casings scattered on the blood-stained concrete and subsequently checks the paper for news reports of what she witnessed, or rather half-witnessed. At this point, the chronicle comes to an abrupt close: "En sus páginas había ofertas de los supermercados y un desfile de palabras y fotos huecas, lejanas, baldías" 'In its pages there were supermarket sales and a pageant of words and photographs hollow, distant, barren" (195). Why scour the papers for reports on an event she has already witnessed, and from which she wished to take distance? What is the significance of her first impulse to peer through her window in the first place, however briefly? When we witness a remarkable event, there is a strange pleasure in later finding it corroborated in news media: I was there and saw it happen; I had a moment of contact with this newsworthy incident, with an event now known to all. Through this news story, then, my singular experience is incorporated into a shared narrative, articulated onto what is, in some sense, a communal experience. At the same time, by measuring my experience of the incident against the authority of a public version, I am able to account for that experience with a greater certainty. Both of these gestures, then, express a nostalgia for participating in the elaboration of shared memory as public knowledge, a refusal to accept wholeheartedly the city's law of oblivion—a refusal that points to the *insufficiency of private memory*. By pointing to this lack, Valdez's text positions itself apart from the mainstream media's narratives of violence,

which, according to Polit Dueñas, are intended to disrupt communal identifications: "These unrelated deaths become necessary for our survival. Once the possibility of solidarity is gone, violence is almost seen as a necessary evil. . . . Writing restores humanity, and a writer recognizes a story when everything looks barren" (84).

The transference of memory from the private to the public, and vice versa, is of central importance to the politics of fear that is the basis for the chronicle's recourse to anonymous narratives. No journalist's life was put directly at risk when the arrest of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera was made public across every Mexican news medium in February of 2014; the media strategy of the Procuraduría General de la República guaranteed this incident's immediate formulation as public knowledge concerning a publicly known figure. The perils of knowing emerge precisely when private knowledge becomes public knowledge, or when private knowledge becomes linked to public knowledge. To illustrate the latter scenario: it is public knowledge that the Sinaloa cartel operates throughout Culiacán, and it is not taboo to discuss this fact; and yet it would be dangerous for any journalist to openly link a specific crime to this group.

Yet there is something contradictory at work here. On the one hand, in "Noches y balas," we have a containment of private knowledge—and a concomitant erasure of public knowledge—experienced as an alienating lack, as an ambivalent nostalgia: I want to know what happened, but I don't want to know anything. On the other hand, in "El paquetito," we can observe a set of shared public narratives in circulation onto which fears and desires are mapped; narratives that synthesize a fuzzy, nonspecific past and that determine the shape of a variable but largely predictable future. These narratives are shared, but they are also anonymized; they are referential but stripped of identifiable details, severed from empirical specificity and therefore from facticity. Viewed thus, these chronicles allegorize the problematic relationship to knowledge of populations beleaguered by violence. At the level of content, they show how a daily, tangential contact with the drug war grants Sinaloans a familiarity with the *narco* in ever uncertain terms, making them into witnesses capable of neither ascertaining nor understanding what they have witnessed. In this regard, *Malayerba* succeeds in shedding light on the sizeable obstacles to the dissemination of knowledge that the drug conflict has created. Anonymity, then, may be construed as an allegory of this uncertainty at

the level of form—an allegory of this inability to ascertain the contours of an event that touches us.

Anonymity in these chronicles has an additional effect, namely the back-and-forth slippage from the particular to the general to which I alluded above, and which grafts the experience of the particular onto collective memory. The hunter's dream draws from a reserve of clichés concerning the *narco* with which the reader is at least partially familiar; the reader, in turn, may recognize his own idle fantasies in the hunter's dream, and may go on to incorporate this anecdote of a non-event into the reserve of commonplaces that shape his own knowledge of the *narco*. This use of anonymity facilitates the process that Polit Dueñas discovers at work in her study of narco narratives in Culiacán and Medellín, Colombia. Describing her interviews with longtime residents of these two cities long besieged by drug-related violence, she comes to note the importance of published narratives on collective memory of this violence: "they remember not what they witnessed, but what they read, recognizing themselves in the words of others" (5). A similar dynamic is visibly at work in the case of "Noches y balas," through which any number of sleep-deprived readers may identify with the woman from Las Quintas, whose insomnia freely lends itself to all sorts of broad allegorical readings—sleeplessness as collective guilt, for example. Remarkably, this continual slippage toward the general (and back) infuses Valdez's anecdotes with contextual meaning, while at the same time conferring a detectable primacy upon their particularity. In other words, his chronicles exploit both the absolute specificity of the *fait divers* and the informative bent of the exemplary anecdote. They achieve this through their recourse to anonymity, to be sure. Yet for this anonymity to be effective, it must go beyond the simple omission of proper names. Having surveyed some of the narrative strategies of the *Malayerba* chronicles, I will conclude with a few words on the particular uses of anonymity that make it possible for Valdez to overcome the traditional tension between anecdote and referential narrative.

Valdez deploys a structural anonymity at all levels of his *Malayerba* narratives insofar as these are drawn from an oral reserve of anecdotes that participate in what Maurice Blachot calls *parole quotidienne* or "everyday speech" (21). According to Blanchot, the public space of the street is the privileged site of this everyday speech. As a space open to all, the street becomes a kind of staging point for this shared everyday life primarily

because of what is said there, i.e. because of the kind of knowledge that that people share and construct there. Urban legends, small talk, gossip, invectives, greetings, exclamations, clichés, jokes, statements of the obvious, repetitions, misstatements, and so on: all of these are instances of "everyday speech," a term which we might approximate in lay terms by thinking about what we mean when we refer to "the word on the street." The word on the street—that fickle, ephemeral, and often banal kind of public prattle that we always hear around us but so rarely examine seriously—is beholden to no criteria of veracity, emerging and vanishing as it does with the crowds that generate it. Everyday speech neither affirms nor negates any statement because of its absolute informality. It is not concerned with verification, attestation or demonstration of any universal propositions. By contrast, almost any kind of learned, written discourse is trying to say, demonstrate, or describe something in ordered, definitive terms. Not only do written declarative statements tend to have an unambiguous relationship to truth and falsehood, but they also carry the authority of enduring utterances; the word on the street, on the other hand, is always changing, if not disappearing altogether—a slippery statement recurrently retracting and revising itself.

Amid this absence of truth and grand narratives on the street, Blanchot argues, the individual is made anonymous: "when we meet someone in the street, it comes always by surprise . . . for one does not recognize oneself there; in order to go forth to meet another, one must first tear oneself away from an existence without identity . . . " (18). This anonymity is not the product of alienation. Rather, immersion in the multitude deprives an individual of the cognitive modes that allow for the formulation of subjectivity itself. Just as the raw, everyday experience of time utterly lacks the ordered *telos* of drama (or of historical narrative), it also lacks the paradigms of cognition and classification that allow an individual to recognize either himself or others as separate entities. Everyday life's incommensurability with the demands of veracity and verifiability are thus the basis for the anonymity of the city-dweller in relation to knowledge: "And yet what is published in the street is not really divulged; it is said, but this 'is said' is borne by no word ever really pronounced, just as rumors are reported without anyone transmitting them and because the one who transmits them accepts being no one" (17). A declarative statement either establishes or denies, and its claims are subject

to verification; but in order for verification to take place, the declarative statement requires a structure of authority against which its truth content might be ascertained. Because everyday speech emerges as an anonymized chatter attributable to no one, however, it forecloses the possibility of establishing its status as either fact or fiction. Hence Blanchot's assertion regarding the urban everyman: "And the man in the street is fundamentally irresponsible; while having always seen everything, he is witness to nothing" (17). The city-dweller cannot, in his daily shuffle, attest to anything because there is no authority to summon him to account for any particular statement. Attestation belongs to the domain of knowledge and law, after all. Yet in foreclosing the possibility of accountability, the epistemological anarchy of everyday speech also forecloses the possibility of individualized experience. An incident, in order to take shape as a coherent event or experience, requires a subject to cognize it as such and claim it as his/her own. Without a witness who becomes a subject upon formulating a historically situated personal narrative, the urban *anonyme* forgets his selfhood amidst the un-individuated time of daily, humdrum existence.

The harmonious oscillation between the general and the particular in Valdez's *Malayerba* chronicles stems precisely from the structure of rumor that informs their narrative substratum. Valdez's nameless stories read like whispers carried in the wind, whispers that avow, contradict, repeat, and respond to one another—that accumulate around one another and just as readily disperse. Formally, then, these texts replicate the way in which everyday speech continuously weaves together a corpus of knowledge in the public realm. Everyday speech is not only anonymous, after all, but also *anonymizing*. This is not, however, the same process of anonymization to which so much news coverage relegates the petty criminal, preoccupied as it is with the sole spectacle of the headline-friendly *capo*. Thematically, Valdez's work tends to reject this unbalanced coverage by devoting much of his attention to stories about *buchonas* and *buchones*, terms which, in Sinaloa, designate the men and women working in the bottom echelons of organized crime. This focus is not surprising. After all, in the context of imposed silence, the kinds of secrets conveyed by word of mouth will tend to be stories about neighbors and acquaintances, to wit the kinds of people with which one comes into contact in everyday life. The anonymity through which these stories are told, then, does not effect an erasure of the particular so much as it replicates the uncertain terms

through which the general population can know the *narco* in everyday speech: a diverse, extensive knowledge of no one in particular; a second-hand knowledge that is also an empirical knowledge in the sense that it structures social relations. Of course, this is not to say that the texts comprising *Malayerba* are unmediated expressions of the everyday speech in circulation. In "Noches y balas," Valdez is all too conscious of the limits of the press. At the same time, however, these chronicles attempt to reach beyond those limits by enacting a recurring slippage from the general to the particular, in a mechanism that mirrors the gesture of the woman who checks her memory against the newspaper, and the newspaper against her memory, and who may conceivably repeat this ritual page after page, and morning after morning.

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