Translated Lives in Australian 'Crónicas'

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Abstract
The genre of writing known as crónicas throughout the Spanish-speaking world has been described by Mexican novelist and cronista Juan Villoro as "the platypus of prose". These short, column-length prose pieces published regularly in newspapers and magazines in Spanish America and in Spain may take the form of an essay, narrative, reportage or opinion piece or any combinations of these. Villoro's comparison of the crónica with the odd looking, egg-laying, Australian monotreme underscores the hybrid nature of the genre, which, like the platypus, appears to be both one thing and another: both fact and fiction, real and imagined, serious and humorous, critical and, at times, whimsical. In making this analogy, however, the Mexican author was very likely unaware that, in fact, the Spanish-language crónica had in recent decades migrated successfully, if improbably, to the home of the platypus: Australia. Literary work in Spanish is an important part of Australia's multicultural heritage. With over 110,000 Australians speaking Spanish at home, it is not surprising that this linguistic community has its share of writers producing poetry and short stories, novels, plays, biographies and autobiographies. Translated work, however, represents a very small proportion of the Spanish-speaking community's literary output. Significantly, crónicas written in Australia and published through a range of Australian newspapers and magazines have never been translated. This chapter aims to address this gap by bringing to attention the work of one of Australia's cronistas and by arguing that crónicas represent a significant aspect of this migrant nation's literary heritage. This chapter will provide an overview of crónicas in Australia, with a particular focus on the work of Michael Gamarra, who for over thirty years has been involved as editor and writer of Spanish-language publications in Sydney. It argues that his crónica-style columns from the 1980s, written under the pseudonym of Ernesto Balcells, provide a mediating space that allow the consequences and implications of "being translated", in the sense of being "carried across" to new geographic, linguistic and cultural contexts, to be explored within a popular and familiar literary tradition.

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The genre of writing known as ‘crónica’ throughout the Spanish-speaking world has been described by Mexican novelist and ‘cronista’ Juan Villoro as “the platypus of prose” (Blanco, Leñero and Villoro 2002, 66). These short column-length prose pieces published regularly in newspapers and magazines in Spanish America and in Spain may take the form of an essay, narrative, reportage or opinion piece or any combinations of these. The crónica offers a subjective view of contemporary events, current affairs or social issues which the cronista believes deserves deeper consideration than otherwise afforded in the press. The columns or narratives may appear political, satirical, quotidian, personal, even mundane. Villoro’s comparison of the crónica with the odd looking, egg-laying, Australian monotreme underscores the hybrid nature of the genre, which, like the platypus, appears to be both one thing and another: both fact and fiction, real and imagined, serious and humorous, critical and, at times, whimsical. In making this analogy, however, the Mexican author was very likely unaware that, in fact, the Spanish-language crónica had in recent decades migrated successfully, if improbably, to the home of the platypus: Australia.¹

Crónicas have long been associated with travel and encounters with the new. In Spanish America, crónicas began almost simultaneously with European arrival in the New World. Hernán Cortés, Bernál Díaz del Castillo and Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca wrote chronicle-like accounts of Spanish exploration and conquest (Monsiváis 2002, 26). In the 19th century, crónicas became well-established as a regular feature of the Spanish-language press and developed the hybrid ‘literary-journalistic form’ that continues to characterise the genre today (Corona and Jørgensen 2002, 2). Aníbal González defines crónicas as writing “that combines literary with journalistic elements in a variety of ways, resulting in brief texts that often focus on contemporary topics and issues addressed in a self-consciously literary style” (2007, 24). González focuses on the cronistas of Spanish American ‘modernismo’, a literary movement spanning the four decades from the 1880s to the 1920s. During this period, writers such as José Martí, Rubén Darío and José Enrique Rodó, among many others, published regular columns in newspapers and magazines throughout Spanish America. Darío’s crónicas in particular were often accounts of travel, later collected in book form with titles such as España contemporánea (Contemporary Spain 1901), Peregrinaciones (Pilgrimages 1901) and El viaje a Nicaragua (The Voyage to Nicaragua 1909) (González 2007, 42).

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At the same time, crónicas are more than accounts and reflections of travel. They are also a form of social commentary and critique, sometimes taking the form of the short story. The cronista as social commentator became a feature of the Spanish-language press in the United States in the early 20th century, in response to the increasing numbers of migrants from Mexico. Literary critic Nicolás Kanellos (2008) argues that these American-based cronistas were particularly critical of those in the Mexican immigrant community who were readily assimilating American habits and morals and surrendering their cultural heritage and identity. Migrant women especially became a target of these cronistas, who wrote repeatedly of the dangers of Hispanic women succumbing to the unaccustomed freedoms enjoyed by 1920s American women.

Whether conservative in perspective or radical, crónicas have continued to circulate in contemporary writing. Villoro writes of the significant role played by crónicas in Mexico following the crisis of 1968, when ten days before the summer Olympic Games in Mexico City, government troops fired upon students and protestors, killing hundreds. Villoro notes that the first of this round of crónica-style prose appeared in book form, led by Elena Poniatowska’s La noche de Tlatelolco (The Night of Tlatelolco, 1971), but soon spilled over into newspapers where cronistas were then able to construct narratives utilising “subjective views of events” in order to denounce abuses of power (Blanco, Leheró and Villoro 2002, 65).

While literary theorists have turned attention to crónicas in these more typical or expected Spanish-speaking contexts, there is little critical work on crónicas in the Spanish-language press in multicultural contexts such as Australia where Spanish is one of many diverse migrant languages. Australia is a nation with over 200 cultures and languages and Australian literature reflects this cultural and linguistic diversity. Although most readers assume Australian literature to be written in English – the de facto official language of government and the primary language of education and business – writing in languages other than English has a significant presence in Australia through community newspapers, publishing and writing associations. Spanish is among the top ten languages, other than English, spoken at home and it is not surprising that this linguistic community has its share of writers producing poetry and short stories, novels, plays, biographies and autobiographies and crónicas.

Through five decades of literary production in Spanish in Australia, an enormous body of creative writing has accumulated. Some of this has appeared in bilingual publications, with English and Spanish versions appearing side by side, or in ‘tête-bêche’ format. Translated work, however, represents a very small proportion of the Spanish-speaking community’s literary output. Significantly, crónicas written in Australia and published through a range of Australian newspapers and magazines have never been translated. This chapter aims to address this gap by bringing to attention the work of one of Australia’s cronistas and by arguing that crónicas represent a significant aspect of this migrant nation’s literary heritage.

The first substantial wave of Spanish migration to Australia occurred between 1958 and 1963, with a joint Spanish and Australian government supported scheme to bring workers to participate in labour-intensive sectors of the Australian economy. Along with this cohort of labourers came a number of journalists who established the first Spanish-language newspapers in Australia, beginning in the mid-1960s, with La Crónica in Melbourne in 1964 and El Español en Australia in Sydney in 1965 (Garcia 1988). The second wave of migration from Spanish-speaking countries began in the 1970s and continued through the 1980s and 1990s, as political violence escalated in Latin America forcing thousands to seek asylum overseas. Australia took significant numbers of refugees from Chile, Uruguay and Argentina, and later from El Salvador. Today there are more than 110,000 Australian Spanish speakers and this reading community has, for five decades now, supported numerous newspapers and magazines in Spanish.

In the 1970s, when Spanish-speaking migrants to Australia turned to their newly established newspapers and magazines, they found, along with the news reporting, political commentary, advertising and social calendars, crónicas that drew on these same traditions of social critique and satire, but now applied to the Australian context. For these readers, their status as ‘translated beings’ is expressed and debated through these crónicas and in the correspondence from readers which a number of the instalments provoked. I use the phrase ‘translated beings’ here, following Michael Cronin, who in turn borrows the phrase from Anne Malena, to describe the parallels that exist between migration and translation (Cronin 2006, 45). As he writes:

The condition of the migrant is the condition of the translated being. He or she moves from a source language and culture to a target language and culture so that translation takes place both in the physical sense of movement or displacement and in the symbolic sense of the shift from one way of speaking, writing about and interpreting the world to another (ibid.).

For Spanish-speaking migrants to Australia, I want to argue that crónicas provided a mediating space that allowed the consequences and implications of being translated, in this sense of being ‘carried across’ to new geographic, linguistic and cultural contexts, to be explored within a popular and familiar literary tradition. In these crónicas, the process of translation involves representations of the migrants’ shifted circumstances but in a form of writing and a way of interpreting the world that remains familiar to its readers.

Although there are a significant number of Australian cronistas, I will focus on the work of Ernesto Balecels, a pseudonym for Uruguayan-born migrant, Michael Gamarra. Published in the magazine Versión between 1982 and 1986 the Balecels crónicas total thirteen in all. Elsewhere I have commented on one of Balecels’ crónicas, “La clase de Inglés” (“The English Class”), a column which prompted a heated exchange between a reader and the editor/author (Jacklin 2010). This reader/writer exchange is characteristic of crónicas which set out to be provocative, to pique their readers’ sensibilities, to encourage readers to think of their relationship to current events and circumstances in alternative ways. In this chapter I would like to extend my discussion of
crónicas and examine a range of Balcells’ columns in order to demonstrate how these narratives might work for Spanish-speaking migrants, representing their experiences as ‘translated beings’. To do so, I will have to translate and paraphrase a sufficient portion of these narratives — none of which have been translated into English previously — to provide a sense of their humour and their critique.

The first of Balcells’ crónicas to be published is titled “Por ser impresionable” (“On account of being impressionable”). It begins: “One cold August morning I left behind the troubles of this world” (Balcells 1982, 34) and tells the story of Ernesto arriving at the gates of Heaven and being greeted by St Peter who asks him, “Tell me my son, how is it you have arrived here so young? Was it an accident?” (34) Ernesto explains that his demise was a result of his being so impressionable. He read in magazines all the things that one should avoid eating or drinking: first alcohol, then butter and all dairy products, then meat, then sugar and carbohydrates. The list goes on until finally even fruit and vegetables are off-limits because of pesticide residues. And so, he dies of starvation. St Peter tells him, “Well, that’s a shame but now that you’re here there’s nothing to be done but adapt and make the best of it”. “No problem”, says Ernesto. “That’s what they told me when I came to Australia: adapt and make the best of it. But tell me father, you speak Spanish. I suppose you also speak English” and St Peter answers, “My son, you’re in heaven now. We only speak Spanish here”. (34) Balcells is delighted, and then he asks, “But what about the... the...?” And St Peter answers, “Do you mean the Australians? Oh, we keep them in a migrant hostel where they study Spanish like anyone else. But some of them are not too bright, believe me, and it’s pretty difficult for them”. (34-35) At that moment, Balcells says, he is sure he is in Heaven. But also at that moment, he hears a distant voice calling him: “Ernesto, it’s time to get up, you’ll be late for work”. (35) It’s his wife waking him and this migrant’s heaven has turned out to have been a dream. Ernesto gets up, gets dressed,

2 “Una fría madrugada de agosto se acabaron todos mis problemas en este mundo.” All translations and paraphrasing from the original Spanish are by the author of this article.

3 “Pero dime, hijo — preguntó — ¿Cómo es que has venido tan joven? ¿Alguien accidente?”

4 “- Bueno, hijo, ahora ya no tiene arreglo. Lo que tienes que pensar es que ya estás acá y no tienes más remedio que adaptarte. - Eso no va ser problema — le contestó — Eso fue lo que me dijeron cuando llegué a Australia... Pero, digame, padre, usted habla español. Hablará también inglés, supongo — ¿Qué esperanza, hijo? Acá se habla solamente español. Únicamente la lengua del inmortal Manco se escucha aquí.”

5 “- Pero entonces, padre, ¿Cómo se arreglan los... los...? — ¿Te refieres a los australianos? — preguntó. Movi la cabeza afirmando, porque no me animé a decirlo. - Bueno, a ellos primero los llevamos al ‘hostel’ que hay acá. Y ahí tienen que estudiar español como cualquier hijo de vecino — me aclaró — Algunos son ‘re-burros’ créeme, y les cuesta un triunfo hablar un poco”.

6 “La voz parecía venir de muy lejos: - ¡Ernesto! - Poco a poco se hizo más sonora y clara: - ¡Ernesto! ¡Levantate que ya es hora!”

7 In this, his opening crónica, Balcells incorporates a number of features that will reappear in the columns which follow over the next four years. The prose is marked by its lightness, its casualness, as if narrating daily circumstances familiar to any of its readers. It borrows on a familiar formula, the joke of being greeted by St Peter at the gates of heaven, and applies it to a migrant’s circumstances, the need to fit in, to learn a new language, being segregated from the mainstream who, all too commonly, perceives the new arrivals as dim-witted because of their lack in linguistic competence. The twist, of course, is that all the above is what the English-speaking Australians will experience when they arrive at this migrant’s heaven. And that’s why, at the end of the narrative, Balcells gives his foreman at the factory such a sly smile. He is revelling in the sense of inversion that his dream has told him may be possible. On the other hand, a darker note to the narrative is the equation this crónica generates between migration and death. Balcells is not the first migrant writer to make this connection and some of his readers, having left their home countries under extreme and life-threatening circumstances, may well read migration in similar terms: as one life ending forever and the uncertainties of another beginning.

Among the challenges of ‘being translated’ explored in these columns is that of gender relations. Like the crónicas appearing in the American migrant press of fifty years earlier, these Australian crónicas give considerable attention to the disruption of expectations with regard to male/female relations. In fact, at first glance, one might think that these Australian crónicas draw on gender stereotypes that were not only characteristic of the American material, but typical throughout Latin America. The Balcells columns are illustrated with cartoon-style representations of the characters which appear in each instalment. Women are drawn with exaggerated curvaceousness and usually appear as either housewives or secretaries. American academic and translator Sara Cooper (2008) has analysed cartoons appearing in Cuban magazines immediately following the revolution in 1959, finding similar visual representations, and arguing that despite the gender equality promised by the Cuban revolution, stereotypes appearing in the popular press were difficult to overcome. The Australian crónicas and their accompanying illustrations might suggest this as well; however, the narratives tell a slightly different story.

In the Balcells column titled “El ‘honor de la familia’” (“The ‘family honour’”), the narrator’s brother suspects his wife of having an affair as she is out every Tuesday night and won’t explain where she has been. He asks Ernesto, as the elder sibling, to throw away all the magazines he’d been reading, and has a big breakfast. Then, when he gets to the factory and punches in his time-card for the beginning of his shift, he greets his foreman with a voluble “Good morning!” and a smile wider than he’d ever given him during their five years of working together (34-5).
intervene and save the ‘family honour’. The younger brother remarks: “This is all because of my coming to this country; it never would have happened at home. This country drives women crazy. Look at the wife of Ramiro, and Fermín’s wife; they’re both divorced now. And Jesús is more cuckolded here than a pampas bull” (Balcells 1983a, 23). Migration, from the man’s perspective, has resulted in the disruption and destabilisation of once-harmonious gender relations. Except, as in almost all of Balcells’ crónicas, there is a twist, which in this narrative reveals that actually the sister-in-law is attending cooking classes on Tuesday nights, which she wanted to keep as a surprise, and meanwhile the brother is having an affair with a ‘gringa’, the term Balcells uses for Anglo-Australian women. The suggestion here seems to be that if migration has resulted in increased divorce rates amongst Spanish-speaking couples in Australia, it is not necessarily, or at least not only, the women who have strayed from marriage fidelity.

Gender relations, dating and marriage feature in two more of Balcells’ crónicas. In “Boda por computadora” (“Computer Wedding”) a migrant from South America receives a letter from his mother, who is concerned about his rushing into a marriage with a woman he has met through a computer dating service. Sufficient to say that the mother is right and the marriage ends in disaster. In “Una broma pesada” (“A practical joke”) a man named Néstor convinces his girlfriend to respond to a personal advertisement that he reads in a Spanish-language newspaper, in which a 40 year old male is looking for companionship with a Spanish or South American woman between 25 and 35 years of age, with a view to matrimony. Néstor wants to draw the man out, so that he and his friends at the pub can laugh at someone so pathetic that he needs to advertise for a woman instead of meeting someone suitable at a dance, as Néstor found his girlfriend Sylvia. (Balcells 1985, 15) The twist here is that Manuel, the 40-year-old, sweeps Sylvia off her feet and within days they are on their way to New Zealand for their honeymoon, leaving Néstor dumbfounded. Again, the narratives are characterised by a lightness of touch, and a play on expectations that offers their readers the chance to reflect on circumstances somewhat different to that of their home countries. Balcells implies that finding a partner through computer dating or personal advertising is, for the migrant community, a relatively uncommon alternative to traditional courtship. As Néstor says, anyone who needs to post an advertisement to find a woman is a racial! And yet, at the end of the story it is Néstor who is left looking the fool. Among the readers of these crónicas, of course, there would have been men and women with a range of attitudes but Balcells’ narratives provide, at least, the opportunity to think about and talk about choices in the new country. Unlike the American crónicas discussed by Kanellos, the episodes by Balcells which focus on gender relations do not impose a conservative view, nor cautionary stance. On the contrary, Balcells’ crónicas suggest that if gender relations have become problematic among the Hispanic migrant community, it is because the men have resisted this aspect of their ‘being translated’ and remain fixed on values and mores from their countries of origin. Rather than implying that the migrant’s traditional attitudes should be defended, these Australian crónicas, by satirising entrenched male perspectives on gender, point towards a transformation of social relations with which Hispanic migrants must come to terms.

Although many of the characters included in Balcells’ crónicas are factory workers, there are two exceptions worth pointing out, as they demonstrate that his critiques of migrant life included more than gender issues. In “La familia Rodríguez ‘Grant’” (“The Rodríguez ‘Grant’ family”) the narrator reports on a visit to friends who, despite being unemployed, aim to make a living through Australia’s generous welfare system and its support for education and cultural diversity. The husband has applied for a grant to help him establish a business as a guitar teacher; the wife has submitted a grant application to open a theatre group; the son has a grant with some friends involved in community work, and the daughter is hoping for a grant to write a book about yoga and karate. Ernesto is clearly overwhelmed at their apparent ability to work the system to their advantage and in response to his bemusement, the husband says, “We have to live ourselves up somehow, old fellow, if not, why do we have the ‘viveza criolla’? I’ve already worked hard and paid enough tax”, he adds, as he prepares another mate to drink. (Balcells 1983b, 14) The mate identifies the speakers as either Argentinian or Uruguayan, and this phrase viveza criolla refers to an attitude to life, apparently typical of Buenos Aires, which disavows social responsibility and recognises that an individual will take as much for himself or herself as the system or state will allow. It translates as ‘native cunning’ but in Australia it would most likely be called ‘rorting the system’. Although at the time this crónica was published in the 1980s, small-sum grants for multicultural organisations and community projects were becoming quite common, the exaggerated extent of this family’s success in obtaining such funding suggests their exploitation of government generosity beggars belief. Balcells ends this instalment by asking himself whether or not he feels envious of his friends’ native cunning, and the question, in terms of ‘being translated’, is to what extent the Rodríguez Grant family’s application of viveza criolla to their Australian circumstances is an adaptation that will, in the long term, be in their best interests, or in the interests of the migrant community.

In another example of how migrant lives are translated in these Australian crónicas, the column titled ‘Vanity’ (“Vanity”) relates a case of a migrant businessman duped by an Australian saleswoman. The main character of this instalment, Arnoldo Cuevas, owns a travel agency and is fond of demonstrating his business success by telling people...
on the phone, "Sorry, could you hold for a moment? I have a call on the other line". As the narrator remarks, two telephone lines give Arnoldo status and is, he believes, a source of envy amongst his acquaintances. (Balcells 1984, 10) As the story opens, the call on the other line is from a young lady who wants to arrange a personal wine tasting for Arnoldo. The next day an attractive blonde woman named Betty comes by and convinces Arnoldo to purchase several cases of imported wine, complimenting him on his choices remarking, "You foreigners do have excellent taste in wine", (10) Whereas the previous crónica discussed involved a scenario of a migrant family visiting the Australian system, this episode provides the opposite point of view: that of a migrant being swindled by an Australian. It is a perspective perhaps not unfamiliar to some of Balcells’ readers who, as recent arrivals and English-language learners, would be vulnerable to misunderstandings in business and employment, and experience feelings of coming out second best. Arnoldo and Betty make arrangements for payment of the wine and the cases are delivered. Arnoldo then invites Ernesto and another friend, Luis, to dinner to show off the quality of his newly acquired drop, only to find that it bears no resemblance to the wine he had tasted with Betty. He won’t admit, however, that he’s been cheated, insisting to his friends that the wine is very highly regarded, as well as expensive. However, after leaving Arnoldo’s later that night, Luis, who is a graphic designer, tells Balcells that he recognised the label as one printed in the factory where he works in Parramatta, a suburb of Sydney. The wine certainly is not the imported brand Arnoldo insisted he had purchased. “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity”, quoting Ecclesiastes, says Balcells to himself as he walks the remaining blocks to his home. (12) What is ‘carried across’ in this episode is not a regional attribute, but a personal foible as likely to be a part of migrant lives as it is that of the host culture. Arnoldo has successfully translated himself into Australian business and culture – and it should be noted that this episode features a number of exchanges in English between Arnoldo and Betty – but his friends, Balcells included, see him as somewhat foolish.

My translations and paraphrasing of the Balcells material may give the impression that quite a number of these crónicas portray members of the Spanish speaking migrant community as foolish, or at least the focus of the cronista’s humour. The columns are satirical; they are meant to make some of their readers mildly uncomfortable, but they are also meant to provide an opportunity for readers to laugh at themselves, and to laugh with those whose lives they share, for these narratives of translated lives were written to be consumed within the migrant community. Very few Anglo-Australians would have had the linguistic capacity to have read these crónicas in their original publications, and it is certain that even fewer have read them since then. As noted previously, not a single example of this type of writing has been translated in Australia.

To English-reading Australians and to mainstream Australian literature, crónicas remain a complete unknown. While it is true that they were never intended as serious literary work – Michael Gamarra (‘Cartas’ 1983, 3) has said of the Balcells pieces that they were written “without literary pretensions” – they are an interesting form of migrant representation in writing, and these Spanish-speaking lives are also Australian lives and deserve to be acknowledged as contributing to Australia’s diverse and multilingual literary heritage.

In terms of national literature and identity, Lawrence Venuti (2005, 178) has written that nations “profit” from translation. With this he refers to the translation of ‘foreign texts’ and the relationship between nation and language that much nationalist thinking assumes:

Translation can support the formation of national identities through both the selection of foreign texts and the development of discursive strategies to translate them. [...] The irreducible foreignness of these materials may actually result in an intensification of national desire: in this instance, whatever linguistic and cultural differences may be communicated by a translation elicit a desire for a unified nation that the translation cannot fulfill by virtue of those very differences (180).

And yet, for Australia, a multitude of ‘foreign texts’ originate within the nation, written in Spanish, as well as in Greek and Italian, in Arabic, Chinese and Vietnamese, in Latvian, Polish and Serbian. Through language and cultural heritage these texts may appear ‘foreign’ in the sense that they are not English, not Anglo-Celtic, but I would not attribute to them an ‘irreducible foreignness’, for many of these texts tell Australian stories with Australian settings, Australian characters and Australian circumstances. The crónicas discussed here exemplify this Australian focus; they do so in the language spoken by those many thousands of Australians who have migrated from Spanish America and from Spain and who, in the process, have both translated themselves and have been translated into new modes of living. And while translation is a daily act in so many aspects of Australian life, from the provision of social services to television programming and radio, its potential contribution within Australian literature – to translate the writing of Australia’s many migrant communities, in their many languages – is yet to be embraced.

Works Cited


11 “— Un momento, por favor, Manuel, que llaman por la otra línea.
Esta frase le producía a Arnoldo una sensación de inmenso regocijo. Dos líneas telefónicas le daban ‘status’ a su agencia de viajes y causaban envidia entre sus conocidos.”
12 “Ustedes los extranjeros tienen excelente paladar para los buenos vinos.”
13 “Vanidad de vanidades... todo es vanidad.”
14 “sin pretensiones literarias” (‘Cartas’ 1983, 3).