

## THE SRPR INTERVIEW: CARLOS SOTO-ROMÁN

For those readers of *SRPR* who are reading your work for the first time, and who have not read more from the book manuscript *11* (forthcoming in 2022 from Ugly Duckling Presse), some of the questions below will help to contextualize this important and innovative book. To start, could you say a few words to answer the following questions:

**Daniel Borzutzky:** How was the book written? What kinds of documents and archives did you incorporate? What kinds of procedures did you use, etc...?

**Carlos Soto-Román:** First, I wouldn't say the book was written, at least, in the traditional sense. Maybe just a couple of "poems" included in the book were actually written by me. The whole process was more about compiling different fragments, quotes, and excerpts from multiple documents related to the Chilean dictatorship period and combining them within a new context in order to configure an alternate narrative of the events, one that is intentionally veiled, which forces the reader to confront the past in a different way, encouraging the exercise of personal and collective memory to therefore complete the gaps. The book includes a lot of official documents: forms and certificates from detention centers, fragments of some of the infamous bandos militares which were communications from the Junta exhorting the population to comply with the "new rules" within the state of exception. I also incorporated testimonies from victims and torturers, fragments from interviews, audio clips, and visual material. The sources were mainly the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation Report, also known as the Rettig Report; the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture Report, aka the Valech Report; and the archives of the digital library of the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, besides many other documents I was able to find on the Internet, like the agenda of President Ford the day Orlando Letelier was assassinated in Washington, DC. The procedures I used were somehow dictated by the documents themselves. I employed erasure, fragmentation, combination, serialization, etc., but I worked on each "poem" individually to make sure the procedures

used made sense and work not only obscuring the documents but also causing exactly the opposite, making way for the appearance of new meanings.

**DB:** Why did you choose to write it this way? In other words, why did this combination of documentary, conceptual, and visual techniques seem to be a good way of poetically capturing the history of the dictatorship?

**CSR:** Before I made the book, I tried to make a list of all the books that had been written on the coup and the dictatorship up to that point. The list consisted mainly of investigative journalism and lyric poetry. And I thought that perhaps both genres, although relevant and necessary, were a bit exhausted in terms of conveying the real horror of those years. I mean, there is a kind of anesthetic effect when you tell a story over and over again in the same way. But this was not a regular story, it was a terrible one, so I thought something else needed to be done to raise awareness again. It occurred to me then, that maybe other voices—the original ones, the voices of the victims and the perpetrators that were embedded and alive in the documents—could be more effective at transmitting those atrocities rather than just channeling them. I was living in the States during those years, and the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the coup was coming, so I felt the urge to do something from a distance, to tell the story again and write about those years but not in the same style. Since forty years had passed, and many things remained unchanged in Chile, and many people involved in the dictatorship were still active in politics, I was convinced that something more emphatic, more radical was required.

**DB:** As I stated above, the book uses documentary techniques. In the U.S., it reads as part of a tradition that comes out of writers like Muriel Rukeyser and Louis Zukofsky, and also is aligned with more recent projects that take state documents as their source texts by poets like Layli Long Soldier and Solmaz Sharif. Are there Chilean or Spanish-language traditions of documentary poetics or conceptual poetics that form part of this book's lineage?

**CSR:** I've been trying to track down that kind of local lineage for a while and have been able to find some examples that might be considered good starting points. Like the first poem written in Chile

during the sixteenth century, *La Araucana*, which is an epic poem but it's the very first example we have where the poet acts as a witness and tells the events of the Arauco War, that is he documents them as they occur. And even though the veracity of the stories included are not very accurate, the poem was read as a true chronicle of what was going on in Chile and is regarded as one of the greatest testimonial writings of that time. Another example worth mentioning is *La Lira Popular* (The Popular Lire), also known as string literature, which were broadsides containing engravings and popular poetry in *décimas* that were sold hanging from a string in the streets. The commonly treated subjects were representative of the reality of the country, portraying personal experiences and news related to the people, the government, and general contingency. Nowadays this writing is considered as a historic source. That use of the news and/or the newspapers as source material for the making of poetry will reflect later on in the works of poets like Nicanor Parra (*Quebrantahuesos*), Jorge Torres (*Poemas Encontrados*), Karo Castro (*La Mujer Gallina*), Carmen Berenguer (*Bobby Sands desfallece en el muro*), etc. Many of these works have an important visual component. And more recently we have Luz Sciolla's work *Retratos Hablados*, which is an astonishing archive/book made of newspaper clippings about human rights violations in Chile and the world, collected by the author during the last forty years, establishing a powerful relation between literature, memory, and politics. There is also a large tradition of social literature, take for example Baldomero Lillo's *Sub-Terra*, in the field of what is known as social realism. But there are also some other interesting pieces, more related to the experimental/conceptual, like the work of Juan Luis Martínez, of course, and Raúl Zurita. All these examples are a fascinating and influential configuring what we might call a current Chilean documentary poetics, and all of them combine in their own particular ways historical, chronical, testimonial elements and the use of the documents as main procedures for poetry making.

**DB:** When you are invited to give readings, how do you perform and present the work in *11*?

**CSR:** I think I've never read from *11* at a reading after it was published. I believe I read from it maybe one or two times when it was still a draft. But when it finally got published, I organized with some friends

a launch event at a former detention and torture center; I read some fragments there and it was a very solemn moment. After that, I've never been able to read from it, by myself. But another way to present the work appeared. Along with bass player and poet Pablo Fante, and my son, the guitar player and composer Juan Diego Soto, we formed Radio Magallanes, a sound poetry project which is basically a band that experiments with poems and music. Pablo and I wrote a script combining poems from *11* and *Verde Noche*, a book of sonnets written by him. And JD and Pablo composed original music for the script. I added some sound effects and Pablo made a couple videos with footage from the dictatorship times that we use to project during our presentations. Later on, guitar player Gonzalo Henríquez joined. He and his band (González & Los Asistentes) have a similar project and have performed widely with many poets, Raúl Zurita among them, so his experience has been very useful for the band. We have performed together several times, mostly at literary events, and with a very positive response from the audience. We even played at the Memory and Human Rights Museum for the 9/11/1973 commemoration in 2019. It is very curious how the work found a completely different way to be shared and transmitted.

**DB:** *11* was awarded an important literary award for Chilean poetry, so in that sense I know a bit about its critical reception. I wonder if you could talk about other ways that the book has been received. For example, have there been any personal responses that have felt important to you? Any responses about the book's innovative form? Or even negative responses that can tell us something?

**CSR:** Fortunately, the book has had a very positive critical reception, which I believe is unusual for a book of that kind (self-published, experimental, etc.). Nonetheless, what I've most often encountered are questions about its nature. Is it really poetry? Is it nonfiction? Testimonial, collage, investigative journalism? Or just a historical book with images? I personally think of the work as poetry, but I really enjoy the fact that its classification remains a mystery and prevails as an open question. Actually, that is something I encourage. With Radio Magallanes, which can be considered in part an extension of the work, we have also had a good reception. Which is curious because the music adds another layer of complexity to something that

is already weird enough. Maybe it helps digest everything, or maybe it allows something that is entirely new. When I launched the book at the ex-Clínica Santa Lucía, a former detention and torture center now turned into a memorial site, the people who attended were mostly friends, family, writers, and folks associated with the place. The event was very interesting and positive for various reasons, but most of the audience agreed that the book was particularly uncanny. That I'd say is the most "negative" comment I've ever received on the book so far, even though I agree 100% with the statement, and I take it as a compliment. But I've always been concerned about its reception, that is I've always been worried about whether I found not a better but a different way to represent/narrate violence, tragedies, and horror in a way that is proper and respectful. I'm aware of the importance of working with memory, that's indeed a strong motivation for what I do, and I honestly believe that in order to fulfill the important task of facilitating the effort of not forgetting, sometimes it's completely necessary to be innovative, provocative, and relentless, while at the same time being mindful, respectful, and true. There is a thin line there that's easy to overstep; I try to stay vigilant on that front. But it's definitely something that I care about and I'm always willing to discuss.