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The Death of the River and the River of Death: The Magdalena River in *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* and *La novia oscura*

Ana María Mutis

Translated by Pablo J. Davis

“Huancayo,” which means “river of tombs” in the Yanacona tongue, was the name the pre-Hispanic settlers gave to the upper basin of the Magdalena River. This name, together with that of “Magdalena,” which calls to mind the sorrowful figure of the Gospels and the flood of tears she shed at the feet of the crucified Christ, seem cruel omens of the fate of Colombia’s most important river. The Magdalena has suffered the onslaughts of deforestation and of contamination from industrial effluents, urban waste, and oil spills.¹ But death visits the waters of the Magdalena not only in the form of ecological destruction; it also does so in a more direct and macabre way: the river’s currents often carry bodies that have been cast into its waters—an image that has become iconic of Colombia’s violence. The atrocious practice of throwing the bodies of victims of violence into the river goes back to the civil wars of the nineteenth century and continues up to the present with the purpose of concealing the traces of crimes—whether by making the victims disappear or by carrying them far from their home territories, impeding determination of the locale of the crime and therefore its investigation.²

The image of a river whose current bears human dead appears with some frequency in Colombian literature.³ Indeed, the “novel of *la Violencia*,” which evokes the horrors of the conflict between Liberals and Conservatives during the 1940s and 1950s, has as one of its central images that of corpses floating on the river, reflecting a common practice of the period whose purpose was to terrorize the rural population (Oquist 121). With respect to the ecological destruction of the river, one of the first

testimonies appears toward the middle of the nineteenth century in the verse of Candelario Obeso (1849–1884). Nearer to our own day, Colombian literature widely recognizes that, in addition to cadavers, the river bears refuse and contamination; contemporary narrative is replete with nauseating streams that serve as dumping-grounds for toxic discharges and human waste. In the rivers in *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (1985) by Gabriel García Márquez, *La novia oscura* (1999) by Laura Restrepo, *El desbarrancadero* (2001) and *La rambla paralela* (2002) by Fernando Vallejo, *Angosta* (2004) by Héctor Abad Faciolince, and *35 muertos* (2011) by Sergio Álvarez, to mention just a few examples, environmental destruction is fused with violence in narratives that give voice to a disenchanting vision of Colombia. But beyond the pessimistic viewpoint they share, the differing forms that disenchantment takes in these works reveal important differences in their ways of apprehending the nation's realities.

This essay focuses on two of these works: *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (Love in the Time of Cholera) by Gabriel García Márquez (hereinafter *Amor*) and *La novia oscura* (The Dark Bride) by Laura Restrepo (hereinafter *Novia*). Though it is true that these novels coincide in presenting the Magdalena as the scene of Colombia's deterioration and destruction, the river of *Novia* explores the connections between natural space, individual conscience, and national reality, all the while commenting on, and questioning, the message the Magdalena is made to convey in *Amor*. The analysis that follows seeks to elucidate the dialogue Restrepo's novel opens up with that of García Márquez, particularly with respect to the representation of the Magdalena and its function as a national symbol.

Novia tells the story of Sayonara, a prostitute who works in an oil town called Tora on the banks of the Magdalena. As with *Amor*, Restrepo's novel presents a love triangle, in this case between a prostitute and two men who pursue her with different intentions. One of them, Sacramento, wants to make Sayonara his wife and to rescue her from a life of prostitution, while the other, El Payanés, whom Sayonara loves, is content with the amorous assignations they enjoy on the last Friday of each month. The story unfolds during the 1940s, the era of *la Violencia*, and is based on historical information regarding the presence of the Tropical Oil Company in Barrancabermeja, the present-day name of Tora.⁴ The novel blends reality and fiction in incorporating historical facts and presenting a sort of sociological investigation into prostitution; but, primarily, it is through the figure of the journalist-narrator and the story she tells, arising out of the interviews with various characters who knew the protagonist, that this fiction certifies its ties to reality. The narrator's continual references to the process of writing and research encourage the reader to approach *Novia* not merely as a love story set in the era of *la Violencia* but also as a novel about writing; and such a reading confers greater relevance on the novel's dialogue with the literary tradition.

Given its setting during *la Violencia*, critics have examined *Novia* mainly in relation to other literature set during that historical period. Claire Lindsay and Rory O'Bryen have seen in the work a feminist response to the genre, predominantly male, of *la Violencia* novels. As O'Bryen notes, "the novel's contribution to a fictionalized counter-history of *la Violencia* lies in its unique exploration of feminine perspectives" (104). Less attention has been devoted to the mark of García Márquez in this novel, although his influence on Restrepo's work generally has been amply recognized.

Lloyd Hughes Davies points to the presence of García Márquez's work in *Novia*, tracing certain resonances of *Cien años de soledad* in Restrepo's novel. Most evident among these is the similarity between Restrepo's denunciation of the Tropical Oil Company and that of García Márquez against the United Fruit, particularly in connection with the residential compounds for North American employees (1038). Among other points of coincidence, Davis mentions the idea of showing younger characters as partial reincarnations of older characters and conveying the futility of human agency through the acts of doing and then of undoing what has been done (1036). But, as Davies aptly notes, "Restrepo inhabits the discourse of García Márquez in order to subvert it" (1049), and, if Macondo is founded by a patriarch and dominated by the Buendía family, Tora is founded by the chief enemies of the institution of the family, namely the prostitutes of La Catunga, the town's red-light district. Likewise, Remedios la Bella finds her parodic opposite in the prostitute Claire, of whom the narrator says that "podría pensarse, de acuerdo con su pálida hermosura y con las huidizas líneas de su carácter, que se elevó en cuerpo y alma al cielo en el arrebató de una Asunción, como la Virgen María. Pero no fue así: la suya fue una muerte terrena y brutal" (111) (it could be thought, in light of her pale beauty and the fleeting lines of her character, that she rose body and soul into Heaven in the rapture of an assumption, just like the Virgin Mary. But it was not, in fact, so: hers was a death both mundane and brutal). These parodic transformations lead Davies to conclude that "Restrepo's text can be seen as a feminist response to the 'master narrative,' *Cien años de soledad*, correcting its often unreflecting acceptance of patriarchal assumptions and inscribing the postcolonial on the literary map of Colombia" (1049–50).

It is worth noting that the influence of García Márquez on Restrepo's novel is not limited to *Cien años de soledad*; indeed, *Novia* contains references to other works of his. The shadow of García Márquez is visible in various episodes of the novel, as for instance when the hair of the young Sayonara, only recently arrived in Tora, grows uncontrollably, reminding us of Sierva María's untamable mane in *Del amor y otros demonios*. Or, when the protagonist witnesses the murder of a shoemaker at the hands of a furious mob in a scene of sacrifice reminiscent of the "death foretold" of Santiago Nassar in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*: "Sayonara contempló la matanza sin despegar los ojos de la víctima como si volviera a mirar lo ya

visto, lo desde siempre presentado” (422–23) (Sayonara watched the murder unfold without once averting her eyes from the victim, as if she were looking again on something already seen, something foreseen from the start). But *Amor* is the novel that most corresponds with *Novia* and the one in which it is possible to locate the perfect precursor text for Restrepo’s novel.

The thematic similarities between the two books are quite striking, and we can read in them an ironic parody on Restrepo’s part toward certain elements of García Márquez’s novel. *Novia*, like *Amor*, presents a love story with the twist that the romantic triangle involves not a distinguished lady but a prostitute with a murky past and an uncertain future. Sayonara’s marriage to Sacramento is born not of love but of convenience, something like the marriage of Fermina and Juvenal Urbino, with the difference that, while Fermina finds conjugal bliss, Sayonara rejects the wifely role and leaves Sacramento, returning instead to the world of prostitution. Disease stalks the inhabitants of both novels—cholera in García Márquez’s, syphilis in Restrepo’s. The connection between love and sickness, infused with a romantic atmosphere in *Amor*, is decidedly more direct and mundane in *Novia*.⁵

At the same time, the traits of some characters in *Novia* echo those of characters in *Amor*: for instance, Renato Leduc, the photographer who makes the portrait of Sayonara, was a poet and telegraph operator just like Florentino Ariza. Likewise, Todos los Santos, madam of La Catunga and Sayonara’s protector, inherits from Fermina Daza her love for animals and, like Fermina, fills her house with them. Among Todos los Santos’s pets, a prominent one is a macaw called Felipe, whom the narrator mistakes for a parrot, a veiled allusion to Dr. Urbino’s parrot. All of these correspondences suggest a reading of *Novia* as Restrepo’s response to *Amor* from a feminine perspective that rejects the idealization of love in the latter novel. Restrepo seems to dismantle the amorous fantasy of *Amor*, relocating it in the crude, mundane reality of the prostitutes—in all their marginality—during the period of *la Violencia*, with the aim of bringing to the fore previously silenced voices and realities.⁶ But it is in her representation of the Magdalena River—principal point of convergence between the two novels—that Restrepo distills her vision of the nation’s realities and mounts the most frontal response to the novel of García Márquez.

In order to compare the representations of the Magdalena in the two novels, it is useful to begin by analyzing the river’s role in *Amor*. There are two occasions on which Florentino Ariza sails the Magdalena’s waters: when he sets out for the interior on a therapeutic voyage to help him forget Fermina Daza and, fifty years later, when the same couple embarks on board the ship *Nueva Fidelidad* (New Fidelity), and the protagonist achieves his dream of having Fermina at his side for the rest of his days. It is the same river, yet different. On his first voyage, Florentino’s heartache cannot

dampen the natural wonders he beholds along the fabulous stream:

Los días se le hacían fáciles sentado frente al barandal, viendo a los caimanes inmóviles asoleándose en los playones con las fauces abiertas para atrapar mariposas, viendo las bandadas de garzas asustadas que se alzaban de pronto en los pantanos, los manatíes que amamantaban sus crías con sus grandes tetas maternas y sorprendían a los pasajeros con sus llantos de mujer. (204)

(The days weighed lightly on him, seated there before the railing, transfixed by the alligators sunning themselves, immobile, on the riverbanks, their jaws held open to trap butterflies; observing the flocks of startled herons that suddenly rose up from the swamps; the manatees who nursed their young and surprised travelers on the river with their cries that resembled the weeping of women.)

And, alongside the exotic beauty of the riverscape, three corpses float down the stream “hinchados y verdes, con varios gallinazos encima” (green and bloated, vultures perched atop them)—casualties, Florentino assumes, either of cholera or of the war.

On his second voyage, Florentino encounters a river that has been victimized by deforestation, the alligators and manatees wiped out, the chattering of parrots and monkeys silenced (469). Now he sees floating down the Magdalena not three corpses, but an uncountable number. At night, the passengers on the boat “no los despertaban los cantos de sirenas de los manatíes en los playones, sino la tufarada nauseabunda de los muertos que pasaban flotando hacia el mar” (204) (were awakened not by the siren song of the manatees but by the nauseating stench of corpses floating by on their way to the sea).

The Magdalena River that Florentino Ariza came to know on his first voyage was described as a fabulous place, mythic in scale, extravagant in the richness of its animals and vegetation. Its voluminous waters run through “una selva enmarañada de árboles colosales” (202) (a forest tangled with colossal trees) where alligators, manatees, monkeys, and parrots are part of a stunning visual and acoustic spectacle. It could be said that the river is described, in this first portrayal, as a geographical utopia, even though it is not an inexistent non-place. The idealization of its forests and its fauna fits within Ernst Bloch’s definition of a geographical utopia as a place that serves as inspiration for a dream, a kind of Edenic scene inviting discovery. For this reason, adds Bloch, the characteristic operations associated with a utopia are discovery and invention—the first seeking the path to a possible new and better world, the second undertaking its rational and orderly construction. Geographical utopia, in this way, is the principle and foundation for architectonic utopia, because it is all potentiality, the

possibility of a better place than the one we now inhabit (746–94).

Amor shows the destruction of this dream through the devastation of the river at the end of the novel. On his first voyage, Florentino admires the manatee mothers; when he steams up the now pestilent stream with Fermina on his second trip, he hears the captain's anecdote of the hunter who shot a manatee's head off, leaving her pup shrieking, crazed with grief, over its mother's dead body (470). The killing of the manatee mother is accompanied by other images of a region whose fertility is dying, images that presage an end-time: "El río se volvió turbio y se fue haciendo cada vez más estrecho, y en vez de la maraña de árboles . . . había llanuras calcinadas, desechos de selvas devoradas . . . escombros de pueblos abandonados" (476) (The river grew turbid, and more and more narrow, and in place of the tangled canopy of trees . . . were charred plains, the remnants of devoured forests . . . the rubble of abandoned villages).

The river's apocalyptic end could be compared to the conclusion of *Cien años de soledad* were it not for the fact that the two lovers will sail on the Magdalena's polluted waters to the end of their days, ignoring the destruction that surrounds them. The restorative power of Florentino and Fermina's love momentarily brings back the singing of birds, and one last manatee appears, miraculously nursing its pup before the astonished eyes of the protagonists (487). Fermina's love for Florentino allows her to hear birds that no longer sing, to perceive with a new intensity the fragrance of roses, and to behold a dead manatee living and breathing once more. The possibility of happiness is, as David Bueher observes, a minor utopia; built on the feelings of the lovers, it rescues them from the ruin that accompanies them. Bueher remarks that this minor utopia is García Márquez's response to *Cien años de soledad* and that he mentions this utopia in his Nobel acceptance speech (16). García Márquez proclaims in that speech that, in the face of the overwhelming reality they are witness to, the inventors of fables feel "entitled to believe that it is not yet too late to engage in the creation of the opposite utopia. A new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth." That is why, despite García Márquez's use of the Magdalena as a setting for destruction and a metaphor for the nation's deterioration as a result of modernization and violence, the presence of a utopia in his portrayal of the river allows a ray of hope to shine through. Just as the geographical utopia of the first voyage allows us to see the past as a possible future, so the minor utopia of love that overcomes the annihilation of the dreamed-of land amounts to the "second chance on earth," which García Márquez evoked in his speech.

A contrary interpretation put forward by Laura Otis finds no redemptive power in the couple's love. She suggests, rather, that the river's devastation

and the suicide of América Vicuña (Florentino's young lover) cast a shadow on the lovers' victory as they voyage endlessly on the waters of the Magdalena (281). It is clear that the novel's ambivalent ending leaves room for contrary interpretations, leading some critics to see love's triumph as a sign of the author's optimism, while others read pessimism in the destruction of the river and in the death borne by its currents. Roberto González Echavarría, for instance, declares the novel to be "one of the few optimistic ones to have come along in many years" (35), and Gene H. Bell-Villada characterizes it as the happiest of García Márquez's books (47). In contrast, Jean Franco argues that the novel's joyousness is only apparent, since the narrative begins with a suicide and ends with the death of Nature; she further holds that "García Márquez's deeply pessimistic outlook has been cleverly camouflaged by the rapid surface motion of the narrative which forestalls but cannot overcome death" (103).

This ambivalence is exacerbated by the ambiguous relationship García Márquez establishes between human beings and the natural environment, as identified by Raymond L. Williams in his analysis of nature's presence in *Cien años de soledad*. Williams proposes that the novel "portrays an ambiguous relationship between the non-human and the human world, and actually privileges both" (85), a claim borne out by *Amor*. On the one hand, the destruction of the Magdalena in the novel reflects an evident environmental preoccupation and demonstrates a rejection of the modern idea of progress. The feeling that dominates the depiction of the Magdalena throughout the novel is that of nostalgia, that longing for a past annihilated by the unfulfilled promises of modernity and the devastating effects of violence. For that reason, perhaps, Dominic Head uses this novel as an example of an ecologically conscious work, where "personal history (is) linked to collective goals, which emerge through the realization that a disastrous banishing of the natural is the product of modern social and industrial history" (240). On the other hand, García Márquez grants Florentino Ariza the possibility of realizing his dreams, even if they come to fruition in a ruined region—and this character, after all, having worked for the Compañía Fluvial del Caribe (Caribbean River Corporation), was one of those responsible for the river's destruction. This victory implies human primacy over nature and that of the individual over the collective, for Florentino manages to maintain "su dominio invencible, su amor impávido" (493) (his dominion invincible, his love unperturbed) even in the face of the ruin that surrounds him and that future generations will inherit. A deep contradiction, then, runs through the novel's value system: while the Magdalena's agony manifests deep ecological and social concerns, Florentino and Fermina's amorous triumph at novel's end implies that redemption is possible for the individual as long as happiness is built on indifference in the face of reality.

Of course, this does not necessarily mean that García Márquez is

mounting a defense of individualism or that he argues in favor of a self-absorbed quest for happiness. Indeed, as Jean Franco proposes, the contrary is possible—namely, that he is denouncing the ethical problem of individualism: “Whereas in nineteenth-century realism, private and public good were closely associated, such that individual blemishes were registered on the social body, García Márquez’s novel deploys realist allegory to quite different ends, showing the incompatibility between private and public good” (111). Nevertheless, the conclusion’s ambivalence poses serious difficulties for any attempt to evaluate the ray of hope offered by this “minor utopia.”

Less ambivalent is the portrayal of the Magdalena in Laura Restrepo’s *Novia*, which, despite its many similarities to *Amor*, presents significant differences. Just as in *Amor*, disenchantment with national reality in *Novia* can be perceived in the narration of the river’s ecological ruination—in this case a product of the oil industry. The narrator states,

el otrora Gran Río de la Magdalena se me aparecía como una larga ausencia: lenta, negra, recargada de dragas . . . y de otros aparatos metálicos y ortopédicos que la convertían en una prolongación de la refinería, que se extendía a la orilla opuesta oxidando el cielo nocturno con la combustión perpetua de sus altas chimeneas. (133–34)

(the once Great Magdalena River appeared before me as one long absence: slow, dark, clogged with dredgers . . . and by other metallic and orthopedic machinery that transformed it into a prolongation of the refinery, which reached all the way to the opposite bank, rusting the night sky with the perpetual fires of its high smokestacks.)

Likewise, Sacramento notices that the river’s waters taste of gasoline, and the narrator repeatedly describes a foul-smelling vapor that rises up from the current. The floating corpses travel down this Magdalena as well, more and more of them each day, to the point that the protagonist wonders “por qué los muertos buscan el río; quién sabe adonde quieren que los lleve” (164) (why the dead seek out this river; who knows where they want it to carry them).

Also, the Magdalena River of *Novia*, just as with the river of *Amor*, plays a primordial role in the narrative. It is the alpha and omega of the novel, since by its waters the protagonist first arrives in Tora and also departs at the end of the story. Moreover, it is on the banks of that river that Sayonara meets and falls in love with El Payanés; it is where they have their first sexual encounter and where they make a vow to meet again on the last Friday of every month. It is at the river, too, that they promise to seek each other out if one of them should leave the village. But, more significantly, at the novel’s end, the protagonist’s search for happiness follows the river’s

course in what could be seen as an echo of the love story between Fermina and Florentino. Just as in *Amor* the happiness of the protagonists is crystallized into an unending journey on the Magdalena's waters, so, too, in *Novia* does the novel end with the possible voyage of Sayonara and El Payanés "Magdalena arriba, el uno en pos del otro, y el otro en pos del uno y ambos siguiéndole el rastro a la vida" (447) (up the Magdalena, one of them after the other, and the other after one, and the two of them following the trail of life).

Despite these similarities, Restrepo erases the boundary García Márquez so sharply draws between private and collective well-being. If in *Amor* the riverscape of the happy ending becomes a space for that "new and overwhelming utopia of life" of which García Márquez spoke in his Nobel acceptance speech, a realm where love and happiness are possible, in Laura Restrepo's novel this possibility appears before us as uncertain. The words of Todos los Santos at the novel's conclusion plant doubt in our minds: in the end, did Sayonara's dream of running away with El Payanés come true, or did everyone witness a mere mirage and, in reality, she set forth alone, searching for relief from the sorrows that besieged her? According to Todos los Santos, the image of the loving couple navigating the river in quest of a better future was a mere hallucination or, as she calls it, "reverberaciones del deseo" (447) (reverberations of desire)—a term that could also apply to the ending of García Márquez's novel. Todos los Santos's skepticism about the chance of her apprentice finding happiness of the kind that García Márquez allowed the lovers aboard the New Fidelity reflects Restrepo's mistrust of this sort of "minor utopia." Restrepo is incredulous at the notion that individual happiness can blossom in a devastated place and, for that reason, presents the happy ending as something that can only exist in the realm of desire.

In place of this mirage, Restrepo proposes to write the reality of Colombia through a combination of personal drama, collective trauma, and the destruction of the natural surroundings. To this end, she takes up once more the motif of the river as the scene of national devastation but adds an important element that contrasts strikingly with the representation of the Magdalena in *Amor*: the protagonist's kinship with the river. If García Márquez presents the river from the distant vantage point of Florentino, who observes the scene perplexed, Restrepo dissolves this distance by endowing the stream with human qualities, sometimes making it blush (80), breathe (170), become agitated, and, on many occasions, grow calm (203), emotional manifestations that on various occasions reflect Sayonara's feelings. There are times when the author describes the Magdalena as if it were Sayonara, as for instance after the protagonist weeps inconsolably on the riverbank and the waters turn "charoladas y compactas: una masa de oscuridad que invitaba a caminar sobre ella" (351) (shiny and dense: a dark mass that invites you to walk on it), an image that reminds us of the dark

bride, her lush hair “que llegó a convertirse en una caída de aguas oscuras y rumorosas” (45) (transformed into a cataract of dark and whispering waters). Even the protagonist identifies with the river when she says, “Yo también soy de este río” (164) (I too am of this river) and we know that, from that moment on, El Payanés “nunca más en su vida pudo asomarse al Magdalena sin recordarla” (164) (for the rest of his life, would never again be able to come near the Magdalena without thinking of her).

The association of Sayonara with the Magdalena bolsters the novel’s ecological consciousness, for Sayonara’s fusion with the riverscape underscores the kinship between humans and the natural environment. This fusion, in Restrepo’s work, can also be observed in the narrator’s assertion that the Magdalena’s waters are alive and that their volume is fed by “los efluvios de la naturaleza y los humores de los hombres” (the effluvia of nature and the humors of men,) among which she lists “lluvia, savia, leche, sangre, nieve, sudor y lágrimas” (352) (rain, sap, milk, blood, snow, sweat, and tears). Lawrence Buell explains that works marked by ecological consciousness present nature “not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (7), and, in the case of *Novia*, these two histories are revealed as inseparable.

The protagonist’s communion with the river also emphasizes the political message of the book. The feminization of the Magdalena in *Novia* has an erotic quality, arising from the alliance of its currents with the prostitute character and from its serving as a place of seduction. The river is at once the scene of erotic pleasure and an expression of that pleasure, as when its “burning waters” reflect Sayonara’s burning passion for El Payanés during one of their amorous encounters (168). In the same way, when passion ebbs, “El río Magdalena, que un día había incendiado sus aguas para recibirlos, convertido en hoguera que consumía y no quemaba, ahora les pasaba por enfrente menso y aburrido, testigo apático de su desencuentro” (343) (The Magdalena River, which one day had set its waters afire to welcome them, transformed into flames that consumed but did not burn, now passing before them listless and dull, an apathetic witness to the waning of their passion). Kate Soper explains that the metaphor of nature as woman or as a source of erotic pleasure is not innocent because it arises from an anxious drive for domination—not solely toward virgin and unexplored territory but also toward the women who symbolize it. This connection has led to analogies between domination of nature and feminine oppression, which *Novia* exploits by identifying the polluted river with a young prostitute in a village under the political and economic control of a U.S. oil company.

Clearly, the feminization and sexualization of the river in *Novia* are intended to underscore the destructiveness of multinational interests’ interference while also representing a harsh critique of the presence and

power of these corporations in Colombian territory, supported by the “pimping government”—the “Estado proxeneta”(86), as the prostitutes call it. The affinity of Sayonara and the Magdalena River as victims of the oil company brings with it the accusation that the Tropical Oil Company contaminates everything it touches, from the river’s waters that touch its land and the air that its workers breathe to the lives of the women who come to Tora to sell their bodies as a final attempt at survival.⁷ The parallel between the sexual exploitation of the women of La Catunga and the exploitation of the environment by the multinational oil company takes on deeper significance when we consider that both Sayonara and the river are symbols of something bigger: the country.

This association is suggested by an interview in which Laura Restrepo affirms that *Novia* is a metaphor for her country (cit. in Lindsay, 50). Restrepo’s statement can be taken in a broader sense as an analogy between the universe of the novel and the reality of Colombia; but the protagonist Sayonara, the dark bride of the title, also embodies important national attributes. So Montserrat Ordóñez understands when she writes, “Sayonara es la nación: oscura, amada, indefinida, desconocida, hecha de versiones contradictorias, de pasados idealizados y de proyectos frustrados. Incapaz de explicarse a sí misma, pero capaz de una total dignidad” (192) (Sayonara is the nation: dark, beloved, undefined, unknown, made up of contradictory versions, idealized pasts and frustrated projects. Unable to explain itself to itself, but capable of absolute dignity). Lindsay, too, alludes to the relationship between Sayonara and the nation, though less explicitly, when she perceives in Sayonara’s family tragedy a sign of the collective trauma suffered by the Colombian people and suggests, “Sayonara’s amnesia might thus be associated with Colombia’s own apparent failure to remember its past” (50).

The reading of Sayonara as a symbol of the nation becomes even more evident when we join it to her identification with the Magdalena. In the description of the river offered by the narrator during her voyage on the Magdalena in search of information about the protagonist’s past, the protagonist and country converge: “Se ha vuelto un río ensimismado, olvidado de la historia, desprendido de sus propias orillas, que se deja arrastrar sin entusiasmo por un presente de corrientes mansas que no evocan su lugar de origen y que pretenden ignorar hacia dónde van” (187) (The river has become absorbed in itself, oblivious to history, detached from its own banks, allowing itself to be carried along without enthusiasm by the present and its tame currents, which bear no witness to its place of origin and pretend no knowledge of where they are headed). This description calls to mind Sayonara herself, who is marked by a tendency to lose herself in thought and by an “evanescent nature” (262) and whose history is characterized by a directionless wandering, lacking any known past. But it alludes, too, to Colombia, with its inability to remember the past, as Lindsay

notes, or to set a clear direction for the future.

The merging of Sayonara and the Magdalena as symbols of Colombia is illuminated through an analysis of one of the episodes of the novel that has most captured the attention of critics. In it, Sayonara submerges her feet in the waters of the Magdalena, feels the corpses floating by, and receives contentedly the messages that these bodies send her:

Aunque la noche le impedía ver a los muertos que arrastraba la corriente, Sayonara los sintió pasar, inofensivos en su tránsito lento y blanco. Bajaban de uno en uno, abrazados en pareja o a veces en ronda, tomados de la mano, transformados en esponja, materia porosa que flotaba apacible, pálida, por fin impregnada de luna después de haber derramado en la orilla, hace ya tanto tiempo, todo el desasosiego y el dolor de la sangre. Sayonara, la niña de los adioses, metió los pies entre el agua para estar cerca de ellos y contuvo el pánico cuando a su paso le rozaron los tobillos, se le enredaron en las piernas con viscosidad de algas y le enviaron mensajes en su peculiar lenguaje, que era gorgoteo de sustancia orgánica deshaciéndose en sombras. (352)

(Although the night prevented her from seeing the corpses carried by the current, Sayonara felt them pass, harmless in their slow, white transit. They flowed past one by one, or embracing as a couple, or sometimes hand-in-hand as part of a larger circle, transformed into a sponge, a porous material that floated peacefully, pale, at last impregnated with moonlight after having spilled into the riverbanks, so long ago now, all the unrest and pain of their blood. Sayonara, the girl of good-byes, submerged her feet in the water to be close to them, and controlled her panic as they brushed her ankles, got tangled in her legs with the viscosity of algae, and sent her messages in their peculiar language, which was a gurgle of organic substance dissolving into shadows.)

As Prudence Jones notes, the immersion in the river's waters has long been associated with ritual observances that mark a transition from one phase of life to another (19). Although Sayonara's immersion in the Magdalena serves no ceremonial function, it does carry the sense of a rite of passage by awakening her to the realization that she is connected to the dead bodies carried by the river. By recognizing the weight of her past and her closeness to her dead loved ones—who float down the Magdalena along with other anonymous victims of violence—her memories of them are finally subdued after years of suffering:

tuvo la seguridad de que la romería silenciosa arrastraba también a sus seres amados, su madre ardida, la dulce Claire, su idolatrado hermano, que corrían Magdalena abajo purificados por fin y convertidos en recuerdos mansos, después de tantos años de sufrir y hacerla sufrir, acechándola como espantos. . . . Supo también: Yo soy yo y mis muertos, y se sintió menos sola como si se hubieran acortado los millones de pasos de su distancia. (352)

(she knew that this silent pilgrimage also carried her loved ones, her burned mother, sweet Claire, her beloved brother, traveling down the Magdalena purified at last and transformed into gentle memories, after years of undergoing, and causing, so much suffering, haunting her like phantoms. . . . She knew too: I am myself and my dead ones, and she felt less alone, as if the millions of steps of distance had been shortened.)

Lindsay interprets Sayonara's immersion in the water and her communication with the floating corpses as an immersion in memory and history, and she points out that, from this moment forward, the character once again takes up (if only temporarily) aspects of her past, such as her real name and her relationship with her father (51). This drawing close to her past is ephemeral, Lindsay makes clear, but, due to the link between Sayonara's amnesia and the collective amnesia that affects Colombia, it represents a call to remember, to carry out an exercise of memory that transcends the merely personal. For Lindsay, "the individual and the collective are interwoven in *Novia* in such a way that the novel itself functions precisely as a kind of 'counterforce' . . . to the amnesia affecting present-day Colombia" (50).

Besides emphasizing the importance of memory, as Lindsay has noted, Sayonara's rite of passage in the Magdalena brings forth the ritual elements of cleansing and spiritual healing traditionally associated with river water. Jones explains that, in the context of Greco-Roman funerary rites, bathing in the river or sprinkling river water is part of the purification process of the mourners (20). Sayonara's dipping her feet in the water is also reminiscent of the religious rite of foot washing for spiritual cleansing, common in several Christian denominations. It is significant that this purification process impacts not only Sayonara but also the deceased, signaling the importance of recognizing the fusion of personal experience and collective trauma in order to achieve healing.⁸ It is also meaningful that this ritual cleansing entails a communication with the past mediated by nature through a language that is a "gurgle of organic substance." The rhetoric of nature in the passage, along with the fusion of the human with the non-human (the corpses are transformed into sponges and have the viscosity of algae) suggests an inseparable connection between the two, reinforcing the

presence of an ecological consciousness in the novel.

In that light, the bonding of the living and the dead in the waters of the Magdalena can be viewed as a corrective to the traditional representation in Colombian literature (particularly in the García Márquez novel examined in this essay) of the images of dead bodies floating in the river. Where the love between Florentino and Fermina can navigate untouched the polluted waters of the Magdalena, indifferent to the presence of floating corpses, Sayonara is one with her surroundings: she dips her feet in the river and communicates with the dead, who are *her* dead. The floating corpses of *Novia* are inseparably part of the lives of the living, who should see them not as alien, as one observes an “other,” but rather affectionately, as one looks at one’s own people and at oneself. The poetic and embellished image Restrepo puts forward for destruction and death, far from minimizing the gravity of feeling it conveys, appears as an urgent cry for understanding that on the river—that fugitive stream that symbolizes the nation—row the living, like Sayonara, who are a little bit dead, and the dead, who are a little bit alive. Restrepo seems to suggest that there exists no possibility of strictly personal salvation, because individual and collective destinies are inseparably intertwined.

For Restrepo, unlike García Márquez, nature, national history, and the individual drama of the protagonist are not only inseparable, but also reflect one another: Sayonara is the river, the river is Colombia, Colombia is Sayonara, in a game of mirrors that shrinks distances and annihilates differences. In likening Sayonara to the river and the nation, Restrepo warns that pollution, amnesia, death, trauma, exploitation, and violence are ills that know no boundaries. With equal force, they invade private and public space, personal and national reality, and thereby shape alike the destiny of an individual and of an entire country.

For all of these reasons, nostalgia for an idealized past and longing for an impossible future, sentiments on which the representation of the Magdalena in *Amor* is built, find no foothold in the portrait Restrepo develops of the river and of the country it symbolizes. For Restrepo, the Magdalena is much more than an emblem of the nation’s moral rot; it is a vehicle of reflection and a unifying tie between individual and community. Sayonara’s immersion in the waters underscores the traditional relationship between the river and the quest for knowledge, a search that, in this case, connects personal history with that of the community.⁹ That is why Restrepo proposes that the tragedy of Colombia, represented by a river in agony, a messenger of death, not be observed from a distance, or from the comfort of a steamboat. To truly witness this tragedy and to write about it, Restrepo suggests that it be seen up close, face-to-face, remembering that in its image are reflected the individual, nature, and society as a whole.

Notes

1. Carlos Castaño Uribe, in his *Río Grande de la Magdalena*, explains that the river's water quality is seriously affected by the discharge of industrial and sewer wastes and by contamination from herbicides and fertilizers. At the same time, the sediment load from the river and the deforestation of the Magdalena basin have degraded ecosystems, led to the collapse of fishing, and compromised navigability along various stretches of the river (172–73). Despite efforts to revive the river over the years, its deterioration continues to pose a major ecological and economic problem for the country. For more information on studies about and projects aimed at the Magdalena's rehabilitation, Castaño Uribe offers a list of such initiatives (174–82).
2. Many Colombian rivers, not just the Magdalena, have borne large numbers of corpses throughout the nation's history. Catalina Montoya Piedrahíta, in a story written for the publication *El Colombiano*, mentions as examples the Cauca, Atrato, Sinú, and Catatumbo Rivers. She notes, too, that the motives for casting the bodies of victims into rivers have changed over time: a punishment in the nineteenth century, it was more a warning to others during *la Violencia* in the 1940s and 1950s. Today, Montoya Piedrahíta adds, the main purpose of the practice is to make the dead disappear or to deterritorialize them. With respect to who carries out this practice, the reporter states that during the 1940s and 1950s both Liberal guerrillas and the Conservative paramilitary tossed bodies into Colombia's rivers. Today the FARC, ELN, paramilitary, drug traffickers, and common criminals all continue the practice, although it is used mainly by the right-wing paramilitary groups known by the term "autodefensa."
3. Not only Colombian literature but also photojournalism, cinema, and painting have taken up the subject of the river as cemetery. The most representative film is *El río de las tumbas* (1965) (River of Tombs), directed by Julio Luzardo, and for which Rory O'Bryen offers a valuable analysis in his book *Literature, Testimony and Cinema in Contemporary Colombian Culture: Spectres of La Violencia*. A photojournalistic example is the photograph entitled "Tumbas de agua" (Watery Graves) by Manuel Saldarriaga Quintero, which won an honorable mention in a national photography competition, "Sin rastro" (Without a trace), that is devoted to the subject of forced disappearance and organized by the Dos Mundos Foundation. The image shows a cadaver floating on the Atrato River, a buzzard perched atop it (Saldarriaga Quintero 4). With regard to painting, I would like to mention the procession-exhibition mounted by Gabriel Andrés Posada in November 2008, which he called "Magdalenas por el Cauca" (Magdalenas on the Cauca): Ten rafts bearing works of art that represented victims of violence floated down the Cauca River in homage to the mothers who weep for their sons and daughters, disappeared and thrown into the river.
4. La Tora was the indigenous name for the city known today as Barrancabermeja, where the Standard Oil of New Jersey subsidiary, the Tropical Oil Company, operated from 1919 to 1951 (Lindsay 51). Claire Lindsay locates the chronological setting of the novel from the date of the Tropical Oil workers' strike, which coincides with the breakup of Sayonara and El Payanés. Lindsay observes: "The revolt corresponds to the last of a number of strikes that took place in Barrancabermeja during the 1930s and 1940s . . . The 1948 strike was deemed to be the most successful" (51).
5. The link between cholera and love in García Márquez's novel has been studied by critics like Michael Bell, who analyzes the comparisons the protagonists themselves

make between love and that disease: “her mother was terrified because her condition did not resemble the disorders of love as much as the havoc wrought by cholera” (qtd. in Bell 59), or “She was confusing cholera with love” (qtd. in Bell 60). Bell observes: “if the image of cholera assimilates war to human mortality at large, it also encompasses the dangerous fever of love” (59). It is difficult to find a disease that better represents the dangers of love than syphilis, although this comparison reduces love to its sexual manifestation, thereby reaffirming the criticism of the amorous myth as mentioned by Julie Lirot in her analysis of the female protagonist of *La novia oscura*.

6. *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* covers approximately fifty years, from 1880 to 1930, while the story of *La novia oscura* begins roughly where that of García Márquez ends.
7. It is possible to affirm, with Debbie Martin, that the prostitutes of *La novia oscura* are not victims, but rather women powerful within the constraints of marginality (117). It is also true that Sayonara chooses prostitution over the traditional role of wife that Sacramento offers her, a role that strikes her as more oppressive than that of sex worker. Nevertheless, although these women are not presented as weak or defenseless, and their labeling as victims is certainly questionable, the novel does lay bare the harsh difficulties inherent to prostitution as well as the social, economic, and sentimental restrictions that lead to that path. With regard to the debate over whether Laura Restrepo idealizes prostitution in the novel (as Montserrat Ordóñez suggests) or whether the novel, while not presenting prostitution as an evil per se, refuses to glamorize it either (Martin’s view), it is appropriate to read those passages, few but powerful, that address the exploitation and misery that this occupation brings with it. For forcefulness we need look no further than the narrator’s comparison of the prostitute, in bodily submission to her client, with “los cuadros de los mártires cristianos que voltean hacia el cielo el rostro sereno, intacto e iluminado mientras el cuerpo, sometido a tortura, se deshace en espanto” (291) (those paintings of the Christian martyrs who turn heavenward their countenances, serene, composed, and illuminated, while the body, in the throes of torture, is wracked by horror).
8. O’Byrne agrees with Lindsay in identifying in this image an allusion to *la Violencia* and in seeing Sayonara’s immersion in the river and communion with her dead as a rite of purification; but he questions the collective implications of this rite. For O’Byrne, “what remains open to question here is whether such a rite has collective significance or whether indeed it entails a projection of individual psychobiography onto a collective trauma that continues to remain murky and irreducible” (112). I argue here that the collective implications of this rite rest upon Sayonara’s and the Magdalena’s representations as symbols of Colombia.
9. In his study of the rhetoric of rivers, W.H. Herendeen affirms that the search for knowledge is the chief metaphoric deployment of the river: “Metaphorically and geographically it has a unique symbolic and literal significance which makes it specially suitable for man’s self-conscious gropings for knowledge . . . There are numerous other metaphoric uses of the river, but this one is the most basic” (127).

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