

in the written variety was taught, along with access to a growing literature, secular as well as ecclesiastical, led to identification with a larger community, the *umta*, 'nation' or 'people'.

Today, Assyrian social and political associations throughout the diaspora promote literacy in Assyrian as a symbol of ethnic identity and a tool in community maintenance. The Assyrian Church of the East is active worldwide in promoting both literacy in Assyrian and Assyrian nationalism; in Detroit, the Chaldean community has established bilingual private schools in order to foster both literacy in the native language and a sense of ethnic identity in its children. In Iran and North Iraq, as part of their attempt to preserve their heritage, the Assyrian communities are maintaining their own schools, which use Assyrian as the medium of instruction. The importance which the Assyrian community places on literacy in Assyrian as part of ethnic-identity maintenance is also shown by the fact that Assyrians in diaspora have written and disseminated computer software packages and established numerous sites on the Internet to teach literacy skills to those Assyrians who, while fluent in Assyrian, are not literate in it.<sup>7</sup>

The importance of the written language in the creation and definition of Assyrian nationalism is also demonstrated by the controversies surrounding the compilation of dictionaries. For example, in 1996, the Assyrian Academic Society became involved in a project to compile a bilingual English and Modern Assyrian dictionary. Major disagreements arose among Assyrian participants in the project with respect to which dialect's pronunciations should be reflected in the transcriptions provided in dictionary entries, whether to include words from all dialects even if they were borrowings from other Middle Eastern languages,<sup>8</sup> and whether to include forms from Classical Syriac<sup>9</sup> not used in vernacular Assyrian Neo-Aramaic as replacements for borrowings into the vernacular from other Semitic languages. Another contentious debate arose over the desire of some Assyrians to include in the same dictionary both Assyrian Neo-Aramaic and Toroyo which are not mutually intelligible and are considered to be separate languages by Semiticists.<sup>10</sup> However, many Assyrian nationalists consider Toroyo speakers to be Assyrians and, therefore, wish to claim that Toroyo and Assyrian Neo-Aramaic are the same language.

The standardization process, which gave birth to a written standard language, also became the first step in the evolution of an oral Assyrian koine (Odisho 1988:20). This process, which was begun in Urmia in Iran and continued in Habbaniya and Baghdad in Iraq, still continues today in the Assyrian diaspora. Assyrian communities in countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia support radio and television programs broadcast in Assyrian. These broadcasts, for the most part, are not conducted in the various dialects but rather in a koine, so that they will be intelligible to a wider audience. Thus, they serve to link Assyrians throughout the diaspora and in the homeland as well. Furthermore, radio programs that provide standards for the oral language, for example *Mr u La Mr*, 'Say and Don't Say,' broadcast in Chicago, aid in the process of koine-

formation. The process is also furthered by columns dedicated to enriching people's vocabularies found in newspapers and magazines, and in Internet publications such as the weekly Assyrian newsmagazine, *Zenda*.

The importance of the role that the Assyrian language plays as a marker of ethnic identity and as a boundary-maintenance device, separating members of the Assyrian ethnic group from others, may also be seen in the codeswitching between English and Assyrian found in American Assyrian communities. Even those Assyrian bilinguals who are strongly dominant in English will frequently use Assyrian words and phrases in conversations with other Assyrians to mark their shared ethnic group membership and such codeswitching increases in situations where Assyrian nationalism is at issue.

Assyrian-English codeswitching also occurs in the written channel. One important context in which it is found is the Internet. As Albert Gabriel notes in an article in the *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (Gabrial 1998),

Today, Assyrians are one of the most widely scattered indigenous peoples. Most Assyrian families in the U.S. generally have relatives in Australia, Sweden, Lebanon, Iraq, or Canada. For such a small nation scattered throughout the world, the Internet is a dream come true.

Although the Assyrians do not have a nation-state, Gabriel states that by 1995 it was possible to build a home for the Assyrians in cyberspace and to establish a global community. Today, Nineveh On-Line, the global community that Gabriel created, receives over 100,000 visitors per month. There are dozens of Assyrian web pages, electronic magazines, chat rooms, and newsgroups.

The Assyrian language is one of the aspects of the Assyrian culture that is emphasized on the Internet, despite the fact that it has no standard transliteration and that technical problems make it very difficult to write extended messages on the Internet in the Assyrian alphabets, such messages having to be handled like graphics rather than by using ASCII. In addition to the sites that teach literacy in the Assyrian alphabets, there are others that provide vocabulary lessons and give English translations of the lyrics of songs written in Assyrian in order to provide more material for learning the language.

Furthermore, one can see the way individuals affirm their Assyrian identity by using Assyrian in chat rooms and in postings to newsgroups. In addition to the occasional words and phrases used in the bodies of messages, greetings and closings are very frequently written in Assyrian. For example, in one posting from the newsgroup [soc.culture.Assyrian](#), both a greeting and a closing are given in Assyrian. The greeting is *Shlana Elokxon Bnei Unti*, 'Peace to you children of the nation,' and the closing is *Hal d-Tapqakh Go Atour*, 'Until we meet in Assyria.' Another common greeting is simply *Shlamalokhun*, 'Peace to you', and two common closings are *B-shena*, 'In peace' and *Push b-shena*, 'Remain in peace.' In one posting, the phrase *la bshaina*, 'not in peace' and the phrase *It*

*shlama*, 'there is no peace' occurred in an argument over ethnic identity. Both the writer of the message at issue and the author of the message to which he is responding agree that they are members of the same ethnic group, and that fact is tacitly acknowledged by the use of the Assyrian phrases in the text. What is at issue is the correct name for the ethnic group — Assyrian or Aramean.

Another written medium in which Assyrian-English codeswitching also occurs frequently is advertisements. Typically, the information reproduced in the two languages is not the same. In one example, the only Assyrian that appears is *Qala d-Aturaye*, 'Voice of Assyrians'. In another, an ad for a butcher shop, the Assyrian text informs the reader that there are special prices for Assyrian households for meat for religious holidays, information which is not presented in the other two languages, Arabic and English, in which the advertisement is printed. Thus, we can see that the use of Assyrian in advertisements is motivated by several different factors — identifying the advertiser as a member of the Assyrian community, affirming pride in one's language and culture, demonstrating ethnic solidarity, and restricting the provision of certain information to members of one ethnic community. Wedding invitations and announcements for community lectures, dances, and other cultural activities are other contexts in which Assyrian is used. As in the case of advertisements, more information is typically provided in English than in Assyrian in such written materials.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined the relationship between language and identity in the Assyrian diaspora. We have discussed the way in which Assyrian nationalists have constructed etymologies to support their assertions that their ethnic group has always self-identified as Assyrian. We have also noted their attempts to use modern Assyrian cognates with Akkadian to support their thesis that the modern Assyrians are the descendants of the ancient Assyrians. We have shown how political concerns have created a desire to treat as one language dialects which linguists consider to belong to separate languages. We have also discussed the importance of the standardization of a written language in the process of formation of Assyrian national consciousness and the continuing importance of literacy in ethnic identity maintenance. The importance of the formation of an oral koine in promoting ethnic group unity in diaspora has also been noted. Finally, we have discussed the way in which codeswitching is used to affirm membership in the Assyrian community and to establish boundaries between Assyrians and members of other ethnic groups. Clearly, for Assyrians in diaspora, the Assyrian language is a very important marker of Assyrian identity, since Christianity, which set them apart in the Middle East, does not serve that function in the West. The importance Assyrians give to their language is eloquently expressed in the excerpt from the poem 'Mother Tongue' by the well-known Assyrian writer Geewargis D-BetBinyamin given below.

## Mother Tongue

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Work for the nation without stopping:      | like a son in the family                   |
| Not like a foreign employee:               | hired for a daily wage.                    |
| If you wander through the whole world:     | take your language with<br>you             |
| And take it as a part of the household:    | for your Assyrian son.                     |
| If you lose your language:                 | with it you lose your name                 |
| And if your name is forgotten:             | your seed will be wiped<br>out.            |
| As long as there is language in the mouth: | in the world you have a<br>name            |
| And you will continue to be called alive   | like your Assyrian father.                 |
| As long as there is life in the body:      | of a sick person without<br>hope           |
| Yet there is hope that the doctor:         | skillful, will cure the pa-<br>tient.      |
| Just in that way too the language:         | that exists in the speaking<br>mouth       |
| If carried to the last day:                | will live like a declaration.              |
| One day there is no remedy:                | again it will come to light                |
| The Assyrian language:                     | the vernacular and also the<br>literary    |
| These for you an example:                  | true like the law.                         |
| That they be before your eyes a light:     | burning by day and by<br>night.            |
| From today swear oaths:                    | that if you set out for other<br>countries |
| That a foreign language you will not:      | use like a family one.                     |

(English translation by E. McClure)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Indicative of the dissension within the community over this topic are two long threads on the Internet newsgroup [soc.culture.assyrian](mailto:soc.culture.assyrian). In the first, Gabriel Rabo, a member of the Syrian Orthodox Church, who considers himself to be an Aramean, engaged in a dispute with members of both the Church of the East and the Syrian Orthodox Church who consider themselves to be Assyrians. Replying to a message from Sabro Gabriel that contained the statements, 'I am a Syrian Orthodox Christian; my identity is of course Assyrian,' Mr. Rabo stated, 'That's right, your confession is Syrian Orthodox, but your identity is wrong ... The true site of our history teach [sic] us: we are Aramacan, and we speak Aramaic not Assyrian'(Gabriel Rabo. [grabo@gwdg.de](mailto:grabo@gwdg.de) 'Re' Syrian Orthodox Christians are Aramacan' 11 July 1996. [soc.culture.assyrian](mailto:soc.culture.assyrian) (11 July 1996)).

In the second thread, Matay Arsan, who identifies himself as a Syrian Orthodox Assyrian, states, 'I think we are the descendants of the Sumerians-Akkadians-Babylonians-Chaldeans-Arameans, and Assyrians' (Matay Arsan. 'JB.d.raadt'@student.scw.vu.nl 'Re: Difference in culture?' 28 Jan. 1999. [soc.culture.assyrian](#) (29 Jan. 1999)). Esho Tower, in commenting on Matay Arsan's note, says, 'Don't forget to include the Israelites' [etower@cgcocable.net 'Re: Difference in culture?' 12 Feb. 1999. [soc.culture.assyrian](#) (13 Feb. 1999)]. Raman Michael, responding to Esho Tower's comment, denies that the Israelites have a place among the ancestors of the modern Assyrians: 'The fact that the majority of the 10 tribes were in Babylonia and not in Assyria proper does not support the theory that we are somehow descendants of these tribes' (erbil@wwa.com 'Re: Difference in culture?' 12 Feb. 1999. [soc.culture.assyrian](#) (13 Feb. 1999)).

<sup>2</sup> Although there is controversy with respect to the use of the term 'Assyrian' to denote the Christian population in question, Heinrichs 1993 endorses its use. In the introduction to his paper, he states, 'The perspective of the following paper is historical-onomastical. Its aim is to focus on the various acceptations of the name "Assyrian" during the course of history as well as on the various other names applied to the people presently carrying that name, the vantage point in all this being the present-day situation. From a review of these data, it will become apparent that, given the historical circumstances in which the Assyrians found themselves in the first two decades of this century, it was almost inevitable for them to readopt or reapply the term "Assyrian" as a national name for themselves; at the very least, it made good sense for them to do so' (1993:99).

<sup>3</sup> Heinrichs 1993 notes, 'From the point of view of language and church tradition it would make sense for the Nestorians (plus offshoots) and the Chaldeans to join ranks as one Assyrian nation. But then there is the even larger range of application of the name "Assyrian" which would include the Western Syrians — and thus ideally, all groups whose church language is Syriac. This idea is espoused by most Assyrian nationalists' (1993:111).

<sup>4</sup> The derivation of the term 'Suraye' is an issue that surfaces frequently within the ethnic community, and it is one that arouses strong emotions. The Assyrian nationalist position on the derivation may also be found in a journal article by William Warda 1994 and in numerous discussions on the Internet. In a thread on the newsgroup [soc.culture.assyrian](#), which ran from January 22, 1999 until February 12, 1999, Matay Arsan mentioned two additional derivations that have been offered, namely that the term is derived from 'Sur' (Tyros), a city in Lebanon, and that it is derived from 'Cyrus of Aginur', a king of a tribe in the region of Syria ('JB.d.raadt'@student.scw.vu.nl 'Re: Difference in culture' 28 Jan. 1999. [soc.culture.assyrian](#) (29 Jan. 1999)).

<sup>5</sup> It might, perhaps, be more accurate to refer to the creation of oral Assyrian Neo-Aramaic koines, since the koine created in Urmia is not identical with that created in Iraq, nor is either identical with the koines being created in the diaspora.

<sup>6</sup> This process has yet to reach completion. Since the Assyrians do not have a nation-state, there is no national organization with the authority to establish standards for the language. Orthographic conventions differ across writers, as do morphology, syntax, and vocabulary.

<sup>7</sup> More than half of the Assyrians for whom Assyrian is a first language are not literate in Assyrian because there have been many periods during which the governments of the Middle-Eastern countries in which they have resided have either discouraged or forbidden schooling through the medium of Assyrian.

<sup>8</sup> While some participants wanted to exclude Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic, and Persian loanwords from the dictionary, no objection was expressed towards the inclusion of Greek and Latin loanwords or of those from modern European languages.

<sup>9</sup> Classical Syriac and Assyrian Neo-Aramaic stand in a diglossic relationship to one another, Classical Syriac being used as the language of the church, and Assyrian Neo-Aramaic being used for all other purposes. The two are very closely related; the majority of their lexical items are shared. Whether Assyrian Neo-Aramaic is a direct lineal descendant of Classical Syriac is an issue that has not yet been resolved by Semiticists.

<sup>10</sup> See above for a discussion of their classification.

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## DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN CONTEMPORARY COLOMBIA

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In Western civilization and history it is the Genesis story of the Bible, with its myth of the exile of the primal parents from that initial unitary world, that has established in our minds the diasporic consciousness as part of the human condition. Exile thus becomes linked to a narrative which relates the loss of home to the loss of innocence. This essay explores the diasporic consciousness in several current Colombian writers, a consciousness shaped by that country's history over the past five decades.

'Diaspora' is defined as a compelled exile, removal, dispersal, or displacement, together with the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of a return to and a recuperation of the physical spaces of one's cultural and personal identity. The diasporic experience does not require physical exile from a country, but the key point is the issue of a compelled displacement.

The history of Colombia's violence over the past five decades is reviewed in order to establish that the *desplazamiento* or the physical displacement of people from their native towns and farms is a fact of Colombian reality. Colombian writers have responded to their current situation either by disengagement of one kind or another, or by engagement. Five writers are commented upon as paradigmatic: Gabriel García Márquez, Alvaro Mutis, Philip Potdevin, Gustavo Alvarez Gardeazábal, and Fernando Cruz Kronfly. In each instance we see a diasporic consciousness at work.

### Introduction

Seldom do we hear it acknowledged that in Western civilization and history it is the Genesis story of the Bible, with its myth of the exile of the primal parents from that initial unitary world, that has established in our minds the diasporic consciousness as part of the human condition. Exile thus becomes linked to a narrative that relates the loss of home to the loss of innocence, as if to say that all



who have been forced into exile were being punished for particular transgressions, that they deserved to be 'victims'. As powerful as the Genesis story is, it is neither unique nor unusual. Most cultures that I know of have myths describing a fall from grace and a consequent exile from home. Perhaps that explains why diasporic consciousness is so deeply a part of our emotional constitution and moral outlook, facilitating our empathy with experiences of people the world over. We sense both the universality and the intensely personalized particularity of diasporas as a phenomenon. Some of that particularity will be explored in these pages on diasporic consciousness in several current Colombian writers, a consciousness shaped by that country's civil disturbances, national crises, and forced migrations over the past five decades.

I will not dwell on the phenomenon with which the term 'diaspora' is most commonly associated, the Jewish Diaspora, which began after the destruction of the Second Temple in the first century of the Common Era and continued, some would maintain, until the establishment of the State of Israel after the Second World War. Nor shall I explore a number of other experiences which have been labeled 'diasporas': those of the Armenians in various countries, of the Turks in Germany, of the Cubans in the United States, of the Pakistanis in Britain, of the Africans in the Caribbean as well as in North, Central and South America. These transnational migrations may or may not be 'diasporic' in the sense in which I am using the term.

For instance, because the Turkish experience in Germany is not the result of a compelled displacement, I would not call that experience a diaspora *per se*, though I would say that it has diasporic elements. Germany, no matter how long the Turks may have lived there, does not, say many Turks, feel like 'home'. Because the Mexican experience in the United States is similar to that of the Turks in Germany, I would not call it a diaspora either, though some of its diasporic elements include the feeling of alienation in American life and a cultural identification with Mexican rather than with American values. So, too, with a number of other communities throughout the world. I leave those experiences and issues to one side as 'nondiasporic'. The distinction should be preserved between those experiences which result from forced exile and those which result from emigration for different reasons and which end in complete assimilation. With such assimilation, diasporic consciousness, whatever the initial reason for the abandonment of 'home', in effect ceases to exist.

A 'diaspora', in my view, has the following characteristics: it is a compelled exile, removal, dispersal, or displacement, together with the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of a return to, and a recuperation of, the physical spaces of one's cultural and personal identity. Whether the return is difficult or impossible, the separation from 'home' causes enormous pain. The diasporic experience does not, I believe, require exile from a country. Indeed one can experience a diaspora within the borders of one country, even within the borders of one's own country. The key point is the issue of a compelled displacement.

The term 'diaspora' has been much in the air in the last decade. Certainly the fact that a journal bearing that name has been in existence since 1991 is significant. Also significant is the fact that the journal is of high quality, that it attracts contributors from the best universities, and that it regularly publishes articles which are transnational in origin and interdisciplinary in approach. Yet it is precisely that journal's sophistication that leads me to the following observation. By and large, the diasporic experience is a classless phenomenon, affecting people from every stratum of society and from the entire spectrum of professional life. However, *most* of the writing about diasporic experiences is the product of an elite that has been fortunate enough to survive and even thrive in exile.

Those of us born and raised in foreign countries who now live in the United States should remain aware of the delicacy of our position whenever we speak about the phenomenon of diaspora. Though we may have experienced some of the pain of exilic life, we should not assume that we speak from the same ground of experience as those who have lost so much more and who have so many fewer resources — linguistic, educational, financial, professional — to fall back on. To assume so is to run the risk of alienating those in the audience or among our readership who may have had deeper and more extensive diasporic experiences than we have. I vividly remember the reactions of several Indian students to the public lecture of a prominent Indian intellectual on the topic of post-coloniality and Indian identity. These students were incensed that the speaker should have chosen to identify himself to the American audience as a prime example of the effects of post-coloniality on the people of India as a whole. What angered these students was that this most privileged of Indian intellectuals should have equated his or her problems of self-identity with those of so many people so much less fortunate back in India.

### Autobiographical positioning

The subject at hand requires a brief autobiographical positioning. I was born in Colombia and lived there without interruption until after I turned sixteen. Since then, I have not lived in the country continuously for longer than four months at any one time. True, Colombia and Cali, my hometown, remain 'home' for me in ways that the United States and Champaign-Urbana, where I have lived for twenty-one years, can never be. True, I identify emotionally with Colombia and with being Colombian. However, since my family was not *compelled* to leave, my own situation and consciousness cannot be labelled 'diasporic'; I consider myself more of an émigré than an exile. Thus, although my empathy with my countrymen is profound, I cannot claim to have experienced the diasporic events of our common history to the same degree that Colombians in Colombia have. I do this even though my family, like all Colombian families, has had its share of difficulties and tragedies that are directly related to the situation in the country. For instance, in June of 1996 my cousin, Miguel Palencia, was murdered, thus becoming just another statistic in the civil unrest that has plagued Colombia since the late 1940s. Since then, my cousin's family has rarely returned to the family

farm, which is in an area intermittently controlled by guerrillas. Despite events like these that have affected both my family and many of my friends in Colombia, I am fully aware that my life in America is so much more tranquil than it would have been had I remained in Colombia. It is the kind of tranquillity that tenure in a major American university is designed to foster. Even the occasional viciousness of American academic politics pales in comparison to what academics in other parts of the world often go through.

If Colombia were Ireland or Israel or Yugoslavia, we would hear about it on the news every night; its problems would have been placed before the court of world opinion by the United Nations and other entities; it would have been invited to participate in highly publicized multilateral talks in Camp David or the Wye Plantation; it would have hosted visits from the president and vice-president of the United States, or from the Secretary General of the United Nations. But, whatever the reason, Colombia does not figure much in the national consciousness of America. It is a mostly invisible country whose problems are generally either ignored by the international media or minimized and relegated to the back pages of newspapers, bulleted as one of a group of international items worthy of mention but not of analysis. More attention has been paid to Colombia by Spain, France, and Germany than by the United States, and this despite the millions of American dollars in foreign aid to the country and despite the presence there of American 'advisors' to help the country in its war on drugs.

It is the war on drugs that has drawn most of America's attention, a war reminiscent of Hercules's confrontation with the multi-headed hydra. So many and so varied are the fronts, so elusive the enemy, and so shifting the ideological or political positions taken by the various factions that it is difficult to know what or whom to attack, and how. The complexity of the situation is partly the result of civil wars and other problems that have gone on for so long that some Colombians refer to them as 'our tradition'. Colombia's civil wars have been intermittently occurring for almost two hundred years, spawning a culture of violence and forcible displacements by now so woven into the fabric of our national consciousness that one writer, Juan Carlos Moyano, speaking at the National Book Fair in Bogotá in the spring of 1998, advocated spelling 'violence' with a 'b' (as *biolence*) because it seems to be part of biology, part of the genetic make-up of Colombians. Though such rhetorical exaggeration may be unfortunate, begging as it does the question of responsibility, it nonetheless also reveals the despair that has come to permeate Colombian life in almost every sphere of activity.

The current civil wars in Colombia are rooted in an event from fifty years ago known as 'el bogotazo' in which, in response to the assassination of a charismatic political leader named Jorge Eliézer Gaitán, the people of Bogotá arose in spontaneous violent protest, burning and destroying several city blocks in the center of the capital. The unrest spread quickly to other parts of the country, initiating a period in Colombian history — which we are still living through — known as *la violencia* or the violence. This period has been marked by assassina-

tions, by massacres in remote villages, by armed insurrections, by the creation of independent armies, by the explosive growth of narco-terrorism, by the forced migration of countless people from their villages to large urban centers like Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali. As a boy, I remember families coming into Cali with all their possessions loaded onto a horse-drawn cart or a peddler's two-wheeled cart. And these were the lucky ones, for they had survived the massacres and the beatings.

These childhood memories are supported by reports and data from more objective sources. The newspaper of Cali, *El País*, reported in April 1998 that for a considerable time before that particular news release, an average of ten displaced families *per day* had been arriving in Cali. Driven from their homes, they had entered the city without money or prospects. In 1997, the Catholic Church of Colombia issued a report which documented that between 1987 and 1997 more than 1,000,000 Colombians had been forcibly expelled from their towns and villages and forced to seek the relative safety of the larger cities. The 'Colombia INFOinBRIEF', a publication of the U.S./Colombia Coordinating Office of Washington, D.C., stated in its internet edition of February 23, 1999, that in 1998 alone approximately 308,000 people were internally displaced. All this, it must be noted, in a time of widely praised governmental stability and free elections in what has been declared to be one of the most enduring 'democracies' of Latin America. Such forcible migrations testify to one of the internal and tragic diasporas of Colombia, in this case affecting mostly the rural and defenseless poor. This phenomenon is so much a part of Colombian life that it is known simply as *el desplazamiento*, or the displacement, the word being sufficient on its own to raise in every Colombian's mind images which American audiences would reserve for a fragmented, war-torn Yugoslavia.

Present circumstances not only mitigate against easy solutions to Colombia's tragic situation, they also virtually ensure the continuation of its internal diasporas. There are now, in effect, four separate armies in the country, each with its own agenda and command structure. There is of course the military arm of the government, with its army, navy, and air force, supported by police units. On the left or Marxist side of the political spectrum are the armies belonging to several guerrilla movements, the most prominent of them being the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia) and the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, the National Liberation Army). These movements have drawn their inspiration at times from Castro's revolution and from Liberation Theology. Prominent among its leaders — both living and dead — are former priests. Over the past decade or two, the ideological theory driving these leftist forces has lost its definition as the targets of their revolutionary activity have become more diverse and even fragmented. At one time the guerrilla movements had a clear and single enemy: the national government. Now that is no longer the case, for two other armies have arisen. One comes from the right or conservative side of the political spectrum and serves some of the *latifundista* families of Colombia, those families that for generations

have used their enormous *landed* wealth to wield considerable political power and influence in the country. This oligarchic class established private armies because it could no longer count on the state for protection and safety. These private armies are known as *los paramilitares*, nicknamed *los paras*, and they do combat with the other three armies of Colombia. The issue usually is the control of land in remote areas of Colombia, usually land rich in natural resources like oil. The *paramilitares* have no ideology; their only duty is to protect and enhance what the rich already possess. The fourth army — less an army, really, than armed groups resembling battalions or squadrons — is the army that most Americans might have heard about. This army belongs to the *nouveaux riches* of Colombia, the drug lords and their extended family of partners and international networks. This army is driven neither by ideological considerations nor by the concerns of the country's super-rich. The situation has been complicated even more in recent years by the turn in all four armies to drugs, primarily cocaine, in order to finance their activities and the acquisition of sophisticated weaponry. This turn has created a culture of literally cut-throat capitalism in all four groups, even among the leftist guerrillas. Moreover, it has become virtually impossible to sort out the exact relationship among the armies, for they are shifting, with *paramilitares*, for instance, sometimes acting at the behest of drug lords or high-ranking government military officers.

Colombians have learned not to trust the media, either theirs or that of any other country. If, for instance, the media reports a massacre occurring in a distant village, one must frequently wait days in order to learn whether the massacre had been perpetrated by guerrillas, by *paramilitares*, by drug lords, by the Colombian army, or by some combination of those forces. And even then there will be room for doubt. Given the endemic nature of the violence in Colombia, it should not be surprising to learn that for the past several decades between 20,000 and 30,000 people *per year* have been killed as a result of the activities of these four armies or because of what is euphemistically known as *la delincuencia común*, ordinary delinquency, as if the violence visited upon Colombians day in and day out were the result of mere truancy or of ordinary social unrest.

### **The historical context and the disengagement response**

I am not alone in maintaining that Colombia is in a state of war, a situation made all the more tragic and difficult to deal with by its being undeclared. Almost 50% of the country is under the direct control of drug lords and the guerrillas, collectively known in the journalistic shorthand of the national press as 'las fuerzas subversivas' (the subversive forces). This brutal fact of Colombian reality has implications for the country's cultural life, as many of its writers, artists, and other intellectuals have lost the physical spaces — and the access to those spaces — which have enabled them to feel Colombian. The fact that these losses have come as a result of violence has made them all the more painful and difficult to accept.



There is scarcely a writer in Colombia who has not been affected by the current situation and who has not responded in some way to it. A comprehensive analysis from this perspective of Colombia's literature during the last fifty years would run to several hundred pages. Consequently, here I will suggest only the outlines of an analysis by commenting on the following writers: Gabriel García Márquez, Alvaro Mutis, Philip Potdevin, Gustavo Alvarez Gardeazábal, and Fernando Cruz Kronfly. These five writers represent the four major literary responses to the country's crises of the past five or six decades. Three of these authors may be said to have responded by disengagement of one kind or another; two of them by engagement. In each instance we see a diasporic sensibility at work.

The first of the disengagement responses is conventionally exilic or diasporic. Some writers feel compelled, or have actually been compelled, to live and work outside of Colombia. It does not strike me as insignificant that Colombia's two greatest living narrative artists, Gabriel García Márquez and Alvaro Mutis, have lived in Mexico City for the past thirty or so years. Both of them began living outside of Colombia for political reasons. As the years went by, it became increasingly difficult for them to reintegrate themselves in a permanent way into Colombian life on Colombian soil, though both have tried on occasion. Most recently, García Márquez has bought *Cambio*, a Colombian magazine of general news and cultural commentary, and is using his position as owner and editor to influence his Colombians' political and cultural views. Yet he has maintained his residence in Mexico City and has not permanently moved back to Colombia. Both García Márquez and Mutis do return to the country frequently and are generally treated with admiration and respect by all but those Colombians who consider living abroad to be an act of treason.

In the fiction of García Márquez and of Mutis, as well as of others who live abroad, Colombia usually becomes a land clarified and exalted in an imagination emancipated by distance, freed from the cumbersome trivialities of daily living and at least geographically separated from the incessant violence which hangs, like the sword of Damocles, over the head of every Colombian in the country. This is not to say that writers like García Márquez and Mutis are escapist, but it is to suggest that they reach for a level of style and content beyond the vicissitudes of any particular present moment. Their exile has allowed them in effect to re-fashion Colombian reality on their own terms. Thus, I also do not consider it insignificant that for both writers the sources of their creativity may be found in their rural and village childhoods, worlds purified for them by time and distance.

Macondo, the archetypal Latin American village which is the setting of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and which is based on García Márquez's hometown of Aracataca, is made typical precisely by a description of its features which emphasizes its universality rather than its particularity. The second sentence of the novel reads: 'At that time Macondo was a village of twenty adobe houses, built on the banks of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones,



which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs'. And Maqroll, the peripatetic hero of Mutis's narratives, wanders through much of Europe and Latin America, yet in Colombia spends much of his time roaming the countryside where Mutis himself grew up. The descriptions of specific villages, roads, and rivers have been painted with brush strokes broad enough to make them simply typical Colombian landscapes. For instance, the action of the novel *Un bel morir* begins in an unnamed settlement at the edge of an unnamed river and then unfolds in a landscape of coffee plantations and sugar cane.

Those Germans who remained in Germany during the Hitler years, but who, nonetheless, considered themselves to be 'good Germans' likened their situation to that of an 'inner emigration'. Rather than take the path of physical exile, as Thomas Mann and Stefan Zweig did, they chose to remain in the country and within the Nazi orbit of influence. Theirs was a kind of compelled psychological exile in which they felt they could only write about events and subjects far from the problems of daily life in the Germany of the 1930s and 40s. Many of the scholars among them turned to periods remote from contemporary Germany, such as classical Greece, imperial Rome, medieval Europe, Golden-Age Spain, and the Baroque. In the very different context of Colombia, this is the second kind of disengagement which I have identified. This inner emigration or psychological exile creates a consciousness which is internally diasporic in significant ways.

Philip Potdevin is such an internally diasporic writer. A Colombian in his early forties who has published two highly praised novels, a number of critical essays, and several books of short stories and poems, he is, in his professional life, concretely engaged in making a living as a lawyer, a sometime professor of literature in a major university in Bogotá, and an employee of a multi-national firm. He also writes some social commentary in newspapers. In his creative work, however, he is so escapist, detached, and disengaged that the relationship between the person and his literary work is at times difficult to fathom.

His first novel, entitled *Metatrón*, tells of the discovery, in a forgotten chapel in a forgotten village high in the Andes, of a series of paintings of mysterious archangels and the effects that this discovery probably has on two couples who travel to the village to study the paintings. The novel's allusions are to alchemy, cabala, the history of painting and of religions, theology, and, of course, angelology. The book's subject matter and its resolutely esoteric tone and style make it among the more unusual novels published in Colombia in the mid 1990s.

No less remote from contemporary life and issues is his second novel, *Mar de la tranquilidad*. That novel, published in late 1997, concerns a bullfighter who becomes the student of a Zen Master and who, through bullfighting, *zazen*, and the tea ceremony, experiences a kind of *satori*. It is as though Ernest Hemingway and Juan Belmonte were to meet D. T. Suzuki. No detail of the novel situates it in any definite Colombian or Latin American city. That vagueness does not seem to be the result of an intention to create an archetypal Latin American city which

every citizen of the continent would recognize as his own, as is the case with García Márquez's Macondo. Potdevin's vagueness seems rather to be part of a strategy of detachment that is as deliberate as it is pervasive in his work thus far.

Potdevin's short stories are, most of them, similarly detached from a specific time and place. In his poetry, he writes mostly haikus and poems on classical themes and figures like Circe. In correspondence with me, Potdevin has acknowledged the detachment which permeates his work, but he does not really explain it. My own view is that the tragic dissonances and insecurities of current Colombian life have driven him into a kind of psychological exile in his creative work, while remaining physically in Colombia.

### The engagement response

There appear to be two kinds of writers who continue to live in Colombia but deliberately refuse the position and condition of psychological exile. The first type is engaged and confrontational; the second, engaged, yet nostalgic for a country that no longer exists.

The first kind may be represented by Gustavo Alvarez Gardezabal, one of the most prominent writers of the generation after García Márquez. Alvarez Gardezabal grew up during *la violencia*. He recalls that, as a boy in his native town of Tuluá, he would open the door of his house in the mornings to see who had been assassinated the night before and whose body was lying in the street. I have heard him speak with eloquence about the trauma of such daily violence on the psyche of a growing boy. And yet he chose to face the issues of violence directly. A student in the Universidad del Valle in the late sixties, he wrote a thesis in 1970 on novels of *la violencia* in Colombia. That work of research and criticism set him on his path as a writer, for his literary work is similarly concerned with *la violencia* and the dissonant realities of contemporary Colombian life. Though scarred by his experiences, he does not seek refuge in a distant past or in a place remote from contemporary Colombia. In sum, he is not nostalgic and not a psychological exile. Unlike Philip Potdevin, he does not lead a life conflicted by the contrary impulses of engagement and disengagement.

This is not to say that Alvarez Gardezabal's life is free of conflict. In fact, he seems always to court controversy and difficulty. It is partly this devotion to the committed life and its attendant struggles that, I believe, led him into regional politics and to the governorship of the state (Departamento del Valle del Cauca) in which he was born. As one might expect, his governing style was as confrontational and as direct as his writing style. In confronting political corruption, for instance, he named names and was specific in his accusations. Such forthrightness did win him a following among the people, but it has also created powerful political enemies. Those enemies were behind an accusation that during his campaign for the governorship, he accepted financial contributions from people later associated with the drug mafia of Valle del Cauca. Jailed in May of 1999 and held without bail until the prosecutors had assembled their case and argued it be-

fore the national Court of Justice, he was found guilty in the spring of 2001, sentenced to six and a half years of prison, including time already served, and fined an enormous sum. Also, he has been barred from seeking public office. It is now very much an open question whether or not he will ever return as a voice to be reckoned with at the national level.

The second kind of writer who refuses psychological exile, who remains engaged but who is, nonetheless, nostalgic about the past, may best be represented by Fernando Cruz Kronfly. His attitude and his responses to the current situation are probably the most typical of Colombians in the late 20th century. Although he lives in the country and would not consider living elsewhere, he views himself as uprooted and forcibly displaced from those spaces that shaped and nurtured his sense of identity. The family farm associated with his most intimate childhood memories is no longer available to him, and it has not been since the day eight or nine years ago when his son, then a teenager, was kidnapped from it and ransomed. The farm sits abandoned except for a caretaker, too dangerous to visit even now, and yet too precious in memory to be sold. The city of Cali in which Cruz Kronfly grew up has been so altered and blighted by industrialization, overbuilding, and pollution, and rendered so unsafe by the drug culture that he no longer feels at home in it. Cruz Kronfly's experiences with kidnapping and his feelings about Colombia's dangerous countryside and altered cityscapes, I should add, are shared by countless other Colombians.

In essays, Cruz Kronfly has described his own works as registering the effects of post-modernity: they capture, he says, the horror of contemporary life, the numbing indifference that protects the psyche from that horror, the uprootedness caused by the loss of those physical spaces that defined a person, and the brittleness in human relationships. Anyone reading the preceding sentence would say that what Cruz Kronfly describes is not particularly unique, or even limited to Colombia. That is true. A major city like Cali in Colombia is in a sense only an exaggerated example of the post-industrial, post-modern third-world city.

Cruz Kronfly has described his creative work accurately, for it is peopled by characters who, bitter and lonely, desperate and alienated, have lost their way. And yet these same characters, perhaps precisely because they are so lost, search for a positive meaning to their existence. They usually try to find in the present an older and more intimate way of being in the world. It is a search almost always doomed to failure, and thus moments of happiness are few in Cruz Kronfly's works. When they do come, they are accompanied by feelings of guilt, as if happiness in such a world were the undeserved consequence of a cosmological mistake. For Cruz Kronfly, happiness is generally to be found only in a certain kind of past time and place. Thus, even as he registers the dissonances of the post-modern third-world city, he tries to recreate or otherwise memorialize the vanished spaces of childhood, those quiet homes and patios, those villages and rural spaces which until recently substantially determined what it meant to be a Colombian. He is, in a word, nostalgic.

*Nostalgic.* The word comes from the Greek *nostos*, which signifies a 'return', usually a return home. Thus the English word 'nostalgia' carries with it the longing for home. Is it not significant that two of the stories most important for establishing the cultural identity of the West, each story told toward the beginning of our historical memory, are concerned with home, exile, and the longing to return? The first of these stories, that of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden with which I introduced this essay, promises to replace the exile with a return, that return given figural expression in the promise of the Messiah for Jews and in the Kingdom of Heaven for Christians. That the return is to be accomplished at the end of History, writ large, is indication enough of its impossibility in any ordinary life.

The second of these stories is perhaps more hopeful, perhaps because more modest and more secular. Homer's *Odyssey* is also based on the loss of home, a time of forced wandering, and a longing to return. Critics have identified this set of themes in the *Odyssey* as the *nostos* perspective in the epic. And, precisely because Odysseus's wanderings are *compelled* by the gods, they are diasporic.

John Gardner has written that there are only two basic plots in literature: that of the man who goes on a journey, and that of the stranger who comes to town. The early verses of *Genesis* set up both situations: Adam and Eve are forced to leave home; and Cain is the stranger who comes to town. In Greek literature, the *Odyssey* is based on the first plot; *Oedipus Rex*, on the second. Yet both plots are in my view part of a larger and even more universal story of the hero cycle: the 'master plot' of his expulsion, his diasporic existence, and his return, a return which then is often explicitly defined as either successful or failed. No wonder, then, that we see the echoes of this master plot in so many literary works of western civilization, both in the works of the western canon like the *Aeneid*, the *Divine Comedy*, and *Ulysses*, and in the cultural expressions of countries like Colombia which have made instability almost its national tradition.

## 5. Conclusion

Each of the Colombian writers that I have described as diasporic has felt himself to have been separated irrevocably from his past. Each has seen that past destroyed either by the forces of modernization or by the violence that has defined Colombian life for most of the decades of this century. Most of these writers tend to look back to a Colombia which may never have been actually innocent, but which they have defined as more innocent than the country at present. Rightly or wrongly, these writers have imagined Colombia's cultural innocence to have been real at some level. Their views are not unique. The past, precisely because it is irrecoverable, often becomes a world of 'once upon a time'. Becoming so, it is transformed into the site of nostalgia, identified with a home long since destroyed, a garden long since abandoned, an innocence long since lost. Most of these writers thus embody, though in differing degrees of intentionality and awareness, the Greek principle of *nostos*. In exile, whether actual or psychologi-

cal, external or internal, they long for a cultural wholeness which may be as impossible to achieve as it is necessary to believe in. Jorge Luis Borges once said that to be Colombian requires an act of faith. I believe it.

### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

**Gustavo Alvarez Gardeazábal** was born in 1945 in Tuluá and grew up there, educated by Franciscans and Salesians. He abandoned the study of chemical engineering in Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana in Medellín, devoting himself then to literature at the Universidad del Valle. In 1970, he wrote a Masters Thesis on 'Las novelas de la violencia en Colombia' (*Colombia's Novels of the Period of Violence*), directed by Walter Langford of Notre Dame. His first major novel, *Cóndores no entierran todos los días*, which won the Manacor Prize in 1971, appeared in Barcelona, Spain, after first being published in Colombia. Other prizes in Spain and elsewhere followed, as did major fellowships like the Guggenheim. His other major works of fiction are: *Dadeiba* (1973), *El bazar de los idiotas* (1974), *El titiritero* (1977), *Pepe Botellas* (1984), *El divino* (1986), *Los sordos ya no hablan* (1991). In 1980, after a decade of teaching in several universities, he resigned from his professorship at the Universidad del Valle to dedicate himself to writing and to politics. He was twice elected mayor of his native Tuluá (1988 and 1992) and was elected governor of the State of Valle in 1998.

**Fernando Cruz Kronfly** was born in 1943 in Buga, Colombia, but grew up in Cali. He received a law degree from the Universidad de Gran Colombia, in Bogotá, and has practiced law for most of his life. He also taught for a number of years at the Universidad del Valle, retiring from that university in 1998, and throughout his career has written for most of the major newspapers and journals of Colombia. His first short stories won literary prizes in Colombia and in Mexico. His first novel, *Cámara ardiente* (aka *Falleba*) won the Bilbao Prize in Spain in 1981. Novels published since then include *La obra del sueño* (1984), *La ceniza del libertador* (1987), *La ceremonia de la soledad* (1992), *El embarcadero de los incurables* (1998), *La caravana de Gardel* (1998). His most important collections of essays are: *La sombrilla planetaria* (1994) and *Amapolas al vapor* (1996)

**Gabriel García Márquez** was born in Aracataca, Colombia, in 1927 and lived there with his grandparents until 1936, when he rejoined his parents in Sucre, a town on the banks of the Magdalena River. He was sent to a private boarding school in Zipaquirá (on the outskirts of Bogotá) in 1940. After high school he enrolled as a student of law at the Universidad Nacional, and it was during that first year in 1947 that he wrote and published his first short story, 'La tercera resignación'. He was in Bogotá on April 9, 1948, the day of the *Bogotazo*. The riots and the ensuing disturbances shut down the university and García Márquez returned to his Caribbean roots in Cartagena, La Guajira, Aracataca and Barranquilla. It was in these towns that he turned to writing both journalism and fiction. He became nationally known first as a journalist and then as a short-story writer



and novelist. He burst on the international scene with the astonishing success of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1967. Other major novels and stories followed. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982. His main works, besides *One Hundred of Solitude*, are: *El otoño del patriarca* (*The Autumn of the Patriarch*, 1975), *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 1981), *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (*Love in the Time of Cholera*, 1985), *El general en su laberinto* (*The General in his Labyrinth*, 1989), *Del amor y otros demonios* (*Of Love and Other Demons*, 1994), *Noticia de un secuestro* (*News of a Kidnapping*, 1996). He divides his time between Mexico City and Colombia (Bogotá and Cartagena).

**Alvaro Mutis** was born in 1923 in Bogotá but spent much of his childhood in Belgium. Returning to Colombia in adolescence, he enrolled in classes on poetry taught by the country's major poet, Eduardo Carranza. He was a student in Bogotá, as was Gabriel García Márquez, at the time of the *Bogotazo*, and he lost his first book in the conflagration which consumed much of the center of the city. He left Colombia in 1956 and has lived ever since in Mexico City. He began his career as a poet and gradually turned to fiction. He has published more than seven works dedicated to the invented persona and alter ego, 'Maqroll el Gaviero', a character whom he never physically describes and whose national origin he leaves uncertain. These works include poetry and fiction. Poetry: *Summa de Maqroll el Gaviero*, a collection of all his poetry books about Maqroll, published in 1973. Fiction: *La nieve del Almirante* (1986), *Ilona llega con la lluvia* (1987), *Un bel morir* (1988), *La última escala del Tramp Steamer* (1989). His novels about Maqroll el Gaviero have been collected under the general title of *Empresas y tribulaciones de Maqroll el Gaviero* (1993).

**Philip Potdevin** was born in 1958 in Cali, Colombia. Raised in that city, he received a law degree from the University of San Buenaventura and began a career in journalism, writing first for *El País* and *El Mundo*. Moving to Cartagena in 1989, he burst on the national scene in 1992, winning in that single year all three major short story national competitions in the country. He received a grant from Colcultura (similar to the National Endowment for the Humanities) to work on the manuscript which became his first and highly praised novel, *Metatrón*, published in 1995. His second novel, *Mar de la tranquilidad*, was published at the end of 1997. His other books include poetry (*Cantos de Saxo*, 1994; *Mesteres de Circe*, 1996; *Cánticos de Éxtasis*, 1997; *25 haikus*, 1997) and collections of short stories (*Magister Ludi*, 1994; *Estragos de la lujuria*, 1996). He is the Director of a literary research center called the Centro de Estudios Alejo Carpentier in the Universidad Nacional, and he works in Bogotá as an executive for Dow Chemical.

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