

**'Laura Restrepo (1950)', in *The Contemporary Spanish American Novel: Bolaño and After*, ed. by Will H. Corral, Nicholas Birns, and Juan E. De Castro (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 252-57.**

Long revered by a loyal readership, Laura Restrepo has only begun to receive scholarly attention. She has now achieved the rare feat of reaching vast audiences both local and international, and both academic and general. Of major national and international standing, Restrepo is celebrated for the oblique focus she brings to recent and contemporary Colombian history, as well as for engaging with the wider panorama of Spanish American political history. Translated into over twenty languages, and recognized by major international prizes and awards, Restrepo is not only a key figure of contemporary Colombian literature, but of Spanish American as well as world literature today.

Born in Bogotá into a middle-class family well equipped with an abundant cultural and intellectual capital, Restrepo studied literature and philosophy at the prestigious private Universidad de los Andes before being assigned a teaching post at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Perpetuating a paternal tradition of self-driven intellectual curiosity, Restrepo veered from the academic path that awaited her to become involved in militant socialist activism through her contact with leftwing students. Leaving Colombia to join militant activists abroad would set a precedent for her recurrent future transnational mobility and her involvement in political struggle both within and beyond Colombia's borders, firstly joining the Socialist Workers Party in Spain in the aftermath of the end of Franco's reign and then militant groups in Argentina opposed to the military dictatorship. Upon returning to Bogotá in the early 1980s, Restrepo began working as a political journalist, and her experience of militant activism and intimate knowledge of Colombia's political climate led to her participation in pioneering peace negotiations in 1983 between Belisario Betancur's government and leftwing guerrilla groups (mainly the M-19). That involvement would have an immense personal and professional impact, leading to her subsequent six-year exile in Madrid, then Mexico, and to the publication of her first book on the eventual failure of the peace negotiations to achieve

their aim, *Historia de una traición* (1986, History of a Betrayal). The original title was changed to *Historia de un entusiasmo* (1999, History of an Enthusiasm) in the second edition, reflecting the optimism with which the first negotiations were hailed in the climate of escalating violence in the mid-1980s.

Initially intended for publication as a series of 34 newspaper articles recounting the development and eventual collapse of those negotiations, *Historia de una traición* set a precedent for all of Restrepo's subsequent works. From a journalistic impetus of investigation and witness, her fiction and nonfiction testify to periods of (predominantly Colombia's) recent political history, and seek to disseminate this information through their accessible style, thus inscribing herself into a wider tradition in Latin American writing that is both political and plot-driven (Boldy 2012).

*Historia de una traición* recounts the stages of the negotiations from a perspective of personal involvement and evidently increasing sympathy for the M-19 and a sense of betrayal towards the government that failed to respect ceasefire agreements, assassinating guerrillas who had laid down their weapons. Written in a state of urgency upon her sudden flight to Madrid after receiving threats following the breakdown of negotiations, the didactic drive of this first book seeks to provide a detailed and vivid account of the background and context of the negotiations and their principal protagonists. Largely overlooked by critics, *Historia de una traición* establishes one of the principal dilemmas that Restrepo encounters throughout her corpus: the negotiation of objectivity and subjectivity of the narrative voice.

Restrepo's second book, 1989's *La isla de la pasión* (*Isle of Passion*, 2005), is similarly concerned with recounting a period of history in order to preserve it from cultural amnesia, although in this work her focus shifts to Mexican history – reflecting her engagement with the history and culture of the country in which she was living at the time – and her style more overly to fiction. Restrepo's transition from journalism to fiction and the ongoing heterogeneity of her style reflect a pronounced tradition of the journalistic leanings of many Latin American writers, such as Gabriel García Márquez and Cristina Peri Rossi. Restrepo recounts actively searching for an

undocumented historical period to unearth and narrativize in order to connect with the culture and history of the country that had become home while in exile. Characteristic of her approach of making up for the silences and omissions of historical archives, Restrepo imagines those missing details in order to bring the characters and episodes of historical records to life. Recounting the struggle for survival of a group of Mexican soldiers and their families left to their fate on the tiny Clipperton Island in the Pacific Ocean, long disputed over by the English, French, Mexican and US governments, Restrepo writes herself into a literary tradition of tales of adventure in the tradition of *Robinson Crusoe*, while staking out a space for herself in the literary representation of Mexican history. However, unlike Defoe's eponymous hero, Restrepo's heroes in *La isla...* are women, the wives of the soldiers, who are shown to be intelligent, resourceful, and highly socially organized, and through whose perseverance the whole island community finally manages to prevail. While immediately popular in the Spanish-speaking world, this novel received little media or critical attention abroad at the time of its publication, and had to wait until the publication of later, more high-profile novels to be translated into English and to receive the acclaim it so richly deserves.

1993's *Leopardo al sol* (*Leopard in the Sun*, 1999), Restrepo's subsequent novel, lauded in Spain (Marco 2001) if not universally (Håkansson 2010), relates the drama of two rival families from the criminal underworld who menace an entire community in Colombia's La Guajira peninsula. The dialogue-heavy, fast-paced plot is related in two narrative strands. The retrospective narration of the two warring families, whose ill-begotten fortune is only exceeded by the bad taste and recklessness with which they dispense it, is interspersed with the present-day reminiscence of elderly villagers who recall the conflicts of the past. Often compared to García Márquez's *News of a Kidnapping*, which appeared shortly after *Leopardo...* and similarly attempts to come to terms with recent violence through narrative rooted in social and historical reality, Restrepo's novel not only traces the rise of drug-related violence in Colombia, but also demonstrates the highly complex impact of this on local communities. Lending a tone of orality to the work, the villagers recollect this period of lawlessness, overseen by the big-spending, gun-toting family dynasty from behind the

tinted windows of their white-leather-upholstered Cadillac. Largely overlooked for its proximity to flashy soap opera and the melodramatic rendering of the conflict between the Monsalve and Barragán families, *Leopardo...* deserves more sustained critical attention for the focus it brought to the rise of drug-related violence and the masterful parallel of the outcome of such violence to the fateful unfolding of Greek tragedy.

If the male protagonists occupy center stage in the violence at the center of *Leopardo...*'s action, male characters are moved downstage in her subsequent novel where Restrepo shifts to an almost entirely female cast of characters. 1995's *Dulce compañía* (*The Angel of Galilea*, 1998) explores the exploitation and abuse of a group of marginalized, impoverished women by religious institutions and their leaders, and the women's attempts to resist marginalization and find autonomy. The narrative focus distinguishes between the Church as an institution complicit with corrupt state authorities and paramilitary groups, and religion as a form of personal and communitarian spirituality which is all that remains for a community bereft of economic, political, or any other kind of power to exercise any kind of self-determination. Incorporating into the narrative the investigation, fact-gathering, and witness of the kind that the author herself carries out, *Dulce...* tells the story of La Mona, sent to investigate the appearance of a so-called angel in one of Bogotá's slums. Eventually revealed to be the son of Ara, one the slum residents, conceived after she was raped by the local priest who removed the baby after his birth and sold him, *Dulce...* explores the extreme vulnerability of Colombia's poorest women while attempting to negotiate the representation of the underrepresented Other, unable to represent – or defend – herself. Class tensions subtend the surface of this novel, and Restrepo demonstrates their entrenched nature in that by the novel's conclusion, these remain largely unchanged. The first of Restrepo's novels to receive considerable international acclaim, *Dulce...* was awarded the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Prize in Mexico and the France Culture Prize.

The focus on a female reporter sent to investigate a marginal community is once again central in 1999's *La novia oscura* (*The Dark Bride*, 2001), which resulted from Restrepo's own interviews

with prostitutes in the Magdalena Medio region. In *La novia oscura*, the plot centers on a group of women economically and sexually exploited by the Church, the government and a foreign oil company to tell the tale of the legendary prostitute Sayonara, daughter of an indigenous woman and a white man, whose tale emerges through the accounts of the ageing prostitutes some forty years later. In this novel, Restrepo fictionalizes the impact on the local community of the exploitation of the oil fields in the province of Santander by the US-based Tropical Oil Company which operated in the region from 1919-51. While brothels have been a popular setting for exploring identity and power in Spanish American novels, *La novia oscura* takes more after José Donoso's *Hell Has no Limits* (1966) than Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Green House* (1966) in eschewing a dominant masculine viewpoint and illustrating the exploitation of those disempowered by race, gender and class, as well as the pernicious effect of the interventions of foreign interests on local communities. Foreign intervention can also be said to be the issue at the heart of her 2001 novella *La multitud errante* (*A Tale of the Dispossessed*, 2003): perhaps nowhere else in her corpus does Restrepo attend to the disastrous consequences of historical events and political violence moreso than in this slim volume. She examines the effects of the violent uprooting and internal displacement that affects vast numbers of mostly rural Colombians that is one of the consequences of the violence fuelled by the US-backed "war on drugs". Relating the story of "Siete por Tres," who seeks the woman who raised him from whom he has been separated, this novella raises one of the most significant yet underrepresented consequences of Colombian violence in recent years.

Restrepo's characteristic stylistic traits become fully realized in her 2004 novel: the carefully crafted intersecting narrative strands, the portraits of individuals embedded into a wider historical and social reality, and the impact of History on individual histories of *Delirio* (*Delirium*, 2007) earned her international recognition and overwhelming critical acclaim. In the second of her two novels that deal explicitly with illegal drug-trafficking in Colombia and its ensuing violence, *Delirio* recounts Aguilar's quest to find his wife Agustina, who has disappeared from their home after suffering a mental breakdown. Gradually piecing together the steps that led to her

disappearance, *Delirio* reveals the complicitous links between the protagonists in Colombia's complex system of narco-capitalism – the ruling elite, the drug cartels, and international politics and the “war on drugs” – in a novel that reads like classic detective fiction (Bollig 2007). Set in the 1980s at the height of a particularly violent period, Restrepo's novel departs from other *novelas de narcotráfico*, such as Fernando Vallejo's *Our Lady of the Assassins* (1994), in depicting a female protagonist caught in a debilitating state of madness that is reflective of a society that is not characterized by violence, but by delirium, on the brink of disintegration due to the hypocritical alliances between its criminal underclass and its social elite. Earning her significant feathers in her writer's cap – Spain's Alfaguara Prize and the Grinzane Cavour Prize for best foreign fiction in Italy, as well as being shortlisted for major prizes in France, Ireland, and the UK – *Delirio* is by and large the novel which made Restrepo known to foreign audiences. Following up such a feat has proven difficult, and *Demasiados héroes*, in 2009 (*No Place for Heroes*, 2010), met a mixed reaction.

By far the most autobiographical of her novels to date, *Demasiados héroes* recounts Restrepo's time spent as a militant activist in Argentina, albeit through the voice of a protagonist named Lorenza. When she takes her son to Buenos Aires to find his estranged Argentine father, Lorenza is compelled to recount her story – the story of her involvement in organized resistance to the military dictatorship and that of her relationship with Mateo's father – to her disinterested son. Signaling a positional shift from one of protagonism in events related, to revisiting them in a narrative present, *Demasiados héroes* appears more concerned with history and memory, and (like *La isla...*) with preserving recent history from cultural amnesia while confronting the dilemma of how to transmit this to a younger generation who dismiss the struggles of the past as bearing little relevance to the present and their own experience.

Having firmly established her reputation as a journalist, writer, speaker, political activist and public intellectual, it is due to her engagement with issues of widespread humanitarian relevance to Latin America, and indeed more widely, and through her accessible style that Restrepo is a key

figure in the Spanish American novel today. Stating in an interview that the principal objective behind both her writing and her politics is to communicate in such a way as to reach as wide an audience as possible (Lirot 2007), her style denotes a shift from previous generations of Spanish American novelists, such as Diamela Eltit\*, who used challenging formal structures to give expression to complex social realities, often alienating readers along the way. Deconstructing the myth that popular literature “tends to be viewed as more transparent than the intellectualized texts of the postmodern era” (Carvalho, 3), Restrepo explores new ways of introducing issues of fundamental national and international significance that sees her follow in the footsteps of other Colombian intellectuals. Restrepo’s latest novel, *Hot sur* (Hot South), due to be released in 2013, indicates an ongoing drive to introduce issues of national and regional significance into the wider public debate. This novel, which examines the lives of three Latin American women as they cross geographical and political borderlands to build their lives in the United States, can hardly fail to bring a new perspective to the US’s uneasy relationship with its Latinos and bring Restrepo to the attention of a new body of readers.

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