

## Writing Displacement, Demythologising Violence: Discourses of Violence in Contemporary Colombia and Laura Restrepo's *La multitud errante*

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### Abstract

This article explores and analyses the representation of violence in contemporary Colombian culture. Violence has come to characterise Colombian society since the onset of the current armed conflict, with devastating consequences for its population. Within this context, this article examines tendencies in contemporary literary representations of violence, with a focus on *La multitud errante* (2001) by Laura Restrepo, one of Colombia's foremost writers. It begins with an outline of the origins and evolution of violence in Colombia in the twentieth century, and draws links with the contemporary crisis. It then goes on to explore the ways in which violence in contemporary Colombian society has been narrativized in political, media and cultural discourses before focusing on Restrepo's text to reveal a recent shift in cultural representations of violence. Framing the analysis in the recent findings of narratological and cultural studies of the discourse of violence, notably those of Sara Cobb, Yeny Serrano and Juana Suárez, this article argues that Restrepo offers new tools for understanding the origins and impact of Colombia's now endemic violence by shifting the focus of representation from a contemporary trend towards the mythologization of violence and its actors, which characterises contemporary cultural production, to emphasise the story of its victims.

### Keywords

Contemporary Colombia, violence, displacement, representation, Laura Restrepo, contemporary women's writing.

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In her seminal work *On Violence*, Hannah Arendt describes violence as the last resort of the disempowered (Arendt, 1970). For individuals or groups with no other, legitimate means at their disposal through which to assert their agency, as for official State authorities with eroded legitimacy, heightened vulnerability, or insufficient governance, violence may be seen to offer the only recourse. Such is the relation of power to violence in contemporary Colombia, where the multifarious armed groups implicated in the armed struggle each seek to exercise a power which is troubled by problematic claims of legitimacy.

Violence has come to characterise Colombian society since the onset of its ongoing armed conflict, with devastating consequences for the population, who have suffered decades of human rights abuses, considered by international human rights organisations among the worst in the world. This article examines the innovative literary representation of violence by Laura Restrepo in her 2001 novel, *La multitud errante*.<sup>1</sup> Analysing her engagement with the representation of one of the most pernicious consequences of Colombia's recent armed conflict, that of massive internal displacement, it reveals a significant shift in the literary representation of violence in contemporary Colombia, and explores the potential consequences of such a shift on the national discourse of violence. In order to establish the context in which contemporary representations of violence in Colombia emerge, this article begins with an outline of the origins and evolutions of violence in Colombia in the twentieth century, drawing links with the contemporary crisis. It then goes on to explore the way in which violence in Colombian society has been portrayed in political, media and cultural discourses before revealing the ways in which Restrepo's text breaks new ground in the representation of violence, thus bringing about a significant shift in cultural representations of violence in Colombia today.

Laura Restrepo, born in Bogotá in 1950 has earned herself a reputation as one of Colombia's foremost writers, journalists and public intellectuals, and is no stranger to breaking new ground. Her transnational trajectory is indicative of the historical and political climate in which she lives; she has spent periods outside Colombia in exile as a result of the threat of political violence, and like many of her literary compatriots and predecessors, currently lives in Mexico. The heterogeneous nature of her corpus is deeply rooted in the multi-faceted nature of Restrepo's intellectual trajectory, which includes roles in academia, in organised international militant activism, political journalism, fictional writing, and as a major public figure in Colombia and more widely in Latin America.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Referred to hereafter in intratextual parenthetical references as *ME*.

<sup>2</sup> For further biographical and bibliographical information, see Kate Averis. Author profile on Laura Restrepo. Centre for the Study of Contemporary Women's Writing website, University of London.

But in order to appreciate the imperatives of Restrepo's writing project, it is necessary to establish the historical and political context in Colombia from which her writing emerges and in which it is embedded. Thus it becomes necessary to examine the evolution of the political process in Colombia over the twentieth century in order to understand what many Colombians refer to as 'nuestro estado de guerra' (Castro Lee, 2005: 9) and the complexity of the contemporary crisis.

### **Contemporary Violence in Colombia: Creating a Historical Narrative**

While foreign observers are quick to reduce the origins of violence in Colombia to illegal drug cultivation, processing and trafficking, its causes and consequences are varied and complex. Jorge Iván Marín Taborda underlines four principle causes at the root of the endemic violence in Colombia: i) the institutional weakness of the State, its ineffective judicial system and compromised political legitimacy; ii) the armed conflict, in the form of clashes between armed groups and state armed forces since the 1960s; iii) the consequences of drug-trafficking: large-scale corruption and murder; and iv) high levels of social and economic inequality reflected in widespread poverty and restricted political representation and participation (Marín Taborda, 2005: 33). According to Marín Taborda, there is a direct link between the lasting nature of violence in Colombia and the political system inaugurated after colonisation, which concentrated power in the hands of the wealthy, land-owning, Catholic elite, partisans of the Conservative party, and excluded others from participating in the political system, some of whom united to form the Liberal Party.

While the outbreak of violence in Colombia in the twentieth century is often traced to 9 April 1948 and the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the popular Liberal Party leader and presidential candidate, the conditions that foster violence and conflict were already in place. After decades of Conservative hegemony from before the turn of the century to the 1930s, during which the Conservative party singlehandedly held the reins of power, the historical bipartisan stranglehold of the political process between the Liberal and Conservative parties was born. This was shored up by vast social and economic inequality and political exclusion, and the assassination of Gaitán in Bogotá fuelled the already simmering discontent, sparking what became known as the *bogotazo*, and leading to a particularly brutal and extended period of violence known as *la Violencia*, which lasted for most of the 1950s and claimed an estimated 300, 000 lives. In an effort to put an end to this period of violence, the National Front Pact was

signed in 1958 to put in place a bipartisan powersharing agreement with the aim of bringing about a cessation of the conflict between Liberal and Conservative Party leaders and their supporters. Yet such a measure prevented the participation of any other group in the political process during the four presidential periods of its existence, until 1974, prompting the formation of leftist guerrilla groups which emerged in response to the failure of the democratic process. In response, paramilitary groups emerged to collaborate with the state armed forces and landholders in combatting the guerrillas and their actions against state and private property.

As Marín Taborda reminds us, alongside the causes and origins of the violence of twentieth-century Colombia, the forces which create the circumstances in which violence has flourished and been perpetuated need also to be considered in order to understand the contemporary crisis (Marín Taborda, 2005: 34). With the emergence of the illegal drug trade in the 1970s, and its consolidation as a major force in the 1980s and 90s, came a peak in violence and lawlessness, coinciding not only with the height of the illegal drug trade but with the emergence of paramilitary groups. The wealth generated by the drug cartels strengthened both guerrilla and paramilitary groups, and fuelled violence and corruption by infiltrating an already partial judicial system, further delegitimising the power of the State. The State's own role as an actor in the violence – either by commission, in the form of violent acts carried out on the civil population, or by omission, through the absence of its institutions in vast swathes of the country, leaving the population isolated and at the mercy of armed groups – has also directly contributed to the massive internal displacement of millions of rural Colombians who have been forced off their land through threats, intimidation, terror and violence. While 220,000 people have lost their lives in the conflict since 1958 (Human Rights Watch, 2014), Colombia has the second-highest number of internally displaced people in the world, with 5.7 million people displaced since 1985 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2014).

### **Political, media and cultural discourses of violence**

While the violence associated with the drug cartels of the 1980s and 90s was largely an urban phenomenon, much recent violence replicates the rural violence of the period known as *La Violencia* in the 1950s, disproportionately affecting the rural population. The knock-on effects of this rural violence can be seen in the major cities, such as Bogotá and Medellín, in the ever-expanding marginalised communities built on the geographic, economic and social peripheries of these cities, to which those fleeing violence in the countryside gravitate. Marín Taborda describes a national mood of exasperation, largely articulated by the urban majority, with the

seemingly constant and unresolvable conflict largely experienced, on the other hand, by the rural population:

los colombianos están cansados con una violencia cada vez más irracional e incomprensible. En este sentido, tanto el movimiento por la paz, como los medios de comunicación, se han encargado de presentarle a la sociedad colombiana una violencia descontextualizada, ahistórica y estéril que no le dice nada a las mayorías urbanas del país, pero que se les aproxima a través de la televisión, y que les afecta en forma de delincuencia organizada y banal. En otras palabras, la violencia se vive en la sociedad rural y sus ecos en los centros urbanos sólo causa mayor malestar (Marín Taborda, 2005 : 57).

In her analysis of the discourse of conflict in the Colombian media, Yeny Serrano reminds us: ‘il importe de s’interroger sur les conditions dans lesquelles le conflit est nommé et par qui’ (Serrano, 2012: 120). Serrano tells us that ‘[l]a façon de désigner la situation de violence sociopolitique en Colombie engendre des enjeux, juridiques et de légitimité considérables’, and identifies a ‘guerre langagière’, whereby social actors contest the way in which the confrontation is designated due to underlying strategic interests. Serrano gives the example of the avoidance of the designation ‘armed conflict’ by the former Colombian president, Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010), and his preference for the phrase ‘war against terror’ (Serrano, 2012: 13). This had the effect of masking the political origins of violence in Colombia, and of delegitimising the guerrilla groups as a political force, rebranding them ‘terrorists’, echoing a parallel discourse in the US, a close ally of the Uribe administration with major foreign interests in Colombia, and demanding that the nation rally around the State in a national effort against ‘terrorism’, consequently legitimising the militarisation of society. Under the current president, Juan Manuel Santos, the discursive strategy has shifted: he has recognised the existence of an ‘internal armed conflict’, although Serrano sees this as an ongoing tactic of war aimed at diverting attention from the political origin of the conflict (Serrano, 2012: 116). By identifying the guerrilla groups as the adversary in the armed conflict, and calling them to the negotiating table at the peace negotiations initiated in Havana in 2012, the Colombian government has placed the onus of peace in the hands of the guerrilla groups. The conflict in Colombia is thus represented as the result of guerrilla violence and the guerrilla’s refusal of the conditions imposed by the government, a representation which downplays or overlooks the government’s own protagonism in the conflict, as well as that of paramilitary forces.

If public perception and understanding of the conflict in Colombia and its resulting violence are highly mediated through political discourse, Serrano underlines how media organisations

frequently feature sensationalist, stereotypical news items without providing sufficient context for audiences to grasp the complexity of the stakes and interests involved, due to pressure from State and economic interests. For example, from 1995 to 2012, the CNTV (Comisión Nacional de Televisión, now replaced by the ANTV, the Autoridad Nacional de Televisión) prohibited the broadcasting of any communication from ‘groupes de guérillas, ou des délinquants liés à la subversion ou au terrorisme’, thus restricting sources to a limited number of official representatives of the State or representatives of the armed forces, in turn imposing a sole version of the conflict in media discourse (Serrano, 2012: 59). Serrano describes the simplified triadic scenario of ‘aggressor’, ‘victim’, and ‘saviour’ that is created in this singular media discourse which privileges state sources (configured as the ‘saviour’), and from which other actors are excluded: the ‘victim’ (innocent civilians), and the ‘aggressor’ (illegal armed groups) (Serrano, 2012: 24; 59; 113).

As well as demonstrating the media’s selectivity in the presentation of information, Serrano outlines the way in which journalists may act as the mouthpiece for actors of violence. As Serrano testifies, armed groups are rarely permitted media space to express themselves directly, but journalists demonstrate a tendency to adopt their language and terminology, thus framing information in a discourse of conflict and violence. Serrano illustrates this tendency with the use of the term ‘secuestrado’ in media discourse, highlighting how the term is used by journalists in the absence of any distancing or framing strategies, who thus adopt and circulate such terms, becoming, themselves, instruments in the discourse of violence. From a broader perspective, Sara Cobb notes that the nature of the narratives that are told about our communities and nations, as well as those which are left untold, reflect and recreate the violence that is perpetuated within them (Cobb, 2013).

We have seen how the narrativisation of violence is mediated and instrumentalised in political and media discourses for strategic ends. I want to examine a third and final aspect of the representation of violence in public discourse before going on to examine the literary representation of violence, and more particularly, that of Restrepo in *La multitud errante*.

Television – through news channels, soap operas and drama series – plays a highly significant role in the public perception and understanding of violence in Colombia as it reaches vast audiences, far larger than any other medium. In particular, a staple of television programming in recent times has taken the form of series, both entirely fictional and those based on historical events, such as the hugely popular *Escobar, el patrón del mal*, which recounts the life of the infamous leader of the Medellín cartel in the 1980s and 90s (Caracol, 2012). Yet, like political and other media narratives, television also leaves it to audiences to distinguish fact

from fiction, and myth from reality. As Juana Suárez highlights: ‘los conglomerados de televisión colombiana y los medios de comunicación en general han logrado crear un discurso reiterativo de la violencia, pocas veces ofreciendo programas [...] que ahonden en las estrategias culturales de presentación de la misma y proporcione herramientas de análisis’ (Suárez, 201: 14). Representations such as that of *Escobar, el patrón del mal* tend to emphasise the rags-to-riches lifestyles of the networks of people involved in the illegal drug trade, and celebrate Escobar as a mythical Robin-Hood type character who allegedly built schools and homes and provided work and resources for the people of his neighbourhood. As a result, they downplay, or overlook, the violence inflicted during the period, or else sensationalise it, creating action-plot narratives from the misery, terror and suffering from which it was born, and which it produced.

Such programming has also served to maintain a disproportionate focus on the illegal drug trade, emphasising its links with guerrilla groups, and portraying it as the root cause of violence in Colombia, obscuring the recorded paramilitary involvement with the illegal drug trade as well as the cooperation of paramilitary groups with state armed forces as another major contributor to contemporary violence in Colombia (Lemoine, 2013; 2013a). The tendencies observed here in the narratives of violence which circulate in political, media and cultural discourses – a sharper focus on urban violence at the expense of the more widespread rural violence, a disproportionate focus on the illegal drug trade, the downplaying of paramilitary and state forces as key actors in the conflict, and the mythologisation of key agents of violence – are also apparent in contemporary literary discourse. Violence in contemporary Colombian literature has predominantly been represented in such a way as to risk either banalising and normalising violence, or sensationalising and mythologising it, through its repetition as a trope in contemporary narratives, but also in the focus of the particular kind of violence that is portrayed, and the way in which it is represented.

The Colombian writer, Héctor Abad Faciolince, laments the ‘narcotización’ of Colombian literature in a recent article where he notes the public appetite for the testimonial literature written by ‘former’ agents of violence (i.e. hired assassins, paramilitary soldiers, traffickers) and which, he posits, risks accounting for recent Colombian history from a reductive perspective of violence (Abad Faciolince, 2012). To such texts we can compare Abad Faciolince’s own account of his experience of violence, *El olvido que seremos* (2006), in which he recounts the murder of his father, Héctor Abad Gómez, and which shares many of the narrative strategies of Restrepo’s *La multitud errante*. These two narratives which engage with

contemporary violence in Colombia are anomalous in the literary landscape of violence as they offer an alternative to the dominant tendencies, for the reasons discussed below.

María Helena Rueda observes that Colombian narratives of violence fall into two main categories: i) novels of war, violence and the guerrilla (or rural novels), and ii) novels of *narcotráfico* (or urban novels) (Rueda, 2004). This is a highly important distinction to make, when considered in light of the scarcity of the former (rural novels), and the frequency of the latter (urban novels). This quantifiable trend in the setting and focus of Colombian novels of violence also reflects the invisibility of the violence in the countryside, from the perspective of the city. If most of the people that read and write novels are located in the city, and most of the information regarding the conflict in Colombia is filtered through public and media discourses, it follows that the rural victims of the Colombian conflict are written out of literature, and out of history. Significantly, many contemporary Colombian authors state in interviews that they are merely attempting to give a realistic account in their novels, a realist intent that can perhaps be seen as an attempt to shake off the legacy of magic realism that has frustrated many Colombian writers who came after Gabriel García Márquez, and which also goes some way to explaining a resistance to rural settings, characteristic of the magic realists and a past literary tradition, and a preference for the urban, seen as more contemporary and more relevant. The terror of massacres, extortion, forced eviction and displacement of *campesinos* is far outweighed by the spectacle of urban violence, and the flashier narratives of gun-toting, fast-living drug cartels, or grittier narratives of the city's poor youth enlisted in the cartels' armies of dispensable traffickers and hitmen that have seen recent popularity in Colombian narratives such as Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios* (1994), Jorge Franco's *Rosario Tijeras* (1999), Sergio Alvarez's *La lectora* (2001), and more recently, Juan Gabriel Vásquez's *El ruido de las cosas al caer* (2011). In this selective focus we see literary narratives reflecting trends in television programming, and echoing the surge in popularity of soap operas and drama series known as '*narconovelas*', many of which are themselves developed from literary works (notably, the first three of the titles mentioned here have been adapted to film and/or television).

Claire Lindsay has noted the androcentric picture presented by surveys of Colombian literature, which is confirmed and reiterated by contemporary Colombian novels of violence (Lindsay, 2003). Some of the most widely read and adapted texts of recent times, the texts mentioned above have a common focus on the explicit depiction of violence, featuring a solitary male 'lone ranger' figure caught in a hostile world whose only recourse is violence. This is not to say that alternative narratives of violence do not exist. In *Guerras y paz en Colombia: las mujeres escriben*, Carmiña Navia Velasco focuses on a number of texts that seek to rethink and



restructure stories of violence, texts which are often overlooked by readers and critics and which offer an alternative to mythologised, ‘narcoticised’ accounts of violence (Navia Velasco, 2003). The proliferation of *novelas de violencia*, now arguably a genre of its own (Escobar), and the widespread reception of certain narratives that conform to particular trends raises the question of the role that narratives of violence play in the cultural construction of violence, as well as in the actual manifestation of violence in Colombian society. To what extent do literary narratives in Colombia offer a channel for understanding and resolving violence? Or do they rather contribute to feeding a national culture of violence, and a national myth of Colombia as an inherently violent nation?

Victoria Carpenter argues for the restorative potential of narratives of violence: ‘As long as violent acts are remembered in acts of narration, there is some hope that the collective memory of Latin America’s violent past and present may teach future generations to avoid entering a new cycle of self-destruction’ (Carpenter, 2007: 22). The literary challenge in this context is to portray armed conflict in such a way as to avoid normalising or banalising violence, and without mirroring the kind of sensationalist or mythologising tendencies present in certain media and cultural discourses. How can new strategies of representation be found in order to achieve the kind of narratives that Carpenter believes are possible? These are some of the questions that Restrepo poses in her texts and which are at the fore of *La multitud errante*, which offers a site of resistance to the dominant paradigms of the narrativisation of conflict and violence.

### **Rewriting violence in *La multitud errante***

One of the ways in which Restrepo resists dominant paradigms of the literary representation of violence is by shifting the focus of representation. In *La multitud errante*, Restrepo examines the disastrous consequences of the shifting face of the armed conflict in Colombia on its rural population throughout the second half of the twentieth century, beginning with the period of violence of the 1950s and continuing to the contemporary crisis. While we have seen that recent narratives in Colombia have demonstrated a disproportionate concern with the drug-related violence affecting Colombia’s urban populations, Restrepo’s novel examines the effects of the violent uprooting and internal displacement that affects vast numbers of Colombians from rural areas, forcing them into constant ongoing migration, or to migrate to makeshift neighbourhoods on the fringes of major urban centres. While Rueda observes that Restrepo’s use of ‘errancia’ as a configuration of displacement bears the disadvantage of obscuring the human or experiential agents that cause such displacement, I contend that it equally has the advantage of focusing on the consequences and plight of its victims, rather than on the perpetrators of

violence and thus is at the root of Restrepo's shift from a focus on the *acts* of violence to the *impact* of violence, and from its *actors* to its *victims*.

Narrated in the first person by a woman who works in a refuge for internally displaced migrants forced from their land by violence, *La multitud errante* tells the story of Siete por Tres, so named because he has six toes on one foot, thus twenty-one digits in all. Rueda illuminates Siete por Tres's nickname as an indication of the legacy of displacement: the loss of identity related to the loss of anchorage in a place, as well as the conversion of individual identity into figures and statistics, employed to emphasise the magnitude of the tragedy in place of individual stories (Rueda, 2004: 403). Of indigenous origin, Siete por Tres was raised by Matilde Lina, who found him on the steps of the town church where he was left by his parents when Conservative aggressors arrived in the Liberal town of Santamaría Balarina, killing most of the inhabitants including Siete por Tres's parents. As a consequence of the attack on the town on 1 January 1950, its survivors flee the site of violence in fear of repeat attacks and in search of refuge, and amongst them, Siete por Tres and Matilde Lina, who takes him under her wing. This is the first of three significant episodes of violence which mark his life, the second being when army forces attack the group of survivors, killing Matilde Lina when Siete por Tres is ten years old, and the third involving an unspecified armed group running him out of town on suspicion of being a guerrilla fighter. These three incidents occur prior to the novel's main plot, with the third and most recent incident leading to his stay at the refuge and his encounter with the refuge assistant who is also the narrator. One of the main concerns of the novel is with conveying the accumulative impact of living under the constant and ongoing threat of violence: a life of poverty, hunger, illness, fear, constant migration, and further violence.

From the outset, the protagonist's life is thus marked by errancy, illustrating Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the nomad as the ultimate 'war machine' and the violent, disruptive antithesis of settled societies, as developed in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1993 [1980]), as well as illustrating the very real phenomenon of the pattern of the victim becoming the perpetrator of violence, as is made clear when the protagonist says:

—Éramos víctimas, pero también éramos verdugos —reconoce Siete por Tres—. Huíamos de la violencia, sí, pero a nuestro paso la esparcíamos también. Asaltábamos haciendas; asolábamos sementeras y establos; robábamos para comer; metíamos miedo con nuestro estrépito; nos mostrábamos inclementes cada vez que nos cruzábamos con el otro bando. La guerra a todos envuelve, es un aire sucio que se cuele en toda nariz, y aunque no lo quiera, el que huye de ella se convierte a su vez en difusor. (*ME*, 35)

In this novel, as in other texts by Restrepo such as *Leopardo al sol* (1993) and *La novia oscura* (1999), Restrepo perceptively shows how violence operates and has persisted in Colombia.<sup>3</sup> Firstly, by illustrating the transformation of the victims into the perpetrators of violence as shown, and secondly, by demonstrating how stories of violence may have the effect of perpetuating actual violence. Before the Conservative attack reaches the Liberal town of Santamaría Bailarina in the opening pages of the novel, the residents of the town hear numerous reports of the anticipated violence, such as: ‘—Viene brava la vaina —se oía comentar entonces—. Por la cordillera viene bajando una chusma violenta clamando degüello general.’ (ME, 26) Through these reports of imminent violence that the townspeople transmit to each other, Restrepo not only demonstrates how the townspeople are primed for violent confrontation by these imports, she also provides a description of the logistics of violence, and how each band’s tactics of intimidation operated, for example: ‘—Los conservadores pintaron de azul todas las puertas del pueblo; pintaron de azul hasta las vacas y los burros, y dicen que al que se atreva a andar de colorado le van a tajar la garganta.’ (ME, 33) These tactics of intimidation and threat of massacre are familiar to contemporary local readers in that they are similar to the tactics used by guerrilla and paramilitary groups today who, prior to their arrival, first spread the word to publicise their demands of loyalty, subsequently meting out violent punishment to those they identify as disloyal.

The telling, or reporting of imminent violence is reiterated throughout *La multitud errante*, and is also demonstrated to be another vehicle which facilitates violence, by serving as a mouthpiece for the agents of violence (in a manner resonant with that noted by Serrano and discussed above). In adopting this narrative strategy, Restrepo illustrates how the townspeople, in reporting on the impending attack by the Conservative aggressors, are simultaneously enacting the role of their messengers, as emerges explicitly: ‘—Dicen los azules que sólo paran cuando hayan derramado toda la sangre liberal. Dicen que así piensan ganar las elecciones próximas.’ (ME, 33)

Restrepo equally explores another aspect of public discourse of violence in Colombia in *La multitud errante* by illustrating how violence takes on the quality of an autonomous force, when the narrator says: ‘Pero la violencia, librada a su antojo, en vez de pasar arreciaba y las noticias que llegaban de abajo eran soplos de desaliento.’ (ME, 33) In reflecting popular discourse,

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<sup>3</sup> For analysis see Elicenia Ramírez Vásquez. 2007. Entre el mito y la historia: una reflexión sobre la violencia en la novela *Leopardo al sol* de Laura Restrepo. *Estudios de literatura colombiana*, 21, 93-107; and Rory O’Byrne. 2008. *Literature, Testimony and Cinema in Contemporary Colombian Culture: Spectres of La Violencia*. Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY: Tamesis.

whereby violence is dehumanised and attributed with autonomy, Restrepo demonstrates how the human agents of violence are rendered invisible, and the agency of its victims undermined, as they come to see themselves as subject to an autonomous and therefore ‘incontestable’ force with no human cause to oppose. In this way Restrepo illustrates how the victims of the armed conflict in Colombia come to see violence as fate, as inescapable and unpreventable as natural disasters like flooding or landslides, phenomena to which the tropical climate and mountainous Colombian terrain is also prone. The now persistent state of violence in Colombia explains why some now see violence as inherent to the region, given that three generations of Colombians have now experienced constant violence. While the contributory factors and causes of the violence have changed from the early part of the twentieth century to the present, and while the population has experienced peaks and periods of relative calm, the fact of persistent violence remains.

Thus *La multitud errante* also explores the impact of repeatedly witnessing, and of growing up with a constant backdrop of violence:

Fue así como a los pocos meses de vida, Siete por Tres debió ver por vez primera —¿por segunda?, ¿por tercera?— el espectáculo nocturno de las casas en llamas; los animales sin dueño bramando en la distancia; la oscuridad que palpita como una asechancia; los cadáveres blandos e inflados que trae la corriente y que se aferran a los matorrales de las orillas, negándose a partir; el río temeroso de sus propias aguas que se aleja de prisa, queriendo desprenderse del cauce. (*ME*, 31)

As this passage also illustrates, perhaps the most significant way in which Restrepo disrupts dominant paradigms of the representation of violence within the recent tradition of Colombian literature of violence is the representation of the impact of violence *without explicitly representing violence itself*. Images of houses in flames, of panicked animals, and of bloated corpses in rivers, while not violent in themselves, evoke very powerfully the horror of which they are the product. By exposing the impact of violence whilst refusing to contribute to the construction of violence as spectacle, Restrepo posits the restorative potential of narratives of violence at the same time as she distances herself from a wider discourse that focuses on the acts and actors of violence, rather than on its impact and its victims. We see repeated instances of implied violence in *La multitud errante*, many of them related to Matilde Lina. When she disappears from the narrative, her abuse and murder by the army are never in doubt despite the fact that they are not reported explicitly: ‘—A Matilde Lina la maltrataron, la arrancaron del niño y la llevaron arrastrada hasta algún lugar del cual no se tuvo noticia’. (*ME*, 49.) Finally, such references introduce a further consequence of violence also explored by Restrepo in *La*

*multitud errante* and frequently overlooked in other narratives: the horror of losing relatives or others to violence, while suffering the ongoing trauma of not knowing exactly what happened to them, or where they, or their bodies, are. As *Siete por Tres* wonders about Matilde Lina's disappearance: '¿La doblaron trincándola del cabello, la tildaron de perdida y de demente, la obligaron a hincarse entre el barro, la quebraron en dos, le partieron el alma? [...] *Siete por Tres* no lo sabe.' (*ME*, 50)

### **Conclusions**

In this article I have argued that Restrepo uses a variety of strategies in the representation of violence in *La multitud errante* which work to disrupt narrative mechanisms by which violence produces and perpetuates itself, and which distinguish Restrepo's text from other contemporary Colombian narratives of violence. Much could be said of the problematic position of the narrator, and of Restrepo's reflections in the text on unequal power structures – both within the novel and regarding the wider resonances beyond the novel – which have been insightfully discussed elsewhere (O'Bryen 2008; Rueda, 2004). Suffice it to say that Restrepo explores new ways of revisiting issues of fundamental national and international significance that sees her follow in the footsteps of other Colombian women writers (such as Rocío Vélez de Piedrahita, Albalucía Ángel, Marvel Moreno, Flor Romero, and Fanny Buitrago) whose critical works about national life are conditioned by a sense of authorial responsibility towards their reading public, a comparable sense of responsibility that is also demonstrated by Restrepo throughout her corpus, as I discuss elsewhere (Averis, 2014: 98-129). Like her predecessors, Restrepo demonstrates an ongoing commitment to engage with the events of contemporary history. Yet this is less a personal struggle to come to terms with the individual experience of historical circumstances and the trauma of violence, than an effort to win back representation from a dominant tendency of the representation of urban, drug-related violence which has focused on the acts and actors of violence, overshadowing the impact of violence in rural areas, and consigning its victims to silence.

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