

## *Introduction*

*Raymond Leslie Williams*

Colombia's literature is one of its most revered national treasures, yet, paradoxically, it is generally less known outside of its national boundaries than are its internationally recognized visual artists, performance artists, soccer players, and even drug traffickers. Since the 1970s, this international ignorance with respect to Colombian literature has gradually changed, primarily because of the enormous international impact of the writing of Gabriel García Márquez. Since the meteoric rise in the international scenario of García Márquez, particularly since his Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982, today international readers have become aware of translations of writers such as Alvaro Mutis, Fernando Vallejo, Jorge Franco, and Laura Restrepo. At the same time, scholars from around the world have become increasingly regular readers of Colombian literature published in the original Spanish.

In the early sixteenth century, when the Spanish conquistador Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada explored and conquered the region we now call Colombia, he was motivated by a fiction—the legend of El Dorado. Venturing up the Magdalena River with his soldiers, he found neither gold mines nor the fountain of eternal youth but some emeralds, a mountain full of salt, and butterflies. When he returned to Spain, he filled the ears of the Spanish Crown with more fictions and was sent back to the New World to pursue his dream. The experience of Jiménez de Quesada was but an early example of the complex, often confounding interaction between a literary and a more scientific understanding of Colombia over the centuries. Jiménez de Quesada was the quintessential man of letters, for he was the author of several tomes on a variety of political and literary topics. His *Antijovio*, written in approximately 1567 and published centuries later, is the earliest literary or historical text to which the contemporary reader has access.

The formative period of the new nation, from 1810 to 1862, was dominated intellectually by Julio Arboleda (1817–62) and José Eusebio Caro (1817–53). Writers of this period were typically young large

landowners and aristocrats, most of whom were either actual participants or sons of those who had fought in the battles of independence. Arboleda and Caro, men of letters who thought of themselves primarily as poets, belonged to the landed gentry. Two of the most noteworthy novelists of the period were Eugenio Díaz and Juan José Nieto. During their lifetimes, however, they were viewed as social and intellectual novices whose work was relatively unimportant as literature, since their novels in particular and the genre in general rendered an insignificant contribution to the ideological enterprises of the upper class political and literary elite. Political essays, for example, had much more immediate impact; Díaz and Nieto today remain relatively unrecognized as novelists.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, José María Vergara y Vergara had a major role in authenticating the novelists into the “national” literature he was promulgating. He admitted new intellectuals into this essentially male and Conservative national literary group – *El Mosaico* – with the proper class and literary credentials, as in the case of Jorge Isaacs, a young aristocratic. After serving his early literary apprenticeship with *El Mosaico*, Isaacs returned to the Greater Cauca to write his only novel, *María*, which appeared in 1867.

The major intellectual figures of the 1886 to 1909 period were Rafael Núñez (1825–94), Miguel Antonio Caro (1843–1909), Rufino José Cuervo (1844–1911), and José Asunción Silva (1865–96). Núñez was president, and Caro was his vice president and later became president. Many Colombian scholars have also considered them to be the “official” poets of the period. Núñez composed the “himno nacional,” the present-day national anthem. This song is a text parallel to the constitution of 1886, which, in turn, became the instrument for the political legitimization of the Regeneration. These four leading intellectual figures of the Regeneration were poets and scholars of the language. An exception was Silva’s one novel of “modernista” aesthetic, *De sobremesa* (1886).

The rise and the fall of the concept of Bogotá as the “Athens of South America” took place from 1910 to 1929, a period of Conservative domination. Following the Regeneration model, and despite such irreverent writers as José María Vargas Vila and Clímaco Soto Borda, literature in Colombia continued to function to a considerable extent in its role as moral ideology. The writer and Conservative president Marco Fidel Suárez was perhaps the most prominent example of the socially beneficial effects of writing, as his essayistic production contributed to his own social acceptance by the elite. Suárez was the last Colombian president to embody the ideal of the capital as the Athens of South America. At the

*Introduction*

3

same time, Suárez was the last representative of the nineteenth-century pastoral ideal as nation.

A period of unprecedented peace, never achieved before or after in Colombia, transpired from 1910 to 1929. No conflicts of national importance took place until the roots of La Violencia began to appear in certain rural areas in the 1930s. Signs of modernity were the establishment of the national airline in 1919 and the first radio transmission in 1925. With respect to culture, several regional publishing houses began to publish novels and to distribute them regionally. An important contribution to national culture involved the national newspaper *El Tiempo* initiating a literary supplement in 1923 and *El Espectador* making its debut with a weekly literary supplement in the following year.

The two generations of writers and intellectuals are often placed in this period are the *Generación del Centenario* and the *Generación de los Nuevos*. Following the Spanish idea of a national literature developed by successive generations since the Generation of '98 and Colombian intellectuals have assigned to these generations of task of producing an organic national literature.

José Eustacio Rivera was considered the major novelist of the period. In the cultural debates, nationalistic attitudes prevailed and lengthy debates on the existence of a national cultural tradition, such as music, were carried out in the 1920s. Emilio Murillo, Pedro Morales Pino, Guillermo Quevedo, and Luis A. Calvo participated in the debates; Osorio and Rafael Burgos founded a national theater, and in 1927 a national film company was established. A lacuna for a "national culture" was the novel. Rivera's *La vorágine* was the timely answer to this lacuna, and the nationalistic positive reaction to it has often eliminated any question in Colombia about its authentic value.

Tomás Carrasquilla proclaimed a national literary independence in 1906, calling for what he considered a "modern," national literature. Despite the allusions to modernity and newness, Carrasquilla's literary practice itself, was, paradoxically, quite traditional – basically an ideal of nineteenth-century rural Antioquian values and its oral and popular culture. His novel *Grandeza* (1910) concerns Medellín's turn-of-the-century new rich and relates the eventual ruin of the female protagonist who negates the elitist aestheticism of the Highland writers and intellectuals. Carrasquilla states in his preface that *Grandeza* is a book of few aesthetic concerns – only some notes on his milieu.

A series of Liberal governments promoted modernization from 1930 to 1946, with progressive social and economic reform being particularly

dramatic under Alfonso López Pumarejo's government. The most widely recognized national literature, however, continued to be the elitist poetry. The novel, often written by Liberals, functioned as a relatively minor genre, for Colombian literature was viewed primarily as a generational succession of poets. After the national frenzy generated by *La vorágine*, some writers attempted to imitate it; it was a novel that lauded the sensitive poet figure.

By following literary history chronologically as it is frequently projected in Colombia, the reader of Colombian letters can conclude that the literature of this period was continued by the generation of Piedra y Cielo and soon thereafter by the generation of Cántico. The poet Jorge Rojas founded the Piedra y Cielo group in 1939 by publishing an ongoing collection of poetry using this name. The poets Rojas, Eduardo Carranza, Arturo Camacho Ramírez, Carlos Martín, Tomás Vargas Osorio, and Gerardo Valencia were the main poets of this generation of writers, who espoused inspiration from the poetry the Spaniards Juan Ramón Jiménez, Rafael Alberti, and Gerardo Diego. The Cántico group (an homage to Spanish poet Jorge Guillén) was established in 1944 by the Colombian poet Jaime Ibáñez. Polemics around the Piedra y Cielo poets, such as the debate fomented by Juan Lozano y Lozano in 1940, contributed to the group's authenticity. In the big picture of national culture, they were a relatively small group of poets based in Bogotá.

Along with these poets, a group of scholars and critics, mostly employing very conservative criteria, came forth during this period with a body of work, most of which promoted the idea of a national literary tradition in a country historically fragmented by region. This series of national literary histories included José Joaquín Torres's *Historia de la literatura colombiana* (1935), Antonio Gómez Restrepo's *Historia de la literatura colombiana* (1938–45), Javier Arango Ferrer's *La literatura colombiana* (1940), Baldomero Sanín Cano's *Letras colombianas* (1944), Rafael Maya's *Consideraciones críticas sobre la literatura colombiana* (1944), and Gustavo Otero Núñez's *Historia de la literatura colombiana* (1945). The most informational of these books of traditional and essentially conservative literary history was Antonio Gómez Restrepo's history of Colombian literature.

Given the traditional and conservative overtones of Guillermo Valencia's poetry, which was still much lauded in the 1940s and 1950s, the strong presence of several generations of poets, and the central place of the novel *La vorágine*, the Colombian novel did not play a major role in the cultural scenario. Colombia was not the kind of setting that promoted

*Introduction*

5

the kind of modern novel that was arising throughout most of Latin America as Jorge Luis Borges, Miguel Angel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, and a host of others were actively involved in creating a new, modern fiction closely aligned to the European avant-gardes and Anglo-American Modernism. Colombia would not host the modern novel until the rise of Gabriel García Márquez in the 1950 and the publication of *La hojarasca* (1955, *Leafstorm*), followed by the fiction of Alvaro Cepeda Samudio and Héctor Rojas Herazo.

Three decades before being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, García Márquez claimed in 1960 that Colombian literature was a fraud to the nation. This was both a political statement and aesthetic judgment about an elite literary establishment that had supported its mediocre poets – such as Guillermo Valencia – as canonical Colombian writers. This was also an attack against a weak corpus of critical work by scholars and journalistic critics who were unwilling or unable to recognize legitimate literary value. For García Márquez, the Colombian novel had reached a point of nothingness and the supposedly great poetic voices were mediocre.

In this volume, we review and discuss Literature and society in Colombia in essays that have been organized into three parts. In Part I, “Colombian literature, culture, and society” we provide an overview of Colombian literature over the centuries, from the Colonial period into the twenty-first century. The first three chapters deal primarily with the complexities of the Colonial period. In the first of these chapters, Michael Palencia-Roth discusses the diversity of literatures of Colonial period, focusing on Spanish-language authors primarily, but also taking into account “colonial discourse.” He makes the case that the Colonial period had much to offer in terms of intellectual history. In Chapter 2, “Cosmography, ethnography, and the literary imagination of the New Kingdom of Granada,” Elizabeth Pettinaroli interrogates issues related to the 1538 publication of Alonso de Santa Cruz’s *Epítome de las conquistas del Nuevo Reino de Granada*. James Alstrum begins in the Colonial period and the epic poetry of Juan de Castellanos in “Colombian poetry from the Colonial period to *Modernismo* (1500–1920) in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 consists of Kevin Guerrieri’s presentation of more than a century of the Colombian novel in “The Colombian novel: 1844–1970.” Guerrieri’s approach, however, is less a chronological overview than a reflection on the literary historiography of the novel in relation to the novel during this long century. He identifies and discusses four “tensions” or “vectors” for his discussion. In Chapter 5, James Alstrum reviews the major and minor movements in

modern Colombian poetry since 1920. Chapter 6 is an overview of the Colombian novel of the late twentieth century by Juan Pablo Bustos and Raymond L. Williams. We cover from the novel of “La Violencia” of the 1970s to the new urban violence of the 1980s and 1990s. In “Twenty-first century fiction,” Claire Taylor and I review recent trends in twenty-first-century fiction in Chapter 7, from the new urban violence and the “sicaresque” to fiction written using recent digital technology. In Chapter 8, Lucía Garavito addresses issues related to transgenerational violence and the sociopolitical body in theater in her contribution “Colombian theater: staging the sociopolitical body.” In the closing chapter of Part I, Chapter 9, Héctor Hoyos provides a thorough and insightful overview of the Colombian essay from the Colonial period to the twenty-first century, thus providing much of the intellectual background to many of the previous essays of this first part of the volume.

In Part II, “Colombian culture and society in regional contexts,” we recognize that Colombia was really a grouping of relatively autonomous regions during the first century of its existence as a nation of sorts. Thus, we provide a closer look at some specific regional scenarios in Colombia, with no intention of exhaustive completeness with respect to the regions. In this second part, we are more interested in depth than breadth, with more in-depth consideration of society and culture per se. In Chapter 10, “Literature, culture, and society of the Magdalena River,” Rory O’Bryen considers a broad range of cultural and socioeconomic issues related to the economic consequences of capitalistic enterprise in the Caribbean coastal region of the Magdalena River. Juan Carlos González Espitia’s “The Highland region as seen by an outsider from the inside and an insider from the outside” in Chapter 11 offers an analysis of how foreigners to Colombian society viewed the Highland region, as well as how Colombians living abroad viewed Colombia from afar. Thus, much of this discussion deals with how the German scientist and explorer Alexander Von Humboldt viewed the Highland region compared to how the iconoclastic Colombian José María Vargas Vila viewed it from abroad. In Chapter 12, Mercedes López Rodríguez analyzes racialized discourse in the Andean highland region of Colombia. Studying a variety of nineteenth-century texts, she reveals how lettered elites defined and limited “whiteness” in literature. She includes such canonical texts in Colombia as *María* and *Manuela*. Chapter 13 is an analysis of society and culture in Antioquia, written by a lifetime intellectual and resident of Antioquia, Juan Luis Mejía. In Chapter 14, to conclude Part II, González-Bohórquez and Dodson Lee provide an overview of regions that have been historically

*Introduction*

7

marginalized by mainline Colombian culture. In regions such as La Guajira, indigenous peoples were recognized for the first time in the Colombian constitution of 1991 as true citizens of Colombia. This constitution recognized Colombia as a multiethnic nation. Since then, an increasing number of indigenous writers have begun publishing in their indigenous languages and in Spanish. Writers in the Caribbean islands of San Andrés, known as *raizales*, have also become increasingly active in the past two decades. In addition, some writers in Colombia who are recognized writers in Spanish have begun recounting the traditional stories of San Andrés.

In Part III, “Beyond the boundaries,” we consider Colombian culture and literature from a wide variety of perspectives not offered in Parts I and II. In our consideration of García Márquez (in Chapter 15), we did not consider it necessary, at this point in the second decade of the twenty-first century, to construct yet another overview of García Márquez’s fiction in itself. Our alternative approach is Gene H. Bell-Villada’s discussion of the figure of García Márquez as a public intellectual. Bell-Villada provides an historical perspective on the figure of the public intellectual in the West, introduces some of the major public intellectuals in Latin America, and then provides informed insight into the role García Márquez had as a public intellectual until his untimely death in 2014. Claire Taylor’s Chapter 16 “Women writers in Colombia” offers an in-depth perspective on exclusively women writers in Colombia, from the nation’s independence until well into the twenty-first century. She includes *crónicas* of the nineteenth century and journalism in the twenty-first century, as well as the traditional short story and the novel. In Chapter 17, Gina Ponce de León discusses queer narrative in contemporary Colombia. She goes back to the renowned early twentieth-century poet Barba Jacob and covers up to the twenty-first century with writers such as Fernando Vallejo and Jaime Manrique, particularly in the context of their queer topics. Chapter 18 consists of Mark Anderson and Marcela Reales’s “Extracting nature: toward an ecology of Colombian narrative,” a detailed proposal for rereading nature in Colombian fiction. In Chapter 19, Ana María Mutis and Elizabeth Pettinaroli, “Visions of nature: Colombian literature and environment from the Colonial period to the nineteenth century,” the two authors analyze visions of nature in major texts written by Colombian writers of the Colonial period and the nineteenth century. Enrique Salas Durazo’s “The intersections between poetry and fiction in two Colombian Writers of the Twentieth Century: Alvaro Mutis and Darío Jaramillo Agudelo” (Chapter 20), is the author’s

exploration the subtle ways in which the respective authors' poetry informs their fiction, and vice versa.

In the "Afterwords," we offer two chapters of reflection on the entirety of Colombian literature, one reflection by a Colombian writer, another by a scholar of Latin American literature who generally works outside the borders of Colombia. In Chapter 21, a writer and reader of Colombia literature, Darío Jaramillo Agudelo, writes "Colombian literature: national treasure or fraud?" He offers an in-depth overview of how Colombian and foreign critics have viewed and judged Colombian literature since the early nineteenth century. He delves into how foreign critics, such as the Argentine Miguel Cané, praised Colombian literature to such a degree in the late nineteenth century that it became a widely accepted assumption, in Colombia, that Colombian literature was widely recognized in the international scenario as a literary leader. It is not until García Márquez's oft-cited essay in 1960, "La literatura colombiana: un fraude a la nación," (Colombian literature: a fraud to the nation) that the virtuosity of Colombian letters had ever been seriously placed into doubt. Jaramillo Agudelo's chapter thoroughly rethinks how Colombian literature has been perceived and evaluated before and after this seminal 1960 essay by the Nobel Laureate. In Chapter 22, Elzbieta Sklodowska, offer some well-informed and thorough final reflections on the state of culture, literature, and criticism in Colombia. She reviews the study of Colombian literature and culture in the context of recent developments in postcolonial studies, signaling the important recent contributions of scholars such as Joana Rappaport and Lesley Wylie.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brushwood, John S. *The Spanish American Novel: A Twentieth-Century Survey*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1975.
- Foster, David William. *Gay and Lesbian Themes in Latin American Writing*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991.
- Sexual Textualities: Essays on Queering Latin American Writing*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997.
- Gómez Ocampo, Gilberto. *Entre "María" y "La vorágine": la literatura colombiana finisecular (1886–1903)*. Bogotá: Fondo Cultural Cafetero, 1988.
- González Echevarría, Roberto and Enrique Pupo-Walker. *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature*. 3 vols. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1996
- Kline, Harvey. *Colombia: A Portrait of Unity and Diversity*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1983.

*Introduction*

9

- Levy, Kurt. *Tomas Carrasquilla*. Medellín: Institución de Integración Integral, 1985.
- McGrady, Donald. *María*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1972.
- McGreevey, William Paul. *An Economic History of Colombia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- Menton, Seymour. *La novela colombiana: planetas y satélites*. Bogotá: Plaza y Janés, 1977.
- Rappaport, Joana. *Intercultural Utopias: Public Intellectuals, Cultural Experimentation and Ethnic Pluralism in Colombia*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Wade, Gerald. "An Introduction to the Colombian Novel," *Hispania* 30, No. 4 (November 1947): 467–83.
- Wylie, Lesley. *Forgotten Frontier: A Literary Geography of the Putumayo*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-08135-2 - A History of Colombian Literature  
Raymond Leslie Williams  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---