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Creation and (Re)presentation of Historical Discourse in *Isle of Passion* by Laura Restrepo

Abstract

Published in Colombia in 1989, but neglected until the author's later distinction, Laura Restrepo's first novel, *Isle of Passion*, focuses on historical facts, as well as on the issues that arise when the impact of events is articulated in official discourse. This study—drawing from Walter Dignolo's idea of decolonial theory—explores how Restrepo's attempt to rewrite history following “an-other logic, an-other language, an-other thinking” contributes to the decolonization of knowledge, being, community interests, and cultural heritage. The novel's plot centers on a minor event in international history: the territorial dispute over the island of Clipperton, which was encountered by an English pirate escaping the Spaniards in the 1700's, claimed by the Mexicans for its geographical proximity, owned (since 1930) by the French, and occasionally disputed by the English and US governments. Writing while personally experiencing the trauma of exile, Restrepo narrates the forgotten story of the Mexican soldiers—deployed with their families to defend the island—as a metaphor of marginalization. Clipperton, therefore, represents not only a geographical, but also a historical entity. This reading of *Isle of Passion* describes how its creative disorder recovers a chapter of national history, finally retold by its silenced protagonists.

Keywords

Laura Restrepo, novel, *Isle of Passion*, Colombian literature, exile, marginalization

Creation and (Re)presentation of Historical Discourse
in *Isle of Passion* by Laura Restrepo

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Preoccupied with memory and the definition of truth in History, the Colombian ex-journalist Laura Restrepo has created her own literary space between and among genres with a novel based on rigorous historical research. This essay presents a reading of *La isla de la pasión* (1989) *Isle of Passion* (2005)—her first novel, hardly read until the writer attained international recognition in later years. The critical corpus that has formed around Restrepo’s work over the last five years records her deep commitment towards the (re)writing of national and continental History, demonstrating the postcolonial character of a discourse that subverts phallocentrism as it reorganizes the patriarchal literary canon.¹ Among the most recent criticism, *El universo literario de Laura Restrepo* (2007) ‘The Literary Universe of Laura Restrepo,’ brings together twenty-two essays and three interviews presenting a variety of readings generated internationally by Restrepo’s writing. The discussion starts with Paolo Vignolo’s introductory essay on *Isle of Passion* titled “Doubtful Existence: between History and Utopia.” After decanting the hybridity of the literary text—designed within the journalistic deontology of its author—Vignolo emphasizes the presence of a “clear political stance” reflecting upon “the emergency of History from the bottom up” (64, my trans.).² The critic stresses the contraposition between the hegemonic vision of official history and the subordinate vision proceeding from the personal stories of the novel’s protagonists. Starting from Vignolo’s argument, I propose a non-localistic reading of Restrepo’s text that highlights the presence of a universal

repertoire of ideas and problematics even within the geo-historical and cultural specificity of the fictional setting. Virtually all critics of Restrepo's narrative have discussed questions of genre definition—fiction, non-fiction, (new) historical novel.³ As a matter of fact, *Isle of Passion* was almost not published because editors would not validate its generic hybridity. However, the fact that the novel embraces the rhetoric of other genres does not indicate a hesitation on the writer's part, but a deliberate literary mode that consolidated itself some time before publication. After receiving the first draft of *Isle of Passion*, an English editor told Restrepo that he was "willing to publish it provided [she] made up [her] mind, once and for all, if what [she] wanted to produce was a novel or reportage," (qtd. in Manrique 7) so she decided that what this editor asked of her was exactly what she was not going to do, adding the following note at the beginning of the book: "The historical facts, places, names, dates, documents, statements, characters, living and dead persons appearing in this story are real. So are the minor details, sometimes." "Looking back," Restrepo noted, "I see that this was my declaration of independence with respect to the borders between genres" (qtd. in Manrique 7). My goal here is to interpret the novel's narrative strategy in the light of the decolonial theory conceptualized by Walter D. Mignolo, who highlights that the (re)writing of history according to another logic, another language, and another thought pattern contributes to the decolonization of knowledge understood as a community of universal interests and cultural heritage. This analysis centers on how the experience of recovering and balancing historic memory is transcribed, as private trauma that is exhumed for public view. To this end, I will identify the esthetic and literary strategies that allow the turning around of historical discourse and rectification of history through a constantly oblique and disorderly view. Restrepo's text reproduces a non-colonial stance that calls for projecting the same perspective presented through the story towards reality itself. As a result, the narration transforms itself into a gigantic sounding board for contemporary, cultural issues.

Characterized by a plausible, metafictional intent,⁴ *The Isle of Passion* allows other points of view to materialize, in which marginalized subjects create their discourse by articulating the difference between what is said—and known—and what is not known

because it is not part of the official discourse. In this polyphonic ensemble, the writer amalgamates literary creation with historical reality while the narrative voice exposes the effort necessary to sort and assemble its puzzle. In the novel, in accordance with Restrepo, the reader finds herself side by side with a narrative voice that

is always doing this exercise of penetrating behind the mirror to see the hidden side of reality, [...], the backside of the tapestry, [...] the place where you see the knots, in which you don't see the fabric already polished and perfect, but how it still is in the reverse [...], so that one can see reality through the obverse. (qtd. in Melis 120)

During the six years she was exiled in Mexico, after a series of threats following her political militancy, Restrepo found the opportunity to speak of her own situation in metaphoric terms in a chapter of Mexican history.⁵ In one of the first interviews with Restrepo, published in the United States, the writer recounts that her first novel originated from the experience of isolation and yearning that she had to go through at that moment, inside the “confinement in the very special island that is political exile, with its strange struggle for existence and close coexistence with other castaways” (qtd. in Manrique 5). As well as configuring itself as a metaphor of exile, the text makes it possible to recover a segment of international history—a real event previously overlooked and now rescued through the voice of its protagonists—and to participate in the postcolonial debate about the (de)construction of official history and geopolitical configurations. The reader deals with a non-chronological historical narration that articulates and reaffirms what Mignolo terms decolonial vision, which allows for the creation of other points of view of the same event and the setting of new epistemological paradigms, a new geopolitics of knowledge:

History is an institution that legitimates the telling of stories of *happenings* simultaneously silencing other stories [...]. Once you get out of the natural belief that history is a chronological succession of events [we can then look at it] as a series of nodes in which [...] heterogeneity [...] provides a theoretical anchor in the perspective of local histories (and languages) instead of grand narratives. (*The Idea of Latin America* 29, 48, 49, original em-

phasis)

Isle of Passion narrates the historical events that took place in Mexico at the beginning of the twentieth century during Porfirio Díaz's second term of office (1884-1911). The plot cannot transcend the context of the Mexican Revolution; however, this macro-historic event, although causally and relevantly connected to the narrated incidents, holds together the protagonists' stories only indirectly. What moves the action forward is an event that lacked any relevance in Mexican history during a period when the country and the entire world were torn apart: the 1931 dispute between the Mexican government and France over France's commitment to the colonizing effort to secure sovereignty over the tiny island of Clipperton, 945 kilometers southeast of Mexico in the Pacific Ocean. Within the first duality—national and international history—a second one is generated, juxtaposing larger political issues to the central storyline of the novel. Yet, in the text, local and world history are placed in the margin and simply interspersed in the story of the protagonists' vicissitudes.

Structurally, the novel is divided into three narrative macrosegments—"Clipperton," "Marooned" and "The Last Man." The first opens with an untitled section following the rhetoric of a prologue—dated "Mexico City, December 1988"—whose creator is plausibly the same I as the compiler of the events. The prologue is set in one of the numerous chronotopes of the novel, the one nearest to the contemporary reader, which refers to the year 1988, as do all the segments framed by the temporal marker "Today." In this temporal coordinate, **the spatial frame varies as the narrator travels** to Orizaba, Mexico City, Colima, Acapulco, and Taxco in search of evidence. The most remote point on the spatiotemporal line is "Clipperton, 1705"; the rest of the fragments put into place by the narrative voice are distributed between 1902 and 1917. I insist on using the term narrative voice because, even though all critics have identified the first-person narrator with a female *narradora* 'narrator,' nowhere does the text introduce gender indicators that would allow us to assign a female identity to the narrative I. Moreover, the most significant **characteristic of this narrating I is the renunciation** of an authoritative stance, in that it does not strive to polarize the attention upon him/herself, but rather emerges, unassumingly,

only in the eleven microsegments headed with the temporal marker “Today”:

Finally, after knocking on many wrong doors, poring through the telephone directories [...], consulting with public officials, admirals, deep-sea divers, pious church ladies, tarot card readers, and local historians, *I* came across someone on a street corner who, almost by chance, gave *me* this address. If it is correct, *I* will finally have found one of the last three survivors of the Clipperton tragedy. [...] In some dark corner of her mind this story that *I* am looking for is ensconced, well preserved. (8-9, emphasis added)

Through its patient work, the discrete intradiegetic *I* that relates the story converses with witnesses, respectfully interrogates them, takes trips, walks through city squares, reads military dossiers and private journals, investigates official archives, studies novels and newspapers from the turn of the century, makes telephone calls, looks at photographs, and speaks with the owners of old businesses. Juxtaposed against the narrator’s voice, the separate voice of an author intervenes by way of six concise footnotes, to clarify or rectify the scant bio-bibliographic data referring to the characters. **Finally, after the brief “Epilogue,” placed outside the narrative frame, two additional sections—“Acknowledgements” (353) and “Bibliography” (albeit only in the Spanish editions)—leave an objective indication of the narrative construction process and, in passing, hint at the possibility of a detailed study of the historical facts that have been unearthed.**

There is a text that functions as a link between the historic-journalistic work of Restrepo and her novelistic production. In 1986, the Colombian subsidiary of Plaza & Janes published a long report titled *Historia de una traición* (1986) ‘Story of a Betrayal’ that Restrepo wrote as a journalist and member of the “Commission on Negotiation and Dialogue” created by the government of Belisario Betancur to mediate the relations with two guerrilla organizations that signed a truce with the government in 1984. In the prologue of the first edition of the report, the writer exposes her intentions without hesitation:

My name is Laura Restrepo, I am a journalist and a member of the “Commission on Negotiation and Dialogue” [...]. My offi-

cial and somewhat discredited appointment [...] was [...] a front row seat to witness [...] a key episode of recent Latin American history [...]. Since I think the testimonies of the people [...] should not be records sleeping in the bottom of a drawer of some public official, which is the only thing that has happened up until this point, today I give mine to the public opinion. (11)

To consider that **people's testimonies "should not be records sleeping in the bottom of a drawer"** presents a motivation similar to that which animates the narrative voice in *Isle of Passion*. The substantial difference is that, in the literary text, the lack of egocentrism, combined with the energy and expository grace of the narrative voice, attracts the attention of the reader, who focuses quickly and exclusively on the details of the story: "A doll abandoned decades ago is lying on the rocks. [...] On this same beach [...] a while back there were children running after booby birds [...]. But this was all before tragedy struck" (3-4).

As the chronology of time and space dissolves, the text elicits the readjustment of all mechanisms of perception of the truth. A blunt literary proposal, since we live in a historic juncture in which there is a tendency to pose clear-cut truths on the one hand and to believe in organized and simple macro-narratives on the other. By (re)presenting a vision of history that is neither territorial, nor lineal, but off-centered and fragmented, Restrepo reaffirms the necessity to unauthenticate the sender of the official story. And, exercising her right not to know and the right not to believe, the author reclaims the relevance of an inquisitive desire for historical accuracy.⁶ At the same time, the willingness to rectify and to try to illuminate dark areas problematizes truth, and once again reaffirms that the only way to recount history is to rummage through stories, to juxtapose experiences, to contrast points of view. *Isle of Passion* is a perfectly constructed tale, only seemingly chaotic, since both the plot and the narrative strategies facilitate the direct experience of a kaleidoscopic vision of history.

The novel tells the story of Ramón Arnaud, son of a French bureaucrat and Orizaba (Veracruz) railroad builder who, at the age of twenty-seven, after his father's death, joins the military in Mexico and is sent to this island of Clipperton, in command of a unit of eleven soldiers. The notification of the mission both dismays and

flatters the second lieutenant, who senses ambivalence in the stilted speech of his colonel, but chooses to focus on the moment's official fanfare, just when his desperate, initial attempts to protest

[...] merely served to free the torrent of Colonel Avalos' patriotic fervor. [...] **Ramón Arnaud could perceive only fragments, unconnected phrases** that reached his ears slowly, as if deferred [...]. "There are issues that must take precedence," the colonel went on irrepresibly. "Now is the time for daring action...think of your country, your homeland...of defending this piece of Mexican soil from the French, who want to take possession ... of taking up arms against historical injustice... Mexicans do answer the call to arms... (21)

Ramón's mind continues registering the doubts of a soldier who is weighing the advantages and disadvantages of his imminent deployment: "Arnaud was stunned by it all. What at first had sounded like a terrible disgrace and a punishment had suddenly turned into that golden opportunity to change the course of his life" (22-23).

The time marker, in the section just quoted, is the year 1907. Later—after the reader has been catapulted haphazardly through four different time periods (1918, "Today," 1917, 1908)—the narrating voice relates the events of August 30, 1908, the day on which the newlyweds Ramón and Alicia, accompanied by eleven soldiers, plus *soldaderas* and children, arrive at Clipperton.⁷ On the island a silent "reception committee" (58), formed by half a dozen soldiers and a handful of women and children, is awaiting them:

Alicia looked at them from the barge and they seemed dejected and lonesome in that hot weather. [...] The small, faded universe in front of her eyes reverberated and consumed itself in a slow combustion. Alicia saw how the ocean seemed to explode over the reefs, pounding the rocks, the few sickly coconut palms, and the human beings [...]. The ocean spray would fall slowly on the people, transforming them into salt statues. It was only in their eyes, in the feverish eagerness in their gaze, that Alicia discovered the great expectations, repressed but fierce, for the boat's arrival. [...] "They all look like castaways—Alicia thought uneasily. Someday I myself will be watching for the arrival and will also have an expression on my face like Juan Diego's when the Virgin

of Guadalupe appeared to him.” (57-58)

The ships gain significance throughout the text because they foster the narration's dynamics—bringing, periodically, the goods necessary for the survival of the island's inhabitants—and also because they end up acquiring the symbolic value of referents of the divided existence of the protagonists. For Ramón and Alicia, life in Clipperton entails the dispossession of material well-being and the obliteration of their civic and social identity. **During the periods** lived in isolation “within that penny-sized universe” (72), the existence established in the immobile time of Clipperton starts to seem, for all of the characters, in fact, bearable and tranquil, marked by the simplest events. However, with the arrival of the ships, life on the island—as it encounters and confronts life on the continent—redefines itself. The constant rethinking in terms of the inclusion/exclusion of the marginal space of the island within the destiny of the nation can be interpreted, metaphorically, as an allusion to the process of writing history, and the fact that those who record it decide who is and who is not a part of it. “Some day a page will be written about me in the history of my homeland” (25)—reflects the sublieutenant Arnaud, shaken by the notice of his imminent deployment to Clipperton—“[a]nd if nothing gets written, at least I got a pay raise” (25). Restrepo's text fictionalizes Arnaud's desire to be recognized by historians (precisely what did not happen historically) and reaffirms the legitimacy of that desire in a tale in which the totalizing metanarrative of history does not silence but juxtaposes itself against other perspectives. One year later, Diogenes Mayorga, the captain of *The Democrat*, the first ship to return to Clipperton one year after the arrival of Ramón and Alicia, advises them, “Things in the country are turning ugly [...]. [D]on Porfirio Díaz—eighty years old and thirty years in power—was getting ready for his sixth reelection, and [...] his enemies were suddenly coming forth out of nowhere. They called themselves ‘anti-reelectionists’ and the name of their leader was Madero. Francisco Madero” (91). Next, when the same boat arrives in Clipperton two years later, Mayorga continues his account:

“You people must be the only Mexicans who do not yet know,” he said. “Porfirio Diaz is out...out already.”

“What?” shouted Arnaud, his round eyes wide open.

“You heard right. [...] He escaped on a boat to Paris, and there he must be, nursing his prostate.

[...]

“And who could have ousted General Díaz?

“What do you mean ‘who’? Francisco Indalecio Madero, of course.

[...] We are all on his side.” (119-20)

The comparison between the inertia characterizing history on the island and the dynamism of the **macroevents on the island** becomes more evident when Ramón Arnaud, upon learning of the fall of Porfirio Díaz, decides to leave for Mexico with his pregnant wife and two children, in order to “**firsthand [...] find out what designs this new government had for Clipperton**” (120). In the capital, Ramón undertakes an exhausting pilgrimage **during which he crosses** paths with officials who neither remember nor care about the geopolitical issue of Clipperton, and even less so about the personal circumstances of Captain Arnaud. However, in the end, he succeeds in finding out that the French and Mexican governments, upon the request of the latter, had agreed to submit their disagreement to the international arbitration of Victor Emmanuel III, King of Italy. The act, signed by Porfirio Díaz before he fled Mexico, had set legal procedure in motion and left the dispute unresolved. In the wake of this legal juncture, Ramón Arnaud obtains the necessary authorizations to continue at his post and the logistical support of the government—to be sent by ship from Acapulco. It is 1913: the Arnauuds’ stay on the continent, prolonged until Alicia can give birth and recover, coincides with some new shocks for the Mexican nation, since General Victoriano Huerta is trying to overthrow President Madero and the country is at war. The violence of the rapid national events disorients Alicia and Ramón, who are surprised when they realize that there is a paradoxical link between themselves and the island of Clipperton:

“Then, let’s go,” she pleaded in a tone that he had never heard.

“Please, let’s go back home. Clipperton is paradise compared with the rest of Mexico.”

Ramón did not answer her right away. He took out of his shirt pocket the orders he had recently obtained from the Ministry of the Army and the Navy, and with the edge of the paper he stroked

his wife's nose.

"We must wait, darling," he said. "This little piece of paper was signed by a government no longer in power. Now we need to see if Huerta's will ratify it." (126)

By opting to return, Captain Arnaud forges an unbreakable tie between his own destiny and that of "the island that the world forgot,"⁸ in that both seem bound to a future of abandonment and invisibility.

As the two stories of Clipperton—the tragic and the quixotic—move forward, the narrative voice insists on the idea of history as a fabrication, on one side juxtaposing dissimilar voices that tell various versions of the same anecdotes and, on the other, including fuzzy narrative sections interspersed with hesitations, memory lapses, and discordant recollections. These contrapositions are present from the beginning of the novel, where it is reported with scientific accuracy that Clipperton "lies on the Pacific Ocean at 10° 13° north latitude and 105° 26° west [...] which is 511 nautical miles, or 945 kilometers" (5) from the Mexican port of Acapulco. In the following paragraph, allusions are gathered that point to an uncertain and deceitful reality, and it is even suggested that the toponyms *Clipperton* and *Isle of Passion* do not simply refer to a historical and logistical landmark, but come to represent a transcendental reality: "The name of the isle is not even its real name. 'Clipperton' is an alias, a sleight of hand. [...] The real name, [Isle of Passion, is a] suggestive name in a schizophrenic way [...]. Anyone can verify, just by opening a dictionary of synonyms, the contrasting meanings of its name" (5).

In recounting the wedding of Alicia and Ramón, the narrative voice reports that "according to the Arnauds' biographers [...] the wedding took place June 24. However, the wedding invitation contradicts this fact [...] and it is dated 'Orizaba, July 1908.' They were married then in July, not June" (45). Similarly, reality becomes hyperfragmented owing to the juxtaposition of points of view throughout the conversation between the narrative I and one of its first witnesses, the septuagenarian Alicia Arnaud, the second of the protagonists' four children. It is from her voice that the reader receives the first account of the death of Captain Arnaud, whose boat was overturned by a manta ray while trying to reach a rescue boat.

“We also saw the manta ray, enormous and black like a shadow, coming out of the water. I am not quite sure we saw it, or just thought we did” (11). The end of the novel suggests that the uncertain detail of the manta ray arises from the labile **memories immediately preceding** Ramón’s death, when he had embarked on the dangerous waters of the reef in a quixotic scene of surreal visions:

“A ship! A ship!” Ramón suddenly shouted.

“No kidding!” piped in Cardona. “Where?”

“I don’t see it anymore, but I swear I saw it.”

They both rose to their feet in order to look, cupping their hands to protect their eyes from the sun’s glare.

“There it goes again!” Arnaud said quickly. “It’s a big one! Look at it: how come you don’t see it! It’s sailing from east to west...”

“Well, I don’t see a thing... Is it coming?” (210)

The chronological disorder and the apparent contradictions of the account demand that the reader proceed at the same pace that the persona of the compiler carries out the investigative work. The chronological shifts create a slow and rigorous dosage of information, the same that is experienced by the narrative I in its rigorous recovery of the events. As we read the thirty-eight fragments in the disorderly sequence in which they are presented, we rebound repeatedly in space and time while trying to understand the relationship between the given contexts: Mexico City, Orizaba, Acapulco, Taxco, the Far East, Clipperton, the United States, and the Old World. By the time we come to understand the historical, transatlantic **problems that the novel reconstructs, we have oscillated** between 1705 (when Clipperton was only the temporary destination of privateers, buccaneers, and pirates), to 1902 (according to the excerpts from the military files belonging to First Sergeant Ramón Arnaud), until the narration set in the present, is identified by the marker “Today.” The spatiotemporal sequence requires a series of movements that end up positioning the reader close to the narrating voice and its fragmented process of investigation. At the same time, the pendular movement between temporal planes subverts the historical discourse—chronological and monologic—thereby penetrating its dialogic nature.

The relevance of achieving an oblique historical outlook is also

reiterated through the fictionalization of the historic figure of H.P. Perril, captain of the North American gunboat U.S.S. Yorktown, who rescued the survivors of the island in 1917. Perril, fascinated with the story of the castaways, prepares to write in his onboard diary, addressing his wife as the recipient of the entry. The captain is carrying out the same task the narrative I performs throughout the novel; however, he is guided by the traditional principle of narrative order, as the narrative voice swiftly and ironically highlights:

When the captain finished writing, he had spent the whole night of July 18, 1917, telling the recent events in exact details. [...] *“In order to develop [my story] in the proper chronological order, I am going to begin with its less important aspects.”* He did not wish to render chaotic a story already confusing in itself, so he at first avoided broaching the heart of the matter. (48, 49 emphasis added)

Perril does not consider that there may be another way of narrating the story except in chronological order, and not before submitting the events to an arbitrary evaluation that allows him to distinguish the least relevant from the central. This plot detail shows that the not chronological method employed by the narrative voice—and the vision, in Restrepo’s words above, “through the obverse”—aims to take apart the discourse that comes from the same locus of enunciation, which pretends to classify universal history. According to Mignolo, “[t]he fact that a significant sphere of modern history has been silenced is a consequence of the perspective of European modernity (of Occidentalism as a locus of enunciation), [...] the epistemic location of those who were classifying the planet and continue to do so” (42). Restrepo’s text highlights the necessity of a geopolitical reconceptualization of knowledge from the analysis of the modern world system (i.e. colonial); it configures a kaleidoscopic historical discourse that presents the object whose story is told along with various historical subjects—who tell their own history and validate it. This viewpoint is solidly reaffirmed at the end of the novel, when the reader, having lived inside the intimate, minute stories of Clipperton’s inhabitants, ends up sharing his or her own locus of enunciation—the center of the novelistic tale. Rescued in 1917, after nine years on the island and already a widow, Alicia speaks with Captain Perril on board the North American gunboat Yorktown, on

the high seas:

“Don’t you have a special desire, or wish for anything in particular?” Perrill managed to say. “I would like very much to be able to please you, after the many years of deprivation that you had to suffer.”

She thought about it for a moment and told him there was something, that she would like to have some orange juice. The captain ordered a tall glass for her, and while drinking it, Alicia commented that if they had not lacked this on the isle, many lives would have been saved. From there, she told him about the scurvy episode. Then he told her about the world war, and she spoke about Victoriano; he informed her about the Russian Revolution, and she explained how they used to catch boobies. So he told her about the death of Emperor Francis Joseph I [...]. (291)

By (re)presenting a vision of history that is neither territorial nor linear, but off-centered and fragmented, Restrepo legitimizes the disorder of historical discourse and reaffirms the necessity of unauthorized its official emissary. Simultaneously, by asserting her (and our) right not to know and the right not to believe, she asserts the need to question prefabricated and hierarchical discursive paradigms.

The fact that a novel assumes a critical view of history and how to narrate it is not new in the literary tradition of Latin America. *Isle of Passion* offers a new opportunity to analyze the relationship between literature and history and illuminates a forgotten chapter of Mexican history that has remained inconclusive until now. “It was my way of creating a strong connection with Mexico”—affirmed Restrepo in an interview with *La Jornada*—“This book was a key to get there through a story that was still alive” (Mateos-Vega 1). The possibility of coming upon the characters of *Isle of Passion* in contemporary history may provoke a certain commitment to the issues raised. The one who best projects the narrated subject matter outside the text is María Teresa Arnaud de Guzmán, granddaughter of the late protagonist and herself the true author of a book of family memories titled *La tragedia de Clipperton* (1982) ‘The Tragedy of Clipperton.’ The character in Restrepo’s text is fifty years old when she is approached by the narrative voice, and she speaks of the island

not only because of her “deep bond” (34) with her grandmother, but also because “[her] mission on Earth [is] to tell that story” (34):

Look, my grandfather was really a Frenchman, his parents were French, and he sacrificed his life so that Mexico would not lose a piece of land, which today, after many a turn and tumble, is precisely in the hands of the French. That is why, because of his spilled blood, my family finds no peace and cannot rest until Clipperton is again under the Mexican flag. (36)

Non-literary texts published in Mexico over the last twenty years approach the topic with similar feelings. *Clipperton, isla mexicana* (1992) ‘Clipperton, Mexican Island,’ by Mexican jurist Miguel González Avelar, is still reviewed in various articles of Comparative Law by UNAM (*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*); it presents the case of Clipperton as a political, economic and judicial issue in the national and international scene:

Son tan absurdas las circunstancias que determinaron la exclusión [de Clipperton] de la soberanía mexicana, que no hay persona que, al conocerlas, se conforme con el resultado. Por esto el asunto sigue vivo y agitándose periódicamente en la conciencia de los mexicanos. Y es mi opinión que ésta no quedará satisfecha hasta que México recupere la soberanía sobre la isla. (16-17)

The circumstances that determine the exclusion [of Clipperton] from Mexican sovereignty are so absurd that no one, upon knowing them, could agree with the result. Therefore, the issue is still alive and periodically stirring up the consciousness of the Mexican people. And it is my opinion that this will remain unsatisfied until Mexico gains sovereignty over the island.

A few years after *Isle of Passion* was published, González Avelar examined and reopened the case both for questions of principle and of interest, on one hand, noting “la invalidez que la conciencia jurídica universal ha dado al fenómeno del colonialismo” (32) ‘the invalidity that the universal juridical conscience has given to the phenomenon of colonialism’ and on the other hand, highlighting the partiality of the trial that led to the allocation of Clipperton to France. In light of the claim of the patrimonial sea, the verdict

continues to deprive the American country of a considerable area of ocean and consequently of its right to fish and exploit the aquatic mining industry, although it would be legally impossible to take action based on those arguments.⁹ As noted above, the process of transferring ownership of the island began following an agreement signed by Porfirio Díaz in 1909, although the decree that made the French sovereignty over the island official was not issued until 1931, twenty years later. According to González Avelar, the case of Clipperton represents a profound injustice, as the supposed impartiality of the arbitrator Victor Emmanuel III was dishonored for “un calculado interés del régimen fascista que gobernaba Italia [...] para congraciarse con el gobierno parisino” (33) ‘the calculated interest of the Italian fascist regime [...] to ingratiate itself with the Parisian government.’ The King of Italy ignored, eluded or dismissed valuable pre-existing details and facts, therefore the decree “fue un fallo de conveniencia, basado en los intereses del árbitro y no en los de la justicia” (11) ‘was a ruling of convenience, based on the interests of the arbitrator and not on the interest of justice.’ To González Avelar, a sensible action would be to reexamine the issue and “buscar alternativas para pasar a una situación nueva y más justa” (13) ‘look for alternatives that would create a new, more just situation.’ The benefit of recovering the island of Clipperton cannot be restricted to a **theoretical set of principles inasmuch as it implicates** delicate historic and economic questions referring to the contraction of borders suffered since Independence in 1821—one of the fundamental aspects of Mexican nationalism. Another element is the **controversy surrounding a distracted government, whose political indifference** to the case of Clipperton is the same that was manifested at the beginning of the twentieth century towards the victims of the human drama on the island, when the town had been reduced to four women on the verge of insanity and a small group of ragged children. Arnaud de Guzmán, in *The Tragedy of Clipperton*—published seven years after *Isle of Passion*—declares that

México tiene una deuda de honor con los héroes de Clipperton. [...] El ignorado sacrificio de estos valientes, muertos por México, novecientas millas lejos de él, protegiendo un trozo de tierra rodeada por el Océano Pacífico, es tan grande y tan digno de ser conocido en nuestro país, como la hazaña del Pípila, como

el triunfo de Puebla o como la epopeya de los niños héroes de Chapultepec. (6)

Mexico has a debt of honor towards the heroes of Clipperton. [...] The ignored sacrifice of these brave people—killed in Mexico, 900 miles away from it, protecting a slice of land surrounded by the Pacific Ocean—is so great and so worthy of being known in our country as the feat of Pípila, the triumph at Puebla, or the saga of the Boy Heroes of Chapultepec.

It is problematic to hold on to the legal reason for undertaking the review of the Clipperton case, as in 1934 Mexico attuned its constitution with the verdict by ratifying the judicial principle of *pacta sunt servanda* ‘agreements must be kept.’ Nevertheless, the private trauma of the protagonists has finally been brought to light and (re)counted. With *Isle of Passion*, Restrepo participates in the collective effort to redeem history from oblivion. For González Avelar, who did reopen the public case of Clipperton, Ramón Arnaud is “un mexicano excepcional [...] a la altura del arte (29) ‘an exceptional Mexican [...] with the stature of art.’ From a literary standpoint, the character of Ramón Arnaud may seem quixotic; however, from a historic and political point of view, his stance reveals a convincing civil engagement. From the geopolitical standpoint the notion of the **unresolved iniquity endures** regarding the *Île de la Passion*, which—like Guadalupe and Martinica in the Caribbean, Guyana in South America, and the Polynesian archipelago in the Pacific—remains as French territory. As Mignolo explains, the colonial matrix of power continues to assert itself today through a system of control over territories and of epistemological spaces. By illuminating the forgotten events of Clipperton and by placing the macronarratives of the Americas and European events as a background, Restrepo’s *Isle of Passion* successfully questions the universalistic conceptualization of History and restates the need for a distribution of knowledge emanating from local histories.

Notes

1 In *El universo literario de Laura Restrepo*, the compilers Julie Lirot and Elvira Sánchez-Blake gather contributions from the following scholars and writers:

Luz Stella Angarita Palencia, Grícel Ávila Ortega, Vania Barraza Toledo, Juan Alberto Blanco Puentes, Helena Isabel Cascante, Mery Cruz Calvo, Rosana Díaz-Zambrana, Marí Victoria García Serrano, Samuel Jaramillo González, Magdalena Maiz-Peña, Jaime Manrique, Gustavo Mejía, Elizabeth Montes Garcés, Carmiña Navia Velasco, María E. Olaya, Montserrat Ordóñez, José Jesús Osorio, Lourdes Rojas, Pedro Saboulard Restrepo y Paulo Vignolo.

2 All translations are Fiore and Melis unless otherwise noted. All quotes from *Isle of Passion* correspond to the Harper Perennial, 2005 edition.

3 On the question of gender in this novel, see *Geografías textuales, cultura material y género* ‘Textual Geographies, material culture and gender,’ by Magdalena Maiz-Peña and José Jesús Osorio.

4 Restrepo states in an interview with *La Jornada*: “For me, it was a wedding with Mexico through words. [...] It was my way to relate with the people, higher than the solidarity with which they welcomed me or the interest of the Mexicans in what was happening in Colombia. The roles were reversed” (Mateos-Vega 1).

5 As a member of the Trotskyist party in the sixties, Restrepo threw herself wholly into politics—first in Colombia, then for a couple of years in the *Socialist Workers Party* in Madrid, where she participated in the process of the reconstruction of democracy in the post-Franco era. In Spain, she then became part of the *Simón Bolívar Brigade*, which fought against the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua. She was sent to Argentina in search of medical doctors and nurses willing to travel to Nicaragua. In Argentina, for four years, Restrepo belonged to the underground resistance against the military dictatorship. As she explains in her 2002 interview with Jaime Manrique, she “was underground but unarmed, because firearms and terror are a frightful distortion of what I dreamed of, a humanitarian revolution” (55).

6 Restrepo explained in an interview that for her, writing a novel is a process of discovery: “siempre parto de la base que tú vas a empezar a escribir sobre cosas que no conoces, y que el proceso de la escritura de una novela hace intentar entrar en ellas y conocerlas” ‘I always start from the premise that you’re going to begin to write about things you don’t know about, and the process of writing the novel makes you try to get inside them and learn about them’ (Melis 118).

7 *Soldadera*, or camp follower, is the term that refers to the role women played in contribution to the Mexican Revolution. They traveled with the Revolutionary Army to serve as a support system to the male soldiers (foraged for food and cooked meals, nursed the wounded, washed clothes) and—occasionally—participated in the fighting.

8 This phrase, used here as an epithet, comes from the geographic and geologic

study titled *Clipperton. A History of the Island that the World Forgot* (Walker and Co., 1989), written by the U.S. historian Jimmy M. Skaggs.

9 In the late fifties, the UN established that the “patrimonial sea is an economic zone not more than 200 miles in breadth from the base line of the territorial sea in which the coastal State will have the exclusive right to all resources” (Nelson).

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