

Literary autofiction in three new Colombian narrators

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Abstract

In this essay, the concept of literary autofiction is addressed, by way of the analysis of several publications by the following authors: Paola Guevara, Juliana Restrepo, and Natalia Mejía. As a neologism that suggests the reality-fiction relationship, the aim is to approach the nearly invisible crossroad between real and fictitious stories, from the experience of each author.

Key words: Literary fiction; Colombian novel; Autofiction; Literature.

1. Introduction

Between 2016 and 2017, three Colombian writers forayed into the literary world, with writings that walk the ambiguous border between reality and fiction. Numerous Colombian authors have invoked the distant and recent past for the literary reconstruction of their personal experiences. These include Héctor Abad Faciolince, with *El olvido que seremos*, Piedad Bonnett with *Lo que no tiene nombre*, and Fernando Vallejo, with practically the entirety of his narrative work. This text approaches the first narrative proposals of Paola Guevara, with *Mi padre y otros accidentes* (2016), Juliana Restrepo, with *La corriente* (2016), and Natalia Mejía Echeverry, with *Once bombas antes de las cenizas* (2017a) and *El sol y la rabia* (2017b), based on the autofiction concept.

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2. On autofiction

There are discussions regarding the delimitation of the autofiction concept, which contrast with certainties that exist, regarding the autobiography concept: if biography is the narration of an individual's life, autobiography is an account of the author's life. It is the writer who recounts a facet or synthesis of their life story.

The term autofiction poses an oxymoron: it is the description of fiction from the author's life. But if it is, in fact, fiction, then it is no longer the author's life, but rather a parallel life, whether possible or imagined. It is an invention. It is an alteration of reality, or a fantasy written by the author, about themselves (auto comes from the Greek αὐτός, which means "oneself"). This "oneself", however, is just a starting point, because if the life of "oneself" is modified in the text. One is no longer speaking of "oneself" but of another: of a variable of "oneself".

The interesting proposition of autofiction is that, in reality, it is not one story on top of another. It does not focus on a third party or imagined character. It concerns a variable of the author's person, a story that permits the construction of parallel lives, in a way that is quite similar to what Borges envisaged in *The Garden of Forking Paths*.

The Garden of Forking Paths is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe, as imagined by Ts'ui Pen. In contrast to Newton and Schopenhauer, his ancestor did not believe in uniform, absolute time. He believed in infinite time series, in a growing and dizzying network of divergent, convergent, and parallel times. The fabric of times that approach one another, fork, are snipped off, or are simply unknown for centuries, contain *all* possibilities. In most of these times, we do not exist; in some, you exist, but I do not; in others, I do, but you do not; in others still, we both do. In this one, which the favoring hand of chance has dealt me, you have come to my home; in another, when you come through my garden, you find me dead; in another, I say these same words, but I am an error, a ghost (Borges, 1944).

The term "autofiction" is relatively new. It is attributed to French critic and novelist Serge Doubrovsky, who coined it in 1977 in the counterpart to his novel *Fils* (children), in which he presented his book in the following terms: "Autobiography?" No. Fiction of strictly real events and facts. Autofiction, if you will, to have entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language (Doubrovsky, 1977, back cover).

Manuel Alberca proposes that the term "autonovel" would be more precise than "autofiction".

We may consider autofictions daughters, or younger sisters of autobiographical novels. However, we should, in no case, confuse the two. In the latter, the author is totally or partially embodied by a novelesque character, and hides behind a fictitious costume or takes advantage for the novelesque plot of their vital experience, which is duly distanced, via the nominal identity detached from their own (Alberca, 2005, p. 116).

It is an anecdote of this paradox that proposes that autofiction constitutes a non-fiction novel. When Truman Capote published *In Cold Blood*, in 1966, he defined his book as a “non-fiction novel”. Why not call it a report or an exclusive report? There are those who consider journalistic genres to be inferior to or lesser than literary genres, but Capote put literature’s narrative tools at the service of a journalistic story, as had Rodolfo Walsh in 1957 with *Operation Massacre* (2000).

What “autofiction” proposes is another turn of the screw: if there are non-fiction novels, there can be fictional biographies. The fiction and non-fiction labels in journalism and literature ask the reader to jump from one shore to another, between veracity and verisimilitude. Journalistic, historical, and biographical texts presuppose that what is narrated is true. In other words, they refer to true and verifiable facts, although they may seem impossible. The experiments performed by the Nazis on Jews in concentration camps during World War II may seem quite difficult to believe, as it is hard to imagine such human degradation and cruelty, but they were real. They are true stories, although they may seem improbable. Fiction, on the other hand, considers matters that may have occurred only in the author’s mind, such as the *Journey to the center of the earth* or the *Suicide of Madame Bovary* (Flaubert [1821-1880], 1886). The challenge for these authors lies precisely in convincing the reader to believe the fictitious story: constructing improbable stories, based on fantasies proposed by the imagination.

Non-fiction novels and autofiction navigate this crossing of turbulent waters that connects the two shores.

Is there recent Colombian literature that fits the autofiction concept? The answer lies in three examples, which are just that, and are not to be confused with exclusive or exhaustive lists:

3. About the book

3.1. Paola Guevara’s outright “I”

In 2016, Editorial Planeta published *Mi padre y otros accidentes*, a 180-page volume written by a journalist from Cali, Paola Guevara. The drama narrated by the author in her book is common to thousands: she grew up without knowing her father.

The writer labeled her text a “non-fiction novel”, and therein states that Paola’s maternal grandparents, the namesake protagonists, raised her, gave her their surname, and raised her as if she were their child, not their grandchild, and as if her mother were her older sister. However, she always yearned to have a relationship with her father. The mother, an fascinating character, breaks from the traditional mold of a loving and endearing woman, and tells her only that her father is a man who went to Spain and never came back. Life stayed its course until, one day, when Paola was 30 years old, married, and a mother to a son, she received a text message from her mother saying that her real father, Fernando Lince, was going to call her. The relationship that emerges and grows between the two fills the remaining pages of the book.

“The family had matryoshka secrets, secrets contained in bigger secrets, *ad infinitum*. This may have been the only entertainment for beings whose existence occurred from the doors in, and without great shocks”, writes Paola Guevara in her non-fiction novel, which uses her family as a narrative map.

Her story is a commonplace, intimate, clear tragedy that is read with avidity, since the prose obliges one to advance. As such, it makes a good chronicle. The a phrenetic story focuses on Paola and Fernando: her shortcomings and his adventures, as a pilot who survived a plane crash. It is not only an elegy to a father, but also a vindication of the paternal figure. The book is a warning about the falsity of the myth that says that the mother is the important parent, and that children can be raised smoothly when their fathers are absent.

The text is set in Cali, although for readers who are unfamiliar with the city, it is difficult to create a mental image of the literary territory. Several of the characters, including the husband, aunts, and others, appear in as ghostly a form as the city. The emphasis is on what Paola thinks, says, does, and fears. The main character is a resounding I, who speaks through her actions and thoughts, and makes the protagonist’s mind the story’s main space.

Is *Mi padre y otros accidentes* autofiction? In reality, the book, it seems, has little or no fiction, and a great deal of “auto”: autoreferences to the author, her world, and her thoughts, in a narrative exercise which permits her to state her own ideas about machismo, family, affection, and this shifting ground between truth and fiction. In one section, the author writes: “Never underestimate the intelligence of a liar. To lie, and convince others to believe the lie, one must utilize all kinds of interesting resources”. She further warns: “What is fiction if not a refuge of those for whom reality is insufficient, and who must invent new worlds?”.

Manuel Alberca says of autofiction that:

... a) it may camouflage an autobiographical story under the term ‘novel’, or b) may simulate a novel as an autobiography, without this, in fact, being the case. In both cases, the ambiguity is of a very different depth. It is fleeting in the former, and more complex and continuous in the latter (Alberca, 2005, p. 117).

On this route, it may be affirmed that *Mi padre y otros accidentes* is the first type of autofiction: it camouflages an autobiographical story with the term ‘novel’, and in this particular case, this is made explicit in the definition that the author creates for her book: a non-fiction novel.

3.2. Juliana Restrepo’s personal atmospheres

La corriente (2016) is not only the feature physics debut of Juliana Restrepo, but also of Editorial Angosta, which opened in Medellin in 2016. In this publication, the raconteur speaks about Juliana, Elvira, Camila, and other women who are much like the author. These women are from Medellin, from the upper class, whose adolescence occurs in a time during which the drug trade scourged the city, and said urban violence served as a backdrop in several of the stories. Others are set in France, where the author earned her doctorate.

It is curious that the book is called *La corriente*, like one of the stories. The world ‘corriente’ has two meanings: on one hand ‘corriente’ may be ‘normal’ or ‘ordinary’ or ‘simple’. On the other, it may be flowing water, or the power of running water. As such, it is an accurate title: this 12-story volume speaks about the women typical of a class and time. There are no important, groundbreaking events. The stories focus the happenings of daily life. The author is able to write with a strength that is not immediately evident: it is not sensationalist, does not employ artifice. This is the internal, invisible current of the stories.

The cartography of the stories, as with their soundtrack, speaks of the characters, but also about the author. Without being biographical, there are several clear aesthetic showpieces from the writer’s personal universe, and this is perhaps that which lends the *current* of such a singular voice to these stories. As it concerns various stories, autofiction appears in the book in different forms: in several texts, it has to do with parallel lives or variations on the life of the author or those close to her, and in other cases, they emerge from recreations or alterations of concrete facts, or better yet, of the memory of those events.

Juliana Restrepo, the author, was born in 1982. Her texts, however allude not only to the past and present of the Julianas of fiction. It also writes about Julianas who are mothers, middle-aged, and seniors. Many possibilities of the feminine universe appear in these stories that, although they function autonomously, dialogue with each other, with names that travel from one page to another, and with repeated winks, help to identify common concerns.

It is an honest book written from the author’s language and social strata. It reveals the questioning generated by her birth into a privileged class, with a confident, natural, simple voice that flows without artifice, and permits the construction of verisimilar images about daily spaces such as a farm, house, party, and park.

Perhaps for some, the phrases in English and French included in some texts may seem a bit contrived. This characteristic, however, also reveals the character of a narrator who lives between two worlds, and has naturalized her existence in various languages.

3.3. Natalia Mejía Echeverry’s fragmented ambiguity

Natalia Mejía Echeverry’s book steps away from banality. In its pages, everything must be interpreted, thought through, digested. One elemental piece of information, such as the title of her feature debut, which is not discussed for the vast majority of authors, is unclear in her case. Without this, she debuted in 2017 with three feature texts, published simultaneously in Argentina: on the last page of the novels *11 bombas antes de las cenizas* and *El sol y la rabia*, in Editorial Malisia, she states that: “This book finished printing in August of 2017”. In the poetry book *Irse para adentro*, from the Milena Caserola editorial, it is read that “...this finished printing in Buenos Aires in winter of 2017”.

Although there are propositions for ways to address autofiction in poetry (Scarano, 2011), this approach exceeds the scope of the present text, and as such, the analysis of *Irse para adentro* must be left for another time.

Natalia was born in Manizales in 1986, studied *Social Communication and Journalism* at the Universidad de Manizales, and lived in Buenos Aires for nine years, where she studied Photography and Dramaturgy Directing, worked on audiovisual projects, and graduated with an M.A. in Creative Writing.

11 bombas antes de las cenizas is a short novel in which autofiction manifests as a novelized biography that begins in a childhood memory at Manizales' Plaza de Toros. The author has no interest in the bullfighting debate. She instead concentrates on language, on words like blood red, right and left-handed passes, and many others that only exist in this specific place, and at a given time of year.

The narration flows naturally from the bulls to the routines of artistic ice skating in the Coliseo Menor, where the protagonist practices, with ironclad discipline, for many hours, every week of the year, until well into her adolescence, as did the author. Later, life goes on, in different places, and with different company.

The writing of the text is fragmented by permanent digressions about writing, the writing exercise, distant and indifferent to publication. Natalia goes through her novel with constant reflection on the insignificance of words, in an agile, intelligent, and cosmopolitan text, although it has its roots in a conservative city like Manizales, and its fundamental axis moves on the topic of family ties.

"I can say: I'm a writer. This is irrefutable. If I say: *I am a writer*, it is like saying: *I'm a woman*. Who can deny that? Who is going to say: no, Natalia, you're not. However, *to be*, by itself, means nothing. It's useless. *To be* a writer does not mean *to do* what a writer does", says writer Natalia Mejía, protagonist of her own book, in a game of mirrors different from *Mi padre y otros accidentes* (Guevara, 2016). While the story that Paula Guevara tells focuses the entire time on her version of her relationship with her father, in *11 bombas antes de las cenizas*, Natalia Mejía uses word play to create ambiguities around her own autobiography. It is conscious autofiction: the author takes advantage of this permanent question that the reader has about whether the text relates or not that which happened to the author "in real life", and exploits this doubt to enhance the story.

Its fragmented structure permits it to oscillate between a novel and an essay. Not the academic essay, but rather the literary essay, which has had such a grand presence in the Argentine narrative. For this reason, her book permits digressions on the topic of literature, such as:

Why write? In principle to provoke [...] To write to separate pieces and traverse vanishing points [...]. She made a statement that applies to writing: 'You like classical music because it is an abyssal experience. You die without dying'. Writing is a seed that hydrates invisibly, germinates in someone else's presence, (and) Why write? To feel balance. Balance what: the life that is in course with the life that is possible.

If *11 bombas antes de las cenizas* is a fragmented novel, what could be said of *El sol y la rabia*: "...it is a bizarre experiment partially in draft form" said its author about this vortex of bipolar, flyaway phrases, which still have an overwhelming internal strength and that united

in the midst of their chaos to form a short, fresh, agile, risky, contemporary novel. Some may say that it is postmodern, although at this point, this epithet may sound outdated for the exercise proposed by the author.

The nearness of the author to the audiovisual world is noted in her writing, in a particular way. Normally, the most obvious relationship between cinema and writing is the so-called 'scene-by-scene narration' of which Tom Wolfe spoke (2012). Natalia does not create scenes, but her text does have an audiovisual structure: the narrative vertigo of her prose relates closely to that of a videoclip.

The protagonist of the text, as indicated previously, is a girl from Manizales, called Natalia Mejía, who lives in Buenos Aires. The narrative licenses of autofiction become the marvelous space of creative freedom that permit the author to navigate the land of fiction with a story that leaps between Buenos Aires, Manizales, and San Andres, and which insinuate, choppily, a breakup, mental disorder, and a sordid story of familial violence.

It uses a potent feminine voice that speaks plainly with phrases like: You have time, I have words. I hope that we arrive together, but if not, be sure that I'll get there alone, I'll get there (or) who ignores sadness? In other words, he who does not know her (or) the ego is a cockroach, and cockroaches, apart from their speed, can survive an atomic bomb.

She is one voice that explores the artifice of autofiction to provoke uncomfortable questions for the reader from the swamp-like terrain of ambiguity.

4. A doubtful culmination

Is autofiction fertile ground for women's writings? I don't know. There are many male writers who have also made their mark here, and in any case, analyses based on author gender may be discriminatory or biased.

However, it is valuable to have autofiction written by women. In other times, women would dress like men in order to write, preferred to hide their identities with pseudonyms, or limited their literary production to certain topics and genres. Today, for example, there are still few female science fiction writers.

Ninety years ago, Virginia Woolf explained: "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write". In the past century, many women have attained these things, but many others remain lacking. In the absence of these things, these imbalances and inequalities, it is possible to learn more from literary texts written by women who decide to become literary characters and who, in doing so, vindicate their right to speak using their own voice.

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