



Tuggeranong Arts Centre - November 28th, 2014

TUGGERANONG ARTS CENTRE

November 28, 2014

Remarks by

H. E. Mrs Clemencia Forero Ucrós

Ambassador of Colombia

MACONDO

Mrs Rauny Worm, Director of the Tuggeranong Arts Centre

Members of the Board of the Tuggeranong Arts Centre,

Dear Colleagues and Members of the diplomatic community,

Friends from the local Government and Federal agencies,

Fellow Colombians,

Media representatives and friends.

Mr. Felipe Bernabó, Arts Centre Operations Manager

Dear friends,

It is a privilege to be here at the Tuggeranong Arts Centre and I thank you all for your participation this evening. I particularly wish to express my gratitude to Felipe Bernabó for organizing this event and exhibit in commemoration of the life and works of Gabriel García Márquez. The planning was undertaken by Felipe, not only with professional dedication, but above all with affection for our great writer and



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admiration for his legacy to Latin American and universal literature. In an informal conversation we had, together with our Embassy team, to organize this event, we decided to name it Macondo, in order to evoke the magical space created by García Márquez as the setting for his most famous novel “One Hundred Years of Solitude” and for other short stories. And tonight my remarks will reflect on the origin of the term Macondo and its symbolical meaning in the works of García Márquez.

Gabriel García Márquez was born in Aracataca, a small remote village on the Caribbean Coast of Colombia, almost forgotten in the shadows of our own history. “Ara” means river in the language of the “chimilas”, the original inhabitants of the region and “Cataca” is the word for the chieftain of the tribe¹. Through the magic of literary creation, and the genius of Gabo, Aracataca was transformed into Macondo, and reality turned into myth.

Where did Gabo get this name from? In one of the most admirable biographies of García Márquez, “The Trip to the Seed”, (“El Viaje a la Semilla”), Dasso Saldívar, a Colombian literary critic, who has done an impressive research on the life and works of the Nobel Prize winner, provides some details about the term²: Makondo, with “k”, is the word for plantain, in the language of the Bantu African slaves brought to Colombia by the Spaniards during the 16th century. With time, the word became the denomination for a certain type of tree, the “Macondo”, which was used for many agricultural and home artifacts and for building canoes. It existed for many years and then became extinct.

¹ Saldívar, Dasso. “El viaje a la semilla”, p.46

² Íbidem, p.103



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Gabo himself tells us in his autobiography “Vivir para Contarla”, (“Living to tell the Tale”) where he first saw the word “Macondo”. It was the name of a farm part of the huge banana plantations that the United Fruit Company had on the Caribbean Coast of Colombia. You could see the name engraved on its front door when the train passed by on its way to Aracataca. Let Gabo himself describe the attraction that he felt for the word:

“The word had caught my attention since the first trips I made with my grandfather, but only as an adult I discovered that I liked its poetic resonance. I never heard it from anybody and I did not ask myself what it meant. I had already used it in three books as the name of an imaginary village, when I found in an Encyclopedia that it is a tree from the tropics, similar to the breadfruit tree, that doesn’t produce flowers or fruits, and whose spongy wood is useful for canoes and home artifacts. Later, I found that in Tanganyka there is a nomadic tribe called the “Macondos” and thought that could be the origin of the word. But I never really found it out or saw the tree, although I asked for it in the banana region and nobody could tell me. Maybe it never existed.”³

Gabo spent his first years in Aracataca at the house of his maternal grandparents, Colonel Nicolás Márquez, a former combatant of the civil war of the Thousand Days and Tranquilina Iguarán, a small nervy woman with grey anxious eyes, as Gerald

³ García Márquez, Gabriel.

“Vivir para Contarla” pg. 19 – informal translation by Clemencia Forero.



Martin describes her in his brilliantly written biography of García Márquez, who was certainly the dominant figure in the everyday life of the family.

Tranquilina, a superstitious woman, was in permanent communication with the spirits of the dead and with fantastic forces, and according to Gabo *“it was like the Roman Empire, governed by birds and thunder claps and other atmospherical signals which explained the weather, change of humour; really we were manipulated by invisible gods, even though they were all supposedly very Catholic people”*⁴.

Colonel Marquez was the main inspiring figure for the lonely child. He took him everywhere and told him endless stories about the glorious past of Aracataca, and the civil wars where he, as a leader of the Liberal Party, fought for the Revolution, together with more recent memories about the conflict between the workers of the banana plantations and the United Fruit Company. This tension led in 1928 to a massacre, where hundreds of workers were killed by the army, which supported the interests of the multinational. Colonel Marquez was involved in a mediation that failed to prevent the tragedy.

The works of García Márquez are dominated by his early childhood at the house of Aracataca, inhabited by his grandparents, aunts, servants, aboriginals, and the ghosts that dominated the phantasy of his grandmother. Gabo acknowledged that *“my most constant and vivid memory is not so much of the people, but of the actual house in Aracataca where I lived with my grandparents. It’s a recurring dream that*

⁴ Martin, Gerald. “A Biography” p.35

persists even now. What's more, every single day of my life I wake up with the feeling, real or imaginary, that I've dreamed I am in that huge old house."⁵.

I would like to recall today a crucial moment in the life of García Márquez that determined his future as a writer. In 1952, some years after the family left Aracataca, his mother invited him to accompany her to sell the old family house.

After the 1928 tragic events, the village had started its decadence. Everything was desolation and silence. After the death of the grandparents, the house was left alone with its ghosts and sold to two different landlords, the last of them poor peasants that could not really maintain it. As Dasso Saldivar recalls, this traumatic encounter with a desolate past, gave way to what Saldivar calls the "trip to the seed", the return to the origin, the intention to recuperate the past, but at the same time the willingness to recreate the painful encounter.

Mario Vargas Llosa recalls the intensity of the moment in his doctoral thesis "*Historia de un Deicidio*". García Marquez described to him how he crossed the phantasmagorical and solitary town with his mother: no one was out in the street and Gabo felt that his mother was also suffering as much as he was, to see the impact of time on the village. When they reached a small pharmacy on the corner of the street, Luisa found a close neighbour and friend, a "*comadre*" and the two women hug each other and wept together for half an hour⁶.

⁵ García Márquez, Gabriel.

"Vivir para Contarla" p.29 – informal translation by Clemencia Forero

⁶ Vargas Llosa, Mario.

"Historia de un Deicidio" Barcelona: Caracas, Monte Avila, 1971. P.96.

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This is the moment when Gabo decided that Aracataca, as he had known it, no longer existed and that he, as a novelist, was bound to recreate it. Aracataca is transformed into Macondo, reality and superstition are combined in a prodigious fusion.

Luis Harss, a renowned Chilean literary critic, who interviewed the writers of the Latin American Boom in his famous essay *“Los Nuestrós”*, described the local and universal character of Macondo in a superb way. *“Thanks to Gabriel García Márquez, the most captivating place of contemporary Colombia is a tropical village called Macondo, that doesn’t appear on any map. Macondo, situated between dunes and swamps on one side, and on the other by the impenetrable “sierra”, is a coastal town, scorching and decadent, like thousands of others in the heart of the Hemisphere, but at the same time, very special, strange and well known, peculiar and instantaneous like a premonition, eternal as the image of a forgotten landscape. It is one of those places where the traveller arrives without having to leave home, sure of having finished his trip before having even started it. Macondo, an atmosphere more than a place, is everywhere and nowhere. Those who travel to it, undertake an interior trip that stops over the hidden face of a continent.”*⁷

Now, we are going to watch *“BUSCANDO A GABO”*, (“Looking for Gabo”) a documentary produced by the Colombian film director Luis Fernando Bottia in 2007,

⁷ Harss, Luis. “Los Nuestrós”, p.2



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as a tribute to the 80th birthday of García Márquez and the forty years of publication of his novel “One Hundred Years of Solitude”.

It was filmed in Aracataca, Barranquilla, Sucre, Bogotá, Zipaquirá, Cartagena, Mexico City, and Havana, and includes images from the archive of the “Colombian Film Heritage Foundation” (“Fundación Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano”).

This documentary presents a human portrait of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, as evoked by his friends and members of his family, such as his brother Jaime and his sister, Ligia. It will allow us to have a close look on special circumstances that define who this great Colombian writer was, and where Macondo and his magical realism originated.

We also will be able to hear testimonials from several intellectuals, such as Carlos Monsivais, a famous Mexican writer and journalist; Alvaro Mutis, Colombian novelist and poet, winner of the Principe de Asturias Award in 1997; Enrique Santos, a prominent essay writer and journalist who was President of the Interamerican Press Society –SIP; Roberto Pombo, currently Director of the prestigious journal El Tiempo and Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, a journalist and novelist who was one of Gabo’s closest friends. Through the documentary, we will also remember the ceremony in 1982 in Stockholm in which García Márquez received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

As it is well known, García Márquez was also a journalist, and quite a polemical one, and a script writer. He had a passion for education and was the founder of two well-known schools: one in Havana, “Fundación Del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano”



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("Foundation of New Latin American Cinema") and one in Cartagena, "Fundación Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano" ("New Iberoamerican Journalism Foundation"). His influence and teachings in these fields of action, will remain in the future generations of film-makers and journalists, and of course his legacy will stay in the minds and hearts of readers all over the world, who will never forget his mythical world of patient lovers, dignified colonels, respected old women and yellow butterflies.

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