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To cite this article: Marta Milena Barrios & Toby Miller (2016): Green Passion Afloat, Journalism Studies, DOI: [10.1080/1461670X.2016.1198241](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1198241)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1198241>



Published online: 05 Jul 2016.



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GREEN PASSION AFLOAT

The discourse on Colombia's Magdalena River in letters to the editor

Marta Milena Barrios  and Toby Miller

Colombia's long-awaited emergence from armed conflict seems to be under way, at the same time as a passionate green movement is emerging. We trace the use of emotion in newspaper letters to the editor that address environmental matters concerning the Magdalena River in relation to ecology, the conflict, and cultural identity.

KEYWORDS armed conflict; Colombia; emotions; environment; letters to the editor; Magdalena River

Introduction

Five decades of armed conflict dominate Colombia's recent history, self-image, and international standing. Those decades have seen not exactly a failed state, but one that has been hugely compromised in its capacity to ensure its citizens' safety, both because of the lawlessness of drug dealers and revolutionaries, and the government's own human-rights violations. Human Rights Watch (2015) and the Colombian state itself estimate that 200,000 people have been killed and almost six million displaced by the conflict over the last half-century ("Colombia's Santos 'in Serious Difficulty'" 2015).

The conflict began as a *guerrilla* strategy to bring about rural land reform. It has seen the splintering of leftist groups, their ethical disintegration into kidnapping, torture, murder, and drug dealing, and a brutal response from the state and its proxies, the *paramilitares* (Manrique Rueda and Tanner 2016). Colombia's role in the cocaine trade also stimulated the rise of powerful, ruthless cartels, notably in Cali and Medellín. They ruled a sizeable amount of territory across the 1980s and 1990s (Atehortúa Cruz and Rojas Rivera 2008).

Despite this violent history and the dominance of dictatorships across Central and South America, Colombia never ceased to be a democracy, at least in formal terms. And it maintained a free press, which was guaranteed under the revised Constitution of 1991. But conditions have long been far from ideal for journalists, and remain so. Everything from pay, safety, and working conditions through to libel laws and political interference militate against the maintenance and development of high standards and basic security (Farah 2012; Freedom House 2014; Reporters Without Borders 2015). On the other hand, the news media have enjoyed remarkably cozy relationships with politicians, many of whom are media proprietors (Arroyave and Barrios 2012). During these difficult years, letters to the editor have been noted sources of public opinion (Barrios 2015). They form part of a longstanding literary and artistic culture articulated to the natural and political worlds.

On the opposite side of the ledger from the conflict, Colombia is renowned as one of the most extraordinary natural environments in the world, from animals to flowers, insects to fruits, gorges to mountains, and rivers to oceans, spread across continental and tropical climates. Its physical terrain has been a particular stimulus to aesthetic and political celebration and lamentation. Conquering and controlling the landscape were central both to Spanish colonization in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and Colombian independence in the nineteenth century (Acosta and Peñaloza 2014).

It is no surprise that the country's astonishing variety of wildlife, scenery—and tragedy—stimulated the celebrated and passionate literary genre, *realismo mágico* (magical realism) and its most noted progenitor, the Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez. A complex and at least paradoxical blend of scientific observation and utopian hope, of imaginative anthropomorphism and description of the natural world, of Western Enlightenment preoccupations encountering indigenous cosmology, *realismo mágico* incarnates the coeval and coterminous spread of tradition and modernity across the region.

Gabo, as he is known in Colombia's Caribbean region, where he was born, described the region's flora and fauna with great gusto. He drew on personal observation, knowledge of untold numbers of adventures, migrants, traders, and romantics, and interpretation of nineteenth-century artworks representing zones that were subject to malevolent ecological transformation. His work continues to inform and inspire environmental critique (Williams 2013; Anda 2015; Zeiderman 2016).

Sadly, the areas he described have long been subject to human- and animal-rights violations through bio-power that controls populations and extractive industries that jeopardize nature. These forces operate in the name of government, development, and even sustainability (Asher and Ojeda 2009; Anguelovski and Alier 2014; Rochlin 2015). The state urges its citizens to avoid an environmental discourse of victimhood—"síndrome de damnificado"—in favour of self-help to confront disasters (Zeiderman 2016).

But the country has a significant and growing environmental movement that opposes such tendencies (Escobar 1998; Oslender 2004; <http://intercambioclimatico.com/es/itemlist/tag/Colombia.htm>) and a vibrant informal recycling sector (Vergara, Damgaard, and Gomez 2016). The particular environmental challenges faced by indigenous and Afro-Colombians have seen social movements organize around collective versus individual and corporate rights over everything from biotechnology to river banks (Nemogá 2014; Velasco 2016).

When the venerable research and agitprop multinational Greenpeace set up shop there in 2009, rather than simply channelling global corporate campaigns, it focused on issues of particular pertinence to Colombia, notably the *páramos* (moorlands) of the Sierra Nevadas and Andes. Situated 9000 feet above sea level, the *páramos* are home to unique animal and plants and produce three-quarters of the water used in the nation's major cities. They are under dire threat from climate change (<http://www.greenpeace.org/colombia/es/campanas/paramos-en-peligro/>; Ruiz, Martinson, and Vergara 2012). The Constitutional Court recently ruled against mining and oil exploitation of the *páramos*, undermining part of the Government's 2014–18 Development programme (Hill 2016)—a milestone for environmentalists and a millstone for developers.

In terms of our concerns in this paper, it is telling that Gabo relied on the natural scenery of the Magdalena River as a background to the magical lives of the characters he created. For it has also inspired members of the public to express themselves.

Through a mixture of qualitative methods, we seek to demonstrate that a vibrant green passion is evident in letters to the editor about the River.

The Meaning of the Magdalena

Fifteen hundred kilometres long, the Magdalena River passes through 11 of Colombia's 32 provinces to its mouth in the Caribbean, draining most of the Colombian Andes along the way. It "covers 22% of the surface of the national territory, is home to 80% of the population and produces 85% of GDP" (Escobar and Barg, 1990). Some call it "the homeland river" (Castro 2013).

The Corporación Autónoma Regional del Río Grande de la Magdalena (Cormagdalena), an autonomous public corporation, is responsible for managing the River's land use, port facilities, transportation, and sustainability. Its slogan reads: "the energy of a river that drives a country" (<http://www.cormagdalena.com.co/>). But a Chinese state multinational, Hydrochina, has produced the key vision of the Magdalena's future. Embraced by the Colombian government, this model satisfies all the current clichés of privatization and power generation while being promulgated by Chinese Communist Party cadres dressed up (or is it down?) as businesspeople (Trujillo 2014). Even the notoriously pro-capital Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2014) notes that environmental imperatives have been overrun by profit-driven ones, because Colombian state institutions purportedly dedicated to preservation and sustainability have grown weak by contrast with more developmentalist agencies.

The entire area has long been subject to intense anthropocentric change: by 2000, 80 per cent of the tropical Andes' natural vegetation was destroyed, most of it in the Magdalena's basin. During the extraordinary 30 years from 1970, more than 230,000 hectares of forest were devastated each year in a restless search for precious metals, arable land, and grazing for cattle (Restrepo, Kettner, and Syvitski 2015).

The Magdalena has the largest sediment yield of all South American rivers, and the 10th-highest worldwide. This sedimentation has negatively influenced fishing and transporting goods for import and export (Peña, Pino, and De León 2015) and the River is laden with toxic materials (Tejeda-Benitez et al. 2016). In addition, deforestation through agriculture and urbanization has produced dramatic erosion and pollution, endangering water supplies not only along the coast, but in the country's central region as well. Climate change and volcanism have also transmogrified the river. Its wildlife has been particularly affected by human economic exploitation, with a unique turtle threatened, fish suffering high concentrations of mercury due to goldmining, and coral reefs and sea-grass beds imperiled (Restrepo et al. 2006; Vargas 2009; López-Castaño and Cano-Echeverri 2011; Hammond, Rosales, and Ouboter 2013; Restrepo 2015). One of Gabo's featured animals, the jaguar, is under intense pressure due to anthropocentrism (Boron et al. 2016).

In addition to the Magdalena River's economic contribution, this main fluvial artery of the country has inspired social movements and literary and artistic expression, and boasts its own museum.¹ Fals Borda's (1986, 16a) analysis of the people who inhabit the banks of the Magdalena describes "communities immersed in a world that seemed to have stopped in isolation, but which suffered from ... the tensions of the great modern society to which they belonged". Their amphibious culture presented a "complex of behaviours, beliefs, and practices related to the management of the natural environment" replete with "ideological elements ... prejudices, superstitions, and legends" (21b). One of the most famous legends,

which has also appeared in music, concerns the alligator man. It tells the story of a fisherman from Plato Magdalena who becomes an alligator with the help of a magic formula so he can spy on women bathing in the river without being discovered. One day, the white liquid that enables him to return to his natural shape disappears in the River. A few drops fall on his face and he is permanently transformed into half-man, half-alligator—a hybrid beast that women fear and men hunt (26b).

The sense of a spirit incarnate in the Magdalena has influenced artists, writers, filmmakers, and composers alike.² It is often identified with the very nation itself, as in Marco Aurelio Álvarez and Óscar García's song "Puente Pumarejo".³ Gómez (n.d.) counts 16 Colombian and four foreign feature films, three videos, 56 short movies, and four television series about it.⁴ From photography to art, the River has animated generations of creativity.

As noted above, the Magdalena was a particular inspiration for García Márquez. The protagonists of *Love in the Time of Cholera* (Márquez 1985) travel the Magdalena to heal the pain in their hearts, and *The General in His Labyrinth* (Márquez 2015) describes the meaning of the river for the people who lived on its shores. Márquez is alert to the suffering they and other creatures experience as a consequence of its deterioration: "fish will have to learn to walk on land because the water will end" (Márquez 1985, 55). He laments that "alligators ate the last butterfly, and gone are the maternal manatees, parrots, monkeys, peoples" (185), while *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (Márquez 1981) is about the failure to manage foreseeable tragedies. But again and again in Gabo's work, the Magdalena is reborn through the power of love; life is stronger than death.

In response to the river's evident decay, citizens' letters to the editors of the press in Colombia have told stories, made appeals, and criticized those responsible for the Magdalena. Their imaginative prose and passionate concern index both the legends summarized by Fals Borda and García Márquez's *realismo mágico*. We look now at the lineaments of these letters and their place in the cultural meaning of the Magdalena River.

Letters to the Editor and Emotions

It is easy to write off, so to speak, letters to the editor as of minimal significance—venues for slightly dotty retired British army officers to claim sightings of spring's first cuckoo (Gregory 1976) or places where readers with too much time and newsprint on their hands offer pedantic corrections to stories. Journalists are notoriously dismissive of the genre, regarding it as little more than a source of minor market intelligence (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002; Raeymaeckers 2005; Da Silva 2013; Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2015). Unsurprisingly, some scholarship questions their capacity to express public opinion (Grey and Brown 1970; Renfro 1979). In an Olympian manner, Ruben and Lievrouw (1990, 128) argue that research into the genre has failed to generate "an accepted theory or a working paradigm".

The letters-to-the-editor section can stimulate bizarre conspiracy theories, while its capacity to convey the truth is scarred by the prevalence of anti-evolutionary and anti-climate change ideology (Karlsso et al. 2015; Silva and Lowe 2015; Slavtcheva-Petkova 2015), rampant racism (Richardson and Franklin 2003), and a preponderance of conservative masculinity (Perrin 2016). Under state socialism, letters to the editor legitimized repressive regimes (Fielder and Meyen 2015).

Nevertheless, letters to the editor have long served as a forum of relatively free opinion and debate—an articulation of public sentiment and popular democracy (Hynds

1991, 1994; Wahl-Jorgensen 1999, 2001; Richardson and Franklin 2004; Nielsen 2010). In Newman's (2007, 158) words, they "create particular impressions of the reading public", while Webb (2006, 868) affirms that "even though we don't know to what extent the published versions are filtered through the editors' lens ... the content, however altered, is representative of readers' interests and lifestyle".

Wahl-Jorgensen (2007, 60) argues that "by publishing letters in mainstream newspapers, marginalized social movements contribute to setting the agenda and introducing new topics for discussion, including ones that would not otherwise get a hearing". Reader (2015, 148) maintains that public fora for audience commentaries are "spaces for collective action ... virtual communities that can be just as rewarding, contentious, cohesive, or divisive as any other community" (also see Conover and Searing 2005). They may form a feminist counter-public sphere where women engage with each other as points of reference, side-stepping the biases of the malestream news agenda (Pedersen 2004; Cavanagh 2016); a site of post-colonial frustration (Ansari 2011); and a stimulus to nascent progressive movements (Thornton 2007). Hart and Curry (2016) go so far as to describe letter writers as the "Third Voice of American Politics" alongside politicians and journalists. Consider the serious, sensuous debates between readers and journalists in *The Economist's* letters page: the better side of the *bourgeois* media's participatory *ethos* (<http://www.economist.com/news/letters/21699425-letters-editor>).

What used to be the only way of replying to a newspaper's reports and claims is also a model for Twitter, comment strings, and other forms of popular gossip and critique (Ihlebaek and Krumsvik 2015; Quinn and Powers 2016). Nielsen (2010) usefully describes letters to the editor as a fragmented contentious zone between politics, the media, and the private life of the limited number of citizens who get a chance to express themselves through the concrete operations of one of the institutions that gives the abstraction "the public debate" whatever reality it has.

He identifies three sub-genres: "storytelling, criticism, and appeal". They match what we found in our analysis below and constitute a potentially vigorous environmental counter-public sphere, animated by high emotion.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives wrote: "people are more likely to engage with stories about people and ecosystems (and polluters) that are close to where they are" (Cross et al. 2015, 40). Schneller (2016) advocates schooling students in writing letters to the editor to forward their environmental concerns, and the genre has proven to be both a core part of anti-fracking activist strategies (Neville and Weinthal 2016) and a key space for stakeholders to debate wildlife conservation (Jager et al. 2016). In the case of some media, letters offer the only place where environmental issues are discussed (Eriksen 2016).

Editorials and public-service announcements primarily frame environmental risk through moral arguments about social harm and care, particularly during disasters of cosmic proportions (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen, and Cottle 2012). This form of altruism and commitment to justice supposedly resonates with progressive readers. When the discourse invokes purity and disgust, it may engage conservatives (Feinberg and Willer 2013). So progressives can be appealed to through social- and self-awareness, and conservatives by external threats and opportunities (Schreiber et al. 2013). Such studies support the communication strategies offered by cognitive linguistic research on environmental frames, ideology, and political partisanship (Lakoff 2010). Emotion discourse has also proven effective in educational settings for stimulating environmental awareness (Reis and Roth 2009). Given that conservatives potentially react pro-environmentally to imagery of ecological

disasters that elicits disgust or poses threats to bodily purity, such as the Magdalena's contaminated water, green persuasion should blend a liberal emphasis on aesthetic and moral values with frightening accounts of habitat destruction and oil-slimed waterways.

In the light of this binary, we examined the language used by authors of letters to the editor to describe the difficulties confronting the Magdalena River and its inhabitants. The depth of feeling experienced and expressed by letter writers incarnates their potential commitment, sometimes in response to disasters that are sudden and prominent, sometimes as reactions to subtle stories beyond the headlines—in other words, in a bipartisan fashion.

Based on the above discussion, this article seeks to answer the following questions: What public emotions about the Magdalena River animate these letters? And what narratives about the Magdalena River inform them?

Methodology and Results

Our research is based on a previous study that analysed 5425 letters to the editor in the Colombian newspapers *El Tiempo* and *El Heraldo* between 1999 and 2008 (Barrios 2013, 2015). In accordance with their respective circulations, 90 per cent of the data came from *El Tiempo* and 10 per cent from *El Heraldo*.

The letters encountered in that original analysis had four main themes: citizenship, domestic policy, international policy, and the production of newspapers (Barrios 2013, 2015). Numerous letter writers were very emotive in their accounts of the conflict. In addition, a significant number focused on the environment and climate change. As a consequence, we decided to embark on this new study to explore views expressed on sensitive ecological issues to do with the Magdalena through content as well as textual analysis, which permitted us to appreciate trends in both numerical and interpretive ways (McKee 2003).

We examined 652 paragraphs within 595 letters. Our primary unit of analysis was the paragraph, because the letters frequently referred to more than one theme in different sections. We looked for key words associated with the environment, as per Table 1. Using QDA Miner software, we placed key terms in context and carried out simultaneous searches. Categories emerged organically from the data (Ryan and Bernard 2003; Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2013) because of the aforementioned process, allied to a careful and repeated reading of texts.

1. The 652 paragraphs were organized in a database. They contained such expressions as risk, accident, collapse, rainy season, flood, rain, river, Bogotá River, Magdalena River, creek, Sierra Nevada, water, badlands, mountains, disaster, natural environment, emergency, Red Cross, civil defense, and relief.
2. We created a virtual file for each thematic area and pasted articles into the corresponding documents.
3. Two senior graduate students with experience in qualitative research read the texts several times, along with the authors. Each reviewer grouped quotations from those letters to form categories and establish possible connections between themes (*q.v.* Van Manen 1990).
4. We discussed each individual's categories. Categories were agreed upon, merged, and reorganized, providing topical diversity of the data (Van Manen 1990). The co-authors

TABLE 1
Percentage of key words in paragraphs, 1999–2008

Key words	<i>El Tiempo</i>		<i>El Herald</i>		Total	
	Paragraphs	%	Paragraphs	%	Paragraphs	%
Water	93	14.3	64	9.8	157	24.1
River	89	13.7	39	6.0	128	19.6
Risk	52	8	17	3	69	11
Natural environment	40	6.1	13	2.0	53	8.1
Accident	40	6.1	9	1.4	49	7.5
Emergency	25	3.8	6	0.9	31	4.8
Rainy season	19	2.9	8	1.2	27	4.14
Rain	12	1.8	14	2.15	26	4.0
Magdalena River	6	0.9	17	2.6	23	3.5
Bogotá River	16	2.5	0	0	16	2.5
Creek	1	0.15	14	2.1	15	2.3
Mountains	10	1.5	5	0.8	15	2.3
Disaster	9	1.4	3	0.5	12	1.8
Sierra Nevada	6	0.9	0	0.0	6	0.9
Red Cross	3	0.5	3	0.5	6	0.9
Relief	2	0.3	3	0.5	5	0.8
Collapse	4	0.61	0	0.0	4	0.61
Badlands	4	0.6	0	0	4	0.6
Civil defense	1	0.2	2	0.3	3	0.5
Flood	3	0.46	0	0	3	0.46
Total	435	67	217	33	652	100

used their knowledge of Colombian culture, history, and geography to interpret the texts. They translated a selection, which is quoted below.

- Words used within letters that derive from indigenous languages were associated with themes and emotions in Spanish.

Our study discloses a mixture of emotions and expectations about the Magdalena River that indicate its salience and importance to readers. Quotations in the results section were selected to convey the historical and cultural significance of the Magdalena and the emotions it elicited in letter writers.

A River of Memory, Activism, and Policy

The sample shows a nostalgia for the original condition of the Magdalena and an embrace of its national importance. The “great River of Magdalena” is a prominent expression. Consider these contrasting texts from *El Herald*, the journal of record of Colombian’s main Caribbean city, Barranquilla:

A letter from our incomparable poet José Asunción Silva to his relatives in Bogotá says, “I’m on a train from Calamar to Cartagena ... I think of Cartagena as Colombia’s golden gates and Calamar as the nation’s lobby, because everything that comes into the country enters through Cartagena, then by train to Calamar before being transported along the Río Magdalena for all of Colombia to enjoy, including Barranquilla”; there were no highways in those days. (*El Herald*, November 20, 1999)

Another letter, a decade later, expresses disappointment and sadness at damage to the River's wildlife:

One Sunday in December 1966 ... [.] peeking through a small window, I spotted a large flamingo in the Caño de la Auyama, a tributary to the River Magdalena. It had long legs, a long neck, a downturned beak, and pink plumage. ... Today, forty years later, I no longer see these beautiful birds—just rotten waters full of excrement. (*El Heraldo*, June 2, 2008)

These texts feature a literary tone that describes the Magdalena River as a creative yet vulnerable force. It has clearly inspired ordinary writers as well as Gabo. In reaction to years of state priorities that emphasized economic development, many letters express intense regret and disappointment at both official neglect of, and citizen apathy towards, the Magdalena River; only a few constructive emotions appear (Ekman 2008):

If Bogotá could control the River that bears its name so that its rubbish only contaminated Sabana, we could say that this was a problem for the capital and the province. But because these effluents flow into the Magdalena and adversely affect other regions, they become a national issue, originating in the capital. It's a great pity that resources that could improve the state of the Magdalena have been cut. (*El Tiempo*, February 18, 2008)

Letter writers feel sad and angry at the lack of potable water and basic infrastructure in the towns on the banks of the Magdalena and other tributaries in Colombia:

It is inconceivable—inexplicable—that the inhabitants of the banks of the generous River Magdalena must endure grievous water scarcity when they live so close to this precious, sacred liquid. (*El Heraldo*, May 19, 2004)

Inhabitants of the banks of other major rivers, such as the Amazon, report similarly inadequate supplies of drinking water:

I had the wonderful experience of spending a year in Puerto Nariño, the principal municipality in Amazonas province, and I dare to denounce the neglect of this place and its people: they do not have drinking water, and they line up both to drink from and to pollute the river, with all the health problems that entails. They have three phone booths, which only function during office hours, and weather permitting (a rarity in Amazonas). But what concerns me most is electricity; they have only one plant, and in addition to making monstrous noises, it only works for a few hours in the afternoon—when the Mayor's office has the money to buy fuel, and when it's not damaged (which is the case several times a year). In the afternoon, with the temperature above 40 degrees and 80 per cent humidity, you can't eat, work, or even rest. I hope the Government takes action to counter this abandonment of its people, given there is sufficient infrastructure to export energy to other countries. (*El Tiempo*, July 10, 2004)

This is a recurrent problem across Colombia:

How can it be that we have an abundance of water thanks to two oceans, the Magdalena, Amazonas, and underground currents, but half our inhabitants lack access to this vital and irreplaceable resource? Twenty-five million of our countrymen consume poor-quality water. The remainder enjoy pure, uncontaminated water, much of which they waste. (*El Tiempo*, January 15, 2000)

Many letters appeal to the government to find permanent solutions to the environmental problems affecting vulnerable populations, especially those living on the River's banks. In the next letter, the word "sad" is associated with a lack of initiative on the part of the authorities:

I do not know whether hidden interests have constructed our forestry legislation. It certainly assists multinationals. When laws are passed without great scrutiny or analysis of their costs and benefits, that inevitably excites suspicion. It makes one sad to think that the nation's leaders do not concentrate on the need to protect its future. Why is there such a lack of environmental consciousness when the rest of the world acts to protect its ecosystems and water resources? Without a credible opposition, they just do what they want. Now they are looking to privatize water. (*El Tiempo*, December 19, 2005)

Due to industrial construction over the last few decades, Barranquilla has not made access to the Magdalena easy. But the Avenida del Río (River Avenue) regenerative project (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lx7_ATAZMj0) is awakening hope for its recovery in readers:

Barranquilla and the Caribbean coast in general welcomed the River Avenue project. It met a yearning across generations of people who did not think of the area as a national tourist attraction. It is a great pleasure to watch the sunset and the dawn between the murmur of waves and currents, to bear witness to the ephemeral idyll noted by the poet Julio Flórez, and the perennial kiss that the river shares with the sea. ... [C]leaning up the river is primordial: the morning glory and the water hyacinth that form on its banks are cleaned or sanitized to avoid unpleasant odors. ... God willing, we shall see the realization of desires that course through our beloved Barranquilla. (*El Heraldo*, July 7, 2006)

The Great Pact for the Recuperation of the Río Grande de la Magdalena must become part of our national purpose, with the full backing of political leaders. This is the only way to return the Magdalena River to its former glory as the engine of development in the region and a place where Colombia unites. *El Heraldo's* participation in this noble campaign to create citizen culture and consciousness of the River ennobles this important publishing house. (*El Heraldo*, November 29, 1999)

Also, drawing on progressive rhetoric, letters filled with emotions call on Colombians to bear collective virtue in mind (Ferreter Mora 1994), notably solidarity and compassion (Nussbaum 2013), to improve the situation of coastal people suffering the consequences of anthropocentric destruction:

The lack of official solidarity with coastal peoples who must deal with a harsh winter season is amazing. Poor people have always lived there. Their difficulties are not of their making: we have over-invested in development and polluted the River. Again and again, we fail to apply the necessary resources to solve, once and for all, the problems with rivers and dykes that arise every year. (*El Tiempo*, March 20, 2008)

When Rivers Become Casualties

In addition to suffering the negative aspects of economic development, the Magdalena River and other waters have been casualties of the armed conflict: the principal *guerrilla* forces, the Ejército Liberación Nacional (ELN) and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias

de Colombia (FARC), have abused the environment to influence the government. When the rebels bombed sections of the country's oil pipelines, such as Transandino, they caused major environmental disasters. Massive spills killed uncountable numbers of species and denied clean water to residents of the river's banks. Such actions have threatened ecosystems and lives alike. Letters to the editor indicate readers' anger and grief in response, and call for the exclusion of natural resources and underprivileged communities from the conflict:

How can we say everyone should respect everything, when we have birds without forests? Rivers without fish? Land without crops? Crops without water? Pets with brutal owners? Riverbeds without rivers? People who must use oxygen masks to breathe? Where children have no fathers, no brothers—no family at all? What will become of the children without friends? Should we have freedom without order? God said about the world: I welcome you all; you may live in peace. (*El Tiempo*, December 17, 2005)

The letter writers make frequent use of question marks (Barrios 2013). In the example above, interrogatives are used rhetorically to express despair at the environmental and the social reality, that Colombia's protracted struggle has damaged rivers and other natural resources. Our last two letters address this issue:

The ELN, with all the arrogance that characterizes it, has made a very unclear proposal. They speak of a bilateral truce. Is this a real ceasefire, where they release hostages and end kidnapping, extortion, laying mines, burning vehicles, destroying pipelines, and poisoning rivers? Or is it a truce so that our Army will leave them alone and they can continue their war against the Colombian people? (*El Tiempo*, July 13, 2004)

It would be good to compile all the atrocities committed by the terrorists of the FARC over the past 40 years ... Likewise, the number of gas cylinders launched to destroy barracks, schools and health centres; the amount of spilled oil that has polluted our rivers and fields; the tonnes of exported drugs. (*El Tiempo*, May 31, 2004)

Discussion

The Magdalena has been an ample source of reflection and emotion in Colombian culture. The river has triggered many letter writers' affection for the nation, reaffirming core social values and collective goals. They express a wide array of emotions that flow through—and sometimes flood—daily life.

Our study discloses a community committed to the environment and united in the hope that their magical but all-too-real river will regain its importance as a crucial source of income and a significant cultural reference for the country, and in sustainable ways. The letters reveal certain characteristics shared by this community of readers: their wish to protect natural resources, their green activism, and the solidarity and compassion they feel for fellow citizens. The emotions they exhibit are mainly sadness, anger, hope, joy, and despair.

This is in keeping with Reader's (2015, 158) findings, that letters "allow people to confront one another and blow off steam, which is why so many forums have been called, in the past, social safety valves". Some virtual communities become critical and even transformative. As Nussbaum (2013, 2) says, "emotions directed at the geographical features of a

nation are ways of channeling emotions towards its key commitments—to inclusiveness, equality, the relief of misery, the end of slavery”.

In this instance, readers’ letters lobby compatriots and decision makers to preserve natural resources. Veritable rivers of emotions surround their criticisms of the lack of conservation and appeals for drinking water and sewerage services for people living on the Magdalena’s banks. Many writers call for urgent action to stop the contamination caused by mining, industrial waste, and the conflict. The expressions of emotion amount to a telling instance of how Colombians relate to “their” river.

We hope these findings may encourage journalists to write more stories about environmental issues and exert pressure on legislation and policy. We see value in further analysis of the genre, alongside other ways in which ecological crises give rise to public displays of emotion. Perhaps none of these writers have produced imagery of the quality of Gabo, but they vividly express a commitment as great as his to a precious world under threat.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thanks to Lina María Vega for her excellent research assistance.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTES

1. See <http://www.museoscolombianos.gov.co/fortalecimiento/comunicaciones/noticias/Paginas/La-nueva-propuesta-museogr%C3%A1fica-del-Museo-del-R%C3%ADo-Magdalena.aspx>.
2. Consider the variety of these exhibitions: <http://www.arteinformado.com/agenda/f/el-rio-magdalena-109949>; <http://www.citytv.com.co/videos/340548/exposicion-en-museo-de-arte-del-quindio-rindo-homenaje-al-rio-magdalena>; <http://www.vkgaleria.com/es/exposicion/el-rio-magdalena>.
3. See <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Los-Melodicos/Puente-Pumarejo-with-Ramon-Alberto>.
4. A selection of films is excerpted in Calderón (2015).

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