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MINNI SAWHNEY

Ex-centric Affects in Cristina Rivera Garza's *Nadie me verá llorar*

Though the literature of the frontier between Mexico and the United States has emerged as a major category of writing only in the last thirty years, some of us remember Carlos Fuentes' reference to Gloria Anzaldúa's description of the border as "an open wound" or "scar" (1992, 287), as well as his novels *Frontera de cristal* (1995), and *Gringo Viejo* (1985). In the latter, his protagonist, the American civil war veteran Ambrose Bierce, crosses the border in order to die in Mexico during the Revolution at the hands of Pancho Villa. At the end of his life Bierce chooses death in Mexico over the non-descript life of a retiree in San Francisco. As a Mexican soldier comments, looking at his dead body,

Ellos los gringos, sí—dijo el coronel Frutos García—se pasaron la vida cruzando fronteras, las suyas y las ajenas—y ahora el viejo la había cruzado hacia el sur porque ya no tenía fronteras que cruzar en su propio país.

¿Y la frontera de aquí adentro?—había dicho el general Arroyo tocándose el corazón.

*Hay una frontera que sólo nos atrevemos a cruzar de noche*—había dicho el gringo viejo*—la frontera de nuestras diferencias con los demás, de nuestros combates con nuestros mismos.* (Fuentes 1985, 13)

"The Gringos, yes," said Coronel Frutos García. "they spend their lives crossing borders, theirs and others." And now the old man had crossed to the south because he had no more borders to cross in his own country.

"And the border here inside us?" general Arroyo had said, touching his heart.

"There is a border that we only dare cross at night," the old gringo had said. "the border of our differences with others, of our combats with ourselves."

The internal frontiers that Frutos García mentions can also be understood as the man-made or imagined borders within countries and as insurmountable as the lines that divide nations.

In Mexico the hierarchisation of the social space and the privileging of Central Mexico can be retraced to colonial times. The capital owes its grandeur to its position in New Spain and since then aspirants to power or fame have converged here. It was hoped that the Mexican Revolution would address this anomaly since, according to Carlos Fuentes, one of its enduring legacies is that it made clear that none of the many existing Mexicans could be sacrificed. (Fuentes 1994, 63) However, the centralization of Mexico became even more pronounced during the long regime of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI). In this scheme, other regions have been maintained as tributary zones and their culture a mere offshoot of "Mexicanness." Needless to emphasize, in the arts and literature, Mexico City continues to be the principal pole of attraction for writers. This latter situation is not particular to Mexico. Pascale Casanova provides a detailed exposition of a hierarchical literary world that privileges a few metropolitan centers like Paris, London, New York and Mexico City, and the vicissitudes faced by writers who belong to the periphery or regions far from the consecrated spaces of literary production. New entrants into a literary space have had to assimilate to the criteria of these spaces or run the risk of permanent alienation. Casanova however also elaborates on the methods used by writers who have successfully rebelled against the domination of these centers. Recently Jean Franco (2006) has given a new fillip to writing on the margins of consecrated centers by confirming the inviability of sustaining the notion of national literatures in Latin America in post-national times when the center is, so to speak, at the margins, and when a questioning of the standards set forth by this erstwhile center starts to arise.

Presently, the nation is just one of the players on the post-national stage and the centralization of the Mexican literary scene has recently
been challenged by a body of writers from the northern border states. Their success is due to the patronage of institutions like that of the University of Sonora in Hermosillo and their different *habitus*. This accounts for literary themes that in general are connected to the sociology of their space like migration and drugdealing, and are at a distance from the mythology of the national and “mexicanidad,” a characteristic of writing from the center. However amongst these writers there are crossover stories of those who have a foot in the center and yet are avowed border-writers who have obliquely highlighted the literary production of the periphery.

Cristina Rivera Garza, a trained historian, was born in Tamaulipas on the northeastern border with the United States. She studied in Toluca and has taught there as well as in central Mexico, San Diego, California and in the border-city of Tijuana. Appreciative of the desire of writers from the northern frontier to break the monopoly of the center she says in an interview:

I have this very deep, very personal, very intimate relationship with Mexico City that doesn’t mean that I agree with the centralization of Mexican culture which I believe is a fact. It’s something that has been dominating the dynamics of cultural production in Mexico throughout the twentieth century. It was the case in colonial times and the case even in precolonial times. I believe it is very important for Mexicans, especially those who are in the process of producing books, to be able to see the reality of the whole country from a place, from a perspective that is not located or not only located in Central Mexico. (Samuelson 2007, 3)

Like other writers from the Mexican side of the border, her work has stand-alone characteristics and her voice is unrecognizable from one work to the next. Her work, however, does not always overtly include themes from the frontier region. Her novels and stories have lingering descriptions of the streets of Mexico D.F. or the northern desert or even a nameless sea and allegorical cities called the City of the North or City of the South. Although Rivera Garza’s literary production tends toward the universal and does not yet touch the themes that appear in other writers of the border (migration, human trafficking and drugdealing) her conscious distance from the myth of the national or “mexicanidad” is an indicator that her versatility is an act of rebellion.

Like other writers of the border, she has created new standards by which to be evaluated. She mixes genres and literary styles because as she explains,

I might explain it perhaps as just a very old tradition of mine that consists of going against the grain just for the sake of it. Escaping from a style is important, escaping from the idea of an authorial and authoritative voice is important for me. (Ibid., 4)

In this paper I try to establish how her novel *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999) has broadened the category of border writing and the way that border writing is constituted. Her border perspective on Mexican national history in this novel gives us an insight into the aleatory nature of borders, and on the inferiorization that results from these forced demarcations. The space she describes in her novel allows us to search for clues to the literary space the author herself occupies. It is possible to extract information about the capital and also the relationship of the latter to its periphery.

Rivera Garza’s borders are metaphorical spaces that accompany her principal protagonist Matilda Burgos to every location and make her a permanent outsider. The questions that she and Joaquín Buitrago, her psychiatrist interlocutor, frequently pose to each other (“How does a woman become mad?”, “How does one become a photographer of the insane or of prostitutes?”) (13, 15, 16, 18) remit us to the exclusive state and nation that Porfirio Díaz sought to create at the turn of the nineteenth century when the marginal or nonconformist were considered burdens on society. As is well known, the displacement of peasants, repression of miners and general alienation of the middle classes eventually led to the Mexican Revolution.

The last pages of *Nadie me verá llorar* state that the work is based on records, official documents, diaries and letters of the inmates of Mexico City’s *La Casanegra* General Asylum, and that the data on the city’s roads and buildings is part of the author’s research for her doctoral thesis. She does however mention that though the name and photograph of the principal protagonist exist, the rest of her life is imaginary.

The novel is structured as a series of disconnected flashbacks,
anecdotal breaks and interruptions. The reader deciphers a maze of national history of the period spanning the mid-nineteenth century until the first two decades of the twentieth, focusing on the life of Matilda Burgos, the novel's principal protagonist. The novel opens after the Revolution of 1910 with a conversation between Matilda Burgos and Joaquín Buitrago, the main protagonists, who meet after a gap of twenty years in the mental asylum where the latter was a psychiatric student but later becomes a photographer of prostitutes and the insane. In the waning years of the last century the madhouse is a place for all those that Porfian society deems unproductive and alienated. Some of them are drug addicts of elite families, law students brought there by their fathers who tell the director that their sons have become so cynical of society that they do not even fear God anymore. As a student caught injecting morphine says, "Todo el mundo rompe las reglas, doctor, todo el mundo." [everyone breaks the rules, doctor, everyone] (81)

In the novel the country seems to be divided into people whose careers are on the ascendant—like the director of the mental asylum, Eduardo Oligochea—and who in the words of the narrator are the easiest to bribe because they believe in the 'progress' Díaz promises. The other half of the country is composed of those like Joaquín Buitrago, who come from wealthy families but are subversive because they choose to drop out. At times even Oligochea, who considers his directorial tenure a stepping-stone to better things, wavers in his zeal. What if they are right, what if as the mad Santiago Davis—one of the inmates—keeps repeating, there is no future and the country is going straight to hell? The kinds of oppositions that continually crop up in the text, foreground the tension between a way of life deemed correct and its imposition over an existing lifestyle.

To ascertain the facts of Matilda's life, Joaquín Buitrago looks for documents in the National Library where there are records of the arrival of immigrants and their histories. Matilda Burgos is the granddaughter of Marcos Burgos, the only Spaniard amongst the boatloads of Italian immigrant families who arrive to Veracruz around 1857. It is a time when Porfirio Díaz is leading Mexico into the world market and the country has to shed its vestiges of eccentricity and conform to international standards. The Reform Laws put in place by Benito Juárez to curb the power of the Church are vigorously implemented, and small landowners like Matilda's parents are likely to lose their vanilla plantation to the big latifundistas (landowners.) Marcos Burgos, Matilda's grandfather, marries an Indian woman, Maria de la Luz in 1885. Soon after the birth of their grandchild Matilda, they take part in a rebellion of seven thousand Totonac Indians organized by Antonio Díaz Montfört against the new agrarian measures which demarcate the land of the Totonac Indians. Marcos Burgos and his wife die during this four-month uprising but one of his two sons, Santiago Burgos, stays in Papantla, Veracruz, taking care of his vanilla plantations and earning the nickname "el esposo de la vainilla" [the vanilla husband]. But Santiago proves to be even more of a misfit at a time when oil companies are making a bid for the lands around Papantla. Desperately trying to awaken the conscience of the people to what is happening around them, he climbs onto a pole thirty-five meters above the ground and rants for three days against the government and the greed of the oil companies who had caused the 'death' of the vanilla plantations. He minutely lists all the land expropriations and the concentration of thirty thousand hectares of land in seven buyers. And yet the doctor who attends to him when he finally relents to come down diagnoses him as suffering from delirium tremens.

To guard against the eccentricities of her parents, the doctor advises that Matilda be sent away and Marcos Burgos, Santiago's brother in Mexico City, is considered the right choice. There she meets Joaquín Buitrago, the piano teacher Diamantina Ovando and Cástulo, who rebel against the allure of the new prosperity which has numbed a middle class that does not protest enough against Díaz's authoritarianism. In the words of Diamantina:

Los ricos sustituyen su falta de imaginación con objetos. Y los objetos, siempre terminan por ser un obstáculo para la imaginación. (41)

Rich people substitute their lack of imagination with objects. And the objects
always end up an obstacle for the imagination.

But Diamantina dies, massacred along with the factory workers she is fighting for, and Joaquín Buitrago and Matilda turn their lives into a form of Refusal in order to embarrass the system. As the narrator says of Joaquín Buitrago:

Joaquín salió al fracaso y lo invitó a sentarse junto a él. Joaquín se imaginó por primera vez que podría descansar, que tal vez en el fracaso encontraría finalmente la paz, el silencio, ir a contracorriente del progreso, del tiempo mismo, y él, como el país entero, no necesitaba nada más. Cuando Joaquín salió del Templo del Amor, lo hizo para alejarse definitivamente de la historia. (21)

Joaquín greeted failure and invited it to sit down beside him. Joaquín imagined that for the first time he would be able to rest, that perhaps in failure he would finally find peace, silence, go against the stream of progress, of time itself, and he, like the entire country, would not need anything more. When Joaquín left the Temple of Love, he did it to distance himself definitively from history.

Joaquín and Matilda's strategy of resistance is an opting out of a system that they abhor and which despises their kind. Matilda builds a wall of silence around herself and refuses to speak for years, facilitating the task of those who want to exclude her. On the other side of the divide is Marcos Burgos, Matilda's uncle who wants to flee a past of eccentricity and become part of the mainstream in the capital. He exemplifies the new Mexico. Lacking in imagination he does not construct a new past, he instead only mentions that he is the son of Spanish immigrants who for lack of means were forced to cultivate vanilla. He leaves out his indigenous ancestry, and like those who want to triumph over their past, he develops a blind faith in the possibilities of the future, in the progress of the nation. (103) Together with his friend Julio Guerrero, the author of the anthropological treatise La génesis del crimen en México—Ensayo de psiquiatría social (Genesis of Mexico's Crime—An Essay on Social Psychiatry), he believes that the poor are a real threat to the country because of their lack of hygiene and lazy work habits, their unstable family life, high alcohol intake and promiscuity as well as their highly seasoned food. He applauds Díaz's drastic law-and-order measures and for his own part tries to experiment with his social engineering ideas on Matilda. Cleanliness, hygiene and self-discipline are the ways the poor can change their fate. When Matilda escapes from him, rejecting thereby the chance that Periffrían Mexico offers to change her destiny, he stops mentioning her name and drops the matter as an irredeemable failure. Matilda however revels in her aberrant ways. After leaving her uncle's house she works in a factory and then, after being sacked for absence from work when she takes a colleague to the hospital, she goes to live in a brothel. As the narrator tells us, about twelve to fifteen percent of women in Mexico City at the beginning of the twentieth century had at some time in their lives lived in brothels.

The divide between the sanitizing urge of Marcos Burgos and the chaotic reality of Mexico is gaping. For Burgos, the project of imagining a coherent nation means regularizing and regulating all that deviates by means of repression and education. The other inmates of the brothel are women from the provinces working in factories or who have been laid off work. Rather than a den of degradation, the brothel becomes for Matilda a place where she and the other residents develop considerable agency in learning to fight the police. She takes on a woman lover who she nicknames La Diabresa and together they set out to discover the wonders of Mexico's capital, pleasures that had been denied to her in the cloistered setting of her uncle's house. Taking into account Rivera Garza's own relationship to the Center, it is important to emphasize that these sympathetic portraits of the outsider and the rebel requires reading this text as an alternative vision of the Mexican nation, and not as a counter-nationalist discourse. The description of Mexico City in these pages bears comparison with other writings that exalt the wonders of the capital. What is contradicted is not so much the Center's majesty nor the forthcoming Revolution but the way differences are brushed under the carpet and the uncomfortable is shunned in favor of cultural compatibility. Like other writers from the border, Rivera Garza's endeavor does not seem to be to reify the difference of the periphery (though for writers of the border habitus the frontier is posited as an idiosyncratic space because it is exceptional and distinctive.) Thus her endeavor is not to confirm
cultural and historical prejudice, but to renegotiate Mexico City's identification with the provinces.

Matilda Burgos finally ends up in the mental asylum, but the precipitating factor that leads her there is her cohabitation with the American researcher and engineer Paul Kamack, another emblematic figure who serves as a mirror-image for Matilda, confirming the heroine's alienation from Mexican reality. After the death of his wife and child, rather like Ambrose Bierce in *Gringo Viejo*, Paul has shifted to Mexico looking for a woman in whose arms he can die. The manner of his portrayal—he is the only other man apart from Joaquín Buitrago who Matilda empathizes with—goes against the grain of the way foreigners were portrayed during the Revolution. Sitting in the asylum Matilda remembers him thus:

Paul podia transformar pulgadas en centímetros con una facilidad tremenda. Grados farenheit en centigrados. Libras en kilos. Pies en metros. En esos días encontrarse con un ingeniero de los Estados Unidos no era difícil. Había cientos trazando mapas, identificando minas, planeando el tendido de los rieles, construyendo fábricas. Se les reconocía por los trajes austero y la manera de observar los objetos (....) Eran exploradores en un paisaje extraño; los aventureros que modificaban la superficie de la tierra; los hombres con la habilidad de cambiar de lugar el horizonte. (156)

Paul could transform inches into centimeters with a tremendous ease. Farenheit into centigrade. Pounds into kilos. Feet into meters. In those days to find an engineer from the United States was not difficult. There were hundreds drawing maps, identifying mines, planning the laying of the railroads, building factories. They could be recognized by their austere suits and the way they observed objects. ...They were explorers of a strange landscape; the adventurers who modified the surface of the earth; the men with the ability to change the place of the horizon.

Paul woos the woman from the brothel though he is popular in the upper strata of Mexican society. In the words of the narrator:

Las señoritas de sociedad a las que invitó a la ópera le parecieron sosas e inculanas débiles, pálidas, (....) sus pieles cubiertas de talco tenían un dudoso color blanco. En sus manos lisas y suaves no había huella alguna de trabajo. (158)

The society girls that he invited to the opera seemed to him insipid and uncultured, weak and pale (...) their skins covered with talcum powder had a doubtful white color. In their smooth, soft hands there was no sign of work.

While trying to escape from his own prison of social identity he finds a kindred spirit in Matilda. Again the contrast with Marcos Burgos, the other foreigner and Spaniard who wanted to construct prisons and barriers to preserve class interests is evident. For Matilda Paul is an escape, but when he dies and the police question his death they disbelieve her stories of her foreigner husband and even the history of her family, her father's obsession with the vanilla plantations.

The incredulous manner in which her stories are heard, coupled with her own behavior considered wayward for the age, lead the police to refer her to the mental asylum La Castañeda. The author has talked about the texts of Michel Foucault on madness that influenced her in the writing of this novel. The role of society in deciding madness is crucial to understanding why Matilda Burgos's stories would have been deemed inconvenient for the Mexico of Porfirio Díaz. Matilda could not escape the identity that others fitted her with and hence her quasi acceptance of her madness. Though she tests negative for the Wasserman test of insanity used at that time, Matilda ends her days in the madhouse. Even her last friend, Joaquín Buitrago the psychiatrist interlocutor and drug addict who proposes to her, is turned down because Matilda steadfastly refuses to give up her outsider status after having come this far.

We can read her story as an allegory of Mexico and its relationship with its provinces. Where Matilda comes from, where she speaks from and the inability of those around her to understand and interpret what she says is a metaphor for a nation that did not have room for eccentric stories. Rivera Garza produces a boundary crossing by creating a protagonist who represents a site of flux and contestation with her untrammeled life. The leitmotifs of the mental asylum and madness that appear in this novel are common in Chicano writings north of the border. In the words of Gloria Anzaldúa: "Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged.
Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us." (Anzaldúa 1998, 890)

Mental hospitals are also a characteristic in the life of the Chicano civil-rights activist Oscar “Zeta” Acosta on whom Ilan Stavans wrote a biography. Zeta is born of naturalized US citizen parents but yet he considers Chicano alienation from the mainstream as connected to geography. He considers Chicanos as part of a separate nation that has been taken over. “Chicanos never moved, it was the world that moved around them. Unlike other immigrant waves, they did not come to the United States; the United States came to them.” (61) Stavans tries thus to explain the schizophrenic behavior of his subject, his flitting between identities, because he cannot find a place in the country that he feels invalidates his self. In Stavans’ words:

A Latin lover and a fuckin’ Mexican, a freak, a rebel, a romantic husband, an idealist, a wandering father, he was everywhere and nowhere at all times, an identity in search of shape, a yo looking for una habitación propia, a room of his own.” (17)

More than just a figure of speech, Colonel Frutos Garcia’s statement in Gringo Viejo of the frontier within touches the very heart of debates that posit assimilation of provincial, ex-centric practices and affects into a policy. Even though the Mexican Revolution was fought to include the many Mexicos (Emiliano Zapata and his peasants from Morelia, Pancho Villa from the North) the nation it led to was again imagined as a contained space in which the provinces melded in, submerging their differences. Yet towards the end of Nadie me verá llorar, the narrator sees a chink in this exclusivist vision of the national imaginary. Matilda Burgos accuses Joaquín of wanting a mad woman as his wife just so to have a different exotic kind of home. (197) Just before this scene, the narrator has apprised us of the changes in Mexico after the Revolution. The Aztec past is being valorized and now cigarette advertising uses an Indian with his feathers as their mascot replacing the French women that were the earlier models. Matilda’s words acquire a new meaning in this context. She rejects the domestication of her difference and refuses to assimilate. Her boundary crossing would have been all in vain otherwise. Instead she says she wishes to leave for the desert and rest with the remains of Paul Kamack. We might grieve for Joaquín Buitrago who to all intents has been chasing mirages all his life as he settles down in the words of the narrator with strangers in the eponymous “Café de Nadie, la mejor metáfora del país.” [Nobody Café, the best metaphor of the country] (197) But at the end of the novel with no satisfactory closure, there is an endorsement of Matilda Burgos’s outsider status and the valence of the periphery.

Endnotes

1. For a discussion on Mexicanness, see Roger Bartra (1987). Claudio Lomnitz Adler (1992) insightfully analyzes the way centralist ideology enters into a dialectic with local customs in the provinces to form a variant or different take on the original ideology. In his words “Social analysts who have studied agency, power, culture and ideology have examined some important dimensions of the relationship between culture and space. Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ (1979), for example, is designed to address the relations between cultural structures, the ways in which these structures are laid out and the self. So although the production and reproduction of social spaces are the result of the practices of people these people are social personae whose very identities and practical orientations are influenced by the spaces in which they have been socialized. (...) There is, in other words, a dialectic between person and place; because places are frames of social relations, they become imbued with the values of those relations and therefore help to create the relational values that make up the self.” (18)

2. Roderic A. Camp has described the way in which intellectual life converges in the capital and in a few elite institutions here. “The pattern of universities attended by Mexico’s intellectuals has very definite biases, in many ways similar to those of its political leaders. The most striking characteristic in this regard is the substantial number attending the National University, even when including figures for intellectuals who did not attend any university. If we only consider intellectuals who attended college, we find that two thirds went to the UNAM” (Camp et al 1991, 559)

3. “Para acceder a la simple existencia literaria, para luchar contra esta
invisibilidad que desde el principio les amenaza, los escritores tienen que crear las condiciones de su 'aparición', es decir, de su visibilidad literaria. La libertad creadora de los escritores oriundos de las 'periferias' del mundo no les ha sido concedida de entrada: la han conquistado únicamente a fuerza de combates siempre negados como tales en nombre de la universalidad literaria y de la igualdad de todos ante la creación." [In order to have access to a simple literary life, to fight against this invisibility that from the beginning menaces them, writers have to create the conditions for their "appearance", that is to say, their literary visibility. The creative freedom of writers coming from the "peripheries" of the world is not conceded to them as a point of entry: they have conquered it solely through the force of combats that are always denied as such in the name of literary universality and the equality of all as creators" (Casanova 1991,233)].

4. *Habitus* for Bourdieu (1997, 77-95) is a system of dispositions that originate in a class condition and that structure these structures, it is a product of history and produces collective or individual practices.

5. In a series of critical works on the literary production of the border, Miguel Rodríguez Lozano has described the inherent centralization of the Mexican literary field and the power of literary journals like *Vuélta, Nexos*, and *Letras Libres* to create literary reputations. (Lozano 2002, 2003)

6. Borderlands are where people "cope with social inequalities based on racial, gender, class and/or sexual differences as well as with spiritual transformation and psychic processes of exclusion and identification—of feeling in between cultures, languages or places. And borderlands are spaces where the marginalized voice their identities and resistance. All of these social, political, spiritual and emotional transitions transcend geopolitical space." (Segura and Zavella, 4)

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**Works Cited**


