

Journal: CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S WRITING

Article doi: vmp001

Article title: I Call it New Orleans

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I Call it New Orleans

DEBRA A. CASTILLO

“A todo esto [.] le llamo Nueva Orleans” “All of this [.] I call it New Orleans,” says one of the characters in Cristina Rivera Garza’s 2004 novel, *Lo anterior*.¹ In this particular novel, “todo esto” includes a wind blowing out of the 1950s, “el sonido anaranjado de la melancolía / the orange sound of melancholy,” nausea and vomiting (136–7). A strangely specific referent in this highly abstract and literary novel, the allusion to the city of New Orleans largely seems like a gratuitous metaphor, a marker for an abjected and exotic liminal psychological state rather than a crucial geographical setting. It becomes a trope for a tainted past which, like tainted food, must be violently expelled. But why is New Orleans represented at all, even fleetingly, in this novel where there are so few markers of specific geography? And what resonance does this US city have for a Mexican writer?

I want to suggest that Cristina Rivera Garza—along with fellow turn-of-the-millennium transnational writers like Juvenal Acosta and Anna Kazumi Stahl, who make even more prominent reference to this US port city—use “New Orleans” as a placeholder to anchor a theory and practise of writing that goes beyond the thematic in transcending national boundaries. Their works are one way of figuring the impact of globalization in the cultural realm, and their literary allusions to New Orleans (rather than, say, New York, Los Angeles, or Miami—three other highly figurative US cities in the international imagination) offers a particular nuance to their take on this diasporic imaginary.

The popular press has certainly been aware of the marketing phenomenon of the bicultural and transnational writer, tracing the permutations of the so-called “Latino boom” in the US and, more recently, in a July 2006 article in *Time* magazine, highlighting authors such as Zadie Smith, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Gary Shteyngart as the voices of this generation more generally. “The world has changed and the novel has

¹ All translations in this text, unless otherwise marked, are mine.

changed with it," writes Lev Grossman in the *Time* article. "Fictional characters just can't get away with being generically white and middle class and male anymore, the way they used to. Not and still be the object of mass identification. [^^.] If the novelists under 40 have a shared preoccupation, it is [^^.] immigration. They write about characters who cross borders" (63). With the largest contingent of border crossers on the continent, it seems like Latin America/Latino US has a privileged location on this literary and generational map.

A growing scholarly and popular press bibliography sees the Latin American equivalent of this generational shift to the immigrant writer in the ascendancy of internationally-savvy authors like Jorge Volpi, Rodrigo Fresán, Alberto Fuguet, and Edmundo Paz-Soldán, many of whom have been closely associated with the then-controversial 1996 anthology, *McOndo*² and who are notable border crossers themselves.³ Thus, Nicole LaForte, writing about these young, cosmopolitan Latin Americans in *The New York Times*, talks about how "the line between North and South America has become increasingly blurred," and the celebratory tone in such recent popular-press overviews like Grossman's and LaForte's suggests how quickly such writers are becoming the mainstream, overwhelming the earlier resistance by readers North and South who found it difficult to imagine Latino/a writers with themes other than the barrio or Latin American writers who were not magic realists.

Rey Chow would add that a similar evolution is (finally!) occurring in academic circles, where "the scholars who have been working on more marginalized cultures are somewhat ahead of the game" with respect to colleagues in more traditional, first-world fields (81). Although she adds the cautionary note that "the possibility of moving beyond national boundaries is not exactly at everyone's disposal" (80), she argues that transnational and transcultural scholars are reshaping the conceptual basis for literary studies:

Unlike the old-fashioned comparative literature based in Europe, none of the studies in question [e.g. Carlos Alonso, Naoki Sakai, Partha Chatterjee] vociferously declares its own agenda as international or cosmopolitan; to the contrary, each is firmly located within a specific cultural framework. Yet, in their very cultural specificities, these studies nonetheless come across as transcultural, with implications that resonate well beyond their individual locations. (84)

Increasingly, as Chow trenchantly argues, the definition and practice of literary scholarship takes place outside of the old Anglo-European paradigms and, I would add, the confluence of transnational writers with transcultural scholars is reshaping the way we think about literary scholarship and its objects.

Which brings us back to New Orleans. Not everyone who crosses a border is a stranger, or treated as one, and some borders are themselves strange, or estranging. New Orleans is a port city, a border city between the US and Latin America, as well as a city that has long been seen as an exotic outpost in the US urban imaginary. Its famous tourist attractions depend upon its precarious existence on land provisionally

2 Associated with a group of under-40 urban novelists, with a broadly cosmopolitan background and a particularly strong habit of citing US popular culture in their works.

3 The fact that the "Crack" and the "McOndo" writers are almost exclusively a male club has been commented on previously, in other studies including mine, and the implications will not be explored here, as it is a tangent to the current article.

stolen from the river and the gulf, as well as its often equally precarious cultural positioning between Anglo, African, and Latin cultures. It is impossible to decouple the city from its racially fraught past and present, and, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, it has been revealed internationally as a US third-world city—"flooded, stinking and dangerous" according to Richard Rodriguez ("Third World"). In Kirsten Silva Gruesz's summary of the vast body of New Orleans representations, the city typically evokes a set of familiar tropes: "contamination, backwardness, and danger on the negative spectrum; romance, exoticism, and sensual pleasure on the positive" (469). While I am not interested in pursuing the implications of literary New Orleans per se (a larger project beyond the scope of this paper and one already well advanced by scholars like Kirsten Silva Gruesz), it does intrigue me that this city has shown up as a trope in several key texts of this emergent transnational American fiction, and this exotic siting in one of the US's premier contact zones offers a convenient point of entry into the larger question of transnational American studies today.

But first, the novels. They are all, as Acosta writes, "las historias que uno escribe en el borde de esta cicatriz milenaria, en la costra absurda de esta transición" 'the stories that one writes on the border of this millenary scar, in the absurd scab of this transition' (*Terciopelo* 13). Anna Kazumi Stahl's *Flores de un solo día* (Flowers of a Single Day, 2002) is a detectivesque bildungsroman of a young Japanese-Argentine woman who receives a mysterious letter summoning her to New Orleans to receive an inheritance. Reviewers have typically pointed out the elements in this novel that are presumed to derive from Stahl's own life; the author is of mixed German-Japanese-American descent, and was brought up in New Orleans. She now lives and works in Buenos Aires and writes her fictions exclusively in Spanish. Juvenal Acosta's *Terciopelo violento* (Violent Velvet, 2003) is the sequel to his 1998 *Cazador de tatuajes / The Tattoo Hunter* and, like that earlier novel, *Terciopelo* is a stylish erotic thriller with a cosmopolitan cast of hemisphere-hopping characters, loaded with references to French post-structuralist theory. Born in Mexico D.F., Acosta has lived for over twenty years in the San Francisco Bay area, and his novels, too, are understood to have significant autobiographical references, partly because of the first-person narration (including the repeated allusion in the second novel to *Cazador de tatuajes* as a manuscript written by his protagonist), partly because of the author's own performative self-presentation in a personal style that evokes—take your pick—fin de siècle decadentists, or San Francisco beat poets. Cristina Rivera Garza's *Lo anterior* (Before, 2004) is a fragmentary narrative that circles around a woman writer/photographer who finds an unconscious man in the desert, and it narrates (or ventriloquizes in two voices) their conversation/love affair. Now working in Toluca, the author is originally from the US-Mexico border region, was largely educated in the US, and lived for many years in the San Diego-Tijuana area.

In the background of all these novels are questions related to a plural identity, a multilingual and multicultural background, a vexed sexuality, and a fluid cartography: What does it mean to be Mexican in the US? Argentine and Japanese? Male ventriloquized through a female narrative ethos? What the trope of "New Orleans"

4 I am extending the valence of the concept of “queer” beyond its more usual, restricted understanding based on sexual orientation, to include an estranging perspective that does not align neatly with dominant culture or heterosexist presumptions, and implicitly critiques sites, communities, and pairings from an insider/outsider point of view.

adds to this mix, this leaky, elliptic drift, is very much in accord with that city’s most engrained stereotypes: tropical, murderous, poor (aristocratic), exotic (Latin, feminine), erotic (incestuous, African)—in a word, queer.⁴ Rivera Garza says it most directly: “lo que a mí me interesa aclarar, sobre todo cuando se habla de marcas de identidad como género, clase social, nacionalidad, raza, etcetera,—de acuerdo con posturas de la teoría Queer—, es que no creo que el yo sea ni singular ni estable” ‘what I want to clarify, especially when talking about signs of identity like gender, social class, nationality, race, etc.,—in agreement with the propositions of queer theory—is that I do not believe that the “I” is either singular or stable’ (“Amor” 50).

Tango Dreams

All of the writers highlight female characters and two of them feature a novelistic trajectory that moves between the two port cities of Buenos Aires and New Orleans, settings that serve as a shorthand to signal volatile and passionate mixtures of races and cultures. While Rivera Garza does not foreground New Orleans (or indeed, any specific city) in her novel, she imbues it with hints of a similar affective link. In *Lo anterior*, she deploys the opposite tactic of Acosta and Stahl—she plays down the melodrama implicit in a plot that turns on a mysterious lover, while nevertheless melodrama remains in faint traces across her text, like literary contrails. She expels passion to the margins of her text, as in the fugitive allusion to New Orleans.

In a similar manner, she delicately points to the central theme of this novel, as reflected in the title, deflecting further commentary in an un-annotated list of references: “muchos han intentado explorar lo que sucede ‘antes’ desde el único punto de vista posible del ‘después’” ‘many people have attempted to explore what happens “before” from the only possible point of view, the “afterwards”’ (70). The list that follows enumerates a series of erotic/pornographic texts that link unsanctioned sex and violence: *End of the Affair*, *Simple Passion*, *Story of O*, *Damage*, *The Ravishment of Lol V. Stein*.⁵ In an interview with Jorge Luis Herrera, Rivera Garza defines her goal more precisely in terms of an intentional illegibility: “En *Lo anterior* quise escribir sobre todo lo que sucede antes de lo que denominamos amor, antes de domesticar la experiencia a través de la narrativa familiar y legible que conocemos como historia de amor. El amor es una reflexión, un volver atrás” ‘in *Before* I tried to write what happens before that which we call love, before domesticating the experience through the familiar and legible narrative that we know as the love story. Love is a reflection, a turning back’ (“Amor” 49).

Illegibility also marks Anna Kazumi Stahl’s narrative, and in her work, as in Juvenal Acosta’s, one of the ways of writing this illegibility is through the trace of the metaphorical tango in her narrative. One of Stahl’s stories in her earlier collection, *Catástrofes naturales / Natural catastrophes*, is entitled “Sueño tanguero de un japonés” ‘Japanese Tango Dream.’ Likewise, Acosta calls his novel *El cazador de tatuajes* a “tango finesecular” ‘tango for the end of the century.’ Tango is to Buenos Aires as jazz

is to New Orleans, as the list of erotic novels is to Rivera Garza: it defines the rhythms of what came before the narrative. Tango, like jazz, is the music of the disenfranchised, originally despised as raw, violent, erotic, and associated with marginalized elements in society, now celebrated internationally and elevated to a symbol, turned into a tourist attraction. Stereotypically, Buenos Aires and New Orleans have little to do with the rest of the continent in which they are inserted. New Orleans is decadent and French (decadent because French?). Buenos Aires' architecture "both spectacular and decadent, like that of Europe." As is the case with the US city, Buenos Aires' Europeanness "is a product of the desire to see itself reflected in a distorted and distorting mirror" (*Hunter* 138–39). Decadence and distortion, irony and racism, incomprehension and self-reflection—these are some of the elements that connect the two cities, the two musical forms, in Acosta and Stahl.

In Stahl's short story, Toshiuri Matsushiro immigrates to Argentina, hears "Mañana zarpa un barco" 'Tomorrow a ship undocks', a tango that will haunt his life, for the first time in a bar. He borrows the LP from the bartender, carefully copies down the lyrics, tracing the unfamiliar letters of the Roman alphabet without even the least understanding of their meaning.⁵ Eventually he coincides with the singer, and the two of them spend the evening singing tangos that the Japanese immigrant, still uncomprehending, knows as a sequence of sounds (205–06). Here Stahl offers an unusual take on the much-discussed topic of contact zones. Her immigrant character's ostensible access to Argentine culture through the tango is limited to the sonoric echo of the phonemes in the lyrics. Homero Manzi, the composer, is enchanted by this strange knowledge of his music, and the encounter becomes an important anecdote in his repertoire. Most importantly, though, the "sueño japonés" 'Japanese dream' finally, is not Matsushiro's, but more correctly, the projection of the waiter Roberto, who sees the Japanese man through his own tango-flavored understanding of the incident.

In *Flores* the protagonist's mother, Hanako, a Japanese war bride and refugee from New Orleans, is lovingly protected from contact with the city of Buenos Aires where she has resided for many years. Mother and daughter have a successful business selling Hanako's traditional Japanese floral arrangements (ikebana) for the discerning Buenos Aires elite. The ikebana are literally "flores de un solo día" 'flowers for a single day': beautiful, fragile, expensive, requiring constant renewal. They serve as objective correlatives of Hanako herself, and evoke her transculturated history. Aimée assists her mother in the flower shop, and is married to Fernando, a first generation Sicilian-Argentine doctor, who in comparison to mother and daughter, "tiene otro ritmo" 'has another rhythm' (17).

Hanako is mute, so her story comes out only in fragments as her daughter pieces it together during her sojourn in New Orleans. The first clue is that the protagonist's name experiences mysterious shifts: from the French creole Aimée Levrier (Buenos Aires) to Irish Amy Oleary (the name on her inheritance in New Orleans). In a nutshell, Aimée's family history revolves around Francisco Oleary "el Argentino," (bodyguard, spy, accused rapist) who marries Aimée's paternal grandmother, Marie.

5 This is a trope that Stahl echoes elsewhere, as in *Flores*, where Aimée comes upon a text written by her mother in what appears to be Roman letters, but on closer examination proves to be only a simulacrum of western writing.

Marie, in turn, is the decadent scion of an old creole family, and mother of the war-traumatized soldier—Henri Levrier, Aimée’s putative father—who brings home and marries a young Japanese woman brutalized by American soldiers. El Argentino engages in a tragic love affair with his step daughter-in-law; Aimée is the result.

In contrast with the serene and ordered world of ikebana, this is a poisonous heritage of a story, including war violence in the Pacific, guilt over war crimes, rape and accusations of rape, dirty dealings in organized labor, a soft-hearted mercenary, an overwhelming passion, a murderous matriarch, cover-ups, flight, and a slow seeping into destruction. Aimée, the tricultural mixed-race offspring of this Argentine-Japanese-New Orleanian triangle, parses together her family story during her extended trip to New Orleans to settle the inheritance. Yet resolving the mystery does not fully orient her, except back to Buenos Aires and Hanako’s silent art. Her identity remains in flux. Each of her names is in conflict with the message of her raced body, queering it: Aimée Marconi is not Italian, Aimée Levrier shares a family history but no links of blood with the French creole New Orleanians, Irish-sounding Amy O’Leary is of Argentine descent on her biological father’s side. Indeed, the more closely the narrative aligns her with one or the other of these names, the greater the distance and disidentification. In the end, neither western legal forms nor even the symbolic language of the ikebana accurately captures her. Like the note written by Aimée’s mother, or the tango lyrics in her earlier “Sueño tanguero de un japonés,” this is a story that echoes the form of western letters, but only from a distance, and a closer look reveals the incongruencies that make it illegible.

For Acosta’s narrator, Julián Cáceres, New Orleans is a city defined by the elusive fragrance of “terciopelo violento” ‘violent velvet’ (179), a synesthesia that hints at smooth, dark surfaces and obscure vices. Describing the differences among the cities that serve as his primary compass points, he makes the equation: “San Francisco o Niebla, Nueva Orleáns o Deseo, Buenos Aires o Nostalgia” ‘San Francisco or Fog, New Orleans or Desire, Buenos Aires or Nostalgia’ (67) and later adds, “Nueva Orleáns es la frontera espiritual con el Caribe, más allá de éste, la frontera de América con África” ‘New Orleans is the spiritual border with the Caribbean, more distant still, the border of America with Africa’ (123). He tells himself that this gulf coast city rather than New York is the real city that never sleeps (175). Two stories can serve to encapsulate Acosta’s vision in *Terciopelo violento*. The first describes Julián:

Piel tatuada, bordada con signos, legible para el braille de la lengua. Piel texto y pretexto del deseo. . . . Texto de placer y redención. Pero, ¿en qué puto lenguaje? . . .

Esta es la historia del cazador de tatuajes y la Condesa tal como la leyó en el manuscrito, pero es también la suya, tal y como ella, Marianne, la recuerda, tal y como ella, a su vez, se la contó a Constancia. (24–25)

Tattooed skin, embroidered with signs, legible for the tongue’s braille. Skin as text and pretext for desire. . . . Text of pleasure and redemption. But, in what fucking language? . . .

This is the story of the tattoo hunter and the Countess as read in the manuscript, but it is also her story, as Marianne remembers it, as she, in her turn, told it to Constanca.

Each of these characters is associated with a particular city, each with a sexual repertoire inflected by this point of origin. Julián is a Mexican living in the polysexual haven of San Francisco; Marianne is from New York City; Constanca from Mexico; la Condesa from New Orleans, Sabine (not mentioned in this quote) is from Buenos Aires. Acosta lays these shorthand references against each other, asking us to remember that the writing (on the body) signifies differently as interpreted through these different cultures, different histories, different genders, different musical rhythms. The play of alternative texts (tattoos, manuscripts) echoes Stahl's juxtaposition of ikebana and legal writ, while the self-conscious literariness and shifting point of view among the three characters reminds us of Rivera Garza's foregrounding of the problematic gender ventriloquism in her novel. This is a tale marked by apposition, by sequential interpellation; it is ragged, and can be twisted back on itself.

In a parallel context, the seemingly straightforward (if thematically baroque) story of Ángela Caín, alias la Condesa, with its almost comically over-the-top piling up of New Orleans stereotypes, becomes somewhat more illegible when taken in the context of disparate narrators and audiences:

Cuando tenía apenas diez años su madre asesinó a su padre, que era un hombre de negocios muy rico e importante en Nueva Orleans, porque descubrió que éste abusada sexualmente de su hija desde que tenía seis o siete años. La madre no fue a la cárcel, porque durante el juicio el jurado dictaminó a su favor, cosas de Nueva Orleans. [^^] Era cantante de ópera, era famosa y muy rica. Dos años después se volvió a casar, esta vez con un matador de toros español (148).

When she was barely ten years old her mother killed her father, who was a very rich and important New Orleans businessman, because she discovered that he had been sexually abusing their daughter since she was six or seven. The mother did not go to jail, because during the trial the jury found in her favor, New Orleans style. [^^] She was an opera singer, she was famous and very rich. Two years later she married again, this time with a Spanish bullfighter.

In the continuation of this narrative, following a highly predictable course, the sexually precocious daughter becomes her Spanish stepfather's lover and the mother commits suicide, leaving her daughter to inherit a huge fortune.

According to philosopher Denise Riley, "syntax does possess an affect. [^^] Syntax may operate as the structural engineer of recalled affect" (*Words* 172). In this narrative, as Riley would tell us, we are immersed in the familiar syntax of melodrama, phrases shot through with aggressive cadences and a morbid fascination with

suffering, where desire is blended with nostalgia. We could say that it is Acosta's version of the rhythms of the tango *finesecular*, queerly displaced onto New Orleans.

The Woman Came from another Planet

Says Michel de Certeau: "Objects and words have hollow places in which the past sleeps", and more pointedly: "you see, here there used to be..^.,' but can no longer be seen" (108). He further warns: "Stories about places are makeshift things. They are composed of the world's debris..^^. The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning; it is a sieve order" (107). If Michel de Certeau's observation is true in general for even the simplest of everyday stories and memories in a monocultural context, the situation is far more complicated when we take into account the transnational locations and stories of the narrators and characters in this set of novels. Arjun Appadurai would add that what is new in today's transnational exchanges, "is a world in which both points of departure and points of arrival are in cultural flux, and thus the search for steady points of reference [..^.] can be very difficult. It is in this atmosphere that the invention of tradition (and of ethnicity, kinship, and other identity markers) can become slippery" (*Modernity* 44). Here, then, the slippage of stories drifts further, unmoored across fluid geographies. Putting together these thinkers provides a set of orienting questions as we think about these three authors: What is the status of narrative in these fluid geographies? How does an author respond to the imperative of flux, of being always out of place, even in the place of the story?

For Acosta, the narrative is figured as an erotic quest, a game that begins arbitrarily with the map. The narrator opens an atlas page at random, blindly points at a spot, and tells a story through and about the woman whose body in some sense occupies that space. Similarly, syntax itself can be figured as "this mapping of emotions" (*Hunter* 22). The body and the voice are the most consistent and portable maps. Thus, for instance, narrating in the voice of Condesa, the character describes the blood in her veins as "tinta de mi cartografía interna" 'ink of my internal cartography' (*Terciopelo* 17). More than just the banal understanding of blood as a symbol of family history, Acosta envisions the body as a literal map, in the absence of other stable markers of place and identity. At the same time, if each body is a map, unexplorable except in the tracing of arteries and veins, the narrator's game is doomed to frustration. He engages in randomized travels through women's bodies and cities, but can never quite arrive, just as they could never quite leave, the point of origin. In a typical aside, his narrator comments: "The map is not the city..^^. In a similar manner, the contemporary city represents an idea of what we, postmodern beings possess of life..^^. Every woman is an Ithaca of the flesh..^^. Woman: dangerous city that I did not survive" (*Hunter* 10–11). Like Rivera Garza, Juvenal Acosta foregrounds, but does not attempt to resolve, the technical problem of trying to write from the opposite gender in a heterosexually normed narrative structure, and gestures toward the

inherently queering quality of this overt ventriloquism. However, Acosta's narrator is doomed to inhabit an affective space in which visible tattoos imperfectly echo invisible pathways of blood.

Says Cristina Rivera Garza in a sentence that seems perfectly parsed to respond to Appadurai and Acosta: "he ahí el reto de todo el que narra: porque, cómo contener algo que se está desvaneciendo" 'here is the challenge of all narration: why, how to contain something that is fading' (*Anterior* 50). Her narrative, as is evident from the title of the novel, is centrally concerned with time, but this too is a slippery concept. In order to name "before," the speaker can only do so relationally, from an already inhabited "after." This "after" inevitably (re)shapes the "before," rewriting it as it is in the process of being written, so that the receding horizon of the anterior time turns strange, elliptical, becomes not just a alien time, but a foreign place: "The past is a foreign country," in the famous phrase of L. P. Hartley, "they do things differently there."⁶

The man in the desert who provides the initiating gesture of this narrative is described as a deaf mute. The frame narrator, a woman, is out photographing the desert and comes upon his inert body. She first fears him dead, and death subsequently plays a crucial metaphorical role in the novel, if only to halt the otherwise unending spinning out of a narrative that can never quite achieve a stable resting point, even in the frozen time and space of the photographic image. Nevertheless, despite his revealed muteness, the narrative gives significant space to his (ventriloquized) voice describing the process of his evolving relationship with an unnamed woman, at various points in the narrative going back over the same conversation and shifting from his point of view to hers, retelling in a slightly different register the same sequence of events. In both narratives, one of the common elements is that this anterior time of the relationship that will in the present/recent past come to be called "love" is also an alternative space. Consider the following exchange: He says: "en mi planeta [.^.^] a esto se llama amor" 'in my planet [.^.^] this is called love" (*Anterior* 39). She responds: "en mi planeta esto siempre se resiste al nombre, a cualquier nombre" 'in my planet this always resists naming, any name whatsoever' (*Anterior* 49). He ponders her response: "confirmaba la sospecha que había tenido desde la primera vez que la vio: la mujer venía de otro planeta" 'it confirmed the suspicion that he had had since the first time he saw her: the woman came from another planet' (*Anterior* 39). She, for her part, "dice que él viene de otro planeta" 'says that he came from another planet' (*Anterior* 126). This otherness—space, time, gender, voice, naming—constantly collapses and reformulates itself, as the narrative goes through successive deconstructions, retellings, and new fragmentation. Otherness, then, is the space–time of this fractal geography.

In *Flores*, Aimée comes upon a piece of paper, and realizes that her mute mother is the author of this mysterious writing: "No puede creer lo que está viendo: el papelito está escrito. No son rayas o cruces o marcas hechas con un movimiento cualquiera. Son formas, y require atención para ver que, en realidad, no son letras verdaderas, pero son muy parecidas y las imitan bien..^^." Hanako estuvo escribiendo.^^." 'She

6 This is the famous first sentence of his 1953 novel, *The Go-Between*.

could not believe what she is seeing; the paper is *written*. They are not lines or crosses or marks made with a random gesture. They are shapes, and it requires attention to see that they really are *not* true letters, but very similar, and well imitated. Hanako was writing. (132). Hanako's muteness is an important theme in the text, as well as an obvious plot device to justify Aimée's ignorance of her family history. Her ikebana arrangements offer a partial mode of communication with her daughter, one that has a specific cultural history. The piece of paper with a simulacrum of western writing is another interrupted attempt at dialogue, of Hanako using the unfamiliar shapes of a foreign aesthetic to reach across the cultural, linguistic, continental divide. Here again, as in the previous two novels, is a geography of sorts, and one that is hyperaware of the physical traces of words on a page, as Acosta is hyperaware of writing on a body, and Rivera Garza of the photographic and narrative traces of body and voice.

Sara Ahmed provides a valuable third point of reference to complement Michel de Certeau and Arjun Appadurai. She is aware not only of the slippages of story, exacerbated in the flux of transnational, multilingual exchange, she also asks us to think specifically about the ways in which sexuality and gender further shift coordinates of space and identity: "For me the question is not so much finding a queer line but rather asking what our orientation toward queer moments of deviation will be. If the object slips away, if its face becomes inverted, if it looks odd, strange, or out of place, what will we do?" She responds to her own question: "A queer phenomenology would involve an orientation toward queer, a way of inhabiting the world by giving 'support' to those whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange, and out of place" (179). While all of the affective relationships in these novels are heterosexual pairings, I would suggest that each novelist is working from a queered—perhaps, given their transnational flavor—necessarily queered, perspective.

Identity is a Verb

Speaking in abstract terms, Zygmunt Baumann argues that "identity, although ostensibly a noun, behaves like a verb, albeit a strange one to be sure: it appears only in the future tense" (82). Denise Riley adds that "identity," a plastic and mutable concept, "is really the name given to attempts at escape from the uncertainty of not quite belonging. [T]he common urge towards identity itself becomes an implicit social critique. It is a testimony to a felt lack." (131). All identity references, in this respect, hinge on a compromised noun: pointing to an unstable nexus of social, political and affective affiliations that shift and change over time, and to the historical circumstances that create the concept of identity as a heuristic device we develop in order to move more or less comfortably through the world.

In Acosta's texts, for example, the prominence given to tattoos hints at a parallel anxiety, and at a compensatory mechanism to which his characters have frequent recourse in their efforts to bring body and identity together in a readily legible form: "A tattoo is not a sign imprinted upon the skin, but rather upon the idea that one has

of oneself. A sign made of desire, the tattoo is a scar. The readable product of desire” (*Hunter* 1). In this way, the instability of the transnational’s constantly contextualized and re-examined self comes into some sort of artificial resting place.

Rivera Garza would agree with Riley and Baumann that the concept of identity needs to be closely interrogated and, as she explicitly notes, queered: “no creo en una identidad fija, estable, permanente. A últimas fechas el concepto de identidad—aun en su aceptación más fluctuante o relacional o manufacturada—me resulta limitante y maniqueo” ‘I don’t believe in a fixed, stable, permanent identity. The bottom line is that the concept of identity—even in the most fluid or relational or manufactured version—seems limiting and manichean’ (“Amor” 48). At the same time, Rivera Garza is not content to imagine identity as an unstable, future tense verb. Her interest in this novel is in sifting through the accretions of memory, from certainty back to chaos. In this way, she engages in the narrative invention of a past that has come into focus due to another lack; the missing body: “La voz proviene de la pequeña grabadora. Es la voz de un cuerpo que ya no está. The grief. Or the body-no-longer-body. The she/he-who-is-not-here-beside-me. La voz de la muerte misma” ‘the voice derives from the small recorder. It is the voice of the body that no longer is. The grief. Or the body-no-longer-body. The she/he-who-is-not-here-beside-me. The voice of death itself’ (*Anterior* 168). Here Rivera Garza projects an anterior lack that consolidates only in memory, and that when fixed on the page inescapably intimates death. The missing voice (a written reflection on a recorded medium, the disembodied voice with all its auditory qualities intact) reminds us of the missing body in whose mouth and throat and lungs this voice was produced. Furthermore, the very choice of language used to evoke this missing voice/body follows the path of her transitive, transnational peregrination across borders and languages: la voz, la muerte, the grief, the body.

For Stahl too, a fluid geography finds its echo in fluidity across the board. Thus, in the early pages of the novel, the narrator comments: “Las viviendas son así: parecen sólidas y persistentes pero en realidad son fluidas y cambian orgánicamente” ‘homes are that way; they look solid and persistent, but are really fluid and change organically’ (8), suggesting that the ethos of the ikebana has found its way into a generative metaphor for the text as a whole as “algo muy caro que al otro día muere y decae” ‘something very expensive that dies and decays the next day’ (14). Most importantly, though, the metaphor of the ikebana reminds the reader that Hanako herself, the seemingly most stable and unchanging figure in the novel, its architectural still point in a sense, only seems permanent and unchanging to the untutored, orientaling gaze. Hanako’s life—though mysterious and largely unknown—can best be imagined through the activity of creating her flower arrangements. Unlike westerners who often wish to preserve bouquets associated with particular events, she never dries her flowers, never saves them. Aimée ventriloquizes her mother’s thoughts, imagining her mother’s perspective: “la flor se mira, se huele y se disfruta ese primer día, después no está más. No hay flores de un ‘segundo día’ porque hay otras flores, nuevas, frescas, las hay y las va a haber siempre, y entonces no se guarda ninguna porque *no hace falta*” ‘you look at the flower, smell it, enjoy it that first day, then it no

longer is. There are no “second day” flowers because there are other flowers, new, fresh ones. There they are and always will be, and thus you never save any because it is *not necessary*’ (314). Thus, while Aimée—the hybrid, transnational daughter of Argentine, US, and Japanese cultural and genetic heritages—finds herself caught up in the eminently western genealogical detective work of uncovering her family past, implicitly, Hanako has the gift of indifference. No matter how others categorize her by gender and race, she calmly reinvents herself every day, discarding the past without remorse or nostalgia.

Implicit as well in this evocation of body and voice, is the ethnic body, the raced identity created by crossing borders, by the language spoken with a discernable accent. In his first novel, Acosta’s narrator muses: “When I left Mexico I became truly Mexican. [.^.^] I became Mexican in a foreign land because the eyes of foreigners demanded me to be Mexican. Since then I have become the foreigner. I learned, in spite of myself, to be a full-time Mexican” (*Hunter* 24–25). It is impossible for him to be at home in the US, but equally impossible for him to feel at home in Mexico, which at best reflects a past he has left behind, a present he no longer shares, a future that is alien to him. The very language of self-reference is queered, operating at cross purposes. Denise Riley would say that “here is one instance of the strange temporality of language as a kind of anteriority—the anterior future perfect tense of interpellation where you become what, hearing yourself called, you acknowledge yourself to be” (34–35). The very condition of transnationality cancels the possibility of its full enactment, his definitive arrival, since the social context demands of him an authenticity tied to his country of origin. At the same time he is fully cognizant of the inauthenticity of such ascriptions, but is strategically helpless to fight his way out of an identity that seems more and more restrictive and alien.

Sara Ahmed and Denise Riley share a phenomenological orientation toward the concept of identity, but where Riley only briefly touches upon the implications of raced bodies and transnational markings (her discussion of gender is far more developed), Ahmed supplements and complements the British philosopher. For Ahmed, one crucial aspect of the racialized heritage of colonialism concerns the mechanisms by which bodies take up space: “the ‘matter’ of race is very much about embodied reality; seeing oneself or being seen as white or black or mixed does affect what one ‘can do,’ or even where one can go, which can be redescribed in terms of *what is and what is not within reach*. If we begin to consider what is affective about the ‘unreachable,’ we might even begin the task of making ‘race’ a rather queer matter” (112). In each of these novels, identity is queered from a white, western perspective; it is gendered, raced, and verbed, and readers are made to feel the presence of a contingent, imperfectly grasped, and unreachable alternative.

Preparing for English

Once the category of the 'social' loses its transparency, it calls into question other categories as well. If considerations of identity often reduce to forms of being spoken, here I want to briefly turn to conceptions of speaking, of telling (about) oneself when the options for telling are no longer limited to a single language. Thus, Stahl describes writing in Spanish as allowing for options that her native tongue cannot provide, including the possibility to access "una óptica nueva o renovada. La compara con conocer muy bien una película en color, pero verla de pronto en blanco y negro" 'a new or renewed optics. She compares it with knowings a color movie very well, but seeing it suddenly in black and white' ("Anna Kazumi Stahl" np). This shift is not just one of visual acuity, but an attention to the different musics (jazz, tango), as well as the customary rhythms of other languages. Hanako's space, for instance, is defined by the "fronteras sonoras" 'sound borders' (21) that surround her, protecting and insulating her from contact with the city. Aimée too is aware of these sonic borderlines, so that when she calls New Orleans from Buenos Aires in response to the legal summons, she is already engaging in linguistic border-crossing. It has been a long time since she spoke anything but Spanish; as she picks up the phone: "se prepara para usar el inglés" 'she prepares herself to use English' (120).

The linguistic and the political boundaries have other correlates as well. Once Aimée arrives in the US, flavors too present their borders: New Orleans food reintroduces her to the culture, as it reintroduces her to the French/African-flavored English of this gulf city: "Aimée captaba fragmentos de descripciones exóticas sobre los sandwiches 'muffaleta,' los camarones con salsa 'roumelade,' algo llamado 'crawfish jambalaya' y 'gumbo' y un brebaje 'Dixie' que resultaba lo suficiente liviano como para rebajarse varios en una misma comida" 'Aimée caught fragments of exotic descriptions about muffaleta sandwiches, shrimp with roumelade sauce, something called crawfish jambalaya, and jumbo, and a Dixie brew that was light enough to down several in a single meal' (162). The quotation marks and italics around the New Orleanian comfort foods suggest their strangeness to an Argentine ear and tongue and palate—strangeness of name, of taste—and also their estrangement from the Buenos Aires-flavored Spanish syntax of the text they interrupt and make unfamiliar. Confined within the marked category by typography, for the monocultural Argentine reader the text conveys only the vague quality of the exotic that Aimée offers as an orienting (or queering) gesture.

This thingness, this estrangement of words that become exotic, made inoperative for conveying the precise meaning of a cultural context lived in another language, is also a significant part of Acosta's text. The first chapter of *Terciopelo violento* begins with just this point, and with the most basic question of all for a bilingual narrator: "¿En qué idioma?" 'In what language?' (*Terciopelo* 23). Later, the narrator despairs at the inadequacy of a single language to express his bilingual and bicultural experience: "Cómo espresar en español lo que le había pasado.].^.^] Era difícil pensar que una narrativa sobre San Francisco pudiese ser realizado en español" 'How to express in

Spanish what had happened to him. [˘˘] it was difficult to think about a San Francisco narrative that could be told in Spanish' (*Terciopelo* 88). He makes reference to pages written in English (e.g. *Terciopelo* 60) that are not reproduced in the text although, like Stahl, he will sprinkle English terms in his narrative to interrupt it and estrange it. Furthermore, as an immigrant to the US, Julián is only ever allowed to represent the identity he left behind, becoming, as he says, a full-time Mexican upon leaving Mexico, so that his choice of languages (accented or unaccented, native or second- or third languages) is always conditioned by the primary fact of his essential unassimilability to his adopted home.

One of Acosta's English-language poems, with the ambiguous title "Amar a la extranjera" 'Loving the foreign[er]', captures succinctly this author's vexed relationship to his multiple languages and their embodiment, each of which only speaks some incomplete part of him:

Inside my tongue
there is a foreign blood
and inside that blood there is still
another foreign blood
—I must say I go from blood to blood
like an international vampire—

Here we see a concise reflection on the problem of maintaining an imperfectly consolidated performative self, where essence (blood) provides no guarantee of stability. In the end "amar" devolves into a kind of blood lust, and the poetic voice is that of a vampire: an exotic nighttime creature, alien even to himself.

Rivera Garza's novel also moves between English and Spanish, but, interestingly, ignores this halting and vexed bilingualism, normalizing her language choices within her text by not calling attention to them, as if in this indeterminate world that she signals by reference to an interpellation ("A todo esto.˘˘ le llamo Nueva Orleans") such code switching is natural. Instead, the salient queering element in her text involves the insistence on a female narrative voice used to imagine and speak the masculine while never losing sight of its performative quality: "Se trata de un hombre y una ventrilocua. Eso dice. Hoy. To act as mouthpiece of" 'it's about a man and a ventriloquist. That's what s/he said. Today. To act as mouthpiece of' (*Anterior* 131). Here the man becomes the female ventriloquist's dummy, where what seemingly comes from his mouth is actually formed in hers, a physical and auditory trick that also includes a transition across two languages. The crucial nature of the oral is highlighted in the disjunction between voice and body, where the male rhythms and intonation patterns performatively derive from a female throat. Even further: the bifurcation across Spanish and English hints that the projection from female to male also carries with it linguistic implications. One could even stretch a point and imagine that the man in the desert figuratively represents a politically energized image of all the exhausted immigrant men who collapse in the deserts of the US southwest on their way to find work in this country, whose lack of knowledge of English makes

them mute in their encounter with official institutions, and whose defense is ventriloquized through US immigrant rights representatives.

The ventriloquist is Rivera Garza's most important metaphor, and, indeed, her novel has an extended homage to Spanish sculptor Juan Muñoz's installation art piece, "Ventriloquist Looking at a Double Interior", the title (in English) of one of the sections of this novel. Many of Muñoz's pieces from the 1980s were initially inspired by a ventriloquist's dummy, and he evokes these uncanny speechless mannequins as generative figures to signal the important repeated themes of sound and silence in his work. Says the exhibition catalogue for a recent Muñoz retrospective: "The area which his works describe is one of memories and expectations. Seen, heard and written experiences intersect here. [.^.^] By creating these figures, Muñoz approached the topic of the speechless and impenetrable unknown as a mirror of the self" ("Juan Muñoz, np). The work cited by Rivera Garza participates perfectly in this mysterious contemplation of doubled spaces and doubled bodies:

Here, in Muñoz's conception, the ventriloquist (or her dummy) is lost in mute contemplation of the doubled image on the gallery walls, while the statue is itself doubled in the human spectator who wanders through and becomes the necessary fourth reference point for the installation, in silent conversation with the other elements.

For Rivera Garza's narrator, the man in the desert fulfills a similar function. He provides the occasion for narrative, the necessary point of departure for the implicit second-level conversation with the reader (two mute points on this narrative triangle, two options for ventriloquism). The outward expanding of this conversation is accompanied by a self-conscious pulling back into the silence of the author's room, her busy thoughts: "El hombre imaginado por mí..^^. (Todo esto dentro de mi imaginación, que es o puede ser un cuarto, cuando no tengo nada más, ninguna otra cosa por hacer)" 'The man imagined by me..^^. (All of this within my imagination, which is or might be a room, when I have nothing else, no other thing to do)' (*Anterior* 148).

The New Comparative Literature

Rivera Garza's novel, more explicitly than the other two, foregrounds the role of the reader/spectator in her text. These expectations of the reader are not trivial considerations in a study of novels written between cultures and languages. Unlike the typical dominant culture text, where claims to universality are often based on an implicit understanding of the audience as sharing the same western (local) culture, these transnational writers operate in the shadings between two or more local cultures, in the understanding that while the ideal reader is someone equally as well traveled as themselves, the reality is that many of the readers will have access to only one of these systems. The result is that each of these texts flaunts its incomprehensibility at the same time as it normalizes this transnational perspective,



The ventriloquist looking at a double interior, 1988–2000. Resin, motor, silicone, wood and mixed media on fabric. Drawings: 146,5 × 100 cm. Figure: 63 × 25 × 25 cm. Private Collection© The Estate of Juan Muñoz, Torrelodones 2006.

reminding the reader of the words we cannot read, the sounds we cannot hear, the references we do not understand. No wonder there is such an emphasis on muteness, such a running theme of ventriloquism. No wonder that New Orleans takes hold on the imagination of all three of these writers as a topos for externalizing this fictional mode where the first reaction of the local reader is to see exoticism.

A review by John Freeman of Juvenal Acosta's first novel begins, "If Michel Foucault wrote fiction, he might have composed something resembling 'The Tattoo Hunter'" (np), and, indeed, Michel Foucault—influential historian-philosopher and famously sado-masochist gay man—serves as one of the narrator's crucial references in both these novels, where his philosophy is foregrounded, and veiled or overt allusions to Foucauldian-like sexual preferences litter the texts. Freeman's review, moreover,

7 Acosta has recognized García Ponce's (1932–2004) influence on his works (see, for example, *Hunter* 59, where his narrator talks about writing a book about this author). A prolific scholar and author in many genres including essay, poetry, theater, and novel, García Ponce is best known for his translations of and work on Pierre Klossowski (eg. *Teología y pornografía*), and for his erotic novels (e.g. *De anima*, *Inmaculada*).

points succinctly to the issue I am describing here: the reader of Acosta, to best appreciate his work, should minimally be trilingual (French, Spanish, English), and needs to understand the historical and biographical context of this late-twentieth-century thinker as well as the history and geography of both the US and several countries in Latin America. Acosta's work is flavored with references to, and quotes from Baudrillard, Barthes, Foucault, and other European thinkers, as well as the tony Mexican pornographer for the elites, Juan García Ponce.⁷ The shortcomings of his putative audience very much come into play. Thus, for instance: "me descubrí emputado porque quería hablar en *mi idioma* de un cuento en particular de García Ponce (*El gato*) y no pude hacerlo con Marianne" (*Cazador* 50).

Likewise, when Acosta describes for his readers the Mexico City colonia of "la Condesa" (evoking also the woman he calls "la Condesa," from New Orleans) as "a kind of Greenwich Village or North Beach or Recoleta" (*Hunter* 73), he assumes by this shorthand that his reader will share his familiarity with New Orleans, New York City, San Francisco, and Buenos Aires, if not necessarily also Mexico City, so as to recognize the architectural and cultural styles of these famous urban areas, and use that knowledge to build a palimpsest for this Art Deco-flavored subdivision on the west side of Insurgentes Avenue in the Mexican capital city.

Rivera Garza cites French thinker Roland Barthes on the photographic punctum (119); and makes other crucially important allusions to writers that include punk novelist Kathy Acker (who, like Acosta, is fascinated with tattoos), Dickinsonian poet Elizabeth Robinson, and sculptor Juan Muñoz, as well as numerous other writers from a wide range of Euro-American traditions. She too flirts openly with her text's incomprehensibility. Her narrator muses: "que el hombre o la mujer frente a quien contaré esto, creando al esto.^^. no tendrá la menor idea de lo que estoy hablando.^^. (tal vez todo es cierto)" "that the man or the woman in front of whom I will tell all this, creating the *this*.^^. will not have the slightest idea what I am talking about.^^. (perhaps it is all true)" (*Anterior* 143–44), where the "esto" and the "cierto" are both terms loaded by shared culture as well as expectations about gender roles.

For her part Anna Kazumi Stahl, in her University of California–Berkeley PhD dissertation, written before her move to Argentina and Spanish-language fiction, argues that: "our national traditions can no longer be thought of or read as entirely autonomous of other traditions, and I argue that minority or immigrant writing, by its very heterogeneity of narrative modes, offers us concrete inroads towards an expanded critical vocabulary for reading beyond the monocultural mode and mind" (1128). Stahl's observations jibe with those of fellow daughter-of-immigrant and person-of-color scholar Sara Ahmed. Looking at the limitations of the monocultural heterosexual perspective, Ahmed writes that "white bodies do not have to face their whiteness" (132), and so have a distinct advantage in moving through space, but the heavy disadvantage of not seeing clearly the work that has cohered around this comfortable and familiar institution and its practices.

This is a perspective shared by the scholar with whom I began this paper, Rey Chow. Chow argues that "Comparative Literature" is not a neutral disciplinary

concept. Even more powerfully, she trenchantly points to the intellectual incoherence of reading in comparative literature or through a traditional comparatist perspective without recognizing its hierarchical institutional structure wherein Christian Europe is at the top, and all other literatures and cultures are marginal with respect to this dominant paradigm. The result of this cultural blind spot is that the “cultures of Europe (the grid), such as French and German, tend to be studied with meticulousness, while cultures on the margins of Europe, such as those in Latin America, Africa, or Asia [.^.^.] may simply be considered examples of the same geographic areas” (77). Chow approvingly cites Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, who argues that comparative literature as it is practiced in the west is an unmarked form of area studies (78), and can best be understood in the western intellectual context of other familiar area studies projects (e.g. Latin American Studies, East Asian Studies, etc.)

Not only is this long tradition of reading from the west intellectually suspect as a universalizing practice, but it also presents significant pedagogical problems in the current academic environment, when the preferred disciplinary methodology has traditionally been to privilege close reading, but scholars frequently do not the read original languages or have any deep familiarity with the cultures they teach or write about in scholarly papers. For Rey Chow, the best possibility for shaking up these old certainties comes from transcultural thinkers, whose work, as the authors explored in this article so well demonstrate, carry resonances beyond a single, local understanding. The most important common ground among scholars specializing in studies of “post-European culture” is that it “needs to be recognized as always operating *biculturally* or *multiculturally* even when it appears predominantly preoccupied with itself” (85). Thus, in scholars and writers like Acosta, Rivera Garza, Stahl, Chow, Ahmed, there are inklings that the conventions based on Europe are about to “give way to other, as-yet-unrealized comparative perspectives, the potential range and contents of which we have only just begun to imagine” (Chow 91).

These authors interpellate us with Europe, and also with non Europe. The question they leave open for us is how to tolerate this knowing: knowing that European literature is a local literature, and European theory a local theory, put into dialogue at last with other theories and literatures and languages.

The Ventriloquist Looking at a Double Interior, 1988–2000

Resin, motor, silicone, wood and mixed media on fabric. Drawings: 146,5 × 100 cm. Figure: 63 × 25 × 25 cm. Private Collection © The Estate of Juan Muñoz, Torrelodones 2006

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