HISPANIC STUDIES
review

Literary Obstinacy: Violence and the Literary in Cristina Rivera Garza's La muerte me da (2008)

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Abstract

Written to address the contemporary crises of violence and the exhaustion of the symbolic capacities of literature in Mexico, Cristina Rivera Garza's *La muerte me da* (2008) puts together a self-effacing narrative that crumbles in its attempt to give words to the reality that it faces. This article offers a close reading of *La muerte me da* so as to argue that the novel's reflection on violence and literature operates by recurring to an engagement with, and through, the literary tradition which allows for both a critique of the representational ethics of literature and for an ethics of literature. It goes on to show how this literary investigation recuperates a previous aesthetic and ethical operation from the literary tradition which, when articulated with the contexts of contemporary violence, yield novel ways of thinking this relation.

We might begin this essay playfully by asserting that Cristina Rivera Garza's *La muerte me da* (2008) is a bad detective novel. It is bad in that it fails to celebrate the detective as agent of social justice, "as the original poetic figure", and in that it is incapable of offering a glimpse of redemption in a dark world, as G.K. Chesterton and Raymond Chandler, two masters of the craft, respectively wrote (Chesterton 645, Chandler 989). But also, and more importantly, it is bad in that it does not seek to "tell the whole story," a normative role which, according to Mario Vargas Llosa, is the inherent tendency of all novels ("The Art of Fiction no. 120").[1] In fact, from the beginning of its respective narrative, and within its specific diegesis, it sets itself in relation to the classic, "good" detective novel as a genre and a normative tradition against which to "act out" and "fail." In that sense, we might conclude that it is bad for all the *good* reasons. Written to address the contemporary crises of violence, the literary tradition, and the exhaustion of the symbolic capacities of literature in Mexico, *La muerte me da* puts together a self-effacing narrative that crumbles in its attempt to give words to the reality that it faces. Interestingly, Rivera Garza's reflection operates by recurring to an engagement with and *through* the literary tradition, which allows for both a critique of the representational ethics *of* literature and *for* an ethics of literature. In this essay, I will focus on Rivera Garza's ethical engagements by putting the emphasis on the textual. That is, this article studies how Rivera Garza's approach to the relationship between literature and violence in *La muerte me da* very much depends on an investigation into the literary tradition and the form of the novel carried out from within its novelistic diegesis.[2] As we will see, this literary investigation recuperates a previous aesthetic and ethical operation from the literary tradition which, when articulated with the contexts of contemporary violence, yield novel ways of thinking this relation.

1 Emily Hind has characterized Rivera Garza's heterodox novelistic practice as "non-consumable ("El consumo textual" 36). Hind extrapolates and develops the concept from Rivera Garza's earlier novel *La cresta de Ilión* (2004), and explains that "el término 'no-consumible' intenta describir el opuesto de una literatura que lleva a una asimilación o 'digestión' fácil; esta literatura no-consumible resiste a la memoria y al dominio de los lectores" (36).

2 For other readings of Rivera Garza's use of intertextuality see Zavala, Abreu Mendoza.

La muerte me da opens when, in the middle of her routine evening run, eponymous character Cristina Rivera Garza stumbles onto a corpse. It takes her a minute to recognize what it is she is seeing, as she has never before witnessed a dead body. "Es un cuerpo", she repeats to herself, facing the "[c]osa sobre el asfalto," and she knows, almost immediately, that because she is the one to have found *it*, she has already ceased to be a woman on a run to occupy the role of "la Informante" (16). This *thing* she has found, a castrated dead body, leaves her beside herself with shock and grief. This particular body and the others that amass throughout the book have the same effect on each and every one of the other characters including, among many others, the case's detective, and Valerio, her assistant. All are left beside themselves, de-centered for the rest of their lives, as the novel itself tells us. Intensifying these dislocations are excerpts from the poetry and diaries of Argentinean poet Alejandra Pizarnik, which the anonymous murderer leaves behind. These excerpts further deepen the estrangement that haunts the novel's characters in that they take the texts to be clues into the murders, even though "[l]a poesía no se lee así," as the informant informs more than once (42). What they find in this fool's errand of taking the literary—and Pizarnik's work at that—as a tool to solve a mystery is nothing short of the destitution of both subject and of language. That is, after all, the ultimate horizon of Pizarnik's poetry, as Jaime Rodríguez Matos has said, and it is toward this horizon that *La muerte me da*'s cast of characters plunges (582).

La muerte me da undermines the hermeneutic of the detective story by simply refusing to forget the mutilated corpse.[3] In a traditional detective story, we have a detective, grounded in the scientific method, for whom the crime presents itself as a series of questions, as an intellectual puzzle to be completed through the responsible reading and nuanced interpretation of clues that allow him or her to reconstruct a true, rationalized, and logical account of the original violence. As Ronald R. Thomas has written, at stake in the detective's analysis "is not just the identification of a dead victim or an unknown suspect, but the demonstration of the power invested in certain forensic devices" (2). These devices traditionally "enable the detective to read the clues to a mystery that is written in the suspect body" (2). This discovered truth could be said to be ontological in that it empties the secretive and mysterious nature of violence by returning it to the naturalist realm of positive phenomena. The detective's informed scrutiny "reveals a code that his trained eye is uniquely capable of reading" (3). As Thomas points out, the conventions of the genre "generally require the detective to explain what seems to be his uncanny act of second sight as the simple application of a technique, or even a technology, to the variable of the present occasion" (3). This explanation, we might add, sheds light on a truth that abolishes the singularity of the violence (and of the corpse) in question by presenting it as merely the symptom and result of larger causative phenomena, which ought to be analyzed and solved (see Zi-Ling 22).

In Rivera Garza's work, however, the scientific method and all of the characters consistently fail in their early attempts to find some rationale or logic for the murders, whose truth remains shrouded in secrecy. In this sense, the novel fits very well in the subgenre of postmodern or metaphysical detective fiction, in which the totality of positivist explanation is deferred and which, in turn, leads the texts to seem like failures "in that clues have little stability, solutions are not forthcoming, the means of transmission are paradoxical, focalization is problematic,

3 Rivera Garza's novel has been read against the novela negra/detective novel in Close and Alicinio. Rivera Garza herself, in an interview with Cheyla Rose Samuelson, addressed her novel in relation with the literary genre: "I didn't want it to be the kind of detective story that ends up with a conclusion, with a resolution, with a clarification. I want to take the Thriller and do something else with it, so we'll see what happens..." (145). In this article, I do not dwell in a comparison of Rivera Garza's novel against other contemporary *novelas negras* insofar as this genre is most often written in relation to the classic detective story, which it seeks to subvert, and not to itself.

and all manners of contentions are overturned" (Zi-Ling 24).[4] Beyond the acknowledgement of the similarities between the victims, none of the characters interested in "solving" the crime are capable of moving beyond the fact that a body was mutilated and a life taken, interrupted. They are traumatized by the facticity of the body and the seemingly unexplainable (and ultimately unexplained) ferocity of the violence.[5] This trauma, understood as "an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language" (Balaev 1), sunders the traditional narrative of the detective's investigation from the possibility of its solution, sieving the whodunit until all that is left is endless inquiry.

Particularly interesting in the novel's refusal is that its critique of narrative and literary approaches to violence—which aestheticize, rationalize and, thus, abolish the singularity of the violent act—is carried through a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, at the level of the plot, the novel disarticulates the narrativity of violence by both insisting on the impossibility to truly decipher a murderer's clues, and by focusing on characters that are powerless to transcend the traumatic effects of violence. Facing these traumatic effects, the inquiry of the sundered whodunit is reduced (revealed) to be merely literary criticism, an endless exercise of interpretation that can provide no final conclusion, as the novel presents it. In one of the messages the murderer sends to the diegetic Cristina Rivera Garza, she quotes a fragment of Pizarnik's poem "Piedra fundamental," which reads:

> Las muñecas desventradas por mis antiguas manos de muñeca, la desilusión al encontrar pura estopa (pura estopa tu memoria): el padre, que tuvo que ser Tiresias, flota en el río. Pero tú, ¿por qué te dejaste asesinar escuchando cuentos de álamos nevados? (qted. in Rivera Garza 87)

The murderer proceeds to analyze it line by line, in much the same way the detective did early on in the novel, when she tried to read poetry literally and denotatively. However, the murderer interprets each line in the opposite way, connotatively, suggesting literary and existentialist associations that further deepen the secret behind the murders. At the end of the letter, she sums up her morbid argument, dissuading Cristina from engaging in the traditional detective hermeneutic: "El que analiza, asesina. Estoy segura de que sabías eso, profesora. / El que lee con cuidado, descuartiza. / Todos matamos" (88). Put simply, the murderer seems to imply that participating in said hermeneutic, trying to rationalize violence, whether real or literary, only leads to its repetition, to *more* violence. To a certain degree, that is the murderer's goal in *La muerte me da*: to make accomplices of everybody.

The second prong of Rivera Garza's approach, on the other hand, is intrinsically related to the first and consists of the elaboration of an artistic corpus spearheaded by Alejandra Pizarnik, which *formally* enables her critique. *La muerte me da* uses this corpus so as to articulate an alternative aesthetic tradition to which it declares its allegiance, and from which it draws its own

4 For a panoramic literary history of Latin American detective fiction and of the *novela negra*, see Close's *Contemporary Hispanic Crime Fiction* (2008). Despite *La muerte me da's* affinities with "metaphysical" or "postmodern" strands of detective fiction, this genre does not constitute its frame of reference. See previous note.

5 This facticity of the corpse is made all the more apparent by the castration. The removal of the penis makes the writer consider why victim, in Spanish, is a female noun: "Pensé—y aquí pensar quiere en realidad decir producir una imagen—en los cuerpos castrados de los tres hombres jóvenes que habían aparecido desnudos y sangrantes sobre el asfalto de la ciudad....Y pensé—y aquí pensar quiere decir en realidad practicar la ironía—que era de suyo interesante que, al menos en español, la palabra víctima siempre fuese femenina" (30). This reflection, as well as the specificty of the castrations themselves, is essential to the consistent problematization of the representation and embodiment of gender that characterizes Rivera Garza's *oeuvre*. For a survey of the critique of gender throughout her works, see Oswaldo Estrada's *Ser mujer y estar presente: Disidencias de género en la literatura mexicana contemporánea* (2014), especially "Cristina Rivera Garza: En gustos se rompen géneros", 227-257.

aesthetic operation. In "La tradición que retrocede", Oswaldo Zavala reads Rivera Garza's uses of the literary tradition along with other recent similar deployments in works by Pedro Ángel Palou, Jorge Volpi, Juan Villoro, and Roberto Bolaño (232-33). The critic understands these intertextual engagements as acts of positionings within the Mexican literary field, and notes that "al asociarse Cristina Rivera Garza con Amparo Dávila y Alejandra Pizarnik, su obra se adelanta como autoridad de un importante legado literario poco apreciado y olvidado que a través de su nueva lectura identifica su poética (y ulteriormente su capital literario) con el suyo" (235). Yet, Zavala continues, Rivera Garza locates herself within a heterodox lineage of women writers, which allows her to radicalize notions of gender and language and, thus, move towards an exploration of the exteriority of language, where the dynamics of power and gender are disseminated, "disueltas en la irrelevancia e indecibilidad de su trazo derrideano, en la imposibilidad de la fijación, en la temporalidad del pliegue discursivo de una novela." (235-36). Likewise, in an article which studies the intertextual relationships between Rivera Garza's *oeuvre* and the literary tradition, Carlos Abreu Mendoza insists that Pizarnik's exaltation of an "escritura desbordada que habla desde el otro lado del lenguaje" seeps into *La muerte me da* not only through its diegetic inclusion into the plot, but also by pushing for an erasure of the limits between poetry and prose (298). For Abreu Mendoza, Pizarnik is the key to Rivera Garza's novel and explains the novel's fragmentation and its "posicionamiento extrínseco al texto a través de las mascaras y el fracaso final de la empresa poética" (306). Furthermore, the critic reads the use of Pizarnik in the novel as a mechanism of disruption that affects the boundaries between prose and poetry and, like Zavala notes, the status of language itself. This disruption, Abreu Mendoza holds, sends its reader "al fertil territorio de la poesía para que allí, en el espacio de la palabra en libertad, sea capaz de producir la realidad de la novela más allá de los límites de su género" (310).

In other words, for both critics Pizarnik makes possible a transgression of the generic limits of prose, which allows the novelist to access the exteriority of language, a realm available to the poetic form. Yet, Pizarnik's use is not exhausted in the disruption of these limits. The poet also "works" in relation to the novel's approach to violence and its narration. Put simply, through the diegetic inclusion of Pizarnik's poetry, which plotwise habilitates the deconstruction of the narrative of the detective story by *narratively* allowing for a murderer and an informant deft in post-structural practices of (literary) critique, Rivera Garza is able to bring to the foreground questions that are central to Pizarnik's work and to her own reflection on the epistemic and symbolic impact of violence and on the ethicality of a literature written to address it.

In the most thorough and recent article written on *La muerte me da*, Glen S. Close draws together Rivera Garza's literary reflections with her inclusion of contemporary (plastic) artists, and argues that "with an acute poststructuralist awareness of the impropriety of literary language," Rivera Garza's novel "renders the crisis of the subject when confronted with...the abject cadaver" ("Antinovela negra" 410). For Close, Rivera Garza's "ethical and poetical intelligence" manages to accomplish much of the same effect that haunts her characters and which contemporary art seeks: defamiliarization, estrangement, and desensationalization (409). In this manner, Rivera Garza insists on the incapacity of literary narrative to provide a "true knowledge or cognitive mastery of violence," such as the one the conventional detective novel claims to offer (410). Close concludes arguing that,

> [w]hat [literature] can offer us, [Rivera Garza] seems to say, is a demonstration of how language falters and fails when confronted with violence and with the ultimately unbreachable enigma of death. Rivera Garza's *antinovela negra* proclaims its own incapacity

> to represent real violence coherently, yet it jolts us out of our habitual modes of perception and sharpens our critical sensitivity by evoking the inarticulate language of the traumatized subject and by engaging in intertextual dialogue with artworks that ask us to ponder our capacity for empathy together with our capacity for enjoying the pain of others. (410)

As Close rightly argues, *La muerte me da* repeats the critical operation of certain post-structuralist and contemporary art critiques that respectively insist on the impropriety of language and vision (perception, sensationalization) at the same time as it undermines the narratological, representational, and hermeneutical presuppositions of the *novela negra* and other more traditional (and representational) literary genres. By refusing to forget the corpse and the fact of violence, the novel declines to represent the violent act as capable of being internalized into a narrative logic through its rationalization. This representation and rationalization would purportedly, as Rivera Garza herself has acknowledged, make the act of literary writing complicit with "the violent act in the process of narrating them" (quoted in Close 393). In other words, the rationalizing representation of the violent act, its fixation within and through language, and the hermeneutic of the *novela negra*, would make of it a spectacle, a simulacrum of the real, which, as Guy Debord once argued, is nothing but "repressive pseudo-enjoyment" (par. 59).

That said, I believe that despite Close's incisive analysis of Rivera Garza's "incapacity to represent real violence coherently," and Rivera Garza's own expressed intentions, it is easy to overstate the fact of this incapacity. After all, Rivera Garza's novel *does* in fact represent, describe, and narrate the violence done upon the bodies of the murdered men in multiple occasions, even if through fractured syntax: "Desmembrado. Sin genitales. Cubierto de sangre" (69); "Violentamente. Un túnel ahí. Un orificio de entrada sin orificio de salida. El cauce vacío de un río" (102); "...el vientre machacado, abierto, todavía cubierto de sangre fresca. Una boca en realidad. Un orificio brutal. Lo sin entraña. La entraña expuesta" (119). Moreover, she does so coherently and logically in a narrative that, despite failing to fulfill, while undoing the *novela negra*'s demands and tropes, follows them closely enough so that it reaches a logical, if "incomplete," conclusion. Put differently, Rivera Garza's conceptualization or thematization of her literary critique of the literary in the face of violence does not imply its performance insofar as that would entail the abandonment of the *literariness* of the literary critique itself. In short, despite deconstructing the narrative arc of the *novela negra*, the literary genre of violence *par excellance*, Rivera Garza's novel still instantiates a narrative arc of its own, one which is still markedly *negro* in that it is built on narrative suspense and anticipation. Nonetheless, *La muerte me da*'s thematic refusal allows Rivera Garza to habilitate, through an adoption of the traumatic and unspeakable reality of violent acts, the ethicality of literature in that it interpellates the reader's personal ethics and aesthetics, as Close points out. We could then say, paraphrasing Martin Jay, that Rivera Garza calls for the participatory festival of literature to supplant the contemplative literary spectacle (Jay 428).[6] In this sense, Rivera Garza's novel implicitly echoes Fredric Jameson's introductory phrase to *Signatures of the Visible* (1992/2007), in which he writes: "The visual is *essentially* pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination; thinking about its attributes becomes an adjunct to that, if it is unwilling to betray its object" (1). Rivera Garza's writing is more than willing to betray its object—namely, the detective novel in particular, and the narrative novel of literary fiction in general. But it does so, as we have seen, not by abandoning its mode—Rivera

6 This sentence paraphrases Martin Jay's: "[The situationists] wanted the participatory Festival to supplant the contemplative Spectacle." (428)

Garza's critique is not an essay, after all—but by expanding literary fiction *through* the literary.

It is only through Pizarnik's poetry that Rivera Garza manages to articulate the interdisciplinary constellation that she weaves through the book, including not only its intertextual elements, but also its paratextual materials, such as the epigraphs that crown each section. Despite the centrality of the contemporary arts, on which Close focuses, and the poststructuralist musings that serve as epigraphs, it is the mystery of Pizarnik's poetry that allows an opening in the diegesis for Rivera Garza's eccentric canon, and serves as its anchoring point. After all, in the novel we do not find reproductions of contemporary art nor fragments of poststructuralist theory etched on the corpses. We find, instead, Pizarnik's writing as solicitation. It is here that my reading more markedly diverges from Close's in that I believe that despite the importance of the contemporary artists mentioned throughout the novel (on which Close focuses), they are structurally secondary to Pizarnik. Put simply, Pizarnik's poetry is the condition of possibility for the question of ethics in *La muerte me da*.

In the novel, there are a few instances in which the detective approaches the diegetic Rivera Garza with her own readings of the poet's work, which grow more adept as they progress. However, in one of the earliest instances of these sessions of poetic exegesis and interpretation, the diegetic Rivera Garza becomes frustrated at the detective's insistence of taking at face value the Argentine poet's "En esta noche, en este mundo," a poem which tellingly, and in a case of "theoretical" foreshadowing, concludes that "ninguna palabra es visible," and that everything is possible "salvo el poema" (Pizarnik 322). After listening to the detective, the diegetic Rivera Garza reflects:

> ¿Cómo decirle a la Detective que todo poema es la imposibilidad del lenguaje por producir la presencia en él mismo que, por ser lenguaje, es todo ausencia? ¿Cómo comunicarle a la Detective que la tarea del poema no es comunicar sino, todo lo contrario, proteger ese lugar del secreto que se resiste a toda comunicación, a toda transmisión, a todo esfuerzo de traducción? ¿Cómo decirle, sin atragantarme con el sorbo de agua y esa tristeza que me producía el constatar, una y otra vez, que la lengua nunca será un órgano de resurrección, que las palabras, como dice Pizarnik unos versos más adelante, en esa declaración no por acertada menos sombría, que "las palabras no hacen el amor/ hacen la ausencia"? (56-57)

Put simply, from the get-go, the diegetic Rivera Garza tries to communicate to the detective that the (written) word is frustratingly limited to empty representation, condemned to its incapacity to truthfully *present* or *denote*. Or, as she explains elsewhere in the book, in relation to Pizarnik's prose, "[s]e trata de una prosa que, incluso, pone en tela de juicio la capacidad comunicativa de la misma. Una idea que cuestiona la supuesta habilidad intrínseca de la prosa para transmitir significado" (190). The mystery of the castrated men is only deepened by the "secreto que se resiste a toda comunicación" of the poems left behind by the serial killer in lieu of clues. Mistaking these poems for what they are not, she seems to say, will only lead the detective further down the rabbit hole. And yet, the rabbit hole of subjective destitution seems to likewise be the destination for those who decide to take the poems exactly as what they are.

Despite the fact that Pizarnik wrote about violence and evil in the latter part of her life, it is her work with language and negativity that concerns Rivera Garza in *La muerte me da*.[7] In gen-

7 For more on Pizarnik and evil, see Depetris, and Nicholson.

eral, Pizarnik's is a poetry built around absence and negativity, critical of both the efficacy of language and the consistency of subjectivity. In her work, language and self "are not only working at a limit, but are constantly pushed to a limit where both risk a radical loss of meaning and communication" (García Moreno 69). Much like Rivera Garza's own work in *La muerte me da*, the Argentine's oeuvre develops, in the words of María Negroni,

> entre el silencio y la procacidad, entre la ablación lingüística y las muecas de los significantes desatados, yendo y viniendo de un registro a otro por mecanismos de intratextualidad, robos y autocensura evidentes, esta obra obliga a reformular, una vez más, como cuestiones candentes, los vínculos entre poesía, silencio y represión, carencia y ostentación, tristeza y ritmo, lirismo, crimen y estética (176).

It is not for naught that, in the academic article that is embedded in the book as Part IV, Rivera Garza the author reads Pizarnik through Negroni's lens. For this reason, the poetic path that Pizarnik's poetry takes, for Negroni and Rivera Garza, should not be understood as a simple alternation or dialectic progression. It is an ambivalent poetry characterized by a voice that "displaces the unity of opposites," while also, and at the same time, becoming "the site where such union takes place" (Rodríguez Matos 576). As Rodríguez Matos contends, "[h]er texts are most productively engaged not as a succession of phases, but as the tense coexistence of contradictory poetic projects that divide her work from within" (576). For the critic, Pizarnik's poetic projects are characterized by the elaboration of a poetic voice that "marks the borderline between writing something that is already accepted and recognized as poetry and an expansion of the limits of poetry itself" (587). In Pizarnik's work, we stumble onto a poet who has discovered that "it is poetry as an experience of the impossible" itself which is exhausted, and yet instead of negating this exhaustion, she incorporates it (587).

These characterizations of Pizarnik's poetry could easily and very well be applied to *La muerte me da*. Rivera Garza's text develops between silence and obscenity—what is kept unsaid and what is overexposed—, coming and going from the registers of detective fiction, academic criticism, and theoretical reflection through the mechanisms of intertextuality and appropriation, reformulating the relations between literary and philosophical reflection. Like in Pizarnik's case, this process is not one of alternation or dialectic progression. It is an ambivalent project that insists on the distance between its disparate parts: between the novel's detective fiction which insists on a narrative explanation of violence, the theoretical reflection on secrecy, otherness, and the singularity of violence; the academic article on Pizarnik embedded in Part IV of the book, and the *poemario* which occupies Part VII. Yet, the project is, at the same time, very literally the site where the union of these takes place, in that they coexist and operate both diegetically and extradiegetically in the narrative and within the book object.

The inclusion of Pizarnik's volatile poetic matter—with its questioning of language, of representability, and the denotative capacity of the poetic—within *La muerte me da*'s diegesis, a diegesis which markedly revolves around the question of the murders and of how to think the violent act, allows Rivera Garza to develop her literary critique of the literary in the face of violence from within the limits of the diegetic. That is, Rivera Garza fashions a critical space that fits the parameters of verisimilitude or intelligibility established by the novel's plot and narrative logic, justifying within this narrative logic a statement such as: "Lo que en realidad pasa: Eso no lo puede saber la novela" (107). This rhetorical move also makes narratable a supposedly unarratable event: "Esa mirada carece de metáfora, de analogía, de metonimia. En sentido estricto,

entonces, se trata de una mirada que no existe" (116). Hence, for all of Rivera Garza's deconstruction and dearticulation of the detective novel, of traditional literary accounts of violence, and her engagement with post-structural thought, *La muerte me da*'s inclusion of Pizarnik within the diegesis guarantees that her literary critique and her literary ethics respect the novel's very traditional tenet of self-enclosedness and autonomy.

On the one hand, when read carefully, *La muerte me da* reveals itself to be far from an "anti-novela," as Close characterizes it, recurring to Rafael Lemus's call for an "antinovela" composed of "[u]na prosa brutal, destazada, incoherente. Una estructura delirante, tan tajada como la existencia" (Lemus 41). As I have shown, Rivera Garza's novel is tightly coherent and self-contained; its critique, reflections, and conceits are destructive of the novel only in appearance, justified through the presence of Alejandra Pizarnik's poetry. On the other, taken together, the presence of Pizarnik's poetry and Rivera Garza's respect for the novel's self-enclosedness permit the author an obstinately literary answer to the question of literature in the face of violence: Rivera Garza takes a form (the novel) which is traditionally representational—as a result, regressive to her own ends—, and, while remaining within its formal constraints, includes elements (a particularly literary murderer, a post-structuralist critic, a confused detective, etc.) which allow her to expand the limits of said form so as to insert within its economy an anti-representational critique of violence in literature. This move allows Rivera Garza to have her cake and eat it too, all at the same time. In sum, *La muerte me da* articulates a critique of the representation of violence from within the confines of the representational.

In *Killer Books: Writing, Violence, and Ethics in Modern Spanish American Narrative* (2001), Aníbal González put forth two categories through which to consider literary approaches to the relationship between literature, ethics, and violence: "admonitory" and "abusive" texts (22-23). For González, "admonitory" texts were those works which, while engaging thematically or not with the topic, offered meditations on the ethics of writing and its relationship to violence and evil. Admonitory texts, the critic wrote, participated in a historical tradition marked by a distrust of writing, a "graphophobia" that insists on the always already "tainted" nature of writing (22). "Abusive" texts, on the other hand, displayed "no awareness of the ethical problematics of writing" (22). If, as a conclusion and rhetorical conceit, we were to imagine a spectrum of what we could call "literary critiques of the literary in the face of violence" in Mexico, which graphed González's two categories, with "admonitory" texts to the left and "abusive" texts to the right, Rivera Garza's *La muerte me da*'s approach to violence would occupy the westernmost end, with more "traditional" novels about violence such as *narconovelas* or the contemporary *novela negra* at the easternmost. One possible, and interesting, point of comparison would be Rosa Beltrán's *Efectos secundarios* (2011), which recurs to an operation similar to Rivera Garza's. In her novel, Beltrán, too, launches into a literary critique of the literary in the face of violence through the incorporation of the literary tradition, but in place of Pizarnik, she recurs to the canon of the modernist novel (from Franz Kafka and Virginia Woolf, to Juan Rulfo). This choice leads her down a markedly different path. In our imaginary spectrum, Beltrán would place somewhere along the middle, definitely closer to Rivera Garza than to "abusive" texts, but still "held back" because of her choice of a register we could qualify as "reformist," where Rivera Garza's hopes to be "radical."

Beltrán's novel tells the story of an unnamed book "presenter" who travels from city to city successfully introducing superficial best-sellers while abstracted in his own thoughts. His routine begins to fall apart when the Q&A sessions of his events become filled with anecdotes about the generalized violence in contemporary Mexico. Topic notwithstanding, every question and

every statement lead to a tale about kidnappings, tortures, lost relatives, "desaparecidos", etcetera. In an attempt to escape these maddening circumstances, the protagonist attempts to flee the eruption of violence (in vain) by delving into his own personal literary canon, composed by the modernist novel. Like *La muerte me da*, *Efectos secundarios* presents a self-effacing narrative that crumbles in its attempt to address contemporary violence. That said, whereas Rivera Garza's work opts for the representational insufficiency and incapacity of language vis-à-vis violence and death in the style of negative critique which characterizes poststructuralist positions, as we have seen; Beltrán's novel insists on the insufficiency not of language like Rivera Garza's, but of contemporary genres and the current state of the literary institution in the face of a threatening cultural present.[8]

What holds Beltrán's critical speculations on the power of the literary from being as cutting as Rivera Garza's is the fact that the former acknowledges the limits and exhaustion of literary representation and narration, but identifies this as a problem plaguing an abusive, commercialized, and vacuous iteration of contemporary literature instead of literature as a whole, and insists on the necessity to assail this with *more* narration. In this sense, Beltrán's 2011 novel recognizes the crisis faced by the literary arts and institution, but responds not with the deconstruction of its forms, like her compatriot, but with a literary nostalgia that, in the face of Rivera Garza's style of negative critique, reveals itself as an attempt to rehabilitate the narrative powers of the literary. This is not, however, detrimental in any shape or form to Beltrán's project. In fact, both her work and Rivera Garza's attest to what we could call "literary obstinacy," in that they seek to think the literary *through,* and not *despite,* the literary tradition. Their marked divergence derives, in part, from the potentialities and limits proffered by the traditions from which they engage the cultural present in their respective novels. In short, where Beltrán's modernist engagements allow her to insist on the narration of the crisis of literature in the face of violence, Rivera Garza's interdisciplinary canon in general, but her use of Alejandra Pizarnik in specific, habilitate for her a path for the conceptualization or thematization of this crisis.

8 For more on Rosa Beltrán, see Estrada, *Ser mujer y estar presente*.

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