

Waterworks: Desiccation, Desedimentation, Writing

By Alfonso Fierro

In her recent book, *Autobiografía del algodón* (The Autobiography of Cotton, 2020), Mexican author Cristina Rivera Garza weaves together the story of two road trips to an intriguing place called Ciudad Anáhuac. Close to the Mexico–United States border, Ciudad Anáhuac is what remains from the dream of transforming a desert in the state of Coahuila into a gigantic cotton plantation by diverting water through a massive irrigation system. During the 1930s, in the heat of post-revolutionary reconstruction, Mexico’s government undertook the construction of all the infrastructure needed to make this fantasy possible. There were a few good harvests, but soon the project revealed the cracks in its foundations. Eventually, Anáhuac became something of a ghost town.

Rivera Garza’s book tracks two road trips to Ciudad Anáhuac made by two different people at two different times. The first is a journey taken in the 1930s by the young writer José Revueltas. As an official representative of Mexico’s Communist Party, he was to oversee the organizing efforts of a group of *campesinos* who worked in the cotton fields and planned to go on strike. The second is the road trip Cristina Rivera Garza herself took to the living ruins of Ciudad Anáhuac, haunted as she was by its past and present history.

Cristina Rivera Garza spoke on December 1, 2021, as part of the *New Grammars, New Vocabularies: Imagining Other Worlds* series hosted by UC Berkeley’s Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) and co-sponsored by the

Mexican farm workers picking cotton in a field near the U.S.–Mexico border, 1942.



Photo by Howard R. Hollem, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs, with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Vice Chancellor for Research. During her presentation, Rivera Garza shared the notion of “geological writing,” using this concept to group a series of past and present authors interested in excavating the different events, projects, or catastrophes that have transformed a given territory’s social and natural landscape, leaving physical marks behind. Rivera Garza used the term “desedimentation” to describe the writing practice of following these tracks, excavating the different historical layers that compose a particular landscape, and revealing the social life hidden in rocks, cement ruins, rusting iron, or regrown forests. If Rivera Garza mentioned José Revueltas as one of the writers that she is reading in a geological key, the two road trips that she reconstructs in *Autobiografía del algodón* certainly constitute an attempt to unearth the historical layers of a long-forgotten place like Ciudad Anáhuac.

From her earliest writings, Rivera Garza has always questioned the boundaries between history and fiction, resulting in complex texts that we locate in the fiction aisle only for convenience. In *Autobiografía del algodón*, she employs archival research and fictional narrative to follow the tracks of another author, José Revueltas, adopting his perspective while filling in the gaps in this biographical episode. Through the imagined eyes of the bright, 19-year-old Revueltas, we see the cotton fields of Ciudad Anáhuac for the first time. A young member of Mexico’s Communist Party, Revueltas had been sent from Mexico City to supervise the organizing efforts behind the strike in these cotton fields in the far north of Mexico, the middle of nowhere really. In Rivera Garza’s tale, Revueltas was impressed by the project’s magnitude, particularly by the colossal dam and its branching irrigation system. “The desert had folded,” he claimed, giving way to a productive oasis and a utopian city of circular, concentric streets called Ciudad Anáhuac (Rivera Garza, 2020, p. 17, my translation).

As Rivera Garza suggests, these massive waterworks bent on transforming the desert into arable land were a perfect example of post-revolutionary reconstruction in Mexico. After more than a decade of armed conflict, political instability, and economic crisis, the 1920s came with high hopes and a change in mindset. The winning factions of the Revolution sought to restructure Mexico’s political, economic, and social systems. The generals and bureaucrats now in charge understood that massive public works and infrastructure projects capable of modernizing Mexico’s territory were essential for achieving this objective. They channeled increasing amounts of capital and labor toward their construction, cast them as projects that would vindicate the social struggles of the Revolution, and pinned huge political bets on their success. President

Plutarco Elías Calles came into office in 1924 suffering from what some historians call “road fever,” a delirious belief that in only four years, Mexico could produce out of nowhere an interstate highway system that would finally connect the territory as a whole.

Around this time, the Mexico City-based cultural magazine *El Universal Ilustrado* began publishing a section titled “Cosas de México” (Things About Mexico), which reported every single “advance” taking place in the capital, from newly paved streets to plans for new markets to innovations in the garbage-collecting system. Anything that smacked of Mexico was finally booming once again. Anything that even hinted at the fact that the city was changing, becoming modern, was reportable news and deserved a place in the weekly pages of *El Universal*. In the heydays of reconstruction, ideas for far-fetched projects like Ciudad Anáhuac and its irrigation system popped up everywhere, charming minds all over the place. A few of these pipe dreams became reality, but soon enough, their weight would feel as heavy as a hangover.

Indeed, Mexico’s working classes woke up in the middle of the 1930s only to realize that, despite official claims to the contrary, they were token guests at the reconstruction party, invited only for the official picture, silenced. Many of the projects undertaken by the early post-revolutionary governments had certainly managed to reactivate the economy and secure political stability, mainly by centralizing control in Mexico City, but industrial workers, campesinos, and the urban population in general lived and worked in conditions not too different from before the Revolution.

In response, the 1930s saw a renaissance of the labor movement, both in the cities and in the countryside. Organizing efforts, new unions, cooperatives, strikes, and the emergence of associations that brought together different labor organizations were a common sight in the 1930s. So was the support of many radical avant-garde artists and writers, who provided art for strikes and protests or used writing to criticize the fact that the revolutionary state’s massive infrastructural projects seemed to benefit only big landowners and capitalist interests. In this context, the radical young writer José Revueltas traveled all the way up north to aid the cotton workers in their strike. And that is how he found himself wandering the cotton fields of Ciudad Anáhuac in 1934.

In Rivera Garza’s “desedimentation”—the result of archival research and fictional speculation—José Revueltas could not do much to help. The organization was already pretty solid, and Revueltas himself was soon arrested and sent on a journey through various prisons that would finally take him to the penal colony of Islas Marías, where he would stay

until he received a pardon from President Lázaro Cárdenas in 1938. Meanwhile, in Ciudad Anáhuac, the strike eventually failed. A storm then flooded the dam and ruined the harvest, while the drought that followed was the final nail in the coffin, revealing irreparable flaws in the construction. While Revueltas was in the Islas Mariás, contemplating what he might write about the cotton strike, everyone else was fleeing Ciudad Anáhuac. Progress had come and gone; for a fleeting moment, like an optical illusion, the desert had turned into a field of white flowers. In a couple of years, the only traces left of that illusion were abandoned ruins.

According to Rivera Garza's tale, Revueltas decided to write about the cotton strike the minute he set foot in Ciudad Anáhuac and understood the almost insurmountable difficulty of organizing a protest in the far north of Mexico, in a place that most Mexicans had never even heard of, with little or no supporting networks, with no one paying any attention at all. This impossible obstacle is, according to her, the genesis of the Revueltas's novel *El luto humano* (Human Mourning) published almost a decade later in 1943. Rivera Garza points out that the book had the interesting working title of *Las huellas habitadas* (The Inhabited Remains) and suggests reading it in apocalyptic key, as an end-of-the-world story.

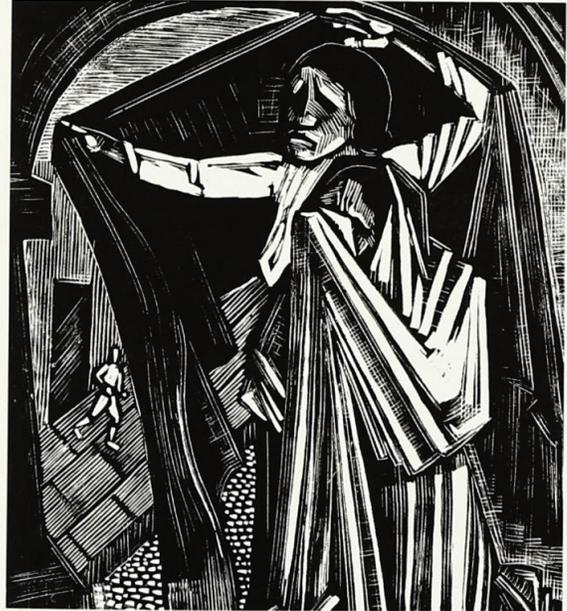
There are grounds to do so. Readers of *El luto humano* will find themselves in the middle of a ruined town, inhabited only by a few lost souls: a couple of campesinos and a priest, who live in three or four huts scattered here and there. One woman is dying, and her husband must go for the priest in the middle of a terrible storm, a flood of biblical proportions punishing these people as it punished Noah. The subtext is clear: controlling water lay behind Ciudad Anáhuac's *ex-nihilo* creation. It was possible (or so it seemed) to deviate water's natural course, taking it to a place where it did not want to go, where it could not flow. As such, it was only fitting that water put an end to such recklessness. In the novel, Ciudad Anáhuac's apocalypse thus takes the form of a tempest, a flooded river in a ruined place, a roaring wet wind, and endless rain.

But who are these people that are still there, dying, getting drunk, trying to kill each other? How did they come to be there and why? They are the remaining workers from the cotton fields, the ones who could not leave in time. Through their memories, the reader travels to the peak of the strike, a time full of hope, when everything seemed possible, even harvesting in the desert, even the wildest dreams of collective ownership and cooperative labor unleashed by the Revolution.

In the novel, the workers organize around Adán—Spanish for Adam, the “first” man. The narrator describes Adán as strong, handsome, very attractive, and a righteous

José Revueltas

El luto humano



Ediciones  Era

Image courtesy of Ediciones Era.

Cover of a 2014 edition of *El luto humano*.

leader, too. In my opinion, this characterization reveals a Revueltas who, in the early 1940s, was still caught up in some traps of Socialist Realism that he would patiently dismantle in his later works, for example, in the brilliant novel *Los errores* (The Mistakes, 1964). Back in the 1930s, a group of socialist writers in Mexico attempted to launch a “proletarian literature” project that aimed to experiment with Socialist Realism. Their novels conceived labor organization as a process that needed to be led by a strong man, and thus, their protagonists tended to be characters just like Adán in *El luto humano*. Indeed, following this tradition far too closely, Revueltas reiterated the idealization of the masculine leader, the pure and strong individual on whose shoulders rested the full weight of the workers' revolutionary hopes. When an anti-strike agent murders Adán, it signals the strike's collapse and, eventually, the ruin of the agricultural project as a whole.

The characters that the reader meets seem trapped in this place, like ghosts in purgatory, wandering in circles while trying to escape, as everyone else did after the apocalypse.

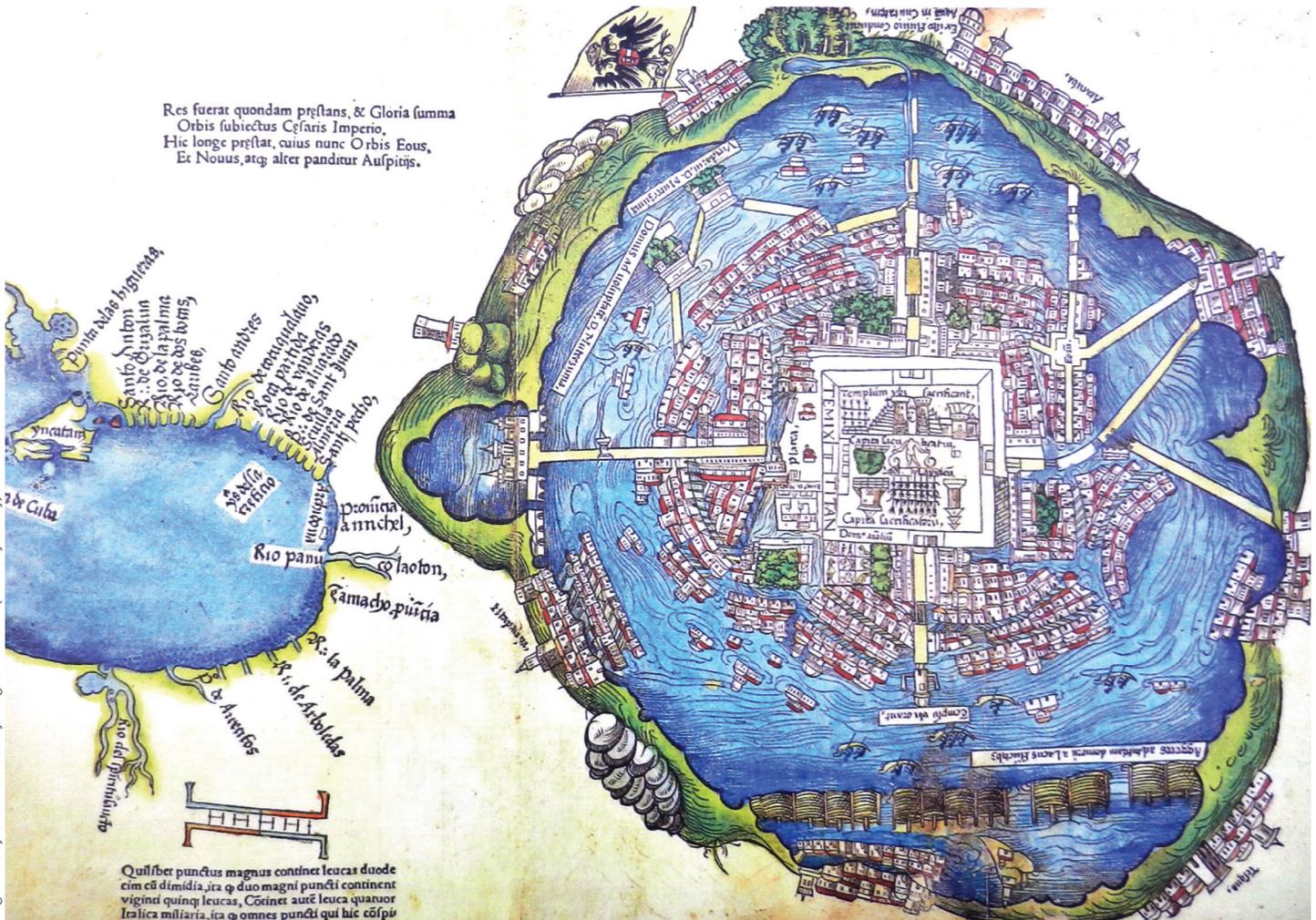
Cristina Rivera Garza claims that they inhabit a place beyond death, even if they, too, are desperate to live:

Quizá fuese cosa del destino y no de ellos nada más eso de huir siempre. Pero huir permaneciendo, o mejor, con un anhelo tan violento de permanecer que la huida no era otra cosa que una búsqueda y el deseo de encontrar un sitio en la tierra, vital, donde pudieran levantarse.

Perhaps it was not just them, it was a matter of destiny to always run away. But to run staying, or better said, with a desire of belonging so violent that running away was nothing but searching and desiring to find a place on Earth where they could stand. (*El luto humano*, 1943, p. 60, my translation)

El luto humano thus reads as a scathing critique of Mexico's post-revolutionary governments and the false promises of reconstruction. The novel places at its center those who inhabited the forsaken fringes of the country, the absolute shadows of Mexico's population. From their perspective, it is easy to see how the "revolutionary" regime had failed—if not betrayed—its revolutionary aspirations, leaving only a wasteland of ruins behind.

The "Nuremberg map" of Tenochtitlán shows Lake Texcoco surrounding the city in the Valley of Mexico.



Is it possible to write a history of the territory we call Mexico from the perspective of water, as Revueltas attempted to do in his own way? Contemporary environmental historians like Vera Candiani seem to believe so. In *Dreaming of Dry Land: Environmental Transformation in Colonial Mexico City* (2014), Candiani discusses the Spanish colonial regime by reconstructing the history of the massive project to empty the lakes that surrounded Mexico City, a project known as "El Desagüe" (The Draining). The colonial elites were deeply concerned about the periodic floods that assailed the city, damaging their property and impacting their rents. Their solution was to empty the lakes, using European technologies and engineering techniques to radically and dramatically transform the landscape where they had decided to locate the center of colonial administration. According to Candiani, the Desagüe represented the most complex desiccation project in the Americas, but it was by no means the only possible alternative or course of action.

Many Indigenous groups had inhabited the Valley of Mexico long before the arrival of the Spanish. These groups had developed forms of life, agricultural techniques, and water infrastructure that helped them inhabit that particular landscape and ecosystem. The famous *chinampas*, floating



Photo by ArCaña.

Various eras of the Desagüe technology in northern Mexico City.

agriculture plots, are only one example. In an alternate (albeit painfully absurd) history of the valley, the Spanish could have learned other ways to deal with water from these groups, with periodic flooding and the continued presence of the lakes that for years had represented a human and non-human life source.

Instead, the colonial elites decided to drain the lakes, a project begun in the 16th century that—truth be told—has never been completed. The Desagüe kept growing in size and scope throughout the colonial period and had a massive renewal during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz that preceded the Mexican Revolution of 1910. But none of these efforts were ever enough to control such a stubborn force as water, which keeps seeping into the city to this day. As Candiani explains, the result of this multiseular project was that the lakes disappeared. Still, the periodic floods that concerned the colonial elites have never left the city alone. Caught up in this recurrent nightmare (the other part of which is the fact that Mexico City has to pump all potable water into the urban area), even contemporary governments invest in finding ways to push water out of the capital during the rainy season.

Rivera Garza is correct in pointing out that in *El luto humano*, Revueltas touched upon the fact that not even the

Mexican Revolution managed to overcome the colonial regime imposed in and through social and spatial projects like the Desagüe. Instead, a similar fantasy emerged once again in the waterworks of Ciudad Anáhuac, devastating in its own way and creating its own set of natural and social catastrophes. Inhabiting these ruins as Revueltas did is what Cristina Rivera Garza called “desedimentation” during her intervention at the *New Grammars, New Vocabularies* series.

In the context of the current global environmental crisis, she suggested that “desedimentation” is a writing practice that scrutinizes the geological traces left by social and historical processes in a given place. In Latin America, as I have been trying to show here, these traces often lead back to dreams of progress and development that have grabbed hold of certain regions since the colonial days, aiming to transform them at will... at least as long as the dream lasts.

But Rivera Garza also recognized in her talk that in Latin America, other possibilities have always existed and have consistently confronted and opposed these dreams. Indigenous communities of the past resisted the Desagüe, while contemporary Indigenous movements have organized against massive infrastructure works of a similar nature. Likewise, ideas for reconstituting Mexico City’s lakes and other affected environments abound, even if they are often

ignored or considered useless. Thus, as a writing practice, “desedimentation” similarly implies uncovering these other geological traces, using writing to follow these alternate—but living—histories from the past to the present to the diverging futures they foretell. It is in this sense that “desedimentation” evokes the momentous undertaking that the *New Grammars* series presents in its subtitle: the task of “imagining other worlds.”

In light of this, and by way of conclusion, I want to add a final waterwork to Rivera Garza’s constellation of “geological writing” in Latin America, which already includes authors like the Argentine writers Selva Almada and Gabriela Cabezón Cámara. My contribution is the post-apocalyptic novel *Las puertas del reino* (The Doors of the Kingdom, 2005) by Mexican writer Héctor Toledano.

For me, Toledano’s novel takes *Revueltas* one step further, showing us a glimpse of what comes after the end of the modern world. Following a period of intense violence, Mexico has disappeared. A series of small communities called “the warp” live here and there. The warp has developed a simple lifestyle, leaving most technology behind (including writing). It also venerates nature, particularly water. It conceives of existence as a constant overflowing and forbids capturing or diverting water in any way. Even the concept of a dam, the narrator says at one point, is considered a grave blasphemy.

And so, the lakes surrounding Mexico City have reappeared, flooding the abandoned megalopolis once again. Aurelio, a man who remembers the past, is trying to deal with this new life, adapting and resisting at the same time. He guides the reader through a landscape in which our present stands as the geological past of a strange new world, born after the previous one plotted its own extinction.

At an event for CLAS in December 2021, Cristina Rivera Garza (top left) discusses her work with CLAS Chair Natalia Brizuela (top center) and Alfonso Fierro (top right) as well as Ilana Luna (bottom left) and Cheyla Samuelson, who have translated some of Rivera Garza’s work. (Image by CLAS.)



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Cristina Rivera Garza is an author, translator, and critic. She is a Distinguished Professor and Director of the Doctorate Program in Creative Writing at the University of Houston, a MacArthur Fellow 2020-25, and the recipient of the Premio José Donoso (Chile, 2021) and the Premio Nuevo León Alfonso Reyes (Mexico, 2021).

Deborah Meacham is the editor of the Berkeley Review of Latin American Studies.

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