

Breathing in Tandem: Notes on Co-Translating Cristina Rivera Garza's Poetry

By Ilana Luna and Cheyla Samuelson

Once again, we come together to be with our friend Cristina. We're ensconced in the woods above Lake Tahoe in a small cabin that, despite the recent Caldor fire, miraculously still stands in the scanty March snow pack. We pick up the now-familiar rhythms and resonances of her poetry. Cristina is actually far away—in Houston or some other point unknown—but in these texts, her presence is palpable. She is with us. In this parenthesis, we go to work.

We are Ilana Luna and Cheyla Samuelson, dear friends and colleagues who completed our doctoral studies in Hispanic languages and literatures at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where we first met the Mexican writer Cristina Rivera Garza. These days, we are both scholars of contemporary Mexican cultural production, Ilana as

Associate Professor of Spanish and Latin American Studies at Arizona State University, and Cheyla as Associate Professor of Spanish at San José State University. We have a long history of sharing professional and personal space, and our best work is done together, in communion with the natural world.

Translating Cristina Rivera Garza's poetry draws on our particular strengths: Ilana is an accomplished translator of Latin American poetry, and Cheyla is a long-time scholar of Rivera Garza's work. Together, we have developed a process of translating that respects the multiple valences of a poetic *corpus* characterized by a transgressive relationship with the rules and norms of language and an openly political engagement with the pressing issues of the day. To translate Rivera Garza is to read her deeply and to write alongside her.

Translation can be a messy and exhausting process.

(Photo courtesy of Ilana Luna and Cheyla Samuelson.)

Cristina Rivera Garza: Writer, Theorist, Poet

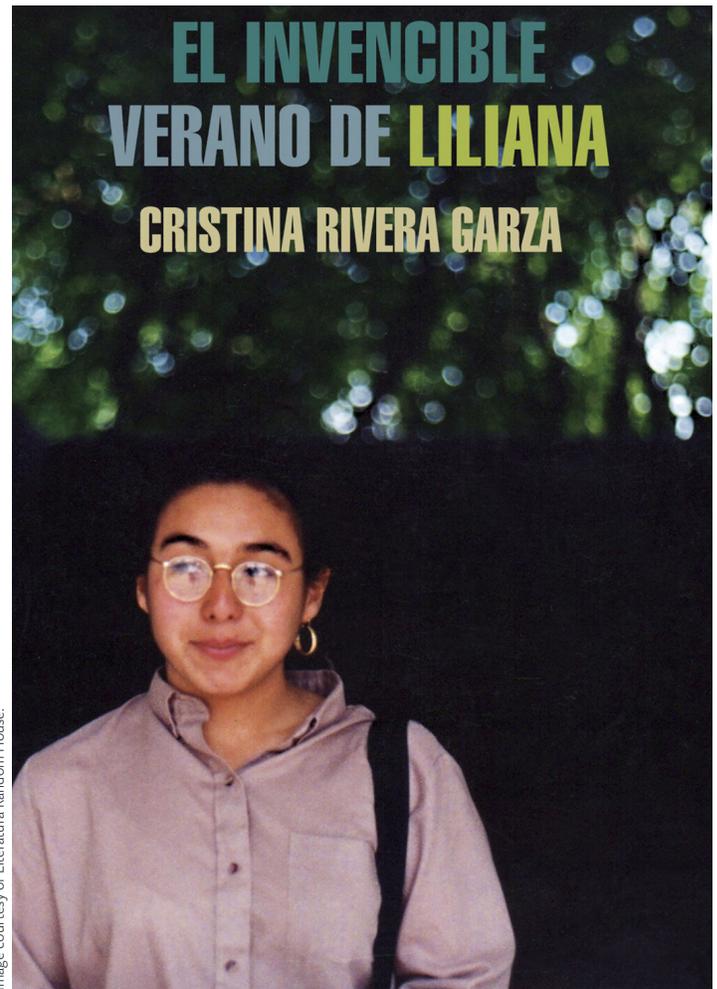
Cristina Rivera Garza (b. 1964, Tamaulipas, Mexico) is perhaps the most influential Mexican writer of her generation. Recent English translations of her novels, short stories, and essays have brought her to the attention of readers in the anglophone world (*Ed. note: See the sidebar for a partial list*). Her most recent cross-genre work *El invencible verano de Liliana* (2021a) is slated for publication in 2023 as *Liliana's Invincible Summer* (forthcoming), translated by the author herself.

A 2020 MacArthur fellowship and glowing write-ups in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and other publications in English underscore the uncannily lyrical beauty of her work as well as its political urgency. Her creation and leadership of the doctoral program in creative writing in Spanish at the University of Houston—the first program of its kind in the United States—speaks to her commitment to social transformation in the context of the changing demographics and literary practices of this country, home to the second-largest population of Spanish speakers in the world (after Mexico).

Rivera Garza has been recognized with many artistic residencies, grants, and literary awards, including the Prix Roger Caillois de littérature latino-américaine (France, 2013), the Premio Excelencia en las Letras José Emilio Pacheco (Mexico, 2016), and the Premio Iberoamericano de Letras José Donoso (Chile, 2021). She is the only writer to have twice won the prestigious Premio de Literatura Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz for women writers in the Spanish-speaking world (Mexico, 2001, 2009). Her work has clearly achieved the global recognition that will make her an acknowledged author in the pantheon of what we call—for want of a better term—World Literature.

Rivera Garza's work has long been taught in Spanish programs in the United States. Her 1999 novel *Nadie me verá llorar*—published in English as *No One Will See Me Cry* (2004)—is acknowledged as one of the great masterpieces of Mexican literature and represents a subversive undoing of the canonical *Novela de la Revolución*, a genre infamous for its heteropatriarchal nationalism. Through the use of archival materials and other found texts, Rivera Garza's mode of writing enters into a nuanced engagement with literary tradition, a conscious “making strange” of language and an ethical commitment to the dispossessed. This mode of writing is both consistent and flexible across her *oeuvre* and appears in her poetry as an experimental playfulness that couples at times with a profound sense of outrage over the myriad types of violence and injustice suffered by the people of her home country and immigrants in this one.

In Mexico, Rivera Garza's early reception was mixed, with some critics distrustful of her experimental, cosmopolitan style and her openness to influences beyond a national



The cover of *El invencible verano de Liliana*, forthcoming in English.

Cristina Rivera Garza in Translation

- No One Will See Me Cry* translated by Andrew Hurley (Curbstone Books, 2004)
- The Iliac Crest* translated by Sarah Booker (Feminist Press, 2017)
- The Taiga Syndrome* translated by Jill Levine and Aviva Kana (Dorothy, A Publishing Project, 2018)
- Grieving: Dispatches from a Wounded Country* translated by Sarah Booker (Feminist Press, 2020)
- The Restless Dead: Necrowriting and Disappropriation* translated by Robin Meyers (Vanderbilt University Press, 2020)
- New and Selected Stories* translated by Sarah Booker, Francisca González Arias, Lisa Dillman, Cristina Rivera Garza, and Alex Ross (Dorothy, A Publishing Project, 2021)

tradition dominated by masculinist and nepotistic cultural industries. Although in contemporary Mexican circles Rivera Garza is now acknowledged for her contributions to national letters, she is still a polemical writer as she continues to challenge existing modes of writing and the biases of the literary establishment, while also signaling the hypocrisy of the political class. The incorporation of wide-ranging



Photo by Marta Calvo.

Cristina Rivera Garza.

erudite philosophical and theoretical works into her texts means that reading her is often a heady experience, one enhanced by an awareness of the ongoing debates about the ethics of authority and representation, biopolitics, and the imperatives of what French philosopher Jean Luc Nancy describes as our “being in common” (cited in Rivera Garza, 2020c, p. 18). This “thinking alongside” theorists like Jean Luc Nancy, Judith Butler, Achille Mbembe, Adrianna Caverero, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—writers who share Rivera Garza’s concerns about how we are to live humanely under the current realities of neoliberal capitalism and necropolitics—is tempered by the specificity of her identity as a Latin American author who also writes in conversation with thinkers like the feminist scholar Rita Laura Segato or Mixe anthropologist Floriberto Díaz.

Rivera Garza’s alert attention to these writers and scholars and the urgency of the contemporary political and social situation in Mexico has compelled her to devise her own theoretical frameworks to understand and address the crisis that intensified during Felipe Calderón’s presidential term (2006–2012). The war being waged against Mexico’s drug cartels unleashed a horrific wave of violence on the civilian populace that continues to this day. Under this avalanche of mass death and forced disappearances, she confronts circumstances similar to those that led German philosopher Theodor Adorno to question the legitimacy of writing in the face of atrocity. Rivera Garza asks:

What does it mean to write, today, in such a context? What are the challenges for writing, when professional precariousness and gruesome deaths are the stuff of everyday life? Which aesthetic and ethical dialogues does the act of writing hurl us into when we are quite literally surrounded by corpses? [...] If writing is supposed to

critique the status quo, then how is it possible—through writing and with writing—to dissociate the grammar of predatory power from aggravated neoliberalism and its deadly war machines? (Rivera Garza, 2020c, p. 2)

Faced with this impossible situation, Rivera Garza searches for a way forward in her writing that feels true to her own experience of unredressed loss and also takes part in the collective grief of her nation. Her book *Dolerse* (Rivera Garza, 2011a/*Grieving*, 2020a) gives rise to a response: in *ConDolerse* (Aguilar Gil et al., 2015), several authors share their grief together, thus moving beyond mere empathy to collective action.

As developed in *Los muertos indóciles. Necroescrituras y desappropriación* (2013a/*The Restless Dead: Necrowriting and Disappropriation*, 2020c), Rivera Garza’s concept of “disappropriation” draws on Floriberto Díaz’s description of the Mixe concept of *tequio*—the obligatory sharing of labor in a community predicated on mutual care and the protection of the common good (Rivera Garza, 2020c, p. 47). She addresses the longstanding ethical problem of literary appropriation by developing an alternate form of writing that:

Unlike the paternalistic “giving voice to the voiceless” promoted by certain imperial subjectivities, and unlike the naive putting of oneself into another’s shoes, [...] incorporate[s] those shoes and those others into the materiality of a text. Writing always involves a co-authorship; the result is always a text-in-common. (Rivera Garza, 2020c, p. 5)

This ethical mode of writing has been taken up by others, with works like Sara Uribe’s *Antígona González* (2012/2016) showing the traces of Rivera Garza’s influence.

In *Dolerse* (2011a), Rivera Garza's documentary poem "La reclamante"—"The Claimant" in *Grieving* (2020a)—offers a demonstration of these disappropriative strategies that are both ethical and aesthetic. The poem explicitly combines the words of Luz María Dávila—an outraged and grieving mother who eloquently rebuts President Calderón's disparaging comments about the death of her sons in the 2010 San Villas de Salvárcar massacre—with those of journalist Sandra Rodríguez Nieto, modernist poet Ramón López Velarde's famous "Suave Patria" (1921/"Gentle Homeland," 2013), and Rivera Garza, herself. This procedure creates a compelling text that graphically "shows its seams" and also hits the listener like a blow to the chest. The juxtaposition of the patriotic and literary "Suave Patria" with the terse language of journalism and the anguished words of a mother in grief serves as an indictment of the cynicism and corruption of the Mexican state and the impunity that destroys the public's faith in the possibility of justice. In "The Claimant," we see a keen example of how Rivera Garza's poetics are part of a larger ethical and aesthetic project that is consistent across her diverse body of work.

Rivera Garza's writing practice has included poetry from her earliest efforts, and although her narrative and essayistic work has received the most translation and critical attention to date, it is telling that her very first literary prize was the Premio de Poesía Punto de Partida (Mexico, 1984). Her first collection of poetry, *La más mía* (1998) was later absorbed as the first book of the triptych *Los textos del yo* (2005). She subsequently published *La muerte me da* (2007) under the pseudonym of Anne-Marie Bianco, as a corollary to the novel by the same title published in the same year.

Rivera Garza's poetry has been little-translated prior to our 2022 publication of seven poems in translation in *Lana Turner Journal*. (Ed. note: See sidebars for these and other notable exceptions, as well as more Spanish-language poetry by Rivera Garza.)

In a very real sense, Rivera Garza's writing has always been poetic, the materiality of her language always foregrounded. Her prose employs many of the same linguistic usages and themes that characterize her poetry, and in fact, we often see in her poetry a key to a deeper understanding of her body of work, writ large. Critics like Roberto Cruz Arzabal focus on the unique combination of experimental poetics with a rootedness in the body that typifies Rivera Garza's unsettling poems (Cruz Arzabal, 2019). As we work through our translations, we find traces of Oulipian Conceptualism, the Formalist experiments of the LANGUAGE poets, and documentary poetry, with its commitment to archival research and its activist stance. The challenge and the joy of translating Rivera Garza resides in the densely layered nature of her texts, and our task—as we see it—is to reinvent density and polyvalence in a new English text.

Más Poesía de Cristina Rivera Garza

El disco de Newton: Diez ensayos sobre el color (Bonobos, 2011b)

Viriditas (Mantis Editores, 2011)

La imaginación pública (Conaculta, 2015)

La fractura exacta. Poesía completa (Libros del Cardo, 2020)

Cristina Rivera Garza's Poetry in Translation

"Third World"

translated by Jen Hofer, in *Sin puertas visibles. An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry by Mexican Women* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003) and in *The Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (Oxford University Press, 2009)

"To Clear"

translated by José Antonio Villarán (*Make Literary Magazine*, no. 14, 2013)

"The Claimant"

"Horrorism"

"Keep Writing"

translated by Sarah Booker, in *Grieving* (Feminist Press, 2020)

"The Dream is a Noun"

"Medicine"

"Not Terrorized No"

"The Third Stop"

"Thrashing"

"To Dream is a Verb"

"The Víctima is Always Feminine"

translated by Ilana Luna and Cheyla Samuelson (*Lana Turner Journal of Poetry and Opinion*, no. 14, 2022)

On Our Process of Co-Translation

The poem we have chosen to share here comes from Rivera Garza's latest published collection of poetry, *La imaginación pública* (2015), which we are translating together as *The Imagination of the Commons* (manuscript in preparation). We have found a special synergy in concentrated bursts of togetherness, often in the mountains or near bodies of water. We share this affinity for nature with Cristina, and when the three of us are together, we go to the water, walk in the woods, hike the foothills.

Our process of co-translation involves active and lively debate predicated on mutual respect and trust. We have discovered that to collaborate, we must give time and space to the multiplicity of meanings that Rivera Garza's poems

present, so we begin by confronting the text alone. Once we have both individually rendered the poem into English, we come back together and read our own words against one another's and against the source text. At this point, the fun begins. We often make the same choices, but sometimes, our texts vary widely. With each "problem," we see opportunities to hone, to interrogate, and to make the case for resonances with other texts, both Rivera Garza's and those that appear to peek out from the interstices. Eventually, we let the text rest, only to return to adjust, to rethink, to rewrite. For Rivera Garza, the text is never finished, always open, and in our translation process, this is also the case. Our goal is to create a new poem that is true to the impact of the original while also standing on its own as a poem in English. It's like a breathing in tandem, adjusting our breath to hers until we feel it's right.

We take her disappropriative mode of writing-in-community as an invitation to playfulness and flexibility, as well as responsibility and respect for the other. The epiphanies that arrive often come long after we have purportedly finished, like our choice in the following verse from "la tercera parada" in *Los textos del yo* (2005)/"The Third Stop," (2022d). The word "acorazados" referred to people, presumably armored or iron-clad, but it didn't quite sit right in our first pass. As we were resting halfway up a mountain in Sedona, the idea of "forged-in-fire" arose as we bounced words about, gazing out over the red rock-studded landscape, struggling to recuperate the alliterative sounds of "furibundos" and "feministas" in our English rendering:

Y los furibundos, las feministas, los acorazados
encontrarán consuelo bajo los árboles
transparentes de sus propias manos.

And the incensed, the feminists, the forged-in-fire,
will find solace beneath the transparent
trees of their own hands.

As translators, we are always attending to sound and meaning, rhythm and affective impact. The vast variability in Rivera Garza's poetic *corpus* requires us to be willing to participate in experimental language games, to chase ideas down the rabbit holes of theory, philosophy, and science, to tease out intertextuality, and to write from a place of resonance rather than certainty.

In this issue of the Berkeley Review, we share a poem that we have provisionally entitled [THE SOUND]. In choosing this poem, we looked for a short piece that would offer a glimpse into Rivera Garza's poetic ethos and aesthetics. The poem is made up of the vibrations of sound and memory; it moves between registers, opening to the scientific, widening to make space for remembered conversation, and revealing a lyrical "I" that teeters, but does not fall, on the edge of coherence and consciousness.

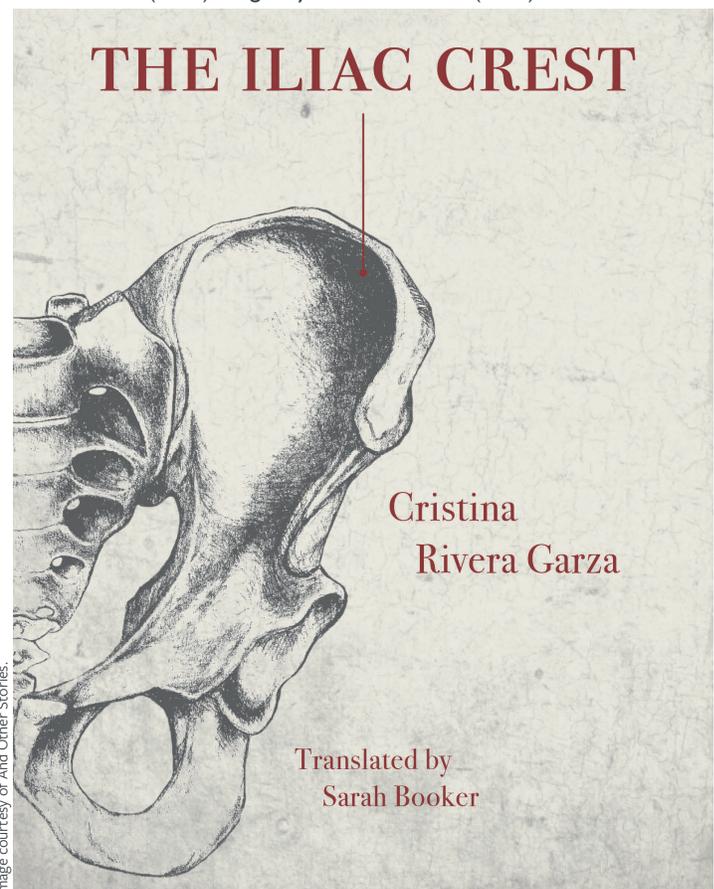
In Rivera Garza's texts, certain words are overdetermined with meaning and referentiality. Readers familiar with Rivera Garza's narrative will pause on the phrase "se zambulleron en el agua" (they plunged into the water) in which they will find resonances with the "primera invitación" that serves as an epigraph to her novel *La cresta de ilión* (2002)/*The Iliac Crest* (2017), which cites the late Mexican writer Amparo Dávila's short story "El patio cuadrado" (1977)/"The Square Patio" (2015).

In Dávila's surreal and fragmented text, a lone woman seeks entry into the masculine world of book learning, but she is horrifically stymied and destroyed at every pass. The final moments of the text find her disregarding the male gatekeeper's prohibitions by diving into a pool in which she can see the sacred and canonical books sunk to the bottom. Her defiant and joyful plunge changes to horror as she realizes that the books are constantly receding, just out of her reach, and her desperate attempt to resurface finds her bumping up against the lid of what seems to be a giant sarcophagus. In Dávila's texts, female lives are often depicted as stifled and terrifying, expressing through the genre of the fantastic the repressive realities of mid-century Mexican womanhood, true especially for a woman with literary aspirations.

In a real-world context, Rivera Garza's novel inspired a rediscovery of Amparo Dávila's work. Before the publication of *La cresta de Ilión* (Rivera Garza, 2002), Dávila's out-of-print

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The Iliac Crest (2017), originally *La cresta de ilión* (2002).



[EL SONIDO humanamente audible] [ondas sonoras] [oscilaciones de la presión del aire] [ondas mecánicas en el oído humano] [percibidas por el cerebro].

El mensaje fue un sonido. Una especie de murmullo o de canto.

“Pasaron por aquí. Las dos pasaron por aquí. Me preguntaron por mi pipa y, sin esperar respuesta, se zambulleron en el agua. Algo vieron allá abajo porque regresaron maravilladas. El silencio es a veces así. Luego se fueron tal como llegaron, escondiéndose apenas tras los oyameles, cuchicheando con su sombra. Los pasos: pequeñísimos. Su manera de levitar y de reír. Ya no supe más.”

Es el viento, me dije. Es la falta de oxígeno y el mareo que provoca la altitud, me dije. Pero todo mundo sabe que la propagación del sonido involucra el transporte de la energía sin el transporte de la materia—esas ondas mecánicas que se propagan a través de estados sólidos, estados líquidos, estados gaseosos. Estas mecánicas. Estas ondas.

– Cristina Rivera Garza
La imaginación pública (Conaculta, 2014)

[THE SOUND humanly audible] [sound waves] [oscillations in air pressure] [mechanical vibrations in the human ear] [perceived by the brain].

The message was a sound. A kind of murmuring or chant.

“They came through here. Both women came through. They asked about my pipe and, without waiting for a reply, they plunged into the water. They must have seen something down there because they came back up astonished. Silence is that way sometimes. Then they left, just like they had come, cloaking themselves among the sacred firs, whispering with their shadows. Their footsteps: infinitesimal. Their way of levitating and of laughing. That was the last I heard.”

It's just the wind I told myself. It's the lack of oxygen and the vertigo induced by altitude, I said. But everybody knows that the propagation of sound involves the transfer of energy without the transfer of matter—those mechanical vibrations that propagate across solid states, liquid states, gaseous states. These mechanics. These waves.

– Cristina Rivera Garza
(Translated by Ilana Luna and Cheyla Samuelson)

A forest runs down to a lake.
(Photo by Redd Angelo.)

texts were close to impossible to find, an erasure that the themes of Dávila's own texts ironically presaged. The extensive disappropriative intertextual conversation with Dávila's work in Rivera Garza's novel—including excerpts from her stories and the depiction of Amparo Dávila herself as a fascinating multitudinous character—revived interest in Dávila's texts.

This renewed attention culminated in the publication of Dávila's collected works in Spanish as *Cuentos reunidos* (2009). Subsequent to the publication of *The Iliac Crest* (Rivera Garza, 2017), we see the first version of Dávila's stories in English: *The Houseguest and Other Stories* (2018). In this way, Simone de Beauvoir's question of "what can literature do?" is answered: if writing is action, it can right the historic wrongs of erasure that typify the literary canon and materially impact the machines of cultural production. Likewise, it can find a killer, as in the case of *El invencible verano de Liliana*, Rivera Garza's archival narrative about her sister's life and murder, which resulted in locating Liliana's fugitive killer, 30 years after the fact (Russell, 2022.) In this way, Rivera Garza shows us how literature can matter and shares tools to that end.

Returning to our translation of [THE SOUND], we find clear resonances with Dávila's female character and her desperate plunge into water, but now there are two, and instead of suffocation, they find wonder at the bottom of the pool. They keep their revelation to themselves, and "cloaking themselves among the sacred firs," they elude the observer, "whispering with their shadows [...] levitating [and] laughing." In this doubling of the female character, we identify Rivera Garza's commitment to solidarity and her desire to rewrite the lonely narrative of the female writer and scholar. With their conspiring and their tiny footsteps, these characters also harken to Rivera Garza's ludic and enigmatic imagining of "Las Aventuras de las Increíblemente Pequeñas Forajidas," tiny fugitive female characters who appear and reappear in her narrative and poetry as well as in the blog *No hay tal lugar: U-tópicos contemporáneos* and in her innovative multimedia works, like photonovels hosted online.

However, from the perspective of the lyrical "I" in the poem, the women are lost, and the poem is about the search. In the context of Mexico's ongoing crisis of disappearances and femicide, the emotional resonance of a seeker haunted by traces of the now long-absent comes into sharp focus. In [THE SOUND], the contemplation of dry scientific fact—the way sound propagates through different mediums—becomes a way to talk about the agentic qualities of bodies *in absentia*. The listener receives the vibrations of sound as pure energy emanating from bodies that are no longer materially in the frame. In her discussion of what she calls "tragic agency," Rivera Garza explores how agency can be exercised by the most vulnerable subjects, even by the dead (2020a, pp. 38-41). In Mexico, the concrete example of the collective

Madres Buscadoras—searching mothers who defy threats and governmental indifference to carry out their search for missing children—provides a vision of this agency.

As translators, we see all these possible valences in the poetry, and we seek to leave room for them to breathe in our renderings. Cristina Rivera Garza's poetry in translation is an invitation to the English-speaking world to discover this unique and powerful writer. We are honored to participate in this process of co-creative rewriting, and we look forward to the publication of these translated collections.

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Cheyly Samuelson is Associate Professor of Spanish at San José State University. A long-time scholar of Rivera Garza's work, she recently published an interview with Rivera Garza and translator Robin Meyers (*ASAP Journal*, October 15, 2020).

Cristina Rivera Garza is Distinguished Professor in Hispanic Studies and the Director of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston. She is an award-winning author of six novels, three non-fiction books, three collections of short stories, and five collections of poetry.

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

Cheyly Samuelson (left) and Ilana Luna.



Photo courtesy of Ilana Luna and Cheyly Samuelson.

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