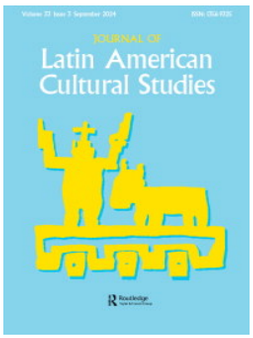

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Claire Lindsay

"QUEER ERRANTRY" IN THE WORK OF CRISTINA RIVERA GARZA

In this essay I consider two books by the Mexican writer Cristina Rivera Garza – Había mucha neblina o humo o no sé qué *(2016) [There Was a Lot of Fog or Smoke or I Don't Know What] and* Autobiografía del algodón *(2020) [Autobiography of Cotton] which conjugate journeys to sites in Mexico where agricultural and industrial labour played a critical role in the country's post-revolutionary reconstruction. I illustrate how these works not only spotlight the long-term effects of dispossession, transnational migration, and "slow violence" but also articulate an epistemology of what I call "queer errantry". Drawing on ideas from Edouard Glissant, Anna Arabindan-Kesson, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Sara Ahmed, I argue that, in the context of significant environmental and gender violence in Mexico and its "visceraless" state, for Rivera Garza travel and pedestrianism function as acts of relation, forms of reckoning with the rapid acceleration of capitalist modernity. As a way of reading and representing the world, "queer errantry", I suggest, comprises a decolonial feminist praxis of orientation and remembrance.*

Keywords: Cristina Rivera Garza; decolonial; environmental violence; errantry; feminism; queer

> Someone was here, where I am: and someone else will be here after my stay. The reasons for that absence are the very thing of politics; the reasons for the presence are the very thing of ethics.
>
> Cristina Rivera Garza, *Grieving: Dispatches from a Wounded Country* (2020a, 146)[1]

> Longing produces modes of both belonging and "being long", or persisting over time.
>
> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010, 13)

There is a long-standing but curiously under-studied connection between travel and work. In the global north, they have often been seen in oppositional terms: in short, travel, as a form of leisure/tourism, provides respite from work and routine. Yet the etymology of the word "travel", with its roots in travail, speaks of a more fundamental, ancient, attachment – travel as a form of labour. In the transition from industrial to modern society, the two have become mutually

constitutive. Indeed, as MacCannell (1999, 6) observes in *The Tourist*, work has even become a touristic fetish in diverse forms of museumisation, spectacle, or amusement where it has been transformed into cultural productions that allow modern workers "to apprehend [it] as part of a meaningful totality". In what follows, I am less interested than MacCannell in the ways in which "tourism makes an attraction of the relationship of man and his work" (1999, 120). Rather, my concern is with the convergence of travel and work in two volumes by Mexican writer Cristina Rivera Garza that document the role of paid and manual forms of labour in agriculture and industry in processes at the heart of the country's post-revolutionary reconstruction. Notwithstanding Rivera Garza's avowal that there are only two essential literary categories (the book and loose notes) and her evident preference for generic indeterminacy, journeys have underpinned many of her publications of the last decade or more, including the two books selected for discussion here.[2] Yet, *Había mucha neblina o humo o no sé qué* (2016) [There Was a Lot of Fog or Smoke or I Don't Know What] and *Autobiografía del algodón* (2020) [Autobiography of Cotton], as much as they deal with the Mexican author's perennial concerns of gender, nation, and genre, to some extent remain outliers in her *oeuvre*. This is not only due to the degree and form of their engagement with those historical processes just mentioned – the result of substantial archival research that materialises in various forms within the books themselves – but also because in them travel and travail coincide with particular conceptual and ethical potency. In what follows, drawing on ideas from Edouard Glissant, Anna Arabindan-Kesson, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Sara Ahmed, I will argue that these works correspond suggestively in their depiction of the long-term effects of dispossession, transnational migration, and "slow violence" in Mexico and in their shared expression of what I call "queer errantry".[3] Where in *Había mucha neblina o humo o no sé qué* [There Was a Lot of Fog or Smoke or I Don't Know What] this is most obviously but not exclusively attached to the journeys of Juan Rulfo as a jobbing writer in the country's Indigenous south, in *Autobiografía del algodón* [Autobiography of Cotton] it comprises a partial reinterpretation of *mestiza* consciousness in the Mexico/US borderlands. In both works, I maintain, Rivera Garza's "queer errantry" is effortful, vital, and proffered as a riposte to the "visceraless" state (Rivera Garza 2020a): a way of reading (and representing) the world that constitutes a decolonial feminist praxis of orientation and remembrance.[4] It is, moreover, as much a matter of poetics as it is of politics, for, as Glissant (1997, 18) insists of his influential notion of Relation, [it] "always infers that at some moment it is told"; and in Rivera Garza's work "queer errantry" entails both temporal *and* phenomenological deviations. The following discussion of these is organised into two sections, one on each of the works, in reverse order of their publication dates.

Discrepant temporalities and *mestiza* inheritance in *Autobiografía del algodón*

Autobiografía del algodón is a history of the Mexico/US borderlands after they became the epicentre of international cotton production. This region, notwithstanding its unsuitability for agriculture, saw a huge expansion in cotton farming particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century, the age of "white gold"

(Walsh 2008, 5).[5] Transnational migration reordered power and physically reshaped the natural environment there, transforming Mexico's north-eastern frontier into the western edge of the southern United States. In the 1920s and 1930s there were acute tensions in commercial cotton society, including ideological conflicts between landless sharecroppers and landowners and, under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, a massive programme of agrarian reform as people and production were reorganised in lands south of the Río Bravo/Río Grande. Major engineering and irrigation feats such as the construction of waterworks designed to turn the desert into arable land were also realised then and are documented in Rivera Garza's book, using a method she aptly calls "desedimentation", a process that scrutinises the geological traces left by social and historical processes in a given place.[6] *Autobiografía* . . . , a conjunction of archival research and fictional creation, is interwoven with narrative and visual reproductions of historical documents and other sources relating to that period, including letters, telegrams, and photographs, inter alia. Notwithstanding its post-anthropocentric title, the book's regional history of cotton farming is framed through an affecting narrative about the lives of the author's grandparents, José María Rivera Doña and Petra Peña. At its start, they encounter the writer José Revueltas, sent to the region by the Communist Party because of a 1934 strike by thousands of agricultural workers (which Revueltas would go on to write about in his 1943 novel *El luto humano*, the working title of which was *Las huellas habitadas*). *Autobiografía del algodón* features other historical figures such as Cárdenas and chief state engineer Eduardo Chávez, who directed construction of the region's irrigation and flood control works. As Rivera Garza describes it, her book is "the story of how a humble and powerful plant transformed the lives of so many people, entire communities, even the climate itself. The story of how, even before birth, cotton formed me" (Rivera Garza 2020b, 292).[7] What she calls her grandparents "errancia" (wandering or errantry, 2020b, 42) across Mexico's northern states and the border is propelled not only by employment but critically also by environmental poverty, in their case the loss of a child to dysentery at a Zacatecas mine from where they are driven north, one of several premature infant deaths in their family. Forfeiture of a permanent home is perpetuated when, following the strike, flooding devastates the new settlement, leading them to embark once again on what Rivera Garza denominates "a strange emigration". Indeed, the effects of myriad losses and environmental deprivation are felt traumatically in the present too, in the region's exploitation by the fracking industry and drug cartels alike: "the cotton lands are now lands of blood and torture, lands of open air tombs, lands where the disappeared are sown and impunity, disgrace and oblivion are harvested" (2020b, 295).

In this binational delta region travel comprises historically determined collective journeys of repetition and repatriation, in circular patterns of south-north-north-south migration which oblige the author at various junctures of the text to self-correct her own use of verbs such as return (retornar) and arrive (llegar). Rivera Garza, who as "from northern Mexico and errant at the same time" (Rivera Garza 2018a, inside flyleaf) has lived and worked on either side of the Mexico-US border, traces a genealogy of this displacement to the practice of a kind of posthuman nomadism by itinerant Indigenous predecessors, the Guachichiles. Both the refusal to bury their dead and the

propensity to carry their ashes in leather waist bags wherever they went enabled the Guachichiles to "not be obliged to return" (2020b, 155), ensuring that "their dead continued moving. Travelling. Fading" (2020b, 107–8). Such a spectral expression of errantry finds a correlate in Rivera Garza's own quest to follow in their footsteps, for, as she puts it in the book's opening section, "We approach the past and the present at the same time" (2020b, 31). If human and non-human loss and absence beset the histories of both her family and the region, Rivera Garza is equally mindful of the injurious possibilities of her own journey in their footsteps and in this terrain. Her expression of this reformulates an emblematic modernist disavowal of national identity:

> We've got to remember that we are two women on a highway that crosses the plain (…). In effect, two women alone. Two women without a State, without an army, perhaps without a country. (2020b, 35)

Yet, Rivera Garza also characterises her genealogical pursuit as an act of remembrance and conviviality, as a basic need to recognise the self as part of a species. In this light, while acknowledging that nomadism might be "a form of desperation" (156), the Mexican author tenders wayfaring as "a form of fundamental complaint" (29), part of "a call to which one can only respond by moving places. Making yourself uncomfortable. Putting yourself at risk" (29). Here mobility, discomfort, and peril are the conditions of possibility for travel as an expression of social and environmental justice. In the face of territorial and symbolic attrition – the kind of slow violence described by Rob Nixon ("neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" [2011, 2]) – Rivera Garza's journey-making reciprocates with a fitting temporal reach, pace, and accumulation. That is, the Mexican author responds to the social, environmental, and human destruction she documents in these two works with a collective praxis characterised by the kind of extension and reserve identified in this essay's second epigraph. In doing so, her journeying in *Autobiografía …* becomes a reminder of the "persistent vitality of the numinous within modernity" (Nixon 2011, 63). In Nixon's thinking this is an idea that is largely related to toxic threat, but in *Autobiografía …* it constitutes an asynchronous, incorporeal and intergenerational expression of shared fortitude and knowledge. Remarkable in this respect is that Rivera Garza's anonymous, ancestral, or apocryphal co-travellers are ever present throughout this book in the author's preferred *nosotros* form of narrative voice. I contend that this choice of first person plural is just one of several "chronoqueer" dimensions of the Mexican writer's work in this (and other) published volume(s), where teleological progression and linear distinctions between past, present, and future are frequently and wilfully dissolved and/or dis-continued.

The five stylized plates that appear in *Autobiografía del algodón* articulate a visual form of this queer temporality. Rather than photographic souvenirs that attest to presence at different sites en route, these plates speak of absence, disappearance and environmental violence in the borderlands. Vega Sánchez Aparicio's diaphanous images of landscape and built environment (including the desert, a bridge, a dam) superimpose either two different forms of visual media (photography and what appears to be watercolour) or two representations of the same view: black-and-white close-ups over larger panoramas in a muted telluric colour palette. Abbreviated handwritten annotations reinforce captions in the surround of four of the five photographs. Overlaid on the second plate's

image of a bridge across a river, for example, announcing the word "work", is an enhanced black-and-white detail of a train with a caption ostensibly (but futilely) providing directions: "You need to cross the Río Salado to get to Camarón Station". The third image, an ironic encounter with the sublime, observes "nothing more beautiful" than the dam in the picture, which the caption characterises as "that old, solemn, and noble amphitheatre". The final plate – the most unalloyed and abstract of the five – is a black and gold digital screen print of a cotton plant. The colour to black and white ratio is reversed in different plates between close-ups and panoramas so that conventional chromatic encodings – of the indexicality of black and white, for instance, or the associations of colour photography with aestheticisation and modernity – are upturned as quickly as they are affirmed. Further, insofar as the close-ups are held in the fingers of a disembodied hand, these montages, which visualise the very handling and comparison of visual representations produced at different times, have a strong haptic quality. Fingers and hands invoke an inexorable corporeal presence, their position in the foreground, particularly in the second plate's cupped gesture, also recalling the present-day ubiquity of smartphone photography. Because the hands are disconnected from the body, the viewer is encouraged to focus on the images being held and to compare what is, and what is no longer, in view. The visible hands and annotations on the photographs symbolically (and self-reflexively) gesture to the degree of human intervention and alteration to which both the illustrations and the borderlands they depict have been subject (Figure 1).

These overdetermined pictures, in their assembly of analogue and digital technologies, draw attention to their status as volatile, "untimely" fabrications. That is, they invite the viewer to toggle between diverse kinds of visual media as well as different perspectives and temporalities. In that respect, I suggest that these plates resist – and place the viewer in a position to question – what Elizabeth Freeman calls chrononormativity. That timeline, explains Freeman, is measured by socio-economically "productive" moments recorded by the state (such as birth, marriage, and death), which represent "what it means to have a life at all", and organise individual human bodies towards maximum productivity. As such, the plates form part of the Mexican author's wider project of de-sedimentation in this work, other features of which are identified by Gaëlle Le Calvez House, who reminds us of the association with Revueltas's novel (to which I referred earlier) in her description of Rivera Garza's intermedial attempts in the volume to "convert evidence of the transit of life towards death (birth, marriage and death certificates) into inhabited traces [huellas habitadas]" (2021, n.p.).[8] Further, in a gesture that challenges normative chronological patterns, the plates stage and destabilise a form of visuality and temporality that is particular to the cotton complex and which Anna Arabindan-Kesson, in her work on Black bodies in that industry, calls "speculative vision". "Speculative vision", which was often materialised through environmental transformation, is "a way of seeing the natural world through the lens of profit" (2021, 8). Arabindan-Kesson elaborates:

> Cotton framed a sense of projection – based on a desire for profit – that was materialized in its production. Looking at cotton was to also look through space, across time, to look into the distance and see potential profit. (2021, 16)

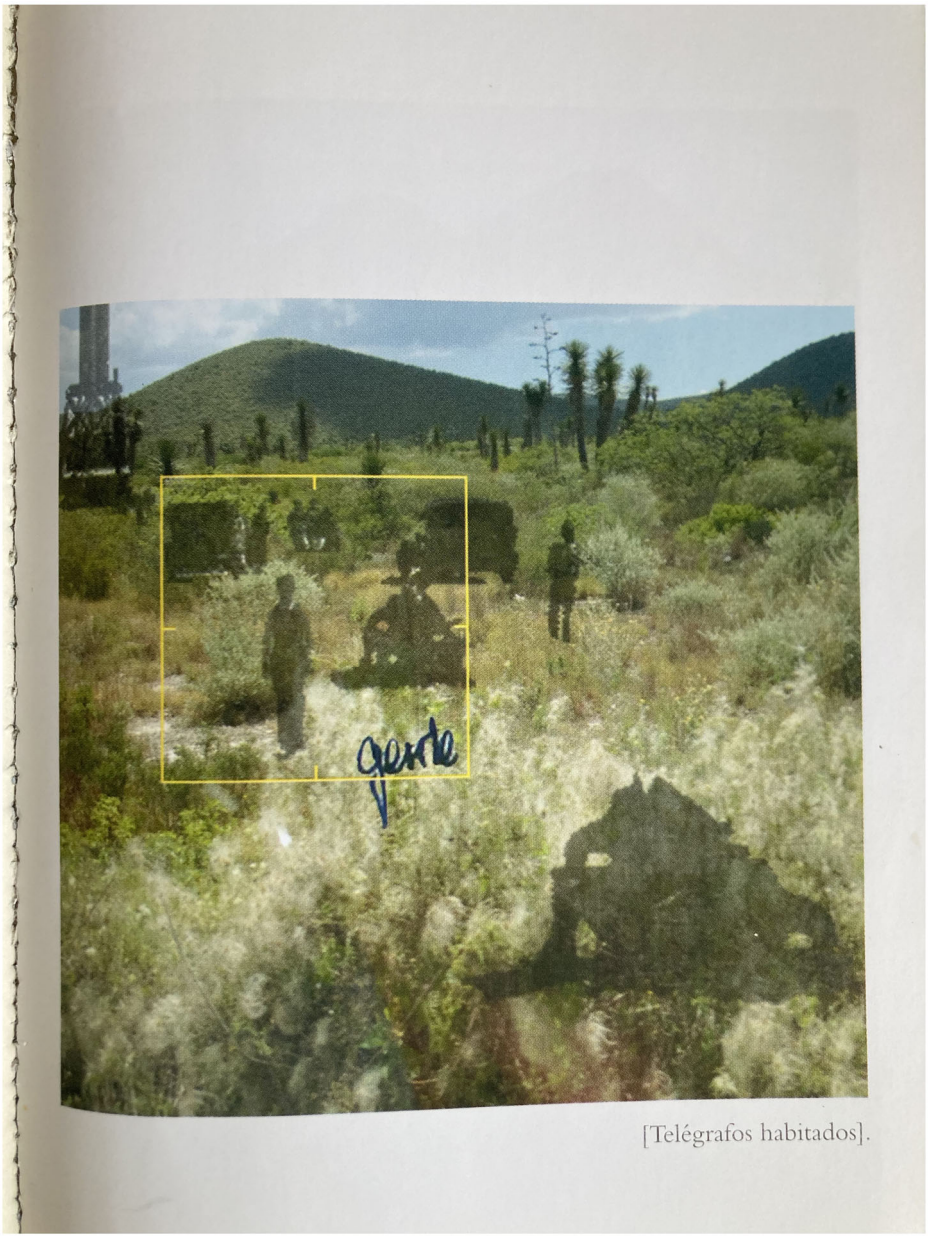

Figure 1. "Telégrafos habitados" by Vega Sánchez-Aparicio. From *Autobiografía del algodón* by Cristina Rivera-Garza. Reproduced with permission from Sánchez-Aparicio.

The plates in *Autobiografía del algodón* invoke this speculative act of "visual accounting" but in retrospective form. Where this typically relied on "processes of abstraction and the elision of the presence of labour, the role of bodies, and the value of physical work", Rivera Garza's composite, asynchronous images reanimate and reassert the presence of those features in multiple ways (Arabindan-Kesson 2021, 21). That human figures and the word "people" are sketched onto the first

of the plates of an otherwise "empty" borderlands landscape – populating a terrain from which workers and their settlements have long since been erased – is just one example. That phantasmal image, like the others, speaks to and disrupts the positionality of and power invested in a colonial gaze that ordinarily displaced Indigenous and Black peoples to anachronism, a typical racialising device in straight temporal logic that operated to "naturalis[e] unilinear evolutionism at the root of the colonial/modern divide" (Avila 2018, 717). Insofar as they articulate the co-presence of several socio-historical junctures in human and nonhuman lives in the region, the plates in *Autobiografía del algodón* [Autobiography of Cotton] comprise a visual means of contesting the straight, sequential time of cotton-capital.

In this respect the word Rivera Garza uses in this book to describe her grandparents' migration – "errancia" – has an atavistic but equally apposite tenor.[9] The term's critical role in Edouard Glissant's poetics of Relation, where, "in errantry one knows at every moment where one is – at every moment in relation to the other" is especially suggestive here (1997, xvi). Indeed, *Autobiografía del algodón* can be regarded in some ways in germane terms as those used by Glissant for whom "the tale of errantry is the tale of Relation" (18). For Rivera Garza, as for Glissant, journeys are not about aimless roaming, where one might get lost. Rather, as the semantic ambivalence of the word *huella* in Spanish indicates in the following passage, they are a route, a duty, a reckoning:

> La tarea más básica, la más honesta, la más difícil, consiste en identificar las huellas que nos acogen (…) la huella, sí, nos altera, obligándonos a reconocer la raíz plural de nuestros pasos y obligándonos también a cuestionar la ausencia que hace posibles a los nuestros en primera instancia. (91)
>
> [The most basic task, the most honest and difficult one, consists of identifying the footsteps that take us in (…) the track/trace transforms us, obliging us to recognise the multiple roots of our footsteps and also to question the absence that makes ours possible in the first place.]

Insofar as they take place in space, the footprints of a route or path are no less significant than other forms of material evidence of the past (such as, among other official documents reproduced by the author in the volume, her grandmother's identity card). While, as Rivera Garza concedes, "there is nothing left of my paternal grandparents (…) their way of migrating (…) remains": indeed, the migration denoted by the Spanish verb form "crossing", Rivera Garza writes elsewhere, is "an eternal gerund" (2020a, 145, 62). Sara Ahmed remarks that a path is made by "the repetition of the event of the ground being trodden upon (…) traces of feet that 'tread' and that in 'treading' create a line on the ground". They are one of the lines of motion and thought that direct us and they are performative: "we find our way and we know which direction we face only as an effect of work", Ahmed observes, "which is often hidden from view" (Ahmed 2008, 16). For Rivera Garza such tracks issue a precarious, paradoxical but generative invitation, crystallised in her choice of grammatical construction in Spanish in the quotation above, "las huellas que nos acogen" (the footsteps that receive us/take us in). That

formulation, to which this essay's first epigraph also alludes, denotes as much a kind of reception as a cue: "footsteps remind us of our status as guests and, with all probability, with spectacular frequency, our status as usurpers" (2020b, 91). Footsteps have a critical role in other works by the Mexican author, as we shall see in the next section.[10]

In the case of *Autobiografía* . . . , there is a particular feminist precedent at stake: Chicana queer activist Gloria Anzaldúa's ideas about *mestiza* consciousness from her 1987 work *Borderlands/La Frontera*. This "autohistoria" is a semi-autobiographical narrative of the author's upbringing in Brownsville (TX), regional history of the same borderlands that concern Rivera Garza, and feminist Chicana treatise. That Anzaldúa's *new mestiza* narrative documents her own grandmother's dispossession at the hands of Anglo agribusiness and provides a quotation for an epigraph to the third part of *Autobiografía* . . . – "We have a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks" – points to the cogency of the multi-layered affiliation between the two works and warrants a brief return to the ideas at source (Anzaldúa 1987, 33). Indeed, I submit that both Chicana and Mexican authors recast lived experiences occasioned by the emergence of the commercial cotton complex in like manner, enunciating a posthuman feminist epistemology akin to that of Braidotti (2017, 33), which rests on "an expanded relational vision of the self as a nomadic transversal assemblage engendered by the cumulative effect of multiple relational bonds". In the 1920s and 1930s, as a result of an increase in the number of immigrants displaced by the Mexican Revolution and attracted by new employment opportunities, a new rural social formation began to emerge in the Valle Bajo Río Bravo. There was a fundamental shift in the region from kin- or occupancy-based ownership to a new property regime, resting on sharecropping contracts. In effect, as Casey Walsh points out, this "embodied the transition from a (. . .) society organised around the kin relations of the original community of families to a more fragmented social formation that included *new groups* with *no genealogical connection* to those families" (emphasis added): in fact, it led to a new class of sharecroppers and tenants that became "a potentially radical force in the region" (Walsh 2008, 87). I suggest that Anzaldúa's and Rivera Garza's successive expressions of "queer" travel make a strategic ethical virtue out of that historical phenomenon of popular reorganisation, which was based on "revolutionary-period concepts of land reform and social justice" for the purposes of transformational coalition (Walsh 2008, 69).

In one of the chapters of the bilingual *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa considers the importance of retreat from oppressive norms at home. Her own departure is bound up in her avowed choice to be queer, but it is a departure that involves "taking with me the land, the Valley, Texas" (1987, 38). Anzaldúa decries the binary, reactive limitations of a counterstance to white, patriarchal conventions:

> At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, *we will have to leave the opposite bank*: the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed *so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and/eagle eyes*. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture (. . .) and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. *Or we might go another route*. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react. (1987, 100–101; emphasis added)

Queers, she goes on, are "supreme crossers of cultures (…) our role to link people with each other", "to transfer ideas and information from one culture to another" (1987, 106, 107). It is these properties of and potential in traversal, I suggest, that inform the subsequent expression of "queer" travel in *Autobiografía del algodón*, a word which, in *transfronteriza* fashion, Rivera Garza retains in English, rather than utilise any of the Spanish-language possibilities available.[11] On one level, the Anglophone italicised form in which the term "queer" appears in Rivera Garza's work speaks to its complex theoretical freight, not least in Latin America, signalling its ethnocentric strain and geo-historical provenance in the global north. It affirms at once the necessity for and redundancy of translation (the concomitant need to rethink a term that, however productive, cannot be appropriated in its entirety) and points to a particular geopolitics of knowledge that is called into question here (Falconí, Castellanos, and Viteri 2014, 11). As such, as well as its associated non-binary, anti-essentialist states of strangerness and divergence, it enunciates what Kaminsky (2008, 881) calls "its own strangeness, its ambivalent state". The word appears on numerous occasions, such as when Rivera Garza retraces the footsteps of her "family of travellers", whose perpetual peregrinations might be compared to the *mestiza*'s "psychic restlessness" (Anzaldúa 1987, 100), and describes one of the consequences being "forming another similar family: *queer*, nomadic, iconoclastic" (2020b, 29). She goes on:

> I suspect that many of the female border pioneers shared with Anzaldúa not only a territory and a job. Without the strength of their walking, without a shared determination (…) they would not have survived the inhospitable landscapes of the border. (214)

Deviation here – both in the sense of difference and displacement – is ontological, for Anzaldúa's paradigmatic *mestiza* has no country ("yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover"), but "holds tight to the earth" (Anzaldúa 1987, 102, 103). Anzaldúa's formulation of the serpent woman, a queerly gendered image, is also put to use in *Autobiografía del algodón*. This key facet of *Borderlands/La Frontera* rests on that animal's importance in pre-Columbian America as a feminine, sexualised symbol of the Earth, "the basis of all energy and life" (1987, 57). "To live on the cotton frontier", Rivera Garza suggests, "a woman needed a serpent at her side" (2020b, 211). Indeed, if Anzaldúa was in her estimation "rebellious, stubborn, queer", Rivera Garza characterises her grandmother Petra as "mestiza de algodón" [a cotton mestiza] on the basis of her "volatile, hard, surly character", propensities bequeathed in turn to her granddaughter ("Perhaps for this reason I went in search of her", she avers, [214, 215]).[12] The Mexican author, who, as this essay's first epigraph indicates, is attuned to absences, has been critical in *Autobiografía …* and elsewhere of the erasure of Indigenous presence in the very concept of *mestizaje*. Nevertheless her 2020 volume, like Anzaldúa's, is largely silent on the issue of Black lives, geographies, and histories in the Mexico-US borderlands, notwithstanding their foundational importance in the genesis of the book, to that region and to Latinx geographies more broadly.[13] I pursue the complex question of kinship further in the next section.

Pedestrianism and posthuman kinship in *Había mucha neblina o humo o no sé qué*

Había mucha neblina o humo o no sé qué, like *Autobiografía del algodón* a composite multi-layered volume of narrative and visual texts, retraces the journeys of writer Juan Rulfo as a travelling salesman (a peripatetic form of employment that, for Walchester [2020, 162], is always already "dubious and unsettling").[14] Although this book reimagines key figures and parts of his literary output, and takes its gnomic title from his landmark 1955 novel *Pedro Páramo*, *Había mucha neblina …* is not about Rulfo's literary life or creative production. Rather, it focuses on the period of his career working both for motor tyre company Goodrich Euzkadi and as an employee of the Papaloapan Commission in Oaxaca, a body that played a pivotal role in that southern, largely Indigenous state's "modernisation" in the mid-twentieth century. Rivera Garza claims that one of her principal concerns in this book is to inquire further into a claim Rulfo made in an interview to the effect that "the reality is that I work" (2016, 85). *Había mucha neblina …*, then, is a portrait of the artist as traveller in service of state and commerce, where the acclaimed Rulfo is as much an operative agent as a beneficiary of that rampant and extractive period of modernity known as the Mexican miracle. The words of the book's title derive from a scene in *Pedro Páramo* in which the ghost of Miguel Páramo, wayward son of the novel's irascible protagonist, testifies to his own demise and to multiple forms of dis-orientation. In that regard, the title of Rivera Garza's volume announces the same digressive, discordant errantry articulated throughout the book.

Había mucha neblina … is part history of the development of tourism during Mexico's "miracle", part imaginative-historical reconstruction and rewriting of Rulfo's migration from rural NW Jalisco to Mexico City. It includes excerpts from and reworkings of Rulfo's works *Pedro Páramo* and *El llano en llamas* (1953) [*The Burning Plain*] throughout. Like *Autobiografía del algodón*, this book is about mass migration and displacement, especially of the country's Indigenous populations. Between 1955 and 1957, Rulfo worked and produced reports for the Papaloapan Commission, whose avowed purpose was to "open up" the country's largely Indigenous south to investment. In service of that body Rulfo participated first hand in the displacement of *chinantecos* and *mazatecos* in the valley of Soyaltepec due to the construction of the Miguel Alemán dam (the apogee of the Commission's work), witnessed the first meetings of the *mixe* townhalls in Zacatepec and indexed a magazine about government activity in the region. During that time he also visited various *mixe* populations in Oaxaca to capture photographic images for a documentary by German filmmaker Walter Reuter. In *Había mucha neblina …*, Rivera Garza's exploration of "mi Rulfo bien queer" [my very queer Rulfo] underscores the term's association with non-normative sexualities and their "antisocial" (Wiegman and Wilson 2015, 13) resistance to futurity, most obviously in Part IV: "Mi pornografia, mi celo, mi danza estelar". That section of the book revisits the question of sexuality in *Pedro Páramo*: for example, reimagining the relationship of its incestous siblings, Dorotea/Doroteo, and reconfiguring Miguel Páramo's sexual aggression in a series of tweets. This is just one aspect of *Había mucha neblina …* that is likely to have contributed to the

controversy of the book's reception in Mexico, where it has been considered defamatory by the Juan Rulfo Foundation: another, perhaps more fundamental one being that depiction of Rulfo, whose literary work was so rooted in rural Mexico, as a border crosser of a different tenor, a double agent: "an active agent of modernity (…) at the same time as a supportive defender of Indigenous communities" (Rivera Garza 2016, 107).[15]

In the face of the rapid acceleration of the country's so-called miracle decade, Rivera Garza submits Rulfo's peripatetic labour on Mexico's highways as a kind of slow travel: what she calls "reading the world with the body (…) with the feet" (2016, 78). Walking, Rivera Garza observes, is all about deceleration and embodiment, the anatomised contact of the body with the earth's surface: "one step and another step; and yet another. The instep, the tarsus and the metatarsal. The heel. The ankle. The sole of the foot" (2016, 78). To be sure, this is a "slow bipedal progression that stands opposed to the encroachment of modernity" (Egan 2012, 108) but one that is devoid of the transcendence attributed to pedestrianism in other works of the (largely Anglophone) slow travel canon, which is frequently bound up in nostalgia and dependent on unacknowledged class privileges.[16] If Rulfo did not fulfil the human and planetary safeguarding at stake in our present understanding of this modality of movement, nonetheless for Rivera Garza this is a central part of the discipline, "a way of being in and a way of writing the world" (2016, 79). A critical part of this is the Indigenous conception of collective labour, *tequio*, which captured Rulfo's interest during his journeys in the region, and which Rivera Garza claims for the *mixe* is "a transformative energy that maintains human beings in constant creative contact with Nature" (2016, 116).[17]

It is with an example of *tequio* that *Había mucha neblina …* ends in a final section that cites and at times contradicts the contents of Rulfo's 1955 ethnographic article, "Notas sueltas sobre los mixes". In Rivera Garza's ending, an anonymous first-person-plural narrator recounts a mountain ascent to celebrate the first twenty days of a *mixe* child's life with the community. The journey has ancient provenance in *mixe* legend (of rebel leader Kondoy taking refuge in a mountain cave) and also recalls – and follows in the footsteps of – Rulfo's 1955 ascent of the same mountain (Zempoaltepetl) accompanying Reuter. The narrator's sense of outsidership to the *mixe* pilgrims is patent – "We are strangers [extranjeros] here" (2016, 221) – yet it is not irremediable. In fact, the act of walking enables communion with fellow travellers and with the earth itself. This is a congruity insinuated in Rulfo's original description of blackened *mixe* housing "disappearing" into the night. In contrast to Rulfo's benighted apprehension, in Rivera Garza's journey narrative there is a more congenial co-presence of human/nonhuman:

> We lie back directly on the surface of the earth, our spinal columns against the veins of the planet. Our spinal columns and each of their 33 vertebrae, and the spinal canal that protects the marrow of all our bones, adapt with an incredible ease to the peaks and troughs of the land. (2016, 227)

This prospect is far from the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene that has become paradigmatic of the mountain ascent in the journey narrative tradition and in which

asymmetrical structures of mastery prevail. Rather, it comprises an (unexpected) corporeal, earth-centred experience. Instead of privileging archetypal features such as sight, aestheticisation, and sovereignty, Rivera Garza's ascent culminates in tactility, a supine repose that yields to the shape of the land. This is complemented by her depiction of mountaintop pilgrim kinship, of travellers *mixe* and *extranjero*, "shar[ing] words and food" (2016, 231). This is an encounter, then, that rests on the "robust emphemerality" (Egan 2012, 109) of *communitas* and a relationality with the natural world's sensual, intimate, and embodied dimensions, and which has the potential to "perforate the colonial divide" (Gómez Barris 2017, 61). That *Había mucha neblina …* then closes with a translation into *mixe* of this same encounter/ section of the book comprises a further, in this case translingual act of collective labour and advocacy. As Glissant observes, "Relation is spoken multilingually (…) it rightfully opposes the totalitarianism of any monolingual intent" (1997, 19, 18). In her volume of theoretical essays *Los muertos indóciles*, Rivera Garza acknowledges recent efforts to document in written form the largely oral *mixe* language, which itself has numerous variants, in collaborative efforts in which speakers, anthropologists, linguists and others have all participated in what she calls "un acto de muchos" [a deed, act, ceremony of many] (2019, 74). In her articulation of this so-called *comunalidad* in *Había mucha neblina …* , Rivera Garza draws attention to language (difference) as a fundamental part of relationality. The original Spanish conveys a sense of the poetic as well as material possibilities of linguistic exchange and the polysemic qualities of "historia": "se necesitan palabras extrañas, palabras de otros, palabras con definición y traducción, palabras que vienen de lejos, para contar esta historia de otros como mía o mía como de otros" [strange/foreign words are required, others' words, words with definition and translation, words that come from afar, to tell this story/history of others like mine or mine like others] (2016, 292). The conclusion of *Había mucha neblina …* thus points to the kind of work Michael Cronin conceives of in his study of eco-translation about "developing an ecology of translational attention that brings the *wayfaring of language and cultural movement* to the fore" (2017, 29/30; emphasis added).

Conclusion

In the final section of *Borderlands/La frontera,* called "El retorno", Anzaldúa reiterates her love for "th[e] tragic valley of South Texas". The land, notwithstanding its history of (re)possession and dispossession, prevails in "a constant changing of forms, *renacimientos de la tierra madre*" (original emphasis). Anzaldúa's well-known final lines – "This land was Mexican once/was Indian always/and is./And will be again" – submit that Indigenous landscapes cannot be fully colonised but that they can be a source of collective future (1987, 112, 113). The expressions of "queer errantry" in Rivera Garza's works that I have discussed in this essay conclude with similar gestures of futurity. In *Autobiografía del algodón*, a sojourn to her grandparents' former settlement reveals its erasure from the map, the author's birth family either fled north of the border or "frozen in the midst of the gunfire" (2020b, 294) in the south. Nonetheless Rivera Garza insists on resilience rather than

retribution, movement rather than stasis. Mobilising a central term in her vocabulary that denotes a spatial and temporal move backwards, she writes, in another expression of the queer chronology discussed earlier, that "avanzamos para retroceder, y por eso avanzamos otra vez" [we advance to turn backwards and for that reason we advance once again] (2020b, 294).[18] Unable to locate the graves of her deceased ancestors in Mexico, she returns to Houston with tortillas made and bought south of the border, which are then eagerly consumed: "We will walk and be sustained thanks to Zaragoza's food. We will open our eyes. We will dream. We will laugh, for sure. And we will leave once again" (2020b, 304). Although this ending testifies in part to the ways in which labour in the global south underwrites the autonomy of the global north, it also speaks of embodied experiences that (here, literally) feed a commitment, a compulsion even, to move, to return.

Meanwhile, *Había mucha neblina …* closes with that "timeless" spatial practice discussed earlier, with "the soles of the feet on the plants of the earth" [las plantas de los pies sobre las plantas de la tierra], "a lot of ligaments, cartilage, bones, movement (…) we have been advancing towards this mountain even before we were born" (2016, 217). By way of response to Claudia Rankine's definition of solitude which is cited in this section of the book, Rivera Garza's errant practice is about the potency of conviviality: "This is what we can do for each other on the mountain. This is what we have done" (2016, 231). For the Mexican author, therefore, walking is imperative rather than impulsive; as she puts it in her essay "Writing in Migration", drawing on the same Revueltas who features in *Autobiografía del algodón* [Autobiography of Cotton], "the poor looking for their own place on earth have no other option than to walk fervently" (Rivera Garza 2020a, 143). In *Autobiografía …* Rivera Garza continues to insist on pedestrianism as a phenomenology and a poetics in full ambiguity:

> We allow ourselves to be taken, I mean. We like to depart. We like to produce distance into which afterwards we will fit memories or writing. Melancholy. Anger. We like to disobey (…) we persist as those nomadic farmers – well, what a contradiction – those workers of the land or those labourers without a post who, on facing injustice or natural disaster, take their tools and devote themselves to opening up new clearings. The hoe in their hands. The axe of words. The stubble. (2020b, 296)

There is a lot that could be said about this quotation, not least about the (queer) dialectic of desire *and* dysphoria in play here. Nevertheless, the passage and particularly its time-honoured, though not unproblematic, agrarian metaphor evocatively recall the travail of travel's etymological and experiential roots to which I referred at the beginning of this essay. In a region of the world where the attachment of travel and work continues to be defined by geography and geopolitics, the passage reminds us that the labour done in and by the journeys documented in both *Autobiografía del algodón* and *Había mucha neblina …* rests on an abiding complex social and affective history. Each book in different but complementary ways acknowledges wayfaring as collaborative toil and, like Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, insists on the primacy and perseverance of the land.

In this light, Rivera Garza's articulations of "queer errantry" are a reminder of the vitality and potentiality of deviation. If travel and labour are both about effort, they also share a generative quality that is resonant for the discussion here of books in which "queer" transpires to be a limber term, effectively but not entirely detached from its associations with sexuality that have prevailed in queer studies to date.[19] That is, Rivera Garza, just as she recalls the "anachronism" of errantry, also appears to return to queer's etymological roots, which, although disputed, are thought to be the early sixteenth-century German *quer*, meaning "oblique, perverse".[20] Indeed, the "queer errantry" articulated in *Autobiografía* … and *Había mucha neblina* … not only resounds with Glissant's ideas about Relation, which rest on their own archaisms, but also aligns geometrically with a germane understanding of queer advanced by Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson – that is, as an elliptical moving askew or "moving *athwart*" (Ahmed 2008, 21).[21] These linguistic and conceptual archaisms befit a regional context of violence where the ancient and baroque have indeed been afforded new resonances: as Rita Segato has pointed out, "in the language of feminicide the female body also means territory and its etymology is as archaic as its transformations recent".[22] In recurring to the social as well as the sexual register of "queer", Rivera Garza underscores not only the broad valence of this term for thinking about and theorising travel but also the need to regard its own movements as a point of departure rather than arrival; as Epps (2008, 917) puts it, as "an interminable conceptual, cultural, political and linguistic coming and going". In essence, *Autobiografía del algodón* and *Había mucha neblina o humo o no sé qué* both illustrate how queerness itself moves and in its voyage encounters decolonial thinking, for, as Pereira (2019, 409) has it, "[in the global south] the condition of being queer (…) is one of being decolonial". This in turn is precisely the work or labour that Rivera Garza's digressions do, providing a model for collective re-imagining: how, in Anna Tsing's terms, they enable "movement of the heart" and "re-make" the world (Tsing 2005, 214). If the "visceraless" neoliberal state has enabled the forgetting of the body in political and personal terms and set aside responsibility for its own citizens, Rivera Garza's "queer errantry" offers a decolonial feminist praxis of orientation and remembrance, a way of reading (and representing) the world *from* and *with* the body.

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Notes

1. I am indebted to Natasha Tanna for commenting on an earlier draft of this essay and to the journal's two anonymous peer reviewers, whose suggestions have also advanced my thinking and writing.
2. Her novels *La cresta de Ilión* [*The Iliac Crest*] (2017) and *El mal de la taiga* [*The Taiga Syndrome*] (2018) also come to mind.
3. On slow violence see Nixon (2011).

4. This is the subject of her essay "The Viceraless State" in which Rivera Garza argues that the neoliberal state in Mexico has established "disemboweled relationships (…) without hearts or innards" with its citizens. For more on this see Rivera Garza (2020, 18–25, 22).
5. The dry Gulf Coast borderlands were ill suited to agriculture because of the difficulty of moving water out of river channels into fields and because of its poor soil. See Walsh (2008).
6. See Fierro (2022) and Rivera Garza (2022).
7. All translations of this and other works cited by Rivera Garza are my own, unless otherwise indicated.
8. Rivera Garza, in an essay on the work of Lina Meruane, explains that languages, body movements, and physical appearances of entire generations might be lost but that "something sediments in the body". See Rivera Garza (2020a, 146).
9. Rivera Garza pursues the confluence of travel and labour further in her essay "On 2501 Migrants by Alejandro Santiago" (2020a, 55).
10. See also her *Liliana's Invincible Summer* in which Rivera Garza recollects recent feminist protests against gender-based violence in front of the Attorney General's Office: "Our feet on their footprints. Their footprints enveloping our feet. Many footprints. More feet" (2023, 9–10).
11. For a discussion of the terminology, see Falconí et al. (2014).
12. See also her reference to the quality of being "argüendera" in 2022 (141).
13. See the acknowledgements section of Rivera Garza's *Autobiografía…* and, for more on the implications of such erasures, Madelaine Cahuas's essay: https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/interrogating-absences-in-latinx-theory-and-placing-blackness-in-latinx-geographical-thought-a-critical-reflection (accessed 20 June 2023).
14. Walchester also discusses in this piece the underrepresentation of work as a theme in the scholarship on travel writing.
15. All translations of this work are my own.
16. As Ella Mingazova points out, slowness is now "a master trope for initiatives (…) to fight capitalism, inequality and climate change and to promote localism, sustainability, attention and mindful consumption" (2019, 176).
17. *Tequio*, which is "trabajo colectivo, gratuito, obligatorio" [collective, free, mandatory work], may comprise direct physical work, reciprocal help, participation in *fiestas* (in which the appearance of the community is at stake) and intellectual work (Rivera Garza 2019, 73). The word bears the implications of its colonial history, however, since its Nahuatl form refers to "cosa que tiene o da trabajo" [something which involves or supplies work] and translates as that which owes tribute. It is also related to *tequitia*, meaning "to assign a duty to someone, order someone to do something; or give an order to everyone in general; or, to pay tributes" (see https://nahuatl.uoregon.edu/content/tequitia). My thanks to Natasha Tanna for bringing this etymological connection to my attention.
18. For more on this see Rivera Garza (2018b, 137). My thanks again to Natasha Tanna for bringing this connection to my attention.
19. As Ahmed reminds us, "queer" is a spatial word that has been translated into a sexual one and, while she insists that "to lose sight of the sexual specificity of queer would also be to 'overlook' how compulsory heterosexuality shapes what coheres as given, and the effects of this coherence on those who refuse to be compelled", the term still has a "semantic flexibility" that for Heather Love "is one of the most exciting things about it". See Ahmed (2008, 67, 172) and Love (2011, 182).

20. Indeed, such "connections to movements that transverse and twist" have animated vigorous methodological and thematic interest in mobility in queer theory and queer studies more generally and informed a related lexicon with strong associations with motion and (re)orientation. See, for example, José Quiroga, who avows that his interest is "less in theorising on the present state of gay studies than in *moving about, creating a book that is a sort of travelling and moveable object*" (2000, 8; emphasis added).
21. Betsy Wing points out that some of these overtones in English are not necessarily present in the French original but "do play an interesting part in Glissant's writing elsewhere". See Glissant (1997), xvii. In their work, Wiegman and Wilson challenge queer antinormative arguments – such as the kind of singular, exclusionary logic articulated by Lee Edelman in *No Future*, for example – resting on what they see as an "anodyne notion of moving against". See Wiegman and Wilson (2015, 11).
22. Although recent statistics show higher annual rates of femicide in Central American and Caribbean countries such as Honduras and the Dominican Republic (see https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/eclac-least-4473-women-were-victims-femicide-latin-america-and-caribbean-2021), the Mexican context is exceptional, not least because, as Segato claims, its border with the USA is historically "the site of the largest and most prolonged number of attacks and murders of women with a similar *modus operandi* of which we have knowledge in 'peace time'" (2013, 35; emphasis added).

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