

## ***The Taiga Syndrome: Cristina Rivera Garza in a World without Refuge***

Cristina Rivera Garza's *The Taiga Syndrome* (*El mal de la taiga*, 2012) conjures up a world that is strange but also oddly familiar. "This is not a fairy tale," one of the characters announces (17), but in many ways it obviously is, with its self-conscious references to "Hansel and Gretel" and the Brothers Grimm, to woodsmen in an enchanted forest, complete with lurking wolves and perhaps vulnerable women wearing red. It is "a fairy tale run amok," as the blurb has it ("The Taiga Syndrome"). The invocations of fairy tale are part of what makes this novel familiar, in that it draws on plots and settings that are embedded in a general cultural unconscious: almost everyone has heard of Hansel and Gretel, of Little Red Riding Hood, or of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. But they are also part of what makes this novel strange, in that fairy tales are strange, often disquieting and uncanny, especially the more that we think about them. Because they speak to and from our unconscious, they tell, however obliquely, of primordial fears, of untamed desires, of basic needs, and of punishments and consequences. Even sanitized for contemporary children, they still bear traces of an older, more violent world that has not perhaps entirely disappeared. As the narrator here observes, for instance, "Scholars of Hansel and Gretel argue that the original story by the Brothers Grimm was a warning against the brutality of life in the Middle Ages, a time characterized by a hunger and scarcity that with frequency, with terrifying frequency, led to infanticide" (29). But brutality and scarcity have hardly gone away. Indeed, as capitalism and climate change encroach on the farthest limits of the earth, we may come to see forests, enchanted or otherwise, less as sites of danger than as among the few remnants of ever-dwindling natural resources or refuge.

This is a tale that is not particularly Latin American—or is so only in so far as similar encroachments are taking place there, or driven by forces that arise there. One of the lessons of Rivera Garza's book is that the words "near" and "far" no longer have much traction: "THE DISTANT NEVER SO CLOSE" (35). This story that almost literally has no end is not only a fairy tale awry, but also a detective story whose poetics of failure point to the end of sovereignty without obviously establishing any alternatives. We can no longer even escape to the vanishing woods.

### 1. *Beginnings, Endings, and Limits*

As with any good fairy story, the plot of *The Taiga Syndrome* starts out simply enough: it is a quest narrative. At its centre are two women: one who has apparently run away; and another, the novel's narrator, who is sent in search of her. The first woman is the wife (in fact, the second wife) of a man who lives on the coast of an un-named country, a man who hires the second woman, who is a former detective, or a detective who is otherwise done with detecting, to track down his wife and her new lover. The elusive couple have sent back signs suggesting that they are heading for the taiga, the Arctic forest, either in the same country or more likely in some other. The detective is tasked with bringing the woman back, or at least writing a report on her whereabouts. The man provides her with documents—telegrams and letters—that, like breadcrumbs, suggest where the two runaways have gone. She follows the trail, hiring a (male) translator *en route*, to a small village on the edge of the forest, where they install themselves in a cabin that the pair they are looking for have only recently vacated. While there, asking around to pick up the scent again, they have a variety of encounters with the local people and wildlife, including a feral boy and a lone wolf. Finally, they make it into the forest, and apparently find the object of their quest, but the detective fails to persuade the other woman to come back to her former husband. She returns home to report to her client.

As the story proceeds, it increasingly takes on aspects of the fantastic and of (often disturbing) fantasy. There are visions, for instance, of tiny figures, *homunculi*, that were once perhaps vomited out by the missing woman. These little folk may remind us of elves or other sprites that populate myth and legend, but here they are put on show in a brothel or sex club that the detective and her translator find themselves visiting. The story's conclusion is particularly enigmatic and allusive, and difficult to piece together in any ordered narrative. The detective returns to the man on the coast and informs him of everything she has seen and heard, but "the more I talked the more incredible it all seemed to me" (115). The man gets angry and apparently beats her up, with sufficient violence to send her to the hospital. She reads a newspaper story about a wolf that has escaped from a zoo. "We all carry a forest inside us," she concludes. "And then, air. Just air. / Yes, that's how it all went. That, as always, I told the truth. Yes. That I had" (118-19). But we are left wondering what exactly is the truth she has told.



An abandoned village in the Russian Urals

We are also left wondering where it all ends. Literally, as well as figuratively, it is not clear where the book stops. The lines I have just quoted—“Yes. That I had.”—may seem to be the book’s last lines, in that they are the last to be voiced by the novel’s narrator. But they are followed, after a few lines of white space, by what we must take to be the authorial inscription of date and place, presumably of the book’s completion: “*December 31, 2001 / At the foot of a volcano*” (119). Then, however, there is at least one further chapter, “Chapter XXIII” (numbered sequentially to follow the twenty-two previous ones), which is a “Playlist” featuring a variety of songs and tunes, ranging from electronica (Aphex Twin) to Tuvan throat singing from southern Siberia (Sainkho Namchylack). Finally—but is it really finally?—in the Spanish original, but not in the English, there is yet another numbered chapter, “XXIV: *Colofón*.” A colophon is usually an “inscription or device, sometimes pictorial or emblematic, formerly placed at the end of a book or manuscript, and containing the title, the scribe’s or printer’s name, date and place of printing.” It is also, however, in English at least, archaically a “finishing stroke” or “crowning touch” (“colophon, n.”). In Spanish, *colofón* has the secondary meaning of “*Remate, final de un*

*proceso*" ("colofón"): conclusion or *coup de grace*; the end of a process. Here, the colophon, or what we find in the chapter entitled "Colophon," is the last of a series of black and white drawings in pencil or pen and ink, by the artist Carlos Maiques, that appear (but in the Spanish edition only) interspersed with the text from the outset. This final drawing is of a cabin, only partially visible, that seems almost subsumed into the white of the snow, or perhaps of the page. As with many of the other drawings (some even more so), it hints at something rather than strictly delineating it. It is a trace, not a tracing, of what may endure even after the novel is over: a fading but unmistakable impression that puts the lie to the claim that this is truly the finishing stroke or the irrevocable end of a process.

Let us go back to the authorial imprint (if that is what it is) that follows the narrator's final lines: "*December 31, 2011 / At the foot of a volcano.*" It is surely not by chance that the date is New Year's Eve, the end of one year and the imminent arrival of another. New Year's Eve is a time of celebrations and new beginnings, of resolutions and the determination to start again. But it is also (for instance in Stonehaven, Scotland, not far from the taiga) a time for ritual cleansing, for fireballs that are thought to attract the past year's spirits, which are then driven out as the fire is doused in the sea, or (more generally, in Scottish Hogmanay) a time to be cautious as to who will plant the "first foot" across the threshold, to bring good luck or bad for the next twelve months ("Hogmanay Traditions"). The notion of place is hardly insignificant, either: rather than a placename, Rivera Garza gives us a location defined by geomorphology, and by a relation to sometimes violent natural forces. To live at the foot of a volcano is all well and good, until the mountain erupts! Volcanoes testify to the unpredictable points of collision between geological time and human history, as forces that have steadily built up over years, decades, or even centuries suddenly explode, often to devastating effect.

The volcano with which Rivera Garza signs off, moreover, is one of the few explicit markers of what could be Latin America in the story—albeit not even in the story itself, but to one side, after it is notionally finished. There are volcanoes in many parts of the world, of course, including in or rising above the taiga (in Russian Kamchatka, for instance). But to write "at the foot of a volcano" may also invoke, say, Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947)—a novel about, among other things, the tragic relationship between a man and his ex-wife, set in Cuernavaca, in the shadow of the peaks Iztaccihuatl and the ever-active Popocatepetl, the second-highest mountain in Mexico. Both these

volcanoes can also be seen (when the smog clears) from Mexico City. In 2011, Popocatépetl had not erupted for some years, but in January and April 2012 it emitted dust, ash, and superheated rock fragments; in 2013, further eruptions and ash plumes led to the temporary cancellation of flights into Mexico City's airport. When the ground trembles or the earth explodes, we can no longer move around the globe quite so easily.

My question to you is about the relationship between volcano and taiga. To put it simply: is this a Latin American book? My guess is that, without the clue of the author's name, the text itself does not immediately suggest Latin America to you. What might be gained by seeing it as a Latin American book, written within a Latin American tradition? And what might be lost? Jot down some ideas in your notebook. While you do that, I'll have a shot of vodka, but I'll be right back.

#### Drinks Pairing: Vodka

Meeting a local bigwig, "the man in charge of the local lumber industry," the narrator and her translator are offered first tea, and then vodka (54). They are also served bread with salt, what may be parsley, and "hunks of meat that our host ate with his fingers" in an ostentatious display of plenty in a village otherwise marked by scarcity: "All those liquids. All that acid. I remember the noise of gold chains around forearms and wrists" (55). It is possible that the vodka, like the swimming pool in the man's garden, is a luxury import, out of place, but it fits with the taiga if we are imagining the setting to be Russia or Scandinavia. Vodka is not obviously (except, again, as an import, conspicuously consumed by a fraction of the middle classes) a Latin American drink. The so-called "vodka belt" passes through Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, as well as Russia and the Nordic countries. Traditionally distilled from grains, potatoes, or sugar beet, it is typically drunk neat, and warms the insides over a long northern Winter night.

Framing *The Taiga Syndrome* as a Latin American text can lead to quick critical short-cuts. Predictably, some reviewers in the Anglophone world—Anna Aslanyan in *The Guardian*, for instance—were keen to dub the novel a "magic-realist fable" ("*The Taiga Syndrome*"). On the other hand, other critics, more thoughtfully and insightfully, have compared the novel to the so-called *novela de la selva* or "forest novel" tradition in South America (Walczak, "Tropos del viaje") or even to the frontier fiction of Northern Mexico (Velasco,

“Frontera e hibridación”). For critic Ignacio Sánchez Prado, it is Juan Rulfo, author of *Pedro Páramo* (1955), who is “a central influence in *The Taiga Syndrome*, particularly in the way in which the novel conceives of an inescapable site, and the role that the ghostly play in the book’s atmospherics” (“The Intense Atmospheres of Language”). And there is no doubt that Rivera Garza is well-read in the Latin American tradition. But what she tells us, in interview, she has learned from Rulfo is dislocation or deterritorialization: “Rulfo’s Comala, for instance, may be located in Jalisco (in fact, Comala is a town in the neighboring state of Colima), but this necrocity is at the heart of our dwelling experience on Earth. If I have learned anything from Rulfo, it’s the relevance of that tension” (Fitch, “Questions of Genre and Gender”). Without at all denying her reading within the Latin American tradition, or her experience of (for example) borders, violence, and gender in their specific Latin American instantiations, Rivera Garza makes clear that her interests are both more material (less abstract) and more general (less constrained) than fitting her within a Latin American frame might suggest. From the foot of a volcano, this is also taiga literature, a novel that aims to reach to the ends of the earth.

## 2. *Forests, Failures, and Low-Level Fear*

The ends of the earth are also within: “we all carry a forest inside us” (118-19). Equally, some journeys take us nowhere. The narrator tells us at the start that she is a failure as a detective, though her failures have “helped [her] to tell stories, or at least get them down on paper. [. . .] Failures force us to reflect” (20). Still, she sets off initially with some confidence that this case is one she can crack, perhaps because she imagines there is nothing really to crack: “I wanted to come back and tell him that, in the same way, just like being in love, being out of love also ends one day” (19). She even seems to think that the runaway bride has set up a sporting challenge, the opening move in a game: “what she seemed to want was for someone to catch her, to wrestle her down, like in rugby” (25). But this is a strange conception of rugby, for which the point surely is to escape, to dodge or side-step the tackles that come your way. The narrator appears to think that the person she is seeking has set up a losing game, that she wants to be caught. But at the end of the book her initial self-confidence, however diffidently articulated in terms of learning from failure, comes back to haunt her: “Had I really told him that?” (115). The wolf was always there, waiting on the coast for her return after her mission’s inevitable disappointment. And the husband is surely not so perplexed as to why his wife had left.

Had his first wife really “died in an accident, years ago” as he is rather too quick to tell the narrator (15)? Is the detective missing the real case, right under her nose?

The classic detective—Sherlock Holmes, for instance, or Hercules Poirot—employed sharp observation and deductive reasoning to restore order and legibility to an increasingly complex modern world that seemed to be outpacing the capacities of what was imagined to be an increasingly sclerotic and bureaucratic state. Where the combined forces of Scotland Yard failed, a talented if eccentric and inimitable individual such as Sherlock would step in. The private eye was imagined as the indispensable supplement to an official (in)capacity to read the world aright. Sovereignty was sustained—the criminal was (almost always) handed over to the proper authorities—even as its limits were revealed. Critic Fabricio Tocco shows that in Latin America, a more cynical version of the detective story arises, especially in the wake of the dirty wars of the 1970s and 1980s: here the state is not simply outwitted and overtaken by market forces or breakneck production; in countries such as Argentina and Chile, the state turns criminal as it targets its own citizenry with extra-judicial killings and forced disappearances. In this context, the private eye, then, however smart or perceptive, is nonetheless compelled to fail, or take the fall. Hence in authors such as the Argentine Ricardo Piglia or the Chilean Roberto Bolaño, we see what Tocco calls a “poetics of failure.” But failure, for Tocco, does not have to be negative, in that it “overcomes the myth of individualistic detectives while it aims to challenge the very possibility of personification itself [. . .] in the pulverization of the private eye and of the sovereign” (*Latin American Detectives* 199). Undoing the notion of the heroic detective riding in to save the day, it also removes a buttress from the crumbling façade of sovereignty “while at the same time offering the emergence of an impersonal multitude” (200). The poetics of failure refuses the false dualism that poses individual genius against (but also complicit with) dull-witted sovereign transcendence.

In *The Taiga Syndrome*, however, the state is effectively absent. The man who hires the detective does not seem to have even considered putting the police onto the case, which in any event is apparently not a criminal matter. Out in the taiga, it is the man in charge of the lumber industry who considers “this corner of the world [to be . . .] his own”; “and in the strictest sense he was correct,” the narrator confirms (54). When the detective looks at the businessman “out of the corner of [her] eye,” she sees “a boy—a monster more than a child” with “rows of sharp teeth” and “the presence of the word ‘saliva’: something

sticky and dirty and discarded. Something difficult to escape" (58, 59). He presides over "the constant economic pounding involved in the production and exportation of lumber" (64), an exploitation driven by scarcity and hunger that leads to the obscenity of piled-up meat in the businessman's sticky fingers, and a useless swimming pool, with leaves floating on its surface. *This is the wild west (wild north?) Russian style—or Swedish or Latvian, even Mexican or Argentine, it matters little, as it is the same almost everywhere now that untrammelled extraction reduces and eliminates any refuge a forest may offer, for wolves or for children, or for lovers on the lam.*

"The development of the timber industry," we are told, "had brought lumberjacks and businessmen alike. The need of the lumberjacks had, in turn, brought cooks and merchants, usury and sex." "Small nomadic tribes" of migrant workers turn up, "carrying only what was needed for daily survival." "It's not a good life," the translator comments: "Too many drugs needed to keep up the work pace [. . .] too much anxiety" (92). Here it is lumber, not far away it is oil. Elsewhere, it is lithium or diamonds, cattle-ranching or soy, all inter-connected through flows of capital, machinery, and transient populations that bypass or sidestep all regulation. The low-grade fear that reverberates through the forest is not, or not only, primeval anxiety; it is a symptom of our present moment. All this amounts to "the Taiga Syndrome": when "certain inhabitants of the Taiga"—and the taiga is everywhere—"begin to suffer terrible anxiety attacks and make suicidal attempts to escape" (10-11). Perhaps the woman and her lover, the "mad couple of the Taiga" (18), are among the few sane ones. They, after all, know not to return even to the coastal cities, where other wolves, equally deadly, lurk.

Tocco imagines that all this clears a path for the "impersonal multitude." Rivera Garza's book in many ways lacks persons: none of the characters, for instance, have names; as in a fairy tale, for the most part they are more archetype than individual. Even the narrator barely exists outside of the tale she is telling: there is little attempt to establish back-story or context, or the illusion of psychological depth; she affects and is affected by the range of sensory experiences the story offers, which are replicated for the reader in its gestures towards sound (with the playlist) and sight (with the illustrations in the Spanish edition). But there is not much in the way of community, however much Rivera Garza herself tells of her interest in "the ways in which 'we' builds communities, the ways in which 'we' connects with something bigger than ourselves, the ways in which 'we' always remains



exiled from these same experiences" (Fitch, "Questions of Genre and Gender"). Instead, what endures is the sensation that the narrator is perpetually on the outside; the nearest she comes to a relationship is with her translator, who to that extent is no longer a transparent medium for communication, but its opaque object. It is as though translation itself were the closest we have to a shelter if we are to start again in the storm that is building, in the gray skies over the northern boreal forest.

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Image: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kushtunga\\_9540.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kushtunga_9540.jpg)

Song: "First Snow" (Emancipator)