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Latin American Literature in Translation

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

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*The Taiga Syndrome: Cristina
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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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Cristina Rivera Garza's *The Taiga Syndrome* (2012) conjures up a world that is strange but also oddly familiar.

“This is not a fairy tale.” (17)

The invocations of fairy tale make this novel familiar, in that it draws on plots and settings that are embedded in a general cultural unconscious.

The invocations of fairy tale make this novel familiar, in that it draws on plots and settings that are embedded in a general cultural unconscious.

But fairy tales are also strange, often disquieting and uncanny, especially the more that we think about them.

“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)

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.

“THE DISTANT NEVER SO CLOSE.” (35)

We can no longer even escape to the
vanishing woods.



BEGINNINGS, ENDINGS, AND LIMITS

As the story proceeds, it increasingly takes on aspects of the fantastic and of (often disturbing) fantasy.

The story's conclusion is particularly enigmatic and allusive, and difficult to piece together in any ordered narrative.

“The more I talked the more incredible it all
seemed to me.” (115)

“We all carry a forest inside us, yes, kilometers and kilometers of birch, fir, cedars. [. . .] / 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).

We are left wondering what exactly is
the truth she has told.

“colophon, *n.* †1. “Finishing stroke’,
crowning touch’. *Obsolete.* 2. *spec. a.* The
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, etc. [. . .].” (*OED*)

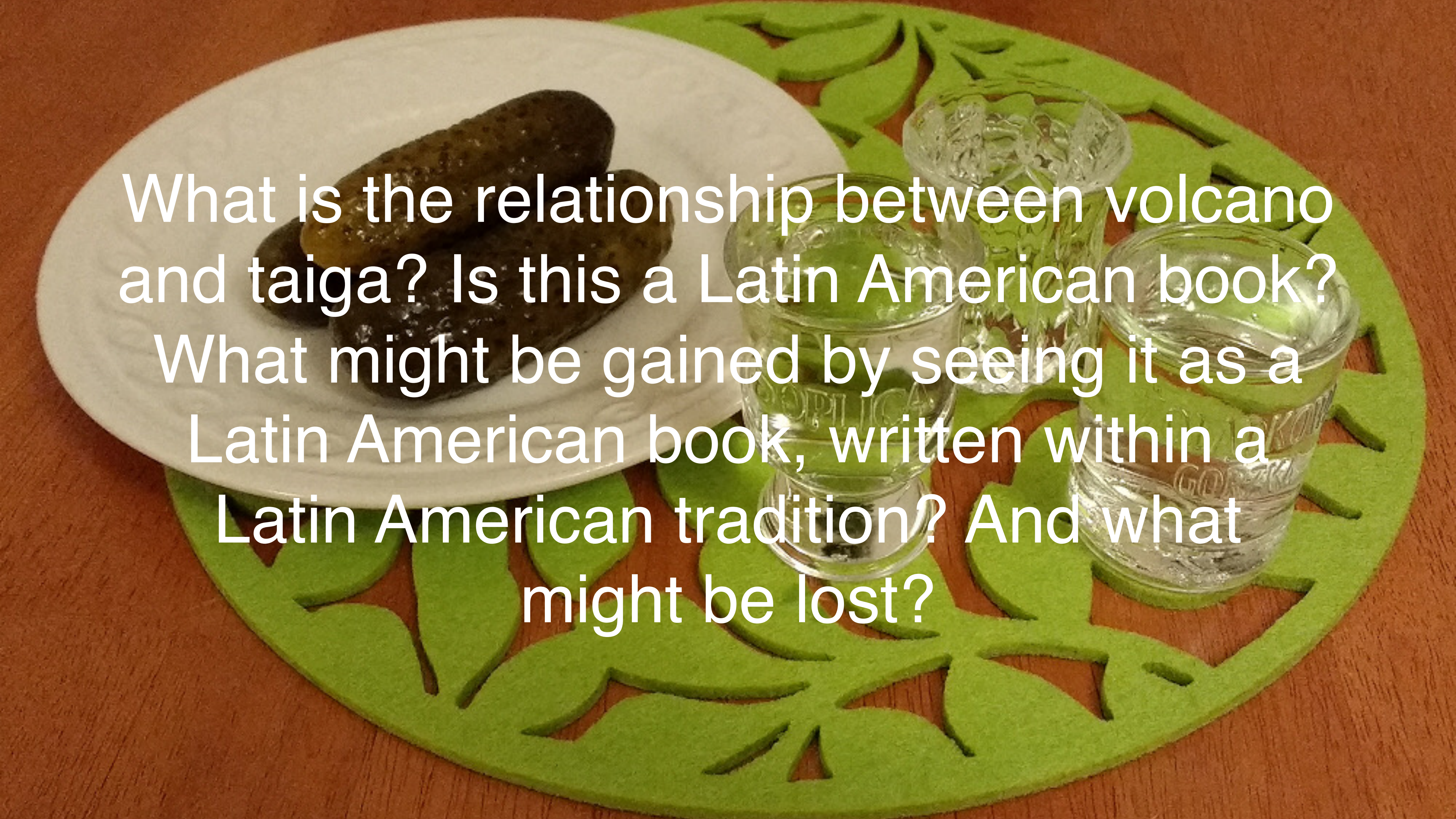
“colofón 1. m. Anotación al final de los libros, que indica el nombre del impresor y el lugar y fecha de la impresión, o alguna de estas circunstancias. 2. m. Remate, final de un proceso.” (*RAE*)

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.

*“December 31, 2011
At the foot of a volcano.” (119)*

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.

What is the relationship between volcano and taiga? Is this a Latin American book? What might be gained by seeing it as a Latin American book, written within a Latin American tradition? And what might be lost?



What is the relationship between volcano and taiga? Is this a Latin American book? What might be gained by seeing it as a Latin American book, written within a Latin American tradition? And what might be lost?

Framing *The Taiga Syndrome* as a Latin American text can lead to quick critical short-cuts.

“Rulfo 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.” (Ignacio Sánchez Prado)

“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.” (Cristina Rivera Garza)

From the foot of a volcano, this is also taiga literature, a novel that aims to reach to the ends of the earth.



FORESTS, FAILURES, AND LOW-LEVEL FEAR

“We all carry a forest inside us.” (118-19)

“Writing reports of all the cases I was unable to solve, however, had helped me to tell stories, or at least get them down on paper, as they say. [. . .] Failures force us to reflect.” (20)

“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)

“What she seemed to want was for someone to catch her, to wrestle her down, like in rugby.” (25)

Is the detective missing the real case,
right under her nose?

The private eye was imagined as the indispensable supplement to an official (in)capacity to read the world aright.

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.

“The poetics of failure 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.” (Fabricio Tocco)

“The poetics of failure, then, pulverizes the incarnation of the traditional masculine sovereign while at the same time offering the emergence of an impersonal multitude.”

(Fabricio Tocco)

The poetics of failure refuses the false dualism that poses individual genius against (but also complicit with) dull-witted sovereign transcendence.

“What exactly had brought us [. . .] to this corner of the world, a corner he considered (and in the strictest sense he was correct) his own?” (54)

“When I looked at him out of the corner of my eye all I saw was a boy—a monster more than a child in the strictest sense of the word. [. . .] The rows of sharp teeth. [. . .] The presence of the word ‘saliva’: something sticky and dirty and discarded. Something difficult to escape.” (58-59)

“People were facing the constant economic pounding involved in the production and exportation of lumber.” (64)

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 had brought lumberjacks and businessmen alike. The need of the lumberjacks had, in turn, brought cooks and merchants, usury and sex.” (91)

“From a distance they looked like small nomadic tribes. Off they went, carrying only what was needed for daily survival. [. . .]

‘It’s not a good life,’ the translator volunteered without my asking. ‘Too many drugs needed to keep up the work pace [. . .] too much anxiety.’” (91-92)


The low-grade fear that reverberates through the forest is not, or not only, primeval anxiety; it is a symptom of our present moment.

“It seems [. . .] that certain inhabitants of the Taiga 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.

“I’ve been thinking about the ‘we,’ for example [. . .], 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.” (Cristina Rivera Garza)

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.



MUSIC

Fósforo,
“Cochabamba”



PRODUCTION

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