



México Interdisciplinario / Interdisciplinary Mexico

ISSN 2193-9756



XIII. Género y sexualidad en la literatura mexicana del siglo XXI

2018/1, año 7, n° 13, 167 pp.

Editor: **Oswaldo Estrada**

DOI: 10.23692/iMex.13

Traces of Lesbianism in Cristina Rivera Garza's *La cresta de Ilión* (2002) and Valeria Luiselli's *Los ingravidos* (2011)

(pp. 60-72; DOI: 10.23692/iMex.13.4)

Alejandra Márquez

Abstract: Much research has been done regarding male queer narratives in contemporary Mexican literature. However, lesbianism has been greatly neglected by criticism. Although works such as Rosamaría Roffiel's *Amora* (1989) or Sara Levi Calderón's *Dos mujeres* (1990) have garnered some academic attention, little has been written about subsequent narratives. This article moves beyond those works whose main focus is lesbianism in order to understand how peripheral same-sex desire serves to undermine heteronormative patriarchal notions. I analyze Cristina Rivera Garza's *La cresta de Ilión* (2002) and Valeria Luiselli's *Los ingravidos* (2011). Because these narratives are not associated with depictions of lesbianism, my work shows how transgressive female desire pervades contemporary Mexican literature.

Keywords: lesbianism, queerness, Mexico, sexuality, same-sex desire, *Los ingravidos*, *La cresta de Ilión*



Licencia Creative Commons Atribución-CompartirIgual 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-SA 4.0)

[Website:](http://www.imex-revista.com)

www.imex-revista.com

[Editores iMex:](#)

Vittoria Borsò, Frank Leinen, Guido Rings, Yasmin Temelli

[Redacción iMex:](#)

Hans Bouchard, Bianca Morales García, Ana Cecilia Santos, Stephen Trinder

**Traces of Lesbianism in Cristina Rivera Garza's *La cresta de Ilión* (2002)
and Valeria Luiselli's *Los ingravidos* (2011)**

Alejandra Márquez

(University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

The 19th century served as a key moment for the consolidation of Mexico as an independent nation. However, this period privileged masculine subjects and portrayed women as objects used to perpetuate a heterosexual hegemony. Thus, it is not surprising that such heteronormative values are present in the literature of the time. Robert McKee Irwin highlights the way in which these works emphasize the importance of masculine homosocial bonds as an allegory of national unity.¹ Although in the 19th century much of the literary production revolved around heterosexual romance, there remained a tendency to exclusively situate women as a cornerstone in the relationships between men who competed for their affection based on their own masculinity.² Later, with the arrival of the 20th century and after the incident of *Los 41* in 1901,³ there was a proliferation of works that attempted to highlight virile values and attack the possibility of 'effeminacy' in men, that is to say, homosexuality as it was seen at the time. Regarding masculinity and the misogyny that it entails in Mexico, Carlos Monsiváis notes:

La ideología patriarcal hace de un hecho biológico la meta codiciada y prestigiosísima: *un hombre*, alguien de tal modo desprovisto de fragilidades y debilidades que obtiene la inefable madurez: hacer lo que le venga en gana. Nueva trampa semántica: el *muy hombre* es el triunfador, fatal destino el de las mujeres...y el de los fracasados (Monsiváis 1988: 105).

Although both Monsiváis and Sayak Valencia have pointed out that the concept of masculinity and the scope of *machismo* depend on the context in which they take place and that they have gradually changed,⁴ they both recognize that these ideas are still apparent in society. Valencia argues that, in México, the demands of hegemonic or traditional masculinity have been and continue to be redistributed to males by both the State and society.⁵ Therefore, there is a link between gender and national power that emanates from a series of heteronormative and patriarchal norms. I have pointed out masculinity in Mexico, as well as the role that it plays in

¹ See Irwin (2003: xiii).

² See Irwin (2003: 48).

³ In 1901, police raided a party of 41 men, some of whom were dressed in women's clothing. This, as Carlos Monsiváis points out, became the 'birth' of homosexuality in Mexico, as it created a media frenzy that brought with it visibility to homosexual subjects –albeit hostile– and became a watershed moment in Mexican society.

⁴ See Monsiváis (1988: 116); Valencia Triana (2014: 76).

⁵ See Valencia Triana (2014: 70).

patriarchal hegemony because it lays the groundwork for the ensuing analysis. My work analyzes the way in which lesbianism and an openness to non-heteronormative female sexuality can undermine this system by rejecting normative orientations as well as sexual desires imposed from a patriarchal hierarchy that sees heterosexuality as the only option. I do so by following Adrienne Rich's arguments regarding the idea that heterosexuality is seen as a norm and, therefore, lesbianism is an exception. Rich proposes the existence of a lesbian continuum that emphasizes relationships exclusively among women and that seeks to make them part of history, therefore making visible something normally ignored by phallogocentric systems –Rich not only explores relationships with a sexual or amorous component, but all of which establish ties between women.⁶ Acknowledging Rich's continuum, we may return to the discussion of homosocial bonds outlined by Irwin and Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba (2007) that lay the foundation for relationships among men in Mexico. Joining these theorists, David William Foster, in *Sexual Textualities: Essays on Queer/ing Latin American Writing* (1997), examines the possible similarity between these relationships among men –that go from *compadrismo* to intimate relationships– and Rich's continuum.⁷ Therefore, if in Mexico there has been a tendency to focus on male interactions, my work explores the multiple sides of their female counterparts, albeit by focusing on same-sex desire.

It is for this reason that I explore the least explicit side of the lesbian continuum and analyze works that are not looked at based on their characters' same-sex desire. In her essential *Entre amoras: lesbianismo en la narrativa mexicana* (2009), María Elena Olivera Córdova takes into account works that openly explore lesbianism in contemporary Mexican literature, including those such as the canonical *Amora* (1989) by Rosamaría Roffiel. My study, on the other hand, seeks to have a broader scope, tracing relationships between women in texts where these are not the main focus. I explicitly explore lesbianism due to its ability to resist a patriarchal vision of sexuality.⁸ Regarding this subject, Irwin argues that, as opposed to male homosexuality –in which, supposedly, there is an active and a passive subject, thus reproducing heterosexual encounters–, lesbianism does not translate as easily into heterosexual terms, posing a greater challenge for sexual hierarchies.⁹ According to Norma Mogrovejo, "[I]as relaciones entre mujeres, sean o no explícitamente sexuales, tienden a ser pasadas a través del filtro de una hetero-homo-sexualidad masculina socialmente construida y definida, ignorando la experiencia antitética" (Mogrovejo Aquis 2011: 30).

⁶ See Rich (1981).

⁷ See Foster (1997: 69).

⁸ See Rich (1981: 24).

⁹ See Irwin (2005: 99).

My study explores the characters La Traicionada and Amparo Dávila in Cristina Rivera Garza's *La cresta de Ilión* (2002), due to the women's homoerotic relationship that leads them to invent their own language, placing them out of reach for men. Likewise, I analyze Valeria Luiselli's *Los ingravidos* (2011) because of the protagonist's unfulfilled erotic encounters with a friend during her youth in the United States and the way in which these are constantly questioned, years later, by her husband in Mexico. Although Rivera Garza and Luiselli do not belong to the same generation and their work differs both stylistically and thematically, their narratives certainly incorporate peripheral same-sex desire between women. Even though other authors such as Enrique Serna, Mónica Lavín, Ana Clavel, and Iliana Godoy do this as well, I am interested in Luiselli and Rivera Garza due to their visibility in contemporary Mexican literature. Unlike many writers whose work focuses on lesbianism, these authors have been widely read in Mexico and internationally after having been translated into other languages.¹⁰ Their popularity and importance to current literary production allows me to show how same-sex desire pervades contemporary Mexican narratives.

Cristina Rivera Garza's work has been explored by critics based on its gender transgressions. Nonetheless, the possibility of approaching her 2002 text, *La cresta de Ilión*, by analyzing the lesbian desire and behavior of its characters has not yet been explored. The novel narrates the story of a doctor working in the Granja del Buen Reposo whose name is never revealed. One day, without warning, a woman calling herself Amparo Dávila shows up at his house and begins to question his gender, causing him to become uncertain about it. At the same time, when Amparo arrives, the doctor is living with his ill ex-lover, La Traicionada, who develops an intimate relationship with the visitor. Throughout the novel, the protagonist questions his identity and constantly attempts to assert his masculinity. These efforts are hindered by Amparo, who always refers to him as a woman. At the end of the novel, the doctor comes to terms with his attraction to men and locates himself on a gender continuum where his masculine physical appearance or the feminine shape of his pelvic bone no longer matter.¹¹

In Rivera Garza's work, we can observe the ambiguous lesbianism that I seek to point out, as well as the way in which it might serve to undermine the patriarchal mechanisms represented

¹⁰ Some of Cristina Rivera Garza's short fiction and poetry has been translated into English, while her novel *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999) has appeared in Italian, French, and Portuguese translations; in 2003 Andrew Hurley published the English translation as *No One Will See Me Cry*. *La cresta de Ilión* has recently been translated into English by Sarah Booker as *The Iliac Crest* (2017). Valeria Luiselli's work has also been translated into English by Christina MacSweeney. *Los ingravidos* was translated as *Faces in the Crowd* (2012). Her essay collection *Papeles falsos* (2010), her novel *La historia de mis dientes* (2013), and her testimonial book *Los niños perdidos (un ensayo en cuarenta preguntas)* (2016) have been published in English as *Sidewalks* (2013), *The Story of My Teeth* (2015), and *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (2017), respectively.

¹¹ See Estrada (2014: 235).

by the doctor at the beginning of the novel. This lesbianism arises when the two women who share the protagonist's house, La Traicionada and Amparo Dávila, begin a close relationship that escalates to the point of sharing a bed and creating their own language that locates them out of the doctor's reach. Due to his constant doubts regarding his gender, it is not until he fully accepts his femininity that he is able to break the barriers and access the women's language. In regards to the author's treatment of gender in her works, Oswaldo Estrada contends that Rivera Garza, as well as Rosa Beltrán and Ana Clavel, create metaphorical rooms of their own in order to combat reductive representations, not only as women, but also as human beings who find themselves prisoners to social constructs.¹²

Because numerous critics have discussed the many dimensions of the doctor's gender and sexuality, I wish to focus on the two female characters and their relationship. From Amparo's arrival to the protagonist's house, it is possible to observe the way in which she and La Traicionada begin to exclude him as they grow closer. The narrator and protagonist comments, in regards to the moment he discovers the beginning of the relationship between the two women, that Amparo Dávila "volvió a subir las escaleras y a encerrarse, para mi total desconcierto, en la habitación de La Traicionada. Fue así como supe que habían empezado a dormir juntas" (Rivera Garza 2002: 34). The act of locking herself in the room with La Traicionada reminds us of Estrada's argument about the authors' creation of metaphorical rooms of their own, although it is now the characters who create these spaces. By doing so, they delimit that which can only be accessed by women, developing a place beyond the reach of patriarchal heteronormativity. The doctor's confusion turns into anger, and although he claims to fear that the women know each other from before and might be planning an act of 'feminine revenge', it is evident that the proximity between them causes him anxiety because he is not included. Because this occurs at the beginning of *La cresta de Illión*, when the doctor has yet to question his masculinity, it is clear that his fear emerges because the women's relationship could undermine his power as a man.

Adrienne Rich argues that lesbianism can be seen as an act of resistance against patriarchal heteronormativity because lesbians reject a compulsory lifestyle. In many ways, their very existence can be considered an attack –direct or indirect– on what Rich calls "male right of access to women" (Rich 1981: 24). For this reason, she sees female homosexuality as an act of resistance against patriarchy. In Rivera Garza's novel, the doctor's fear of becoming a woman comes from his strong misogyny at the beginning of the story. This becomes evident especially when he talks about the nurses at work: "Porque eran mujeres, su rango menor, claramente

¹² See Estrada (2009: 65).

inferior comparado con el mío, no les provocaba resentimiento alguno sino, por el contrario, secretos deseos arribistas que, a veces, se mezclaban con extrañas urgencias sexuales" (Rivera Garza 2002: 48). On one hand, he feels superior to women, not only because he is a man, but also because of his higher rank. This shows that the division of labor, as R.W. Connell argues, is organized according to gender and, unsurprisingly, empowers men. This sexual division is a distribution of different types of work for different categories of people, and the social structure is based on restrictions for certain individuals.¹³

Even though in *La cresta de Ilión* there are both male and female nurses, only the latter are seen as inferior by the protagonist. The labor division explained by Connell emphasizes the power of a heteronormative patriarchal hegemony, situating the doctor at the top of this system. At the same time, the nurses' 'inferior' position, as well as their gender, make him feel as though they desire him sexually. This can be contrasted to the characters of Amparo Dávila and La Traicionada. At home it is not him, but rather Amparo, who is in power; the woman not only cares for his ex-lover, but also enters his house uninvited. The power dynamic shifts in the space of the house, which causes him to feel inferior, "Me sentí aislado y débil como el exiliado que vive en un país que nunca le resultará familiar" (Rivera Garza 2002: 39). Following Rich's postulates, these women are able to undermine his authority and place him "en una posición de marginalidad en la historia" (Ríos Baeza et al 2015: 51).

At the same time, Amparo Dávila transgresses the feminine roles assigned by Mexican patriarchal values. As pointed out by Linda McDowell Carlsen, Amparo can be situated within the archetype of the 'loose woman', studied by Debra Castillo, one that does not fit into the role of the submissive and pure Mexican woman because of her transgressive and powerful sexuality.¹⁴ Castillo points out that men need these types of women to serve as outlets for their own sexuality and as opposition to "decent" women (Castillo 1998: 12). On one hand, she makes the doctor feel helpless through her relationship with La Traicionada, while on the other, the possibility of her lesbian relationship denies men access to the intimate space that she has created. Adrienne Rich argues that "compulsory heterosexuality" causes the lesbian experience to be perceived "on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent, or simply rendered invisible" (Rich 1981: 4). This perception of deviance in the novel stems from Amparo being portrayed as a 'loose woman'. Not coincidentally, since the beginning of the 20th century in Mexico, female homosexuality has been linked to prostitutes. This can be seen in novels like Federico Gamboa's *Santa* (1903), with the character of La Gaditana, as well as in criminological texts

¹³ See Connell (1987: 99).

¹⁴ See Mc Dowell Carlsen (2010: 232). For more on the 'loose woman' archetype, see Castillo (1998).

like *Los criminales en México* (1904) by Carlos Roumagnac, where most of the lesbianism that takes place outside the prison originates in brothels.¹⁵ The bordello, a space where the least orthodox sexual behaviors become momentarily accepted, denies entry to the virgin and is only acceptable as long as it is the place where men relieve their sexual impulses. Therefore, it is clear that even within the brothel, lesbian behaviors or desire are seen as abhorrent and destined only to execrable women. Although not a prostitute –but rather a 'loose woman'–, Amparo develops her relationship with La Traicionada in the doctor's house, making him a witness but not allowing him to penetrate the bond between them.

This lack of access to the women grows when the protagonist realizes that not only do they sleep together, but they have also created their own language:

Tan pronto como abrí la puerta trasera de la casa, sin embargo, la placidez se transformó en horror. Las oí hablar. Al inicio sólo distinguí los murmullos pero, conforme subí la escalera, descubrí que compartían palabras totalmente desconocidas para mí [...] Para mi total desconcierto supe entonces que, en el poco o mucho tiempo que llevaban juntas, se habían hecho de un idioma propio (Rivera Garza 2002: 38).

This language serves as a metaphor for their relationship and, therefore, for the intimate space that he cannot enter. Not coincidentally, Rich argues that men's fear of being excluded lies in the possibility that women can feel indifference toward them, and that they may only be granted sexual, emotional, and economic access to them on women's terms.¹⁶

Although they are able to exclude the protagonist, the relationship between the women collapses when he invites the hospital's Director General to his house to meet them. Much to their surprise, he is able to speak their language. From his arrival, tension grows between the women. Surprisingly, even the doctor perceives the anxiety that arises from La Traicionada's jealousy due to the apparent attraction between Amparo and the Director General: "Yo había detestado su mutuo acercamiento, es cierto, lo había soportado más por terror que por deferencia, pero nada me había preparado para esto" (Rivera Garza 2002: 118). It is worth noting that this occurs towards the end of the novel, after the doctor has begun doubting his masculinity and questioning whether he is a man or a woman. This distances him from the masculine and patriarchal role that he had at the beginning of the story, making him more of an ally to the women because of his new found gender identity. Although the evening concludes amicably when the three of them speak their own language, the intrusion of the man in the bond between Amparo and La Traicionada changes their relationship. To our surprise, La Traicionada –and not Amparo– ends up getting close to the Director General. Amparo

¹⁵ See Irwin (2005: 98).

¹⁶ See Rich (1981: 17).

complains to the doctor about the two of them spending time together, making her jealousy clear; if they once had their own space and language, a man, compulsory heterosexuality, and patriarchy have ended their relationship. In a suggestive article, Rebecca Garonzik analyzes how the Director General's gender identity could be seen as ambiguous because he is given attributes commonly associated with feminine characteristics, such as excessively caring about his looks or, as the narrator claims, his purple shirt that "había elegido para la tarde me dio a entender que había rasgos de su personalidad, y de sus gustos que ni siquiera presentía" (Rivera Garza 2002: 116). Garonzik adds that the possible homosexuality or effeminacy of the man is problematized by his apparent attraction to Amparo. Although it is true that he is given an air of sophistication and that Rivera Garza makes him an ambiguous character, his masculinity is not scrutinized as much as the protagonist's, maintaining his position of power from the male hierarchy. Therefore, the fact that he breaks into the women's language –as opposed to the protagonist– has negative consequences for their relationship by situating himself as a patriarchal element that ultimately separates them.

Although the relationship between La Traicionada and Amparo, until the arrival of the Director General, has been constituted by its ability to remain out of the reach of men, the female circle opens up to the doctor once he goes beyond gender distinctions. If we are told throughout the novel that he is a man, at the end of the story he comes to terms with his female identity. *La cresta de Ilión* concludes as the protagonist accepts his 'secret', the fact that maybe the women who referred to him as a woman were right: "Sonreí al recordar también que la pelvis es el área más eficaz para determinar el sexo de un individuo. Todas las Emisarias debieron haberlo sabido para poder dar con mi secreto" (Rivera Garza 2002: 158). Interestingly, even though on multiple occasions he touches his penis and testicles to make sure he is a man, it is precisely a physical attribute –his wide pelvic bone– that betrays his femininity. Oswaldo Estrada has analyzed such circumstances following Judith Butler's postulates and argues that, as proof that gender identity is a social construct, throughout the novel, the doctor feels the need to confirm his fragile masculinity based on what he is and what he has.¹⁷ At the beginning of the novel the protagonist is a representation of the patriarchal heteronormativity due to his misogyny and anger for not being able to penetrate the space created by La Traicionada and Amparo. Nonetheless, once he accepts his own femininity, the women's language opens up to him. Only after he accepts his true gender identity is he able to enter the female space and become a part of the lesbian continuum, which, in Rich's words, reflects a deeply feminine

¹⁷ See Estrada (2014: 234).

condition –one that refers to a specific history and experience shared by women and their relationship to one another, going beyond sexual acts or desire .¹⁸

Unlike Rivera Garza's work, Luiselli's novel does not focus on issues of gender or sexual transgressions, and yet it certainly portrays same-sex desire. *Los ingravidos* (2011) tells the story of a woman whose name is never revealed. The work takes place through a series of fragments that jump from past to present in order to narrate the protagonist's youth as an editor in New York City and her current life as a wife and mother in Mexico City. Occasionally, and due to the woman's interest in his work, we hear the perspective of Mexican poet Gilberto Owen, who talks about his life in New York from his deathbed. Luiselli intertwines the lives of the poet and the protagonist based on their experiences in the American literary world and as foreigners navigating everyday-life in New York.

What is of interest for this study in Luiselli's novel, however, is the erotic relationship that the woman develops with her friend Dakota during her youth in New York, even though it does not result in a sexual encounter. From the moment that she meets her friend, the woman lets the reader know the extent of the curiosity she causes her to feel: "Nunca me lavo las manos en los baños públicos, pero la mujer que se estaba repasando el futuro rostro de Dakota con una esponja me pareció inquietante y quise verla de cerca. Así que me lavé las manos" (Luiselli 2011: 24). Their first encounter takes place in a space that is seen as exclusively feminine and that, if we follow heteronormative guidelines that regulate such binary spaces, should be exempt from any type of interaction that might question heterosexuality. We can see the moment they meet as a queering of the space because their encounter, without any type of physical or sexual contact, takes away the layer of heterosexuality of the bathroom and opens up the possibility of women who are curious about other women. At the same time, the protagonist does something that she admits to not doing normally just to get close to Dakota, creating a disruption in her routine in order to make this encounter happen.

Later on, the eroticism of their relationship intensifies when Dakota moves in with the protagonist and their interactions become more physical. The woman narrates: "Cuando yo no pasaba la noche en otro sitio, dormíamos ambas en mi cama, aunque Dakota llegaba casi siempre muy tarde de trabajar. Se metía desnuda a la cama y me abrazaba la espalda, también desnuda. Tenía unos senos suaves y abultados; los pezones pequeños" (Luiselli 2011: 46). Even though the women never have sex, they do share moments of intimacy and affection that are somewhat erotic. Furthermore, although they do not stop having encounters with men, their physical interactions take place in the solitude of spaces where only the two of them are present,

¹⁸ See Rich (1981: 25).

inhibiting the possibility of men taking part in them. When Dakota moves out of the protagonist's place, another moment of intimacy occurs in her new apartment: "Abrimos todas las ventanas y nos desnudamos hasta los calzones. Pintamos el baño, la cocina, la mitad del único cuarto. Nos pintamos los pezones de azul cobalto. Cuando se acabó la pintura nos tiramos boca arriba en el piso del cuarto y prendimos un cigarro. Dakota quiso que intercambiáramos calzones" (Luiselli 2011: 63). Following this fragment, Luiselli inserts an interruption by the protagonist's husband in the present, who has read her writing: "Todo es ficción, le digo a mi marido, pero no me cree" (Luiselli 2011: 63). Although the erotic interactions with Dakota do not seem to bring her any consequences, years later, in Mexico, these actions are questioned by her husband.

In order to further delve into my analysis and comprehend how the relationship with Dakota destabilizes the patriarchal order –when the protagonist is in Mexico– it is productive to think about the contrasts between her life in the United States and her present as a wife and mother in Mexico. The narrator recounts her multiple sexual encounters with different men during her stay in New York. Nonetheless, while her life in the American city seems to allow her certain degree of freedom and carelessness, her life in Mexico is constantly affected by her husband, who reads and questions her writing. This happens on more than one occasion without the woman's permission, making him function as a representation of patriarchy that is constantly challenging her past, specifically any expression of her sexuality. While in the United States she is able to have a more open sexuality, once she returns to Mexico and continues the heteronormative patterns analyzed by Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) as part of success –marriage, procreation, etc.–, the possibility that her stories might be true disturbs her husband. In a way, the protagonist of Luiselli's novel creates two separate spaces, where Mexico is associated with patriarchal values and the United States with being able to leave them behind momentarily. According to Sayak Valencia, "en el contexto mexicano las construcciones de género están íntimamente relacionadas con la construcción del Estado" (Valencia Triana 2014: 72). Although *Los ingravidos* does not occupy itself with constructions of Mexican identity or nationalism, it does show how the protagonist follows normative gender roles when in her country. If we revisit Rich's postulates regarding male control of female sexuality, we can think about the fear that is opened up to men because of the possibility of indifference or exclusion by women if they are able to control their own sexuality, and even more if they do so by having encounters with other women.¹⁹ For this reason, although her husband is suspicious and feels uneasy to think that his wife could have led a more sexually

¹⁹ See Rich (1981: 17).

adventurous life, what he finds more troubling is the possibility that she may have had sex with women. Therefore, he questions her writing: "Mi marido ha vuelto a leer algunas de estas páginas. ¿Te acostabas con mujeres?, me pregunta" (Luiselli 2011: 46). He insists, "¿Pero te has acostado con alguna mujer?, insiste mi marido. Nunca, respondo. No sabría cómo" (Luiselli 2011: 47).

The fact that the possibility of a lesbian encounter is particularly disturbing to her husband is parallel to Rich's arguments about compulsory heterosexuality as a mechanism from which men, while seeking to condemn or dismiss lesbianism, secure their physical, sexual, and emotional control of women.²⁰ After being pressured, Luiselli's protagonist reassures her husband that she has never had sex with other women, and in order to reassert her heterosexuality, she must say that she would not even know how to have sex with a woman. By claiming ignorance in regards to this topic, she is able to stop her husband from asking about the possibility of a lesbian encounter. Although we may speculate about whether or not she is telling the truth, what is truly productive is to think about her need to reassure her husband that she is not capable of having sex with another woman. This reclaims her heterosexuality at the same time that it keeps her inside the margins of patriarchal thought. Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui argues that the fascination of heterosexual men with lesbian encounters is based not on the possibility of witnessing two women having sexual intercourse but rather on having the power to force them into it.²¹ On the other hand, thinking that two women could have sex without the presence or desire of a man undermines that position of power. Therefore, we can think that her husband's questions arise from not having had any type of power over her possible interactions with Dakota, rendering them unacceptable within a heteronormative system that maintains gender and power relations. Although the character's actions interrupt –albeit only in the form of momentary desire and curiosity– normative heterosexual relationships, this interruption carries with it meaning beyond sexuality. In his aforementioned work, Halberstam argues a reading of failure as a way to reject capitalist, heterosexual impositions. For him, success in Western terms is based on a series of notions about reproduction and power of acquisition based on 'hard work', which oftentimes is preferable to thinking about privilege based on race, gender, and class.²² For the critic, "other subordinate, queer, or counterhegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique" (Halberstam 2011: 89). Along these lines, the narrator's desire goes beyond a simple reproduction of the heterosexual model. She,

²⁰ See Rich (1981: 22)

²¹ See Sifuentes-Jáuregui (2002: 105).

²² See Halberstam (2011: 3).

therefore, distances herself momentarily from what Lisa Duggan has referred to as "new homonormativity" (Duggan 2002: 179). This concept arises from Western politics that do not question institutional heteronormative impositions, but rather maintain them in favor of a gay culture based on domesticity and consumption, while refusing to engage with a critical or social movement.²³ While I do not intend to claim that she completely separates herself from the capitalist notions of success –after all, in the present, the character is married and has children– it is possible to think about the traces of lesbianism surrounding her as disturbances that threaten to destabilize such system.

Regardless of the gender and sexual relations between the narrator and her husband, open lesbianism is not completely ignored in Luiselli's novel since the protagonist's sister is married to a woman. She describes the relationship: "Laura vivía en Filadelfia con su esposa Enea. Todavía viven ahí. Son personas activas, contentas consigo mismas. Enea es argentina, da clases en Princeton. Laura y Enea pertenecen a toda clase de grupos y organizaciones; son académicas; son de izquierda; son vegetarianas. Este año van a subir el Kilimanjaro" (Luiselli 2011: 25). Interestingly, just like the interactions that the protagonist has with Dakota, the relationship between Laura and Enea takes place specifically outside of Mexico and in the United States. Authors like Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba have already pointed out how, during the consolidation of Mexico as a nation and later, with the emergence of the concept of homosexuality, the homosexual and, specifically, the 'effeminate' was seen as something foreign.²⁴ This is opposed to lesbianism, which, in the Mexican imagination, is conspicuous by its absence as manifested by Carlos Monsiváis in a letter to lesbian activist Nancy Cárdenas: "¿Cómo era posible? Mujeres que se entendían entre sí, sin la necesidad de los hombres. El lesbianismo era tan inconcebible que a sus practicantes se les vilipendiaba por el aspecto de 'marimachas' o de 'quedadas profesionales,' y no por la conducta que la sociedad se negaba a creer posible" (Monsiváis 2013: 131).

This deliberate lack of visibility –also studied by Rich in the U.S. context– can be understood in Mexico if we take into consideration the aforementioned archetypes. Since lesbians do not fit the role of either the virgin or Malinche, or even the one of the spinster analyzed by Luis Leal,²⁵ it is not surprising that their existence tends to be ignored. If I have stopped to talk about the lack of acknowledgement of lesbians, it is because it seems that in Luiselli's novel there is a relationship between lesbianism or possible lesbian desire and the foreign. Although Laura is Mexican, her wife is Argentine and they both live and have lived during their entire relationship

²³ See Duggan (2002: 179).

²⁴ See Domínguez Ruvalcaba (2007: 43).

²⁵ See Leal (1983: 235).

in the United States. There, they are situated far from the patriarchal control associated with Mexican society. It is worth noting the way in which the narrator describes them as being happy with themselves. This is opposed to her own situation where her relationship with her husband is on the verge of failure as she suspects he is cheating on her, and she is unable to finish her writing. I do not want to claim that she sees lesbianism as a better option, but she recognizes the possibility of a healthy relationship between two women as long as it takes place away from the patriarchal heteronormative hegemony represented by Mexico.

While the works I have explored do not focus on lesbian relationships, they all show some form of behavior or desire from their characters that positions them along Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum. Although scholars such as María Elena Olivera Córdova have written essential works that analyze texts belonging to what they refer to as "lesboliteratura" (Olivera Córdova 2009: 29), defined as literature that examines emotional and sexual relationships between women, it is important to broaden the scope of such studies and attempt to trace peripheral characters from works that would probably not fit into said genre. This further exploration is important because, female sexuality, in both literature and the society that surrounds it, is not static and should be analyzed in its diverse manifestations. Furthermore, the positioning of characters that feel curiosity, desire, or that have sexual encounters with other women regardless of not being part of a genre such as "lesboliteratura", helps us understand how Mexican writers have incorporated sexualities that go beyond heteronormative standards as part of their female characters. These examples serve to rethink the way that, through their desire and actions, they can undermine patriarchal heteronormativity in Mexico.

Bibliography

CASTILLO, Debra (1998): *Easy Women: Sex and Gender in Modern Mexican Fiction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

CONNELL, R.W (1987): *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*. Stanford: Stanford UP.

DOMÍNGUEZ RUVALCABA, Héctor (2007): *Modernity and the Nation in Mexican Representations of Masculinity: From Sensuality to Bloodshed*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

DUGGAN, Lisa (2002): 'The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism'. In: Russ Castronovo / Dana D. Nelson (eds.): *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 175-194.

ESTRADA, Oswaldo (2014): *Ser mujer y estar presente*. México: UNAM.

ESTRADA, Oswaldo (2009): 'Against Representation: Women's Writing in Contemporary Mexico'. In: *Hispanófila* 157, 63-78.

FOSTER, David William (1997): *Sexual Textualities: Essays on Queer/ing Latin American Writing*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

- HALBERSTAM, Jack (2011): *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- IRWIN, Robert McKee (2005): 'Las inseparables' and Other Early Traces of Modern Mexican Lesbianism'. In: *Confluencia*, 20.2, 98-111.
- IRWIN, Robert McKee (2003): *Mexican Masculinities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- LEAL, Luis (1983): 'Female Archetypes in Mexican Literature'. In: Beth Miller (ed.): *Women in Hispanic Literature: Icons and Fallen Idols*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 227-242.
- LUISELLI, Valeria (2011): *Los ingravidos*. México: Sextopiso.
- MCDOWELL CARLSEN, Linda (2010): 'Te conozco de cuando eras árbol': Gender, Utopianism, and the Border in Cristina Rivera Garza's *La cresta de Ilión*'. In: *Symposium* 64.4, 229-242.
- MOGROVEJO AQUISE, Norma (2011): *Teoría lésbica, participación política y literatura*. México: UNAM.
- MONSIVÁIS, Carlos (2013): *Misógino feminista*. México: Debate Feminista/Oceano.
- MONSIVÁIS, Carlos (1988): *Escenas de pudor y liviandad*. México: Grijalbo, 1988.
- OLIVERA CÓRDOVA, María Elena (2009): *Entre amoras. Lesbianismo en la narrativa mexicana*. México: CEIICH-UNAM.
- RICH, Adrienne (1981): *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*. London: Only Women Press Ltd.
- RÍOS BAEZA, Felipe / Samantha Escobar Fuentes / Antonio Durán Ruiz / José Martínez Torres / Manuel Briones Vázquez (2015): 'Visos de la narrativa posmoderna: de *Nadie me verá llorar* a *Lo anterior*'. In: Alejandro Palma Castro / Cécile Quintana / Alejandro Lámbarry / Alicia Ramírez Olivares / Felipe Adrián Ríos Baeza (eds.): *Cristina Rivera Garza: una escritura impropia. Un estudio de su obra literaria (1991-2014)*. México: Ediciones E y C, 23-64.
- RIVERA GARZA, Cristina (2002): *La cresta de Ilión*. México: Tusquets.
- SIFUENTES-JÁUREGUI, Ben (2002): *Transvestism, Masculinity, and Latin American Literature: Genders Share Flesh*. New York: Palgrave.
- VALENCIA TRIANA, Sayak (2014): 'Teoría transfeminista para el análisis de la violencia machista y la reconstrucción no-violenta del tejido social en el México contemporáneo'. In: *Universitas Humanística*, 78, 65-88.