

Novel Dialogue 2.6
Cristina Rivera Garza in conversation with Kate Marshall and Dominique
Vargas (AV)

Aarthi Vadde

Hello and welcome to Season 2 of Novel Dialogue, a literary podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies. I'm Aarthi Vadde. My co-host is John Plotz. We take turns hosting episodes throughout the season. If you are new to our show, Novel Dialogue brings critics and novelists into lively conversations about how we read, write, publish, and remember novels.

And today we are expanding our usual format to stage a trialogue between the wonderful novelist Cristina Rivera Garza and critics Kate Marshall and Dominique Vargas. Professor Rivera Garza is of course much more than a novelist. She is a prolific writer of short stories, poetry, essays and nonfiction. She is also a translator and founder of the first Spanish language doctoral Creative Writing program in the United States. She has been awarded more prizes than I can count, but suffice to say, she is a MacArthur genius and her novels, most recently the beautifully eerie *The Taiga Syndrome* have been translated into multiple world languages. So thank you so much for making time for us, Professor Rivera Garza.

Cristina Rivera Garza

Thank you so much for the invitation.

AV

Yes, we're very excited.

Professor Kate Marshall joins us from Notre Dame, where she is an associate professor of English and the author of a fantastic book on American Literature and Media Studies, entitled *Corridors*.

She's currently finishing up a second book about novels by non-human narrators.

And our third guest is Dominique Vargas, who was a postdoctoral fellow at Notre Dame and has just defended her dissertation on decolonial consciousness in multi-ethnic women's literature. So congrats, Dominique. Welcome, welcome Kate. Say hi to everyone.

Dominique Vargas

Hello, hi, thank you.

Kate Marshall

It's great to be here, thank you Aarthi.

AV

Yes. And without further ado I'm passing the mic to Dominique to get us started.

DV

Hi, thanks. Thank you so much Professor Vargas for taking time to talk to us today. I think we'll start with just sort of a basic question and ask you how did you know you wanted to be a writer? How did you start writing?

CRG

Well, that's apparently a simple question, right? It's always very complicated and I tend to have a couple of answers for that. Now that I look back, I think it all started because I was an avid reader as a child, and reading, you know, all kinds of books, not necessarily novels or not necessarily literature. I read some chronicles, I read some history of medicine, some accounts by botanists. So just getting close to the written word allowed me to dream, to imagine different worlds, and I believe that's pretty much the seed that started it all.

DV

And did you do that from a very young age?

CRG

Oh well, you know we used to travel a lot too. We used to take a lot of long road trips when I was a child I'm talking about being 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, you know sort of a preteen age, I suppose. In addition to reading, I think these long road trips allowed me to just get used to imagine alternative worlds, alternative ways of being in this world. So I think both came more or less at the same time. Not extremely young, but somehow getting there to the age you know, to the teenage years when you are questioning everything, interrogating everything around you.

KM

Well, thank you for also giving me some good motivation to continue my policy of not using iPads on long road trips with my young children, who I've been encouraging to spend a little bit more time in their heads as we as we travel the country.

It's, you know, it's really interesting to hear about this early reading and how you're thinking about different ways of engaging with texts, you know, ranging from stories to botany texts, and we were wondering if we could ask you about other ways in which you could describe the key influences on your work.

CRG

I'm so glad you mentioned the issue of technology. I should have mentioned, Kate, that when I'm talking about these road trips, these very long road trips, all across northern Mexico, the car was one of those old Volkswagen sedan cars, you know, the "Vochitos" we called them in Mexico. And of course it didn't have a radio, so it was a very basic type of car. So there's so much you can talk in family in these very long trips so there is nothing else left after a couple of hours, but the imagination. So engaging with that in a very active and dynamic way, it transforms what you see through the windows into you know entire movies, entire novels, very complicated plots and everything. So that was very relevant.

And that allows me to talk a bit about those influences, I think. And the names are the names that you usually hear when Latin American literature is mentioned. Juan Rulfo, in Mexico. Rosario Castellanos, a wonderful woman writer too. Poets, also, López Velarde, Ramón López Velarde from Mexico as well. Later on when I was in the university, women writers like, of course Virginia Woolf and Marguerite Duras and you know a range of both women and men authors. But I have to say I read a lot of women, that was not something that I chose consciously. It just seemed they were available and they seemed to be important in the way I was trying to think about my place in the world as well.

DV

So listening to you talk about sort of the ability to have time and I'm wondering if that branches into your work as well. Do you, what's your relationship, like with your books once they're done? Do you go back and revisit them? Do you take some time apart?

CRG

When I'm doing readings, that's when I read my books back and I cannot help it, I'm workshopping my own work and I'm thinking, Oh my gosh, this comma shouldn't be there. That word is not the exact word. I should change that. This paragraph needs a better closing sentence. So it's a very dramatic experience. It's never like this is complete and done. So in a way, it is, exploration is, but the work of writing, that's never ending and there is always space for something else, for an alternative view, for a new word, or something that I would do differently now. And given the chance, like when I'm translating, when I'm working with translators, specifically into English, I take every single opportunity to rewrite my books. So if I could, I would change some of the titles of my books too, but I've been told that that's not a good idea. Yeah, because of the identity of the book, you know, but also because you cannot offer an old book with a new title to readers, it would be like lying to them, and that I wouldn't do, I wouldn't like to do that. But you know, books change, books evolve.

AV

When you were talking about having a relationship with your translators and not letting a book end, I'm reminded of, you know, other writers who either auto-translated their work, you know, Tagore translated *Ghare Baire* as *The Home and the World*, and in Bengali that would be "inside outside," which has a very different resonance in his own national tradition versus, say, an American or global tradition. But Aimé Césaire, who kept coming back to *Cahier* and kept rewriting that poem throughout his career.

I was just curious if you, with your translators, feel like you're revisiting and rewriting a text that could follow you for longer, you know a text that you maybe, it's more like your life or that changes as your life changes.

CRG

Yeah, yeah, there is definitely, that sensation is very organic too. And I have another story for that one as well. I was working with, that was Suzanne Jill Levine and Aviva Kana in the translation of *The Taiga Syndrome*, and you know, I wrote that, I published that book in Mexico. It was classified as a book of literature, just that. But once it was translated into, I guess literary fiction, that's how you would use, that would be the label in English. But once it was translated into English, I was very surprised, pleasantly surprised, that the

book won the 2018 Shirley Jackson Award. Which is, you know, it was a very different reading of the book, one that I loved, of course. One that taught me to read my book in a different way, to look at scenes and plot lines and character development in such a different way. So I love the power of translation in that sense. There is not only the moving language, you know from one type of register into a different one. You are able to cross genre lines.

KM

So we were going to make some space for you to give a brief reading, and now might be a great time to invite you to read from your work.

CRG

So what I, I'm going to take a moment to read the last section of this book, the title in English is *Keep Writing*. I'm not going to read every single one, it would be too long, but I'll read a couple of the sentences right here:

“Because we become social in language. My *I* for *you*. Your *you* for me. Our *you* all for *them*.

Because writing by nature invites us to consider the possibility that the world can, in fact, be different.

Because the secret mechanism of writing is imagination.

Because *imagination* is another word for *criticism* and, this, the other word for *subversion*.

Because those who write will never adapt.

Because memory.

Because writing teaches us that nothing is “natural.” Things are closer than they appear, writing also tells us that.

Because it is through that rectangular artifact we call a book that we communicate with our dead. And all of the dead are our dead.

Because the sentence produces memories that will be inhabited by the names of Marco and José Luis Piña Dávila, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, January 30th, 2010.

Because belonging is something I do through you, the sentence.

Because at the end of each line there is an abyss worth tumbling into. Or launching yourself into. Or disappearing into.

Because look how the verb *to burst* bursts out of itself.

Because too, it is what we would write in the case that we were to write.

Because the line is an imprecation or a prayer.

Because terror stops there ,where the word *terror* stops inscribed.
Because a paragraph is an extreme sport.
Because language is a form of opposition that always takes us
elsewhere.
Because it is only through writing that the here is founded. Because the
now.
Because while the violence invites and acquires unprecedented forms,
contemporary language has difficulty giving it possible names: Martín and
Bryan Almanza; Nuevo Laredo-Reynosa-Matamoros, April 2010.
Because in the rectangle of a page I am nourished and I dream and I
plunged and I die. Because there, too, I am reborn. We are reborn.
Because *yes* is a small and sacred and savage word all at the same time.
Because I do not forget. Because we will not forget.”

KM

Thank you. And I really love that section of *Grieving*, this section called *Keep Writing*. And one of the lines that wasn't part of this reading is one in which you say “Because this is the most definitive form of the collective.” And I wanted to think a little bit about that with you and ask you to talk a little bit more about this picture that you've been really building with us all day about how writing produces collectivities.

CVG

Yeah. I've been working for quite a while about a concept, disappropriation. I published the book, recently translated into English, by the way, by Robin Myers called *The Restless Dead: Necrowriting and Disappropriation*, and essentially what I did there was trying to think, well trying to give a sense of the kinds of thinking processes that I've been going through as I try to explain myself and others how writing comes into being, especially one that is situated in the United States. A writing that I do in Spanish, in the United States, while I'm working as a professor at different universities, right? So there has been, I'm very aware of a very important discussion that we've been having as a collective about issues of appropriation, issues of who has the right to say what, and to write what, and the way in which I've been thinking about is precisely through the issue of disappropriation. Essentially, I mean, it's way more complicated than whatever I want to say right now, but it's an invitation to consider that the root of all writing processes are, the roots are plural. That we are first members of a community and then when that community fails, is that we become individuals. That when we, pictures,

stereotypical pictures of writers that depict them, you know by themselves in front of the computer and with a huge bookcase behind them as though they are troubled souls struggling by themselves against the world, that's something that I'm essentially questioning all the time. Because essentially what I'm kind of, I'm going to repeat a bit what I've said earlier, but I'm using language and that's what I do, when I'm exploring and working with language which is what I do when I write, there is a sociality in it. There is no way that I can do that by myself. That's the reason I have said there is no solitude in writing. I might appear to be by myself in front of the computer, but if I'm working with language, I'm working with entire histories. I'm working with my community or what I consider to be my community, that I'm working with a range of communities, too. And that is to me, the great capacity, the power of writing and responsibility, too.

So because the language I'm using is not of my own making, because it brings with them all these embedded histories and stories and because what I do is part of an ongoing larger dialogue that involves many other practitioners, that's basically why I'm saying this that appears to be a solitary profession, it's not at all, ever, right. And then as a consequence, as a result of that, I think the writing has this enormous capacity for community making. In terms, as I said of the telling of the stories, but also in terms of the way in which we interrogate language in general, and different communities with different cultural mores with different needs with different distances, processes, have always, specific ways to approach language and what language is for, right.

I've said recently on the occasion of the publication of *El Invencible Verano de Liliana*, my most recent book in Spanish, which is an exploration of the femicide of Liliana Rivera Garza, my younger sister, I've said that it's taken me 30 years, this tragedy occurred on July 16, 1990. So 31 years after that I was finally able to write this story, and I did that, I was able to do it because collectively now we have generated a language that allows me to tell this story without resorting to the usual mores of the passionate crimes or the usual way of telling this story from the patriarchal point of view, which usually makes the victim responsible and exonerates the perpetrator. So it is not something that we can decide on our own. We work with these materials and this wait, that it might appear to be such a long wait, 31 years, in the specific case of the book that I'm talking about, is just something that was personal, my own personal process, grieving process. But it's also social. The way in which the time that it has taken us, and specifically to feminists, to feminist

mobilizations throughout the world to produce a language with which now I can tell this story with dignity and faithfully to, and critically as well.

In another way obviously it's something that we do on campuses and university campuses, right. We teach creative writing. To me was extremely relevant to be able to collaborate, to contribute to the emergence of the PhD in Creative Writing in Spanish, especially because it took place in 2017, a crucial year of recent politics and it was very important to me that we were doing this, us, as Spanish was being deleted from the pages of the White House and to be able to say that in that year we launched a program that might allow writers who write in Spanish in this country was part of my activism, my writing activism, and that to me is important. We can do way more, and many other people, they're wonderful, very important. They engage with communities in other ways, but this is what I see as my own responsibility. This is what I can do. We are after all, about 50-60 million Spanish speakers in this country. Spanish is hardly a foreign language in the United States. I live in the second largest Spanish speaking country in the world. Every time that I say this it's like hmmm, where this woman might be living, it's like the United States!

AV

That's such a, I mean, fascinating set of ideas, and you've introduced so many interesting concepts into the conversation. I mean disappropriation being one of them, but also an aesthetic collectivism as an antidote to aesthetic individualism, which is, I think, what often defines experimental writing to a lot of people, right? The sense that you are pursuing difficulty or incomprehensibility in the name of somehow breaking with the community, not conveying a communal spirit.

I was going to go back one step and ask you about that doctoral program. Creative Writing in Spanish and to think about that in terms of a topic that has come up several times on our podcast, which is decolonizing the university and how one does it, right?

CVG

Those are two wonderful, wonderful questions and I think they go together. Let me just very briefly elaborate on the first one. It has to do with issues of experimentation. I've said this also in regards to my most recent book, but I think it applies to earlier works as well that in order for me to be

able to write this book in the way in which it was written, I had to investigate, contest, struggle with received narratives, received, powerful, hegemonic narratives of violence against women, and so experimentation is not an option, right, is not a decision that any individual can take on his or her own.

I think in my case, what I would like to think is that in order for me to be able to tell this story, as I said earlier with dignity and with political relevance, I had to not only pose the questions but also to subvert the form. So both things to me are related, and of course I'm a writer and at times I indulge myself. I like some of the exercises that the professional readers might enjoy more than readers that I've just, that are not professors of literature, let me put it that way, right.

AV

Casual reader.

CVG

Yeah, these casual readers and it's relevant, what they do, is what we do, I didn't want to imply anything else. But as much as I can indulge myself in that exercise when I'm writing, when I'm engaging into a longer project, that's my task. So I have to investigate language. I have to do something, because without that there is no aesthetic moment. There is no aesthetic operation to begin with, and therefore the whole ethical aspect of that gets, its missed too. So that's extremely important, so I don't consider that to be a feat of, you know, a deed of extreme individualism. I think, it's just a matter of obedience, honoring the materials that I'm working with, rather than the opposite, you see.

And on the other hand, I think there is much to be done about decolonizing, both writing and the university. I think the PhD that I'm working with is housed in the Department of Hispanic Studies. I'm betting on the fact, I truly believe that the future, let me see, let me find a way to put this in a better way. The PhD program that now we belong to had two tracks, literature and linguistics, which is usually the usual structure for many of these departments and we came to add a third one, Creative Writing.

I do believe that this is the future for Departments of Hispanic Studies or Departments of Spanish and Portuguese or Departments of Romance Languages. There is of course, the pull, the attraction that creative writing elicits among students and that's, in terms of numbers, incredibly relevant.

But also there are pedagogical tools that we bring into campus and to the discussion of language that are extremely relevant for future professors of Spanish in this country. So there is a horizontal structure of the workshop, the careful reading and consideration of text. The conversation that is central to, you know, to workshopping in general, and the possibility to being vulnerable even in a university setting, in a PhD program, which usually requires the opposite, right. We have to think that we are, we know what we are doing and we have what it takes. We have the stamina and the determination. Well, yes, we all have to do that, but at the same time we can be vulnerable and allow dissent and allow this critical conversation that to me is extremely relevant in the pedagogy of creative writing programs.

So there are many, many limitations that comes with the university setting, and I'm very aware of that. But there are issues, specifically about public universities that are very dear to me.

And I am the product of a public university, without the UNAM and later the University of Houston, I wouldn't be the professor and writer than I am now. And I'm saying that in terms of structural terms, you know in terms of finances and the economy, but also in terms of the friendships and in terms of the conversation, right. And I would like to think that creative writing programs that are placing community and community making processes and practices at the center of their own exploration will teach us something about decolonizing the university.

KM

So I have the final question which is a tradition of this podcast. So Novel Dialogue always asks what is your favorite treat while you're in the throes of writing? So what do you do or play or eat when the going gets really tough?

CVG

Oh my gosh. Let's see, I usually write in the mornings, that's my best time. That's my best energy, especially after you know, right after waking up, and I'm not so sure if I'm still dreaming, I'm still, I'm already thinking, that kind of threshold is important to me. But obviously I have to do something to just start typing and that would have to be green tea.

AV

I love that.

CVG

Yeah, yeah, that's, and then I continue with that. It's much better than coffee. I had to quit coffee, for you know, health reasons. But I would say that it's simple, it's powerful and it helps me.

AV

I have to say that's my favorite answer because I drink about 6 cups of green tea a day.

KM

I switched to it from coffee recently too. It's good.

CVG

Is that right? Yeah, it's much better, right? It's less, I don't know, I get less jittery.

AV

Yeah, it's a nice slow burn throughout the whole day.

CVG

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I agree. So it's been a good change in my life, yeah, writing life.

AV

Well, I'm going to thank you all for letting me make it quadrilogue every now and then. But I thought this was a really wonderful triologue and. I will just send us out.

John and I are grateful to the Society of Novel Studies for its sponsorship and acknowledge support from Duke University and Brandeis. Nai Kim is our production designer, Claire Ogden is our audio engineer, Hannah Jorgensen is our transcript editor, and James Draney is our blog editor.

Past and upcoming episodes include Mark Wollaeger talking to Tom Perrotta, Corina Stan with Carol Phillips, and Colleen Lye conversation with Viet Tan Nguyen.

So from all of us here at Novel Dialogue, thanks for listening and if you liked what you heard, rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts.