

Letters from Rosario: On Power, Gender, and Canon Formation in Mexico

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In Memory of María Escandón (1923-1994)

More or less accustomed to the role of villain in a relationship that started to become public following the death of *Balún-Canán*'s author in August, 1974, in Israel, where she was acting as ambassador, Guerra is now waiting for the latest attack by "the feminists"—as he himself calls them—made practically inevitable by the circulation of the letters written by the woman who was his spouse from 1958 to 1971, and the mother of his son Gabriel.

(Rivera, "Ricardo" 58)

Last year saw the long-awaited publication of the 77 personal letters that the Mexican author Rosario Castellanos (1925-74) wrote to her husband, the philosopher Ricardo Guerra, during two distinct periods of her life. The first group is from 1950-52, right after she first became involved with Ricardo, while she was away in Spain and then on her family ranch in Chiapas. This period overlapped with Guerra's marriage to the painter Lilia Carrillo and his first break-up with Rosario. This is followed by a fourteen-year hiatus in which Castellanos writes her major works, becomes famous, and marries Ricardo. The second group of love letters dates from 1966-67, eight years into their troubled marriage, while she was teaching Latin American literature as a visiting professor at several U.S. universities, and Ricardo and their son Gabriel remained in Mexico. After she and Guerra divorced

in 1971 and she left with Gabriel for her diplomatic post in Tel Aviv, she entrusted the letters she had written Guerra to her close friend Raúl Ortiz y Ortiz, with instructions that they be published after her death. There is apparently no record of Guerra's letters to Castellanos, although her detailed commentary on them—and, even more frequently, on their absence—makes it possible to reconstruct the gist of Guerra's letters.

The manuscript had been ready for several years before Ricardo Guerra, ceding to their son's wishes, finally allowed it to be published. Given Castellanos' stature as a significant Mexican writer and feminist thinker, this would be a major editorial event in its own right, even if she and the other three principals—Ricardo, Gabriel Guerra, and Raúl Ortiz—had not all served as Mexican diplomats. (After Castellanos' death Ricardo became Ambassador to West Germany, and Gabriel served as an attaché to the Embassies in West Berlin and Moscow. Raúl Ortiz was cultural attaché to the British embassy when I interviewed him in 1991; he is now deceased.) When you add to this coincidence of literary and political prominence, lingering questions regarding the cause of Ambassador Castellanos' death in Israel in 1974, and a high-profile literary skirmish over the publication of the letters twenty years later, you have the stuff of mystery novels.

These letters, together with Castellanos' uncollected newspaper columns from the 1970s and a series of 1991 interviews with her friends in Mexico City and in Comitán and San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, suggest revised readings of certain aspects of Castellanos' biography and its relation to her place in the Mexican power structure and literary canon: i) Castellanos' estrangement from her childhood confessor, Father Mandujano; ii) possible allusions to danger in letters written several days before her death; iii) the influence of several strong-willed women in the author's life, including a childhood friend, two cousins, and her servant (who was herself a cousin); iv) the existence of an illegitimate, *mestizo* half-brother and the story of their intense and ambivalent relationship; v) the continual inner struggle between Castellanos' powerful literary vocation and her role as a wife and mother; vi) new evidence regarding Ambassador

Castellanos' attitudes toward the Israeli and Palestinian peoples; vii) the biographical origins of several short stories in *Ciudad Real* (*City of Kings*, 1960); viii) lingering questions regarding the cause of Castellanos' death, alleged to be an accidental electrocution; and ix) the continuing issue of literary censorship two decades after her death.

i. Invitation to a Book-Burning

I am sitting on a park bench in the deepening twilight, across from the Iglesia de San Sebastián in Castellanos' home town of Comitán de las Flores. This is the neighborhood where Rosario's mother, Adriana Figueroa, grew up. It is the same neighborhood where the child narrator of *Balún-Canán* (*The Nine Guardians*, 1957), out walking with her Tojolobal Mayan nanny, caught her first glimpse of *la tullida* (the cripple), based on a woman named doña Cholita (Bonifaz, personal interview). This bitter object of her mother's charity is presumably destined to lead her into the kingdom of Heaven:

Los balcones están siempre asomados a la calle, mirándola subir y bajar y dar vuelta en las esquinas. Mirando pasar a los señores con bastón de caoba; a los rancheros que arrastran las espuelas al caminar; a los indios que corren bajo el peso de su carga. Y a todas horas el trotecillo diligente de los burros que acarrear el agua en barriles de madera. (11)

The balconies are forever staring into the street, watching it go uphill and down and the way it turns the corners. Watching the gentlemen pass with their mahogany canes; the ranchers dragging their spurs as they walk; the Indians running under their heavy burdens. And at all times the diligent trotting donkeys loaded with water in wooden tubs. (trans. Irene Nicholson 15)

The Tojolobal servant women sitting next to me on the bench are eyeing me curiously; they obviously are not accustomed to seeing strangers, let alone foreign academics, in their neighborhood. They ask me who I am and what I'm doing here; the question will be repeated verbatim the next day by

the creepy groundskeeper at the Comitán cemetery, as I wander around the elegant tombs of the Castellanos family and the modest graves of their poor relations, the Escandóns. He pesters me until I give him a tip. The sentiment is also echoed by the young *ladina* ('white,' non-Indian) woman sitting next to me in the movie theater that night, who, as soon as I sit down, inquires whether I'm traveling alone and if I don't have a husband.

Sitting there on the park bench, I am waiting for Father Raúl Mandujano to finish mass so I can request an interview. A young writer from Chiapas, who wishes to remain anonymous, has suggested that I talk to him because he is known to have a strong opinion about Castellanos. Father Raúl's brother, Father Carlos Mandujano, who has died recently, had been Castellanos' childhood confessor. He was notorious in Comitán, a close friend of Castellanos' has confided in me, for making obscene remarks to his young parishioners of both sexes, and for sexually molesting the girls. The conspicuous ringworm on his face was rumored to be a divine manifestation of his sin. This is the same priest who sponsored the public book-burning of Castellanos' autobiographical novel *Balún-Canán* in her hometown of Comitán shortly after its publication in 1957, while the author was working for the National Indian Institute in the nearby town of San Cristóbal de las Casas (Bañuelos, personal interview). However, Castellanos took her own revenge, one might say, by fashioning Father (Manuel) Mandujano in her second novel, *Oficio de tinieblas* (1962), after him. Unlike the actual priest, the fictional Mandujano was not allowed a peaceful death of old age, two decades after the author's passing; rather, he was hacked to death with machetes by followers of a Mayan messianic movement for trying to punish their heretical priest-ess:

El padre Mandujano quiso castigar a la ilol pero unos hombres lo sujetaron por la espalda. Catalina quebró el fuele contra sus rodillas y esto fue como una señal. Algunos con palos, otros con machetes y los demás provistos con piedras, todos se abalanzaron contra el padre Manuel. Cuando se fueron de allí no quedaba más que una masa asquerosa de huesos y de sangre.

Father Mandujano tried to punish the *ilol* but some men held him back. Catalina broke the whip across her knees and this was taken as a sign. Some armed with sticks, others with machetes, and the rest with stones, they all jumped on top of Father Manuel. When they left that place, there was nothing left but a disgusting pile of blood and bones. (264; my translation. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent translations are also mine.)

Earlier that day I asked the hotel guest clerk to lend me the phone book, and as I pored fruitlessly over its pages he asked me what I was looking for. "Oh, Father Mandujano," the clerk responded, "He'd be having lunch at his sister's house about now. But you can probably catch him after mass this evening at seven, in the Iglesia de San Sebastián."

The doorway to the Church of San Sebastián is crowded with excited little girls, dressed up as miniature brides for their first communion. Their elegantly dressed mothers and aunts are fussing over the children as they anxiously await their turn in the spotlight. The image vividly recalls the first-communion portrait of Rosario that her servant of thirty years, María Escandón, recently dug out of a shoebox as we sat in her bedroom at Na Bolom, the Mayan studies center that the archaeologists Frans and Trudy Blom founded in San Cristóbal de las Casas forty years ago (paying \$1,600 in 1949 for the sprawling former seminary, which was originally designed to train missionaries to convert the Indians [Brunhouse 200-201]).

The mass finally ends and Father Mandujano, a stern, patrician-looking man in his seventies, strides out the side door toward an idling Volkswagen bug. When I approach him with my request for an interview, he pronounces with infinite disdain, "Rosario Castellanos wasn't *from* here. She was born in Mexico City. If you want to interview someone, why don't you talk to Professor Bonifaz." He climbs into the beige VW and it speeds away.

I return to my room in the Hotel.

ii. Stalked by the Yellow Cat

The next evening I take a taxi to Oscar Bonifaz's house in downtown Comitán. When I give the driver the street address he says, "Oh yeah, that's Professor Bonifaz's house. He drives a yellow Ford and lives right next door to the Joyería María."

Bonifaz, a slight, mustachioed man in his sixties, is a retired schoolteacher who lives alone, separated from his wife and children. It occurs to me that he is probably gay, and that Comitán must be a particularly claustrophobic place for a gay person to have spent his entire life. He fancies himself a poet, and he befriended Castellanos in the last years of her life through their mutual interest in poetry.

Bonifaz initially seems more interested in discussing his own writings: poetry, short stories, a biography of Castellanos, and a dictionary of archaic and regional expressions from Chiapas, which does interest me. He presents me with a copy of the dictionary and dedicates it: "Gracias a Cynthia, por haber compartido con ella, el recuerdo de Rosario, en esta noche comiteca; Oscar Bonifaz; Comitán, Chicapas, febrero 23, 1991" 'Thanks to Cynthia, for having shared the memory of Rosario, on this Comitán night; Oscar Bonifaz; Comitán, Chiapas, February 23, 1991.' The dictionary includes many terms that appear in Castellanos' works, including the mythological figures of el Cadejo, Cajchoj, Catashaná and el Sombrerón. It also includes terms like *yalcac*, "flea excrement," *tzipite*, "melancholic, said of a child who is sad because his mother is pregnant," *jtzilín!*, "the sound a pot makes when it breaks," and *tzisim*, "edible red queen ant that is brought out by the first rains." (It turns out that *Cuscat*, the real surname of the historical Mayan leader of the 1869 uprising portrayed in *Oficio de tinieblas*, means "luminous.")

Eventually we get back to the topic of Castellanos' life, and Bonifaz tells me his theory about her death: Six or seven days before she died in 1974 in Tel Aviv, where she was serving as Mexico's ambassador to Israel, Castellanos allegedly wrote Bonifaz in a letter, "Un gato amarillo anda rondando mi casa. A ver si logro ponerle mordaz" 'A yellow cat is prowling around my house. Let's see if I can manage to muzzle

him.’ Bonifaz reads this as an allusion to a stalker who went on to murder Castellanos. He points out the use of the term “mordaz” and its resemblance to Díaz “Ordaz,” the previous Mexican president, whom Castellanos presumably had angered in 1968 with her eloquent poem “Memorial de Tlatelolco,” protesting the student massacre. When I ask to see the letter, Bonifaz smiles quixotically and promises to show it to me some other time. His biography *Rosario* (1984), on the other hand, repeats the official story of her death as an absurd accident:

Salía descalza de su casa en Tel Aviv y cuando se disponía a conectar una lámpara sobre la pequeña mesa que acababa de adquirir, fue fulminada por una potente descarga eléctrica.

She was walking barefoot around her house in Tel Aviv and when she went to plug in a lamp on the little table she had just acquired, she was electrocuted by a powerful electrical shock. (56)

In her posthumous essay “Recado a Gabriel, donde se encuentre” ‘A Message to Gabriel, Wherever He May Be,’ which many have interpreted as a farewell letter to her son, Castellanos tells him about the yellow cat:

El Gato amarillo se compró un collar para hacer creer que tiene dueño. Lo cual es absolutamente inverosímil y paso a comprobarlo: la vecindad entera de la cuadra está cerrada por vacaciones y él continúa asistiendo a la Residencia diariamente, con una asiduidad que sólo se explica por el hambre. Y después que recibió su ración de comida ronronea de lo más satisfecho y ofrece el lomo para que se le acaricie. Yo lo hago como si creyera que el collar no es una adquisición hecha con sus ahorros . . . o un aparato electrónico que le conectaran los espías. Por si las dudas no hablo con él más que lo indispensable y de manera deliberadamente enigmática.

The yellow Cat bought himself a collar to make people think he has an owner. Which is absolutely ridiculous and

I'll tell you why: all the houses on the block are shut up for vacation and he keeps on coming to the Residence every day, with an assiduousness that can only be explained by hunger. And after he receives his ration of food he purrs, so very satisfied, and lets me scratch his back. I go along with it, as if I really believed he hadn't bought the collar with his own savings. . . or that it isn't an electronic device put there by spies. Just in case, I don't talk to him any more than I need to, and I do so in deliberately enigmatic terms. (Recado 7)

According to Castellanos' best friend in Israel, Nahum Megged, the author's personal secretary, Ester Solay-Levi, and her chauffeur, Israel Maya told him that she had kept a diary and letters and may have written some poems. In her articles of June, July, and August, 1974, Castellanos makes repeated reference to the "masterpiece" or "complete works" that she is writing. However, according to Levi and Maya, right after her death someone from the Mexican Embassy came to the house and destroyed all her papers, saying, "No quiero dejar evidencias" 'I don't want to leave any evidence' (Megged, personal interview). The only writings that survived from her three years in Israel were the weekly newspaper articles published in the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior*, and the play *El eterno femenino* (which the actress Emma Teresa Armendáriz and theater director Rafael López Miarnau had taken back to Mexico following a visit to Tel Aviv, and which they would be the first to stage, posthumously).

Is not Israel Maya a peculiar name for an Israeli chauffeur employed by the ambassador from Mayan Mexico? As we have seen, Castellanos was not in the habit of using pseudonyms for the people she writes about, but she does briefly refer to him as X, in order to complain about his terrible sense of direction and dangerous driving. In an undated article she explains she is all alone with Gabriel at her residence because Israel Maya has mysteriously disappeared with the cook ("Grandeza"): "se ha desvanecido como un espejismo del desierto" 'he has vanished like a mirage in the desert.' In subsequent articles the chauffeur has inexplicably reappeared (or perhaps she explains it in a letter to which I don't have ac-

cess). Maya was the only person at home the day that Castellanos died; Gabriel had returned to live with his father in Mexico, and the rest of the servants were on vacation.

Several of the *Excélsior* articles dwell on Castellanos' suffering in Gabriel's absence, even if only for two or three weeks at a time. In "La cena con el Hassid" (10 September 1973) she says of her reaction to Gabriel's leaving on vacation:

Comencemos por hacernos los desentendidos. Ni Gabriel está ausente ni yo lo extraño hasta con mis pulmones que no saben respirar bien este aire que no compartimos. . . . Ni de cuando en cuando unas pequeñas y breves explosiones nos hacen recordar que, después de todo, estamos en el Medio Oriente y que en esta zona se está realizando una guerra muy poco convencional. En suma, finjamos que soy feliz, como decía Sor Juana. El resto es verdad.

Let's start by pretending we don't notice. Gabriel isn't absent and I don't miss him so much that even my lungs don't know how to breathe this air that we don't share. . . . From time to time there are no short little explosions reminding us that, after all, we are in the Middle East and, in this region, they are carrying on a most unconventional war. In short, let's pretend that I'm happy, as Sor Juana used to say. All the rest is true. ("Cena" 7)

On July 29, 1974, a week before she died, Castellanos wrote:

Yo soy, de nacimiento, cobarde. He temido muchas cosas pero lo que he temido más es la soledad. Una mujer sola. . . . ¿no se le ven, por todas partes, los huecos de los hijos que no tuvo, del marido que le falta, de la familia de la que ella es el centro y la base?

I am a coward by birth. I have feared many things but the thing I have feared most is solitude. A woman alone. . . . Can't you see, all over her, the holes left by the children she didn't have, by the husband she's lacking, by the family for which she should be center and base? ("Académica" 9)

In April of 1973, a year and a half earlier, Castellanos had completed her most openly feminist literary work, the play *El eterno femenino*. According to Echeverría's Foreign Minister, Emilio Rabasa, he exerted pressure on her not to publish this play as long as she was ambassador, since its criticism of Mexican institutions struck him as incompatible with her diplomatic role. Castellanos agreed to postpone publication of the play, and it appeared posthumously in 1975.

iii. San Pascualito Bailón, San Caralampio and Santa Lola

I have been reading up on the folk saints of Chiapas, which have been researched most extensively by Carlos Navarrete. San Pascualito Bailón, a local version of the Spanish saint Pascual, is a skeleton in a coffin who has been venerated by the Mayans since a nineteenth-century plague spread into Chiapas from Guatemala and the skeleton was found to have curative powers. Since then the human skeleton has been replaced with a wooden one. This unrecognized branch of the Church, paradoxically called the Orthodox Catholic Church, is located in a working-class neighborhood of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the Chiapas state capital. The unordained priest from this church has officiated in San Juan Chamula for several years, since a priest attached to the diocese of San Cristóbal, and thus associated with Bishop Samuel Ruiz and liberation theology, was expelled from the Mayan community.¹

As for San Caralampio, the patron saint of Castellanos' native Comitán, this white-bearded European saint has been worshiped by the indigenous and *ladino* poor of the region since 1853. I visit the humble Church of San Caralampio and see Tojolobal Mayans rubbing fennel bulbs and a piece of candle over the saint's purple velvet robe. Dolores Albores, Castellanos' closest childhood friend and now the official historian of Comitán, tells me that the faithful save these items as relics and, when they get sick, they make medicinal tea out of the fennel.

We are sitting on doña Lola's bed in her cozy bedroom. Golden sunlight is streaming through the window, and the walls are crowded with pious portraits of saints. She is pull-

ing photographs of the Castellanos and Figueroa families out of boxes to show me. One is a graduation picture of Rosario's father, César Castellanos, a tall, pale, formal, morose man. It was taken in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in February of 1904, when he received his degree in civil engineering. A U.S. university education was, of course, a source of great prestige in turn-of-the-century Chiapas. Another is a 1921 group portrait of debutantes at the Porfirian Comitán theater, including Rosario's mother, Adriana Figueroa, a small, dark, pretty girl with lively eyes. This portrait is entitled "Hermosas y delicadas flores del verjel [sic] comiteco" 'Lovely, delicate flowers from Comitán's garden.' Lola offers it as evidence that, contrary to popular belief (and statements by Castellanos herself), doña Adriana was not from a lower social class than her husband. Doña Adriana's mother, Carmen Abarca, even traveled to Egypt, she tells me. It was Adriana's niece Carmelita Abarca who was the poor relation, she explains. María Escandón, Rosario's *cargadora* (childhood servant-playmate) and subsequently her cook, was from this branch of the family. María's parents were Francisca Abarca, a seamstress, and Trinidad Escandón, a bricklayer.² If doña Lola is right and there was no significant class difference between Castellanos' parents, however, there was a gulf in terms of both education and skin color. (The one advantage that she had over her favored brother Minchito, Rosario used to say, was her white skin.)

Doña Lola tells me about Rosario's early boyfriends: Dr. Guillermo Robles Domínguez, a future dentist about whom Rosario kept a diary; Anselmo Castillo Mena, a fellow student in Mexico City, in the Colegio Luis G. de León and then in Mascarones (the Law School), to whose hands Rosario dedicated a sonnet; Fernando Castillo Nájera; and Wilberto Cantón, who worked at the magazine *Siempre* and courted Rosario in 1946 and 1947. (According to the autobiography of Castellanos' notorious cousin Irma Serrano, "La Tigresa"—a former Presidential mistress and country-and-western singer turned leftist senator—Rosario was planning to marry Cantón, despite his sexual orientation, until he started checking into her bank account [Serrano 146]). Doña Lola lived with Rosario's family while she was attending nursing school in

Mexico City in 1944 and 1948. She remembers don César as a sensitive man and doña Adriana as a doting mother.

Doña Lola is a warm, expansive, exuberant woman in her mid-sixties. From time to time she lifts her ample body up from the bed and maneuvers energetically around the house with a cane. While we are talking a steady procession of neighbors files into her bedroom seeking medical advice. Lola is still generous with her time, expertise, and money; she seems to thrive on making herself useful to others. Over the years, she tells me, she has helped many local girls in trouble. Her confession is moving but a bit startling, amid this domestic gallery of martyred Catholic saints.

A shrivelled old man dressed in tatters comes shuffling into the bedroom and, bowing with enormous respect, hands doña Lola a ten-peso bill. After he has left she explains to me that the man is a laborer who makes his living loading produce trucks at the market. He has no family and, now that he is old and frail, he can no longer manage to feed himself. So doña Lola makes him periodic loans which he faithfully pays off in token installments.

Before I leave she gives me precise directions to Rosario's childhood homes and those of two of Rosario's cousins. One of them, María Elena Castellanos de Robelo, owns the Parador Museo Santa María, on the road to the Lakes of Montebello. She is the granddaughter of César's first cousin Ernesto Castellanos, who owned the El Retiro ranch, where César grew up, and where he himself was killed during the Revolution, in 1916 or 1917. (Ernesto, of course, is also the name of the bastard son of the ranch owner in *Balún-Canán*, who is shot to death during the unrest occasioned by agrarian reform.) A first cousin of Rosario's, Lucita Lara (Luz Lara Vda. de Ruiz), lives with her daughter's family over a record store, next to El Calvario Church. Early in my visit she is out of town, but I finally catch up with her on my last evening in Comitán. A perky, gray-haired wisp of a woman, she seems surprised that anyone would be interested in meeting Rosario's relatives. The present owner of one of Castellanos' childhood houses is also startled by my visit; he has obviously never entertained literary tourists before, nor does he seem to grasp the significance of the building's former owner. While he is proud of

the section of the house that has been remodelled, he apologizes for the wing that has remained basically intact since Rosario's childhood: a broad, restful interior patio flanked by dark, claustrophobic rooms; white-washed walls; a red tile roof. Afterwards I walk by another of Rosario's childhood homes, around the corner and over a bicycle shop, but the owner is away at his ranch for an extended period of time.

The afternoon is hot and dry, so I stop for a cold drink at "Helen's Enrique," the upscale open-air restaurant on the main plaza. The other clients are upper-middle-class Mexican teenagers out on a date, flirting over milk shakes, and a pair of earnest American refugee workers engrossed in writing a report. I ask the waiter whether the owners of the restaurant are named Helen and Enrique; no, he responds with a puzzled look, the owner is a single gentleman named Ramón. Across the square is the brand-new Rosario Castellanos Cultural Center, a massive, modern beige building, but it is already closed for renovations.

The next time I am to see the placid main plaza of Comitán, on my way to a Christian Base Community in Las Margaritas in March of 1994, it will be occupied by truckloads of heavily armed Mexican troops.

iv. Sor Juana, the Other Brother, and the Silk Handkerchiefs

Even before the death of Rosario's younger brother, Mario Benjamín, the family dynamics had been unhealthy. "Nuestros padres eran un poco raros," Raúl told Beatriz Reyes Nevares, "por [su] férrea sujeción a las normas religiosas y . . . [su] peculiar negativa a comunicarse entre ellos" 'Our parents were a little strange, because of their strict adherence to religious norms and . . . [their] peculiar refusal to communicate with each other' (12). In an interview with Beatriz Espejo in 1967, Rosario described her parents and upbringing as follows:

Murieron hace veinte años. Conservo de ellos una imagen estereotipada que no corresponde a ninguna realidad. Es la única que puedo transmitir. Mi padre era un hombre profundamente melancólico, incapaz de contemplar el sufrimiento ajeno. Débil ante la adversidad. Mi madre

debe haber tenido una juventud y un temperamento poderosos que el matrimonio destruyó. Cuando los conocí, se encontraban tanto física como espiritualmente en plena decadencia. Me crie en el ambiente de una familia venida a menos, solitaria, aislada, una familia que había perdido el interés por vivir. . . . Mi experiencia más remota radicó en la soledad individual; muy pronto descubrí que en la misma condición se encontraban todas las otras mujeres a las que conocía: solas solteras; solas casadas; solas madres. Solas, en un pueblo que no mantenía contacto con los demás. Solas, soportando unas costumbres muy rígidas que condenaban el amor y la entrega como un pecado sin redención. Solas en el ocio porque ese era el único lujo que su dinero sabía comprar. Retratar esas vidas, delinear esas figuras forma un proceso que conserva una trayectoria autobiográfica. Me evadí de la soledad por el trabajo; esto me hizo sentirme solidaria de los demás en algo abstracto que no me hería ni trastornaba como más tarde iban a herirme el amor y la convivencia.

They died twenty years ago. I retain a stereotyped image of them that doesn't correspond to any reality. It's the only one I'm capable of transmitting. My father was a profoundly melancholic man, incapable of contemplating other people's suffering. Weak in the face of adversity. In her youth my mother must have had a strong temperament which marriage destroyed. When I knew them, they were well into a process of both physical and spiritual decay. I was raised in the atmosphere of a family that had fallen on hard times, solitary, isolated, a family that had lost all interest in living. . . . My earliest experiences were of individual solitude; I very soon discovered that all the other women I knew were in the same situation: lonely old maids; lonely married women; lonely mothers. All alone, in a town that maintained no contact with other towns. Alone, putting up with very rigid customs which condemned love and surrender as unredeemable sins. Alone in their idleness, because that was the only luxury their money could buy. Portraying those lives, drawing those figures constitutes an autobiographical pro-

cess. I evaded solitude through work; this made me feel in solidarity with others in an abstract way that didn't wound or trouble me, as love and cohabitation were later to wound me. (Espejo 21-22)

Adriana Figueroa had married César Castellanos not out of love but out of fear of poverty. Unlike her daughter, she was a simple, fun-loving woman who shared none of her husband's cultural passions: classical philosophy, music, and literature.

It is widely known that Rosario felt guilty for the death of her seven-year-old brother Minchito. Like all siblings, she had wished her brother dead; perhaps all the more so, given her parents' clear preference for him. Moreover, Rosario had been the first of Adriana's children to survive; two older brothers had died in childbirth (just as Rosario was to lose her two first-born children.) Thus, Rosario felt guilty for outliving these two older brothers, as well as the pampered male heir. She also felt guilty for standing between her parents and the grave after Minchito's death. They frequently told her that, if it hadn't been for her, they would have committed suicide. Instead, they took their parental sense of duty to an extreme and became jealously over-protective of their only surviving child. At the same time, they prolonged the mourning process by taking toys to Benjamín's grave and even reading him the books that they didn't read to their living child. Finally agrarian reform and the need to educate Rosario exiled them from Chiapas. The move to Mexico City, however, would only bring them greater unhappiness, because there, according to Rosario, they would find themselves reduced to what the author called "the petit, very petit bourgeoisie." But the move also allowed Rosario to mature intellectually, achieve greater emotional independence, and eventually rebel against her parents. Although she did reconcile with her mother three years before the latter's death, once Rosario realized how much her mother had suffered at her father's hands, there was no reconciliation possible between father and daughter. César and Adriana both died in Mexico City in 1948, leaving the entirety of their estate, including the Chapatengo family ranch in Chiapas, to Rosario.

She was not, however, their only surviving child. César had an illegitimate son, five years her senior, with a Mayan servant from his wife's ranch, El Rosario, near Ocosingo. It seems likely that this boy served as the model for Ernesto in *Balún-Canán*. The relationship between Rosario and Raúl was strained and conflictive until she returned to Chiapas in 1951, three years after her parents' death. At that time she retreated with Raúl was to Chapatengo, which she had invited him to manage. While she had been recovering from tuberculosis, she later told friends, Raúl was among the very few who would dare to visit her in the hospital. He would sit at the foot of her sick bed and murmur, "Vas a morir" 'You're gonna die' (Jacobson and Marren, personal interview). At some point, according to Castellanos' cousin Elena Torruco, Raúl went to the United States to work as a bracero.

There were erotic overtones to the brother-sister relationship. For instance, at Chapatengo Raúl presented Rosario with a set of silk handkerchiefs embroidered with his initials, a gift from a sweetheart. Earlier, while they were still living in Mexico City, Raúl reportedly had made a declaration of love to Rosario, and she had sent him back to Chiapas (Escandón, personal interview). Castellanos may be alluding to this incident in her letter to Ricardo Guerra dated 16 April 1951, in referring to "un incidente bastante penoso de nuestras relaciones personales" 'a very painful incident in our personal relations' (*Cartas* 122). As she goes on to write, "Sus cartas me han mostrado que tiene hacia mí un afecto de lo más atormentado e intranquilo" 'His letters have shown me that he feels the most tormented and anxious affection for me' (122).

During Rosario's cruise to Spain the previous year she had devoured the poetry of the Spanish mystic Santa Teresa, which she experienced as a revelation of the insufficiency of reason to account for faith. Shortly after her return to Mexico City, she left on a spiritual sojourn to Chapatengo, the remote family ranch in the mountains of northern Chiapas which, unlike El Rosario, had survived agrarian reform. Chapatengo was only accessible by airplane or horseback and was totally cut off from the outside world. The radio was broken and Rosario purposely took no books there. In a gesture reminis-

cent of Sor Juana, she had her brother shave her head so she wouldn't be tempted to leave the ranch. Elena Poniatowska characterizes this act as a "dreadful self-flagellation... a cruel joke" ("Prólogo" 16). And yet, from the narrative that follows, this seems to have been the happiest period of Castellanos' life, until her Israeli sojourn two decades later:

La vida está llena de sorpresas. ¿Te acuerdas en qué disposición de ánimo venía a Chapatengo? Esperaba encontrar aquí un ogro, una espina, un problema más que lo hacía intolerable, también sentimental. Recordaba con amargura y como queriendo huir, los episodios de mis viajes anteriores: el caballo que se encabritaba, las medicinas negadas, los ataques de rabia, etc. En suma, tenía yo mucho miedo porque ante una situación así no sé defenderme sino desapareciendo. Y vengo y me encuentro con un hermano equilibrado, maduro. Y en una conversación confidencial que tuvimos el domingo pasado, descubro que me conoce mejor que ninguna otra persona, que mide todo el alcance de mis defectos y, lo que es maravilloso, me acepta así y me quiere. Desde entonces la tensión terminó. Yo me siento completamente a mis anchas y me abandono completamente a él, sin ninguna suspicacia. Me siento muy, muy feliz.

Life is full of surprises. Do you remember my mood when I came to Chapatengo? I expected to find an ogre here, a thorn in my side, one more problem, which would make [my stay] intolerable and sentimental. Bitterly, wanting to flee, I recalled episodes from my previous trips: the horse rearing up, the medicines I was denied, the fits of anger, etc. In short, I was really afraid, because, when I find myself in that sort of situation, the only way I know how to defend myself is by disappearing. And I come here and find a level-headed, mature brother. And in a confidential chat that we had last Sunday, I discovered that he knows me better than anyone, he's aware of my defects in all their magnitude, and, marvelously, he accepts me like this and loves me. Since then the tension is gone. I feel completely at ease and give myself over to him com-

pletely, without a trace of suspicion. I am very, very happy. (Castellanos, *Cartas* 174-75)

She would return to Chiapas once again in 1957, shortly after *Balún-Canán* was published, this time to run the National Indian Institute's (INI's) educational puppet theater in Mayan villages near San Cristóbal. "Me sentía en deuda, como individuo y como clase, con [los indios]," she later told Beatriz Espejo, "Esa deuda se me volvió consciente al redactar *Balún-Canán*" 'I felt indebted, as an individual and a class, to [the Indians]. I became aware of that debt while I was writing *Balún-Canán* (Espejo, ARC 23). The experiment was to end badly in 1957, when Castellanos and her fellow INI workers Carlos Jurado and Carlo Antonio Castro, unhappy with Alfonso Villa Rojas' directorship of the San Cristóbal Coordinating Center, attempted to have him ousted, and failed. In retaliation he had them transferred (Castro and Jurado to Xalapa, Castellanos to Mexico City), and the crazy, brave federal experiment of hiring *ladino* artists to work with Indians was stopped dead in its tracks, not to be resuscitated for another thirty years.

v. A "Disconsolately Literary" Vocation and a Bad Marriage

It was also during her 1951 stay with Raúl at Chapatengo that Rosario became aware of the intensity of her literary calling. As she wrote to Ricardo Guerra in a letter dated 22 December 1951 (three weeks before they broke up the first time):

Y ahora es preciso, Ricardo, que me despoje ante ti de otra máscara. Yo no sé cómo me ves tú. (¿Cómo iba yo a saberlo? Necesitaría fijarme en ti, en lo que piensas, en lo que quieres. Y eso jamás lo he hecho.) Yo sé que me veo, colocándome en tu lugar y al través de tus ojos, como una mujer tan femenina, tan tierna, tan dulce, tan leal, tan fiel, tan discreta y tan enamorada. ¿De qué novela rosa he sacado este engendro? Lo ignoro. Lo único que puedo asegurarte (no te digo nada nuevo, te has dado perfectamente bien cuenta) es que yo no soy así. Yo soy de muy otro modo y te lo digo no con un orgullo y retador

levantamiento de hombros que equivalga a un: “y qué.” Sino con humildad, pero con mis muy fundadas sospechas de que no puedo cambiar. Vayamos por partes, procedamos con orden. Tan femenina . . . bueno, ni tanto. Puede que yo lo sea (no tengo especial interés en negarlo), puede que yo lo sea hasta mucho, pero junto a eso y tanto como eso, soy un ser asexual que cree, nada más, y con cierta ferocidad y encarnizamiento, en su vocación. Y que esa vocación no es maternal ni amorosa sino desconsoladoramente literaria. Y que hasta ahora siempre que ambos aspectos han entrado en conflicto el primero ha quedado completamente *knocked out*.

Now it's necessary, Ricardo, for me to take off another mask before you. I don't know how you see me. (How could I know? I would have to pay attention to you, to what you think, to what you want. And I have never done that.) I know that, if I put myself in your place and look at me through your eyes, I see myself as such a feminine, tender, sweet, loyal, faithful, discreet, and loving woman. What romance novel have I taken this idiotic scheme out of? I don't know. All I can tell you for sure (and I'm not telling you anything new, you've realized it all along) is that I'm not like that. I am very different from that, and I say so without pride or a rebellious shrug of the shoulders meaning “So what?” Rather, I say it with humility, with my well-grounded suspicions that I cannot change. Let's take it in order, one step at a time. So feminine . . . well, not really. I might be (I have no particular interest in denying it), I might even be very feminine, but also and to an equal degree, I am an asexual being who believes, no less, and with a certain ferocity and rage, in her vocation. And that vocation is neither maternal nor romantic but disconsolately literary. And, until now, whenever the two aspects have clashed, the former has always been completely *knocked out* . . . (Castellanos, *Cartas* 177-78)

Castellanos' passionate letters were based on a two-week affair with Guerra (her first sexual relationship), followed by a year-long separation while she traveled to Madrid on a schol-

scholarship and then made her pilgrimage to the family ranch in Chiapas. At the time of their brief involvement, she was 25 and he was 23; from Guerra's perspective, there was insufficient basis for a commitment (Rivera, "Ricardo" 60). However, as Elena Poniatowska points out, at the time Rosario was writing him these love letters from Chapatengo in 1951, Ricardo had not bothered to inform her that he was already married, to the painter Lilia Carrillo, and that they were expecting a baby and moving to Paris. In 1954, when she was expecting their second child, Lilia left Guerra for the artist Manuel Felguérez. Six years later, after Rosario had returned to Mexico City from Chiapas and Guerra had returned from Europe, they resumed their relationship and, just three months later, in January of 1958, they finally married (Poniatowska, "Prólogo" 16).

Judging from Castellanos' letters, and as this rocky beginning suggests, theirs was a troubled marriage. Following a miscarriage and the death of a newborn daughter, Castellanos gave birth to Gabriel, a source of great happiness amid her recurrent episodes of depression, including several suicide attempts.

Castellanos wrote the second set of letters to Ricardo while she was teaching Latin American literature as a visiting professor at the Universities of Wisconsin, Indiana and Colorado. (As Poniatowska notes, despite her insecurity and well-founded jealousy, it is interesting that she is always the one who is leaving.) The letters are punctuated with references not only to Castellanos' frequent bouts of depression, but to Guerra's depression and his chronic and extensive department-store debts (which she invariably pays off).

During a visit to his mother in Madison, Gabriel reveals that Ricardo has moved a lover, Selma, into their home in Mexico City. Guerra will later marry Selma, after he and Rosario finally divorce in 1971. Shortly thereafter she will leave with Gabriel on her diplomatic mission to Israel. (As we learn from the letters, the divorce comes right after her late sexual awakening: "Ya ves que me quedé con la miel en los labios porque apenas estaba descubriendo las delicias de la sexualidad" 'You see, you've left me with the honey on my lips, since I was just beginning to discover the delights of

Rosario is to die alone in her ambassador's apartment in Tel Aviv, on August 7, 1974, before her fiftieth birthday. The servants are on vacation and Gabriel has just returned to Mexico City to live with his father (Poniatowska, personal interview). The next day Castellanos is scheduled to leave for Mexico City herself, to deliver a keynote address at a Presidential breakfast (Poniatowska, "Prólogo" 23).

vi. Putting Baby Jesus in His Crib: From A Long Line of doña Bárbaras

As I knock at the door of the nondescript gray house on Insurgentes Avenue in San Cristóbal, I'm not sure what to expect. I have heard that Elena Torruco, Castellanos' cousin, is the daughter of Rosario's Aunt María, after whom she fashioned the unhappily married, hypochondriacal Aunt Romelia in *Balún-Canán*. I have also heard that, back in the 1950s, Elena had shot her husband in Mexico City, leaving him paralyzed, upon learning he was gay. Shortly after she and her son moved back to Chiapas, her son was accidentally shot to death by a playmate with his father's army pistol. Torruco then reportedly attempted to run over the boy and his father with her car, as well as to kill the painter Carlos Jurado, who had published a caricature of her in his political newspaper. According to Jurado, she sent him 'anonymous' death threats addressed to El Niño Carlitos (her nickname for him), warning "También los pintores mueren" 'Painters also die' (Jurado, personal interview). Then she sawed through the legs of the wooden scaffolding he was using to paint the mural of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas in San Cristóbal's Law School. Consequently, the dean of the law school had a metal scaffolding built especially for Jurado's safety.

Just down the block is the house where Rosario lived in 1955-57, while working for the INI and writing *Ciudad Real* (*City of Kings*, 1960) and *Oficio de tinieblas* (1962); and the Hotel de Mónica, a flamingo-pink Colonial hotel with a Chinese restaurant, which was the ancestral home of the Ochoa family. Jorge Ochoa, whose father owned the pharmacy on the main square, was the model for his namesake in the short story "Modesta Gómez," who seduces and impregnates the family servant, leading his mother to expel her from the house

for immorality. After *Ciudad Real* was published Ochoa turned up, indignant, at his neighbor Rosario Castellanos' front door. She invited him in and somehow managed to persuade him that, despite the remarkable coincidence in their names and biographies, there were one or two minor discrepancies proving that the character Jorge Ochoa was not based on him (Jacobson and Marren, personal interview).

The door opens to reveal a handsome gray-haired woman in her early seventies. As she escorts me in, I pass a fireplace decorated with an old musket and a human skull. Otherwise it is a typical *colecto*⁴ household circa 1960, with its stiff brocade sofas covered with plastic and end tables decorated with frilly knick-knacks. Elena Torruco shows me seemingly endless snapshots of her trips to Europe with a girlfriend, and she invites me to accompany her to put the Baby Jesus in his crib the next day (but I have already arranged interviews in Comitán.) Before I leave she gives me two more phone numbers where I can reach her: at a friend's house in the elegant Lomas de Chapultepec suburb of Mexico City, and at her Sierra Fría Ranch near San Cristóbal.

What a marvelous name for the ranch of this latter-day doña Bárbara. In a letter to Guerra dated 22 December 1951 (exactly forty years ago), Castellanos described her early adult relationship with her half-brother Raúl in these terms:

Con mi hermano yo me había adjudicado un papel de lo más incómodo. Yo era la mujer fuerte. Mi corazón, una roca inmovible. Mis convicciones, mis proyectos, claros y constantes. Y además yo era una amazona capaz de soportar ocho o diez horas a caballo sin mostrar el menor signo de fatiga, de asistir, sin pestañar, a las hierras (ese calor sofocante, esas nubes de polvo, esa cantidad de bichos picándole a uno). Y además hábil para los negocios, capaz de sacar adelante el rancho. Cuando me pongo a ver esto, ahora, me da risa. ¿De dónde saqué una imagen tan estrafalaria? De Doña Bárbara de Rómulo Gallegos, lo menos. Pero era un papel que me quedaba grande y me exigía un enorme esfuerzo. . . . Total, nuestra relación era un desastre. Ahora él, sin herirme, me muestra lo que soy.

Un ser débil, sin ninguna madurez en ningún sentido,

voluble, inconstante porque no sabe lo que quiere ni lo que debe ni lo que puede hacer. Que en un rancho debe estarse muy sentada en su casa mientras los hombres hacen las tareas de los hombres.

With my brother I had taken on the most tiresome role. I was the strong woman. My heart, an unshakeable rock. My convictions, my projects, clearcut and consistent. And what's more, I was an amazon capable of putting up with eight or ten hours of horseback riding without showing a trace of fatigue, of witnessing brandings without blinking an eye (that suffocating heat, those clouds of dust, all those insects biting you). And also shrewd at business, able to carry on with the ranch. When I stop to think about it now, it makes me laugh. Where did I come up with such an outlandish image? In *Doña Bárbara*, by Rómulo Gallegos, no doubt. But the role didn't suit me and required an enormous amount of effort on my part. . . . In short, our relationship was a disaster. Now, without wounding me, he shows me what I am. A weak creature, not the least bit mature in any sense of the word, fickle, inconsistent, because I don't know what I want to do, or what I should or can do. Which, on a ranch, is to stay put in the house and leave the men to the men's work. (Cartas 175-76)

In addition to her mother María, 'La Nena' Torruco tells me, the three aunts in *Balún-Canán* were based on María's sisters Josefa (Matilde, the old maid) and Ester (Francisca, the strong-willed rancher and witch), who helped Father Mandujano with the book-burning of *Balún-Canán*. The three sisters were first cousins of Rosario's father César, daughters of his aunt Reinalda. They were the owners of Chactajal, the ranch that remained in the Castellanos family after the agrarian reform; the other ranch, El Rosario, which Adriana had brought into the marriage, was expropriated for distribution to Mayan peasants. Elena Torruco tells me that, when she ran for mayor of San Cristóbal several years ago, rival politicians within the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) persuaded peasants to invade the ranch she now owns, Sierra Fría. She claims to have enjoyed enormous popular support,

despite losing the elections; this is later corroborated by Janet Marren and Marcie Jacobson, who tell me that Torruco had the support of a major leftist peasant union, the CIOAC (Independent Central Organization of Agricultural Laborers and Campesinos).

Now, however, she seems lonely and isolated. I find myself wondering whether this Elena, along with her strong-willed and eccentric mother and aunts, might have inspired Castellanos' poem "Evocando a la tía Elena" 'Evoking Aunt Elena':

¿es lícito destruir la obra de la belleza
 cuando sólo enmascara al sufrimiento?

Is it valid to destroy the work of beauty
 when it only masks suffering? (*Poesía* 321)

When I return to Chiapas the following year, in 1992, there has just been an apparent assassination attempt against another of Rosario's strong-willed female cousins, Irma Serrano 'The Tigress.' During the 1960s Serrano was the mistress of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, perhaps best remembered as the President who ordered the Army to open fire on the students at Tlatelolco. She went on to become a popular country-and-western singer, the owner and lead actress in a nude cabaret, and then a maverick leftist politician. In 1992 she was in Chiapas campaigning for national Congress as the candidate of the Frente Cardenista (not related to Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas' PRD) when a car sideswiped her caravan on a mountain road. She disappeared from the scene and claims to have been kidnapped by the PRI and held in an isolated mountain cabin until she managed to escape. Subsequently witnesses have raised questions about the veracity of this part of her account; however, her alternate lost his arm in the 'accident,' which resembles the apparent assassination attempt against the PRD gubernatorial candidate Amado Avendaño in March 1994, on another lonely Chiapas highway. Along with Avendaño, Serrano went on to become an outspoken defender of the EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army) and "civil society," and to be elected to the national Senate on the PRD ticket. In this position she continues inciting controversies among the left.

vii. City of Kings: Castellanos as Ethnographer of the 'Authentic Coletos'

If *Balún-Canán* draws on Castellanos' childhood experiences in Comitán and Chactajal, the short stories in *Ciudad Real* are ethnographic sketches of Mayas and ladinos she encountered in San Cristóbal while working with the INI in 1955-57. The painter Carlos Jurado, Castellanos' distant relative and her close collaborator in the traveling puppet theater, the Teatro Petul, told me about his hiking into the Lacandón rain forest and happening on a little American boy on a tricycle in a clearing deep in the jungle; the boy lived at El Real, a ranch owned by Protestant missionaries and equipped with a radio and a small plane. This incident was the germ for Castellanos' short story "Arthur Smith salva su alma" 'Arthur Smith Saves His Soul.' At another point during their stay in San Cristóbal, a red-bearded German painter had gotten lost in the forest near a Mayan hamlet called Mukem and the villagers, mistaking him for the devil and having no common language in which to communicate with the intruder, had killed him.

This incident, of course, inspired the short story "The Truce" 'La tregua,' as well as a sketch for the Teatro Petul. In the latter, entitled "Petul y el diablo extranjero" 'Petul and the Foreign Devil' (Castellanos *Teatro petul* 2), Petul, the Mayan Everyman, explains to another Mayan peasant, Xun, that the red-headed stranger he has just struck with his hoe is not the devil at all but a foreigner, who has come to take photographs and buy folk art because he has heard how beautiful Chiapas is. Most foreigners, he explains, just like most other people, are good, but if Xun thinks a foreigner is going to harm him, he should report it to the authorities and they will decide how to proceed. According to Carlos Jurado, when the Teatro Petul performed the play in San Juan Chamula, the townspeople took great offense, and yelling "We aren't like the people from Mukem," started pelting Castellanos, Jurado, and their Mayan assistants with rocks.

As for "El don rechazado" 'A Gift, Rejected,' it was based on a true incident in which Castellanos and another INI worker helped a Mayan woman who had just given birth in wretched conditions but who refused their help and went back to work

for the employer who had endangered her and her child. Castellanos found this incident deeply troubling, and couldn't fathom the mother's motivation. Several other stories in the collection apparently have their origins in similar dilemmas of incomprehension (Marren and Jacobsen, personal interview). It was this mutually destructive colonial mentality that Castellanos explored in depth in her next novel, *Oficio de tinieblas* (1962).

The poet Juan Bañuelos was living in Tuxtla Gutiérrez in the mid-1950s, and he would travel up the mountain regularly to visit Castellanos at her house on Avenida Insurgentes. Castellanos was convinced that the house was haunted, that she could hear someone walking around at night, knocking on the doors and moving the beds around (Jacobson and Marren, personal interview). Now the rambling house has been converted into a lower-middle class restaurant and a traditional sweet shop.

Castellanos and Bañuelos would read poetry together, including Virgil, whom they were reading in translation when she wrote one of her most famous poems, "Lamentación de Dido" 'Dido's Lament.' According to Bañuelos, Rosario was in love with a civil engineer from Mexico City, Eduardo or Lalo, who had been in town supervising the construction of the highway between Tuxtla and San Cristóbal. (César Castellanos, Rosario's father, had also been a highway engineer; he had built the road to Pichucalco.) When Lalo's job was finished and he returned to the capital, he left Rosario a false address in Mexico City. This was her personal Eneas of the poem: "Dido, la abandonada, la que puso su corazón bajo el hachazo de un adiós tremendo" (Castellanos, *Poesía* 93) 'Dido, the abandoned woman, who placed her heart under the axe blow of a terrible farewell.' Bañuelos believes that Lalo was married; Jaime Sabines thinks that Lalo, like Castellanos' later boyfriend, the playwright Wilberto Cantón, was gay.

According to several people who knew her during her years in San Cristóbal, Castellanos also fell in love with the married theater director Marco Antonio Montero and with a married poet from Tuxtla. María Escandón, Castellanos' servant, tentatively identified the latter as Jaime Sabines. Sabines and Castellanos, the two leading poets from Chiapas, had

formed part of the same literary circle at the National University of Mexico in 1949-51, and they remained lifelong friends. Sabines' poem "Recado a Rosario Castellanos" 'Message to Rosario Castellanos,' written on the occasion of her death, is well known:

Sólo una tonta podía dedicar su vida a la soledad y al amor.

Sólo una tonta podía morirse al tocar una lámpara,
si lámpara encendida,
desperdiciada lámpara de día eras tú.

Retonta por desvalida, por inerme,
por estar ofreciendo tu canasta de fruta a los árboles . . .
La próxima vez que platiquemos
te diré todo el resto.

Ya no estoy enojado.

Hace mucho calor en Sinaloa.

Voy a irme a la alberca a echarme un trago

Only a stupid person could devote her life to solitude and love.

Only a stupid person could die from touching a lamp,
even if a glowing lamp,
the spent lamp of day is what you were.

So stupid in your helplessness, your defencelessness,
offering your basket of fruit to the trees. . .

The next time we talk I'll tell you all the rest.

I'm not mad anymore.

It's really hot in Sinaloa.

I'm going out to the pool for a drink. (Sabines 289-90)

It is also possible that Castellanos' mysterious suitor from Tuxtla, Gutiérrez, was the painter and engraver Héctor Ventura, whom many identify as Rosario's "medio-novio" 'semi-boyfriend' while she lived in the state capital. (Over the telephone wires from my Tuxtla hotel room, Ventura acknowledges in a soft, shy voice that they were close, but he declines an interview.)

viii. Making Peace in the Middle East: Life and Death of a Woman Ambassador

Castellanos' direct supervisor in her post as Ambassador to Israel was her friend and fellow law student Emilio Oscar Rabassa; President Luis Echeverría also went to law school with them. Rabassa, a *chiapaneco* like Rosario, is a grandson of the nineteenth-century novelist Emilio Rabassa Gamboa. According to Rabassa, Castellanos was Mexico's second woman ambassador; the first had been Castillo Ledón, who had served in Austria during the Presidency of López Mateos.

From the beginning of her three years in Israel, Castellanos wrote passionately of her admiration for the Israeli people. Her weekly column in *Excelsior* and her comments to friends indicate that, while she had no illusions about Israel's being free of patriarchy, she felt more independent and respected as a woman there. Castellanos' posthumous article "Jerusalén celeste, Jerusalén terrenal" 'Celestial Jerusalem, Earthly Jerusalem,' dated 30 July, 1974, which she mailed from Tel Aviv a week before her death, reads like a farewell to a beloved adopted country, just as her other posthumous letter, "Recado a Gabriel, donde se encuentre" 'A Message to Gabriel, Wherever He May Be,' reads like a farewell to her son:

Gente que ha permanecido durante dos mil años en los cuatro puntos cardinales de la Tierra repitiéndose diariamente la promesa del regreso a Jerusalén. Y cuando la persecución se desata y la injusticia los aísla y la violencia los diezma, no se sustentan más que de una memoria y de una esperanza. Las dos tienen el mismo nombre. Las dos se llaman Jerusalén.

Para los socialistas la iniciativa privada tiene una manga demasiado ancha. Para los capitalistas el poder de los sindicatos es excesivo. Todos se irritan. Algunos se van. . . y no se lo perdonan. . . . Otros, avisados, no vienen . . . y se avergüenzan. Los que perseveran saben que es a costa del sacrificio de sus comodidades y del riesgo de sus vidas. Pero los hijos de los que permanecieron, los

sabras, tienen lo que no tuvieron sus antepasados: raíces. Y para ellos Jerusalén es algo muy concreto y muy tangible: una cantera que se labra, una semilla que se siembra, un fusil que se carga. Y música para sostener la vigilancia. Que es Incesante. Que es ardua. Pero que no es, no puede ser, inútil.

People who have remained for two thousand years at the four cardinal points of the Earth repeating to themselves every day the promise that they will return to Jerusalem. And when the persecution begins and injustice isolates them and violence decimates them, all they have to sustain them is a memory and a hope. They both have the same name. They both are named Jerusalem.

For the socialists private enterprise has too long an arm. For the capitalists the unions are too powerful. Everyone gets irritated. Some leave . . . and are not forgiven. . . . Others, forewarned, don't come . . . and feel ashamed. Those who persevere know it is at the cost of sacrificing their comforts and risking their lives. But the children of those who remained, the sabras, have what their ancestors didn't have: roots. And for them Jerusalem is something very concrete and very tangible: a quarry that is mined, a seed that is sown, a rifle that is loaded. And music to sustain the vigil. They know it is Endless. That it is arduous. But that it is not, that it cannot be, in vain. ("Jerusalén" 9)

At the same time, during her term in Israel Castellanos privately came to adopt a sympathetic attitude toward the Palestinians. Shortly before her death Castellanos wrote in a personal letter to Rabassa, which he did not make public until 1991:

Ayer, en una conversación con _____ del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores me hablaba del problema que tendrá que plantearse cuando quiera establecerse un diálogo con los palestinos. ¿Quién va a representarlos? ¿Sobre qué bases se discutirá la creación del Estado? ¿Qué nuevos aspectos tomará el conflicto al tocar esta raíz de

un pueblo desperdigado que en término de su desesperación no ha encontrado más salida que el terror?

Yesterday, in a conversation with _____ from the Ministry of Foreign Relations, he spoke to me of the problem that will have to be faced once they decide to establish a dialogue with the Palestinians. Who is going to represent them? What will the basis be for discussing the creation of a State? What new dimensions will the conflict take on when it touches these roots of a scattered people that, in the face of desperation, have found no alternative to terror? (Rabasa 31-A)

One of the conspiracy theories regarding Castellanos' death would link it to her growing sympathy for the Palestinians and her possible negotiations with the PLO on behalf of Echeverría, who allegedly aspired to lead the United Nations and be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for making peace in the Middle East. Echeverría was counting on Castellanos, this theory would have it, to persuade Arafat to form an alliance with Mexico, thus allowing Echeverría (rather than Fidel Castro) to emerge as the leader of the Third World after Allende's fall.

Yet another conspiracy theory would tie her death to the personal animosity of her assistant in the Mexican Embassy, who reportedly resented having a woman boss who, moreover, was not a career diplomat. Might this have been the yellow cat who was stalking her? This seems plausible but improbable, since Castellanos had fled politics all her life and, even in Israel, seemed to concern herself with it only secondarily. Moreover, in at least two of the newspaper columns she denies having any real enemies, and, from all we know about her personality and temperament, it is difficult to imagine her involved in cloak and dagger work.

If the yellow cat of Castellanos' letters was meant to be symbolic, it seems to bear less resemblance to a stalker than to the *dzulum* of *Balún-Canán*, the creature whose Mayan name means "ansia de morir" or 'death wish.' Castellanos had a long history of severe depression and had attempted suicide on several occasions. Although Ricardo Guerra claims that her mood disorder had been resolved by 1971, there is

ample evidence in the *Excelsior* columns of frequent bouts of depression, particularly in response to separations from Gabriel. On August 28, 1973 she writes:

no es bueno que el hombre esté solo, según se asegura desde las primeras páginas del Génesis. Y que Gabriel, que va a ser un hombre, que ya está empezando a serlo, necesita figuras masculinas que le sirvan de modelo (para imitar o para rechazar) y que yo no puedo proporcionarle. Le doy, pues, lo que tengo: libertad. . . . Todo muy bonito muy moral. Pero, ay, cómo duele
. . . yo vuelvo a la embajada sintiéndome tan mal como me veo: desmañanada, traspasada (como dicen en mi tierra cuando el hambre se aguanta hasta que deja de sentirse) y preguntándome si la Biblia dice algo relacionado a si será o no bueno que la mujer esté sola.

it isn't a good thing for a man to be alone, as we are assured from the opening pages of Genesis. And Gabriel, who is going to be a man, who is already becoming one, needs male figures to serve as role models (that he can imitate or reject) and I can't provide him with them. So I give him what I have: freedom. . . . It's all very nice and moral. But oh, how it hurts. . . . I return to the embassy feeling as bad as I look: clumsy, 'transfixed' (as they say in my hometown when you have put up with hunger for so long that you can no longer feel it), and wondering whether it says anything in the Bible about whether or not it's a good thing for a woman to be alone. (Castellanos, *El uso* 266)

Now, a year later, the thirteen-year-old Gabriel had left Israel for good to live with his father. How might Rosario have reacted to such a definitive loss? According to Elena Torruco, despite her repeated requests to view the body, the coffin remained sealed on Presidential orders. Castellanos' columns make frequent reference to literary pieces on which she was presumably working during 1973-74; were these, together with her diary, in fact destroyed by the Embassy right after her death? And if so, why? Why, on the other hand, did the Embassy choose to publish the farewell letter to Gabriel

that was found “among her papers”? If Rosario Castellanos was murdered, this obviously should be investigated. Nahúm Megged, Castellanos’ closest Israeli friend, requested an inquest of the Attorney General but received no response. If Castellanos did commit suicide, which seems the more likely explanation, what is accomplished by continuing to cover it up? Such an acknowledgement of her suffering would make Rosario Castellanos’ biography no more tragic, and her literary and political achievement no less significant.

ix. The Posthumous Struggle over the Letters

The publication of Castellanos’ love letters to Ricardo Guerra, twenty years after her death, stirred up a controversy comparable to many of the squabbles that, for all her personal modesty, the author’s literary works had incited during her lifetime. The news weekly *Proceso* published excerpts from the letters, along with Elena Poniatowska’s prologue, in their September 1994 issue. The following week they printed an interview with Ricardo Guerra in which he attacked Poniatowska’s prologue, allegedly without having even bothered to read it. As he told the reporter, “Hace mucho que conozco a la autora, entonces no pienso perder nada de tiempo ni de humor viendo esas cosas” ‘I’ve known the author for a long time, so I don’t plan to waste any time or put myself in a bad mood by looking at those things’ (Rivera, “Ricardo” 58). Poniatowska replied in the next issue of *Proceso*, “Si leyera el prólogo, a lo mejor cambiaría su humor y ganaría tiempo” ‘If he read the prologue, maybe he’d be in a better mood and save some time.’ (Poniatowska, “Carta” 72)

The two thousand copies of *Cartas a Ricardo* quickly sold out. In the ensuing months there was a struggle over a possible second printing. Initially Guerra insisted that the publisher include an afterward that would be more sympathetic to his point of view than he felt Poniatowska’s to be. (In fact, her prologue was actually remarkably discreet, in light of the ample evidence regarding Guerra’s character provided by the letters).⁵ Then, in the Spring of 1995, Guerra refused to permit a second printing under any circumstances, despite Rosario’s instructions that they be made public. Even as her

literary works were censored during her lifetime, first by her Catholic confessor and then by the Mexican Presidency, Rosario Castellanos' personal letters continue to be censored by her ex-husband twenty years after her death.

Notes

1. I am grateful to the Joint Committee on Latin American Studies of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies, as well as the Graduate School and Committee on Latin American Studies of the University of Washington, for supporting my research in Mexico City and Chiapas during 1990 and 1991. I would also like to thank Elena Poniatowska for sharing, with characteristic generosity, her materials on Rosario Castellanos, including many of the author's columns from *Excélsior* that have not been collected in anthologies. Furthermore, I am deeply indebted to all the people who shared documents and vivid memories of Rosario, including my own 'Deep Throat.'
2. For a discussion of Castellanos' relationship with María Escandón, see my article "Rosario Castellanos y María Escandón: Feminismo, indigenismo y política personal en el 'profundo sur' mexicano." *Inti* (1994): 317-25.
3. The officials of San Juan Chamula and the government finally reached an agreement in 1994 allowing an ordained priest from the Tuxtla diocese—not from Bishop Samuel Ruiz's nearby diocese—once again to officiate in Chamula.
4. *Coletos* is the term used by the 'white' people of San Cristóbal to distinguish themselves as a class/caste from indigenous and mixed-race peoples. Recently an organization of "authentic coletos," i.e., old ruling-class white families, has been formed in response to the Mayan uprising.
5. Ricardo Guerra's controversial tenure as Dean of Arts and Sciences at the Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM) in the 1970s has been immortalized by the Mexican novelist Jorge Aguilar Mora in *Si muero lejos de ti* (1979). The villainous abortionist in the novel is named 'el Doctor Rasguia'; this is an anagram for Ricardo Guerra.

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