

[“A way of belonging to the future”: A Conversation With Carmen Boullosa](#)

written by Joe Milazzo | June 11, 2015



It may not be evident from the questions posed below, much less whatever line they may be drawing, sinking, etc., but Carmen Boullosa's [Texas: The Great Theft \(Deep Vellum, 2014\)](#) is a lot of fun. At least, it is as “fun” as a yarn “loosely based on the little-known 1859 Mexican invasion of the United States” (aka Cortina's Wars, or, as they're known on this side of the Rio Bravo, [“The Cortina Troubles”](#)) can be. *Texas: The Great Theft* certainly endeavors to engage the reader at the level of narrative pleasure, and in spite of the fact that the story it tells is as horrifying in its overt misogyny, racism, bigotry and overall lust for violence as only history can be. Sometimes pulpy, sometimes fantastic (a talking crucifix; dreaming trees), crammed both with action sequences and (nearly James-ian) micro-observations of social mores alike, and witty as well as perverse, this is a novel that isn't shy about being sprawling and suspenseful and unshakeable in its sympathies. The bad guys are bad guys, the good guys good (if not always wise), and the story itself embraces the paradigm shifts partly camouflaged by its own implications and entailments. As Alli Carlisle writes in her review of the novel (at [Full Stop](#)):

Texas is an unusual kind of historical fiction. The narrator is the most interesting and complex character—her humor and vision make the history feel, at first, like a fun adventure story, all hijinks and hilarity. She whisks us through the panorama of characters and events as if not wanting to get too serious with any of them. And yet, after a while, the effect of all this lightness begins to sink in, impressing you so slowly with the horror and sadness that are the real subject of this history that you don't feel the weight until it's already unbearable. It's an interesting counterpart to a mainstream Anglo-Texan version of this history that erases the violence, or presents it as the kind that doesn't really hurt, with ketchup-blood and quick deaths.

Much like Claude Simon's *The Grass*, Mikhail Shiskin's *Maidenhair*, or even Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, history (or, if you prefer, ur-fiction: history as the fiction by which all other fictions are determined to be fictional) in *Texas* is anything but transparent, and as much medium as it is raw material. What sets *Texas* apart from those other books is that it is unrepentant about being “big”; the defiance with which it pronounces how its atrocities belong both to everyone and to no one.



1) ***Texas: The Great Theft*** overall, and especially in its opening pages, has a very cinematic feel. (Reminiscent, to me at least, of the panoramic vistas we associate with John Ford's Monument Valley, but also of the vertiginous tracking shot that introduces us to the border world of Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil*.) How "visual" was this story to you as you imagined it and worked to translate those imaginings into the prose that fills these pages?

It started in an "audible" version. I wrote a version—very different indeed—focused on Lázaro, the old cowboy and musician that ends up lynched. I tracked him from his childhood to his old age, from Veracruz all the way up to Texas, an orphan kid who was "sold" to a company of musicians as a servant. I extended his life, abnormally, to tell the tale of what I imagine was the birth or the creation of the corrido. But when I had almost ended the first version I realized it didn't work – it only told a story, but not "the" story I wanted, did not capture the tension of that moment at Texas. It was not fair to my main goal. So, I set it aside, and went visual. It helped me because the eye does not perceive chronologically, and for the same reason does not respond to space the same way a narration does. I could stay put in some minutes for as long as I wanted, and I could travel as fast as the eye can do.

For that reason, I went into a kind of cinematic mood. And I wrote with the eye, though the audible part was never totally abandoned.

2) For many Americans, for nearly all of the state's present-day "natives," Texas is a place saturated with myth and emblematic of particular ideologies. How is this novel in dialogue with the larger meanings Texas might hold for the contemporary Mexican reader?

I think that most Mexicans prefer to ignore the fact that Texas exists. We surrendered with the territory its "imaginary" value. And that's what I wanted to recover: what Texas had meant for Mexicans. I wanted it captured, and alive. Now, this was true when I was writing the book. The truth is I don't know what readers feel about what I've published. It's a painful relationship, the one I have with books that have to fly on their own. I feel abandoned by them, I wish they were loyal to what I wanted them to be. Are they? I don't know. In the case of *Texas* the problem's in fact wider. It's not only if "I" did the job properly, if the text holds and says what it should, but also if there is in fact a Mexican inertia, a determination to not see Texas. And there, I can't tell you. Sales haven't been bad, by my standards. I am not a best seller, I have the literary reader, not the mass audience.



3) Instead of dividing itself into successive chapters, ***Texas: The Great Theft*** presents itself to the reader in two unequal parts. What significance would you assign to this particular narrative structure?

Unequal and in another tone and style. It had to be. It's a novel, also, about a recently, arbitrarily designed frontier, and I had to reproduce that in the "geography" of the body of the novel. I think it's there, in the unequal division, and not only in the two portions, or so I hope.

4) There are over 200 characters who populate *Texas: The Great Theft*. Every single one of them is treated as an individual: not as a type, not as a prop, not as a piston in the engine of plot, but as a citizen, so to speak, of the novel. How did you manage the demands made upon you by this huge—and hugely diverse—cast?

It was a fun crowd to watch, and I enjoyed the company of every one of them—even the more nasty (and maybe particularly the most nasty). I stopped in each enough to really get what he or she was, and what was happening in this moment of their lives.



5) In some ways, and although they are the chief actors in the novel, the male characters here—[Don Nepomuceno](#), Sheriff Shears, King, Stealman, Glevack, etc.—are incidental to the women pursuing their desires and making their choices, and not so much at book's margins as in its deeper recesses. If you could identify one female character in *Texas: The Great Theft* as the most "heroic," who would that be, and why?

I'm flattered. I thought that it was mostly a males' world—and I sneaked girls in. If they seem to be important, I did a nice job. Almost all are totally fictional, or almost. (Big is drawn from a character that did live in Brownsville, she used to boast she had been Zachary Taylor's lover, that part survived). I wanted girls to be part of the Texan dream. They, for their part, also wanted to be there. Cowgirls' photos exist—but real cowgirls instead were very infrequent. To be a "cowperson" of the Far North was very appealing, a way of belonging to the future. I wanted a utopia for females, and I built it. For most of them. As nothing's white and black, I had my "tepid" woman characters, like the ridiculous wife of the "founder" (or robber of the land) of the city.

6) If you could imagine a different outcome to any of the many stories in this book, one that did not have to respect the dictates of "what actually happened," what might that outcome be?

I did all I could that would be plausible to the reader—and even there with some liberties. I squeezed Cortina's wars into one—and I did give him a victory, in that he loses only by chance. That, I think, did more than enough fixing. I would not like to do more, if I want the novel to be the Texan tale I desired.

7) How do you feel about *Texas: The Great Theft* being discussed within the context of specific genres? For example, "the Western," or "historical fiction"?

I don't really believe in genres. If I was going to opt for one, I would go for a "[corrido](#)." Yes, I know it's long to be the lyrics of a song, but if I

could choose which genre I want to belong to, I want that.



8) Who is the narrator, really, of this novel?

A character that sometimes resembles my grandmother—she had a terrific sense of humor. Sometimes, “it” (for I’m not sure it’s a she or a he) resembles me teaching Latin American literature. Some other times, a reader of my generation. I got the narrator very clearly—but he (or she) is a big liar: I could never obtain the real story. It’s somebody that has read the classics, what I call the classics, but somebody who also understands what happens on a stove, a real cook. Not young. Traveled. I know him (or her) very well indeed, but don’t know the story, and she/he is so old that femininity or masculinity are past legends.



9) What quality or qualities of Samantha Schnee’s translation do you most hope English-language readers of *Texas: The Great Theft* will appreciate?

Her capability to keep a tone throughout. It is the most difficult part of the book. How do you get that narrator? It seemed almost impossible. Then she also has imagination, and a keen intuition. It was a wonder to work with her.

10) Has this novel influenced or in any way impacted whatever it is you are working on right now? Or: How, if at all, do you write differently having written *Texas: The Great Theft*? Or: What contribution do you feel *Texas: The Great Theft* has made to your evolution as an author?

The novel inflated me with life. First because writing it was a great joy (as much joy one can have with the hard, solitary, routinary life of a writer). Then came [Deep Vellum publisher] Will Evans. He’s fantastic. He’s made my novel come to life. He’s given the book respect. And for that reason the book has given me extra oxygen. Oxygen has never been lacking in my life, but one can never get enough. And now I have more.

Deep in my literary persona, however, *Texas* has not made an impact. The book collected all my former ones. And the novel I have just finished (the novel that Anna Karenina wrote: Tolstoi tells—in his masterpiece—that Anna did write a book, and never again mentions it; I found the manuscript, I tell the tale of how it appeared and I write what I think she did in her last years)... as I was saying, the novel I have just finished has collected my former novels and poems again, including *Texas*, and the books I’ve read, re-read and thought of since I finished writing *Texas*. And I do not discard movies, nor music, nor friends. Ah, friends are so important, friendship is a lot of what I’ve called “oxygen”. And there’s something else: my beautiful life companion. He’s always an adventure, my dear, sweet, sexy and bright Mike Wallace. And he’s changed so much the last years. And all the changes I see in him are for me more oxygen still. Till one day I’ll get hyper-oxygenated—that used to be an issue for me when I was a young poet, panic attacks obtained via extra oxygen. But isn’t life a mockery of a panic attack? That, or death.



Carmen Boullosa (born in Mexico City in 1954) is one of Mexico's leading novelists, poets, and playwrights. She has published fifteen novels, the most recent of which are *El complot de los románticos*, *Las paredes hablan*, and *La virgen y el violin*, all with Editorial Siruela in Madrid. Her works in English translation include *They're Cows, We're Pigs*; *Leaving Tabasco*; and *Cleopatra Dismounts*, all published by Grove Press, and *Jump of the Manta Ray*, with illustrations by Philip Hughes, published by The Old Press. Her novels have also been translated into Italian, Dutch, German, French, Portuguese, Chinese, and Russian.