

## Of Mourning and Hope: *Río Olvidado* by Rocío Favela

Ana Mayela De Velázquez Farfán



Photo by Michelle E. Carreon

Rocío Favela joined the third cohort of La Semilla's [Chihuahuan Desert Cultural Fellowship](#). She is an emerging writer from the border of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. She discovered her passion for creative writing while pursuing a Master's degree in Spanish American Literature at the University of Texas at El Paso. She describes her encounter with this creative art as an eternal dance of a harmoniously chaotic world with the individual and unique who lives and grows in this whole while being just one.

Rocío Favela's work explores the Río Bravo—as a metaphor, as a site of legends, as being attacked by divisive policies and extractive industries. She explores nuances of border life, providing an important voice and perspective of the Paso del Norte region. She was born in Los Angeles. Two months after she was born, she arrived in Ciudad Juárez. She currently lives in El Paso and identifies as part of the transnational community.

*“I am the only one in my family who is a citizen, and everyone, my mother, my father, my brother, are residents. My mother arranged residency through a treaty with people who worked in the fields, and then she asked for my father and my sister. But it took about eighteen years. So all that time we were living in Juárez, and when they arranged it, I was about thirteen years old. At fourteen, I came [to El Paso], and they made me repeat the eighth grade. I had finished, but I wasn't old enough to go to high school.”*

Rocío remembers the street where she lived when she was a child. From there, you could see the star on the mountain. El Paso was very close, but she didn't like crossing and being asked things on the bridge, going to the stores, not knowing English. Her life experience formed a sensitivity that seeks to reflect the border reality: full of challenges; yet, full of light and hope only found in situations similar to those of the northern border

between Mexico and the United States. She says it is the darkness of the night that only makes the light of the new day seem clearer.

On May 18, 2023, Rocío Favela presented her unpublished novel *Río Olvidado* (Forgotten River) to her colleagues from the third cohort of the Chihuahuan Desert Cultural Fellowship. She gave voice and presence to the ideas she had been working on for months, years.

Her project for the fellowship consisted of continuing the writing of her novel: *“It is about the figure of the Río Grande that unites us and at the same time divides us. It becomes a spokesperson for the injustices that different marginalized social groups suffer, on both sides of the river [...] forgotten between two strips of asphalt, its waters are extracted and taken away [...] It speaks about the culture of the daily crossing, and it speaks about this transnational community.”*



Photo by Michelle E. Carreon

Rocío explains, *“It is a fictional novel. The main character is named Juan Carlos. He is an elderly man who becomes widowed. So he enters a process of mourning that makes him isolate himself from others. He becomes absorbed in his pain.”* The change in the protagonist occurs when the reality of what is happening around him awakens him, pulls him outside of himself.

*Río Olvidado* is set in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when cases of femicide began to increase in Ciudad Juárez. This is not an autobiographical novel, but the author's life experience runs throughout the writing: *“I was living a very difficult reality at home. I had to cope with that and what was outside. I was always watching my back. I was always alone, and I was fourteen years old. I knew that I had to take care of myself. I was never*



*into dating or having lots of friends. I didn't watch the news. I didn't watch anything. I didn't talk to anyone. I didn't get involved with people in the neighborhood, and that's how I lived it, in that bubble."*

At the same time, the research process involved in writing *Río Olvidado* broke the thin surface of the bubble that protected her when she was a girl, allowing the author to assume the possibility: *"It could have easily been me."*

The river functions in this novel as a symbol of flow—the movement of the population between countries. It gives it an identity that belongs to two cultures, it flows. *"Your essence is the river. The river represents that essence of where you really are from,"* as Rocío explains it.



Photo by Michelle E. Carreon

Another important figure in the novel is the legend of La Llorona, the woman who loses her children and looks for them every night. Rocío approached groups of relatives of victims of femicide and found that: *"Not knowing anything about her children, days and days go by, and they go out into the streets to shout her name. The ladies said, in the interviews, that they feel that their children are listening to them."* She found the similarity between legend and real life.

*Río Olvidado* is a novel in which it is very important to name the actions: waking up the children every morning to take them to school, pouring coffee in a favorite cup, taking a taxi, crossing the bridge. The narration of this everyday life gives a form, a body to the grief of Juan Carlos, the protagonist.

For Rocío Favela, creating is a privilege, and she discovered it recently: *"It made me go to that part that I had left behind, my mother tongue, history, too, and now in a more stable situation, emotionally, with my husband, with my son, with my children. I entered the Master's degree, I remember that I left around six, and the sun was setting. I left*

*with a feeling of: 'This is what I was born for.' It was like encountering something that had never happened to me before, like a passion that I didn't have, that I hadn't had the opportunity to find."*

Rocío Favela's writing is a writing of presence, a writing that names the space of the border from the everyday. A writing that, based on the narration of the main character's intimate grief, manages to put into words the public mourning of the femicides in the city.

Rocío Favela declares that the stories we tell and read reaffirm our reality and make bridges to materialize those realities that we wish to achieve. She is a writer who speaks out for hope. Mother of three and waiting for a fourth child at the time of this interview, her personal experience is reflected in the hope she holds for a border society where human quality is increasingly better and more equitable for everyone, giving emphasis to the voices of women and men who fight every day for a dignified life.

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Interview conducted by Ana Mayela De Velázquez Farfán, MA in Creative Writing from the University of Texas at El Paso. Ana Mayela was part of the 2022 cohort of La Semilla's [Beginning Farmer Agroecology Fellowship Program](#) at the [Planty for the People Community Garden](#).