The Performance of Illness in Cristina Rivera Garza’s *Nadie me verá llorar*

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Abstract
Illness, its manifestation, diagnosis, and treatment, is central to Cristina Rivera Garza’s novel *Nadie me verá llorar*. In consideration of both mental and physical maladies and acknowledging the rhetoric of disease that was central to Mexican projects of modernity, this article traces the ways in which illness is used as a mechanism of control in Rivera Garza’s novel and the ways in which the performance of such afflictions has the potential to function as an act of resistance. It becomes apparent that in early twentieth-century Mexico, as represented in this novel, there is a potentially radical side to illness and the performance thereof, as it allows for the subversion of marginalizing power structures that use health to subjugate people.

Ilness, its manifestation, diagnosis, and treatment, is central to Cristina Rivera Garza’s novel *Nadie me verá llorar*. It has now been nearly two decades since its initial publication in 1999 and in that time the novel has been translated into several languages, and its central themes have contributed to a contemporary conceptualization of the experience of marginalized bodies in early twentieth-century Mexico. Many critics consider the literary significance of *Nadie me verá llorar* to be the way that it reveals the source of pain in Mexican history—specifically, the marginalization of certain sectors of society—and the ways that such power dynamics affect the individual. While not new to the twenty-first century, in recent years the female body and its maladies have been at the center of contemporary political debate; sexual assault, violence, family planning, and the work force have all been brought to the fore in Mexico and the ways that such bodies are both regulated by hegemonic forces and act as agencies of resistance is of utmost importance in contemporary conversations and policy-making.

Growing out of her doctoral dissertation *Masters of the Street: Bodies, Power and Modernity in Mexico, 1867-1930* (1995) (the themes of which she revisited in her 2010 study *La Castañeda*), Rivera Garza’s novel recounts the story of Matilda Burgos—characterized by her work as a prostitute and her time spent in La Castañeda asylum—and her experience in Mexico City before, during, and after the Mexican Revolution. Unlike other novels that have focused on this same period in Mexican history, *Nadie me verá llorar* tells “las historias periféricas,” or the stories that have been excluded from hegemonic narratives of the Mexican Revolution (Price 112). Primarily constructed from the intertwining narratives of Matilda Burgos and Joaquín Buitrago, the novel relates the life stories of both characters, focusing on the lovers that move in and out of each of...
their lives and the institutions and labor with which they engage. Rivera Garza’s exploration of illness in this novel is particularly meaningful because it does not resort to the use of metaphor, against which Susan Sontag cautions. Instead, she examines the ways that it operated during a specific historical period and finds ways to put illness on stage in a manner that calls attention to the very real experience of illness.

Illness and performance do not only emerge as dominant themes in Nadie me verá llorar, but they are also central to Rivera Garza’s other writings, such as La cresta de Ilión (2002), in which the hospital is one of two major landscapes in the novel, or Verde Shanghai (2011), which revolves around a doctor’s wife who suffers an automobile accident. Rivera Garza’s critical writing, too, explores these issues both in historical terms and in the ways that they speak to recent events in Mexico, and a consideration of her historical and theoretical texts can be a useful way of approaching her fictional work. In 2011, Rivera Garza published Dolerse: Textos de un país herido, a collection of essays that examine and call attention to the horrific violence in contemporary Mexico in a way that suggests that the textual performance involved in the production of the book is a means by which to confront such violence. Focusing on violence rather than illness in contemporary Mexico, Dolerse, like Nadie me verá llorar and the characters that move through the novel, also understands performance as a political act.

In consideration of both mental and physical maladies and acknowledging the rhetoric of disease that was central to Mexican projects of modernity, this article traces the ways in which illness is used as a mechanism of control in Rivera Garza’s novel and the ways in which the performance of such afflictions is capable of being an act of resistance. The first part of the article focuses on the institutional and individual experience of health through an analysis of representations of public health policies and individual/familial experience of disease. By looking at Rivera Garza’s fictional and historical depictions of early twentieth-century Mexico, it is apparent that, for the Mexican government, illness became a means by which to divide society.

The second part of the article takes into consideration specific scenes that stage the subversive possibilities of illness through a discussion of performance in the novel. Two key moments of the novel primarily inform this discussion in the ways that they bring together questions of illness and performance: the theatrical dance performances that Matilda and Ligia choreograph and perform while working in a brothel, and Matilda and Joaquín’s performance of their own madness before Dr. Eduardo Oligochea. In the moment of Matilda’s performance of illness, it becomes clear that illness, and its performance, has the potential to subvert the marginalizing power structures portrayed in the early twentieth-century Mexican context of the novel that employ a rhetoric of illness to subjugate individuals. Illness in Nadie me verá llorar is very much a political experience.

Many critics have analyzed Nadie me verá llorar since its publication, writing about mental illness, the insane asylum as an institution, gender politics, and the novel’s connection to history. While insanity and the asylum are frequent subjects of analysis, fewer critics have expanded

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1 Matilda comes to Mexico City as a teenager and works as a caretaker for a sick, elderly woman, becomes part of a group of revolutionaries, works in several brothels, and moves in and out of La Castañeda insane asylum. Joaquín, spending time in Mexico and Italy, works as a photographer, starting out as an independent artist and eventually working in a prison, and then La Castañeda.

2 In her seminal text Illness as Metaphor, Sontag discourages the use of metaphor to talk about illness as she argues that it negates the very real experience of the disease that the patient endures. “My point,” she argues, “is that illness is not a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is one most purified of, most resistical to, metaphoric thinking” (3).

3 See, in particular, Laura Kanost or Rebecca Garonzik on insanity and the insane asylum as an institution; Vinodh Venkatesh on masculinity in the novel or Sara Poot-Herrera on the experience of women during the period;
such analyses to examine the novel through the lens of illness in conjunction with questions of performance and resistance. Olivia Vázquez-Medina’s article “Seeing the Insane in Cristina Rivera Garza’s *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999)” is particularly relevant to this particular study in the way that it focuses on the representation and visibility of mental illness. She argues that the examination and representation of various levels of cognitive disability—-institutions, social networks, the individual—in this novel function to show the way that disease operated during the beginning of the twentieth century in Mexico. “Departing from those discourses and traditions of representation that objectify the mentally ill,” she argues, “the novel’s poetics serve to give visibility to absence, loss and suffering, challenging the idea of progress concomitant with that of Mexican modernity” (186). This approach directly relates to Rivera Garza’s interest and work on history, and it is essential to our understanding of this period. Of particular interest in the present study, however, is the way that illness operates within the novel, which can be seen by examining its institutional and social impacts on the characters as well as the ways in which the characters use illness as a subversive tool.

**Illness and Mexican Modernity**

In her historical work, Rivera Garza does not focus on the major events that led up to and then constituted the Mexican Revolution, but instead looks at the stories of the marginalized people, in particular the prostitutes and the insane, and the ways that their bodies influenced major events and policy decisions, and in turn the ways those same policy changes affected them. She argues that during this period there was an emergence of a complex system meant to control the growing vagrant population living on the streets of Mexico City. This apparatus, as she calls it, “encompassed the increasing production of medical knowledge, the implementation of public health legislation, and the establishment of institutions of confinement and assistance by the public welfare system” (2). Within such an understanding of the complex dynamics, she argues “that these instances of social control readily became contested scenarios where the urban poor and the group of medical professionals engaged in conflict-ridden and relational definitions of work, gender demarcations and the making of a nation” (2). In other words, she sees the marginalized bodies as playing an integral role in larger conceptualizations of a newly emerging and modernizing Mexico.

Within the historical context of *Nadie me verá llorar*, illness is regarded as anything that makes an individual unable to be a productive member of society. The author argues that Mexican society labeled any individual who was unable to participate in the process of modernization of the country as sick, and managed such individuals through institutionalized treatment. The asylum was not necessarily a place to cure the sick, but more so to contain and hide them from society. “The insane, especially the alcoholic man and the immoral woman,” writes Rivera Garza in *Masters of the Streets*, “served as primary representations of the lack of productivity that menaced the economic foundations of society” (22). Following such a definition of illness, the mind is considered a part of the body, in as far as it could be sick. Thus, changes in the mental state of an individual would have fallen within the prevailing definition of illness of the period.

Many of the characters that move through *Nadie me verá llorar*, as well as the city itself, are depicted as sick or represent medical treatment. Alcoholics, drug addicts, syphilitics, and madmen and women move through what Joaquín, the photographer and man who listens to Matil-
da’s story, sees as a sick city. At one point, Joaquín tries to convince his acquaintances that the modernized Mexican state is not the fantastic, invincible, progressive entity they see it as, but that it is a sick city full of sick people. Joaquín takes his companions on a tour of his Mexico City, which the narrator describes as follows:

Los llevaba al hospital Morelos, donde las prostitutas que atendían de noche en casas de citas abigarradas de adornos chinos y espejos monumentales, rumiaban a solas los efectos de la sífilis y la gonorrea en lechos sin sábanas y cuartos repletos de gritos y vomito. Ahí, el olor de la lenta descomposición de los cuerpos mezclado con la humedad de siglos les hacía arrugar la nariz. (31)

While both Porfirian and Revolutionary Mexican politics worked towards ideals of modernization—albeit distinct ideals—defined by public hygiene, economic health, and class stability, Joaquín reveals the dark periphery of Mexican society to his companions and to the reader. It is this city that forms the backdrop to the events depicted in the novel. A reading of Rivera Garza’s more recent work reveals a parallel description of contemporary Mexico. In Dolerse, she describes the visible violence of twenty-first century Mexico as follows: “Lo que los mexicanos de inicios del siglo XXI hemos sido obligados a ver—ya en las calles, en los puentes peatonales, en la televisión o en los periódicos—es, sin duda, uno de los espectáculos más escalofriantes del horrorismo contemporáneo” (12). Narratives of the same physical space separated by one hundred years and written ten years apart, nevertheless reveal parallel concerns about the sick and mutilated Mexican bodies of the periphery that have been made visible through Rivera Garza’s prose. In both her fictional and critical work, Rivera Garza’s approach has been to put the body in all its states on stage as a means of calling attention to it.

The central characters of Nadie me verá llorar personify the characters that make up the author’s critical work and they give a face to the violence that she describes. When Matilda first arrives in Mexico City, for example, she lives with her uncle, Marcos Burgos, who represents the Porfirian model of progress that emphasizes the importance of hygiene and public health in the way that he gives her explicit house rules meant to control individual health through personal hygiene. In her study, Vázquez-Medina suggests that Rivera Garza’s particular focus on discourses of hygiene and degeneration “help to elucidate the epistemological framework according to which Matilda is understood” (187). In other words, the novel pays particular attention to the ways in which Matilda’s body is seen and manipulated by the masculine gaze. Vázquez-Medina argues that these discourses function to show the dark underbelly of modernization and the ways that it marginalizes people (191).

An understanding of Matilda’s illness is ambiguous and in constant transformation throughout the novel. Much of the difficulty the reader confronts in determining her illness is due to the elusive narrator that presents varying portrayals of it. Her primary, society-diagnosed affliction appears to be cognitive as she spends the majority of her life in an insane asylum where her symptoms are characterized by excessive talking and lying. Dr. Eduardo Oligochea initially diagnoses her as follows: “Habla demasiado. Hace discursos incoherentes e interminables acerca de su pasado. … Sufre de una imaginación excéntrica y tiene una tendencia clara a inventar historias que nunca se cansa de contar” (91). Such a diagnosis suggests that Matilda might not be a reliable narrator while also highlighting the subjective nature of diagnosis. The medical report also describes symptoms of syphilis: “Chancros sifilíticos. Bubas. Placas en el labio inferior” (91). These symptoms, however, are not the focus of her medical treatment in La Castañeda. Later, Dr. Oligochea underscores her psychological—and not her physical—symptoms, as he tries to
convince Joaquín not to get involved with the woman: “todos los síntomas de Matilda indican demencia. La verborrea, el sobresalto, el exceso de movilidad, la anomalía de su sentido moral” (92). Finally, her death report reveals that she was also diagnosed as schizophrenic: “Certificado de defunción. ... 7 septiembre 1958, 4 horas. Hemorragia cerebral no traumática 10 días. Hipertensión esencial 5 años. Esquizofrenia 38 años” (205). Despite such medical conditions, throughout the course of the novel the perspective of the narrative challenges the reader to question such diagnoses through the juxtaposition of medical documents, third-person observations of the character, and the character’s own accounts.

Illness plays a major role in Matilda’s life story, as she tells it, as sick people have constantly surrounded her and health policies have determined that her body is unfit for a modernized Mexican society. Both in her narrative and in the medical reports that define her afflictions, the reader sees illness as an integral experience in her life. She works as a caretaker for a sick woman before she escapes into the dark streets of Mexico City. The medical report that serves as the epigraph of the novel refers to Matilda as “la enferma,” and the narrator refers to her as “la loca” (155) in the latter part of the novel. Furthermore, the author shows the reader how illness has played a role in her life even before she was born. When, in an attempt to learn more about this strange and intriguing patient he had photographed, Joaquín thoroughly investigates the history of Matilda’s hometown, Papantla, he finds a history of the diseases that have afflicted her town: “Joaquín lo ve todo y, luego, con la nariz cerca de los libros, contando con todas de las manos, hace el recuento de las epidemias que diezmaron a la población: cólera morbus en 1833, y viruela en 1830 y 1841” (56). Illness is an equally strong component in her family history; Matilda was born from the union of two people who came together because of their diseases. “Santiago,” her father, “aún de niño podía padecer ataques de cólera provocados por cosas nimias e incontrolables: el clima, por ejemplo, la inevitabilidad de los lodazales en el tiempo de lluvias, el apabullante sol del verano” (60). And her father met and seduced her mother, who was “una mulata recién llegada del puerto en busca de un mejor clima para descansar de una afección tuberculosa” (60). According to medical reports inserted in the narrative of the novel, her parents were both alcoholics, which was considered to be a disease during the period. Sick characters pass through her story—an alcoholic father, a wounded revolutionary, a depressed husband and a drug addicted lover—until she too comes to be among those defined in the novel and in society by illness.

Illness affects the individual’s experience of the body as well as the way that body interacts with those of an individual’s peers. Matilda’s body is central to this novel, not only because of her mental illness, but also because of her work as a prostitute. In the novel and its reflection of early twentieth-century Mexico, however, the figure of the prostitute is highly ambiguous; the prostitute is both fascinating and worthy of depiction in art, but her body is also sick and necessitates regulation. “De todas las obsesiones que emergieron a finales del siglo,” the narrator explains: Sólo las prostitutas alcanzaron la calidad de leyenda. Los poetas las compadecieron y las celebraron por igual. Los escultores tallaron el mármol y la madera con ellas en mente. Los pintores las inmortalizaron. Los médicos y los licenciados crearon el primer reglamento de prostitución para defenderse de su peligro y establecer las reglas del juego de los cuerpos. Hubo muchos en contra. Otros a favor. (132)

Their bodies navigated and appropriated by others, the prostitutes and the insane were marginalized from society. Rivera Garza notes in Masters of the Streets that “the psychiatrists working
at La Castañeda insane asylum focused on the economic and social uselessness of the mentally impaired” (21). Not only those who could not be productive for the greater good in Mexico due to an individual condition, but also those who carried the risk of spreading disease to others, were considered sick and in need of isolation. The author continues: “unfit for the ‘battle of life,’ both prostitutes and the insane constituted the weakest link in the fabric of society” (22). As such, prostitution was a problematic profession because of its immorality—or morally sick status—and because it carried the risk of spreading disease. Rivera Garza explains: “as diseased bodies, doctors sustained that prostitutes were the carriers of syphilis through the exercise of an unrestricted sexuality” (21). Matilda, both a prostitute and diagnosed as mentally ill, characterizes both such diseased bodies and points to the overlapping definitions of medical and moral illness, especially in regard to questions of hygiene.

While social institutions play a major role in the diagnosis and control of illness, as previously discussed, it is also a highly personal and individual experience. This dual nature of the phenomenon, according to Marc Augé is central to an understanding of illness:

> It is the very paradox of illness that it is at once and the same time the most individual and the most social of things. Each one of us feels it in his body and sometimes dies from it. ... At the same time everything about illness is social, not just because a certain number of institutions take it in charge at the different phases of its evolution, but because the patterns of thought which allow one to recognize it, to identify and treat it are eminently social. (24)

In his discussion of disability studies, Ato Quayson further explains that “corporeal difference is part of a structure of power, and its meanings are governed by the unmarked regularities of the normate” (17). In both her fictional and critical work, Rivera Garza, too, teases out the tension between the social and individual diagnosis of illness, and notes in Dolerse that “el sufrimiento es una acción, una experiencia social y cultural que implica los más ominosos aspectos de los procesos de modernización y globalización” (29). In Nadie me verá llorar, the social power of diagnosis and treatment can best be seen through the character of Marcos Burgos. From his perspective, the Porfirian approach to public health can be summarized as follows: “La estrategia económica establecida por el presidente Díaz era, a sus ojos, la más adecuada para limitar la peligrosa influencia de la gente atávica” (106). The state of being physically or mentally incapable of participating in the process of modernization in revolutionary Mexico depended on a diagnosis, predominantly made by those in power, and not on the individual. And that diagnosis was used to separate those that were harmful to society from those that were beneficial in an attempt to advance the greater population. It is precisely this tension between those who diagnose and those who are diagnosed that Matilda attempts to subvert throughout the novel.

It is significant that the first time Matilda is committed to La Castañeda, it is soldiers who send her there, primarily for withholding sexual favors. This intersection of the government, military, medicine, and sexuality speaks directly to Foucault. Foucault argues that the institutionalization and discipline of the diseased or the criminal is a structure that aims to keep the dominant group in power. Rivera Garza illustrates such power structures not only in the way they existed in revolutionary Mexico (as can be seen with La Castañeda, for example) but also in the ways that they continue to dictate Mexican society. As Oswaldo Estrada points out, it is always the authorities in Nadie me verá llorar that diagnose insanity, rather than the individual self-diagnosing (157). Illness and its diagnosis become ways of marginalizing people and imposing power. In the way that Certeau proposes an exploration of the marginalized and the ways
that such individuals use pre-existing power structures to their advantage, Rivera Garza also plays with Foucault’s theory as her characters find moments of subversion of these power structures through individual performances. This retroactive imagining of moments of contestation, or how individuals might have played with definitions of illness that dominated early twentieth-century Mexico, is key in a reading of this novel.

The performance of illness

In *Nadie me verá llorar*, performance emerges as a way for the marginalized characters to define themselves and to question the oppressive use of illness during the period. Furthermore, performance allows the narrative to reflect a disjointed view of illness that brings historical and contemporary views into dialogue. When considering performance in the novel, there are many moments that might come to mind. One might think about Joaquin Buitrago’s work as a photographer as well as the performance that his subjects enact, or about Matilda’s own recounting of her story to the audience that is Joaquin and the reader.

Language, and its performative nature, is central to *Nadie me verá llorar* as it is one way that Matilda is able to contest the marginalization she repeatedly experiences. The very narrative of the story, which in and of itself is a performance, is problematic as her verbosity marks her illness. Dr. Oligochea tells Joaquin: “¿Y no ha notado su logorrea al hablar? Ésa es su historia” (92). Yet, the process of telling her story allows Matilda to represent her own history. The reader sees Matilda take control of this performance at the outset of the novel when she sits down in front of Joaquin's camera. Instead of the usual silence that Joaquin receives from his subjects, this particular woman asks the photographer how he came to be a photographer of the insane (13), to which Joaquin, on the defensive, responds with an equally direct question: “Mejor dime cómo se convierte uno en una loca” (16). The excessive talking and story-telling gives Matilda the opportunity to perform and to legitimize her corporeal identity. But it also gives her the opportunity to tell her own story.

There are two scenes in particular that stand out as discrete performances in the novel that both function to contest medical diagnoses in the novel. The first set of performances are those that Matilda and Ligia stage while working in a brothel, which they put together, at first, as a way to entertain themselves while waiting for their evening work to begin: “Algunas tardes, antes de empezar a trabajar, cuando las mujeres se reunían en la sala, alrededor del piano, en espera de clientes, Matilda y Ligia ensayaban pasos de baile al ritmo de la música. Pronto la práctica que inició como juego adquirió los matices de una puesta en escena” (146). These performances quickly take on the form of various diseases, and then evolve to represent social institutions and eventually depict scenes from Federico Gamboa’s 1903 novel, *Santa.* The second pertinent scene takes place towards the end of the novel, after Matilda finishes telling her life story and is living with Joaquin in his family house. When Dr. Oligochea visits the two in order to confirm that Joaquin was sober—a stipulation to gain access to his inheritance—the two exaggerate their own

4 The photographer, played by Joaquin in *Nadie me verá llorar*, not only performs a particular role as he works with a variety of subjects (including, but not limited to, prostitutes, criminals, and the insane) but also instigates the performance of his subjects as he becomes an audience member.

5 As is well known, Gamboa’s novel tells the story of a young woman who resorts to prostitution in Mexico City after her family throws her out of the house for having premarital sex and then getting an abortion. Of particular interest to critics when reading the novel is the underlying, unrequited lesbian romance that takes place within the brothel between Santa and another girl. In his article on modern Mexican lesbianism in which he highlights the overlaps between Gamboa's and Rivera Garza's novels, Robert McKee Irwin clarifies that homosexuality was a taboo during the period, and was even considered a disease.
madness in an effort to parody and undermine it.

With Judith Butler’s now familiar argument that gender is a performance and that drag serves to destabilize such an act, performances can be read as subversive in many ways, including the use of humor to undermine social norms, the ability to call attention to something, and in the way that the act of performance implies an alternative, underlying identity. In the way that she puts pain on center stage in order to critique the violence of present-day Mexico in Dolerse, Rivera Garza offers a framework through which to understand the power of performance, suggesting that language and its performative nature has the ability to spark change. “Cuando todo enmudece,” suggests Rivera Garza,

> Cuando la gravedad de los hechos rebasa con mucho nuestro entendimiento e incluso nuestra imaginación, entonces está ahí, dispuesto, abierto, tartamudo, herido, balbuceante, el lenguaje del doler. De ahí la importancia de dolerse. De la necesidad política de decir ‘tú me dueles’ y de recorrer mi historia contigo, que eres mi país, desde la perspectiva única, aunque generalizada, de los que nos dolemos. De ahí la urgencia estética de decir, en el más básico y también en el más desencajado de los lenguajes, esto me duele. (16)

For Rivera Garza, then, writing is a political act and pain necessitates a different kind of writing, one that calls attention to violence and makes its effects visible. The significance of certain performative scenes in Nadie me verá llorar thus becomes clearer through an understanding of Rivera Garza’s use of language and performance to subvert institution and societal manipulations of the female body. If Butler sees drag as a performance that reveals the fluidity of gender and Rivera Garza understands writing as a stage on which to point to and renounce pain, Nadie me verá llorar uses discrete performances to question and undermine her diagnoses.

In her work on the performance of cultural memory in Latin America, Diana Taylor considers how expressive behavior, or performance, transmits cultural memory and identity (xvi). For Taylor, performance constitutes “the many practices and events—dance, theatre, ritual, political rallies, funerals—that involve theatrical, rehearsed or conventional/event appropriate behaviors. These practices are usually bracketed off from those around them to constitute discrete foci of analysis” (3). She goes on to discuss the many ways that the term performance is employed in scholarship, noting that “this multilayeredness indicates the deep interconnections of all these systems of intelligibility and the productive frictions among them” (6). Along these same lines, Rivera Garza plays with the various meanings of performance. Several instances, however, stand out in the novel as they function to undermine certain realities or diagnoses.

Matilda and Ligia’s performances in La Modernidad epitomize a formal understanding of performance in that they are rehearsed events that are bracketed off from the surrounding action.
and that function to express a certain depiction, in this case, of illness. While Taylor assumes a formal understanding of a stage on which the performances she discusses take place, Butler argues that identity-constructing performances take place across multiple layers of society, and, in particular, occur across the body. Such a conceptualization opens up a discussion to consider the ways that illness is performed on multiple stages. In Nadie me verá llorar, these stages consist of the body, the private home, and the bracketed space of the brothel. Such a space allows for the reworking of social norms as Matilda and Ligia exemplify in their performances in the brothels where they live and work.

Instead of allowing illness to define her—which it certainly continues to do throughout the novel—while in the brothel, Matilda takes the opportunity to perform it. The moment of her performance allows her to confront that which has defined her throughout her entire life, to point to the source of her pain and to recognize its effect on her. The marginalized people of the period, some of whom Matilda represents, were closely marked with disease; the prostitutes were carriers of syphilis and other venereal diseases, the vagabonds were alcoholics, and the insane were given clinical diagnoses, such as “toxicomanía, histeria, esquizofrenia” (85). Fittingly, the first piece that the women put together is originally called “el abrazo de la Sífilis” (146), and although Matilda opts for the more universal “enfermedad” as a title, such a representation speaks directly to their own professional and personal experiences. When the pair puts such afflictions on stage, they are able to point to that which has afflicted and determined the identification of their bodies; they find a way to say: “tú me dueles.”

The titles of these performances appear to be of greater significance than the movement itself, as the dance is never fully described. While the reader does see how Ligia “recorría la habitación con pasos largos y los brazos extendidos como si buscara algo, alguien detrás del aire” (146), and Matilda “irrumpía después en la habitación con movimientos bruscos y dando vueltas sobre uno de sus pies, como si fuera un trompo” (146), it remains unclear how these movements represent disease. Notably, Rivera Garza focuses more on the titles of these dances as well as the clothing that these women wear, or that which covers these women’s bodies, in this and later dances than on the movements themselves. Such obfuscation of the performance itself can be considered to be a calculated rhetorical strategy. Rivera Garza denies the reader the voyeuristic pleasure of watching a display of the sick—physically and morally—woman’s body, preferring to focus on the ways that the women enact their performative agency.

On the other hand, the symbolic representation of certain diseases speaks directly to Quayson’s discussion of the representation of disability and the ways that such depictions cause, what he calls, aesthetic nervousness. This feeling is significant as it forces the audience members to evaluate the source of their discomfort on both an ethical and aesthetic level. He suggests that “the representation of disability oscillates uneasily between the aesthetic and the ethical domains, in such a way as to force a reading of the aesthetic fields in which the disabled are represented as always having an ethical dimension that cannot be easily subsumed under the aesthetic structure” (19). For Quayson, the representation of disability incites interpretation along both aesthetic and ethical lines, thus complicating any reading. In much the same way, in Nadie me verá llorar, the staged representation of illness—or institutionalized spaces, or naturalist novels—forces the viewer to negotiate both the ethical and aesthetic implications of that which is represented on stage. It is in this negotiation that the subversive potential emerges.

While it is the intersection of the actions on stage and the experience and reaction of the audience members that makes this scene so radical, it is worthwhile to examine the personal significance of these performances for the women involved. The performances of such negative
aspects of society and the implicit power structures they signify are first and foremost for the benefit of the performers themselves. Aside from “Enfermedad,” the women also portray “Cárce1, Hospital, Neurastenia y Reglamento” (146), all of which represent hegemonic structures in an attempt to rethink such institutions. Furthermore, such subversive performances allow the women to take on an alternative role in society as they briefly escape their roles as prostitutes. One of the more notable elements of this scene is Ligia and Matilda’s insistence that they perform these dances for themselves, and not to entice their clientele (although the importance of their audience does become increasingly important for the women). While putting together the performances, a painter named Santos, who has taken an interest in the women’s work, suggests that they change the name of their piece in order to attract a larger public:

– El nombre de Enfermedad además de móbido no atraería la atención de nadie, Ligia. ¿Por qué no lo cambian por el de Las Ninas y el de Las Odaliscas? –ante cada sugerencia, “La Diamantina” se introducía el dedo índice en la boca abierto indicando que le producía asco.

– Pero Ligia, ese tipo de nombres siempre pone calientes a los hombres –les dijo tratando de convencerlas.

– ¿Y quién te dijo que esto lo hacemos para los hombres, Santos? Si quieren venir que vengan, y que se vengan también de paso, pero todo esto es para las muchachas, ¿entiendes? (146)

Such a debate underlines the power the women are able to attain through labeling their own performances. It also emphasizes the women’s initial intentions that these dances were for their own benefit, although this changes over the course of their performances as the audience becomes more important to their identity construction.

The ability to name is central to what Matilda and Ligia are able to do through their performances in the same way that Matilda’s narrative of her own story gives her the power to tell it as she chooses. The power they attain through the popularity of their representations allow the women to express explicit opinions they have concerning the medical discourse that has determined their own experience. Consequently, “cuando Santos les suplicó que al menos usaran adjetivos o un segundo nombre, como por ejemplo Delirio, Matilda le informó que en nada de lo que ellas hicieran aparecería un vocablo tan ridículo” (147). Matilda’s denial of the term “delirium” signals her aversion and conflicted feelings towards it. It is significant that Matilda would be diagnosed with syphilis and delirium, the two diseases that she refuses to specifically represent, thus signaling a boundary to how personal Matilda will allow these performances to be; she uses them to explore her own experience with illness, as long as she is not explicitly representing her own symptoms.

Beyond taking on a position of authority in the production of their performances, Matilda and Ligia also utilize these performances to recreate themselves and their identities. It is once they move to La Modernidad, where they are more financially secure, that the two women begin to create a stage presence based on Santa that goes beyond the stage and beyond individual experiences with medicine to signal their relationship. Again emphasizing the clothing that covered the women’s bodies, these performances are described as such: “de pantalones oscuros siempre y sin joya o perfume alguno sobre el cuerpo, ‘La Diablesa’ empezó a tener fama de andrómana. Ligia, por su parte, combinó su amor por los brillantes con túnicas de estilo prehispánico para crearse una personalidad exótica y vanguardista a la vez” (149). Yet again, it is the clothing, or the surface representation of the individuals, that most defines their performances.
and, by extension, their identity within the brothel. When the two are performing the pieces for themselves, in front of a small, specific crowd, they have the opportunity to express something about illness (or prison, or the hospital, etc.) within society, namely the complex, problematic nature of it. Once they become more prominent and find a larger audience, however, they do not call into question the identity imposed on them, but instead begin to construct an alternative identity. The larger their audience, the more power the women have over their own self-determination and their ability to produce a sense of aesthetic nervousness, as Quayson might put it. Furthermore, these are working women and the performances directly benefit them financially. As a result, they do modify their performances to please the customer.

Such a differentiation between the possibilities presented by the differing audience sizes—a smaller audience allows for the questioning of hegemonic institutions, while a larger audience allows the two women to benefit financially—indicates the importance of that audience, or other, to validate one’s own identity. The audiences that gather for these performances change significantly over the course of their performances. Originally, the performances seem to only attract a specific group of people: “Algunos de los clientes, especialmente aquellos con ínfulas de poeta o de artista, empezaron a llegar más temprano a la casa de paso” (146). However, it is when the women move to their new venue, La Modernidad, where they parody Gamboa’s novel, that they begin to attract a more diverse crowd:

A partir de las diez de la noche empezaban a llegar los burócratas de alto rango siempre en busca de algo para combatir el aburrimiento cotidiano; los inversionistas extranjeros con deseos genuinos de probar algo realmente mexicano; los directores de teatro; los poetas hartos de largas noches solitarias y cisnes blancos; las vedetes de moda; los arquitectos recién llegados de París; los generales con ánimos de algo tan fuerte como una batalla; los pintores de renombre aficionados al éter; los matrimonios de clase pudiente, dominados por el deseo de transgredir las normas. Todos aplaudían por igual. Todos, a partir de las diez de la noche, sentían que eran parte de otra sociedad. (149)

It is noteworthy that not only is this crowd diverse, it is also powerful as artists, as much as businessmen or generals, are all in attendance. As such, the theater created within La Modernidad constitutes a bracketed space that functions distinctly from the Mexico outside the walls of the brothel. Women who were pushed to the periphery of society become the figures of authority as they represent their stories on stage. While such a space creates the possibility for a particularly powerful type of subversion, as it becomes possible to replicate and twist hegemonic norms that exist within society, it also becomes possible for the women to interact with society, in particular to make money. It is illness that allows the women to represent these performances, to become productive, and, for a time, self-sustaining members of society.

The performance of illness, as a way of staging visibility, complicates the voyeur’s pleasure in the gaze as well as the experience of the actors on stage. Before she retreats to the asylum towards the end of the novel, Matilda, through the narrator, voices her frustration with the ways that this male gaze has followed her throughout her life: “Las miradas masculinas la han perseguido toda la vida. Con deseo o con exhaustividad, animadas por la lujuria o por el afán científico, los ojos de los hombres han visto, medido y evaluado su cuerpo primero, y después su mente, hasta el hartazgo” (193). Indeed, Jessica Lynam argues that Matilda Burgos becomes “el palimpsesto renuente sobre el que varios de los personajes masculinos de la novela intentan superponer sus
proyectos y caracterizaciones, ya sea con el fin de diagnosticarla, definirla o retenerla” (505). By performing illness, something that is unpleasant to look at, the women put something on stage that society, and in particular revolutionary Mexican society, tried to hide—or de-stage—from society through the construction of institutional structures. The power of performance is that it invites the audience to question the stability of societal norms of that which is being performed. Following Butler’s depiction of drag as a potentially subversive act that calls into question the “naturalized categories of identity and desire” (139), Matilda and Ligia’s performance of illness also calls into question the naturalized, hegemonic influence it held during the period.

While Matilda and Ligia’s performance in La Modernidad allows the two women to contest the institutions that have determined the course of their lives, other moments in the novel in which Matilda attempts to perform her own illness are more ambiguous in their effectiveness. Towards the end of the novel, Dr. Oligochea visits Joaquín and Matilda in order to confirm Joaquín’s sobriety, thus allowing him access to his inheritance. When Eduardo arrives, Joaquín and Matilda, half-naked, put on a bizarre dance reminiscent of the earlier scenes she enacted with Ligia.

– Es que estamos muy locos, doctor –dice Matilda mientras le da cuerda al fonógrafo y extiende sus brazos para empezar a bailar con Joaquín. Sus pasos son grotescos, la manera en que se besan también.
– ¿No vas a tomar notas, Eduardo? –le pregunta el fotógrafo-. Somos todo un caso. (189)

The term “grotesco” points towards the illness, specifically the mental deviations, that the two are enacting as they purposefully stage the very diagnosis Dr. Oligochea has given to both of them. The explicit acknowledgement of their insanity invites the reader to question that sanity as we have seen how performance can both construct identity and contest pre-existing identities. The reader must question whether the couple, and Matilda in particular, showcases their madness in an effort to return to the refuge of the asylum, as Jungwon Park and Sarah Poot-Herrera suggest, or whether, in parodying their illness, they are able to subvert it.

Unlike the earlier performances that, based on their descriptions, have a lot to do with the ways that the women’s clothes covered them, Matilda and Joaquín’s performance is based on their partial nudity and unconventional clothing as they now appear with their most intimate body parts exposed to the doctor’s view. “Joaquín aparece ataviado con una túnica de organza que deja entrever sus piernas flacas y el sexo colgando entre las piernas” (189). The narrator notably refers to Matilda and Joaquín as “los dos travestidos inmóviles” (190). Drag, as Butler argues, is sometimes subversive, but not always, and here we see how Joaquín and Matilda's parody fails as the two become immobile and removed from it. “Parody by itself is not subversive,” Butler points out, “and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony” (139). While Butler suggests a difference between productive and counterproductive drag, she never provides a clear way of understanding such distinctions. In the audience’s reception of the act of drag, Rivera Garza offers a way of distinguishing successful and unsuccessful moments of parody. While the earlier performances play with covering and uncovering the body—the location of such hegemonic contestations in revolutionary Mexico—Joaquín and Matilda provoke Eduardo’s voyeurism, thus inciting a different kind of audience reaction than was seen earlier in the novel. Eduardo denies their invitation to participate in their performance, thus indicating a failure.
With Ligia, Matilda refuses to perform the disease with which doctors would later diagnose her. She was able to create a successful performance based on more universal interpretations of illness that could be seen in the audience’s positive reactions. With Joaquín, however, Matilda dramatizes her insanity, but instead of becoming enthralled in the performance, as in earlier instances, this audience rejects her performance. Kanost reads this particular scene as a performance similar to the one that takes place in La Modernidad in the way that it ridicules diagnosis. She argues: “By exaggeratedly playing out Eduardo’s own interpretations of them as mentally ill, they flaunt their authority not only to execute the same reading but to mock its inaccuracies. … [T]heir performance ridicules any attempt by medical authorities—and even, by extension, the novel itself—to represent them” (313). In consideration of the context of this performance as well as the audience’s reaction, however, this performance fails in its intended effect. Instead of being paralyzed by shock, Eduardo negates the performance, instead challenging them to take it further and, consequently, discrediting their performance: “en lugar de incorporarse y salir indignado de la casa, Eduardo da ligeros sorbos y los observa cuando una sonrisa se asoma. –He visto cosas peores –los reta” (189). It becomes clear that Joaquín and Matilda’s performance went too far, and its extremity invalidates it. “–No sabe cuántos recuerdan la reunión en que conoció a la Vicario –menciona Eduardo con voz firme, juguetona–. No sabe cuántos recuerdan la promesa de su talento, Joaquín, y su caída –añade” (190), Eduardo tells them, effectively using Matilda’s sexuality and Joaquín’s professional failures to discredit their performances, to make clear that “la fiesta de disfraces se ha convertido en un funeral” (190). While the performance in its exhibition of her madness is what ultimately brings Matilda back to the asylum, the act itself fails in its attempt to parody dominant notions of insanity. It becomes apparent through a comparison of the two performances discussed in this essay that some performances are subversive while others are blurrier in their effectiveness. One performance allows Matilda an element of productivity and self-affirmation, while the other underlines and reaffirms her mental afflictions.

Through an analysis of the function and performance of illness in Cristina Rivera Garza’s novel, Nadie me verá llorar, it becomes apparent that illness emerges as a complex element of subjugation and subversion. However briefly, the performances in the brothel allow Matilda and Ligia to examine the structures that determine their experience in society and to financially support themselves. Matilda and Joaquín’s bizarre performance calls into question the authenticity of their madness as they are able to produce it for an audience, but, unlike the warm reception of Matilda and Ligia’s audience, their audience rejects the performance. Nevertheless, the performance allows Matilda to retreat to the asylum where she can find solace in her separation from society. As evidenced by Matilda’s story, in the society reflected in Rivera Garza’s novel, illness serves as a tool of marginalization for those in power, but also as something that can be empowering for the individual to contest such marginalization.

An extensive analysis of the function of illness in a fictional representation of a historical period has the potential to illuminate and complicate an understanding of the maladies in said period, as Vázquez-Medina demonstrates. It can also direct our attention inwards as we consider the ways in which physical and mental afflictions function within contemporary society. Incorporating Rivera Garza’s more recent work, Dolerse, into a reading of Nadie me verá llorar reveals not only parallels in the ways that she understands violence in Mexico across history, but also a similar valorization of performance as a means of contesting such pain. It is that element of performance that is most radical in this novel, and such a twist on the Mexican Revolution novel exemplifies Rivera Garza’s insistence that writing from a position of pain necessitates a new approach: “Dolerse, que siempre es escribir de otra manera” (17). Texts like Nadie me verá llorar...
create the opportunity to point to such pain—both in the past and in present-day Mexico—and to imagine ways of subverting it.
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