

Cartographies of Vulnerability: Body and Space in Contemporary Mexican Literature and Culture

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Abstract

Moving away from dominant narratives my interdisciplinary project, “Cartographies of Vulnerability: Body and Space in Contemporary Mexican Literature and Culture,” explores how Mexican women writers and artists are contending with and reconfiguring notions of gender, sexuality, citizenship, and space in a globalized twenty-first century Mexico. Chapter one examines bodily and spatial malleability in Cristina Rivera Garza’s *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999). I argue that the spaces represented within the narration as well as the ones that inspired this historical work of fiction allow for the representation of sexual, class, and gender fluidity. Taking as a point of departure an analysis of Ana Clavel’s *Cuerpo naufrago* (2005), chapter two explores perceptions of sexuality and gender identity, and simultaneously examines disruptions of the traditional literary forms and other artistic interventions. Chapter three argues that Guadalupe Nettel’s *El huésped* (2006) provides new approaches to understanding the city and its irrepresentability. The novel also rethinks the role that works of fiction and other artistic objects offer in response to the growing urbanization of the country. In this way, the spatial representations in much of the chronicles of the mid-twentieth century by men authors are reconfigured by Nettel and other women artists. The final chapter focuses on *relingos*, mapmaking, and the disappearing boundaries of spaces in Valeria Luiselli’s work of fiction and non-fiction. This dissertation examines the thematic, theoretical, and narrative innovations that Mexican women authors and artists integrate in their recent works. It also requires that we consider how these works challenge current perceptions of gender, sexuality, and space while offering a way to rethink the Mexican literary production of the twenty-first century through cultural studies.

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Introduction

In quexquichcauh maniz cemanahuac, aic tlamiz, aic polihuiz,
in itenyo, in itauhca Mexihco Tenochtitlan.

En tanto que dure el mundo, no acabará, no perecerá la fama,
la gloria de México Tenochtitlán.

Tenoch, 1325

No cesan los golpes sobre la cantera y, a medida que crece
la amenaza del vacío en este patio, en algún otro
lugar de la ciudad se está cuarteando una banqueta; en otro,
alguien derrumba una pared; y en la cabeza ligera y redonda
de un niño, suavemente apoyada sobre la ventana de un vagón
de metro, se abre la grieta de una idea, la fisura de una nueva
palabra.

Valeria Luiselli, 2010

On May 3, 2021 a section of Line 12 of Mexico City's Metro Subway system collapsed, killing twenty-six people and leaving many more injured. *The New York Times* recently exposed the structural failures of Line 12, which included construction deficiencies and planning carelessness. The report also revealed how former Mexico City mayor Marcelo Ebrard expedited the project so that it could be inaugurated before his term ended in 2012.¹ This tragic case at once reveals the continued issues that exist in this megalopolis of more than twenty million

¹ On June 13, 2021 *The New York Times* published an article entitled "Why the Mexico City Metro Collapsed." The report explains that the line's construction was rushed during the mayoral period of Marcelo Ebrard, who currently serves as Mexico's Secretary of Foreign Affairs and is also a 2024 presidential hopeful and a close ally of president Andres Manuel López Obrador. The article is damning in that it provides very specific details that led to the collapse in May, such as the purchase of incompatible train cars, poor welding, and ill-fitting parts. Days later, on June 16, 2021 *El Financiero* reported that a recently released government report indicates that the Line 12 collapse was the result of at least six construction deficiencies.

people, while also highlighting the central role of the city in contemporary Mexican studies. I mention this particular case because it also serves as a frame for some of the spatial analyses and arrangements that I examine in *Cartographies of Vulnerability: Body and Space in Contemporary Mexican Literature and Culture*, specifically those related to the cultural and literary engagements in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. When Mexico City's subway system was inaugurated in 1969, it rapidly became an important connector and mode of daily transportation for thousands of people.² The construction of Line 12 began in 2008 and was touted by Ebrard and others as the most modern train project to be constructed in Latin America in recent times. The line was built in order to link the city's working-class neighborhoods to the greater metropolitan area by offering affordable transportation and cutting commute time for workers that live in municipalities that are located farther away. The sad irony of this situation is not lost on me, the project was initially publicized as a "social project" that was intended for the good of the general public. However, the deaths of metro riders who were mostly working-class people, have further revealed issues of class, accessibility, urban crisis, and disruption, in addition to exposing the failures of urban modernity in the twenty-first century.

² In *Mapping Latin America: A Cartographic Reader*, Alain Musset studies Mexico City as a megacity and explains that the population growth that took place during the 1950s, along with the economic development and the rising gap between working zones and residential areas produced a huge increase in traffic inside the city. Musset also provides a brief history of mass transit in the city mentioning that the first subway line (Observatorio-Pantitlán) opened in 1969 and that,

To ease car traffic congestion, eight large avenues were opened in a southerly direction and eleven in a westerly one (the ejes vials [sic] indicated on the plan in black letters), which went back to the orthogonal frame inherited from the colonial time and the nineteenth century (calles and avenidas), the progressive construction by the Mexican government of the Sistema de Transporte Colectivo followed the same logic (233).

Throughout its history, Mexico City—as well as the rest of the states have experienced a series of modernization processes. Years after dictator Porfirio Díaz overthrew the government of Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada in 1876, he and a group of close allies and advisors called the *Científicos*, became the driving force of large infrastructural and modernization projects that ultimately displaced, abused, and overall had very negative effects among the poor working-classes in Mexico.³ Some of the projects completed during Díaz’s long dictatorship include the expansion of the railroad and telegraph systems, as well as sanitation and health-related improvements in the city.⁴ Díaz’s government continued modernization projects until his ousting in 1910, with the start of the Mexican Revolution.⁵

The effects of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) are well documented and represented in Mexican literary and cultural tradition and can still be observed in the places frequented by tourists around Mexico City.⁶ In the years following the war, muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, received state sponsorship and quickly became the most well-known Mexican artists. The Mexican government approved of their work because they denounced “bourgeois art” in favor of a monumental public art that was thought to be uniquely Mexican. Furthermore, they believed that portraying the “glory” of Mexico’s

³ For detailed explanations see, Joseph, G. M. and Timothy J. Henderson’s *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Duke University Press, 2002.

⁴ Between 1876 and 1910, around 19,000 miles of railway were built, 45,000 miles of telegraph wires were installed and many buildings, such as hospitals, were erected both around the country and in Mexico City.

⁵ Ironically, the year the Mexican Revolution started (1910-1920), the Centenario, a big event that was planned in order to commemorate the Mexican independence from Spain in 1810 also took place.

⁶ Diego Rivera’s murals in Mexico City are located at the Palacio Nacional, the Secretaría de Educación Pública, Museo Mural Diego Rivera and the Palacio de Bellas Artes.

indigenous past would result in a strong national identity and solidify the country after the war.⁷ Similar discourses were happening in the literary world between writers preoccupied by issues related to the Mexican Revolution and a group of poets known as the Contemporáneos. I am referring to the *Contemporáneos*, who took their name from a magazine that circulated in Mexico between 1928 and 1931. The group of young poets, including Xavier Villaurrutia, Salvador Novo, José Gorostiza, Carlos Pellicer, Jorge Cuesta and Gilberto Owen published their work in the magazine. This group rejected the Mexicanism/nationalism of the earlier Mexican poetry and instead established connections with European writers such as André Gide, James Joyce and Marcel Proust. Guillermo Sheridan explains that one episode that led to these tensions happened at a conference in 1923 when, José Vasconcelos, who was then Secretary of Education, spoke of the indifference towards the country's "reality" in the poetic production of the time and encouraged intellectuals to take the role of pedagogues. Another incident occurred in 1925, when a group of writers labeled them using a homophobic slur and declared their literary production was "effeminate literature" (*México en 1932*, 33-35). Because some of the *Contemporáneos* were openly homosexual, the second episode clearly showcases the homophobia and sexism among Mexican men of letters while simultaneously demands that Mexican literary production be virile and strong.

Because no work of literature or other cultural object exists in a vacuum, I examine some of the tensions and engage with the discourses mentioned above throughout my dissertation. In the following chapters, I explore how contemporary women writers engage with past aesthetics and in some cases reconfigure or reshape what it means to be a writer in the twenty-first century.

⁷ The nationalist discourse has been debated and critiqued in subsequent decades by Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, Guillermo Sheridan, and Ignacio Sánchez-Prado, among many others.

As such, there are some guiding questions I have kept in mind throughout this study: What can we learn from the past by looking at the current literary and cultural production in Mexico and beyond? How are spaces being reconfigured and interpreted in the narratives? How did these literary reconfigurations happen? What else was going on at the time and where was it taking place? And, in what ways does the context shape how we interpret works of fiction?

i. State of the Field

A number of processes and discourses of modernization continued throughout the twentieth century until the present. These processes include infrastructural changes such as transportation and housing projects, and commercial ones, such as transnational agreements allowing the easy flow of goods across national borders. It is also important to remember that transformation frequently incites resistance to these so-called modernization projects which can take the form of cultural movements, public protests, military rebellions or other forms of critique. The student killings of 1968; Mexico's hosting of the Olympics the same year; the deadly earthquake of 1985 and its aftereffects; the 1994 introduction of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas in response to it; the war on drugs of the 2000s, along with the violence, displacement, and disappearances perpetrated by the Narco state; the collapse of Line 12 in the Mexico City subway system mentioned above, and more recently, the Tren Maya, which is under construction in the southern region of the country, all serve as clear examples of the existing cultural and spatial tensions across Mexico.⁸

⁸ For a reading that accounts for cruelty and violence across Latin American countries see, Jean Franco's *Cruel Modernity*. Duke University Press, 2013.

Robert McCaa explains that during the nineteenth-century only four cities in addition to Mexico City had more than fifty thousand inhabitants and notes that urbanization in Mexico is a twentieth-century phenomenon.⁹ According to information provided by Our World in Data, beginning in the 1960s more than fifty percent of Mexico's population lived in an urban setting.¹⁰ As of 2017, the percentage was close to eighty percent, and it is projected that by 2050 almost ninety percent will live in an urban area in Mexico. For comparison, in the 1960s one billion people lived in urban areas around the world, while as of 2017, that number had increased to more than four billion people across the world (Ritchie and Roser, "Urbanization"). Spatial studies began around the 1960s with the "spatial turn," and scholarship on urban studies has continued to emerge over the past few decades.¹¹ My project engages in dialogue with various disciplines including history, cultural studies, photography, and gender and sexuality studies. Rubén Gallo and Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, have done extensive and comprehensive work on Mexico City.¹² Their work explores the peculiarities and context of Mexican cultural production in and around the city since the twentieth-century. Both authors pay attention to literary works

⁹ See Michael R. Haines and Steckel, Richard H. (Richard Hall). *A Population History of North America*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

¹⁰ For studies on the changes experienced in Mexico City around these years see, Selvidge, Sarah Marie. "Modernism and Miracles: Architecture, Housing and the State in Mexico, 1930-1970." Berkeley: University of California Berkeley. PhD Dissertation. 2015. And also: Yee, David. "Divided Landscapes in the Mexican Metropolis: Housing and Segregation in Mexico City, 1940-1976." Stony Brook University. PhD Dissertation. 2019.

¹¹ See José Eduardo González and Timothy R. Robbins, editors. *Urban Spaces in Contemporary Latin American Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019; Dym, Jordana, and Karl Offen. *Mapping Latin America: A Cartographic Reader*. The University of Chicago Press, 2011; Ortiz, Maribel, and Vanessa Vilches Norat. *Escribir la ciudad*. 1. ed. Fragmento Imán Editores, 2009.

¹² See Rubén Gallo's *Mexican Modernity: The Avant-Garde and the Technological Revolution*. MIT Press, 2005; *New Tendencies in Mexican Art the 1990s*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004; *The Mexico City Reader*. University of Wisconsin, 2004 and, Tenorio-Trillo, Mauricio. *I Speak of the City Mexico City at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*. The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

without ignoring other important cultural artifacts such as artistic production, radio, cameras, typewriters, cement, the metro, street vendors, the language of the city, and streets, among many others. For his part, Rubén Gallo makes brilliant urban analyses, paying special attention to the complexities and the contradictions of living in such a large Latin American city. Furthermore, contributors in Gallo's *The Mexico City Reader* illustrate how the city is conceived as a place simultaneously alluring, repulsive, and violent, creating at times a sense of displacement and dislocation.¹³ Because recent scholarship has overlooked the contributions of Mexican women writers and artists to existing discourses on space and the body, my research explores how Mexican women writers in the beginning of the twenty-first century have reconfigured notions of space and of the body in contemporary works of fiction. As such, historical and cultural studies focusing on gender, sexuality, and race issues in Mexico and across Latin America in the twenty and twenty-first centuries have also informed the critical and historical approaches of this dissertation.¹⁴

Diálogos, the very first chronicle of Mexico City (known as New Spain at the time) was published in 1554 by Francisco Cervantes de Salazar. Since then, texts on the city have

¹³ It is worth noting that out of the twenty-two contributors to the anthology, only five were women and only five out of the thirty-six chronicles were written by women.

¹⁴ I am in dialogue with the work of Christine B. Arce, Gabriela Cano, Debra A. Castillo, Jean Franco, Joanne Herschfield, Anna Macías, Anne Rubenstein, Mary Kay Vaughan, and Jocelyn Olcott, among others. Debra Castillo traces the consequences of disrupting the Mexican male-dominated social order in *Easy Women* (1998). She further explains how women's work in the fields became perceived as a transgression that had material consequences for women who challenged gender norms. In chapter 4 of *Plotting Women* Jean Franco discusses the struggles women faced during the 19th century to become participants of the cultural literary and nationalist discourses. Since the idea of modernization and the construction of a national identity in Mexico was dominated and created by men and male domination, it is no surprise that a lot of the literature from the period was didactic in nature—with the goal of teaching women how to be “new women” but also keep their modesty. Nevertheless, some of the few women writers in Mexico during the 19th century did manage to rebel through literature. They wrote texts in which they criticized the expected domesticity of women and the power men exerted over them.

continued to explore the streets, people, and the multifaceted character and a fragmented city. Over the past century, men writers such as Salvador Novo, Carlos Monsiváis, Jorge Ibargüengoitia, Carlos Fuentes, and Juan Villoro¹⁵ have been easily identifiable as chroniclers of Mexico City. Although the Mexican and Latin American literary canons have recognized important women writers such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Rosario Castellanos, Elena Garro and Elena Poniatowska, until very recently, women writers were seldom included in studies, conferences, or special editions exploring the city or the urban spaces in Mexico.¹⁶

María Inés Lagos has noted that political and social transformations of the 1960s allowed Latin American women writers to thrive and increase their presence in the public sphere.¹⁷ Furthermore, Luz Elena Gutiérrez de Velasco's reminds us that the literary "female boom" of the 1970s and 1980s revealed the quality of Mexican and Latin American writers as well as new emerging trends (196). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, new spaces to critique and to rupture with official nationalist and patriarchal discourses that existed in Mexico prior to 1968 facilitated the development of new forms of innovation in the arts. Critics such as Debra Castillo, Jean Franco, and Carlos Monsiváis have noted that women and feminist intellectuals increasingly

¹⁵ Recently published, *El vértigo horizontal* (2019), is a book of chronicles of Mexico City as remembered by Juan Villoro. The book takes as a point of departure Villoro's own memories of the city as it simultaneously narrates the history of Mexico City.

¹⁶ Although it is not strictly a chronicle, *La vida en México durante una residencia de dos años en ese país* (1843) published in Boston by Madame Calderón de la Barca portrays her life through a series of letters she wrote in Mexico during a period of two years (1839-1842). As such, this would be one of the first books by a woman writer to write about life in Mexico City during the 19th century.

¹⁷ See Lagos, María Inés, "Displaced Selves: Exile and Migration in Latin American Women's Writing (1980–1995)." *The Cambridge History of Latin American Women's Literature*, edited by Ileana Rodríguez and Mónica Szurmuk, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 326–340.

took advantage of those opportunities to reveal their side of the story and to talk about issues that are important to understanding contemporary Mexican cultural and literary production.¹⁸

Although some argue that contemporary women writers no longer struggle to become part of the canon and that we are beyond gender issues, Emily Hind's *Dude Lit: Mexican Men Writing and Performing Competence, 1955–2012* offers another perspective,

Claims that a canon no longer exists, that differences between high and low literature have been erased, that women can compete equally now, are simply delusional given the ongoing context of prejudice in which literary critics live, read, and publish. If the underlying issues fail to change, the new respect afforded to women writers such as Guadalupe Nettel and Valeria Luiselli will be a shortlived phenomenon, with their fame soon to give way to another token set of younger women writers. Cristina Rivera Garza, Carmen Boullosa, Elena Poniatowska, and others, as they mature, already know to be wary of the longstanding sexism that includes the refusal to allow women to age and gain in intellectual authority the same as men (212).

In the excerpt above, Hind mentions women writers from a previous generation in order to expose how women writers, unlike their male counterparts, continue to find obstacles and are unable to become authorities in their field. At the same time, this case also showcases why it matters to recognize that there, in fact, are differences in who is allowed to enter the canon and why. Furthermore, in *The Cambridge History of Latin America Women's Literature* Debra Castillo discusses the intercultural flows and the importance of globalization in literary

¹⁸ See, Debra Castillo's *Easy Women: Sex and Gender in Modern Mexican Fiction*. University of Minnesota Press, 1998. Jean Franco's. *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico*. Columbia University Press, 1991, and Carlos Monsiváis' *Cultura urbana y creación intelectual: el caso mexicano*. United Nations University, 1981; *Los rituales del caos*. Era, 1998.

production of the early twentieth century through the present. Castillo pays special attention to Mexican women writers who write about the global experience, or from a global perspective. Similarly, the works of the authors I discuss throughout this dissertation also establish dialogues and connections with a larger network of artists, cultural artifacts, as well as with other works of fiction.

The epigraphs to this introduction were written almost seven hundred years apart. The first one by Tenoch, leader and founder of the Mexica (Aztec) empire, and the second one is part of Luiselli's essayistic work on contemporary Mexico City. Both texts allude to the diversity, simultaneity, complexity and richness of Mexico City. Moreover, reading both texts together reveals a sharp contrast between two perspectives of the city: the first one, right after the city was established in the 1300s; and the second one, written from the point-of-view of a twenty-first century city dweller. While Tenoch speaks of the never-ending glory of the city, Luiselli invites the reader to enter whatever small space is available to them, while also evoking simultaneity in the city.¹⁹

ii. *Theoretical Interventions*

The most recent versión of the Constitución Política de la Ciudad de México [*Political Contitution of Mexico City*] states, “La Ciudad pertenece a sus habitantes. Se concibe como un espacio civilizatorio, ciudadano, laico y habitable para el ejercicio pleno de sus posibilidades, el disfrute equitativo de sus bienes y la búsqueda de la felicidad” [The City belongs to its inhabitants. It is conceived as a civilizing, urban, secular space, inhabitable for the full exercise

¹⁹ Carlos Fuente's portrayal of 1950s Mexico City in *La región más transparente* (1958) also comes to mind. The fragmentary writing technique defies time and space in the novel and by doing so, Fuentes presents the city as fluid, open, and changing as well as divided across many boundaries and social signifiers such as class, race and gender.

of its possibilities, the equitable enjoyment of its goods, and the pursuit of happiness] (*Political Constitution of Mexico City*, 2017). Mexico City is one of the most cosmopolitan and progressive centers in the country.²⁰ The city passed a law in 2008 to allow transgender people to change their legal gender and name on the birth certificate; it became the first Latin American city to allow same-sex marriage in 2009; in 2008, voluntary abortions up to twelve weeks were decriminalized in Mexico City; and in 2019, the state of Oaxaca made a similar decision.²¹ Moreover, as noted in the city's Constitution mentioned above, the city is a space for those who inhabit it, and as such, Mexico City has historically been known as an open and welcoming space that is particularly safe for political refugees and asylum seekers.²²

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Virginia Woolf highlights the centrality and importance of both physical and figurative space for women. The essay discusses how female subjectivities develop and why it is necessary to find outlets for experimentation and innovation. This is true for the authors I discuss in this project and for their contributions to a feminist reading that is informed by various interdisciplinary fields that range from literary and cultural studies, feminist and space theory, sociology, human geography, history, and architecture. Human geographer

²⁰ In the past few years, other cities and states around the country such as Guadalajara, Querétaro, Puerto Vallarta, Monterrey, Oaxaca, Sinaloa, and Yucatán have consistently been moving towards more inclusive laws.

²¹ *Carpeta informativa: Interrupción legal del embarazo. Congreso del Estado de Oaxaca*. Available digitally: https://docs64.congresoaxaca.gob.mx/centros-estudios/CEMPAG/estudio/INTERRUPCION_LEGAL_DEL_EMBARAZO.pdf

²² In the late 1930s Mexico welcomed Spanish citizens fleeing Francisco Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975). Decades later, people from Chile and Argentina also fled to Mexico City during Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship (1973-1990) and the National Reorganization Process (1976-1983) respectively. More recently, many Cuban immigrants have traveled to Mexico City looking for career and job opportunities. It is also important to note that currently there is rampant violence towards Central American and Caribbean immigrants and asylum seekers. Black and indigenous people traveling across Mexico to the border with the United States tend to be the victims of crime and violence perpetrated by criminal groups but also by the Mexican state.

Doreen Massey explains, “from the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only in themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood” (*Space, Place, and Gender*, 179). By establishing a connection between spaces and how they are constructed and interpreted, Massey asserts that all spaces are gendered. Additionally, the author also argues that space and time are inextricably interwoven.²³

My analysis of these novels explores the different spaces and places represented, including mental institutions, restrooms, the metro, as well as textual, public, and porous spaces. At the same time, I engage with cultural studies and feminist thought such as Butler’s idea of gender performativity, Kristeva’s ideas of the abject, and Ahmed’s mapping of spaces according to ideological frameworks.²⁴ Moreover, the theoretical work proposed by the thinkers enters in dialogue with Walter Benjamin’s meditations of Parisian arcades and the role of the *flâneur* in the city or the urban space and engages with ideas of porosity and interconnectedness.²⁵ Additionally, as Michel Foucault noted in 1986,

²³ See Doreen Massey’s 1992, “Politics and Space/Time.” *New Left Review* 196: 64-84. This idea will be discussed more in depth in chapter four where I explore how time and space bend in Valeria Luiselli’s *Los ingrátidos*. This characteristic is observed in modernist literary works of the 1930s.

²⁴ See Sara Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Routledge, 2015 and *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press. 2006; Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990; Paul B. Preciado’s “Basura y género. Mear/cagar, masculino/femenino.” In *El museo apagado. Pornografía, arquitectura, neoliberalismo y museos*. Malba, 2017 and *Manifiesto contrasexual*. Editorial Anagrama, 2016, and Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press. 1982.

²⁵ In *The Arcades Project* (1999), Walter Benjamin offers and architectural and cultural history of Paris during the nineteenth century as well as provides a reading of the arcades, which was a type of new shopping mall at the time. In the same text, Benjamin also discusses the role of the *flâneur* or city wanderer in the city. In his reading of Benjamin’s arcades in Paris, Victor Burgin asserts,

The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and suspension, of crisis, and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world. The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.²⁶

Foucault notes the shift towards spatial theoretical frames of living in the world that we continue discussing in the present and stresses ideas of juxtaposition and simultaneity, both of which are recurring themes throughout this dissertation. The network and the intersecting points that humans experience has been evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. After the shut down in March of 2020, most of our networks and connections had to be reconfigured and shifted to remote and digital formats, creating juxtapositions like the ones Foucault describes above.

Henri Lefebvre pointed out in the 1960s that the right to the city and urban life were a basic condition for renewed humanism and democracy. He also noted that this was about the

In this space it is not simply that the boundaries are “porous,” but that the subject itself is *soluble*. This space is the source of bliss and terror, of the “oceanic” feeling and of the feeling of coming apart; just as it is at the origin of feelings of being invaded, overwhelmed, suffocated. The generation of Europeans to which I belong grew up in a world of fixed borders, of glacial boundaries: frozen, it seemed for eternity, by the cold war. Now, in the time of thaw, borders everywhere are melting, sliding, submerging, reemerging. Identities—national, cultural, individual—are experiencing the exultant anxieties that accompany the threat of dissolution (155).

²⁶ See Michel Foucault’s “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16 (Spring), 1986. 22-27.

right to the use of a city, including its meeting places of social and cultural exchange, and as such, the city was a product of the great revolution that “urban society” would carry out.²⁷ In this same sense, David Harvey claims that the right to the city is not the right to (improve) the city we have, but the right to change it and to build a better city: that is, one that is socially just. Elizabeth Grosz talks about the specificity of the body in the city, asserting that “the city is made and made over into the simulacrum of the body, and the body, in its turn, is transformed, ‘citified,’ urbanized as a distinctively metropolitan body” (112). I keep this idea in mind in my discussions of the body in and around Mexico City and New York City. Moreover, Carlos Monsiváis also delves into a spatial analysis of bodies and proposes a reading of the Mexico City subway by explaining that “in the metro, the laws of molecular structure lose their universal validity, bodies merge like spiritual essences, and transcorporeal graftings are commonplace” (*The Mexico City Reader*, 144). The breakage of boundaries, such as the one that takes place in the extremely crowded metro cars described by Monsiváis in the previous quote, is also one of the recurrent themes in this project. For example, Luiselli’s *Los ingravidos* incorporates breakages and interconnectedness in her use of *relingos*²⁸ and the presence of porosity.

Juan Villoro asserts that “Large cities lack a structured language; they can only aspire to a broken language, a mosaic fragmented by limitless growth and exuberant chaos” (*The Mexico City Reader*, 124). Here, Villoro suggests that the city is not fully graspable because it is so big and so vast and thus, whatever attempt one makes at portraying it in a totalizing manner is bound to fail. Furthermore, Ricardo Padrón explains that texts are a sort of map because they give places “life and meaning” (258) and later notes that “we only map what we cannot see, in order

²⁷ See Henri Lefebvre’s, *Le Droit à la ville* [The right to the city] (2nd ed.). Anthropos, 1968.

²⁸ Refer to chapter 4.

to be able to see it. Every map, therefore, provides...the privileged point of view ordinarily enjoyed only by birds, pilots, astronauts, angels, and gods” (286). Hence, in this dissertation I introduce the use of cartographic approaches in order to understand spatial representations and dynamics in contemporary Mexican literary and cultural production, especially the one produced by women writers and artists. I follow Robert T. Tally Jr.’s understanding of the novel who sees it as a sort of literary cartography because,

the novel projects, describes, and figuratively maps the social spaces depicted and in some sense created in its pages. In a way, the novel is a sort of map, one that enables readers to orientate themselves and the characters, events, settings, and ideas of the novel in the world. Looking at various critics and theorists, I suggest that the novel is a form ideally suited for the project of figuratively mapping the world and our situation and prospects in it (95).

I use cartographies to refer to the mapping of spaces, places, locations, and sites of contention using both the fictional text and also the cultural and historical context in which the narratives unfold. As such, I look at contemporary works of fiction from multiple points of view and read them through those multidisciplinary positions. The authors I examine have reinvented past stylistic forms resulting in different explorations and forms of representation, including new ways of imagining our place in the world. I use the term vulnerability to refer to subjects that do not fit the social “norm”—that is, subjects whose class, ability, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity and race threatens heteropatriarchal systems.

iii. Chapter Descriptions

In the following chapters I explore twenty-first century literary and cultural production and the constant dialogues that the authors establish with past literary traditions, cultural

movements, historical events, and spaces. The chapters are arranged in chronological order according to the novel's publication date. Employing theories of space, gender, and photography, chapter one examines bodily and spatial malleability in *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999) by Cristina Rivera Garza. This chapter argues that beyond the dynamics of power in spaces, the sites in the narration allow for sexual, class, and gender fluidity. Chapter two focuses on gender ambiguity and multimodal and multispatial aspects of *Cuerpo naufrago* (2005) by Ana Clavel. In this work of fiction Clavel simultaneously questions perceptions of sexuality and gender identity while also disrupting the traditional forms of literature by superimposing a photographic text that encourages the reader to explore the virtual space of the text. This results in an expansion where the literary space moves into the street installation and into a performance art piece and a digital space created by Clavel. Chapter three examines the subterranean world of the metro as a space that can serve simultaneously as a place of community building for marginal subjects as well as a place of horror in Guadalupe Nettel's novel *El huésped* (2006). Moreover, Nettel's treatment of the spatial differentiations between external (outside, public) and subterranean (subway) spaces dislodges other anxieties present in Mexican society today. The final chapter focuses on mapping, *relingos*,²⁹ and the disappearing boundaries of textual and represented spaces in *Los ingravidos* (2011) by Valeria Luiselli. Through a narration that is both fragmented and porous, this novel invites the readers to (re)construct the text as it contains empty spaces, as well as engages with metafiction and ideas about architecture, space, and time.

²⁹ Refer to chapter 4.

Chapter 1

Politics of Space and Corporeality in Early 20th Century Mexico City in Cristina Rivera Garza's *Nadie me verá llorar*

¿Cómo se llega a ser fotógrafo de putas?
Cristina Rivera Garza

The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and suspension, of crisis, and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world. The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.
Michel Foucault, 1986

In the prologue to the 2014 Limited Edition of *Nadie me verá llorar* Cristina Rivera Garza revisits the genesis of her novel, first published in 1999.³⁰ While reflecting on the real-life woman that inspired the protagonist in *Nadie*, the author states that “quería que las palabras hicieran lo único que no pueden hacer y lo único que vale la pena pedirles: que la hicieran caminar otra vez por estas calles” (14, *Nadie*). This statement brings to the fore the question of space and its centrality in the novel, which originated from the author's own research completed as a doctoral student of Latin American history at the University of Houston. In the 2014 prologue, Rivera Garza briefly explains the nature of the photographs and the documents she

³⁰ Since then Rivera Garza has published many novels, short stories, poetry, special editions and other work of non-fiction. Some of the works include, *Lo anterior*, 2004; *La muerte me da*, 2007; *La frontera más distante*, 2008; *Verde Shanghai*, 2011; *Dolerse. Textos desde un país herido*, 2011; *El mal de la taiga*, 2012; *Allí te comerán las turicatas*, 2013; *Los muertos indóciles. Necroescrituras y desapropiación*, 2013; *La cresta de Ilión*, 2014; *Autobiografía del algodón*, 2020; *El invencible Verano de Liliana*, 2021. Furthermore, Rivera Garza has also won some of the most prestigious awards such as, the Beca Salvador Novo, 1984-85; Premio Nacional de la Novela José Rubén Romero, 1997; Premio Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 2001 and 2009; Anna Seghers International Prize, 2005; National System of Artistic Creators Grant, CONACULTA, México, 2015-2017; awarded MacArthur fellowship in 2020.

reviewed from the General Hospital, also known as La Castañeda, a psychiatric hospital that was open from 1910 until 1968 in Mexico City. Eventually, the author's dissertation project inspired the plotline and characters in *Nadie*, as the asylum became one of the main spaces portrayed in the novel. *Nadie* presents the complex lives of multiple characters in early twentieth-century Mexico City as they negotiate their realities inside and outside of a psychiatric asylum known as La Castañeda. Moreover, in 2010, Rivera Garza published the non-fiction book *La Castañeda: Narrativas dolientes desde el Manicomio General, México, 1910-1930*, based on her dissertation project and the files she investigated from the asylum. Existing studies on *Nadie* have touched on the topic of space but none have offered an in-depth study of the multiple spaces in the novel and how they relate to the bodies that move in and around them. Furthermore, no studies have examined the different forms of power negotiation taking place in these spaces. For instance, in her study of the novel, Laura Kanost explores how the characters negotiate with distinct discourses in order to find their own voices and identities through the text and the narration. Kanost bases her study on the work by Michel de Certeau, offering a reading in which both the author and the characters "are able to diverge from the ingrained, interdependent structures that correspond to the medical model of mental illness" (300). Moreover, she goes on to say that the spaces in the novel are indeterminate and thus open to "multiple interaction between individuals, physical structures and discourses" (*ibid.*).

While I agree with this reading, it is also imperative to take into consideration the larger discourses of modernization – including discourses of hygiene, gender, sexuality, class and race – that were taking place in the early twentieth-century in Mexico. In this chapter I study a dimension of body vulnerabilities in contemporary Mexican literary production through various texts. In particular, I explore the interactions and intersections that exist between the body that is

considered mad, ill, subversive, homosexual and dirty and the spaces in which those bodies move. I use the term “space” to refer to both the actual physical spaces and also, through Lefebvre’s concept of space as a “social product,” an artifact of human practice rather than “a container without content”; thus, space is a location in which social power is activated and social relations are enacted. I propose that although the bodies represented in the novel experience different forms of marginalization and vulnerabilities, enacted via political and social discourses of sanitation and hygiene, they are also malleable; they are mutable bodies that find different and unique forms of articulation in different spaces. This results in a body/space dynamic that further complicates the spaces these subjects inhabit, transforming them into ambivalent spaces of power relations where different forms of contestation occur. To illustrate these interactions between body, space and the discourses mentioned above, I focus on the following spaces in *Nadie*: La Castañeda, the psychiatric institution and one of the central spaces of power and surveillance in the novel, and the brothels, present in the narration as sexual spaces but also as major spaces of subversion and production of an alternative (counter)-cultural expression. In order to explore the spaces and the power dynamics studied in this chapter I also examine the presence and the use of photography in the control of prostitutes³¹, madmen and madwomen by the state. However, as a modern technology, photography simultaneously helped the state regulate and manipulate discourses surrounding deviant subjects and also aided those subjects appropriate and subvert the systems used to control them.

The Asylum

³¹ I am using the term “prostitute” intentionally throughout this chapter in order to emphasize the existing connections of the term with criminality and immorality, especially in relation to the problematic conduct and laws enforced in Mexican society beginning in the 19th century. I recognize sex work as work and believe that sex workers should have appropriate access to health, legal, and social services.

Since the 1960s there has been renewed interest in re-examining and historicizing mental institutions and the role they have played in creating medical and clinical discourses around the world.³² More recently, *The Confinement of the Insane* (2003) by Porter and Wright brings to light new perspectives on the study and history of psychiatry, madness, and the power relations that took place in major state-run institutions and mental asylums around the world from the nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries. Their compilation brings together multiple perspectives and readings on the subject of madness and the politics surrounding mental institutions in a comparative way. Unsurprisingly, one of the contributors to this book is Cristina Rivera Garza, who discusses and documents the historical and social aspects surrounding La Castañeda. She explains that the asylum itself was a massive project that ultimately came to highlight some of the major problems faced by the government both before and after the Mexican Revolution.

The psychiatric institution known as the General Hospital or La Castañeda was constructed during the Porfirian era (1876-1911) and was inaugurated just in time for the Mexican Independence centennial celebration in 1910. The asylum, which was also a hospital,

³²See for example, Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique – Folie et déraison*, (Paris, 1961) in French and translated as *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, by R. Howard (New York, 1965; London, 1967). Also, J.G. Howells (ed.), *World History of Psychiatry* (New York, 1968). T.S. Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness* (New York, 1961; London, 1972; revised edn, New York 1974). Additionally, D. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston, Mass., 1971). See also, M. Roth and J. Kroll, *The Reality of Mental Illness* (Cambridge, 1986). The authors assert that the symptoms of mental illnesses have been stable, as such we may confidently affirm that madness is “more than a label, a device for scapegoating deviants in the interest of social control it is real disease, probably with biological basis” (3). See also, *Going (in) Sane: Deconstructing Madness In Contemporary Argentine Narrative* (University of Virginia, Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, PHD, 2010) and *Spaces of Madness: Insane Asylums In Argentine Narrative* by Eunice Anne Rojas. In addition, the novel *Rayuela* (Edhasa/Sudamericana, 1977) by Julio Cortázar treats the theme of madness. Separately, the photographic/textual project by Diamela Eltit and Paz Errázuriz *El infarto del alma* (Ocho Libros Editores Ltda, 2010) offers visual insight regarding the lives of psychiatric patients at Hospital Psiquiátrico Doctor Philippe Pinel de Putaendo in Chile.

took a total of 26 years to plan and build (1884-1910). The construction was funded by the Mexican state under the pretenses of progress and the project of modernization undertaken by the Porfirian government, whose motto was “Order and Progress,” and his group of close allies, known as *Los científicos*. While there is no consensus as to who *Los científicos* were,³³ the term originated in the late nineteenth century and different groups had different notions as to who *Los científicos* were and what they represented. For instance, Emiliano Zapata “llamaba *científicos* a todos los aristócratas terratenientes del estado de Morelos, mientras que Luis Cabrera, por otra parte, caracterizaba a *los científicos* como financieros e intermediarios de las compañías extranjeras, y establecía una diferencia entre ellos y la clase de los terratenientes...” (Lomnitz np). Consequently, the public notion of *Los científicos* was that they were close allies of Díaz, that they were members of the Mexican elite, and overall represented aristocratic values. As a result, they were perceived to be out of touch with the broader Mexican reality that exhibited

³³To understand this better it’s important to know that the Porfirian regime had problems starting in 1892 when Porfirio Díaz sought the presidency for the third consecutive time. The situation created tension, social unrest, and public protest against the dictator. In response, Díaz asked a group of young liberals led by Justo Sierra to help him organize a reelection campaign and a National Convention, similar to the US primaries. The group, self-denominated Unión Liberal, was successful in setting up the political campaign to counter the protest and national unrest with Díaz’s reelection. Moreover, Sierra wrote a manifesto in favor of the Díaz’s reelection in which he “expresaba su satisfacción de la patria con el progreso porfiriano, pero también expresaba su esperanza en el porvenir; sus declaraciones se centraban sobre todo en la educación y el desarrollo económico y, asimismo, en una detallada preocupación por la reforma administrativa; consecuentemente, afirmaba en el manifiesto, que la patria: ‘Desearía que no hubiera tregua en el empeño de sacar nuestro régimen tributario del período puramente empírico, proporcionándole en el catastro y la estadística sus bases científicas’” (Lomnitz, np). This gave birth to their name of *los científicos* which was later ridiculed and disliked by the general population due to their social Darwinist and eugenic ideas. In the end, Díaz rejected all the proposals that limited his power in the presidency, ultimately resulting in the dissolution of the Unión Liberal party, though the group remained and became a type of technocratic intellectual elite. Additionally, the *científicos* were associated with French positivist thinker Auguste Comte, with whom Gabino Barreda (a precursor of the group) studied during his stay in Paris (1847-1851). Other prominent *científicos* such as Manuel Romero Rubio and José Yves Limantour also adopted positivist ideas.

high poverty and illiteracy rates.³⁴ This illustrates that even years after they had established themselves as a group, and right around the time of the start of the revolution, people had different notions about the group of intellectuals who worked with Porfirio Díaz. For their part, the group described itself as an intellectual aristocracy rather than a political party mainly because not all of them shared the same sociopolitical ideology. Nonetheless, *Los científicos* were disliked and ridiculed since the inception of the group because, among other things, they proposed first and foremost the use of science in a positivist manner in matters of public policy. Furthermore, Claudio Lomnitz has discussed how the group became the target and scapegoat for the nationalist hypermasculine tensions and discourses that dominated Mexico during and after the revolution (*El antisemitismo*). This is also illustrated by Guillermo Sheridan's analysis of the literary production during the postwar. He explains:

Por lo menos desde el Porfiriato se utilizaba la antinomia “virilidad-afeminamiento.” Gutiérrez Nájera, por ejemplo, corona como “el más viril” de los escritores a Quintana Roo en “Literatura propia y literatura nacional”, de 1885. Más tarde, incluye entre los epítetos contra los poetas decadentes (grotescos, encaprichados, neuróticos) el de “afeminados” (35).

This points to some of the tensions and anxieties present in Mexico during a time that was marked by the rapid changes of modernization brought by the war and the postwar periods. Once the revolution ended, there was a clear interest in defining the nation through cultural products such as literature. Particular attention and emphasis were put on calling for literature that was not “effeminate” but rather, “virile”. The use of this adjective by Gutiérrez Nájera to

³⁴For additional analysis on the poor in Mexico City see Ann Blum's study, “Conspicuous Benevolence: Liberalism, Public Welfare, and Private Charity in Porfirian Mexico City, 1877-1910” and Silvia Marina Arrom's *Containing the Poor, the Mexico City Poor House, 1774-1871*. Duke University Press, 2000.

criticize and attack poets in the late 19th century, points to existing anxieties towards sexual difference. Furthermore, the attacks only increased in the 1920s with the formation of the literary group, Los Contemporáneos, which consisted of well-known homosexual writers such as Salvador Novo and Xavier Villaurrutia. Parallel to the negative view of homosexuality, there was an active interest and a political project in creating nationalistic discourses that possessed the hypermasculine traits the revolution had celebrated. Later in this chapter I discuss sexuality further by analyzing Matilda's sexual practices (and what would now be described as bisexuality) and the subversion of gender norms that occurred during the period.

It is around these multiple discourses, tensions, and sociopolitical circumstances that La Castañeda was built. The asylum was meant to be a beacon of progress and modernization, one of the greatest accomplishments of the Porfirian government, along with the Lecumberri Penitentiary and other buildings that were erected before and after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917),³⁵ such as, the Monument to the Revolution and the Postal Palace. La Castañeda was located in a large area of Mixcoac, a region known among wealthy families as a weekend getaway. Rivera Garza explains that the selection of the location where the asylum was to be constructed “responded to medical notions associating clean, ample spaces with the improvement of mental health, yet equally significant were the panoramic views, the bucolic landscape and the rolling hills that, according to de la Barra, would make the asylum look ‘more picturesque’” (663, “She neither”). Thus, the planning and construction of the asylum was also informed by hygienist and positivist ideas imported from Europe and the United States.

³⁵ For an acceptable account in English of the Mexican Revolution, and other important historical moments, see *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics* edited by Joseph, G. M, and Timothy J Henderson.

Although there was an interest in keeping patients away from the “sane” population of Mexico City, beginning in the year 1900 there was an electric train line that connected Mixcoac with the city. This mode of modern transportation facilitated the hauling of people and provisions, but it also meant that there was a clear division between the sane and those considered “insane” (Rivera Garza 663, “She neither”). Furthermore, the Porfirian committee comprised of physicians and lawyers to oversee the asylum recommended “strategies to treat insanity, spatial tactics to prevent contagion, and social concerns with the order and progress of society” (Rivera Garza 661, “She neither”). However, the reality was that the asylum became overcrowded and underfunded, and it deteriorated very quickly as the revolutionary war started only a few months after the asylum’s inauguration.³⁶ This pessimism and failure of the system that built the asylum is evidenced in *Nadie* by Oligochea’s internal monologue in which he reflects on what it means for him to be at the asylum, “Todos sabían que diez años de descuido y una revolución de por medio habían transformado a La Castañeda en el bote de basura de los tiempos modernos y de todos los tiempos por venir. Este era el lugar donde se acababa el futuro...” (Rivera Garza 37, *Nadie*). This criticism and pessimistic tone are important to note precisely because they come from Oligochea, a psychiatrist who apparently aligns ideologically with the Porfirian government. In addition, in her historical exploration of the asylum Rivera Garza states:

Tan pronto como se inició la lucha revolucionaria, el hospital enfrentó serias limitaciones financieras. En lugar de convertirse en un moderno establecimiento de tratamiento e investigación psiquiátrica, el manicomio se transformó

³⁶The asylum closed in 1968, just a few weeks before the inauguration of the Olympic games hosted by Mexico under President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. The project was called “Operacion Castañeda” and the government decided to demolish the Manicomio General.

rápidamente en un lugar periférico donde poco personal sin mucho entrenamiento especializado tenía grandes dificultades para tratar a más internos de los esperados, muchos de los cuales sufrían condiciones crónicas.

[As soon as the revolutionary struggle began, the hospital faced serious financial constraints. Rather than becoming a modern psychiatric research and treatment facility, the asylum quickly became a peripheral place where few staff without much specialized training had great difficulty treating more inmates than expected, many of whom suffered from chronic conditions] (185, “La vida en reclusión”).

The asylum quickly deteriorated and surpassed its capacity to house patients. Thus, it is no surprise that the photographic evidence from the 1930s and 40s shows residents sleeping in small flimsy beds in crowded rooms while others lie on the floor. There are also photographs of patients in the crowded patios staring blankly into space, while one of the photographs depicts a group of men sitting on the ground holding small bowls of broth (Colección Archivo Casasola, Fototeca Nacional INAH).³⁷

³⁷For some time after the inauguration of the hospital and up until the late 1940s there were other activities for the patients like fitness classes, arts and crafts, and social events and dances. Nevertheless, the photographs depicting those activities are minimal in comparison to the ones depicting the precarious state of the conditions in which patients lived. For instance, see the following photographs: Colección Archivo Casasola, Fototeca Nacional. *Enfermos mentales en una habitación del manicomio de La Castañeda*. 1945; 1950.; *Internos dormidos en una habitación del manicomio de La Castañeda*. 1945; 1950. *Enfermos mentales comiendo en un patio del manicomio de La Castañeda*. 1945; 1950.; *Enfermos mentales en los patios del hospital psiquiátrico La Castañeda*. 1945; 1950.; *Enfermos mentales acostados en el interior de un dormitorio del manicomio La Castañeda*. 1945; 1950.; *Enfermos mentales acostados en un dormitorio del manicomio La Castañeda*. 1945; 1950.; *Enfermos mentales recostados en colchones en los patios del manicomio La Castañeda*. 1945; 1950.; *Maestro instruye a internos para realizar ejercicios en los patios del manicomio La Castañeda*. *Internos del manicomio La Castañeda en clase de gimnasia*. Ca. 1945.; *Internos del manicomio de La Castañeda en taller de artes manuales*. ca. 1945.; Colección Salud Pública. *Internos del manicomio de La Castañeda, boxeando*. 1932.; Colección Salud Pública. *Peluquero corta el cabello a interno de La Castañeda*. ca. 1935. All can be found at the INAH, Mexico City. Web. Dec. 2018.

To reiterate, *los científicos* made a series of recommendations regarding La Castañeda, such as locating the asylum away from populated areas to create a distance between the world of reason, or sanity, and the world of madness. More importantly, they proposed that there be a department of admissions and classification because the belief was that “insanity lacked a characteristic mark” and that it could go undiagnosed. They also, “suggested that inmates be classified according to first and second categories, giving priority to paying inmates” (Rivera Garza 662, “She neither”). In other words, the asylum employees had the power to diagnose, classify and determine whether or not somebody was “mad”. In addition, it is important to note the issues related to economic standing, as not all patients could pay for their stay and those who paid received certain privileges, such as better living conditions in a different building of the asylum complex, known as the Pavilion of the Distinguished.³⁸ Although it has been established that most patients were brought by their families, many patients were unhoused or poor people and children who had been brought in by the police.³⁹ These patients had been classified as deviant subjects because they did not conform to the modern norms of hygiene, moral behavior,

³⁸ In “La Castañeda,” Guadalupe Ríos explains the distribution of patients at the asylum, “de acuerdo con el Reglamento de 1913, los enfermos estuvieron distribuidos en las siguientes secciones: el Pabellón de las Distinguidos recibió a pensionistas de primera clase, sin distinción de padecimientos; el Pabellón de Observación, era destinado a indigentes y pensionistas de segunda y tercera clase, que permanecían el tiempo necesario para su clasificación; una sección especial se reservaba a los toxicómanos; el Pabellón de Peligrosos albergó a los asilados violentos, impulsivos o agitados, también resguardaba a los presos cuya seguridad no podía garantizar.” (np)

³⁹ A study based on the files of patients who entered La Castañeda during the Mexican Revolution has shown that, in the majority of cases, the decision on the entry or exit of those considered mentally ill, not only depended on the psychiatrist or the State, but on the family as well. The families opted to give control and custody to the state. There were times when families asked for the discharge of their “*loco/a*” relative and took care of the patient had not been cured. However, there were also cases of “cured” patients whose relatives refused to accept the diagnosis because they believed that mental illness was still present. This phenomenon is a sign that the psychiatric hospitalization was preceded by a social and cultural definition of what was considered sane and insane. Consequently, the author argues that families appropriated the psychiatric institution based on their own interests and needs (Ríos Molina, “El Manicomio General La Castañeda en México”).

sexuality, social class, etc. Further on, I will discuss how a similar, although more invasive, mode of classification into first-, second-, and third-class categories, was also replicated with registries for prostitutes. In this case, they were required to undergo a medical examination to register with the Sanitation Office in order to legally work as prostitutes. Based on the discussion above, we can conclude that the asylum exerts many forms of control and power in the patients through the classification, diagnosis and custody they experience there. It is also worth noting that in her study of gender and class at La Castañeda Rivera Garza has explored how the system of classification and diagnosis used by the asylum discriminated on the basis of race and class.⁴⁰ For instance, the author has studied how poor women coming from the countryside tended to be misdiagnosed and concludes:

The General Insane Asylum replicates values and hierarchies of the city in which it was built. Echoing fears of disorder and contagion characteristic of the Porfirian political imagination, the physical layout of the institution secured separate areas for men and women, divided them with fences disguised with bushes and plants to avoid ‘the appearance of a jail.’ (“She neither”)

This quote demonstrates that there was a conscious effort to disguise the function and character of the mental institution while at the same time it was providing psychiatric services to the destitute of the city and of the country. In general, during the Porfirian era (and also in later presidencies) there was a tendency to hide marginal groups like the poor, the prostitutes, the

⁴⁰ See “‘She Neither Respected Nor Obeyed Anyone’: Inmates and Psychiatrists Debate Gender and Class At the General Insane Asylum La Castañeda, Mexico, 1910-1930” by Rivera Garza.

mentally ill, homosexuals, and workers that went on strike as they were considered to represent Mexico in a bad light.⁴¹



Figure 1. Photograph of La Castañeda (Manicomio General), *El Universal*, ca. 1910.

In the novel, the massiveness and character of the asylum is described as follows:

El manicomio tiene veinticinco edificios diseminados en 141. 662 metros cuadrados. Dentro, protegidos por altos muros y rejas de hierro, los locos y los

⁴¹ Something similar happens in 1968 during the student protests at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco, when President Díaz Ordaz orders the military attack against students protesting there. Because Mexico was hosting the Olympics that year the government wanted to give the impression of stability and control.

castaños proyectan sus sombras sobre lugares, apartados del tiempo. El manicomio es una ciudad juguete. Tiene garitas, calles, enfermerías, cárceles, viviendas. Hay bullicio y riñas, tráfico de cigarrillos, y estupefacientes, intentos de suicidio. Hay talleres donde los hombres fabrican ataúdes y alfombras sin agujerarse las manos con clavos y sin cortarse las venas. No reciben sueldo. Las mujeres lavan los uniformes azules hasta dejarlos desteñidos y, en los talleres de costura, hacen rebozos y sarapes, remiendan camisas, sábanas raídas. Hay poetas escribiéndole cartas a Dios; mecánicos, farmacéuticos, policías, ladrones, anarquistas que han renunciado a la violencia. Ocurren historias de amor. Melancolía callada. Clases sociales. Desesperación que se expresa a gritos. El dolor nunca se acaba. (Rivera Garza 45-46, *Nadie*)



Figure 2. Photograph of the interior pathways and gardens of La Castañeda. 1938. Archivo Casasola.

Figure 1 above shows the façade of the building around the time of its inauguration while figure 2 shows the interior pathways connecting the pavilions and gardens surrounding the building complex. Even though the asylum is a space in which order, control and discipline are expected, the narration presents multiple cases in which this is far from reality. This complicates the idea of the asylum as the perfect example of modernity, order and progress despite the architectural success of the project. Through the excerpt and the images above, it is clear how big of a project the asylum was to manage and monitor. With a total of 25 buildings that housed approximately

1200 patients, it is no surprise that the asylum operated as a small city. In addition, the textual fragment above also exposes some of the problems the asylum faced, such as the presence of illicit drugs among patients, the division of social classes, and the labor that the patients performed without pay. In the asylum, there is a sense of inequality, enclosure, isolation, and noise which, as illustrated in the description above, results in the production of different forms of subversion in the patients.

The idea of hygiene as a major goal to help with the modernization of the country is a personal driving force for two characters in the novel: Marcos Burgos and Eduardo Oligochea. Garonzik describes the multiple traits present in the novel shared by both Oligochea and Marcos Burgos, Matilda's successful uncle. Both characters express a predilection for scientific thought, hygiene, and a preference for maintaining order and regulation (8-10). Oligochea, in a manner reminiscent of the *Científicos*, likes order, organization, rules, and precision; he listens to patients and classifies their symptoms clinically as he examines them, using terms such as "neurosis," "cuadro de esquizofrenia," "demencia con psicastenia," "fondo de insanidad moral," and "locura intermitente." This happens even in his everyday conversations with people, as he once wondered if he could diagnose Joaquín Buitrago. Oligochea is a clear example of the educated men of the era who believed in the Porfirian ideals of order and progress; they trusted they could better their position in life through hard work and by following the rules and norms of modernity. He also aspires to become a great psychiatrist and part of the Mexican elite via marriage. Furthermore, there is a preponderant sense of class-consciousness in the character of Oligochea, a common trait among those immigrating to Mexico City during the time as many came from rural areas that were considered backwards, immoral and unhygienic.

More importantly however, are the complex dynamics of power at work in the asylum between Joaquín and Eduardo. Joaquín's attempt and success at getting Matilda's medical file from Eduardo is an obviously illegal act, but also a type of pact between the two men. On the surface, this does not seem like a serious offense, but it becomes significant upon taking a closer look at Eduardo's character and his constant worry for keeping everything in order, for making a name for himself, and for being a "good citizen." An additional factor that is at play in the interaction between Eduardo and Joaquín is one of social class. To explain, Eduardo finds interest in and tolerates Joaquín—for example, when he lets Matilda sleep in Joaquín's room for a while, an act which is prohibited as he is an employee of the state and she a ward of the state. He does this not just out of boredom and wanting someone to talk to at the asylum, or for the frivolous motive of diagnosing Joaquín, but possibly because he knows that Joaquín is the son of a prominent family in the city. In contrast to Joaquín, Eduardo comes from a small village in the coastal state of Veracruz. He has neither the prestige nor the social connections to become a well-respected psychiatrist unless he makes the necessary acquaintances in the city.

At the same time, there is also a commentary on uncle Marco's assimilation to the modernity of Mexico City, "Cuando Marcos Burgos llegó a la ciudad de México conservó el apellido pero se deshizo de todo lo demás" (Rivera Garza 131, *Nadie*). In Mexico City, uncle Marcos becomes a man of order and progress; he is a doctor who works for the state and has dedicated his life to working in trying to eradicate the "bad habits" of poor people and their lack of hygiene. As a medical student, he wrote his thesis on hygiene in Mexico City and it is later revealed that he "pensó que con Matilda podría poner en práctica todas sus teorías. En 1900, Marcos Burgos todavía creía que la influencia civilizadora de la higiene podría convertir en un buen ciudadano hasta al más primitivo de los seres humanos" (Rivera Garza 135, *Nadie*). Also,

uncle Marcos Burgos' home is a space of discipline and control. This is the house where Matilda lives when she arrives from Papantla, Veracruz, after her father's death. Here, she is given instructions on how to behave properly and how to be hygienic. He establishes a list of ground rules for Matilda which are mostly about personal hygiene and how to stay healthy. Thus, uncle Marcos, like Oligochea, is a man that is ideologically aligned with *los científicos*.

Ultimately *Nadie* reveals that there are flaws and shortcomings in the hygienist discourses of the early 20th century in Mexico. The final commentary is perhaps that there is no way to reconstruct someone else's life via fragmentary pieces of information. Rivera Garza uses the discourses of the time in the construction of the narrative as a form of self-critique in which Rivera Garza, both the author and the historian, presents a story criticizing the very systems of control and information used in her novel *Nadie*. For Garonzik, "In this passage Rivera Garza reveals the role of the psychiatrist—or at least that of the psychiatrist in early twentieth century Mexico—was not far from that of the novelist or the historian who, from the facts presented to him or her, attempted to construct a coherent, causal narrative" (7). In other words, what Rivera Garza is doing is exposing the ways in which flawed medical and scientific discourses shaped daily life, and the forms of policing happening among the population of Mexico City and among the country's population as a whole.

Brothels and Houses of Appointment

In an article entitled "Realicemos un bello sueño" published in the *Revista El Amigo de la Juventud: Organo de la Sociedad Sanitaria y Moral* in 1921, Ernesto González Tejeda describes what he believes to be the problems of sanitation and "serious illnesses" in the Mexican countryside:

Y si consagrarse al placer sexual en todas partes expone a contraer graves enfermedades, este peligro sube de punto en aquellos lugares, donde la vigilancia sanitaria es completamente nula y donde aquellas míseras sacerdotisas del placer, están en su mayoría enfermas y sucias, como que se entregan a todo aquel que las solicita, por unas cuantas renegridas monedas de cobre. (3)

Some of the key words that stand out from the text are “graves enfermedades,” “vigilancia,” “sucias” and “placer.” The author condemns sexual activity in the rural regions of the country because, according to him, the people there are dirty, sexually promiscuous, and lack vigilance and order. He also describes sexually active women as “miserable priestesses of pleasure”⁴² who are sick and dirty. Furthermore, this text is addressed to the “noble men”, the philanthropists, and the good men of the nation. The author expresses contempt for women of ill reputation and in his closing remarks, asks the morally good and responsible men to help eradicate the ills of the nation. Specifically, the author makes a plea for help in “curing” the country of venereal diseases. Ideally, he says, “El remedio seria [sic]: para combatir la vagancia, castigar la embriaguez y vigilar a las prostitutas, internando en un hospital a todas las que estuvieran en condiciones de contagiar” (3). That the author equates and views prostitution through the same lens as vagabondism and inebriation speaks of the anxieties, prejudices, and public conversations around deviant subjects that were taking place at the time after the revolution. This ultra conservative and moralistic text illustrates the context in which Matilda and the other prostitutes are portrayed in the novel.

According to Patience A. Schell, the modernity of Mexico City in the 1930s was remarkable. The author states that the city had grown to more than one million inhabitants by the

⁴² This is my translation of the original text.

beginning of the decade and had also seen a considerable increase in the migration of people moving from the countryside to the city. In addition to the architectural and demographic changes, the city encouraged the culture of consumption in different spaces such as the cinema, dance halls and cabarets, which served as spaces open to performativity and contestation of gender roles. However, there was also a growing population of prostitutes as “working women had difficulty earning enough to support themselves and their children and that some became prostitutes out of economic necessity. Women also turned to prostitution, according to legislators, because they lacked skills and employment opportunities” (Schell 114). This is the setting in which the space of the brothel and dance hall appears in *Nadie*. Even though most of the plotline takes place between the time Matilda arrives to Mexico City in 1900 and the early 1920s, her participation in these cultural products is significant. In the city, she becomes a witness of many historical periods such as the years prior to the war, the years during the war, and the ongoing period of modernization in the postwar years. But perhaps more importantly, she is also subject to these products of modernity: she first is a type of positivist experiment for her uncle Marcos; then becomes a prostitute; and, finally, is a patient at the mental asylum, subject to the medical notions of illness from that time. Thus, by studying the brothel we can also explore the themes of control, power, and the beginning of commercial capital as they become a central issue in the novel.

Prostitution and “houses of concubines,” or brothels were tolerated in New Spain (modern day Mexico) starting in 1538, as prostitution was seen as a “necessary evil.” It was not until the end of the eighteenth century that the public perception and the political repression of prostitution began. From then on, there was a “repressive attitude towards the “scandalous” women and the pimps who they supported with their labor” (Nuñez and Fuentes 445). However,

it is important to note that the regulation of prostitution had started at a smaller scale in 1851 with the *Proyecto de decreto y reglamento sobre la prostitución*, a decree that did not require prostitutes be isolated in red districts or zones of tolerance in the city, as they had before, under Spanish rule. The second regulation of prostitution was mandated by Emperor Maximilian of Habsburg who ruled Mexico from 1864-1867. On February 17, 1865 Aquiles Bazaine, an official of the Superior Council of Health, promulgated the official regulation of brothels in Mexico City with the creation of the *Registro de mujeres públicas conforme al reglamento expedido por S.M. el Emperador* (see figure 3 below). The new regulation required the use of photography and a system of classification that was intended to identify, tax, and keep a registry of prostitutes working in the city. The system in Mexico was based on the French system created by Dr. Alexandre Paret Duchâlet (a specialist in drainage and sewage), with the initial intention of protecting the health of the invading French soldiers (González Ascencio 78-79, “Control sanitario”). In Mexico, this resulted in the creation of the Office of Health Inspection, the administrative center controlled by the Ministry of Health that was in charge of keeping the prostitutes’ registry and of collecting the taxes set by the state to authorize the practice of prostitution.

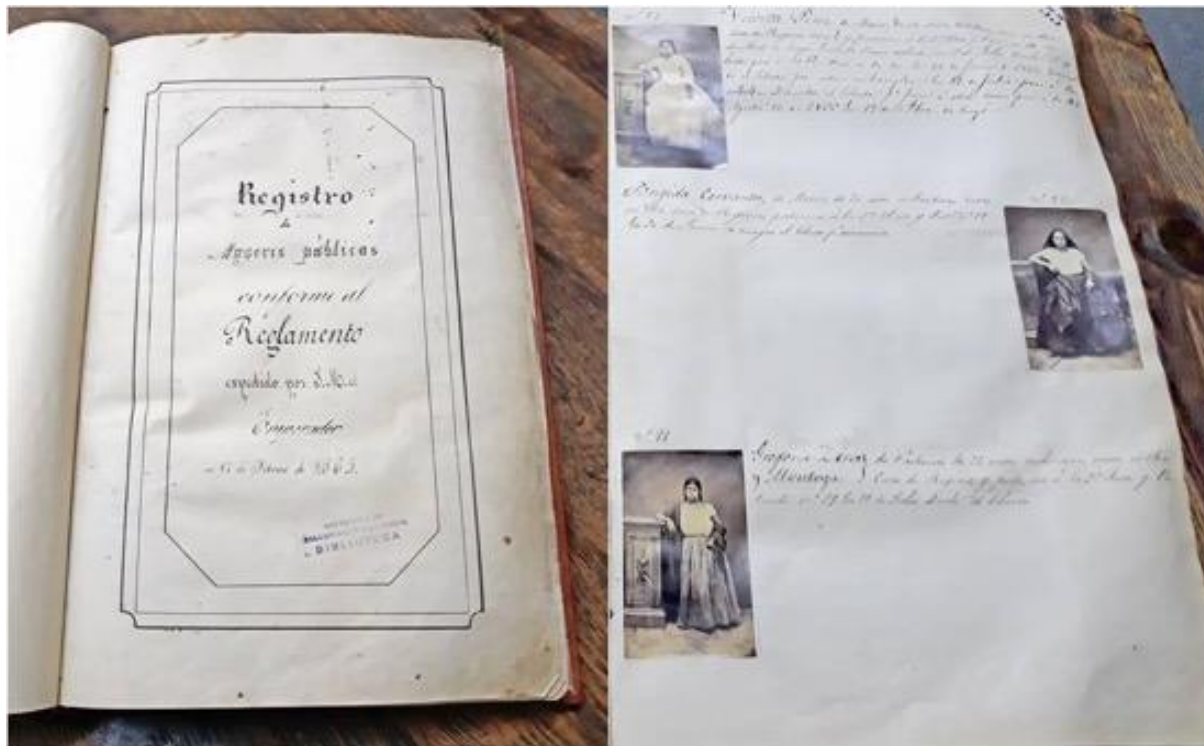


Figure 3. First registry of “public women,” *Registro de mujeres públicas conforme al reglamento expedido por S.M. el Emperador*, mandated by Emperor Maximilian of Habsburg in 1865. Mexico.

In a study on the history of prostitution in Mexico, historian Ríos de la Torre explains how the system of classification worked:

Las mujeres eran clasificadas según su juventud, edad y atractivo y así existían mujeres calificadas como de primera, de segunda, de tercera y de ínfima categoría y de acuerdo a esta división era la tasa para el pago de impuestos. Estaban además obligadas a vestir con “decencia”, abstenerse de permanecer en puertas y balcones de burdeles y casas de citas, saludar a señores acompañadas de señoras “decentes”

o niños, vivir a menos de cincuenta metros de los establecimientos de educación y culto y visitar familias “honradas.” (np “Las calles”)

As a result of this form of classification, similar to the one used at La Castañeda asylum, and in some prisons, people in these institutions became the subjects of systems of control and regulation that started with the modernization projects in the city beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century. The regulations at these state institutions resulted in many contradictory and moralistic rules of decorum and behavior established to keep control over groups that were considered deviant. However, once the revolution ended, the policies implemented became more nuanced: there was an interest in reforming the deviant subjects. This allows for a reading of this system of reformation through *Discipline and Punish*, where Foucault argues that one of the distinctive features of modern power is its concern with correcting and reforming people. Thus, one of the main features of the modern disciplinary system is to correct deviant behavior. The goal is reform, where reform means living by society’s standards (Gutting and Oksala, np). Read under these Foucauldian ideas of the prison system we can see how the system of registration imposed on the prostitutes serves both as a form of control but also exhibits some of the changes and ideals implemented by the new revolutionary, reformist government.

One of the main goals of the new government during the period of transition after the war and up until about 1940, was the creation of new policies that better reflected it. Thus, a group of reformists and revolutionaries were able to experiment and learn how to implement new policies. Unlike Porfirians, reformists “sought to emphasize each Mexican’s potential for regeneration and rebirth” (Bliss 4-5). There was a belief that people could be cured and regenerated, which is also the reason why in the novel Matilda is sent to La Castañeda, a place that is both a hospital and an asylum for mental patients. Katherine Bliss explores the preoccupation that the revolution

reformists had with syphilis and curing the country of venereal diseases and promiscuity. She explains that reformists also had the conviction that the state possessed the power to redeem Mexican men and women. This conviction of the reformists facilitated the state intervention to diagnose decadence, to probe the pathology of promiscuity, and to prescribe methods of reform. “The reform community had faith that new penal and sanitary codes could shape the behavior of Mexican men” (39, “The Science”), especially because men had not historically been subjected to the same regulations that were imposed on women. Furthermore, it is important to realize that the revolution had contributed to the toxic masculinity traits of the time by emphasizing the importance of virility and having a permissive attitude towards men who had sexual relations with multiple women. However, this changed in 1926 when President Calles signed new regulation to end the medical inspection and registration of prostitutes. Instead of supporting a system in which a specific group of women were responsible for the health of the nation, it was decided that both men and women would be penalized for spreading diseases, “these diseases included syphilis, gonorrhea, Nicolas-Farve disease, and vulvar tuberculosis. The infraction was known as the *delito de contagio*” (Bliss 36, “The Science”). However, the control and regulation over the bodies of prostitutes did not stop. In 1927, Drs. Armando L. Valenzuela and Roberto Romero from the Manuel Domínguez Hygiene Center, stated, “algún día se obtendrá el fin deseado. El Departamento de Salubridad Pública inspirado en lo que representa para la humanidad y para nuestra raza curar el mayor número de sifilíticos” (Valenzuela and Romero 1). The statement by the doctors demonstrate that there was concern regarding the spread of syphilis and that concern was mostly placed on the bodies of prostitutes.

In the Mexican literary tradition, *Santa* (1903), a naturalist novel by Federico Gamboa tells the story of a young woman from a small village who arrives to Mexico City to work as a

prostitute at a high-end brothel. This novel became a classic of Mexican literature and one of the first novels to portray urban society and the moral ills of the Mexican middle and upper classes.⁴³ The novel also illustrates how young women experienced hygiene and control under the new state regulations. In Gamboa's narrative, as soon as Santa arrives, she is required to submit to a medical examination and later asked to shower. When Elvira, the madam and person in charge of the brothel checks on Santa she reminds her that she must wash, "¿Se ha bañado ya?—inquirió volviéndose a Pepa--. ¡Magnífico! No importa, al vestirte esta noche para bajar a la sala, volverás a lavarte; mucha agua, hija, mucha agua..." (Gamboa 16). The double emphasis on water illustrates, again, the question and importance of cleanliness in the first years of the twentieth century and the Porfirian era.

In juxtaposition to Gamboa's *Santa*, most of the plotline in *Nadie* takes place during the years right before the war and the years after. As a result, the novel reflects some of the revolutionary ideals of freedom and the rights of workers. Another point to make is that even though Rivera Garza places *Nadie*'s plotline around the same time as *Santa*, there's a clear parody of *Santa* in *Nadie*. For instance, when Diamantina Vicario gets flustered reading and mocking *Santa*, "Este hombre es un idiota—decía a quien la quisiera escuchar en la salita de Mesones--, ¡mira que poner a hablar en francés al fantasma de la estúpida de Santa en el prefacio!" (Rivera Garza 168, *Nadie*). Diamantina, a strong and independent character in *Nadie*, calls Santa stupid and thinks it is ridiculous that she is portrayed speaking French in the novel's

⁴³In an article for the magazine *Proceso* José Emilio Pacheco recognizes the importance of Gamboa's novel, "Del *Periquillo Sarniento* a *Pedro Páramo* y *Artemio Cruz* la novelística mexicana ha producido grandes personajes y un solo mito: *Santa*. Mito en el sentido de creación anónima colectiva fluida y nunca estática de cuento que narra hechos imaginarios tenidos en su origen por verdaderos" (np, cited in Amador Tello). Additionally, in *In Search of the Sacred Book: Religion and the Contemporary Latin American Novel* the author also cites Pacheco's observation on the significance of *Santa* in Mexican literature (33).

preface. Later in the novel, there's another Diamantina-like parody and commentary of *Santa* when the third voice narrator states, "A finales de 1907, cuando Matilda hizo de la prostitución su oficio, sólo las muy atolondradas o francamente estúpidas, como Santa, acudían al registro y pasaban por la humillación del examen médico" (Rivera Garza 170, *Nadie*). The quote refers to the practice of not complying with the registration regulation by practicing prostitution clandestinely. Regarding this apparent issue for the state, Bliss reports that there were many *clandestinas* (unregistered prostitutes) during the revolutionary and postrevolutionary periods with an estimated presence of 15,000 *clandestinas* in Mexico City during the postwar period (16, "The Science"). In addition, Debra Castillo explains that in 1904:

There were many unregistered prostitutes as well as unfortunate women such as servants who were often forced into occasional prostitution...A minimal control over this vast population was instituted through the Ministry of Health registry and through the establishment of "red zones" where prostitution could be legally practiced. (35, cited in González)

Therefore, this adds another dimension to the way in which prostitutes saw themselves and the ways in which they defied the regulations (by going *clandestina*) imposed on them by the state.

In *Nadie*, the brothel of San Andrés, the first brothel where Matilda works as a prostitute in 1908, transforms her. At San Andrés, she becomes a heroine when she saves her friends, other sex workers, and defeats the young men and the policemen trying to take advantage of them. At this brothel, she also becomes "La Diablesa," what the third person narrator calls Matilda's "war title." "La Diablesa" is the nickname she earns at a first-class clandestine brothel after defending a fellow prostitute by preventing inspectors from apprehending her. The inspectors show up to break up a fight between the women and a group of young men, one of which refuses to pay the

right amount for the services he demands. Finally, when one of the inspectors threatens the woman with a gun, Matilda responds with a passionate speech on freedom, the agents' lack of justice, and the rights of workers. On the other hand, Matilda gets her first nickname, "La doctorcita," when she escapes from her uncle's home. After days of sorrow for the loss of Diamantina, Matilda finally finds a room for rent with a single mother of two in a small *vecindad* (tenement block). The decision to leave her uncle's house and protection signals a type of transformation by going out into the world of labor and by forging her way to find a new home. During this phase, Matilda works at a tobacco factory and rarely shares any personal information, "parecía salida de la nada. Sin historia, vacía como una página en blanco, Matilda sólo era conocida por su buen temple, su buena letra, sus conocimientos de medicina" (Rivera Garza 176, *Nadie*). Although reserved, Matilda helps neighbors in the *vecindad* with their ailments by checking them and making recommendations she learned from her uncle, Dr. Marcos Burgos. By becoming "La doctorcita" first and "La Diablesa" later, Matilda subverts the static role society has imposed on her. Her malleability and ability to adapt to new conditions show that she is no longer the naïve young lady from Papantla, Veracruz, afraid to ride the train to Mexico City. Instead, she has become a smart woman who chooses the best possible pathway for herself under the circumstances of homelessness and the low wages she earns at the tobacco factory. At the same time, she defies and subverts political and social norms by experimenting with her sexuality, by not complying with either her uncle's or the state's rules, and by continuously choosing where she wants to go.

In a textual parallel reminiscent of Matilda's past relationship with Diamantina, la Diablesa and "la Diamantina", another prostitute that works at the brothel, become lovers. The nickname "la Diamantina" has a double association here. On the one hand, the third person

narrator explains that the nickname is due to the woman's predilection for diamonds; she wears a *faux* diamond necklace, and, on the other, the name is effectively that of Matilda's former lover, Diamantina, the strong woman who teaches music and mocks *Santa*. Additionally, at the brothel Matilda establishes a romantic relationship with "la Diamantina." There, both women read *Santa* together and mock the protagonist's inability (and Gamboa's textual construction of Santa's supposed innocence) to notice another prostitute's sexual attraction towards her, "Cuando "la Diablesa" y "la Dimantina" leyeron el pasaje juntas, no sólo no pudieron evitar las carcajadas sino que además hicieron el amor sobre las páginas del libro. ¡Ay, pobre embajador Gamboa, tan cosmopolita y tan falto de imaginación!" (Rivera Garza 181, *Nadie*). Just as Diamantina had done before, la Diablesa and "la Diamantina," make fun of Gamboa for his "lack of imagination" regarding women's pleasure and sexuality.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity as discussed in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* helps illuminate Matildas's sexual practices and gender performativity in *Nadie*. Regarding the construction and the fluidity of gender, Butler explains "there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (25) and later states that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33). Therefore, Matilda may be read as a sexually and gender fluid character as she establishes sexual and emotional relationships with men, Joaquín and Cástulo, and also with women, Diamantina and "la Diamantina." Using the space and freedom the cabaret provides, and acting and performing as a form of expression and entertainment for the clients' and for their

own pleasure, Matilda and the other prostitutes perform cabaret-style shows to explore and defy the gender norms of the time:

Para divertirse, “la Diamantina” quiso representar una parodia de Santa y se salió con la suya. Mientras que ella misma se hizo cargo de transformar a la provinciana estúpida en una dama con alas de dragón, Matilda se convirtió en un hombre de frac cuya inocencia e ignorancia del bajo mundo le ganaron el apelativo “el Menso.” (Rivera Garza 186, *Nadie*)

In their parody of *Santa*, Matilda “becomes” a man. Although, historically it was uncommon for women to break social and gender norms in such a way, it did happen during the time of the revolution⁴⁴ as many women became soldiers⁴⁵ while *soldaderas* (camp followers)⁴⁶ were either forced or willingly decided it was their best choice for survival to accompany their husbands, brothers, or partners. However, it is now known that some women disguised their identity by wearing men’s clothing.⁴⁷ For example, one of the most notable cases of transgenderism is the

⁴⁴In *Against All Odds* Anna Macías explains how women moved from the private domain of the house to the public spaces usually dominated by men. The author explains that the active presence of *soldaderas* in battlegrounds actually started during the war of Independence from Spain in 1810 (40).

⁴⁵For example, La Coronela María de la Luz Espinosa Barrera of Yautepec, Morelos who was on duty from 1910-1920. She also mentions Rosa Mójica Bobadilla of Jojutla, Amelia[o] Robles, “El Güero” of Río Balsas, “La Chata,” “La Güera Carrasco” and “La Corredora” (*Ibid*, 42-43).

⁴⁶Macías explains the important role the *soldaderas* (camp followers) played during the revolution and makes a distinction between *soldaderas* and women who became soldiers. The author states that women who were soldiers possessed a courageous and decisive attitude and had to prove themselves in battle, while *soldaderas* commonly took the roles of caregivers by tending to soldiers’ wounds and preparing food (40).

⁴⁷See *Mexico’s Nobodies* by B. Christine Arce. The case of Colonel Amelia Robles: an interesting historical character who is also considered an exceptional case in gender studies during and after the revolution. Born a cis woman, it is believed he dressed and took on masculine traits to make a name in the army. It is also possible that he was the first transgender man who we know of in Mexican history. Amelio Robles became a war hero and a colonel, and lived his life as a male for the remainder of his life after the war. Colonel Amelio died in 1984, five years after making an official administrative statement of

case of Colonel Amelio Robles (Figure 4) who enlisted in the army, fought many battles, and continued to live his life as a man once the war was over.



Figure 4. *Coronel[♂] Ameli[o]♂ Robles revolucionari[o]♂, retrato, México, 1914.*

his female gender. One wonders if this was really an exceptional case that was luckily documented or if it was fairly common for women to pass for men during the war in order to fight along men (63-64).

Gabriela Cano explains that Colonel Robles was able to live his life as a man and enjoy tolerance precisely because he “embodied the ideal of the macho revolutionary soldier: courageous and daring, capable of responding to aggression immediately and violently, and skilled in handling arms and horses” (40 *Sex in Revolution*). Regarding women in the army Gustavo Casasola explains that if the women who joined the columns proved themselves in battle they were made officers. He further notes that such women:

needed to masculinize themselves completely; both inwardly and outwardly; dress like a man and act like a man; go on horseback, like the rest, be able to endure the long marches and, at the hour of combat, prove with weapon in hand that she was no longer a *soldadera*, but a soldier. (Casasola 42, cited in Macías)

In the novel, there is a play exhibiting gender performativity and its representation at the brothel, the cabaret, and the dance salons which I use interchangeably in this chapter, as the brothels mentioned in the novel are either a combination of these or an undefined space of sexual commerce. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that according to the 1931 Reglamento de Cafés Cantantes Cabarets y Salones de Baile, cabarets are “sites of diversion that fulfill the following conditions: they have restaurant service, orchestra, variety spectacles, and a space for dancing.” Dance salons on the other hand, “did not have restaurant service nor sell intoxicating beverages” and were not “obligated to present shows to entertain certain guests” (cited in Bliss 170, *Compromised Positions*).⁴⁸

⁴⁸Carlos Medina Caracheo explains the additional requirements set by the state to open such establishments. “Se requería de una licencia expedida por el Departamento del Distrito Federal. Para obtenerla, los interesados debían disponer de un local que reuniera las condiciones siguientes: no tener vista directa a la calle, ocultándose el interior del salón por medio de una mampara; estar a una distancia de doscientos metros cuando menos de las puertas de las escuelas públicas o particulares, templos, hospitales, hospicios, fábricas, cuarteles y demás instituciones militares [...] Los propietarios de “café-cantantes” o “cabarets” debían depositar en la Tesorería del Distrito Federal la cantidad de un mil pesos, para garantizar el cumplimiento de las disposiciones” (25).

In “Los burdeles y la decadencia de la conversación” Salvador Novo, a well-known Mexican chronicler of the period, gives an account of the fancy *casas de cita* (literally meaning “houses of appointment” but better understood as brothels) and the prevalence of the sexual activities at these high-end brothels:

Aquellas casas eran, para empezar, grandes. Mayores, desde luego, que las de quienes por una soñada noche escapaban a la estrechez monótona de su domesticidad, para pasar lo que se llamaba un buen rato. Lujosas, atractivamente instaladas. Las señoritas putas o “pupilas”, administrada su conducta profesional por la señora madrota, con la delicada pericia con que un buen director de orquesta maneja las cuerdas y los alientos: a las especialistas en violines o las virtuosas de clarinete, disponían de alcobas individuales competentemente equipadas con un lecho cuyo muelle amplitud afrontara cualquier gimnástica fantasía; espejos estratégicamente situados para multiplicar el goce plástico, y lavabos de peltre o de porcelana para las abluciones de la despedida, después de haber discretamente depositado en el buró de cubierta de mármol el importe convenido por el solaz. A tiempo convocado, un “serafín” doméstico y diligente renovaba la provisión de agua del lavabo o “aguamanil”, y recogía las toallas, anteriores a la bendición moderna del kleenex... (Ava Vargas x, in *La casa de citas*)

At the same time, the brothel is a space that provides some of the much-coveted freedom Matilda desires. She is not only financially independent by selling sexual services to men, but she also develops a creative and subversive side of her persona: she writes and performs cabaret-style shows with other women at the brothel. Together, they come up with a series of mini dramas that

they also perform, with titles such as *El abrazo de la sífilis*, *Enfermedad*, *Cárcel*, *Hospital*, *Neurastenia* and *Reglamento*. Interestingly, all of them are topics that relate to the preoccupations and anxieties of the time. Thus, Matilda is not only rejecting the positivist approach to order and control of her hygienist uncle's view, but she is also starting to show the traits of a modern woman, or a "chica moderna." She demonstrates this by cutting off her braids (Rivera Garza 165, *Nadie*), by wearing modern clothes at the brothel, and by participating in the scene of entertainment at the brothel. Hershfield explains that the "chica moderna" is a "hybrid creature," that possesses a "blend of traditionalism and cosmopolitanism" and that "Mexican women became modern not simply through rhetoric of nationalism and an imagined conception of community, but also through their participation in transnational gendered commercial discourses and practices of everyday life" (10).⁴⁹ On his part, Jungwon Park studies *Nadie*'s defiance of discipline and control and the historical context in which the plotline takes place. He explores the idea of the "new citizen" and the representation of madness through the character of Matilda and contends that the asylum is a "battlefield" of constant negotiation of power and language. I agree with this reading and would add that Matilda also negotiates this type of power at the brothel via the shows she and the other women perform. In addition, at the brothel she likes to dress in provocative and fancy clothing, and agrees to be photographed in what can only be compared to the fashion of the flappers and the nude postcards popular in Europe at the time.

The role of photography in the project of modernization is a major one.⁵⁰ The novel presents Joaquín as one of the main mediators of this new form of technology brought from

⁴⁹For a comprehensive study on the subject and role of "la chica moderna" in Mexico in the early 20th century see *Imagining La Chica Moderna: Women, Nation, and Visual Culture In Mexico, 1917-1936* by Joanne Hershfield.

⁵⁰ In *Mexican Modernity: The Avant-Garde and the Technological Revolution* Rúben Gallo explores the technologies of the 20th century that helped modernize the country. One chapter is dedicated to

Europe to Mexico in the nineteenth century. The character of Joaquín in the novel places photography in the historical context of the time and also helps understand how the state used it as a medium to control the population, especially populations that were considered inherently deviant like prisoners, prostitutes and mentally ill people. Thus, I will take a closer look at the presence of this new medium of representation and portraiture.

photography and its importance during the first decades of the century. The author explains, “Though many of these images were created while Mexico was experiencing one of the most rapid and intense modernizing booms, modernity is conspicuously absent from these representations. The cameras, stadiums, typewriters, radios, and cement constructions that fascinated avant-garde figures in the first decades of the twentieth century are nowhere to be found in these idyllic photographs (42).



Figure 5. Photograph from *La casa de citas en el barrio galante* by Ava Vargas, discovered in 1975.

Joaquín Buitrago photographs prostitutes, prisoners and “locos” or mad people. In the novel he is presented as a photographer that is misunderstood and underappreciated. For instance, after showing another photographer his work of nude women, he is told “¿Esto es lo que fuiste a aprender a Roma, flaco? Esto es un trabajo muy menor” (Rivera Garza 31, *Nadie*). He also shows frustration at his inability to explain his photographs of nude prostitutes at the brothels so people end up referring to him as “fotógrafo de putas”. In addition, his internal monologue is

plagued by the thoughts of the women he has photographed at different brothels “Ahí estaban una vez más imperecederas, las poses únicas de las mujeres de las casas de citas. Mis mujeres. En el centro de cuartos abigarrados, rodeadas de estatuillas y espejos, vistiendo ropas transparentes del lejano Oriente o completamente desnudas, las mujeres posaban como si estuvieran haciendo un pacto con la eternidad” (Rivera Garza 26, *Nadie*). Looking at the photographs Joaquín describes the brothel as a space that has elegant and ostentatious décor: walls with mirrors, tapestries, sculptures everywhere, naked women posing for the camera wearing only oriental see-through garments or nothing at all. The place he describes is reminiscent of the French courtesan photographs of the *belle époque* imitated in photographs taken between 1900-1920 in Mexico.⁵¹ Figure 5 comes from Vargas’s collection of photographs showing women in sensual poses in exotic spaces such as the salons described in the novel. Other photographs in the book portray naked women outdoors in the middle of a river, or in the woods.

In relation to this, in describing the settings chosen by Mexican painters in the nineteenth century and which photographers later adopted, Adriana Zavala explains that “like the generation of European artists that preceded them, Mexican artists imagined women of such brothels as odalisques and the brothel as a harem” (89). It is important to note that the presence of nudity was not new in Mexican culture, for example, the painting in figure 6, *Huntress of the Andes* by Felipe S. Gutiérrez from 1891 depicts a full body female nude lying on the ground. However, as a form of portraiture photography was more practical, more accessible (to lower and middle classes), and more affordable than paintings, hence its tremendous success and popularity.

⁵¹ For a splendid collection of this type of photography in Mexico see *La casa de citas en el barrio galante* by Ava Vargas. The author published the book in 1991 after acquiring a collection of photographs that were taken sometime between 1900 and 1920 in Mexico and only found in 1975 (xv).



Figure 6. *La cazadora de los Andes* (*Huntress of the Andes*), Felipe S. Gutiérrez, 1891. *Museo Nacional de Arte*, CONALCUTA, INBA. Mexico.

Photographs also served as methods of surveillance since prostitutes were required to register in order to work legally.⁵² According to Bliss, regulation required women who had

⁵²Just like prostitutes, prisoners were also photographed for reasons that were fairly similar. The images of deviant subjects presented to the general public confirmed the negative notions held by the upper and upper-middle classes about the identities of criminals in the country, “aquellos que desconocían lo que era una cárcel, y en el fondo se negaban a visitarla, aun con fines humanitarios, comprobaban la existencia de criminales a través de retratos que acentuaban la idea preconcebida que se tenía de ellos: sucios, depravados, carentes de educación... Aquellos que amenazaban su vida, su hogar, su cultura, la honra de

regular sexual relations with more than one man to “have their photographs taken, give their names and addresses to sanitary authorities, and undergo periodic gynecological examinations to check for signs of syphilis or other contagious genital afflictions” (15). However, sex workers also contested and subverted these regulations by changing their names frequently, by lying about their age, their hometown, and their marital status (González Ascencio 78-79). In addition, prostitutes also used photography’s power of representation as a form of subversion by posing in the conventional manner of the bourgeois women photographed during this period, as shown in figure 7. In regards to this, a publication from 1994 from the Archivo Histórico Municipal of Oaxaca presents a description of the women at the registry there as follows:

Hacia 1890 las prostitutas oaxaqueñas aparecían como cualquier mujer del pueblo, con trajes de campesinas con trenzas a los lados. Pronto, hacia 1894, se afrancesan. Llevan al estudio sus mejores vestidos, como las que usan las señoras de la capital. En 1898 llegan a usar uniforme: las pupilas de un burdel se visten con las mismas prendas. Unas llevan una bonita blusa blanca, con ribetes oscuros, y se peinan de chongo. Otras van con un simpático sombrerito con un moño almidonado de tela escocesa, a cuadros. La ambición es evidente: se retratan como señoritas burguesas. Aparecen sentadas en cómodos sillones, con fondos de flores o jardines, con la mano apoyada dulcemente en una mesa tripié [sic] o en un libro. Si están paradas se recargan en una bonita silla de madera, con

sus mujeres... De cualquier manera, era una medida “progresista” que se justificaba en sí: permitiría formar un acervo de información para los estudios “científicos” que delinearía el perfil arquetípico del criminal y revelaría su espacio de acción... hasta su erradicación. Estos estudios eran útiles ejemplos del progreso alcanzado en el país al ser presentados en los congresos internacionales sobre criminalidad” (Casanova and Debroise).

educación, en un ambiente que despide estabilidad, casi de lujo. (83-84, cited in González Ascencio)



Figure 7. Sex worker. “Prostitute number 459” from the registry of 1865. Mexico City.

This brief genealogy of prostitution in the archive from Oaxaca describes how prostitutes are portrayed in the photographs of the late nineteenth century. The text above points out that the prostitutes adopted the fashion of the capital, that they dressed in sophisticated clothing and hairdos, common among women of higher social classes, and that they posed in settings that

were typical of the “señoritas burguesas” (bourgeois young ladies).⁵³ Furthermore, in reference to the case of prostitutes in Oaxaca, Overmyer-Velazquez argues that, “The prostitute’s staged adoption of characteristics of urbanized, respectable society had material consequences. By elevating their perceived social status, indigenous sex workers from Oaxaca sought to compete with the newly arrived, white prostitutes for the higher wages in first and second-class brothels” (92). Therefore, prostitutes were not only appropriating the norms of portraiture of elite women to present themselves as belonging to a higher social class, they were actually doing it in order to monetize their image and to increase their job prospects.

To illustrate this further, let us look at the textual evidence in the case of Eduardo Oligochea and his fiancé, Cecilia Villapaldo, who is portrayed in the following manner on a photograph of her the psychiatrist carries with him:

En la mesita de mármol, donde ella recarga su codo derecho, hay un jarrón de vidrio lleno de azucenas. El encaje zurcido sobre el vestido disimula la ausencia de pechos la delgadez casi enfermiza del torso. Todo en ella exhibe debilidad, delicadeza, mimos, lecciones de piano. Cecilia es el tipo de mujer que le hace exclamar la palabra “pobrecita” automáticamente, casi sin pensar. (Rivera Garza 60, *Nadie*)

⁵³About the specific photographs depicting prostitutes in the registry from 1865 Debroise explains the supposed visual traits that help identify the women as prostitutes. Apparently, the women possessed “cierta desnudez en los brazos y las pantorrillas, un porte significativo de la cabeza, el peinado apenas exagerado o la abundancia de joyas, a no ser, en los casos de las más humildes, una extraña austeridad que revela como por oposición cierta coquetería manifiesta en una extraña—casi diría exagerada—pulcritud (44, *Fuga*).

Additionally, the author explains that the images of prostitutes can be compared to those depicting homosexual men in a “álbum de presos” from the Fototeca del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, who were possibly also imprisoned for practicing prostitution. However, in the case of homosexual men the “delito” is not specified (44).

Cecilia is the embodiment of what it meant to be a good bourgeois woman in Mexican society. She belongs to a well-off family, she is delicate, frail, and thin. She poses in the stereotypical setting a member of her social class would: in a salon, standing next to a marble table where a glass vase full of lilies rests. After seeing the photograph, Joaquín responds with a nonchalant “Vamos, Eduardo. No te hagas pendejo. Eso ni siquiera es una mujer” (61, *Nadie*). Oligochea responds by showing Joaquín an old photograph of Mercedes, his former girlfriend from his hometown of Veracruz. In complete juxtaposition to Cecilia, the shot of Mercedes captures her in the outdoors, fishing: “Hay una excitación en su rostro oscuro, en sus cabellos crespos recogidos con dificultad en una cola de caballo... Mercedes parece estar llena de energía” (Rivera Garza 63, *Nadie*). This difference in portraiture can be attributed to the women belonging to different social classes, but it also brings to the fore the question of race as Mercedes is a woman of color from the Caribbean part of Veracruz.

Additional textual evidence of the subversion of regulations and social norms of portraiture in photographs of prostitutes is observed when Joaquín photographs Matilda and reflects on the choices other prostitutes make regarding the way they want to be portrayed:

Como todas las otras mujeres que había retratado en el mismo burdel, Matilda seleccionó el escenario y las poses. Algunas habían preferido permanecer en sus cuartos, recostadas sobre los mismos colchones donde realizaban su trabajo; otras, en cambio, le sugirieron la visita a un arroyuelo cercano. Algunas se desnudaron sin más, otras eligieron exóticos tocados chinescos, y las menos decidieron enfrentar la cámara con sus ropas cotidianas a medio vestir. (Rivera Garza 26, *Nadie*)

Another important point to realize is the easiness with which photography is considered real. Even though it possesses the power of appearing or giving the appearance of reality and authenticity, that is not always the case. For this reason, in her study of Mexican modernist art, Zavala explores the role of photography in the first decades of the twentieth century and the appearance of reality they hold. The author states that:

More than any other visual medium, photography appears unmediated, but, like any other visual art, the photographer has the ability to “free [him or herself] from the encumbrances posed by material reality [and] still lay claim to that reality...[photographs] give a greater appearance of the “real” because they would have appeared as three-dimensional likenesses both of the women and of their social identity. That social identity bespeaks a comfort with lavish surroundings and the leisure time to enjoy expensive material goods. The women’s poses also lay claim, real or not, to their comfort with the expression of overt sexuality. They also take possession of the viewer by smiling for the camera. (93)

It is significant that prostitutes subverted elite mechanisms of surveillance, regulation, and administration to position themselves as integral components of the turn-of-the century city. As I have discussed above, many prostitutes found multiple ways to subvert the systems of regulation and control that were imposed on them and also made decisions on how to portray themselves on the photographs they were required to take. By posing in elegant settings and attire, the prostitutes attempt to be perceived as bourgeois women, thus mocking the social norms of the time. Moreover, they also attempt to elevate their classification in the registries in order to get jobs at higher paying brothels.



Figure 8. *El suicidio de Dorothy Hale* (*The Suicide of Dorothy Hale*), Frida Kahlo, 1939.

Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, USA.

Selecting *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* (1938), a painting that was commissioned to Frida Kahlo in 1938 and that the artist produced in the manner of a *retablo* or *ex-voto* as the book cover for *Nadie* is significant. The *retablo* is a style of painting of Spanish origin with religious motifs brought to Mexico during the colonial period. In more recent times it has become a popular art form that is meant to be used for private devotion which in some cases, as Susana Vargas Cervantes explains, has turned into a form of subversion for abject bodies such as those of the LGBTQIA+ community.⁵⁴ It is worth noting that in this *retablo* Kahlo depicted Dorothy's suicide in a very graphic manner which caused shock and controversy at the time. The fact that Kahlo did not shy away from depicting her friend's death in such a manner also brings to the fore notions of which subjects were acceptable to be portrayed and those who were socially unacceptable, and thus, unrepresentable in the 1930s. People were shocked with the depiction of Dorothy's bloody body lying on the street. Furthermore, in this painting Kahlo deviates from the common aesthetics of *retablos* by depicting Dorothy in a public space such as the street; in contrast to the painting, *retablos* generally depict subjects in the interior of their own homes or in churches kneeling in front of the saint they worship. Therefore, Kahlo deliberately painting Dorothy Hale in such an unconventional manner also illustrates many of the themes present in the novel. By way of symbolic representation, the painting effectively juxtaposes Matilda's experience (and that of other prostitutes) with Dorothy's. Matilda in *Nadie*, like Dorothy in the *retablo*, also becomes a "public woman," although in very different ways. Dorothy, by way of taking her own life jumping from a window to the public space of the street and Matilda, by working as a prostitute in a historical period marked by moralistic norms that despised women

⁵⁴For a study of *retablos* and abject bodies in contemporary Mexico see "Retablos: emociones, afectos y cuerpos en subversion" Susana Vargas Cervantes. *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre Cuerpos, Emociones y Sociedad*.

like her. In addition, Matilda is a woman who lives outside of the social norms and moves in different spaces that carry different levels of social stigma. However, unlike Dorothy, Matilda does not commit suicide; instead she returns to La Castañeda because she cannot bear life with Joaquín and prefers (and possibly cannot afford anything else) the space she inhabits at the asylum.

The visual representation via photography was an innovative and modern method used in Mexico to control and regulate certain groups considered deviant, dirty, dangerous and ill. However, by practicing malleability in the ways they presented and self-fashioned themselves and the information they provided, prostitutes and prisoners⁵⁵ were able to subvert these mechanisms of control. In his article on control and sanitation, González Ascencio mentions the language used by the officers writing the reports of women who left the brothels or those who were fired from them. I want to point out some of the phrases that stand out because they are relevant to understanding how little agency women had. About one woman, the report reads, “se retiró del oficio por inútil”; another was fired due to being “inútil en el servicio” and a different one, “fue retirada, después de varios ingresos al hospital, del servicio de prostitución por certificado médico probando la inutilidad de la mujer para ejercerla” (85). Furthermore, the annotations next to these women’s names point to the creation of a narrative in which women were classified as disabled individuals who needed a guardian, a “tutor y solicitante de fianza” (86), in order to be allowed to withdraw from the brothels and to be officially removed from the

⁵⁵In “Fotografos de cárceles” Rosa Casanova y Olivier Debroise describe how prisoners disfigured their faces as they were being photographed with the purpose of outwitting the camera to avoid being recognized if their photograph was distributed to the public. Additionally, in “La fotografía decimonónica de reos en México” Gerardo González Ascencio traces the origins of photography in Mexico and its uses by the state to regulate official forms of identification in the 19th century. The author focuses on the surviving photographic evidence of prisoners and discusses the role of photography in criminalizing the poor and the working-class people of Mexico.

registration book. This indicates that a narrative of mental disability that was reinforced by the very system that created it, at the same time was used to the detriment of some women.

Therefore, if women decided they no longer wanted to work as prostitutes they had difficulty officially removing their name from the registry as they had various requirements they needed to fulfill before receiving approval.

Lastly, the bodies in the novel and the photographic archives cited in this chapter are represented through the various lenses of power and control used in both the Porfirian era and the revolutionary governments. On the one hand, the Porfirian regime was marked by policies that allowed prostitution but also regulated it employing positivist methods. Once the war ended, the policing, regulation, and control of bodies took a different approach with the presence of the reformist government and the project of modernization and nationalism that followed the war. In this chapter I have discussed the different ways in which illnesses and deviant behaviors were regulated in different spaces in the late nineteenth century, and the first decades of the twentieth century. By studying the spaces of La Castañeda and the brothels in Rivera Garza's novel, the photographic evidence from the archives, the multiple historical and critical studies on the subject, and the registries from Mexico City and Oaxaca, it is evident that these sex workers found ways to subvert the rigid policies and the state systems that continuously targeted deviant groups such as mental health patients, prisoners, prostitutes and homosexual people.

Chapter 2

Gender Disruptions: Ana Clavel's Transformations and Aesthetics of the Textual, Private and Public Space

Yo monstruo de mi deseo/carne de cada una de mis
pinceladas/lienzo azul de mi cuerpo/pintora de mi andar/no
quiero más títulos que cargar/no quiero más cargos ni
casilleros adonde encajar/ni el nombre justo que me reserve
ninguna Ciencia.
Susy Shock

Mira que si te quise, fue por tu pelo,
ahora que estás pelona, ya no te quiero.
[Look, if I loved you, it was for your hair,
now that you are bald, I no longer love you]
Frida Kahlo ⁵⁶

If I didn't define myself, I would be
crunched into other people's fantasies for me and
eaten alive.
Audre Lorde

Identity is about situatedness in motion: embodiment and spatiality.
It is about a self that is constituted through and
against other selves in contexts that serve to
establish the relationship between the self and the
other.
Juana María Rodríguez

In December of 2019, Twitter exposed some of the anxieties inherent to the ideals of traditional Mexican masculinities rooted in the archetype of the hypermasculine *macho* man, that was shaped and reinforced after the 1910 revolutionary war and which still exists today.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Verses from a popular song used as epigraph in Kahlo's painting *Autorretrato con cabello corto* (1940).

⁵⁷ See, Castillo, Debra A. *Easy Women: Sex and Gender in Modern Mexican Fiction*. University of Minnesota Press, 1998. Moraga, Cherríe, and Gloria Anzaldúa, editors. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*; Stevens, E. P. "Marianismo: The Other face of Machismo." In *Female and Male in Latin America: Essays*, edited by A. Pescatello, 89–103. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973; Sheridan, Guillermo. *México en 1932: La polémica nacionalista*. FCE, 1999; Monsiváis, Carlos. *Cultura urbana y creación intelectual: el caso mexicano*. United Nations University, 1981; Franco, Jean. *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico*. Columbia University Press, 1991; Lomnitz-Adler, Claudio. *El antisemitismo y la ideología de la revolución mexicana*. Primera edición

Because the revolutionary man is still imagined as a strong, fearless figure, who was willing to fight and take arms for the revolution and thus for his nation, these heteronormative traits became the common and acceptable way of thinking about and conceiving the Mexican man throughout the twentieth century until the present, even when these characteristics existed at the expense of erasing different sexual orientations and gender identities.⁵⁸ It comes as no surprise, then, that in his famous 1910 address to future revolutionaries, Emiliano Zapata states, “Forward, comrades! Soon you will hear the first shots; soon the shout of the rebellion will thunder from the throats of the oppressed. Let not a single one of you fail to second this movement, launching, with all the power of conviction, that supremist of cries, Land and Liberty!” (Joseph and Henderson 338). Furthermore, the archetype of the Mexican revolutionary was well illustrated in the literary canon with the 1915 publication of *Los de abajo* [*The Underdogs*] by Mariano Azuela; *El águila y la serpiente* [*The Eagle and The Serpent*] by Martín Luis Guzmán in 1928; and the 1931 publication of *Cartucho* by Nellie Campobello. More recently, Sabina Berman’s 1993 play *Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda* [*Between Pancho Villa and a Naked Woman*] satirizes Pancho Villa, a historical *macho* figure par excellence, and the role of women in contemporary times. Moreover, these hypermasculine traits and the archetype of the revolutionary predominated in cultural artifacts produced throughout the twentieth century, and were especially disseminated through film, such as in revolutionary melodrama and *cabaretera* [dance hall] prostitution melodrama.⁵⁹

electrónica, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2013; Macías-González, Víctor M., et al. *Masculinity and Sexuality In Modern Mexico*. University of New Mexico Press, 2012.

⁵⁸ I discuss this further in chapter one of this dissertation, specifically with the case of Amelio Robles and his transgenderism while and after participating in the Mexican Revolution.

⁵⁹ For instance, in *Cinemachismo: Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film* Sergio de la Mora, presents the case for the study of what he calls cinemachismo,

The events that led to the social media dispute at the end of 2019 occurred when the exhibition “Emiliano: Zapata después de Zapata” [Emiliano: Zapata After Zapata] was hosted at the Palacio de Bellas Artes [Palace of Fine Arts], one of the most important cultural centers in Mexico City. When the museum published the exhibition’s promotional advertisement (Figure 1) on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, it included a reproduction of *La Revolución* (2014) [The Revolution], a painting by artist Fabián Cháirez that was among the one hundred and fifty pieces on display at the exhibition. By presenting a contemporary homoerotic and effeminate take on Zapata that was interpreted as a transgression by the general public, the exhibition challenged the socially acceptable ideas of masculinity and heteronormative attitudes, all while demystifying the image of a well-respected and popular revolutionary figure of Mexican history.⁶⁰ However, the response to the promotional advertisement for the exhibition that exploded on social media was simultaneously unexpected and strangely familiar.

Macho is also the quintessential virile image of the post-revolutionary Mexican nation, embodied by the charro (*cattle rancher*), an image widely circulated through film, popular music (*rancheras, mariachi*), performance, sports, the graphic arts (Jesus de la Helguera’s famously illustrated calendars, for example), and literature (2).

⁶⁰As demonstrated in Diego Rivera’s murals and many other artists that helped push the idea of a Mexican national identity after the Mexican Revolution.

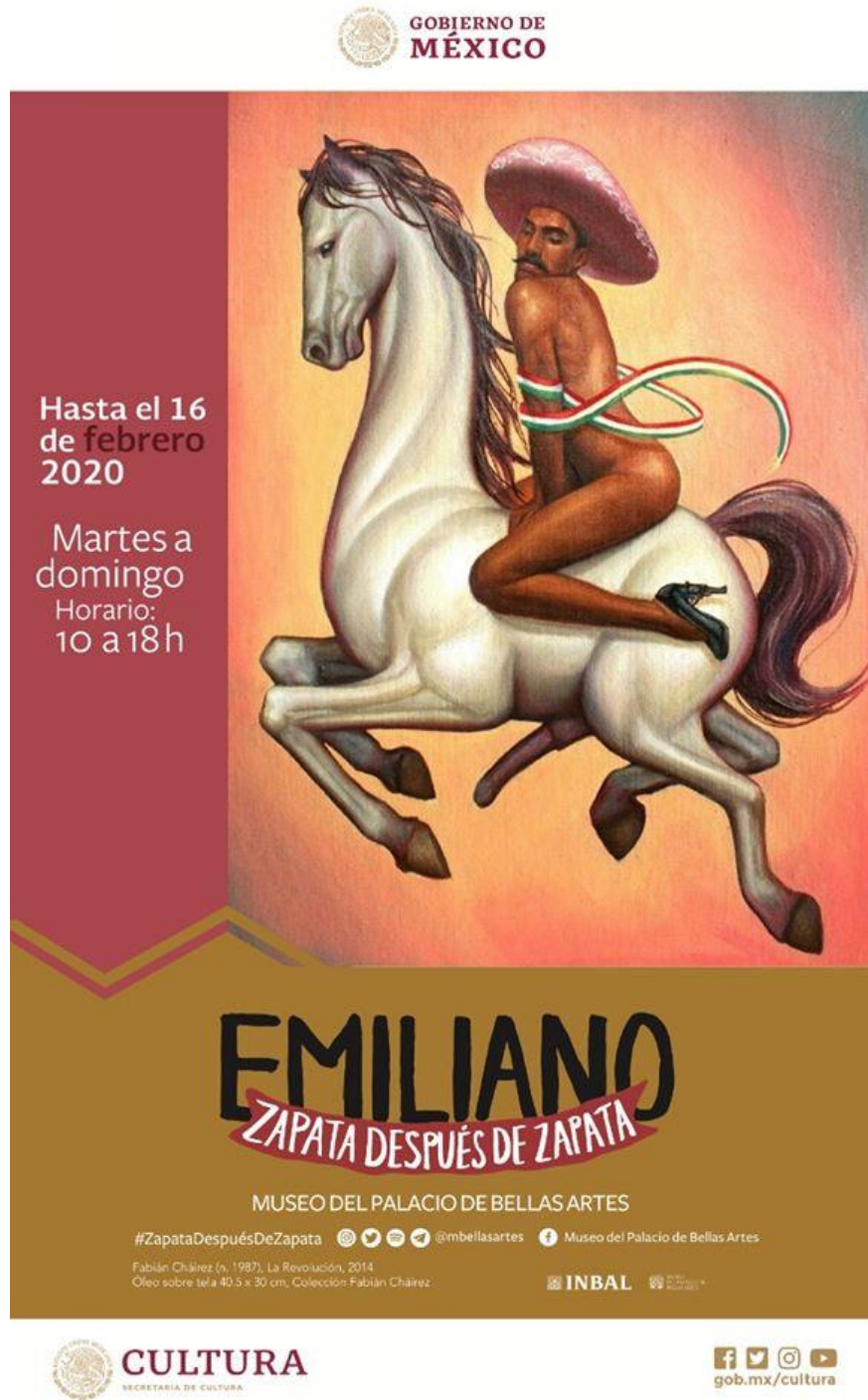


Figure 1. Secretaria de Cultura del Gobierno de México. Government-issued flyer advertising the exhibition “Emiliano: Zapata después de Zapata” at the Palace of Fine Arts, February 2020.

Because of the overtly sexualized subject matter and the codes of femininity displayed in Zapata's figure through the representation of a naked slender figure wearing heels and a pink hat, the painting caused outrage and a very negative response, including homophobic remarks from many people on social media, including disapproving comments from the living relatives of other revolutionaries. "Tu obra de Zapata es un insulto a tan distinguido personaje, simplemente es vulgar e irreverente," commented one user under the exhibition's promotional post on Facebook.⁶¹ A few days after the initial advertisement appeared, and when the backlash against the artist and the painting peaked, a protest at the museum that included those defending the painting, who were mostly allies and members of the LGBTQIA+ community and those against it, turned violent. Several days later, when the museum refused⁶² to remove the piece by Cháirez from their exhibition, Zapata's grandson announced that he was suing the museum for defamation.⁶³ Cháirez's response was conclusive: he shared a photograph of himself on social media dressed in very feminine drag while also sporting a prominent mustache (Figure 2).

⁶¹ Chilean artist Juan Domingo Dávila (1946) experienced a similar situation in 1994 when his painting *The Liberator Simón Bolívar* led Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador to present a formal protest to the Chilean government. His painting portrays a semi-naked Bolívar with breasts and gestures with his middle finger.

⁶²Miguel Fernández Félix, Director of Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes responded through his official Twitter account by saying:

Las representaciones de Emiliano Zapata son un importante detonador en un momento de cambio, para abrir brecha en diálogo con la diversidad en la sociedad mexicana./ Emiliano Zapata ha sido estandarte de luchas libertarias en todos los ámbitos, su representación ha abanderado gran variedad de movimientos políticos, sociales y artísticos. Son bienvenidos al Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes, para conocerlas en la muestra #ZapataDespuésDeZapata./ #ZapataDespuésDeZapata es un recorrido por la diversidad de representaciones de Zapata a lo largo de los siglos XX y XXI. Desde la libertad de expresión y la libertad creativa damos cabida a la pluralidad de manifestaciones artísticas que se han apropiado de la imagen de Zapata (@MiguelFdezFelix).

⁶³See Embargo, Redacción / Sin. "Nieto de Zapata alista demanda por pintura del Caudillo del Sur 'afeminado'. 'Es una aberración', dice." *SinEmbargo MX*, 10 Dec. 2019, www.sinembargo.mx/09-12-2019/3693088

Cháirez's posing in front of his painting of Zapata in drag became the artist's way of communicating that there's no shame in gender expression, whether it be non-binary, masculine, feminine, or a more fluid form that plays with both.⁶⁴ At the same time, Cháirez's response both questions and to some degree also parodies the limiting binary norms in which society reads and assigns our sexual orientation and gender identity.



Figure 2. Fabian Cháirez at Mexico City's Palacio de Bellas Artes next to his painting *La Revolución*. Photograph reproduced with the artist's permission.

⁶⁴ In *Vested Interests*, Marjorie Garber asserts that “drag is the theoretical and deconstructive social practice that analyzes these structures from within, by putting in question the “naturalness” of gender roles through the discourse of clothing and body parts” (151).

Why was there such a negative response and a censorship effort towards an art exhibition honoring the most important figure of the Mexican Revolution? I discuss this case study to demonstrate why questions of gender identity and sexuality continue to be important in contemporary Mexico, and to showcase how issues related to sexuality create social tensions that become polarized under public scrutiny. I argue that the answer to this question is related to issues of gender, sexuality, and the rights of individuals to occupy and disrupt spaces. This chapter focuses on the experimental and disruptive elements within and beyond *Cuerpo naufrago* [Shipwrecked Body], the 2005 novel authored by Ana Clavel.⁶⁵ Specifically, this chapter explores the presence of gender ambiguity and the innovative and seemingly effortless ways in which the novel engages the reader multimodally and multispatially by incorporating photography as well as digital spaces through Clavel's website cuerponaufrago.com, and via the public street installations that she produced following the novel's publication. Employing theories of gender, visual art, and space, I examine how Clavel simultaneously questions perceptions of sexuality and gender identity in highly contentious spaces, while also disrupting the traditional forms of literature by embedding a photographic text that encourages the reader to explore both the virtual and public spaces connected to the work. Furthermore, this chapter also analyses how Clavel presents notions of masculinity in such a way as to expose their absurdity by parodying them. I argue that she uses these moments of parody to uncover the roots of essentialism and homophobia in a binary gender system that frequently invisibilizes people who do not conform to traditional gender expressions. As such, Clavel's multispatial engagement with the reader and viewer results in an overall expansion of the work in which the literary space

⁶⁵ Clavel's *oeuvre* including her collections of short stories, her essays, and novels such as *Los deseos y su sombra* (1999), *Cuerpo naufrago* (2005), *Las violetas son flores del deseo* (2007), and *Las ninfas a veces sonr en* (2013) is known for dealing with controversial or taboo issues such as sexual desire and violence, suicide, and pornography.

inhabits both street installation and the digital pieces created by the author, but not necessarily in an orderly fashion.

Cuerpo naufrago is the story of how twenty-seven-year-old Antonia wakes up one morning from a dream transformed into a man that she later names Antón. Unable to define the protagonist's gender definitively, the narration alternates between the feminine and masculine names and pronouns. On the day of the transformation Antonia/Antón reconnects with Francisco, an old friend from university years who notices her/his changes but is not shocked when Antonia/Antón tells him that she/he just woke up in a male body. Instead, Francisco becomes a sort of mentor who helps Antonia/Antón navigate her/his new reality. Later, Francisco introduces Antonia/Antón to two of his close friends: Carlos Díaz, a pilot; and Raimundo Ventura, a photographer. The group become friends and start hanging out together while Antonia/Antón learns the ways of the world in her/his body as a biological man. Through these friendships, Antonia/Antón is able to enter and explore spaces that were inaccessible to her/him as a biological woman, especially to spaces that are coded as highly masculine such as men's bathrooms, gentlemen's clubs, and bars. Antonia/Antón's constant reflections on desire and her/his fixation with urinals after the first encounter with them in a men's bathroom becomes one of the *leitmotifs* of the narration as well as the subject of most of the photographs embedded throughout the text. Though Antonia/Antón is attracted to women and has sex with Malva, Raimundo's ex-girlfriend, the protagonist also discovers that she/he is attracted to men and has a brief romantic affair with Raimundo. However, they quickly decide that they only want to maintain a friendship and soon after that decision, Antonia/Antón meets Paula, a biologist with whom the protagonist falls in love. Finally, the protagonist travels to the Aeolian Islands to meet with Paula, who is there on a work assignment. In the last page of the novel, while swimming in

the ocean surrounded by the beauty of the islands, the protagonist reflects on her/his life and on what it means to inhabit a new body and a new reality.

The drastic transformation that happens overnight in *Cuerpo* is reminiscent of previous important works of literature, specifically Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915). Clavel establishes a dialogue with Woolf's *Orlando* in the very first few lines of *Cuerpo*, which begins, "Ella—porque no cabía duda sobre su sexo, aunque las presiones de la época contribuyeran a que asumiera otros roles—estaba dormida en la cama y se resistía a abandonar el último sueño" (11). This is a direct reference and a reframing of *Orlando*'s first few lines, which read, "He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it" (Woolf 11). Clavel includes Woolf's words almost verbatim, but instead of using the masculine pronoun "he", she uses the feminine pronoun "ella [she]." In doing this, Clavel is paying homage to Woolf's novel, locating her work within an established feminist discourse, and as I will discuss later, turning *Cuerpo*'s attention to a different direction where the protagonist explores and interrogates gender from the ambiguous perspective of a person who does not necessarily identify as a woman or as a man. This is evident in the continual and confusing use of the names (Antonia/Antón) and the pronouns (she/he) throughout the text, and is left unresolved in the last page of the novel. Therefore, *Cuerpo*'s most evident contention is that in comparison to the physical characteristics that mark our sexuality and gender identity socially, desire plays a more significant role in our conception of our own identity and our romantic relationships⁶⁶.

⁶⁶ Similar issues related to gender were undertaken by Carmen Boullosa in 1995 with the publication of *Duerme*, a historical novel set in colonial Mexico where the protagonist dresses as a man to save herself from prostitution in the Old World, then travels to the New World where an indigenous woman saves her life with water from lake Texcoco. Furthermore, this conception of gender shows a clear influence of Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity.

In *Metamorphosis*, Kafka's protagonist experiences a transformation that is presented as follows,

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning out of restless dreams, he found himself in bed, transformed into a gargantuan pest. He lay on his hard, armored back and saw, as he raised his head a little, his domed, brown belly, divided into arched segments; he could hardly keep the bed sheets from sliding from his stomach's height completely to the floor (13).

While Antonia/Antón's transformation is not from human into an animal-like being as in the case of Gregor Samsa, there is also an important transformation that can be read as a sort of monstrosity in *Cuerpo* where the protagonist is interpreted as a "freak."⁶⁷ The change from biological woman to biological man that happens without a logical explanation in *Cuerpo* is very similar to Samsa's horrifying experience. Thus, an unexplainable physical event happens overnight in both novels and is described as follows in *Cuerpo*,

Antonia abrió los ojos y recordó a los niños. Frunció el entrecejo y murmuró: 'Qué sueño más raro.' Paseó la vista por el techo donde una lámpara traslúcida colgaba indiferente, como la cara del director de relaciones públicas cuando escuchara el reporte de la semana. Tendría que darse prisa o llegaría con retraso. Saltó de la cama y corrió en dirección del baño. Antes de salir de la habitación alcanzó a percibir una figura desconcertante en el espejo de cuerpo entero que acababa de pasar. Tuvo que volver sobre sus pasos. Frente al espejo, se frotó una

⁶⁷ For a close analysis on this topic please refer to Elizabeth Stephens's chapter "Geeks and Gaffs: The Queer Legacy of the 1950s American Freak Show" in Bauer, Heike, and Matthew Cook. *Queer 1950s: Rethinking Sexuality in the Postwar Years*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. I tend to think that the protagonist in this novel would likely be considered a freak due to their ambiguity and undefined gender and sexual identity.

y otra vez los ojos. De seguro había caminado dormida y seguía soñando. El niño que había sido en el sueño ahora era un hombre. Ella misma, pero indudablemente un hombre: ahí entre sus piernas, plantado como una señal irreductible, su nuevo sexo.

[Antonia opened her eyes and remembered the children. She frowned and murmured, “What a strange dream.” She glanced up at the ceiling where a translucent lamp hung indifferently, like the face of the public relations director when he heard the report for the week. She would have to hurry or she would be late. She jumped off the bed and ran in the direction of the bathroom. Before leaving the room she caught a glimpse of a puzzling figure in the full-length mirror that had just passed. She had to retrace her steps. In front of the mirror, she rubbed her eyes over and over again. She surely had sleepwalked and kept dreaming. The boy who had been in the dream was now a man. Herself, but undoubtedly a man: there between her legs, planted as an irreducible sign, her new sex⁶⁸](12).

Even though the protagonist does not understand how her/his body underwent the transformation that she/he suddenly noticed in the mirror, she/he quickly seems comfortable with the changes that happen and decides that the best possible way to face this new reality is to allow the changes into her/his life and to explore her/his deepest desires. As a result, this exploration and disruption of the protagonist’s desires happens in multiple spaces such as in the textual, private, and public spaces that *Cuerpo* explores both within and without the narration. Therefore, each of these

⁶⁸ This is my translation of the original in Spanish. Please note that the ambiguity in the pronouns “ella” and “él” from the original is difficult to convey in the translation. I’ve chosen to use the feminine pronouns because the Antonia is the name that appears at the beginning of the section but the rest is not as easily identifiable.

spaces will be discussed and analyzed in the following three sections starting with the textual and stylistic disruptions present in the narration, followed by an analysis of how the private and public spaces converse with each other, and finally with an examination of the spaces beyond the actual narration and text of the novel.

i. Between the Textual and the Photographic

A close analysis within and beyond the textual spaces of the novel is necessary in order to understand the stylistic and aesthetic elements that develop, sustain, and expand the narration. Moreover, the analysis also serves to understand how these spaces support the centrality of the theme of desire and the critiques of gender and sexuality proposed by the narration, as well as the artistic spaces created by Clavel beyond the narration. As such, this section analyzes the presence of the embedded photographs in the text and discusses how the work expands into the digital and the public spaces. Furthermore, it explores the role of the unreliable narrator and the use of feminine and masculine pronouns in the narration along with the inconsistent use of the names Antonia and Antón.

One of the most innovative and experimental characteristics of *Cuerpo* is the presence of embedded photographs in the text, along with the expansion of the textual narration through other artistic forms such as performance art, street installations, and digital web design.⁶⁹ It is worth noting that Jane Elizabeth Lavery has labeled Clavel a “multimedia writer,” which means that she uses different types of digital media, such as blogs, social media outlets, and the Internet to share and promote her work, and to reach a broader audience⁷⁰ (8). Because the aim of this

⁶⁹ In addition to the work of W.G. Sebald, few other literary writers work with embedded photographs and images. One of them was John Berger’s *A Fortunate Man* (1967) as well as Geoff Dyer’s *The Missing of the Somme* (1994).

⁷⁰ This is not unique to Ana Clavel, many other Latin American and Spanish writers are very active in the digital world. Carmen Boullosa, Margo Glantz, Guadalupe Loaeza, Cristina Rivera Garza, Jorge Volpi,

chapter is to explore the multimodal and multispatial aspects and the disruptions in Clavel's experimental project, the term "multimedia" does not fully encompass my research. Instead, this chapter examines the novel as a hybrid project that is part fiction and part visual narration and argues that this project, when read as a larger collection of artistic elements that includes the digital and street installations archived in the website cuerponaufrago.com achieve an expansion of Clavel's overall work. Furthermore, I contend that the different types of media analyzed in this chapter are mutually dependent on one another and are connected in such a way as to enable a reading of both the textual (diegetic) and the external (extradiegetic) spaces that the novel engages with. As such, all these elements are interconnected aesthetically, thematically, and critically.

Through the analysis of the images in the text, an understanding of the more than twenty embedded and mostly uncaptioned photographs in the narration can be developed. Because the majority of the photographs in the text depict random urinals that vary in shape, size, and color, they provide documentary "evidence" of Antonia/Antón's fetishization and obsession with urinals, while also presenting them as real places that she/he visits. In one of the first encounters with the urinals Antonia/Anton is both fascinated and perplexed by the object,

Antonia no podía enfrentarse a un mingitorio sin que el encuentro le resultara inquietante, pues su condición de objeto para uso exclusivamente masculino le recordaba ese espacio liminal, ese borde adonde sus nuevos deseos y apetitos la hacían chapotear antes de decidir precipitarse o detenerse (Clavel 35).

Angeles Mastretta, Guadalupe Nettel, Valeria Luiselli, Fernanda Melchor, Gioconda Belli, Mario Bellatin, Rosa Montero, and Arturo Perez-Reverte are some among many authors who currently maintain a presence online.

This fragment shows that in the early days of the transformation, Antonia/Antón was unsure how to process the change and how to respond to having access to the male-exclusive bathroom. However, the photographs' presence leads the reader to believe that the protagonist—and thus Clavel herself—must have visited or been in close contact with the bathrooms and urinals that are mentioned or that appear in the photographs. Nevertheless, this is debunked in the acknowledgements where Clavel credits many of her friends as the authors of the photographs that are embedded in the text. Furthermore, in her essay “Dos cuerpos del deseo” Clavel recognizes André Breton's literary influence on her work, especially in the ways in which both of them make references to works of art in the narration. In the essay, the author also discloses that the presence of embedded photographs was inspired by a 2001 novel written by German author W.G. Sebald:

Tiempo después leí la deslumbrante novela de W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, y me decidí a intercalarlas en el cuerpo del texto como un juego dialógico entre palabra e imagen. Mientras tanto el proyecto fotográfico crecía con las sugerencias de amigos que, de viaje en el extranjero, me mandaban fotos de Francia, Inglaterra, Holanda, Egipto, India, Turquía. Yo misma tuve oportunidad de viajar a Nueva York, España, Italia, Viena, Hungría y Checoslovaquia. Los especímenes fotografiados iban dando cuenta de la concepción de una virilidad occidental que se precia de orinar erecta y que para hacerlo estiliza las formas de los receptáculos convirtiéndolos, muchas veces, en lúbricas máquinas de deseo.

[Later, I read *Austerlitz*, the dazzling novel by W.G. Sebald, and I decided to insert them in the body of the text as a dialogical game between word and image. Meanwhile the photographic project grew with the suggestions of friends who,

traveling abroad, sent me photos from France, England, Holland, Egypt, India, Turkey. I myself had the opportunity to travel to New York, Spain, Italy, Vienna, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The photographed specimens were giving account of the conception of a western virility that prides itself on urinating erect and that to do so stylizes the shapes of the receptacles turning them, many times, into lubricious machines of desire] (*Género y sexualidad* 19).

Note that she calls the interaction between text and photograph a “juego dialógico [dialogic game]” that occurs between the words in the narration and the images, and also mentions how urinals are seen as “lúbricas máquinas de deseo [lewd machines of desire],” a description that simultaneously connects with the erotic as well as reinforces Western notions of masculinity given the association between power, force, machines, and the ability to urinate while standing⁷¹. Because her collection of photographs comes from all over the world, Clavel is also providing a contemporary global and feminist interpretation of the urinal and of bathroom accessibility more broadly, which has been a contentious topic among trans rights and bathroom access activists for the past several years⁷². Moreover, the photographs in this text not only serve

⁷¹ Unlike the majority of Western countries, in many parts of the world, especially in Asia and Africa it is customary for men to urinate while seating. For a discussion on the politics of disgust in bathroom practices after WWII see Susan L. Carruthers', "Latrines as the Measure of Men: American Soldiers and the Politics of Disgust in Occupied Europe and Asia." *Diplomatic History*, vol. 42, no. 1, 1 Jan. 2018, pp. 109 - 137. It is also worth noting that in 2015 the BBC reported a story about a German court that ruled that “urinating standing up is still common practice” after a landlord sued a tenant who damaged the marble floor in the bathroom. This case points to a growing debate in the matter and a possible shift in bathroom practices in the West.

⁷² See Courtenay W. Daum's *The Politics of Right Sex: Transgressive Bodies, Governmentality, and the Limits of Trans Rights*. State University of New York Press published in 2020 for a close analysis at the intersections of gender, race, class, and immigration status among trans individuals in the United States and how they are governed and disciplined. For a discussion on the difficulties that trans students face and the steps necessary to ensure equal access to bathrooms and other school facilities for trans students see Laura Wernick et al. "Gender Identity Disparities in Bathroom Safety and Wellbeing Among High School Students." *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, vol. 46, no. 5, 1 May 2017, pp. 917 - 930. Additionally, the Transgender Europe advocacy network formed in 2005 and since then has provided expertise, research,

as a constant visual reminder of the protagonist's obsession with urinals, but also provide a sense of palpability. According to Susan Sontag, palpability is the essence of the erotic as it engages other senses when it is perceived as shiny and wet (76). Although it appears as if the narration's subtext is the presence of the photographs, I argue that this is only one of the multiple innovations present in Clavel's work. It is through the visual aid of the photographs that the author exposes and critiques deeper issues related to desire, gender, and sexuality in spaces that are commonly associated with men or socially labeled as masculine in the West. This will be discussed further later in this chapter when I examine the theoretical grounds of the private and public spaces that help to expand this work beyond the fictional narration.

The presence of an unreliable narrator that the reader cannot fully trust is also noteworthy in *Cuerpo*, as it provides a complex element that makes the reader question the veracity of the whole narration. This is not an accidental feature of the novel, as it is evident in several ways in the narration, and instead seems to support notions of ambiguity and other textual disruptions that exist in the novel. A significant example of this unreliability is evident in the presence of the many footnotes included within the narration.⁷³ For instance, some of these footnotes are added to clarify a statement, others add information about the references introduced or mentioned in the main text, and at least one appears to be a footnote by the author herself, "Los personajes, autor y editores de esta historia agradeceremos cualquier información que nos permita dar el crédito correspondiente [The characters, author and editor of this story will appreciate any information

policy guidance and hard data on the human rights situation of trans and gender-diverse people all over the world. The Trans Murder Monitoring map reports that between the years 2008-2020 Mexico had an absolute number of 528 murders of trans people. This information helps us to understand how prevalent transphobia is in Latin America and in other parts of the world, and thus proves to be extremely important in order to understand the possibilities and the changes that must happen to ensure the safety and wellbeing of trans people everywhere.

⁷³ These footnotes are located in pages 18, 40, 48, 84, 103, 136, 161, and 184.

that allows us to give the corresponding credit]” (Clavel 136). However, this is quickly followed by a confusing footnote where the narrator states that Antonia (in this footnote the narrator uses the female name “Antonia”) called to let them know about a newspaper article that discussed urinals at an airport in the United States. Ultimately, it is never completely clear who the unreliable omniscient narrator is, but the reader learns that the narrator somehow has insider information unknown to the reader, and they also know or appear to know Antonia/Antón, with whom they maintain a kind of communication.

An additional source of confusion and ambiguity that is present throughout the novel is the inconsistent use of the pronouns *ella* [she] and *él* [he], as well as the proper names Antonia and Antón, all of which are used unpredictably through the narration⁷⁴. Moreover, once Antonia’s bodily transformation from female to male happens in the first few pages, the reader continues to encounter references to Antonia and Antón using the feminine and masculine pronouns. Because of the constant change and frequent misgendering of Antonia/Antón (which appears to be intentional), the reader is unable to decide what name or what pronouns to use to refer to the protagonist. For instance, this happens when Antonia/Antón goes to a sculptor’s inauguration party where she/he experiences the following after seeing an attractive young woman in the room:

Antonia sintió un cosquilleo en la entrepierna. “Al ataque...”, escuchó decir a su pene como si ahí estuviera la verdadera espada. “Pero si yo antes era una mujer”, se oyó replicar a sí misma. Su miembro siguió inflándose y, orgulloso de su poderío, ni siquiera se dignó contestarle. De todos modos, Antonia creyó que

⁷⁴ While writing this chapter I consulted a translated version in English and found instances where this ambiguity is not present, even though the original text does this frequently. Unfortunately, the translator’s decision to either completely omit the ambiguity or to opt for the feminine version may contribute to misinterpretations of the novel.

pensaba: “Sí, antes eras mujer, pero eso ¿de veras crees que importa?” Mientras Antonia dudaba, su sexo continuó abultándose hasta lastimarla con un borde del calzoncillo (Clavel 57).

[Antonia felt a tingling in her crotch. “On the attack ...”, she heard her penis say as if there was her real sword. “But I was a woman before,” she heard herself reply. Her member continued to swell and, proud of her power, he didn't even deign to answer her. Anyway, she Antonia thought she was thinking: “Yes, you were a woman before, but do you really think that matters?” While Antonia doubted her, her sex continued to bulge until it hurt her with an edge of her underpants⁷⁵] (Clavel 57).

In this fragment, the mixing of the female name along with both the female and masculine pronouns, as well as the female grammatical markers are present in a fragment of the text that describes when Antonia/Antón experiences an erection, which is commonly considered a male exclusive bodily reaction and thus may appear to be stylistically incongruent in the narration. However, I argue that this actually reinforces the idea of ambiguity and disruption that Clavel creates in order to engage with issues related to gender identity, sexual orientation, and questions of desirability. In the citation above, Antonia/Antón's internal dialogue in response to the situation, “Sí, antes eras mujer, pero eso ¿de veras crees que importa? [Yes, before you were a woman, but, do you really think that matters?]]” (Clavel 57) challenges rigid binary notions of gender while at the same time it also opens up the narration to other possibilities. Moreover, current feminist notions of gender and sexuality are compatible with this line of thought. Before completing his transition to male, the philosopher, theorist, and critic Paul B. Preciado published

⁷⁵ Unless noted, all translations of *Cuerpo* are my own.

Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic (2008) where he presents a cartography of what he calls pharmacopornographic society, and also uses his own body to experiment with this. During eight months he ingested doses of testosterone daily and observed how his body was modified by it. It is worth noting that Preciado did not have the intention of changing his sex or gender, but rather hoped to develop a micropolitics of ambiguity, a zone in which he would neither be man or woman, nor straight, gay or lesbian but an unrecognizable body in a society that bases its control on principles of recognition (*The Funabulist Magazine* np). Additionally, in his essay “Pharmaco-pornographic Politics: Towards a New Gender Ecology” Preciado exposes how twenty-first century human subjects are being controlled biologically through chemical substances and psychologically through pornographic images. Preciado’s view of gender as techno-political explores how technology, politics, love, and sexuality exist as an intricate network in which they overlap, penetrate, and affect each other. He goes on to explain that the category “gender” was introduced in the late 1940s as a bio-technological discourse and that the terms “gender,” “masculinity” and “femininity” are inventions of the Second World War and were subsequently expanded during the Cold War, along with objects such as canned food, nuclear energy, the credit card, and plastic chairs, among many others (111). In the essay, Preciado asserts that

Our contemporary societies are enormous sex-political laboratories where gender is being produced. The body, the body of each and every one of us, is the precious enclave where complex transactions of power are taking place. My body = the body of the multitude. That what we call sex, but also gender, masculinity/femininity and sexuality are *techniques of the body*, bio-technological extensions that belong to the sex- political system whose objective is production,

reproduction and colonial expansion of heterosexual human life on the planet (113).

Considering Preciado's conception of gender and sexuality as products of power structures and of biotechnology created and reproduced in order to expand heterosexual human life, I return to the previous quote where Antonia/Antón states that it does not matter whether she/he is a woman. By questioning herself/himself through the internal dialogue above, Antonia/Antón is also inviting the readers to make these considerations for themselves. As such, the textual and stylistic disruptions in this novel are so fundamental and apparent that, much like in Preciado's testosterone experiment, it is impossible to assign a sexual or gender identity to the protagonist. Because of this, the traditional binary conceptions of gender and sexuality are rendered useless in the narration.⁷⁶ Furthermore, transgender women who are born with male genitals and are assigned a male sexual identity at birth but decide against sex-reaffirming surgical procedures have male genitals and experience erections all while identifying and presenting as women. To that end, their experiences would serve as real-life examples of how this apparently confusing text represents and speaks to actual issues of contemporary life. Moreover, because this decision is made even at the risk of being interpreted as confusing, the disruptions of the traditional forms of literary style in this text allow the reader to continue moving along with the narration and to consider how the pronouns and proper names in this text shape or challenge their own belief systems.⁷⁷ Ultimately, without providing a simple solution

⁷⁶ This is the main reason why I am using Antonia/Antón and she/he throughout this chapter when referring to the protagonist.

⁷⁷ I am not suggesting to ignore transgender people's correct pronouns or deadnaming them, which is a term used when someone refers to a person who is transgender by the name they used before they transitioned. Instead, I am advocating for the use of transgender people's affirmed name and pronouns not only because it is ethical but also factually correct.

about the protagonist's biological sex assignment and sudden new identity, this novel encourages the reader to pay close attention to the narration so that they can understand Antonia/Antón at a deep and very personal level while also exploring other realities and possibilities. This is all accomplished with the presence of the embedded photographs, the role of the unreliable narrator, and the inconsistencies in pronoun usage and proper nouns outlined above.

ii. Engaging with the Private and the Public

Throughout the past several decades the idea that women have historically been associated with the private space of the home and with the domestic realm has been discussed and challenged extensively by scholars and authors alike⁷⁸. In a 2016 interview with David Edmons and Nigel Warburton, feminist geographer Doreen Massey stated that “the history of the division between private spaces and public places has been crucial in the history of gender difference between men and women, and the confinement for centuries of women to private space, while men are the public figures in the public space” (“Big Ideas” np). Although Massey is correct it is also worth noting that more recently, scholars such as Elizabeth Wilson, Lauren Elkin, Laura Gowing, Elizabeth S. Cohen, Robert C. Davis, and Danielle van de Heuvel have exposed the dynamic role that women played in the streets and in other public spaces commonly associated with men in major cities of the world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries⁷⁹. Additionally, in *Feminismo: Transmisiones y Retransmisiones*, Marta Lamas discusses the disadvantages that women who work at home and do not receive any kind of financial

⁷⁸ Audre Lorde, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Simone de Beauvoir, Doreen Massey, bell hooks, Sara Ahmed, Hannah Arendt, Rossi Braidotti, Gloria Anzaldúa, Rosario Castellanos, Elena Garro, Elena Poniatowska, Laura Esquivel, Cristina Rivera Garza, Amparo Dávila, and Guadalupe Nettel are among some of the authors and critics that write, explore, and theorize about the roles of gender in creating, maintaining, and challenging domestic and public spaces.

⁷⁹ This is also one of my arguments in my discussion of *Nadie me verá llorar* by Cristina Rivera Garza in chapter one of this dissertation.

compensation face every day. She explains that domestic work in Mexico has traditionally been construed as a woman's activity—one that is done out of love and therefore undeserving of payment—and consequently not considered a real job. Lamas also describes how these misconceptions lead to workplace discrimination and an array of other negative consequences for working women (69). Thus, these scholars challenge the idea that women were not active participants in society until the twentieth century, and demonstrate how they in fact participated in the public sphere such as in markets and in public parks, even as early as the eighteenth century. Through a framework of feminist, queer, and space theories, I challenge these notions and discuss how the disruptions of the private and public space can be understood within and beyond the novel in Mexico. As such, this section is in constant dialogue with the main themes presented in the narration, as well as with theories of gender, space, and the visual arts.

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed argues that physical space is mapped according to ideological frameworks which make it more difficult for bodies that do not ascribe to those frameworks to feel at home in that world. In *Cuerpo*, the bathrooms for men possess qualities of both private/domestic and public spaces, and at the same time they also have the potential of becoming spaces of queer and homoerotic possibilities. As Ahmed explains:

when Merleau-Ponty discusses queer effects, he is not considering “queer” as a sexual orientation—but we can. We can turn to the etymology of the word “queer,” which comes from the Indo-European word “twist.” Queer is, after all, a spatial term, which then gets translated into a sexual term, a term for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a “straight line,” a sexuality that is bent and crooked (67).

According to Ahmed, “queer” is a spatial term, and thus a connection is established between the spatiality of bodies in *Cuerpo* and their perceived or imagined masculinity, femininity, and queerness. So, when Antonia/Antón first enters the men’s bathroom and urinates while standing she/he is entering a space that is made and designed for men and inserting herself/himself into that space. Initially unfamiliar with the process and the politics of the bathroom, “Antonia tuvo que concentrarse. Orinar frente a un otro casi siempre es una tarea ardua, pero cuando se ha mudado de cuerpo no queda más que probar, seguir arriesgando los pies de plomo de la lógica” [Antonia had to concentrate. Urinating in front of another is almost always an arduous task, but when one has changed his body, there is nothing left but to try, to continue risking the leaden feet of logic] (Clavel 26). This situation is akin to Butler’s idea of gender performativism in the sense that Antonia/Antón is both communicating and reiterating through her/his actions that socially she/he is a man and is willing and able to “prove” it by going into the bathroom and micturating into the urinal. Furthermore, given the significance of gender and sexuality in very specific spaces present in the narration, it is also necessary to discuss how Antonia/Antón’s actions after the physical transformation takes place contribute to readings and interpretations of gender and queer experimentation. Besides, Ahmed also challenges the neutrality of objects and how they come to be. In order to do so she asks why and how objects are where they are and evaluates Husserl’s ability to work at a desk and what that implies. She explains,

The family home provides, as it were, the background against which an object (the writing table) appears in the present, in front of Husserl. The family home is thus only ever coperceived, and allows the philosopher to do his work. This familiar place, the family home, is also a practical world: “Things in their immediacy stand there as objects to be used, the ‘table with its books,’ the ‘glass

to drink from,' the 'vase,' the 'piano,' and so forth'' (1969:103). If Husserl is facing the writing table, then this "direction" also shows us the nature of the work that he does for a living. It is the table, with its books, which first gets his attention. As Diana Fuss reminds us, "the theatre of composition is not an empty space but a place animated by the artefacts, momentos, machines, books, and furniture that frame any intellectual labour" (Ahmed 30).

Through her analysis of Husserl's accomplishments as a professional writer and by noting the different challenges that men and women face in order to achieve similar labor and recognition, Ahmed is presenting a theory of objects and what their orientations might mean. She further explains, "The desk that is clear is one that is ready for writing. One might even consider the domestic work that must have taken place for Husserl to turn to the writing table, and to be writing on the table, and to keep that table as the object of his attention (30)." Therefore, if women enter the phenomenological space, they do not have the privilege of just forgetting about all those other things that are necessary for the writing table to be clean, for the children to be fed, or for the food to be ready. In fact, for women those realities are very present, they come to the forefront of their daily lives, and may prevent them from completing their own writing and philosophical work. Ahmed makes a distinction in regards to gender-specific spaces and the rules they encounter in *Strange Encounters*, where she explains that "women's movements are regulated by a desire to 'safe-keeping': respectability becomes measured by the visible signs of a desire to 'stay safe'. In this sense, movement becomes a form of subject constitution: *where* 'one' goes or does not go determines *what* one 'is', or where one is seen to be, determines what one is seen to be" (33). Having established the importance of spaces and objects through Ahmed's conception of queer phenomenology we can say that Antonia/Antón experiments and

challenges her/his gender expression and physical transformation throughout the novel via the spaces and objects with which she/he engages. Although Antonia/Antón's gender identity is in constant tension and never completely clear, the readers learn that she/he visits men's bathrooms in search of urinals, as well as entering other male-coded spaces such as bars and gentlemen's clubs, but she/he also sneaks into public bathrooms for women. Before Malva leaves for Europe, she takes Antonia/Antón to a public bathroom for women as a farewell "surprise,"

Ahora en cambio era introducido a escondidas en el baño de mujeres y le parecía que era doblemente tráfuga, que patinaba en el terreno incierto de los tránsitos, deslizándose en los bordes, sin un lugar definido. Eso lo atemorizaba pero también la excitaba. Miró de reojo a Malva para saber si lo había descubierto. La joven tenía la mirada brillante—vértigo y desafío—de quien se ha hecho voluntariamente cómplice de algo prohibido. Con el dedo índice señaló a Antonia un objeto peculiar, empotrado en la pared de mosaicos, cubierto con una bolsa negra para basura y sellado con cinta plástica.

[Now, on the other hand, he was being sneaked into the women's bathroom and it seemed to him that he was doubly a turncoat, skidding on the uncertain terrain of transits, sliding on the edges, without a defined place. That scared him but it also turned her on. He glanced at Malva to see if she had discovered it. The young woman she had the bright look — vertigo and defiance — of whom has voluntarily made oneself an accomplice of something forbidden. With her index finger she pointed to Antonia at a peculiar object, embedded in the mosaic wall, covered with a black garbage bag and sealed with plastic tape] (Clavel 98).

Antonia/Antón is fascinated by the urinal covered in black plastic bags and names it a “Mingitauro,” which is a clear reference to the Minotaur, the monster that is half human and half bull in Greek mythology. As such, Antonia/Antón’s constant disruptions of the traditional social norms and rules imposed in these gendered coded spaces is discussed in the following paragraphs.

The protagonist’s ambiguous identity and erotic desire are represented in the novel’s cover image entitled *La censura también es fuente* (Figure 3), which was designed collaboratively by Clavel and Paul Alarcón. The image is a creative digital intervention, a type of media art that is based on Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’s 1856 painting *La Source* (Figure 4)⁸⁰ and Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 readymade *Fontaine* (Figure 5)⁸¹. As seen in figure 3, the book cover depicts a nude woman whose breast area and genitals are delicately covered by yellow tape with the warning signs “Zona de Riesgo [Danger Zone]” and “Prohibido Pas[ar] [Do not Enter]” written across. Additionally, the water pitcher that the nude woman carries in the original painting is replaced in *La censura también es fuente* by Duchamp’s readymade, from which water pours down to the ground. With the presence of this image, Clavel establishes a connection and a dialogue with the plot of the narration and with the other disruptions that are present in the novel, such as the embedded photographs of urinals from around the world and with the website and street installations. More significantly however, the author disrupts the traditional and apparently masculine space of the bathroom as well as the literary space; that is, the space of the

⁸⁰ The pose and figure of *La Source* may be compared to Ingres’ earlier work *Venus Anadyomene* (1808). For further details please see Sidney Geist’s *Interpreting Cézanne* (1988).

⁸¹ In *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1977) Rosalind Krauss identifies an “erotic subtext” in *Fountain* but she presents it as heterosexual. While in her article, “Eros, That’s Life, Or the Baroness’ Penis” Amelia Jones introduces gendered language to describe the work and William Camfield’s monograph entitled *Fountain* maintains that *Fountain* exudes sexuality.

fictional text through the linguistic and stylistic devices discussed in the previous section. Nevertheless, more than a digital intervention, the front cover image serves as a visual representation of the codes of eroticism and censorship that simultaneously help us to understand how they contribute to discourses of femininity, masculinity, and queerness.⁸² This is supported by art historian Paul B. Franklin, who while examining Alfred Stieglitz's 1917 photograph of *Fountain* asserts that in the repositioning or reorientation of the urinal (placed upside down and shot from a lower angle as if the viewer were looking up towards it) the viewer switches positions with it and becomes a human urinal in a subservient position,

The slightly low viewpoint in the original, uncropped photograph casts me in the subservient role of a human urinal, a kind of “fetishistic/homosexual interpretive position” into which, according to Hopkins, *Fountain* faces all viewers. Erect and symmetrical, this surrogate male figure stands over me and thrusts his bare, thick, round organ (the hollow, porcelain protrusion in the exact center of the photograph into which a metal flushing valve normally would fit) in my face, as if ready to relieve himself and perhaps even soliciting me to assist him into his biological function (Franklin 33).

⁸² In his article “Object Choice: Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* and the Art of Queer Art History” Paul B. Franklin explains how *Fountain* was a result of Duchamp's familiarity with linguistic queer codes of his time. He explains, “Before gay liberation gay men relied on intricately coded systems of communication in order to navigate the homophobic terrain of their cultures, locate one another and communicate in mixed company. Such systems still serve as important function within certain sectors of gay culture, including the sexual arena. In the modern American queer lexicon, for example, the act of urinating during gay sex is referred to as the ‘golden shower’, ‘golden champagne’ or a ‘champagne fountain’, while the general use of urine during gay sex is termed ‘water sports’” (40).

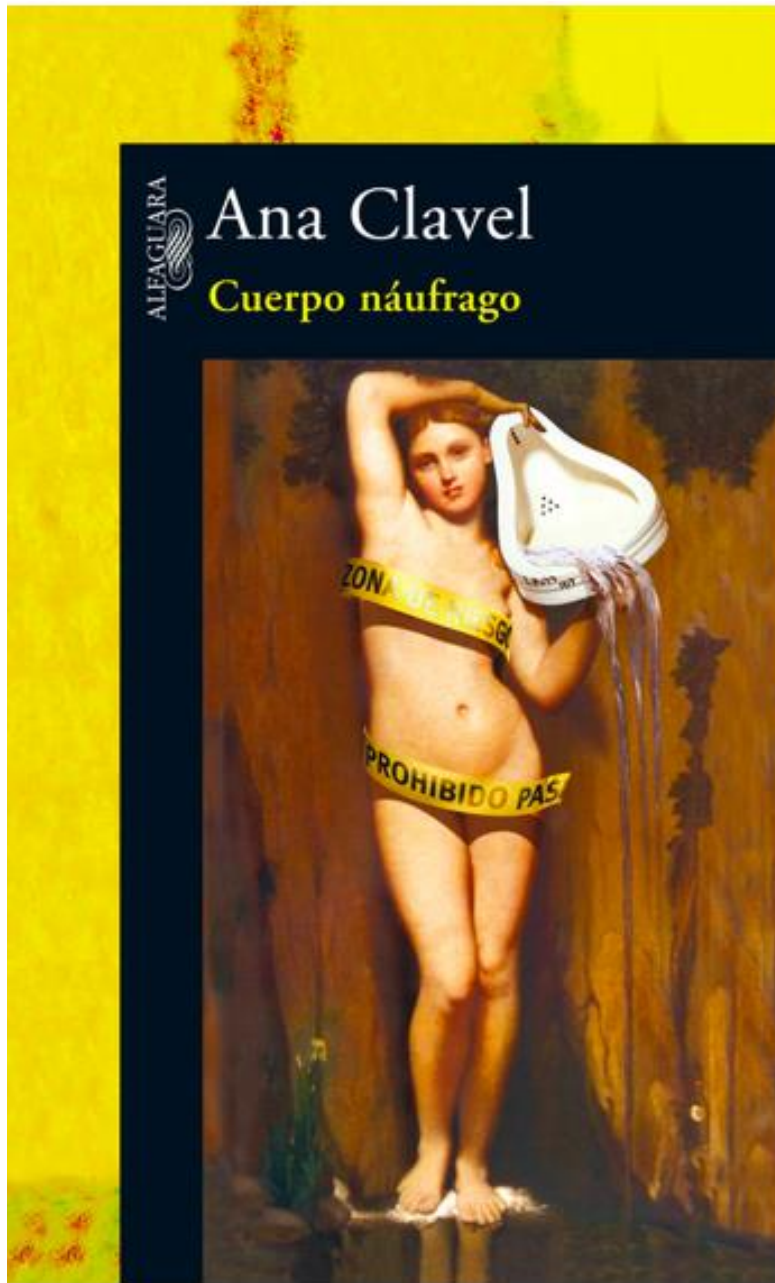


Figure 3. *La censura también es fuente*, Ana Clavel and Paul Alarcón, 2005.



Figure 4. *La Source*, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, 1856. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.



Figure 5. *Fountain*, Marcel Duchamp, 1917. 1964 replica, porcelain urinal on plinth, Tate Museum.

In a manner similar to Ahmed's notion of the orientation⁸³ of objects, Franklin's analysis establishes a connection with the homoerotic and the queer through the repositioning of the urinal in the photograph. In addition, Duchamp confessed in a letter that *Fountain* was submitted to the Society of Independent Artists in New York City by a female friend under the pseudonym

⁸³ Ahmed emphasizes,

Objects, as well as spaces, are made for some kinds of bodies more than others. Objects are made to size as well as made to order: while they come in a range of sizes, the sizes also presume certain kinds of bodies as having "sizes" that will "match." In this way, bodies and their objects tend toward each other; they are orientated toward each other, and are shaped by this orientation. When orientation "works," we are occupied (QP Ahmed 51).

Richard Mutt,⁸⁴ but Franklin contends that Duchamp may be referring to an early conception of the artist's own drag persona named Rose Sélavy, of whom there is a photograph at the Philadelphia Museum of Art⁸⁵(43). In "Sites of Public (Homo) Sex and the Carnavalesque Spaces of Reclaim the Streets", Gavin Brown discusses the importance of public spaces in sexual encounters by commenting that "outdoor cruising areas in parks, woodland, and beaches allow men to indulge in and explore a broader range of roles than they might in a small toilet that can only accommodate a handful of men at any one time" (100). The author explains that although bathrooms are spaces of sexual encounter, there are other public spaces such as parks, woodlands, and beaches that allow men to experiment sexually. In *Cuerpo*, bathrooms for men become the spaces where Antonia/Antón first encounters the urinal, while at the same time the connection with this object and with the seemingly masculine traits it represents enables the exploration of her/his own sexuality. The first such experience occurs while she/he visits the Palacio de Bellas Artes with Malva to take photographs of the elegant urinals, but instead end up having sex on the floor of the men's bathroom. The second sexual encounter happens after Raimundo gifts Antonia/Antón a urinal, and the situation is quickly surrounded by homoerotic tension that finally leads to sex. In his essay "Basura y género," Preciado proposes that we read urinals and toilets as prosthesis of gender. He explains that restrooms are nothing but places

⁸⁴Interestingly, in a different letter dated May 1917 and accompanied by Alfred Stieglitz's photograph Duchamp expresses frustration with the Society of Independent Artists' rejection of his submission. He writes, "1-Some contended it was immoral, vulgar. 2- Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing. Now if Mr. Mutt's fountain is not immoral. That is absurd, no more than a bathtub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumber's show windows. Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object" (Harrison 252).

⁸⁵ To see the photograph, "Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy" visit the Philadelphia Museum of Art's digital catalogue at www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/56973.html.

where only gender matters (in opposition to the actual purpose of why we visit them). He asserts that restrooms are clearly marked as either feminine or masculine and that in both spaces women and men reproduce ideas of femininity and masculinity, as well as discipline or are disciplined by others.

Moreover, Preciado explains that while for women, the public restrooms become an extension of domesticity, for men, public restrooms are both a performance of heterosexual masculinity and an ideal place for sexual experimentation and heterosexual anxieties (36-37). Preciado clarifies, “Por ello, los urinarios no están enclaustrados en cabinas opacas, sino en espacios abiertos a la mirada colectiva, puesto que mear-de-pie-entre-tíos es una actividad cultural que genera vínculos de sociabilidad compartidos por todos aquellos, que al hacerlo públicamente, son reconocidos como hombres” (36). This assertion of the role of male sociability in public restrooms is relevant to the ways in which masculinization happens and is later practiced by Antonia/Antón and is also present in the early days of her/his transformation when we learn that, “Antonia no podía enfrentarse a un mingitorio sin que el encuentro le resultara inquietante, pues su condición de objeto para uso exclusivamente masculino le recordaba ese espacio liminal, ese borde adonde sus nuevos deseos y apetitos la hacían chapotear antes de decidir precipitarse o detenerse” (Clavel 35). Taking Preciado’s critique into consideration, the distress and anxiety that the urinal generates in Antonia/Antón is representative of the queer anxieties surrounding public recognition of sexual and gender difference because she/he understands that she/he is occupying uncharted territory and navigating unfamiliar spaces in a new body, much like the tensions and anxieties that transgender people currently experience in public bathrooms. Antonia/Antón is able to reflect on this when Carlos invites her/him to visit a sauna. While there she/he notices how being naked in

front of other men in that very specific space of the sauna provides some relief from everyday stresses and creates a sense of camaraderie, however, at the same time she/he also experiences discomfort and fear there,

Estar solo entre hombres también resultaba amenazante. Desnudos los cuerpos en el área de regaderas, unos y otros fingían una indiferencia que nada tenía que ver con sus impulsos. Antonia observó que inclusive Carlos deslizaba miradas oblicuas al sexo de otros hombres [...] Solo cuando el deseo se abre paso— Antonia miró con deleite la espalda y las nalgas de Carlos cubiertas por una capa de espuma—, florecemos. Estuvo a punto de acercarse pero entonces lo asaltó el miedo.

[Being alone among men was also threatening. Their bodies naked in the shower area, one and the other feigned an indifference that had nothing to do with their impulses. Antonia observed that even Carlos slid oblique glances to the genitals of other men [...] Only when desire breaks through — Antonia looked with delight at Carlos's back and buttocks covered by a layer of foam— do we blossom. She was about to get closer but then fear seized him] (Clavel 65-66).

This is another instance of the narration in which homoerotic desire is present, but because Carlos—the most stereotypical *macho* character of the narration—is the one involved in this situation, it is much more unanticipated. In his article focused on Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, Franklin analyzes the long history and importance of public bathrooms for men, which were also known as “public comfort stations,” “washrooms,” “lavatories,” and “tearooms” in the early decades of the twentieth-century. Through a social and historical study of public toilets for men and male-male public sex in Paris and New York in the 1910s and 1920s, Franklin argues

that Duchamp's object of choice was revolutionary because it [the urinal] questioned art history's canon and the art object "by making visible the intimate alliance between certain modes of avant-garde artistic production and queer sexualities" (26). Furthermore, in her examination of the erotic and the characteristics of the erotic in photography, Susan Sontag states:

Thus, one of the perennial successes of photography has been its strategy of turning living beings into things, things into living beings. The peppers [Edward] Weston photographed in 1929 and 1930 are voluptuous in a way that his female nudes rarely are. Both the nudes and the pepper are photographed for the play of forms—but the body is characteristically shown bent over upon itself, all the extremities cropped, with the flesh rendered as opaque as normal lighting and focus allow, thus decreasing its sensuality and heightening the abstractness of the body's form; the pepper is viewed close-up but in its entirety, the skin polished or oiled, and the result is a discovery of the erotic suggestiveness of an ostensibly neutral form, a heightening of its seeming palpability (75-76).

According to Sontag, the essence of the erotic is palpability, which refers to the way somethings are not just visually explicit, but also feel-able or touchable. She analyzes the work of Weston and comments that the photos of the peppers are actually more erotic than the photos of the nude people. Likewise, Weston's 1925 black and white photographs of his toilet in Mexico entitled *Excusado* depict the shiny curves of a toilet and therefore its palpability and eroticism are also more erotic than those of the human bodies. However, toilets and urinals have very different functions and histories, and should not be conflated⁸⁶. Furthermore, another spatial transgression

⁸⁶ In 1925, Weston wrote: "For long I have considered photographing this useful and elegant accessory to modern hygienic life, but not until I actually contemplated its image on my ground glass did I realize the possibilities before me. . . Here was every sensuous curve of the "human form divine" but minus

occurs in *Cuerpo* when Malva takes Antonia/Antón into the women's bathroom to show her the urinal covered in plastic. This demonstrates that the borders of two apparently well-demarcated and gendered spaces are in fact not clearly defined, and that their definitions and usage are likely ever-changing. Therefore, when there is a fracture or an overlapping of these spaces, it can be interpreted as a transgression. In this case the Mingitauro—the urinal in the women's bathroom—transgresses the female space by standing out as a large object on the wall wrapped in plastic. It is a prohibited object located in the “wrong” place that actually stands out in its very attempt at being disguised.

Lastly, *Cuerpo* disrupts the norms of cartography and viewing in Antonia/Antón's simultaneous occupying of both the conventional and of the male-coded spaces that she/he inhabits and frequently explores, such as men's bathrooms, bars, and clubs. For Antonia/Antón and her/his friends, bars become a socialization tool of masculinity that also serve as educational places where friendships are forged and where “men” and masculine habitus are “made” or polished. These roles are mainly performed in the narration by Francisco and Carlos, whose prompt interventions in the perceived lack of seduction abilities of Antonia/Antón serve as parodies of the uncritical, often homophobic, male acquaintance or older friend who believes he has the necessary sexual wisdom to pass on to the younger, more inexperienced men they know in order to preserve phallocentric and at times, misogynistic behavior. I call their behavior a discourse of the phallus due to its roots in sexist and rigid views of gender and sexuality, and due to their misogynistic views of women. For example, Francisco is the first person to encourage Antonia/Antón to use the urinal for the first time and later, when Antonia/Antón wonders what

imperfections.” Cited in the Met Museum's website:
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/283282>.

male desire might possibly look like, Francisco admonishes her/him by saying, “—Y perdóname lo que voy a decirte, pero lo he pensado desde que te he visto con esa locura extrema por los mingitorios... Todo eso, Antón, esa historia sobre el deseo en los hombres, ese asunto de los mingitorios como otra cosa que mingitorios, todo no son más que fantasías de las mujeres. Los hombres somos mucho más simples... Yo diría que hasta rudimentarios...” (Clavel 157). By telling Antonia/Antón what is acceptable for a man to do and what is not, Francisco is reproducing the false notion that men are not as “emotional” or introspective about life’s issues as women are. Similarly, earlier in the narration, after Antonia/Antón and Raimundo show interest in finding urinals to photograph, Carlos responds “¿Ir a fotografiar mingitorios? ¿Están locos, son maricas o están pervertidos?” (Clavel 40). Carlos obviously disapproves of their interest in urinals and indicates that only mad people, gay men, or “freaks” would be interested in taking part in such a form of entertainment. For Carlos, masculinity and phallocentrism are at the axis of men’s experience, thus Casanova, don Juan, and Ovidio are the ideal male archetypes that Antonia/Antón should be modeling and reproducing. Nonetheless, the adult or gentlemen’s clubs that they visit are the spaces where encounters with the erotic and with queerness happen. These clubs are places of socialization for them, but just like the men’s bathrooms, gentlemen’s clubs are also exposed to homoerotic desire and sexual experimentation. For instance, when they pay to have an exotic dancer in a private room with them, Francisco, Carlos, Raimundo and Antonia/Antón enter and create a space that is highly homoerotic. Antonia/Antón realizes this,

Afiebrada, llevada por el vértigo de una fuerza que la impelía a continuar, tocaba a la mujer aquella y sus manoseos se encontraban con los de Carlos y Francisco y entonces también los encontraba cuerpo a cuerpo, aunque el objetivo fuera otro:

esa otra mujer que sin ser Tamara se prodigaba en una entrega que, a todas luces, disfrutaba (Clavel 110).

A few paragraphs later, while Carlos and Francisco are absorbed with the dancer, we also learn that Antonia/Antón and Raimundo kiss on the lips, which foreshadows the sexual encounter that happens between them later in the narration. Through an analysis of the physical spaces where the urinals are found, a discussion of the photographic images that engage with the text, and an exploration of how they function to maintain a relationship with the important themes of the narration, the overall textual and spatial disruptions in the novel become more easily identifiable.

iii. Installations, Performance, and Virtual Spaces

In *Architecture from the Outside*, Elizabeth Grosz has commented that “any understanding of bodies requires a spatial and temporal framework” since “spatiality, the space surrounding and within the subject’s body, is [...] crucial for defining the limits and shape of the body image” (31). Thus, an examination of the public and virtual spaces with which *Cuerpo* engages contributes to the understanding of the intersections that exist between space, gendered bodies, and sexuality in contemporary Mexican literature and culture. Furthermore, the analysis of the projects beyond the novel also serve as snapshots of the social and cultural changes that Mexico was undergoing the first few years of the new millennium, and might help us to understand how the censorship experienced by artist Fabián Cháirez in 2019 was an expression of the social tensions that have been present in the country for many decades and become more evident in the urban space of Mexico City. As discussed above, the protagonist’s obsession with urinals leads to important explorations of gender identities, queer theories and queer spaces. Because this novel is part of a larger project that incorporates multiple spaces and artistic media, the final section of this chapter explores the additional artistic elements created by Clavel and her

collaborator Paul Alarcón that help us to understand and read the text beyond the narration of the novel. As such, by moving away from the narration, I will reveal how street installations such as banners and performance art archived on the website cuerponaufrago.com are some of the most innovative and experimental elements from the time. In the very last page of the novel, the reader is invited to visit the website cuerponaufrago.com in order to see how the novel materialized and to access other artistic projects completed by Clavel shortly after the novel's release in Mexico. Though the website now looks outdated due to computer software changes, it is still live and contains various hyperlinks that take visitors to view a digital archive of a photography exhibition that depicts the urinals that also appear in the novel; a video of a live performance art piece entitled "Somos cuerpos encarcelados por nuestras mentes"; photographs of the street installation "UrbEspectaculArt: La censura también es fuente" as seen in figure 6; along with non-fiction entries written by Clavel to accompany the projects. Due to its unusualness, the photographs of the street installations are some of the most experimental ones. One of the installations was a large banner that was hung and covered the façade of a building in Zona Rosa [Pink Zone], a well-liked neighborhood in Mexico City known for its counterculture, its sophisticated avant-garde aesthetic that is appealing to tourists, locals, and entrepreneurs, and also for being (although not explicitly accepted) a hub for the gay and lesbian communities of the city⁸⁷. Zona Rosa has historically, at least since the 1960s, been perceived as progressive and cosmopolitan, and was a frequent reference in Carlos Monsiváis's work, who recalls its fascinating past in the following passage:

⁸⁷ For a closer analysis, see *Refried Elvis: The Rise of Mexican Counterculture* by Eric Zolov, who explains the complicated dynamics that unfolded in the city beginning in the 60's with the presence of North American youth visiting Mexico and the consequences of absorbing and reinterpreting the avant-garde for Mexican youth and culture in subsequent decades.

La Zona Rosa florecía cosmopolita: los murales efímeros de Cuevas, los *happenings* contraculturales de Gurrola y Jodorowsky, el Kineret lleno de escritores melencólicos el cielo surcado por el helicóptero donde Vicente Leñero recopilaba información para escribir una serie sobre las ciudades de México (*A ustedes* 463).

Though Monsiváis acknowledged and was fascinated with the neighborhood himself, he also critiqued the artifice surrounding it and recognized how the neighborhood symbolized the urge to belong to something he called non-Mexico (Zolov 136). However, it is worth considering Coco Fusco's ideas of the public sphere as a fragmented and heterogeneous terrain that is open to oppositional activity (*Corpus Delecti* 13). Therefore, choosing to hang the banners in Zona Rosa allows *Cuerpo* to create disruptions beyond the original text because of the existing connections to queer and gendered spaces and symbolism in the geographical and commercial area that the banner engages with. Additionally, Clavel stresses that,

En una ciudad como la nuestra asolada por la prosa de la violencia visual cotidiana—amén de otras violencias—, *La censura también es fuente* intenta convertirse en un manantial de instantes de arte y perplejidad reflexiva en torno a las interrogantes: ¿Quién decreta la prohibición y el comportamiento de los cuerpos? ¿La identidad empieza por lo que vemos? O más bien habría que considerar la posibilidad de que la identidad comienza por lo que deseamos, de que tal vez somos cuerpos encarcelados por nuestras mentes, y sólo cuando el deseo se abre paso, florecemos (np).



Figure 6. Banner and bus stop installations based on the intervention “UrbEspectaculArt: La censura también es Fuente.” Screen capture taken from cuerponaufrago.com.

Clavel’s meditation above also refers to the politics of creating art that has a social purpose or a social responsibility, and while authors are never expected to interpret their work for the readers, Clavel has made the choice to uncover some of the questions that motivated her novel, and thus is effectively practicing a progressive feminist attitude. Additionally, both the banner and the bus stop posters shown in figure 6 comprise the street installations and demonstrate how authors and artists such as Clavel can expand their work and make it more accessible in order to engage with the public in the twenty-first century, both physically in the public sphere and virtually. Furthermore, although Clavel is not the first author to interweave

performance art with her literary work, she is one of only a few.⁸⁸ The performance “Somos cuerpos encarcelados por nuestras mentes” expands the narration in *Cuerpo* as it presents a visual interpretation of gender roles and eroticism through video, projected images, sound, and movement. As seen in figures 7-9 the ten-minute video depicts a woman dressed in a white mini-dress and a man painted in white and characterized as a urinal. While the melodies of PJ Harvey’s songs, “Angelene”, “The Wind”, and “A Perfect Day Elise” play in the background the performers alternate between sitting and embracing each other in a sensual and at times aggressive or tense dance while the viewers see words and images projected on a screen behind the stage. The performance gets progressively sensual and at one point the woman takes the place of the man-urinal on the floor but quickly stands to recover her position of power in front of the man-urinal. Immediately after, while standing in front of the man-urinal, the woman moves her pelvic area back and forth in a manner that resembles oral sex. As such, the performance adapts some of the elemental ideas in *Cuerpo* that are related to gender and sexuality and that were discussed in previous sections, while at the same time presenting a cohesive visual story where physical tensions arise and where the human-urinal is personified in the body of a man. More recently, artists such as La Bruja de Texcoco and Lukas Avendaño⁸⁹ have interrogated gender norms and proposed new artistic forms of non-binarism and gender fluidity in contemporary Mexican art and music.

⁸⁸ In 1980, Diamela Eltit’s performance “Zona de Dolor” incorporated reading parts of her novel *Lumpérica*. The performance can be accessed through New York University’s Hemispheric Institute archive here: <https://sites.dlib.nyu.edu/hidvl/xsj3tz1r>.

⁸⁹ La Bruja de Texcoco is a non-binary queer artist from Mexico who experiments with femininity and makes music as a form of activism. Lukas Avendaño is a *muxe* artist and anthropologist from Oaxaca, Mexico.



Figure 7. Still from performance “Somos cuerpos encarcelados por nuestras Mentes,” Ana Clavel.



Figure 8. Still from performance “Somos cuerpos encarcelados por nuestras mentes”.



Figure 9. Still from performance “Somos cuerpos encarcelados por nuestras mentes”.

Through a comparative and multidisciplinary analysis of the distinctive ways in which Clavel's work continues to challenge and disrupt gender essentialism, the traditional forms of literary style, and questions of spatiality, I have established how Clavel's multimodal and multispatial work questions who and how certain behaviors are either acceptable or unacceptable in different spaces and how certain objects are coded according to their gender, even when these boundaries are not clearly defined. As a result, *Cuerpo*, the embedded photographs, the street installations, the performance art piece, as well as the other content on the website cuerponaufrago.com generated a multitude of spaces where ideas of gender essentialism can be questioned, problematized, and dismantled. When Fabián Cháirez faced the scrutiny of Mexican conservatism in 2019, he disrupted similar notions of gender and masculinity but quickly responded with a photograph of himself in drag in front of the controversial painting at Palacio de Bellas Artes. In this chapter, I have traced how Clavel's novel and work beyond the narration disrupted notions of gender in the textual, private, and public spaces with which it engages.

Chapter 3

Mexico City: the Metro, the Body, and Abjection in Guadalupe Nettel's *El huésped*

There lies a den,
Beyond the seeming confines of the space
Made for the soul to wander in and trace
Its own existence, of remotest glooms.
John Keats, *Endymion* (Book 4, lines 513-516)

To investigate the city is therefore a way of examining the
enigmas of the world and our existence.
Lea Virgine, in Mazzoleni, *La città e l'immaginario*, (qtd.
in Soja 3)

The city is made and made over into the simulacrum of the
body, and the body, in its turn, is transformed, 'citified,'
urbanized as a distinctively metropolitan body.
Elizabeth Grosz, "Bodies-Cities" (31)

Recent studies focusing on the ways in which human experience is shaped, represented, and mediated in the urban spaces of Mexico City reference the chronicles written by Salvador Novo (1904-1974)⁹⁰ and Carlos Monsiváis (1938-2010), and novels by authors such as Luis Zapata (1951)⁹¹ and Carlos Fuentes (1928-2012).⁹² In *The Mexico City Reader* (2004), Rubén Gallo takes the innovative editorial approach of commissioning *crónicas* in order to write about life in Mexico City over the last three decades. The anthology is comprised of *crónicas* by many authors who live in Mexico City and are "avid *flâneurs*, persistent explorers of the most recondite corners of the capital" (Gallo 3). The anthology contributors illustrate the complexity and the contradictions of living in a modern megalopolis of more than twenty million people that is conceived as a place that is simultaneously alluring, repulsive, and violent. It is through these

⁹⁰ See *Nueva grandeza mexicana*. Colección Austral, 1947.

⁹¹ See *El vampiro de la colonia Roma: las aventuras, desventuras y sueños de Adonis García*. 5. ed. Editorial Grijalbo, 1987.

⁹² See *La región más transparente*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1968.

lenses that I examine the 2006 novel *El huésped*, by Guadalupe Nettel (b. 1973),⁹³ a contemporary writer whose literary production frequently deals with representations of corporeal marginality and vulnerability.⁹⁴ In this reading I propose that Nettel and the characters in the novel are modern *flâneurs*, or explorers, of Mexico City. Moreover, I discuss how Nettel challenges traditional conceptions of space in Mexico City and the ways in which the spaces within the city are understood and socially constructed. Through a comparative reading that incorporates theories of space and abjection in conjunction with other cultural artifacts and textual evidence, I argue that Nettel's work provides new approaches to understanding the city, its irrepresentability, and the artistic and literary responses to the growing urbanization of the country. Lastly, this chapter explores the ways in which the fictional characters find meaning in the friendships, the connections, and the communities that they form and concludes that these communities lead to a certain type of individual freedom and political contestation. In this way the spatial representations in much of the chronicles of the mid-twentieth century by male authors are reconfigured by Nettel and other women artists.

To understand the importance of *El huésped* and the representation and role of the city in Mexican literary tradition, I first provide some background about texts that portray the city. Because chronicles provide insightful depictions of the spaces that they describe I establish a dialogue between traditional chronicles known in the literary canon and *El huésped* as both deal with the urban spaces in Mexico City as well as document life in the city. A chronicle is a hybrid

⁹³ Her work has been recognized by critics and has been the recipient of internationally recognized awards such as the Premio Herralde de Novela (2014) and the Premio de Narrativa Breve Ribera del Duero (2013).

⁹⁴ Other works by Nettel include, *El cuerpo en que nací*, 2011, Editorial Anagrama; *Después del invierno*, 2014, Editorial Anagrama; *Pétalos y otras historias incómodas*, 2008, Editorial Anagrama; *El matrimonio de los peces rojos*, 2013, Páginas de Espuma.

text that is part literary, part a documentary genre which is well established throughout Latin America and particularly in Mexico.⁹⁵ Although it is not considered a chronicle, the 1604 poem *Grandeza mexicana* by Bernardo de Balbuena (1568-1627) is perhaps one of the most widely known texts from the colonial period that attempts to represent the New World and the supposed grandiosity of what is now Mexico City. Salvador Novo's *Nueva grandeza mexicana* [New Mexican Grandeur] (1947), which won an award from the Mexican government in 1946 for best essay about Mexico City, pays tribute to Balbuena's work. In *Nueva grandeza mexicana*, Novo makes a similar journey around the city, writing instead about Mexico City in the 20th century; in particular, its apparent and inevitable modernization during the postwar nation-building years of the 1920s. Stylistically, Monika Kaup describes Novo's work as neo-baroque, which turns the attention to colonial Mexican baroque writers like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Singüenza y Gongóra (255-256). Novo, along with other authors such as, José Gorostiza (1901-1973); Jorge Cuesta (1903-1942); Xavier Villaurrutia (1903-1950); and Gilberto Owen (1905-1952), belonged to a group known as the *Contemporáneos*.⁹⁶ The group positioned their works and style at the vanguard of Mexican Letters, which was in direct opposition to the nationalistic and more traditional stance held by the Mexican government, and artists and intellectuals such as José Vasconcelos and Diego Rivera.

⁹⁵ *Antología de crónica latinoamericana actual* (Alfaguara, 2012) is a recent anthology on contemporary chronicles edited by Darío Jaramillo Agudelo. For a now defunct journal that contributed to the scholarship about chronicles in the 21st century see *Textos Híbridos: Revista De Estudios Sobre La Crónica Latinoamericana*. E-Scholarship, 2011.

⁹⁶ The role of this group of intellectuals was discussed in chapter one of this dissertation.

In 1965 Novo was named official Chronicler of the City of Mexico, and is now highly regarded as an influential chronicler⁹⁷ by Latin American scholars for his critical, insightful, cynical, and ironic style. His appreciation for the modern and for the transformation of the city can be read in the following quote, where he describes how the city must continually transform in order to survive.

Las ciudades, como los hombres que las forman y habitan, se enfrentan por escapable determinismo a un incómodo dilema: o la cripta honorable o la vida imprevisible: o la momia o el hombre: o el museo o la urbe: razones que van ejerciendo en el curso del tiempo y del espacio para alejar al hombre y a las ciudades de la muerte, a costa de irles despojando de cuanto pueda congelarlas con su hálito y al precio de irles imprimiendo los moldes de una adaptación imprescindible a su supervivencia, y por ella condicionada. Desde Tenochtitlán...y a diferencia de Teotihuacán...ha sido el destino de México sobrevivir a costa de transformarse. El empeño, por lo visto, vale la pena. (Novo 131-32)

[Cities and their inhabitants are faced with an uncomfortable dilemma: either honorable tomb or unpredictable life; either mummies or people; either museums or metropolis. Throughout history and around the world, these reasons have saved men and their cities from death by freeing them from whatever might congeal them in time, at the price of stamping them with the traces of the adaptations necessary for their survival. Since Tenochtitlan—and unlike Teotihuacan—this

⁹⁷ Novo is also highly regarded as a writer, poet, playwright, translator, expert in gastronomy, and member of Los Contemporáneos. Additionally, it is recognized that the group advocated for the construction of the Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional, and created a new style of Mexican drama located at Teatro Ulises.

has been the destiny of Mexico City: to survive by transforming itself. The effort, it seems, is worth while (trans. by Rubén Gallo)].

Here, Novo addresses the changes happening in the city in the first few decades after the revolutionary war, and later describes how different sectors of Mexican society responded to them. Novo's assertion that the city must transform in order to survive was later echoed by Carlos Monsiváis, who became a significant voice for the production of chronicles in Mexico City throughout the twentieth and early twentieth-first centuries. For instance, in *Los rituales del caos* (1995) and *Cultura urbana y creación intelectual: el caso de México* (1981) Monsiváis explores the irrepresentability of Mexico City and the emergence of popular and mass culture respectively. Nonetheless, in a 1987 article entitled "De la santa doctrina al espíritu público," published in the *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica*, Monsiváis also questions why the chronicle as a genre has not been given the attention and criticism it deserves,

¿Por qué el sitio tan marginal de la crónica en nuestra historia literaria? Ni el enorme prestigio de la poesía, ni la seducción omnipresente de la novela, son explicaciones suficientes del desdén casi absoluto por un género tan importante en las relaciones entre literatura y sociedad, entre historia y vida cotidiana, entre lector y formación del gusto literario, entre información y amenidad, entre testimonio y materia prima de la ficción, entre periodismo y proyecto de nación. Muchos de los grandes escritores mexicanos han intentado la crónica que, por ejemplo, ocupa un espacio fundamental en la obra de Guillermo Prieto, Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, Francisco Zarco, Manuel Payno, José Tomás de Cuéllar, Ángel de Campo (Micros), Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, Amado Nervo, Artemio de Valle-Arizpe, Alfonso Reyes, Martín Luis Guzmán, Salvador Novo. Y sin

embargo, el género aún no recibe la atención que sus logros merecen. Así, pues, en estas notas, centradas en cinco autores, intento aproximarme a las causas de la consideración del público y la desconsideración de los historiadores literarios (753)

[Why does the chronicle occupy such a marginal place in our literary history? Neither the enormous prestige of poetry, nor the omnipresent seduction of the novel, are sufficient explanations for the almost complete disdain for such an important genre in the relationship between literature and society, between history and everyday life, between the reader and the development of literary taste, between information and entertainment, between testimony and raw material of fiction, between journalism and the nation-building project. Many of the great Mexican writers have experimented with the chronicle, which for example, occupies a fundamental place in the work of Guillermo Prieto, Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, Francisco Zarco, Manuel Payno, José Tomás de Cuéllar, Ángel de Campo (Micros), Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, Amado Nervo, Artemio de Valle-Arizpe, Alfonso Reyes, Martín Luis Guzmán, Salvador Novo. Nonetheless, the genre has yet to receive the attention its achievements deserve. So, in these notes, centered around five authors, I approach the reasons for the public's consideration and the disregard of literary historians.⁹⁸]

In this article Monsiváis encourages the readers to learn about the tradition of chronicles in the country, especially in Mexico City, and discusses the work of five authors, including Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera and Elena Poniatowska. Similarly, Jorge Ibargüengoitia's humor and

⁹⁸ This is my translation from the original in Spanish.

witty writing via his articles for the newspaper *Excélsior* provided great insights on the ongoing modernization of the city, until his death in 1983. His social commentary included issues of class disparities, the absurdities of Mexican society, and the ongoing struggles of living in the urban spaces of Mexico City. For example, in his famous *Instrucciones para vivir en México* (1990)⁹⁹ he writes,

Todos los mexicanos somos iguales y tenemos los mismos derechos, pero, al mismo tiempo, vivimos en una sociedad de castas. La adaptación al medio consiste en dejar que se nos sequen derechos, como ramas en un árbol viejo, de acuerdo con la casta a que pertenecemos. El último derecho que se nos seca es el de quedarnos dormidos en la vía pública (63)

[All [us] Mexicans are equal and have the same rights, but, at the same time, we live in a society of castes. The adaptation to the environment consists in letting our rights dry up, like branches in an old tree, according to the caste to which we belong. The last right that dries up is the right to fall asleep on public spaces (63).¹⁰⁰]

In this quote from 1969, Ibarguengoitia brings to the fore a social and political critique of the rights of citizens to inhabit and occupy public space. This is significant, as only one year prior to the publication of this text President Díaz Ordaz had ordered the repression of student protesters in a very large public space known as La Plaza de las Tres Culturas¹⁰¹. Evidently, tensions

⁹⁹ This 1990 edition by Editorial Joaquín Mortiz was compiled by Guillermo Sheridan and published as *Instrucciones para vivir en México*. The book contains a selection of Ibarguengoitia's articles that were originally published in the national newspaper *Excélsior* between 1969-1976.

¹⁰⁰ This is my translation from the original in Spanish.

¹⁰¹ Elena Poniatowska published *La noche de Tlatelolco* [*Massacre in Mexico*] in 1971 in response to the massacre that took place at La Plaza de las Tres Culturas on October 2, 1968.

between the government and some sectors of the population were related to issues of spatiality and the rights of citizens to inhabit and travel through the spaces of a rapidly growing city. An additional consideration that is necessary to highlight the events that happened in Mexico City in 1968, is the idea of the “right to the city” that was first used the same year by philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre. Both the concept and the phrase have been taken up by social movements and academics as a way to articulate and resist spatial inequalities in the capitalist city. However, these issues had been present for years in Mexico but were exacerbated during this time by the overwhelming number of attempts on the part of the government to make the country, and especially Mexico City, attractive to tourism, foreign companies, and to the participants and fans of the Olympics which to big fanfare, were held in the country in 1968¹⁰². During this time, Mexico saw itself at a disadvantage in comparison to other cosmopolitan metropolises in the rest of the developed world. For this reason, the government encouraged the construction of the subway system before the Olympics started. Peter Blake explains why it was important for Mexico to build the subway,

No city really dares to call itself a metropolis unless it can boast a subway.

Montreal had to get itself a metro before it qualified for Expo '67, and Munich had to get itself a U-Bahn before it qualified for the 1972 Olympics. A metropolis without a subway, nowadays, is like a church without a steeple: i.e., not entirely convincing (qtd. in Castañeda 207).

¹⁰² As the host of the 1968 Olympics the Mexican government wanted the country to appear modern and sophisticated, as was expected of any other urban center in the world. For a further discussion dealing with the projects that were funded by the Mexican government in preparation to host the Olympics see, Luis M. Castañeda's *Spectacular Mexico: Design, Propaganda, and the 1968 Olympics*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

It is also likely that Mexico was attempting to appear more cosmopolitan than it really was by building a subway system in the city. However, the government's rush to crush and control the student demonstrations escalated the tensions that ultimately lead to the massacre in October of 1968. It was not until the following year, in September of 1969, that the first line of the metro was inaugurated¹⁰³.

Similar questions of public space and urban life in Mexico City can also be found in music. Of particular relevance is the prolific work of Chava Flores, who used both comedy and nostalgia to describe life in the city, beginning with his first songs in the 1950s. Chava Flores wrote songs with titles such as, "Sábado, Distrito Federal" and "Voy en el metro." Consequently, his work can be considered a sociological exploration of the city and its *barrios populares* [working-class districts] through music. For instance, in "Sábado Distrito Federal," Chava Flores narrates life in the urban spaces of the city and describes the harsh realities of living in Mexico City:

Desde las diez ya no hay donde parar el coche,
ni un ruletero que lo quiera a uno llevar,
llegar al centro, atravesarlo es un desmoche,
un hormiguero no tiene tanto animal.

Los almacenes y las tiendas son alarde
de multitudes que así llegan a comprar,

¹⁰³ Castañeda explains that before the end of his presidency, Díaz Ordaz inaugurated the third line of the subway system. On November 20, 1970, the President made his way to the final stop of the third line which extraordinarily ended at the Tlatelolco station. This way of reclaiming the space where the massacre had taken place only two years prior, can be read to symbolize the government's power and stronghold of the city (236-238).

al puro fiado porque está la cosa que arde,
al banco llegan nada más para sacar.

El que nada hizo en la semana está sin lana,
va a empeñar la palangana, y en el Monte de Piedad
hay unas colas de tres cuadras las ingratas,
y no faltan papanatas que le ganen el lugar.

Desde las doce se llenó la pulquería,
los albañiles acabaron de rayar,
¡Que re' picosas enchiladas hizo Otilia,
la fritanguera que allí pone su comal!

[...]

Toda la tarde pa'l café se van los vagos
otros al pókar, al billar o al dominó,
ahí el desfalco va iniciando sus estragos,
¿y la familia? ¡Muy bien, gracias, no comió!

Los cabaretes en las noches tienen pistas
atascadas de turistas, y de la alta sociedad,
pagan sus cuentas con un cheque de rebote
o "ahí te dejo el relojote, luego lo vendré a sacar"

[...]

(Flores “Sábado”)

The first verses of the song allude to the overcrowded public transportation as they mention “el ruletero,” a word used to describe both, taxi drivers and the old green buses that transport many people to and from the farthest parts of the city at a relatively low cost. Additionally, the song mentions the overwhelming traffic situation in the city and sarcastically mentions the overcrowded department stores where people buy on credit. The song also comments on the idea of labor and capital as the poetic voice states that those who do not work have no money and must pawn their belongings at the Monte de Piedad, a well-known institution in Mexico City that helps people in financial need by providing low-interest loans and pawning services. The final verses of the song portray social life activities commonly associated with working and middle-class people such as drinking “pulque”¹⁰⁴ and going to see burlesque style shows at one of the many cabarets in the city. Another example of this type of musical ethnographical and documentary-like study of the city is present in the work of Rodrigo “Rockdrigo” González. His song “Estación del metro Balderas” became an iconic and widely circulated song in the city after the singer’s death in the 1985 earthquake¹⁰⁵ that devastated great part of Mexico City and the Bajío region. The lyrics narrate the story of a man that mourns, at times aggressively, the disappearance of a girlfriend in the underground crowds of the metro,

¹⁰⁴ Pulque is a traditional Mexican alcoholic drink that originated during Mesoamerican times. It is made from the fermented sap of the maguey (agave) plant and has a somewhat viscous consistency and sour flavor. During the 20th century it declined in popularity due to the rise of beer consumption but recently it has become a popular drink in the hip neighborhoods of the city like colonia Roma, colonia Doctores and the Downtown Historic Center.

¹⁰⁵ Alfredo González Casanova produced a life-size sculpture of Rockdrigo González that was placed at the Balderas metro station in 2011. This serves as a testament to the love and respect the city residents feel towards the musician.

Sáquese de aquí señor operador este
es un secuestro, yo manejo el convoy
mejor haga caso para usted es mejor
así es que hágase a un lado porque yo,
ahí le voy.

Hace cuatro años que a mi novia perdí en
esas muchedumbres que se forman aquí
la busqué en andenes y en salas de espera
pero ella se perdió... en la estación de
Balderas.

En la estación del metro Balderas ahí
fue donde yo perdí a mi amor en la
estación del metro Balderas ahí dejé
embarrado mi corazón.

No no no no no no no

En la estación del metro Balderas
una ola de gente se la llevó
en la estación del metro Balderas
vida mía te busqué de convoy en
convoy.

Mejor haga caso o le doy un balazo
¿No se ha dado cuenta que estoy
muy alterado? Ya lo dijo Freud no
recuerdo en que lado solo es la
experiencia que he experimentado.

Antes de la ruta que me lleva al
trabajo hoy estoy dispuesto a
mandarla al carajo llévame hacia
Hidalgo, hacia donde quieras pero
no me cruces no... por la estación
de Balderas.

En la estación del metro Balderas ahí
fue donde yo perdí a mi amor en la
estación del metro Balderas ahí dejé
embarrado mi corazón.

No no no no no no no
en la estación del metro Balderas
una ola de gente se la llevó
en la estación del metro Balderas

vida mía te busque en el convoy en
el convoy.

(González “Estación”)

The song speaks to the significance of the metro for the residents of the city, who in addition to using it as a mode of transportation on a regular basis, also see and experience the metro as a place and an archive of memories and emotions (e.g. the experience of “losing” a girlfriend in the subway). Moreover, Luis Castañeda explains that González’s evocation of Freud in the fifth stanza implies that the poetic’s voice emotions in the song “emerge in the underground transit system, drawing a parallel between the Freudian conception of the subconscious as a submerged space within the mind and the subway’s location under the city” (243). This suggests that an association exists between what a subject perceives to be a place of significant emotional and personal value and the spaces in the city that are presumably only transitory. This research suggests that these songs and artist became very popular in Mexico City precisely because the millions of riders of the subway could associate with the lyrics of the songs. Since subway riders would hypothetically be spending more time traveling, this would mean that their life’s events would also unfold there. As exposed by the work of these two musicians, chronicles through music are fundamental because they provide information that is not always readily available in other texts, either visual or literary.¹⁰⁶

An additional point that I emphasize and remediate in my work is the absence of women intellectuals who were also actively writing about and exploring the city in the 20th century through the present. Specifically, this research proposes the presence of a -female *flâneur*-, the

¹⁰⁶ A similar association can be made between these urban rock songs and the Mexican *corridos*, which were made especially popular earlier in the twentieth century, as well as to the *canción de protesta* [Protest song] that developed in South America in response to oppressive political environments of the 1970s.

female version of the male intellectual who writes about the city from within the city in a non-totalizing manner. A notable example from the early twentieth century is Tina Modotti, an Italian born photographer whose engagement with both the city as well as with regions such as Oaxaca, clearly show that she had a keen eye and an interest in the tensions happening at the time.¹⁰⁷ Her photographs—Figure 1, *Telephone Wires* (1925), and Figure 2, *Stadium* (1927)—both depict two modern technologies that were rapidly transforming the country. On the one hand, the telephone wires that were being installed around the country and were changing the landscape everywhere, and on the other, the new concrete buildings being constructed around the city, using cement, such as the Estadio Nacional and the Estadio Jalapa. Regarding these modern inventions, Gallo explains that cement, the building material, was another modern product that was introduced in Mexico at the time (*Mexican Modernity* 170).

This research suggests that, because cement played a significant role in modernizing the country it also contributed to shaping the ways in which some intellectual groups of the Mexican *avant-garde*, especially the Estridentistas, engaged with their surroundings. An additional critical piece of information regarding Modotti's possible sources of inspiration are her involvement, interest, and friendship with members of the *Contemporáneos* and the Estridentistas groups. Her involvement with the latter is how she became interested in the aesthetics of *estridentismo*.

Roberto Tejada explains,

Fronted by poets and printmakers who were familiar with Italian futurism, the Estridentistas advanced a theory of images and typography based on spatial volumetrics. In manifestos, these artists embraced radical social practice, the

¹⁰⁷ The are two photographs from Oaxaca: *Fiesta in Juchitán* and *Mother and Child* in Modotti's collection at MoMa, <https://www.moma.org/artists/4039?=&page=&direction=>.

electrically powered industrial world of the machine, and the visual and phonographic communication technologies (68).

Given these reasons, Modotti's interest in photographing the new buildings, the geometric figures and the lines formed by them, along with other technologies such as the telephone wires, comes as no surprise. As an Italian foreigner who traveled to Oaxaca, a poor state located in the southern region of the country with a significant indigenous population, Modotti must have seen the extreme contrasts between the underdeveloped towns of Oaxaca and the boastful modernity of Mexico City. Additionally, a manifesto from 1929 titled "On Photography," reveals that Modotti addressed the place of photography in social and cultural production and argued that photography, as a form of art, could serve to document reality or to gain knowledge of the past,

Photography, because of the single fact that it can only be produced in the present and based on what objectively exists in front of the camera, is clearly the most satisfactory medium for registering objective life in all its manifestations. For that reason, it has documentary value. If we add to all of this some sensitivity and understanding of the matter, and above all, a clear orientation of *the place photography should hold in history*, I believe the result is something [that] deserves *a place in social production*, something to which all of us should contribute (qtd. in Tejeda 84).



Figure 1. *Telephone Wires*, Tina Modotti, 1925.



Figure 2. *Stadium*, Tina Modotti, 1927.

More recently, the publication of *Las niñas bien* in 1987 is considered Guadalupe Loaeza's major contribution to chronicle writing in the country¹⁰⁸. Before becoming a book about the lives of high-class wealthy Mexicans, the book was a series of chronicles that were

¹⁰⁸ In 2018, the book was adapted into a film entitled *Las niñas bien* [The Good Girls] by director Alejandra Márquez Abella.

published via the *Unomásuno* magazine. *Las niñas*'s success can be attributed to both the innovative style of the short chronicles published weekly in the form of articles, much like Jorge Ibargüengoitia, Carlos Monsiváis, and Elena Poniatowska before Loeza, and also due to the subject matter with which they deal. Loeza's chronicles describe the lives and idiosyncrasies of Mexico City's wealthy elites and underscore the realization that no person is exempt from the oppressive patriarchal and hypermasculine systems of power, including high-class women like Loeza herself. In this text, Loeza's writings about the Mexican bourgeoisie is clear, succinct, and because she belongs to a wealthy family, the text reads as an "insider's take" of the world she describes in her writing and understands extremely well.

In *Las niñas*, Loeza provides a classification that serves as a sort of genealogy of the idea of the "niñas bien," [good girls]: (Niña bien, bien; Niña bien, fresa; Niña bien, liberada; Niña bien, en decadencia; Niña bien, universitaria; Niña bien, pobretona; Niña bien, sonsa; Niña bien, intelectual; Niña bien, hija de político, etc.) [Affluent, good girl; Preppy, good girl; Liberated, good girl; Declining, good girl; University educated, good girl; Poor, good girl; Silly, good girl; Intellectual, good girl; Politician's family, good girl, etc.] and provides details of their habitus, and the social and cultural expectations that exist for each one of the types of good girls and good boys she describes and categorizes in the chronicles.¹⁰⁹ Here, I cite at length to show

¹⁰⁹ Loeza's work can also be critiqued along with the work of conceptual artist and photographer Daniela Rossell. Her series *Ricas y famosas* (1999-2002) gained similar attention and critical acclaim as Loeza's *Las niñas bien* when it was published. The series documents the lives, often through very lavish and staged images, of very wealthy women in Mexico. In "A Woman's Place is in the 'Home': The Spatial Politics of Daniela Rossell's 'Ricas y Famosas'" Jamie L. Ratliff discusses how the private spaces of the photographs are traditionally constructed as feminine spaces and argues that the photographer's staging of the photographs helps to destabilize traditional notions of femininity. Ratliff concludes that,

Thus, the series calls into question the supposed integrity of traditionally gendered roles and spaces. As the nation-building projects of the twentieth century were built upon such gendered bedrock, the significance of *Ricas y Famosas* holds the possibility of national reverberations, reconfiguring the space of the home through its relationship with and representation through mass media formats. The artist acknowledges the media as an entity that in Mexico traditionally straddles the public/private dichotomy in its

Loaeza's innovation, attention to detail, and refreshingly stimulating style that simultaneously exposes some of the anxieties and habitus experienced by women belonging to the bourgeoisie class:

“Tu-eres niña bien, ¿verdad?”, me preguntaron el otro día. Me quedé *de a seis*. No supe que responder. ¿En qué consiste ser una *niña bien*? Las hay de varias categorías, a saber:

Niña bien, bien: Viven en Las Lomas, o en San Angel (sic). Casi no se maquillan. Siempre visten *sport* con un estilo muy clásico. Tienen amistades internacionales. Su mayor preocupación es tener *clase*. Desprecian a los nuevos ricos y a los políticos. Tienen escritura *picudita*, como la que enseñan en el colegio de monjas. En sus cenas íntimas, usan joyas de familia. Se sienten por encima de la crisis. Su *shopping* lo hacen en París como lo hacían su abuela, su mamá y sus tías. Los fines de semana se van a sus haciendas. Dejan caer con cierta naturalidad algunos vocablos en francés: *nouveau riche*, *tres comme il faut*; cuando viajan a Nueva York, van exclusivamente a restaurantes franceses. Se hospedan en hoteles con muy pocos cuartos. No se mezclan con cualquier gente. Juegan bridge en su grupo. Y son parientes de “todo México”. A sus sirvientas las tratan como si fueran de la familia.

Niña bien, fresa: Las que trabajan, lo hacen en relaciones públicas o como edecanes, y las que estudian, se sienten atraídas por historia del arte, o por la

representation of women. By appropriating these media techniques, and producing the space of the home, Rossell not only presents alternatives to an archetypal image, but she also deconstructs the process through which the feminine character of the home is fabricated. Thus, she constructs the home from the ground up, rebuilding it as a space that reveals and blurs the limits of such spatial confinements and offers a feminist vision of subjectivity that extend well beyond the home (13).

carrera “M.M.C.” (mientras me caso). Siempre están a la última moda, pero no tienen gusto refinado. Les gusta abrazar mucho a sus novios, pero obviamente, no se permiten ir más lejos... Van a todas las discotecas (Quetzal, Magic, etcétera). Ya dejaron de usar frenos, pero ojo, no son desenfrenadas. Las casadas, están muy conscientes del triunfo de su marido, que por lo general es ejecutivo de cuenta. En las vacaciones largas, se van a La Jolla y los fines de semana, a Valle de Bravo. Por las noches miran cablevisión con sus hijos, para que practiquen su inglés. A las 10:00 p.m. cambian el canal a *24 horas*, para ver qué ha pasado con Díaz Serrano, “que cosas, se veía tan buena gente, el pobre”. Casi todas vienen del colegio Vallarta o del Regina.

Niña bien, liberada: A ella no le gusta que le digan que es niña bien. Ya no es virgen y por las noches, antes de dormir, a veces tiene remordimientos. Por lo tanto actúa en sociedad y dentro de su casa como si fuera virgen. Suelta, de vez en cuando una palabrota, pero siente que no le queda, no le sale natural. Discute con los muchachos, de política. Habla mucho de sexo y de mota como si fuera una cosa muy normal. Lee los periódicos, pero confiesa que no entiende a Carlos Monsiváis. Coquetea con los nacos. Es amiguita de su muchacha y le regala maquillajes. Usa huipiles sobre pantalones Calvin Klein. Las que trabajan, lo hacen en una agencia de viajes, para viajar solas y conocer otras cosas... Las casadas le “pintan el cuerno” al marido, pero eso sí con muchos remordimientos.

(Loaeza 9-10)

These are only the first three classifications from the 1983 chronicle that appeared in *Unomásuno* magazine in July of that year. In the lines above it is clear that the author understands the social

circles she describes and can point to the most distinctive details about each one of the “types” of good girls. In subsequent chronicles from that same year, Loaeza also published a chronicle on “niños bien” [good boys] that provides a sort of genealogy of the types of “good boys” that belong to upper-class Mexico City families. Though, the chronicles written by Loaeza provide a snippet of the common social dynamics that unfold among the Mexican bourgeoisie, in 1994 sociologists Larissa Lomnitz and Marisol Pérez-Lizaur completed a series of studies looking at the often-ignored roles upper-class women play in their social circles. The authors examined wealthy women and the ways in which they play significant roles in maintaining business contacts among elite circles, as women are frequently aware of the information on individuals. The researchers also found that upper-class women can also sometimes serve as “brokers” in establishing contacts or providing good references about friends and acquaintances for possible partnerships. However, Lomnitz and Pérez-Lizaur also discovered that wealthy women were simultaneously expected to play the traditional gendered roles of mothers, housewives and behind-the-scenes partners (180). It is thus evident that the roles of upper-class women in Mexican society are complex and can be easily misrepresented if no ethnographical or sociological study, like the one mentioned above, is taken into consideration.¹¹⁰

Having briefly traced the tradition of the Mexican chronicle and the urban texts produced there, I will now turn to Guadalupe Nettel’s novel, *El huésped* [The Guest]. Narrated in the first-person by Ana, the novel’s protagonist, the narration is divided into three parts. As a young girl, Ana, believes that something she calls “la Cosa” [The Thing] has invaded her body and has the potential to control her every move. When her brother Diego dies unexpectedly, Ana blames herself for his death. Although the cause of Diego’s death is never revealed, the reader learns

¹¹⁰ This is similar to the gender oppression demonstrated in the works of Rosario Ferré, Rosario Castellanos, and Victoria Ocampo.

through Ana's narration that he had been suffering with a mysterious illness. After Diego's death, the family is broken and unable to recover from the loss. Two years later, the father leaves the family, as Ana's mother becomes distant and grieves in solitude. Ana's loneliness then begins to grow, as do her guilt and fear of la Cosa. Soon after the death of Ana's brother, her fear of blindness intensifies. Ten years later, the now-adult Ana believes that because she will go blind, she must find a way to learn how others deal with the disability of blindness. For this reason, she becomes a reader at an institute for the blind. The story plays out in the spaces of Ana's family home; on the streets of her neighborhood, la Roma; at the institute for the blind; and in the subterranean world of the metro. At the institute, Ana meets el Cacho (the Limp), with whom she becomes friends and later introduces her to the community of people with disabilities who live in the streets begging for money and who inhabit the subway tunnels. The institute for the blind is of significant importance for the story as this is where Ana meets and becomes part of a community of "rebels," "outsiders," or "freaks" that ultimately contribute to her final decision to permanently live underground.

Guadalupe Nettel's personal background helps us to understand the basis of her work. In a conversation with Efrén Ordóñez in September 2019, Nettel commented that *El huésped*, her first novel, was motivated by a phrase she heard among indigenous people in the state of Chiapas: "Only when we dare to confront the things that most scare and shame us can we know who we really are, which gives us enormous integrity and strength" (np). She further explains that this refrain served as a form of literary and existential advice as she often felt judged and ashamed throughout her childhood because of her "abnormal" eyes. More specifically, Nettel was born with a congenital cataract in her right eye, which has left her partially blind. Nettel's partial blindness is a subject that she further develops in *El cuerpo en que nació*, an autofictional

work published in 2011. Questions of corporeality, disability, and vulnerability are present throughout Nettel's work. That is particularly the case in *El huésped*.

In *The Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* (1980) Julia Kristeva explains what gives rise to horror and disgust in human beings and why. The theory is rooted in philosophy and psychology. According to Kristeva, abjection marks self and the Other, the inside and the outside, the clean and unclean bodies through the expulsion of that which is not "I" and through the demarcation of space where such divisions blur and threaten the boundaries of subjective identity. Although abjection is intimately linked to disgust and taboo, it is "not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). This ambiguous space exists between the semiotic realm of affects, which Kristeva associated with the maternal body, and the symbolic realm of language, associates with paternal judgement.

Kristeva also identifies abjection as a site of cultural production, which helps to describe how bodies are racialized, classed, and gendered as "insiders" or "outsiders" within communities. Additionally, modern literature writes about the abject and provides "an elaboration, a discharge, and a hollowing out of abjection through the *Crisis of the Word*" (Kristeva 208). In this way, works of literature are created to articulate the abject. Authors such as Joyce, Borges, and Proust provide primary examples of this kind of literature. In Mexico, the work of authors Mario Bellatín, Fernanda Melchor, and Guadalupe Nettel would fall in this category.

To begin examining the novel and its abject qualities, I explore the dialogue that is established between the fictional narration presented in the novel and the photograph that is used

in the front cover of the 2006 edition.¹¹¹ Figure 3, *Identical Twins, Roselle, New Jersey* is a black and white photograph that was shot in 1967 by Diane Arbus, an American photographer known for her work with marginalized communities including members of the LGBTQIA+ community, exotic dancers, children, and mothers. The photograph depicts two young twin sisters standing in front of a white background. They are wearing matching outfits and look very similar. However, the photograph destabilizes the viewer's assumptions: while the visual language and composition of the photograph lead the observer to believe that the subjects are identical twins, upon close examination, the viewer realizes that the sisters are not really identical. Their facial expressions are different, they have slightly different facial features, their clothes and the patterns in their leggings are not identical—and yet, the image is composed in such a way as to make us believe that they are in fact identical. In this sense, the photograph makes the familiar almost unfamiliar, it documents an encounter of difference, and uses the camera to unlock the emotion of the encounter. Moreover, the staging of the photograph also brings to the fore questions of fictionality and truthfulness in documentary photography. There is a manipulation of reality in

¹¹¹ It is also worth noting the association I see with the short story “El huésped” [“The Houseguest”] published in 1928 by little-known writer Amparo Dávila (1928-2020). The short story is significant for this discussion because it also deals with questions of spatiality and horror, with a focus in the domestic space of the home. The story narrates the horror experienced by a housewife and her housekeeper when her husband brings a strange creature to the home. Here is a short excerpt of the story,

My miserable life became a hell. The very night he arrived, I begged my husband not to condemn me to the torture of his company. I couldn't help it; he filled me with mistrust and horror. “He's completely inoffensive,” my husband said, looking at me with marked indifference. “You'll get used to having him around, and if you don't. . .” It was impossible to convince him to take him away. He stayed in our house (Dávila np, translation by Audrey Harris and Matthew Gleeson).

[Mi vida desdichada se convirtió en un infierno. La misma noche de su llegada supliqué a mi marido que no me condenara a la tortura de su compañía. No podía resistirlo; me inspiraba desconfianza y horror. “Es completamente inofensivo” —dijo mi marido mirándome con marcada indiferencia. “Te acostumbrarás a su compañía y, si no lo consigues...” No hubo manera de convencerlo de que se lo llevara. Se quedó en nuestra casa]

the images that serves to convey and explore elements of affect through visual metaphors. I see this photograph as an attempt to create a sense of uncanniness, via the use of black and white film, that is usually not easy to achieve.



Figure 3. *Identical Twins, Roselle, New Jersey*, Diane Arbus, 1967.

Just like Nettel's novel, Arbus's photograph also demonstrates difference and Otherness as recurring themes of her work. Moreover, a philographic interpretation of *Identical Twins, Roselle, New Jersey* was echoed in the 1980 film *The Shining*, a psychological horror film by Stanley Kubrick that was based on the 1977 Stephen King's novel with the same title. The film's most iconic scene features a pair of twin sisters in similar blue dresses much like the subjects in

Arbus's *Identical Twins*. The scene in the film also evokes the sense of uncanniness that Kristeva describes when explaining the abject: while riding his bike around the hotel's empty hallways a little boy named Danny encounters two sisters wearing blue dresses and holding hands. They quickly disappear but their presence on multiple occasions throughout the film contributes to the film's disturbing and destabilizing tone and aesthetics. In *El huésped*, this idea of the uncanny is clearly articulated when Ana states, "Todos los ciegos llevan algo idéntico, algo como un talismán, pero dentro de esas similitudes también hay diferencias" [All blind people carry something identical, something like a talisman, but within those similarities there are also differences] (Nettel 129). This statement also serves as an important reminder for the readers as they are confronted multiple times with blind characters who experience the city and its spaces very differently and who the reader must come to understand and explore as the narration progresses.



Figure 4. Still from *The Shinning*, 1980.

This connection can now help us establish a better understanding of the abject in *El huésped*. I argue that the very first time we see abjection in the narration occurs when Diego dies. According to Kristeva, the corpse – which is unable to speak on its own behalf – is inscribed with meaning by its living witnesses. In the case of *El huésped*, the very first witness to Diego’s death is Ana. After dinner, she walks to the bathroom and sees her brother’s body lying on the floor, but it is unclear why she does not approach him or say anything to her parents. Instead, she locks herself in the bathroom until her mother finds Diego’s corpse. While she is waiting, however, she has her first menstrual period, “Entonces me levanté del excusado y vi con estupor—ninguna explicación previa mitiga el impacto de la primera vez—que de mi entrepierna a la taza emanaban hilachos de sangre; no pude dejar de relacionarla con la sangre de mi hermano petrificado en la escalera” (Nettel 39) [Then I got up from the toilet and saw with stupor - no previous explanation mitigates the impact of the first time - that from my crotch to the toilet emanated blood threads; I couldn't stop relating it to the blood of my petrified brother on the stairs.].¹¹² This linkage of blood between two bodily functions, one in which the body is no longer alive and the other that indicates that the body is ready to bring life into the world, results in abjection because Ana cannot comprehend why either one of them has happened.

Kristeva identifies the corpse as the ultimate frontier of abjection: “[C]orpses *show* me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. ...There I am, at the border of my condition as a living being. ...The border has become an object” (3-4). In *El huésped*, Ana refuses to approach Diego’s casket during his funeral, noting that:

No quise entrar. Me conformé con ver de lejos el ataúd gris claro donde algún sentimental inoportuno puso el sombrero de cow-boy en el que habían llevado a

¹¹² Unless noted all translations are mine.

Diego al hospital...Hubo gente que se me acercó para convencerme de que entrara a despedirme del cadáver...pero nadie consiguió arrancarme de la pared donde me había detenido.

[I refused to enter. I was content to see from afar the light gray coffin where some sentimental inopportune placed the cowboy hat in which Diego had been taken to the hospital ... There were people who approached me to convince me to come to say goodbye to the corpse ... but nobody could get me [to move away] from the wall where I stood] (43).

By refusing to see her brother's corpse, Ana rejects the materiality of death and thus asserts herself among the living. Nonetheless, this experience is very painful for her as a ten-year-old child who has just lost a sibling. Later, as her brother's corpse is being carried away she hears an internal voice telling her, "Es tu culpa" [It is your fault].

Nettel's attention to and inclusion of the abject should also be examined within the context of a larger and more disturbing reality in Mexico. For instance, contemporary artist Teresa Margolles's work illustrates the ongoing violence in the country, and particularly in Mexico City. The many projects that Margolles has led since the 1990s, when the art collective SEMEFO (which took its name from Mexico City's morgue known as Servicio Medico Forense) demonstrate a political and sociocritical stance on this violence. Cuauhtémoc Medina indicates that the morgue, "is a space that falls in between Michel Foucault's "heterotopias of deviation" (prisons, rest homes, psychiatric hospitals) and the cemetery as archival representations of the modern city" (315). Though Margolles's intervention through her art pieces became more conceptual and meditative in the late 2000s, her work has never completely moved away from representing the crude violence that exists in the country. For example, at first glance *Los*

Herederos, Figures 5.1 and 5.2, seem very minimalistic, but upon close examination, the viewer learns that the colors in the canvas come from human blood; more specifically, blood of homicide victims. Because most of the corpses that Margolles uses are those coming from poor and working-class people, her work suggests that not even death erases social inequalities in Mexico.



Figure 5.1. *Los Herederos* installation in Zürich, Germany. Teresa Margolles, 2009.



Figure 5.2. *Los Herederos* detail, Teresa Margolles, 2009.

When discussing the response to the violence experienced in the city, *El huésped* invites us to explore two of the spaces that offer supporting communities for individuals that are affected by marked difference. In *El huésped*, the main spaces that provide this, although in very different ways are, the metro's underground space, and the institute for the blind where Ana works. Speaking on the invisible aspects of the city in *New Tendencies in Mexican Art* (2004), Rubén Gallo asserts that the subway system, has created an entire underground city with a life that mirrors the space above ground, noting that its stations are crowded by street vendors, bookstores, food courts, and even museums (88). As such, the metro is a liminal space that exists between two worlds: the upside, where the city life takes place, and also the underground where there is a lot going on. Just by its very nature of being a space that serves as a thoroughway to

another place, the underground spaces in the novel are both unsettling and abject. It is also worth noting that the 2002 film *Spiral City* by Melanie Smith establishes a dialogue with the urban chronicles and the spaces above ground. *Spiral City* plays off the counterpoint of Mexico City's grid, working against the upward movement of the camera and flying in spirals. As the film advances the viewer witnesses how the structures build upon each other and collapse, resulting in the abstraction of the city. As seen in Figure 6, Black and white photographs are also part of the series, and together they compose a document of the city that serves as a chronicle of the city's surface. Moreover, *Spiral City* was inspired by Robert Smithson's earthwork piece *Spiral Jetty* (1970), figure 7, which was constructed at the shore of the Great Salt Lake, in Utah. The sculpture is a 1,500 foot-long, 15-foot-wide coil built with mud, salt crystals, and rocks, that reaches into the lake and is sometimes submerged under water, depending on the water level. Both artistic pieces inform and support my argument that *El huésped* is, in fact, documenting spaces in Mexico City through Ana and the rest of the characters and the spaces they inhabit and come to know. In contrast to the idea of an ever-expanding surface that is abstract, as presented in the work of Melanie Smith, Nettel instead breaks up this separation by bringing attention to the underground spaces of the subway system and its diverse inhabitants.



Figure 6. *Spiral City*, Melanie Smith, 2002.



Figure 7. *Spiral Jetty*, Robert Smithson, 1970. Photographed by Gianfranco Gorgoni.

In *The City and the Grass Roots* (1983) Manuel Castells asserts that,

Space is not a “reflection of society,” it is society... Therefore, spatial forms, at least on our planet, will be produced, as all other objects are, by human action.

They will express and perform the interests of the dominant class according to a given mode of production and to a specific mode of development. They will express and implement the power relationships of the state in an historically defined society. They will be realized and shaped by the process of gender

domination and by state-enforced family life. At the same time, spatial forms will be earmarked by the resistance from exploited classes, from oppressed subjects, and from dominated women. And the work of such a contradictory historical process on the space will be accomplished on an already inherited spatial form, the product of former history and the support of new interests, projects, protests, and dreams. Finally, from time to time, social movements will arise to challenge the meaning of spatial structure and therefore attempt new functions and new forms (qtd. in *Postmetropolis*, Soja 95).

Castells explains that spatial forms will definitely “express and perform the interests of the dominant class” but that at the same time, these forms of domination will also be confronted by the resistance from exploited classes, oppressed individuals, and dominated women. These dynamics of space formation proposed by Castells are both achieved and contested in the spaces represented in *El huésped* and will be discussed further in the following pages.

The case of Madero in the novel illustrates how the spatial constructions and the politics of space take shape in the subway. El Cacho, Ana’s friend and lover, introduces her to Madero, a sort of anarchist who serves as the leader for the group of beggars, disabled, and homeless people that work and live underground. After telling Ana about his humble background and how he became blind as a result of a street fight he suggests Ana moves there. She refuses, but Madero explains that he is completely opposed to living in an institution like the institute for the blind where Ana and el Cacho work, as he believes that such places prevent disabled people from achieving real independence. Madero states, “el metro es el mejor lugar para vivir en México. ¿No has oído que cada gran ciudad tiene una cloaca proporcional a su esplendor? El nuestro por consecuencia tenía que ser a toda madre, limpio y tranquilo” (121) [The subway is the best place

to live in Mexico. Have you not heard that every great city has a sewer [filthy place] proportional to its splendor? Ours therefore had to be great, clean and calm]. Madero's resistance to institutional spaces of power and control over bodies is ultimately reinterpreted by Ana, who at the end of the novel decides to actually live underground.

Nettel's work has been read as a political *Bildungsroman*¹¹³ and as work of fiction that deals with the embodiment of disability.¹¹⁴ Departing from these readings, my contribution to existing research focuses on a feminist reading of *El huésped* through community formation. Writing about the aesthetics of the novel in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, Rita Felski writes:

The feminist *Bildungsroman* thus combines the exploration of subjectivity with a dimension of group solidarity which inspires activism and resistance rather than private resignation, and makes it possible to project a visionary hope of future change: "It was a vision of community. Of the possible. Of the person merged with the group, yet still separate. Of harmony" (139).

Felki's proposal above shows us a way of for a feminist reading of the narration that is noted in Ana's oscillation between the city (above) and the subway spaces (below), her explorations in both spaces, her awareness of her subordination, and the final realization that she could act and build a hopeful future with a small community of disabled people. Because Ana finds friendships and a supportive community in the subway, *El huésped* can be categorized as a feminist *Bildungsroman* where friendships are valued, nurtured, and where the community

¹¹³ See Carina González's, "La potencia de los cuerpos corrompidos: 'El Huésped' Como 'Bildungs' político." *Hispanófila*, no. 174, 2015, p. 97-115.

¹¹⁴ For more, see Lilia Adriana Perez Limón's "Visualizing the Nonnormative Body in Guadalupe Nettel's *El cuerpo en que nací*" (211-226) in *Mexican Literature in Theory* (ed. Ignacio Sánchez Prado) for a study on disability in the work of Nettel.

becomes a sort of mediating structure for the subject to find meaning in the world. As the narration progresses, the readers come to see Ana as a mature woman who finds unity within the collective of the metro, a group of people that is seemingly unrelated to her, but who understands her and helps her in her journey towards liberation.

Additionally, the novel also presents a brief political commentary about victims of political repression. A clear example of solidarity and violence in *El huésped* is evidenced in the presence and role of Marisol, a secondary but significant character that only appears briefly but has lasting effects in the ways in which Ana sees the community of disabled and homeless people that inhabit the metro. Marisol and Ana originally meet through el Cacho and form a kind of female community or bond that develops during the most politically engaged intervention of this novel. As a form of political protest, the group of people that live and work underground, effectively plan to interfere in a local election by replacing good ballots with ballots containing excrement. This act is itself a reflection and a commentary on some of the problems that Mexico City is currently facing: political corruption and dissatisfaction with democracy, on the one hand, and the environmental hazards that residents of the city must constantly endure. *Excélsior*, *El Universal*, *Milenio* and other major newspapers in Mexico City have reported on the environmental problems and pollution the city faces today. According to UNAM investigator Irma Aburto López, exposed fecal matter in the streets of Mexico City is one of the most significant public health problems. In 2018, *Excélsior* also reported that every year there is at least half a ton of fecal residue circulating in the city.¹¹⁵ By alluding to a real problem that exists in Mexico City today, Nettel succeeds in calling attention to this problem by way of the novel.

¹¹⁵ In the *Excélsior* article Lilián Hernández explains that many people are unaware of the real cause of their illnesses but many respiratory complications are due to the excessive amounts of microbes and excrement in the air.

In *El huésped*, Marisol is captured by the police during the distribution of the contaminated ballots. Her dead body is later found near a Catholic shelter for women. While waiting to hear from her, Ana reflects on what seems to be a common experience for people in the city:

Había pasado ya una semana desde que Marisol ingresara al mundo de los objetos y las personas perdidas. ¿Dónde estaba? Era imposible saberlo. Entre los desechos no hay jerarquías, cuando se busca ahí existen las mismas posibilidades de encontrar un zapato viejo que a un estudiante desaparecido (175).

[It had been a week since Marisol entered the world of missing people and objects. Where was she? It was impossible to know. Waste has no hierarchies, when you search, there are the same possibilities of finding an old shoe as there are of finding a missing student (175)]

Ana's frustration and cynicism over Marisol's disappearance are evident here, as she juxtaposes missing people and missing objects as waste or rubbish that, once lost, is almost impossible to recover. The subtle, yet clear political commentary connecting state violence and missing students allows us to think of real-life instances when this has happened, such as the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968 and the students from Ayotzinapa in 2014.

En consecuencia, en esta temporada hay un mayor riesgo de contraer este tipo de enfermedades que provocan ausentismo laboral o escolar, sin saber que la causa fue por haber respirado las heces que, aún pulverizadas y en el aire, conservan los parásitos.

Si bien la mayoría de estos desechos proviene de perros y gatos, una parte considerable son humanos, subrayó la especialista en salud pública de la Universidad Nacional y aunque no hay una cifra exacta de cuántas están al aire libre en la vía pública o incluso en las casas, sí hay un estimado de que 500 kilogramos al año se convierten en parte del aire que respiramos todos los días en el Valle de México ("Heces").

As a result of Ana's continued contact with the group of people with disabilities, beggars, and those living underground, *El huésped* theorizes community building strategies and ways of creating solidarity in the city. These connections empower both the subjects and the social interactions that develop in the narration. As the narration progresses, Ana becomes more attached to the community and learns to appreciate the spaces they inhabit. Regarding this aspect of the novel, Liesbeth Francois argues that Ana's contacts with people in the metro broaden the perspective on herself, her spatial experience and her view of the city (27). In this sense, Ana's experiences with and in the different spaces of the narration are not all negative, but instead provide a safe source of community and belonging.

The existence of community building and hope is present in sociological and anthropological studies starting in the 1950s. For instance, the study by Emilio de Antuñano discusses the creation of community building and hope in Colonia Morelos in Mexico City, one of the poorest and most dangerous sites in the metropolitan area. In his study, Antuñano compares Colonia Morelos to its U.S. counterparts and explains that while the cities and the poor became associated with the idea of "urban crisis" in the U.S., Mexico City's poor neighborhoods created more communal dynamics and shared community spaces. Being part of a bourgeois family, Ana's initial dismissiveness towards the inhabitants of the metro system gradually changes in *El huésped*. After her first meeting with Madero, she returns to the metro many times. In the beginning, when asked if she wants to form part of the underground group she responds, "No, gracias, detesto las reglas. Además, no podría vivir en el metro" [No thanks, I hate rules. Also, I couldn't live on the subway] (121). However, the initial rejection towards the community, becomes a more nuanced reflection while changing the ballots, "En ese ambiente contenido, una mezcla de ceremonia sectaria y carnaval, encontré algo que no había experimentado en años:

fraternidad en el sentido más cotidiano; tropezarse con los demás; sentir sus cuerpos cerca. Distinguir sus olores—por más fuertes que fueran—era de alguna forma grato, pues distraía del tufo de los costales” (144) [In that contained environment, a mixture of sectarian ceremony and carnival, I found something I had not experienced in years: fraternity in the most everyday sense; stumbling upon others; feeling their bodies close. Distinguishing their scents — no matter how strong they were — was somehow pleasing, as it distracted from the tuff of sacks (144)]. The safety, community, and solidarity she experiences with the people underground and briefly with Marisol allow her to appreciate and understand the importance of having those human connections.

Ana’s perspective is so radically transformed that by the end of the novel, she decides to live underground as well, like Madero. The Ana of the final pages of the novel is very comfortable with darkness, with the possibility of going blind and with living in the underground space of the metro. In her reading of *El huésped*, Carina González analyzes Ana’s acceptance of her link to society and the “social body” which strengthens her and provides a way of living that is communal (“La potencia de los cuerpos corrompidos”). The final decision to move into a space that was initially scary, uncertain, and excessively dark for Ana, becomes the safe space where she plans to live in imminent blindness.

To conclude, in answering the questions, what is it like to live in Mexico City in the 21st century? And, how do literary and cultural artifacts represent and engage with the city and its inhabitants? I have traced the ways in which literature, theory, history, and culture mesh together to provide insights into the urban spaces in Mexico City and how they are shaped by human action. My work moves beyond issues of violence, horror, and abjection in the city. In *El huésped*, Ana, along with other abject characters marked by their marginality and Otherness,

learn to live in a city that is both unrepresentable and a source of community. The streets of the city, the institute for the blind, and the metro all engage with the characters in different and intricate ways, and ultimately become sources of knowledge and community building for the protagonist. In this chapter I have examined how Guadalupe Nettel's *El huésped* provides an understanding into the very notions of space and the impossibility of representing Mexico City as a whole, in a totalizing manner. Through the study of a variety of spaces, inspired by the tradition of the urban chronicles in the 20th century, we can see and learn crucial aspects of life in 21st century Mexico City. ¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ My research builds on the work of scholars of the city. See Andeas Huyssen's *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing World* (ed.,2008) and *Miniature Metropolis: Literature in an Age of Photography and Film* (2015) as well as Beatriz Sarlo's essays on the city and urban culture.

Chapter 4

Porous Metropolises: *Relingos* and Mapmaking in the Work of Valeria Luiselli

Pain — expands the Time —
Ages coil within
The minute Circumference
Of a single Brain —

Pain contracts — the Time —
Occupied with Shot
Gamuts of Eternities
Are as they were not —
Emily Dickinson

Sometimes it is through a crack that we find moments of
discovery but also the same crack can hide what you/we
could not see.
Michy Marxuach

In chapter three I discussed how Guadalupe Nettel's *El huésped* (2006) challenges traditional conceptions of space by rethinking the role of the contemporary female *flâneur* in Mexico City. Through a reading of the abject, Nettel's work offers approaches to understanding the urban growth and irrepresentability of the urban landscape. This interest in writing about the City of Mexico and about human cartographies and spatiality is similarly important to Valeria Luiselli (b. 1983),¹¹⁷ whose work is informed by her experiences growing up and living in places such as South Korea, South Africa, India, Mexico and New York City. Luiselli's sophisticated cosmopolitanism is evident in her recent portrayals and meditations of places like Mexico City

¹¹⁷ In the past ten years Valeria Luiselli has become one of the most prominent Mexican writers publishing in both English and Spanish almost simultaneously. Her work of fiction and non-fiction includes, *Papeles falsos* (2010) published in English as *Sidewalks* (2014); *Los ingrátidos* (2010) published in English as *Faces in the Crowd* (2011); *Where You Are*, "Swings of Harlem" (2013); *La historia de mis dientes* (2013) published in English as *The Story of My Teeth* (2015); *Tell Me How it Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (2016) published in Spanish as *Los niños perdidos: un ensayo en 40 preguntas* (2017); and *Desierto Sonoro [Lost Children Archive]* (2019). In 2019 Luiselli awarded the MacArthur Fellowship.

and New York City, which simultaneously exhibit a profound understanding and curiosity about both of these metropolises. Furthermore, Luiselli's spatial interest is equally evident in her work of non-fiction, including her 2015 doctoral dissertation at Columbia University, entitled *Translation Spaces: Mexico City in the International Modernist Circuit*, her recent book of non-fiction *Tell me How it Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (2017),¹¹⁸ as well as her contributions to various newspapers and magazines such as *El País*, *The Guardian*, and *Granta*.

Taking Luiselli's early works, *Papeles falsos* (2010) and *Los ingravidos* (2011) as a point of departure and reading them along her scholarly and other work of non-fiction this chapter argues that Luiselli's work is structured and mapped through architectural thought and planning.¹¹⁹ As a result, spatiality, and especially the presence of porousness becomes a central element for the development and comprehension of the narration. Employing Luiselli's conceptualization of empty spaces in the city called *relingos*,¹²⁰ which is a regional word in Mexico used to refer to spatial gaps consisting of small lots of land that are difficult to utilize

¹¹⁸ *Tell me How it Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* deals with the experiences that Central American children seeking asylum in the United States face once they cross the border and enter the federal court system and also explores questions of territoriality and the meanings of place and home. The book was awarded the American Book Award in 2018 making Luiselli only the second Mexican author after Reyna Grande (2007) to receive the award.

¹¹⁹ This includes a consideration of her digital mapping contribution of New York City's playgrounds in *Where You Are*, "Swings of Harlem" (2013).

¹²⁰ These residual lots are also known in Spanish as "espacios urbanos residuales" and "retazos urbanos". A similar concept has existed in English since the 1960s with the invention of "Interstitial space" which is most commonly used in architecture to refer to the empty space designed between floors inside a building in order to facilitate maintenance work. More recently, however, projects have been planned and completed using the remnants of the city, or the *relingos* of big cities across the world. Cities like Rotterdam and Philadelphia have completed projects that utilize *relingos*. In Japan projects like Love House; House in Nada; and O House are representative of this work. Japan has been at the forefront of using these leftover lots, the book *Pet Architecture Guide Book* includes many inventive ways in which micro projects can be completed in Tokyo and around the world in order to use these *relingos*.

after a renovation (Figure 1).¹²¹ Her use of the term is based on the work of Mexican architect Carlos González Lobo who devoted his career to finding effective ways to reuse these spaces across Mexican and Latin American cities. Through the use of a fragmented and porous narration Luiselli invites the readers to (re)construct the story in *Los ingravidos* as it contains empty spaces or *relingos*. Moreover, the resulting porousness of the narration is facilitated by both typographical *relingos* and the textual ones. Lastly, Luiselli incorporates the use of metafiction and engages with other ideas of spatiality such as Marc Augé's "non-place" and David Seamon's "place ballet", both of which will be discussed further in later sections of this chapter.

¹²¹ Manuel Aguirre Botello is a now-retired engineer who publishes well-documented entries about thruways, the history of neighborhoods, and the history of monuments across Mexico City on his website Mexico Maxico. In an entry about Paseo de la Reforma, Aguirre Botello explains that the wide avenue was planned and built during the brief reign of Emperor Maximilian of Hapsburg in the 1860s in order to connect the city center with the imperial residence at Castillo de Chapultepec. The project was originally named after Empress Carlota as "Promenade of the Empress," then changed to "El Paseo del Degollado" after Maximilian of Hapsburg was executed in 1867, and then renamed as "Paseo de la Reforma" by the government of president Sebastian Lerdo de Tejada, 1872-1876. Decades later, from the 1940s until the 1960s, the government of Mexico City also proposed many changes along Paseo de la Reforma. Due to the amount of construction proposed, the press deemed it a "Proyectazo" [Huge Project]. Looking at the map in Figure 1, the color tracing helps to identify the large areas that had to be remodeled and, in many cases, demolished. The changes completed in the 1960s resulted in many of the *relingos* that architects like Carlos González Lobo have attempted to reuse.

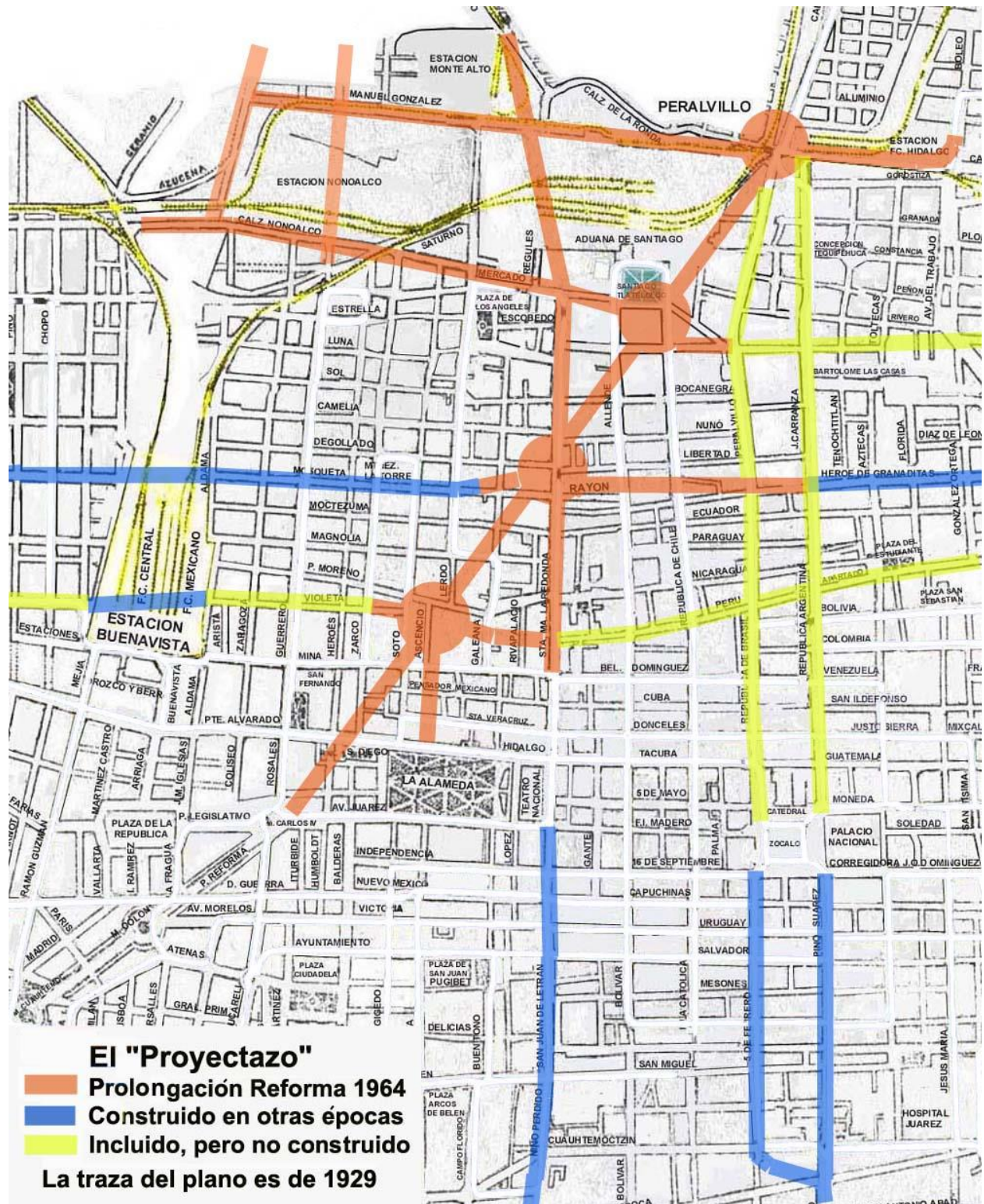


Figure 1. Plan of the “Proyectazo” in Mexico City drawn by Manuel Aguirre Botello. The bright orange color shows the Paseo de la Reforma 1964 renovation route.

i. *Relingos*

Carlos González Lobo (1939-2021) was a Mexican architect known for his contributions to functional and affordable housing (Figure 2). For the past several decades he offered architectural housing solutions for working-class and low-income people in Mexico and across Latin America. González Lobo was the son of Carlos González Camarena, a doctor who contributed to major sanitation projects during Lázaro Cárdenas presidency in the 1930s. González Lobo studied with Antonio Pastrana, a notable architect from Veracruz who emphasized the importance of integral planning and affordable housing for working-class people during the post-revolutionary period (González Ortiz “Arquitectura,” 118). Antonio Pastrana (1913-1967), Juan O’Gorman (1905-1982), and Juan Legarreta (1902-1934) were part of a robust group of modern Mexican architects committed to creating functional, affordable, and efficient housing and buildings (Figure 3).¹²²

¹²² Juan O’Gorman was an architect and an artist who completed projects such as the 1929 *Cecil O’Gorman House* and the *Rivera-Kahlo casa-estudio* (1931-1932) as well as murals for both the famous Biblioteca Central at the Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and at the Castillo de Chapultepec. On his part, Juan Legarreta designed functional and financially accessible apartment complexes located in the working-class neighborhoods of Aarón Sáenz, 1933; Plutarco Elías Calles, 1934; and La Michoacana, 1936, among others. His projects have been described as having a good mix of functional and radical elements. Considering women at the center of a house, specifically housewives, he added both intimate and flexible spatial arrangements. While Juan O’Gorman and Juan Legarreta are well-known established names in the architecture and art worlds, Antonio Pastrana is less recognized. However, his contributions to architecture are well documented by some of his students and colleagues. Pastrana completed “horizontal condominiums” in Tlatelolco; a floor at the Cardiology Hospital in Mexico City; other hospital projects in Veracruz; the Hotel del Prado in Mexico City, and in 1950 designed a never-completed plan for the gymnasium, a casino and bathrooms for the Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).

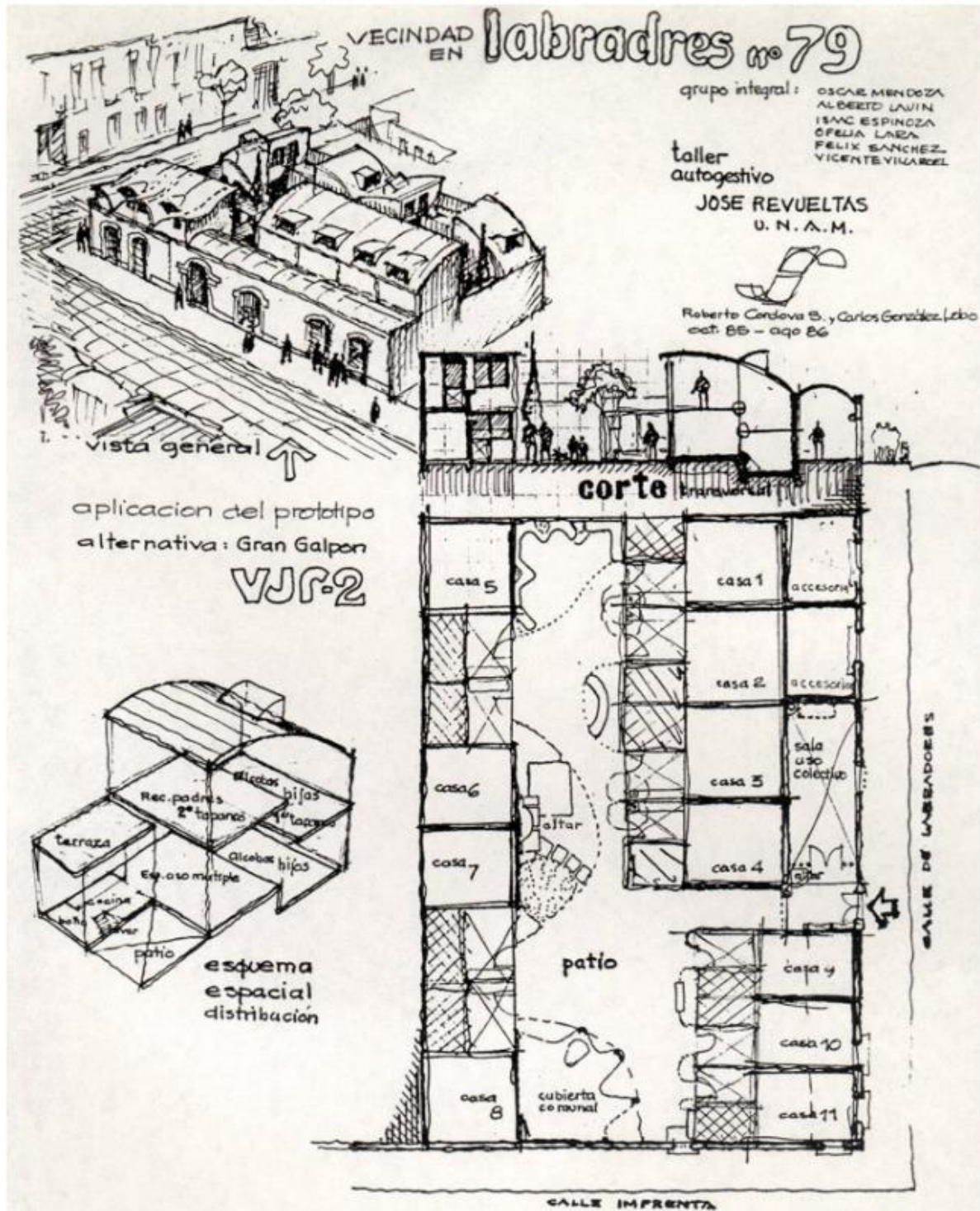


Figure 2. González Lobo's plan for a tenement housing project completed in Mexico City between 1985-1986. The plan appears in Humberto González Ortiz's doctoral

dissertation, *Carlos González Lobo: caminos hacia lo alternativo dentro del ámbito conceptual, proyectual y contextual de la arquitectura* (2002).



Figure 3. *Cecil O'Gorman House* by Juan O'Gorman, 1929. Unidentified photographer. Museo de la Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo.

Like his predecessors, González Lobo was committed to solving the housing problems in the country and continued doing so until his death in April of 2021. Presenting at “El patrimonio moderno en Iberoamérica: protección y coordinación internacional” first international colloquium in 2005, González Lobo exposed the failures of the Mexican government and of modern architectural projects that claim to protect urban heritage and legacy yet fail to fulfill the actual needs of citizens living in the city. In his talk, González Lobo presented an argument in favor of utilizing small, unused empty sites in Mexico City in order to create more livable spaces. At the conference he emphasized,

Qué sucede si en esos barrios nos enfrentamos a que sólo hay casas. ¿Conocen la práctica del viviendismo semioficial y de la rapiña urbana? GEO te presenta fotografías aéreas de 50 mil por 50 mil casas, todas igualitas, y no hay un pedacito para una tienda en donde comprar las medialunas de grasa, los cerillos o los chipotles, ni eso. Pero mucho menos hay una catedral, el lugar de la [sic] reunión de la feligresía; mucho menos el lugar de la convivencia, los espacios públicos. Y cuando ya están instalados los que van a las casas ordenadas y los que hicieron la ciudad desordenada, que no deja de ser la más sugestiva, encuentran relingos o retacitos en donde invitan, y aquí por eso yo considero que el doctor Mederico Faivre, más que patrimonialista, es combatiente; también en esos retazos se puede hacer ciudad. Y esa ciudad junto con el resto de la vivienda desordenada adquiere significación y sentido. Y quizá sería una de las aportaciones patrimoniales que espero en el futuro interesen a la reflexión de algunos.

[What happens if in those neighborhoods we are faced with the fact that there are only houses? Do you know the practice of semi-official housing and urban

pillage? GEO presents aerial photographs of 50 thousand by 50 thousand houses, all the same, and there is not a bit of space for a store where you can buy croissants, matches, or even chipotles. But much less is there a cathedral, the meeting place of the congregation; and even less likely a place of coexistence, public spaces. And when those who go to their tidy houses are installed and those who made the disorderly city, which is still the most suggestive, they find *relingos* or little remnants where they entertain, and this is why I consider that Dr. Mederico Faivre, more than patrimonialist, a combatant; in these remnants you can also make a city. And that city along with the rest of the disorderly dwelling acquires significance and meaning. And perhaps it would be one of the patrimonial contributions that I hope in the future will interest the reflection of some] (“El patrimonio moderno en Iberoamérica” 153-154).

In this excerpt González Lobo defines the *relingo* as scraps or remnants of the city where he claims, “también en esos retazos se puede hacer ciudad. Y esa ciudad junto con el resto de la vivienda desordenada adquiere significación y sentido” [You can also make a city in these remnants. And that city along with the rest of the disorderly dwelling acquires significance and meaning.] (154). Thus, it is clear that for González Lobo small spaces that are seemingly useless have been repurposed and continue to be used in meaningful ways by people in the city. On his part, Humberto González Ortiz explains that *relingos* also invite us to rethink and consolidate an alternative kind of architecture that is present and common in “Third World” countries where it is common for inhabitants to appropriate and occupy both plazas and streets (“Arquitectura,” 123). Furthermore, in his 2012 university thesis “Albergue para indigentes: Relingo urbano en la colonia Guerrero Distrito Federal” Daniel Centeno Hernández explains that,

La teoría de los relingos sostiene que el tejido urbano puede ser zurcido o remendado por medio de elementos arquitectónicos que sirvan de parches. Para poder lograr una armonía urbana, la teoría de los relingos propone utilizar conceptos primordiales con los cuales se construye una ciudad por medio de elementos arquitectónicos que aporten un enriquecimiento al contexto urbano próximo.

[The theory of relingos holds that the urban fabric can be sewn or patched up by means of architectural elements that serve as patches. In order to achieve urban harmony, the theory of relingos proposes to use primordial concepts with which a city is built by means of architectural elements that provide enrichment to the nearby urban context.] (3-4).

Thus, architectural *relingos* are intended to serve as patches in order to create and provide urban harmony. In *Papeles falsos* (2010) Luiselli explains that her understanding of *relingos* departs from the work of González Lobo which is further explained by the theory of *relingos* mentioned above. Additionally, in her essay entitled “Relingos” from the same collection she asserts,

Restaurar: maquillar espacios que deja en cualquier superficie el taladro del tiempo. Escribir es un proceso de restauración a la inversa. Un restaurador rellena huecos en una superficie donde ya existe una imagen más o menos acabada; el escritor, en cambio, trabaja a partir de las fisuras y los huecos. En esto se parecen el arquitecto y el escritor. Escribir: rellenar relingos.

No, escribir no es rellenar huecos (construir una casa, un edificio, en un espacio vacío tampoco lo es necesariamente). Quizá sea más acertada la imagen de los

bonsáis de Alejandro Zambra: <<Escritor es el que borra...Cortar, podar:
encontrar una forma que ya estaba ahí>>.

Pero las palabras no son plantas y, en todo caso, los jardines son para los poetas
de corazón: los de corazón ajardinado. La prosa es para los que tienen espíritu de
albañil.

Escribir: taladrar paredes, romper ventanas, dinamitar edificios. Excavaciones
profundas para encontrar—¿encontrar qué?—, no encontrar nada.

Escritor es el que distribuye silencios y vacíos.

Escribir: hacerle hueco a la lectura.

Escribir: hacer relingos.

[Restoration: plastering over the cracks left on any surface by the erosion of time.

Sidewalks

Writing: an inverse process of restoration. A restorer fills the holes in a surface on
which a more or less finished image already exists; a writer starts from the
fissures and the holes. In this sense, an architect and a writer are alike. Writing:
filling in relingos.

No, writing isn't filling gaps—nor is it constructing a house, a building, just to fill up an empty space.

Perhaps Alejandro Zambra's bonsai image might come closer: <<A writer is a person who rubs out. . . . Cutting, lopping: finding a form that was already there>>.

But words are not plants and, in any case, gardens are for the poets with orderly, landscaped hearts. Prose is for those with a builder's spirit.

Writing: drilling walls, breaking windows, blowing up buildings. Deep excavations to find—to find what? To find nothing.

A writer is a person who distributes silences and empty spaces.

Writing: making *relingos*.] (Luiselli *Papeles falsos*, 78-79).¹²³

The use of words such as “restorer”, “architect”, and “builder” reintroduces the theory of *relingos* while at the same time it also establishing a direct comparison between the work of the builder and that of the writer. By doing this, Luiselli is inviting writers to “drill walls”, “break windows” and to “blow up buildings”—that is, to transform and write texts by committing to

¹²³ This is Christina MacSweeney's translation.

employing similar actions in the text itself in order to create spaces. In the citations above I have recreated the spatial typographical gaps in the text that are present in both the printed version in Spanish as well as in the digital version in English. Furthermore, if both the writer and the architect work with *relingos*, what do readers do with the empty spaces or *relingos* created by writers in literary works such as *Los ingravidos*? This is one of the questions that I consider in this chapter. Moreover, this excerpt from Luiselli's essay also introduces an architectural lens into the literary form and therefore creates a linkage between the architectural spaces of the city, and the architectural elements or organizational features in both, her work of fiction and non-fiction. I argue that Luiselli's conception of *relingos* in *Papeles falsos* is formally applied in *Los ingravidos* through a series of multiple layers that helps to explain the seemingly fragmentary style and the main themes presented in the narration. One layer establishes the porosity of the novel through the back and forth alternation that happens between the narrative voices in each passage of text. The narrative voices travel between Mexico City and New York City in the 1920s, the 1950s, and the present—resulting in a constant moving and bending of time and space. A second layer is observed through the presence of metafiction when the narrators are conscious of the literary world and reflect about the work of the writer and about writing. Luiselli conceives the *relingo* as “an emptiness, an absence—is a sort of depository for possibilities, a place that can be seized by the imagination and inhabited by our phantom-follies. Cities need those vacant lots, those silent gaps where the mind can wander freely” (“Relingos: The Cartography”). In this way, the *relingos* in *Los ingravidos* ensure the porosity of the narration and disrupt the traditional linearity and chronology of the literary form. At the same time, the presence of *relingos* in the text creates the space necessary to wonder and thus imagine other possibilities such as the unlikely connection between Gilberto Owen and the woman

narrator that we find in the novel. In the following sections I will explain how these layers function and overlap in the narration.

A particular feature of the narration is the novel's apparent fragmentary typographical arrangement, which is comprised of textual passages, or fragments, that alternate between the narrative voices in time and space. Typographical space in *Los ingravidos* is distinguished by the continuous placement of one asterisk in order to separate each textual passage. Visually, this arrangement creates small gaps, or small *relingos* on the page that are noticeable upon opening the book.¹²⁴ The resulting *relingos* allow the reader to pause and to “wonder freely,” as Luiselli herself suggested in her essay quoted above. Similar techniques were used by modernist authors in the early twentieth-century. For instance, in *Ulysses* (1920) James Joyce used dinkus and other typographical symbols, in order to highlight some dimension of the materiality of language and to remind the readers to pay attention to every marking (Alioto, “Ode to the Dinkus”). As such, Luiselli's use of asterisks is not a new or innovative typographical feature, however, their presence in *Los ingravidos* demonstrate a deep understanding and an appreciation of both literary and architectural modernist style. Simultaneously, the use of these *relingos* or gaps in the text provides the reader a break and a space to wonder and to imagine other realities and possibilities. Through the use of asterisks, Luiselli offers a space to fill in the gaps of the stories that she constructs and (re)constructs in the text, but ultimately, the decision to pause and wonder freely is up to the reader.

¹²⁴ Similar typographical choices are also observed in *Tell me How it Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*, a work of non-fiction where Luiselli uses the dinkus (a series of three asterisks that look like this ***) to divide textual passages.

Though not entirely consistent in her assertion, the narrator insists throughout the novel that she is writing a horizontal novel.¹²⁵ For example, she describes “Una novela horizontal, contada verticalmente” [A horizontal novel, told vertically] (Luiselli 66), followed by “No una novela fragmentaria. Una novela horizontal, contada verticalmente” [Not a fragmentary novel. A horizontal novel, told vertically] (Luiselli 74), and “Una novela vertical, contada horizontalmente. Una historia que se tiene que ver desde abajo, como Manhattan desde el *subway*” [A vertical novel, told horizontally. A story that has to be seen from below, like Manhattan from the subway] (Luiselli 128) appear throughout the narration. These descriptions of the organization of the plot present a critique of the traditional act of writing and telling a story based on our reading patterns in the Western hemisphere: starting at the top of the page and ending at the bottom. However, her insistence on describing the text as a “horizontal novel” also suggests that the story is traversing both time and space while it simultaneously uses the imagery of the moving subway train to create this connection. Let us analyze the idea of horizontality that the narrator mentions, that is, the idea of moving across in space. In a passage where the narrator cannot be identified the text reads, “El metro, sus múltiples paradas, sus averías, sus aceleraciones repentinas, sus zonas oscuras, podría funcionar como esquema del tiempo de esa otra novela” [The subway, its multiple stops, its breakdowns, its sudden accelerations, its dark areas, could function as a time scheme for that other novel] (Luiselli *Los ingravidos* 65). This passage introduces a conceptualization of time in the narration that is established through a comparison between the features of the text and the journey that the subway cars and its passengers make across Manhattan. By moving horizontally and traversing space, the journey

¹²⁵ This inconsistency can be partially attributed to the role of both the woman and Owen being unreliable narrators.

offers insight into the intentionality of these chronological gaps as well as the chosen organizational structure and the use of space between each textual passage. Hence, this fragment serves as an example of the presence of porosity that happens in the novel through the continuous use of asterisks and *relingos* in the narration. Furthermore, the idea of horizontality establishes a relationship with the subway trains as it resembles the movement of a train traveling across the city. Additionally, a connection between the organization of the plotline and the typographical presence of asterisks used to mark each passage of text is established. As a result, as we read down the page each textual passage is separated by a single asterisk all throughout the narration.¹²⁶ For the most part, this arrangement helps us to identify when the narrative voices change but there are also many passages where it is not clear who the narrative voice is.

ii. Porosity in *Los ingravidos*

Los ingravidos is narrated in the first-person by two different narrators: a woman whose name we never learn, and Gilberto Owen. The real-life Owen was a little-known Mexican poet who lived in New York City during the late 1920s and was part of the Mexican modernist group known as the *Contemporáneos*. The story alternates in time and space, recounting the lives and memories of both narrators, whose voices become interwoven together through a series of events, as well as chronological and spatial jumps. Because the woman narrator also lived in New York City in the past, the voices sometimes overlap with each other, making it progressively more difficult to distinguish who is narrating the story, where, and when. In this way, the novel maps the lives of two different characters at different times and in different

¹²⁶ This image also reminds us of the small dots used to mark the subway stations in the maps of the New York City subway system.

spaces. While the woman narrator recounts her past in New York City from her home in modern-day Mexico City, Owen narrates his own version of events from New York City and Philadelphia in the 1920s and 1950s respectively. The novel begins *in medias res* when the woman narrator, a married mother of two children and living in Mexico City, is awakened by her son. In a parallel manner, which also creates an architecturally balanced narration, the novel ends after an earthquake shakes their house in Mexico City and the same kid, breaking the laws of space and time, uncovers Owen and screams “Encontrado” [Found].

Regina Cardoso Nelky analyzed the presence of doubles and metaliterature in *Los ingravidos* but the focus was limited to only a few examples in the narration. Relatedly, doubles and metaliterature are also present in the works of modernist writers from across the world. Examining Luiselli’s broader *oeuvre*, including her theorization of space and the presence of some modernist features, offers a clearer understanding of this novel and of the rest of her work in relation to contemporary Mexican and U.S./Mexican literary production. Furthermore, Luiselli’s *Translation Spaces: Mexico City in the International Modernist Circuit* does not isolate Mexican authors of the twentieth-century as “vanguard” authors, but instead presents a compelling argument for the existence of a Mexican modernism in which intellectuals, artists, and architects actively participated during the 1920s and 1930s. Luiselli explains that this was possible through a series of exchanges that included translations, in-country stays, and friendships between Mexican, American, and European modernist authors, many of whom spent time living in Mexico. Through a comparative reading of translations, architectural spaces, journals, and other cultural artifacts planned and published in Mexico City, her work maps both “the physical and the cultural spaces that foreigners and the foreign occupied in 1920s and 1930s Mexico City” (11). As a result, it is no surprise that *Los ingravidos* utilizes similar stylistic elements and shows

affinity to the works of modernist authors. Furthermore, in some instances in *Los ingravidos* Luiselli also makes direct references to the primary sources that she consulted for her dissertation project, such as Gilberto Owen's letters to his friends.

There are many references to both well-known and non-canonical figures of the twentieth-century throughout *Los ingravidos*. For instance, in only the second passage the narrative voice states that they would have liked to begin the story in the same way in which Hemingway's *A Movable Feast* ends,

Todo empezó en otra ciudad y en otra vida, anterior a ésta de ahora pero posterior a aquella. Por eso no puedo escribir esta historia como yo quisiera—como si todavía estuviera ahí y fuera sólo esa otra persona—. Me cuesta hablar de calles y de caras como si aún las recorriera todos los días. No encuentro los tiempos verbales precisos. Era joven, tenía las piernas fuertes y flacas.

(Hubiera querido empezar como termina *A Moveable Feast* de Hemingway)

[It all started in another city and in another life, before this one now but after that other one. That's why I can't write this story the way I want to - as if I were still there and I was just that other person. It is hard for me to talk about streets and faces as if I still walk them every day. I can't find the precise verb tenses. I was young, my legs were strong and skinny.]

(I would have liked to start as Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* ends)] (Luiselli *Los ingravidos* 11).¹²⁷

It is impossible to identify the narrative voice in this fragment and the absence of gender identifiers makes this entire passage ambiguous at best. Although the reason for the use of parenthesis in the last sentence is unclear, it is possible that this is the first narrator/narrator intervention in the text. Because the fragment immediately before this one is clearly about the woman narrator, perhaps this one inconspicuously introduces Owen's narrative voice in the text. Moreover, there are other similar stylistic features throughout the narration, such as short biographical notes about Owen and references to works of literature that dealt with the period or were published during the 1920s and 1930s. "There is Never Any End to Paris" is the last chapter of Hemingway's 1964 edition of *A Movable Feast*, which ends when the narrator states,

There is never any ending to Paris and the memory of each person who has lived in it differs from that of any other. We always returned to it no matter who we were or how it was changed or with what difficulties, or ease, it could be reached. Paris was always worth it and you received return for whatever you brought to it. But this is how Paris was in the early days when we were very poor and very happy (Hemingway 211).

This quote from Hemingway's from his memoir simultaneously portrays the emotions and strong connections that Paris evoked in the author, and it transports the reader to the post-World War I period of the 1920s and 1930s when American authors such as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound and others emigrated to Europe. This group of American writers and poets included both men and women and was known as the "Lost Generation." Moreover, the

¹²⁷ This is my translation from the original in Spanish.

period was also marked by many other literary figures of the non-anglophone world such as Federico García Lorca in Spain and Mexican authors such as Salvador Novo, Xavier Villaurrutia, and Gilberto Owen. Although the connection between modernist literature and culture from around the world and the one produced by Mexican authors in the twentieth-century is not well-circulated within the United States academe, it has been documented in scholarship in Spanish for a long time, and now also includes both Luiselli's scholarly contributions as well as her work of fiction.¹²⁸

A similar scene plays out in the middle of the narration when Owen's narrative voice becomes fully present. Writing about his arrival to New York City in 1928, Owen says,

Empezar así: todo sucedió en otra ciudad y en otra vida. Era el verano de 1928. Trabajaba como escribiente en el consulado mexicano de Nueva York, redactando oficios sobre el precio del cacahuete mexicano en el mercado yanqui, que estaba a punto de reventar... Han pasado casi veinticinco años desde entonces: aunque quisiera, no podría escribir esta historia como si todavía estuviera ahí y fuera ese joven flaco y lleno de entusiasmo, traduciendo a Dickinson y a Williams.

(Me hubiera gustado empezar como empieza *The Crack-Up* de Fitzgerald)

[Start like this: everything happened in another city and in another life. It was the summer of 1928. I was working as a clerk at the Mexican consulate in New York, writing notes on the price of Mexican peanuts in the Yankee market, which was

¹²⁸ See the work of Alfonso Reyes, who mentored and supported the *Contemporáneos*. Also, the work of Carlos Monsiváis and Guillermo Sheridan cited in this chapter, as well as Merlin H. Forster's *Las vanguardias literarias en México y la América Central* (2001).

about to burst ... Almost twenty-five years have passed since then: even if I wanted to, I couldn't write this story as if I were still there and I was that skinny, enthusiastic young man, translating Dickinson and Williams.

(I would have liked to start like Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up*) [Luiselli *Los ingravidos* 64).¹²⁹

This particular passage resembles the ambiguous one at the beginning of the novel, and it also includes a parenthetical intervention with a reference to a work of fiction by a modernist writer. However, unlike in the earlier passage, here Owen's voice is clearly identifiable. Specific details about his job and his translations of American authors, which the real-life Owen completed, help to identify Owen's narrative voice. Moreover, part I of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up*, which was published by in *Esquire* magazine in 1936, and makes an appearance in *Los ingravidos* right at the moment when Owen begins narrating his own story. In *The Crack-Up* Fitzgerald explains,

Of course all life is a process of breaking down, but the blows that do the dramatic side of the work—the big sudden blows that come, or seem to come, from outside—the ones you remember and blame things on and, in moments of weakness, tell your friends about, don't show their effect all at once. There is another sort of blow that comes from within—that you don't feel until it's too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again. The first sort of breakage seems to happen quick—

¹²⁹ This is my translation from the original in Spanish.

the second kind happens almost without your knowing it but is realized suddenly indeed.

Before I go on with this short history, let me make a general observation—the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise (Fitzgerald *The Crack-up*).

These first two paragraphs at the beginning of *The Crack-Up* stress the importance of having or gaining the capacity to hold more than one truth at the same time. Therefore, we can connect Fitzgerald's reference in *Los ingravidos* to the bidirectional relationship that is established between the woman narrator and Owen's narrative voice. Both of their stories unfold across the pages in the form of passages that are divided by asterisks, and a series of flashbacks to the past, and meditations of their respective present. By creating a porous narration through the use of these *relingos*, or empty spaces, the novel is able to present multiple stories and perspectives that are also very subjective and open to interpretation. It is also worth bringing to the fore Albert Einstein's theory of relativity as it was and continues to be one of the most influential theories of physics to be proposed. After the theory was published in 1915, news covering the story traveled all over the world, including Mexico. There is evidence that by May of 1921 the Mexican newspaper *El Informador* was publishing updates detailing Einstein's arrival in New York City (Figure 4).¹³⁰

¹³⁰ In *Modernist Physics: Waves, Particles, and Relativities in the Writings of Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence* Rachel Crossland rejects 1919 (when proof of the theory of relativity was announced at the Joint Eclipse Meeting of the Royal Society and the Royal Astronomical Society) as the one and only important date for Albert Einstein's pivotal popularity and recognition. Instead, she argues that Einstein's work from 1905 had been circulating before the 1919 announcement and should be the starting point

PAGINA NUMERO SEIS
EL INFORMADOR
MAYO 21 DE MAYO DE 1921

Espectaculos Para Hoy

Cine Lux

La bella historia de
DOROTHY PHILLIPS
en la gran pelicula
"THE LITTLE GIRL"
Cine Lux, 10 y 12.30 y 8.30.
Entrada: 10 y 12.30 y 8.30.

Cine Opera

La bella historia de
DOROTHY PHILLIPS
en la gran pelicula
"THE LITTLE GIRL"
Cine Opera, 10 y 12.30 y 8.30.
Entrada: 10 y 12.30 y 8.30.

TEATRO CUANTEMOC

La bella historia de
DOROTHY PHILLIPS
en la gran pelicula
"THE LITTLE GIRL"
Teatro Cuantemoc, 10 y 12.30 y 8.30.
Entrada: 10 y 12.30 y 8.30.

Cine Royal

La bella historia de
DOROTHY PHILLIPS
en la gran pelicula
"THE LITTLE GIRL"
Cine Royal, 10 y 12.30 y 8.30.
Entrada: 10 y 12.30 y 8.30.

Cine Rialto

La bella historia de
DOROTHY PHILLIPS
en la gran pelicula
"THE LITTLE GIRL"
Cine Rialto, 10 y 12.30 y 8.30.
Entrada: 10 y 12.30 y 8.30.

HOY SABADO

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La deliciosa creación de DOROTHY PHILLIPS, basada
en un argumento actual, interesante y bello.

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DOMINGO 22 DE MAYO DE 1921

En los Cines de esta Ciudad, la super-producción de REX BEACH, (El más célebre
hoy cinematográfico)

La Redentora

En 3 partes por el popular
mimico CHARLIE CHAPLIN
7 partes GOLDWYN.

AVENTURERO

En 3 partes por el popular
mimico CHARLIE CHAPLIN
7 partes GOLDWYN.

TEATRO DEGRALLADO

HOY SABADO 21 DE MAYO HOY

A las 9 P. M.

GRANDIOSO FESTIVAL PRO-JALISCO,
PATROCINADO POR LA CAMARA DE COMERCIO

PROGRAMA:

- 1.-OBERTURA THANNHAUSER WAGNER, Ejecutada por la BANDA DE LA CENADARERIA DEL ESTADO.
- 2.-Aluscion PRO-JALISCO, por el periodista con-
tribuyente ANTONIO VENEZUELA MARTINEZ.
- 3.-ESTRENO, ESTRENO de la comedia en 3
actos

EL RAYO!

DE PEDRO MUÑOZ SECA

Música: 2 Grandiosos Funciones 2

"El Informador" Vale 10 Cvs.

PLAZA DE TEROS DEL PROGRESO

Monumental, surtido para la tarde del

Domingo 22 de mayo

Grandiosa Presentación del refrigerante español

JOAQUIN JIMENEZ Trianero

Quien alternan con el espléndido malador
DANIEL NAVARRO -ALEGRIAS-
y estarán en 1.º hermanito, ¡¡¡¡¡

Sta. Rosa

Precios populares.

No hay que faltar

TONIKEL

ENRIQUECE LA SANGRE Y
FORTIFICA LOS NERVIOS.
DA FUERZA, ENERGIA Y
VITALIDAD A LAS
PERSONAS DEBILES,
ANEMICAS Y NERVIOSAS

PREPARADO EN LOS
LABORATORIOS DE LA
"SALVITA"

SECRETARIA DE HACIENDA Y CREDITO PUBLICO DEPARTAMENTO DE BIENES NACIONALES

CONVOCATORIA

El día 14 de mayo del año en curso, a las diez a. m., en punto se procederá en el Departamento de Bienes Nacionales de la Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público al remate de la propiedad de los terrenos de la Federación, ubicados en esta ciudad, y que se segun-
da se expresan:

Nombre:

Tres Cuartas	\$ 557,200.00
San Mateo	\$ 457,174.40
San Carlos	\$ 427,774.40
San Pedro y San Pablo	\$ 598,900.00
Perálito	\$ 210,105.60
Rio de la Laja	\$ 124,587.40
Doctor Liviata	\$ 102,278.40
Boriquien, Puebla	\$ 436,149.00
Tren de Artilleria	\$ 369,210.00
Invitados	\$ 144,145.00
Buena Vista	\$ 224,815.00
Guadalupe Hidalgo, D. F.	\$ 70,144.00
Guadalupe Hidalgo, D. F.	\$ 5,224.40

Las personas que deseen adquirir la propiedad de al-
guno de los terrenos que se rematan, deberán compare-
cer al Departamento de Bienes Nacionales ya citado, a
las diez y hora señalada y presentar sus posturas por es-
crito, rubricadas, donde luego un certificado de deces-
to expedido por la Comisión Monetaria, por la cantidad
equivalente a un diez por ciento de la base señalada,
para el remate de cada uno de los terrenos inmuebles, a
fin de garantizar su postura y las puestas, en su caso, de-
berán librarse precisamente en efectivo por el importe
de ellas.

México, 24 de abril de 1921.
R. E. MUZQUIZ.

NO SE DESCUIDE NO LO DEJE PARA MAÑANA

RENALURICAS

PARA LOS
RINONES Y VEJIGA

CURAN DOLORES DE ESPALDA, CADERA Y CINTURA, REUMATISMO E HIPOFOSIA, DESARREGLOS RENALES Y VESICALES
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PROMOCION DEBIDA

Requena Tardes

LA GIGANTICA

Requena Tardes

LA GIGANTICA

Requena Tardes

UNA NUEVA Y MARAVILLOSA TEORIA SOBRE LA RELATIVIDAD DE LOS ESPACIOS Y DEL TIEMPO

ALBERT EINSTEIN VE MUY ESTRECHO EL MUNDO

LA ENTREVISTA DE UN PERIODICO AMERICANO CON EL
SABIO PROFESOR ALEMAN

El Profesor Albert Einstein, uno de los más grandes científicos de la actualidad, ha publicado en la revista "Science" un artículo que ha causado gran sensación en el mundo científico. En este artículo, Einstein expone su teoría de la relatividad, que revolucionó la física clásica de Newton. Según Einstein, el tiempo y el espacio no son absolutos, sino que están relativos al observador. Esto significa que el tiempo puede fluir más lento o más rápido dependiendo de la velocidad a la que se mueva el observador. Esta teoría ha sido confirmada por experimentos y es la base de la física moderna.

CABLES

EN LA PLAZA DE TEROS DEL PROGRESO

Monumental, surtido para la tarde del

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Quien alternan con el espléndido malador
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Sta. Rosa

Precios populares.

No hay que faltar

Figure 4. Page from *El Informador* published on May 21st, 1921. Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México.

when discussing the exchanges that happened between scientific discoveries and literary and cultural objects (3).

- 183 -

This 1921 newspaper article highlights that, “El notable sabio alemán, arribó por el mes de abril a los Estados Unidos, para predicar acerca del Zionismo, así como con el objeto de propagar su teoría revolucionaria de la relatividad.” [The remarkable German scholar arrived in the United States in April to lecture about Zionism, as well as to propagate his revolutionary theory of relativity] (*El Informador* “Una nueva y maravillosa”). This newspaper coverage of Albert Einstein’s visit to the United States helps to contextualize how this information spread across Mexico as well as confirms Einstein’s popularity around the world. Though *Los ingrátidos* makes no mention of the theory of relativity directly, the narration is unquestionably informed by, or at least responding to both the cultural and scientific context of this period. Furthermore, the theory continues to hold true and led to the discovery of black holes in 1964 and to other recent quantum physics phenomena.¹³¹ Because Einstein’s work creates a fundamental link between time and space, some of the scenes in the novel are better understood through a reading that considers the literary and cultural interpretations that developed at the time.¹³² The theory of relativity was attractive to artists, intellectuals, and critics alike throughout the twentieth-century and many continue to be fascinated by the range of possibilities that the theory allows. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, when Einstein was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1921, he had already turned into a cultural icon. Scientists and intellectuals in Mexico such as Sotero Prieto, Miguel Bustamante, Elpidio López, and Ricardo Mónges

¹³¹ Scientific discoveries including ideas related to time dilation, the twin paradox, the expanding universe, black holes, and nuclear power, have departed from the ideas proposed in Einstein’s theory of relativity.

¹³² The theory of relativity responded to theories proposed by Isaac Newton and James Clerk Maxwell and essentially proposes that the faster you move through space, the slower you move through time due to how gravity affects the space-time continuum. Thus, Einstein postulated that time and space are not fixed, instead they are intertwined, fluid, and malleable.

López, were publishing about the theory of relativity in the early 1920s,¹³³ and only a few years later the theory had caught the attention of figures such José Ortega y Gasset and Pablo Picasso in Spain.

Writing about the dynamics between science and literature in the early twentieth century, Rachel Crossland uses the concept of the “shared discourse,” which is a kind of middle road approach to “explore some of the ideas, anxieties, and language that literature, physics, and the wider culture shared in the early twentieth century” (11). In her book *Modernist Physics: Waves, Particles, and Relativities in the Writings of Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence*, Crossland analyzes Albert Einstein’s 1905 papers, the literary works of Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, as well as the work of other authors and concludes that,

The context of the early twentieth century clearly included the issues raised by a rapidly growing and increasingly organized population, as well as by mass urbanization, leading literary authors, scientists, and psychologists to turn their attention to the movements and interactions of masses. Contemporary research on molecular movements may well have been provoked, or at least encouraged, by the cultural setting in which scientists found themselves; but even if not, that setting certainly provided a range of useful images with which to explain and describe such interactions. Meanwhile, images of molecular collisions and of individual particles suspended within a medium seem to have resonated with literary writers, whose individual characters are frequently placed in scenes of a similar formulation. This is not to say that scientists were exclusively influenced

¹³³ See M.A. Moreno Corral, “Relatividad general; su presencia temprana en México.” *Revista mexicana de física E*, vol. 63, no. 1, June 2017, pp. 56–62.

by the crowds around them, nor that writers were exclusively influenced by scientific models of molecular interaction (178).

Crossland employs a multidisciplinary approach in order to understand the dynamics between science and literature, and suggests that each discipline interacted with the approaches of the other in different but interrelated ways during the period. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to say that the relationship and interactions between the scientific and artistic or cultural artifacts was one-directional only. In my view, this stance is similar to Luiselli's argument that modernist writers across the world were participating in a sort of bidirectional exchange of ideas. As discussed by Crossland above, it is possible that multiple social and scientific conditions gave way to both the scientific discoveries that occurred at the time, as well as to the artistic interpretations that were produced during the same period of time. In this way, Luiselli's work and her references to modernist writers, and especially to Owen's literary production, is also connected to the scientific ideas that were circulating in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

In *Los ingravidos* space-time dynamics exist in constant tension. For instance, there is a passage where the woman narrator recounts a significant experience that happened to her in New York City. While reading Owen's *Obras* at the library, she finds his New York City address in a letter that he had sent to his friend Xavier Villaurrutia. Excited to see the familiar address, the woman narrator finds Owen's old building, but is accidentally locked out on the rooftop overnight. After finding a dried-up plant, similar to the one that Owen mentions later in the narration, the woman reveals,

Tal vez me congelé, tal vez morí esa noche de hipotermia. En todo caso, esa fue la primera noche que tuve que pasar con el fantasma de Gilberto Owen. En la vida

hay giros de tuerca, pero fue a partir de entonces que comencé, poco a poco, a existir como habitada por otra posible vida que no era la mía, pero que bastaba imaginar para abandonarme a ella por completo.

[Maybe I froze, maybe I died that night of hypothermia. In any case, that was the first night I had to spend with the ghost of Gilberto Owen. In life there are twists and turns, but it was from then on that I began, little by little, to exist as inhabited by another possible life that was not mine, but one that was enough to imagine in order to abandon myself to it completely]¹³⁴ (Luiselli *Los ingravidos*, 33).

The same passage also exposes a sense of detachment and not belonging when the narrator retells her experience of sleeping on the rooftop of the building, using old newspapers to protect herself from the cold. Right after suggesting that she might have died that night in the rooftop, the narrator explains that in her present life in Mexico City she is unable to sleep, which only reinforces the idea of ghostliness and the blurring of boundaries that is recurrent throughout the narration. The woman narrator then continues explaining that the next morning she had to entice a little Black girl named Dolores Preciado¹³⁵ to open the rooftop door for her. Moreover, the mood of ghostliness and the bending and fusing of time and space is intensified later in the narration when we learn that Owen, the narrator, also owned an orange tree in the 1920s.

However, we also learn that Owen's orange tree dries up while he is on a trip to Niagara Falls.

¹³⁴ This is my translation from the original in Spanish.

¹³⁵ In Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955) Dolores Preciado is Pedro Páramo's first wife and Juan Preciado's mother. It is worth noting the connection between *Los ingravidos* and a book that is part of the Mexican literary canon of the twentieth-century and now considered part of universal literature. *Pedro Páramo* is a story about a ghost town called Comala where mainly ghosts inhabit. *Pedro Páramo* is the second of only three books (*El llano en llamas*, 1953; *El gallo de oro*, 1980) written by Juan Rulfo's and continues to be a point of reference for young authors such as Luiselli.

He explains that upon finding the dead tree, “me puso tan triste su repentina muerte seca, me pareció tan profética a su manera, que subí las escaleras de mi edificio hasta la azotea y ahí mero lo abandoné” [Its sudden dry death made me so sad, it seemed so prophetic in its way, that I climbed the stairs of my building to the roof and just left it there]¹³⁶ (Luiselli *Los ingrátidos*, 111). Like most of the other parallels and doubles in the narration, this one is “discovered” by the readers as they progress or move through the narration. This is possible by reading about seemingly trivial details early in the narration only to see them reappear and connect in new scenes by either one of the narrators as they (re)tell or (re)construct the story from a different point of view or by adding details not previously mentioned.

Luiselli’s contribution to the digital collection of personal maps *Where You Are Mapping Project* (2013), which was published both as a physical book and as a digital archive, points to her continued interest in understanding and mapping the spaces and places she inhabits. “Swings of Harlem,” the author’s contribution to this collective project is comprised of a series of Polaroid photos that Luiselli took around the Harlem neighborhood in New York City (Figure 5). The photos are mapped and arranged digitally in a live map of the city that is displayed alongside the photographs that Luiselli took and the text that she wrote for each entry. Her daughter and other people appear in the photographs, but some of them are very blurry—almost ghostly—and thus unrecognizable. Throughout the short texts that accompany the photos, we read Luiselli’s reflections of her childhood as well as her thoughts on motherhood and the relationship she has developed with her daughter, Maia. In the passages in the narration, Luiselli also reflects on Maia’s way of communicating, describing her innocent, yet poetic descriptions of the places that they visit together, although Luiselli does this alone sometimes, and the emotions that she feels

¹³⁶ This is my translation from the original in Spanish.

while spending time with her daughter. As we scroll down the page, we read the stories that the different swings and parks evoke in the author. Because the texts are very personal, anecdotal, and symbolic, the author's experiences at these places also reveal themselves to us, like the Polaroids she takes.

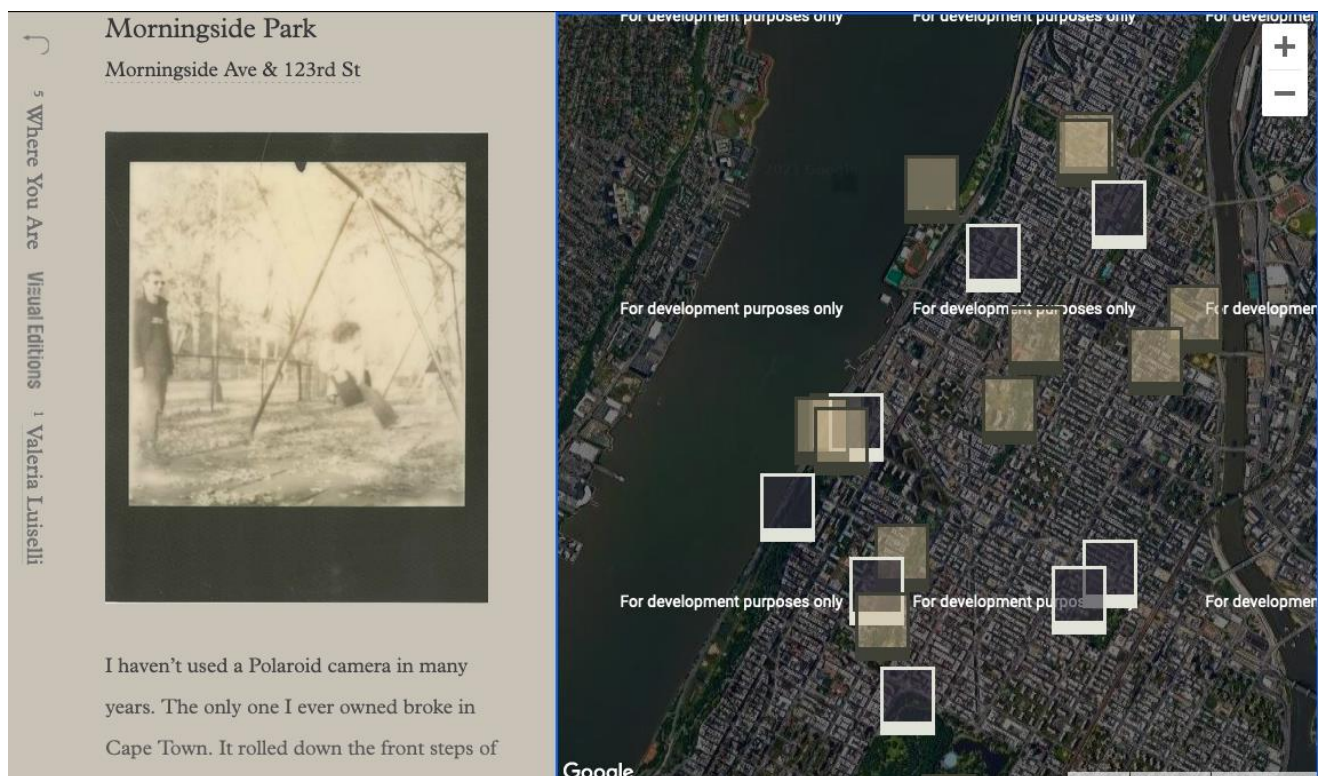


Figure 5. Screen capture of digital mapping project *Where You Are* displaying Luiselli's contribution entitled "Swings of Harlem."

David Seamon's concept of "place ballet" from *A Geography of the Lifeworld:*

Movement, Rest and Encounter is useful to understand situations where social interactions are so intense that they have the capacity of erasing and merging the boundaries between the self and the outer world. In *Los ingravidos*, this phenomenon is observed in certain situations between the two narrators when they are in public spaces such as at the subway station. According to Seamon a "place ballet" can happen in any kind of environment including indoors, outdoors, markets, transportations depots, and more. A "place ballet" is essentially a series of repeated "accidental" meetings of people in public places such as a favorite café. Seamon also explains that the "place ballet" is where "participants generally appreciate the climate of familiarity which grows and to which they become attached. The base of place ballet is body-subject, supporting a time-space continuity grounded in patterns of the past" (57). Consequently, there are instances, especially when moving through familiar places, in which these routines or place ballets can dissolve the boundaries between the self and the world, so that

Permeable boundaries allow the outsider to enter easily. They draw him in freely and sometimes he knows that he has entered only after he has arrived. Open doors, many windows, crossable streets, sounds from within, a vista sweeping into place —aspects such as these mark out a permeable edge allowing easy entrance. Closed doors; wide streets filled with speeding cars; blank facades; no visual, aural or olfactory allurements —these features shut the person out or insulate him from place (Seamon 149).

Seamon's concept of the place ballet as a porous or permeable space where the people experiencing it find comfort and familiarity helps us to further analyze the scene from *Los ingravidos* where Owen mentions seeing a dark-skinned woman with bags under her eyes riding

one of the subway cars and wearing a green hat and a red coat while he is waiting in the platform for his own train. Owen's narrative voice states, "En el vagón de enfrente, la cabeza apoyada contra la ventana, estaba la mujer, con un sombrero de tela verde oliva y un abrigo rojo, abotonado hasta el cuello. Iba leyendo un libro de tapa blanca. Inclinando un poco la cabeza, alcancé a leer el título, que para mi sorpresa era una palabra en español: <<Obras>>, decía" [In the opposite car, with the head leaning against the window was the woman, wearing an olive-green hat and a red coat, buttoned up to the neck. She was reading a book with a white cover. By tilting my head a little I managed to read the title, which to my surprise was a word in Spanish: <<Obras>>, it said]¹³⁷ (Luiselli *Los ingrátidos*, 111).

In many passages, including the one above, both characters seamlessly witness or merge into each other's reality. This is especially evident in the subway stations of New York City which have both the potential to become a place ballet for people who frequent the subway, as well as the potential to mimic a bending of time and space. Owen makes this clear when he describes that, "la mujer se me aparecía, sobre todo, en esos momentos en que dos trenes andan por vías paralelas a la misma velocidad durante unos instantes y uno puede ver a los demás pasar como si viera correr los cuadros de una cinta de celuloide" [The woman appeared to me, above all, in those moments when two trains travel on parallel tracks at the same speed for a few moments and one can see the others go by as if they were watching the running pictures of a celluloid tape] (Luiselli *Los ingrátidos* 93). This particular quote links the apparitions of the woman in Owen's reality to the specific space and time when the subway trains are moving at the same speed, thus facilitating a space-time association and opening up the narration to the

¹³⁷ This is my translation from the original in Spanish.

possibility of bending and interweaving of both realities—a breakage in the time-space continuum. Interestingly, the New York City Subway currently has 472 stations in operation and in 2020, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) launched a first of its kind live digital map for users of the New York City subway system. The live map has various features to improve the user experience, including one that allows users to see moving trains in real-time. In this way, what the novel imagined in 2011 is now observable digitally through the application. Because it allows users to track trains moving and crossing paths in real-life we can see trains approaching other trains like the gray lines inside the parallel blue lines shown in figure 6.

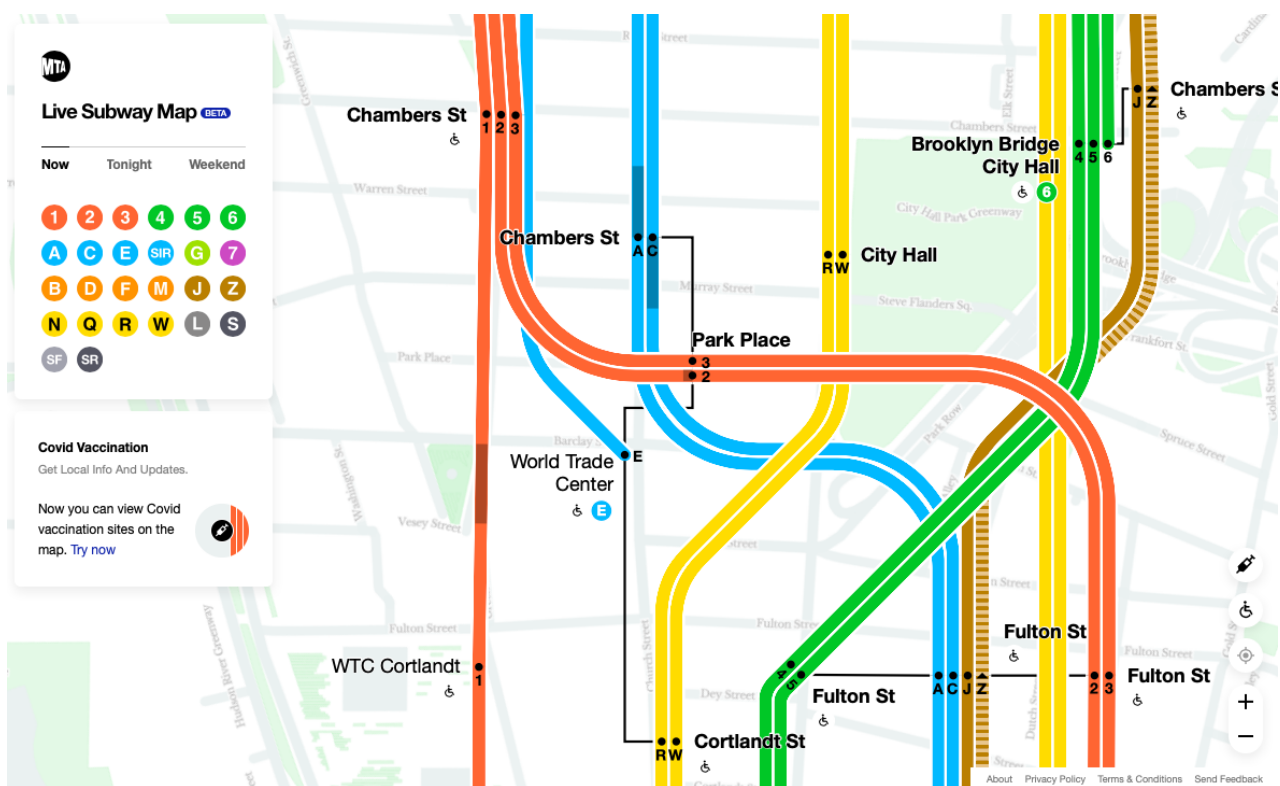


Figure 6. Screen capture of the live digital map launched by the MTA in 2020.

It is also worth noting that in the citation above, Owen's narrative voice mentions *Obras*, the title of the real-life Gilberto Owen's collected works that was published in 1979 by the Fondo de Cultura Económica, and published more than twenty years after his death in 1952. Taking the chronological information provided by the narration at face value renders this situation logically impossible. However, we must remember that there are both stylistic and narratological devices at play. Throughout the narration Luiselli masters the use of *relingos* and creates a porous narration that provides pauses and spaces for the reader. Thus, the use of these narrative devices as well as typographical breaks becomes an integral part of this work of fiction. We encounter multiple passages in the narration where both of these worlds, Owen's and the woman narrator's come together. For instance, when Owen suddenly starts seeing unfamiliar people and new objects in his apartment he finds, "Apariciones de muebles y decenas de libros que no había adquirido, desde luego las moscas y cucarachas, y sobre todo el árbol plantado en una maceta que un día encontré" [Appearances/apparitions of furniture and dozens of books that I had not acquired, of course the flies and cockroaches, and especially the tree planted in a pot that I found one day] (Luiselli 71).¹³⁸ The reader continues finding passages where unexplainable situations and linkages, arise and Owen describes more encounters later when he is waiting at the subway station,

Pero no sólo había visto a Ezra Pound. Me di cuenta un día, entre mis idas y vueltas del consulado, de que llevaba viendo una serie de personas en el *subway*,

¹³⁸ In "El pasaje como *modus operandi*: perspectivas simultáneas y recíprocamente excluyentes en *Los Ingrávidos* de Valeria Luiselli" Maria Pape has encountered evidence of the Latin American tradition of the fantastic in Luiselli's work and traces the North American neorealist tradition. Note in particular the mention and presence of cockroaches, which are recurring throughout the whole narration in both Owen's and the woman's worlds. There is an obvious link to Kafkaian imagery which also directly links the novel to the literary tradition, but it is also worth noting that the presence of cockroaches links the novel to the particular realities of New York City.

y que éstas no eran, por así decirlo de un modo, personas comunes, sino ecos de personas que tal vez habían vivido en la ciudad de arriba y ahora sólo transitaban por sus entrañas de ballena sobrecrecida. Entre esa gente había una mujer de cara morena y ojeras hondas que vi en repetidas ocasiones; a veces en el andén, esperando, otras a bordo del tren.

[But I had not only seen Ezra Pound. I realized one day, between my comings and goings from the consulate, that I had been seeing a number of people on the subway, and that these were not, so to speak, ordinary people, but echoes of people who perhaps had lived in the city above and now they were only passing through its overgrown whale entrails. Among those people there was a dark-faced woman with deep bags under her eyes that I saw repeatedly; sometimes on the platform, waiting, sometimes on board the train] (Luiselli *Los ingravidos*, 92).

Through Owen's passages, the encounters and experiences with famous literary figures and with the woman narrator in the subway become commonplace in the narration.¹³⁹ It is also through Owen that the reader learns information about the woman that she does not mention in her own narration of the story, like her looks and her clothing. We can also assume that the random notes that contain Gilberto Owen's apparent biographical information were written by the woman narrator while she was doing research in order to publish a fake book on Owen in New York City. As a result, both narrative voices add or sometimes distort each other's versions of the story, rendering both of them unreliable narrators.

iii. Metafiction in the text

¹³⁹ Owen claims to see Ezra Pound in the subway and also spends a few hours at the station with Federico García Lorca putting on a reading show.

Throughout the narration we observe multiple comments regarding the work of the writer and the purpose of literature. By associating her work with Gilberto Owen, Valeria Luiselli is also indicating that her work is cosmopolitan, new, and modern, like the works of the *Contemporáneos*. Furthermore, through the writing she does something similar to what the *Contemporáneos* attempted to do during the 1920s, which was to create an oppositional response to the “novela de la revolución” and other aesthetic norms of the time. Instead, the *Contemporáneos* had an interest in writing literary works that were more experimental and perhaps more in line with their interests and the features, themes, that were also present in the works of American and European authors. And like many other modernists, they were also interested in urban spaces. Gilberto Owen was part of this group of intellectuals and artists known as the *Contemporáneos*, with whom he worked, maintained friendships, and exchanged letters while living abroad. Owen had a special interest in modernist authors and a particular affinity for Emily Dickinson, who was not a modernist author but Owen read and translated extensively. In one letter to Xavier Villaurrutia, Owen describes his apartment in New York City, including some of the books he owns:

Por las dos ventanas llega el parque, todo voces de niños. Es un parque escalonado, como un espectáculo que se viera desde el foro (...) En la ventana derecha hay una maceta que parece una lámpara. Tiene redondas llamas verdes. En la pared derecha están los tubos de la calefacción (...) Arriba un grabado de la plaza de San Marcos veneciana mirándome con sus aguas lisas ahogarme en esta ciudad dura (...) Contra el espejo está un reloj parado. Son ahí las 3 y dos minutos. A sus lados están centinelas negros dos floreros. Yo les torcería el cuello porque de la Alquimia nació la Química (...) Sobre [el piano] una seda y un florero chino.

Se le parecería a la cúpula del Woolworth si se pusiera blanca y floreciera (...) En la pared izquierda están: una victrola para recordarme de Miss Hannah. Un librero (mis libros: *Obras completas* de Joseph Conrad; *Obras completas* de Lautréamont; *Obras completas* de Poe; Diccionario Inglés Español de Appleton; *Gramática Inglesa*; *Reglamento del Cuerpo Consular*; *Tratado de Teneduría de Libros*. Los libros que Mrs. Pritchard quiere que lea: *Holy Bible*.

[Through the two windows the park comes in, all children's voices. It's nestled in a steep incline, like a spectacle that you watch from a stage (...) On the window to the right there is a flower pot that looks like a lamp. It has round, green flames. On the wall to the right there are the heating system's tubes (...) On top, an engraving of the Venetian Plaza de San Marcos, with its smooth waters, watches me drown in this hard city (...) Against the mirror there is a clock, which has stopped. There it is two minutes past three. At its sides are black sentinels two vases. I would twist their necks because from Alchemy came Chemistry (...) On top of the piano a silk cloth and a Chinese vase. It would resemble the Woolworth's cupola if it became white and bloomed (...) On the left wall there is: a gramophone to remind me of Miss Hannah. A bookshelf (my books: *Complete Works* of Joseph Conrad; *Complete Works* of Poe; Appleton's English- Spanish Dictionary; *English Grammar*; *Regulations of the Diplomatic Corps*; *Treatise of Book Keeping*. The books that Mrs. Pritchard wants me to read: *Holy Bible*.] (261)

(quoted in English and Spanish in Luiselli *Translation Spaces*, 334-335)

In *Los ingravidos* Luiselli weaves the experiences of Owen the narrator with those of the real-life Owen while he was living in New York City. While the quotation above is from one of Owen's personal letters to his friend Villaurrutia, in the novel, the fictional Owen writes,

‘Por las dos ventanas llegaba el parque, todo voces de niños’ le decía a Xavier.
‘Es un parque escalonado, como un espectáculo que se viera desde el foro de mi ventana. Aquí los niños son niños. Los grandes se besan, a veces cuando no están muy cansados. Yo estoy solo y desnudo, con sólo una bata de seda cubriéndome’
[‘Through the two windows the park comes in, all children’s voices.’ he told Xavier. ‘It’s nestled in a steep incline, like a spectacle that you watch from the stage of my window. Here children are children. The grown-ups kiss, sometimes when they are not very tired. I am alone and naked, with only a silk robe covering me.] (Luiselli *Los ingravidos* 110-111).

Luiselli has recreated Owen's actual words almost verbatim in the first two sentences of the letter that is included in the novel. It is evident that for the real-life Owen, his apartment in New York City allowed him to experience the world from the inside, observing closely and listening to the sounds of the city that he could perceive from the window. These experiences and the actual writing about it are also closely tied to the poetry of Emily Dickinson, whose work Owen translated and admired greatly. Analyzing Owen's translations of Dickinson's poem “Presentiment is that long shadow on the lawn” Luiselli stresses that “What is happening in this analogical poem is that time is being merged with space; *interior* time is being merged with *exterior* space, in a way that space becomes an interior experience and time is externalized into space” (*Translation Spaces* 340). Thus, it is evident the poetics of time and space that were articulated symbolically in Dickinson's poetry had an effect in how Owen also articulated his

perception of reality. In his letter both time and space are converging in the space of his room, from where he observes and listens to the outside world.

Both narrators contribute to the metafictional aspect of the narrative and thus propose a literary theory or their own reflections on the act of writing. Early in the narration the woman explains,

Vuelvo a la novela cada vez que los niños me lo permiten. Sé que debo generar una estructura llena de huecos para que siempre sea posible llegar a la página, habitarla. Nunca meter más de la cuenta, nunca estofar, nunca amueblar ni adornar. Abrir puertas, ventanas. Levantar muros y tirarlos.

[I return to the novel whenever the children allow me. I know that I must generate a structure full of holes so that it is always possible to reach the page, to inhabit it. Never put more than the account, never braise, never furnish or adorn. Open doors, windows. Build walls and throw them down.] (Luiselli *Los ingravidos*, 20).

The woman narrator explains that the structure of the novel she is writing must contain holes so that she can inhabit the page whenever the children allow her. The meditative nature of the citation above serves as an example of metaliterature and also resembles Luiselli's literary ideas discussed in her essay "Relingos". In the essay she suggests authors "drill walls", "break windows" and "blow up" buildings in order to make room for empty spaces or *relingos*. In this fragment from *Los ingravidos*, the woman narrator further explains that this should also happen due to practical reasons. A woman writer, like Luiselli and the woman narrator, needs this kind of flexibility.

For his part, the fictional Owen also reflects on the process of writing. After meeting José Limón, a dancer from the Mexican state of Sinaloa, Owen notes

Hay personas que saben contar su vida como una secuencia de eventos que conducen a su destino. Si les das una pluma, te escriben una novela aburridísima donde cada línea está ahí por un motivo: todo engarza, como en una cobija asfixiante.

[There are people who know how to tell their lives as a sequence of events that lead to their destiny. If you give them a pen, they will write you a boring novel where each line is there for a reason: everything is linked, as in a suffocating blanket] (Luiselli *Los ingravidos*, 126).

Through both narrative voices in the novel Luiselli is presenting her own literary theory and her reflections on what literature can and should do. Furthermore, she is taking as a point of reference the work of twentieth-century modernist authors and making it her own.

iv. Non-place

For Michel de Certeau space is “a ‘frequented place’, ‘an intersection of moving bodies’: it is the pedestrians who transform the street (geometrically defined as a place by town planners) into a space” (Cited in Augé 79-80). This conception of space complements Seamon’s place ballet, which is the series of familiar acts that we share with strangers in public spaces. This understanding of space also helps us to understand how both narrators’ convergence in the subway creates a space of encounters where the merging of time and space is possible. These meetings produce the spatial connections that de Certeau explains above and thus transform the street and the other common spaces into inhabited space that is only made possible collectively. In contrast, Augé’s concept of the non-place, which is a transient space where one loses their identity or individuality like an airport or shopping mall, further explains that the person who enters these spaces,

Tastes for a while—like anyone who is possessed—the passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasure of role-playing. What he is confronted with, finally, is an image of himself, but in truth it is a pretty strange image. The only face to be seen, the only voice to be heard, in the silent dialogue he holds with the landscape-text addressed to him along with others, are his own: the face and voice of solitude made all the more baffling by the fact that it echoes millions of others. The passenger through non-places retrieves his identity only at Customs, at the tollbooth, at the check-out counter. Meanwhile, he obeys the same code as others, receives the same messages, responds to the same entreaties. The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude (103).

In Augé's view, the non-place is a space of solitude and similitude where losing one's identity quickly becomes a strange and lonely experience. I have explained extensively in this chapter how *relingos* offer space for other possibilities. In the woman narrator's view, current society has reverted the spatial status of the private and the public space as she explains,

Vivimos en un mundo en donde hace tiempo ocurrió una inversión completa del estatus de la calle como el espacio público, y el de la casa como el lugar privado por excelencia, y en este trueque de categorías resulta difícil saber cuándo estamos de veras adentro y cuándo afuera.

[We live in a world where a complete reversal of the status of the street as the public space, and that of the house as the private place par excellence, occurred long ago, and in this exchange of categories it is difficult to know when we are really inside and when outside] (Luiselli *Papeles falsos* 95).

Due to the contemporary fragmentation in most aspects of our lives, “solo nos queda erigir pequeñas y fugaces intimidades en espacios ajenos” [We can only erect small and fleeting intimacies in other people's spaces] (Luiselli *Papeles falsos*, 96). For people like Owen, the woman narrator, Valeria Luiselli herself, and the thousands of people around the world who move frequently in this globalized age, it is not surprising to see and experience the world through only passing moments and experiences like the ones described by the narrators in *Los ingravidos*.

The study and analysis of the several disciplines discussed in this chapter facilitates the exploration of the cultural and literary exchanges and connections that existed in the past and that continue existing in the present between the United States and Mexico. As a Mexican author living and working in the United States, Luiselli reminds us of Carlos Fuentes, who had a similar experience in previous decades. As such, Luiselli engages with literary tradition and specifically with Mexican literary tradition. Luiselli's work of fiction as well as her work of non-fiction establish meaningful explorations of spaces and offer a theorization of space that departs from a poetics that is aware of space-time dynamics. The author employs various stylistic devices in order to engage with the work of modernist writers such as Gilberto Owen and with ideas of literary theory. This engagement is achieved through the presence of a fictionalized Owen in *Los ingravidos* and through the use and (re)creation of modernist literary features and the incorporation of *relingos* and porosity in the narration.

Conclusion

My research examines how four Mexican women writers in the beginning of the twenty-first century have reconfigured notions of space and of the body in contemporary works of fiction. Specifically, I analyze the manners in which concepts of space and body are represented, explored, and reconfigured in contemporary Mexican literature and culture. I have engaged with theories of space, gender and sexuality in order to explore the representations that a group of contemporary Mexican writers and artists have contended with during the past twenty years, while also engaging with past literary, cultural, and historical artifacts and discourses. Employing spatial theoretical concepts, this project rethinks recent literary production by Mexican women writers that are currently well-known inside and outside of Mexico and helps us to understand how contemporary writers are exploring and reconfiguring the boundaries of the represented space as well as the formal aesthetics of literary tradition. Moreover, by mapping and examining the spaces that these works explore, I am also analyzing power structures and dominant discourses that the works engage with.

Chapter one explores stigmatized spaces and sex work by looking at early twentieth-century spaces in Mexico, such as mental hospitals and brothels. Through Cristina Rivera Garza's *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999), I examine the regulations that were put in place during the first few decades of the twentieth-century, while also exploring how some characters in the novel took it upon themselves to challenge oppressive regulations. In this chapter, I conclude that certain spaces allowed for the fluidity and malleability of gender, sex, class, and race. Taking multimodal and multispatial approaches, chapter two delves into questions of gender identity and sexuality in contemporary Mexico. At the core of this chapter is a study of current negotiations surrounding gender identity, such as the use of pronouns, while also exploring digital and public

spaces in order to engage with the broader heteropatriarchal Mexican society. I examine the innovative elements in Ana Clavel's *Cuerpo naufrago* (2005) and conclude that by incorporating photography as well as digital spaces through the website cuerponaufrago.com, and via the public street installations, the work engages with the reader multimodally and multispatially, and in turn, expands our understanding of the possibilities of the novel.

Chapter three examines Guadalupe Nettel's *El huésped* (2006). In this reading, I propose that Nettel's work can be read through the lens of the *flâneur*, but instead of an exclusive masculine space, the city spaces now allow the presence of a contemporary female *flâneur* who is simultaneously in constant danger. In this chapter I discuss how Nettel challenges traditional conceptions of space in Mexico City, and the ways in which the spaces within the city are understood and socially constructed. This chapter explores the ways in which the fictional characters find meaning in the friendships, the connections, and the communities that they form and concludes that these communities lead to a certain type of individual freedom and allow political contestation. In this way, the spatial representations in much of the chronicles of the mid-twentieth century by male authors are reconfigured by Nettel and other women artists. Chapter four tells the story of two characters who are simultaneously separated and linked across time and space through the use of Valeria Luiselli's literary devices and knowledge of architectural concepts. In order to understand the significance of the novel, I propose a reading using *relingos*, an architectural term that also serves as a form of literary tool. I conclude that the narration invites the readers to (re)construct *Los ingrátidos* as it contains *relingos* and simultaneously presents a fragmented and porous story.

Throughout this dissertation I have been in dialogue with the novels that I write about, and also with many stories that I read about every day through non-literary channels. For

instance, many stories come from the conversations that I have with my family and friends both in Mexico and in the United states that are facilitated through digital spaces, such as social media. My future research will examine spatiality and corporeality in spaces I have not yet had the opportunity to study. Specifically, I am interested in spaces such as the U.S.-Mexico border as well as spaces in Mexico and in the United States where Indigenous, Afro-Mexican, and Afro-Indigenous thought and futurism continues reconfiguring and challenging nationalistic and homogenous views of Mexican identity.¹⁴⁰ For instance, it is important to note that despite its 125 years of existence, the Mexican census just included the option to self-identify as Black, Afro-Mexican, or Afro-descendant in the 2020 census for the first time.¹⁴¹ Thus, exploring racial and spatial justice, immigration, and gender and sexuality continues to be important.

Writing poetry about the experience of living in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, Wendy Trevino reminds us that,

A border, like race, is a cruel fiction

Maintained by constant policing, violence

Always threatening a new map. It takes

Time, lots of people's time, to organize

¹⁴⁰ See, Figueroa Mónica G. Moreno. "Distributed Intensities: Whiteness, Mestizaje and the Logics of Mexican Racism." *Ethnicities*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1 Sep. 2010, pp. 387 – 386; and, "'We Are Not Racists, We Are Mexicans': Privilege, Nationalism and Post-Race Ideology in Mexico." *Critical Sociology* 42 (2016): 515-533, for important discussions and studies on continued anti-blackness in Mexico and an overview of the racism expressed by important Mexican intellectuals like José Vasconcelos (Secretary of Education during the 1920s).

¹⁴¹ For specific details see INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía) [National Institute of Statistics and Geography] results: https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/saladeprensa/boletines/2021/EstSociodemo/ResultCenso2020_Nal.pdf

The world this way & violence. It takes more
Violence. Violence no one can confuse for
Anything but violence. So much violence
Changes relationships, births a people
They can reason with. These people are not
Us. They underestimate the violence.
It's been a while. We are who we are
To them, even when we don't know who we
Are to each other & culture is a
Record of us figuring that out.
(90)

Trevino exposes some of the recurring issues, which are essentially and complexly, spatial issues, between the United States and Mexico. The word “violence” appears seven times in the verses above highlighting the fact that the border is a violent space that also serves as a surveillance machine. In *Capitalismo Gore*, Sayak Valencia explains that violence goes hand-in-hand with current globalization processes unfolding between Mexico and the United States. Valencia further notes that Narco-capitalism has also created a sense of hyperconsumerism where violence has become work. Moreover, Valencia stresses the centrality of violence for neoliberalism, and notes that often the victims of this violence are the most vulnerable members of society.¹⁴² Additionally, I want to note that because these painful and traumatizing experiences do not stay within the confines of the particular Mexican city or town where they

¹⁴² See Sayak Valencia's *Gore Capitalism*. Semiotext(e), 2018, published in Spanish as *Capitalismo gore* in 2010.

take place, because as Trevino's poetic voice notes, borders are also fictions. As such, news of young people going missing or being killed quickly travel across the porous border to their families and relatives in the United States. Personally, two family members are currently missing and another close relative was the victim of femicide in Mexico earlier this year.

On May 28, 2021 Cristina Rivera Garza tweeted "Los feminicidas tienen nombre, apellidos, parientes, vecinos, amigos, cómplices [sic]. Ángel González Ramos, presunto feminicida de mi hermana #LilianaRiveraGarza, huyó desde julio de 1990 y sigue impune. Si alguien tiene algo que contarnos: elinvincibleveranodeliliana@gmail.com" [Those responsible of feminicides have names, surnames, relatives, neighbors, friends, accomplices. Ángel González Ramos, alleged femicide of my sister #LilianaRiveraGarza, fled since July 1990 and remains unpunished. If anyone has something to tell us: elinvincibleveranodeliliana@gmail.com] (@criveragarza). The tweet included a photo of Ángel González Ramos and Rivera Garza is currently gathering information and leading a strong digital campaign to find more information about her sister's killer. Cristina Rivera Garza's recent *El invencible verano de Liliana* (2021) recounts the story of her sister Liliana Rivera Garza, who was the victim of femicide in 1990. In a recently published article for *Nexos*, the author writes:

Quería prescindir de las mediaciones usuales entre el cuerpo y el espacio, obligando a la reconfiguración de lo que era y, sobre todo, de lo que iba a ser, fuera de los asideros que marca la costumbre o la falta de imaginación, la estabilidad, lo conocido. Quería, como se dice, empezar de cero. Sabía que solo así, empezando desde cero, o buscando ese cero, podría ponerle punto final a este libro. Tal vez sólo así podría encontrar el silencio de un nuevo inicio.

[I wanted to dispense with the usual mediations between the body and the space, forcing the reconfiguration of what was and, above all, what was going to be, outside the handles that custom or lack of imagination marks, stability, the known. I wanted, as they say, to start from scratch. I knew that only by starting from scratch, or by looking for that zero, I could put an end to this book. Perhaps only then could I find the silence of a new beginning] (“El desamueblamiento”).

In the article, Rivera Garza talks about how the revision process unfolded and explains that in order to revise the book, she stayed in an empty house that was being remodeled, where she had nothing but a sleeping bag. In this way, Rivera Garza continues reconfiguring and engaging with space in new ways through her writing, all while engaging with a topic that is at once violent, powerful, and very personal.

The vision for the future of the world in Mexican literature and culture requires that we rethink who, where, and how knowledge is produced and shared. Furthermore, it also requires that we include cartographies that consider the contributions made by Indigenous and Afro-Mexican people. For instance, Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil, an Indigenous Mixe linguist from Oaxaca, reminds us that by paying close attention to the relationship that exists between patriarchy, colonization, and the current environmental crisis along issues related to race and gender, we can articulate forms of resistance and center life. She explains, “in the midst of catastrophes, in a context of so much death, there is an articulation of resistance that centers life. It is from that coming catastrophe, from the tension that precedes it and from the articulation of resistances that I will be writing, because, against all odds, we are still here” (“Writing in the Face of Catastrophe” np). Moreover, Aguilar Gil’s 2020 *Ää: Manifiestos sobre la diversidad lingüística* exposes the discrimination and systemic violence that indigenous communities

experience both in Mexico and around the world and argues that Nation States are the main oppressors of linguistic rights. For their part, filmmakers Ángeles Cruz and Federico Cuatlacuatl, both engage with issues related to indigeneity, sexuality, immigration, and indigenous futurism.¹⁴³ Furthermore, Afro-Mexican filmmakers and poets such as Ebony Bailey, Ariana Brown, and Alan Pelaez Lopez continue exploring Mexican identity and the possibilities of Afrofuturism while simultaneously question the Mexican nation state.¹⁴⁴

The past few years, I wondered how living in Charlottesville and witnessing the violence of white supremacy that played out on August 11th and 12th, 2017 shaped my thoughts and my preoccupations with life in the twenty-first century. Moreover, I have also reflected a lot about who and how certain people are allowed or prevented from living or making a living in certain places and spaces.¹⁴⁵ While writing this dissertation I also tried to make sense of my position in the world in order to understand and expose the violence that oppressed and vulnerable individuals, especially Black and Brown women experience in different spaces, including academia. How am I perceived by the University community, by faculty, and by my own students? At the same time, what voices are missing from the dominating narratives? And, what

¹⁴³ See, Ángeles Cruz's *Nudo mixteco*, 2021 and Federico Cuatlacuatl's *Fin De*, 2014; *Future-Past*, 2015; *Xochimilco*, 2015; *Kauitl*, 2015; *Carnaval*, 2015; *Coapan sin tiempo*, 2016; *Coapan en espera*, 2019; *Tsenacommacah*, 2020; *Tiemperos del Antropoceno*, 2020; *Papalotes en Resistencia*, 2020.

¹⁴⁴ See, Ebony Bailey's *Jamaica y Tamarindo: Afro-Tradition in the Heart of Mexico*, a documentary film that explores Afro-Mexican identity through food and music. See, Alan Pelaez Lopez's *Intergalactic Travels: Poems from a Fugitive Alien*, The Operating System, 2020; and, Ariana Brown's *Sana Sana*, Game Over Books, 2020 who explore Afro-Mexican futurism. For a scholarly study on the subject see, Henry Louis Gates, *Black in Latin America*. New York University Press, 2011.

¹⁴⁵ One example of this is the local digital project, "Mapping Charlottesville" which was created by journalist Jordy Yager and maps inequities in Charlottesville. For example, one of the projects looks at racially restrictive deeds in the city that prevented Black Americans, "and sometimes Jews and other specific groups of people, from living there." For more information see their website: <https://mappingcville.com>

is my role and position in this globalized world and how I can understand it better? Although most remain unanswered, these are some of the questions that I kept in mind throughout the past several years and especially since last year with the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the academic job market crash.

Having recognized some of the gaps in the Latin American literary canon when I first arrived in Charlottesville, I knew that I wanted to write about women and about gender and sexuality. At the time, I did not know and could not fully grasp how living in this city would transform my views on gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality, disability, and other forms of oppression related to lived experience and subjectivity. Moreover, writing about these topics from a scholarly position at once seemed familiar but also daunting. Ultimately, those anxieties led me down many pathways—and, like the authors that I study in this dissertation, I frequently had more questions than answers. As a racialized woman of color with the privilege of my university education, I understand that what we do and what we write about matters, and that I can use the little privilege I have in order to make this a more just world.

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