TRAMPAS DE GÉNERO:

DISRUPTING GENDER IN THE NOVELS OF CRISTINA RIVERA GARZA

AN ABSTRACT

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BY

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Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine how Mexican author Cristina Rivera Garza (Matamoros, 1964) critiques gender in her novels. In an era of prolific publications dealing with gender, Rivera Garza’s work stands out for its fresh critique of how socially gendered modes of behavior are “written” into the social code. I argue that she exposes latent and explicit gender prejudices and then literally and metaphorically rewrites gender expectations. Central to her objective is to quash binary divisions (masculine/feminine, male/female, privileged/marginalized) to create a space for nuanced, complex characters in her novels. Rivera Garza employs the metaphor of writing to weaken these gendered divisions and in doing so, she destabilizes the division between literary genres.

My first chapter focuses on *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999) and how Matilda, the young, mestiza protagonist, endures the many (and at times oppositional) labels society imposes on a young woman. It is through her own self-imposed isolation at the infamous *La Castañeda* asylum that she finds the freedom to articulate her own identity. In my chapter dealing with *La cresta de Ilión* (2002), I discuss how biological sex shapes identity and how Rivera Garza presents a sex as a spectrum rather than just a male/female dichotomy. Multiple characters named “Amparo Dávila” challenge the notion of authenticity while also bringing attention to this talented female voice deserving of a permanent spot in the Mexican literary cannon. In the final chapter, I address how *La muerte me da* (2007) reimagines the detective genre by inverting the male and female roles that are typical in this genre. An overwhelming number of inter-artistic references, with special attention paid to Argentine poet Alejandra Pizarnik, blur the divisions...
between visual art, the written word, and the subgenres of these two categories. Instead of cracking the case, this detective novel evolves from prose to poetry and never identifies a definite murderer. I argue that Rivera Garza is advocating not for a new type of detective fiction, but for an innovative way of writing that allows authors to blend, mix, and create original writing that does not reproduce inequitable gendered norms.
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A DISSERTATION

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Introduction

This dissertation, titled *Trampas de género: Disrupting Gender in the Novels of Cristina Rivera Garza*, examines three novels by celebrated Mexican author Cristina Rivera Garza. These novels, *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999), *La cresta de Ilión* (2002), and *La muerte me da* (2007), engage in a poignant critique of socially-constructed gender roles. Each novel offers a distinctive angle in Rivera Garza’s endeavor to invalidate a binary understanding of male and female identities. The first novel vilifies socially imposed structures, the second examines how said structures are internalized individually, and the third exposes these structures by inverting them. A parallel study of language builds across these novels beginning with how names construct identity, the power of writing to create new realities and culminating in the appropriation of certain literature genres. Rivera Garza’s postmodern writing breaks with the norms of a traditional narrative writing style, opting instead for fluid, unnamed protagonists and uncertain realities. The author’s tendency to provoke anxiety in her reader through her ambiguous texts is precisely her intention: to rouse the reader’s consciousness of
restrictive gender behavior while drawing attention to language’s ability to shape new realities.

Before going into further detail about how gender and genre are treated in these novels, it is worth pausing a moment to contextualize this accomplished author. Cristina Rivera Garza (b. 1964) was born in the northeast Mexican border city of Tamaulipas, Matamoros. At 15 years of age, she moved with her family to Mexico City where she would stay through her undergraduate education. Rivera Garza received her master’s and doctorate degrees from the University of Houston in Latin American History. Her dissertation was a detailed investigation of the insane asylum La Castañeda in early 20th century Mexico and her findings serve as the historical backdrop for *Nadie me verá llorar*. She taught at various American universities until 2000, when she received the National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship. That same year, she received Mexico’s Juan Ruben Award for best manuscript and the following year won her first Sor Juan Inés de la Cruz prize for *Nadie me verá llorar*. She also earned the prestigious Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz prize for *La cresta de Ilión* (Samuelson 14-15). Enthusiasm for Rivera Garza’s writing has exploded in the past decade as an international audience sought out her texts translated into English, Italian, Portuguese, German, and Korean. Mexican intellectual Carlos Fuentes once characterized her as one of the most original voices of “our” literature (cited in Palaversich 101). Currently, Rivera Garza teaches at the University of California San Diego and splits her time between Mexico and the United States.
Rivera Garza’s writing encompasses various modes (novels, short-stories, prose, essays, blogs, and criticism) and in keeping with her aversion for rigid categories, often blends these styles. Much of her work centers on liminal spaces, both physically and psychologically as well as biologically. Identity markers, such as sane/insane, masculine/feminine, and male/female, become fluid so to allow for a reinterpretation of their implications. Contained in her examination of these traits is a careful study of the language used to define individuals. In *Nadie me verá llorar*, the main character, Matilda, adopts a series of different nicknames as she progresses through different stages in her life. At times the nicknames are self-proclaimed and at times the other characters impose them. The process of assigning meaning via monikers is part of a larger motif of language’s power to change realities that is present across Cristina Rivera Garza’s writing. In her next novel, *La cresta de Ilión*, the central character is living in an ambiguous location, between the loosely-named cities La Ciudad del Norte and La Ciudad del Sur. Like Matilda in *Nadie*, it is not clear if this unnamed protagonist is sane. The texts present both characters as living on the brink of mental stability. Adding additional volatility to the protagonist in *La cresta* is confusion with respect to his biological sex. He is confirmed both as a male and a female at different points in the narration. This uncertainty begins when another character labels him as a woman demonstrating yet again the transformative power of language. While it is never definite—few things are in Rivera Garza’s texts—if the protagonist undergoes a physical transformation or if he hysterically rejected his true, female identity, the evolution from a
male identity to a female identity raises questions of privilege and belonging. The final novel examined in this dissertation, *La muerte me da*, is so heavy with intertextual references that Rivera Garza’s authorial presence fades into the tumult of many different artists of many different backgrounds, including Argentine poet Alejandra Pizarnik, Montenegrin performance artist Marina Abramović, British conceptual artists Jake and Dinos Chapman, Spanish romantic painter Francisco de Goya, among others. The result is that not the obliteration of Rivera Garza’s voice, but the sense that *La muerte* is a collaborative project across art forms, nations, and centuries. Through this interpretation, art no longer must be either written or visual, it may be both. As exemplified in this text, a novel can belong to many different movements and be tied to many different artists. *La muerte* pays particular attention to the division between poetry and prose, a binary that so obsessed Alejandra Pizarnik. Not only does it directly address this tension, but the novel itself slyly shifts from one genre to the next thus forcing the reader to examine any prejudices that marginalize poetry.

While language and intertextuality are important components of Rivera Garza’s novels, the instability of gender(s) stands out as the dominant theme. Linked closely to feminist theory, gender theory experienced a surge of attention at the end of the 20th century following the publication of *Gender Trouble* (1990) by Judith Butler. Butler’s use of the term “gender performativity” problematizes widely-believed notions that biological sex determines gender behavior. Instead, as Butler proposes, “acting out” gender is a performance whose cues are socially dictated starting in childhood. These
socially determined behaviors are centered on essential gender myths and support the larger matrix of hegemonic heterosexuality. This is to say that amongst the milieu of gendered behaviors ascribed to men and women, perhaps the most inflexible is that of compulsory heterosexuality. This term, coined in 1980 by feminist poet and essayist Adrienne Rich in her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” articulates the societal pressure to conform and explains how anything outside this dynamic is conserved abnormal, subversive, and even threatening. These theories dialogue well with Michel Foucault’s groundbreaking 1976 text *The History of Sexuality,* wherein the French philosopher details the links between power and sexuality as a result of a proliferation of discourse on the subject beginning in the 18th century. Foucault describes how this increased emphasis on sexual desire resulted in sexuality becoming a defining element of one’s character. These theories provide a critical framework for analyzing these three Cristina Rivera Garza novels. Gender roles, gender identity, and gender as articulated/constrained through language play an important part in her work. The goal of her texts is not to reproduce these gendered expectations and behaviors, but to question them, undermine them, and at times, even ridicule them. This subversive tactic demands that the reader confront societal expectations with respect to gender. Arguably, a spectrum understanding of sexuality is becoming increasingly mainstream, but this has not been the case for gender and even less so for biological sex. Rivera Garza seeks to apply sexuality’s rupture from a binary model to gender and sex in her novels.
Cristina Rivera Garza’s fresh, unique voice inspired my interest in her writing. When I first read *Nadie me verá llorar*, some five years after its publication, there was a steady production of provocative texts by young authors. The Crack Movement¹, known in Spanish as *La Generación del Crack*, along with many other authors born in the 1960s², emerged as the dominant voices in contemporary Mexican literature. While the innovation of the Crack Movement presented a new direction for Mexican literature, their rejection of Mexico as a subject in an effort to create a more universal literature seemed rather heavy-handed or clumsy. In comparison, Rivera Garza’s novels do seem universal in nature and not at the expense of Mexico’s presence. Her experimental writing engages her reader, presenting challenging and contradictory scenarios that raise difficult questions about social mores. It comes as no surprise, then, that Rivera Garza has politely and repeatedly declined any literary association with the Crack Movement (Interview in *Espéculo* n/p).

The three texts chosen for this dissertation best exemplify Rivera Garza’s critique of gender norms and genre categories. Each chapter examines one novel and the chapters

¹ The Crack Generation includes Ignacio Padilla, Jorge Volpi, Eloy Urroz, Pedro Ángel Palou, and Ricardo Chávez Castañeda. This all-male group emerged as a response to the *Boom* and the new historical novel. As a premise, this group of writers seeks to move away from Mexico as the subject *de rigueur* upon which to study (Sánchez 182). Their 1996 manifesto details their goals and for further reading, see Alberto Castillo Pérez’s article examining the evolution of this group.

² These writers include Roberto Bolaño, Mario Bellatin, Enrique Serna, Rosa Beltrán and Ana Clavel.
follow the chronological publication of her writing. By presenting these texts in a sequential order, I aim to show the development of Rivera Garza’s writing. Each novel builds upon the themes of the previous one and each novel becomes increasingly more ambiguous in its narration and experimental in its style. The first chapter focuses on Rivera Garza’s 1999 novel, *Nadie me verá llorar*, a text set in the infamous Mexican insane asylum La Castañeda during the Porfiriato. Here I examine how the main character, Matilda, is objectified by her gender and her position as a lower-class mestiza woman at the beginning of the 20th century by powerful, educated men who unduly influence her life. As a child, she is a recent arrival and outsider to Mexico City and her uncle, a doctor, unsuccessfully tries to treat her “condition” using a positivist approach. The text ridicules this character for his desperation to whiten and fit in with bourgeoisie society. However, the message here is not so much a condemnation of attitudes from over a century ago, but recognition of the agency Matilda exercises in rejecting her uncle’s influence. This is yet one instance of many in which Matilda is stronger-willed and more self-determined than the male protagonists in *Nadie* having fewer resources. In another example, the fairytale binary of a damsel in distress and a knight in shining armor is inverted when Matilda saves the life of the young revolutionary, Cástulo Rodríguez. Not surprisingly, Rivera Garza does not merely transpose the male and female roles. Instead, a third party, Diamantina, becomes part of an alternative, amorous, and triangular relationship. This chapter examines how Rivera Garza challenges clichéd models of homosexuality by focusing on Matilda’s freedom to enter into sexual relationships
without reproducing stereotypes. The protagonist’s laughter upon reading Federico Gamboa’s 1903 novel *Santa* translates to the reader as a harsh condemnation of socially imposed sexual norms and of the male-centered erotic fantasy of lesbianism. Later, when Matilda is interned in La Castañeda, a young photographer, Joaquín, attempts to adopt the socially-determined male role of rescuer and takes Matilda out of the institution to live in his empty mansion. However, he never succeeds in “possessing” her and Matilda ultimately elects to return to the asylum rather than stay prisoner to Joaquín’s incessant gaze. Joaquín’s failure to “win over” Matilda demystifies the damsel in distress paradigm. This dynamic of inverted gender roles where the female emerges as the dominant character is one that repeats throughout the novels, as I show in subsequent chapters.

This first chapter also explores the gendering of space within the asylum. Matilda, because she is there as an interned patient, is the involuntary recipient of Joaquín’s camera’s gaze. She is isolated in the women’s ward while Joaquín, who freely visits the asylum as the in-house photographer, has the privilege to leave when he chooses despite his own morphine-induced hysteria. I focus on the privileged treatment Joaquín receives from the psychiatrists at the institution and how it reveals a gendered standard in Porfiriato politics and in the medical discourse of this era. It is important to note that Rivera Garza avoids overemphasizing the obvious power imbalance of an interned woman and her treating male psychiatrist, preferring to explore the various, if subtle, ways that Matilda does manage to exert her agency within the walls of La Castañeda.
Rivera Garza’s historical research for her dissertation supports the position that patients did have surprisingly ample opportunity to express their own clinical narrative in a supportive psychiatric environment. In *Nadie me verá llorar*, Matilda communicates her own story to Dr. Eduardo and does not experience an external, clinical, and male voice imposed upon her. This chapter closes by looking at the other various ways that Matilda is able to exercise her agency despite being an interned, lower-class female: her decision to run away from her controlling, positivist uncle; leaving the asylum to start a life with Joaquín; and her ultimate decision to return to the asylum, ironically a place where she has the most independence. In this chapter, I propose that Rivera Garza negates the oppositional binary of doctor, as the male oppressor, and patient, as the oppressed female that is articulated in much of the anti-psychiatry literature. Instead, the strong character of Matilda violates the preconception of the helpless, hysterical woman by using her limited agency to manipulate the male-centered structures that surround her. Inversely, *Nadie* offers privileged male characters, like Joaquín, who reject gendered expectations and thereby subvert the widely-held myth of Mexican machismo.

The second chapter moves on to the more metaphorical novel, *La cresta de Ilión*. This chapter includes an in-depth look at male privilege and masculinity, building on the theories articulated by Judith Butler and R.W. Connell. Both *Nadie me verá llorar* and *La cresta de Ilión* deal with the treatment of gender norms; however, while the first chapter centers more, though not exclusively, on gender norms in relation to women, this chapter focuses more on gender expectations of men. *La cresta de Ilión* depicts a nameless and
unhappy protagonist desperately seeking the truth about what surrounds him and even about himself. In order to better understand his own identity, he must release the reality he knows, a reality that is already in a precarious condition, and deconstruct the normative roles that he assumes. The novel, in spite of its simple and fluid prose, is a tightly-knit, complex text in which the reader cannot be sure of the biological sex of the main character, his performative gender, or his biological sex. *La cresta* employs a resolutely postmodern treatment of reality and identity discourses, both of which are in crisis. In this chapter, I discuss the destabilization of the categories of biological sex, acted gender, and sexual identity. As is the case with *Nadie me verá llorar*, part of this novel is set within the vicinity of an insane asylum. The male protagonist claims to be a psychiatrist at the institution but is likely a patient himself. I argue that the protagonist’s obsession with his biological sex adversely affects his mental condition and is the cause for his internment. At one point in the story, two women move into his house and replace him as the head of household. They speak in a language that he does not understand and his unease escalates as he feels himself losing authority and violating the hegemonic rules of what he considers a naturally phallocentric society. This chapter shows how Cristina Rivera Garza not only criticizes this dynamic, but questions what are real differences between the sexes. At the end of the novel, the protagonist is as confident that he is a woman as he was at the beginning of the novel of his manhood. *La cresta* neither indicates that this might be a transgendered character nor implies the presence of a
fantastic experience. I show that this intentional ambiguity serves to destabilize the rigid connections between biological sex and gender performativity.

My final chapter concentrates on *La muerte me da*, which arguably is the novelistic version of a 2004 collection of vignettes, *Lo anterior*. Originally, I planned to include *Lo anterior* in this dissertation, but eventually decided against it since it is a text that works more with the process of writing than with gender. As Emily Hind points out, *Lo anterior* is more atmosphere than context and was written in preparation for *La muerte me da* (314). The two overlap mostly in the plot details and to avoid repetition, I focused on gender-driven novels and *La muerte* moves further away from a traditional narrative than the previous two studied texts. This novel begins with a murdered man who will be the first of multiple victims, all of whom are castrated. Here a female detective and a female author/critic named Cristina Rivera Garza investigate the crime employing a transposition of gender roles, much like in her previous texts. This time, Rivera Garza moves past inverted fairytales so to dialogue with the detective genre. I analyze the displacements that this novel imposes on the detective genre and how that relates back to gender. Glen S. Close’s *Contemporary Hispanic Crime Fiction* and Kseniya A. Vinarov’s *Novela detectivesca posmoderna de metaficción* provide a context of detective fiction in Latin America. This chapter contrasts the traditional gender roles of this genre as articulated by Close and Vinarov with the gender roles portrayed in Rivera Garza’s text. In terms of language, this novel struggles to maintain its narrative structure as the plot disorganizes and the writing transforms into poetry. This chapter shows how the battle
between poetry and prose closely resembles that of Alejandra Pizarnik. Pizarnik was an enormousl
y productive and well-recognized writer who, despite personal struggles, successfully conveyed her thoughts through her writing. Like Matilda in *Nadie me verá llorar*, she is labeled as unstable, but actually has an extremely clear articulation of self. My hypothesis in this final chapter argues that *La muerte me da* is an effort to revalorize the female voice in the literary canon as well as to demonstrate the conflict associated with the detective novel, a genre based upon the male as the perpetrator of violence and the female as the recipient of violence.

The critical framework that I will now mention only briefly is of tremendous influence in framing my proposed arguments. This is dissertation is intended to be feminist in nature and relies heavily on the theories of critics Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Kristeva is firstly influential for her exploration of intertextuality. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, this compelling French critic reviews the systems through which meaning is assigned and emphasizes the implicit relationship between all texts. This notion is made explicit in the plethora of intertextual references, most especially though Francisco Gamboa in *Nadie me verá llorar*, the figure of Amparo Dávila in *La cresta de Ilión* and of course Alejandra Pizarnik in *La muerte me da*. This last novel goes further to mimic and critique the detective novel genre through parody. Kristeva, I argue, is also important for her advocacy of an artistic space to encourage experimental literary production by female authors. Rivera Garza celebrates this tradition via intertextuality as well as through her own innovative writing. Michel Foucault’s
writings seem to dialogue directly with Rivera Garza’s texts. She is keenly aware of his arguments and often references this established philosopher in her own dissertation. His theories regarding social control and the state provide a context for understanding the state power structures at work at the beginning of 20th century Mexico. The third critic who played a fundamental part of my reading of Cristina Rivera Garza’s novels is American gender theorist Judith Butler. It would be difficult to overstate the extraordinary influence of her two texts *Gender Trouble* (1990) as well as *Bodies that Matter* (1993). Influenced by *The History of Sexuality*, Butler expanded on Foucault’s work to expose the cultural signification attached to sex and gender. Her arguments expose how the collective cultural psyche supports masculine hegemony and heterosexist power. Rivera Garza builds on this idea by inverting or blurring traditional markers of sex. The crisis of the *La cresta’s* protagonist directly speaks to this privilege and the fear of losing his social advantage, or “the phallus.” *La muerte* takes the concept a step further by replacing the anonymous female bodies tragically disposed of along the US/Mexico border with middle class male bodies. As Teresa de Lauretis writes “I do not mean by this that the ‘victims’ of such kinds of violence are man and woman, but rather that the object on which or to which the violence is done is what establishes the meaning of the represented act; and that object is perceived or apprehended as either feminine or masculine” (de Lauretis 42). Butler and de Lauretis points are expertly demonstrated in Rivera Garza’s novel.
All three of these novels by Cristina Rivera Garza present careful critiques of gender. Her poetic language subtly presents different problematic gender expectations in relation to sexuality, to gender norms, and to gender identification. Each publication contains slightly less structured language, suggesting that a breakdown of language is necessary for the destruction of preconceived socially-created and governed behaviors.
Battling Gendered Archetypes and Resisting Interpretation in *Nadie me verá llorar*

Cristina Rivera Garza’s 1999 novel, *Nadie me verá llorar*, tells the fragmented story of a young girl from her arrival in Mexico City in 1900 to her internment and eventual death in La Castañeda, a mental health institution in what was then the suburban area of Mixcoac. This protagonist, Matilda Burgos, repeatedly confronts other characters who seek to mold her into a preconceived and gendered vision of what they believe to be a modern woman. The quotation used as an epigraph to this chapter is spoken to Matilda by Doctor Columba Rivera, and it is clearly loaded with a preconceived image of what a “decent girl” is and how she should behave. Columba’s comment additionally gives credence to the threat of the inverse, the “indecent” or “bad girl” and how unacceptable that would be. Such dichotomous ideas are maintained by many of the novel’s characters, but in no way does the author limit herself to introducing such a narrow range of female identities. Quite the opposite, as this chapter will demonstrate, Cristina Rivera Garza portrays so many possible variations of womanhood that the reader is obliged to recognize the impossibility of conceiving of individuals in prepackaged and gender-specific terms. Although the narration is presented almost exclusively in a third person, omniscient voice, the centrality of Matilda’s subjectivity makes her a sympathetic
character. Therefore, it is of little surprise that readers may find themselves sharing Matilda’s resentment as others attempt to label her and interpret her according to their registry of female archetypes. Resisting this interpretation places Matilda outside society and outside history as she attempts to escape this constant social pressure. Although the diegesis of this novel takes place during a moment of supreme historical importance in Mexico, Matilda isolates herself from the end of the Porfiriato, the Mexican Revolution and the ensuing Cristera Wars because she intentionally avoids placing herself within society’s structures. The novel dialogues with these moments with a historical consciousness that its protagonist attempts to avoid. Additionally, this chapter aims to explore the archetypes that Rivera Garza explores and also examine how she undermines them. While these archetypes are mostly centered on women, with special attention given to women who do not abide by heterosexual norms, inevitably this chapter must also explore the treatment of male archetypes, as well.

In her essay on *Pedro Páramo*, Susan Sontag praises author Juan Rulfo for how effectively his opening line hooks his reader into a dramatic narrative and, at the same time, demonstrates that his readers are “in the hands of a master storyteller” (106). It is in this same fashion that Cristina Rivera Garza begins her celebrated novel *Nadie me verá llorar* with a question from one of her protagonists: “¿Cómo se convierte uno en fotógrafo de locos?” (13). This query, posed by Matilda to Joaquin Buitrago, sets the scene for a marginalized population, living physically and metaphorically outside the sphere of influence of Mexico at the beginning of the 20th century. *Nadie* is a historically-
based novel which grew out of Rivera Garza’s dissertational research on a mental health institution (or “manicomio” in Spanish). This hospital, named La Castañeda, was a hallmark project from Porfirio Díaz’s modernization effort and opened in 1910, at the dawn of the Mexican Revolution. Dialoguing with this moment of supreme political importance is a cultural history in which the author illustrates the double-standards women confronted during this dynamic period and the stiff notions of sexuality which confined socially-accepted behaviors in the exploding population of Mexico City. Rivera Garza investigates how the urban population of Mexico’s capital attempts to make sense of the female figure in this rapidly changing and increasingly modern society. As the novel develops, different characters (usually male, though not exclusively) fallaciously choose to engage the aforementioned and unrealistic bad girl/good girl dichotomy. Additionally, the various characters of Nadie rely on the use of nicknames to package the protagonist into a simple if incomplete individual.

This opening confrontation between Matilda and Joaquín underscores a series of contrasts between these two characters; immediately the reader recognizes Joaquín’s privileged position. After all, he is only visiting the mental health institution and is not interned there against his will. The gold watch ticking in his pocket indicates an affluent background and his morphine addiction is another nod to his wealth. Most noticeable, though, is Joaquín’s position as a photographer. He is the one looking at Matilda, and she is the object of his camera’s lens. However, she cleverly claims her own subjectivity with her question: How does one become a photographer of crazies? Now he is the object to
be scrutinized and assessed. Although Matilda remains confined to the hospital, her question follows the photographer home and haunts him as he battles his insomnia. Her memory plagues him, in part due to her startling assertiveness: “Joaquín, desacostumbrado a oír la voz de los sujetos que fotografiaba, pensó que se trataba del murmullo de su propia conciencia” (15). In his experiences, the “locos” (15) whom he photographs are usually statuesque, unmoving and uncommunicative. He mistakenly presumes Matilda to be identical to other patients, which is to say that Joaquín fails to consider her subjectivity. The question provokes shame for Joaquín and he blames the morphine for his disreputable career as a hospital photographer. When confronted with Matilda’s question, Joaquín can no longer see her as a dehumanized statue, but as a person and as a woman. The next step is to try to decide what type of woman she is, and he immediately compares her to Alberta, his unhappy love affair from his time in Rome. The demise of this relationship, according to Joaquín, drove him to his morphine addiction. Uncomfortable with the loss of his authority in this situation, the photographer hostilely responds, “Mejor dime cómo se convierte uno en una loca” (16). She challenges him back, asking if he is sure he wants to know, which provokes laughter from Joaquín, thus breaking the standoff between the photographer and his subject, the male and the female, the allegedly sane and the insane. For these two individuals, momentarily at least, the social barriers between them are broken.

Shortly after their encounter, Joaquín recalls where he previously saw Matilda and he finds proof of his suspicion in his work. It is with affection that he filters through his
“most prized possession” (17), photographs of naked prostitutes looking directly at the camera. While these prints could be conceived as scandalous, the fondness and respect with which Joaquín thinks of “mis mujeres” (17, emphasis in original) demonstrates that these prints may be categorized as art and not pornography. The novel depicts a rigid process of modernization occurring at the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century in Mexico which had little patience for prostitution or for its perceived association with diseased bodies and diseased minds. Joaquín recalls how nonplussed Matilda was by removing her clothes and facing the camera. It was as if she were completely unburdened by socially-dictated modesty when she directly faces his camera lens. Then, mimicking the question that began this novel, Matilda asked him all those years ago in the brothel, “¿Cómo se llega a ser fotógrafo de putas?” (19). The question pained him then, as does his recollection of it. It is clear how much he cares for these images “Para imprimir las places utilizó bromuro de plata y, con mucho cuidado durante el proceso fotográfico, logró vistosos colores. Después, cubierto por el sudor, el cansancio de varios días sin sueño y el sobresalto que le producían las imágenes, las observó una vez más antes de introducirlas con toda delicadeza en su baúl de latón” (19). With his grade school buddies, he can feign he is “just a guy” and would, of course, be interested in photographing naked women. However, the reader is quick to perceive the tinny ring to this false claim. In truth, Joaquín is a sensitive man, driven to find beauty and tenderness in his female subjects, though he perceives this would be an unacceptable response to an all-male group. Although his position as a man allows him more social freedom than would be
afforded a woman, he is still constricted by what realms are considered to be appropriate for men. Critic Robert McKee Irwin in his study of Mexican masculinity in the 20th century identifies how art intersected with socially defined notions of masculinity. McKee convincingly argues that following the Mexican Revolution, a national discourse emerged questioning the “virility” of Mexican literature and this preoccupation led artistic movements to prize masculinity and scorn femininity (117-121). Sensitivity became part of this abhorred femininity and this is why Joaquín must pretend his photos are not of vulnerable women but rather dirty photos of common whores. Here the reader confronts the unforgiving dualities Mexican men faced as the nation struggled to define itself following so many years of unrest. Joaquín must belittle his own art to gain acceptance from other men.

Returning to these photographs, they represented much more than art for art’s sake. The artistic rendering of these prostitutes, long considered pariahs in Mexican society, is subversive to the dominant culture in that it draws attention and glorifies traditionally marginalized female subjects. These images return an element of humanity to hypersexualized subjects removed from society. The shyness of the majority of these prostitutes as shown on the film hints that these women were forced by circumstance into the sex industry. Matilda certainly is representational of this group of female workers in that she tried working in various other industries before accepting that those other positions would not provide adequate pay and working conditions.
However, Matilda differentiates herself from the other prostitutes in that she unabashedly sheds her clothes for Joaquín’s camera at the bordello. For his part, Joaquín is surprised and uncomfortable that a woman would so freely expose her body the way Matilda did. He is fascinated by her defiance of social rules and this fascination will return to him all those years later in the asylum. He projects onto Matilda that she is somehow like Alberta, his first love, and will continue to look for clues that indicate this to be true.

After his initial visit with Matilda at the brothel, Joaquín returns to visit her but is told that she has run off with an engineer from the United States, Paul Kamàck. The madam comments, “No sé qué tienen estas indias que siempre vuelven locos a los gringos” (20). Her question is rich with societal criticism, inferring that an “india” is somehow less desirable than a lighter-skinned individual. The reader recognizes “indias” as used here is a slur to reinforce a racially structured society in which the female indigenous population is at the very bottom of the social hierarchy on account of having dark skin. This inferiority is further “confirmed” by its female status. For this reason, it appears incongruous to the owner of the brothel that a woman like Matilda would be so desired. With respect to Matilda, it reveals that she is operating within the hierarchy in which light-skinned men with money reign. This chapter will return to the many social implications of Matilda in the role of “la Señora Kamàck,” but first a more thorough understanding of Joaquín’s perspective merits investigation. For the photographer, Matilda’s marriage follows a fairytale formula of a (male) hero saving a damsel in
distress. In a very real sense, Paul “saves” Matilda from a life of prostitution. It is not altogether surprising, then, Joaquín attempts to mimic the formula. After all, he is white and wealthy too, but his attempt to “save” Matilda from the asylum will end in disaster, as the reader witnesses. After Paul’s death, Matilda ends up in La Castañeda where she and Joaquín meet again. The wayward photographer requests that she tell him her story in her own words, a significant request in that it does not assume a preconceived identity for the protagonist. That Matilda provides her own narrative is essential in recognizing that Rivera Garza goes beyond merely pointing out that women of mestizo origin were marginalized in the period surrounding the Mexican Revolution. She allows Matilda her own voice to recount her experiences. Critic Laura Kanost notes that this representation of the asylum as a sanctuary where individuals can be themselves is important because it is not presented as “a monolithic mechanism of rigid control and silence, but as a continual negotiation of bodies and words” (299). Nadie has a critical eye for the treatment of marginalized figures, including the medically interned, but it is not in line with the Foucauldian anti-psychiatry movement.

It would be difficult to overstate the influence of Michel Foucault’s theories in this novel. Nadie at once recognizes the powerful influence that Foucault had in the 20th century while also questioning the radical nature of the anti-psychiatry movement for perhaps overstating the lack of agency granted to the medically infirm. Rivera Garza does not aim, then, the disprove Foucault’s positions, but rather to amend them to align with her own historical research of La Castañeda. Of course, there was inevitably a great deal
of oversight and control of patients and their bodies, as is reflected in this novel. For instance, the first scene begins with Joaquín’s camera classifying the bodies of La Castañeda’s interned residents. Within the asylum, these photographs served to tautologically justify the extraction of the mentally ill from the mentally well population. The residents are photographed because they are at the asylum, and that photograph serves as evidence that they should remain there. In her dissertation, Rivera writes: “Photography can indeed constitute an effort to appropriate and thus control the subject, however, the subject is always the subject” That is, an agent of history, a human activity and a process” (316). Matilda is the personification of this resistance to being classified. Of course, it was not just the government who sought to exercise such tight control on members of the populace. Society was also complicit, and Rivera Garza’s reader notes how allegedly modern policies are enforced by the citizen protagonists of this novel. For instance, her Tío Marcos wanted to control Matilda or “modernize her” because of the threat of the mestizo lower class. Rivera Garza writes in her dissertation “Dangerous Minds” that “The mestizo lower class, a racially mixed group of people that, according to the most Porfirian experts, carried the worst characteristics of the indigenous and Spanish legacies they combined. Because of their liminal status and their growing

3 To the extent that Nadie me verá llorar presents a rich, fictional tapestry of the characters that occupied La Castañeda during this intense period of modernization in Mexico, her dissertation offers a drier, more analytical approach to La Castañeda’s past, more consistent with the historical investigation, which it is. Included in her dissertation are a collection of photographic portraits of the residents from the asylum of “vacant” (308) individuals who failed to embrace the new rules of the modern state of Mexico.
numbers in the country at large and in the capital city in particular, poor mestizos were the target of Porfirian policies of social control” (38). The high level of regulation of public life, that Matilda experiences both in and outside of La Castañeda indicate these discriminatory controls are even worse for the female mestiza. Critic Dolores Rangel affirms that Nadie not only delineates this “social map” but also exposes who was most adversely affected by these ideas (60).

Archetype: The First and The Second Mujer

Joaquín Buitrago and the asylum’s doctor, Eduardo Oligochea, come to be on friendly terms as part of Joaquín’s plan to gain access to Matilda’s file. For his part, the twenty-four year old doctor is interested in the third person ramblings of the much older Joaquín to break the tedium of his workday. Joaquín’s drug addiction piques the interest of the ambitious psychiatrist, who is trapped in La Castañeda himself, stuck waiting for a more lofty position to become available to him. During one of their talks, Joaquín recalls his first mujer⁴, Diamantina Vicario. He first saw her as she played challenging and modern pieces on the piano (35). Diamantina’s talent and intellect immediately attracted Joaquín. On their first date, the new couple mocks the poetry of Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, the “Mexican precursor of the modernist movement in Spanish poetry, (who) endeavored to amalgamate French spirit and Spanish form and so produce a type of poetry with the qualities of intellectual music” (Walsh 551). Their ridicule of one of Mexico’s most

⁴ Here “mujer” means neither “woman” nor “wife,” but is something of a hybrid. It perhaps could be best translated as “lover” because Diamantina was Joaquín’s lover, though not his legal spouse.
celebrated poets emphasizes the central role that modernity has in the novel. Romanticism is no longer pertinent and Diamantina cannot be equated with the “tímida virgen” (37) of Gutiérrez Nájera’s poetry. The narrator recounts that “en ese momento, Joaquín supo que Diamantina nunca le pertenecería” (37). Joaquín’s desire and failure to possess a woman replays itself with Alberta and Matilda. His “loss” of Alberta when he abandons her in Rome torments him. As for Matilda, his obsession to know fully the intimate details of her history invades her privacy and will eventually push her away.

Joaquín categorizes women in two categories: the “first mujer” and the “second mujer.” This limited classification system will curtail his ability to fully appreciate the women in his life since he cannot accept them outside of this limited duality.

From Diamantina’s father, the reader learns that she is a young widow following a brief two years of marriage. He speaks admiringly of her hardheadedness and how her musical determination is so demanding so not to allow anyone else in (40). This fierce independence will play into Joaquín’s formula of a first mujer. Every night Joaquín is drawn to Diamantina’s old, empty house where he listens to her play piano and then gives discourses on greed, laziness and the corruption of power. Before he met her, Joaquín was directionless, but after their acquaintance, he enrolls in the Academia de San Carlos, a prestigious art school in Mexico City (Ruiz Gomar 74). In a gender role reversal so typical of Rivera Garza’s work, here it is the man who seeks salvation through the woman: “[Joaquín] estuvo seguro de que lo que había llevado a Diamantina hacia su cuerpo no era la pasión romántica, sino otra fuerza: la pasión de la salvación” (42). And
while his “mujer” is the recipient of Joaquín’s complete devotion, her superior intellect fills him with anxiety. Diamantina and her father speak over breakfast about the increasingly preposterous orders from General Porfirio Díaz, but Joaquín has nothing to contribute to the conversation. She even takes him to anti-Porfiriato meetings, but he can only concentrate on her physical being, admiring her body. He acts as if he lives outside of history; he is so engrossed in his own life while remaining ignorant of the imminent Revolution. Their relationship eventually ends on the platform of a train station, where Diamantina fatefully heads off to Veracruz to organize the workers in an effort to bring down the oligarchy to which the Buitrago family belongs.

As historian Alan Knight points out in his much celebrated two volume work, *The Mexican Revolution* (1986), the facts behind this period of political upheaval have become much obscured by its mythologization. So while 1910 is frequently cited as the start of the Revolution on account of Madero’s failed coup, in truth the unrest had already been established for some time. Without having it explicitly elucidated, it is evident that Rivera Garza intended Diamantina’s departure for Veracruz to be in anticipation of the Rio Blanco strikes. As a *revolutionaria*, Diamantina makes an interesting figure in that she highlights some of the ambiguities obscured by the myth of the Revolution. Perhaps one might imagine a typical revolutionary as an uneducated rural peon and most definitely a male figure. Diamantina pertains to none of these categories and most of her organizing takes place in illicit meeting in the nation’s highly urban capital city. Her circle is made up of other literate urban dwellers that participate in the arts and artisan
economy. Knight affirms that the urban artisan class’s contribution “has been largely neglected in historical accounts” (133), although it played a key role in organizing strikes and riots. Ironically, it is the myth that praises the Río Blanco strikes as a potential “trigger” of the Revolution while Knight argues that these accounts are much exaggerated\(^5\) (135). Regardless, Diamantina’s sacrifice in Veracruz does succeed in acknowledging this exceptional historical moment while at the same time creating a contrast between her own fervent political beliefs and Joaquín’s self-absorbed political apathy.

Joaquín emerges from this analepsis to his time with Diamantina so to inquire what Eduardo thinks of love. The latter takes out a photo of his fiancée, Cecilia Vallapando\(^6\), whose delicate, pale and “casi enfermiza” (45) characteristics are quite contrary to Diamantina’s fit frame or Matilda’s indigenous heritage. Joaquín, perhaps recognizing how he used Diamantina to feel alive, berates the doctor for his choice in mates: “Vamos Eduardo. No te hagas pendejo. Esto ni siquiera es una mujer. Cecilia es tu boleto para entrar por la puerta grande a la colonia Roma” (46). Needing Joaquín’s approval, Eduardo nervously concedes that Cecilia is the “segunda mujer” (45), validating the opposition of the first \textit{mujer} and the second \textit{mujer}. This type of nomenclature restricts these two male characters from understanding the women in their

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\(^5\) See Friedrich Katz’s chapter in \textit{Mexico Since Independence} (1991) as an example of scholarship claiming the Río Blanco strikes held considerable influence in the beginning of the Revolution.

\(^6\) Cecilia’s last name is spelt both “Villalpando” and “Villapando” in the text. For clarity, this chapter uses the latter.
personal lives. In this system, a woman may either be the first mujer, the one that cannot be tamed, who is unruly and refusing subservience; or she may be the second mujer, submissive, attainable and lacking personality. In short, the first mujer is real love and the second is used for personal gain. From Cecilia’s “ephemeral” description, the reader gathers that she has little to offer besides the financial backing of her father’s silk shop. Up to this point, Rivera Garza has yet to present her reader with a singular successful relationship in Nadie. Loneliness marks all of the central characters (Joaquín, Matilda, and Eduardo). Curiously, it is not the need to be understood but the desire to understand others which drives the male protagonists. Perhaps this is why the system of first and second mujer is so appealing to Joaquín and to Eduardo, it permits them to neatly classify a woman and that label will determine both the treatment she receives as well as the expectations they maintain.

Bitterly, Joaquín tells the young doctor that he must not know love because, “Si te hubieran amado, Eduardo, sabrías que nunca es una suerte ser amado por una mujer” (46). Incited by Joaquín’s condescension, Eduardo takes out a picture of his first love, Mercedes Floras. This young woman from Jalapa was a medical student with Eduardo and she was his former lover. The first time they had sex, she turned to him and said “I’m your man” (46) in English. The doctor took her remark as a confrontation to his manhood and took offense. That she said it in English compounds the insult since English is often perceived as the language of (neo)colonization. Eduardo plays into the “game” and responded by saying to Mercedes, “I’m your woman” (46), a point she concedes before
breaking into laughter. The doctor’s pained face reveals that she is the first *mujer* for him, the untamable one whom he still loves. Why is this interaction between Mercedes and Eduardo so painful, both to recount and to hear? Perhaps because this suggested role reversal where the woman is “The Man” (in uppercase to indicate authority) and the man is “a woman” (marginalized and lacking power) indicates changing power relations with respect to gender in Mexico at this time. The Mexican Revolution significantly altered the power dynamics in gendered relationships on account of women emerging into public life after years of being legally subjugated to strict, traditional roles imposed by the Mexican Civil Code of 1884. Strong female leaders like Dolores Jiménez y Muro and Hermila Galindo challenged the once widely-held belief that politics was exclusively the realm of men⁷ (Soto 31-32). However, Mercedes comment intentionally undermines the doctor’s sense of self and wounds him. The reader recognizes her cruelty but also the sad irony that a woman referring to another person as a woman as an insult is, in fact, insulting to herself. However, Mercedes is much more than a female macho. She desires to be everything:

Mercedes quería ser la Florencia Nightingale del Partido Liberal Rojo. Escribir acertijos en inglés. Regresar a Edimburgo [*sic*] y quedarse a vivir para siempre en la torre de un Castillo. Ser la primera mujer mexicana en correr, y

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ganar, los cien metros en un Olimpiada. Emular las aventuras de Rimbaud en el norte de África. Mascar tabaco. Recorrer la muralla china en bicicleta. Tener hijos. Y llamarse, mientras tanto, Mercedes Flores de Oligochea. Decía que el nombre tenía buen ritmo. (47)

Given this *joie de vivre*, Rivera Garza’s reader begins to understand the doctor’s tender feelings for his first “*mujer.*” While lamenting their romantic losses, a fraternal bond develops between Joaquín and the doctor that allows them to overcome the many social differences between them. By affirming their shared position as heterosexual men who lost their first loves, Joaquín and Dr. Oligochea foster a homosocial bond which affords them an intimate relationship. Taking full advantage of this confidence, Joaquín inquires about “expediente 6353” (50), as Matilda’s dossier labels her. The doctor concedes this request and Joaquín at last has exclusive access to Matilda’s background information wherein he hopes to find the answers as to why she is so hard to define and whether she could be another “first *mujer.*”

This folder with personal information, of course, will not provide the full picture of Matilda which Joaquín seeks. His desire to know her completely obsesses him, a weakness Eduardo notices and believes to be rooted in Joaquín’s nostalgia for Diamantina Vicario. The doctor explains Joaquín’s interest in Diamantina as, “porque ella (Matilda) es el prototipo de la primera mujer” (51). His comment reestablishes a
mindset as to which characteristics comprise a first *mujer*, and which a second. However, the reader must question what shared traits do Diamantina, Mercedes and Matilda really have in common? In truth, the reader, like Joaquín, has a much clearer picture of Diamantina than of Matilda. While Matilda’s file can only hint that she is free-spirited, the narration paints Diamantina as a passionate musician who is galvanized by politics and the need to effect change. This socially-minded desire is what puts her on the train to Veracruz.

These Rio Blanco strikes, which took place in 1907 and spread to Puebla, were violently suppressed by Porfirio Díaz killing hundreds of workers (Katz 112). As narrative mixes with history, the reader might assume that Diamantina was among those who lost her life in the fight for workers’ rights. However, at the end of the novel, Eduardo discovers from state medical records that Diamantina died in Mexico City in December 1906, suggesting she never made it to Veracruz. How is it, then, that Joaquín recalls saying goodbye to her on the platform of a train station and seeing her off? These mutually exclusive accounts coupled with the evidence provided by Eduardo suggests that Diamantina’s romantic departure to fight for improved working conditions might be an invention by the drug-addicted Joaquín. If he labels Diamantina as a first *mujer* and all first *mujeres* are unattainable, then he cannot fault himself for the end of their relationship. While it is impossible for the reader to determine exactly how Joaquín and Diamantina’s romance concluded, it is fair to say that Joaquín projects his first *mujer*
ideology onto Diamantina and uses it to explain her absence from his life following the 
winter of 1906.

Rivera Garza’s narrator provides a detailed account of the end of Joaquín and 
Diamantina’s relationship, but scant details about what went wrong with Alberta. We 
know that she preceded Diamantina because Joaquín met her while he was in Rome, from 
1897-1903. Alberta is a waitress that hopes to marry Joaquín, but he abandons her when 
he returns to Mexico. In a rare transition to first person narrative, separated from the rest 
of the text through the use of italics, Joaquín speaks of “la crueldad de su (Alberta’s) 
inteligencia” (187). He left Alberta to pursue photographic ambitions in Mexico City and, as a punishment, Alberta sends him sexual photos of herself, frequently with different 
partners. She cleverly deduced that Joaquín was using her for sex during his stay in Italy 
and she uses her wits to torture Joaquín through his own medium. This tactic appears to 
mimic that of a jilted lover in Juan Carlos Onetti’s short story, “El infierno tan temido.” 
In Onetti’s story, a widowed reporter hastily marries a much younger woman and after a 
few months, they separate. As he continues his work with a newspaper, his separated 
second wife sends the protagonist similar photos of herself engaged in sexual encounters 
with other men. Presuming he will stop opening her letters, she begins to send the photos 
to his boss, his deceased first wife’s mother and even his daughter’s school, causing the 
protagonist an increasing sense of anxiety. His impotence to stop the letters tortures the 
protagonist until, finally, he sees no other alternative beside suicide. Joaquín does not kill
himself; instead, he self-medicates with morphine. Although Alberta at one point was
used and abandoned, she resists the distinction of a second *mujer*.

As for Eduardo, he believes Mercedes to be a first *mujer* and that she possessed
the qualities associated with this position: she is full of life, passionate, and unattainable.
The “second *mujer,*” at least for Eduardo, is the practical woman for whom he settles. His
fiancée, Cecilia, is sickly and most certainly lacking the personal magnetism that
Mercedes possessed. However, she is the daughter of a wealthy silk merchant and can
offer stability instead of excitement. The preference of both men is clear, they idolize the
“*primera mujer.*” Matilda with her loquacious personality symbolizes Diamantina for
Joaquín and Mercedes for Eduardo. For these men, the protagonist presents an
opportunity to recapture a bit of their lost love. In this sense, being the “first *mujer*” refers
not just to a chronological order but to a preference on the part of the men. Of course,
such consideration significantly limits the subjectivity of Matilda. By dividing their
lovers into two groups (first and second *mujeres*), the men impose an incomplete
taxonomy for women that prohibits these two characters from fully appreciating the
women they claim to love (or claim to use). In other words, by seeking Mercedes or
Diamantina in Matilda, they fail to capture Matilda’s true identity.

This dichotomy of two female archetypes revisits the stereotypical juxtaposition
of the whore and the virgin. The whore is desirable, like Diamantina, Mercedes and
Matilda, but lives on the outskirts of mainstream society. This is why these *mujeres*
cannot occupy the “wife” sense of the term “*mujer.*” The virgin, Cecilia, is an ethereal
creature whose description makes her seem otherworldly and asexual. While at the end of the novel, Joaquín admits the truth about Alberta, how he left her and how she tormented him, for most of the novel Joaquín portrays Alberta as a perfect, dreamy memory. He tries to make her into the second mujer, but can only do so if he ignores some salient and rather vulgar parts of her persona. Similarly, Eduardo describes his fiancée as frail, pale, and unfit for this world. Of course, Nadie does not invoke the whore/virgin model to reinforce it, but rather to establish how such binaries can be disastrous to those who subscribe to them. The doctor’s evident misery and Joaquín’s obsession to emotionally dissect the “prototipo de la primera mujer” are evidence of this danger.

Archetype: The Good Girl and The Bad Girl

From Matilda’s folder, Joaquín, and the reader, learn more of her history in Chapter 2, “El esposo de la vainilla” (53). Her adolescence and early adulthood additionally introduce many other “types” of women for the reader to critique. At the age of 15, Matilda travels alone to Mexico City via railway. The train tracks which connect the small towns to the thriving metropolis are indicative of Mexico’s modernization and of increasing urbanization of Mexican society. The narrator generously includes details that could not possibly be listed in her medical record. Are these details merely a literary device to develop the story, or is Rivera Garza hinting that this might be Joaquín imagining Matilda’s childhood? Either way, the reader must now question the narrative voice. Is this voice neutral or does it reflect Joaquín and his obsessive need to portray Matilda in a certain light?
Upon arriving in Mexico City, Matilda is scared and resolves to hide her fear, “Nadie la vería llorar” (53). How interesting that here the reader observes the first instance of many where the narrative voice shifts from addressing the future, *No One Will See Her Cry*, to the conditional, *No One Would See Her Cry*. The future tense is so much more definite, almost threatening in its finality. It does not allow the possibility of Matilda’s vulnerability being exposed. However, the conditional, *vería*, implies a stipulation. No one *would* see her cry operates on the premise that she can control her circumstances and therefore also can ensure that no one sees her in a vulnerable condition. This structure allows the narrative voice a certain power, which is unusual in an extradiegetic third person narrator. Arguably, this authoritative voice is representative of the state as it tries to mold its citizens to conform to its modernizing ideals. Matilda, however, is not one to bend to the will of others and does not seek to try to refashion herself to correspond with the state’s vision. While Matilda will repeatedly try to isolate herself to control the situation, she will not always be able to escape from the prying eyes of the other characters. Also of note is that while the title of the book employs the first person direct object pronoun “me” indicating the speaker is talking of herself, here the narrator uses the third person feminine direct object pronoun “la.” The difference is that Matilda is not speaking about herself in the text; the narrator is speaking for her. This narrative voice is interpreting the protagonist for the reader.

Also arriving in Mexico City in 1900 is Joaquín Buitrago and, according to the narration, he meets her this very day and comforts her as he does see her cry. So intense
is her need to guard this private moment that it shapes the title of this novel. However, at this early point in her development, Matilda is so young and unable to keep her emotions subdued. Her crying is a public spectacle, which is interesting because if avoiding such a scene is what a young Matilda initially seeks to avoid, creating (or rather, “performing”) a scene will define her adulthood as a regular performer in “La Modernidad.” Of course, the reader must take into account the credibility of the voice that relays this story, Joaquín. This is quite possibly an example of Joaquín fictionalizing Matilda’s personal history so to insert himself. After all, the train station has already proven to be a slippery place where Diamantina possibly disappeared. According to the photographer, she does cry just as she meets him for the first time. He comforts her, unaware of how often their paths will cross. There will be other instances when Joaquín inserts himself into Matilda’s history and the reader will have to wonder if he is innocently retelling the events or deliberately manipulating Matilda’s personal history so that he can play the hero. I believe the distinction between Matilda’s past and Joaquín’s imagination can be found in Matilda’s actions. When she is being photographed at the asylum, she recognizes Joaquín before he recognizes her from when they met at the brothel, La Modernidad. However, at that meeting, there is no flicker of recognition from either party and therefore, it would be fair to interpret the photographic session at La Modernidad as, in fact, their first meeting.

Returning to the present, Joaquín studies Matilda’s file, attempting to make sense of her small-town story which, at first, seems so foreign to him. He repeats the names
from Totonacapan region of Veracruz that appear in her file, failing to identify it with this eastern part of Mexico. Veracruz is significant in many ways. Firstly, its racial background is considerably more varied than that of other regions of Mexico, in large part due to the heritage from black slaves during Mexico’s colonial period. Even before Mexican independence, blacks and Afro-

*castas* (persons with African and indigenous ancestry) rebelled for greater political rights, including voting rights and the freedom to hold political office. (Carroll 149-153). In this sense, it is ethnically distinct and more progressive than other parts of Mexico. Veracruz is also meaningful because during the final stages of the Mexican Revolution, the United States occupied this state. This occupation resulted from the Tampico Affair where the United States illegally entered the port of Tampico despite a blockade ordered by Mexican president Victoriano Huerta. Although the U.S. Marines were immediately released, the United States government demanded a 21 canon salute, which Mexico denied. As a result, the U.S. overtook Mexico’s principle port of Veracruz (Hagg y Saab 17). This incident is part of a broader pattern of colonial history that remained present in the region long after the end of the colonial era. Finally, Veracruz links Matilda and Diamantina since both characters either begin or end their stories here. It is quite possible that the text seeks to underscore the shared relationship between these two women and to hint at a cosmic relationship which they share.

Returning to Joaquín’s reading of Matilda’s medical records, this determined protagonist investigates every detail with care and soon those places reveal themselves to
him sensually. He can see and smell the diverse vegetation that framed Matilda’s childhood. He reads more about her specific town, Papantla, and takes in the images of it as “un poblado apacible aunque desordenado” (55). The author of this fictional reference book projects his own condescending vision of the town as being disordered, an implicit reference to the belief that the capital city is organized and modern while the countryside is backward. In the course of his investigation of Papantla, Joaquín tries to ascertain more information about Matilda’s racial heritage. “Cuando aparece mencionado un español fabricante de puros, Joaquín contiene la respiración, pero al comprobar que su apellido no es Burgos, la deja escapar con desconsuelo” (56). Joaquín is disappointed that the Spanish cigar manufacturer is not a Burgos because that is Matilda’s last name and he desires to whiten Matilda by tying her to European roots. He is attempting to force the protagonist to conform to his idea of a first mujer, or his ideal woman. It perhaps seems far-reaching to read so much into an exhaled breath, but his disappointment is evident. He wants Matilda to belong to the same socioeconomic and racial background as he does. Furthermore, his sigh reveals that he is not just trying to learn about Matilda’s history, but is trying to force her to match a predetermined set of characteristics which may not correspond to her personal history. Joaquín does manage to locate some details on Matilda’s heritage, though. Her ancestor, Marcos Burgos was the only Papanteco who was not Italian and who spoke Spanish. This detail thrills Joaquín, though its scant information can hardly confirm a Hispanic heritage. Rather, the reader feels disgust at Joaquín’s reactions.
Once again at the asylum, Joaquín gives Matilda a bottle of vanilla extract, the smell of which transports her back to Papantla. The gift is just as much for himself as it is for Matilda. He hopes the aroma will prompt her to share more details of her childhood not included in her official file, and he is not disappointed. She speaks of her indigenous grandmother, María de la Luz, who would pollinate the vanilla plants by hand. Here, the vanilla transforms into a metaphor for the indigenous peoples. Matilda tells Joaquín, “Pero una vez separada de los árboles, la vainilla también se vuelve amarga, ¿Sabía eso? Entonces la flor ya no está en manos de indios, sino bajo la mirada de los beneficiadores y los políticos” (58). Rivera Garza is artfully establishing the historical background of Matilda’s hometown and the exploitation of the indigenous (both residents and flora) by powerful foreigners, “blancos, mestizos, europeos” (58) Matilda continues to speak of how her father, Santiago Burgos, was an expert at harvesting the vanilla before he became dependent on aguardiente. She then dismisses her story, saying, “Pero yo estoy loca, Joaquín, así que no me crea. No me crea nada” (59). This leads the reader to the paradox that only a sane person could rationally consider his own sanity. Why does Matilda undermine her own retelling of events? She is effectively pushing herself back from the world, a world that has ripped her from Papantla just as vanilla is stripped from the vine. Santiago Burgos allows a regional version of aguardiente, known as aguardiente chuchiqui, to dominate the end of his life. The narrator relays how Santiago did not drink until 1885, the year of Matilda’s birth. It was also the year his parents both died in the Totonac uprising and the year that a drought threatened his vanilla crops. It was not the
first year of bad luck, however. Theft of his vanilla was an increasingly common and violent problem. Political corruption threatened the proprietorship of indigenous-held lands which led Antonio Díaz Manfor to lead 7,000 indigenous individuals to fight in a failed uprising (59). Santiago’s mother, María de la Luz, is indigenous and his father, Marcos Burgos, is Spanish immigrant. The narrator describes Santiago as a hysterical man, prone to attacks and mood swings. Matilda’s mother, Prudencia Lomas, came from more of an aristocratic background and she is described as enjoying French poetry and “los placeres de la carne” (60). Prudencia was already pregnant when she married Santiago and she also had a tendency to drink heavily, though not to the extent of her husband. The end of Matilda’s parents’ story is transcribed directly: “Su padre falleció a causa del alcohol y a su madre la asesinaron” (61). No further details are revealed regarding her mother’s death.

The history of Matilda’s parents is important because it informs the naturalist beliefs of how the capital city community perceives her. In the naturalist school of thought, it was held that illnesses like alcoholism were perhaps hereditary but also were very much environmentally-driven. Naturalists also believed that skin tone indicated the degree of refinement or savagery. For example, Matilda’s mother, Prudencia, “se enorgullecía de no llevar sangre indígena en sus venas” (64), yet she still takes compliment from a French traveler calling her the prettiest “indiane” (64) because as a European-born man, she believes he is innately more sophisticated than she is. Related to the taboos associated with skin color, naturalists believed that all diseases, including
alcohol abuse and mental illness, were largely racially determined in nature. Therefore, it is not surprising when the local doctor, Professor Donato Márque Auara, recognizes Matilda’s parents as unfit and immediately seeks to remove the young protagonist from her parents’ home. Of course, they are unfit in that they both heavily abuse alcohol. The distinction is that Matilda’s father was driven to alcoholism by years of colonial hardship and not by any sort of indigenous predilection for drink.

At the station in Mexico City, a 15 year-old Matilda meets her Uncle Marcos for the first time. Marcos’ first comment, “Vamos a hacer de ti una buena ciudadana” (72), reflects a preconceived and singular ideal for a “good female citizen” and that Matilda does not yet match up to this expectation. Additionally, Marcos conveys that he is in a position of power as the older, urban, and educated male to impose this archetype upon Matilda. Life in Marcos’s house is bleak and Matilda “se acopla a los hábitos domésticos de los Burgos con la mente en blanco” (97). This quotation speaks to the notion that Matilda is a “blank page” waiting to be shaped. The idea that a citizen is an empty vessel waiting to be educated is a theory consistent with the positivist thinking in “modern” Mexico. A closer look at the protagonist’s development would suggest, however, that she is biding her time maturing and waiting for the window when she can find her own path, or at least attempt to do so. She lives in a servant’s quarters apart from the main house and is treated likewise. For her uncle, Matilda’s presence is not that of a family member or even a guest, but rather an experiment to prove his theory that modern hygiene and discipline can “save” the adolescent Matilda from her condemned past of alcoholic
parents and also from her indigenous heritage. Somehow lost from his consciousness is Marcos’ own indigenous heritage. After all, it was Matilda’s mother who is criolla and her father who gives her his morena skin. Marcos was anxious to “whiten” himself, falsely claiming both his parents were from Spain. His obsessive cleanliness, his studious glasses and his medical degree never betray this deception. Of course, there is nothing inherently white (or racial in any respect) about cleanliness, glasses or medical degrees. Rather, his behavior reveals his own fallacious beliefs about race whereby the doctor considers white to be “good” and clean to be “good.” While it may seem that Marcos is a loathsome, one-dimensional character, Rivera Garza’s text presents a more complex character whose acceptance of racist, socially-held beliefs leads to his own rejection of self. In this light, the reader observes how such prejudice is maintained within a community.

Perhaps Marcos’ desire to transform, or whiten, Matilda is his way to prove the success of his own transformation. If he can alter Matilda in the same fashion which he altered himself, then Marcos will have completed his transformation into the image of the “good citizen.” If not, then he will simply be an urban façade on his old, uneducated and rural self, a concept that he, of course, would find unacceptable.

Matilda internalizes the importance of being a good citizen and a “good girl,” even if this is an elusive and not fully defined category. At some point she teaches herself to tell time because, as she later explains to Joaquín, “Una buena ciudadana, una muchacha decente, una mujer de buenas costumbres tiene que empezar por aprender los
nombres exactos de las horas” (98). Her sarcastic tone reflects just how staunchly she once believed in this hypothetical model citizen when she was younger and how little respect she maintains for it as an adult. In retrospect she can see that although she was taught to read, her education was stunted and she did not have the benefit of any civic training outside the house. The Burgos family is essentially teaching her to be a servant in her home, or rather, in their home, as she is relegated to sleeping in the servants’ quarters. Uncle Marco’s focus lies more in “domesticating” Matilda rather than in engaging her in civic life. Even for early 20th century Mexico, his views are extremely conservative with respect to women and education: “La educación no sólo amedrentaba el innato sentido de abnegación y sacrificio, las mejores virtudes femeninas, sino que también producía legiones de mujeres arrogantes e inútiles que, naturalmente, nunca conseguían marido” (109). Such sentiment reveals that although he is close friends with Doctor Columba Rivera, one of the first female doctors in the country, Marcos perceives her life to be a failure on account of her unmarried status.

The rules of the Burgos house, enumerated for the reader in the aptly named fourth chapter “Las buenas costumbres” reflect Marcos’ desire to not just shape Matilda’s behaviors, but to mold her mind, as well. The second rule requires Rivera Garza’s protagonist to stay continually busy to preserve her “higiene mental” (101). Also included in the rules is a blatantly anti-woman and ignorant set of directives, including the suggestion to bathe three times a day during menstruation and to avoid any physical or intellectual effort so to avoid a nervous breakdown. Even when she is not
menstruating, Matilda is instructed that “las mujeres decentes se bañan todos los días antes de las seis de la mañana, siempre” (101). As a result of such a high degree of molding by a misogynist mad scientist, Matilda becomes an empty, unthinking vessel of a woman. However, she has finally achieved the coveted status of a “good citizen.”

Tío Marcos’ hygiene-centered theories are informed by his friend, Julio Guerrero, who believed crime to be tied to atavisms of the lower classes that were presumably holding back the progress of all of Mexico.

“La falta de higiene y hábitos de trabajo, la inestabilidad de sus familias, la promiscuidad de sus mujeres, el desmedido gusto por el alcohol y otros vicios y hasta la costumbre de comer alimentos demasiado picantes hacían de este grupo una amenaza real para el país” (105).

Of course, Rivera Garza’s reader will be quick to question Guerrero’s theories. For example, with whom are these women being promiscuous? It is all too familiar and nonetheless fallacious to typecast women as salacious seductresses who destabilize society. Guerrero, though, does not limit his criticism to women, but to all of lower class society: “Todos ellos eran salvajes” (105) and, of course, this underclass is characterized by its “piel oscura” (105). Attempting to validate Guerrero’s theories, Tío Marcos boasts that he recognized a pattern in prostitutes that their big toe is farther separated from the rest of the toes as compared with non-prostitutes. His conclusion is that they are more
related to monkeys than to “seres evolucionados” (106). Marcos’ “big toe” research clearly is intended to provoke chuckles from the reader, but more significantly, it shows the desperate need scientists and physicians felt to classify (and discriminate) within society. Biological proof, even if the evidence is perhaps fabricated, justified the hierarchy which cemented social structures and allowed for quick and sanctioned stereotyping. In his cultural studies text Médicos, maleantes y maricas, Jorge Salessi explores the historical tendency of doctors in Latin America to determine what constitutes a healthy body within the broader national discourse (15-22). Of course the practice of doctors delineating the parameters of civilized and uncivilized (or barbaric) behavior has its origins in Sarmiento’s 1845 text Facundo, as Salessi points out on the first page of his book. In Nadie, Rivera Garza uses Tío Marcos’ character to acknowledge this tendency within the medical community. His efforts to cast Matilda as a “buena ciudadana” is really just a euphemism for what he believes to be good-faith efforts to “civilize” this young indigenous girl from eastern Mexico. However, the author is not one to paint her characters with a broad stroke and indeed Dr. Eduardo Oligochea offers an alternative to the model that Salessi proposes. Dr. Oligochea works with Matilda so that she may articulate her own story. Versions of this process abound in Rivera Garza’s aforementioned dissertation, Masters of the Street, and the reader can be certain she does not believe that all doctors of this period followed Tío Marcos’ bad example.

Marcos’ wife, Rosaura, serves as a model for the intellectual, quiet and therefore undesirable woman. Her perceived over-education, demonstrated through her appetite for
Russian novels, left her outcast as a “solterona” (24) at the age of twenty-four. For Marcos, though, she is the daughter of one of his medical school professors and the means to integrate himself into the capital city while erasing his small-town, indigenous past. Marcos and Rosaura’s love story is notable because it reveals so much social history from this period. Rivera Garza includes Rosaura being cast off as an “old maid” despite only being twenty-four to provoke her reader’s attention. Her intellectual side is seen as a flaw and also as a fulfillment of the proverb “mujer que sabe latín, no tiene marido ni tiene buen fin.” Had it not been for Marcos (and also for being the daughter of a medical school professor), she would have remained forever in her parents’ home. Although she does “finally” marry, Rosaura still represents the archetype of the old maid in *Nadie me verá llorar*. While she is legally wed to Marcos, their marriage is lacking romantically and certainly sexually (104). Coupling her asexuality is Rosaura’s economy of words. In fact, she so seldom speaks that she becomes a flat, one-dimensional character, which is fitting as it seems Rivera Garza is mocking this *solterona* stereotype.

Returning to the figure of Dr. Columba Rivera, her position as an accomplished woman invites the reader to contemplate what opportunities were open to educated women of this period. At the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century, she was only the second female doctor in Mexico (108), an accomplishment which Marcos believes is responsible for her being 43 and unmarried. Even though Marcos denies Matilda a formal education on the belief that education corrupts women, he sends his niece to work with Columba to combat Matilda’s “terrible legado genético” (109). If educated women are so dangerous,
why would Marcos think Columba could shape Matilda into the “good citizen” or “good girl” that he so wishes to impress on the protagonist? The difference, it may be argued, is found in Matilda’s “terrible genetic legacy” in comparison with Columba’s obvious whiteness. The *doctora* is described as being light-skinned with green eyes (109) whereas upon arriving at the Burgos’ home, Matilda is described as the following: “Matilda pronto se convirtió en la personificación misma del enemigo al que, más que derrotar, había que subyugar, convencer, domesticar. Como todos los léperos, Matilda tenía en contra su propio legado genético” (107-108). While working at the doctor’s house, Matilda receives the education that Marcos so wished to avoid: she begins reading classical literature from Columba’s extensive library. She also receives a piece of advice from the doctor warning her again love: “eso es lo peor que puede pasar a una mujer” (115). Of course, Marcos would be furious since he believes the only virtuous path for a woman is marriage. However, Columba’s comment reveals that her single civil status is a product of her own choice to avoid relationships rather than an unfortunate consequence of her medical degree and education. The portrait of Columba that Rivera Garza paints is that of an ambitious woman struggling to find legitimacy in male-dominated field by playing the part of the male. Critic Vinodh Venkatesh writes, “Columba se ejerce una puesta en escena de la masculinidad” (140). Like Marcos, she attempts to shape *Nadie’s* protagonist to conform to societal expectations of a “good girl.” So while Columba seems subversive in her advice to avoid romantic encounters, she never fully transgresses the rules of gender. She merely attempts to play the male role.
While Columba’s advice is well-meant, it is reflective of yet another character in this novel instructing the protagonist on what is the singular, correct way to live. Not surprisingly, Matilda is dehumanized from so many people trying to shape her. When Marcos “vio sus ojos [de Matilda] una mañana de invierno de 1904, se sintió satisfecho de su obra” (111) because the pupils staring back at him are vacant, lacking the curiosity that once was there.

Marcos’ success in transforming Matilda into a good girl is short lived as the protagonist proves to herself that she is much more than the good manners imposed upon her. “Además de las buenas costumbres, ella tiene algo más. Fuerza, por ejemplo. La inteligencia sufficient para dar el golpe definitivo” (116). This force is awakened by the unexpected arrival of Cástulo, an injured revolutionary, in her room one night. He is shot and fleeing persecution, so he slips in Matilda’s room, thinking it belonged to a servant and someone loyal to his social cause. Matilda, though not a servant, occupies a liminal space between true household servants and the privileged sphere in which her uncle and Columba live. Whether to care for him is quite likely the first decision that Matilda makes for herself since leaving the village and it is certainly her first opportunity to break the rules of her aunt and uncle willfully. However, for her it is an instinctual reaction to care clandestinely for the injured soldier. When he is well enough, Cástulo tells Matilda to advise “Tina” that he survived. Tina will introduce a whole other type of woman.

When meeting Diamantina, or “Tina,” Matilda is unsure how to act. “Matilda todavía carece de personalidad” (118) because she is a shell of a person, hallowed out by
social pressures from her family. This image of the protagonist as an empty cavity, waiting to be filled, is one which Rivera Garza repeatedly presents while Matilda is living in the care of her aunt and uncle. It also brilliantly illustrates the author’s belief that personalities are not necessarily predetermined, but can be shaped by surroundings. This is to say that the archetypes of the “good girl” and the “bad girl” are socially produced (and reproduced), and therefore cannot be an inherent part of one’s being, as Marcos upholds. While Cástulo opens Matilda to the possibility of being more than a good girl and a subservient niece, it is Diamantina who incites Matilda to leave her bourgeois household and live an alternative lifestyle in tune with the Mexican Revolution’s call for social change.

When Matilda, and the reader, first meets Diamantina, she is wearing “overol” (118), a controversial change in what kind of clothing was acceptable for a woman. Her outfit bucks social conventions and shows the protagonist how gender is performed. As Venkatesh writes, “Diamantina transgrede no solo los roles económicos de la mujer (como Columba), sino también las expectativas sociales de ella. En su forma de vestir y en su participación activa en el proceso revolucionario con Cástulo, Diamantina transgrede por completo la performancia del género; convirtiéndose en un ente masculino” (144). I am reluctant to agree with Venkatesh in that not engaging in a traditional female dress does not necessarily denote that she is an “ente masculino.” Such language can be dangerous because it so strongly reinforces a male/female dichotomy that denies any spectrum of gender performance or sex identity. Instead, I would
advocate that Diamantina is an important character in the book because she shows Matilda how an individual can be female without necessarily following all of the socially-prescribed dictates as to how a woman may or may not act. This interaction with Diamantina will later influence Matilda to experiment with her own gender identity.

Of course, Matilda does not immediately jump to questioning whether or not gender is a socially instructed performance. Instead, her first impression focuses on Diamantina’s glasses because Columba has glasses like Tío Marcos. However, “a diferencia de Columba, [Diamantina] es hermosa, casi bella, graciosa, llena de vida” (119). Young Matilda, perhaps because of her shut-in lifestyle, is guilty of believing there are only a limited number of ways to be a woman: either like her obedient aunt, her alcoholic mother or the spinster doctor. Having been raised in a household that embraced these rigid archetypes, it is not surprising that Matilda accepted this belief system. However, when she breaks out of the role into which the Burgoses lured her, she finds herself attracted to these other female possibilities.

While caring for Cástulo, Matilda begins a relationship with him. Unlike the novels she reads at Columba’s house, here the victim in need of care is a man and the savior is a woman. This is a key moment of awakening for Matilda, who realizes the reality outside her uncle’s home is quite different from how she conceived of it. The narrative voice comments, “En las novelas que lee en casa de Columba los desenlaces son diferentes. Al final, ya todo resuelto, los héroes se vuelven eternos en un abrazo, en un beso” (119). However, the care for the injured soldier turns out to be far more difficult
that of a quick hug and kiss. Challenging though it may be, nurturing Cástulo empowers Matilda to question the life and lifestyle imposed upon her and eventually to leave the Burgos household. When she leaves the household, she is seemingly leaving behind the *buenas costumbres* and the “good girl” etiquette that Marcos Burgos had so intently tried to impress upon her. What ultimately pushed Matilda out of the comfortable bourgeois home is her uncle’s reaction to the Cananea Strike in Sonora, where over 30 striking workers were killed by Arizona state rangers (Goldman 294). Marcos celebrates this loss for the labor movement, and even laughs at the loss of life. By this point in the novel’s development, the protagonist has proven she can play the role of a “good citizen,” though in the end, as evidenced by Marcos’ reaction to the Cananea strike, a “good” citizen is not necessarily a moral one. Disgusted, she leaves his home without even saying goodbye. Marcos reads her abrupt exit as a failure on her part and cannot see how his own wretched behavior drove her out.

**Los apodos: How Changing Nicknames Shape Changing Expectations**

Before leaving her uncle’s house, Matilda struggles between aligning herself with the privileged life she knows or with the “La Causa” (123). Diamantina and Cástulo try to portray Marcos as a capitalist pig, and despite her mistreatment as his hands, Matilda still recognizes how her uncle works long hours to serve his patients and will even admit sick individuals into his home at night to receive treatment. Rivera Garza is careful not to make Marcos a one-dimensional “bad guy.” Matilda is now entangled with members of La Causa, but is living a double life at her uncle’s home where she does not want for
anything. The protagonist’s critical eye sees weaknesses on both sides and is unsure about where she fits in the city: “El esfuerzo, muchas veces, la deja confundida. ‘Quién es Matilda Burgos? Matilda Burgos soy yo’” (124). To the members of La Causa, Matilda is nicknamed “La Dama” or “La Damita” (127). Her association with this organization would be considered radical by her family and yet her colleagues judge her to be too proper. Although she eventually rejects her family, Marcos’ teachings on the importance of hygiene leave a permanent impression on Matilda and she frequently is cleaning up after the organization, enforcing this epithet of the “Little Lady.” Jokingly, Diamantina asks, “¿Quieres casarte conmigo, Matilda?” (127) because Matilda makes such a dedicated and devoted “wife.” However, like so many jokes, this one is nuanced with secondary meanings. For example, it exemplifies to what extent Matilda has internalized the domestic role because of her sex. It is true that Marcos advocated for a pristine household, but he never participated in the cleaning. That function was relegated to the women of the household. Here, Matilda reenacts her assigned gender role, even at the expense of being teased. On the other hand, though, Matilda does have a sexual interest in Diamantina and would like to have the romantic relationship with her which marriage implies. Of course, the possibility of gay marriage is anachronistic at the time when the novel takes place, and in fact continued to be an impossibility even at the time when *Nadie* was published. This is what makes Diamantina’s “proposal” so interesting, she is undermining a powerful social institution with humor and she does so in a seamless, apparently unintentional manner. Matilda’s relationship with Diamantina ends
When the latter leaves for Sonora to help strengthen the labor movement and is presumably injured.

When Matilda leaves the Burgos household, her ties to La Causa are weakened by Diamantina’s absence. Cástulo invites her to travel with him as a medic, but she no longer feels her place is with the movement that sees her only as a little lady, or “damita.” Instead, Matilda goes on to work in a cigar factory, renting a room from a single mother named Esther. She teaches Esther’s two children to write and medically treats them, as well as many of the neighborhood children, when they are ill. During this period of the protagonist’s development, she goes from being “la damita” to “la doctorcita.” However, this designation is short-lived because Esther gets sick and Matilda is fired for missing work to take her landlady to the hospital. After Esther’s death, Matilda tries to care for the orphaned children, but finds it difficult to find another factory job, so she joins the 12% of Mexico City women ages 15-30 who worked as prostitutes at this time (140).

Rivera Garza shows how many women, faced with extremely low-wage positions, were forced into prostitution due to their underprivileged social position. This new role represents the extreme opposite of her life as “la Damita.” When she was living as a “buena ciudadana,” Dr. Columba Rivera frequently expressed how prostitutes repulsed her, even though she treated them at the Hospital Morelos (115). Matilda’s entrance into the realm of prostitution is in part driven by necessity, though it arguably is also a rebellion against her upbringing.
As a prostitute, Matilda’s nickname will change yet again, this time to “La Diablesa” or “The She Devil,” which, “como todo nombre de guerra, lo ganó después, precisamente en la guerra” (141). This war posits privileged men using their positions of power to take advantage of the prostitutes. After a medical student attempts to get more than what he paid for, he complains to the madam, creating a scene to which the police are called. When the police attempt to detain this young woman, still naked, for attacking the medical student, Matilda gives a lecture on working conditions and workers’ rights. The police laugh at her speech, prompting the naked prostitute to break a chair over one of the officers. When the other pulls out his gun, Matilda warns him that if he pulls the trigger, they will all kill him. The mood is quick to change and the police leave without arresting anyone.

The nickname “La Diablesa” is curious because it is yet another example of Rivera Garza taking a traditionally male figure, the devil, and inverting this character into a female version. Following the fight, one of Matilda’s colleagues comments, “Pero si parecías el mismísimo diablo, Matilda” while another corrects, “Querrás decir una diabla” (142). The fight between the police and Nadie’s protagonist is an empowering scene as the reader cannot help but to share in Matilda’s victory over an oppressive power structure. She proves that these women, long considered the dregs of society, still maintain their humanity and deserve to be treated with a modicum of respect. The distraught, naked woman who fought with the medical student is named Ligia, though she is also known as “La Diamantina” for the fake diamond necklace she wears.
However, she hardly compares with the determined, intellectual of Diamantina Vicario. Shortly after this encounter, Ligia and Matilda become lovers.

While working (and cohabitating) together at La Modernidad, Ligia and Matilda conceive and perform a parody of *Santa* in which Ligia dresses as the protagonist and Matilda cross-dresses as a dandy known as “El Menso”. The carnavalesque parody contrasts their true subjective existence with the naturalist conceptions of prostitutes that Gamboa’s work reflects. It also demonstrates a fluidity of self on Matilda’s part as she is comfortable portraying a character that does not reflect society’s expectations of her. If anything, she appears to relish challenging perceived norms. A brothel is an ideal place to transgress the rules of gender and sexuality. Even the madam of La Modernidad is a male-to-female cross-dresser who goes by the name “La madame Porfiria.” Their successful show attracts all segments of society by offering the sensation of belonging to an alternate society (149).

The performers refine their act, inventing new vignettes, including a dance they call “Enfermedad.” A gentleman who is painting the duo suggests a more provocative name, to which Ligia replies: “Y quién te dijo que esto lo hacemos para los hombres, Santos? Si quieren venir que vengan, y que se vengan también de paso, pero todo esto es

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8 *Nadie* makes clear that Rivera Garza imposes her criticism of Gamboa’s treatment of prostitutes through the protagonist here. Santa’s story of an indigenous, small-town woman who ends up working in a brothel is mirrored in Matilda’s story. However, Santa’s naivety and moral “weakness” contrasts strikingly with Matilda’s street smarts and socially-imposes limitations. This comparison encourages the reader to share in Matilda and Ligia’s rejection of Gamboa’s naturalist text.
para las muchachas, ¿entiendes?” (146). As there are no female clients explicitly mentioned in the text, the reader may conclude that Ligia’s snarky comment implies that the performance is done for the benefit of their colleagues. This very well could be the intention, but given the intimacy shared by these two characters, I would argue that these women are performing for each other first. In this relationship, Matilda feels freedom for the first time. “Fuera de la cárcel de los Burgos y fuera también de la salita de Mesones, y de la vecindad de Balderas, las calles se convirtieron en su única casa y el cielo azul de la ciudad de México en su único techo. Así descubrió su verdadera patria” (145). Not even the gender-queer performances in La Modernidad are done to meet someone else’s expectations, as Ligia so tartly informs the painter. Matilda engages in this art for her own enjoyment and even cuts her hair in a traditionally masculine style and stops wearing perfume. Her audience begins to consider her androgynous, proof that she has broken with society’s expectations for how a woman should behave. However, on the other hand, she is still answering the question of “Who is Matilda Burgos?” She is no longer “la Damita” or ‘la Doctorcita”, but she also does not seem entirely comfortable in the role of “la Diablesa” either. After all, it is another identity imposed upon her by others and not chosen by herself. Even when playing the part of “El Menso,” a role she chose for herself, she is performing as someone she is not.

**Intertextuality with Federico Gamboa**

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9 “La salita de Mesones” is where La Causa would meet.

10 Balderas is the neighborhood where she rented a room from Esther.
The parallels between Federico Gamboa’s text *Santa* and Matilda’s arrival as the brothel “La Modernidad” are undeniable. There are even several intertextual references to Gamboa’s celebrated novel that tells the quintessentially positivist tale of a woman (Santa) from the provinces who, after being disowned by her family, is forced into prostitution in a house run by a Spanish madam, Elvira. Santa quickly ascends to be the most sought-after courtesan in Mexico City and is even invited to be the private mistress of a few prominent male citizens, including El Jarameño, a bullfighter whom she loves though she is unfaithful. After a few bouts between private homes and her brothel, Santa quickly falls from her pedestal, descending into alcoholism and increasingly disreputable bordellos. Finally, plagued with venereal diseases, she dies in the care of Elvira’s blind piano player, Hipólito, after being thrown out from the lowest possible type of brothel.

The figure of Santa as the weak but good-hearted prostitute became an indelible figure in Mexican literature. Of course, the figure of Santa as the “hooker with a heart of gold” is problematic because, like most prototypical figures, she is so simplified she loses her subjectivity. The end of Gamboa’s novel is moving and evokes a strong sense of empathy from the reader. However, it fails to challenge the social norms of the day or investigate what gendered limitations coerce young women into this dangerous occupation. Unlike Matilda, who tried to work at factories before being forced into prostitution, Gamboa’s protagonist goes straight from the expulsion of her family’s village to a brothel. Santa’s downfall and death are sad, but an inevitable consequence of her decisions, at least according to Gamboa.
Rivera Garza, however, brutally unpacks Gamboa’s 1903 novel and its treatment of prostitutes through the figure and voice of Matilda. Matilda tells her colleagues that she was taken advantage of by a law student in the same way Santa was taken advantage of by soldier. However, just as a devil is the opposite of a saint, la Diablesa is the inversion of Santa. Matilda is not innocent, nor is she one-dimensional, and the background which lead her to La Modernidad is much more complicated that Santa’s. While Matilda becomes much sought after in her brothel, she is there more to escape society than to find a way to integrate herself into it as somebody’s mistress. La Modernidad is a haven for the protagonists where she tries to avoid any kind of identity, to be “sin historia, vacía como una página en blanca” (138). Matilda repeatedly rebels against labels and expectations put upon her because of her position. As a prostitute, she critiques the figure of Santa to prevent the same preconceived notions about prostitution from being imposed upon herself.

At one point, Matilda and her lover, Ligia, read Santa together and mercilessly laugh at Santa’s disgust upon learning she is the romantic interest of another woman, La Gaditana. Reading this passage, the two chuckle to themselves: “¡Ay, pobre embajador Gamboa, tan cosmopolita y tan falso de imaginación!” (143). The two lovers lament the system which condemns them as a social ill and regulates them like livestock. Together, they mock Gamboa’s protagonist for having officially registered herself as it confirms the legitimacy of a corrupted system. It is at this point that Ligia and Matilda organize their parody of Santa.
While their relationship lasts, Ligia and Matilda grow very close, and the former discloses how she was abused by her father before being sent to a church-run orphanage where she was abused by a priest. Like Matilda, Ligia tells everyone else a version of Santa’s story because it is more digestible narrative than the truth. Rather than discuss the abuses she suffered at the hands of male authority, she pretends to have been seduced by a telegraphist. Her true history, however, defies the preconceived notion of fault assumed by the story of Santa. In other words, Gamboa presents Santa’s fate as being her fault because she broke the rules by sleeping with a soldier. Matilda pretends to have followed the same story but with a law student just as Ligia substitutes a telegraphist. Their clients accept these “stories” more readily because then their downfall would be a natural consequence for their careless behavior. For the male clients, these narratives are readily-accepted because it sanctions their behavior in what is arguably an exploitative relationship. However, Ligia’s true story adds subjectivity to her person in particular, and to the literary figure of the prostitute, more broadly.

A Return to Heteronormativity

Matilda suffers greatly when Ligia abandons her to live with a wealthy man who woos her with gifts. Matilda bitterly refers to him as “El Jarameño”, the name of Santa’s bullfighter. La Porfiria confronts Matilda when Ligia leaves saying, “te digo que la verdadera dictadura es la de pareja hombre y mujer” (153). However, such a broad generalization rings false. This is the sentiment reflected in a quotation from Gamboa’s Santa included in Nadie: “¡La eterna y cruel historia de los sexos en su alternativo e
inevitable acercamiento y alejamiento, se aproximan con el beso, la caricia y la promesa, para separarse poco a poco con la ingratitud, el despecho y el llanto!” (150). La Porfiria reflects Gamboa’s antiquated view of the “battle of the sexes” and the sweeping nature of this stereotype undermines its own meaning. Rivera Garza is absolutely not making an anti-heterosexuality comment; quite the opposite, the author is merely demonstrating the privilege that heterosexual relationships receive. Because Ligia’s “El Jarameño” has the means to provide for her and Matilda does not, Ligia chooses to leave the woman she loves in favor for financial security. At El Buen Tono cigar factory, Matilda made $.35 a day and, when she was fired for missing one day, she was unable to find a position in any other factory, though that would have made for a difficult lifestyle, too, as the other factories paid only $.25 a day. The combined income of these two women, therefore, would hardly be enough to support them, which is why Matilda and Ligia end up in La Modernidad. At the brothel they can make a livable wage serving their male clients. However, their income power even at La Modernidad is limited and this is why both women end up abandoning the brothel to go live with men. Shortly after Ligia leaves, Matilda leaves with the American engineer, Paul, and she is no longer La Diablesa but Señora Kamàck.

Matilda’s relationship with Paul takes place both physically and figuratively out of society. They leave Mexico City for Real de Catorce outside of San Luis Potosí. Free

11 In Santa, this line reflects the reaction of Pepa, the assistant to the madam in the brothel, to Santa’s retelling of her downfall.
from the strict social norms of the city, the fluidity of Matilda’s sexuality as well as her transvestite past presents no difficulty to the newlyweds. Rivera Garza portrays this seamless transition as a natural reaction by Matilda to her own fluid desires. Sexually, the reader may suppose that *Nadie’s* protagonist is bisexual, though arguably Matilda resists such labeling. Her desire to live unshackled by societal standards manifests itself initially through her decision to leave the Burgos house and fully through her move to a remote area of the state of San Luis Potosí. While Matilda receives many labels (la Damita, la Doctorcita, etc.), at no point does she take ownership of these epithets. Instead, she resists labeling and it is for this reason that it may be too reductionist to characterize her sexuality as “bisexual.” A character who so successfully resists identity markets cannot be easily classified by slippery sexual labels. Additionally, Robert Irwin McKee points that the concept of being gay as an identity was not very well articulated in Mexico until midcentury, well after the Famous 41 scandal (48).

A parallel argument can be made with respect to Matilda’s gender. During her time at La Modernidad, Matilda performed in exclusively male roles. Initially, her male behavior is limited to the reenactments of *Santa*, where she plays the male counterpart to Ligia’s *Santa*. However, after she cuts her hair in a male fashion, the lines between her performing the role of the male and assuming a male identity begin to blur. At no point does Matilda fully identify as transgendered and I would be reluctant to label her as such. Nonetheless, it also cannot be denied that her male performances have little to do with provoking a reaction from the crowd since the reader is already aware that Ligia and
Matilda participate in these performances to entertain themselves exclusively. Once again, attempts to categorize Matilda are frustrated because the definite labels of “transgendered” or “transvestite” do not reflect the spectrum of gender in which Matilda operates. Returning to Paul, he meets Matilda while she is working at the brothel in her transvestite/transgendered state. Yet, as mentioned, he does not obsess over what Matilda is, rather who she is and invites her to become his wife. The immediate acceptance of Matilda’s bisexual tendencies allows the story to develop uninterrupted, but, more importantly, it weakens the authority of heteronormative rules.

Although Paul accepts Matilda readily, their relationship is rather difficult for the reader to penetrate. On one hand it would seem that this is an even purer love than what the protagonist felt for either of the Diamantinas. On the other hand, Matilda and Paul’s heavy use of peyote precludes an intimate relationship between the two and their marriage is characterized by silence. Rivera Garza’s reader must question whether a real relationship can take form when “Matilda (…) no ve nada. Bajo la influencia del peyote no ve nada” (169). In their flight from society, they end up isolating themselves even from each other.

Matilda and Paul spend ten years in isolation together, but they cannot forever escape the dramatic historical changes taking place around them. Two foreigners come to Wirikúta to marvel at the Huichol indigenous culture, bringing with them preconceived and exotic ideas of what to expect. “Cuando descubrieron entre todos a Paul y Matilda Kamàck los invitaron a su campamento. Querían oír historias, leyendas, cuentos de
aparecidos. Querían llenarse los oídos de maravillas.” (169). Arguably, these travelers are more interested in confirming their projection of what rural San Luis Potosí is than in learning about Paul and Matilda’s experiences. Additionally, their arrival is a harbinger of the two more intruders, the land surveyors, who bring with them Mexican Revolution. Realizing the threat that the Revolution poses to his utopia and the imminent end of his social isolation, Paul decides to blow himself up. Traumatized by the explosion, Matilda goes into shock and wakes up in a hotel in San Luis Potosí proper. Nobody believes she could have really been living out in the undeveloped part of the state and the staff believes her to be delusional. She ends up on a train back to Mexico City and headed, ultimately, toward La Castañeda. Without her husband to tether her to Real de Catorce, she must again invent herself, which symbolically happens by burning down their home and undoing the purple bolt of silk that Paul bought her in Mexico. The loss of not just her husband, but of their solitary way of life, too, leaves the protagonist again feeling empty: “Fuera: desierto: dentro. La diferencia es nula” (171). Matilda goes from being “la Señora Kamàck” to “la loca” at La Castañeda.

Real de Catorce, located in San Luis Potosí is important historically as it is widely considered to be the start of the Mexican Revolution. Following the fraudulent 1910 elections, Francisco I. Madero was forced to exile in San Antonio where he drew up the Plan de San Luis, calling for the Mexican people to rise up in protest. The document
gained its name because it was published in San Luis Potosí (Knight 222-276). Like Joaquín, Matilda seems to live ahistorically, somehow excluding herself from major political events. Even when she was involved with La Causa, she was more focused on overcoming her oppressive home life than in agrarian reform. When she and Paul move to Real Catorce, they are trying to avoid the heating political climate. However, much to their dismay, the Revolution seeks them out leading to the downfall of both Kamàcks.

**Inside La Castañeda: Social Reclusion/Exclusion and the Parade of Inmates**

As a patient in the asylum, Matilda recognizes herself as a “loca” from the very first page of the novel, where the narration begins with Matilda as an interned patient. This degree of self-awareness causes the reader to question if she really suffers from mental disease or if she is opting out of society, as she has already done repeatedly beginning with her departure from her Uncle Marcos’ house. Matilda is able to eloquently and coherently tell her story, a skill which belies her diagnosis. Even when Joaquín Buitrago reads her chart, the most serious allegation is “logorrhea” (34) or excessive talking.

Before Joaquín rediscovers Matilda, she essentially recreates the social isolation she experienced in Real de Catorce. Given the asylum’s physical location outside the city limits, Matilda is free to slip in to the role of an anonymous patient. Here there are no

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expectations for how she should behave, as she had experienced in all of her previous roles. Additionally, by being labeled “mentally infirm,” she is free to speak at length and tell her true personal history, but since there is little chance that her doctors will take her seriously, Matilda maintains her privacy, even with her information out in the open. It is almost a trick that she plays on the medical authorities. However, her obscurity is jeopardized when Joaquín recognizes her as the prostitute from La Modernidad that he photographed many years prior. Joaquín’s increasing obsession with Matilda makes it difficult for her to be herself. Ironically, although she is interned in the hospital, it is the most freedom she experiences in the novel because here she is not been pinned down by other characters’ preconceptions.

Matilda briefly leaves the hospital, choosing to live with Joaquín in his grand familial home. Joaquín was only able to obtain his inheritance by manipulating Doctor Eduardo Oligochea to falsify a certification of good health indicating that Joaquín is no longer abusing drugs. When the doctor comes to drop off the form, Joaquín and Matilda put on a drag show not only to undermine established mores about gender, but also to undermine the medical establishment’s authority when it comes to determining sanity. Eduardo enters the house to find Matilda sitting backward on the chair in a male fashion. She offers the doctor some whiskey excusing Joaquín’s absence as: “Estas mujeres, siempre las tenemos que esperar, ¿No es cierto, doctor?” (189). Her comments and cartoonish male behaviors parody this disrespectful attitude toward women, robbing this point of view of its influence. Joaquín also participates in the spectacle, wearing a see-
through organza tunic. Matilda comments directly on the theme of sanity: “Es que estamos muy locos, doctor” (189). The two dance theatrically and Joaquín taunts the doctor “No vas a tomar notas, Eduardo? Somos todo un caso” (189). The ridicule of the psychiatric realm is palpable in this section to the point of eliciting the reader’s sympathy for Eduardo. After all, he is there to do Joaquín a favor, so why are they torturing him? Perhaps Matilda’s response is born out of resentment that her doctor essentially sold her to a drug addict. La Castañeda was a sanctuary for Matilda following the violent death of her husband. She developed a relationship with Eduardo while at the asylum, as evidenced by her thick medical record. Even though she was not opposed to accompanying Joaquín out of the hospital, it would be reasonable that she recognizes the hypocrisy of this morally weak doctor. The trans show that she puts on (the parallels to her performances at La Modernidad combined with Joaquín’s morphine-induced apathy make it clear that this performance is Matilda’s creation) is the extreme enactment of how a “crazy person” might be expected to behave. The contrast between this performance of being crazy and her previously calm behavior when interned at the hospital denies that she is mentally unstable. By forcing the doctor to recognize that she usually does not behave so erratically, she is also forcing him to recognize that she is not insane. Additionally, as Laura Kanost notes, “Ultimately, only Joaquín and Matilda have access to their individual thoughts and perceptions, and their performances ridicules any attempt by medical authorities—and even, by extension, the novel itself—to represent them.”
(313). By purposefully acting in a way that so obviously is a performance, these two characters deny Eduardo (and the reader) the ability to evaluate who they really are.

In the end, Matilda’s stay at the Buitrago family home is brief. Joaquín’s desperate need for Matilda to fill the void in his life was created by his own failed relationships and exaggerated by his drug abuse. Matilda finally, desiring to be alone, declares “Ya no tengo ganas de hablar, Joaquín” (196) and he knows she will leave him. “¿Qué se había imaginado Joaquín? Una esposa. Una mujer salvada de su propio descenso a fuerza de compañía. Un amor estéril, sin cuerpos, que durara cien años. El agradecimiento sobre todo” (196). Joaquín expected Matilda to fulfill his needs without considering hers. The split between the two main characters is sad, but Matilda is not a wife. She cannot be those many roles that he wants her to be and so she decides to return to La Castañeda of her own accord to seek peace. Upon her exit, Joaquín tells her that he has loved her and she replies, “Lo sé. Tú querías a una loca en tu casa para que la casa fuera distinta” (197). In truth, though, she is not a “loca,” she is just a woman who cannot easily fit into the proscribed roles for women during a particular moment of history in Mexico, though Joaquín’s constant pestering Matilda to find out the rest of her story exacerbates the divide between the two: “Joaquín’s inability to relinquish control over Matilda’s narration is an inability to conceive of her as a speaking subject, and Matilda therefore eventually shuts him out completely, emphasizing her own ultimate authority through her silence” (Kanost 310). She is more comfortable playing the part of a “loca” and not having to meet other people’s expectations as she had to do as la Damita, la
Doctorcita and la Diablesa. Her election to return voluntarily to the mental health hospital is yet another indicator that she does not neatly fit into the role of “la loca.”

Peppered within the text, though especially clustered toward the end, are a series of profiles of patients at La Castañeda highlighting the diversity of the patients and the impossibility of a singular archetypical “loca.” The personal histories vary from Cirilia Esquivel (199) who speaks to invisible beings for hours to Teresa Olivares (200) whose “crimes” include walking in the street alone and having two lovers. Of course, the reader may scoff at Teresa Olivares’ internment for something that today would be considered mundane. Rivera Garza slips in these historical details to demonstrate how ideas regarding social norms are influenced by the changing attitudes of the times. It also serves as a suggestion for the reader to not make snap judgments about what is inferred by referring to an individual as “crazy.” There are male profiles, as well, including Cástulo Rodríguez who is “crazy” because he believes in change. The over-reaching emphasis of these profiles, though, is to show the subjectivity and humanity hidden in the medical profiles. To accept this subjectivity is to necessarily reject labeling and stereotyping, a prominent theme of the novel.

Before we conclude, it would be remiss to ignore that the male characters in Nadie also must confront sometimes unreasonable gender expectations. For example, Joaquín is rejected by his family for not living up to his father’s ideal of a man. His father rejected Joaquín’s career as a photographer, believing art not to be a masculine enough field. Even from his grave, Joaquín’s father attempts to manipulate his son’s life through
a list of requirements necessary to inherit the sizeable family estate (70). To escape from the burden his family creates, Joaquín attempts to avoid society hiding behind his camera’s lens. The manner in which he attempts to remain anonymous is similar to Matilda’s: “Joaquín es un hombre tenso, alguien que solo se siente cómodo en los márgenes de los días, detrás de los espejos” (14). Having failed to live up to his father’s expectations, Joaquín chooses a reclusive life.

Eventually, when Joaquín finally goes to see about his inheritance, he visits with attorney Arturo Loayza. The two are from similar families and were friendly growing up, but Arturo followed the traditional path which Joaquín’s father wanted for his son. Ironically, while Joaquín is made to feel inadequate for not choosing a traditional career, Arturo feels bad that he followed such a conservative path. Joaquín’s presence makes the attorney feel bored with his own life and fascinated by Joaquín: “Joaquín de repente, es su otro espejo” (177). The juxtaposition between these two childhood friends shows the beauty of a life well-lived, but also the tragedy of drug addiction. After all, Joaquín’s adventures were all prior to his taste for morphine.

When Matilda comes to live with him, Joaquín attempts to take on the role of her caretaker. He tells her, “Yo te cuidaré día tras día. Yo te protegeré del mundo. Yo te ayudaré a escapar” (179). However, Matilda does not need Joaquín to care for her as if she were a child, and even if she did, Joaquín would not be capable of doing so. Furthermore, Matilda already had “escaped” society when she was in the asylum in Mixcoac. In truth, the two are more engaged in playing house than in building a
relationship. After many nights of playing the “wife” and caring for Joaquín through his bouts of morphine-induced insomnia, Matilda gets fed up and returns to the asylum. Her departure is a condemnation that Joaquín did not fulfill his role as the husband figure. However, Rivera Garza is not condemning Joaquín for not taking care of Matilda. Rather, the author suggests that assuming a paternalistic role in a relationship nullifies the possibility that the two parties can be equals.

We have already examined how Eduardo responds when his first lover, Mercedes, tells him that she is the man and he is the woman. This insult to his masculinity echoes the same threat expressed by Amparo in Rivera Garza’s *La cresta de Ilión*. Eduardo, though, fulfills the expectations that society imposes upon him as a man. He is educated and makes a respectable wage as a doctor. However, he feels trapped into marrying Cecilia Villapando to continue to achieve the male-specific goals of a better job and more income to support his family. His real goals are revealed when Joaquín offers to bribe him. He wants to travel to Europe to take classes with Emil Kreaplin and avoid entering into Cecilia’s mindless family silk business. He dreams, “No más domingos en familia discutiendo la calidad del agua del río Grijalva. Ninguna sorna más de parte de comerciante de sedas. La respetabilidad, por fin. El triunfo” (181). Perhaps what is interesting about Eduardo’s aspirations of respectability and triumph is that they are so public compared with Matilda’s dreams of anonymity and peace. This signals a gender divide that is not reflective of innate biological preferences, but is a result of social expectations. As a man, Eduardo is expected to be present in the social sphere and his
masculinity is evaluated by his professional success. Matilda, as a woman, is not expected to have a career. Her uncle intended for her to live entirely in the domestic sphere, as her aunt Rosaura does, attending to the men of the household. When Matilda rejects this structure, she finds there is little opportunity for her in the public sphere. This is why, in the end, Matilda shrinks back from society preferring privacy to the possibility of “respectability” or “triumph.” Of course, Joaquín seems to break with this tradition, but really he too once desired success as a photographer. When drugs begin to interfere with his career, Joaquín stops visiting the bar where his local artist friends are and essentially drops out of the public sphere, too.

**Conclusion**

The novel concludes with Matilda’s death certificate. At the age of 72, she suffers a stroke and dies alone. At last she is in peace, no longer battling other character’s interpretation of her. *Nadie* closes with the first person: “Déjeme descansar en paz” (200). Matilda finally finds her own voice, even though it came at the cost of isolating herself in an asylum. The final shift to first person brings the title back to the reader’s attention. Only at the title and in the last lines of the book does the reader directly hear Matilda’s voice. The transition from “Nadie la vería llorar” (53) to “Nadie me verá llorar” indicates the finality that death implies. It also indicates an authorship and subjectivity provided by the first person. The protagonist finally answers the question, “¿Quién es Matilda Burgos?”
In *Nadie me verá llorar*, author Cristina Rivera Garza explores how stereotypes are used to reinforce gendered roles in society. Matilda transitions through various social groups, attempting to find a space where she is free from judgment and from “(l)as miradas masculinas la ha perseguido toda la vida” (193). Rejected by her uncle for their shared indigenous past, Matilda attempts to play the role of the *buena ciudadana* and the good girl. While succeeding in the eyes of her uncle, her friends associated with La Causa judge the protagonist to be too conservative and use the condescending term “la damita” to refer to her. From this position, she segues to the working class where her self-education earns her the title of “la doctorcita.” This title, also unsolicited, echoes the hope of a marginal community, hoping that Matilda can be their emblem of success. However, once she is fired from her factory job, she undergoes yet another transformation and becomes “la Diablesa,” a prostitute that stands up to the police. Her transgendered shows bleed into her everyday life as Rivera Garza blurs the lines between performance and identity. When Matilda flees society to join her American husband in rural outlying areas of Real de Catorce, she feels she may have found happiness free from the judgmental eyes of the city. However, this peace is, in part, derived from peyote and its effects leave the protagonist as empty as she was in the Burgos house. Finally, her husband commits suicide, Matilda can finally find peace in isolation. As a “loca,” her behavior is assumed to be irrational and there are finally no expectations about her behavior. It is in La Castañeda, free from the anticipations of others, that Matilda can finally express her own voice.
Cristina Rivera Garza’s 2002 novel, \textit{La cresta de Ilión}, begins with an unnamed and unhappy protagonist fumbling for the truth about himself and about everything that surrounds him. In order to achieve a more profound awareness of self, he must leave his already precarious reality and deconstruct the normative models of behavior that he unconsciously has adopted. The novel’s simple prose and quick 158 pages belie an ambiguous and dense text that destabilizes traditional beliefs about biological sex and gender roles while at the same time provoking doubt in the reader by employing the device of an unreliable narrator. Surprisingly, sexual identity, although implicitly connected to a hegemonic heteronormative identity, is not presented as an overt obstruction for the characters in the book. Instead, the text presents the reader with an alternative, fluid sexuality that neither requires labels and restraints nor ties directly into a character’s own gender. This chapter examines the multiple identity markers which Rivera Garza undermines and subverts. The title of the novel derives from the part of the hip bone known as the iliac crest. It is not until the final page of the narration that Rivera Garza reveals this bone is used to distinguish biological sex (158). It is also a bone used to define classic male beauty (Goldhill 17). The title fits perfectly within the author’s playful shifting between biological realities (bone formation) and social norms (ideas of beauty) with respect to sex and gender. Additionally, as this chapter will demonstrate, this novel presents correlations between biological sex and mental sanity that invite the
reader to evaluate societal prejudices with respect to mental disease and gender where perceived transgressions of sex and gender become tied to mental instability. The precarious nature of these categories, most noticeably of biological sex, are reflected in the border setting, a clear nod to border politics and the limits imposed upon individuals as well as the violations of those very rules. Two other salient and related issues present in *La cresta* are masculinity in crisis and the subversion of a male-dominated or patriarchal order. Because the biological sex of the protagonist is unclear and the performed gender fluctuates, it is necessary to examine the different implications of reading the text as if the main character were a biological man and again as a biological woman. Perhaps more importantly, the reader must ask what are the implications of a possible mutability in the protagonist’s biological sex? Rivera Garza’s use of precise language is essential to approaching these challenges to biological sex, acted gender and sexuality. Additionally, this chapter will analyze the concept of “authenticity” and how it connects with the multiple versions of Amparo Dávila, a literary allusion to the Mexican author by the same name (b. 1928) who at one point enjoyed a brief celebration of her use of the fantastic with gender constructions in her writing (Saunero-Ward 173).

**Revivifying Amparo Dávila and Celebrating the Fantastic Tradition**

A brief biography of the writer Amparo Dávila might illuminate the reader’s understanding of this once celebrated author. Dávila was born in the provincial town of Fresnillo in Zacatecas, Mexico to a traditional family (Domínguez Michael 1251). She began her writing career with poetry and, under the tutelage of Alfonso Reyes, began to
write prose. Erica Frouman-Smith of Long Island University characterizes her writing as known for containing elements of the fantastic, the unreal and the absurd, following a tradition set forth by the Uruguayan writer Horacio Quiroga and the Argentine writers Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar (56). Although Dávila falls in chronologically with the Generation of 28, a literary circle which includes luminaries such as Carlos Fuentes and Inés Arredondo, Dávila maintains in an interview with Frouman-Smith that she purposefully abstained from joining any movement in particular (58). However, as noted in the Antología de la literatura mexicana del s. XX, her works were extremely influential on the following generation despite the lack of recognition for her work (58).

To reflect upon written works done within the fantastic trope, as is the case here, is to evoke literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov. Todorov defines the fantastic in the following terms: “a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of the same familiar world” (25) in The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre. As a result, the protagonist of a fantastic work must decide whether this unnatural event was a result of an overactive imagination or whether the laws of reality are not what the protagonist once believed them to be. Todorov declares that it is this uncertainty, the not knowing what actually happened, where the fantastic dwells. He explains that the fantastic genre is “(this) hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25). This
impossibility of knowledge and the questioning of reality will certainly play a large role in the reading of *La cresta de Ilión*.

It is this constant examination of reality which introduces the necessary elements for a fantastic literature. Todorov indicates that a fantastic work is characterized by certain fundamental elements (33). To begin with, a successful fantastic piece would oblige the reader to consider whether or not the incidents in the story are natural. Additionally, there must be a character within the text who also questions the verisimilitude of the events. Finally, it is important that the reader not have an allegoric approach that would diminish the fantastic component. In *La cresta de Ilión*, it is the protagonist who vocalizes the doubts and anxieties of the reader. However, the author Rivera Garza twists this rule by depicting the narrator as unreliable. Rivera Garza frequently manipulates literary genres and it is not altogether surprising that this novel cannot be neatly classified into the fantastic field. While it may be tempting to label *La cresta* as a fantastic piece of narrative fiction because it meets with the three mentioned prerequisites, it would be hasty to do so. After all, *La cresta* is a 2002 publication and anachronistic with the fantastic movement in literature. The reader must, therefore, consider Verónica Saunero-Ward’s interpretation of this novel as a pastiche of fantastic literature (173). The multiple allusions to a famed fantastic reader, Amparo Dávila, adds weight to the pastiche argument given that a pastiche is an homage to the original form, but also one that allows for modifications. Additionally, the reader may also wish to contrast how this novel breaks with some of the more traditional models of fantastic
literature. As noted, the narrator’s deliberate dishonesty provokes even more hesitation when the reader weighs the veracity of the story according to the narrator. Another characteristic of this text that precludes it from being strictly read as a fantastic piece of literature is the inevitable likelihood that the reader takes an allegorical approach to this text. *La cresta* has no named character, it takes place on a border between two cities and there are no definite labels to coerce the reader into assuming it must be Mexico. This ambiguity entertains the possibility that the text is an allegorical presentation of all borders, be they between nations or the borders that separate socially-constructed definitions. Simply put, the fantastic genre is present in Rivera Garza’s text, though it is not introduced in the same manner with which Amparo Dávila wrote in the 1960s and 70s.

The novel begins with an excerpt from Dávila’s “Patio cuadrado” about how texts will be lost to the public until the right reader comes to rescue them (*Cresta* 12). Rivera Garza thus begins her novel by challenging the reader to find the real Amparo Dávila in the text, to find out more about this author and to bring her name back into the consciousness of literary circles. Such metatextuality also invites the reader to constantly reassess whether the novel’s events are real or imagined. The addition of a relationship with Dávila’s oeuvre creates another layer of complexity and distance from the possibility of one, singular truth.
Multiple readings of biological sex and sexual identity

One potential reading of the text avers that a man, who later identifies as a woman\textsuperscript{13}, allows two female guests into his home and that, against his will, these two women usurp his role as the head of the household. The novel begins much in the style of a horror story, on a “dark and stormy night.” An unexpected rapping on the door startles the protagonist, who relates the events from a first person perspective. Such an unnerving interruption presents a strong degree of similarity with “The Raven,” by Edgar Allan Poe. Exploiting the suspenseful tone only intensified by allusion to Poe and the tempestuous night, the owner of the house timidly opens the door to meet with his first guest, Amparo Dávila. She invites herself inside and slowly begins to take control of the house. Just like the protagonist in “The Raven,” the protagonist in Rivera Garza’s novel feels impotent in front of this unwanted intrusion. Nonetheless, the intruder, Amparo, pushes her way into his home and awakens conflicted feelings in the main character. He at once is aware of her physical presence, admiring her figure accented by her soaked clothing, focusing in particular on her hip as he puzzles over the medical term for her protruding bone. This directed focus by the narrator draws the reader’s attention to iliac crest, from which the novel derives its name. It is this upper region that is more prominent in women and frequently is used to distinguish biological sex (Vetter 65). However, as Simon Goldhill

\textsuperscript{13} As the biological sex and gender of the protagonist is never explicitly and definitively defined, this chapter will refer to the main character using masculine pronouns for the sake of clarity on account of the lack of named characters. The novel begins with masculine identifiers and switches over to feminine before the protagonist accepts this “transformation/realization.”
notes, as far back as the ancient Greeks, a well-sculpted iliac crest in men was one of the most admired markers of masculine beauty (25).

The narrator attempts to reduce his visitor to be the object of his sexual gaze, but fails to convince the reader of a genuine sexual interest in Amparo. He states, “La deseé. Los hombres, estoy seguro, me entenderán sin necesidad de otro comentario. A las mujeres les digo que esto sucede con frecuencia y sin patrón estable. También les advierto que esto no se puede producir artificialmente” (14-15). Such commentary is an attempt by the protagonist to position himself within the heteronormative patriarchal sphere of a socially-constructed ideal of masculinity. He relates these alleged sexual impulses as if it were universal “guy knowledge” and therefore outside the realm of female comprehension. Rebecca Garonzik explains that, “by assuming the support of his implied male audience and offering an explanation to his implied female audience, the narrator alludes to the nature of the gaze as both universally and ontologically masculine” (48). This language is clearly divisive in terms of separating biological sex into two classes: the privileged men who “get it” and the excluded female outsiders who do not. This brief commentary also suggests that women are less sexual creatures whose desires are not naturally occurring. Interestingly enough, the least “natural” part of this excerpt is the protagonist’s assertion that his feelings cannot be artificially produced. Such awkward speech and pathetic insistence robs the protagonist of his credibility. As mentioned, he attempts to maintain his own subjectivity and objectify his guest through his gaze; he even tries to morph Amparo by describing her in the following manner: “[sus ojos]
suspendidos dentro del rostro devastador de un gato,” (14). A cat certainly seems less threatening than a woman, but as is frequently the case in literature, a cat is an inauspicious figure and soon the gaze is reversed. The narrator cites becoming lost in “el poder expansivo de su mirada” (14). The concept of “male gaze” is founded on the principle that the domineering subject uses a “controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 113). This scopophilic gaze, as termed by Freud, fits well into the protagonist’s cat metaphor. Amparo’s catlike stare is indeed reminiscent of a cat toying with its mouse. Rivera Garza inverts the initial power of male gaze to challenge traditional gender hierarchies and to neutralize the anthropomorphic comparison averred by the protagonist. However, as Garonzik points out, Amparo’s own gaze is described as having the power to appropriate and expand the space around her. In this sense, Rivera Garza rejects that gaze is implicitly masculine and that women must be the object of gaze. Here the author is quite effective in showing the lack of stability of gender politics and does so in an amusing way that delights her reader.

To himself and to his audience, the narrator affirms and reaffirms his desire for Amparo and how he imagines her. However, these are not lustful imaginations. Quite the opposite, they vacillate between the infantile images of her eating blackberries to his panicked anticipated rejection as he visualizes her ignoring him while in his presence. Why is it that when he has the real, physical person in front of him, he chooses to let his mind invent fictitious versions of Amparo? If he is intimidated by her presence, he does not seem to find relief in envisioning her ignoring him. Perhaps the protagonist is only
capable of knowing his subject through his imagination and deduction. He finds himself in the uncomfortable situation of fighting two competing social laws: on one hand, he is presented with the classic damsel-in-distress and pressures himself to “save” her from the rain and her plight. On the other hand, it is clear that Amparo, though wet from the rain, is hardly in need of saving. If anything, she immediately commandeers control of the house, her searching eyes appropriating the space for herself. The protagonist’s masculinity is threatened by any possible reaction to her behavior. By refusing her at the door, he forfeits his chivalry, but in allowing her to usurp control of the house, he loses his autonomy. This paralyzes him and encourages him to escape into his imagination. Eventually, perhaps due to inertia, he allows Amparo to enter his home.

The reader’s distrust of the narrative voice is further confirmed shortly thereafter when the protagonist confesses that he would have liked for the events to have occurred in this fashion but it was not so (17). He admits that his true reaction to Amparo was one of fear and not desire. However, is it not possible that these two sentiments could easily overlap? Despite his admission of fear, which could be perceived as a violation of acceptable male behavior, the narrator continues to insist that this is a natural reaction that other men would implicitly understand and, at the same time, he accuses women, as a population, of being responsible for this fear. In this way, the main character manages to relieve himself of the burden of his dread and target Amparo, specifically, and women, more generally, as monsters who “conocía[n] su propio horror” (18). This conclusion liberates the protagonist from the shame of not having the sexual attraction toward
Amparo that he intuits he should possess as well as excusing his fear. At the same time, he reinforces a model that privileges men and marginalizes women as freaks and monsters who not only lack a humanizing sexual drive, but whose mere presence produces a “rational” fear that all men supposedly acknowledge and understand. Cristina Rivera Garza creates such an extreme character so to parody more subtle versions of these fallacious beliefs often instituted in Western society. She is indubitably questioning what constitutes universal “guy knowledge” of what “los hombre lo saben” (17) and how this male code is repeated and used to reinforce the current patriarchal order (even if that order is represented to be in a precarious condition). Rivera Garza also outlines the normative rules regarding female archetypes through the protagonist’s disappointment that Amparo does not follow them. He complains, “La mujer no tuvo piedad alguna. No me dirigió miradas seductoras ni actuó con la fragilidad de las muchachas que aparentan andar en busca de cobijo” (18). This is to say, she is neither the whore nor the victim and this refusal to adopt these oft-repeated archetypes provokes in him a paralyzing fear.

Unsettling the narrator even further, Amparo avers that she previously knew him. This assertion alone startles him, but then she surprises him by adding, “te conozco de cuando eras árbol. De aquellas épocas” (19). This link between the narrator and a previous life as tree is the beginning of a leitmotif which will play out throughout the novel. This reference calls to mind an English refrain which speaks of “the treeness of the tree.” The neologism of “treeness” implies that without the essential qualities that define the tree, it can no longer be considered such (Brewer’s 1199). It is no leap of faith for the
reader to feel the protagonist’s masculinity being stripped from him and he, consequently, feels less of a man. A tree is not a tree without its “treeness” and similarly, the protagonist is not a man without his masculinity. Such a crisis of identity puts into perspective the fear not just of losing a sense of self, but also the fear of becoming female. After all, the female is so often understood as the non-male and his fear can be read as typical Freudian fear of castration. To lose his phallic position would, in his mind and, by extension, society’s as well, “demote” him to being a second-class citizen. As readers, it is easy to recognize the fallacy of such an argument, but it is also difficult to deny the legitimacy of his fears.

His recollection of a past life as a tree serves an additional role. It indicates that he is capable of profound physiological change. This will be relevant when considering later whether he transforms from a man into a woman or rather just changes his adopted gender or even whether he changes at all. His nostalgia for his life as tree alludes to a past existence where he was not a subjective being but rather part of the background. He was witness to his environment without participating in it. Thus, his transformation to a person is informed by the highly privileged person he became: a well-educated man who, as a doctor, controls the lives of those around him. In his world, the protagonist is essentially at the top of hegemonic power pyramid. For him to even consider the possibility of becoming or being a woman, he will have to sacrifice his privileged position as a male and view himself as equal to his houseguest.
Masculine panic

The third section begins with the narrator declaring that he is a man who is misunderstood frequently. Rivera Garza employs a curious structure in which the protagonist on one hand declares directly that he is a man (“Soy un hombre…”), but then alludes to this theoretical man through the indirect object pronoun: “…al que se le malentiende con frecuencia” (20). Why does the narrator insist on distancing himself by using the construction “I am a man whom is frequently misunderstood” instead of “I am frequently misunderstood.” Although both are grammatically correct and convey similar meanings, the more complicated structure creates a distance between the narrator and his own self-identification. The narrator practically uses the third person here to refer to himself. Could it be he is uncomfortable with directly assessing himself and is it also possible that he is trying to reestablish his own belief that he is “un hombre.” Perhaps this declaration of masculinity does not contrast with immediate disassociation from a hypothetical and misunderstood man, but rather reveals a desire to both be a “man” and an impulse to express that he does not fully comply with the hegemonic definition of this term. To compensate, this character begins to slowly extract himself from the semiotic chain. Literary theorist Julia Kristeva refers to the pre-linguistic psychodevelopmental state as the “chora” (McAfee 19) and the narrator in La cresta is arguably regressing toward this infancy state through the repeated leitmotif of his chanting, “retrocedí.” In her work on Kristeva, Noëlle McAfee notes that the chora is something that “belongs to each person (…) before he or she develops clear borders of his or her own personal identity”
This unbound identity that seems to navigate between the male/female borders fits in perfectly with Kristeva’s definition. This pre-linguistic state is also relevant in considering that none of the main characters are named. Returning to the protagonist’s fanciful way of expressing that he is an oft-ignored man, the reader senses the narrator’s slight shift away from reality. Perhaps by undercutting his own statements with alternative truths he attempts to step outside socially dictated rules. For example, although in the first chapter the narrator informs his reader that he has to fight his own laziness to attend to the door and to his unexpected visitor, in section three he indicates that he had, in fact, been waiting for a different female visitor. If the reader is to believe this later assertion, then it is impossible to also believe that he was surprised by a knock on the door in the opening sequence. Thus, it becomes increasingly clear that the narrative voice is untrustworthy. Later on in the novel, the reader will be forced to evaluate whether this discrepancy is purposefully misleading or whether it is the misguided babbling of a mentally unstable individual. Rivera Garza intentionally provokes an anxiety in her reader by denial of a singular and concrete truth, an anxiety mirrored in the protagonist and thus creating a sympathetic connection between the reader and the main character. Although the narrator is hardly reliable as he constantly is changing his story and correcting himself, he is still more accessible than the other characters of this novel.

The nameless narrator refers to his anticipated guest as “la Traicionada,” or “the Betrayed,” and to himself as “el Traidor,” or “the Betrayer.” The reader never learns her
real name and the narrator professes to be too gallant to reveal it. According to the protagonist, these monikers resulted from an illicit affair as well as his departure for the coast without informing her. Before her arrival in the story, the protagonist casually refers to this stubborn need that they both had to transcend themselves (21). This desire to spiritually be more than the physical self affirms much of what we have seen of the narrator and establishes one of the strong themes of the novel. Upon arriving at the house, the Traicionada collapses and it is Amparo and, curiously, not the protagonist who is a doctor, who responds immediately and tends to her care. The narrator reveals that Amparo, “se dirigió al baño y abrió el botiquín como si se encontrara en su propia casa, como si ella fuera especialista en las enfermedades del cuerpo y no yo” (22). In this small act, Amparo has robbed the protagonist of the autonomy of his home and of his expertise as a medical provider, as his complaint denotes. Once again, the main character is unable to provide for the “damsel in distress,” even when, unlike Amparo, the Traicionada really is in grave need of assistance. Additionally, Amparo appropriates his relationship with the Traicionada, creating a physical and emotional distancing between him and his former lover. His uninvited guest continues to situate herself inside the house and to care for the Traicionada, which further provokes the narrator’s insecurities. In his paranoia, he imagines them planning a feminine vengeance against him for not being “bastante hombre” (38). Adding to his mistrust of his guests is the narrator’s observation of Amparo ascending the stairs and enclosing herself in the Traicionada’s room. It is in this moment that he realizes that the two had begun to sleep together. It is somewhat
unsettling and even implausible that this petty and insecure narrator does not react more strongly to this episode. He expresses neither jealousy nor curiosity about their relationship, which invites the reader to question his sexuality and why he is unbothered that the two women for whom he allegedly lusts are excluding him while engaging in an intimate relationship in his own house. However, amongst the behaviors that most inflame his hysteria is when he hears the two women speaking a language completely unknown to him and that he, therefore, cannot penetrate: “no podia entrar en él” (40). This language not only excludes him from their relationship, but it also forces the protagonist to realize how close they now are. Naturally, he feels isolated and weak: “Tuve que comprender, y aceptar, en ese justo momento que me había convertido en un apostado en mi propia casa” (39). The penetration language that the main character employs here undoubtedly refers back to his fear of not being “man enough.” The protagonist does not express anxiety about being unable to “enter” into their physical relationship but he is worried about his linguistic exclusion. Much of Cristina Rivera Garza’s work puts an almost sacred onus on language as capable of transcending an undesirable present and La cresta is no exception. However, in addition to esteeming the role of language, she is also showing how naïve the protagonist is when it comes to sexual relationships. This naïveté also undermines his alleged possession of “guy knowledge,” as he claimed at the beginning of the novel.

One day, out of curiosity, the narrator asks Amparo what it is that she writes every day and she responds that they are letters related to her disappearance because she
was previously a famous writer. Her explanation makes sense to him because, “sólo un
desaparecido como Amparo, lo comprendí de súbito, podía actuar como si en realidad no
existiera porque, he aquí la ausencia de paradoja, no existía en realidad” (25). If this
woman is in front of him and she is not situated in reality, then the protagonist must face
the alarming likelihood that he also finds himself in “unreality” or outside the symbolic
order. He fears her disappearance is a contagion and fears for the Traicionada and for
himself. Realizing that the entire community is isolated there with only a hospital of
nearly dead patients as neighbors, the protagonist reflects that they are living as if they
had already disappeared. He muses, “pocos sabían de nosotros y aún menos se
preocupaban por nuestro destino” (34). Not having a personal history is essentially like a
death on account of falling outside the symbolic order. If a character’s past is not
nameable, it erodes his identity. During one of his walks on the beach, he begins to doubt
his own existence. His and his houseguests’ existences and subjectivities are questioned
given that they are not socially recognized. Although at this point in the narration the
protagonist’s gender is not overtly called into question, it is strongly related to the thread
of his existence because he believes he exists and that he is a man. However, if it turns
out this world does not exist, then his understanding of himself as a man living in this
world is also suspect. It undermines his gender-based identity.

Returning to the protagonist’s crisis about being excluded from his houseguests’
secret language, the reader realizes to just what degree Rivera Garza situates the novel’s
action in a completely liminal space. It is unclear where the action takes place, what the
names of the protagonists are and whether they actually exist. The addition of a secret language layers the novel with ambiguity and forces the reader to evaluate the consequences of the action occurring in a void. What social rules have debilitated along with the dominant language? The introduction of the secret language makes the protagonist uncomfortable in his home and so to escape from Amparo’s increasing authority in the house and his fear that he might “catch” her disappearance, the main character spends much of his time at the municipal hospital for the terminally ill where he works, la Granja de Buen Descanso or “The Farm of Grand Rest.” It would only be appropriate that the hospital also possesses such an interstitial nature where the patients find themselves trapped in a non-life, expelled from the land of the living but not yet dead. In a novel of limited certainties, a hospice makes for an ideal representation of this uncertain space.

It is from this hospital that the protagonist steals morphine to a plot to drug Amparo in an effort to ascertain her “true” story. The narrator describes Amparo’s physical reaction to the morphine using divine imagery and transforming her into a feminine Christ. Such language indicates his recognition of her authority. No longer is she compared to a housecat, as when she first arrived, but to a god. The protagonist’s admiration (though it is imperative to note the nonsexual nature of his attraction) is undeniable. The stunted conversation between the protagonist and Amparo carries these two characters to “una explanada inmensa, sin orillas, sin identidad alguna” (43). The
search for concrete truth actually eases the protagonist farther outside of his reality and further erases his identity.

While the main character is on the verge of his own disappearance, Amparo discloses that a conspiracy disappeared her and that she suspects the man responsible was a patient in the hospital. This “confession” neither brings the narrator any closer to the truth behind Amparo’s presence nor reinstutes his position as head of household. He realizes that Amparo must be accustomed to habitual morphine use and that his plan is yet another failure. The houseguest, despite her sedation, calmly remains the same while the protagonist’s anxiety and, with it, the reader’s anxiety increase.

While apparently enjoying morphine’s effects, Amparo continues to explain that her visit is to find a lost manuscript that her perpetrator allegedly stole. This perpetrator, described as both a Prometheus and as “el Hombre Arrebatado” (46) represents an excessive showing of masculinity, especially when compared with the narrator. It is later revealed that Prometheus was instituted in La Granja to suppress his anti-government politics. For this reason he is so strong [“corpulento” (51)] and so alert since he is not actually ill. While at the hospital, he attempted to organize the half-dead patients into a revolt against their doctors in protest of their care. However, in this abyss of a civilization, the patients turn on Prometheus and he jumps out a window. If this jump from the building sounds familiar, it is no accident. The narrator finds Prometheus’ file to reveal his name is “Juan Escutia,” who historically was one of the Niños Héroes who fought the invading U.S. armies during the Mexican-American War. It is believed that
Juan Escutia jumped from the roof of the Chapultepec Castle wrapped in a Mexican flag to keep the flag from falling into enemy hands (Lee 590). This historical allusion is one of the very few in La cresta and yet it does little to provide the reader with the much sought-after context for the setting. I believe Rivera Garza includes this reference to playfully emphasize that such concrete truths are impossible to ascertain. Mexican literary scholars are often eager to discover the “mexicanidad” of any literary work by a Mexican writer. This nod to such an important historical moment in this history of Cristina Rivera Garza’s natal country but is by no means intended to integrate this text into the ever expanding canon of Mexican new historical fiction and the reader will be hard-pressed to find a suggested definition for “mexicanidad” in La cresta. If anything, the novel has thus far been arguing against such essential identities. By including a character with Juan Escutia’s namesake, the author also offers the dramatic comparison of a heroic young boy to a skittish middle-aged man without going into the specific details surrounding the actual historical figure. The narrator even indulges in the comparison of himself with this “modern Prometheus” (52). He points out that they both came to the institution with a desire to change it and he describes himself as still dying on account of his inaction.

Although the main character laughs off Amparo’s desire to recover her lost words, he does manage to find it in the archive, although he does not share this discovery with his guest. During his search, Rivera Garza offers a brief though apt observation of how rank and biological sex interact to create an unequal gendered interaction. The
doctor avoids the male bureaucrats in attempting to gain access to the archive because they are of lesser rank and therefore, at least in the eye of the protagonist, are resentful of the doctor’s higher status. However, he points out that he can easily manipulate the female bureaucrats into granting him access to the archive. He notes that the difference in rank and gender affords him special treatment and he believes that these women will mix sex with ambition which is why it is so easy to influence them. Although the narrator’s voice is not completely reliable, the reader can envision this plausible situation that the protagonist describes. These plotting women, sadly, are made the fools of their own scheme and the narrator’s observations are just reflecting societal beliefs with respect to gender and power. Although this brief scene lasts but half a page, it is an eloquent comment by Rivera Garza on how acted gendered norms reinforce power imbalances.

While researching Prometheus’ case, the protagonist is reminded of the compromises he has made in his life and feels so self-disgusted that he passes out and wakes up in one of the hospital beds. This is a carnavalesque turn of events as the doctor has become the patient. However, his office also seems to be that of a patient’s room. It is difficult to ascertain if in truth he is a doctor or perhaps has been a patient all along. He struggles to remember how he ended up in a patient’s bed, but finds it difficult as now he is the recipient of an unsolicited dose of morphine. Two days later when he returns home to change clothes, the “Invaders,” as he refers to his houseguests (54), have barely noticed his absence. Indeed, his disappearance is well underway.
The protagonist’s identity becomes even more obscured when Amparo announces to him that she knows his “secret” (55). He responds with an uncomfortable laugh, indicating his confusion, fear and perhaps unwillingness to hear what she knows. She insists revealing the secret that he is, in fact, a woman. This open challenge to his biological sex and gender evokes a stunned response from the protagonist such that he cannot even comment when the Traicionada, now recovered enough to descend the stairs, enters the room. She asks Amparo, “¿Ya se lo dijiste?” as if he were not in the room, adding more force to his disappearance. His male identity is destabilizing by the mere suggestion by these women that he is a woman. Unsure of what to make of this turn of events, he concludes that this is the female vengeance which he had imagined they were planning. If his crisis of masculinity begins when he loses autonomy of his house to a woman, it now enters full swing.

El miedo siempre comienza desde cero porque tiene la virtud, o el defecto según se aprecie, de borrar antecedentes, premisas, historias. Uno siempre lo experimenta por primera vez. Supongo que fue miedo lo que sentí al ver mi rostro frente al espejo del baño al siguiente día. (63).

By his own admission, the protagonist acknowledges his “cambio genérico” (57) and blames it on the Traicionada. He tells how their affair began with Thursday meetings and slowly began to spread to Wednesdays and Fridays. Soon she begins to dominate the whole week and he claims to fall madly in love with her by imagining her, just as he did with Amparo when she first arrived at the house. He discloses, “La imaginaba sobre todo.
La imaginaba en todo instante. La imaginaba incluso cuando estaba frente a mí” (59). However, when their weekly encounters turn into a monotonous relationship, he feels the passion is no longer there. He imagines that she would blame him for the relationship failing on account of his selfishness, his irresponsibility, his lack of manliness, his insensitivity, and his calculated desire for revenge. Indeed, he is quite preoccupied by his lack, whether it is lack of responsibility or manliness, he clearly feels an absence of adulthood. This absence can also be correlated with perhaps a lack of a phallus, a possibility made even more likely given the “secret” his houseguests maintain. He describes running into another an ex-lover, la Traidora (or a female Betrayer) and feeling that same twinge of desire. Enchanted with this encounter, he skips his usual meeting on Thursday with the Traicionada.

With the Traidora, he adopts a macho attitude in that he acts as if he must possess her even though he knows there is no future for them. This acting out of masculinity compensates for the lack of manliness he felt with the Traicionada. He desires the Traidora because, he claims, he cannot handle the possibility that she might be with another man and his ever active imagination projects her many years down the road and with children that surely will not be his (60). This fear that another would come to possess the Traidora motivates the protagonist to kiss her until he enters a madness, or “locura” (60). For three years, the Traidora dominates his life, allegedly causing him to forget his previous existence or the betrayed woman whose moniker of the “Traicionada” is now made clear. When the Traidora, also true to her namesake, betrays the main
character, the Traicionada allows him a second chance. She briefly goes back to being the Thursday Woman. Their relationship quickly accelerates again and, fearing another failed relationship, the doctor leaves for the hospital on the coast without even advising the Traicionada of his move. Although the narrator began this story by saying gendered change began with the Traicionada, he ends by saying that if these events happened as he states, then he is not really sure where she got the idea that he was a woman. The protagonist views these possibilities as mutually exclusive because he makes no distinction between biological sex, gender and the physical act of sex. He understands a very strict heterocentric view of sex in that a man has sex with a woman and because he engages in sexual relations with the Traicionada, he must, therefore, be a man. Even though the Traicionada is now in a sexual relationship with Amparo in his own home, he does not realize the fallacy of only recognizing heterosexual pairing. Equating sex with gender is another mistake he makes. He frequently alludes to his fear of not being “man enough” yet seems perplexed by the possibility of being female. Although the protagonist maintains that he cannot imagine why the Traicionada would think he is a woman, he does begin to express some doubts with respect to what his true biological sex might be. He stares at himself in the mirror, attempting to recognize himself and performing genital self-evaluations: “Toqué mi sexo y, con evidente alivio, comprobé que mi pene y mis testículos seguían en su sitio” (63). He seeks answers in the mirror, but the reflection is deceptive. This scene echoes back to Ovid’s Metamorphoses when Narcissus fails to identify himself in his reflection. Narcissus cannot understand the image that he sees
reflected in the water, just as the protagonist in Rivera Garza’s novel also does not know how to intellectually approach his own reflection. Furthermore, *La cresta*’s narrator cannot fully see the reality of his appearance since the mirror offers only a two-dimensional and inverted image. The answers he seeks about his own identity are not to be found on the exterior by physical observation. Because the narrator is not ready to truly understand himself, he only attempts to do so in a superficial manner. According to Rosemary Jackson, there is a Western societal tendency to equate the “real” with the “visible.” She writes, “That which is not seen, or which threatens to be unseeable, can only have a subversive function in relation to an epistemological and metaphysical system which makes ‘I see’ synonymous with ‘I understand’” (47). This scene exemplifies the privilege of sight pointed out by Jackson.

Contemplating oneself in the mirror can also mean reentering the “mirror stage” of Lacan, the moment in which a child recognizes himself in the mirror for the first time and understands that he is a separate entity from his mother. It is the beginning of the formation of the ego. This second mirror-stage which the protagonist is now experiencing as an adult possibly signifies a desire to re-contemplate his persona. This desire to reform the ego manifests itself through the many fantasies in which he engages. According to Jackson, fantasies serve to create an alternate space where one can construct a new being. However, in order to do this, the main character must leave reality and suffer a complete disintegration of self to later be reborn. It is interesting that Amparo and the Traicionada choose to call him a woman because if they only wished to have insulted the protagonist,
they could have used a variety of pejorative terms used for men deemed “not man enough.” To associate the female with something derogatory would, in effect, be an insult to themselves. It is for this reason that their commentary is not intended to slander him, but rather to voice his subconscious. Reflecting back of the metatextuality with the writer Amparo Dávila, Rivera Garza’s reader recalls that nearly all of her short stories involve manifestations of latent desires (Saunero-Ward 179). The parallels between the protagonist’s own repressed nature and this subconscious current in Dávila’s waiting opens the possibility that he may be physically male but wishes to gender identify as female.

In exchange for access to the records at his hospital, the narrator promised the two female hospital clerks a ride to the City of the North. They come dressed up and invite him along to a party. From there, the protagonist’s imagination starts up and he imagines the three of them involved in a sexual tryst. This imaginative process allows him to avoid the experience of being with these two women. His fantasies lead to an urge to masturbate which reminds him of the infuriating words of Amparo, accusing him of being a woman. He pulls to the side of the road on the pretext of a bathroom break so to touch himself and prove that “todo seguía ahí, en su sitio: mi pene y mis testículos y mi escroto y todas las evidencias que contradecían flagrantemente la aserción de Amparo Dávila,” (66). The medical terms he employs here add a stiffness to his insistence that he is a man. The ritualized way in which he formally lists the elements of his genitals is uncanny, as if he were performing an exam on someone apart from himself. The
narrator’s inability to identify with his own body contributes to his degenerating sense of self.

While at the party with his female colleagues, the protagonist realizes his sexual fantasies from earlier, but instead of focusing on the pleasure of what he calls “la gimnasia silenciosa de los sexos opuestos” (67), he says Amparo Dávila’s name repeatedly to prove he is not a woman, as she claimed. It is peculiar that this sexual encounter between “opposite sexes” actually involves at least two women, especially given that earlier he did not even recognize the relationship between Amparo and the Traicionada as sex. It is without a doubt a transgression of socially acceptable sexual practices. Furthermore, the description of the physical act undermines the widely held heteronormative belief that sex is between a biological man and a biological woman. It is even more interesting that at times the roles of penetrator and penetrated, traditionally positions respectively assigned to men and women, are reversed in this explicit scene when one of the women penetrates him from behind with a candle, making him both the penetrated and the penetrator. During the process he complains that he is incredibly bored but then also claims extreme sexual pleasure at the end of the act. Georgina Muñoz Martínez writes that he engages exclusively in anal sex which undercuts his performance as a heterosexual male (271). This interpretation gives the reader pause, however, for a few reasons. To begin with, the sexual act as described in the novel is not limited exclusively to anal sex but rather suggests a fluidity of positions and appetites, including oral sex and a more general description of their “ejercicios sudorosos, que nos llevaban
de una cama a otra, de besos a mordiscos, de gemidos a gritos destemplados” (67).

Whether or not these “sweaty exercises” include vaginal sex is ambiguous, as that is clearly the point. The episode with the candle is introduced later in the page allowing the possibility that the sexual act was more than just anal intercourse. Muñoz Martínez’s writes that the sex act is unclear because “el narrador evita la penetración vaginal” (67) and she also believes that because the women have rounded shoulders and muscular backs that they seem more like transvestites than women (67). However, it would be uncharacteristic of Rivera Garza’s writing to employ a reductive correlation between vaginal sex with heterosexuality and anal sex with homosexuality. Muñoz Martínez also does not address the veracity of the protagonist’s claim that he enjoys the sexual act. Although the description is erotic, the narrator makes no mention of climax. His only ejaculation in the entire novel was earlier when he masturbated on the side of the road. The absence of climax lends itself to the possibility that he is carrying out the heteronormative sex act (two women and a man, a clichéd male fantasy), but does not actually garner any felt pleasure from it.

Afterward, he steps into the bathroom and when he comes back, the women are kissing on one of the beds, without him. This scene closely parallels what is happening in his own home with Amparo and the Traicionada. He finds himself in the company of two women whose attraction to each other exclude him and emasculate him. However, the narrator claims to be nonplussed and thanks them before leaving the hotel. He feigns interest in them, but also confesses that, “lo único que tenía ganas era de regresar al mar,
a su calma, a su inmensidad” (67). The reader cannot know whether the protagonist is genuinely gratified by the fulfillment of his fantasy, but his tendency toward fear and inaction is clearly present in this scene. He leaves the building and, after wandering around, stumbles upon a phone book where he finds Amparo Dávila listed with a phone number and an address in the City of the South. This find fills him with a giddy explosion of glee. He feels at last he has the upper-hand over the Amparo living in his house and begins to refer to her as the “Falsa” or “False One” since, he assumes, the one in the phone book must be the true one. Again, Rivera Garza underscores the importance of language, especially of the written word. There is no reason for the protagonist to assume the one in the phone book is absolutely the real Amparo Dávila, but, accustomed to Western thought which privileges the written word, he chooses to believe this information will empower him over his guest. The protagonist savor this triumph, biding his time before visiting the address listed in the phonebook. He affirms the Falsa’s inferiority (and therefore, his superiority) by belittling her claims that she is a long-forgotten famous author when her hip bones, a clear reference to the iliac crest and this novel’s title, indicate her to be less than 25 years of age. He researches everything he can about Amparo Dávila and in drawing attention to the “ambivalente respeto” (72) that the writer once enjoyed, Rivera Garza is, in fact, celebrating a talented female Mexican writer. The protagonist is foiled, however, when he finds an article with an accompanying photo of the “real” Amparo in a newspaper and is shocked to see that the woman so closely resembles his houseguest. His brief self-confidence is shattered and he finds
himself lost again, scared to address the Amparo he knows and not yet able to meet the one listed in the phonebook. At home, his isolation increases and the women speak in their secret language, ignoring him. He complains, “Sus gestos, sus palabras, su incesante cercanía me producían una humillación sin límite,” (73). To affirm his existence, he begins to obsess about whom he considers to be the true Amparo Dávila. “Ya me había dejado yo de preguntar sobre la verdad, para empezar a explorar el fundamento mismo de lo real” (74). His research gives him purpose and keeps him relevant; perhaps this is why he continues to postpone his visit to the real Amparo. This is yet another example supporting the novel’s theme of the impossibility of a singular truth. The protagonist’s desire to know who the “real” or “true” Amparo might be is an unreasonable undertaking. Cristina Rivera Garza’s novel disputes these binary absolutes. Just as the narrator cannot know which is the real Amparo, the reader cannot know what is the real sex of the protagonist. The author excludes the possibility of either case being mutually exclusive. Rather, each of the characters named Amparo will continue to present evidence that suggests they are the real Amparo just as the narrator will continue to present evidence of his maleness while confronting contradictory evidence of his femaleness. The protagonist, uncomfortable with his own task of maintaining himself in the real, obsessively focuses on the two women named Amparo Dávila. His research distracts him from the urgency to evaluate himself and the possible reasons for which his houseguests insist on referring to him as a woman.
It is about this moment in the text that the narrator begins to suffer from a “sueño” (75), which is more of a nightmare than a dream. He is in his mother’s house and, returned to his childhood home, he is stripped of his adulthood and, included in that elimination, he loses the masculinity that comes with adulthood. He hears shots fired upstairs and, rather than investigating what happened, he flees in fear. The protagonist explains that he is cognizant that he should have gone upstairs and that he has an obligation to be fearless so as to protect others, but in his dream, he failed to perform. Still in the dream sequence, he returns home to find his mother cleaning up the blood left by a homicide, unaware of what happened. His failure to act and his failure to protect his mother in the dream demonstrate his anxiety concerning his lack of masculinity. In the dream progression, another commotion happens behind the house and the protagonist sees two wild boars are attacking two horses and the sight and smell are so disturbing that he wakes up sweating and dials the number for Amparo. His fear finally forced him to act and, to his surprise, she answers immediately, almost as if anticipating another call. He requests to see her on the pretense that he has something of hers, assuring himself that he is not lying since he believes he recovered her manuscript in the files of the former patient Juan Escutia. She agrees, “Lo espero mañana,” (77), employing the masculine, formal singular direct object pronoun to refer to the doctor.

With his customary incapacitating fear, the narrator hesitates before arriving at the home of Amparo Dávila. He even returns to his car, intent on going home, before he regains his courage and knocks on her door. She allows him in and immediately her
presence overwhelms him and he is again returned, perhaps only in his mind’s eye, to his condition as a tree. This recollection of his life as a tree perhaps ties into the writer Amparo Dávila’s short story, “Muerte en el bosque.” In this brief story a lazy and rather surly man fantasizes about becoming a tree so to not have to care for his wife, whose heavy weight and incessant complaining he finds so offensive. The protagonist from “Muerte” embraced the unrealistic societal expectations of a perfect, perky wife (52) and when reality could not meet these goals, he felt trapped in his relationship. Dávila has another short story in which people become trees, and that is “Los árboles petrificados” (243) from within a collection originally published in 1977 by the same name. In this story, a pair of lovers escape to a forest and their embrace physically merges them into a tree. Social rules had kept them apart and now they are free to openly be together. Both Rivera Garza and the author of “Los árboles petrificados” are alluding to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. *La cresta* already referred to the story of Narcissus and the petrified tree and here the text refers to the story of Apollo and Daphne. After Apollo spurns him, Cupid punishes the boasting warrior by making him fall in love with Daphne and making Daphne loathe Apollo. To escape Apollo’s insistence, Daphne begs for help from her father and is transformed into a tree. For Ovid, just as for Dávila and Rivera Garza, this transformation into a tree represents escape from an unbearable social reality.

In *La cresta*, the narrator feels awkward, not knowing what to do with his body and performs the role of a tree. In a sense, he becomes petrified in his spot, unable to respond. However, unlike the fantastic works of Dávila, this novel does not allow him to
anthropomorphize and he must respond to the situation at hand. He violates his own male code and begins to cry. Nonplussed, Amparo ignores this episode, offering no comfort, and finally leads the protagonist to the couch. To himself, he notes that, “creo que había imaginado una vivienda más llena de cosas, más poblada de historias, más marcada por el tiempo” (81). In a text where the characters are struggling to remain within the symbolic order, the Verdadera is no exception. Earlier the protagonist worried that no one knew about his existence and he was essentially disappearing (34) and his linguistic exclusion from the secret language left him helpless. Now he sees his fears mirrored in the Verdadera’s parse existence. This resistance to any markers revealing a life lived or an impression made in the surrounding community alerts the reader to the possibility that the “True One” might not be as “true” as she may seem.

Up until this point, the development of La cresta has been built on a series of permeable borders, both real and metaphorical. For example, the action develops between the City of the North and the City of the South. The doctor works with moribund patients who are between life and death. Even the sex of the narrator seems to vacillate between male and female. All these dualities, or perhaps it would be more accurate to characterize this phenomenon as failed dualities, are intensified in the apartment of the Verdadera. She also seems to be straddling the invisible line between life and death. The protagonist ruminates that “parecía mentira que estuviera viva” (80). The Verdadera is so decrepit it seems impossible to the main character that she could still be living and yet, there she is in front of him. The rules governing life as he knows them are no longer in play. When
she joins him on the couch, she inquires as to what brought him here: “¿Qué la trae por aquí?” (82). Although on the phone she told him that she would see him (lo) tomorrow, here she employs the feminine direct object pronoun to refer to the protagonist. Seemingly unaware of this changed evaluation of his biological sex, the narrator puts the manuscript he took from the hospital on the table. The Verdadera reacts suspiciously and the narrator is instantly transformed from a welcome guest into a potential enemy, so slippery are the limits of hospitality. However, when he begins to explain that another woman showed up on his doorstep calling herself Amparo Dávila, the Verdadera again transforms the protagonist from a threat into an innocuous bystander. The older Amparo explains to him that the younger Amparo is an Emissary. The Emissaries are a group of feminists that were formed after Dávila’s disappearance in order to be messengers from the past. When the narrator returns home, taking the manuscript with him in his Jeep, the young Amparo challenges the status of the Verdadera as the authentic writer. She claims that the older woman is an “Impostura” or “Imposter.” If the “Real One” is, in fact, not the “real one,” then there are no named central characters in this novel. They are all situated outside the real world.

**Disappearing borders**

At noted, Rivera Garza has established a liminal space marked by ambiguity. The characters are living between two definite places, La Ciudad del Norte and the Ciudad del Sur. Perhaps the reader could assume it is a reference to the border between Mexico and the United States, which is what critic Oswaldo Estrada assumes in his article “Against
Representation.” Estrada writes that, “One can only assume that the narrator is referring to San Diego and Tijuana, respectively” (65), but being a border city also means having an imprecise identity, because the border is an interstitial place marked by contradictory ideas that divide the space. Rivera Garza makes no allusion to cultural or temporal markers. In no moment does the narrative reveal to its reader an event or object that can be necessarily placed in history. Even the story surrounding the patient Juan Escutia mirrors, although it does not match, the historical version of this individual. The result is that the actions seem to develop as if in a void. This extraction of space, time, and culture allows the text to transcend these terms and deny the certainty of any specific border. Rather, the reader can allow that this plotline develops on a metaphorical border, in a contradictory space. Although Cristina Rivera Garza is from the Texas/Mexico border town of Tamaulipas and currently lives much of the year in San Diego, the reader senses the principles of borders more readily than any necessary reference to Mexico, and certainly any reference to the United States/Mexico border. After all, a border is a site where social rules break down. This unique position of belonging to neither one category nor its opposite (physically or otherwise) is known as “nepantla.” According to Antonia Darder and Rodolfo D. Torres, being in nepantla means, “to be disoriented in a space, to experience bouts of disassociation of identity, identity breakdowns and buildups. The border is in a constant nepantla state” (165). “Nepantla” derives from the indigenous Nahuatl word that most closely translated to English means “threshold” or “entryway.” (165). It is in this space that is neither on one side nor the other that transformation is
possible. This term applies just as much to the physical location where the action of the novel takes place as to the state of being of the characters. This is especially true if the reader considers Gloria Anzaldúa’s explanation of nepantla as “a birthing stage where you feel like you’re reconfiguring your identity and you don’t know where you are” (5).

One effect of this anonymity is that the story takes place as if in a vacuum. Such ambiguity allows the text to transcend cultural and historical markers so to communicate its message to an unlimited number of readers from an unlimited number of backgrounds. As such, La cresta cannot be considered a novel strictly about the Mexican border experience. Instead, Rivera Garza presents her reader with a novel where categories of sex and gender can be re-imagined free from social presumptions and rules.

The narrator shamelessly laughs (the same absurd laughter that the Falsa also evokes) at the Verdadera’s explanation of the Emissaries, believing the story to be impossible. However, he quickly grows silent when he hears the Verdadera’s response. She says, “Veo que eres una de las Incrédulas” (85), employing the feminine to indicate that he is one of the “Incredulous.” Again, he misses the reference to himself using a feminine article and takes offense that the Verdadera would use the second person informal when addressing him. Following this observation is the realization that she was referencing him with the feminine. This unsettling observation upsets the protagonist and he starts to mentally list all of the biological indicators on his body that prove that he is not a woman: he has not breasts, not a narrowed waist, nor long hair, nor painted nails. How unusual that his first instinct is not specify his male physiology, or to affirmatively
claim what he is, but rather first acknowledges what he is not. Nonetheless, after exhausting why he is not a woman, he does touch on his masculine features: facial hair, a man’s stature and a “bulto entre las ingles” (86). Part of his dilemma is that he is unable to distinguish between biological sex and gender. For example, he combines long hair and painted nails, both socially associated with women, with a narrowed waist and breasts, which are biologically determined characteristics of females. He heads toward the door, indignant, and, on his way out, the Verdadera tells him to give the manuscript to the “Pequeña.” The request only further agitates the protagonist, who vows to himself never to return the manuscript. However, his dramatic exit is frustrated by the locked door, to which he does not have the key. He is forced to go retrieve the key from the Verdadera. As he leans in to take the key from her hand he can smell her presence and allows that she indeed is real and that time does pass. She leans into him and whispers, “‘Todas sabemos tu secreto,’ susurró entonces. ‘No te preocupes, pero tampoco trates de engañarnos’” (87). After running out, the main character again recalls his life as a tree and this time he yearns for such a paralyzed life. He then feels himself being watched and the section ends with, “Y entonces retrocedí. Retrocedí. Retrocedí’” (87).

This episode is followed by the visit of the hospital’s guard, who obliges the narrator to go with him in his military vehicle to the hospital administration. He is brought to the office of the Director General, who is almost a satirical version of the “perfect man.” The Director General is known to be a refined man and his “caballerosidad” (90) discomforts the protagonist who feels he cannot compare with this
version, the protagonist’s version, of such a quintessential man. The director addresses
the protagonist with masculine, direct object pronouns, offers him a whiskey (despite it
being not yet nine in the morning) and inquires as to whether the allegations that the main
character has been snooping into the files of certain former patients is true. At first the
protagonist is unable to reply because he is so fixated on the glass of alcohol in his hands.
He tells how the aroma transports him to other lands, a direct allusion to the theme of
escape and his desire to escape himself. However, it is also arguable that the narrator is
not only looking to escape his physical location, but to pretend to be someone other than
himself. Drinking the Director General’s whiskey allows him to imagine that he is not a
gender disoriented individual, but rather he takes on the persona of the Director General.
For a few fleeting seconds he can pretend he occupies the privileged position of the
dominant male. The escape is ephemeral and upon swallowing, the narrator feels his
cheeks blush, his body feminizing and undercutting his dream to ascertain a masculinity
which he does not possess. After the second glass, the protagonist realizes he must make
a decision as to whether to lie and say the accusation is a mistake, an option the director
is baiting him to take, or tell the truth. This second option is more problematic as the
protagonist confesses “Podía decir la verdad, aunque a esas alturas yo sabía cada vez
menos acerca de ella” (92). As the reader has seen, the truth is a slippery concept without
clear definitions. Torn, he opts for a combination and admits he was looking into the files
of Juan Escutia because he believes Escutia’s mysterious condition is reappearing in the
hospital in other patients. The director is furious and retrieves the guard from earlier to
take the protagonist to the infirmary and announces that they will figure out what to do
with the main character. In the infirmary, the narrator is stripped and smeared with a
cream to prevent infections. He is forced into the blue bathrobes which the patients use,
marking his loss of corporal autonomy. Having transformed from the role of doctor
overseeing the care of other bodies into the position of the patient, the narrator loses his
sense of time and begins to think (or possibly realize) that he has been without his
temporal sense for a significant period of time. After a quick interview and being
reassessed (again naked) by a different team of nurses, he is returned his clothes and he
directs himself back to the house. His houseguests greet him at the door and, typically,
ignore his wellbeing to insure that he was not questioned about Amparo. Pouting like a
child, he marches in the house, out the back and begins running along the sea. Exhausted,
he finally feels peace, “Sentí una dulzura inigualable,” (96). This entire scene adds yet
another element of complexity to the reader’s efforts to try to define the protagonist in
any definite terms. Once presented in his blue bathrobe, especially following such an
illogical sequence of events, the protagonist’s standing as a doctor is questioned. Rivera
Garza purposefully manipulates his image so that the reader must confront the possibility
that the main character might never have been a doctor. After all, the narrative voice, a
voice in the first person, has already shown itself to be unreliable and the possibility that
the events of the novel might be the ravings of a lunatic is certainly no less plausible than
the Director General of a hospital offering whiskey to a doctor in the early hours of a
working day and then humiliating him with two invasive physical exams. As with the
ambiguity surrounding the protagonist’s sex, there is not sufficient evidence for the reader to draw an unequivocal response. However, the shared haziness surrounding the biological sex and the mental capacity of the patients has been clearly outlined and, given their shared vagueness, a potential link between the two has been created. It would seem that by transgressing the norms of appropriate gender behavior, the protagonist became marked as mentally feeble.

Back at his house, the main character begins an effort to more fully remove himself from reality by creating his own *mise en abyme*. He spies on himself and any instant of self-contact becomes an opportunity to further separate his mind from his body. He also begins to spy on others, isolating himself to an even greater extent. It is most curious that his spying on others seems to only be on other women, the female nurses and the female cooks at the hospital. He seems intent on confirming these women are harsh and lacking in the tenderness that the protagonist states should be “innate” and “natural” (97) in women. He is surprised to find they are as rude and vulgar as the male guards, who are supposedly entitled to be this callous behavior. His disappointment in these ladies violating his assumed gender codes leads him to conclude “Esas mujeres eran tan femeninas como el árbol que yo había sido” (98). This is the first moment in which the narrator admits a degree of femininity, although he does so in a quite disassociated manner. If these women of lower rank disappoint him for not swaying their hips in the way he believes to be appropriate for women, the administrative ladies seem more focused on their feminine appearance than to dedicating themselves to their job. Here,
Rivera Garza presents the clear double standard that many working women must face. On one hand, if you are not in a “professional” position, such as the cooks, there is an expectation toward an unattainable femininity. These labor intensive jobs require one’s full attention and for this reason, the women who occupy these positions are not looking to seduce their male colleagues. It is, upon further reflection, seemingly absurd that the narrator would assume these women would be concerned with showing off their charms to him, as if the singular presence of any male should trigger such coquettish behavior.

On the other hand, the narrator condemns the more accomplished women of the administrative side of the hospital, such as the bosses, for caring about their appearance, the lack of which is so offensive to him in lower-rank employees. His attitude clearly reflects the impossible standards of beauty and professionalism with which working women must contend.

His comparison of the women of his office with his previous life as a tree may perhaps be read another way. Ute Seydel in her essay “Contrucción y desestabilización de identidades en la narrativa de Carmen Boullosa y Cristina Rivera Garza” avers that comparing both himself and the women to trees makes them equal. After all, Seydel points out, trees do not have gender and so her interpretation that men and women are not only equal, but that the narrator’s comparison suggest that “no había diferencias entre hombres y mujeres” (166).

From here his musings roam from this perceived failure of women to behave like and appear as women to the androgynous nature of his patients. He comments that there
is little difference between them and that the genitals of the dying men and women had equally decomposed. The protagonist is willfully confusing the difference between performed gender, such as the manicures of the female office staff, and biological sex. He claims that “poco les podía importar si en vida habían sido hombres o mujeres” (99), but is unable to consider the implications of this statement. Does it not matter because biological sex does not carry with it essential personality traits? Or, does it not matter because their near-dead status has cost the patients their personhood? Although he does not explicitly weigh these alternatives, the reader must examine his preoccupation with the perceived genderless status of the patients. His houseguest, Amparo, challenges his claim, pointing out that he has not even taken it upon himself to inquire how his patients feel before turning back to her work and ignoring him. Not to be dismissed (as the doctor does with his patients), the narrator insists on insulting her, demanding to be acknowledged. She believes his tantrum to be the result of his guests knowing his secret. The main character forces himself to reevaluate his preconceptions regarding the importance of biological sex, commenting “por alguna casualidad de la desgracia yo era en realidad una mujer, nada cambiaría,” (100). The possibility of being a woman and of changing his gender identity slowly begins to seem less horrific than when the Falsa first refers to him as a woman. It would have seemed implausible if he had accepted his guests’ declaration from the start, but he tries to accept the idea that there is no essential difference between genders. The protagonist approaches the possibility that the categories of biological sex, gender and, therefore, sexual identity, are not as strict as he had once
conceived. “Todo era un burdo espejo de lo Mismo” (101), he declares, hinting at the lack of differences between being a woman and being a man. However, this possibility is too much for him and he finds himself unable to speak before he loses consciousness again. His final thought is that men should understand that this happens more often than we (first person plural in text) think. He appears to be justifying the fluidity of his sex.

(In)sanity and sexual identity

As the main character tries to reconcile his previously held essentialist approach to biological sex with his new one, he enters a state of cognitive dissonance and his own sanity is called into question. First he references Juan Escutia’s rapid decline into mental instability and then parallels this experience to his own life, wondering if Escutia was similarly affected by the hospice’s environment. The thought transfixes him to the point he becomes trapped in his own imaginings and is only wrestled free from them when the Director General interrupts him and takes him on a walk along the beach. The protagonist’s boss offers him a cigar and then questions him about the women staying in the house. With respect to Amparo (the “Falsa”), the director seems particularly suspicious causing the narrator to wonder if the manuscript he has is behind this interrogation. To lessen his boss’s distrust and, perhaps, also to fit in with the man he so admires, the protagonist resorts to the “guy knowledge” which was mentioned at the beginning of the text. He tells the Director General how the Falsa was too pretty to resist. His retelling brings back the initial fear he felt when Amparo arrived followed by the sting of self-deprecation that a woman is living in his house neither as a paying tenant nor
as his lover. Then the narrator confides in his reader that the sexual arousal evoked by this memory is so strong that it affects his pace. However, the image that he describes is not one of Amparo but of the director. The reader must ask whether this fantasy was provoked by another man and, unable to confront the possibility of homosexual desire, he speaks of Amparo while admiring the Director General. The hospital’s director agrees to meet the Falsa and the Traicionada on the pretext of making a report and the reader learns that their tenancy is a violation of the narrator’s work contract. The Director General appears to be worried about the reputation of his facility, which seems quite odd given that it is a hospice of nearly dead patients, barely conscious due to morphine, situated outside any major town. The main character explains that “al instituto siempre le interesó promover una cierta imagen de normalidad, algo que resultaba fácil perder en un sitio como en el que trabajábamos” (111). The protagonist acknowledges to himself that he knew he was breaking the rules and that it is not socially acceptable for a middle aged man to be living with two young women, but, he concedes, he is willfully rebelling against the rules socially imposed upon him. It is with some skepticism the reader accepts this explanation. On one hand, he is beginning to resist rigid structures associated with gender. However, his houseguests have remained in his home much to his alarm. He is not allowing them to be there; they forced their way in and never left. Nonetheless, his initial resistance is a somewhat promising indicator of his ideological shift outside the patriarchal norm.
On his way back to the house, the narrator recalls the last time another man provoked such “intimate” sensations. It was during his adolescence, a time typical for sexual experimentation. He names the object of his attraction as “Alguien” (113) or “Someone,” yet another protagonist without a name. Oswaldo Estrada notes that by using the epithet of “Alguien,” a gender-neutral noun in Spanish, the lover becomes “a person whose individual identity overcame the need for gender definition” (Sor Juana 73). He describes an idyllic young courtship, complete with staring at clouds and frolicking in the wilderness until, finally, “nos dábanos a la tarea de tocarnos” (114). He describes the anguished separation that followed this romance and yet, at no point does he seem to question this relationship in light of his current crisis. He does not wonder whether he falls outside the dominant heteronormative spectrum. He only contemplates his biological sex after the women in his house force the matter. This not to imply that a man attracted to another man is therefore feminized. Quite the opposite, Cristina Rivera Garza demonstrates the fluidity of sexuality and how, when unburdened by societal restraints, one might pick his partner based on individual sexual desire and not on biological sex.

Once returned to the house, the Director General meets Amparo and the Traicionada. The narrator declares his intent to transcribe this interaction as honestly as possible, but admitting that a perfect retelling would be impossible. Again, the reader confronts the impossibility of the truth, but while observing cracks in the protagonist’s previously rigid façade. Whereas before he would constantly correct and undermine his own telling leading to the suspicion of dishonesty, here the protagonist confronts his own
limitations and the limitations of the truth. He relinquishes his position as the authoritative voice telling the story and, in doing so, he gains some of the credibility which was lost to him at the beginning of the novel. In sacrificing his position as sole custodian of the diegetic events he risks losing his privileged position and this forfeiture of power could reflect on his identity as “the man” and his belief that as a man, he is obliged to assert control. So this very small act, seemingly unrelated to his identity crisis, in fact does tie back to gendered power dynamics. After all, the Spanish word for witness, “testigo,” also can mean “testicle,” the implication being, of course, that a male voice is a reliable one. The main character is moving further and further away from this male-centered ideology.

According to the protagonist, whose narrative voice is becoming increasingly more dependable, the Director General arrives finely dressed with a bottle of whiskey and a white orchid, hardly the tools one would need to inspect an improper tenant situation. The narrator relates how his boss came to seduce the Falsa, whom the protagonist had so explicitly described for her beauty. The Director General, whose name is never provided, becomes the “Seductor” (117) or “Seducer.” Amparo seems to return his interest, leaving the main character and the Traicionada as unwelcomed intruders in their own home. The Director General even takes over the protagonist’s chair, a clear usurpation of his position. Meanwhile, the Traicionada tries to interrupt the Director General’s courtship by addressing the Falsa in their secret language. This arrests the entire scene as all three

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14 See Real Académica Española (www.rae.es), eighth entry.
turn to look at her. Up until this point, the narrator (and the reader, complicit with the narrator’s perspective) has shown this language to only be a feminine language, a clear reference to the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray. Irigaray viewed language as necessarily masculine and as reinforcing the social structures which oppress women and privilege men. She proposed that, “the creation of woman’s language (...) would privilege the multiple over the singular” (Gazomik 49). Here, Rivera Garza voices her contempt for such gender isolation and breaks the spell that the secret language has held on the reader. Of course there is no female-only language and the Director General’s fluency of this secret language proves this to be so. The Falsa does not respond and the situation becomes increasingly uncomfortable. After spending so much time resenting the relationship between the two women, he feels a surprising empathy for the Traicionada. Up until this point in the narration, the language the women speak has been portrayed as a female-only language and one that the protagonist has been unable to master, perhaps because he is not a woman. However, after the Falsa ignores the Traicionada, it is the Director General who answers her in the secret language. This leaves the protagonist in complete isolation and wondering, “si sólo ciertos hombres de indudable gusto sofisticado podrían tener acceso a ese lenguaje privado” (119). His exclusion becomes so complete that he claims, “dejé de existir” on account of his guests’ rejection of their host. Helpless, he again positions himself in front of the window where he remains, only linked to his guests by their shared whiskey inebriation. He fails to gain even their gaze and
faces two options: “podía seguir luchando o podía aceptar la derrota, acomodarme en sus manos, disfrutarla incluso si fuera necesario. Decidí hacer lo último” (120).

Cristina Rivera Garza, through the narrative voice, transcribes the gibberish of the secret language. The reader is also unable to understand what the characters are saying, but, thanks to the narrator, we are aware of the nonverbal indicators that allow the protagonist (and the reader) an educated guess at the topics on which they touch as well as the power dynamics at play. For instance, he mentions that the Falsa takes on an authoritative tone and, by ignoring the Traicionada in the earlier sequence, the reader also realizes that she is attempting to assert her dominance. The main character relays how the Director General tells a joke and, given the sidelong looks he gives both women, the protagonist can ascertain the nature of the joke is vulgar and that the Director General is attempting to flirt with both the women of his household, in front of the narrator and with no regard whatsoever for his host. Rivera Garza is effectively deconstructing the usage of language as a domineering force and this effort ties directly into her parallel deconstruction of biological sex and gendered norms. If the word “woman” or “mujer” is taken outside its semiotic context of being “not male” or even “less than male,” then the protagonist would be liberated to approach biological sex, gender and even confront his own sexual desires untethered from sociolinguistic associations. The introduction of a secret language allows for this possibility. Despite not understanding the secret language of his guests, the narrator does pick up on their mention of “Juan Escutia” and then he hears the Falsa say, “Amparo Dávila” (121). Based on the tone of the conversation, the
main character believes she successfully recruits the Director General to assist her group of Emissaries. The narrator carefully observes his boss, allegedly in an effort to decipher the language. He catches the Director General staring at the Falsa’s pelvic bone, or her iliac crest. He notes: “Supe que la deseaba como lo había hecho pero que, a diferencia mía, el Seducor no conocía el miedo” (122). The protagonist compares his fearful self with his hyper-masculine and fearless manager. The Director General does not know this anxiety, but he is presented as an obnoxious character. This is to say that the dynamic at play here is that to be a man but to lack some pre-prescribed role, such as fearlessness, is to fail and be less manly, or womanly. On the other hand, to excel in this role is to err on the side of brashness. The masculine paradigm is a failed one in that its pursuit strips one of his humanity.

The evening comes to a close when the Falsa excuses herself. She had tied the evening together and her exit dissolves the rest of the company. The narrator is left with his linguistic notes, trying to understand the secret language. He first summarizes the motivations of the players: the Traicionada is again, as her name predicts, in danger of being excluded by the new pair of the Director General and the Falsa. The Director General believes he successfully seduced the Falsa when in fact she has him under her thumb and will undoubtedly manipulate their relationship in attempt to access the manuscript the narrator has already stolen. As for the narrator, he is still confined to the periphery, forced to observe but not understand the actions taking place in front of him. His conclusions are questioned by Amparo the Verdadera who accuses him of not
understanding anything. She called him at his office and insisted on seeing him immediately: “Necesito verla tan pronto como sea posible” (126). The continued use of the feminine direct object pronoun (“la”) goes unnoticed and he concedes the visit. Once at her apartment, the Verdadera begins to address the narrator using the second person informal, an unwelcome lack of respect. He complains “El tuteo me molestó” (85).

Nonetheless, he feels more comfortable on account that his houseguests have become almost “invisibles” (127) since his boss’s visit. The three tenants share a societal exclusion that allows great privacy but even greater exclusion. Before his visit to the Verdadera, he realizes that these changes are not necessarily resulting from a newfound respect for him as the owner of the home, but rather due to the Falsa’s desperation. One morning she comes downstairs and admits that she is struggling and does not know if she can continue with her work. She describes her efforts as “retroceder…retroceder” (128). This last term disturbs the protagonist as this is exactly the term he uses to describe his mental escapes from reality. She begins to cry and this provokes a true discomfort in the narrator who claims, “verdaderamente me molesta cualquier asomo de expresión emocional, especialmente cuando denota debilidad” (129). Amparo picks up on his discomfort and plainly states that he does not know what is happening. She recognizes that he cannot respond to her emotions and she tries to explain her exhaustion. She continues, “uno se queda así, desamparada, y necesita algo, un refugio, cierta protección, algo parecido” (130). Her description is one of a damsel in distress, which is exactly the trope presented when she first arrived at the house seeking refuge on a stormy night.
this sense, the narrator achieves the chivalrous role of “savior,” without completely being conscious of his actions. When he gently suggests that maybe the Traicionada could help the Falsa, she scoffs that the Traicionada spends all her time at the hospital now with the Director General. Yet again, the protagonist realizes he was mistaken and that his conclusions about the amorous triangle from his living room were incorrect. The narrator believes the Traicionada is seeking vengeance against him and is doing so successfully. Like the Falsa, he feels jealous, but while she misses the Traicionada’s company, and, perhaps, her affection, he is thinking about the Director General. Once again, he finds his ex-lover entangled in another amorous adventure, but he is not jealous of the Director General for being with the Traicionada but of the Traicionada spending time with his boss. “Supuse que la Traicionada debería de estar a esas horas en la oficina del Seductor, degustando el whisky que debió haber estado en mi boca, oyendo la música que debió haber entrado por mis oídos” (131). It is curious that Rivera Garza’s protagonist covets not the macho, alpha-male character who earned the title of “the Seductor.” Instead, he envies the Traicionada, though not to attain the Seductor’s attention, which would perhaps only suggest homosexual desire, but actually wishes to be her in this scenario, suggesting a latent transgendered desire. Arguably, scenes such as these provoke the reader’s continued reevaluation of the narrator’s alleged manhood. After all, here the protagonist is longing to share this intimate moment with the Director General and yet he does not seem to find this contrary to his alleged heterosexuality. He continues to identify as a straight biological man and yet is attracted to his exaggeratedly macho boss. The
protagonist’s adolescent sexual encounter with another boy does not affect him in the slightest and now Rivera Garza continues to portray her protagonist as unaware of his own jealousy of the Traicionada’s relationship with the Director General.

To distract the Falsa from her sadness, the narrator, now assuming a paternal tone, suggests that she go see the real Amparo Dávila. She becomes upset by the news that he knows of the Verdadera but insists that the older Amparo Dávila is an Impostura, or Imposter, and the protagonist begins to regret his suggestion. His brief emotional connection to the Falsa is broken and he again is treated as if he does not exist, “me veía como si tratara de un fantasma o de un espejo, sin en realidad darse cuenta de que yo la estaba oyendo,” (132). Because his identity is so precarious at this moment, this rejection threatens his existence even further. It is then that he decides to visit the Verdadera’s house again and this time he has the will and self-determination to overcome his previous fears demonstrating the protagonist is emerging from his metamorphosis. He states that he is rebelling against himself and turning away from the comfort that his hateful, boring life as a hospice doctor provided. He is beginning to take on new challenges and finding out whether the Verdadera is the true Amparo or an Imposter is his new goal.

When he arrives at the Verdadera’s home, she appears to be quite ill and disoriented, almost senile entering into what he describes as “trances femeninos. Se quedó inmóvil, observando las gotas de agua que resbalaban por la ventana” (136). How can a trance be masculine or feminine? If such a gendered characteristic were possible, would not it be the case that his frequent retreats where he stares at the water parallel the
Verdadera’s “feminine trance?” It would appear she forgot that she invited him to her house and he suspects that this might be a case of Alzheimer’s. This incapacitating disease where the memory is so badly affected is, in a way, parallel to the protagonist’s experience. Although he feels pity for the Verdadera who is forgetting who she is, the protagonist is also forcing himself to try to find his own identity, one that is just as slippery and intangible as the Verdadera’s weakened memory. Not recalling her invitation, the Verdadera brings up the Falsa and inquires as to whether the Falsa sent him. It is then that the narrator uses this opportunity to report that the Verdadera has also been accused of not being the real Amparo Dávila. Instead of shock, the older woman responds by asking, “¿Qué importancia podría tener eso?” (138). Her words strike the protagonist strongly and he realizes indeed it does not matter whether or not this decrepit woman is Amparo or not because there is no one “real.” His hostess continues, referencing the repeated theme of the impossibility of ascertaining the truth, “Uno nunca sabe a ciencia cierta por qué hace las cosas ¿verdad? ...Uno no sabe nunca nada, ¿No es así?” (139) and then she announces to him, “se va a matar.”

These four words set off a flashback for the protagonist of a woman telling him that she has long been dead, and he begins to wonder if the Verdadera is also speaking to him from the grave. However, when he asks her if she is dead and she gives the chilling response that she is the only one who remains. The characters of the novel are slowly disappearing. The Traicionada has left to be with the Director General and the older Amparo Dávila is dying. Perhaps, the protagonist is also facing his own “death” and the
prophecy that he hears announcing a death refers to the end of his cherished masculine identity. The narrator again feels nostalgia for a previous past where “we” (first person plural in original) were trees in a forest and sighs, “Quise tener raíces. Quise retroceder” (140). His desire to escape is certainly not new to Rivera Garza’s reader, but the desire to have roots presents a new approach to the protagonist’s continued references to being a tree in a past life. If he feels he is facing the “Desaparición Misma” (140), then perhaps a desire for roots, for community, is in fact expressing a will to live. Unlike Juan Escutia, the patient who jumped through the window taking his own life, the protagonist wishes to remain in this world and participate. Therefore, when the Verdadera states that someone is going to kill him or herself, we know that person is not the protagonist, at least not in the literal sense. He is, as has been noted, undergoing a transformation and so perhaps the self-inflicted death would be more closely linked to his fragmented and gender disoriented personality than his physical self. As the protagonist undergoes the inner turmoil related to his disappearance, or rather, the disappearance of a world he thought he knew, he stops to admire the Verdadera and acknowledges her beauty. Admiring such non-traditional beauty is marked proof that he is no longer self-imposing societal standards of femininity. In this moment he finally and without realizing it understands the secret language. “Las palabras finalmente como algo que se toca y se palpa, las palabras como material ineludible” (141). The words and categories that have for so long trapped the main character have now set him free. Realizing the importance of language makes the narrator recall the lost manuscript of Amparo Dávila. Unable to remember its
contents, he flees the apartment only to find his Jeep is not where he left it. He stored the manuscript in his car and now he nervously considers whether he might be part of an elaborate trap set by the Falsa. He searches fruitlessly in the rain before attempting to walk home and, more figuratively, walk away from the rational world. He acknowledges to himself that walking was the most foolish option, but he is looking to create his own rules and is undergoing the final steps in a process to detach himself from reality. On his journey he claims, “Caminé por horas, tal vez días eneteros,” (142). His distancing himself from the urban city is also a distancing from time and is one step more outside the symbolic order and one step closer to an approximation of the real. He walks so far that when the Traicionada finds him, he is very sick. However, his transformation is now complete that is reflected through his mastery of his guests’ secret language.

It is a useful exercise to further investigate the importance that he suddenly can understand this “other” language. Before he wished to speak it, but he could not because he was not ready to face what it signified: a separation from the known cultural order and an entry into an unknown space free of cultural mandates. When he leaves his language behind, he is exiting the symbolic order. He is beyond the scope of the narrative because he rejects, consciously or not, the implied social binds implicit in the dominant language. It also means that he is leaving behind the rigidity of categories like gender and sexuality. He is free of these structures, and of the heteronormativity, that previously governed his life. The protagonist now spends a period as a patient in his own hospital where the two named nurses, named for a short story by Dávila) are introduced: Moisés and Gaspar.
Their appearance potentially signals a return to reality as a transformed being. While in the hospital, the protagonist presents a comical list of all the things one can do while in the hospital, all while employing the passive device of “se impersonal.” There are two points of special interest amid the 29 numbered points. The first is number 20: “Darse cuenta, de súbito, que no se está ya sobre la cama del hospital sino frente a la transparencia de la ventana que, ficticiamente, lo liga uno con el exterior” (149). When the protagonist walks away from the Ciudad del Sur, he is walking away from the reality in which he once believed. However, here the reader observes the narrator once again positioning himself in his world as a changed person. By touching the window, he is reclaiming his connection to society and that he can no longer be an observer, can no longer presume the passivity of a tree. He vows to take control of his home, and his life, when he is well again and free himself of the Falsa. The second point which is remarkable is number 22, where the narrator hears voices repeating a line the reader has seen before. “‘Se va a matar,’ le dije. ‘Se va a matar,’ le dije de nuevo, porque el hombre permanecía sin dar un paso atrás, como si estuviera resultó a lanzarse’” (147, emphasis in original). The use of the first person preterit suggests that the narrator is potentially the one who is repeating the Verdadera’s words of “he is going to kill himself.” Another possibility is that this episode did not exist at all. After all, he is in a hospital for the mentally and physically infirm. The reader has no choice but to wonder if the series of events told by the narrator are the ravings of an unwell patient or the inevitable trials of a doctor who finds himself forced to question the reigning hegemonic structures and then
punished for challenging social norms. At the hospital, only the nurses who care for the protagonist when he gets ill have real names. Conceivably, their presence as “real” characters implies that they are the only ones that exist and the others, the Amparos and the Traicionada, are part of the narrator’s intricate delusion. The second part of the voice he hears is a reference to Juan Escutia and his fateful jump through the window that so upset the stability of the hospital. His dramatic suicide challenged the hegemonic system in which the doctors, masculine and authoritarian, are in charge of the bodies of the genderless and submissive patients. The protagonist does not need to resort to such extreme measures to challenge this patriarchal order because he achieved the same goal without ending his life.

He returns to his home, afraid both to find himself alone and to confront the Falsa. How interesting that while he once was afraid of the company of his female houseguests, he now fears their absence. The imagined “threat” that he once thought women possessed has been replaced with a more personal affection for an individual woman. He even begins to refer to the Falsa as “mi Amparo” (152, emphasis in original) and states that the reader should understand why he would employ a possessive pronoun when referring to his guest. This type of speech mirrors what the narrator states at the beginning of the novel as “guy knowledge” when he claims that the men will understand his attraction to and fear of Amparo. That same smug tone is used here, but now it is genderless. There is no longer a need to belong to the privileged group and there is no longer the fear of becoming the other. He then makes a comment which seems something like a non-
sequitur. He tells his readers, those that do not “get it” to just wink or pretend they do. He muses: “Cualquier cosa sirve para negar la realidad. Yo lo he hecho en innumerables ocasiones” (151). The Falsa welcomes him and explains that they are the only two remaining. The two walk out to the sea and have the first real moment of human interaction in the novel. Sitting on the sand, she confesses that she has missed him and he confirms that he, too, missed her. This moment perhaps could seem frivolous in another context, but in *La cresta* it stands out as unique because there is such a dearth of intimate interaction. This moment lends humanity to both the protagonist and also to the Falsa, who up until this point has seemed purely self-interested. The narrator concludes that this is why he opened the door to the Falsa when she first arrived, because he needed her presence to make a home to which he can return.

*La cresta* very easily could conclude at this point. After all, Cristina Rivera Garza’s protagonist has undergone a transformation in which he left his reality a weak and troubled man terrified by all women and returned a more complete person who is able to connect on an intimate level with other women and accept himself outside the privileged male heterocentric sphere. However, Rivera Garza takes the novel one step further and returns the fated line, “se va a matar.” This time it comes from the Falsa, who repeats it twice (155). She is referring to a pelican that, in diving for food, appears to be self-destructing. This reference to destruction is a harbinger that the novel is not yet done and there is more that must become undone before the events are concluded. The narrator begins to imagine the Falsa, just as he did at the beginning, only this time he is
remembering imagining her instead of living in this false world. He pictures his various memories as “hojas en árbol petrificado” (154). The leitmotif of his life as a tree is finally complete and the reader as well as the narrator confront the immovability of the past. It is true that he cannot control what is already done but he can control his future. Their reunion is short-lived and when she offers her hand, he says to her, “‘Yo no voy contigo a ningún lado’” -sonreí sin saber de dónde exactamente me llegaba el buen humor, el cinismo. La confianza de decirlo,” (156). The Falsa marches off into the distance, alone. It is altogether fitting that these characters not remain together as they no longer need each other. The Falsa, as an Emissary, has done her job to spread awareness of the forgotten author, Amparo Dávila. She also forced the protagonist to abandon his failed role as a heterosexual male, to forfeit his privileged position and to reenter the world as a more complete being, one free to make his own decisions without regard for societal norms.

The novel concludes with the narrator unable to recall the Falsa’s face but able, at last, to recall the name of the pelvic bone that not only provides the title for this novel but also so eluded him at the beginning of the novel. This linguistic epiphany allows the protagonist to finally overcome the last of the barriers between himself and the real that he faced. Having mastered the secret language of his guests marked the narrator’s arrival outside of his social world and recovering this lost word is his entrance back into society as a changed man. The closing line of the novel is perhaps the most revealing with respect to gender. The bone which he spent the entirety of the narration trying to name
has one more role. “Es el área más eficaz para determinar el sexo de un individuo. Todas las Emisarias debieron haberlo sabido para poder dar con mi secreto” (158). If the reader believes this to be true, this implies that he shares the same biological formation and is indeed a woman. It would certainly seem that the protagonist has grown to accept himself, or herself, as such.

Any literary text allows for the possibility of diverse interpretations, but Cristina Rivera Garza’s novel in particular seems to be especially ambiguous and demanding in that the reader is forced to re-evaluate the fluid conceptions of gender and sex in an effort to unravel the protagonist. La cresta is further complicated by the mixture of the fantastic with psychoanalysis. Critic Gabriela Mercado while recognizing a fantastic element in the novel, prefers a purely psychological approach to the text. In her article “Diálogo con Amparo Dávila y resolución de problemas de género en La cresta de Ilión,” Mercado proposes that the entirety of the novel’s action takes place in the imagination of a mentally infirm patient who, at the end, recognizes that his “sexualidad responde a lo femenino” (47) and accepts himself as a woman. Dealing with feminine sexuality as if it were a static condition that is the same for all women is a problematic approach because it does not address multiple, dynamic issues, including culturally-coded behavior and sexuality. Moreover, this criticism limits the reader to a strict dichotomy of man/woman. However, a transsexual, or a subject who has a “bulto entre las ingles” but also identifies as a woman, proves the fluidity of gender and, perhaps even the instability of sex. Another doubt regarding the diegetic body is whether the narrator’s tale occurs only in
his mind. After all, Rivera Garza’s protagonist does not prove to have an entirely reliable narrative voice, which only further contributes to the ambiguity of who the protagonist “really” is. Mercado approaches the subject as a person who is biologically a man but identifies, in the end, as a heterosexual woman. This is a rigid and, perhaps, limited interpretation of Rivera Garza’s rich text. After all, the text would carry very little meaning if there were no events, no transformation and no climax. Of course the reader is obliged to ask whether or not the protagonist is a doctor or a patient, but there are no answers and it is dismissive to state unequivocally that the protagonist must be a mentally ill male. The reader must also remember that while it is true that the narrator is untrue at times, his voice changes with his own personal development and he comes to admit his own limitations as a storyteller. In this sense, the reader can rely on his version of the events at the end of the novel.

Verónica Saunero-Ward presents an alternate reading in which La Cresta introduces fantastical elements so to question social norms. In “La Cresta de Ilión: lo fantástico posmoderno,” she writes that fantastical works are:

…versiones negativas o inversiones de la unidad que persigue el imaginario y representan la frustración e insatisfacción con un orden cultural que rechaza o aparta el deseo [subconsciente] y que al mismo tiempo niega la posibilidad de otras realidades. (174)
However, the use of the fantastic should not be overly exaggerated in Cristina Rivera Garza’s work. “Magical realism” and its counterparts predate the literary stylings of this novel and are anachronistic when applied to this text. The narration does not indicate that this transformation is physical but rather one of self-acceptance. At the end of the novel, the protagonist is as certain that he is a woman as he was at the beginning that he is a man. It is possible that the main characters possesses a latent desire to be a woman, but that it was repressed on account of his fear of castration and transformation into another. For him, it is not a conscious decision to act as a man; instead, he is reproducing what Judith Butler refers to gender performativity, which consists in the regulatory practices of gendered acts (33). *La cresta* examines the crisis of the lineal correlation between the categories of biological sex, gender and sexual identity as questioned by Butler. The protagonist’s repeated acts of backing away (*retroceder*) acts as a catalyzing agent which culminates in the identity transformation of the protagonist from a man to a woman at the end of the novel. Nonetheless, the reader cannot be certain if this is a gender change or a physiological one. Perhaps, though, the element which most undermines the possibility of reading *La cresta* as a fantastic, or neofantastic, piece of literature is that it violates the third principle of Tzetan Todorov’s guidelines to fantastic literature. To be fantastic, the reader must not approach the text with an “allegorical” or “poetic” approach (33), which is to say the reader should not read the extraordinary events of a narration metaphorically. In this sense, each reader could choose whether or not to read this novel as allegorical and then decide whether it meets the Todorov’s elements of the fantastic. However, given
the ambiguity lacing nearly every element of *La cresta* (time, space, culture, gender, sex and sexuality), it is nearly impossible to approach this without a poetic approach. For this reason, it cannot be strictly considered a fantastic text, but rather it is better classified as containing some fantastic elements.

**Conclusion**

*La cresta de Ilión* is a postmodern text rich in its questioning of the authority of societal structures. The ambiguous approach by Cristina Rivera Garza can be frustrating to her reader, but it is also challenging. She places nearly all identity markers at risk, including nationality and culture, but especially those tied to male and female identities. Language plays an important role in demonstrating how the hierarchical order is maintained through repeated linguistic acts. To free himself from this domineering semantic order, the protagonist must learn the secret language of his houseguests so that he can recreate himself under different terms. Above all, this novel concentrates on how categories like the spheres of sex, gender and sexuality are not as interrelated as one might presume. Rivera Garza even offers the possibility that these fields can even be left undetermined. After all, in the end the reader cannot definitely ascribe an exclusive sex assignment, gender adoption or sexual preference to the narrator. Perhaps the only constant that the reader finds in this novel is the omnipresence of its own ambiguity.
El género repensado: New approaches to gender/genre in *La muerte me da*

“El que lee con cuidado, descuartiza. Todos matamos.” *(La muerte 88)*

“Es siempre tan difícil escribir sobre los muertos que uno ha querido; es casi como decir algo de una música; en realidad, se está hablando de otra cosa.”

Julio Cortázar

In 2007, Tusquets published Cristina Rivera Garza’s *La muerte me da*, a text which potentially could be considered either a novel or a book of poetry as this hybrid work morphs from one category into the other. Our prolific writer, who is well-known for dialoguing with gender studies and for using her narrative to critique social gendered norms, further challenges the limits placed on women and men in *La muerte me da*. Here, Rivera Garza delineates not just the boundaries between typified gender roles, but inverts the very category of genre in literature. She first destabilizes the detective genre or “*novela policiaca*” through its language which traditionally defines the criminal perpetrator as traditionally male and the victim as traditionally female. While this text includes all of the necessary “ingredients” of a detective novel (a victim, an investigation, a suspect, clues, informants, etc…), the novel deliberately and playfully breaks many of the fundamental concepts of the original hard-boiled classic. Rivera Garza does this by not “solving” the crime for her reader, but rather demanding an active and critical audience to navigate her challenging text. *La muerte me da* struggles to maintain its

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15 The structure of Latin American crim fiction is laid out by Glen S. Close in *Contemporary Hispanic Crime Fiction*. 
narrative structure as the plot disorganizes and the writing transforms into poetry. This battle between poetry and prose closely resembles that found in the works of Argentine poet Alejandra Pizarnik. Additionally, the numerous references to Pizarnik’s writing found in Rivera Garza’s novel further emphasize this intertextual connection. Today, Pizarnik is a much celebrated poet whose work occupies a permanent spot in the Argentine cannon. Some critics, like Alicia Borinsky and Sonia Fernández Hoyos, acknowledge the mythology that surrounds the poet on account of her suicide. Alicia Borinsky of Boston University posits that her “acto final” can be understood through her poetry and vice versa (2). In a separate article that tries to draw Pizarnik’s reader beyond the “leyenda-mito” that defines the poet as a “[m]ujer, escritora, judía, excesos sexuales, locura, muerte por suicidio” (84), Sonia Fernández Hoyos writes that Pizarnik’s suicide was not a tragedy that befell the poet, but a conscious decision and it would be erroneous to approach Pizarnik’s poetry focusing on that one element (84). In La muerte, Rivera Garza adopts a more mainstream approach in which she focuses on the poet’s work and not her personal life. This is not accidental, but instead is a didactic tactic and figures into how Rivera Garza herself to be read.

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17 For further reading, see Samuelson 2007 interview in which Rivera Garza indicates she prefers to address new texts from the perspective of the “Death of the Death of the Author” (140), indicating that
Gender Traps: Critiquing Gender Roles through Inversion

One of the signature traits of Rivera Garza’s prose is the slippery nature of her protagonists who frequently lack descriptions and even names. On this occasion, her protagonist shares the very name of the author: Cristina Rivera Garza. Much like the real Rivera Garza, the narrator protagonist by the same name is a literature professor who writes fiction. The novel begins when the protagonist stumbles upon the dead body of a castrated man while jogging. This will be the first of five cadavers found, each one with a snippet of poetry by the aforementioned Argentine writer Alejandra Pizarnik. Our protagonist helps la Detective (no formal name) and the detective’s subordinate, Valerio, investigate the crime. At one point, the narrator protagonist goads the detective as to why there are no leads, to which the detective responds that it is a difficult case and one that is “Lleno de recovecos psicológicos. De oscuridades poéticas. Trampas de género” (54). These “trampas de género,” or “gender/genre traps,” are essentially the crux of this novel. The text does not lead its reader to a resolution of the crimes but rather offers a critical exposure of the detective novel reader’s potential prejudices with respect to gender roles.

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not only is an author’s personal biography relevant, it is no longer necessary to discuss autobiographical relevance.

18 When referring to gender roles, I refer to the paradigm of “traditional” gender roles insofar as men conventionally the dominant, authoritative “head of household” role while women often found themselves in subservient, domestic roles. After Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble came out, a number of
Immediately, Rivera Garza’s reader recognizes an inversion of roles typically held by men or women in a detective novel which have become undone beginning with the first male victim. The sexually mutilated corpse, callously dumped in an alley, is very likely a remark on the many unsolved femicide victims of Ciudad Juárez and along the border between the United States and Mexico. This male dead body also reminds the reader that this violence, though not exclusively linked to female victims, is so often targeted at women. In an era of such prolific and generalized aggression, perhaps it is important to recall that men and women are targeted and attacked differently. As Teresa de Lauretis indicates: “There seem to be two kinds of violence with respect to its object: male and female. I do not mean by this that the ‘victims’ of such kinds of violence are man and woman, but rather that the object on which or to which the violence is done is what establishes the meaning of the represented act; and that object is perceived or apprehended as either feminine or masculine” (42). In my own reading, a male victim caught my attention not because men are never victims, but because men are so rarely portrayed in this role. It raises the question: what does it mean that Rivera Garza can surprise her reader with a male victim? Additionally, what does it mean that the three central investigators who work the case (la Detective, the character Cristina Rivera Garza and the unnamed female journalist from Nota Roja19) are all women? The cerebral task of

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19 The Nota Roja periodical is significant because nota roja refers to the type of tabloid which sensationally covers crime. As Glen S. Close notes “The nota roja assumes a cynical attitude toward the
cracking a murder case in hard boiled fiction typically falls upon the male gumshoe. *La muerte*, however, not only presents female investigators, but also suggests that the murderer is a woman. The gendered roles typically portrayed in detective fiction will receive a closer look in the next section focusing on genre. Here, though, it is worth commenting what these roles expose about general attitudes with respect to gender.

Traditionally, the character charged with investigating a crime is either a police detective who is acting as an agent of the state to restore order or is some sort of private investigator\(^\text{20}\). In both instances, this figure is presumed to be male. Alternatively, a female character in this genre traditionally occupies two roles: she is either the victim or an accomplice to the crime. The importance of this dichotomy is that it necessarily situates the male character in the privileged position to gaze at the victim and/or the accomplice and judge who they are. This fixed, unidirectional gaze reinforces the male as an authority figure (even if he is working outside the state) and the woman whose merit is to be assessed by said male figure. As mentioned, in this paradigm a female character (when she does not end up dead), serves as just an accomplice. The implication is that the constant spectacle of violent criminality, report it in harrowingly graphic detail and with a distinctively black humor” (29).

\(^\text{20}\) The private eye, or rather the lack of official involvement in “cracking” a murder, is more typical of the hard-boiled approach to detective fiction, also known as *la novela negra*. Many critics, including Glen S. Close and Persephone Braham (among others) attribute this preference to a lack of trust in the government. The detective genre, in fact, is believed to have “immigrated” to Mexico ahead of other Latin American countries as a response to the doomed student movement of 1968.
mastermind of a crime and the mastermind who solves it are both male. For this reason, it is fascinating that *La muerte* immediately hints that a female assassin might be responsible for the portrayed crimes. The first indication hinting that this might be the case is found in a note of poetry accompanying the body. The snippet is carefully written in nail polish, a careful appropriation of a female-centric product. Nail polish, of course, is an item marketed almost exclusively to women with the purpose of increasing their sexual appeal. Nail polish also serves the purpose of hiding the natural nail and presenting, instead, a masked, artificial version of what it purports to be. The murderer seems to be playing with these two categories and embraces the “mask” that nail polish allows while mocking the cosmetic purpose for which the product was intended. Did the murderer lure the man first using these ornamental appeals? The detective (and the reader) must ask themselves this question and in doing so, must consider the likelihood of a female assassin. The third body also has a fragment of poetry written in a cosmetic product, this time in lipstick. Reacting to the body and the message that accompanies it, the detective murmurs “Estamos frente a un esteta…Frente a un esteta obsesivo que quiere darnos un mensaje sobre el cuerpo, el cuerpo masculino, y la letras del alfabeto.” She continues “Estamos frente a un esteta que quiere darnos un mensaje sobre el cuerpo masculino y las letras del alfabeto pero con objetos de mujer” (226). The detective’s repetitiveness and trance-like state signal her slowly understanding the murderer’s desire to connect gender, violence and language. While meditating on the first note written in nail polish, the second written with letters cut out from newspapers and magazines and
now this third body found with a clue written in lipstick, Valerio wonders aloud “¿Un hombre que posa como una mujer? ¿Una mujer que posa como una mujer?” (226). His comments underscore the performative nature of gender and how it may be defined separate from sex. In a rare display of affection, the detective applauds his comments with a hearty pat on the back. Even these inept agents of the state are able to recognize that gender is enacted and not biological in nature. The fifth and final body is discovered with a handkerchief that is embroidered with yet another poetry excerpt that is also perfumed. Because perfume is by definition an artificial enhancement marketed toward a specific sex so to enact the “corresponding” gender it becomes a deliberate symbol of performed gender. The responsible party may as well have left a sign to suggest “I am a woman!” Of course, these clues, in all likelihood, are manipulating the performative nature of lipstick, perfume, etc… so to mislead the detective and her staff. Such hypotheticals lead Valerio to ask, as just mentioned: Is this a man posing as a woman? A woman posing as a woman? The enacted gender is so heavy-handed as to create doubt of its verisimilitude. The detective must realize that gender can be divorced from biological sex, as is the case here.

As the detective weighs the possibility of the assassin being a woman, she recognizes that such a possibility would change the dynamics of the murder into “un asunto ideológico cuya base sería eminentemente emotiva – cosa de celos y rabia, despecho, impotencia” (242-243). It is frustrating that the detective, who seemingly is poised to recognize the performative nature of gender, instead falls back on trite clichés.
The detective, representative of a state-sanctioned and conservative approach to gender and identity, simplistically projects that a female murderer would be provoked by stereotypical female hysteria triggers, like jealousy and rage. However, her understanding of the crime pivots when considering the possibility of a male assassin: “las castraciones se convertirían en un asunto erótico cuyo fundamento sería del todo sexual –cosa de poseer la masculinidad del otro, arrebatándola; cosa de penetrar y arrancar” (243). Interestingly, the detective later considers the possibility that the assassin is both male and female, casually suggesting a spectrum of sex-based identity despite her rigid gendered hypotheses of the crime. This seems contrary to her previous assertion that the perpetrator’s biological identity (either male or female) would shape his or her motivations. In a sense, the detective represents the general public’s nascent acceptance of spectrum identities. Although the detective flirts with ideas that do not conform with the monolithic heteronormative model, she continues to return to simplistic, gendered explanations of behavior, much like those found in hardboiled detective novels.

Returning to the clues, the murderer (or perhaps “murderess”) appropriates items used to enact female behavior and repurposes these artifacts to make them powerful and threatening. In this context, nail polish, lip liner, embroidery, and perfume cannot be associated with a docile femininity, but rather with something much more threatening. As the previous two chapters note, a salient characteristic in Cristina Rivera Garza’s texts fight against the concept of fixed, unalterable gender roles and norms. Therefore, while it may be the case here that the victim is male and the assassin is female, La muerte shows
that a man or a woman could assume either role by exposing and inverting the
expectations established by the detective novel genre. Nail polish alone, though, does not
constitute conclusive evidence revealing the identity (or sex) of the assassin. Rather it
suggests an ambiguity regarding the murderer’s identity: the reader might presume the
responsible party is a man because the detective genre is built around this assumption\(^2\),
but might also feel inclined to presume the killer is a female because of the gender-
specific materials left by the bodies. More to the point, this inversion obliges the reader to
confront society’s comfort level with regular, horrific violence directed at women, and, as
a result, to challenge this status quo. Four other castrated male bodies follow the first
victim, and naturally, their fate affects more than just the five characters in question. For
the first time, the male population of the fictitious community in *La muerte* must accept
the unfamiliar role of potential victim. Upon seeing the castrated dead men, Valerio must
contemplate his own vulnerability. “Había algo en la castración que lo obligaba a pensar
en el peligro personal, en la amenaza contra el propio cuerpo” (209). This compulsion to
fret over one’s personal safety is a burden that though it may be routine for women,
creates a panic among the men: “No se trataría de un miedo individual entonces, sino de
toda una paranoia colectiva. Una nube de libélulas. Una marabunta de langostas. La

\(^2\) This is not to imply that there are not female serial killers, but to suggest that in the public
imagination, a serial killer is presumed to be a man. For further reading on female serial killers, consider
Deborah Schurman-Kaufflin’s book which features an interesting study on how men overtly perform
multicide (such as the bludgeoning described in *La muerte*) whereas women opt for more covert methods,
like suffocation or poisoning (5).
trepidante destrucción. Los jóvenes buscarían, y eventualmente encontrarían, nuevas maneras de proteger los genitales, escondiéndolos o camuflajéandolos. Convirtiéndolos, en todo caso, en otra cosa. La Otra Cosa” (233). The hysteria amongst the male community is the result of this new reality in which they have lost full autonomy over their body parts. Much in the way a woman might take pains to deemphasize her curves so to avoid an unwelcome male gaze, now these men must face this loss of autonomy over their own bodies. This unwelcome change in identity pushes them into the category of “La Otra Cosa.” This change has far-reaching implications for women, too, who themselves have a new role to play. They will become accustomed, according to Valerio’s report, to constant suspicion. This would appear to be a reversal of the dynamic in which all men are potential rapists and all women are potential victims. It is only by inverting these roles that it becomes apparent how this dynamic negatively impacts both men and women. Clearly, it is challenging to live in fear of attack, but it is also damaging to be constantly suspected of violence. Neither party comes out ahead.

When the narrator discovers the first body, she is surprised to learn the detective and even her lover both consider her a suspect. Yet, she claims it does not bother her, even enjoying to a certain degree the rush of being thought to be dangerous and therefore powerful. This accusation leads the protagonist to consider what type of person would be capable of these crimes and she concludes: “Alguien con la suficiente fuerza física como para arrastrar los cuerpos desmembrados por estrechos callejones o sobre banquetas oscuras. Alguien, también con la suficiente delicadeza como para trascibir, con esmalte
The idea presented here, that men are associated with strength and women with delicacy, is meant to enunciate socially-held beliefs and to challenge those beliefs. That the murder possesses both qualities indicates that such divisions are illogical and that gender and biological sex are more complex constructions than this neat binary originally offered. Further proving this point is how the protagonist responds to her lover when he acknowledges his suspicions. She enacts both violence and tenderness in their bed, first biting his nipples and then mussing his hair. This scene, which immediately follows the above mentioned quotation, emphasizes that while expectations may be gendered, behavior does not always meet these expectations.

This sexual encounter between the protagonist, Cristina Rivera Garza, and her lover, el Amante con la Gran Sonrisa Iluminada, also challenges some established norms regarding gender and sexual behavior. In a heterosexual pairing, it is standard to portray the male as the penetrator and the female as the penetrated. This dichotomy implies the male is the aggressor and female becomes a passive victim. In La muerte, the reader encounters an entirely different scenario in which the female protagonist takes control of her sexual encounter “Como para guiar su [la de el Amante] mano hacia mi pubis mientras me montaba sobre su cadera” (39-40). He responds with “gestos de dolor” (40), a response that deviates from a standard intimate scene in which the woman is more often described as enduring penetration in a pleasure-through-pain model. La muerte continues to defy this paradigm using language in which the female body actively engulfs the man’s
penis, thus rejecting the “passive” female sexual partner. Later, the section titled “La mujer barburda,” describes another intimate encounter between the protagonist and a different lover known as “El Hombre-Que-Era-A-Veces-Él.” In this scene, Cristina Rivera Garza is the bearded woman, opting to wear a false beard during their romantic encounter. Again, her lover’s penis is not the acting agent penetrating the main character. Instead, his penis is overwhelmed by the protagonist’s vagina. She muses “Iba a convertirme yo misma en una Amante de Sonrisa Iluminada cuando no vi su pene que, perdido dentro de mis sexo, continuaba provocando placer” (59). The beard adds another dimension to this liaison: why does the protagonist wear artificial body hair associated with the male body? Perhaps her beard is intended to be sexy or to provoke or just to be silly. While it could be any of those things, I would argue that is a distraction from a more interesting point: the lack of reaction from her partner, who, in fact, offered her the beard made from his own hair in the first place. This gesture may be interpreted as a transference of masculinity wherein masculinity is something one has (or wears) and not something one is. This text presents an easy intimacy between these two characters in which they are free to enjoy themselves and each other free of gendered expectations. Their preferences might strike the reader as unconventional, if not outright bizarre, but they do function as a hopeful model of what kind of intimacy is possible once freed of social dictums. They both experience pleasure and she triumphantly concludes “[s]u pene en esos momentos era mío. Entonces sonréí hermafroditamente” (59). The protagonist experiences a hermaphroditic satisfaction, a term which might mean a shared pleasure
known to both men and women. Rivera Garza’s reader will place this scene within a larger pattern of women dressed as men in her novels. Here we have the narrator protagonist wearing a beard and in Nadie me verá llorar, the character Matilda cross-dresses both as a performance and in her relationship with Diamantina. Additionally, the doctor in La cresta de Ilión seems to assume both a male and female identity in that text. This leitmotif shows how easily a character can slide into a different gender and how undeniably contingent the performative aspects of gender can be.

An interesting character that reoccurs in La muerte is the Mujer Increíblemente Pequeña. This most likely imaginary figure appears exclusively in one-on-one interactions with different characters, often just to serve the function of an interlocutor. Cheyla Rose Samuelson explains this diminutive character as “capable of asking the questions and asserting the desires unspoken by other characters in the novel…In this exquisitely intertextual little creature, we see multiple traces of Pizarnik’s texts and references to Gulliver’s relations with the Lilliputians…and with the Brobdingnagians” (Líneas 291). Pizarnik’s texts and diary entries often reflected the desire to shrink herself, in a way, to disappear. The Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians are a reference to Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels, specifically to the two scenes in which Gulliver finds himself either as a giant among tiny people (the Lilliputians), or as a tiny person among giants (the Brobdingnagians). Swift’s novel also shatters established “truths” about a character’s identity. What passes for normal in one environment, is freakishly large or small in another. The Mujer Increíblemente Pequeña seems like a Lilliputian, and just as the
Lilliputians subdued the “giant” Gulliver, the Mujer Increíblemente Pequeña also seems to dominate in spite of her slight frame. When portrayed in a sexual context, the Mujer Increíblemente Pequeña assumes the male-role of penetration by jumping into the body of her partner. “Una mujer está dentro de un hombre…El hombre que yace, inmóvil, solo podría, si pudiera, ver el cielo” (284). In addition to the role reversal of having a woman enter a male body, the reader also observes how Rivera Garza resignifies what it means to be small. Her character’s tiny size does no imbue vulnerability; instead, it functions an asset. At times, it would seem that this incredibly small woman may be the murderer, causing the reader to adjust some preconceptions about who is capable of carrying out a crime. After jumping into and travelling through the man’s system, the Mujer emerges nonplussed, covered in bodily fluids. Her actions and demeanor undercut the tendency to characterize women, especially smaller-sized women, as “cute.” The “material viscosa” (285) that covers body is hardly adorable.

The chapter titled “Le envidia del pene” (144) takes Freud’s controversial theory about penis envy and undermines it. The detective asks her male assistant, Valerio, “¿Quién querría un pene, Valerio? ¿Quién querría poner un pene en otro lugar?” (145). These questions may be read two ways. In terms of the crimes, the mutilated bodies were found, but never did the police uncover their severed penises. Under this first reading, the detective is asking who would want to acquire someone else’s penis. The victims’ genitals were never recovered and the detective suggests that the killer still has them. A second reading, though, would suggest something different. It also sounds as if the
detective is conjecturing as to who would want to have a penis or, more directly, who would want to be male. The subordinate is put in a rather tough position here. On one hand, he does have a penis and because of it, he occupies a privileged place in society, certainly according to Freud’s understanding of society. However, he is still an underling and cannot risk defying his boss. As a response, Valerio ventures that perhaps someone who does not have a penis would want one. Immediately, the detective recognizes the Freudian undertones of his response and mocks him for referencing “la famosa envidia” (145), but after further consideration she reconsiders Valerio’s perspective that this envy refers not to a female desiring to have male parts, but a male jealous of another male’s parts. By way of example, she suggests a cuckolded man might feel jealousy toward the penis of his partner’s new lover. Valerio appears unable to follow the detective’s thought and considers the cuckolded suggestion too literally. He suggests that a cuckolded man, a man symbolically castrated, might be a man that has transitioned into a woman (145). The detective corrects her assistant indicating that she is referring to “un hombre que quiere recuperar algo que es suyo” (145). The scenario she paints is quite likely. A man who lost his lover to another man plausibly could be jealous of the penis of his rival. Penis envy, then, cannot be limited to little girls exclusively, as Freud implied. Rivera Garza skillfully takes a well-known term from pop psychology that for decades has belittled women and gives it a fresh context in which the penis is not a coveted piece of human machinery that the female, “lacking” in this equipment, desires.
At various points in *La muerte*, the narrator protagonist describes her amusement and frustration at how language can shape these gendered ideas. She muses: “me di cuenta de que era la primera vez que lo [the term “asesinatos seriales”] relacionaba con el cuerpo masculino. Y pensé –y aquí pensar quiere decir en realidad practicar la ironía- que era de suyo interesante que, al menos en español, la palabra víctima siempre fuese femenina” (29-30). Similarly, the perpetrator, “el verdugo” is always masculine. She tries to explain this concept to the detective: “‘Es la palabra víctima, Detective’ le expliqué sin esperanza alguna de ser comprendida mientras escribía el artículo determinado y el sustantivo sobre una servilleta de papel. ‘La víctima siempre es femenina. ¿Lo ve? En el recuento de los hechos, en los artículos del periódico, en los ensayos que alguna vez se escriban sobre estos eventos, esta palabra los castrará una y otra vez” (30). This comment opens up a discussion regarding language and its relationship to victimization (which is discussed in detail in a section below). Additionally, the protagonist’s comments expose the culpability that a variety of genres share in propagating this gendered dynamic. In recounting a crime, whether in a newspaper, an essay or another genre, this feminine word “castrates” the male victim a second time.

The theme of castration is laden with questions regarding gender and gender roles since because these concepts are constructed based on one’s biological anatomy. The doctor in *La cresta de Ilión* is nearly hysterical at the prospect of losing his phallus (metaphorical or otherwise). R.W. Connell’s study of masculinities sustains that masculinity is “simultenously a place in gender relations, the practices through which
men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture” (71). This supports why La cresta’s protagonist fathom the extent of the loss associated with sacrificing his privileged position and then, necessarily, entering into the marginalized category of Other, a category which includes females. He “acts” the desired role and sees that role reflected corporally, even if that might not be the case. In La muerte me da, Cristina Rivera Garza continues to examine this hysterical possessiveness of the male anatomy and, using art and cross-cultural references, resignifies castration. Rivera Garza identifies castrated men in a new light so that “un castrado” cannot be synonymous with “female” or even “non-male.” The first example she employs to redefine castration is that of the Italian castrato singer. In the chapter, “Todos los campos/Todas las batallas,” the narrative voice, presumably that of the protagonist, imagines an “Alguien” (45) responsible for the first castration. Her thoughts are overwhelmed, though, with references to historians, philosophers, soccer players and rather significantly to castratos, including Carlo Broschi Farinelli, Baldassare Ferri, Antonio Maria Bernacchi, among others. The figure of the castrato, or a male soprano singer who is castrated before puberty so to retain his high octave voice, has an interesting origin. According to opera expert Katherine Bergeron, this practice was the result of a ban on women in female choirs, which is to say the castrati were meant to substitute as an artificial reproduction for the female voice (169). Here, then, we see the castrati singing the roles of women, which of course has its own interest just for the sheer transgressive power of an individual to assume an artificial identity. Looking deeper, the
prohibition of women in church choirs, a prohibition perhaps intended to marginalize
women, ultimately resulted in the valorization of the female voice. The scarcity created
by these 18th century rules allowed the female voice to attain a position of privilege and it
was so sought after that it led to sanctioned practice of preadolescent castration as an
ersatz substitute. The procedure, both violent and socially sanctioned, was administered
in the name of art. This combination of the aesthetic with the grotesque, specifically with
castration, is a combination repeated in the poetry of Pizarnik and again in this Rivera
Garza text. The castrati reference serves not so much as to justify the disturbing scenes
portrayed in La muerte as to indicate that the aesthetic sphere cannot exist divorced from
an often brutal reality. This effort to erase boundaries speaks to a larger purpose in Rivera
Garza’s writing, which is to problematize socially constructed borders. In this same
chapter, just after referring to the castrato as “el eunuco” (46), the narrator protagonist
references the berdache. The prose at this intersection is choppy, consisting mostly of
stream of consciousness nouns that share a connection to a plural gender identity. The
castrato is a biological man who has been physically altered to play the part of a woman.
The berdache, though, is more complicated, as Brian Schnarch explains in his article
“Neither Man nor Woman: Berdache – A Case for Non-dichotomous Gender
Construction” (105). As the title of this article suggests, the binary approach to gender, so
common in Western society, falls short with some Native American communities.
Schnarch indicates that for many tribes there is a third or even fourth gender that is often
misunderstood by ethnographers anxious to understand these cultures through the lens of
their own (106). While this Western approach might have its roots in foundational stories, like Adam and Eve, it fails to recognize a different social construction in these indigenous groups. Schnarch criticizes cultural anthropologists for being too quick to label any identity and/or behavior outside the heteronormative paradigm as “berdache” (107). The reference to the berdache in La muerte, though brief, serves to further destabilize a binary approach to gender. Perhaps the greatest problem that a binary approach implies is that there must be one privileged group and then a lesser or “other” body. In the male/female paradigm, it is readily apparent that the male enjoys a higher status and it is because of that implication that castration is so much more than a medical procedure. It is a demotion in social status. This is why, Schnarch argues, the Native American perspective has much to offer to feminist scholars. Rather than insisting that men and women are equal, or favoring certain “feminine” qualities as some feminists might argue, Schnarch points out that a cross-cultural understanding of multiple gender possibilities might offer a valuable new approach to gender identity and privilege.

Another cross-cultural reference present in the castrato section is the “hijra” (46), referring to India’s transgendered community. Nick Harvey, a columnist at The New Statesman, extensively profiled the hijra community and examines the interstitial space that this marginal group occupies. He writes that documentation of this group dates back to over 4,000 years and while on one hand they are celebrated for “special powers” (n/p), these individuals often suffer targeted discrimination and even violence. One hijra member known only as Deepa with whom Harvey spoke shared “Nobody says, ‘I’d love
to be a hijra!’ Not if they know what happens to us. But what else can we do? A hijra is a man’s body with the soul of a woman.” The hijras, comprised only of male-to-female transsexuals, are nearly invisible in Indian public society, denied access to employment, education and any type of government identity. Such stigmatizations force the hijras to earn their money through begging. Their other source of revenue, incongruously, is attained through dancing at weddings (Harvey n/p). How curious that the hijra is welcome in such an intimate and special celebration, but rejected in other spheres. Such irony is not lost on Rivera Garza and it is clear how the gender-defiant figure of the hijra ties in with her general questioning of strict gender categories. Relevant specifically to La muerte me da is the ritualized practice of castration that accompanies entry into the hijra world. Lawrence Cohen notes that not only is castration a ritual part of joining the hijras, but that it also “is social (…), symbolic (giving up the position of having ‘just as a man has, everything’), and often psychological. Castration is necessary to physically change internal gender” (285). Although stigmatized in larger society, the hijra group celebrates the excising of male identity, both literally and metaphorically. La muerte includes the hijra figure, then, not to advocate male castration but rather to undercut the absolute privilege associated with this “everything” that a man possesses.

The protagonist receives a series of provocative messages, presumably from the killer and one in particular (n.° 7) makes a series of disturbing assertions. The first item in a numbered list from this message reads “Las muñecas desventradas: ¿y no es un hombre sin pene una desventrada muñeca?” (87) and then follows that question with
“Por mis antiguas manos de muñeca: porque, en verdad, la muñeca soy yo. Yo siempre soy la muñeca. ¿Qué mujer que es mujer no es la muñeca?” (87). The responsive declaration purports that all women, including the author of this message, is a doll. The association between a woman and a lifeless, “desventrada” doll is clearly a negative one. The tone, then, is presumably ironic. The person responsible for “Mensaje n.º 7” is also likely responsible for the castrations and murders, as evidenced by the excerpt from Alejandra Pizarnik’s “Piedra fundamental” that appears at the beginning of the note: “Las muñecas desventradas por mis antiguas manos de muñeca” (87). It would seem that the assassin’s “doll” hands are not as powerless as it might initially seem. Could it be, then, that the murders constitute a furious response from a marginalized figure, perhaps a woman, who was relegated to the role of a doll? Within La muerte this rage is inscribed on the bodies of the castrated men, but in Pizarnik’s poetry (and metaphorically in La muerte) it is a reference to the destructive capacity of a text. As the message declares “Nada está oculto, Cristina. Los signos van abiertos. La frase va abierta. Todo está roto. Partido en dos. En tres. Desmembrado. El cuerpo. El texto. Todo es superficie. Una grieta. Corte.” (87). The juxtapositioning of “body” with “texts” is an apparent effort to prevent the reader from being too literal when considering the castrated bodies in the novel. Returning to the first statement (“¿y no es un hombre sin pene una desventrada muñeca?” (87), the reader comes to understand that the male body without his penis is like a hollowed-out doll only in the sense that new meaning can be ascribed upon it. Is a man without a penis still a man? Obviously so and building on this conclusion, Rivera
Garza urges a redefinition of gender separate from the definition of sex. In other words, having a penis (or not) does not define a body as male. The reference from “Piedra fundamental” to Tiresias, the blind prophet of Thebes who was transformed into a woman for seven years, goes one step further to suggest even biological sex is not a stable marker.

Returning to the novel at hand, the detective and her assistant Valerio end up engaging in a sexual relationship and just thereafter emerges an enumerated list of Valerio’s impressions in the chapter titled “El reporte de Valerio”. Number “5 bis” asks: “¿Puede ser un hombre en realidad una mujer o vice versa?” (154) If sex is the space where biological difference is enunciated and gender norms are most in play, then how can these roles be reversed? Valerio’s report suggests that it is his perspective that these roles are not as tightly structured as the detective initially suggested. Later on in the novel, when the detective asks her assistant to speculate on the killer’s identity, Valerio seems to answer his own question. The detective asks “¿Es una mujer o un hombre, Valerio?” to which he responds “Si me lo preguntas así, tendría que decir que es una mujer y un hombre, las dos cosas al mismo tiempo –guarda silencio, esperando una respuesta que no llega–. ¿Pero quién en verdad no es una mujer y un hombre al mismo tiempo?” (217). Gradually, Valerio’s character has come to reject a binary model of sex. If in his report he was beginning to question the possibility of multiple different sex identities, then at the time of the above-referenced quotation, he absolutely develops an approach to sex that understands it in a continuum, rather than a binary. The reader
witnesses evidence of his new attitude in his slightly hostile reaction to the detective’s question. “Si me lo preguntas así” implies that the question is inherently flawed and the defect is in presuming absolute categories of biological sex. The detective wants to know if the assassin is a man or a woman and thus engages the two socially-recognized and mutually exclusive categories of sex. For her part, the detective also seems to be considering alternative models of sex and identity. She does not object to Valerio’s position, or even question it. Rather, she considers it and immediately seeks out the protagonist-version of Cristina Rivera Garza to debate the matter further.

**Genre Traps: Unsettling Categorical Genre Borders**

In addition to questioning these *gender* rules, this text also tinkers with the concept of literary *genre*. Of course, in Spanish, the term “género” refers to both gender and genre, and so I argue that in subverting one, Rivera Garza is symbolically subverting the other, as well. Many critics would agree with Oswaldo Estrada’s comment on the author in that she “se ha convertido en un fenómeno literario difícil de enmarcar” (*Asignaciones* 179). There are two genres targeted and reimagined in *La muerte me da*. The first is the detective genre. This section will briefly review the tenants of this type of novel and its tendency to continually cast men and women into strong and weak characters. Additionally, *La muerte* focuses on the tension that exists between poetry and prose. Prose often enjoys more critical attention, perhaps due to the straightforward nature that a linear storyline provides. Poetry can be seen as dense and intentionally difficult to access, which promotes a certain elitism. Alejandra Pizarnik, a looming
presence in the novel, was extensively celebrated for her poetry, but still sought to improve her prose writing. Her journal entries, cited in *La muerte*, indicate that she felt prose to be a higher form of expression. While paying tribute to this esteemed Argentine writer, Cristina Rivera Garza destabilizes this genre rivalry by diminishing the gulf between them and merging them, through *La muerte*, into a hybrid genre.

To understand how *La muerte* reimagines the traditional detective novel, it is first necessary to understand the development of this genre and its unique emergence in Mexico and the broader Latin American community. Arguably, this genre has its roots in the Western-style judicial system in which through a process of deduction, the detective cracks the case and justice is served. The crime, the obvious starting point for this genre, represents a transgression of society’s rules. In her study of the changing role of women in the detective novel, Myung N. Choi notes the importance of returning to the established social order by catching the “bad guy” and validating the victim (11). The refusal of this novel to return to the established social order will, no doubt, frustrate the devoted detective-novel reader. And while it does seem that Rivera Garza enjoys having a little fun in her texts by upsetting reader’s expectations, there is arguably a bigger criticism she is unleashing against the status quo. *La muerte* does not present its reader with an easy resolution and a return to normal because a violent reality cannot be

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22 Choi’s work does not address Cristina Rivera Garza’s novels, which is a shame since her work speaks so directly to Choi’s study. The novels that Choi addresses are Spanish authors Lourdes Ortiz and Alicia Giménez Bartlett, Mexican author María Elvira Bermúdez, Chilean author Marcela Serrano and the Mexican-Argentine writer Miriam Laurini.
acceptable or “normal.” Indeed, the bloodshed that has become a daily fixture in the Mexican news cannot be traced back to a single killer. The drug cartels, the police corruption, the ubiquitous international appetite for illegal substances all contribute to Mexico’s violence. There is no single contributor whose removal would end the violence, like shutting off a valve. The novel at hand also treats these murders as a metaphor for the larger criminal reality. How could La muerte present an individual who is singularly responsible for the fictional homicides when such a scenario would undercut the brutal conditions of Mexico today? Rivera Garza even implicates her reader in the crimes by transforming the act of reading into something subversive. The main character, who is a literature professor, is suspect for knowing too much about poetry and Alejandra Pizarnik. The perpetrator also would appear to know too much about Pizarnik and her poetry. It is, therefore, logical that on an extradiegetic level the reader also knows “too much” and is thus implicated in this process. This guilt by knowledge builds on the parallels that Cristina Rivera Garza creates between the act of writing and the act of murder. In reading these gruesome scenes, the reader is recastrating the victims with each successive reading. Returning to the larger social problem that Mexico is facing, Rivera Garza’s reader must ask him/herself what role s/he plays as a bystander in allowing such violence to perpetuate.

An examination of the trajectory of the detective genre and its place in the Mexican cannon helps contextualize La muerte me da while also providing a contrast with those adapted models. This genre grew out of Edgar Allan Poe’s publication of “The
Murders in the Rue Morgue” in April of 1941 as the birth of the genre (Close 2). Poe’s work was slow to catch on in the Americas, including in his native United States. His readers primarily resided in England, Scotland and France, where his work was widely read, imitated, and even plagiarized. Close writes that Spain was late on the scene to import these novels and slower still to create their own detective fiction, but by the beginning of the 20th century, they were participating in the genre and even exporting it to Latin America, primarily to Argentina. The reason for the late acceptance of the detective novel genre in Latin America, Mónica Flórez explains, is related to late industrial development in the region as well as the lack of democratic governments (104-105). The crux of a detective novel is that it takes place in a city (and of course urbanization is a necessary byproduct of industrialization) where an organized police force, such as Scotland Yard, is in place to protect the bourgeoisie and to restore order following a crime. It was not until the 1920s that the detective novel became prominent in Mexico. However, even then many of these novels were published under English pseudonyms and took place abroad. In part this is because the detective novel was not (and arguably still is not) considered to be “high art,” though also because, as Flórez writes: “resulta casi imposible en estos países con gobiernos corruptos, inestables o posesivos, la exploración de un género literario que cuenta con la creencia en la Ley como fuente de bienestar y garante del orden y la justicia” (106).

Cristina Rivera Garza is not the first Mexican author to tinker with this literary tradition. There can be many parallels drawn between Salvador Elizondo’s celebrated text
Farabeuf o la crónica de un instante and La muerte me da. Elizondo was at the forefront of the self-referential experimentation in Latin American writing during the sixties and seventies, a technique that Rivera Garza is resurrecting in her texts. The presence of torture in Farabeuf is echoed in La muerte in that both draw on descriptions of torture and the mutilated body becomes its own text. This metaphor of violence to represent writing in both texts startles their readers, respectively. More contemporarily, other writers are also pushing the limits when it comes to murder mysteries and detective novels. The Chilean-Mexican writer Roberto Bolaño’s masterful 2666 also re-imagines the detective novel structure in which nontraditional “investigators” explore another crime that cannot be solved, this one with roots in reality: the brutal sexual mutilations and murders of women along the U.S./Mexico border. Also writing concurrently is the Mexican self-taught journalist and novelist Sergio González Rodríguez\textsuperscript{23} whose hybrid narrative approach to the femicides in Ciudad Juárez drew international attention. González Rodríguez does not write from a traditional fictional background, but he does create a “who-done-it” dynamic in which he plays the part of the detective. Again, the reader finds a chilling tale (or tales) of violence, but is not given the satisfaction of a neat resolution as in earlier detective novels. La muerte directly addresses how it is bucking tradition as the detective ruminates in her office about the case’s failure to progress:

\textsuperscript{23} The two works for which he is most well known are his 2002 journalistic cronica, Huesos en el desierto, which details and attempts to investigate the crimes relentless border violence and more recently his essays, El hombre sin cabeza (2009).
“Hablaban, a veces, de autores que siempre resolvían casos en el rectángulo de la página o, con más frecuencia, de series de televisión donde hombres y mujeres que no lucían para nada como ellos resolvían, con gran sentido del deber y una condición física envidiable, casos estridentes y de relevancia internacional” (214).

After Tlatelolco in 1968, Mexican writers began to engage in the detective novel, writing with a national orientation, as a tool with which to criticize the government. Thus the genre in Mexico transforms from la novela negra to el neopoliciaco. The height of this genre came in the 1990s with authors like Carmen Boullosa, Jorge Ibargüengoitia and Víctor Ronquillo. The difference between these two approaches to the detective novel is that the hard-boiled classic (la novela negra) was conceived as a means of entertainment and the neopoliciaco ideally provokes political and social discourse. However, this experimental genre still maintained one aspect in common with its predecessor: The novel ends when the crime is solved. This is one of the biggest points of departure in La muerte me da and invites the possibility of yet another transformation of the detective novel. Here the reader confronts a “who-done-it?” without the text revealing who is responsible for the murders. Early on, the novel hints that an easy resolution and return to normalcy is not likely as the detective struggles to make sense of the clues found near the body. Perhaps some readers may be disappointed in this divergence from the genre’s formulaic pattern. For instance, I was surprised to find Rivera Garza’s novel listed on Amazon with a rating of just one star. The reviewer wrote:
Realmente esta novela la compré porque era para una clase. Puede que Cristina Rivera Garza sea una muy buena escritora, pero, a mí, la novela no me gustó. Soy de la vieja escuela y prefiero la novela clásica. Esta representa a la nueva escuela de escritores que juegan con la literatura, transformándola, renovándola, repensándola...y en este caso Rivera Garza entremezcla la prosa y la poesía. Pero no es prosa y no es poesía. Y además coge el género de la novela detectivesca, que tradicionalmente tiene un final, pues se resuelve el crimen. Para los que le guste este tipo de novela bien. Para mí, como ya dije, no las prefiero.

Ironically, the complaints of this reviewer are exactly what makes La muerte such a compelling novel. This review is just the opinion of one novice reader, but I include it because it reveals many deeply held beliefs about upholding traditional literary models. Cheyla Rose Samuelson notes that this disdain for the “failed” police novel is not limited to the sphere of the everyday reader. Quite the contrary, she points out that “not only is the average reader ‘repulsed,’ but also many self-proclaimed scholars of Mexican literature have declared themselves unable—or unwilling—to finish the novel; others proclaimed a profound disappointment produced by a lack of a clear-cut solution to the crimes” (Líneas 258). I would argue that the richness of La muerte comes precisely from observing how Rivera Garza “juega con la literatura, transformándola, renovándola, repensándola.” Whether fairly or not, one of the reasons that detective literature was not highly-regarded is because the ending provides the conclusion of the crime, requiring
little interpretation from the reader. This text, however, implies from the beginning that the crime may not be solved. Early on, the narrator says, “a quien le interesa resolver un crimen, pueda entender que correr por los callejones de la ciudad es una mejor alternativa que correr en una pista de tartán o sobre las banquetas alumbradas: eso es difícil” (17). In this novel, the reader may find pleasure from thinking about the case and not from solving it. The metaphor of running, the protagonist’s hobby of choice, explains this concept further. The character Cristina Rivera Garza must explain to the police why she was running when she discovered the first cadaver. She insists that her exercise is not about the destination, but about the opportunity to dedicate some time to thinking. “En cada corredor debe haber una mente que corre. La meta es el placer” (18) she explains.

This cherished time dedicated to her thoughts is paralleled in the reader’s journey to consider La muerte without necessarily solving the crimes. The protagonist, who is also a writer, directly expresses how writing is also part of this exercise in thinking. She does not share this with the detective, but thinks “Sí, escribo. También por placer, como el correr” (20). If the original hardboiled detective novel strives to entertain, and the neopoliciaco seeks to incite social and political debate, perhaps it could be said that this new text does both. Additionally, La muerte demands a great deal of metatextual and intertextual debate as the reader attempts to situate this text in established understandings of genre. Whether this positions La muerte in the category of the neo-neopoliciaco or outside the genre altogether is a debatable matter.
In J.K. Van Dover’s book examining the evolution of the detective novel, the author dedicates an entire chapter (“He Used to be High Brow: Intellect, Taste and the Detection of Crime”) to the mental prowess that these fictionalized detectives possessed. Van Dover’s argues that the reader identifies with the detective on account of the implied cleverness of this figure. The reader of *La muerte*, however, might take offense to be linked with the detective. This detective, who is already somewhat transgressive just for being a female (with a male subordinate!), fails to measure up to the intellectual giants portrayed in early versions of the detective genre. Apart from seeming to lack any capacity to interpret the clues by the assassin, she is wary of those that might have that knowledge. In fact, she is quick to suspect the protagonist because of her familiarity with Pizarnik’s work. In short, the detective is the anti-intellectual and her presence upends the reader’s expectation for both a male detective and an intelligent detective. The work of deciphering the clues falls upon the narrator protagonist, whose experience as a writer and literary critic positions her as the admirable cerebral force in the novel and as the character with whom the reader is most likely to sympathize. After all, the reader has already “bought into” the real Cristina Rivera Garza’s fiction just by purchasing *La muerte*. It is logical then that a fictionalized character by the same name enjoys an easy alliance with the reader. Why, then, does this novel propose breaking the mold to position a female detective as taking charge of the case and then undermine that character by making her anti-intellectual? Arguably, that would be too simple for Rivera Garza to merely stick a female character in a role of authority as a means of questioning the genre.
This text does not seek to replace male privilege with female privilege, but to diminish privilege in any direction. Furthermore, *La muerte* is not a didactic text to encourage young, female writers to break into male-dominated arenas. This is not *Nancy Drew*. Rather, it is to draw attention to certain suppositions about traditionally male/female roles in scenarios of violence, both fictional and the very real contemporary violence.

The reader and author traditionally have enjoyed a unique relationship in the detective novel. The author reveals just enough clues in the text to provoke the reader into speculating what the conclusion will be. The reader engages in an imaginary dialogue with the author/detective during this process. Even within *La muerte*, the professor protagonist becomes a suspect cleverly positioning the character Cristina Rivera Garza as both a writer and an entity capable of murder. In her study of character development in this novel, Samuelson explains “[t]he seemingly central role of this dynamic between author and reader in detective fiction partially explains the disquieting impact of Rivera Garza’s text, in which the traditional relationship between the author

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24 There are many texts that support the theory in which the reader identifies with the detective and the criminal/author is trying to elude or mislead the reader/detective. In addition to Samuelson’s study, John A. Hodgson has a concise article identifying this pairing and Dennis Porter has a more in-depth look at the development of the novel while tracing the relationship.

25 Of course, the character Cristina Rivera Garza is a reader/scholar, as well as a writer and a murder suspect. This is further indication that *La muerte* seeks to destabilize established categories as to who is capable of murder and who is destined to be a victim. Or, in a more metaphorical sense, who is allowed to assume the role of “the writer” that influences the worldview of her reader.
and reader is parodied, fragmented and uncoupled, and the satisfaction of a neat solution—and the reader’s victory—are compellingly denied” (Líneas 258). Rivera Garza effectively upends the fundamental principle of the detective novel: the presumption that a crime must be solved. Furthermore, she links the act of writing with acts of violence. For instance, in chapter-poem XVI “Un libro para mí,” Rivera Garza writes “La frase corta la página en dos” (335). The journalist from _La Nota Roja_ also reinforces this idea about the creative and destructive powers of writing. This unusual character insists that she is “en realidad” a journalist, although she works for a sensationalist newspaper. Despite this apparent embarrassment regarding her questionable employer, the journalist is arguably a key figure as a very likely suspect. Some critics, including Claudia Guillén and Emily Hind, have unambiguously argued that the journalist is the killer and that the text at the end of the book detailing the crimes is, in fact, written under the penname of Anne-Marie Bianco (99). However, Rivera Garza purposefully does not reveal the mastermind behind these crimes and it seems difficult to support such an unequivocal announcement. Rather, the reader may look to the journalist as evidence of the impact of the written word. Her stories detail the crimes committed as well as point an accusing finger at the detective for not cracking such a high-profile case. The _mise en abyme_ of “La muerte me da” credited to Ms. Bianco is a rich collection of poems, retelling the crimes while casually mixing poetry and prose. This piece is the climax of _La muerte_ and encapsulates the major themes of the novel by the same name.

**Rethinking “El anhelo de la prosa:” Relieving the Tension between Poetry and Prose**
Whether Cristina Rivera Garza’s reader understands La muerte me da as a new approach to a detective novel or perhaps as a modified neopoliciaco is complicated further by the mixing of poetry and prose. Though not a traditional detective novel, it nonetheless begins with a traditional, first person prose narration. However, the fictionalized version of Cristina Rivera Garza loses control of the narrative voice as a polyphonic invasion assumes control of the narration. It becomes unclear who is speaking and if the reader can trust this voice or these voices.

Within the novels there appears a collection of poetry also called “La muerte me da” and the collection is credited to Anne-Marie Bianco. As mentioned, many critics including Guillén and Hind, believe this to be written by the Periodista de la Nota Roja, but the reader can never be sure. The chapters get shorter and more experimental until they structurally must be considered poetry. This interplay of prose and poetry is intentionally messy, forcing the reader to consider the validity of the boundary between poetry and prose.

This novel weakens the borders of many types of “género” whereby both gender and genre fail to stand up to rigid categorizations. La muerte initially presents itself as a detective novel, but defiantly chooses not to conform with many of the structural elements that define this genre. As the separation of poetry and prose becomes less defined, Rivera Garza seizes upon the opportunity to exemplify how the two can be skillfully combined weaving in even more literary styles. Within the novel, the overwhelming number of references to other artists and their work continues to assault
these borders. Can a text that is built on a seemingly excessive number of intertextual references still be considered to be a valid, complete and original piece of work? Even the presentation of these intertextual references is thorny because it relies on Alejandra Pizarnik’s poetry and constitutes its own use of mixed media. The clues found near the bodies complicate the neat divisions of artistic categories. For example, the reader may consider the first note found by the original cadaver. It is an excerpt from Pizarnik, but it is skillfully recopied in nail polish and the assassin presumably selected the text carefully as well. The result is a mixed media piece that honors the Argentine poet in its meticulousness, but also horrifies its spectator with its grotesqueness. Rivera Garza’s reader must reflect on whether or not this is art too. The third body found with the Pizarnik excerpt written in lipstick repeats this challenge, but this time with an added layer. The police department took a photograph of the body and the clue so when the detective seeks the protagonist’s input on the clue, she is showing her a photograph of another writer’s poem recopied carefully in lipstick. The character Cristina Rivera Garza is interpreting Pizarnik’s words through the distance of multiple reproductions, first via lipstick and then printed onto a photograph. Should that excerpt be considered part of Pizarnik’s art? Part of the murderer’s art? Is it just part of routine police work? Arguably, all these layers insulate the reader and the protagonist from getting too close to the killer or to the original text. Each reproduction imbues the text with different meaning. The blend of intellectual poetry reproduced in a campy fashion tears down the aesthetic distance that so often separates the highbrow world of poetry and the lowbrow world of
detective fiction. In *La muerte*, the reader witnesses these allegedly distant worlds intersect. The combination results in each category borrowing the social equity of the other. The mixed media art piece specifically\(^{26}\) and the detective genre more broadly are now tied to the lofty work of esteemed poet Alejandra Pizarnik. *La muerte* encourages the reader to change his perspective with regard to Pizarnik’s poetry as the text progresses. Cristina Rivera Garza seeks to makes poetry more accessible and she does so by slipping poetry into her novel and thus exposing her reader to this genre. A reader who might feel intimidated by poetry but comfortable reading a detective fiction will encounter both in this hybrid novel. This forced exposure diminishes the exclusiveness that poetry is sometimes thought to possess. This forced intrusion of poetry into a text that purports to be prose and on a perhaps unwilling reader is, perhaps, a violent act in itself. This imposition positions poetry as something of an aggressive disruption of the organized system of literary genres and even the literary market.

As a professor, the protagonist lectures on the relationship between “el género” (65) and literary creation. She mocks the idea of feminine writing and the famous French structuralist philosophers\(^{27}\) who differentiate writing based on sex and/or gender by

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\(^{26}\) The photography element of this mixed media piece is of special interest as it echoes back to *Nadie me verá llorar* and the portraits of prostitutes that Joaquín created. His moving prints of prostitutes were believed to be nothing more than pornography when in fact they captured something much more moving.

\(^{27}\) The “feminine writing” or “écriture feminine” is a term first used by French theorist Hélène Cixous and seeks to promote female authorship. Under this model, feminine writing is essentially different
ridiculing her students who align with this camp. She mocks the passionate division between these camps, as if implying that this division between male-authored writing and feminine writing were no longer relevant. Yet, the first of the twelve anonymous messages that she receives (presumably from the killer) begins by citing the celebrated feminist thinker Hélène Cixous: “All great texts are prey to the question: who is killing me? Whom I am giving myself to kill?” (75, cited in English). Cixous’ words reflect Rivera Garza’s treatment of writing as a symbolically violent act where one’s identity must be undone so that a new one may be created. The protagonist’s rejection of feminine writing contrasts with this inspired excerpt that so aptly captures La muerte’s message. The reader must attempt to reconcile the feminist celebration of female authorship that inadvertently regulates itself to second-class status. More to the point, the concept of feminine writing implies inherent intellectual differences in how women and men express themselves, and Rivera Garza’s texts clearly reject such gendered ideas, at least in their absolute form. The protagonist must confront this paradox when the journalist from La Nota Roja asks her “¿Usted escribe como mujer?” (67), to which she responds “a veces” (68). The noncommittal nature of her response suggests that either her writing is not unified and stable, that her identity is not cohesive, or perhaps both. That she sometimes

d from male writing because it must break free of the norms created in a patriarchal culture. Other noted feminists from this camp include Julia Kristeva, Monique Wittig, Luce Irigaray, and Gloria Anzaldúa. For further reading, see Cixous’ influential essay “The Laugh of the Medusa.”
does write “as a woman,” but does not feel the pressure to do so exclusively allows the protagonist to engage in *écriture féminine* on her own terms.

Having addressed what space feminine writing may occupy in Cristina Rivera Garza’s writing (referring here to Rivera Garza both as a character in the novel and as the true author of this text), *La muerte* proceeds to embrace a nontraditional style, not altogether different from the *écriture féminine* espoused by Cixous. In doing so, the text transitions from prose to poetry as it abandons its narrative line. One of the first breaks with a traditional, prose structure manifests through the character known as the “Mujer Increíblemente Pequeña.” Her presence functions as a leitmotif and a composite of images from Alejandra Pizarnik’s poetry, descriptions from Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, and Valerio’s own psychological paralysis regarding his dead sister. At times, the text even implies she might be the killer. Though her figure is borrowed from Swift’s famous prose, her appearance coincides with dream-like, incomplete dialogue between the Mujer and the main characters in *La muerte*. These interactions are not quite poetry, but do not conform to a traditional prose style, either. Perhaps they may be classified as a poetic prose, which would be an important differentiation to make because it demonstrates that *La muerte* is made up not just of alternating poetry and prose, but operates across a spectrum bound by these two genres. The fanciful conversations of la Mujer Increíblemente Pequeña have the double purpose of exploring the character’s internal dialogue while also bridging poetry and prose.
Another break in traditional prose comes in the form of newspaper snippets, but they are not from a true newspaper. Instead, they reflect what the detective is thinking, reading “EXTRA DE LA MENTE DE LA DETECTIVE” (234, italics in original). Identifying this new medium, in addition to the title in all caps, is the change in font, further distancing this section from the rest of the novel. The ability to “see” this newspaper allows the reader to get further lost in the detective’s obsession with catching the responsible party. These false newspaper headlines and articles blur the lines between reality and fantasy, continuing the novel’s quest to break down barriers that once seemed monolithic in nature.

Further tantalizing the reader is another text, also entitled “La muerte me da” and whose author is listed as “Anne-Marie Bianco” (299). This is the complete reproduction of a 2007 [28] Bonobos poetry collection that is most likely Cristina Rivera Garza publishing under a penname. The use of a penname conjures up questions of authorship authenticity in a text where the author’s identity is already complicated by a main character who shares her name. Whereas the protagonists writes under Rivera Gaza’s name, Anne-Marie Bianco, on the other hand, transmits Rivera Garza’s words without using her identity. Both the narrator and Bianco speak for the real Cristina Rivera Garza, but with a pronounced distance so that their words cannot be absolutely considered to be the real Rivera Garza speaking. The nom de plume that Rivera Garza chooses (Anne-

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[28] Bianco’s La muerte me da was published by Bonobos Ed. in May 2007 and Rivera Garza’s novel La muerte me da came out shortly thereafter in October 2007.
Marie Bianco) is curious in the duality of a decidedly French first name with an undeniably Italian surname. The reader, before realizing this is an alias, does not question whether Bianco is French or Italian but naturally assumes a shared, hybrid identity of both. In a similar way, this text is neither poetry nor prose but a rich hybrid of each. This merging of identities once thought separate is a micro-version of Rivera Garza’s quest to take down barriers: the killer is neither man nor woman, but both; the text is neither poetry nor prose, but both. Bianco’s presumed French and Italian heritage is just a small nod at how identities may be multiple.

The closing two poems of this mini-collection are credited to Bruno Bianco and Santiago Matías, the real editor of Bonobos publishing house. They explain that Bruno Bianco was probably not a real person, but rather a pseudonym under which a group of writers published. By divorcing the poet from the poem, the author(s) elevate the text above the reader, arguably as a prescriptive way to read poetry. Furthermore, they create the cheeky and paradoxical name of Bruno Bianco, whose first name refers to darkness and second name means “white.” His name joins two categories thought to be oppositional. If Bruno Bianco is an invention, as Matías asserts, then his name is

Another name that implies multiple heritages is Alejandra Pizarnik, who has a Spanish first name and a Jewish/Ukrainian surname. Pizarnik and Anne-Marie Bianco’s names reflect a cultural hybridity common in Latina America and especially prominent in a border region. The very nature of a border implies the place of encounter between two cultures and Rivera Garza’s texts celebrate the emergence of new identities emerging from the destruction of previously “fixed” cultural markers, including nationality (as seen through these names), gender and sex.
representative of this group of writers who chose to represent themselves through a male voice. Anne Marie Bianco, then, offers an alternate, female voice through which contemporary authors, here Cristina Rivera Garza, may express themselves. Even more scintillating is the publication of Bruno and Anne Marie in the same hybrid text. Therefore, the mini *La muerte me da* does not choose between female or male authorship, but presents both coexisting together.

Nevertheless, as echoed later through the heavy intertextual references to Alejandra Pizarnik, there still permeates a tension between poetry and prose that can only be resolved by combining them. The protagonist feels this same pressure that Pizarnik did, noting “Aunque muchos dirían que mi campo de acción, tal como lo denominó la Detective, es la narrativa, secretamente siempre he creído que mi campo, mi acción, le pertenece a la poesía” (38). Her statement echoes a common sentiment of academe and even hints that there is something forbidden and secretive about poetry. With this added mystery comes an added allure, elevating poetry’s status and undercutting the privilege that prose is thought to enjoy. Because poetry seems so impenetrable at times, it may seem to the inexperienced reader that poetry is a riddle to be cracked. In *La muerte*, that novice is the detective, as evidenced by the language she uses to discuss Pizarnik’s poetry. While at coffee with the protagonist, the two contemplate *El árbol de Diana*, Pizarnik’s 1962 poetry collection, and the detective’s question about “this type of poetry” brings the daydreaming Cristina back to reality: “entonces me volví a ver a la Detective como si acabara de regresar de un largo viaje o de despertarme de un sueño muy oscuro.”
Poesía. *Este tipo de poesía*” (33, emphasis in original). The detective unintentionally reveals her own negative feelings about poetry and her categorization of poetry into different types. “This type,” written in italics and repeated sourly by the protagonist, insinuates that it is the “wrong” type of poetry. The protagonist takes umbrage that the detective, an amateur, would disparage Pizarnik’s work with her tone. In this scene, as is the case often in this text, the reader is inclined to identify with the protagonist and share in her disgust for how the detective fails to appreciate literature. The detective cannot understand what is so unique about Pizarnik’s writing and this ignorance adds to the exclusiveness that belongs to poetry readers and writers. The protagonist, Cristina, chides the detective for looking for clues in poetry. “‘La poesía no se lee así,’ susurré, todavía estupefacta. ‘La poesía no es denotativa. No es como un manual’” (42). This prescriptive approach to poetry presents a general ignorance about how to appreciate poetry and cements the protagonist’s (and the reader’s) contempt for the detective. The detective’s fallacy is that she seeks an absolute and singular meaning from a poem, a desire that is contrary to the layered texture of poetry.

The detective’s position, of course, is an understandable one. Prose is more direct and easy to understand, as demonstrated by the protagonist while sitting at a coffee shop. Her stream of consciousness shows the transition between three texts from most understandable to least. First, she reviews the cold statistics of a chart outlining the personal details of the victims, a text arguably lacking in aesthetic character. This chart is the work product of the detective and reflects the detective’s exclusively functional
approach to language. Then the protagonist’s mind drifts into a fanciful narration of a
man precariously walking on trees. The vulnerability of the characters in this daydream
reflects the vulnerability of the murdered men; it allows the protagonist to process these
horrors. Furthermore, it tells a more intimate story than the chart communicates. Finally,
the last citation opening this chapter signals an artistic peak with a transition to poetry,
including the following verses: “Lo que en realidad pasa:/Eso no lo puede saber la
novela” (107). These lines are not just the creative climax for this section, they also speak
directly to poetry’s unique capabilities. Truth as understood through “realidad” is made
accessible through poetry. The novel, meant here as the most representative embodiment
of prose, cannot share in that understanding.

Nevertheless, the strong urge that Pizarnik felt to craft prose is referenced in this
novel and there is even a chapter titled “El anhelo de la prosa” (177). It begins with an
author’s byline (Dra. Cristina Rivera Garza30) and includes a prohibition to reproduce the
text, listing the journal _Hispamérica_ as proprietor of this article. This is to say the real
author Cristina Rivera Garza writes the narrator protagonist who shares the same name
referencing back to the real Cristina Rivera Garza. The confusing overlap between the
real Cristina Rivera Garza and the fictional one destabilizes the authority of the narrative
voice in _La muerte_ because it essentially recognizes the protagonist as an imposter. The

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30 Although Cristina Rivera Garza has one fictional short story published in this journal (“Hay
cosas que las manos nunca olvidan), this article presented in _La muerte me da_ does not have appear in print
elsewhere.
acknowledgement of a “real” Cristina Rivera Garza and a “fake” one is reminiscent of the “real” and “fake” versions of Mexican author Amparo Dávila in *La cresta de Ilión*. The destabilized author figure diminishes the importance of the author and pushes the reader’s focus toward the text itself. Furthermore, the prohibition of the author accessing her own intellectual property as per the copyright clause is unsettling because it further complicates questions of authorship and authenticity since it implies the author’s words are not her own.

Following the redacted citation is a quotation from Pizarnik scholar María Negroni which reads “Escribir, desde esta perspectiva, equivale a inscribir algún signo sobre la superficie de un cuerpo desmembrado o bien, simplemente, a dejar que la lengua misma se descuartice, se vuelva voz de un sujeto disociado” (177). Negroni’s words speak directly to the destructive imagery that governs this novel: the writing process, told through the metaphor of body-directed violence (“un cuerpo demembrado”), must destroy so to create something new. From this quotation, the reader further understands that the violence in *La muerte* is not the fetished violence of lowbrow thrasher movies, but rather a sophisticated desire to remake societal structures, specifically gendered structures. The attractive, upper to middle class victims of Rivera Garza’s novel surprise the reader because it would be unlikely that men of their prosperous background and solid social standing would end up the victims of a brutal homicide. As mentioned, María Negroni is often thought to be one of the most recognized Pizarnik experts and her presence in the text ties *La muerte* to Alejandra Pizarnik’s writing. Additionally, though,
Negroni is important because she is a celebrated prose and poetry writer (in addition to being a literary critic and essayist). The figure of Negroni further illustrates the shared bond between poetry and prose. The final epigraph to this chapter comes directly from Pizarnik “Ahora/la muchacha halla la máscara del infinito y rompe/el muro de la poesía.” Yet again the reader notes a violent action verb, “romper” or “to break,” implying the necessary destruction of “the wall of poetry.” For Pizarnik, poetry is a place of enlightenment to which many are unfortunately excluded and Rivera Garza shares her desire to deconstruct the obstacles that alienate poetry from other, more approachable genres, namely prose. There are, then, two simultaneous and competing goals. On one hand, Pizarnik strives to improve her dexterity in the prose arena, but there is also a desire, championed by Rivera Garza but also evidenced in the Pizarnik epigraph, to exalt poetry. Such paradoxes are emblematic of the Mexican author’s work and her signature blending of different genres hints that she does not believe in favoring one genre over the other and even that she does not recognize poetry and prose as necessarily separate categories.

The contents of the “El anhelo de la prosa” chapter is a departure from the narrative arc and consists of a close reading of passages of Alejandra Pizarnik’s prose and poetry, as well as many references to her journal. Quite directly, Pizarnik writes “Lo que yo deseo es escribir prosa. Respeto por la prosa, excesivo respeto por la prosa” (179) and continues to say “Prosa perfecta…cuyo fin sería [ilegible] la prosa de mi idioma espantoso” (180). She expresses her admiration for writers like Kafka, Dostoyevsky and
Virginia Woolf (184-185) in the chapter “¿De qué habla cuando habla de la prosa?” The answer to this subsection header found within “El anhelo” is that when one talks about prose, they are speaking of it as a separate and different entity than poetry and thus reinforcing this imagined border. Rivera Garza writes “Se trata, pues, de una escritura que problematiza un hacer material que no solo atañe al entre sino también al intra que junta pero no funde géneros literarios de carácter propio” (185). Even as Pizarnik yearns to be a prose writer, she seems to recognize the intersection of these two literary genres. In a journal entry cited in La muerte, Pizarnik writes “Poemas en prosa: necesidad de los espacios dobles. Al menos para mi estil” (192). Rivera Garza interprets Pizarnik’s craving for prose not as the desire to become a successful prosaist, but as the need to push herself outside of her comfort zone as a writer. The result of such literary experimentation is the possibility of failure and perhaps even the intention to fail, “como si le diera gusto fracasar. Como si este fracaso constituyera, al fin y al cabo, el guiño victorioso de su anhelo” (193-194). This failure would be proof that Pizarnik had pushed herself up to and beyond her capabilities. The purpose of writing, seen through this perspective, is the cerebral challenge it presents. If Pizarnik has already dominated poetry, then she must move on to another form to satisfy her intellectual cravings.

Rivera Garza seeks to bridge the chasm separating poetry and prose and argues that Pizarnik’s poetic prose does the same. There are still, of course, characteristics that differentiate the two. For example, prose lends itself to a linear narration and even when events are recounted out of chronological order, as Juan Rulfo famously does in Pedro
*Páramo*, the pieces can still be puzzled out to recreate an ordered timeline. Poetry is free of this obligation, but prose should theoretically follow this “rule”. *La muerte*, however, resists this practice. For instance, a conversation between the detective and the protagonist’s sometimes lover (known only as “El Amante de la Sonrisa Iluminada”) undermines the tenant of prose writing that there must be a beginning. Indeed the very concept of “Once upon a time” is to provide the starting point in a story. However, when discussing the matter, the lover offers the following conclusion: “Le dijo (la Detective) que quería empezar por el principio, y él le respondió que no había principio. Que su historia carecía de principio. Que cualquier historia que mereciera el nombre no era más que la continuación de otra: o su difuminación o su postergamiento” (259). The text does not directly quote the lover, but instead paraphrases his responses as if endorsing his conclusions. This conversation further diminishes the separation between poetry and prose.

By the end of the novel, *La muerte* has experienced two literary transformations. What began as a standard, fictional novel departs from a traditional narration via multiple intertextual references, an article discussing Pizarnik’s work and concludes with a series of poems. *La muerte* even includes a line explicitly prohibiting its classification: “Éste no es un poema narrativo” (325). That is not entirely true. On one hand, this text lends itself to so many genres and in this sense it may be considered all of these categories, including that of narrative poem. On the other hand, *La muerte* breaks so many of these “rules” by implementing a spectrum of different writing styles. The result weakens the absoluteness
that poetry and prose are often thought to possess. Right before the conclusion of the novel, the detective asks the protagonist if the short book of poetry, also called *La muerte me da* allegedly by an Anne-Marie Bianco, might be considered poetry. The protagonist is stumped as to what to answer. The need to divide texts into supposedly mutually exclusive categories is, for the protagonist, not germane. She must ignore the detective’s question, torn between saying yes and saying no: “Apenas sí alcancé a decírselo que sí y a decir que no al mismo tiempo” (342). The protagonist knows the fluidity between these two genres as both a literature professor and a writer herself, but she also must confront, through the unimaginative detective, how fixed these two categories are in the mind of the public. Pizarnik’s “guiño victorioso” (193) is the wink of an inside understanding. Pizarnik and the protagonist and the author versions of Cristina Rivera Garza know that the poetry/prose division is perhaps an arbitrary one, but one that will persist in the minds of the readers like the detective.

At the beginning of the novel, the detective believed that if she could “crack” the poetry snippets then she would solve the case. As previously mentioned, the exasperated narrator explained that poetry cannot be read in that fashion. The poem “XXI: Un libro para mí,” found in the book of poems by Anne-Marie Bianco returns to this idea. It reads “Yo pude haberte dado una llave. Yo pude entregarte la paz” (336). The key is symbolically the key to understanding the text, but this cannot happen since it is the reader who must consider the words and ponder their meaning. Even then, though, poetry does not offer a key to explain some outside truth. Instead, the key may be bestowed to
the thoughtful reader with a desire to know the truth. The point is not to find a killer, but to enjoy dissecting the text. The “key” will not remove the reader from a text by wrapping it up, but draw him deeper in as the pleasure is derived from such a close reading.

Toward the end of the novel, the reader comes across the following unequivocal statement “Esto es un libro” (345), the logical if delayed follow-up to the earlier assertion “Este no es un poema narrativo” (325). There are at least three obstacles that prevent the reader from accepting these statements at face value. The first is that the former declaration immediately follows Anne-Marie Bianco’s book of poetry and its placement at that point in the text weakens its very claim. The second issue that arises is that Cristina Rivera Garza’s work time and again resists absolute categories. As Samuelson puts it “given Rivera Garza’s persistent habit of breaking genre conventions and mixing elements of disparate genre, this discussion of the merits of prose versus those of poetry appears simultaneously enlightening and confounding” (Líneas 285). Arguably Samuelson’s argument may be taken one step further to add that given the author’s propensity to bend genre categories, her reader may conclude she rejects such rigid categories and proves the possibility of a blended text through her own writing. Finally, La muerte is a detective novel that provides no resolution of the crime and no absolute information as to who perpetrates the offenses. Instead, it is a text that demands the reader puzzle out the conflicts through close reading. Considering that Rivera Garza “withholds” this information from her reader, it hardly seems consistent that she would
then explicitly spell out what type of text *La muerte* is meant to be. The individual reader must also determine that classification alone and not buy into false clues that function as red herrings.

**Las lectoras de Pizarnik: Literary Intertextuality with Alejandra Pizarnik**

*La muerte* is flooded with intertextual references, but it is clear from the overwhelming references to Alejandra Pizarnik that the influence of her work stands apart. In a 2006 interview with Cheyla Rose Samuelson, Cristina Rivera Garza refers to *La muerte* by its original title “Las lectoras de Pizarnik” (145). Although this is clearly not the final designation for this text, it does emphasize how central a role Pizarnik plays in it. Like Amparo Dávila in *La cresta de Ilión*, Alejandra Pizarnik is an important female voice to whom Rivera Garza perhaps sought to draw attention. Beyond that, though, Alejandra Pizarnik’s own oeuvre is a superb example of literature breaking with established norms to experiment with new content and styles.

There are many elements (as well as direct quotations) of Pizarnik’s work present in *La muerte*. For example, the leitmotif of trees found in Rivera Garza’s novel ties into Pizarnik’s 1962 collection of poetry, *Árbol de Diana*, where the battle between poetry and prose is palpable in the text and her snippets of poetry act as clues at the murder scenes. Intertextuality enjoys a regular presence in Pizarnik’s work\(^\text{31}\), perhaps even more

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\(^{31}\) For example, “Sala de psicopatología” in *Textos de sombra* refers to Nietzsche, Stringberg, Paul Éluard, Einstein, Hegel, Enrique Pichon-Rivière (the Swiss psychiatrist credited with bringing psychoanalysis to Argentina), Freud, Marx, Rimbaud, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, and Kafka.
so than in Rivera Garza’s text. However, the most salient “borrowed” element from Pizarnik’s work arguably is the dead bodies, which are featured heavily in her final collection *Textos de sombra* (1972-1973). Additionally, a few select poems unfold using the imagery and language related to castration. In the essay section “El anhelo de la prosa,” *La muerte* cites Pizarnik’s journals where she explained that she could not write prose because she creates “una suerte de castración del oído” (198), severing verbs and nouns. The violence in her text almost always refers to the writing process.

Pizarnik wrote in Spanish, French, English, and occasionally German about her frustrated desire to adequately express herself and to be understood. In *Pequeños cantos* (1971-1972), Pizarnik articulates her frustration that “la lengua natal castra” (398) in “En esta noche, en este mundo.” Pizarnik compares the act of writing to an act of violence, a metaphor emulated in Rivera Garza’s writing. The purpose, of course, is not to glorify violence but rather express the intense desire for creative production. This metaphor encourages her reader to reexamine the metonymic axiom “the pen is mightier than the sword”\(^32\) and to consider how both writers record violence to control it and to undermine

\(^{32}\) This proverb derives from Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s play “Rischelieu; or the Conspiracy” in which the playwright condemns violence and advocates for the salvation of the state through the act of writing. “Beneath the rule of men entirely great/The pen is mightier than the sword. Behold/The arch-enchanter’s wand! —itself a nothing!/But taking sorcery from the master-hand/To paralyse the Casesers—and to strike/The loudest earth breathless!—Take away the sword/States can be saved without it” (39). The persuasive, almost supernatural, power which Bulwer-Lytton bestows upon the written word is echoed in the texts of Cristina Rivera Garza and Alejandra Pizarnik.
it. In the case of Pizarnik, the violence reflects the personal anguish felt by the author on account of the difficult writing process. Cristina Rivera Garza builds on this concept of reflecting the challenging creative writing process in her violent narration so to draw attention to the real brutalized victims. To arrive at this double conclusion (both that writing is a “violent” process and that society can no longer accept horrific crimes as mundane), Rivera Garza adopts Alejandra Pizarnik’s treatment of violence and writing. Later in the same poem, Pizarnik expresses: “no/las palabras/no hacen el amor/hacen la ausencia” (398-399) and the absence, or lack, is perfectly expressed through the metaphor of castration. The multilingual approach Pizarnik often uses is, no doubt, a reflection of the limitations and possibilities of each language. What cannot be expressed adequately in Spanish appears in another language. Pizarnik’s incorporation of various languages is an anxious effort to express herself which may explain her equally fraught need to master both poetry and prose. So pressing was her need to correctly convey her thoughts that Pizarnik incorporated different languages and different genres. *La muerte me da* incorporates this latter aspect in that it, too, moves from prose to poetry, resisting categorization. In a publication of Pizarnik’s collected poetry, editor Ana Becciú notes that it was, at times, difficult to select which texts to put in the edition of poetry and which in collected prose in part because she had so much more poetry than prose and Editorial Lumen wanted to have a more measured publication (455). However, it was also challenging to categorize certain pieces, which is logical considering the genre category tension with which Pizarnik struggled.
The presence of up to entire stanzas of Alejandra Pizarnik’s poetry intermixed with original verses by Rivera Garza highlights the importance and shared nature of poetry. This theme is at once ubiquitous and subtle. Perhaps the most explicit reference to poetry’s worth is when the narrator tells her audience that: “Aunque muchos dirían que mi campo de acción, tal como lo denominó la Detective, es la narrativa, secretamente siempre he creído que mi campo, mi acción, le pertenece a la poesía” (38). There is a deliberate effort here to juxtapose poetry and prose and possibly even to privilege poetry. After all, the novel (if it can still be considered a novel) ends with poetry. Poetry appears the victor, or at the very least earns the same legitimacy as the more-celebrated prose. This tension relates back to Pizarnik, who famously wrote in her diary how she struggled with prose, feeling pressure to excel in a category which receives much more attention than poetry. However, Cristina Rivera Garza re-esteems poetry by citing the work of a master poetess. Additionally, she applauds the challenges that poetry brings with it through the metaphor of an unsolved detective novel. The clues are present, but it is the work of the reader to decipher them. In a poem, the words are there, the onus is on the reader to determine their meaning.

As mentioned, one of the strongest links between Pizarnik’s writing and Cristina Rivera Garza’s fourth novel is the overwhelming presence of violence. In both texts, the intended effect is to disturb the complacency of the reader. As the protagonist notes, “Eso lo hizo siempre muy bien Pizarnik. Decir cosas brutales” (24). This tribute reveals the aim of La muerte: to name the unnamable and for the reader to confront a violent reality.
Arguably, Rivera Garza is directing her reader’s gaze to re-see the horrifying violence that has become so commonplace as to lose its ability to shock. Pizarnik does not have the same politic message, but instead is refers to her internal turmoil. Her works are laden with violent images reminiscent of British Gothic fiction. Interestingly, British Gothic literature is believed to have had a lasting influence throughout Europe and Terry Hale credits the origins of the French *roman noir* with having its roots in the Gothic style (63). Of course, the *roman noir* is closely linked with hardboiled fiction and the *novela negra* of Latin America, detective genres in which the crime is not solved by the police but by an outsider (such as the professor/protagonist in *La muerte*).

Much as she did with Amparo Dávila in *La cresta de Ilión*, Rivera Garza is attempting to re-value Alejandra Pizarnik and eradicate the hype surrounding her suicide that distracts from her important work. *La muerte* reframes the poetess’ suicide as a passive tragedy. It is not that Pizarnik gave up on the world, but that the world crushed her, “el mundo que la mató” (24). Before learning to appreciate Pizarnik’s work, the protagonist admits that she initially read Pizarnik because she was attracted to the Argentine’s tragic figure, “el morbo que produce la imagen de la poeta suicida” (41). Then she sought out Pizarnik’s texts because they were hard to find and their scarcity made them valuable. Reading an author whose work is hard to find lent her a certain prestige. Finally, the protagonist matured intellectually enough to read Pizarnik for pleasure. As she began to truly study her oeuvre, the protagonist came to understand the richness of Pizarnik’s texts and even becomes something of an expert. As a sophisticated
reader she states: “Leeré estos textos tratando de escapar expresamente del retrato romántico y estereotípico de la poeta suicida obsesionada por el dolor y la muerte, para explorar a la Pizarnik, que, con lecturas abundantes y meticulosas, se dedicó a pensar, y pensar bien y rigurosamente, sobre las limitaciones de la poesía y lo que para ella se convirtió, a medida que su salud mental se resquebrajaba, en el refugio de la prosa” (181).

This profound knowledge of Pizarnik’s writing makes the protagonist indispensable to solving the crime and gives her an intellectual power over the detective. While this one fictional character managed to move past her morbid curiosity, such will not be the case for many readers and Pizarnik’s suicide will unjustly overpower the strength of her writing. As Tamara R. Williams comments in her article on the genealogy of the poet, “[t]his image of the poet as a castaway, as a misunderstood and rejected alterity expelled, and ultimately occluded from, the centers of power and cultural production, endures as one of the most predominant figures of lyric subjectivity in the Latin American literary tradition” (35). Alejandra Pizarnik, cast as the suicidal poet, fits Williams’ description as a subaltern, othered writer. The nature of Pizarnik’s poetry is dark, but so is the content of many prose writers, like the ones Pizarnik admires (Kafka, Dostoyevsky and Virginia Woolf). It is the cultural bias against poetry that marginalizes poets and their work. *La muerte* force feeds its reader Pizarnik’s texts so that these texts must be read, but within the context of a novel. Thus, the reader may appreciate the richness of Pizarnik’s writing before an anti-poetry bias may take hold.
How to Speak of the Victims: Addressing Violence through Intertextuality

As this text explores the processes of a murder investigation, it also seeks to explore the linguistic processes behind talking about murder. How does a culturally agreed upon definition of “victim” and “victimization” occur? The character Cristina points out to the detective that the noun “victim” in Spanish is a feminine noun. Of course, all nouns in Spanish are categorized as masculine or feminine and there would be no gender association between the simple feminine noun of “the table” or “la mesa,” to give an arbitrary example. The difference, though, is that a table lacks the subjectivity of a victim or “víctima” and for that reason it is interesting that this noun is necessarily feminine and that the perpetrator or “verdugo” is necessarily masculine. So the victims in La muerte me da are “las víctimas,” which is to say that their masculinity is called into question by being placed in a precarious role. The victims in this text are double castrated: first physically and then again linguistically. The shock value that these sexually abused bodies present to the reader is one that obliges a reevaluation of who is accepted as a victim and who is not. Clearly, the reader’s distress, as well as the gendered terms of “la víctima” and “el verdugo,” confirms an established pattern of female victim and male perpetrator. It would be too simple a reading to interpret this potential inversion of roles as a type of female empowerment. Brandishing (and abusing) a weapon does not confer an intrinsic and gendered power to men and it certainly cannot do so in this text, either. Quite the contrary, La muerte me da subverts this paradigm, suggesting at times that the true assassin might be the Mujer Increíblemente Pequeña. Power is not derived
from physique or from using weapons. The only real power present in the text is the intellectual power of the character version of Cristina Rivera Garza.

The notes accompanying the victims suggest that violence cannot exist in a vacuum and that language is necessary to understand aggression. The medium in which language is presented affects the tone of its message. For instance, the first body was found with a note written in nail polish. The discord between the mutilated body and the “ink” next to it is more unsettling than just the body alone, indicating the extent of influence that language can have. The next note is written with “letras castradas” (31) cut out from newspapers and magazines. Such a note conjures up the image of a ransom note and inspires a higher degree of fear among the survivors. Additionally, this second victim’s clue includes a tribute to Julio Cortázar and his first wife, Aurora. The protagonist mulls over this Argentine writer’s name “tampoco pude dejar de ver que en la misma superficie del apellido Cortázar se escondían, amenazantes, un cortar y un azar – palabras que, en ese momento, carecían de toda inocencia” (32). Language cannot be innocent and that is why such care must go into every word. This process was excruciating for Pizarnik because for every word chosen, an infinite number of other possibilities were excluded. This is why she wrote “la lengua natal castra/la lengua es un órgano de conocimiento del fracaso de todo poema/castrado por su propia lengua” (Poesía completa 398).

Many of the intertextual references reinforce the tie that binds art and violence. The first reference is to Jake and Dinos Chapman’s piece “Great Deeds Against the
Dead”, a mixed media rendering of Goya’s “Disasters of War” series. This piece ties so well into *La muerte* because it features murdered, mutilated and castrated male figures. It also ties in with this novel because these British conceptual artists refer back to the master romantic Spanish artist, Francisco de Goya. The multilayered intertextuality (Rivera Garza referring to the Chapman brothers referring to Goya) connects these seemingly disparate artists from different periods. All three artists use castrated men in their art. In the Goya piece, his series includes horrific prints of castrated men hanging from trees during the fight for Spanish independence during the Peninsular War. “Great Deeds Against the Dead” is a sculpted mixed media piece that also features castrated men hanging from trees. When Rivera Garza’s protagonist encounters the dead body, she recalls seeing the Chapman piece some years before. She falls to the couch, overwhelmed by what she has seen and remembering the violence of “Great Deeds.” The Chapman brothers do not appeal to the aesthetic needs of their viewer, but rather are seeking to shock and to ignite a conversation about body-directed violence. The protagonist in *La muerte* imagines this effort going completely unrecognized by the uncouth detective. She envisions the detective and other spectators blithely sipping champagne while not responding to such graphic images. In this fantasy, the ignorant detective is consuming the violence rather than exacting meaning from it.

Another intertextual reference that resonates in *La muerte* is the allusion to Maria Abramović’s work (108). Abramović (b. 1946, Belgrade) is a performance artist whose provocative pieces earned her the distinction of being “one of the field’s most visible and
magnetic figures” (Cotter 25). Her desire to engage her audience was so intense that Abramović at times opted for pieces where either she or the audience could cause the artist injury. The self-mutilation component of her performance art also shocks her viewer and commands that they be present as indicated by the title of this chapter “El espectador tiene que estar aquí y ahora” (108). Violence without art will only perpetuate the cycle of violence whereas violence shown through art denounces man’s inhumanity to man. Her piece *Balkan Baroque* consisted of a woman cleaning hundreds of bones while singing a nursery rhyme. The juxtaposition of the sweetness of her tune with the horror of the bones is similar to the light-hearted nature of the poetry snippets next to the rotting cadavers in *La muerte*. The care with which Abramović cleanses the bones lends a certain humanity to the dead. In recognizing the life of the victims the artist (be it Abramović with *Balkan Baroque* or Rivera Garza with *La muerte*) prevents the dead from just being another photo spread splashed across a newspaper like *La Nota Roja*.

**Conclusion**

*La muerte me da* is a powerful, ambiguous text that startles its reader in many ways. Cristina Rivera Garza opens the novel by experimenting with the established structures of the detective novel and goes on to bend the division between poetry and prose. Her text is rich with intertextual references that transcend time and media, but share a critique of violence. These other intertextual pieces are overshadowed by the

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33 For further reading, consider the Marina Abramović sanctioned bibliography *When Marina Abramović Dies*, written by her assistant James Westcott.
homage paid to Argentine writer Alejandra Pizarnik. Pizarnik’s work looms large in the text. The result is that Rivera Garza’s reader inherits her reverence for the misunderstood poet and learns to look beyond Pizarnik’s suicide to see the true richness of her writing. Both authors use violence as a metaphor to discuss the writing process, suggesting that destruction is a necessary precursor for creative expression. *La muerte* is a composite, then, of prose, poetry, poetic prose, literary theory, and copious references to other artists. Such an amalgamation is difficult, if not impossible to classify and that is just as the author would want it. Easy answers and fixed labels do not correspond with Rivera Garza’s approach to literature and so when trying to label this complex text, her reader may have to be content with the rather long-winded label: a hybrid prose-come-poetry experimental neo-detective novel.
Conclusions

To study these three Cristina Rivera Garza novels is to be left with more questions than answers. What forces push Matilda toward her internment at La Castañeda? Is she truly crazy? What about the protagonist in La cresta de Ilión…is he a doctor or a patient? A man or a woman? Who is responsible for the brutal murders in La muerte me da? Is Anne-Marie Bianco a “real” interdiegetic character? Is she a “real” person outside the text? The critical reader, the type of reader that Rivera Garza is attempting to cultivate, cannot walk away indifferently from these questions. This reader knows that concrete answers are unattainable (despite some critics attempts to do so), but still reads and rereads the text, noting subtle references and commentary with each new reading. It can be a frustrating process at times, but also a gratifying one. While absolute answers may not be had for the aforementioned questions, they do lead the reader to more immediate inquiries. In contemplating Matilda’s sanity, the reader must consider which societal powers control who is sane and who is insane. Additionally, the reader must examine how the limited opportunities afforded to a young, single, indigenous woman living in Mexico City might only allow the restrictive roles of “puta” or “loca.” Ideally, the reader might examine which of these processes that restrict female autonomy are still at work today and how, if at all, is the reader complicit. In La cresta de Ilión, the reader might laugh with Rivera Garza at the depiction of the protagonist feverishly searching his body to confirm his maleness, but also pause to reflect on male privilege and why it would be
difficult to forfeit. *La cresta* also provides the reader with an opportunity to borrow the “spectrum” theory of sexuality and extend it biological sex. This novel initiates a conversation not only about privilege, but about multiple identities along the gender and biological sex spectra. As a reader, I admit I understood a spectrum of sexualities well before I understood that gender and sex also do not operate in a binary fashion. Without directly referencing the trans movement, *La cresta* persuades its reader to reconsider multiple gender identity markers from a new perspective. Finally, *La muerte me da* invites the reader to ponder the crimes, but also to consider who is accepted in the role of “la víctima.” Though the crimes allude to the femicide along the U.S./Mexico border, the male victims in her novel wake up the reader’s complacency concerning regular, sexual violence against women. How do traditional detective novels reinforce ideas about gender-based crime? Rivera Garza asks her reader to consider how literature affects or reinforces prejudices. She references the works of many great artists to break down divisions between poetry and prose, visual art and the written and artistic movement spanning generations and countries. The message is not that every artistic mode is the same, bluntly categorized as “art,” but that artistic creation does not exist in a vacuum; it builds upon the work of previous artists. If this is true, which Rivera Garza convincingly presents to be the case, then there is no value gained from privileging one genre over another. This is to say prose is not somehow better than poetry, as Pizarnik repeatedly fretted in her journal. It is also to say that society cannot afford to overlook poetry in the
literary canon because to do so would be to ignore, as an example, the masterful voice of Alejandra Pizarnik that Rivera Garza’s obliges her reader to appreciate.

In this project, I have studied three rich novels that each offers its own critique of gender and its own survey of how language creates and restricts gendered identities. Together, though, the novels show a trajectory in the author’s writing style that began with a more standard postmodern approach in Nadie me verá llorar and evolved into a highly experimental prose/poetry hybrid in La muerte me da. As Rivera Garza creatively explores new modes of expression, she creates a parallel space to imagine new ways to approach gender. Through these texts, the reader meets an unusual assortment of complex characters: prostitutes, transvestites, morally-compromised doctors, the insane and the allegedly insane, an inept reader who is also an inept detective, a bearded woman, an incredibly small woman, to name just a few. There is a conscious and explicit recognition of how language and texts shape these colorful characters. The historical records that informed Cristina Rivera Garza’s dissertation led to the literary creation of Matilda and the reproduction of her actual medical history serves as the closing document of Nadie. In La Cresta de Ilión, a fictional creation of Mexican author Amparo Dávila is searching for her lost manuscript. Intertextual references abound in La muerte me da, with notable praise for Alejandra Pizarnik’s poetic voice. Each text demonstrates Rivera Garza’s respect for language and the creative power that the written word, or really all art, wields.

It is my hope that these chapters have illustrated the nuanced way in which Cristina Rivera Garza treats gender and how her sophisticated writing style distinguishes
her as one of the most important voices in contemporary literature. Undoubtedly, Rivera Garza is an influential voice in Mexican literature, but as her work continues to be translated and praised abroad, Rivera Garza’s influence will continue to grow across borders.
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Biography

Caroline Leigh Good, originally of Houston, Texas, received a B.A. in Spanish and a B.S. in communication from the University of Texas at Austin in 2004. She went on to received her M.A. in Spanish from Tulane University in 2008 and anticipates a Ph.D. in Spanish from Tulane University in 2014. She received the Graduate Student Summer Merit Fellowship in 2012, a Tinker Grant for field research conducted in Mexico in 2008 and the Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship from the U.S. Department of Education in 2007. She has presented at conferences at the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Texas El Paso, the University of California Irving, and the University of Chicago. She has taught classes on Spanish language, literature, and culture at Tulane University from 2007 until the present. Additionally, in 2012 she developed a medical Spanish class for the LSU Health and Science Center in New Orleans, where she continues to teach.