



PASILLOS SIN LUZ: READING THE ASYLUM
IN *NADIE ME VERÁ LLORAR* BY CRISTINA
RIVERA GARZA

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ABSTRACT Mexican historian and literary writer Cristina Rivera Garza approaches the space of the asylum not as a monolithic mechanism of rigid control and silence, but as a continual negotiation of bodies and words. The characters in her 1999 novel *Nadie me verá llorar* improvise their own unique paths through the physical structure of La Castañeda asylum and the sociocultural space of mental illness. Through its narrative techniques, the novel positions its readers, too, in an indeterminate interpretive space. Readers' paths through the fixed structure of the novel are as idiosyncratic as the characters' trajectories through La Castañeda and Porfirian society. By representing and fostering such maneuvers—which Michel de Certeau has termed “tactics”—*Nadie me verá llorar* challenges the subject/object dynamic inherent in conventional concepts of madness. Rivera Garza's novel manifests a relationship not of reading and writing subjects and voiceless objects, but of interdependent, mutable subjects. Viewed in the context of 1990s mental health care reform initiatives throughout Latin America, the “tactics” at work in *Nadie me verá llorar* reflect the reality of individuals currently living in psychiatric hospitals, as well as the potential for reform movements to resituate both concepts of mental illness and individuals who are identified as mentally ill.

“To read is to wander through an imposed system,” proposes Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (169). In writing her novel *Nadie me verá llorar*, Cristina Rivera Garza acts first and foremost as a reader, as, through extensive archival research, she makes her way through the imposing

physical and discursive structures of the long-closed La Castañeda asylum on the outskirts of Mexico City. La Castañeda—indeed, any asylum—might seem to resist any sort of wandering: it is a remote, highly structured institution, founded on a medical model of mental illness that depends upon rigid distinctions between sane subjects and insane objects. Yet, as Rivera Garza “reads” and subsequently represents this place, Certeau might suggest, she inevitably takes unexpected detours and drifts away from established pathways. Her characters do the same as they navigate both the space of La Castañeda and their experiences of being identified as mentally ill. My own reading of these “wanderings,” inspired by *The Practice of Everyday Life*, discerns the extent to which Rivera Garza and her characters are able to diverge from the ingrained, interdependent structures that correspond to the medical model of mental illness. The fictionalized La Castañeda and the novel itself are represented as indeterminate spaces, inscribing multiple possibilities for interaction between individuals, physical structures, and discourses.

Contemplating the dynamics of cultural consumption, Certeau hypothesizes a constantly shifting web of relationships amongst individuals and their contexts. *The Practice of Everyday Life* suggests ways of appreciating the creative potential of unexpected individual routes through existing spaces, texts, and structures. Certeau adopts the speech act as a theoretical model, since “speaking effects an appropriation, or reappropriation, of language by its speakers; it establishes a *present* relative to a time and place; and it posits a *contract with the other*, (the interlocutor) in a network of places and relations” (xiii). In everyday life, consumers trace out “‘indirect’ or ‘errant’ trajectories obeying their own logic,” forming “unforeseeable sentences, partly unreadable paths across a space” that “are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop” (xviii). Rather than following the prescribed “strategies” that correspond to controlled, rational “places,” consumers often resort to improvisational “tactics.” This element of indeterminacy transforms place into “space,” a complex network of variables of direction, velocity, time, and the interaction between its various changeable elements. A text, then, is a “place,” but reading puts that place into practice, producing a “space” (117). Thus, “stories” inscribe a constantly changing pattern of relationships between places and spaces, strategies and tactics (118). It is impossible to think of a text—or a place—in isolation from the context of a reading (170). In practice, then, there are no fixed places, only maneuverable spaces.

Mexican historian and literary writer Rivera Garza approaches the space

of the asylum not as a monolithic mechanism of rigid control and silence but as a continual negotiation of bodies and words. She argues that the former view, popularized in part by the antipsychiatry movement of the 1960s, does not correspond to the real conditions within asylums, which typically lacked the resources necessary to enforce such control. Rather, Rivera Garza's historical research investigates the tactics at work within La Castañeda asylum: "together, crossing frail bridges fraught with misgivings and mistrust, asylum doctors and inmates authored polysemic, multivocal, and heteroglot narratives with which they captured the fluid reality of mental illness, however fleetingly or fragmentarily" ("Beyond Medicalization" 269). *Nadie me verá llorar* takes its narrative cues from this historical dialogue, representing La Castañeda as a mutable site of exchange amongst interdependent and changeable subjects.

Accordingly, Rivera Garza's doctoral dissertation and other scholarly publications are crucial intertexts for *Nadie me verá llorar*.¹ The dissertation, titled "The Masters of the Streets: Bodies, Power, and Modernity in Mexico, 1867–1930," studies the state's attempts to confine and control the bodies of prostitutes and "the mentally ill" who threatened and negotiated the positivist discourse of modernization in late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Mexico.² This study contains most of the "ingredients" that would later form *Nadie me verá llorar*. Rivera Garza's characters are adaptations and composites of real-life people studied in her dissertation; the key setting of La Castañeda insane asylum on the outskirts of Mexico City is a major focus of the dissertation chapter on the insane; and the novel's temporal span of roughly the 1880s to the early 1920s corresponds to the dissertation's scope of 1867 to 1930. Furthermore, the novel delves into thematic

1. These intertexts are especially important because, to date, few critical studies (Rodríguez, Irwin) have been published dealing with the full range of Rivera Garza's scholarly, narrative, and poetic works. This seems to be changing. A cluster of articles on Rivera Garza (see Castellanos, Chávez Pérez and Sáenz) appeared in a 2004 issue of *Revista de Literatura Mexicana Contemporánea*, and the author's blog has received critical treatment as "ciberliteratura" (Choi). Rivera Garza has gained recognition by winning several national literary prizes in Mexico—the Premio Nacional de Cuento (1987), the Premio Nacional de Novela José Rubén Romero (1997), and the Premio Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (2002)—and she has participated in various published interviews dealing with her work.

2. Rivera Garza's studies participate in the "new cultural history" of Mexico, which examines the intersections of culture, politics, and power. For an overview of this contentious trend, see Deans-Smith and Joseph's *Mexico's New Cultural History: Una Lucha Libre*, a special issue of *Hispanic American Historical Review*.

issues central to the dissertation, such as the sociopolitical implications of how people considered mentally ill are represented and represent themselves. The dissertation's reading of verbal exchanges between psychiatrists and patients recorded in the patients' files is an attempt to listen to the remnants of disenfranchised voices with new ears, a project that continues through Rivera Garza's novel and her subsequent historical research.

Nadie me verá llorar takes its title from the character Matilda Burgos's repeatedly expressed determination to remain strong and outwardly stoic in the face of numerous hardships throughout a long and difficult life. As the novel progresses, bits and pieces of Matilda's life story accumulate, mainly through analepses branching out from a moment in which Matilda is living in La Castañeda. Although the reliability of some of the information provided in the analepses is questionable, the following seems to be Matilda's story. As a teenager, she is uprooted from her rural, indigenous community when her alcoholic parents send her to Mexico City to live with her uncle, a physician who uses her to test his theories of hygiene as a social panacea. As a young adult, Matilda takes part in a political resistance movement and works as a prostitute and performer. Although she becomes well known for her performances mocking the prostitution clichés of Federico Gamboa's popular novel *Santa*, Matilda herself eventually falls in love with and marries a client. After her husband, a foreign engineer involved in the mining business, commits suicide, Matilda spends the remaining decades of her life in La Castañeda. There, she becomes the obsession of asylum photographer Joaquín Buitrago.

Throughout the novel, readers are also challenged to piece together the life story of Joaquín, a young, upper-middle-class art photographer who becomes addicted to morphine and, cut off financially by his parents, degenerates to photographing corpses, prostitutes, including young Matilda, and prison inmates. Finally, he settles in as the resident photographer at La Castañeda, where he reunites with Matilda and becomes obsessed with shedding light on her mysterious past and inner life. The stories of these two main characters merge for a brief period in 1921 when Joaquín and Matilda live together in Joaquín's newly inherited family home, but Matilda soon tires of Joaquín's persistent efforts to know her innermost thoughts and take care of her, and she retreats to a hermetic inner world back within the protective walls of the asylum. Parallel to and influencing the stories of these characters are the great events of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Mexican history, from the Porfirian era through the aftermath of the Revolution, and

the ongoing processes of modernization, foreign political and economic intervention, and a changing socioeconomic structure.

In addition to these interwoven personal and national histories, *Nadie me verá llorar* intensely contemplates how such stories can be narrated. The novel's narrative style is nonchronological, leaves unresolved ellipses, and carefully avoids the first-person point of view. Over the course of the seven chapters, the third-person narration is most frequently focalized through Joaquín, but also Matilda, the psychiatrist Eduardo Oligochea, and, even more briefly, through a few minor characters. At times, the narration seems to be filtered through an outside observer with a historical perspective. In addition to the multiple focalizers, the novel incorporates epigraphs from a variety of sources, and interposes actual medical file excerpts, passages from history books, Matilda's own letters, and fragments of literary, scientific, and popular texts from the period. These multiple narrative strategies point to and reinforce a central preoccupation at work on many levels in the novel: the ethical problem of how one person can access and represent another individual's private history and perspective. The narrator—ambiguously focalized—asserts at one point, “En los edificios del lenguaje siempre hay pasillos sin luz, escaleras imprevistas, sótanos escondidos detrás de las puertas cerradas cuyas llaves se pierden en los bolsillos agujereados del único dueño, el soberano rey de los significados” (110–11). Through Certeau, my reading fleshes out this relationship between space, language, and subjectivity in *Nadie me verá llorar*.

Certeau's ideas about dynamic “spaces” and improvisational “tactics” provide a fruitful approach to considering ways of reading in the broadest sense. Rivera Garza reads *La Castañeda* and its occupants through the documentation that remains—the official files and records left by the medical authorities. This reading process is evidenced implicitly by the novel as a whole, and is documented more directly through the “Notas finales” on sources and acknowledgments following the novel's conclusion. While asylum authorities used writing and photography as a means to diagnose, classify, and impose a degree of control on residents, Rivera Garza reads these records against the grain, seeking instead to understand what the patterns in the doctors' use of language and management of information can reveal about their own participation in discourses of gender and modernity. The novelist does not use the official documents in an attempt to reconstruct the patients' lost voices—this would only reinforce the doctors' privileged claim to authority—but to document and meditate on the loss itself.

Just as Rivera Garza's reading of the asylum is shaped but not dictated by the textual structures of its historical records, her characters trace out their own idiosyncratic trajectories in their daily lives within the formidable constraints of the asylum walls and procedures. *Nadie me verá llorar* represents the asylum as a multidimensional "space" that acts and is acted upon by the range of complex subjects who occupy it. The novel projects no hope of recovering these subjects' voices, lost forever because they were almost never granted the status of being recorded. Rather, just as the characters find some degree of leeway within the oppressive structures of the asylum, the space of the novel includes narrative "pasillos sin luz" that purposefully introduce indeterminacy into the representation, mirroring the author's own readerly experience. Like Rivera Garza herself, readers have no choice but to accept the darkened passageways and wander through the novel's maze of voices and silences. *Nadie me verá llorar* thus predisposes readers to view and experience the asylum and the lives of its occupants through tactics that challenge the subject/object dynamic inherent in conventional concepts of madness. Together, the characters' varying readings of the space of La Castañeda provide readers of the novel with a multifaceted and open-ended tour of the asylum. It is represented as a marginal and hermetic enclosure that can also be a refuge, and as a highly structured space that is nevertheless negotiated by consumers. The external narrator possessing a historical perspective emphasizes that the marginality of La Castañeda as a Mexican institution replicates the isolation of its occupants from the rest of society: Matilda's writings, filed away, "se quedan en los márgenes de los días y del lenguaje, como Joaquín, como el manicomio mismo" (27). After the fanfare of its inauguration by Porfirio Díaz, the asylum, meant to be a beacon of progress and modernization, has been neglected over the course of the Revolution, and has become "el bote de basura de los tiempos modernos y de todos los tiempos por venir. Éste era el lugar donde se acababa el futuro, [Eduardo y Joaquín] estaban conscientes de este hecho" (29). While making his night rounds, Eduardo observes that the asylum seems "tan pequeño y tan hermético como el interior de una nuez" (96). For Joaquín, at least, this sense of enclosure offers security; returning from his five days of research in the Biblioteca Nacional in the city, he realizes for the first time that the asylum "es su santuario. La guerra perpetua de la ciudad lo cerca entero" (85). The physical and social isolation of the asylum is thus presented as both disempowering and therapeutic.

Individual trajectories are limited but not controlled by the highly ordered

structure and regulations of La Castañeda. Repeatedly, Joaquín and Matilda forge their own paths within the asylum, moving in ways that are supposedly forbidden. In one instance, Joaquín approaches Matilda, who is out in the gardens near the gate:

Ella no debería estar ahí; ninguno de los dos debería estarlo. Los internos necesitan un permiso especial para cruzar los patios del plantel y los fotógrafos no tienen pretexto alguno para acercarse a ellos. De cualquier manera ocurre: la encuentra. (27)

Similarly, Matilda knowingly defies the institution's rules by spending several nights in Joaquín's room (120). In practice, these asylum consumers find opportunities to make unpredictable moves within the constraints of their situation.

In one significant passage, the novel takes readers on an extended tour of La Castañeda, quickly diverging from the conventional representation of the asylum as a rigidly structured place. Eduardo has invited Joaquín to join him for a walk around the asylum, yet the description that follows does not seem to come from either of them. Rather, its source is a narrator resembling Rivera Garza herself: an external narrating agent with a historical perspective and a detailed knowledge of La Castañeda. This orientation to the asylum begins by focusing on the technical aspects of its structure:

El manicomio tiene veinticinco edificios diseminados en 141.662 metros cuadrados. Dentro, protegidos por altos muros y rejas de hierro, los locos y los castaños proyectan sus sombras sobre lugares apartados del tiempo. (37)

Even here, the technical discourse meanders off into reflective imagery. Still, the asylum is presented first as a large, exact, distinct place marked by a fixed boundary.

The tour continues as the external historian narrating agent goes on to describe how La Castañeda is divided and how its residents specialize in various activities. Again, the presentation wavers between a Foucauldian view of the asylum as an instrument of socioeconomic discipline and, alternately, a concept of the asylum as a dynamic space that is interpreted in varying ways by its occupants. Thus, while the men and women inmates are made to work without pay in separate workshops, the asylum also houses "poetas

escribiéndole cartas a Dios; mecánicos, farmacéuticos, policías, ladrones, anarquistas que han renunciado a la violencia. Ocurren historias de amor” (37–38). And although the imposing and symmetrical building is meant to divide patients neatly by sex, class, and condition, the people also interact with this structure in unforeseeable ways:

algunos cuerpos se mueven con nerviosismo, chocando contra los muros; otros permanecen inmóviles sobre las bancas de madera observando hacia dentro las planicies púrpura de la melancolía. Sus ojos hablan con fantasmas sepultados en las paredes, con las voces diáfnas del aire. (38–39)

Despite the rigidity of its structures, then, *La Castañeda* is presented as a negotiable system that can be experienced actively in diverse and inventive ways.

This degree of flexibility is also apparent in the representation of the voices of asylum residents. Repeatedly, the asylum is described as a noisy place, but individual utterances typically blend together in what Joaquín considers a “griterío incesante,” and their distinct meanings are lost (28). Through the use of such narrative techniques, the novel enacts an extended and partially successful attempt to recognize the individual voices of Joaquín, Matilda, and Eduardo. Just as Rivera Garza’s historical research resists the illusory goal of distilling intact voices of historical asylum residents, her novel confronts readers with prominent narrative filters that feature the indeterminacy and tactical potential inherent to the asylum itself and its representations. Readers may struggle in vain to shed light on these narrative dark spots, but ultimately they are obliged to wander, mirroring the errant spatial “readings” that the characters carry out within *La Castañeda*.

Further reinforcing the necessity and usefulness of this indeterminate mode of reading, the novel explores the counterexamples of frustrated, inflexible readers: Joaquín, and to a lesser extent, Eduardo. Although only Joaquín’s reading process is narrated at length, both characters fail in their attempts to read and represent Matilda’s identity because they are incapable of accepting “pasillos sin luz,” and instead strive to impose external systems of narration. In other words, using Certeau’s vocabulary, Joaquín and Eduardo attempt to fit a complex and dynamic space into the fixed structures of a place. It is through the narration of these frustrated efforts that the majority of the plot unfolds; readers receive Matilda’s story principally through nar-

rated accounts of how Joaquín and Eduardo construct their markedly limited versions.

Motivated by a fascination with Matilda and a sincere desire to take care of her, Joaquín strives to fill every gap in his understanding of Matilda's identity, resorting to representational systems ranging from photography to historical and medical narratives to, finally, Matilda's own autobiographical narrative. Throughout the novel, Joaquín undergoes a learning process that improves his understanding of Matilda and also of how best to gain access to Matilda's thoughts and memories. Joaquín never realizes that his goal of a perfect representation of Matilda's identity is doomed to fail, however, because he is unable to conceive of listening to her narration without smoothing out the patchy areas with his own interpretive systems. Joaquín ultimately fails at reading Matilda because he relies too heavily on totalizing strategies rather than accepting gaps and detours in the narrative.

Nevertheless, Joaquín's development as a reader and writer throughout the course of the novel is considerable. Before meeting Matilda, Joaquín has complete faith in his own ability as a photographer to capture from the outside a person's innermost identity and thoughts. He firmly believes that he can perfectly and accurately represent a woman's true nature without any participation on her part:

las mujeres se volvían hacia adentro, hacia donde se veían como ellas mismas querían verse. Y ése era precisamente el lugar que el fotógrafo anhelaba conocer y detener para siempre. El lugar en que una mujer se acepta a sí misma. (19)

Joaquín still believes “en lo imposible” when he photographs Matilda for the first time, in the brothel. As she will later do in the asylum, Matilda returns Joaquín's authoritative gaze, not only asking him how he became a “fotógrafo de putas” but also “buscando sus ojos tras la lente” (19).³ Although it is suggested that this first encounter with Matilda profoundly affects Joaquín,

3. As Rivera Garza acknowledges in the novel's “Notas finales,” Joaquín's photographs of the prostitutes correspond in many ways to the images compiled by Ava Vargas in *La Casa de Cita: Mexican Photographs from the Belle Époque*. These stereoscopic plates were apparently created during the Porfirian era by a photographer with the initials J.B. in collaboration with the workers in a high-class brothel. Curiously, subsequent research (Sánchez Arteche) has suggested that the space depicted in the photographs is actually a private residence.

his reaction to Matilda's behavior when they meet in the asylum does not evidence such a change.

Reflecting on that meeting, Joaquín recalls being surprised that Matilda spoke to him as he took her picture: “—¿Cómo se convierte uno en fotógrafo de locos?—le había preguntado. Joaquín, desacostumbrado a oír la voz de los sujetos que fotografiaba, pensó que se trataba de su propia conciencia” (15). Joaquín still expects his subjects to accept passively the visual representation he creates of them without asserting their own agency and voice. By verbally turning the focus back on Joaquín, Matilda destabilizes his approach. This effect is heightened by Matilda's active participation in shaping the story that the picture will tell about her, in contrast with Joaquín's customary control:

Ahí, frente a él, sentada sobre el banquillo de los locos, vistiendo un uniforme azul, la mujer que debería haber estado inmóvil y asustada, con los ojos perdidos y una hilerilla de baba cayendo por la comisura de los labios, se comportaba en cambio con la socarronería y altivez de una señorita de alcurnia posando para su primera tarjeta de visita. . . . En lugar de recargarse sobre la pared y mirar en silencio el vacío, ella se había inclinado hacia la cámara, y acomodándose el largo cabello de caoba con gestos seductores, formuló la única pregunta que le recordaba la muerte. La suya. (15–16)

Joaquín's reaction to Matilda's demeanor and question clearly shows that he has been deeply disturbed by this experience, because it so directly challenges his basic understanding of his role as a cultural reader and writer.

When he subsequently becomes obsessed with understanding and taking care of Matilda, Joaquín shows a changed way of thinking by asking Matilda to tell him about her life from her own perspective, thereby relinquishing part of his interpretive control and inviting Matilda to participate in her own representation. Yet Matilda's fragmentary style of speaking and her frequent use of ellipsis—notably, also characteristics of the novel itself—do not meet Joaquín's expectation for a coherent narrative: “sus pocas charlas carecen de sentido. Matilda se escapa a mitad de la conversación y luego se confunde entre las otras internas” (27). Unsatisfied, Joaquín seeks to fill in these gaps and impose order by researching secondary sources. After obtaining Matilda's diagnostic file from Eduardo, Joaquín goes to the Biblioteca Nacional and spends days poring over historical documents to reconstruct a coherent,

contextualized narration of Matilda's life. It begins objectively, with excerpts from a reference book describing Matilda's place of origin (62–65). Yet as the novel's narration shifts between Joaquín reading in the library and detailed, intimate descriptions of the lives of Matilda's parents and Matilda herself, there is no clear indication as to Joaquín's sources—library books? the asylum file? Matilda?—or the extent to which the narrative has been filtered by Joaquín's own drug-addled imagination. At the very least, Joaquín's several appearances or interventions in the story he reconstructs make it clear that he projects his own feelings about Matilda onto his interpretation of her life. At times, Joaquín seems to be “watching” as Matilda's story plays out according to his expectations, and occasionally, he goes so far as to literally insert himself into the story:

Justo como lo quiso Joaquín, Matilda bajó las escalinatas sola, todavía llena de energía, curiosidad. . . . La soledad, por primera vez, la tomó de las manos y le dio un cariz de fingido valor a su rostro. Nadie la vería llorar. . . . Entonces, sin darse cuenta, empezó a llorar. *Una sombra baja de lo lejos y le ofrece, a través del tiempo, un pañuelo blanco, inmaculado.* J.B. (76, original emphasis)

Scenes such as this one indicate that, although Joaquín may not realize it, the personal motivations and expectations of the biographer inevitably become a part of the biography. As Joaquín struggles to execute a coherent reading of Matilda's life, readers of the resulting ambiguous narration must also grapple with their own “strategic” or “tactical” approaches.

Joaquín's development as a reader peaks when he seeks out and transcribes Matilda's own narration of her life story. While the two live together in the asylum, Joaquín

noche a noche transcribe algunas sombras de la vida de Matilda. Su afec-
ción mental. Su condición. Son apuntes escritos a toda velocidad, garabatos
sin puntuación, frases entrecortadas y fragmentos organizados sin método
alguno que sólo él será capaz de entender después. (122)

Ironically, then, Joaquín's written narrative is just as hermetic as Matilda's spoken words. Prompting her with questions—“¿Qué pasó entonces, Matilda? ¿Qué *nos* pasó?” (122, my emphasis)—Joaquín again reveals that his own perspective is inextricable from his documentation of Matilda's life

story. Kind as his intentions may seem, 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. Although, as we have seen, Joaquín makes use of "tactics" in negotiating the space of the asylum, he is unable to extend this flexible approach to his reading of Matilda.

Eduardo stands as an additional example of the limitations inherent in a strategic reading. He does not realize that his faith in his own (pseudo)scientific authority and his unquestioning acceptance of contemporary gender norms make it impossible for him to access or represent Matilda's inner life objectively, accurately, or respectfully. Pointing to the true instability of the ostensibly fixed system of scientific representation, the novel stresses the narrative and aesthetic qualities of Eduardo's clinical writing:

Hay vocablos por los que Eduardo Oligochea siente especial predilección. El adjetivo implacable, por ejemplo; las sílabas de la palabra delirio que, pronunciadas una tras otra, le recuerdan las perlas artificiales de un collar.
(102)

Given Eduardo's pleasure in the manipulation of language, it is significant that his written assessment of Matilda's symptoms focuses on what he deems inappropriate language use:

La interna es sarcástica y grosera. Habla demasiado. Hace discursos incoherentes e interminables acerca de su pasado. . . . Sufre de una imaginación excéntrica y tiene una tendencia clara a inventar historias que nunca se cansa de contar. Pasa de un asunto a otro sin parar. Proclividad a usar términos rebuscados a los cuales pretende dar otro significado. (110)

This file excerpt makes it clear that Eduardo's adherence to strategy leaves him unable to find meaning in Matilda's tactical approach to language. Together, Eduardo and Joaquín serve as examples of the failed narrating and reading strategies that the novel hopes to avoid and discourage.

Nadie me verá llorar juxtaposes these problematic outward narrations of Matilda's inner life with the novel's own tactical approach to representing the unconventional perspectives of both Joaquín and Matilda. Through its focalization, the novel confers upon the drug addict and the asylum inmate the ability to tell their own stories, and yet, the consistent use of third-person

narration remains a constant reminder that Matilda and Joaquín are not truly speaking for themselves. For readers of the novel, this unresolved narrative tension promotes a reading approach that acknowledges the necessary instability of the space of the text.

Although much of the novel's narration is focalized through Joaquín, a morphine addict, his perspective seldom conveys the unconventional thought processes that might be expected with such heavy drug use. The high degree of filtration involved in conveying Joaquín's perspective occasionally becomes clear when the novel hints at his true way of speaking or thinking. Eduardo's assessment of Joaquín's narrative style is one of those key moments:

Hablar, para Joaquín, es desvariar. Confunde el tiempo de los verbos y los pronombres. Omite fechas. "El," dice refiriéndose a sí mismo, describiendo a otro. El pasado lo refiere en tercera persona. Eduardo Oligochea lo escucha en silencio, tratando de organizar el marasmo de las palabras, los cabos sueltos de sus relatos. (33–34)

Curiously, Eduardo's observation that Joaquín uses the third person instead of the first person opens up the possibility that all of the third-person narration focalized by Joaquín is actually directly narrated by him. The novel never clarifies this narrative ambiguity, but by leaving it unresolved, it calls attention to these multiple possibilities for representation.

The novel gives another glimpse of Joaquín's perceptions by presenting his thoughts directly before and after a morphine fix. Immediately beforehand, Joaquín's thoughts are at their most fragmentary and unstable: "hay sucesos que no puede olvidar, calles que permanecerán en su memoria para siempre. Agujeros luminosos. Diamantina Vicario. Un ataque súbito de nervios lo hace tartamudear. Mesones 35" (141).

Subsequently, under the influence of the drug, Joaquín can literally see Matilda and Diamantina Vicario as the former describes the two women's relationship:

Mientras la voz de Matilda sigue cayendo pausada y neutra sobre la habitación a oscuras, Joaquín efectivamente logra verlas. En la pantalla de sus paredes aparece la imagen de Matilda caminando de la casa de los Burgos a la casa de Columba. (141)

This scene hints at Joaquín's idiosyncratic modes of perception, but the novel limits this type of direct insight.

Similarly, the style of the narration focalized through Matilda does not correspond to other characters' assessments of her thought processes. This discrepancy suggests an unresolved difficulty in how to represent the unconventional modes of perception identified as mental illness. Matilda focalizes much of the narration, especially the narration of her life before entering the asylum, but these passages do not typically display the hallmarks of Matilda's voice—fragmentation, disorder, playful use of language, and profanity—observed by Joaquín and Eduardo. One of the few instances of an apparently direct insight into Matilda's thoughts challenges Joaquín and Eduardo's view of Matilda by presenting her apparently deteriorating mental health as a logical and conscious decision. Through Matilda's focalization, her return to an impenetrable inner world and to the asylum is an intentional act, a way of exerting authority over her own life and withdrawing from a society that will not cease to see her as an object:

Ante sus miradas inquisitivas y amorosas, Matilda añora más que nunca vivir en un universo sin ojos, un lugar donde lo único importante sean las historias relatadas de noche. El silencio. Las miradas masculinas la han perseguido toda la vida. Con deseo o con exhaustividad, animadas por la lujuria o por el afán científico, los ojos de los hombres han visto, medido y evaluado su cuerpo primero, y después su mente, hasta el hartazgo. En la luz húmeda de julio, lo único que desea es volverse invisible. (236)

Here the novel makes literal the commonly held notion that insanity is a way in which people, particularly women, protest and subvert oppressive sociocultural norms. And yet, Matilda's retreat into "madness" constitutes not an empowering way of speaking freely, but a real silence: the events of the remaining decades of her life are a gaping ellipsis in the novel capped only by news of her death.

It is not until the very end that the novel presents Matilda's thoughts directly, in the form of letters she has written during her confinement in the asylum. These hermetic letters do not adhere to conventions of order or structure, and thus display the characteristics that Joaquín and Eduardo have observed about Matilda's speech all along. Significantly, the letters are not accompanied by any externally imposed interpretation, but are allowed simply to speak for themselves. Because Matilda's words are placed near the end

of the novel, readers confront these “pasillos sin luz” as a culmination of the novel’s exploration of tactical modes of consumption.⁴ Matilda has created a dark textual space, and it is the readers’ task to find ways to negotiate it.

Both Matilda and Joaquín act as “writers,” then, at given points in the novel, but only Matilda’s written text is presented directly to the readers of the novel. In addition, the two collaborate in the creation of a performance that is observed by Eduardo and, indirectly, the readers of the novel. As they are both considered mentally ill by their contemporaries, Matilda and Joaquín are constantly being diagnosed and read by powerful others, and they demonstrate an awareness of this process by creating a parodic performance of insanity. By exaggeratedly playing out Eduardo’s own interpretations of them as mentally ill, they flaunt their authority not only to execute the same reading but to mock its inaccuracies. During the brief time they live in Joaquín’s family home, Matilda and Joaquín transform the conventional place into an artistic, performative space:

han comprado máscaras y maquillaje, papel de china y un fonógrafo, copal. . . . Todas las fotografías de Joaquín están prendidas a las paredes con tachuelas. Mujeres y ausencias se reparten de manera desigual en la sala y la biblioteca, la cocina y el baño. . . . Matilda ha fabricado hileras de flores con el papel de china para adornar los cuartos comunes de la casa. Pedazos de seda cubren las lámparas para cambiar los tonos de la atmósfera. (230–31)

The two cross-dress and put on a show of insanity, with the sole visitor Eduardo as their audience. Dancing grotesquely, they taunt him: “es que estamos muy locos, Doctor . . . ¿no vas a tomar notas, Eduardo? . . . Somos todo un caso” (231). Ultimately, only Joaquín and Matilda have access to their individual thoughts and perceptions, and their performance ridicules any attempt by medical authorities—and even, by extension, the novel itself—to represent them.

Although *Nadie me verá llorar* does not arrive at any easy conclusions about its complex problems of representation, the novel itself reaches closure

4. Matilda’s letters are a verbatim reproduction of letters written by an actual La Castañeda inmate, Modesta Burgos, cited and analyzed in Rivera Garza’s dissertation (“Masters of the Streets,” 324–28). To her credit, Rivera Garza does not impose her dissertation’s reading of these letters on readers of the novel, but rather, leaves each reader to find a way to approach them.

with the death of Matilda. Readers learn of her death through an official document, but this externally imposed narrative is quickly displaced by the final words of the novel, a sort of self-written epitaph through which Matilda forcefully commands everyone—the novel and its readers included—“déjenme descansar en paz” (251). Finally in the first person, Matilda takes the last word to assert her subjectivity and to resist being interpreted and represented by others. By closing in this way, the novel reasserts its claim for tactical modes of reading adapted to the indeterminacy inherent in the dynamic spaces and subjects that make up any story.

Rivera Garza has persuasively advocated just such an approach to historical reading and writing on her blog in an entry titled “Di no a la voz dada”:

Dar-voz implica borrar la voz que está, la voz que es.

Dar-voz esconde una voluntad imperialista y sorda.

Dar-voz transforma en mudo a alguien que sólo habla otra cosa.

Dar-voz refuerza el yo del dador.

Dar-voz incluso le otorga una calidad moral, sin prueba alguna, al dador.

Dar-voz multiplica la voz del dador.

Rather, she calls for historians to admit, honestly and humbly, “que lo que hacemos es escuchar / leer cuidadosamente, poner la atención adecuada y, entonces, traducir eso que viene de atrás del tiempo o se dice en otras latitudes.” Through its characters and narrative techniques, *Nadie me verá llorar* elicits a compatible mode of listening and reading. Characters’ trajectories through the space of the asylum are just as varied and indeterminate as readers’ paths through the novel, manifesting a relationship not of reading and writing subjects and voiceless objects, but of interdependent, mutable subjects. Rivera Garza’s novel, like the historical asylum it brings to life, is a fixed yet unstable space where diverse subjects perpetually wander the darkened halls.

Although La Castañeda no longer exists, its literary representation resonates strongly with the realities of mental health care in Latin America at the end of the twentieth century. Coinciding with the fall of dictatorships throughout the region was a “renaissance of mental health issues in general and societal concern for human rights” (Levav et al. 75), marked by the groundbreaking Regional Conference for the Restructuring of Psychiatric Care held in Caracas in 1990. The sixteen participating countries agreed on the need to update mental health legislation and replace centralized psychiat-

ric hospitals with “community-based services as the chief means to attain accessible, decentralized, comprehensive, continuous and preventive care” (Levav et al. 71). The asylum and the corresponding medical model of mental illness were thus acknowledged as obsolete, but in the years following the Caracas initiative, Latin American mental health care generally continued to revolve around large, deteriorating institutions (Arboleda-Flórez and Weisstub 38). Viewed in this context, the negotiation of these discursive and physical structures in *Nadie me verá llorar* is at once a reflection of the “tactics” available to real individuals whom they enclose, and a manifestation of the current potential for resituating concepts of mental illness and people identified as mentally ill.

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