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MODERNISMO AND THE AUDACIOUS ILLNESS NARRATIVES OF AURORA CÁCERES AND MARÍA LUISA GARZA

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By selecting the title *La novia de Nervo* for her 1922 novel, exiled Mexican writer María Luisa Garza (“Loreley”) invoked popular *modernista* poet Amado Nervo’s famed book of poetry *La amada inmóvil*, thereby linking her own work to the *modernista* movement. Published posthumously in 1920, Nervo’s book was dedicated to Ana Cecilia, a woman who had secretly lived in his home until she died in 1912. Garza’s title thus alludes to the role established for women within Spanish American *modernismo*: languid, beautiful muse. Although it was consumed by a strong female readership (Martínez), the *modernista* canon cast women as aesthetic objects imbued with meaning by male artists, leaving no clear position for a woman writer to participate in the movement.

Early studies of women in *modernismo* in the 1980s and 1990s documented this exclusion and concluded that women writers did not participate in *modernismo* because they wanted nothing to do with a boys’ club that gathered in physical spaces inaccessible to women and relegated women to the roles of muse or recipient in their work (Frederick, Sternbach). Women poets such as Delmira Agustini who did address the decadent, exotic, and ancient motifs, ornamental structures, and gendered conventions of *modernista* writing have been categorized in literary histories as a separate phase, “*posmodernismo*.” Perhaps this is because, as Sylvia Molloy observed, “la mujer sujeto, tan distinta de la mujer fetichizada del texto modernista, es una realidad cultural . . . que amenaza el sistema de representación modernista” (21). Scholars including Cathy Jade, Sarah Moody, Tina Escaja, and Chantal Berthet have worked to read texts by women writers within the frame of *modernismo*, illuminating the participation of early twentieth-century women subjects as critical readers who actively engaged the movement on their own terms. Recognizing that the narrow traditional definition of *modernismo* would exclude the narratives by women writers that are the subject of her dissertation, Chantal Berthet counters:

Ellas deseaban ser ‘intelectuales modernas’ y para esto acogieron un instrumental literario en boga que les permitiera validar sus propuestas y su interés muy específico en la situación de la mujer y el potencial desperdiciado por su restringida participación en el mundo laboral o cívico. Si el modernismo deseaba crear un discurso moderno hispanoamericano, quizás se puede decir que este grupo de narradoras intenta plenamente integrar a la mujer de la región en el imaginario de esa modernidad. (186)

Within this context, my essay discusses audacious illness narratives —Garza’s *La novia de Nervo* and *Tentáculos de fuego* (1930) and Aurora Cáceres’s 1914 novels *La rosa muerta* and *Las perlas de Rosa*— that reinterpret the *modernista* image of the ailing female body. In doing so, these works denounce discourses, social structures, and medical institutions that harm women, while imagining both male and female figures who defy convention.

Mainstream *modernista* imagery associated illness with the uniqueness and creativity of male writers, and with the pallor and stillness of the female body as aesthetic object. Gabriela Nouzeilles has argued that canonical *modernista* texts represent illness as a source of artistic activity for male writer figures (149–51). Conspicuously marking their illness narratives with *modernista* motifs, Cáceres and Garza countered such conventions with representations of women protagonists’ experiences of illness within their social as well as artistic contexts. Their work extends an effort by late-nineteenth-century women writers such as Juana Manuela Gorriti to challenge positivist representations of illness through “personal meditations on the female body” and its relationship to nationalist discourses of modernity (Masiello 7). In these texts by Garza and Cáceres, illness does not simply stand for the special role of the *modernista* artist or for social fears of so-called “degeneration.” Rather, Cáceres and Garza offer literary works that view personal suffering and its social and medical context as worthy of attention in their own right.

AURORA CÁCERES’S INTENSE ROSES

Peruvian feminist Aurora Cáceres (also known by her righteous pen name, Evangelina) published *La rosa muerta* in Paris in 1914, and it would take nearly a century for the novel to see a second edition (2007). At that point the work became, in Nancy LaGreca’s words, “the only readily available example of *modernista* prose by a prominent woman writer in Latin America” (“Intertextual” 617). Through Laura, the novel’s ailing Spanish protagonist, Cáceres condemns corrupt physicians and reveals the shame that women were socially conditioned to feel about seeking treatment for gynecological issues. I argue in the introduction to my English translation of the novel that Cáceres’s protagonist embodies the impossible role available to a woman artist within *modernista* discourse. Laura, as Rebecca Mason observes, is an artist whose medium is her own body: through exercise, corsets, high heels, and a carefully chosen wardrobe, she has fashioned a perfect aesthetic object. Layering *modernista* motifs of sculpture, “exotic” cultures, and flowers, Laura’s skin is so marble-white that her face has “una azulada palidez lapidaria” (1), her gauzy dress

highlights her “perfiles de levantina estatua” (5), and she smells and looks like a flower with her tightly cinched waist (6, 15).

Laura’s perfect outward appearance conceals the physical and emotional suffering she experiences due to an ailment identified in the novel as uterine fibroids that may have resulted from an infection transmitted to her by her philandering late husband. While Laura goes to great lengths to prevent her elite social circle from finding out about her condition, the novel follows every excruciating detail of her examination by three different gynecologists. With the third—the sensitive, feminine Dr. Castel— Laura pursues a sexual relationship, in spite of his warning that it may prove fatal due to her ailment.¹ Indeed, Laura’s condition worsens, but at the peak of her suffering she is still a perfect *modernista* vision, clad in a kimono “cual un samurai herido,” her “palidez de cirio semejándola a los fumadores de opio” (61–62). She hides her deteriorating condition from Dr. Castel by leaving the country. In the last moments of her life, surgeons are unable to perform a procedure to save Laura because she has forbidden them to leave any external mark on her perfect body. Through a letter informing Dr. Castell of her impending death, Laura controls the sad denouement of her own story. She has commissioned a nude portrait to shape her enduring image: “la Venus más perfecta que queda del arte contemporáneo” (66).

Laura cannot survive as simultaneously *modernista* subject and aesthetic object. The novel abandons this dilemma in its final scene, when Laura is explicitly replaced by the only other female character who speaks in the novel, Dr. Castel’s intelligent young daughter who symbolically switches on an electric light (LaGreca “Intertextual” 624). Centering her plot on Laura’s experience with illness allows Cáceres to send a distress signal as a female *modernista*, while daring to narrate a sexual relationship outside of marriage from a woman’s point of view; as Berthet observes, “las contradicciones reunidas en el cuerpo de Laura sirven como vehículo para criticar las limitaciones y el confinamiento de las mujeres tanto en el plano sexual como en el social” (165).

The detailed account of Laura’s suffering and treatment voices experiences not often discussed in public, let alone in literature. Cáceres roundly condemns doctors who recommend costly surgeries based on the patient’s wealth, and unhygienic facilities where women are treated “como a carne descompuesta que causa repugnancia” with what Laura considers a shocking disregard for social protocol (14). In particular, as Nancy LaGreca points out, Laura’s examination by Dr. Blumen is so violent that it “conjures a rape scene” (“Intertextual” 623). Laura has the means and the will to keep shopping until she finds a doctor who treats her with courtesy and offers a non-surgical treatment option, but the rows of resigned women in the first two doctors’ waiting rooms ostensibly do not.

Just as important for Laura, the aesthetic qualities of Dr. Castel and his office are a suitable match for her *modernista* tastes. The doctor is an “exotic” man from Constantinople with superior aesthetic sensibilities that allow him to appreciate her body’s perfect contours (31). His luminous office with its jewel-like surgical instru-

¹ Dr. Castel is discussed at length by Nancy LaGreca (*Erotic Mysticism* 120–26).

ments, which he personally keeps sparkling clean, is the setting that Laura chooses for her treatment and, eventually, the fatal sexual relationship that she initiates. Part statue, part *mujer fatal*, Laura embodies the toxic *modernista* aesthetic until she is displaced in death by a perfect portrait. Nevertheless, Dr. Castel's daughter will carry the torch: "apenas una rosa acaba de perfumar la existencia de algún hombre cuando se deshoja, y luego otro nuevo capullo se abre en un nuevo florecimiento, tan intenso como el de la rosa muerta" (70).

Illness is also linked to *modernista* motifs in the *costumbrista* companion novel, *Las perlas de Rosa*, originally published in the same volume as *La rosa muerta* and never reprinted. The decadent protagonist, Rosa, is a blue-eyed Peruvian mestiza with the complexion of "un lirio enfermo" (132), who inherited a mysterious illness from her mestizo father (and his Spanish father before him). They experience relief not from Western medicine, but by living far from "la civilización de las grandes ciudades" in Ayacucho (141), where they can breathe the mountain air and use traditional herbal remedies. Rosa is ashamed of her indigenous ancestry and she treats her indigenous mother with disdain. Unconcerned with the aesthetic or monetary value of material riches, at the age of ten she is decked out in silk, velvet, pearls, and gold — "vestida a la europea con el gusto deslumbrante de las indias" — and she feeds pearls inherited from her indigenous ancestors to a donkey for amusement (133-34). Rosa's excessive adornment, recombining European materials to create a new American look, brings to mind Gwen Kirkpatrick's description of *modernista* language:

Just as they held a penchant for ornately decorated physical spaces, language itself had to be filled, decorated, and overburdened until it groaned under the excess of sensory paraphernalia. With rhyme, rhythm, and extended imagistic development, every inch of space was filled, inviting crowding, violence and, ultimately, parody . . . the female figure in *modernismo* is an object almost at one with the language, heavily decorated, distant and elusive. (7-8)

As a young woman, Rosa orchestrates decadent evening social events where behavior does not follow gendered social protocols. In attendance are local (primarily male) professionals and intellectuals, including a "mocete flaco y cadavérico" by the nickname of Elvira, a popular friend of the young ladies (thanks to outstanding dressmaking skills) who would happily "reemplazar a una dama en el baile cuando hacía falta" (148). The lavish revels that Rosa organizes include poetry, music, folklore, and a great deal of food and champagne, taking for granted the labor of indigenous and black servants and musicians. Carelessly tossing pearls into the river for entertainment (and possibly casting aside another "treasure") at one such event, Rosa tells her beloved Captain Manuel that he will leave her and "la ausencia de usted me llevaría a la muerte" (154).

When Manuel indeed disappears, Rosa sinks into melancholy and insomnia, eventually turning to alcohol as an escape. Soon a homeless alcoholic, she has lost her beautiful figure and resembles "un junco oscilante que se inclina tristemente," her once splendid eyes and hair now devoid of color (235). Her illness is certainly not an aesthetic experience; it strips Rosa of the riches, beauty, social network,

and festive leisure time that linked her to *modernista* iconography. Now, she must spend her time securing basic physical needs: shelter, food, and alcohol. The mysterious illness that Rosa shares with her father, as well as her alcohol addiction, seem linked to racist notions of degeneration; Rosa’s struggle with alcohol is triggered by her socially rebellious romance with Captain Manuel—which, in contrast with the scandalous detail of the preceding novel, is only implied. Western medicine and modern social welfare institutions play no role in Rosa’s experience with these illnesses, and despite her prayers and the donation of her remaining pearls to the church, Rosa is redeemed by the Virgin Mary only in death. Readers of *La rosa muerta* who continued through *Las perlas de Rosa* would be left with a moralizing religious message layered over, but not erasing, the shameless actions of Laura.

Cáceres’s self-destructing protagonists embody the tensions between *modernista* images of women, cultural gender norms, and the position of woman artist. As the daughter of a Peruvian president and a devout Catholic who married a bohemian writer and participated in an international feminist network, Cáceres herself surely grappled with these same competing frameworks. While her brief marriage to Enrique Gómez Carrillo had given Cáceres access to *modernista* circles, the fraternity clearly did not consider her one of their own. Rubén Darío began his perfunctory prologue for her essay collection *Oasis del arte* by establishing that writing by women was not his cup of tea: “confieso ante todo que no soy partidario de las plumíferas” (Cáceres, *La rosa muerta* 71). The prologue to *La rosa muerta* by Nervo praises her choice to write a love story—which he considers the rightful domain of women writers—but ends by hinting at aesthetic flaws while condescendingly encouraging her to keep writing:

Al librito de la Señora Cáceres, tal vez pudiera yo hacerle algunos reparos con respecto a cierta sintaxis, a un vocabulario algo cosmopolita . . . como los protagonistas, a la intromisión repentina de tal o cual crudo toque de naturalismo que ya no está quizás con razón, de moda; pero entiendo que mi distinguida y simpática amiga, al hacerme el honor de solicitar para su libro unas líneas a guisa de prólogo, no es precisamente crítica lo que desea. Ésta llegará por otros caminos que el mío y ojalá que venga, para que el libro dure y la novelista se sienta estimulada a nuevos trabajos, tan estimables como el presente. (xxxiii)

The prologues by Darío and Nervo suggest a link to the *modernismo* movement, but are carefully worded to keep Cáceres in her place in the margins.

MARÍA LUISA GARZA: MELTING DOWN THE JEWELS OF *MODERNISMO*

Mexican writer María Luisa Garza (who used the pen name Loreley, evoking the siren) connected her novel *La novia de Nervo* (1922) to *modernismo* not through the style of the writing but through its focus on Nervo and one of his readers—a beau-

tiful ailing woman— as its main characters.² Published in San Antonio, Texas, *La novia de Nervo* fictionalizes Nervo's epistolary relationships with his female readership.³ Turning the spotlight on the female consumers of *modernismo*, Garza's novel features a protagonist who draws inspiration from her readings of Nervo to gain control over her own life as she struggles with illness in a patriarchal society.

In World War I-era France, the French-Mexican protagonist, Madeleine, suffers from a morphine addiction that is deliberately induced by her abusive French doctor/husband in a move to usurp her inherited wealth. Under the pretense of treating a painful uterine ailment that develops after she gives birth to their child, the doctor gives his anxious and depressed young wife morphine, expecting it to kill her within a year or two. Sustained by her religious faith and the correspondence with Nervo that she initiates while under the effects of the morphine, Madeleine continues to fight. A letter from Nervo arrives just in time to prevent her from resorting to prostitution to acquire more morphine. When her nefarious husband chloroforms her and has her committed to an asylum, she escapes by donning a drunk man's military uniform —Nervo's words echoing in her mind. After her husband throws their angelic child out a window to his death, Madeleine puts her military uniform back on and quickly goes on to achieve a stellar career as intrepid air mail pilot León Nemour. At the novel's conclusion, Madeleine moves from literary consumer to co-creator when she chooses to disseminate her own story by giving autobiographical notes to the fictional writer of the novel.

Although it draws on conventions of the popular serial novel, *La novia de Nervo* nevertheless is linked to *modernismo* in several ways; as Robert McKee Irwin observed, these connections include the “language of degeneration, the exaltation of the figure of Nervo, the focus on gender-related social ills, the European setting, and the transgender fantasy” (142), and yet, *La novia de Nervo* stands out for its “feminist social consciousness” (141). The novel depicts Madeleine as a beautiful reader of *modernista* writing, but over time, she becomes an appreciated writer; a letter she pens is described as “todo un poema” (131). Moreover, *La novia* rewrites *modernista* imagery of drug use. Rather than portraying opiates as a path to creativity to contest positivist discourses of modernization, consumerism, and nation-building (Aguilar, Viera, Hollingsworth), or as a figure for social fears of cultural decadence or degeneration (Hollingsworth), Garza's novel associates morphine with images of domestic and institutional abuse and physical and emotional suffering. Madeleine uses reading and writing as tools to fight her way back to health; she tells her story in spite of morphine, rather than through it.

Throughout *La novia de Nervo*, Garza reworks *modernista* motifs and images of feminine beauty. In contrast to typical *modernista* portrayals linking drug use to

² According to Juanita Luna Lawhn, the novel's cover even featured photos of both Nervo and Garza (90).

³ José María Martínez refers to the “intenso epistolario mantenido por Nervo con sus lectoras de ambos lados del Atlántico, epistolario cargado de una sentimentalidad cursi y con unas lectoras que consideraban a Nervo una especie de director espiritual” (“El público femenino del modernismo: las lectoras pretendidas de Amado Nervo” 391).

beauty and creativity,⁴ Madeleine's addiction destroys her physical beauty: she becomes "como un espectro, como una sombra, con la boca hecha una porquería, llena de baba hedionda y asquerosa" (99). In desperation, she takes the belt of her silk kimono (101) —reminiscent of *modernista* orientalism— and attempts to hang herself with it.

When he encounters the dire lack of a social safety net in the form of 12-year-old prostitute known as Pimienta, Garza's fictional Nervo imagines another transformation of the *modernista* ideal woman: "Mujeres . . . figulinas de porcelana, maniqués de escaparate, bellos modelos de las más afamadas casas de París y de Nueva York . . . abajo esas galas, abajo esas sedas . . . fundid el oro de vuestras joyas como fundiera doña Isabel la Católica sus alhajas para que Colón conquistara un mundo . . . conquistad vosotras el mundo también" (36). Invoking *modernista* motifs, both Madeleine and Pimienta are repeatedly likened to birds and butterflies with broken wings, but this image, too, is transformed when Madeleine becomes a pilot and takes the helm of a "pájaro de acero" to enable the transmission of written messages (229).

At the same time, Garza, writing from exile in Texas, engages gendered Mexican discourses of national identity. Luziris Turi notes that both Madeleine and Mexico are represented as ailing women in the novel, and reads Madeleine's suffering as a figure for post-Revolutionary Mexico (107). Amid fears of degeneration, Mexican social reforms at the time of the novel's writing included a campaign against alcohol, marijuana, and opiates (Pérez Montfort 120-22; Campos). Garza explicitly links Madeleine's story to this national discourse by having her moan "la regeneración . . . o la muerte!" when she willfully tosses aside her morphine syringe and enters treatment (11).

However, the values ascribed to gender in Garza's novel are much too fluid to be read as a simple allegory of national identity privileging traditional gender roles. The primary male Mexican character in the novel, Nervo, celebrates and protects women's traditional role, but he himself is portrayed as sensitive and saintly, veering away from convention. When he is mistaken for a drunk due to one of his frequent dizzy spells, Nervo comes into contact with young Pimienta and informally adopts her, rescuing her from "degeneration" by paying for her to live at a convent where she is restored to proper femininity and renamed María. Nervo's letters give Madeleine strength to fight her addiction, and an American doctor successfully cures her, but she turns out to have power of her own: when she escapes from the asylum, all it takes is a haircut and a change of clothing, not just to pass as a man,

⁴ For example, Julio Herrera y Reissig, who had a heart condition, played up his illness and use of morphine and opium as part of his public image as a singular poet (Aguilar). Julián del Casal's "Canción de la morfina" celebrates the drug with verses such as "Ante los bardos sensuales / de loca imaginación, / abro la regia mansión, / de los goces orientales." Pérez Montfort cites a 1908 article condemning the social effects of the consumption of opiates by Porfirian bohemians imitating Parisians: "El exotismo, la sensibilidad enfermiza, la delicadeza morbosa, la espiritualidad de talles tuberculizados y la alba transparencia de las epidermis anémicas, son ahora las pinceladas predilectas del arte moderno, también exótico, enemigo (*sic*) y tuberculoso" (89-90).

but to excel in the exclusively male role of pilot. She enjoys living as a man: “Madeleine pensó que era muy bello ser hombre, que no se estaba expuesto de ese modo a cariños interesados ni a violencias, ni a injurias” (220). Her true identity is only discovered much later, when she is being honored at an award ceremony and her husband, high on marijuana, shows up to kill her. Madeleine’s steadfast, self-sacrificing indigenous Mexican nana displays fantastic physical strength when she leaps in front of a bullet to save Madeleine and dies while mortally wounding the attacker at the jugular with her bare hands and nails. When Madeleine faints, those administering first aid discover she is a woman, which comes as a shock to the audience who had just been admiring “un jovencito imberbe, pálido y delgado” (238). In the logic of the novel, conventional femininity is to be protected and cherished, but when *machista* violence surfaces, women handily take on conventionally masculine roles to protect themselves.

Populated by orphans and fragmented families, the novel closes optimistically with a makeshift national family formed by an elderly, progressive U.S. doctor as the father figure, war hero Madeleine as the mother figure, and reformed prostitute María as the daughter. The possibility of a heteronormative relationship between Madeleine and Nervo has been foreclosed by his death before they ever meet in person—and it is never a strong possibility anyway, since both liken their love to that of siblings and Madeleine swears to God that she will never break her marriage vows. She plans to raise María in the U.S. and put her through school there, “donde la mujer es respetada y puede defender sus derechos. Si mi marido me busca en ese país, buen trabajo le costará cometer los crímenes que cometiera en mi patria” (234). Upon the impending death of the good doctor, Madeleine will use her inheritance to start a hospital to treat addiction, and María will help her.

At the novel’s close, Madeleine is poised to create a new space for recovery based on a different model for wellness. Like Cáceres, Garza uses her protagonist’s experiences to criticize institutions that fall far short of promoting the health of modern society: “dos viejos médicos atendían aquel hospital si atenderse puede llamarse el venir uno en el día, otro al caer de la tarde, pasar una visita de inspección a las celdas, pasear un rato por el patio con el pretexto de que van a informarse de la salud de los alienados; pero en verdad solo por ganar el sueldo que el gobierno les ha asignado . . . y nada más” (159). This asylum only worsens Madeleine’s mental health: there, Madeleine “era infinitamente nerviosa, todo la asustaba y todo la enloquecía” (164). If Madeleine is to be read as a symbol of post-Revolutionary Mexico, then Garza’s national vision privileges spiritual and physical strength invested in remaking patriarchal institutions and their survivors, reconfiguring traditional gender roles and heteronormative models.⁵ Garza rewrites *modernista* and positivist portrayals of ailing women with a female character who survives in an

⁵ My interpretation here contrasts somewhat with María Patricia Napiorski’s analysis of the “nonegalitarian feminism” of Garza’s journalistic writing (48): “Garza’s coercive nationalism creates points of tension between the political space acquired by an educated woman like herself, and the women relegated to their place as subordinate to the male, whom she praises and sees as the guardians of Mexican national culture” (46).

abusive patriarchal society through her tenacity and versatility. Madeleine draws inspiration from *modernista* readings, but rather than fatally embodying them, she engages a *modernista* writer to overcome domestic and institutional violence and recover from her induced morphine addiction. She escapes from the physical restraint of the asylum and gains independence by appropriating a social role gendered as male. Like Laura’s final letter and portrait in *La rosa muerta*, the notes that Madeleine provides to the fictional novelist shape the telling of her story.

Garza’s 1930 temperance novel *Tentáculos de fuego* serves as a counterpoint to *La novia de Nervo*. Because *Tentáculos de fuego* focuses so heavily on social concerns about alcohol, generally downplaying the aesthetic, its few *modernista* flourishes are thrown into sharp relief. Like the other novels discussed in this essay, *Tentáculos de fuego* criticizes the inadequacies of modern health institutions through its characters’ experiences. The plot is primarily concerned with how the protagonist, Diana, is affected by the alcohol addiction of her fiancé, Ernesto. The stress of being unable to help Ernesto affects Diana’s nerves to the point that she nearly commits suicide by crashing her car. Diana’s singular beauty —“tenía un talle de redondeces tentadoras, pero su cabecita interesante, sus ojos de un verde enigmático y su cabellera de azabache la elevaban de la categoría de mujer hasta la de semidiosa” (22)— and love are no match for the eponymous monster of alcohol addiction that has a stranglehold on Ernesto. His mother’s religious faith and the latest scientific advances at the Rochester sanatorium in the U.S. also fail to save him. Shortly before his suicide, Ernesto winds up in La Castañeda psychiatric hospital, heralded at its opening as a beacon of modern progress but fallen into neglect through the revolutionary years (Rivera Garza). Ernesto certainly does not perceive the hospital as a progressive social institution where he will recover his health: “monstruos y fieras me persiguen. Hombres armados con cuchillos enormes me acosan . . . la locura del alcohol” mingles terrifyingly with “los aullidos de los locos a cada instante” (87). According to the novel, Ernesto is unable to overcome the illness of alcohol addiction because he lacks resolve and he is surrounded by an unsupportive society. Ernesto’s friend Jacobo, a self-made intellectual and labor movement leader, is set up as an alternative love interest for Diana, but the novel’s conclusion does not pursue this possibility, instead focusing on how each of them will continue to fight this monster: Jacobo through his words and Diana by using her inheritance to start a hospital for alcoholics, similar to Madeleine in *La novia de Nervo*.

Although the aesthetic is not foregrounded in *Tentáculos de fuego*, the novel revisits *modernista* discourses of drug use, modernity, and literary creation. Garza rejects *modernista* views of drugs as a source of creativity, unequivocally casting alcohol as an all-devouring monster that Mexico must confront as a modern nation.⁶

⁶ According to Deborah Toner, writers of the Porfirian era, including Nervo, had linked alcoholism to degeneration, portraying alcoholism as both a threat to modernization and a peculiarly modern condition when it came in the form of addiction to distilled liquors considered “modern” (313–405). Campos explains, “Alcohol was widely cited as a substance that degenerated entire races and placed the nation’s security at risk. It was thought to cause crime, madness, and death, while also leaving the seed of degeneration in the children of alcoholics, which then eventually led those children to the abuse of other drugs” (399).

A concern with modernity also appears in the form of modern technologies: a telephone conversation in which Ernesto and Diana are aware of the telephone operator listening in; a female writer condemning alcohol on the radio; a series of childhood memories likened to a “visión cinematográfica” (46). In contrast to *modernista* novels focused on the identity of the literary writer, *Tentáculos de fuego* lingers over the craftsmanship and machinery bringing literary works into the hands of primarily female consumers. Books are a motif throughout the novel, as Ernesto’s late grandfather’s print shop is a central space where the novel’s characters converge. Ernesto’s mother Ernestina was the daughter of the printer, and she read the beautiful books her father published; “desde niña respiró tinta de imprenta” (34). Their mothers’ mutual love of books was ultimately the reason that Diana and Ernesto grew up together. Having worked his way up in a series of print shops, Jacobo views printing as an art, likening the types to jewels: “sacar los tipos de sus cajas era su embeleso. Los llegó a querer como si fueran joyas y los conocía, y los acariciaba con una ternura sin límites” (27). Garza added cultural resonance to her didactic tale through glimpses of an aesthetic world with which her readers would have been familiar. Heeding her own exhortation in *La novia de Nervo*, Garza melted down the trappings of *modernista* iconography to write characters whose creative efforts are aimed at preventing and treating an illness of particular concern in modern Mexico. Both *La novia de Nervo* and *Tentáculos de fuego* explore the social potential of the *modernista* repertoire.

Cáceres and Garza reinterpret social body metaphors through narratives detailing physical experiences of gendered ailments that are situated in social contexts of inequality. Illness in these novels stands as a personal and sociocultural crisis rather than serving aesthetic purposes as it does in many *modernista* texts. Through experiences of illness, the beautiful female protagonists of these works complicate or abandon the role of aesthetic object established for them by *modernismo*. In that sense, they contribute to what Óscar Montero has described as the “founding moment of Spanish American literary queerness”: coinciding “with the development of nationalistic cultures, ‘ostensibly grounded in ‘natural’ heterosexual love’ and marriage (Sommer 6)” in *modernismo*, “an ‘against the grain,’ often willful marginality comes to be a part, if not the central part, of the new aesthetic” (95). All four novels displace the “national romance” and instead focus on fragmented families and women who do not conform to the traditional role of wife and mother. *La rosa muerta*, *Las perlas de Rosa*, and *La novia de Nervo* feature willfully marginal women intellectuals who rewrite *modernista* scripts as they experience illness and fashion the narratives of their own lives. While Cáceres’s protagonists ultimately pay dearly for their lavishly narrated transgressions, the novels by Garza feature female protagonists who survive to band together with a makeshift modern family and work to advance their nation’s health.

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