

# DISABILITY, DOMESTIC WORKERS, AND DISAPPEARANCE IN OCTAVIO SOLÍS'S *LYDIA*

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*Looking at the doppelgänger relationship between a disabled Chicana and a female undocumented Mexican domestic worker, two characters suffering from social invisibility in Octavio Solís's prize-winning play Lydia (2008). Drawing from the fields of theatre studies, Latin@ studies, disability studies, and labor research regarding domestic workers, I argue Lydia carefully mutualizes their plight. In so doing, Lydia dramatizes social invisibility at the same time the play interrogates the culturally constructed divide between binaries like able-bodied/disabled, care/abuse, and sibling/sex partner. This interrogation opens up the hidden costs of binary logic to the possibility of continuum and continuity rather than opposition, challenging audiences to value the spectrum of human experience. Thus, I argue that Solís's Lydia makes a significant cultural critique of the politics of visibility and of our collective investment in binary logic.*

**Key Words:** *disability, disappearance, domestic workers, gender, labor, Latin@ studies, Latin@ theatre, social exclusion, theatre studies*

**On a brisk** Los Angeles evening in the fall of 2008, my friend and I left the Mark Taper Theater stunned into silence. We had just attended Octavio Solís's *Lydia* and it would take a few hours before either of us could speak in an intelligible way about the play. A tabloid description might read: Permanently vegetative Chicana commits suicide after being sexually pleased by her brother. The unsanctioned sex is the culmination of a play centered on the familial reckoning of the Flores family.

Don Claudio and Doña Rosa, the parents, have ascended from unspecified informal labor to skilled laborers as legalized residents. However, this ascension from undocumented immigrants to legal residents and from informal labor

to skilled labor has not culminated in the prosperity anticipated by Doña Rosa when she convinced Claudio to cross over to the United States some twenty years before the play takes place. Their children, Rene, nineteen, Ceci, seventeen, and Misha, sixteen, appear conflicted rather than confident and successful, for all their parents' efforts. Rosa's decision to return to her county clerk job sets the play into motion. Rosa has spent two years caring for her disabled daughter Ceci, who spends the better part of the play lying "on her mattress locked in her body in a semi-vegetative state" (4). Ceci is the victim of a terrible car accident, in which—unbeknownst to all—Rene was the driver.<sup>1</sup>

At first blush, the play seems an odd frame to explore racialized gender, labor, and disability made all the more unusual by connecting the play's protagonist, the disabled Ceci, to the plight of an undocumented female Mexican domestic worker, a *sola*, after whom the play is named. Focusing on the characters Ceci and Lydia, I closely read inscriptions of gender, disability, and class as they play out in the Flores household. From this frame, I study how they rework the tension between binary terms like able-bodied/disabled, documented/undocumented, and sibling/sex partner. I draw from the fields of literary criticism, Latin@ Studies, disability studies, and social science research to argue that Ceci and Lydia conjoin as doppelgangers, the theatrical technique through which I demonstrate *Lydia's* overarching cultural critique.

The play principally explores two themes: the human costs of social ascension and the psychological fallout from prohibited desire, culminating in Misha's incestuous sexual pleasuring of Ceci and Ceci's tragic suicide. However, Solís posits these acts as actually nonincestuous sex and an untragic suicide, for the play's dramatic events challenge the audience to see self-destruction and agency, understanding and delusion, advocacy and abuse as false binaries. The play's semiotics strongly argue that to judge the aforementioned pairs as only

antitheses feeds social privilege in that as absolutes, the logic of the binary denies the spectrum of human experience, especially for those without recourse to effectively access or embody the privileged term. Solís dramatizes the undoing of binary logic in multiple instances, but the play most successfully troubles the binary human presence/absence in the relationship between Ceci and Lydia, Ceci's caretaker.

A dramatic engagement between racialization, gender assignment, and disability should not surprise us when race and gender have long been categories in the United States of what disability scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997) refers to as non-normativity. From the Hottentot Venus of the eighteenth century to the parading of Native Americans during the seventeenth to twentieth centuries to its more recent critical engagement in Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco's 1992–93 performance piece, "A Couple in a Cage," race and gender have shared venues with disability in the history of the circus freak, as forms of legalized ugliness, and as historic rationalizations of unacceptability.

Critiques of comparative approaches argue against employing the language of disability to describe experiences of racialization and other forms of ostracism of people of color (Shakespeare 2010). However, Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997) compels the plight of the racialized and the marginalization of the gendered to be ordered as historical categories of otherness in conjunction with her study of the social construction of disability during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a parallel vein, Latin@ Studies scholars Suzanne Bost and Julie Avril Minich see not a parallel experience but a common feature in social assignments of gender, ethnicity, and disability. In Bost's words: "Latina studies and disability studies...draw attention to previously overlooked

corporeal experiences as well as the role of cultures and environments in shaping identity” (2010, 89).

Both Bost and Minich caution overstating corollaries between *latinidad* and disability. In Minich’s study of disabled figures in Chicana literature, disability functions as a rhetorical deployment dissuading essentialist renderings of *chicanidad*. As Minich states, “[Chicana@ cultural texts] invite dialogue between Chicana/o studies and disability studies and demonstrate how the theories developed in each field might help the other to contest more effectively the ‘rise to power’ of unjust social systems” (2014, 23). While racialization, gender, and disability are clearly dissimilar as bodily experiences, each carries social rejection. The play presents Lydia as similar to Ceci: a socially diminished sufferer of racialization, gender assignment, and social disability.

### **The Dramatization of Disability**

Renowned Latino playwright Octavio Solís wrote *Lydia* in 2008. Nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, *Lydia* premiered at the Denver Center Theater Company and was staged later the same year at Campo Santo, Intersection for the Arts.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, *Lydia* has been staged at the Marin County Playhouse (2009), the Yale Theater (2009), Mark Taper Forum (2009), San Diego State University (2011), and The National Pastime Theater in Chicago (2013). Set in El Paso, Texas circa 1970, *Lydia* tells the story of a Mechicano family,<sup>3</sup> by which I mean immigrant parents from Mexico and their US-born children, beset by a secret love affair between the eldest son Rene and his male cousin Alvaro. In the play’s present, Rene’s younger sister, Ceci, intermittently capacitated to speak, recollects events of two years prior in monologue. Speaking Ceci tells of lying hidden in Rene’s car while the lovers fondled each other during an evening drive. Ceci, infatuated with Alvaro, accosts Rene in a fit of grief and homophobia in retaliation for her broken heart. As Ceci

explains, Rene's driving faltered during Ceci's outrage, instigating the car accident that left Ceci in a permanent vegetative state.

Ceci, a young woman in a perpetual state of seizure, is a material presence—a body—creating the visual affective frame of the play. Theater critics like Charles McNulty (2009) highlight the play's themes of closeted sexuality and dysfunctional family relationships, but I contend that *Lydia's* greatest dramatic contribution is the way Solís situates the disabled body as communicative vehicle of the racial, ethnic, and gendered oppressions suffered by the *sola*. I frame my argument on the body, for theatre is primarily “a practice in which societies negotiate around what the body is and means” (Shepherd 2006, 1). I focus on this visual affective frame instead of plot to argue a theatrical semiotic showing Ceci's physical abnormality as driving the dramatic action of the play at the same time it delimits and stylizes characters.

By my description, it would seem Ceci is the play's protagonist, but then what of the character Lydia, after whom the play is named? In what could appear ironic, Lydia, an undocumented Mexican woman, works as a housemaid for the Flores family who does little more than assist in the characterological development of the cast, and in particular, Ceci. The tangential aspect of Lydia's character is first conveyed by Lydia's late and undramatic entrance and the scant rendering of her backstory as an undocumented migrant made available through a circuit of underground domestic servants in the Chicano community of El Paso, Texas:

(CECI flails madly about. LYDIA appears at the door, bag in hand.)

LYDIA. ¿Señora?

ROSA. Oh. Si, si, si. ¿Eres la muchacha de Jalisco?<sup>4</sup>

LYDIA. Yes. (19)

And a few moments later, Doña Rosa introduces Lydia to her youngest son, Misha:

ROSA. This is our maid—

LYDIA. Lydia.

ROSA. Lydia from Jalisco. (20)

An orphan, Lydia fulfills her dream of crossing over to the US to begin anew. What she may not have fully anticipated are the social and psychological costs of becoming an undocumented domestic worker. Chican@ plays often intentionally delimit the issue of domestic work to the perspective of secondary characters such as in Sánchez-Scott's *Latina* and Luis Valdez's *I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges*. The voices of domestic workers form the racial and gendered backdrop against which the protagonists (none of whom are themselves domestic workers) drive the plot. In contrast, Solís directly portrays the situation of undocumented, gendered, domestic work, and through the play's title, highlights not only Lydia's importance, but also the importance of the situation she represents. At the same time *Lydia* stays faithful to the second-class status of workers like Lydia by the way Solís writes her character.

Typifying a hegemonic interpretation of such a personage, *Los Angeles Times* theatre critic Charles McNulty states, "Lydia needs a place to live and in exchange will anticipate the household needs and desires with an intuition that recalls all those old tales of *magical nannies*" (2009, italics mine) creating a second tangential relation.<sup>5</sup> McNulty's assessment of nannies and magical realism draws *Lydia* into the theatrical trajectory of American literature's fancy with houseboys and other domestic workers usually (but not exclusively) of color like Joel Chandler Harris's 1881 *Uncle Remus*, Caroline of Tony Kushner's 2003 *Caroline, or Change*, P. L. Travers's *Mary Poppins* series (1934–88) and others. Yet, rather than anchor her special understanding of Ceci to

Lydia's supposed sixth sense as a woman of color, Solís dialogically situates Lydia as protagonist through her caretaking of Ceci's body, the character I will refer to as Ceci-the-body such that Lydia's so-called magic turns on extra linguistic intimacy.

Their intimacy hinges on Ceci's unique capability to understand Lydia's predicament and unexpressed true self. Through the cracks of silence and halved expressions, Solís draws our attention to the spiritual connection between Ceci-the-body and Lydia. Ceci, languishing in a devastated vegetative state, and Lydia, performed as a Spanish accent-inflected, young, vulnerable female, I contend, are two socially invisible characters who broker a relationship through disability. Engaging disability studies and the sociology of Mexican domestic workers, I argue Lydia's social vulnerability only becomes legible through the physical expression of Ceci, a disabled woman.

Solís's *Lydia* contrasts with other American plays that present disability but only elliptically. Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), for example, comparatively skirt the physiological implications of disability, while Samuel Beckett's modernist theater distorts the politics of disability through characterological synecdoche. Ceci is not the first mentally or cognitively impaired character Solís has developed in his body of work, but his focus on Ceci in *Lydia* is akin to Peter Nichol's 1967 play *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*, as disability in *Lydia* is staged through the lens of the mundane.

We must also consider the situation of the domestic worker within Chican@ theatre, American theatre written with the interest of portraying life in the US from the vantage point of the Chicano community. In Chican@ theatre, plays with maids or domestic workers as protagonists are few. Luis Valdez's

*I Don't Have to Show You No Stinking Badges!* (1986), and Milcha Sánchez-Scott's *Latina* (1980) address the figure of the Mexican maid, albeit abstrusely. Connie and Buddy Villa of *Badges!* may be successful professional actors, but their success is contingent upon their passive countenance as domestic workers, affirming social expectations of Solís's Lydia.

Milcha Sánchez-Scott also employs the figure of the maid in her play *Latina*. Based on an autobiographical account, the play takes up the story of Sarita, a temporary receptionist in an employment agency specializing in farming out domestic laborers to well-off Anglo-Euro women. Via backroom exchanges, Sánchez-Scott allows discussion of the trials shouldered by domestic workers; however, *Latina* restricts the subject to a topic of conversation rather than a fully developed theme of a social problem. In the end, *Latina* subjugates the plight of the domestic worker to Sarita's ethnic coming-to-terms. As we see, *Badges!* and *Latina* broach without directly addressing the reality of Mexican@ domestic work. Despite the prevalence of domestic work carried out by solas in the US, the theme has not been explored in depth in Chican@ theatre.

Since the 1970s, disabled characters have played a more notable role in Chican@ theatre. Three Chican@ plays featuring a disabled character are Luis Valdez's *Bernabé* (1990) and *Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* (1989), and Cherríe Moraga's *Heroes and Saints* (1994). Luis Valdez's *Bernabé* submits a Chicano adult who is considered mentally-challenged because of how he practices his love and respect of the cosmos (Huerta 2000). Bernabé's faith misunderstood as mental difference could be problematic for disability scholars as well as scholars of Latin@ studies, as disability here stages the effect of settler colonial violence Valdez's *Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* and Moraga's *Heroes and Saints*. Their relative protagonist is actually bodiless—the character is written as a



head. Indeed, Belarmino believes himself to be the missing head of Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa while Cerezita's state results from in utero pesticide contamination, a fictional take on an epidemic for agricultural workers. *Heroes and Saints* and to a lesser degree, *Shrunken*, depict everyday life, with and among impairments, and help bring the body to the fore where, in theatre scholar Tiffany Ana López's words, "the focus on the Latino body does not necessarily guarantee the visibility of that social body" (1995, 58).<sup>6</sup> By the play's end audience members have been deeply informed of the situation of farm workers in *Heroes and Saints*, but have they learned anything about disability?

Though several important Chican@ plays like Luis Valdez's *Bernabé*, *Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*, and Cherríe Moraga's *Heroes and Saints*, and *Watsonville* feature disabled protagonists, Solís's *Lydia* dramatizes disability using true-to-life cause and effect to understand Ceci's condition. As car accidents leave victims with severe brain damage, Solís unrealistically registers Ceci as "semi-vegetative" for two years (4), an impossibility according to medical findings whereby those who suffer in this state beyond twelve months are considered irremediably afflicted (Jennett 2002, Wade and Johnston 1999). Albeit a partial invention, Solís's rendering of semi-vegetative Ceci plays out in his theatrical treatment of her character. A typical depiction of Ceci-the-body's speech follows a phonetic transcription of an imagined groan: CECI. "Gh. Ghgngn" (58),<sup>7</sup> such that Solís gives Ceci-the-body utterances rather than lines. His imaginative leap continues with her ability to be fed orally, to exert some control over excretion, and to stand assisted. His modification may have been motivated by theatrical necessity. Still, in the end, Ceci's semi-vegetative state effectuates the dramatic affective frame of the trials of this kind of disability.

### **Staging the Struggle of Silence**

Thematizing the family's troubles in managing Ceci may seem a predictable choice given the limitations of care a nuclear family generally provides. Two years after the accident, the family that has devolved into one more emotionally dead than alive in contrast to Ceci, who remains physiologically very much alive. Indeed, she passes most of the two-hour performance unremittingly convulsing, her snarls and groans punctuated by bodily functions. Throughout the play, Ceci is situated up close, spotlight, stage right. Her performance pulsates like a heartbeat; her body, a constant presence foregrounding the family's emotional drama.<sup>8</sup> She is bothersome, pathetic, and irrefutably magnetic. An unusual role for the able-bodied actor, Ceci's epileptic-like gesticulations put the dramatization of an othered body front and center. Solís describes Ceci as such:

For most of the play, Ceci lies on her mattress locked in her body in a semi-vegetative state. Her body's muscles rigid, her hands curled and fingers knuckled, she undergoes degrees of spasticity that come and go in ways that underscore the play. Her voice is fallen back into her throat and her eyes unfocused; her powers of expression are utterly buried in a neurological prison. (Solís 4)

As the Flores family negotiates affection for Ceci in her physical discord, they contend with feelings of disgust and irritation. The graphic nature of her affliction “[confronts] viewers with physical reality, asking them both to stare at the bodies on display and to see them as individuals, not objects” (Fahy and King, 2002, x). Thus challenged, the audience watches the portrayal of Ceci urinating on stage:

(A small wet spot gathers around CECI as she pees herself.)

CECI. Gghgngg.

ROSA. ¡Ay dios mio! ¡Que desastre! ¡Mira nomas! She's doing number one!

ALVARO. Ceci...please...my uniform...

RENE. CECI GODDAMNIT STUPID BITCH!

(RENE tears CECI away from ALVARO and she collapses in a heap crying aloud.)

MISHA. See what you done? Look at her! Are you happy? Is this what you wanted? You asshole! (37)

The Flores's relatively good physical care of Ceci contrasts with their difficulties in providing her with the same quality of emotional care. Tending to Ceci's physical necessity establishes the primary relational context for the Flores family. The feeding, bathing, massaging, and diapering attenuate their emotive response to Ceci as forever infantile, a familiar stance for normalizing non-normative bodies in US culture. Treating an adult in need like a child provides an affective approach seeking to sidestep the social unease in US society with adults unable to care for their bodies. As a dramatic approach, infantilization helps an audience identify with the family's shame, a result of the given admixture of compassion, sorrow and repulsion scripted in our reception of the disabled.

Accordingly, the visual specter and dominance of Ceci's body correlates with Ceci's role as a characterological afterthought. Her family bothered into ennui, Ceci's flailing body registers (what they consider) her ruined selfhood. However, familial relations with Ceci pivot on negotiations of her continued gender affiliation. Whereas the Flores family seems comfortable assigning Ceci with a nostalgic sense of the heteronormative gender she performed as a fifteen-year old, the family feels threatened by the possibility of Ceci-the-body's present attractiveness and sexual desire:<sup>9</sup>

CECI. Now I remember. I'm horny! I'm just horny! I want to be wanted. I want to be touched. Not just touched, groped! ... I want someone to plunge their hands into my body and grab that ball of fire burning my insides and hold it super tight till the picante bursts through my eyes...How could [God] take so much of my brain and still miss the part that craves the hokey-pokey? (24–25)

Like the compulsion to nostalgically render Ceci heterosexual female, such a description very likely conditions Lydia's employment. And, as with Ceci, Lydia's attractive gender performance provokes anxiety in the Flores family. The most salient example of this anxiety occurs between brothers Misha and Rene. A budding poet, younger brother Misha aims this gendered and assumed reciprocal heterosexual desire as poetic impetus when he fashions Lydia as his muse. Lydia considers but ultimately dissuades Misha's love/erotic fantasy. Her rejection intensifies both brothers' anxiety expressed in Rene's warning not to fall in love with a "low-class Mexican whore," adding "Come on, ese, she's the maid! Don't you know it's a taboo?" (55). While Lydia's labor becomes an impediment to her sexual appropriateness in Rene's mind, in both cases, sexualized gender is the primary vehicle through which both Ceci and Lydia gain heteronormative social legibility to others and to themselves. Nonetheless, said legibility and its corresponding (albeit ephemeral) power will be usurped by their respective diminishment as taboo love/sex objects, leading to their ultimate and literal disappearance.

Playing with hegemonic notions of gender and sexual orientation, Ceci asserts herself nevertheless as an individual in ways unscripted in heteronormativity; that is, through the special intimacy she shares with Lydia to be addressed shortly. Solís facilitates these assertions primarily through Ceci's monologues. While the characters wonder at times how and whether Ceci-the-body thinks

and feels, Ceci intermittently rises and speaks to the audience as a mentally coherent, normative-bodied character, exceeding the human abilities of her physical condition and effectively breaking the fourth wall. In her monologues, Ceci describes her life as a “vegetable,” her hopes and aspirations before the accident, and responds to current situations, providing intermittent omniscient narration. Scripting monologues gives Ceci unmediated access to frame the play’s events as Deborah Geis argues, the monologue “yields a powerful ‘way of speaking’ about the attempt to enter subjectivity” for characters who “struggle against silence...” (cited in López 2000, 6). Upright stature and a spotlight dramatically signal Ceci’s monologues, furthering Ceci’s assertion of self with a normatively intelligible address. However, despite their often late-adolescent sexual content and insightful observation, Ceci delivers these monologues in a childlike vocal tone and gesticulation out of step with the seventeen-year-old young woman she portrays. Perhaps serving to dramatically connect speaking Ceci and Ceci-the-body, the monologues’ childlike stylization reifies Ceci’s diminishment as a woman.

Lydia, however, has more modest assertions of self. Solís underscores Lydia’s sense of powerlessness as an undocumented *sola* by restricting her speech to exchanges rather than monologues and, in these, limiting her self-disclosure. Lydia covertly challenges the emotional role of surrogate daughter that Doña Rosa cajoles Lydia to play through other assertions such as initiating sex with Don Claudio, Doña Rosa’s husband. In her daily employment, Lydia continually challenges the Flores’s to awaken from the family’s shorn emotional life. The latter is exemplified in the following exchange:

LYDIA. In the kitchen. What happened to [Ceci]? (No reply.)  
It’s okay.  
She’ll tell me.

(He glares at her then goes to the kitchen.)

...

([CLAUDIO] returns with a cup and turns on the stereo, puts on his headphones and sits to watch TV.)

...

(LYDIA dusts the TV, blocking his view. Then she dusts the stereo console. She finds the sleeve of the record album.) ¡Ay mira! ¡Pedro Infante! My mother's favorite!

(She raises the volume to full. CLAUDIO rips off the headphones and jumps to his feet, his eyes glaring with rage.)

CLAUDIO. HIJO [sic] DE LA CHINGADA! (25–26)

Lydia challenges the patriarchal arrangement of the Flores family as well as confronts the secret of the accident that binds the family's grief. In that Lydia makes assertions within her ethnically gendered labor ascription, to some degree she complies and reifies their stipulation. However, Lydia's assertions arise in relation to her role as the Flores's *doméstica* rather than express who Lydia is as a person. Nevertheless, her assertions will provoke the family's ire, which, along with her sexual conduct, will galvanize the family to utilize Lydia's legal vulnerability against her at the play's end.

### **Disability and Secrets**

In an interview, Solís states the primary use of Ceci's disability is as a dramatic catalyst, a literary invention to create a physical container symbolizing the way secrets psychologically entrap (Cornish 2013). Ceci's shameful physical discombobulation, like Lydia's social vulnerability, ultimately leads the audience to become aware of its own untold stories, its secrets, and its hidden and disowned physicality, those places where we are all at some level expected to vacate self, or, as renowned sociologist Erving

Goffman describes, act as a ‘non-person’ (1967, 89). The non-person in theater is often the stigmatized character “defined by both performers and audience as someone who isn’t there” (ibid). *Lydia*’s Ceci must find her way out of dreaded non-personhood through sex or death—or both, as we shall see. Solís states in an interview:

...I put the biggest secrets inside Ceci, inside the soul of a person who can’t communicate with anybody. ...That’s where Lydia comes in, and she says, ‘Tell me, I’ll translate.’ At that point, the two of them became fused.... (Cornish 2013)

Lydia clearly acts as Ceci’s “translator” but also as her interlocutor per the citation above. Her twin roles as translator and interlocutor are the most discernible dramatic techniques that lead me to qualify them as doppelgangers, or “a ghostly counterpart of a living person” (Merriam Webster). Literary scholar Terry Thompson notes its pervasiveness in literature: “The idea of characters encountering their doppelgangers, identical or nearly identical versions of themselves, is probably as old as storytelling itself. From Artemis and her shadowy other (Hecate) to Doctor Jekyll and his alter ego Mister Hyde, ...” (1998, 1). This paradigm may fascinate humans since time immemorial but requires a unique suspension of disbelief for most US audiences. This relationship is all the more implausible given Ceci’s physical challenges. Solís shows significant skill in drawing the audience to its feasibility in *Lydia*.

Given the physical constraints of Ceci-the-body, Solís draws their doppelganger relationship via Lydia’s role as Ceci’s translator, who in turn engages Ceci on the level of her body. That Ceci can be known as a normative person (to borrow Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s term) via Lydia’s interpretation of Ceci-

the-body puts bodily disarray up for translation. On her own, Ceci-the-body would be unable (or prohibited) to render herself a subject for an audience invested in fixed ideas of physical and mental normalcy who simultaneously contends with social shame of abnormality. The need for translation illustrates an underlying acceptance that normatives cannot understand, empathize, or commonly relate to the disabled writ large. The playwright's split rendering of speaking Ceci and Ceci-the-body deftly underlines a common bias in reception of the disabled without recourse to language as unknowable. It would seem likely that a family member closer to Ceci would be better suited to understand Ceci. We must ask why isn't Rosa, Ceci's mother, or Misha, Ceci's preferred brother, the one who understands Ceci? Instead, Solís intentionally designs Lydia, the undocumented domestic worker, to best understand Ceci despite their very recent acquaintance.

The doppelgänger purposefully ties the two via their scripted social positionality as the vulnerable and marginalized characters in the play. Solís designs a dramatic economy where the state of socially-adjudicated powerlessness becomes the psychosocial platform from which to ally, illustrated succinctly by scholar Edén E. Torres's observation: "Beyond their critique of the ways in which the dominant social structure wounds women of color, [Latina] writers also ask us to consider an alternate sociality built upon vulnerability and interdependence" (2003, 99). There is a form of interdependence, an alternate sociality that makes Ceci seem more normative and thus for most normative audiences, more palatable. Ceci's words, whether delivered by speaking Ceci or through Lydia, challenges the audience to transcend their conventional evaluation and reevaluate Ceci as more than an object of abject pity. Equally important, Lydia's special understanding of Ceci's utterings establishes Ceci's mental acuity for her family. Showing an emotional range triggered by conventional desires and situations, through Lydia, Ceci



accesses memories as well as demonstrates a desire to be social.<sup>10</sup> Lydia's role primarily functions to make Ceci-the-body reasonable and understandable to an audience assumed fearful of and unaccustomed to sufferers of PVS.

In *Lydia*, we see the staging of disability as a material performance intercalated with normative physical action and speech effectuating a strategy of amelioration, a strategy to elicit the social rehabilitation paradigm similarly held out by social models of ethnic acculturation and assimilation, leading us to the unstated but nevertheless present oppressive social context of the Flores family and Lydia. The character of Lydia brings to the fore the insistence on and investment in the imagined normal subject where treatments and tactics of care assimilate Ceci as a normative person, where progress or success is considered in degrees of normative behavior. Lydia can decipher Ceci's wants, which leads us to wonder how their doppelganger relationship also fashions Lydia.

### **Domestic Labor and Disappearance of Self**

What began with Lydia's translation broadens to include reverse dialogues where speaking Ceci translates Lydia's physical gestures and eventually verbal exchanges, making their minds and bodies into two expressions of one being:

CECI. Ay Lydia. All the want of before, dilating my corazón, it's dilating yours. You speak the idioma of ants and miscarried love. The cards of La Vida Cecilia falling into place. Some desmadre is coming into view and I'm gonna need you, loca. I'll need you when I fall.

LYDIA. ¿Que [sic] ves, pajarita?

CECI. A new card. Las Gemelas. The twins.

(LYDIA goes. Darkness descends on the living room...) (71)

As thus far argued, as a domestic worker, the personhood of Lydia herself is pressured to disappear. The hegemonic gaze that diminishes the disabled out of authoritative subjectivity and thus, outside of sociality, also repudiates undocumented Mexican workers like Lydia. Their psychosocial subjective interconnection established by the doppelgänger finds expression ultimately in intelligible speech, whereas Solís dramatizes their condition of respective social vulnerability and subsequent invisibility in Ceci's groans and Lydia's silenced personhood.

Literary scholar Donna Walker King calls "body fictions" the social narrative put (up)on certain bodies, a practice that prompts "conceptual violation" of "the mind and spirit" of those who "have been made invisible" (2000, ix-x), for whom the *doméstica*, like the disabled, should submit to the "requisite of invisibility" (Katzman [1978] 1981, 188). From a sociological perspective, invisibility is addressed largely as the result of diminished social standing in terms of vulnerable immigrant status, inferior wages and erratic conditions of work. Sociologist Mary Romero's work (2013) also comments on the psychological cost of invisibility. As Romero states, nannies, like other kinds of live-in caregivers, suffer greatly from feelings of isolation in addition to substandard wages and erratic hours. Despite these, they are hired and thus are expected to present themselves as "exceptionally warm, patient, and loving" workers (Wrigley cited in Romero 1992, 57). Romero enumerates the emotional costs involved in the duties of such employment for these laborers who provide nurturance for all without expecting any emotional reciprocity from their employers. Similarly, Walker King brings the discursive power in the concept of body fictions to the findings of psychological invisibility studied in the work of Katzman and Romero.

Lydia scripted to speak for Ceci gives Ceci a voice, but when we analyze these two characters as a dyad, suddenly Lydia's emotional repression becomes palpable. In fact, Lydia delivers her most emotionally significant lines on Ceci's behalf. When Ceci-the-body reenacts her failed quinceañera party to the horror of her family and lost love, Alvaro, Lydia explains:<sup>11</sup>

MISHA. Oh my god.

ALVARO. Ceci.

RENE. What do you think you're doing?

LYDIA. She wanted to wear this. She said Alvaro would have the first dance. In her quinceañera. First her dad, then you. Because you know her better than anyone.

ALVARO. Jesus.

ROSA. Lydia, por favor— (36)

Parallel to Ceci's hyperbolic physical presence yet subjective absence, Lydia's work is omnipresent, while she exists unknown:

CECI: (cont.) Hours pass like seconds. She's fast as a bird's wing. Lydia the blur. She brings me soup but I don't remember slurping nothing but blur. (25)

While we witness a lovely, jovial character asserting her opinion of things, her character remains nevertheless superficial, eye-catching but devoid of complete personhood. It occurs to the youngest brother Misha (and only Misha) midway through Act One the Flores family has almost no knowledge of Lydia outside of her employment:

MISHA. Why are you [Lydia] trying to speak English?

LYDIA. It's a beautiful idioma.

MISHA. But why do you want to learn it? You live in Jalisco.

LYDIA. I never say that. My friend, she is from Jalisco. I come from a pueblo outside of that. En los montes.

MISHA. We don't know anything about you.

LYDIA. You know my name...(23)

This exchange exposes the underlying reality for domestic workers like Lydia who, as people, are a non-entity. Playing on her employers' desire for her emotional labor, (and the Flores's desire to incorporate Lydia into their family on their terms), Lydia seems to draw the reality of the situation out in these lines to emphasize the de facto work culture demanded of domestic workers. As a result, although the Flores's may want to believe they enjoy a reciprocal relationship with Lydia, her limits of personal disclosure divert the overture to a personal relationship. Lydia's last line in the passage cited underscores she understands and delimits herself as a worker regardless of the family's fantasy parentesco to her. While her social demeanor in the Flores home is stylistically hers and appears authentic, her quiet solitude and anger lie just beneath as evidenced when Lydia first meets Claudio the father:

(CLAUDIO enters, gruff and disoriented after a long daylight sleep. He stands in the middle of the room and stares at LYDIA, who stops and stares back.)

LYDIA. Lydia. I am your maid. (No reply.) ...(25)

Furthermore, the conundrum of demands for emotional labor cajoles a disturbing combination of Lydia's active compliance and resentment, exemplified in a sexual encounter with Claudio. Claudio spends most of his stage time seated on a couch with his back to the audience where he ritually

cloaks his misery and frustration with his family and himself by watching television while listening to music through headphones and drinking beer. Lydia complicates her stipulated role as Ceci's caregiver when she silently approaches Claudio offering sex as a balm of connection for his lonely soul:

CECI. I had a dream the night before you [Lydia] came. That you stand at the door and stop breathing. And a part of you falls away...

*(LYDIA sets her bag down and peels off her underwear. She approaches CLAUDIO who stares straight at the TV.)*

That you come like a ghost into our house and stand over my daddy, who's a ghost himself, and you take his crown and hear the voices in his heart crying for love...

*(She takes off his headphones. She places them over her head and listens for a moment.)*

And then you blind him...

*(She straddles him in his chair and kisses him. He enfolds her in his arms and begins to cry.)*

Each breathless beso reaches into his heart and lays grout over the crumbling walls of his pride, you touch him who can't remember touch any more than I can. It was a dream more real than this maid on my father making sex like the last act of God, I see your eyes, Lydia, dreaming the same thing, burning their grief into me, their want, their reckless need for darkness—

*(She turns and meets LYDIA'S gaze.)*

I see—you! With the inscription La Muerte, La Muerte, La Muerrr...

*(They continue to make love as CECI goes into convulsions.)*

gngghgng. gfhghngng. (47)

In this scene, Lydia instigates emotional succor in the form of sex without pretense to reciprocal emotional connection. Lydia relegates her resentment for only Ceci to see. At the moment when the audience will see Lydia's hidden loathing of her labor arrangement where she finally satisfies her employer through sex, Solís suddenly shifts from speaking Ceci to Ceci's response as Ceci-the-body. The adroit stage directions read: "They continue to make love as CECI goes into convulsions" (47).<sup>12</sup> Lydia's silence of self set alongside Ceci's continually convulsing body acts as an abstract materialization of Lydia's seething yet unremitting travail. At that point, underneath Lydia's seemingly perverse engagement may be her hope to ingratiate herself to the head of the house and so secure her job. Importantly, it is Ceci, not Lydia, through whom we learn of Lydia's resentment and psychosocial death as announced in the above passage. Inverting the role of translator, Ceci translates Lydia's silence into her sentiment as part of the doppelganger dyad.

The emotional labor of such vulnerable workers reveals Lydia as a kind of martyr demanding that the audience know the many ways women like Lydia labor for US families. Romero delineates the all-too-common thinking of employers of domestic workers where labor expectations fall well outside of job descriptions and where the domestic worker is considered as a highly conditional intimate:

Women of color are hired to perform not only physical labor but emotional labor as well, and they are used to fulfill psychological needs...It follows that the more personal service is included in the domestic's daily work, the more emotional labor is extracted and the more likely the employer will insist that the domestic is 'one of the family.' (1992, 43–44)

Employers also use undocumented status to leverage worker compliance and loyalty (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). “Employers commonly threaten to deport undocumented domestics if they refuse to do more work, refuse sexual advances, or attempt to return home” report Romero’s informants in her seminal study (1992, 92). Solís’s Lydia falls prey to the above despite the kinship most of the Flores family feels for her. Lydia’s complex portrayal layers feelings and vulnerabilities, more accurately reflecting the social and economic reality of domésticas in the US. The intentional staging of Lydia’s invisibility marked by her late entrance (19), her limited dialogic role, her countenance of absent presence, and ultimately her deportation dramatize the conditioned visibility of Mexican domestic workers on both sides of the border.<sup>13</sup>

Lydia and the Flores family most likely build their perception and delivery of domestic service on Mexico’s culture of domestic work. The prevalence of domestic workers in United States households has become more common in recent decades (Romero 2013, 193). In the United States, statistics show “in the latter half of the 1990s, there were roughly 802,000 legal private household workers employed in the United States,” a fairly conservative number according to Moni Basu, author of “The Invisible World of Domestic Work: Report Documents Abuses,” when we consider that a significant percentage of Mexican workers are residing in the United States without a visa and are paid under the table, thereby making their status as workers effectively invisible (2012).<sup>14</sup>

In the United States, the personal diminishment of Mexican and Chicana domestic workers is inculcated by both prospective employers and workers. Incredibly, Mexican domestic workers have been instructed to minimize their visible presence as well as their personality (Romero 1992, 89). Pressured by popular publications beginning in the last half of the twentieth century to today, this work culture circumscribes an interpersonal paradigm of subjugated labor relations between the worker and the US mistress where the worker should not add her voice, her music, or her personal concerns, to the family environment. In a global market of disparaging psychosocial conditions of labor, in the US, Mexican and Chicana domestic workers generally leave employment as *encerradas* because of its degrading nature for better jobs. The social inscription of this work positions *domésticas* both in Mexico and the United States as disenfranchised despite the many important roles—physical and emotional—they play. Their personal invisibility, living behind a “puerta cerrada” (a closed door), where many resent emotionally and physically excessive labors, recalls the desperation of Lydia’s sex scene with Claudio where in the end, she appears spiritually dead. Latin@ theatre critic Jon Rossini argues, “If Lydia’s ease of engagement with the world is predicated on her self-understanding as being already dead, it appears being dead only makes one free to suffer the imposition of others’ fantasies” (2013, 213).<sup>15</sup>

We return to this scene to pay close attention to the social invisibility of both Ceci-the-body and Lydia as they materialize in the end with their own literal disappearances. Speaking Ceci equates Lydia’s erotic mounting of her father with the dead look of a ghost Ceci. First noticed in her doppelganger’s countenance upon entering the Flores home (47), Lydia’s ghostly look couples with her retention of breath, intimating Ceci’s impending physical death while foreshadowing Lydia’s deportation. This dramatic tie between physical holding of the breath, symbolic self-asphyxiation, sex with Claudio as an act between



two “ghosts,” and sexual climax among them gathers additional meaning from *la Muerte*, the card played in the Mexican game. Imposed gendered emotional labor expects an erotic interplay presaged in the above scene and others; the sexual, a deepened level of self-effacement of domestic work figured in the ghost and the breath. Signifying the psychosocial and physical costs of crossing over into the US as an undocumented worker, Ceci notes: “In your world, Lydia, people die and come back but not all the way. Not all the way” (40).

The play stays faithful to the sociological findings identified earlier with Lydia’s sudden deportation. Doña Rosa’s discovery of her husband’s infidelity with Lydia creates the first dramatic climax with Lydia escorted off stage for deportation upon Rosa’s request. Lydia’s removal elicits the nebulous real world of deportation where journalist Suzy Khimm of *The Washington Post* reports detainees are physically managed like criminals (2013).<sup>13</sup> The reality of living in the United States without documentation, knowing detention and deportation are always a threat, pressures a complicit countenance of domestic workers as loving, agreeable and upbeat, some of the qualities US respondents report seeking in a Latina domestic worker. This implicit threat along with a subjugating domestic work culture motivates a highly pressured façade at the price of the self. In this way, *Lydia* effectively dramatizes the treatment of Mexican@ domestic workers as commodities—smiling bodies that labor, are vulnerable to mistreatment, and when needed, can be dismissed with impunity.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Ceci’s suicide while being pleased by her brother also rids the stage of Ceci’s difficult body; death, a frequent theatrical tactic used on disabled characters (Mitchell and Snyder, 278).

Far from the strange but albeit happy ending one might suppose, Ceci’s orgasm will coincide with her physical death when she swallows a seventies-style beer tab carelessly discarded by her father Claudio in an earlier moment (12). Ceci’s

suicide attributes Ceci-the-body with consciousness and volition, implying a degree of restoration of Ceci's subjectivity without amelioration of her physical state. She has become intelligible to both Lydia and Misha, and arrives at sexual adulthood dramatized via orgasm. In Solís's dramatic logic, Ceci is finally knowable as a person directly through her disabled body and, in the play's logic, can therefore let go of her will to live. Thus, Ceci dies by a pleasurable suicide, opening up the binary logic of self-possession/disability, aliveness/dying, sibling/sex partner, and care/abuse, proposing to the audience instead the possibility of confluence, of a continuum, and of simultaneity. However, in dramatic terms, Ceci's suicide also neatly relieves the family from the burden of living with her body and her memory, (un)easing the play to a close. Solís's convincing engagement of the fields of domestic labor and disability allows him to create an explicit common discourse between the two women.

Initially, Solís bridges Lydia to Ceci through shared dreams and special communication, but the doppelgänger becomes effective because of their shared positionality as socially stigmatized subjects. It is not clear if Solís intends to advocate for disability rights; nevertheless, he does complicate anticipated notions of ability and disability when the prospective capabilities of Ceci and Lydia are actually reversed—Ceci physically expresses Lydia's silences while Lydia assumes an "illogical" ability to understand Ceci's sonic utterances. Though disability scholar Mark Sherry worries when ethnic and racial identity projects engage a "politics of shame and stigma," they threaten to usurp the specificity of disability (2010, 103), Solís's engagement of disability and Latin@ issues participates in a characteristic project of Latin@ dramas which, according to López, often "magnif[ies] all that is usually shrouded in mystery or placed in shadow. [These dramas] give a name, a face, and—most importantly—a fully human context to those insistently put under erasure" (2003, 38).

In Octavio Solís's *Lydia*, we, the audience, are stuck in a non-cathartic play. Solicited through our identification with the characters in a quagmire of our own desires and unacceptability, we experience our disquiet with race, gender, and states of physical abnormality. We are called to confront the edges of human vulnerability, of self-possession, and of communal acceptance, for "the representation of disability suggests the vulnerability of all bodies" (Stiker 1997, 178). Although as Mitchell and Snyder note, "the desire to impose closure on a narrative is a feature of many narratives of disability" with the solution of curing or killing off disabled characters ([1996] 2010, 278), Ceci's suicide trumps a predictable satisfying ending, an ending many theatergoers expect to see of social integration and/or physical improvement. *Lydia* resists this convention, insisting instead on the gravity of racialized labor conditions and of stifled desire as they function within frames of heteronormative gender and cultural bias against the disabled as the dispossessed. Although not without complications, *Lydia* successfully employs disability in Tobin Seibers's sense where: "The representation of the disabled body does not suggest an obstacle or linguistic impasse, but rather 'a lever to elevate debate'" (2008, 182), prompting bigger questions such as our collective buy-in to binary logic.

The play encourages the arrest of facile oppositions and at the same time it makes us aware of social diminishment in the forms of silence, disappeared self, and literal disappearance undergirding America's treatment of the disabled and the racialized underclass. Octavio Solís's *Lydia* presents us with Ceci-the-body, theatrically purposing disability as a physical proxy to subtly explore what life is for women like Ceci and Lydia. If, as Hall argues, "...bodily variation and vulnerability constitute a point of similarity for all human beings then disability shifts from an 'integrable' perspective to become 'integral' to the theorization of the human" (2012, 14), then we can

contextualize the young women's doppelganger relationship as integral to their respective recuperation of psychological integrity. Despite their relative social powerlessness, both women demonstrate agency through their interpersonal alliance and their laboring bodies that confound rather than comfort us.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although Solís explains Ceci in this way, further prefatory notes describe her physical state as more in line with what the medical field calls "permanent vegetative state" or PVS. PVS sufferers physically function but are believed to have no cognitive ability. Different than the comatose, PVS sufferers make sudden verbal sounds, sometimes cry, show cycles of wakefulness with open eyes and sleep with closed eyes. Despite these behaviors, doctors consider PVS sufferers to live in an unconscious state (Wade and Johnston 1999). Solís's text uses Spanish punctuation irregularly. Textual citations follow how they appear in print, respecting the author's choices regarding Spanish punctuation.

<sup>2</sup> *Lydia* was the winner of the 2008 Denver Post Ovation Award, Best Production, the 2008 Henry Award for Outstanding New Play, and was nominated for the 2010 GLAAD Award for Outstanding Los Angeles Theater.

<sup>3</sup> Theatre scholar Jorge Huerta (2000, 10–11) uses the term *mexicano* to address the concerns of both Mexicans living in the United States like those of Chican@s who are generally US citizens raised in the United States.

<sup>4</sup> Theatre critics like Charles McNulty and Neda Ulaby employ the literary term *magical realism* to consider the spiritual connection between Ceci and Lydia. This term may be suggestive among many US theatergoers and, in this way, attempts to justify its imprecise use. I am of the opinion that *magical realism* is frequently overused by US critics in relation to Latin American and US Latin@ literatures. As Frederic Aldama (2009) argues, *magical realism* minimizes the political content of US Latin@ literature and, I would add, diffuses the aesthetic merits of US Latin@ literature by applying this one familiar literary lens too often to this literature.

<sup>5</sup> López (1995) makes this remark in the context of visual art, but I believe it is useful for my analysis.

<sup>6</sup> See Solís's play *Gibraltar* for the touching marriage of an older normative bodied man and his cognitively impaired wife, Amy, and *Dreamlandia* for treatment of Pepín, a mentally challenged character.

<sup>7</sup> This analysis refers to the performance I saw on June 5th, 2009 at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, California. Although there are no stage directions in the published version of the play, the change in personage from the speaking Ceci to Ceci-the-body necessitates a dramatic physical change in acting style. For example, Ceci's opening monologues transition into her role as Ceci-the-body signaled in the text by the following: "The girl that touched me...her face in a mirror

looking back...showing me her own sccc—ggghn mmm her own—ssccrrmmgfmhm...” (7).  
Lighting decisions and stage positions are attributed to the 2009 Mark Taper performance under director Juliette Carrillo.

<sup>8</sup> A similar tension occurs in Chicana playwright, Cherríe Moraga’s *Heroes and Saints* (1994) in the figure of Cerezita.

<sup>9</sup> Unlike, for example, the way those with autism are seen as anti-social or indifferent to social relations and therefore misfits.

<sup>10</sup> To better appreciate the social function of the quinceañera and gendered identities, see Karen Mary Davalos’s (1996) article, “La Quinceañera: Making Gender and Ethnic Identities.”

<sup>11</sup> Ceci’s simultaneous convulsions during Lydia and Claudio’s tryst may equally express Ceci’s own frustration, longing and likely, her voyeuristic sexual satisfaction, furthering the doppelgänger nexus between the two women.

<sup>12</sup> I tentatively enter into the important transnational character of Mexican domestic work. A subject worthy of its own study, I make mention of the role of domestic labor in Mexican culture in considering possible transnationalism of attitudes and expectations of Mexican in-home caregivers working in the US.

<sup>13</sup> Maggie Caldwell (2013) also uses the term *invisible* in reference to domestic workers, where in the first-ever national survey carried out by the National Domestic Workers Alliance, an agency that interviewed 2,000 workers “to shed light on an industry that exists quietly behind closed doors.”

<sup>14</sup> Live-in domestics like Lydia are cited as using words such as “vivir encerrada,” ‘puerta cerrada,’ and ‘adentro’ literally translate as ‘to live locked in,’ ‘closed door,’ and ‘inside’ to describe their work situation (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 133).

<sup>15</sup> Detainees are managed through tens of legal forms, housed often in prison facilities owned privately or by the state, and managed often times by private corporations. While the US Immigration Visa Center gives reasons for deportation and lists legal remedies for detention, most studies show waivers are rarely granted for release from detention. Simply determining if someone has been detained is difficult and the hire of legal counsel is often economically prohibitive (Reasoner 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Ceci’s will to suicide seems perilously close to plays in which women who, when unable or unwilling to maintain gendered social norms, must pay in lowered social regard or otherwise come physically undone, as is the case of Ceci after the accident.

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