

Burgos and Harvey Go to the Beach: Urban Theory in “La flor de la playa”

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THE PURPOSE of this brief essay is to apply the theories developed by David Harvey on the processes of capitalism to Carmen de Burgos’ short story “La flor de la playa.” Harvey’s theories seek to reveal the real physical changes that capital makes to space—as well as how it affects our perception of time. An analysis of space and time in Burgos’ work enriches not only our understanding of her writing, but also of the dialogues and rapidly-changing politics of the time in which she wrote.

As David Harvey explains, novels have participated in the definition of alternatives, or possible worlds, within the capitalist process of urbanization (“City Future in City Past”). In this essay, I emphasize what Harvey calls “space-time compression” as it is exemplified in Burgos’ short story. According to Harvey, as capital accumulates in urban centers, it seeks to increase itself and accumulate even more by extracting maximum efficiency from laborers by enacting artificial schedules (such as factory shifts, train schedules, etc.) which seek to regiment and control time and the movement of individuals. In “La flor,” time-space compression fundamentally changes the way in which individuals interact with their environment and each other, all of which is readily evident in the cartographic imaginary Burgos constructs in the narrative.

What Harvey’s theories do not particularly address is the role of gender in these changing interactions. By carefully investigating the structure of “La flor,” it becomes clear that gender cannot be excluded from this analysis. As this essay will show, Burgos places gender relations at the forefront in her portrayal of the processes of capitalism, showing ultimately that the experience of urban space and consciousness is profoundly different for men and women.

Carmen de Burgos wrote during a time of great social and economic change in turn-of-the-century Spain. Her career is particularly notable because of her great success as a journalist and fiction writer during an era in which the roles of women were rapidly changing. As a single mother, she supported her family on her own earnings, and sharply criticized social structures that would restrict other women from doing the same (Larson x-xv). She was a well-known advocate for divorce and women’s rights, but also wrote under a pen name, Columbine, on various “women’s issues” such as household maintenance, beauty and hygiene. It is hard to say whether Burgos was a “feminist” in the ways we often understand the term today. While boldly taking advantage of the opportunities modernization allowed her, she also strongly supported specific roles

for women based on their supposed feminine essence. Her stories often deal with the negotiations of private and public space under modernization and the resulting conflicts between men and women, especially in domestic circumstances. Concepción Núñez Rey explains: “Carmen invents with [her protagonists] the woman of today (or perhaps of tomorrow.) But, the great protector, does not forget reality: in various novels she denounces the unjust inequality that the woman suffers before the law [...]” (47). Therefore, we can see that Burgos’ criticism of the condition of women does not easily forget the lived realities of her reading public.

The environment in which Burgos wrote was marked by rapid change. Commenting specifically on another one of Burgos’ novels, *La rampa*, Susan Larson states that “[i]n the press, the popular theater, put above all in the daily conversations one perceived the sensation of living a dramatic process of modern change”(xiii). This rapid modernization set the stage for debates about changing aesthetics. Maryellen Bieder argues that during the era in Spain in which Burgos wrote, male modernist writers focused primarily on artistic concerns, while women opted for closer examination of the social: “Women’s quest for autonomy, authority, or financial freedom thus displaces the more abstract concerns of male authors” (*Gender and Nation* 252). In the moment in which women writers began to claim some access to the publication market, they concerned themselves much more with questions of their “new identity” within “modern” society than their male counterparts. Roberta Johnson confirms this, saying that “Like male vanguard art, women’s vanguard fiction reflects the rapid changes of modern life, but it does not partake of the dehumanized aesthetic [...]” (224). At the turn of the century, women were beginning to gain some ground in their ef-

fort to become full and participatory members of the social and economic spheres, therefore, the dehumanized aesthetic mentioned by Johnson would be counter to their project. However, this does not necessarily mean that Burgos did not experiment in her style. As Susan Kirkpatrick explains, Burgos incorporates modernity into her stories, if not modernism: “That which injects a sense of modernity into her stories is her increasing focus on Spain and what is happening in the urban centers as a result of changing relations between classes and genders and the resulting instability of social identities and traditional psychologies” (199).¹ By investigating the day-to-day minutiae of women’s experiences in their relationship to the city or countryside, Burgos stands out as an author who engages the social and economical on a practical level much more than the experimental aesthetic. Her essays on social topics help to confirm this fact, and it remains clear that Burgos utilized her publications to help provoke real change. Her denouncement of social and economic abuses and demands for legal reform in Spain make her literature notably activist. It seems appropriate, therefore, not to call her a “modernist” writer, but perhaps “modernity-ist.”

In the story I examine here, the two protagonists Elisa and Enrique are workers in Madrid who survive on modest wages. Thanks to a raise Enrique earns, they take a trip to Portugal. The trip abroad gives them the opportunity to live as husband and wife, although they are still officially single, and to try on a new life in the countryside. While the move to the beach allows them to play house, it also fundamentally changes their relationship, ultimately resulting in their mutual discontent. I argue that the change in space and the symbolic transition from lovers to spouses has unequal and gendered effects on the two characters. Enrique finds himself liber-

ated by the money, but upon quitting her job, Elisa is obligated to submit to the will of her boyfriend. Their relations become centered on the domination he exerts over her as Enrique attempts to redefine her identity. These interactions are documented in the detailed descriptions of Elisa's clothing and in the structure of the narration itself. Outside the city, the monotony and drudgery of daily married life is reflected in the painfully long descriptions of their routines, emphasized by the use of the imperfect tense. More specifically, their displacement to the countryside decelerates time and changes their experience of space.

As Elizabeth Munson argues, women and men's relationship with public space was particularly complex during the era of modernization in which Burgos wrote, explaining that "the performance of gender rested upon the principle of difference as enacted in concrete spaces" (69). Due to rapidly-changing economic development, the presence of women in the workforce was becoming more necessary and, hence, more visible. The city and society adjusted to accommodate this feminine presence in the urban public spaces, but simultaneously resisted fully opening spaces previously considered masculine. Munson connects the entrance of the woman into public space with Spain's ambition to "modernize" (63). As Michael Ugarte states, Carmen de Burgos maintains a tense relationship with the city, cautioning against its dangers while simultaneously recognizing the openings it provided for women (100). If the modern woman is the working woman, then this is the very role Carmen de Burgos embodied as a writer and the role her protagonist, Elisa, fills in "La flor de la playa." As a working woman, albeit with a modest salary, she has access to the city and a certain amount of independence.

When Elisa leaves her work and travels to another country in the company of her boyfriend, she consequently sacrifices her independence. As David Harvey explains, in the processes of capitalism, "Money [...] becomes the abstract and universal measure of social wealth and the concrete means of expression of social power" (*Consciousness and the Urban Experience* 168). When Elisa becomes unemployed, she loses any power she had in the relationship. Enrique obligates her to change her appearance and to play the role of a "lady." Nostalgic retrospectives in the narrative reveal the freedoms that Elisa enjoyed in Madrid, where she had control over her identity. These differences are highlighted in the dichotomy of the beach (or countryside) and the city that Burgos constructs.

The images of the border between Portugal and Spain are central to this contrast. Portugal functions not only as a distancing from the urban center but also as isolation from a familiar culture. As she does not speak the language and knows no one, Elisa finds herself completely separated from society and entirely dependent on her boyfriend. As Ann Hardcastle has explained, the border, therefore, represents the transition from independent working woman to dependent wife. On the return trip to Madrid, the border symbolizes their divorce. Hardcastle elaborates:

Their border crossing then has clear ties with the traditional threshold crossing ritual the day of a wedding as a mark of the beginning of a new life together. With their return to Spain, their figurative marriage will end, and consequently this re-crossing of the original threshold maintains its symbolic importance. (249)

Burgos' narrative serves to further separate Spain and Portugal in time and space by referring to Portugal as a distant land, quaint in its antiquated customs, and far cheaper than the modern center of Madrid.

The second symbolic space that places Elisa under Enrique's control is her own body, realized through his re-fashioning of her attire. Like a doll, he dresses her up in the clothes that represent married women. Her new wifely uniform is initially exciting to her, but quickly becomes cumbersome:

But what work it cost her to be like that! The veil had made her dizzy, the hat impeded her movements. It was an extraordinary weight on her head...and then all of those details Enrique had wanted to buy...gloves, parasol, purse...everything was very pretty, very stylish... she was made a lady (wife), and when she passed by a mirror she didn't recognize herself. (317)

This description is almost suffocating, as Elisa is required to cover herself more and more, separating herself from contact with anyone other than Enrique. In this scene Enrique establishes her uniform and then makes it his mission throughout the narration to maintain it: "Enrique [was] far too preoccupied that Elisa wear the hat well and not reveal her heritage, her profession as a seamstress, in her movements or in her behavior" (343). Elisa is not only obligated to perform her gender, but a very specific type of confining gender and class performance is demanded of her. Enrique seeks to identify with the accommodated classes, and the accessory of an appropriately—dressed and well-behaved wife is part of his performance. Unsatisfied with playing a companion, and suffocating under the weight of his demands, Elsa longs to return to her independent lifestyle. This is why, upon en-

tering Madrid, she removes her hat in an act of self-liberation: "In an instinctive movement she also took off the hat and put it on the luggage rack. Her hair swung in the air with the movement of the train. It seemed to her that her head was free of a heavy yoke. It was as if she liberated herself again" (360). As in the previous quote, the reader is reminded of the restricting nature of the hat, its weight and its cumbersome nature, not only physically, but also emotionally. Of course, the use of the word *yoke* suggests a certain dominance and control that one usually associates with an animal, implying that Enrique was, in part, able to purchase his control over Elisa and mark it with this symbolic item.

The narrative further reveals the incompatibility of the clothes of independent Elisa and dependent Elisa, most specifically in the descriptions of her shoes. In Madrid, Elisa identifies herself through her footwear: "Her luxury, the luxury of a madrileña were her shoes, tailored and with a very high heel" (312). At the beach, however, her shoes no longer function in the same way and even turn out to be dangerous: "Elisa slipped sometimes in her Luis the XV heels and she had to support herself on the cane, afraid to support herself on those uneven rocks, sharp and prickly, that would hurt her if she touched them, Falling [sic] there, she said, the blood comes up before the dust" (345). This incompatibility of Elisa's city wardrobe with the country life is somewhat explained by David Harvey, who views fashion as a "partial compensation for the alienations of monetized individualism" and explains that "the search for expressive means to mark individualism (through, say, fashion) or to shape symbolic capital in the realms of consumption can lead to the formation of consumption classes and distinctive communities of consumption" (*The Urban Experience* 245). In the city, Elsa possessed her own dispos-

able income, albeit a modest one. This allowed her to define her personal style and to negotiate her identity through style within the modern city. It is clear that her use of clothing defines her position in society. Therefore, when Enrique attempts not only to control the space Elsa can occupy, but also the very space of her own body and the construction of her identity, Elisa feels overwhelmed.

Susan Kirkpatrick explains that in a context in which women had little space to determine their own destiny, fashion and appearance function as expressions of their modernity: "The activity of self-modeling of the woman, long underestimated as a frivolous vanity or as a function of her subordinated domestic roll, it is at the same time a motor of the economic modernization and projection of a modern aesthetic, each time newer and more brilliant" (192). In an era in which fashion reflected rapid changes, the right to personal style was a central concern of Burgos' writings. As she presented the matter, women could express their desires through their consumption. While women did not enjoy many of the basic rights afforded to men, the structure of capitalism allowed them a certain amount of self-fashioning. Elizabeth Munson explains: "Simplistically, nineteenth-century liberal rights and the rights of individuals were transformed for women into the right to consume and the choice to wear whatever one pleased" (70). Of course, the consumption of fashion does not afford women any resistance to the system of capitalism itself, but at the same time, it gives women with some disposable income the ability to form their own identities, especially as pertains to the personal space, or more specifically, the body. This little freedom depends, of course, on the access to some amount of disposable income. Women with their own jobs and some amount of left-over income had the luxury of this type

of self-fashioning while the poorer classes did not. The independence Elisa finds in her work comes not only from earning her own money, but from her ability to then use her earnings to fashion her own outward identity through the consumption of fashion.

The effects of capital are not only highlighted in the overt descriptions of Elisa's frustrations with the demands of her "husband," but are also imbedded in the structure of the story itself. The transition from the city to the country does not only signify a loss of control for Elisa, but also a deceleration of time. As David Harvey explains, urbanization accelerates time and condenses space. The frequent use of ellipsis in the first section of the story emphasizes the incapacity of the narrative voice to tell everything because time is moving so quickly: "Those five days in which they had wanted to see everything..." (317), "Everything was so happy, which communicated a sensation of well-being..." (315). The acceleration of time parallels the movement of the train: "Upon entering the tunnel of the Rocío station she hugged close, full of fear, to the body of Enrique..." (311). This technique is also utilized in the nostalgic recollections of their furtive meetings in the city before they were able to take the trip, all emphasizing the urgency and excitement of their relationship. The notable use of ellipsis is maintained until the arrival of the couple at "La flor de la playa," a restaurant that rents them a room in Portugal. Before their arrival in the town of Manzanillas, which covers six pages in this particular edition, there are 39 incidences of this use of ellipses. This section of rapid changes explains how the lovers came to this point, how they arranged their plans for the trip, how they then frenetically purchase new clothes and change identity, and how they travel to a foreign country. The speed of the descriptions suggests that there is insufficient time to

control details, and the dot, dot, dot of the ellipses not only mimic the engine of a train, but also, visually, the rolling wheels.

This fast-paced description contrasts heavily with the rest of the story, in which the ellipses appear 41 times more, but over the course of 18 sections which in this edition cover 45 pages. When the couple arrives in the country, everything changes. Whereas in the city they had to sneak around and steal moments together in the time between work and rest, in the country they see each other in the drudgery of everyday life and are almost immediately bored: "They kept living on all the tiny details, the things that in Madrid they never would have paid attention to" (356). Time decelerates and is represented by the almost exclusive use of the imperfect tense. The monotony and repetition of domestic life contrast sharply with the rhythm at the beginning of the story. Now slowed down, the narrative explains: "The same images always repeated" (323).

As Maryellen Bieder explains, Burgos interrupts the romance to show the tediousness of everyday life, or the "drudgery and oppression of cohabitation" (253). The interior descriptions of their room emphasize these feelings. The furniture is sparse, the bed is uncomfortable, and there is not enough room to bathe without getting water all over the floor. Their jealousy keeps them from bathing in the sea, and so, neither has access to public space as they once did. The narrator blames their boredom on their being a couple: "Sometimes, one or the other thought about how different their lives would have been if they had lived alone. Then they would have had friends, they would have had fun..." (323). Again, the possibility of a better, more accelerated life is accompanied by the ellipses.

The difference between urban life and life on the beach becomes even clearer when the

couple receives correspondence, and the ellipses appear once again: 4 times in one paragraph. This suggests that contact with their friends and families accelerates time once again: "The days when they had correspondence were full, optimistic; they filled in this hole of desire that they didn't know how to fill, [...] they wrote in order to receive letters, for this pleasure in hearing at 5pm the little knocks of Menina María on the door" (334). This is also the only occurrence of an exact time in the story. As we can see, the mail helps them to measure time according to the urban schedule, connected to the rural areas by the regulated movement of transportation.

In this situation, Madrid represents the hope of separation and the freedom that Elisa had as a seamstress. The narrative imagines Madrid as stable in the world, reliable and desirable in contrast with the uncertainties of Portugal:

They remembered, fearfully, the famous earthquakes of Lisbon, the dangers of volcanoes alongside the sea, they remembered anecdotes of huge waves falling onto the earth and they almost regretted being there instead of Madrid, which in its quality of population seated solidly on the peninsula, was immovable and had nothing to fear. (344)

Madrid, therefore, stands in the location of solid civilization, in comparison with the unpredictable rural life on the beach. Reminders of the toil of the poor servant girl, Menina María, and her long-suffering family and their various illnesses serve to uphold this comparison.

For both Elisa and Enrique Madrid represents freedom. Their return to the city inspires happiness and relief: "They entered Madrid! A sensation of indefinable happiness and sadness at the same time took over them. But they *did not have time* to give themselves over to this im-

pression" (363; my emphasis). For Elisa, the city represents even more; she will have the opportunity to live separated from Enrique again and exercise the concessions that modernity and the city afford her: "She felt like crying, but the air of the morning and the aspect of that neighborhood waking up in Madrid were optimistic" (363). For the first time in the story, except in the brief retrospective, Elisa and Enrique separate and go in different directions: "Later his car continued by the Prado and hers went up Atocha" (363). The urban geography, which Elisa has the right to traverse, gives her the opportunity to choose her own direction.

Carmen de Burgos did not imagine the city as perfect, nor as a particularly safe space for a single woman, but she still recognized the opportunities it offered to women who could not or would not submit to the will of an individual man. In the case of "La flor de la playa," she imagines the country as a space in which men still exercised more power over women and the protagonist, therefore, finds herself dominated. In the intersections of time and space, Elisa feels unstable. Not only does she feel controlled, but time itself decelerates. We see these conditions reflected in the overt descriptions in the text as well as reflected within its structure, as Carmen de Burgos imagines a rapidly-changing society that has uneven effects on men and women.

Notes

¹All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

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