

The City as Labyrinth in Mexican Women's Contemporary Writing

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Mexico City, with its complex and gritty urbanism typical of Latin American megalopolis, has been the subject of numerous academic and creative inquiries. The city has inspired such classic works as Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados*, Oscar Lewis's *The Children of Sánchez* and Carlos Fuentes's *La región más transparente*. Contemporary Mexican films such as *Amores Perros* (González Iñárritu) and *Ciudades oscuras* (Sariñana) are also evidence that the city continues to be fertile ground for exploration and analysis. The challenges of city life have many manifestations and the works mentioned above are attempts to explore the myriad experiences of the city. Rosa Nissán's *Hisho que te nazca*, Josefina Estrada's *Desde que Dios amanece* and Mónica de Neymet's *Las horas vivas* have been selected for analysis because these novels contribute to this dialogue on Mexico City, as they build upon the urban motif by adding the voice of women and the subject of woman and the city. These novels reveal the different ways women relate to or participate in the urban environment. In *Hisho que te nazca*, the main protagonist learns to make use of the city's resources when she decides to abandon the role of housewife, while in *Desde que Dios amanece*, the city serves as the background of the housewife's daily domestic life, reinforcing this role and limiting other possibilities. Lastly, *Las horas vivas* presents a withdrawal from city life due to the fear of a precarious urbanization, which becomes challenged by the introduction of a connector space. The order and discussion of these novels will reveal the different levels of participation in city life and the female protagonists' strategies and approaches to an unwelcoming environment.

CITY AS GENDERED LABYRINTH

These narrative works expose an urban environment that is configured according to gender hierarchical relations in which the male subject

occupies an advantageous positioning over the female subject. Alejandra Massolo, an urban sociologist whose research focuses on gender and the urban environment in the Latin American context, explains Mexico City's gendered spatial configuration to include the cultural significance of the domestic space:

La ciudad [de México] no es un espacio neutralmente genérico, es decir, donde son inexistentes las relaciones y divisiones sociales entre los géneros femenino y masculino. [. . .] Así como los hombres, las mujeres también producen y modifican el espacio urbano marcándolo con las diferencias de género que forman parte de la diversidad, pluralidad, heterogeneidad y conflictualidad de la ciudad moderna. Diferencias de género que resultan de las posiciones y roles asignados a la mujer en la esfera privada de la sociedad, determinando relaciones, percepciones, accesos, usos y experiencias específicas y desiguales respecto a la ciudad y a la vida social urbana. (Massolo 427)

This “private sphere” involves the historical relationship between the woman and the home as an integral factor in the structuring of the gendered city. The process of socialization that occurs within the home teaches the notion of femininity as a value to be housed. As a result, the home is construed as a place of belonging and sanctuary for the woman and the family. The female protagonists, Oshinica in *Hisbo que te nazca* and Ángeles in *Desde que Dios amanece*, are culturally anchored to the domestic space because of their roles as mother and housewife, which are reinforced by family traditions and rituals.

While the private domestic space of the house is configured as feminine and as sanctuary, the public space of the city, on the other hand, is structured as the place for the masculine subject. Often the public space is conceptualized as a labyrinth, as it is the setting for business and politics. The external environment is volatile and expansive. Even when the private and public model is perceived as artificial and illusory, movement and participation in the public realm can be challenging and requires a complex system of strategies and negotiations. It is an untamed and open terrain that is receptive to masculine agency, yet it is problematic for the feminine subject. In the novels, some women are unprepared to enter the public space in

other capacities not defined by their domestic roles. Since they have identified exclusively with the domestic realm, the space beyond it is perceived as uncharted and tricky. Yet this anxiety of the city is not exclusive to women who identify with their socialized gender roles. Even Matilde in *Las horas vivas*, who is neither wife nor mother and does not carry out traditional domestic roles, is fearful of the masculine space of urban Mexico City which in turn causes her to retreat within the confines of the home.

The geographer Doreen Massey offers a vivid, personal example of this common fear women have of the city through a young girl's 'sense' of not belonging in a public space. At nine or ten years old, Massey was already aware of the relationship between people and places, where she describes how "this huge stretch of Mersey flood plain had been entirely given to boys. I did not go to those playing fields—they seemed barred, another world (though today, with more nerve and some consciousness of being a space-invader, I do stand on football terraces—and love it)" (185). What is most interesting about Massey's example is the signifying power of the physicality displayed on the football field. The acts of playing, running and manipulating the external environment allow these boys or men to establish themselves as subjects and owners of the field. This behavior of agency delimits the configuration of this area and establishes who enters or belongs in this space. A young girl who does not display this masculine pattern of behavior is made to feel foreign in this area. This childhood experience illustrates the effects of the gendered external environment on a young girl. It is also indicative of the rite of passage undertaken by the female 'invader' who wishes to access this terrain.

As a result, women's presence in the city is highly impacted by the gender roles that have been prescribed within the private space. Anthropologist Shirley Ardener explains this by showing how 'social maps' determine the positionality of individuals to reflect structural or hierarchical relationships, while the 'ground rules' dictate the behavior of these individuals within a given space (11). Ardener's theories map out the spatial politics of the private and public paradigm. In the urban space, the male subject displays a 'strong' physical and social presence to demonstrate dominance over the environment and over the other inhabitants. As mother, (house)wife or daughter, the Mexican woman must decipher and heed the 'social maps' and 'ground rules' of the city. Consequently, women decipher these bodily

and social mechanisms and take on the appropriate behavior in which they display a 'weak' presence in the urban landscape.

An interesting interpretation of these bodily spatial politics is offered in Marianne Wex's photographic work, which exposes women's gendered experience of the public environment. Wex's work serves as a visual example of how the sense of belonging in public spaces is established and negotiated through the body and its movements. Her photographic investigation of 'female' and 'male' 'involuntary' or 'unconscious' body language in public spaces was based on the premise that men and women are socialized to use public spaces differently as a result of gender identities and roles. According to Wex, this socialization serves to establish and reinforce gendered hierarchy and categories of 'weak' and 'strong.' The more than 5,000 photographs led Wex to conclude that compared to men, women appear to be less physically 'present' in public spaces. Their bodies are restricted to minimize their presence, as depicted in the following description:

The general characteristics of women's body posture are: legs held close together, feet either straight or turned slightly inward, arms held close to the body. In short, the woman makes herself small and narrow, and takes up little space. The general characteristics of male body postures are: legs far apart, feet turned outwards, the arms held at a distance from the body. In short, the man takes up space and generally takes up significantly more space than the woman. (7)

This dominating male physical presence displayed in public spaces sends a telling message about hierarchy and power relations. In general, Wex explains that men have great physical freedom and this translates into advantageous positions over women. Moreover, women's body movement depends on the presence of men. In their absence, a woman's posture appears more relaxed, yet at the moment a man is present, there is noticeable change, her body language becomes strained. These 'involuntary' body postures displayed in the public space are, so argues Wex, very effective means of communicating "patriarchal power structures" (8).

Wex also offers the following very personal and revealing account of a woman's experience using public transportation. This example

sheds some light on the gendered power struggles carried out in public spaces. The tension and anxiety are accentuated by the physicality of being enclosed and in close proximity to the male subject. Again, the feelings experienced by this woman are of not belonging in this highly contested site and of being undermined by the ground rules that expect her to limit her physical presence when a male subject is near. And as in the example given by the geographer Doreen Massey, the physical dominance displayed in the public space is a strong identifier of the 'master' of this domain:

The master of the world sits opposite me in the subway. Four men on a seat which has room for five, legs sprawled, padded shoulders, hands resting on their knees, fingers spread apart. [. . .] I am sitting close up to myself, knees pressed tightly together...The appropriate muscles are to be held tensed all day long. I close my eyes. To cast off this repressive posture! To act as though I could sit unhassled with legs relaxed. (8)

This woman's restricted behavior in the city space, especially in the presence of a male subject, is the result of the spatial politics that dictate women's movement throughout public spaces and render them in a subaltern position.

In this article, I examine the varied ways in which the female protagonists utilize strategies to depart from a restrictive domestic space and negotiate their participation in a gendered urban landscape where cultural mechanisms inhibit women's participation. Ardener's concept of spatial configurations is instrumental in my approach to the novels because I explore the positionality of the women as they move from the domestic space to the city environment. Also, I draw on the theories elaborated by Massey and Wex on the woman's sense of not belonging in public spaces. Wex's photographic approach to the body language displayed in public is utilized in this analysis to look at specific scenes in a similar fashion. As a result, I present "snap shots" of scenes to reveal the bodily composition of the women in the city space. Finally, Massolo's insight about the cultural implications of the domestic space in the Mexican urban context is especially pertinent to my analysis of the novels, as I am mindful of the pervasiveness of a masculine ideology that places a low social value on the feminine.

In the novels, Oshinca, Ángeles and Matilde must contend with a social structure where gender inequality is a cultural ideology and an accepted practice. It begins with the 'feminine' space of the home, which holds low social value, and is carried out into the public sphere where women are confronted with an unwelcoming urban environment. While some female protagonists experience stress and difficulty when moving about the city, others do manage to learn the ways of the streets to become skillful urban navigators. My discussion begins with *Hisho que te nazca*, in which Oshinca develops a strategy of utilizing the city's resources when she abandons her domestic role of housewife. By being able to identify valuable mechanisms, such as connector spaces, Oshinca becomes successful in negotiating her presence in the urban environment. *Desde que Dios amanece* represents a partially successful female urban navigator. Ángeles is skillful in trekking the city when running her errands to complete her role as housewife. She negotiates her presence by performing the feminine, whether it is through the role of housewife or of lover. Yet these strategies fall short when she steps beyond the boundaries of the ground rules and she is forced to contend with the gendered city environment. Ángeles is made to see that not all public spaces are accessible and she has limited mobility. Lastly, *Las horas vivas* presents a failed relationship with the city. Matilde is unable to cope with the intimidating urban environment and therefore chooses self-exile as an initial way to deal with living in contemporary Mexico City. By denying herself agency, Matilde demonstrates an extreme fear of the city. Despite the different strategies and outcomes, these women embody different approaches to an urban environment that is problematic for women. These narrative works represent a gendered perspective of the urban experience and by positing these microhistories within the dominant narrative space, they contribute to creating a more comprehensive contemplation of life in contemporary Mexico City.

SKILLFULLY NAVIGATING THE LABYRINTH

Oshinca is a Jewish-Mexican housewife in Rosa Nissán's novel, *Hisho que te nazca*, who breaks from the domestic ideal in order to pursue her own space where her artistic expression is allowed to flourish. In this journey to self-actualization, Oshinca will need to abandon the domestic paradigm that has stringently defined her identity and enter the city environment, which represents an unknown territory. While

this process is difficult and painful, Oshinica will discover and make use of the strategies necessary to survive on her own in Mexico City.

The highly structured domestic space has been instrumental in shaping Oshinica's sense of place in her Jewish home and community. The parental and marital homes mark her identity and define her participation in the public spaces of Mexico City. Oshinica's rearing has been based on the separate gendered spaces paradigm. Initially, she follows the basic societal rule that women belong in the home and not out in the street. As a result, Oshinica contends with the strong feeling of not belonging in the public realm, as theorized by the geographer Doreen Massey. Furthermore, Oshinica senses she is only being permitted a temporary pass to reach a particular destination. She has been socialized to understand femininity as a value to be contained within a respectable domestic environment. As a seasoned housewife, she follows the unwritten rules for the married woman when moving about the city. She is expected to safeguard her highly valued marital identity. As a result, Oshinica develops personal tactics that will enable her to comply with these expectations, which she explains in the following manner:

Cuando voy sola por la calle, si me llaman o me tocan el claxon no volteo, a menos que me vayan a atropellar. Si nada más es para vacilarme, pongo la cara más seria del mundo y apuro el paso, no me pica la curiosidad por saber quién es. A lo mejor es mi marido que lo hace para calarme, por eso no pelo. Una señora casada no tiene que andar volteando a ver a cualquiera. (65)

This scene reveals the thought process and strategies Oshinica uses when navigating the city. According to Ardener's spatial theories, Oshinica is using a social map in which women of her Jewish community are generally absent in the city, while men dominate this space. Moreover, she understands and follows the ground rules that guide her behavior as a married middle-class woman. She also knows that when she is unaccompanied, she must use body language to fend off the objectification of the male gaze. Lastly, Oshinica must also contend with an overbearing husband who has instilled in her the sense of being watched even when out of his sight. At this phase in her life, the city represents a volatile labyrinth that is clearly not an appropriate environment for her.

Oshinica experiences a rift with the domestic paradigm with the introduction of a connector space, or a space similar to what the social anthropologist Teresa del Valle terms “un espacio puente” (164). This space bridges together the private and public spaces and allows for a fluid movement between them. Most importantly, this space acts as a catalyst for change and transformation, as it blurs the boundaries of the private and public paradigm (164–165). For Teresa Del Valle, a woman’s group best exemplifies this connector space because it brings women together outside the private space, while retaining the essential identifier of these women: the daily domestic life (166). In Oshinica’s case, the “espacio puente” is the Instituto de Cultura Superior, a school for women. At first Oshinica experiences feelings of not belonging, but gradually this space is perceived as non-threatening as she meets other students who are housewives. She begins to incorporate the school into her weekly routine and here begins the collapse of the domestic paradigm.

When Oshinica decides to separate from her husband and move beyond all that constitutes the domestic identity, she confronts the first step required to make the transition from the private space to the public sector: she needs to become economically independent. However, the notion of working to earn a living is challenging and daunting. Again, Oshinica discovers another valuable connector space through the network of divorced women who have entered the world of paid work. These women serve as a tangible example of living outside the domestic ideal. One divorced woman in particular, Oshinica’s cousin, challenges her to remove the veil of homemaker, an identity that had been instilled in her from childhood and which had granted her social status as a married middle-class woman. She encourages her to move toward that moment of epiphany when the notions of domesticity and paid work have been demystified. “¡Quítate esas arañas de la cabeza!, todos tenemos las mismas necesidades de casa, comida, etcétera. Con orgullo trabajas para mantenerte y ya!, Esto te ennoblece, prima boba [. . .]” (Nissán 160). Oshinica reaches the decisive moment to embrace her passion and earn a living as a photographer. She is now determined to succeed in the world of paid work.

Oshinica’s success in the public space will depend greatly on her ability to access various city spaces, which will be challenging when she lives in the distant middle-class suburb, Ciudad Satélite. In order to be able to negotiate her participation in the city, Oshinica will need

to employ many strategies and make use of connector spaces. To best move from the domestic space to the various sites of work, she will rely heavily on her car, and learn to navigate efficiently through the city's congested traffic. Oshinica adapts quickly by making her Galaxie "una casa ambulante," a mobile home that allows her to maximize her day out in the city:

Apenas salgo de la casa y me topo con el primer obstáculo: un montón de coches. El tiempo que tenía se me va de las manos, no hay posibilidad de avanzar... Opté por no regresar a Satélite hasta la noche, si vuelvo en la tarde, ni de relajo me lanzo a la aventura de cruzar otra vez esta ciudad. Lo bueno es que la cajuela del Galaxie es tan grande que caben miles de cosas. Es mi casa ambulante. Me cambio de ropa donde puedo, llevo artículos de tocador, sudadera, tenis, zapatos de tacón. (161)

This description highlights how the car is not merely her mode of transportation through intimidating public traffic, but is also the connector space that allows her to go back to the private space when needed.

With the divorce in process, Oshinica is forced to move her household into an apartment on a busy commercial street. And while the children are horrified by their fall from social grace, this move to the city means that Oshinica will have improved her chances for economic independence by adopting an alternative lifestyle:

[. . .] aquí en La Condesa se me facilita la vida: se ponchó la llanta, a la vuelta está la vulcanizadora; que no dejó bien el coche el mecánico, hay otro; ¿no hay nada de comer?, ¿que me aburrí en la noche?, salgo a caminar, a comerme una quesadilla, una hamburguesa, que son buenísimas en la esquina, al cine. El cerrajero, el plomero, el eléctrico, con todos platico, uno me recomienda con el otro. (208)

Oshinica's description shows that there are many nearby resources that she is eager to utilize, as she embraces her new identity as a working single parent. Life in the city also means that her children will need to learn to use public transportation and get around on their

own, thus freeing Oshinica from many activities related to motherhood. Her challenge now is to unlearn the domestic ideal and with it the middle-class notions of femininity and the home. Oshinica begins to see that she can survive on her own and that the boundaries of the private and public spaces can be collapsed. The city has ceased to be an intimidating environment. It is now a valuable setting for the new life she is forging.

PERFORMING THE FEMININE IN THE LABYRINTH

In Josefina Estrada's novel, *Desde que Dios amanece*, the female protagonist will learn that while she has been allowed to trek the city under the guise of the housewife, she is not in any authoritative position to alter the integrity of the highly valued and guarded masculine spaces. Ángeles's use of city spaces is defined by her status and role as a middle-class housewife. Her mark of identity is that of a domestic manager and her sole reason for being out in the public realm is to carry out related responsibilities. Based on Ardenner's concept of space, Ángeles follows a social map that gives limited access and participation to women. Each morning, Ángeles faces a day that is based on the tasks to be done for her children or for her husband. When she first steps out into the city streets she transforms into a skillful navigator. Upon leaving her house she sheds the protection of the marital home and yet is still able to dominate the external environment to complete her errands. However, one day in particular is different from others since she is to meet with her lover. The encounter with her lover in a public space will reveal to Ángeles the true nature of the city as labyrinth. Her navigational skills fall short when facing her lover in the 'masculine' space of the business office. This is a highly revered and protected space that proves to be off limits to Ángeles when she wishes to access it by performing her role as lover.

Ángeles adopts a bold and almost reckless attitude toward her role as lover. Without reservations she incorporates extramarital activities into her domestic responsibilities. As she runs errands she will select and purchase condoms as if she were choosing a food item for the family's meal, "¡Los condones! Me voy a amarrar un hilito para que no se me vayan a olvidar...Tendré que pasar rápido a Sanborns; hay mejor surtido. Los del súper son muy furrís; les falta imaginación, colorido, sabor" (12). This gesture subverts her role as dutiful housewife and adds a comical note to a serious matter. Ángeles is disillusioned

with her domestic life because it has become devoid of meaning, as she lacks authority and autonomy. Unlike Oshinica who questions the imposed domestic identity and abandons it when it becomes oppressive, Ángeles is not able to take on this difficult examination. Instead, she embraces humor as a mechanism to cope with her domestic life and with her extramarital activities. By making light of the situation she is able to evade the identity of Ángeles the housewife and take on the persona of Ángeles the lover, which is based on skillfully performing the feminine.

Ángeles moves confidently throughout the city by negotiating her feminine presence. Rather than shy away from her sexual identity she exhibits it cautiously. She adorns her body with colorful clothing yet masks her identity with protective sunglasses that serve as a barrier to the intrusive gaze. She purposely attracts male attention in order to control it. In this manner she performs the role of the skillful seductress. Yet, she also sets limits to the gaze and to potential interaction by not allowing eye contact. Ángeles recognizes the strong sexual undertone of the city and demonstrates a risqué attitude by playfully challenging this aspect of the city. As an unaccompanied woman in the public space, she is vulnerable to sexual objectification, yet she is literally quite capable of holding her ground. The following scene is suggestive of an urban environment that is primal and animalistic: “Ángeles sale protegida tras sus enormes anteojos oscuros...Camina de prisa, dejando tras de sí una estela de perfume ácido y penetrante, de hierba fermentada...En la calle de Amado Nervo, un automovilista, a pesar de tener el siga, no avanza; la mira con insistencia” (19).

While Ángeles is very comfortable with running her errands during the day, she does recognize that the city takes on a different dimension at night. She knows very well that navigating the city alone at night time is particularly tricky. However, Ángeles falsely believes she understands the spatial politics of the city. Thus, she is not afraid or intimidated by the implications of the night, as she has developed effective strategies that give her the confidence to pay a visit to her lover at his office in the evening. However, when she transgresses the closely guarded boundaries of her lover’s work place, Ángeles confronts the hierarchical gender nature of this environment.

The risky visit to her lover’s office involves an elaborate logistical approach to a complex spatial situation. As a married, unaccompanied woman and non-employee, Ángeles faces the difficult task of entering

an accounting firm outside business hours to encounter employees who are working late into the night due to an audit. The accounting firm represents a masculine space par excellence, while the evening audit heightens the seriousness of the business setting. Once in her lover's office, Ángeles becomes involved in a tug of war with her lover, as her attempt to carry out a surprise romantic encounter is rejected by her lover who is resolved in maintaining a serious business environment. He 'performs' his role of the busy executive and disregards her visit. Ángeles's presence threatens the integrity and respectability of his workplace and he succeeds in denying her wish of displaying their love affair in an inappropriate space. The final humiliation for Ángeles is being forced to leave through the emergency exit so as not to be seen by his wife who is about to enter through the main entrance.

Prior to this encounter, Ángeles was guided by the false impression that her femininity was an effective mechanism that enabled her to move throughout the urban labyrinth regardless of time of day or type of public space. She derived great pleasure from the attention she received when displaying a coquet image, yet knew to be careful in concealing her respectable identity. While she had been encouraged to perform the role of seductress in restaurants, city streets, hotel rooms, and other public spaces, she has now been denied this role in her lover's place of business. She has been taught a lesson on the ways of the city. The role of lover does not grant her any power with which to negotiate her presence in the masculine space of the business setting. It has been made clear to Ángeles that she cannot take the initiative to enter 'his' space as she pleases, nor can she gain entry through flirtation or other seductive gestures. Essentially, Ángeles as lover must abide by the social map drafted by her lover and which indicates the spaces that are accessible or restricted.

This disastrous ending is completely contrary to the daytime scenario. During the day Ángeles finds the city to be easily navigable as she carries out her domestic related errands. With a firm and confident stride she covers many streets, takes cabs and enters public spaces such as the supermarket, the department store Sanborns, and her son's school. However, the city does present some challenges at night, specifically when she attempts to enter her lover's office. In this space and time, Ángeles is reminded of the ground rules that dictate her roles as housewife and as lover. The city at night is no place for the unaccompanied housewife. However, when Ángeles skillfully performs the role

of lover, the city becomes more receptive to her presence. The conflict arises when Ángeles boldly takes her performance to her lover's work place. As the guardian of this respectable 'masculine' space, he rejects her presence and shows her the true master of the extramarital domain by putting her back in her place. As a result, Ángeles will give up her role as lover and conform to her life as housewife. This mark of identity will inform the way she occupies city spaces and she will again face an unfulfilled existence in both the domestic and public spaces. Unlike Oshinica who sees the city as a resourceful environment that allows her to move beyond the domestic role, Ángeles's relationship to the urban environment is defined specifically by her role of housewife. She looks to the city to achieve her domestic tasks and is quite skillful in this regard. Yet, Ángeles is only partially utilizing the city's resources, and she does so to fulfill the needs of others.

EVADING THE LABYRINTH AND DENYING FEMALE AGENCY

In Mónica de Neymet's *Las horas vivas*, the city environment is decisive in shaping the women's relationship to the domestic space. The novel presents a diverse group of women who live in the same middle class apartment building and who employ the obligatory maid. For some women, city life has granted them the opportunity to reconfigure the middle class home and its notions of femininity and the home. The woman is now the breadwinner and exercises authority over the others who live in this space, or she undomesticates it by doing away with the hierarchical structure of the familial and marital paradigm. The latter is the home environment for the main protagonist Matilde, a young economically independent, unmarried woman, who shares the apartment with her maid, María Diosdado, a shy and anxious young mother who is a recent newcomer to Mexico City. However, Matilde's alternative domestic space fails to bridge the gap between the private and public spaces and she is not able to experience an enriched and fulfilling life in contemporary Mexico City. Instead, the apartment becomes a protective shelter in which to find comfort and isolation from an intimidating urban environment. Matilde's anxiety is the result of not having a social map with which to read the city and her place in it.

Unlike Oshinica and Ángeles who navigate the city, Matilde is an awkward presence in the urban space. She has a strong aversion toward the external environment and is crippled by this phobia,

which is an extreme version of Massey's theory about the feeling of not belonging in the public space. Her fear may be a consequence of the void left by the death of her parents; however, the details of her family life are unknown to the reader. Matilde shows no emotional connection to the family home. The only reference to her past is the pink coverlet from her childhood that she uses as a security blanket. By sleeping with this childhood remnant, Matilde demonstrates a longing and need to regress to her past, to a time and space where she felt safe and protected. It is evident that Matilde's traumatic experience has impacted her adult identity.

It is also important to note that the pink coverlet is the only gender identifier. While Matilde clearly recognizes the gender signifiers of the women who live in the apartment building, she chooses to ignore her own gender identity. She is acutely aware of the beautifying measures used by her neighbors to cope with the issues they face as women. Such is the situation of the middle-aged career woman who is anxious about her age and fading beauty in light of having married a young aspiring actor. Similarly, the quiet and withdrawn young woman who makes a living as a call girl, hides behind her beauty so as not to see the damaging effect of selling her body. Matilde knows that these women give in to the beautifying myth because it allows them to conceal their despairing realities.

Matilde, on the other hand, seeks to avoid her gender identity and to be invisible to others to deter any social contact and to be present only as an observer of others' lives. In the following description, Matilde explains her vulnerabilities in which as an outsider, she occupies such a small and insignificant presence that she goes unnoticed:

Vuelve a mí esa sensación de estar fuera de la escena, mirando a las cosas desde una ventana. La ventana es la de mi cuarto de niña. [...] Yo no tengo rostro al que los demás puedan mirar: soy el hueco de la ventana. Puedo poner atención y observar lo que pasa, y oír lo que hablan los demás. Pero no me ven. Vuelve la sensación angustiosa de que es peligroso vivir allí en las calles, mostrando un cuerpo y unas facciones [. . .]. (25)

Matilde will constantly refer to the window motif, which serves as a protective looking glass through which she safely observes others, yet

is not seen by them. It is clear in this passage that she struggles with her anxiety about the dangers of displaying the gendered body when out in the city streets.

Matilde's need to avoid social contact and the implications of her presence in the city leads her to take on a tedious thesis project that serves the purpose of evasion. For the past two years, Matilde has been working on a Spanish translation of a nun's collection of letters written in the fourth or sixth century. This project allows her to evade reality and life in contemporary Mexico City, as she is transported to a distant past where she loses herself in the life of this medieval nun. At times, Matilde detects the moment when she slips into this mysterious persona, blurring the boundaries of both realities, as described in the following passage, "Estoy inquieta en este inhóspito enero. ¿La soledad? Una isla helada en la que la monja está sola, vestida de blanco. Pero no, soy yo a la que el frío paraliza y encoge. La monja no está sola" (31). Matilde draws a parallel between the nun's life of solitude and her own self-exile from contemporary life in Mexico City. She easily identifies with the nun and finds comfort in her letters. It is telling that Matilde becomes attached to this woman whose vow of celibacy identifies her as an asexual being. Again, Matilde's avoidance of a gendered or sexual identity is manifested through her identification with this nun. Ardener's social map would prove to be a valuable resource for her, as it would provide her with the codes for guiding her own behavior and that of others, thus being able to integrate herself in city life. Instead, Matilde allows herself to become consumed by her thesis project as a way to avoid life beyond her apartment.

Matilde withdraws from the city because she fears it and lacks the skills to face an intimidating environment. Indeed, the trauma of losing her parents has also severed her confidence in life beyond the domestic space. Without this foundation, Matilde is unable to decipher the various mechanisms at work or the nonverbal language of other city dwellers. She knows she does not belong in this urban jungle where she is vulnerable. Matilde expresses this alienation in the following passage:

Temo, cuando estoy allá fuera, perdida en ese seco torbellino de ruidos, no saber leer la clave de las voces, de las señas, como no descubro, porque no estoy en el secreto, los insultos lanzados por los claxons de los coches. Extraña en

la calle, en mi propia ciudad, no reconozco los refugios, los contactos, pero ¿los demás los conocen? (81)

Matilde acknowledges the peculiarity of her situation and senses that there is a missing link that would have provided her with the ground rules to guide her behavior, as explained by anthropologist Shirley Ardener. Therefore the female protagonist lacks the skills to carry out a normal urban life. She manages by living on the periphery, by looking down at the city through her window and avoiding direct contact with others.

This deficiency in survival strategies has been fostered by her complete attachment to an undomesticated private space. To avoid stressful urban situations Matilde becomes a recluse in her protective apartment. She is most at ease alone at home where she has created an alternative domestic environment, as there is no gender or familial hierarchy represented by a husband or father figure. Rather, she creates a soothing atmosphere based on classical music, academic books and her translation project. However, by enclosing herself in her “*isla departamento*,” (9) or “*departamento de cristal*,” (40) Matilde is demonstrating behavior symptomatic of a person suffering from the fear of open spaces. By giving into her fear she is denying herself agency and participation in city life. She is living in a metaphysical dead space where gender and contemporary cultural references are nonexistent. Matilde is unable and unwilling to leave the sanctuary of her home.

However, Matilde’s attempts to shun city life are gradually challenged by María, her maid, who serves as a connector space to the outside world. María is instrumental in bringing about a change in Matilde’s hermit-like state. María engages Matilde in life beyond her apartment through conversation about her new neighbors. As she goes about her chores, María subtly incorporates the exterior into Matilde’s secluded life, as described in this passage, “*Entonces habían aparecido los extraños, los invasores que ya entraban con la avanzada de los comentarios de María, que puntual con el jugo de naranja, el pan tostado y el café, me preguntaba: Ahora en la mañana llegaron los vecinos. ¿Los oyó?*” (17). In this interaction Matilde takes on a passive role while María is the active story teller who is timidly bringing Matilde out of her indifference and self-exile. Surprisingly, Matilde responds well to María’s stories and begins to listen attentively to the maid’s narration and to the others who live in the building.

Indeed, in the brief time that María worked as a maid, Matilde's reclusive attitude was challenged by her presence in the apartment. María was effective in sparking Matilde's interest in the building's activities, and consequently, was able to detach Matilde's grip on the thesis project that had become her reason for self-exile. While Matilde's experience with this connector space does not reach its full actualization, as is the case with Oshinica who makes drastic changes with her lifestyle, there is a positive result. As Matilde begins to actively observe the lives of the women in the apartment building, she learns of the many ways women inhabit Mexico City, whether the woman is the middle class 'patrona' or the humble woman who serves her. This interest in the activities immediately outside her apartment door represents a step closer to the contemporary life of a chaotic urban environment she had been avoiding. Even though she is not ready to actively take part in city life, Matilde has made a significant break from the phobia that has led her to a sheltered existence. A telling scene near the end of the novel is when Matilde buys a notebook in which to write down her observations. These observations will constitute Matilde's first novel and represent an effort to bridge her private space to the public spaces of Mexico City. As the novel closes, the reader is assured that Matilde will now move closer to city life and possibly learn to become part of it.

CONCLUSIONS

The women in these novels represent the different ways of experiencing life in contemporary Mexico City. Gender and social class mark their use of domestic and public spaces. The spatial theories of 'social maps' and 'ground rules,' elaborated by anthropologist Shirley Ardener, highlight how spatial politics informs the domestic and city spaces these women inhabit. According to Ardener, spaces are configured to reinforce hierarchical relationships. While the domestic realm has been constructed to house the feminine, the female protagonists do not feel 'at home' here, as they must contend with gender and class power struggles. The home, then, may be experienced as a safe or oppressive environment. For women like María, who works as a maid, the middle class home in the city is indeed a sanctuary from an abusive marital relationship found in some homes of rural Mexico. For Matilde and other women unskilled at navigating the city, the domestic space represents shelter from the objectification

and harassment of an intimidating and chaotic urban environment. On the other hand, some women view the city as a liberating space. For the newly divorced Oshinica, the urban environment is the best setting to ensure her survival as a single working parent. Her success in the city depends on her ability to maximize the resources not easily accessible to women. An effective strategy for Oshinica is identifying those connector spaces that allow her to move beyond the domestic. Ángeles looks to the city to carry out the necessary tasks as dictated by her domestic role, but she also looks to it to perform her role of lover. However, when she fails to follow the ground rules, she is firmly reminded of her place and role as housewife. She is also schooled in the urban spatial politics. The 'masculine' spaces of the city will not be undermined, nor its integrity threatened.

Regardless of the various ways each female protagonist relates to the city, this space is not neutral terrain. On the contrary, it has been configured by gender, social and cultural ideologies. This environment acts upon its inhabitants, and is also acted upon by them. Through socialization male agency is encouraged and reinforced in city spaces. Male social and physical dominance is displayed as part of the ground rules that configure this environment. Consequently, some women react to this 'performance' and modify their behavior to assume a subaltern role in the city. They succumb to the obstacles that discourage their active participation as citizens of this megalopolis. As a result, they either become entrapped in the labyrinth or choose to avoid exposure to the city as they are unable to leave the familiarity of the domestic paradigm. For these women, the gendered hierarchical environment undermines female agency and reinforces the private-public paradigm. However, other women are skillful in reading the spatial politics of the city and in identifying and creating connector spaces, which facilitate movement from the domestic realm to the urban space. Arming themselves with these strategies, they are able to maneuver around cultural mechanisms or turn them into useful resources. These women succeed in negotiating their presence in the city and mark the feminine onto the urban landscape, thus gaining some ground in the tug of war that is characteristic of contemporary Mexico City.

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