CHAPTER 5

Trash as Theme and Aesthetic in Elvira Navarro’s *La trabajadora*

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La basura se siente bien contigo.
Hazla metáfora.
O deja aquí, entre plástico, los ojos
para que otro los use.

(Trash feels good with you.
Make it a metaphor.
Or leave it here, between plastic, eyes
for someone else to use.)

“Basura” (Garbage) is a poem by Carlos Pardo from *Echado a perder* (Spoiled)³

The social movements and participatory urbanism in Madrid in the wake of the economic crisis of 2008 resulted in a storm of social protest centralized in the Puerta del Sol that has since spread out in real space into all manner of neighborhoods and symbolically into a wide variety of artistic forms. This essay focuses on one example of this collective desire to articulate new ways of thinking about and inhabiting urban space: Elvira Navarro’s 2014 *La trabajadora* (*The Worker*), a novel that directly confronts the human cost of austerity measures in Spain by addressing the indignation experienced by those whose life plans have been altered by economic instability and labor precarity. Specific attention is paid to the notable presence in contemporary works of urban social criticism of references to garbage, trash, waste, and detritus of all kinds.² In many of these works, garbage and its recycling appear as recurring themes but also function at the conceptual level to propose an aesthetic all their own. *La trabajadora* is a direct response to the material conditions of the city and serves as a prime example of art that envisions the reuse and repurposing of refuse within urban space. It’s a novel about contemporary life in Madrid that suggests there are
viable alternatives to the accumulation strategy of debt-driven financial capital. It’s also a work that explores how human beings find ways to inhabit the cracks and abandoned areas left behind by the failure of the neoliberal project.³

Words, sounds, and images exist in a reciprocal relationship to urban space, creating meanings that are constantly being renegotiated and fought over. Urban culture is invariably tied up in the “production of social space,” to use Henri Lefebvre’s term. As Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago points out in “This Square Is Our Home!” the 15-M movement combined some of the already existing political answers to Spain’s problems from the left-wing parties making up Spain’s parliamentary government with very different (and oftentimes conflicting) calls for self-government that came from more radical groups.⁴ Even if only for a short period of time, on the municipal, national, and global scales the Puerta del Sol spatially embodied a set of radically new political possibilities. Luis Moreno Caballud subsequently identifies a post-crisis shift in Spanish culture toward what he terms a “culture of anyone”:

The economic disaster has generated such a huge drop in the credibility of political institutions that it has begun to affect this hierarchical cultural system, thus compromising the very authority of those “in the know.” This has driven many people “in the dark” to trust in their own abilities to collaboratively construct the knowledge they need in any given situation and to generate effective answers to the problems that confront them. In the process, they avoid having to weigh down their ways of knowing with the monopolistic, exclusive, hierarchical ambitions that accompany the tradition of the “experts.” (3)

15-M, as Moreno Caballud explains, sparked a social movement that spawned a host of grassroots collectives that have ever since been bringing together people who want to reimagine urban space and artists that look to the everyday to create meaningful connections that are more accessible and inclusive.

La trabajadora can be understood as part of this artistic response to 15-M in that it directly confronts the effects of austerity measures in Spain by addressing the indignation and frustration experienced by two women, Susana and Elisa, whose life plans have been destroyed by economic instability and labor precarity. As the title of the novel indicates, the women’s identities are irrevocably tied to their work, their economic status, and their debt. Their identities evolve over the course of the novel as their work situations worsen and they are subsequently disconnected from traditional notions of urban space and pushed to the periphery of society. One explanation for changing social perceptions of
work and workers in Spain can be found in anthropologist Irene Sabaté’s ethnographic study of individual responses to the economic crisis of 2008—responses that hinge on what she calls the “failure of the central concept of the ‘moral economy’” (109). Sabaté argues that the moral economy has traditionally depended on the perception of mortgage overindebtedness as an illegitimate condition. As indebtedness becomes an increasingly common experience, however, the condition of being in debt is now more widely shared and rearticulated. The effects of violating moral economies include the collapse of life projects, the renunciation of promised futures, and the perceived “regression” of debtors to earlier stages of life. The current economic crisis has made people feel as though they have lost the futures promised to them through the years of financial prosperity. According to Sabaté, those involved in her study increasingly feel that the moral economy has been violated, promises broken, and their long-term life plans devastated. Many are now left with unpayable debts and feel disillusioned with and frustrated by capitalist credit-debt agreements that have sold off their futures and left them tarnished by negative stereotypes.

Elvira Navarro’s La trabajadora is, then, a work that considers how the 2008 economic crisis in Spain, coupled with the aggressive privatization of public space and increasingly precarious labor situations for both working- and middle-class workers, has affected Madrid’s citizens. It’s a model of what Jon Snyder calls a “poetics of opposition”: a work that actively reappropriates and resignifies urban space. Snyder explains that the events that first transpired on May 15, 2011, in the Puerta del Sol have had a lasting impact on how people read and resist the rhetoric of austerity.

Although the protesters’ reshaping of the city may be precarious, forever on the shore of its own disappearance . . . what persists when demonstrators no longer occupy the square, and when the urban milieu may succumb again to routine commerce, private enterprise, and property speculation, are the transformative practices of protesters who read their common subjugation critically and, in the process, make the sources of domination legible as a collective circumstance, with material consequences . . . . Reading, it seems, plays an important role in constituting and reconstituting multitudes that mobilize toward change. (2–3)

Snyder’s argument is that the social movements stemming from 15-M in 2011 gave protesters the tools to read and subsequently denounce the rhetoric upholding processes such as gentrification and the privatization of the urban landscape, forced evictions, and a whole host of other policies that were recast in the media as outcomes of the personal failings of the poor.
In the wake of the highly visible 15-M demonstrations across Spain, Navarro’s novel is one of many examples of the proliferation of small-scale grassroots endeavors that work toward creating new ways of living in and theorizing the city, and it accomplishes this by questioning some very basic assumptions about what a city is. Both individually and collectively, 15-M has resulted in a consideration of what some have termed a “new ecology of urban space.”

Many urban geographers interested in theorizing a more socially just organization of space in the wake of the 2008 economic collapse have begun to explore what they call “degrowth” in both fiction and grassroots initiatives of the kind mentioned above. They have dissected the depoliticizing effects of the growth discourse (Swyngedouw, 2015) and have investigated how cities can adapt to the prolonged and foreseeable absence of growth. Central to this conceptualization of the new city and its economies of degrowth are trash, waste, and reuse in the wake of urban (and, by extension, regional) shrinkage. The degrowth movement is particularly strong among activists and intellectuals in southern Europe who share a vision of an alternative to capitalist socioecological relations. The concept signifies a ruthless critique of the ideology of economic growth and its material effects as well as a search for alternatives to the teleological progression marching toward ecological disaster. The terms mentioned here—“degrowth” (D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis; Prádanos-García, “poetics of resistance” (Snyder), “cultures of anyone” (Moreno-Caballud), and an “aesthetics of trash and recycling” (Feinberg and Larson)—have all been used in recent years to identify a set of collective political and closely related cultural tactics that articulate the unraveling of the social fabric in Spain in general and propose radical changes to urban life in particular.

Elvira Navarro’s 2014 novel La trabajadora comes in at a relatively short but remarkably dense 150 pages. The reader is invited to consider the social and psychological impact of Spain’s 2008 economic crisis through a plot that hinges on the everyday realities of part-time labor contracts, rising rents, and severely weakened social services. The existence of young women in abandoned, provisional nonspaces in the novel is made even more precarious by the decentralized experience of the informal and increasingly digital environment in which they work and conduct some of their most important intimate relationships. Mental illness brought on by this alienation and the effects of anti-depressants on an entire generation of young Spaniards are closely related themes thoughtfully developed in La trabajadora.

The urban imaginary created in Navarro’s novel is one where Madrid’s working- and middle-class citizens alike are pushed into abandoned and peripheral spaces. The main protagonist of La trabajadora is Elisa Núñez. She is a well-
educated copy editor for a major publisher based in Madrid whose short-term contracts become further and further apart after Elisa is named an independent contractor (the official term in Spanish is, significantly, “colaboradora externa”) who works increasingly from home. The company she works for is part of the Grupo Editorial Término (allusions to Melville’s Dead Letter Office come to mind with this nomenclature, of course, as does Bartleby’s famous phrase, “I would prefer not to”). As her work situation becomes increasingly precarious (she is paid by the hour and loses her designated office space), her economic situation worsens and she is forced to move from her rented apartment in the rapidly gentrifying Tirso de Molina neighborhood in Madrid’s historic city center to an apartment found for her by the city’s Sociedad Pública de Alquiler in Aluche (on Madrid’s southwest side), which is the only place she can afford.

Though Elisa is a highly educated author, ghost writer, editor, and translator, these skills are not enough to earn her a place in Madrid’s middle class. Spanish geographer Jorge Sequera has described how Madrid’s neoliberal economy has stripped a generation of hope for the future. To compete as a global city, Madrid has capitalized on its culture industry, with dire implications for its citizens and its use of public and private space. In the process of becoming a global city, Sequera writes, Madrid is

tratando de conformar un entorno urbano propicio para la creación de clusters creativos en el centro histórico de Madrid. Este tipo de políticas urbanas materializa distritos creativos y culturales y recurre para ello a la potencialidad de la cultura, basada en el arte, la contracultura, el “artivismo” o la multiculturalidad. . . . La cultura, por lo tanto, se pone al servicio de la producción capitalista, en el centro de las dinámicas de la ciudad global que “debe ser Madrid”: la marca Madrid. (128)

(trying to shape an urban environment that fosters the creation of creative clusters in Madrid’s historical center. This type of urban politics creates creative and cultural districts and, to that end, makes use of the potential of culture, based on art, the counterculture, “artivism,” or multiculturalism. . . . Culture, then, is put at the service of capitalist production, in the center of the dynamics of global culture of “what Madrid should be”: Madrid as a brand.)

In Aluche, Elisa is forced to find a roommate to make ends meet. Her cote-nant is Susana, a woman some ten years her senior whose portion of the narration on the first page of the novel uses the advent of the Internet and cell phones (15) as essential temporal markers with the phrase “Acababa de regresar
a Madrid, no existía Internet y tenía que recurrir a los periódicos” (11) (I had just returned to Madrid; the Internet didn't exist yet, and I had to resort to newspapers). Technological advances are used to temporally mark and signify the timeline of her life in Madrid. Significantly, Susana couples this life change with her parallel mental illness diagnoses and their treatments: “Para entonces ya me habían cambiado el Risperdal por el litio: mi categoría pasó de esquizofrénica a bipolar” (13) (Back then they had already changed my prescription from Risperdal to lithium: my category changed from schizophrenic to bipolar). These changes in geographical location, in mass communication and technology, and in the main characters’ psychological conditions are therefore linked and interconnected from the very first pages of the novel, making the work an exercise in following the evolution of both characters as they change jobs and learn to manage their personal relationships, finances, and mental illnesses through a series of major shifts in work, home, technology, and medical treatments.

Susana's version of her life as an urban citizen involves her moving from what she calls a “cuchitril” (dump) in Madrid's Plaza Mayor close to the iconic Chocolatería San Ginés to Usera, a neighborhood on the south side of the city between Arganzuela and Orcasitas. La trabajadora goes into great detail about Susana's pre-Internet, pre–cell phone period (from the mid-1980s through to approximately the year 2000) in Madrid from the perspective of a young woman who spends much of her time either working or simply wandering the streets of the capital's city center. Susana narrates a period in her life when she was recovering from a violent trauma, undergoing therapy, and taking strong medication. From the very first pages of the novel, she describes the source of her depression through the use of urban metaphors. She explains to Elisa, “[N]o sabes hasta qué punto deprime que lo real, o tu cabeza, sea un pedazo de vidrio roto, opaco, abandonado al borde de una acera” (13) (you don't know how depressing it is to have what's real, or what's in your head, be a piece of broken glass, opaque, abandoned on the edge of the sidewalk). This fragmentation and lack of clarity best describes Susana: a broken object that exists within but has been thrown aside by the city. Susana explains that the only thing that helped her get through this difficult period in her life was taking out classified ads inviting the exchange of what can be termed idiosyncratic sexual favors: “El objetivo me centraba. Me daba cierto aire de amazona y la ilusión de que llevaba en mi mano una brújula” (13) (This goal centered me. It made me feel powerful and gave me the sense of having a compass in my hand). In its very first pages, then, the novel presents the female characters as fragile, sharp but beautiful objects cast aside as urban waste. They have been dirtied by everything life has thrown
at them, leaving them isolated, abandoned, and alone. Each character survives these difficult conditions by voicing her desire: in this case of Susana, a desire to make a human connection with another person, no matter how fleeting, is described as holding a compass in her hand—a way to trace a route for herself on the urban map.

Elisa, the figure of the author within the text, experiences a significant connection to spaces making up the urban periphery just as she loses her ability to make out the details of even the most iconic monuments in the city center. On the ride back to her apartment in Usera after a particularly difficult conversation with her boss about her lack of a long-term contract, for example, Elisa states, “Al llegar a Cibeles y a la Gran Vía tuve la impresión de que había menos estatuas coronando las fachadas. No habría sido capaz de precisar qué estatuas faltaban” (65) (When I got to Cibeles and the Gran Vía, I had the feeling that there were fewer statues on top of the fronts of the buildings. I wouldn’t have been able to say exactly which statues were missing).

Susana also reflects on how the cost of rent has changed the city of Madrid since the 1980s, saying of her attic apartment in the Plaza Mayor, “Ahora pienso que las condiciones en las que habitaba mi buhardilla preconizaban lo que iba a pasar veinte años después con las viviendas. . . . Me podría haber alquilado una casa de cinco habitaciones en el barrio de Salamanca por el precio de mi habitación en tu piso” (19) (Now I think that the living conditions I experienced in my attic apartment foreshadowed what was going to happen twenty years later. . . . I could have rented a five-room home in the Salamanca neighborhood for the price of my room in your apartment). In a segment of this first part of the narration that belongs to Susana, we learn why she chooses to live in the more expensive city center during the most difficult period of her mental illness and during the worst heat of summer. Searching for open space and silence in the city, she inevitably finds herself in the Sabatini Gardens: “Algo en mis nervios me impelía a moverme, sobre todo durante la noche, y ese movimiento no solo era una necesidad de los músculos tensos, sino que el día cercado por las paredes de mi buhardilla y las de mi cabeza buscaba la amplitud de los espacios abiertos” (27) (Something inside compelled me to keep moving, especially at night, and that movement wasn’t merely a result of my tense muscles, but of the day spent hemmed in by the walls of my attic apartment and of my mind, looking for the openness of open spaces). Susana carefully details the route she takes on these August evening walks by herself, starting in the Puerta del Sol, walking down Arenal toward Ópera to the royal palace, where she stands on the viaduct over Calle de Segovia and looks out over the Casa del Campo.
Si me concentraba lo suficiente durante las noches cerradas perdía el sentido de la lejanía. Las luces de Somosaguas se tornaban en farolas repartidas en cerros, al igual que los ranchos de Caracas. Me daba una tranquilidad mustia, como si me hubiesen envasado en un vacío aburrido y acogedor, imaginarme que estaba en otro lugar, o bien pensar en los trayectos de mi infancia en el coche, con mis padres y hermanos. (21)

At another point in this narrative segment, Susana shares this view with her lover and reflects on the fact that “daba gusto llegar a la Almudena y contemplar cómo caía la tarde con esos filos de nubes fugaces sobre la Casa del Campo, el paseo de Extremadura y Somosaguas. El cielo aproximaba; parecía querer contarle algo a los pedazos de urbanizaciones que asomaban sus cuerpecitos histéricos de ladrillo entre la maleza y la lejanía” (30) (it was great to go to the Almudena and contemplate how the afternoon fell with those sharp edges over the Casa del Campo, the road to Extremadura and Somosaguas. The sky got closer; it seemed to want to say something to the fragments of housing developments that thrust out their hysterical little brick bodies amid the brush and the distance). Susana’s walks in the 1990s are then described not in visual but in tactile terms: “me aplicaba en recorrer con las manos la turgencia de los bojes, las espinas de los rosales sin rosas, la tierra negra y seca y también, si tenía el día atrevido, los cabellos y los fútiles chándales de manga larga de los pasantes... y el silencio, pues eso también era fundamental para llegar a mi casa con sensación de espacio: el campo sonoro” (21–22). (I dedicated myself to running my hands over the firmness of the boxwoods, the thorns of the roseless rosebushes, the black, dry earth, and also, if I was feeling daring, the hair and futile long-sleeved tracksuits of the passersby... and the silence, since that too was fundamental in order to arrive at my house with a sense of space: the sonorous open air). La trabajadora contains several descriptions of women walking through the city looking for brief moments of respite. Places to recover and reflect on where exactly they are in time and space. In the passage quoted above, Susana hungers for a real connection to the space around her through touch and hearing. These moments contrast with her desire to find a connection to those around her in
the digital age, where she is more disconnected from her body and lives much of her life looking at a screen.

*La trabajadora* is divided into several fragments, told in different styles and from the points of view of different narrators. Immediately after the first segment of the narration laying out Susana’s life and mental illness issues, the second segment consists of a short story written by author-in-the-text Elisa—a short story called, curiously enough, “La trabajadora.” It consists of four pages, and the segment ends with the words (in caps) “RELATO PUBLICADO EN UN EXTINTO DIARIO ESPAÑOL” (48) (STORY PUBLISHED IN A NOW-DEFUNCT SPANISH NEWSPAPER). It’s a miniature version, so to speak, of the novel the reader holds in his or her hands and an autobiographical narration of Elisa’s trajectory as a culture worker fallen victim to gentrification and labor precarity in Madrid, some twenty years after Susana’s experience in the late 1980s and 1990s in the same location. The mixture of narrators, styles, and lengths of each segment of the novel give the impression that it is a piecing together of found texts that have been salvaged from the trash. This almost accidental piecing together of whatever is at hand by the amateur artists in the text works at both the thematic and stylistic levels.

A particularly well-crafted section of *La trabajadora* in which the precarious, provisional nature of life on the city’s periphery is interwoven with a reflection on the construction of objectivity suffered by all authors occurs in chapter 8. Elisa is a runner and puts on her warmest clothing to go on nightly runs throughout the most abandoned and empty spaces she can find. As Michel De Certeau explains in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (in the chapters “Walking in the City” and “Spatial Stories” in particular), pedestrians, in effect, tell urban stories through their movements. They give their own particular shape to spaces and weave together places in ways that potentially transgress, from within, the abstract map imposed from above by the panoptic gaze and administrative strategies of corporate and government interests. For De Certeau, the physical act of walking (or running, in this case) realizes the radical possibilities of refashioning the urban spatial order (the network of streets, for example), in the same way that a speaker or an author uses language to create articulate meaning. This creative process “affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it ‘speaks’” (De Certeau 99). Walking is framed as an elementary and embodied form of experiencing urban space—a productive, yet relatively unconscious, speaking/writing of the city. *La trabajadora*, then, highlights how the characters move through, write down (in the case of Elisa), and remake the map (literally, in the case of Susana) of Madrid’s periphery.
The periphery of Madrid highlighted in most of the novel is not the globally competitive tourist center nor even the more central gentrifying areas where the cultural industry is housed. Susana and Elisa do run into each other in one such neighborhood at one moment at the Café Barbieri in Lavapiés, but the two pretend not to know each other. Their relationship has no place in the city center, and they cannot share the same community. They belong to a part of the city where there are a variety of abandoned or unfinished housing developments. Elisa explores these areas every night, assuming that she is passing through block after block of abandoned or unfinished housing construction projects until she notices that as night falls, lights turn on inside, powered by almost invisible cables that are taking electricity illegally from the few streetlights that remain on the street. “Siempre pensé que estos proyectos fracasados estaban en mitad de páramos, o a unos reglamentarios kilómetros de la línea de costa. No imaginaba que tal cosa sucediera en la ciudad” (76) (I always thought that these projects were in the middle of moors, or at a regulated number of kilometers from the coastline. I didn’t imagine that such things happened in the city). “Vivienda clandestina” (clandestine housing), “viviendas sin permiso de habitabilidad” (housing without an occupancy license), “cooperativa de viviendas habitada por los timados a pesar de su construcción inacabada” (a housing cooperative occupied by those who were scammed despite their being unfinished), “urbanizaciones fantasma” (ghost developments), and “el fenómeno de la autoconstrucción” (do-it-yourself construction) (76–77): this is the new vocabulary of postcrisis housing in the southernmost areas of Madrid. The inhabitants of this area “se comportaban como los que viven al pie de un volcán y llevan años atentos a los suaves hilos de humo que atraviesan los días claros” (78) (behave like people who live at the foot of a volcano and spend years carefully watching the soft plumes of smoke that cut across the clear days). Madrid’s citizens increasingly live in spaces where they are not supposed to live, in unplanned, half-constructed developments that are neither entirely urban nor rural because they are falling into ruin and degenerating into their natural state.

Allusions to trash, recycling, and abandoned spaces are prevalent in La trabajadora. There is a recurring reference to a group of gypsy scavengers—“los del camión” (57) (the guys with the truck)—who are constantly crossing paths with Elisa along her nightly jogging routes. Elisa at one point goes through the clothing that her deceased mother left her years ago when she needs to find something more professional to wear. Elisa’s apartment is furnished by her “recogidas de muebles en el barrio de Salamanca” (86) (furniture pickups in the Salamanca neighborhood). We learn that Elisa is herself a published author of prose only
when her roommate Susana happens upon a crumpled-up short story of Elisa’s being used to pack ceramic mugs during Susana’s move from Italy to Spain. In the few hours a day when Elisa is not working or sleeping, the reader follows her wanderings by bus and on foot through the empty boulevards and urban wastelands on the periphery of Madrid. For weeks, the protagonist travels to a park called Eugenia de Montijo to watch the demolition of the Carabanchel Prison, “un deformes hueso urbano” (71) (a deformed urban bone), saying that she stayed in front of its “piedras . . . un buen rato, pues aquella desolación me resultaba consoladora” (47) (stones a good while, since that desolation was comforting to me). Elisa enjoys riding the practically empty buses at night that run from La Colonia San Ignacio de Loyola past General Fanjul, Carpetana, and Plaza Elíptica and down the empty boulevards “que me dejaban una agradable sensación de estar en otra parte” (47) (that always gave me the agreeable sensation of being somewhere else).

These are just some of the numerous references to trash and abandoned, isolated spaces in the novel. They work together to create a series of interwoven impressions and experiences that hinge on the narrator’s desire to find something real, something solid to connect to in her daily life. But the real contribution—the startling originality of La trabajadora—is the description of the narrator’s experience of abandoned, urban ruins in Madrid’s noncentral, semi-industrial or more residential neighborhoods. The novel expertly critiques the reasons behind the abandonment of peripheral urban space on a massive scale in Madrid’s metropolitan region since the bursting of the real estate bubble, and the ways that people are now occupying these informal and difficult-to-define areas.

The novel’s first mention of her new neighborhood of Aluche is secondhand: “me dijeron que se trataba del cerro donde Antonio López pintó uno de sus cuadros, pero lo único que encontré en mi búsqueda internauta fue un paisaje de Vallecas y otro que rezaba MADRID SUR, que no concordaba con lo que veía desde la ventana” (78) (they told me that it was the hill where Antonio López painted one of his paintings, but the only thing I found with my Internet search was a landscape of Vallecas and another that read SOUTH MADRID that didn’t match what I saw out of the window). The image of the typical city street—full of people, traffic, small businesses—is elusive throughout much of La trabajadora. There is some question as to whether or not the periphery of Madrid (where, after all, the majority of Madrid’s citizens actually live) is faithfully represented in the urban imaginary. Antonio López’s iconic paintings of the periphery of Madrid come up again in the novel when Elisa looks out the fifth-floor window of the Vallecas Library. She looks out on the M-30 and M-40 and notices that
a eso se parecía aquel paisaje, a un puro recuerdo, y también a una impresión
general de soledad, como si los edificios estuvieran deshabitados o los ocupara el
desierto. Aquellas vistas me llevaban de nuevo a repasar los cuadros de Antonio
López en Internet, esos cuadros con su exactitud delirante, de cuajo echado a la
existencia. La ciudad parecía congelada, pero no por el frío, sino por la luz y el
calor. Desde aquella cuarta planta jamás se veían transeúntes a lo lejos. No es
que no los hubiera, sino que resultaba imposible reparar en ellos. La soledad de
los edificios erguidos, la precariedad tan eficaz con la que se multiplicaban unas
cuantas formas, como las amebas y otros organismos cuando un rayo fecundó
los océanos, hacía que la vista borrara la vida, y todo funcionaba como un revés
de ese origen, pues la tierra se resecaba. Por eso, me dije, el cuadro que buscaba,
ese cuadro que estaba segura de haber contemplado, había simplificado la forma
hasta resolverla con unas líneas escuetas. (78–79)

(that’s what that landscape looked like, a pure recollection, and also like a general
impression of loneliness, as if the buildings were uninhabited or were inhabited
by the desert. Those views brought me back to looking over the paintings of
Antonio López on the Internet, those paintings with their dizzying exactitude,
fully immersed in existence. The city seemed frozen, not with cold but with light
and color. From that fifth floor you never saw passersby from afar. It’s not that
there weren’t any, it was just impossible to get a fix on them. The loneliness of the
straight buildings, the efficient precarity with which certain forms were multi-
plied, like the amoebas and other organisms when a bolt of lightning brought life
to the oceans, made the gaze seemingly erase all life, and everything worked as if
in reverse from that origin, since the land was drying out again. That’s why, I told
myself, the painting that I was looking for, that painting that I was sure I had seen,
had become more simplified in shape until it was reduced to a few stark lines.)

Elisa, gazing out the window in Vallecas, is looking for a way to describe and
understand the space she sees. She describes the landscape as a product of the
drying out of an ocean and has a difficult time comprehending what remains.
What is its plan? Its rationale? How do humans inhabit this space? Is it urban at
all? If not, how can it be categorized? Her point of reference is painting: Anto-
nio López’s visualization of the region. Indeed, Benjamin Fraser says of López’s
neorealist paintings of Madrid and its periphery that they do nothing less than
“reorient our urbanized consciousness. . . . López’s urban scenes remind us that
paintings are not only surfaces but entire worlds that overlap with and stand in
contrast to our own” (2). The references to the López paintings here are another
opportunity for Navarro to remind us that our own perception of space—urban
TRASH AS THEME AND AESTHETIC

space, in this case—is intricately bound up in and informed by the competing images and discourses of the urban already in our heads. The narrator in this segment of the novel is lost and looking for direction in a rapidly changing urban environment that does not resemble what she has been led to expect the city to look like. Its planning seems to have been undone; its housing and infrastructure are not being used in the ways for which they were built. The city has been decentralized and seemingly overtaken by nature—a kind of devastated ruin or rubbish heap slowly reverting back to nature. Antonio López’s paintings, then, seem to contain a nostalgic form or structure that the narrator looks for in real life but cannot find.

The very structure of *La trabajadora* reinforces and provides a model for how to produce art that draws on everyday life. The second part of the novel, five pages long, consists of a story about a young woman whose work situation becomes increasingly precarious over time. Only later do we learn that this is Elisa’s first published short story, an accomplishment that Elisa refuses to talk about with anyone. Significantly enough, the newspaper pages where the story was published are discovered by accident (as mentioned above) when Susana finds that it has been used to wrap her coffee mugs during her move. Elisa’s one and only published work narrowly escapes making its way into the trash, only to be recycled by her roommate/friend/artistic competitor, Susana. Only when the novel is finished does the reader find the note on the last page that states that this second section was indeed published in the “Cuaderno de Verano” section of a Spanish newspaper called *Público* in August 2010 with the title “Un ejemplo deplorable de estructura circular” (157) (A deplorable example of circular structure). The euphemism “circular structure” paired with the phrase “deplorable example” alludes to the trash can as the ultimate destination of the hard work and incipient literary creations of young authors such as Elisa.

At one point in the novel, Elisa finds Susana hunched over the northernmost section of a map of Madrid issued by the Entidad Estatal del Suelo (State Land Commission), with tiny nail scissors in hand. She has for years assiduously been cutting out and classifying miniscule, millimeters-wide images of Madrid’s buildings, monuments, cars, people, and plants from a variety of publications into envelopes entitled “Trees,” “Gardens,” “Tall Buildings,” and “Low Buildings,” leaving only the trace of the form of the city left in the pockmarked and incomplete maps. When asked why she obsessively collects these miniature depictions of essential urban landmarks, Susana states that she wants to make her own maps of Madrid by changing the locations of all of the buildings: “Su pretensión era que el mapa permaneciera igual en su estructura, pero con todos sus elementos traspuestos. Iba a componer varios mapas” (79–80) (Her aspira-
tion was for the map to maintain the same structure, but with all of its elements rearranged. She was going to put together several maps). Significantly, when Susana is asked why she doesn’t use a computer program to cut out these images and paste them back together, she replies by saying that she knows that it would be much faster and the computer would enable a large number of different combinations, but the problem for her is that “quedaría perfecto, y a mí me gusta que se note el trabajo. La suciedad” (it would be perfect, and I like for the work to be visible. The dirt). Susana makes a series of these maps, saying during the creation process that she will either burn them or show them in an exhibit. Much of the last third of the novel is devoted to how she works her way into the art world in Madrid and how Elisa struggles with feelings of jealousy that ultimately motivate her to change her life in significant ways. The two protagonists are looking for ways to make meaningful lives in a city that keeps changing the rules. Pushed into the periphery and subject to the whims of the ever-changing labor market, they look for ways to restructure, reorder, and remake the city, resorting to image and text. Out of necessity, both women resort to *bricolage* or do-it-yourself techniques that empower them by enabling them to take some control through their ability to combine the objects around them in new ways that speak to their own experiences. It is significant that Susana and Elisa find outlets for their creative impulses only when they are able to reject the virtual world and its digital culture. While the Internet is constant in the novel (the main characters spend most of their working hours sitting in front of a computer screen; they conduct their long-distance relationships over Skype; they look for entertainment and social connection through Facebook, Netflix, and other resources) both very consciously fight against Internet addiction to create their own subjectivity, to forge their own path through the layers upon layers of cultural references they use to communicate their feelings to one another.

*La trabajadora* is the result of one character telling the life story of another: Elisa’s fictional version of Susana’s autobiography, with Elisa’s own fictionalized account of her own precarious work situation thrown in seemingly haphazardly as a fragment unconnected to the rest of the story. The very structure of the novel is highly asymmetrical—seemingly put together from found fragments of narrative that serve very different purposes and are written in very different styles and for different purposes. The novel begins with an aside in italics, presumably written by Elisa, the author within the text: “Este relato recoge lo que Susana me contó sobre su locura. También anoto algunas de mis reacciones, en verdad no muchas. Huelga añadir que su narración fue más caótica” (This story compiles what Susana told me about her madness. I will also jot down some of my reactions, but really not many. I should perhaps
mention that her telling of the story was much more chaotic). This unevenness and fragmentation is highly significant because it underlies many of the issues discussed throughout the novel: the fact that we make the stories of our lives out of what we encounter around us, and that our lives themselves are a mixture of the otherworldly and the mundane, of the beautiful and the ugly, of high culture and low, of the digital and the material, of the intensely private and the social. The novel amounts to a moment of quiet tranquility and reflection in a loud, fast-moving, and chaotic city. David Shields argues in his *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* that contemporary writers tend to take larger and larger pieces of the real world and use them in their work because they are “obsessed by real events because [they] experience hardly any” (16). The aesthetic of *La trabajadora* is very much in tune with Shields’s proposal in *Reality Hunger*. Some have described Shields’s book and its deconstruction of the modern novel as an insightful breath of fresh air, others call it a fraud, but still others have called it a good-faith presentation of what literature might look like if it caught up with the present-day strategies being used in the other arts to revive its outdated forms.¹⁰ Shields argues,

Painting isn’t dead. The novel isn’t dead. They just aren’t as central to the culture as they once were. Skeptical of the desperation of the modernist embrace of art as the only solution, and hyperaware of all artifacts of genre and form, we nevertheless seek new means of creating the real. Suddenly everyone’s tale is tellable, which seems to me a good thing, even if not everyone’s story turns out to be fascinating or well told. (22)

*La trabajadora* is a novel whose purpose is to tell the stories of the everyday women being left behind by Spain’s austerity economy. In terms of urban space, both the young artists and white-collar participants in the culture industry are pushed out of the city center by gentrification. The style of the novel can be considered to be as hyperrealist as an Antonio López painting, and its structure is a piecing together of seemingly disparate episodes, texts, and registers. The main characters struggle to find ways to express themselves in a world where every feeling and experience is mediated through popular culture (music, film, television, visual art, literature) and their most meaningful relationships are conducted via Facebook, Skype, and e-mail.

It is significant that the women of the novel invariably explain their past lives and their aspirations by comparing them to films and television series. Susana’s lover, Fabio, is compared to Señor Galindo from the television program *Crónicas marcianas*, Elisa compares her Christmas-associated angst to a well-
known commercial for El Almendro turrón, Susana’s cartographic montages are compared to the work of Hieronymous Bosch and Ivan Zulueta, and there are a number of references to musicians whose songs provide the soundtrack to the protagonists’ lives. La trabajadora describes the lives of women awash in a sea of information in the form of texts, images, and sounds circulating with increasing speed and frequency. It explores how women creatively piece together their own survival tactics in this dehumanized urban environment where one’s emotions are closely related to a sense of place, which in the twenty-first century city is simultaneously material, symbolic, and virtual. Against this backdrop, the novel ultimately stresses that one’s life in the city is made up of a collection of found objects and relationships pieced together with care to form one’s particular subjectivity.

Elisa and Susana are redundant, peripheral, and living on the outskirts of a city that has expelled them from its center as they have grown older and increasingly unable to find a foothold in the middle class to which they fully expected they would belong. They are walking, breathing financial problems. In his 2004 book Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman draws a distinction between the use of the term “unemployed” in previous decades (with its implication that those without work belong to a “reserve army of labor” that would soon be called back into active service) to the more recent term “redundant.” He explains that “to be declared redundant means to have been disposed of because of being disposable. . . . ‘Redundancy’ shares its semantic space with ‘rejects,’ ‘wastrels, ‘garbage,’ ‘refuse’—with waste” (12).

Expanding on Bauman’s concept of human redundancy, Spanish philosopher José Luis Pardo’s 2010 Nunca fue tan hermosa la basura extends the idea into a theory of everyday life: “‘Nunca fue tan hermosa la basura’ . . . y si lo que llamamos basura no lo fuera en realidad? Entonces no tendríamos que preocuparnos porque nos devorase, no nos sentiríamos asfixiados por los desperdicios si dejásemos de experimentarlos como desperdicios y los viviéramos como un nuevo paisaje urbano” (170) (“Trash was never so beautiful” . . . and what if what we called trash wasn’t trash at all? Then we wouldn’t have to worry about it devouring us; we wouldn’t feel strangled by waste if we stopped experiencing it as waste and lived in it as if it were a new urban landscape). Pardo, like Bauman, points out that for the first time in human history we are living in a period in which there is not enough space for the waste that the world’s population produces. Historically, Pardo argues, the more refuse that modern societies created (in terms of both quality and quantity) the wealthier, bolder, and more energetic they were considered to be. Wealth meant squandering, wastefulness, and surplus. In the past, he claims, modern societies needed ever-growing spaces
to deposit trash so they could carry on with life and keep on wasting in the midst of their own waste. These non-places (to use Marc Augé’s term) became necessary and by extension even gave rise to social non-places, locations where segments of the population are transferred that the systems of production and consumption cannot absorb (in the form of suburbs, shacks, favelas, ghettos, and camps, for example). “Trash” for Pardo is that which does not have a place, that which is misplaced, and, therefore, that which has to be moved to another place in the hope that it might disappear as trash there, that it might be reactivated, recycled, extinguished: trash is that which searches for another place. The movement of people from one place to another is no longer a feasible solution, as both Bauman and Pardo argue, because almost all the places in the world are now occupied, and there is nowhere to put those who are not wanted. Pardo’s philosophy of trash, then, and its concomitant “new urban landscape” require anyone interested in cities and urban culture to focus not on the monumental public spaces of the historic city center (such as Madrid’s Puerta del Sol) but on the more peripheral non-places that are difficult to define because they don’t fit into traditional ways of imagining the city.

Afterword

Equally as rich as her novels is Elvira Navarro’s blog Periferia. Vallecas – Usera – Hortaleza – Carabanchel – Las Tablas. It’s an open-access portal, updated frequently, that pairs descriptions of peripheral urban spaces (all of which are detailed in La trabajadora) with photographs. More photojournalism than fictional narrative, Navarro’s digital space is an exploration and celebration of what grows between the cracks of Madrid’s crumbling infrastructure.

Quizás no sea gran cosa, pero tranquiliza saber que todavía está permitido generar lugares en estos no lugares. Y que la vegetación crezca alguna vez en los cilindros del ecobulevar, que buena falta hacen aquí el fresco y el arropo.

( Maybe it’s no big deal, but it’s a relief to know that making places in these non-places is still allowed. And that vegetation grows every once in a while in the cylinders of the ecoboulevard, that fresh things and groundcover are direly needed here.)

Navarro’s novel and other satellite projects such as her blogs often feature such manifestos directed specifically to all of those struggling to understand
their place during this era of austerity and neoliberalization. By focusing on the trials and survival tactics of women who have been stripped of their dignity and self-esteem as workers, Navarro’s fiction is part of an attempt to create a new social space: a space where people who have been suddenly disqualified, refused, and expelled by the political and economic system are coming up with new rules for the game at the heart of the experience of living in the city.

The author would like to thank the members of the Fall 2016 Texas Tech University Women Faculty Writing Group for their camaraderie, support, and incredibly contagious energy during the writing of this essay. Formidable trabajadoras indeed.

NOTES

1. The English translation of this selection is that of Curtis Bauer. All other translations are the author’s.
2. See Amago for a study of the political and cultural implications of the popular response to the week-long sanitary workers’ strike that took place for several weeks in November 2013.
3. See Feinberg and Larson for an essay that takes as its point of departure Swynge-douw’s concept of cultural ecology to look at architectural manifestos, philosophical essays, and occupied green spaces in Madrid since 2008 that call into question basic assumptions of what a city is and can be by offering proactive understandings of natural/artificial oppositions that privilege the interconnected role of culture and community in previously discarded, abandoned, or otherwise unused city spaces.
4. See “Geografías de 15-M: Crisis, austeridad y movilización en España” for a discussion among eleven young academics from different disciplines and activists on how the highly localized and largely symbolic occupation of the Puerta del Sol for a short time in 2011 worked its way into larger-scale and longer-term struggles over the privatization of public space and the future of Spain’s housing, health, and education (Díaz Cortes and Sequera 1–9).
5. The concept of the “moral economy” stems from the eighteenth century but was more recently elaborated by E. P. Thompson (1971). He may be best known for exploring how it is possible for groups of people to construct a “non-capitalist cultural mentality using the market for its own ends” (97).
6. The term décroissance (degrowth) was first coined by André Gorz in a debate organized by Le Nouvel Observateur in Paris in 1972. Participants included the philosophers Herbert Marcuse and Edgard Morin, the ecologist Edward Goldsmith, and then President of the European Commission Sicco Mansholt. Gorz used the term to question the compatibility of the capitalist system with the “degrowth of mate-
rial production,” and he underscored the importance of reducing consumption and promoting values such as frugality, autonomy, and conviviality. The intellectual genealogy of degrowth also includes the thinking of Ivan Illich, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Hannah Arendt, and there are many parallels with Murray Bookchin’s libertarian municipalism (Demaria, Schneider, Sekulova, and Martínez-Alier, 195).

7. Prádanos-García extends this degrowth proposal to the level of a pedagogy that guides students toward “unlearning ingrained commonplaces about economic growth, technology or progress. Only after such unlearning occurs can the floor be opened to deep critical discussions about posthuman environmental ethics and alternatives to growth that are socially desirable and environmentally sustainable” (154).

8. See Benéitez Andrés for a thorough analysis of the theme of mental illness in La trabajadora, Murray for a broad theorization of the representation of neoliberal urban space in Spanish fiction after 2008, and García for a discussion of hybrid digital and real worlds in Navarro’s fiction.

9. Sequera points out that Madrid is the city in Spain with the highest concentration of what can be called highly educated “culture workers” belonging to what he calls a “creative class” whose noted presence in revitalized (gentrified) parts of the historic city center are a key component of the city’s strategy to compete on a global scale (125–28). See “Geografías de 15-M” (Díaz Cortes and Sequera, eds.) for a more detailed description of the long-term impact that the social movement has had on Spanish political discourse and efforts to rethink the use of urban space.

10. Elvira Navarro’s 2016 novel Los últimos días de Adelaida García Morales is a fictional biography that presumes to recount some of the reasons behind the death of one of Spain’s most respected, reclusive, and mysterious novelists. The work was immediately embroiled in a heated debate over the ethics of writing about well-known, real-life people whose surviving family members demand that the “truth” of their loved one’s stories be told. See Víctor Erice’s denouncement of Navarro’s fictional appropriation of García Morales’s life story in Babelia (26 Oct. 2016).

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