Carmen: Gypsy Icon and Subject of Spectacle and Performance in Prosper Mérimée’s novella and Vicente Aranda’s film

You are crueller, you that we love, Than hatred, hunger, or death; You have eyes and breasts like a dove, And you kill men’s hearts with a breath.
~Algernon Charles Swinburne, “Satia Te Sanguine”

Prosper Mérimée’s novella Carmen (1845), particularly with the myth of Carmen herself, has evolved into literary and visual constructions of novel, opera, and cinema. These constructions have allowed for a variety of reactions from the public that adhere to presenting either a positive or negative image of the female figure, Carmen. It is through this female figure that racial, gender, and sexual motifs, to name a few, have served as a reminder of the various interpretations that the actual work has built upon. This essay explores themes of the above mentioned concepts and also emphasizes how both male and female genders can be subject to marginality and dichotomies of destruction of the other, as with Carmen. As main support for this essay, I will base my premises on the work of José E. Colmeiro and his article “Exorcising Exoticism: Carmen and the Construction of Oriental Spain,” Saidiya V. Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection, Jayna Brown’s Babylon Girls, and Shane Vogels’ The Scene of Harlem Cabaret to identify direct associations with Prosper Mérimée’s novella and Vicente Aranda’s film. I will also include theoretical notions of Luce Irigaray to confirm issues of female norms and constraints that are present in both the film and novella, Carmen.

1 Here I am referring to Prosper Merimee’s novella Carmen (1845), that later inspired the making of Georges Bizet’s opera (1875), and the production of numerous cinematic films thereafter.
The female character of Carmen was created by nineteenth century French author Prosper Mérimée. His novella, published in 1845², portrays a tragic love story between a fugitive Basque aristocrat and a gypsy, whose beauty and sensual attraction lead men to desire her, and ultimately lead to their perdition. The action takes place in Spain, in 1830, during the first visit of the author to that country; hence he tells and writes the story as if it actually happened to him. He narrates the story, until the third and fourth chapters, where don José (a bandit he meets during his journey), recounts the adventurous life with Carmen to him. “Don José clearly acts as a mediator for the master narrator--he is his mirror reflection--as they both represent male authority figures displaced in an exotic territory” (Colmeiro 136).

“Dicen que las mujeres y los gatos nunca vienen cuando se les llama. Y acuden sin falta en cuanto no les haces caso” (Don José in Carmen). [It is said that women and cats will not come when they are called, but will come without hesitation when they are not called.]³ This is the first description of the female character, Carmen (portrayed by Paz Vega), whose first appearance in Vicente Aranda’s film and Mérimée’s novella evokes sexual desire, infatuation, and threat to the townspeople and males in particular.

She wore a red skirt, very short, which exposed to view her white silk stockings, with many a hole in them, and tiny shoes of morocco leather, tied with scarlet ribbons. She had thrown back her mantilla so as to display her shoulders, and an immense bunch of acacia blossom, which was stuck in her chemise…she walked with a movement of a

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² There was an additional chapter added in 1847.

³ My translations from Vicente Aranda’s film, Carmen. At times, Don José Lizarabengoa is also referred to as “El Navarro.”
thoroughbred filly from the Cordova stud. In my country a woman in such a costume would have made people cross themselves. (Mérimée 61-61)

Carmen’s first appearance in both works is vital to the development of her character as the plot continues. Her body, eyes, and demeanor provoke a hypnotic enchantment to all who see her, and she is praised with flirtatious remarks such as “¡qué culo gitanilla!,” “¡chula!,” and “¡guapa!”⁴ This vulgar jargon is not at all condescending to Carmen. On the contrary, she is proud and accepts it with praise and a roguish attitude. Her first encounter with don José, (portrayed by Leonardo Sbaraglia), is tactful, yet hypnotic. She asks for his chain and seductively asks if he knows how many moles she has on her body. “Then, taking the flower from between her lips, she flipped it at me with a movement of her thumb, and struck me between the eyes. […] I do not know what possessed me, but I picked it up when my comrades were not looking, and put it carefully in my vest. That was the first act of folly” (Mérimée 63).

This “act of folly” represents the male’s first subjugation by the female, and can be interpreted as a ‘performative’ act on Carmen’s behalf. She is the center of attention, and manifests herself as a sexual icon towards all who lay eyes on her. It is important to consider Carmen’s physical appearance, which causes questions and doubts about her origin and race. “The narrator’s first encounter with Carmen is marked by a reciprocal case of mistaken ethnic identity. At first he takes Carmen to be an Andalusian, then he cannot tell whether she is Moorish or Jewish, until finally she reveals to him her true identity as a Gypsy. Carmen takes the French narrator for an Englishman, a mistake that provides the narrator with yet another opportunity to develop the

⁴ These remarks are said in Vicente Aranda’s film, Carmen. They translate to “what an ass gypsy!,” “foxy!,” and “good-looking!” They are vulgar remarks that Carmen accepts as praise.
orientalist West/East, white/non-white dichotomy” (quoted in Colmeiro 135). The narrator is captivated by Carmen’s savage beauty, and she is captivated by his gold, musical watch. In the film, the narrator states:

Dicen que la andaluza para ser bella debe tener tres cosas negras: las pestañas, las cejas y el cabello. Y tres cosas blancas: el cutis, los dientes y las manos. Y tres cosas que son rosadas: los pezones, los labios y las uñas. Mi seductora no podía aspirar a tanta perfección física… era la sierva de Satanás. (Prospero in Carmen) [They say that for an Andalusian to be beautiful, she must possess three black things: the eyelashes, the eyebrows, and the hair. And three white things: the skin, the teeth, and the hands. And three things that are pink: the nipples, the lips, and the nails. My seductress could not aspire to such physical perfection… she was Satan’s bondwoman.]5

Following Saidiya Hartman’s premise in her book Scenes of Subjection towards the construction of a woman, one can’t help but wonder if Carmen fits into a specific categorization simply based on her well-endowed physical attributes. Throughout the development of both story and film, Carmen is mistaken to be from the “Holy Land” or Andalusía because of her appearance and soft accent. “At issue here is the construction of “woman” not as a foundational category with given characteristics, attributes, or circumstances but within a particular racial economy of property that intensified its control over the object of property through the deployment of sexuality” (Hartman 101). Carmen’s physical attributes allow her to be independent and defy any patriarchal or male dominated system. She is exoticised as a dark gypsy woman and recognizes that she evokes both desire and fear to the male gender. She does not want to conform to the

5 My translations from Vicente Aranda’s film, Carmen.
norm of society by becoming anyone’s property. This parallels with one of Gargi Bhattacharyya’s tales titled “The story of the exotic dancer” from her book Tales of dark-skinned women: Race, gender and global culture. In it, she describes an interpretation of Salome, whose character can relate to that of Carmens’.  

So in translation, Salome’s dance becomes a performance of the body struggling to become free of material constraint, the twitching of flesh which itches to be revealed. In the story reworked through Western performance, Salome mesmerizes because she demonstrates the body’s need to be confirmed through sight, and for sight to confirm the body. She refuses her veils and reveals her flesh. Instead of being sublimely indescribable, the story becomes one in which sight fixes the previously unseen and no troubling mystery remains. (Bhattacharyya 330)

Carmen can be seen as a subject of spectacle; she mesmerizes and enchants with her body and knows she is a threat. She uses this in her favor to indulge in the most cunning and sexual acts.

In her book Thinking the Difference, Luce Irigaray argues that “women are still in a state of social and cultural subjugation, even those who believe they are free and emancipated. Why? Because the order that lays down the law is male” (Irigaray 14). After being taken in by the soldiers (Don José is one of them) because she slashed a woman’s cheek in the cigar factory, she uses her tactics to convince him to let her escape.  

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6 In his article “Visions of Salome: The Femme Fatale in American Popular Songs before 1920,” Larry Hamberlin defines Salome as “an archetypal exotic femme fatale whose dance before Herod and the beheading of John the Baptist offer a potent mixture of decadent obsessions: murder, incest, female sexuality, and the mysterious Orient” (631).

7 While working in the cigar factory, Carmen is insulted because she is a gypsy and a witch. She takes the knife she uses for cutting cigars to slash a cross on the woman’s cheek.
from Navarre, and she is sharp to speak to him in the Basque language. Carmen states, “I was brought to Seville by the gypsies…They have insulted me because I do not belong to this country of pick-pockets, merchants of rotten oranges; and these low women are all against me because I declared that all their ‘jacks’ of Seville, with their knives, would not frighten one fellow from our part of the country, with only his blue beret and his maquilla” (Mérimée 71). This can be seen as another performative act that will lead to another “act of folly” on behalf of don José. Don José states,

She was lying, sir; she has always lied. Indeed I doubt whether in all her life that girl ever spoke a word of truth. But when she spoke I believed her. She was stronger than I. She talked broken Basque, and I believed she came from Navarre. Her eyes, mouth and complexion stamped her a gypsy. I was befooled---mad---and no longer paid attention to anything. I thought that if the two Spaniards with me had said anything in disparagement of the country I would have slashed them across the face just as she had treated her comrade. In fact I was like a man intoxicated. I began to talk nonsense, and was ready to commit any folly. (Mérimée 71-72)

The scene in both the film and story is essential to the series of acts that will unfold from this point on. Don José lets her escape; he is then stripped from his position, is demoted, and must spend one month in prison.⁸ Again, he is subjugated by the female and risks his chance of one day becoming captain or general, all “For a chit of a gypsy who laughs at me, and who at this moment is at large in some corner of the town” (Mérimée 75). In his article, “Exorcising

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⁸ It is from the prison that Don José tells his story to the narrator, Prosper Mérimée, portrayed by Jay Benedict in Vicente Aranda’s film Carmen.
Exoticism: *Carmen* and the Construction of Oriental Spain,” José F. Colmeiro states the following:

Carmen tries to pass off as Basque to don José, replaying the old myth of the child stolen by the Gypsies and speaking to don José in Basque. Don José, in turn, trades his military uniform for a gypsy costume and becomes an acculturated Gypsy, to the extent that he is mistaken for one by the Gypsies in Gibraltar; this transformation is reflected in his name change from Don José Lizarrabengoa to José Navarro. (137)

This name change reflects marginality because later on in the plot, he will dedicate his life to smuggling after killing two of Carmen’s lovers. His social status will no longer be praised, as he will become marginalized and have his status tapered to a mere bandit. After his release, Carmen uses her body to repay don José for having let her escape. This particular moment between Carmen and don José represents the weakest point for don José. From this point on, he will become obsessed with her. He will want to possess her and make her his *romi*.9 Following Jayna Brown’s analysis of possession from her book, *Babylon Girls*, “Possession works as a trope for the mimetic contact Europeans sought. It becomes a poetic refrain in the anthropological writings of discovery, of *l’art negre*. Possession was a key concept for French ethnographers and artists during the surrealist period. To be possessed promised a reconnection with repressed aspects of the self; it promised a reunification of self, alienated by modern life” (Brown 255). Carmen will not be anyone’s property, and for this, she must embody the ‘femme fatale’ figure.10 According

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9 In Mérimée’s novella, *Rom* means husband, and *Romi* means wife.

10 “The femme fatale emerges as a central figure in the nineteenth century, in the texts of writers such as Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire and painters such as Gustave Moreau and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. She is associated with the styles of Decadence, Symbolism, and Art Nouveau as well as with the attention to decoration and excessive
to Mary Anne Doane and her book *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*,
“The femme fatale is the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma. For her most striking characteristics, perhaps, is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be. She harbors a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable [...] But the femme fatale is situated as evil and is frequently punished or killed” (1-2). This is vital to the myth of *Carmen* because Carmen, as a whole, represents one who goes against the norms and constraints of a male dominated society. As stated by Colmeiro, “Carmen’s body is a constant reminder of her resistance to domination. Gender: she resists male domination; sexuality (her desires are free and uninhibited, and create fears of emasculation); race (as a Gypsy, she illicit fears of miscegenation); religion (she practices occult magic and is repeatedly seen as a devil and a threat to Christian faith); and politics (Carmen not only continually resists both civil and military authority; she also obliterates geo-political borders…” (140). She refuses to be possessed and become a *romi* to any male.

Both don José and the narrator are captivated by Carmen’s persona and charm. They perceive her as an ideal beauty with enchanting physical attributes, but as a threat to society and to the male gender. They believe she is wicked because she can tell one’s *la baji* and cause enchantment and obsession towards man.11 This construction parallels with Patrick Bade’s book, *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women*, where he states the following:

detail linked to a persistent and popular Orientalism (in the constant return, for instance, to the figures of Salome and Cleopatra)” (Doane 1) Doane, Mary Anne. *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. New York, Routledge, 1991.

11 *La baji* is referenced as good-fortune. In Mérimée’s novella, Carmen asks the narrator if he wants her to tell his good-fortune because she is a gypsy.
Of course wicked women had always existed in art as in life, and there had always been men who feared female sexuality or who took a masochistic delight in fantasies of fatal women. The superstitions that women are bringers of ill-luck and that they sap men of their virility and creativity, that they are tainted with evil and devious and mischief-making by nature are, in more or less primitive forms, universal. (9)

Don José follows Carmen’s orders by taking refuge in the woods and joining her band of smugglers. Not long until he finds out that Carmen actually does have a real *rom* does he become even more obsessed and violent with her.12 He cannot fathom the idea of another male possessing her body, and this infuriates him. In the film, don José expresses, “Yo quiero a Carmen. La quiero a ella y la quiero para mí; para mí y para nadie más” and later when he kills Carmen’s husband he states, “¿Vas a ser mi mujer y de nadie más, para toda la vida?” (Don José in Carmen). [I want Carmen. I want her and I want her for myself; for myself and no one else] [Will you be mine and no one else’s woman, for the rest of your life?]13 Don José has become weak before Carmen and wants to believe that she will abandon all her former practices of prostitution, lies, and promiscuity. Carmen refuses and states, “Do you know, that since you have really become my *rom*, I care less for you than when you were my fancy man. I don’t want to be worried and ordered about; what I wish is to be free and to do as I please. Take care---do not push me too far. If you trouble me too much I will find someone who will serve you as you served García” (Mérimée 134). This is an important part of the plot, in that Carmen is expressing

12 Carmen was bought by a “one-eyed” bandit when she was twelve years old, who then became her husband.

13 My translations from Vicente Aranda’s film, *Carmen.*
her innermost desires. She does not want to be subjugated or dominated by anyone. She is showing resistance and is not afraid of the consequences.

Carmen embodies the heroic defiance of free spirit, desire, and natural instinct over the social governing modernity. She is the idealized image of the bohemian. But for those same reasons she also represents a symbolic threat. Her natural freedom warrants her autonomy, as she will not be tied to any man, and this constitutes a permanent threat to the confused identities of don José, the French narrator, and ultimately Mérimée” “…while Carmen incarnates the principles of freedom espoused by bohemians, her independence threatens the male dominated social and narrative order” (Colmeiro 138).

It is not surprising that Carmen fails to conform to any man’s orders. She does not want to yield to anyone and refuses to change or be saved. In Aranda’s film, Carmen becomes interested in a bullfighter by the name of Lucas García. Through him, she feels she can become rich, protected and “loved.” Don José, jealous and infuriated, shoots him and takes Carmen on his horse to a church. He pleads her to change her way of life and that he forgets everything she has done. Carmen spits in his face and throws back the ring he had given her.

As both novella and film come to an end, the final “act of folly” takes place. Don José implores to Carmen that she listen and to let her soul be saved by him. She states:

---José, you ask me to do what is impossible. I no longer love you; you love me still, and for that reason you want to kill me. I could very easily lie to you, but do not care to take the trouble. All is over between us. As my rom you have the right to kill your romí, but Carmen will always be free. Calli she was born, and Calli she will die! (Mérimée 148)
In the film, Carmen tells him that she hates herself for having loved him. Don José does not want to kill her; it is more the act of possessing her. He wants Carmen to be his and only his. She states, “¡Atrévete a matarme!, ¡Mátame o deja que me vaya!, Mata a Carmen, mátala!” (Carmen in Carmen). [I dare you to kill me! Kill me or let me go! Kill Carmen, kill her!]14 This is such a powerful ending scene because an audience is expecting a death, but simultaneously hopes that the main protagonist might repent, in hopes of saving herself. Don José states, “Fury took possession of me---I drew my knife; I wished she had displayed some fear and pleaded for mercy, but the woman was a demon” (Mérimée 149). Love is not a factor here for both genders. It is more a desire of possession and of consumption for one another. After the final kiss, he stabs her. According to Colmeiro, “Carmen must die, for she is unwilling to submit to master/slave relationship. Thus, Don José’s final embrace of Carmen, like the orientalist embrace of the exotic other, is the kiss of death” (Colmeiro 139). He must put an end to her life because she is not willing to conform to his standards and subjugate herself to him. After this final act he states, “Al amanecer, me entregué a la guardia” (Don José in Carmen). [Once day broke, I turned myself in.]15 With regards to possession, Saidiya Hartman states:

The disregard of sexual injury does not divest slave women of gender but reveals the role of property relations---the possession of the enslaved---and racial subjugation in the constitution of gender and sexuality. Possession occurs not via the protections of the patriarchal family and its control of female sexuality, but via absolute rights of property. Therefore terms like “protection,” “domesticity,” and “honor” need to be recognized as

14 My own translations from Vicente Aranda’s film, Carmen.

15 My own translations from Vicente Aranda’s film, Carmen.
specific articulations of racial and class location. The captive female does not possess
gender as much as she is possessed by gender—-that is, by way of a particular investment
in and use of the body. (Hartman 100)

Although Carmen does not wish to be held captive by anyone, she allows her body to be used for
the purpose of gaining fame, luxuries, and envy. She refuses to be possessed and wants to be
free.

Following Luce Irigaray’s premise on love, “The elevation of love to its human and
divine identity is, from the point of view of the genesis of our culture, women’s concern. And
when women are banished from love or dispossessed of it, when their divinity as lovers is
forgotten, love once more becomes drives that verge on animality, disembodied sublimation (?)
of them, or death” (Irigaray 95). Carmen and don José’s love-hate relationship, cause an
obsession with one other, but yet, a resistance towards ownership and consumption. In his book,
The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance, Shane Vogel discusses modes of
nightlife performance that parallel with the scene of the cabaret. One argument that coincides
with the relationship between Carmen and don José is their actual interaction with one another.
They seem so close, yet so far from each other, and both resist in conforming and accepting to
the norms imposed by themselves. “It is this interplay of closeness and distance, acceptance and
refusal, connection and disconnection, concentration and distraction that shapes the cabaret as an
intimate formation, the perpetual disorganization and reorganization of sound, bodies, sightlines,
and feelings as the performer competes with the audience itself for its attention” (Vogel 70).
Although we are not dealing directly with the cabaret in both works, it is more the spatial
atmosphere that surrounds the characters and causes their perdition. Both compete with each
other and risk losing one another. This loss is equivalent to death. Although Carmen at one point considers don José as her *rom*, she denies being and becoming his property. Irigaray states that, “The woman is supposed to leave her family, live with her husband, take his name, let herself be possessed by him physically, bear his children, bring them into the world, and raise them…” (Irigaray 15). Carmen’s actions speak for themselves when warning don José about not wanting to abandon her malicious ways. Carmen lives to use her body, magic, and charm to have her way with the men in her life. Don José is willing to forget all of this and start a new life with her. It is not until he realizes that she will not yield to his desires that he wishes to kill her. He states, “I am tired of killing all your lovers; it is you whom I shall kill” (Mérimée 143). Colmeiro states that “The pressure to stop Carmen’s devilish magic and menacing charm and, ultimately, to make her conform is clearly felt from the beginning of the narration. Because he is unable to tame Carmen’s independent spirit, the only way for don José to put an end to these practices is to put an end to her life” (Colmeiro 139).

Can don Jose’s last “act of folly” be considered an act of spectacle to the audience or reader? Is this final act one that makes don José feel complete? In his book, *The Space of Literature*, Maurice Blanchot states:

A work is finished, not when it is completed, but when he who labors at it from within can just as well finish it from without. He is no longer retained inside by the work; rather he is retained there by a part of himself from which he feels he is free and from which the work has contributed to freeing him. (54)

Carmen’s dead body allows don José to be free. He has now possessed and consumed her. In the film, he stabs her, she falls to the floor and he lays her on a pedestal, covered with her rose
mantilla; he then licks her whole body and states, “Su cuerpo, todavía estaba vivo para mí. Ahora por fin Carmen me pertenecía” (Don José in Carmen). [Her body was still alive to me. Carmen was now finally mine.] Carmen’s performance as a gypsy may be attractive to the reader and audience because she projects exoticism and sexuality as a woman. Her body is beautified and she is strong and fearless. This parallels with Jayna Brown’s point on burlesque women and their bodies. She states that “Burlesque women were robust in constitution, physically agile, and sexually expressive, combining in their acts the properties of unbounded appetite with physical stamina. What I emphasize here is that female spectacles relied on particular fantasies of the working woman’s body” (Brown 99). From the first introduction of Carmen as seen on screen and read in the novella, she is seen as a spectacle to those around her. She resists domination, and goes against the norms of society; thus falling under the femme fatale motif. “Grosz explains that we can think of the body as a “productive and creative body which cannot be definitely known since it is not identical with itself across time. The body does not have a ‘truth’ or a ‘true nature’ since it is a process and its meaning and capacities will vary according to its context” (quoted in Brown 60). There is one particular scene in both novella and film where Carmen exhibits a sense of resentment and defensiveness after her first sexual encounter with him. As don José is getting ready to go back to the barracks for roll-call at work, Carmen is disappointed and feels betrayed. She expected him to stay with her and conform to her capricious ways. When don José does not follow, she expresses the following in a scornful tone: “To barracks! So you are a negro-slave and permit yourself to be driven with the whip! You are a regular canary in appearance and disposition. Go along with you! You have a chicken’s heart!” (Mérimée 89-90).

16 My own translations from Vicente Aranda’s film, Carmen.
This is Carmen’s first moment of vulnerability and recognition of feelings towards a male. Unable to go against Carmen’s will, don José stays. According to Colmeiro:

Contemporary critical readings of the Carmen myth, particularly in cultural studies, follow two contradictory tendencies. Those informed by feminist theory see her as affirmation of free will, independence, and liberation; those informed by postcolonial theory seek to unmask the misogynist and racist undertones toward the other, which ultimately neutralize those emancipatory impulses. (128)

Both characters portray attitudes of resistance, marginality and oppression, but strive for an acceptance of each other. Both Carmen and don José fight to arrive to a utopian state of mind by catering to each other’s needs, but are not able to reach this; thus one must consume the other through death.

The romantic construction of Spain embodied the qualities that writers such as Borrow, Chateaubriand, Hugo, Byron, Irving, Mérimée, and many others were looking for: a rich cultural past, preservation from modernity, certain quaintness, and a heroic history. The romantic imagination exoticised the strange non-Western substrate of Andalusia in particular--its oriental influence, the legends of its Moorish past, and, most importantly, the continuous presence of the Gypsies--blending all these images into a composite oriental Spain. (quoted in Colmeiro 130)

After careful analysis of Carmen in both Mérimée’s novella and Aranda’s film, it can be concluded that the figure of Carmen embodies exoticism through her iconicity as a gypsy, and follows a construction and deconstruction of the feminine myth. It is through both male and female protagonists that issues of race, marginality, sexuality and resistance unfold to arrive at a
state of reconfiguration through the *other*,

It is through the death of the *other* that the male gender can arrive to a utopian state of mind because he is able to possess the highest of his ideals. “Don José clearly symbolizes bourgeois honor, duty, and possessiveness, yet he also embodies the fatal attraction to the life of freedom outside of bourgeois conventionality offered by Carmen” (Colmeiro 136). In order to free himself, as well as Carmen, he must end her life. With this act, consumption and possession has been fulfilled.

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17 This *other* I am referring to is Carmen.
Works cited


