

Between Europe and North Africa: Reflections on Spain and Morocco in the War Novels of Carmen de Burgos (1909) and Ernesto Giménez Caballero (1923)

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Abstract

*This paper explores the notion of cultural and racial bonds and boundaries between Spain and North Africa in two literary works written during the Spanish colonial campaigns in Northern Morocco in the early twentieth century: Carmen de Burgos' *En la Guerra* (1909), and Ernesto Giménez Caballero's *Notas Marruecas de un soldado* (1923). My analysis centres on the opposing concepts of degeneration and regeneration. I argue that Carmen de Burgos' novel establishes hierarchical moral and racial boundaries between Spain and Morocco, and that these boundaries reflect her underlying anxieties concerning cultural differences between Spain and North Africa and the possibility of degeneration through contact with an 'uncivilized' environment. Giménez Caballero's vision of Morocco in *Notas Marruecas* is also informed by a set of binary oppositions; however, unlike Burgos' positioning of Spain as culturally superior to Morocco, Giménez Caballero locates Spanish culture somewhere between Europe and North Africa and sees contact with Morocco as a potential source for national regeneration. Ultimately the analysis sheds light on some of the complexities and underlying anxieties of Spanish cultural discourse on North Africa in the first decades of the twentieth century.*

Keywords: Orientalism, colonialism, nationalism, race, degeneration theories

The Spanish colonization of Northern Morocco, which was internationally recognized as its protectorate from 1912 until Morocco obtained its independence in 1956, involved a series of costly and unpopular military campaigns between 1909 and 1927 known as the second Rif War. This paper examines two literary works written during the war that explore the cultural relationship between Spain and Morocco. *En La Guerra*, [*In the War*] (1909) is a novella written by the popular writer and women's activist Carmen de Burgos. It presents the war from the perspective of a female protagonist, Alina, who is the wife of a Spanish officer in Morocco. Though fictional, it draws on Burgos' own experience of the war as a correspondent for the Madrid newspaper *El Heraldo* in 1909 and represents a rare female account within the male-dominated body of literature on the Moroccan campaigns. In terms of genre, it represents a strange marriage of the literary conventions of the melodramatic popular novella aimed at a female audience and the naturalist novel. *Notas Marruecas* [*Notes on Morocco*] is the debut work of Ernesto Giménez Caballero, a key figure in the Spanish vanguard movement in the 1920's and the earliest intellectual in Spain to embrace fascism (after a visit to Italy in 1929) and to adapt the ideology to the Spanish context.¹ It consists of a series of unrelated episodes containing vividly sensory descriptions of Moroccan culture in the style of a modernist travelogue.

This paper examines representations of Moroccan culture in these works in relation to their historical context, primarily in terms of contemporary theories of biological determinism, fears of degeneracy, and the rise of proto-fascist nationalism in Spain. The discussion of the notion of cultural and racial bonds and boundaries centres on the opposing concepts of degeneration and regeneration. Theories of degeneration as a process of moral or physical decline of individuals or societies gained widespread authority at the end of the nineteenth century,² as the enlightenment belief in progress was eroded by fears of reverse evolution and cultural decline (Gluck, 2014: 350). The evolutionary theories of Lamarck and Darwin in particular provided impetus for these fears because they presented the possibility that the human species could revert to its 'bestial' origins. Regeneration drew on the same organic metaphors and scientific theories to refer to a process of racial, moral, and cultural improvement. It also carried spiritual connotations of rebirth that were widely applied in the nationalist ideologies that emerged across Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century.

In its narrative of war, *In the War* establishes a Manichean dichotomy between Spain and Morocco. A passage that compares the Rif War to the Spanish Carlist wars of the nineteenth century provides a concise example of the delineation of this dichotomy:

Y eso que aquello [las guerras carlistas] era pelear con cristianos, hombres como ellos, no rifeños de doble estatura, feos como demonios, que con los ropajes de fantasmas se precipitaban desde las lomas dando gritos extraños, furiosos como lobos hambrientos. ¡Era menester ser español para no sentir miedo de aquellos tíos!

[But in that war they were fighting against Christians, men like them, not Rifians³ of double stature, ugly as demons, leaping down on them from the mountains in their ghostly garments with their strange cries, furious as hungry wolves. One had to be Spanish to not fear them!] (Burgos, 1909: 36)⁴

A number of boundaries are erected here between Spanish men and Rifian men. Firstly there is a religious boundary: Their enemies in the Carlist wars had been Christians like them, while the Rifians are Muslims, the historical enemy of Spain. Secondly, the emphasis on physical ugliness and the bestial simile imply that the Rifians are located on an inferior level of a racial hierarchy. Thirdly, predatory and demonic metaphors, which appear repeatedly throughout the novella, serve as symbols of moral transgression. The war is described elsewhere as 'una crueldad suprema' [supremely cruel], and the enemy's tactics of guerrilla warfare and their practices of mutilation and castration of enemy corpses are seen as transgressing the boundaries of what the narrator deems honourable in battle. A fear of their martial superiority is also encoded in their hyperbolic stature; and their description as wolves is an unmistakable reference to the devastating attack on Spanish troops in Barranco del Lobo (Wolf Ravine) in July 1909, when the Berber insurrectionaries proved to be a formidable enemy for the scarcely trained and badly equipped Spanish troops.

The dehumanised image of an enemy that represents absolute evil is typical of the melodramatic genre as well as wartime discourses. As a war journalist, it is not surprising that Burgos employs this propagandistic technique. By representing the Moor as an infra-human enemy, she traces a boundary between Spanish military culture and Rifian martial culture, between her vision of noble men and savage men. The perceived moral corruption and barbarism of the Berbers demonstrates the intrinsically *Iberian* courage of the Spanish soldiers, 'one had to be Spanish not to fear them' (36)

Burgos applies the same image of savagery to Rifian women as she does to Rifian men. In fact, historians have shown that women played an active role in the Rifian resistance, often by acting as spies or by smuggling weapons and ammunition.⁵ In Burgos' novella, Rifian women are marked as enemies on the battlefield not only because they sometimes fight alongside their men, but also because they fuel the men's thirst for death and religious hatred from the home front. They too are depicted as dishonourable and cruel, for example, in their horrific act of clubbing weakened Spanish soldiers to death (Burgos: 54). Burgos again shows a naturalist emphasis on physical and moral ugliness. 'Las moras eran todas feas, deformadas, negras' (these Moorish women were all ugly, deformed, black), she writes, 'las cabelleras, tan lindas desde lejos, consistían en madejas de algodón negro [...] que ocultaban la tiña de sus pelados cascos' (their hair, so beautiful from a distance, consisted of skeins of black cotton [...] concealing the ringworm that covered their heads) (53). She even questions their mythical sexual appeal, writing, 'las leyendas de su apasionamiento eran tan falsas como las de su belleza' (the legends about their passion were just as false as those about their beauty) (52). Their only redeeming feature is their

dark eyes, which are described as having some of the mystery of the gypsies, a reference to a culture that many contemporary Spanish observers also viewed as degenerate.

In her analysis of Burgos' writing within its cultural context, Catherine Davies argues that the cultural insecurity of *fin de siècle* societies resulted in a longing for 'strict border controls' (1998: 129). She suggests that Burgos equated the threat of disintegration in Spain not with class or gender, but with race, providing examples from her writing in which she emphasizes degeneracy in rural areas in Southern Spain.⁶ For example, Burgos' novel *Venganza*, (1918), which unfolds in her native Andalusian town of Rodalquilar, is concerned with the degeneracy of morally corrupt Andalusian women 'hembras morunas ardientes' (burning Moorish women) who incite conflict between the men in their community (Burgos, 1918: 16). The similarities in her portrayals of Andalusian women and Moroccan women is striking. Burgos' location of 'otherness' in Southern Spain as well as Morocco signals her anxieties surrounding difference between Spanish and North African culture.

Therefore, while the primary function of Burgos' dichotomy is to separate the civilized from the uncivilized, because she draws on theories of biological determinism and degeneration, there remains the possibility of slipping back into a diseased or regressive state, despite the attainment of high levels of civilization. As a result, in the construction of these boundaries there are two underlying anxieties: the fear of non-difference and the fear of degeneration through contact with an 'uncivilized' environment, in the words of Erin Graff Zivin, 'a fear of the invasion of the dominion of the same by the contaminating force of the other' (2009: 30).

Giménez Caballero's vision of Morocco is also informed by a set of binary oppositions. Primarily, he establishes a dichotomy between North and South, or between Europe and North Africa. In one chapter or *episodio* in *Notes on Morocco*, cannabis (kif) and tobacco serve respectively as metaphors for North African and European culture. Kif is associated with instantaneous and unrestrained pleasure. It is represented as an oasis, 'donde el oriental descarga el peso y la gravedad de soportar su vida, sin esperar a más ni más' (where 'the Oriental' unloads the weight of life without hoping for anything better) (Giménez Caballero, 1983: 19). Cigarettes, on the other hand, burn slowly and are a philosophical "quid" that one pursues like an intellectual ambition (19). Cigarettes represent European materialism and rationalism: they are associated with persistence, restraint, intellectualism (the seed of ideas), and cosmopolitanism. Kif represents the opposite: excess, religious fatalism, irrationality, and poverty, 'un mundo cerrado en un dogma' (a world closed in by dogma). Within this dichotomy, Giménez Caballero distinguishes between the gendered racial 'types' of dark and repulsive Moroccans, which he associates here with the masculine, and blonde, delicate Europeans, which he associates with the feminine.

Like *In the War*, *Notes on Morocco* establishes hierarchical cultural boundaries between Europe and North Africa. This delineation is clearly illustrated in the following passage, which describes a religious rite of the Aïssaouas, a Muslim sect known for its symbolic dances that bring participants to a state of ecstatic trance.⁷

La danza se fue enardeciendo. Los sones de las roncadas *derbukas* y los quejidos de las *chirimías* se fueron precipitando. Se les veía brincar embriagados, hiperestésicos, irracionales.

La brutalidad del sacrificio se iba acercando. Efectivamente, primero fue uno el que se destacó impetuoso a abarcarse al sacerdote, convulso por recibir el arma sacra. Un hacha de filo Redondo [...] Apenas el muchacho la tuvo en la mano adolora un momento, intensamente, y, enseguida, dio principio a la ceremonia de abrirse la cabeza lentamente, con golpes rítmicos, y sin dejar de bailar la sagrada danza.

En su cabeza, rapada y blanchuzca, comenzó a brotar la sangre. Primero, en un manchón. Luego en hilos que se deslizaron por el rostro. Luego, a borbotoncitos, que cubrieron su testa enloquecida, transformándola en una masa trémula.

El coro seguía danzando imperturbable.

[They solemnly emerged in formation [...] most of them were adolescents, a young militia of fanatics with shaved heads and an unbalanced gaze [...]]

The dance becomes more passionate. The sound of the hoarse *derbukas* and the whine of the *chirimías* becomes more urgent. The dancers begin to convulse, aroused and irrational.

The brutality of the sacrifice draws near. One impetuous man approaches the priest with an uncontrollable desire to receive the sacred weapon. An axe with a rounded blade [...] the man held it in his hands for a mere moment, with intense adoration, then initiated the ceremony of opening his head slowly, with rhythmic blows, never ceasing his sacred dance.

Blood began to flow from his bare white head. First a large stain. Then in streams creeping down his face. Then bubbling spurts that covered his crazed head, transforming him into a tremulous mass. The dancers continued their dance, unperturbed.] (105)

Like earlier European observers on the Aïssaoua, the narrator is appalled at the sacrifice, proclaiming 'a violent urge to end the ritual'. The Hamachas appear as crazed, masochistic savages, performing an eroticised rite of violence, 'aroused', inebriated, unbalanced in a trance-like state of possession. As C.W. Thompson notes, for many European travel writers, the values of 'primitive' societies were etched on to, and expressed by, the bodies they observed. (2011: 182). The bodies of the Hamacha reflect Giménez Caballero's construction of Islamic fanaticism; their self-inflicted pain a cruel demand imposed by an

implacable deity, their indulgence in violence a reflection of the brutality of their culture. The fact that the sacred dance occurs in a cemetery heightens its macabre character. And yet, despite the radically foreign nature of the ceremony, Giménez Caballero ultimately associates the dance with the most Castilian of all rituals. ‘Parecía una tarde de toros’ (It reminded me of a Sunday bullfight), he writes, ‘y en efecto, esa sensación me perduró toda la fiesta’ (and in effect, that impression remained with me throughout the ceremony) (106). This association evokes the fascination of romantic travel writers in the nineteenth-century with bullfighting, which in its perceived brutality and ‘primitive’ authenticity confirmed to French and British observers the Moorish heritage of Spain.

The exaltation of the instinctive and irrational character of ‘primitive’ cultures was a feature of European modernist movements of the early twentieth century. European vanguard movements sought to counter bourgeois decadence and reinvigorate art, in part through a return to ‘primitive’, instinctive art forms. A fascination with ritual is associated in particular with the surrealist movement, which Giménez Caballero would become associated with later in the 1920’s.⁸ The Spanish poet and playwright F.G. Lorca likened *el duende*, the term he applied to the dark spirit of Spanish art, to the ‘spirit’ of the religious dances of the ‘Orient’ Lorca too saw a reflection of ‘oriental’ religious rites in Spanish cultural traditions.

Therefore, although Gimenez Caballero seems to have established a boundary between civilised and uncivilised cultures in this portrayal of the Aïssaoua, he also seems to have discovered a cultural bond between Spain and Morocco. This bond appears again in a passage where the narrator reflects on the nature of the *genio* of Morocco, an abstract notion that can be understood as an essence or national spirit. He posits the fig tree and its fruit as symbols of the spirit of Morocco.

Por fuera una envoltura sobria, de pliegues, un poco mísera y misteriosa. Más por dentro almíbar y fuego. Sonrisas, zalemas genuflexiones formulas archicortesés. Melosidad y empalago. Y en el fondo, un sabor y un resultado ardiente, apasionado, turbulento.

En invierno, contemplando la higuera pelada, sin hojas y sin frutos, sólo con el armazón de ramas retorcidas, bajas, sin armonía, impulsivas y bárbaras, muchas veces he figurado que así será [...] el esqueleto de sus pasiones, si se sacara al aire libre del fondo del alma de uno de estos moros.

[The outside of the fruit is austere, wrinkled, and somewhat miserable and mysterious. Underneath is sweetness and fire ... smiles, adulations, excessive flattery, nauseating obsequiousness. And at its core: burning, passionate, turbulent flavour. Contemplating the bare fig tree in winter, without leaves and without fruit, nothing more than a shell of twisted disharmonious branches, savage and impulsive, I often imagine that this must be what the skeleton of the Moorish spirit looks like, if the depth of the soul of one of these Moors were to be exposed] (16).

The essence of Morocco is *imagined* here to be figuratively twisted and disharmonious. This notion of imbalance suggests that the narrator is defining Morocco against an ideal of harmony and wholeness, which we often expect in colonial discourse to be the European self. However, almost in the same breath the narrator claims the fig tree as a symbol of old Castile.

The implication is that Morocco and Spain have the same ethnic and cultural roots. Spain is distinguished from Morocco only by its location in Europe. In his recognition of what Angel Ganivet refers to as ‘the paternity of Africa’, Giménez Caballero inserts himself into the so-called Spanish Africanist current of thought. This begins in the mid-nineteenth century and can be traced through to many of Caballero’s literary contemporaries from the literary generation of 1898 who emphasized a legacy in Spain of fatalism and irrationality of the Moors. As Miguel de Unamuno declared in 1906, ‘¿Porqué, si somos berberiscos, no hemos de sentirnos y proclamarnos tales?’ (If we are Berbers, why should we not proclaim ourselves to be such?).⁹

The search for primitive cyphers was also a feature of the proto-fascist movements that were taking shape in Europe at the time. The rise of fascism responded to a widespread search for spiritual values and ‘organic’ cultural features that could counteract what were considered to be the corrosive effects of modernity and that could become a force for regeneration. Mark Antliff has argued that concepts associated with modernist aesthetics - including cultural and biological regeneration, primitivism, and avant-gardism - were integrated into the anti-Enlightenment pantheon of fascist values, with the result that many artists found common ground in the two movements (2002: 148).¹⁰ Giménez Caballero would become one of the first artists in Spain to do so, as a key figure in the Spanish vanguard movement in the 1920’s who also became Spain’s first fascist ideologue.

In these reflections, he positions Berber culture as a Spanish mythic cipher for the primitive ideal, fusing modernist and proto-fascist aesthetics. In German, French, and Italian fascism, figures from a pre-modern or medieval European past served as primitive signifiers. For Giménez Caballero, the Moor represents the Spanish ‘primitive’, a figure from the Iberian pre-modern past and an ideal of instinct and irrationalism. This is not to say that Giménez Caballero advocates a full return to Moorish culture. As we have seen, he is critical of the Berber rituals he witnesses and positions himself as a modernist *flâneur*, an observer who remains at a distance from them. However, his mystification of Moorish irrationality and fatalism in *Notes on Morocco* represents an early articulation of what would become a central component of his construction of Spanish fascism in his book *Genio de España [The Soul of Spain]* nearly ten years later.

Spain’s relationship with North Africa and with its Muslim-Iberian past unsettled and fascinated Spanish writers in the twentieth century. The colonial campaigns in Morocco gave rise to an ‘Africanist’ movement that began to look to the multi-cultural medieval Iberian past to reconstruct conceptions of national identity in the present. In this process, cultural boundaries and hierarchies were contested and renegotiated. The works of Burgos and Giménez Caballero represent examples of this process. Burgos endeavours to construct dichotomies of racial and moral difference between Spain and Morocco,

however these dichotomies are ultimately an artificial structure erected in an attempt to temporarily clarify blurred cultural and ethnic boundaries. As this article notes, her emphasis on degeneracy, and moral corruption in her novels about southern Spain demonstrates that she locates 'otherness' not only across the strait, but also within Spain itself, and it is not insignificant that her concern lies with the areas in Spain where the Muslim legacy is strongest. The war in Morocco, which in her view represents the 'primitive' roots of Spain, presents the possibility of cultural regression through contact with this less civilised environment. Giménez Caballero's representations of Morocco are also informed by a set of binary oppositions between north/south, civilised/uncivilised, rational/irrational, however, his reflections are not centred on asserting difference between Spain and North Africa, but on *locating* Spain within these binary oppositions. As a result, he ultimately establishes cultural bonds between North Africa and his own nation by positing Morocco as a primitive cipher for Spain. In this context, contact with Moroccan culture is represented as a potential source of cultural regeneration rather than a threat of degeneration. This view would later be appropriated in the discourse of the Africanist military subculture that conceived and carried out the coup of July 1936 that led to the Spanish Civil War and would form an integral part of Francoist discourse after the war.

This paper sheds light on the complexities and underlying anxieties of Spanish cultural discourse on North Africa in the first decades of the last century. Spanish colonialism provides a fascinating case for analysis of European constructions of the colonial 'Other' because, in fact, for Spain, Morocco was never truly Other. The analysis of constructions of Moroccan culture in this context provides insight into two important historical concerns: the contradictory ways in which Spanish writers conceived of their own cultural identity in relation to North Africa and the impact of the colonial war in Morocco on the civil war that followed in Spain, in terms of the development of Spanish nationalist ideology.

Endnotes

1 Giménez Caballero fused Pan-Latin fascism and Catholic traditionalism in an ideological project that culminated in his manifesto *Genio de España* in 1932.

2 After the publication of Bénédict Morel's foundational text on Degeneration theory: *Traité des dégénérescence physiques, intellectuelles, et morales de l'espèce humaine* in 1857.

3 Another word for Berber

4 All translations used in this article are the author's.

5 C.R. Pennell gives an example in 1916 of women in the Anjara tribe near Tangier who took the place in the firing line of their men who were killed during the fighting against the Spanish. In 1921, women of another tribe in the Yeballa used guns that they had hidden in the mountains to ambush a Spanish Patrol (Pennell: 1987: 115).

6 Portrayals of degeneracy in rural areas appear in fiction set in her home town Rodalquilar, for example, in the significantly entitled early novel *Los inadaptados* (1909) and the later stories, *Venganza* (1918) and *El ultimo contrabandista* (1922).

7 The Aïssaoua sect originated in Meknès -a city in Northern Morocco that was part of the French protectorate in 1921- among the Hamacha tribe, which is why Giménez Caballero calls it the dance of the Hamachas.

8 In the early years of editing the journal *La Gazeta Literaria*, Giménez Caballero drew attention to the surrealist enterprise in the publications of the journal, and his novel *Yo, inspector de Alcantarillas* (1928) is considered to be one the earliest examples of Spanish prose surrealism.

9 It should be noted that when these writers used the word *Africa*, they were referring only to North Africa, as they were primarily concerned with the African identity of the descendants of the Muslims and Jews who had settled along the coast of the continent after their expulsion.

10 Antliff (2002) and others have explored in details the modernist dimension of fascism's cultural politics, showing that many of the paradigms that spawned the development of modernist aesthetics were also integral to the emergence of fascism.

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Biography

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