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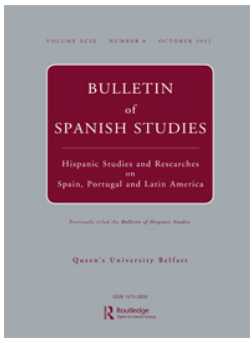
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The Male Return to the Countryside in Spanish Culture

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Introduction

In his article on ‘la literatura de la crisis’, Pablo Valdivia affirms that ‘rural areas have occupied, both as a problem and as a setting, a very peripheral position within the cultural production referring to the 2008 crisis and its aftermath’.¹ On the contrary, I argue that from 2008 onwards, there was a substantial shift in the representation of the rural male in Spanish culture, which until that date, had been considered a type of subordinate masculinity, as per R. W. Connell’s typology.² To date scholarship on masculinity has focused on the neo-liberal model of masculinity which has meant that the cultural representation of the urban male’s predilection for the countryside has not received scholarly attention. This article aims to explore the masculine return to the rural by selecting key works that illuminate this phenomenon in terms of mental health, ecocriticism, community and labour relations, thus granting us a comprehensive insight into this new cultural trend. This analysis also subverts binary stereotypes of the rural as either backward or a bastion of moral purity by showing it to be a more complex space that can both favour and hinder male reinvention.³

1 Pablo Valdivia. ‘Literature, Crisis, and Spanish Rural Space in the Context of the 2008 Financial Recession’, in *Culture, Crisis, and Renewal in Spain. Part 2*, ed. Jorge L. Catalá-Carrasco, Manuel de la Fuente & Pablo Valdivia, *Romance Quarterly*, 64:4 (2017), 163–71 (p. 164).

2 R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995).

3 See for example, Nathan E. Richardson, *Postmodern Paletos: Immigration, Democracy, and Globalization in Spanish Narrative and Film, 1950–2000* (Lewisburg:

The 2008 economic recession re-envisioned the countryside as a restorative space where male disenchantment with corrosive neo-liberal economic practices could be palliated, giving rise to autonomous forms of male subjectivities, disconnected from capitalist frames of reference. This representation of the rural space has two forms: a portrayal of the resident elderly rural male in cultural texts such as Asier Altuna's 2015 feature, *Amama*, Carla Simón's 2022 film, *Alcarrás*, Icíar Bollain's 2016 film, *El olivo* and Edurne Portela's 2020 novel, *Los ojos cerrados*. These male characters can act as an omniscient sage transmitting wisdom to the younger generation in *Los ojos cerrados*, as an intransigent father in *Amama* or an Alzheimers' sufferer in *El olivo*. Therefore, this first strand of representation focuses on the intersection of rurality with ageing, intergenerational relationships and illness. The second strand, and the subject of this article, is the return of the damaged or dissatisfied male to a rural setting in works such as Santiago Lorenzo's novel *Los asquerosos* (2018), Javier Cercas' 2019 novel *Terra Alta*, Oliver Laxe's film *Lo que arde* (2019), Rodrigo Sorogoyen's 2022 film *As bestas* and Mikel Gurrea's film *Suro* (2022). For the most part, except for *Lo que arde*, these male returnees are urbanites who seek a different value system and to recuperate communal values in the countryside. These works are equally important for their depictions of the city, the variability of rural masculinities and the relationship between rurality and male mental health.

At the time of the recession, Spanish society had found itself overwhelmed with the demands and consequences of urbanization and hyper-capitalism. The hectic pace of life and corporate pressures in cities meant that the lure of urbanity began to pall for many male residents who re-engaged with the rural setting as an antidote. Thus, this cultural phenomenon is an unsparing critique of the values of an urbanized Spanish society that lacks the social links that sustained rural life in the past and is now characterized by social *anomie*. Women's growing independence and high divorce rates had also destabilized male identity to the extent that a lone rural existence became an enticing prospect.⁴ Having been raised in cities or disenchanted by their urban lives in Spanish or foreign urban centres, these authors and directors, such as Oliver Laxe and Santiago Lorenzo, sought to represent the rural as both a potential *locus* of reinvention for male urbanites, but also as a space of

Bucknell U. P., 2002); and Mary T. Hartson, *Casting Masculinity in Spanish Film: Negotiating Identity in a Consumer Age* (Boston: Lexington Books, 2017).

4 For an insightful account of these social changes, see: Marta Seiz *et al.*, 'La evolución de las normas sociales relativas a las transiciones familiares en España', *RES. Revista Española de Sociología*, 31:2 (2022), 1–28 (p. 7); available online at <<https://recyt.fecyt.es/index.php/res/article/view/89793>> (accessed 16 November 2023).

decline and violence. This dual representation complicates the Spanish public understanding of the rural space, which was revealed to be heterogeneous, variegated by class, race, gender and generational differences. Most of these texts destabilize what Hugh Campbell terms 'traditional normative rural masculinity', thus opening up new spaces for urgently needed dialogue about gender transformation in a rural setting.⁵ The relationship between masculinity and rurality in these texts demonstrates a multiplicity of rural masculinities which perform masculinity in hegemonic, subordinate and alternative ways that often defy categorization. Drawing on a wide-ranging interdisciplinary framework of affect, ecocriticism, sociology, migration and masculinity studies, this article explores the cultural representation of the urban male's return to the countryside, which has implications for not only masculinity but gender equality, affect, male mental health, class and the role of the landscape in the formation of masculinity and ecocriticism. It seeks to prove that this male return to the rural represents both a consolidation of hegemonic masculinity and the reconsideration of a subordinate rural masculinity. Prior to examining the representation of masculinity in these novels, I will firstly analyse the representation of the rural from the Francoist era to the present day.

The Rural in the Spanish Cultural Imaginary

There have been multiple meanings attached to the Spanish countryside from 1939 to the present day. Prior to 2008, the rural was held to be incompatible with Spanish modernity, figuring only as evidence of the need for modernization in the *apertura* period and part of Spaniards' leisure agenda, in the form of rural tourism, in the post-millennial period. The Franco regime exalted the rural as the antithesis of the artificiality of urban living, which was also associated with moral corruption in films such as Antonio Nieves Conde's *Surcos* (1951). However, it increasingly became secondary to Opus Dei technocrats' ambitious plans for Spain's modernization and industrialization during the *apertura* period (1957–1970), when the recurrent trope of the *paleta* in films such as Pedro Lazaga's *La ciudad no es para mí* (1966) highlighted rural migrants' gaucheness in the growing urban centres. The democratic period reinforced this binary between urban progressiveness and rural backwardness. Since the 1960s conversion of Spain into an industrialized, consumer society, the

5 Hugh Campbell, 'Real Men, Real Locals, and Real Workers: Realizing Masculinity in Small-Town New Zealand', in *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life*, ed. Hugh Campbell, Michael Mayerfield Bell & Margaret Finney (University Park: Pennsylvania State U. P., 2006), 87–104 (p. 92).

rural male was generally thought to lack the qualities of the hegemonic neoliberal model of masculinity based on external success markers and capital acquisition and was thus classified as a subordinate masculinity.

The democratic period, from 1975 onwards, reinforced this binary between urban progressiveness and rural backwardness. A physical and intellectual disability motif was interwoven in key cultural texts such as Miguel Delibes' 1981 novel *Los santos inocentes*, to emphasize the backwardness of rural life.⁶ Accordingly, the preservation of ancestral rural traditions was deemed a retrograde aim, antithetical to industrial progress, and the rural itself was represented as a space of inexorable decline and fragmented family bonds. In Julio Llamazares' 1988 novel, *La lluvia amarilla*, the elderly protagonist laments his son's abandonment of the village. This tendency was replaced by a materialistic revalorization of the rural as a tourist destination for Spaniards in the mid to late 1990s when the nascent rural tourism industry grew by 83%.⁷ In the post-millennial period, the rural served to validate urban, middle-class Spaniards' postmaterialist status.⁸ Importantly, the rural was still depicted as an ungovernable landscape that corrupted educated urban visitors in cultural texts such as Jorge Sánchez Cabezudo's 2006 film, *La noche de los girasoles*, or irredeemably murderous in Carlos Saura's 2004 film, *El séptimo día*.⁹ Therefore, we can observe a disjuncture between the veneration of the rural as a tourist destination and the cultural image of it as retrograde, which can be attributed to Spaniards' desire to distance themselves from memories of poverty that contradicted the self-congratulatory, post-millennial narrative of prosperity and abundance.

The post-recession salience of the rural in Spanish culture stems from a distinctly nostalgic impulse that occurs in societies that begin to question their ethical and moral foundations. Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase contend that 'nostalgia is experienced when some elements of the

6 Helena Miguélez-Carballeira, 'Noves geografies de l'Espanya Negra: lloc, discapacitat i documentalitat en *As bestas* de Rodrigo Sorogoyen', unpublished conference presentation, 1^r Seminario Ruralim. Imaginarios del rural: cultura, cine, periodismo (Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona 11–12 April 2023).

7 Michael Barke, 'Rural Tourism in Spain', in *Rural Tourism: 10 Years On*, ed. Richard Sharpley & Lesley Roberts, *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 6:3 (2004), 137–49 (p. 138).

8 The term 'post-materialism' was first coined by American social scientist Ronald Inglehart who held that people align to this value-system once basic material needs for survival are satisfied. See, Ronald Inglehart & Paul R. Abramson, 'Measuring Post-materialism', *American Political Science Review*, 93:3 (1999), 665–77.

9 It is important to note that this predilection for rural tourism did not result in an improvement of local residents' lives or incomes, even depriving them of sites that were previously owned by the village as many urbanites set up businesses in these now flourishing touristic villages. See Barke, 'Rural Tourism in Spain', 146.

present are felt to be defective and when there is no public sense of redeemability through a belief in progress'.¹⁰ Nostalgia, or a yearning for the recuperation of the values of yesteryear, can be regarded as a means of escaping presentist worries.¹¹ An imagined spatial relocation diminishes anxiety because 'when one is dissatisfied with one's immediate situation, it can be a comforting exercise to imagine, construct and effectuate a more pleasing idealized environment'.¹² The social conjuncture in Spain certainly warranted such a nostalgic impulse. Various corruption scandals, such as El caso Gurtel, El caso Malaya and Don Juan de Borbón's elephant-hunting escapade in Botswana undermined Spaniards' faith in the governing institutions: a survey found that while 59% disliked Zapatero, they equally distrusted his rival, Mariano Rajoy.¹³ Compounding this situation was a high youth unemployment rate of 52%.¹⁴ In this economic conjuncture, the rural was reimagined as an unmaterialistic space that would enhance personal well-being. This hankering for a pre-industrial rural idyll was proved by the immense success of Sergio del Molino's 2016 non-fiction bestseller, *La España vacía*, which sold over 50,000 copies in its first year alone. Almudena Grandes' portrayal of a couple's return to a smallholding in a rural setting in one of the vignettes of her 2015 novel, *Los besos en el pan* was a tribute to the rural values of industriousness and austerity. This wistful longing for a value-laden rural past can also be perceived in Almodóvar's 2006 film, *Volver*, which venerates and simultaneously challenges rural female solidarity. The director revisited the theme in his 2019 semi-autobiographical film, *Dolor y gloria* which exalted the communal rural solidarity he experienced as a child.

This nostalgia for a rural setting affirms multiple counter-hegemonic movements that are particularly concerned about Spain's unfettered economic growth and have gained traction in Spain in the post-millennial period. Firstly, it validates the Spanish *decrecimiento* movement which argues that incessant production is unnecessary, and that consumerism must be regulated to protect the environment and to impede a debt-driven

10 Malcolm Chase & Christopher Shaw, 'The Dimensions of Nostalgia', in *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*, ed. Christopher Shaw & Malcolm Chase (Manchester: Manchester U. P., 1989), 1–17 (p. 10).

11 Peter Nosco, *Remembering Paradise: Nativism and Nostalgia in Eighteenth-Century Japan* (London/Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies/Harvard U. P., 1990), 3.

12 Nosco, *Remembering Paradise*, 4.

13 See 'La confianza en Rajoy y Zapatero se desploma', *Público*, 9 November 2009, n.p., <<https://web.archive.org/web/20121028220726/http://www.publico.es/espana/267939/la-confianza-en-rajoy-y-zapatero-se-desploma>> (accessed 16 November 2023).

14 Lidia Farré, Francesco Fasani & Hannes Mueller, 'Feeling Useless: The Effect of Unemployment on Mental Health in the Great Recession', *IZA. Journal of Labor Economics*, 7:1 (2018), 1–34 (p. 12).

hyper-capitalism.¹⁵ In 2005 alone, Spain saw the construction of more houses than France, the UK and Germany combined, an unsustainable level of growth that culminated in the 2008 recession.¹⁶ Luis I. Prádanos avers that this unfettered growth has also caused Spain's largely ignored ecological crisis which has been exacerbated by 'the lack of any public discussion about what kind of growth is desirable in Spain: growth of what, for what, for whose benefit, orchestrated by whom, and at what cost?'¹⁷ *Decrecimiento*, a multidimensional concept, premised on anthropological theories of reciprocity, which rejects the idea of transactional human relations and unregulated growth, has been popularized as a panacea to unrestricted growth. It is a deliberative process designed to reduce the overall capacity to produce and consume and to dismantle the primacy of markets and commercial exchanges as the central structuring frameworks for human lives.¹⁸ It is based on the re-evaluation of needs and the deprioritization of exchange and capitalist accumulation.

Nostalgia for a rural setting is also intimately connected with minimalism in Spain, which can be defined as 'una tendencia estética e intelectual que busca la expresión de lo esencial eliminando lo superfluo'.¹⁹ Both movements, *decrecimiento* and minimalism, assert that increased consumption has not culminated in increasing levels of happiness, rather the opposite, because it relies on inanimate goods, rather than personal relationships, to fulfil us emotionally. As Byung-Chul Han writes: 'it is only in the ascetic realm that we can find true liberty'.²⁰ Therefore, these theorists urge a return to a less materialistic way of life, which has direct implications for Spanish masculinity that had been premised in the democratic period on capital acquisition and high levels of consumerism.²¹

However, it would be reductive to equate this nostalgia to a cultural idealization of the countryside as these writers and directors have produced a discerning vision of it in the works I will examine, which are as follows:

15 Carlos Taibo, *El decrecimiento explicado con sencillez* (Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata, 2019), 10.

16 Farré, Fasani & Mueller, 'Feeling Useless: The Effect of Unemployment on Mental Health in the Great Recession', 18.

17 Luis I. Prádanos, *Postgrowth Imaginaries: New Ecologies and Counterhegemonic Culture in Post-2008 Spain* (Liverpool: Liverpool U. P., 2018), 132.

18 Taibo, *El decrecimiento explicado con sencillez*, 10.

19 See Real Academia Española, 'Minimalismo', *Diccionario de la lengua española* (2022), <<https://dle.rae.es/minimalismo>> (accessed 16 November 2023).

20 Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity, 2017 [1st German ed. 2009]), 110. See also, Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (New York: Melville House, 2020).

21 Lorraine Ryan & Ana Corbalán, 'Introduction: The Reconfiguration of Masculinity in Spain', in *The Dynamics of Masculinity in Contemporary Spanish Culture*, ed. Lorraine Ryan & Ana Corbalán (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), 1–18 (p. 7).

Santiago Lorenzo's *Los asquerosos*; Oliver Laxe's *Lo que arde*, Javier Cercas' *Terra Alta*, Rodrigo Sorogoyen's *As bestas* and Mikel Gurrea's film *Suro*.²² In these texts, the rural becomes a *locus* of masculine self-invention, both intentional and inadvertent, for damaged or dissatisfied male characters fleeing from hostile economic and social forces in Spanish or foreign cities or from their own crimes. Unlike urban hegemonic notions of masculinity that privilege the corporate 'suit' (almost a denial of nature), rural masculinity, which requires physical contact with nature, residence within nature, and (frequently) dominance over nature, has the potential to revitalize jaded urban masculinities. Significantly, some of the male protagonists in for example, *Los asquerosos* and *Terra Alta* belong to the urban working class, which hints at social immobility in increasingly unequal Spanish urban areas that privilege property ownership which has become inaccessible for young people without family support,²³ or alternatively that urban spaces have transformed into sites of exploitation and alienation which is the theme of the first text I will examine, Santiago Lorenzo's mordant bestseller, *Los asquerosos*.

Loneliness and Alienation in *Los asquerosos* and *Lo que arde*

Los asquerosos charts the exile to the countryside of an urbanite named Manuel. Violence is associated with the city of Madrid where Manuel accidentally injures a policeman in self-defence during a riot. Erroneously believing that he has killed him, he absconds to a deserted village where he occupies a house with no heating or light. The setting of the protagonist's urban downfall in a riot is a reference to the 15M demonstrations, which were caused by growing urban social inequalities that have also begun to affect the main Spanish cities. In the countryside, Manuel embraces the solitude of country life, deliberately choosing not to interact with the village inhabitants. His peaceful life, however, is interrupted by the arrival of urban weekenders, *los mochufas*, as he calls them, who while hypocritically praising rural quiescence, initiate a series of activities such as barbecues and loud music that effectively urbanize it. Irrked by their carelessness, Manuel starts a campaign of terror against them to persuade them to leave. Lorenzo's portrayal of an ascetic rural masculinity highlights the need to transform hegemonic neo-liberal masculinity while simultaneously critiquing the violence, both psychic and corporeal, that results from the atomization of the major Spanish cities. The predominant

22 However, we should not be too sanguine about the rural which is frequently a relatively homogeneous space where the existing social structure remains unchanged and prejudices prevail, as we can see in other works of this genre. For example, in Daniel Gascon's *Un hipster en la España vacía* (2020), the immigrant Mohammad is ridiculed as a misfit.

23 See Javier Ruiz, *Edificio España: el peligro de la desigualdad* (Madrid: Espasa, 2022).

affects of Lorenzo's novel are loneliness and solitude, feelings that are both gendered and spatial; they encode the emotional havoc wreaked by expectations of masculinity premised on capital accumulation and the spatial transformations of post-millennial Spain, but also the paranoia induced by rural isolation in the countryside.

A vital step in the protagonist Manuel's quest for self-knowledge, as Lorenzo imagines it, is the need for absolute solitude which brings us to a consideration of the distinction between loneliness and solitude, and, more specifically how solitude can act as a restorative balm that enables true liberty in neo-liberal societies. From the onset of the novel, Manuel is a 'latchkey kid' who had hoped in vain that employment in Madrid would alleviate his perennial melancholy: instead, he becomes a misfit who flounders socially in the city. Manuel's experience is an indictment of urban settings in which it is possible to feel alone despite the presence of millions of people. Richard Weiss classifies loneliness into two categories: the first category, emotional loneliness, is defined by the inability to maintain an intimate relationship with anyone. He cites the example of widows who are unable to forge a connection with anyone following their husbands' deaths. The second category, social loneliness, refers to difficulties in integration in the social environment, typically experienced by new arrivals to a city who do not establish a complicity with their neighbours.²⁴ It can be gleaned from both categories that loneliness is not created by physical proximity but is rather akin to an emotional state whereby the individual feels disconnected from everyone. It does not pivot on the absence of relationships, but on the difficulty of creating new ties or maintaining the existing ones.²⁵

Initially, it seems that Manuel is exchanging the social alienation of Madrid for a more satisfying solitude in the village, Zarzahuriel. Manuel's only link with the external world is a weekly delivery of Lidl shopping from his uncle Miguel, the novel's narrator. Ironically, in the austere conditions of the rural village, he begins to thrive as his self-reliance increases, which can be considered a tribute to works such as Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). Significantly, the exaltation of solitude implicitly rejects the neo-liberal construction of a personable self, constantly engaged in productive interaction that leads to advancement.²⁶ A *côterie* of academics have outlined the benefits of solitude. Noted psychiatrist, Antony Storr, established that whereas loneliness is an *a priori* undesirable condition,

24 Richard Weiss, *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973), 62.

25 Weiss, *Loneliness*, 71.

26 Sarah Bracke, 'Is the Subaltern Resilient? Notes on Agency and Neoliberal Subjects', in *Relocating Subalternity*, ed. Jamila M. H. Mascot & Sara de Jong, *Cultural Studies*, 30:5 (2016), 839–55 (p. 849).

aloneness or solitude may be a desirable or positive condition fostering creativity, enabling self-reflection, identity formation, concentration, thinking and learning.²⁷ In his scathing critique of neo-liberal society, *La sociedad del cansancio*, German-Korean philosopher, Byung-Chul Han contends that in what he terms the ‘la sociedad del rendimiento’, individuals engage in chronic overwork which results in ‘violencia neuronal’ or ‘un infarto del alma’. In his words: ‘El animal salvaje está obligado a distribuir su atención en diferentes actividades. De este modo no se halla capacitado para una inmersión contemplativa: ni durante la ingestión de alimentos ni durante la cópula’.²⁸ According to Han, solitude and ‘el aburrimiento profundo’ characterize ‘una vida contemplativa’ that prioritizes reflection and creativity.²⁹

From the outset, solitude formed part of the novel’s publicity campaign and the construction of the author, Santiago Lorenzo’s persona. The iconic cover by Blackie Books, features a lone figure in a vast rural landscape that dwarfs him, which seems to indicate that Nature is a vastly superior force to Man. Evidently, this conceit is antithetical to the neo-liberal exaltation of individual effort and the ability of man to triumph over all adversities. The nostalgia for rural solitude also stems from the author’s own retreat to a village in rural Segovia with only twenty-three residents, where he lived in relative isolation to distance himself from the hyper-capitalistic values of Madrid.³⁰ Solitude was fundamental to finding his voice as an author and facilitating his prolific output: during his decade living there, he published four books. The title, *Los asquerosos* constitutes an unsparing critique of Spain’s uncontrolled urban sprawl, as Lorenzo reveals in his interview with Juan Vilá: ‘la España llena sí me parece un problema. Un problemazo: la España saturada’.³¹ Therefore, the title reverses the sustaining myth of Spanish industrial growth—rural regression *versus* urban progressiveness as the ignorant urbanites who intrude on rural stillness, *los mochufas*, become ‘the disgusting ones’, as the narrator, uncle Miguel, states at the end of the book.³² Corporeal and moral disgust reinforces this exaltation of rural solitude: Manuel’s personal hygiene, which is very much in decline in the village, contrasts with the moral revulsion, inspired by *los mochufas* who personify the baleful

27 Anthony Storr, *Solitude: A Return to the Self* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

28 Byung-Chul Han, *La sociedad del cansancio*, trad. Arantxazu Saratxaga Arregi (Barcelona: Herder Editorial, 2022 [1st German ed. 2016]), 21.

29 Han, *La sociedad del cansancio*, trad. Saratxaga Arregi, 26.

30 Juan Vila, ‘Santiago Lorenzo: “La España llena sí que me parece un problema”’, *Jot Down*, 26 November 2019, n.p., <<https://www.jotdown.es/2019/11/santiago-lorenzo-la-espana-llena-si-que-me-parece-un-problema/>> (accessed 15 February 2023).

31 Vila, ‘Santiago Lorenzo’, n.p.

32 Santiago Lorenzo, *Los asquerosos* (Barcelona: Blackie Books, 2020), 227. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in the main text.

consequences of a vulgar consumer society in which appearance and possession have become the defining criteria. Importantly, the mocking of the condescending urbanite is a constant feature of these back-to-nature novels: in Daniel Gascón's *Diario de un hipster*, the city returnee, Enrique tries to educate the rural denizens about Gramsci and initiates an Agnès Varda cinema cycle while also establishing a workshop on new masculinities.³³

In *Los asquerosos*, the experience of solitude bolsters Manuel's faltering masculinity, which had been undermined by his social maladaptation in the city. Entertained solely by his collection of Austral books, Manuel embarks on a life of near total self-sufficiency, growing his own crops and cutting his own timber. Linda Marie Bye contends that the physical fitness required to thrive in nature connects men with their physicality, and accordingly, the rural morphs into a space for the physical expression of masculinity.³⁴ The protagonist's revelling in these physical activities substantiates the central tenets of the 1980s men's movement, whose maximum exponent was Robert Bly, a revered American poet. In 1990, he published *Iron John: A Book about Men*, in which he argued for the necessity of men to recover healthy and vigorous aspects of masculinity that have been jeopardized by not only industrialization but the rise of feminism, and concomitant social change. The book revealed that existing prototypes of adult masculinity (i.e., the traditional, 'macho' male or the gentler, feminine-identified male of the 1970s and 1980s) were both psychologically limiting and detrimental to men who sought more convincing role models. Its phenomenal success led to the establishment of Iron John camps all over the US whereby men returned to spartan conditions in the wilderness where they engaged in masculine activities.³⁵ Thus, Manuel's rejoicing in the cutting of timber reaffirms a faltering self-confidence, allowing him to think of himself as an independent, functioning man who excels in physical activities. However, *los mochufas* prove to be a disruptive force who threaten his newly found plenitude. Tellingly, the narrator comments that Manuel does not dedicate as much time to woodcutting when the *mochufas* arrive. In fact, woodcutting evolves into the most telling metaphor of the *mochufas*' self-centredness. When Manuel is engaged in this activity, Joaqui, the matriarch of the family, surprises him which results in him injuring himself with the axe. An ambulance is called, but Joaqui does not accompany him as she must prepare the family dinner.

33 Daniel Gascón, *Un hipster en la España vacía* (Barcelona: Literatura Random House, 2020).

34 Linda Marie Bye, 'How to Be a Rural Man: Young Men's Performances and Negotiations of Rural Masculinities', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 25:3 (2009), 278–88 (p. 282).

35 See Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book about Men* (London: Hachette UK, 2015).

Their absolute and vulgar adhesion to materialism has dehumanized the *mochufas*, obviating any concern for the other.

The stagnation of time in the rural space enables his transformation because temporality reverts to the unstructured, pre-industrial pace of agricultural societies. Manuel is liberated from his former bosses in the city who exploited him in ‘curros precederos’ depriving him of his ‘fuerzas vivas’ (*Los asquerosos*, 104). Now master of his own time, Manuel decides to reduce his weekly shopping in order to reduce his teaching of foreign students via telephone, which are his only source of income. As his uncle relates: ‘con su pobreza autosurtida compraría tiempo, porque pasaba ratos mucho mejores en el mercado de horas que en el de frutas y verduras. Aquel le ofrecía mejor producto’ (*Los asquerosos*, 51). The emphasis on a temporal limitlessness, facilitated by this austerity, is recurrent throughout the novel: ‘Con cada céntimo que dejaba de fabricar compraba un minuto de frenética paz a estrenar. Le parecía muy barato’ (*Los asquerosos*, 63). Lorenzo brilliantly analogizes what Byung-Chul Han has identified as the temples of neo-liberal society,³⁶ the gymnasium and the amassing of money and property, to natural phenomena:

La carencia era su gran, saciante patrimonio. Se estaba instalando en una austeridad fiera en la que chapoteaba cada vez con mayor deleite, como quien de da a la gimnasia extrema y goza con la queja muscular, la falta de aliento y el dolor de plantas. Su apetito por la sobriedad empezaba a ser gula, y su amor por la pobreza empezaba a ser lujuria. (*Los asquerosos*, 78)

Interestingly, in all these back-to-nature novels, the male protagonists’ self-directed lives leads to time itself becoming irrelevant, which questions the increasingly prevalent view that all individual time should be productive and monetizable.³⁷ It lends credibility to another construction of time in the service of individual needs and wants, rather than generating economic worth or labour, harking back to John Maynard Keynes’s famous dictum that economic growth would allow the individual to work only fifteen hours a week, devoting the remainder of their time to personal development.³⁸ Most importantly, Manuel’s plenitude in a rural setting brings into relief the affective limitations of Spanish neo-liberal masculinity that enforces a homogenized and emotionally damaging concept of maleness that is ultimately alienating because ‘external economic circumstances rather than

36 Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2017 [1st German ed. 2014]), 52.

37 See James Davies, *Sedated: How Modern Capitalism Created our Mental Health Crisis* (Boston: Atlantic Books, 2021).

38 Davies, *Sedated*, 67.

personal characteristics are the measure of worth'.³⁹ This alienation is reversed in this novel by solitude and engagement with nature, which ostensibly produces a more authentic version of masculinity, and presents the rural as a type of anarchical-individualist paradise where the individual male lives freely.

The complexity of the novel resides, however, in Lorenzo's cautioning against male rural solitude by showcasing the effects of Manuel's paranoia, induced by long-term solitude. The novel's narrator, his uncle, reveals this ambiguous attitude to rural masculinity, creating a narrative tone that oscillates between admiration and incredulity at his nephew's trajectory, which signals to the reader, from the incipit, the ambivalence of this portrayal of lone rural masculinity. Manuel's abhorrence of his loud urbanite neighbours, *los mochufas*, is akin to a state of paranoia, which compels Manuel to damage the neighbouring property and eventually to set fire to it. In her work *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai argues that paranoia was historically characterized as a distinctly male trait, intimately connected with the experience of intellectual superiority.⁴⁰ However, it is a particular type of paranoia that afflicts Manuel: namely hypervigilance, a by-product of intense solitude that leads to over-concern with safety and the perception of threats.⁴¹ Manuel's deliberate explosion of the *mochufas'* boiler, which injures the matriarch, Joaqui, loses readerly sympathy for him. In a similar vein, his self-concealment from his visiting uncle demonstrates that solitude has transformed into misanthropy just when his re-entry into society is guaranteed by the revelation that his victim, the injured policeman, has recuperated following several months in hospital. Phillip Roth warned, in reference to the American countryside, that 'la utopia del aislamiento en el campo, la defensa del oasis contra la rabia y la aflicción' culminates in 'una soledad inexpugnable'.⁴² By negative inference, this salutary tale reveals rural masculinity to be relational, based on authentic and meaningful ties, not the instrumental ones advocated by neoliberalism but neither a complete immersion in rural solitude. This portrayal disputes the benefits of an unfettered rural masculinity, revealing instead that a return to the rural can give rise to a misanthropic masculinity whereby liberty from economic and social constraints leads to a psychological decline that culminates in behavioural aberrations. In this sense, Lorenzo eschews a conception of the rural as a panacea for male mental health problems, presenting male

39 Hartson, *Casting Masculinity in Spanish Film*, 172.

40 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Boston: Harvard U. P., 2005), 173.

41 Olivia Laing, *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone* (London: Macmillan, 2016), 23.

42 Philip Roth, *Me casé con un comunista*, trad. Jordi Fibla Feito (Barcelona: Debolsillo, 2005 [1st English ed. 1998]), 214.

psychological equilibrium to be dependent on an amalgam of factors, just one of which is place.⁴³

The intricate relationship between masculinity, mental health and the rural is at the heart of Oliver Laxe's 2019 film, *Lo que arde*, which is set in rural Galicia; it garnered a slew of international prizes winning best film at the Thessaloniki Film Festival, the Cairo International Film Festival and Cannes. Laxe, a second-generation immigrant who was born in Paris, was inspired to make the film to reverse the pervasive negative image of the rural. As he stated in an interview:

También me apetece mucho cambiar un discurso que hay un poco negativo de lo rural, parece que siempre estamos llorando. Tenemos que cambiar la mirada. Los valores de esta montaña son patrimonio de la humanidad, son el futuro.⁴⁴

The film is an important reclamation of a distinctly Galician identity that was even emphasized in the Cannes Film Festival where the female protagonist Benedicta Sánchez danced a *muiñeira*, a traditional Galician dance, and spoke in her own language, Galician. In that respect, it can be considered an exemplar of *el novo cinema galego*, which has been defined by Samuel Amago as 'idiosyncratic, critically acclaimed films that have drawn new attention to Galician spaces, places, culture and language in a post-national, deterritorialized world'.⁴⁵ It became the highest grossing Galician-language film ever, presumably for the complexity of its representation of a Galician rural identity, its eschewal of stereotypes and its credibility which was

43 For discerning studies that encompass both the possibilities and limitations of the role of nature in reducing mental health problems, see the following works: Samantha Walton, *Todos necesitamos la belleza: en busca de la naturaleza curativa*, trans. Lorenzo Luengo (Siruela: Barcelona, 2022 [1st English ed. 2022]); Cassandra Y. Johnson, 'A Consideration of Collective Memory in African American Attachment to Wildland Recreation Places', *Human Ecology Review*, 5:1 (1998), 5–15; and Rebecca Schiller, *Earthed: A Memoir* (London: Elliott & Thompson, 2021). Walton convincingly shows how natural spaces tend to be the preserve of the middle classes, co-opted into festivals or commercial leisure activities that can exclude ethnic minorities or neurodivergent people. Significantly, Cassandra Johnson's research on place attachment has demonstrated how African Americans tended to avoid rural spaces in the deep South that evoked troubling memories of lynchings during the Jim Crow era. In her memoir of living on a smallholding, *Earthed: A Memoir*, Rebecca Schiller, an ADHD sufferer, found the rural setting isolating to the extent that it exacerbated her condition. Thus, we need to qualify the idea of nature as an automatic resolution for mental health problems and to interrogate the privileges of class, race and belonging when assessing its efficacy.

44 Clara Laguna, 'Oliver Laxe y su proyecto vital en Os Ancares', *Conde Nast Traveler*, 24 September 2021, n.p., <<https://www.traveler.es/articulos/oliver-laxe-y-su-proyecto-vital-en-os-ancares>> (accessed 3 March 2023).

45 Samuel Amago, 'Local Landscapes, Global Cinemascesapes, and the New Galician Documentary', *Abriu. Estudos de Textualidade do Brasil, Galicia e Portugal*, 7 (2018), 81–95 (p. 85).

enhanced by Laxe's memory of childhood holidays in Los Ancares.⁴⁶ As he describes it, he underwent 'a kind of ritual to remember all of the small gestures: how we cut the bread, how we do the fire, how we speak to the animals'.⁴⁷ The story dramatizes the return of pyromaniac Amador, who has served a two-year prison sentence, to live with his mother who ekes out a living on a smallholding. From its very inception, the film seemed to promote gender equality by selecting unknown, ageing and plain-looking amateur actors who retained their names for their characters: for example, Amador's mother, Benedicta, was played by the octogenarian Benedicta Sánchez while the principal character Amador was a former forest guard named Amador Arias Mon. The title clearly references the proliferation of fires in that region, but also alludes to Amador's attempt at integration into the local community, which is doomed to be destroyed by the forest fire at the end of the film. Although it is not known whether Amador is the arsonist, we can infer, from the locals' persistent mistrust of him throughout the film that he will be condemned as such by them.

As I discussed in the previous section, the rural is considered to be an unalloyed site of masculinity where men can revive their virility and approximate a pre-industrial prototype of masculinity. The originality of *Lo que arde*, however, is that the male character becomes the subject of the rural world, not its creator, which allows us to gain an insight into the interdependence of masculinity and nature. Nature and masculinity can intersect in many ways. As Mark Allister explains:

There is no 'nature' that is stable or foundational. And when we see that nature has numerous and shifting roles, sometimes existing as an idea, or as a commodity, or as the 'pure' entity for those who want to attack what is more obviously human made, then we are able to acknowledge how complex are the relations between this larger view of nature and masculinity.⁴⁸

Significantly, the word nature comes from *natura*, the Latin term for birth, which hints at its power of rejuvenation and renewal. Laxe defends a new way of understanding nature as a place that is common to us all, a place with a powerful discursive construction that apparently erases distinctions

46 María Yáñez, "O que arde": a película-acontecemento que a nosa xeración precisaba', *Vinte*, 11 October 2019, n.p., <<https://vinte.praza.gal/artigo/a-pelicula-acontecemento-que-a-nosa-xeracion-precisaba>> (accessed 20 November 2023).

47 Michelle O'Connell, 'Oliver Laxe on *Fire Will Come*, Finding the Essence of Cinema and Leonard Cohen', *The Film Stage*, 29 October 2020, n.p., <<https://thefilmstage.com/oliver-laxe-on-fire-will-come-finding-the-essence-of-cinema-and-leonard-cohen/>> (accessed 10 March 2023).

48 Mark Allister, 'Introduction', in *Eco-Man: New Perspectives on Masculinity and Nature*, ed. Mark Allister (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2004), 1–22 (p. 19).

and stigmas, compelling the spectator to rethink the relationship between humans and non-humans, ecosystems and their environments. The foundations for Amador's healing and construction of a coherent rural manhood reside in the rejection of Man/Nature divisions and an immersion in nature and silence. Reconnecting with the cycle of the seasons, developing sensuous awareness of living things and working the land are the key elements of Amador's redemption. Thus, the wild landscape of Los Ancares becomes what geographer Wilbert Gesler refers to as a 'therapeutic landscape' where the physical characteristics and the meanings attached to a place coalesce to transform it into a place of curation, calm and personal renewal.⁴⁹ In fact, Amador's healing validates the universal turn toward nature as a remedy for mental health problems, which is premised on Stress Reduction Therapy (SRT). Roger Ulrich found that natural settings aids our body's soothing system—the parasympathetic nervous system—to function, calming us down in the short term, and potentially helping to avoid more serious conditions relating to chronic stress.⁵⁰ Labouring the land to extract its resources can be considered a creative act, which implies that even when the work is physically exhausting, it holds intrinsic value, and contrasts favourably with urban alienated labour that can lead to emotional angst. Farming provides a steady supply of repetitive, routine relatively simple chores, activities that are conducive to mindfulness and feelings of absorption. In so doing, they create, what the philosopher Drew Leder calls 'bodily absence', which we experience when we are so preoccupied with our activities that consciousness of the body—paradoxically—disappears. Leder describes this experience as oneness, flow or 'being away', and it is fundamental to mental health.⁵¹ Stephen Kaplan expands on 'being away' as a sense of timelessness, of forgetting yourself, permitting your thoughts and impressions to develop unfettered by the everyday constraints of rationality.⁵²

Amador's grazing of the cattle with the dog, Luna and his unblocking of a stream to provide local farmers with water, marks him as a useful member of this agricultural society, thus providing a source of healing and renewal for his stigmatized masculinity. Throughout the film, cinematographer Mauro Herce uses a 116 mm stock to emphasize Amador's evolution through interaction with nature: the cows languishing in the late afternoon sun suggest the harmony Amador finds in nature. Living in proximity with nature, Amador comes to realize that nature has a cycle of its own that

49 Wilbert M. Gesler, 'Therapeutic Landscapes: Medical Issues in Light of the New Cultural Geography', *Social Science and Medicine*, 34:7 (1992), 735–46 (p. 742).

50 Roger S. Ulrich, 'Visual Landscapes and Psychological Well-Being', *Landscape Research*, 4:1 (1979), 17–23 (p. 21).

51 Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990), 23.

52 Stephen Kaplan, 'The Restorative Benefits of Nature: Toward an Integrative Framework', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 15:3 (1995), 169–82 (p. 175).

depends on man's treatment of the various species of the biosphere in a homogeneous world where man should share an equitable relationship with the landscape, animals and vegetation. In this way, Amador comes to epitomize eco-masculinity, a positive construction of masculinity that sees men interact with nature in a nurturing and responsible way.⁵³ Eco-masculinity disputes the automatic association of masculinity with patriarchy, replacing it with a profound vision of masculinities in nature as pluralistic, which means that multiple masculinities, including subordinate and marginal masculinities, engage with nature in different and unpredictable ways.⁵⁴ Clearly, eco-masculinity provides a pathway for the articulation of an alternative form of masculinity that fosters an attitude of care towards nature, which can be considered a feminization of rural masculinity, which as we have seen, is typically based on rugged individualism and hyper-masculinity.

Significantly, eco-masculinity is a variation of what Gregory Peter *et al.* term 'a dialogic masculinity' which is characterized by 'different measures for work and success in a rural setting, less need for control over nature and greater social openness'.⁵⁵ Considering the concept of dialogic masculinity in conjunction with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, we can state that, in dialogic conditions, social actors seek to take each other into account, in this case, mother and son, which creates a long overdue egalitarianism.⁵⁶ Rural Spain has been the patriarchal space *par excellence* that relegates women to secondary status and often invisibility. As veterinarian María Sánchez states: 'Las mujeres del medio rural son doblemente discriminadas. Doblemente olvidadas. Primero por su género, pero también por el lugar en el residen y trabajan'.⁵⁷ Innovatively, Laxe exalts rural femininity—more particularly, the elderly mother's forbearance—both in its own right and in its role in enabling the renewal of Amador's masculinity. Mother and son are open to each other's concerns and views and they conceive their position in daily life as an interactive part of a familial framework; their silences in each other's company indicate harmony, rather than social awkwardness. Adhering to a solid

53 Martin Hultman & Paul M. Pulé, *Ecological Masculinities: Theoretical Foundations and Practical Guidance* (London/New York: Routledge, 2018), 82.

54 Hultman & Pulé, *Ecological Masculinities*, 90.

55 Gregory Peter *et al.*, 'Coming Back across the Fence: Masculinity and the Transition to Sustainable Agriculture', in *Shelves and Bins: Varieties of Qualitative Sociology in Rural Studies*, ed. Gilbert W. Gillespie Jr & Peter R. Sinclair, *Rural Sociology*, 65:2 (2000), 215–33 (p. 228).

56 See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Michael Holquist & Caryl Emerson (Dallas: Univ. of Texas Press, 2010 [1st Russian ed. 1975]).

57 María Sánchez, *Tierra de mujeres: una mirada íntima y familiar al mundo rural* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2019), 12.

belief in the power of redemption, it is his mother who reminds Amador that trees only inflict harm if they are also hurt, a cogent metaphor for the destruction of human relations and the ecosystem in the locality. At the end of the film, she helps Amador get up and leave a group of infuriated neighbours who are shouting allegations at him ensuing the forest fire. Her sheltering at a tree trunk during a rainstorm associates her with an implacable moral coherence that can withstand both social and natural chaos, while her stoking of the hearth in their house provides a tellingly domestic counterpart to the raging forest fires. Food plays a vital role in consolidating their complicity. Following a social rebuff at a neighbour's funeral, Amador recovers by sipping coffee and eating toast by the warmth of the hearth. An ageing rural maternity, symbolized by the hearth, is conceived as the sustaining force of this fractured Galician family, which reverses the traditional consignment of rural women to oblivion. Amador's attention to his mother facilitates his transition from a gruff former prisoner to a more empathetic male, attuned to both humans and nature, which stresses the need to remove both humans and nature from patriarchal control.

Amador's affinity with animals can be considered the first iteration of this film's dismantling of unnatural hierarchies within nature, which is prefigured literally by his name: Amador, which means 'lover', in this case, I would venture, a lover of nature. Scholar Matthew Calarco aptly comments: 'the question of the animal obliges us to consider precisely the anthropocentric value hierarchy that places human life always and everywhere in a higher rank over animal life'.⁵⁸ The male-animal relationship is equitable and mutually beneficial, as Amador dispenses care to the cows, calling the vet when they are sick, while they, in turn, provide him with a meaningful gendered identity. Amador searches for their cow Parda, who has become sick and refuses to leave a small muddy pond. There is a close-up of Amador, Elena and especially Parda looking at the mountains as they trundle down the country road together. The cow, Parda's illness facilitates the merging of animals and humans and, for Amador, the possibility to escape his notoriety as a pyromaniac and the chance of a relationship with Elena. This man-animal relationship refutes the homogenization of rural manhood, which has become synonymous with rural men's role in systematized animal exploitation and suffering to a more nuanced vision that advocates the interconnection of male and animal who enjoy a seamless relationship.

In this film, the damaged male's relationship with animals affirms nature as a live, holistic entity with restorative powers: however, it is also a

58 Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2008), 12.

cornucopia of resources to be exploited and consumed solely for commercial interests and the site of an inhospitable community. The planting of eucalyptus trees, which will inhibit the growth of the autochthonous plant life, disturbs Amador who believes that the sickness afflicting the eucalyptus trees is the result of a touristic construction project. Here, director Oliver Laxe highlights the narrowness of looking blindly to nature for our own healing and emphasizes the necessity of coming to terms with the suffering inflicted on the Earth in constantly extracting its resources. Interestingly, Amador's concern manifests what Kari Marie Norgaard has termed 'eco-anxiety', which can be defined as the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are destabilized.⁵⁹ She contends that 'disruption of the ecological habitus' can lead to 'emotions of guilt/anxiety' and to the destabilization of identities forged around the environment.⁶⁰ Norgaard's study showed that anxiety and other difficult emotions were caused by both changes in geophysical environment and pressures to their social world. People afflicted with eco-anxiety express a desire for understanding from their immediate social group: they feel that their anxiety is worsened by socially constructed silence and social conflicts arising from the ecological problems. Therefore, we can conclude that the idea of nature as a remedy for mental health ills is premised on a naïve conception of it as static and unchanging, unaffected by commercialization and the outside world.

Amador's eco-anxiety initially stems from regional ecological policies that culminated in the hyper-production of eucalyptus trees. The 1992 Galician Plan Forestal, ratified by the then President, Manuel Fraga, sanctioned the planting of 250,000 hectares of eucalyptus trees by 2030. At present, 500,000 hectares of the trees have been planted, which has caused the reduction of the price per cubic metre.⁶¹ 15 million tonnes are produced annually when internal demand remains at 5 million, a disparity which can be attributed to the neo-liberal prioritization of productivity and profit, regardless of necessity. The eucalyptus trees have played a negative role in the forest fires crisis as their hyper-production stems from defective forestry policies in the region, which—until summer 2021—privileged the monocultural production of eucalyptus. Given its papery pulp, eucalyptus is highly flammable which has been a contributing factor to the multiple forest fires in recent decades.⁶² This commodification of the local ecosystem threatens Amador's eco-

59 Kari Marie Norgaard, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

60 Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, 122.

61 Cristina Huete, 'El dinero no frena los incendios forestales en Galicia', *El País*, 9 September 2021, n.p.; available online at <<https://elpais.com/espana/2021-09-09/galicia-no-consigue-frenar-los-incendios-pese-a-destinar-a-ello-180-millones-de-euros-anuales.html>> (accessed 22 November 2023).

62 Huete, 'El dinero no frena los incendios forestales en Galicia', n.p.

masculine identity by making him the ideal scapegoat for the forest fire which symbolizes the explosion of the local eco-system.

The rural community exacerbates his eco-anxiety by failing to provide the emotional comfort that is vital to Amador's reintegration into everyday rural life and his continued emotional well-being. The cold reception extended to him in the village bar, and the jokes made about his former crime of arson at a funeral he attends, indicate that the rural community is a site of ostracism and social differentiation. The grieving mother's enquiry as to Amador's welfare springs more for a concern for Benedicta than him, which confirms that rural communities are discerning and stratified, reduced to only conforming members. Amador's retreat to the car for the night reveals that he feels adrift and alone following the funeral. His gormless attempts at romance with the local vet, Elena, only exposes his cultural backwardness as he fails to recognize a Leonard Cohen song. Local rumours convey his past to the unknowing vet, which brings their incipient relationship to an awkward *impasse*. Moreover, his mother's keen efforts to obtain work for him with the construction boss, Inazio, indicate that rural male labour does not suffice as a source of economic self-sustenance, and thereby intersects with contemporary debates on the economic decline of rural Spain. Evidently, the linear narrative of masculine redemption in a rural context is stymied by social marginality, class divisions and the looming commodification of nature. Just as the bulldozers and fire pave the way for an irreversible deforestation, the barbed taunts of the villagers and economic instability jeopardize Amador's re-entry into civil life. Rural masculinity, in this film, is conceived as a source of renewal, but also part of both an ecosystem that is subject to commercial intrusions that do not respect the boundaries between man and nature, and a rural community that ostracises outsiders. Thus, the protagonist functions contradictorily as a symbolic bridge between the realities of ecological destruction and a possible harmonious coexistence, between the catastrophic decline of the ecological world and the ample horizons of a better future.

Rural Male Subordination in *Terra Alta* and *As bestas*

Javier Cercas's *Terra Alta*, which won the Premio Planeta in 2019, is a crime novel that fictionalizes the story of Melchor Marín, a policeman who leaves Barcelona to establish himself in the eponymous rural village, Terra Alta, in the province of Tarragona, where he leads 'una vida luminosa infinitamente mejor'.⁶³ This idyllic life is interrupted by the murder of a wealthy local couple, the Adells, which uncovers a web of corruption, moral

63 Javier Cercas, *Terra Alta* (Barcelona: Éditions Actes Sud, 2021), 53. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in the main text.

turpitude and opportunism, offering the reader a perspective on the hierarchical nature of rural masculinity. Raymond Williams' views on the countryside are particularly instructive to understand the economically stratified nature of country life, which will also play a role in *As bestas*, my next subject of analysis. Williams held that rural communities are classified as 'knowable communities' where relationships are straightforward, face-to-face and profound. The enduring and transparent ties of belonging that strengthen relationships to a greater degree than in the city underlie this idealization of rural life as 'knowable communities'. However, Williams cautions against such an idealization, stating that rural communities also have 'a division of labour, there is the contrast of social position and when necessarily there are alternative points of view'.⁶⁴ In fact, he affirms that a knowable community is 'a matter of consciousness, and of continuing as well as day-to-day experience'.⁶⁵ Therefore, according to Williams, it is social class that determines social interaction and friendship in a rural setting, rather than their physical proximity to neighbours who do not occupy the same class position.

In a similar manner to *Los asquerosos*, Cercas establishes a dichotomy between the violent and seedy urban setting, in this case Barcelona and the tranquillity of Terra Alta. The latter is presented as Melchor's salvation, which is even indicated by the name that translates as 'high ground' in contrast to *la terra baixa* (low ground) of Barcelona. The copious references to the policeman's favourite book, Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862), is a literary conceit that reinforces Cercas' negative representation of urban Barcelona, the site of Melchor's mother's prostitution and untimely death, Melchor's descent into criminality and his atonement in the prison where, inspired by the character of Javert, he decides to become a policeman. This representation of Barcelona contrasts sharply with its image as a vanguardist city, associated with progress and modernity. Cercas conveys the unseemly side of Barcelona, converting the city into an oppressive space that shunts the poor and provincial immigrants, such as Rosalía, Melchor's mother, to the peripheries, condemning them to social marginality, delinquency and death. Nevertheless, Melchor's meteoric rise within the police force nuances this vision of urbanity as the city of Barcelona morphs into a space of masculine reinvention that permits the former criminal to become 'el héroe de Cambrils', fêted by his colleagues.

Urban dynamism is contrasted with the apparent peacefulness of Terra Alta, which is later revealed to be premised on a monopolistic capitalism that leads to economic stagnation. When investigating the murder of Francisco Adell, Melchor uncovers that the apparent

64 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Vintage, 2016), 240.

65 Williams, *The Country and the City*, 240.

benefactor was not quite as magnanimous as he initially seemed, paying his labourers meagre wages that they are forced to accept, due to a lack of better options:

Los sueldos que pagan son bajísimos, porque los pactan con los demás empresarios de la comarca, y sus fábricas ni siquiera tienen comités de empresa. Quien quiera quedarse en la Terra Alta se tiene que conformar con la miseria que les dan' (*Terra Alta*, 72).

The character of Francisco Adell can be classified as what Campbell *et al.* term the 'small-town patriarch', who dominates rural life by providing employment or guidance to the local residents, or in a Spanish terms, he is the local *cacique*, a dominant male figure who controls the local economy.⁶⁶ As Susana Narotzsky and Gavin Smith explain, the *cacique* undermines local workers' attempts to defend themselves, and is primarily individualistic showing little solidarity with the labourers.⁶⁷ Therefore, although these male figures appear to be lynchpins of the local community, they can perpetuate gender and class inequalities, as is the case in the novel, when Adell employs Romanian workers for less money, thus compounding the dire economic conjuncture. Marín's wife, Olga analogizes the patriarch to a tree that does not permit growth in its shadow, an arboreal metaphor that conveys the unequal distribution of wealth in rural Spain and the consequent imposition of class divisions that do not allow for social mobility.

Francisco Adell's tyranny and savage criticism diminishes the masculinity of two managers in the company, his son-in-law and another manager, Josep Grau, to the extent that they become subordinate masculinities who are forced to accept Adell's constant denigration. In their study of labour in rural Spain, Narotzsky and Smith prove how rural people became vulnerable to vertical dependencies and clientelism in the wake of the Spanish Civil War, and how democratic Spain's prioritization of peace obviated the reclamation of worker rights, particularly in a rural Spain defined by the absence of a public sphere. This dependency refutes the idea of the rural as a pre-industrial haven for damaged masculinities by instead demonstrating how rural economic stagnation circumscribes masculine development, initiating relationships defined by hierarchy and inequitable power relations. Rural masculinity is shown to be highly hierarchical with little space allotted to males across the class spectrum to evolve, which may also be a contributing factor to the domestic violence suffered by Olga at the hands of her ex-husband, Luciano Barón, whom

66 Campbell, 'Real Men, Real Locals, and Real Workers', 89.

67 Susana Narotzsky & Gavin Smith, *Immediate Struggles: People, Power, and Place in Rural Spain* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2006), 105.

Melchor assaults. This conflict signals the limits of female autonomy in the countryside and the male domination that replaces any state support for victims of domestic abuse. Thus, the rural is a restrictive space where both masculinity and femininity are regulated and even abused by patriarchal rural omnipotence and economic control.

Rodrigo Sorogoyen's 2022 film *As bestas* focuses on the failed assimilation of a French couple in a deserted Galician *aldea* populated only by the foreign couple and their enemies, the Anta family. It is based on the real-life 2010 murder of Dutch national, Martin Verfondern following a conflict over common land with his neighbours in Galicia: the case was the subject of a documentary, *Santoalla* (Andrew Becker & Daniel Mehrer, 2016). *As bestas* was critically acclaimed, winning nine Goyas including that for Best Picture. The film was criticized for reinstating a binary view of intellectually feeble Galician natives *versus* the urban and civilized French couple, which was based on the age-old shibboleth of rural irrationality and ungovernability versus the benign urban and foreign influence. Neither was Sorogoyen's choice of a French couple arbitrary: *el afrancesamiento* has long been associated with progressiveness, as a way for Spain to evolve into a modern nation. The rural is embodied by the two brothers, who are disenfranchized by economic marginality and intellectual disability respectfully which makes them resentful of the foreigners' intrusion. The feud between the Anta brothers and the French couple stems from their differing views of the area's ecological future: the brothers, coarsened by years of misery and deprivation, welcome the windmills to be installed in the area, while the French couple are opposed to the idea. Significantly, Sorogoyen himself, opposes the windmills, proclaiming in his Goya speech, '[e]nergía eólica sí, pero no así', which referred to the central government's plan to install four wind energy parks in the Sabucedo mountains in Galicia, which is also the natural habitat of the last wild horses in Western Europe, an autochthonous type of pony, who have populated the region for the last 450 years. They are crucial to the biodiversity of the region and more importantly, help in the fight against forest fires.⁶⁸ Activists argue that the wind farms will endanger their habitat and lead to the extinction of the breed.

In this film, the windmills offer the possibility of transforming unequal power and economic relations between the urban and the rural for it will facilitate the older brother, Xan Anta's, move to Orense to be a taxi driver. His yearning for urban working-class masculinity is just one of the

68 Fernando Prieto, Agnes Delage Amat & Luis Bolonio, 'Las críticas a la actual expansión de las energías renovables a las que se refiere el director de cine Rodrigo Sorogoyen', *El País*, 13 February 2023, n.p.; available online at <<https://elpais.com/clima-y-medio-ambiente/2023-02-13/las-criticas-a-la-actual-expansion-de-las-energias-renovables-a-las-que-se-refiere-el-director-de-cine-rodrico-sorogoyen.html>> (accessed 13 February 2023).

contradictions in both the native and French attitudes to masculinity and rurality. The Anta brothers oscillate between presenting themselves as highly emotional beings—overwhelmed with hostility toward the French family and anthropomorphic sympathy—but conversely, one of them is willing to leave it all behind for urban life. Similarly, the Frenchman Antoine is supposedly enraptured of nature but demonstrates a proprietorial attitude to the windmills, failing to demonstrate empathy to the Anta brothers' plight. His attitude is a caustic comment upon the urban returnees' relationship to nature, only thoroughly appreciated when it is jeopardizes their livelihoods and well-being.

The film's wholly negative depiction of a rural 'knowable community' is biased and, on superficial analysis, does not engage with the historical adversities that have condemned rural males to lives of bare subsistence. Admittedly, the close relations of a rural setting can give rise to enduring conflicts and intense hatreds, but also to solidarity and intimate understanding of neighbours that is not the case in urban zones.⁶⁹ This partial view of rural males stems from its alignment with Spanish centralist and hegemonic interests that relegate rural inhabitants to a mostly unheeded minority. The establishment of a binary between the two parties is conveyed by the differences in performances of masculinity which are constantly mapped and remapped in terms of corporeality, position within the discourses of rural masculinity and the physical landscape. The older brother, Xan Anta, is, from the outset of the film, unduly aggressive towards the Frenchman, replying to his invitations to take a drink together with exaggerated discourtesy. His facial mannerisms are grotesque, and he is pictured bare-chested; thus, in this way, both facial and corporeal markers confirm latent prejudices of rural inhabitants as uncivilized 'paletos'. As César Caramês astutely remarks: 'O personagem de Zahera que o representa manifesta-se como um psicópata perigoso, amargado e que se desvive por fugir da aldeia'.⁷⁰ A deliberate infantilization of the brothers bolsters this impression; both live with their mother who treats them as children, and both engage in childish pranks intended to upset the French couple, all of which substantiates the association of rural masculinity with cognitive decline and impairment (especially in the case of the younger Anta brother, Lorenzo). Nevertheless, the pranks, which include the poisoning of the tomatoes, and Lorenzo Anta's baiting of Antoine when his car breaks down, are designed to demonstrate the brothers' mastery of the environment. Clearly, rural male identity is sustained through local structures of power and decision-making bound to bodies, their physical

69 Sergio Del Molino, *La España vacía* (Madrid: Turner Ediciones, 2016), 74.

70 César Caramês, 'As bestas som eles', *GaliziaLivre*, 24 November 2022, n.p., <<https://www.galizalivre.com/2023/01/04/as-bestas-som-eles/>> (accessed 10 September 2023).

qualities, their relationship to the landscape and power over the environment.

Although the title ostensibly refers to the wild ponies that inhabit the mountain, during the course of film, it becomes figurative as the brothers are animalized by their poverty and ungovernable passions. In contrast, the French couple are teachers, a profession dedicated to learning and to realising the individual potential of the learner, and even more meritoriously, they become local entrepreneurs, selling their products in the local markets. A policeman recognizes this polarization in the film, advising the French couple that urbane, cultured people like them should take pity on the brothers who have not had the same opportunities in life. Ironically, it is the French newcomers who embody the rugged individualism which will enable them to conquer nature both physically and economically, while its lifelong residents are only victims of it. The most important aspect here is that foreign interaction with the rural is ascribed with the notions of pioneers and foreign superiority, which converts the rural space into a battleground for survival and dominance. In this way, the film relies on the Western Frontier narrative, privileging the representation, performance and embodiment of the dynamic newcomer who can master and control nature in the wild frontier populated by savages who are gradually marginalized in their own hometown. The risk here is that an unreflective adherence to notions of rugged individualism—whether in the pioneer or the Thoreauvian versions, frequently conceals the grave social and economic problems related to late capitalism in the Spanish countryside.

To his credit, Sorogoyen does not allow the Western narrative to hold sway as Rafael and Xan's lucid perspective on their differing statuses complicate Galician masculinity. The character of Rafael, their neighbour Briexo's nephew, blurs the binary between the two parties, epitomizing a successful Galician urban masculinity. Laundry owner Rafael constantly interjects smug comments on his financial status, 'a mí, me va estupendamente', and subtly conveys his contempt for the Anta brothers, who are revealed to be misfits, not only from a foreigner's point of view but also within their own region. Innovatively, Galician rural masculinity is constructed through an ambivalent relationship to nature, which recognizes its sense of territorial belonging, but also its economic unviability, and attendant discourses of inclusion and exclusion. Xan realizes that control over nature is rapidly transforming in a technologically driven, post-industrial, and increasingly global economy: hence his support for the windmills which will permit him to retire their beleaguered mother, and his outpouring of his mainly economic grievances to the Frenchman. Tellingly, when Antoine, in conciliatory mode, invites the brothers for a drink, Xan laments his brother, Lorenzo's degeneration from a 'un niño hermoso' to a malodorous and intellectually impaired

dependent who is even rejected by prostitutes. Unlike the earlier denigration of intellectual disability and rurality in the post-transitional period, the contextualization of Lorenzo's affliction raises awareness of how intellectual disability affects intimacy and sexuality, thus humanizing a vulnerable rural male subject. Xan's riling of the Frenchman manifests his self-loathing, as he accuses Antoine of looking down on them as 'taradas' and 'tontos'; when he confides that both brothers only want 'una mujer y un niño igual que lo que tú tienes', it brings into relief his awareness of their inferior positionality in the wider world, and the emotional suffering that they have endured. Therefore, we can observe a disjuncture between a rural subordinate masculinity that aspires to urban working-class masculinity with connotations of regular earning power, while the Frenchman Antoine's idolizes a rural hegemonic masculinity requiring physical and economic dominance over nature.

It would be reductionist however, to believe that the Frenchman embodies an alternative to rural patriarchal culture for the marginalization of women is central to both the Galicians' and the Frenchman's identities. On her visit to Galicia following Antoine's death, his daughter intimates that he was a controlling husband who repressed her submissive mother who only became assertive following her husband's death. Thus, we can perceive that rural masculinity in this film can be classified as what Peter *et al.* term a monologic masculinity, which is a traditional masculinity with monolithic gender expectations and strictly negotiated performances that make a clear distinction between men's and women's activities and their associated social status.⁷¹

The Urban Male Returnee as *Cacique*: The Case of *Suro*

Mikel Gurrea's 2022 film, *Suro*, centres on the move of an urban couple, architects Helena and Iván, to a rural *finca* which they have inherited from Helena's aunt. For them, the return to the rural reflects their commitment to communal values that they feel have been lost in metropolis and which can only be restored in the countryside. The conflict between the immigrant and Spanish labourers employed by Spanish foreman Mauricio, at Iván's request, to extract cork on his estate brings to the fore an intersectional ideal of rural masculinity complicated by race, class and attendant tensions. The harvesting of the cork trees becomes the site of fiercely contested national ideologies on working-class masculinity, manifested by endurance for physical labour and the exclusion as well as the denigration of the Moroccan labourers. The working-class rural labourers feel threatened by the arrival of cheaper and more flexible

71 Peter *et al.*, 'Coming Back Across the Fence', 228.

Moroccan workers, which demonstrates how globalization jeopardizes male identities based on control of the environment. Male migrants are automatically assumed to be the winners in the migration process, but actually, they frequently face precarity and exploitation in the workplace. Traditional gender expectations are intensified in the host country and, consequently, the male migrant is expected to be stoic and resilient, even when confronted with adversity.⁷² In *Suro*, the immigrant males become the marginalized masculinity in contrast to the subordinate masculinity of the Spanish labourers, which indicates the establishment of a new rural male hierarchy, created by the global flow of labour. It is Iván who questions whether the Moroccan labourers have social security and who invites Karim to his house to play football. It is noticeable, however, that Iván's concern about social security is motivated by his potential liability as owner of the estate and that he is only sympathetic to Karim outside of work, habitually issuing terse instructions to him in the workplace so as not to antagonize the Spanish labourers who are hostile towards their Moroccan counterparts. These nuances of characterization have two potential explanations: Iván may be coarsened by the harsh rural environment which is very far from the rural idyll he first imagined, or his progressiveness may just have been a shallow façade. I incline towards the former motive as his enthusiastic integration into the cork harvesting group gives way to a sombre realization of the inequities and pressures that the rural economy, governed by the capitalist dynamics that he apparently rejects, exerts upon its denizens. The film highlights the difficulties experienced by the harvesters who struggle against the arbitrariness of nature, namely the imminent threat of forest fires that will ruin the cork harvest, and in this way, nature itself tests the rural males' resourcefulness in the face of adversity. Rural life is presented as tough and full of friction, not least of which is marital conflict, which undermines the couples' naïve idealization of the countryside as an unchanging repository of communal values. The pressures of rural life transform Iván into an uneasy *cacique* who has to balance ethical concerns with economic realities.

Migrant masculinity intersects with rural masculinity to demonstrate how the progressive urban male, Iván, is repositioned within the rural male hierarchy as a *cacique*. Karim indirectly leads to the accident of the older Spanish labourer, when he throws him from his back as he mounts a tree. An act of self-defence at this merciless exploitation endangers him and the couple protect him in their house. The sequence when Iván protects Karim against a Spanish lynch mob who seek to avenge their

72 Cristen Dávalos, 'Localizing Masculinities in the Global Care Chains: Experiences of Migrant Men in Spain and Ecuador', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 27:12 (2020), 1703–22.

friend's injury seems to be symptomatic of the divide between the rural and urban masculinity, the latter is violent and savage while Iván is protective. Once again, the director encodes a certain ambiguity that collapses this division as we can observe that the vengeful labourers retreat upon the arrival of Iván, murmuring 'el jefe'. From this we can deduce that Iván has morphed into the rural *cacique*, the rural boss associated with economic power and social punishment, whom they will not dare to defy for fear of their livelihoods. In this way, the rural space reproduces hegemonic masculinity that privileges property ownership. The movie ends with scenes of urban diversions in the country house, the couple jumping into the swimming-pool that they have built there, and Helena's intoxication at the ensuing party with their city friends where there is a conspicuous lack of any rural friends. Iván's integration can be classified as solely economic and hierarchical with no real attempt to understand the rural mentality and consequently, no real understanding of rural masculinity, as anything but abrupt and racist, is produced in this film.

Conclusion

The male return to the countryside represents Spanish post-millennial unease about mass urbanization, as well as the neo-liberal forms of masculinity epitomized by *el triunfador*. Writers and directors such as Santiago Lorenzo, Oliver Laxe, Javier Cercas, Rodrigo Sorogoyen and Mikel Gurrea intertwine the rural landscape with male dissatisfaction, renewal and authenticity; paradoxically, their representation of the male return to the rural is both anchored in nostalgia for a lost past, which would erase the moral transgressions of the present, but also in latent undertones of the democratic contempt for the rural as uncivilized and backward. Neither do they succumb to the facile tendency to present the rural as a curative space that validates damaged masculinities and ensures good male mental health, for they offer an emerging redefinition of rural masculinity as a heterogeneous, gendered identity, subject to multiple inflecting variables, such as class, racism, affect and economic and social inequalities that can affirm hegemonic masculinity rather than revaluing a rural subordinate masculinity. In many of the texts such as *Los asquerosos* and *Lo que arde*, the rural space negatively affects male emotional well-being: in *Terra Alta*, the *cacique's* tyranny distorts its male inhabitants' lives while in *As bestas*, rural masculinity is associated with poverty and intellectual disability. *Suro* highlights the plight of the rural male migrant and how globalization pits subordinate and marginalized masculinities against each other in the struggle to eke out a living from diminishing resources. Importantly, there is a conspicuous lack of fathers in these works, the Anta brothers, Manuel, Amador and Melchor, are all lone male figures, which portends the demise of a distinctive rural masculinity as the

intergenerational transmission of rural values will not take place. This effective depatriarchalization of the countryside intimates the emergence of an alternative masculinity, grounded in an ethics of self-care and harmony with nature, rather than the imposition of patriarchal norms. Thus, these authors and directors cogently underscore the inherent contradictions and impossible expectations attached to Spanish rural masculinity in the twenty-first century, which oscillates between exploitation and idealism, harsh economic and social realities and the possibility of a pre-industrial utopia.*

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