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The resituated rural: exploring narratives beyond the empty Spain

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ABSTRACT

The controversies surrounding the rural have generated a lively discussion in Spain. Notions of “empty Spain” have gained momentum since the second half of the 2010s while the mainstream media have continued to replicate negative stereotypes and narratives about the countryside: the lack of opportunities, abandoned villages, economic depression and impoverished cultural life. These clichés, though grounded in the difficult realities of these spaces, come from a background of stigmatized depictions of the rural. However, these mainstream narratives may conceal alternative perspectives that allow new representations. The author proposes the notion of the *resituated rural* to refer to these new narratives and identifies three markers: the determination to leave behind victimization; the rejection of rural stereotyping; and the commitment to values rooted in cultural identities, sustainability concerns, social justice and gender equity. To illustrate this notion, the author reviews cultural works ranging from novels and feature films to documentaries about agriculture and nature, as well as magazines producing quality journalism on a variety of media platforms and social networks. The article argues that the resituated rural provides alternatives to hegemonic storytelling, avoids polarized apocalyptic or idyllic scenarios and explains the Spanish countryside as a “livable space”, thus offering critical insights for the construction of acceptable futures.

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Quiero que este libro se convierta en una tierra
donde poder asentarnos todos y encontrar el idioma común
—María Sánchez, *Tierra de Mujeres* (2019)

Introduction

Spain is engaged in a long, public debate on how to make its vast, unpopulated rural territory sustainable. The intense and rapid industrialization planned by Francisco Franco's dictatorship during the second half of the 1950s led to a massive loss of population in the countryside and stigmatized the rural as a place to leave behind. There were many

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negative sociopolitical and economic effects associated with the increasing abandonment of rural areas in Spain, in addition to the problematic cultural representations produced in response to these changes; including journalistic narratives, fictional works and popular culture depicting the city as the place for economic progress and opportunities, while the rural was romanticized and, at the same time, stigmatized as a place of poverty, decay and hopelessness.

Although this is not the place to make an exhaustive review of “the rural”, we do need to briefly refer to what we understand by this concept here. In this regard, we consider that the rural is more than just a politico-economic structure and, as has been pointed out by geographers, it can be defined more in line with constructivist perspectives to include social and cultural relations (Cloke 2006; Halfacree 2006; Woods 2011). Therefore, in addition to being a physical, geographical and economic reality, the rural is principally a social construction rooted in the imaginaries that we produce, share and consume. Cultural narratives and storytelling, frequently discussed and problematized, play a leading role in its constitution. It is also clear that the strict dichotomy between the rural and the urban currently does not hold. The diversity of communities and discourses on rurality is embedded in the concept of the *resituated rural* that I propose. Thus, as Marc Vidal (2017, 19–21) argues, just as we identify the opposition between the city (as concentration) and the countryside (as “the distance to be crossed”), we are also aware of their mutual interconnections. Likewise, just as we recognize the traces of the rural in the city, we also increasingly identify signs of the urban in the countryside.

In this article, I argue that some of the latest fiction, essays and journalism in Spain – under the umbrella of what is known as *nueva ruralidad*, new rurality or new ruralism (Baylina 2019; Resina 2012; Querol Vicente, Sánchez and Castillo 2020) – have triggered a renewed discourse that I refer to as the *resituated rural*, which displaces the clichés and negativity surrounding the rural. The *nueva ruralidad* is grounded in previous rural movements but also brings innovation. For example, the people moving to rural areas today intend to start sustainable projects and are technically trained, in terms not just of the environment but of a whole range of competencies, from the financial to the social and the cultural. They respect traditions but also reinvent them because they do not plan to do the same as their grandparents did; they are looking to apply innovations and new values. Gender perspectives are important here, and the new rurality gives rural women a more empowered role. All these changes are being expressed in literature, film and media storytelling. In the realm of cinema, some authors have already noted how innovative filmmakers are concerned with rural and environmental issues (González del Pozo 2021; Moreno-Nuño 2021), but this is also happening in other forms of cultural expression, including in television programs (Castelló 2023). Although Spain could be thought of as a special case, innovative narratives around the rural are also taking place in the Netherlands, France and the United Kingdom, where, for example, there are moves to go beyond stereotypes such as the rural idyll.¹

To illustrate my case, I have reviewed various initiatives in the realms of film, fiction, the essay and the media and journalism, with a particular focus on writers such as María Sánchez and Santiago Lorenzo and filmmakers such as Carla Simón. Before explaining how these narratives are dismantling certain stereotypes and stigmatizations, I must briefly explain some of the cultural landmarks that had situated rural representations where they were in the middle of the last decade.

Context and background

The rural has long been stigmatized in journalistic and literary circles. At the end of the nineteenth century, novels by Vicente Blasco Ibáñez and other authors popularized descriptions of the idyllic and beautiful nature of the countryside and of a society ruled by prejudices and attached to the traditional ways of life depicted in *costumbrismo*. Ruralist fiction also depicted the brutality and harshness of rural life through characters living in the countryside and their circumstances. The rural was both idealized and demonized in novels and in dramatic works staged in theaters; this was true in Castilian, but also for Catalan or Galician authors and traditions. These polarized modes of discourse and framings of the rural were already active when the moving images of cinema started to cultivate a common imaginary.

Before and during the Second Republic, rural depictions were common in silent cinema, for example in the films of Florián Rey. At that time, the social imaginary in many regions of the country conceived of the rural as a place for folklore and regionalist cultural expression (García Carrión 2014; 2015). Later, Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan* (1933), a film that produced substantial commentary in both cultural and political circles, represented the rural as a site of poverty, misery and hopelessness. After the Civil War (1936–39), the Franco regime would use the rural in the state-controlled newsreel, or NO-DO, to offer a propagandistic story of the recovery of agriculture, with particular emphasis on technical advances and folkloric depictions – for example, the episode on agriculture in the 1964 “25 años de paz” issue (Carles 1964). As noted by Moreno-Caballud (2016a; 2016b), the countryside was used by the dictatorship in a schizophrenic manner: it was the essence of the Spanish being, the root of identity and the truthful spirit of the country, and at the same time it was going to be transformed, replanned and adapted to the economic demands of capitalism.

It is simplistic to speak of the dictatorship as a monolith, given the differences between the early postwar period and the regime's later stages. However, I agree with Richardson (2002) that Francoism relaunched and reread the rural/urban dichotomy and fostered division at a time when the *paleta* (the hick, the yokel) contrasted with the sophistication of the new middle-class population resulting from *desarrollismo*. The regime also used the rural as a pretext for offering fictional dramas with ideological messages, as was the case of TVE's *Crónicas de un pueblo* (Mercero 1971). Paul Julian Smith (2009, 70) reports that the series depicted a rural village where everything coming from outside was “almost invariably malign”, while José Carlos Rueda (2006) holds that the series also generalized for the whole country an idea of rurality with a strong Castilian accent. Remarkably, this bias would remain part of the Spanish mindset about the rural.

During the democratic transition there was a cultural focus on cosmopolitanism, with the city as a space for freedom and progress, for counterculture and movements like the *movida madrileña*. Instead of focusing on the much-commented melancholia and disenchantment of cultural production during the democratic transition, Smith (2006, 51–56) suggests that this period should be seen in the light of everyday life triggered by liberty, pleasure and inhibition. The city was the space, and the democratic transition the time, for a Spanish cultural renaissance, and new subcultures in film and music were opening up new possibilities. The obscure past of rural imaginaries had a powerful presence on screen at the end of the 1970s. Then, TVE adapted novels by Blasco Ibáñez

such as *Cañas y Barro* (Romero Marchent 1978) and *La barraca* (Klimovsky 1979); Pío Baroja's *El mayorazgo de Labraz* (Caro Baroja 1983); or Emilia Pardo Bazán's *Los pazos de Ulloa* (Suárez 1985). These adaptations, among many others, greatly impacted the public's perception of rural society given the fact that, prior to 1983, the two channels of TVE provided the only television available to most Spaniards.

The countryside and its place within the narratives of democratization and progress was, and still is, in dispute. The 1990s was a time of increasingly decentralized regional television stations (known as *autónomicas*) that broadcast new fiction and nonfiction series and programs depicting rurality. However, the mainstream media continued the tone of stigmatization – for example, it was the time of the impactful case of the “Alcàsser Girls”, whose 1992 kidnapping and murder tragically ended in a rural depopulated area near Tous. This case was covered by all sorts of media and particularly exploited by private television channels. Beside this rural horror, in the second half of the decade, there were positive portraits of the countryside that gave viewers nuanced idealizations of the rural – like José Antonio Labordeta's *Un país en la mochila* (1995–2000), which offered a close but candid view of contemporary life in rural Spain.²

This background and its consequences are discussed in Sergio del Molino's influential essay *La España vacía* (2016), in which he criticizes and reflects on the cultural discourse surrounding the rural in Spain. The emptiness to which his essay refers was primarily a *political* issue, but one rooted in a *cultural* conception of the countryside, constructed layer by layer over time. Among other things, Del Molino revealed an elephant that had been in the room for decades. This was partly understandable in a country that had turned its back on the rural and focused its creative attention on cities and urban space. Del Molino's notion opened a Pandora's box; the book marked a turning point and indeed a new beginning. The essay's critique was timely and was applauded in the media. However, some concerns were also expressed about the insufficient efforts to better include diverse cultural realities (Labrador Méndez 2021, 121; Lladó Mas 2022, 58–59). There are, as these critiques pointed out, many conceptions of the rural in Spain. Nonetheless, the geographer Jaume Font defended the essay, stating that its portrayal of empty Spain provided a “more than acceptable” (2023, 112) synthesis of rural depopulation. Soon after, the significant variant *la España vaciada* (emptied Spain) appeared, activating a political resignification of the issue: the object (Spain) had been emptied by someone or something with a specific agency that possibly had “a certain intentional nature” (Taibo 2021, 8).

So, why can we now talk of the resituated rural in Spain? Of course, Del Molino's 2016 essay attracted media attention to the rural. The politicization of the *España vaciada* movements in 2019 put the emphasis on addressing the lack of services (like schooling, health centers and transportation) and other complaints, while the media and cultural production focused on other rural-related issues such as the adoption of green energies, the installation of massive solar and wind farms on rural land and debates on the agrifood industry, especially after a much-commented interview with the Ministro de Consumo Alberto Garzón warning about unsustainable megafarms in the country (Jones 2021). COVID-19 and the strict Spanish lockdown in 2020 also turned Spaniards' gaze back to the countryside. The impact of the “emptied movements” and the onset of COVID-19 triggered a dislocation of the discourse on the rural and pushed it beyond the notions of the “empty/ied” (Castelló [forthcoming](#)). The narratives about the rural started to dialogue

with and contest previous depictions, although some also flirted with well-established representations of the rural, particularly with the rural idyll and its variants. Today, we are witnessing an imaginary that is reconciled with the rural and reconsidering it as a place to be restored, both in a symbolic and an economic sense. To illustrate this change, I will undertake a close reading and contextualization of some recent cultural products that involve representations of the rural. I have organized the study in three sections that are crucial to understanding the main premises and characteristics of the resituated rural: the ending of the victimization of the rural, the rejection of stereotyping the rural/urban as a source of humor and the problematization of a hegemonic discourse that unidimensionally imagines the rural as a space to be intensively exploited for the farming or leisure industries.

Leaving despair behind

We need to start at the end of the 1980s. Rural Spain was described as a place of decline. The discourse that conceived it as a dying place deepened the gap that separated the urban from the rural, while the countryside's feelings of grievance and victimization grew. An impactful and influential work about rural decline was Julio Llamazares's novel, *La lluvia amarilla* (1988). It is invariably quoted in all serious literary and cultural analyses of the representation of the rural in Spain. In the first edition published electronically, Llamazares (2013) stated that his novel was regarded as a sort of "bible" by people who vindicated the countryside as "a lost paradise", a surprising conclusion for him given that this had not been the aim of his book. It is indeed a curious impact, given that the depictions of the countryside found in the novel – particularly those of Ainielle, the village where it is set – portray it as a place of hardship and decay.

The story masterfully transmitted feelings of solitude and abandonment by placing the reader inside the mind of Andrés, the village's last inhabitant, and playing with the specter of madness and the influence of magical realism. The novel has been associated with a process of mourning for Spain's traumatic past and labeled as counter-hegemonic (Llera 2019). However, according to Díez Cobo (2017), its touch of *tremendismo* connects Llamazares to Cela and Delibes and is a precursor of such neorural novels as *Intemperie* (2013) by Jesús Carrasco. In my view, Llamazares's masterpiece offered no possibility of hope. The narrator weaves a spider's web around readers, page by page, line after line, enclosing them in Andrés's mind, in the walls of his room, in his thoughts about death and the disappearance of the world. There is no respite at any point in the novel; it is an imaginary of despair and extermination. It was an influential novel but it still belongs to narratives that posit the rural as a victimized space.

Carrasco's *Intemperie* (2013), *El País's* 2013 book of the year, was also a precursor of Del Molino's essay. It is a novel that was lauded for "un lenguaje intenso y poderoso", and for depicting "un universo rural –claro protagonista de la historia– de tremenda dureza y violencia" (*El País* 2013). Novels like *La lluvia amarilla* and *Intemperie* prefigured what was to come. The notion of the resituated rural emerged in parallel to the success of *La España vacía*. However, I would argue that Del Molino's well-written book was not an attempt to resituate the rural, but rather the catalyst for a wealth of new narratives. It was the storm after which different expressions bloomed. Soon, essays and journalistic works, expressing a variety of views, started to focus on the issue (Badal 2017; Campo Vidal 2020; Cerdà

2017; Martínez 2020; Mendoza 2017). But they did not all offer innovative narratives about the rural. For example, *Los últimos: Voces de la Laponia española*, by Cerdà (2017), a journalistic collection about decline and depopulation, was not precisely about leaving negative portraits of the rural behind. Cerdà (2017, 35–36) used the catchy concept of “Laponia española” (Spanish Lapland), coined previously by a group of geographers to refer to the high levels of depopulation of the so called “Serranía Celtibérica” (Burillo Cuadrado et al. 2013). Cerdà’s compilation of chronicles is a story of desolation, which matches the vision of the rural given by Llamazares, whose name and book he quotes.

It was a few years later that the resituated rural began to emerge. The book that best summarizes the new positioning of rural narratives was *Tierra de mujeres* by Sánchez (2019). Its subtitle was “Una mirada íntima y familiar al mundo rural”. As the author has stated on many occasions, it could be described as a mix of essay, memoir and manifesto. Acclaimed by the media, the publication of her book led some journalists to talk about the rural being portrayed in a renewed light (Rodríguez Marcos 2019), while at the same time reviewers noted that Sánchez connected with early-twentieth-century journalist Carmen de Burgos and the painter Maruja Mallo (Bender 2022). The text is divided into two parts. The first is longer and essayistic, and clearly defends the role of women in rural communities, the recognition of the rural as a cultural space, the need to hear the voice of people living in the countryside and the need to launch a new narrative beyond the stories told by men visiting the countryside for a weekend. The second part is more literary and intimate, and justifies the subtitle by offering a moving story about Sánchez’s family that focuses on its women.

Tierra de mujeres was published before the COVID-19 pandemic and was promoted on social media. Numerous rural and feminist associations hailed the book, which became popular thanks to word of mouth. It went through six print runs in 2019 alone, two more in 2020 and another in 2022. The context was meaningful, because the book was published one year before the lockdown, when reading rates in Spain rose (Federación de Gremios de Editores de España 2022) and the population living in rural areas grew (Gurrutxaga 2021), which in the Spanish context was a historical milestone. “No somos la España vacía”, says Sánchez clearly (2019, 96) in chapter 4, which carries the title, “La España vaciada”. She responds to the “empty” narratives at that time so popular among journalists, politicians and commentators. She argues that people are living there, all of whom have their communities and stories. Sánchez used the word “emptied” in the title of the chapter, associating herself with the claim that rural Spain did not empty itself but was emptied by an external agent, which we could summarize as bad policymaking, hegemonic discourses disparaging the countryside and the disregard of cultural heritage, amongst other factors. In Sánchez’s view, all these factors triggered depopulation. However, one of the clearest messages in this part of the book is that she does not buy into the common discourse of depopulation, crisis, hopelessness and misery. Her proposal is to swing into action and start to build a new narrative. The resituated rural is the story of the people who have been cast in the role of victims but have now rejected this role. In Sánchez’s words (2019, 185), it is time to “crear un vínculo y cuidarlo. Esa es la única manera de que nuestro medio rural no desaparezca y siga existiendo”. This is by no means naïve; it is a call to action that involves leaving despair behind and starting to give a value to land, animals, culture and everything surrounding the materiality and immateriality of the rural. And this is true in the case of Sánchez, who

more recently published a second book attached to a project that rescues lost words of the rural world (Sánchez, 2020).

That joke isn't funny anymore

The resituated rural is a narrative of someone who knows the rural, someone who lived or lives there or who perhaps worked the land or raised cattle. It is a story of someone who stayed there, who knows what it is about and whose aim is to explain the rural as a livable place. They perhaps had strong relations with people inhabiting small villages or they possibly cultivated an orchard or shoveled horse manure. They are storytellers rooted in a pragmatic knowledge of the countryside. Their stories consistently refuse urban stereotypes of the rural. The jokes about the rural that circulate in hegemonic narratives do not work in the resituated rural. This type of narrative represents a conscious diversion from the topoi commonly attached to the rural.

One of the personages found in the iconography of the rural in Spain is Agustín Valverde, as played by Paco Martínez Soria in *La ciudad no es para mí* (Lazaga 1966). In the film, he leaves his tiny village to go and live for a time with his family in Madrid. Agustín represented the epitome of the paleta: he is an endearing character and his blindness to modernity goes hand in hand with his simplicity and authenticity. The idea of the rural as a place of purity, honesty and humanity is well rooted in Iberian culture, as well in other European contexts. The city is the place where humans are corrupted, where individuality destroys the sense of community. This framing was already present in the cinema of the 1950s in José Antonio Nieves Conde's *Surcos* (1951) or even before, in nineteenth-century theater, for instance in the Catalan character of Manelic in Àngel Guimerà's *Terra baixa* (1896). Laughing at Agustín's reactions and expressions was, in a way, laughing at the rural. Agustín was a sort of *inner otherness* incarnated in the figure of the paleta, a common feature of Spanish television culture that was portrayed in such figures as Marianico el Corto, La Vieja'l Visillo, El Gañán or El Ovejas.³

Today's counterpart to this comic effect are the stories in which a relatively young, educated, modern character goes to the countryside. This was the basis for the fictions by Daniel Gascón about a hipster in the countryside: *Un hipster en la España vacía* (2020) and *La muerte del hipster* (2021). Gascón's main character, Enrique, is a young, well-educated man who ends up in a tiny village in Teruel, La Cañada, to carry out an ecological project. Enrique aims to translate his political thought and urban activism to the villagers, including ecologism, social rights and liberal perspectives on gender identity. His approach to the rural is in tune with Del Molino's *España vacía*, which is in fact mentioned and, remarkably, saves Enrique's life in a hilarious hunting episode. To some extent, we witness here the opposite of Lazaga's Agustín in *La ciudad no es para mí*: the rural is the place where the hipster Enrique and his ideas seem to come from another planet, creating the humoristic effect of inverting both rural and urban stereotypes.

Enrique starts a political career as mayor because a group of Catalans want to take a religious work of art to Lleida (a parody of a real conflict on this very issue between Aragón and Catalonia). He then undergoes a sort of transformation, after a series of events parodying left-wing political claims about cultural appropriation, historical memory and climate change. The story takes some of these ideas to a level of absurdity or nonsense. New "counter-Agustín" characters have also appeared in other mainstream

cultural productions. This is the case with *El pueblo*, first aired on Telecinco (Caballero 2019). In this TV sitcom, the characters Moncho and Ruth (Santi Millán and Ingrid Rubio) represent neorural hippies coming from the city to organize mindfulness sessions and all sorts of alternative activities in the village. Gus (Jairo Sánchez) represents the character of the hipster, determined to enroll people for a party where he will deejay pop music. However, the sitcom's recourse to the opposition between the paletos and the hipster does nothing to resituate the rural. Even when refreshed or reread, such depictions fail to go beyond the standard simplistic dichotomies, exploiting the comic effect of contrasting stereotypes. That joke is not funny anymore. To resituate the rural means precisely the blurring of borders between the urban and the rural; thus, the humor must find its source elsewhere.

It can be a real challenge to discover the resituated rural humor. One illustration is the novel *Los asquerosos*, by Lorenzo (2018). Lorenzo abandoned Madrid to live in a tiny village and he considers that the problem of the countryside is not the "empty" but the "crowded" Spain (Vilà 2019). His novel is a suggestive literary innovation in recent Spanish fiction. It is a harrowing story, a tragicomic thriller about a young man (Manuel) who flees from the city (Madrid) and settles in an abandoned town – Zarzahuriel, a fictitious name – to escape from a possible accusation related to the death of a policeman. The book does not focus on describing life or the situation in empty Spain. It is not a novel about the rural despite the fact that the main plot takes place there. The rural here is a space where the protagonist finds extreme loneliness, which ends up being restorative. After touring the surroundings of Zarzahuriel, the protagonist confirms that "lo de la Laponia española era verdad" (2018, 61). Manuel is someone who discovers that he is an unsocial being; for him, then, the desolation is a gift. The narrator, his uncle, says: "Se habla mucho de la España despoblada, vacía, y siempre en tono doloroso por el número de núcleos abandonados. Para Manuel aún había demasiado poco de estos" (217). The narrator sketches Manuel's experience and reports his adventures while discovering an abandoned universe. The *domingueros* – day trippers from the city that the narrator scornfully labels *la mochufa* because of their, in his view, disrespectful and inconsistent behavior – will represent what the crowded Spain produces. In contrast, the lonely, silent, empty rural is portrayed as a space of liberation, while the alleged repopulation, which arrives with all the trappings of capitalism – big cars, lawnmowers, brand name outfits to go to the mountains – is portrayed as the worst of all evils for the protagonist. "No me preocupa mucho lo de la España vacía, me da la impresión de que se va a corregir solo", considered Lorenzo afterwards in an interview with María Sánchez and Miqui Otero (2022), adding that "la mochufa no es un movimiento de capitalinos a pueblos, es bidireccional del todo".

Los asquerosos portrays the countryside just as it could have portrayed the urban; the stereotyping of urban people is finally broken and problematized, showing that it had been mentally constructed by Manuel. It is a scenario that is required to build extreme social isolation and misanthropy; however, the story is not designed to denounce any type of demographic disorder or neglect. The story is poking fun not at the rural, not at the urban, but at humans in general. Another main topic is the book's focus on consumerism; the main character shows that we do not need such a wide variety of products and services to live. He also pays a sort of homage to frugality and modesty and highlights the false necessities that our consumerist system imposes on everyday life. Here we find a

diversion from the hegemonic modes of humor typically produced in rural-based stories: they rely too much on stereotyping the paleta, exploiting commonplace clichés. This diversion from the main path brings the stories to a new place, to a relocation that relies on the experience of those who live in the countryside and not on the superficial, short visits of the domingueros.

Films, magazines and network reconciliations

The resituated rural is not sympathetic to neoliberal approaches that conceive the countryside as a place of mass production or depict the locals in passive roles. Victimization of the rural turns into vindication and resistance in resituated narratives. Of a wide variety of productions, the film *Alcarràs* (Simón 2022), winner of the Golden Bear at the 2021 Berlin Film Festival, is one example of this displacement. It is a protest narrative rooted in voices from the rural, in this case in a fiction film with a documentary tone. Simón's film was played by amateur actors experiencing the decline of agriculture as a way of life. Although the land that the Soler family works already belongs to an intensive, monoculture agricultural model, they maintain certain self-sufficiency practices (they tend an orchard and can fruits, for example). In a certain sense, the film could be read as a story of the crisis of an industrial agricultural model based on lowering the prices paid to farmers and subjecting the inhabitants of local communities to precarious jobs. According to the filmmaker, it is the story "of all those people who are leaving the land because it is not profitable for them to cultivate it" (Jiménez 2022). In the story, the farmers' response to the threat to their daily lives is not just to complain but to stand firm, protest and keep on working with dignity. *Alcarràs* was mostly a film about the loss of farming and land speculation and the transformation of productive crops into solar energy plants. Carla Simón, who won the Premio Nacional de Cinematografía in 2023, and the scriptwriter Arnau Vilaró, however, show how the family of farmers resist. The film dialogues show them demonstrating against the low price of fruit and laying claim to their dignity. In this regard, the film does not completely victimize them although it portrays a way of living, a form of agriculture, that is unsustainable (Simón and Vilaró 2022, 15).

Alcarràs is not alone. There are other examples: documentaries that privilege the voices of local, rural communities in Catalonia, like *El no a l'ós* (Freixa and Camps 2021); TV reports about wildfires like *Entre cendres* (Ciuraneta Rofes, Francín Morales and Pena Costa 2022); or narratives of new, young farmers settling in rural areas like *La pasegia que ve* (Jené Riba 2022). They give multiple examples of the resituated rural that has caught the attention of young writers and filmmakers specializing in documentary and fiction. In Catalan, the resituated rural had an acclaimed precursor with Marta Rojal's *Primavera, estiu, etc.* (2011), a novel about a young architect experiencing a personal crisis who spends some days in her village in the Ebro region. Here, the language and the vernacular accent is crucial to embrace a whole cosmovision of the rural. These works can be seen as part of a long tradition in Catalan fiction, joining authors ranging from Jesús Moncada to Pep Coll or Maria Barbal, to name some of the more salient examples. Here, we must cite novels like *Canto jo i la muntanya balla* by Solà (2019), winner of the 2019 Anagrama Novel Award. It is an intimist story exploring relationships between humans and nature – mountains, plants, trees and wild animals – in a small village in the Pyrenees. The fiction portrays a rural space that, as pointed out by Geli (2021), is

not bucolic but rather one of latent violence; as previously noted, the resituated rural does not replicate idyllic conceptions of rural life but can incorporate its toughness. Solà has recently published a new novel, *Et vaig donar els ulls i vas mirar les tenebres* (2023), where she returns to women's stories rooted in the remote mountain areas of Catalonia. One of the transversal aspects of these productions is that the resituated rural implies an *agentic rural* (Castelló 2023), which means that the stories of the people living in the country have an agency in the stories, an initiative, a chance to transform the story.

We do not have room in this article to discuss the many other authors and filmmakers in Galicia or the Basque country who are producing works that could be included in the category of the resituated rural. Another example, however, would be Óliver Laxe, with his film *O que arde* (2019), who approaches rurality with a fresh vision and slow rhythm. The story of an arsonist who returns to his modest home in the mountains and tries to renew his life with his mother breaks the boundaries between fiction and reality, with an almost documentary style and essayistic reflexivity. Again, we find a creator intimately linked to rural space: Laxe recently launched a project in Os Ancares, in rural Galicia, to host filmmaking projects (EFE, 2002). Some of these productions can be labeled as rural protest and at the same time as conciliatory, because they seek an answer to how we can bring about social and economic change that values the rural and its people. Sorogoyen's film *As bestas* (2022) can also be discussed in light of the resituated rural, particularly since the story is about empowered women determined to fight for justice. However, it also makes reference to the old discourse of tremendismo or *la España negra*, which was a topic of debate in classic novels like Delibes's *Los santos inocentes* (1981), as Helena Miguélez-Carballeira recently noted (2023).

Feminist claims play an important part in the resituated rural and lay the groundwork for many short productions broadcast by associations like *Ramaderes de Catalunya* (Women Farmers of Catalonia) or *Ganaderas en red* (Networked Women Farmers) in an attempt to give women their role back in agriculture. These organizations and communities are very creative and they set up their own networks to solve their day-to-day needs in terms of farming and rural life (Fernandez-Gimenez, Oteros-Rozas, and Ravera 2021). These initiatives make use of social media to express an ecofeminist position and establish bonds of sisterhood using small but creative audiovisual productions (Castelló and Romano 2021).

Dozens of initiatives in Spanish social media replicate the narratives of the resituated rural. Sometimes they are promoted by individuals like Ton Lloret, who launched the platform @Repoblem on X (formerly known as Twitter) – which, in September 2023, had 41,300 followers – and published a book of the same name on experiences of rural repopulation in Catalonia. He has started acting as a link between country dwellers and urbanites wanting to move to the countryside. In his book, Lloret (2021) explained that during the summer of the 2020 pandemic he started to share information about houses and job opportunities in small villages. He tells the story of people who returned to the countryside and settled down, starting new economic activities, learning traditional trades or working in the fields and with livestock. His experience is similar to that of Marta Lloret (no known relation to Ton), known as “La caçadora de masies” (the farmhouse hunter), who started documenting old farmhouses in Catalonia and tweeting pictures and stories about a heritage that is in ruins. She manages accounts on Instagram and X – both of which maintain over 40,000 followers – where she documents a vast heritage

and interacts with her community by posting pictures, texts and files. These pictures and stories show the value of what is not valued: buildings and architecture, objects, farming tools, stone walls, doors, troughs, fireplaces, rural art, decoration and all sorts of material culture attached to rural life. Here, there is also a window for humor, in the comments and replies that ironically talk about the lack of policies that consider rural necessities, communities and the protection of rural heritage.

Among these initiatives, two cultural magazines are circulating narratives about the resituated rural. One is *Salvaje*. It is directed by Guillermo López, and first appeared in 2019 after a crowdfunding campaign.⁴ The publication, whose subtitle reads “La revista que quiere sacarte al campo”, could be catalogued as slow journalism focused on the rural, the environment and culture. It tackles issues through deep reporting, photojournalism, art, reports and essays. The first issue of the magazine sold out and today *Salvaje* is a quality journalism project. In Catalonia, the magazine *Arrels* was first published in winter 2020. Like *Salvaje*, it publishes four issues a year. In this case, the project goes beyond journalism and cultural production and is associated with a virtual market connecting farmers directly to consumers. The early subscribers were involved in founding a market that sells local products without intermediaries, thus shortening the distribution chain, increasing farmers’ revenue and making food production and commercialization fairer and more sustainable.⁵ Their online radio station broadcasts podcasts on a range of rural topics: the environment, culture, gastronomy, sports, agriculture, handcrafts, climate, history and human rights. *Arrels*, like *Salvaje*, is also interesting because of its minimalist aesthetics, also a feature of the many facets of the narratives of the resituated rural.

Concluding note

In this article I have argued that the Spanish cultural context is experiencing changes in relation to representations of the rural embedded in different forms of popular cultural expression ranging from novels to documentary film. They are products of a diverse nature, rooted in different Spanish contexts; however, they share the aim of redefining and offering innovative, reflexive insights into relationships with the countryside. The resituated rural in Spain is overcoming the binary opposition between the rural and the urban and explores new discursive sites that are neither idyllic nor apocalyptic.

Spanish rurality is still dominated by urban perspectives and modes of communication, but to resituate means a problematization of the concepts of center and periphery. This means relocating the rural at the center of the story, empowering communities and people living in the countryside. To resituate also implies a new structuring of Spanish “rural media space” in the three ways noted by Andersson and Jansson (2010): connectivity, representation and imagination. This imaginary is closer to the notion of the “good countryside” (Shucksmith 2018) than to that of the “rural idyll” (Yarwood 2005) in that it offers projections of “desired rural futures” (Shucksmith 2018, 171). Indeed, resituation is necessary in order to project the rural as a “livable space” where people can plan their lives and settle. It is the role of desire in these narratives which works as an engine, as a projection connected not with the well-worn trope of the rural idyll, but with the creation of a different future for the rural.

Although in today's context the narratives of la España vacía resonate, many areas that we could consider rural are today inhabited by people who could be considered urban. As Vanesa Freixa (2023) rightly indicates, many young adults who returned from the city to the countryside – that is, its new inhabitants – have projects and ways of thinking that originated in the city. Moreover, in many places agricultural activity has become more technical and industrialized, not to mention the number of urbanized areas found in rural zones that are used principally for second homes. This questioning of rurality, and of the stereotypes that culture, literature and cinema replicate about it, is at the base of the resituation we are discussing.

These diverse works in the realms of fiction, essay and documentary that I have reviewed have been produced in different regions of Spain, often in the regional language. Expressing the country's rich cultural and linguistic reality makes a powerful contribution to the resituation of the rural, taking a critical approach to consumerism and modes of mass production in rural spaces and connecting with concepts underpinning sustainable environmental practices. The markers of the resituated rural that I have proposed are: the end of victimization, the abandonment of stereotyping and the problematization of mainstream discourse on the rural through demands for social justice, sustainable perspectives and gender equality. These goals require a departure from the narratives that currently structure our relations to natural resources, agricultural activities and food production. This shift implies a deep change that challenges intensive and extractive schemes, aiming to recover aspects of the commons and a consideration of the inhabitants of rural areas, their way of life and their culture.

Notes

1. One example is the project “Rural Imaginations” (<https://www.ruralimagination.com>, accessed March 20, 2023), coordinated by Professor Esther Peeren, who is making progress in various contexts and has recently published a special issue in 2022 in the journal *Armada: Tijdschrift voor Wereldliteratuur*, 21 (75) (in Dutch).
2. The writer stated, in the program, “pretendemos dar una visión actual, más bien positiva, de cómo viven los habitantes, cuáles son sus trabajos e inquietudes. La serie no va por la parte folclórica, ni arqueológica o artística, quiere reflejar la faceta humana” (Ortega 1991).
3. There are many differences among the characters who exploited *paleta* humor. Marianico el Corto, played by Miquel Àngel Tirado, was an Aragonese villager on the TV show *No te rías que es peor* (1990–1995). La Vieja'l Visillo, played by José Mota, is an old village woman who is always lurking behind the net curtains and spends her time gossiping on the program *La hora de José Mota* (Mota and Sopeña 2009). El Gañán, played by Ernesto Sevilla, was always giving advice about how to be a real country bumpkin in the shows *La hora chanante* (Reyes 2002–2005) and *Muchadada nui* (Reyes 2007–2010). And perhaps one of the latest examples, El Ovejas, played by Javier Losán in the sitcom *El pueblo* (Caballero 2019), represents the simplicity and good-natured ignorance of villagers. These are only some popular examples of many characters who exploited the humor surrounding paletos.
4. It is noteworthy that, to increase its membership, the magazine offered promotion subscription deals plus a copy of *Los asquerosos*.
5. See <https://www.mercatarrels.cat>, accessed on September 26, 2023.

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