

## **Environmental Apocalypse and the Spanish Crisis Novel**

*Bécquer Seguí*

Just weeks before the anniversary of the 15-M movement, an interdisciplinary group of scholars and researchers published a lengthy report on Spain's handling of climate change. The report, titled *Consumo y estilos de vida. Cambio Global España 2020/2050* (Consumption and Ways of Life: Climate Change, Spain, 2020/2050) and edited by the economist, magazine editor, and researcher Álvaro Porro González, ambitiously analyzed not only the current state of consumerism in the context of climate change but also the imminent political challenges in attempting to change the consumption habits of Spaniards. Its conclusions were as predictable as they were wide-ranging: in order to confront climate change in a serious way, Spain needed to completely rethink its consumption habits, habits so entrenched, the report claimed, that the government needed to enter into a new social contract with its citizens. The 15-M or *indignados* movement, for Porro González and the other contributors to the report, provided an ideal blueprint for such a social contract. It would, ideally, tap into the country's newly reinvigorated democratic culture and, all the while, channel some of those energies and strategies toward addressing a problem that, because of its long-term and global nature, often did not inspire participation beyond a small subset of scholars and activists. Further, it would bring the two groups—citizens and policy-makers—to the table more quickly and under a popular mandate that enjoyed wide legitimacy on both sides. Without both reinvigorating democratic participation and accruing popular and scholarly legitimacy, the report suggested, any vision of establishing a new social contract on climate change would meet a similar fate to that which had befallen much of green activism in Spain before the Great Recession, which began in 2008.

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With this in mind, the report engaged in some self-criticism. “Los discursos sobre otras formas posibles de consume,” it said, “son mayoritariamente inestables” (192) (The discourses about other possible forms of consumption are mostly unstable).<sup>1</sup> Such discourses about climate change and the need for citizens to alter their consumption habits, it argued, relied too heavily on the media—and its corresponding limitations—as well as on the mediated accounts of others. It completely ignored, in other words, the knowledge and transformation that comes about through personal experience. The public was being treated as if it were in a lecture hall for a course it never signed up for. In sum, the discourse around climate change, the report claimed, had taken on “posicionamientos defensivos en muchos casos” (defensive positions in many cases) and was seriously “faltando argumentos de lo cotidiano” (192) (lacking in everyday arguments), arguments that would relate to people’s lived experiences. Consequently, despite numerous surveys indicating that nearly 50 percent of Spanish citizens would be willing to accept changes in their consumption habits and that nearly 90 percent of Spanish citizens would be at least open to the idea, the only ecological practice Spaniards widely embraced was recycling.

One of the last sections of the report invited a number of researchers, from biologists to psychologists to moral philosophers, to examine what had gone wrong in the attempt to mobilize Spaniards behind alternative consumption habits. Researchers drew some reasonable conclusions. Public administrators, one pair of scholars suggested, needed to focus on strategic forms of communication in order “detectar ideas erróneas, malentendidos y mitos que sustentan el status quo, pero también [en] las nuevas oportunidades . . . para que la gente pueda ‘saltar’ hacia opciones y hábitos más sostenibles” (188) (to detect erroneous ideas, misunderstandings, and myths that supported the status quo but also [on] new opportunities . . . so that people can “jump” toward more sustainable options and habits). Ecological psychology, several scholars pointed out, tells us that “los contextos donde se ‘construyen’ socialmente nuestros valores” (199) (the contexts where our values, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and personal norms are socially “constructed”) are groups and communities, and that messaging should therefore be oriented toward more collective and less individual action. Moral philosophy, another scholar argued, clarifies the inability of capitalism and liberal democracy to spur the dramatic reduction in consumption necessary in order to confront our current ecological crisis (221). Thus, in order to meet this demand, according to this argument, we need to embrace collective self-regulation. The general picture that emerged from the report was twofold: politicians, scholars, and activists had, by and large, failed to communicate accurate information about climate change to the public, on the one hand,

and had failed to develop a collective approach to establishing a new social contract to confront climate change, on the other.

Despite numerous self-criticisms, the report overlooked perhaps one of the most salient obstacles facing environmental politics: the logic of apocalypse. Though not examined in the report, the attempt to inform citizens about the roots and ramifications of climate change often preempts the organization of any kind of collective action that might counter it. That's because the ways in which information about climate change is communicated to citizens, in Spain and elsewhere, often involves fear and eschatological argumentation. While fear can, in many cases, inspire action, it is action of the decidedly antidemocratic sort. Eschatological argumentation, because of the magnitude and imperceptibility of end times, frequently orients such fear toward paralysis and away from action. As Alex Gourevitch writes, "when catastrophe becomes the cause of political action, it once again serves to repress instead of open up politics. . . . A properly political choice also carries with it the force of necessity. But that kind of necessity means that social conflict has gotten to the point where individuals must recognize their social existence and use their powers of reason and judgment to choose between alternatives." Arguments stemming from the logic of apocalypse, catastrophe, or even crisis, in other words, work to relieve citizens from the responsibility of making political decisions and following through on them with political actions. Such logics cultivate, instead, what Gourevitch and others see as an antipolitical response focused on security and self-preservation, where "the blind necessity of acting to save individual and collective existence is supposed to substitute for appealing to the will and reason of human beings" (423). Celebrated at the time by *El País* as "un informe pionero en España sobre el consumo en el ámbito del cambio global y hacia la sostenibilidad" (Fraguas) (a pioneering report in Spain on consumption in the context of global climate change and toward sustainability), the *indignados*-inspired climate change report nevertheless overlooked how apocalyptic messaging and argumentation had foreclosed collective action of any considerable scale.

Many representations of environmental apocalypse in culture have grasped this paradox, where citizens who are meant to be propelled into action by the knowledge that the end of civilization is near, in fact, become paralyzed by it. Films, novels, television shows, and other forms of art have shown us, time and again, that by the time humans realize that the end is near, it is too late to save but a fraction of humanity. More often than not, as in the Pixar film *WALL-E* (2008), the planet itself in these representations gets entirely left behind. Aesthetic works in Spain, from Icíar Bolláin's film *También la lluvia* (2010) to Rosa Montero's *Lágrimas en la lluvia* (2011), are often good at showing where we err in our apocalyptic thinking about climate change.

Yet it remains challenging for works of art to arouse rather than anaesthetize collective efforts to address the problem. “Slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively,” Rob Nixon has explained.

How can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention? (2–3)

The answer to both of these questions, it seems, should not involve doubling down on the apocalyptic narratives that have driven too significant a portion of the literature and art that has reflected on climate change over the past several decades. Apocalyptic narratives indeed seem to be “sensation-driven” and even “dramatic enough” to spur collective action—after all, what could be more dramatic than the end of the world as we know it? But this is far from the case in practice. In the world of politics, apocalyptic narratives have arguably done more to stymie than to incite action. Moreover, if these are the features by which we ought to judge such works of art in times of environmental crisis, as Nixon suggests, aesthetic practitioners have, overall, resoundingly failed on both counts: they have failed to overcome the narrow framework of our media-driven desires as well as to turn fictional drama into real-life action.

But aesthetic practitioners should not be judged on whether their work inspires action. Such a bar would be impossibly high. Critics should instead focus on the first criterion, evaluating whether artworks indeed force us to rethink the narrow framework of the apocalyptic narrative, which has been a feature of the most unproductive and antidemocratic forms of environmentalism. If apocalyptic narratives foreclose democratic decision-making, what practices might advance it? In what follows, I will focus on the other aspect of the conclusion drawn by the report *Consumo y estilos de vida*, namely, collective action. A number of Spanish novels published in the wake of the Great Recession have commented, directly or indirectly, on the ecological crisis. Some have sought to depict the dystopian future that awaits Spanish society, were it to continue down the current path of neoliberalism, political mismanagement, and, ultimately, ecological destruction. Others have embraced an aesthetic style that more closely hews to magical realism, depicting our present through psychological inquiry into the dizzying period of economic boom

witnessed in Spain during the first decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> But two novels of the Spanish crisis—Rafael Chirbes’s *En la orilla* (2013) and Cristina Sánchez-Andrade’s *Las Inviernas* (2014)—have managed to borrow elements from both kinds of depictions without succumbing to apocalyptic reason. They have instead embraced psychological realism—that literary genre Lukács and others deemed incapable of depicting the true nature of social relations—in order to present a picture of ecological shifts over time and provide political arguments in support of collective action. Examined alongside one another, these novels reveal the utility of collective action and the futility of individual effort when faced with ecological crisis.

Let us begin with Rafael Chirbes’s *En la orilla*. The last novel published before his untimely death in 2015, *En la orilla* tells the story of Esteban, a seventy-year-old man who resembles a “horgazas de pan, morcillas hinchadas” (moon-faced, over-stuffed sausage) (179; 160) and lives in the small town of Olba, Valencia, on the Mediterranean. We meet him in a state of depression, resentment, and financial ruin. Having lost all of his family’s assets after going in on a speculative investment with his friend Pedrós, he has recently closed the carpentry workshop his family has owned for several generations. One by one, we witness him laying off the caregiver of his ninety-year-old father as well as all five workers at the shop. The narrative, which is told in lengthy paragraphs that fuse together dialogue, historical reconstruction, memory, projection, speculation, rumor, social and political opinion, as well as the narration of other characters, amounts to a dizzying “retórica de la saturación . . . una prosa cenagosa en perfecta armonía con la temática que se recrea” (Villamía Vidal 409) (rhetoric of saturation . . . a marshy prose that is in perfect harmony with the subject that it recreates). Instead of simply presenting a portrait of people, families, and relationships, the protagonists of the novel are arguably its settings. The marsh—*pantano*, in Spanish—that surrounds the town of Olba is one of the story’s main characters; hence, Chirbes’s “marshy prose.”<sup>3</sup> It is the stage upon which the town’s many contradictions have played out since the time of the Spanish Civil War. The site of comedy and tragedy, irony and secrecy, regeneration and caprice, the Olba marsh, during Esteban’s lifetime, goes from being at least a symbol if not a part of Franco’s Plan Hidrológico Nacional (National Hydrological Plan) to becoming “la moda conservacionista y el ecologismo” (the latest fad for conservation and ecology) (41; 30).<sup>4</sup>

Esteban’s view of conservationist practices is oriented by the history of what has happened to the marsh in Olba, and specifically to the history of one of its lagoons. A seventy-year-old man, he himself has witnessed many transformations to the lagoon as well as the townspeople’s shifting treatment of it. He tells us that “el pantano ha sido una especie de abandonado patio

tresero de las poblaciones cercanas en el que se ha permitido todo y donde se han acumulado basuras y suciedades durante decenios” (the lagoon has long been a kind of neglected backyard for the neighboring towns, one where everything was permitted and where decades of garbage and filth have been allowed to accumulate). It was only recently, he notes, that people started caring about it and cleaning it up. “Hasta hace una decena de años, Bernal, el fabricante de telas asfálticas, se dedicaba a tirar en las charcas más profundas las piezas defectuosas que producía su empresa. Todo el mundo lo sabía y a nadie se le ocurrió denunciarlo. Impune” (Until about ten years ago, Bernal, the manufacturer of asphalt roofing felt, used the lagoon as a dumping ground for any defective material. Everyone knew about it and yet it never occurred to anyone to report it. Bernal went entirely unpunished) (41–42; 30). Lagoons don’t inspire the attention, let alone collective action, of citizens and, as such, conveniently provide cover for the moral failings of a society. “Los romanos desecaron lagunas como ésta por razones de salubridad y economía” (The Romans drained lakes like this for reasons of health and economy) he notes, but modern society has all but done away with such practices, considering them “tan perjudiciales para el medio ambiente” (highly prejudicial to the environment) (42; 31). For Esteban, while the collective attitude toward the lagoon has shifted— from wasteland to “gran pulmón verde” (great green lung) (41; 30)—the collective attitude toward the workers who interacted with the lagoon on a daily basis has not. “Ha vivido aquí tanta gente” (A lot of people managed to make a living here) (42; 31), he tells us.

Olba’s changing social whims have understandably led Esteban to adopt a very skeptical view of the self-proclaimed environmentalism that has descended on Olba. For Esteban, the current frenzy over conservation is undergirded by an impervious eschatological logic. “A la gente le da todo igual,” he complains. “mientras no le tiren la basura del otro lado de la tapia, ni le llegue el olor de podredumbre a la terraza, se puede hundir el mundo en mierda” (People don’t care: As long as the marauders don’t throw their garbage over the wall and the smell of putrefaction doesn’t reach their private terrace, the whole world can sink into the shit for all they care) (36; 26). For Esteban, the apocalyptic rhetoric around climate change in Olba has had consequences. It has highlighted the frivolity of people’s actions: people can dramatically shift their perspective from one day to the next without any recognition or self-criticism. It has produced political apathy: people only care enough to act when a problem infringes on the conveniences in their daily life. But it has, for him, perhaps most important, ignored questions of class and labor. The apocalyptic rhetoric around climate change, he contends, is itself blind to how so many people have found work in the industries associated with the lagoon. Since such narratives do not acknowledge this feature of life in Olba,

they subsequently overlook the role labor might play in future approaches to environmentalism. In Olba, Esteban witnesses what Gourevitch and others have diagnosed as apocalyptic reason's antidemocratic logic. That logic, embraced by the local media in Esteban's account, treats the laborers living next to the lagoon as having less value even than the lagoon itself. Several years ago in Olba, people used to dump their dead animals in the lagoon without the slightest worry; today, the region's newfound environmental consciousness has similarly disregarded local workers as disposable, property-less agents.

If we turn our attention to Esteban himself, we find that the apocalyptic logic has already awakened his cynicism. Left to fester, that cynicism can become politically entrenched to the point of precluding action—whether individual or collective. As Alison McQueen has argued, “the apocalyptic imaginary leads to three dangerous political postures. The first and most dangerous response is a full-throated embrace of the apocalyptic worldview, one that divides into good and evil, vilifies opponents, and pushes the battle for ultimate justice to its violent consummation. . . . The second response is to withdraw from participation in politics.” That withdrawal is not only away from politics, but also inward, in such a way that the individual relieves him or herself from political complicity and thus political responsibility for whatever ensues. “The third posture is resignation,” McQueen continues. “The world is going to hell, concludes the apocalyptic believer, but there is nothing to be done. This is a common reaction to apocalyptic images in the climate change debate” (204).

The novel appears to be pushing Esteban toward the third posture. But, as we find out at the end of the novel, he ultimately chooses death over resignation. As such, Esteban's reaction to the apocalyptic logic that has overtaken environmentalism in Olba is the second one, the withdrawal from participation in politics. Esteban, we progressively realize, is ultimately carrying out a premeditated plan of patricide and then suicide, one that points far afield from the paralysis involved in what McQueen describes as a posture of resignation common to the apocalyptic rhetoric around climate change. The novel, in fact, slowly reveals this premeditation through constant references to death, making the final scene, where Esteban drowns his father and himself in the lagoon, all but an inevitability. Esteban's resignation, by the end, turns into a withdrawal from politics and from the living world. It is an act of hubris, in a way, that relieves him and his father from misery and desolation at the same time that it absolves him from political responsibility for his own, admittedly inconsequential, complicity in the Spanish crisis. The best way to deal with the chaos and degradation of the present, Esteban's actions suggest, is to retain one's purity and abide by the dictum, which John of Patmos gave to early Christians, “Those who care about the fate of their souls must not

be complicit with evil” (McQueen 204). Esteban’s own complicity extends in importance from having fired all of his workers to having thrown his cell phone into the lagoon and, thus, “form[ó] parte de la larga lista de destructores y contaminantes del marjal” (joined the long list of the lagoon’s destroyers and contaminators) (298; 274). But his suicide is an attempt to retain the little self-worth he has left. He tells us, “no le daré ese gusto a la titular del juzgado número 2 de Misent” (I won’t be giving the incumbent of Court Number Two in Misent that particular pleasure) (299; 274): that is, the pleasure of putting him in jail for failing to pay his creditors. More important, however, by taking his own life, Esteban is relieving himself of the responsibility to rebuild the community he, in part, was complicit in destroying.

Built into Esteban’s decision to kill himself and his father is a critique of Spanish history. That he decides on the lagoon as the site where this will take place is no coincidence. It is, in a way, a symbolic repudiation of the Franco regime’s influence on Olba and other marsh-laden towns across Spain. Following the Civil War, the Franco regime enacted the National Hydrological Plan, building man-made marshes throughout the country strategically on top of mass grave sites. These marshes not only hid such sites from view, but also made it very difficult for subsequent generations to find Francoist victims through conventional excavations (Bernardo). Certain families profited from the construction of these marshes. Though the novel, suggests that the lagoon in Olba predated Franco’s Hydrological Plan, the symbolism still holds and is, in fact, imbued with a particular memory of the Civil War.

In *En la orilla*, this story of Franco-era enrichment comes from the family of Francisco Marsal, Esteban’s childhood friend, who becomes a powerful, elite figure in the town of Olba—it is “seguramente, más fácil cuando tu acumulación no es precisamente acumulación primitiva sino un incremento de segunda generación” (doubtless easier when your accumulation of capital is not exactly primitive, but a second-generation increment) (195; 176), Esteban impresses on the reader. “Gracias a él, al dinero, se habían difuminado en la desmemoria de los Marsal las batidas de maquis en la montaña, en el pantano,” Esteban recalls, “los meses en que su padre ponía el reluciente Hispania al servicio del grupo [falangista]” (Thanks to money, it had completely slipped the Marsal family’s feeble memory that they had participated in the hunt for resistance fighters in the mountains and around the lagoon: the months during which his father placed his gleaming Hispania motor car at the service of the Falangists) (79; 65). Esteban illustrates the Marsal family’s high status in the village with a list of actions that demonstrated its accumulation of power during the Franco regime: “papá-falange: pistola, requisas, mercado negro, saltos por los peñascales detrás de famélicos espantapájaros cubiertos de harapos” (Falangist father: pistols, land seizures, black market dealings,

the pursuit through the mountains of famished, fugitive scarecrows in rags) (183; 164). The history behind the family's social and economic status in the village, just as that of the lagoon, goes unexamined. As such, we can comfortably assume, the irony of killing himself and his father, an imprisoned Republican, in a marsh that represents the remnants of Francoist corruption and violence is not lost on Esteban.

*En la orilla* finally presents, in addition to apocalyptic logic, a critique of the commercialism used to promote environmental consciousness. The kind of commercialism the novel critiques turns on a fetishizing primitivism. Shows “con títulos como Medio Ambiente, Planeta Azul, Territorios, o Nuestras Tradiciones” (with titles like *Environment*, *Blue Planet*, *Territories*, or *Our Traditions*) Esteban notes, represented,

con reverente beatería los paisajes que supuestamente el hombre aún no ha destruido, repasan los viejos usos rurales, o presentan algún museo etnológico que guarda aperos de labranza, de trilla, de poda, ruedas de molino, prensas para aceite y viejos carromatos, programas televisivos que se esfuerzan por convertir en poco menos que un paraíso o en un precioso parque natural lo que conocí.

(with reverential sanctimoniousness, the landscapes that mankind has supposedly not yet destroyed; they talk about old rural customs, visit some ethnological museum where they keep tools once used for cultivating, threshing, pruning, as well as millstones, oil presses and wagons, programs that try to make a near-paradise or a precious natural park out of the place I knew as a child.) (72; 59)

The commercialization of environmentalism, in Esteban's view, makes a mockery of the lived experience of rural residents. Similar to the sudden shift in ecological awareness among Olba's bourgeoisie, commercialization also celebrates individualism and thrives on historical and regional ignorance. First, it fixates on purity, an ethics of individual action, in a way that recalls what McQueen has identified as the posture of withdrawal from participation in politics. Such a withdrawal from politics happens at the expense of an argument that might foreground a collective responsibility and relationship to the environment. And, second, it ignores historical factors important to the residents of the supposedly untouched landscapes, like Olba. Those

historical factors, in the context of Olba and Spain more generally, have to do with the legacy of Francoist policies toward natural resources, such as the Hydrological Plan. Thus, any blind celebration of the countryside can easily become a promotion of “old rural customs”: a reverence of the Franco regime, the Catholic church, and the autarkic economy these two groups helmed during the early years of the dictatorship. In wiping away history, the commercialization of environmentalism, like apocalyptic logic, enables an antidemocratic or antipolitical approach to resolving climate change through reverence and fetish. It treats the participant—the viewer of television shows or the reader of novels—in purely individual terms, consequently ignoring questions of how democratic participation in addressing climate change might be best pursued collectively.

Before moving to Sánchez-Andrade’s *Las Inviernas*, a word on its classification in this essay as a Spanish crisis novel. At first glance, this may seem an unusual choice. The novel does not appear, for instance, in scholarly accounts of the literature of the Spanish crisis.<sup>5</sup> This is mostly because, unlike Chirbes’s *En la orilla* and other novels included in that description, it neither explicitly reflects on nor takes place in the historical period circa the economic boom or Great Recession. In fact, it instead might fit rather snugly within another literary tradition: the Spanish Civil War novel. Set in 1950s rural Galicia, the novel is largely an investigation into the forced disappearance by Francoist forces of the narrators’ grandfather in 1936, just a few months into the war. The novel, however, has yet to receive much attention on this front, either.<sup>6</sup> Upon publication, reviews and commentators even slotted the novel into other literary traditions, describing it as fable-like, ruralist, and even *costumbrista* (Domene; Sanz Villanueva; Pozuelo Yvancos). But its inclusion as a crisis novel is justified for several reasons. For one, despite its thematic focus on the Spanish postwar period, the novel itself was written during the Great Recession. It’s to be expected, then, that the novel shares a sensibility with other novels of the Spanish crisis. This is especially true of the novel’s ironic account of legal contracts and the metaphorical selling of oneself to others. But it is also true of the novel’s concern with queer experience, *violencia machista* (chauvinist violence), and economic hierarchies, among other subjects of contemporary importance in Spain. Perhaps most of all, the contemporaneity of the novel lies in its emphasis on forms of collective decision-making and the threats these might face from political and military power. It will be the task of this essay, then, to argue that, in making the case for the novel’s sophisticated account of collective action, it simultaneously participates in the long tradition of Spanish Civil War novels at the same time that it contributes to the short history of Spanish novels of the Great Recession.

Through metaphor and indirect association, Sánchez-Andrade's *Las Inviernas* resolves this problem of environmentalism's idealization of the past by creating collective subjects. The novel tells the story of two sisters, Dolores and Saladina, the eponymous "winterlings," who return from exile in England to Tierra de Chá, a coastal town like Olba, just over a decade after the end of the Spanish Civil War. The sisters spend much of the novel reconstructing their grandfather's last steps by speaking to the townspeople, who reveal clues in fits and spurts. The novel's climactic ending forces the sisters to reconsider their own place, together, in the village's communal atmosphere. This togetherness is important for understanding the political argument of the novel. Its characters, the two sisters as well as the townspeople with whom they interact, are often treated not as individual people but as groups. Experimenting with collective narration of various shapes and sizes, the novel often registers the two sisters speaking in unison as well as the townspeople speaking as one. The first encounter between these two groups sets the stage for this collective narration: "—¡Inviernas!, ¡abrid la puerta, Inviernas! . . . —¿Quién va?—dijeron a un tiempo . . . —Somos nosotras—repitearon las mujeres en la puerta—. Las mujeres de la aldea" ("Winterlings! Open the door, Winterlings!" . . . "Who's there?" they said in unison. . . . "It's us," called the women at the door, again and again, "the women from the village") (21, 23, 26; 19, 20, 23). Notice that no individual appears in what readers take for granted as the highly individualized scene of knocking on and opening a door. Where one might expect to find one person doing the knocking and another doing the opening, the novel instead presents two distinct collective subjects. Collective narration, at first, appears to be merely a literary device, an attempt to provide local color to an otherwise unknown rural region of Spain. But readers soon discover that collective narration reflects the sister's collective understanding of their identity. Their return to the small Galician town of their childhood appears in the context of "old rural customs" and a romanticism of nature: "cuando iban a bañarse al río, del olor agrio de tojo recién cortado, del resplandor del follaje humedecido por la lluvia. . . de los praderíos, de las voces de las gaitas, de los pájaros de Tierra de Chá . . . los olores de la tierra y el profundo misterio de la fraga" (the times they would go to bathe at the river; the bitter smell of freshly cut gorse; the brilliance of the undergrowth dampened by the rain . . . the oak groves, the fields, the voices of the Galician women; the birds in Tierra de Chá . . . the smells of the earth and the deep mystery of the forest) (40; 35). But their solution, unlike that of the born-again environmental movement depicted in *En la orilla*, first and foremost involves becoming a collective subject themselves. As the narrator recalls, "unidas y vencidas . . . volvían a encontrarse, a ser las dos una" (United, they were defeated, but each found the body they sought, and the two became one) (40; 35).

Communication occurs in the rural Galician village, Tierra de Chá, whence their grandfather, Don Reinaldo, was forcibly disappeared by Francoist forces in 1936, through acts of collective narration. Their attempt to recreate the scene of their grandfather's death, however, does not merely amount to a construction of collective subjectivity. It is also, notably, an investigation into Spain's historical memory of the Franco era through unity and shared experience. As the two women venture out of their cottage and speak to the townspeople, a picture emerges of how postwar historical memory has been collectively created and maintained by communities across Spain. "Habían estado haciendo pan de fermento en el horno communal," the narrator recalls. "El horno de piedra era el lugar de reunión de los vecinos de Tierra de Chá, sobre todo de las mujeres que no iban a la taberna; mientras lo calentaban arrojando tojo seco desde las seis de la mañana, arreglaban los problemas del mundo" (They had been baking bread in the communal oven. The communal stone oven was a meeting place for all the villagers in Tierra de Chá, especially for the women who didn't go to the tavern. While they built up the fire at six in the morning, throwing on dry gorse branches, they solved the world's problems) (143; 136). In Sánchez-Andrade's novel, collectives—the sisters, the women from the village, and so on—transform old rural customs into operative political challenges. The process clearly echoes the historical memory movement that has developed in Spanish society over the past two decades, lending the novel part of its contemporaneity.<sup>7</sup> Mirroring the process by which historical memory associations discover the locations of mass graves, the Winterlings eventually find out what happened to their grandfather thanks to a mixture of stories and rumors of the Spanish Civil War that have been passed down from generation to generation. One of the aesthetic accomplishments of the novel is to collectively narrate this process through oral literature particular to Galicia and northern León.

The novel, finally, reconnects the experience of historical reconstruction to environmental concerns when addressing how the townspeople in Tierra de Chá relate to certain crops. Early in the novel, we are told that, during the war, "escaseaban las berezas, los tomates, los repollos. Incluso la cosecha de patatas empezó a menguar. Sólo el tojo seguía creciendo, tenaz y solitario, ajeno a la falta de cuidados o a las carencias de la guerra" (Cabbages, tomatoes, and collard greens were all scarce. Even the potato crop began to dwindle. Only the gorse bushes kept growing, fierce and solitary, unfazed by a lack of cultivation or the privations of war) (28; 25). War, in other words, took an environmental toll on the town in the form of lower harvest yields. It is a scene that, following the logic used by the environmental activists in *En la orilla*, might have been primed for apocalyptic description. But the characters in the novel avoid describing the threat of war or hunger in apocalyptic terms and, in fact,

find solace in the resistance of “unfazed” gorse bushes. Later in the novel, we discover the extent of the environmental and nutritional devastation exacted on the community by the war. “Había recaudado unas filloas, pan y un taro de miel, azúcar, un repollo (¿es que la panadera iba a comenzar ahora a hacerle una puñeta con verduritas?)” (He had requisitioned some fiolla pancakes, bread, a pot of honey, sugar, and a cabbage (did the baker’s wife think she’d get away with little vegetables now?)) (57; 52). The narrator packages a description of a market haul with an offhand comment referencing the food scarcity of the past and present. Once a staple of the village, vegetables in postwar Spain, the reader learns, have become a scarce and valued food item. Vegetables are something that should be (or have been) managed collectively by the townspeople, not individually through one’s economic ability to out-purchase one’s neighbors. Similarly, later in the novel, townspeople collectively reject the decision by fiat of their mayor, an unelected Francoist official. As the narrator explains, “El alcalde de Sanclás hizo traer la electricidad a todas las casas; se construyó una pista que comunicaba Tierra de Chá con Coruña y se instalaron retretes en muchas viviendas. Estaban canalizando el agua potable y llevándola hasta la plaza” (The mayor of Sanclás connected every home with electricity, a road was built between Tierra de Chá and Coruña, and many houses had toilets installed inside. They were redirecting drinking water through pipes and had it running all the way to the town square) (201; 189). These decisions, though made by decree, we are to understand as consensual, as the result of a mutual agreement between the state and the town. But not all such decisions were met with communal enthusiasm. “Cuando tendieron los cables a lo largo de la carretera, la aldea entera rechazó la oferta de tener una cabina. ¿Por qué iban a gastarse el dinero en algo que nadie iba a usar?” (When they were laying the cables down by the side of the road, the whole village rose up to reject the possibility of a telephone booth. Why waste money on something that nobody would use?) (201; 189). In other words, the novel suggests, why not spend money on something everyone needs?

As we see in the above case of crop shortages, the Franco regime, despite its autarkic economic approach during its first two decades, enacted policies that led to the country’s current environmental crisis. In Galicia, these policies served, especially, to concentrate agricultural production in grains and, with it, to transform the ecology of its countryside. As Xosé Ramón Viega has explained, “Unworked lands went from being used as common agricultural or pasture ground to serving the timber industry via aggressive reforestation programmes that tended to favour fast-growing species such as eucalyptus and pine rather than indigenous, slow-growing trees such as oak and chestnut.” “Galicia’s present-day natural landscape,” he concludes, “is largely the effect of these transformations” (45). The novel registers these transformations in

its own present just as it forecasts a collective subject that might be used to address them in our time, its own future. When Dolores is confronted with the imminent death of her sister Saladina, she does so alone, warping her picture of the ecology of Tierra de Chá and her own place within it. “El mundo del amanecer se revelaba ante ella: el rumor del río, los ecos lejanos de la fraga, los chillidos agudos y terroríficos de los animales pequeños. Quedó inclinada hacia delante, tratando de contener los sollozos” (The world at dawn revealed itself to her: the burbling of the river, distant echoes from the forest, sharp and terrifying shrieks from the little creatures. She doubled over, trying to contain her sobbing) (230–1; 218). What before Saladina’s death might have looked like an inviting scene of new fruits to be found and vegetables to be picked, all of a sudden becomes one in which potential produce has lost its visibility against the murkier aspects of the forest. As we learn early in the novel, the sisters’ “fuerza está en el tirar y empujar de la repetición” (strength is to be found in the push and pull of repetition (32; 28), the harmony of sisterhood, not by the troubling cacophony of the unknown. Just as the country’s ecological makeup is transformed, often with the aid of decrees from politicians, so it can be resisted through collective experience. Far from wiping away history under the guise of commercialization, the novel continually intertwines a political story with a cultural one. And on both counts, it develops a kind of collective narration that illustrates the meaning and potency of viewing experience through the eyes of the character of a group, not an individual.

As one might gather from the description of the novel so far, *Las Inviernas* promotes a specifically feminist form of collective action. The women at the communal oven who “solved the world’s problems” were, of course, largely solving the problem of patriarchy created by Catholic Church and instituted across many aspects of life in Francoist Spain. As they recall early in the novel,

Había un tufo rancio en la educación, en las puntadas que daban al coser, en la ropa y en el aire que respiraban. Las Inviernas asistieron a los cursos de la Sección Femenina, en donde les explicaron que tenían que ser hormiguitas graciosas y amables. Y eso es lo que fueron. Eso es lo que eran. Hormiguitas graciosas.

(The rotten scent of politics had set in everywhere: in the schools, in each stitch they made while sewing, in their clothes, and in the air they breathed. The Winterlings went to courses organised by the women’s section of General Franco’s Falange Party, where they were told that they

should behave like delicate and pleasant little ants. And that's what they were. Delicate little ants.) (43; 38)

Here the “rotten scent” points to Francoism and Francoism points to Catholicism’s patriarchal organization of society, one in which the political opinions and actions of women are practically invisible. But underneath the cloak of invisibility to which the women of the village are subjected, the novel shows how they counter the Catholic vision of social organization with female-driven, community-centered, and collective living that, ultimately, breaks with the daily rhythms of the Francoist state that have been imposed upon them at work, at school, and at home. Instead of behaving like the delicate ants they are told to emulate, the women from the village, we realize, are the ones behind such political organizing as when the village rose up to reject the building of a telephone booth. Unlike other events in the novel, the organizing of the women from the village has little to do with myth or tropes associated with magical realism. A minimal form of wresting some communal control back from the state, the organizing of the women instead develops the social cohesion of a collectivity.

From our limited vantage in the present, as is the case with Esteban in *En la orilla*, the collective answer to the environmental crisis appears as but a blur. The Great Recession has revealed—and encouraged—society’s earlier and consequential embrace of commercialism. With each individual addressed as just another consumer and no social cohesion beyond *homo economicus*, one would be hard-pressed to begin to build any kind of concerted movement that might address the environmental status quo. The novels in question here at least orient us toward an important critique. *Las Inviernas* shows us that aspirations beyond consumerism exist and forms of mobilizing against it are readily available. This novel turns to the historical memory movement as its source for developing a form of collective narration. If *En la orilla* lays bare the apocalyptic logic that has come to distinguish some prominent approaches to addressing climate change in recent decades, *Las Inviernas* might point toward the kind of collective response scholars and activists might embrace against the pressure to adopt individualism and commercialization.

## Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Spanish are mine.
2. I am thinking here especially of Elvira Navarro’s psychological novel *A Working Woman* and Jesús Carrasco’s *Out in the Open*. See Navarro and Carrasco.

3. In her English translation of the novel, Margaret Jull Costa most often translates *pantano* as “marsh.” Her choice is shrewd and appropriate as it carves a middle ground between the nature-made “swamp,” on the one hand, and the man-made “reservoir,” on the other. But the Spanish original strongly suggests that much of the marsh in Olba—the lagoon excepted—is man-made.
4. Ana Luengo has drawn attention to the connection between the marsh in *On the Edge* and Franco’s National Hydrological Plan. See Luengo.
5. See, for example, Moreno-Caballud; Bezhanova; and Mecke et al.
6. Sánchez-Andrade’s novel doesn’t appear, for example, in a number of recent excellent books on the debate over historical memory and the Spanish Civil War novel. See, for instance, Becerra Mayor; Martínez Rubio; and Faber.
7. Since 2000, a movement has emerged in Spain with the goal of recovering a collective, social memory of what happened during the Franco era. Organizations such as the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH) have since created a network of volunteers—archaeologists and forensic scientists as well as helping hands—that has managed to open over 150 mass graves across Spain, recovering more than 1,400 of the 114,000 victims of Francoist repression that are still unaccounted for. See, for example, Jerez-Farrán and Amago.

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