

Resilient Stereotypes in Recent Crisis Novels from Spain

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Abstract

After the outbreak of the financial crisis of 2008, the hegemony of the politics of financial debt was largely perceived in Southern Europe as an internal colonisation, with Germany as the leading economic power. According to this view, Southern Europe became the trial ground for neoliberal late capitalism. The unequal impact of the crisis on the different European economies resulted in the unwelcome reactivation of old stereotypes that hinder the European process towards transnational economic, social and cultural convergence. This contribution considers fiction as a privileged space for the nuanced representation of the complexities characterising the current moment of European liquid modernity and presents the novel as an important arena for critical reflection. It discusses a selection of recently published novels from Spain, which, set in the aftermath of the construction boom and the unveiling of systemic corruption, register the multiple negative consequences of the European austerity policies and grapple with the resurfacing of the stereotypical constructs of national identities through humour, satire, and social and political critique. Among the authors considered are Almudena Grandes, Germán Gullón, Rafael Chirbes, Luis García Jambrina, and Belén Gopegui.

1 Introduction

Our era is perceived as one of uncertainty and precariousness, accentuated by the current global hegemony of neoliberal capitalism and its collateral effects, the crisis of national sovereignty, the unequal impact of globalisation, unequal access to instant electronic communication, unprecedented migration flows, accelerating urbanisation, neo-colonialism, climate change, the overexploitation of natural resources, market volatility and the subsequent polarisation of

wealth and society.¹ The instability, turmoil and violence resulting from the coalescence of these developments prompts a re-evaluation of the Western ideology of modern progress, as European societies resort to different strategies of resilience – from the emergence of extreme political parties on the right and the left, to the isolationism implicit in Brexit, and the reaction against asylum policies. Unsurprisingly, the very different effects of the 2008 financial crisis on the various European economies has also caused the resurgence of dormant stereotypes of national identity.

Parallel to an increasing perception of vulnerability, the concept of resilience has gained popularity in the West, to the extent that *The Guardian* proposed the term as the word of the year 2012.² Though emerging from the realm of the natural sciences, the term has come to denote the capacity of nature and of humankind to withstand shocks by being able to adapt, renew and even thrive in the face of adversity and destructive conditions. In Spanish, the term *resiliencia* still rings as an Anglicism and is rarely used to talk about the strategies to overcome the consequences of the recent multi-layered crises caused by the financial crash of 2008. However, the successive conservative Governments led by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy of *Partido Popular* (22 Dec. 2011–7 Jun. 2018) consistently resorted to the neoliberal discourse of resilience to encourage people in Spain to put up with the austerity policies that the IMF and ‘the Troika’ demanded.

A number of novels published recently in Spain testify both to the resilience of the Spanish people in times of economic, social, political and cultural turbulence, and to the resilience of stereotypes. Taking fiction as a source of inquiry that may contribute to create an ‘imagined discourse’,³ this essay offers to look at a selection of five recently published novels from Spain that create a narrative of endurance, struggle and hope in the face of the traumatic reality of the 2008 financial crisis by working with national stereotypes. *La codicia de Guillermo de Orange* (2013) by Germán Gullón, *Bienvenida, Frau Merkel* (2015) by Luis García-Jambrina, *En la Orilla* (2013) by Rafael Chirbes, *Los besos en el*

1 Research for this paper has taken place within the framework of the research project *Narratives of Resilience: Intersectional Perspectives about Literature and Other Contemporary Cultural Representations* (FFI2015-63895-C2-2-R), graciously funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness.

2 See Juniper (2011).

3 I follow Leerssen (2000), Leerssen (2007a), Leerssen (2007b) in the use of the term “imagined discourse” to refer to a discourse that is “concerned with the characterological explanation of cultural difference,” articulating “a moral, collective-psychological motivation for given social or national features” Leerssen (2007a), p. 28, and relying “on imputations of national character, rather than on testable fact”, Leerssen (2007b), p. 342.

pan (2015) by Almudena Grandes and Belén Gopegui's *El comité de la noche* (2014) were reviewed by the major national newspapers upon their publication, and were the object of interviews and discussions in radio and television shows. However, to date, only Chirbes' has been translated into English as *On the Edge* (2016). The authors considered are avowedly leftist intellectuals, whose fictions register via humour, irony, satire, and social and political critique the perception that the cleavage between Northern and Southern European countries has been accentuated, on the one hand, by the European and national economic policies during the crisis and, on the other, by the reactivation of discourses that rely on stereotypical constructs about national identities. Therefore, these novels capitalize on historical stereotypes that include *self-images* of Spanish identity, i.e., the characterological reputation that Spaniards currently share of themselves, *hetero-images*, i.e., the opinion that others have about the Spanish purported character, and *meta-images*, a term used to refer to "how a nation believes it is perceived by others."⁴ My aim is to ponder whether and how these fictional narratives offer an opportunity to study the role of stereotypes in engaging the collective imagination in the creation of a metanarrative that contributes to keep a positive sense of identity and dignity in the midst of crisis.

I propose to offer a brief survey of the key tropes and pervading stereotypical images of Spain used on and off in the course of history to refer to the Spanish national character both within Spain and internationally, before exploring the extent to which the proposed novels draw on this tradition in order to sanction, negate, mock, or extend it.

2 The Historical Construction of the Spanish Character

Spain's image appears as a palimpsest of layered stereotypes of complex origins in the long European history, created as much by hetero-images, the gaze of non-nationals, as by the self-image cultivated within Spain. Lucena Giraldo classifies the stereotypes about Spain in three main categories that encompass the Spanish Black Legend, the Romantic image of Spain as an exotic country, and the re-evaluation of Spain's image during the Democratic Transition period after 1975.⁵

4 Leerssen (2007b), p. 344.

5 See Giraldo (2006).

The Spanish Black Legend, a term coined by Julián Juderías at the beginning of the twentieth century,⁶ results from the (hetero-)images emerging from the convergence of religious and political developments. It has its roots as much in the Spain of the Inquisition, a champion of Catholicism against Protestantism, Judaism and the Islam in the Middle Ages, as in the perception of Spain as a cruel and despotic state involved in numerous conflicts of interests with other European and non-European powers after becoming an Empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁷ Contributing to the Spanish Black Legend were John Foxe, Father Bartolomé de las Casas, and William of Orange, among others. The latter's exaggerated accusations of "murder, arrogance, avarice, excessive territorial ambition, fanaticism, cruelty, brutality and lack of education" in the *Apology* (1581) gained widespread credence,⁸ and these stereotypes about the Spanish character remained unchanged until the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁹

The change of dynasty in Spain in 1700 marks the transition to a romantic and Orientalised view of Spain in the nineteenth century. Whereas the French justify the invasion of Spain as an attempt to instil the Enlightenment ideals and liberate a vicious, lazy and devious people from tradition, clericalism and secular intolerance, the English embrace the romantic view of Spaniards as a brave, passionate people rising up in arms to defend their freedom against the French tyrants. They foster an exoticism that is enhanced by a focus on the legacy of Arab culture, the values of a pre-modern, pre-capitalist society, and the loyalties and spontaneity that are encapsulated in the bandits and Carmen types.

The twentieth century elaborates upon all these stereotypes, with the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) triggering a neo-romantic image that blends the Black Legend with the idea of a free people in arms. The ensuing post-war period, marked by Francoist authoritarianism, National Catholicism, militarism, and conservatism, congeals the image of Spain as archaic and isolated. In the 1960s the industry of tourism that helps to open the country to the outside world also revives the romantic stereotypes regarding Spain's exceptionalism as a nation anchored in erstwhile values, passion, sex, fiesta and siesta. After the dictator's death, Spain's enthusiastic embrace of and inclusion in the European Union contributed to its 'normalisation' and modernisation. The view of Spain before the 2008 crisis was that of a successful country that had restored

6 See Juderías (1914).

7 See López de Abiada (2007), p. 243.

8 Dadson (2004), p. 144.

9 See López de Abiada (2007), p. 244.

democracy in a model Transition from a 40-year-long dictatorship, performing what is known as the Spanish (economic) Miracle, while preserving a passion and creativity that situate the country in the post-modern cultural arena, for example in Calatrava's architecture or Almodovar's films. However, after the crisis, this positive image was readily overturned in the political and media discourses both abroad and within, reverting to that of a misgoverned, inefficient and corrupt country that had lived above its means. Counteracting this negative stereotype, other voices emerged within Spain. In particular, the 15-M grassroots movement re-energised the image of a proud Spanish people rising against the tyranny of national and international politics in defence of their civil liberties.¹⁰ These bipolar perceptions constitute what Joep Leerssen terms "imagemes", or deep structures generating a polarity of contrasting attributes.¹¹ They continue to the present to the extent that two contrasting images of Spain coexist.

3 Dealing with National Stereotypes in Spanish Crisis Novels

The novels selected for this study were published between 2013 and 2015, during the peak of the economic crash in Spain. Coeval with the crumbling of social prosperity and of Spain's positive image, these novels engage in the revision and adaptation of stereotypes that prove resistant to change.

Germán Gullón's *La codicia de Guillermo de Orange* (*The Greed of William of Orange*) capitalizes on the historical clash between Northern and Southern Europe, taking Holland and Spain as case studies.¹² This confrontation, which is well documented by historians, is also well represented in literary works that testify to stereotypical tropes which seem to have resurfaced during the

10 The *Movimiento 15-M*, also called *Movimiento de los indignados*, takes its name from the demonstrations of 15 May 2011 that took place all over Spain, originating a series of peaceful protests aiming to promote a participative democracy against the two-party system and its purported subservience to neoliberalism, banks and multinational corporations. Protesters also demanded to confront the alleged current crisis of the institutions that hampers the real division of powers and damages democracy. Along with the Arab Spring and the Greek protests, the 15-M Movement inspired the global Occupy Movement.

11 See Leerssen (2000) and Leerssen (2007a), pp. 29, 33.

12 Germán Gullón is Emeritus Professor of Spanish Literature, as well as a writer and literary critic. He graduated from the University of Salamanca, got his PhD from Texas University and began his teaching career at the University of Pennsylvania. He became Chair of the Spanish and Classics Department at the University of California Davis, and the Director of the Cervantes Institute in Utrecht.

current crisis.¹³ Similarly, the novel tracks the present-day phobias and phobias back to the enmities caused by historical imperialistic power games. In the novel, the revival of historical animosities in present-day Dutch politics concerns Richard Vaessens, an influential professor holding the Spanish Chair at Amsterdam University, who notes that “Willem van Oranje-Nassau’s ideas [...] are embedded in current Dutch culture, undoubtedly due to the crisis. [...] The stereotypes against the Spaniards help speculators, who are betting for the economies to crash in the Europe warmed by the Mediterranean sun.”¹⁴ The book opens with the Dutch defeat against Spain in the final of the Soccer World Cup Championship in 2010, an event that enrages Joost van der Linden, who has a great hatred for all things Spanish. He owns a corporation called Orange, after the monarch and founding father of the Netherlands William of Orange, whose *Apologia* (1581) defends his right to rebel against what he considered the tyranny of Phillip II of Spain and Portugal (1556–1598). After the Dutch soccer defeat, Joost plans to offer as a Christmas gift to friends and good clients thousands of copies of the *Apology* in Dutch, German, and English. This is part of Joost’s strategy to make financial profit from an advertising campaign to discredit Spain, and further devalue its rating in the market. Joost tries to convince his associates Sloterdijk and Toorn that the *Apology* can serve their corporative interests, the same as it served the nationalist Dutch interests in the past: “It helped to spread the Spanish Black Legend, also fostered by the English, an effective weapon for the discredit of the Spanish Empire in the sixteenth century. Its publication will contribute to our corporation’s current

13 See Zacharasiewicz (2010), pp. 24, 142–147, 468–502. An example of the stereotyping at work in the present construction of a cultural rupture between Northern and Southern Europe is the use of the pejorative term P.I.G.S. to allude to the economies of Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain. Coined by the *Financial Times* and *Barclays Capital* in 2010, this derogatory acronym epitomizes the stereotypes held against Southern Europe by its Northern neighbours. Ireland also became associated with the term, either replacing Italy or changing the acronym to PIIGS. Sometimes a second G (PIIGGS or PIIGGS), for Great Britain, was also added. As a counterpoint, there is a general perception in these Southern countries that Northern Europeans are self-righteous, interventionist, greedy peoples, lacking solidarity and empathy, and possessing a sense of unjustified moral superiority with respect to Southern Europeans, based on their greater economic development. This state of affairs is humorously captured in Yanko Tsvetkov’s bestselling *Atlas of Prejudice*, where Germany appears from Spain’s point of view as “Cruella de Merkel”. Similarly, from Greece’s perspective, Central Europeans, and Germany in particular, are perceived, according to Tsvetkov’s map as “imperialists,” “freaks,” and “egoists.” See Tsvetkov (2012), n.p.

14 Gullón (2013), p. 27. All the quotations from the novels are my translation into English, except for Chirbes’, for which I use Margaret Jull Costa’s translation.
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objective to shatter the confidence in the Spanish financial debt.”¹⁵ Jan, however, articulates his scruples, arguing that “it is the moment for the Germans and Dutch to show some solidarity after the glorious years following the adoption of the Euro, when we got rich due to the rise of prices [in Spain].”¹⁶ Like William of Orange, who hired German mercenaries at his own expense to launch his insurrection against the Spaniards, Joost does not hesitate to blackmail journalists and the Dutch university authorities, and to pay mercenaries to intimidate those who threaten to unveil their game. The Orange Corporation thrives by reviving the stereotype of the hedonist Spaniards who enjoy life too much – purportedly partying instead of working, dilapidating the European funding they received for decades and basking in corruption. This supports the conclusion that Spaniards deserve their fate because they’ve lived beyond their means.

Ellen, a Dutch graduate student majoring in Spanish, stands in stark contrast to these characters’ Hispano-phobia. Her research discloses Joost van der Linde’s financial conspiracy against Spain, simultaneously revealing his businesses’ strong roots in ultra-nationalism and racism towards Spaniards. The novel reveals the media’s construction of an *imagined* discourse that, in connivance with politicians and the economic powers, creates the cleavage between the North and the South of Europe in Holland. Wouda, for instance, remembers a political campaign around

the excessive contribution of Holland to the EU. It thrived on the voters’ ignorance, hiding from them that the beneficiaries of EU funding were actually the German and Dutch exporters, because if good roads were built in the South and East of Europe, our cheese and chemicals, and the German appliances would get there faster. You won’t hear complaints from Bosch, AEG, Siemens or Miele. We weren’t exactly any Pollyanna ourselves. Rather, we have a good eye for business.¹⁷

Eventually, it is the transnational Spanish-Dutch cooperation between academia, the press and the police that thwarts, at least momentarily, the financial and physical violence exerted by Joost van der Linden’s greed. Resistance to stereotypical images of Spain is achieved precisely by the same means that spreads the stereotypes, namely, the globalisation of information through electronic instant communication and fast travel.

15 Gullón (2013), pp. 15f.

16 Gullón (2013), p. 16.

17 Gullón (2013), p. 69.

Thus, Gullón's text dwells on ingrained historical images containing compounded contradictory polarities (imagemes) only to unveil the fallacy of the binary and to point towards the rejection of the meta-image. However, in the process of dispelling the negative heteroimage of Spain as – according to the text – created in Holland, the novel may be reinforcing a stereotypical hetero-image of the Dutch for the Spanish reader of the novel.

If Gullón's novel offers a critique of the Dutch for aggravating the precarious financial situation of the Spanish economy so as to exact an economic benefit while punishing and humiliating the Spaniards, Luis García-Jambrina's *Bienvenida, Frau Merkel* (2015) is a scathing self-critique in the Spanish literary tradition of *el esperpento*, the grotesque parody mastered by nineteenth-century classic writer Ramón del Valle-Inclán.¹⁸ It also pays homage to the 1953 classic film by Luis García Berlanga, *Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall* by recounting in the same humorous and satirical vein the frustrated efforts of a little town in La Mancha to be saved from economic collapse by the intervention of a foreign power. Whereas in Berlanga's film the inhabitants of Villar del Río pin their hopes on the Marshall Plan which helped reconstruct Western Europe after World War II, but ignored a torn Spain equally distraught after its Civil War, in García-Jambrina's novel salvation lies in the possibility of Germany, as the embodiment of the EU's political and economic power, helping Villar del Campo out of its bankruptcy. Hit by the financial crisis, all the corruption and bad management of the previous decades come to the surface, and shatter the myth of the 'Spanish miracle' after the democratic transition of 1975. When the Mayor Germán García learns that Merkel is going to pass nearby on her way to a European summit to be held in Toledo, he convinces his neighbours to put up a farce and recreate their town as a model German village. Germán hovers between the heroic idealism of Don Quixote and the clever picaresque of the anti-hero Lázaro de Tormes, the two literary referents in the Spanish cultural imaginary.

The plan he concocts evokes the heteroimage of Germany in Spain: "If we manage to convince the German chancellor that we're a truly austere, serious, disciplined and hard-working people, that is, just like them, I'm sure she will help us out of this crisis with some European recovery program, a sort of Merkel Plan for those of us who are truly determined to improve and change."¹⁹ The

18 Like Gullón, García-Jambrina studied Hispanic Philology at the University of Salamanca, where he currently teaches Spanish Literature. Besides his academic and critical work, he is the author of two collections of short stories and eight novels that combine historical and noir genres.

19 García-Jambrina (2015), p. 18.

novel's satire emerges from the dynamic tensions between the self-images and the heteroimages emanating from both the Spanish and the German protagonists. Thus, the Mayor's emphasis on contrition and transformation in the way of carrying out business, shunning corruption and the dilapidation of public funds in unsustainable projects, is soon revealed as a devious manoeuvre to proceed as usual, making easy money by literally selling an image that does not correspond with the reality it represents, but that actually could transform that reality. This becomes apparent in the Mayor's words after proposing to convince Merkel they are just like the Germans: "Not to mention the publicity all this would bring; we'd be trending topic in Twitter and all the social media, we'd be all over the press, including the digital newspapers, and the TV and radio news would open with us. This would make foreign capital interested in investing in our town, and bankers would give us soft loans to refinance our debt if necessary."²⁰

Furthermore, the text extends the stingy satire to the Germans, represented by Petra, a German artist who resides in Spain. Petra articulates an imaged discourse by singling out the 'typical' characteristics of Spaniards and highlighting the stereotypical differences between Spain and Germany, consequently portraying Spaniards as the Other of Germans. Focusing on the antithetical economic situation of both countries during the crisis, she finds a characterological explanation of cultural difference (and of the different economic results) in religion, adopting a moral superiority that rejects contestation on the part of her interlocutor, as the following dialogue between Petra and the Mayor in the village's church demonstrates:

"For starters, Catholics are profligate and luxury lovers: it suffices to look at that altarpiece", she explained, pointing towards the altar, "full with images and gilded figures, even in this little town, whereas us, the Lutherans are sober and thrifty. On the other hand, it's evident that you, the Catholics, go through life sinning and getting in debt and then you fix it all with a confession. [...] And if that were not enough, you take out of your sleeve that invention of the indulgence, so criticized by Luther, which is something like getting a loan so that you can continue getting into debt. This clearly demonstrates that Catholicism goes against the economic and fiscal health of a country, and if you don't believe me, there're Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain itself, all of them Catholic countries."

"And what about Greece?"

20 García-Jambrina (2015), p. 18.

“The Greeks are even worse, as they pass for being Orthodox, and you see the result”, she added with a certain contempt.²¹

When Germán protests that most Spaniards are only nominally Catholic, Petra—in tune with the inflexibility and harshness that her name implies—vehemently defends that that is typically Catholic: “as good Catholics you’re hypocrites; actually, it could be argued that that dissociation between believing and practicing is exclusively yours, as it hardly appears in other religions.”²² Next, Petra resorts to bio-cultural essentialism to close the discussion:

As much as you deny or disguise it, Catholicism is something the Spanish people carry in their genes, your national DNA. You don’t have but to see how much they like festivities, which are religious for the most part, or the fact that he who lives carefree is called in Spanish a “vivalavirgen,” [or “long-live-the virgin”]. That explains that the Counter Reformation succeeded here, or that religion continues being a taboo, a sensitive issue if anyone dares to call it into question.²³

The irony is that Petra makes a living out of the various official subsidies to culture and the arts offered by the Spanish administrations, which in turn may come from European funding, which implies, like in Gullón’s novel, that Northern Europeans also benefit from the money put into less economically buoyant Southern countries. Petra’s character is thus exposed as hypocritical, too, contradicting the clear-cut cultural line separating Southern and Northern Europeans that she drew in her imagined discourse.

Drawing on the Spanish Black Legend, Rafael Chirbes’ *En la orilla* (2013) presents the Spanish character in a much grimmer light. Continuing with the theme at the core of his celebrated previous novel *Crematorio* (2007), Chirbes focuses on the consequences of the real estate bubble in Levante, and by extension, elsewhere in Spain. *En la orilla* won a number of relevant awards and has reached an international readership with its translation into English.²⁴ The

21 García-Jambrina (2015), p. 70.

22 García-Jambrina (2015), p. 70.

23 García-Jambrina (2015), pp. 70f.

24 Rafael Chirbes (27.06.1949–15.08.2015) is the author of four books of essays and ten novels, including his trilogy dealing with postwar Spain (*La larga marcha*, *La caída de Madrid* and *Los viejos amigos*), and the Crisis novels *Crematorio* (2007), about the Spanish real estate bubble, and *En la orilla* (2013). *Paris-Austerlitz* was published posthumously in 2016. His first novel, *Mimoun* (1988), was a finalist of the Herralde awards. In addition to the awards for *En la orilla*: Premio de la Crítica de narrativa castellana (2014), Premio

mood of decay, fear, frustration, anxiety, resentment and despair infuses the novel with a sense of hopelessness and the apocalyptic feeling of being at the end of time. The *marjal*, the lagoon ecosystem on the outskirts of Olba, a town near Alicante that has become a dumping ground for all kinds of toxic waste, becomes a metonymy for Spain, a despoiled nation, reeking with poverty, greed, prostitution, xenophobia, Islamophobia, immigration fears, terrorist threat, human trafficking, violence, corruption, disillusion and betrayal.

The novel highlights the historical links between the current environmental decay and a corrosive immorality that seems to be inherent to the national character. Through Esteban, the septuagenarian protagonist who lives with his dog and his mute, disabled and terminally ill father, the text weaves a narrative of continuity between the callous repression of the post-civil war years and the present, bringing to the surface the connections between the destructive practices of those who won the war and their economic and social ascent in Spanish society. In the following excerpt, Esteban reminisces about the persecution and repression his Republican father tried to avoid after the war by, first, hiding in the reedbeds near the lagoon and later handing himself in to the authorities. The civil guard would chase him, and many others like him, “like animals, even burning down the vegetation. The crackle of the reedbeds burning and the sticky smell of the smoke suffocating the other marsh creatures would reach as far as Olba. To make the fire spread more rapidly, they would pour gas on the reedbeds and the scrub, which were often small islands of floating vegetation.”²⁵ Yet, destroying the natural environment where the villagers in hiding found refuge had the further purpose of creating allegiances and servitude on the part of those who were given strips of land from the drained lagoon. Consequently, those lands signify the foundational moment of present-day corruption:

It wasn't all about repression though. There was a business aspect too. On the excuse that they had to hunt down those poor wretches, the authorities encouraged the draining of the lagoons, promoted the idea of filling them in, giving swathes of swampy land to a few friends and ex-combat-

Nacional de Narrativa (2014), Premio Francisco Umbral al Libro del Año 2013 (2014), Premio Bial de Novela Mario Vargas Llosa finalist, it was also considered best book of the year by the newspaper *El País*. Chirbes also won the German award *swr-Bestenliste* for *La larga marcha* (1999), the book of the year Premio Cálamo for *Los viejos amigos* (2003) and again in 2007 for *Crematorio*, which also won Premio de la Crítica de narrativa castellana (2007), and Premio Dulce Chacón (2008).

25 Chirbes (2016), p. 82.

ants, granting them authority to drain and cultivate it. Greed was enough of an incentive to mobilize the volunteers for the hunts. Properties like Dalmau and La Citrícola were born out of those re-distributions. [...] La Citrícola was born out of the part of the lake handed over to Pallarés to be drained, another blue shirt who strutted about with a pistol in his shoulder holster,²⁶ generally tyrannising the area until the late 1960s, when his legal heirs took over the estate, and while they – a sign of the times – have behaved rather more discreetly, they have been just as greedy, and all their dealings were wiped clean of the old ideological cobwebs: clean money without the packaging of patriotic speeches, proclamations or saber-rattling.²⁷

Esteban himself realizes that immorality and greed have since then extended and infected almost everyone, himself included. At present, he faces eviction and jail after forging his father's signature and investing all his money and possessions in a real estate company that has gone bankrupt after the outbreak of the housing bubble and whose owner has fled the country with the money. While he pretends in front of his friends that everything is fine, he determines to put an end to his father's and his own life.

En la orilla has been acclaimed as the best novel on the Spanish economic crisis, and yet, it goes beyond the narrow scope of economics to ponder on a particular national brand of the banality of evil that results in further grimmer and more hopeless crises, if only because they are more difficult to fight, namely the moral crisis, the crisis of values, the institutional crisis, the crisis of the nation-state. Other crises, like the crisis of the Anthropocene, are rendered in an ambiguous, ironic way, like when Esteban reflects on the current concern about nature in contrast with the scarce interest in the crimes against humanity committed during and after the Civil War that remain unpunished:

now the great shrine of divinity is nature: impregnating water and mud with asphalt roofing felt, bituminous matter, glass fiber, carcinogenic asbestos, which is what Bernal Jr. did, seems far worse than the murders his father committed. If you throw a corpse into the sea, you're doing the environment a favor, supplying food for the fish to nibble on with their

26 The Blueshirts, or *Camisas Azules* in Spanish, were the paramilitary militia of the Falange political party, officially renamed Falange Militia in 1940 during Franco's regime. The symbolic blue colour of their uniforms sought to gain support among the Spanish blue-collar workers.

27 Chirbes (2016), p. 82.

small cold mouths. The sins of the gunmen – who turned ditches into graves and peppered the walls of cemeteries with bullets, who fed the fish out at sea – those were absolved by the Transition, because apparently they were only venial sins, whereas the sins committed against the environment have no expiry date and no judge can absolve them. Let's not deceive ourselves, man is nothing very special. In fact, there are so many of us that our governments don't know what to do with us all [...]. The sleight of hand that made man the center of the universe no longer convinces.²⁸

Despite the negative tone of the novel, however, there is a sustained imagery in which the marsh can paradoxically act as a space of freedom, protection and regeneration, the same as carrion engenders life and beauty:

We live off what we kill. We live from killing, from what is served up to us dead: the inheritors consume the spoils of their predecessors, which nourish and strengthen them when it's time to take flight. The more carrion they eat, the higher and more majestic the flight. And, of course, more elegant. And none of this is in any way at odds with the natural condition of the world.²⁹

Yet, the marsh's beauty appears at the end of the book as a mere mirage, and the text shuns the ideology of linear progress while reinforcing the idea of immobility and death through the imagery of dark colours and tombs: "The passing clouds reflected on the surface create an illusion of a world in constant evolution, but which is, in fact, motionless, fixed as if in an old photograph, whose sepia tones precisely match the rusty colors of the winter reeds, faced yellows and ochers and a brown so dark it's almost black, and which forms sooty clumps, the melancholy tombs of giants."³⁰ Furthermore, the novel eschews any attempt at poetic justice by choosing Tomás Pedrós as the focaliser in its last pages. Pedrós, the crook who swindled Esteban out of his savings, has managed to escape and is ready to continue living the good life in his 'exile': "money has no homeland, just make sure you've got plenty of convertible euros or convertible dollars (is that what they call them?) in your handbag,"³¹ he says, and the doctrine he lives by seems to serve him well. Thus,

28 Chirbes (2016), pp. 32f.

29 Chirbes (2016), p. 130.

30 Chirbes (2016), p. 389.

31 Chirbes (2016), p. 399.

the myth of the *pícaro* or trickster figure devoid of any moral values but his own profit and survival, prevails.

In contrast with Chirbes' ominous tone, Almudena Grandes portrays in *Los besos en el pan* (*Kisses on the Bread*) an urban middle class that after the shock of being hit by the economic crisis, actively struggles to pull itself up by their bootstraps, adopting resilience strategies in the face of the political corruption and austerity measures that have the country on the edge.³² An excerpt of the novel focusing on the scene that explains its title appeared in *The New York Times* on 13 December, 2017. The title alludes to the traditional gesture of kissing the bread as a sign of gratitude, even in the midst of misfortune, as the narrator of this polyvocal novel was taught to do as a child during the times of scarcity of the Spanish civil war and the post-war period. Grandes' novel targets a Spanish audience that is well acquainted with the recent historical political and social developments in the country, readers who may identify with one or more of the myriad characters inhabiting the novel. The text draws on the myth of the heroic Spanish people rebelling against tyrants and invading foreign powers, which in the novel's historical juncture are global neoliberalism and its national and supranational defenders, the Spanish government and the 'troika' formed by the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. *Los besos en el pan* highlights the various personal and collective strategies of survival developed by Spanish society to avoid succumbing to the crisis and its various nefarious manifestations – unemployment, evictions, divorces, etc.

A key buffer the text highlights is the family, which continues functioning as a nurturing and indispensable social structure when other institutional structures fail. The other interesting development involves social solidarity and the people's capacity and willingness to join forces to contest, reverse and direct institutional decisions that affect their lives. Regarding the former, the novel establishes intergenerational links, highlighting the role of grandparents. They

32 Almudena Grandes is the author of thirteen novels and two collections of short stories, among other works. She is an outspoken leftist intellectual and a well-known public figure in Spain. Like Chirbes, she graduated in History and her fiction reflects her interest in the postwar and the Transition periods, as well as their continuing effects on the quotidian reality of present-day Spain. Her first novel, *Las edades de Lulú* (1989), won the award La Sonrisa Vertical and became a best-seller, translated into more than twenty languages. It was adapted to the screen in the homonymous film directed by Bigas Luna. Since then, she has received numerous literary awards and many of her novels have been turned into films and TV series. Among her most important awards are Premio José Manuel Lara and Premio del Gremio de Libreros de Madrid, for her novel *El corazón helado* (2007), and the Elena Poniatowska Award she received in Mexico for the novel *Insensibilidad* (2010). In 2020 she received the Jean Monnet Prize for European Literature.

not only sustain their unemployed children and grandchildren with their care and usually meagre pensions, but act as the living memory of the Spanish people's ordeals of the twentieth century, and the holders of the survival mechanisms necessary in times of crisis. The narrator establishes already in the prologue the importance of cultural memory, regretting – like Gullón's and Chirbes' characters – the political and social pact of forgetting at the foundation of the Spanish Transition to democracy, which resulted in the apparent erasure from collective consciousness a history of sheer poverty, but also of the necessary audacity to confront adversity:

Thirty years ago, in Spain, children inherited poverty from their parents, but also dignity, a way of being poor that was never undignified. We learned to never stop fighting for a better future, to never give up [...]. Later, they told us we had to forget, that [...] to build a democracy it was essential to look forward, to pretend nothing had happened. And by forgetting the bad, we Spaniards also erased the good [...], we lost touch with our tradition, with the values that now could help us overcome this new poverty. This deprivation has been foisted on us from the very heart of that Europe that was supposed to make us rich, and has stolen from us a treasure that cannot be bought with money. Today, this neighbourhood dwellers are not just broke; they are lost, stunned and confused, as disoriented as a spoiled child whose toys have been taken away. That child does not know how to make his voice heard, claim what was his, denounce the robbery or stop the thieves.

If our grandparents saw us, they would first double-up with laughter, then die of shame. For them, our economic slide would be a mere inconvenience, not a crisis. Because Spaniards, who for centuries knew how to be poor with dignity, never knew how to be docile.

Never, until now.³³

In tune with the narrator's perspective, Martina offers her grandson her civil war and post-war experiences as a counterpoint to the current crisis, insisting that "one cannot just accept whatever, but must take the reins, refuse to accept all this ruin."³⁴

33 Grandes (2015), pp. 16f.

34 Grandes (2015), p. 41. Joaquín Estefanía provides a counterpoint to this image of grandparents in his recent book *Abuelo, ¿cómo habéis consentido esto?* (2017), drawing attention to the responsibility of the generation of elders for the mistakes that have led the country and the world to the current situation.

The novel elaborates, therefore, upon the trope of the romantic image of Spaniards as proud and brave people, readily mobilising in defence of their values and freedoms, as it captures the shift from political apathy and disaffection to active engagement in local politics in solidarity with the weakest members of the community, namely, the immigrants, battered women, the rapidly increasing number of families facing eviction, children in impoverished families, the elderly and the sick. Consequently, there is a focus on citizen initiatives that both defy laws that are perceived as unjust and result in the emergence of Community Associations.

The public Health System, which Spaniards take great pride in, comes under scrutiny in this novel. In the midst of a Government campaign aiming to mobilize public opinion against civil servants so as to neutralize any opposition to lower their salaries, decimate their numbers, privatize public services in schools and hospitals, etc., the novel captures the atmosphere of popular struggle and resistance that materialised in the movements called ‘mareas’: “The Green Tide” in defence of Public Education, the “White Tide” in defence of the Public Health System and so on and so forth. In the novel, one of the doctors explains to an elderly patient of his why the hospital staff are preparing to protest against the Regional Government orders to shut it down. His words stress the cynicism of neoliberal policies that, in connivance with the private sector, are depleting the public treasury:

The Regional Government wants to close the clinic [...]. They say that this hospital is obsolete, bullshit, that it isn't profitable, bullshit, that this neighbourhood is overfunded, bullshit, that our work plan is not efficient, lie upon lie upon lie [...]. And what will they do then, those rascals? Demolish the building, build luxurious condos and make a fortune, as usual [...].³⁵

When the time comes for a demonstration, the whole neighbourhood shows up, including Venancio, the ultraconservative elderly man whose wife with Alzheimer Disease receives the daily visits of social workers and nurses at home.

Grandes' novel touches upon many other current concerns – corruption, unemployment, immigration, gender crossing, homosexuality, gender violence, and the protection of children. Empathy, love and unity prevail against the backlash of the economic crisis. There is an awakening of the people, the rise

35 Grandes (2015), p. 192f.

of solidarity and the realisation that people need to empower themselves by making their own politics, organising themselves as communities with agency.

Belén Gopegui's *El comité de la noche* (*The Night Committee*) also connects the crisis to the strong emergence of grassroots activism directed to resist the Government's alliance with neoliberal capitalist powers.³⁶ Gopegui found the inspiration for the novel's plot when she read the news published by Europa Press in 2012 about a multinational pharmaceutical corporation that intended to pay seventy euros per week to unemployed people who became blood donors. The commodification of human organs does not only make economic profit via the exploitation of the vulnerability of human beings. It also turns life into capital and divides humanity into those who can buy their own wellbeing and survival and those whose right to life and health is disregarded given their *precarity*, a term coined by Judith to convey the vulnerability artificially and differentially inflicted over human beings due to gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and other categories.³⁷ Thus, Gopegui tackles head on two contemporary ethical problems or concerns, that of the creation of the subhuman and that of the ethical regulation of bio-technological human enhancement leading to a posthuman era. *The Night Committee* is a powerful critique of the generalisation of vulnerability caused by the connivance of national states with the neoliberal forces of late capitalism that thrive precisely on people's precariousness. Like Grandes' *Los besos en el pan*, this novel takes resilience one step beyond individual malleability and resistance by countering "the authority of capital" with social democratic mobilisation.³⁸

At the novel's opening Álex, a young doctor who has been fired from her last job after the privatisation and closing of public hospitals and the shrinking of staff contracts and salaries in private clinics, returns to live with her parents. Jobless at thirty-three and a single mother after the separation from her husband, she faces an existential crisis. Far from a drawback, this insight constitutes a revelation that allows her to reinvent herself away from her personal

36 The novel won the award Otra Mirada, Premios Cálamo 2014. Belén Gopegui studied Law at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and has worked for several newspapers. She is the author of thirteen novels, one play, several film scripts, among other works. She has won various national and international literary awards, among which, Premio Iberoamericano de Primeras Novelas "Santiago del Nuevo Extremo" for her first novel, *La escala de los mapas*, VII Premio de Narrativa Española Dulce Chacón for *Deseo de ser punk*, and her novel *La conquista del aire* adapted to the screen by Gerardo Herrero as *Las razones de mis amigos*.

37 See Butler (2004); Butler (2009).

38 Gopegui (2014), p. 256.

history and all the external circumstances that have determined it so far. Thus, Álex joins a group of transnational scope that aims to prevent global pharmaceutical corporations from convincing the EU to pass legislation for the liberalisation of the blood trade. The vision of this semi-clandestine group is to build up a new world without necessarily pulling down the foundations of the current one, relying instead on bottom-up mutation and transformation: "If we began building up everything, communities, cooperatives, occupy movements, evicted properties, networks, new relations, if we could go on mutating, may be the war would not need to be bloody nor long nor devastate everything."³⁹ However, for this vision to succeed, Álex and her group realize, the mutation has to entail the community and strategically take into account a politics of location.⁴⁰ Like Grandes, Gopegui draws on the romantic image of the Spanish people as brave, ingenious and defiant, rising up against oppression and joining in solidarity against injustice. Gopegui, however, goes beyond Grandes' portrayal by pointing at the transnational nature of the struggle. Thus, the social activism of the protagonists reaches European and global dimensions with the networks and interconnections they help establishing.

4 Conclusion

To conclude, this survey suggests that the Spanish authors in this limited selection render a view of the construction of a Spanish identity in the wake of the European crises that depends as much on the Spanish self-image as on their meta-image—i.e., the Spanish perception of how Spain is shaped by the gaze of other countries. This is the case in Gullón's novel regarding the historical stereotypes that prompt the plot about the rival relations between the Netherlands and Spain. Likewise, García-Jambrina's novel playfully revels in the stereotypical images that Spaniards hold of Germany and of themselves, as well as in the images Spaniards think the Germans have of Spain. As both novels draw on the stereotypes about the Dutch and the Germans in Spain, they cement a static sense of national identity across time. Irony becomes a relevant strategy in this crisis juncture to mock established stereotypes, particularly in Gullón's and García-Jambrina's novels. Furthermore, García-Jambrina grounds his play with stereotypes about Spain, Germany and the EU in the Spanish literary and cinematic traditions by adopting Valle-Inclán's *esperpento*

39 Gopegui (2014), p. 58.

40 Gopegui (2014), p. 59.

or penchant for exaggeration and the grotesque, the anti-hero attitudes of Don Quixote and Lázaro de Tormes, and by taking inspiration from Berlanga's classic film *Bienvenido, Mr. Marshall*. In the process of alluding to the Spanish literary and cultural canons, cultural memory is mobilised in the creation of patterns of othering and selfhood. Chirbes, Grandes and Gopegui also dwell on historical remembrance and the layered historical assumptions about the Spanish character. Whereas Gullón, García-Jambrina and Chirbes underline for the most part aspects of the Spanish Black Legend, Grandes and Gopegui bring forward the more positive and romantic aspects of the construction of a Spanish identity, highlighting the passion, courage, and struggle against tyranny and oppression. Gopegui and Gullón also add the important element of transnational collaboration and solidarity across social boundaries, questioning the distinction between nationalities and, as a result, the basis for the accretion of the various stereotypes.

Hence, the genre of the novel appears as an important space for reflection on the revival, reshaping and contestation of old stereotypes that offer not just a mirror to the current perception of a divided Europe, but a tool to build up resilience in times of crisis. These novels can be seen as an attempt to constitute a narrative ethics that, on the one hand, may help redefine the notion of European citizenship, and on the other, create meaning and bonds that may reinstate the transnational European ideal emerging after World War II. All in all, these novels convey a sense of social resilience that draws on the unravelling, revision and adaptation of stereotypes that prove themselves to be resilient to the passing of time.

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