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“Everybody hates a tourist”: la España rural as theme park

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ABSTRACT

This article will examine ways in which three contemporary artists – the filmmaker José Díaz and the writers Gabi Martínez and Isaac Rosa – engage with *la España rural* as a would-be theme park. It will argue that pressure from the conventions of the self-discovery documentary (Díaz) or the nonfiction narrative of return to rural roots (Martínez), causes both artists to slip into depoliticized solipsism. Meanwhile, the satirical writer, Isaac Rosa, uses his short story “#SoyMinero” to decry a tendency to frame Spain’s depopulated, postindustrial landscape as a nostalgic iteration of heritage tourism. This paper will examine to what extent such approaches to *la España rural*, for all their good intentions, can offer anything but a fleeting glimpse of solutions to intractable national problems.

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Desde hace varias décadas, España se resquebraja, y no políticamente, dividida en dos mitades, la de las regiones ricas y la de las regiones pobres, que el mapa marca perfectamente: las ricas son las que baña el mar y las pobres las que están lejos de él. Solamente Madrid es la excepción, por los motivos que todos conocemos.

—Julio Llamazares, “Las dos Españas” (2007)

Introduction

Of the public intellectuals who have endeavored in recent decades to shine a light on Spain’s rural depopulation and resulting demographic crisis, Julio Llamazares is arguably the person whose voice has been the most consistent and persistent. Among his first interventions on the topic is a report on the première in Spain of a Russian film, *Adiós a Matorra*, which depicts the plight of a rural community whose inhabitants are forcibly evicted so that their land can be flooded to create a hydroelectric dam. He ends the article with the following sardonic observation: “Por supuesto, dramas como el de Matorra sólo ocurren ya en la Unión Soviética, donde, como todos sabemos, no hay libertad” (2008, 22). The sarcasm reflects the author’s lasting sense of injustice that, as a child, he should have suffered an identical fate: the village of Vegamián in the province of León, hitherto his family home, disappeared beneath the waters of just such a hydroelectric

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dam, as the Franco regime sought to boost its energy security and industrial infrastructure during the 1950s and 1960s.¹ The nostalgia for a lost rural homeland has arguably shaped Llamazares's writing ever since. His second novel, *La lluvia amarilla* (1988) is narrated by the imagined final inhabitant of a real abandoned village, Ainielle, in Huesca, as he leaves a record of the community's modest trace in history. In 1999, Llamazares collaborated with the screenwriter, producer and director, Icíar Bollain, on the screenplay for the feature film, *Flores de otro mundo*, which dramatizes efforts to repopulate a dying village by busing in single women, many of them economic migrants from Spain's former colonies.² In his journalism, he has denounced the demise of Spain's mining industry, rural infrastructure, cultural heritage, and community life (2008, 84–87, 92–94, 130–133, 186–189, 197–200, 235–238). On the eve of general elections in 2015, he reiterated with weary familiarity a fact first reported by the newspaper *El País*: that out of the fifty provinces that make up Spain's electoral map, twenty-one depopulated inland provinces had received not a single visit from a major politician during the campaign, such was their seeming irrelevance and invisibility to the country's powerbrokers (2015). Earlier that same year, he had used the flooding of his childhood village as inspiration for a choral novel, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua*, whose characters deliver interrelated monologues about their memories of a landscape that vanished when drowned as part of a civil engineering project.

This article will focus on three recent texts – a short story, a documentary film and a nonfiction memoir – which grapple with the question of how best to represent a crisis of demographics and political visibility. As we shall see, each of these texts will take aspects of *la España rural* as broadly defined by Llamazares: the short story, “#SoyMinero”, depicts a village grappling with the aftermath of decline in the national coal industry; the documentary film, *100 días de soledad*, implicitly asks what the country's designated natural spaces can do for the jaded urban dweller; the nonfiction memoir, *Un cambio de verdad*, grapples with the paradoxes of return to an agrarian community in which climate change, economic pressure and intergenerational nostalgia leave the prospects for the future uncertain and complex. Each of the artists concerned is engaged in turning *la España rural* into a theme park. In the first example, the process is deliberate and satirical on purpose. In the second and third, the process is less intentional and more open to critique.

The writers and filmmakers this article critiques are engaged in shaping debates on what is variously referred to as *la España vacía* or *la España vaciada*: the depopulation of rural communities in many Spanish provinces, among them Álava, Ávila, Badajoz, Burgos, Cáceres, Cantabria, Castellón, Ciudad Real, Cuenca, Guadalajara, Huelva, Huesca, Jaén, La Rioja, Lérida, Lugo, Orense, Salamanca, Segovia, Soria, Teruel, Valladolid and Zamora. By the middle of the 2010s, it was estimated that no fewer than 3000 villages had become devoid of human habitation, as access to essential services, medical care, schools and amenities dwindled to a point beyond which sustainability was no longer possible. At that time, public – and subsequently political – attention has focused on the issue of rural depopulation thanks in no small measure to Sergio del Molino's book, *La España vacía: Viaje por un país que nunca fue* (2016). In 2017, rural depopulation was declared a national priority by the Conferencia de Presidentes, the body which brings together the leaders of Spain's seventeen Comunidades Autónomas and the country's president. As climate change puts coastal areas at risk from rising sea levels and inland

areas struggle to maintain access to drinking water due to diminished rainfall, the issue is of ever-greater public concern (Villavicencio Calzadilla and Borràs-Pentinat 2023). The sense of political urgency has translated into increased visibility in the cultural sphere, to which discussion now turns.

Isaac Rosa, “#SoyMinero”

In 2020, the writer Isaac Rosa, one of the country’s most respected novelists and political commentators, published *Tiza roja*, a trenchant collection of short stories, many of them darkly satirical, even cynical, in tone.³ Among them was “#SoyMinero”, in which a jaded narrator, a long-term resident of a decayed postindustrial village, reports bitterly on the new lease of life breathed into his moribund community. Its streets once more resound to the singing of miners on their way to a shift at the pithead, there are customers again in the local bar and the coal on which it used to rely for its income has once again found a market. In spite of which, the narrator’s tone is sardonic rather than celebratory. This is not the first time the dilapidated village has attracted the attention of outsiders: “El poblado minero estaba ruinoso, aunque atraía a gilipollas de toda la provincia y más allá, que venían a hacerse fotos en las casas destartadas, la capilla con el techo hundido, la escuela fantasma, el dispensario, sitios ideales para hacerse fotos artísticas” (Rosa 2020, 388). Now, however, rather than trade on its status as a picturesque ruin, the local mayor has spotted an opportunity to reinvent the very same coalmine whose closure initiated the community’s decline. The mine now exploits a trend in tourism for immersive, “authentic” experiences: celebrities, executives, revelers on hen or stag weekends, even whole families, pay to come and work at the coalface of a mine that closed for good thirty years prior. Central to their experience is a sense of reconnecting with a nostalgic vision of the past and the natural world: “Presumen de vivir por unos días como vive la gente del campo, como han vivido generaciones de aldeanos durante milenios, trabajando con las manos, en contacto con la tierra, al ritmo de las estaciones” (Rosa 2020, 389). As Rosa observed in an article reflecting on the Asturian miners’ strike of 2012, made famous for the gruelling, weeks-long march undertaken by 8000 workers from their mines in the north to the capital, Madrid:⁴

La figura del minero, con su casco, su lámpara y su rostro ennegrecido está fuertemente arraigado en el imaginario de la clase trabajadora desde hace siglos, y por eso con los mineros no funciona el habitual discurso de los “privilegiados” con que algunos intentan anularlos desde la derecha mediática (por eso, y porque la minería representa desde siempre lo más duro y peligroso del mundo del trabajo, y su fatiga, lesiones, enfermedades y accidentes no casan bien con ningún privilegio). (Rosa 2012)

Those who arrive in Rosa’s fictional mining community seek to tap into that sense of authenticity, revel in the solidarity of working-class life or lose weight thanks to the back-breaking toil. Theirs is a privileged dipping of the toes in the water of industrial labor, precisely the kind of life that their ancestors fled in hopes of finding less deadly work in the cities from which their descendants now arrive. Irony overlays irony, not least in the narrator’s stark observation that none of the original cohort of actual miners has lived to tell the tale: “se los fue llevando la silicosis”, as he straightforwardly puts it (Rosa 2020, 388). The tone of the story’s final lines is darker still and sets out the community’s fear that this reinvention of their history could yet run out of road:

Aunque nos preocupa que se vulgarice tanto que pronto ya no sea una experiencia auténtica y única, y la gente deje de venir en cuanto encuentren otra experiencia más auténtica y única y telúrica y ancestral y sensorial y mística y gilipollas que la nuestra. Cualquier día otro avisado ofrece qué sé yo, pesca en alta mar, o coger fresas en invernaderos, o descubrir la espiritualidad de una cadena de montaje, y se nos acabó el invento. (Rosa 2020, 392)

In comparing the touristic mining experience to jobs typically regarded as unskilled, undesirable or (in the case of fishing) unacceptably dangerous – the preserve often of migrant workers – the narrator highlights the ludicrousness of the whole endeavor. Superior wealth gives the tourists the privilege of cosplaying a worker's role, while the structures of inequality on which that privilege rests remain untroubled, or even enhanced. If the toll on the body exerted by prolonged effort in lethal environments can be repackaged as beneficial for health, then, as Orwell suggested, perhaps “two and two are five” (Orwell 2002, 442). Rosa's story begs questions about how customers who have paid for the privilege of “living like a miner” for, say, a few days, will react to future demands for better pay, safer working conditions and higher coal prices from those same workers whose labor they have imperfectly mimicked. His story is also a refinement of Dean MacCannell's observation, in his landmark study of tourism, that “wherever industrial society is transformed into modern society, work is simultaneously transformed into an object of touristic curiosity” (2013, 6). Rosa's miners further feel what Raymond Williams has identified as the nostalgic pull of rural life: “the perception and affirmation of a world in which one is not necessarily a stranger and an agent, but can be a member, a discoverer, in a shared source of life” (2016, 428).

The mayor of Rosa's fictional village has created what one of his fellow citizens calls “un parque temático” (Rosa 2020, 390), with the environment and accoutrements of industrial labor repurposed as props in an immersive experience that is fueled by nostalgia for an “archetypal” working-class existence. Luis Alfonso Camarero Rioja has identified this repurposing of rural life as spectacle as a key component of postmodern perceptions of rurality in Spain: “las actividades rurales han progresado desde su orientación como producciones orientadas únicamente por su valor de uso, a producciones destacadas por su valor signo” (2003, 111).

Precisely what distinguishes a “theme park” from other tourist or leisure spaces has been the subject of considerable academic discussion in recent decades, as demonstrated by Zengxian Liang and Xiang Li in their survey of 317 published contributions to that debate. Such venues are distinguished by five core characteristics: thematic identity, closed space with controlled access, hybrid consumption, performative labor and merchandising. Their conclusion is that a park's “theme is typically born from a story, film, cartoon, myth, daily life, or imagined future and is communicated via a logo, brand, slogan, vision, or general idea” (2023, 1347). Its territory “should have concrete boundaries and be physically, economically or culturally separate from the surrounding area” (2023, 1348). It should be “a ‘one-stop’ experience that facilitates hybrid consumption and caters to visitors' every need” (2023, 1348). Theme parks “use performative labour to emphasize host-guest interaction” and produce their own merchandise (2023, 1348–1349). It is not difficult to see how these criteria could be applied to the repurposed coal mine in Rosa's tale. Humorous and satirical though the latter may seem, we do not have to look far to find its equivalent either in recent history or in contemporary cultural production in Spain. In the case of the former, the demographic shift from rural areas to

urban centers, which began in earnest during the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera in the 1920s and reached its peak during the Franco years, created an audience hungry for rural nostalgia among the millions of Spaniards who by then owned a television set (Townson 2023, 106–107, 319–320). Antonio Cazorla Sánchez has argued that the enduringly popular series, *Crónicas de un pueblo* (1971–1974), produced at a time when the health of Franco was failing, social unrest on the rise and uncertainty over the future only growing, fed that hunger:

Ordinary people watched the stories of an ideal community of peace and stability in a rural setting with nostalgia. Every week Spaniards could witness the comings and goings of a community that reminded them of their villages of origin; the striking difference was, of course, that this village was devoid of the bitter conflicts, poverty, and suffering that they had left behind. (Cazorla Sánchez 2010, 163)⁵

I argue in the following two sections of this article that Rosa's vision of postindustrial Spain repurposed as a theme park for seekers of authenticity can be found in two further cultural productions depicting other environments affected by the country's changing demographics: la España rural and la España vacía. The former will be examined through analysis of José Díaz's documentary film, *100 días de soledad* (2018), while the depiction of the latter will be scrutinized through Gabi Martínez's nonfiction memoir, *Un cambio de verdad* (2020). It will draw on both Liang and Li's definition of the theme park as a space but also on Rosa's jaundiced vision of a return to the rural as a quest for personal growth or self-renewal. However, whereas Rosa skewers that phenomenon for its self-indulgence and political illiteracy, the other artists to whose work I now turn arguably appear less self-aware in their approach.

José Díaz, *100 días de soledad*

At first glance, Díaz's documentary, *100 días de soledad*, is a sincere attempt to encounter Spain's rural landscape as viscerally and uncompromisingly as possible.⁶ The writer-director-protagonist challenges himself to live a self-sufficient existence, without contact with family or friends, for the titular hundred days in the Parque Natural de Redes, Asturias. That natural park setting thus provides Díaz with his ready-made boundary between his "theme park" and the rest of Spain. Living between two remote huts with only his horse and some chickens for company, he stayed from 12 September to 19 December 2015, and thus is able to capture the spectacular colors of autumn, the storms heralding the approach of winter and the changing qualities of the light between seasons. His sole contact with the world beyond the wilderness comes via a drop box, through which family members supply him with letters, as well as fresh batteries and memory cards for the digital equipment he uses to document his experiences. As the first words delivered in the film's voice-over narration attest, Díaz's stay has a "theme", since the landscape is tied up with memories and mourning. In fact, his time in the Parque Natural de Redes is explicitly framed as griefwork, a reconnection with the brother he lost many years before but whose memory is bound up with the landscape:

Estoy perdiendo la voz. Llevo noventa y tres días aislado en este lugar. Vine escapando del vértigo de la ciudad, con el deseo de rendir un homenaje a estas montañas y reencontrarme de algún modo con mi hermano, Tino, que nos dejó hace años y fue quien me trajo por aquí por primera vez. (Díaz 2018)

That somber premise has an appropriate corollary in the film's snowbound title sequence. Filmed by drone, the seventy-five-second tracking shot pans farther and farther from the hut where Díaz has made his temporary home until the vast landscape fills the screen and the scale of the human construction appears dwarfed by nature (see [Figure 1](#)).

100 días de soledad was coproduced and distributed by RTVE and Wanda Films, the latter a company which has carved out a particular niche in nature documentaries about rural Spain, among them Joaquín Gutiérrez Acha's trio of films: *Guadalquivir* (2013), *Cantábrico* (2017) and *El bosque del linco: Dehesa* (2020). Whereas those films showcase the wildlife of particular habitats or regions, Díaz's film is an interrogation of man's place in a wider natural environment. It sits within what Scott MacDonald has described as a "tradition of filmmaking that encapsulates this pattern – that uses technology to create the illusion of preserving 'Nature,' or more precisely, that provides an evocation of the experience of being immersed in the natural world" (2004, 108). What insights might the emptiness and solitude of his time in the mountains provide? Among the first he offers is one that proves perhaps unwittingly telling, given that it focuses on the idea of monetary value and a strange form of extractivism from the landscape, which then shades into the language of self-help or the wellness industry:

El frío, el silencio y la soledad son estados que en el futuro serán más preciosos que el oro. En este maravilloso rincón de Asturias, en la reserva de la biosfera de Redes, puedo experimentarlos, seguir alimentando mi alma y crecer como persona. Aquí está sentado uno de los pilares que sustentan mi felicidad. (Díaz 2018)

That allusion to monetizing solitude could appear misplaced, not least because the very premise of his film – spending one hundred days away from the responsibilities of everyday life – is not a realistic prospect for the vast majority of the film's potential audience: those with caring responsibilities, those with children, those with jobs which they cannot



Figure 1. The culmination of the opening tracking shot of Díaz's film, with his wooden hut dwarfed by the surrounding landscape. © José Díaz/Wanda Films.

neglect for longer than their statutory holiday entitlements will allow; not to mention those without the financial, physical or practical resources to make such a commitment realistic. In that sense, the extremity of the example Díaz is setting places the documentary in an oddly liminal space between aspirational fantasy and the recording of nature's bounty. There is undoubtedly plenty of the latter on display: chamois and red deer streaking across the mountain slopes; stags braying out their mating calls; or the extraordinary scene in which, in the dead of night, Díaz successfully mimics a wolf's howl, to be greeted with an answering call from seemingly dozens of unseen "fellow" creatures. Those animals become the unwitting coparticipants in the performative labor Liang and Li identify as essential to the theme park experience. Moreover, a sequence had earlier shown him sporting a T-shirt emblazoned with the logo of the experiential tourist business Díaz co-owns, *Redes de Ensueño* (see [Figure 2](#)), which encourages others to encounter the natural world as he did, albeit paying for the privilege.⁷ It turns out that Díaz's park even has its own merchandising, as Liang and Li have suggested, given that Díaz's company website sells glossy photobooks of the Parque Natural with the director's name featuring prominently on the cover. Viewers begin to wonder whether what we are watching is the griefwork exercise in self-exploration announced at the start or an extended advertisement for Díaz's aspirational holiday venture. The combination of the film's extravagant premise and its ambiguous intentions place it firmly within the territory of an ecocritical discourse T.V. Reed has characterized as blind to "concern for economic, racial, and gender justice" since the example it sets could never be followed by any but the wealthiest members of society (2002, 157).

Doubts as to the sincerity of the director-protagonist's willingness to allow the viewer access to his real intimacy are not helped by a sequence in which he explains that he cannot keep the camera rolling while he reads a letter from his wife because it would



Figure 2. Díaz films himself via a selfie stick, with his tourism company's logo emblazoned on his T-shirt. © José Díaz/Wanda Films.

be too personally revealing. As befits a film shot alone and at times in an improvised fashion, the level of polish on individual sequences proves indicative of the candor on display. Díaz films himself showering, for example, but always at a distance and with his underwear on. For greater candor the viewer must look to moments where he is off-guard, and the polish of the filming process briefly slips. One such example is also the sole occasion on which he alludes to the brother whose loss has prompted him to make this journey in the first place (see [Figure 3](#)).

The minimalist lighting and awkward camera angle indicate improvisation, as do Díaz's words to the camera:

Muchas veces pienso en si seré como tengo que ser, si soy buena gente, y al final ... no sé, la respuesta parece que me la da el cómo me trata la vida, cómo me va la vida ... mejor no me puede ir, vamos. Salud mía y de los míos, salvo la muerte de mi hermano Tino, en paz descanse, que fue el batacazo mayor de mi vida, pero increíble ... increíble lo que aprendimos, yo personalmente. ... Me quitó la vida cuando pasó y me la fue dando según va pasando el tiempo ... es curioso. (Díaz 2018)

Such reflections could be dismissed as careless talk, except that they made it past the editing process to which the hundreds of hours of original footage were subject. In their banality and self-satisfaction, Díaz's thoughts could be filed under the category of self-revelatory for all the wrong reasons: the obverse of his reasoning – that anyone who encounters misfortune somehow deserves it – is hardly the kind of life-enhancing message the film wishes its viewers to take away.

Such moments of emotional release as there are hobble the film's sense of authenticity. Díaz appears most exercised during his time in the mountains by the loss of one of his precious – and presumably very expensive – drones. Gabi Martínez, the author to whose book I will turn shortly, registers within its pages his reaction to the juxtaposition

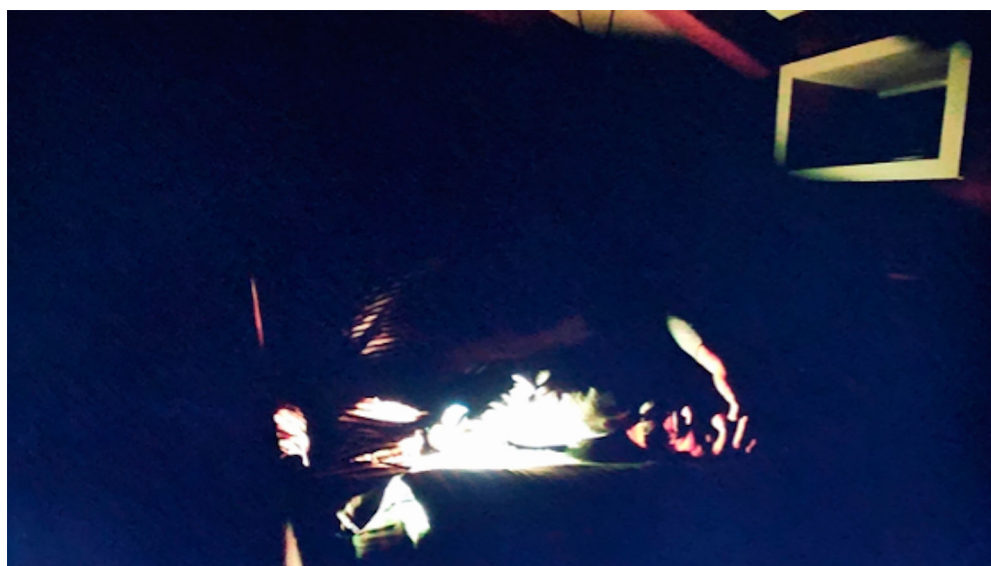


Figure 3. The polish on Díaz's filming slips as he records himself at night, reflecting on his brother's death. © José Díaz/Wanda Films.

of nature and cutting-edge digital equipment, having watched Díaz's documentary during a break from his time as a shepherd. He states: "me han hecho pensar en cómo los ingenios bien usados permiten narrar la naturaleza con una nueva poesía. ... Me pregunto si hoy Thoreau se habría llevado a su cabaña un dron" (Martínez 2020, 399–400). Given the American naturalist's determination to live as spartan an existence as possible and his ambivalence toward modern technology, there is no guarantee that Martínez's question would receive a positive response.⁸ Díaz, meanwhile, is most visibly moved when his son, the composer Pablo Díaz Fanjul, uses the drop box to give him a sample of some of the music that will go on to form the film's soundtrack. This glimpse of the ways in which the one-hundred-day sojourn in the mountains is already being instrumentalized – while still in progress – for its artistic and commercial potential strikes a hollow note, for all the considerable qualities of the film's score.

Scholars of tourism have suggested that a theme park must meet a range of relevant criteria to be so designated: spaces that can be enjoyed by pedestrians in contrast to the dominance of the car in suburban America; that are safe, regulated and free from crime, unlike the generally perceived experience of urban America. Theme parks present a festival-type environment, with active forms of entertainment, which contrasts with the dominance of passive leisure options in many people's suburban lives. They offer a seemingly liberating experience and illusions of escapism from the demands of everyday life (Lovell and Bull 2017, 173). All of which can equally be applied to Díaz's interaction with the Parque Natural de Redes. That environment becomes for him a theme park whose major attraction is the (illusory?) possibility of personal growth, which is also held out as an enticement to would-be customers of his own tourism venture. He is both the subject of his own experiment in solitude and a would-be empresario selling its possibilities to others – an uneasy ambivalence which the documentary never supersedes. While he may be disappointingly unaware of the irony, Díaz's film demonstrates the unwitting truth of one of his voice-over observations:

Aquí en las montañas todo tiene sentido por sí mismo desde cualquier distancia, sin necesidad de que lo mire nadie. Por eso, al contemplarlo desde el cielo, el bosque me permite perderme en él, sin tener que encontrar ninguna explicación. Cada árbol, cada roca, cada arroyo se explican por sí solos; componen una sinfonía a la que yo no tengo nada que añadir. (Díaz 2018)

Gabi Martínez, *Un cambio de verdad*

Gabi Martínez's book, *Un cambio de verdad*, sees its author-protagonist embark on a journey likewise billed as a flight from city life – in this case, Barcelona – to the more tranquil rhythms of rural Spain. It is, likewise, a journey of self-discovery, as its subtitle – *Una vuelta al origen en tierra de pastores* – indicates, with the origin in question being that of Martínez's maternal grandparents in northeastern Extremadura. He returns, just as Raymond Williams has analyzed, to a rural landscape associated with "an idea of childhood: not only the local memories, or the ideally shared communal memory, but the feel of childhood: of delighted absorption in our own world, from which, eventually, in the course of growing up, we are distanced and separated" (Williams 2016, 427). As it transpires, the brief account of his grandparents' decision to leave the area decades before speaks to the demographic shifts implicitly addressed in "#SoyMinero":

Para cambiar se tiene que llegar a un punto, y comprender que ese punto ha llegado. Con mis abuelos fue así: después de toda la vida pastoreando las tierras y el ganado de un hombre, mi abuelo le visitó con mi madre, que entonces ya tenía doce años, para pedirle algo más de dinero:

—A ver si puedo cambiar los zapatos de la pequeña, que mire cómo los tiene.
—Todavía estoy esperando los zapatos nuevos – me dijo mi madre hace unos meses.
(Martínez 2020, 172)

Such were the degrading feudal conditions fled by many thousands, if not millions, of Spaniards over the course of the last two centuries: a choice between remaining mired in millennial poverty, under the thumb of landowners who regarded them with disdain, or trying their luck in the expanding cities. Martínez is the prodigal grandson returning to tend his flock in the most literal sense, given that he will take charge of several hundred sheep while getting to know an area named La Siberia for its tundra-like openness and sparse population. This latter point – the area's dwindling number of inhabitants – is a constant refrain in Martínez's account, marking his book as a contribution to debates on rural depopulation. Among the paradoxes of that fact is that Sergio del Molino was anxious to emphasize in *La España vacía* how much the anxiety over migration away from rural Spain was fed by a nostalgia for, and a degree of false consciousness about, a lost arcadian past that never really existed. It could be argued that the Martínez of *Un cambio de verdad* is an encapsulation of one of Del Molino's most telling insights: "La infancia es una patria poderosa, pero la infancia de los padres y de los abuelos lo es mucho más" (2016, 81). Martínez's book has a neoruralist premise which seeks to answer a question formulated by Joan Ramón Resina: "whether something like a rural society, or more precisely something that inherits modes of experience from a no-longer existing rural community can emerge from the wreckage of urban, i.e., capitalistic exploitation of the land" (2012, 10).

As Martínez finds his feet in the spartan accommodation he has found – no running water, a petrol generator he can afford to run for only a few hours per day – and in the wider community, it becomes clear that rival schemes for regenerating this landscape are vying for supremacy. Two possibilities for halting the exodus of younger people and reinvigorating the local economy compete for investment and political support, though both have the potential to reshape the environment in ways that breed mistrust. The first is to turn La Siberia into a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve:

La Reserva es un proyecto para visibilizar a la comarca como destino de naturaleza. Si saliera adelante, la Unión Europea velaría por que estos espacios se mantuvieran lo bastante vírgenes, preservaría los Montes Públicos y La Siberia gozaría de una marca de calidad que podría favorecer la llegada de algún turista, sinónimo de ingresos añadidos, seguramente modestos pero suficientes para mantener en marcha a varios pueblos en flagrante decrecimiento. En Garbayuela, por ejemplo, el año pasado nació un solo niño y era el hijo del alcalde. (Martínez 2020, 145–146)

When it is suggested that adopting less invasive farming techniques and rewilding the countryside could mean the reintroduction of wolves, the support of local sheep farmers fades away. Other people Martínez meets are more skeptical and suggest that the rumors about wolves are being spread deliberately by a different species of autochthonous apex predator – the big local landowners: "Varios grandes ganaderos y algún

empresario influyente desconfían del control que pueda ejercer Europa sobre miles de hectáreas, de modo que desde el principio han criticado a la Reserva” (2020, 146).⁹ The second project is to build a theme park (though this later morphs into a waterpark) that will attract tourists and create two thousand jobs. Local politicians strategically brandish talk of this tantalizing possibility in the run-up to elections, while actual progress towards attracting investment, identifying a site and building the relevant infrastructure proves more elusive. Martínez relays the world-weariness of local farmer, Miguel, who has long since cottoned onto the cynical game being played at the electorate’s expense:

A mí me han engañado pocas veces – dice al detener el motor –, pero me han engañado. Y los que lo han hecho siempre iban vestidos de traje y corbata. Sobre el parque temático ese ... la verdad, no me gusta pero tampoco voy a ponerme en contra porque conozco a personas que están a favor y entiendo sus razones. Ésta es una zona difícil, con mucho paro, y hay gente que ve las cosas de otra manera. (2020, 206)

These local politicians are merely the latest iteration of a system of rural vote rigging that has its roots deep in nineteenth-century Spain. They are modern-day *caciques*, who, though no longer able – like their erstwhile historical equivalents – to bully, threaten or cajole people into voting the “right” way, still find the means to keep power in the hands of those who have held it in perpetuity.¹⁰ As Del Molino explains in *La España vacía*, a quirk of Spain’s 1978 Constitution means that the system of proportional representation in general elections breaks down in provinces where there are low numbers of voters. In such cases the system effectively reverts to a first-past-the-post model in which the largest party occupies all the available parliamentary seats (2016, 64–68). That quirk and the vested interests of powerful landowners thus conspire to ensure that the larger parties of the political right have largely held sway in much of la España vacía. Nor is that the only weapon in their armory. After a livestock auction a short time later, the smallholders in local bars grumble into their drinks about the owners of the largest herds who manipulate the market to increase the value of sheep when it is their animals going under the hammer: “por mucho que a menudo acusen a las metrópolis de fagocitarlo todo, o al gobierno de no subvencionar lo suficiente, son ellos mismos quienes también propician la fuga a las ciudades” (Martínez 2020, 242). One of the narrative arcs of *Un cambio de verdad* is closed in the final pages of the book when Miguel announces news that the Canadian company that had been lined up to invest in the waterpark project has baulked at the enormous cost and pulled out, leaving it dead in the water, so to speak.

Valuable as these glimpses are of how vested interests conspire to maintain a failing status quo, Martínez’s book raises an issue germane to much of the new nature writing – as well as travel writing *per se* – which is one of intentionality. Does a writer travel exclusively for the purposes of gathering new material from which to write, or does the traveler take a journey that in retrospect seems memorable enough to write up? In today’s world of publishing and given the challenges of forging a career as a professional writer, the strong suspicion would be in favor of the former of these two scenarios. I argue that such a realization has consequences for the sense of authenticity the resulting text can command, perhaps particularly when the travel narrative in question – whether a written travelogue or a documentary film – bills itself as a personal journey of self-discovery or reconnection with a mourned or spectral past. Are the insights that accrue around such journeys simply of

the kind demanded by the narrative arc of a travelogue or a ninety-minute documentary? Or are they faithful records of experience as lived by the narrator? As Jos Smith has argued, nature writing has been particularly dogged by “a wariness of literary artifice” ever since its identification as a distinctive style of prose (2018, 10). As early as 1936, the editor of one of the first anthologies of “modern nature writing”, Henry Williamson, averred that “most people leave such books alone, and suspect with a tendency to derision, the idea of ‘nature loving’ ... which is bad, inefficient, amateurish, imitative, pretentious writing” (quoted in Smith 2018, 8–9). The artifice germane to much of the new nature writing in the United Kingdom and Spain arguably exacerbates the problem because it is an artifice that seems always in danger of collapsing under the weight of its own kitsch:

[Timothy] Morton challenges nature writers for, in a manner less than self-conscious, attempting to close the gap between language and the world, but in so doing making use of more and more complex forms of rhetoric that are mired in convention. One trope in particular Morton uses as an example goes something like this: “As I write this, I am sitting on the sea shore. ... No,” he scoffs, “that was just pure fiction; just a tease. ... As I write this, a western scrub jay is chattering outside my window. ... That was also just a fiction,” he scoffs again. ... In trying to close that gap, to somehow break down all the distancing effects of language ... the nature writer unwittingly creates a complicated rhetorical maze that Morton dismisses as “kitsch”. (Smith 2018, 26–27)

One of the most celebrated practitioners of both nature and travel writing of recent decades, the German writer W. G. Sebald, has also acknowledged this tension: “Moving from one subject, from one theme, from one concern, to another always requires some sleight of hand” (quoted in Schutte 2018, 72).

In the remainder of this discussion, I examine what I take to be the significant insights Martínez offers up as accruing from his time in La Siberia. What does his time in Extremadura tell his audience about the future of rural Spain, about himself, about nature writing as a discipline? The first of them I wish to examine is the sense of his own career trajectory, namely that writing about his point of origin has brought him full circle, back to his beginnings, after much time outside Spain. At the time *Un cambio de verdad* appeared, Martínez had written fiction and nonfiction based on his travels in China, Morocco, New Zealand and Pakistan, as well as New York City, the Great Barrier Reef and the Nile Delta. The author sows the figurative seed of the question of origins early in his account: “Ir al origen de mi madre también es viajar a algo anterior a ella, y tiene que ver con semillas y raíces. ¿De dónde sacó su resistencia? La aspiración es intuir el origen de su fuerza” (Martínez 2020, 23). His time in La Siberia is, like Díaz’s stay in the Parque Natural de Redes, a sojourn with a designated theme – reconnection with familial heritage. He is prompted to reflect further after being afflicted with writer’s block, something he compares to the fertility treatment he needed to avail himself of in order for he and his then-partner to conceive: “La experiencia de tener que acudir a ayuda médica para concebir a mi hijo me hizo comprender que la facilidad de la naturaleza en ocasiones no es tanta y por supuesto que no hay que dar nada por sentado, ni siquiera la creación” (Martínez 2020, 12). Precisely when he had begun to think of himself as a writer whose powers and ability were consolidated and ready for any task, he discovered the difficulty of writing about matters closer to home. Key to circumventing the problem was thinking of his career in different terms, as an apprenticeship in writing about far-off lands to gain the skills to turn the lens of scrutiny on himself, his homeland and his relationship with his mother:

Es decir, he hecho un viaje literario al revés: me entrené a fuerza de extraños antes de mirar a los míos. Es otra forma de aprender. Pero, aunque tantas madres parezcan iguales, sobre la tuya sueles saber demasiado. Sobre tu país, también. A escribir, a narrar, no ayuda saber tanto, la moral importa más. (Martínez 2020, 127)

Engaging though this narrative arc might be, it happens to be simply untrue. It is at variance with the reality of Martínez's career. His first published work of nonfiction was indeed an account of his travels in Morocco, *Solo marroquí* (1999), yet his second and third were set on home soil: *Diablo de Timanfaya* (2000), detailing his exploration of the Canary Islands, and the sadistically underedited *Una España inesperada* (2005), describing a variety of locations across the Spanish mainland. In fact, *Diablo de Timanfaya* gained an unexpected afterlife and was republished in 2021, prompted by the eruption of the Cumbre Vieja volcano on the island of La Palma. During a round of appearances on Spanish news networks, Martínez was keen to point out that his book had warned two decades previously of the danger of building homes on the slopes of an active volcano; homes that were now crumbling into lava flows or burning swiftly to the ground. As Martínez also observed with a possible hint of schadenfreude, not only had the relevant authorities chosen to ignore his earlier warnings, but they also engaged in a textbook example of shooting the messenger who had delivered bad news: the Cabildo of La Palma led an active campaign against his book, denounced it in the local press and urged the island's booksellers not to stock it.

What of the fate of La Siberia itself and Martínez's experience of reconnecting with ancestral roots? At the book's outset, he recognizes that his commitment to the area is – of necessity – only temporary:

Sigo económicamente tan pelado como siempre pero mi hermano vivirá en mi casa de Barcelona encargándose del alquiler hasta que yo vuelva. Con eso y los ahorros estoy cubierto seis meses. Ayuda haber encontrado vivienda gratis y la garantía de que los gastos serán mínimos durante esta temporada que preveo resolver a base de alimentos básicos y algunos de los que proporcione el campo: dicen que, a partir de primavera, si quisiera y supiera, podría comer de él. (Martínez 2020, 23)

Just as the urban tourists who play at being miners in Rosa's short story subsidize the existence of a community that would otherwise be slowly dying, Martínez performs a role not dissimilar. His stay is only ever conceived of as temporary. To give the author his due, he is not unaware of the tension his position creates; something that appears clear from the title of his account. The words "un cambio de verdad" could be taken for their self-help-inflected surface meaning: an opportunity to change the fundamental "truth" or purpose of the author's existence; contact with the ancestral rhythms of rural life prompting a reevaluation of priorities. In fact, the words are spoken by his friend Miguel during a conversation at El Cuervo, a dilapidated small holding to which he takes his flocks at the height of summer. Martínez has announced his intention to return to Barcelona, prompting Miguel to wonder whether his rural community has a realistic future. He challenges the author:

—Como tú. ¿Tú por qué estás aquí?
 —No sé, Miguel. Ya te lo he dicho alguna vez. Mi madre y mis abuelos ...
 —Ya, ya. Pero tú, tú. ¿Por qué estás aquí? ¿Por qué te has venido con los Cabello a echar tiempo con las ovejas y los pavos y los burros? (Martínez 2020, 275)

The author's answer can only be described as evasive, returning as it does to one of Miguel's hobbyhorses, which is the promotion of historically indigenous species of sheep. Miguel tries again with a plea for the author to make a go of a rural life – "Necesitamos personas que vengan al campo" – and urges him to imagine what El Cuervo could look like if someone were to resurrect its fortunes: "Tú no mires cómo está, imagina cómo puede estar. ... ¿Cómo lo ves? Porque esto sí que es un cambio de verdad, ¿eh?" (Martínez 2020, 277). Thus, the quotation that gives the book its title alludes to the very act of severing the umbilical cord to Barcelona and committing to this landscape and its future. It is a commitment the author simply cannot make.

Pulling in the other direction, meanwhile, is a desire to belong, to gain access, to be accepted. A desire he acknowledges, moreover, early in his stay, when his initial attempts to meet people and strike up conversations are met with skeptical incredulity that an outsider could possibly find anything of interest in such a backwater: "Una postura que tampoco está tan mal porque sugiere un desafío: si superas la capa de desalentadoras palabras, accederás a lo incontado" (Martínez 2020, 38). In his seminal study of tourism, MacCannell theorized the existence of "front" and "back" spaces, the former engineered for the outsider-spectator, the latter accessible to the trusted indigenous population. It is the aspiration of the tourist to gain access to "back" spaces because they are more intrinsically authentic:

Touristic experience is circumscribed by the structural tendencies described here. Sightseers are motivated by a desire to see life as it is really lived, even to get in with the natives, and at the same time they are deprecated for always failing to achieve these goals. The term "tourist" is increasingly used as a derisive label for someone who seems content with his obviously inauthentic experiences. (MacCannell 2013, 92)

Birgit Trauer and Chris Ryan likewise discuss the intimacy value associated with drawing back the veil on a society's secrets through association with native peoples whose roots there run deep (2005, 482). It is precisely this dynamic which appears to lure in Martínez when he is invited into the intimacy of Miguel's family home for dinner:

—¿Qué te parece? – pregunta Miguel encendiendo un cigarro al final de la comida.
—Impresionante.
—Pues es todo ilegal.

Nada de los hay en la mesa ha pasado ningún control sanitario. Todo ha sido recogido y facturado por las personas que tengo delante. Marisa se encargó de fermentar la leche de sus cabras retintas para después amasarla con las manos frías, porque dice que sale mejor. (Martínez 2020, 103)

His admission to an increased level of trust and intimacy draws him further into the community.

If the tug of war over his sense of belonging remains unresolved, what of his reconnection with his Siberian roots? It is perhaps here that the book's most solid claims to a satisfactory narrative arc lie. I quoted above Martínez's aspiration to understand better what formed his mother's character. Early on in his time as a shepherd, he gains an embodied insight into the demands of agricultural and domestic female labor, having had to spend a good while bent over studying the wounds of a dead sheep.

Después de examinar en cuclillas la herida donde empiezan a asomar gusanos, un trallazo me agujiunea los riñones dejándome a media incorporación. Siria [su perra] ha erguido el lomo al

percibir mi estremecimiento, el peaje de vivir a gachas. Las mini sillitas de enea, los fogones a la altura del muslo, sacar agua del pozo y transportar el barreño hasta la casa, fregar los platos en palanganas que sólo puedo colocar en el suelo, coger leña, encender fuegos. ... Con la mano a la espalda y medio cuerpo encorvado es más fácil entender a millones de madres y abuelas que se han pasado media vida invocando a los riñones. (Martínez 2020, 48)

Martínez comes to the realization that, alongside the rigors of domestic labor, Spain's women have had to carve out a place for themselves in "un país tan obsesionado con el aparato genital masculino" (Martínez 2020, 91). His admiration for their achievements in that context only grows: "Hay mujeres como mi madre, criadas en la profundidad rural, que entendieron el valor de su sexo y soportaron indecibles embestidas por difundir su visión femenina" (Martínez 2020, 91).

The turn to the question of gender and parenting cannot but recall the final scenes of Díaz's documentary, in which he is reunited with his wife and two sons. A significant prerequisite that made his sojourn in the mountains possible was the fact that his wife was prepared to keep the home fires burning while he was away. As Martínez's narrative reaches its conclusion, the reader realizes that his time in La Siberia has relied on an analogous dependency, given that his son has been looked after by his ex-wife until father and son are reunited in the final weeks of his stay. Martínez reveals that his relationship with his own mother had come under strain in recent years due to the breakdown of his marriage, a subject about which he is tight-lipped, even with that very son, who is still full of questions over the paternal decision to curtail family life. Such reflections on gender, responsibility and communication jar oddly with the conclusion Martínez reaches after months with his flock – that what connects him strongly to his mother is his admiration for her caregiving:

Algo que cuidar. De una manera distinta a como parecía estipulado. Cuidar a un hijo sin ser un hombre-toro. Diría que en la base de algunos de mis actos fundamentales está el haber querido ser madre. Quise adoptar una sensibilidad que no percibía en mi género. Ser el responsable sin excusas de otra vida. Supongo que estos deseos son la reacción a la mirada ultramacho adquirida en el entorno donde me eduqué, y la acepto. Es la que tengo, con sus deseos. (Martínez 2020, 335)

As he prepares to return to Barcelona, he has arguably joined Rosa's miners and Díaz the documentarian in using depopulated Spain as a theme park in which to play out the story of his personal growth. In that sense, they have all fulfilled Del Molino's prophecy, delivered in the final pages of *La España vacía*:

Y es ahora, cuando ya apenas existe, cuando sólo es un mito en la conciencia dispersa de millones de familias, cuando toma la palabra. Se reinventa y se expresa a través de los nietos y bisnietos de quienes la habitaron y fueron arrancados de sus solares. Toma forma de enumeración de adjetivos que nadie usa en la calle pero que, puestos en un libro o recitados por un actor, adquieren el poder de una invocación mágica. (2016, 251)

Conclusion

As I show above, the narrator of "#SoyMinero" expresses concern that the renewed prosperity his community is experiencing thanks to the reinvention of industrial labor as recreational tourism could yet founder. If the fad for such experiences should fade in its turn, the cycle of decline will only resume. Rosa is alluding to the fickle and unpredictable

trends in the tourism industry, one founded on a principle explored with beguiling frankness by MacCannell: “Tourists dislike tourists. God is dead, but man’s need to feel holier than his fellows lives. And the religious impulse to go beyond can be found not merely in our work ethic ... but in some of our leisure acts as well” (2013, 10). If the problem of a depopulated Spain is to be addressed as a burning political issue, depicting it in the fictional, filmic and nonfictional texts examined in this article as a theme park in which to stage narratives of self-renewal is not a realistic agenda for future prosperity. It is striking that in the same period – the 2010s – politicians acknowledged the existence of a problem many decades in the making, the sample of artists examined here should have both satirized and fallen into the traps of a narcissistic indulgence of rural life. Such an exclusive emphasis on the choices of the individual perhaps speaks to a political climate in which problems at the scale of “la España rural” seem beyond realistic resolution.

Notes

1. For an overview of cultural responses to this phenomenon, see Fernández-Cebrián (2023). For an overview of the politics of water in contemporary Spain, see Swyngedouw (2015).
2. For an account of their collaboration, see Bollain and Llamazares (2000).
3. For two scholarly approaches to *Tiza roja*, see Gustrán Loscos 2023 and Araújo Branco 2023.
4. For further information on the strike, see Herrero and Lemkow 2015.
5. For further examination of *Crónicas de un pueblo*, see Smith 2006, 58–81.
6. For an overview of recent developments in filming Spain’s rural landscapes, see González del Pozo 2021.
7. The website advertising Díaz’s company, *Redes de Ensueño*, can be found here: <http://www.josecaleao.com/index.php>.
8. Thoreau’s stance is famously articulated in the “Where I Lived, and What I Loved For” chapter of his celebrated work, *Walden* (1854).
9. La Siberia was in fact granted this status in June 2019, something which goes unmentioned in Martínez’s book.
10. For an explanation of the workings of nineteenth-century *caciquismo*, see Preston 2020, 7–27.

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