

Shifting Subjectivities  
in Contemporary  
Fiction and Film  
from Spain



# Shifting Subjectivities in Contemporary Fiction and Film from Spain

Edited by

Jennifer Brady and Meredith L. Jeffers

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



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This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-0777-7

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0777-7

“No entiendo la vida sin libros ni literatura”  
—Rosa Montero

Engaging in literary and filmic texts remind us that we are all learners and teachers. The insightful studies of the authors of this book affirm that collaboration, whether through written language or in conversation, is the foundation of all that we do. We thank our teachers—university professors, loved ones, friends, and collaborators—for their many lessons, affirmations, and joyous moments. This volume is fueled by their passion and guidance.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Jennifer Brady and Meredith L. Jeffers	

## **Part One: Representing Recovery in Post-Crisis Spain**

Chapter One.....	10
Precarious Narratives: Subjectivity in Rosario Izquierdo's <i>Diario de campo</i> and Elvira Navarro's <i>La trabajadora</i>	
Christian Claesson	

Chapter Two .....	37
Ghosts in the Present: The Haunting Voices of Contemporary Youth in Twenty-First-Century Spanish Film	
Graham Stefan Ignizio	

## **Part Two: Marginalized Texts and Identities**

Chapter Three .....	54
Exile and Psychosis in Joseba Sarrionandia's <i>Lagun Izoztua</i>	
Ibon Izurieta Otazua	

Chapter Four.....	70
Transcribing Loss: Kirmen Uribe's <i>Bilbao—New York—Bilbao</i>	
Meredith L. Jeffers	

## **Part Three: Silenced/Silencing Subjectivities**

Chapter Five .....	88
The Interplay of Female Voice(lessness) and Agency in the Face of Objectification, Commodification, and Fetishization in Carlos Vermut's <i>Magical Girl</i> (2014)	
Maureen Tobin Stanley	

Chapter Six.....	113
The Other (in) Silence: Transgressive Subjectivities and Emptied Spaces in Contemporary Literature and Film	
Eduardo Barros Grela	
<b>Part Four: (Re)Formulating Relationships</b>	
Chapter Seven.....	134
Schizophrenia, Sex, and Sentience: Familial (Dys)function as Identity Formation in <i>La isla interior</i> (2009)	
Heather Jerónimo	
Chapter Eight.....	155
Almodóvar's Palimpsestuous Bastards: Interserial Interpretations of Illegitimate Identities in <i>La mala educación</i> (2004), <i>Volver</i> (2006), and <i>La piel que habito</i> (2011)	
Amanda Eaton McMenamin	
<b>Part Five: Spaces of Desire and Control</b>	
Chapter Nine.....	182
Desiring Bodies: Disorienting Texts and Spaces in Two Contemporary Literary Works by Juan José Millás	
Jennifer Brady	
Chapter Ten .....	209
The Barcelonian Bourgeoisie in Ruins: Jaume Balagueró's <i>Mientras duermes</i> (2011)	
Conxita Domènech	
About the Authors .....	224
Index.....	229



# INTRODUCTION

JENNIFER BRADY AND MEREDITH L. JEFFERS

## **Subjects and Subjectivities**

The notion of self is not isolated. Rather, it is a complex paradigm that constantly fluctuates in response to internal and external forces. Intersectionality thus guides the contemplation of one's notion of self: race, gender, marital status, ethnicity, age, professional status, intellectual status, physical ability, health, and nationhood, among other categorizations, all account for the ways in which we come to understand ourselves and come to be understood by others. Conceptualizing identity (or identities) in cultural products—namely, in works of cinema and literature—can therefore be a tricky pursuit. If comprehending one's self is at the very core of human thought and experience, how may we represent individual subjects and their corresponding sets of beliefs and traits? How may we portray the process of questioning one's identity—of formulating subjectivity? And how does language, itself an imperfect system, further problematize said conceptualization and articulation of self?

These questions form the foundation of the present anthology. The constellation of studies compiled within this book offers insight into the complex nature of how the self and subjectivity are represented, contested, and contemplated in cultural products from Spain in the twenty-first century. When we think about literary and filmic representations of subjectivity, we peel back the proverbial layers of the self to expose political statements, social consciousness, subjective insights, philosophical musings, linguistic inquiries, and psychological ramifications. This is part of the power (and pleasure) of engaging with literature and film.

That subjectivities shift and reshape means that much can be learned about how literary and filmic representations of the self have evolved and continue to evolve. Following Gail Weiss:

the becoming of the subject cannot be described through a linear trajectory, but involves a disparate series of backward and forward movements in which the subject repetitively, reflexively, turns back upon itself, and

moreover, this self that the subject returns to is not a fixed self but a self that is phantasmatically projected as a stable site of significance. (1999, 121)

If we take inventory of the literary and filmic representations of self and subjectivity pertaining to twenty-first-century Spain, we may better understand how individuals are attempting to understand and identify themselves—and how these processes are perpetual and problematic. We may similarly discover what pressures have most come to affect notions of self in contemporary Spain and how the self perceives interactions with others. Such reflection and reflexivity are embedded in the works that are studied throughout this volume.

## **Spain in the Twenty-First Century**

Spain, a country located on the Iberian Peninsula, boasts approximately 46.5 million people in a geographic space of about 193,000 square miles (the approximate size of the two US states, Colorado and Minnesota, where the editors of this collection currently reside). It is a multilingual and multicultural nation whose past has been plagued by a series of seemingly disparate (yet ultimately connected) backward and forward movements, which Raymond Carr (2000) aptly characterized as the ebb and flow of Spanish history. For this reason, Spain's "becoming"—to borrow Weiss's term—cannot be described in a purely linear trajectory. Instead, the process of understanding Spain now is intrinsically and inevitably tied to the process of understanding Spain's past.

In the case of the current anthology, our contributors are principally motivated by the desire to reflect upon the primary forces shaping twenty-first-century Spanish subjectivities, as represented in a variety of works produced in Spain since the turn of the century. This enterprise depends upon an awareness of the trends that bind contemporary Spain to its past; key among them, one finds family, gender, economic disparity, political affiliation, minority status, and power.

As a means of orienting the less familiar reader, and perhaps at the risk of oversimplifying knowledge the veteran scholar may already possess, we offer the following brief overview of the historical milestones that will be referenced throughout this volume. In the twentieth century, Spain's ebb and flow consisted of progressive years (e.g., the Second Republic [1931–36]), violent years (e.g., the Spanish Civil War [1936–39]), and retrogressive years (e.g., the fascist dictatorship of Francisco Franco [1939–75]). In 1978, the current Constitution, based on democratic principles, was instituted. The end of dictatorship and subsequent Transition to democratic

government—arguably a progressive and retrogressive process—made way for the last two decades of the twentieth century in Spain, which were characterized by countercultural movements (e.g., the *movida madrileña*), increased expression(s) of individuality, and an implicit “pact of silence.”<sup>1</sup>

The new millennium offers a starting point from which to reconsider the past and ponder the future, for many reasons. Aside from being a symbolic temporal marker, the turn of the century in Spain has been dominated by two significant trends, both of which have informed the representations of self observed in the primary works studied throughout this volume: the recovery of historical memory pertaining to the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship, and the response to the global economic crisis that reverberated throughout the country since the collapse of Lehman Brothers.

With respect to the former, the foundation of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (referred to as the ARMH, or *Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*) in the year 2000 began responding to and fueling a renewed interest in the past. Its primary mission has been to collect information about the “ghosts” that continue haunting the Spanish present, in the form of testimonies and texts previously unavailable to the general public.<sup>2</sup> The revamped preoccupation with the recovery of historical memory has been prompted by a sense of urgency—not just personal but temporal. In Spain, the progressive loss both of firsthand witnesses of and participants in the Spanish Civil War and of those who lived during the Franco regime has put pressure on the younger generation to create a more complete record of what transpired. As we pen this introduction, mass grave sites, undeniable proof of Spain’s unavoidable ties to its more violent past, continue to be uncovered as the country (re)builds and (re)develops. The need to recover history and memory has become a key theme in literature and film produced since 2000: in some works, it is overtly represented whereas in others it is more implicitly implanted. Nonetheless, the recovery of history and memory is intrinsically tied to the discovery of self and the formulation of subjectivity, as seen in the works analyzed within this anthology.

The global economic crisis of 2008 has also deeply impacted twenty-first-century Spain and its cultural production. Also known as the Great Recession in Spain or the Great Spanish Depression, Spain’s crisis was instigated by the housing bubble and the accompanying unsustainably high GDP growth rate. Although some fundamental national economic problems were evident prior to the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, the financial shocks produced by its breakdown caused the worst national unemployment rise ever recorded, as well as reduced income per capita

and access to education and public services. Perhaps less obviously, the economic crisis has also affected the relationships between and identities of disparate autonomous communities within Spain, which have reconsidered their affiliations, priorities, and global statuses. Recovering from crisis and negotiating identity in times of crisis thus inform the representations of self that are to be explored throughout the contemporary works of literature and film presented within this volume.

Authors and film directors alike have demonstrated an ongoing commitment to keeping Spain's recent past a part of the contemporary narrative.<sup>3</sup> As such, it is our responsibility as scholars to examine their works in an attempt to better understand the subjects and subjectivities that comprise present-day Spain.

### About the Book

The current collection brings together a variety of scholars from the United States and Europe. Collectively, we analyze shifting notions of self, as represented in films and novels written and produced in Spain in the twenty-first century. In doing so, our goal is to establish a global dialogue of multicultural perspectives on trends in contemporary Spain, which we hope will serve as a useful reference for scholars and students of Spain alike. All the contributors selected the literary and filmic works that were to serve as the focus of their study. Their insights are well-grounded and provocative, united by the primary theme of the anthology and by the editorial decision to limit the study to the turn of the century.

The book is divided into five parts, each of which features two chapters that are thematically linked: "Representing Recovery in Post-Crisis Spain," "Marginalized Texts and Identities," "Silenced / Silencing Subjectivities," "(Re)Formulating Relationships," and "Spaces of Desire and Control." Part One includes analyses of novels and films that explicitly and / or implicitly represent the response of the self to the economic crisis of 2008. Claesson's chapter sets the framework for how subjectivity is understood in this collection. Using Rosario Izquierdo's *Diario de campo* (2013) and Elvira Navarro's *La trabajadora* (2014), two novels that embrace and transcend the crisis, he shows how the fictional subjects relate to the surrounding collective. Ignizio focuses on the representation of youth in Spain in Alberto Rodríguez's *La isla mínima* (2014) and David Trueba's *Vivir es fácil con los ojos cerrados* (2013). He demonstrates the ways in which contemporary Spain is experiencing a newer wave of haunting: specifically, how the economic crisis has produced and continues

producing twenty-first-century “ghosts” that plague society, particularly the younger generation depicted in the films.

In Part Two of the anthology, “Marginalized Texts and Identities,” our authors explore literary representations of marginal/ized, specifically Basque, identities, as mediated by exile and transcription. Izurieta’s chapter analyzes Joseba Sarrionandia’s *Lagun Izoztua* (2001), a complex novel that emphasizes the universal problem of identity as a constantly shifting, multi-leveled sense of self. He argues that Basques, including Basque exiles, may recover the political activist potential of their subaltern experience through their performance of identity—without submitting to the national (Spanish) norm. Jeffers offers a complementary close reading of the representation of Basque identity through use of transcripts in Kirmen Uribe’s *Bilbao—New York—Bilbao* (2008), a novel that explores the impossibility of reproducing, and thus preserving, that which is absent and / or no longer.

The studies of Part Three, “Silenced / Silencing Subjectivities,” explore three unique filmic and literary works. For her part, Tobin Stanley investigates Carlos Vermut’s film *Magical Girl* (2014) as a commentary on gender, Spanishness, and self-definition in an ever-changing world. Positing that Vermut uses recognizable contemporary Spanish mythemes and iconography to denounce Spain’s recent state of affairs, Tobin Stanley offers a feminist approach to *Magical Girl* that exposes how the female body of the protagonist continues to contest objectivization, violence, and fetishization through forms of silent, “voiceless,” bodily expression. Barros Grela also considers Vermut’s *Magical Girl*, in addition to Julio Medem’s film *Caótica Ana* (2007) and Marina Perezagua’s novel *Yoro* (2015). By examining the tension between cultural ideology and identity production, he shows that the auteurs attempt to overcome articulation impediments, vestiges of silence and silencing in the twentieth century, through the representation of silence and space in their works.

Part Four, “(Re)Formulating Relationships,” offers new perspectives on identities and their intersections with others, as represented in four popular and commercially successful twenty-first-century Spanish films. Jerónimo studies the tension between the self and the Spanish family in Dunia Ayaso and Félix Sabroso’s film *La isla interior* (2009). She outlines the multigenerational transmission of memory and its impact on identity formation, showing how the family is portrayed as an isolated and isolating space of fragmentation. Meanwhile, McMenamín offers an interserial reading of three of Pedro Almodóvar’s recent films: *La mala educación* (2004), *Volver* (2006), and *La piel que habito* (2011). She examines the notion of *casta / mala casta* in them, which produces and

eschews a spurious link between disparate periods: Golden Age Spain, Francoist Spain, and twenty-first-century Spain.

Finally, Part Five, “Spaces of Desire and Control,” groups together two chapters that offer complementary analyses of how the self is subject to the space(s) it inhabits. Brady investigates the repeated theme of desire in two of Juan José Millás’s twenty-first-century narratives: the novel *Dos mujeres en Praga* (2002) and the collection of short stories titled *Cuentos de adúlteros desorientados* (2003). She identifies yearning as the catalyst for examining physical bodies and notions of self in Millás’s characters; in these two texts they participate in corporeal modification and fragmentation or clandestine erotic acts. Domènech scrutinizes Jaume Balagueró’s film *Mientras duermes* (2011), articulating how the film presents an interesting take on gender, economic, and power struggles in contemporary Spain. Specifically, if bourgeois women emanated a sense of feminist liberty at the turn of the twenty-first century, it may be argued that the same women have been subsequently silenced by the effects of the economic crisis and the symbolic restoration of the patriarchy.

The cohort of studies in this anthology emphasize that change is a constant. Here, shifting notions of subjectivities in fiction and film from Spain in the twenty-first century may not only present individual cases of the self in motion, but also offer commentary on communities of people in twenty-first-century Spain. It is our hope that *Shifting Subjectivities in Contemporary Fiction and Film from Spain* thus inspires readers to watch and read the texts studied herein and to engage in analyses of them. Filmic and literary texts may teach us about economic, political, and social situations. Perhaps more importantly, however, text—with its mysteriously provocative messages entrenched in the power of language—may give insight into the subtle movements of our individual and collective subjectivities.

One final note: the authors of the chapters in this anthology are committed to the study of literary and filmic works written and directed by minority groups, including female and LGBTQ writers and directors, as well as writers and directors representing minority cultures within Spain. They are similarly engaged in presenting newer voices from the filmic and literary landscape of contemporary Spain and in offering new perspectives on more established works. It is the hope of the editors that scholarship continues in these directions: paying critical attention to films and texts by and about underrepresented groups and shedding new light on more canonical works.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sebastiaan Faber (2005) offers an excellent summary of what he calls “the price of peace” in his review.

<sup>2</sup> See Urioste Azcorra (2009) for an in-depth overview of the political and literary milieux of Spain during the last twenty-five years of the twentieth century, as well as Alonso (2003) for more information about novels published in Spain during the last twenty-five years of the twentieth century.

<sup>3</sup> See Labanyi (2000) for a thorough explanation of the notion of haunting, as well as Labanyi (2007) for a more recent analysis of memory in modern-day Spain.

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**PART ONE:**  
**REPRESENTING RECOVERY**  
**IN POST-CRISIS SPAIN**

## CHAPTER ONE

# PRECARIOUS NARRATIVES: SUBJECTIVITY IN ROSARIO IZQUIERDO'S *DIARIO DE CAMPO* AND ELVIRA NAVARRO'S *LA TRABAJADORA*

CHRISTIAN CLAESSION  
LUND UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

### Introduction

Virtually every Spanish novel published in the last few years set in contemporary Spain will be marked by the economic and social crisis that has rocked the country since the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008. The crisis has been so pervasive and enduring that it would be difficult to avoid it altogether; if a novel does not mention the crisis, the absence would be conspicuous. Even though the economic crisis in Spain is now an unavoidable part of the country's literary imaginary, critics have discussed whether the literary consequence is the rise of the genuinely political novel or if the political might be covering up something more. The Spanish novelist Gonzalo Torné points out that interest in political matters within works of literature has grown, but most authors lack the political sensibility to make of the crisis anything more than a setting for sentimental affairs (Torné 2014, 117). Writer and critic Marta Sanz sees what she terms the "crisis novel" as a way for novelists to clear their conscience (Rodríguez Marcos 2013b), while novelist Patricio Pron (2014) sees the crisis label as little more than publicity for writers with newfound political interests. David Becerra Mayor (2013) goes further and calls the crisis novel "un cántico nostálgico a lo bien que vivíamos antes de la caída de Lehman Brothers," and dismisses it as pseudo-political, in most cases lacking sophisticated political sensibility.

The crisis has renewed the debate among writers, readers, and critics concerned with the relationship between literature and politics (see, for example, Becerra Mayor [2015]). What does a socially critical and

political novel look like? Must it advocate for one political position or another, or does a critical description of the state of affairs suffice? In any case, literature retains the ideological stamp of the time of its production, as any Marxist will point out, and the study of the novel in times of crisis will prove fruitful for a general understanding of the social climate.<sup>1</sup> As Becerra Mayor's comment above indicates, Spain's serious economic and social problems—widespread corruption in politics and business, the construction bubble, unemployment and economic precariousness, and unsolved conflicts from the Franco dictatorship and the Transition—did not exactly start in 2008, nor did all writers have a political awakening in the wake of Lehman Brothers. The literary establishment may have been looking elsewhere. For instance, Antonio Muñoz Molina wonders in *Todo lo que era sólido* (2013) how he and everyone else could have missed what was going on (149).<sup>2</sup> But there were certainly novels, like those of Belén Gopegui and Isaac Rosa, that tried to analyze and navigate Spain's political malaises. Rafael Chirbes, whose 2013 novel *En la orilla* was hailed by *El País* as “la gran novela de la crisis en España” (qtd. in Rodríguez Marcos 2013a), already in 2007 had published his *Crematorio*, a novel that did not differ much from the latter one in its thematic, aesthetics, or intentions.

Caught up in these ambiguities are Rosario Izquierdo's *Diario de campo* (2013a) and Elvira Navarro's *La trabajadora* (2014), two novels that embody and transcend Spain's economic crisis. They could both have been written before that *annus horribilis*; in fact, Navarro states that her novel stems from her personal experience in 2001–02 (Iglesia 2014). Personal experiences are, nevertheless, part of the narrative of the crisis. *La trabajadora* tells the story of Elisa, a freelance proofreader and one-time novelist, and of the mysterious and eccentric Susana, who rents a room in Elisa's apartment. The novel centers on the roles that work, mental illness, and spatiality assume in the two women's lives, as well as on their uneasy communal living. The narrative voice of the novel, which belongs to Elisa, mixes modalities and registers. In the narration, boundaries between fiction and reality and between subject and object are blurred in search of a format to represent experience. *Diario de campo*, in turn, narrates the work of a sociologist who studies social exclusion of women in Seville. From the first page of Izquierdo's novel, the first-person perspective of the sociologist narrator is introduced, distancing the text from the conventional objectivity of a sociological report through a reflection on the many similarities between researcher and informant. Further on, the narrator declares her intention to break the mold of the

sociological report, writing a text located in the intersection between field diary and novel.

This chapter will illustrate that the exploration of subjectivities is what unites *La trabajadora* and *Diario de campo* and is also what makes both novels profoundly political. Neither novel is particularly conventional: they lack both a clear plot and a neat beginning and end; they are disorganized and tentative in their form; and their intention is not quite discernable from the outset. More than relating events, these novels are interested in the way in which the subject relates to the surrounding collective. Both novels deal with a range of similar topics: the limits and possibilities of expression and writing; space and the city from philosophical, artistic, and lived perspectives; work, precariousness, and crisis; and corporeality. Taken together, all these topics tell a story of subjectivities in contemporary Spain.

### **The Theoretical Background of Subjectivity**

The question of subjectivity has been a core issue of philosophical inquiry throughout history and is of utmost interest in the times of postmodern fragmentation and ever-increasing attention to the individual. In contrast to identity, which may be characterized as “a particular set of beliefs, traits, and allegiances that gives one a consistent personality and mode of social being,” subjectivity “always implies a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity, often allowing a myriad of limitations to our ability to comprehend identity” (Hall 2004, 3). Subjectivity, then, “invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises, to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence. How does our understanding of knowledge relate to, impact, and / or constrain our understanding of our own existence?” (Hall 2004, 4). Subjectivity, thus, stands at the crossing of ontology and epistemology, asking questions about the nature of being and about how we might know anything about that being. Likewise, the subject is distanced from the related concept of the self in that it always takes into account the social and cultural interconnectedness that makes it as much a part of a collective structure as an individual expression (Mansfield 2000, 2–3). In this vein, the connections between self and others need to be underscored:

Subjectivity refers to a general principle that defies our separation into distinct selves and helps us to understand why our interior lives always involve other people, either as objects of need, desire and interest or as

necessary sharers of common experience. In this way, the subject is always linked to something outside of it—an idea or principle or the society of other subjects. It is the linkage that the word “subject” insists upon. (Mansfield 2000, 3)

What is most personal cannot be defined without reference to the Other. By the same token, what is of interest to many theorists, at least from the nineteenth century onward, is that the subject entails both agency and subjugation, summarized in Judith Butler’s question: “How can it be, that the subject taken to be the condition for and instrument of agency, is at the same time the effect of subordination, understood as the deprivation of agency?” (1997, 10). While the subject is linked to personal identity, it is also entangled in a web of always already determined meanings and structures. Anders Johansson calls this “the dialectics of subjectivity:” subjective freedom is inseparable from objective subordination, which invariably will affect the narratives that people tell about themselves (2015, 215).

Some of the complexities related to the study of subjectivity may arise from the different definitions and functions of the concept of the subject. Mansfield (2000) summarizes the discussion and defines four broad usages: (1) the grammatical subject, where the word *I* seems to denote our most immediate sense of selfhood but which at the same time is shared by every other user of our language; (2) the politico-legal subject, which defines our status as subjects of the State and the law; (3) the philosophical subject, where the *I* is both analyzed in itself and as an epistemological ground; and (4) the subject as a human person. Linguistic, political, and philosophical inquiries notwithstanding, we are still “an intense focus of rich and immediate experience that defies system, logic and order and that goes out in the world in a complex, inconsistent and highly charged way. . . . It is this unfinished yet consistent subjectivity that we generally understand as our selfhood, or personality” (Mansfield 2000, 4).

Although an inquiry into subjectivity may choose a variety of approaches, this chapter focuses specifically on knowledge production, interdependency, and the “unfinished yet consistent subjectivity” in *Diario de campo* and *La trabajadora*. Here, subjectivity is analyzed in these novels through the lenses of personal expression, space and the city, work and precariousness, and the body, with the issue of gender as a general starting point. Since the issue of subjectivity necessarily involves a metaperspective, I pay particular attention to agency and consciousness of selfhood at the levels of character, narrator, author, and reader.

## Personal Expressions in *La trabajadora* and *Diario de campo*

Both novels contain an explicit and complex exchange between the fictional and the autobiographical from the very beginning. *La trabajadora* opens with a bracketed indication of the context in which it is to be read: “Este relato recoge lo que Susana me contó sobre su locura” (11). We do not yet know who Susana or the narrator is, but what then follows is a thirty-page narration of two months in Susana’s life, some fifteen years before what later turns out to be the novel’s present time, sometimes punctuated by the narrator’s reaction. After the story of Susana, told by someone else, there follows a much briefer story called “La trabajadora” (sharing the name with the novel), unsigned but stated to have been published previously in a now-defunct Spanish newspaper. Not until after this does the main plot begin, taking place sometime near the year of publication of the novel.

The framing of the novel is thus marked by subjective interchanges between both narrator-protagonist and character, and also narrator and author. Later on, narrator Elisa Núñez (sharing the initials with the author of the novel) first tells us that she has retold the story of her tenant in order to achieve the same shock effect that it had on her, but then returns to search for meaning in that strange text. “Quería que destilara algún tipo de certeza” (Navarro 2014, 137), she says, but certainty seems elusive; the more she digs into the problem, the more she realizes that meaning does not reside outside her own self, but rather as her own memory, “Como si yo fuera Susana” (139). The brief narrative titled “La trabajadora,” using the first-person singular, recounts how the unnamed narrator descended into economic precariousness and had to leave downtown Madrid for an apartment in a modest suburb. Here is another seamless shift between the fictional and the biographical; a postscript tells us the short story was originally published under the name of Elvira Navarro, but this change of address is also what leads the narrator to take in Susana as a tenant. The novel’s final framing is its short third part, where the (unnamed) narrator tells her therapist that she had to write the novel of Elisa and Susana in order to recover from her nervous breakdown a few years earlier. Just as authors of autobiographical novels often need to do when confronted with journalists and their readers, the narrator here denies a clear correspondence between herself and her protagonist: “Lo que hay en la novela es un personaje basado en mí, pero no soy yo. Ni lo que he contado es exacto” (154).

As we see, *La trabajadora* moves in the familiar yet uncanny contemporary landscape between autobiographical novel and metafiction.<sup>3</sup> Not only is there an intermingling between biographical author, fictional author, narrator, and protagonist, but also—and perhaps more interestingly—between the narrator-protagonist and the secondary character. Although overlooked by many critics, the very first sentence is in fact crucial to understanding the novel: it tells us who is talking and who will be the primary character in the first part and secondary in the second one; it also establishes a present moment of the narrator and a past of the confession and explains that what we are about to read is a *relato* that at the same time intends to transmit a series of events truthfully (Mora 2014). The first sentence, likewise, sets the basis for this novel, regardless of the sometimes harrowing story, as being a text about writing. It is not a simple postmodern exercise but rather a text that seriously reflects on subjectivity by circumscribing the questions of how we know what we know about ourselves.

In attempting to understand herself, Elisa refers to both herself and Susana as Other. Emile Benveniste defines subjectivity as a function of discourse rather than its origin: “I is the individual who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance I” (qtd. in Oriel 2009, 58). There is no *I* outside the dialogical situation, since it always presupposes a *You*, and there is a dialectical tension between the uttering and the uttered subject. “The system of personal pronouns enables every participant to assume incompatible roles simultaneously, namely that of the I and that of the You,” writes Jürgen Habermas (qtd. in Oriel 2009, 58), stating that the *You* is at the same time decidedly different and yet identical to ourselves. Elisa wrestles with this simultaneous sameness and otherness of her own self in *La trabajadora*, oscillating from one standpoint to the other. While thinking about how her present reminds her of the past, she says that “el paso del tiempo no cambia nada, todo el rato hacemos las mismas cosas, pero les ponemos un disfraz para que parezcan distintas” (Navarro 2014, 74). A few pages later, she is horrified by the prospect of reading the novel she published a few years earlier: “¿Y si me daba por abrir la novela y leer un par de páginas? ¿Qué sinsentido trenzarían esas palabras?” (89). Revisiting her past through a most intimate artistic expression promises to be an uncanny experience, since she would be confronted with an unrecognizable alterity.

With respect to the Other, Mora (2014) goes as far as to call Elisa “uno de los personajes más creíbles y verosímiles de la narrativa creciente [sic], precisamente porque en varios momentos duda sobre el estatuto de su voz,” referring, for example, to the moment when Elisa wonders whether

Susana's story is not part of her own memory. It might be added that it is not only that she doubts her own voice, but also that someone else's voice is overtaking her own. The relationship between Elisa and Susana may be triggered by the crisis—Elisa loses part of her income and has to move to a place in the outskirts and find a roommate—but it is, in some sense, held together by their pathologies. Susana's history of mental health stretches from schizophrenia to bipolar disorder, while Elisa has had a nervous breakdown, suffers from panic attacks, and is medicated throughout the present of the novel (which also might affect her reliability as a narrator, as she notes). Their pathologies take on various functions of parallelism and perspective. Nadal Suau (2014) points out that in *La trabajadora*, “un personaje (Susana) es indiscernible de la enfermedad, y el otro (Elisa) parece necesitado de entender qué lógica, relato, sentido, o vocación emergen con su enfermedad mental, y cuáles la anularían.” Susana herself is never analyzed but is part and parcel of the “madness” that Elisa underlines in the very first sentence of the novel. Aside from the long monologue in the beginning, ordered and made coherent by Elisa, the reader's knowledge of Susana is rather limited. In fact, what she tells about herself seems a narrative stitched together from different books and films.<sup>4</sup> Elisa, on the other hand, is acutely aware of her predicament and how it affects her relation to the world, as she minutely describes her delusions and shifting perspectives on her surroundings. She constantly regards her illness as a part of her changing subjectivity, trying to grasp the subject in process as it tries to grapple with the mutating circumstances. Suau (2014) underscores how, at a certain point, she even seems to embrace her depressive state: “Elisa acoge fríamente a Susana porque no quiere a nadie que interrumpa su depresivo ‘divagar de mí misma a mí misma’, y la mejor forma de evitarlo es incorporarla a esa divagación.” The reader has the ever-present sense that the two female characters are reflections of one another, interconnected from the very opening of the narrative, and here we see that Susana is effectively made part of Elisa's rambling from herself to herself. In this way, Susana is no more than a detour of Elisa's reflection of herself; Susana is indeed treated as part of the narrator-protagonist's own subjectivity.

*Diario de campo* is divided into four parts: “Entrevista número seis,” “Burkas,” “Redes,” and “Entrevista número dos.” There is no explicit logic behind this order, but there is a certain movement from the objective toward the subjective, from the women on the outskirts of Seville to the sociologist-narrator herself. As Ernesto Ayala-Dip (2013) notes, however, we have no access to the interviews themselves, but what we read is a *relato* of the interviews. Just as in *La trabajadora*, then, it contains an



instance of storytelling that makes clear that reflection on experience will be as important as experience itself. Already in the first page of the novel, the narration slips from object to subject in a way that sets the tone for the rest of the text: “A veces guarda [the interviewee] silencios expresivos y a continuación aclara, como si se diera cuenta por primera vez o hablase consigo misma, de que [the mother] no se lo decía por hacerle daño sino porque la madre estaba enferma, pero que no era mala, lo único es que a *mí* me costó un poco más de trabajo crearme que *yo* sí era capaz de hacer otras cosas” (Izquierdo 2013a, 9; italics added). This is a novel where perspectives will be shifting, genre conventions questioned, the constitutive qualities of language highlighted, structures made visible, and precariousness exposed. Many reviews mention the hybrid nature of the text, what Ayala-Dip (2013) calls a welcome redefinition of genres: “La ficción, que se necesita desdramatizar para evitar el sensacionalismo sociologista; la sociología, que necesita desmitificar su estatus cientificista, y el diario o la autobiografía, que tiene que desautorizar su pulsión narcisista.” To put it slightly differently, fiction needs to depend less on plot and event, sociology needs to be less objective, and autobiography needs to be less subjective. A novel like *Diario de campo* works like a counterweight to what seems to be the natural inclination of some genres and destabilizes conventions that tend to stifle certain types of expression.

Even though *Diario de campo* also falls into the realm of the autobiographical novel, there is never tension around the fact that the biographical Rosario Izquierdo seems very close to the narrator of the text. After all, we know that the former is a middle-aged woman who has worked as a sociologist in the areas represented in the novel (see, for example, the interview with Izquierdo [2013b] by Coradino Vega). It is rather in the function of writing that the tension is located. From the outset the narrator makes it clear that the sociological format will be too constricting for what is about to be told, and therefore approaches fiction and what Alejandro Gándara (2014) calls “un lenguaje capaz de perderse en la oscuridad de la propia insuficiencia.” Navarro (2014) calls it a literary language—a language able to produce an experience in the reader. Writing and conscious work with language will distance the narrator from her material and at the same time bring it closer to the reader. Navarro contends that one of the effects of the novel is to show how language constructs identities and what we generally call knowledge. This, I might add, is equally pertinent with respect to the narrator of the story, who observes a gradual subjectivation among the women: “Me ha sorprendido la siguiente afirmación, repetida por muchas de ellas: ‘Aquí he aprendido a hablar’ . . . . Se refieren a que en los meses que llevan han aprendido a

expresarse mejor, a no decir tacos continuamente y a ‘hablar sin gritar’” (Izquierdo 2013a, 93). The narrator refers to the fact that the women have encountered a more articulated and personal voice and does not primarily refer to whether the subaltern can speak at all, in Gayatri Spivak’s sense, although in a larger perspective, the quote also entails the inclusion (and neutralization) of these women in the language of power. It would be more accurate to say that the women in question are learning how to listen; speaking without screaming or swear words also means that one, as a subject, leaves more room for the interlocutor to speak, for the Other to take part in the conversation unfolding, to be a more active part of one’s subjectivity. In a transferred way, this might be applied to the narrator, as well. In her interviews and fieldwork with the women, she also learns how to listen and finds her own articulated voice, drifting away from the objectivity of sociological writing toward a more subjective, literary register. In this process, she opens up and lets the women’s testimonies affect her subjectivity, both in the way that she is mirrored in them and in the way she sometimes even blends in with the women. The more or less literal mirror images in the text only reinforce her sense of not being able to stand outside, of her becoming part of the narrative.<sup>5</sup> Aside from being a part of the growing precariousness in Spanish society, as we shall see soon, she often sees that the *relatos* of her informants invade her own, so that when she listens to the recorded interviews at night, the testimonies mingle with her personal ruminations.

In both novels, then, there is a gradual blending of subject and object. Elisa’s subjectivity seems constituted in part by the presence of Susana, to the point that Susana’s story comes to be a part of her own memory. The narrator of *Diario de campo*, for her part, is constantly overtaking the place of her informants, and by the end it is her, as researcher and person, that is the object of study. This entails several questions regarding subjectivity, which will guide the remainder of my arguments here: Is it possible to talk about a unique and personal experience, dissociated from the collective? How can these experiences be narrated through writing? When we describe and analyze a person, how much do we actually talk about ourselves?

Moreover, both novels depend on shifting technological media. The protagonists work all day on computers—one proofreading, the other writing reports—but when it comes to narrating their lives, they both return to the more primitive medium of pen and paper. They eschew technology without much comment: the sociologist merely states that she resists the temptation of the comfortable use of the computer, while Elisa remarks that the computer reminds her too much of work. But it is not

difficult to see, along with Friedrich Kittler, larger implications of their choices. By choosing one medium over another (although the freedom and the consequences of choice are relative here), we also enter a particular discourse network, a “network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data” (Kittler 1986, 369). Computerized word processing is indeed closely connected to comfort and work, but it also structures our thinking and writing in ways in which we can barely catch a glimpse. Writing on paper, an older technology both in terms of humanity and of the human being who learns how to use the pen before the keyboard, opens up a private room, distanced from a technology with far-reaching ramifications. It brings us closer to the personal and the corporeal. The pen may make us a cyborg, as Donna Haraway has it, but for these two protagonists this more humanized prosthesis and the analog script it produces also gives way for a more intimate sort of narrative (see Mansfield 2000).

To wit, there is a little red light that blinks throughout the texts: in *Diario de campo*, it stems from the narrator-interviewer’s digital recorder, and in *La trabajadora* it comes from Susana’s old-school answering machine. Both machines are meant to facilitate dialog but often complicate it in ways not always foreseen. In *Diario de campo*, it is technology that enables a later transcription—the literal quotes of sociology in relation to the paraphrase of the novel. The recorder affects the informants like a “detonante de sus contenciones” (Izquierdo 2013a, 11); they are constantly aware of the blinking red light, and the most intimate confessions do not emerge until after the tape recorder is shut off. Conversely, the machine exposes “la superficialidad de la pregunta previamente diseñada frente a la hondura del relato espontáneo” (14), as if a previously written question could foresee the rich testimony that is pronounced when someone from a very different cultural and social background takes an interest and sincerely listens to one’s life story. Once again, listening is the condition for an extended subjectivity.

In *La trabajadora*, on the other hand, what is most important instead is a non-listening. Susana runs daily personal ads in the newspaper for several months, but as soon as she meets Fabio, the homosexual lover that satisfies her desires, she stops. Or at least she wants to stop, but since the messages keep coming, she cannot let go entirely: “no podía prescindir de lo que sugerían, de la promesa de los cuerpos perfectos, de ese timbre que parecía pertenecer a la persona indicada para comprenderme, amarme y sentirse amada por mí” (Navarro 2014, 23). She turns off the volume of the answering machine so that the messages may be recorded while she is in bed with Fabio, and she has to cover the “ojo rojo que pestañeaba

pletórico de mensajes” (26). The only thing heard is the “sonido *poltergeist*” (26; italics in the original) of the turning tape, which she tries to drown out with music that mixes with the voices of *churros*-munching tourists in the street below. Susana explains that she misses all those dates with men that she had before meeting Fabio, because of “el vacío entre uno y otro,” which catapults her toward the future, that “espectro del pensamiento” (27). What is striking here are the many ghostly references: the red eye, the poltergeist, the specter, the pregnant void between people, the low-intensity cacophony of music and distant chit-chat, and especially the storage box of disembodied voices. Lurking like an eerie shadow around her is the future Susana, a woman who has overcome her loneliness, poor self-confidence, and illness, and who has established contact with her surroundings and connected with people who might understand her, love her, and be loved by her. Ghostly are also the voices that remain trapped on Susana’s answering machine, voices that are kept unuttered in an impassable storage of the text. Only one message is transcribed in the novel. For Susana and for us, it is a box of unsatisfied male desires, an unarticulated possibility, a potential work of art of non-meetings and amorous ambitions.

## Space and the City

Space “not only shapes subjectivity,” as Nathan Richardson (2012) says while discussing Henri Lefebvre, “it is inseparable from it” (18). In *Diario de campo* and *La trabajadora*, too, subjectivity is closely linked to issues of spatiality. In both novels, the characters move around the city, trying to find their place in the physical, social, and mental environment. Reflecting upon the spatial turn in the humanities, and particularly in relation to literary studies, Robert Tally (2013) argues that social mapping is “the most significant figure in spatiality studies today, partly because of its direct applicability to the current crisis of representation often cited by theorists of globalization and postmodernity, but also because of the ancient and well known connections between cartographic and narrative discourse. To draw a map is to tell a story, and vice versa” (4). Mapping is done at the level both of character and of reader, but since my focus is here on the function of subjectivity, I pay primary attention to the characters’ own understanding of their spatial milieu. Today’s postmodern placelessness and bewilderment is a variant of the existentialist anxiety in the world and Freud’s uncanny—the German term, *Unheimlich*, partly suggests the “unhomely”—as a way to name what is familiar and strange at the same time.<sup>6</sup>

Elvira Navarro has shown a persistent interest in spatiality. Her earlier short-story collection *La ciudad en invierno* (2007) and novel *La ciudad feliz* (2009) both examine the effect of space and place on the characters. Since 2010, she has maintained the blog *Periferia* (for a period also published on the newspaper *El mundo*'s website), which focuses on an exploration of the streets of the same Madrid outskirts where *La trabajadora* is situated.

“Tenía una rara capacidad para orientarme” (Navarro 2014, 73), Elisa says in the beginning of Chapter 7, in what might be considered this novel's equivalent to Don Quixote's “Yo sé quién soy” (Cervantes I, 6). The comments seem self-assured, but the novels are to a large extent dedicated to confirming, contradicting, and exploring the very nature of those statements on subjectivity. It is precisely these attempts at orientation that will be the guiding principle for Elisa. Soon after the links between precariousness and spatial movement in the short story “La trabajadora,” the spatial is fused with the mental: “este divagar de mí misma a mí misma, los pasos perpetuos de una habitación a otra, el territorio insoportable y limitado que iba de la entrada al salón y del salón a mi cuarto, a la cocina, al baño” (Navarro 2014, 51). What, in Suau's discussion above about the same quote, seemed to be well-found metaphor of a brooding mind is here turned into a decidedly more spatial and literal affair. Here we can clearly picture how the character wanders from one room to the other, having to confront different versions of herself in each place, as her thoughts ramble and digress. *Divagar* has the same double meaning as the English *wander*; both can be used referring to physical movement as well as a diverging conversation—off the subject, so to speak. It is like she is taking a detour from herself to herself. She even brings the architecture of her apartment when she is walking on the streets: “caminaba por una cápsula, la conformada por las paredes del piso, unas paredes que yo llevaba puestas en mis paseos a la manera de una capa invisible” (74).

However, it is not in the apartment but in the street that her affliction is most acutely reflected. Just as in the case of the phantasmatic atmosphere around Susana's answering machine, what we are witnessing alongside Elisa on her nightly walks is the strange order of a new city. Several times she wanders through the ruins of the old Carabanchel prison, built by (and for) political prisoners in the immediate post-Civil War era with Bentham's panopticon as a model,<sup>7</sup> which now lies looted and silent. The silence is also what acts as an estranging element: “Yo iba por aquel entonces a la cárcel con una amiga que grababa el silencio en el penal. Si mi amiga me hubiese acompañado ahora le habría sido imposible no

registrar los sonidos de ese deforme hueso urbano en el que crujían todas las articulaciones” (Navarro 2014, 71). As if she were a mix between John Cage and Johnny Cash, the friend records the silence in a place that formerly has been full of sounds and now seems like the backbone of an underground city. Affected by the unearthing of the unseen activities in and around the prison, Elisa discovers a secret urbanity all around her: squatters in the middle of the city, “urbanizaciones fantasmas” with entire blocks of empty apartment houses, cases of “autoconstrucción” as in the dire post-war period, old buildings infested with termites and provisional columns turned permanent. From the fourth floor of her local library, sheltered from the urban noise, the city looks like a memory of itself, abandoned, quiet, and hot as in the paintings of Spanish hyperrealist Antonio López García: “La ciudad parecía congelada, pero no por el frío, sino por la luz y el calor” (78). The view of Madrid is reminiscent of Michel de Certeau’s from 110th floor of the World Trade Center, reading the “texturology” of the city in the landmark *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984, 91). But this Madrid is not de Certeau’s New York. Elisa’s “hecatombe asumida” (78) is definitely a more somber image than the dynamic oppositions of the Frenchman’s Manhattan; instead of “this stage of concrete, steel and glass, cut out between two oceans (the Atlantic and the American) by a frigid body of water” (de Certeau 1984, 91), we have brick, heat, dryness, and rugged, arid land. Instead of Wall Street, Harlem, and Central Park, we have a mass of unnamed, silent buildings.

Both these images—the secret urbanity and the taxidermic city—reveal sides of Elisa’s surroundings that are not part of her daily lived experience, capable of modifying the “escenario mental” (Navarro 2014, 117) that she has of the city. The metaphor is important, once again, in the way it combines the spatial and the mental, reminiscent of Fredric Jameson’s “cognitive mapping” but tuned toward a psychic structure rather than a social one.<sup>8</sup> The revelation is so perplexing to her that she compares it to that of a Borgesian *Matrix*: “equivalía a descubrir que éramos marcianos, el sueño de alguien, o un programa informático cuyas reglas cambiaban de un día para otro” (118).

These thoughts are represented in the artwork within the artwork, Susana’s collage maps. Made up of tiny buildings, cars, and other urban elements cut from magazines and brochures, these maps constitute alternative renderings of Madrid, based on the same city but very different from one another. Some critics see them as the junction of identity, city, narration, and voice. Luis González (2014) calls them “una cartografía (o una ontología) de recortables” that correspond to Elisa’s mental collage of captured urban images that exist to reconstruct identities and strengthen