

Journey through the *Movida*: feminism, creativity and otherness in Luisa Castro's *El secreto de la lejía* (2001)

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Abstract

Painted as a celebration of creativity, plurality and feminist subcultures, *la Movida madrileña* was central to the 1980s nostalgia which permeated the Spanish narrative fiction produced at the beginning of the new millennium. Luisa Castro's 2001 novel *El secreto de la lejía* recounts the lesser-represented experiences of a young Galician woman who moves to the Spanish capital to pursue a writing career during the *Movida* through an experimental, multigenre exploration of suffering and personal growth. This article shows how *El secreto de la lejía* unmasks dark realities of the *Movida* for the female outsider, contradicting interpretations of its universal social inclusivity. Through an intersectional feminist framework, it is argued that indicators of progress such as women's independence, literary production and cultural plurality remain acutely subjected to discourses of power as the protagonist navigates the threatening atmosphere of elite artistic spaces at the cost of her own wellbeing. Castro's novel fundamentally disrupts the mythologization of the *Movida*'s spirit of progress from a minoritized perspective, revealing the instability of the period and the enduring influence of heteropatriarchal power structures in Spain's nascent democracy.

Keywords

Luisa Castro; *El secreto de la lejía*; *Movida madrileña*; Spanish transition; Galician migration

Madrid's influential (counter)cultural happening, labeled the *Movida madrileña*, famously materialized in the 1980s in the wake of Spain's transition to democracy. This particularly contested period of Spanish history followed the dark years of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and ensuing ultranationalist military dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939–1975). Influenced by international postmodern pop and punk trends with production in music, art, design, literature, film and fashion, what has been designated a complex urban social, aesthetic and (sub)cultural “process” (Usoz de la Fuente 2015, 1) emerged in the context of the collective sensation of “desencanto” regarding the nation's rocky road to democratization (6). Women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community are largely perceived to have been its core actors, instrumental in percolating inclusive and subversive discourses into the foundation of contemporary democratic society (Pérez-Sánchez 2008, 145). In many ways contradictory and undefinable (Subirats 2005, 38), the movement's

cultural legacy has been debated, manipulated and coopted countless times (Usoz de la Fuente 2015, 150).

Over the past twenty years, critics have identified a revival of 1980s trends and potentially rose-tinted Movida nostalgia, encompassing “self-reflexive meta-memory” (Nichols 2009, 115) and even “fossilización acelerada” (Bermúdez 2009) in the Spanish cultural production of the early 2000s. As attested to by the eponymous Movida project funded by the Comunidad de Madrid to mark its twenty-fifth anniversary (Berciano 2007), writers, artists, musicians and other creatives have drawn on the cultural politics of the period to try to make sense of Spain’s layered embrace of democratic modernity, consumerism and economic growth (Fouz-Hernández 2009, 168; Usoz de la Fuente 2015, 5). With a view to understanding alternative interpretations of the 1980s Madrid cultural scene and the paradoxical reality of its perceived social inclusivity and artistic hedonism, this article examines the fictionalization of a working-class Galician woman’s formative yet traumatic experiences in the 2001 novel *El secreto de la lejía* by Luisa Castro.

While the Transition period is framed by some scholars as lasting from 1975 to 1982 (Magone 2011, 228), many argue that it actually began earlier and lasted later (Vilarós 2018; Garcès 2010, 1), until as late as 1996 with the return of the right-wing government to power. Sarah Thomas refers to the “Long Transition” given the “ongoing, lengthy, dilated nature of transitional time and process” (2019, 9) which Giulia Quaggio and Igor Contreras Zubillaga argue was “ripe with considerations of politics and power, mobilized as a demand and a promise” (2023, 192). The dictatorship had in reality begun to unravel years before Franco’s death, with Basque separatist ETA’s pivotal assassination of prime minister Luis Carrero Blanco in December 1973. In 1977, the implementation of the Ley de Amnistía de España freed political prisoners and facilitated the return of exiles to Spain whilst granting impunity to perpetrators of crimes committed during the dictatorship. Democracy was thus founded on a collective *pacto de olvido* political consensus which insisted on overlooking the brutality of the past (Resina 2003, 91), as social order, compromise and peace were prioritized over justice and freedom in the immediate aftermath of the dictatorship (Aguilar 2001, 264). On the ground, however, this institutionalized structural approach might be said to have functioned as “a pact of silence, not of forgetting” (Casla 2021, 85), with a view to mitigating the legacy of conflict and violence. Nevertheless, discourses of historical memory continued to a greater or lesser degree to pervade social, cultural and political life in the newly democratic state (Aguilar 2001, 163; Moreiras-Menor 2002, 29).

Previously outlawed, adultery (1978), contraception (1978), divorce (1981)ⁱ and abortion in certain cases (1985) were legalized following the end of the regime, whilst the feminist movement, which had been pushed underground and operating in exile, began to gain ground in the mainstream (see Bermúdez and Johnson 2018). Though successfully quashed, Falangist General Antonio Tejero’s attempted military coup on 23 February 1981 evinced the shaky foundations of the newly democratic state. Against this backdrop of the fraught arrival of (post)modernity (Song and Nichols 2009, 106-107) the Movida would

emerge, its official beginning marked by a concert in homage to the musician Canito in the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid in February 1981 (Vilarós 2018). Celebrations of radical, experimental creativity served as a direct response to decades of acute artistic, literary, cultural, sexual and gender-based oppression, and Madrid became a microcosm for Spain's changing collective sensibility and the local appropriation of international trends (Fernández de Alba 2020, 9), as secular cultural revival facilitated the reinvention of the image of a city that had for the past four decades been known more as the center of Francoist bureaucracy (Usoz de la Fuente 2015, 61). Cultural hedonism and rebellion against social norms proliferated during this period throughout Spain, with localized, distinct iterations of the movement reverberating across cities such as Bilbao, Barcelona and Vigo, and towns like Puertollano and Torremolinos (Vilarós 2018). It was characterized by hitherto inconceivable freedom of expression and an "insatiable hunger for freedom" (Nichols and Song 2014, 1), exuding tolerance for diverse lifestyles and celebration of women, queer cultures and international influences, epitomized by the work of iconized creators such as director Pedro Almodóvar, artist Fabio McNamara, photographer Ouke Leele and music acts such as Alaska y Dinarama and Mecano.

The period was nonetheless marred by the rapid surge in the abuse of illegal drugs corresponding to the worldwide cocaine and heroin boom (Vilarós 2018) and the subsequent HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s (Subirats 2005, 40). Negotiating identities informed by democratic values and generally ambivalent to capitalism and tradition (Fernández de Alba 2020, 119), the Movida's often rather well-to-do participants were in some contexts disdainfully framed as *pasota*, given their apparent apathy and indifference to politics and Spain's recent past (Labrador Méndez 2017; Subirats 2005, 32; Vila Diéguez 2022, 115; Vilarós 2018). What was in reality a localized, community-driven happening maintained a complexity far beyond the binary of liberation arising in the wake of repression (Wheeler 2016, 376), as Castro's novel shows. With the Movida viewed by some as "un fenómeno amorfo, descoyuntado, sin dirección ni ideología política" (Marí 2009, 127) in which culture replaced politics (Medina 2015, 305), claims of celebration of difference and individual liberties cannot be viewed entirely apolitically, as the movement was arguably situated "en el límite mismo de lo político" (Vilarós 2018). Toward the end of the 1980s, the Movida had become somewhat neutralized and appropriated for capitalist and political gains, with the PSOE taking credit for its liberal creativity after sweeping to power in 1982 as the nation made a landmark move away from hard-right politics.

Narrative fiction by women writers like Castro's *El secreto de la lejía* captures the spirit of 1980s Madrid through an exploration of changing gender dynamics and builds on the tradition established by texts such as Rosa Montero's first novel *Crónica del desamor* (1979), which employs metafictional devices to capture the zeitgeist of the 1980s through a female professional struggling to navigate changing social structures. An additional example of a foundational text in this vein would be Montero's 1983 novel, *Te trataré como a una reina*, in which a number of characters who have moved to Madrid from rural areas in the

early 1980s become disillusioned with the city's embrace of modernity in a way that is similar to Castro's protagonist.ⁱⁱ Thematic and formal echoes of *El secreto de la lejía* can also be traced in the post-2000s work of other writers of Castro's generation such as Almudena Grandes, whose *Castillos de cartón* (2003), adapted to a 2009 feature film by director Salvador García Ruiz, is also a retrospective coming-of-age narrative exploring freedoms, loss of innocence and mental health in an artistic milieu. The title itself, based on the song "Para ti" by Movida-era band Paraíso, reflects the fragility of newfound social freedoms, though Grandes denied the text was about the Movida *per se* (Lorenci 2004). Elvira Lindo's *Lo que me queda por vivir* (2010), like Castro's novel, contains autofictional and poetic inflections with its first-person narrative of "una joven de provincias que había llegado a la gran ciudad a pasar un hambre sublime mientras publicaba versos" (Lindo 2010), but whose experience is defined by her role as a single mother and the breakdown of her marriage. More recent examples of fiction that attest to the persistent influence of the 1980s on contemporary writers, irrespective of gender, include Alice Kellen's romance novel *Tú y yo, invencibles* (2021) and Fernando Benzo's *Los viajeros de la Vía Láctea* (2021) – both replete with iconic Movida music references – as well as Fernando Marías's memoir *Arde este libro* (2021) and Enrique Llamas's *Todos estábamos vivos* (2020), which expose the dark realities of the Movida that also infiltrate Castro's text. Cecilia F. Santomé's *Unha rapaza de provincias* (2021), meanwhile, is noteworthy as a Galician-language novel that explores a young Galician woman's move to Barcelona during the Transition.

I argue that *El secreto de la lejía* occupies its own niche in this literary arena. Expanding on Béatrice Rodríguez's claim that the novel "desafía las verdades establecidas" (2003, 97) through a fragmented temporality and the inclusion of fantastical elements that blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, I aim to show how these elements render it a privileged site for revising memory of the Movida and the mixing of various cultures in 1980s Madrid more broadly. With this text, Castro was only the third woman to be awarded the highly prestigious Premio Azorín for Best Novel in the Spanish Language, thereby securing its publication with Spanish publishing conglomerate Planeta. The novel stands out as an insightful interpretation of 1980s Madrid in part due to its use of innovative genre braiding to explore a Galician woman's experience, "sin falta de precauciones formales" (José Manuel Caballero Bonald, quoted in ABC Cultura 2001b), with narrative that encompasses recognizable elements of autofiction, the bildungsroman, the artist's novel, the fantastic and the *novela negra*; influences that render its genre challenging to classify (Rodríguez 2007, 109). In keeping with broader trends in experimental Spanish women's writing at the turn of the millennium that are categorized under the broad label of *nueva narrativa* (De Urioste 2001), its fragmented multigenre form accommodates the temporal sequencing of a mature writer reflecting on her youth during a historical turning point. The focus on women's search for identity and barbed social critique that can be traced in texts by women writers of *nueva narrativa* serves as a means of resistance to patriarchal aesthetic and commercial pressures in the literary sphere at the turn of the millennium (De Urioste 2001, 283–285).

Crucially for the focus of this analysis, *El secreto de la lejía* explores “la mirada de una forastera a un mundo desconocido” (Rodríguez 2003, 105) through a lesser-represented, lived experience of 1980s Madrid; namely, that of a budding young Galician woman writer. Though what constituted participation in the Movida remains challenging to quantify, and the phenomenon is never named within the text, Castro interrogates the “democratization of lifestyles, consumption, and sociopolitical pluralism” (Fernández de Alba 2020, 116) said to characterize it. In doing so, her novel counteracts perceptions of the Movida’s inclusivity by exposing oft overlooked gender, cultural, class and health anxieties in the aftermath of the dictatorship, breaking from traditional expectations of women’s writing at the time by managing to “incorporate social perspectives beyond strict middle-class lines and present a broader segment of the society” (De Urioste 2001, 286). With the writer’s earlier novels being set in rural Galicia, this would be her first to focus on the urban. Narrative elements allude to the author’s own move to the Spanish capital from her coastal hometown of Foz, as Castro established herself in the vibrant Madrid literary scene after publishing her first book of poems, *Odisea definitiva: Libro póstumo*, in 1984, at the age of seventeen. Castro has recognized the significance of the autofictional throughout her novels (Griñán 2019), demonstrating Hannie Lawlor’s assertion that “life writing has a more significant presence in contemporary literature by women authors in Spain than the relative obscurity of this body of work in [theoretical] discussions would suggest” (2024, 200).

In the analysis that follows, I take an intersectional feminist approach to examine Castro’s nuanced configuration of the struggles faced by underrepresented cultural actors in Madrid’s cultural renaissance through the interrelated themes of female independence, creative writing and cultural otherness. In this essay it is argued that *El secreto de la lejía* complicates the Movida’s stereotypical associations with youthful euphoria, progress and inclusivity through its focus on the lived experience of a cultural minority. Intersectionality, as it was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, is productive for the analysis of diverse experiences as it facilitates examination of “interrelated and mutually shaping” (Hill Collins and Bilge 2020) discourses of identity such as those concerning race, sexuality, disability – or, as in the case under study here – gender, class, age and cultural origin. Given its origins in Black feminism, there are marked limitations to applying an intersectional framework to representations of white European communities, yet the emphasis on interlocking systems of oppression can prove especially productive for the interrogation of discourses of subjugation and empowerment. Sara Ahmed’s theorization of “the promise of happiness” (2010), the expectation for minoritized communities such as immigrants and women to achieve happiness in neoliberal heteropatriarchal societies, illuminates the intersectional challenges the protagonist faces as a Galician working-class woman migrant in Spain’s rapidly evolving capital in which supposedly welcoming artistic spaces continue to be marked by classism, sexism and cultural prejudice.

On first glance, *El secreto de la lejía* appears to ride the new millennial wave of 1980s nostalgia for the freedoms of an especially formative period of youth by drawing on

elements of the bildungsroman. Though, as we shall see, the novel's overall approach is more critical. Speaking of her own experience as a young woman embracing youth culture in the Spanish capital of the 1980s, Castro described "años de juventud, de formación y de generosidad mutua, que es cuando más aprendes" (Castro, quoted in Fortes 2002). Associated with the intellectual elite in the Galician context (López Sáñez 2016, 15), the influence of the bildungsroman corresponds to the post-1975 opportunities for self-expression for Spain's minoritized communities. The evolving Transition process has itself been framed as a metaphorical bildungsroman documenting the Spanish nation's maturity (Medina 2015, 301). The bildungsroman centers on a coming-of-age journey, an accumulation of formative experiences which consolidate identity in the transition to adulthood, underlining the importance of individual agency (Keunen 2008, 260). In *El secreto de la lejía*, we witness the development of the naive and seemingly unworldly narrator, who falls into the typical bildungsroman narrative of a provincial subject navigating modernity in the corruptive urban space. Yet the novel departs from classic androcentric iterations of the genre by underscoring how, in the bildungsroman focused on a woman's experience, the "quest for her identity may be explorative rather than goal-orientated" (Joannou 2019, 203). In the context of the "promise of happiness" for women migrants, Ahmed pitches the bildungsroman as "all about the intimacy of trouble and happiness" (2010, 60), as we see in the experiences of Castro's protagonist. *El secreto de la lejía* furthermore incorporates aspects of the *Künstlerroman* by documenting the maturity and development of a cultural creator. The trajectory of the protagonist does not culminate in heteropatriarchal ideals of marriage or maternity, but rather in professional development and self-realization, though it does so critically when considered within the historical context, as this development is hampered by harassment, manipulation and mental illness that expose social instability and entrenched patriarchal, class and cultural prejudices in the "marvellous paradox of a postmodern modernisation" (Subirats 2005, 44).

El secreto de la lejía unfolds in the intimate, retrospective first-person narrative of África, a poet from small-town Galicia who reflects on how in 1983, when she was twenty, she was invited to the Spanish capital to read her work on the national radio. Though the program ends up being canceled, radio presenter Isaac, who is also a publisher, encourages her to remain in the city, offering to publish her first book of poetry and introducing her to high-profile writers and artists, including a mysterious artist named Piedad who turns out to be África's symbolic double, and Isaac's ex-wife, Lucía, who just happens to be Piedad's sister. África becomes embroiled in what she terms the "Universo de la Improvisación" (Castro 2001, 49) of the Movida, her life marked by a series of coincidences which culminate in intense creativity, a dramatic loss of innocence and acute mental illness. This denouement is provoked by the crime fiction inspired mystery disappearance of África's lover Alberto (Piedad's ex-partner), whose murder had been ordered by Lucía, as he was blamed for the decline in her sister's mental health. Upon discharge from a psychiatric

hospital ten years after the events of the novel, África returns to Galicia to document her experiences in the metanarrative.

Galicia has been described as a borderless nation (Moreiras-Menor 2011, 155) that is “created by absence itself” (Romero 2012, 125), marked since the nineteenth century by waves of emigration en masse due to “push factors” (Palmer 1990, 7) such as socioeconomic hardship and political persecution. Mobility has been noted as a recurring metaphor signifying the construction of identity in Galician culture (López Sáñez 2016, 10), with travel historically constructed as a male endeavor, particularly during the Franco years, when women needed paternal or spousal permission to take a trip (Radcliff 2001, 504). Narratives of internal migration to the Spanish capital in the immediate postdictatorship period are “part of the account of the Movida, that of the youth who moves from the province into the city in search of his or her dream” (Song and Nichols 2009, 108), as a younger generation less invested in resistance to Francoism embraced new opportunities. Women had a strong presence in the waves of internal migration from Galicia, which gradually replaced movement to other parts of Europe in the 1970s (Vilavedra 2022, 10). Yet, women’s role in Galician migration phenomena has consistently been overlooked in scholarship (Hernández Borge 2015, 227–228). In traditional literary narratives documenting earlier periods of Galician migration, women tend to be depicted as confined to the family home, pining for the return of male emigrant family members (González Fernández 2009; Garrido González and Moszczyńska-Dürst 2017, 46; Garrido González 2020). Castro’s novel expands on this passive secondary role by foregrounding the mobility as well as the personal and professional growth of women in this period, but nonetheless showing that this comes at great cost.

África’s arrival in Madrid occurs one year after the PSOE government came to power for the first time since the demise of the Franco dictatorship, two years after Colonel Tejero’s attempt to overthrow the democratically elected government in a failed military coup and three years before Spain was accepted into the European Economic Community. Symbolic of the Transition era, women’s independence is a driving force within the novel, yet this is compromised at every turn for África. Madrid’s seemingly limitless creative, professional and social opportunities for young women contrast with the apparently stifling familiarity of her life in rural Galicia. The bohemian urban space is initially presented as “lleno de misterios, de maravillas” (Castro 2001, 42) reflecting how newly democratic Madrid promised happiness in the Ahmedian sense. In the words of the author, reflecting on her own experience arriving in the city as a young woman, she found it to be “posibilista y fecundo” (Castro, quoted. in ABC 2001a), which maps onto critical perceptions of how it seemingly “empowered citizens to do and to become” (Fernández de Alba 2020, 118). *El secreto de la lejía* might at first appear to foment a binary understanding of the contrast between the underpopulated rural sphere of “La España vacía” (Del Molino 2016) and the rapidly expanding urban center; however, the typical idealization of the city as a site of

progress that is often associated with the Madrid Movida becomes nuanced over the course of the novel.

Hesitant about making the trip to Madrid alone, upon her arrival África decides to stay with Belén, a new female acquaintance from Ponferrada, instead of her aunt and uncle. This bid for freedom and anonymity (Rodríguez 2007, 98) corresponds to the Movida's reimagining of community through nonnormative forms of "queer kinship" (Bradway and Freeman 2022, 2) as a reaction to the heteropatriarchal Francoist ideal of the nuclear family, showing how Castro's fiction seems to "consistently question how human beings imagine relationships" (Molinaro 2009, 137). Belén's hospitality represents a feminist gesture of solidarity between newcomers to the city. Yet África depends on radio presenter Isaac to an extent for financial support, such as when he offers to publish her poetry, persuading her to remain in the city rather than return home to her familial safety net. His claim that "algún día me agradecerás haberte traído" (Castro 2001, 42) reiterates the expectation for the woman or the migrant to be "happy" (Ahmed 2010, 133), in this case to a privileged male mentor.

Whilst the 1980s in Spain have been rather cynically summed up by Mark Allinson as "an era in which everyone had multiple creative projects, lots of free time, no responsibilities and few political convictions" (2000, 269), labor productivity was nonetheless sustained (Medina 2015, 303). Class privilege undoubtedly facilitated participation in the Madrid Movida, as is evidenced in the novel by the liberties enjoyed by Isaac and his ex-wife. The working-class protagonist takes on waitressing and later works as a literary critic to support herself whilst pursuing a carefree, progressive lifestyle largely inaccessible just twenty years prior, reflecting how "the anxiousness, defensiveness and pragmatism" (Allinson 2000, 266) of 1980s individualism fostered a *carpe diem* attitude: "la libertad ... se me revelaba ahora como un don" (Castro 2001, 34). The rapidly transforming modern urban space of "a nation under political, aesthetic, economic, legal, and sexual revision" (Pérez-Sánchez 2008, 10) enables mental ill health and substance abuse, evident in the alcoholism and drug addiction África witnesses in the neighborhood square and on the night bus. África could be said to adhere to Carmen Martín Gaité's concept of the "chica rara" (1987) as a result of her behavior that diverges from traditional patriarchal norms. She rebels against prescribed gender roles by frequenting late-night bars, facing sexism for binge drinking. Dressing in the fashionable clothing of the time means that she is mistaken for a sex worker at one point in the novel: "entre la pinta de chulo de Isaac, mi vestimenta de entonces, con minifalda color vino y medias de cebra, con el fajo de billetes por medio, la escena no daba lugar a dudas" (Castro 2001, 85). She also enters into a casual relationship with a man she repeatedly encounters named Alberto, defying the heteropatriarchal emphasis on marriage and children. The novel plays with the limitations of the traditional bildungsroman which suggest that women who roam cause suspicion in patriarchal societies (Joannou 2019, 202), particularly in the context of the enduring conservative attitudes still common in Spain after the dictatorship. Acting as a kind of flâneuse, África "vagaba por las

calles al sol" (Castro 2001, 34), reclaiming leisure time and public space as a woman, but not without encountering social prejudice.

Although the Movida tends to be associated with punk and pop culture, it in fact embraced both "high" and "low" art (Pavlovic 2002, 97; Wheeler 2016, 369) in an apparent reconfiguration of the associated class divisions (Sieburth 1994) that nonetheless mark África's experience. In keeping with the 1980s literary tendency of "privilegiando nuevos espacios y modos de agrupación social y comunitaria" (Moreiras-Menor 2002, 193), the protagonist attempts to navigate its privileged cultural circles barred from the masses (Fernandez de Alba 2020, 119), showing "the distinctive agency of the subaltern and the local in transgressing and reworking official narratives of Spanish democratization" (Quaggio and Contreras Zubillaga 2023, 197). Yet she constantly feels out of place and even under threat. While she engages socially with individuals as diverse as Belén, Alberto's brothers, the friendly concierge of her apartment block and a group of unhoused people in the Retiro park, her activities and movements are monitored by her wealthy male mentor and his bodyguard (appropriately named Stoneman), with a level of patriarchal surveillance that is all too uncomfortable in the immediate postdictatorship context.

África furthermore becomes subjected to patriarchal competition between women when Isaac introduces her to Piedad at an art exhibition, as the rural Galician subject infiltrates an elite setting typical of the artist's novel. The concept of the double that drives the plot is immediately apparent in the intense dynamics of influence and rivalry between the two. In a nod to the fantastic, Piedad is presented as África's alter ego, showing how "the (post)modern city grants individuals the necessary space and freedom to play with different identities" (Usoz de la Fuente 2015, 20). África will eventually achieve self-realization by confronting the dark side of her identity, as represented by Piedad. The protagonist's alter ego is a trailblazing painter and fan of África's poetry who follows the tradition of women artists subverting aesthetic and cultural boundaries (Nochlin 1988, 176) and typifies the irreverence for norms typical of the Movida (Fernandez de Alba 2020, 119). The artist represents a source of inspiration and mentorship, having also arrived in Madrid from the provinces at a young age; though, conversely, she and her sister come from a wealthy background, with financial support for their artistic endeavors. Piedad's very name alludes to her disillusionment with the artistic process and previous admission to a psychiatric hospital in a health system marred by the legacy of Francoism (Huertas 2018; Novella and Campos 2017). As her obsession with África grows, she begins to stalk her, even renting the flat next door, and destroys a copy of her book in a fit of jealousy, an uncomfortable reminder of the censorship of literature during the Franco era. The actions of Piedad conform to clichés of the class divide and female rivalry that impede coalitional resistance to oppression (hooks 1982, 157), insinuating broader social tensions in the wake of the Transition. The patriarchal association between so-called hysteria and femininity is simultaneously bolstered through this symbolic violence, undermining any feminist alliance associated with Movida cultures. The latter half of the novel thus becomes increasingly

reminiscent of a *novela negra*, inflected with the fantastic and in contrast with the initial bildungsroman set-up.

Caught in a Faustian pact with Isaac and Piedad (Aladoud 2018, 72–73), África increasingly comes to fulfil the roles they envisage for her, taking Piedad and Belén's ex-partner Alberto as her lover in the culmination of symbolic doubling. Initially a source of support, Alberto, too, betrays África through his simultaneous relationship with Lucía, reflecting the diverse sexual dynamics typically associated with the Movida (Pérez-Sánchez 2008) that are the focus of, for example, *Castillos de cartón*. Lucía blames Alberto for Piedad's mental ill health and orders Isaac to arrange his murder, a power move facilitated by her upper-class status that implicates África. The fickle, abusive nature of these relationships undermines the queer, feminist, horizontal and community-oriented potential associated with the Movida's artistic spaces as the young working-class migrant is symbolically sacrificed to the elite. One morning África wakes up to find Alberto missing, a large bloodstain on his side of the bed, a scene that Farah Aladoud suggests undermines literary depictions of female victimhood (2018, 83). This textual integration of elements of the novela negra might reflect disillusionment with the fraught realities of the Transition whilst constructing "a site for the recuperation of historical memory" (Aramburu 2019, 4) of violence. Psychologically traumatized by the dissolution of her apparent support network, África aimlessly wanders the emblematic Retiro park in a state of delusion believing she herself had killed Alberto, as she conforms to the stereotype of the "melancholic migrant" (Ahmed 2010). The sense of disorientation, embedded at a textual level through interior monologue that echoes her state of mind, demonstrates Castro's use of narrative technique "to illustrate the psychological complexity of both the protagonist and her precarious situation" (Delgado-Proust 2012, 183). The lack of support from África's well-to-do acquaintances in her time of need is contrasted with the consolation she receives from members of the local unhoused community residing in the park, who show solidarity with a fellow outsider, mistaking her for her double Piedad in a scene reminiscent of the fantastic. Like Piedad before her, she is admitted to the hospital for psychiatric treatment, succumbing to the challenges of conforming to the expectation for minorities to be "happy" (Ahmed 2010). África is hospitalized throughout a period of further social, economic and political development under the PSOE government, marked by milestones such as, for example, Spain entering the EEC in 1986, and Barcelona hosting the Olympic Games, Seville hosting the World Expo and Madrid being named the European Capital of Culture in 1992. Her condition reflects the damaging impact of capitalist modernity on the mental health of women on particular (Davies 2021). Meanwhile, the character of Piedad goes on to have a glittering career as an artist. For the upper-class Piedad to be happy and successful, it transpires that her double, the working-class África must suffer, undermining feminist social mobility or collaboration.

In keeping with postmodern literary tendencies, another identifiable marker of disillusionment in *El secreto de la lejíja* concerns literary creativity (Tanner 2022, 1713),

explored through “autoconciencia literaria” (Lópea García 2001); a common thread running through Castro’s other novels. África’s output is at first stimulated by the urban environment of the Movida in which living a creative life is integral (Usoz de la Fuente 2015, 20), which for her meant a newfound artistic milieu and the “room of one’s own” (Woolf 1929) so coveted by the woman writer to afford her space and resources to write. Creativity offers a means of escape from the confines of her circumstances as a woman who grew up in peripheral Spain during late Francoism and the Transition to Democracy: “una manera como otra de evitar la vida, sumergida en una realidad que se desarrollaba aparte de los hechos” (Castro 2001, 8). This is a characteristic of women’s writing of Castro’s generation that Carmen de Urioste identifies as a means of documenting disenchantment with the everyday (2001, 285). While the Franco regime had invested significantly in state censorship of literary, artistic and journalistic expression, as it struggled to fully control the cultural sector (Fernández de Alba 2020, 5) a more relaxed Ley de Prensa e Imprenta was implemented in 1966. Restrictions were rolled back after 1975, though there continued to be instances of censorship in the Transition period (Ríos Carratalá 2022), as is narrated in the novel. The magnum opus of África’s new neighbor, Eleuterio, himself a Galician migrant from a neighboring village whose name denoting “liberator” reflects his politics of resistance, was banned by Franco’s ultra-Catholic regime due to its radical philosophical reinterpretation of Christian doctrine. The essay is enthusiastically shared amongst Isaac’s artistic circle in a reflection of persistent cultural resistance circulating during the Transition (Vila Diéguez 2022, 115). África is ashamed that she is not familiar with Eleuterio’s work despite their shared cultural heritage, which reflects her affinity to Galician writers and the far-reaching success of the censorship mandate. She looks to him as a source of inspiration and mentorship in her desire to improve her writing and have her book published, which is presented as an issue of national pride, “una prueba que certificara mi calidad de poeta del pueblo” (Castro 2001, 74). This elucidates the well-documented importance of literature as a means to assert Galician national identity in the absence of institutional support (Rábade Villar 2011). África perceives the significance of literary production in spiritual terms, reclaiming loaded religious connotations in the name of liberal self-expression. Fundamentally, she craves the illusory promise of the opportunity to “hablar de libros” (Castro 2001, 120) and focus on her writing, without the power dynamics that the atmosphere of the Movida appears to impose on her.

Undermining the promise of cultural change, it is the young prodigy’s male mentor Isaac who profits from África’s literary production, capitalizing on the monetary potential of literature from “the provinces” in a democratic Spain embracing plurality yet implicitly perpetuating internal colonialism. He uses one of Piedad’s paintings as the cover image to África’s book without asking for the author’s permission and demands he obtain the rights to publish her entire oeuvre. África comes to realize that the advance he has paid her for her book was the fee Lucía paid him for the hit on Alberto, so her literary success is in fact built on blood money – a *novela negra* allusion to the corruption, violence and instability of

the period. Isaac insists that she should write narrative rather than poetry to make more money, mindful of increasing market pressures and perpetuating the hierarchy of labor and genre inherent in the notional divide between poetry and narrative as classed, regionalized and gendered. Speaking to the traditional associations of Galicia with poetry (Miguélez-Carballeira 2013, 2) that Isaac disregards in a reflection of intercultural difference, Eleuterio claims that Galician literature is unique due to the lyrical soul of the Galician people. He tells África that her poetry is in need of the eponymous “secreto de la lejía”; the cleansing secret of good writing that has the power to blur the lines between lived reality and fantasy. In another example of male influence on her creative output, Eleuterio suggests she researches and writes the history of his hometown. However, in a feminist reawakening that makes up the denouement of the novel, África eventually decides instead to document her formative, calamitous experiences in the postdictatorship capital, finding her own “secreto de la lejía” to make up the metanarrative of the novel. Castro’s novel thus documents the role of women’s stories in transferring cultural memory, reinforcing the critical role of historically marginalized voices in consolidating contemporary Spain (Pérez-Sánchez 2008, 195).

Literary creativity in the fast-paced atmosphere of the Movida has nonetheless taken its toll on the young writer. Rather than fostering África’s talent and promise and facilitating social mobility, she is time and again forced to make compromises and take risks that ultimately jeopardize her mental health, apparently as a result of her gender, class and cultural origin. This is nuanced by her retrospective account, as she reflects on how women during the Movida reclaimed streets and historically male-dominated public spaces. When África is discharged from hospital a decade after taking refuge in the Retiro in a state of delirium, she makes a point of visiting her creative inspiration, Eleuterio; he has risen from obscurity to win Spain’s prestigious national prize for literature, a reflection of the radical change made possible by the demise of the Franco regime. Tellingly, África’s only true source of friendship and solidarity in Madrid appears to be the aging Galician writer and fellow emigrant. For Eleuterio, writing served as a form of catharsis during a harrowing period of Spanish history, and for África too, it functions as a means to heal. In this way, Castro confronts and unsettles the quintessential “madwoman in the attic” (Gilbert and Gubar 2000) trope that had been constructed to undermine female creativity and nonnormativity by framing women writers as mentally ill, a cliché that they have repeatedly had to contest. Indeed, Castro has herself remarked on her need to write to protect her mental health (Oliva 2023).

A final related thread to be considered here is the perception of otherness in the context of cultural politics in Spain’s new democracy, a key feature of Castro’s fiction more broadly (Molinero 2009) that, as we have seen, also percolates through works by Montero and Lindo. In the Transition period, plurality was celebrated in the postmodern context of valuing the local within global tendencies and of PSOE’s support for devolved autonomous governments, counteracting the state homogenization enforced during the dictatorship with

“a new regional sense of place” (Stapell 2007, 178). Galician nationalist sentiment was galvanized by the political possibilities of democracy, the return of exiles and emigrants, the protection of autonomous communities and languages written into the 1978 Constitution and the reinstating of the Statute of Autonomy in 1981 after it had initially been drafted and ratified in 1936 before the outbreak of war. Generally said to be inclusive of diverse ages, social classes and cultural backgrounds (Gallero 1991, 2; Stapell 2009, 358), the *Movida* was largely perceived to be defined by inclusion and cultural mixing (Stapell 2009, 359–360) as Spain embraced European democratic values. Basque, Catalan and Galician national cultures were celebrated in the reverberations of *Movida* counterculture in these territories (on the specificities of the Galician case, see, for example, Colmeiro 2017). The character of Isaac is Andalusian, and, indeed, cultural actors from outside of Madrid made many of the most notable contributions to the movement (Stapell 2009, 360), including Galician fashion designer Adolfo Domínguez and Galician broadcaster Jesús Ordoñas, film director Pedro Almodóvar from Castilla la Mancha, singer Alaska, who was born and raised in Mexico City, and Uruguayan exile Cristina Peri Rossi, who penned the postmodern masterpiece *La nave de los locos* in 1984. Nonetheless, many participants belonged to the middle and upper classes (Vila Diéguez 2022, 113), and, as we have seen, it is class tension which drives the narrative through África’s discomfort with Lucía and Piedad’s wealthy, urban milieu.

For as much as the nation is an inherently patriarchal construction that has tended to suppress women’s subjectivities (Yuval-Davis 2011), nationalisms have been theorized as subjective, imaginary bonds that connect individuals and are often reinforced by a shared language (Anderson 2006, 154). Collective identities are determined by shared elements of what Patrick Colm Hogan terms “practical identity”, such as language, culture or religion (2000, 322). Contrast with communities identified as “other” therefore serves as a means of self-definition. As we have seen, África embraces a sense of community with other Galician immigrants in the Spanish capital, reassuring her mother that she is safe and well by informing her that she has Galician neighbors: “si no nos ayudamos los gallegos, quién nos va a ayudar” (Castro 2001, 63).ⁱⁱⁱ Eleuterio’s occasional outbursts in the Galician language are embedded within the Spanish-language text and highlighted in italics, a device which corresponds to Emily Apter’s theorization of the “politics of untranslatability” (2013) by consciously hampering the Spanish-language reader’s immediate understanding in the flow of the narrative. This serves to draw attention to and assert Galician cultural and linguistic distinctiveness as just one example of the influence of the writer’s bilingual heritage on her use of language (Keefe Ugalde 1991, 286). Indeed, whilst Castro’s poetry is primarily penned in Galician, the language she grew up speaking at home, she has stated that writing all her novels to date in Spanish has been largely due to the publishing opportunities available to her in that language whilst living outside of Galicia. Though Castro is a highly respected poet in the Galician language, her decision to publish fiction in Spanish has had a somewhat negative impact on her reception in the Galician cultural system (Barbour 2020, 60). Reflecting the extent of the significance of the language to Galician identity and cultural

consciousness, África remarks that exposure to her native tongue through interactions with her neighbor ameliorates her prolonged stay in Madrid, “como si aquellas palabras dieran carta de naturaleza a mi estancia” (Castro 2001, 27), enhancing her sense of belonging through links to the Galician diasporic community. Hearing Galician makes her homesick, however, a feeling that is exacerbated as she becomes engulfed in psychosis as documented in her interior monologue, “si no volvía [a Galicia] pronto, algo se rompería para siempre dentro de mí, algo que me ahogaba” (Castro 2001, 85), a reflection of how immigrants are psychologically located between multiple communities at once (Ahmed 2010, 158). Her absent homeland is idealized as the site of her innocence: “pensaba volverme a Galicia, donde mi madre cantaba canciones por los pasillos y donde, al menos, podría ganarme la vida sin intoxicarme cada noche” (Castro 2001, 83–84). Examples such as these show how the migrant can “imagine happiness as being somewhere other than where we are in the present” (Ahmed 2010, 160-161).

Though the Movida was a celebration of social mixing and progressive ideals, including openness to alternative cultures, the protagonist is continuously confronted by cultural prejudice (Encinar 2005, 158) at its intersection with sexism and classism. From the very first line of the novel, the narrator identifies her Galician heritage as a factor in the challenges she encounters whilst navigating Madrid. Well documented in Galicia’s history has been its lack of infrastructure, mass emigration and economic hardship provoked by Spanish colonization and abandonment (Beiras 2020), so that social class “continues to be of capital importance for elucidating conflicts, tensions, and social identities in the history of Galicia” (Losada Montero 2017, 13). África experiences a culture shock symbolized by her “exotic” name, which speaks to her sense of being othered, and is reminded of her position as an outsider from “un pueblo que no conoce nadie” (Castro 2001, 70), perpetuating notions of Galicia’s peripherality and rurality. As Julia Kristeva has argued, “always elsewhere, the foreigner belongs nowhere” (1991, 10), with this sense of foreignness especially stark for women; this sentiment, in particular, is commonly explored in stories of Galician migration (Palacios 2023, 19). África is of course easily identified as Galician due to her accent, and mistakes her Portuguese neighbor Julia (Eleuterio’s wife) for a Galician due to cultural affinity. She is subjected to the prejudice of a taxi driver who claims that Galicians are “raros” and “gente sumisa” (Castro 2001, 24), showing how, in Ahmed’s words, “it is as if you have a duty not to be hurt by the violence directed toward you, not even to notice it, to let it pass by, as if it passes you by” (Ahmed 2010, 158). In response, she herself participates in stereotyping Galicians as “humildes” and “raza esclava” (Castro 2001, 24), reinforcing the colonial link between Galician identity and the “peasant” social class (Miguélez Carballeira 2013). This is not the only occasion on which she appears to internalize entrenched stereotypes rather than contesting them: “todo el mundo sabe que los gallegos somos de una reticencia inscrutable” (Castro 2001, 7). She is obliged to defend her unique literary heritage and sarcastically berates the centralism of the Spanish cultural scene that enforces colonial discourse about low levels of education and culture in Galicia –

“en Galicia también hay libros” (Castro 2001, 39) – though career opportunities in Madrid have inevitably informed her decision to stay. It is only by returning to her homeland and writing retrospectively about her experiences a decade after their occurrence that she is able to begin to properly process them and recover her health given the negative impact of urban Madrid Movida culture and the broader complexities of the Transition on her wellbeing.

Conclusion

The hedonism and rebelliousness of the Movida madrileña soon gave way to disenchantment caused by social ills and political instability (Gómez Montero 2007, 9), and the movement became commercialized and coopted for political gain (Pérez-Sánchez 2008, 145), dying out around 1985 and leaving a lasting but contested legacy in Spanish society. *El secreto de la lejía* reorganizes received understandings of Movida narratives through its experimental, multigenre approach, reclaiming the influence of diverse and often historically androcentric genres of the bildungsroman, the artist’s novel, the fantastic, the *novela negra* and autofiction for an innovative female-oriented narrative that chimes with the formal and thematic reconfigurations of fiction produced by Spanish women writers at the turn of the millennium while building on the influence of earlier texts. Yet Castro diverges from the Movida-era nostalgia that seemed to dominate cultural production in the early 2000s. As this article has outlined, her novel critically interrogates 1980s Madrid society from an underrepresented Galician perspective that is linguistically embedded within the narrative, explored through the interrelated touchpoints of feminism, creativity and cultural otherness that reveal how Spanish society continues to grapple with the shadow of the conservative values enforced by the Franco regime whilst navigating capitalist modernity.

The textual tension rides on the framing of Movida culture as inclusively democratizing but ultimately being represented as an elite, exclusive enclosure. This proves to be the formal motor that drives the contributions of this novel to nuanced understandings of a movement that is not even explicitly referred to within the narrative. A seemingly welcoming, liberal community that initially facilitates agency, creativity and acceptance – in line with the novel’s use of elements of autofiction, *Künstlerroman* and the female bildungsroman – is ultimately revealed through the influence of the fantastic and the *novela negra* to be disorientating, stifling and finally threatening for the young woman outsider, as sexist, classist and regionalist prejudice and betrayal results in acute mental illness. Plagued by the pressures of capitalist modernity in the face of intersecting oppressions relating to gender, social class and cultural background, África fails to achieve the migrant’s “promise of happiness”, to the extent that she returns home to recover her health and creativity. Her difficulties, and those of her double Piedad, map onto the nation’s disillusionment with the realities of the Transition more broadly, as the textual paradox of suffering and personal development arguably echoes Spanish society’s rocky path to

democratic modernity. Ultimately, *El secreto de la lejía* takes an original approach to showcasing the contradictory, turbulent atmosphere of Madrid at the time, disrupting any mythologization of the Movida's diversity and inclusion by drawing attention to engrained heteropatriarchal, classist, culturally homogenizing power structures in newly democratic Spain.

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ⁱ In *El secreto de la lejía*, characters Isaac and Lucía are a wealthy married couple who have separated, able to take advantage of newly gained civil liberties.

ⁱⁱ For other earlier examples of fiction set during the Movida, see Escudero 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ On Galician migration to Madrid in the latter part of the twentieth century, see for example Acuña 2014.