

Settled in Normal: Narratives of a Prozaic (Spanish) Nation¹

L. Elena Delgado is Associate Professor of Spanish, Criticism and Interpretive Theory at the University of Illinois (Urbana). A specialist in modern and contemporary Spanish literatures and cultures, she is the author of La imagen elusive: lenguaje y representación en la narrativa de Galdós (2000) and numerous articles on nineteenth-century literature, decadentism, and modernities. She was also guest editor of "Imperial Disclosures" (Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture, 2001) and Re/Constructions (Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies, 2003). She is currently completing a book entitled "The Normal Nation" on the cultural construction of Spanish identity.

This private world of loony bins and weird people which I always felt I occupied and hid in, had suddenly turned inside out so that it seemed like this was one big Prozac Nation, one big mess of malaise.

—Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Prozac Nation*

Me habían dicho que es peligrosísimo dejar el Prozac de golpe, sobre todo si uno ha estado tomándolo años... y que podía sobrevivir una crisis seria, un episodio depresivo, que podía sobrevenir un brote esquizoide....

—Lucía Extebarría, *Amor, curiosidad, Prozac y dudas*

...it is very conceivable that the sense of guilt produced by civilization is not perceived as such either, and remains to a large extent unconscious or appears as a sort of malaise, a dissatisfaction, for which people seek other motivations.

—Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*

In his chapter dedicated to the essay, included in the *Cambridge Companion to Modern Spanish Culture*, Thomas Mermall claims that after Franco's death the issues of Spain's national identity and Europeanization lost their traditionally ontological and metaphysical dimension and acquired a more functional character (170). He argues, moreover, that the essay is precisely the genre that stands as concrete proof of Spain's stable European intellectual location (172). Mermall's contention, far from being controversial, aptly captures the general tone of recent analysis of



Spanish cultural and political identity, both inside and outside of Spain. Thus, for example, noted Spanish historians Juan Pablo Fusi and Jordi Palafox argue that when Spain became a member of NATO (1981) and the European Union (1986), it at long last became Western and European, thus resolving the issue of national identity (Fusi and Palafox 442). And another equally distinguished historian, Javier Tusell, celebrated in 1999 the fact that the hagiographies of nationalism were in the process of being overcome in the entire Spanish state (243).

If indeed Spaniards can now boast of having arrived “where her artists and intellectuals have long sought so fervently to be—integrally in Europe” (Mermall 172) it would seem to be a logical conclusion that the “anguish” over national identity, so crucial a component of Spain’s modern intellectual tradition, would have ceased to exist. And indeed that is the conclusion of such a lucid intellectual as Eduardo Subirats, who remarked in the early nineties that in post-Franco Spain “el tema de España,” so widely and bitterly debated in an essentialist and negative rhetoric during most of the twentieth century “se ha dado [...] por completa, rotunda y definitivamente zanjado” (143).

But if in fact the question of Spain’s national identity has now been resolved, how does one explain the renaissance of the political essay in Spain?² Why have so many of those essays become unlikely best-sellers and elevated their authors to the rank of media personalities? And how should we interpret the renewed prestige of essay awards such as *Premio Anagrama de Ensayo*, *Premio Espasa*, *Premio Jovellanos* or *Premio Nacional de Ensayo*, all of which carry substantial monetary and cultural capital?

In order to attempt to answer some of these questions, we need to turn our attention now to some of the titles published in recent years which, in one way or another, deal with Spanish cultural identity or the idea of the nation in Spain: *Si España cae... asalto nacionalista al estado*, by César Alonso de los Ríos; *Nacionalismos: el laberinto de la identidad* by Xabier Rubert de Ventós; *España, una angustia nacional* by Javier Tusell; *La novela de España: los intelectuales y el problema español* by Javier Varela; *Tragedia y razón: Europa en el pensamiento español del siglo XX* by José María Beneyto; *España, reflexiones sobre el ser de España*, edited by the Royal Academy of History; *España, evolución de la identidad nacional* by Juan Pablo Fusi; *La construcción de la nación española*, by Mario Onaindía. All these essays received wide critical attention within Spain and many of them became instant best-sellers. No less successful and publicized are essays that deal more “explicitly” with issues of nationalism(s) and in particular with the Basque and Catalan nationalisms and their interactions with the state. I am referring of course to works such as Mikel Azurmendi’s *La herida patriótica*, Xabier Rubert de Ventós’s *Catalunya: de la identitat a la independència*; Borja de Riquer’s *Identitats contemporànies: Catalunya I Espanya*; Mario Onaindía’s *Guía para orientarse en el laberinto vasco* and the now famous series of essays written by Jon Juaristi on the subject of Basque nationalism and in particular his by now classic *El bucle melancólico*.³

Since I mention here only a small selection of the many essays published on this topic, it is obvious that the sheer number of existing works points to a need to “explain” the nation and its evolution.

Indeed, it could be argued that the very preeminence of the “national debate” in contemporary Spain reveals precisely that which the contents of the above mentioned works often negate: that the idea of the Spanish Nation or of its cultural identity might even today be problematic. It is significant, for example, that the rhetoric used in the very titles of these works to describe the “Spanish non-problem” is that same which, according to Subirats, had been displaced: labyrinths, tragedies, anguish, struggle. It could be argued, and rightly so, that the focus of many of these books is to re-examine phenomena of the past. But then we are faced with the paradox of a supposedly by gone problem that is nevertheless re-examined over and over, in the midst of invocations to the present Europeanized and “normalized” status of Spain. From a merely narratological point of view, this imbalance points to a common narrative device, one by which the impulse driving the narration turns out to be the same one which the text eventually disqualifies and annuls. In other words, Spain may want to represent itself as a completely “normal” European country with an unproblematic collective identity, but the concept that keeps turning up as the key element of the national narrative, the one sustaining its interest, is precisely that denied yet ever-present “difference.”

It would seem, in fact, that in contemporary Spain the essentialist use of the term “difference,” used during Francoism to characterize the country as a whole, has not been erased, but merely shifted to refer only to the “peripheral” (particularly Basque, Catalan and Galician) nationalities. That is to say, the consensus seems to be that while as a nation Spain is now

“indistinguishable” from other European countries, internally the different autonomous communities that constitute the Spanish state are irrevocably different from one another. The very expression chosen in contemporary Spain to denote cultural differences within the state, “hechos diferenciales” (“differentiating facts”) points to a static and hierarchical, rather than malleable and relational understanding of difference. For “fact” is a word that implies certitude, immutability. Indeed, in Spanish the expression “es un hecho” is used in contexts that exclude *ab initio* any sort of interpretive, ideological or even affective variable. In this sense both the recurrent claims of normalcy that characterize contemporary analysis of the different Spanish cultures, as well as the equally recurrent invocation of a fundamental, intrinsic difference that disproves any similarity among them, point to an epistemological fissure, to an ambivalence that is in fact characteristic of all nationalisms (Nairns 348-49). If, as E. Balibar and others have demonstrated, the construction of national subjects can never be void of tension and contradictions, the insistence on the part of Spanish politicians and intellectuals on stressing the seamless normalcy of the Spanish national identity acquires a “prozaic” dimension. By this I mean that the sources of tension and conflict within the national body are not duly acknowledged and dealt with, but simply anesthetized and/or circumscribed to a convenient problematic symptom.

Indeed, the narrative mode dominant in Spain in the 1990s has been said to follow “the poetics of Prozac” due to the predominance of an aestheticization of personal neurosis and narcissistic egocentrism (Fernández Porta). In poetry too

there is a clear tendency to favor a poetics of normalcy and “common sense” that rejects all forms of social and stylistic marginality as extravagant and fosters “a literature that is ‘European’ in the most generic (or least specific) sense of the word” (Mayhew 242). As for the political and historical essay, much of what is written today is characterized by a seamless discourse wherein both individual and collective identities are presented as uniformly consistent and comprehensible. It is possible to have a “before” and an “after,” and in fact many well-known essayists have publicly unveiled and renounced their pasts (among them Jon Juaristi, Mikel Azurmendi, Eduardo Haro Tecglen, Mario Onaindía).⁴ But the rupture is presented as definitive and unproblematic: “what I was then is not what I am now.” More than a process of personal evolution, where there is an occasional overlap and tension between the present and the past, many Spanish intellectuals seem to have suffered quasi-religious, radical personal conversions. Nevertheless, the public apostasies of so many public figures, the visceral political and personal attacks they direct at one another, and the lack of self-irony characteristic of their discourses could be interpreted as another symptom that under the surface certainties of political normalcy there is a great deal of repressed anxiety and guilt. At the same time, this “poetics of conversion and recantation” points to what Edward Said identifies as a type of narcissistic self-mutilation characteristic of an intellectual discourse that has become suffused in orthodoxy (113-20) and avoids self-critical reflection.

In general, the representations of collective national identities in Spain (both central and peripheral) tend to minimize *internal* tensions and disruptions to foreground cultural (even ethnic) homogeneity and historical continuity. Let us consider, for example, the essay by Xavier Rubert de Ventós, a lucid and justly respected Catalan intellectual, whose latest book, *From Identity to Independence: The New Transition*, makes a claim for Catalan independence. In the essay, Ventós acknowledges that modern consciousness emerges from the experience of belonging to different and distinct orders of reality: I am several things at once, *ergo*, I exist (59). Thus, individual lucidity begins when one recognizes the fragmentary nature of all identities and also the intrinsic ambivalence that any adherence to a collective identity entails. Addressing specifically the notion of Catalan identity, de Ventós points out, rather humorously, that a non-conflictive identity where all the elements form a logical continuum (I am a Catalanist, therefore I like *sardanas*, therefore I belong to the *Barça*, therefore...) is simply not an identity but a “redundancy” (65).

For all his explicit pronouncements, however, there is a slippage in de Ventós’s argument whereby what is a personal, singular *locus* of enunciation (he defines himself as a white, male, bourgeois, Catholic, independentist Catalan [67]) becomes entangled with “general” pronouncements on *the* Catalan identity, which is discussed in the book as if it were one homogeneous category. For example, the parallelism between Feminism and Catalanism is often repeated in the book, which underlines

the still imperative need for both and the manner in which both movements are ridiculed by hostile critics. However, when Ventós speaks ironically about the fact that it is difficult to be a woman or to be a Catalan (49) he seems to assume that *all* women would identify as feminists and *all* Catalans would identify as independentists. Clearly, there are women who not only do not fight the *status quo* but on the contrary, benefit from it. As the massive bibliography on the subject attests, “woman” cannot be used as a homogeneous category of analysis based on the sameness of their oppression.⁵ Similarly, it would seem that the high ranking Catalan politicians who serve in the conservative Spanish government of José María Aznar and helped him win an unprecedented electoral victory in Barcelona for the (Spanish Nationalist) Partido Popular do not feel “burdened” by their Catalan origin—or at least not enough to override their loyalty to a party obsessed with preserving “national unity” and a very exclusive notion of “Spanishness.”

Even more problematic is the claim by de Ventós that Catalonia, as a nation without a state, cannot count on the United Nations to defend it as Kuwait did during the Gulf War (81). While the first part of the argument is acceptable (it is of course possible that the best interest of the Spanish state might not coincide with the best interest of Catalonia), the second is highly questionable. For it is well documented by now that the Gulf War had nothing to do with the international “protection” of Kuwait “as a nation” but rather with the preservation of its oil reserves and the protection of its ruling aristocracy. And leaving aside the fact the Kuwaiti citizens themselves had no say whatsoever in what-

ever measures were taken in their name, since they live under totalitarian rule, it is quite obvious that no international organization would dare to intervene in Catalonia, a Western European territory, and enact the kind of military interventions that are routinely practiced in Arab, Latin American and other “Third World” territories. Therefore, while de Ventós can certainly claim the need for Catalonia to be constituted as an autonomous nation-state independent from Spain, with a right to international representation, he should not do so by suggesting a “sameness of oppression” between a prosperous European territory and Kuwait; nor should he do so by implying that *all* Catalan citizens would agree that their interests would be well represented by institutions such as the United Nations or NATO.

What we see in de Ventós’s line of argument in *De la identidad a la independencia*, then, is the involuntary homogenizing of Catalan identity, something that did not escape the critical eye of Pasqual Maragall, who wrote a prologue to the Castilian translation of the book (11).⁶ In de Ventós’s case, however, the ideological elision between “Catalans” as a discursive construction and “Catalans” as specific historical subjects can be explained due to the *quasi* didactic nature of his book. As Maragall himself shrewdly points out, sometimes it seems that de Ventós is oversimplifying matters “for the sake of the argument” (12, in English in the original) since *De la identidad a la independencia* ends by acknowledging that:

los nuevos gobiernos nacionalistas deberán ser especialmente sensibles al pluralismo interno, ya que su legitimidad se medirán, en último término,

por la heterogeneidad que hayan sido capaces de asumir. (169)

It is rare to find, however, an overtly *Spanish* nationalist discourse with a similar unequivocal affirmation of the acceptance of internal heterogeneity as the basis of political legitimacy. On the contrary, the overt manipulations and omissions of the present Spanish nationalist discourse point to a renaissance of a narrow concept of Spanishness—now euphemistically called “constitutional patriotism”—which emphasizes, precisely, the purported cultural and political homogeneity of the nation-state. The true nature of this patriotism is evident in the recent revival of a type of historiographic production marked by a perennialist (as opposed to voluntarist) understanding of the nation. Such a view, predominant in Spanish historiography since the nineteenth century, is characterized by what Américo Castro defined as “retrospective panhispanism” (30): the desire to see *Spaniards* and *a Spanish nation* where there existed but a precarious collection of very different political systems, which only are identified *a posteriori* with nationhood. This “panhispanism” is of course inseparable from the persistent use of inadequate and obsolete historiographic categories, including the term “Reconquest” to designate the brutal and traumatic expulsion of Muslims and Jews from the Peninsula, or “Descubrimiento” to characterize the encounter with non-European civilizations. The political usefulness of an historical analysis framed as teleological narrative is explicitly acknowledged in many state-sponsored publications. Thus, publications like *Reflexiones sobre el ser de España* or *España como nación*, both edited by the Real Academia de la Historia,

are intended to counteract the perceived “state of siege” being sustained on the Spanish nation by peripheral nationalisms.⁷

A paradigmatic example of this Spanish nationalist revival is the re-edition of the controversial book *España, un enigma histórico*, by Claudio Sánchez Albornoz, originally written in 1957 as refutation of Américo Castro’s *España en su historia*. According to the new back cover of the book, the purpose of Albornoz’s book was to investigate “*nuestra misteriosa y compleja vida histórica en los albores de nuestra identidad*” (my emphasis). The a-problematic “we” addressed in this description can also be found in the “Note from the editor” that introduces the volume, where it is affirmed that it is imperative that:

la Historia con mayúsculas pero sin artificio elitista, no las historias o las historietas, sea también una lectura *normal*, habitual de todos y no de unos pocos, y cumpla así *esa misión de forjadora de hombres libres*. (V, my emphasis)

The messianic rhetoric of the sentence is consistent with the ideological charge of its content: the *normalcy* of the type of history envisioned by Sánchez Albornoz, consists precisely in its singularity, in being History with a capital H; a history that should nevertheless be written in an accessible style compatible with its mission of forging free *men*. The argumentation of the unnamed editor is, of course, consistent with the ideological tenets of Sánchez Albornoz himself. As is well known, the historian’s main thesis was a repudiation of Américo Castro’s notion that the Semitic element of Spanish culture is an absolutely essential component

and what marks its uniqueness. For Sánchez Albornoz, Spain's "unidad de destino," forged on Christianity and Castilian prominence, both precedes and transcends the presence of Arabs and Jews, whose contributions he considers inconsequential. Ironically, the prologue to the new edition alludes to the acrimonious confrontation between these two intellectuals, characterizing it as a:

contrapunto inolvidable a la prohibición de toda polémica real—es decir de pluralidad—que denominaba en la España sometida a la dictadura de Franco.

At the same time, however, it is immediately noted that the evolution of national historiography has turned such a controversy into "a thing of the past" (IV). It is worth pointing out, in this regard, that *España, un enigma histórico*, was re-edited in the year 2000, the same year that a very controversial report by the Royal Academy of History about the teaching of Spanish history came to light. The ensuing caustic exchanges between "national" and "peripheral" historians, prompted by the report's methodology and ideological biases, led to a national debate about the (im)possibility of teaching a common and unified *Spanish* history. In such a cultural climate, the Sánchez Albornoz re-edition is extremely timely. As the book of a Republican historian who lived in exile during the Franco regime it has impeccable democratic credentials; yet its main thesis about the "unity of destiny and identity" of the Spanish people (a thesis which was in fact very much in line with the ideological tenets of the Francoist regime itself) fits perfectly into the concept of patriotism and "españolidad" being pro-

moted by the conservative ruling party policies.

Clearly, the central government is not the only one entangled in an identity politics rooted in essentialism and polarization, for similar tactics characterize many of the public pronouncements of the different autonomous governments. In fact, one of the most unambiguous examples of the Eurocentrism and narcissism that often typifies the positions of both the central and autonomous governments is the now infamous publicity campaign devised by the Basque Department of Justice in 1998, one of whose advertisements proclaimed:

He nacido blanco, soy vasco y soy europeo. Una cuestión de azar, pero también de suerte, porque hoy por hoy el origen de los seres humanos marca definitivamente el futuro. Muchas veces me pregunto hasta cuándo tendrá que ser así. ("Enfrentamiento")

The scandal and debate unleashed by this statement was such that it embroiled all of the national press. Naturally Basque politicians complained (rightly) that the indignation of the Madrid press and the ruling right-wing *Partido Popular* often concealed an agenda that had nothing to do with sensitivity to racism and much to do with their opposition to Basque self-determination, which was the primary objective of the campaign. But even accepting that Spanish "chauvinism" was at play, this does not excuse the ultimate irony of the matter: that a government might not be able to recognize a racist, classist or sexist message. Because the problem with the polemical text is that it assumes a premise which should by now be obsolete: that

gender (in Spanish the piece is enunciated in the masculine gender, which therefore is aligned as such with privilege); race (white) ethnicity (European, Basque) are “definitive” locators of our “place in the world.” Equally significant is what the message excludes by implication: not only the opposite categories of those found in the ad (I am poor, I am illiterate, I am a homosexual, I am an immigrant) but also the *combination* of characteristics: “gypsy Basque” or “Black Basque.” Are those unthinkable and unutterable categories in the context of societies where whiteness and Europeanness are unambiguous signifiers of privilege?—societies where, moreover, gender and racial privileges are interpreted as a mere accident of luck and not as the clear and methodical consequence of concrete political, social and economic ideologies in which both the Spanish and the Basque governments are complicit?

The final irony is that the ad was part of a series commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights. Rather than locating Basque ethnicity on the side of European privilege, a more appropriate campaign could have deconstructed that pairing in order to confirm the Basque government’s *commitment* to foster an inclusive society in which luck and chance are *excluded* as determining factors in attaining what should be legitimate human rights. The Basque government ended up requesting the arbitration of the non-profit organization SOS Racism, a gesture that in fact represented the clearest, and perhaps more accurate, message of the campaign: that in matters of racism neither the Basque nor the Spanish government could offer an honest and unbiased opinion.

What can be ascertained from the examples that I have just presented is that the constant invocations to “Europeanness,” modernity and normalcy present in the political and cultural discourse predominant in the Spanish state are not accompanied by a rigorous intellectual interrogation of those terms. What is being alluded to and what is elided/concealed when one refers to “Europe” and “modernity”? And why are we not even considering the possibility of studying those two signifiers as ideologically charged constructions, rather than as unquestionable axioms? How can we define and analyze what establishes the boundaries between “normal” and “abnormal” national histories and trajectories? What are the inherent dangers of “normalizing” policies? And finally: why do we encounter the persistent narrative reiteration of a journey already concluded? That is to say, if Spain (or the Basque country, or Catalonia) are, as it is so often claimed, already firmly located in a “normalcy” consistently equated with European (post) modernity—why the compulsion to revisit again and again the sites of (past) differences and anomalies?

In an insightful analysis of Jon Juaristi’s “nationalist sagas”—in particular his monumental hit, *El bucle melancólico. Historias de nacionalistas vascos*—Joseba Gabilondo posits a series of questions similar to the ones I have just articulated myself in reference to Spanish nationalism: why would a critic return again and again to the same topic, in this case the constructed nature of nationalisms in general and Basque nationalism in particular? And why would a successful writer and professor of Hispanic Philology choose to revisit and discuss so publicly his own transposition, from his early membership in ETA,

to his subsequent dissidence from the group, to his present role as spokesperson of the conservative ruling party's policies? Endorsing the Freudian dictum that the compulsion to repeat is the first sign of trauma and that the repetition itself indicates the place of resistance (the subconscious), Gabilondo asserts that there is a repetitive, irrational excess in Juaristi's analysis that prompted him to write "half a dozen different accounts of the same nationalist fallacy;" and although the analysis itself has expanded and grown, the object of denunciation remains essentially the same (545). The fact that *El bucle melancólico* could have had such widespread resonance in Spain precisely at a moment when "the Spanish state is set on a course of Europeanization and globalization" (Gabilondo 541) can be explained in part because Juaristi, the ultimate Basque insider, offered Spanish nationalism the means to safely criticize Basque nationalism, therefore implicitly justifying the state's attempts to control and reduce it (552). I would also propose that by speaking of nationalism and nation-building processes in psychoanalytical terms (including such expressions as "primal violence," "melancholia" and "trauma") Juaristi brought to the forefront the unresolved conflicts and tensions that the "normalizing compulsion" promoted by Spanish official political discourse wanted to efface. Because the reality is that while most citizens of the Spanish state would certainly like to consider themselves "normal" and "European," it is quite clear that a significant number of them do not consider themselves part of the "Spanish" nation. So what Juaristi's and other books on "peripheral" nationalisms do is to acknowledge (unwillingly of course) what

is in fact a crucial fracture in the foundation of the contemporary Spanish nation-state, while at the same time shifting the responsibility for it safely from *the ideology* of nationalisms (in general) to a particular *kind* of nationalism (the non-central). So that now instead of the perennial "Spanish problem" what we have is "the Basque problem" or "the Catalan problem." Thus, if in 1943 Gerald Brenan saw all of Spain as a "labyrinth," that same metaphor is now used by Mario Onaindía to characterize specifically the Basque Country. Such a shift is consistent with the often mocked explicit political pronouncements by José María Aznar: "Spain is doing just fine" ("*España va bien*"). Aznar's proclamation, part of the same predominant "Prozaic political discourse" is nevertheless a symbolic locator of his own political beliefs and attitudes towards non-central nationalisms: "Spain" is doing fine. The "others" are the ones who have a problem.

There are, of course, notable exceptions to the *quasi* unanimous chorus of intellectual voices that sing the praises of Europeanization and modernity. One of them is the Catalan essayist Eduardo Subirats who in his well known essay, *Después de la lluvia*, maintains that the cult of Europeanization which has characterized Spanish cultural politics during recent years is intellectually superficial, and that the omission of Spain's own historical realities has desensitized intellectuals to the profound and dramatic conflicts that have accompanied the process of modernization of the last few decades (145). And what are some of those profound, yet unacknowledged conflicts that emerge as ghostly reminders of an unwelcome past?

One possible answer is that modernity presented Spain with a compulsory choice based on a dualistic logic, between a modernity perceived as foreign and a constructed authenticity that galvanizes a false national cohesion (usually in the name of religion). This is, as Kevin Robbins articulates, an impossible choice imposed by the hegemony of the European West (63); a choice that promotes what Daryush Shayegan calls a “schizoid disorder” in the collective identity, a condition prompted by the realization that certain nationalities can only survive “by subtraction,” to use Roberto Schwartz’s felicitous expression. The fact is, in order to be truly “European” and modern, without problematizing both terms, one must cease to be “Spanish” (or Turkish, or Russian, or a Gypsy).⁸ Moreover, one must be *a certain kind* of Englishman, German or Frenchman, since even in those countries the promises of modernity were not equally met for all citizens. This would explain what so many critics call the “split consciousness” of Spanish intellectuals: torn between the utopia of modernity and the awareness that this very modernity condemns them, as members of a second-rank nation marked by its Semitic heritage and “primitivism,” to remain outside of its paradigm. This phenomenon is not, of course, exclusive to Spain. It is, rather, a situation characteristic of all the “peripheries” which have been discursively and politically excluded from the modern European utopia. Therefore, the necessity for Spanish writers, historians and critics to “repeat” the narrative of Spain’s transition from difference to normalcy betrays two different sentiments. The first is clearly one of insecurity, as if by virtue of reiterating *ad nauseam* their newly acquired

European discursive location, the trauma of five centuries of exclusions and marginalization could be erased. The current “normalizing” obsession of the Spanish state betrays its insecurity over the very components that constitute it and that do not fit into the “modern European” paradigm: gypsies, Arabs, Jews, but above all the “bastardly” and contaminating mixture of them all.

Historian Carmen Iglesias has shown that as early as the fifteenth century Spain was already considered by other European countries an “impure” and feminized culture due to its oriental and African elements. This disqualifier did not apply exclusively to the Southern regions of the country, as would happen in the nineteenth century. On the contrary, it was originally used against the Catalans who as late as the sixteenth century in Italy were identified metonymically with *all* Spaniards and were “accused” of having a population where Jews and converted Jews exceeded Christians (Iglesias 394, 400). Thus the opinion crudely articulated by Spenser in “A View of the Present State of Ireland” that “of all nations under heaven [...] the Spaniard is the most mingled, most uncertain and most bastardly” (qtd. in Mariscal 7) only synthesizes a consistent and extended European prejudice towards Spain based on fear of, and contempt towards, racial, ethnic and cultural miscegenation.⁹ Unfortunately, that same bigotry and intolerance would also be the guiding principle of Spain’s domestic policies, and the devastation created by Spain’s *internal* racism is still, to this day, minimized or justified in the name of political causes, nation building or, once again, “social normalization” (qtd. in Mariscal 15). It should not be surprising, therefore, that

the current European invocations made by the different Spanish cultures are accompanied by very public outbursts of racism consistent with the increased visibility of openly racist movements in other European countries. Highly publicized events like the civil unrest created by harassment and persecution of Moroccan migrant workers in the Andalusian town of El Ejido; or the parental withdrawal of 650 children from a Basque school owing to the government-mandated integration into the same school of 3 gypsy children (who had to be escorted to school by the police) are only the most public and violent incidents provoked by an intolerance towards ethnic, racial and religious difference that has been invoked far too many times within and by the Spanish state as the essential component of national cohesiveness and cultural identity.

Thus, Spain's current, almost obsessive fixation with the notion of "normalcy" points perhaps to what Slavoj Žižek calls "the traumatic kernel of *jouissance* structurally unassimilable into [the subject's] symbolic universe." "The real" in Spanish cultures would be, then, precisely that (apparently) reviled *difference* that separates Spaniards but also *distinguishes* them culturally and politically from other (European) cultures. In this sense, that melancholic curlicue that adorns many recent historical national (re)constructions, reveals not only trauma, but rather a certain enjoyment in maintaining/negating an "essentialist" notion of "difference." This interpretation, which Jon Juaristi applied so successfully in his studies on Basque nationalism, is in fact true of *all* nationalisms, including (certainly) the Spanish one.

What we now see in Spain is a double movement: on the one hand, the recent propagation of and emphasis on the valorization of a "decaffeinated" difference, motivated by and completely integrated into the space of transnational capital. The existence of this "safe" difference, the one behind the commercial success of Celtic or generally "ethnic" music and the proliferation of "magic realisms" in Galician and Basque narrative, helps to forget the reality of that "other," more threatening difference that cannot be simply enjoyed as aesthetic artifact and subsumed by the commercial. But just as disconcerting as the superficial commercialization of difference is its essentialization: the emphatic affirmation of isolated otherness that is articulated in the same polarized language of the politics of homogeneity, thereby perpetuating a self-absorbed discourse incapable of coming out of itself in order to establish fluid and relational categories.

In his well known book *Nacionalismos. El laberinto de la identidad X*, Rubert de Ventós established that post-state, assertive nationalism is to be distinguished from nineteenth-century "defensive" nationalism by its concern for defending collective identity, while at the same time rejecting proselytism and the appeal to universal principles such as Truth or Reason. Significantly, Ventós characterizes this collective identity by using the fable of Narcissus, through which nationalism is defined as the reflection of a "we" defined dialectically with respect to the "others" from whom "we" demand recognition (*Nacionalismos* 140). The allusion to Narcissus in relation to a "merely assertive" (micro)nationalism is meaningful, given that the obsessive preoccupation of Span-

ish intellectual discourse with the definition and characterization of the nation has also been called “narcissistic” by non-Spanish historians (Russell). Ventós himself recognizes that the conflict between Catalonia and Madrid is becoming more narcissistic, in the sense of the little differences of which Freud spoke (*De la identidad* 101). We need, therefore, to ask ourselves if it is not a narcissistic melancholy which emerges from the persistent (re)definitions of national identity that are taking place in Spain today? A desire to re-visit sites of past (imperial, national, local) glories, when *we* were truly “different” (i.e. “better”)?¹⁰ Moreover, should we not need to review the myth of Narcissus to determine if this is really the most adequate metaphor to translate a “new” version of nationalism, or if this metaphor arises precisely because of our tendency to operate within the paradigms of a given epistemology? It is noteworthy, for example, that Ventós himself suggests the necessity of psychoanalyzing the state “for our state id-entify to reconcile itself to the ego” (71). However, Leo Bersani has already shown the ego to be the enemy of difference and desire, and others have suggested the necessity of displacing the ego, allowing non-identitarian positions to come to the surface in its place (Lane 11). Not doing so means perpetuating a divided national consciousness in which, in order to make a positive affirmation (that which is “truly” European, Spanish, Basque, Catalan), we must subtract the part which does not fit into that paradigm.

A good example of how those cultural and psychological subtractions operate can be found in the work of Catalan writer Nuria Amat. In her collection of essays entitled, significantly, *Letra Herida*

(*Wounded Letter*) Amat tells how after her mother’s death she rejected the Catalan language which she identified with her bourgeois father and chose to speak and write in Castilian, which she characterizes as follows:

Es híbrida. Es bastarda. Es mestiza. Es catalana (¿blanda?). ¿O pura y dura castellana? Es española (tibia). Es árabe (me llamo nur-ia). Es gitana. Canastera. Enfebrecida. Dicharachera. Muda. Deslenguada (eso me gusta). Es tímida y a veces huérfana. Es polémica. También rebelde. Es andaluza (¡Olé!) y moreneta (¡Visca!). Es de mar y de montaña. Es impura. Y atravesada. Muy latina (mi apellido la canta). Y por ello hispana. De Colombia, de Perú, Nicaragua y Argentina. Es gachupina. Y sorda. Y rara. Y de virgen negra o violada. Es libresca. Copiada de los libros vivos. Robada a las novelas sabias. Y francesa (por demasiada lectura). [...] Popular. Desobediente. Herida. Poemática (¿existirá esa palabra?). Desterrada. Judía y alemana. Perdida. Desgraciada. Luminosa. Rica y pobre. Le gusta depender de instantes. Asombrar las ideas. Comerse los minutos. Africanizarse y, entonces, ser más corrosiva y amplia. O empequeñecer las sombras. Desaparecer y resucitar de nuevo. Borrarse del mapa y extenderse. Es tuya y mía. Es, por supuesto, prestada. Por eso la invento cada día como si fuera una lengua personal, semisecreta y desclasada. (Amat 162)

It is meaningful that in both her theoretical and her creative work, Amat explicitly rejects official hegemonic Europe in favor of “the wounded Europe” of marginalized groups while referring to the writer’s profession as an “oficio de frontera.”

Amat's deconstruction of "Europe" as homogeneous signifier is refreshing, as is her recognition that Castilian is not only "la lengua de Franco" but also that of many who fought against him and were subjugated by his regime. Indeed, Castilian, like most languages, has been an instrument both of orthodoxy and repression and also of rebellion and change. However, needless to say, the same logic applies to Catalan which is not only the language of entrepreneurs and businessmen but also of peasants, workers and, of course, immigrants. Amat's public proclamations justifying her literary use of Castilian and her public stance towards/against the Catalan language can certainly be interpreted as a shrewd marketing ploy on the part of an author who simply wants to be able to sell more books in a wider market. Given her specific explanations regarding why she decided to switch to Castilian, however, her choice can also be taken as precisely the symptom of a split psyche: that of an orphan child who somehow came to the conclusion that she had to make a choice, between two parents, between two houses, between two languages. Hers was truly an unnecessary and ultimately self-mutilating choice. Ironically, the historical refusal on the part of the Spanish state to acknowledge its non-Castilian national identities led the Catalan nationalist Francesc Cambó to proclaim in 1916 that Spain itself was "un ser incompleto, un ser mutilado" (qtd. in Tusell 237).

So how can we go beyond prozaic certainties, beyond the narcissistic, relentless search for tokens of identity without choosing to stay in a state of wounded unconsciousness? We would need, first of all, "a new historiographical grid, one that

acknowledges the permeability of boundaries and categories, rather than inscribes their rigidity" (Enders and Radcliff 5). This would allow us to start a debate about cultural identities that rearticulates the categories of history and geography, time and space, memory and localization while at the same time demanding new geo-historical categories to displace those constructed by modernity (Mignolo 691). So that, instead of lamenting the "split psyches" of so many Spanish thinkers, artists and writers, we could interrogate the persistent articulation of what is considered the "Spanish national identity" in terms of oppositional binaries and mutually exclusive choices. Such an interrogation would in turn lead us to a radical questioning of the normalization of certain spaces—national, cultural and academic—as spaces of exclusion and marginalization (Mignolo 692).

This is her home
 This thin edge of
 Barbwire.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

From exile in Mexico, the poet Luis Cernuda lamented in a beautiful and bitter poem that he was Spanish because he could be nothing else. Implicit in that sentence is the notion of nationality as almost a religious sacrament or DNA, something that leaves an indelible imprint, and that cannot be altered, combined, bracketed. In holding on to that belief, Cernuda was, unwillingly of course, upholding the very essentialist notion of Spanishness that placed him (a gay man,

a Republican) outside the normative national narrative.¹¹ Had he understood national identity in a less messianic and over-determined way, perhaps he could have lived his years in exile differently. Perhaps he would have then understood what Theodor Adorno, writing after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, put so succinctly: that *all* intellectuals should be in permanent exile for “it is a part of morality not to be at home in one’s home.” (qtd. in Said 57). Or, as Cervantes, writing after Lepanto, during the Inquisition, claimed: the writer’s only homeland is “el feraz territorio de la duda” (the fertile domain of doubt).¹² The lessons both Adorno and Cervantes taught us serve as powerful reminders that as scholars and as citizens, it is imperative that we dare to question our given “place in the world” so that we might move towards what lies ahead and separate from our own location, beyond Normal.

Notes

¹ I am indebted to Joseba Gabilondo for suggesting the neologism “prozaic,” to Brad Epps and Joan Ramon Resina for a dialogue that helped me to re-focus my arguments and to Teresa Vilarós for providing both the forum and the intellectual stimulus for important debates. A shorter, slightly different version of this essay (“La normalidad y sus síntomas”) has appeared in Spanish as part of a special monographic issue of *Letras Peninsulares*, edited by Victor Fuentes.

² Interestingly, the political essay is not mentioned in Mermall’s otherwise excellent introduction to the contemporary essay in Spain.

³ The other titles are: *Auto de terminación*, *El Linaje de Aitor*, *Vestigios de Babel*, *El chimbo expiatorio*, *Sacra némesis*, *El bosque originario* and *La tribu atribulada. El nacionalismo vasco explicado a mi padre*.

⁴ In the case of Juaristi, Azurmendi and Onaindía, the “past” they renounced is their membership in ETA. For Haro Tecglen (and many,

many others) it is his association with the Francoist media.

⁵ It would be impossible to summarize here the massive bibliography on the subject, but I am thinking of critics such as Cherríe Moraga, bell hooks, Teresa de Lauretis, Marnia Lazreg, S. P. Mohanty and Judith Butler, for example.

⁶ Maragall picked up on the weakness of de Ventós’s “feminist” comparisons and pointed out the obvious: that a woman would suffer much more discrimination for being also black, poor and an immigrant (11).

⁷ Incidentally, the qualifier “peripheral” is mine, since according to the ideologues of Spanish nationalism the only true “nationalists” are the Basques, Catalans or Galicians, whereas the Spanish centralist patriotism is not, in fact, nationalist at all.

⁸ My line of argumentation in this section is greatly influenced by Kevin Robbin’s nuanced analysis of Turkish cultural identity (“Interrupting Identities: Turkey/Europe”). A very similar argument can be found in Amin Maalouf’s *In the Name of Identity*.

⁹ A prejudice that, as George Mariscal has shown, would travel intact from the Black Legend to the genderized and racialized language of Manifest Destiny and to this day taints the United States’ opinion of all things Hispanic.

¹⁰ Kobena Mercer has analyzed a similar situation in 1980s Britain, which is characterized as a “neoconservative remythification of the imperial past” and a fabricated response to a generalized crisis of national identity (289-90).

¹¹ Ironically, that quote is widely attributed to the conservative nineteenth-century politician A. Cánovas del Castillo.

¹² The Cervantes quotation I take from Juan Goytisolo’s “Lo que no se dice de Sefarad.”

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