

# A short review of literary geographies of depopulation

## Short communication

Literary geography has its beginning in the framework of regional geography, during the 1970s and 1980s, geographical facts are part of fictionalized stories. With humanistic geography the literature reaches a central place for the geographical inquiry.<sup>1</sup> It incorporates subjectivity, the human experience and agency, but the (real) experience, place and sense of place as a central concern. With humanistic geography, literature tries to contribute to the balance between geographical information and geographic imagination, by integrating mystical and subjective experiences. Radical geography performs a certain critical humanistic orientation by elitist and individualist, while suggesting to incorporate the social and spatial conditions of existence.<sup>1</sup> That is, it gives relevance to critical discourses, based on the materiality of social life. The criticism of all these approaches and acceptance as a fact of study (and source) for geography, occurs with the so-called cultural turn. The texts are source and object, through the analysis of discourses and textuality, to understand how spaces, places and peoples are represented in literature. In short, relevance is given to textuality and the specific geographies that novels can generate. In this phase dominates the plurality of research directions.

In rural geography the cultural turn has an important milestone in the book writing the rural. Five cultural geographies<sup>2</sup> that suggests the poststructuralist deconstruction of different rural texts. It incorporates into the geographical research the lay discourses, but also integrates -and opposes- the academic discourses of the written and literary discourses, with the aim of addressing the remarkable complexity and ambiguity of rurality and life in rural areas. It is about redefining the relationship between geography and literary in a postmodern rural environment. The deconstruction of the text and the analysis of discourses provide an important set of opportunities for the analysis of the texts.<sup>3</sup> As in the tradition of geography itself, the incorporation of literary narrative in rural studies broadens the range of trends, but does not suppress the precedents. The new cultural geography, which dominates since the beginning of this century is based on the rural politics of identity and difference, for that reason the usefulness of literature is to contrast the differences between narrative and academic in form (s) of presentation. The novels can discuss -or not- the positionality of rural academy. As suggest Williams<sup>4</sup> 'most novels are in some sense knowable communities. Is a part of traditional method than the novelist offers to show people and their relationships in essentially knowledge and communicable ways'.

The phenomenon of depopulation can be expressed in a plural and fluid way, as well as contribute to enhance its romanticization: (a) associated with a character, the last inhabitant of a place, in this case depopulation charges a individual vision in a limited place; (b) converted into a (new) territorial scenario, where the new rural life is reproduced in an area affected by rural depopulation; (c) or associated to a place or territory, the remembrance of the extinguished rural life in a town or a space of greater dimension, in this case not only in its material dimension, but above all symbolic or cultural. The intertextuality allows to refer the different texts to the cultural context in which they operate.<sup>3</sup> The three narrative perspectives of

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depopulation are addressed in six works: The disputed vote of Mr. Cayo & Delibes<sup>5</sup> and the yellow rain of Llamazares<sup>6</sup> on the last inhabitant; New trip to the Alcarria by Cela<sup>7</sup> and The happiness of the land by Leguineche<sup>8</sup> on depopulation as a new territorial context; Historias de Alcarra by Abel Hernández<sup>9</sup> and Pirineos, sad mountains by Palleruelo<sup>10</sup> about rural depopulation in a town or territory. These authors shared knowledge, hobbies and relationships among them, which evidenced publicly by citing each other in their works. They are ideological networks, not in the classic sense of the term, but in the way of understanding and giving meaning to the rural depopulation and the space where this phenomenon is evident.

The literary narrative on depopulation has a certain tradition in Spain since the mid-twentieth century, when the effects of the rural exodus towards the cities became evident. The work of important writers such as Cela or Delibes, attest to an interior Spain affected by the phenomenon of depopulation. These authors base their novels or short stories especially on the phenomenon of depopulation in Castile and Leon, in the context of a concern for the rural theme of social and landscape background. Delibes,<sup>11</sup> with a work characterized by concern for nature, the countryside and the rural world and clearly the rural exodus, through the memory of the emigrant for the place (lost) in Old Stories of Old Castile (1964) or Camilo José Cela<sup>12</sup> addresses the issue of rural exodus and depopulation in some of his most classic works such as: Jews, Moors and Christians.

The theme of depopulation in the narrative during democracy has had certain continuity. It even opens, in a recent way, a certain style that combines essay with narration. It is possible to highlight six works from the beginning of Spanish democracy, which are milestones in the Spanish novel about the phenomenon of depopulation: (1) The last inhabitant of the town. Miguel Delibes,<sup>5</sup> the disputed vote of Cayo & Javier Llamazares,<sup>6</sup> the yellow rain, are two novels inspired by similar argument: the experiences of the last inhabitant of a town in the epilogue of the process of rural exodus. In both novels individual behavior and personal experience as country peoples are analyzed; using people for convenience in some aspects of personal characteristics, but also in particular aspects of social and economic local relationship. Depopulation is not only a particularly dramatic event, but also crucial in everyday life. There is a marked separation between the human intensity of the main character and the nonexistent social life of the people. (2) Depopulation in its new spatial context.

Cela<sup>7</sup> in *New Journey to the Alcarria* incorporates new subjects to the rural novel in depopulated areas and Manuel Leguineche<sup>8</sup> in *The Happiness of the Earth*, a novel that tries to continue the wake of *New Journey to the Alcarria* (1986) of Cela.<sup>7</sup> They are novels written in areas affected by notable processes of depopulation, but depopulation is not the argument, but life or its interpretation through a vital trip in a rural area. The inhabitants of the uninhabited places, in these novels, settle down on a socially selective landscape fruit of the process of depopulation. Depopulation is described as a landscape, a social landscape that is to be recomposed after a process of remarkable change. (3) The rural depopulation of a town or territory. Abel Hernández<sup>9</sup> with *Historias de Alcarama*, uses the perspective of the rural idyll of traditional life in their depopulated hometown. Severing Palleruelo<sup>10</sup> with *Pyrenees, sad mountains*, relates the rural anti-idyll, in the description of the traditional rural life in the Aragonese Pyrenees. In both cases, the authors had a biographical commitment to the depopulated areas, which they interpret in different ways. In these novels special emphasis is placed on the moral and emotional dimension of the behavior of various individuals in a rural community, in the absence of a complete reference to the social landscape. The selected individuals articulate their personal experience, in a framework of moral discrimination and emotional crisis. This social selectivity expresses the social position of the observer/ author, in the form of a comfortable rural idyll or rejection of the new social reality. Representing places and spaces suggests some author(s) positional ideologies, in whose context the place acquires personalities and reputations.

In definitive, literature contributes to the cultural persistence of depopulation. The literature on depopulation and its different interpretations can be conceptualized as a form of intervention into these politics,<sup>3</sup> based on the social political agency of the authors and may promote new identity questions and resist symbolic and culturally dominant point of view involved ideological positionality.

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## Conflict of interest

None.

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