HISPANIC STUDIES
review

La crisis, la risa y catarsis: The 2008 Financial Crash and Comedic Representations of Spanish Emigration

Joanne Britland
University of Virginia

Abstract

The 2008 financial and social crisis was and continues to be one of the greatest challenges facing Spain in recent times. Its repercussions include soaring rates of unemployment, substantial numbers of evictions, and an overall disillusionment with the nation's political institutions. This article examines another consequence of the crisis: mass Spanish emigration. Focusing on Nacho Velilla's 2015 film *Perdiendo el norte*, and Borja Cobeaga and Diego San José's novel *Venirse arriba* (2014), the study draws on comedic theory and sheds light on how humor in cultural production serves as a tool to address Spanish financial, social, and political anxieties regarding the precarious economic and social predicament.

Introduction

In the opening scene of Nacho Velilla's film, *Perdiendo el norte* (2015), its Spanish protagonist, 27 year-old Hugo, laments: "Pertenecemos a la generación mejor preparada de la historia, la que iba a poner a España en la Champions en la economía mundial, la que iba a vivir mejor que sus padres, pero que ha acabado viviendo como sus abuelos, emigrando y pagando los platos rotos de Europa" (00:02:03). His reference to José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's 2007 analogy between the elite soccer league and Spain's position as an economic powerhouse reflects the drastic turn of events from pre to post-crisis Spain: hopeful and naive, yet now facing a tragic twist after the financial collapse.[1] With youth unemployment reaching an unprecedented level of fifty percent and an overwhelming twenty-five percent for the general population (Bermudez & Bray 85), it was and continues to be one of the greatest challenges facing Spaniards in recent times. Young Spaniards impacted by the massive recession have been called "ni ni's" (ni estudian, ni trabajan), and referred to as the "generación perdida" (lost generation). A good number of these young people—many of whom are highly educated but unable to find employment—have sought job opportunities elsewhere, resulting in a departure of a skilled and intelligent workforce: a phenomenon known as the "brain drain" (Portes 40). Consequently, between the years of 2010 and 2014, Spain experienced higher levels of emigration than immigration, with many of its educated youth leaving to find work in other nations (INE 2016).

The 2008 crisis has been widely discussed in political and economic spheres, but the impact of the crash is also depicted in the cultural realm. Focusing on personal stories, works of popular culture, such as novels and films, tell aspects of the history and lived experience during the re-

1 On September 11, 2007, Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero announced in front of Congress that Spain's economy was stronger than ever, suggesting that they belonged to the "Champions League" of the global economy ("Zapatero").

cession that economists and official commentators cannot describe in detail. They describe the human dimension of these economic phenomena and explore the ambiguities and uncertainties surrounding the event. Reaching a broad population, these works expose the repercussions of the crisis to a mass audience, thus providing the general public with views of the disaster that they may not have seen otherwise. This type of production can perform a broadly mimetic function but can also easily transcend it, channeling reactions and even serving instrumentally as a medium of protest or catharsis. In response to recent cultural works depicting the 2008 economic collapse, several critical studies on cultural production and the crisis have also emerged (Bezhanova [2017]; Castells et al. [2012]; Donovan [2017]; Labrador Méndez [2012]; Moreno-Caballud [2015]; Ryan [2015]; Smith [2012]; Snyder [2015]; Valdivia [2016]). There are, nevertheless, few studies that focus on the representation of the emigration of Spaniards following the 2008 crash. In this article, I examine Nacho Velilla's film, *Perdiendo el norte* (2015), and the novel *Venirse arriba* (2014), by Borja Cobeaga and Diego San José, as recent examples of cultural production that utilize a comedic framework to portray emigration as a consequence of the crisis. The present study demonstrates that comedy serves as a mechanism to express the underlying anxieties of the Spanish population regarding the crisis, emigration, and a resulting European perception of these emigrants as "others." Comedy creates awareness about social and political concerns and also provides a cathartic medium to help people cope with the catastrophic effects of the financial collapse.

Comedy and Crisis: A Brief History

The production of comedic works during times of disaster is a phenomenon that has occurred during other moments in Spanish history. As Stuart Green points out in his article on 1940s comedy in post-war Spain, that particular time of crisis "made possible the commercial success of the sophisticated comedy at a time when demand was high for something to help forget—even if only for an hour or so—the dreary reality of the immediate post-war period" (71). Not only does comedy help the affected cope with traumatic events, but it has even been argued that it has the power to transform political situations. When focusing specifically on satire, Sophia McClennen and Remy Maisel write that it is "increasingly attracting citizens to find ways to develop and act on political ideas while enjoying themselves" (12). Comedy is an integral part of how people view news events, with late night Spanish talk shows such as laSexta's *El Intermedio* and Antena 3's *El Hormiguero 3.0*. It serves as a mechanism to respond to global events, informing the population and urging change. As McClennen and Maisel note,

> Night after night, day after day, there is a veritable satire movement in place that is helping to restore the democratic values that are under threat in our nation today. Satire speaks truth to power and it does so in a way that demands critical thinking and creates community, while entertaining and inspiring us. Its wit allows us to avoid falling into cynical apathy or downright depression; its exposure of social flaws helps us open our eyes and become more aware; and its style can coax a broad audience to question the status quo. (190)

Miqui Otero also postulates that laughter serves as a response to crisis situations. Using his home country of Spain as an example, he argues that many comedians often address social and political situations in the nation by demonstrating their absurdity. A prime example, as Ote-

ro notes, is Borja Cobeaga's work. As the creator of *Venirse arriba*, the film *Ocho apellidos vascos* (2014), and most recently, the Netflix original film, *Fe de etarras* (2017), Cobeaga tackles sensitive topics like ETA, Spanish nationalism, and the crisis, examining them with humor (181). This notion is important because it emphasizes that comedy often connects with a type of "national" humor. Likewise, in a separate study on Spanish film and dark comedy, Juan Egea notes that "[f]ilm genres seem especially conducive to being read in connection with social or national anxieties and hence treated as the expression of a particular Zeitgeist" (10). Comedy, he argues, stems from a type of struggle and provides a channel to respond to it. Some examples include dark comedies from the 1950s and 1960s by José Luis Berlanga, such as *Plácido* (1961) and *El verdugo* (1963), as well as Marco Ferreri's *El pisito* (1959) and *El cochecito* (1960) (Egea 1; Kinder).

In a similar vein, Luisa Elena Delgado emphasizes that in Spanish works there exists a strong presence of a national critique through humor, most often found in popular culture.[2] Pointing to the difficult moments of the 2008 social and economic crisis, she writes that irony, satire, and humor treating difficult moments are often found in mass culture, citing theatrical and cinematic works such *Yes, we Spain*, by Jordi Casonovas and Carlos Latre, which premiered in 2011 and ran through 2012, some of the most critical years of the crisis (201). The assertion, then, that comedy frequently depicts the lives of ordinary people is pertinent when linking comedic cultural representations to the financial crisis in Spain. Those most affected by the failed economic system were young people from the lower and middle classes. Therefore, comedy allows members of this population to relate more directly to the storylines in narratives about the crisis. It provides them with a means of coping—through comic relief—with the difficulties that arose following the financial crash.

The use of comedy in popular culture as a response to the 2008 crisis warrants further investigation. The present study draws on the assertions of Otero, Egea, McClennen and Maisel, and Delgado about comedy manifested in popular culture during times of crisis. What is of interest is that the works I analyze not only serve as a response to crisis, but they also reveal an anxiety of the Spanish population regarding their precarious situation and decision to emigrate.

Perdiendo el norte: Emigration and the "Lost Generation"

The bleak outlook in the aftermath of the crisis emerges in the opening frames of Nacho Velilla's *Perdiendo el norte* (2015), with its protagonist, Hugo, describing his experience as a member of Spain's "lost generation." His narration is accompanied by Johann Strauss's "The Blue Danube," but suddenly transitions to Kiko Veneno and Rozalén's contemporary rock rendition of Cecilia's 1975 "Mi querida España" with graphic texts such as "paro," "recortes," "corrupción," and "deuda" chasing comic images of two Spaniards, who are eventually pummeled by the word "emigración," as seen in Figure 1 below. The abrupt shift from Strauss's melodic waltz to a modern-day version of Cecilia's 1975 song urges the spectator to "wake up" and focus on the screen, but it also points to the dismal state of affairs for Spain's youth. Like the experience of the spectator, the music parallels the film's message: the tune is familiar, invoking memories of a nation crushed by the Franco dictatorship, attempting to renew itself. But this is not 1975; it is 2015, revealing a new generation struggling in an entirely different context, yet suffering from a social,

2 According to Neale and Krutnik, "As a genre, comedy is often concerned with the lives of 'ordinary' classes and people, and thus with what is, from a ruling-class point of view, the *indecorum* of the speech, behavior, actions, and manners of those of a lower social rank" (85). This idea appears as far back as Horace's theory of *decorum* in his *Ars Poetica*, where he emphasizes that a genre should be appropriate to its audience and subject (Horace 138).

political, and economic crisis all the same.[3]

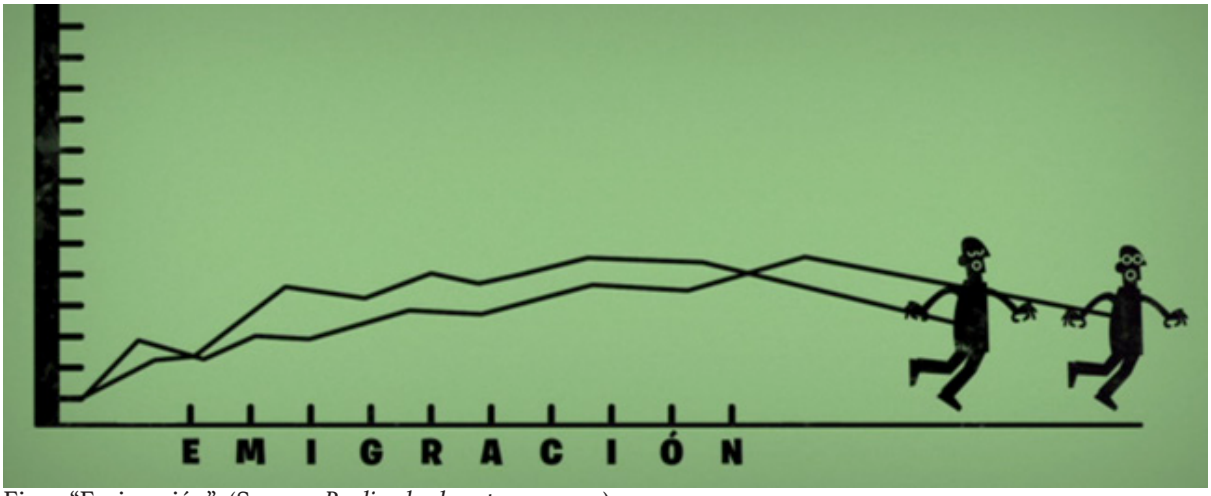

Fig. 1: "Emigración". (Source: *Perdiendo el norte*, 00:02:57)

With its cast of acclaimed Spanish stars (Yon González, Julián López, Blanca Suárez, Carmen Machi, and José Sacristián), *Perdiendo el norte* enjoyed great box-office success, and in its first month grossed more than 6.5 million Euros, making it one of the most lucrative films in Spain in 2015 ("Perdiendo"). Eventually, it earned a total of 10.4 million Euros, with more than one million spectators (Regatero, *Bekia*), and currently reaches a global audience through online streaming on Netflix. It was such a hit that it inspired other works, such as *Buscando el norte* (2016), a television spin-off on Spain's Antena 3 channel ("Buscando"). Furthermore, a sequel to the film, *Perdiendo el este*, premiered in February 2019 (IMDB 2019).

The movie centers on the story of two young Spaniards who epitomize the "lost generation" and the "brain drain." One of the protagonists, Hugo (Yon González), has completed two bachelor's degrees and holds a master's degree in business administration; Braulio (Julián López), is a scientific researcher with a master's degree in biology. Hugo sends his resume to every major finance and business firm in Spain and jokes that his name should be "*Hugo ya te llamaremos*," for he has heard that phrase too many times with no resulting job offers. He eventually lands a position at his girlfriend's father's financial firm, but on his first day discovers that executives in the company have been accused of fraud; consequently, the firm will close, forcing Hugo back into unemployment. Hugo's unpleasant experience at the company highlights the corruption and greed all too prevalent in Spain leading up to and during the time of the crisis (Fontana 60).

Braulio suffers a similar dilemma. He is a brilliant scientific researcher, but the institution for which he works runs out of money due to budget cuts, thus severing the funds necessary for his research. After viewing an episode of *Españoles alrededor del mundo* (a parodic reference to the real TV show *Españoles en el mundo*) an interview with a young Spaniard who boasts of newfound success and happiness after emigrating to Germany impels Hugo and Braulio to do the same and try their own luck outside Spain, in Berlin.

Expecting to reach Germany and find dream jobs in a prestigious company or scientific lab, the formerly privileged Hugo and Braulio instead face obstacles that many emigrants encounter abroad. These challenges underscore cultural differences that complicate their prospects

3 Aleix Saló employs a similar format in his film short, *Españistán: de la burbuja inmobilaria a la crisis* (2011). See Matthew Marr for a detailed analysis of Saló's work.

of obtaining a good job. Stereotypical assertions about Spaniards and Germans pervade these moments, highlighted by a series of intercutting scenes exemplifying the protagonists' futile attempts to get hired. In one case, an employer rejects Hugo's job application because he arrives five minutes late for an interview. Hugo jokingly brushes it off, referring to the unspoken rule in Spain that a slight tardiness is acceptable. Braulio is rejected time and again due to his inability to speak German; furthermore, he offends a potential employer by greeting her with the Spanish "double kiss," a faux pas in Germany when interacting with others in the workplace.[4] The characters' body language in the below shot (Figure 2) shows the stiff, uncomfortable German woman in response to Braulio's Spanish greeting. Braulio, in his brown suit, stands out amongst the white background, clothing, and sterile laboratory equipment in the rest of the frame. He is an outsider and seems to contaminate the aseptic, German laboratory.

Fig. 2: Braulio gives a "Spanish" greeting to a potential German employer. (Source: *Perdiendo el norte*, 00:21:04)

This sequence of scenes suggests that the characters' "Spanishness" impedes them from obtaining employment (Corbalán 64). Despite the comic use of stereotypes, the situation does shed light on the anxiety of the Spanish people in dealing with their economic challenges (Quiroga 129), and more specifically, Spanish worries about the resulting global opinion of them. One example of a negative reference to Spain following the crash is the common acronym that denotes the countries most afflicted by the crisis, PIIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Spain) (Quiroga 131). PIIGS is not specifically mentioned in the film, but it alludes to these countries in a negative context due to their economic plights and likely fuels Spanish sensitivities over perceptions abroad. Furthermore, in the actual context of the crisis, as a result of the European Union's role in the 2012 bailout of the Spanish banks, Spaniards were required to concede to EU demands and implement severe austerity policies.[5] As Manuel Castells writes, several Spaniards have denounced

> the dictatorship of the European Commission and of the German government over the Spanish government, at the time led by a So-

4 See Ana Corbalán's chapter, "'No nos vamos, nos echan': representación fílmica de la nueva emigración" in *El cine de la crisis: Respuestas cinematográficas a la crisis económica española en el siglo XXI* (2018), for an analysis of *Hermosa juventud* (2014) by Jaime Rosales and *Perdiendo el norte*.

5 In 2012, the Eurozone provided money to Spain in order to keep its banks and economy afloat (Minder).

> cialist Prime minister. The government bowed to the direct pressure of Angela Merkel, going as far as approving a constitutional amendment, in alliance with the Conservative Partido Popular (PP), to ban public spending beyond certain limits (*Europe's Crises*, 334-335).

The film references the Spanish economic reliance on the European Union, and more specifically, Germany, following the 2008 crash. However, it lightens the topic by employing comical clichés of the two countries.

Moreover, the protagonists' status as immigrants amplifies their anxiety over perceptions of them abroad and at home. The scene depicted in Figure 3 of Hugo and Braulio's arrival in their new neighborhood makes obvious that they are in an immigrant zone: Turkish music plays in the background, the protagonists are surrounded by signs in Arabic, Turkish flags hang from several windows, and secondary characters in the scene even don shirts that say "Turkey." The hyperbolic juxtaposition of two Spaniards now living in a Turkish neighborhood emphasizes that the two Spaniards are now living similarly to how they had perhaps formerly perceived immigrants in Spain. This ironic twist can either demonstrate that the Spaniards are laughing at the "other," or, perhaps in attempts to reconcile their own anxieties, are laughing internally at themselves, as they are now the "other" outside of Spain. These issues arise repeatedly in the film in scenes such as the characters' attempts to gain employment as well as their residential location in a peripheral neighborhood.

Fig. 3: Hugo and Braulio enter their new neighborhood in Berlin. (Source: *Perdiendo el norte*, 00:12:44)

Mary Kate Donovan acknowledges this issue in her article "'Se ríen de la crisis': Chinese Immigration as Economic Invasion in Spanish Film and Media." She notes that several Spanish films address immigration within Spain and, "Although problematic in varying ways, these films represent immigrant protagonists whose presence forces the Spanish characters to confront their own prejudices, and in doing so gesture towards an increasingly heterogeneous sense of national identity in post-Franco Spain" (370). Donovan's study focuses on the depiction of Chinese immigrants in Spain following the 2008 crisis and their correlation to Spanish concerns about the "other" immigrant in their own nation. However, her argument applies to *Perdiendo el norte* because of the film's inversion of this idea; the Spaniards are now the immigrant "other." The comedic portrayal of the Spanish characters as the "other" in Berlin reflects Spanish anx-

ieties regarding their perceptions of immigrants in Spain and the corresponding fear of being viewed similarly in their new home.

Although the narrative is set in Berlin, there are no central German characters in the film, only secondary ones with little dialogue, such as those who interview Hugo and Braulio for jobs. The primary interactions occur between the Spanish protagonists and other immigrants, mainly Spaniards and Turks. Thus, the film is directed to a very "Spanish" audience, corresponding to Juan Egea's theory of a "national" sense of humor in film comedies:

> When it comes to comedy—and especially dark comedies—who gets the joke and who doesn't is the benchmark for measuring the possible communal and hence exclusionary properties of film genres. As theoretically unsophisticated as it may seem, "getting the joke" is still an apt expression with which to broach subjects such as the workings of cultural *untranslatability* or the possible existence of a "national" sense of humor. (10)

By focusing primarily on Spaniards and depicting them in the same context as they would an immigrant in Spain, the film emphasizes the Spaniards as "other," but uses a "national" sense of humor to address the topic.

In addition to his situation as the "other" immigrant, much of Hugo's strife originates from the issue of working in a lower-skilled job for which he is greatly overqualified. Due to the challenges of adapting to Germany and after one month of fruitless searching, Hugo and Braulio are jobless and desperate to earn money, thus resigning themselves to working more than ten hours per day at a kebab restaurant owned by Hakan, a Turkish immigrant who resides in Berlin with his Spanish wife, Marisol.

Underemployment can cause psychological distress and low self-esteem (Prause and Dooley 68). Due to their underemployed status working long hours for a meager salary at Hakan's Turkish restaurant, Hugo and Braulio feel shame and attempt to hide their actual employment predicament from their friends and families back home. For example, Hugo is reluctant at first to take a job washing dishes at a restaurant, but his attitude swiftly changes when he learns that his family cannot pay their mortgage and soon will be evicted from their home. In attempts to improve morale, he lies to his father, boasting of his great job in Germany and promises to wire money for financial assistance. Hugo's narration of e-mails to his parents describing his "great" life are juxtaposed with scenes depicting his actual situation: scrubbing restaurant floors, riding a scooter around Berlin as a delivery boy, and scraping for money to send them.

Hugo is not the only Spaniard who pretends to be better off than he actually is in order to avoid humiliation. Even secondary characters attempt to conceal their employment status from friends back home. For example, Hugo and Braulio discover that the Spaniard who appeared on *Españoles alrededor del mundo* and inspired their move to Berlin is in reality a garbage collector. Although he holds a peripheral role, the man's connection to trash is significant as another example highlighting a failure of the capitalist system. As Samuel Amago, in reference to the 2013 sanitary worker strike in Madrid, notes: "Nada hace resaltar mejor el fallo de los sistemas estatales que vertebran el sistema capitalista como la acumulación de basura" (46). Moreover, this character's status as a garbage collector contains additional underpinnings; he is not needed in his home country and, forced to leave to find a job elsewhere, is essentially "thrown away."

In addition to the plight of the current Spanish emigrants, the film invokes memories of the past, alluding to emigration caused by hardships during the post-Civil War period. Andrés (José Sacristán), an elderly Spanish man, emblemizes the importance of historical memory, which is

reinforced through his struggle with Alzheimer's disease. He enlightens the younger Spaniards with tales of trying times in Germany during the post-war years, emphasizing the phrase made famous by George Santayana: "el que olvida su historia está condenado a repetirla." Andrés underscores that one must "emigrar por necesidad," and sacrifice much to survive abroad. His story touches on what Hugo proclaims at the beginning of the film: these young Spaniards were supposed to be a brilliant generation, they are the most educated population in the history of Spain, yet they ended up having to leave the country like their grandparents did in the post-war years. Much like the contemporary-rock version of Cecilia's "Mi querida España" sung at the outset of the film, Andrés, too, bridges the past to the present, demonstrating that this is not the first time that Spaniards have had to leave their home nation for survival. In fact, many Spaniards emigrated to Germany after the war (Bermudez and Brey 88), and this specific emigration is also depicted in past films, such as *Vente a Alemania Pepe* (1971),[6] where José Sacristán also performs the role of one of the protagonists. The character in *Perdiendo el norte* serves as a parodical reference to past representations of Spanish migration to Germany and strengthens the connection between these two periods of crisis. His presence echoes Alison Ribeiro de Menezes and Stuart King's discussion on the importance of memory and studying Spain's past in order to build a better future (796). Andrés reminds the young protagonists of past crises, and he serves as a mechanism to warn of the consequences that can arise if history is forgotten.

Hugo's ending words return to the idea of comedy, likening the absurd situation in Spain to a farce: "Creo que fue Marx quien dijo que la historia se repite: primero como tragedia, y luego como farsa. Y por lo que parece, nosotros formamos parte de esta generación a la que ha tocado ser el chiste" (01:40:06). He acknowledges that their predicament is absurd, but that this misfortune can be converted into something comical. In the end, all of the characters remain in Berlin, other than Braulio, who moves to China.[7] Although they ultimately do not achieve their dreams of landing successful jobs in their desired fields, they create an emigrant community, joining together in solidarity and continue to face challenges abroad. Furthermore, the end result points to a continuity of their status as "other" outside of Spain. The protagonists work and live in an immigrant zone, accepting that they might not reach the goals that had inspired them to move abroad. Their stories demonstrate emigration as a response to the crisis in Spain, but far from an entirely successful one.

Venirse arriba: Ignorance is Bliss

The next work this study examines is the novel *Venirse arriba* (2014), by Borja Cobeaga and Diego San José. The novel, like its creators' widely-recognized films *Ocho apellidos vascos* (2014) and *Fe de etarras* (2017), is full of wit and comedy, playing on a father's escapades during his son's Erasmus [8] year abroad. Through humor and hyperbole, it illustrates the dramatic impact of the crisis on Spaniards and the drastic measures that many took in order to survive financially. In this novel, as in *Perdiendo el norte*, there is a focus on laughter at Spaniards and their position as the immigrant "other" outside of Spain.

At the beginning of the novel, Miguel, a college-aged Spaniard who travels to the Nether-

6 For more information about *Perdiendo el norte* and its comparison to *¡Vente a Alemania, Pepe!* see Ana Mejón and Rubén Romero Santos' article, "*Perdiendo el norte*: Una brújula para la crisis."

7 This narrative thread is the main storyline in the sequel, *Perdiendo el este* (2019).

8 The Erasmus program, founded in 1987, is part of the European initiative to facilitate international study of European students within the continent. Through this program, students travel and study at other European academic institutions outside of their home countries (Teichler 395).

lands to study on an Erasmus scholarship, receives a surprise and unwelcome visit from his father, Jesús Miguel, a broke and recently unemployed miner from Mieres, Asturias. Upon his arrival in Amsterdam, Jesús Miguel finds himself in a state of despair financially and emotionally; he has hit rock bottom following his divorce from his wife and Miguel's mother, Rosario, and is in utter poverty after losing most of his savings following his dismissal from the mine. Uneducated and believing that he is completely out of luck, Jesús Miguel unwisely assumes he can leave Spain for a time and move in with Miguel, surviving off his son's Erasmus scholarship while he searches for his own job. During this time, the protagonists encounter circumstances that represent what some Spaniards might confront while moving abroad and living in Amsterdam, all of which are depicted through a comical lens ripe with stereotypes of Spaniards and clichés regarding other Europeans.

One of the greatest difficulties the protagonists face is adjusting to a new culture, and this affects Jesús Miguel even more than the characters in *Perdiendo el norte*. His inability to acclimate abroad stems from his general unawareness of any nation outside of Spain. An uneducated and unsophisticated miner from rural Asturias who has never left the autonomous community prior to his current trip, Jesús Miguel frequently confuses his whereabouts, believing that he is in Germany or another European nation instead of the Netherlands. Examples of Jesús Miguel's lack of education pervade the novel, and are even included in epistolary form, evidenced by several e-mails where he commits elementary orthographic errors:

> Querido Marianin:
> Qe raro es esto de escribir en la internet web. Esto os llegara inmediatamente segun lo escribo o como es la cosa? Yo que se, bueno. Imagino que estais bien y seguis llendo yendo todos los dias al trasgu eso hace qe me entre la rememoranza puesto que como ya sabeis e stoy viviendo en el estranjero desde que mi hijo chusmi Chusmi me pedio que venga viniera aqui a darle respaldo y apoyo moral en su nueva vida... (95)

In addition to his ignorance of Spanish orthography, it is Jesús Miguel's first time using a computer and e-mail, a gross exaggeration of a lack of contact with the globalized world. He is, however, familiar with certain stereotypes of his new home country, the Netherlands, and ventures to the renowned "Red Light District." During this trip, he makes an embarrassing effort to woo Greta, a prostitute, but due to his lack of English, is unable to communicate with her.

> '*You don't speak English?*' preguntó Greta. 'Qué inglis ni qué inglis, ¿esto a cómo va?' Mientras intentaba dialogar en el español, Greta no había dejado de preparar cosas en la habitación: la peluca en un cajón, una sábana sobre la cama...Ahora se paró y miró a Jesús de arriba abajo, como si realmente reparara en el aspecto de aquel ser por primera vez. Él le devolvía la mirada con una sonrisa boba y entonces ella le hizo el gesto universal del dinero, frotando el pulgar con el corazón y el índice. (154)

Jesús Miguel's ignorance is a predominant comedic theme in the novel and is another self-deprecating jab at the Spanish population as "other" through the use of humor. It is also another glimpse of a negative Spanish self-view due to its economic plight and a reference to the (PIIGS) acronym. This is because the novel focuses on specific European stereotypes and the perception of Spaniards abroad, which, according to the authors in an interview, "'Normalmente cuando hacemos humor nos reímos mucho internamente de las comunidades, pero siempre

hay un respeto un poco ridículo al europeo', añade San José, quien considera que esto se debe al complejo que tienen los españoles de ser 'los últimos de la clase'" ("*Venirse arriba*"). The entirety of the novel plays with this theme, laughing at stereotypes of people from specific countries, namely Spaniards, as a way to counteract the pain and struggle of the crisis. It also points to the gravity of their precarity as a result of the recession.

The hyperbolic use of comedy to address serious current issues returns to McClennen and Maisel's theory on humor and its power to transform crisis situations (193). The humorous threads and absurd situations in the novel indicate that entertainment and comedy are forces that can be utilized to transform social, political, and economic situations. Jesús Miguel's hilarious actions engage the spectator, making him an accessible character. His awkward faux pas due to his ignorance and precariousness, although humorous, are a result of deeper social and political matters, which become more visible to a broad population through the novel.

As Jesús Miguel is unable to adapt to the Netherlands, it is not surprising, then, that he finds solace and feels most at home in a symbolic Spain in Amsterdam: a tapas bar called the Don Quijote. While unlike Cervantes's character, Don Quijote, Jesús Miguel does not set out on a quest to solve the injustices of the world, he is nonetheless a Quijotesque figure: a man perceived by others as a lunatic who voyages forth, escaping a type of crisis in search of a better life. Moreover, it is at the Don Quijote where Jesús Miguel feels most at ease, enjoying *cañas* (beers) and Spanish *tortilla de patata*. He befriends Antonio, the Spanish bar owner, and soon becomes a regular in the establishment. Antonio and the bar, like Jesús Miguel, also suffer financially, and Antonio often expresses his worries to Jesús Miguel. Jesús Miguel offers suggestions to improve the bar's appeal to the Dutch, such as converting it into a *sidrería*, a typical bar in Asturias that serves *sidra*, an alcoholic cider native to his home region.

The idea of creating a *sidrería* is predominantly what carries Jesús Miguel out of his personal and economic crisis. He makes a permanent move to Amsterdam and establishes his own successful Asturian *sidrería*. Jesús Miguel's accomplishment also reflects a phenomenon that appears in *Perdiendo el norte*; the hospitality and tourism sectors are some of the only industries where jobs are available during the financial crisis. In Spain, these types of jobs provide a vital source of income, which has become even more essential following the advent of the crisis. A January 11, 2018 report from *El País* notes that 2017 was a record-setting year for tourism, with more than 82 million foreigners visiting the country, an 8.9 percent increase from 2016. It surpassed the United States as the second-most visited country in the world, coming in second only to France. Tourism has been a constant source of income in Spain, especially during the financial crash, providing employment and money to Spaniards both home and abroad. To maintain and increase such high levels of tourism in the country, promoting and exporting Spanish language and culture at home and abroad is quite common. For example, the mission of the Cervantes Institute (Instituto Cervantes)[9] is to disseminate and teach the Spanish language and culture. Via centers in Spain and in other countries, it offers courses, seminars, and other activities related to Hispanic languages, literatures and cultures.

However, these efforts do not simply link to Spain's desire to promote tourism; marketing of the Spanish "brand" also connects to the aforementioned theme of their status as "other" in relation to Europe's vision of Spain. In contrast to the characters in *Perdiendo el norte*, Jesús Miguel

9 According to its website, the Cervantes Institute is "an institution that was founded by the Spanish government in 1991 to universally promote the Spanish language, its teaching, study and use, as well as develop the quality and visibility of these, and to spread Spanish and Hispanic-American culture. The central head office of the institution is located in Madrid and in Alcalá de Henares (Madrid), birthplace of the writer Miguel de Cervantes." For more information, see the organization's official website: http://www.cervantes.es/default.htm

takes advantage of his position as an "other" to succeed in the Netherlands with his *sidrería*. Although perhaps he does so unintentionally, Jesús Miguel capitalizes on the differences between Spain and the rest of Europe to serve as a cultural and culinary ambassador. Thus, the relationship with food in times of crisis in this novel is significant because it provides Jesús Miguel with tools to manage and subsist abroad. His ending letter to his son, Miguel, discusses the newfound success he has achieved through exporting his home culture.[10]

> ...Lo mejor de todo sin enbargo es que el local ba mucho mejor con la nueva orientacion de sidreria que tambien quiero hacerlo gastroteca y no veas como se llena de turistas y incluso de gente de aqui holandeses. antonio el de Astorga esta que se le hace el culo pexi-cola con este reModelacion que menos mal que tenia yo la indernizacion mia pa poder hacerlo. (301)

Although Jesús Miguel achieves success in the restaurant industry, it was his son's Erasmus stay in Amsterdam that initially motivated him to leave Spain. At first, he was reluctant to tell his son that he was unemployed: "Le quedaba en el bolsillo el dinero suficiente para sobrevivir un mes, y a partir de entonces, solo podría sobrevivir tirando de la beca Erasmus de su hijo. Eso era lo que había pasado realmente. Pero se negó a reaparecer en la vida de su hijo como un fracasado" (34). Wanting to seem like the fatherly figure in control, his reliance on his son due to his Erasmus scholarship magnifies the tragicomic depiction of Jesús Miguel. The novel underscores the generational differences between these two characters. Jesús Miguel belongs to a generation that grew up during the late-Franco years, and in many cases did not have the opportunity to spend a year abroad. Miguel, on the other hand, is part of a generation that, before the crash, experienced relative luxuries and lived in a much freer and different Spain than that of the youth of Jesús Miguel's generation. In this way, Miguel's situation is similar to that of Braulio and Hugo in *Perdiendo el norte*. All three are part of a highly educated group of young adults who, until the crisis, led a life with certain privileges (Mejón and Romero Santos 129). According to the novel's creators, "En el libro estábamos obsesionados con eso y también con el cambio que ha habido entre ser joven ahora y ser joven en los 70 o los 80. No tiene nada que ver. El padre es de una generación que no ha disfrutado de una beca Erasmus ni de una etapa sabática o de fiesta en su vida, incluso que ha viajado muy poco" (Vilá, *El Periódico*). The novel emphasizes the generational differences in a comedic light, but also demonstrates that although the younger generation has experienced new privileges and freedoms, the crisis presented this "lost generation" with new challenges.

In *Venirse arriba* as in *Perdiendo el norte*, the young characters must respond to these obstacles, and do so through emigration. Generational shifts in attitude are also reflected in changes in political activism. McClennen and Maisel stress the transformation in the younger generation's participation in political activism. "Today's activism is increasingly tied to satire as a fundamental part of the way that it reaches a broad audience and inspires progressive political action: we call it *satiractivism*" (196). The novel fits the framework of comedy as a mechanism to increase awareness of serious political and social problems while simultaneously providing comic relief and catharsis for the crisis-suffering Spanish population. As a review of the book in *The Huffington Post* points out, "... si cae en tus manos no dejes de leerla. En los tiempos que corren, evadirte de la realidad a base de risas tampoco es un mal plan" (Lázaro, *Huffington Post*).

10 Efforts to market Spain's image abroad transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries; the Spanish government has taken other steps to reinvent its "brand" promoting Spanish companies and institutions. It has even established a government-sponsored initiative with this goal: *Marca España* (Martínez-Expósito 288-89).

Conclusions

Perdiendo el norte and *Venirse arriba* are examples of recent Spanish cultural productions that depict emigration as a response to the challenges of the 2008 financial crisis. Through the comedic portrayals of the protagonists' strife all too relatable to the Spanish crisis-suffering population, these works serve as cathartic mechanisms to help people cope with the repercussions of the recession. Drawing on the comparison between generations who have struggled through political, social, and economic crises both past and present, they suggest that Spanish history is perhaps destined to repeat itself for those who forget it, as José Sacristán's character warns in *Perdiendo el norte*.

These popular cultural works point to underlying anxieties of the Spanish population regarding the recession and emigration and also question the hegemonic forces that led to the economic disaster. Furthermore, by reaching a broad audience, both the film and novel expose the general public to critical political and social issues occurring in the post-crisis context, simultaneously informing *and* providing catharsis to the crisis-weary Spanish. Although both works help the broad population cope with the crisis through comic relief, the works diverge in that the characters experience different outcomes following their decision to emigrate. Ironically, the highly-educated protagonists in *Perdiendo el norte* ultimately do not achieve the promising careers they had desired at the outset of their departure from Spain. Conversely, *Venirse arriba*'s Jesús Miguel remains in Amsterdam and, due to his ignorance and inability to adapt abroad, decides to open up his own *sidrería*, leading to his eventual success. The varied outcomes and struggles of the characters demonstrate that there are no easy answers to overcome crisis, and so, if there is no "simple fix," a sense of humor can provide some relief.

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