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## Roots Under the Water: Dams, Displacement, and Memory in Franco's Spain (1950–1967)

*Ana Fernández-Cebrián*

With more than 1,200 reservoirs and dams, Spain is the first country in Europe and the fifth globally in terms of the number of hydraulic structures.<sup>1</sup> It is the global region with the highest installed hydroelectric capacity, which constitutes around 15 percent of the energy consumed in a territory where almost half of the river flows are dammed. Throughout the twentieth century, the country consolidated itself as a “hydraulic society,” a social order founded on the intensive management of water in which more than 500 towns were flooded, forcing the displacement of some 50,000 people, as well as the alteration of the affected ecosystems.<sup>2</sup> Tens of valleys have been swamped, entire forests destroyed. The fluvial dynamics of many rivers have been modified and hydrographic networks fragmented, not to mention the impact all this has had on fauna and flora, especially in the Pyrenees.<sup>3</sup>

The history of the Spanish state and its current physical configuration cannot be understood without considering the socio-ecological transformations derived from a political model in which, after the process of external decolonization at the end of the nineteenth century, a policy of internal recolonization was inaugurated. According to this model, problems associated with scarcity and unequal water distribution linked, in the country, “the promise of its modernity and its Europeanization to the need for greater control and better use of its water flows.”<sup>4</sup> After the

- 1 María Ángeles Fernández and J. Marcos, “Memorias ahogadas. Los impactos secretos de los pantanos,” *Ctxt*, (18 Aug. 2020), <<https://ctxt.es/es/20200801/Politica/33132/Maria-Angeles-Fernandez-J-Marcos-pantanos-embalses-janovas.htm>> [accessed 1 May 2021].
- 2 Marina Estévez Torreblanca, “Los pueblos del agua,” *Revista entrelíneas*, 24 (2012), 54-59 (p. 55).
- 3 Natalia Funes, Santiago Martín Barajas, and Erika González, *Grandes fracasos hidráulicos. Embalses carentes de utilidad* (Madrid: Ecologistas en Acción, 2018), pp. 7–11.
- 4 Tatjana Gajic, “Fronteras líquidas: Agua y biopolítica de la territorialidad en España,” *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, 11 (2007), 25–42 (p. 25).

Civil War, the alignment of fascist nation-building dreams and the “regenerationist hydraulic utopia” with the interests of the nascent electricity industry led to the consolidation of territories of hydropower, making a common good such as water a lucrative business for electricity companies.<sup>5</sup> Hydro-modernity during the Franco regime was seen as the main initiative to conduct what Eric Swyngedouw has labeled “Franco’s Hydro-Social Dream” in the Spanish countryside, where the 180 reservoirs in 1939 swelled to 800 by 1975.<sup>6</sup> The project was inserted within the so-called “inward colonization” that was preceded by the elimination of the agrarian reform and the establishment of an entire institutional framework around the National Institute of Colonization (INC) in charge of its implementation.<sup>7</sup> As Lino Camprubí points out, the INC became a key instrument to promote the Francoist ideology of “redemption,” according to which the dictatorship and its modernizing projects were to redeem the misery that plagued the country and favor the national territorial integration of the depressed countryside, which for a few years had escaped the control of the government owing to the presence of the *maquis* (guerrillas).<sup>8</sup>

During the 1950s and 1960s, writers with different political leanings created stories about the social and natural consequences of this model of hydraulic capitalism, a form of extractive economy that revolves around the (dis)possession of the territory and natural resources by the State and electricity companies. In their narratives, the writers portrayed how the vision of the “colonizers” of the Francoist administration (hydraulic engineers, government officials, companies, etc.), as well as that of the workers and inhabitants of the affected areas, were negotiated in a process in which entire communities were disciplined and controlled through water management. This essay introduces some discussion about individual and collective resistance that denounced the socio-environmental consequences of the dominant hydraulic paradigm in novels and short stories of writers such as Severiano Fernández Nicolás (*Promised Land/Tierra de promisión*, 1952), Eulalia Galvarriato (*Roots under Time/Raíces bajo el tiempo*, 1953), Ana María Matute (*The Dead Children/Los hijos muertos*, 1958; *The River/El río*, 1963), Jesús López Pacheco (*Power Plant/Central eléctrica*, 1958), Miguel Signés (*Dam/Pantano*, 1966), and Santiago Lorén (*The Dam/El Pantano*, 1967).<sup>9</sup>

5 Bibiana Duarte-Abadía and Rutgerd Boelens, “Colonizing Rural Waters: The Politics of Hydro-Territorial Transformation in the Guadalhorce Valley, Málaga, Spain,” *Water International*, 44.2 (2019), 148–68 (p. 165).

6 Erik Swyngedouw, “Technonatural Revolutions: The Scalar Politics of Franco’s Hydro-social Dream,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 32 (2007), 9–28 (p. 9).

7 Gustavo Alares, “Ruralismo, fascismo y regeneración: Italia y España en perspectiva comparada,” *Ayer*, 83 (2011), 127–47.

8 Lino Camprubí, *Engineers and the Making of the Francoist Regime* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), pp. 3–14.

9 Severiano Fernández Nicolás, *Tierra de promisión* (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1953); Eulalia Galvarriato, *Raíces bajo el tiempo* (Barcelona: Destino, 1985); Ana María Matute, *Los hijos muertos* (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1963), and *El río* (Barcelona: Librería Editorial Argos, 1963); Jesús López Pacheco, *Central eléctrica* (Barcelona, Ediciones Destino, 1958); Santiago Lorén, *El Pantano* (Barcelona: Plaza & Janés, 1967).

During the Franco dictatorship, the role of literature fulfilled a testimonial and documentary function that other archives could not offer to readers, constituting a repository of testimonials about popular resistance that were a portrait of those that really existed. These were protests and struggles against the construction of hydraulic infrastructure, which environmental historians have examined in recent years in different archives of the period that had not received sufficient critical attention.<sup>10</sup> Some of these actions can be synthesized in a slogan painted in 1964, coinciding with the celebration of the “Twenty-Five Years of Peace” campaign, on the walls of Mequinenza (Zaragoza), a town submerged by a reservoir for hydroelectric use: “25 years of peace and 7 of war against EHNER,” the acronym for Empresa Nacional Hidroeléctrica del Ribagorzana. The villagers thus responded to the vision of the dominant hydraulic paradigm as recreated by Jesús López Pacheco in *Central eléctrica*, a novel in which the engineers responsible for the construction of a dam affirm that “Nothing will be lost when these towns disappear under the waters of the reservoir” (Pacheco, p. 23). As some characters in Miguel Signés’ *Pantano* sum up, all those affected by hydraulic constructions are obliged to join forces to face the projects that are going to take away their ecosystems and shared ways of life and livelihoods: “The dam is a common enemy. The dam is also a disaster. Solidarity is equally necessary. No one could consider alien to the dam. Those who do not have land on the road had it in the ravine” (Signés, p. 90).

The aforementioned novels and stories tell of the processes of large-scale water infrastructure construction, which included land expropriations, water drainage, and large movements of soil and population. The use of slave and forced labor by political prisoners (the so-called “Franco’s slaves”), the lack of environmental legislation or defense mechanisms for the population affected by these works, and the repression by the government and companies facilitated this conjuncture. Some authors such as Pedro Arrojo and Javier Martínez Gil have even spoken of “hydrocaust” to refer to the dire consequences that the indiscriminate construction of dams and reservoirs has had in many rural areas.<sup>11</sup> The rural world, already depressed since before the Civil War, received most of the negative externalities of this model: forced abandonment of villages, loss of fertile lands due to flooding of sedimentary basins, loss of biodiversity and landscapes, and the deaths of hundreds of people during the construction or in the breakage of dams and reservoirs, such as occurred in Ribadelago in 1959 when 144 people lost their lives. The examples of these dam failures and the deaths of workers and local people were also recreated in *Tierra de promisión* and *Central eléctrica*.

In this way, the literary imagination explained the “invention of emptiness” of the flooded areas through the narration of the life stories of a population who

- 10 See Pablo Corral-Broto, “Sobreviviendo al desarrollismo. Las desigualdades ambientales y la protesta social durante el franquismo (Aragón, 1950–1979),” *Ager*, 10 (2011), 111–55; Ana Cabana and Daniel Lanero, “Movilización social en la Galicia rural del tardofranquismo (1960–1977),” *Historia agraria*, 48 (2009), 111–32; Miguel Ángel del Arco Blanco and Santiago Gorostiza, “Facing the Sun: Nature and Nation in Franco’s ‘New Spain’ (1936–51),” *Journal of Historical Geography* 7 (2021), 73–82.
- 11 Pedro Arrojo, “Los retos éticos de la nueva cultura del agua,” *Polis*, 5 (2006).

had been turned into “ghosted casualties” in projects linked to an “imaginative self-enclosure that concealed them from view ... spaces of amnesia predicated on imaginative evacuations.”<sup>12</sup> Literature thus becomes a place of memory in which to collectively remember lost landscapes, resources, and communities, so that the interconnections between capitalism, the State, and environmental degradation can become visible. Through the narration of the processes of dispossession, these dam novels displayed the cultural, economic, and environmental logics related to the disputed territories in a public reflection on the geometries of power of the economic, social, and ecosystemic dimensions of these waterscapes. These hydraulic projects were presented as examples of modernity and progress while playing a symbolic role as “modern shrines” and emblems of the unity of the Spanish landscape.<sup>13</sup> They were portrayed as embodiments of technocratic developmentalism, capable of producing the “magic of kilowatts” with which, according to the propaganda of the regime, the “miracles of the Spanish creative power” materialize.<sup>14</sup> As described by the narrative voice of *Central Eléctrica*, future electricity “was a kind of expected God who demanded the sacrifice of people and remained indifferent to the problems that its arrival caused” (Pacheco, p. 49).

Although the ideology of mastery over nature of the Francoist hydraulic paradigm entered into crisis in the 1990s with the emergence of the so-called “New Culture of Water,” at the end of the 1980s the writer and engineer Juan Benet still insisted on the need of a model based on the expropriation of those whom the Franco administration had called “surplus population.”<sup>15</sup> Juan Benet, who had been the engineer responsible for works such as the Porma Reservoir (León) that bears his name, expressed his vision of the hydraulic policy in these terms: “You only have to walk a little through the province of León to realize that, to a large extent, these provinces are fossils. Taking a valley in León and filling it with water, isn’t it better than having it as it was before?”<sup>16</sup> For the writer, there was no sacrifice in the fact of “extracting from some regions something that is left over and that they do not use, and of which others are in need” (Benet, p. 227). Juan Benet never mentioned in his novels the forced expropriation of land and property, or the modification and disappearance of ecosystems. His experimental novels fulfilled the role of burying realist literature, which had contributed to narrating the life stories of populations affected by hydraulic constructions or their later trajectories as displaced communities.

In *El río*, Ana María Matute returned to the dam that flooded her childhood town, Mansilla de la Sierra (La Rioja), and told stories about the displaced

12 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 153.

13 Maria Kaika, “Dams as Symbols of Modernization: The Urbanization of Nature Between Geographical Imagination and Materiality,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 96.2 (2006), 276–301 (p. 295).

14 Waldo de Mier, *España cambia de piel* (Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, 1954), p. 11.

15 Alberto Sabio Alcutén, *Mediano: El ojo del pasado* (Huesca: Diputación Provincial de Huesca, 2012), p. 118.

16 Juan Benet, *Cartografía personal* (Valladolid: Cuatro Ediciones, 1997), p. 226.

community. Matute compared the life of the flora and fauna of that ecosystem with the lives of the villagers, who complain that “they gave them little time to leave” since the companies and the State “acted badly, very badly” (p. 18). For the writer, all of them are lives “truncated” and “sacrificed” under the excuse of the “common good” for the region:

Valentín is a boy truncated by that swamp. He would have been a good mechanic, had he been able to learn the trade. A good carpenter and a good bricklayer. But, like birds, like rockrose, he has grown up on the verge of this threat: One day, the swamp will come. Everything had a provisional air in his life. (p. 26)

Matute dedicates her novel *Los hijos muertos* to narrating the lives of the inhabitants of the village of Hegroz, condemned to disappear under the waters of a swamp, and the lives of the community of prisoners who are forced to build it as part of a “penalty redemption” program, by which political prisoners could reduce their sentences in exchange for labor. In *El río*, she explains the persistence of the animals that insist on returning to the old flooded roads and the resistance of the neighbors who even commit suicide at the possibility of leaving their home (p. 30). The issue of suicide as a form of resistance in the face of forced expropriations, which occurred on numerous occasions in the actual evictions from rural lands, also appears in the case of a villager who decides to end his life before having to leave in *Tierra de promisión*, or in the case of the peasants who threaten to stay in their homes even if the water reaches them in *Central eléctrica*, or in *Tierra de promisión* (Pacheco, p. 92; Nicolás, pp. 119, 161, 207–10). In the short story *Raíces bajo el tiempo* by Eulalia Galvarriato, readers can reflect on the narration of the trauma and psychological suffering of one of the villagers, through his experience with a hallucination that anticipates the moment when the waters flood the town forever (pp. 32–33).

Dam novels of the 1950s and 60s offer a repertoire of collective actions against the hydraulic projects, including the protests of locals against national and regional authorities as in *Tierra de Promisión* (Nicolás, p. 146), the intentional burning of company facilities in *Central eléctrica* (Pacheco, pp. 103–06), a labor boycott in *Tierra de Promisión* (Nicolás, pp. 165–90) or *El Pantano* (Lorén, pp. 45–71), and even physical violence or the use of weapons in *Tierra de Promisión*, in which some of the villagers intend to “expel the invader as against the French” in a confrontation described as a “war of highlanders against workers” (Nicolás, pp. 113, 172). In all these works, communities are also fully aware of the all-encompassing strength of the electricity and construction companies linked to the Francoist State. Likewise, in the face of the threat of losing their material and immaterial conditions of reproduction of life, rural communities at risk in these novels reaffirm the valuation languages of the peasants, as opposed to the mercantile ones, in which they affirm territorial rights, environmental and social justice, and systems of human livelihood.<sup>17</sup> In *Pantano* by Miguel Signés, a case of sabotage in the modified waterscape is used to paralyze the construction at the dam site.

<sup>17</sup> Joan Martínez-Alier, “Conflictos ecológicos y lenguajes de valoración,” *Revista Facultad Nacional de Salud Pública*, 26 (2008), 24–34.

Two villagers uproot 3,000 pine shoots planted by the electricity company as part of the transformation of the water basin. For the villagers, “the planting of the pines on the banks of the well-worked terraces felt like a shock to the peasants whose properties were affected by the road. Allowing the mountains, voracious like a cancer, to invade the lands planted with fruit trees, olive trees, almond trees” (p. 85). When the authorities try to find the perpetrators, one of the older peasants takes responsibility for what in his opinion is a “crime” against the community’s sources of livelihood:

The crime, sir, was committed by those who ordered the planting of the pines in that place ... The pine is like scabies, or like leprosy. It takes everything in its path. Bring ruin to earth. The pine must be planted in the mountains, not next to our orchards. (p. 99)

As Rob Nixon observes, the dispossession of environmental resources from developing societies involves not only the physical displacement of local communities, but “their imaginative displacement as well, indeed on the prior rhetorical and visual evacuation of those communities from the idea of the developing nation-state” (p. 150). Literature thus becomes a device capable not only of giving testimony of the socio-environmental movements of re-appropriation of nature by the affected communities, but also capable of interrupting and questioning the social imaginaries segregated by “the dynamics of invisibility and hypervisibility, the myths of emptiness” that “generate unimagined – or at the very least, underimagined – communities” (p. 165).

As has been explored in these pages, the literature written during the period between the departure from economic autarky and the implementing of the First Economic and Social Development Plan (1964–1967) may be considered as an archive of the collective memory pertaining to the resistance to hydraulic projects in Spain. These literary works, depicting the ways in which people were forcibly removed from their lands, their roots destroyed, brought to public attention questions which are still debated today, about the meaning of sustainability, biodiversity, and the notions of “common good” or “general interest.”