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# To Be or Not: The Rural Village in Post-Rural Times

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*Keywords*

Galicia  
Rurality  
Urbanity  
Microsoft  
Xurxo Borrazás  
Luz Pichel  
Rafael Dieste

*Palabras  
clave*

Galicia  
Rural  
Urbano  
Microsoft  
Xurxo Borrazás  
Luz Pichel  
Rafael Dieste

*Abstract*

Drawing on examples from the work of Luz Pichel and Xurxo Borrazás, as well as from an ad campaign produced by the Microsoft corporation and the Xunta de Galicia, this article examines representations of the rural village, analyzing some of the ways in which Galician cultural producers have been contending with the historical shift toward what might tentatively be called a post-rural Galicia, and advances Rafael Dieste's notions of perdurance and ontological furor as tools for understanding post-rural cultural production.

*Resumo*

Tomando exemplos da obra de Luz Pichel e Xurxo Borrazás e das campañas publicitarias de Microsoft e da Xunta de Galicia, este artigo examina as representacións do rural, analizando algunhas das maneiras nas que a produción cultural galega se vén enfrontando ao cambio histórico cara ao que se podería chamar a Galicia post-rural, e propón o uso das nocións de perduranza e furor ontolóxico acuñadas por Rafael Dieste como ferramentas teóricas para o entendemento da produción cultural post-rural.

Up until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Galicia had been characterized by a diffuse pattern of settlement in which a large portion of the population lived in small hamlets scattered over the territory. As of 2002, however, three-quarters of the Galician population was concentrated in the largely urbanized Ferrol-Vigo corridor, and only 15-20% of the land was in agricultural production (Lois-González 2002: 46). This demographic shift is a notable element in contemporary Galician cultural production, where the *aldea*, as opposed to the city, is often deployed as a symbol of such concepts as family, tradition, authenticity, and even Galician-ness itself (Richardson 2001; Romero 2012). In this article, I examine three representations of rural Galician villages that are linked, each in its way, to urbanites and the urban gaze. I suggest that these representations point to a post-rural Galician cultural sensibility, that is, a collective feeling of relation to rural spaces and rural culture that is coloured by a rapid process of modernization and deruralization that disarticulates that culture. The texts analyzed here —an advertising spot by Microsoft, Luz Pichel's book of poems *Casa pechada*, and Xurxo Borrazás's novel *Ser ou non*— in spite of their substantial differences in tone, genre, and medium, all provide points of entry into a discussion of the post-rural condition. My working hypothesis is that because modern Galicia is a place deeply and indelibly marked by its rural past while immersed in an increasingly urban present, the ways in which rurality is represented tend to be influenced by the cultural ambivalence of urbanites: a feeling of being between urbanity and rurality, between modernity and tradition, of wanting both and wanting neither. I will argue in what follows that this post-rural ambivalence, with its tensions, conflicting desires, and underlying sense of loss, presents a series of aesthetic and, perhaps more importantly, ethical challenges. In order to better understand these challenges, I will refer throughout this essay to two interrelated concepts drawn from a 1975 lecture by Galician intellectual Rafael Dieste: *furor ontolóxico* and *perduranza* (Dieste 1995: 47). As I will argue, Dieste provides us with a useful vocabulary for analyzing the complexities inherent in representing rurality and its affective valences, leading us into a discussion of the commodification and monumentalization of rurality.

Dieste introduces the concepts of *furor ontolóxico* and *perduranza* as he unpacks Galician painter Carlos Maside's (1897-1958) views on aesthetics and the relationship between art and being. According to Dieste, Maside draws a distinction between *arte decorativo* and *arte verdadeiro* (Dieste 1995: 46); while the former is characterized by its descriptive or decorative powers, the latter has a mysterious added element: the power 'de presenciar a imaxe directa' which 'cando a vemos na súa fugacidade [...] cando a vemos coma sostida por algo que por non sere lei, senón por sere eternidade sustancial, faise presente' (46). Dieste's contemplation of Maside's definition of true art, which is capable of producing both 'arrepío e unha sensación de confianza entrañable' (46) and allowing a glimpse into something mysterious and abiding, leads him to wonder whether Maside is a pantheist: '¿É que Maside ten daquela unha actitude panteísta?' (47). At this juncture, however, Dieste skirts the question of Maside's pantheism, arguing, somewhat evasively perhaps, that the artist is not concerned with theology, but rather with providing a definition of art. Dieste then

makes a quarter-turn away from his consideration of a specifically Masidean aesthetics to the possibility of a specifically Galician way of experiencing art and other cultural artifacts:

Tense falado dunha sorte de panteísmo difuso nos galegos. Eu non acredito moito nelo. Agora, o que si pode haber nos galegos é unha conciencia ontolóxica de seu, unha tendencia manifestada nas formas do románico, nas maneiras mesmo da artesanía, nos cruceiros, etc., unha sorte de furor ontolóxico, un desexo de que as cousas existan realmente, un degoiro de que teña [sic] unha perduranza, mais non unha perduranza pola dureza exterior, pola máscara que se lle poida pór, ben material ou formal, senón entrañable, interior, de xeito que a perduranza exteriormente manifesta sexa máis que o signo, a luz, a mensaxe de algo fundamente sólido, sólido coma o ser, que se encontra dentro e configura *rennidade* [sic] por si sola, pro a perennidade esterna, o énfase de certos moimentos, xeralmente fúnebres, nos que se nos está a falar do grande, do perenne, do eterno, polo común dalle un chisco de riso. No cruceiro máis modesto, nunha margarida, nunha froliña ventureira, é onde pode estar xustamente o que non proz pode dare moimento algún; ise misterio, tan entrañado pra Maside, que ao mesmo tempo prodúcelle arrepió, ise misterio ontolóxico, desa solidez total, absoluta, na cal sobrenada a espresión graciosa, aínda que á [sic] veces témera, das cousas. (Dieste 1995: 47)

To make use of Dieste's proposal for our discussion of post-rural culture, we first need to recognize and bracket off the essentialism that is woven into it; for my purposes here, it is not required that *furor ontolóxico* be a specifically Galician way of experiencing cultural products. Instead, what is important is the way in which this *furor* allows us to analyse how the viewer or reader perceives the relationship between signifiers and signifieds that a given product embodies. When Dieste describes the 'desexo de que as cousas existan realmente' or refers to the wish for things to have 'unha perduranza, mais non unha perduranza pola dureza exterior', he is suggesting a desire for modesty and proportionality in representation, a preference for understatement, and a need for art that, rather than creating a grand screen upon which an amplified and distorted version of reality can be projected, allows the viewer to glimpse the real.

I would like to suggest that post-rural cultural products, charged with representing to a predominantly urban audience a rural world that is at once real and important, endangered and out of time, succeed to the degree that they are able to embrace *furor ontolóxico*, avoiding the monumentalizing urge that so often afflicts those who witness the passing of something or someone. In this sense, Dieste's ideas lead us back to the aesthetic and ethical challenges I allude to above: how can artists and other cultural actors engage meaningfully with rural spaces, social forms, and practices that are disappearing, while at the same time avoiding their monumentalization? What becomes of the monumental urge when one becomes conscious of its futility, the inability of external perdurance to generate or sustain inner perdurance? And indeed, what does inner perdurance even mean when applied to a rural village or rural folkways? In the next section, I begin to take up these questions as I discuss the vision of the rural Galician village offered up by Microsoft and the Xunta de Galicia.

## Microsoft and the Techno-Utopian Vision

In a 1996 review of Santiago Jaureguizar's *Freedom Spik* (1995), Dolores Vilavedra writes that Jaureguizar's novel counters what some might call Galicia's 'tensión patolóxica' between the urban and the rural by suggesting that this tension can be dispelled by reframing it in terms of rural hybridity: 'Jaureguizar parece querer dicirnos que non é para tanto, que avós e netos contemplan xuntos a MTV, que un pode falar polo seu motorola cos colegas da cidade en tanto coida as vacas' (Vilavedra 2000: 158). For Vilavedra, however, the putative compatibility of cell phones and animal husbandry does little to remedy the historical shift away from traditional forms of rural life and towards a predominantly urban late-capitalist economic and social paradigm, or, as she succinctly puts it, 'O malo é que todos sabemos que si é para tanto' (2000: 158).

Vilavedra wrote sceptically of MTV and cell phones as the glue that binds together the old and the young, the village and the city, and fifteen years later the Microsoft Corporation returned with the same message, this time without the overt scepticism. In its 2011 advertising campaign for the Galician-language localization of Windows 7, produced in collaboration with the Xunta de Galicia, Microsoft offers a techno-utopian example of how the rural-urban divide is being bridged by advances in personal computing. The campaign included an advertising spot in which highly-stylized scenes of a young man, dressed in slim suit, at work in a modern, clean, and luminous (urban) Galicia are crosscut with scenes of a middle-aged woman in a traditional stone cottage amidst a *mise-en-scène* in which dirt, smoke, and food are prominent features. Both ambits are portrayed sympathetically, as if to suggest that, in spite of the obvious outward contrasts between them, they are both part of a coherent whole, their denizens bound together both by affective ties and by technology. Eugenia Romero (2012: 25-27), in her close reading of the ad, writes that

from the beginning, the video creates a contrasting dialogue between the old and the younger generations and between spaces (the village vs. the city). Both the woman and her son are in their 'own' environment —her in the rural kitchen and him in a business office— but new technologies bring them closer together. Therefore, the video stresses the obvious: computers, cellular phones, and the Internet have the power to erase generational and spatial gaps. (26)

Indeed, later in the video we see the young man, now home from the city for the weekend and clad in a heavy woolen sweater, sitting in a circle with his relatives, watching as chestnuts are roasted over a crackling fire and listening to his mother teleconference with relatives living in Brazil. Not only does it seem that technology is capable of keeping families in touch even as the younger generations pursue employment in the urban centers, returning to the village only at weekends, it also seems that the same technology is capable of bridging the much wider spatial gap between Galicia and overseas.

But amidst this techno-utopian vision, a darker reality is hinted at when the woman of the house tells the emigrant relatives, 'nós eiquí no pueblu queda [sic] moi pouquiña xente, tan pouquiña xente que xa nos

contamos cos dedos dunha mao' (Microsoft 2011). Almost as if to divert the viewer's attention from this first-person account of rural depopulation, a voice-over intervenes:

Galicia é unha terra unida pola maxia, polas tradicións, polas lendas arredor da lareira e os sabores de sempre. Tamén é industria, tecnoloxía e innovación. Agora grazas a Microsoft en galego, estamos máis unidos ca nunca. Galicia é moitas cousas e nós, coma ti, formamos parte de todas elas. (2011)

Similar to the image Vilavedra cites of youngsters tending the livestock while talking on cell phones with their urban friends, Microsoft's rhetoric here is one of conjunction; it seeks to convince us that we do not have to choose between old and new, rural and urban, tradition and innovation. This rhetoric is buttressed by the ad's visual grammar, its appealingly postmodern contrasts and juxtapositions between the office and fireside, between the manicured hands of the son and the dirt-encrusted nails of the mother, between chestnut roasting and teleconferencing, all of which proposes a union of equals between old and new, traditional and modern, a process that José Colmeiro has celebrated as productive of 'new hybrid realities and new forms of identity that bind the old with the new, the local with the global' and yielding a new Galician culture 'that is neither urban nor rural, but "rurban"' (2009a: 217). But for as much as there is to celebrate in cultural dynamism and hybridity, the notion of a union of equals between rurality and urbanity is suspect, due to the fact that the latter is the more dominant paradigm, tending to infiltrate and fracture the former. Marc Augé has written that, in most modern dwellings, 'the television and the computer now stand in for the hearth of antiquity' (2008, vii); in light of this observation, the interplay we see in the advertisement between the fire and the laptop can be seen as indicative not of rurban hybridity as a historical endpoint, but rather as emblematic of a transitional phase in the ongoing processes of out-migration, modernization, and urbanization that are carrying village life and traditional rural folkways toward extinction, at least as lived social realities: *xa nos contamos cos dedos dunha mao*.

When we think in terms of *furor ontolóxico* and what Dieste called the 'desexo de que as cousas eistan realmente', the specific structure of rurban hybrid cultural forms becomes important. In effect, *furor ontolóxico* asks us to consider to what degree a given cultural product depicts the rural world as a social reality or, on the contrary, whether it merely deploys the touchstones of rurality within a matrix of hegemonic urbanity. This distinction can be illustrated by examining the role of music in Microsoft's ad, which carries the viewer away on a feel-good, nostalgic tide, buoyed by the sounds of *gaitas*. On one hand, these sounds indicate external perdurance, the continued existence of a robust (musical) signifier of Galician rurality that indicates that survival of the signified —its inner perdurance— is assured. On a visual level, however, the ad reveals more complexity: in one scene we see that the sound of bagpipes reaches the cottage, not through the window, but through *Windows*; although old and new are allowed to coexist, technology is shown as the preferred culture delivery system, with music extracted from everyday life, packaged, and retransmitted *grazas a Microsoft*. In this case, at least, the ad's rhetoric of conjunction is revealed as naive, if not patently cynical, in that it fails

*To Be or Not: The Rural  
Village in Post-Rural Times*  
Neil D. Anderson

to take seriously the possibility that something is in fact being lost as rural culture is disarticulated. In this sense, what is objectionable about Microsoft's techno-utopian discourse is not that it celebrates technology, but that it attempts to sell us a utopian vision of what that technology can accomplish. By failing to acknowledge the negative side of the ledger, the losses and displacements occasioned by new, hybrid, electronically mediated cultural practices, Microsoft's ad leaves ontological furor unsatisfied.<sup>1</sup>

This is not to say that the ad is not enjoyable; on the contrary, it is quite effective at linking technology together with ideas of family, music, prosperity, tradition, language, flavour, and intimacy in a way that makes us feel happy and reassured. As we first experience the vision that Microsoft and the Xunta de Galicia have created for us, we are beset by a swirl of sensations and emotions; it is only later, when the pleasure recedes, that we realize that the rural world we have been shown is merely decorative, a trotting out of signifiers. Our ontological furor is still with us, our desire to be shown something difficult and true, to wave off the announcer and hear more from the woman whose village is dying even as it is being consumed as a fetish object for the urban gaze. But of course, the advertisement exists to fulfill another set of imperatives; while it fails as art, it succeeds as alchemy, converting a moribund village into symbolic capital that can be leveraged to sell not only an operating system, but a whole techno-utopian worldview.

If we cannot look to Microsoft and the grammars of advertising for satisfaction of our post-rural ontological furor, perhaps poetic discourse will prove better suited to the difficult task of showing us a rural world without objectifying and commodifying it. In the next section I turn to Luz Pichel's *Casa pechada*, a book that visits a rural village, looking for the real in what remains.

### Cleaning and Saving, Labeling and Loss: Luz Pichel's *Casa pechada*

Luz Pichel's book of poems *Casa pechada* (2006) presents the perspective of an urbanized subject who returns to her native village following the death of her father. As Pichel writes in her preface to the 2013 bilingual (Castrapo-Galician)<sup>2</sup> edition of the book, *Cativa en su lughar / Casa pechada*, the original Galician text was written to make peace with her own language and past. Born in rural Galicia in the 1940s, Pichel studied in Santiago de Compostela and has lived for many years in Madrid; in *Casa pechada* the poet allows herself to recover what can be recovered from her rural past, or as she puts it, 'Ser aldeana para pertenecer al mundo dignamente. Ser de *ningures* para restaurar la cuna donde se nació' (2013: 8). Thus, Pichel announces from the outset the intention to meet, at times to occupy, the gaze of the historical and geographic other, the past inhabitants of the village who go in and out of focus as the poet inhabits the space of her childhood and whose cultural milieu differs greatly from that of the urban(ized), late capitalist subjects who comprise the book's likely readership. While the visit undertaken by the poetic subject — closely aligned with the poet herself — is oriented toward the mundane goal of cleaning up the family house, this village sojourn allows the evocation of both the rich materiality of the house and its environs, and an equally rich landscape of memory and observation. As the poetic subject goes about her tasks, scenes from the present day village blend with scenes from the

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For examples of the positive, fertile side of musical hybridity in the Galician context, see José Colmeiro (2009b) on *bravú* music and culture, and Xelis de Toro (2002) on bagpipes and digital music.

2

According to the *Diccionario da Real Academia*, *castrapo* is a 'Variante do idioma castelán falado en Galicia, caracterizada pola abundancia de palabras e expresións tomadas do idioma galego' ('Castrapo'). For Pichel, *castrapo* is a contact language that 'representa en Galicia dos actitudes muy generalizadas que suelen darse unidas: a) la de un voluntario desligamiento de la lengua de la tribu con la ingenua intención de pertenecer a una tribu socialmente "mejor" [...] y b) el trabajo del miembro de la tribu por hacerse entender de quien, de fuera, se acerca. En cualquiera de los dos casos, es lengua de esfuerzo y de amor. Y de dolor' (2013: 9). Pichel's choice of *castrapo* as a language of translation, then, is a way of bringing her text into Spanish, while maintaining the subaltern voice that characterizes the original.

past, and characters whose voices the poet channels appear to emerge from everyday objects. In this sense, *Casa pechada* is a personal archeology of haunted materiality, an exploration of a relationship with a house, a village, and a way of life, carried out by one who must decide what to keep, what to throw away, and what all of these bits of the past signify.

As the poetic subject faces a disconnect between her vivid memories of the village's past and the disordered, run-down state of her family house as she finds it in the present, she must contend with a set of problems that can be examined in terms of Diestean perdurance and *furor ontolóxico*. In 'O museo dos cestos que fixo o papá', the poetic voice asks of her dead father, 'Como levar ao colector do Consello / os cestos que ti nunca tiraches / nin vendiches na feira?' (2013: 138). If Maurizia Boscagli has written that the modern subject is confronted with the constant presence of materiality 'awash with meaning but always ready to become junk' (2014: 2), the tension created in the poem between preserving and discarding reveals a concern over whether objects, once invested with meaning by someone, take on a new ontological status, becoming more real and therefore less available for ethical disposal. Faced with the prospect of throwing away the father's handiwork, the daughter decides to display them as museum pieces in an outbuilding from which she has already removed junk of every description. This creation of a monument to her father stands as a response to her own question: 'Cando acabe de levar ao colector todo o que non serve / que vou poñer no cobertizo baleiro, papá?' (2013: 151), a question which in turn resonates with the broader question of what to do with the vestiges of a way of life that seems to be fading into oblivion while, at the same time, continuing to provide relevant points of reference for individual and collective identity. Each of the father's baskets is hung from a stick wedged into the gaps in the stacked stone walls of the building, each one given a certain prominence and dignity that derives, of course, from the fact that it has been selected, saved, and curated, separated from the accumulation of useless junk that formerly filled the shed. The curatorial urge that motivates the creation of the basket museum also demands that the baskets be labelled, catalogued: 'Debaixo hei poñer letreiros. / Tamén deberían figurar as datas' (2013: 138); but as the poem draws to a close, it signals the futility of such a project: 'pero non hai nesta aldea / quen agarre polos cornos ao rei doente do tempo / que cospe nos portais e vaise / sen dar os bos días' (2013: 138). The respect and care invested in the creation of the basket museum is thus undermined by time itself, portrayed as a curmudgeonly monarch, utterly unmoved by the whims of humanity. Even the daughter — especially the daughter, with the loss of her father still an open wound — cannot wrangle time into submission; the basket museum, which gestures toward becoming an archive, remains incomplete, under-documented, inadequate.

The problematic nature of labelling and cataloguing is a major thematic element in *Casa pechada*, and in fact more than twenty of the collection's poems are indicated as *letreiros* in their titles. Perhaps paradoxically, the poet often proposes signs for lived experiences whose labelling seems quite beside the point: 'Letreiro para deixar colgado na cesta grande', for example, reads 'Dentro da cesta / arrólanse os amantes / apertadiños' (2013: 139). The reader is left to wonder who might read the sign and what purpose it might serve. I suggest that this act of labelling is less an act of communication and more an eruption of ontological furor, driven by an urge to show that the basket is not merely an object but

instead stands for something more abiding, that it is an object invested with meaning by a subject who includes it in her zone of affective involvement. The poem, then, treats the basket as a site of conjuration. By anchoring memory to the basket and by using the present tense—with its multiple temporal valences: present, present habitual, historical present—the poem conjures the past and brings it into the present, it flattens the hierarchy between 'is' and 'was' and thus provides a phenomenological, not empirical, account of the basket.

Closely related to the desire to archive and catalogue objects that we have just seen in reference to the basket museum, the poetic voice is also possessed of a desire to project her knowledge of the human geography of the village, of the relationships between people and local sites, onto the sites themselves. By inventing signs that document the village as she has experienced it, she attempts to bridge the gap between an intrasubjective reality in which the village is remembered as animated by social life and an objective reality in which the place has been reduced to its outwardly observable features. In the poem 'Letreiro para colgar á entrada da cova do Penedo', we read: 'Quedou preñada a tola / dun ninguén. / Apertou a barriga apertadiña / cunha corda das vacas. / Botouse ao monte' (2013: 141). The sign is the only connection between future visitors and the woman who once lived in the cave; the visceral content of the sign reminds the reader that the woman was also a person of flesh and blood and thus serves as a bulwark between the woman and the existential precipice of being forgotten or turned into an abstraction. Similarly, in 'Letreiro para labrar na pedra do lavadoiro', a sign links an inanimate element of village infrastructure to an individual's haptic experience and affective world: 'Frío na fonte. / A nena lava e chora. / Vese no fondo' (2013: 150). In these poems and throughout the book, the poetic subject uses the interaction between words and things to create a multi-dimensional scrapbook, a rag-rug that weaves together bits of the past, creating for the reader a geo-sensorial guided tour of the village.

Pierre Nora (1989) has drawn a distinction between *milieux de mémoire*, cultures or environments that are propitious to living memory, and *lieux de mémoire*, sites that encase and curate memory and are 'fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it' (12). In light of Nora's observations, we can read the *letreiros* as a response to the experience of returning to a village that is no longer a *milieu de mémoire*. By creating intentional spaces of commemoration—*lieux de mémoire*—the poetic subject attempts to preserve some trace of the web of meanings that once characterized the village as lived space. Owing to the autobiographical nature of *Casa pechada*, readers can imagine the real-life poet, Luz Pichel, moving about her village, cleaning, listening, watching, and thinking up *letreiros* inspired by that which she sees and remembers, tacking up signs on the outbuildings, leaving notes in drawers, at the washing trough, at the mouth of a cave. This 'rubricophilia'—a compulsion to label—is intimately related to the poetic drive; both the *letreiros* as (perhaps hypothetical) extra-literary objects and the poems that propose them respond to a need to make sense of the social and material world through language and attempt to provide an archival substrate that will permit the preservation of a point of view that issues from a particular subject position, a position that is threatened by changing socio-historical circumstances related to modernization and demographic shifts.

But if the poems function as places of memory and often strike an elegiac tone, they also reveal a certain scepticism regarding their own efficacy. Poems such as 'Tanto tén [sic] onde se deixa este letreiro' and 'Non sei onde poñer este letreiro' seem to signal that there is either an excess of signs or an abysmal undersupply. To put it another way, these titles suggest that the project of labelling the world fails on two accounts: first, because the task of labelling everything that matters is limitless, and second, because there are things that matter that do not correspond to anything that can be labelled. Other poems such as 'Letreiro para gardar no caixón dos panos rotos e que se vaia desdibuxando' recognize the impermanence of the label, a recognition of the possibility that the act of labelling is essentially a private one, not necessarily driven by the need to preserve one's view of the world for posterity, but rather to bear witness to what Dieste calls 'a imaxe directa, inmediata' which, paradoxically, when seen 'na súa fugacidade, na súa transitoriedade' (1995: 46) shows us eternity; as if in the act of labelling, the poetic subject demonstrates that she and her world exist in some abiding sense, in spite of their material precarity.

One of the briefest and starkest poems of the collection is 'Letreiro para poñer na sepultura do meu pai':

Vaite, meu ben.  
Cando te bote en falta  
durmo na terra. (2013: 147)

Faced with the death of the father, the poetic voice turns the *letreiro* into a monument that records its own irrelevance. The poem does not invoke the sign as a source of comfort or a locus of mourning. Instead, the poetic 'I' conveys her intention to seek out 'a terra'—a rich, polyvalent term that encompasses *the earth, our country, our home, etc.*—, and the land itself emerges as the only element constant and solid enough to allow a connection to the dead. To return to Dieste's notions of internal and external perdurance, even as the poem creates the *letreiro* as an external sign of perdurance, it sets the *letreiro* aside as a useless artifact, proposing instead a mode of grieving that refers to the realm of affect, 'Whenever I miss you', and invents a practice, 'I will sleep on this land.' In this way, the poem advocates a focus on internal perdurance, looking in mourning for some part of the father that still persists.

As the book draws to a close, the poem 'Os sons da noite' tells of the daughter's final night in the village before returning to the city. Unable to sleep, she laments not having paid greater attention to the sounds that she has always taken for granted and spends the night focused on those sounds, trying to fix the sonic geography of the place in her mind, knowing all the while that efforts are late in coming: 'A noite en vela non basta para escoitar os sons que non escoitei / cando hora foi e gardalos na bolsa das cousas de levar' (2013: 199). The synesthetic notion of packing sounds safely away in her bag 'of things' echoes the theme, so present throughout the book, of bringing order to the chaotic materiality that her father has left behind. In 'Todo moi limpo' (2013: 187), for example, cleaning and organizing the house is cast as a countermeasure against the ravages of time, personified as 'o rei das casas pechadas' who plants woodworm in the beams and breaks tiles from the roof; in 'Se viñeses, papá', the daughter takes pride in having put the shed in order, once again framing her work as that of a preservationist: 'Todo queda gardado para que dure' (2013: 195).

In 'Os sons da noite', however, the daughter's new focus on sound shows that preserving things as a way of honoring the past, as important as that practice may be, is always symbolic, metonymic; those chosen things set aside to last are asked to stand in for, perhaps to evoke, a range of sensory experiences and affective involvements that vastly exceed them. The book concludes as the daughter enters her car and prepares to leave for the city, finding her father's gloves on the front seat. Here, sound, materiality, affect, and memory come together unexpectedly: 'É a lembranza da túa voz na guanteira do meu coche' (2013: 203). For all her efforts to organize and preserve her father's things, putting everything in its place, the gloves' appearance in the car — a liminal space between the village and the city, between the past and the present — demonstrates how family and the territories of childhood overflow their boundaries and how the smallest, least monumental thing can be what Dieste might call 'sólido coma o ser' (1995: 47). Faced with this reminder, the daughter reaffirms poetic practice as the means of doing justice to the 'historias que aínda han de ser narradas' (2013: 203), stories that, however tenuously, preserve the village as a lived place in a way that merely manipulating the material remains of the village cannot.

### Desire and the Rural Tourist: Xurxo Borrazás's *Ser ou non*

While Pichel's *Casa pechada* is articulated around a trip to the daughter's home village — possibly Pichel's own home village of Alén — Xurxo Borrazás's 2004 novel *Ser ou non* recounts the journey of an unnamed narrator-protagonist from his home in Vigo to the fictitious rural village of A Pena de Ancares in mountainous eastern Galicia. And while Pichel's book feels personal and autobiographical, representing one poet's attempt to 'ser aldeana para pertencer al mundo dignamente', *Ser ou non* works in a parodic mode as it delivers an indictment of urban vanity and the failings of cultural memory. Despite their differences, though, both books are explorations of *furor ontolóxico* and perdurance in the post-rural context; each is haunted by what remains of rural reality and seeks a mode of representing that reality in the face of its material and social deterioration.

At the outset of *Ser ou non*, however, the Diestean 'desexo de que as cousas eistan realmente' is subordinate to the desires of the traveller. Dennis Porter has written that 'most forms of travel at least cater to desire: they seem to promise or allow us to fantasize the satisfaction of drives that for one reason or another is denied us at home' (1991: 9). For the narrator of *Ser ou non*, the original object of desire is a rupture with his normal life and identity; his journey is thus originally conceived in negative terms, as travel away from the city rather than toward the country. In spite of this, the narrator's experiences during his sojourn in A Pena, including most notably his sexual liaison with the ghost of a village woman, lead into an exploration of rurality as an object of desire, a desire as real as its attainment is impossible.

Much like the characters mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the narrator seeks an antidote to his urban woes; the village appeals to him because his landlord promises that it is completely unpopulated: 'Vin á Pena porque me dixeron que non ía haber ninguén' (2004: 7). His desire is for simplicity and emptiness, a country experience defined in the negative, the country as an un-city, abstract, vague in its particulars. As the narrator

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Indeed, Francisco Rodríguez Iglesias's *Atlas de Galicia*, with a resolution of 1:200,000, does not show A Pena de Ancares. I am therefore unable to confirm or deny its empirical existence and leave the pursuit of this question as an exercise for rural tourists with literary inclinations. Borrazás himself identifies A Pena as 'inspired, or shaped by a tiny village called Robledo, near the not so tiny Rao, belonging to the even less tiny Navia de Suarna' (personal communication).

approaches A Pena in a hired Land Rover, he must try to square the abstract notions of the country he has constructed from maps with the physical reality he sees through the vehicle's windows; he expresses surprise that points on a map correspond to real places, observing also that some places are not mapped, and therefore do not exist in the symbolic order: 'Outros [lugares] non saían nos mapas, lugares desprezables para os conquistadores cartógrafos de escala 1:250.000. A Pena era un deles. Os cartógrafos pasárono en coche co lapis entre os dentes e sen erguer a ollada dos seus cadernos' (2004: 31-32).<sup>3</sup>

If maps are created as a means of inscribing both territories and subjects in the political landscape and, as the narrator contends, of experiencing multiple and simultaneous worlds (2004: 32), moving off the map is an attempt to block out some of this bothersome multiplicity and create the illusion of a singular, coherent subjectivity. Rural travel, on this view, is not a question of seeing the wider world and thus becoming more cosmopolitan, but rather of finding an empty space in which to imagine a narrower, more local space in which to escape the global village. But even as the narrator longs to break with urbanity, he fears it will be a temporary and futile disentanglement, futile because, as he points out, the inevitable trip home means that 'todo volvería a enguedellarse' (2004: 23).

It must be noted, however, that the narrator's commitment to the pursuit of disentanglement is questionable from the outset, as evidenced by the fact that he begins his vacation by ensconcing himself in a bubble of modern convenience: a newly renovated guest house (aptly named 'O Refuxio'), with internet access and all new appliances. At the same time, though, he yearns to do without: in addition to lacking access to newspapers, he has sworn off television and radio and entertains a fantasy of pastoral purity in which he restores himself by drinking only 'auga fresca dos mananciais' (49). And although he has come to A Pena partly to write, he eventually swears off writing as well, a practice that he begins to associate with ineffectual urbanites and his own 'vaidade de artistíña' (2004: 35). Through this search for physical purification and psychological disentanglement, the narrator participates in the idealization of the country as simple and pure. But although he tries to break with daily urban life, the narrator soon discovers that this is, as Porter (1991) warns, an unattainable fantasy, that there is no fresh spring water: 'Pero estabamos en setembro e as neves derreteran meses atrás; unha mágoa que o meu pulo saudable e pastoril se frustrase por un erro do calendario' (2004: 49). The narrator, realizing that he is out of step with the rural reality in which he has immersed himself, falls back on his usual consumerist habits, which include hearty daily doses of internet pornography and alcohol. His fantasy of spring-water-drinking purity is soon forgotten as he immerses himself in sadomasochistic websites and in the task of repeatedly drinking *augardente* to the point of intoxication, behaviors that stand in absurd contrast to his stated intention of seeking out purity, thus opening up a space for a critique of how urbanites conceptualize rural spaces.

As part of this critique, *Ser ou non* presents rural tourism as a process that capitalizes on the desires of both absentee owners of rural property and of urban vacationers. The property owners of A Pena aspire to be post-rural, to rid themselves of their families' properties, and in so doing become fully urban. For the Barcelona taxi driver who grew up in A Pena, for example, 'desprenderse dun cortello na aldea é limpar a memoria, darlle brillo ao pasado, e enriba cobra' (2004: 14). At the same time, the rural tourism entrepreneur who buys up village properties in order to renovate

them with public funds is portrayed as the mastermind of an up-cycling project writ large in which the village, the refuse of the historical process of urbanization, becomes a value-added product that will appeal to vacationing urbanites. Although the narrator participates in this tourism, his derisive tone makes clear that he views the rural tourism industry with suspicion. From his cynical perspective, the appeal of imagining the once-bustling life of a rural village lies in the certainty that such a reality is safely in the past (2004: 13), illustrating that once rural spaces are drained of their social center of gravity, they become vulnerable to stylizations driven by the desires of urbanites, creating what Manuel Forcadela has called an 'idilio' imagined by 'a poboación da cidade que segue a pensar nesa soidade utópica, pastoril' (2005: 194). In this context, the television crew that comes to A Pena to film dawn over the mountains of the Ancares may be understood as disseminators of this idyllic conception of rurality. Our narrator relates that

Filmaban alí o ceo en cor maxenta, o reloucar do resío nas follas e as rochas, a progresiva definición das tonalidades na vexetación das lombas cara ao oeste. Semanas despois nun estudio en penumbra montarían unha secuencia de escasos tres segundos por cada media hora, un interludio relaxante no decurso dun documental divulgativo sobre os Ancares: *Segredo verde* ou *O corazón húmido*. (2004: 147)

In this passage, the narrator not only parodies the exaltation of Galicia's verdure, but also signals how the landscape, represented in a time-lapse sequence, undergoes a process of stylization and compression that ultimately reduces it to an aesthetic object, a 'relaxing interlude' that allows spectators to enjoy the pleasures of nature connoisseurship from the comfort of their living rooms. The narrator's critical stance toward this mediatization of the landscape, when taken together with his own previous idealizations, reveals a kind of ambivalence toward rurality as an object of desire: for as much as he is attached to the image of rurality he has created, to the degree that this image is a falsification, he realizes that ultimately such an attachment is absurd and, in Dieste's terms, 'dalle un chisco de riso' (1995: 47).

This ambivalence is explored further through the main narrative event of the novel — a sexual relationship between the narrator and Aurora, an elderly woman who is later revealed to be a ghost, a point to which I will return. Aurora, at first depicted as a naive, illiterate, and unhygienic rustic other, is transformed — through a sort of June-October romance story in which a hapless youth is cured of his existential malaise by an older woman who teaches him the meaning of life — into a symbol of nature, love, and plenitude. Through this plot device, the novel takes a sarcastic view of the essentialist Galician rhetoric that associates the rural with authenticity and, significantly, with the feminine. Scholars such as Carmen Blanco (1995), John Thompson (2009), Eugenia Romero (2012) and Helena Miguélez-Carballeira (2013) have signaled the frequent association in Galician culture between femininity and the land; *Ser ou non* renders these tropes with mock lyricism, for example describing Aurora's orgasm thus: 'A natureza enteira estremeceuse con ela. Era como facer o amor coa serra dos Ancares' (2004: 137). Inmaculada Otero Varela has written that in *Ser ou non* 'a unión carnal entre os dous personaxes se converte nunha metáfora de unión de dous mundos: o rural e o urbano, o artesanal

e o industrial, o sobrenatural e o audiovisual' (2006: 97), an affirmation that is worth examining. On one level, the relationship between Aurora and the narrator shows that the country and the city are both objects of desire, it is an eroticization of the tension between urbanity and rusticity. If sexual relationships between individuals are a series of *(des)encontros*, successions of psychic and physical couplings and decouplings mediated by the fluctuations of desire, by eroticizing the encounter between the narrator and Aurora, *Ser ou non* emphasizes the relationality of the urban-rural interface, its shifting, dialogic, indeterminate character. In this sense, the novel moves away from what Nestor García Canclini has called the confirmation of self-sufficient identities and toward an exploration of 'formas de situarse en medio de la heterogeneidad y entender cómo se producen las hibridaciones' (2000: 86), as both subjects incorporate elements of the other's cultural practices and ways of seeing, creating new, hybrid subjectivities: Aurora takes up daily baths, internet porn, and brand-name yogurt, while the narrator discovers conversation and sex that involves more than one person. Borrazás's novel is part of a larger Galician discourse that places the rural and the urban, the present and the past, in conversation. In reference to Manuel Rivas's *Os comedores de patacas* and *¿Que me queres, amor?*, Eugenia Romero argues that Rivas 'explores the diverse elements that conform a *Galeguidade* by the juxtaposition of urban and rural lives' (2012: 40) and it bears noting that Romero uses *galeguidade* as a countable noun, a concept with multiple instantiations and permutations. For its part, *Ser ou non* participates in the production and representation of hybrid, juxtapositional *galeguidades* by creating a literary *parrafeo* in which an appreciation of 'o reloucar do resío nas follas e as rochas' (2004: 147) dialogues with a disdain for a Galician 'fodido apego á terra' (2004: 174).

At the same time that the novel presents an urban-rural dialogue, however, the fact that Aurora is ultimately shown to be a ghost raises serious issues for Otero Varela's proposal that the novel presents a metaphoric 'unión de dous mundos.' What does it mean to dialogue with a phantom, or even more pointedly, what does it mean to have sex with one? In the following scene, the narrator describes an act of sexual congress:

A partir de hoxe todos os ríos levarían augas abondosas, frescas e transparentes. Crin sentir como ela se corría de novo nos meus brazos, nunca tal o así sentira. Foi algo suave, un suspiro alongado, un pausar vagaroso, unha praia deserta no solpor en agosto, un orgasmo sen orneos gratuítos nin espaventos de actriz mercada. Logo ficou exánime, relaxada, silandeira, un rizo de onda a retirarse en marea baixa. O contacto mol das súas cachas co meu bandullo e o comezo das coxas fixo que exaculase axiña, cun chíío de euforia reprimida e un peidiño inaudible. Ata entón non sentín que a roupa da cama se enchoupara coa miña suor. Nada máis extravagante se me puido ocorrer naquel instante: co membro empalmado dentro dela, pensei: 'Os nenos fanse así, carallo. Así é como a vida nace. A vida nos condóns nada. Nace de min. ¡Empreña, Aurora!' (2004: 138)

Aurora's orgasm is once again portrayed as connected to nature, 'an August sunset over a deserted beach' and she becomes 'a wisp of a wave heading out at low tide.' Her pleasure is portrayed as authentic and allows the narrator a new perspective on the truth of human reproduction, with its sweaty sheets and flatulence. This realization leads to his absurd

exhortation that Aurora become pregnant, absurd both because of her advanced age and, of course, her ghostliness. More importantly, there is the additional irony that in spite of the novel's gestures toward portraying Aurora as a metonym of the country, the details of her life as she relates them to the narrator reveal not an idyllic rural existence, but rather a life of confinement and social exclusion. In Aurora's words, she has spent nearly 'sesenta anos sen raíces nin follas, unha árbore podre e furada por avespas, vermes, formigas' (2004: 86) and the metaphor she advances of a tree that is compromised, infected, and incomplete casts a shadow over any idealized notions we may harbour about rural life. Far from representing *a terra nai*, then, Aurora is 'a nena viúva' (2004: 81), the product of a social milieu that marginalizes her after her husband's untimely death.

Through his travel to A Pena, the narrator experiences a demythification of rurality, allowing him a glimpse into the complexities of the world he has idealized. But while he has finally experienced love, looked into the eyes of the geographical other, and renounced his anti-social ways, the revelation that Aurora, the catalyst for his transformation, is a ghost, raises serious questions about the ultimate significance of that transformation. Or, to cast the conversation in less allegorical terms, what does it mean to desire a rural past one cannot truly inhabit? This question points to difficulty inherent in the satisfaction of *furor ontolóxico*: while most forms of desire tend toward the idealization of their objects, the desire for things to truly exist is, at bottom, a rejection of such idealization, whether in pure form or as a monument that serves as its external manifestation, converting it into something that can be seen, perhaps possessed, while ultimately reducing it to something both less complex and less real. For Borrazás, it seems that the only ethical means of representing rurality without monumentalizing it is through suicidal art, art that 'sente e expresa un desprezo rabioso por ela mesma' (2007a: 153) and that deploys formal and conceptual complexity to address both 'o contraste entre o que somos e o que imaxinamos ser' (2007a: 154). In the case of *Ser ou non*, parody, absurdity, and indeterminacy are some of the elements that allow the author to approach the complexities inherent in the relationship between urban and rural Galicia, between the present and past. Indeed, beginning with its very title, 'Ser ou non', Borrazás's novel signals its willingness to walk the jagged line between what is and what is not, pressing the narrator to confront the likely incompatibility between his longing for rurality and what Dieste describes as 'un desexo de que as cousas eistan realmente' (1995: 47).

### Rescuing the Subject: The Rural Village and the Ethics of Representation

In a 2014 blog post dedicated to Luz Pichel's *Cativa en su lughar*, Helena Miguélez-Carballeira points to a photo, tweeted by chef Alberto Chicote, in which two women are pictured selling *grellos* in Compostela's Praza de Abastos. Miguélez-Carballeira points out that Chicote's tweet, which reads 'A alguien que le guste el producto le tiene que enamorar esta imagen' (qtd. in Miguélez-Carballeira 2014: n.pag.), 'falaba de namoramento cara ao bo produto —os cestos de grelos— utilizando a imaxe de dúas mulleres do rural galego para crear o efecto da entrañabilidade' (2014: n.pag.). Miguélez-Carballeira goes on to note that although many readers responded to the tweet, 'nin Chicote nin os que responderon ao seu chío fixeron mención ningunha ás mulleres en si (en mantelo, enfurruñadas) que pasaban así a

funcionaren, previo paso polo filtro instagram, como metáfora do bonito' and asks: 'É esta a función actual dos indíxenas?' (2014: n.pag.). Are these rural women depicted as subjects, or, as Miguélez-Carballeira suggests, is their image used in a merely instrumental fashion?

Throughout this essay, I have attempted to examine some of the ways in which rural subjects and their worlds are represented in contemporary Galician cultural production and to interrogate the ethical dimension of those representations. In terms of the Diestean vocabulary adopted here, the pattern that emerges is that ethical representations of rurality are distinguished by 1) *furor ontolóxico*, a desire to depict the rural world as a social and material reality, not merely as a set of signifiers, and 2) a self-conscious awareness of the fact that even well-intentioned representations, to the degree that they focus on external perdurance, risk monumentalizing and objectifying the realities they set out to represent. Looking at the three works I have examined here, I conclude, not unpredictably, that it is in the Microsoft ad, with its inherently commercial, instrumental function, where we find the most univocal, celebratory discourse and the weakest ethical position vis-à-vis rural social realities. As for Pichel and Borrazás, their radically different proposals are bound together by their complexity, their suspicion of external perdurance, and their willingness to dialogue with rural subjects, which I have referred to here as the historical and geographic other. If as Borrazás writes in *Arte e parte* '[a] arte contemporánea, a arte suicida, pretende rescatar o que nos seres humanos hai de suxeitos: vivos, actuantes e impredecíbeis' (2007a: 159), *Ser ou non* and *Casa pechada* are two works that take the leap, attempting a representation of rurality that respects the rural subject, preserving what Miguélez-Carballeira has called 'a dignidade dos nosos indíxenas, para cando chegue o tempo no que só habiten na nosa memoria' (2014: n.pag.). In this sense, the question of how rural villages are represented is tied to the more general question of how we represent other places and other times: whether we afford the geographical and historical other the dignity of subjecthood, and whether our representations are motivated by *furor ontolóxico*, the desire for things to truly exist and the fortitude to admit that perhaps they no longer do.



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