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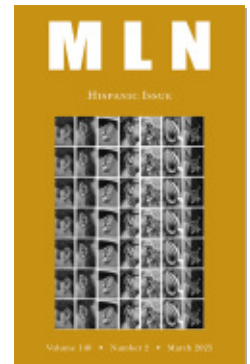
Better Alone? Capitalist Primitivism and the Antisocial Turn  
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# Better Alone? Capitalist Primitivism and the Antisocial Turn in the Contemporary Iberian Rural Novel<sup>1</sup>



*Katryn Evinson*

**Abstract.** Recent acclaimed novels and films have rekindled interest in the Iberian rural as a microcosm for exploring the social nature of humankind. This resurgence attempts to forge sustainable alternatives but confronts a mythologized view of the rural as antisocial, resistant to political change. This narrative emphasizes the inherent violence and primitiveness of rural life, countering the 1970s Marxist-leaning peasant studies, which recover the rural as a space pregnant with non-capitalist practices. Focusing on contemporary novels *Un amor*, *Sola*, and *Mamut*, this study argues that they reinforce liberal individualism and property's central role in freedom, and that they reject the rural as a feminist counter-concept.

**Keywords.** Ruralism, Possessive Individualism, *Capitalist Primitivism*, Antisocial Feminism, Sara Mesa, Eva Baltasar, Carlota Gurt

A recent wave of acclaimed novels and films has revived interest in the Iberian rural world. This surge, I argue, is driven by a desire to use the rural as a miniature to test the human condition and the nature of the social bond—that which ties communities together on

<sup>1</sup>See Resina's *Iberian Modalities* for a discussion of *Iberian* as a critical framework that challenges the homogenizing narratives of Spanish national identity by emphasizing the peninsula's linguistic and cultural plurality.

the premise of mutual dependence.<sup>2</sup> In most cases, what begins as a journey to build a sustainable social alternative ends up confronting what is presented as an inescapable reality: the belief that the only notion of community possible in rural areas is that of an already given and impenetrable entity. This mythological approach is then used to stage a revelation of its supposedly inherent forms of violence, further linking rural ways of life to negative ideas of the primitive as savage. In doing so, this flurry of rural-centered cultural production presents a cautionary tale for those who envision the utopian potential of the countryside as a communal space, as raised by the Marxist-leaning field of Peasant Studies in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> These studies sought to reclaim non-capitalist, alternative life practices through the historical experiences of peasant life, emphasizing direct access to the means of social reproduction. To this end, the cautionary tale portrays rurality as harboring an implicit form of sociality that is resistant to, if not fundamentally incapable of, historical progress. In contrast to Joan Ramon Resina's signification of "new ruralism" as the attempt to question the valence of modernity and the dissociated subjectivity it has given rise to,<sup>4</sup> in my view, this cultural wave produces the rural as the quintessential "other" to modernity's social paradigm, which prioritizes the individual as the primary agent of freedom—the freedom to opt in or out of the social contract. Consequently, it reinforces the antisocial notion that community is a matter of choice rather than a fundamental aspect of human existence.

This study focuses on a recurring trope within the resurgence of ruralism that has gained prominence in the contemporary Spanish and Catalan novel: the antisocial narrative of the urban woman who, disillusioned with city life, escapes to the countryside in pursuit of self-sufficiency and renewal—only to face a harsh and unsustainable reality. Here, liberation is framed as antisocial, as these characters sever ties with both past and present communities. When they attempt trust, they encounter violence and betrayal, leaving them isolated—not by choice, but by their failure to integrate into social structures depicted

<sup>2</sup>This article focuses on the imaginaries of the rural in cultural production rather than on the historical rural areas and their specific socioeconomic realities. For a discussion on what characterizes the complex and disparate realities of rural settings in Spain, see Entrena-Durán, specifically pp. 49-50.

<sup>3</sup>See Friedman for a discussion about the origin of field of Peasant Studies and the political implications of turning to the peasant as an agent of social change.

<sup>4</sup>See Resina pp. 7-27, for a discussion about how "new ruralism" constitutes a site for questioning the modern subject and the project of modernity as one that has alienated humanity from its dependence on and connection to nature.

as natural rather than constructed. It examines how this narrative is reworked in three critically acclaimed novels: Sara Mesa's *Un amor* (2020), Carlota Gurt's *Sola* (2021), and Eva Baltasar's *Mamut* (2022).<sup>5</sup> Through an analysis of recurring aspects in these novels, this study argues that, whether intentional or not, they ultimately re-discipline women into the—once emancipatory and now constraining<sup>6</sup>—trope of the liberal individual. First, it examines the motif of rented homes, which initially displace the domestic space as a site of exploitative reproductive labor, reframing it as a space of freedom—only to have that freedom undermined by abusive landlords and trespassers. Second, it explores how each protagonist's pursuit of autonomy devolves into distinct iterations of antisocial figures with an inability to form lasting social bonds, which ultimately results in condemning these female lead characters to existential and material loneliness: the thief in *Un amor*, the madwoman in *Sola*, and the notion of lesbian animality in *Mamut*, where queer desire and the disavowal of maternity is entwined with extinction. Third, it considers how these novels position sex as women's most valuable exchange currency. Sex is misleadingly used to invoke a fantasy of a return to a presumably primitive barter system. But paradoxically, its *primitivism* points us to how the organization of economic relations in the countryside intensifies the gendered division of labor beneficial to the modern capitalist system. In other words, rather than a pre-capitalist system, primitivism is a sign of boundless capitalism, what I term *capitalist primitivism*. In doing so, the study argues, the novels ultimately reject the rural as a potentially feminist counter-concept rooted in communal, rather than individualistic life.

These novels contribute to a renewed cultural preoccupation with the rural, a phenomenon that has gained particular momentum since the 2008 financial crisis and is widely recognized by scholars and critics as the “neorural” trend.<sup>7</sup> In my view, at least four aesthetic

<sup>5</sup>See Álvarez-Blanco's chapter for a very different discussion of this trope of the escape to the countryside in Spanish contemporary rural fiction that focuses on reading it as a nostalgic desire where the connection with nature would stand in for a fiction of suture of an always already fragmented subject, offering a soothing effect.

<sup>6</sup>These novels allude in various degrees to Caterina Albert's seminal 1904-05 Catalan novel *Solitud* (published under the male pen name Víctor Català), and share with Albert's narrative a notion of the rural as inherently patriarchal and violent—though solitude as a prerequisite for women's autonomy and liberation seems outdated in light of the communitarian and internationalist claims of twenty-first-century feminist movements.

<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of neoruralism as an identity-driven phenomenon emerging in response to the phase of globalization that followed the 2008 financial crisis, see Arroita. In contrast, Mougoyanni Hennessy argues that the post-2008 resurgence of interest in the rural is less about the identitarian erosion caused by globalization and

motifs—often interwoven—define this neorural movement. First, a feminist current—central to this study—imagines the countryside as a site of escape from urban alienation. Second, the motif of *La España vacía* (“emptied Spain”) laments the decline of rural communities, framing them as ghostly remnants of a lost past, notably examined in Sergio del Molino’s *La España vacía* (2013),<sup>8</sup> which draws inspiration from an earlier generation of writers, such as Julio Llamazares’ *Lluvia amarilla* (1986), with its vivid depictions of abandoned villages.<sup>9</sup> This theme is also fictionalized in novels like Jesús Carrasco’s *Intemperie* (2013) and Santiago Lorenzo’s *Los asquerosos* (2018), both of which implicitly mourn the depopulation that followed the rural exodus of the 1950s. Third, a fascination with folkloric aesthetics revives rural traditions, presenting them as rich cultural heritage worth reclaiming.<sup>10</sup> This is evident in literature, from Andrea Abreu’s *Panza de Burro* (2020), set in a small town in the Canary Islands that tells the story of a girl from an underprivileged background to Lara Moreno’s *Por si se va la luz*, which projects a dystopian vision of small-town life as the only viable future after cities become unlivable due to the climate crisis. Layla Martínez’s *Carcoma* (2021) reimagines the Gothic genre in the story of a mentally ill woman and her mother, ostracized in their rural community, while Ana Iris Simón’s *Feria* (2020) reclaims the traditionalism of small-town values. This aesthetic also extends to cinema from Pedro Almodóvar’s *Volver* (2006), set in a Manchego town to *Destello Bravío* (2022), which follows a group of elderly women in rural Extremadura whose boredom leads them to plan all-female

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more about how capitalism’s failure sparks a search for alternative, potentially more sustainable ways of life.

<sup>8</sup>In this 2016 essay, Sergio del Molino introduced the term “España vacía” (empty Spain), in which he analyzed the depopulation of the Spanish countryside and its cultural and social implications. Subsequently, social groups and movements adopted the expression “España vaciada” (emptied Spain) to emphasize the active responsibility in the depopulation process, suggesting that it is not only a natural void, but a consequence of policies and decisions that have led to the abandonment of these regions. In his 2021 essay “Contra la España vacía,” Del Molino reflects on how his concept has been reinterpreted and used in different contexts, but he does not adopt the term “España vaciada” or modify his original position.

<sup>9</sup>For Rico, the phenomenon of “España vaciada” in literature and cinema predates Sergio del Molino’s diagnostic and aligns instead with a broader reckoning of the effects of *despueblamiento*, the depopulation resulting from rural exodus, a process first depicted by writers and filmmakers of the Generación del 50, such as Juan Goytisolo, Armando López Salinas, and Luis Buñuel.

<sup>10</sup>In the recent issue, *Auras pueblerinas*, Sánchez-Mateos Paniagua and Fernández López, propose the notion of “lo pueblo” as an aesthetic category and a dimension of experience and knowledge through the senses (1), which I would call, following Williams, a “structure of feeling.”

orgies.<sup>11</sup> Finally, a last motif centers on a tension that emerges between the land as a space of traditional labor and its transformation under capitalism—whether through agro-industry or the encroachment of renewable energy—highlighting the shifting stakes of life in the countryside. This motif is exemplified in films like *As Bestas* (2022) which follows a French couple who move to a small Galician village, lured by a climate-conscious, bourgeois fantasy of permaculture. However, they soon realize the locals see modernization—not pastoral simplicity—as a path out of poverty. Similarly, *Suro* features a young architect couple who inherit a rundown *masía* in Alt Empordà, only to have their idyllic vision shattered by the brutal realities of the cork harvest. As the male protagonist confronts the limits of his leftist ideals, he ultimately abandons them to protect his family and property, underscoring the film’s critique of rural life as incompatible with emancipatory politics. Carla Simón’s *Alcarràs* portrays a family’s loss of their generational land to capitalism, reinforcing the rural as an unchanging community bound for erasure.

While the focus here is on the use of a feminist trope to disguise the re-disciplining of women into liberal individualism, it is also worth noting that some feminist works have embraced a more collective approach to women’s emancipation. Perhaps the most acclaimed proponent is María Sánchez’s *Tierra de mujeres* (2019). Blending autobiography and essay, Sánchez’s feminist rural literature aims to politically intervene by attempting to challenge the dismissive view of the countryside as backward, instead elevating it as a vital cultural space. Central to this mission is recognizing rural women’s overlooked contributions, whom she describes as “doblemente discriminadas, doblemente obviadas, doblemente olvidadas” (Sánchez 68). Through their stories, struggles, and idioms, she seeks to underscore their social, cultural, and economic significance. Yet Sánchez ultimately reinforces an idealized vision of the rural. While she rejects what she calls “esa postal plana y bucólica que no termina de romperse” (53), her portrayal remains romanticized presupposing an inherent authenticity. Her critique of urban alienation takes a moralistic turn, attributing the mistreatment of the rural to city dwellers detachment, stating “No preguntamos, no cuestionamos, no contamos. No queremos saber... ¿Nos preguntamos por la persona que hace posible nuestra comida? ¿Por su historia?” (68–69). In shifting the burden onto individuals,

<sup>11</sup>See Renée Congdon’s chapter on *Destello bravío* for a discussion of rural Spain as non-reproductive that challenges the imaginaries set on revitalizing the countryside solely along productive lines.

she overlooks how neoliberalism structurally produces this alienation—not the individuals themselves. This binary thinking extends to her dismissal of urban communitarian efforts—such as Madrid’s *La escalera* initiative to foster neighborly connections—which she mocks as contrived and artificial, she confesses “Sentí como una especie de ternura y gracia. Empecé a reír... Porque pensaba en mis abuelas y en todas las mujeres de los pueblos. En sus casas. Con las puertas abiertas, con los zaguanes siempre encendidos, unas pendientes de las otras, cuidándose entre ellas” (Sánchez 71–72). Sánchez dehistoricizes both spaces by casting rural life as the unquestioned locus of community and the city as inherently capitalist and individualistic. For her, the city remains irredeemable, forever incapable of fostering the organic communal bonds that rural life nurtures.

Representations of the rural in *Un amor*, *Mamut*, and *Sola*—though set in distinct regions, some fictional and others identifiable—share key similarities. Their protagonists inhabit desolate landscapes, shaped by isolation and the relentless labor such remoteness demands. Tethered to small towns or hamlets, they navigate rugged terrain and its challenges. Most strikingly, each arrives with a romanticized vision of the countryside as a place of solitude and retreat, only for this idyll to unravel into something threatening, exposing a longing for restoration that ultimately turns into a demonization of the rural. In *Un amor*, Nat moves to a fictional *pedanía*, La Escapa, a name reflecting her desire to escape city life. The novel never specifies its location, but it is “dejada de la mano de Dios” (Mesa 55). Once in “el campo,” she is disillusioned. “Fuera el silencio no es como esperaba, she laments. “De hecho, no es silencio” (Mesa 9). The rural life she envisioned as an escape from urbanization falls short of expectations. Yet she clings to the simplicity of La Escapa, avoiding the larger town of Petacas (Mesa 14), where even the presence of “bazares chinos” disconcerts her, as if globalization should not have reached such a remote place (22).

The area is not particularly beautiful. Still, Nat perceives a fleeting beauty in this “paisaje castigado por la sequía” (Mesa 20). She is drawn to its simplicity—its endless chores, the futile attempts to cultivate infertile soil (19), the minor yet consequential interactions with neighbors, the care of Sieso, her newly adopted dog (11). What at first appears as an escape instead immerses her in the fundamental tasks of reproductive labor—cleaning, growing food, tending to an animal, and making hesitant attempts at human connection. Stripped of urban consumerism, services, and production, these acts suggest a life outside the neoliberal model—perhaps the only kind she can

still bear. Yet this life is not wholly redemptive; it carries an ominous weight, as if its very simplicity veils something catastrophic.

In *Mamut*, the protagonist's location appears to be the Pyrenees, inferred from her interactions with pilgrims traveling in reverse along the Camino de Santiago toward Aquitaine (Baltasar 18). Before leaving Barcelona, she buys a car, knowing she cannot carry her belongings by bike or rely on a train that would leave her stranded in some remote station. The region consists of small *municipis* (villages) (Baltasar 33), where rental prices push her farther into the wilderness, down precarious dirt roads that threaten to send her car skidding off the path.

Walking in the woods becomes part of her daily routine, offering solitude in a landscape where human encounters are rare. The novel immerses her in this isolation, much like *Un amor*, where rural life is anything but idyllic. Yet, it is precisely in the physical demands of this environment that she finds purpose—something the city had stripped away. In contrast to the alienation of urban life, the countryside provides a form of fulfillment, not necessarily through community but through a deeper connection with the world. At the same time, in a Marxist sense, it involves reproductive labor that is neither exploited nor devalued under capitalism, granting a form of agency and purpose often absent in urban life.

In *Sola*, Mei returns to a farmhouse in the woods where she grew up, near Sorrius, a small fictional town in the Catalan countryside. The house is in a remote location, as described: “Caminant es deu tardar una hora en arribar-hi, pot ser dues, mentres que en cotxe només són uns vint minuts” (“It must take an hour to walk there, maybe two, while by car, it’s only about twenty minutes”; my trans.; Gurt 10). Like Nat in *Un amor*, her plan is initially temporary—a break from the city to finally write the novel she has been struggling to complete for years. The nearby town has few services: just a store, a bar, and a car shop (Gurt 10). The first person she meets, the shopkeeper, strikes her as a stereotype, “una pagesa universal” (“a universal peasant”; my trans.; Gurt 11), the kind of figure she expects from rural life. In this sense, the setting appears schematic, a projection of what rural life in the Catalan interior is imagined to be, even though Mei herself is originally from the area.

This schematism underscores how the location provides an ideal setting for the deep concentration writing requires. The lack of phone signal in the house ensures she will not be distracted—the kind of disconnection only someone from a city would romanticize. Yet from the very first pages, silence is foreshadowed as something ominous.

What Mei initially seeks as a space of focus and self-connection will soon transform into a place of fear and violence. As Gurt describes it, “el silenci gairebé catastròfic” (“the almost catastrophic silence”; my trans.; Gurt 13) signals that something terrible is to come.

It is important to note that his literary and cultural trope of the lost rural idyll—an idealized past of simplicity, mourned for its destruction yet imagined as restorable—is not new; it lies at the core of Western civilization. As the critic Raymond Williams has shown, this motif is already present in ancient Greek literature and, most notably, in the poetry of Virgil. The recurrence of the pastoral setting has often been understood as an allegory for grappling with fundamental truths about life. However, this approach, as Williams argues, dehistoricizes the trope, obscuring how its resurgence reflects political and economic transitions—such as how it was instrumental to the development of agrarian capitalism in the fifteenth century for shaping social consciousness (20-22). In this case, the myth that frames the transition from a rural to an industrial society as a “kind of fall”—the original source of social suffering—becomes, for Williams, a structure of feeling—the emergent, pre-theoretical ways people experience and navigate cultural and social change—that perpetuates a nostalgic lament for a lost organic society, which views it as natural rather than constructed. And this myth, Williams warns, rather than exposing capitalism itself, instead reinforces a broader, more pervasive illusion: that urban industrialism alone is to blame for our contemporary crisis (96).

Through the implication that their protagonists would have been better off had they never chosen to leave the city, *Mamut*, *Sola* and *Un amor* construe the city as *the* place where one’s individuality can be protected. They do so right at a time when urban centers in Spain are experiencing a total crisis strongly felt by the local population due to a structural lack of access to affordable housing as well as high rates of job insecurity and insufficient wages. Barcelona, from which the protagonists of *Mamut* and *Sola* flee, and an imaginary city like Madrid or Seville, from which Nat leaves in *Un amor*, have completely succumbed to a tourist economy. In 2024, seasonal rentals accounted for 40% of the rental stock in Barcelona (Cordero 2024). In 2023, the average rental price exceeded the minimum wage of 1,080 €, a staggeringly high figure considering that practically 49% of households living in rented accommodation are at risk of poverty (Casamitjana 2024). These novels, I suggest, reinforce the belief that late-capitalist societies remain a far safer and more viable option than any life one might attempt to build outside of them. Given that capitalist societies

prioritize profit at all costs over basic human needs and favor destruction over the sustainability of production, these novels are antisocial in implying that capitalism is ultimately the lesser of two evils. In doing so, they align with the belief that self-destruction through capitalism is the preferable path. In other words, while the novels do position the city as the least harmful option, they have moved past the disavowal of capitalism that Williams identified in the industrial city as a proxy. Instead, rather than the rural representing a pre-capitalist space—external to capitalism—it is an outside produced by capitalism itself. In this sense, the novels depict women trapped between two types of capitalism, one “civilized” in the city, and one “savage” in the rural. The renewal of the rural as a negative representation—one that serves as proof of the necessity of maintaining the liberal tropes of social contract theory—relies on exposing rural life as fundamentally violent. Yet, paradoxically, this violence is expressed through capitalist rather than pre-capitalist dynamics, framing the rural as inherently capitalist, recreating a *capitalist primitivism*.

In demonizing the rural, *Un amor*, *Mamut*, and *Sola* reinvigorate the counter-pastoral trope—recognized by Williams as integral to the pastoral’s dialectics—<sup>12</sup> echoing modern Spanish literary depictions of the rural that date back at least to the industrialization period. Liberal writers such as Galdós and Clarín while depicting the countryside through an Enlightenment lens that framed it as resistant to the liberal model—where the peasant is cast as a figure governed by instincts—nonetheless sought to redeem rural people through education and progress. In contrast, Emilia Pardo Bazán takes a conservative, deterministic turn in *Los pazos de Ulloa* (1886), depicting rural characters as brutal, irrational, and ultimately incompatible with modernity—a perspective later revisited by Camilo José Cela in the postwar 1940s. *La familia de Pascual Duarte* (1942) similarly portrays rural life as governed by violence, instinct, and fatalism, contributing to a rural iteration of *tremendismo ibérico*, a postwar cultural trend that emphasized the cruelty of the human condition;<sup>13</sup> while Jesús López Pacheco also presents a violent primitivism overtaking a rural community in *Central eléctrica* (1958), he attributes the breakdown of communal relationships to the structural violence of capitalist extractive projects under Spain’s *desarrollismo*. Yet, despite its critique of capitalism, the novel

<sup>12</sup>For a discussion on the notion of the counter-pastoral, see Williams, chapter 2.

<sup>13</sup>For a reading of *Un amor* through the lens of a renewal of *tremendismo ibérico*, see Gómez-Castellano.

still upholds the notion of rural sociality as an innate, prelapsarian state that should remain undisturbed.

This is accomplished through motifs that echo C. B. Macpherson's theory of possessive individualism, which holds that property is central to a liberal conception of freedom. To do so, the novels reinstate classical ideologies of social contract theory. They begin leading these women to retrace the journey of Rousseau's *noble savage*—an Enlightenment myth that justified the need for a social contract by proposing that humans, once morally pure and self-sufficient in a state of nature, fell from this state and became corrupted through socialization, mating, and the division of labor. However, rather than reaffirming Rousseau's idea that sociality is the root of moral decay, what these women encounter in the countryside aligns with a Hobbesian view of human nature as inherently violent, making individuals fundamentally dangerous to one another and thus necessitating a social contract. Additionally, by centering the female protagonists' fraught relationship with their rented homes—spaces they attempt to shape as sites of freedom yet remain under constant threat from their landlords—the novels reflect Locke's argument that unequal property distribution fuels conflict. They suggest that, in the absence of a social contract, private property relations inevitably lead to instability and strife. The rural, I will argue, is thus depicted as a return to a supposedly natural state of violence, reinforcing the notion that capitalism—historically linked to urban life—remains *the* necessary social contract.

While all these approximations appear as different inflections of the rural, we see how they all fall within the ideology of progress that modernity promotes, dichotomizing the rural as authentic but backward and the urban as manufactured but progressive, a logic that capitalism requires to continue to create spaces of differentiation, zones of "civilization" and zones of "nature" that can then be capitalized in what Jason W. Moore has defined as Cheap Nature—a concept that highlights how capitalism systematically reduces the value of nature to justify its appropriation for economic exploitation.<sup>14</sup>

To do so, however, capitalism's production of Cheap Nature has found a complementary support that compensates and masks the damage it causes in ideological apparatuses of idealization. Primary to this agenda is the promotion of a capitalist version of the city, allowing

<sup>14</sup>In *Capitalism and the Web of Life*, Jason W. Moore redefines appropriation, diverging from the Marxist view that equates the appropriation of nature with that of wage labor. Instead, he argues that capitalism operates through the continuous production of boundaries, delineating zones that can then be appropriated for exploitation.

the perpetuation of the nature/society divide suitable for capitalist expansion. According to Ellen Meiksins Wood, the belief that cities are intrinsically capitalist due to their historical role as centers of trade is not only historically inaccurate but also reinforces the framework that presents capitalism as an inevitable development (Meiksins Wood 27). That is to say that in trying to salvage the rural for its ancestral communal practices—or the city by showing the rural as inherently antisocial—what is missed is the very notion that sociality is historically contingent—malleable and subject to constant experimentation.<sup>15</sup>

In the following pages, I analyze the key elements that I argue shape an antisocial representation of life—if not completely detached from, then at least marginally outside capitalist social relations of production. My aim is to understand how these novels serve as cultural artifacts that provide comfort in the perpetuation of the status quo.

Despite differences in the precise narrative arcs of the characters, questions of escape and freedom, sex and exchange, ostracism, and loneliness recur in each novel's plot. *Un amor* narrates the story of Nat, a young translator who leaves the city and moves to La Escapa, a small rural area, to escape (as the name suggests) her old life. Nat rents a poorly maintained country house from an intrusive landlord who repeatedly enters the property without her consent. She slowly develops relationships with her neighbors, a married couple with children, whose husband shows a sexual interest in her that makes her uncomfortable. She befriends Píter *el hippie*, a paternalistic figure who attempts to manage her integration into the community, telling her whom she can and cannot trust. The house has serious water leaks that the landlord refuses to fix. Lacking the budget to fix them herself, Nat agrees to the proposition of her enigmatic neighbor *el alemán*: sex in exchange for help in fixing the leaks. Against all odds, this sexual exchange develops into a romantic relationship as Nat becomes increasingly obsessed with *el alemán*. The relationship ends badly, presumptively because each partner belongs to contrasting social paradigms (urban versus rural) that lead them to have inconsistent expectations of romantic relationships. As Nat struggles with a separation she cannot comprehend, her dog attacks her neighbor's daughter, severely injuring her. The entire community, except for

<sup>15</sup>In *The Dawn of Everything*, Graeber and Wengrow challenge the conventional narrative that human societies evolved in a linear progression from simple, egalitarian hunter-gatherer groups to hierarchical, state-based civilizations, arguing instead that early societies exhibited a diverse range of social and political arrangements, often consciously experimenting with different forms of organization.

Píter, turn their backs on Nat, ultimately pushing her to move to another rural hamlet.

*Mamut* tells the story of a young sociologist whose name is never revealed. She shares an apartment in Barcelona with roommates and is unwaveringly committed, at the age of twenty-four, to finding a man who will get her pregnant to have a baby of her own. Her motivation stems from a desire to engage what she believes is a more animal side of the human experience. As her plan to get pregnant fails in the city, she leaves to begin anew in the countryside. After spending some time in a shelter operated by nuns, she finds an arrangement that she can afford, renting a *masia* from an old man for a very affordable price. She takes on a few informal jobs, including cleaning the house of her neighbor down the street, a shepherd who provides her with basic food and supplies. The shepherd offers her money in exchange for sex and protection. When he unintentionally gets her pregnant, she keeps the news a secret. Once in labor, she drives herself to the hospital where she delivers her baby and, in a sudden turn of events, gives her baby up.

*Sola* is the story of Mei, short for the Catalan name of Remei, a married woman nearing her forties who was recently fired from her longstanding job at a publishing house. She takes off to the rural area where she grew up to write her first novel, a dream she had long postponed. Mei arranges to rent the same *masia* in the Pyrenees that once belonged to her family, but since has been sold. Her new landlord constantly intrudes into her home and life. At first, Mei does not intend to get involved in local social life, but the community remembers her and seems to care about her. She befriends a neighbor, and they bond over a shared love of literature. A few days after settling in, she notices that her period is late and suspects she is pregnant. When she tells her husband who comes to visit her, they get into a terrible fight, and he leaves in a huff. He dies in an accident *en route*. Mei throws herself into writing and an increased isolation from the world, driving her to madness. The few relations she has deteriorate. She is either raped or imagines her rape (the text suggests the event may be imagined) in her house by a man that is familiar but whom she does not recognize. The novel ends when her estranged mother and landlord try to convince her to get psychological help. After finishing her novel and destroying it as soon as she completes it, Mei takes off to the woods to avoid being involuntarily committed to a mental hospital.

### A Rural Home of One's Own

All three novels focus on the relationship between the main characters and their new rural homes. They explore various aspects such as the search for housing, the abusive leases they enter, the power imbalances with landlords, their efforts to create a sense of home through cleaning and organizing, the subjection to male threat and intrusion, and the isolation of their homes from the community. I challenge the notion that freedom is defined by property relations. If liberation is viewed as a material possession, this paradigm of emancipation, inherently detached from a social collective—a core principle of liberalism—renders freedom fundamentally antisocial.

The repeated pattern of poorly maintained rental houses in which these female characters find themselves foregrounds their weak bargaining position, suggesting the fragility of their independence and, in contrast, the critical importance of property ownership. In *Un amor*, the landlord tells Nat that she cannot demand necessary house improvements (i.e., roofing to prevent leaks) as he has already lowered the rent twice. The lease agreement seems to be effectively worthless: “revisan el contrato, firman.... Nat piensa que da igual, es un contrato sin ninguna validez, incluso el precio que aparece recogido no es el real” (Mesa 12). In *Sola*, Mei finds herself having to pay rent for the house in which she grew up because her mother sold it off. While the landlord is responsive to Mei’s requests, he repeatedly enters her home without authorization. In *Mamut*, the sociologist confronts “the mercat immobiliari bipolar” (“the bipolar real estate market”; my trans.; Baltasar 34), in which renovated countryside homes are leased at a prohibitive price. She eventually manages to find an affordable place. However, her issue is not with a landlord invading her space but with a camper who, after coming for dinner, has sex and refuses to leave despite her requests. With the aid of her dog, she forces the man out of the house (Baltasar 93). By highlighting the vulnerability of these women due to their status as solitary, financially disadvantaged tenants rather than property owners, these novels imply that any emancipation they achieve—including liberation from their traditional roles as providers of social reproduction—is only partial. Implicitly, the novels suggest that owning real estate, rather than renting, is necessary for true freedom.

In their own ways, these novels each echo Virginia Woolf’s notion of writing as a cornerstone of women’s intellectual freedom, which relies on financial independence and a private, uninterrupted space. Woolf asserts that a woman “must have money and a room of her own”

(3). In *Sola*, the protagonist editor's inability to secure unemployment benefits disrupts her novel-writing efforts, leading to financial instability. Her struggles with writing become a point of contention with her husband, who criticizes her inability as a writer during their last argument before his death. In *Mamut*, the sociologist's research and writing about old age involve mainly transcribing interviews and analyzing data, which she eventually abandons because it makes her feel like an idiot (Baltasar 21), rather than providing intellectual freedom as Woolf envisioned. In *Un amor*, Nat, a translator, finds her daily writing neither creative nor financially sustaining, often feeling as though each translation is a losing battle: "Cada palabra se convierte en una enemiga y traducir es lo más parecido a batirse en duelo con una versión previa, y mejor, de su texto" (Mesa 27). These tenuous relationships with writing underscore the limitations of each protagonist's liberation, reinforcing Woolf's ideal of individual and property-based freedom as the central standard.

The scene of repeated male intrusion into the home and eventual rape (if not constant fear of it), in conjunction with the underlying abusive housing situation, is the additional piece that reminds us of the still challenging achievement of true women's emancipation. Whether latent or explicit, predatory male violence is deployed through the scene of trespassing, where the broken-in home and rape—as a broken-in body—constitute iterations of the violation of women's freedom, to convey, in the negative, a particular ideology of freedom conceived in terms of property: that a lack of property exposes women to the constant threat of sexual violence, or, that sex is the natural right of their male landlords.

C.B. Macpherson's notion of "possessive individualism" calls attention to how property lies at the foundation of liberal conceptions of freedom. He argues that the individual had been ideologically conceived as being in a relationship of ownership to freedom, meaning that "freedom is a function of possession" (3).<sup>16</sup> The main tenets of possessive individualism are fundamentally three: that freedom is independence from the will of others; independence from any relations except for those that the individual engages in out of interest; and

<sup>16</sup>Macpherson defines possessive individualism by establishing how its possessive quality "is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself. The relation of ownership, having become for more and more men the critically important relation determining their actual freedom and actual prospect of realizing their fully potentialities, was read back into the nature of the individual" (3).

that the individual is seen as owning their own person and abilities which it would have developed independent of the support of society (Macpherson 263).

As these novels grapple with the complications that arise when women strive for a natural state of freedom—including freedom from society—it is ultimately “possessive individualism” that seems to succeed. These novels’ main characters tirelessly try to achieve a life of freedom in which they will finally become the owners of their own choices and bodies. Yet, the protagonists’ lack of access to financial sufficiency functions as a limit that makes visible how in rural life, even if one aims to live on the fringe, patriarchy as the recognizable order of *capitalist primitivism* prevails as the dominant system that regiments hierarchies of freedom as a function of property. This model of proprietary freedom is antisocial because its ideal version assumes that, as a proprietor of their own person, humans are—or should aspire to be—independent and self-sufficient units that can operate without the necessity of social relations. This is in itself a contradiction, since all presuppositions that sustain the idea of human beings as self-sufficient depend on society securing such an understanding of freedom as a right in the first place. But whether we argue that these novels ideologically adhere to this ideal and want to maintain it as a horizon for all, or that they oppose it by showing that its universal attainability is structurally impossible, the only alternative given is the one from which the protagonists were escaping, the cities they left behind. Thus, the freedom that emerges from individual, capitalistic property ownership is represented as the least harmful social model possible, while all other alternatives, including those offered in pre-capitalist rural societies, remain unexplored.

### **The Thief, the Madwoman, and the Lesbian Mammal: Antisocial Forms of Freedom**

In contrast to the landlord, these novels offer a gamut of strikingly antisocial figures—the madwoman, the thief, and the animal—whose inevitable vanishing forecloses notions of non-proprietary freedom, positioning them as counterparts to a proprietary understanding of freedom and possessive individualism. Through madness, ostracism, and animality, these figures construct cautionary tales that warn against seeking utopian projects outside capitalism. In *Sola*, a man she recognizes but cannot identify rapes Mei in her home at a moment when she is having what might be called a psychotic break, the aggravation

of which can only have been a deep depression caused by grief over the tragic death of her husband, for which she feels responsible. It is unclear whether the rape episode is the product of delirium. The novel strangely dwells on this ambivalence by basing the event on Mei's mistaken recollection of the number of steps that make up the staircase in her house (counting the fifteen steps is a scene that recurs throughout the novel). During the rape, Mei counts fourteen steps and is confused by the missing step, leading us to question the rape's veracity (Gurt 366-370, 373), the purpose of which is unclear. As she insists "Els vas comptar i eren catorze. / Però la realitat no es descompta. / No es descompta mai, Mei" ("You counted fourteen steps. / But reality does not lose count. / It never loses count, Mei," my trans.; Gurt 373). Perhaps this moment indexes how deeply ingrained the structural questioning of women's reliability is in matters of sexual violence—itsself an act of structural violence. Soon after, in the last chapter, she destroys the computer that contains what we can assume is the only complete copy of her finished novel, packs a small bag, and flees into the woods before her mother and landlord can track her down and commit her to a psychiatric facility. The destruction of her novel and desertion of her home could be interpreted as a last attempt to maintain her autonomy, now revealed as detached from the house and her writing. The price she must pay for a non-proprietary freedom is her sanity, which leaves her dispossessed of a community that can recognize, affirm, and sustain for its members the kind of social relations that allow for the cultivation and practice of self-determination.

In *Un amor*, the intersection of isolation, property, and violence shapes Nat's trajectory, revealing how the societal framework that defines individual autonomy is deeply entangled with dispossession and power struggles. This entanglement becomes evident when Nat's landlord sexually assaults her. The episode takes place after the hamlet community has ostracized Nat because her dog brutally attacks the neighbor's daughter. When the community urges her to sacrifice the dog, Nat reacts by running away with it, until Píter informs the police of the dog's whereabouts, and they proceed to put it to sleep. The landlord's disrespect for Nat's boundaries is plentiful throughout the novel. He enters her home several times unannounced, such as when he fixes her toilet, prompting her to scream in terror: "Nat grita quién hay ahí, se asoma aterrorizada a la puerta del baño. Cuando ve al casero dentro, pega otro grito. Primero es el miedo, luego la indignación, pero en seguida, otra vez el miedo" (Mesa 34). From the outset, Nat

senses his volatility, noticing his anger when she lists the necessary repairs: “Nat intuye que es un hombre iracundo y siente ahora deseos de recular” (Mesa 11). His hostility escalates when he refuses to fix the leaking roof during heavy rain, leaving her overwhelmed with frustration and an unsettling fear she struggles to name: “Entonces sí llora, llena de rabia por no entender qué es lo que la aterra de ese hombre. Un hombre maleducado y mezquino, sin verdadero poder sobre ella” (Mesa 62). As Nat becomes increasingly isolated—rejected by most of the community except for her friend, Píter el hippie—, whatever may have restrained the landlord’s violence is now unleashed. He physically attacks and verbally humiliates her without fear of consequence.

Nat’s alienation reaches its peak after the attack, as she drifts between seeking help and resigning herself to solitude, ultimately marking her expulsion from the community and her forced displacement. After the attack, Nat drinks a bottle of whisky and falls asleep. When she wakes up, she heads to the house of her former boyfriend—*el alemán* who has recently left her and wants no communication with her—presumably to seek help, but he is not there. Unable to find solace, she lingers by his door, settling on the ground in a state of exhaustion and despair. Like a wounded dog, she curls up against the entrance, relieving herself in the nearby bushes before wrapping herself in her coat and drifting in and out of sleep: “Se acerca y se sienta en el suelo, junto a la puerta... Orina allí mismo, entre unos matorrales. Se arrebujá en el chaquetón, se tumba como puede, a ratos se adormila” (Mesa 181). Though she briefly considers staying in La Escapa despite the community’s overt hostility, an overpowering impulse to leave ultimately takes hold of her. Nat’s rumination on the staircase of her home further evokes her separation from the community, as she feels “invulnerable, más allá de los juicios,” yet recognizes that this sense of immunity stems from having fallen out of the temporal flow of those around her—“como si, al subir una escalera interminable, hubiese caído al vacío por un peldaño roto, mientras el resto de la gente continuaba hacia arriba sin advertirlo” (Mesa 184). While others continue their ascent, unaware, she remains suspended in isolation, disconnected from the life she once inhabited. The novel ends with Nat moving to a different town, to a very old house for even cheaper rent.

Nat’s reflection on a past theft reveals how her pursuit of self-discovery is inextricably tied to the dynamics of unlawful appropriation. This connection crystallizes as she contemplates at the top of the mountain on the life trajectory that has brought her to this point, she reflects: “el robo que cometió en el pasado adquiere todo su sentido. Ahora

sabe leerlo. Comprende que no se llega al blanco apuntando, sino descuidadamente, mediante oscilaciones y rodeos, casi por casualidad” (Mesa 185). It is this link between the unexplained theft she commits at work—which ultimately compels to leave the city for the countryside—that leads to this moment of realization, of enlightenment. Although this might initially suggest that life is a series of unfortunate events through which one discovers oneself, and that this process is somehow liberating, it is crucial to recognize that it is the theft itself that triggers this entire journey. In other words, Nat’s emergence as a conscious and relatively autonomous subject comes at the cost of her tacit expulsion from the community, with the familiar yet doomed fate of having to start all over again, back to the scene of finding a house *of her own* where she resumes the tasks of making an unlivable space habitable, as she “barre y rastrilla, barniza maderas viejas, lija los azulejos con una rasqueta, poda las ramas secas”—a repetition of tasks that, in this new place, she does not see as stagnation but rather as “un avance” (Mesa 184). Theft at the very foundation of this relative achievement of freedom returns us to the relationship between freedom and property. This, in turn, suggests that Nat grounds her relationship with her sense of a liberated self in something to be stolen, suggesting that a fundamental act of theft is implicit in the paradigm of the individual encouraged in this model of society. Her unexplained motive for stealing can be seen as illustrating how, in a capitalist society, the drive for individuation and self-discovery aligns with the logic of appropriation and accumulation.

In *Mamut*, the attack on the main character also takes place in the context of her home but, in this case, the violent encounter takes place soon after she reflects on the inherent nature of humankind, reinforcing her perception of men as instinctual predators and herself as an isolated, self-sufficient figure. According to her observations—which aspire to be somewhat sociological—men’s nature, abstracted from society, is to think of sex instinctively and predatorily when they are in an isolated place with a woman (Baltasar 91-92). Her assessments, in which we can recognize Hobbesian principles of innate predatorial attitudes in humans, also serve to abstract her socially. One example of this self-sufficiency is evident in how she approaches sexual relations with men as a calculated means to an end—primarily as a way to experience gestation rather than to fulfill a desire for motherhood. As she explains, “no era el desig d’un fill, el que m’havia segrestat, era el desig de gestar-lo, el de fer passar la vida cos a través, el de crear” (“It was not the desire for a child that

kidnapped me, but the desire to gestate it, to have life pass through my body, to create," my trans.; Baltasar 28). To achieve this, she sees the need to "desengabiar" (uncage) herself, a conviction that persists throughout the novel. *Mamut's* protagonist invites a camper who is a fossil collector to her house for dinner. Sensing his desire for sex, she consents without hesitation, engaging in what she describes as "un polvo violent, com una bufetada" ("a violent fuck, like a slap in the face"; my trans.; Baltasar 92). When she later asks him to leave, he refuses, seizing her arm "com si fos seva" ("as if she were his," my trans.; Baltasar 93). In response, and with the help of her dog, she throws him out of the house, snatching a burning log from the fire to defend herself.

The question of freedom is here introduced as a tense intersection between animal instinct and the idea of property as a natural right. Her reflections present men's sexual impulse as inherently violent and possessive, rather than considering how social and historical constructions shape the understanding of sexual instinct. What is more, to arrive at such a conclusion, to begin with, she draws these observations from the dynamics unfolding within a given social context, rather than abstracting them from it,<sup>17</sup> that is to say, her findings are socially mediated rather than unmediated insights into instinct. But the novel does away with this presupposition. Instead, *Mamut* juxtaposes what the protagonist sees as the paradigm of the possessive male animal nature, with the figure of the lesbian protagonist, as an alternative archetype of animality, supposedly millenarian like the mammoth. From the onset of the novel, the protagonist is persistently called into her instincts, insisting that she "debia aferrar-me a l'instint" ("had to cling to instinct," my trans.; Baltasar 16). Her perception of reality is shaped by a continuous, almost excessive reliance on animal metaphors—she describes herself as shedding "sus gustos, su piel" ("her tastes, her skin," my trans.; Baltasar 13), envisions women's conditioning as akin to that of "un rosegador de sotabosc, un mamífer treballador pensat per alimentar animals més grans de totes les espècies" ("an undergrowth rodent, a working mammal designed to feed larger animals of any species," my trans.; Baltasar 20), and sees herself as "instint sense tamís, com una daina o un porc senglar" ("instinct without a sieve, like a fallow deer or a wild boar," my trans. 30) where "la carn em crida y m'abriva per a que m'estiri" ("the flesh beckons

<sup>17</sup>See Macpherson, especially 17-29, for a discussion on how Hobbes' conception of the natural condition of mankind is based on an already civilized idea of desire, in other words, an abstraction inferred from the behavior of men in society.

me and urges me to lie down,” my trans.; 30) Rather than aligning animality with competition and violence, as in the Hobbesian notion that *homo homini lupus* (man is a wolf to another man), *Mamut* reclaims instinct—particularly through lesbian desire—as an alternative to the liberal concept of freedom, one that operates outside a proprietary mindset yet ultimately necessitates a return to the realm of the animal.

The novel ends with the main character giving up her baby for adoption after giving birth in a hospital alone, without informing anyone in her environment. Her anguish is palpable as she laments “No em suportó per haver-la donat. Tinc als llavis el petó que vaig estar a punt de fer-li quan se la van endur” (“I can’t stand myself for having given her. I keep on my lips the kiss I almost gave her when she was taken away,” my trans.; Baltasar 127). The adoption comes as a surprise, leaving us to question how her deep-seated desire for pregnancy could shift to a decision to give up the baby. While one might argue that her precarious circumstances make raising a baby unfeasible, her particular experience of carrying a fetus is premised on the disconnect between pregnancy and motherhood. As she explains, “No era el desig d’un fill, el que m’havia segrestat, era el desig de gestar-lo, el de fer passar la vida cos a través, el de crear. Per fer això m’havia de desengabiar” (“It was not the desire for a child that kidnapped me, but the desire to gestate it, to have life pass through my body. To achieve this, I had to uncage myself,” my trans.; 28). Her relationship with pregnancy, then, is rooted in the physical and existential experience of creation rather than in maternal attachment, challenging a societal framework that equates motherhood with ownership.<sup>18</sup> Rather than viewing childbirth as the beginning of a parental bond, she understands gestation as an expression of pure vitalist instinct, where any attachment to the baby is socially imposed. Within her metaphorical framework, motherhood becomes yet another form of confinement—an oppressive cage from which she must escape to preserve what might be seen as a form of non-proprietary freedom. This rejection of ownership extends beyond

<sup>18</sup>See Federici, especially 63-71, for a discussion on the rise of a “breeding industry” of surrogate mothers and the abstracted notions of property posited to usurp gestating mothers not only from their offspring, but from their freedom by turning their bodies into procreative machines. However, Federici’s account on how this industry that straightforwardly commodifies the child, an expression of capitalism’s apex, would benefit from comparing the different understandings of property, if they are indeed so, between the mother’s right to the child and the circulation of the child as a commodity in the market. Also, see Lewis (2019) for a problematization of the proprietary ideologies of surrogacy and her provocative claim to conceive all gestation as surrogate, which seeks, through inversion, to dissolve property as the undergirding concept sustaining capitalist ideologies of motherhood.

motherhood to life itself, as she declares, “No hi ha vida desitjable. He comès un crim. La vida és el territori de la multitud, per això m’he desentès del crim. No hi ha res meu, fora de mi” (“There is no desirable life. I have committed a crime. Life is the territory of the multitude, so I have disengaged myself from crime. Outside of me, there is nothing mine,” my trans.; Baltasar 128). By relinquishing any claim to what was once hers, she asserts a radical detachment from possession, surrendering the child to life’s own course: “Mano que tot el que ha estat meu sigui de la vida, que busqui i trobi el seu camí dins de la vida inhumana i crua, perquè ja no és meu” (“I command that all that has been mine be of life, that it seek and find its way in the inhuman and crude life, for it is no longer mine,” my trans.; Baltasar 128). This total renunciation extends to her relationships as well. Her final act of severance is directed at the shepherd, symbolizing her break from the social world entirely. She proclaims, “Mano un nou desterrament, ara que he pervertit el vell. Que sàpiga estar alerta quan la vida, a mitjanit, m’enviï els seus llancers” (“I order a new banishment, now that I have perverted the old one. May he know to be on his guard when, at midnight, life sends me its spearmen,” my trans.; Baltasar 128). Here, “desterrament” (banishment) signals not only her self-imposed exile but also her refusal to root life and freedom in land settlement. In abandoning the rural space, she ultimately surrenders to a relationship with life itself—one that is shaped by its unpredictability and “llancers” (spearmen), the dark forces that punctuate its path.

In short, the only options available to her are either to opt in or out of reproducing an iteration of the family form which, under capitalism, renders her, as Silvia Federici would say, a “machine for the production of labor power” (63)—or else to refuse the undertaking as the bearer of unlimited unwaged labor that traditionally defines women’s role in the family. To this end, the family is not only the ideological pinnacle of how we imagine a virtually unbreakable social bond; but is also, and most importantly, the institution that makes possible the privatization of care, as Sophie Lewis would put it,<sup>19</sup> in the capitalist state’s unbridled effort to release itself from its role as the bearer of social welfare. The function of the family was already recognized by

<sup>19</sup>In *Abolish the Family*, Sophie Lewis argues that the family functions as an antisocial form of sociality, isolating individuals within a privatized, hierarchical unit and diverting care and resources away from collective, communal support. By naturalizing care and sociality as exclusive to the family, it precludes the possibility of experimenting with alternative social bonds.

Engels at the end of the 19th century, when he linked the historical origin of the family to the rise of the private property class, which made the family, borrowing Michèle Barrett's and Mary McIntosh's formula, the ultimate antisocial institution that to this date is essential to the advancement of the capitalist project, which is, most fundamentally, an antisocial one. So, while *Mamul's* protagonist rejects the antisocial trap offered in childrearing under the capitalist institution of the family, the only other path left to her is the purely rootless human version of the animal as a way of showing the protagonist's adamant disinterest in building any possible collectivist alternative that could grow into a sustainable social structure.

In sum, the madwoman, the ostracized thief, and the lesbian animal are the vanishing figures these novels offer as counterparts to a proprietary understanding of freedom and possessive individualism. Madness, ostracism, and animality serve in the creation of cautionary tales against seeking utopian projects outside capitalism.

### **The Myth of Barter or *Capitalist Primitivism***

By way of conclusion, I turn to the role that sex plays to suggest that it is through the protagonists' entry into a barter logic—the trade of sexual services for basic needs—that we see how these novels imagine a rural organization of economic and sexual relations, supposedly outside the capitalist logic of exchange value. The imagined scenario relies on a double coincidence of wants: men seek sex as their primary need, while solitary urban women, overwhelmed by the manual labor of rural life, require help maintaining their homes and securing basic supplies. This ideal barter situation is of the same nature as that imagined by economists when they try to explain the origin of money. The development of money in so-called primitive societies, they hypothesize, would have replaced the barter economy to make the exchange of goods easier and more efficient.

In *Un amor, el alemán* proposes the exchange of sex for construction work as she needs to fix her roof but has no money to pay for it and he makes the case by saying that “es innegable que los hombres tienen ciertas necesidades... No se siente viejo, pero tampoco con fuerzas para conquistar a nadie... Tampoco quiere recurrir a las prostitutas... Puedo arreglarte el tejado a cambio de que me dejes entrar en ti un rato” (Mesa 66-67). The use of “dejar entrar” evokes the metaphor of the body as a home, a property. “Mi cuerpo lo necesita” (68), he says, equating his needs not to her sexual needs, but to her needs regard-

ing the house. Nat initially refuses. But after another week of intense storms causing further leaks, she reconsiders the proposal when a sudden reflection takes hold of her “Una reflexión fugaz cruza por su cabeza, tan rápida que no le da tiempo a agarrarla y entenderla. Algo sobre intercambios primigenios. El trueque como relación social básica. Por qué no, se dice. Hay algo hermoso ahí. Algo esencial y humano” (Mesa 75). As if she had access to a rationality that humanity would have long since forgotten, but the core of which remained in her by virtue of being human; barter, she comes to understand, is a beautiful human expression of primitive social relations.

However, the retrospective postulation of barter is not only an unsubstantiated story of the origin of money—a myth—as the anthropologist David Graeber has shown in his analysis of the assumptions that run unchecked through the works of major figures in economics, from Adam Smith to Peter Stieglitz. Graeber shows that barter was an anomaly in the economic organization of societies, as evidence indicates it was typically used for transactions with strangers and enemies—those outside of kinship networks (22-29). In other words, barter functioned as an antisocial economic practice, distinct from exchanges based on strong social ties.

In contrast, these novels depict barter as a fundamental aspect of the social economy in rural communities, where trade is supposedly conducted without relying on credit and debt, suggesting a sort of primitivism that replicates false assumptions plaguing economic theory. Additionally, the prominent representation of sexual services as a key commodity for women to barter reinforces the idea that these rural communities are essentially patriarchal and oppressive towards women, further circumscribing any potential idea of rural life as a horizon for other, more sustainable, and egalitarian ways of living.

In *Un amor*, the one-time arrangement with *el alemán* quickly develops into a romance. The rural and pre-capitalist economic arrangements Nat believes she has embraced are, in fact, reflections of the gendered division of labor characteristic of capitalist societies. In these systems, women’s sexual services—along with other essential social reproductive activities—are naturalized and rendered invisible as work. This mirrors Silvia Federici’s assertion in her seminal 1974 text on the Wages for Housework movement: “They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work” (74).

Nat, who, is troubled by her thoughts about whether her exchange constitutes “prostitution,” determines that by avoiding money and other intermediaries, she has remained outside this type of work (Mesa

81). And yet, it is the very act of disavowing her sexual services as work that constitutes the portal into a romantic relationship through which the nature of this work as unwaged work will be accepted and internalized, metamorphosed in Nat's words, in the form of her own desire, she says about her feelings for *el alemán* "¿Es una obsesión? Sí, claramente es una obsesión. Pero no solo eso, se dice. Es un rapto, una metamorfosis, una transformación radical de lo esperado... lo que era invisible y carecía de interés, está ahora dentro de ella, habitándola, sacudiéndola" (Mesa 93).

This metamorphosis refers to the sublimation of unwaged work into romance in which Nat's services will soon evolve from a one-time sex exchange into an endless giving of sex, care, and love, in an act of self-deprivation from what Maya González and Jeanne Neton have reconceptualized from a Marxist feminist lens as "the wage fetish." This is the ideology by which the wage—which is supposed to cover the cost of the worker's means of reproduction—creates the reality, through the payment of a limited time of labor, that workers are not selling themselves completely, but only a portion of their time.<sup>20</sup> As a result, unwaged reproductive activities must be cut off from the wage in order for waged labor to create value under capitalism. This has the effect of producing a separation between activities that, being perhaps the same such as, for instance, sexual services, get classified as work and non-work. And to the extent that reproductive activities are excluded from the wage and therefore from the forms of social validation ascribed in capitalism, González and Neton suggest that, in this specific way, reproductive unwaged activities become unsocial.

In *Mamut*, however, the main character is occasionally paid for sexual services provided to the shepherd, the neighbor with whom she has developed a friendship and who supplies her lamb meat and other provisions. However, their payment arrangement, or lack thereof, is primarily informal and depends on the willingness of the shepherd to pay her, which is unpredictable in terms of when she is paid and how much, as it varies for the same amount of sex (102). While at first she prefers the informality of the arrangement because it gives her a

<sup>20</sup>In *Capital*, Volume 1, Marx explains "The owner of labor-power must always sell it for a limited period only, for if he were to sell it in a lump, once and for all, he would be selling himself, converting himself from a free man into a slave, from an owner of a commodity into a commodity. He must constantly treat his labor-power as his own property, his own commodity, and he can do this only by placing it at the disposal of the buyer, i.e., handing it over to the buyer for him to consume temporarily. In this way he manages both to alienate (veräußern) his labor-power and to avoid renouncing his rights of ownership over it" (271).

sense of freedom, “Em semblava bé aquesta informalitat, em sentia còmoda, perquè no em lligava” (“That informality was fine with me, I felt comfortable because it didn’t tie me down,” my trans.), soon it begins to weigh on her as she finds herself giving increasingly giving in to his demands for sex to not upset the stability of her primary, and only, real relationship (Baltasar 102). Sex, as a basic and primal need (supposedly instinctive but only for men), thus becomes emblematic of all that is erroneously imagined as primitive, such as barter. This narrative fascination with “primitive” barter belies a pre-capitalist imaginary that is, nonetheless, capitalist.

Instead of staging the possibility of any externality to capitalism, the “primitive” rural is depicted as a scene of *capitalist primitivism*. We see how, without the presence of the state, and by contrast to the urban spaces in these novels, the rural is the place where capitalism’s expansion of the gendered sphere of unwaged reproductive activities and exploitation takes over. As a result, the rural socioeconomic relations imagined depicted here are, to use González and Neton’s formula, fundamentally unsocial. They are also antisocial because these relationships are based on a logic of domination that leads the protagonists to withdraw from society altogether.

By presenting *capitalist primitivism* as the sole—yet false—escape from late capitalism, this genre of contemporary obscures the historical nature of capitalism, foreclosing the horizon of a different order. To do so, instead of a potential outside of capitalism, the rural is produced by capitalism as its own internal externality—the outside capitalism produces within. Consequently, the liberal-based social contract is reasserted as the sole safeguard against the inherent violence and solitude of the human condition, thereby perpetuating the very antisocial ideologies of freedom the novels aim to critique. What we are left with are cultural forms that constrict the imagination, shutting down the possibility of experimenting with alternative socialities.

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