

5-22-2017

Cars, Space, and the Dynamics of Power in Cuéntame cómo pasó ('Tell Me How It Happened')

Linda B. Bartlett

Furman University, linda.bartlett@furman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Spanish and Portuguese Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Television Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Bartlett, Linda B. (2017) "Cars, Space, and the Dynamics of Power in Cuéntame cómo pasó ('Tell Me How It Happened')," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 41: Iss. 1, Article 16. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1909>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Cars, Space, and the Dynamics of Power in *Cuéntame cómo pasó* ('Tell Me How It Happened')

Abstract

Cuéntame cómo pasó 'Tell Me How It Happened,' Radio Televisión Española's long-running television series, recreates Spain's recent past from the late years of the Franco regime through the transition to democracy and beyond through the daily experiences of the fictional yet typical Alcántara family, thus functioning as a form of historical memory project. This critically-acclaimed program, which debuted in fall 2001, has attracted not only record-size audiences in its 18 seasons (to date), but also scholarly interest as well. While other studies have analyzed the use of the television medium to represent history, or critiqued its historical accuracy, the present article utilizes spatial theory to examine the geography of change portrayed in the program. Informed by the work of theorists such as Nancy Duncan and Doreen Massey, this study specifically considers how increased automobility, the ability to traverse space rapidly and independently, is a sign of growing individual and national autonomy in a society emerging from authoritarianism. The study of the relationship between space and power, which takes into account both class and gender, reveals the equivocal nature of Spain's advances in the post-Franco era.

Keywords

Spain, television, history, geography, space, power, class, gender, automobility

Cars, Space, and the Dynamics of Power in *Cuéntame cómo pasó*
(‘Tell Me How It Happened’)

Linda B. Bartlett
Furman University

In its eighteen seasons to date, the popular Spanish television series *Cuéntame cómo pasó* ‘Tell Me How It Happened’ continues to garner both critical acclaim and faithful audiences in its captivating portrayal of the life of the fictional yet representative Alcántara family in a time of significant turmoil and change in Spanish political and social life. This “clásico en vida” (Cruz) ‘living classic,’ “a rare case in the Spanish audiovisual market where mass audience and critical acclaim coincide” (Smith 22), recreates and explores the dramatic period from the late Franco years to the transition to democracy and beyond through the struggles and triumphs of its collective, multi-generational protagonist.¹ The various narratives associated with this family typically exploit historical events as the premise for the theme or even specific details and content of each episode’s plot line. Thus the series endeavors to interpret Spain’s recent past as a form of historical memory project, striving to be “la crónica humana y cotidiana de nuestro pasado inmediato . . . en el marco de un entorno histórico que nuestra memoria colectiva debe recuperar antes de que caiga en el olvido” (“*Cuéntame*. El origen de la serie” ‘Tell Me. The Origin of the Series’) ‘the human, daily chronicle of our recent past . . . in the framework of a historical setting which our collective memory must recapture before it falls into oblivion.’

Critical studies of this program have tended to consider the implications of the portrayal of Spain’s recent past it renders, specifically the question of revisionism and the unique features of the television medium in portraying recent history.² The current study also examines the portrait of Spain reflected in *Cuéntame*, but by seeking to interpret the depiction of the economic, social, personal, and political vicissitudes of the Alcántara family through the lens of spatial theory, with a particular emphasis on what has been called its “personajes de metal” ‘characters of metal,’ the numerous automobiles that appear throughout the series (Tejeda). If *Cuéntame* is, indeed, a program that “marcha sobre ruedas” ‘runs smoothly [on wheels],’ then the role of these omnipresent and significant “metal characters” invites an analysis beyond their effective (and expensive) role as prop (Tejeda). Automobiles in *Cuéntame* function on multiple figurative levels: as symbol, typically of the status associated with gender or socioeconomic class; as metaphor for a rapidly changing society; and as a marker for individual character development. The present consideration of the discourse of “automobility” in the context of spatial theory will take into account these functions of the car within the series and the space (literal and figurative) it creates. Furthermore, it will also

illuminate the dynamics of individual character development—and the society these characters represent—in the context of a quest for autonomy, mobility, power, and identity. The first part of this study shall emphasize the role of space in representing the development of the Alcántara family in general, especially its patriarch, Antonio; the second will examine a spatial representation of the changing role of women in the years just before, during, and after the transition to democracy.

The program and its sets, artificial places created precisely to represent and connote meaning within the context of the series, initially reconstruct a late-Francoist Spain of socioeconomic, gender, and political inequality and repression. Originally from the fictional village of Sagrillas, the Alcántara family—Antonio, the patriarch, his wife Mercedes (Merche), her mother Herminia, their teenaged children Inés and Toni, and eight-year-old Carlos—resides in the likewise fictional neighborhood of San Genaro, understood to be on the periphery of Madrid. The Alcántaras' migration to Madrid, a typical experience in Spain in the 1960s, represents an essential element of the policy of economic development of the era, the impulse to move from one social class to another and to overcome the economic limits associated with their rural setting.³ Yet in the urban environment, the spaces the characters inhabit are also coded, reflecting and reinforcing the limitations of each member of the family, as well as revealing their culturally assigned identities along both class and gender lines. Antonio works at a government ministry in the morning and moonlights at a printing company in the afternoon; both environments are clear hierarchies in which he has little autonomy. When he is not working, he is having a drink and a smoke at the neighborhood bar with the other men—never women—in the neighborhood. The women function exclusively in the circumscribed domestic sphere of shopping, sewing, preparing meals, and taking care of the family's needs. Inés, the oldest child (nineteen as the series opens), contributes to the family income by working at a local beauty parlor frequented entirely by women, although she yearns for a much broader sphere of experience like that available to her eighteen-year-old brother Toni, who embarks on his university career in the sixth episode of the series. Carlos, eight in the first season, occupies spaces typical for children: home, school, and the vacant lot where he and his friends play. Ventures beyond San Genaro are limited; it is not until the family enjoys some minor financial success later in the first season that they are able to have their first beach vacation.

The themes of economic advancement, consumerism, and the search for increased personal autonomy in this repressive and limited context emerge in the initial episode, establishing a pattern that will distinguish the arc of the Alcántara storyline throughout each subsequent season. Anxiety about how to make ends meet dominates family conversations and motivates character choices and dreams (a frequent *Cuéntame* technique). The family's perpetual dependence on the

goodwill and generosity of Don Pablo, Antonio's boss at the print shop and representative of the regime's power base, emphasizes their subordinate status. Yet they are also zealous consumers, acquiring their first television set in the initial episode, and later in the season purchasing a washing machine and a sewing machine, all paid for in installments. The television, its news, images, and commercials not only give them access to the larger world (albeit filtered through the regime's censors), but also fuel their impulse to acquire these items and many more objects and experiences (such as travel outside of Spain) as they pursue an upwardly mobile trajectory. The Alcántara family and their purchase of a new TV reflect Tatjana Pavlović's observation that in this era "[t]elevision (alongside other novel mass-produced goods) was inscribed in a new discourse of progress mirroring a society oriented increasingly towards consumer values" (19). The context of the series is thus clearly capitalist, as well as authoritarian. The Alcántaras' status is working-class, and their space is a narrow, rigid realm that both invites and frustrates attempts to advance beyond it. Thus the struggles and yearnings of the Alcántaras are represented and constrained by the space in which they reside, as the boundaries of San Genaro remind us that "the class struggle is inscribed in space" (Lefebvre 55).

This quest for increased personal autonomy through materialism is closely associated with the ultimate symbol of individual and spatial freedom, the automobile. Freedom, power, and status are all embodied by the automobile, which is described by Henri Lefebvre in 1968, as Tim Dant tells us, as a "Leading-Object" in terms of its centrality within the culture of modern societies and the promise of control it offers" (Dant 61). This theme of automobility first emerges in episode 4 when Antonio's older brother Miguel returns for a visit from France, where he emigrated some years before. Arriving with his French wife and daughter in what Jorge Pérez calls "one of the most emblematic cars in the history of the automobile," his Citroën *Tiburón* 'Sharknose,' Miguel draws the attention and admiration of everyone in the neighborhood (82). The sign-values that critic John Urry attributes to the car—"speed, security, safety, sexual desire, career success, freedom, family, masculinity" (25-26)—explain the universal awe of Miguel's car. "¡Qué cochazo!" 'What an awesome car!' the Alcántaras and their neighbors comment repeatedly throughout the episode. Antonio, envious of Miguel's apparent success, bluntly tells him, "Quiero tener un coche como tú" 'I want to have a car like you,' yearning in actuality for what Miguel's car represents ("Los invasores" 'The Invaders'). Yet all is not as it seems. Miguel's *cochazo* 'awesome car' fails to start at the end of the episode as his family departs to return to France, exposing him as a fraud who drives a clunker he does not know how to repair (despite his supposed job as a mechanic) and whose French wife disdains him as an inferior Spaniard. Thus the paradox of automobility is established in *Cuéntame cómo pasó*: the promise of freedom and autonomy associated with automobiles is

limited and, perhaps, even illusory, at least while Franco's regime maintains its power.

This equivocal hope of autonomy recurs throughout the program, creating an ongoing tension in which both the micro-history (of the characters) and the macro-history (of Spain) unfold. The title of episode 9, "*Non plus ultra*" 'Nothing Further Beyond,' signals this ambivalence as it significantly both evokes the warning to sailors inscribed on the mythical Pillars of Hercules and ironically negates Spain's national motto (*Plus ultra*, 'Further Beyond'). This notion of limits, the desire to exceed them, and the danger and futility of attempting to do so are evident in Antonio's experience in this chapter of the series. Newly infected by a love of speed, Antonio briefly realizes the yearning for a car he expressed in episode 4 when he impulsively decides to buy his friend Desi's SEAT 850. A self-professed *don nadie* 'Mr. Nobody,' Antonio feels newly empowered behind the wheel of Desi's car, a version of the emblematic brand of Spain's economic miracle connoting the "moment in Spanish modernity when space came to be defined more by mobility than by dwelling" (Pavlović 186). The adult Carlos, who serves throughout the series as the program off-camera narrator, remembers his ride with his father this way:

Creo que nunca había visto tan feliz a mi padre. Al volante de aquella máquina se sentía liberado y dueño de su propio destino. Ya no era un don nadie. Era todo un señor. Ahora [2001] cualquiera tiene un coche, pero en esa época era un sueño. En 1968 quien tenía un coche se sentía respetado. ("*Non plus ultra*")

I believe I had never seen my father so happy. At the wheel of that machine he felt liberated and the master of his own destiny. He was no longer a Mr. Nobody. He was a total gentleman. Now [2001] anyone at all has a car, but in that era it was a dream. In 1968 having a car made you feel respected.⁴

For Antonio, this control assumes a spatial dimension as his car allows him to break the boundaries of physical, economic, and societal constraints. The adult Carlos narrates: "Mi padre había descubierto la fiebre de la velocidad. Conducir un coche era para él como para los astronautas volar al espacio exterior. Una sensación de poder indescriptible, un vértigo, un escalofrío, el placer total" ("*Non plus ultra*") 'My father had discovered the fever of speed. Driving a car was for him like flying to outer space was for astronauts. A sensation of indescribable power, dizziness, chills, complete pleasure.'

This sense of autonomy is, however, illusory for Antonio, who is not actually licensed to drive. At episode's end his speed and actual lack of control result in an embarrassing crash in front of the family's apartment building. Although earlier he has had an overtly sensual dream of an adoring Merche

awaiting him in a car, in reality he finds his wife humiliated and enraged by not only the crash, but also his impulsive purchase of an item they cannot afford. Antonio's brief foray into car ownership and the supposed status it confers has ultimately created only domestic tension and financial distress, as his efforts to defy space and take control of his life fail. As Jorge Pérez writes in *Cultural Roundabouts: Spanish Film and Novel on the Road*, mobility in late Francoist and post-Franco Spain "does not take place along a smooth and straightforward path, but rather by taking detours, encountering unexpected bumps, and sometimes making (un)necessary stops and U-turns," just as Antonio discovers (36).

Subsequent episodes reinforce the power dynamic associated with automobility, the upward and outward mobility that it connotes, and the ongoing, fraught quest for self-determination in the context of a society struggling to challenge dictatorship (and, later, transition to democracy). By season 6 (1972, in the context of the program) Antonio has been the owner of a series of increasingly expensive vehicles that denote his improved economic standing, social status, and sense of personal freedom. Still unsatisfied, however, he envies Desi's sleek new Dodge Dart, which the family borrows in episode 90 for an excursion to Segovia. The promise of autonomy through automobility once again proves problematic, however, as Desi's black Dodge is mistaken as part of Franco's official motorcade en route to a formal ceremony at the *Valle de los Caídos* 'Valley of the Fallen.' When the Alcántaras are discovered inside, they are held for questioning on suspicion of an assassination plot before being released many hours later. Free movement through space is once again repressed, despite—and in fact, even because of—the Alcántaras' access to automobiles. Here the explicit desire to emulate the free movement of those with absolute power endangers those who dare venture outside the space of San Genaro. Tellingly, the car is described as both a "coche de ministro" 'ministry car' and a "tanque" 'tank,' in which Desi has proudly boasted he is treated as a "general" 'general' ("Si la envidia fuera tiña" 'If Envy Were Ringworm').

A season later, the Alcántaras are eyewitnesses to the 1973 assassination of Franco's designated successor Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco, who (in the program as in reality) dies when a car bomb explodes in his Dodge GT 3700, the same type of car Desi sported in episode 90. As Franco and his regime decline and die, the middle-class Alcántaras enjoy increased freedoms and, ultimately, power, evidenced once again in the cars they drive. Merche, now a licensed driver and university student, acquires a car of her own in season 10 when Antonio once again decides to upgrade. Living what he calls "el mejor momento de mi vida" 'the best moment of my life,' Antonio (now known by his employees by the honorific "*don* Antonio") is the manager of the print shop and is thriving financially ("El coche nuevo del emperador" 'The Emperor's Brand-New Car'). Set in 1976 as political reform dominates the national conversation and a young Adolfo Suárez captures

the public imagination, this season inverts the earlier Miguel-Antonio relationship as younger brother Antonio—frequently compared in looks to Suárez in episode 168—surpasses Miguel in terms of economic, personal, and political power. Miguel, now returned to Madrid, newly remarried and an expectant father, drives a taxi he co-owns in his struggle to make ends meet. The discrepancy between his financial status and Antonio’s exacerbates their feud over the distribution of their deceased mother’s estate, a battle in which cars are used as figurative weapons. Eager to appear successful, Miguel purchases a red sport coupe he cannot afford; Antonio, in turn, buys a blue Mercedes, his dream car and the ultimate symbol of status and financial success. Much is made of the color of their cars, which holds political significance. In this Alcántara “Civil War” over the proceeds of the land belonging to their mother (a sort of “motherland”), Miguel, the communist, drives a red car; Antonio, the “Duque de San Genaro” ‘Duke of San Genaro,’ chooses a blue one. As the nation progresses toward a vote on political reform and weighs how the “two Spains” will share power, the Alcántaras similarly struggle to reconcile a bitter conflict with a difficult history.

In episode 170, “La mujer del César” ‘Caesar’s Wife,’ this power struggle reaches a climax. Antonio, as a Mercedes owner and person of consequence, has been invited to join the Real Automóvil Club de España (RACE) ‘The Royal Automobile Club of Spain.’ His social standing is juxtaposed and contrasted with Miguel’s when Antonio finds himself in Miguel’s taxi upon returning home from the club one evening. Although Miguel is the one driving, he is clearly subordinate, required to follow his customer’s directions. When his taxi is later towed because he falls behind on his payments, Miguel tells his wife Paquita that Antonio is “la viva imagen del éxito. Porque conducir un Mercedes es la viva imagen del éxito” ‘the living image of success. Because driving a Mercedes is the living image of success.’ In contrast, Miguel calls himself “un moroso al que se han llevado el coche” (“La mujer del César”) ‘a defaulter whose car has been taken away.’ This conflict—cast in terms of automobility—runs parallel to the national one. As spectators, program viewers watch along with Merche and Herminia as Miguel’s taxi is towed away, gazing down from the physically and symbolically superior perspective of their upper-floor apartment window. Left behind on the pavement is a clearly visible stain inscribed in space by the lost automobile: a quasi-map of Spain, highlighting the symbolic nature of the brothers’ feud.

The resolution of this conflict revolves around the imminent arrival of Miguel and Paquita’s baby. With Miguel’s taxi gone, Antonio must take them to the hospital in his Mercedes when Paquita’s labor begins. The hospital waiting room, an example of a Foucauldian “crisis heterotopia” where disparate groups of people are brought together, provides the space and opportunity for the brothers to address their feud and leave it behind. “Lo pasado, pasado” ‘Let bygones be bygones’ they agree, effectively establishing a family amnesia parallel to the

national decision to silence discussion of the Civil War and the abuses of the Franco regime in order to establish democracy peacefully. Furthermore, Antonio will be the godfather of the new baby girl born at *La Milagrosa* ‘The Miraculous [Virgin]’ hospital. As the miracle of the birth of Diana Alcántara bears witness, Spain’s journey to a new national space of democracy will be the result of shared power and cooperation, as the entrenched ruling class yields political ground to collaborate with its former enemy. The adult Carlos stresses this significance further as the episode ends, commenting that his father and uncle “[p]usieron fin a una guerra sin sentido” ‘put an end to a senseless war,’ signaling a national trend: “En 1976 fuimos muchos los que decidieron no mirar el pasado sino el futuro” (“La mujer del César”) ‘In 1976 there were many of us who decided to look to the future rather than the past.’

Diana’s birth and the reconciliation of the extended Alcántara family suggest a promising future not only for Antonio, Miguel, and their families, but also for Spain and its people. Symbolically, this promise is reflected in the fact that both sides of the warring Alcántaras traverse space and limitations together in a high-end vehicle. This apparent domination of space expands as the Alcántara fortunes continue on an upward trajectory throughout 1977 and 1978. After the victory of the *Unión del Centro Democrático* ‘Union of the Democratic Center’ in the 1977 elections, Antonio, formerly employed as a ministry assistant, himself becomes the new Director-General of the Ministry of Agriculture. With this increased prosperity, they also move spatially from the periphery to the center, from the fringe of influence to the core of power, relocating from San Genaro to the tony Salamanca district at the beginning of the Constitutional year, 1978. Yet this transition is ultimately short-lived, as the Alcántaras’ economic crisis mirrors the national recession. Not only will the Alcántaras, disillusioned with political life and the self-interested use of power, ultimately return to the margins and the boundaries of San Genaro after Antonio loses his ministry job, but they will also sell the Mercedes he can no longer afford. Although Antonio will later once again own a blue Mercedes, the contradiction of automobility is evident: the problematic quest for autonomy will be filled with figurative and literal reversals across the conceived, designed, and lived spaces of the program, even as the value of the quest itself becomes less clear.

The Alcántaras’ journey reveals that space in *Cuéntame cómo pasó* thus functions not just as a backdrop in which the family narrative unfolds, but also as a dynamic element in the representation of one of its central themes: the struggle for personal (and national) autonomy and identity. From San Genaro to the halls of power and back again, the uneven trajectory of the Alcántara family involves an engagement with space and the power dynamics it signifies and creates. The central role of the automobile as a means of conferring status in a capitalist, patriarchal society and of conquering the limitations of space, both literal and figurative,

underscores the ultimately unstable and uncertain nature of this quest for freedom, as well as its viability. For example, Antonio Alcántara briefly finds a sense of gratification and freedom in car ownership, but it is temporary and ultimately unsatisfying. As David Gartman writes,

The development of the laws of the market over the last century has forced humans into the realm of consumption to satisfy their needs for identity, autonomy, and individuality. And the ultimate expression of this compensatory consumption has been the automobile, the individualized means of mobility that has become synonymous with freedom . . . the automobile has ultimately foundered due to the inability of this thing to satisfy human needs, to provide identity in sheet metal and autonomy in movement. (193)

Antonio's advancement through space and economic class, furthermore, often comes at the expense of the family and community relationships that ultimately sustain him. Throughout *Cuéntame*'s phenomenal run, it is clear in the character of Antonio Alcántara that the price of autonomy is high, its value ambiguous, and its vehicle insufficient.

Yet the spatial dimension of Spain's transitions pertains not only to the men of *Cuéntame* in their quest for increased power, nor merely to the family unit as it attempts to advance economically, but also specifically to the women whose role in society is completely transformed in the post-Franco era. Even as Antonio and the other male characters achieve increased (if insufficient and often unstable) autonomy in a newly democratic Spain, the privilege of authority they previously enjoyed in an era of patriarchal dictatorship is challenged by the new freedoms women attain. Thus, both men and women alike must contend not only with the broader social implications of the democratization process, but with the personal, domestic ones, as well. As Jorge Pérez underscores, quoting Cynthia Enloe: "Traveling and mobility have traditionally been perceived as male domains . . . 'In many societies being feminine has been defined as sticking close to home. Masculinity, by contrast, has been the passport for travel'" (158). The lens of spatial theory thus once again informs an understanding of this transition, as cars and other motor vehicles continue to play an important role in portraying how women in this era claim new rights and territory, transgressing the coded boundaries of their conservative society in a trajectory that is distinguished by both substantial gains and losses.

The show and the sets that shape it reflect Nancy Duncan's contention that "[s]ocial relations, including, importantly, gender relations, are constructed and negotiated spatially and are embedded in the spatial organization of places" (4-5).

Even the seating at the family dinner table, evident from the opening scenes of the first episode, reveals how gender relationships are embedded in space. As head of the household, Antonio sits, naturally, at the head of the table, while Toni, as oldest son, sits at his right hand. Merche and Herminia sit conveniently on the side closest to their assigned space, the kitchen, while Inés, even though she is the eldest, sits farther from Antonio than her brother Toni does. This initial dinner table tableau captures the essence of the traditional family structure and the space it creates (and which helps create it) while serving as a visual frame of reference for the changes to come. As the camera shows the family around the table, the adult Carlos reflects on his family's radical transformation in the intervening thirty-three years:

Así era mi familia en 1968. Al recordar aquella época, me parece como si estuviera hablando de otra gente y de otro país. Y no es que hayan pasado tantos años, lo que ocurre es que todos hemos cambiado tanto en tan poco tiempo que hasta mi propia familia me parece irreconocible. (“El retorno del fugitivo” ‘The Return of the Fugitive’)

That was the way my family was in 1968. Looking back on that time, it seems as if I were talking about other people and another country. And not because so many years have passed, but rather because we have all changed so much in such a short period that even my own family seems unrecognizable to me.

Thus from the first episode, the thematic emphasis of the program is one of change as portrayed through the family unit, which in turn is defined and characterized by the space it occupies. As the series progresses, Antonio's patriarchal status will be challenged as the softening of the regime and the eventual transition to democracy creates a social climate in which women increasingly assume new freedoms and responsibilities outside of the home. Accordingly, domestic space itself will be reconfigured. For example, eight seasons later, Antonio, in a gesture of equality and spousal support, will cross into female territory by entering the kitchen, donning an apron, and attempting to prepare the family meal. Yet as has already been observed in Antonio's trajectory of power, these transitions are fraught with emotional and relational implications that reveal an uneven, and often problematic, process of change.

Long before this domestic transformation occurs, a character outside the confines of San Genaro emerges as the first emblem of female liberation and spatial control: Marta Altamira, the political radical Toni meets at the university. Marta poses a direct contrast to the women of San Genaro: outspoken and confident, she smokes, wears pants, attends university and, significantly, has a “room of her own,”

a studio apartment decorated with images of Bob Dylan, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Picasso's famous 1937 war-protest painting *Guernica*. Uninhibited by the conventions that constrain the Alcántara women, Marta introduces Toni to the world of social and political activism that will change both his outlook and the trajectory of his life. Her power to take Toni to new places, literally and figuratively, is represented by the motorcycle that allows her to traverse the city with him along for the ride. The ability to move freely across Madrid marks Marta as more autonomous, liberated, and powerful than not only Toni, but also Antonio and most of the other men of San Genaro.

Marta will broaden Toni's ideological and spatial sphere by taking him to political rallies, subversive concerts, and public demonstrations, where their transgression of boundaries forces them to flee from the riot police. Marta is at the wheel in episode 15 when she, Toni, and other activist friends protest the declared state of national emergency by shouting and throwing anti-government pamphlets from her car. She also initiates Toni sexually, reinforcing her role as the "new woman" who has premarital sex and who plans to contend with the unexpected pregnancy that results on her own. Yet 1969 Spain still does not allow for such liberal attitudes, especially for women. Upon learning of Marta's pregnancy, her parents arrange with Toni's for them to marry; when she miscarries, Marta's influential father controls her space by sending her abroad. Marta's and Toni's bold negotiation of space ultimately reflects the societal and familial constraints of the era: their activism results in a brief and frightening sojourn in prison, the confined space of the very least powerful, while their families' intervention in their relationship reflects the norms of this authoritarian society. Toni's relationship with Marta is precisely one of the "dangerous friendships" Antonio warned him he might find at university. Even years later when Toni and Marta briefly reunite, she poses the same threat: realizing they are being watched, they must abruptly flee from the bar where they have met, ultimately escaping in the rented space of a taxi. The liberated, boundary-transgressing woman represents a consistently hazardous, yet exciting, agent of personal and social upheaval.

At the same time that Marta opens dangerous new horizons for Toni, Inés embarks on her own problematic trajectory of independence and defiance of social norms. In "*Non plus ultra*," Inés, newly free after breaking up with her boyfriend, challenges parental (and societal) authority by moving outside her assigned sphere and into discos and nightclubs where she sings and dances with a disk jockey associated with the countercultural world, unconventional values, and free expression of rock-n-roll. His influence awakens in her a new yearning for personal and sexual expression, represented, significantly, by the speed, power, and danger she feels when he lets her drive his car. As she tells her friend Pili, "Hay que dejarnos llevar por los instintos" 'We must let ourselves be carried away by our instincts,' a sensation she has when she is behind the wheel. "Me encanta la

velocidad” ‘I love speed,’ she says, “pero me vuelve loca” (“*Non plus ultra*”) ‘but it drives me crazy.’

If, as Isabel Estrada avers, in *Cuéntame* motor vehicles metaphorize “la superación de la inercia de la sociedad franquista” ‘the overcoming of the inertia of Francoist society’ (555), they also reveal the contradictory emotions Mimi Sheller assigns to driving and, I would add, the freedom it entails: “[p]leasure, fear, frustration, euphoria, pain, envy” (224). While Marta and her motorcycle can transport Toni to new and enticing, albeit risky, places, Inés similarly experiences both the thrill and danger of venturing outside her apportioned territory. Driving home in her boyfriend’s car one evening, it is Inés who crashes into Antonio as he attempts to drive Desi’s car, resulting in a true generational clash. Inés, like Antonio, discovers that her sense of freedom and control over space are illusory. Like him, she is not licensed to drive and thus is not legitimately able to move at will out of the circumscribed realm the Franco regime has assigned her. Driving, and the personal autonomy it connotes, is fraught with risk for both the men and women of San Genaro, but especially for women, whose status under the regime is so clearly limited.

The arc of Inés’s storyline reveals an ongoing pattern of desire to expand her horizons and defy the patriarchal power structure by occupying spaces outside of it. As her collision with her father prefigures, Inés—and the women of her generation—are on a “crash course” with male dominance and control. Her extended trip to England in the first season—where she meets her new boyfriend and first lover, Mike—represents her initial challenge to her father’s authority, as she refuses to come home on his explicit command. Once she does return to Spain, she seeks only to discover again the freedom she experienced in England with Mike, as she finds the spatial organization of life in conformist Madrid to be suffocating. Her subsequent foray into new territory (both geographically and symbolically) occurs when she and Mike travel to Ibiza, where they live as hippies until Inés returns home to San Genaro.

Her later disillusionment upon learning that free love and fidelity do not necessarily coincide foretells the series of disappointments she will face in her search for personal freedom and identity. As the seasons progress, Inés’s pattern of leaving and returning only to leave again reveals her constant restlessness and reminds the viewer that, as Linda McDowell says, “The work of constructing an identity is never complete, involving struggles and resistances as well as acceptance, pleasure and desire” (41). Inés struggles to find a lived space she can truly claim as her own, finding self-realization only in the conceived space of the stage where she will develop her career as an actress. This tension between space as lived and as conceived (to evoke Lefebvre) defines her trajectory, as her personal life becomes a series of roles she assumes before chafing once again at the confines induced by her choices. Her marriage to parish priest Eugenio, who abandons the

priesthood for her, will bring her love, but will also eventually cast her in the role of exile to France and, later, single mother when she and Eugenio separate. A subsequent move to Argentina and a period of heroin addiction are reminders that the most peripatetic Alcántara will always stray outside the limits. However, her pattern of returning home to San Genaro and the traditional family unit time and again represents her chronic inability to fully constitute herself, as Nancy Hartsock defines it, as a subject as well as an object of history (170).

While both Marta and Inés represent different faces of the perils of female independence for the rebellious women coming of age in the late Franco era, it is Merche, a child of the regime, who most fully embodies the complex implications of the transition for traditional gender roles. Her gradual transformation from submissive wife to confident entrepreneur is marked by an increased engagement with a broader world and emblemized by her personal control over space through automobility, a clear indicator of her transgression into male territory. As noted earlier, automobiles in *Cuéntame* are associated as early as episode 4 with masculinity, status, power, and sexual pleasure, clearly demarcating the female realm (home and family) from the male one (work, power, authority). Antonio's own journey to a sense of manly self-esteem and sexuality is associated with car ownership. An Alfa Romeo Spider he briefly possesses is the venue for a sexual rendezvous he and Merche enjoy during an afternoon outing; his dream car, his blue Mercedes, is a vehicle that not coincidentally shares its name with his wife, suggesting that Antonio's identity is associated with a traditional masculine role of ownership and dominance over women. Yet episode 9, in which Antonio purchases his friend Desi's car in order to gain the social status he craves, reveals the complexity of the dialectic of automobility. Merche's furious reaction to his impulsive purchase represents the reality of his limited authority, especially when she insists he return the car they cannot afford in order to keep the sewing machine she needs for her growing business.

When Antonio finally gets his first car at the end of season 2, it is Merche who purchases it for him, further creating ambiguity about who actually possesses the expanding power in the family. His authority will be challenged directly when Merche decides to learn to drive. The opening scenes of episode 76 show archival footage of frustrated pedestrians and drivers trying to learn how to negotiate urban space effectively. The scene transitions into one of Merche behind the wheel of Antonio's car with Antonio at her side. As the adult Carlos explains,

De repente 1971 trajo además del primer paso de cebra que hubo en mi barrio, la subida del precio de gasolina, lo que provocó una inflación tremenda. Y para terminar de arreglar las cosas las mujeres empezaron a no tener bastante con tomar píldoras anti-conceptivas, ahora se lanzaban a conducir coches. Lo que nos faltaba. Mujeres conductoras. ("El año de

crisis ‘The year of crisis’)

All of a sudden 1971 brought, in addition to the first pedestrian crosswalk in my neighborhood, a sharp rise in gas prices, which caused terrible inflation. And to top it all off women were no longer satisfied with taking birth control pills, now they were throwing themselves into driving cars. Just what we needed. Women drivers.

The comparison between female reproductive control and automobility is striking. In a changing world, women wish to exercise more authority over their space and the power it represents—both the external physical environment and the ultimate personal space, their bodies.

Not surprisingly, the reaction among the men and traditionalists like Herminia is highly negative. Herminia characterizes driving as “poco femenino” ‘unladylike’ and worries that women will want to expand their power further into the realm of controlling space for money: “Ahora querrán conducir taxis y autobuses” ‘Now they will want to drive taxis and buses’ (“El año de crisis”). Her words will prove prophetic several seasons later, as Miguel’s wife Paquita attempts to learn to drive so that she can have relief from the demands of their home and three young daughters. Her goal is to become a *mujer taxista* ‘woman taxi driver,’ which horrifies her husband, especially because she is a terrible driver who accidentally runs down the parish priest.

It is this symbolic destruction of social norms that the men of San Genaro decry by saying of women “Ya no quieren limpiar, lo que quieren es conducir” ‘They no longer want to clean, what they want is to drive’ as they watch with fascination a type of female “Demolition Derby” on the bar TV (“El año de crisis”). The ultra-conservative mechanic Ramón believes it is a question of power: if they failed all women on their driving exam, the threat of female encroachment on male territory would be eliminated.⁵ Yet Desi notes that Merche is a better driver than Antonio, even as Antonio, who is surprised Merche has passed her exam, insists on driving because, as he tells her, “No sabes conducir” (“El año de crisis”) ‘You don’t know how to drive.’ But his collision with another car as they leave suggests that his attempts to stand his ground—and hold onto his superior status—are in vain, something the adult Carlos confirms in his final voiceover narration.

Merche’s new automobility and the freedom and power it connotes, however, are associated with what the adult Carlos describes as “la crisis más gorda” ‘the most serious crisis’ of his parents’ lives together: “Todo empezó el día que mi madre tuvo la peregrina de sacarse la licencia de conducir. No era algo que fuera a gustarle a mi papá” (“En la cuerda floja” ‘On the Tightrope’) ‘It all began the day my mother got the ridiculous notion of getting her driver’s license. It was not something my dad was going to like.’ As equal business partners in Merche’s

fashion boutique, Antonio and Merche have ventured outside their conventional gender boundaries and encountered new challenges in their relationship as a result. Antonio's insecurities emerge when Merche takes the car without asking him to try to get their customers to pay. Merche, too, is disturbed by the shift in their relationship and her own growing independence. When Antonio offers to let her drive (after telling her he is leaving the business), Merche refuses, insisting that he should drive when they are together. In a narration resonant with spatial language, the adult Carlos says "De repente el suelo empezó a temblar bajo sus pies. Era como un terremoto expansivo que aún tardaría en llegar" ("En la cuerda floja") 'All of a sudden the ground began to shake beneath their feet. It was like the foreshock of an extended earthquake which would take some time to arrive.'

The earthquake that arrives is Antonio's growing attraction to another woman, Elisa, a temptation fueled by the increasing alienation between him and Merche. Their reconciliation occurs, significantly, when Merche reveals she is pregnant. Her most intimate space, her body, is devoted anew to her maternal role. Accordingly, Antonio, who again perceives Merche as primarily a wife and mother rather than competitor, abandons his adulterous plans and re-embraces his role as loyal head of the family. Gender normalcy—and family harmony—have been restored, at least for the time being.

As the Franco era ends and the transition to democracy occurs, bringing with it a host of freedoms for both men and women, Antonio will continue to confront his wife's growing empowerment, a transformation which he alternately embraces and rejects. Increasingly in the driver's seat of her life, Merche attends university, participates in a protest for women's rights, and develops a life outside the boundaries of San Genaro and her household. Yet she remains the domestic angel, balancing her newfound freedoms with retaining her position as the family's stabilizing force. Her commitment to family exceeds Antonio's: in season 15, his affair with Paz empowers Merche rather than diminishes her as she dramatically evicts him from their home. He, on the other hand, wrecks not only his blue Mercedes on a weekend away with Paz, but also his own ability to repair his family relationships (reminding us once again of the importance of the shared name of his car and his wife). Merche, not Antonio, controls their ultimate reconciliation: in Spain in 1983, with a divorce law on the books, her power over their domestic space is substantial, and her decision to allow Antonio to return is not externally imposed by law or custom, but by personal choice.

This power shift in their relationship after Antonio returns to their home to San Genaro is indicated spatially by his restless efforts to rearrange their furniture in season 16's episode 277 ("Unidos" 'United'), an act indicative of both his resistance to change and of his struggle to regain his privileged status in his home. (In a parallel story line, Miguel is hurt that his now former wife Paquita has painted the bedrooms in the apartment they once shared without consulting him,

recognizing that by modifying the nature of her living space she is expressing her independence from him.) Even more significantly, Antonio is without a reliable vehicle since crashing his Mercedes, giving Merche total authority over his movement through space. Although egalitarian Merche is willing to share the car she views as their joint property, Antonio tells her he needs a big, new car which he will pick out himself, because “los coches son cosa de hombres” ‘cars are a guy thing.’ In response, Merche indicates the newspaper headline about Sally Ride, who in June 1983 became the first female astronaut to travel to space. The import of her laconic comment—“Hasta ahora viajar al espacio era cosa de hombres, ¿verdad?” ‘Up until now space travel was a guy thing, right?’—could not be clearer: space (in all its dimensions) now belongs to women as well as men (“Unidos”). And while ultimately Antonio agrees they should pick out a car together, it is clear that his process in understanding the new spatial reality of democratic Spain will be ongoing. After all, it may be that “las cosas cambian” ‘things change,’ as Merche reminds him, but he stubbornly insists that he prefers that they remain “como estaban” ‘like they were.’

The discourse of female automobility and the reconfigured gender landscape of *Cuéntame cómo pasó* is a reminder that “space is . . . a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and cooperation” (Massey 81). Throughout the series, male and female characters alike evince a conflicted attitude about and mutual responsibility for creating the space of a more equitable society, an uneven process which carries with it both disillusionment and satisfaction. The new ground gained by women in *Cuéntame* is thus both a hard-won victory and equivocal ongoing project with an uncertain conclusion, a reminder of Virginia Scharff’s warning: “We should not mistake female mobility for emancipation” (*Twenty Thousand Roads* 6). Its ultimate implications remain to be seen, not only for the Alcántara family, but also for the viewers who continue to follow their advances and retreats so faithfully.

As an examination of space in its many dimensions in *Cuéntame cómo pasó* reveals, the issue of automobility and power explored in this series raises questions about Spanish identity not just during its transition to democracy, but some forty years later as well. In an era of economic crisis, political stalemate, increased separatist fervor, ongoing violence against women, and a sense, among some quarters, that the *pacto del olvido* ‘agreement to forget the past’ compromised the democratic project, the question of Spain’s sense of self reverberates throughout this television program which seems to examine the nation’s present as much as its past. As the discourse of automobility makes clear, the issues of Spanish autonomy, identity, economic and political viability, gender equality, and relationship to recent history ultimately remain unresolved in *Cuéntame cómo pasó*, just as in reality.

Notes

1. All translations are mine.
2. See Ortiz and Estrada, for example.
3. For a thorough analysis of the economic and cultural impact of *desarrollismo* ‘policy of economic development,’ see Longhurst.
4. As Longhurst indicates, “In 1960, the percentage of households with electrodomestic appliances was below the 5 per cent mark, as it was for car ownership. By 1976, the vast majority of Spanish households had fridges and television sets, and half had cars” (17).
5. Ramón is echoing attitudes that, according to Virginia Scharff and Ryan Prout, date back to the earliest days of automotive culture. Scharff cites as evidence a warning by Ray W. Sherman, editor of *Motor* magazine, in an article in the January 1927 issue: “every time a woman learns to drive . . . it is a threat at yesterday’s order of things” (qtd. in *Taking the Wheel* 117). Prout elaborates: “Once automobility was masculinized . . . women’s accession to the driving seat and to the open road would always be marked by a conflict over the role of cars in policing or in breaking down the notion of gendered spheres of agency” (117).

Works Cited

- “El año de crisis.” *Cuéntame cómo pasó Temporadas 3, 4, y 5*, created by Miguel Ángel Bernardeau, Grupo Ganga Productions, season 5, episode 76, RTVE, 2009, disc 21.
- Bordería Ortiz, Enrique. “Los medios audiovisuales y la historia: memoria del franquismo y la transición en la serie *Cuéntame como pasó*.” *Aula historia social*, no. 15, 2005, pp. 54-62. www.jstor.org/stable/40343184
- “El coche nuevo del emperador.” *Cuéntame cómo pasó Temporadas 9 y 10*, created by Miguel Ángel Bernardeau, Grupo Ganga Productions, season 10, episode 168, RTVE, 2009, disc 47.
- Cruz, Juan. “*Cuéntame*.” Review of *Cuéntame cómo pasó*. *El país*, 1 Aug. 2015, http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2015/07/31/television/1438339388_028518.html. Accessed 19 May 2017.
- “*Cuéntame*. El origen de la serie.” *En serie*, 2007, <http://cifp.joseluisgarci.alcobendas.educa.madrid.org/enserie/?p=1244>. Accessed 19 May 2017.

- Dant, Tim. "The Driver-Car." *Automobilities*, edited by Mike Featherstone, et al., Sage, 2005, pp. 61-80.
- Duncan, Nancy. "Introduction: (Re)placings." *Bodyspace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Nancy Duncan, Routledge, 1996, pp. 1-10.
- "En la cuerda floja." *Cuéntame cómo pasó Temporadas 6, 7 y 8*, created by Miguel Ángel Bernardeau, Grupo Ganga Productions, season 6, episode 88, RTVE, 2009, disc 25.
- Estrada, Isabel. "Cuéntame cómo pasó o la revisión televisiva de la historia española reciente." *Hispanic Review*, vol. 72, no. 4, 2004, pp. 547-564. www.jstor.org/stable/3247146
- Gartman, David. "Three Ages of the Automobile: The Cultural Logistics of the Car." *Automobilities*, edited by Mike Featherstone, et al., Sage, 2005, pp. 169-95.
- Hartsock, Nancy. "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" *Feminism/Postmodernism*, edited by Linda J. Nicholson, Routledge, 1989, pp. 157-75.
- "Los invasores." *Cuéntame cómo pasó Temporadas 1 y 2*, created by Miguel Ángel Bernardeau, Grupo Ganga Productions, season 1, episode 4, RTVE, 2009, disc 1.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. 1974. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell, 1991.
- Longhurst, Alex. "Culture and Development: The Impact of 1960s 'desarrollismo.'" *Contemporary Spanish Cultural Studies*, edited by Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas, Oxford UP, 2000, pp. 17-28.
- Massey, Doreen B. "Politics and Space/Time." *New Left Review*, vol. 196, 1992, pp. 65-84.
- McDowell, Linda. "Spatializing Feminism: Geographic Perspectives." *Bodyspace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Nancy Duncan, Routledge, 1996, pp. 28-44.
- "La mujer del César." *Cuéntame cómo pasó Temporadas 9 y 10*, created by Miguel Ángel Bernardeau, Grupo Ganga Productions, season 10, episode 170, RTVE, 2009, disc 48.
- "Non plus ultra." *Cuéntame cómo pasó Temporadas 1 y 2*, created by Miguel Ángel Bernardeau, Grupo Ganga Productions, season 1, episode 9, RTVE, 2009, disc 2.
- Pavlović, Tatjana. *The Mobile Nation: España cambia de piel (1954-1964)*. Intellect, 2011.
- Pérez, Jorge. *Cultural Roundabouts: Spanish Film and Novel on the Road*. Bucknell, 2011.

- Prout, Ryan. "Between *automoción patria* and Maternal Combustion: Driving through Change in *Sor Citroën* (1967)." *International Journal of Iberian Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2011, pp. 109-127. https://doi.org/10.1386/ijis.24.2.109_1
- "El retorno del fugitivo." *Cuéntame cómo pasó Temporadas 1 y 2*, created by Miguel Ángel Bernardeau, Grupo Ganga Productions, season 1, episode 1, RTVE, 2009, disc 1.
- Scharff, Virginia. *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age*. U of New Mexico P, 1992.
- . *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West*. U of California P, 2002.
- Sheller, Mimi. "Automotive Emotions: Feeling the Car." *Automobilities*, edited by Mike Featherstone, et al., Sage, 2005, pp. 221-42.
- "Si la envidia fuera tiña." *Cuéntame cómo pasó Temporadas 6, 7 y 8*, created by Miguel Ángel Bernardeau, Grupo Ganga Productions, season 6, episode 90, RTVE, 2009, disc 25.
- Smith, Paul Julian. *Spanish Visual Culture: Cinema, Television, Internet*. Palgrave, 2006.
- Tejeda Rocha, Alejandro. "Cuéntame cómo pasó: una serie que marcha sobre ruedas." *RTVE*, 27 Sept 2011, www.rtve.es/television/20110927/cuentame-como-paso-serie-marcha-sobre-ruedas/465279.shtml. Accessed 19 May 2017.
- "Unidos." *Cuéntame cómo pasó Temporada 16*, created by Miguel Ángel Bernardeau, Grupo Ganga Productions, season 16, episode 277, RTVE, 2009, disc 82.
- Urry, John. "The 'System' of Automobility." *Automobilities*, edited by Mike Featherstone, et al., Sage, 2005, pp. 25-40.