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Miguel Brieva, *quincemayista*: Art, Politics and Comics Form in the 15-M Graphic Novel *Lo que (me) está pasando* (2015)

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Abstract

Como una contribución a la tradición quincemayista de España y a la primera novela gráfica del artista, la publicación de *Lo que (me) está pasando* (2015) por Miguel Brieva (1974, Sevilla) requiere un análisis dual. La obra es una meditación autoconsciente que comenta la tradición artística del propio autor a la vez que explora el papel de la cultura del cómic pos-15-M en la crítica política y espacial actual. Aquí Brieva continúa el compromiso social de producción cultural anterior y enfatiza más concretamente el potencial de modos de crítica colectivos frente a la enajenación y la colonización del espacio llevados a cabo por el capitalismo contemporáneo.

As a contribution to the *quincemayista* tradition in Spain and the artist's first graphic novel, the publication of *Lo que (me) está pasando* (2015) by Miguel Brieva (1974, Sevilla) prompts a dual analysis. The work is a self-conscious meditation that comments on the artist's own artistic tradition at the same time that it explores the role of post-15-M comics culture in the political and spatial critique of the present moment. Here Brieva continues the social commitment of his previous cultural production and emphasizes more concretely the potential of collective modes of critique in confronting the alienation and the colonization of space carried out by contemporary capitalism.

Keywords

Miguel Brieva, cómic y novela gráfica, España, 15-M, individualismo, estudios urbanos, literatura de protesta/ Miguel Brieva, comics and graphic novels, Spain, 15-M, individualism, urban studies, protest literature

Introduction

“¡Pero es que nadie se ha parado a pensar que eso de la individualidad es una fantasía absurda! . . . Desde que el mundo es el mundo todo ha estado siempre unido, entrelazado, interdependiente lo uno de lo otro . . . Esta sobredimensión actual de la psique, los problemas personales y la subjetividad del sujeto es una anomalía biológica . . . Los problemas no son de nadie, son de todos, ¡y es entre todos que hay que resolverlos!”

—A ficus plant in a psychologist's waiting room,
talking to protagonist Víctor Menta (Brieva 2015)

Analysis of Miguel Brieva's graphic novel, *Lo que (me) está pasando*, provides a window into the syntheses of art, culture, and politics that drive cultural studies method.¹ In doing so, it provides the opportunity to reassess the aesthetic autonomy and critical potential of the ninth art (comics). Literary-trained scholars may not yet fully appreciate that the Spanish field of comics has long fought to be respected on its own terms. Comics creators and critics have long had to deal with the disregard of this type of art by those who have dismissed it as a consumerist and infantilized form of culture. As scholars of the ninth art have noted, it was only in the mid-to-late 1960s that comics began to be taken seriously as an art form.² Amidst the newfound and still developing cultural legitimacy of comics, creators in the 1970s were exposed to the U.S. tradition of underground comics, and in their work they contributed to development of comics as a graphic space for social criticism.³ As Antonio Altarriba writes in his *La España del tebeo. La historieta española de 1940 a 2000* (2001), comics artists of the 1970s gravitated toward the representation of social themes—drug-use, exploitation of labor, and police repression—with the intent to denounce these ills.⁴ Brieva's more recent work harnesses this countercultural comics tradition of the 1970s and updates it to comment critically on twenty-first-century neoliberal practices that are just as social as they are economic.

The story of the graphic novel can be summed up concisely to tease out its connection with 1970s underground themes as well as the contemporary invocation of the themes of social division and collective action, which resonate with a broader 15-M aesthetics. A young Víctor Menta is fascinated by rocks; he pursues the geological sciences only to discover that there is no job market for geologists. He finds ways to earn money by working in catering, handing out pamphlets, and donating blood/plasma; he finally obtains a library shelving job only to be laid off in the third year of the economic crisis. Having retrained in search of a broader range of careers and without a job offer, he takes a position answering calls for a telephone company. Laid off again, he lives in his parents' basement and later, in his grandmother's apartment after her death, eking out a quiet existence. Underscoring the tension between the personal feelings of individuals and their broader social circumstances, he remarks that: "lo más lamentable de toda esta situación no es que yo esté deprimido . . . sino que todo sea tan deprimente, ¿no?" Much further alienated from his former self, and experiencing the fallout from the economic crisis, he begins to have auditory and visual hallucinations, to argue with his parents about the supposed end of the crisis, and even has a dream lampooning the Spanish Parliament (cf. Cameron 2014: 2).⁵ He later joins the organizing committee of the Primer

Congreso Nacional de Jóvenes Emperdedores, a group that meets in the park and that includes characters named Yolanda, Héctor, el Salve, and la Pepa.

As the storyline advances, Víctor consults a psychologist and receives an offer to write a prescription for *pastillas onírico-inbibidoras*—to stifle his imagination and curb his dreams. This seems to be a way of resolving Víctor’s drug-induced, imagined conversations with a Flubby-brand animal who prefers to be called Aparicio Rodríguez and whose inclusion is another reference to the US underground comics tradition.⁶ Instead of turning away from life, Víctor ultimately recognizes that “No puedo evadirme eternamente de la vida... debo afrontar todos estos demonios.” He finds a space of refuge and intellectual speculation in Pepa and her father’s house, which is situated on the outskirts of town, and he begins a job at the airport. One night, the group of friends finds themselves in a drug haze participating in an economic forum. There is a man in a suit who, seeing a younger version of himself in them and crying as he relives memories of fighting the *grises*, gives them a business card with an invitation to contact him at the powerful conglomerate named Multicorp. Another night, Víctor participates in an event where a strange mythical story centered on systematic crisis is narrated by an enigmatic woman. Problems escalate as Víctor’s father loses his career-spanning job at the company. The gang’s favorite park is slated to be turned into a parking lot, and urban renewal plans to raze Pepa’s residence to begin construction on *megacentro comercial*. This is the crucial moment when Víctor gives in to his progressive psychosis, represented at once in both horrific and humorous images. As emphasized in the conclusion of this article, Brieva harnesses the power of dreaming to see beneath the ideological veil of consumer capitalism and to imagine—and potentially construct through collaborative action—a world free from the individualistic values of neoliberalism.⁷

As should already be evident in this brief summary of *Lo que (me) está pasando*, the artist exploits the comics text as a creative visual space in which to reveal and challenge the ideological patina of contemporary capitalism. Miguel Brieva relies on visual depictions of urban space to forge metonymic connections with the neoliberal practices and policies that participants in 15-M have sought to protest and critique. Yet he also plays with comics form to advance a meta-commentary on representations—whether these are understood in artistic or social terms. The author’s point, of course, is that in art, just as in social discourse, the systemic nature of exploitation is often hidden under a patina of individualistic ideology and by habitual patterns of consuming mass-marketed entertainment. The artist’s nesting of these social and artistic frames allows him to transmit a critical perspective through the world he creates that resonates also through the extra-artistic world of post-crisis Spain that is

inhabited by his implied readership. In the process, he also emphasizes the ninth art's potential for critical reflection.

Steven Torres (2012) has produced the most masterful cultural studies close reading of Brieva's work to date, but with the publication of the artist's first graphic novel there is now an increased need for close readings of his work that blend political critique with deeper discussions of form, content, and long-form comics narrative.⁸ It is important to analyze the formal properties of the graphic novel (panel design, page layout and multiframe) as we investigate its content and connection to 15-M. These explorations can elucidate the way that notions of the individual and the social collective, self and world, are fused in the work. This is not an exhaustive exploration. Instead key choices made by the artist are taken as representative of his representational style. In this spirit, this article explores how Brieva mobilizes the paratextual space of the graphic novel's marketing band and title-pages, the comic's iconic depiction of urban space, and the author's self-reflexive meditation on comics form (including comics-inside-comics) all to force a condensation of artistic text and social world. Subsequent sections of this essay explore first, the artist's increasing interest in long-form comics ("Brieva's Turn Toward Narrative: Dissolving the Border between Text and World"); and second, the artist's commitment to a culture of protest associated with the 15-M movement ("Cultures of 15-M Protest: Politics, Comics and Urban Space"). Throughout, attention is given to the visual strategies used by Brieva to advance his social commitment.

Key to the overall analysis is the way the artist foregrounds the construction of narrative in the space of comics as a way of drawing attention to the construction of narrative in social spaces of the twenty-first century. Brieva's act of closing the perceived gap between artistic creation and social reality is a rejection of interconnected forms of capitalist alienation, namely the distinction between anaesthetizing mass-culture and socially committed art, and the individualism that separates the urbanite from the collectivity. Blending together the content, form and context of this graphic novel leaves no doubt that Brieva has earned his current reputation for being a socially committed, *quincemayista* comics artist. In the end, while the artist has been progressively moving toward long-form narration in his works—pictorially and textually—the irruption of the extended graphic novel form at this social moment and in the trajectory of his work foregrounds his insistence that there is a need for dialogue, collective action and collaborative critique.

Brieva's Turn Toward Narrative: Dissolving the Border between Text and World

Lo que (me) está pasando undoubtedly marks a significant point in the trajectory of Miguel Brieva's work—not merely because it plunges fully into an extended sequential/narrative format heretofore unexplored by the artist (see Dapena 2016: 97),⁹ but also because it illustrates that his countercultural critique is alive and well in this new format. In order to fully appreciate this graphic novel, readers must understand how it both diverges from Brieva's early work and sustains crucial aspects of his approach and style.

For those familiar with Brieva's career, it should come as no surprise that *Lo que (me) está pasando* has been called a “cómic-protesta” (Vargas Iglesias 2016: 245). The artist's long-standing links to the underground and the fact that his work unfolded in the peripheral cultural space of the fanzine (as opposed to any notion of a burgeoning Spanish comics industry) are important in this regard (Torres 2012: 49-50). In an article from the *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, Torres describes the artist's *Dinero: Revista de Poética Financiera e Intercambio Espiritual* (begun in 2000, published as a complete collection in 2008) as a project whose design and execution places it in the comics tradition of the underground.¹⁰ As explored in Pablo Dopico's work on comics during the Transition to democracy in Spain, the mid-to-late 1970s were a time when “El comix underground español se desarrolló como una necesidad de las jóvenes generaciones que veían en la historieta un medio de expresión sencillo y económico que, años después se convirtió en la profesión de muchos de ellos” (2005: 142-43).¹¹ Brieva's reputation for producing highly critical work—he is described by Torres as being “uno de los humoristas críticos más destacados de la España actual” (2012: 49)—thus stems arguably from both the content of his work and also its countercultural location. Carried out at the margins of more mainstream graphic arts publishing markets, the artist's intention from the beginning has been to “producir una intervención política y social desde el ámbito de la cultura” (Torres 2012: 63). His commitment is to intervene in the socio-political and economic realities of the 2000s, of course, which roots his visual art in a period governed by the neoliberal (and late-stage capitalist) rather than the post-dictatorial Spanish state (Labrador 2014; Torres 2012; López-Aguilera 2016).

Brieva's early work—in *Dinero*, for example—took the form of single-page vignettes that frequently satirized the alienation of contemporary capitalism precisely by re-appropriating the visual language of marketing. Those contributions can be described as lavishly designed color images that positioned themselves as advertisements for consumer products. This single-page approach to the comics form continued as Brieva's work was released in a number of collections. In these anthologized publications, the notion of an overarching narrative was subdued, and the impact of any given page

was much more important than the way these pages contributed to a larger whole. The artist's collection *Bienvenido al mundo* (2007) featured loosely related, sardonic, alphabetized encyclopedia entries (e.g. Corrupción, Culpa, Cultura...) with single-panel illustrations accompanying what are relatively extensive sections of prose.¹² *El otro mundo* (2009) emphasized the single-panel format, but also opened with a paneled sequential narrative spanning over twelve full pages. *Memorias de la tierra* (2012) consisted largely of single-panel vignettes but also featured nine chapter-division pages and an epilogue where introductory prose and evocative titles frame a range of the artist's characteristic themes (e.g., "Una cosa llamada capitalismo," "La violencia necesaria").¹³ The narrative frame that held the volume's contents together was the discourse of an alien who arrived on Earth by chance ("Mi destino era un protoagujero negro cercano a la confluencia astral de Lem" 2012: 5). One can see in these prior works—despite each volume's reliance on single-page comic—the artist's progressive interest in developing long-form narrative. *Lo que (me) está pasando* (2015) builds on these previous attempts to bring more cohesion to his projects through overarching narrative organization. Yet in the end it represents a significant shift for the artist as it has clearly been conceived from the outset as a long-form comics project.

Juan J. Vargas Iglesias (2016: 245-46) tends to paint Brieva's move from single-page work to the long-form graphic novel as a decisive renunciation of the vignette's critical limitations. Yet my view is that the critical force of single-panel critique is operative also in *Lo que (me) está pasando*, and that it even makes a fundamental contribution to his thematic focus on integration. That is, the eclectic organizational structure of the graphic novel parallels the thematic focus on the need for individuals to break out of their isolation and alienation and redefine themselves as part of a larger social collectivity. Even a brief perusal of the graphic novel's pages reveals that the force of the single-panel vignette has not been completely excised from it. Numerous pages—at least twenty-three pages, in fact, not counting the title pages and interior covers—feature full-page illustrations that boast a certain autonomy with respect to the entirety of the comic. While a bit over half of these are an integral part of the sequential narrative, a number of these are non-sequitur transitions (in Scott McCloud's typology¹⁴). The latter pages are labeled as figures and contain textual statements cited from other artists, literary authors and philosophers that are linked to images of individual rocks, in line with the central character's childhood dream to become a geologist. In order of presentation (a chaotic order, to be sure) these are: Fig. 89, Calcita depresiforme (featuring a cited quotation from Enric Selt); Fig. 21, Almandino apático (F. Pessoa); Fig. 17, Pirita Traumansis (G.K. Chesterton); Fig. 73, Barita ansiosoide (Hunter S. Thompson); Fig. 65, Dolomita somnoliense (Luis Buñuel); Fig. 36, Malaquita

delirens (no text appears); a repetition of Fig. 36, Malaquita delirens (Frank Zappa); and Fig. 40, Frustracita común (Bob Dylan). While these images are delivered in an oneiric mode—a consequence of the protagonist’s frustrated career goals—their associated quotations tend to be somewhat tangentially related to the narrative. Their progressive intercalation calls attention back to the young protagonist’s dream of making a living via his love for rocks and geological process and seems to ‘ground’ his critique of the systematic socio-economic crisis he must suffer. Interestingly, there are at least two instances of oneiric images that omit an actual figure number and blend somewhat more closely into the narrative action. (These are an illustration featuring a flute and business card from the plot along with a cited quotation by G.K. Chesterton; and a few pages later, an advertisement for ‘iPhaust 5’ that, while it could equally stand alone, also ties explicitly into the narrative’s focus on a pact with the CEO of Multicorp and a discussion of the human soul). These pages add layered complexity to the interest in narrative framing that Brieva demonstrated earlier in the book-length collection *Memorias de la Tierra*, for example, while also preserving his interest in the sarcastic, eclectic and fragmentary mode of illustration that, according to Vargas Iglesias, has characterized his previous vignettes.¹⁵

It is important to underscore how the shift toward long-form narrative resonates with Brieva’s social commitment as a 15M artist. In his essay titled “Ese fantasma es el capitalismo,” Xavier Dapena (2016) expresses the opinion that Brieva’s traditional one-page style was not merely informed by but rather defined by his preference against narrative continuity.¹⁶ Yet with *Lo que (me) está pasando*, the creator demonstrates the potential of long-form comics to connect equally well with critique and protest. Investing in comics characters and situations over time, a possibility that Brieva creates for readers of this graphic novel, sustains a form of critical engagement with the fragmentation of social life, and allows notions of social interconnectedness and collaboration, and the synthesis of divergent discourses, to come to the fore. Brieva seems to want readers of this long-form comics creation to do a bit more mental work than was required in his single-page images. The goal is not merely to critique and satirize capitalistic alienation and marketing—as in his single-page one-offs—but moreover to get readers thinking about what happens when different viewpoints clash on the comics page and in the streets of Madrid. In drawing explicit attention to variations of comics form and sustaining this attention over the whole volume, Brieva wants readers to question the way that not only artistic but also social, political, and economic discourses are constructed.

There is perhaps no better example of this than the marketing band adorning the cover of the work’s second edition published by Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial (Barcelona, April 2015).

This marketing band is emblazoned with the phrase “La primera novela gráfica de Miguel Brieva.” The graphic pretension of this text is lampooned in the word balloons emanating from a series of single-cell organisms rendered by the artist. Recalling the skepticism voiced by Spanish comics theorist Santiago García (2010: 31-37) regarding longstanding battles over what are nuanced distinctions between the terms “comic” and “novela gráfica,” the creatures express scorn and disbelief, wince with disgust, and cry out for atonement prompted by the artist’s seeming transgression: “¿Novela qué?! ¡Pero ¿qué chorrada es ésa?!”; “Pues lo que viene a ser un tebeo de toda la vida, vaya... Ahora lo llaman así para que parezca algo importante”; “¿Y este tío quién es?”; “Pues sí dice que es la primera... ¡Eso es que piensa hacer más!”; “¡Virgen Santal!”.¹⁷ In claiming even the most peripheral paratextual space of his work for an implicit critique of a publishing industry where marketing co-opted by capitalist ideology cultivates politically sanitized content, Brieva thus showcases his reluctance to dispense with the critical view that has pervaded his work to date. This marketing band is best understood as a tangible metaphor for the artist’s trenchant criticisms of consumer capitalism, criticisms that cross the boundary of his texts to connect with the contemporary struggles faced by his 15-M readership. As evident in the self-effacing tone channeled by his creatures, Brieva’s critical view on contemporary life in Spain is also a critical view on the packaging and sale of cultural production within the circuits of capital, broadly understood.

Cultures of 15-M Protest: Politics, Comics and Urban Space

As emphasized by Bryan Cameron in his article launching a special issue of the *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* on the topic, the radical movement known as 15-M “emphasizes a nonelitist, horizontal approach to collaborative culture that short-circuits neoliberal ideology (shaped by competition and individualism) in favor of a collective model” (2014: 2). As emphasized in this account, on 15 May 2011 thus begins a moment where “the affective dimension . . . of political identification” and “new political vehicles such as Partido X or Podemos” (2014: 3, 2) are reshaping pathways to radical democracy. Even for those with a basic understanding of the movement, *Lo que (me) está pasando* clearly offers a direct meditation on the everyday lives of urban residents who suffer socio-economic crisis in post-15-M Spain. The cover image, front matter and structure of the work challenge contemporary Spanish society and emphasize plurality rather than univocal meaning. Key examples from the remainder of the graphic novel showcase the way Brieva foregrounds themes of isolation, alienation, and ultimately how he offers a lesson regarding the interconnectedness of contemporary urban life and the need to move beyond the individualism and alienation to advance the needs of the urban

collectivity.

The comic's political commitment is immediately evident. Even if its exploration of the complicated and heterogeneous notion of community might be a bit more nuanced (in terms of Harvey 2005b, 2009; Young 1986, 1990 and La Parra-Pérez 2014),¹⁸ critics have recognized that its vision is highly attentive to the need for people to overcome alienating ideologies of individualism and work concertedly to enact social change. For one, Germán Labrador lists Brieva as one of a handful of artists who have constructed “desde comienzos de milenio una sensibilidad *quincemayista*” (2014: 27; see also Dapena 2016: 98). Vargas Iglesias joins Labrador in this identification of Brieva as a *quincemayista* comics artist, writing of the graphic novel that “este ejemplar sea uno de los raros casos de arte comprometido que ha conseguido ofrecer el movimiento ciudadano del 15M” (2016: 247). Similarly, López-Aguilera writes that Brieva “draws the negative consequences of late-stage capitalism on common people's lives: labor and economic insecurity, environmental pollution, isolation and degradation of democratic institutions” and underscores that “Brieva's work relates to the social and political movements in Spain (*15M*, *Indignados*, or *Podemos*) that aim to bring politics back into people's everyday lives” (López-Aguilera 2016: 69-70). Yet it is arguably Víctor's response to the crisis that most connects his work with the 15M tradition, as the protagonist “finds a way out of isolation and despair through political affiliation and social compromise” (López-Aguilera 2016: 69).

Those who would exceptionalize 15-M as a break with political struggles of the past must keep in mind, however, as Stephen Vilaseca points out, that “The 15-M movement did not mark the beginning of the culture of Spanish indignation, but, rather, was simply the most visible interaction recorded by international media. For more than 40 years, since the 1970s, neighborhood associations along with activists and artists have been sharing creative experiences of protest against urban renewal plans, specifically, and official governmental discourses, more generally” (2014: 119).¹⁹ We must remember that comics of the 1970s in Spain also dealt with the connection between urban form and social relationships. One notable example is the issue of *Butifarra!* titled “El urbanismo feroz” (1979), in which a range of comics artists use the extended strip format as well as the single-page format to denounce urbanistic speculation, with specific and iconic references to both Barcelona and Madrid.²⁰ Looking through that volume's pages it is easy to see how Brieva's style is already anticipated by earlier generations of comic artists. Moreover, he seems to be aware of the continuity between the contexts of 1970s and 2000s Spain when, after his graphic novel's title pages he writes: “Este es un libro sobre lo que nos pasa últimamente al mundo y a mí, o tal vez a mí desde que nací y al mundo desde tiempos inmemoriales... Eso ya lo dejo a juicio de cada cual.” That said, with this work, he contributes to a

growing list of comics artists who have taken on representations of persisting efforts for radical democracy in this most recent concrete manifestation of what is a much more storied historical process (e.g., Pinya and Mejan 2011).²¹

Serving as yet another example of the power of stand-alone images even in this sequential work, the cover of the graphic novel boldly represents—iconically and without ambiguity—the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, which was the epicenter of 15-M protests in 2011. Dapena (2016: 102) discusses this cover image briefly, but he does not explore how it operates beyond noting its general connection to the 15-M theme of the work. The image’s westward orientation captures the square’s iconic buildings, showing a creature with robotic arms and a screen depicting a human face menacingly hovering above the crowd, anchored to the clock tower of the building that houses the government of Madrid’s Autonomous Community. At right, the equestrian statue of Carlos III is missing its head. In place of it there can be seen a group of pink squiggly tentacles reaching out in all directions. Police with riot gear have cleared out a space in the crowd of protestors: one beats a pink elephant with a billy club, another shoots rubber bullets into the crowd, and a third stares directly at the reader wearing a business suit and tie and holding a riot shield with a red dollar sign on it. A figure in jeans and light jacket stands facing us in the foreground, a sign reading “Miguel Brieva” at his side. In front of his face he holds a makeshift image of a ghostly, blurry red countenance. Nearby, an open can of red paint leaves no doubt that this is the self-representation of the graphic artist himself. Above him, and above the crowd, is a banner bearing the graphic novel’s title *Lo que (me) está pasando: diarios de un joven emperdedor*. Here the ‘me’ and the subtitle are hand painted in red brushstrokes, seemingly after the fact, in an impromptu move of protest. Other animated characters co-exist in this space with the human figures—a green gumdrop offers a bystander what looks like a pamphlet; a juggler with no discernible hands or feet takes the opportunity to perform in front of the assembled crowd; a single-celled organism reaches out to drag off the “Miguel Brieva” sign, repurposing it for an unknown need.

Most significant, in this Puerta del Sol representation the artist has modulated the degree of iconic realism with which the humans and the creatures are represented (see McCloud 1994, 2009). The effect—similar to the way the stylized underground character of Aparicio Rodríguez figures at length into various diary entries inside the work—is such that there are multiple, distinguishable but overlapping, representational dimensions that coexist on the cover. Taken as representative of Brieva’s work and even his critical style in a much broader sense, the cover combines the representational space of art with the representational space of the city in order to connect both spheres at once with politics and protest. The surreal, desacralized urban world depicted on the cover is meant to denounce the

social, political, and economic institutions that sustain the Spanish state. The choice of the Plaza del Sol what allows Brieva to get his meaning across, and it is crucial to his intentional appropriation of the graphic novel form toward a contemporary social commitment.

In the comic's front matter, Brieva challenges conventions of comics as a complement to how the 15M commitment challenges Spain's neoliberal practices. Here he dissolves the text zone into the image zone of the page.²² On the cover, the word *me* as written is easily distinguished from the words *Lo que está pasando* due to its appearance in a different font/color/spacing and its layout on a slanted axis. Distinct interior title pages display two versions of the title. *Lo que está pasando* appears first, accompanied by drawings of an open inkwell and a hand with a fine paintbrush. *Lo que (me) está pasando: diarios y delirios de un joven emperdedor* appears second: here the inkwell remains but the hand has disappeared. Given Brieva's strategic use of the physical book's multiframe here (see Groensteen 2007), each rendering of the title appears on a recto page, such that the reader's action of turning the page causes the drawing of the hand to disappear as if one were reading a flip book. Thus in reading, the resulting visual disappearance of the hand and paintbrush is counterbalanced by the sudden appearance of the additional wording noted above, in a red font, resulting in a visual suggestion of movement, and thus symbolically of revolutionary action or even insurrection. (Vargas Iglesias writes of "una insurrección del color rojo" in the work, 2016: 247). The artist has here written himself into the story, turned himself into words on the page. In so doing, he has visually highlighted the tension between self-representation and the institutional norms that constrain it. While the wording "Lo que está pasando" gives the impression of a representational distance between observer and event, between self and world, the reworded title "Lo que (me) está pasando" connotes that self and world are one. In this sense, the artistic reconciliation of author and text—their visual condensation on the pages of the graphic novel—serves to parallel the theme of the work itself. The marked nature of the additional 'me'—which lacks parentheses on this page where it is distinguished by graphic and not typographic means—assures that readers perceive not the alternative between two opposing meanings but their connection, rendered through an insertion that stands as a reminder of a narrative act of self-representation. This use of the formal properties of comics form of course recapitulates a pervasive theme of self-representation in 15-M movements: it highlights both the distinction between the individual and the larger social collectivity that obtains in contemporary capitalism and also the possibility of forging new social relationships in which individualistic motivations and corporate greed are no longer decisive.

In terms of narrative structure, *Lo que (me) está pasando* proceeds by way of chapter titles that

are labeled chronologically and advance day-by-day, only occasionally including gaps of time.²³ The full-page verso vignette opposite the first recto chapter title of “Lunes 25” depicts a scene that might very well stand alone in one of Brieva’s other single-image works and yet also sets the stage for the comic’s storyline discussed above. A vast employment office is depicted with a black-and-white geometrical design. Seven rows of numbered desks can be seen stretching into the background, chairs filled with what are presumably job-seekers. In the foreground, a woman at left listens to headphones and blows a bubble with her chewing gum, while a man at right stares at a queue ticket bearing the number 072. The ceiling occupies just about half of the page’s vertical dimension, lending a claustrophobic feeling to the image and working with the room’s supporting columns and floor angling to draw readers’ attention toward an unoccupied desk at the very back wall of the office in the very center of the panel frame. As we learn from the text on the recto page, the body lying face-up in the middle of the office floor and the central area of the image’s width is the graphic novel’s protagonist:

He muerto. Mi cuerpo yace sin vida en la sala principal de la oficina de empleo. Sin embargo, todo transcurre con absoluta normalidad: la gente aguarda su turno, los empleados teclean en sus ordenadores, los fluorescentes del techo emiten su zumbido monorde... Al cabo de unas horas, de mi cadáver comienzan a brotar unos filamentos luminosos que se propagan en ondulaciones por toda la estancia, pero tampoco esto parece llamar la atención de nadie.

This is yet another example of the author’s purposeful integration of the single-panel vignette into a long-form comics narrative. In what could just as equally function as an isolated one-off, the protagonist’s body becomes, from the outset, a concrete visual metaphor for Brieva’s indictment of a normalized alienated and alienating social environment. Looking into how the artist conveys this message through the formal elements on the page is important and reveals further reinforcement of his themes of individual isolation and the need for collective action.

The panel’s evenly-spaced depiction of disconnected individuals stages the pervasive way in which self-interest distances people from one another under the economic policies of neoliberal Spain, and the unoccupied central desk intimates visually that there is no one at the helm to regulate the excesses of the capitalist mode of production’s tendency toward monopolistic practices and crisis (Harvey 2010).²⁴ Jobseekers are estranged from one another, embodying the routine state of alienation that parallels their dire economic situation (Lefebvre 1991; Fraser 2015).²⁵ As the narrative indicates through both image and text, the protagonist’s body attracts attention neither from the office’s

daytime staff and visitors or from the nighttime cleaning crew. The luminous filaments emanating from the body appear in an orange color and stretch out at length, encroaching invasively on the personal space of a number of people in the room, and still no one notices. In this image there is an apparently calculated exclusion of the office staff themselves, whose faces are hidden by signage, pillars and desktop computers or whose bodies lie outside of the page margins. Brieva's exploitation of what Pascal Lefèvre calls the *bors cadre* in comics²⁶ uses the unseen or the invisible as a comics metaphor for social invisibility and lack of political agency. This formal decision is a way of reflecting the post-crisis dehumanization of labor, and it emphasizes that even down-and-out jobseekers—the only figures readers can fully identify—are oblivious to the suffering of others. In three panels on the recto page even the word balloons of office workers and a housekeeper are truncated at the margins so as to disrupt the reading process, another manifestation of the theme of alienation, now carried to the level of the border between text and world. The protagonist is thus introduced to readers as a casualty of contemporary socio-economic forces beyond his control—synecdoche for a whole generation. The almost sci-fi depiction of luminous, orange entrails with which he is depicted signals an enlightened estrangement and conveys that he alone may possess a capacity for seeing—and for narrating—differently.

As Brieva develops the theme of Víctor's isolation, he brings the protagonist into contact with members of a countercultural urban group. It is interesting that comics are portrayed as an integral part of the critical activity of its members.²⁷ A two-page spread features six individual comic strips representing the quotidian conversations and activities of the group, each with a different title and episodic subtitle: "Los Jóvenes Emperdedores..." "...en jornada intensiva," "...en un día de provecho," "...en visión de negocio," "...en el hábito hace al monje," "...en actuar con cabeza," and "...en hay que ser realistas." While the depictions center on the frustrations of being over-educated and under-employed due to a stifling socio-economic system, the episodic format and purposely banal content—along with the orange-hued "risas enlatadas" stamp accompanying three of the strips—also simultaneously counterbalances the critique. There are two effects of this inclusion of comics-within-comics. Because the strip format has been associated with the industrialized production of comics from the first half of the twentieth-century (see Altarriba 2001) rather than the 1970s or 2000s, its use here is marked. This is all the more notable because Brieva is not himself a frequent practitioner of the strip format (as above, instead he has preferred the full-page vignette). Here the recursive decision to return to the strip format again and again slows the pace of the story. It also suggests by association that the represented characters are stuck in a cycle, and that their actions are formulaic and have little

potential for enacting radical social change from the margins. While it would not be accurate to say the strip format mocks the activities of the group, Brieva's characteristically wry style does communicate in these sequences an implicit critique of their insularity—i.e., that their self-aware community building is nothing if it cannot be translated to action.

In the context of Brieva's storyline and 15-M themes, the appearance of comics within the graphic novel discussed is also a crucial part of its critique. The intercalated episodic representation of the "Los Jóvenes Emperdedores" storylines employs a strip layout/hyperframe (Groensteen 2007: 30-31)²⁸ that is markedly distinct from the rest of his comic's emphasis on either sequences beyond the strip or page-spanning images. This is important, as the distinct narrative frame used here calls attention to the border between narrative levels, and as a consequence reinforces the border between the narrative contained by the work's multiframe and the consumption of *Lo que (me) está pasando* by readers. This should be seen as an equivalent, in comics, of what metafiction accomplishes in the area of prose literature. Thus the intercalated stories remind us that we are ourselves reading a narrative, and by consequence we are implicated in a larger social narrative. This is a lesson that is of importance for both the central character of Víctor and the reader of the graphic novel, alike.

Toward the end of Brieva's storyline, the city's social fabric is literally torn apart due to destructive actions carried out by the constellation of political, urban, social and economic forces portrayed in the graphic novel. Visual diary entries in the comic are arguably filtered through Víctor's half-psychotic, half-lucidly-critical and semi-subjective point of view. Entries for the days spanning Sunday 15 to Wednesday 18 portray a dystopic and lawless city in ruins.²⁹ Orange-toned machine arms with human faces projecting from their screen torsos climb buildings, wreaking havoc and capturing humans who flee from them on foot; open flames blaze, and cracks in the pavement reveal dark abyss underneath the city—a representation the text narration describes as "el fin de toda civilización." Even thus, Víctor marches to the Multicorp building, using the business card he received at the economic forum, and asserts his demand to the CEO/capitalist speculator: "Verá... necesito que paralicen el Proyecto urbanístico del barrio sur... esas obras no deben llevarse a cabo... nunca." In exchange, for stopping the spatial exploitation of urban citizens, the protagonist offers his soul. His efforts initially seem to come to nothing, as the urbanistic machine, unstoppable, razes the park and neighborhood. Channeling the suffering of many, he enters the police station, frees his gang and a host of others who have been arrested, and in the following days a great number of residents take to the streets in protest to claim the right to the city that was so powerful for Henri Lefebvre and the Situationists (Vargas Iglesias 2016; Lefebvre 1996; Delgado 2010).³⁰ During the melee, Víctor plays a flute unleashing

tentacle-like orange-toned forces that aid the citizens in their battle, but he is hit by a rubber bullet and blacks out. The end of the story is intentionally surreal and somewhat ambiguous: after a dream sequence involving a desert (a plausible return to the beginning of the graphic novel's storyline), he wakes up happy and seemingly sane in Pepa's bed. Abruptly and consciously ending his diary entries, indicating his return to life, the couple go to a bar where the inclusion of a painting hung over a TV, which is a reference to a previous plot point, suggests that he may still be in a dream, and that he must remain ever-vigilant if he is to see underneath the ideological patina of consumer capitalism and neoliberal practices and once again take collective action.

As indicated at the beginning of this article, the notion of dreaming is in fact quite central to the graphic novel. The oneiric sequences already discussed are one manifestation of this focus on dreaming. Yet it is equally important to see the act of dreaming as intimately connected to the ability we have to enact a better world than the one that exists—by forging interdependent relationships and advancing collective interests. The speech given by the ficus tree in the office of Víctor's psychologist, chosen as the epigraph for this article, highlights the central idea of the story—i.e., that the protagonist must overcome his isolating individualism through the power of the imagination, and use that power to seek community and forge patterns of collective action. This theme is present in many aspects of the visual storytelling. At the level of storyline, the protagonist gradually takes on the role of a community leader of sorts. In the culminating scenes involving the CEO of Multicorp, the police station, and the collective street protest, Víctor is not merely someone who thinks critically but someone who acts in society and stands up for the needs of the community. This theme of combatting the individualism propagated by advanced capitalism (Harvey 2005a; Snyder 2015: 125-44)³¹ is paralleled through the introduction of hallucinated characters (like Aparicio and the ambiguously real 'invisible' man) and, artistically, through a collective multiplication of the protagonist's image in reflected surfaces (he progressively sees not merely his own reflection but that of an additional person, two additional people, and finally an entire crowd of people representing the diverse range of those suffering under economic crisis in Spain). Overall, the selective use of orange tone is used throughout the graphic novel to symbolize the vital energies of people not merely to see differently, but to dream, to imagine a different socio-economic reality other than the one that exists and even to demand social change.

When Víctor gives in to his progressive psychosis at the end of the graphic novel, this may be in fact a positive result. That is, this apparent psychosis is a metaphor for seeing the world as it is, without conditioning by social institutions such as the police, capitalistic or individualist ideologies,

forces of urban speculation that tout consumerism over living cities, or drugs that limit Víctor's ability to dream. Along with Víctor, readers of *Lo que (me) está pasando* may seek out opportunities for disalienation, for deindividuation, for community building, and for dreaming and building new social worlds. Due to Brieva's insistence on paralleling his social commitment to denounce with a more introspective meditation on his own approach to the ninth art, readers finish the graphic novel having to think through the construction of a great many things: the construction of cities, the construction of ideology, the construction of relationships, and—returning the earlier example of the marketing band—the construction of comics consumer markets. Readers will need to piece together disparate fragments, work through an eclectic range of materials and discourses (full-page stand-alone images, comic strips; surreal and oneiric sections as well as realistic urban critique) to fully digest what Brieva has delivered. To the ever-greater popularity of the consumerist graphic novel form, Brieva opposes a protest-comic. No doubt his works will continue to be unrelenting in their critique of political lethargy, their commitment to denouncing cycles of urban renewal as well as persisting forms of systematic socio-economic exploitation, and their imaginative challenges to staid comics form.

Notes

¹ As described in *Toward an Urban Cultural Studies* (Fraser 2015), I arrive at an urban cultural studies method by inflecting the definition of cultural studies provided by Williams with urban concerns. The result is an approach that “gives equal weight to the [urban] project and the [urban] formation” (Williams 2007; Fraser 2015).

² See Altarriba 2002: 84; Merino 2002: 49; Moix 2007: 21-22. In an effort to encourage serious study of comics, Antonio Martín and Antonio Lara edited the acclaimed publication *Bang! From 1968-1977*. Important here are Luis Gasca’s launch of the magazine *Cuto* in 1967 (disappeared in 1968), as well as his book-length publications (e.g., Gasca 1966) and collaborations with Román Gubern (Gasca 1972).

³ Enric Sió, for some, best represents the social commitment of 1970s artists, see Altarriba 2002: 90. Román Gubern’s influential *El lenguaje del cómic* (1972), which features a prologue by Luis Gasca, is dedicated to Enric Sió. Among other things, Gubern notes that Sió was known for his innovative alternation of black and white and color (1972: 132). On the importation of US underground artists into Spain in the 1970s see García 2010: 163-64.

⁴ Altarriba 2001: 330-31. “El mundo de la droga, de la prostitución, de la delincuencia, de la explotación laboral o de la represión policial es abordado no solo como fuente inagotable de historias sino con voluntad evidente de denuncia.”

⁵ This detail squares with what Cameron notes of the post-15M period regarding “the public’s dissatisfaction with stagnant parliamentary politics” (2014: 2).

⁶ Notably, in the conversation Aparicio calls Víctor out for mixing too many kinds of drugs in his system at once and—inverting the normative logic spoken by the psychologist—professes that life itself is the heaviest drug: “La frustración, el deseo, la duda, el desánimo, la sociedad, el miedo. Todo eso siempre está por ahí danzando... ¡Puf! ¡Es mucha tela que cortar, tío!” Read against the drug-addled stories of many post-Transition comics in Spain (e.g. Gallardo and Mediavilla’s *Makoki: Fuga en la Modelo*, recently re-edited for a growing comics market), this can be taken too as a push beyond the marketed value of hedonism as protest in Spanish comics as a hallmark of Brieua’s pervasively political critique. Note of course, that the hedonism associated with the Movida—its focus on sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll in comics, film, and music—needs to be studied itself within the context of its time as part of a concerted political critique (see Nichols and Song 2014; Pérez-Sánchez 2007, and Compitello 2014). Interestingly, as the article by Kostis Kornetis explores, the models of activism employed by indignados, like the situation of comics I describe here, also “involved in some way a radical reconceptualization of the past” (2014: 87).

⁷ See Harvey 2005a on the myth of individualism and Snyder 2015 on its links with Spain.

⁸ One of the problems with comics scholarship today—in truth this is merely a variant of an issue with much cultural studies scholarship—is its seeming reluctance to read artistic form and theme/content together. In focusing on the social critique evident in cultural production many analyses skim the surface of the artistic dimensions of text. Dapena (2016), for example, is not nearly as attentive to comics form as the article by Torres (2012); and Labrador (2014) seems to prefer a bird’s-eye view to the close analysis of artistry. While valuable approaches, more attention is needed to explore the fusion of art, politics and narrative that obtain in striking cultural products like the graphic art of Miguel Brieua.

⁹ Xavier Dapena writes of the stylistic shift constituted by Brieua’s use of the sequential format that it “supone un giro en la misma trayectoria de Brieua pues asume un desarrollo narrativo clásico, con un claro protagonista Víctor Menta” (2016: 97).

¹⁰ Although Torres does indeed provide contextualization of Spanish comics in the 2000s, his article assumes much on the part of readers regarding the history of fanzines and early comics from the 1970s through the 1980s. For example, Brieua’s decision to “lanzar la serie *Dinero* como un fanzine, realizando él mismo toda la labor de la publicación: guión, dibujo, diseño y maquetación” (Torres 2012: 50, citing Casanova) was a relatively common point of entry into the profession for graphic artists in the period of the underground comic (see Dopico 2005). Pere Joan, for example, also self-published his early work such as “Baladas Urbanas” in the mid-1970s. For further remarks on *Dinero* and its reedition, see Díaz de Guereñu (2011: 216).

¹¹ Though the scholar’s book covers the period of 1970-1980, this quotation comes from an analysis focusing on the persistence of censorship in 1976 and 1977, in the wake of Francisco Franco’s death in 1975. Though they are valuable studies, neither Dopico (2005) nor Pérez del Solar (2013), understandably, focus on the time frame in which Brieua has come of age. For more information on the history of comics in Spain prior to 2000, readers should consult: Alary 2002, Altarriba 2001, Gasca/Gubern 2001, Lladó Pol 2001, and Merino 2002, and to a lesser degree, Vilarós 2002. One needs to keep in mind in any discussion of comics in contemporary Spain that under Franco: “La modernidad franquista es autoritaria y tecnócrata, y solo deja que el cómic se desarrolle como aparato de entretenimiento para los niños” (Merino 2002: 270).

¹² The work also boasts a significant number of sequential panel structures. These are usually confined to a single page, but in some cases they span up to four full pages (2007: 11-14, 27-30).

¹³ As noted on the inside cover of the book, “Este libro se compone fundamentalmente de colaboraciones publicadas entre 2007 y 2011 en los suplementos *Tierra y Revista de Agosto* del diario *El País*, y en la revista *El Jueves*.”

¹⁴ See pp. 70-74 in both the Spanish and the English versions of *Understanding Comics/Entender el cómic* cited in the references list.

¹⁵ The artist’s use of single-panel vignettes to critique advertising and consumer capitalism appears also, somewhat more obliquely, in the embedded signs appearing within other panels and panel sequences, for example, in a billboard promoting urban renewal.

¹⁶ Dapena writes, for example, that *Dinero* “destaca por la ausencia de protagonista y su planteamiento fragmentario en pequeñas tiras o piezas que disloca la sencilla aproximación gráfica al imaginario publicitario de los años cincuenta y sesenta y los ácidos textos que con tintes surrealistas, mantienen un sesgo situacionista sobre la capacidad de alienación del medio publicitario” (2016: 97).

¹⁷ The section of the image that appears on the inside front-cover fold of the marketing band shows a group of these creatures clustered together in a close reading of Brieva’s work. Visually frantic, they criticize its drawing style, use of colors, intelligibility, ending, and—relating to the artist’s movement toward sequential art from single panel work—bemoan that “¡El protagonista parece distinto en cada viñeta!”. In addition, these failures of the work are linked to criticisms of the country itself and its citizens (“¡Qué burro! ¡Albacete es con v!” “¡Así va el país!”). On skepticism regarding the graphic novel see also Dapena 2016: 95.

¹⁸ The work does not address, that is, the complicated problem of how community is constructed, how it is internally differentiated, and how schisms persist even among like-minded politically conscious groups. Political activism, of course, is subject to the same internal differences as are communities in general, on the general subject see Harvey 2005b, 2009; Young 1986, 1990. Relating to 15-M, the article by Pablo La Parra-Pérez (2014) works through a number of disagreements involving the movement including, for example, accusations of “indefinición ideológica” and also Manuel Delgado’s suggestion that such “movimiento ciudadano” may lack enduring transformative strength (2014: 46). Counteracting these potential criticisms, the basic message of 15-M is one of community constructed precisely through difference, as in the statement by Jaime Posadas in *Yes We Camp!* (coords. Pinya and Mejan) that “nuestra identidad nos hace especiales y nos integra al colectivo” (2011: 42).

¹⁹ Another point of view stresses the uniqueness of 15-M as the irruption of “a different climate that is altering the limits of what is possible in Spanish society” (Moreno Caballud 2015: 183; drawing on a highly circulated online blog post written by Amador Fernández-Savater in 2012).

²⁰ The Equipo Butifarra for this particular album includes: “RAFAEL VAQUER, ALFONSO LOPEZ, RAFAEL GORDILLO, L’AVI, EL CUBRI, RAUL RUIZ, BERNARDO SERRAT, DINO, JOAN ALIU, JUANJO SARTO, JAVIER GRANERO, RICARD SOLER, JOAN SIMO, STELA COMETTA, MAX, CRISTINA, GERARDO GONZALEZ, JUAN, JUANITO L. MEDIAVILLA, RAMON, M.a CARMEN VILA DOLORS.” See also Pérez-Sánchez 2007 for insight into post-Transition urban comics.

²¹ See, for example, *Yes, We Camp!* (Pinya and Mejan 2011), also mentioned in Dapena (2016: 95), which collects the work of 30 artists and activist connecting explicitly with 15-M: “nace de nuestras mejores ideas para contribuir a lo que ha conseguido y está por conseguir el movimiento de concienciación ciudadana que es el 15-M” (2011: 3). It is important to note that nonethless valuable studies of politics and culture in the post-15-M period often reference other manifestations of cultural production (film, performance, prose literature) but tend to omit any significant discussion of comics as a medium (i.e. Moreno Caballud 2015; Snyder 2015).

²² This is an innovation or variation of the way in which words become images in comics. See Carrier 2000: 28 for the common example of the word balloon; and also Groensteen 2007: 69 for further discussion of the textual zone and the image zone.

²³ Month and year are not noted in these titles, and all days are consecutive unless separated by a comma as noted here: lunes 25-sábado 30, lunes 2-martes 10, viernes 13, domingo 15-miércoles 18, and miércoles 25. Regarding these time gaps, the Viernes 13 entry interestingly begins with an apology: “Lo siento, no he podido escribir nada hasta ahora.” In addition, this entry is arguably the turning point of the graphic novel as it ties the loss of Víctor’s father’s job visually to urban renovations that affect Pepa and her father’s house as well as the park where the gang usually hangs out. See above in the body text.

²⁴ In *The Enigma of Capital*, written in the wake of the economic crisis, David Harvey concisely repeated a key point he had been exploring for decades, “crises are, in effect, not only inevitable but also necessary, since this is the only way in which balance can be restored and the internal contradictions of capital accumulation be at least temporarily resolved. Crises are, as it were, the irrational rationalisers of an always unstable capitalism” (2010: 71).

²⁵ My understanding of alienation is here simultaneously philosophical, social, political, ideological and economic as Lefebvre outlines in *Critique of Everyday Life* (1991: 249). In addition, of course, it is urban, in the concise outline of Lefebvre’s thought that forms part of *Toward an Urban Cultural Studies: Henri Lefebvre and the Humanities* (2015: 45-55).

²⁶ Lefèvre 2009: 157-58. “The reader constructs the diegetic space in various ways: both by elements that appear inside the frame of a panel and by elements that remain unseen (in French called *hors champ*). This non-visualized space does not only refer to the virtual supposed space outside the frame (in French called *hors cadre*) of a certain panel, but also to the supposed ‘hidden’ space within the borders of the panel itself (in French called *hors champ interne*): for instance figures can overlap one another and hide parts from the eye of the viewer.”

²⁷ Héctor states that “Aquí vengo con todo lo necesario para un Nuevo día de emperdimiento a destajo: birra, patatas, cómics, bollería industrial... ¿Estáis preparados?” (“Sábado 30”).

²⁸ Groensteen distinguishes between page layout and hyperframe but notes their interconnection—the page hyperframe is the inverse of the page layout (2007: 30-31).

²⁹ The full text reads: “...La ciudad entera está siendo devastada por una maquinaria infernal. Los trájímanos se han aliado con fuerzas oscuras y todopoderosas. Ya no hay reglas, ni leyes, ni muros de contención, Es el fin de toda civilización...”

³⁰ Vargas Iglesias uses the Situationists in making sense of the graphic novel writing that “es la muerte del arte, convertido a la oferencia inane de la estética publicitaria de lo pulido, o bien confinado en museos (al igual que la naturaleza en parques) como antesala a su aniquilación, la que imposibilita, siguiendo a Simmel, cualquier espacio de cohesión social y por tanto cualquier revolución. Parfraseando a Guy Debord en *La sociedad del espectáculo* (1967), los contenidos míticos urdidos por el modelo capitalista reúnen lo separado, pero lo reúnen en tanto separado” (Vargas Iglesias 2016: 247). The right to the city claimed by the protagonists is equally well interpreted in light of Lefebvre’s work *The Right to the City* (1996)—remembering too that Lefebvre and the Situationists share a common genesis—or Manuel Delgado’s more recent text *El espacio público como ideología* (2010).

³¹ Harvey explores this point in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* where, for example, he notes the ideological character of individualism: “Individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (such as not investing significantly in one’s own human capital through education) rather than being attributed to any systemic property (such as the class exclusions usually attributed to capitalism)” (2005a: 65-66). Jonathan Snyder’s work *Poetics of Opposition in Contemporary Spain: Politics and the Work of Urban Culture* (2015: 125-44) maps a critical view of neoliberalism’s myths to the space of Spain, specifically, drawing heavily on Harvey’s work.

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