

## Repensar los estudios ibéricos desde la periferia

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# Historical Fiction in Spain

## History, Memory and Mythscape

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**Abstract** Medieval historical fiction is a popular genre in Spanish publishing. This essay interrogates the popularity of these novels, and explores the possible theoretical frameworks for understanding its contribution to Spanish cultural identity. It traces the rise of medieval historical fiction set in the “España de las Tres Culturas” from the early 1990s, with particular reference to 1992’s Quincentennial commemorations. Furthermore, the subject matter of these novels (*convivencia* between ethno-religious communities) links it to modern social and political issues – Islamic immigration, terrorism, cultural diversity, Holocaust memorialisation and historical memory – that also arose in the 1990s, giving it special relevance. To understand the contribution of this genre to Spain’s historical vision, this essays examines its relation to both history and memory, highlighting the problem of reading historical fiction in either of these ways. The paper concludes that a better way to understand historical fiction’s contribution to Spanish cultural identity is to see it as a part of a process of constructing a national mythscape, rather than as part of Spain’s history or collective memory.

**Keywords** Historical novel. History and fiction. Collective memory. National mythscape. Medieval historical fiction.

The fact that historical fiction is, and has been for over twenty years, a boom genre in Spanish publishing, has been noted by a number of critics, fascinating some and irritating others. In 2000, Santos Sanz Villanueva stated that “la presencia, hasta los límites del agobio, de novelas históricas es uno de los más llamativos fenómenos de la narrativa reciente española” (2000, 355). Six years later, revisiting the subject, he said that, while in 2000 the quantity of historical fiction being published was “una marejada gruesa”, by 2006 it was a “tsunami con los naturales efectos arrasadores” (2006, 219-20).

José Jurado Morales lists exhaustively the evidence of the significance of the historical novel in the Spanish market, referring to “la existencia de editoriales especializadas, la creación de colecciones específicas, [...] la convocatoria de premios [...], los monográficos sobre la cuestión [...] la multitud de estudios [...], la celebración periódica de congresos y seminarios [...] y la proliferación de auténticos best-sellers” (2006, 8-9) all signs of massive support from both the publishing industry and readers. Carlos García Gual too notes that, despite its “poco prestigio entre críticos e historiadores”,

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the historical novel “goza de una excelente salud, tanto por la profusión de sus autores, como por la fidelidad de sus muchos lectores” (2002, 9). Within that general wave of popularity, Fernando Gómez Redondo finds that “[l]a novela histórica de temática medieval – por el número de títulos publicados y la coherencia de sus planteamientos – constituye uno de los fenómenos literarios más singulares de las últimas décadas” (2006, 358).

The seemingly insatiable Spanish demand for and supply of historical fiction in general, and that relating to the medieval period in particular, has been the centre of my own research for a number of years. I focus on historical novels in which representations of the two historical ethno-religious minorities of the Iberian Peninsula (Muslims and Jews) play a significant part.<sup>1</sup> These novels – both ‘popular’ and more ‘literary’ works – are usually set in the period between 711 and 1492, the period when Christians, Muslims and Jews cohabited within the boundaries of the Iberian Peninsula. This period, often referred to as the “España de las Tres Culturas”, provides the setting for fictional representations of both the *convivencia* of the three cultures, and its failure. My intention in this chapter is twofold: firstly, to explore reasons for the popularity of these particular stories; and secondly, to problematise historical fiction’s perceived connection with history and memory. I conclude by positing an alternative way of understanding the socio-cultural function of this genre through the concept of a national mythscape.<sup>2</sup>

Novelists and critics alike have asserted the close connection between the historical novel and the present, belying the common idea of historical fiction as entertaining, escapist stories about the past. For novelist Antonio Gómez Rufo, for example, “la novela histórica también debe ser un pretexto para explicarnos qué está pasando en nuestros días” and he uses the past “más o menos como espejo en el que vemos nosotros mismos” (2006, 65). Critic García Gual describes the link between historical fiction and the present thus: “La narración novelesca propone una evasión al llevar al lector al pasado, pero al tiempo atrae ese pasado evocado hacia el presente, mostrando la semejanza de uno y otro” (2002, 139). These writers, and others, articulate a view that an important function of the historical novel is its relevance to the present. It speaks to the present and provides something the present needs or wants to learn from the past. For the purposes of this chapter, I ask but what needs of the present are being met by the medieval historical novel in Spanish fiction?

1 My focus has been largely on works published after 1992, a watershed year in relation to this topic, as I explain later.

2 It is worth mentioning here (although it is beyond the scope of this essay to do more) that this project of understanding historical fiction as a contribution to the refashioning of the national mythscape is intimately linked to other rewritings of history. For example, the peripheral nationalisms too have sought to refashion the Francoist Castilian-centric national mythscape into one which allows for the inclusion of peripheral histories, identities and subjectivities.

While the Middle Ages has been a focus of historical fiction from the very beginning of the genre, the main surge in its popularity in Spain, I argue, can be dated to the early 1990s, in particular to the massive publicity surrounding 1992's Quincentennial commemorations. 1992 represented both a celebration of Spain's newly achieved modernity,<sup>3</sup> and a commemoration of events in Spain's past, marking the quincentennial of the 'Discovery' of the Americas, the expulsion of the Jews and the defeat of the Muslim Kingdom of Granada. Although the commemorations were primarily focussed on the relations between Spain and the Americas, 1992 also included within its scope the promotion of Spain's Jewish and Muslim history. Thus, Morgan has argued, in 1992, Spain "reaffirmed its long-undervalued Arab and Jewish cultural traditions" (2000, 65-6).

To promote a public awareness of and stimulate popular interest in the Islamic and Jewish cultures, two working parties, Sefarad 1992 and al-Andalus 1992, were set up, leading to public exhibitions, publications, conferences and symposia. Both working groups pitched their project as promoting a 're-encounter' or 'rediscovery' of the immense wealth of Spain's lost, or forgotten, non-Christian roots, while not necessarily focusing too overtly on how this loss came about.<sup>4</sup> While some proposed a more critical re-examination of the events of 1492 from the perspective of the victims,<sup>5</sup> generally the commemorations were viewed positively.

The fact that this 'lost heritage' was relatively unknown can be attributed to the dominant conservative line taken by Spanish historiography from the nineteenth century onwards, in which the Muslim and Jewish parts of Spanish history were treated as irrelevant to Spain's 'true' Visigothic, Christian tradition. The defeat of the Muslims and the expulsion of the Jews were seen as necessary to ensure Spain's essential identity as an imperial, Catholic and Castilian nation and any contribution of these 'other' communities to Spanish culture and national identity needed to be erased from history in the cause of upholding Spain's Christian tradition. This view was imposed by the Franco regime in historical scholarship and education as the historians of the State exerted a sustained coercive power over ideas about the past, "with the dual aim of stifling dissent and controlling the sense of history" (Herzberger 1995, 12). The Francoist privileging of one particular view of the historical past to justify and legitimate itself

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3 The events include the Games of the XXV Olympiad held in Barcelona, the Universal Exposition in Seville and Madrid being named European Capital of Culture that year.

4 For more on this issue see Gilmour 2017b and the report by the Comisión Nacional, *500 Years, 500 Programs* (1988).

5 Eduardo Subirats (2003) and Juan Goytisolo (2003) have repeatedly and vociferously expressed criticism of the way in which significant parts of Spain's past were ignored in the construction of the official events of the Quinto Centenario.

left a gap in the historiography (and in literature<sup>6</sup>) the extent and nature of which became visible as a result of the commemorations of 1992.

A key result of this increased visibility and activity, as Jennifer Green notes, was that after 1992, there was a growing tendency “to profess pride in Spain’s multicultural past” (1998, 16). The idealised, romanticised vision of a multicultural past is encapsulated in the expression “España de las Tres Culturas”, which captured the public imagination over the 1990s. This term was, and is, often used as a kind of shorthand for what is assumed to be a tolerant and multicultural medieval Spain, where the three faiths and cultures lived together in peace and harmony, influencing each other and interacting in a positive way – almost an “interfaith utopia” (Soifer 2009, 31).<sup>7</sup> This is a seductive vision of Spain’s past which connects to present social needs, as I will explain shortly. Given the enthusiasm generated by 1992, it is not surprising that writers of historical fiction begin to turn to the Muslim and Jewish past for material for their stories; a different story was waiting to be told.

A second reason for the surge in the popularity of medieval fiction from 1992 onwards relates to the way in its subject matter (particularly in regard to *convivencia* between ethno-religious communities and its failure) links it to particular social and political issues that arose in Spain at that same time. With regard to Muslim Spain, social issues that might be seen to make the medieval past particularly relevant to the present include a renewed Islamic presence in Spain due to high immigration from North Africa in the 1990s and early 2000s. This situation not only triggered the need for greater cultural awareness, but also reawakened a five-hundred-year-old conception of Muslims as Spain’s Other *par excellence*, a view which had been reinforced by the Franco regime in its propaganda (García García 2001, 13; Flesler 2008, 80). Interaction between Muslims, Christians and Jews also became of importance in light of the fundamentalist Islamist terrorist attacks from the early 2000s onwards around the world, including Spain, as well as ongoing conflicts in the Middle East.

With respect to the medieval Jewish (and *converso*) communities of Spain, present triggers included an increasing awareness within Spain in the twenty-first century of the Holocaust and therefore possible connections with the treatment of Jews in Spain in the fifteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Paloma Díaz-Mas, for example, refers to “un largo período de silencio casi absoluto” in reference to fictional representations of the Jews over most of the twentieth century (1997, 348).

7 Needless to say, this simplistic vision has been widely critiqued by historians like Serafín Fanjul ([2000] 2004; 2004), Novikoff (2005) and many others.

8 Alejandro Baer (2011) traces the development of Holocaust memorialisation in Spain as part of the integration of Spain into the wider European debate about history, culture and memory. He also points to the link between Holocaust memory and Republican memory (2011, 95).

There was also a growing interest in the question of historical (in)justice and historical memory in Spanish society. The experience of the medieval Jewish community, rejected as Other and, as a result, expelled as a threat to the nation and wiped from the nation's history, can easily be seen as a parallel to the condition of the defeated Republicans of the Spanish Civil War and their inner and territorial exile.

Fictional re-imaginings of the treatment of the historical Muslim and Jewish communities in Spain's medieval past, thus, raise questions pertinent to the present of how a society lives and deals with an ethno-religious Other and how a society acknowledges a wrong in its past. Furthermore, the question of cultural diversity also connects to the diversity and identities not just of migrants but also of the peripheral historical nationalisms, also repressed under Franco. In other words, solutions to the thorny issues of cultural diversity, tolerance and integration – issues very relevant to contemporary society – can be read into representations of the *España de las Tres Culturas*. But how can we understand the role historical fiction plays in relation to Spain's understanding of its past?

Best-selling fiction reaches far more readers than any work of historical scholarship (Coll-Tellechea 2002, 307) and the impact of this reach should not be underestimated. According to Jerome de Groot, popular cultural products like historical novels “are extremely influential in creating and sustaining a particular type of historical imaginary,” albeit one that perhaps contradicts or simplifies the historical reality (2010, 49). As influential cultural manifestations of history, they form part of what Marek Tamm refers to as “‘stories we live by’, [...] narrative templates which give coherence to a community's past” (2008, 510-11) and are “one of the most influential shapers of cultural memory” (502). Historical fiction is seen by scholars as having a complex relation with both history (understood as historiography) and, increasingly, with collective or cultural memory, as another way of narrating, constructing and understanding the past. In the remainder of this chapter I explore these connections and posit a different way of conceptualising the role that historical fiction plays in order to answer the questions I posed above.

Historical fiction is often presented as being in opposition to works of historical scholarship, despite a number of similarities between them that were highlighted by poststructuralist scholars and historians such as Hayden White.<sup>9</sup> Curthoys and Docker argue that “history presents the results of its enquiries, its research, as narrative, and so necessarily enters into and partakes of the world of literary forms” (2005, 11). Both historians and novelists select the events they write about and endeavour to organise those events coherently, often deploying certain common narra-

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9 David Herzberger (1995) summarises this debate in his book's introduction (4-9).

tive techniques to construct their narratives and persuade their readers of their perspective. Historical fiction, like history, is a form of writing about the past; it contributes to the understanding a community has of its past and, in the process, contributes to ideas about national or community identity – but with significant differences.

History and historical fiction are read with very different expectations about the nature of the end result, largely due to the truth claims that the two kinds of writing can make. Works of historical scholarship are expected to stick truthfully and accurately to the historical facts, not to embellish them or imagine alternatives. Historical fiction, on the other hand, is a work of the imagination, written using the events of the past (and, indeed, the work of historians) as raw material but not necessarily being constrained by them. If we wish to know if a particular aspect of a fiction actually happened, Herzberger (1995, 4) affirms, we generally turn to the texts of historians for verification. Indeed, when authors wish to emphasise the veracity of their historical fiction, they often provide lengthy historiographical bibliographies for their readers.

For some practitioners of the historical novel, the particular contribution of their art to historical understanding (frequently expressed in Introductions or Afterwords to the novels) is by way of humanising the past. By adding colour, emotion and so on (putting fictional flesh on the historical bones of the past, so to speak), the historical novel allows for empathetic engagement with, and therefore supposedly a better understanding of, a long-dead past, lost to living memory but resurrected by the artistic imagination of the writer. Some authors and critics argue that, as such, historical fiction not only makes history feel more real, presenting it is a more palatable and accessible form, but also embodies a kind of truth (albeit an imagined one) about the historical events – a truth that works of historical scholarship cannot provide, one which helps the present-day reader to understand more about the period, events or character depicted.

Sometimes writers choose to write about moments in the past that they believe have not been adequately covered by historical scholarship, or use the novel, as García Gual puts it, to give a voice to the vanquished and the marginalised “para que éstos suministren otra versión de los hechos históricos” (2002, 19), providing an alternative vision to that of the victors. In a way, then, they write to ‘correct’ the past by providing information that the historical record has supposedly omitted, distorted or covered up.<sup>10</sup> And as we have seen, the Muslim and Jewish past falls into that category.

Furthermore, there seems to be a generalised desire from the end of the Franco regime onwards to re-examine history with fresh eyes. Coll-

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10 Toti Martínez de Lezea, for example, in the Foreword to her best-selling novel *La calle de la judería* speaks of revealing “la cara oculta de nuestro pasado” and sees her work as contributing to greater tolerance and to the “mejor entendimiento de una parte de nuestra historia” (1998, 13).

Tellechea writes of that period: "Beneath the foundations of nationalist history, a multiplicity of new and old historical versions of our past are coming to light" (2002, 308). However, underlying the perceived need for a new history, there is also a certain ambivalence in some sectors towards history itself. One critic has suggested that, given the number of seemingly incompatible versions of the past that Spanish society has been presented with, any version of the past has become a 'valid' version of the past - even when it is an imagined one (Coll-Tellechea 2002, 308). That is to say, given the divergence and contestability of competing histories of Spain's past, the public might well turn to fictional versions to understand the past.

And what the novels provide is the template of *España de las Tres Culturas*, a new historical past for Spain, a pathway through history that acknowledges an alternative, autochthonous tradition of liberal tolerance, cultural diversity and *convivencia* - the perceived values of modern Spain - and rejected the conservative Francoist tradition. The *España de las Tres Culturas* template is a past of use to modern European Spain.

These tendencies - scepticism as to the truth claims of history and the desire for a new history - come together to create a climate where historical fiction gains an additional weight and popularity because, in a sense, it usurps the place of history in the popular arena. However, while fictional re-imaginings of the past contribute to a nation's ideas about the past (its narrative templates), there is no guarantee of their inherent reliability or accuracy about events of the past. Therefore, no matter how well researched they are, at a fundamental level, the truth claims of historical novels cannot be read as equivalent to historical scholarship.

Could the historical novel, however, be conceptualised as a kind of (imagined) memory? This has been suggested by some authors, tapping into the discourse of the memory boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Again, as there were with history, there are similarities: an emphasis on emotional engagement with the past rather than scholarly detachment, and the fundamental importance of narrative organisation and creativity to both fiction and memory. Jorge Semprún, for example, has specifically linked fiction as an alternative way of remembering, stating that "[e]s preciso recuperar la memoria histórica a través de la ficción, porque pronto no quedarán testigos de lo sucedido" (cited in Ferrán 2007, 277).

It is unsurprising, then, given the above, that literature is now seen as playing a role in the field of memory studies, in particular in relation to what is loosely termed collective or cultural memory.<sup>11</sup> For Jan Assmann

11 The two terms seem to be used interchangeably, despite Aleida Assmann saying that collective memory is far too vague a term for critical use "It is an umbrella term for different formats of memory that need to be further distinguished, such as family memory, interactive group memory, and social, political, national, and cultural memory" (2008, 55). Indeed, the term *memoria histórica* (or historical memory) is equally vague in its use of the term 'memory'.

(2006), cultural memory is the process by which selected aspects of factual history of a group are transformed into a founding story narrated to form the identity of a group. As opposed to individual memory, which dies with the person, cultural memory “corresponds to a much longer phase when all participants have died out, and a society has only traces and stories left as a reminder of past experience” (Tamm 2008, 500), a view similar to that expressed by Sempérn above. For Aleida Assmann, the cultural memory of a society is constructed with the aid of memorial signs, such as texts, symbols, images and so on, from which groups and institutions ‘construct’ an identity (2008, 55-6).

Literary theorists too have linked literature to cultural memory. For Renate Lachmann, “[w]hen literature is considered in the light of memory, it appears as the mnemonic art par excellence. Literature is culture’s memory, not as a simple recording device but as a body of commemorative actions” (2004, 172). For Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (2006, 112) too, literature is intricately connected to the production of cultural memory.

Certainly, historical fiction often uses memory as a theme, or as a structuring device (such as a figure remembering their past from the vantage point of an advanced age). The language of memory pervades many historical narratives, particularly in relation to the Jews, a reflection of the important role of memory in Jewish identity.<sup>12</sup> Writers themselves (in their paratexts) sometimes articulate their intention as restoring the ‘memory’ of a group that was ‘disappeared’, creating a historical amnesia that needs to be remedied. For example, Martínez de Lezea comments of her novel about the Jewish community of Vitoria, “es emocionante compartir con los posibles lectores el recuerdo de unas gentes de las que la memoria colectiva ha perdido el rastro” (1998, 11). She is not alone in taking this view of filling gaps in the collective memory, and again we see the historical novel as filling in gaps, this time in collective memory, rather than history.

However, just as historical fiction is not history, can it be described as memory in any meaningful understanding of the word? Criticisms of the concept of collective or cultural memory have centred on the loose, figurative use of the very word ‘memory’. For some, “memory cannot be thought independently from an organ and organism. As part of the brain and its neurological networks, it is tied to individual lives and dies with each person” (A. Assmann 2008, 50). “[I]t cannot be passed down from generation to generation”, states Duncan Bell, “let alone ‘cultivated’ or constructed in the minds of those who live often hundreds of years after

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José F. Colmeiro points to the confusion between the terms collective memory and historical memory, and redefines the latter term much more precisely as “conciencia histórica de la memoria” (2005, 17).

<sup>12</sup> Geraldine Nichols (1999) explores this particular issue in relation to Carme Riera’s 1994 novel *Dins el darrer blau*.

an event (real or imagined)" (2003, 73). Memory implies a truth claim, evoking a recollection of something real that happened to the subject who remembers. Therefore I would argue with Bell that "memory is not transferable (as memory) to those who have not experienced the events that an individual recalls" (2003, 73).<sup>13</sup>

Societies, nations and cultures certainly, however, share understandings about their past, Assmann notes: "To be part of a collective group such as the nation one has to share and adopt the group's history, which exceeds the boundaries of one's individual life span" (A. Assmann 2008, 52). But, rather than struggling to understand historical fiction as a kind of cultural memory, there is alternative formula that can be used - that proposed by Bell, of national mythscapes - that works just as well and avoids the common sense objections that are raised against 'cultural memory'.

Bell argues that "our shared understanding(s), conceptualization(s), or representation(s) of past events generally considered to be vital in the forging of group identity [...] should be conceived of as *mythical*", rather than as memory (2003, 65; emphasis added). The very term *mythscape* highlights the constructed (and potentially fictional) nature of the shared vision, thereby defusing the question of a truth claim being attributed to it. Bell defines a national *mythscape* as "the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of peoples [*sic*] memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly. The *mythscape* is the page upon which the multiple and often conflicting nationalist narratives are (re)written; it is the perpetually mutating repository for the representation of the past for the purposes of the present" (2003, 66). There is room here then for historical fiction to be seen as contributing to the changing national *mythscape*, part of the process of constructing stories to pass on to the collective. Historical fiction plays its part by selectively simplifying and dramatizing parts of the nation's past that suit the present in some way (2003, 75). As I have already argued, historical novels serve the present interest and reflect present concerns in a historical moment when the past seems very much to be in the process of being re-constructed.

By rewriting certain key aspects of Spain's Jewish and Muslim past from a new perspective (often that of the 'losers' of history), the many writers of historical fiction can be seen, I argue, to be participating in the forging of a new national *mythscape* for Spain, particularly after 1992. There are

**13** This assertion seems in direct contrast with Marianne Hirsch's widely deployed concept of familiar post-memory, which asserts that traumatic memories can be passed from generation to generation. However, I would argue that it is not so much memories of the original traumatic events per se that are being transferred as the individual impact on each generation of behaviour and ideas caused by the original traumatic events. That is to say, it is not necessary to assert the transmissibility of memories in order to account for ongoing family trauma.

numerous novels which fulfil this function however a few examples will suffice. Novels like Carme Riera's *En el último azul* (1994), Lucía Graves's *La casa de la memoria* (1999), or Toti Martínez Lezea's *La calle de la judería* (1998) rewrite aspects of Spain's Jewish past, particularly in the peripheries in ways that differ significantly from the earlier conservative national mythscape. In all three, there is a concerted attempt to show the Jewish community as an integral part of their local communities, as a group who were 'just like us' rather than profoundly Other (as in the Francoist version) and who suffered a terrible fate for reasons beyond their control. The depictions in all three focus on their normality as people, and portray from the inside experiences and memories which had no representation in the previous vision of Spain as a wholly Christian culture.<sup>14</sup> With respect to perspectives on the Muslim past that differ from the traditional mythscape outlined earlier in this essay, a number of novels depict the Muslim kingdoms as tolerant of other ethno-religious groups, particularly in relation to the sharing of knowledge between scholars of different religious faiths, as in for example, José Luis Corral Lafuente's depiction of the kingdom of Zaragoza in *El salón dorado* (1996). Ultimately, such interfaith collaboration is brought to an end by the Christian Reconquest, which is shown to be destructive rather than unifying.<sup>15</sup>

This reformed vision of Spain's past is one in which these formerly excluded groups play a much more important role in Spain's cultural formation than in the previous mythscape imposed by the Franco regime. They are seen as a part of the national community and as contributors to Spain's national and cultural identity, rather than as the demonised Other of the earlier historical tradition. Their eventual exclusion from Spanish identity is viewed as unjust rather than necessary, and as out of step with Spain's previous historical tradition of tolerance, embodied in the idea of the *España de las Tres Culturas*.<sup>16</sup>

To conclude, then, I am arguing that the numerous medieval historical novels published from the early 1990s on can be seen as part of a post-dictatorship reconstruction of Spain's national mythscape, one which

14 For more on this topic, see Gilmour 2011 and 2017a.

15 For reasons of space I am unable to enter into greater detail as to the ways in which numerous contemporary historical novels rewrite the national mythscape in relation to the Jews and Muslims of Spain's past. However, any attempt to represent these groups as human beings who had a cultural role in Spain's past rather than demonised Others to be rejected can be seen as a rewriting of that traditional Christian mythscape.

16 It is worth noting that this new national mythscape, although widely accepted by the public imagination, has not gone uncontested. Some more conservative authors of historical fiction, like César Vidal, and historians like Serafín Fanjul ([2000] 2004; 2004), have pushed back against the vision of *España de las Tres Culturas*, reasserting the traditional perspective of rejection, especially with regard to Muslims.

incorporates a modern interpretation (or idealisation) of Spain according to the narrative template which I have referred to as “España de las Tres Culturas”. These novels identify or create a different image of the past than that imposed under the Franco regime – participating in a mythscape that can be of use to the present by providing both an historical justification of the present values of the nation and a lineage for it. And furthermore, this mythscape is seen as connecting to problematic issues of the present. Rather than presenting an alternative history or contributing to collective or cultural memory, then, I would argue that the historical novel is best understood as an element in the national mythscape, and its popularity is both the result of, and feeds into, an on-going process of contestation and reconstruction of Spain’s national mythscape in relation to the medieval and more recent past.

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