3.2. Words in the Kitchen: Subsistence Cultures and Productivist Cultures

3.2.1. Peasant tertulias as images of a culture in Luis Mateo Díez

According to the Real Academia Española’s dictionary, a filandón is an ‘evening get-together of women to spin and chat,’ and this is how Mateo Díez uses it (partly because the maintenance of that dictionary has been one of his responsibilities as an academic since 2001). But the Leonese writer has always suggested in his work that these get-togethers served to construct, maintain, and reactivate the cultural patrimony of the rural, eminently peasant communities that practiced them. In his book Relato de Babia (1991), Díez deliberately played on that function, including a central chapter titled ‘Filandón’ that presents, in dialogue form (and with no substantial modifications in the three extant editions of the book), an encounter between neighbors or friends (men and women) who recall various local anecdotes, stories, legends, jokes, and ballads relating to cultural, geographical, and historical characteristics of the Leonese region of Babia.8

Díez’s Babia is the epitome of peasant cultures, which for him are, above all, filandón cultures; that is, cultures that constantly negotiate their meaning and their identity through the collective narration of oral stories. Stories that people speak to explain what they are and where they are: that, for Díez, is Babia. John Berger corroborates this in his quote that Díez put at the beginning of the third edition of the Relato de Babia:

The self-portrait of every town is not built with stones, but with words, spoken and remembered: with opinions, stories, eyewitness accounts, legends, comments, and rumors. And it is a continuous portrait, it is a

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8 Regarding the question of gender’s relation to narration, it is very interesting to observe that although Mateo Díez broadens his version of filandón to include both men and women, in his conception of ‘popular’ narrative, women continue to have a certain priority. Often women appear in his narrative to be the best prepared to tell the story of the ‘forgotten ones’ left behind by modernity and ‘progress.’ This characteristic is in line with the construction of narration as ‘feminine space’ which the Argentine Edgardo Cozarinsky uses in his essay ‘El relato indefinible’ (2005). According to Cozarinsky, the link between the feminine and narration goes back to the early Middle Ages, when, while men hunted and warred, women studied nature and transmitted ‘legends passed from mother to daughter, where the gods of pagan antiquity found a fragile but persistent survival’ (21). For a historical analysis of the relationship between women and popular culture, I think it is essential to relate both terms to the arrival of capitalist productivism, according to Silvia Federici’s study in her book Calibán y la bruja: mujeres, cuerpo y acumulación originaria (2004).
never-ending job to paint it. Until relatively recently, the only materials a town and its inhabitants had at their disposal to define themselves were their own spoken words. The portrait that each town made of itself, apart from the physical achievements of the fruits of their labor, was the only thing that reflected the meaning of their existence. (29)

‘Until relatively recently’ is crucial in the consideration of peasant cultures. In the filandón narrated by Díez, the elaboration of Babia’s collective self-portrait is constantly swinging between a before and an after: the chapter is narrated in the present, and the temporal references situate the encounter at a time close to the writing of the book (1980–81), but the question of Babia is constantly posed in terms of a comparison between the Babia of the present and the Babia of the past. So they discuss changes in agriculture and in social composition, the erosion of local dialects, the durability of popular knowledge like recipes, and even the imprint of macroeconomic changes like the arrival in the area of the coal industry.9

Time changes lived practices and how they gain meaning. Televisions that have already found their way into the homes of Babia have begun to form the self-portrait, or those writers who, like Mateo Díez, sat in on the filandones as children, and as adults write their ‘literary’ versions of the stories they heard there. It’s beginning to be done with words and voices that come from other places and tell of other experiences, until Babia’s very existence, and that of other peasant cultures, is called into question by the whirlwind of migration, the proliferation of the mass media, and the diffusion of the urban, capitalist way of life.

In that whirlwind many things were broken, among them perhaps some of the things that could have provided that democratizing, anti-elitist component that Ordás and Mateo Díez wanted to bring from the peasant cultures to the post-dictatorial present of the 1970s. Of course, the capacity

9 ‘Here in Babia a lot of us still bake cakes. Other things are lost, but not that’ (Díez 126). ‘Agriculture here went to hell in a handbasket. You go around looking for a pound of lentils, you know we were famous for our lentils in Babia, and they still talk about them in cookbooks, but now you can’t find them’ (134). ‘What there are, in spite of everything, are different degrees of preservation in the different areas of Babia. There are towns that deliberately hang onto their old ways of speaking, for instance in Quintanilla, in Babia Alta, and in Robledo down in Babia Baja’ (135). ‘Well, you could say that all the towns have good infrastructure: streets, running water, good light, television, and bathroom and heating equipment’ (134). ‘For example, see what kind of impact the coal industry has had, especially in Laciana and Babia Alta, the huge social changes that cause changes in our way of life, and at the same time they attract a huge number of people from other regions who bring their own influences with them’ (135).
of human communities for self-representation through orality is one of those broken threads, but it’s important to find that thread within the complex fabric of peasant cultures, which compose and weave symbolic needs and tasks with materials in an especially compact way.

So not only stories are told in the filandón, but also recipes, home remedies for ailments, and, in general, any type of eminently practical knowledge (such as, in part, the fictions themselves, for their exemplarity). In the filandón, of course, not only do they talk, but they also drink and eat; it is no coincidence that these tertulias are held in kitchens. What’s more, people sing and dance at these gatherings. And, as the Peruvian writer and sometime anthropologist (like Díez) José María Arguedas related, the peasant gathering was the natural place for the young men and women of the village to meet someone special and fall in love.

3.2.2. Disarticulation of a way of life: Sayago through José María Arguedas’s eyes

Arguedas’s book, Las comunidades de España y del Perú (1968), is an exceptional document for understanding the process of disarticulating the peasant cultures during the period when Francoism began opening up to capitalist ‘modernization.’ He documented his research and his stay in several towns in the Zamora region of Sayago from 1958 to 1962, in connection with a project funded by UNESCO to investigate the possible survival of rural Spanish communitary cultures that might have an impact on the colonization of Peru. Arguedas found himself in a changing world and, among other things, he noted a particularly striking symptom: in the towns he studied, there was a growing number of single people, and fewer and fewer marriages. Speaking with people, he discovered that the general perception was, ‘It’s too expensive to get married,’ and so men preferred to stay single. This is particularly striking in an agrarian society that only gives the title of vecino (neighbor) to married men. With that title come the rights to use parcels of the community fields and pasturelands that are redistributed annually. True, the benefits to be gained by exploiting those community parcels are not great, but it hasn’t always been seen this way. The elders of the place speak of an even more miserable past, when wheat—now the main source of food—was not yet cultivated, and when country folk made their own clothes, slept on the floor, and ‘hardly even knew what money was.’

Certainly Arguedas found a small, very isolated society, but it was already highly destabilized by the transition towards what the geographer David Harvey has called ‘the money community.’ Harvey analyzes the urban experience under capitalism by foregrounding the substitution of traditional ways of organizing mutual human dependence that is based
on direct social ties and relationships with others based on ‘objective’ relationships. This substitution effectively creates a situation where the use of money is the only measure of all social wealth. The arrival in Sayago of wheat as the main subsistence crop could be a decisive moment in that transition, in that it brought with it the more generalized use of money as an organizational system for subsistence. But the most truly destabilizing moment for this type of Castillean peasant (who for the most part had supported Francoism during the civil war), the moment that put an end to what the sociologist Víctor Pérez Díaz calls the ‘traditional model’ of Spanish peasant communities, happened when the regime rescinded the ‘autarchy’ policies that had directly favored them, through key organizations of the postwar statist economy, such as the National Wheat Service. At that moment, Francoism produced a progressive economic liberalization that would force traditional peasants to either become ‘businessmen farmers’ (through the mechanization of agriculture) or to migrate to the cities.

This is precisely what was happening when Arguedas arrived in Sayago, and he personally observed the pressure these changes brought on the financial situation of those who couldn’t buy agricultural machinery, in the ‘quiñonización’ (parceling and privatizing) of the common lands of some towns, as well as in the state’s appropriation of communal forests. In general, he saw the breakup of a hybrid economy in which money and state protection through a controlled wheat market were key, but in which certain institutions were still maintained that were unfamiliar with the logic of monetary exchange—notably, the common lands, which were often called vecindades.

Arguedas’s sensitivity to questions of daily life, and to its symbolic and affective dimensions, also makes him an excellent witness to the parallel breakup of the processes of creation and transmission of meaning that underpinned that not entirely monetarized world. He realized that if getting married, and thus becoming a vecino (someone who had a share in the vecindad) with all the rights that entailed, ‘is very expensive’ in Sayago, it’s because, in fact, everything was becoming very expensive in a community that was being urged to complete its transition to the monetary quantification of all its social wealth. He also realized that this monetarization of life affected the ways a traditional society managed its own reproduction without needing recourse to money. At the center of those traditional institutions facilitating the reproduction of community life was what in Sayago was called the tertulia (gathering, get-together) or serano.

One particularly eloquent informant, who is identified by the initials C. A., revealed several key issues to Arguedas: the seranos, he says, were to help young men and women meet; after the tertulias, couples would ‘lose
themselves in the fields.’ There was a tacit sexual freedom, which was what usually initiated the processes of dating and marriage. But this disappeared after the civil war. The informant lists the causes of the change: ‘money, the war, priests, the severity of the authorities, which are the work of the masters; all that has come down on these young men’s heads, it’s intimidated them. Now all they do is work, talk to their families, or watch girls singing in sunny meadows ...—they’re afraid’ (143).

When Arguedas was in Bermillo, the capital of Sayago, a new dance hall opened up with a cover charge (one duro for the young men). Children weren’t allowed in, changing a long-standing custom of allowing children at the dances, all adults spontaneously sharing the responsibility of looking after them. In the new dance hall, ‘modern slow dancing’ was imposed, contributing to the gradual demise of native songs and dances. Only young girls kept them alive, like games, in the ‘sunny meadows’ mentioned by C. A. They have become a kind of entertainment for the adults, who watch the songs and dances but don’t perform them anymore. One vecina said of the new dance hall: ‘the damn business creeps everywhere, it’s a sin!’ (113).

These tensions articulate the problematic transition between what the writer and researcher of peasant cultures, John Berger, called ‘survival cultures’ and the very different ‘cultures of progress.’ In the former, eking out a living, or what is sometimes called the reproduction of life, is the most important thing, and it is inconceivable that the state of permanent scarcity which impels that constant struggle for survival might someday disappear. In the latter, in contrast, the emphasis is on the future, precisely because one always hopes to gain greater abundance and better living conditions in the future.

In the case of the Sayago peasants, the introduction of wheat into their economy meant an extension of the subsistence mentality, supported in this case not only by their work, which would be used for their own consumption (and often sustained by community property structures), but also by the sale of their agricultural product in a state-protected market. But only when that system starts breaking down does the demand to think in new ways become stronger, to produce not just for subsistence, but for ‘progress.’ This is clearly seen in the investments required of the peasant who wants to mechanize his work to be able to become a ‘businessman farmer,’ according to the program that technocratic Francoism had designed for this population. Money very quickly began to be in short supply for everything, including for cultivating the land, and therefore, for surviving. Whoever couldn’t adapt to that new way of life in the field, had to emigrate to the city, where in the vast majority of cases, he would come to depend directly or indirectly on salaried work.

Without a doubt, as Berger affirms, it is extremely unfair to idealize the
very difficult conditions of life for the peasant cultures, no matter how traumatic the processes may have been that ended up dismantling them. But at the same time, that shouldn’t prevent a critical analysis from also being made of these processes of change. What happened in rural Spain during the fifties was that the Francoist dictatorship forced an adaptation to capitalism, which in turn forced many to emigrate. As opposed to what could have been an idealization of subsistence, feminist historical and economic analyses such as those of Silvia Federici or Amaia Pérez-Orozco remind us that the problem of ‘cultures of progress’ based on capitalism is that they tend to put all the emphasis on production and accumulation (of products or capital), making invisible and even putting at risk the reproduction of life itself.

Therefore, Federici has critiqued Marx’s concept of ‘primary accumulation,’ as noted in a previous chapter. It’s true that the privatization of lands and common resources, which often served to guarantee European peasants their subsistence (and therefore a certain autonomy from the feudal lords), constitutes a central process in the implantation of capitalism. However, she explains, another, no less important, process is the constant appropriation and exploitation of the work necessary to maintain and reproduce life (caring for children, domestic work) by a system that doesn’t recognize it as creating value, and therefore doesn’t integrate it into its system of wage distribution.

Without the millions of women, customarily in charge of doing that reproductive work, who have brought into the world and taken care of the men whose manpower would drive capitalist production, this system could never have existed, no matter how much it had pulled them from the communal lands to those proletarian futures. The interesting thing about the rural cultures of survival is that within them, despite their many problems, including the maintenance of violent precapitalist versions of patriarchy and many other forms of hierarchy, reproductive work was recognized as a fundamental source of value, because in fact, as Berger explains, it was inconceivable that there could have been valuable work beyond the reproductive.

3.2.3. From reproduction to production: A writer between two worlds
The management of human subsistence by means of communal structures foreign to the productivity and monetarization of social wealth was not the only thing, therefore, that is profoundly alien to the type of individualistic and consumerist urban society that most of Spain quickly became during the fifties and sixties. So too was the mentality that puts the reproduction of life at the center, that doesn’t understand the separation between work
and play, that believes that the stories, the recipes, the jokes, the dances, and tumbles in the hay shared by young men and women all form part of a single continuum of the reproduction of community life, as much as the work in the fields or the meetings to decide what to do with communal lands.

Referring to the kitchens in which the *filandones* were held, Mateo Díez (2000) said, ‘what was told in them, what was heard, with that point of respect and entertainment from which the knowledge of things, pleasure, emotion, mystery, is best derived, was not separate from the fire and the food; not even words conflicted with the wood and the pots and pans’ (20). That continuity between language and food, between the symbolic and the material, is found in rural cultures because both aspects are indispensable to the unquestionable priority of the reproduction of community life. As that priority is increasingly replaced by the production of quantified monetary wealth and applied to individual (as opposed to community) use, both words and material goods become segmented into distinct functions organized to make them produce that new type of wealth.

Just as the cultures of survival based on the reproduction of life become ‘cultures of progress’ based on the production of private property and exchange value, reality remains divided into two halves: the ‘productive’ half, supported by technoscience, and the half that is not yet productive but will be as ‘progress’ advances. The artist, and in particular the fiction writer, can oppose projects to this model that radically question productivity, and this is what many have been doing ever since modernism and the avant-garde all the way up to postmodernity. But that doesn’t mean that an individual artist, confined to the aesthetic sphere, is able to construct the conditions for her symbolic work to function as an element incorporated into the reproduction of community life, when this reproduction has been subsumed into the productivity of money and the markets.

This, I think, is the main difficulty facing the project of translating the rural subsistence cultures’ experience of traditional collective oral narration into the world of written authorship as the cultures of progress understand it: how can one now be not only ‘an anonymous voice chatting with the neighbors,’ but a voice that integrates narration into the reproduction of community life when one lives in a society that has subordinated reproduction to production and the community to the individual?

Perhaps in institutions like the Casa de León in Madrid or the CCAN in León, Mateo Díez and his colleagues in the autonomous Leonese culture could recreate in some measure situations in which words recuperated the nourishing value they had in the traditional cultures, at least for communities that still believed in the primacy of reproduction over production. Or rather,
to use the language of the cultures of the transition, the value of ‘the millenary culture of the people’ against the domination of the cities.

Those autonomous cultures were subjected to countless contradictions, and the history of their attempts to construct a ‘rooted,’ civic, foundational alternative that was both ecological and pacifistic towards the neoliberal ‘Europeanization’ already under way is complex and still unfinished. The same is true for other democratic cultures born out of the transition (including the neighborhoods movement, youth countercultures, and working-class autonomy). One of the threads of that history, and perhaps not the least significant, is constituted by the evolution of artists and writers who, like Mateo Díez, were heir to the symbolic heritage of the peasant cultures of survival and tried to keep it alive in a culture as markedly progressive as the Spain of the transition with its hopeful eye on Europe.

Two central elements ended up channeling the fate of that evolution: on one hand, the specialization and ‘professionalization’ of the artists, which involved distancing themselves from those civic cultures in which they acted as ethnographers, journalists, activists, or cultural agitators. On the other, there was a progressive mythologization of rural cultures and their symbolic legacy, which allowed a pushing to the background of the historical material transformations—the implantation of capitalism in the context of the Francoist dictatorship—which led to their breakdown. In light of these two elements, writers like Mateo Díez ended up finding a space of recognition in the highly commercialized culture of post-dictatorship Spain, after encountering many difficulties in even getting published during Francoism and the transition.

These types of stories promote a non-elitist use of fiction, as Ordás intended. They become material that is particularly appropriate for circulation among the broad sectors of society that the new culture industries of the democracy wanted to attract as consumers of novels.10 So it’s not unusual to find, among the rolls of the ‘banners of literature’ of the political, cultural, and economic ecosystem forged in the Spanish state of the early eighties, writers who

10 Which doesn’t mean that the only literature produced during Francoism was ‘elitist’ or ‘not appropriate for consumption by broad sectors of the population.’ There was a broad spectrum of ways of writing and editing that in many cases tried to reach a wider public. Examples range from pulp fiction like the famous westerns and romances of Bruguera Press to prestigious literature written in accessible language published by Destino Press (which included the greats of realism like Delibes, Matute, Cela, and Martín Gaite). However, as Labanyi and Graham and others have shown, it is not until the arrival of democracy and the appearance of the big culture-media groups of the eighties that literature becomes a true mass phenomenon in Spain.