Between Frontiers of Dictatorship and Democracy: Voicing Otherness in the Spanish Historical TV Fiction Remember When

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ABSTRACT

In 2001, Spanish public television started to broadcast the longest-running drama series in its history: Remember When (Cuéntame cómo pasó). Through the lens of the daily life experiences of a middle-class Spanish family, the Alcántaras, narrated by their youngest son as an adult, this highly successful cultural production rewrites the history of Spain from the last years of Francisco Franco’s dictatorship to the consequent transition to democracy. The construction of the televisual discourse in Remember When reveals a tension between a centralist and a peripheral vision of the history of democratization in Spain from the 1970s to 1980s. Employing Geoffrey Bennington’s concept of existential frontiers, this article analyzes how the defiance of cultural and political hegemony prompted marginalization and consequently shaped the self-discovery process of the younger generation of protagonists, the so-called Children of the Transition, epitomized in the series by the oldest son of the Alcántara family.

Since 2001, Spanish public television has been broadcasting the longest-running drama series in its history: Remember When (Cuéntame cómo pasó). Through the lens of the daily life experiences of a middle-class Spanish family, narrated by their youngest son as an adult, this highly successful cultural production rewrites national history from the last years of Francisco Franco’s dictatorship to the consequent transition to democracy. After the death of Franco in November 1975, Spain undertook a process of democratization, commonly known as the “Transition.” In an attempt to promote a sense of national reconciliation, the main protagonists of the Transition suppressed the memory of the Spanish Civil war and postwar repressions. Such suppression, often referred to as the pact of silence or the pact of forgetting, fomented an intellectual and existential debate for many families on historical memory that initiated in Spain in the 1990s. Remember When resonates with this debate as the production team of the series centres the narrative on the experiences of four generations of protagonists from

1 In 1936 General Franco led the Nationalist troops in an uprising against the democratically elected Spanish government of the Second Republic. This rebellion turned into a bloody civil war, which lasted three years and resulted in 540,000 deaths. To this number, one must add some 450,000 forced into exile. After the war, Franco established a dictatorial regime commonly referred to as Franquismo. Among other drastic consequences, this regime buried the memory of the Republicans fallen during the war and discriminated against their families.

2 To this date, thousands of families victimized by the Franco regime have neither received reparations nor an opportunity to bury their dead. In 2007 the debate led to the Historical Memory Act, passed under the Socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. The object of this law was to rescue the historical memory of Franco’s reprisals and crimes during and after the Civil War, thus breaking the so-called pact of silence promoted during the Spanish democratic Transition.
1969 to the 1980s. Through a detailed depiction of the daily life experiences of the Alcántara family, composed of grandmother Herminia (María Galiana), parents Antonio (Imanol Arias) and Mercedes (Ana Duato), children Inés (Irene Visedo), Toni (Pablo Rivero), Carlos (Ricardo Gómez), and Maria (Paula Gallego), and later, grandchildren Oriol (Javier Lorenzo) and Santiago (Víctor Garrido), we observe the shaping of a new democracy with its flaws and setbacks. By virtue of the diversity of its characters and their experiences, this TV series offers heterogeneous versions of the historical memory of the Spanish democratization process and demystifies the official narrative of an exemplary consensus-led transition.

The defiance of the Francoist regime and its legacy within the non-conformist population is exemplified by the Alcántara children and echoes the emergence of new social patterns as a reflection of the ideological and cultural pluralism of the people of Spain. As illustrated through the traumatic experiences of Toni Alcántara that result from his overtly political subversion, the rejection of the dominant order and transgression of its rules prompt systematic violence and victimization of a dissentient citizenry. This institutionalized violence was not only customary during Franco’s rule, but accompanied the Spanish transition to democracy as well.iii The immediate contact with political repression in the beginning of the narrative positions the future trajectory of eighteen-year-old Toni outside of the boundaries and conventions of the established societal norms during the last years of Francoism and into the newly democratic Spain. Thus, while employing the televisual signs that articulate strong emotions caused by the country’s liberation from dictatorship, the series Remember When also brings to the surface latent traumatic memories of underrepresented social groups, such as political dissidents, women, and ethnic minorities. In this article I explore how textual references to political and police corruption, violence, and conflict between social classes reveal, in Stuart Hall’s words, “the repressed content of [... the] culture” (“Television” 11) before, during, and after Spain’s democratization. I offer a discussion on the construction of Toni Alcántara’s character as an agent of social, cultural, and political transformation, marked by a series of new experiences precipitated by his exposure to the above-mentioned problems. These innately dangerous experiences leave traces in the molding of his identity, provoking a series of existential interrogatives which not only leads the character on a continuous search for authenticity, but also results in the affirmation of his Otherness.iv

This discussion, informed by Geoffrey Bennington’s concept of frontiers, offers a critical reflection on Toni Alcántara’s identity construction that stems from a series of traumatic events; specifically, his incarceration for suspicion of political dissidence. Toni’s imprisonment in Remember When represents what Bennington denominates “the experience of the frontier” (“Frontiers” n.p.), which inevitably leads to character transformation and marginalization. Due to the intrinsically dangerous nature of such experiences, defined by a contact with something “unknown on or beyond a frontier,” and in which “there is something of the order of politics,” a subject starts to question all previously accumulated experience. Thus, his “identity opens up to an alterity” since one is not really himself in the moment of such fear, anxiety, and/or violence (Bennington n.p.). Toni’s evolution as an agent and receiver of the process of social and cultural restructuring is defined by crossing a frontier between incarceration and liberation. Upon his arrest, the threat of lengthy imprisonment allows him to maintain “alive [his] identity by making it different” (Bennington n.p.).

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iv Scholars such as Isabel Estrada and Ana Corbalán, among others, have made valuable contributions to the study of Remember When shedding light, respectively, on the revisionist nature of the series and the role the nostalgic/reflexive perception its audience plays in reconstructing Spain’s historical memory. However, the above-mentioned authors limited their analyses to the first two seasons of the series without focusing on the trajectory of specific characters.
His previously unseen trepidation shifts to audacity, thus reinforcing his political beliefs as a driving force behind his personal and professional development as a young man who embodies nonconformist Spanish youth during this important period of transformation for Spain.

The frontier as a tool of analysis for Toni Alcántara’s identity construction within the public and private realms is justified in this reading due to the nature of his experiences in spaces between symbolic and physical frontiers. These bordering spaces represent points of transition between the present and the past, where non-conformity in the shape of ideological and legal transgressions promotes an emergence of new cultural and social patterns, which in turn dictate a re-definition of this young protagonist’s identity. The experience of youth citizenry between the frontiers of dictatorship and democracy is determined by this contestation embedded in undertaking a change from the institutionalized oppression to the establishment of a democratic regime in Spain. In the storyline of the series, the character of this protagonist caught between the frontiers of old and new political, social, and cultural paradigms is impacted by his experiences on the margin of the hegemonic order, which leads to instability in his career path and personal relationships. Consequently, we observe how during the last years of Francoism, the Transition, and finally during the first years of consolidated democracy, a young citizen confronts what Cristina Moreiras calls “certain alienation,” due to the “impossibility […] to intervene efficiently in the logic of the absolute hegemony” and thus becoming “expelled from centrality” (273). I

From the late 1960s, Spanish youth aspiring to live in a democratic Spain forms a “source of an emergent cultural practice” (Williams 124) as it occupies peripheral spaces within the dominant culture and places itself directly against the authoritarian regime. Consequently, during the process of identity shaping, Toni Alcántara as a citizen of a country in transition continues to defy conventional practices, even when the celebratory spirit of the late 1970s hegemonizes the citizenry as the country consolidates its new-born democratic state. Due to political activism and subsequent investigative journalism—central elements in the universe of Toni’s individual expression—he becomes marginalized and excluded from the hegemonic order, which, in turn, reinforces his identification with subversive social elements. Moreover, these endeavors repeatedly endanger his life as he faces powerful enemies such as members of the Social Investigation Brigade—an influential group of secret police within Franco’s General Security Directorate known for corruption and inhumane treatment of detainees. The inclusion of these dramatis personae based on historical characters who maintained their positions and influence within the police corps during and after the Transition—such as Antonio González Pacheco, known as Billy the Kid—reveals failed eradication of Francoist elements from the major governmental institutions, and calls into question the authenticity of the democratic spirit among Spain’s political elite.

In accord with Bennington’s proposal that “an experience of life as life on the edge” is ultimately one of a frontier, in Remember When we observe how the traumatic experiences of Toni Alcántara on the edge of losing his freedom (however limited during Franco’s rule) and his life demarcate new limits in the evolution of his identity and force him to seek new forms of self-expression and fulfillment (n.p.). Toni’s imprisonment for suspicion

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1 I also consider the process of the political transition itself as a frontier between the dictatorship and democracy since it manifests traits emphasized by Bennington as paradigmatic of a frontier, such as a junction between the end of one experience and the beginning of another, lack of its own identity, uncertainty, threat, violence and risk. Without a doubt, Spain’s democratization became a frontier experience for both the political elite and the people. It was accompanied by the risk of failure to enter the European community of democratic nations, violence between police forces and street protesters, exchange of threats between the ultra-right and the radical left, and the uncertainty of provoking another massive bloodshed as seen during the Spanish Civil War some forty years earlier. (See Sánchez Soler, Mariano).

2 All translation from Spanish sources belongs to the author of this article.
of political dissidence in the spring of 1969 (Season 1) exemplifies another frontier experience that provokes *thaumazein*, in Heidegger’s terms, which promotes characters’ questioning, reevaluating, and consequently re-affirming ethical/moral principles. Once at a frontier where “life reaches a limit, [and] identities tremble” (Bennington n.p.), Toni’s state of being undergoes transformation and opens the path for various dimensions of his identity to metamorphose, demonstrating an inner strength of which he has not yet been aware. Toni’s arrest represents an experience where life as he knew it comes to an end, and fear makes his core shudder only to place him once again at the frontline of the resistance movement. Parting from Bennington’s imagining of the “frontiers as point of contact as well as separation, a space in between that implies risk and is difficult or impossible to cross” (“Frontiers” n.p.), I view the experience of Toni’s incarceration as a displacement from his familiar environment, and therefore as a point of contact with new surroundings within the prison walls. Upon crossing that frontier, the protagonist encounters himself in a space where his authentic self seeks revelation through a series of questions, the answers to which will affect his future as well as the future of the entire family. Due to a violent and threatening separation from his habitual setting, the oldest son of the Alcántara family experiences a turning point in the evolution of his identity and a bolstering of his dissent. Such inflexion will determine his personal and professional future, perpetuating his exclusion from the hegemonic structures for having made decisions guided by his ethical principles.

Non-conformity as the character’s distinctive identity trait gradually arises in the storyline during the historical context of Francoism when, according to Alejandro Ruiz Huerta-Carbonell, a critic of the Transition, “the social movements, professional colleges and key institutions like the university, artists, and including many sectors related to the Catholic church, continued to demonstrate their rejection of Francoism, and not only of its political structure, still with fascist overtones, but also its thirst for repression and for degradation of human life” (56). Throughout various seasons of *Remember When*, the individual act of subversion, that is, political activism, disobedience of fatherly authority, and protest against social injustice, transports Toni to a universe of risk and tension within the dominant order. The open contestation of the established norms limits Toni Alcántara to a space between the frontiers of imprisonment and liberation, danger and security, family obligations and individual aspirations.

The beginning of Toni Alcántara’s university career, occurring in the show’s first season, represents a decisive moment for the identity development of the character. From that moment, the young man starts to define his own stance against Franco’s dictatorial rule and to articulate his criticism of the regime through his struggle for justice and liberty. By January of 1969, he becomes involved in underground political activism, influenced by his classmates at the university, especially Marta Altamira (Anna Allen), the daughter of the Vice-minister of Agriculture. Soon Toni becomes romantically involved with Marta, which will challenge his view of traditional gender roles and the dynamics of romantic relations.

The university environment as a frame of reference gains relevance within the diegesis to mirror the historical context in which, from 1962, the agitation of the student population and police presence on all university campuses become a constant reminder of the ideological crisis in the country (Preston 14). Therefore, the university as “an instrumental platform for anti-Franco struggle” (Maravall 117) opens way for an intense political mobilization of

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“iii In Basic Questions of Philosophy, Heidegger defines *thaumazein* as a “basic disposition – one that transports [us] into the beginning of genuine thinking and thoroughly determines it” (3). Cited by Brad Elliot Stone in “Curiosity as the Thief of Wonder: An Essay on Heidegger’s Critique of the Ordinary Conception of Time.”

“iiii Ruiz Huerta-Carbonell was also one of the employment attorneys wounded during the terrorist attack on Atocha Street in Madrid on January 24, 1977, by a group of ultra-right fascists against a law office of employment attorneys known for their activism in the Spanish Communist Party.
the character and his fellow students. Among the victims of political repressions were children of Franco’s high-ranking officials and young people of other influential families (Preston 14), exemplified in Remember When by the character of Marta Altamira. In its attempt to create a verisimilar version of the past, the narrative strives to emphasize the heterogeneous nature of the social sectors involved in resistance against Francoism and the ideological division among social classes and generations of Spaniards.

Toni’s politicization and anti-Franco militancy start to create generational conflicts between the young man and the paterfamilias, and ultimately threaten to destabilize the family equilibrium. For instance, in Episode 15 of the 1st season, “Preterit Imperfect” (“Preterit imperfect”), upon arrival to the family lunch, Toni is indignant towards the news of the state of emergency in the country and the suspension of classes at the university, as well as towards the conformity of the older generations of the family to the status quo, and thus starts an argument with his father, Antonio. Toni’s mother, Mercedes Fernández, represents the Spanish population’s obedience to the authoritarian order and their acquiescence to the lack of civil liberties. Mercedes chooses not to intervene directly in confrontations between the father and the son even though she, the grandmother Herminia, and the older sister Inés share the father’s concern about Toni’s political radicalization. Regardless of domestic pressure, the young man’s impetus for political protest continues to intensify after he learns about his grandfather’s death at the hand of Francoist troops in 1936. “Madres no hay más que muchas” (“There are not but many Mothers” Season 1, Episode 23), is set in the spring of 1969; in it, we witness a culmination of this subplot as Toni and Marta become arrested incommunicado by the General Security Directorate until Marta’s influential father manages to have them released due to his political connections.4

The filming and montage of the introductory shots of “Una larga espera” (“A Long Wait” Season 1, Episode 24) as a sequence of flashes concretizes an impactful introduction of the protagonist within a liminal threshold between incarceration and liberation. Each image registers the young man’s symbolic entrance into a new existential order of risk and instability. Therefore, the experience of a frontier with the Francoist law is transformed into an acute memory for the protagonist, as well as for the audience, and marks a new stage of the young man’s social and political defiance of the hegemonic order. The character is forcefully placed within the margins of violence and fear, with “an impressive array of control mechanisms,” such as heavy locks, metal gated doors, a police dog, and Franco’s portraits as a “display of national identity and power” (Bennington n.p.), all of which aim to compromise the detainees’ integrity. The sonic and audio regimes of the introductory scenes of episode 24 intensify Toni’s trauma as he crosses the threshold between fear and oscillation within the physical confines of the General Security Directorate. The combination of these cinematographic resources and the narration of the detention scenes—Toni’s arrest, booking, and his seclusion in the solitary cell—manages to capture a moment of anxiety and anticipation of a new frontier. The montage of this sequence enhances the sensation of danger as we see a chain of second-long frames accompanied by the

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4 According to the historian José Maravall, by the 1970s university campuses had acquired a status of “political and cultural ghetto” due to interminable student protests and police brutality (114).

4 Following his daughter’s arrest, Luis Altamira feels obligated to renounce his position at the Ministry of Agriculture. It should be noted that this introduction of an upper-middle class family into the world of a working class Alcántara family lays out a premise for the criticism of the hierarchical structure of social classes and the paternalism of the bourgeoisie towards the lower class. The contrast between the social positions of both families, as well as Toni’s and Marta’s idealism and their parents’ pragmatism, alludes to the tension in the intergenerational and social dynamic, and lays out the impossibility to reconcile the differences. The text also underscores the differential treatment of the Alcántaras and the Altamiras by the police, who serve as guardians of Francoism who leave chaos in the home of the former after a violent search, while showing consideration and respect for the household of the latter.
piercing sounds of a typing machine, the opening and closing of prison doors, and the distorted echoes of the guards' voices (Fig. 1).

With the creation of Toni Alcántara’s file in the General Security Directorate database, the protagonist is projected towards a marginal space, the elements of which register the tragic atmosphere of the lockup. The props in the shape of objects and symbols with defined borders placed within the frames—the height measurement, the edges of the keyboard of the typewriter, the young man’s photo placed on the square-shaped file card—cross the screen space vertically and horizontally, and function as a leitmotif in this televisual text, symbolizing life experiences between frontiers and their impact on the future of the protagonist (Figs. 2, 3). The organization of the mise-en-scène elements related to the registration of Toni’s datum, specifically his imposing proximity to the camera lens, the immobility of which also allows to manipulate the sensation of tight space within the frame, reinforces the somber tone of this segment (Fig. 4). By using such visual resources as vintage esthetics and digital insertion of archived images—for example, those of a fingerprinting process for new files or a close-up shot of a prison hallway,—the creators of the show enrich the discursive authority of the televisual re-writing of Spain’s recent history (Fig. 5).

The initial frame of the sequence centres on the image of the typewriter leaving traces of the printed letters that compose Toni Alcántara’s data file in black ink over the white page (Fig. 6). With the introduction of each element of the form—the personal information, the picture, and the fingerprints—the process of filing metaphorically unfolds as a profound remnant of the character’s identity formation and his demarcation within social and political realms. The sonic space of the screen, dominated by the sharp sounds of typewriter keys and some indistinguishable echoes, intensifies the air of tension. The character’s gaze at the camera filmed in a close-up and followed by Toni’s photo on the file document accentuates the expression of fear that the character experiences on the frontier with the legal system where torture presents as a real possibility (Fig. 7).
The setting of the following scene emphasizes Toni’s confrontation with Francoism by the frontal positioning of the camera towards the General Security Directorate’s photographer—the regime’s accomplice and facilitator of the legal detention process whose menacing gaze penetrates through the screen space. The placement of the close-up shot of the photographer’s face over the medium shot of the young man’s profile highlights the regime’s omnipotence within the prison walls (Fig. 8). The low-key illumination in these sequences perpetuates the sensation of a somber and dangerous environment. The introduction of a strong light coming from the camera flash directs the audience’s attention to the expressivity of actor Pablo Rivero as Toni Alcántara, while also creating a sharp contrast between the edges of the protagonist’s image and the shadow of his surroundings. To further emphasize non-diegetically the thematic of terror and insecurity the character feels as he is about to be confined to a solitary cell, a yellowish color filter is placed over his image. The stamping of the official government seal over the picture on his file symbolizes the unmistakable entrance of the protagonist into the subversive order from which Toni Alcántara will continue his resistance to Francoism, and later its residuals in the first democratic institutions of Spain (Fig. 9).

The gloomy tone of the episode also dominates the scene of Toni’s confinement in a solitary cell, which is filmed from a medium distance by a tracking shot moving towards the character, and thus centers the filmic frame on his image and foregrounds his emotional state. The sound of male and female prisoners’ desperate cries off-screen takes a form of another threatening element, as
it alludes to the brutal treatment of the detainees known to be a common practice in Francoist prisons. Cornered between the walls of the cell, Toni is shaking from shock, cold, fear, and repugnance, which metaphorically reflects his trepidation in the face of a new frontier. From a direct angle, the camera captures the protagonist in a moment of anticipation, inseparable from any experience of a frontier where anything eerie can happen, and for Toni Alcántara both violent interrogation and torture are conceivable outcomes during his imprisonment (Fig.10).

Restricted by the limits of his immediate surroundings, the protagonist experiences yet another dimension of a frontier elaborated by Bennington: a point of simultaneous contact and separation. Upon being violently separated from his private environment, the young man comes in contact with representatives of the public order’s control system, one of whom will become his nemesis and reinforce Toni’s positioning at a threshold with the legal system. The separation of the protagonist from his milieu during his late adolescence sets forth an existential refection, and thus enables the re-affirmation of his personal affinities and political aspirations. These in turn are later manifested in his struggle for democratic principles and practices; that is, for social justice and liberty in Spain. In addition, the interaction between the General Security Directorate representatives and the Alcántaras in this subplot of the tele-narrative allow yet another interpretation of Toni’s incarceration as an experience of a frontier. As Bennington suggests, “over the frontier comes someone who perhaps brings the law, but if he does, we have no way of recognizing it for certain- for the legislator by definition always speaks a foreign language, or at least a language foreign to the language and law we understand: and so, the supposed legislator is always perhaps only a charlatan” (“Frontiers” n.p.). In this episode, the police are representative of legislators and choose not to communicate efficiently with the Alcántaras, refusing to offer any coherent information about the motives for their son’s detention.

In an attempt to discover the reasons of Toni’s arrest, the Alcántaras face a combination of dry answers and silence, which results in misunderstanding and despair. The representatives of Francoist security services fail to present charges against Toni Alcántara since the motives for his detainment lack firm grounds. His release due to the intervention of Marta’s father and the lack of evidence of his guilt demonstrates the fraudulent nature of the arrest committed by the guardians of Franco’s regime. From the very beginning of this frontier experience, the ambivalent figure of the law bearer continues to render antagonism in Toni’s storyline. As the narrative progresses, the initial allusion to the fraudulent nature of the police forces during Francoism transforms into an explicit denotation of its corruption, which Toni’s journalistic investigations expose. Through the development of future subplots linked to Toni’s investigative work, the series continues to expose the traces of Franco’s regime in the principles of Spain as a democratic state. As Carbonell points out, the “defeat of anti-Francoism in the transition, has conditioned the survival of authoritarian vices in Spanish reality” (376). This “defeat” due to the lack of unity among the political left facilitated the impossibility of rupture with the old regime, which manifested itself strikingly in the State’s repressive and violent treatment of Spain’s dissenting sectors until 1980s.

At the end of the episode “Una larga espera” (“A Long Wait”) the sonic regime concludes the thematic unity around Franco’s repressions with a reflection in the narrator’s voice about “many others, democrats and freedom fighters [who] spent many long years far away from their loved ones for the only crime of thinking differently.” After the dictator’s death, those who survived years of incarceration had to wait until the Amnesty Law of 1977 to return to their families.
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claim on freedom. “[T]he wire” which separates both characters from their “home, […] their world, and […] their city,” is “just a piece of metal […] unable to detain […] their] yearning to fly” (“Free”). Thus, the themes of anti-Franco resistance and political reprisals converge here both on diegetic and non-diegetic levels.

In the case of Toni Alcántara, it becomes apparent that behind the prison bars he establishes his agency and gains impetus for social and political engagement. Upon crossing once again the frontier of his world in the working-class neighbourhood of San Genaro, Madrid, after his arrest, Toni enters into a new order of identification imposed by the public sphere. Perceived as the Other, he now faces new challenges both in personal and professional arenas. The voiceover of the narrator reaffirms the marginalization of the Alcántara family due to the ideological affinities of their oldest son: “[i]n 1969, to have a communist in the family was the same as being infected by typhus. All of a sudden, many of those who until now had been your friends, had a sudden allergy attack which prevented them from approaching you” (Season 1, Episode 24). As a result of Toni’s arrest, the neighbourhood’s conservative sectors identify Toni as a member of the Communist Party, vilified for decades by the official discourse and thus imprinted in the collective imagination as the epitome of evil. Such identification subjugates all the Alcántaras to discriminatory treatment, which impacts the parents and the siblings more than the protagonist himself as he maintains indifferent to public opinion.

Nevertheless, the sense of responsibility for his family and his preoccupation for their well-being motivate the character to develop new strategies for survival, imperative
for the realization of his underground activism and the preservation of equilibrium in the family structure. Toni manages to remain within the margins of security and learns to navigate the turbulences of counter-establishment movements as a member of various political parties. In September of 1973 (Season 7), he joins the Revolutionary Communist League of Trotskyist ideology. He later distances himself due to his disagreement with its radical stance and disposition to violence, and becomes a member of the Communist Party. By 1976, the awareness of the impossibility of rupture with Francoism during the years of the Transition leads to disenchantment with the democratization process on the part of younger generations of Spaniards, as exemplified by Toni Alcántara’s political disaffiliation.

The protagonist’s yearning for political activism extends as well towards social injustice and becomes omnipresent throughout the narrative units of the drama. In the 5th season of the series, correspondent to the historical year of 1971, Toni becomes a low-wage worker at a construction site due to the financial predicaments of his family. The company owners, as representatives of the Spanish elite, exploit their workers and foster life-threatening labour conditions which result in a fatal accident. For Toni Alcántara, witnessing the death of this co-worker becomes an experience of yet another frontier, which Bennington describes as a “new experience that always comes to surprise and defy all […] the previously accumulated” ones (“Frontiers” n.p.). This “experience [which] is intrinsically perilous in that as such it exposes to something still unknown” (n.p.), prompts a questioning and the re-evaluation of all Toni’s previous idealism. At this frontier, he has to apply his law degree and theoretical knowledge of Marxist ideology and to a real-life situation. With Toni’s introduction into the world of the low-working class, the narrative converges two major forces of political dissidence within the historical context of Franco’s Spain: workers and students. According to Maravall, in 1969 the regime intensifies repression against the members of both student and worker’s anti-government movements (11). This escalation of state control exacerbates fear among some members of the oppressed class, which is reflected in the diegesis by the resistance of unskilled construction workers, Toni’s co-workers, of any propagation of class struggle.

Toni’s apprenticeship as a day laborer symbolizes his entrance into a frontier realm of the living reality of the underprivileged class, which establishes a stark contrast with his immediate surroundings. The daily exploitation of the wage-earning workers becomes a point of contention between the young man and the management of the construction company. This new frontier experience, during which Toni is accompanied by the parish priest and personal friend Father Eugenio, culminates in the death of Jacinto, one of Toni’s friends at work. This fatality triggers a direct confrontation between the young man and the company, which is archetypal of the ruling class and a pillar of Francoism whose economic and political power were perpetuated during the democratic transition.

Toni’s life is endangered via his formal complaint against the construction company and his role as the main witness. In the last episode of the 5th season, “La tormenta del verano” (“The Summer Torment”), the young man’s determination to give his testimony in front of a judge turns him into a victim of violence. A day before his appearance in court, Toni is followed by thugs hired by the owners of the construction company to threaten him. Later, Toni admits to being “really scared,” but at this frontier with death his mental determination dominates his sensible side, and his consciousness presents him with no other option than to

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Family Eugenio, a representative of an ecclesiastic sector denominated “priests-workers,” stands out for his progressive stances and high social and political consciousness, which motivates him to live experiences of the underserved communities of the Spanish society. As we are reminded by the historian Javier Tusell, by the beginning of 1960s an “invigorating, critical and reformist element that diffused the principles of pluralism, equal participation and democracy” emerged and distinguished itself within the Church. Therefore, suggests Tusell, the democratic “transition of the Church antecedent the political one and facilitated it” (216).
officially denounce the company, holding it responsible for the violation of security norms at a workplace, and ultimately for Jacinto’s death. Alvaro, his friend from military service, tries to provide Toni with the service of bodyguards, but the young man refuses the offer and also dismisses Eugenio’s suggestion to involve the police as they fail to inspire confidence. The same night, Eugenio finds Toni bleeding on the stairs of the church, but the physical traumas do not debilitate the young man’s will; rather, they reinforce his sense of moral obligation to discredit the corrupted order and its agents. Following the crossing of the frontier of “violence and lawlessness” (Bennington n.p.), we witness a culmination in the subversive nature of Toni Alcantara’s identity and his uncompromising commitment to justice. Thereby, the risk of violence and the physical threat against him (and his family) turn into a leitmotif through all the seasons of the narrative, which continues to expose the inefficiency of the public order agencies before, during, and after the Transition. The zeal to contribute to the dissolution of Francoism and the establishment of an authentically democratic regime pushes the character to once and again cross new frontiers, both internal and bilateral (or physical).

According to Bennington, the crossing of internal frontiers between an individual’s “profound affirmation and sincere convictions” on the one hand, and a false stance, or a “façade,” on the other, forms a fundamental part of professions related to asserting the truth (n. p.). As far as the trajectory of Toni Alcantara’s character, during the 7th season (corresponding to events in September 1973), the beginning of his journalistic career in the Pueblo magazine—distinguished in the historical context of late years of Franco’s rule for its “relative boldness,” “spirit of criticism,” and “leftism” (Barrera 67)—places the character on the threshold of an internal frontier. This is due to existing press censorship as a stumbling block for professing his beliefs. From then on, the young man learns to profess by codifying his reports in a way that the state’s machines of ideological control would not detect his criticism of the regime,

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while more agile readers could de-codify the subversive
tone of his messages. Consequently, Toni exercises his
journalistic pursuit between the façade of compliance
with the regime’s mandates and the articulation of his
convictions as an extension of his ideological struggle.
Idealism, as the young man’s most striking identity trait,
determines his career choice; it entails risk and insta-
bility, but also satis/f_i  es his longing to contribute to the
country’s democratization and promotes the emergence
of a new culture of ideals in Spanish society.

Undoubtedly, in Remember When, Toni’s formative
process is rooted in the so-called “bilateral frontiers”
experience, or the crossroads “from one country to
another” (Bennington n.p.). Bennington conceives the
experience of traveling abroad as a moment of “revela-
tion” as the traveler encounters “something else to be
found outside,” beyond the country’s physical frontiers.
In Toni Alcántara’s numerous professional trips abroad,
including his impactful reporting on the Carnation
Revolution of 1974 in Lisbon against Portugal’s dicta-
torship, the protagonist acquires a first-hand experience
of freedom and the power of organized protest. These
experiences of “bilateral frontiers” further motivate
Toni’s non-conformity with the hegemonic order and
a better-defined opposition to its structures. Thereby,
the displacement of the character towards a dramatic
space between frontiers delineates new dimensions in
his identity development.

The re-construction and re-invention of Toni
Alcántara’s identity on the margins of the dom-
inant order are molded by his experiences of clandestine
activism and legality, repression and liberty, tradition
and modernity. Due to his coherent objection to
hegemony, this protagonist continuously negotiates a
sense of belonging within a new social, cultural, and
political “normativity.” The quest for self- affirmation
undertaken by Toni Alcántara in the broader context of
instability and uncertainty in Spain during the late years
of Franco’s rule and its aftermath reveals a resistance
to hegemonic structures and its social paradigms. We
observe how in identity genesis within a society oppres-
sive towards all minority groups, the limitations of the
marginalized subject provoke higher resistance of the
authoritarian system. The changing nature of identity,
embodied in the evolution of Toni Alcántara’s character,
perpetuates the protagonist’s identification with emerg-
ing cultural values foregrounded by subversive sectors
of Spanish society during the last phase of Franco’s
dictatorship, the Transition to democracy, and the
first years of Spain as a democratic state. Therefore, the
depiction of both dominant and counter-establishment
social and cultural practices during a critical period
of recent Spanish history responds to the dramaturgic
necessity to explore the concept of change that perme-
ates main plots and sub-plots of the historicist narrative
of Remember When.

In this televisual drama, the young subject forges
his identity in a repressive society whose rigid control
mechanisms intend to perpetuate the victimization of
marginalized groups. Thus, the narrative structure of the
series projects Toni Alcántara’s character into a dramatic
space between subjective idiosyncrasy and social control
during Franco’s rule, and a new democratic culture with
the residuals of the old regime. Via themes of violence,
corruption, and class struggle, the series problematizes
the triumphalist discourse of the Transition as this
approach to story-telling addresses the interests of less
represented social groups. By articulating memories and
social realities marginalized by the official narrative of
a general consensus between the political elite and the
people during the country’s democratization, Remember
When reveals a number of issues unresolved during the
Transition, which to this day continue to challenge the
political and social structure of Spain.
WORKS CITED


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