LAS BATUECAS, LAS HURDES AND THE SPANISH CRYPT

by

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Abstract

My dissertation analyzes the Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes region’s unique function in Spanish culture from the turn of the 17th century to the present day. Due to its geographical isolation, Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes was once believed to house a people lost in time, ignorant of the world outside their valley home—the “discovery” of this mythologized space was dramatized by Lope de Vega in the early 1600s, and ever since then, Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes have captivated the imaginations of authors, artists and audiences in Spain and abroad. By studying the valley’s depiction in a variety of cultural modes and historical contexts—the Baroque stage, the pages of the Semanario Pintoresco Español, photographic reportage of Alfonso XIII’s royal tour of the region, a polemical documentary—my analysis demonstrates that the valley was repeatedly cast as a crypt space, or a site of inscrutable presence in an epistemologically uncertain world.

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Introduction

The rugged valleys of Spain known today as Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes are located some fifty miles southwest of Salamanca, straddling the borders of two autonomous regions: Castilla y León and Extremadura. Although now distinct entities, Las Batuecas once encompassed Las Hurdes—the two were not differentiated until the middle of the 1700s, before which time they were simply referred to as “Las Batuecas.” Beginning around the turn of the 16th century, a host of myths, superstitions and historical legends were attributed to that place and its people. Inspired by the natural, geographical isolation imposed on Las Batuecas by the mountains that ring and delimit it, local folklore claimed that the batuecos knew nothing of the world beyond those peaks, that they were ignorant of the true Catholic faith, and that they were lawless barbarians who cavorted with the Devil and his minions.

But that dystopia was not the only fantasy projected onto the sociopolitical tabula rasa of Las Batuecas. In 1599, the Order of the Discalced Carmelites founded an eremitic monastery there, which they called the Santo Desierto de San José del Monte Batuecas. The edifice was sited in Las Batuecas because of the place’s natural serenity, its isolation, and, most crucially, the fact of God’s physical presence therein. In order to carry out the mystical asceticism and communion with God that was their calling, those Carmelite monks did not seek out a metaphorical or imaginary connection to the divine, but rather a literal, direct one. The decision to build the Santo Desierto in Las Batuecas was based on their belief that such a connection to God could be established there. This conception of the valley as home to the divine is a far cry from the condescending, pejorative folklore
circulating at the same time, and my analysis begins by exploring that complex foundational scene in the imaginary and physical construction of Las Batuecas.

Their differences notwithstanding, both the utopian and dystopian valences of Las Batuecas lore that circulated at the turn of the 17th century were predicated on shared assumptions: the place’s capacity for the supernatural—whether divine or demonic—and the appeal that it held by virtue of its mysterious opacity, its status as *terra incognita*. In the first decades of that century, these narratives and their essential qualities were synthesized and animated on stage by none other than Félix Lope de Vega y Carpio, the foremost dramatist of Golden Age Spain. His *comedia*, *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* (1604-1614), stages many of the contemporaneous popular beliefs about the valley, from its isolation and its residents’ ignorance, to the presence of the Devil in their midst. However, Lope also characterizes the *batuecos* as the lapsed descendants of medieval Gothic knights—the crème de la crème of old Christian stock—ripe for swift conversion by a just ruler. As luck would have it, these people and their lands fall within the purview of Lope’s former patron, the Duke of Alba. In *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*, the titular Duke was more than happy to assume lordship over the *batuecos* and their unassailable bloodline.

Early on in the *comedia*, the valley-dwellers happen upon a cave in which they find the skeleton and personal possessions of an unknown figure who turns out to be one of their fallen ancestors. The action of the entire play centers on determining the provenance of that cave’s contents, and although those objects’ meaning is not immediately apparent, their meaningfulness is undeniable. Once the knight’s remains are identified, they become the lynchpin of the *batuecos* origin story. In *How the World
Became a Stage, William Egginton gave a name to the on-stage spaces that housed such potent contents: the crypt. In the course of a play, curtains, trap doors, stones, tree branches, or other obstacles initially hide the crypt from view. Only later would a technical feat of stagecraft reveal that space’s contents, often resolving the *comedia*’s plot in the process. However, the crypt was more than a standardized site within which to present a convenient *deus ex machina*—it had a profound effect on the audience as well, one that stems from its roots in medieval liturgical spectacles that centered around saintly reliquaries, the rite of the Eucharist and the real presence of God.

In his eleventh seminar, Jacques Lacan discusses how artistic representations act as “trap[s] for the gaze” (Lacan 89). The observer’s eyes are drawn to a picture (or stage, screen, etc.), and in viewing what is revealed and represented there, he or she wonders what is missing, what reality is being incompletely rendered by the mimetic figures or signs that make up the painting. As Joan Copjec notes, “representation appears to generate its own beyond,” and once a viewing subject is convinced of this fact, he fervently desires to occupy that “beyond,” an achievement that he erroneously believes would grant him access to a perspective from which everything signified or imitated by the representation in question would be revealed in its totality (Copjec 34). This all-seeing position is so tantalizing that the desire to assume such a perspective becomes the very foundation of the subject. Again, Copjec: “The subject is the effect of the impossibility of seeing what is lacking in the representation” (Copjec 35). And yet, the “beyond” whose existence is implied by what a representation fails to represent—the “real” meaning or referents promised by signifiers, whether linguistic, artistic, theatrical, cinematic or otherwise—does not exist. The continuous imperative to scrutinize the signs
and appearances of the world constitutes the subject, and yet that essential, defining drive is based on a fundamental misrecognition—Lacan’s méconaissance—of its chance for success. To realize that the representation hides nothing would result in the “very annihilation” of the subject (Copjec 35).

Lacan refers to Hans Holbein’s The Ambassadors (1533) in order to illustrate this process. The anamorphic shape in the bottom portion of Holbein’s painting demands the viewer’s attention, but it cannot be identified from a normal point of view. Only when observed from an oblique angle does the shape appear visible as a human skull—this intriguing, initially opaque “stain” within the representation both attracts and resists interpretation before finally revealing its “true” self and putting to rest the newly generated anxiety as to its identity (Lacan 88-89, 97). But this resolution is artificial, merely a dramatization-in-miniature of the total discovery that the subject hopes to achieve. An audience member of Lope’s comedia would be driven by the same desire, and thanks to its situation on stage and its contents, the crypt space offered its onlookers a physical simulation of that “point of the gaze,” whose revelation was dramatized—but not achieved—by the stain in Holbein’s painting. In addition to whatever superficial or incidental meaning attached to the stuff of the crypt, its effective function was “to stand in for the real, the unrepresentable, and hence the foundation of all representations” (Egginton 152).

At the end of Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba, we learn that the found skeleton was not the only entombed body in the valley—there are many others like it waiting to be discovered. The knight’s tomb is a crypt space within Las Batuecas, and thanks to this proliferation of yet-unearthed human remains, the region as a whole acts as a crypt for the
surrounding areas. Lope’s *comedia* emphasizes the structural affinity between the series of concentric spaces that lead to the theatrical crypt, its contents, and the physical geography of Las Batuecas. In concert with the contemporaneous founding of the Santo Desierto, which asserted the place’s divinity, *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* effectively turns the off-stage geographical referent into a crypt for neighboring Castile: a site of mysterious, inscrutable presence. The theatrical crypt housed the secret or hidden “truth” that the audience suspected was lurking behind the deceptive appearances of plays-within-plays, mistaken identities and other feints, but it also acted as a proxy for the more fundamental desire of which that theatricalized version was a symptom. Furthermore, this desire to achieve a perspective with access to an underlying truth obscured by the contradictory and unstable phenomena of the world is replicated on a cultural-national level as well. Thanks to Lope’s use of the crypt, Las Batuecas was cast as the site of that reality for Castile, and then for Spain as a whole. If only one could gain access to Las Batuecas, penetrate the unforgiving crags and mountains for which it was so famed, he would find the “real” Spain there. Nevertheless, those searching for that “impossible real” would find only approximations and simulations of the object they craved (Copjec 35).

The chapters that follow chart how the role of crypt attributed to Las Batuecas in the early 17th century is perpetuated, modified, imitated and critiqued by subsequent media treatments of the valley. Despite centuries of social, political and technological changes, Las Batuecas—and later Las Hurdes—retains its status as the Spanish crypt. Indeed, the texts I examine reveal a remarkably persistent characterization of that region as a crypt space, both in content and form. Several key aspects of the crypt reappear in these varied contexts. First, it is situated at the heart of a series of “telescoping” or
“nesting spaces” that are successively unveiled before arriving at their terminus (Egginton 120, 105). The stuff of the crypt, from human remains to saintly relics to the physical presence of God, exhibits an extra-rational or divine quality, as noted by Egginton. Building on that base, my dissertation enriches our understanding of how that trope works generally and how it informs Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes’ fraught cultural legacy in particular. As to the former, the crypt’s potency is largely due to its contents’ indexical—as opposed to mimetic—nature. Regarding the latter, Las Batuecas has been ground zero for the clash of fiction and fact for over four hundred years; indeed, that debate has not changed much since Lope’s play first inflamed it. My analysis goes beyond that polemic by re-contextualizing the region in terms of its crypt-function, which has less to do with the veracity of any one mythical, historical or political narrative than with how the crypt works on its observers.

**Indexicality and the crypt-function**

In the decades surrounding the turn of the 20th century, philosopher and semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce developed the concept of the index, which he describes as a signifying complex constituting a physical link between a sign and its referent—“the footprint, the bullet hole, the sundial, the weathervane, and photographs,” for example (Gunning 30). In other words, an index is an effect whose sheer presence testifies to the existence of its cause. As Peirce puts it:

This is a real thing or fact which is a sign of its object by virtue of being connected with it as a matter of fact and by also forcibly intruding upon the mind, quite regardless of its being interpreted as a sign. It may simply serve to identify its object and assure us of its existence and presence. (Peirce 4.447, 1903)
Mimetic likenesses, symbols and signs need to be read or interpreted in order to decipher the relationship that they describe between a representation and its referent. With an index, on the other hand, the connection is self-evident—it relies upon neither an artist’s intervention nor arbitrary signifying conventions to manifest a link between sign and referent. The crypt contains precisely such self-evident “presence,” “materiality” or “substance” (Gumbrecht 17; Egginton 53). The crypt’s contents are indices of death, the divine, or both—corpses, skeletons and other human remains are undeniable evidence of the human lives that used to animate them. Moreover, when those remains or relics belonged to a saint, the material connection between sign and referent assures the onlooker of the presence of that person and of the divinity the he or she approached in life.

Thanks to its indexicality, the stuff of the crypt overwhelms the observer’s reason and obviates the need for interpretation. The material presence found therein is the antidote to the skeptical paranoia experienced by the audience of spectacles in which phenomenal appearances are repeatedly revealed as contingent or untrustworthy. In general, indices relieve onlookers’ doubts as to the fidelity of what they observe, and the crypt deploys indices whose referents are most resistant to interpretation. This combination was a powerful one, and it was reproduced in diverse media depictions of Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes in the centuries following Lope’s play. Over the course of four hundred years, the textual\(^1\) renderings of Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes—in theater, prose narrative, the illustrated periodical, photography, and documentary film—approximate their referent’s crypt-function to varying degrees. As we will see, those texts that rely on

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\(^1\) Here, “text” refers to any number of media products, not just written prose.
indexicality to do so are the most impactful, and specific developments in media
technology lent the crypt-function an added dimension.

_Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba_ was so successful that it earned the scorn of the
likes of Benito Jerónimo Feijoo, who blamed that work for promoting erroneous beliefs
about the region. Calling them “ficciones poéticas para hacer comedias” in 1730, Feijoo
denounced the mythical-historical elements of Lope’s play, but he also alluded to
others—_comedias_, plural—that were responsible for the dissemination of those
superstitions. “Staging the Crypt of Castile: Lope de Vega’s _Las Batuecas del Duque de
Alba_,” my dissertation’s first chapter, describes how Lope’s _comedia_ relied on the crypt
to exert its influence and ultimately converted the extra-diegetic referent it staged into a
crypt as well. The following chapter, “Las Batuecas: Collector’s Edition” examines two
adaptations of that play, both of which attest to the impact of their model and signal a
shift towards the reification of the experience offered by the crypt. Like a Hollywood “re-
boot” of a film franchise today, Juan de Matos Fragoso’s _El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla_
(1671) and Juan de la Hoz y Mota’s _Descubrimiento de Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba_
(1710) staged what their playwrights thought would be successful. The known
commodity of Las Batuecas lore—the version penned by Lope, in particular—was ripe
for adaptation, but each new play meddled with its source material in telling ways.
Specifically, although both _comedias_ include a crypt space that contains evidence of the
batuecos’ illustrious heritage, these adapted crypts are recast in terms of another cultural
practice quite popular at the time: collectionism.

The galleries, cabinets of wonders and decorated grottoes that graced the homes
of wealthy collectors exhibited a mélange of artifacts, natural curiosities, and stunning
feats of artisanal craftsmanship. These items were selected for their power to induce awe, their rarity, and in many cases, their indexicality. In such collection spaces, singular, “original” objects were most prized, but copies, facsimiles or artists’ renderings of them were often displayed in their stead. This admission of mimetic works alongside indexical objects intimates the function that the crypt would exert more and more in subsequent centuries. Texts that treated Las Batuecas-as-crypt and copied the crypt’s structure began to overwhelm a spectator’s logical objections to its capacity to produce its referents’ physical presence. Thanks to their indexicality, or a semblance of it, these media products exerted a crypt-function like their object, and when the two were combined, the result was uniquely compelling. The collection was like a crypt—a site of presence—in which indices were joined by and jumbled with mimetic art objects, and in the adaptations of Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba and in Antonio Ponz’s Viage de España (1778), Las Batuecas-as-crypt is incorporated into an idealized model of Spain as a grand cultural collection itself. Las Batuecas belongs because of its status as crypt—no metaphorical model of Spain would be complete without the site that was held up as possessing the key to reconciling its disparate component parts, whether religious, ethnic or political.

It is remarkable that Ponz described the region at all—bereft as it was of any manmade cultural treasures—in his inventory of the newly expelled Jesuit order’s artistic holdings. Indeed, it was a black mark on Spain’s reputation in Europe—how could a supposed imperial power be so ignorant for so long of a region within its own borders? Beyond the fact that it merited his attention at all, the way in which Ponz relates the journey to Las Batuecas is noteworthy for its use of nested epistolary accounts of the place. On the one hand, Viage de España is explicit in privileging eyewitness testimony
as a source of truthful reportage; however, the text’s principal narrator—a textualized version of Ponz himself—does not visit Las Batuecas. Instead, he relies on the report of a local resident, whose letter is interpolated in a frame text. But that narrator is Ponz’s creation as well, and he eventually confesses that he could not visit all of Las Batuecas, leaving part of the valley veiled in secrecy. He calls that area Las Hurdes, and though the text does describe some of Las Batuecas in its capacity as crypt, there is a portion still hidden from view—a crypt-within-a-crypt—and that aspect of the place is certainly worth adding to Ponz’s prose catalogue of Spain’s collected artistic and cultural patrimony.

*Viage de España* posits a space within Las Batuecas that has yet to be uncovered; furthermore, that space is situated at the end of a series of interpolated letters that mimic the nesting spaces leading to the crypt space on stage. Roughly fifty years later, the *Semanario Pintoresco Español* would produce a multimedia feature on the region that employs the same structure, but with graphic illustrations of Las Batuecas in addition to its prose narrative. The dissertation’s third chapter, “A Different Kind of Magic: Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes in the *Semanario Pintoresco Español* (1839),” analyzes that three-part series on Las Batuecas as an example of what Rebecca Haidt terms the “media of immediacy” that flourished in Madrid during the mid-19th century. As this moniker suggests, the goal of these media of immediacy was to reproduce reality in an uninterrupted or un-mediated a form as possible for their readers and viewers. This aim—to collapse the distance between observer and the depicted referent—was the function of the crypt on stage, and with the advent of technology that facilitated mass-production of
engraved images and prose side by side, magazines like the *Semanario Pintoresco Español* could approximate that crypt-function like never before.

Matos Fragoso’s and Hoz y Mota’s adaptations and Ponz’s prose shifted conceptions of Las Batuecas toward the conceptual framework of collectionism, in which a facsimile or replica of a desired object could be accepted instead of the singular or unique original. The *Semanario Pintoresco*’s feature on Las Batuecas also responds to that desire to experience and to possess the presence on offer in the crypt, and its novel format both draws on its predecessors and presages the explosive impact that other media of immediacy—photography and film—would have on perceptions of Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes. The *Semanario Pintoresco Español* published its three articles on Las Batuecas over the course of three months in the spring of 1839, and like Ponz’s text, firsthand observation was stated as the authority upon which the account would be based. The staggered, serial publication of these pieces replicates the “telescoping” spaces that lead to the crypt on stage, and despite inviting the reader to identify with the perspective of the narrator—that is, a view from within Las Batuecas-as-crypt—the illustrations that accompany his narration spoil that visual plenitude. In particular, the last engraving in the series is a rendering of a Discalced Carmelite’s personal cell, carved out from a tree-trunk. However, we do not see inside—there is only an opaque black field within the tree, framed by two eaves and a human skull and several bones incrusted in the wood above the entrance. The series of articles’ months-long play of obfuscation and revelation ends with a flat denial of access to this space, another recapitulation of the crypt’s workings within Las Batuecas itself and in the medium that rendered it.
As the chapter title indicates, the magical effect of the perspective rendered in the *Semanario Pintoresco Español*’s feature on Las Batuecas is the crypt-function of this new medium of immediacy: its capacity to oblige the reader to forget or ignore the paradox that such a name suggests. No depiction can conjure its referent’s unmediated presence, although the indices of death and the divine as instantiated in the crypt are unique in their ability to make an onlooker believe that this is possible. The crypt-function is just this capacity to overwhelm spectators and oblige them to ignore their skeptical objections to media claims to immediacy. The fourth chapter, “Once More Into the Crypt: Luis Buñuel’s *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan*,” details how the crypt-function is wielded to its greatest effect yet by Luis Buñuel’s 1933 documentary film about the region. However, Buñuel’s iconoclasm and unflinching exploration of human desire are on full display as well, resulting in a short film that still looms large in the region’s legacy today.

By the time Luis Buñuel films *Las Hurdes*, the place was considered the dystopic corollary to Las Batuecas’ unspoiled rusticity. Since the publication of the *Semanario Pintoresco Español*’s series on Las Batuecas, the broader region’s poverty and lack of infrastructure had gained national attention, although the *hurdanos* in particular became the object of concerted charity efforts and developmentalist projects. Miguel de Unamuno, the doctor Gregorio Marañón, and King Alfonso XIII all visited the region in the decades prior to *Las Hurdes*’ filming in 1933, and photojournalists amply documented these trips. This and previous photographs of Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes, as well as Maurice Legendre’s 1927 doctoral dissertation, *Las Jurdes: Étude de géographie humaine*, were incorporated into Buñuel’s film, which both recapitulates and
exposes the workings of the crypt-function and the specific site that had exercised that function for hundreds of years.

Throughout the documentary and in one exemplarily brutal scene, Buñuel exposes the desire underpinning the need for a crypt space. *Las Hurdes* is infamous for its sequence in which Buñuel fired a revolver at a mountain goat so as to provoke its fall from a cliff. This cruelty was in the service of filmmaking—Buñuel wanted to capture a shot of a goat falling to its death because he claimed that the malnourished *hurdanos* only ate meat on such occasions—but it also confronted the crypt’s observers with the consequences of appeasing their desire for presence. If an index of death, such as the cadaver, would offer the materiality that onlookers craved, then observing the means by which that cadaver came to be would bring the costs of such a desire to light. Furthermore, the goat also acts as a stand-in for the *hurdanos* themselves—Buñuel’s film insinuates that animals are not the only beings whose suffering and death serves to calm the anxiety of others.

The impact of *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan* on the place’s legacy cannot be overstated. In 2013, the *comarca* of Las Hurdes celebrated the centennial anniversary of Miguel de Unamuno’s tour of the region. The Centro de Documentación Hurdano promoted Unamuno’s glorification of the *hurdanos*’ rural simplicity and capacity for suffering as quintessentially Spanish virtues. This effort to re-brand Las Hurdes with a different Spanish cultural luminary—replacing Buñuel with Unamuno—is the subject of the dissertation’s conclusion. Through an analysis of a didactic graphic novel and a television program devoted to paranormal phenomena, that final section addresses the
crypt’s status in the long shadow cast by Buñuel’s brutal exposé of its function and legacy in Las Hurdes.

State of the field

This project is not a comprehensive monograph of the region’s cultural history—that is the goal of Fernando Rodríguez de la Flor’s *De Las Batuecas a Las Hurdes* (1989), which presents the results of his thorough archival research on Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes. That text is an invaluable resource for scholars of this area’s past, but such depth notwithstanding, Rodríguez de la Flor’s analysis devotes only one paragraph to early 20th-century renderings of the place. Other surveys of the valley’s life in letters, on stage and in Spanish culture generally include volume IV of Feijoo’s *Teatro crítico universal* (1730), Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo’s *Crónicas y leyendas dramáticas de España* (1900), and Maurice Legendre’s *Las Jurdes: Étude de géographie humaine* (1927). More recent scholarship on the region has a narrower scope, focusing on one cultural product regarding Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes and referring to others in passing. In addition to Rodríguez de la Flor, María José Vega Ramos, Leo Cabranes-Grant and Titus Heydenreich address Lope’s *comedia* in detail, debating its relationship to reigning political and religious ideologies of the day. Their critiques are all viable, but they fail to appreciate the importance of the crypt in *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*, as well as its formative impact on the region’s legacy.

Vega Ramos and Menéndez Pelayo compare their readings of *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* with Matos Fragoso and Hoz y Mota’s adaptations of it, but Menéndez Pelayo only does so to denigrate them for failing to reproduce the genius of their model.
Vega Ramos refers to *El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla* (1671) and *Descubrimiento de Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* (1710) in order to contrast their various takes on the Duke of Alba’s assumption of lordship over the *batuecos*. These adaptations garnered little criticism; again, Rodríguez de la Flor’s analysis of those plays is the most detailed—it characterizes them as comprising part a dramatic evolution from Lope’s original to Juan Eugenio Hartzenbusch’s romantic, fanciful *Las Batuecas: una comedia de magia en siete cuadros* (1843). In addition to that critical reading, the collected conference proceedings, *Los Segundones: Importancia y valor de su presencia en el teatro aurisecular* (2005), offer some vital philological details regarding the production of each *comedia*.

My discussion of collectionism and the crypt in those adaptations deals extensively with David Castillo’s *Baroque Horrors* (2010) and the expansive *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150-1750* (1998), by Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, not to mention more specific works by Naomi Miller, Miguel Morán and Fernando Checa on the space of the grotto and the collection. In particular, recourse to the index clarifies Daston and Park’s compelling exposition of collectors’ appetite for artisanal imitations of natural wonders, such as Bernard Palissy’s nature casts (285-286). Although each of the above texts addresses the theoretical underpinnings of the collection in a different light, my critique synthesizes the disparate criteria that guide that practice, elucidating a connection between the monstrous, the singular and the indexical.

Daniel Crespo Delgado’s and Ana Rueda’s work on Las Batuecas in Enlightenment Spain is deployed alongside Rodríguez de la Flor—once again—in my analysis of Antonio Ponz’s *Viage de España*. However, their scholarship explores Ponz’s general project and his impact on 19th-century depictions of the region, respectively,
whereas mine details the structural affinities between his prose and the crypt space. My examination of the _Semanario Pintoresco Español_’s series on Las Batuecas engages primarily with texts on 19th-century Spanish visual culture by Bernardo Riego, Enrique Rubio Cremades, and Rebecca Haidt. Rodríguez de la Flor is another critical interlocutor—my analysis offers a response to his focus on Mariano José de Larra’s satirical writings that make use of Las Batuecas as a metonym for Spanish underdevelopment. The third chapter of the dissertation puts Haidt’s concept of the “media of immediacy” in productive dialogue with Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes’ accrued legacy and its depiction in the _Semanario Pintoresco Español_’s multimedia feature on the valley.

This effort to read Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes’ appearance in various media as part of a centuries-long formative process rather than an isolated moment in time continues in chapter four. The critical corpus relating to _Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan_ is by far the most developed of any that I address in the dissertation. I respond to Román Gubérn and Paul Hammond’s research on Buñuel’s political activities, Jordana Mendelson and Javier Herrera’s archival work on the making of the film and its contemporaneous impact, and close readings of the documentary by Tom Conley, Joan Ramón Resina, Sara Nadal-Melsió, Vivian Sobchack, Rob Stone and James Clifford. Although it includes such insightful projects as syntheses of ethnographic documentary and surrealism, Resina’s study of the film’s spatiality, and Nadal-Melsió’s claims of Buñuel’s “indexical realism,” my analysis adds to this body of scholarship thanks to a broader view of _Las Hurdes_’ intertexts, influences and interaction with its conceptualized referent: Las Hurdes-as-crypt.
A geocritical approach

Although *Las Hurdes* generated much critical attention upon its release and of late, no scholarship on that film is devoted to placing it in the broader context of Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes’ centuries-long legacy in the Spanish imagination. Ever since the first folkloric, superstitious, speculative stories about Las Batuecas, conceptualizations of that region have issued from its physical geography. Over the next four hundred years, this interaction would only grow more pronounced, manifesting what Bertrand Westphal calls the “looping mechanism” by which “space⁴ informs the text that produces a fictional representation of a spatial referent” (Westphal 169). A largely oral tradition surrounding Las Bateucas’ past and present was superseded by Lope’s play and the ensuing “literary stratification of referential space” that it catalyzed—Westphal calls the critical method devoted to analyzing that phenomenon, “geocriticism,” and that is the method that I employ in this dissertation (170).

Although it draws on a diverse array of postmodern theorists and practitioners of spatiality—Deleuze and Guattari, Jean Baudrillard, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa—Westphal’s geocritical method is simple at its core. By attending to the mutual interpenetration and redefinition of a physical place, its conceptualized space, and fictionalized versions of one or both of them in literature and other media, geocriticism eliminates the need to hermetically seal off “true” or “historical” descriptions of a site from textual renderings of it. Indeed, it would be

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² A note on terms—following Anne Davies, I use “place” and the Spanish “lugar” to refer to a physical or geographical site; “space” or “espacio,” on the other hand, is a type of field that can manifest itself in a variety of contexts. Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes is a place that comes to simultaneously function as a crypt space (11).
impossible to do so. Moreover, this attention to how “the representation fictionalizes the source from which it emanates” does not come at the expense of the human and geographical reality of that source (Westphal 75). On the contrary, only by attending to that interplay, “stratification” and mutual influence of place and text can a critic do justice to the lived experience of either. In that vein, my project is a geocritical account of Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes’ “stratification,” a process that pressed the place and its people into a specific role within the Spanish cultural imaginary: a crypt space.

Ever since Lope staged the region’s “discovery,” and despite the four centuries’ worth of diverse social, political and historical contexts in which depictions of Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes appear, the place has continued to be function as a crypt in the Spanish cultural imaginary. My dissertation explains how that phenomenon played out, from 1600 to the present. As such, narratives’ particular assessments of Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes—living hell or locus amoenus, home of degenerates or victims of underdevelopment—are not as critical to the conception of the place as the structure of the plays, texts and images that represent or reproduce it. Beyond merely demonstrating that Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes was, in fact, perceived this way, my analysis also charts the remarkable interaction between that region and the media in which it appeared. Over and over again, the latest and greatest ways to reproduce reality through media were brought to bear on Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes, and this coincidence of function in both medium and referent worked to reinforce the region’s role as crypt even further—that is, until Luis Buñuel’s explosive documentary forever altered that trajectory. If, as Ann Davies claims, “the landscape, space and place of Spain is not something off which we can read Spanish culture and ideology, but an entity that gestures towards an explicit or implicit
desire to bestow ‘Spain’ with meaning,” then the continued treatment of Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes as crypt spaces is the epitome of that desire (Davies 4). Thanks to its broad chronological compass and geocritical approach, my dissertation sheds new light on Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes as a uniquely powerful site of the interplay between media history, geography and popular culture in Spain.
Staging the Crypt of Castile: 
Lope de Vega’s *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*

La extrañeza y retiro de estos montes, de estas vigorosas breñas, habían derramado en los pueblos circunvecinos opinión que allí habitaban demonios, y alegaban testigos de los mismos infestados de ellos. En los pueblos más distantes corría fama que en tiempos pasados había sido aquel sitio habitación de salvajes y gente no conocida en muchos siglos, oída ni vista de nadie, de lengua y usos diferentes de los nuestros, que veneraban al demonio, que andaban desnudos; que pensaban ser solos en el mundo...

-Fray Alonso de la Madre de Dios  
*Crónica de la Reforma de los Descalzos de Nuestra Señora del Carmen*, 1683

In 1730, the Galician scholar and monk, Fray Benito Jerónimo Feijoo, published the fourth volume of his *Teatro crítico universal*, an immense opus whose stated goal was the disabusal of unfounded notions, or the *desengaño de errores comunes*. In the *discurso* entitled, “Fábula de Las Batuecas, y Países imaginarios,” Feijoo attacks the popular belief that a region of Spain some fifty miles southwest of Salamanca, known as “Las Batuecas,” and later “Las Hurdes,” is actually home to a group of pagan wild men who had lived in total isolation from the rest of the Iberian Peninsula for hundreds of years. In Feijoo’s estimation, one of the primary culprits in the perpetuation of this story was none other than Félix Lope de Vega y Carpio, whose play, *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* (1604-1614), staged the region’s accidental discovery by a pair of lovers fleeing the wrath of the titular Duke. Feijoo takes pains to refute these “ficciones poéticas para

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3 Quoted in Rodríguez de la Flor 82.

4 Most critics agree that *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* was engendered during Lope de Vega’s stay at the court of Alba de Tormes in the closing years of the 16th century; however, the date of the play’s composition is less clear. Through a comparative analysis of Lope’s various metric structures, Morley and Bruerton claim that the play was written between 1598 and 1600 (260, qtd. in Vega Ramos 172). Menéndez Pelayo refers instead to the lists of Lope’s works that appear in *El peregrino en su patria* (1604), and because *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* figures only in the 1614 edition’s list, he settles on the range of 1604-1614 as the span during which it was composed (*Obras completas* XXXIII 352-53).
hacer Comedias” that allegedly took place during the reign of Phillip II (Alonso de la Madre de Dios, qtd. in Feijoo III.8, II.4). Feijoo argues that the claims of the region’s barbarity and lack of communication are baseless by referring to evidence compiled in the Crónica de la Reforma de los Descalzos de Nuestra Señora del Carmen (1683) and Tomás González de Manuel’s Verdadera relación y manifiesto Apologético de la antigüedad de las Batuecas (1693); in addition, he reminds the reader of trade routes’ proximity to the area and the unavoidability of occasional contact between nearby towns and Las Batuecas (III.11, IV.12-19). And yet, despite texts like Feijoo’s and the works he cites, those beliefs were engendered and persisted.

Feijoo was right to assert that Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba played a crucial role in the dissemination of the fábula he wished to dispel. Lope’s play depicts the discovery of an isolated portion of Spain and its “barbarous” inhabitants, although not in the late 16th century, but rather in the first months of 1492, while Columbus thought he was en route to the Orient and mere weeks after the Catholic Kings retook Granada. After their unauthorized marriage earns them the scorn of the Duke of Alba, courtiers Don Juan and Brianda flee Alba de Tormes and seek refuge in the wilderness of Las Batuecas. Once there, the lovers realize that the batuecos are aware of nothing beyond the mountains that bound their valley home. They speak an archaic language, live without king, law, or Catholicism, and at the start of the play, they believe themselves to be alone in the world. Eventually, through the batuecos’ own testimony and the examination of an archeological discovery, the valley-dwellers are revealed to be descendants of the Christian Goths who fled Islamic invaders in the 8th century. After Brianda explains her way of life to the batuecos, her servant, Mendo, tries to escape the confines of the valley.
In the process, he initiates a series of events that culminates in the Duke and his retinue being made aware of the region as well. The *comedia* ends with the Duke baptizing the batuecos and offering them civil and religious protection as his subjects.

Ever since *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* was written, it has been subjected to plenty of criticism. In addition to the four centuries’ worth of projects much like Feijoo’s, more contemporary critical work has consisted of particular theses regarding the *comedia*’s dissemination of various ideological tenets. Generally, these analyses address issues of sovereignty, cultural identity and Catholicism, all of which are wrapped up in the Conquest and colonization of the Americas. The parallels between the “discovery” of Las Batuecas and the “discovery” of the so-called “New World” are many, and critics such as Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, María José Vega Ramos and Fernando Rodríguez de la Flor enumerate them comprehensively. According to Menéndez Pelayo, Lope’s *El Nuevo Mundo descubierto por Cristóbal Colón* (1604-1614) and *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* take on similar subject matter, but the former work is properly epic, whereas the latter is a parody (*Obras completas* XXXIII 306, 367). Rodríguez de la Flor and Vega Ramos both assert the status of Las Batuecas as a microcosm of the “New World” to be colonized and Christianized, with Vega Ramos emphasizing that the Duke of Alba is portrayed as a new Columbus who offers his king “nuevos vasallos y salvajes que cristianizar y nuevas tierras en las que erigir la cruz y desterrar la idolatría” (177). Moreover, as Lope’s patron, the Duke could not help but appreciate such a favorable characterization.

In keeping with his broader claim regarding *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*, Menéndez Pelayo casts a debate amongst the batuecos regarding the best form of
government as an anticipatory parody of Rousseau’s social contract (Obras completas XXXIII 367). Titus Heydenreich disagrees, stating: “aquí no se anticipa nada y much menos en forma de parodia,” declaring instead that the batuecos’ voluntary submission to ducal authority is an integral part of the prevailing absolutism of early 17th-century Castile (96). Heydenreich stresses the importance of the erstwhile “savages” being of noble, Christian, Gothic descent; as such, the Duke’s new subjects bring much-coveted identitarian prestige to their sovereign (ibid.). Although Veronika Ryjik’s Lope de Vega en la invención de España only mentions Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba in passing, her assertion that much of Lope’s work advances the identitarian “mito neogótico” is very much in accord with Heydenreich’s thesis (9-10). Of all the critical work to have examined Lope’s play and the legends of Las Batuecas as cultural phenomena, Fernando Rodríguez de la Flor’s is the most extensive. In his thoroughgoing De Las Batuecas a Las Hurdes, Rodríguez de la Flor coincides with Vega Ramos’s emphasis on the contemporaneous context of the play’s reception, calling the region, “esa América interior” (20). Unlike Vega Ramos, however, Rodríguez de la Flor gives priority to the Discalced Carmelite order’s portrayal of Las Batuecas as an Edenic landscape, a place uniquely suited to mystical contemplation and prayer. Indeed, he goes so far as to call the valley a “lugar de lugares,” or a site of actual divine presence (14). Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba harnesses that power in a particular theatrical trope, ultimately staging the region as exactly such a place of presence.

Their specific theses aside, the aforementioned analyses all address the inception of the legendary beliefs about Las Batuecas as well as later writers’ refutation of them.

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5 Citations of De las Batuecas a las Hurdes will appear as “Rodríguez de la Flor,” and any other of his works will be cited by their titles.
Many, such as those by Maurice Legendre and Rodríguez de la Flor, adhere to Menéndez Pelayo’s claim that Lope collected folkloric narrative material during his visit to Extremadura Alta at the end of the 16th century; however, Vega Ramos contends that the similarity between ostensibly “historical” accounts and Lope’s plot are actually the sole product of the comedia’s influence, not of pre-existing beliefs about Las Batuecas: “Lope no ‘pone en comedia’ una leyenda local, sino la inversa, que es la comedia la fuente última de los testimonios no literarios sobre el descubrimiento de las Batuecas” (Vega Ramos 175). According to Vega Ramos, tracts by Juan Eusebio Nieremberg (1629), Alonso Sánchez (1633), and Fray Alonso de la Madre de Dios (1683) that relate Las Batuecas’ “discovery” are all the result of Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba (ibid.). Vega Ramos’s theory may well be correct, but as Rodríguez de la Flor notes, it is nearly impossible to confirm the precise historical moment in which the beliefs about Las Batuecas first emerged, given the loss of nearly all the sources regarding the region that these 17th-century chroniclers would have consulted—Lope’s comedia is the notable exception (“Fábula barroca” 144).

Whether the conception of Las Batuecas pre-dates Lope’s play or not, its repercussions in the popular imagination over the next several centuries are not in doubt. But what about this comedia in particular made it so effective in disseminating these beliefs? As we will see, Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba is constructed around a feature of Early Modern stagecraft that William Egginton terms the “crypt.” Among other things, this trope staged a space in which the assumed incompatibility of empirical observation and imaginative myth was rendered moot. A scholar such as Feijoo could rail against unfounded folkloric beliefs all he wanted, but much of his audience was in the thrall of
the crypt, preferring inscrutable presence to logical proofs. This analysis will show how this mechanism rendered Lope’s *comedia* so compelling; furthermore, through a combination of geographical particularity, a pleasing historical narrative and the impact of the crypt in *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*, the region itself was ultimately converted into a crypt space for Spain as a whole.

In the opening act of *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*, we find ourselves not amidst the courtiers of Alba de Tormes, but rather the batuecos of the titular region. Triso, who is something of a sage in his community, has proposed that they choose someone to be their leader. However, his suggestion is met with responses of confusion and dissent like this one, from Marfino:

Nosotros habitamos este valle,  
cerrado destos montes espesísimos,  
cuyas sierras empinan sus cabezas  
a topetar con las estrellas mismas,  
sin que jamás ninguno haya sabido  
quién fue el primero que nos dio principio.  
En esta lengua habramos, estas chozas  
nos cubren, estos árboles sustentan,  
y la caza que matan nuestros arcos.  
Si vivimos en paz sin ser regidos  
y nos habemos aumentado tanto,  
¿por qué das ocasión que nos deshaga  
alguna envidia donde nunca reina? (Lope de Vega 860).

In this passage, Marfino defines life in *Las Batuecas* and emphasizes the valley-dwellers’ patent lack of curiosity about the outside world; in fact, the mere conception of an “outside world” is impossible. For the batuecos, the “montes espesísimos” that ring their valley home are the contours of the world itself (ibid.). However, Triso forever alters
their conceptions of reality when he presents an object that suggests that there is life outside the valley. He shows the bateuocs “una espada vieja muy mohosa,” and as soon as the discovery is revealed, he leads the assembled group to the site of his find (Lope de Vega 861). When the bateuocs reach the place in question, Triso implores the crowd to break through the rocks that block their way. A batueco named Mileno obliges him, and the stage directions provide a description of how this new space should open and what it should contain:

Dan golpes con bastones, y se abra o caiga de lo alto una puerta hecha de peñas y ramos, y dentro de una cueva se ve un cadáver sobre lienzo, y la calavera será de pasta: tenga la lanza en la mano y un escudo en la otra con dos leones y dos castillos pintados, y alrededor estas cuatro letras: T. S. D. R. (Lope de Vega 864).

The bateuocs have encountered a crypt containing the remains of an unknown person, and they are quick to speculate as to the meaning of their find. Eventually, a consensus emerges that the skeleton cannot be that of a batueco because there are strange animals—“dos leones”—painted on the man’s shield (ibid.). As a result, the valley-dwellers realize that they are not alone in the world. Triso then proposes a challenge to his astonished compatriots: the man who first brings proof of life beyond the valley will rule over Las Batuecas.

This crypt is revealed in just the first act of Lope’s play, but it will continue to shape much of the action to follow. Specifically, the bateuocs cannot make sense of the letters, “T. S. D. R.” inscribed on the shield. Nor, indeed, will anyone else discover the meaning of the inscription until the comedia’s last moments, despite the earnest efforts of multiple characters. In addition, although Triso and his peers do not recognize the castles and lions adorning the skeleton’s shield, the audience would likely be familiar with
medieval Castile’s escutcheon of the same design (Vega Ramos 176). Its presence in the crypt is one first indications of a possible solution to the fundamental mystery of Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba: who are the batuecos, and how did they end up in their current state of isolation? With the opening of the crypt, Lope both poses those questions and provides the stuff of their eventual resolution.

The conclusion of Act I sees Don Juan and Brianda flee the court for the rugged isolation of Las Batuecas, and upon gaining access to the valley for the first time, she delivers a soliloquy in which “Asperísimas peñas” ring a “lóbrega habitación” of darkness and despair (Lope de Vega 876). Brianda’s assessment of the valley is clearly colored by the reason for her stay there—forced exile has not endeared the place to her—but this courtly lady also articulates the spectators’ combined fear and fascination with the land hidden behind the wall of crags she has just crossed. In addition to the intimacy and confidence established by speaking directly to the audience in a soliloquy, Brianda’s status as viewer proxy is further emphasized during first encounter with a batueco:

MILENO: ¿Mas qué es lo que vengo a ver?
BRIANDA: (¡Ay Dios!)
MILENO: Estó por fuir.
BRIANDA: (¡Qué bárbaro tan extraño! ¿Si le llamaré? ¿Qué haré?) (Lope de Vega 877).

The parentheses indicate that Brianda is speaking her lines as apartes, or asides, and because Mileno and Brianda are the only characters on stage in this scene, her seemingly rhetorical questions have only one possible recipient: the audience. By being addressed in this way, the viewers are drawn even further into their identification with Brianda. Moreover, they are privy to the fact that she is dressed as a man, something the batuecos do not notice for the vast majority of the play. As a result, a knowing, conspiratorial tone
is confirmed between the audience members and the exiled lover, who will then proceed
to explain her way of life—and, by extension, theirs—to the startled batuecos. In a series
of questions posed by Triso, Brianda describes the existence of the Duke of Alba, the
King Fernando, the state of Spain, Christopher Columbus’s expedition, the “Reconquest,”
the law, and the Catholic faith (Lope de Vega 884-87).

Once she is firmly established as a de facto representative of the audience,

Brianda asks the question that is on everyone’s mind:

BRIANDA: ¿Cómo habéis vivido aquí,
hombres, sin Dios, y sin ley?
¿Y habláis castellano así?

DARINTO: Dicen que fuyendo un rey
vino a aportar por aquí;
y que ciertos labradores,
o soldados de una guerra,
se encerraron en la sierra
que miras. (Lope de Vega 887).

After hearing from another batueco, Pelasgo, that the mountains surrounding the valley
kept it isolated from the rest of Spain, Brianda makes what will become the play’s central
assertion about Las Batuecas and its inhabitants:

Sin duda sois castellanos
de la perdición de España,
que huyendo los africanos,
cerrados desta montaña,
habitàis en estos llanos. (Lope de Vega 887-88).

In this brief statement, Brianda refers to and modifies a mythologized episode of Spanish
history. In La historia verdadera del rey don Rodrigo y la pérdida de España (1592),
Miguel de Luna claims to offer a historical recounting of the “loss of Spain” by the
Gothic King Rodrigo in 711, although it is clear his text is largely a fabrication (Ryjik 44). Miguel de Luna’s text details Rodrigo’s seduction of La Cava, daughter of don Julián, Count of Ceuta. La Cava eventually leaves Rodrigo’s court in Toledo and returns to Ceuta, where she promptly tells her father about the affair. To avenge his daughter, Count Julián forms an alliance with his erstwhile Muslim enemies—portrayed favorably by de Luna—and attacks Rodrigo, thus inaugurating the conquest of Christian Iberia.

The “perdición de España” to which Brianda refers is a morally charged modification of the “pérdida de España”—thanks to a proliferation of accounts describing these events, La Cava became the hyper-sexualized scapegoat in this episode, a temptress who brought Gothic Iberia to ruin (ibid.).

If the legendary La Cava episode precipitated the “loss of Spain,” then the Reconquest was its prophesized restitution. Indeed, old Christian refugees from Toledo were said to have settled in the mountains of Asturias, maintaining their blood purity over the course of hundreds of years before launching a counter-offensive against the Muslim inhabitants of Iberia (Ryjik 10). Together, these narratives form the basis of what Ryjik calls the “neo-gothic myth” of Spanish ethnic continuity:

A partir de las primitivas crónicas asturianas de finales del siglo IX, España se concibe como un reino que estuvo unido bajo el poder de los godos, que se desintegró con la invasión musulmana y cuya perdida unidad debe ser recuperada por los reyes cristianos, que se consideran herederos directos de la dinastía goda. (9-10).

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6 Lope was certainly familiar with the events of this narrative—his own play, El último godo, dramatized the episode, drawing heavily on Miguel de Luna’s text—but he ignores Miguel de Luna’s pro-morisco cast to the episode (Ryjik 44, Castillo 153-154). Incidentally, de Luna was eventually revealed to be one of the “translators” of the so-called “leaden books” unearthed in Granada just a few years before Lope penned Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba. The fénix may have inadvertently relied on Miguel de Luna’s legendary fabrications twice over (Castillo 152).
In her speculation as to the batuecos’ origins, Brianda has combined several immensely popular narratives. Las Batuecas, not Asturias, has sheltered the descendants of Castilian knights since their flight from invading African forces. What’s more, Lope’s play is set mere days after the retaking of Granada by the Catholic Kings, further characterizing Las Batuecas as the cradle of “pure,” unsullied Castilian cultural identity in a newly unified Iberian Peninsula.

When she makes this sweeping claim, Brianda has not yet seen the sword, skeleton or shield found in the crypt—she has only the sketches of a rumor from Pelasgo upon which to base her assumption. On the other hand, the audience has been granted a glimpse of the crypt, and it is no great leap for them to categorize the ancient Castilian crest as proof of Brianda’s rendition of the neo-gothic myth. The remainder of Lope’s play holds the audience in suspense while the rest of that archeological evidence—specifically, the inscription, “T. S. D. R.”—is interpreted. Given the implications of the neo-gothic myth, the audience would naturally be quite eager to find evidence to support it. After all, in a society dominated by statutes of blood purity and presided over by the Inquisition, the prospect of hailing from bona fide old Gothic stock was eminently desirable. Furthermore, as presented in Lope’s comedia, the evidence to support Brianda’s claim is not mere rumor, but rather the unearthed physical remains of that manifest its truth.

The spectators are not the only ones willing to perform the “conceptual gymnastics” necessary to reconcile the neo-gothic myth with their own local history (Linehan, qtd. in Ryjik 10). After Brianda has proselytized to the batuecos and driven the devil from the valley by erecting crosses, her servant attempts to escape Las Batuecas.
Mendo, having been separated from Don Juan and Brianda earlier on, hopes to return to Alba de Tormes after suffering some humorous misadventures with a lusty *serrana*. Having no other means of protection, Mendo brings the lance and shield from the crypt with him, but he soon tires and falls asleep after crossing the mountains that gird the valley. A mock-heroic group of armed shepherds charged with protecting their lands from the batuecos then stumbles upon Mendo, who then flees the scene, leaving the mysterious weapons behind. In this brief scene, the stuff of the crypt has been exported to the world outside Las Batuecas, and the group of shepherds is soon joined by none other than the Duke of Alba, who is returning home after participating in the re-taking of Granada. The “villanos,” the Duke’s entourage, and finally the Duke himself then attempt to make sense of the lance and shield that Mendo left behind. Like Brianda, they articulate the same hypothesis of the batuecos’ origins, and they also match her alacrity to believe such a story. Lucindo, one of the shepherds, declares:

\[
\text{que sin duda serán de aquellos hombres} \\
\text{que se escondieron entre aquestas peñas,} \\
\text{huyendo de los moros africanos,} \\
\text{cuando el gozo Rodrigo perdió a España. (Lope de Vega 926).}
\]

The Duke is amazed, and he responds with enthusiasm to such a possibility: “En más estimaré que verdad sea, / que todo lo que valen mis Estados” (926). Whatever the evidence from the crypt reveals, the Duke is determined that it will support the conclusion he so fervently desires to be true.

The assembled group recognizes the weapons as those of medieval Castile, and after the Duke orders a messenger to bring the shield to an expert at Salamanca, they set about determining what “T. S. D. R.” could mean. Each guess is in keeping with the
foregone conclusion of the batuecos’ noble provenance. Ramiro, the nobleman to whom Brianda was originally betrothed, declares that the letters stand for: “Tú, sólo, Dios, reinaste” (Lope de Vega 927). The Mayordomo follows Ramiro’s pious effort with his own: “…tener, saber de Dios recibe el hombre” (927). The Duke is pleased, but he reminds his servant that there is no “h” for “hombre” in “T. S. D. R.” Nevertheless, the response is acceptable because it is in keeping with what all assembled have already agreed to believe. Finally, Belardo, a comical shepherd and alter ego of Lope himself, states: “T. S. D. R., desta suerte lo entiendo: / tonto soy, Duque, remitidlo a un sabio” (Lope de Vega 928). Although the Duke agrees on both counts—that Belardo is stupid and that an expert should interpret the inscription—his actions belie that decision, for as soon as the guesses have been made, he declares:

¡Hombres de casi setescientos años,
de habitación de un profundo valle,
sin conocer a Dios, ni rey, ni leyes!
¿En qué libro se escribre mayor fábula? (Lope de Vega 928).

The Duke’s desire to believe the fabulous story is explicit, as is his willingness both to rely on and to manipulate the archaeological findings to confirm that “fábula.”

Eager to meet the descendants of medieval Gothic knights, the Duke’s retinue and the shepherds attempt to enter Las Batuecas. Don Juan encounters the advancing group and offers to act as mediator between the Castilians and the batuecos. While he is away on this diplomatic mission, Ramiro returns with word from the scholar in Salamanca. The consulted expert has rendered his verdict as to the letters’ meaning: “Teodofilo, sobrino de Rodrigo” (Lope de Vega 936). The crowd is thrilled that the skeleton’s noble lineage has been confirmed, but it would not have mattered precisely what the letters stood for—
the variety of solutions offered speaks to the interpreters’ desire to believe a flattering historical thesis, even before knowing the meaning of the material that supposedly proves it. The onlookers’ minds are made up, and when the artifacts from the crypt bolster their conviction, it becomes nearly impossible to break.

In *How the World Became a Stage*, William Egginton argues that over the course of the 15th and 16th centuries, certain changes in theater architecture, stagecraft, and performance practices gradually transformed “medieval” drama into “modern” theater. In the contexts of France and Spain, Egginton traces the shift from medieval *tableau vivant*, to the introduction of the Renaissance façade, to the “modern” stage as we know it today—a framed, “empty space of universal representation” (108). In a *tableau vivant*—outdoor performances of liturgical drama with scenes situated throughout an entire village, for example—setting corresponded to the action being performed. However, the backdrops of those scenes were eventually recreated as façades that began to frame and “flatten out” that full space of one-to-one correspondence between dramatic figures and the things to which they referred (107). With the modern stage, the plenitude of medieval drama is condensed into “pockets of presence” distinct from the abstract space of the stage (107). Egginton explains:

> These pockets of presence became the “real” anchors of the protean stage; they are the place of hard materiality, the breakdown of interpretation, the locale of magic and of miracles and, for this reason may aptly retain the name of their origin: the crypt. (107)

The crypt continued to exert the same indisputable power and presence it inherited from medieval liturgical drama, but it was re-contextualized in the spatiality of the modern stage.
Madrid’s *corrales* were prime manifestations of this new stage architecture that Egginton describes in terms of the “four spaces of theatricality”: “S0,” “the space of the audience;” “S1,” “the space of the stage;” “S2, the space of the play within the play;” and finally “S3,” “that space within which no new spaces may be opened” (105). These spaces are concentric, telescoping inwards with each successive revelation until they reach the inscrutable S3, or the crypt. With these architectural changes came conceptual ones as well—the audience had a fundamentally different experience of a dramatic performance within the theatrical spaces described above. Specifically, prior to the modern theater, a spectator would easily accept the capacity of a dramatic performer or scenery to stand in for its referent. However, the shift that Egginton describes led to the audience’s conviction that “there exists beyond the screen of appearances an essence that is somehow more real, but that is currently concealed or absent” (111). For an audience of a *comedia* such as *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*, the crypt manifested that unseen, “true” reality. Egginton elaborates: “the mise en abîme of nesting spaces that characterizes theatrical spatiality is potentially, but only potentially, infinite. In practice, there is always some ultimate interior space that cannot be opened any further” (105). The crypt is this uniquely “solid, full, impenetrable” space (105).

The crypt would only be effective if the audience recognized it, and playwrights made sure of that by establishing a set of stagecraft practices that would mark a crypt space as such. As Egginton describes, the physical design and phenomenological impact of the crypt went hand in hand:

The function of S3, the crypt, within the economy of theatricality, is to respond for this desire for substance, for presence, for the real. Like other stages of the time and since then—and like all media today that partake of the structure of the
screen and that are, hence, fundamentally theatrical—the *comedia* tried to oblige precisely that desire by making the screen multi-leveled, and opening the rear curtain or trap door in order to effect “discoveries” that, more often than not, represented the fullest, most substantial possible entities: cadavers or mutilated bodies. (111)

In *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*, Lope has crafted a quintessential crypt space in both form and content. The cave that Mileno breaks into is staged by opening a trap door from on high, revealing the skeleton and artifacts that will dominate the remainder of the play. Characters and spectators alike demand to know the particular meaning of their find, and once the expert from Salamanca confirms the supposition that all were so eager to believe, the combination of message and medium—the bauecos’ old Christian heritage and the crypt—accounts for the play’s profound influence in the years to follow.

**The crypt writ large**

Despite all empirical evidence to the contrary, Lope’s fictional history of Las Batuecas was taken as fact not only because it was a flattering story, but also because it was conveyed via the phenomenon of the crypt. Furthermore, *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* effectively transformed the valley itself into a crypt space for Castile—like its counterpart on stage, Las Batuecas was cast as a “pocket of presence” in which inscrutable presence was made manifest. First of all, the geographical features that allowed Las Batuecas to go unnoticed for so long correspond to the structure of the crypt. That is, the mountains that encircle the titular valley act much like the curtains or scenery covering the crypt space on stage. Let us recall that upon successfully gaining entrance to the cave, Mileno declares: “¡Válgame el cielo! / Parece que se viene el monte al suelo” (Lope de Vega 864). By comparing the opening of the crypt to the destruction of the
mountains that ring Las Batuecas, Mileno articulates poetica what the entirety of Lope’s play renders dramatically. Just as the batuecos encounter inscrutable presence by breaking through the “puerta hecha de peñas y ramos” that sealed the crypt, so do Brianda and her fellow Castilians transgress the “Asperísimas peñas” that hid the valley from their knowledge (Lope de Vega 864, 876). The crypt is not obscured from the characters’ and audience’s view by curtains; rather, Lope deemed that a stage door should be composed of rocks and branches, mirroring the mountain crags, or peñas, that long isolated the valley from its Castilian neighbors. Thanks to this structural correspondence between the crypt and the valley itself, Las Batuecas is primed to become a crypt space for the rest of Castile.

The Duke of Alba himself further implies that the valley will function as a crypt for its neighboring regions. After hearing that the mysterious skeleton’s Gothic identity has been confirmed, the Duke expresses his desire to honor this nephew of King Rodrigo:

Sin duda es verdad. ¡Gallardo ingenio!
¡Bien declaradas letras! Pues ver tengo
el cuerpo, y darle honrosa sepultura,
cual es digna de un príncipe cristiano,
y este escudo enviar al Rey Católico. (ibid.).

In declaring his intentions, the Duke acknowledges the power exerted by the cadaver that proves the batuecos’ noble heritage, and whether he realizes it or not, the Duke will effectively harness that power as his own by re-interring the found skeleton. At the play’s end, the Duke asserts his sovereignty over the crypt as well as the region, effectively conflating the two under his authority.

In addition to its form, each of the elements that Egginton mentions as constitutive of the crypt is well represented in Las Batuecas. Most basically, the crypt
usually houses what he terms “the fullest, most substantial possible entities: cadavers or mutilated bodies” (111). The importance of the skeleton and shield to the plot of Lope’s play has been discussed at length, both in this analysis and elsewhere. However, what has not been noted when mentioning the crypt’s contents is the remarkable claim that Darinto makes immediately after opening the cave for the first time:

En otras cuevas oscuras
hay homes desta manera;
mas como non han tenido
esas enseñas famosas,
por nuesos los he tenido. (Lope de Vega 865).

Not only have the batuecos found the body of what we learn to be a medieval Gothic warrior, but there might also be numerous others like it. At the moment when Darinto makes this startling revelation, the batuecos assume there to be some fundamental difference between themselves and the man whose skeleton they have unearthed. That is, the “homes desta manera” were deemed to be former batuecos, whereas this man with his inscribed shield is characterized as somehow “other” (ibid.). Indeed, were this cadaver not viewed as fundamentally different, the batuecos would have no reason to doubt their previous assumption that they were alone in the world, and Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba would have a very different plot. Although his compatriots largely ignore it, Darinto’s declaration has several key implications regarding Las Batuecas’ status as crypt space. To begin with, the erstwhile difference between Teodofilo’s body and the other “homes desta manera” is called into question (ibid.). Indeed, the batuecos are ultimately lauded for their genealogical isolation, which means that although they might not have shields with the same insignia, the other cadavers to which Darinto refers are of the same lineage as both the present and original inhabitants of Las Batuecas. The physical
evidence of batueco cultural history is buried in caves throughout the valley, waiting to be uncovered. The presence of these interred remains makes a crypt of Las Batuecas as a whole—it is simply a large-scale version of the crypt space that proved so powerful in Lope’s play.

In addition to the enigmatic corpse, the batuecos and their visitors must reckon with the presence of another powerful entity. While erecting crosses in order to help Christianize the batuecos, Brianda finds herself face-to-face with a real, live demon:

“Sale un demonio en forma de sátira, media máscara hasta la boca, con cuernos; hasta la cintura, un desnudillo de cuero blanco, y de la cintura a los pies, de piel, a hechura de cabrón, como le pintan” (Lope de Vega 901). The creature curses Brianda’s evangelical achievements, confirms her assertions of the batuecos’ noble origins, and then vanishes. Shortly thereafter, the creature is joined by other demons fleeing the valley for the same reason, although they do not show themselves:

Hágase dentro un gran ruido y salgan por los árboles del monte llamas.

PELASGO: ¡Válgame el sol! ¡Qué truenos! ¡Qué ruido! ¡Qué ruido!

Dentro.

[DEMONIOS:] Ya nos vamos, ya nos vamos. (Lope de Vega 904).

When the demon joins his brethren in leaving Las Batuecas, their decision causes flames to appear on stage. Although such a fiery exit may symbolize the end of paganism in the valley, it is also literal—these demons ruled Las Batuecas before Brianda’s crosses physically drove them from it, and Lope’s pyrotechnics emphasize that former presence. Before he leaves, the “demonio” tells Brianda:

Voyme porque en estos riscos
apenas hay peña alguna
donde no estén los dos palos,
que por dármelos se cruzan. (Lope de Vega 902).
The creature’s speech makes it clear that he and his fellow “demonios” are not merely allegorical representations or metaphors in the service of some didactic goal. Citing the work of Teresa Ferrer, Luis González Fernández characterizes the physical rendition of demons as satyrs as a feature of 16th-century religious theater: “se muestra todavía cercano a la tradición medieval en cuanto a la representación física de sus diablos: todos ellos aparecen ante los ojos del espectador como monstruos alados, cornudos y rabilargos” (Ferrer, qtd. in “Como le pintan” 117). The “demonios” of Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba are rendered according to the medieval dramatic sensibility described by Egginton, and although they do not appear in the crypt itself, they testify to the valley’s function as “the locale of magic and of miracles” within the Castile of Lope’s play (107). As the comedia’s reception will bear out, one result of the crypt-valley conflation is that distinctions of natural and supernatural are rendered moot in Las Batuecas.

The above episode in Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba manifests two features of the valley, each of which characterizes the region as crypt for the rest of Castile. The first is the simultaneous physical presence of the supernatural and the natural, as evidenced by the “demonios” and their flight from Brianda’s crosses. The second derives from the first; that is, Las Batuecas is “the locale of magic and of miracles” insofar as it is historically or temporally isolated from the surrounding areas (ibid.). The batuecos are remarkable not because they actively chose to reject the trappings of contemporary society in favor of some rustic ideal. Rather, they are so compelling because they are manifestly pre-modern, and it is this juxtaposition that endows Las Batuecas with such power. From their unkempt appearance, to their antiquated speech, to their ignorance of the world beyond their valley home, the batuecos are portrayed as a people lost in time, unchanged.
for hundreds of years. In his presentation of the batuecos as the Duke’s new vassals, Don Juan calls them “aquestas reliquias, / ya de los godos de España” (Lope de Vega 936). For Don Juan and the rest of the Castilians, the batuecos are living relics—a tableau vivant of Castile’s Gothic heritage (Vega Ramos 177). In fact, his declaration is more right than he knows. The proliferation of yet-unearthed crypts that Darinto mentions further attests to the batuecos as powerful relics of an idealized history, both above and below ground. Those bodies, the mountains that conceal Las Batuecas from view, the kind of events that transpire there, the place’s temporal displacement and the inhabitants themselves combine to characterize the valley as a crypt space. In the “mise en abîme of nesting spaces” staged in and implied by Lope’s play, Las Batuecas is the end of the line—an inscrutable manifestation of a noble Castilian past beyond which no further meaning can—or need—be found (Egginton 105).

The crypt’s finality notwithstanding, if we could imagine another act of Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba beyond its conclusion, we might see the Duke of Alba touring his newly acquired territory, pausing to observe his subjects at work and play. Such a sojourn would be much like that of a medieval spectator during a festival, in which he would take in the various dramatic scenes performed throughout his town or village. Just as the crypt exerts its power by contrasting the uncertainty of the modern theatrical experience with the “hard materiality” of a bygone era, the simultaneous legacy and actuality of Las Batuecas’ historical isolation effectively converts its inhabitants into a medieval tableau vivant, or a kind of dramatic living museum for outside observers. Nevertheless, what was to become of such presence once it was discovered? That is, how do the batuecos’ awareness of their uniqueness and Brianda’s efforts to “modernize”
them change the region’s role amongst its neighbors? This introduction into the Duke’s sovereignty and contemporary Castilian society ought to destroy the very isolation that rendered Las Batuecas a site of inscrutable presence to begin with, and yet it did not. Thanks to the crypt space’s power and Las Batuecas’ geographical particularity, the characterization begun by Lope’s play would withstand centuries of criticism.

**Archaeology and Authority**

*Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* was only one of many plays to utilize the trope of the crypt.⁷ Moreover, the power of the crypt space was not confined to the *comedia*—one contemporaneous archaeological “discovery” in particular evoked this force as well. In the city of Granada on March 19th, 1588, “laborers working on the demolition of a tower known as the Torre Turpiana uncovered a parchment and a collection of saintly remains” (Harris xi). Many Granadinos were elated to have found a link to their city’s old Christian past, and another discovery in 1595 would bolster their civic pride even more. In February of that year, a treasure-hunting expedition on the Sacromonte—a hill just outside the city—turned up several *plomos*, or leaden plaques, bearing inscriptions in Latin (Harris 4). Among other things, these *plomos* chronicled the fates of several first-century Christian martyrs, one of whom was St. Cecilio, the patron saint of Granada; moreover, the *plomos* claimed that Granada’s patron had died in a cave on that very hillside (Harris 5). The Granadinos, thrilled at having tangible proof of their old Christian *bona fides*, soon established the Sacromonte as a holy site, and on April 30th, 1600, “Granada’s archbishop authenticated the relics” that were unearthed in the Torre

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⁷ For example, Egginton examines the crypt space as manifest in Lope’s *Lo fingido verdadero* (see: Egginton 113-21).
Turpiana and described by the *plomos* (Harris 5-6, xi). However, after examining the twenty-two lead books that were discovered on the Sacromonte, scholars began to point out the “obvious anachronisms” and “dubious doctrinal content” of the texts’ syncretistic theological claims, and it became more and more evident that the treasured leaden books were “imaginative forgeries” and most likely the work of Granadino *moriscos* who sought to ingratiate themselves with Christian political authorities (Harris xi, 30). After an extended political struggle both for and against their authenticity, Pope Innocent XI declared the *plomos* to be heretical works in 1682 (ibid.).

Such a decisive blow against the legitimacy of the *plomos* ought to have ended their influence, but despite the papal condemnation, the Collegiate Church of the Sacromonte continued to argue for their authenticity, and even into the 20th century, their continued influence drew the ire of critics such as Menéndez Pelayo (Harris xii). The historical narrative suggested by the *plomos* is strikingly similar to the neo-gothic myth presented in *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*. As A. Katie Harris succinctly states: “Through the discourses that developed around the *plomos*…Granadinos came to locate their city upon a new historical terrain, refiguring their civic identity and imagining themselves as the legitimate heirs of an ancient Christian heritage” (xiv). Moreover, these discourses grew so rapidly and so forcefully because they presented observers with the aforementioned history by way of the crypt. Although outside the realm of the *corrales*, the perpetrators of the hoax staged the saintly relics and their authenticating texts for discovery exactly as Teodofilo’s skeleton and weapons were discovered in *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*. As it did for the Castilians and batuecos in Lope’s play, the crypt space offered the eager Granadinos the unflappable certainty they so desired via the
material presence of human remains and artifacts. The Pope’s rejection of the plomos and multiple scholars’ demonstration of their theological inconsistencies were not enough to completely dissuade those who had been so affected by their encounter with the crypt space on the Sacromonte. The forged plomos and their reception demonstrate that manipulation of the crypt space was not limited to the theater. Indeed, just such a manipulation began in Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba and went on to convert the titular region into a similar space. But transforming an entire valley into a crypt would not have been possible were it not for the place’s natural obscurity and isolation—Las Batuecas was geographically suited to the role of crypt before Lope’s play cast it as such.

On June 5th, 1599, with the Duke of Alba’s blessing, the Carmelite Order founded the “Santo Desierto Carmelitano de San José del Monte de Batuecas” monastery in Castilla la Vieja (Pablo Maroto 313). In keeping with the mystical vocation of the Discalced Carmelites’ prior, Tomás de Jesús, the Santo Desierto was designed to be not only a site of hermetic contemplation and prayer, but also a space within which to commune physically with God (Rodríguez de la Flor 28). Only the holiest of places would do for such a project, and the founders of the Santo Desierto selected Las Batuecas because its geographical seclusion was conducive to the meditation and mysticism they hoped to practice. The valley was viewed as a spiritual locus amoenus, “como lugar de maravillas naturales, en el sentido en que había escrito el Profeta Isaías, describiendo el lugar de retiro de hombres de religión” (Rodríguez de la Flor 74). That is, the Discalced Carmelites determined that Las Batuecas was home to the actual presence of the divine. Rodríguez de la Flor, summarizing this mystical conception of the valley, calls it a “lugar de lugares,” an epithet that distinctly evokes the “holy of holies” in the temple of
Jerusalem, which houses both the Ark of the Covenant and, ostensibly, the veritable presence of the divine (14). Although popular folklore diverged from the Carmelites’ conception of the valley, the same “extrañeza y retiro de estos montes, de estas vigorosas breñas” that gave rise to legends about the batuecos piqued the hermits’ curiosity as well (Fray Alonso de la Madre de Dios, qtd. in Rodríguez de la Flor 82). Before Lope’s play was ever staged, the Discalced Carmelites determined that Las Batuecas was the site of miracles, a quality due in no small part to the valley’s isolation and striking landscape.

Both within Lope’s play and then beyond it, Las Batuecas functions as a crypt, or what Egginton describes as a:

historically-past referent, a medieval tableau vivant, which marks the stopgap in a potentially infinite telescoping of interior spaces and which, perhaps, retains some of the power it once had: a power to evoke the miraculous, to make present the objects of faith (120).

Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba’s articulation of the neo-gothic myth commanded the audience’s imagination because it was grounded in this miraculous, full space of the crypt—Teodofilo’s skeleton physically and incontrovertibly manifests the batuecos’ ancient Christian lineage. Moreover, the presence of demons on stage, the untold number of entombed skeletons and the valley-dwellers’ temporal and geographical isolation render the entire region a crypt for its Castilian neighbors. As a result, much to the chagrin of critics such as Feijoo, readers and spectators saw no need to distinguish between empirical evidence, fantastic claims and literary representations when dealing with Las Batuecas. In fact, not even Feijoo himself was immune to the pull of the crypt. As he confesses before beginning his condemnation of Lope’s influence: “Esta es en suma la historia del descubrimiento de las Batuecas, a que yo di asenso mucho tiempo
como los más ignorantes del vulgo” (II.5). Even in his denunciation of *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*, Feijoo attests to the play’s persuasive legacy, and, in so doing, to the power of the crypt.
Ever since Lope de Vega dramatized Las Batuecas’ alleged “discovery” in *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* (1604-1614), the rugged region has enjoyed a kind of fabulous notoriety. However, extant criticism’s focus on competing mythical and factual characterizations of Las Batuecas does not capture the place’s significance in late-17th and 18th-century Spanish culture. Fernando Rodríguez de la Flor’s analysis of a late-18th century treatment of the region appears to be just such a reading, but it actually insinuates that there is a different, more salient lens through which Las Batuecas’ impact can be viewed—the practice of collectionism. Antonio Ponz’s *Viage de España* (1772-1794) is an extensive catalogue of Spain’s artistic treasures, and yet the text contains an entire section devoted to a description of Las Batuecas. Rodríguez de la Flor rightly questions why Ponz would include a description of the valley, given its reputation as lacking precisely the feats of art and architecture that *Viage de España* is devoted to celebrating (*De Las Batuecas a Las Hurdes* 118).

Las Batuecas merits a place in Ponz’s catalogue because two adaptations of Lope’s *comedia* had transformed the place into a collector’s item over the previous century and a half. By examining those plays—Juan de Matos Fragoso’s *El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla* (1671) and Juan de la Hoz y Mota’s *Descubrimiento de las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* (1710)—alongside *Viage de España*, this chapter goes beyond the myth/reality dichotomy to demonstrate how changes to Lope’s *comedia* inspired a shift in the valley’s role from crypt to collection during the 17th and 18th centuries. These texts altered the conception of their referent’s past and present, but they also shaped its function. The demand for Lope’s play was met by Matos Fragoso and Hoz y Mota, but
their audiences were not satisfied. People wanted a piece of this geographical analog of the theatrical crypt space, and just like so many other ancient artifacts, marvels of nature or works of art, Las Batuecas and its people were reified, commodified and placed in a collection to be admired—as Ponz’s text makes clear, that collection was none other than Spain itself.

In *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*, two lovers on the lam from the court of Alba de Tormes find themselves in Las Batuecas, a supposedly hidden, “barbarous” Iberian territory, where their misadventures lead to the region’s discovery by the Duke of Alba and a mock-heroic band of neighboring shepherds. Thanks to another discovery—that of an entombed skeleton and his inscribed shield—the *batuecos* are revealed to be the descendants of Gothic knights who sought refuge in the isolated region while fleeing invading Moorish armies in the 8th century. Finally, the valley-dwellers are Christianized, and they accept the seigniorial authority of the Duke. Lope’s *comedia* was so influential that over a century after its appearance, an Enlightenment thinker as prominent as Benito Jerónimo Feijoo felt compelled to dispel what he viewed as the play’s pernicious influence on the vulgar crowd and reputable historians alike (*Teatro crítico universal* III.8, II.4). His and other critical assessments of the region’s reputation attest to the current against which they were directed; that is, the very existence of their critiques manifest the popularity of *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*.

As argued in the previous chapter, the *comedia’s* influence was due in large part to the deployment of a certain theatrical trope: the crypt. *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* hinges on a quintessential crypt space and its contents—a cave that houses the body

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8 For a list of 17th-century texts addressing Las Batuecas, see Vega Ramos, notes 9-11 (174).
9 For a more detailed description of the crypt space, see chapter 1.
of the *batuecos*’ ancestor. The characters’ efforts to decipher the letters “T. S. D. R.” inscribed on that ancestor’s shield constitute the dramatic crux of Lope’s play. Although the discovered body’s identity is not finally determined until the *comedia*’s end, the material existence of the corpse itself is powerful. The spectator accustomed to distrusting what he or she saw on stage—one more unmasking or revelation was always theoretically possible—could take comfort in the material presence of the cadaver, both in itself and as it informed the plot of *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*. Thanks to its situation within the crypt and its indexicality, the corpse offers viewers a modicum of relief from the anxiety engendered by the “the mise en abîme of nesting spaces that characterizes theatrical spatiality” (Egginton 105). Moreover, the proliferation of buried corpses throughout the diegetic Las Batuecas in Lope’s *comedia* casts the entire region as a crypt for nearby Castile. Although those changes occur within the diegesis of *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*, another transference soon took place—audiences’ conception of the theatrical Las Batuecas bled into their understanding of its extra-theatrical referent.

Feijoo blamed the theater—and Lope specifically—for fomenting popular beliefs regarding Las Batuecas’ mythical past and present, and he was quite right to do so. Centuries later, Menéndez Pelayo would praise *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* by denigrating its adaptations: “Tuvo la desgracia…de ser torpemente refundida” (*Obras completas* XXXIII 356, 375). For Menéndez Pelayo, Lope’s prescient comedic gloss of political philosophy was nowhere to be found in the adaptations of *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*. Instead, only what Feijoo identified remained—the *comedias* were only vehicles for the perpetuation of cultural myth. Whether their model was viewed favorably
or not, the adaptations of Lope’s play have languished in critical disesteem and relative obscurity. Nevertheless, the two comedias to which Menéndez Pelayo refers—Juan Matos Fragoso’s *El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla* (1671) and Juan de la Hoz y Mota’s *Descubrimiento de las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* (1710)—were of vital importance to the perception of Las Batuecas in the years following Lope’s play. Matos Fragoso and Hoz y Mota have traditionally been relegated to the ranks of the segundones in critical histories of Spanish theater, and studies of these “second-rate” dramatists are often limited to the authors’ original comedias rather than their adaptations of previous works (Cassol and Oteiza 7, Pannarale 178-179, Domínguez de Paz 11). Neither work has garnered an extensive critical bibliography. When discussed at all, the plays are either dismissed as lacking aesthetic merit or narrowly defined as part of the mythmaking strain of Las Batuecas literature (Menéndez Pelayo 356; 375, *De Las Batuecas* 35).

María José Vega Ramos examines *El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla* and *Descubrimiento de las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* in a political context, commenting on the variations in the promises made by the Duke of Alba to his newfound vassals (Vega Ramos 171, 182-183). Fernando Rodríguez de la Flor’s reading of Las Batuecas’ restaging is the most extensive available and a key interlocutor in the present analysis. In *De Las Batuecas a Las Hurdes*, Rodríguez de la Flor aptly characterizes the skeleton, inscriptions and cave as a leitmotif running through the three comedias under discussion; however, this identification does not go far enough (45). Matos Fragoso’s and Hoz y Mota’s works did recapitulate the neo-gothic myth popularized by Lope, and the crypt did remain the site within which that narrative was staged; however, the playwrights’

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10 I will refer to Rodríguez de la Flor’s monograph, *De Las Batuecas a Las Hurdes* (1989) as “*De Las Batuecas*” and to his article, “Las Batuecas: fábula barroca, desmitificación ilustrada” (1985) as “fábula barroca.”
changes to their source material ultimately undermine their efforts to cater to their audiences’ taste for Lope’s staging of Las Batuecas.

If *El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla* and *Descubrimiento de las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* are only considered as attempts to perpetuate Las Batuecas lore, then they fall short of their goal—each adaptation’s presentation of the neo-gothic myth is obviously lacking in verisimilitude. Lope’s rendition of that myth strains credibility, but it remains within the bounds of the possible—at the very least, it is internally consistent. In the Baroque theater, it was quite common to see mythical narratives of the Iberian past brought to life; however, when an iteration of such legendary content is so outlandish as to belie its own flaws, its verisimilitude suffers as a result. The adaptations of Lope’s *comedia* lack their model’s internal consistency, thereby drawing attention to their implausibility as well as manifesting it. Nevertheless, the same changes to *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* that render the adaptations so implausible also altered the nature and impact of the crypt itself, recasting it and the valley within the framework of another contemporaneous practice—aristocratic collectionism. Taken together and in this conceptual milieu of collectionism, the adaptations’ treatments of the crypt and its contents are highly influential in spite of their absurdity. As was the case with Lope’s *comedia*, the subsequent theatrical renderings of Las Batuecas affected the reputation of its human and geographical referents, and the modifications made by Matos Fragoso and Hoz y Mota led to the valley’s turn as both a mythical-cultural collectible and collection space within Spain.

The Las Batuecas-as-crypt phenomenon was a victim of its own success. In order to offer their audiences the gratification they sought in the familiar stuff of Lope’s play, the adaptations of *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* commodified the region and its
people, casting Las Batuecas as a collector’s item. In doing so, they confused the quality that lent the crypt such presence to begin with—it’s indexicality—with a tokenized version of the valley’s mythical past and contemporaneous reputation. And yet, a modicum of indexicality remained intact thanks to the conceptual framework of the collection space, where the indexical and the mimetic were displayed side-by-side. The former category of object was prized for its anxiety-sating presence, and the latter was often sought after for its approximation of that quality. The adaptations of Lope’s play commodified and rendered its diegetic content a collectible, and Ponz’s text demonstrates that the comedias’ geographical referent experienced that shift as well.

The first adaptation

Juan de Matos Fragoso (1609-1689) spent the bulk of his professional career in Madrid, where he wrote original comedias and collaborated with other authors; however, he also showed a penchant for adaptations, many of which were almost identical to their source material (Pannarale 181-182). Written and performed in Madrid, El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla was published as part of the 1671 compilation, Parte treinta y siete de Comedias Nuevas Escritas Por Los mejores Ingenios de España (Pannarale 181, De Las Batuecas 35). The source text of El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla is readily apparent—numerous passages are reproduced verbatim from Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba. Matos Fragoso duplicates much of Lope’s plot as well, making just a few superficial changes. Isabel\textsuperscript{11} does not become pregnant, and a scene in Las Batuecas prior to the fleeing lovers’ entry into the valley is eliminated, for example. However, it is El Nuevo

\textsuperscript{11} The character, “Brianda” in Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba is named “Isabel” in both adaptations.
**Mundo en Castilla**’s revision of its source’s chief plot element that proves to be its most critical departure.

In *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*, stage directions describe the first appearance of that key element—the crypt:

*Dan golpes con bastones, y se abra o caiga de lo alto una puerta hecha de peñas y ramos, y dentro de una cueva se ve un cadáver sobre lienzo, y la calavera será de pasta: tenga la lanza en la mano y un escudo en la otra con dos leones y dos castillos pintados, y alrededor estas cuatro letras: T. S. D. R. (Lope de Vega 864)*

Deciphering the inscription on the cadaver’s shield—T. S. D. R.—is the primary dramatic force of Lope’s play. Attempts are made throughout all three acts to discern the origin and identity of the corpse, and although many characters make guesses as to each, the final word is brought from an expert at Salamanca: the letters stand for “*Teodofilo, sobrino de Rodrigo,*” which confirms that the body belongs to a Christian knight from the 8th century (Lope de Vega 936). Here, Lope imports the neo-gothic myth to Las Batuecas, dramatizing the discovery of the ultimate *cristiano viejo* for a society fixated upon religious and cultural purity.

The stage directions in Matos Fragoso’s *comedia* depict the crypt’s discovery as follows:

*Dan golpes con los baftones, y caera de lo alto una puerta hecha de peñas, y ramos, y dentro de una gruta fe descubre una estatua de mármol, con una lanza en la diestra, y un escudo en la otra, y en el escudo eftarán pintados dos leones, y eftas letras en guarifmo: VII.I.IV. (Matos Fragoso 121)*

The space’s situation in “lo alto” of the stage and its construction of “peñas y ramos” are identical to its deployment in *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*—the space is most certainly a crypt. However, a comparative inventory of each crypt’s contents reveals
several significant departures in *El Nuevo Mundo de Castilla*. For example, the letters “T. S. D. R.” do not appear at all in Matos Fragoso’s play. In their place, we find the roman numerals “VII.I.IV” (ibid.). More importantly, no cadaver is mentioned; instead, there is a marble statue grasping the lance and shield in its hands (ibid.). At this point in the plot, it appears that the crypt houses artwork and artifacts, but no human remains.

Only in the final scenes of the *comedia* is it revealed that the body of the knight had actually been in the crypt all along. In the course of asking the Duke to forgive his transgressions, don Juan declares: “Ya lleua, para reparo, / de aquel sepultado Godo, / el escudo, y lança, quando / de los pies no fe aproveche” (Matos Fragoso 141). Here, don Juan suggests that the “sepultado Godo” he mentions is a human Goth and not a marble statue (ibid.). Although statues often accompanied an entombed corpse in a crypt, they did not customarily merit tombs of their own. Don Juan’s statement implies that the statue is a sculpted depiction of and memorial to the dead knight, but the audience is left to assume that the warrior’s body has been present all along. Given the more than fifty years between the appearance of *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* and *El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla*, Matos Fragoso’s audience had most likely not seen Lope’s play themselves. However—recall Feijoo’s complaint—that *comedia* so popularized the neo-gothic myth that if a viewer had heard of Las Batuecas at all, she would probably have known the narrative staged by Lope.

Don Juan’s casual remark belies precisely this preconception of Las Batuecas held by *El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla*’s audience. Indeed, it speaks to the demand for Lope’s play, which would have provided Matos Fragoso and Hoz y Mota with a basic and powerful motivation for adapting it: paying customers. As with the seemingly
endless sequels, prequels and franchise “re-boots” that make Hollywood producers rich, these adaptations of old, successful material present viewers with a marginally novel version of what they already know and desire to experience again. This implicit project—to give theatergoers what they want, thus inspiring them to pay to see it—guides the changes made to Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba. These viewers’ knowledge of the material to be presented is the genesis of Las Batuecas’ commodification as collectible and collection space.

In addition to not mentioning the knight’s body until the play’s end, there is no doubt as to its origin. Whereas guesses as to the significance of “T. S. D. R.” occupied Lope’s characters and audience for the majority of the drama, Matos Fragoso does away with the letters, all but eliminating the suspense as to the cadaver’s identity (Lope de Vega 864). Indeed, there is no need even to name the corpse. In El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla, the body simply belongs to a Goth, and in the place of four identifying initials there is a series of roman numerals. Those characters, “VII.I.IV.” signify “7.1.4.,” which seems roughly to indicate the year of the knight’s death in the aftermath of the “pérdida de España” (ibid.). That said, “VII.I.IV./7.1.4.” is a crude concatenation of three isolated digits: the numerals “DCCXIV” properly signify “714.” Like the facts of the cadaver’s presence and provenance, the roman numerals’ significance is taken for granted. The intelligibility of Matos Fragoso’s cues depends on the audience’s familiarity with Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba’s plot, and thanks to that influence, only a rough sketch was required to designate what the viewer already assumed to be true—the valley of Las Batuecas was the setting for the neo-gothic myth.
Matos Fragoso’s changes to the crypt imply that *El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla* was geared toward an audience that both knew and demanded the Las Batuecas lore staged by Lope de Vega. And yet, Matos Fragoso failed to reproduce either of the features of Lope’s play that made it so compelling. In the original *comedia*, the crypt is more or less verisimilar, giving the neo-gothic myth a veneer of factual credibility. By contrast, the statue in Matos Fragoso’s crypt is patently absurd. How would a ragged group of fugitive soldiers have the time, materials, skill or inclination to construct a marble monument of a fallen comrade? The statue’s mere existence harms the diegetic plausibility of the crypt in *El Nuevo Mundo de Castilla*, but Matos Fragoso’s version of that space is not merely a poor imitation of its model. Whether intentionally or not, Matos Fragoso’s inclusion of the marble statue alters the trope established by Lope, casting Las Batuecas as a curated collection rather than a crypt.

**From crypt to collection**

By substituting a work of sculpture for the body of a deceased knight, Matos Fragoso seems to have done away with both the archaeological lynchpin of the neo-gothic myth and the crypt’s defining content in one fell swoop. As Egginton explains: “more often than not…cadavers or mutilated bodies” gave the theatrical crypt both its name and the presence that it provided its viewers (111). The cadaver in Lope’s crypt exerts such influence thanks to its indexicality, or its inscrutable, substantive link to the life of the Gothic knight. According to philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, an index is a signifying complex in which sign and referent share a material commonality or influence, in contrast to a mimetic likeness or an arbitrary symbolic representation of that referent.
Famous examples of the index include “the footprint, the bullet hole, the sundial, the weathervane, and photographs” (Gunning 30). Thanks to this inexorable connection, indices may prompt observers’ interpretation, but they do not require it in order to exert their influence. The index is a mute testament to its referent’s existence, as Peirce explains (and as was mentioned in the Introduction of this analysis):

This is a real thing or fact which is a sign of its object by virtue of being connected with it as a matter of fact and by also forcibly intruding upon the mind, quite regardless of its being interpreted as a sign. It may simply serve to identify its object and assure us of its existence and presence. (Peirce 4.447, 1903)

Despite categorizing it as one of several signifying complexes, the index exceeds the bounds of semiotic signification. There is something essentially a-rational about the index—it eschews determination by the intellect in favor of a brute factuality. In this way, Peirce’s concept names the kind of phenomena that Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht describes as capable of producing presence (Gumbrecht 17).

Peirce explicitly mentions only one particular category of corpse—the murder victim—as an index, but every cadaver is an index of the thoughts, words and deeds of the individual to whom it belonged—it is the undeniable material presence of a past human life (Peirce W2.53-4). Although they purport to embody varying degrees of physical connection to a saint or divine personage, holy relics such as a shroud, a lock of hair or a bone fragment are indices of a similar order (Bazin 8). Finally, the phenomenon that most overtly illustrates the mechanism by which Peirce defines an index’s operation is also the origin of the crypt’s power—the rite of the Eucharist.

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13 This is the citation format used by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy in reference to The Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition. The above citation refers to volume 2, pp. 53-54.

14 See: chapter 4 (on Las Hurdes)
In the Catholic liturgy, the miracle of the transubstantiated host is the manifestation of the divine amidst the mundane. As Gumbrecht notes, the Catholic Eucharist—as opposed to its Protestant counterparts—does not relegate the host to the status of metaphorical body of Christ; rather, God is physically present in the sacrament administered during mass (29). Even the language of the liturgy itself—“this is my body”—is quintessentially deictic (Gumbrecht 29). The priest declares the sacramental bread to be God’s body, and it is. As Egginton notes, the theatrical crypt space has its roots in the rite of the Eucharist and the reliquary nature of church altars, many of which housed saints’ remains amongst other holy objects (Egginton 53, 107). Each of these indexical phenomena—Eucharist, relic and cadaver—either informed the crypt’s formation or can be found within it. Whether archaeological, magical or miraculous, the stuff of the crypt offers the viewer presence, “forcibly intruding on the mind, regardless of its being interpreted as a sign” thanks to its indexicality (CP 4.447, 1903).

When viewed in light of the crypt’s indexicality, the statue in *El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla* is not only a blow to the verisimilitude of the narrative it ostensibly supports—the neo-gothic myth—it is a categorical shift in the kind of object featured in the crypt. Although Matos Fragoso’s stage directions give no description of the statue’s pose,15 they do indicate that it holds a shield and lance in its hands. These artifacts are not merely features of a uniform, stone statue; rather, they are the dead warrior’s possessions. Thus, the sculpture is an object of mixed composition—part mimetic representation and part archaeological trace, or indexical relic. The knight’s marble likeness grasps its human

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15 The characters do not comment on any perceived action or pathos in the statue’s pose, so we can assume that the statue is most likely seated, standing, or lying in state—a stone depiction of the human body in the same grave. No certain conclusions can be drawn—absence of evidence is not evidence of absence—but this last option seems most plausible.
referent’s weapons as if they were its own, and the batuecos who discover this mimetic-indexical object attest to its hybrid nature. Upon seeing it for the first time, Silbano declares the statue to be “más que un mármol,” and Gerarda goes so far as to characterize the marble figure—not the decaying cadaver that we eventually learn is nearby—as a “fantasma”: “Muchas fantasmas he visto, / mas ninguno deste modo, / ni que tanto atemorize” (Matos Fragoso 121). Both characters attribute an ineffable power to the sculpted figure—it frightens Gerarda, and it is somehow more than stone for Silbano. Here, the batuecos implicitly recognize a modicum of indexicality about the otherwise mimetic statue, but the categorical mélange does not seem to trouble them. Indeed, their comfort with the statue’s hybridity signals a shift in the depiction of Las Batuecas from crypt to collection, a space characterized by its admission and exhibition of the mimetic alongside the indexical.

This transition was not instantaneous, and Florian Nelle describes the process by which individuals grew to accept facsimiles of experiences of presence rather than the indices that originally produced them. In his essay, “Eucharist and Experiment: Spaces of Certainty in the 17th Century,” Nelle claims that during the 1600s, people living in western Europe sought out moments of “real experience” in an epistemologically uncertain world—a milieu much like the one that Egginton describes in How the World Became a Stage. Indeed, what Nelle calls “real experience” is achieved by beholding presence, or the certain indication of what cannot be achieved through interpretation. During this “real experience,” Nelle argues that:

[T]he only thing that is decisive is the tearing of the veil. For this is the moment in which the second nature, which one can never possess completely, appears behind
the deceptive immediate appearance of the first…The pleasure which is experienced here is comparable to the pleasure at the presence of God. (335)

Although he does not mention it by name, Nelle has described the function of the crypt on the Baroque stage. However, whereas Egginton describes that space’s capacity to sate an anxious theatergoer, Nelle contemplates what happens after those observers leave these scenes of pleasurable presence, such as a Catholic mass or a laboratory experiment.

As elaborated above, the Eucharist is quintessentially indexical, and the laboratory spectacles to which Nelle refers offer the observer presence thanks to their indexicality as well. These “experiments” were often exhibitions of a live animal’s bodily systems. For example, cutting open a dog’s chest and letting the audience behold its inflating and deflating lungs demonstrated the functioning of its respiratory system (Nelle 333). Of course, such procedures were fatal to the “subjects” involved; indeed, they were predicated on the animal’s death. The reliably repeatable, observable difference between respiring lungs and expired ones constituted the proof of their working. Such a demonstration was doubly indexical—just as the weathervane indicated the otherwise unobservable presence of the wind, so did the moving lungs indicate the flow of air upon which they depended. Also, the transition from animated body to newly deceased corpse indicated the most inscrutable of events—death itself (Nelle 335).

Nelle goes on to claim that these indexical demonstrations were so compelling that the viewer felt a “compulsion to repeat” her experience after the spectacle was over (317). In an effort to satisfy this desire, spectators flocked to Catholic masses and laboratory demonstrations; however, many viewers demanded to possess the indexical objects or phenomena that they saw at work in such spectacles. New practices arose in response to that shift, converting observable moments of presence into “aesthetic
artifact[s]” that could be manipulated by the spectator. That is, rather than stage an indexical demonstration or spectacle again and again for demanding observers, objects were created to reproduce or simulate the moment of presence that those spectacles offered (Nelle 317, 318).

As we will see, the phenomena detailed above—beholding presence staged through a trope such as the crypt; the “compulsion to repeat” that experience; and the subsequent acceptance of artificial indices designed to simulate such presence—converge in the practice of collectionism, which was devoted to the possession of indexical objects and their derivative simulations alike. The theatrical adaptations of Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba are most significant in their invocation of those guiding concepts of collectionism. Thanks to that framework, El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla and Descubrimiento de las Batuecas del Duque de Alba alter their geographical referent’s reputation, shifting it towards—simultaneously—that of a collector’s item and collection space for the rest of Spain. More than a century after Matos Fragoso’s play was written, Antonio Ponz would attest to that shift.

Collectionism and the index

Although royal treasuries and collections of artwork had existed since Greco-Roman antiquity, Spanish royalty and noblemen alike began in earnest to amass collections of marvelous objects around the turn of the 16th century (Coleccionismo en España 15). Items from the so-called “New World” certainly played a prominent role in such displays, but Spanish collectors were equally interested in Iberia’s past. J. Miguel Morán and Fernando Checa describe a typical collection, in which “aparecían
inscripciones, medallas, anillos, cuadros, estatuas, monedas, esferas armilares, reliquias—como la urna con las cenizas de Trajano y la cabeza de barro de don Pedro—y la habitual galería de retratos de hombres ilustres” (Coleccionismo 155). These antiquities, exotica, works of exquisite craftsmanship, busts of past heroes and religious relics were displayed side by side, making it difficult to divine a logic structuring such an eclectic collection. Nevertheless, critics assert that the objects’ singularity and the prestige associated with possessing them informed collectionist practices (Coleccionismo 140, Daston and Park 266, 285). Mimetic art objects held appeal as well, but this valuation of the singular implies collectors’ valuation of indexical objects in particular; as such, it constitutes a structuring principle of otherwise eclectic collectionist practices.

Although collections of antiquities in Spain began as displays of archaeological erudition, by the 1600s, the antique itself had become “un deocrado para la vida, y no en obje de estudio” (Coleccionismo 145). Collectors wanted to possess the material past, not study it, and a wealthy nobleman did not need to sponsor an archaeological expedition in order to obtain ruins or saintly relics. Rather, he could simply purchase the objects that others had unearthed and add them to his collection (Coleccionismo 140). As described above, human remains such as Trajan’s ashes or the head of don Pedro are fundamentally indexical. However, as illustrated by the forged leaden books that were buried and later “discovered” near Granada in 1598, such objects were often of questionable origin.16

The rarity that made such indexical objects so valuable also limited a collector’s ability to obtain them. As a result, artificial indices and derivative simulations of presence-producing phenomena were often accepted in place of the genuine article. If the

16 See chapter 1.
deceit were discovered, such an explicitly counterfeit index would be at odds with the crypt’s expressed function—to relieve spectators of the anxiety that other such simulations had engendered. However, these derivatives were not the collection’s undoing; in fact, not only did they co-exist with mimetic works of art and natural wonders in cabinets of curiosities and aristocratic collections, they were sought after in their own right. In *Wonders and the Orders of Nature*, Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park’s exhaustive study of Early Modern cultural and philosophical conceptions of the natural and the artificial, the authors describe several items often included in 17th-century European collections: artificial imitations of natural wonders and images *contrafactum* [sic] (*Wonders* 285-286). As to the former, Daston and Park demonstrate that an artisan’s imitation of nature was a coveted quality of objects such as “casts from nature in bronze, plaster or ceramic” (*Wonders* 285). Quoting the French artist and engineer Bernard Palissy’s description of a planned project, Daston and Park expand upon this claim:

> Palissy imagined that the imitation of nature would be so flawless, “so close to nature, that it will be impossible to describe,” astonishing all who beheld it. This wonder of art astonished not only because it was visually indistinguishable from nature, but also because it mimicked nature’s own workings, the ceramic casts creating forms in the same way, Palissy believed, that nature impressed fossils into stone. (*Wonders* 286)

The natural/artificial ambiguity of such objects is certainly compelling; nevertheless, when Daston and Park assert that these casts were impactful and “impossible to describe” because they “mimicked nature’s own workings,” they actually suggest that indexicality was partly responsible for their power. These impressions of animals, plants and shells share an irrefutable material connection with their models, a quality suggested but not fully articulated by Daston and Park. Furthermore, the cast’s power to astonish—that is,
to eschew interpretation and description—is also an effect that Peirce ascribes to the index. Furthermore, Palissy’s casts were imitations of a naturally indexical phenomenon—the fossil—that fuses the indexical qualities of the footprint and those of a formerly living creature’s remains. No matter how gifted the artisan, the “petrified remains of plants and animals” could not be fabricated—only the process by which that petrification occurred could be replicated, resulting in an artificial index.

The collection was a space in which indexical objects mingled with their artificial replicas, such as Palissy’s casts. Daston and Park also relate how collectors responded to the rarity of the physical objects they sought by collecting representations of them when neither the item in question nor a replica was available. Such images were distinct from contemporaneous “natural history images [that] aimed for an idealized representation that could stand in for an entire species” (Wonders 285). On the contrary, “[t]hese images contrafactum, as they were called, enjoyed an almost notarial status as exact visual records, especially of preternatural phenomena, testifying to the minutest details as well as to the bare existence of the marvel” (Wonders 285). In depicting their referents’ singularity, these images contrafactum indicated those objects’ “bare existence;” that is, despite lacking a material connection with their referents, they were deictic indications of those unique items. Once again, we see that an appetite for the indexical informs the logic of collectionism. As Nelle asserts regarding the procuress’s client, the appeal of presence was strong enough to prompt individuals to accept derivative approximations of indexicality in the absence of indexicality itself. Collectionism was directed, in part, toward satisfying this desire.

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17 Indeed, these images contrafactum presage the documentary function of a typically indexical medium: the photograph.
The “retratos de hombres ilustres” mentioned by Morán and Checa are a variation on the images *contrafactum* valued by collectors (*Coleccionismo* 155). In the absence of archaeological evidence of a celebrated king or saint, works of art depicting that person could be commissioned or bought in a similar effort to associate that figure’s reputation with its owner. As Daston and Park note: “Collectors wanted images so singular as to substitute for the actual object, as well as to certify possession” (Daston and Park 285). For example, a collector might hang a portrait of a medieval knight or king in his gallery so as to share in the represented figure’s contribution to Spanish culture. Collectionism was devoted to possessing indexical objects and their derivatives, and when reassessed in view of this project, the function of the marble statue in Matos Fragoso’s play comes into focus—the statue is absurd in the crypt, but not in the collection.

Neither *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* nor *El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla* call their crypt spaces by that name—Lope’s Gothic knight is entombed in a “cueva,” and Matos Fragoso’s statue and cadaver are found in a “gruta” (Lope de Vega 864, Matos Fragoso 121). These two spaces have much in common, but their differences speak to the influence of collectionist principles in Matos Fragoso’s play. In her study, *Heavenly Caves: Reflections on the Garden Grotto*, Naomi Miller notes that the term “grotto” issues from the same Latin root as “crypt” and is sometimes synonymous with “cave;” these commonalities notwithstanding, the cave is almost always a naturally-occurring geological formation, but the grotto can be either natural, artificial, or some mixture of the two (Miller 8).
Aside from their sacred, theatrical and architectural functions, grottoes were often collection spaces—the “artificial grotto” that Palissy envisioned as home to his nature casts is one such example, and Matos Fragoso’s “gruta” is another (Wonders 285-286). In 1671, *El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla* stages the crypt as if it were one of the many grottoes and “jardines anticuarios” that so popular during the 16th and 17th centuries in Spain (*Coleccionismo* 147). In name, form and function, Matos Fragoso’s version of the crypt can be identified as a collection space. Several decades later, Juan de la Hoz y Mota would extend that status to Las Batuecas as a whole.

**The second adaptation**

Juan de la Hoz y Mota’s adaptation of *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* offers an alternative, yet equally implausible rendering of the crypt first staged by Lope. As with *El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla*, those who judge Hoz y Mota’s *comedia* by how successfully it stages the neo-gothic myth ought to be harsh in their criticism. And yet, *Descubrimiento de las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* (1710) is not a failed dissemination of a cultural legend, but rather a successful elaboration on the crypt to collection shift staged by Matos Fragoso. In addition, this second adaptation would further the extra-diegetic valley’s assumption of its theatrical reputation. Although it seems to hew closer to Lope’s *comedia* than to *El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla*, the impact of the latter is already apparent in *Descubrimiento de las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*. The crypt’s transformation into a

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Rodríguez de la Flor notes that each play’s “gruta” hews closer and closer to the theatrical “gruta mágica” trope predominant in the 18th and 19th century. He argues that Juan Eugenio Hartzenbusch’s *Las Batuecas, comedia de majia* [sic] *en siete cuadros* (1843) is the culmination of that trend (*De Las Batuecas PAGE ##?).
collection space is continued, and the region of Las Batuecas itself is explicitly conflated with that space.

As with Lope’s and Matos Fragoso’s comedias before it, Descubrimiento de las Batuecas del Duque de Alba was performed in Madrid; unlike its predecessors—and despite Rodríguez de la Flor’s suggestion to the contrary—Hoz y Mota’s play is not a simple paean to the Duke of Alba (De Las Batuecas 53-55). The comedia begins at the court of Alba de Tormes, where the servant Isabel is in love with don Juan; however, she is also the object of the Duke’s affections. In an effort to keep her for himself, the Duke offers Isabel a sham marriage to don Juan, but the pair decides to flee to Portugal, stopping at the Peña de Francia along the way. Meanwhile, the batuecos are shown engaging in largely the same disputes staged by Lope and Matos Fragoso before discovering the crypt. Beginning with the revelation of the crypt, Hoz y Mota’s plot diverges from his precursors’. Once they find themselves in Las Batuecas, Isabel and don Juan question the valley-dwellers about their isolation and inform them of Christianity, Spain and the Monarchy, but the visitors’ news is not accepted with the alacrity of Lope’s or Matos Fragoso’s batuecos. Instead, they dialogue openly with “la Idolatría,” an incarnation of their deity—the Sun—in whose honor they plan to build a temple. Later, Isabel and don Juan are imprisoned in a subterranean cavern at la Idolatría’s behest. Only when the Duke and his company are descending upon the valley at the play’s end do the batuecos release the lovers so the pair can intervene on their behalf. La Idolatría then declares her own defeat and abandons Las Batuecas. Finally, a priest traveling with the

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19 I employ feminine pronouns in reference to “La Idolatría” strictly on the basis of the gender of the noun in Spanish.
Duke gives an authoritative reading of the crypt’s contents, and the *bataecos* are declared to be of noble Christian origin in accordance with the neo-gothic myth.

Although this ending appears to reinforce the cultural myth first imported to Las Batuecas by Lope de Vega, a change to the crypt’s contents actually undermines that narrative’s viability. Like *El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla*, *Descubrimiento de las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* fails to credibly perpetuate the neo-Gothic myth thanks to an authorial modification of the crypt’s contents. That space in Hoz y Mota’s play is described as follows:

*Dan golpes con bastones, y se abre o cae de lo alto una puerta de peñas y ramos, y dentro de una gruta se ve un cadáver vestido a lo godo con una lanza en una mano y en la otra un escudo, y en el pintados un Castillo y un león. Y arriba estas cuatro letras: T. S. D. B. y abajo, DCC.XIV.* (Hoz y Mota 1.14)

Like its precursors, Hoz y Mota’s crypt is a space situated in “lo alto” of the stage, obscured by crags and branches. Matos Fragoso’s statue is nowhere to be found—a body and its possessions are the only items found in the crypt. The proper Roman numeral notation of 714—“DCC.XIV”—replaces the crude “VII.I.IV” from *El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla*. Also, the body is described as being dressed “a lo godo,”—further archaeological evidence not present in either previous rendering of the crypt.

Despite all the evidence in support of the neo-Gothic myth, the inscriptions on the cadaver’s shield undercut that narrative. “T. S. D. B.” replaces Lope’s “T. S. D. R.,” so instead of standing for “Teodofilo, sobrino de Rodrigo,” the initials signify “Teudio, Señor De Batuecas” in Hoz y Mota’s *comedia* (Hoz y Mota 1.14; 3.13, Lope de Vega 936). Teudio, also known as Teüdis or Theudis, was an Ostrogothic king who reigned in

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20 Hoz y Mota’s 1710 manuscript paginates each act of his play separately, so my citations of *Descubrimiento de las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* will be in the form of “act #.page #” with “r” signifying the reverse side of a page.
Castile from 531-548 A.D. (Mariana 145). He may or may not have ruled over Las Batuecas as well, but for the same revisionist project that would cast him as a proto-Christian exemplar of Castilian virtue, this is an insignificant detail. Substituting this figure for an immediate relative of Rodrigo is in keeping with the aim of the neo-Gothic myth—to glorify Spain’s present by retroactively crafting and claiming its storied Christian past—but it contradicts the chronology of the narrative that Lope, Matos Fragoso and even Hoz y Mota himself stage. A king from the 6th century cannot also have died after a battle in the 8th century.

Just as Matos Fragoso did before him, Hoz y Mota manages to stage an obviously absurd version of the neo-gothic myth, and this gaffe implies that the *comedia*’s significance lies elsewhere. The few extant critical assessments of *Descubrimiento de las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* insist on its myth-making capacity. Fernando Rodríguez de la Flor, for example, emphasizes the allegorical nature of La Idolatría, deeming the play a Christian “epopeya,” a “revisión de un mito que había cobrado una singular importancia” (*De Las Batuecas* 53). The change from “T. S. D. R.” to “T. S. D. B.” is critical, and although Rodríguez de la Flor notes Hoz y Mota’s continuation of the skeleton and cave as a leitmotif in the theatrical renderings of Las Batuecas, he makes no mention of the chronological contradiction so apparent in the crypt’s contents21 (*De Las Batuecas* 55). This “singularly important” myth is certainly revised, but much to its detriment rather than to its benefit—the *comedia*’s most impactful feature is not this new religious plot line, but rather the treatment of the spaces in which that plot is set.

As described in chapter one, Las Batuecas was particularly suited to the role of crypt—the veil of mountains that obscured it from view replicated the function of the

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21 To my knowledge, no critic comments on the identity of the entombed knight in Hoz y Mota’s play.
crags and branches that guarded the theatrical crypt space. The extra-diegetic Las Batuecas is home to caves bearing prehistoric artwork, and Rodríguez de la Flor argues that these spaces and the theatrical trope known as the “gruta mágica” converge in the figure of the cave in which Isabel and don Juan were imprisoned (De Las Batuecas 54-55). However, he fails to mention that Hoz y Mota’s stage directions also characterize the knight’s tomb as a “gruta” (Hoz y Mota 1.14). Indeed, this is quite understandable—characters in Descubrimiento de las Batuecas del Duque de Alba refer rather indiscriminately to the cave-prison, the cave-temple to be built for la Idolatría, the grotto-crypt, and the valley as a whole as “gruta,” “cueva” and “sepulcro” (Hoz y Mota, 1.14; 2.6-2.6r; 3.6r). Don Juan makes this last connection most explicit, explaining to the Duke that for the fleeing Goths, “aquestos peñascos / como asilo recibieron / como tumba sepultaron” (Hoz y Mota 3.18). Las Batuecas is called a crypt, Hoz y Mota describes the knight’s crypt as a grotto, and the cave that acts as a prison is also a grotto, according to Rodríguez de la Flor. These descriptions articulate the various etymological affiliations of “grotto” outlined by Naomi Miller, and thanks to this dizzying conflation of terms, Descubrimiento de las Batuecas del Duque de Alba elides any functional distinction between the crypt, the grotto and the valley itself. Each comes to embody all of its associated spaces’ characteristics.

El Nuevo Mundo en Castilla casts Las Batuecas’ crypt as a curated grotto, one of a variety of collection spaces whose most prized possessions were indexical objects. The remote valley retains key features of a crypt, but thanks to the influence of collectionist concepts, it admits replicas, simulations and approximations of indexicality as well. Hoz y Mota then confuses the space originally devoted to producing presence via
indexicality—the crypt—with the grotto and the valley itself. Taken together, the adaptations of Lope’s play render Las Batuecas a site of presence—a collection whose living inhabitants, indexical and quasi-indexical contents are curated as possessions to be admired by theatrical spectators and Spaniards in general. Thanks to Lope, Las Batuecas became a crypt for Spain, and after Hoz y Mota—with Matos Fragoso’s interim contribution—it was treated as a collection as well.

**Closing the curtain**

Thanks to almost one hundred years of theatrical representations, the *batuecos* were rendered a cultural collector’s item and their valley home was made a collection space to be observed and claimed by Spain’s people. This conceptual frame—Spain-as-collection—was deployed and expanded upon by Antonio Ponz in his *Viage de España*. Composed and published over two decades, Ponz’s text is an epistolary account of his travels through Spain. Some critics, such as Daniel Crespo Delgado, emphasize the *Viage de España*’s developmentalist thrust alongside its epistolary conceit: “El Viaje nació del proyecto aglutinador perseguido por los Borbones y por nuestra Ilustración y que tuvo como meta la construcción de una España renovada” (38). However, the first of the voyages whose descriptions would constitute the *Viage de España* was undertaken so as to inventory the recently expelled Jesuit order’s holdings of art objects and artifacts in Andalucía (Rueda 190). Indeed, Ponz studied to be a painter—not an agronomist or economist—and it was this expertise that came to the fore, despite a generalized desire to raise Spaniards’ standard of living (Crespo Delgado 46).
As Rodríguez de la Flor states, the appearance of that region in such a project is puzzling:

En efecto, consagrado a describir el inventario de las cosas artísticamente notable que quedan en el país, no se entiende bien, bajo esta óptica, qué es lo que pretende una descripción como la de Las Batuecas, fundamentalmente basada en los elementos geográficos que peculiarizan esa extensión. (De Las Batuecas 118)

Ponz’s text manifests the impact of the three comedias’ portrayal of Las Batuecas as crypt and then collection—*Viage de España* treats the region as if it were an object in the collection that is Spain. The valley and its people were worthy of his attention not because of any artistic merit, but rather because of their codified reputation for indexicality and an approximation of presence (Crespo Delgado 48). Despite his avowed Enlightenment skepticism, the narrative composition of Ponz’s account of Las Batuecas actually reasserts the opacity and indexical potential that Lope first exploited when he staged the valley as a crypt—in that capacity, the region is more than worthy of inclusion in Ponz’s cultural catalog.

In the eighth letter of the *Viage de España*’s seventh volume (1778), Ponz addresses Las Batuecas. At the outset, he emphasizes the empirical nature of the account to follow: “Mi ejercicio es ir siempre viendo, y escribiendo” (Ponz 177-178). However, like the other letters that comprise the *Viage de España*, this one is a narrative device rather than a dispatch from the region in question—it is “una ficción. Aunque Ponz recorrió España y su trabajo se fundamentó en las notas recopiladas en tales viajes, no hay duda de que lo redactó en su gabinete en Madrid” (Crespo Delgado 83-84). Ponz’s travels through Spain and his eyewitness authority inform his text’s content, but the narrator’s journey within the diegesis is an imagined one.
In itself, such a conceit in travel literature of the 18th century is unremarkable (Crespo Delgado 84). However, the section devoted to Las Batuecas begins with the narrator excusing his very failure to travel there on his way to Portugal:

No pienso resolver la entrada en Portugal…Esta práctica de acercarme á las cosas, y apuntarlas tan de continuo, y tan de cerca, no sé si será facil en Portugal: hacer de otra manera el viaje, lo tengo por inutil á mi propósito: no obstante, tomaré consejo, y el tiempo dirá. (Ponz 177-178).

According to the opening paragraphs of this letter, the narrator does not recount his firsthand experience of the place because he has not been there. In order to give the reader the observational reporting that he cannot provide, the narrator reproduces a letter he claims to have received from a resident of Las Batuecas: “…el pais de las Batuecas, cuya descripción verá V. en la carta que sigue, y me ha escrito aquel sugeto de esta ciudad” (Ponz 181). The narrator’s letter then serves as a frame for the received description of Las Batuecas; as we will see, these nested accounts eventually come up against an impenetrable space—both narratively and geographically—creating a potent lacuna at the center of Ponz’s text.

Although this local source hails from the notoriously humble Las Batuecas, he is characterized as an eloquent and shrewd observer—traits that Ponz would happily apply to himself (Rodríguez de la Flor 118). The letter, he writes, is “un hallazgo que debemos apreciar mucho por su erudicion, y modo de pensar tan conforme al nuestro” (Ponz 181). His Enlightenment bona fides established, the narrator of the interpolated letter begins his account of Las Batuecas by situating it geographically. The batueco source relates the distances between various towns deeper and deeper within the valley until he finally reaches “el hoyo de las Urdes, ó Jurdes, parte ya del territorio conocido generalmente con
el nombre de Batuecas” (Ponz 182). This distinction will prove crucial in the centuries to come—Las Batuecas’ rusticity was often associated with utopian or Arcadian fantasies, and Las Hurdes would come to be its dystopian counterpart.22

Las Hurdes’ relative position within Las Batuecas is most striking—Las Batuecas in general is already described as “una terrible profundidad,” and Las Hurdes is the “hoyo” at its center or bottom (Ponz 181, 182). Indeed, even for a local resident such as Ponz’s batueco source, that valley proves inaccessible:

“No baxé á ellas porque mi caballo no podía caminar por veredas tan angostas. La gente se tiene por la mas inculta, y misera de toda la serranía. La angostura de sus habitaciones, sus usanzas, trages, alimentos, contratos, &c. seria largo de contar” (Ponz 196).

The author of the interpolated letter acknowledges that his own account is not based entirely on his observation of the territory or people in question—he has not seen Las Hurdes with his own eyes. Thanks to its unforgiving landscape, Las Hurdes remains the mysterious terra incognita at the core of Las Batuecas, skeptical dismissal of its mythical origins notwithstanding.

Both of Ponz’s observers approach but do not reach a space within the territories they set out to describe—Spain and Las Batuecas, respectively. The frame letter’s author fails to set foot in Las Batuecas and the second narrator fails to penetrate Las Hurdes. Of course, both figures are the creations of one author—the letter-within-a-letter trope is Ponz’s narrative device. Crespo Delgado notes that Ponz subscribed to the Horatian imperative to delight as well as instruct, and in that light, these unfolding accounts could

22 As its title suggests, this reputational shift from rural idyll to underdeveloped backwater is charted in Rodríguez de la Flor’s De Las Batuecas a Las Hurdes. My analysis engages less with the content-driven characterizations of the region and more with the ascribed ontological status of Las Batuecas—positive or pejorative associations are ultimately secondary to the region’s role as a site of presence.
merely be the function of his efforts to capture his readers’ attention (Crespo Delgado 85-86). However, if a diligent reader has reached the point at which Las Hurdes is declared to be inaccessible, then the compositional trope of the nested narratives has succeeded, leaving no reason for the author not to satisfy his reader’s curiosity. But Las Hurdes is not described—it is actively cast as the inscrutable space at the center of a series of concentric spaces, both narrative and geographical.

On stage, the crypt was the posited terminus of “the mise en abîme of nesting spaces that characterizes theatrical spatiality,” and Ponz’s unfolding accounts assign that role to Las Hurdes (Egginton 105). However, the crypt is only established, not revealed—Viage de España’s treatment of Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes draws the curtain on the latter, imbuing it with tantalizing opacity. Over a century and a half before Ponz’s text was written, Lope de Vega first established a crypt within Las Batuecas, staging its indexical contents. His successors then recapitulated those contents in terms of collectionist principles—in the space of the grotto—casting the entire valley as a collectible source of indexical presence and its approximations. By simply including Las Batuecas in Viage de España, Ponz frames the region’s importance within the catalogue of Spanish artistic patrimony-as-collection; however, Las Batuecas is not assigned any positive value thanks to its artistic or architectural achievements. Instead, Viage de España celebrates the very mechanism that first endowed it with such appeal—not its content, (the neo-gothic myth) which it seeks to disprove, but its status as a site of presence. Las Batuecas may not lay claim to grand works of art, but it is home to Las Hurdes, and in its capacity as crypt, that space is more than worthy of inclusion in Ponz’s catalog. As the batueco narrator declares, the description of Las Hurdes would be a long
one to recount, and the following chapters will examine the forms taken by attempts to do so.
A Different Kind of Magic: 
Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes in the Semanario Pintoresco Español (1839)

Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.

–Walter Benjamin
“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

Esta perspectiva produce un efecto mágico.

–J. Arias Girón
“Curiosidades naturales de España: Las Batuecas”

In the late-17th and early 18th centuries, Juan de Matos Fragoso and Juan de la Hoz y Mota staged Las Batuecas—and its reputation as crypt space—in modified, reified form for audiences who already knew of and desired it. These theatrical adaptations of Lope de Vega’s Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba (1604-1614) re-contextualize the valley within the organizing strategies of collectionism, where natural curiosities, artificial imitations of them, and mimetic artworks coexist alongside the indexical objects that help endow the crypt with its alluring presence. All these marvelous or beautiful items have something to offer their observers or owners—admiration, wonder, pride in cultural patrimony—but thanks to their inscrutable material connection with their referents, indexical items stand out as particularly compelling. Antonio Ponz’s Viage de España (1772-1794) strengthens Las Batuecas’ connections to those strategies by envisioning Spain itself as a kind of grand collection, of which the famed region is a prized piece. However, rather than stop at rehearsing the neo-gothic myth in some form or another,
Ponz reasserts the valley’s primary function as a tantalizingly opaque source of presence for its viewers.

A specific development in media technology—the theatrical crypt—was largely responsible for the popularity and appeal of the Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes areas that Ponz set out to describe. His prose account of a tour of Las Batuecas was by no means the first such text, nor would it be the last; however, it is noteworthy for manifesting in prose the same telescoping structure that leads to the crypt space on stage. In 1839, the architecture and function of the theatrical crypt were adapted to fit yet another different medium: the illustrated periodical. In the spring of that year, the Semanario Pintoresco Español published a three-part series of articles describing Las Batuecas. In these pieces, prose and graphic depictions of the region work in concert for the first time to reaffirm that place’s status as crypt space for a new generation of Spaniards, all while anticipating the workings of later media advancements—such as photography and documentary film—that would also exercise a crypt-function over their viewers.

The Semanario Pintoresco Español’s treatment of Las Batuecas deals directly with that status, and the inclusion of illustrations of the valley in the series is a response to the same kind of desire that Walter Benjamin would later describe in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”: “Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction” (Benjamin 223). This is a modern version of the collectionist impulse—in previous centuries, a decorated grotto, gallery, or cabinet of wonders would house those assorted objects that aristocratic

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23 Until the end of the 18th century, “Las Batuecas” included what is now called “Las Hurdes” as well. In this chapter, I use the former term for the whole and the latter for the smaller part: Las Hurdes. Nevertheless, the texts I analyze here are not totally consistent in that distinction.

24 I have found no graphic depictions of Las Batuecas prior to these etchings; if they are not the first such images, then they are certainly the first to be made widely available.
collectors sought to possess. In the 19th century, illustrated magazines and their reproducible prints were directed towards a similar end, but for a much wider audience: they purported to collapse the distance between observer and object, doing away with impeding layers of mediation in the process—all for an affordable price. However, Benjamin’s assertion conflates two distinct concepts: “likeness” and “reproduction”—as we will see, a mimetic representation and an indexical re-presentation of an object affect a viewer in markedly different ways. The theatrical crypt, Las Batuecas-as-crypt, and the Semanario Pintoresco Español’s feature on the region rely on the latter.

Rebecca Haidt is quite right to call the illustrated periodical one of the “media of immediacy” that flourished in the mid-19th century in Spain and throughout Europe (Haidt 19). Haidt does not mention, however, that these media could never truly achieve what they promised. They were dealing in paradox—the original object in question was not conjured up for the reader-customer. The illustrated periodical was a form of mediation that trumpeted its very immediacy, or the elimination of barriers between an apparent sign and an implied or signified referent. Thanks to Las Batuecas’ reputation as crypt—a site of precisely such un-mediated material presence—the remote valley was an ideal subject for a medium that attempted to perform a similar function. That the Semanario Pintoresco Español would devote extensive coverage to this otherwise unassuming corner of Spain makes perfect sense when one considers Las Batuecas’ legacy as crypt space.

The Semanario Pintoresco ran its three-part, observational report on Las Batuecas during the period of its highest readership ever, and only four years later, Hartzenbusch’s play—full of wizards, gnomes, and magical fountains—flopped. I argue that each work’s
fate indicates the changing perception of the place for a public that had increasing access
to the “media of immediacy” that Haidt describes. Through its prose description, its
illustrations and its seriality, the Semanario Pintoresco’s series on Las Batuecas deploys
the theatrical architecture of the crypt in a new medium and eschews the more fanciful
“magical” qualities of Las Batuecas’ legacy as crypt space that Hartzenbusch’s comedia
emphasizes. Madrid’s nascent middle-class consumers sought a reprieve from negotiating
the leaflets, broadsheets and billboards that competed for their time, attention and
income. This promised end to mediation was the true magic of Las Batuecas and of the
crypt for 1830s and 1840s Spain. The prominence and treatment of Las Batuecas in the
Semanario Pintoresco Español demonstrate that fact, while the failure of Hartzenbusch’s
comedia de magia provides a telling negative example of the same phenomenon.

Las Batuecas, at Home and Abroad

In the last years of the 18th century and the first three decades of the 19th, Las
Batuecas was the subject of diverse—occasionally competing—cultural and political
appropriations. Proponents of the region’s Arcadian, mythological appeal still clashed
with exasperated critics of that fabulous history; however, several new political and
intellectual contexts cast the debate in a new light. More and more, the intellectuals who
attacked the fantastic qualities attributed to Las Batuecas were not historians, but
geographers (Rodríguez de la Flor 142). Works such as Sebastián Miñano’s Diccionario
Geográfico Estadístico de España y Portugal (1826) sought to define and catalog the
material realities of Iberian places and their inhabitants, and Miñano, for one, would not
abide the “fábulas inventadas” associated with Las Batuecas (Miñano, quoted in
Rodríguez de la Flor 142). As Fernando Rodríguez de la Flor notes, this focus on Las Batuecas’ physical state would also play into the hands of those captivated by a romantic “vuelta al Antiguo” and the archaeological impulse it inspired (Rodríguez de la Flor 142). Geographers sought to map the valley so as to dispel utopian myths, whereas romantics in search of Rousseau’s “natural man” hoped to unearth evidence of an Arcadian past—or present.

Geographers and romantics were equally frustrated—the former in their efforts to debunk spurious claims regarding Las Batuecas and the latter in their hunt for a rustic “Edad de Oro”—and both approaches to the valley were appropriated and ruthlessly satirized by Mariano José de Larra (Rodríguez de la Flor 142). In his series of missives written under the pseudonym, “el Pobrecito Hablador,” Larra bemoans the batuecos’ illiteracy and condemns their general ignorance and apathy. Rodríguez de la Flor is quite right to assert: “Mariano José de Larra difunde desde la prensa madrileña [en 1823] el nombre de Batuecas, convertido ahora en un símbolo, valdría decir, una sinécdoque—la parte por el todo—de la vida española” (Rodríguez de la Flor 137). In her analysis of Madame de Genlis’ French novella, Les Battuécas (1816, trans. 1826, Plácido y Blanca o Las Batuecas), Ana Rueda concurs: “Las Batuecas como sinécdoque para expresar la incultura del pueblo español ejerce gran poder entre los escritores que se han abierto camino en un contexto hostil a la cultura, como bien codificó Larra…” (Rueda 191). For Rueda, those thinkers who were manifestly “hostil a la cultura [española]” were predominantly French—Montesquieu, Alexandre Laborde, the Baron de Bourgoing—and often travel writers (Rueda 191). Larra was neither, but his self-critical posture situated
him amongst those whose dealings with Las Batuecas were not colored by the impulse to advocate for Spanish culture at all costs.

In addition, Juan Eugenio Hartzenbusch’s *Las Batuecas: una comedia de magia en siete cuadros* (1843) staged the place for roughly the same *madrileño* audience as Mariano José de Larra’s prose. The valley would seem to offer the quintessential backdrop for the romantic *comedia de magia* in vogue at the time—wizards, apparitions and fanciful creatures meddled with young lovers’ fates, and great feats of technical stagecraft conjured that magic on stage like never before. Nevertheless, Hartzenbusch’s *comedia de magia* was a flop, and this lack of appeal is due to the play’s emphasis on one facet of the crypt—its status as “a place of magic and of miracles”—while another aspect of that space was more and more ascendant—its pretension to immediacy (Rodríguez de la Flor 152, Egginton 107). As we will see, the *Semanario Pintoresco*’s feature on the region plays to that aspect of the valley to great effect.

Beyond being a *cause célèbre* for proponents of geographical facts, romantic origin stories, and those who lamented the state of Spanish arts and letters, Las Batuecas served another, more explicitly political purpose. It was a “penitenciaria” for enemies of Spanish kings Carlos IV and Fernando VII—the Santo Desierto de Las Batuecas housed political exiles from 1795 until 1836, just a few years prior to the appearance of the *Semanario*’s feature in 1839 and Hartzenbusch’s *comedia* in 1843 (Rodríguez de la Flor 135). Those undesirable enough to warrant internal exile under these absolutist kings were freethinking intellectuals, “aristócratas revolucionarios y sacerdotes liberales” (Rodríguez de la Flor 135). The *Semanario Pintoresco Español*’s series of articles only briefly touches on that rich turn in the valley’s recent history, and Hartzenbusch’s play
does not do so at all. Larra does not explicitly refer to Las Batuecas’ function as site of internal political exile, but his vision of that region as a synecdoche of Spain implies that liberal intellectuals such as himself were living in exile from the rest of “enlightened” Europe.

Larra’s texts indicate that Las Batuecas was of critical import to those concerned with defining or defending Spain’s political and cultural value, whether from within our outside of its borders. However, the “Pobrecito Hablador’s” writings on Las Batuecas in the Madrid press did not go unanswered. Indeed, Larra’s foremost interlocutor and sometimes adversary, Ramón de Mesonero Romanos, weighed in on the eminently popular region as well. As publisher of the Semanario Pintoresco Español during its heyday—from 1836 until 1842—Mesonero oversaw its three-part series on Las Batuecas in 1839 (Rubio Cremades 62, 64). Surprisingly, Rodríguez de la Flor’s otherwise sweeping coverage of Las Batuecas’ status in the Spanish political and cultural imaginary during the 19th century mentions those articles only in passing. Rueda, although her stated focus on Genlis’ novel is much narrower than Rodríguez de la Flor’s, does not include them at all. This chapter will address that gap in criticism.

Before 1839, all prominent representations of Las Batuecas were either theatrical or textual—the Semanario Pintoresco Español’s series is the first widely disseminated treatment of the region to employ both prose and graphic depictions of the place. I argue that through the productive combination of its written description, illustrations, and the serial nature of the feature as a whole, the Semanario Pintoresco Español’s work on Las Batuecas is a definitive articulation of that place’s role in the cultural imaginary of mid-19th-century Spain. Las Batuecas’ status as crypt space is once again reinforced in a
distinctive cultural-historical moment, and this articulation indicates a change in what onlookers expected from that real-and-imagined space. With the increasingly widespread reproduction of the texts and images that mediated and constituted the daily lives of countless Spaniards during the 1830s and 1840s, the crypt’s power and appeal lay in its capacity to eliminate—or to pretend to eliminate—those interfering strata. The *Semanario*’s articles prioritize this characteristic of the crypt while Hartzenbusch’s *comedia* ignores it. The former’s success and the latter’s failure to appeal to similar madrileño consumers indicates those Spaniards’ narrowing conception of Las Batuecas—it was seen as a crypt space endowed with a magical quality, but not because it housed supernatural wonders; instead, it was valued almost exclusively for its unmediated presence.

**Las Batuecas and the *Semanario Pintoresco Español***

The inaugural issue of the *Semanario Pintoresco Español* appeared in April of 1936, during the throes of the 1st Carlist War and under the leadership of editor Ramón de Mesonero Romanos. He would helm the publication until 1842, and during the peak of his tenure, the *Semanario Pintoresco* commanded a following of roughly 5,000 subscribers—the most in its history (Riego 125). Under the title “Introducción,” the journal’s first essay outlines the means by which it would attempt to attract those subscribers: “Dos medios hay en literatura para llamar la atención del público; el primero consiste en escribir muy bien, el segundo en escribir muy barato”—its opening paragraphs make it clear that the *Semanario Pintoresco* will opt for the latter. (*SPE* #1,
1836, 1\textsuperscript{25}). The “Introducción” goes on to describe the benefits that this cheap access to the printed word will bring:

Muchas invenciones, muchos adelantos se han hecho en el siglo actual en otros países; pero ni las máquinas de vapor, ni los globos, ni el gas, ni los caminos de hierro, ni tantas aplicaciones útiles para la industria, han producido al pueblo mayor beneficio que las publicaciones baratas. La lectura es la base de la instrucción, la instrucción es la primera rueda de todas las máquinas, el móvil de todas las riquezas; un pueblo que no lee opondrá siempre una fuerza invencible á su prosperidad. (SPE #1, 1836, 3)

In these selections, the Semanario Pintoresco Español announces its intention to respond to the lament of Mariano José de Larra’s pseudonymous persona, the “Pobrecito Hablador,” who asked in 1832, “¿No se lee en este país\textsuperscript{26} porque no se escribe, o no se escribe porque no se lee?” (Larra 9). The “Pobrecito Hablador” goes on to answer his own question with an idealistic eulogy of a vanishing Spanish reading public, a classic example of what Azorín called Larra’s “romanticismo profundo,” or his knack for going beyond superficial description of ephemera; in other words, Larra offered what Benjamin Fraser describes as, “a layered critique of bourgeois institutions such as the State and the Spanish family” (Fraser 60). Although both the Semanario Pintoresco and Larra’s text claim that the Spanish populace would prosper if only it read more, they disagree markedly on how and what people should read. If readers are attracted to either cheap or good writing—the binary presented by the Semanarios Pintoresco’s opening line—Larra

\textsuperscript{25} The numbering of the Semanario Pintoresco Español’s issues begins anew with each new series, and because these series do not coincide directly with any particular year, I have cited them as follows: (issue number, year of publication, page range).

\textsuperscript{26} As it appears in the epistolary essay, “Carta a Andrés escrita desde las Batuecas por “El Pobrecito Hablador” (1832), “este país” refers to Las Batuecas in its capacity as synecdoche for Spain. The very mission of the Semanario Pintoresco Español, then, is implicitly framed within the cultural debate surrounding Las Batuecas’ legacy. It is no wonder that the magazine should include sustained coverage of the valley.
would opt for the latter. Unlike the *Semanario Pintoresco*’s plan to appeal to readers’ wallets, Larra would appeal to their sense of aesthetics or taste.

Despite their shared goal to increase Spanish readership in general, the “Introducción” to the *Semanario Pintoresco Español* is a far cry from Larra’s paean to the “deep” or substantive culture to which reading would grant access; rather, it is a hymn to the latest in media advancements and to the widened audience that those advancements could attract. Indeed, the *Semanario Pintoresco* would do more than mass-produce print—it would mass-produce graphic illustrations as well. In explicit imitation of foreign models such as England’s *Penny Magazine*, Mesonero’s journal would include woodcuts alongside its prose. The “Introducción” elaborates on the effect of that combination in those other publications:

De esta manera pudieron improvisar frecuentemente en medio de su narración agradables dibujos que hacen mas perceptible el objeto de que se trata, y los moldes de ellos colocados en las mismas prensas que los caracteres tipográficos, pudieron dar el inmenso número de ejemplares necesarios para venderse á precios ínfimos. (*SPE* #1, 1836, 4)

It was not merely the inclusion of visual images that mattered, but also the technological capability to produce them using the same press for all printed materials. Furthermore, the images themselves are often included in the middle of the narratives that they accompany so as to render what they describe “mas [sic] perceptible” (*SPE* #1, 1836, 4). For the *Semanario Pintoresco Español*, observation was the order of the day. In the case of Las Batuecas, the journal would offer its brand of prosaic-visual reportage on the Spanish crypt space, illuminating that site’s hidden secrets in a novel, popular medium. In this chapter, I argue that the *Semanario Pintoresco*’s feature on Las Batuecas reproduces the theatrical architecture of the crypt space, and by combining that structure with its own
media innovations—mass-produced, prose-and-image reports—it anticipates the feature of Las Batuecas-as-crypt and of the illustrated periodical that would captivate Spaniards’ imaginations for the century to come: their indexicality.

The *Semanario Pintoresco Español*’s series on Las Batuecas was published over several months in the spring of 1839. The 12th, 15th and 18th volumes27 of the magazine that year each contained multiple pages’ worth of reportage on the valley, and the second and third installments included illustrations as well. A byline following all three pieces attributes the prose of each to “J. Arias Jiron,” and the accompanying illustrations include signatures from “AVRIAL, G°,” and “V.C.” (*SPE* #12, 1839, 96; *SPE* #15, 1839, 120; *SPE* #18, 1839, 137, 140). Fernando Rodríguez de la Flor does not speculate as to the signatures’ provenance, declaring that the illustrations were anonymous; however, the initials “V.C.” most likely refer to Vicente Castelló, one of several printers working in Madrid during the time that the *Semanario Pintoresco Español* was being published there (Rodríguez de la Flor 127-29, Riego 132). Furthermore, one of his artisan colleagues was José María Avrial y Flores28 (1807-1891), a celebrated painter noted for his masterful rendering of three-dimensional perspective, both in landscapes and in theatrical set design (Peláez Martín, *Introducción*29). During the 1830s and 1840s, printing woodcut and lead-plate engravings was less specialized in Spain than in France or England; nevertheless, there was still a fundamental division of labor between the artist-engraver, or “dibujante,”

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27 Published March 24, 1839; April 4, 1839; and May 5, 1839 respectively.
28 José María Avrial’s brother, Jesús, was also an illustrator, but a much less successful one. After examining the work of each, as well as taking into account the possible transposition of “J” and “G,” in the signatures, I believe that the illustrations in the *Semanario Pintoresco Español* were done by José María Avrial, not his brother.
29 Not paginated.

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and the printer, or “grabador” (Riego 112, 133). The presence of the signatures of both a madrileño printer and an established visual artist makes it likely that the former—Vicente Castelló—printed the engravings of the latter—José María Avrial—to produce the illustrations for the Semanario Pintoresco’s feature on Las Batuecas.

The first of the magazine’s articles on Las Batuecas appeared on March 24, 1839, with the title: “Curiosidades Naturales de España: Las Batuecas.” In this initial report on the region, no drawing appeared—its prose laid the conceptual groundwork upon which those visual elements would build. Like other treatments of national, natural “curiosidades,” this article was devoted in part to debunking superstitions and “fábulas” surrounding Las Batuecas. Indeed, Arias’ prose indicates his boredom with such perfunctory denials: “Harto sabida es la fábula de Las Batuecas para detenerse en referirla…” (SPE #12, 1839, 94). Nevertheless, Arias proceeds to do just that—he offers a précis of the various fabulous beliefs about Las Batuecas’ isolation, its discovery, and most recently added to the list, its inhabitants’ barbarism. Then, in an audacious rhetorical move, he proceeds simply to displace those charges—especially the last one—onto a particular section of Las Batuecas: “Todo lo que va dicho hasta aquí conviene al territorio de las Jurdes que antes so llamaba de Batuecas…” (SPE #12, 1839, 95).

Reiterating the shift made by Antonio Ponz in 1778, Las Jurdes (or Las Hurdes) now assumes the dystopic valences of the rustic-Arcadian myths previously applied to Las Batuecas.

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30 The Spanish term “clisé” (the English “cliché”) has its origins in this same process—the word was onomatopoeia, an imitation of the sound made by the collision of lead plates used to mass-produce engravings through the printing technique known as “stereotype” (Riego 137). It is no surprise that costumbrista periodicals are often accused of forging stylized stereotypes or clichés out of different regional types—their printing techniques did precisely that.

31 For example, the Semanario Pintoresco’s piece on the “Sima de cabra,” which also appears under the heading “Curiosidades naturales de España” and is accompanied by an illustration, systematically addresses the flaws in fabulous beliefs about that natural well or cave (SPE #4, 1839, 5).
As it did for Ponz, such a change does not illuminate both Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes; rather, it merely displaces the opacity or illegibility of Las Batuecas as crypt—its inscrutability and the promise of resolution with which it tantalizes viewers—onto a specific pocket within it\textsuperscript{32}. The “mise en abîme of nesting spaces” to which Las Batuecas-as-crypt is the artificial terminus is extended, creating and leading to a “crypt within a crypt”: Las Hurdes (Egginton 105). But the \textit{Semanario Pintoresco Español}’s feature on Las Batuecas does more descriptive work than Ponz’s prose. Narrative discretion aside, Arias’ account of his descent into the hidden valley does relate what is to be observed there in its entirety. Indeed, the reader’s forced identification with the narrator’s observational perspective is essential to the effectiveness of the piece.

Arias relates the moment in which his party gains sight of Las Batuecas for the first time:

\begin{quote}
…mientras la vista se esfuerza por distinguir en un abismo profundo la vega de que hablamos [Las Batuecas], se estrella da frente y á los lados contra sierras altísimas que por una pendiente áspera y desigual, bajan hasta el riachuelo que hay en el fondo. \textit{Esta perspectiva produce un efecto mágico}. El horizonte se estrecha después á medida que se descinde, y al llegar abajo se ve solo un pedazo de cielo como pudiera desde el fondo de una caberna ó de un pozo de grandes dimensiones. (emphasis mine; \textit{SPE} #12, 1839, 95).
\end{quote}

Las Batuecas is characterized as the absolute bottom of a deep abyss, cavern or well, and just as a theatrical set’s curtains first appear closed across the mouth of the crypt, access to that point is obscured, framed and also implied by the high mountains that Arias mentions. In this description, Las Bateucas is the vanishing point for those who view it

\textsuperscript{32} In Ponz’s case, as detailed in the previous chapter, his narrators could not access all of Las Batuecas, let alone illuminate Las Hurdes as well. Both Las Batuecas and its dark heart, Las Hurdes, remained potently obscure.
from a distance as one might view stage scenery—the geographical analog to the theatrical crypt space. Once both Arias’ body and his perspective occupy the “abismo profundo” that is Las Batuecas, however, a small patch of sky forms a speck of light—again framed by the same mountains—that is now furthest from the narrator’s eye. A theatrical spectator only catches sight of the crypt from her position in the audience, but the Semanario Pintoresco’s series on Las Batuecas takes its readers on a “viaje virtual” through the Spanish crypt (Riego 138). When the narrator-observer physically descends to that furthest possible point and enters Las Batuecas, the position of the vanishing point is inverted, and this unique perspective from within the crypt “produce un efecto májico [sic]”: it creates the illusion that the conceptualized crypt space—as projected onto Las Batuecas—could be, and is, physically occupied by those who formerly could only look upon it.

This narrativized entrance into the geographical valley of Las Batuecas is an entrance into the Spanish crypt, and such a transformation of perspective produces, in Arias’ words, a magical effect. Where Ponz’s and other narrators stopped short, the Semanario Pintoresco’s does not, but this “magic” of being in the crypt is only first signaled here in prose—the entirety of the magazine’s feature on Las Batuecas performs and produces that “efecto májico.” Such magic is conjured by the medium in question as well as the subject it seeks to reproduce. According to Rebecca Haidt, the Semanario Pintoresco Español was one of the many 19th-century media “aimed at creating effects of immediacy” (19). To achieve that end, these media phenomena, such as “magic lantern exhibitions…peepshows and photography a few years later” all “used reality effects to explore tensions between what is seen, and what lies beneath the surface” (Haidt 19).
When the *Semanario Pintoresco* devoted a three-article series to the Spanish crypt space, content coincided with form, and that space was presented to reader-viewers like never before. The interplay of prose, illustrations, and the serial nature of the feature simulated for its readers what the crypt was also devoted to providing them: relief from mediation through the observation and experience of material presence.

After guiding the reader into the valley-as-crypt, Arias offers a litany of the tree species—cedar, cypress, chestnut, pine, hazelnut, arbutus—that populate and purify the air of this naturally “amenjo jardín” (*SPE* #12, 1839, 95). Then, after several more equally hyperbolic passages, Arias declares that all his efforts are wanting: “En fin es tal el efecto de los primeros momentos que no es posible delinearlo porque siempre será un reflejo muy pálido cuanto se diga de la impresión que producen” (*SPE* #12, 1839, 96). In this short, stand-alone paragraph, Arias reiterates the lament of many a poet—their language is incapable of fully capturing and portraying the thoughts, sensations and passions that they experience or imagine. In this case, however, help is on the way. The narrative ends with Arias’ assurance that his next article will include details on the party’s visit to the disentailed Carmelite monastery, the Santo Desierto de Las Batuecas.

Then, after the body of the article but before the byline of “J. Arias Jiron,” there is an italicized “NOTA,” which reads: “*En otro artículo se concluirá la descripción de LAS BATUECAS en su estado actual; y si es posible se acompañará un dibujo...*” (emphasis original, *SPE* #12; 1839, 96). This first article is prose only, it declares its own incapacity to describe its object, and in this appended note, it promises both a conclusion to its narrative and the possibility of a coming “dibujo” to better render the valley for the reader-viewer. The next installment in the series does include an illustration; however, it
is not the conclusion of the feature, but rather the second of three articles. The note states that the description of Las Batuecas will be concluded “en otro artículo,” or another article—there is no explicit mention of the three-part series that would eventually run in later issues. This ambiguity suggests two likely possibilities: either the editors of the Semanario Pintoresco Español planned two articles and then added a third due to high demand for Las Batuecas content; or, three articles were planned all along, and the “NOTA” was deliberately misleading. In this second scenario, the reader would expect a conclusion to the feature on Las Batuecas in the next article, only to find that this “final” piece was actually not final, and he would be compelled to buy the next issue in order to satisfy his curiosity.

Deploying a fundamental strategy of serial publications, Mesonero Romanos and his fellow editors would string the reader along in order to generate interest and increase sales of future editions. However, when that promised resolution is a further or deeper revelation of the Spanish crypt, the seriality of the Semanario Pintoresco’s treatment of Las Batuecas takes on the structure of its object. On stage, tropes such as the play-within-a-play can reveal that the original space of the dramatic action is not final, but rather contains another space of dramatic action within it. This first revelation generates anxiety in the spectator that further disclosures are possible, and the crypt space appears on stage as the end to this theoretically infinite series of revelations. The Semanario Pintoresco’s feature on Las Batuecas reproduces that architecture, generating anxiety, curiosity and revenue in the process. In this case, the first article in the series claims to have entered the valley-as-crypt, offering at long last a description from within it. And yet, the resolution of doubt and satisfaction of curiosity that such a piece seems to provide is shown to be
hollow—there is more to see in the crypt, and there is a better way to see it: the “dibujo” or engraved and mass-produced print illustration. The “efecto mágico” of this first-person observational account from within Las Batuecas has not yet reached its full potential. This tantalizing seriality and graphic depictions come to the aid of Arias’ prose, reproducing and enhancing the architecture of the theatrical crypt in this new medium.

**Illustrating Las Batuecas**

A reader of Arias’ first article would have to wait three weeks for the next chapter of the journey into Las Batuecas. On April 14, 1839, the 15th issue of the *Semanario Pintoresco Español*’s second series contained another entry devoted to the region, this time under the heading, “Geografía y Viages” (*SPE* #15, 1839, 118). After one column of prose devoted to “Islandia,” Arias takes up his narrative in a section titled, “Las Batuecas (segundo artículo)” (emphasis original, *SPE* #15, 1839, 118). The promised illustration does not appear until the article’s end, and before the reader reaches that point, Arias describes his party’s interaction with a friar of the Carmelite monastery. The “lego” who acts as their guide is dismayed by the current state of the Santo Desierto, and Arias peppers his account of the place’s disrepair with detailed descriptions of the physical site itself, from the crude wooden altarpieces to the humble paintings that decorate the “convento” (*SPE* #15, 1839, 118-119). He concludes this inventory by stating that, on the whole, the convent possesses nothing of artistic or architectural note, “nada de notable” (*SPE* #15, 1839, 120). This installment ends with a half-page illustration by Avrial (Figure 1).

33 However, his definition of the process by which the legacy of Las Batuecas-as-crypt was formed, and would continue to be formed, is what Bertrand Westphal calls “the literary stratifications of referential
In this first image, the view from within the valley that was characterized in the previous article as producing an “efecto májico” is reiterated here: “La posición de esta vega en el fondo de las montañas” results in “un paisage que engaña la vista” (SPE #15, 1839, 120). Only a few lines separate this assertion and Avrial’s “dibujo,” which is not so much a revelation of the interior of the Santo Desierto as a rendering of its exterior. Apart from within the valley that was characterized in the previous article as producing an “efecto májico” is reiterated here: “La posición de esta vega en el fondo de las montañas” results in “un paisage que engaña la vista” (SPE #15, 1839, 120). Only a few lines separate this assertion and Avrial’s “dibujo,” which is not so much a revelation of the interior of the Santo Desierto as a rendering of its exterior. Apart from
from the wide variety of tree species reported in Arias’ first article, the stuff of the author’s reported observations is walled off by the monastery’s exterior in Avrial’s illustration. Furthermore, a graphic match aligns the bell-tower of the monastery with the mountain peak behind it, the former seemingly nested within the latter. Such a rendering reproduces the penetration of the valley in miniature via the entrance into the Carmelite retreat. The engraving by Avrial casts this second article’s descriptions as a response to the reader’s desire to see behind both the mountains that ring Las Batuecas and the walls that encircle the Santo Desierto. The image shows a view from within one of the concentric, telescoping spaces that lead to that hidden interior, but not that interior itself. It fails to embody the perspective of Arias’ first-person report on that monastery, let alone show the objects listed in that report.

Although it does not reveal graphically all the physical details cataloged in Arias’ prose, this engraving does match another of the author’s characterizations of Las Batuecas: the landscape depicted by Avrial certainly “engaña la vista” (*SPE* #15, 1839, 120). The mountains surrounding Las Batuecas promise to reveal that space to the intrepid soul who can traverse them. Arias is a proxy for his readers in his descent into the valley, and in his first article, he solicited their identification with his own look back to the world outside Las Batuecas—the evidence of his successful entrance into the mysterious space. But once inside the valley itself, the thrill of that achievement fades, and it is replaced by the anxiety inspired by yet another veiled space: the Santo Desierto de Las Batuecas. Avrial’s “dibujo” re-focuses the viewer’s perspective, orienting it towards the still-hidden portions of the valley-as-crypt (*SPE* #15, 1839, 120). The vanishing point that Arias’ prose inverted—from the valley-as-crypt to a patch of sky
between mountain peaks as seen from within that valley—has been recast as the closed entrance to the Carmelite monastery. The “engaño,” or trick, is convincing the reader that the next revelation will be the last one, that there will ever be a truly satisfying end to the series of unveilings that these first two articles perform.

On May 5, 1839, the Semanario Pintoresco Español published its final chapter on Las Batuecas, immediately greeting the reader with this image (Figure 2).

Figure 5. "Las Batuecas" (SPE #18, 1839, 137).
The second of Avrial’s illustrations is what a film director would call an establishing shot: the valley is shown in its entirety so as to orient the viewer’s perspective before focusing in on another, more detailed portion of that space. This vantage point implies a step back from the perspective embodied by the previous “dibujo,” depicting a much smaller Santo Desierto in the middle-distance and mountains in the background. In addition, this broader vista is partially blocked by a dark landmass in the right foreground of the frame. A faceless man—presumably one of the Carmelite hermits—sits on a rocky hillside beside a cross, and in a play of chiaroscuro, both he and the cross are illuminated against the shadowy mountain. Even in the image that introduces the reader-viewer to Las Batuecas as part of “España Pintoresca,” the architecture of the crypt is at work (SPE #18, 1839, 137). Avrial’s illustration offers a glimpse of the faraway monastery and part of the mountain range that surrounds it, but it blatantly closes off almost a third of the frame from view. It piques the reader’s curiosity and anxiety as to what is hidden behind the mountainside, even though the previous article’s image had already shown that area. Liked the still-curtained crypt, Las Batuecas is defined by the fact of its hiding something, and this “dibujo” recreates that economy of revelation and obscurity.

A footnote reminds the reader that this is the third in a series of pieces on Las Batuecas, indicating the publication dates of the issues in which the previous installments appeared. As the “tercero y último” of the reports on the valley, this article bespeaks a consciousness of its seriality, of its place in a chain of successive revelations regarding the region that is its object (SPE #18, 1839, 137). Despite the opening illustration’s retreat from the position implied by the previous piece’s closing image, this will be the final chapter in the Semanario Pintoresco Español’s guided tour of the Spanish crypt.
space. Arias, on the other hand, picks up where his prose left off, describing a temple within the Santo Desierto de las Batuecas: “Un antiguo templo, desnudo de todo artificio y de riqueza arquitectónica, se eleva sencillamente en uno de los ángulos del espacioso edificio” (SPE #18, 1839, 137). This building-within-a-building reiterates the asymptotic nature of the quest for the space’s true center, and Arias’ phrasing situates the reader as one of the party in search of those discoveries: “si penetramos en el interior…” (SPE #18, 1839, 137). But the interior of Las Batuecas can never fully be penetrated, as the remainder of this article and the final illustration of the Semanario Pintoresco’s series make plain.

Arias goes on to describe the various hermits’ cells that dot the hillsides behind the walls of the Carmelite monastery, noting their rusticity and isolation. However, one “ermita” in particular stands out and merits further scrutiny:

Hay una entre todas las ermitas, una que no puede menos de llamar la atención con mas particularidad que las otras, y de provocar al mismo tiempo la reflexión y el sentimiento con una fuerza irresistible. Está construida en el tronco de un árbol: parece que el cenobita del desierto se complica en estrechar y en aproxiar la habitación que ha de ocupar durante su peregrinación en el mundo, á aquella que le espera después de haberla concluido. (SPE #18, 1839, 139).

This hermit’s dwelling, hollowed out within a tree-trunk, is described as a hybrid space that links the spheres of life and death. Arias notes the presence of a powerful *memento mori*: “Encima de la puerta hay un cráneo humano y dos huesos incrustados en el tronco, y al abrir la puerta para entrar se leen estas terribles palabras: MORITURO SATIS” (emphasis original, SPE #18, 1839, 139). The Latin inscription, “death is enough” is a written corollary to the human remains that decorate the entrance to the arboreal “celda” (SPE #18, 1839, 139). As Arias tells us, the cell’s former occupant was the hermit “Padre
Acebedo,” who renounced his worldly possessions and a promising naval career to live in the Santo Desierto at the turn of the 19th century, and who died only eight days prior to their arrival (SPE #18, 1839, 139-140). As a site of a mystical communion with God and as a week-old deathbed of its occupant, this space evokes both the physical presence of the divine and human mortality—the two founding elements of a crypt space (Egginton 107). This connection is further emphasized when the reader finishes the article to find one last illustration—a rendering of Padre Acebedo’s dwelling (Figure 3).
Figure 6. "Ermita del P. Acebedo en las Batuecas" (SPE #18, 1839, 140).
Nestled deep within the valley of Las Batuecas, inside the walls of the Carmelite monastery there, behind the temple inside that monastery and tucked in the hills beyond, this is the final stop on the Semanario Pintoresco Español’s tour of the Spanish crypt. Avrial’s illustration conveys this sense of interiority through a rounded, borderless frame. Rocks and trees are parted to reveal—yet still surround—the “celda,” whose doorway is a flat, opaque black. In the series’ journey through the region, the intervening, mediating barriers listed above have all been traversed, but at the bottom of the deep abyss first described over a month earlier, Arias and the reader find one last inscrutable field. At the center of Las Batuecas, the valley-as-crypt for Spain itself, there is a physical crypt.

**Conclusion**

The *Semanario Pintoresco Español* is one of the “media of immediacy” that Rebecca Haidt characterizes as relying on first-person observational reportage:

> One basic assumption of literary *costumbrismo* was that narrative, on-site “witness” of a described object authorized the truth-value of observation of that object. Thus *costumbrismo* utilized the device of “presence in place” to lend realism to its depictions and maximize their analogy to the truth effects of engravings and photographs as they were developing in print media at mid-century. (Haidt 26)

As Haidt notes, media like the *Semanario Pintoresco* anticipate what she calls the “truth effects of…photographs”—in “Ontology of the Photographic Image,” André Bazin describes in finer detail how this “truth effect” might operate (Haidt 26). He claims that photographs exercises an “irrational power to bear away our faith” in the physical connection between the image and its referent. This is not thanks to a mimetic likeness of representation and represented object, but rather to an indexical link between them—the
index being a signifying complex in which sign and referent share a material connection, such as an animal’s tracks or the impression made by a child’s handprint in wet cement. As mentioned above, Peirce’s indices do not require interpretation or judgment to determine the sign’s fidelity to its signified; instead, that signifying complex “forcibly intrud[es] upon the mind” by virtue of the inscrutable commonality of both its component parts (Peirce 447).

The prose of the Semanario Pintoresco’s feature on Las Batuecas invokes the authority of “on-site witness” that Haidt mentions, explicitly describing the narrator’s gaze from within Las Batuecas so as to allow the reader to identify with a previously inaccessible vantage point (Haidt 26). Furthermore, the graphic renderings of perspectives of and within that space aspire to the same impact as a photograph—to persuade the viewer to ignore the mediation at work between an image and the objects it reproduces. Combined with the serial nature of the Las Batuecas reportage, these aspects produce a potent illusion of the reader’s “presence in place,” but not by appealing to any interpretive faculty; rather, the Semanario Pintoresco Español does the opposite (Haidt 26). It overwhelms the reader-viewer with its blend of reportage, images and seriality, obliging him to ignore the basic fact of his always-mediated access to the space in question. This is the “efecto mágico” of the crypt and of the illustrated periodical’s crypt-function—to elide the ultimately impenetrable and inscrutable nature of the valley-as-crypt and the impossibility of the reader’s co-presence with the events and places depicted for him in prose and graphic illustration.

The Semanario Pintoresco Español and other “media of immediacy” rely on a sleight of hand, a self-effacing function that endows them with their influential power.
That is, all of these media—the illustrated periodical, photography and eventually documentary film—aspire to a crypt-function, or the conjuring of presence that would relieve the onlooker of any need for further interpretation. When those media took Spain’s crypt space as their object, the effect was powerful, and with the advent of documentary film, Luis Buñuel would highlight and exploit that function in his film, *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan* (1933), in which Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes-as-crypt was reproduced in harrowingly vivid—and morbid—detail for the audience that so desired it.
Luis Buñuel’s short documentary film, *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan* (1933) has long confounded and intrigued critics, who have variously categorized it as a socialist-realist call to arms, a brutal parody of ethnography and a flirtation with sadism. Some question whether the film is a documentary at all. By examining the film in light of not only its historically immediate predecessors, but also an often-neglected one—Lope de Vega’s play, *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* (1604-1614)—I will account for the facet of *Las Hurdes* that these disparate characterizations fail to include. To do so, this investigation engages in what Bertrand Westphal calls “geocriticism,” a critical practice that “studies the literary stratifications of referential space” (Westphal 170). Here, the space in question is the valley of Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes, and the key strata are Lope’s play and Buñuel’s film. Amidst the shifting semblances of the Early Modern theater for which Lope wrote, spectators often distrusted the identities they saw on stage—anther unmasking always loomed—and the “crypt space” offered inscrutable material presence as an antidote to that anxiety. *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* casts the Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes region as just such a “crypt space” for Castile, and Buñuel’s film recapitulates and critiques that role in a new temporal context. By scrutinizing these textual reconfigurations of the region as part of the same broader phenomenon, I will elucidate the aesthetically and politically contentious relationship of *Las Hurdes’* diegetic content to its human and geographical referents.
*Las Hurdes* is a twenty-seven minute, black-and-white film shot in a remote valley some 50 miles southwest of Salamanca, Spain. A few title screens inform the audience of the inhospitable terrain and harsh conditions that characterize the region, and in most versions, there is a sequence of three maps that focus in on the titular valley. After filming a violent festival ritual in the town of La Alberca, which is just outside Las Hurdes proper, the camera pans across the range of mountains that encircle the region in question. *Las Hurdes* then presents a series of ostensibly un-staged, “typical” episodes of *hurdano* life. The conservative coalition government of the Second Spanish Republic, which banned the film during the years 1934-36, was incensed by the brutality and absurdity of those sequences. However, Spanish leftists welcomed the film’s depiction of poverty and misery as a harrowing work of Soviet-style socialist realism—the communist journal *Octubre* even used stills from Buñuel’s work on the front and back covers of their inaugural 1933 issue (Mendelson 85-87). But critics were also confronted with the film’s visual allusions to Buñuel’s earlier surrealist works, *Un chien Andalou* (1929) and *L’Age d’Or* (1930), and its obvious directorial manipulations, such as the explicit shooting of a goat in order to film its “accidental” fall. Given such content, two related concerns have consistently emerged in the criticism of Buñuel’s film: to determine *Las Hurdes*’ political orientation and whether or not such images and manipulations strip it of any “documentary”—and thus, political—credibility.

With good reason, Luis Buñuel’s statements regarding his own political affiliations are often deployed by those who would place *Las Hurdes* alongside Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) in the canon of socialist realist cinema (Morris 81-82). This emphasis, however, can obscure other critical facets of Buñuel’s film.
Following the scandal provoked by the French government’s reaction to Louis Aragon’s 1931 poem, “Red Front,” André Breton’s Parisian surrealist group saw the departure of Luis Buñuel and Pierre Unik—both collaborated on the script and cinematography of Las Hurdes—from its numbers. In a letter to André Breton, dated May 6, 1932, Buñuel declares his “adherence to the PCE” (Buñuel, qtd. in Gubern and Hammond 111). Citing his correspondence with his patron, the Viscount of Noailles, Román Gubern and Paul Hammond situate Buñuel’s communist conversion some six months prior:

“Buñuel…joined the PCE during his three months’ stay in Spain in winter 1931-32” (Gubern and Hammond 98). Helen Lewis disagrees, asserting that Buñuel’s decision to distance himself from the movement was due more to Breton’s draconian demand that his followers “sign a text he had prepared committing them all to accept no other discipline but that of Surrealism” than with any rejection of surrealist aesthetics or politics themselves (Lewis 113).

Buñuel’s decision to privilege his Spanish Communist Party membership above all else is qualified in that very same letter to Breton:

The fact of my separation from its your activity does not imply the total abandonment of ALL its concepts but rather only of those that TODAY are opposed to the acceptance of Surrealism by the CP, and that, I would really like to believe, are of a formal and passing nature. (emphasis original, Buñuel, qtd. in Gubern and Hammond 112)

Although he claims to further aesthetic and political revolution via orthodox communism rather than surrealism, he also declares those projects’ differences to be superficial.34

Whether driven by a political epiphany or a simple need for creative autonomy, Buñuel

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34 In an interview given decades later, Buñuel himself would go so far as to deny ever being an official member of either the French or Spanish Communist Party: “I was a sympathizer, no more” (Buñuel 36). The documentary evidence amassed by Gubern and Hammond belies this statement.
was officially a communist by the spring of 1932, which meant the end of his participation in the Parisian surrealists’ aesthetic and political activity.

The critical assessments of *Las Hurdes’* politics generally reproduce the ambivalence of Buñuel’s letter to Breton. The film is either taken to be a doctrinaire, communist exposé of capitalism’s impact on the proletariat; or it is regarded as surpassing or problematizing that partisan message. Gwynne Edwards’ reading of *Las Hurdes* belongs to the former group—he argues that the film completes a Buñuelian “triptych,” in which *Un chien Andalou* and *L’Age d’Or* manifest the work of Freud and Hegel, respectively, with *Las Hurdes* speaking for Marx (Edwards 79). James Lastra, on the other hand, suggests that the film is far from a straightforward leftist call to arms. He claims that *Las Hurdes* “adopts and rejects both” a socialist realist celebration of the hurdanos’ humanity and a fascist excoriation of them as “societal waste”; indeed, in Lastra’s view, this “equivocation” supplies the film’s critical force (Lastra 14). Like this representative sample, critics have voiced competing positions on the politics of Buñuel’s documentary ever since its debut, and this debate continues today.

The question of the film’s politics dealt primarily with its content, and the second question—that of its “documentary” nature—addressed the medium for such content. The obvious directorial manipulations, surrealist visual allusions and parodic tone found in an ostensibly objective documentary film both demand and defy explanation. Tom Conley, Vivian Sobchack, and more broadly, James Clifford, have sought to reconcile the projects of realist documentary film and surrealist cinema. Sobchack argues that the film achieves a radical surrealist synthesis only when the viewer manages to resolve the tension created by the film’s “thesis”—its mimetic-and-indexical images—and its “antithesis”—Brahms’
*Fourth Symphony* on the extra-diegetic soundtrack and the detached voice-over narration; the entirety of *Las Hurdes* offers no such synthesis on its own, she asserts (Sobchack 71-73). Clifford, writing from within the discipline of anthropology, regards surrealism’s preoccupation with collage and so-called “primitivism” as evidence of the movement’s “ethnographic” tendencies (Clifford 539). That is, surrealist aesthetics evince a willingness to accept the new or the foreign on its own terms, not privileging the observer’s epistemic mode over that of the observed subject.

Conley echoes and modifies Clifford’s notion of “ethnographic surrealism” in his reading of *Las Hurdes*, calling the film a work of “documentary surrealism” that achieves a properly surrealist aim with more traditional cinematic tropes (Conley 176). Referring to surrealist cinema’s use of lap-dissolve as mimicking the workings of the unconscious, Conley declares:

> There is no reason to see why the same device does not advance the principles of cinematic realism. By suggesting that an undeniable flow of force and endless, timeless energy is inaccessible to the eye but ubiquitously visible, surreal cinema could make the unconscious manifest. *Land without Bread* suggests that realism accomplishes this task no less effectively than vanguard experiment. (Conley 181)

Gubern and Hammond disagree with these conciliatory assessments of *Las Hurdes*’ socialist realism and its surrealism (Gubern and Hammond 168-169). Instead, they refer to Buñuel’s avowed communism to support their characterization of *Las Hurdes* as “angrily denouncing the negligence of the monarchy and the bourgeois republic toward that miserable region” (Gubern and Hammond 166, 171). They argue that the film’s politics and documentary interventionism combine in a proletarian “rehumanization” of art rather than a surrealist dehumanization of it (Gubern and Hammond 169). Curiously, this attack on the qualification of *Las Hurdes* as a work of surrealist cinema comes
immediately after a thorough catalog of that film’s visual and thematic allusions to Buñuel’s earlier, surrealist œuvre (Gubern and Hammond 167-168). It would appear that these influences are not as easily separated as Gubern and Hammond contend.

The documentation of Buñuel’s conversion to communism is quite convincing, but Gubern and Hammond’s accompanying insistence that this shift is totally responsible for the content of Las Hurdes unnecessarily discounts the film’s profound impact in spheres beyond the political. By moving our focus from Las Hurdes, the film, to the referent that it pretends to depict, we can account for the impact omitted by the critics mentioned above. Because it privileges analysis of a space’s accumulated textual strata above any one particular depiction of that space, a geocritical approach will help define Las Hurdes’ cultural legacy more completely than ever before. When Buñuel and his crew produced Las Hurdes, they were not dealing with a typical human-geographical referent. Indeed, the film took a form that reflected its object’s unique status and recapitulated its inherited cultural function in a new historical moment. And Buñuel, ever the iconoclast, challenges the spectator to acknowledge exactly how Las Hurdes exerted such influence over him or her\(^{35}\) in the first place. In addition to its political implications, Las Hurdes confronts the viewer with the consequences of her desire for unmediated certainty in an utterly mediated world, all but accusing her of murder in the process.

The work that first cast the valley as a crypt space was produced at the turn of the seventeenth century, when Las Hurdes was known by the name of the region that now borders it: Las Batuecas. Between 1604 and 1614, the prolific Spanish playwright Félix Lope de Vega y Carpio penned Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba, a comedia that

\(^{35}\) I will refer to a spectator of Las Hurdes as “she” or “her,” however, gender has no particular role to play in what I claim to be the crypt’s or Las Hurdes’ effect on that viewer.
dramatized the “discovery” of a then-unknown valley in the heart of Iberia. In Lope’s play, the batuecos were barbarians totally ignorant of the world outside their valley home. A pair of lovers fleeing the court of Alba stumbles upon them and subsequently integrates them into contemporaneous Castilian society. After finding the skeleton of a medieval Christian knight sealed inside a cave, the batuecos are revealed to be his descendants. According to the play, the knight Teodófilo and his comrades fled advancing Muslim armies in the eighth century, taking refuge in the valley of Las Batuecas. Thanks to the discovery of the buried warrior’s bones, the batuecos could boast the much-coveted “pure blood” of old Christian heritage. In Lope’s comedia, these people were living proof of Christians’ unbroken presence on the Iberian Peninsula for hundreds of years, and given Golden Age Iberia’s singular preoccupation with racial and religious status, the titular Duke was more than willing to accept them as his vassals.

This appealing fiction—what Veronika Ryjik calls the “neo-gothic myth”—was taken as fact, and the play itself was wildly successful, spawning two adaptations over the next century, both of which would perpetuate and modify the region’s status as crypt (Ryjik 9-10).\(^{36}\) It had its critics, to be sure, but viewers were all too happy to accept the pleasing identitarian myth, inaccuracies notwithstanding. But that alone does not account for the comedia’s enduring influence; in addition to this cultural origin fantasy, Lope’s deployment of the crypt is largely responsible for the play’s lasting impact. Furthermore, the geographical referent he rendered on stage was itself transformed into just such a space for Castile as a whole. Centuries later—and not without the influence of intervening textual and photographic treatments of this phenomenon—Buñuel’s film

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\(^{36}\) For an analysis of *El nuevo mundo en Castilla* (Juan de Matos Fragoso, 1671) and *Descubrimiento de las Batuecas del Duque de Alba* (Juan de la Hoz y Mota, 1710), see chapter 2.
forms another entry in the history of Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes as the Spanish crypt, albeit populated by starkly different content.

Ever since its inception in Lope’s *comedia*, the Las Batuecas-as-crypt phenomenon has manifested an intermingling of geography, history and fiction. Rationally- and empirically-based critiques could not disentangle the historical record of Las Batuecas from the version staged by *Las Batuecas del Duque de Alba*. Such critiques simply could not contend with the inscrutable presence offered by the crypt. This initial production of the valley-as-crypt phenomenon occurred by what Bertrand Westphal defines as a “looping mechanism” in which “space informs the text that produces a fictional representation of a spatial referent” (Westphal 169). This vertiginous process of mutual and reflexive modification between geographical referent and textual rendering is what geocriticism proposes to examine, and the case of Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes exemplifies the merits of such a practice.

In order for the valley-to-crypt transference to take place at all, there had to be a modicum of geographical similarity between the physical region, the theatrical depiction of it, and the crypt space—the valley was hidden by mountains, it was remote, and it was the site of a powerful, extra-rational presence. In 1599, the Discalced Carmelite order elected to build an eremitic monastery in the valley because they were convinced that Las Batuecas housed the veritable presence of God (Rodríguez de la Flor 74). Given these beliefs and physical characteristics, the geographical region and its imagined nature would be forever confounded after Lope’s foundational stratum was laid, producing what Edward Soja terms “real-and-imagined” space (qtd. in Westphal 161). This space, too, would accumulate more strata over time, and this stratification meant that when Buñuel
and his crew made their documentary, what they filmed was no longer solely a geographical or historical referent—Las Hurdes was a cultural phenomenon.\footnote{For Joan Ramón Resina, film in general creates a “space of intuition” in which the viewer senses the material, extra-diegetic existence of the things depicted on screen thanks to the camera’s physical presence amongst them (Resina 193). However, those particular things, or \textit{pragmata}, “are extricated from the relations of immediacy and alternate with what is known, presumed, or remembered. Spatiality becomes geography and geography becomes history” (Resina 203-204). Using \textit{Las Hurdes} as an example, Resina argues that documentary film plunges the viewer into co-presence with \textit{pragmata} as both clinging to and freed from their geographical and historical particularity; that is, it manifests Westphal’s “looping mechanism” in which a geographical referent and its renderings in media are braided together over time.}

**Las Hurdes and the crypt**

Lope’s \textit{comedia} is the origin of the valley’s turn as crypt, and although \textit{Las Hurdes} projects other identitarian myths onto and into that space, Buñuel’s film attests to the valley’s conceptualization as crypt, recapitulating Las Hurdes’ unique function in its own historical context. Furthermore, thanks to its particular medium—documentary film—\textit{Las Hurdes} performs a function much like that of its object. The film begins with several title screens that precede the camera’s entrance into Las Hurdes, and Buñuel and Unik’s text describes the valley-dwellers: “The Hurdanos were unknown, even in Spain, until a road was built for the first time in 1922” (Conley 189). In one sense, this statement is patently untrue—thanks to Lope’s \textit{comedia} and the texts that followed it, the hurdanos, nés batuecos, have figured prominently in Iberian cultural consciousness since the turn of the seventeenth century. The abundance of stories about them notwithstanding, the region and its people are posited as unknown entities. Just as the crypt held the promise of hidden truth on the Early Modern stage, \textit{Las Hurdes}’ title screens establish the valley as a hidden, archaic space whose revelation will awe its spectators—this time, a positivist, scientific discourse promises to draw back the curtain on Las Hurdes.
In a statement that is soon belied by the rest of the film, the next title screen declares, “the film may be considered a study of human geography” (Conley 189). This phrase refers to Buñuel’s acknowledged inspiration for his film, Maurice Legendre’s ethnographic text, *Las Jurdes: Étude de géographie humaine* (1927). The bibliography of Legendre’s work contains an exposition of the Spanish literary treatment of Las Batuecas since the 1600s (Gubern and Hammond 155). Legendre’s report of Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes’ accumulated characterizations ranges from Lope’s *comedia* and its adaptations, to Antonio Ponz’s 18th-century travel literature, to 19th-century geographical manuals and magazine stories, to a bevy of contemporaneous journalistic and scientific reportage (Legendre 495-501). In addition to the “Bibliographical Note” at the text’s end, Legendre’s opening chapter addresses Las Hurdes’ mythical legacy, not only mentioning Lope’s play, but quoting from it as well (Legendre 3, 25-26). Having read *Las Jurdes*, Buñuel could not have been ignorant of Lope’s influence, nor would he have failed to encounter the centuries of literary stratification responsible for the real-and-imagined Las Hurdes that he confronted in 1933. These more recent sources—and their photographs in particular—provided much of what Gubern and Hammond term the “iconography” of *Las Hurdes* (Gubern and Hammond 155). However, Buñuel would reproduce and animate those photographs as indices, not as icons. As we will see, *Las Hurdes*’ use of its photographic source material interrogates the viewer’s relationship to such work and to the region and people it depicts.

After the title screens have reiterated the region’s function as crypt, a series of maps focuses in on the titular valley. A map of Western Europe gives way to one of the Iberian Peninsula, which then dissolves to a map of Las Hurdes and its environs.
However, these magnifications cannot penetrate into the region in question—they establish Las Hurdes as a space nestled within the mapped world while implying that the region has somehow remained opaque to those practices until now. On a structural level, this sequence of maps mimics the successive revelation of telescoping theatrical spaces that leads to the crypt. Next, instead of cutting directly to a shot filmed within Las Hurdes itself, the audience is treated to an ethnographic vignette filmed in the nearby town of La Alberca. The Albercan festival sequence occurs adjacent to the promised crypt, further orienting the audience while simultaneously piquing their curiosity—if something as shocking as the ritual decapitation of roosters is customary in La Alberca, a tour of Las Hurdes promises to be even more extreme.

But the camera cannot immediately plunge into the eponymous valley; instead, the viewer sees a series of ruined churches that dot the countryside outside Las Hurdes. Only then, after the audience’s presence in that space has been sufficiently established, they are shown not the interior of Las Hurdes, but rather the veil of mountains that encircle it, define it and obscure it from view. Like in Lope’s day, these mountains are the geographical analog of the “curtain or trap door” that guarded the theatrical crypt space, and their presence must be noted before entering the territory that they conceal (Egginton 111). The title screens promise that Las Hurdes will function as a crypt, the subsequent maps reproduce the spatial orientation of the theatrical crypt in a documentary film, and the first filmed shot of the titular region reveals nothing—it is an obstructed view of the valley. Before ever showing footage of Las Hurdes itself, the region has been identified, situated and framed as a crypt space.
The valley’s formal situation as crypt is reinforced by the content of Buñuel’s film. The disturbing depiction of uneven development and human misery in Las Hurdes has been detailed at length, so let us turn to a few key sequences that demonstrate the content common to both the region and the crypt. First, the hurdanos seem to be ignorant of the technological achievements of the rest of Spain and Europe. Only rudimentary agriculture is practiced, and much of the population is afflicted with ailments stemming from endemic malnutrition, such as the goiters that were already powerful symbols of the region’s poverty prior to the film’s release (Gubern and Hammond 155). The hurdanos’ lack of basic necessities was an embarrassment in the early twentieth century, during which positivist political discourses wove together scientific, technological and national progress. Although there were some—most notably Miguel de Unamuno—who sought to cast the hurdanos’ capacity for suffering as a characteristically “Spanish” virtue, the valley and its people were largely considered to be an antiquated stain on the image of a nation aspiring to modernity.

Malnutrition, disease and lack of technology are a few manifestations of the temporal displacement—first articulated in the title screen—that appears throughout Las Hurdes. In addition, the “neo-gothic myth” that Lope imported to the region in his play has been replaced by another, quite different origin story. Buñuel’s film casts the hurdanos as “Descendants…of bandits, Jews and heretics who fled into this [sic] remote mountains to escape the Inquisition” (Resina 205). No longer lapsed Catholics descended from medieval Gothic nobility, the region’s inhabitants are characterized as degenerates who were reduced to their current misery because of their own sins—habitual incest being the most severe charge against them (Lastra 62). As indicated by the title of his

38 See: Lastra, Edwards, Conley, Sobchack, Mendelson, etc.
study, *De Las Batuecas a Las Hurdes*, Fernando Rodríguez de la Flor demonstrates that in the wake of the Enlightenment’s emphasis on societal and scientific progress, the connotation of the region’s isolated rusticity was effectively inverted during the late 18th and early 19th centuries—the unspoiled, rural Las Batuecas were replaced by the underdeveloped, miserable Las Hurdes, and the inhabitants of the region suffered a similar reversal (Rodríguez de la Flor 124). Although these identitarian myths are political opposites, they both locate the valley-dwellers in a previous era. As Resina avers, each characterizes the *hurdanos* as “people trapped in a time warp” (Resina 205). Whether they are Lope’s quasi-Arcadian rustics or Buñuel’s grotesque cretins, the *hurdanos* are “living relics” of a bygone era (Vega Ramos 177). Like the theatrical crypt space, Las Hurdes is an isolated bastion of the archaic in an otherwise “modern” world—the physical manifestation of an imagined past situated within the present.

In addition to the living, breathing *hurdanos* status as physical traces or evidence of the region’s antiquity, the valley is materially populated with remains of another kind: corpses. Over the course of the film, the audience sees several dying or deceased people and animals: a sick girl, a snake-bitten man, a goat falling from a cliff, the slow demise of a beehive-laden donkey, and the staged funeral of an infant. Both Joan Ramón Resina and Sara Nadal-Melsió note the ubiquity of death as one of *Las Hurdes* defining features, and they also agree that the film’s power emanates from its production of presence, or at least the traces of it (Nadal-Melsió 197; Resina 196, 200-203). This same physical evidence of death is critical to the crypt’s manifestation of presence—the indexical nature of its “cadavers or mutilated bodies” offers onlookers a grounding glimpse of materiality (Egginton 111). After Lope’s play staged a crypt space within Las Batuecas, the region
itself took on that role, and Buñuel’s film both records the region-as-crypt phenomenon and pretends to fulfill that trope’s promise of presence. However, *Las Hurdes* pushes this link between death and presence to its extreme, exposing the potential consequences of the desire that created and sustains the crypt space.

**The Index, the crypt and the documentary**

Recalling its definition by Charles Sanders Peirce as a signifying complex that possesses a material connection to its referent, the index testifies to that referent’s physical existence; nevertheless, this production of presence is qualified by temporality. Several indices—the footprint, the bullet hole, and the photograph—are often referred to as “traces,” or the signs that remain as testaments of some previous, now inaccessible phenomenon (Gunning 30). These traces still possess a uniquely evocative power, but the presence they conjure is always already past. The weathervane and sundial, on the other hand, invoke the presence of their referents simultaneously. This difference proves critical in the assessment of filmic indexicality. Not surprisingly, the photograph emerges as the protagonist in the discussion of indexicality and the cinema. Before the advent of digital technology and computer-generated imagery, live-action cinema was essentially a concatenation of still photographs augmented by sound. As such—editing, animation and special effects aside—the qualities of the photographic index were also exhibited by film, making each film a “document of the ‘thing-in-itself’” that was captured by the camera (Resina 195).

This is not the case for fiction film, which creates a diegetic world that relates to extra-diegetic material reality in a fundamentally different way. Despite its reliance on
identical technology, fiction film must be more properly mimetic than indexical.

Unfettered indexicality is reserved for those cinematic texts whose diegeses are historical records: documentary cinema, for example (Gunning 46). When Michael Renov claims that the defining difference between fiction film and documentary is the “differing historical status of the referent” in each, he implies this split between documentary film’s fundamental indexicality and fiction film’s implementation of indexicality to lend verisimilitude to a mimetic or imagined diegesis (Resina 195). In conceptions like Renov’s, documentary’s indexicality is limited to the index-as-trace. Thanks to this past-ness, the phenomena whose presences are evoked are still essentially outside the cinematic document.

Not all critics who comment on photography’s indexical quality emphasize this conception of the index-as-trace. In 1969, Peter Wollen identified the appearance of indexicality in André Bazin’s writings on photography, but in doing so, he conflated the two types of index described above, not accounting for what Gunning describes as Bazin’s “magical” approach to photographic and cinematic indexicality (Gunning 33). In “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945), Bazin echoes Peirce’s inclusion of the photograph as an index: “The photograph as such and the object in itself share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint” (Bazin 8). However, Bazin is explicit in claiming something more for photography—an “irrational power to bear away our faith” that stems from its indexicality:

In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue
of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction. (emphasis original, Bazin 8)\textsuperscript{39}

Here, Bazin claims that photography—and, by extension, documentary film—is a uniquely powerful development in media history because it pretends to present the spectator with objects in their materiality, overwhelming the rational objections to such a possibility that inevitably arise.

In keeping with Bazin’s schema, documentary cinema moves its viewers to treat the indication of material presence as if it were material presence in its own right and then somehow obliges them not to scrutinize their own logical slip. Let me be clear: I am not claiming that documentary film tricks its spectators into believing that they are in the actual physical presence of the people, places and things whose images are depicted on screen. We need not posit the naïve or delusional spectator who grasps at projections, believing them to be their material counterparts. On the contrary, because documentary film’s indexical images are uniquely capable of invoking the presence of their referents, the cinematic text is endowed with an authority comparable to that of the referents themselves. Finally, documentary covers its tracks, wielding the power of presence it has just conjured in order to deny that such a transfer ever took place.\textsuperscript{40} Of course, this quality of documentary film lends itself to deployment in the service of political ends;

\textsuperscript{39} Gunning also notes that this characterization strips the index of its original semiotic function: “When Bazin claims that ‘photography actually contributes something to the order of natural creation instead of providing a substitute for it,’ he denies the photograph the chief characteristic of a sign, that of supplying a substitute for a referent” (Gunning 33).

\textsuperscript{40} Jacques Derrida cites Peirce’s theory of infinite semiosis as prefiguring his own deconstructive project insofar as it attacks the desire for a “transcendental signified” at the heart of the “metaphysics of presence” (Derrida 49). However, Derrida only includes Peirce’s concepts of the icon and the symbol—not the index—as part of an anticipatorily deconstructive semiotics (Derrida 48-49). Derrida’s “trace” is not the trace that forms part of Peirce’s index—the latter does not satiate an anxious spectator by providing some ultimate meaning from within an interpretive or hermeneutical framework. Rather, the index’s testament to and conjuring of presence is the manifestation of what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls the “nonhermeneutic,” that which is outside or “beyond meaning” (Gumbrecht 13, 51).
however, the incidental—and often stirring or disturbing—content of a documentary film often obscures the process that provides it with such force. This essay seeks to elucidate that procedure, its political content and implications notwithstanding.

When it executes this process, documentary cinema recapitulates the workings of the theatrical crypt space in a new medium. Centuries before the invention of photography or the cinema, the crypt harnessed indexical production and transference of presence in a fundamentally similar way. Both entities are innovations that constitute “pockets of presence” within their respective media—the theater and cinema as a whole, respectively (Egginton 107). Each deflects or overwhelms valid rational criticism through an onslaught of indisputable materiality, and Bazin articulates how the epistemological assurance provided by photographic indexicality was also produced by other, earlier phenomena:

Here one should really examine the psychology of relics and souvenirs which likewise enjoy the advantages of a transfer of reality stemming from the “mummy-complex.” Let us merely note in passing that the Holy Shroud of Turin combines the features alike of relic and photograph. (Bazin 8) Peirce would coin the term hundreds of years later, but the foundational stuff of the crypt space was indexical—the “relics and souvenirs” that Bazin mentions were kept in sacred church reliquaries, and the theatrical trope reproduced that religious architecture and influence within the confines of the early modern stage (Bazin 8).

The crypt offered the spectator a modicum of presence because it housed the on-stage indices of an off-stage world. Corpses were the most influential of those indices, and they came to be just as authoritative as the deaths they both indicated and manifested (Egginton 111, 107). That is, insofar as a corpse is the material evidence of a particular
death, the spectator transfers to the diegetic cadaver some of the authority that an extra-
diegetic, or “real” death would carry. Documentary cinema exhibits the same crypt-
function as its early modern precursor, but the theatrical crypt’s cadavers are of a
different order than those that might appear in a documentary. When a death is captured
on camera, that event and the resulting corpse brings its cinematic record closer to the
most extreme articulation of the crypt-function: the snuff film (Egginton 111). As we will
see, Las Hurdes’ most infamous sequence explicitly approaches that extreme.

They shoot goats, don’t they?

Roughly mid-way through Las Hurdes, Eli Lotar’s camera films two goats
clambering along a rocky ledge. One animal stumbles, and “an alert viewer notices a tuft
of smoke entering from the right edge of [the] frame” (Conley 194). The body of the
unfortunate creature is then shown plunging into the ravine below. This sequence, which
Tom Conley aptly refers to as “Sca ped Goats,” captures the death of an animal, and if
that were not disturbing enough, the “tuft of smoke” that appears on screen is the product
of a gunshot—Buñuel himself fired at the goat so as to provoke its fall (Conley 194;
Buñuel 31-32). When the audience is first shown the goat on the cliff-side, they are
treated to classic documentary footage—the animal’s “natural” movements demand that
the camera follow it, thereby implying the suspension of the director’s agency and
reinforcing the sequence’s indexicality from its very beginning. The narrator then
declares that the hurdan os only eat meat on the occasion that a goat falls to its death.41
That is, he describes extra-diegetic reality, or the reality whose presence Las Hurdes

41 A translation of the French voice-over narration differs. It reads: “At times, a goat falls from the rocks”
(Buñuel 31).
pretends to conjure. As a result, the spectator is primed to expect the goat to fall and thus confirm the film’s status as objective document of life in the titular valley. Right on cue, the goat slips and falls. At least superficially, the film thus seems to fulfill its role of documentary record—we are told that goats fall to their deaths in Las Hurdes, and a goat is promptly shown doing just that.

For Sara Nadal-Melsió, this sequence indicates something that occurs in Las Hurdes but that cannot be depicted in Buñuel’s—or anyone’s—film: the possibility of a goat falling so as to become food:

The staging of the goat’s fall is neither purely fictional nor entirely real. By merging fiction and reality it points to an exteriority we cannot see but need to imagine. Buñuel’s indexical realism is both a self-conscious acknowledgment of limits and a dialectical play between the figure and the frame. Indexical realism refers to an understanding of realism that is not concerned with representation or mimesis but with the ability to point deictically, as an index, to a reality that is necessarily outside the realm of representation. The target of indexical realism is not representation but presence. (Nadal-Melsió 194)

Nadal-Melsió characterizes Las Hurdes as indexical, but only insofar as it manifests the traces of events or indicates their potential occurrence. According to her reading, the goat sequence remains indexical in spite of the gunshot—the film documented a staged event so as to present the viewer with a facet of hurdano life that could not be represented. That may be, but the gunshot’s effect can be better explained when reconsidered in light of the region’s legacy as crypt space. Upon seeing the puff of smoke, the viewer speculates as to its origin; that is, she wonders what cause is responsible for the effect shown on screen. Given a series of reasonable assumptions—the suddenness of its appearance rules out its having come from a campfire, it billows directly toward the goat, the animal falls
immediately after the smoke is seen, etc.—the spectator surmises that the smoke most likely came from a gunshot. It follows, then, that the gunshot was responsible for the goat’s death. Upon reaching this conclusion, she is forced to recognize an unsettling fact: the animal was killed for the purposes of the documentary.

The victim is not a human being, but this portion of Las Hurdes is effectively a snuff film—a living creature was killed so that the audience could watch it die. As Rob Stone observes, assigning symbolic or metaphorical meaning to the deaths of the goat, the bee-stung donkey and the decapitated roosters obscures the brute indexicality of those events: “Human suffering is contextualized by social and political events, but for the cock, the donkey and the goat, there is no contextual ‘sense’ to their suffering. You simply see them die” (Stone 79). The crypt’s primary function is to manifest presence for its audience, and the corpse—whether human or animal—is one of the most potent indices of it. Furthermore, the spectator who wants to be reassured by material presence cannot deny that such a shocking act sates that desire. This is not to say that the viewers of Las Hurdes are sadists who delight in the pain of other living creatures; on the contrary, the fact of the dead or dying animal’s or human’s suffering is incidental to the assuaging of anxiety that comes with observing the undeniable fact of their deaths (Egginton 110-111). Las Hurdes’ goat sequence obliges the audience to acknowledge its complicity in the animal’s death.

Despite its foundational role in shaping the cultural-geographical object that Las Hurdes depicts, Lope de Vega’s comedia was only one of several texts with which Buñuel interacted while creating his film. Las Hurdes also bears the influence of the photographs included in Legendre’s study, as well as those that appeared in “four
illustrated reports in the Madrid magazine *Estampa* in August-September 1929” and “the photographic reportage” of King Alfonso XIII’s 1922 visit to Las Hurdes (Gubern and Hammond 155, Nadal-Melsió 189). But Buñuel was not simply inspired by these stills and their captions—he animated them, vivifying the people and events they depicted. Paradoxically, one of those photographed subjects that Buñuel brought to cinematic life was the corpse of a child. Nadal-Melsió describes this photo, in which “a smiling hurdano carrying a small coffin on his shoulders en route to bury his child in a cemetery miles away is surrounded by the King’s entourage” (Nadal-Melsió 189). Buñuel used a sleeping child and other hurdanos as willing extras in order to render this photograph on film, although the film itself did not reveal this artifice—according to *Las Hurdes*, the child in the coffin was deceased.

Despite *Las Hurdes’* passing off a sleeping child as a dead one, this scene does not point to a merely symbolic truth or hypothetical possibility of hurdano life, but to a specific event. Buñuel created a deixis of a widely disseminated photograph of one particular death; that is, in vivifying the 1922 photograph of the dead child and her pallbearer, the sequence reminds those spectators who had seen it of the material presence indicated by that photograph. Not all viewers of *Las Hurdes* had encountered that image, but the presentation of an ostensibly deceased child on film responds to the desire for presence in its own right. Furthermore, because this sequence appears after the “genuine” demise of the roosters, donkey and goat, *Las Hurdes* draws an extended parallel between the animals’ deaths and the multiple human deaths staged or alluded to throughout the film. In this way, Buñuel’s film confronts the spectator with the collateral

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42 This sequence also testifies to a broader cultural phenomenon beyond the specific example at hand. In the first years after photography had been introduced to Spain, portraits of recently deceased family members, often children, were extremely popular (López Mondejar 26, 71).
damage wrought by her desire to maintain Las Hurdes as a cultural-national crypt. The creatures that die and the people shown to be dead or dying cannot be read as symbols or political instruments alone because they expiate nothing—their purpose is to provide the viewer with unassailable evidence of the most inscrutable of events: death itself. *Las Hurdes* simultaneously fulfills the audience’s desire for presence while exposing the consequences of doing so—the film is a provocative examination of death’s material allure and the particular, Spanish geographical site that was imagined and crafted as its repository. When the region’s role as crypt is considered, the hurdanos cannot only be an “eschatological avant-garde” whose proximity to death endows them with “privileged insight” into an always-inaccessible “ultratumba,” or hereafter (Nadal-Melsió 197). Rather, the valley-as-crypt’s primary function is to house materiality per se, death being the most potent vehicle for that presence. *Las Hurdes* is a cinematic iteration of the theatrical trope that its human and geographical referents began to embody in the 17th century, and whether we note the region’s obscurity, archaism, or the prevalence of death within it, the people and events of Buñuel’s film do not just point to or signal the ultratumba; rather, they manifest the presence housed in the tumba, or the crypt. *Las Hurdes* documents the cultural phenomenon of the Spanish crypt space, dialoguing with three centuries of tradition while exposing the desire for presence that created and sustains it. In order to describe *Las Hurdes* in all its complexity and import, we confronted the legacy of the people and place it depicts, and the resulting reading goes beyond questions of Left- or Right-wing politics or the film’s relationship to conventional documentary filmmaking. Buñuel’s film posits the lengths to which people will go in order to preserve the crypt space, articulating its founding desire’s unmitigated
fulfillment and the ethical dilemma that it occasions. *Las Hurdes* inculpates its viewers in the deaths that fill and define the crypt space, whether conjured on screen or instantiated in a remote corner of Spain.
Conclusion:
The Spanish Crypt Today

Buñuel consiguió el efecto esperado, pero quizás no calculó los efectos colaterales que llegarían más tarde (turismo morboso, imágenes esteriotipadas...) que todavía en los tiempos actuales se siguen manteniendo.

-Luciano Fernández Gómez and José Pedro Domínguez
Official website: Centro de Documentación de Las Hurdes

This dissertation tells the story of how a specific region of Spain, thanks to its geographical similarities to the structure of the theatrical crypt space and an influential comedia, took on that trope’s function off stage as well as on it. In a series of interactions with theatrical, textual and graphic depictions of them, first Las Batuecas and eventually Las Hurdes within it came to be crypt spaces for Spain, a function they still perform. Even today, those remote valleys are often treated as if they housed beings and objects that transcend interpretation. My project charts how the media that rendered Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes as crypt spaces gradually shifted audience’s expectations of observing indices of presence to accepting facsimiles or replicas those indices, initially alongside and eventually instead of their models. Lope de Vega characterized Las Batuecas as a space full of indexical remains and relics; Matos Fragoso, Hoz y Mota and Antonio Ponz added mimetic objets d’art and indices contrafacta to that inventory under the guiding logic of collectionism. Furthermore, Ponz’s Viage de España posited another reason to

include Las Batuecas in the cultural collection that was Spain—not just its indexical contents, but the sheer possibility that it held even more of those contents that had yet to be discovered. In his account, a section of the region remained unexplored, opaque and tantalizing: Las Hurdes. Las Batuecas was simultaneously collectible and collection space, a crypt worthy of inclusion in Ponz’s collection thanks to its own indexical objects and the promise of yet-undiscovered presence in Las Hurdes.

Like those collections, the *Semanario Pintoresco Español* responded to the desire to possess or be in close proximity to the presence offered by indexical artifacts, relics and remains—or their reproductions. In the novel form of mass-produced print media, the illustrated periodical deployed prose narrative and graphic depictions of Las Batuecas side by side, taking the reader/viewer on a virtual journey by obliging her to identify with the perspective of the narrator inside the valley. This forced perspective sought to achieve an effect of immediacy, or a collapsing of the distance between the reader and the pieces’ referents. The series’ eyewitness reports and illustrations of the remarkable, inscrutable stuff of Las Batuecas was designed to overwhelm the reader—to prompt her to either forget or ignore the fact that she was reading about a far-off place—and simulate direct access to the indices of presence for which Las Batuecas-as-crypt was renowned. The *Semanario Pintoresco Español* deployed a nascent, anticipatory version of the crypt-function that photography and documentary film would later use to great effect.

The indexical quality of those media was so impactful as to make observers treat the photograph or film in question as if it were the referents whose presence were indicated by them—thanks to the crypt-function, the text seems just as reassuring as the real thing. When the crypt-function of these media is brought to bear on the site reputed
to exercise the same impact, the effectiveness of each is strengthened and confirmed. That is, except when an iconoclast such as Luis Buñuel takes aim—literally and figuratively—at the consequences of satisfying the demand for such a space. *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan* epitomizes both documentary film’s crypt-function and Las Hurdes’ status as crypt while simultaneously confronting the viewer with the horrible cost of maintaining such a space: the deaths of humans and animals within it. Despite such a withering critique, a survey of contemporary treatments of Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes makes clear role that those valleys’ status as crypts survives, albeit in slightly different form.

Several recent texts shed light on Las Hurdes’ and Las Batuecas’ current reputations, and despite the variety of media and approaches taken toward their shared object, these cultural products confirm that the regions continue to serve as crypt spaces. The fight against spurious claims regarding Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes began in the wake of Lope’s play, and it continues to be fought in media of all kinds. In an effort to combat Luis Buñuel’s bleak, miserable version of Las Hurdes, the Editora Regional de Extremadura—under the auspices of the Junta de Extremadura’s Consejería de Cultura y Turismo—published Fermín Solís’ graphic novel, *Buñuel en el laberinto de las tortugas*, in 2008. The text is a didactic treatment of the making of *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan*—an attempt to clarify once and for all the history of Buñuel’s infamous directorial interventions. Solís’ text does that, but a telling afterword belies that very work’s chances for success. Indeed,

José Pedro Domínguez, director of the Centro de Documentación de Las Hurdes, pens the second of two epilogues that accompany Solís’ graphic novel. In that brief essay,
“La mirada del espectador,” Domínguez tries to distinguish between the actual state of his home region and the place’s reputation: “Pero ya se terminó. “Las Hurdes de Buñuel” ya no existen” (117). This is quite a fair assessment—the region has undergone significant infrastructure development, and although still not a wealthy comarca, Las Hurdes is not the epidemiological disaster that Alfonso XIII, Unamuno, Gregorio Marañón, Maurice Legendre and Buñuel all observed in the first decades of the 20th century. However, Domínguez protests too much, following his previous statement by claiming, “Ya no es Tierra sin pan un argumento vergonzoso para Las Hurdes” (117). Were this the case, that sentence would have no work for which to serve as an epilogue—Buñuel en el laberinto de las tortugas seeks to rectify what Domínguez’s declaration denies: the shameful legacy of Las Hurdes.

Buñuel’s film and all depictions of Las Hurdes that exploit the region’s crypt-function cannot be refuted through appeals to reason alone, even if those appeals take a more popular form, such as the graphic novel. Like the countless critics before him who sought to pen an authoritative historical assessment of Las Batuecas and/or Las Hurdes, Domínguez and his fellow hurdanófilos cannot ever fully best the competition. Las Hurdes-as-crypt is a space that exercises the power to defy precisely such skepticism, to serve as a proxy for the “unoccupiable point” of the Spanish national-cultural gaze (Copjec 34). Las Hurdes goes to extremes to pillory its viewers—the same people who went to even further extremes in order to satisfy their desire to put aside the task of reconciling the messy, undeniable heterogeneity that is Spain. If some of their countrymen had to be relegated to horrendous poverty, strife and death so that, even for a moment, they could “bestow ‘Spain’ with meaning,” as Davies remarks, then so be it—
after all, Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes had been playing that role for hundreds of years, and even the most well-intentioned didactic intervention will not put a stop to that (Davies 4).

Francisco Nieva’s play El rayo colgado y peste de loco amor (1969), on the other hand, takes quite a distinct approach to the famed site—it is an esoteric, avant-garde riff on both Lope’s comedia and the legacy of Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes as crypt spaces. The action begins when Sabadeo, who is in Las Batuecas to work on a construction project, is injured in an explosion. The dazed engineer then stumbles deep into the valley, and his total inability to communicate with a pair of weird sisters—decrepit ascetic nuns who may or may not possess supernatural powers—frustrates his every move. La Cantera’s playbill for El rayo colgado includes director Juan Dolores Caballero’s assessment of those mystical nuns:

Las monjas representan la vida que se alcanza a través de los sentidos y de la ilusión. Pertenecen a la Orden de la Resignación Armenia y aceptan la realidad tal y como es sin plantearse su modificación. Son iluminadas, místicas, y para ellas el mundo se eleva por encima de lo lógico, buscando el anhelo infinito de lo sublime.

Nieva’s play is an exercise in the theater of the absurd—one character’s speech is unintelligible to another, and the audience has its own difficulty comprehending the characters; however, as Dolores Caballero’s commentary suggests, more is at stake than linguistic misunderstanding (Aggor 448-449). Two modes of thought are in conflict throughout El rayo colgado—Sabadeo’s reason and logic fall on the mystical batuecos’ deaf ears—and this conflict satirizes the centuries-old debate surrounding the “truth” of Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes. Moreover, Nieva adapts the crypt to the theater of the absurd as well; there is a mysterious closet on stage, the doors to which open, close, lock
and unlock according to no discernible logic whatsoever. Ultimately, this space offers no resolution of any kind for Sabadeo, who cannot abandon himself to the a-rational sublimity sought and practiced by the ancient sisters he encounters.

Although it was penned in 1969, *El rayo colgado* could not immediately be performed in Franco’s Spain. It was staged in Rome that year and made its Spanish debut in Madrid eleven years later, in 1980. In spite of this delayed release, Nieva’s work is alive and well in Spain today. The “la Cantera” theater company’s production of *El rayo colgado* began its current tour in 2013—playing Ciudad Real, Madrid, Seville, Valencia and elsewhere—and its final performance is scheduled for February 20, 2015 (http://www.lacanteraproducciones.com/?q=el-rayo-colgado-gira accessed February 10, 2015). As opposed to José Pedro Domínguez’s efforts, Nieva’s play sets aside the task of accurately defining Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes’ past and present. Neither fact nor fiction wins the day in Nieva’s absurd vision of the valley. The crypt thralls its observers because it offers them a reprieve from interpretation, and through Sabadeo’s repeated failure to understand his surroundings, Nieva’s play also suggests that Las Batuecas should be approached in this nonhermeneutic mode.

The “turismo morboso” that Domínguez condemns is not only the product of Luis Buñuel’s film, however. No one exemplifies the target of Domínguez’s criticism more than Iker Jiménez Elizari, the host of the television show, *Cuarto milenio*, and creator of a multimedia empire devoted to unexplained phenomena, or “casos límite.” Among the decades’ worth of reports on “astro-archaeology,” premonitory dreams, UFO sightings, and the like, Las Hurdes holds a special place in Jiménez’s heart—his first major project culminated in the publication of *El paraíso maldito: Un viaje al rincón más enigmático*
de nuestra geografía (1999), a book on paranormal activity in Las Hurdes. A blurb found in the “Tienda de la nave del misterio,” the online retail space for his investigative team’s literature and paranormal collectibles, describes the impact of El paraíso maldito on Jiménez and the public:

El libro más extraño y personal de Iker Jiménez, fruto de veinte viajes a la comarca más misteriosa de España. Crónica de un mundo irrecuperable. Un trabajo de antropología que ha hecho viajar a miles de personas a la mágica región de Las Hurdes. Con doce ediciones en diferentes formatos es un libro de culto, difícil de conseguir hoy en día. Fue publicado en los últimos días de 1999.  
(http://tienda.navedelmisterio.com/epages/ec4893.sf/es_ES/?ObjectPath=/Shops/ec4893/Products/129027)

Jiménez’s work of “anthropology” proudly takes the credit for inspiring precisely the kind of tourism that Domínguez detests—people go to Las Hurdes in search of the paranormal and the inexplicable, tokenizing its residents as atavistic simpletons, beholden to the whims of the very superstitions that attracted their own interest. This blurb reiterates Las Hurdes’ status as crypt of Spain, a site of mystery that promises its onlookers a glimpse of a hidden reality that will transcend their skepticism.

Now in its twelfth edition, El paraíso maldito embraces and reproduces the textual strata that have described and shaped Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes for centuries. Quotations from José Nieremberg, Lope, Thomas Borrow,44 Unamuno and Buñuel—among others—appear as epigraphs, and the body of the text is interspersed with longer excerpts from Legendre, the magazine Estampa’s feature on Las Hurdes (1933-1934), still frames from Las Hurdes itself, photographs taken by Jiménez, and digital illustrations of the beasts, phantoms and unidentified objects allegedly seen in Las

44 English author of The Bible in Spain (1850).
Jiménez’s book continues the “literary stratification of referential space” that has shaped Las Batuecas and Las Hurdes for the Spanish public for more than four centuries (Westphal 170).

In an episode of Cuarto milenio that aired January 30, 2012, Jiménez describes one hurdano’s fatal encounter with some low-flying UFOs. Holding a manila folder containing the eyewitness report of this “caso límite,” Jiménez concludes his report on the subject by saying:

Quizá para el hombre moderno sea imposible creer en estas historias, aunque hayan llegado a cobrarse más de una víctima. Pero lo cierto es que caminando entre las piedras de este pueblo muerto, después de haber recorrido en Soledán las solitarias sendas del paraíso maldito, estas experiencias parecen absolutamente verosímiles. Tanto como para que puedan volver a repetirse en noches como ésta. (http://www.cuatro.com/cuarto-milenio/programas/Caso-limite-Hurdes_2_1356105001.html)

Ever since Lope de Vega cast Las Batuecas as a crypt space on the Early Modern stage, authors and artists have capitalized on Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes’ unique ability to render the supernatural verisimilar and the incredible credible. Jiménez relies on that capacity to make an implicit promise to his viewers, the same promise made by indexical objects and by the crypt-function: let yourself believe in the impossible, if only in this unique setting, and you will be rid of the anxiety engendered by critical reason, skepticism and doubt. Domínguez would have his fellow Spaniards view Las Hurdes as normal, a place like any other in the country, but such normalcy is both unremarkable and un-marketable. The valley’s past and present status as crypt is what makes it exceptional, and Jiménez’s book, radio reports and television segments about Las Hurdes present that legacy for consumers today.
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Curriculum vitae

Christopher Kozey (b. January 8, 1984 in Washington, DC) received a BA in comparative literature from Haverford College in 2006 and an MA in Spanish from Middlebury College in 2008. As a PhD candidate here at Johns Hopkins, Christopher has done research on the literature and cinema of modern Spain, and his dissertation examines the unique function of the Las Batuecas/Las Hurdes region in Spanish culture from the turn of the 17th century to the present day. He successfully defended that dissertation, *Las Batuecas, Las Hurdes and the Spanish Crypt*, on March 12, 2015, and his Ph.D. will be conferred on May 20, 2015.