

A full-page photograph of a shepherd in a wide, green field. The shepherd, wearing a white shirt, blue jeans, a straw hat, and a backpack, is walking towards the right. In the foreground, a large white dog and a smaller black dog are running. In the middle ground, a large flock of sheep is grazing. The background features rolling green hills under a blue sky with scattered white clouds.

# A COUNTRY OF SHEPHERDS

## CULTURAL STORIES OF A CHANGING MEDITERRANEAN LANDSCAPE

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TRANSLATIONS BY GRADY C. WRAY



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Kathleen Ann Myers, *A Country of Shepherds: Stories of a Changing Mediterranean Landscape*, with translations by Grady C. Wray. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0387>

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Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0387#resources>

ISBN Paperback: 9 978-1-80511-206-8

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-207-5

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-208-2

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-209-9

ISBN XML: 978-1-80511-210-5

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-211-2

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0387

Cover image: photograph by Costagliola (purchased from Deposit Photos, ID: 266971314)

Cover design: Licia Weber and Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

# 4. Inheriting a Farm: Marta Moya Espinosa, Castillo de las Guardas (Seville)

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The days of near-slavery are long gone — as it should be — people don't want to sleep under trees in rough conditions. As a landowner, if you're not on top of things 100% of the time, you pay a price.... You have to be on top of things every day right along with the shepherds.

Marta Moya Espinosa

## Overview

When a friend comments that he used to help another friend on an annual transhumance nearby, I ask if I could meet with the shepherd. He laughs at my assumption that the friend is a shepherd — it turns out that she is a landowner. Marta Moya Espinosa manages a *dehesa* she inherited in Huelva, but she lives in downtown Seville. Having seen the multifunctional approach in Fortunato Guerrero Lara's and Rafael Enríquez del Río's collaboration and land use (see Chapter 3), I decide to call Marta to help me understand from a landowner's perspective the key role of land use in sustainable pastoralism.

This case is about a woman of privilege, who, after working and raising a family, came to a personal and professional crossroads. When I first meet Marta, she acknowledges that a "romanticism" obscured the numerous farming challenges she would face—ones that, after several years of working either full-time or part-time on the *dehesa* every week, she can now quickly list: increased government regulations, the retirement of the family shepherd and the difficulty of replacing him, natural disasters (including a recent wildfire), volatile markets, and,

finally, absentee landownership. Many people simply criticize owners who are “absent” or try to manage their farms from afar as contributing to a fundamental structural problem in Andalusia, but Marta has acted on the problem. She understands that such landowners can be looked down upon, and she worries about the current state of farming. Her story reveals the complexity of the changes and challenges that landowners face, as well as the arduous work required to revitalize not just a family business but the ecosystem itself.

Marta helps us understand the difficulty of being an urban career woman with little practical experience, faced with reviving her *dehesa* after years of neglect. Her determination and innate connection with the farm have helped her overcome a steep learning curve. Marta’s case highlights how, even with a lot of capital, a valuable and working farm and flock, and some knowledge of how to oversee them, it is still an enormous challenge to make the farm profitable over the long term. An important part of Marta’s story is really her family’s story, so I am fortunate to meet and interview Marta’s mother, Carmen, who talks with us about being a wife and mother during the postwar years on the farm.

## From Absentee Landowning to Learning the Land

### The Visit, Part I: The City

A few days after my initial call to Marta, I meet her at her city home in a trendy area of old Seville near the fourteenth-century San Juan de la Palma’s Church. Settled into the comfort of a large leather couch, Marta nostalgically recalls joining family, friends, and the farm’s long-time resident Portuguese shepherd and his dogs for the twice-yearly short-distance transterminance. They moved herds thirty-three kilometers between the family’s *dehesa* outside of Castillo de las Guardas (Seville) to their agricultural farm outside of Paterna del Campo (Huelva), where the grazing sheep would clean the fields in the winter. Setting out at dusk under a waxing or full moon, they would walk all night, arriving at dawn before the Andalusian summer heat hit forty degrees Celsius (one hundred degrees Fahrenheit). Marta shows me photographs of their treks and recollects celebrating upon arrival with a beer, bits of

potato *tortilla* and cured serrano ham, and songs. At the same time, she recalls how fortunate they were to be able to afford a truck that carried supplies and provided a place for injured sheep and newborn lambs. The route was full of hazards: one farm had put up a fence and another had reduced the public right away to a funnel only a few meters wide by overplanting along its edges. Rocks hidden by the night caused people or animals to stumble. Once, a ewe went into labor. Even with all the obstacles, Marta declares “it’s pure romanticism,” and she confesses to being “addicted to transhumance and life in the country.”

Her great-grandfather bought the farm sometime before 1920 and worked it and two other family farms with her father, who Marta fondly referred to as a postwar land boss (“*patrón-jefe de la posguerra*”). Before her father’s passing, he held a lottery to distribute the farms to his children, and Marta inherited the nearly 1,000-hectare (almost four-square-mile) sheep farm of rolling *dehesa* mixed with areas classified as *monte mediterráneo*, as well as some ponds. Marta has retained a deep connection to her inheritance, both with the land and with the animals. There she raises a flock that fluctuates between four and seven hundred *Segureña* mixed with Merino sheep, along with some Inra 401 sheep—a newer “laboratory breed” developed in France. Marta may be a self-professed romantic, but she is also a foresighted businesswoman who hopes to make the farm profitable again. To this end, she is investing in raising Iberian pigs, establishing an ecological reserve, and selling hunting licenses for the property.

What began as occasional country outings to help move the flocks and vacation a few times a year at the farm Marta inherited has turned into the life of a farmer-owner. Once a high-powered event planner for an elite country club in Seville, she is learning the ropes of running a large *dehesa* and raising nearly a thousand sheep. Marta started out a decade ago with land that was in good shape, but she continues to climb a steep learning curve as she works to restore the farm completely.

Marta’s experiences outside of Spain, where she lived and worked for many years, as well as her jobs running various hotels and a large country club, have broadened her perspective in valuable ways. Now that she has been called back to the land and traditions she grew up with, she understands, “if you’re not on top of things 100% of the time, you pay a price.” But the daily tasks and outcomes bring more satisfaction

for her than working at a country club. She recognizes “I’m a woman of privilege,” and feels fortunate to be able to work more closely “with what life has already given me.”

### The Visit, Part II: The Farm

After our meeting in Seville, Marta invites me out to see her work on the farm and witness the land, animals, and natural setting. So, on another early spring morning, my colleague Mar and I find ourselves turning down the old road leading out of Aznalcóllar, which suffered a disaster in 1998 when the dam holding toxic waste from a local mine poured into its waterways. The area has since been restored as a greenway, now filling with mountain bikers for a race. Locals warn us to not take the dangerous old road and to use the new road instead, but Marta’s *finca* cannot be accessed by the new route. We must wind along an unbanked single-lane road (through a stomach-turning “140 sharp curves” as Marta says), at a speed not much faster than a donkey—the form of transportation here for centuries. I can’t imagine anyone driving this road in the rain or fog. A few kilometers and forty minutes later, we reach a relatively flat plateau with a few gentle hills. In every direction, sheep graze. Around the next curve, the generations-old family sign — with its insignia for *ganadería*, warriors, and a cross — appears. When we stop to open the gate, a dozen sheep wander over to greet us. Driving down a gravel road, we come upon the landowner home estate, a large house which now belongs to the family who bought part of Marta’s grandfather’s original farm. We then pass a new white-washed duplex, built recently for the resident shepherd and his family. Finally, we arrive to the old farmhouse — the smallest of the three buildings — where Marta lives when she is working on the farm.

Marta greets us looking vastly different from when we first met in Seville, dressed in jeans with the classic sage green wool jersey preferred by shepherds. She invites us into the simple four-room working farmhouse. Two small bedrooms adjoin the front hall and heavy green curtains separate the main room with its low pine ceiling and a small wood-burning stove, the only source of heat for the rustic farmhouse. It is a chilly fifteen degrees Celsius (fifty-eight degrees Fahrenheit) inside

this morning. With no central heat or air conditioning, the temperatures inside can range from freezing in winter to forty-four degrees Celsius in July (well over 110 degrees Fahrenheit). We peek into the small 10 × 12 foot kitchen that barely has room for a two-burner stove, a small sink, and a few open cupboards. The sparsely furnished main room includes a rustic dining nook, while two rocking chairs and a small, narrow sofa provide a sitting area. Marta seems to notice our surprise at the simplicity of the farmhouse and explains this is not a place to rest and relax. In fact, the sofa is a new addition; there never used to be one. As Marta says, “you don’t sit down or lay around much here because there is always work to be done.” The couch contrasts sharply with the deep, soft “L”-shaped leather couch in her Seville living room. The few adornments — including a set of traditional *cencerro* bells and an antique water bottle from the farm’s past — further accentuate the farmhouse’s function. On a shelf there are a few books about breeding, along with a copy of *Don Quijote* and of an Agatha Christie novel. Above it hangs a picture of a Swiss transhumance with cattle that Marta’s father gave her, complete with an engraving of her father’s motto: “The land’s worth what a man’s worth.”

I soon learn that Marta’s outlook on life and the farm is as informed by her parents’ work ethic as her years abroad. Since her birth in 1968, Marta has been coming to this farmhouse and land. She fondly recalls summers here. She says she imperceptibly absorbed the work of traditional sheep husbandry from her childhood visits. As a young girl, eight years behind the next-youngest sibling, Marta spent a lot of time with the resident shepherd just playing on the farm. She recalls how the shepherd built a swing for her and shared his “magical cures and potions.” Although Marta loved these years, she had more options at age nineteen than her mother’s generation of women, and she wanted to gain experience in other European countries. Marta worked in France and later studied hotel management in Switzerland, becoming an expert in the event-planning industry. At age twenty-seven she returned home, where she met her husband, had two children, and launched a high-powered career in hotel management. She jokes that the hard-working character she inherited from her parents, not to mention her experience working abroad, made her “one hell of a wedding planner.” Her years in Switzerland also taught her how the Swiss have a vastly

different relationship to their land, animals, and cultural identity. Martha believes that the Swiss value a deep connection with their own pastoral traditions and that they know how to harness this connection for tourism and profit.

Today, Marta has left the sixty-hour-a-week job planning baptisms, first communions, confirmations, weddings, and funerals, for another sixty-hour-a-week job running her own farm. Although she still commutes several times each week between Seville and the farm, she acknowledges that, for the farm to run well, she needs to spend more time there and learn how to do the work herself. The daily physical labor is both a joy and a hardship:

You have to be on top of things day in and day out, and you have to work with the shepherds.... Part of the money I earned at the club I lost on the *finca* when I wasn't there.... First are the hens; they're the queens. You've got to feed them. Then you feed the dogs; then you put feed in the troughs for the lambs that are in the feeding area and the ewes that are good for re-breeding. We leave everything ready for the next morning. You finish with the cattle and the pigs so that when you get back in the afternoon you've got less to do. We still haven't had the time change, and by 7:00 it's already night. It's a little bit of a pain in the ass. You've got to count them, feed them, and see that they've eaten.

At first, Marta was stunned by the twelve-hour days and the pain from the demanding physical labor:

At 8:00, 8:30 we were in the fields until it was getting dark. Non-stop. By 2:00 I hurt everywhere. I said, "I'm gonna have to take drugs!" Something! An ibuprofen, some kind of ointment, a heating pad. I'm dying here. But it all turned out OK because we've learned a ton.

While she is a quick learner and in great shape now, Marta details other aspects of her new life. Like the physical labor, living in the countryside brings both comfort and challenges. While the isolation can offer a deep sense of peace, over time it can be hard. Marta jokes that for the last ten years they have at least had electricity. Still, she recognizes that few people want to live this far from town: "There's a silence and a darkness that make a lot of people afraid."



## Walking the Farm: Livestock Cycles and New Initiatives for Land Use

Even in spring, the midday sun begins to burn early, so Marta quickly moves us toward the door for what becomes a four-hour walking tour of the *finca*. In each part of our tour, Marta explains the natural cycles we witness and how her recent investments have helped them thrive. As someone who both summered on the farm as a child and is now learning about the full seasonal cycle of the farm and animals, Marta is an ideal teacher for an outsider like myself.

Our first stop is where the traditional sheep-keeping takes place. Here, she carefully describes the cycle of care for, depending on the year, between four and seven hundred *Segureña*-Merino sheep, focusing on how they must be separated, fed, and moved around — all of which require daily vigilance. “I grew up around all of this,” Marta explains as she points to sheep on both sides of the road, sheep in a separate field, and more sheep in a newly constructed barn. Her farm includes the “full cycle” of sheep being raised on extensive-grazing and fully organic principles. The first group of sheep Marta shows us are marked with an “X.” At this point in spring, she explains, she and the shepherd-manager have selected the *recrías*, ewes who have given birth and have shown promise as good breeders. They look for a successful previous pregnancy, faces with good morphology, and strong teeth, among other health indicators. The selected sheep are then set out in a pasture at a ratio of about 30 ewes to one male sheep during the traditional breeding days associated with the ancient saints’ feast days of San José (March 19) through to San Juan (June 24). With pride, Marta notes some ewes have had many birth cycles, yet “they still don’t look old.”

Another set of ewes in an adjacent field are marked with an “O,” because they have not yet given birth. She refuses to give them melatonin, which some farms use to induce a stronger heat cycle and fertility. Smiling, Marta explains that this breeding process is “as much art as skill” and that the ewes do best “if they look for their own boyfriend.” The newborn lambs are in yet another field or still in the birthing area along with their mothers, who are under closer supervision. She explains: “Sometimes the first-time mothers aren’t that good, and they

don't do very well." As we heard in our last chapter from Fortunato, new mothers are often tired and nervous.

Under the shade of intermittent holm oak trees across the gravel drive, a few dozen grazing sheep marked with an "M" (ready for market) have reached about sixteen kilograms, but several will be held back and allowed to reach about 23 kilos, the preferred weight for Arab markets. They will be taken for local processing by CorSevilla, a collective of about five thousand producers. Marta's sheep, she reports proudly, generally sell with "extra" rating, which signals high-quality flavor and texture due to her extensive grazing practices.

We now move from the pastures into a beautiful, new two-story barn as the morning sun streams in through the main nave. The sweet smell of fresh hay wafts over us, and we hear the weak bleating of a few new mothers and their lambs. Marta introduces us to her young water dog, who is being trained to master the important guard work of a sheepdog. Upon command, he eagerly jumps up to Marta's shoulder. He will guard the new mothers as they are being monitored to ensure good nursing habits get established. We see one mother continually butt her lamb, but Marta assures us that by putting the two of them in the pen barely large enough for both of them, they will soon figure it out. While just a few lambs and their mothers are in the barn now, it will fill later in the season when shearing season begins and inclement weather hits.

Before her father split the farm into three parts for his children to inherit, the land encompassed 2,500 hectares and supported at least 1,200 sheep. Today the flock has been reduced to between four and seven hundred. Marta ticks off the current challenges she and pastoralism in general face: decades of stagnant market value for lamb, generational turnover of shepherds, new animal diseases, and oppressive government restrictions. Regarding the first economic challenge, she repeats a story we have heard from all our interviewees: the price of lamb had stagnated at the 1980 price of about 40–50 euros, with farmers receiving just 5–8 euro per sheep. "Why bother?!" she exclaims. More recently, however, the repercussions of global-market changes have tipped the scales back to Spain. With the ripple effect of Brexit in 2021 on the Commonwealth states of Australia and New Zealand, Spain is once again the primary exporter of lamb to Europe. Lamb prices have doubled this year, but

Marta remarks that there is an ironic edge to this change: now there are very few shepherds to raise sheep.

As we have heard from Juan Vázquez (Chapter 1), Pepe Millán (Chapter 2), and Fortunato Guerrero Lara (Chapter 3), the generational turnover of shepherds is on everyone's mind. In Marta's case, the farm had a full-time shepherd for nearly twenty years, who Marta describes as "otherworldly." He was expert at mixing up remedies from local plants to cure sick sheep and would suddenly disappear and reappear as he stealthily checked on sheep when he heard a fox or wolf. He knew how to work "the lead sheep, that are fine-tuned when they are raised to help lead the rest, so they begin to follow the flock." He could imitate the sound of a whip to move the sheep and trained the shepherd dogs and the guardian mastiffs. Since his retirement, several shepherds have worked for them, but none have lasted: "The days of near-slavery are long gone — as it should be — people don't want to sleep under trees in rough conditions." Marta has already been through three sets of workers. The first left because of a severe drinking problem — alcoholism is not an uncommon problem in these rural, isolated places. Then, she hired recent immigrants from Romania who were delighted to have good living conditions in the new duplex built for farmhands, but they soon moved closer to a town because they had school-aged children. Next, she hired someone she calls a "new/old" shepherd, someone with traditional skills but newer ways of working together with owners. Once again, Marta reports, the situation did not work out: during the pandemic, when she and her family moved to the farmhouse fulltime to escape Seville's lockdown and contagion, the resident shepherd took a job at a nearby farm because he wanted more solitude and control. In another case, she realized that a skillful shepherd had set up an unauthorized side-business to rent use of the land to hunters — a potentially lucrative business but one that can also damage the ecosystem. Now, Marta is training a young couple with little experience but a strong desire to live the pastoral life. She understands the challenge of finding a balance between trustworthy, knowledgeable shepherds who work well with her and people who can tolerate a rural lifestyle.



Fig. 4.2 A local shepherd works for hire on Marta's *dehesa* (2018).

In addition to market prices and scarcity of shepherds, another hardship Marta describes is the devastation brought by diseases. Disease is an inevitable part of sheep-farming. She recalls how her father's pigs were stricken with the African swine fever (*PPA: Peste Porcina Africana*) in the 1970s and that he never recovered from the shock of having to slaughter so many animals. She herself has had to deal with an outbreak of Bluetongue, a viral disease affecting livestock throughout the area. Marta initially had to stop the biannual transhumance because movement of flocks through open lands was prohibited due to the likelihood of contagion. Later, when she tried to reinstate the practice, one of her ewes tested positive for the infection brucellosis: her whole flock was categorized as M3, which meant it had to be quarantined. Marta hopes to reinstate a small-scale transhumance (known technically as a transterminance) soon.

It's been eight years since the last transhumance. Normally we'd do it on foot, and it was 33 kilometers, but when there was an outbreak of Bluetongue, they kept us from moving the herd on foot because of the threat of a spread. And we had to move them by truck. So, the last transhumance we did by truck. And this year, when I talked to [a local landowner], who has a *finca* of 1000 hectares that's some five kilometers down this same road, she told me she's got a lot of pasture and not much livestock. So, last year she offered to take my sheep to her *finca* in the

summer because they maintain her land quite well, and they don't do any harm. People really don't mind because they clear the land of brush and cut down on forest fires. So, this year, I'm going to see if I can get my M4 rating back and start the transhumance with the sheep again by foot. It wouldn't really be for transhumance, it would be for the benefit of the pastures. It would be what the Junta de Andalucía rates as a "pasture benefit." And I'd take them here, to our *finca* El Campillo, in the summer.

While the neighbor's land will tide her over and Marta's sheep will clear and fertilize it, she still hopes to resume the practice of a short transterminance. Extensive grazing, she acknowledges, "is complicated."

Marta, like other informants, also mentions an increase in government regulations, which can be just another hurdle to efficient pastoralism and profit. She cites the difficulty caused by the recent "tug of war and locking horns" of the political parties — one often undoing policies established by the other — as well as the enormous amount of paperwork that has made pastoralism nearly impossible for anyone who does not have the means, time, and training to work with lawyers and government officials. She has had to hire an engineer to map out land usage, then a lawyer to authorize the plan; this year, too, Marta must prepare a new action plan for the Junta de Andalucía (the executive branch of the provincial government). The plan reflects a series of recent regulations that must be observed, many of which come from the EU headquarters in Brussels. Marta, like other shepherd-farmers, complains that the EU does not understand the delicate ecosystems in Andalusia, such as the *dehesa*, and the sustainable-grazing traditions that have evolved over centuries.

Let me give you some examples: let's say I want to add a parcel of land, well, I have to ask permission; I want to cut down a dried up live oak tree, well, I have to go to the Junta de Andalucía and ask permission; I want to move the herd from one pasture to another, well, I have to go to the office with the agrarian guide, which comes from the Junta de Andalucía, and ask permission. Another example: let's say a sheep dies, they want me to locate the dead animal by its ear tag, which is like its ID. Excuse me? I have a rather large range of land. They say, "No, it's not that, it's that in Brussels...." Sure, in Belgium, a tiny country with intensive grazing flocks where the guy who's setting the standards maybe doesn't understand just how large the expanse of our land is. He's using standards that put you on a farm where they've got 200 animals in a pen. That way they can control things easily, but here? Here it's a lot healthier and upkeep is

easier. I always feel like the Junta de Andalucía treats me like an accused criminal, like I always have to go around defending my innocence, proving that I haven't done anything that goes against their standards.

The government always wants to control everything, right? Don't they control every area of our lives? Don't they know that we're the ones who are the first to be concerned about preserving the environment? I'm the most concerned about my *finca*, and I want it to be perfect: the trees not dying, the herd in good health. The first person concerned about all of that is me.

Despite the government hurdles, Marta admits that the regulations have brought some benefit. Working on her plan has helped her consider new areas of revenue to make the farm profitable, given that sheep-raising alone is not sufficient. The government has helped by providing startup funds for some of the new projects. One of her newer ventures is raising Iberian pigs. As we walk further down the gravel road to visit this operation, we pass a springtime explosion of color. Marta explains that an unseasonable thirty-seven liters of rain fell during Holy Week. Now the pastures are unusually green and speckled with red poppies, lavender, daisies, and yellow rockrose. The sounds of bleating sheep fade, and grunts punctuated by intermittent squeals become louder. Under the dappled shade of an old holm oak and a handful of cork oaks, the classic long, dark shapes of Iberian pigs come into view. As the warm sun climbs higher, about a dozen huddle together either napping or rooting around to coat themselves in a cooling layer of dirt. Marta sees my surprise and observes that in a couple of months, when the temperatures can easily hover around 45°C for hours, the farm animals all find ways to keep cool. The sheep have their own technique: they circle around facing toward the center to cool themselves, moving the hot, still air with their collective breathing.

For this new porcine-related enterprise, Marta is able to utilize land not appropriate for grazing sheep. Since she only takes on part of the early life cycle of the pigs, the effort can be profitable. Marta raises around 500–700 Iberian pigs (*ibéricos*) bred with a white breed variety; about half are hers and the rest belong to a business partner. The piglets arrive in February to her farm, but because the *ibéricos* in particular require an enormous number of acorns to feed their huge appetites, her farm simply does not have enough acorn-producing holm oaks to support grown pigs. So, they stay until late summer, when they are moved to

another farm with more acorns to finish the feeding process and to qualify as “*Ibérico de Bellota*” or “*Sánchez Romero Cinco Jotas*” pigs, the meat from which, after two or three years of curing, brings a premium price at popular Christmas markets in early December.



Fig. 4.3 Iberian pigs graze on Marta’s *dehesa* for months each year (2018).

However, there are many pitfalls of the pig-raising enterprise, especially when it involves going into business with another investor. As we walk to a fenced-in muddy plot outside a long-arched metal barn, the calm scene under the oaks changes to a din of squealing as hundreds of pigs dart around, pressing against each other. For the first time, Marta bristles as she recalls how the partner, a former veterinarian, had assured her that their pigs would get along fine, despite being from different broods. “He deceived me!” she repeats several times. His pigs were wild and attacked her pigs, slept on top of them, and took most of the feed. Her own pigs suffered life-threatening stress, stopped eating, and became ill — some even had heart attacks. She had to invest in a large barn to separate the two broods; the solution was costly. Disgusted by the partner’s lie, Marta observes that as a livestock professional, he surely was well aware of the problems that mixing the two broods might

cause. "He took me for a fool just because I was a woman." The most difficult part of learning the trade and running a farm, she argues, is that she is at a deep disadvantage as a woman in a man's world.

After visiting the pigs, we head to the farm's reserve area. A peaceful stroll through rolling meadows alive with the spring songbirds and a couple of ponds takes us to a fenced-off area with young trees. Marta smiles broadly, explaining how the area serves as "a small ecological reserve" with habitat for black bass, ducks, grey herons, and a host of other animals and birds. The fenced area of fourteen hectares is dedicated to restoring the native holm oaks as part of a reforestation project sponsored by the European Union. No livestock is allowed in the area. Marta then relates a vivid example of the damage done to her farm and others nearby. After years of neglect, during which non-native eucalyptus trees were not thinned and the underbrush was left to grow unchecked, a forest fire broke out and raged through 29,000 hectares, including much of her farm. The fire lasted only forty-five minutes from start to finish, but, as one worker recalled, it was "like the fire was screaming, and it was horrific." For two years, the *finca* could not function, but Marta argues that they were also fortunate. Since the fire was so rapid and intense, it moved through the *finca* quickly and did not deeply damage the trees. Luckily, it bypassed the farmhouse, though by just fifteen meters. Her brother, who inherited a part of the farm where the sheep used to go, now helps her every year by sending one of his workers to cut a fire-prevention lane around the farm. More recently, Marta also has received a large grant from the EU to further replant the part of the ecologically valuable *dehesa*. She hopes this extensive work will revitalize the wooded areas of the farm. Increasingly, advocacy on behalf of the Andalusian *dehesa* has influenced EU funding and national regulations.

As we make our way up the final stretch back to the farmhouse and pass a tractor from 1941 (one of the first tractors in Andalusia), Marta repeats her motto: "It's complicated; you really have to be dedicated to your work." She summarizes the challenges of a sheep farmer-owner: stagnant market prices, shortages of shepherds, epidemics and diseases, and oppressive government regulations, not to mention the long days of hard work and semi-isolation. Although "some people look at you with envy, it can be a bitch of an inheritance." Marta jokes that the farm



“is a pain in the ass, but I love it.” When I ask what she likes best about being a farmer-owner, she doesn’t skip a beat and lists three things: “The quality of life is better; at night there’s a peace, and I sleep well; and I love the animals because they don’t talk back.” The “pure romanticism” of the biennial transhumance during her childhood and later vacations at the *finca* have now become more than nostalgia. Marta is an essential contributor to the work of this farm.



Fig. 4.4 Parcels of Marta’s *dehesa* are dedicated bio-reserves for local flora and fauna (2018).

As our visit comes to an end, Marta offers us a local beer and whips up some rustic tapas from her pantry: a Spanish potato salad with fresh farm eggs, tuna, and red peppers, dressed with her own homemade vinegar. She observes that her life trajectory of leaving and coming back to Spain, inheriting the land, and then returning to it must include the story of her eighty-eight-year-old mother, Carmela, who lives in Seville and would certainly offer another perspective that should be recorded. Carmela was married to the “postwar land boss” and ran a large household on an isolated rural farm in the early years after the civil war. Her perspective foregrounds the huge changes in gender roles in just one generation — although with forty years difference in their ages.

## Looking Back: A Postwar Wife of a Landowner, Carmela Espinosa Calero

Marta's mother, Carmela Espinosa Calero, spent a dozen years as a young postwar wife and mother living on one of the family *fincas*. Her story helps us to see more clearly how these Andalusian mother-daughter landowners have worked within a traditionally male world, pushing up against gender boundaries by managing a household and making a world for themselves in the field in the process.

A week after our visit to the farm, Marta and I meet at the Metropol Parasol, the famous modernist landmark in the heart of old Seville (popularly known as "Las Setas") built at the turn of the twenty-first century, after construction for a much-needed parking garage was halted by the discovery of an ancient Roman marketplace. We pass a Renaissance convent before arriving at her mother's apartment. Carmela, a petite, spry woman, greets us. As we step into her apartment, we seem to step back in time. Elaborate hand-carved antique settees, cabinets filled with figurines, and a formal dining table fill the room. Saints in oil paintings look on as Carmela proudly displays crocheted doilies and tablecloths from her 1940s bridal trousseau. Her live-in domestic helper from Colombia serves us a snack of *café con leche* with traditional almond cookies made by the nuns of the nearby convent.

Carmela now perches on the edge of a straight-backed chair, remarking that the key to good physical health is never slouching into an easy chair. I smile, recalling how the small, firm sofa at the farmhouse had been a very recent addition. Still energetic after walking to Seville's famous bullring La Maestranza to see the opening of the season, Carmela clearly still maintains the traditional activities of a woman of her class and generation. When I begin the interview with a question about living on the *finca*, Carmela's voice fills with excitement. She delights in having an audience as she paints a lively scene with vignettes polished through the lens of memory and a keen wit.



Fig. 4.5 Marta's mother, Carmela Espinosa Calero, in Seville (2019).

Born in what she calls a “small city town” in 1928, she met her future husband at a fair when she was just fourteen years old. He was eight years her senior. He was “the rich young man from the neighboring town,” she reports, and, as the only son, he inherited the family’s lands. At seventeen years old, he enlisted with the Nationalists when the civil war broke out and three years later returned home to manage the family’s extensive land holdings. He met Carmela soon afterwards. The couple married in 1948 and began life on the farm in the province of Huelva, where they remained for almost twenty years.

Although managing rural life on her husband’s *finca* in the postwar years and raising what would become a family of seven daughters and one son was clearly challenging, Carmela was clearly a strong-willed young wife who insisted on making the best out of rural life. Her anecdotes reveal the demands made on a young woman who had never lived on a farm. Their first-born child was deaf, and a son was stillborn.

It was five kilometers to the nearest village, Paterna del Campo, and the farmhouse had no electricity or running water. Carmela had to go into town for supplies by burro.

Despite these challenges, she was determined to bring joy to her isolated farm life. One year, during the height of the Francoism, she hitchhiked in full traditional dress to the renowned Seville Feria de Abril:

I was probably thirty, something like that, still at a good age for having a good time. I got into a car with a man who, instead of going to the fair, could have taken me somewhere else, even to Constantina. Can you imagine? And I was not going to get home late, not on your life. So, I went up to a man who was starting his car, and I asked, "Sir, where are you going?" He said he was going to the fair. "Would you mind taking me? I need to be let off at the main entrance." I didn't want anyone I knew from the booths inside to see me get out of another man's car. I was always one who wasn't afraid to take a risk, as we say around here.

In another attempt to help enliven rural life, she had a rudimentary pool built to cool off in the scorching summer heat, but she broke both legs jumping into the shallow waters and had to endure the long and painful trip by burro to a town with a doctor. Though the hardship and loneliness of farm life seep through her story, it is clear that she fought to maintain her innate joy for life, even while living with her "hard-working, melancholy husband." Like many of her generation, she never mentions her husband's Nationalist wartime activities or why he left his high-ranking position under Franco's new regime to return to the *fincas* and rural life. Still, Carmela took on the duties of a wife without losing her sense of humor. With glee, she recounts being charged with packing his suitcase for the first time.

The first time I packed his suitcase, I didn't know how to pack for a man. I wondered, "How do I fold his jackets?" He asked me: "With four brothers, you've never packed a suitcase?" I answered, "Why would I pack a suitcase for my brothers?" "Fine," he said: "I'll show you how just once, but the next time I tell you I want you to pack my suitcase, you're going to do it on your own." "Sure, yes, don't worry," I responded. Then he showed me how to pack his bag, and I learned. On our honeymoon he was in the shower, and there was no bathmat. He took off his underwear and stepped out on to them. He then says to me, "Carmela, bring me another pair, these are wet." I looked in the suitcase, and there were none.

I went to my sister-in-law, who was younger, and I said, "I don't have any underwear for your brother. I forgot them." Surprised, she said: "Oh my, Carmela, what are you going to do when he finds out...?" "Look, I just forgot them, I didn't mean to," I told her. "Well," she said, "if it only happened once, then it will all be fine." He took it well, and it really made me laugh because, as they say, anything can happen in Castilla. Since his pants were made of fine wool, they itched him a bit. And I was like, "Ha, ha, ..., look at your brother, ha, ha, ha. He can't stop scratching." "Why are you laughing?" "I'm not laughing," I had fun with it. All the things he had to put up with. And he didn't get mad. He thought it was funny.

When I ask about her own education, Carmela smiles, but without a pause, answers: "I was a very good administrator." This was a key role for the proprietor's wife, but she adds impishly that she learned because, as she repeats several times, "every night I went to bed with a very clever man" who didn't let the farm go into debt. In between the lines, it is clear that, as a postwar woman married to a wealthy, land-owning husband, there was no opportunity for formal education. She learned how to run the household and family "on the job" — and stood by her savvy businessman husband.

In the countryside it's like everywhere else, if you have money in your pocket, you're fine. What you can't do is go to the country owing money. That's the way I always thought about it, and so did he. You've got to buy and make it with your own money, not with any money that you've borrowed from the bank. The moment you have to pay high interest, all you earn goes back to the bank. I haven't studied this as a career or anything like it, but every night I went to bed with a very clever man.

A key part of Carmela's work of managing a large household of workers and children was the preparation of the abundant farm products. She fondly recalls her recipe for large pots of garbanzos and fresh roasted lamb. Even simple eggs could be turned into a delicious meal, but it was the traditional *matanza del cerdo* — the process of slaughtering a pig that often weighs around two hundred kilos and preparing all the different meats, oils, and soaps from a single animal — that most required her skill and time. I hear how important this skill is from many of my informants: to make the most of the animals you have raised. At the same time, I recall Fortunato describing how the latest government regulations prohibit livestock farmers from carrying out this tradition on their own farms (see Chapter 3). Carmela recounts that there often

were as many as nine slaughters a year that would provide staple meats in many forms for many months and months.

One year I killed nine pigs. In December, January, February, I did nine *matanzas del cerdo*. I had the maid who helped me and a woman from town who knew how to do it who came to teach me. But after that, I alone made the foie gras, the paté.

Although in those years she describes herself “like an earthquake” in the kitchen, she admits to not liking to cook now. Marta, who has been listening to her mother’s stories as we talk, now speaks up for the first time, noting that her mother still has a bit of “trauma” after so many years of overseeing such a big operation.

The family grew, and times changed after two decades of living on the farm. By the 1960s, the five oldest children were attending boarding school in Seville. The cost of room and board for five school-age children was becoming exorbitant, and Carmela was tired of the isolated rural life. So, she traded the rural environment for a home back in the city. Yet this new situation, she recalls vividly, brought its own sense of isolation. While at first her husband joined them in Seville, he soon recognized that the *fincas* suffered from his absence. Even though these years coincided with Franco’s push toward the modernization of roadways and public transportation to develop tourism in Andalusia’s sun-drenched coasts and culturally exotic towns, commuting daily was still out of the question. So, he moved back to the *finca*. Carmela now enjoyed a dynamic urban environment, but, without her “rooster,” she recalls, a new sense of loneliness crept in:

I’d call him, and I’d say, “Pepe, I don’t hear the hens clucking, and I’m very sad. Why don’t you come get me?” I wanted to see him. “What’s the matter Carmela? Tell me what’s the problem. What’s wrong?” I’d say, “I want to be with you. I don’t hear the turkeys either. I don’t want to stay here. I’m better off in the country.” “Very well, I’ll come for you this afternoon.” And he’d come get me. I missed him very much.

Since leaving the *finca*, Carmela has only returned to it as a vacation pastime. She recalls her days on the *finca* with what seems to be a mixture of distaste and nostalgia — a pride in her ability to run a household with limited resources along with an acceptance of this sometimes-frustrating existence. Carmela surely has many more stories to offer

to an interested listener like me, but when she hears the seven o'clock bells calling worshippers to San Pedro's Church, she abruptly changes gears, saying, "you have to live up to God's demands too." She hasn't been to Sunday Mass yet that day. We accompany her on the two-block walk to church and, with a few kisses on the cheek to say goodbye, she disappears inside.

Carmela understands that she has lived a privileged, traditional life. Coming from an aristocratic family that had once owned a large part of what is now Doñana Natural Park but lost everything when her thirty-year-old father became ill with Parkinson's, she married a prosperous, industrious man. But as she charmingly recalls the postwar years on the *finca* and the early years of modernization, Carmela also reveals the challenges even privileged women faced in a highly gendered society as they navigated customary responsibilities, all while trying to find a space for themselves as well. Traditional pastoralism established clear roles for property owners and shepherds, as well as for their families, which remained fairly static until the turn of the twenty-first century.

## Conclusions and Update

Despite generational differences, both mother and daughter seem to approach their own lives in a similar way: Carmela by striving for independence and expression in the small ways that were acceptable at the time, and Marta by being a woman in charge in the countryside. Marta observes: "As far as generations go, women my age find ourselves closer, educationally speaking, to our mothers and even our grandmothers than to our daughters." Both mother and daughter understood that the health of the farm depends on the owner living on the farm at least part-time and staying involved in the daily decision-making, as well as on working closely with dedicated shepherds who tend to the animals. Marta is still learning what it takes to run a good farm and care for animals, but she is also taking measures to improve the quality of life for people who work her farm: she has provided new accommodations, a restructured pay scale, paid vacation, and makes efforts to consult regularly with her farm managers. She has even learned one of her mother's skills: the resident shepherd taught her how to perform the

traditional slaughter, and they split the 220 kilos of meat they prepared; it will feed both their families for months.

When I check back in with Marta two years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, she sadly informs me that her mother has passed. Carmela could fight COVID-19 but not the new loneliness that came with lockdown. Marta also updates me on how much she has learned about how to manage her flock and to work to keep a shepherd. Moreover, she has a new business partner with a more comprehensive plan for raising pigs. He provides about six hundred pigs, while she provides land and labor for raising them. While Brexit doubled the price she got for lamb, her return on pork fell dramatically during the pandemic with the global lockdown. Seventy million tourists normally visit Spain every year, she explains, and many of them visit Andalusia for a taste of the famous cured serrano ham. Because of travel restrictions and health risks, however, this profitable trade collapsed. Most large celebratory events were cancelled, along with the orders for the *ibérico* ham that is traditional at these occasions. Marta had to sell many of her pigs at a loss, but the savvy businesswoman decided to keep some of them and began her own direct sales, offering package deals of sausages, ham, and pork loins.

By mid-summer 2022, tourism was mostly coming back, but Marta now struggles with a longer-term challenge that worsened for her during the pandemic. The post-pandemic job market and shortage of labor has wreaked havoc on finding a stable shepherd and set of farm laborers. This is when Marta told me about the difficulties relating to keeping her skilled shepherd. Like many landowners during the pandemic, Marta's whole family left Seville during the lockdown and moved to the farm, where they could be outdoors. But many shepherds and farmhands, she explains, enjoy solitude, and suddenly having a whole family around created a tense situation. When her neighbor offered the shepherd more money and space, he left, and it has been hard to replace him.

As the economy moves toward recovery, there have been many shifts in the labor market, so it continues to be difficult to hire people. Marta compares her attempts to find qualified workers who like living in the country and who are reliable to being in a soap opera. One man, for example, turned out to be involved in a drug operation. After firing him, Marta had to run the farm herself for nearly four months with only occasional help from friends and family. "If I don't have people working



on the *finca*, everything falls back on me.” Laughing, she recounts how one cold December night a neighbor called at 2:00 a.m. reporting that hundreds of Marta’s sheep were wandering in the road. Dressed in pajamas, Marta single-handedly guided them all back to the farm.

Marta’s and Carmela’s stories help me to realize that the future of pastoralism depends on more than shepherds and grazing lands. Like Rafael Enríquez del Río and his work with Fortunato Guerrero Lara (see Chapter 3), Marta exemplifies a new spirit of collaboration. Farm owners like Rafael and Marta are a critical part of this traditional system, essential to moving it forward amidst new regulations and markets, as well as new threats to animals, land, and ecosystems. At the same time, landowners also need to offer better conditions and more equal relationships with their workers to attract and keep shepherds.

Through two distinct lenses — a mother’s memory of rural life during the postwar and a daughter’s present-day drive to return to the land — the vastly different worlds of two generations of land-owning women come alive. Both mother and daughter have sought to find their place in the world: Carmela went from the countryside to the city in middle age, and Marta has gone from the city to the country in the same period of her life. Carmela learned to survive and thrive in a rural world she knew nothing about — and indeed initially seems to have had little natural affinity for. She lived through the transition from postwar rural life to modernization and urban living in a world that increasingly connected social mobility to an urban lifestyle. Marta, born more than forty years later, found refuge in the farm during this new age. She watched older sisters come of age when democracy, and its resulting dramatic cultural changes and a gender revolution were in full force. Her life story, however, reveals another set of challenges. Marta wanted to return to the rural life and be the resident boss running the farm, but raising livestock is still largely a man’s world. Choosing to follow in her father’s footsteps in middle age, she is taking the reins as a good steward of the *finca*. Her mother has given her a legacy of sure-footedness when it comes to doing work that needs to be done in the campo. Marta hopes her inheritance will pay off economically, but more importantly, she values a newfound sense of balance between life in the city and on the farm that allows her to be proud of her contributions to the sustainability of pastoralism in her region.



Fig. 5.1 Dehesa San Francisco in Santa Olalla del Cala, Huelva (2017).