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## **The Power of Myths and Storytelling in Nation Building: The Campaign for the Independence of Catalonia from Spain (2012-2015)**

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# The Power of Myths and Storytelling in Nation Building: The Campaign for the Independence of Catalonia from Spain (2012–2015)

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## ABSTRACT

**Background** *There is no nation without its origin story. The recent success of the Catalan campaign for independence (2012–2015) can be explained by a strong capacity to build and convey a story capable of informing, persuading, and eliciting emotional responses from Catalans and other Spaniards.*

**Analysis** *The recent Catalan nationalism narrative has been forged by updating the foundational myths of Catalan nationalism through four main plots—quest, escape, revenge, and transformation—that with a pragmatic character have been able to integrate current affairs into the old myths.*

**Conclusion and implications** *This article explores the elements of the new Catalan nationalism narrative by analyzing the interaction of foundational myths, the use of master plots, current affairs, and the means of dissemination.*

**Keywords** *Nation building; Storytelling; Spain; Separatism*

## RÉSUMÉ

**Contexte** *Sans histoire d'origine, il n'y a pas de nation. Le succès récent de la campagne catalane pour l'indépendance (2012-2015) s'explique par une forte capacité à imaginer et diffuser une histoire propice à informer, persuader et toucher les Catalans et autres Espagnols.*

**Analyse** *Le récit récent sur le nationalisme catalan résulte de la mise à jour de mythes fondateurs par l'entremise de quatre intrigues clés—quête, fuite, vengeance et transformation—qui de manière pragmatique ont réussi à resituer les vieux mythes dans l'actualité.*

**Conclusion et implications** *Cet article explore les éléments du nouveau récit sous-tendant le nationalisme catalan en analysant les correspondances entre les mythes fondateurs, le recours à des intrigues clés, l'actualité et les modes de diffusion.*

**Mots clés** *Construction de la nation; Mise en récit; Espagne; Séparatisme*

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I know who I am, and I know too what I am capable of being.

—Don Quixote in *Don Quixote*, 1516

## Introduction

The results of the last Catalan regional elections, held on September 27, 2015, confirmed that almost half of the Catalan population supports independence for the region from Spain (“Elecciones catalanas 2015,” 2016). Although these elections were not per se a referendum for independence, the two main Catalan pro-independence parties built a coalition with the objective of independence as the main point of their programs, and the elections took the shape of a plebiscite. The pro-independence block was defeated, but not by much, as it collected more than 47 percent of the votes. In 2012, the support for independence in Catalonia was at less than 25 percent, and in 2006 it was only 13.9 percent (“Elecciones catalanas 2015,” 2016).

So what changed? Different decisive factors explain the strength of Catalan separatism, including an economic crisis (Catalan unemployment was 23.8 percent in the fourth quarter of 2012 [Idescat, 2012]) and the limitations placed on the third statute of autonomy by the Spanish Constitutional Court in 2010. It is questionable, however, whether these factors alone are enough explain the rise of Catalan support for independence from 13 percent in 2005 to 48.5 percent in 2013, or the increase of 16 percent in independence supporters in a single year, from 2011 to 2012 (Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió [CEO], 2015).

There is some evidence that massive organized street protests, particularly the September 11 Diada demonstration of 2012, were a key method of successful strategic communication to pull together supporters for the independence of Catalonia (García, 2016). Between June and November 2012, support for independence went from 34 percent (CEO, 2012a) to 44.3 percent (CEO, 2012b). As Table 1 suggests, the increase in support for an independent Catalan state grew 50 percent right after the Diada demonstration of 2012, after a decade of relative stability. Whether the demonstration was a cause or an effect of this support is unclear.

**Table 1: Evolution of Catalan independentism, 2005–2015 (%)**

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Independent state	13.6	14.9	16.9	18.4	19.0	24.3	28.2	44.3	48.5	45.3	37.6
Federal state	31.3	34.1	34.0	33.7	32.2	31.0	30.3	25.5	21.3	22.2	22.2
Autonomous community	40.8	37.3	37.3	36.8	36.8	33.3	30.4	19.1	18.6	23.4	29.7
Region	7.0	6.9	5.5	5.38	6.2	5.4	5.7	4.0	5.4	1.8	4.5
Does not know	6.2	6.1	5.4	5.1	4.2	4.9	3.9	4.9	4.9	6.5	4.9
No answer	1.1	0.7	0.9	0.7	1.6	1.1	1.5	2.2	1.3	0.9	1.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió (2015)

There is agreement among analysts, both pro independence and not, that the consolidation of Catalan secessionism has an additional component that helps to explain its recent durability and the success of the Diada demonstration themselves. This is the construction by Catalan secessionist opinion leaders of a powerful story that has penetrated large segments of the Catalan population that were never previously a part of this movement. The story, although containing a number of plots, can be summarized by the slogan “Spain robs us.” In the analysis of Santos Juliá (2015), it has required “intense support from Catalan public institutions such as the department of culture, televisions, radio stations, publishers, museums, foundations, platforms, associations and assemblies” (para. 6; my translation).

Josep Borrell, a former president of the European Parliament and a Catalan himself, highlighted the three elements that made the “Spain robs us” slogan successful:

It is credible, because Catalonia pays more than it receives from the Spanish state as well as other rich Spanish regions; it has been repeated every day as a ‘thin rain’ by the local politicians using the public and regional media; and it is nice to hear, if I tell you you pay too much in taxes, you are probably going to listen to me. (Redondo & Martín, 2015; my translation)

### **Peculiarities of the Catalan case**

A number of factors differentiate the case of Catalonia from other nation-building processes. First, because it is not a state, Catalonia does not have a national unity in the political sense of the term. Second, the regional government’s strategic communication efforts to forge a community of reference must still compete with the communication apparatus of the official nation-state, Spain, which works to maintain a collective national identity (Morris, 2008). An additional factor is that in Catalonia, as in the Basque Country, for example, there is a non-nationalist sector that opposes nationalist efforts (Fusi, 2006). This situation leads the regional government to use persistently one-way strategic communication efforts, emphasizing the identification features of that community in opposition to the legal nation, Spain. Mass communication tends to be persuasive in order to highlight similarities between people from the *països catalans* (Catalan countries)—e.g., French and Spanish Catalans, and people from Valencia and the Balearic Islands, populations considered by Catalan nationalists to form part of the Catalan countries—as well as to highlight differences from other members of the current nation-state (i.e., other Spaniards).

This article explores and analyzes the importance of storytelling for nation-building purposes. The article is divided into three parts. First, it provides a brief overview of storytelling, its connection with public relations, and the use of myths and stories to forge national mythologies. Second, it analyzes the relationship between the myths of origin and the creation of modern nationalisms (Poliakov, 1986) as well as the importance of the creation of a “symbolic-mythical” complex (Smith, 1986) as a condition *sine qua non* for good nation-building storytelling. The role of the storyteller would be to adapt the myths of origin to the political, economic, and social changes by building a new mythical story that maintains continuity with the tradition (Juaristi, 2000). The third section of this article uses Tobias’ (1993) 20 master plots to analyze the successful

use of storytelling by the leaders of Catalan nationalism. It presents the use of four master plots, according to Tobias' model, that work separately, reinforce each other, and sustain the main narrative, all to justify the creation of a Catalan state. The article delves as well into the combination of myth and reality in the updating of old stories, their adaptation to the current historical time, and the use of mass media campaigns to integrate the different plots and propagate the story.

### **Literature review: Behind every human group there is a story**

Nationalism is a complex subject with a variety of definitions. Eric Hobsbawn (1991) defines nationalism as the ideology that political and national units should coincide. Anthony Smith (1981) emphasizes the identity aspect of nationalism based on shared characteristics such as culture, language, race, religion, and political objectives. Smith (1991) argues that nationalism can be seen as an ideological movement aimed at attaining and preserving the identity, unity, and political autonomy of a group of people who share a sentiment. For Peri Pamir (1997), in the contemporary era, ethnic or cultural communities have used nationalism to voice their dissatisfaction with the status quo. The sources of discontent may be political repression, economic deprivation, or the denial of cultural identity. In the case of nation-building movements, the target is the destruction of the official nation-state that is directly or indirectly accused of repressing nationalist sentiments.

In *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger (1983) compile a series of essays that underscore how the construction of historical narratives strengthens the legitimacy of a claim to a geographical region, self-autonomy, or even a sense of group identity to serve a nationalist agenda. In this sense, and perhaps adopting a cynical position, Hobsbawn (1983) claims nationalist movements are based on invented traditions that target ordinary people as the objects of their actions and propaganda.

The Catalan narrative for independence is similar to many other national narratives (including Spain's). It too incorporates narratives that combine, in varying proportions, myth and reality. The use of storytelling, "a staple of public relations" (Kent, 2015, p. 480), is key to inventing traditions. Storytelling "is a communication, control and power technique" (Salmon, 2010, p. 34) for managing opinions, including nationalist ones. Indeed, myths and invented traditions are nothing more than types of stories. According to Mircea Eliade, a myth is a "sacred, exemplary, significant" story that "supplies models for human behavior and, by that very fact, gives meaning and value to life" (1998, pp. 1–2). The Catalan case is no exception but rather offers proof that the power of myths is alive and well.

In *Mythologies*, through the analysis of different cultural aspects of popular culture, Roland Barthes (1972) revealed the myths (stories) of the society in which he lived. For example, Barthes talked about how the stories from religion and astrology included in *Elle* magazine shaped and orientated the ideas and behaviour of French people in the 1950s. Barthes analyzed how the predictions of the horoscope in magazines adjusted to the social rules of the *petit bourgeois* (the search for love, social relationships, health, money, success, etc.), avoiding any transgression or questioning of the social order. He concluded that if these stories did not allow any dreamlike compensation,

at least they allowed humans to objectivize their reality, to perpetuate a stable system of values needed for living.

Like this personal stability, human groups seek the same. Indeed, Barthes argued that “there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their stories and very often those stories are enjoyed by men of different and even opposite cultural backgrounds” (1975, p. 237).

Anthony Smith (1986) suggests that the most important factor for the historical stability of any ethnicity is not its social organization, its political or military relationship with other ethnicities, or its installation in an adequate political medium. Rather, one has to look at what he terms the *mythomoteur*—“their myths and symbols, their historical memories and central values” (p. 15) that are diffused and transmitted to future generations. For Smith, “[W]ithout a *mythomoteur*, a group cannot define itself to itself or to others, and cannot inspire or guide collective action” (pp. 24–25). He further makes a distinction between two types of *mythomoteur*: dynastic, to perpetuate a dynasty; and communal, focused on an image of the whole community rather than a privileged lineage or a state institution. This second type applies to nation building and can only be understood within a mythology of heroic origins and descent. Smith (1986) identifies a common pattern of development in all ethnic mythologies: “efflorescence, decline and rebirth” (p. 191), the last coming about thanks to the action of nationalist forces that restore the community to its true self.

Indeed, Jon Juaristi (1997) defines nationalism as a melancholic reaction to the loss of origins. This melancholic reaction is transmitted from generation to generation through a number of stories, usually with an emotional component, that people listen to from childhood on. With time, some people are persuaded by the content of these stories and become supporters of nationalism. These stories lead to other stories that will be transmitted to the next generation. He calls this *el bucle melancólico*, “the melancholic ringlet.”

Historicists would be in charge of elaborating “national mythologies” and “myths of ethnic origin and descent,” using a combination of objective scholarship records and legends, with the purpose of producing a single unified past that provides a convincing and emotional account of the present situation of their ethnicity or nationality. “Divergent readings of ‘history,’ ” Smith (1986) suggests, “the chance of multiple histories, can only weaken and stifle a sense of identity which external events have succeeded in ‘awakening’ ” (p. 192). As a result, one or more of the myths of ethnic origins and descent identified by Smith (1986) are present in most of the ethnic or national stories: these are origins in time, origins in space, and myths of ancestry, migration, liberation, golden age, decline, and rebirth.

Schopflin (1997) has a similar taxonomy of myths that provide meaning for those ethnic communities that hold them. He distinguished eight motifs in myths: territory, redemption and suffering, unjust treatment, election and civilizing mission, military valour, rebirth and renewal, ethnogenesis and antiquity, and kinship and shared descent.

Catalan nationalism does not have as much of an ethnic or space origin. The main foundational myths of Catalan nationalism have more to do with the myth of a golden age in which Catalonia was supposedly independent (despite the fact that for most his-

torians, Catalonia has never been independent [Kamen, 2014]). Those are the symbolic dates of September 11, 1714, a day in which the troops of Philip V took Barcelona, abolished Catalan institutions, and imposed the use of Castilian Spanish, and October 15, 1940, when Lluís Companys, president of the Catalonia government during the Second Spanish Republic, was killed by Franco's troops. Catalan nationalists celebrate these "defeats" to symbolize the fight of Catalonia against Spain. Unjust treatment plays a role too. Catalan nationalist leaders such as Artur Mas often emphasize the existence of an extractive Spanish State that historically has taken advantage of the creativity and entrepreneurial character of the Catalans ("Mas reivindica las raíces," 2015).

There is a relationship between the myths of origin and the creation of modern nationalisms. The idea of a national character, linked to the myths of origin, explains the origin of numerous stories and campaigns involving certain ethnic groups (Poliakov, 1986). Yet there is always also an element of convenience. Juaristi (2000) argues that "groups believe in myths because there are pragmatic interests associated to the story content" (p. 30). Paul Veyne (1988) equally suggests that it is better to admit "that truths and interests are two different terms for the same thing: for practice thinks what it does" (p. 64).

Indeed, political, economic, and social changes transform the myths of origin:

In moments of transition, of change, tradition appears as a disconnected ensemble of motifs, *membra disjecta*, from which the mythographer, operating as a *bricoleur*, will choose those that at the same time are integrable into a mythical story, capable of guaranteeing a continuity with the old stories and maintaining the coherence of the great diachronic meta story: the tradition or, even better, the chain of the tradition. (Juaristi, 2000, p. 32; my translation)

In the case of the campaign for a Catalan referendum on independence, Martín Alonso (2015) points out that among the mythographers are historians, writers, and organic intellectuals who have used the same strategy as publicists: "To create a need. For that purpose the situation has to be redefined: the quasi-state will be a stateless nation and the musical ambience will be a syndrome of deficiency reflected in the slogan 'Spain robs us' " (p. 191, my translation). The only response to this syndrome of deficiency, of a country that has never exploited its potential, abnormal in a way, is to leave Spain to be its true self and become a country once again.

Because, as Joan M. Tresserras, a popular columnist in Catalan nationalist circles, writes, "[A]fter such a long way—centuries—of political inaction, some Catalans are accustomed to dependency" (2015, para. 2; my translation). And dependency never gets good press. The satisfaction of many Catalans with Catalonia's autonomous status within Spain is, according to pro-independence storytellers such as Tresserras, a source of alienation that must be fixed through good storytelling.

In national terms, stories are useful for developing and reinforcing identification through the use of rhetoric (Burke, 1969). A story is more than just information; it is "your path to creating faith" (Simmons, 2006, p. 3). "People identify with those they trust. They trust those with whom they identify" (Heath, 2000, p. 81). This is not only a question of rhetoric. As Kenneth Burke (1969) noted, the efficiency of rhetoric is not

only about some one particular address, “but as a general body of identifications that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill” (p. 26). In other words, the quality of the story is as important as the number and frequency of the venues in which that story is being released and shared. This explains why most of the nation-states of the world have a public media apparatus managed by the government to keep building national narratives adapted to evolving times. Despite hidden agendas, they infuse “ideals that give the semblance of a national unity” (p. 108).

In a very divided society such as Spain, the use of mass media campaigns has demonstrated its effectiveness for showing and persuading the world (as well as Catalans themselves) that a majority of Catalans favour independence.

### **Method**

This article uses a critical-conceptual method. It analyzes the interaction between nation-building mythology, storytelling, Tobias’ master plots applied to nation building, current events in Catalonia and Spain, and the use of public communication campaigns in the recent campaigns for the independence of Catalonia from Spain between 2012 and 2015. Regarding the use of myths and historical arguments, the author has relied on history books that analyze the relationships between Catalonia and the rest of Spain.

The new and specific focus of this article on the use of myths and storytelling among Catalan nationalists relies heavily on Catalan nationalist sources. Despite the competing communication apparatus of the Spanish government, the Catalan media have much greater power to influence in Catalonia. For example, the Catalan government-led newscast, *TN Midgia*, has the highest share (31%) of the market, more than twice the market share of TVE, Spain’s main public channel, according to the Consell de l’Audiovisual de Catalunya (CAC, 2016). Furthermore, approximately 45 percent of the Catalan population says that their primary sources of political information are Catalan public newscasts, mainly TV3 and 3/24 (CEO, 2016). The qualitative aspect is also determinant when analyzing media impact on the climate of opinion in this region: with the purpose of promoting Catalan identity, TV3 newscasts and general programs tend to include more local information than their national counterparts.

Likewise, two Catalan radio stations, RAC 1 and the publicly owned Catalunya Ràdio, lead the public radio broadcast system audience rankings. Together, they reach an audience of 1.3 million listeners, equivalent to two-thirds the entire audience in Catalonia (CAC, 2016). Catalan newspapers, mainly *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico*, are also hegemonic (CEO, 2016), boasting six times more readers in Catalonia than the national newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo*. Catalan newspapers receive a constant flux of public money—for example, in 2016, even despite a context of budget cuts, the Catalan government gave 7.5 million euros to the Catalan press (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2016).

### **Pro-independence master plots**

A plot is often defined as the structure, the skeleton of a story (Tobias, 1993). It can also be described as “a series of interrelated and coherent events” (Kent, 2015, p. 484) or as “electromagnetism—the force that draws the atoms of the story together”



(Tobias, 1993, p. 5). Yet the plot is not only structure but also substance, as it holds the story together and simultaneously permeates its spirit.

Tobias (1993) conceives of 20 master plots, namely 1) Quest; 2) Adventure; 3) Pursuit; 4) Rescue; 5) Escape; 6) Revenge; 7) The Riddle; 8) Rivalry; 9) Underdog; 10) Temptation; 11) Metamorphosis; 12) Transformation; 13) Maturation; 14) Love; 15) Forbidden love; 16) Sacrifice; 17) Discovery; 18) Wretched excess; and 19/20) Ascension and Descension. Four of these plots are especially useful for building the current story in support of the independence of Catalonia: quest, escape, revenge, and transformation.

### Quest

Quest refers to “the protagonist’s search for a person, place or thing, tangible or intangible. It may be the Holy Grail, Valhalla, immortality, Atlantis or The Middle Kingdom” (Tobias, 1993, p. 59). Quest plots usually involve a lot of action as “the protagonists are always on the move, seeking, searching” (p. 60). They accumulate wisdom along the way and are not the same at the end as when the story began.

In the Catalan case, the Holy Grail is the independence of Catalonia, the creation of a nation-state. It is a utopia that is possible, that requires a strong degree of mobilization of independence leaders and supporters. Leaders speak out in the Catalan Parliament and on talk shows and radio shows, they write opinion/editorials, tweet, and address crowds in political meetings. And the followers and supporters mobilize just as much. A high level of commitment and mobilization is required. They participate in massive and organized street protests, particularly the 2012, 2013, and 2014 Diada demonstrations (National Day of Catalonia), which brought together between 500,000 and one million people in the streets of Barcelona, having travelled by bus from all corners of Catalonia (Badiella, 2012; Noguer, 2013; Noguer & Ríos, 2014). Independence supporters were organized to shout “Independence” 17 minutes 14 seconds after the Barcelona–Real Madrid soccer match was initiated (“El Camp Nou,” 2012), in reference to one of the foundational myths of Catalan nationalism, the date September 11, 1714, when the troops of Philip V took Barcelona, abolished Catalan institutions, and imposed the use of Castilian Spanish.

### Escape

The plot of the escape deals with a protagonist who is confined against their will and wants to escape. This hero can be unjustly imprisoned and there is a test of wills between two strong personalities: the jailor and the jailed. They devote themselves to the task at hand: the warden to keeping his charge imprisoned, and the ward to escaping imprisonment (Tobias, 1993).

In the imaginarium of the independence supporters, Spain as well as Catalonia are personified: they act like different individuals. Catalonia is considered a single subject who has been defeated (in 1714) and put down by another subject, Spain in this case, also considered a single subject. “Catalonia has resisted all kinds of dictatorship, dictatorships that have not just tried to bury the culture, language and collective institutions of the country” (Mas, Romeva, Forcadell, Casals, Junqueras, Llach, Bel, & Forné, 2015, para. 4), read an editorial in *El País* addressed to all Spaniards and signed by the

president of the Catalan regional government and seven other independence leaders right before the last Catalan elections.

In the Catalan storytelling for independence, Catalonia and Spain are considered separate and somewhat equal entities that act as if in a marriage. It is always Catalonia and Spain, not Catalonia as a part of the whole (Spain). There is, or should have been, an agreement between equal parts. Catalonia has tried to make the marriage work but Spain does not respect its freedom, it has been too possessive. “Catalonia has loved Spain and continues to love it ...” and “has done so despite the absence of reciprocity” (para. 3). Catalonia “has given much and received little or nothing: the crumbs, if not the disdain of governors and governments” (para. 4). For Catalan secessionists, every time Catalonia, always in good faith, has tried to make its feelings manifest, Spain has boycotted or ignored it. This has happened through military (1714) or political actions, such as the Spanish Constitutional Court limiting the responsibilities of the third statute of autonomy in 2010 or forbidding the pro-independence referendum in 2014. In this telling, Spain has forced Catalonia to follow this separate path.

Thanks to the use of personifications, Catalan independence storytelling is able to deny the plurality of two entities, Catalonia and Spain, perceived as monolithic, and it highlights a history of offences against Catalonia. It particularly appeals to two emblematic dates for many Catalans: what most historians consider the war of succession for the Spanish throne between Austracists and Borbons in 1714 (Albareda i Salvado, 2010; Kamen, 2014) is now transformed into a secession war; and the killing of Lluís Companys in 1936 by Franco’s troops during the Spanish Civil War is now seen as an attack by Spain on all Catalans, rather than an attack by the Fascists against the Republicans. (In fact, there is evidence that a number of Catalans fought on Franco’s side in the Spanish Civil War [Dowling, 2013; Kamen, 2014; Riera, 1998]). According to this story, all modern-day Catalans are somewhat imprisoned against their will by an intransigent Spain.

### *Revenge*

In literature, revenge relates to the “retaliation by the protagonist against the antagonist for real or imagined injury” (Tobias, 1993, p. 99). As a visceral plot line, revenge reaches to a deep emotional place. Individuals or human groups bristle against injustice and want to see it corrected. As a product of injustice, revenge is legitimized because “there are times when the law cannot properly dispense justice, so we take the matter into our own hands” (p. 99).

There is an element of revenge in the Catalan independence story, but not in the traditional sense. If it is visceral, its ideologues have tried to avoid this. Indeed, independence is justified as “an expression of a reaction in the Catalan way, democratic and peaceful as a response to an intent of humiliation” by Spain (“Cardús achaca el auge independentista,” 2013; my translation), to borrow the words of Salvador Cardús, a well-known Catalan sociologist and member of the Advisory Council for the National Transition of Catalonia, an organ created by the regional Catalan government to advise the transition to the creation of a Catalan nation-state.

The fact that the Spanish Constitution and the Spanish Constitutional Court do not admit the possibility of organizing a referendum to segregate a Spanish territory is for Catalan nationalists proof that Spanish laws cannot be trusted and, as a conse-

quence, Catalonia must make its own decisions even if that means violating the national laws. As a response to this perceived injustice, on November 9, 2014, the Catalan government organized a “participation process,” as the Government of Catalonia rebranded it after the prohibition by the Constitutional Court, asking Catalans whether they supported independence from Spain. Thirty-seven percent of Catalans in the census participated and 80.76 percent of them voted affirmatively.

### *Transformation*

Transformation deals with “the process of change in the protagonist as he/she journeys through one of the many stages of life” (Tobias, 1993, p. 152). The protagonist of the plot is moving from one significant character state to another and, therefore, will be a different person as a result of the action. A second dramatic phase depicts the effects of transformation, and a third dramatic phase represents the final stage of that transformation. Metamorphosis is closely related to transformation (Tobias, 1993) because, after the inner transformation, the character literally changes physical shape.

Catalan independence leaders have always anticipated a complete transformation, for better, of Catalonia if it were to become a nation-state. For example, Artur Mas, the former president of the regional government, has continually repeated the idea that an independent Catalonia would solve one of the major problems of the region, its high unemployment rate (20% in 2015), and independence would result in employment levels similar to those of Northern countries such as Austria, Denmark, or Iceland (quoted in “Forcadell clama por ‘salir,’ ” 2015). Ivan Tibau, secretary of the Catalonia sport department, has claimed that an independent Catalonia would be a “world superpower in sports” (“Tibau replica a Cardenal,” 2015). As Kent (2015) suggests, transformative messages, especially regarding the increase of wealth or the reinforcement of identity or self-esteem (e.g., through sports successes), are powerful messages that work particularly well in politicized and activist contexts.

### **Mass media campaign**

Persuasion is at the core of strategic communication in general (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 3), and Catalonia nation building in particular (García, 2016). The role of Catalan media can at least partially explain the success of the campaign for independence. Through different channels and narratives, the media has helped to integrate the different plots (quest, escape, revenge, and transformation) into a single story. For example, prior to the celebration of the Diada celebrations, the main Catalan newspapers, such as *La Vanguardia* and *Ara*, tried to prove that a Catalan escape from Spain was possible and that it would have a positive and empirical outcome. These two newspapers offered a positive perspective on an eventual independence of Catalonia, such as a better economic quality of life for Catalans, including relevant testimonies to prove independence would be possible (L. Alonso, 2014). It cannot be ignored that Catalan newspapers receive public funds via direct subsidies. For example, in 2012, the main Catalan newspapers received 10 million euros from the Catalan government (Tercero, 2012).

The main public TV station, TV3, also gave ample coverage in its newscasts to the Diada celebrations. For example, during the second half of 2012, it dedicated 15 hours

to discussion about the relationships between Catalonia and the rest of Spain, with more than 1 hour 47 minutes dedicated to the problem of unemployment and economic crisis (CAC, 2014, p. 191). This public channel allocated about 52 percent of its time to members of the Catalan government, all of them pro-referendum and pro-independence, and 47 percent to the rest of the political parties. Indeed, even representatives of the audiovisual council of Catalonia (Consell de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya), housed in the Catalan government, admitted that critical opinions during the street protests had only a minor role in the Catalan public media (CAC, 2012).

Furthermore, the main branches of the Catalan public media apparatus, Catalunya Ràdio and especially Televisió de Catalunya (the six public channels of Catalonia), programmed 15 special shows in one week as well as a 15-hour monographic program on September 11, 2013, covering the Diada demonstration and involving the use of a helicopter (Gubern, 2014). The independence theme permeated all of the content on TV3, including fiction and documentaries. A number of these stories were about the fight of different countries in their quest for independence or had a patriotic and historical component. For example, two days before the Diada celebration of 2014, TV3 played *John Adams*, a series about the American process of independence. A few days before that, it aired a documentary on the Scottish independence campaign, and on the day prior to the demonstration, TV3 broadcast a documentary about the Catalan volunteers who fought with France in the First World War to gain the acknowledgement of their separatist vindications, as well as another documentary that explained the origin of the Catalan anthem. During the Diada day at prime time, TV3 played *The Case of the Catalans* about the succession war between the Borbons and Austrias, which gave an origin to the Diada commemoration (Gubern, 2014).

## Discussion

Despite the relatively unexpected way that the Catalan campaign for independence took place between 2012 and 2015 (and still ongoing), the main story elements of the campaign respond to the classic pattern of myths and plots used for nation building.

Whether we use Smith's (1986) term *mythomoteur* to refer to the myths and symbols that evoke shared historical memories, or Juaristi's (1997) concept of "the melancholic ringlet," we find the nostalgia for a lost paradise in the construction of the Catalan nationalist storytelling. The four of Tobias' (1993) plots that were employed (quest, escape, revenge, and transformation) offer a response to that nostalgia that fits with the foundational myths of Catalan nationalism that brings together elements of our times.

One of these foundational myths is that Catalonia is a millenary nation. Catalan nationalists believe there is a nation, Catalonia, on a quest to restore the freedom it enjoyed in its origins and later, escaping from an exterior enemy, Spain, against whom it has had to fight in order to survive and maintain its identity. This storytelling adopts a scientific as well as a fictional form. For example, several Catalan historians date the creation of a Catalan nation-state back to the thirteenth century with the emergence of its own language (Fontana, 2014) or even to the contacts between Greeks and Romans in the fifth century B.C. (Soldevila, 1962). Likewise, bestselling author Albert Sanchez Piñol (2013) published *Victus*, a historical novella that describes in heroic terms the Catalan resistance in Barcelona against the troops of Philip V in 1714. Under

these assumptions, the quest for independence and escape from Spain can be seen as perfectly legitimate.

A second and main foundational myth says that Catalans are northern people in the South because they work harder than other people. Catalan nationalism narratives position the laborious and entrepreneurial spirit of Catalans in contrast to the rest of Spaniards, because, as the former president of the Catalan government Artur Mas argued, “Catalans are laborious, industrious and austere individuals. You will not find that in any other Southern people” (quoted in Segura, 2016; my translation). This myth, as well as the plot of transformation and/or metamorphosis that will come about with the independence of Catalonia, fits well in a context of sharp economic recession in which Spain can be fingered as the reason Catalonia cannot be its true self and reach its true potential as a bustling economy.

If, as Juaristi (2000) and Veyne (1988) suggest, there is always an element of pragmatism in the choice of myths, and if truths and interests are the same, then the myth of the industrious Catalans in opposition to the rest of Spaniards is perfectly timed to the current recession in Spain, a country that is on the verge of default, and the idea that Catalans pay more than they receive from the Spanish state. In this telling, Spain is holding back Catalonia’s development.

Both foundational myths, Catalonia as a millenary nation and as a place with a different ethos because of its different work ethic, offer meaning to the people in light of current circumstances. They are both, however, classical myths in nation-building processes. Applying Schopflin’s (1997) taxonomy of myths, we find at least three motifs in the myths of the Catalan case: redemption and suffering (Catalonia has been dominated by an invader, Spaniards, for centuries); unjust treatment (economic, mainly, but also political); rebirth and renewal (of a millenary nation); and antiquity (because of the solidity of Catalan culture and traditions that are different from the rest of Spain’s).

The recent Catalan case includes at least three out of the eight classical elements of national mythology elaborated by Smith (1986): the myth of liberation from an exterior enemy (Spain); the myth of a golden age in which Catalonia was heroic (kingdom of the *Marca Hispànica* under Charlemagne in the ninth century or conquest of the Mediterranean as a part of the kingdom of Aragon) or prosperous (the industrial and modernist Catalonia of the nineteenth and part of the twentieth century); and the myth of rebirth whereby Catalonia will recover its former glory and reputation thanks to the creation of its own nation-state and its association with the other Spanish areas where different dialects of the same language (Catalan, Valencian, and Majorcan) are spoken.

The communication and iteration of these myths through the plots has proved effective because, although the campaign has formally been spearheaded by a civic organization, the ANC (Catalan National Assembly), which organized most of the events, including the *Diada* demonstrations, it has also had the support of the Catalan government thanks to its control of the autonomous public media apparatus, the Catalan Media Corporation (*Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals*, or CCMA). Good storytelling has been supplemented by a strong mass communication campaign. With its 2,600 employees (CCMA, 2014), equivalent to roughly 40 percent of the entire radio

and television workforce in the region (CAC, 2014), the CCMA is a public broadcast service in Catalan with six television channels and four radio stations, among other companies. Through the control of the autonomous public media apparatus, the Catalan government has been able to manufacture stories and plots in order to frame current affairs within the lenses of the foundational myths of Catalan nationalism.

## Conclusion

The typology of myths and plots in nation building stays stable across centuries. However, to activate or reactivate foundational myths, plots must be updated to fit with current events. Storytellers, that is to say politicians, intellectuals, journalists, and the like, have to carefully and pragmatically select which elements of reality to use, because some basis in reality is needed, based on which elements work better in connection with the myths and plots. Although plots show a high level of flexibility in adapting to current events, national myths can prove more difficult. Indeed, there is a limited range of national foundational myths that in open societies can be used according to their capacity of association with current events. These are myths that have to do with ancestry, ethogenesis, kinship, or the possession of a certain territory. Due to the discrediting of ethnic ideologies, these myths, such as in the Catalan case, tend to have a pragmatic character and tend to appeal to aspects such as cultural identity, language, or the economy.

The Catalan case shows that although civic organizations such as the ANC should cultivate these myths and plots through the organization of events and the empowerment of social media platforms, the role of mass media is still decisive in bestowing on these myths and plots an institutional, legendary, and even scientific appearance. When, as is the case in Catalonia, a number of influential media outlets are public and managed by the local government, the media greatly contribute to the nation-building process by enhancing the impression of a majority of citizens being in favour of independence and by discouraging opposition, thanks to the creation of a traditional spiral of silence effect. Future studies using a storytelling perspective on the nation-building processes of territories that want to become states—such as Padania in Italy, Scotland in the United Kingdom, or Flanders in Belgium—would allow a contrast to the characteristics of the Catalan case.

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