“I’m a Bitch”: Eurovision and the Anti-Gender Backlash – a Spanish Case Study.

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“I’m a Bitch”: Eurovision and the Anti-Gender Backlash – a Spanish Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the controversy surrounding Spain’s 2024 Eurovision entry, “Zorra”, as a lens through which to explore contemporary debates over gender, feminism, and national representation. Drawing on close textual and contextual analysis, we situate “Zorra” within the broader history of Spain’s participation in Eurovision and the evolving role of the contest as a stage for negotiating political and cultural values. We show how the song’s explicit reclamation of gendered language and its subversive performance style sparked polarised reactions from across the Spanish political spectrum, including conservative, far-right, and so-called “classical” feminist actors. By tracing the media debates, political interventions, and cultural symbolism surrounding “Zorra”, we demonstrate how Eurovision functions as both a catalyst for social change and a battleground for competing visions of gender and nationhood. Our analysis offers a nuanced reading of how popular music becomes entangled in ideological disputes over feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and the meaning of national representation.

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INTRODUCTION

On the Eurovision stage in Malmö, a life-size keyhole opened and the audience roared: a middle-aged woman stepped out, smiled, and invited them to call her *zorra* (bitch). By then, the song had already become a national flashpoint dividing feminist and conservative voices. To understand how the act resonated so widely, we place the performance in the broader context of Spain's engagement with Eurovision.

Spain made its debut in the Eurovision Song Contest in 1961 with Conchita Bautista's "Estando contigo"/"Being with you",[1] followed by Rafael's romantic ballads in 1966 and 1967, which reached a respectable seventh and sixth place, paving the way for consecutive Spanish victories in 1968 and 1969. In 1968 Massiel's catchy "La, la, la" reflected the country's ideal of a young woman: prim and proper, radiating a stylised feminine innocence with a beautiful voice and a physique aligned to Catholic beauty standards. The sparse lyrics are an ode to youth and motherhood.[2] A reporter for the Spanish daily *Sur* described it thus:

> I trembled with pride as Massiel transmitted strength, vigour and warmth through the song, giving it everything she'd got, proving what she's worth and emphasizing her lineage, her "Spanish stock". There are many ways to be of service [to the nation], tonight Massiel [became] first, "Massiel of Spain" and then "Massiel of Europe." (Gutiérrez Lozano 15)

The proud reporter describes how Massiel delivered a powerful, heartfelt performance that showcased her talent and her Spanish identity. Through her singing, she not only served her nation but rose symbolically to represent both Spain and Europe.

The contrast to 1969, when Spain hosted the contest, could not be starker.[3] The lyrics of aptly named Catalan singer Salomé's[4] "Vivo cantando"/"The Feeling of Love" suggest the trope of a barren single woman who is transformed as soon as she sets eyes on a suitor who gives meaning to her life. Both the rhythm and the dance performance accentuate the portrayal of a woman's body that is ready to enjoy carnal pleasure. This radical shift illustrates the changing political climate in the late 1960s and is particularly noteworthy because Spain was under General Francisco Franco's authoritarian rule from 1939 until his death in 1975. Social change began in the early 1960s, when—mainly for financial reasons after more than a decade of autarky—Franco had to allow foreign trade and tourism (Sánchez López). The *apertura*, or economic opening up, not only created a tourist boom in the 1960s and 1970s (from 4.2 million in 1959, to 34.6 million in 1973; Statista), but also introduced foreign cultures and the changing ideology of the 1968 generation: human rights movements, students confronting the conservative values of their parents, and, importantly, sexual liberation.

The shift from innocent Massiel to sexy Salomé personified the changing sociopolitical environment and marked Spain's entry into the European cultural imaginary. The goal of Eurovision was to foster a sense of European cultural identity, and Spain's two consecutive wins certainly brought the country in from the cold. Massiel's spectacular win forms part of the state broadcaster TVE's "family album", as an iconic moment in Spain's cultural history (Palacio 10–11).[5] TVE was a major tool for propaganda and the construction of national values, and yet paradoxically it also contributed to the cultural opening up by importing foreign TV programmes (Gutiérrez Lozano). The Franco regime capitalised on the double victory. It understood the power of popular culture as a key mediator of social values and, more importantly, what a win at European level would do for Spanish national identity. This had been preceded by Spain becoming European football champions in 1964, and all three victories

1 Translations are our own, unless otherwise stated.

2 Originally, the renowned Catalan singer-songwriter Joan Manuel Serrat was going to be the Spanish representative, but he was swiftly removed when he demanded to sing some lines in Catalan, one of the regional languages proscribed by Franco (Gutiérrez Lozano).

3 Spain was one of four winners in 1969, together with the UK, France, and the Netherlands.

4 Salomé is a character in the New Testament who dances at her stepfather's birthday celebrations. For further details, see Britannica.

5 The legitimacy of this victory has been subject to controversy: in later years, allegations emerged that the Franco regime may have manipulated the outcome by using state influence to buy votes from other national broadcasters (Reuters).

offered an ideal opportunity for the nationalist government to promote the nation's supposed greatness. It is also noteworthy that to this day these early Eurovision performances form part of the nostalgia-creating episodes in a talent show in which young contenders pay homage to their iconic forerunners (*Tu cara me suena/Your face looks familiar*, 2011 and 2018). Although Spain has not won the Eurovision Song Contest since the 1960s, the country did achieve victory in Junior Eurovision in 2004 with María Isabel's "Antes muerta que sencilla"/"I'd Rather be Dead than Ordinary", an anthem that has since become a feminist and queer cultural reference.

In this article we examine how Spain's 2024 entry "Zorra"/"Bitch" became a focal point for public debate around gender, feminism, and national identity, due both to its explicit engagement with gendered language and its performative elements. While some celebrated the song as an act of empowerment, others—including conservative and far-right groups as well as some feminist factions—condemned it, igniting a national debate. Our research builds on existing scholarship on Eurovision as a cultural and political phenomenon,[6] notably Baker, Gutiérrez Lozano, Palma Martos et al., and Yair, as well as studies on anti-gender movements in Spain and Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte; Barrera-Blanco et al.; Obst). While much has been written on Eurovision, little attention has been given to the Spanish contribution. For example, Martínez and Fouce's collection on popular music in Spain (2013), while comprehensive and groundbreaking, does not include an analysis of Eurovision, nor has there been any debate on Spain's entries since. This article thus fills a significant critical gap in the field of Eurovision studies. Not only is it the first article in English on the 2024 Spanish entry, but it also applies a close reading method, highlighting textual and performative detail in order to examine how meaning is produced at the level of lyrics, embodiment, and staging. This is particularly suited to tracing how cultural artefacts become focal points of ideological dispute, and complements the predominantly sociological and geopolitical approaches that have shaped much of the existing scholarship in Eurovision studies.

We examine the complex artistic, cultural, and political layers embedded in the song as cultural artefact as well as its various performances. Our focus lies in both text and context, that is, the song's artistic contribution and the controversy it generated. The article explores the themes that "Zorra" conveys and how it engages with discourses of gender, feminism, and LGBTQ+ representation. After a brief overview of Spanish feminism, it then explores the anti-gender backlash to the song, examining how different actors—including politicians, journalists, feminist organisations, and far-right commentators—framed and responded to it, as well as how Nebulossa themselves navigated the backlash. By situating "Zorra"[7] within its wider context, we argue that the backlash is indicative not only of the objective of conservative actors to conjure up the spirit of a pre-democratic past, but also of enduring tensions within feminist organising itself. Despite the organisers' best efforts to keep politics out of the festival, Eurovision has long become a site of political tensions and disputes. National selection processes, therefore, cannot be seen as isolated aesthetic decisions, but must be analysed in the context of wider feminist and political debates.

SPANISH FEMINISM

Spain has had a patchy history of feminism. Its first wave was on a par with other European countries, following the proclamation of the Second Republic in 1931, when the country became one of the most modern democracies in Europe. This newly founded republic was short-lived, leading to a brutal civil war (1936–39) and the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco (1939–75). The radical reforms of the Second Republic, including gender equality, were seen, then as now, as endangering the very foundations of society (Louis, *Women and the Law*). Throughout history, feminist movements have had to contend with setbacks and false narratives, attesting to men's anxiety about loss of power in the public and private sphere. These backlashes can be traced to moments when there were radical (or not so radical) legal, social, or cultural changes. For example, during the dictatorship in the 1960s, the slightest progress for women's rights was perceived as a danger to patriarchal society (Louis, "Whatever Next?"), as you would expect in an authoritarian regime. Yet during the transition from dictatorship to democracy

6 Although this is not the focus of our article, we note that the 2024 and 2025 Eurovision Song Contests were marked by unprecedented political controversy regarding the European Broadcasting Union's decision to exclude Russia from 2022, while allowing Israel's continued participation, prompting allegations of double standards.

7 While a full history of Eurovision and a review of the academic literature is beyond the scope of this article, we refer readers to Yair, "Douze Point", for a comprehensive overview.

(1975–82), women's demands for rights were again not taken seriously; this was considered an afterthought at best and at worst a danger to society (Louis, "Television Divorce").

While there was slow but steady progress for women's rights in the 1980s and 1990s, it was not until the social democratic government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (2004–11) that progress accelerated, and the longstanding machismo culture began to face a real challenge. Two landmark legislative changes were made to combat gender violence in 2004 and to progress gender equality in 2007, respectively. It is no coincidence that shortly thereafter in 2013, the far-right party Vox was founded. Vox is vocal in its condemnation of feminism and blames women for destroying the nuclear family as the basis for society. Its ideology harks back to Spain's nationalist past, when women were legal minors who were kept out of the public sphere. Vox's ideological anxieties and scapegoating of feminists makes sense in a country that ranks high on gender equality indexes: the EU Gender Equality Index ranks Spain fourth out of 27 countries (2023), while the Global Gender Gap report ranks it 10th of 146 countries (2023; the USA, to name but one example, is ranked 43rd).[8]

Although gender has long constituted a salient axis of political contestation in Spain, as in many comparative contexts, the proliferation of social media platforms has reconfigured the dynamics of public discourse, enabling cultural artefacts—such as "Zorra"—to circulate rapidly and, in doing so, to catalyse intensified and often polarising debates across both digital and traditional media ecosystems. The reactions to "Zorra" did not happen in a vacuum but were part of an ongoing feminist fight for justice. One pivotal point in the feminist movement was *La Manada*/The Wolfpack case in 2016, when an 18-year-old girl was gang-raped during the San Fermín festival in Pamplona. The lenient sentencing of the offenders caused sustained, and nationwide, public protests that not only contributed to the ongoing legal debate about sexual consent but arguably resulted in significant changes to the Law for the Guarantee of Sexual Freedom in 2022, commonly referred to as *Sólo sí es sí*/Only yes means yes.

GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND EUROVISION

The European Council's "Copenhagen Criteria" (1993) stipulate that the protection of minority rights is necessary for any state to become a member of the EU. This shows that it is almost impossible for Eurovision to live up to its apolitical ideals (Yair, "Douze Point"). Advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality has since become a litmus test of a country's "sexual democracy" (Fassin), which manifests itself through gendered performances in the national and international contests—on and off stage. Understanding these wider issues of the Eurovision imaginary thus necessitates an analysis of the politics that surrounds the hosting of Eurovision, as well as its inter/national reception. As Motschenbacher notes, Eurovision stands in sharp contrast to sporting events, which tend to be dominated by mainstream and heteronormative cultures, as an event that embraces sexual and gender diversity.

Eurovision has long served as a space of identity and belonging for the LGBTQ+ community, and particularly for gay men. This is celebrated through camp aesthetics, with Dana International's 1998 win marking a key moment of visibility and empowerment on an international stage (Lemish). As a trans woman representing Israel, Dana International challenged dominant narratives around national identity, gender norms, and the kinds of bodies and voices that could stand for a nation. Her win not only sparked widespread media attention but also galvanised LGBTQ+ communities across Europe. Beyond her performance, Dana International became a cultural icon who helped bring trans identity into mainstream popular culture and opened up a sphere for broader conversations about representation and visibility (Barlow; Yair, "Douze Point"). This was followed by the victory of the Serbian Marija Šerifović, embodying both Roma and lesbian communities (Yair, "Douze Point"). Her rare win with a song sung entirely in Serbian was a defiance of conventional femininity and sexuality which transcended national borders.

By the late 2000s Eurovision had become a key site for projecting tensions between "homo-inclusive" European identity and its perceived Eastern "Other", with controversies surrounding the hosting of the contest in Belgrade (2008), Moscow (2009), and Baku (2012) highlighting state-backed homophobia. The tensions peaked with the victory of bearded drag queen

8 See http://reports.weforum.org/globalgender-gap-report-2023.

Conchita Wurst in 2014 (Baker; Palma-Martos et al.). Wurst's song "Rise Like a Phoenix" challenged binary gender norms and reflected a politics of queer defiance and resilience. Her victory sparked both celebration and backlash across Europe, exposing a stark East–West divide in attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights and visibility, and laying open the limits of queer national belonging (Dunin-Wąsowicz).

While LGBTQ+ rights have been at the centre of the tensions surrounding Eurovision, themes of women's empowerment and the questioning of normative gender roles have also featured more broadly across performances. Israel's Netta won in 2018, breaking with conventional beauty standards and aesthetics by presenting herself as proudly "weird" and embodying a feminist, body-positive resistance. Italy's 2021 winners Måneskin embraced gender-fluid fashion with a glam-rock aesthetic that resonated with LGBTQ+ audiences and challenged binary gender presentation. This in turn paved the way for Switzerland's 2024 winning act, "The Code", performed by non-binary artist Nemo. The song speaks to the experience of breaking out of rigid categories, finding freedom in ambiguity, and discovering a sense of self beyond binary structures.

In our case study, "Zorra", it is particularly important to examine the wider political debate that ensued, culminating in a prime ministerial intervention to support the controversial song. Feminist geopolitics is a "lens through which the everyday experiences of the disenfranchised can be made more visible" and, importantly, moves its discourse beyond representation into the domain of everyday and embodied social practice (Baker 79). The "Zorra" controversy is reflective of current gender politics in Spain, as well as in other European countries such as the UK (McRobbie), where misogyny and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric are part of a right-wing political programme that hankers after "the good old days" of easily identifiable gender binaries and values.

Turning to Spain's national context, the country has historically underperformed in the contest, being one of the "Big Five" countries that automatically qualify for the Eurovision final, which theoretically enhances their chances of performing well. This may be partly explained by the high political and symbolic stakes involved in selecting Spain's entry, which go far beyond musical appeal and winning potential. Instead, Eurovision has become a space where internal debates about how the nation should be legitimately represented are actively negotiated. This shows that countries often regard Eurovision as a form of soft diplomacy, with their entries acting as cultural ambassadors and tools for state identity branding. In Spain's case, the turbulent and ever-changing selection processes reveal how deeply the country invests in its Eurovision participation, not merely as entertainment, but as a place for negotiating national identity.

During Franco's dictatorship, Spain's entries were mostly controlled via an internal process run by the national public television broadcaster TVE (Eurovisión Spain), ensuring political alignment with the regime. With Spain's democratic transition, national finals were trialled, and in the 2000s Spain saw a shift when the talent show *Operación Triunfo* was used to select the country's act (Martín). In 2008 TVE experimented with a radically open process by partnering with the social media network MySpace, allowing users to vote for their favourite acts (Máiquez). This led to the unexpected victory of Rodolfo Chikilicuatre, a fictional character created by comedian David Fernández Ortiz, whose parody reggaetón song "Baila el Chiki Chiki"/"Dance the Chiki Chiki" satirised political figures and mocked Eurovision's conventions. While the entry became a viral hit, it sparked significant backlash from those who viewed it as a national embarrassment (Rizzo). The controversy exposed how easily media platforms (in this case the TV channel *La Sexta*) could manipulate public voting and led to the abandonment of open online selections in favour of more controlled formats.

What becomes clear is that Spain's history of Eurovision has been a history of controversies (Newtral), culminating in the creation of the Benidorm Fest in 2022. This marked another shift in Spain's Eurovision selection strategy, reviving a historical song contest from the late 1950s (Fernández) as a dynamic national final and official platform for choosing the country's entry. The Benidorm Fest is a live event with two semi-finals and a final, held before a large audience and broadcast on national television. The selection format combines public voting, a demographically representative public panel, and a professional jury. While it has successfully reignited public interest in Eurovision, Benidorm Fest has also been immersed in controversy.

In its first edition in 2022, the public overwhelmingly voted for Tanxugueiras, a powerful all-women Galician folk band whose attire drew inspiration from traditional clothing. They were accompanied by men dancers dressed in skirts, barefoot and bare-chested. Their song would have marked the first-ever Spanish Eurovision entry performed in a co-official regional language; a bold move that clashed with nationalist sentiments prevalent across the political spectrum, but particularly on the political right. The audience's runner-up, Rigoberta Bandini, offered a feminist anthem celebrating motherhood and laying bare societal discomfort with women's breasts. Her performance was rumoured to have been intended to include a provocative act, the unveiling of a breast during the live broadcast alongside a large breast sculpture on stage—an idea that would have risked breaching Eurovision's rules. Despite these two acts being clear public favourites, the voting system allowed a five-member jury to overrule the public vote. This resulted in Chanel, the eventual winner, securing just enough points to claim victory. Accusations of foul play quickly surfaced, casting a shadow over the festival and highlighting tensions between the public's choice, nationalist sentiments, and the large commercial interests behind Chanel (La Vanguardia, "¿Ha habido tongo?"; Silvestre). Notably, while regional co-official languages (Basque, Catalan, and Galician) have consistently been excluded from Spain's Eurovision entries, Chanel's performance appeared to bypass established rules by including more than 35% of lyrics in English,[9] therefore exceeding the broadcaster's stated limit while highlighting the unequal treatment of English versus regional, or national, languages.

As a cultural event, we suggest that Benidorm Fest has become not only a platform for selecting Eurovision entries but also a national stage where broader debates over national identity, gender, and artistic legitimacy are publicly negotiated. These tensions come into sharp focus in the case of "Zorra", which sparked intense public and political debate, serving as a rich site for in-depth analysis.

CLOSE READING OF "ZORRA"

To a certain extent, Eurovision performers have long crossed boundaries and mocked musical traditions (Yair, "Douze Point"), so what made "Zorra" stand out even among this kitsch-fest extraordinaire? Firstly, it should be noted that the song did badly, finishing twenty-second out of twenty-five in the ranking of the Eurovision final. However, "Zorra" was already a huge national hit before the main event and became a summer hit in the Spanish-speaking world afterwards; it even headlined Madrid Pride. This indicates how insignificant Eurovision proper is, and how, in the inter/national culture wars, Eurovision reception operates in a parallel universe.

In Nebulossa's act during the finals of the 2024 Eurovision Song Contest, the viewer is immediately presented with an opening medium shot that retracts into long shot and shows lead singer Mery Bas inside a life-size keyhole illuminated in red. The keyhole allows the viewer a look into somebody's private life; her high heels and theatrical sexy pose add to the suggestion of sensual pleasures. A box, reminiscent of a homely setting, is lifted and out she comes, both literally and metaphorically, together with two, adoring (and adorable) male dancers, in a staging that playfully reverses traditional gender roles. As she utters the first lines of her self-conceptualisation ("Ya sé que soy sólo una zorra/Que mi pasado te devora/Ya sé que soy la oveja negra/La incomprendida, la de piedra" (I know I'm just a bitch/That my past eats you up/I know I'm the black sheep/the misunderstood one, the tough one), the audience joins in, answering her provocative lines with a relatively quiet and non-committal "lo sé" (I know) in acknowledgement that they know what type of woman she is. Singer and audience reclaim the insult *zorra* (bitch) to celebrate women's empowerment. Mery Bas's self-confident joy, as she declares herself a black sheep and a woman supposedly made of stone, is infectious, as she commences the long list of playful engagements with, and rejections of, stereotypes. Her presence as a *cincuentona* (woman in her fifties) on the Eurovision stage disrupts the typical celebration of youth, asserting a confident and unapologetic older womanhood that is rarely granted such visibility in Eurovision. As a 50-something woman exclaimed in the YouTube comments: "This song is for the women! Us ladies over 50 dont [*sic*] get enough visibility! thank you SPAIN for this" (@formacionesprofesionales5969).

9 See the legal bases of Spain's preselection here (in Spanish): https://www.rtve.es/television/20211027/bases-legales-preseleccion-espana-benidorm-fest-eurovision-2022/2175212.shtml.

The suggestion of the implied interlocutor that she should change to a more traditional woman's role is met with more mocking provocation: "voy a gritarlo a los cuatro vientos" (I'm going to shout it from the rooftops). The lyrics proceed to a list of seemingly innocuous behaviours, such as going out at night and having a good time, which culminate in her exclamation that she is a "zorra de postal", a picture-perfect bitch. Women who get what they want do so through feminine guile rather than merit is another stereotype that is laughed off through a belittling facial expression, while Bas walks up to a pedestal to be on top of the world. As the camera zooms out from medium to long shot, the camp dancers return to the frame. By now the lyrics have become repetitive, shifting our attention to the scantily dressed dancers and their performance, highlighting how the performance constructs the men's bodies as an object of visual pleasure and thereby challenging normative gender roles. Their dancing is reminiscent of 1980s voguing, a dance style rooted in African American and Latino LGBTQ+ subcultures, which originated in Harlem, New York. Their highly stylised poses and hand gestures were inspired by both *Vogue* fashion models and ancient Egyptian art (Baker and Regnault). According to Gil Vázquez, this appropriation in the Spanish queer community is a relatively recent phenomenon, in part because of television shows such as *Drag Race*, *Pose* (Fx 2018–21), or *Legendary* (HBOmax 2020–), even though voguing arrived in Spain in the 1990s with Madonna's song "Vogue".

As the performance becomes increasingly important, the dance style goes from hand gestures expressing dismay at outdated notions of femininity to full-on voguing. While before the dancers were a mere performative support for the lyrics, they now become the main point of attraction. (It is, however, interesting to note that this part of the Malmö performance was a sanitised version of the national final performance in Benidorm, in which Mery Bas and the dancers danced in a line, their explicit sexual movements of the lower body resembling the act of penetration, at the exact point when the lyrics speak of men's anxieties and women's empowerment.) The audience's ecstasy reaches new heights as a line of the lyrics is projected on to the back wall, and Bas holds her microphone out, encouraging them to sing along. The dancers fire them up even more through their wild performance of complex dance moves. Here the editing team switches from the performance to a close-up of the audience celebrating the "bitch" on stage, while she predicts that in conservative minds she will go "de zorra a chacal" (from female fox to jackal), making the demonisation worse by likening her to an opportunistic carnivore. The audience's enthusiasm is electric and built into the performance, as Bas seeks, and gets, approval of her loose-woman identity.

Many YouTube users celebrated the iconic performance and commented on the "outstandingly huge" interaction between the singer and the audience, noteworthy even among Eurovision fanatics: "Who do you [need] for backing vocals? The crowd is enough" (@oliverqueen5883; @NDrockingIt). Another theme in the YouTube comments, from fans in countries other than Spain, was the unfairly low scores (@miavarghund; @koyacreates; @MatijaVuk-z9n; @OhGranMikele, to name but a few), attesting to the discrepancy between the song's popular appeal and the official Eurovision voting system. The close attention to the song's lyrics, performance, and reception illuminates why "Zorra" became such a resonant and contested cultural object.

As already mentioned, in line with Eurovision's Code of Conduct, Nebulossa's contribution had been stripped of some of its sexual explicitness by comparison with their performance at the Benidorm Fest. This censoring, following the contest's formal restrictions, represents a regulatory sanitisation as much as an editorial one. While this does not neutralise meaning or depoliticise the act, it highlights the tension between institutional norms and (queer) feminist expression, a tension that would later be amplified in media and political responses to the song. That said, the music video released previously provided greater insight into the song's lyrics and intentions. In the absence of dancers, the video unfolds in a cabaret. Mery Bas stands at the centre of a stage framed by glittering curtains, the audience seated around cabaret-style tables. The crowd, mostly composed of people over fifty, appears to enjoy the early moments of the performance, responding to the catchy tune and Bas's sensual delivery with polite interest. As the song progresses, the women in the audience tune into the song's empowering message. Singing along, their faces light up with joy, perhaps wishing they also had the courage to voice their experiences. The video juxtaposes Bas's stage performance with images from another setting: she dances alone, sensually, while the word *zorra* is projected on to her body. It appears in capital letters on her bare back, her face turned away from the camera. This evokes the act of being labelled behind one's back, an insult intended to mark and

shame. The imagery invokes the technique of human branding, used to leave permanent scars as a form of body modification or coercion. Here, however, the projection transforms the insult into a visual declaration and celebration, reclaiming it with defiance.

Midway through the video, the mood in the room shifts. The women, emboldened by the performance, rise from their seats to dance, their movements growing more uninhibited. The men, however, grow visibly uncomfortable, as their heads shake in disapproval. One man in the front row makes exaggerated arm gestures, his annoyance a stark contrast to the women's growing delight. And then, just before Bas joins the crowd of dancing women, capturing a collective sense of liberation, the climax of the video sees Bas smashing her glass on the floor in a decisive, rebellious gesture. Her red dress—a deliberate nod to iconic Spanish trans activist and artist Manuela Trasobares—cements the connection and opens up a broader conversation about how "Zorra" draws on women's and LGBTQ+ cultural references.

Similarly to the video, after performing "Zorra" at the Beniform Fest, Mery Bas made another iconic nod to Trasobares, by twice shouting, *¡Tira la copa!* (Smash the glass!). This phrase was originally uttered by Trasobares on a 1997 Valencian TV show discussing trans rights. Trasobares confronted the host and some of the guests in an emotional speech and ended up smashing her glass while inviting others to do the same (La Vanguardia, "Manuela Trasobares"). Initially, Trasobares praised Nebulossa's "Zorra", stating: "As women we can [do things] despite the misogyny, despite the transphobia, despite ageism, despite the demanding and constant social scrutiny. There are still many glasses to be broken and *zorras* to be liberated" (Europa FM). However, she later expressed discomfort with the use of her image for Nebulossa's commercial purposes, critiquing what she viewed as the appropriation of queer visual culture by artists who are not part of the LGBTQ+ community (Europa FM).

The references to Trasobares and the appropriation of queer culture can, however, also be read as a meaningful nod to the LGBTQ+ community, particularly to trans people. Nebulossa's dancers are cross-dressed in corsets and high boots typically associated with women's clothing, but their incorporation of voguing-inspired dance moves further demonstrates the queer influence of the *mise en scène*. This representation gains particular significance amid growing attacks on LGBTQ+ rights, both in Spain and globally, where trans individuals have become scapegoats in culture wars, their very existence threatened. As discussed in more detail below, much of this rhetoric emerges from small feminist factions that perceive trans women's rights as undermining cis women's rights. By merging feminist and queer causes, Nebulossa's performance suggests solidarity, uniting the struggles of trans and cis women against shared oppression, and reflecting the historically recurrent entanglement of feminist and queer politics in Spain (Trujillo Barbadillo). The reactions that the song and its performances received across the political spectrum attest to its cultural significance.

REACTIONS TO "ZORRA"

On 3 February 2024, during the Benidorm Fest finals, Nebulossa's performance was met with overwhelming enthusiasm from the crowd, who chanted along throughout the show. After "Zorra" was announced as the winning song, securing Spain's official entry to that year's Eurovision contest, the fan shop sold out of T-shirts with the word *Zorra*, the song rapidly climbed into Spain's Spotify Top 50, and the presenter, Ruth Lorenzo, famously dubbed Mery Bas "our Spanish Madonna" (Borrego Escot). Even the centre-right newspaper *El Mundo*, the second largest in the country, produced surprisingly supportive coverage, concluding that "this couple challenges the belief that women do not enjoy their sexuality beyond the age of 50" (Polo and Rosa del Pino). However, the comment section of the same article provided insights into upset conservative groups, whose comments were not long in coming. Readers described the song as a display of a "society in decay" and an "anthem of vulgarity", showing that not everyone was on board with the feminist contribution that Nebulossa had set out to make.

In the weeks following the Benidorm final, "Zorra" received *the Disco de oro* (Golden Record). Meanwhile, conservative media outlets remained cautious in their criticism, but widely reported alleged controversies surrounding the song, such as Eurovision's review of the lyrics to ensure compliance with contest guidelines (LaSexta). By March several outlets were focusing on the claim that betting companies were predicting that "Zorra" would perform poorly at Eurovision

(García González; TRESB, "Así") As Pecino Peláez has shown, media responses to "Zorra" often reproduced moral panics, framing the song's feminist message as vulgar or inappropriate. This tendency was especially evident in opinion pieces and headlines that questioned whether the performance was suitable for public broadcast, and more importantly, national representation.

On YouTube, influencers linked to the manosphere had more confidence in expressing their fierce disapproval. Both InfoVlogger and Un tio blanco hetero (A white heterosexual guy), two prominent anti-feminist YouTubers, argued that Spanish progressives were displaying a double standard in criticising the previous year's winner, Chanel, for wearing a similarly revealing outfit to Nebulossa's dancers, while celebrating "Zorra". Lesser-known conservative influencers, such as Javi Marenas, described "Zorra" as representing "sodomites, queers, effeminates, degenerates, courtesans" and argued that the song symbolises "the decadent, degenerate Spain we are subjected to". These tropes are far from new; as Cleminson and Vázquez García demonstrate, such rhetoric has deep historical roots in Spanish intellectual and medical discourses, where non-normative sexual and gender identities were consistently pathologised and framed as threats to national, moral, and bodily integrity. Marenas's comments echo a long tradition in which queerness is equated with decadence and degeneration, reproducing narratives that have been deployed for over two centuries to define (and confine) sexual identity in Spain.

As criticism of "Zorra" intensified, Nebulossa themselves addressed the controversy in interviews, reiterating that the song was conceived as an act of empowerment and reclamation. In fact, the duo expressed satisfaction that the song had sparked public debate and stated: "We're at an age where you see things differently and deal with them in another way. We're not 20 any more, and don't give a damn about any of it" (Gannon). Taken together, these framings of "Zorra" as a symptom of social and moral decay connect the controversy to broader anti-feminist and anti-gender movements that have grown alongside Spain's legislative advancements in women's and LGBTQ+ rights, including points of convergence between conservative actors and "classical" feminist critiques.

FEMINISMO CLÁSICO

The international press was less focused on the conservative backlash and rather picked up on the arguments of the so-called *feministas clásicas*, a strand of feminism that is centred on legal and political rights exclusively for cisgender women. These groups echoed, and often reinforced, conservative critiques, viewing "Zorra" as misogynist and part of a machismo culture (Newsroom Infobae). British newspapers, such as the *Guardian* (Kassam) and the *Independent* (Giles), alongside the French *Le Monde* (Philibert) and the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Illinger), all engaged in the debate about whether the term *zorra* insulted or empowered women. Misleading headlines, such as the *Guardian*'s "Feminists attack Spain's 'sexist' Eurovision entry", framed the critique as broadly feminist, when in reality it came from a minority of feminist voices. What set out to be a song of empowerment, aiming to shake off stereotypes that are still prevalent, soon turned into a discussion on how to do feminism correctly. For example, the former Spanish social democratic party's (PSOE) equality spokeperson Ángeles Álvarez, warned: "You will see your daughters reclaiming themselves as sluts" (OndaCero).

In light of this, we suggest that Nebulossa's embracing of LGBTQ+ rights acquired further political significance, as the transmisogynist nature of many of the "classical" feminist critics of "Zorra" surfaced. A leading voice came from the Movimiento Feminista de Madrid (Feminist Movement of Madrid), which demanded the song be withdrawn. The group is responsible for organising an alternative march that runs parallel to the main International Women's Day demonstration (8 March), a massive annual event in many cities and towns across the country. Among other issues, the MFM has split from this event due to its rejection of trans women's rights. Another group that exemplifies the intersection of opposition to trans rights and criticism of "Zorra" for its use of a derogatory term is the transmisogynistic organisation Alianza Contra el Borrado de las Mujeres (Alliance Against the Erasure of Women). The group condemned the song, stating that the word *zorra* is often used in gender violence and that the song thus "trivialises violence against women" by normalising the language of abuse and downplaying its real-world impact (Alianza Contra el Borrado de las Mujeres). Former Spanish deputy prime minister Carmen Calvo, a vocal critic of the 2023 trans rights law, dismissed the song as a commercial ploy to "make money and gain votes". She stated that she refused "to debate feminism in Eurovision",

explaining that for some domestic violence victims *zorra* "was the last word they heard before being thrown down the staircase" (La Voz de Galicia), thereby triggering the realities of gender-based violence. Critical of these negative reactions, the then secretary of communication for the progressive electoral alliance Sumar, Elizabeth Duval, argued that the overlap between transphobia and the rejection of the song stemmed from a sexual and moral panic, failing to recognise the reclaiming of the term *zorra*.

"Classical" feminism, characterised by its opposition to trans rights, has, in recent years, formed strange alliances across the political spectrum, particularly where opposition to trans rights has provided common ground with conservative and far-right actors (Obst and Ablett). For instance, in 2019 a group of prominent Spanish feminists made derogatory jokes about trans rights at a conference (Assiego). Similarly, one of the most prominent feminists since the 1960s, Lidia Falcón, has been headlining talks alongside the far-right party Vox (Rivera Barrera) and authored an article for the ultra-Catholic organisation HazteOir (CitizenGo) (Falcón). This organisation campaigns against abortion and LGBTQ+ rights while maintaining strong links to the far right. It is within these anti-gender movements that we can find the context that led to the backlash against the feminist and queer-inflected politics of "Zorra", attesting to the political potential of the supposedly apolitical arena that is Eurovision.

SPAIN'S ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENTS

While international media fixated on Spain's feminists' critique of "Zorra", often misrepresenting the views of a minority as a broader feminist sentiment, much of the vocal opposition came from conservative groups. The BBC was among the international outlets to report on Spain's prime minister Pedro Sánchez's dismissal of the song's critics. During a national TV intervention in February 2024 on *La Sexta*, Sánchez said: "It seems to me that feminism is not only fair, but can also be fun, and this type of thought-provocation must come from pop culture." He also took aim at the *fachosfera* (a right-wing echo chamber), joking that they would have preferred dictator Franco's anthem "Cara al sol"/"Facing the Sun" (OndaCero; Savage). Today, this song is associated with far-right nostalgia for Francoism, highlighting the sharp critique Sánchez offers in counterposing it to "Zorra", which he suggests is a more fitting representation of contemporary progressive values and Spain's top ten ranking in the Global Gender Report (2023). The reference to the *fachosfera* further underscores the reactionary tendencies of Spain's far right, which continues to align itself with Francoist symbolism and struggles to distance itself from the ghosts of the past. This tension reflects the country's broader cultural and political tensions, where key feminist messages face a backlash from conservative factions resistant to social change.

Spain's anti-gender rhetoric was largely driven by the Catholic Church, which actively, though unsuccessfully, campaigned against the same-sex marriage bill passed in 2005 (Blázquez-Rodríguez et al.; Cornejo and Pichardo Galán). Since then, the Church as an institution has diminished its active campaigning against gender-related issues. As Barrera-Blanco et al. demonstrate, the dark past of its collaboration with the Franco regime overshadows the Spanish Church and has curtailed its influence in promoting anti-gender rhetoric, despite having the resources to do so. Instead, the Church has shifted its focus to supporting lay activism; what Vaggione terms *strategic secularism* thus allows the Church, largely disregarded on matters of gender, to extend its reach through lay organisations in the fight against "gender ideology". In light of this, the ultra-conservative organisation HazteOir has played a key role in revitalising and amplifying anti-gender discourse, operating under the guise of lay activism (Barrera-Blanco et al.). HazteOir also gained infamy for its media campaigns, including buses emblazoned with transphobic and misogynistic slogans, later exported internationally (Ojeda et al.).

The emergence of the far-right party Vox has similarly played a significant role. The party targets feminist organisations, with a particular focus on undermining women's protection against gender-based violence, while backing campaigns such as HazteOir's *parental pin*, aimed at allowing parents to withdraw their children from progressive school subjects such as sex education. It does so with a strong focus on masculinist, even militarised symbolism, staging a war against "gender" (Cabezas). This is intertwined with an affective dimension of *hateful love*, promoting love for their own through hate towards the gendered Other (Obst). While Vox has recently shifted its focus to far-right nationalist issues such as security and immigration, anti-

feminist and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric has deeply permeated Spanish society, making rights-based campaigns an uphill battle.

In this context, the backlash to Nebulossa's "Zorra" was unsurprising. Conservative actors seized the opportunity to position themselves through anti-feminist reactions, a backlash that was amplified by the public interventions of the *feministas clásicas*, whose critiques of the song aligned with conservative rhetoric. Right-wing media, wary of appearing too archaic in a society where women's rights enjoy widespread support, resorted to subtler strategies. For instance, *El Mundo* conducted a small survey claiming that most women rejected *zorra* as an empowering term aligned with feminism (Mucientes). While ultra-conservative voices have gone so far as to question the validity of feminism itself, more moderate right-wing factions have reframed the debate to contest what kind of feminism is legitimate, portraying themselves as the true defenders of women's rights. In contrast, the manosphere—less restrained and more overtly anti-feminist—has directly expressed its disdain for "Zorra", illustrating a divide between conservative tactics and the emboldened rhetoric of online misogynist communities.

CONCLUSION

> Nebulossa you will always be famous!!! Europe will be singing along with "Zorra" for years to come, you're legends! (@demonoflight)

This YouTube comment captures how the significance of an entry is not necessarily reflected in the final rankings of Eurovision proper. Similarly, other Eurovision fans immediately called it an anthem (@bdgrb; @borjarosalesingelmo), in the knowledge that iconic entries become part of Eurovision's collective memory. Carlos Marcos, music editor of the Spanish daily *El País*, reminds us "that the act managed to get the audience (as demonstrated in the semi-final), of Norwegians, Irish or Latvians who have no idea of Spanish, to shout: 'I'm even more of a bitch'", attesting not only to the bold lyrics but also the catchy tune. "Zorra" is a paradigmatic case study of popular culture's power as a catalyst for social change. As Cristòfol and Moguer-Terol show, the intense media coverage around "Zorra"—both national and international—transformed the song into a central artefact of cultural discourse, illustrating how Eurovision has given impulse and contributed to broader social debates that far exceed its musical dimension.

The public reactions discussed above, strong in sentiment and wide in reach, exemplify that even harmless feminist messaging is perceived as a threat, particularly so when it is being debated through pop culture on an international stage that becomes an extension of Spanish nationhood. As an ode to women—with a past—who have fun, get what they want, and are empowered through years of struggle, both private and political, the song is not breaking any new boundaries. The tension between the tameness of the lyrics and the outrage it produced in some quarters is therefore significant and yet distorting.

Unbeknown to most Europeans, Spain is one of the most advanced countries in terms of policies to protect women's and LGBTQ+ rights. Pop culture and media campaigns leading to public debates around feminist issues are commonplace in Spain, possibly more so than in other European countries. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that Spain would produce a daring song such as "Zorra" as its Eurovision representative, bringing the fight for women's rights to an international stage. This is in line with other feminist candidates, such as the previous year's Rigoberta Bandini. In a TV interview, she praised "Zorra" as what she considered to be a brave and fun song, while her interviewer, the TV host Inés Hernand, commented that Bandini "walked so that Nebulossa could fly" (TRESB, "Rigoberta Bandini").

Interestingly, negative reactions to the song are split between the so-called *feministas clásicas*, who were not willing to discuss feminism in Eurovision and opposed the reclaiming of the word *zorra*, and conservative-religious factions defending "traditional" women's roles and opposing any mainstream feminist movements. The division for and against the song was so stark that after Nebulossa won the Benidorm Fest, the equality delegate of the public broadcasting service RTVE resigned in protest (Mucientes). Nonetheless, the backlash may have contributed to catapulting Mery Bas into her "maddonisation", turning "Zorra" into a feminist anthem that would make history in Spain's fight against the relics of archaic machismo culture. Despite significant backlash, feminist contributions in Spain continue to gain momentum, even as a rising far-right climate threatens to reverse this progress.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

While both authors contributed to this article in equal measure, we follow the social science convention of naming the person who initiated the collaboration as first author.

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