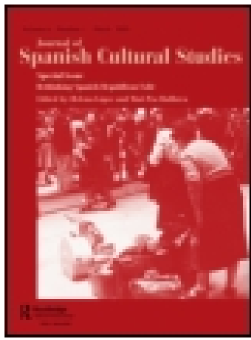

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The death story of the 'Trece Rosas'

TABEA ALEXA LINHARD

On 5 August 1939 thirteen young women who belonged to the JSU, the Juventud Socialista Unificada, were executed in the Ventas Prison in Madrid.[1] Their fellow prisoners named them the 'Trece Rosas' shortly after their death.[2] The exact charge that led to the minors' execution remains unclear today; different sources cite a number of crimes they had allegedly committed. It also remains unclear exactly who named them 'Trece Rosas'; yet, at least three poems written by other imprisoned women on the occasion of the execution of the thirteen minors are available today. Although marginal in dominant historiographies of the Spanish Civil War, the story of the 'Trece Rosas' appears, albeit with slight differences, in a number of memoirs and oral histories of leftist women who were either imprisoned or exiled in the aftermath of the war. Moreover, the execution of the minors, the choice of the name, and the poems represent a crucial moment in which literary conventions and oral traditions intersect, creating a fragmented narrative that oscillates between resistance and accommodation to tropes, myths and narratives stemming from both Republican and Nationalist contexts.

Given the climate of purges and political retribution that reigned in Spain in the postwar years, the fact that thirteen women were singled out and executed together is no coincidence. When General Franco's victory ended the bloody conflict that had ravaged Spain between 1936 and 1939, the war was hardly over. Violence and terror marked the postwar years, and the defeat of the Spanish Republic resulted in the criminalization of all the men and women who had fought for the vanquished side. National reconciliation was not an option; instead, the radical changes and reforms that had marked the years of the Second Republic (1931-36) as well as the war years were to vanish from recent and not so recent memory. One of these radical changes and reforms was women's increasing political participation and agency.

Without idealizing the years of the Republic or the war years, one can safely say that during that time women gained responsibilities and possibilities as well as access to the public arena. Republican cultural production, however, was not ready to articulate the complexity of these changes. But even though underlying patriarchal structures remained mostly unchallenged during the years of the Second Republic, and economic hardship and lack of education often limited women's rights, women's political agency still increased dramatically. During the war gender roles changed even more radically:

> Women in Republican Spain were rapidly mobilized, with activities ranging from the more traditional ones such as procuring of food, childcare and nursing, to work in factories or running the transportation

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> system. Certainly, only a small number of Spanish women joined the front, yet this kind of mobilization is what provided alternatives for women that up to that moment had been unthinkable. (Graham 1995: 110)

Women's participation in the struggle consequently 'opened up significant mould-breaking possibilities and spaces for women's direct action and initiatives' (Graham 1995: 110).

The defeat of the Republic, however, implied radical setbacks for women in the social, political and legal arenas. Francoist propaganda diffused the idea that leftist women were the ultimate culprits of the disasters of the Civil War: leftist militants became *tiorras rojas*, an obviously pejorative term. They were considered to be 'unas cuantas desventuradas, fruto de la perversión moral, del extravío psicológico, que salieron a la calle para propagar doctrinas que disolvían el hogar, que deshacían la familia y que llevaban a la sociedad española a unos senderos desgraciados por los cuales andaban desatados todos los monstruos' (cited in Martín 1978: 4).

The story of the minors' death is elaborated in a constant negotiation between Francoist terror – here the women are scapegoats – and the gendered language of Republican war-time poetry. The name 'Trece Rosas', as well as the poems, reflect images, tropes and icons that had already appeared in the cultural production of the Civil War, particularly in poems that centred on other heroines of the Republican Left.

The repeated appearance of such gendered images, tropes and icons hardly precludes the possibility of a counter-narrative, but these still gesture at the vanishing of women's heterogeneous stories in the magma of history and memory. In *Disappearing Acts*, Diana Taylor argues that, during the dirty war in Argentina, women's performative and textual strategies reflected a similar negotiation between counterhegemonic and hegemonic narratives:

> The counterhegemonic image, as the term itself suggests, is tied to the hegemonic. Even as it tries to break away, it mirrors the hegemonic and its systems of representation that [in the Argentine case] have proved lethal to women. In their struggle to fight back, individual women, too, were forced to erase themselves as material beings as they claimed their existence and validity as icons. (Taylor 1997: 86)

Death stories

Oscillating between memory and oblivion, between myth and history, between inscription and the possibility of counter-writing, the story of the 'Trece Rosas' emerges in the form of a 'death story'. The expression 'death story' is a conscious play on two terms: 'War Story', as defined by miriam cooke, and 'life story', commonly used in the field of oral history. While the War Story 'gives order to wars that are generally experienced as confusion' (cooke 1996: 15), life stories order such confusion by providing a particular life with a coherent narrative. Understanding the construction of the War Story – an endeavour that can be carried out by studying women's multiple war stories in whatever shape or

form these may find their way to different audiences – might radically change our understanding of violence and war. Cooke argues further:

> Feminist praxis gives individuals the courage to be active witnesses whose words may serve to subvert dominant paradigms. These witnesses are elaborating survival strategies that include the forging of alternative visions and stories. They are voicing dissension from the status quo, they are making visible the linguistic strategies of patriotism and patriarchy, they are examining the role of consciousness and constructing a memory that is responsible to the future. (1996: 43)

Thus women's multiple 'war stories' provide alternative narratives to the 'War Story grid' (cooke 1996: 16). Yet the term 'death story' also departs from the notion of the life story, a narrative that ideally provides challenges to more conventional historiographic practices. This certainly does not mean that life stories allow a direct view of an experience unmediated by historiographic discourse. Rather, following Samuel and Thompson, 'recognizing the value of the subjective in individual testimonies' makes it possible to challenge 'the accepted categories of history' (1990: 2). Charlotte Linde also defines the term in her *Life Stories: The Creation of Cohesion*:

> A life story consists of all stories and associated discourse units, such as explanation of chronicles, and the connections between them, told by an individual during the course of his/her lifetime that satisfy the following two criteria:
>
> 1. The stories and associated discourse units contained in the life story have as their primary evaluation a point about the speaker, not a general point about the way the world is.
>
> 2. The stories and associated discourse units have extended reportability; that is, they are tellable and are told and retold over the course of a long period of time. (1993: 21)

Departing from Linde, Daniel James argues that life stories should not be understood as a straightforward repository of facts and experiences that up to a certain point have been excluded from history and are now ready to reveal a concealed historical truth. James stresses that '(l)ife stories are culturally determined constructs drawing on a public discourse structured by class, cultural conventions, and gender, and making use of a wide spectrum of possible roles, self-representations, repertoires and available narratives' (1997: 36). The 'stories' at issue here are not life stories in Linde's or James's sense. Instead 'death stories', without being the exact opposite, are perhaps best understood as the other side of life stories.

I use the term to refer to narratives about specific subjects whose deaths are politically and ideologically inscribed. Deaths, once narrated as a text, critically interrupt – and at the same time, engage in a dialogue with – dominant discourse. Like the study of life stories, the study of 'death stories' involves recognizing contradictions and conflicts between dominant myths, narratives and themes and

alternatives and resistances to these. Death stories always operate in the terrain of the counterhegemonic, which, following Taylor, is necessarily tied to the hegemonic. However, unlike life stories, 'death stories' cannot be told in the first person, as they consist of fragmented narratives that others piece together *a posteriori*.

Death stories appear traced on scraps of paper that might easily vanish from history. They consist of poems, letters or simple testimonies that honour, mourn and remember those deemed not worthy of being honoured officially by a eulogy or a dirge. From this it follows that death stories will always be incomplete narratives. Studying death stories implies, to quote Ranajit Guha, 'bending closer to the ground in order the pick up the traces of a [subaltern] life it in its passage through time' (1997: 36). The first piece one picks up when tracing a subaltern life in its passage through time is usually a politically inscribed and always untimely death.

The death of the 'Trece Rosas'

Even though different sources cite a number of reasons for the execution of the young activists, the women's affiliation with the Communist Party ultimately explains their death sentence. The death of the minors took place only a few days after the political assassination of a Francoist officer, Lieutenant Colonel Gabaldón, and his daughter. Some sources suggest that the women were accused of participating in Gabaldón's murder (García Blanco-Cicerón 1985: 12; Sabín 1996: 262; Cuevas and Giles 1998: 79) even though they were already in prison when the assassination took place. Other testimonies state that, together with male members of the United Socialist Youth, the women were accused of having organized a plot to kill Franco on the day of the Victory Parade, on 18 May 1939 (Cuevas 1980: 19). The likelihood is that the women had simply been involved in re-establishing contacts in order to regroup and reconstitute the United Socialist Youth after the defeat of the Republic (Cuevas 1980: 112).

Be that as it may, the death of the 'Trece Rosas' was an exemplary and politically inscribed execution. Militancy in a leftist party was an outright defiance of the gender roles and rules that the Francoist state had established already during the war, and that relegated women to a controlled, domestic sphere. Although this death story is grounded upon a cliché, a gendered term – 'Trece Rosas' – that originates in Republican Civil War poetry, it allows for the construction of a resistant narrative. The rose is a multifaceted symbol that, in addition to denoting beauty or love, stands for blood. In Christian iconography it represents the 'chalice into which Christ's blood flowed, or the transfiguration of those drops of blood or again, the symbol of Christ's wounds' (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1994: 813). Thus, roses also serve as a symbol of mystical rebirth, resurrection and immortality after an unexpected death, particularly in battle (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1994: 814). While the women's spilled blood might be the reference here, 'Trece Rosas' also alludes to femininity, youth, and ultimately innocence. This trope therefore has different symbolic meanings; the death story of the 'Trece Rosas' represents different narrative functions in

testimonies, oral histories, as well as letters and journalistic articles.

Discursive battlefields

With very few exceptions, the complexities and challenges that women's presence on the battlefield entailed do not appear in the mainstream cultural production of the Spanish Civil War. Nevertheless, the figures and images that come across in Spanish Civil War poetry reveal that the image of the thirteen roses derives from this genre. Cultural production across the Republican spectrum also included such forms of expression as graphic art, novels, theatre or songs; however, poems, and especially *romances* (ballads) attained a privileged status in the war years.[3] The traditional form of the *romance* was particularly appropriate for a cultural endeavour that aimed to unite intellectuals and poets with anonymous *milicianos* and *milicianas* – many of whom were only just learning to write – in a common cause.[4]

The contents of traditional ballads are usually of epic proportions, and could therefore easily be applied to the current situation of war and revolution, in dire need of heroes, heroines and martyrs that would raise popular support for the Republican cause and elicit sympathy in the international arena. *Romances* reflect those themes that are traditional to war-time poetry, as well as those more particular to the situation during the Spanish Civil War. They include such subjects as veneration for the land and peasant life, praise for the defence of Madrid, satires of the enemy, eulogies of the war's victims, and, of course, poems written in honour of heroes and martyrs.

Related to the theme of death that is not death as such but a path towards immortality is the idea of regeneration, which becomes particularly strong in the poems on the 'Trece Rosas'. Alun Kenwood comments: 'Writers expressed a belief in the regeneration of the dead through the recurrent process of nature. Man and land were one since the peasant was bonded to the earth he had tilled all his life' (1993: 35).

However, when we have not fallen heroes but fallen heroines, the conventional paradigm of the hero's death in battle is unsettled. The classic notion of heroism and immortal fame emerges directly out of the Homeric world, an undoubtedly gendered schema. Nancy Hartsock explains that, in the Homeric world, women were traditionally barred from the battlefield and consequently from the possibility of achieving immortal honour and fame, as it remained a woman's task 'to mourn the dead hero, to bury him (Antigone), to recognize his sacrifice' (Hartsock 1985: 187-8).

At least four popular heroines appear in the more canonical poems from the Spanish Civil War: Aida Lafuente, Encarnación Jiménez, Lina Odena, and Rosario Sánchez Mora, 'la Dinamitera'. Aida Lafuente was a young communist activist. On 13 October 1934, during the miners' uprising in Asturias, Lafuente was shot by the repressive government troops sent in by General Franco to attack the striking miners. Even though her death preceded the war, she usually appears grouped together with the other heroines of the Republic (Ramos Gascón 1979: 301). Encarnación Jiménez was an Andalusian laundress who became a popular heroine when the Nationalists executed her. In 1937, the Nationalist forces that at

that point had seized power in Southern Spain arrested Jiménez. She received the death penalty and was executed shortly afterwards. Her crime had been washing the blood-stained clothes of *milicianos* (Ramos Gascón 1979: 302). Lina Odena became a Communist youth leader and Secretary General of the National Committee of Antifascist Women at a young age. On 13 September 1936, Odena met her death while visiting the various frontlines in Andalusia. Although some sources speculate that she was trying to organize an attack on the Nationalist lines, the known facts regarding her untimely death are few. Her driver took a wrong turn, crossing the lines that divided Republican from Nationalist territory. Finding herself at the mercy of her enemies once the car was stopped at a roadblock, Lina Odena shot herself (Gascón and Moreno 1999: 30). Rosario Sánchez Mora, also a young member of the JSU, joined the front in the initial weeks of the war as a *miliciana.* She lost her hand in a training exercise in September 1936. In a military hospital she encountered the poet Miguel Hernández who, upon meeting the young woman, wrote a poem entitled 'Rosario, Dinamitera'. In spite of her injury, Sánchez Mora continued to be active in the militias and later in the Republican army (Rodrigo 1999: 182).

Jiménez's execution, Lafuente's and Odena's deaths in combat, and Sánchez Mora's mutilation made these women relatively famous as well as the object of war-time poetry. The fact that only a heroic death – or mutilation – inscribes these women into historical and literary discourse is certainly a very common pattern. Even though heroines' deaths are articulated in similar terms to a man's heroic demise, the obsessive repetition of three metaphors – flowers, stars, and of course roses – serves to bridge the gap between the patriarchal discourse that informs the motif of a heroic death and the uncommon and often unexpected situation of a woman's life and death in war.

In Rafael González Tuñón's poem 'Aida Lafuente', the young activist becomes 'la rosa de Octubre', as well as 'la novia de España' (Ramos Gascón 1979: 70); in José Romillo's 'Aida Lafuente ha vuelto', the following verses reflect the same images: 'Espuma de los lagares/Estrella de los senderos./¡Eran diecisiete años/como rosales de fuego!' (Ramos Gascón 1979: 73). The images that appear in Hernández's 'Rosario, Dinamitera' are strikingly similar to those that appear in the poems written on the occasion of the death of the 'Trece Rosas'. The lost right hand of 'la Dinamitera' becomes 'la flor de las municiones y el anhelo de la mecha' (Hernández 1966: 312). In Pla y Bertrán's 'A Lina Odena, muerta entre Guadix y Granada', Odena's death is a path towards immortalized memory. Yet she also becomes a rose: 'Lina Odena, fresca rosa/flor de humedecido talle,/se interna el campo enemigo/sin miedo a que la maten' (Gascón and Moreno 1999: 56).

These are only brief examples, but a closer analysis of poems written on popular heroines of the Republican Left suggests that, when the name 'Trece Rosas' was coined and when Rafaela González, Ángeles Ortega and Flor Cernuda wrote their poems on the 'Trece Rosas', a number of tropes and images describing women's heroism in the Spanish Civil War had already become part of Republican poetic language.[5] It is in the way these tropes are used, however,

that we see their ambivalent function. While the authors of the poems draw from a body of conventions, the name 'Trece Rosas' and the poems also function as a means of resistance not only against Francoism itself, but also as a way for these women to establish a counter-narrative that corrodes the patriarchal language of Spanish Civil War poetry from within.

A few days after the women's execution, Rafaela González, a fellow detainee, wrote the poem 'Como mueren las estrellas' in prison. The poem was published in Fernanda Romeu Alfaro's *El silencio roto: Mujeres contra el franquismo* (1994). González's work centres on two underlying motifs: an idealized nature and the possibility of regeneration, two elements that are extremely common in Spanish Civil War poetry. In her poem, the 'trece rosas han tronchado del eterno rosal' (1994: 99). The insistence on spring motifs implies regeneration and transcendence. The women have not died in vain; they are now part of a history and an idealized land that will not forget them. Furthermore, González insists on the innocence of the thirteen minors, using traditional symbols and images that accentuate the women's femininity:

> Trece estrellas han muerto
> trece vestales
> del Templo de la libertad
> Vírgenes
> que en blanco cortejo, sin lanzar un grito
> en brazos de la muerte van hacia el infinito. (Romeu Alfaro l994: 99)

As in other Republican poems, González's work employs religious motifs, suggesting that the women's death was a political sacrifice and thereby filling their violent death with meaning and coherence. The religious references in this poem accentuate the gendered nature of their death, as they become virgins to be sacrificed. Such terms as priestesses or virgins, as well as the white funeral procession to which the author refers, underscore the purity and innocence of the thirteen minors.

Unlike González, who writes her poem in free verse, Ángeles Ortega uses the much more traditional form of the sonnet. This poem was also written in 1939 and in prison, shortly after the minors' execution. The text appears in Giuliana di Febo's *Resistencia y movimiento de mujeres en España, 1936-1976* (1979). As in the other poems, images of death, bitterness and decay coexist with hope for regeneration as well as the notion of a bond with nature. Ortega also emphasizes the youth, innocence and femininity of the minors: 'Trece flores de trece limoneros/hacia el valle que seca los trigales/Trece ninfas de trece manantiales/que les ceden su canto a los jilgueros' (di Febo 1979: 98).

While the lemon trees of the first line of this quatrain might refer merely to the bitterness of the death of these thirteen minors, or might even suggest a certain geographical location, it is also possible that Ortega's metaphor is a direct reference to Federico García Lorca's *Romancero gitano*.[6] Ortega traces the motif of death and decay throughout the first quatrain of the sonnet. The thirteen flowers of the first line are consigned to a dry valley where death awaits them.

The dead minors are now voiceless: they are thirteen nymphs that give away their song to the goldfinches. It has become the task of others to ensure that the 'Trece Rosas' will be remembered. The last line brings to mind the fact that, in spite of their brutal and untimely death, their memory will survive. Ortega emphasizes this again in the first tercet of the poem: 'Trece estrellas que rompen las cadenas/que les impiden alcanzar el cielo/y se desprenden de sombrías arenas' (1979: 98).

The death of the thirteen minors is now filled with meaning. Yet in the very last tercet of the sonnet, Ortega exchanges the motifs of transcendence and regeneration for death and hopelessness: 'Trece ideas con un solo desvelo/Trece arpegios vencidos... Trece penas!/Trece flores truncadas en el suelo' (1979: 98). They become nothing but wilted flowers in a bloodstained battlefield.

The fact that the name 'Trece Rosas' and the poems refer to pre-existing literary conventions that do not account for the complexity of women's experiences in the Spanish Civil War does not imply that these texts should simply be dismissed as manifestations of internalized oppression. Rather, it is in the negotiation with these pre-existing tropes that the authors of these texts produce a body of writing with available pieces and fragments. These are accepted and acceptable gendered expressions that clash with the other side of these women's stories: their activism in a leftist party and their politically inscribed death.

Memory

The last part of this article addresses testimonies that refer to the death of the 'Trece Rosas'. While some of the testimonies I will discuss in this section reflect the rhetoric of the PCE, the Spanish Communist Party, others bear no specific political affiliation. Consequently, in my analysis of the different accounts of the last hours of the 'Trece Rosas', I emphasize the narrative function that this particular event has within the different texts where it appears. This does not mean that the witnesses are merely fictionalizing the death of the thirteen minors. There is always historical and ideological meaning attached to the diverse ways in which the witnesses choose to describe this event.

They were happy to die for a just cause

Fernanda Romeu Alfaro's book *El silencio roto* documents women's resistance to Francoism and pays particular attention to the death story of the 'Trece Rosas'. Romeu Alfaro cites the testimony of Antoñita García, who witnessed the last hours of the thirteen minors. Unlike other testimonies, here the young women are courageous, calm and at peace with their fate. They spend their last hours giving away their personal belongings and writing letters. Romeu Alfaro also cites a document that belongs to a text published by the French Communist Party in 1947, and that collects testimonies of women's anti-Francoist resistance between 1939 and 1941. Here she finds the following statement that, like García's, emphasizes the young women's courage:

> Las jóvenes, dando pruebas de una serenidad admirable, distribuyeron sus ropas entre las reclusas y tuvieron el valor de lavarse y peinarse, se pusieron sus más bonitos vestidos y esperaron con firmeza y sangre fría a que vinieran a conducirlas a la capilla. Consolaron a las otras reclusas que lloraban, asegurando que se sentían felices de dar su vida por una causa justa. Cuando los verdugos falangistas vinieron, las 13 jóvenes menores salieron gritando 'Viva la República'. (1994: 40)

The narrative here is coherent and heroic, the women are clearly the strong victims of a repressive political system in the making. There is no time for tears or fears, and more than anything the women's sacrifice is the dominant note. In this particular narrative, the fact that the women's last deed is to give away their belongings suggests that their political consciousness does not decrease in the face of imminent death. Rather, their death is politically significant, and the proximity of their execution seems to have provided these thirteen minors with a lucid understanding of the meaning of their sacrifice. They are even strong enough to soothe the other imprisoned women. Their death is tragic, but at the same time an act of heroism and political sacrifice that in the rhetoric of the Republican Left and particularly the Communist Party was reserved, with the possible exception of Lina Odena and Aida Lafuente, for the male protagonists of the Spanish Revolution and Civil War. While both Lina Odena and Aida Lafuente died in battle, Encarnación Jiménez was executed after performing a traditional female chore: her death therefore is also a sacrifice but does not transcend gender lines. The images and tropes that appear in the poems written on her death clearly prove this point. The death of the 'Trece Rosas' oscillates between these two poles as, in testimonies such as this one, their death is presented as a worthwhile political sacrifice. In other texts the woman's execution becomes, much like Encarnación Jiménez's death, the senseless murder of women that reveals more about the executioners' brutality than about the transgressions that eventually led to the women's death sentence.

We will die as her disciples

Dolores Ibárruri, La Pasionaria, one of the most important and renowned figures of the Spanish Republic, also includes a short reference to the 'Trece Rosas' in her memoirs.[7] She emphasizes the loyalty of the minors to the United Socialist Youth. In her memoirs, Ibárruri includes the letter of Agripina Moreno, who witnessed the execution of the thirteen minors. Moreno's letter suggests that the minors died not only in the name of the Communist Party, but also in the name of La Pasionaria herself. She describes how one of the women, Pilar Bueno, addressed her before her death: 'Camarada Agripina, si tienes la suerte de salvarte, cuídate y vive para que nos hagáis justicia. Somos inocentes. Y si algún día ves a nuestra Dolores, le dices que moriremos como dignas discípulas suyas' (Vázquez Montalbán 1997: 186). Moreno continues:

> Carmen Barrero me decía: 'Me van a fusilar con mi hermano; lo siento por mi madre. Somos inocentes. Nos matan porque somos comunistas.'

> Juanita Lafite, de dieciocho años, huérfana de un militar de alta gradación, nos encargó [que] dijéramos al partido y a la JSU que moriríamos dejando bien alto la bandera roja. Una jovencita apellidada Conesa exclamaba: 'Moriremos como comunistas, no permitiremos que nos venden los ojos, nos matarán de cara a nuestros asesinos. Somos inocentes.' (Vázquez Montalbán 1997: 187)

Agripina Moreno also remembers a Teresian nun, who, deeply affected after having witnessed the execution, explained to the other imprisoned women: 'Las muchachas no se dejaron vendar los ojos, murieron a cara descubierta, mirando al pelotón. Pilar Bueno, con el puño en alto, murió gritando: "¡Viva la Juventud Socialista Unificada!"'(Vázquez Montalbán 1997: 187). In this letter, Moreno assigns the naming of the 'Trece Rosas' to an anonymous member of the Libertarian Youth who had also written the first poem on the 'Trece Rosas'. Ibárruri herself comments:

> Las 'trece rosas' se llamaron Joaquina López, Virtudes González, Carmen Barrero, Dionisia Manzanares, Pilar Bueno, Julia Conesa, Blanquita, Victoria, Adela, Martina, Palmira, Anita, Anita López... Faltan algunos apellidos... El tiempo, los años borran muchas cosas. Pero en los anales de la lucha de nuestro pueblo siempre resplandecerá el valor de las trece muchachas fusiladas en la cárcel de Ventas. (Vázquez Montalbán 1997: 188)

In this particular narrative the sacrifice in the name of the Unified Socialist Youth, and by extension the Communist Party and Ibárruri herself, is worthwhile and heroic. The fact that here Pilar Bueno wants Pasionaria to know that she and her *compañeras* are dying as the dignified disciples of Dolores Ibárruri gestures at a lineage of politically active women within the PCE. Julia Conesa is reported to have said 'Moriremos como comunistas' at the moment of her death; Pilar Bueno does not say 'Viva la República' but 'Viva la Juventud Socialista Unificada'. Even though tragic, their death becomes a sacrifice for a worthwhile cause and the thirteen minors knew this in their last hours. There is no suggestion that they feared death. They all seem to be at peace with their fate as martyrs for the JSU and by extension for the PCE and La Pasionaria herself. Although loyalty to the PCE permeates this particular testimony, Ibárruri marks the death of the 'Trece Rosas' as a crucial moment in the history of the people's struggle.

Like robots, we all fell to our knees

María del Carmen Cuesta's testimony appears in Tomasa Cuevas's collection of testimonies *Prison of Women* (1998). Even though Cuesta also belonged to the JSU during and before the war, her testimony does not represent the 'Trece Rosas' in the same heroic manner as the previous accounts do. Cuesta joined the JSU in 1934, where she befriended Virtudes González, who would later become one of the 'Trece Rosas'. Cuesta was arrested shortly after the end of the war in 1939. She was 15 years old. On 3 August, Cuesta's friend Virtudes was one of the women who received the death penalty for allegedly having assassinated

Lieutenant Colonel Gabaldón and his daughter. Cuesta explains:

> That night, at what time I don't know, with Victoria asleep beside me and Anita and Martina sleeping elsewhere, we were awakened with a blow to the shoulder. Victoria and I sat up like two automatons; in front of us were the director's lieutenant, Carmen de Castro, María Teresa Igual, and some other officials. I don't know who was outside the room, but Anita and Martina were already standing up and Victoria, with her curls falling over her forehead, clutched my neck, crying: 'María, they're going to kill me. María, they are going to kill me!'
>
> She clung to my neck so hard I couldn't loosen her grip. At last Martina and Anita drew close and Martina said to me: 'You'd better put your affairs in order soon because if you don't, they'll kill you just like us'.
>
> And Anita said: 'Please, Victoria, be brave'.
>
> Then Victoria stopped crying and I saw her go through the door, her head drooping. We were all speechless from shock. I don't think we even cried. I don't know whose idea it was to kneel down, but again, like robots, we all fell to our knees. We remained kneeling until we heard the sounds of a machine gun in the morning. Those sounds you could hear clearly, especially if there was a breeze coming from the east. Some nights we could count perfectly the shots of the coup de grace. That night we kneeled until we had counted sixty-five of those shots.
>
> One half hour later María Teresa Igual, a haughty, cold woman, came in to tell us of the valor and integrity with which our friends had met death. She told us that some of the girls had come to confession – I don't know if that was true – and they had gone out singing JSU hymns and died shouting 'vivas'. What's more, she told us that the machine-gun fire hadn't killed Anita López, the tallest of the girls. Anita was still alive when she fell. She had sat up and asked, 'Well, aren't they going to kill me?' At that very moment the coup de grace was administered. (1998: 80-1)

Even though the JSU hymns and the 'vivas' coincide with the other testimonies, Cuesta's narrative allows a glimpse of the desperation and terror on the night of 5 August. Instead of merely emphasizing the girls' heroism, she also describes their fear and anxiety, as well as the brutality of the executioners. The emphasis here is not on the heroic sacrifice, but on the brutal and untimely death of thirteen young women who found themselves trapped within the mechanism of the Francoist repressive apparatus. Moreover, Cuesta's testimony stresses the impotence of the other imprisoned women who witnessed the last night of the thirteen minors. Cuesta's description of the last night of the 'Trece Rosas' gestures precisely at the limits and inconsistencies of the discourse of an heroic death that is meaningful in the greater scheme of things. It is in María del Carmen Cuesta's account, as well as in others that appear in texts like *Prison of*

Women, that a very different, possibly subalternized narrative of the Spanish Civil War takes shape. In contrast with the poems, here the women's death is not a meaningful sacrifice that will result in a path towards immortality. Contrary to the preceding narratives, the women's political choice will not preserve the memory of a particular ideological struggle. Instead, the text bears witness to the women's impotence, as a new political system in the making has overdetermined the role they are to play in a history that will never be their own.

She called him a son of a bitch many times

A very different testimony appears in Antonio Sabín's book *Prisión y muerte en la España de la postguerra* (1996). The last chapter is dedicated to imprisoned women and it is here that Sabín refers to the 'Trece Rosas'. He cites the testimony of a woman who witnessed the last hours of the condemned minors:

> La iglesia en la cárcel (de Ventas) donde estaban en capilla las trece menores era alegre y grande. Se trataba de una nave muy moderna, llena de luz y de vida. Su aspecto contrastaba con la situación que se vivió aquella noche del 4 al 5 de agosto: el cura queriendo confesar a las condenadas, la directora pidiendo que no gritáramos, ataques de nervios controlados, ojos sin vida, estábamos como drogadas en la tensión que vivíamos. Decía el cura que no era momento de pensar en el mundo sino en Dios, y a nosotras, que éramos tan jóvenes, nos parecía que todo aquello era una injusticia ya que los curas eran colaboradores del franquismo. Una de las chicas le llamó hijoputa un montón de veces. El primer domingo después de los fusilamientos dedicó su homilía a los bienaventurados que padecen hambre y sed de justicia. Las presas se pusieron en pie y comenzaron a patear.... (1996: 263)

Unlike the earlier texts, the resistance to the Francoist executioners – here additionally represented by the priest – is more subdued. The reaction of the imprisoned women to the priest's words on the Sunday after the execution suggests also that this death conveys a certain spirit of resistance: the Francoists could kill young militants but not their memory. Moreover, the description of the prison official, 'pálida como la cera y envuelta en su capa azul marino' (1996: 263), makes the event even more sombre and sinister. She does not need to say a word, everybody knows that the minors are about to be executed. As opposed to the other testimonies that emphasize the event in itself or the courageous behaviour of the minors, this particular testimony is more concerned with recreating the mood of that night, the panic attacks, the lifeless eyes, as well as the impotence of the other women, who felt as though they had been drugged. The acts of resistance are small, maybe insignificant in the sense that they can certainly not prevent the death of the young women. Nevertheless, they are there: 'Una de las chicas le llamó hijoputa un montón de veces' (1996: 263).

Even though the aim here is to describe the individual deaths of the minors, this particular account is also a collective narrative of women in prison who cannot prevent the execution of the 'Trece Rosas,' but who can still stand up and

stomp their feet in order to protest not only at the actual death, but also at the entire political machinery that kills these women in the name of the Francoist state.

These accounts differ in more or less significant details and facts. Yet all emphasize the innocence of the 'Trece Rosas' as well as the strong impression their execution left on the other imprisoned women. More than sixty years after their death, and a quarter of a century after that of Franco, it is not possible to disentangle the actual, true story of the thirteen minors from these layers of myth and narrative. This story is only told because thirteen young women were punished with death for their political activism, accused of a murder they did not commit. This story can only be told in a common discursive language that is not ready to articulate the complexities of women's participation in revolution and war.

The (re)construction of a 'death story'

In the summer of 1994, journalist and fiction writer Rosa Montero published an article entitled 'Las "Trece Rosas"' in *El País Semanal*. In her article Montero narrates the story of the 'Trece Rosas'. In addition to briefly telling the story of the minors' last night, as it appears in Romeu Alfaro's book, Montero uses the article in order to write against the silencing that has in many ways marked women's participation and women's deaths during the Spanish Civil War. Romeu Alfaro's book also includes the letters that Julia Conesa, one of the executed minors, wrote to her mother from prison. These letters end with a very short note that Conesa wrote only a few hours before her death, which concludes with the following wish: 'Que mi nombre no se borre en la historia' (Romeu Alfaro 1994: 285). Thus, the death of the 'Trece Rosas' also becomes a denunciation of active forgetting in contemporary Spain. As Romeu Alfaro explains in the prologue to her book, she encountered great difficulties in publishing her work. The Instituto de la Mujer had sponsored her research, yet rejected her work for publication. So did two other official organisms of the Valencian Autonomous Community: the Institució Alfons el Magnànim and the Instituto de la Dona. Private publishing houses rejected Romeu Alfaro's work on such grounds as 'El tema no encaja en la línea de nuestra editorial. No interesa' (1994: 19) or 'Es una interpretación subjetiva de la historia' (1994: 19). In response to the book that Romeu Alfaro eventually published herself, Montero writes in 1994:

> Es necesario conocer la historia, saber lo que fuimos para saber quienes somos. Se lo debemos a las muchas mujeres ignoradas que ha habido en el mundo, pero sobre todo nos lo debemos a nosotros mismos: porque yo quiero ser dueña de mis propios recuerdos. (1994: 4)

It is in Romeu Alfaro's book, and with the help of Montero's article, that the execution of the 'Trece Rosas' becomes not only a document of women's resistance but also a warning against forgetting in history. The death story of these minors consists of poems, testimonies, a name they would never have received had they not been executed, and finally the letters of a young woman

who gradually realizes she will have to face a firing squad.

The striking letters that bear witness to Julia Conesa's realization are also what ultimately sparked media attention, albeit limited, to the 'Trece Rosas'. The year Montero's article appeared, two Madrid newspapers informed their readers that on 5 August 1994 a group of women gathered to commemorate the death of the 'Trece Rosas' at the Cementerio de Este, today Cementerio de la Almudena. A plaque commemorating the execution of the minors was placed on the cemetery walls, apparently not very far from the spot where the women were killed. Every 5 August a small group of people gathers to remember the 'Trece Rosas', but not every year does this gathering capture media attention. Julia Conesa's letters are usually mentioned in articles that describe the event (Bosch 1994; Lira 1994; Niño 1999).

When thirteen young women become 'Trece Rosas,' what could have been thirteen life stories become one 'death story'. The women's death fosters a series of resistant narratives, though these are mainly articulated through pre-existing and gendered conventions: figures, metaphors, tropes and images. Yet today this 'death story' ultimately reveals more about collective forgetting than about women's political participation in the Spanish Revolution and Civil War.[8]

The death story of the 'Trece Rosas' is an incomplete and fragmented narrative that is such only because thirteen women were killed in an exemplary execution that was part and parcel of a purge of Republican activists and supporters. Moreover, this death story, grounded upon a gendered image that originates in Republican war-time poetry, speaks to the lack of available and adequate terms or tropes to describe the new and uncommon situation of women's participation in war. This is a death story only because it originates in an untimely and violent death, doomed to enter history and memory, if at all, through the backdoor. A young woman's last words bear witness. This is what Julia Conesa writes to her mother:

> Madre hermanos con todo el cariño y el entusiasmo os pido que no me lloreis [sic] nadie. Salgo sin lloral [sic]. Cuidar a mi madre. Me matan inocente pero muero como debe morir una inocente.
>
> Madre Madrecita me voy a reunir con mi hermana y Papá al otro mundo pero ten presente que muero por persona honrada.
>
> Adios [sic] madre querida adios [sic] para siempre.
>
> Tu hija que lla [sic] jamas [sic] te podra [sic] besar ni abrazar
> Julia Conesa
>
> Besos para todos que ni tu [sic] ni mis compañeras lloreis [sic]. Que mi nombre no se borre en la historia. (Romeu Alfaro 1994: 285)

Notes

[1] The Juventud Socialista Unificada was formed in 1936 when the Socialist and Communist youth organizations were united. Even though the organization retained the name Socialist, the group depended directly on the leadership of the Communist Party, the PCE.

[2] In the most comprehensive article written on the death of the 'Trece Rosas', Jacobo García Blanco-Cicerón explains that on 5 August only eleven women were executed, but that imprisoned

members of the Socialist and Communist opposition named them 'Trece Rosas' when two other women, Palmira Soto and Ana, were executed shortly afterwards. According to García Blanco-Cicerón, not all of them were minors: Carmen was 24 years old, Blanquita 29, and Pilar was between 30 and 32.

[3] The *romance* is a popular, traditional Spanish musical form dating back to the Middle Ages, originally recited or sung in public. *Romances* have a simple metric pattern and are designed to be easily memorized (Monleón 1979: 101).

[4] The women who joined the militias in the early months of the war were called *milicianas*. The Government of the Republic recalled women from the front after only nine months of war, and images of *milicianas*, popular in the initial months of war, quickly acquired negative connotations.

[5] Flor Cernuda's poem, 'Fusilaron "Trece rosas" de la libertad', is included in the anthology *Las Republicanas* (1996). Unlike the other two, it has not been possible to date Cernuda's poem. The fact that Cernuda ends her poem with a warning, 'cayeron las "Trece rosas"/con sus pétalos muriendo/delante de sus fusiles/con un grito ¡¡¡Libertad!!!/que resonó en todo el mundo/y alertó a la Humanidad' (*Las Republicanas* 1996: 56), suggests that it may have been written at a later moment.

[6] In 'Romance de la pena negra', for example, Lorca writes: '¡Soledad, qué pena tienes!/¡Qué pena tan lastimosa!/Lloras zumo de limón/agrio de espera y de boca' (1937: 66). In another poem, 'Prendimiento de Antoñito el Camborio en el camino de Sevilla', Antonio Torres Heredia is arrested by the Guardia Civil and later brutally killed, with the lemon symbol serving as a premonition for the gypsy's death: 'A la mitad del camino cortó limones redondos,/y los fue tirando al agua, hasta que la puso de oro' (1937: 76).

[7] Born in 1895 in a Basque mining town, Ibárruri became a Communist activist at a young age. Early in her political career, she signed her political writings as Pasionaria, the name she would retain as perhaps the most mythified figure of the Spanish Civil War. Ibárruri was a congresswoman during the Second Republic (1936), member of the Executive Committee of the Third International (1936), and President of the Spanish Communist Party (1978) (Herrmann 1998: 182).

[8] It was not only memories of women's changing roles during the Second Republic and the Civil War that vanished with the 'pacto del olvido' that marked the Spanish transition to democracy (Vilarós 1997: 8). Rather, as Mike Richards explains, 'the transition of the mid-1970s from a brutal dictatorship to a liberal constitutional democracy rested upon a tacit agreement that, in return for relinquishing its power, the Francoist political class would be compensated by an obligatory exercise in collective amnesia' (Richards 1996: 201).

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