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Voices of the vanquished: Leftist women and the Spanish Civil War

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Republican women and the War Story

What kinds of stories do women tell about their experiences with war and revolution? When I first traveled to Spain in 1997 to begin an oral history project about radical leftist women who had participated in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), I began to record life histories that play out what Miriam Cooke, in *Women and the War Story*, theorizes as a woman's alternative to the traditionally male, orderly, and mythic *War Story*. Cooke explains that women's war stories, 'instead of endlessly repeating tales of roles and experiences in which war mirrors the experience of its predecessors, [. . .] should allow for the narration of war's dynamism and incomprehensibility' (1996: 40). What Cooke is getting at, and what I adopted as my methodological frame, is a challenge to the authority of experience that comes from the institutionally sanctioned version of the history of war. If women tell and/or write their war stories in such a way that reflects or even embraces the messiness of war, then the women narrators and the scholars who disseminate their histories may be able to interrupt certain static historiographies in order to redefine the categories by which war is staged, waged, and then told (1996: 40). It is precisely because women's war stories are often digressive and complicated, incomplete and fractured, that they acquire their disruptive power. If we really want to look at war in all its complexity, then, women's narratives of conflict, which struggle against the limits of recognizable generic models, are the most experientially affective representational models that can give us access to the phenomenon of war.

But the stories of Spanish Republican women have not been readily accessible. In the early postwar period, an imposed and even 'enthusiastic' silence formed the basis of a culture of repression that functioned through mechanisms, carried out by the winners, that steadily cranked out the daily humiliation, political atomization, and economic and social repression of the losers. Political and public memory and its expression were wholly monopolized by the victors.[1] The loss of social agency and voice pushed the vanquished classes into what we might think of as secret spaces: prison, exile, and eventually, the resistance movement (*la guerrilla*). The following analysis of the narrative patterns of Republican women's war stories must be contextualized in terms of the integral defeat that was the loss of the war, along with Francoism's dismantling of leftist solidarity that both men and women suffered. Yet while both genders were subject to repression and abjection, anecdotal evidence supports the claim that women of progressive ideals had less access to certain vehicles of communication than their Republican male counterparts. Two

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examples may stand for many. Nearly all of the women I interviewed had male partners or husbands who were politically active before, during, and after the war. In the cases where these male partners had managed to survive the war, concentration or death camp, prison, torture, or exile, the couple had to decide whether or not to take on the risk of participating in continued anti-fascist or anti-Franco resistance (both during the Second World War or during the years of armed resistance in Spain). Almost without exception, it was the man who reintegrated into the clandestine political arena, while the woman either dropped out entirely or worked in a limited capacity hiding or transporting propaganda, false ID cards, etc. Secondly, it has been the *male* war stories that have generally been collected up until the 1980s. We need only to bring to mind one of the early masterpieces of oral history and of Spanish Civil War historiography, *The Blood of Spain*, in which women's experiences are absent, to capture the extent to which women's war history has been overlooked even by progressive historians.[2]

What follows is my story about the oral histories of leftist Spanish and Catalan women who played compelling roles in the Spanish Civil War, Europe's first war against fascism. I have recorded oral histories from Communist, anarchist, and POUM (*Partido obrero de unificación marxista*, the mainly Catalan-based dissident Marxist party) women who were active either in a military, syndicalist, or home-front role during the conflict. What prompted me to embark on this project was a fascination with one of the stirring myths of the war: the *miliciana* or militiawoman. I was especially interested in the experiences of *women* because the revolutionary spirit that characterized the early days of the Civil War resonated loudly with those for whom the anti-fascist struggle and/or revolution held a particularly significant promise for emancipation and dignity: women of the urban and rural working classes. Under the liberal democratic Spanish Republic, voted into power in 1931 in the first open elections held in Spain, the qualitative change in quotidian existence for women was potentially even greater than it was for men. When a conservative coalition of military, clerical, and land- and production-owning interests backed the military coup of July 1936, the ensuing war gave way to exceptional opportunities for action and agency among the urban and agrarian poor. Women from left-of-center political and syndicalist organizations received rudimentary military instruction, were encouraged to expand their physical sphere of existence by changes as prosaic as wearing pants, to take active posts in their unions, to seek out vocational training, to initiate armed reappropriations of farmlands, and generally to participate in the making of revolution. These politico-cultural shifts were astounding in the context of a Spain in which women workers were exploited with impunity, whether they labored in agrarian regions, in small companies and factories, in their own households, as sex workers, or as domestic servants in private homes.

By the end of 1936, women were making significant contributions to the organization of the home front. Historian Helen Graham describes the new vocational functions carried out by women in this unique wartime situation: 'In Republican Spain large numbers of proletarian and middle-class women were also incorporated to war tasks—either directly to workshops or factories

(particularly metallurgy, chemicals, and textiles) of the Republican home front, or via the Popular Front organizations which provided a range of health and welfare services geared to the needs of home and military fronts. In both Barcelona and Madrid women ran much of the public transport systems' (1996: 110). The Republican government was pursuing a policy of militarization, including the construction of a new army, from October 1936, and the designation of women to the home front, impelled by a strong discourse of anti-fascism, became a fundamental part of this process.

There were some women, however, who were not satisfied to carry out their war-time duties away from the zones of combat. The culture of the earliest days of the war permitted and even encouraged the active participation of women in the armed militia groups (Scanlon 1976: 292). The militiawoman, for a short time, actually became *the* icon of the anti-fascist cause. In the propaganda posters printed and distributed by Communist, POUM, and anarchist trade unions, the Spanish woman fighter in her blue overalls served as a call to arms, as a way to encourage (or shame) men into participation in the fight (Nash 1995: 50-51).

Figure 1. CNT propaganda poster

But by November 1936 the attitudes regarding the utility of women for the war cause shifted. The militiamen began to tease or even show outright disdain for their female comrades in arms. The teenagers and young women who decided

to wear the militant costume only because it was the fashionable thing to do gave a bad name to those few, highly exceptional cases of women who did leave their homes to fight at various fronts (see figures 2 and 3). By July 1937 no women were heading to the front, and most of those who had been fighting were recalled to the home front. Once the Republican government directive that called for a regular, unified army won out over the enthusiasm for a militia-based structure, the government put forth a decree that forbade the presence of women *fighters* (nurses and cooks could remain) on the front lines of battle. Part of the Republican rationale for this decree regarding militiawomen held that the survival of the Republic depended on the formation of a solid military organization that could compete with the enemy in an escalating 'total' war.

Figure 2. 'Dressing Up for War' (photo by Luis Escobar. Señorita vestida de *miliciana*. Albacete, 1937[3])

Figure 3. 'The Real Thing': 'Antonia Villa, *miliciana*' (Private collection of author)

Mary Nash explains: 'For once, there was consensus among severely divided political parties, unions, and even women's organization on the need to oblige *milicianas* to withdraw from the war fronts, and, by September, a policy was sanctioned by the socialist head of the government, Prime Minister Largo Caballero, who endorsed military ordinances ordering women to withdraw from

the militia' (1995: 110). Both Communist and anarchist women's organizations backed this recall of women from the front lines and focused on the need for women to fill in an increasingly diminished work force as well as on the pacifist and maternal nature of women.[4]

The Spanish Civil War offers a twist on the classic case of what often happens to activist women in revolutionary times: they enjoy mobilization but never reap the benefits of the subsequent emancipation their commitment would appear to have guaranteed them. Republican women in the war experienced a retrograde evolution: from some of the most repressive conditions for women in all of Europe to relative freedom and back to repression. New gender relations were largely a mirage as real egalitarian reforms, both on a legislative and sociocultural level, were never fully incorporated into Spanish society—even before the illusion of equality was utterly shattered by the Franco regime. One can only speculate what might have been the social and political fate of women had the Republic won the war. It is, of course, because the left lost the war that these women's short experience with liberation was truncated. However, it is important to remember that even before Franco's victory, the social conservatism of the left circumscribed, to varying degrees, the potential for female political agency. During the Republic and wartime (and indeed even within the party structures in exile or working clandestinely during the resistance), their respective party ideologies were essentially masculinist to the extent that they viewed women's liberation as inseparable from global human emancipation. Although both the anarchist women's group *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women) and the female division of the POUM sought to distinguish a separate but related program for the promotion of women's rights, this vision was either ultimately belittled by their male-run parent organizations or lost in their overall resistance strategy.[5]

The object and the genre

The majority of work done on the topic of women in the Spanish Civil War that has relied on oral testimony has had two purposes: the first, to write social-historical studies about the collective experience of women during the conflict (Nash, Mangini, Di Febo, Acklesberg); and the second to produce collections of testimonies (Romeu, Rodrigo, Cuevas). The work I am doing is different to the extent that it undertakes very close readings of the full life interview in order to observe particularities in the construction of female subjectivity in times of great political enthusiasm and risk. I look at the ties and disconnections between that war-forged, politically circumscribed subjectivity and later motherhood under the drastically different social conditions of the Franco regime. All the women who have participated in this oral history project had children during the war or in the 1940s or 1950s.

A fair portion of the women have been interviewed by other historians and journalists over the years, which accounts, in part, for the fluidity of their narrations about their lives during the war years. To the best of my knowledge, however, I am the only researcher who has analyzed life stories of radical women

across political parties as texts unto themselves, texts which underline what oral historian Luisa Passerini refers to as the 'links between family, love and political relationships' (1992: 22). My vision of feminist oral history practice has been strongly influenced by Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet, whose work, like that of Alessandro Portelli, combines historical inquiry with literary criticism. Chanfrault-Duchet's sophisticated understanding of life history as a narrative and symbolic act is so central to the theoretical and philosophical foundation of this project that I find it worth citing at length:

> I define the life story through two features: (1) the specifically narrative and 'literary' nature of the object produced in a dialogue; and (2) the social nature of the self dramatized in the narrative. The narrative dimension refers to the fact that the life story aims, by means of a coherent and global process, to account for the whole of the informant's life experience until the moment of the interview. This means that the narrative encompasses not only the temporal and causal organization of facts and events considered significant, but also the value judgments that make sense of this particular life experience. In turn, such a view implies that the most crucial information resides not in the answers given to specific questions, but rather the narrative organization itself. The life story represents a meaning system complete unto itself, i.e., it is a text. [. . .] The second feature of my definition deals with the social nature of the self dramatized in the narrative. [. . .] my work emphasizes the narrative and textual analysis of the material as a means of approaching the socio-symbolic contents brought into play in the narrative. (1991: 77-79)

Following this orientation, I looked for instances where certain community myths appear in two intersecting axes: the axis of collective history or memory and that of individual historical experience. Chanfrault-Duchet has theorized the function of these axes and suggests that the collective myths in the axiological framework might be 'The Golden Age', 'The Lost Paradise', 'The Exemplary Strike', or 'The Revolution'. All of these are at play in the Spanish Civil War Story, but it is the intersection of the communal history of political activism with the symbology of maternity that complicated the life narratives of Spanish and Catalan political women on the left. This is because the collective understanding of the maternal as a political category does not correspond to the reality of individual corporeal motherhood and all of the economic, physical, and social consequences it entails.[6] Thus motherhood serves as the point of departure for my analysis precisely *because* it appears to be the primary factor that can account for the affective shifts and narrative re-orientations in the testimonial patterns.

The listener and the tellers

The majority of the twenty women interviewed are politically sophisticated, working-class, urban poor women who have lived a long life of political activism, militancy, and advocacy. And they have had enough contact with

academics over the years to understand that the cultural, material, class, age, and educational differences between us means that my research will have sustained presence in their lives and in their communities only as evidence of a growing interest in the subject of women, politics, and war in Spain.

So, what did these women hope would be the result of our meetings? They sought a vehicle for the dissemination of narratives told by political radicals whose experiences had been erased by Francoist state terrorism (firing squad, work camps, disappearances, mass graves, decades of imprisonment) or by Francoist historiographic practice that constructed the left as violent, ignorant 'red hordes' hell-bent on the destruction of all that was purely 'Spanish'. Martha Acklesberg, in her study of anarchist women in Spain, has noted that 'it was virtually impossible for young people within Spain to learn about what happened, even by word of mouth [. . .] so while they may have learned about political movements, even student protest, elsewhere in Europe, most were denied knowledge of—and therefore any understanding of the significance of—the events which had shaken Spain' (1992: 137). In response to a long-lived cultural erasure of political memory, some of these women today participate in a grass-roots volunteer educational effort (*Les dones del 36*), traveling to schools across Spain giving partial testimonies of their version of the Civil War. And in light of this '*desmemoria*', it has been considered an especially urgent task, and therefore a remarkable accomplishment for the cohort of the Civil War, to teach the 'dehistoricized' generation of their children the history of the war and its political legacy.

Of the women I have interviewed, thirteen were Communists, three anarchists, and four members of the POUM. I contacted the interviewees through trade unions, archival associations of the PCE, the CNT, and with the help of other women historians.[7] Eight had fought on the front lines as *milicianas*, one had been a political commissar, another, a sergeant. Two were founding members of the female anarchist organization *Mujeres Libres*. Two were nurses. Two had been teachers. Two had learned to be seamstresses in party- or union-sponsored vocational institutes. After the war all of the women had suffered years of imprisonment in Franco's dilapidated, overcrowded prisons or immediate exile to France. All of the women continue to live in working-class neighborhoods in Spain, Catalonia, or France, where they remained active, to varying degrees, in their respective political organizations. Perhaps the most striking point of similarity among these women of diverse political orientation was the reiteration of a collectively known, and readily available, narrative template: 'The Young Woman in the Class Struggle': A girl was born into an urban or rural working-class family in which the father (or older brother) was active in libertarian or Communist organizations, often participating in union leadership and militant mobilization or holding membership in the local *ateneo*. The adolescent, influenced by the male figure's political commitments, began to attend union, cultural, or party meetings with him. Most women had brief formal education, as their families relied on them for their labor value. All had belonged to a youth group of their respective union or political party. The coming of the Second

Republic was celebrated ecstatically and was often viewed as the advent of a reformist platform, the long-awaited answer to social injustice. Even the anarchist women recalled the 1931 and 1936 elections as events that inspired a communal, expectant enthusiasm. Since the vast majority of women did not, of course, become militarily or politically involved in the war, one of the few directed questions I asked was: what made *these* women willing to take up arms, go to the front lines of battle, or fill demanding home-front positions? Most women gave the same answer: that they had been born into proletarian communities variously inspired by one or another faction of the Russian Revolution. In these libertarian or Communist neighborhoods, the natural progression for young men and women was to join partisan youth organizations that emphasized, at least in theory, gender equality. Their political responsibilities were endorsed particularly by their fathers, so to join a militia group as a consequence of their syndicalism or party association was an integral part of their microculture. Some of the women who remained in the rear guard nevertheless received rudimentary combat training as part of their initiation into militias with the anticipation that the war might move onto the home front. The combat training they received—indeed all pre-war militia training—was short and inadequate. Their weapons were so antiquated that they often backfired. Some of the *milicianas* reported that they were unable to handle firearms successfully and that the force of the rifle shot knocked them to the ground. All eight *milicianas* I interviewed claimed that for a short time they lived in the trenches or in the immediate rear guard as equals, for the most part, with their comrades. Nevertheless, only three participated in active combat.

When women were forced to abandon their front-line positions, most *milicianas* took jobs at factories that sustained the war effort. In the terrifying last days of the war, many of these women were immediately arrested and imprisoned, others were sent to concentration camps, while still others went underground to fight clandestinely. The tragic final chapter of the war coincided with a loss of any opportunity for continued political agency and, in many cases, with the murder, imprisonment, or disappearance of their partners who had left these women pregnant.

What most intrigues me about the oral histories *as a collection* are the mutually influencing subject positions of militant and mother, and how, in turn, these positions determine the generic status and the potential transgenerational transmissibility of the life stories. To the extent that the communication of lived experience is structured as a narrative, what kinds of scripts were available to these women with which they could organize the oral production of their life histories? With very few exceptions, as I noted above, the narrative patterns that framed the memories were readily recognizable as familiar plots of ‘The Proletarian Struggle’ or ‘The Revolution’. What was surprising and much more challenging to understand was a second tendency for the testimonies to diverge from a linear, coherent narrative design once the speakers reached the point of telling how they became mothers. Now, why might this be? It appears to me that the relationship between being able to retell a radical woman’s life story in a

plot-driven way is ultimately related to the feminist question of women in war and the extent to which radical moments in history usually do *not* provide women with emancipation through mobilization. While individual life circumstances, the personal performance of motherhood, and the endless permutations of any one family's strategies for coping with the realities of the postwar era come together as narrative forces in women's war stories, it is nonetheless crucial to understand the personal trajectory as a function of the *collective defeat suffered by Republican Spain* that disallowed the articulation of war memories from the left.

Before and after the war

As a collection of histories, the testimonies display two basically divergent narrative patterns, usually falling along the line that divides before and during the war from its aftermath, or the collective axis from the personal. The first tended to reveal a structure that borrows from storytelling templates informed specifically by the oral culture of popular songs and poems that heroicize the revolutionary proletariat fighter model which operates as an internalized plot. These songs and poems as well as real-life tales of sacrifice and heroism modeled by young militia fighters of the early war period—such as the young Communist martyr Lina Odena and Rosario 'La Dinamitera' (the militiawoman who lost part of her arm during training exercises)—were the main transmitters of existential models for the militiawomen in their youth.[8] The second, more fragmented story appears to be the result of an antagonistic relationship between politics and domesticity, and between militarism and motherhood. Pierre Nora in *Realms of Memory* writes 'The changes in our lives are of the same nature as the changes in the way we represent our lives' (1996: 2). It follows then, that the confusion, disjuncture, pain, and eventual absence of agency that these women experienced in the postwar would play out in oral narratives often characterized by fragmentation, circularity, or the loss of linear plotting.

As I listened to and transcribed the oral histories, it became clear to me that the factor that determined the relative integrity in the postwar life model was the presence or lack of an ideological continuity between the female militants and what has been called 'the post-memorial' generation: the children of the people who were active in the Civil War. Memory, according to Marianne Hirsch, belongs to the person who experiences the remembered event. Postmemory is what is inherited from survivors: it 'characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor re-created' (1996: 659). Even those women who in the 1990s maintained a limited activism within socialist or Communist parties or labor unions, suggested that their success as activists and parents could be measured by the political interests of their children. For some narrators, it was a strained relationship with their children based on a lack of mutual understanding of ideology that was the source of pain, disjuncture from the past, and a halting, silenced, or diminished (in their own estimation) oral transmission of their life story to me in the present. Given that a political

patrimony had been handed down to them by their fathers when they were adolescents, the rupture in the cross-generational ideological legacy was especially difficult to bear.

Those women who lost their male partners and whose children displayed disinterest or even disdain for their mothers' political beliefs and activism during the Civil War found it difficult to continue to narrate their life stories beyond the immediate postwar period or the birth of their child, even though the political and historical contexts of their lives offered a veritable register of communally identifiable sequential storylines and models of identity. This trajectory describes the testimony of Adelina Vázquez, whose existential path and narrative structures represented not the exception among the women I interviewed, but the rule.

Adelina Vázquez lives alone in an apartment in a working-class neighborhood in Madrid, where her daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter look after her. As a young teenager, Adelina followed her older brother to the Communist youth organization meetings and distributed propaganda. Her parents, although frightened by Adelina's activities, encouraged her political activities. When the war broke out, Adelina went immediately to enlist as a volunteer militia fighter. Much to the surprise of both, Adelina and her father signed up for the same militia unit which was sent to the *Guadarrama* mountains outside of Madrid. It was a reflection of the changing times and of the new place of women in the Spanish war culture: father and daughter went off to war together, an event captured by a photographer on the front page of a major Spanish newspaper in the summer of 1936. When the high altitude of the mountain front taxed her father's weak lungs, Adelina remained, fighting in an armed skirmish. Feeling frail and terrified but determined to stay on, she remained at the front until the call came for women to return to the rear guard.

After the war, Adelina married a fellow militia fighter and had a child, Victoria, named for her battalion. Her husband was arrested and eventually disappeared, murdered by a firing squad. Adelina was also eventually hunted down by Francoist agents and spent eight years of her life in prisons, unable to care for her child. When her mother would bring her young daughter to visit Adelina in the *Ventas* prison, the little girl would cower at her mother's gesture of embrace. When finally released, Adelina was more determined to cooperate immediately in the underground resistance than she was interested in being a stay-at-home mother. But Adelina's own mother refused to continue to care for Victoria. Since a complete commitment to the underground was impossible, Adelina settled down to a life with her mother and daughter and became a seamstress. When she could, and without her family's knowledge, she secretly continued to distribute Communist propaganda. She still attends local Communist Party and union meetings alone, and this continued activism is viewed as 'bothersome' by her daughter and 'quaint' by her granddaughter. The one time Adelina asked me to turn off the tape recorder, she broke down in tears and made me promise never to publish any part of her life story: 'I want you to erase my address and phone number from your notebook. I don't want my daughter to know how much I have suffered for feeling such strong resentment

toward her. Because of her I had to give up the struggle. We never bonded properly because I was in prison for the first eight years of her life [. . .] so my mother was really her mother. Whatever she hears now, I can defend and explain to her if she asks, but after I'm dead, I can't explain anymore'.[9] The ideological disappointment and the material hardships characteristic of her post-incarceration existence did not merit attention—at least from Adelina's perspective. Although she made passing reference to episodes in her life that I found extremely compelling and constitutive of her intimate *and political* identity—such as her brother's internment in a Nazi death camp and how she finally came to discover that her husband had been killed by a Francoist firing squad—I was unable to provide a frame in which she felt comfortable sharing them with me.

Another example of this type of narrative juncture at the point of maternity is the oral history of Flor Méndez, an anarchist living with her schizophrenic fifty-year-old son in one of the most run-down sections of central Barcelona. Flor works six days a week as the proprietor of a small stand in a local open air market and still attends meetings of the CNT (Confederación Nacional de Trabajo), the anarchist trade union. Before and during the Republic, Flor's father and brothers were active in the then hugely powerful CNT. In response to the coup of 1936, Flor and her brother signed up to fight with an anarchist militia on the Huesca front. When women were recalled from the front lines, Flor took a job in a factory manufacturing and quality testing bullets. After the fall of Barcelona, Flor endured the long exile pilgrimage to France, where she lived out the Second World War in refugee camps, in which she met a man and became pregnant. Separated from the father of her child and desperate to be with her family, who had stayed behind in Catalonia, she moved back to Spain with her baby. Single, poverty-stricken, and responsible for the care of her mother and developmentally disabled sister, Flor had no option other than to find work. Unable to care for her infant son, she placed him in a large orphanage that still operated according to a barbaric rule which prohibited mothers from visiting their children until the age of one year. 'When I left him there,' she said, 'he was a healthy and handsome baby. But when I came back to visit him months later, he had turned into a skeleton. I hardly recognized him. I think something of what he has now [his mental illness] has something to do with how they treated him there'. Flor's life journey, especially in the postwar years, is qualitatively different from the stories of the Communist women I met, mainly for political reasons. While communism remained (even in the worst years of Francoist oppression), and still remains a relatively influential political force in Spain, the anarchist experiment dissolved with the loss of the Civil War, never to be reborn as a viable system of social organization or party entity.

Definitive silences, lack of temporal sequencing, and especially a deceleration in narrative enthusiasm characterized Adelina's and Flor's testimonies once they reached the point in their stories where exile, prison, and then sheer survival for the sake of their children prevented them from staying active in the anti-Franco underground resistance.

Maternity and activism

Motherhood can account for at least part of the ruptures and closures apparent in the life stories of Adelina, Flor, and others. Adelina's story is just one example of the extent to which these women's lives became and in some sense continue to be partially incohesive and perhaps even incomprehensible to them as a result of the incompatibility between imprisonment, the resistance movement, and maternal caregiving. I want to demonstrate this point visually.

Figure 4. Miliciana with her child before she leaves for the battlefront (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte. Archivo General de la Adminitración. Fondo fotográfico 'Archivo Rojo' Photo no. 55566)

Figure 5. Pilar Jaraiz Franco with her child in a Republican prison, 1937 (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte. Archivo General de la Adminitración. Fondo fotográfico Pilar Jaraiz Franco)

In figures 4 and 5 above, we see two photos: in figure 4 is a *miliciana* with a child we presume to be her baby. In figure 5 we see a woman *in prison* holding her baby, which the viewer can only know because I have said so.[10] Once the context is established, we might assume that someone has brought the baby to visit its mother. Cynthia Enloe, in her book about women in the military, has this to say with regard to the image in figure 4:

> A popular symbol of the many liberation armies in Asia, Latin America, and Africa is the woman with a rifle over one confident shoulder and a baby cuddled in her protective arms. The picture conjures up images of the can-do-everything 'superwoman'. It also seems to imply that the very process of revolutionary warfare, on the one hand, can transform women's role and sense of self-worth, while, on the other hand, sustain

> the social order that in the past has ensured the reproduction and nurturing of the next generation. [. . .] But interweaving the images of woman as combatant and mother so tightly suggests that as soon as the immediate threat recedes, as soon as the 'war is over' the woman in the picture will put down the rifle and keep the baby. (1983: 166)

It is telling that the *miliciana* photo is part of the political public domain, a propaganda photo that tells a story of revolutionary bravery. Contrast the public recognition value of the first image (the militiawoman and child) with the photo of the woman prisoner, which comes from a private collection. The second photo has less political currency because there is no visual content that specifies the institutional condition or the ideological exchange value of the woman: she is just a woman with a baby. In other words, I read the *miliciana* photo as one in which the iconographic portrayal of the woman/mother/revolutionary corresponds to a certain emotive and readily tellable myth of female heroism; the prison photo—like its subjects—has no immediately recognizable historical/political worth because it does not conform to any visually identifiable narrative. While both photos instantiate an impossible story, the first affirms communal or choral female political protagonism, while the second requires particular, personal contexts (even though the prison experience was often one of great female solidarity). The recorded testimonies encourage us to consider what kind of representational versions of selfhood are permitted within a particular social and political belief system.

The deviations in the narrative flow in many of the oral histories I collected were hard for the women to admit or accept. Most excused themselves or apologized when they felt they had nothing interesting left to tell me. Other women self-edited, putting an end to their own life histories once they had finished describing daily life after their release from prison. I was often told: 'And that's how it was. I have nothing more to tell you'. If I would press those who self-censored to tell me anecdotes that were meaningful to them, a common response might be: 'Oh, well, those stories are my business, they couldn't interest you'. This type of comment, I came to understand, was an oft-repeated code for the privacy they wanted to maintain about their 'romantic/sexual/love lives'. The desire to remain allied with collective modes of self-understanding and self-representation is one way to combat the memories of what were years of loneliness and inner exile. Likewise, it is important to keep in mind that the Communist culture of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s was, in general, 'puritanical'—good revolutionaries, male and female alike, were not supposed to talk about private business. Any move to the first-person singular needs to be understood, because of its threat to the stability of the picture of communal commitments and political values, as a challenge to real-life psychological integrity and to an impression of narrative fullness.

What these women have been faced with, then, is a generic betrayal. There are no popular songs or tales about losing the war, suffering rape and torture,

scratching out an existence in the repressive confines of a fascist dictatorship under which the past of former combatants and prisoners was negated, sullied, made un-history. Once Spanish woman militants fell in love and became pregnant, their political utility as mothers was already long exhausted. When a woman offers her son to fight in a war, her maternity contributes to the needs and goals of a collective struggle. But when the war is lost, and the mother is on the losing side, reproduction becomes private, domestic, and individual to the extent that it loses whatever political weight it had under different civic circumstances. Any narration, then, of the shift from public to private, from female solidarity in war or in prison to womanly singularity in the household, from 'we' to 'I', constitutes an admission of a retreat (even if that retreat was forcible) from a life of politics and a collusion with the bourgeois subject positions that these women had actively rejected. Once these women were out of prison or alienated from the resistance, and were living under the pressures and deprivations of *Franquismo*, who was going to validate the significance or the *goodness* of the commitments and sacrifices they made if not their children and their life partners?

It is not merely that the interviewees resisted telling the major part of the life stories that did not coincide with their image of themselves as active members of a political community; what also comes into play is a matter of sheer narrative interest. Something *happens* in revolution that does not happen in non-revolutionary periods. Being a militia fighter is exciting and makes a great story; being a poor, working-class, single mother generally makes a less compelling one. Fredric Jameson says: 'In ordinary continuous life, nothing really changes or happens, there is basically nothing to tell in the narrative sense. [. . .] The peculiarity of the revolutionary moment is that in it, for the first time, history takes the form of narratable events, reveals itself as a continuity with a beginning, middle, and end. [. . .]' (1971: 259-60). Insofar as these women wanted their lives to be meaningful to themselves and to others, they took pleasure in narrating themselves within the structure of an exciting tale. Once the story of the revolution comes to an end, there is nothing left but what Jameson calls 'random stories'.

Whereas Flor, Adelina, and others demonstrated a deep inner conflict about the connection between being mothers and losing their opportunity for political agency, other militant women who shared their life stories never saw their maternity as a necessary impediment to their continued participation in a revolutionary struggle. To the contrary, having children was an opportunity to extend their activism and their ideology into the future, across generations. Giving new life to a leftist struggle for social justice was itself an attack against totalitarianism.

It is fascinating, at this point, to turn to historian Martha Acklesberg who, in her extensive oral history-based study of the anarchist women of *Mujeres Libres*, identified precisely this same pattern of a successful transfer of political values within families as an indicator of personal contentment with the present, regardless of the quality or quantity of current political engagement:

> I noted in an earlier study that, in the absence of a continuing connection to a sustaining community, many former participants in collectives seemed to lack any framework for analyzing their experiences, and any sense of the significance of what they had done. [. . .] Nevertheless, despite the disillusionment and the years of exile, this did not seem to be the case with any of the women of *Mujeres Libres* whom I interviewed. One after another told me proudly of the political commitments and activism of their children—few of them, of course, anarchists, since there is no anarchist movement to speak of in France; but all of them active on the left. [. . .] Somehow, although they lived apart from any meaningful community of comrades, a life far different from the 'continual effervescence' they had experienced during the war and the revolution, they had managed to communicate the power of their commitments to their children, who had, in turn, made them their own. (1992: 134)

What is most provocative about Acklesberg's findings in relation to mine is that such sense of coherence was the *rule* among the elderly anarchist women, while in the case of the oral histories I collected, it was the exception. This difference leads me to conjecture regarding possible explanations. The degree to which Republican women were able to maintain an engagement with leftist political culture and labor movements was largely determined by post-war geography, that is, whether or not they went into exile. Those women who remained in Spain faced, of course, the consequences of the Franco regime's disruption of the horizontal solidarities of labor movement and of left political parties. Political party identification (that is, being a Communist versus an anarchist); national/geographic identities (that is, Catalan versus Spanish, or Spain versus exile): all these factors came to bear, in varying and mutually influencing ways, on a sense of whole-life integrity within a wider existential frame.

Love and ideology

In the case of my own oral history project, one Communist woman's life history can stand for others with regard to the two issues that concern me here: first, the quality of a postmemorial inheritance of the Spanish Civil War, and second, the generic and symbolic ramifications of that legacy as a tool for insightful readings of the interview as object and genre.

Toni Cardoza began her meeting with me by drawing a parallel between the socioeconomic conditions of her youth and the film *The Holy Innocents* (*Los santos inocentes*), based on the eponymous novel by Miguel Delibes, which portrays the desperation of a rural family enslaved to a cruel *terrateniente*. She said, 'Have you seen the film? Well, that was us, that poor, that humiliated'. She recalled the day when one of her siblings, suffering from starvation, stole a single ripe piece of fruit from the master's grove—and was promptly beaten for it.

Toni's family was so geographically and culturally isolated from the political tensions of the period of the Second Republic that the revolution literally had to come to them. One day in 1936, much to her family's shock, a group of armed pro-Republic militiamen came to the farm compound, triumphantly announcing the counterinsurgency and asking for volunteers. And Toni went with them.

Toni did not fight on the front but worked, through the Communist youth, in the home-font war effort. When the war ended, she and her two sisters were arrested and together sentenced to death. The Cardoza sisters were a familiar topic of conversation in the infamous *Ventas* prison, for they were the only set of three sisters all to be facing the death penalty. Toni recalled that when she was initially imprisoned in 1939 after the fall of Madrid, women were being executed every night. She told me that the most terrifying days of her life were those when she waited to hear if her sisters' names would be called to 'capilla' or to the chapel—the last stop where prisoners were coerced by a priest into confession and taking communion before facing the firing squad at dawn.

Toni's (and her sisters') sentence was eventually commuted to thirty years, and she was freed after a total of eight. She married Francisco, a Communist soldier who had lost a leg in combat during the Civil War. Determined to resist the gross injustices of the Franco regime, she and her husband founded 'the league of the war wounded' (*la liga de los mutilados*), which fought for decades to convince the government to pay reparations to any Republican combatants who had lost a limb during the war. Since her husband's death, she has remained active in the organization she cofounded and is at present involved in a new cause: a pension for the widows of '*los mutilados'*.

Today, Toni lives with her daughter, Elisa, Elisa's husband Ernesto, and their two sons in the center of Barcelona. Toni moved in with Elisa only recently, for she was reluctant to leave behind a full life with her Communist friends and political activity in Madrid. The eldest grandchild, Efraín, is involved in Communist youth organizations in Barcelona, and at the time of my visit, he was trying to convince his parents to let him go to a youth conference in Cuba. All three generations have distinguished themselves as activists. Elisa and Ernesto had themselves been detained for their participation in the anti-Franco student demonstrations in the 1970s. Toni admitted to me that she knows how fortunate she is to have been able to pass her ideology and her values on to the second and third generations of her family. Elisa and her family have modeled themselves after what they see as the extraordinary activism of their mother. Toni and a few others like her (whose children or life partners have shared their worldview) have forged an intimacy that has permitted the children to view and value their mothers as political beings but also as distinct *corporeal* beings.

Sometime before she had been imprisoned, Toni—as occurred with many women—was sent to the dungeon-like police headquarters (*Dirección General de Seguridad*), where she was held, without being charged, for weeks. One of the many detention centers where these illegal confinements took place is in the very center of Madrid, at *La Puerta del Sol*, and is still known as the 'house of the screams' since passerbys on the street could hear the groans and cries of those

being tortured in the cells below ground. Today Toni continues to suffer from debilitating leg pain as the result of the beatings she received in such a place. It is significant that Elisa had to be the one to tell me that her mother's leg ailments were the result of an interrogation. Elisa's acknowledgment of the mother as a valued body that carries the physical evidence of the devastation of the war, confirms the success of the transmission of the war-as-experience to the war-as-memory. The absence or presence of love and love *of ideology* is the single most important consideration in the outcome of lives of the *milicianas*. The fascist denigration and the contemporary socialist co-optations of the woman fighter figure have been so powerful precisely because they refuse this complex blurring of private and political commitment as a category of identity. The leftist social sphere, ironically, has never validated or modeled itself after the militiawomen. Instead, it has taken advantage of her symbolic utility for the sake of controlling institutionally based identities both during the war (as an icon of the ideal of *masculine* valor), in the period of early *Franquismo* (as the image of dangerous, anti-Spanish, 'loose' womanhood), and in the leftist revisions of these periods as they form part of a certain collective pact for amnesia expedient for the transition to democracy in the early 1980s and still operative today, *even as there are strong counterstrains for the recuperation of historical memory*.[11]

Although Toni told, as the other women did, more dispersive, multiform narratives of her post-prison life, the affective quality of her interview nevertheless revealed that a constructive bond between herself and her children made for a coherent sense of self and a more integrated picture of her life. While their lives had been full of economic, familial, and social hardships, Toni and a few other women I interviewed never demonstrated the kind of melancholic response to life that I saw in others. Thus, it seems clear that when the transgenerational heritage of militancy and ideological belief is transferred successfully, the entirety of the life story is understood and narrated in a different way: with greater political agency in the present, with a more integrated sense of self across the life journey, and with more narrative pleasure.

The dissemination and discussion of these oral histories of the Spanish Civil War are poignantly relevant today, as the generation that has this kind of life story to tell is passing away and the postmemorial generations are left to determine the extent to which historiographic and cultural practices as well as political praxis will permit or disallow a collective amnesia about their leftist militant grandmothers.

Notes

[1] For a detailed treatment of the elimination of dissent and the imposition of silence, see Richards (1998).

[2] The scarcity of women's Spanish Civil War stories into the 1980s makes all the more impressive the pioneering work of Tomasa Cuevas who collected women's prison testimonies immediately after the death of Franco.

[3] This photograph by Luis Escobar, 'Señorita vestida de miliciana. Albacete, 1937', has been reproduced in Publio López Mondejar, *Retratos de la vida 1875-1939:Fotografias de Luis Escobar*

y otros (Barcelona: Lunwerg Editores/Caja de Albacete, 1989). I have attempted, without success, to contact Lunwerg Editores for permission to reproduce the image. I welcome the publisher's contact.

[4] For a more panoramic and detailed overview of the position and the condition of leftist women in Spain from the early twentieth century through the Civil War and the immediate postwar period, see Nash (1995), Mangini (1995), Scanlon (1976) and Lannon (1991).

[5] See Nash (1995) and Acklesberg (1991, 1992).

[6] Two studies of the effects of political activism on the mother-child relationship serve as exciting points of comparison and dialogue with my own. They are Carrie Hamilton's work on interviews she has conducted with Basque nationalists (Hamilton 2000) and Martha Acklesberg's on the Anarchist *Mujeres Libres* (Acklesberg 1992).

[7] Historians Tomasa Cuevas, Dolors Marin, and Fernanda Romeu were especially helpful to me in my attempts to locate interviewees.

[8] For specific songs that aroused the fighting spirit of Republican militias, see Francisco Caudet's analysis of the ideological and propagandistic power of song and poem during the Spanish Civil War. The acclaimed poet Miguel Hernández, who died tragically in one of Franco's prisons in 1942, penned one of his most famous poems in response to the heroism of Rosario, 'la Dinamitera'.

[9] She later wrote to me stating that she changed her mind and that I may quote from her transcribed testimony.

[10] I first came across these photos in Shirley Mangini's *Memories of Resistance*; my thanks to her for the copies and to the *Archivo General de la Administración* for permission to reproduce them.

[11] With regard to contemporary co-optations of the image of the militiawoman, I have in mind specifically Vicente Aranda's problematic portrayal of anarchist women combatants in his film *Libertarias*. From what I have been able to gather from interviews with *milicianas*, these women did not experience the kinds of sexualization that *Libertarias* depicts. This film then reinforces old conservative stereotypes even as it (ostensibly) attempts to rehabilitate the *miliciana*.

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