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STUDIA TERRITORIALIA 1

GIVING A VOICE TO THE SILENCED WOMEN OF FRANCOIST SPAIN

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Abstract
During the Spanish Civil War and the Francoist dictatorship that followed, women were shielded from the public eye. Their predetermined social role was that of submissive and devoted wives to their husbands as well as homemakers and childcare providers. There are few artistic works that suggest otherwise. However, during the Civil War and after, many women were in fact politically active. They occupied important positions in the resistance and were present along with the men in the trenches. Spanish graphic novels have managed to create many works of fiction based on the Civil War, mainly drawing on (auto)biographical accounts. There are so many significant works dealing with the war and Francoist repression that they represent a genre of their own. Nevertheless, the authors of these works, as well as their main protagonists, are usually men. This is true despite the fact that after the war, during the four decades of the Franco dictatorship, many women suffered from political persecution. The aim of this article is to analyze the role of women outside the domestic space as it appears in selected graphic narratives set in the period of Franco's regime. Given the extent of the regime's repression, these works are frequently set in the prisons around Spain where female prisoners were incarcerated and tortured. The narratives we analyze are based on real

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testimonies from real victims. Their individual experiences are joined together in a collective whose voice has long been silenced until recently.
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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze certain Spanish graphic novels published between 2007 and 2023, which are set in the period of Francoism (1939–1975) and feature women as their main protagonists. The first impulse for undertaking this study is the scarcity of such stories in the vast archive of literature set in the Francoist period. The topic of the Civil War and the period of Francoism represents a genre of its own. Carmen Moreno-Nuño notes an almost total absence of female authors working in the genre. However, she has highlighted three who are mostly left off of the list of authors who have dealt with the Civil War. They are the authors of *Todo lo que nos contaron nuestros abuelos* [Everything Our Grandfathers Told Us] (2012) by Cachete Jack, *Winnipeg, el barco de Neruda* [Winnipeg, Neruda's Ship] (2014) by Laura Martel and Antonia Santolaya, and *Tante Wussi* (2015) by Katrin Bacher and Tyto Alba.[1] Moreno-Nuño discusses three other graphic narratives in which a female character plays a prominent role. The first of these is *Las damas de la peste* [The Ladies of the Plague] (2015) by Javier Cosnava and Rubén Rincón, which narrates the experiences of three women who fought against fascism in different historical contexts: the Revolution of Asturias in 1934, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, and May 68. The second novel, *El convoy* [The Convoy] (2015) by Denis Lapière and Eduard Torrents, depicts the life of a Catalan woman, Angelita, who lives in exile in France in 1975. The third and last book is entitled *Asylum* (2015) by Javier de Isusi. It tells the story of an exiled ninety-four-year-old woman who reminisces about her long journey from Otxandio to Venezuela.

We could add other significant graphic works to the list, such as *El Ala Rota* [The Broken Wing] (2016) by Antonio Altarriba. That novel is about the author's mother, and is the second volume in the biographical saga of the author's parents. It was preceded by *El arte de volar* [The Art of Flying] (2009),

[1] José Joaquín Rodríguez and Paula Sepúlveda Navarrete, "La legislación franquista frente al cómic femenino (1938–1977)," *Foro. Revista de Derecho*, no. 33 (2020): 103–123, doi: 10.32719/26312484.2020.33.6; Carmen Moreno-Nuño, "La Guerra Civil española en el cómic de autoría femenina," *Dictatorships & Democracies, Journal of History and Culture*, no. 9 (2021): 49–78, doi: 10.7238/dd.v0i9.390805.

which the author dedicated to his father. Another possibility is an homage that author Ana Penyas pays to her grandmothers in her work *Estamos todas bien* [We Are All Alright] (2017).

Although all the foregoing narratives are important contributions to the genre, they do not meet our criteria for inclusion in this paper. We require (1) the presence of female protagonists, (2) exclusively during the Francoist repression, (3) outside the domestic space, (4) playing an active role in the historical context. The only graphic narratives that fully correspond to our requirements for inclusion in this study are *Dentro* (2021) by Isabel Ruíz Ruíz and *Cuerda de presas* (2017) by Jorge García and Fidel Martínez.

We focused our analysis on those two graphic narratives and their representation of the many forms of repression of women which were carried out by the Francoist regime. One egregious form was physical violence, including detentions, interrogations, tortures, rapes, and incarceration in different Spanish prisons. A second form was moral and religious repression inflicted on homosexuals (both men and women), who were stigmatized and persecuted as "perverts" and denigrated as "*violetas*." Homosexuals had to endure not only harassment by the police but also social pressure that used derogatory language to demean and psychologically mistreat them. Lastly, cultural repression was mainly practiced by depriving people, especially women from rural areas, of a proper education and prohibiting cultural performances of any kind within the Francoist prisons.

We established the year 2007 as the starting point for selection of the graphic novels included in this study because an important milestone was reached in that year, the approval in Spain of the Law on the Historical Memory of the Spanish Civil War. This law echoed through Spanish culture in many ways, including an increase in the number of graphic narratives published about that episode in Spanish history. The law will be discussed in more detail below.

Context Matters: Culture and History

The historical context in which the Spanish graphic narratives analyzed in this article were produced has been called the fourth wave of feminism by historiographers and scholars of other disciplines. This feminist wave, which arose in the second decade of the twenty-first century, was marked by the arrival of new communication technologies, major scandals, global media campaigns, the opening of new spaces for association, and the social mobilization of a large part of the population, especially youth. The intellectual contributions of this fourth

wave have included the very concept of feminist "waves" itself, ideas of gender identity and intersectionality, and new demands for social inclusion.[2]

The narrative thrust of Spanish comics and graphic novels from the second decade of the twenty-first century onwards has been reframing the country's past as a dystopia. This perspective results from economic crises, recession, indignation against neoliberalism that has dismantled the welfare state, the resurgence of the extreme right, an increase in concern for the environment and climate change, and so on. According to Theodor Adorno, the products of popular culture tend to reproduce tensions in the labor culture of their time. Aspects of the contemporary capitalist world of work, such as flexible work environments, multitasking, pressure for creativity, and now teleworking, are immediately reflected in visual creations such as comics and graphic novels, as well as other audiovisual and transmedia products. However, as Tony Judt and Timothy Snyder have warned, these mnemonic manifestations of the past are partial, insufficient, and selective. A critical gaze is required of the reader, who must always bear in mind that these mnemonic manifestations are not in themselves true knowledge.[3]

In analyzing the graphic novels for this study, it was necessary to take into account the contributions of recent historiography regarding Francoism. This includes a long debate about the relationship between Francoism and fascism. Key elements of the Spanish model of fascism were humiliation of the vanquished, their dehumanization, and their designation as anti-Spain agents. The totalitarian project of the Falange dominated society through a single party and its organizations, including the Organizaciones Juveniles, Sección Femenina, Sindicatos, and Milicias. Young people, women, and workers were called upon to join their respective organizations. For example, before the mobilization of the Spanish Azul Division in the summer of 1941 to participate in Germany's Operation Barbarossa against the USSR, the Falange Women's Section was mobilized to make outerwear for the Spanish soldiers in Russia and collect donations for the *aguinaldo* (Christmas gift) intended for volunteers. Graphic narratives about females produced in the Francoist period, like *Mis Chicas* (1941)

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[2] Abanella Di Tullio and Romina Smiraglia, "Debatiendo el papel de la reflexión feminista contemporánea: Judith Butler y Martha Nussbaum," *Astrolabio. Revista internacional de filosofía*, no. 13 (2012): 443–453; Judith Butler, *El género en disputa. El feminismo y la subversión de la identidad* (Barcelona: Paidós, 2007).

[3] Tom Moylan, *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 2001); Tony Judt and Timothy Snyder, *Thinking the Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin Press, 2012).

or *Florita* (1949), were ideologically slanted in favor of the regime, whereas the recent graphic novels we analyze focus on women's victimization and the ideology they embraced.[4]

War in Graphic Narratives

Graphic narratives dealing with historical events have become a very popular literary genre since the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980) about a Holocaust survivor and Joe Sacco's works such as *Palestine* (1996) and *Safe Area Goražde* (2000). The latter narratives recount Sacco's experiences in war and conflict in the two troubled areas. They are considered non-fiction graphic narratives because they are written in a journalistic style intended to depict reality shorn of artistic pretensions. It is not our aim to discuss the extent to which a graphic narrative is or is not fiction. In the case of the texts analyzed in this article, which depict a crucial part of the history of Spain, the authors make no claim that their works are objective. Rather, they say they are based on eye-witness testimony and transmit a particular narrative. Their main aim is to visualize and empower the many voices which were silenced during the Francoist regime. In this paper, produced in the midst of the fourth wave of feminism, we focus mainly on the voices of female victims and their historical experiences, which the graphic narratives recount in the first person. The women's voices are historical sources that have inspired new narratives.[5]

Graphic narratives about Francoism began to appear around the year 2007, when the Law on Historical Memory about the Spanish Civil War was enacted. They arose within a specific political context: the end of the conservative government of the Partido Popular (PP), which until then had held an absolute majority in the Spanish parliament. This marked the beginning of a progressive government led by the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and supported by Catalan republicans during its first two years. The 2007 law, popularly known as the Historical Memory Law, was Spain's first official attempt to revisit the past and repair the damage of the Franco period. It was a response to Spanish

[4] Ferran Gallego, *El evangelio fascista: la formación de la cultura política del franquismo (1930–1950)* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2014); Joan Maria Thomàs, *Los fascismos españoles* (Barcelona: Planeta, 2011); Stéphane Michonneau and Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, eds., *Imaginarios y representaciones de España durante el franquismo* (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2014); Carme Agustí Roca, *¡Rússia és culpable! Memòria i record de la División Azul* (Lleida: Pagès Editors, 2003).

[5] Aurore Ducellier, "La represión franquista en el cómic español: cárceles, campos y ejecuciones en la novela gráfica española (2009–2019)," *L'Entre-deux*, no. 8 (2) (December 2020): 1–25, https://www.lentre-deux.com/?b=140.

society's demand for knowledge about the Civil War and its consequences, especially post-Civil War Francoist violence and repression.

The Historical Memory Law was intended to recognize the victims of the Civil War and the Francoist regime, make amends to them, and extend rights to those who suffered from persecution of a political, ideological, or religious nature. It promoted moral reparations and the recovery of lost memories in order to enhance cohesion and solidarity among Spanish citizens. The law was based on democratic principles and provided open access to documents related to the Civil War and the dictatorship, ensuring they would be conserved in public archives. However, after elections in 2011 and the victory of the right-wing PP, implementation of the law was postponed. Money for its implementation was not included in the national budget for the years 2013–2014. The most conservative parts of Spanish society firmly disagreed with the law's premises, arguing that it would be insensitive to "reopen old wounds."[6]

The Historical Memory Law was based on other initiatives such as Catalonia's Democratic Memorial Law (2007). Later, a Catalan Graves Law (2009) was enacted, which established protocols for opening mass graves, including those of victims of the Civil War, Francoism, and the transition from Franco to democracy. A new version of the Spanish Democratic Memory Law was enacted in 2022. It represented an advance over the previous law, especially in terms of recognizing and facilitating the prosecution of Francoist crimes, but it is still too early to predict its social impact.[7]

Public policies regarding historical memory have not focused merely on promoting literary and graphic creations. Such works are only one result of the process of institutionalizing a social movement with strong connections to academic and intellectual spheres. The policies aim to enshrine historical memory as a positive social value and assist the families of the victims of repression and war to recover the remains of their relatives or ancestors. This is a global phenomenon, which has led to social movements organized to recover democratic memory in countries such as Venezuela, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Mexico, Rwanda, and Bolivia. These movements follow in the context of the

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6 Ruben Varillas, "La novela gráfica española y la memoria recuperada," in Alessandro Scarsella, Katiuscia Darici, and Alice Favaro, *Historieta o Cómic: Biografía de la narración gráfica en España* (Venezia: Edizioni Ca'Foscari, 2017), 107.

7 Joan Sagués San José, "Han vuelto a pasar (casi) cuarenta años. Memoria y políticas públicas de memoria en España desde la muerte del dictador," in *Duelo y memoria. Espacios para el recuerdo de las víctimas de la represión franquista en perspectiva comparada*, ed. Conxita Mir Curcó and Josep Gelonch Solé (Lleida: Universitat de Lleida, 2013), 19–39.

vindication of human rights following the end of the Second World War, the issuance of the Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, and the consolidation of liberal democracy and the European welfare state in the second half of the twentieth century.[8]

The process of institutionalizing these social demands accelerated with the election of the PSOE and Podemos government of 2019, which in January 2020 created the post of Secretary of State for Democratic Memory. The Secretary of State's office consolidated powers previously exercised by the Ministry of Justice under the Office of the President. Since 2020, the Secretary has been Fernando Martínez López, a professor of contemporary history at the University of Almería and a specialist in the history of Spanish republicanism. In June 2018, during the first government of Pedro Sánchez, a General Directorate of Democratic Memory was created, headed by Diego Blázquez Martín. Blázquez Martín's office has an eminently political nature. It coordinates the bodies that help victims of Francoism find redress and plan political actions in their memory. On the other hand, the Secretary of State is in charge of promoting the preservation of places of memory, enforcing the Law on Democratic Memory as it relates to those places, and collaborating with local public administrations. All of this suggests a clear intent to institutionalize democratic memory, proving that memory is capable of being managed like any other area of public policy. The number of relevant publications peaked in 2011 during the first phase of the Law's implementation (2007–11). According to Michel Matly, that was the year when the largest number of graphic narratives about the Civil War was published.[9]

The process of institutionalization also includes academic discussion of the concept of memory and its social uses. In this sense, we cannot avoid reference to Pierre Nora, who has characterized places of memory as living spaces. These places keep alive the collective memory of a community and carry with

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[8] Carlos Ernesto Ichuta Nina, "Bolivia: memoria, insurgencia y movimientos sociales," *Polis. Investigación y Análisis Sociopolítico y Psicosocial* 5, no. 2 (2009): 203–210; Ángel del Rio Sánchez, "La Memoria Histórica en escena. Demandas y movimientos sociales," in *La recuperación de la memoria histórica: una perspectiva transversal desde las ciencias sociales*, ed. Gonzalo Acosta Bono, Ángel del Rio Sánchez, and José Mª Valcuende del Río (Sevilla, Fundación Centro de Estudios Andaluces, 2008); Fernández Fernández Íñigo, "El engaño de la memoria: Una revisión histórica de los movimientos sociales en México," *Historia y grafía*, no. 5 (1995): 305–309; Gabriel Izard Martínez, "Del olvido a la memoria y la presencia: Estrategias de visibilización de los movimientos sociales afrovenezolanos," *Humania del Sur: Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos, Africanos y Asiáticos* 8, no. 14 (2013): 121–133.

[9] Michel Matly, *El cómic sobre la Guerra Civil* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2018), 175–194.

them a symbolic element. Nora uses the concepts of "material" and "ideal" in referring to places of memory. His concepts are highly flexible and allow a broad definition of specific places of memory in the urban fabric. However, he leaves out objects such as flags, books and, as in the case at hand, comics and graphic novels.[10] If we accept that a graphic novel can be analyzed as a record of memory, we can understand that an interdisciplinary approach to analysis is required.

Spanish graphic narratives about Spanish Civil War and Francoism published after 2007 focus on the Republican side of the conflict, documenting the testimonies of its participants. The sons and daughters, and even the grandchildren of the protagonists, convert their parents' testimonies into graphic narratives. Thus we are given direct and indirect testimony about events. Such works belong to the genre of (auto)biography and the subgenre of *testimonio*. The personal voices in the graphic narratives add up to the voice of a collective that has shared similar experiences. However, women occupy a prominent role in only a very few of these works. Our main aim here is to analyze those few.

The Spanish civil war has inspired many works of an interdisciplinary nature. Vicente Sánchez Biosca says the memory of the war "has become one of the most powerful cultural industries in recent years, involving in its framework the publication of books, the broadcast of television reports, the edition of facsimiles of the time, and the capture of testimonies in different media of the Spanish tragedy of 1936." Moreno Nuño claims that the historical memory of the Spanish Civil War has become the main theme of Spanish graphic narratives. Samuel Amago says that the boom in the recovery of historical memory is "one of the country's most visible and noteworthy cultural phenomena."[11]

As they strive for a high degree of realism and veracity, the authors of graphic narratives appeal to the emotions of their readership. They employ a number of stylistic and rhetorical devices in the process. For instance, the works incorporate tangible objects such as documents and reports, photographs, letters and parts of journals, which are fictionalized only in the sense that they are transformed into illustrations which form part of the narrated story. Many graphic narratives rely on objective sources of information, including historical docu-

[10] Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

[11] Vicente Sánchez Biosca, *Cine y guerra civil española. Del mito a la memoria* (Madrid: Alianza, 2006), 39; Moreno-Nuño, "La Guerra Civil española"; Samuel Amago, "Drawing (on) Spanish History," in *Consequential Art: Comics Culture in Contemporary Spain*, ed. Samuel Amago and Matthew J. Marr (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019): 31.

ments, and mix them with personal testimonies (intra-stories). Together they are creating a contemporary collective memory of Spain under Franco that is based on verifiable history.[12]

Physical Violence

On February 9, 1939, the Francoist regime approved a Law on Political Responsibilities. This law was applied retroactively and applied to all who had collaborated with the republican government in the years before the so-called National Uprising. Thousands of men and women were executed or physically abused. This abuse included unjustified detentions, long interrogations, torture, and even rape. The exact number of inmates in the Francoist prisons all over Spain remains unknown because the regime did its best to hide it. As far as can be determined from public documents, the number of incarcerated females exceeded the estimated capacity of the women's prisons by the thousands. For instance, the Ventas prison in Madrid had an official capacity of 500 inmates, but it harbored 14,000 female prisoners during those times. Francoist censorship kept the physical abuse of women in the prisons under wraps. Even after the transition to democracy in Spain, it remains little known thanks to the Pact of Forgetting agreed to by the Spanish left and right after the death of Franco in 1975.[13]

The life of women in Francoist prisons is well depicted in two graphic novels, *Cuerda de presas* by Jorge García and Fidel Martínez and *Dentro* by Isabel Ruiz Ruiz. Both works use visual and documentary resources to portray the women's experience of being deprived of liberty and in many cases, tortured. It is interesting that many of the individual stories narrated in the two books coincide. Both authors based their stories on available historical documents, including books by Tomasa Cuevas, one of the survivors of the Francoist prisons. Cuevas collected the testimonies of other female inmates from all around Spain, as well as stories by other authors about the situation of women suffering Francoist repression. A bibliography appears in the back of *Dentro* by Ruiz. In a similar way, the authors of *Cuerda de presas* used authentic documents to source the different stories they included in their book.[14]

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[12] Ducellier, "La represión franquista en el cómic español," 5.

[13] Felipe Hernández Cava, "El terror blanco" in García Jorge and Martínez Fidel, *Cuerda de presas* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 2019).

[14] Jorge García and Fidel Martínez, *Cuerda de presas* (Bilbao: Astiberri, 2019); Isabel Ruiz Ruiz, *Dentro* (Ilustropos, 2021); Tomasa Cuevas Gutiérrez, *Testimonios de mujeres en las cárceles fran-*

The power of fiction and particularly that of graphic novels lies in the aesthetic choices made by authors as they recount certain experiences. They appeal directly to their readers' emotions. That is something historians cannot do because their duty is to maintain objectivity. Both graphic narratives are filled with metaphors and metonymies. For example, in the story "Behind Bars" from *Cuerda de presas*, the authors play with the double meaning of the word *rejas* (which in Spanish can mean either a plowshare or prison bars). To the protagonist, the word implies not only her lack of liberty in prison but also her position as a rural woman and the daughter of a farmer.[15]

Significantly, in the graphic narrative, the symbolism of the bars follows the prisoner into the street after she is released. By means of a high-angle shot and the composition the authors choose, the long shadow of the bars literally crushes and eats the shadow of the protagonist at the moment of her escape, foreshadowing her future. That image goes hand in hand with the conclusion of "Behind Bars." The story's ending implies nothing less than the continuation, outside of prison, of the lack of freedom imposed by the dictatorship.

In *Dentro*, the illustrator plays with the shadows of trees that resemble prison bars in the eyes of an inmate. This way of suggesting the protagonist's lack of freedom, rather than directly showing it, is even more powerful than talking about incarceration in words.[16]

With regard to physical abuse, both graphic novels dedicate one episode to the tortures inflicted on women in the prisons. Historical testimonies affirm that women were tortured with electrodes in order to obtain information about the organizations to which they belonged. In the episode "Rings" in *Dentro*, Ruiz depicts a woman sitting in a chair, with wires around her fingers. This scene is juxtaposed with a picture of her taking off her wedding ring. The rings of wire inflict pain, as can be seen in the close up of her face, contorted in suffering (Figure 1). Ruiz quotes Petra Cuevas, an inmate from the Ventas prison: "I was

quistas (Huesca: Institutos de Estudios Altoaragoneses, 2004); Tomasa Cuevas Gutiérrez, *Presas* (Barcelona: Icaria Editorial, 2005); Rodolfo Serrano and Daniel Serrano, *Toda España era una cárcel* (Madrid: Frida Ediciones, 2016); Enrique González Duro, *Las rapadas. El franquismo contra la mujer* (Madrid: Siglo XXI de Espala Editores, 2012); Fernanda Romeu Alfaro, *El silencio roto. Mujeres contra el franquismo* (Barcelona: Ediciones de Intervención Cultural, El Viejo Topo, 2002); Ricard Vinyes, *Irrendentas. Las presas políticas y sus hijos en las cárceles franquistas* (Madrid: Ediciones Temas de Hoy, 2002); Verónica Sierra Blas, *Cartas Presas* (Madrid: Marcial Pons Historia, 2016); Carlos Fonseca, *Trece rosas rojas. La historia más conmovedora de la guerra civil* (Madrid: Ediciones Temas de Hoy, 2004).

[15] García and Martínez, *Cuerda de presas*, 9.

[16] Ibid., 15.

Figure 1: *Dentro*, "Rings." Courtesy of Isabel Ruiz Ruiz.

plugged in and plugged in again with my hands soaked in gasoline so that the current would be stronger."

The third story in *Cuerda de presas* is entitled "The Room under the Stairs." It also depicts a scene in which a woman is being tortured, but instead of her fingers, the electrodes are placed on her naked nipples. The close up of the victim's face is very similar to the one in Ruiz's book. This scene of torture is part of a wider narrative frame, which portrays multiple rapes of the woman by a guard. Prison rapes occurred on a regular basis, according to the available historical sources.[17]

Ruiz's story "Attractions" acknowledges the ubiquity of rapes by the guards, which she claims could continue for several days. Ruiz has decided to emphasize

[17] Ruiz Ruiz, *Dentro*, "Rings."

the details by insinuating but not explicitly showing them. Her illustrations show hands and feet being tied with a rope. Readers witness the act from the perspective of the victim and see only her legs full of wounds. The victim's helplessness is juxtaposed with the face of a woman guard who is preparing the prisoner for the men's pleasure. The detail of a guard opening his fly and a long queue of men chatting outside the interrogation room need not be more explicit. The reader puts the puzzle pieces together in his or her mind and becomes directly involved in the scene. Its brutality is palpable. On the other hand, in "The Room under the Stairs," the rape scene is not shown at all, but rather implied in a conversation between two women prisoners talking about the victim. García and Martínez provide harrowing details, for instance, the shaving of the women's hair – except for that of the most beautiful women, who were taken away to suffer sexual abuse at the hands of the guards.

Death often resulted from the inhumane treatment of the inmates. Many female prisoners died due to their brutal treatment or the lack of food and hygiene in the prisons. Others were simply executed. These deaths are not explicitly portrayed in either book. Instead, they are conveyed symbolically: tally marks on a cell wall for each gunshot heard from outside, an inert, dead hand filling a panel, and silence.

Both books dedicate an episode each to *la saca*, which was the act of taking a prisoner from their cell in the Ventas Prison to be executed against a wall in a nearby cemetery. Executions were sometimes announced by certain noises during the night. The condemned prisoners would put on clothes to keep their dignity. After being forced to confess their guilt to a priest, they were allowed to write a farewell letter. It is said that in Ventas, the cemetery was so close that the prisoners in their cells could hear the *coup de grace,* followed by profound silence. In *Dentro*, horizontal/landscape panels show keys opening a locked door, the steps of a guard, and the open mouth of the prisoner sentenced to death. This collage-like technique uses aspect-to-aspect transition with changing viewpoints of the same scene, which leaves the reader with an emotional, figurative impression of the victims.[18] After the condemned women are dressed, another illustration shows the truck into which they are loaded leaving the prison yard. In the nine square panels that follow, the illustrator shows the troubled, tear-stained faces of the inmates as they listen to the *coups de grace* coming from the nearby cemetery.

[18] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, 1993, https://archive.org/details/UnderstandingComicsTheInvisibleArtByScottMcCloud.

The second episode in *Cuerda de presas*, "Ballad of Ventas," tells a similar story. We see soldiers dragging a wounded woman who had been previously tortured to her death. The inmates comment on the noises they hear, the *coups de grace* which are perfectly audible from the nearby cemetery. They count the shots to know how many people are being executed that day. Meanwhile, their daily routines continue. They eat only once a day. A tortured woman, Elisa Vázquez, has a headache. The authors say she has been in the office of one Núñez Balboa, who is known for torturing prisoners with electrodes. In *Dentro*, we are told that this kind of torture had several different consequences for the health of the victims. Elisa is sentenced to death as the soldiers guarding her have a casual conversation about the weather. Illustrations resembling German expressionism highlight the juxtaposed realities of the situation. The inmates discuss the possibility of yet another *saca*, as well as the meager supply of water, which tastes of gasoline.

As previously mentioned, during the period of Francoism women prisoners were progressively deprived of their humanity. After they arrived in the prison, their heads were shaved and they were given a uniform reminiscent of the concentration camps elsewhere in Europe. The inhuman living conditions, lack of water, scarce and poor food, plagues, and isolation in cells where women were deprived of any contact or sunlight, all worked to make the prisoners lose hope, give up, and abandon the resistance. In his introduction to *Cuerda de presas*, Felipe Hernández Cava quotes Franco himself:

> It is not possible to return harmful, perverted, politically and morally poisoned elements to society, or as we should say, to social circulation, because their re-entry into the free and normal community of Spaniards without further ado would represent a danger of corruption and contagion for all.[19]

It is well-known that Franco's objective was to do away with his enemies by any means necessary. Moreover, under the influence of the eugenics movement, children of those enemies who did not die in the prisons' insalubrious conditions were subjected to "positive segregation," a term coined by psychiatrist Antonio Vallejo Nájera. Vallejo Nájera defended the kidnapping of the children of democrats and communists as necessary to preserve the "Hispanic heritage" and cleanse the Spanish race of the "reds." The children of inmates were breastfed by their mothers and lived with them in separate cells, but at the age of three, they

[19] García and Martínez, *Cuerda de presas*, 6.

were placed in adoptive families by the Catholic Church. One story in Ruiz's *Dentro*, entitled "Garden," denounces another common practice during Francoism: women sentenced to death who were pregnant (many times as a consequence of the rapes they suffered during their interrogation) were kept alive until they gave birth. After a few months of breastfeeding, they were separated from their child and executed. The children were adopted with the assistance of the Church.[20]

Another form of physical repression forced many families into involuntary exile beyond the Spanish borders. There are accounts of such experiences in graphic narratives like *El convoy*, which depicts the life of a Catalan woman, Angelita, who lives in exile in France, and *Asylum*, which tells the story of an exiled ninety-four-year-old woman who reminisces about her long journey from Otxandio in the Basque country to Venezuela. *Asylum* offers a new look at the experience of exile from a female and clearly intersectional perspective. De Isusi's graphic narrative explores the maturation and the rite of passage that is exile. It explores generational contrasts from racial, feminine, and class perspectives as the author intertwines various stories that knit together the experience of exile in different times and places.[21]

In a similar vein, a paperback adaptation of the animated film *Josep* was published in 2020. The film was directed by the French cartoonist and filmmaker Aurel, with a script by Jean-Louis Milesi. Together with Audrey Rebmann, Milesi participated in the production of the graphic narrative as well (which like the film also involves adaptation and composition). Adapting the visual elements of the film to the graphic novel entailed several difficulties, but the book manages to convey some of the emotionality of the film. In both versions, women occupy a secondary position as desired, sexualized, or idealized objects, depending on the character. *Josep* assigns women a very marked gender identity, defined by their presence in professions linked to care (nursing) and creativity (gallerist and artist), but also by abuse of their bodies (in the form of prostitution, consensual or not, in a concentration camp).[22]

The plot of *Josep* revolves around the protagonist's search for his missing wife. It makes the woman into an immanent, almost mythological being. The mystery that surrounds her is not resolved at any point in the graphic narrative.

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[20] Ruiz Ruiz, *Dentro*, "Raising"; Ruiz Ruiz, *Dentro*, "Jardín/Garden."

[21] Denis Lapière and Eduard Torrents, *El Convoy* (Barcelona: Norma Editorial, 2015); Javier De Isusi, *Asylum* (Bilbao: Astiberri Ediciones, 2017); Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299, doi: 10.2307/1229039.

[22] Aurel, Jean-Louis Milesi, and Audrey Rebmann, *Josep* (n.p.: Símbol editors, 2020).

The Mexican artist Frida Kahlo also plays a part in the story. The author uses her well-known public personality to embody a sexually charged and politically committed discourse. Frida strips naked and leaves behind a corset with a red hammer and sickle painted on it. The pregnancy of Josep's girlfriend is also a recurring theme in the novel. Her fate, and that of her unborn child, remain a mystery to the reader.[23]

Moral and Religious Repression

The Franco regime persecuted homosexuals for their "deviant behavior." Under the Law on Social Dangerousness, homosexuals could be imprisoned for up to three years. Many of them were sent to a concentration camp for "the perverted" called Tefía, situated in Fuerteventura. Although its true purpose was a well-known fact, the government officially called the place an "agricultural penitentiary colony." Imprisonment did not only involve seclusion and deprivation of liberty, but also electroshock therapy and medical experiments, supposedly to cure the inmates of their alleged illness.[24]

The graphic novel *El Violeta* (2018) by Juan Sepúlveda Sanchis and Antonio Santos Mercero, illustrated by Marina Cochet, narrates the story of Bruno, a homosexual who is arrested by the secret police in the Ruzafa cinema in Valencia, which was known as a meeting place for homosexuals. After being imprisoned and witnessing how homosexuals were treated in prison, Bruno is released thanks to his father's political influence. Ultimately, he becomes a policeman and gets married. The story illustrates the many difficulties homosexuals suffered during Francoism in what was at the time an ultra-catholic, fascist state. The Franco regime repressed homosexuals because they were considered as offending the country's morals and causing harm to its social order. At the time, it was even believed that homosexuality could be cured by electroshock therapy.[25]

Although the main protagonist of this story is a man, Bruno, there is another character in the story who is important to our study: his wife, Maricruz. Maricruz represents the many Spanish women who married homosexuals and suffered from frustration, shame, and above all, a feeling they had been fooled and trapped into an unhappy marriage. For homosexuals, getting married was the only way to go unnoticed and survive in the time of Francoism.

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[23] Ibid., 136–137.

[24] Arturo Arnalte, Jerónimo Saavedra, and Pedro Zerolo, *Redada de violetas: la represión de los homosexuales durante el franquismo* (Madrid: La esfera de los libros, 2003).

[25] Juan Sepúlveda Sanchis et al., *El Violeta* (Madrid: Editorial Drakul, 2018).

Figure 2: *Dentro*, "Silencio/Silence." Courtesy of Isabel Ruiz Ruiz.

One episode in the graphic novel *Cuerda de presas* tells the story of two women, Matilde and Nieves, who are caught in an embrace in the prison washroom and reported to the authorities. The two are brutally beaten and Matilde is sent to another prison, her whereabouts unknown to Nieves. The story describes Matilde's efforts to find Nieves by sending notes through inmates who were being transferred to other prisons all over Spain, hoping to obtain some news in response. The story ends with a question: "And what if she finds her?" The question points up the futility of same-sex love under a regime that regarded homosexuality as a frightening plague corrupting the morality of the Spanish nation.[26]

A similar story appears in *Dentro* as well, albeit very briefly. The text reads: "The prison bathrooms were meeting places during the night. Women secretly gathered in them to read, share news, do chores, sing, dance, and even make love." The latter act is portrayed in a panel showing two women facing each other, one with her arm around the other's neck (Figure 2).[27]

Cultural Repression

In the microcosm of the Spanish female prisons, cultural repression by the Francoist regime translated into prohibitions of any kind of cultural

[26] García and Martínez, *Cuerda de presas*, 90.
[27] Ruiz Ruiz, *Dentro*, "Silencio/Silence."

performances. For instance, both *Cuerda de presas* and *Dentro* mention clandestine concerts that were organized in Ventas. Both graphic narratives also mention a song that is an abiding relic of the Francoist past, and which connects the two stories. The song was sung by the prisoners to entertain themselves and escape the harsh reality of prison life, if just for a while. The episode "Balada de Ventas" [Ventas Ballad] tells the story of an imprisoned woman who dances with other female prisoners in a prison bathroom. In Ruiz's book, the illustrations are accompanied by a quotation from Tomasa Cuevas who, after getting out of prison, went back to interview other prisoners: "She dressed herself slowly and confidently. The official, nervous about the silence and the emotion-filled eyes of the women, wanted her to hurry up. Her answer, as clear as it was full of contempt, was: 'Wait, don't you see that I'm shrouding myself in life?'"[28]

The fact that many women did not know how to read and write can also be considered a form of cultural repression. Both graphic narratives, *Cuerda de presas* and *Dentro*, speak of a sorority among the female prisoners in which the young women taught the older ones to read and write so they could receive and send letters home. One story in *Dentro*, "The Letter," says:

> Inmates who were teachers organized themselves to teach other women to write and read. They met clandestinely in the cells, in the corridors, and in the courtyards to pass their knowledge on to one another... When a woman learned to read, she went on to teach other women, creating a network of knowledge and solidarity that grew day by day.[29]

During the Civil War and for some time thereafter, 30 percent of the Spanish population was illiterate. Many people had no access at all to an education. Women would be the last to receive one in any event. Graphic narratives became very popular during the Civil War because they appealed to the illiterate part of the population. Among other things, "comics" were used to communicate news from the war front and to educate soldiers in basic hygiene and avoidance of health problems.[30]

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[28] Ruiz Ruiz, *Dentro*, "La saca."
[29] Ruiz Ruiz, *Dentro*, "La carta/The Letter."
[30] Michel Matly, *El cómic sobre la Guerra Civil.*

Conclusions

In this article we have seen how certain graphic narratives take history and convert it into artistic expression. We also see how the narratives convey the painful experiences of the female victims of Francoism. The graphic media relies on poetic resources such as metaphors, metonymies, ellipsis and other rhetorical tools to reproduce the emotions, pain, and brutality of the Franco regime. In this case, language alone is not enough to convey the horror.

Both *Cuerda de presas* and *Dentro* are illustrated in black and white. As Ruiz, the author of *Dentro*, tells us, the illustrations' somber colors "reflect the oppressive environment in which Franco's female prisoners lived and died."[31] Similarly, the black and white drawings in *Cuerda de presas* evoke early twentieth century expressionist wood cuts, with the demonic faces of the torturers animalized by their brutality. In addition, the illustrations skillfully play with contrasts of light and shadow, reinforcing the sadness of the atmosphere of the women's prisons. The framing, perspectives, and angles chosen by the authors and illustrators purposely emphasize how repressive prison life actually was.

It is curious how these works can still maintain the feel of a comic book when they deal with such adult content. In *Cuerda de presas*, the executioners' faces are contorted with exaggerated anger and sadism, reminding us of the "arch-villains" of the comic books. Both graphic narratives counterbalance their simple illustrations with an emotionally charged plot set against a historical background whose complexity is difficult to understand, even nowadays.

The trait that differentiates the two accounts is the creative license taken by the storytellers. Ruiz opts for illustrations organized in panels and mixed with texts and quotes she found in the research she did. *Dentro* does not so much resemble a graphic novel as it does a book with illustrations (albeit with a nod to comic book conventions). In *Cuerda de presas* on the other hand, García and Martínez choose diverse narrative forms: a letter, an interview, etc. They interweave different timeframes from the past and present.

The authors of both works state that their main aim was to give voice to the silenced women who were imprisoned during the Francoist dictatorship and to repay a historical debt. In particular, Ruiz claims that although the Pact of Forgetting was agreed among politicians in order to support a peaceful transition towards democracy, it did a lot of damage to historical memory. Therefore, the authors of both graphic narratives seek to transmit the silenced voices by means

[31] Ruiz Ruiz, *Dentro*, "Foreword."

of eye-witness storytelling. They always remain conscious of the huge responsibility they have shouldered in their work.

Some critics have warned of a need to take a critical approach to testimonies presented in graphic form because of the gender perspective of most comic books. Most comics are drawn from the perspective of the male gaze and are steeped in a patriarchal and sexist context. They distort the reality of women and, above all, their personal, frequently overlooked experiences. When it comes down to graphic narratives, the task of giving voice to the women of the Spanish Civil War is still a work in progress. As Tony Judt and Timothy Snyder have warned with regard to history in general, it is work that requires a critical approach.[32]

[32] Elena Masarah, "Cuando dibujar es político. Historiografía y memoria de las autoras de cómic en la transición," *CuCo. Cuadernos de comic* 5 (2015): 54–75; Judt and Snyder, *Thinking the Twentieth Century*.