WITNESS TO WAR: PHOTOGRAPHY, ANGLOPHONE WOMEN’S WRITING, AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

A dissertation presented

by

Laura Hartmann-Villalta

to
The Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of

English

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
April, 2016
WITNESS TO WAR: PHOTOGRAPHY, ANGLOPHONE WOMEN’S WRITING, AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

by

Laura Hartmann-Villalta

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities Northeastern University April, 2016
ABSTRACT

This dissertation connects twentieth-century European and American women artists’ documentations of the Spanish Civil War in photography, journalism, memoir, fiction, and poetry to a growing consciousness of humanitarianism in British and American political culture in the 1930s. With attention to a representational strategy called “gendered witnessing,” *Witness to War* unites literary and visual analysis with biographical portraits of non-Spanish women writers and photographers who went to Spain to report, document, and advocate for foreign intervention. The dissertation focuses on seven foreign women of varying nationalities who were in Spain during the war: the Hungarian Kati Horna and the German Gerda Taro, photographers; Americans Martha Gellhorn and Frances Davis, journalists; American Muriel Rukeyser, novelist; and British poets Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland. How these women used visual techniques in their writing and framed the subject in their photography is fundamental to my overarching premise of reading these women’s cultural production from the Spanish Civil War as gendered witnessing and helping to craft a human rights discourse. Representations of the Spanish Civil War helped to shape our present-day definition of humanitarianism; the gendered dynamic in the work of the women writers and artists addressed in this project provides us with a new way of viewing not only the Spanish Civil War, but twentieth-century representations of war in general.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although all parts of the dissertation are challenging to write, few parts inspire in me quite as much joy and humility as writing this acknowledgements section.

I first want to thank my committee, without whom this project would not be – although all faults or failings in this project are certainly all my own. Carla Kaplan, my chair, has guided and challenged me through coursework, comprehensive exams, conferences, Signs editorial work, and now my dissertation. I always entered Carla’s office surprised that she and I are the same height, for she is a mighty lady, and exudes a presence larger than her being. I am a better scholar because of Carla’s mentorship through the doctoral program and through writing this dissertation. Miriam Thaggert joined my committee in what seemed to be a leap of faith in the project. I cannot thank her enough for leaping and providing instrumental guidance and careful feedback. Her generosity and intellectual prompting have improved my approach to visual studies and the Spanish Civil War. There needs to be a new word invented to describe Miriam’s smart and attentive generosity. Lori Lefkovitz rescued me during my comprehensive exams and has had faith in the dissertation from the beginning. Our conversations and her questioning and feedback invigorated the project – and myself. We always laughed, even when talking about very serious topics, and for that I am grateful. I have had an extraordinary time working with these three scholars.

I also want to acknowledge Kimberly Juanita Brown, whose presence and scholarship during coursework and comprehensive exams greatly influenced the direction of my study on Spanish Civil War literature and photography. Her guidance during the Graduate Consortium of Women’s Studies Dissertation Writing Group showed me how Kimberly is a model of good humor, intellectual rigor, and, well, coolness.
Speaking of the GCWS, I want to acknowledge their influence on the dissertation. To Andi Sutton, program coordinator, and all the faculty members from Boston institutions who work to make the GCWS possible by giving of their time and energy: THANK YOU. Your dedication to women’s studies and interdisciplinary work continually inspired me in my dissertation project. I wanna grow up to be just like you!

Through GCWS coursework, I studied with Elizabeth A. Wood, Susan Ware, Eileen McDonagh, and Carla Kaplan on courses that were innovative, interdisciplinary, and challenged normative assumptions – all what a doctoral education should do – and informed my project’s direction. Susan Ware, in particular, as an historian and biographer, has been a tremendous resource for this project and my career. I also participated in the GCWS Dissertation Writing Group with Kimberly Juanita Brown, which was so helpful, not only for feedback, but because I met PhD students from other institutions who shared a commitment to the advancement of feminist scholarship. Thank you for creating a space where interdisciplinary, feminist and queer academic and public work is taken seriously.

Relatedly, I would like to thank the brilliant editorial staff at *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Andy Mazzaschi and Miranda Outman-Kramer, for setting such a high standard of performance and feminist knowledge and for being so damn kind. While I was working at *Signs*, your daily support and encouragement were so appreciated. You guys are just awesome; I wanna grow up to be like you, too. Thank you, most importantly, to Suzanna Danuta Walters, *Signs* editor-in-chief, for giving me a chance as the *Signs* editorial assistant. I hope to carry the *Signs* spirit forward, in this project and beyond.

This project would not have been possible without the support of archivists and librarians. Thank you to the staff at the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History
of Women in America at Harvard University, where the Frances Parsons Davis papers are housed. The Schlesinger is truly a temple for women’s history and a beautiful space in which to research. Thank you for being so welcoming. At the Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive in lovely Dorset, England: a huge thank you to Morine Krissdottir for accommodating my access to the archive and to Judith Bond for helping me feverishly make photocopies of materials. In a similar vein, the resources and staff at the Snell Library at Northeastern—especially the interlibrary loan privilege!—have been an immeasurable help in completing this project. My gratitude to librarians and archivists everywhere.

The late Jane Marcus was generous with her time, resources, and introductions: thank you, Jane.

The origin point of this project was in Madrid, Spain, where I completed my undergraduate degree in Spanish at St. Louis University’s Madrid campus. Thank you to Niall Binns and Francisco García-Serrano for the co-taught Spanish Civil War summer class I attended in between my freshman and sophomore years. In that sense, I have been working on this dissertation for over a decade. Thank you even more so, to Verónica Azcue Castillón, Cary Barney, Hamish Binns, Anne Dewey, Kevin Ingram, Matthew Kineen, Renzo Llorente, Almudena Olondo, Alicia Ramos, Greg Stanford, and Paul Vita. Their patience and guidance with my adjustment to university life in Spain, and to making me feel worthy, welcome, and understood were invaluable during my years in Madrid. These are a selection among the many faculty members who formed not only my love for intellectual pursuits, but my love of Spain, its literature, history, and people. If it were not for that experience, my life would be completely different, and this project would likely not exist.
There’s a reason why Marjory Hutchison de Medina wins teaching awards year after year. She taught me freshman composition at SLU-Madrid. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me over the years – there really are no words to describe how you’ve formed me into the adult, scholar, and teacher I am now.

This project has lived through two master’s degree programs: MA in English at Virginia Tech University and MA in Spanish at St. Louis University. Thank you to Anthony Colaianne, Thomas Gardner, Kaye Graham, Peter Graham, Paul Heilker, Kara McBride, Aileen Murphy, Katrina Powell, Suzanne Reisinger, and Nil Santiáñez, for your continued support of me and my academic endeavors. Your enduring belief that I could achieve this dream propelled me forward.

From faculty to staff to graduate students, the Northeastern University English Department has been a generative and encouraging environment to work in and grow my dissertation project. Each kind word, moment of good humor, and intellectual challenge has been so appreciated to help me become a better scholar and colleague. I want to thank department members past and present: Emily Artiano, Kathryn Bloom, Ryan Cordell, Jeffrey Cottrell, Verdie Culbreath, Theo Davis, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, Ben Doyle, Jimmy Duggan, Laurie Edwards, Chris Gallagher, Aleks Galus, Leslie Dickinson Ganson, Shannon Garner-Balandrin, Genie Giaimo, Kristi Girdharry, Kat Gonso, Kelly Gould, Elizabeth Hopwood, Dana Horton, Shun Kiang, Kat Lang, Charlie Lesh, Marina Leslie, Rachel Lewis, Ted Moss, Hania Musiol, Jeremy Newman, Duyen Nguyen, David Ober, Jonathan Osbourne, Jessica Pauszek, Sarah Payne, Alicia Peaker, Liz Polcha, Guy Rotella, Amanda Runyan, Jenna Sciuto, Danielle Skeehan, Kate Simpkins, Patricia Sullivan, Meg Tarquino Roche, and Ethan Whittet.

Melissa Daigle, Linda Collins, and Jean Duddy have helped me in all manners technical, procedural, and departmental. Thank you for easing the process of…well, everything a graduate
student has to contend with, from teaching to language exam sign-ups to filling out itemized forms.

Thank you to my fellow modernist and contemporary literature focused graduate students for reading various drafts of the dissertation prospectus and chapters: Tabitha Clark, Brent Griffin, Jim McGrath, Victoria Papa, and Kate Templeton. A special thank you to the smart and generous Lana Cook Pomeroy, whose last-minute chapter readings and encouragement will not be forgotten.

My daily writing accountability partner, Jonathan Bruno, is most obviously the way in which the dissertation got drafted. Our daily writing goals and encouragement got the job done. You’re next, buddy. Onward!

Through my terrific Josh, I’ve met some extraordinary scholars, new friends, and supporters of the project: Emily Baldoni, Matt Landauer, Michael Lesley, Daria Van Tyne, Jacob Remes, Emma Saunders-Hastings, Robert Stockman, and Don Tontiplaphol. Our conversations were a wonderful respite from dissertation worries and a refreshing glimpse into the PhD programs of others.

I am fortunate to have a community of beloved friends who supported me, and this project, in numerous ways over the years. Thank you to Laurence Beál, John-Paul Bennett, Ana Hager, Claire Kaplan, Nika Setek, Kama Weatherholt, and Sam Zegas.

I am truly grateful that I entered the program with the best fellow graduate students ever. They have seen me at my best; they have seen me at my worst. And yet they still offer to read my writing and give feedback. Their encouragement has been extraordinarily consistent and flowing. In the words of the great Toby Ziegler: “We’re a group. We’re a team. […] We win together, we lose together. We celebrate and we mourn together. And defeats are softened and
victories sweeter because we did them together. You're my guys and I'm yours. And there's nothing I wouldn't do for you.” I am in love with your dissertation projects and you’re some of the best people I’ve ever met. We got to be scholars together, and isn’t that just the most wonderful thing? Thank you: Neval Avci, Nicole Keller Day, Erin Leigh Frymire, Lauren Kuryloski, Asimina Ino Nikolopoulou, Chris Myers, and Lauren Thacker. We did this.

My love, Josh Cherniss, is my “heart of the heartless world / dear heart.” Falling in love over discussions about the interwar period never was so fun. I am grateful to share my life, my love, and my scholarship with such an understanding, meticulous, and appreciative dude. And his parents, Deborah and Cary Cherniss, are pretty great, too.

But my own parents are the greatest. Their support has meant that I kept going when I was discouraged and I believed in my work. Joseph Hartmann taught me about integrity and sticking-to-it-ness; I. Roxana Hartmann-Villalta taught me about advocacy and continuing in the face of adversity. Mark Hartmann, my brother, teaches me all the time about how to live in the world that was not tailor made for any of us.

This project is dedicated to my parents.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Kati Horna’s Surrealism</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Gerda Taro, War Photographer</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Martha Gellhorn and Frances Davis Report</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Muriel Rukeyser’s <em>Savage Coast</em></td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland, War Poets</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetry Appendix</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

“A complacent ass who was, temporarily, Propaganda Minister of Catalonia, said to me: ‘This is the most photogenic war anyone ever has seen,’” writes British reporter Claud Cockburn, a.k.a Frank Pitcairn in his 1967 memoir. Cockburn was the full-time correspondent in Spain for the British Communist daily, The Daily Worker and reported on the Spanish Civil War. “Considering that people were dying all around us – many of them having come to meet death with extreme heroism because they believed this to be the final battleground where, as in children’s stories, the Good got to grips with the Bad – his remark was offensive. […] All the same, there was a streak of truth in what he so ineptly said” (qtd. in Pettifer 14). As Cockburn mentions, with its high political stakes and ideological background, this conflict of Republican and Nationalist forces attracted men and women from around the world to Spain, like moths to a flame – some to be killed as members of the International Brigades, some to be forever changed by their experiences. Cockburn elaborates:

That terrible war was also ‘photogenic’ in the widest sense of the word. Not just the press photographers turned up, everyone turned up who wanted to be in on the decisive thing of the century, […] The massacres and the battles and the subsequent massacres took place, too, in lovely surroundings. (qtd. in Pettifer 14)

In a chagrined tone not unusual for British writers remembering the Spanish Civil War in the later decades of the twentieth century, Cockburn moves the reader through the possible repercussions of the term photogenic. Photogenic objects emit light or are caused by light; the more familiar or colloquial meaning of the word designates objects to be attractive, a meaning that emerged in the twentieth century in tandem with the rising use of the camera. So how can the Spanish Civil War be attractive, be photogenic? As a beacon for political-ideology-made-reality for international volunteers, to the presence of war photographers, to the very landscape
of the country: the Spanish Civil War was a violent and political battle recorded in light. Photogenic.

“Photogenic” applies, as well, to the textual portrayals of the war. Like photographers and soldiers, writers went to Spain and risked their lives to document the war for the foreign press. In this project, I present seven foreign women of varying nationalities who were in Spain during the war— and who recorded the war and its subjects. These women are: the Hungarian Kati Horna and the German Gerda Taro, photographers; Americans Martha Gellhorn and Frances Davis, journalists; American Muriel Rukeyser, novelist; and British poets Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland. Throughout this exploration, the biographical details of these photographers’ and writers’ lives are included, recuperating their contributions to Spanish Civil War studies. These women artists were gendered witnesses to the war, a phrase that I have coined to underscore both the importance of actually being in Spain, and to highlight the sort of representations—textual and visual—these women created to reflect their experiences in Spain. There are two distinguishing elements that make these women’s representations gendered: first, the women occupy non-dominant subject positions, and second, they created representations that challenge dominant understandings of war as masculine, as heroic, as only having to do with soldiers or combatant forces. Most importantly, by using the word gendered, I push against a tradition where the authoritative voice of witnessing war is masculine, white, possibly combatant, and therefore monolithic.¹ In using the word “gendered” to describe this type of witnessing and its representations, I want to open space for the non-dominant perspective on war and witnessing to emerge.

¹ The inspiration for this approach has an origin point in the essay collection Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers (1996) edited by Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano.
How these women used visual techniques in their writing (some echoed the visual techniques of the cinema, some highlighted visual, visceral details of war in their descriptions, some emphasized how they relied on their eyes to take in the experience of war in Spain, for example) and framed the subject in their photography is fundamental to my overarching premise of reading these women’s cultural production from the Spanish Civil War as gendered witnessing and helping to craft budding human rights discourse.

These women artists went to Spain as women. I do not mean to impose an essentialist framework of analysis here – far from it – but what I do want to underscore is that all these women brought their unique embodied experiences as women to Spain. I hope to avoid essentialism by focusing not only on the women’s experiences, but also on their representations of the war. Their experiences, nevertheless, are important to their perspective and how they understood the Spanish Civil War. Some of them were refugees when they arrived in Spain, like Taro and Horna. All were white, but some were Jewish (like Taro, Horna, Gellhorn, and Rukeyser) in a time when anti-Semitism ran high both in Europe and in the United States. Some were openly in a relationship with each other (like Warner and Ackland).

With respect to the late 1930s, the foreign writers and visual artists in general, but particularly these women photographers and writers, contributed to a nascent humanitarian imagination – which was being constructed in the time before World War Two through propaganda, documentary photography, and literary representations. The connection between gendered witnessing and this nascent humanitarian imagination is crucial because these artists, in their portrayals, introduced distant viewers and readers to the violation of an individual’s humanity through total war techniques, such as aerial bombardment of cities occupied by non-
combatant civilians. This budding humanitarian imagination was shaped around the emergence of total war because suddenly there were non-combatants who were being actively targeted by increasingly destructive military weapons. The gender of both witness and victim influenced the way in which distant audiences perceived vulnerability and victimhood in these non-combatants.

**A War of Many Firsts**

The relationship of the British and American viewers and readers, primarily, but also French and Spanish, to images of atrocity from Spain is key to understanding the emotional and political pull of these visual representations, especially given that the Spanish Civil War was a war of many firsts. The Spanish Civil War was the first war to be “covered” by press photographers in the modern sense. This was the first war, also, to allow women photographers and journalists access to the front where they could see and record first hand battles and violence. Developments in photographic technology facilitated the ability of all photographers to document the action of war, but especially women, who now did not need the physical strength to carry a large, cumbersome camera or the extensive specialized knowledge to operate one. Caroline Brothers, in *War and Photography*, summarizes these main advancements in photographic technology, “Smaller portable cameras, like the Ermanox and the Leica, the manufacture of compact lenses of far greater light passing power than ever before, and faster films which, in allowing exposures to be made without flashlight, made possible both night

---

2 Two helpful books for understanding this historical moment are, first, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (2011) by Michael Barnett, which describes the era of the 1930s as part of “the age of imperial humanitarianism” and a time when “the world was becoming increasingly secular, and humanitarianism’s once-explicit religious discourse was losing ground to the discourse of humanity and international community” (94). The other book is *A History of Bombing* (2003) by Sven Lindqvist, which details the progression of aerial war techniques in twentieth century conflicts.

pictures and interior shots – all these were a far cry from the panoramic viewfinders and glass negative plates used by World War One photographers” (6). In short, the photographic technology had evolved to allow more to be captured, more to be recorded, more to be seen by those abroad.

Another historical development in military technology played a crucial part in the war: the Spanish Civil War was the first European war to feature airplanes extensively and in which aerial bombing targeted non-combatants, often women and children. Spain’s civil war, in addition, was the first on European soil to break two significant taboos of war: first, by “calling […] the air force of a foreign land to bomb one's own territory” and second, “the taboo against bombing a city full of defenseless civilians” (Lindqvist 51). Combined with the sort of violence and destruction wrought by aerial bombardments, and the fact that the camera technology had evolved, the images of this war were the first of their kind; they were new representations.4 The Spanish Civil War was the very beginning of war reportage and total war – the indiscriminate bombing or shelling of non-military targets – as we know it today. As such, it was also the very beginning of the ethical questions of knowing about the violence but not intervening to stop it.

The threat of this modern war on European soil, the threat of aerial bombing, the threat of the targets being non-combatant civilians and the proliferation of visual representations of these threats as they happened in Spain: the political tensions were high for foreign spectators encountering these representations. British, French, American, among many other foreign viewers, encountered these images from a distance, in the newspapers, pamphlets, and posters, at lectures, occasionally in newsreels at the cinema. Although these spectators were no strangers to war – many had lived through and were still coping with the aftermath of World War I – the

4 Photographic images of war can be traced back into conflicts of the 19th century; what is new about these images is the camera shutter speed that can capture action and realism of the shot.
earth-shattering violence enacted on the Spanish war victims, much of it caused by aerial bombardment of civilians, visually placed before them, was new. The circulation of the war images as news and as propaganda increased during the Spanish Civil War, with the confluent rise of camera technology and the photo-magazine. The demand for pictures to illustrate news also increased with these developments, as did the possibility of getting negatives to agencies, and in turn, publishing the photographs quickly. The foreign press and Spanish Republican government met this need. For instance, Catalonia’s Commissariat de Propaganda disseminated propaganda posters and postcards; published pamphlets, graphic albums, and books; organized performances, rallies, lectures, and exhibitions; published its bulletin in various languages, including Esperanto; and established delegations in London, Brussels, Oslo, and Copenhagen (qtd. in Basilio 436-437). The purpose of the Commissariat de Propaganda was to facilitate the creation and dispersion of propaganda on behalf of the Republic, but especially Catalonia, which acted more independently during the war. The efforts to disseminate information and circulate images in many forms were unprecedented and indicate how the Spanish Civil War was a war experienced by foreigners on a new, visual level.

The Outbreak of the Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War was fought between two broadly defined political ideologies and composed primarily of two main groups. The Nationalists (also known as the Rebels), led by General Francisco Franco, were backed by and composed mostly of the Spanish military. The Nationalists wanted a Catholic, fascist ideology to govern Spain. The Republicans were a conglomerate of democratic and leftist groups, such as the socialists, the Communists, the anarchists…but also the Basque independent movement. During the war, Republicans were also called “Loyalists” because they were loyal to the elected government. The Republicans, in
general, supported the legally elected Spanish Republic, voted into office in 1931. With national policy changes – such as secularizing education – the conservative Catholic right, the military, and those who supported a fascist political agenda were increasingly dissatisfied with the Republican government and questioned its legitimacy. In early 1936, national elections were held and the leftist Popular Front once again won, and formed a government with other parties. This did not stop the conservative supporters from agitating for power. Spain was a tinderbox of discontent, with violent clashes in the street between youths from different political parties. In July 1936, a series of political assassinations, one retaliating for another, had the country on edge. A civil war seemed imminent.

The war began on July 17, 1936, when the Nationalist military forces invaded through the Spanish territories in Morocco, landing in Spain on July 18. A civil war ensued, as individuals and other groups loyal to the Republic fought back. The Nationalists won the war on April 1, 1939, officially marching into Madrid, after a three-year conflict. Worried that the Spanish war would become a proxy war for Europe’s fraught ideological tensions, at the beginning of the conflict, the major European powers signed a non-intervention pact. This policy forbade sending war materials such as arms, soldiers, or other weapons to either side of the conflict in Spain, but this restriction did not apply to medical supplies and food. The non-intervention policy was egregiously ineffective. It was an open secret that Germany and Italy supported the Nationalist side with troops, money, planes, and arms; it was the German Luftwaffe that committed the horrors of aerial bombardment on Guernica and other Spanish cities. Many foreigners, in support of the Republican side, thought that their governments were not doing enough to support the

---

legally elected democracy and took action into their own hands: the International Brigades were comprised of such individuals. The artists in this project used their arts to protest against the non-intervention policy and to galvanize support for Republican Spain.

“**There is a war in Spain. The thing to do is to get up and go find it.**”

- Frances Davis

The women photographers and writers highlighted in my project were chosen because of their foreignness to Spain and because they all were physically present in Spain during the war. These women have not been looked at in conversation with each other before; this project will demonstrate how gendered witnessing can be read across genres, both literary and visual in order to provide new insights into the experiences of women writers and photographers and the Spanish Civil War, which in turn enrich the scholarship on writing, photography, and war.

Most of these women did not have more than a functional, beginner’s knowledge of Spanish. Some were in Spain longer than others and they came to Spain in different capacities, but all went to Spain and experienced the Spanish Civil War first-hand. This sets them apart from the individuals who like Virginia Woolf, felt the effects of the war keenly, or Margot Heinemann, a young English poet who lost her love, International Brigadier John Cornford. Both these foreign women – and others – wrote about the war and advocated for their political beliefs…but they did not go to Spain. These seven foreign women that I examine, importantly, were the ones who were creating those newspaper accounts, writing poetry, and taking those photographs, so committed to using their skills as artists that they went to Spain during the war, risking limb and in one case, life.

Physical presence during the war is central to my conception of gendered witnessing, and also for understanding how these women’s experiences bind them together as a group. Yuval
Noah Harari, in his article “Scholars, Eyewitnesses, and Flesh-Witnesses of War: A Tense Relationship,” distinguishes between different kinds of witnessing: eyewitnessing and what he terms “flesh-witnessing.” This term is inspired by a French soldier from the First World War who wrote that the man “who has not understood with his flesh cannot talk to you about it” (Harari 215). Harari outlines how eyewitnesses may know, for example, a great number of observable, verifiable facts about a battle and have the eyewitness authority bolstered by sensory input (215). But, that scope is limited (no two eyewitnesses will relay the same facts about the same battle) and the knowledge is transmittable, reducing the eyewitness’s unique authority and allowing removed observers such as historians to piece together what actually happened (Harari 216). “Flesh-witnessing,” Harari argues, was given priority in the eighteenth-century with the rise of sensibility and direct sensory experience as a key factor to gaining knowledge: “people must be physically and emotionally invested in what is happening in order to gain knowledge” (218).6 This priority – the sensory experience of actually being where the event is taking place – continued into the twentieth-century.

A tension was then created between eyewitnesses and flesh-witnesses, even though flesh-witnesses were not named as such during the early twentieth century. A flesh-witness is dependent on his sensibility and experience, taking in the war events through his flesh. According to Harari, the flesh-witness’s experience is beyond words (221-222).7 Flesh-witnessing underscores the importance of the sensory experience of the war, absorbing the atmosphere of war through the flesh, the intangible “being there”-ness, without necessarily needing to make distinctions between the types of bodies, their capacities, or their roles in the

---

6 Harari notes the long history of flesh-witnessing in battle narratives and the military memoir.
7 Harari writes that the narrative conveyed is only ever an approximation of the knowledge gained; what is conveyed, however, is the flesh-witness’s authority from their experience (221-222).
war. I agree with Harari in that the flesh-witness’s experience is beyond mere *words*, which is why I argue that the techniques representing war incorporate visual strategies of representation and other innovations such as blending genres.

The dynamics of witnessing are more complicated than those Harari outlined, because Harari’s distinction of flesh-witnessing from eye-witnessing depends on a male-centric way of experiencing and representing war. In other words, although his argument is focused on the body, he uses only one sort of body, a male, soldier’s body, as his centerpiece. My concept of gendered witnessing extends Harari’s theory by introducing women’s bodies and witnessing into the study of war and individuals’ experiences and representations of it. (These are not the only types of bodies that can perform gendered witnessing. Simply, white women’s bodies are what this project examines). Because of his focus on embodiedness, Harari’s theory is a useful one for thinking about those artists who went to Spain to document and write about the war, because flesh-witnessing foregrounds the bodily risk of witnessing war and the chance of being injured or killed.

My theory of gendered witnessing requires an embodied being, a position, and an *act* of witnessing through representations of that experience. In addition to these three *components*, there are two distinct facets of the way that gendered witnessing is *gendered*: it both reflects the witness's physical and social condition as gendered, and conveys the gendered dimension of that being witnesses. Unifying these concepts is a new theoretical framework that I am introducing in this project, using these seven women artists who went to Spain as a way to argue that gendered witnessing *does* exist and that it is situational. As a framework, gendered witnessing underscores the importance of viewpoint when it comes to representing violent events like war, and highlights the fact that these women in particular took gender into account while creating their
representations – but not all representations all the time. Gendered witnessing is a situational act. The acts of witnessing – the representations – are just as important to the definition as an embodied witnessing because it is through examining these representations that we understand the constrictions and expectations of embodied witnessing.

The bodily risk inherent in first hand witnessing, in “flesh-witnessing” as outlined by Harari, is fundamental for distinguishing between a spectator and a witness, which is why I want to further elaborate the differences between the witnessing and spectatorship. Spectatorship and witnessing are concepts that have very different implications for how these artists addressed humanitarian imagination. Central to my argument is the distinction between witnessing and spectatorship because the artists that I am examining here were witnessing first hand, boots on the ground, and attempted to reproduce that experience in their artistic representations. Spectatorship implies a distance, a physical removal – through time or geographical distance – to the scene recorded. Witnessing, on the other hand, is a more sobering act for the viewer. Within visual studies, several canonical works address the relationship of the viewer to the visual, and especially the morality of viewing images of atrocity, such as: Susan Sontag’s Regarding the Pain of Others (2004); Jacques Ranciere’s The Emancipated Spectator (2009); Susie Linfield’s This Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence (2010); and Sharon Sliwinski’s Human Rights in Camera (2011), to highlight a few. My distinction between the witness and the spectator is deeply informed by these scholars. Witnessing implies an active involvement on the part of the viewer, because of the potential for testimony, for intervention into the scene. The witness participates, even if she is not performing an action; the spectator looks. Spectatorship implies passivity, a lack of involvement in the scenes represented, and the troubling part: viewing for entertainment, because the lack of involvement belies the question, “then why
look?” if not because of the *pleasure* of looking. Discussing the moral pleasures of looking is not within the scope of my argument; I raise the issue because the affective response of the viewer and reader *is*.

**The Affective Responses of Viewers & Readers**

This introduction opened with Cockburn, but he, of course, was not the only British writer thinking about the portrayal of the war in photographs. These photographs of violence and destruction from the Spanish Civil War are the impetus for Virginia Woolf’s own epistolary contemplation in *Three Guineas*. Sometimes called an anti-war essay, *Three Guineas* is a hybrid text, “part of a major documentary project Virginia Woolf undertook in the 1930s but never completed” (Marcus xlv). In a series of essay-letters incorporating photographs, Woolf reflects on the photographs from the Spanish Civil War to formulate her own ideas of how war is linked to patriarchy and capitalism. Woolf writes about how the emotions roused by the scenes of atrocity from Spain must be addressed and demanded more response and reaction than attending a meeting or signing a petition, “Some more energetic, some more active method of expressing our belief that war is barbarous, that war is inhuman, that war, as Wilfred Owen put it, is insupportable, horrible, and beastly seems to be required. But, rhetoric apart, what active method is open to us?” (15). Woolf outlines many of the obstacles for women in pursuing these “active methods” of response; key to her argument – and to mine – is that images prompted this emotional engagement, images that had never before been circulated so efficiently.

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf continues to write about this new experience of war and how the photographs from the Spanish Civil War affect the foreign spectator:

Those photographs are not an argument; they are simply a crude statement of fact addressed to the eye. But the eye is connected with the brain; the brain with the nervous system. That system sends its messages in a flash through every past memory
and present feeling. [...] War, you say, is an abomination; a barbarity; war must be stopped at whatever the cost. And we echo your words. War is an abomination; a barbarity; war must be stopped. For now at last we are looking at the same picture; we are seeing with you the same dead bodies, the same ruined houses. (14)

Woolf emphasizes that photographs are not an argument; indeed, they appeal to sentiment. Photographs trigger the senses, the nervous system. Not only does the image provoke “every past memory and present feeling” associated with the representation, but the image also instigates a reaction from the physical body and a sensation from the nerves. Woolf’s *Three Guineas* is a seminal contribution to visual studies and informs much of the theory supporting my argument that Spanish Civil War photography *demanded* involvement from its viewers.

A unique element of the Spanish Civil War, and how these photographs contributed to a humanitarian imagination, is that these photographs attempted to overcome the distance of the passivity of spectatorship by *insisting* on the ethical obligations of witnessing, for those abroad and removed. This moral sentiment explored by Woolf in *Three Guineas*, “the opportunity, and the ability, to be moved by the plight of others – to understand that they hurt too, and to feel responsible to that understanding – that has made a great difference in the creation of a human-rights consciousness,” states Susie Linfield in *This Cruel Radiance* (47). This was an historical moment that was not yet overwhelmed by what might be called “compassion fatigue” or the helplessness created by viewing or reading representations of atrocity and not intervening. From the point of view of Spaniards and those foreigners in Spain – and from Woolf’s point of view in *Three Guineas*, as well – those viewers and readers abroad were more than mere spectators to the war because they *could* intervene. This potential for a government intervention on the side of the Republicans is why the Spanish Civil War is important to study – and why these women artists’ representations of the war are critical.
Chapter Outline and Biographies

My exploration of gendered witnessing and the Spanish Civil War involves four genres and seven different artists. The first chapter delves into the photographic archives of Hungarian Kati Horna, and the second chapter looks at German photographer Gerda Taro. I put these women forward as examples of gendered witnessing and contributing to the humanitarian imagination via photography. The third chapter introduces the first writers of this project, American newspaper journalists Martha Gellhorn and Frances Davis, and examines journalistic pieces and memoirs for strategies of gendered witnessing through non-fiction. The fourth chapter focuses exclusively on American Muriel Rukeyser and her recently recovered Spanish Civil War novel, Savage Coast. The last chapter presents a pair of British poets, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland.

Such an assortment of photographers and writers may seem scattered, but there are several characteristics that unite them and make them ideal as case studies for my argument. These seven women artists were all foreigners to Spain, and all went to Spain during the war – a crucial aspect of gendered witnessing as I define it. The photographers were both Eastern European, but from different countries, and used their photography to experiment with visual techniques in representing the war (in the case of Horna) or to raise awareness of events on the Republican side through publishing photographs (in the case of Taro). The writers were Anglophone, either American or British, and share the commonality of their countries’ non-intervention policy toward the civil war. The rhetorical strategies of their different genres are varied, in the case of Gellhorn, Davis, Rukeyser, Ackland, and Warner. But for all of the artists, regardless of medium, the ultimate aim of their work was to bear witness and persuade the reader or viewer that intervention in the war, on behalf of the Republicans, was necessary. Their
audience, in turn, would put pressure on their governments to drop the non-intervention policy and send military aid and weapons to the Republican side, as it was clear through newspaper reports that Germany and Italy were violating the non-intervention policy. As several of these women are not studied widely, and two are, indeed, downright obscure, I want to provide a brief biographical portrait of each and relate each artist’s contribution to the main arguments of the project.

The opening chapter examines Kati Horna, a young Hungarian photographer, and focuses on selections from her Spanish Civil War photography. Horna studied photography and visual art techniques more formally in Berlin before finding her way to Spain. She was in her 20s when she photographed the Spanish Civil War. Horna challenges the assumption that war photography needs to depict soldiers by training her camera on “compassionately observed scenes from behind the front lines,” according to Dawn Ades, professor of Art History at Essex University (Moorhead). Unlike her war photographer counterparts, Horna published in Spanish photo magazines like Umbral, magazines that were more closely aligned with her leftist politics. In addition to these “compassionately observed scenes,” Horna brings to gendered witnessing the use of technical methods such as superimposition to create a surreal depiction of what war looks like, and in turn, how disorienting the experience of war and witnessing can be. These surreal depictions challenge viewer’s expectations of documentary images and create new metaphors for witnessing war, both of which add complexity to the theory of gendered witnessing and to Spanish Civil War studies. Horna’s work has not received much critical academic attention before, beyond essays that accompany her recent exhibition catalogues. Horna lived a long life, engaging in photography and art in Mexico and teaching both. She died in 2000.
Gerda Taro is the focus of the second chapter. Taro’s contribution to the project is a nuanced approach to documenting the Spanish Civil War. Taro did take photos of combat, and a training photo is included in my examination of her work, but like Horna, she was also drawn to the devastating impact of war on civilian life. Taro was born in Stuttgart, Germany, and felt the threat of Nazi fascism earlier than her American and British counterparts. Like Horna, she changed her birth name to adopt an artist pseudonym that were less markedly Jewish or Eastern European. Taro picked up photography as an interest when she met Robert Capa, the now-famous war photographer, in Paris in the 1930s. They collaborated and went to Spain together. During the war itself, Taro was much more well-known than Horna, publishing internationally in photo magazines. She died as a photographer in combat in 1937. With respect to this project’s arguments, Taro’s biography and her images emphasize how gendered witnessing is situational. Taro’s photographs aim to foster the humanitarian imagination through representations that prick the conscience of the viewer.

My third chapter centers on two American women journalists: Martha Gellhorn and Frances Davis. The journalists share similar origin stories, but with two key differences: access to the journalistic profession and location during the war. Martha Gellhorn was born to a wealthy Jewish family in St. Louis in 1908. Although her parents were very involved in the local community and were philanthropic, Gellhorn was not politically motivated until much later in her life. She attended and then dropped out of Bryn Mawr College, her mother’s alma mater, and began to be interested in newspaper work. She held a summer job with *The New Republic* at the age of 21; she worked a junior reporter for six months with the *Albany Times Union*. During a trip to Europe, Gellhorn reported on fashion for *Vogue* magazine and on politics and women’s concerns for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. When the Spanish Civil War broke out in July 1936,
she was not particularly interested in the war until she met Ernest Hemingway during Christmas vacation in Key West. Inspired by their conversations, Gellhorn decided to go, too. She arrived in spring 1937 with credentials from *Collier’s Weekly*.

Frances Davis would have loved to arrive in Spain with those credentials. Davis was also born in 1908, in Massachusetts. Her parents were labor organizers and progressives, émigrés from Russia. The family lived for a time in a utopian community called The Farm in western Massachusetts. In her teenage years, she worked as a proofreader and wrote for the local *Medford Mercury*. After enrolling for a semester at Boston University to take a journalism course, Davis felt compelled to learn the craft by doing. She moved to New York and had several pieces printed in the *New York World*. She idolized Dorothy Thompson, one of the first women foreign journalists, and Davis knew she wanted to follow in Thompson’s footsteps. She canvassed New England, New York, and Pennsylvania newspaper editors for two weeks, selling a human interest column that she would send from Europe. In 1936, secure with some guaranteed buyers of her columns, but no credentials, Davis set off for Europe and headed straight for Spain when war erupted in July, from Paris. She crossed the Pyrenees from France into Spain at Hendaye, which placed her in Nationalist controlled, fascist territory. Once in Nationalist territory and authorized with their pass, she could not report from the other side for fear of being perceived as a spy. Because Davis did not have the credentials that Gellhorn had and because she was on the Nationalist side of the war, her experience and perspective is very different from Gellhorn’s.

My comparison draws attention to their differences in access, location, and ultimately, their careers. After the Spanish Civil War, Gellhorn would become one of the most celebrated war journalists of the twentieth century, passing away in 1998 after nearly 60 years of covering
world conflict. Injured by shrapnel in 1937, Davis became very ill with septicemia and abandoned Europe to recover in the United States. Although she intended to return to Europe to report foreign news, especially as the conflict in Spain ended and the conflict in Europe began, her health did not permit the journey. She settled in Cambridge, MA, married a Harvard professor, and died in 1982. As the first examination in this project of gendered witnessing in written representations, Gellhorn and Davis demonstrate several important characteristics that lay the groundwork for later chapters. First, both writers attempt to document the human aspect of the war, which is a non-normative approach to the war (especially at the time) and attempts to construct the humanitarian imagination. Second, because these writers were on opposite sides of the conflict but shared political views, placing these two journalists together reveals the difference in access for women writers on differing sides and also how central politics were in the Spanish Civil War for women writers. Lastly, this chapter reads the visual and visual techniques in the articles and memoirs of these two writers, arguing that the visual was a critical approach to the Spanish Civil War because most foreigners did not speak fluent Spanish.

Born in 1913 and died in 1980 at the age of 66, Muriel Rukeyser was a journalist, political activist, and modernist poet. Rukeyser was a biographer, a pilot, and a translator. She was a single mother. She was Jewish. Later in the twentieth century, as president of the PEN American Center, Rukeyser held a vigil outside of the prison cell of South Korean poet and dissident Kim Chi Ha; at the age of 58, she traveled to Hanoi to protest the American war in Vietnam (Herzog and Kaufman xv). Rukeyser would align herself with causes and strongly advocate for these causes – she was, after all, president of the PEN American Center – but she was wary of ideology, violence, and exclusionary practices. Her desire for representing the world in its complexity and her repeated advocacy for social causes others would rather ignore
prompted both Anne Sexton and Erica Jong to refer to her as “the Mother of Everyone” (Herzog and Kaufman xv). Rukeyser was an incredibly prolific and varied writer.\(^8\) Finding immense resistance to her approach to poetry from contemporary critics, Rukeyser wrote *The Life of Poetry* as a way to develop her own theories of poetics and how the visual intersects with poetry. Her writing spans multiple genres and often blends them, characteristics that make her difficult to place in the landscape of twentieth-century American literature.

In 1936, she was a mere 23 years old, but already an up-and-coming voice of American poetry. She arrived in Spain in July 1936 to report on the Anti-Fascist Olympics that were being held in Barcelona. Her plans went awry when the war began. Her novel, *Savage Coast*, explores the days of uncertainty before the war and relates Rukeyser’s experiences through a fictional lens. Rukeyser was evacuated from Barcelona via ship soon after the war started – but those heady days of revolution and war would stick with her all life.

So far, all of the women artists that I have presented were in their twenties when they arrived in Spain. Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland were different than these artists. First, they were British. This nationality gives them a different perspective because of the immediacy of the conflict to Britain and how the country could potentially be affected by the victory of fascism in Spain. Second, I have paired these writers together not only because their writings are under-studied in relation to the Spanish Civil War and both wrote poetry about the war, but also because they were a romantic couple. None of these other artists were lesbians (that we are aware of). Their sexuality is not of foremost importance to my reading of their poetry.

\(^8\) Her archive at the Library of Congress contains 15 volumes of poetry, biographies of the scientist Willard Gibbs and explorer Thomas Hariot, “an astounding treatise of poetics arguing passionately for poetry’s vital role in society” entitled *The Life of Poetry*, translations of the Mexican poet Octavio Paz and the Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelof, six children’s books, and uncollected journalism, essays, criticism, plays, and film scripts (Herzog and Kaufman xv).
Rather, as gendered witnesses, their embodied experience of war is different than the other women because Warner and Ackland were already on the outside of a normatively heterosexual 1930s literary scene. Third, unlike the other women who all had leftist tendencies but followed no official commitments, Warner and Ackland joined the Communist Party in 1935.

Another key difference between Warner and the other women examined here is that Warner was born in 1893, a generation earlier than the other women artists. She was an adult during World War One and had even worked in a munitions factory during the war. As such, her perspective on the Spanish Civil War and its stakes are different than the other women, as she remembers the home-front struggles of World War One and understands from a first-hand point of view what the consequences of a European war against fascism would be. Ackland was born in 1906, and had just hit 30-years-old at the start of the war – a little older than Taro, Horna, Davis, Gellhorn, and Rukeyser, but not as significantly as Warner, who was 43 in 1936. Age would generally not be a main concern of mine; however, Warner’s background as someone who has seen war before and does not possess, necessarily, the jejune enthusiasm of the other women. The two women stayed together most of their lives: Ackland passed away from breast cancer in 1959; Warner lived until 1978.

Closing the dissertation with an examination of Warner and Ackland underscores this project not just as an endeavor to discover the visual in the literary, but this closing also emphasizes my project as one of feminist recovery. A lot has been written about the Spanish Civil War, by historians, literary scholars, and biographers, but rarely do the women artists get place front and center of the argument – not as auxiliary to the men’s efforts at political action or advocacy, but as doing such things themselves. Simply making the project a study of women
artists, however, does not suffice for a feminist; I am making a feminist argument view
gendered witnessing and ways of seeing that evoke the subjected, the war victim.

I also want to highlight the recovery aspect of this project. Outside of art catalogues and
art history, Horna’s photography has not been studied critically, and certainly not her specific
photos of the Spanish Civil War. Davis has yet to be incorporated into Spanish Civil War studies
as a journalist and memoirist. Rukeyser’s novel is recently published, and my examination of her
work is one of the first. The other figures – Taro, Gellhorn, Ackland, and Warner – are all known
participants in the Spanish Civil War, but rarely receive sustained critical attention, and
definitely not together. The advantage of bringing these women artists into one project is that we
get a comparative and holistic view of how textual and visual representations of the war worked
to participate in the humanitarian imagination and create the war victim as gendered.

At the end of this project, I want to have drawn attention to the many ways women artists
were participating and recording the war. Lastly, I hope to convince the reader that there was a
humanitarian imagination being generated in the 1930s – one that is recognizable today – and
that these women artists helped to define this humanitarianism, and that they were doing so
through gendered witnessing and portraying gendered war victims.
Chapter One
Kati Horna’s Surrealism

A classic place to begin is with Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* when addressing visual representations of the Spanish Civil War. Its legacy has resonance beyond the war, for *Guernica* has become one of the most famous Cubist paintings in history and an iconic representation of war atrocity. Finished in 1937 for the Paris International Exhibition dedicated to Art and Technology in Modern Life, Picasso painted *Guernica* specifically for the Spanish Republic’s Pavilion in the exhibition. The pavilion, rather than showcasing technological advances as the theme suggests, was intended to collect relief money from visitors and to raise consciousness of the war in Spain. Instead of demonstrating technology’s advances, *Guernica* emphasized technology’s consequences, illustrating the chaos and raising awareness of the annihilating violence the Spanish Civil War inflicted on the Spanish people (in this painting specifically, the Basque people) and how the victims of the war were often defenseless civilians, targets of the destruction technological advances in weaponry created.

In Picasso’s painting, the Basque women are painted in jagged lines and irregular shapes, holding the body of a dead baby or running wildly in panic. A pupil-shaped sun/light-bulb looks down from the upper region of the painting, illuminating the scene of destruction. At the center of the canvas, through a window, a bodiless woman floating into the scene holds a small lamp. This woman enters the scene as an outsider, as one not involved in the scene except by observing its horror and being aghast. She enters as a witness, bringing light into the darkness of war and revealing the terror and carnage of Guernica. She uses light to record and unveil the atrocity around her.
The women in this project are like this witness, coming onto the scene to illuminate and document the Spanish Civil War. Kati Horna was one of those women – a photographer who went to Spain because of her political values and because she wanted to photograph the war as part of the cause. Horna lived a long life after she left Spain, and she would often tell her photography students, “The camera is not an obstacle. The obstacle is oneself!” This understanding is key to making sense of Horna’s position as a gendered witness and her approach to photographing the Spanish Civil War. The self, here, is not just about the technical details of photography and framing the scene with the eye, etc., but the socially constructed self: how one is trained to see and be seen. It is that self which is the obstacle to photography. Alejandro Castellanos interprets Horna’s well-known pedagogical saying, “The phrase is a reflection of her own life experience: a declaration of aesthetic principles and the ultimate synthesis of an attitude linked to the utopias of the historic avant-garde (which emphasized artistic practice as a life project). It is also an invitation for her students of photography to become authentic Cyclopes – mythological beings determined by sight more than any other one of the senses” (177). Thinking of photographers as Cyclopes underscores that the artist must become one with his or her way of seeing, and that the gaze is primary tool for understanding the world. In essence, for the self not to be an obstacle to documenting and witnessing, one must transform the self. The photographer uses her gaze to direct the tool, the camera. The self must become the camera; like a Cyclops, one must be all gaze.

---

9 Castellanos cites José Fuentes Salinas in “The Workshop of Kati Horna” in El Universal, Sección Cultural, 28 May 1989, p. 5. Castellanos also says that this quote is the last phrase of the introduction to the program Horna wrote for her Photography Workshop at the Academia de San Carlos. Naggar mentions this quote as one Horna often said, and translates it: “The camera is not an impediment. It is oneself.”

10 “Declaración de principios estéticos y síntesis última de una actitud emparentada con la utopía de las vanguardias históricas (que subrayaron la definición de la práctica artística como un proyecto vital), la invitación de la fotógrafa para que sus alumnos se convirtieran en auténticos ciclopes (seres mitológicos determinados por su mirada antes que por cualquier otro de sus sentidos) es un reflejo de su propia experiencia de vida” (Castellanos 21).
Returning to Horna’s expression as the obstacle being the self, I add that the self is both obstacle and advantage in gendered witnessing. The gendered witness brings one’s embodied perspective onto the scene; this perspective informs what one chooses to see, what one is able to see, and what kind of representations are created from that perspective – the second main component of gendered witnessing. Horna was a young Hungarian Jewish woman exiled to Spain during the war, a photographer and skilled in the contemporary artistic concerns of Surrealism and photocompositions. In her representations of the war, Horna brings a Surrealist eye to the photographs of the war, a break with reality that throws into relief her perspective as a gendered witness. Horna also plays with photomontages that, in her manipulations, reveal uncomfortable truths about how the humanitarian imagination links to gendered witnessing.

***

Kati Horna was a Hungarian photographer who came to Spain as a way to unite her interests in politics, activism, and photography. She was born Katalin Deutsch in 1912, in Budapest, to a Jewish family (Naggar). Horna was childhood friends with fellow Hungarian Robert Capa, known in childhood and adolescence as Endré Friedmann (Naggar). Norah Horna, Horna’s only daughter, shares this memory of her mother’s relationship with Capa, “She was a banker's daughter from the prosperous area of Buda; he was from humbler origins, from the industrial area of Pest. But he was fascinated by her, and he remained fascinated by her throughout his life. They spent a great deal of time together, and their relationship affected each one very deeply” (Moorhead). In adolescence, they often took portraits of each other in an effort to hone their photography skills.

After the Spanish Civil War, Kati, now in a relationship with José Horna, went to Paris, and then permanently resided in Mexico. Living in Mexico afforded her opportunities to develop
her art and photographic approach. She continued her career as a professional photographer. In Mexico, Horna joined an expatriate community and engaged in Surrealist photographic experiments, even teaching photography at the advanced level.\textsuperscript{11} In a career that lasted over 50 years, Horna produced more than 6,000 negatives, with portraiture being the primary focus of her production (Krinsky 173). Her Spanish Civil War photographs entered into public knowledge in 1979 when she donated them to Spain’s Ministry of Culture at the age of 67. Her many images of Spain at war and remained practically unknown until 1992, when the University of Salamanca displayed her donated collection of photographs in an exhibition. Horna died in 2000.

In 1930, Horna moved to Berlin from Budapest and worked as photographer for an international and influential photo agency, Dephot, which represented mostly men photographers (Naggar). This use of collage techniques to record images using just light, objects, and photo paper influenced Horna’s later surrealist occupation with the object and her playfulness with exposure and light. While in Berlin, she met Bertolt Brecht and the painter and photographer László Moholy-Nagy, a professor at the Bauhaus school (Naggar). His first wife, the Czech photographer Lucia Schulz (later Moholy) inspired him to experiment with the photogram, a photographic image made without a camera. Horna, studying with Moholy-Nagy, was introduced to many of his artistic experiments, such was photomontage, incorporating drawings, photograms, and photographs (Moholy-Nagy). With Moholy-Nagy’s influence, among others, she learned how to use visual photographic techniques to layer meaning and approach meaning-making from different, experimental perspectives not fixated on documentary mimesis.

Photograms are created by putting an object on photosensitive paper and exposing the paper to light; shadows are captured on the paper and it is developed like any other print. These

\textsuperscript{11} For more on this expatriate and Surrealist network in Mexico, see \textit{Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, and Kati Horna} by Stefan van Raay (2010).
techniques emphasize the interplay between light, images, and preservation, but remove the need for a device like a camera or lenses. Photograms were not in Horna’s repertoire (that I know of; instead, she developed photomontages), but awareness of the different ways to make images changes how one thinks of composition. Honing her photography skills and discovering different ways of creating images were a vital pursuit for Horna. In essence, the space around the object is the camera, which affects how one conceives of the gaze and the photographer. The relationship between light, the subject, and the photographer’s gaze would prove a lifelong preoccupation for Horna, as would the more manual aspects of creating images and constructing documents. Horna left Berlin for Paris after just three short years, when the National Socialist Party was elected and the Bauhaus school was closed (Naggar).

By 1936, Horna was a photographer in her own right. Her politics were leftist, but she did not have formal affiliations with the Communist Party or with the anarchist or socialist organizations in Catalonia, beyond working for them and allowing them to use and publish her images. As an exiled Hungarian Jewish woman, Kati Horna may not have formally aligned herself with any one political organization, but her self-interest and work with the anarchists suggests that she was open and receptive to the wide spectrum of leftist political ideologies on the Republican side. Perhaps because of her interactions with Brecht, Moholy-Nagy, and the Surrealist school in Paris, Horna was not as preoccupied with capturing, in her photography, the “action” sequences of war photography that caught the eyes of other Spanish Civil War photographers. On the contrary, Horna turned her attention to the effects of the war on women, children, and other non-combatants on the home front. This focus on home-front Spaniards made it natural for her images to be used as propaganda by Republican organizations, making the audience and viewers of her photographs quite different than Taro’s and Capa’s. Horna, as an
outsider, a foreigner, and a woman, was representing the Spanish Civil War to Spaniards; Taro, Capa, Chim, and others were primarily sending their negatives to photo-agencies in France, Germany, and further abroad.

Horna traveled all over the battlefields of Spain with her camera, documenting events in Aragón, Valencia, Madrid, Barcelona, Lérida, and other towns of strategic importance (Krinsky 174). During 1937, she worked for the Comité de Propaganda Exterior de la Central Nacional de Trabajadores; she also contributed images and worked for the Republican magazines *Umbral*, *Tierra y Libertad*, *Tiempo Nuevos*, *Libre Studio*, and *Mujeres Libres* (Krinsky 174). A number of these magazines were supported by anarchist organizations, like *Mujeres Libres*. At *Umbral*, Horna met her future husband, José Horna, a painter from Anadalusia who also had an international upbringing (Naggar). When the Nationalists won the war, they left together for Paris, then Mexico (Sánchez-Mejorada 8). Most likely because Horna’s work was reproduced locally in Spain for Spaniards, did not find their way into the international scene.

***

War-time Barcelona was a hotbed of propaganda, especially in the form of posters. In December 1936, Agustí Bartra wrote in the newspaper, *Mirador*, “The image and phrase impose themselves in an obsessive manner. Never has their influence had such an efficient penetration...until now. Today the walls not only have ears – as the cliché goes – but they have also learned to reason and to shout” (6 qtd. in Basilio 1). Beginning with the elections in February 1936 – elections that would prove the impetus for the military uprising – the buildings of Barcelona were plastered with propaganda posters advertising all manner of political views.
Once the war started, the Republican side bolstered resistance to the Nationalist cause through images on postcards and posters. When texts accompanied these images, particular ways of viewing and interpretations were encouraged by the words (Basilio 2). One of the forces behind this proliferation of images was to create “a community of viewers,” a community of Spaniards who conceived of their citizenship – and commitment to the Republican cause – in certain ways. On the Republican side, “Artists, political-party propagandists, and government administrators believed that images on the street, in print, and in exhibitions would create a community of viewers brought together during the staging of public exhibitions to understand their own roles as members of the nation. Such visual strategies of display, which blurred hierarchal categories of high art and mass culture, shed light on the guiding assumptions about audience reception that motivated artists, arts administrators, and critics working on opposing sides of the conflict” (Basilio 3). The importance of the visual culture cannot be overstated, especially in Barcelona and Catalonia more broadly. One of the larger aims of the propaganda program was to create a progressive citizenry loyal to Republican values; this was complicated by the internal political disagreements within the leftist coalition of the Popular Front and by the distinct culture and linguistic history of Catalonia itself (Basilio 5). Before the war, Barcelona was a strong graphic-arts center in Spain where a publicity infrastructure thrived (Basilio 19). The city had art schools, professional organizations for those in the printing industry, photographers, and photo agencies (Basilio 19).

The challenge to all this visual culture was this unexpected fact: the significant portion of Spaniards was illiterate. At the turn of the twentieth century, Spain had a high illiteracy rate: in 1900, the national illiteracy rate was 60 percent; in 1931, 40 percent (Basilio 14). The widespread illiteracy among the working-class and rural workers reinforced the need for a strong
visual culture from the propaganda wings of the political parties. The need for visual representations of the war brought challenges. For example, a large percentage of the population was unfamiliar with the historical allusions made in many posters and designs; many of the images alluded to Goya’s paintings or to the invasion of Napoleon. These allusions were lost on a population that did not have substantial formal schooling. As a result, the posters often depicted a viewer making sense of the image, interpreting the image for the viewer, if the image’s meaning and the accompanying text were not clear for an illiterate viewer. If there was not a figure making sense of the image, then other figures were present as allegorical representations for the illiterate Spaniard.

This made photography even more important for its mimetic effect and photo-magazines important in the war cause. Not many propaganda posters featured photography. The poster I choose to focus on uses some of the few Kati Horna photographs employed in propaganda during the Spanish Civil War.¹² There may be more, but scholars can clearly identify this as her work, Horna’s name being in the bottom right corner. The context of the poster must be addressed before delving into a reading of the poster and its influences. This poster was created and displayed for Catalanian viewers – we can tell this by Federación Anarquista Iberica (FAI) along the top of the poster and the text in Spanish below. This organization allied itself with the Confederación Nacional de Trabajo to form the CNT-FAI, a powerful anarchist workers’ group in Catalonia.

¹² In her chapter, “Catalans! Catalonia! Catalan Nationalism and Spanish Civil War Propaganda Posters,” Miriam M. Basilio provides the historical context for the production of these propaganda posters, “Poster production in the republican-controlled area was far greater in quantity and quality than that in rebel [Nationalist] territories, and a strong graphic arts and publicity infrastructure existed in the major cities loyal to the republic: Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia. The tolerance for pluralistic political expression that existed for a least part of the war (after May 1937 anarchist groups were persecuted by communist groups loyal to Stalin and by sectors within the republican government) also meant that groups were able to create their own propaganda” (437).
The poster is a palimpsest of photographic images and text, as Horna layered more than one photograph to create the stunning and devastating final, composite image. The old woman, in white relief against the dark center of the poster, grabs the viewer’s attention as she looks out to the camera. Her face is turned, but we see her eye appealing to the camera and the viewer, and the strain of age and other stresses on her forehead. The hands – supposedly hers – clutch at the air and her left hand fades to gray, blending in with the background as yet another object, potentially destroyed. The old woman and the child are disembodied and super-imposed onto the other image. This disembodying decreases their association with victimhood because it removes them from the present and places them into an indeterminate time and space. They have no bodies to injure; they float like ghosts, haunting the spaces. As one layer of the poster suggests, this destruction has already happened. Are they already dead? In one sense, they could be anybody’s grandmother, anybody’s child; in another sense, the poster does not provide the viewer with enough information or allow the images of the child and old woman to be full enough to grip the reader’s attention. The figures themselves are incomplete, fragmented into representative parts – heads and hands. One assumes that the hands belong to the old woman, but one does not know. The child, peaking out from behind the grandmother, almost blends in with the destruction of the ceiling and is noticed only at a second glance. It is telling that no other human figures are portrayed in this poster – the designers have chosen to skip a generation or three with just the old woman and the child being present. It is also telling that the figures are passive, like the tipped over chair. Since all of them – the figures, the objects in the room – are targets of destruction, all are objectified, transformed by their potential to be broken to bits like the bricks in the lower right corner. Although they are signifiers for the very common humanity
that appeals to the viewer, given their fragmented bodies, this humanity of the old woman and
the child is potentially disassembled.

The text is a vital element of this poster. It is a purposeful choice to place the two
political ideologies on opposite ends of the poster and in contrasting fonts, to emphasize their
opposition and difference. At the top, the “Federación Anarquista Iberica” looks almost friendly
with the rounded circles dotting the i’s. Even if one could read Spanish, the acronym mars the
legibility of the text as a whole, which further indicates the target reader is a Spaniard. The
poster’s meaning also relies on the interplay between text and image in a crucial way, which is
not unusual for Spanish Civil War propaganda posters. The text frames the images, for the
images seem to answer the text, creating a relationship of call-and-response. “El fascismo es…”
means “fascism is…” , but what it is exactly is perhaps unclear. The superimposed images
confuse and overwhelm the viewer, perhaps deliberately. Because the viewer is likely to be
Spanish and experiencing the civil war firsthand, the propaganda multiplies the consequences of
fascism. Fascism, for the Spanish, signifies all these things: the destruction of the domestic
space, conflating the public and private spheres; the elimination of a generation or two, for there
are no adults who are not elderly in the photograph; the total erasure of humans as anything more
than objects to be destroyed. The poster accumulates these signifiers. With all its layers, the
poster wants to be clear that fascism means the destruction of the past, the present, and the
future.

The photographs by Horna, a Hungarian, were manipulated for a propaganda poster,
(likely by her) a poster that, as we see through the Spanish, most likely has a Spanish viewing
audience. This FAI poster appeals to the Spaniards, using the destruction of Spanish dwellings
and Spanish people to signify the violence of fascism. In the circumstances surrounding this
poster, the viewers are intimately and painfully aware of their civil war and its victims. Here, the goal is not the humanitarian awareness that comes from portraying war victims, but rather, the political awareness of the consequences of fascism.

In looking through the Horna archive, I found one of the original photographs incorporated into this composite poster for the FAI. One notices the tipped-over chair immediately, as the chair is the only object still intact in the photograph. In the poster, the contrast has been heightened so that the space is darker – the chair captures the attention of the viewer because the light gleams off its angles. Horna plays with the lighting in the composite image to underscore the darkness of war in general, its bleak effect on the once-stable structures. In the photograph, the destruction is more striking because one can see clearly how this indoor space has been totally destroyed. The viewer does not quite know that this is a domestic sphere – a chair is the only distinguishable object in the ruins, tipped over. This private space has fallen apart through what is likely shelling or aerial bombardment, for we have already been exposed to a visual lexicon of the effect of these military tactics on the integrity of domestic spaces. Contrary to the appearance in the poster, where there is a sense of claustrophobia and a dark cell-like room, what is accented in the photograph is the sheer openness and exposure of these indoor rooms. The pile of roofing tiles in the bottom left, which one supposes to be a third photograph in the poster, actually belongs to this photograph. In the poster, Horna darkened the rest of the scene so that the tiles and the sky stand out more starkly. The original photograph belongs in the documentary tradition; placed in the composite image with cropping, Horna creates propaganda.

In this propaganda poster, the superimposed images of an old woman and a child, most likely a toddler, overlay the dark, ruined, domestic sphere. There seems to be a window in the right center of the poster. It is dark, and it is uncertain what it offers in terms of an escape from
this destruction. The lack of escape increases a sensation of claustrophobia this poster provokes in the viewer, this sense of being cornered by the destruction. These figures of the grandmother and child appeared in another work by Horna, and resonate with the viewer in a different way because of the setting. Another pass through the Horna Spanish Civil War photographic archive revealed this photomontage.

In this photomontage, a slightly different photograph of the old woman and child (very faded in the background, but still present) is superimposed onto a photograph of the interior of a jail. The viewer sees more of the woman’s face, and her left hand is not featured. The word “Carcel” or “Jail” is written in the bottom left-hand corner; Horna’s written her name in the bottom right. This photomontage has been placed over another composite image, of religious iconography and a cemetery. Overall, even though the desperation of the figures is similar in both the poster and this composite image, the effect is lessened. Indeed, this image, with its layers, is chaotic in meaning and raises more questions than answers. What was once almost certainly an old woman could now be an old man. Were the old man and the child in the jail? Do they haunt the jail’s interior, poised between the life-in-jail that is like the death in the cemetery of the background composite? Is this image a commentary on the Nationalist propagandistic approach – wielding fear of jail, death, and religious threats for the after-life? The viewer is not as guided in her interpretation as with the propaganda poster; there is no text to comment on the image. While the composite is disconcerting and unpleasant, its representation of war victim as vulnerable and potentially gendered is less direct than in the poster, and its overall message is muddled in this presentation. In this composite, one is unsure who the victim is, and what they have suffered.

***
Horna takes her documentary photography and manipulates it into composite images and palimpsests of meaning. This palimpsest from the propaganda poster propels Horna’s documentary war photography into the realm of the surreal. Having spent time in Paris, Surrealism’s birthplace, before the Spanish Civil War, Horna uses Surrealist photographic production techniques, such as superimposition, to create this image of domestic spaces and generations destroyed by war for the FAI propaganda poster (Naggar). The space depicted in that poster is more than domestic. It is also part of the city, or at least the town. This is a Surrealist technique, as well. Walter Benjamin, a Marxist visual theorist also intrigued by Surrealism, thought that Surrealist images of the city revealed the “historical transience of commodity fetishes […] integral to the very nature of capitalism” (Greely 3). The broken objects and the destroyed space certainly gesture toward the emptiness of commodities and the domestic as bourgeois preoccupations. According to Robin Adele Greely in *Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War*, surrealism was committed “to theorizing a relationship among social transformation, visual representation, and the human psyche,” and to delving into “dreams” and “psychoanalytic concepts such as desire, the unconscious, memory, or the self” (2). In that FAI poster, Horna puts forth a somewhat negative perspective on social transformation, visual representation, and the human psyche, as destruction, disjointedness, breakdown overwhelm the viewer. Which is precisely the point: this is what fascism is, as the poster’s text declares.

Surrealism, an aesthetic movement partly preoccupied with sexual desire, psychoanalysis, and sexualized bodies (the other part was distinctly Marxist), faced challenges as famous Spanish Surrealists like Joan Miró and Salvador Dalí tried to represent the Spanish Civil War. One difficulty was the breakdown of the body and civilization as wrought by aerial bombardment and total war. Greely writes, “The gendered body proved crucial time and again for this reappraisal
of linking sexuality, politics, and representation] as that site where the violence and confusion of private sexuality might become the mode for addressing the chaos (ideological or physical) of the world at large” (6). By “the gendered body,” Greely refers to Surrealism’s frequent aesthetic representations of the female body and the goal to represent desire as a primal, psychoanalytic urge. Horna pushes back against this tradition in her poster FAI representation of the war. The old woman and the child are not sexualized, desired, or “gendered” in the Surrealist vein as Greely describes it; rather, Horna represents these bodies as gendered by underscoring their vulnerability.

From Surrealism, Horna borrows the notion of the body as a site for understanding how meaning is represented in a social context, especially when that social context is fraught with the violence and uncertainty of war (Greely 11). “Gendered,” for Horna and for this project, means not necessarily sexual bodies, but Horna participates in the Surrealist tradition through their fragmented bodies – indeed, their disembodied bodies – and works strongly against the body as a site through which political meaning can be made. Knowing the Surrealist preoccupation with desire and the female figure, and as a gendered witness, Horna uses her position as the meaning-maker and photographer as another strategy to resist Surrealist sexism and represent the vulnerability of the war’s gendered victims.

The resistance to Surrealist sexism and representation of the gendered war victim is most strongly present in this image of a woman, another photomontage blend, Figure 4. In this photomontage, the face of a woman, (possibly a starlet) a woman with a coiffed and made-up appearance, is super-imposed over the exterior wall of a building and a staircase. Horna titled this “Subida a la Catedral,” or “The Way up to the Cathedral,” dating the photomontage to the year 1938 in Barcelona (Diego 103). Knowing that this photomontage shows a back alleyway or
entry up to a cathedral does not change its impression, as there is no religious iconography in the image. The woman’s figure haunts the walls of the Spanish city. The wall and staircase are also strictly organized, all right angles and even spaces, built to certain dimensions and regimented in their architecture, unlike the woman’s superimposed body, which *would* be organic and appears on the bricks as if it were real. By placing such a delicately presented woman on the surface of the wall, Horna toys with the expectation that women of this era should be ‘soft’ and feminine. She presents this woman as both hard *and* soft, and as neither, simultaneously: both because the woman’s feminine appearance displayed on the hard brick wall combines the hard and the soft; neither because, after all, this woman appears this way because Horna has created her thus. The woman looks onto this symbol of civilization – the empty and structured staircase – and one could argue that in its ascension it symbolizes progress, and ascending to the cathedral above. The emptiness of embodied figures – of someone other than the projected or superimposed woman – is troubling to the viewer. This is where the Spanish Civil War creeps into the photomontage: where are the people?

The woman’s eye, peering outward unblinkingly from the barred window grips the viewer’s attention as the most striking and strategic part of this superimposition. This photo montage underscores how women’s participation in the fighting was excluded from the Spanish Civil War, and also how women were always a part of the war – with restrictions. This superimposition emphasizes that women are part of the very foundation of civilization and war. *This* woman does, after all, make up the walls. Her eye alludes directly to gendered witnessing: the woman witnesses the scene, but does so through the lens of her experience in an embodied gendered perspective– the bars on the window through which she glances. The bars across the woman’s eye also symbolize how the woman is excluded from the scene, how she cannot be
reached or reach out – she has no arms in this picture. Her mouth is shut in an enigmatic smile. She can only gaze outward.

This photograph is a visual metaphor for gendered witnessing. The woman gazes on a scene as a witness. Although this woman is not Horna, she is like Horna because she gazes onto the scene. The woman is uninvolved as a witness, but her very manifestation is dependent on the walls being there on which to project herself. Similarly, Horna would not be in Spain if not for the war, but her view of the war is blocked by the fact that she is not Spanish.

The influence of Surrealism is critical in reading the photomontage. Horna uses the woman’s figure as a way to disturb expectations, in the Surrealist tradition, but also resisting the Surrealist tradition of using a woman’s body for sexuality and ruptures with convention. Here, it is the projection of the woman’s body that the viewer sees, not the woman embodied. The woman’s expression is neutral – she does not smile with pleasure or seduction, or furrow her mouth with worry, or frown at past memories. Her neutral expression underscores her ambivalence as both a hard and soft figure, and also highlights how women have been forced out of the action, only to watch on the sidelines.

Horna may not be representing explicitly psychoanalytical concepts such as desire in her photography (certainly not in the FAI poster); but her photographic representations of the war are distinctly dream-like, delving into an unconscious disturbed by aerial bombardment. In an article focused on Lee Miller and her photography of the London Blitz, Sharon Sliwinski posits a framework for linking photography, surrealism, and aerial warfare. She argues:

In particular during this period, photography emerged as one of the chief styluses for recording what could not be written otherwise. In the early years of air war, this medium became one of the most potent tools for communicating the new landscapes of emotional life, the new states of mind created by this terrible force that targeted civilian life and yet effectively remained “out of sight.” In response to this aggressive
attack on the mind, photography offered a special form of defense by representation. (493)

A violent battle recorded in light: photography would become a stylus for recording what the mind could not comprehend. I am not arguing that all war photography is Surreal, but that Surrealist photographic techniques do offer great potential for representing the psychic wounds of aerial warfare, on combatants and non-combatants alike.

Horna would later delve more deeply into Surrealist photography in her later years in Mexico, but for now, this multilayered image, *Subida a la Catedral*, through its representation of disjointed body parts and break-down of interiority and exteriority (both psychically and physically), certainly references the Surrealist agenda beyond just the use of technical manipulation. This image combines Surrealist aesthetic representations with documentary photography, positing a convergence of two modernist visual cultures in the artistic production of the Spanish Civil War.

***

This preoccupation with the past, present, and future, and how war fuses and destroys all three appears in other Horna photography. In the Horna photograph taken at a hospital, one notices immediately the intersection of public and private spheres and the precariousness of past, present, and future. A family has an intimate encounter in the public space of the hospital. The man, presumably a soldier, focuses solely on the baby. The woman notices the photographer even as she is handing over the child. The arcs visually reinforce the curves of the pregnant woman’s body, but stark, bare, and unyielding where her curves are humanly frail. It is telling that the soldier remains within the arch, as the woman and child remain without: uninjured, they
are free (and able) to go, to run if necessary. The patio where she stands is strewn with debris, evidence of the war despite the immaculate hospital walls.

This photograph reveals much about war in Spain and its victims: it confounds the personal and the public; it marks bodies as sites of destruction and reproduction; it destroys families just as it preserves them; it asks much of Spanish women for – following this photograph – they are responsible for the country’s future. In control of the photographic space, Horna places herself – and the viewer – outside this intimate moment, a voyeur as much as a witness to the war and its effects. The image is populated by gendered, vulnerable war victims: a wounded soldier, a pregnant woman, a child. The voyeuristic nature of this photograph catches our attention because it emphasizes the distance the viewers have to the war, emotionally and physically, even as Horna attempts to close that distance with this image.

Horna took this photograph and manipulated it with José Horna, creating two photomontages in 1938, while still in Spain. The two photomontages excise the wounded soldier and the child and place them in a surreal landscape. These two iterations of the wounded soldier and child have some similar characteristics: both feature the figures in the bottom left corner, with a tree in some sort of field. In both images, to the middle right, an object has been added to the composition, an object featuring destruction. It is difficult to make out clearly. It looks like a woven basket, but is composed of what looks like destroyed crosses. There may be a figure inside the basket, reclining, looking at the viewer. The differences between the iterations are significant, as well. In Figure 1.8, three airplanes, or possibly birds, fly across a cloud. The setting is darker; there is a noticeable crack of white running along the bottom of the photo. In its opposite, the tree is brighter, with leaves highlighted; the meadow is full of flowers.
These contrasting photomontages reveal a number of concerns that Horna tried to address with experimentation. In both iterations, the child and wounded soldier remain oblivious to their surroundings, with the father’s face fixed entirely on his child. It is we, the viewers, who are preoccupied with the action around them, and with the menacing, unknown figure-object in the middle distance. In these photomontages, the exegesis for intervention is made clear to the viewer, because the viewer is the only one who can see the danger and the scene around these two, still-gendered war victims. Indeed, the Hornas have further underscored the vulnerability of the wounded soldier and the child by removing them from the safety of the hospital and capacity of the pregnant woman. In one, we see Horna figuring the war more prominently through darkness and airplanes – the circumstances that led the man to be wounded are highlighted.

***

Horna opens this project with several ways to approach gendered witnessing. Horna provides a Surrealist approach to war representations, which is both modernist and understandable, given that the aerial bombardments shattered the Spaniards’ reality of what was permissible during war. Although Horna focused her camera on intellectuals, women, and children during the war, Emma Cecelia García Krinsky, in her introduction to Kati Horna: Recuento de una obra, emphasizes that “then as now, her gaze did not drift into ‘yellowizing’ representations of the war [propagandizing], but freely selected the content of her images” (16). Horna’s manipulations of her photography into photomontages reveal a deliberate approach to seeing the war, an approach that would not be possible without her being in Spain and seeing it firsthand. The Surrealist photomontages also underscore the idea that the humanitarian
imagination depends on appealing to *fear* – an emotion that Surrealism was trying to tap into in the subconscious. The photomontages are deliberate; they are Surrealist; and they show representations of vulnerable Spaniards and destroyed landscapes.

Importantly, the pedagogical quote at the beginning of the chapter introduces the idea of how the embodied self is the obstacle for photography and creating art. As Castellanos mentioned, in later life, Horna argued for her students to turn themselves into Cyclops: individuals whose selves are entirely made up of the gaze, of the photographic frame. Turning herself into a Cyclops is what Horna did in Spain to document the war. In *Subida a la Catedral*, Horna provides us with a Cyclops-like subject – the woman has one eye gazing outward – but this figure as a metaphor for gendered witnessing underscores how one’s subject position affects what one sees. The focus of the photograph is on the woman’s eye and how it is covered in bars. She must see through the bars, like photographers must see *through* the obstacles of themselves and the circumstances around them to document images.

Because Horna is the only artist who deliberately created propaganda, her gendered witnessing more actively engages in the construction of the humanitarian imagination. The contrast between the original photographs and how they are manipulated provides for us a clear sense of how she was contributing to the humanitarian imagination: with vulnerability.
Chapter Two

Gerda Taro, War Photographer

In the mid-1930s, the British communist party published the *Daily Worker*, an eight-page newspaper that sold at one penny per issue. This newspaper ran little advertising and printed “decidedly inferior photographs – in part the result of its severe financial strictures” (C. Brothers 9). In other words, the *Daily Worker* rarely included picture pages, a layout that was on the rise in the 1930s. On November 12, 1936, the *Daily Worker* editors made a calculated exception to their financial constraints and ran a full-page spread featuring Spanish victims of aerial bombardments – all children. Five dead children, with what are presumably morgue numbers across their chests, are laid out next to photographs of a morgue and a young girl in a garden.

Accompanying the images is an article by Walter Holmes. The opening line declares, “We discussed long and hard whether or not to print this awful page.” The article outlines further justifications for printing the page. Holmes writes, “Why then do we print these pictures. To shock? Certainly. But to shock all who look at them into realising that these dead children are the cost for brutal, militaristic aggression against peaceful people”. As a contrast, the editors chose to place a fictitious “before” photograph in the top left corner of the page, with the text, “Twelve days ago THEY played as SHE does”. The caption for the girl in the garden photograph reads, “She’s English. She plays in peace now. But fascist aggression, unchecked, carries its threat of death for our children too.” In War and Photography, Caroline Brothers writes that including a photograph of a live English girl with the photographs of dead Spanish children “unequivocally identifies the fate of British children with their Spanish counterparts […] the concerns of the British left visualised in these images from Spain” (176). These were some of the first images of
their kind to circulate in the press. But then, as discussed before, the Spanish Civil War was a war of many firsts.

The Spanish Civil War was one of the first wars where women were allowed at the front. On the Republican side, they had the same access to the soldiers as the men did. Although women and men had equal access to the front, women did not have equal access to publications, and had to invent a new way of seeing. Three elements combined to produce a new vantage point for creating images: access to the front, new camera technology, and a new, horrible way of conducting war through aerial bombardment and targeting non-combatants. Their embodied witnessing of the war adds a level of critical viewing that is permanent – they experience the world through their embodied identities – and situational, due to the level of risk and what they have the chance to write about or photograph. In her Spanish Civil War photography, with its wide range of subjects, Taro demonstrated her perspective as a gendered witness.

Without photographers on the ground in Spain, these horrific images would not come before the eyes of British readers and viewers. The role of these photographers was to document the war and disseminate its effects on the civilian population of Spain. One of the more concrete aims of the photographers was to underscore how like other Europeans, like the British, the Spaniards are, despite this outbreak of civil war. By publishing these photographs, the editors of the Daily Worker hoped to spread the horrific knowledge of the violence of the Spanish Civil War and incite responses from their readers. Jessica Berman, in Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism, addresses these same photographs:

The Republican government and other partisan groups on the left mobilized the images of wounded children and terrified women in an effort to create an inescapable emotional response – in other words, to manipulate through propaganda without acknowledging the partisan nature of the message or attempting to mitigate the horror of the images presented. Thus, in these cultural products of the war, we can see the
boundaries among war reporting, art, and propaganda being contested and their narrative dimensions restricted and manipulated. (70)

The porousness of these boundaries is fundamental to understanding the visual culture of the Spanish Civil War. For the first time, some creators of these cultural products during the war – photographers – were women like Gerda Taro.

***

Gerda Taro was born Gerta Pohorylle in 1910 in Stuttgart, Germany. Taro’s parents had emigrated to Germany from Galitzia, a province straddling modern-day Poland and Ukraine, to Germany, but continued to be connected to the Jewish community. New artefacts from a budding visual culture surrounded Taro growing up. The Weimar Republic of post-World War I Germany was flooded with newspapers and media of all kinds. The illustrated magazines founded during the 1920s, such as *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* and the *Müchner Illustrierte Presse*, pioneered the use of the photo essay and would inspire magazines and illustrated newspapers like the American *Life*, the British *Picture Post*, and the French *Regards*, *Ce Soir*, and *Vu* – all magazines that would later publish Taro’s photographs (“Dark Rooms”). Taro grew up in a liberal household, with parents who ran a business and were able to afford to send her to boarding school in Switzerland for a year. Later, she chose to pursue a business degree at the university in Stuttgart. She also chose to study Spanish, being already fluent in French, German, and English (Schaber 12). In the early 1930s, the Pohorylle family moved to Leipzig, where Taro saw firsthand the rise of the Nazi Party. She underwent a political radicalization in the oppositional leftist circles such as the Socialist Worker’s Party, along with her brothers, Karl and Oskar (Schaber 12).

When Hitler was elected, the situation worsened for leftist, second-generation Jewish students and there was less tolerance for their political activities. In March 1933, Taro’s brothers
were wanted for throwing anti-Hitler pamphlets from a roof into the street. The Sturmabteilung (SA), the original paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party, searched for Karl and Oskar and arrested Taro, instead, hoping to lure her brothers out of hiding (Schaber 12). Taro was released after being held for several days in “preventative custody” (Schaber 12). In this brief example, one sees how Taro’s embodied self – her Jewishness and her womanhood – puts her in danger with the SA. This experience would be carried into her experiences in Spain, where her awareness of the fight against fascism would be no less personal, to Taro. Sensing that the situation would only get worse for her now that she was a known radical, Taro left Germany for Paris in the fall of 1933. She would never again see her parents or brothers.

In Paris, Taro lived with a fellow young émigré woman from Leipzig, worked odd jobs to earn money, and hung out in the Café Capoulade on the Boulevard St. Michel, with the growing number of German-speaking Jewish and leftist political refugees. During her time at these circles, she learned of Endré Friedmann’s photography, and finally met him in the fall of 1934. In the summer of 1935, Friedmann and Taro travelled to the south of France, a journey which cemented their romantic relationship. When they returned to Paris, they moved in together and Taro began her photographic career under Friedmann’s tutelage.

Taro was one of many German exiles who were taking up the camera to make a living in Paris. The advantages to being a photojournalist were the accessibility of profession – one just needed a camera and film to begin – and the fact that France did not regulate the journalistic output (photo or otherwise) of the refugees (Schaber 14). Not only was photojournalism a good entry-way into a profession, Taro was also well-versed in the visual culture of the Weimar Republic and would develop an aesthetic all her own influenced by modernist art, fashion photography, and the urgency of war. Irme Schaber writes how “the revolutionary aesthetic of
Soviet films […] modeled her way of understanding the events in Spain and influencing her photographic representations of the revolution” (21). In February 1936, Taro received her first press card, signing with the photography agency A.B.C. Press-Service (Schaber 16). Then Friedmann and Taro had a provocative and wild idea: what if they invented a rich American who they had discovered and presented his photographs to Maria Eisner, the director of Alliance Photo, to see what she thought? This is how “Robert Capa” was born. Eisner saw through the ruse, but the pseudonym was a good idea as a way to catch the attention of French editors, at prices much higher than Friedmann was earning (Schaber 16). The strategy did not work with Eisner as they had intended it to, but Friedmann decided to adopt Capa’s name as his own. Inspired by the film stars Frank Capra and Greta Garbo, Endre Friedmann would become Robert Capa, and Gerta Pohorylle would become Gerda Taro (Schaber 17). In this way, their Jewish refugee status would be obscured behind these Hollywood-ized new names (Schaber 17). Like the Hollywood films that inspired them, these names also became, in the words of Irme Schaber, “a projection screen onto which [Friedmann and Pohorylle] could be the protagonists” (17). They created stamps with which to brand the back of photographs and envelopes they would submit to photo agencies and publications: “Photo Robert Capa” and “Reportage Capa & Taro.” Both photographers submitted materials under the name “Robert Capa,” as a way to promote the pseudonym and because Taro and Capa were collaborators in their work. In 1936, the two went to Spain together to photograph the war. They published their images of Spain in French photomagazines such as Ce Soir, Vu, and Regards. In 1937, Taro, sadly, died in Spain of her injuries after being knocked down by a tank. She was twenty-six years old.

***
Before her untimely death, Taro photographed the war extensively. In the company of Capa and other war photojournalists, or alone, with the Republican soldiers, Taro traveled all over Spain. She photographed a variety of subjects: men and women in combat, daily life in Spain under war, and refugees. Irme Schaber, Taro’s biographer, writes about the war, “Revolutions are not movements that only bring with them a political and social collapse; they themselves imply emblematic change. New symbols are born; others disappear” (19). The ability to recognize these symbols increases dramatically when one is on the scene, seeing individuals and events unfold in real time. Taro was particularly skilled at seeing what these new symbols would be for the Spanish Civil War. In the summer of 1936, she shot a sequence of photographs of milicianas, or militiawomen, in Catalonia and Aragon. The Spanish Republican miliciana, in her mono (navy blue one-piece overall) holding her rifle aloft is one of the most famous images from the Spanish Civil War, a symbol of emblematic change. She stood for the progressiveness of the Republican side and the equality it offered. Photographs and posters of the milicianas were broadly circulated both domestically and abroad.

The miliciana did not originate as a phenomenon purely of the war, as many foreigners thought; the groundwork for a more independent Spanish woman began with the start of the Second Republic. Beginning in 1931, the Second Spanish Republic encouraged women’s political organizations to reach out to Spanish women to determine what they needed to develop more independent lives and political empowerment. These women’s organizations identified education and culture as keys to women’s liberation and began publishing newspapers, developing professional training programs, and teaching thousands of Spanish women to read, among other tasks (Nash 178-179). As a result of this activism, Spanish women challenged the exclusive designation of women to the home and defied many traditional gender restrictions of
Spanish society (Nash 179). This trend continued in the Republican zone when the war broke out. When the war began, women actively participated in the war effort, playing a crucial role in civil resistance and in the antifascist mobilization on the homefront (Nash 178). Spanish women worked in public transportation, munitions factories, and on farms etc., and were paid for their time, but these kinds of contributions were not as encouraged as they were, say, in the U.S. during the Second World War (Nash 178). This is not to say that women did not participate in combat. They did, but only for a very limited window during the first months of the war and very few actually took up arms and went to the front. Fewer, perhaps, than 200 women participated in the war as milicianas. Mary Nash, in the article “Women in War: Milicianas and Armed Combat in Revolutionary Spain, 1936-1939”, describes how, after analyzing the uniforms and groups in photographs, she concludes that the women “appear to have been mostly from an anarchist or Communist youth background, thus on familiar terms with the men they accompanied – friends, husbands, or novios” (275). Most milicianas were young, and so not restrained by housewifely or motherly responsibilities at home.

One of Taro’s first big breaks came from photographing a group of milicianas who were training on the beach outside of Barcelona. In this sequence, the viewer sees Spanish women in the dark *mono* that would become iconic as the Republican uniform. Taro caught a miliciana in perfect profile, crouching down to aim her pistol at a target. The flatness of the surrounding landscape takes her completely out of the context of Spain, were it not for the preceding reputation of the miliciana in the war. Her hair is clipped short and she has military issue

---


pouches attached to her belt. Her shoes – feminine heels, unsuited for combat – hint at the woman’s recent recruitment, as she has not yet acquired suitable shoes for her new pursuit. The pistol and her gaze are aimed forward, toward an unknown target.

Given the new possibilities for women, Taro chose to photograph this subject like this. Susie Linfield, in her 2007 review of an exhibition of Taro’s Spanish Civil War photography at the International Center of Photography for *The Nation*, writes “I doubt, however, that much of an argument about a ‘woman’s view’ can be deduced from photos such as this (though only Taro photographed a militiawoman wearing heels)” (“Dark Rooms”). I am not arguing for a “women’s view” of seeing or taking pictures, a view Linfield hints at. Such an argument would essentialize women into all seeing or approaching subjects in the same way, with the same perspective, because they are women. While I am not arguing for that approach, I do want to take into account Taro’s physical presence in Spain, photographing the war. Taro’s embodied perspective, and all that goes with it (her Jewishness, her refugee/exile status, her femininity and womanhood in the masculine space of war) effect the way that she represented the war. These representations are important, too, as part of Taro’s way of seeing. The photograph would be impossible to capture unless the photographer herself were on the ground, echoing her subject’s pose. Although not a self-portrait, the photograph reveals to the viewer how Taro saw herself, aiming her camera as she kneels in the dirt. As she records this image, Taro posits an answer to the question of how to create a new perspective in an artistic tradition that has kept women as the subject of the gaze: portray the subject as agentic and in control.

Taro’s photographic series of *milicianas* challenges the principles of gendered witnessing as I have outlined them, and indicates the complexity of this type of witnessing. In this photograph, Taro presents the visual argument that Spanish women are not passively witnessing
the war; they are taking up arms and fighting it, too. While this subject is a woman, she is not a war victim here or passive. Taro wanted to attempt a certain type of gendered witnessing with this series, one that presents women not as potential war victims, but as soldiers. Indeed, the miliciana approaches her war exercises seriously; she believes she will have the opportunity to fight and needs to be prepared. This subject is has agency; she is capable; she is a soldier with an alluring femininity. This photograph is one of Taro’s most famous images, if not her most famous image. Taro introduces this new image into the visual lexicon of war: here is a sexy Bond girl ready to fight for Spain. Taro was excited for the revolution that was happening in Spain, and especially in Catalonia. The subject in profile, her gaze turned away, encourages the viewer to project what they want to see onto this portrayal. What many foreigners saw was a subversive masculine woman taking up arms outside of the home…to some, nothing short of the fall of civilization.

The response from outside of Spain would be crucial to how Taro changed her approach. This photograph and the series it belongs to illustrate Taro’s point of view when she arrived in Spain, when she was finessing her approach as to how she would record and document the war, before receiving outside feedback or knowing the consequences of her photography. Taro had the opportunity to photograph Spanish women as milicianas, which would soon change. This type of representation was counterproductive to the goal of persuading foreigners to intervene in the Nationalist military uprising and support the Republican side.

The miliciana in profile and others by Taro were published in a special edition of Vu magazine, on August 29, 1936. Taro’s images from the Spanish Civil War were featured in a two-page photo spread entitled, “Quand les femmes s’en mêlent: portraits de miliciennes” or “When women get involved: portraits of milicianas.” These photographs shocked the foreign
viewers who believed in and wanted to uphold a gender-normative approach to war, where the men were fighters and the women stayed at home providing moral support. They were not ready for the revolution happening in Spain (and especially in Catalonia), where men and women were equal and fought alongside each other. Taro’s photographs showed how Republican Spain is breaking with traditionalist values. Nash argues that the image of the miliciana was used to mobilize men into serving by challenging their male identity; however, most foreigners did not interpret the miliciana this way (“Women in War” 270). This explanation, while it could hold true for the Spanish seeing posters or newspapers with the milicianas, does not make much sense for French-published Vu magazine. As a result, many foreigners lost sympathy with the Republican cause. The figure of the miliciana, while she inspired many leftist women, did not persuade viewers who were indecisive about whether to support Republican Spain.

The visual portrayal of milicianas simply compounded the descriptions of lost traditions coming from the Republican side. Only a month before the Vu photo spread, Lawrence Fernsworth writes in The Times of London, from Valencia:

> Corps of milicianas [militia-women] have been organized, and women, armed and aggressive, take their place in the front line with men. All that womanhood traditionally stands for is rapidly disappearing. Women of the proletariat are not at all perturbed by the fact that in the region held by the government scarcely a church is open, scarcely a priest dares appear in public. (qtd. in Lannon 218).¹⁶

The fact that women are taking up arms to defend themselves alarms the journalist as it is the men’s role to protect the women. To some degree, these women are no longer “women.” These women have become something else, as traditional white Christian womanhood is disappearing, according to Fernsworth. The circumstances of the war, of the necessity to fight for survival, are

---

¹⁶ Lannon simply refers to this person as the Times journalist. Through cross-referencing various secondary sources, like Preston’s We Saw Spain Die and García’s The Truth About Spain!, I deduced that this journalist is Lawrence Fernsworth.
obscured by Fernsworth’s focus on the gender role-bending of these milicianas. By writing, “All that womanhood traditionally stands for is rapidly disappearing,” Fernsworth draws attention away from why these women are fighting to the fact that they are fighting at all. Whether intentionally or not, Fernsworth also associates traditional womanhood with religious faith, one of the cornerstones for women’s lives in Franco’s Spain.

The Spanish Republic wanted to avoid giving Great Britain, France, and the United States a reason not to support them in their fight against the Nationalist uprising. By September 1936, a policy was enacted to formally persuade the milicianas to leave the front.17 Only a few months later, the head of the Republican government, Francisco Largo Caballero, sent out military dispositions ordering women to withdraw from the militia (“Women in War” 276). While women had active roles in the war efforts of later twentieth-century conflicts (even flying war planes) the miliciana is an aberration in how, for that brief period of five months, she was given the same duties as the male militia members and expected to engage in direct combat. That type of equality in a combat unit would not occur again for decades, and when it happened in Spain, it was not well received by foreigners learning about the conditions of the war. Partly as a result of this backlash, Taro embraced more normative subjects when photographing the war. As she continued photographing the war and its victims, Taro demonstrates how gendered witnessing needs to portray its subjects as vulnerable, at least on the surface reading of the photograph. An image of an armed woman dressed in overalls, kneeling in the sand, can be read as many things, but vulnerable is not one of them.

***

17 Nash writes, “I have been unable to locate it in the official Gaceta Oficial del Estado. Although such a disposition existed, it may have been formulated as an internal military norm.” Geraldine Scanlon. La polémica feminista en la España contemporánea (1864-1975). Madrid, 1976. 294. qtd. in “Women in War: Milicianas and Armed Combat in Revolutionary Spain, 1936-1939.” 276.
Vulnerability is key for understanding the visual and textual representations of the Spanish Civil War and for understanding these representations as portraying gendered subjects, regardless of the subject’s sex or gender. As Linfield writes in her review of Taro’s and Capa’s photographs from the war:

This was less an aesthetic or emotional choice than a political one. Taro and Capa wanted the world to see not just what was being destroyed in Spain but also what was being created. […] Documenting civilians as builders, fighters, and victims was central to Capa and Taro’s project. It was a project avowedly international in intent, geared above all to build interventionist support – whether based on solidarity, anger, fear or shame – in Britain, France and America. (‘Dark Rooms’)

The vulnerability of the Republican Spaniards to aerial bombardments underscored the need for international powers to intervene on the Republican side. This need for intervention is the bridge linking gendered witnessing to the humanitarian imagination. Gendered witnessing is not exclusively preoccupied with representing vulnerable subjects or accenting the vulnerability of capable subjects, but rather, challenging a heteronormative, exalted approach to representing war and infusing a humane, more global understanding about war’s impact beyond the battlefront. Photographing milicianas certainly challenges the heteronormative view that only men can be soldiers; and at the same time, these photographs do not inspire the humanitarian need to intervene. Part of challenging the normative approach to war is representing the consequences of modern warfare and its effects on civilians. With the ordered withdrawal of the milicianas from participating in the combat effort of war, and responding to the backlash from foreigners about the women fighters, Taro aimed her camera elsewhere.

Not only did 1937 mark the change of status for Spanish women at the front, but it marked a change for Capa and Taro as well: Taro signed her own contract with the Ce Soir, the Parisian evening newspaper (Schaber 17). Taro’s independent contract did not alter their
romantic relationship, but having her own contract did give Taro her own reporting agenda. She would continue to photograph the war, both accompanied by Capa and without him. In May 1937, Taro photographed refugees from Almeria, a small Andalusian city on the Mediterranean coast. The morning of May 31, the city experienced shelling from German naval warships. The hospitals were crowded with the injured and refugees from Malaga and Almeria, heading to Valencia. One photograph depicts a group of refugees in an unknown indoor space. Taro shot this image from a middle distance, not focusing on any one figure, as if the viewer were walking quickly past this scene. The relationship of these individuals to one another is unknown, but the woman standing is likely the mother of the three children around her. The rolled mattress the little girl sits and the old man leans on marks the group’s transient status. As an inanimate subject in the photograph, the mattress underscores the rupture between the public and private spheres during wartime. This group is evidently not in their home; the mattress is obviously not in a bedroom.

The central woman’s pose and the cluster of her children reminds the viewer of Dorothea Lange’s iconic photograph, *Migrant Mother*, an allusion that places Taro’s image in conversation with the history of documentary photography and the Farm Security Administration (FSA). It is unknown whether Taro saw Lange’s photograph, but it is *highly* unlikely. Lange photographed Florence Thompson in February 1936 and her “photos first appeared in the *San Francisco News* on March 10, as part of a story demanding relief for […] starving pea pickers” (Hariman and Lucaites).

A year later and a continent away, Taro had likely not seen the Lange photograph, but both women photographers engaged in similar projects with similar results: representing disadvantaged women as coping in the face of difficult political and economic circumstances.
Lange was not vulnerable to risk in the same way as Taro; but both women photographers record these moments as part of larger narratives demanding viewer intervention. The *San Francisco News* feature was a success for the pea pickers, in that relief was organized, and there is no record of death by starvation (Hariman and Lucaites). The *Migrant Mother* photograph and accompanying news feature demonstrate that showing the conditions of the unfortunate can prick the humanitarian consciousness and provoke intervention. *Migrant Mother*, in this sense, is a success story.

Taro’s exigence is broader and with a more nebulous goal: to raise awareness of the situation of Spanish refugees. But she does so while still representing the agency and capability of these Spanish women. Taro’s mother adds to the visual vocabulary of the nascent humanitarian imagination by portraying a maternal war refugee, by her circumstances forced to be active, not passive, for survival. Except for the out-of-focus adolescent boy who looks directly at the camera, Taro seems to go unnoticed by her photographic subjects. The wounded older man lies to the side of the main cluster. The viewer knows he is wounded through the bandage that peaks out from under his beret. The man is physically separated from the women; he is positioned on the periphery of the scene and interacts with no one. The boy remains out of focus, emphasizing not only the moment, possibly hurried, in which Taro snapped the photograph, but also hinting at his uncertain future as an adolescent boy in war. At the moment he is too young to fight; that moment soon passes and he will no longer be in the picture.

Taro’s photograph was picked up by *Die Volks Illustrierte*, a German picture magazine, to be the June 30, 1937 cover. As is evident on this cover, the man has been cropped out completely. This is a deliberate choice, and a telling one, to eliminate the man from the Spanish refugee scene. Cropping is instrumental for addressing the porous boundaries of art,
documentary, and propaganda – questions that Berman raised earlier. Here, the humanitarian imagination is actively being determined by judging who is “sympathetic”… and not. A man, even wounded, does not belong in this scene of war victims and refugees. He disturbs the affective, sympathetic response of viewers. Taro’s photograph – with the man isolated – emphasizes that although aerial bombardment destroys and wounds indiscriminately and even though war may obliterate the separation of public and private spheres, the divide of privilege persists in Spain with respect to men and women. His presence highlights their collective disempowered position as war victims; all of them are war victims, but perhaps him even more so. After all, he is the only visibly wounded subject in the frame. But, his presence has other repercussions for the ways in which the war is portrayed. The visual positioning of war refugee motherhood emerges as a tenuous contradiction even at it is first being produced. A maternal war refugee is an active survivor who must be read as passive in order to garner affective sympathy from the outside viewer. He makes the tension of masculine privilege in Spain visible and acknowledges the women’s empowered position as capable survivors. Without him, the reclining wounded man, the women are tense, but can be read as passive victims.

Another photograph of interest comes from the same series. Unlike the photograph of refugees where strength can be read into the war refugee mother and the children are sympathetic but not exposed, this photograph portrays a dependent subject who is terribly exposed, to the gaze and to the consequences of war. Susie Linfield describes it as one of Taro’s “most striking pictures – moving and terrible […] this is an image of unbearable vulnerability” (“Dark Rooms”). The child’s genitals are exposed, but blurry, so one cannot tell if this child is a girl or a boy. The Mary Janes hint at girlhood, but that is not certain; the feminine connotation of the shoes may not hold given the child’s displacement. The child’s mother may simply have reached
for or received those shoes. Despite the child’s exposure, the figure also wears multiple layers, hinting at the fact that these are all the clothes the child owns. Most poignantly, the child’s knees are scabbed, wounds of childhood or of running from aerial bombs.

This photograph was not, to my knowledge, printed during Taro’s lifetime. This photograph falls into a dark voice in the spectrum of war photography, still developing in the 1930s, where grisly photographs of dead children were published in the Daily Worker and a photograph of displaced, but clothed and temporarily safe children is featured on Die Volks Illustrierte. The viewer assumes the child is sleeping on the mattress, and is not dead. The child is poised to fall off the mattress onto the wooden floor: the future of Spain on the edge, possibly to fall into the darkness. This photograph, with its exposed but live subject, is not printed. It is simply too painful to see, this child’s exposure. Only a gendered witness could have taken this photograph: someone who embodies vulnerability themselves, who has a non-normative and non-dominant perspective, and in turn, sees that in the frame. Only a person with a careful, tender eye that is so commonly thought of as maternal and feminine, but could belong to any parent. Taro was not a parent, but she was growing skilled at understanding how to frame her photographs to provoke the consciences of her viewers and demand intervention. For that is what this photograph asks of its viewers: the parental gaze, and intervention.

***

At the start of the summer 1937, Taro received word from her parents in Leipzig. Heinrich and Gisela Pohorylle had lost their business and were obligated to move into segregated housing (Schaber 24). They were seeking help from the Jewish Social Welfare Office in Leipzig for the family to immigrate to Palestine, given that conditions were obviously worsening

---

18 The Nazis would later call this segregated dwelling a Judenhaus, or House of Jews.
for Jews in Germany and Oskar and Karl were known leftists (Schaber 24). Taro’s biographer Irme Schaber writes that this news spurred Taro to become “a critical photographer of war, an active witness” (24). Taro aimed her camera at other subjects that would become visual tropes of the Spanish war (and later wars), such as refugees, orphaned children and ruined buildings. This photograph demonstrates Taro’s skills at framing the war in a provocative way and reinforcing her position as a gendered witness. Spanish children play on an improvised see-saw amid the ruins of the small town of La Granjuela, near the Cordoba front in Andalusia. A child, its back to the camera, is perfectly silhouetted in the center of the image; the child’s dark coat drawing the viewer’s eye.

Unlike other Taro photographs, which focus much more closely on the subjects rather than the whole scene, this photograph emphasizes the destroyed, dystopian reality of life in Spain. As such, this representation of war victims relies much more on the viewer’s gaze than Taro’s previous photographs, because the “damage” and vulnerability of the subjects – the need for intervention – lies much more below the surface of the image. The child stands in for the remote viewer, gazing at the scene from a closer, but similar, perspective as the viewer. The child’s turned back allows the viewer to project her own reading onto the scene of ruins and, incongruously, merriment. Aerial bombardments destroyed the buildings, but there is a curious lack of blood, injured people, or fear. There are no adults in this image. Women and girls are also absent. The children on the see-saw are smiling; at the moment, they feel no danger.

There is an abundance of damage in the photograph, but not to the children, who seem to be uninjured despite the remnants of violence around them. The children are safe – for now – but this is their new reality, playing amidst ruins. Playing on a see-saw would be normal in other contexts – a schoolyard, perhaps. Here, their play is disconcerting because it highlights their
impermanent safety. This setting of ruins will also be their future, if they survive the war. The child in the black coat could be Death, arriving on the scene in a guise that would not alarm the playing children. The exposed, half-destroyed empty building behind the children is placed like another character in the image. The gaze is drawn to peer inside its emptiness, and examine the rooms, whose functions were obliterated by the destruction. The ruins are a metonymic representation of Spain, blown apart by the civil war and exposed to the European gaze.

This photograph is an example of Taro’s gendered witnessing because the image pushes against a glorification of war. As an embodied witness on the ground in the Spain, experiencing the risk of the war and seeing the destruction first-hand, Taro develops a keen sense of the utter destruction wrought by total war. This keen sense and perspective would not exist without Taro’s own vulnerability to the planes’ bombs, and without her own status as a refugee. Even though the children are seemingly healthy and whole, this does not preclude them from being war victims through their circumstances and vulnerability to the bomb-bearing planes that will likely return. This vulnerability makes these children war victims, and in turn, genders them in their need for intervention. The children playing are vulnerable to the same destruction that caused the ruins around them; without intervention, it is likely the destruction will continue. In this photograph, Taro presents to European and American viewers a mirror that shows them their future if they do not intervene in the Spanish Civil War.

***

In July 1937, the Second International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture took place in Valencia and in Madrid. The Second International Congress of Antifascist Writers
had long been planned for 1937 in Spain; the first Congress having been held in Paris in 1935. There were unexpected complications now that the host country was at war. For example, several governments, including Great Britain, refused to issue visas to its delegates (Thornberry 591). The Congress drew around 200 writers from some 30 countries, “from Algeria to Iceland and Peru to China, as well as Great Britain, France, Germany, and the Soviet Union” including the U.S. (Thornberry 590). The Congress was held over two weeks, beginning in Valencia and with sessions in Madrid and Barcelona. It concluded in Paris on July 16-17, for those Republican sympathizers who were not able to get to Spain in time or did not want to undertake the level of risk. On the 50th anniversary of the Second International Congress of Antifascist Writers, Octavio Paz, the Mexican writer, diplomat, and original attendee, wrote in an article for The New Republic reflecting:

> The Congress of 1937 was an act of solidarity with men locked in mortal struggle against an enemy better armed and sustained by unjust and evil forces. Men who were abandoned by the very people who should have been their allies and defenders, the Western democracies. The Congress was moved by an immense wave of generosity and authentic fraternity: among the participating writers, many were combatants, some had been wounded, some would die in the field of battle. All of these things—love, loyalty, courage, sacrifice—remain unforgettable. In them resides the moral grandeur of that meeting 50 years ago.

The agenda for the Congress included topics on humanism, the role of the writer in society, problems of Spanish culture, and aid to Spanish Republican writers (Thornberry 593).

Taro attended and photographed the Congress. A number of the photographs from this series show the writers and intellectuals in rows, singing with their fists raised in leftist salute, or

---

19 The First International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture was held in June 1935, at the Palais de la Mutualité in Paris, with André Gide as president. About 220 delegates from 40 countries attended the Paris Congress and voted to hold the next Congress in Spain (Thornberry 591). For more on the Second International Congress, see Robert S. Thornberry’s excellent article that details the Congress’s history and argues for an underlying Stalinist influence, “Writers Take Sides, Stalinists Take Control: The Second International Congress for the Defense of Culture (Spain 1937)”.


consulting quietly as other figures listen to a speech. When the foreigners were taken on excursions out of the meeting chamber, their attention and care for the Republican cause began to shine through. This photograph was taken at the Guadalajara front near Madrid. In this photograph, Russian writer Ovadi Savich is on the right, bending from the waist to speak to two Spanish boys. Savich was a poet and Spanish-Russian translator, who translated Pablo Neruda’s poetry into Russian (Neruda was also at the Congress) (Teitelboim 318; 464). Both boys wear the Spanish rope-soled sandals, alpargatas, worn by peasants and by some Republican soldiers who could not afford boots. Like the mono, alpargatas would become one of the symbols of Republican Spain. One boy looks up at Savich, arms akimbo, with a look of defiance on his face. The man behind that boy is in a mono typical of the soldier and could be the boy’s father; they are standing quite close and the man is looking down at the boy with what could be fondness. The other boy, wearing trousers that are too big for him and that have been tied somehow to keep them up, also wears a straw hat labeled with C.N.T., or the Confederación Nacional de Trabajo. The CNT was an anarcho-syndicalist labor union founded in Barcelona in 1910 and often worked in alliance with other anarchist groups, such as the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI). The CNT was one of the organizations that made up the Popular Front and fought on the Republican side of the war.

Once again, Taro captures a moment featuring children, but extends beyond the children’s vulnerability. This photograph is a political metaphor for Republican Spain and the Soviet Union. By 1937, Taro – like all those present in Spain – was sensitive to the politics of the Soviet Union’s involvement supporting the Republican side. Catching this Russian writer leaning down and addressing the child, Spain’s future, is a visual metaphor for the Soviet Union’s involvement.
deference and benevolence toward the country that no other Great power would support with military or financial aid. The child, small and slightly gaunt, but defiant, engages with Savich, holding his own: Spain’s hopeful future. This image would not be recorded without her physically covering the Congress. Taro constructs this metaphor deliberately, catching Savich at a moment when the Spanish speaker engaged with the Spanish boys. As a gendered witness, Taro was already looking for different and non-normative ways of showing the Republican side in all its complexity.

***

Just five days short of her twenty-seventh birthday, Taro died the morning of July 26, 1937, in an American field hospital in El Escorial (Lebrun and Lefebvre 137). In the midst of the battle for Brunete and under fire from Nationalist planes and artillery, Taro perched on the running board of a car fleeing the combat zone (Lebrun and Lefebvre 137). A Republican tank hit the car, knocking Taro off the running board and into the tank’s path (Lebrun and Lefebvre 137). The Battle of Brunete was a particularly bloody one for the Republicans. Over twenty-five thousand soldiers were killed, on the Republican side (Lebrun and Lefebvre 138). Of these, four thousand three hundred were members of the International Brigades, including Woolf’s nephew Julian Bell, who had boots in Spain for little more than a month (Lebrun and Lefebvre 138). These numbers do not include the non-combatant casualties of war, such as medical personnel, civilians, and Gerda Taro. In Paris at the time of her death, Robert Capa learned of her death while reading a newspaper in his dentist’s waiting room (Lebrun and Lefebvre 137).

In death, Gerda Taro’s position as a gendered witness is subsumed into her position as a war victim. Foreigners supporting the Republican cause could rally around her figure and what she symbolized. In Paris, on August 1, 1937, “a long funeral cortege passed before [Ce soir’s]
office on rue du Quatre-Septembre; an enormous crowd, preceded by dozens of young girls carrying white flowers, surrounded the hearse” (Lebrun and Lefebrve 138). Once the cortege reached the Pere-Lachaise Cemetery, Louis Aragon and Jean-Richard Bloch, both heads of *Ce soir*, delivered the eulogy for the “Skylark of Brunete” (Lebrun and Lefebrve 138). The signifiers of a virginal sacrifice – young women and white flowers – abound at Taro’s funeral. These signifiers have a dissonant ring: the most public mourner at the event is her lover, Capa, visibly distressed and weeping. The Communist Party claimed Taro as “a Joan of Arc of the anti-Fascist struggle” and a martyr (Lebrun and Lefebrve 138). While she may have espoused leftist viewpoints, Taro never formally joined the party (Lebrun and Lefebrve 138). All of Taro’s agency and participation to effect political change is obscured by the narratives written onto her life for public consumption and to aid the Cause. When Taro is read as active and a fighter in the struggle, she can only be so as a Joan of Arc figure: virginal, misunderstood, possibly crazy, dead, martyred for a greater cause, and betrayed by a government which was supposed to protect her. When Taro is a victim of the war, she becomes Capa’s wife (they never married) and a sacrificial symbol of peace, intervention, and “the horrors of war.”

Regardless of how she is portrayed, when presented to the public, Taro’s position of agency as a war photographer and gendered witness are obscured. In her death, Taro’s life is further memorialized, appropriated, and circulated for public consumption through a 1938 series of cards printed by a Philadelphia chewing gum company (Lebrun and Lefebrve 141). This card is “one of a series of 240 True Stories of Modern Warfare” and the consumer is encouraged to “save to get them all” (“Woman Photographer Crushed by Loyalist Tank”). The ideological support of the gum company for Republican Spain is clear. Not only are they featuring a female
casualty of the Spanish Civil War, but the Nationalists are called Rebels, and the Republicans, Loyalists.

Rebel and Loyalist sides were one way to label and discuss the ideological differences in the war; many foreign audiences found this particular nomenclature confusing, as to Americans, it seemed counterintuitive that the military would be the Rebels.\textsuperscript{21} One side of the card describes the circumstances of Taro’s death, where she is “[p]robably the first woman photographer ever killed in action” and “pretty” (“Woman Photographer Crushed by Loyalist Tank”). The “great battle of Brunete” is rendered absurd by detailing how “the Loyalists had taken Brunete, lost it, taken it again, and then lost it” (“Woman Photographer Crushed by Loyalist Tank”). The narrative switches from its historical tone to an action-packed, dramatic description, as “[w]ith an unexpected swerve the creeping, shell-spitting monster bumped the daring young woman from her perch and crushed her beneath the revolving lugs!” (“Woman Photographer Crushed by Loyalist Tank”). The other side of the card features just this moment before Taro is killed. She lies on the ground, partially under the tank, which was “cruising blind” and “part of a Loyalist counter attack” (“Woman Photographer Crushed by Loyalist Tank”). Essentially, the Republicans, who she supported, killed Gerda Taro.

In her final moments, Taro focuses on her camera, which has been knocked from her grasp, and seems oblivious to her impending death. In the drawing, the Republicans are engaged in a retreat rather than a counter-attack, running away from the explosions and dust-filled chaos behind them. Although she wears the androgynous \textit{mono} characteristic of Republican supporters, Taro’s thin ankles and the fact that the \textit{mono} is filled out on top hint at her femaleness. The shells exploding in mid-air add a kung-pow comic book effect to the serious depiction of war,

\textsuperscript{21} Dorothy Parker’s short story, “Who Might Be Interested,” about a writer raising funds for the Republicans, portrays this confusion to comic, if sarcastic, effect. See chapter 4 for a more extended treatment of this story.
reminding the viewer of the ephemeral, disposable nature of the gum card…and of women’s artistic production, of the gendered witness, and of lives in war.

The description of her death matches this visual depiction of comic book catastrophe. The tank is called a “creeping, shell-splitting monster” and Taro is a “daring young woman,” bird-like, who is bumped “from her perch and […] crushed beneath [the tank’s] revolving lugs!” (“Woman Photographer Crushed by Loyalist Tank”). The tank’s “lugs” and its specialized, militaristic language contrasts disconcertingly with the imagery evoked in describing Taro as a bird who failed to fly away in time. The exclamation point that punctuates the sentence underscores the sensationalism and spectacle of Taro’s death. As Bart Vautour, editor of Ted Allan’s novel This Better Earth, points out, for a card claiming to represent the “True Stories of Modern Warfare,” the facts of Taro’s death are wrong: Capa was not by her side in hospital, and he was not her husband-photographer (xx).

Capa created a documentary photography book Death in the Making, similar to Eskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-While’s You Have Seen Their Faces (1937), as a way to cope with Taro’s death. Death in the Making was published in 1938, with photographs by Capa and Taro. As Vautour explains, “True to the spirit of their collaboration, the photos are not attributed to either Capa or Taro” (xxi). Capa wrote the captions, and Jay Allen, Chicago Tribune correspondent during the Spanish Civil War, wrote the preface and translated Capa’s work. André Kertesz, another well-known Hungarian photographer, arranged the text and images. These details underscore the intimacy of the photobook’s creation, for all these men knew Taro, and worked with what Jeff Allred describes as “the nonspontaneous work of captioning, layout, and other textual manipulation” (19). These men – Capa, Kertesz, and Allen – were
photojournalists and correspondents in Spain with Taro. This photobook as much memorializes Taro’s life and artistic production as it serves to memorialize their own experiences in the war.

In the preface, Allen describes the first time he met Taro. Allen had descended into the “grill room” of the Hotel Gran Via, noticing Taro in “an alcove in a corner with a crowd of French correspondents” (n. pag). He writes:

I was to have taken her a message. I did not and I am sorry. I did not because she had become a legend to me already and it is not wise to meet the physical reality of those who have become legends too soon. Now she is legend indeed. Disembodied, legends flourish best. Legends? There is no knowing how they come into being. From out of the million acts of heroism performed by humble people every day, they do arise and it is usually when there are men there to write and sing the deed. For love sometimes. I may be wrong but I feel that Gerda Taro, already legend in the last of the world capitals, Madrid, will grow. Much will be written and much more unwritten until later. (n. pag)

Allen’s description of legends is Hemingway-esque, with its bare-bones sentiment of the everyday heroism by “humble people” and those men who “write and sing the deed.” He makes Taro’s death almost inevitable, for she had become legend “too soon” and “legends flourish best” disembodied.

This was not the case with Taro’s legacy, however. Taro was buried in the Parisian Père-Lachaise cemetery. According to Bernard Lebrun and Michel Lefebvre, the French Communist Party commissioned sculptor Alberto Giacometti to design her tomb; he created a limestone structure with a cup and a falcon, representing the Egyptian god Horus, a symbol of immortality (141). It seems that in death, Taro became associated with all manner of birds: skylarks and falcons, most notably. Ce soir asked that an epitaph be engraved on Taro’s tomb: “Gerda Taro – photographer for Ce soir – died July 25, 1937, on the front at Brunete, Spain, while doing her job” (Lebrun and Lefebvre 141). The emphasis on Taro’s profession has an almost twenty-first
century feel to it, as does the fact that this job killed her. As Jay Allen predicted, Taro’s legacy was, indeed, unwritten. The inscription on Taro’s tomb, indicating who she was and what she died for, was chiseled away in August 1942 at the command of the Nazi occupants of Paris.

It has not been restored.

***

Taro’s work and death exemplify several aspects of gendered witnessing. All these representations form the half of gendered witnessing that is the representational aspect of this concept – what subjects are being portrayed, and how? Most intriguingly, Taro experimented with techniques of gendered witnessing and altered her strategy for representations when these had a negative effect. This correction can be seen in how she photographed the milicianas on the beach, showing them as women with agency – like Taro herself, breaking into a masculine profession – but then realized that international audiences were not ready for the gender-bending these Spanish militia-women were doing. Ultimately, framing the women as beings with agency did not gain international sympathy. The women were seen to be too capable to be victims; and the Republic was therefore criticized for being too different from the other democracies – England, France – where gender norms still prevailed. Her photographs failed to engage the viewers to the Republican cause; the women did not appear vulnerable. Taro changed her approach, and in doing so, became a gendered witness.

Even though she changed her approach to documenting the Spanish Civil War, she did not whole-heartedly abandon the endeavor to record the gender norms in Spain, as can be seen in her photograph of refugees. Like with the milicianas, it is the cropping and arrangement of Taro’s work that changes the photographs into propaganda, and manipulates how the humanitarian imagination is or is not effected. Because of the fact that cropping and arrangement
were out of her hands, Taro learned to frame the politics of the Spanish war in more subtle ways, like using the figures as metaphors. Taro understood that only certain types of war victims prick the conscience of humanitarian viewers, through the ways in which these images were manipulated. Despite the fact that dead children, victims of the atrocity of aerial bombing of civilians were printed on propaganda posters, Taro’s most heartbreaking image, of the child refugee, gained no attention.

An integral part of gendered witnessing is embodied risk: actually being at the scene of violence or war, and bringing one’s subject position along as one creates the representations. This other aspect of gendered witnessing – embodied risk – sadly caused Taro to lose her life in the course of photographing the battle of Brunete. Sadder still, Taro’s independent life as Capa’s collaborator (not wife) and her agency as a war photographer were obscured by her contemporaries and by history. Her pseudonym, her artist name, once chosen because it allowed her to craft her own identity as a professional, became a projection of other people’s desires: a Joan of Arc for la Causa. She was subsumed into a being a legend, and then she was erased from history.
Chapter Three

Martha Gellhorn and Frances Davis Report

Louis Delaprée was the correspondent in the Republican zone for *Paris-Soir*, a large circulation daily French newspaper and he was frustrated. Delaprée had arrived in Spain on July 22, 1936, reported briefly from Nationalist territory, and then crossed over to Republican Spain where he continued reporting the war for *Paris-Soir* (Minchom). In November, he found himself in Madrid, under the siege of bombs. He was becoming more and more passionate about his subject, and yet, Delaprée was leaving Spain. Delaprée’s message in the telegram, which had been privately communicated to his *Paris-Soir* editor, is plainly vitriolic. Delaprée writes to *Paris-Soir*:

> You have not published half my articles. That is your right. But I would have thought your friendship would have spared me useless work. For three weeks I have been getting up at 5 a.m. in order to give you the news for your first editions. You have made me work for the wastepaper basket. Thanks. I am taking a plane on Sunday unless I meet the fate of Guy de Traversay, which would be a good thing, wouldn’t it, for thus you should have your martyr also. In the meantime, I am sending nothing more. It is not worth the trouble. The massacre of a hundred Spanish children is less interesting than a sigh from Mrs Simpson. (Preston 38)

This is historian Paul Preston’s translation of the telegram. Scholar Martin Minchom, in his translations of Louis Delaprée’s unpublished Spanish Civil War reporting, elaborates on the hot emotions in the telegram by first examining the original French: “‘Le massacre de cent gosses espagnols est moins intéressant qu’un soupir de Mrs Simpson, putain royale.’ The last two words were omitted from published versions, and disappeared from the historical literature. Pierre Lazareff, the head of *Paris-Soir*’s news service, later claimed that Delaprée would never have used […] this kind of language. But he did: the words are perfectly visible in the telegram’s facsimile that the rival newspaper *L’Humanité* published on 31 December 1936.” “Putain royale”
is also omitted from the pamphlet published of Delaprée’s reports in 1937, an omission which makes this telegram’s reproduction on the front page of *L’Humanité* all the more striking for its authenticity.

Frivolity commands the headlines. The affair between Mrs. Simpson and Edward VIII, King of England in 1936, drew more attention than the civil war in Spain and its victims – at least, that is Delaprée’s assumption and accusation. Whether or not Delaprée’s perception is true, his contrast of the massacre of the “hundred Spanish children” to the intangible impermanence of Mrs. Simpson’s sigh reveals the life-and-death stakes of his reporting. It is important, also, to note that Delaprée was writing to a *French* audience, for whom the abdication crisis would be as equally foreign the child victims of the Spanish civil war – each equally spectacular in their implications for foreign policy and equally – if differently – gripping developments of each. But Delaprée, putting himself at risk daily in order to write for *Paris-Soir* sees every difference.

Like Delaprée, Americans Frances Davis and Martha Gellhorn reported the Spanish Civil War from Spain, experiencing that same level of risk. Davis and Gellhorn were in Spain under different circumstances: Davis reported from the Nationalist side and did not arrive in Spain with credentials; Gellhorn reported from the Republican side and arrived *with* credentials from *Collier’s Weekly*. In Nationalist territory, Davis had limited access to the front and many more challenges than Gellhorn to her reporting based on the fact that she was a woman. As a result, she used her femininity strategically, underscoring how the performativity of gender comes into play when gendered witnessing is enacted in a highly rigid, gender normative context. Davis’s representations from her memoirs show that her representations of Spain – what she writes with sympathy – are what she does not get to experience first-hand: the Republican side, with which she ends up deeply identifying. Gellhorn, on the opposing, Republican side of the conflict,
experiences the Spanish Civil War very differently from Davis. Gellhorn has access to the front, and she is able to report what she sees and what she wants. Those reports for *Collier’s* turned out to be the human-interest stories that Davis set out to report. These human-interest stories – the descriptions of conditions in civilian Spain during the war – continue and contribute to the humanitarian imagination, a concept also tapped into by Horna and Taro. These articles borrow from the visual, such as using cinematic techniques, to create affective appeals to American and British readers.

***

In his private cable, Delaprée expresses the superficiality of the publication’s priorities. Delaprée is tired of reporting the atrocities of the Spanish war to no avail; he sarcastically mentions becoming a “martyr” like Guy de Traversay, a fellow French reporter for *L’Intransigeant*, a rival newspaper of *Paris-Soir*. On August 16, 1936, Traversay accompanied Captain Alberto Bayo’s Republican forces as they counter-invaded the Balearic Islands in the hopes of winning them from Nationalist forces (Southworth 416 n. 12). The counter-invasion was expelled after seventeen days of fighting (Southworth 416 n. 12). Although he protested that he was a French journalist doing his work, Traversay had on him a recommendation from the Catalan Generalitat, which was enough to condemn him in the eyes of the Nationalist soldiers (Bernanos 194-195 qtd. in Southworth 416 n. 12). Traversay was shot on the beach with the Republican prisoners. Their bodies were burned. (Southworth 416 n. 12).

One of the first foreign journalists to be killed in action, even despite his credentials as a journalist, Traversay’s death and its circumstances would haunt foreigners reporting the war. Delapréé’s death by plane crash would remind foreign journalists that nothing was secure, nothing was safe. The implications of the word “martyr” are not to be underestimated – its
origins in Greek, μάρτυς, mean “witness” and a now-rare meaning of the word is “A person who bears witness for a belief.” (OED). Delaprée’s self-comparison to Traversay days before his own death chills the reader, particularly knowing Delaprée’s level of frustration as he left Spain and why. The antiquated meaning of “martyr” necessitated an embodied testimony of belief resulting in death; in this case, Delaprée was an unintended martyr, whose embodied testimony as a reporter resulted in his death.

Delaprée’s telegram to his Paris-Soir editor from Spain reveals the working conditions of foreign journalists in Spain: the role of the censors in managing reportage of the Spanish Civil War (early morning calls to Paris to file their reports and the authentication of their articles with official censor stamps); their frustrations with their home publications and home audiences; and the overwhelming investment in the outcome of the war – in advocating for their political beliefs and representing the violence in Spain. Reporters on the ground in Spain, regardless of the side they reported for, used visual techniques “to put before [readers’] eyes” the scenes they had witnessed. They, like Delaprée, offer their embodied testimony, claiming that the first-hand experience gives their reports an authenticity and veracity missing from other documents from Spain. This embodied testimony is the first step toward gendered witnessing. Delaprée’s death, like Traversay’s, emphasizes the high level of bodily risk and danger foreign journalists experienced in Spain in order to write these reports.

All these circumstances held true for the women reporters who went to Spain to report the war. The Spanish Civil War was the first war where women were granted access to the front; this access was regulated differently depending on which side of the war the journalists were stationed, but it was access nonetheless. Taking advantage of this access, seizing the opportunity to be part of a political cause they believed in, and wanting to break into the newspaper business,
women journalists such as Virginia Cowles, Martha Gellhorn, Frances Davis, and Josephine Herbst all went to Spain to report on the war. Some were affiliated with newspapers before they arrived, carrying credentials from American and British editors, such as Martha Gellhorn; others hoped to get to Spain, write up stories, mail them directly to newspapers and get published, such as Frances Davis. Access mostly depended on money to buy gas and requisition a driver and a car. Male journalists, with their generally more-established bylines, had more financial support from their newspapers and could thus afford the means of reporting the front. Because many male journalists also arrived in Spain affiliated with newspapers and possessing credentials, they had first priority in line for the expensive telephone calls and telegrams that allowed them to publish their stories quickly.

And they needed to publish their stories quickly. At the beginning of the war, journalists were not only expected to report “the truth” as they witnessed it, but also to address the need, or not, for foreign intervention in the Spanish Civil War – to speak to the political ideologies of their foreign audiences and bring those political lenses to bear in what they were seeing in Spain. The role of their testimonials as journalists was, in the words of Leigh Gilmore, “to particularize violence, to give it not only a human face and form, but a voice, a record made for those who cannot offer an account” (100). Because of their seemingly impartial positions as journalists, they were expected to give testimony.

***

Martha Gellhorn began her long and distinguished career as a war reporter during the Spanish Civil War. Born in St. Louis in 1908, Gellhorn knew she had a talent for reporting injustice even during her short stint as a junior reporter – and only woman journalist – at the *Albany Times Union* newspaper in New York at age 21. In the mid-1930s, Gellhorn worked with
the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), a New Deal program that provided financial support to those most affected by the Depression. A chief administrator of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal and a close advisor to President, Harry Hopkins, wanted “to learn things about the depression that no amount of facts would ever teach him” (Gellhorn 76). To that end, Hopkins began recruiting newspaper reporters, novelists, and writers, “people accustomed to listening to what people said and writing it all down simply and clearly” (Gellhorn 76).

Newcomers were assigned a region or a major city and its surroundings, and in many ways, this governmental arm of reporting the Depression provided an entryway for women reporters into the profession. Twenty-five years old, Gellhorn was one of the youngest of the investigators and the sixteenth recruit, hired as a field investigator to report on the working and living conditions of the mill towns in the Carolinas and New England (Gellhorn 76). Regardless of their background or their assignment, the investigators were given the same instructions, “go to wherever unemployment and poverty are to be found; talk to everyone you see; write down what they tell you and what your impressions are; and send it in” (Gellhorn 76). With these instructions, Gellhorn would develop her writing voice.

This writing voice was straightforward, “a careful selection of scenes and quotes, set down plainly and without hyperbole” (Gellhorn 76). This description is rather straightforward journalistic prose. None of this is particularly exceptional or distinctive to Gellhorn. Yet, her biographer, Caroline Moorehead, describes how the experience reporting for FERA brought out Gellhorn’s unique voice:

---

22 According to Moorehead in her biography of Gellhorn, some of these women included, “Louisa Wilson, daughter of a missionary to China, a star Washington profile writer, whose girlish clothes and manner concealed ambition and determination; Wilson was assigned to the automobile centers of Detroit and Michigan, and to Ohio. There was Ernestine Ball, the reporter known for her series of articles about Aimee Semple McPherson, the religious revivalist. She was given upstate New York” (Gellhorn 76). Although Gellhorn had some experience reporting and writing, at this time, these women writers in her coterie of FERA reporters were more known for their journalism.
What made [this reporting style] her own was the tone, the barely contained fury and indignation at the injustice of fate and man against the poor, the weak, the dispossessed. Nothing so enraged her as bullying, superiority, the misuse of power; nothing touched her so sharply as people who had become victims, though the stupidity or casual brutality of others, or children who were frightened, in pain, or who did not have enough to eat. [...] For the next sixty years, in wars, in slums, in refugee camps, she used this voice again and again, handling it with such a sure ear for nuance that only very rarely did she stray over that fine line into the mawkish or shrill. Unmistakably, it became her hallmark. (76-77)

This voice would indeed serve her well in Spain, where war precipitated all these conditions that caught her eye and provoked her pen.

Gellhorn was fired from her FERA job in 1934. In Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, she had a conversation with a group of men, former farmers and ranchers, who were being exploited by a relief contractor who arranged long periods of unemployment, and therefore, no work (Gellhorn 83). While buying them beers, Gellhorn said that the way to draw attention to their plight was to do something dramatic, “like breaking the windows of the FERA office” (Gellhorn 83). The next day, Gellhorn travelled to Seattle, and the men did just what she suggested, launching a FBI investigation at what could be a possible Communist uprising (Gellhorn 83). The contractor was eventually arrested for fraud and the men went back to work, but Gellhorn was recalled to Washington and “honorably discharged,” in her words.

The Roosevelts invited her to stay with them at the White House after she left the FERA, where she cultivated a relationship with Eleanor Roosevelt, a friend of Gellhorn’s mother, Edna.23 The relationship between Martha Gellhorn and Eleanor Roosevelt, forged during her time with FERA and afterward, would be central to Gellhorn’s life. The pair kept a

---

23 Edna Gellhorn and Eleanor Roosevelt were fellow Democratic, suffragist activists; Edna was in many ways Eleanor Roosevelt’s representative in St. Louis and its surrounding areas.
correspondence throughout Roosevelt’s long life. Indeed, Eleanor Roosevelt was one of the few people Gellhorn wrote during her time in Spain. Perhaps she believed that writing to Eleanor Roosevelt allowed her access to the White House as she advocated for Spain during the civil war.

In the following months, Gellhorn worked to transform the investigations and reports from the FERA into work with a broader audience. Moorehead describes Gellhorn’s state of mind:

The material was fresh, dramatic, and intensely present in her mind. It was a question of distilling it. She had been haunted by what she had seen; now, she had to haunt others. She decided to cast it as fiction, on the grounds, she told an interviewer later, that the way you make facts come alive is by showing their effects on people, through stories, though her characters were so closely modeled on real people that they were for all purposes real. (Gellhorn 87-88)

These investigations and reports for FERA provided material for a successful collection of four novellas, *The Trouble I’ve Seen*, published in September 1935 and “hailed as the literary discovery of the year” (Gellhorn 104). Eleanor Roosevelt, in her syndicated “My Day” newspaper column wrote of the collection, “I cannot tell you how Martha Gellhorn, young, pretty, college graduate, good home, more or less Junior League background, with a touch of exquisite Paris clothes and ‘espirit’ throw in, can write as she does. She has an understanding of many people, and many situations, and she can make them live for us. Let us be thankful she can” (qtd. in Selected Letters 37). In this description, Roosevelt vouches for Gellhorn’s ability to

---

24 Moorehead writes about this dynamic, “At night, after the guests had left […] Martha sometimes sat in Mrs. Roosevelt’s exceptionally austere room at the end of the corridor, still in evening dress, helping her to answer her vast pile of mail. Anything relating to Missouri went off to Edna [Gellhorn] to be dealt with in St. Louis, as Mrs. Roosevelt used her friends around the country as informal helpers” (Gellhorn 85). Eleanor Roosevelt often received letters from people in trouble, appealing to her on the brink of despair – copies of these some of these letters wound up in Gellhorn’s own files.

25 In her edition of Gellhorn’s selected letters, Moorehead writes, “More than a hundred long letters from Martha to Mrs. Roosevelt survive; the replies, though often short, were affectionate, robust, and solicitous” (Letters 29).

26 Gellhorn had enrolled at Bryn Mawr College, her mother’s alma mater, but left after her junior year and never graduated.
transcend her upper-class, all-American background as she writes about the darker side of the Depression. With her fine eye for details and ability to write difficult situations sympathetically, Gellhorn established her literary reputation.

***

She was 29 years old when she became interested in Spain through conversations with Ernest Hemingway. Unlike many motivated to see the Spanish Civil War firsthand, Gellhorn was not drawn to the politics of Spain; at the time, she cared more about reporting the factual conditions of war and poverty than upholding a political ideology. Back in 1934, Gellhorn describes herself as “a pacifist and it interfered with my principles to use my eyes” (14). But by the time 1936 came around, “no amount of clinging to principles helped me; I saw what these bullying Nazi louts were like and were up to. […] I had stopped being a pacifist and become an anti-fascist” (14). Influenced by her own recent experiences in fascist Europe with her long-term romantic interest, Bertrand de Jouvenel, and by this revelation of anti-fascism, Gellhorn decided to go to Spain. Collier’s Weekly magazine provided her with journalistic credentials, and she arrived in Spain in the spring of 1937. After a few months in Madrid, visiting the front and making careful observations of Spanish life at war, Gellhorn began writing articles about Madrid in war-time, putting to use her keen powers of observation and understated contrasts to represent the war to readers abroad.

When she arrived in Spain, Gellhorn described herself as “an unscathed tourist of wars [tagging] along behind the war correspondents, experienced men who had serious work to do” (16). After a few months, Hemingway suggested that she write about daily life in Madrid to support La Causa, for “it was not everybody’s daily life” (The Face of War 16; Selected Letters

27 Gellhorn would become Hemingway’s third wife in 1940, having started their affair in Spain.
Gellhorn explains that she chose these three pieces because they focus on civilian life during total war (16). Collier’s Weekly published titles with her pieces; in The Face of War, Gellhorn changed those titles because she did not like them, “a trifling price to pay for the freedom Collier’s gave me” (16). Collier’s was a very successful magazine with a large circulation and which paid quite well; Gellhorn was fortunate to have access to them to publish her columns (Selected Letters 49).

Gellhorn titled the first piece in the three-piece collection “High Explosive for Everyone” and it was published in July 1937. I include the following passage, while substantial in length, to demonstrate Gellhorn’s use of visual techniques in her writing and her position as a gendered witness. In this piece, Gellhorn has been describing shelling in the Plaza Major, one of the main squares in Madrid, and how people adjust their behavior to the suddenness of the shelling:

Then for a moment it stops. An old woman, with a shawl over her shoulders, holding a terrified thin little boy by the hand, runs out into the square. You know what she is thinking: she is thinking she must get the child home, you are always safer in your own place, with the things you know. Somehow you do not believe you can get killed when you are sitting in your own parlor, you never think that. She is in the middle of the square when the next one comes. A small piece of twisted steel, hot and very sharp, sprays off from the shell; it takes the little boy in the throat. The old woman stands there, holding the hand of the dead child, looking at him stupidly, not saying anything, and men run out toward her to carry the child. At their left, at the side of the square, is a huge brilliant sign which says: GET OUT OF MADRID. (22-23)

Gellhorn places the reader in the scene with the little boy as the old woman, emphasizing the common humanity between the old woman and the reader with “You know what she is thinking” and continuing to use the second person throughout the passage. She highlights the familiarity of certain objects – “you are always safer in your own place, with the things you know” and in doing so, Gellhorn underscores the terror of urban shelling, for it is a thing they don’t know, a
thing out of place among children and old women – “the small piece of twisted shell, hot and very sharp” – that kills the little boy. The scene becomes gruesomely ironic as the narrator “pans” – to emphasize the cinematic nature of the description – up to the huge brilliant sign, GET OUT OF MADRID. Gellhorn’s focus on the old woman and the child, describing their harrowing journey across a once-safe space, is still striking, but not unusual to us, modern readers. This familiarity with air-borne violence and its representations was not always so, however, and I argue that the Spanish Civil War, with its photographic and textual representations of dead children and other war victims stunned their viewers and readers, contributing and indeed shaping our understanding of human rights.

The last piece in The Face of War is “The Third Winter,” published in November 1938 and set in Barcelona. The war had been going on for almost two and a half years. Gellhorn had left Spain, with “a huge job to do in Czechoslovakia, England, and France for Collier’s” but she returned (Selected Letters 60). By this point in the war, the Republican Catalan territory in Spain had been cut in two, with Barcelona separated from Valencia and Madrid by Nationalist forces. (See Figure 2.3 for the state of play in November 1938).

In “The Third Winter,” Gellhorn visits the multi-generational Hernández family in their home, recording her conversation with them about the war and the family’s circumstances in braving the difficulties. Gellhorn breaks open the structure of a traditional article by interjecting long paragraphs in parentheticals, transporting the reader away from the Hernández home and into other parts of Barcelona. In a letter to Charles Coleburgh, an editor at Collier’s, Gellhorn describes her approach to “The Third Winter”:

But the rub is food and the civil population. So I spent two very grim weeks going into vast detail on the life of the little man and his family and how they are facing the third cold hungry winter. […] I took one typical Barcelona family […] and followed it
through all the ramifications of a wartime daily life. So the story goes like a novel from a children’s hospital where the seven months old kids have t.b. from undernourishment, to the front where the division commander is a fine 26 year old boy who was an electrician three years ago. *(Selected Letters 71)*

Gellhorn uses this technique mostly to relate what is happening outside of the home in different locations – the food lines at shops, the International Brigades leaving Spain, or visiting the opera or the cinema because such activities distract from starvation, etc. – to what is happening *inside* the home. Gellhorn fuses the public and the private with this technique, demonstrating how in total war, the boundary (and safety) between these spaces is porous. The parentheticals are used to highlight the parallel lives the civilians are living: as regular non-combatant Spaniards but also, because of the nature of total war, as potential carnage and victims.

The long parentheticals also create an impression of both a visual break in the narrative and a superimposition, like the photography techniques used by Kati Horna in representing Barcelona at war in her photomontages. While Gellhorn does not create a montage, a rapid-fire, fragmented textual narrative, with her parentheticals, she does effectively represent the interruption of the war visually. Gellhorn begins the piece with a Surrealist jolt, “In Barcelona, it was perfect bombing weather. The cafés along the Ramblas were crowded. There was nothing much to drink; […] There was, of course, nothing to eat. Everyone was out enjoying the cold afternoon sunlight. No bombers had come over for at least two hours” (37). In this opening, the visual works on two levels. The first is simply to note that the high visibility – clear and bright – is considered “perfect bombing weather.” Unlike the kind of visibility that comes from witnessing or advocating for the humanitarian intervention, this is a negative sort of visibility, facilitating death rather than working against it. The visual works on a second level, as well: to underscore the Surrealist reality of war. As Gellhorn travels to the Hernández’s house, she passes
one of the busiest and most cosmopolitan streets in Barcelona, las Ramblas, where everyone is out at the cafés but no one can eat or drink because of war shortages. This description almost indicates a cinematic, stage-set quality to the war in Barcelona: people are going about doing what they would normally be doing, but it is fake and unfulfilled, like an advertisement for normalcy.

In addition to the specter of normalcy in the streets, Gellhorn found the Hernández’s house in a similar state. Gellhorn goes the Hernández’s house to investigate the status of a picture frame for a friend that she has ordered from the owner. As they discuss the frame and the Hernández family, Gellhorn uses the conversation topics to transport the reader to other locations in Barcelona. These locations provide a humanitarian insight into daily life in war-torn Barcelona. What Gellhorn notices and how she represents her impressions to the readers of Collier’s are important because this combination of noticing and representing is what constitutes Gellhorn as a gendered witness.

Miguel, the young Hernández boy, mentions that what he does all day is “stand in the food line” to help his grandmother (Gellhorn 38). Gellhorn asks him if he likes it, and he replies, “‘When they fight,’ he said, laughing to himself, ‘it is fun.’” (38). The grandmother, shocked, explains to Gellhorn that Miguel “does not understand. […] He is only ten. The poor people – so hungry sometimes they quarrel among themselves, not knowing what they do” (38).

Immediately, there is a jump into the first parenthetical, which focuses on the food lines at the shops. Gellhorn writes, “Sometimes when the shop runs out of food before everyone is served, the women [in the queue] are wild with grief, afraid to go home with nothing. Then there’s trouble” (39). In the midst of this starving queuing line of women and children, “the girls behind the counter look healthy because they are wearing rouge” (Gellhorn 39). Like in the streets, there
is a façade of normalcy – in this case, literally, painted over – so that the circumstances of the war do not seem so apparent and visible. Gellhorn’s trained eye as a former fashion reporter for *Vogue* picks up on these more nuanced details.

The next parenthetical shifts from the non-combatant space of the food lines to the retreat of the International Brigades. In September 1938, the International Brigades left Spain, prompted by the Republican government in an effort to shame Franco into *not* accepting foreign aid such as Italian soldiers and German bombers, and equally, to shame the United States, Great Britain, and France into sending military aid to the Republican side.28 The passage highlights how the main interaction between civilians and International Brigadiers was through eyesight, “all the Spanish people thanked them somehow, sometimes only by the way they watched the parade passing” (Gellhorn 40-41). Because of the language barrier between the International Brigadiers (who do not speak Spanish or Catalan fluently) and the Spaniards, reading expressions and how the Spaniards watch to honor the Brigades is important. What Gellhorn underscores in this passage is the necessity of using the visual in this cross-cultural encounter, and that these details could only be seen first-hand, as someone who is herself a foreigner and using this interplay of eyesight with others to communicate. She also notes that International Brigadiers may be leaving Spain for a longer war, “[…] many of them had no country to go back to. The German and Italian anti-Fascists were already refugees; the Hungarians had no home either. Leaving Spain, for most of the European volunteers, was to go into exile” (41). Gellhorn, from her position as witness and her awareness of European geopolitics, understands how these men can be easily transformed from soldier to refugee, from an actor with agency to victim of the state without agency. She wonders especially about “what happened to the German who was the best man for

---

28 This strategy did not work. When the article was printed in 1938, Italian planes were bombing Barcelona (Gellhorn 40).
night patrols in the 11th International Brigade. He was a somber man, whose teeth were irregularly broken, whose fingertips were nailless pulp; the first graduate of Gestapo torture I had known” (Gellhorn 41). Gellhorn dwells on this man, out of the many Brigadiers leaving Spain, because his embodied self illustrates this multiplicity of identity and tension of being soldier/refugee/torture victim all at once. This tension adds a shade of complexity to the humanitarian imagination, as the gendered war victim tends not to be the masculine soldier with agency. The German was an excellent soldier; he is also, now, in need to aid because he cannot return to Germany. She complicates what might have been a simple portrayal of soldiers in a farewell parade out of Barcelona by focusing what the future held for them, and by showing how important eyesight and the visual are for communication in this war.

The conversation that frames that parenthetical is about the army, and the Hernández men that are fighting on the Republican side. The baby has been in a corner, quietly entertained by her mother, Lola, herself described as a girl. Gellhorn glimpses at the child and notes, “The face seemed shrunked and faded, and bluish eyelids rested lightly shut on the eyes. The child was too weak to cry. It fretted softly, with closed eyes, and we all watched it […]” (42). Looking at the child, Gellhorn’s third parenthetical jumps to the children’s building, also known as a pavilion, of the main Barcelona hospital. This is the longest interjection in the article, lasting for over ten long, descriptive paragraphs with some dialogue mixed in. She writes, “I did not want to come, really. I knew the statistics, the statistics were enough for me” (42). Gellhorn enumerates that of the 870,000 school-age children in Catalonia, more than 400,000 were on the range of “bad nutrition” to “pre-famine” (42). As she enters the pavilion, she notes, “I thought the statistics were no doubt mild, and I did not want to think at all about Madrid, about the swift dark laughing children in Madrid. I did not want to imagine how hunger had deformed them” (42).
This parenthetical opens with a classic trope of war narrative: emphasizing how the numbers or statistics (of reported dead, of wounded, of victims) do not reflect the situation’s desperateness as it would if a person were there, seeing the people and not the numbers, and that behind each number is a person. Notably, she does not want to imagine the effects of hunger on the children of Madrid, who had been enduring the siege of that city for two and a half years. By suggesting her reluctance to even think about the Madrid children, and in using the word “deformed,” Gellhorn emphasizes the humanitarian urgency behind her report. The reader, in turn, is prompted to imagine the children of Madrid, an interesting maneuver given that it is based on absence and imagination, rather than Gellhorn’s descriptions of a situation she witnesses.

The parenthetical about the children’s pavilion in the hospital is one of the strongest moments of Gellhorn’s gendered witnessing. Gellhorn does not reveal whether it is the fact that she is a woman reporter that prompts the Spaniards to take her to the children’s wing. Perhaps the Spaniards thought that as a woman, she would be more interested in seeing the war’s effect on the children. She is not alone in her tour; although she is not specific about who is with her, she does mention “we” as the nurses escort them through the pavilion. Regardless of whether or not her womanhood was a reason for her visit to the hospital, what Gellhorn portrays here is gendered witnessing, which is a result of her position as a woman reporter in war. As she moves through the hospital with the nurses and meets children, Gellhorn notes, “There was not one child in the hospital for any peacetime reason, tonsils or adenoids or mastoid or appendicitis. These children were all wounded” (42-43). The threat of children’s deaths by aerial bombardment was plastered on propaganda posters in Britain and in France – there was a famous
and horrific poster of a child’s dead body declaring, “Your Children Will Be Next.” In this long passage, Gellhorn underscores the consequences of war besides the immediate lethality of aerial bombing: wounded children, death by starvation, illness.

Famine and disease have long been present in portrayals of war. What makes Gellhorn’s passage interesting and different is that children – traditionally non-combatants – endure effects of war just like the soldiers fighting it. But their vulnerability and subject position as children is what is emphasized. They are not framed as “brave” like the soldiers or possessing agency in the war, but rather, someone that war happens to. The wounded and orphaned children of Spain were among the first non-combatants to be seen and understood as war victims. The perilous position of these children and their health puts the future of Spain – of the continuation of the nation – at risk. As these children were European and wounded at the hand of indiscriminate bombardments, fellow Europeans, fearful of the effects of total war, could easily imagine their own children suffering similar fates. This is one reason raising money for Spanish children on the Republican side was so successful and why the British took in a number of orphaned Spanish refugee children. The appeal to the nascent humanitarian imagination with action as a result is similar to the case of Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother photograph, where individuals who read the story acted on behalf of the pea pickers. The children in Gellhorn’s parenthetical passage become war victims because of their injuries; they become gendered war victims because of their vulnerability.

---

29 In my chapter examining Gerda Taro, the chapter opens with a newspaper page that depicted dead Spanish children, a similar appeal to British viewers.

30 There is a certain amount of complexity around portrayal of children as fighters or soldiers. One thinks of Gavroche, the street urchin in Victor Hugo’s Les Miserables, who joins the students at the barricades and is killed. On the whole, the child as victim has been a sympathetic figure and is not standardly portrayed as an agentic and potential fighter or soldier. It is not until late 20th century when war narratives and visual portrayals of the child soldier became more standard that children – pre-adolescents – are viewed as potential combatants capable of shooting a weapon.
This vulnerability is all the more moving when Gellhorn closes the parenthetical and returns to the Hernández kitchen, where the Hernández grandchild is weak from hunger.

Gellhorn transitions the reader back into the kitchen by saying, “‘Yes, she’s a fine child,’ I said to Lola Hernández, but I thought, maybe we can stop looking at the child, when we all know she’s with hunger and probably will not live until summer. Let’s talk about something else now, just for a change” (45). That “something else” is the opera and the cinema, which the residents of Barcelona attend to take their minds off the air raids, and also because “the only thing you want to spend money on is food, and there is no food, so you might as well go to the opera or to the movies” (Gellhorn 46). The singers are thin, which is strange to see, all the men are old, as the young men are fighting (Gellhorn 46). As Gellhorn’s article reaches its halfway point, the jumps between the Hernández home and the parentheticals become more abrupt, with less time spent with the Hernández family and more writing devoted to other sites in Barcelona. This staccato approach resembles a cinematic cutting back and forth between sites, an editing technique that in this article serves to heighten the contrast between Barcelona locations. The contrast between the children’s hospital and the Barcelona entertainment venues works to demonstrate the pervasive effects of the war on all aspects of civilian life – everyone is hungry – and to show the pursuit of normalcy during total war. Like the beginning of the article, where Gellhorn describes the crowded cafés on Las Ramblas that do not serve food, the scenes at the cinema and at the opera have a slightly surreal quality. To those outside of Spain, it might seem strange that such peacetime pursuits would be so popular. The reason this surreal quality is so effective is because Gellhorn is there, experiencing the same risk as the Barcelona residents and desiring the same entertainment and escapes.

---

31 Although Gellhorn could not have known this, the scenes of watching a movie during an air raid is eerily familiar for the 21st century reader, who is familiar with such scenes from the London Blitz.
The site of the last parenthetical is a munitions factory, prompted by the return of the Hernández’s only daughter, who works in one. Except for the foreman, the factory that Gellhorn visits employs all women and girls. After being shown the work of the factory by a woman, the foreman takes Gellhorn to storeroom for the new shells. She writes, “We admired the shells and at that moment, like a dream or nightmare or a joke, the siren whined out over Barcelona. […] I looked at my companion and he looked at me and smiled (I thinking, foolishly, never forget your manners, walk do not run) and we sauntered out of doors” (48). The dream, nightmare, or joke of being at the shell factory while under the threat of being bombed with shells is grim with irony. Moments like this one are what highlight Gellhorn’s position as a gendered witness. Gellhorn self-consciously criticizes herself for being so casual about the air raid and, absurdly, remembering her manners, but the truth is that “in case a bomb falls around here we won’t even know it” (48). The unspoken implication in this phrase being that a bomb would detonate the shells and the explosives in the factory and everyone would be dead before they realized what had happened. This is a macabre, but true observation, one that is underscored by Gellhorn’s physical presence and vulnerability. She can write these descriptions because she is experiencing them herself, there, in Barcelona. Her first-hand witnessing makes her flesh vulnerable and makes her gendered witnessing possible.

The end of the article reveals Gellhorn’s distance from the circumstances, even though she shares the same risks. Yet, she can leave. Bidding good-bye to the family, Gellhorn looks at them:

I suddenly said, “The third winter is the hardest.”
Then I felt ashamed. They were strong brave people and didn’t need me to say cheering words for them.
“We are all right, Señora,” Mrs. Hernández said, making it clear at once, saying the last word in her home about her family. “We are Spaniards and we have faith in our
Gellhorn’s offer of comfort is rejected. The Hernández matriarch’s last word and her confidence contrast with Gellhorn’s unnecessary encouragement. Gellhorn lets Mrs. Hernández have the final word in the article, as well, leaving the reader with an understanding of the Spanish Republicans’ determination and endurance. Throughout the article, Gellhorn has shared the difficult and dangerous daily circumstances of Barcelona life in November 1938, circumstances that would be daunting and overwhelming…but still the Republican Spaniards believe they can win the war.

From her experiences in the newspaper business and in the FERA, Gellhorn learned how to write in a style that would appeal to the American reader and that would set her apart from her colleagues, male and female. Through the incident with the lynching article, she learned to be careful with the implications of first-hand witnessing and representing that witnessing in a narrative style that uses techniques from fiction – description, dialogue – but is truly reportage, solidly based in fact. In Spain, Gellhorn learned the importance of seeing the war first-hand, and using her narrative skills to move the reader. This first-hand witnessing is flesh-witnessing because her body is just as vulnerable as the Spaniards’; her perspective is influenced by embodied position as an American woman of Jewish heritage. Gellhorn is a gendered witness because of this embodied position and she notices details about the Spanish Civil War and the Spaniards that emphasize their vulnerability.

***

Martha Gellhorn reported from the Republican side of the war. In essence, journalists who reported for progressive papers reported the war from the Republican side; journalists who reported for conservative papers reported from the Nationalist side. Both the Nationalist and
Republican sides had traits in common when it came to dealing with the press: both employed censors and suspected foreign journalists as spies. But on the Nationalist side, these tactics were more severe. Reporters often crossed back into France to call in their stories to the London and Paris press bureaus as a way to escape Nationalist censorship, which was far stricter with respect to content than the Republican side. Because of these frequent border-crossings, one can see how the Nationalists had a heightened suspicion of foreign journalists as possible spies. On the Republican side, journalists would deliver their stories to the censor’s office in Madrid, Valencia, or Barcelona, where they would be edited for military details that could compromise soldiers, and then transmitted on to the newspapers. The censors were Spaniards and often non-native speakers of the journalists’ reporting languages. On the Republican side, the censor’s office was understaffed and overworked. As a result, on both sides, journalists often tried to cheat the censors by using incomprehensible slang or abbreviations to get their articles approved, but still report what they wanted.

Journalists, motivated by their own political interests or by the political stances of their editors or newspapers, would occasionally report exaggerated accounts of battles. Very rarely did newspapers or magazines have reporters on both the Nationalist and Republican side of the war, able to complement their reporting and verify each other’s truth. In this way, the first-hand accounts of the war relied heavily on interpretation and political stances. Reporters would take into account their audiences and skew their reporting to what they believed their readers would want. The fact that periodicals printed lies was very frustrating to the reporters on the ground in Spain, even more frustrating since the reporters were rarely employed by the same periodical – their only recourse was to report their perceptions of the events and facts in their periodicals. Nowhere is this interpretative way of approaching the war clearer than when examining the

The *New York Times* was one of the few newspapers that could afford to support journalists on both sides of the conflict. Carney reported for the *Times* from the Nationalist zone; Matthews, from the Republican side. Much to Matthews’ frustration Carney repeatedly falsified information that would later be published in the *Times* (Preston 158-159). At one point, Carney had claimed that the town of Teruel had fallen to Nationalist forces and even “added colourful details of Franco’s troops occupying the town” (Preston 158). Matthews knew this was not true and grew so incensed that he undertook a perilous three-day journey to Teruel with the photographer Robert Capa to verify that the town was still in Republican hands. Matthews filed a story contradicting Carney’s version and asking Edwin James, the *New York Times*’ managing editor, to address Carney’s lies. As the managing editor, James would often be the one to choose which stories to publish from which side. James mildly reprimanded Carney for inventing facts about the war, but did not take the issue further (Preston 159). The Matthews/Carney/James dynamic illustrates some of the circumstances facing reporters during the war: the managing editor chooses what to print; the fight against propaganda is real; and, in the case of the Spanish Civil War, reportage could often be confused with propaganda.

The strict parameters on the Nationalist side made first-hand reporting difficult. As of Februrary 1938, the *Servicio Nacional de Prensa* (National Press Service) and the *Servicio Nacional de Propaganda* (National Propaganda Service) in Burgos controlled communications in and out of the Nationalist zone (Garcia 51). Before they were transferred to Burgos, the Nationalist Press and Propaganda Services were in Salamanca. The censors’ priorities were “to eliminate all references to internal tensions within [the Nationalist side], Italian and German intervention in the war, and any atrocities committed by the Nationalists” (for example, bombing
cities in the Republican zone) (Garcia 52). A key difference between reporting on the Nationalist and Republican is that on the Nationalist side, the military had no interest in supporting or interacting with journalists. Sir Percival Phillips, special correspondent for the London *Daily Telegraph*, wrote, “I never felt so isolated in any army. I cannot make contacts with anyone. There seems to be a deliberate policy to prevent the British and American correspondents from making any contacts” (qtd. in Preston 150). In May 1937, the *Daily Mail* correspondent Randolph Churchill wrote to a friend complaining about Luis Bolín, General Franco’s chief press officer, while the press office was still in Salamanca: “I wish you’d go back to Salamanca and tell those damn people at the Press Office that they’re losing this war by their idiotic censorship. The Reds have got them beat as far as publicity is concerned” (qtd. in Preston 150). In the Republican zone, journalists did not need military approval to go to the front; they only needed the resources for a car, a driver, and gasoline. Republican soldiers spoke quite freely with journalists. As the war progressed, reporters on the Nationalist side were encouraged to reproduce official military copy, and were often summoned by whistle to stand in rows and hear the daily briefing from Nationalist General Millán Astray (qtd. in Preston 150). Another noticeable difference, reflective of their countries’ mutual interests, is that German, Italian, and Portuguese journalists received preferential treatment in the Nationalist zone, and were instructed not to mingle with Anglophone journalists (Preston 152-153).

The British journalists began complaining of their treatment and restrictions to the Foreign Office. In *The Truth About Spain! Mobilizing British Public Opinion, 1936-1939*, Hugo Garcia writes about the reporters’ frustrations and London’s motivation to do nothing, “in early May 1938 the British Embassy in Hendaye reported that the representatives of *The Times* and Reuters described Pablo Merry del Val [head Nationalist Press Censor] as ‘a monument to
intolerance.’ [...] This crisis did not lead to any repercussions” as the Chamberlain government did not want to jeopardize its good relationship with the Nationalist headquarters (52).

Such were the challenges for foreign journalists reporting on the Nationalist side when Frances Davis, an American woman journalist, crossed into Spain and found herself reporting on that very side. This was an interesting and unfortunate turn of events for Davis. In 1936, she desperately wanted to be a foreign correspondent, but she also believed in progressive ideals, ideals that were in stark contrast to the values espoused on the Nationalist side.

***

Davis had an unusual youth. She was raised on what modern-day scholars would call a commune, although she and the people that lived there or visited called their utopia ‘the Farm.’ The Farm was founded on the principles of utopia common in New England communities in the 19th century. In *A Fearful Innocence*, Davis explains her unusual upbringing as open and accessible to all: “But ‘family’ as the Farm used it meant everyone who came. A shrinkable, extensible, entirely flexible family made up of whoever happened to be living there, for weekends, for months, for years, or forever” (8). There were many frequenters of the Farm, most notably the American journalist and political commentator Walter Lippmann, who would influence Davis’s chosen profession.

When the Spanish Civil War broke out, Davis was in Paris, barely getting by in a cheap pension. She had become acquainted with many of the eager young journalists with their own bylines, but had not had much success herself. In July 1936, Davis was sitting in a popular ex-pat hang-out, the café de Flore, on the Rue de St. Germain, when she heard the announcement of war breaking out in Spain. She hurried back to her pension for her passport and small amount of
money for traveling. Making it to the French-Spanish border town of Hendaye, Davis felt a
bit at a loss as to what to do next. The important thing was to get to Spain, which was
challenging as all the borders closed when the war began. Davis landed on the Nationalist side
purely by coincidence. She reflects in the memoir, “I had made a wild dash from Paris and here I
was in a quiet room, above the quiet town. Somewhere near is Spain. There is a war in Spain.
The thing to do is to get up and go find it” (A Fearful Innocence 132). As she walked outside of
the hotel in Hendaye, Davis saw journalists she knew from Paris discussing how to cross the
border.

Crossing the border could get complicated quickly. One had the option of getting a salvo
conducto, or safe passage form, from the Nationalist army; however, a salvo conducto was only
available in Pamplona, and one needed a salvo conducto to get there (A Fearful Innocence 134).
Once a passport was stamped by one side of the conflict, an examination by the other side could
lead to an accusation of spy or traitor. Often, such accusations led to immediate execution, as the
order of command was still being sorted out on the Republican side; quick decisions were made
by subordinates, and people were commonly executed on whims. Caught on the wrong side with
the wrong papers, one could be shot on sight. Davis had an idea to get into Spain. Her idea was
to make ‘fake passes’ or dazzlers, on the hope that the salvo conducto concept was so new that
none of the subordinate officers between Hendaye and Pamplona had actually seen them yet (A
Fearful Innocence 135). 32 This idea earned her a seat in the car crossing the border, in the
company of several male journalists and their journalist/guide, Harold G. Cardozo, called the

32 In a letter home in October 1936, Davis discusses meeting Julio Álvarez del Vayo, foreign minister for the
Republican government. She describes, “He had seen no one. And then I started a siege of waiting on his hotel
doors. Finally barricaded him and said: “Listen, I’ve been in Spain on the rebel side for the Daily Mail – I’d like
to talk to you!” He ended up offering me a safe conduct to Madrid any time I wanted to go” (Carton 1, Folder
“Correspondence to/from FDC, 1931, 1934-37, n.d.)
Major by his paper – British Northcliffe’s arch-reactionary *London Daily Mail*. Among the six men in the car Ed Taylor of the *Chicago Tribune*, a paper as reactionary for the United States as the *Mail* was for England; Bertrand of Jouvenel – “the elegant sockless one” – of the *Paris Soir* (and also Martha Gellhorn’s first serious beau); and John Elliott of the conservative Republican *New York Herald Tribune* (*A Fearful Innocence* 135). The Major ran the show, coordinating access to the Nationalist troops and arranging transport for the journalists.

When she first arrived in Spain, Davis did not write for either a progressive or conservative newspaper exclusively. It is clear her personal convictions and upbringing were progressive, and if she had her preference, she would want to work for a paper that reflected her own convictions. Only later did she realize her happenstance misfortune, “I had been deposited [in Nationalist territory] by the meanderings of a mountain road; by having come to Spain on a train to Hendaye instead of Perpignan” (139). This random turn of events put her on a path of internal contradiction, for what she was seeing and how she reported the war’s events directly conflicted with her personal viewpoints. This conflict enriches her perspective and highlights her position as a gendered witness because it emphasizes the importance of Davis’s both *being in Spain* to experience the war first-hand and how her embodied position – with her progressive history – makes this gendered witnessing so difficult for her.

Shortly after her linking up with the male journalists, the London *Daily Mail*, Cardozo’s employer, picked up her stories because they were impressed with her abilities to assist the Major in filing his articles. The editor also recognized her unique situation, being one of (if not the only) foreign woman journalist on the Nationalist side. Davis was very grateful for employment, and to be reporting for a newspaper at all. But, the *Daily Mail* was not the one she
ideally wanted. Her chagrin is mentioned in a letter to her family dated September 15, 1936, when she had briefly left Spain for England:

> Coming over on the channel boat [from France to England] the passport inspector sent word I was to be detained. He finally appeared to say “I recognized your name. I’ve read your stories in the Daily Mail. I hope you won’t think me un-intelligent because I read the Daily Mail.” What could I answer but that I hoped he wouldn’t think me unintelligent because I had written for the Daily Mail.³³

When she crossed the frontier, Davis found that very few of her fellow male journalists could tell her anything about Spanish history. John Elliott, the reporter for the *New York Herald Tribune*, informed the group of journalists about the historical and political context of the war (140). Essentially ignorant of what the different sides represented, Davis was shocked by the militant Catholicism characteristic of the Nationalist troops.

> Drawn from her first encounter with the troops, this example illustrates Davis’s growing unease with the Nationalist side. The journalists are in a car together, heading to the front:

> We sped past groups of young exultant soldiers with newly issued arms. “Arriba España!” they cried. “Arriba España!” we called in answer. This exchange with strangers moved and excited de Jouvenel and me. We were caught up in a surge of brotherhood. But I began to realize that sewn to the tunics of these young troops were medallions of Christ crowned, with thorns, weeping bloody tears. I shivered. I had never seen faith and blood as one before; innocent that I was, bred in the pallid religion of humanity. (139)

At first, Davis welcomed this call-and-response exchange with the soldiers, as did her fellow journalist Bertrand de Jouvenel. Davis is grateful for a sense of belonging, of brotherhood. She feels as if she is part of something bigger, an echo of her communal upbringing in New England. This is the sort of affective belonging that she felt when she saw the male journalists outside of the hotel on the French border. She has an excitement to be somewhere foreign and different, but to still belong. This sense of community quickly sours when Davis’s eye zooms in closer to the

³³ From Carton 1, folder “Correspondence to/from FDC, 1931, 1934-37, n.d. (some incomplete)”
soldiers and notices the Catholic religious iconography on their uniforms. The visuality of her description and its affective response – she shivers – underscores the importance of the visual in the Spanish Civil War and how visual representations influence one’s perception of the war. Davis notices these details in particular because of her upbringing. When she focuses on the soldiers’ medallions, with the crucifix on them, she is repulsed. She shivers at the medallions, and thinks of home. This is a familiar move for Davis: to turn from an experience in Spain which jolts her in some way, and then reference back home on the Farm.

From the beginning of her time in Spain, Davis was uncomfortable being on the Nationalist side, but she did not let that deter her from her goal of becoming a foreign correspondent. She did whatever she could to make this happen. One of Davis’s greatest risks was carrying the stories of her fellow journalists – de Jouvenel, Ed Taylor, John Elliott, and Cardozo – back across the frontier to France, where she could call London, New York, and Paris and read their articles for submission. In an important episode, Davis claimed agency over the fact she is a woman and used the fact that she is a woman to her advantage, performing different aspects of femininity to get what she needed: access and trust. Davis downplayed her womanhood with the Major in order to gain his trust in her abilities; she emphasized it to a border guard in order to allow her to pass into France. This sort of maneuvering is possible because Davis recognized her body as an asset and, of course, a risk. The situation began with the five of them deep in the Nationalist zone near the front. Each journalist was reluctant to be the one to leave and report the stories. The person who left would miss out if there were more action, and get scooped. Davis volunteered to take the one car and drive to France, call in the stories, and then drive back again into Spain to pick them up, possibly with new material. Wanting to prove to the Major that she was not “excess baggage” as he had intimated, Davis
went up to him, saying, “I’m a private in your army. Don’t demote me.” (My Shadow in the Sun 85). The trip is an overnight excursion, but should not take more than 12 hours, there and back.

As Davis and the driver left Jaca, the last Nationalist outpost before France, she thought about the money for the phone calls and the articles in her purse:

The dress I wear has a zipper down one side. I take the stories from my purse and zip open my dress and yank my girdle to make room and line my body with the stories. I crackle a little, but if I don’t move too much it will be all right. Then I think about the extra money I am carrying. […] I take the four thousand-franc notes, unfold them and press them out flat. I put these too inside my girdle, flat against my skin. Then I zip up my dress. (My Shadow in the Sun 87)

As the war progressed and more women were relegated away from the front, women crossing any border on either the Nationalist or Republican side were suspected of being spies and were carefully searched, especially if they were foreigners. In her later memoir, Davis commented how “[n]ot much longer, even in this war, would such naïve tactics be employed” (A Fearful Innocence 146).

But at this moment, Davis was lucky. As the car lurched around a mountain bend and a guard began to approach them at a roadblock, she recognized the flag and whispered to the driver not to show their papers to the guard. On rounding the bend, Davis saw the red, yellow, and purple flag of the “betrayed Republic,” noting that they had crossed lines, and thus had the wrong papers on the wrong side (A Fearful Innocence 146). While the guard searches through her purse, Davis says to him, “You see it is as my passport says. […] I do a little of journalism. But I have had enough. I do not understand these things. I have been very frightened, Monsieur. I want to get out!” “Mademoiselle is very wise” (My Shadow in the Sun 89). Davis cleverly used the fact that she is a woman to her advantage, playing off of the expectations of the guard of her,
as a woman. Her embodied perspective as a woman helped her: she used her girdle to hide stories and money; she pretended to be afraid, ignorant, and to want to leave Spain. The dash across the border underscores the vulnerability facing all journalists reporting in Spain, and how Davis leveraged her specific vulnerability as a woman to help her achieve her objective of being a foreign journalist. It is this derring-do that caught the attention of the London Daily Mail’s editor and got her a job.

Davis’s embodied experience in Spain allowed her to draw visual and affective parallels between her past at the Farm and her present in Spain, creating opportunities for gendered witnessing. In this anecdote from A Fearful Innocence, she relates to the reader that she was chatting with her fellow journalists when they are shot at from a field nearby. Evidently, they were near the front without realizing and were targeted by Republican soldiers. Shots rang out and they dove for cover. In this moment, she and her colleagues were rattled, but unharmed. Davis describes the scene:

I saw the waving grain, this Spanish cornfield and at the Farm the fields of corn, Kit and his cohorts planting and hilling, myself with a basket to be filled for lunch, going in and out the rows, tugging down the tassels to test the ears, the long green fronds rustling to my passing. […] And I saw an inherited vision – the waves of grain of Polly’s Russia, the sea that hid the conspirators reading Tolstoy; and Polly, on her belly like a small fish, listening absorbed to forbidden prophecies of brotherhood. […] The man out there, secret in the cornfield, was vulnerable. He and I were one. I was no longer an observer at somebody else’s war, on somebody else’s planet, I, too, was flesh and blood. I, too, could be shattered by a bullet. (A Fearful Innocence 136)

This “inherited vision” is not just something that she sees in her mind’s eye, but it is also a type of vision that she sees with, a way of seeing that prompts an identification not just with the Republican soldier as “flesh and blood”, but with the Republican cause. This is where her moment of gendered witnessing takes place, through her own body’s vulnerability and viewpoint, and also through the her sympathy for the Republican soldier. Davis sees the moving
grain of the cornfield in Spain, and these fields trigger her nostalgia for the Farm. She relates the unfamiliar to the familiar, in order to fully grasp it. Davis sees in her mind’s eye across Europe to another leftist vision: Russia. This “inherited vision” of Russian cornfields takes her back to the “vulnerable” Spanish soldier, who she never actually sees, but perceives as vulnerable. Indeed, she should feel threatened by the soldier who is shooting at her, but instead, she identifies with him wholly. His fight becomes her fight; they are one in a cause they both believe in. Davis presents her role as a gendered witness: she is no longer an observer – indeed, she never was just an observer – because of her embodied risk. She, too, could be shattered by a bullet. Representing the Republican soldier as vulnerable and sympathetic completes this moment of gendered witnessing.

As the winter continued, circumstances worsened for Davis. She had a shell sliver wound under her knee which would not heal; she could not often find clean bandages to dress her wound and the pain made her limp (A Fearful Innocence 156). The border-crossings had become much more difficult now that there were a number of refugees trying to get into France, and it was necessary to cross the frontier on foot. Before she was shot, she had occupied her mind and efforts with reporting the war, which distracted her from the conflict between her personal beliefs and Nationalist values. Injured, there was very little for her to focus on, except her now raging discontent with Nationalist ideology. Allowed the time to brood over her injury and the wrench it threw into her plans to further her career as a foreign correspondent, Davis became discouraged. Though she was injured, she was well enough to attend a journalists’ meeting with the press chief, in the company of some of her colleagues who were quartered in Burgos. These press debriefings were more like vitriolic speeches, and Davis listened to them frequently.
She described the press officer, British-educated Gonzalo de Aguilera, as from “an old Spanish family of landowners” (A Fearful Innocence 158). The Spanish landowners were one of the most conservative groups on the Nationalist side, and their values utterly opposed Davis’s and how she was raised on the Farm. Davis relates the speech Aguilera made before the journalists. This speech is one of the only times on her memoir where Davis represents a Spaniard expressing his beliefs about the war and its causes in his own words. This is an important exception, as Davis does not let the Spaniards speak for themselves very often in her memoirs; maybe because her lack of Spanish. At any rate, given his British education, Aguilera was fluent in English, and he debriefed the journalists in English. She writes, relaying his voice:

‘You know what’s wrong with Spain? Modern plumbing. In healthier times – I mean, spiritually healthier, y’understand – plague, pestilence could be counted on to thin down the Spanish masses; hold them down to manageable proportions. Now, with modern sewage systems, they multiply too fast. The masses are no better than animals, y’understand? You can’t expect them not to become infected with the virus of “liberty” and “independence.” […] Y’understand what I mean by the regeneration of Spain? It is our program to exterminate one-third of the male population. That will purge the country. Sound economically, too. No more unemployment in Spain. […] The masses aren’t fit to reason! Rights! Does a pig have rights? We’ve got to kill, kill…y’understand?’ (158)

This speech is shocking in its bald aim to kill Republican Spaniards en masse. For the most part, Aguilera’s speech follows the conservative line and represents Nationalist values accurately, as against Marxism and atheism. Aguilera advocates for the need to “purge the country” of “the masses” or those who do not agree with Nationalist dogma. When Spain was “spiritually healthier” (and the issue of Catholicism is one that Davis lingers on when she first sees Nationalist soldiers) there was a proper order and sorting of the class system. There was not the problem of unemployment because there were not the ‘surplus’ of men needing jobs.³⁴ Hugo

³⁴ The emphasis here is on men because women were not allowed to work for wages in Nationalist Spain, a policy that would continue during Franco’s dictatorship.
Garcia, in *The Truth About Spain!*, notes that Aguilera has entered the “black legend” of the historical war record due to his outbursts like the one above, where he demonstrates outright contempt for the “reds” through his casual, horrible statements (33). For Aguilera, the deaths of “the masses” serve to regenerate Spain. On the Nationalist side, as exemplified in Aguilera’s speech, there is no room for the humanitarian imagination. Davis reluctantly and uncomfortably listens to Aguilera’s speech, “I am terrified to look up at the press chief for fear he might see through the orifices of my eyes into my head. If he could see into me he would shoot me too. […] ‘Dear God, what am I doing here!’” (158-159). The importance of vision and eyes underscores both Davis’s position as a witness and a reporter, and her terror at being seen for what she is: the daughter of a Russian leftist émigré, the child of progressives.

Her plan was to recover in Burgos, and then go to Paris once she could walk more or less properly and cross the Pyrenees. Once in Paris, she planned to speak to Edgar Mowrer about working for the *Chicago Daily News*, using the credentials from the *Daily Mail* as a cover to get behind the Nationalist lines. It was a daring plan, and would end up working – Davis returned to Spain to investigate events on the Balearic Islands – but ultimately at the expense of her health. Back in Paris, Davis would nearly die of septicemia at the American hospital in Neuilly, with the doctors threatening to amputate her leg. She writes about the brief period after her recovery, “When I arrived at Edgar’s for a new session of work, he turned me out, as not yet equipped for war. I was to go home for six months and a job would be awaiting me when I returned. My guess is that he was going to keep me behind the lines. He hadn’t liked that whole episode” (*A Fearful Innocence* 173). Before heading home, Davis stopped in at the International News Service

---

35 While it was still uncertain if Davis would survive, Mowrer had visited the hospital, reportedly “walking up the corridors, looking as though he was going to cry. [and saying] “Best girl reporter I’ve had my hands on! And she goes and dies on me!” (*A Fearful Innocence* 171).
office. Going up to an office worker, she introduces herself, saying to the man, “You don’t know me, but…” He interrupts her, laughing, “Sure I know you,” and, after searching through a wastebasket, hands her a piece of copy that had yet to be printed. It reads:


He had just thrown away her obituary.

***

Davis had gone to Europe to report for various newspapers on a tentative basis, selling stories to editors as she wrote them. Before she left for Europe, Davis went on what she describes as “the Mohawk Trail, up into New York state, down into Pennsylvania” and through New England, meeting with newspaper editors and convincing them to buy her column.36 Davis pitched a new style of foreign affairs column, “the kind of intimate, human pictures by which I hope to shake some of the dust out of that dry term ‘international relations’” (Carton 1, Folder 6).

In writing to an editor in Minneapolis, Davis writes:

> I have found that the average person, even if he has an intelligent interest in so-called “foreign affairs”, has great difficulty in visualizing what the bare sentences of a cabled news report really signify. […] My job will be to tell that story in terms of “Tony”. To put it simply; to give the reader the flavor of history in the making, to make him feel he was there, in the streets, in the houses, at the conference tables.

What Davis emphasizes in both letters is the importance of the human element as she writes news stories. Although she did not go to Europe intending to report on war – the Spanish Civil War would not begin for at least another month – there was unrest in Spain and fear of an impending war in Europe. In 1936, Europe was, no doubt, a hotbed of news and events, and where a foreign correspondent would want to establish her career. These circumstances were the

---

36 Letter to Waldo Cook, of the *Springfield Republican*, from Frances Davis, dated 6 June 1936. (Carton 1, Folder 6)
reasons why Gellhorn went to Spain, so too with Davis. Davis did so much legwork before going abroad because she wanted to ensure that her columns would have an audience, and that she would be paid. Davis intended to use “intimate, human pictures” to bring the news to life for the foreign reader. In these descriptions to editors, Davis marries the visual potential of writing, the importance of being physically in the midst of events in order to interpret them, with the nascent humanitarian imagination – human interest stories that underscore the affective dimension of the news for foreign readers.

Davis’s perception of journalism was clearly influenced by her time at the Farm:

“Whatever the cost or the circumstance – punching out the story with two fingers at a typewriter perched on a rock amid the debris of the latest disaster (often enough at risk of their lives), imbedding the evidence of their eyes in enough officialese to get the piece past the censor – this was their job: to inform […] (A Fearful Innocence 130). For Davis, part of the strategy of reporting is using a sort of photographic method, using “the evidence of their eyes” to turn themselves into journalist-cameras and document the scene, using their first-hand account of actually being there to reinforce the veracity of their reports. The job of a journalist, in a democracy, was to see clearly “amid the debris of the latest disaster” and be able to inform despite the strictness of the censor. With such a formation, Davis went to Spain prepared to see the worst, to absorb it, and pluck out the necessary elements to transfer back home.

She had success getting her articles picked up – Davis managed to persuade a dozen different papers across Pennsylvania, New York, and New England to agree to print her columns on a trial basis – but no paper promised her a steady income or a long-term contract based on the sample articles she provided at her meetings with editors. When Davis crossed over into Spain, she had a pointed perspective on what her assignment would be. On July 24, 1936, Davis was in
Hendaye, the French border town to Spain. In the middle of writing a letter to her family in Boston explaining her new situation, she lent her typewriter to Ed Taylor (of The Chicago Tribune) and had to finish the letter by hand.\(^37\) She writes:

Taylor has just returned from across the border and he and John Elliott (Herald Tribune) have been swapping their stuff to build up each others’ yarns. This business of keeping hands off news that is hot is because – it won’t be hot by the time my slow mail stuff gets back – is irksome. But mine’s a different job and a different technique. Not to report the shooting but [t..?] mood around after it’s over and report the state of mind – if any – that provoked the shooting.

The issue of timing would prove increasingly frustrating for both Davis in Spain and for the newspaper editors she had commitments with back in the United States. Her “different technique” was the humanitarian and human-interest angle that she was hopeful would be successful, but ultimately did not work out.

Philip Davis, her father, worked tirelessly to facilitate communications, managed her earnings and advised her from home. He reported conversations he had in person with editors or men journalists, “[The newspaper editors’] point of view with reference to articles, which is, – that, if you wish them to syndicate, you must send not news (which gets old by the time it gets here,) but views, impressions, (interpreted news!) anecdotes, anything that isn’t dated but human and interesting – always.”\(^38\) This was not so easy, however. At first, her difficulty lay in the fact that she had to mail her articles because she lacked access and funds to phone in her material. By the time the stories arrived at their destinations, they were, in fact, dated.

In a letter from December 1936, Polly, Davis’s mother, illustrates very clearly the conflict between what Davis is expected to write as a woman journalist versus what she wanted to write:

\(^{37}\) From Carton 1, folder “Correspondence to/from FDC, 1931, 1934-37, n.d. (some incomplete)”

\(^{38}\) Letter from Philip Davis to Frances Davis, dated 31 October 1936.
I really expected that all of your writing would not be actual reporting, but more on the human point of view, and the woman’s point of view because I have talked to so many women who belong to different organizations and clubs, and they all tell me that they have heard so much about problems in Europe, but the effect on the women in Spain and other parts of Europe would be very interesting and a new field. Now that may be nonsense as far as you are concerned, but I would like to tell you what I hear from other people. The actual slaughter [sic] that is going on in the world, to the people in America, at least, to some of them, that either tired of reading the same thing over again or not being on the scene, the effect is absolutely lost. […] No matter how tragic the situation is, you read and feel only as an outsider. You know yourself that nobody can actually feel the tragedy unless it effects you personally or you are on the scene to see it all.39

This letter illustrates the importance and difficulty of gendered witnessing for the whole project of reporting the Spanish Civil War, and especially for Davis and for Gellhorn. Polly underscores how fundamental it is to be on the scene, otherwise “the effect is absolutely lost.” She encourages her daughter to report on stories about women and the “human point of view” – tactics Gellhorn employed in her Collier’s articles. Davis did not have the same opportunities as Gellhorn, and had less of a choice as to what and how she reported, given that she was working for a conservative newspaper on the Nationalist side. Davis may have gone to Spain with a clear technique of reporting word-pictures from the war, but what had worked out was quite different.

Regardless of their very different levels of success and their radically opposed experiences in Spain, Davis and Gellhorn both shared disillusionment about their position as unwitting Cassandras during the Spanish Civil War. In February 1938, before she returned to Spain and wrote “The Third Winter,” Gellhorn wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt, responding to Roosevelt’s concern for her health:

It is like this. I have made some 22 lectures in less than a month, on Spain. I am not a lecturer and don’t know how to do it, reasonably, saving myself and not getting excited. I see these rows and rows of faces, often women and sometimes men, and think: I have one hour to tell them everything I have painfully learned and to shout at them that if they go on sleeping they are lost. […] (Cannot tell you how I loathe

39 Letter from Polly Davis to Frances Davis, dated 14 December 1936.
Gellhorn hated being in the public spotlight, and wanted to maintain her privacy. Becoming a “celebrity” as a woman journalist reporting the Spanish Civil War deeply troubled her, even if it meant money for Republican Spain. Davis writes of her time reporting the Spanish Civil War, “Between the Apocalyptic vision and Armageddon lay the almost unbridgeable gap of human experience. Experience not being transferrable, whatever the eloquence, there was no way of hurrying mankind to embrace its fate. Journalism was no therapeutic cure for lethargy” (A Fearful Innocence 130). Decades later, writing in her memoir, she expresses the importance and frustration of embodied testimony, seeing the war firsthand, and attempting to spur her readers into action through reportage. Both women, in these excerpts from their personal writing, express frustration with the lethargic attitude of their American readers and listeners.

And it is a lethargy that both women experienced and rebelled against in their bodies, from their embodied testimony. Gellhorn cancelled her lecture tour; she became so physically ill from advocating for Republican Spain. Davis opens her memoir A Fearful Innocence with these haunting sentences:

Among the first women to be a reporter at wars, I was first among casualties. I came back forever maimed, the strength sapped from me. What I had been was finished, the bright promise of my life destroyed. The body that had been the instrument of my youth, and joy, and hope, was now the prison of my being. (1)

***

Davis and Gellhorn both suffered greatly as a result of their reporting in Spain. I believe this is a result of the pressure to break into the profession of being journalists, but also because
they cared deeply about their subjects. As the first women reporting from the front lines, their profession demanded a level of authenticity and truth that one does not see in the poets and the novelists. The same level of passion is there, but the pressure is different. Their subject position as women and as foreign women in Spain recording the war for foreign audiences demanded an intensity of gendered witnessing that one does not see in the other artists in my project.

Davis was wounded and almost died, demonstrating the risk in witnessing the war first-hand and attempting to report it. Davis’s gendered witnessing and being in Spain to see the violence firsthand very nearly cost her life, like Taro. What Davis’s experiences reporting and her memoirs highlight are that performativity in gendered witnessing is key when one is dealing with such a gender-normative culture as was pervasive on the Nationalist side. Davis used her femininity to her advantage on a couple of occasions – with Cardozo and with the Republican guard – and such a fluid performance of gender in the 1930s was possible because there were such rigid expectations of women. Fluidity is instrumental here, as her fellow journalists (besides Cardozo), treated Davis as a comfortable equal. Davis used her femininity to her professional advantage, which Gellhorn does not record doing (although her romantic liaison with Ernest Hemingway indicates that she likely had some advantages such as access to the front, gasoline, and better food than her fellow journalists). Davis also brings to the argument of gendered witnessing an important nuance with respect to representations: because she was reporting for a newspaper whose political views she did not share, she could not represent the war how she wanted to. Davis settled for using her imagination to project herself onto the Republican side, and identifying with the Republican cause. It is through these projections that her representations of gendered witnessing occur. Similarly to Taro, although certainly not to the same extent,
Davis’s contributions to representations of the war – her writing and lecturing – are neglected by scholars, who typically acknowledge her as Cardozo’s assistant when they include her at all.

For Gellhorn, her commitments as a gendered witness were much more straightforward, because she was reporting from the Republican side. As a result, she was able to write about the war in a way that Davis simply could not, and focus on those “human interest” stories that Davis so desperately wanted to be her milieu and springboard into the profession. They were Gellhorn’s, instead, and her writing techniques echo the cinematic. Her gendered witnessing is much more in line with Taro’s and Horna’s, because she is seeing similar scenes. Because the civilians on Republican side were the targets of aerial bombardments, Gellhorn is able to write about those non-combatant victims in a way that stirs the humanitarian imagination.
Chapter Four

Muriel Rukeyser’s *Savage Coast*

Having visited Spain during the war and advocated for American intervention on the Republican side, writer Dorothy Parker was well-positioned to satirize that experience and Spain’s complicated politics to a foreign audience in the short story “Who Might Be Interested.” In the story, an anonymous American author encounters a self-involved woman, Mrs. Pemberton, who is only interested in the author’s fame and not the author’s cause, and who attempts to bond with the author by encouraging the author to tell her all about Spain. Though a fictional account, the short story has a biting ring of truth. Mrs. Pemberton echoes the sentiments of many middle-class Americans during the late 1930s when she says, “I know what [the war’s] all about, and who’s on what side, and all that, but I just can’t get the names straight. I’m forever getting the Insurgents mixed up with the Rebels. Well, go on, and tell me about it, anyway. Go ahead and depress me” (Parker 194). Mrs. Pemberton wants an affective response, but one isolated from understanding, engagement, or action. She wants to *feel* the war and its trauma without having to risk, to sacrifice, or to give anything at all – even her understanding. A somewhat confused exchange between Mrs. Pemberton and the author ensues, during which the author tries to raise awareness of the humanitarian relief desperately needed for starving children. When Mrs. Pemberton realizes that the author is advocating for Republican Spain, she leaves the host’s house in an insulted huff.40

Parker’s short story, with its sting, accurately represents the challenge faced by writers

---

40 Parker published the short story in the magazine *Mother Jones* in 1986, under the title “Spain, For Heaven’s Sake!” John Miller, in his collection of Spanish Civil War writing in which this short story is anthologized, includes a note that “Parker wrote this piece as a response to being labeled a ‘humorous’ writer” (197). This may be apocryphal. Parker waited fifty years to publish this particular war story; she did publish another piece, “Soldiers of the Republic,” in a pamphlet that circulated in the U.S. during the war and is anthologized in the *Portable Dorothy Parker*. She was a remarkable advocate for American intervention and supported the Republicans in various ways.
and artists returning from Spain to speak to their home audiences and to write about the war. There was a desire for either/or thinking because the Spanish Civil War seemed too complex to understand easily. American Muriel Rukeyser, in her novel *Savage Coast* (2013), resists this desire for simplicity by presenting a complicated narrative that explores a young woman’s political and sexual awakening against the backdrop of the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. While not published during Rukeyser’s lifetime, *Savage Coast* offers readers a novel infused with different genres such as reportage and poetry. The protagonist of *Savage Coast*, Helen, goes to Spain to report on the anti-fascist Olympic Games (much like Rukeyser did). Helen is limited by her lack of Spanish language and knowledge of Spanish history, and so absorbs events and understands what is happening in Spain mostly through her body and through her eyes. Shaking hands with others and watching events unfold are among the key ways Helen interprets her experiences in Spain. Rukeyser – through her protagonist – underscores the importance of the body and the eyes to witnessing in general, and gendered witnessing in particular. A humanistic approach to the Spanish Civil War and the Spaniards is a goal of Rukeyser’s novel and of gendered witnessing, as well. Because Helen takes in so much of her experience visually, bodily, or both, *Savage Coast* stresses that there is no substitute for an embodied witnessing.

***

The American public’s disinterest in unraveling the war’s complex politics and the fact that isolationist American tendencies made the war seem distant and somewhat irrelevant to daily life – these were a couple of the challenges facing writers as they reported on the war. Some simply chose not to. In 1960, the American journalist Josephine Herbst opens a long article about her time in Spain with these words:

Apart from a few news accounts, a few descriptive articles, I have never written
anything about Spain. It had got locked up inside of me. There was one thing you
couldn’t do when you came back from Spain. You couldn’t begin to talk in terms of
contradictions. Everyone I knew wanted the authoritative answer. […] What was
wanted was black or white. (131)

Because Herbst was not allowed venues to represent the war as she saw it, “Spain” and all it
signified “got locked up inside.” As Herbst hints, circumstances in Spain were more complicated
than could be represented in “the authoritative answer.” Talking in terms of contradictions and
complexities quickly became too difficult for the average foreign reader to follow. That, and the
prevalence of propaganda which distorted events or represented only one political ideology, and
suddenly it is very easy to understand how a foreigner, reading the newspapers, pamphlets, and
seeing the photographs from Spain, might have trouble keeping the war at all straight. Martha
Gellhorn, in her introduction to the Spanish Civil War pieces in The Face of War, addressed the
influence of propaganda, “Arguments were useless during the Spanish Civil War and after; the
carefully fostered prejudice against the Republic of Spain remains impervious to time and facts”
(17). The desire for subtlety, for nuances, for authenticity in literary approaches to the Spanish
Civil War on the one hand; and a clear rallying cry that would organize and involve the public on
the other: these were the choices for understanding and representing the war. Authors perceived
these limited avenues of representation when they returned from Spain, from encounters with the
public like Mrs. Pemberton to demands for simplicity from editors. Whether one wrote about
Spain, or not, one was bound to be misunderstood.

People who advocated for the Republicans and intervention on their behalf were well
aware of this struggle; and, ignoring these challenges of representation, reached out to writers
and intellectuals directly. Following the Second International Congress of Antifascist Writers in
1937, organized in Valencia by leftist organizations, Nancy Cunard and the Left Review of
London sent out a questionnaire to 148 British writers asking them whose side they were on: the Nationalists, sometimes called rebels (or “Insurgents,” as Mrs. Pemberton labels them), or the Republicans, also called Loyalists.\textsuperscript{41} The options were simple; the questions a no-nonsense prompt. Inspired by the \textit{Left Review}’s example, the League of American Writers sent out their version of a questionnaire to American writers. Together, the questionnaires encouraged an attitude of engagement and plain response from both sides of the Atlantic, for “The equivocal attitude, the Ivory Tower, the paradoxical, the ironic detachment, will no longer do” (\textit{Authors Take Sides}). Implicit in the questionnaire’s prompt is that advocating \textit{action} (foreign intervention into the Spanish war) is the only response of merit, and that long, nuanced responses belong to an “equivocal attitude” which “will no longer do.” The \textit{Left Review} and the League of American Writers published the solicited answers in two pamphlets, the British \textit{Authors Take Sides} and the American \textit{Writers Take Sides}.

The impetus behind gathering these responses is multilayered: to continue the writerly fraternity for Republican Spain demonstrated by the Congress; to create a domino effect of support through the “celebrity endorsement” of these writers; to raise money for Republican Spain through pamphlet sales; and lastly, to put the terms of the war before the public in so plain a language as to compel advocacy and support for the Republicans. What is \textit{not} mentioned is that a foreigner’s opinion on or advocacy for a side of the Spanish Civil War is \textit{necessarily} complicated. The prompt glosses over the very real “paradoxical” situation of being a foreigner with an affective and political investment in a \textit{civil} conflict of a different country. The prompt relies on affective investments that cannot be easily explained. Nowhere was there room for

\footnote{\textsuperscript{41} The International Writer’s Congress was discussed in chapter two, with Gerda Taro taking a photograph of Ovadi Savich talking to a young Spanish boy.}
Herbst’s “contradictions” or explaining the differences between a socialist and anarchist ideology, for example.

The questionnaire’s prompt encouraged a yes or no response, and the answers received occasionally reflect that simplicity. Take, for example, the response from German intellectual Thomas Mann, exiled from Hitler’s Germany and living in Britain in 1937. Briefly, he writes, “I am entirely for the legal Government and the People of Republican Spain; I am determinedly against Fascism, and also against Franco, its Spanish champion. I am with you one hundred per cent and thank you heartily for taking the present action” (Authors Take Sides). Mann answers the prompt directly but without any historical contextualization or particularly forceful advocacy for Republican Spain – unsurprising given that Mann is living in exile and has nowhere to go if his expressed opinions have personal repercussions. This might be why he considers the soliciting of writers’ opinions and the publishing of their answers as “an action,” instead of a form of weak protest, governmental pressure, or intellectual engagement. Although he expresses strong support for the Republicans, Mann also takes no risks on the record.

Most of the pamphlets’ published responses are brief, the publishers aiming for quantity rather than quality, but some do comment on the whole enterprise of foreign intellectuals’ involvement in the Spanish Civil War. In these, there is a skepticism about the affective and political involvement that the questionnaire presumes of its audience. These responses, however critical, also provide a glimpse into the resistance to either/or thinking that the questionnaire supports and encourages. A central figure of modernist poetry, Ezra Pound, in his response to the British questionnaire, writes most colorfully, “Questionnaire an escape mechanism for young fools who are too cowardly to think; too lazy to investigate the nature of money, its mode of issue, the control of such issue by the Banque de France and the stank of England. You are all
had. Spain is an emotional luxury to a gang of sap-headed dilettantes” (*Authors Take Sides*).

Curiously, Pound’s answer emphasizes economics and capitalism as the ultimate causes of the Spanish war, and not necessarily the political differences between the two Spanish sides. Pound is critical of the questionnaire itself and of the people involved with supporting the Republican Spanish cause, who are “too cowardly to think.” Pound essentially dismisses “Spain the idea,” or *la Causa*, as the superficial concern of unthinking people with nothing better to do but indulge their emotions and get passionate.

Pound’s response is an especially caustic one, but hardly surprising given his support of the fascist cause. Pound’s answer, nevertheless, does point to the lack of subtlety and even more lack of understanding of the context of the Spanish Civil War on the part of the writers themselves who went to Spain. Many did not speak or understand Spanish, and the conglomerate of political ideologies and assorted parties and identities that made up the Republican side were confusing to keep straight, particularly given the lack of language fluency and the access fluency provides. Many who went to Spain lacked the contextual and historical understanding to represent the war with anything beyond what they saw and could interpret firsthand. There were, of course, exceptions, but diving head-first into the Spanish Civil War and sorting through the historical and political details later was a common approach for British and American writers and artists in Spain. The personal understanding of Spain’s recent history and language abilities of the foreigners, combined with the press circumstances back home, led to a rather incomplete and highly interpreted representation of the war’s events. Those who felt the subtleties and resisted the propagandistic approach, such as Herbst, were frustrated with those writers and intellectuals who used the war to further their personal agendas.

There was, additionally, one last problem with representation: the Spanish Civil War was
highly symbolic, as well, and, if one ignored many facts, the two sides seemed to fit nicely into a black and white schema of a simplified, good versus evil or democracy versus fascism moral story. These allegorical dynamics encourage the sort of either/or thinking that the *Authors Take Sides* and *Writers Take Sides* questionnaire encouraged, and are precisely what Mrs. Pemberton desired. The war’s history is a paradox in that sense: it was both very complicated to represent accurately as the war went on, and it operates on the level of international moral story and allegory, a story that is easily identifiable for foreigners. Some events from the war, although historically accurate, have a fictional quality to them, a quality that underscores neat divisions and representations. A key historical illustration for this moral story is the People’s Olympiad of 1936. Barcelona had been a rival host-city competitor for the 1936 Olympics, and there was great international disappointment when Berlin was chosen, given the political climate of repression in Germany. Held in political opposition to the International Olympics in Berlin, the Catalonian government hosted the People’s Olympiad.

***

Athletes from all over the world came to Spain for the anti-fascist Games. Archival material reveals how “a total of 6,000 athletes from 22 nations were registered for the People’s Olympiad, including sportsmen and women from the UK, the USA, the Netherlands, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and French Algeria” (Parkes-Harrison). The U.S. Committee on Fair Play in Sports sent nine athletes to represent the United States (“U.S. Team Off for Spain”). Three of these athletes were African-American, including the one woman, Dorothy Tucker, a sprinter and representative of the Ladies Garment Workers Union in New York (Carroll 56-57). When they announced their representatives, the committee issued a statement:
The decision to send a team representing the United States to the People’s Olympics in Barcelona is our final gesture of protest against the Hitler Nazi games in Berlin. We are acting in response to an invitation from the organizing committee in Barcelona, which appealed to all democratic countries to defend human freedom, culture, and progress by taking part in an international truly Olympic manifestation, free to all progressive sportsmen. (“Nine Athletes Selected”)

Even before the war, going to Spain was seen as “a gesture of protest” against fascism. German and Italian athletes – unable to participate in the Berlin Olympics because they were political exiles – signed up for the Barcelona Games, providing both fascist countries with athletic representation at the Olympiad (Parkes-Harrison). When the war broke out in July 1936, the events were getting underway in Barcelona, with the official dates of the Games scheduled for July 22-26, 1936.

The novel *Savage Coast* by Muriel Rukeyser is based on the events leading up to the People’s Olympiad. Rukeyser intended to cover the Olympiad for the London literary magazine *Life and Letters To-day*. She was on her way into Spain via train when news of the war traveled up into Catalonia; *Savage Coast* is based on the five days Rukeyser spent in Spain at the beginning of the war. As the seriousness of the situation became manifest (this was not just a skirmish or random political violence, but civil war) the People’s Olympiad was quickly cancelled, finding its place in Olympic history as the Games-that-never-were. Most spectators and journalists, like Rukeyser, were evacuated from Barcelona via ship to France. Many international athletes stayed behind and volunteered to fight for Republican Spain, including Otto Boch, Rukeyser’s lover and the inspiration for the character Hans, the protagonist’s love interest.

Realizing that the material’s relevance could galvanize support for Republican Spain, Rukeyser quickly wrote the novel in 1936-1937, as the fighting continued, loosely basing its
narrative on the people and events she encountered while reporting. Rukeyser wrote her Spanish Civil War novel before Ernest Hemingway, André Malraux, or George Orwell published their books about the war. At the time, the Spanish Civil War, so new, did not have the book-length representations by male writers that it does today. As a result, Rukeyser’s novel represented a fluctuating situation in progress, and one that had no literary precedent, yet. In more ways than one, Rukeyser was paving new ground for war representation. She sent the completed novel to a publisher in 1937, before the war was even a year old.

What Parker, Herbst, and Rukeyser all have in common is their position as American women writers who went to Spain during the war. These women are all gendered witnesses of the Spanish Civil War with different perspectives: Herbst stayed in Madrid in the Hotel Florida; Parker visited Valencia and Barcelona in 1937; and Rukeyser wrote her autobiographical novel shortly after leaving Barcelona. For them to be gendered witnesses they not only have to embody, through awareness of their gender, a unique perspective so that they witness what others might overlook, but these writers must also represent what they witness as gendered – representing the war victim as child, woman, or injured soldier. Gendered witnessing is both experiencing war through a specific embodiment – which can vary, and stems off of the idea of “flesh-witnessing” – and representing that experience while highlighting the gendered reality of war. Because gendered witnessing is more nuanced and highlights the “other” narratives or representations of war, Parker, Herbst, and Rukeyser all resist facile interpretations of their experiences in the war. Rukeyser’s novel is closely autobiographical, and relates how she experienced the war through her flesh. Physically being in Spain is fundamental to Rukeyser’s narrative, because so much depends on her actually seeing and feeling what she did in Spain – she did not speak Spanish or Catalan, and thus could really only understand what she could see
or feel – and physically being there also underscores the importance of her embodiedness as a woman. Rukeyser’s protagonist has a sexual awakening in Spain, but also has a body that betrays her with its pain. Both details reinforce the gendered aspect of Rukeyser’s witnessing.

With respect to genre, *Savage Coast* is both a bildungsroman and an autobiographical novel, but it is so much more as well. Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, who discovered Rukeyser’s novel in the Library of Congress archive and is the novel’s editor, writes about the novel’s difficult classification, “In addition to its avant-garde and genre bending tendencies – towards documentary, abstraction, poetry – *Savage Coast* harbors the drama, the psychological exploration, and the social critique of the realist novel” (“Her Symbol Was Civil War” 416). Rukeyser blends documentary forms with poetic structures imbued with visuality. In the novel, this unique Rukeyser blend alludes to the aesthetic techniques of modernist prose, and also presents an innovative representation of the Spanish Civil War, one that captures the war’s complexity as seen and experienced by a gendered witness. She does not present the straightforward, either/or presentation sought by the *Writers Take Sides* questionnaire (it had not been passed out yet). She evades giving an answer bordering on the propagandistic. Instead, Rukeyser represents the war, as it breaks out, as a time when the only imperative and clear solution was international solidarity and intervention, an imperative informed by a complex and nuanced lived reality. In this autobiographical novel, Rukeyser lays out how Helen, her protagonist, comes to identify with and support Republican Spain. As a result, Rukeyser’s text infuses bildungsroman, non-fiction novel, and poetry with documentary impulses. The novel, then, is a rich source for visual literary analysis.

*Savage Coast* is about Helen’s experiences traveling into Spain to report on the People’s Olympiad. The novel’s development and action takes place over a handful of hot, Catalonian
days in late July. The narrative follows Helen in and out of Spain, and despite narrative breaks, occurs sequentially. *Savage Coast’s* protagonist is a young Jewish-American woman, much like Rukeyser herself. The narrator underscores that Helen is physically average in most respects – she is not a “pretty” girl – and is coping with an indeterminate but painful leg injury. The train carrying Helen, other foreigners, and Olympic athletes (including Hans) stops in Moncada, a small town, where half of the novel’s action takes place. While in Moncada, the foreigners on the train gradually realize that the delay is caused by a civil war, and not a general strike as they assumed. Amidst the confusion, Helen and Hans begin a romantic relationship. 42

Helen, Hans, and their new friends observe “the enactment of a radical Popular Front and the collectivization of Moncada” (“Her Symbol Was Civil War” 422). Although the residents of Moncada burn and destroy religious icons and there is the danger of aerial bombardment (they see and hear planes in the distance), the war violence in the narrative is limited off in the distance to non-existent. The group undertakes the perilous journey to Barcelona in a pick-up truck; and once there, they are invigorated by the liberated “worker’s city.” Helen and her American friends Olive and Peter are evacuated; Hans stays to fight in the militia and what would become the International Brigades.

Knowing how events in Catalonia were different at the start of the Spanish Civil War than in other parts in Spain is fundamentally important to Rukeyser’s perspective and her representation of the war. Rukeyser – and Helen, in turn – experience the beginning of a worker’s revolution in Moncada and Barcelona, which was unique to Catalonia. Politics in Catalonia had a distinct flavor different from other parts of Spain. Under the Second Spanish Republic (1931-1939), Catalán was spoken and there existed a strong movement for an

---

42 This relationship is somewhat complicated by their mutual language being bad French.
independent Catalonia. In Catalonia, women had more rights than in other parts of Spain. Unlike Andalusia and the Basque country, Catalonia was heavily industrialized and held two of Spain’s biggest cities. Because of this industrialization, there were more factories and in turn, a stronger and more organized worker’s movement. There was more variety in the political ideologies, with anarchism holding genuine sway as a viable political alternative to the Catalanian Generalitat whereas Communism or socialism were more potent in other parts of Spain. When the civil war began, many Catalonians saw this as the opportunity to establish an independent Catalanian government. The anarchists, under the nominal alliance of the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo- Federación Anarquista Ibérica (CNT-FAI), seized many arms and occupied several government buildings in central Barcelona, but deciding, simultaneously, not to overthrow the established government, but to organize alongside it. A worker’s revolution was put into effect; resources were collectivized; equality between the sexes was established and Catalanian women joined the militia to fight the Nationalist uprising.

It was an exhilarating time for leftists and for women, in particular. It was also a dangerous, uncertain time. In September 1936, the CNT-FAI was incorporated into the Catalanian Generalitat. This collaboration caused a great deal of furor both for anarchists in Spain and outside of it. Many felt the revolution was being sacrificed and halted when it was the revolution that would itself be the greatest weapon against the fascists and Franco’s forces. Federica Montseny, a Catalan and the anarchist Health Minister during the war, later explained how there were threats from multiple sides for the anarchist revolution, “At that time we only saw the reality of the situation created for us: the communists in the government and ourselves outside, the manifold possibilities, and all our achievements endangered” (qtd. in Bolloten 210). Emma Goldman, famous American anarchist, visited Spain and Barcelona during this shift and
reported her impressions in an address to the International Workingmen’s Association Congress in Paris, December 1936:

> With Franco at the gate of Madrid, I could hardly blame the CNT-FAI for choosing a lesser evil: participation in government rather than dictatorship, the most deadly evil. [...] Comrades, the CNT-FAI are in a burning house; the flames are shooting up through every crevice, coming nearer and nearer to scorch our comrades. At this crucial moment, and with but few people trying to help save our people from the consuming flame, it seems to me a breach of solidarity to pour the acid of your criticism on their burned flesh. As for myself, I cannot join you in this. I know the CNT-FAI have gone far afield from their and our ideology. (426; 431)

The chaos in Catalonia, with its intense leftist divisions, would form the background of George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*, and be highlighted in his description of the May riots in 1937. Rukeyser would not be in Spain to see these political struggles and the violence caused by the conflict in ideology; like others, she would read about May riots in news accounts from reporters and other foreigners. When she left Spain in July 1936, the war had only just begun and the mood in Barcelona was tense but exuberant with the possibilities of creating a long-desired worker’s revolution. This exuberance and potential of the events in Catalonia were what she sought to capture in *Savage Coast*.

***

In a note before the first chapter, Rukeyser acknowledges the blend of genres, of fiction and fact, and underscores both the reality of the novel’s setting and the elements of invention inherent in fiction. She writes, “This tale of foreigners depends least of all on character. None of the persons are imaginary, but none are represented at all photographically; for any scenes or words in the least part identifiable, innumerable liberties and distortions may be traced” (Rukeyser 5). Of this opening note, Kennedy-Epstein writes that Rukeyser “makes sure to point [out this fictionalized account and] instructs the reader to approach the text as documentary”
(422-423). This disclaimer is filled with contradictions and foreshadow the text’s difficulties. Rukeyser prepares the reader for a tale that is both true and not-true; a tale based on evidence – “identifiable” – but one that is also distorted, invented.

The novel itself begins with another epigraph, “On Saturday, according to all the latest reports, Barcelona was calm, and as yet not a shot had been fired. – Reuters dispatch” and a two-sentence opening paragraph:

Everybody knows how that war ended. What choices led to victory, reckoning of victory in the field with the armed men in their sandals and sashes running blind through the groves; what defeats, with cities bombed, burning, the plane falling through the air, surrounded by guns; what entries, drummed or dumb, at night or with the hungry rank of the invaded watching from the curbs; what changes in the map, colored line falling behind colored line; what threat of further wars hanging over the continents, floating like a city made of planes, a high ominous modern shape in the sky. (Rukeyser 7)

The Reuters dispatch at the start of the chapter exemplifies how Rukeyser pulls from different genres – but especially documentary genres like news reportage – to emphasize what those in Spain were experiencing in the moment. Using this excerpt from a well-known news dispatch company demonstrates how Rukeyser, although this is a novel, depends on factual genres to reinforce her claims to truth. Not only do these moments support her representation with evidence, Rukeyser includes these snap-shot-like excerpts to convey to the reader the texture of information and variety of experience in Spain.

One of the strengths of the opening is its emphasis on the visual, preparing the reader for a text that requires engagement, for a text that will be difficult. The juxtapositions of genre – reportage, then poetic prose infused with visual details – disorient the reader. The temporal jump from the start of the war to its end in the space of two sentences is jarring, as well. After the epigraph and first sentence, there is a long sentence covering the action of the war through its
clausal fragments. “That war” is clearly Mediterranean as the “armed men in their sandals [espadrilles] and sashes running blind through the [olive] groves” is a scene familiar to readers through Capa, Taro, and others’ war photography. These fragments compose a photographic montage of what informed the war’s course. Descriptions “of the armed men running blind through the groves”, “of the plane falling through the air”, “of the hungry rank of the invaded watching from the curbs”, of “the colored line falling behind colored line” underscore the urgency of the writing. This visual-textual presentation has a chaotic accumulation that echoes the chaos of war and the bombardment of the senses. At every turn in these opening sentences, the sensorial is featured as the primary way to experience the war. Sight or lack thereof (“running blind” v. “watching from the curbs”) is linked to action. Linking the importance of sight to the action of war reinforces Rukeyser’s position as a witness to the Spanish Civil War. Witnesses are figured prominently in this opening, too, as the “everybody” with which the novel begins (implying that “everybody” knew of the war through newspapers and other reporting, who are the “witnesses to history” writ large) and, more specifically, as “the invaded rank watching from the curbs.” Witnesses are also key in the Reuters dispatch, itself the product of foreign journalists in Spain who rely on other Spanish eyewitnesses for “all the latest reports.”

The frightening descriptions of war, of planes set against the backdrop of the sky and falling, of the “threat of further wars hanging over the continents,” and the lines on the map demarcating troop advancement, are visual tropes that would become familiar in the experience of World War Two and in its literature. As of yet, these acts were only happening in Spain. The certainty of the first sentence, “Everybody knows how that war ended” contrasts with the vague assessment that follows: what choices, defeats, entries, and threat of further wars affected the war’s outcome. Rukeyser resists the demand for a clear-cut stance on the war in Spain, and
almost pokes holes into such impulses because while “Everybody knows how that war ended,” no one could have known what, exactly, would lead to that end.

***

Rukeyser was very politically committed throughout her life, examining and reporting on social justice issues such as the working conditions of miners and visiting war zones in order to increase political awareness of war’s consequences throughout the twentieth century. After she returned from Spain, Rukeyser advocated for American intervention in the war and repeatedly attempted to go back to the war. She was unable to return to Spain during the war because no newspaper or literary magazine would sponsor her (Rukeyser “We Came For Games”). Despite this setback, Rukeyser was truly committed to La Causa. She volunteered for years with Spanish Refugee Aid, Inc., and Rukeyser’s “archives include hundreds of notes on individual refugees, notes that are themselves a kind of pastiche of the devastation of the Spanish Civil War” (“Whose Fires Would Not Stop” 406). The notes on the refugees occasionally found their way into her poetry, demonstrating further how, for Rukeyser, writing poetry is inextricably woven with her political activism.43

Kennedy-Epstein describes how Rukeyser always “resisted totalizing systems that flattened subjectivity and that could inherently lead to totalitarianism,” and this resistance is easily traced in her writing (“Her Symbol Was Civil War” 434). Actively skeptical of political ideology because of its divisive tendencies, Rukeyser advocated for inclusivity and diversity, traits that could be difficult to achieve in a twentieth-century literary culture obsessed with categorization and alliances. Her striving for complexity often led to contradictory labels; for example, when Theory of Flight, her first poetry collection, was published in 1935, “Rukeyser

---

was accused of such ‘romantic, bourgeois’ concerns [as a preoccupation with the self, the subconscious, and symbolism]. But at the same time she was hailed as an asset to the Communists” (Kertesz 58). In such contemporary assessments, what remains fairly clear is that Rukeyser perplexed and intrigued critics, reviewers, and fellow poets because she did not adopt a certain strategy or rhetoric – she pulled from them all to further a humanist, poetic, literary agenda. As the poet Kenneth Roxroth wrote in the foreword to The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser, “Muriel Rukeyser is not a poet of Marxism, but a poet who has written directly about the tragedies of the working class. She is a poet of liberty, civil liberty, woman’s liberty, and all other liberties that so many people think they themselves just invented in the last ten years” (xii). Rukeyser insisted, always, on linking her political and social justice advocacy to her personal, private life, and to her writing. The three aspects of her life – the public self, the private self, and the writer – were one. Amongst her many literary accomplishments, now we know she was a novelist, as well.

In June 1936, Rukeyser travelled abroad for the first time in her life. She was 22 years old. Even so young, she had begun to make a name for herself as a politically motivated writer willing to flout social conventions normally restricting white femininity. Rukeyser had reported on the Scottsboro trial and been jailed for fraternizing with African-Americans in 1933 (“Her Symbol was Civil War” 417). Kertesz provides the details of Rukeyser’s arrest, “[She] had driven south to cover the [Scottsboro] trial for the leftist Student Review but she was arrested by the police when they found her and two friends talking to black reporters and discovered in her valise thirty posters advertising a black student conference at Columbia” (22). She was already a successful poet, having won the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize in 1935 for Theory of Flight. Rukeyser had been asked to travel to London as an assistant to a couple interested in researching
cooperatives in England, Scandinavia, and Russia (“Her Symbol was Civil War” 417).

Robert Herring, one of the editors of the London literary magazine Life and Letters To-day asked Rukeyser to fill in for a colleague and go to Spain to cover the People’s Olympiad (“Her Symbol was Civil War” 417). Rukeyser, then, cancelled her plans to go to Russia and went to Spain instead. Although unrest was imminent, Rukeyser would be on the last train from France to Spain before the outbreak of the war – events that feature prominently in Savage Coast.

Given the vast Rukeyser archive, we know how the editor, Pascal Covici of Covici-Friede, received Rukeyser’s novel and why it was rejected for publication in 1937. The anonymous reader report, which was returned to Rukeyser and is included in her archives, describes Savage Coast as “too confused, too scattered in its imagery and emotional progression to be real…clearly an example of bad writing” (Reader Report qtd. in “Her Symbol was Civil War” 419).44 Near the end of the report, the anonymous reader summarizes, “This book has been a waste of time – I doubt if at any moment in the writing of it Miss Rukeyser had any confidence in setting down a single paragraph” (Reader Report qtd. in “Her Symbol was Civil War” 430). The editor himself, Covici, wrote that the novel was “BAD,” with a protagonist that is “too abnormal for us to respect” (“Her Symbol was Civil War” 418). These severe comments would not be the last harsh criticisms Rukeyser would receive in her lifetime, but they were enough to discourage Rukeyser from pursuing other publication venues for the novel.45

44 Kennedy-Epstein notes: “The review was most likely written by [Rukeyser’s] mentor, Horace Gregory, as a May 31, 1937, letter from Pascal Covici indicates that he agrees with Gregory’s assessment of the novel. Rukeyser held Gregory in very high esteem. In his mid-30s, Gregory was a poet and a faculty member at Sarah Lawrence College when Rukeyser sought his help before publishing Theory of Flight (Kertesz 68). The correspondence can be found in The Muriel Rukeyser Collection, Henry W. and Albert Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library” (fn. 6 “Her Symbol was Civil War”).
45 For example, the Partisan Review “treated Rukeyser and her work with scathing contempt through the mid-1940s” (Thurston fn. 4). This dynamic became known as “the Rukeyser Imbroglio” and has been much examined by Rukeyser scholars. See Louise Kertesz’s The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser (1980) and Kate Daniels’s chapter
Rowena Kennedy-Epstein wrote about the novel’s rejection in a blog post for *The Paris Review*: “the first critics of *Savage Coast* discouraged Rukeyser from writing the kind of large-scale, developmental, hybrid, modernist war narrative that she had begun – one that is sexually explicit, symbolically complex, politically radical, and aesthetically experimental” (*The Daily*). The discrimination based on her gender and chosen genre of expression is evident in the Reader Report and editor’s rejection letter. Rukeyser, a young woman, was redirected to more “appropriate” genres, like her poetry (*The Daily*). Having met and interacted with T.S. Eliot and H.D. – period-defining modernists if there ever were any – Rukeyser represented her Spanish Civil War experience in a fictional, complex, *modernist* moment. This representation, as such, had to be “scattered” and “abnormal” in order to represent Spain at the beginning of the war and also resemble the modernist trends in poetry.

The rejection implicitly criticizes the novel based on her gender, that Rukeyser’s novel writing is not as cogent or whole because she is a woman writing about war and writing about it using all the aesthetic techniques are her disposal. The author of the reader’s report imposes expectations for how the novel should be because the protagonist is a woman, and because the author is a woman. The fact that the novel does not meet these expectations, but resists them and presents, in its stead, a complex representation of a woman realizing her sexual and political potential, upsets the reader’s expectations. In an article for *Modern Fiction Studies*, Kennedy-Epstein points to the fact that the rejection “demonstrates how the contemporary reader found the hybridity of such a work illegible, and particularly the gender transgression implicit in its experimental intertwining of the quest narrative, the romantic plot, radical politics, and the epic impulse” (“Her Symbol was Civil War” 418). In short, Kennedy-Epstein argues that the world

“Muriel Rukeyser and Her Literary Critics” in the book *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers* for more details.
was not ready for Rukeyser’s narratives, and so Covici and the reader-reviewer reacted against them strongly. I agree. At this juncture in the literary publishing landscape, editors could envision publishing a war novel by a woman – like *One of Ours* by Willa Cather (1922) – or an experimental, transgressive novel like *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes (published in 1936 and in London). *Nightwood*’s foreign publishing in the land of Pound, Woolf, Eliot, and H.D. indicates that the British modernist literary scene might have received *Savage Coast* more willingly. As history stands, in 1937, Covici-Friede Publishers published *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, the same year *Savage Coast* would have been published. The Spanish Civil War ended in April 1939.

Genre difficulty and supposed “bad writing” aside, there is another reason why Rukeyser’s novel went unpublished. The literary world was “not ready” for Rukeyser’s novel, for sure, but they also did not know how to “deal with” Spain, either. In her article “Recovering Rukeyser’s Lost Spanish Civil War Novel,” Kennedy-Epstein writes, “The rejection of *Savage Coast* might say more about the fraught literary and political moment in which Rukeyser was working than it does about the novel itself” (420). Spain, in early 1937, was really just starting to have the strong support and advocacy from the American and British literary left, and others. Having to choose a side in the Spanish Civil War by publishing Rukeyser’s novel may have been too much political pressure for Pascual Covici. For these reasons, *Savage Coast* lay in a mislabeled file in the Library of Congress for over 70 years. Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, then a graduate student, discovered the novel and it was published by the Feminist Press in 2013.

***

In *Savage Coast*, Helen experiences a political and sexual awakening – a maturing – that is common in war writing, but missing from novels traditionally representing women’s
experiences in war. The political and sexual awakenings in the novel classify it as a bildungsroman, a genre that Joseph Slaughter argues in *Human Rights Inc.* shares the same “narrative grammar” as what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights names “the free and full development of the human personality” (Jolly 8). This link is important: Helen’s experiences in Spain, making sense of this war as it erupts and coming into her own self – politically, bodily – mirror human rights narratives. One of the important differences between Helen’s narrative and typical human rights testimonies is that *Savage Coast* does not hinge on the experience of trauma. There is absolutely the threat of danger and violence in the civil war, but Helen does not undergo a violation of her human rights or bodily integrity; instead, what we see in the novel is a recognition of the importance of humanism, of community, of mutual humanity and Helen discovering new aspects of herself through sexual relationship with Hans. There may be fear of the airplanes dropping bombs on Moncada and Barcelona, fear of the far-off gun shots, fear while being transported from Moncada to Barcelona, but what Helen feels most distinctly is inspired, is whole.

This link between human rights narratives and the bildungsroman, in literary criticism, has lessened in recent decades, under the strain of genocidal violence. As Margaretta Jolly writes in her introduction to *We Shall Bear Witness: Life Narratives and Human Rights*, “Slaughter’s unsparing analysis of the false promises of the bildungsroman’s modeling of the human rights citizen is a clear example of how human rights now exist within a ‘fallen’ grand narrative of humanism” (8). Jolly underscores the “false promises” inherent in a portrayal of the global

---

46 Kennedy-Epstein also argues for this connection in her article in *Modern Fiction Studies*, “Rukeyser writes an equivalent relationship between the political upheaval of the 1930s and the psychological realities of her character, asserting that the conditions that lead to the civil war in Spain are the same kinds of conditions that created Helen’s internal bifurcations – capitalism, patriarchy, repression, and rigid political ideologies” (“Her Symbol Was Civil War” 428).
community and human rights narratives. In *Human Rights Inc.*, Slaughter’s assessment is based on eighteenth-century novels as correlating to the law that was still developing the concept of the citizen. Human rights may *now* exist within a “fallen grand narrative of humanism” – certainly human rights and visual studies theorists such as Susan Sontag argue as much – but Rukeyser’s novel was written at an historical moment when the grand narrative of humanism *was* possible. The narrator represents how the threat of a larger, European war haunts the events of *Savage Coast*, “Europe, cracking wide apart, the split going down to the families, the trains, and to be engulfed, not cast up, not assimilated in the struggle! Only wait. Only we cannot be lost in the waitings, while the guns bear down! While Europe is the dark Leviathan, raging!” (Rukeyser 109). The threat of the “cracking wide apart” and engulfment in violence is what Rukeyser writes against in *Savage Coast*. In the novel, she attempts to represent a type of humanism and humanitarianism in the Spanish war invested in mutual aid – the Spanish helping one another to survive in the time of war.

As a foreigner, Helen cannot help but relate the implications of the Spanish Civil War more globally, and to her home country. Like Sibyl, the prophetess of Greek mythology, Helen muses, “She began to know what was to happen. The knowledge turned her thought, irrationally, to her country. American, she thought, far, vivid, asleep. This Europe, boundaried, immense in meaning now, throwing its signals brilliantly ahead” (Rukeyser 115). Through the narrative’s course, Rukeyser outlines how the nascent humanitarian imagination in Spain has a foothold through the Catalonian politics and the workers’ collectivization that Helen sees in Moncada and Barcelona. It also has a place in her relationship with Hans. In part, Rukeyser wrote her autobiographical novel to demonstrate that although there was fear, there was not violence, and that the reports of atrocities against priests and other religious, especially in anarchist Catalonia,
were not as widespread as initially reported. She wanted to provide an alternative narrative based on her eyewitness experiences in Spain, and believed that this alternative narrative had the force to inspire intervention – an intervention based on humanism and humanitarian ideals.

***

Advocating intervention on behalf of humanitarian ideals was not solely the territory of writers and artists. Roughly five weeks after the war began, there was an appeal drafted by the diplomats of foreign countries to the Republican government, asking for the government to “humanize” the civil war. The “idea behind the move,” clarified the Argentine ambassador, Daniel Garcia Mansilla, was “to protect the civil population against such sufferings as imprisonment of hostages and other non-combatants, against blows struck at public health by lack of medical aid, water and light, and against loss of human life caused by bombardment of defenseless cities” (“Envoys Drop Plan to ‘Humanize’ War”). Excerpted from a formal communiqué, Garcia Mansilla posited what a “humane war” would look like from the perspective of the diplomatic corps.

The proposal offers an outsider, non-military perspective on the parameters of a “humane war,” an attempt to delineate between combatants and non-combatants, and also emphasizes that non-combatants were deeply affected, injured, and killed as a result of the civil war. For all the proposal’s emphasis on a “mediation program” rather than an intervention, it is a moment of international intervention: a written document setting forth the parameters of war in the twentieth

---

47 I must note that this missive is by far not the first attempt to regulate war. As Michael Barnett writes in *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, “The first push to regulate war began in the seventeenth century and was the product of advances in military technology that made war more brutal; moral and legal discourses regarding civilized behavior (among Christians); and arguments in favor of international norms to create a stable and just order among (European) states. In the eighteenth century legal and political theorists such as the Genevans Emmerich de Vattel and Jean-Jacques Rousseau advanced the cause of regulated war on both principled and self-interested grounds. […] Also at this time [the 1860s] natural law-based theories led to a stronger distinction between combatants and noncombatants, the view that not all violence was necessary or justified, especially as it pertained to the wounded and prisoners of war” (78).
This moment of intervention demonstrates how state actors (diplomats, in this case) tried “to protect the civil population” from the consequences of modern warfare. As such, this proposal is also one of the first moments when the consequences of aerial bombardment are acknowledged and reported in modern warfare.

The news item appeared in the *New York Times* on August 28, 1936, about five weeks after the military uprising, and reads as follows:

Hendaye, France, Aug. 28 (AP) – Diplomats tonight drafted a note to the Spanish Government at Madrid as the first step in their plan to “humanize” the Spanish Civil War. Approval by the Madrid government would lead to negotiations with both factions for an agreement pledging themselves to refrain from bombarding open cities and executing prisoners. Both sides would be asked to respect historical monuments and to exchange prisoners whenever possible. […]

United States Ambassador Claude G. Bowers did not attend the meeting of his colleagues as the United States policy has been one of strict non-intervention.48 (“Humane Appeal Drafted”)

This appeal went first to the Republican government in Madrid, who took it under consideration but ultimately rejected it a week later. Directed to the Argentine ambassador, Garcia Mansilla, the Republican government’s public statement claimed that “the government, which is the sole legitimate constitutional representative of the Spanish people, is confining its actions to repressing military insurrection, which has created this painful situation and which the government desires to end as quickly as possible by all means within its power, as is demonstrated by the actions and methods it now is pursuing” (“Envoys Drop Plan to ‘Humanize’

---

48 Most *New York Times* articles addressing the conduct or intervention of diplomats concluded with Bowers essentially abstaining from action. Officially, this was true; but in his reports and in his memoir, Bowers presents a different version. Bowers argued in his diplomatic reports to Secretary of State Cordell Hull and others that if the Nationalist won the war, American interests – and eventually, lives – would be directly affected by an eventual world war. Bowers appealed to American identification with Spain and the humanitarian imagination through not only one’s self-interest in *La Causa*, but also in one’s near-certain position as future victim of fascism. Plainly and clearly, Bowers argued for American intervention in the war almost from the start.
War”). From the official state actions of international diplomats to the athletic representatives of the People’s Olympics in Barcelona who volunteered for the militia, the international public sphere demonstrated an understanding of humanistic concern.

In Moncada, a similar episode of intervention takes place in *Savage Coast*. The train has been stopped for a while, and Peter, Olive, and Helen exchange ideas about what should happen next. A Swiss man is lounging in the corner of the train car; some schoolteachers are also there. Helen says, “We have to have something to do,” and after a moment, Olive says, “It’s manifesto time” (Rukeyser 64). What first began as a teasing moment between the couple, Olive and Peter, about American communism becomes a serious idea:

“Yes,” Peter answered, on two slow notes. “From the train to the train – a manifesto. A letter.”

The Swiss began to understand. His slow, kind face churned. “And a collection,” he announced. (Rukeyser 64)

The group in the train car then compose the message, with some disagreement on language.49 The men especially object to the phrase “to express our sympathy” because as “foreign nationals” they can’t (Rukeyser 64). Sympathy also has connotations with femininity that the men might object to. Peter explains the problem with using the word ‘sympathy’, “It was like that in Paris on July fourteenth. The government asked all foreigners who wanted to march to mingle with the demonstration, and not to go as foreign nationals. Can’t, in a revolutionary situation…Incorrect” (Rukeyser 65). Peter, as a foreigner, imposes his own reading of the situation: he does not see what is happening in Moncada, in Spain at large, as the outbreak of a civil war, but as a “revolutionary situation.” He sees what he wants to see, which is what many

---

49 Although the final text is not represented wholly in Rukeyser’s novel, this is the letter they write, “The passengers of the train standing at the Moncada station wish to thank the citizens of the town for the treatment received during their stay at the station and to express our understanding of the hardships of the people’s cause, and to present this small sum collected on the train for the town to use as it sees fit” (Rukeyser 64-65).
foreigners did with Spain and its war.

When the group seeks out the Spanish-language speakers on the train to translate their letter – a Spanish professor and a “lady from South America” – they receive a slightly different perspective on reaching out to the town. Helen does notice that some of the villagers speak Catalan; regardless of the language of the villagers, these Spanish-Castilian speakers understand the radio broadcasts that the village bar receives from all over Spain. They have a sense of the situation that is less romanticized than Peter’s “revolutionary situation” and are understandably more concerned with the violence against non-combatants that is reported over the radio than with Peter’s attempt to communicate. The South American encourages Helen, Peter, Olive and their group, saying “But give it to them tonight; at least they’ll know we’re not against them. I’ll sleep better” (Rukeyser 67). Although they do speak Spanish, and the professor is a Spaniard, both native speakers clearly position themselves as transient outsiders, unrelated to the activity in the village – but also not really aligned with Helen’s group and their manifesto/letter. The Spaniard further urges them to deliver the letter, even though the evening is setting in, “‘Do give it to them tonight, by all means,’ the Spaniard advised gently. ‘It is a very polite gesture; it will be our…guarantee for the night.’ He waved at the open window. ‘We are perfectly exposed here, you realize. […] But this,’ he said, tapping the sheet of paper, ‘this is a very politic gesture. It will at least insure us a quiet night’” (Rukeyser 67). The Spaniard is able to see and grasp their entire situation, their exposure as non-allied Spanish and foreigners, as travelers passing through. He understands their vulnerability, where Peter and the other foreign men are more concerned with political engagement and correct language and behavior. The Spaniard interprets the “very politic gesture” as a bargaining tool or even a sort of blackmail: the villagers, should they want to be violent, would be less likely to attack the train after this expression of solidarity. For this letter
to be a manipulation is, of course, not what Helen, Peter, and Olive want. But then, they do not grasp the entirety of their situation in the same way as a Spaniard would. At the very least, Peter realizes the effectiveness of this more general rhetoric rather than focusing on party alliances, for as they continue to move through the train, he explains “the diplomacy of the gesture” to the fellow-travelers in order to get them to contribute to the collection (Rukeyser 68).

Collecting money from the train is a strange expedition. As the group approaches different nationalities and groupings, talk about money and national/political alliances comes to the fore. The Swiss, when they composed the manifesto-letter together, had put in a fifty peseta note to start the collection. This significant contribution to the collection causes some consternation as Helen and Peter propose their idea of a collection and letter to other passengers. Another English husband and wife comment on the fifty peseta note, that “it’s a little steep for tonight’s lodging” at which Helen replies, “It isn’t like that” (Rukeyser 70). As Helen reads the letter to him, she “could feel him stiffen at the phrasing” (Rukeyser 70) The Englishman pulls out a half-crown for the collection. The narrator points out:

He spoke directly to Helen, avoiding Peter. “It should hire a quiet night, but it does go a little against the grain,” he began.
“Oh, but don’t give anything if you don’t think—” she said.
“Sorry—I didn’t mean it that way.” He put it in the beret, and hunched his shoulder in an awkward self-conscious spasm. His whole body apologized. (Rukeyser 71)

Noteworthy in this exchange is how Helen and the Englishman use “it” as a placeholder for a number of other concepts, as if they either lack the language for intervention and involvement or are too embarrassed to discuss these issues plainly. Another group of men on the train, plainly English-speaking, make Helen and Peter speak to them in French and translate the manifesto-letter, insisting that they’re French even though “Kesker say?” is how they greet the pair (Rukeyser 71). Talking around the issue of putting in money and the politics of giving the village
this manifesto-letter shows how the foreigners are both uncomfortable with their position as outsiders in this situation and uncomfortable with intervention. What does the Englishman mean by “it does go a little against the grain”? Giving the money? The manifesto itself? Asking for help from the Spanish? How would he have continued that train of thought if Helen had not cut him off? His physical reaction to this situation demonstrates his discomfort at even being put in this position: “His whole body apologized.” Only through Helen’s direct appeal does the Englishman give the money – a lesson perhaps to those in the United States and Great Britain who ask for money for Spanish Aid.

After the group collects money from the train, the Swiss man joins Helen, Peter, and Toni, as he speaks Catalan. Together, they deliver the letter-manifesto and collection first to the mayor, who listens carefully as the Swiss explains the train message. The mayor calls them “¡Compañeros!” (“Comrades!”) – a “shift of level [that] hit them hard” – and then sends them away (Rukeyser 73). Peter explains, “The mayor thought it was too important for him to accept. He sent us to the secretary” (Rukeyser 74). The secretary in question is the secretary of the Workers’ Committee of Catalonia. When the group eventually delivers the manifesto-letter to the secretary and three other men from the committee, the secretary types out a message wishing “to assure the passengers that every effort will be made to continue to provide for their comfort and complete safety” (Rukeyser 75). Importantly, the secretary then uses a telephone to make a call (Helen registers shock that a phone is working), a call that seems aimed at facilitating the train’s arrival in Barcelona. Helen and Peter urge the Swiss to tell the secretary that “some of us have our sympathies in theirs” and that it “seemed impossible to continue without any indication, without making any sign or giving a partisan clue” (Rukeyser 76). The Swiss refused, “We have no place in their politics” (Rukeyser 76).
The two groups – Catalan members of the Workers’ Committee, and the group of four foreigners from the train – move forward to say good-bye:

The two files met, grasped hands, and passed. They shook hands with a smiling, curious intensity, trying to find language in that touch. It was, again, a humiliation to Helen not to be able to speak. But there was no constraint: they shook each others’ hands: they could count on the transmission: they were sure. Foreign nationals.

“It was like that on Bastille Day,” Peter whispered. Heavily, they moved down the steps. (Rukeyser 76)

As Helen searches for language, the sentence structure itself breaks down, rendering the last long sentence as the two groups depart into phrases separated by colons, one after the other. What is unsaid is spelled out in this way, almost like poetic verses separated by a backward slash (/). This is a photographic moment, with two lines meeting, shaking hands, and coming apart again. Such moments are often highly photographed and memorialized. Just as it is visual, this description also emphasizes the tactile, where one can “find language.” Helen is greatly moved. We see an echo of the description of the Englishman from before, who apologized with his whole body.

As she bids farewell to the committee members, Helen is humiliated by “not to be[ing] able to speak.” But who censors her? It seems clear that Helen censors herself, as “there was no constraint.” Each group used bodies – through touch – to communicate goodwill and shared intentions. Her body betrays her, preventing her from expressing her sympathies through her voice. This might have something to do, perhaps, with her bad leg, and the challenges Helen already experiences in her body because of her indeterminate leg/back injury. Not that the voice and the leg are connected; but rather, that Helen exists in a body that already betrays her and does not bend to her will. This might have something to do with Helen being the only woman in the space. While these are both possible readings of Helen’s self-censorship, I think the likeliest reason for Helen’s “humiliation” stems from the simple fact that she does not speak Catalan, is
not Spanish, and does not have an understanding that either language, historical knowledge, or nationality would facilitate. What she does have is the flesh. She has her flesh through which to observe and experience the onset of the civil war, and she has her flesh through which to communicate. Hence, the potent and meaningful handshake with the representatives from the Workers’ Party. This scene, to some degree, reinforces the relationship with Hans, a relationship not based on a fluent, mutual language, but on a mutual understanding transmitted through the flesh.

***

The use of documentary was very important to Rukeyser. Using documents and other evidence-based genres like court transcripts are aesthetic techniques closely aligned to the photographic method in textual representation, for Rukeyser. Rowena Kennedy-Epstein writes:

Extending the notion of documentary, a form characteristic of the 1930s Popular Front modernism with which Rukeyser herself has been aligned, her narratives of Spain provide a complex and avant-garde manifestation of the camera-eye that drives the documentary impulse. These works exaggerate the documentary quality of the text by foregrounding process, highlighting the very construction of meaning making, of historical narrative, of fact, and the inherent omissions and fallacies made by the maker and viewer of history. (“Whose Fires Would Not Stop” 389)

In this article, Kennedy-Epstein refers to all of Rukeyser’s work on the Spanish Civil War, throughout her long life and extensive oeuvre, but this assessment is particularly important in Savage Coast. Crucially, Savage Coast was simply one long-form genre in which Rukeyser experimented with incorporating documentary style, the camera eye, and other new techniques in

50 In “Whose Fires Would Not Stop: Muriel Rukeyser and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1976,” Kennedy-Epstein includes a list of Rukeyser’s works inspired by Spain: “four major essays written from 1936-1974, all of them uncollected, “Barcelona, 1936” (1936), “Death in Spain: Barcelona on the Barricades” (1936), “Start of Strife in Spain Is Told by Eyewitness” (1936), and “We Came for Games” (1974), as well as the recently recovered autobiographical novel Savage Coast (2013), the introduction to The Life of Poetry (1949); the unpublished poem “For O.B.” (undated); and a considerable amount of poems available in The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser (2005), edited by Janet Kaufman and Anne Herzog” (385). What Kennedy-Epstein demonstrates in her article is not just how the Spanish Civil War influenced Rukeyser in fundamental ways, but how Rukeyser’s neglected work on the war deserves more study.
the hopes of innovation. In 1937, just after Rukeyser returned from Spain and wrote her novel, she went to West Virginia to investigate the events and the law suits surrounding the Gauley Bridge tunnel. Her interviews, investigations, and observations were the basis for a long poem sequence, “The Book of the Dead,” the centerpiece for the 1938 book of poetry, *U.S. I*. Michael Thurston writes of Rukeyser’s long poem sequence, “Possessing great illustrative power, presenting sheer beauty alongside stunning depictions of suffering, mingling political critique and philosophical meditation, “The Book of the Dead” ranks with the milestones of high modernism in complexity, accomplishment, and aesthetic bravery” (61). Rukeyser, working on both projects in 1937, flexed a newly-discovered muscle incorporating the visual into textual genres. Thurston further describes Rukeyser’s project and its use of documentary techniques:

Case histories of individuals and of groups are presented through narrative, description, testimony, or a combination of the three, and the portrayals are allowed to “speak for themselves” through the pictorial and testimonial codes readers would have recognized from the omnipresent documentary culture of the thirties, rooted in sources as varied as *Fortune* and *You Have Seen Their Faces*. As poetic stagings of familiar documentary scenes, [the poems] are often striking accomplishments. But Rukeyser is not content merely to adapt poetry to the critical function of social documentary; indeed, to do so would doom her to replicate the class-based voyeurism and sentimentality to which documentary is often heir. Rather, as her “note” at the end of *U.S. I* indicates, she wants to “extend the document” through the compositional practices and aesthetic expectations of modernist poetry. (72-73)

The inclusion of extra-textual notes – like the epigraph at the beginning of *Savage Coast* and the *Reuters* dispatch at the start of the chapter – challenge the novel’s composition by layering material outside the text. In this way, we see Rukeyser “extending the document,” in Thurston’s words, using texts from outside the novel to buttress the novel’s narrative. This material informs the action of the novel and strengthens Rukeyser’s account, just as it calls attention to how the

---

51 As Thurston notes, Martin Cherniack’s *The Hawk’s Next Incident: America’s Worst Industrial Disaster* (1986) is the most complete history of the Gauley Bridge tunnel and its aftermath. See also the House Committee on Labor, *An Investigation Relating to Health Conditions of Workers Employed in the Construction and Maintenance of Public Utilities*, 74th Cong., 2d sess., 1936, on H.R. 449 (Thurston fn. 2, 60-61).
events have been fictionalized, how Rukeyser has transformed her eyewitness account into an autobiographical novel.

Rukeyser may be evoking pictorial codes that readers in the 1930s would be familiar with through their exposure to social documentary. To return to Savage Coast’s prefatory note, Rukeyser writes, “None of the persons are imaginary, but none are represented at all photographically; for any scenes or words in the least part identifiable, innumerable liberties and distortions may be traced” (1). In this short note, imagery is highlighted. Rukeyser tells us that “none of the persons are imaginary, but none are represented at all photographically.” The difference, for Rukeyser, between image/imaginary/imagination and photography seems to lie in exactness and mimesis. Using photography as the metaphor for authenticity, for an exact truth, is a vital hint, here, of how questions of documentary evidence, memoir, and narrative will intersect in the novel. The influence of the visual is a key element to understanding Rukeyser’s approach to her writing, as she was both interested in film and other visual media and worked professionally as a propagandist.

Catherine Gander’s Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary: The Poetics of Connection, mentions that before her visit to Spain, in 1935, Rukeyser had studied film editing (8). After the Spanish Civil War, she worked in the Office of War Information as a Visual Information Specialist: she was in charge of creating poster campaigns to support the American effort in World War Two (Gander 13). Gander how, “[a]lthough she resigned from the Office due to her frustration at the attitudes of the ‘advertising men’ in charge, Rukeyser noted that she had ‘learned…the impact that a combined form may have when the picture and the text approach the meaning from different starting-places’” (13). I do not want to suggest that Rukeyser’s work in the OWI and later “photo-texts” and film editing have undue influence on Savage Coast and
Rukeyser’s time in Spain – just the opposite. What Rukeyser produced from her time in Spain informs her later artistic production and experience. Even before her visit to Spain, even before her work in film editing, Rukeyser was interested in exploring the intersection of the visual and the textual.

The play on image and imaginary from the opening note to the novel underscores how central the visual is to Rukeyser’s work even in her youthful production. Raphael C. Allison, in his article “Muriel Rukeyser Goes to War: Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Politics of Ekphrasis,” closely examines Rukeyser’s own visual theory as she applied it to both war posters and long-form poetry. He writes, “[Rukeyser] prized the war-poster above other forms of propaganda since it combined two media: visual imagery and linguistic print content. In this way, the war-poster […] accommodates varied perspectives, as opposed to fascistic or totalitarian forms of unity, which accommodate only one” (4). What Rukeyser achieves in combining the two media – and in combining media more generally – is a way to represent experience more holistically. But mimesis is not what Rukeyser pursues in this technique; realism is not the goal, but rather, a humanistic representation. One that, in Allison’s words, can accommodate varied perspectives. These perspectives are necessary in trying to represent something as complex as war generally, and as sudden and difficult to understand as the Spanish Civil War. Savage Coast was Rukeyser’s attempt to enact this technique in prose, a technique that would gain traction for her in “The Book of the Dead” and continue to be manifest in her later poetry. Allison argues that Rukeyser experimented with “theories of visual imagery” both prior to and during her time as a Visual Information Specialist, and that Rukeyser developed “a literary style of politically engaged ekphrasis” (2). Ekphrasis, the poetic technique of representing the visual work of art in verse, can also be applied to non-verse forms such as the novel or the memoir and representing
visual experiences that are not works of art. One of the main differences here between
ekphrasis and the techniques described by Allison is the political engagement that Rukeyser
brings to bear in her writing, and in choosing her subject as a political one, rather than an artistic
one. “This conceptual formula was to become crucial to Rukeyser during and after the war,”
Allison continues, “when her zeal for combating fascism was matched only by her enthusiasm
for what she called in her numerous writings on war-posters the ‘image’ and its corollary, the
‘imagination.’ For Rukeyser, ‘imagination’ entails complex examination, multiple perspectives,
and a pluralist belief that such multiplicity yields strength” (5). In the prefatory note to Savage
Coast, Rukeyser’s use of the word “imaginary” is in clear dialectic with “photographically”; it
cannot be read as an extension of Allison’s nuanced reading. But, knowing that “image” has such
complex resonances for Rukeyser makes this prefatory note all the more significant because it
adds yet another layer to the Rukeyser’s approach to using the visual in her writing.

***

The Communists help the group – Helen, Peter, Olive, and Hans – get to Barcelona via
truck; the train eventually leaves Moncada and arrives there as well. The People’s Olympiad is
cancelled as it becomes clear that the military uprising will not be squelched quickly. Hans,
able to return to Germany, decides to volunteer for the militia. As the Games are canceled, a
committee member gives instructions to the “representatives of all countries, to repeat here what
had been said in the earlier meeting, and to tell the participants the government’s position now”
(Rukeyser 263). Listening to this announcement, Peter leans into Olive and whispers, “We were
right, the Games have embarrassed the government all along. Foreigners, to create situations –
what parasites we become!” (Rukeyser 263). Peter’s exclamation about foreigners creating
“situations” through their awkward spectator position and being parasites alludes to the fact that
foreigners are not contributing to the war effort in a concrete way.

As an Olympic committee member begins to address the crowd waiting to board ships that will take them away from civil war Spain, Hans and Helen share a good-bye. They are in a doorway, crushed by the crowd:

She hardly heard his words, as the meaning struck her. She only saw his lips move, and felt the hot sunned space between herself and his body, and the hot truth of his biography. [...] And then she saw what he was saying.

“And you!” she cried.

Now it was clear.

Life within life, the watery circle, the secret progress of a complete being in five days, childhood, love, and choice.

Now it as coming to this.

She could see what was coming. (Rukeyser 266-267)

Again, Helen relies on her flesh experience and her eyes to understand what Hans says to her and to connect with him. She “saw what he was saying” and reads the “hot truth” of his biography on his body – seeing the (non-literal) writing on his body and the truth therein. But she does not communicate to the reader what that might be. Echoing the episode of money-collecting on the train, the narrator obscures the meaning here: what is clear? What does Helen “see” that Hans is saying? What does she “see” coming? The reader does not know, but what is underscored is the importance of the visual knowing, of observation, of eye witnessing, and of flesh.

The importance of eye witnessing and acting on those experiences is emphasized in the final paragraph of the novel. Hans has moved into the crowd and disappeared; Helen stands near Olive and Peter, listening to the organizer of the People’s Olympiad, Martín, give a farewell speech in various languages. He repeats his speech in French, which the three Americans can understand:

“You have come to this country as foreigners in the moment of our war, and you have felt the unreal constraint of acting as aliens when you are our brothers, when this war belongs to all of us. [...] You have felt the inaction of strangers, but you are not
strangers to us. […] Now you are about to return to your own countries. […] If you have felt inactivity, that is over now. Your work begins. It is your work now to go back, to tell your countries what you have seen in Spain.” (Rukeyser 269)

In this speech, “the unreal constraint of acting as aliens” is dismissed – a constraint that Peter, Helen, and others experienced in Moncada as they presented their manifesto-letter and money collection to the committee leaders. When Martín says “this war belongs to all of us,” he refers not just to the civil conflict in Spain, and the fight to put down the military uprising, but he extends the war to include the global, political fight against fascism. Martín underscores that the foreigners have been bound together by their experience as aliens in this moment of war; they are flesh-witnesses and “brothers” to the Republican Spanish cause. As such, it is their work; their imperative to advocate for Spain in their home countries. “What [they] have seen in Spain” is the collectivization of the government, the liberation of the people, and the rising of a Popular Front coalition – not necessarily the violence of the war.

Martín’s speech makes up the last lines of Savage Coast. In this novel focused on Helen’s experience of the war, giving Martín the last words of the book demonstrate Rukeyser’s respect for the Republican Spanish cause. She allows a Spaniard’s word on the war to be the final one. Gendered witnessing is key here. That these words are instructions underscores that bearing witness is an active thing, that bearing witness requires going outside of one’s self and representing experiences to others, not just observing and absorbing the experience through the flesh. Rukeyser understood this imperative and tried to represent her experiences in this autobiographical novel that languished unpublished for decades. As the last lines of Savage Coast, the speech is also directed at the reader, putting the reader in the place of the foreigner being told they must share what they have seen in Spain; but the speech also takes the reader outside of the text. The reader, in finishing the novel, now knows that Rukeyser has fulfilled her
imperative.

Though so young, in 1937, Muriel Rukeyser had already developed a reputation for truth-telling and representing with humanity and care the circumstances of social injustice. In the January 19, 1937 edition of *The New Masses*, John Malcolm Brinnin, who in the course of the twentieth century would become a poet and literary biographer, wrote a poem honoring the then 23-year-old writer:

**For Muriel Rukeyser**

*Touch! See, against spotlighted wall,*  
*Crisis sweating in his mask,*  
*Her dagger deftly home and*  
*Wagging at his ear.*

Transcontinent, transwilderness,  
And now  
The first bright wing across:  
Poet in helmet, horizon-eyed.

This woman knows our land,  
Lands nameless as future;  
Inhabits a hangar of plans  
Keen for departure.

Joan of revolution’s arc,  
Luminous and winged, armed  
With the glorious word,  
The April heart. (UNZ.org)

Brinnin’s language is idealistic at best, gushing at worst, but does underscore how Rukeyser’s reputation and writing were equated in the leftist press with revolution and leadership. She is a “poet in helmet,” oriented to the future; “Joan of revolution’s arc / luminous and winged, armed / with the glorious word”: saint and angel and soldier and proselytizer. Importantly, although Rukeyser “knows our land,” she also is “transcontinent, transwilderness” – she is a figure that resonates beyond borders. Rukeyser is able to place a “spotlight” on “Crisis sweating in his
mask;” she threatens him with a dagger. This sort of hope in a writer, with its mix of social justice, vision, and preparation for violence would be an unusual investment at the time in a living male poet, much less a living female poet. In this poem, one can sense the potential Brinnin saw in Rukeyser, in her writing, and especially in this moment in 1937 when fascism threatened democracy so keenly and Spain was fighting its civil war. Rukeyser, as she ends Savage Coast, reminds the reader to stay “horizon-eyed.”

***

Rukeyser’s novel Savage Coast and her experience in Spain underscore the importance of the flesh and the body in gendered witnessing. The use of her eyes in noting details and communicating her experience was so important to shaping her experience of the Spanish Civil War because she was in Spain so briefly, and because she was not fluent in Spanish. The novel is a bildungsroman, which is a genre that underscores how a character comes into their own in the world. A bildungsroman is also an awakening, a literal opening of the eyes, which is how Rukeyser represents her experience in Spain during the war. Helen is unable to run and is away from the front, but we, the readers, still get a very informed view of Spain as the war just broke out because of the way Rukeyser is willing to break the narrative with interjections of poetry and documentary.

In this way, because of the dependence on the flesh, the body, and the eyes for this experience, she might be the most embodied of the witnesses. Rukeyser’s representations are not as preoccupied with the war victim, but rather, with showing the reader Helen’s own experience and what she sees. Violence is on the fringe of the novel; if anything, it is represented in the concern for the foreigners and other non-combatants on the train while in the station at Moncada. But because violence and its consequences for non-combatants are not what are represented in
*Savage Coast*, the humanitarian imagination is expressed through humanism. Helen sees the potential of political collectivization through the action of the Spaniards in Moncada; she presents a hopeful vision of what the response to the humanitarian imagination *could* be.
Chapter Five

Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland, War Poets

“MacSpaunday,” a term invented post-thirties, refers to a British group of poets and, in particular, to the main individuals and friendships within the W.H. Auden circle: W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Cecil Day-Lewis, and Stephen Spender. The four were famously never in the same room at the same time, but the literary ties, influences, friendships, and sympathies among them were real. Roy Campbell, the South African poet and Francoist supporter, invented “MacSpaunday” in his volume-long verse satire, Talking Bronco, published in May 1946 (Sutherland 317). The title of Campbell’s poetry book came from Spender’s 1939 review of Campbell’s pro-Franco Spanish Civil War poetry collection, Flowering Rifle, where Spender labeled Campbell a “talking bronco” (Stanford 111). Embracing the moniker, (perhaps in a performance of defiant masculinity), seven years later Campbell uses “Talking Bronco” as his title for the poetry collection where he belittles and lashes out at Spender’s political and war participation.

Campbell was not just belittling the poetic distinctions of these four writers by lumping them all together with a Joycean-like label. He was rehashing old quarrels and challenging their masculinity, as well. At the heart of Talking Bronco is the political struggle of the Spanish Civil War and its antagonisms and rumors, even six-plus years later. Campbell writes:

[...] joint MacSpaunday shuns the very strife  
He barked for loudest, when mere words were rife,  
When to proclaim his proletarian loyalties  
Paid well, was safe, raked in heavy royalties,  
And made the Mealy Mouth and the Bulging Purse  
The hallmarks of contemporary verse. (Stanford 111)
In these lines, Campbell critiques the poets’ “bark” as unnecessary when there was abundant advocacy for Spain. He assays the accusation that their support of Spain and its cause was directly tied to profit, intimating that the writers’ political advocacy can be bought. In these accusations, Campbell undermines Auden and his peers’ contribution to modern verse and modernism, accusing them of writing “the hallmarks of contemporary verse” only at the behest of “the Bulging Purse.” John Sutherland, in *Stephen Spender: A Literary Life*, analyzes these lines and underscores that at the heart of this debate are questions of real manhood:

Campbell’s scurrility was tiresomely predictable: the Auden Gang were self-promoting, sexually degenerate, yellow-bellied cowards who had let *real* men, notably a certain South African, do their fighting for them.\textsuperscript{52} […] To Spender’s rage, he further alleged (libelously) that MacSpaunday had written Communist propaganda during the Spanish Civil War for financial gain. (317)

Campbell and Spender exchanged a series of letters that summer over the accusations in *Talking Bronco*. Spender was particularly insulted that Campbell claimed Spender went to Spain in 1936-1937, financed by “red gold” (or, as Campbell put it, “stolen pelf”) and attempted to force Campbell to produce proof if he was to make the accusation (Sutherland 317). The exchange devolved into name calling, rather than debating the history and their involvement in the Spanish Civil War or debating history one way or the other.\textsuperscript{53} In the Campbell-Spender kerfuffle, “MacSpaunday” underscores several important points about 1930s poetry: it was (sometimes) about the Spanish Civil War; it was dominated by men; and it was the site of both anxiety over

\textsuperscript{52} Campbell had seen active service during World War Two (Stanford 111).

\textsuperscript{53} In one letter, Spender wrote that Campbell was “a liar, a gross slanderer, an empty-headed boaster, a coward, a bully, and a Fascist” (Sutherland 317). Campbell replied, calling Spender a “chairbourne shock trooper of the knife and fork brigade […] a guzzling poltroon and a banqueteer” (Sutherland 317-318). Campbell’s further insults detailed how T.S. Eliot and Faber publishing (Spender’s publisher, as well) “had my entire co-operation in eliminating a third of the poems in case they might excite your well known hysterical paranoia” (Sutherland 317). Although three of the MacSpaunday men were significantly riled up over *Talking Bronco* and the exchange of letters with Campbell, it seems that no one wanted to jeopardize their relationship with Eliot (who held fascist views during the Spanish Civil War) and Faber the publisher, by pushing too hard to get Campbell fired or the volume somehow retracted or edited.
homosexuality and the performance of traditional masculinity. Whether a poet was brave and fought in the war or advocated for *La Causa* at risk to personal reputation are questions that go straight to the heart of how men, and especially male writers should behave in war. Such questions also are central to the risks of witnessing in general and gendered witnessing in particular.

This project has been pushing against the masculinity of the Spanish Civil War by analyzing photographers and writers who took the same risks as the male artists and believed in *la Causa* just as much as they did. This chapter focuses on Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland. These women were poets, active Communist political members and writers who went to Spain twice during the Spanish Civil War. This chapter demonstrates how Warner and Ackland engaged in gendered witnessing against the backdrop of masculine tradition of war poetry and the machismo of the British writing scene in particular during the Spanish Civil War and late 1930s. Ackland uses the short lyric to satirize the task of witnessing the atrocities in Spain when it is evident that in Great Britain, the government is not interested in knowing the truth. Her causticness comes from her anger at being unable to do more for Spain beyond advocate for the Republic and bear witness. Warner’s poems are more abstract. She draws on Greek mythology and focuses much more on descriptive, lyrical phrases to evoke the drama and scale of the Spanish Civil War than on the gritty reality of the war. Importantly, a recurring trope in the two poems analyzed here is the idea of “border spaces,” – an allusion to Warner’s own discomfort witnessing the war in Spain, but feeling at odds with the male party members and fellow male writers. Gendered witnessing, for these poets, is the most uncomfortable: because they *care* so much about Republican Spain; because of their proximity to Spain and their certainty that war will come to England next; and because as lesbians in this pervasive machista
and homoerotic environment, their participation in the war and writing effort is undermined by sexism.

***

While he did not fight on behalf of the Nationalists in Spain, Campbell did go to Spain and write on behalf of the Nationalist cause. Curiously, Campbell seems to retroactively apply his World War Two service to the conflict in Spain, implying that overall, he is more holistically contributive to the war effort than Spender and the rest of MacSpaunday because he volunteered to fight – albeit, not in the Spanish Civil War. The tension between soldiers and witnesses and risk is one that pervades many conflicts. Spender and Campbell were on opposite sides of the Spanish Civil War and that this animosity should continue well beyond the war’s conclusion is not surprising. What makes this animosity more pronounced is that Campbell discredits Spender’s – and Auden’s – flesh-witnessing even as he obscures his own flesh-witnessing by claiming later risk. This revisionary history writing and the blending of these poets’ identities into one label makes it easier for Campbell to obscure his own participation in the war. No wonder Spender was irritated. Interestingly enough, Spender’s dissatisfaction resides mostly with Campbell’s accusations, and not the term MacSpaunday itself. For MacSpaunday was not the only exclusionary and selective way to address this group of poets during the 1930s.

Among the group’s alternative labels during the interwar period was “Homintern,” a play on words alluding to the fact that three of the four poets were attracted to communism and that two – plus their fellow writers and acquaintances Christopher Isherwood, John Lehmann, William Plomer – were homosexuals (Stanford 110). The word-play is based off the term

---

54 Florence Tamagne writes in *A History of Homosexuality*, “In fact, the Homintern did function as a secret society whose members, unperceived by the public, recognized each other and defended their common interests. The group was bound by the knowledge of intimate details of its members’ lives and by the use of personal signs in alluding to
“Comintern,” the Communist organization founded by Lenin and Trotsky in 1919 and which had some influence in Spanish Civil War propaganda. In *A History of Homosexuality in Europe*, Florence Tamagne highlights the possibly sinister signification of the label, “From the inception of the Comintern, these homosexuals had been the symbol of a foreign force that had penetrated the country and was trying to ‘convert’ followers” (202). This historical reading places the group more in the context of a homosexual “gang” of sorts – one deeply committed to politics, literature, and intellectual pursuits – but a closed-off group, nonetheless. The perception of homosexuality as synonymous with intellectuals was not, perhaps, a new association; however, the social stakes for known and suspected homosexuals were much higher in Britain in the early twentieth century than today. Oscar Wilde, for example, had served jail time for his homosexuality, a trial that effectively criminalized male homosexuality, and the famous obscenity trial over *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall had concluded in 1927. In other words, there was a heightened anxiety not just about non-heterosexuality, but also about the infiltration of Marxist and leftist ideology from the working classes into the wealthier classes, via sexual liaisons and encounters in intellectual circles.

Peter Stanford, in his biography of Cecil Day-Lewis, explains that Cyril Connolly, the literary critic and fellow writer, deployed the word Homintern to describe both the 1930s poets and “more generally […] what he saw as an international network of influential, left-wing homosexuals” (110). Stanford underscores that over time, these nicknames were all meant in good fun, and that the group even came to own the term MacSpaunday. I am not convinced that homosexuality” (202). Tamagne then details how groups beyond the Auden circle came together, portraying the “Homintern” as “a loose network of influence intended to help homosexual young people improve their social position” (202).

Tamagne notes, “In 1951, when two English diplomats, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean ‘went East,’ it was only confirmed that there were ties between [the Homintern and the Comintern]” (fn. 649 p. 202).
Stanford’s reading of the nicknames is entirely true; but rather, “MacSpaunday” and “Homintern” are strategies to emphasize the unity of political ideology in the late 1930s against the war – a unity that Campbell, as a fascist supporter, found himself at odds with. The advantage of “owning” these terms and later treating them lightly are that in the 1950s, such labels serve as an excuse for their Communist affiliations, and also for the lesser-known poets to ride on the coattails of the more famous poets whose identities are all blended. What these labels (MacSpaunday, Homintern) reveal is a preoccupation with sexuality, masculinity, writing, and politics as an embroiled network, and a sort of “boy’s club” where women are ‘the beard,’ excluded from their own sexuality of all types, not considered a political actor (much less as a fellow Communist-homosexual) and hardly the writer-peer. Stanford emphasizes that “the most important common thread – not enough to establish a movement but sufficient to justify the link made by many at the time – was a shared belief that literature, and for them principally poetry, had to confront the menace they saw in domestic and international events” (113). “Confronting the menace” was distinctly men’s work, for the perception of women’s involvement in politics still focused namely on the private sphere. Poetry, and war poetry in particular, was considered the purview of male writers (whose place in the making and conducting of war has been naturalized in and by the 20th century). This was especially so because of the tradition established by World War One poets such as Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen, of a certain type of male war poet: the poet who is a soldier. Yet, many of the most well known names in the Spanish Civil War canon are not the British soldier-poets who died for La Causa – such as John Cornford – but the witness-poets, or observer-poets, like Stephen Spender and W.H. Auden.

The centrality of W.H. Auden to the British poetry of the 1930s cannot be overstated. Valentine Cunningham, in his seminal tome British Writers of the Thirties, writes, “The name of
Auden became a touchstone of the period” (19). Although Auden visited Spain only briefly at the start of war, his experience inspired one of the best-known and canonized Spanish Civil War poems, “Spain.” My intention is not to contest Auden’s place, or Spender’s place, or any other male poet’s place in the canon of the 1930s. Their writing was instrumental to the Spanish cause, and to modernism more generally. Rather, with the inclusion of the history behind MacSpaunday and the Homintern above, I mean to underscore the masculinity of the poetic tradition in Britain in the 1930s, and to highlight that these men were the poet-peers of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland during the Spanish Civil War. Jane Dowson in Women, Modernism, and British Poetry, 1910-1939, addresses the issue straightforwardly, “Because ‘thirties poets’ have been associated with left-wing politics, the omission of women has perpetuated the prejudices that they are politically conservative and concerned with the private life. [Writers like Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland] challenge the lingering assumptions that women’s concerns are with the personal, not public, experience” (215). With labels like MacSpaunday and Homintern invented and used in the 1930s and 40s as short-hand for the important writers and intellectuals of the time, one realizes that women had little place in this struggle, although they were writing, publishing, editing, and in many cases, politically committed. The exclusion of women, both in historical perception and at the time, is real.

***

Within this atmosphere, writers Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland wrote, lived, and participated in the political discourse surrounding the Spanish Civil War, and the
larger leftist movements in 1930s Great Britain. Warner and Ackland wrote for a number of leftist and liberal publications with broad circulations, using their pens as a central part of their activism. According to Mulford, the “papers for which [Ackland and Warner] wrote ranged from the liberal, left-of-centre *Time and Tide*, *New Statesman*, and *News Chronicle*, to *Woman Today*, paper of the broad-based ‘World Women’s Committee Against Fascism and War,’ *The Countryman*, a non-political monthly of country topics (which included some highly political pieces by Sylvia) *Country Standard* (a Communist Party monthly), the *Daily Worker*, the Party newspaper, and the Left periodicals *Left News*, an offshoot of Gollancz’s Left Book Club, and *Left Review*” (70). As one can see from the sheer quantity of periodicals, Warner and Ackland were very actively involved in the political literary scene. Of these, *Left Review* indubitably had the most influence on the political awareness of the average left-inclined citizen. This periodical ran from October 1934 to May 1938 – a period with significant overlap with the Spanish Civil War – and was originally published for the British Section of the Writers’ International (Mulford 70; 253, fn. 1). Dowson explains their involvement in the periodical which published so much of their work on Spain, “Although [Warner] and [Ackland] found that *Left Review* was inappropriately dominated by poets ‘from Oxbridge or Chelsea or Bloomsbury,’ it was an outlet for their poems, fiction, and journalism” (225). Like MacSpaunday and Homintern, place names like “Bloomsbury” or hybrid university names like “Oxford” serve as shorthand for a certain political, literary, and class configurations – configurations that Ackland and Warner did not fit

---

56 Because I want to draw attention to the terrific scholarship that has been done addressing the very fact of women writer’s exclusion from the canon, and that even though significant moves have been made to study and incorporate their lives and work into critical scholarship, more can be done. For examples of the recovery work and scholarship including women writers in the modernist canon, see especially Bonnie Kime Scott’s introduction to *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (University of Illinois Press, 1990) and *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections*, (University of Illinois Press, 2007) also edited and introduced by Bonnie Kime Scott.
into. It was through their connections at the *Left Review* that Ackland and Warner became close to the Party (Mulford 70).

Warner and Ackland visited Spain twice during the war: first, as medical envoys with the Red Cross; the second, to Madrid in 1937 as part of the Second Writers’ Congress of the International Alliance of Writers for the Defense of Culture (IAWDC) in Madrid. Ackland was so impassioned by an article that Nancy Cunard published in the *Daily Worker* and *News Chronicle*, “appealing for volunteers to help the Spanish Republicans,” that within two days she had written to both papers, proposing that forty-nine medical aid volunteers, self-funded and with their own transport, supplement the Spanish Medical Aid Committee and the Communist Party’s contributions (Dowson 225; Mulford 87-88). Ackland wanted to be the fiftieth volunteer, to round out the number. The first time Ackland and Warner went to Spain, it was not through Ackland’s scheme to drive her two-seater car over, but rather by attaching themselves to an ambulance unit in Barcelona (Mulford 88). Neither the Spanish Medical Aid Committee nor the Party sanctioned their departure (in her letters to both organizations from Spain, Ackland writes in a distinctly apologetic tone); nevertheless, Ackland and Warner received official passes declaring them part of the “Primera Ambulancia Inglesa en España” (Mulford 88). This visit lasted three weeks. When they were not in Spain, both were working for *La Causa* from Dorset, writing about and otherwise supporting Spanish war refugees in England. For example, Ackland volunteered at a home for Spanish Refugee children at Tyhrop House, near Thame (Dowson 225). As the war progressed, Ackland wished that there were more of a place for the woman-soldier in the war, for “she always regretted she had no opportunity to use her marksmanship” (Mulford 87). Ackland was a superb shot.
Warner was quite committed to the IAWDC, attending the Paris conference in 1935, and the post-Spain follow-up New York City conference in 1939. During the Second Writers’ Congress of the IAWDC, Warner and Ackland were the only women from the British delegation.\(^\text{57}\) Spender was part of the delegation, and his memoir *World Within World* gives us one of the few accounts of what went on during the Congress. Spender includes a number of topics and incidents that irritated him during the proceedings. Given his record of the Congress, one surmises that Spender was in a foul mood the whole time, “I observed my own behaviour with as much cynicism as I did that of others” (267). One object of his observation was Warner and Ackland, and almost everything about the couple rankled him: their political involvement in Spain, their perception of the conflict, and their homosexual relationship. But Warner in particular irritated Spender. As Peter Tolhurst writes in his introduction to *With The Hunted: Sylvia Townsend Warner, Selected Writings*, “it soon became apparent that he and Warner were temperamentally unsuited” (vi). An accurate, if understated, assessment of Spender’s remarks on Warner. Spender retells his perception of Warner and Ackland in his memoir:

> There was also a Communist lady writer, and her friend, a lady poet. The Communist lady writer looked like, and behaved like, a vicar’s wife presiding over a tea party given on a vicarage lawn as large as the whole Republican Spain. Her extensory smiling mouth and her secretly superior eyes under her shovel hat made her graciously forbidding. She insisted – rather cruelly, I thought – on calling everyone “comrade,” and to me her sentences usually began, “Wouldn’t it be less selfish, comrade,” which she followed by recommending some course of action highly convenient from her point of view. (268)

Spender’s description of Ackland, the lady poet, and of Warner, the Communist lady writer, does not indicate a level of respect for the women’s involvement and their risk in also going to Spain during the war. Spender labeling Warner’s use of “comrade” as “cruel” could be an indication of

---

57\ The official list of the British delegation included W.H. Auden, John Strachey, Lascelles Abercrombie, John Sherwood, Montague Slater, John Lehmann, and Frank Pitcairn (a.k.a. Claud Cockburn); however, the list is not accurate, as Auden and Strachey did not attend, among others (Mulford 97-98).
the tension at the Congress over those who supported André Gide’s publishing a highly critical report on the Soviet Union and those who were Stalinists. Tensions ran high over this divide. Warner and Ackland supported the Soviet Union (Mulford 99).\textsuperscript{58} Regardless of the internal political struggles of delegates at the conference, Spender’s unnecessary insults cut along various axes: class, gender, sex, political, and personal. The “vicar’s wife” comment maligns both Warner’s physical appearance (which Spender denigrates several times, broadly implying that Warner was too uptight) and remarks upon Spender’s assessment of her class – that Warner is too “middle-class” and also feminine to understand the dangers in Spain beyond thinking of it as a “tea party.” Warner, raised atheist, may have approached her Communism with the level of seriousness one reserves for religion; he may be right about her earnestness to get Communism “right,” whatever that might mean. One thing remains, though – when someone wanted to be truly insulting about a woman’s engagement in the Spanish Civil War, one insulted her clothes.\textsuperscript{59} In this case, the shovel hat, which hides Warner’s eyes and supposedly veils her intentions. Wendy Mulford reads this passage as Spender painting “a picture of Sylvia manipulating the delegation to do what she wanted to do” (99). In this example, she seems to be underscoring the good of the community rather than the individual’s interests, and if she does so through appeals to selflessness, the better. If Warner manipulated the delegation, she certainly did no more than the male delegates who were called upon to give speeches.

\textsuperscript{58} Although Ackland’s commitment to Communism and Stalin would wane over the years and she would become more centrist, Warner remained a steadfast Stalinist supporter through the 1960s, even after the news of the purges (Spraggs 110; Mulford 246).

\textsuperscript{59} For example, Martha Gellhorn made a poor impression at the Hotel Florida in Madrid, where many of the journalists stayed, as she “sailed in and out in beautiful Saks Fifth Avenue pants, with a green chiffon scarf wound around her head” (Herbst 138; Eby 123). Virginia Cowles, another American journalist, had “a cloud of suspicion attached to her when she arrived in Madrid wearing a hat (emblem of patrician privilege) […and] with her stylish black clothes and ‘shoes with very high heels’” (Eby 124).
Spende also writes of an encounter with Warner and Ackland later in the trip, after the delegates left the conference and were sunning themselves on the dock in Port Bou, just across the river from Spain:

[...] the Communist lady novelist, half-closing her eyes, said reminiscently: “And what is so nice is that we didn’t see or hear of a single act of violence on the Republican side.” That was too much, and I recounted the cheerful confession of the Catalan driver. The lady and her friend turned from me in a pained way. Then the lady novelist remarked to the poetess: “Isn’t it strange that now, for the first time after all these long, long, days, I feel just a little bit tired?” Her friend replied: “That’s because all of this time, comrade darling, you haven’t had a single moment in which you have been thinking of yourself. Now that there’s no need for you to be so unselfish any longer, you are able to realize how tired you feel, that’s all.” “Ah, how intuitive of you. That must be it.” “You see, darling, The Other Comrades Don’t Need You For A Little While, so you should try to relax.” (269)

Mulford critiques this passage: it “seems to come straight out of [Evelyn Waugh’s] *Vile Bodies*” and “Spender’s heterosexism and homophobia in his description of the part Valentine and Sylvia played in Spain are representative of the exclusive ‘male club’ quality which dominated the set of privileged left-wing intellectuals from Oxbridge to which the ‘MacSpaunders’ belonged” (99).

Although it does not lessen the severity of his depiction, I cannot help but wonder if Spender has simply painted the scene satirically because the only way he could view the lesbian lovers was as spectacle. Warner, for her part, found Spender to be “an irritating idealist, always hatching a wounded feeling,” words that echo Campbell’s description of Spender’s “well-known hysteria” years later (Tolhurst vi).  

---

60 On the previous page, Spender relays how “On our way from Barcelona to the French frontier, the Catalan driver happened to mention to me that during the liquidation of the POUM (the Trotskyist Party) in Barcelona he had shot six people in cold blood. He did not attempt to justify himself. In fact, he spoke of the episode as fun” (268).

61 Claire Harmon’s biography *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, Harmon quotes Warner as describing Spender as “an irritated idealist” [emphasis mine] (162). Neither scholar cites the diary entry or letter where Warner wrote this description, so I am currently hunting down where Harmon and Tolhurst found this quote. The difference between “irritated” and “irritating” is significant – one describes Spender’s state of being; the other describes Spender’s effect on Warner. I suspect it was their dislike was mutual, but it would be good to get the exact wording of the quote correct.
The heterosexism and homophobia that Mulford calls out so plainly in Spender’s memoir are crucial elements of why Warner and Ackland were viewed as outsiders during the war and routinely excluded from the canon afterward, despite the fact that Warner “wrote as much as anybody did about the war” (“Spanish Front” xxxii). “An unorthodox poet like Sylvia Townsend Warner, who combined polemical communist ideals and a couched lesbian sexuality with regular poetic form,” writes Dowson, “has been difficult to position and remained largely underestimated” (216). In “Exiled to Home,” Gillian Spraggs throws into highlighted relief sexual themes in both Ackland’s and Warner’s poetry as she reads lesbianism into their life story. In her readings, Spraggs carefully underscores that while the poetry and fiction can be read and analyzed with a lesbian lens, the poetry and prose is of such a nature as to stand on its own without the homosexual overtone – indeed, as it has for most of the twentieth century. Spraggs reminds us of the high social and economic stakes the two writers endured living openly as lesbians, as she analyzes one of Ackland’s sonnets addressing the “paradox of lesbian existence in a patriarchal society”:

For any woman to acknowledge that she loves another woman while living in a culture in which […] the desire of one woman for another is stigmatised as unnatural, inordinate, taboo, a dangerous personal and social contaminant: that is to experience such a sharp contradiction in the positions offered her within which to understand herself and her relations with the world that coherent discourse becomes impossible. (123).

“Dangerous” is precisely the word for the lesbian relationship in interwar England. Warner relied on her writing for her main source of income; she could simply not afford to take such a risk as to write openly about lesbianism as did the independently wealthy Radclyffe Hall (Spraggs 112). Ackland was more ostentatious. With her close-cropped hair and men’s clothes, she challenged expectations of women’s dress and behavior in a number of ways during her lifetime.
It was not very widely known at the time of the war, and Spender’s biographers approach his relationship with secretary Tony Hyndman very differently, but one of Spender’s main motivations in going to Spain was to help Hyndman, with whom he had been sexually involved. Despite the fact that there were open jokes about the “Homintern,” and Spender himself knew the love that dare not speak its name, his sour interpretation of Ackland and Warner’s relationship bespeaks how the homosexuality of women, of lesbianism, was much more radical and spectacular at the time. Spender may paint a negative portrait of the “politically radical” women in his memoir, but in his anthology Poems for Spain (1939), he included a poem by Warner, indicating that he valued her writing at least enough to place her in the anthology with other male writers of the time.

Warner’s inclusion garnered favorable attention for the anthology, which otherwise might have been taken for propagandistic scrawling. Kate O’Brien, reviewing Poems for Spain in the March 24, 1939 edition of The Spectator, writes, “Easily the best things in this book are the work of born poets, Sylvia Townsend Warner, C. Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice. These were writing real verse before Spain claimed their voices, and they will be poets whether she lives or dies, which—alas for propaganda!—is how poets have to be” (32). Spain’s claim to their voices and the mention of propaganda presages Campbell’s comment years later about the poets’

---

62 Earlier in November 1936, Spender’s live-in relationship with his secretary Tony Hyndman ended; afterwards, both men became more involved with Communism (Leeming 98). Spender committed to the Spanish cause almost as impulsively as he married Marie Agnes “Inez” Pearn in December 1936 (Leeming 99). Although Spender married Pearn, his interest and concern still lingered on Hyndman. In Stephen Spender: A Life in Modernism, David Leeming writes of Hyndman’s reaction to Spender’s marriage: Hyndman joined the Communist Party and the International Brigades and left in December for Spain (99). Spender’s war-time visits to Spain revolved somewhat around Hyndman and efforts to free him from Republican jail, for Hyndman had deserted, been captured, and was awaiting trial by the International Brigade judges (Leeming 107). After great uncertainty, Hyndman was discharged as an invalid, although his file was marked “Recalled for Political Reasons. Undesirable” (Sutherland 224). For Spender, the political nature of the Spanish Civil War is intensely personal; not only because of his marriage-via-political interest with Pearn, but also because of Spender’s sense of responsibility for and investment in Hyndman’s well being.

63 O’Brien reviews both Poems for Spain and Campbell’s Flowering Rifle for The Spectator in the same article – a juxtaposition that only highlights the kerfuffle between Spender and Campbell mentioned earlier in this chapter.
unnecessary bark. In 1939, with the withdrawal of the International Brigades from Spain and
the Nationalist win seeming inevitable, the poems in Poems for Spain represented not so much
an unnecessary bark as an elegiac howl.

***

Valentine Ackland wanted to be known for her poetry. In her lifetime, she published
relatively little, especially in comparison to Warner, whose writing was a chief source of her
income and sustained her financially in the days before she met Ackland (Mulford 16, 24).
Ackland had the luxury of being from a wealthier class; she received an annual stipend from her
family, even when she decided to pursue an unconventional lifestyle. Like Warner, Ackland’s
writing was varied. She wrote short stories, reviews, and journalistic pieces, particularly about
the Spanish war, and a book, Country Conditions. This last was published in 1936, and is “a
compelling indictment of the working and living conditions of rural labourers” and “reflects the
commitment to communism that [Ackland and Warner] shared” (Spraggs 110). Like many poets
of the 1930s, Ackland struggled with how to write poetry that was political, but not
propagandistic. Mulford describes how Ackland felt “a determination to engage with themes that
are politically difficult” (209). “Other left-wing writers in the thirties were attempting [political
engagement in poetry] through satire, ballad and choral speech,” explains Mulford, “so it was not
an unusual thing to be doing” (209). Dowson includes a direct quote from Ackland, “I am still
uncertain how to write poetry as it has to be written […] we need something really hard. Not
noisy and bombastic […] but definite and deliberately reasonable, […] well-devised and
musical” (30-31).64

64 For this quote, Dowson cites: Letter to Julius Lipton, 1935; Wendy Mulford, This Narrow Place, p. 207.
“Instructions from England (1936)” is one of the poems in which the struggle is apparent. Dowson explains, in Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology, how the poem’s “satirical tone indicates [Ackland’s] endeavour to find a successful and contemporary aesthetic for a political cause, characteristically, she felt caught between two impulses, the traditional and the new” (30). According to Mulford, Ackland wanted the material to speak for itself, to move away from subjectivity and the lyric (209). The tension between the traditional and contemporary forms is clear. The imperative tone is what strikes the reader in this particular poem, and not other qualities of the lyric. Spraggs writes of Ackland’s poetry, “her gift was for the short lyric that makes a personal statement” (116-117). The poem is short: two stanzas, a mere eight lines, ABAB CDCD, a rhyme. Its brevity enhances the satire because it calls attention to the formality of the poem.

The adjectives “noisy and bombastic” tell us what was expected of this type of political poetry. In “Instructions from England (1936),” Ackland represents satirically the poet going to Spain from England and being told what to see. In these instructions, Ackland satirizes the very real experience of writers and journalists going to Spain, putting their lives at risk, and being asked to be selective in what they write about. The poem is short enough to include in its entirety here:

Instructions from England (1936)

Note nothing of why or how, enquire
no deeper than you need
into what set these veins on fire,
note simply that they bleed.

Spain fought before and fights again,
better no question why;
note churches burned and popes in pain

65 From Chapter 3, one recalls Delapréé’s sarcasm in his final missive, about writing for the wastebasket.
but not the men who die. (Dowson 33)

Censorship infuriates the speaker. The speaker mocks the possibility of objective reporting in the ideologically-charged civil war in Spain. The emphasis on the opening word “note” underlines the instruction aspect of the poem, and indicates exactly what the speaker wants the reader to notice. The speaker does not want the reader at all to question why the war began in Spain or why people are dying fighting it: simply to report that they are dying. The instructions want the speaker to see the religious iconography, buildings and figureheads that are being destroyed: but not the ordinary men who are soldiers and why. This emphasis on what to see and not see, on what to note and not note, is a familiar dilemma for the gendered witness.

“Instructions from England (1936)” ultimately presents the reader with the difficulties of witnessing in war – especially where there is another agenda from a publisher or editor, especially a foreign civil war where sustained English interest is a challenge. Likewise, the poem presents the impossibility of representing objective interpretations of war when one experiences it first-hand. Ackland’s involvement as a Communist activist exposed her to the struggle against mainstream English politics; her lived experience as a lesbian positions her in such a way to work against heteronormative expectations and perceptions. In these two positions, Ackland, then, is often the target of “Instructions from England” in her personal and political life. As a gendered witness, she brings that lens of struggle to the poem through the caustic tone and portrayal of England’s indifference even as it commands certain results. Ackland’s gendered witnessing is complete through her emphasis on the humanity of the war’s soldier-victims. In contrast to the buildings – “churches burning” – the vulnerability of the men dying, with veins that are bleeding, is accented. While Ackland may not be portraying gender explicitly in this poem, she is representing gendered witnessing through the imperative from England to “enquire /
no deeper than you need” and through the speaker’s concern for the humanity of the subjects. The gendered witnessing lies in the vulnerability of both the war’s human targets, and in Ackland’s own experience heading off to Spain and her vulnerability there.

The speaker of the poem, aware that England signed the non-intervention treaty and refused to step into the war, turns back to England and derides the nation for its overall perception of the war in Spain. The second stanza, with its representations of damaged religious iconography, underscores the anti-religious violence the foreign newspapers reported as the civil war erupted. Even so, the speaker highlights the cultural distance between Anglican England and Catholic Spain, with the pluralization of “popes.” “Popes in pain,” through its alliteration, emphasizes the visual influence of the published photographs of religious violence. This phrase is textual shorthand for the violence of those images. Simultaneously, the alliteration hints at the flippancy and lack of interest certain English feel towards the war; yet the instruction-giver is not interested enough to even get a fairly significant detail about Catholicism correct. England will note only what it wants to note, despite evidence to the contrary, likely because of the official non-intervention policy. Despite the passion of its native sons which “set these veins on fire” (3) to volunteer in the International Brigades, as a country, England remains cool and distant both mentally and emotionally from the war. The speaker underscores the fact that people are dying in the war in the first lines. Despite the knowledge that other European countries had broken the non-interventionist pact, England remains apart, uninvolved. England perceives the war in Spain as just another war in Spain with no need for foreign intervention, an internal struggle: “Spain fought before and fights again, / better not question why,” (5-6). The perception of Spain fighting before and fighting again betrays the English imagining the Spanish as uncivilized or barbaric – conflict is inevitable between the Spanish. Once again, the Spanish are fighting amongst
themselves, “better not question why,” because the answer is irrelevant to the civilized English. Ackland’s speaker derides this apathetic attitude. This war will have international repercussions, but England does not want to see their relevance. The speaker, with her jibes and stinging tone, desperately attempts to make England take note, despite her explicit instructions to the contrary. The instruction emphasizes that the witness turn a blind eye to the “men who die” and note them not. One of the more intriguing aspects of Ackland’s crafting of the humanitarian imagination is her way of accenting the humanity of the war’s victims through understatement and not lingering on the imagery of suffering or war. The casual, but impactful, end to the short lyric does move the reader to consider the men who are dying.

Ackland had a gift for the short lyric that touches its subjects obliquely, emphasizing the use of the senses to absorb the war’s events. In “Instructions from England (1936),” the emphasis lay with the eyesight and what was to be noted by the speaker; in the following poem, “Badajoz to Dorset,” communication and what is to be noted is at stake through hearing:

Telephone wires cry in the wind
and make song there. I stand in the misty night
and listen. Hear voices from a far distance;
hear sounds from further, outside the wires,
than ever inside. Hear sounds from Spain.
The mist muffles all but these; blankets perhaps the reply –
But the wind plays the wires still, and the wires cry. (UNZ.org)

The poem was originally published in the January 26, 1937 edition of The New Masses. The date of the publication is not significant, aside from the fact that the war is seven months old, at that point. The tone of this poem is very different from “Instructions” – it is softer, like the mist with its muffling blanket. The speaker mentions how the technology allows “voices from a far distance” and “sounds from further” to be transmitted to (presumably) Dorset. The speaker experiences how “outside the wires” she can “[h]ear sounds from Spain,” and that “mist muffles
all but these.” The emphasis on the aural shows Ackland using a different sensorial quality.

But, similar to “Instructions,” the phrase “Hear sounds from Spain” can be read as an observation or an imperative.

The distance between Dorset and Badajoz, a town in Extremadura, Spain, is lessened through telecommunications. The geographical similarities of the two towns are noteworthy: both are regional centers removed from the capital; both were known, in the 1930s, for their populations of uneducated workers, if these towns were known internationally at all. Within these similarities, there is one striking difference: Badajoz was the site of a mass slaughter when Nationalists troops took over the resisting town in August 1936. Jay Allen, reporter for The Chicago Tribune, published his account of the slaughter in the August 30, 1936 edition of the newspaper, under the title “Slaughter of 4,000 at Badajoz, ‘City of Horrors,’ is Told by Tribune Man” (Part 1, Page 2).66 The article comes with an editor’s caveat demonstrating the article’s circuitous route:

The following article is a continuation of Mr. Allen's remarkable observations on his recent flying trip to Portugal to report that county’s part in the Spanish civil war and events in Spain along the Portuguese frontier. The dispatch was written on Aug. 25 and sent to the cable office at Tangier, International Zone, Morocco. The dispatch disappeared somewhere en route or into the waste basket of a censor. When Mr. Allen discovered this he found another route by which to get his dispatch to Chicago. (Part 1, Page 2).

The editor’s preface explains the delay in publishing: Badajoz fell to the Nationalists on August 14, and nine days is “a long time in newspaper work; Badajoz is practically ancient history” (Allen). Allen’s long article provides snapshots of what he experienced, and these are grim and

---

66 This feature appeared on the second page of the first part of the newspaper. The headline for front page of this issue of the The Chicago Tribune reads “Bombs Hit Center of Madrid.” The article accompanying the headline, picked up from The New York Times, reads, “This is the first time in history Madrid had suffered an aerial attack, and no bombardment of Madrid had been carried out since Napoleon’s invasion in 1808.” The front page features a lead for Jay Allen’s article on the second page. Also on the first page is a report from Edmond “Ed” Taylor, “Deadlock on Irun Front,” writing about the war from Hendaye, France. Ed Taylor was one of Frances Davis’s close colleagues during her time reporting, and they often worked together to get stories.
spare portraits of violence and international betrayal. He prefaces these reports with two short paragraphs, beginning, “ELVAS, Portugal, Aug. 25 – This is the most painful story it has ever been my lot to handle. I write it at 4 o’clock in the morning, sick at heart and in body, […] I have come away from Badajoz, several miles away in Spain. I have been up to the roof to look back. There was a fire. They are burning bodies. Four thousand men and women have died at Badajoz since Gen. Francisco Franco’s rebel Foreign Legionnaires and Moors climbed over the bodies of their own dead through its many times blood drenched walls” (Allen). Allen continues to describe his account from the beginning (hearing “dark rumors in Lisbon”), his arrival in Elvas, the Portuguese border town with Spain, and how the Portuguese “international police” turned back refugees escaping the violence in Badajoz, where they faced Nationalist firing squads.

The unflinching descriptions of the piece and highlighting the visual are the aspects that make it difficult to read. Allen writes of one particular encounter, “Suddenly we saw two Phalanxists halt a strapping fellow in a workman’s blouse and hold him while a third pulled back his shirt, baring his right shoulder. The black and blue marks of a rifle butt could be seen. Even after a week they showed. The report was unfavorable. To the bullring with him.”67 The bruises are from the impact of the recoil of a rifle. This method of stripping away shirt to prove whether or not a conquered individual had fought against the invasion also happened on the Republican side: militia would check the shoulders of priests to determine if they had born arms against Republican soldiers. The play-by-play cinematic description, the revealing of treacherous evidence through visual marks on the body, the cadence of the last three phrases that reads like poetry: all these elements combine to underscore how Allen relies on visual techniques to effectively influence his readers. The titles of Allen’s sections read like a poem when composed

67 Phalanxists is an Anglicized spelling of members of the Falange, the ultra-right wing Catholic followers of Franco, whose leader was José Primo de Rivera.
into verse lines:

The Story of a Sobbing Woman  
Recalls Badajoz of Earlier Day  
Hundreds Sent Back to Die  
Deputy Handed Over to Rebels  
Shops Looted by Conquerors  
Telltale Marks of a Rifle  
Met by Machine Guns  
Climb over Bodies of Dead  
Bodies Lie for Days  
Reds Get ‘Rigorous Justice’  
Love Song to the Moon

This “Love Song to the Moon” is what might be transmitted through the wires to Dorset. In the poem, “Badajoz to Dorset,” the connection between the two countries is what cries through the wires. In choosing a Spanish town of a similar scale to Dorset, Ackland stresses the similarities between the towns and the possibility of Dorset’s affective responsibility for Badajoz. She hints at the chance that their suffering could be our suffering, given the parallels between the towns. Allen’s article, while incredibly moving and innovative in how he gives the reader a sense of the unsettling events in Badajoz, reaches the limits of its genre as reportage. Allen achieves an affective response because the reader struggles to understand the horrors represented; Ackland’s poem, however, emphasizes the connectivity between the two towns, between the two countries. This connectivity exists regardless of telecommunications because the sounds and cries exist “outside the wires,” and as long as the wind jostles the wires, they will cry.

Ackland, in her poetry, wanted to both close the affective distance between the reader and the poem and find a way to represent the lived experience of war in the lyric. In these two poems, through gendered witnessing, she achieves both aims.

***
Although Ackland published poetry during her lifetime, Warner is the more well-known of the two as a poet. As with Ackland, I have chosen two poems out of Warner’s larger oeuvre of Spanish Civil War poetry to examine closely: “Benicasim” and “Waiting at Cerbère.” Warner’s experience in Spain during the war inspired both poems. As Dowson concludes, “Warner’s best poems combine her skills as a narrator and observer” and this generative tension of participant and witness is certainly present in these selections (226). In both poems, the war is elsewhere. Like in Ackland’s poems, these are not poems that directly engage with the violence of battle. These are not the sort of war poems that describe the horrors of war as one fights it.

Yet, the threat of violence actively haunts the border spaces of the poems’ settings: the town of Cerbère and the convalescent home where sea meets land in “Benicasim.” These poems serve as a lens through which to examine the difficulty of her position while in Spain: as a medic not directly fighting the war; as a foreigner committed to a national cause not her own; as a woman in the male dominated sphere of war; as a lesbian facing the heteronormative expectations of the 1930s. As a gendered witness, Warner occupies multiple spaces at once. This might explain the attraction to writing about border-spaces: Warner herself is in a border space, as many of these gendered witnesses are. Dowson disagrees with the perception of gender as central or even important to Warner’s poetry:

> There is no hint of gender distinction in Warner’s war writing, partly because she echoes Thomas Hardy and the first world war poets and partly perhaps because the Marxist emphasis on the collective and not individual identity superseded gendered imperatives. She is depicting men and women, old and young, in extremis, where hegemonic government, not gender is the site of struggle. (229)

While Dowson is correct in underscoring Warner’s priority on the worker’s struggle, Dowson’s scholarship is situated in a time when “gender” was synonymous with “woman” or “feminine.” Dowson’s assessment originates at a time when it was nearly impossible to make distinctions
about women writers without essentializing their writing through their biology or narrowing their perspective via their biographical material, because the scholarship on these women writers simply had not been done before. I agree with Dowson: Warner does not write “like a woman.” I argue, however, that one cannot talk about hegemonic government without addressing gender, and that by depicting “men and women, old and young, in extremis,” Warner is bringing a gendered lens to the war.

“Benicasim”

The original footnote to the poem indicates that Benicasim was the location of the rest home for Republican wounded. The title of Warner’s poem “Benicasim,” like “Waiting at Cerbère,” is reminiscent of a newspaper article’s title (like Allen’s section titles in his article) – as if the speaker were dispatching these poems, like descriptive notes or articles, to their home newspaper. As if she were giving a tour of Spain, the speaker begins the poem with “Here for a little we pause” (1). The pause itself echoes the purpose of the rest home: a moment to gather attention and strength. A beginning such as this, especially with the inclusion of the pronoun “we,” draws the reader in through an affective engagement. The title and the subsequent line function together: “Benicasim: Here for a little we pause.” The connection between reader, speaker and location is clear, even if the importance of the location is not evident yet.

The following lines reveal Benicasim’s location by the sea: “The air is heavy with sun and salt and colour. / On palm and lemon-tree, on cactus and oleander / a dust of dust and salt and pollen lies” (2-4). The oleander, native to the Mediterranean, is one of the main clues to the reader that she is in Spain. Also in these lines, the speaker establishes an inclination for triple repetition that she will return to throughout the poem, with “sun and salt and colour” and “dust and salt and pollen.” This triple repetition creates in some lines an almost iambic meter, whose
rhythm generates an accumulation of images, sensations, and objects for the reader. The haptic quality of the descriptions and the visual accumulation create an intense reading experience. Here, also, the speaker reveals a bit of why she has paused at this particular place: the phrase, “dust of dust” echoes the “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” phrase from the Book of Common Prayer, customarily read at funerals. The speaker’s echo of this phrase hints that the location is a place where death is present. Not only is death present, but as at a funeral, the speaker and the reader are there to commemorate and witness the fallen. Intervention is not possible, even as the speaker brings us closer to the rest home.

The speaker moves from the ocean up the beach, “And the bright villas / sit in a row like perched macaws, / and rigid and immediate yonder / the mountains rise” (5-8). The bright villas stand out against the mountains behind them, a contrast between buildings and landscape that is also present in the next poem, “Waiting at Cerbère.” The middle stanza begins, “And it seems to me we have come / into bright-painted landscape of Acheron” (9-10). Although the Acheron is a physical river in Greece, in Greek mythology, Acheron was a river god and also thought to be a branch of the river Styx. In pausing here, the speaker suggests this is a place in-between life and death, the territory surrounding the rivers Acheron and Styx. This land is “brightly-painted,” as the tents along the beach are as brightly colored as macaws. We see here visual descriptions used to create a tiered space, an ascension into hell rather than a descent – and more accent on the visual in this brightly-colored carnivalesque atmosphere.

This time at the beach is, indeed, carnivalesque, in that the world seems un-done or distinctly “off”. Next to the tents, the speaker describes the people along the beach: “For along the strand / in bleached cotton pyjamas, on rope-soled tread, / wander the risen-from-the-dead, / the wounded, the maimed, the halt” (11-14). The shoes worn by soldiers fighting in the civil war
– when not wearing boots – were espadrilles or *alpargatas*, a kind of sandal made out of rope material. This is the first concrete hint that signals that the speaker is talking about soldiers recovering from the war. Those readers who had seen photos of soldiers from the Spanish Civil War might recognize the “rope-soled” sandal. The “bleached cotton pyjamas” indicate that something is not quite right with this scene, as people do not normally wear pajamas to the beach. With this description, the speaker unveils a landscape that is a nightmarish vision, made even more nightmarish given that this was the *reality* at the convalescent home. Here on the shores of Acheron, the in-between space of death and life provides a home for these wounded soldiers, the “risen-from-the-dead.” These men – and possibly women, for the speaker never attributes a distinction to these figures – are bleached white in their pyjamas in contrast to the brightly-colored tents on the beach. They move like zombies through beach activities of bathing in the “tideless sea” or “fingering the sand.” This scene could be comical, if it were not so damned grim. The notion of the walking once-dead is reiterated with the following line, “the wounded, the maimed, the halt.” Barbara Brothers, of Warner’s poems about Spain, writes that her verses “do not romanticise or sentimentalise the soldier. Her poems are written in the context of suffering and unheroic battlefield conditions that the World War One poets, such as Wilfred Owen, pictured for those who remained at home” (358). Such an assessment is certainly true here: all of the figures bear in their bodies the wounds from the war, marks of how close they were to death.

The speaker goes on to describe the actions the recovering soldiers take while on the beach: “Or they lay bare their hazarded flesh to the salt / air, the recaptured sun, / or bathe in the tideless sea, or sit fingering the sand” (15-17). All of these activities are typical for the beach. This listlessness creates an eerie quality to the poem. Sunbathing is not an uncommon activity at
the beach, but the description of people laying “bare their hazarded flesh to the salt / air”
sounds like a potentially dangerous activity. The purpose of a convalescent home is to preserve
the body and allow it to recover, to save what life is left so the individual can go on living. The
speaker contradicts this purpose, and implies that the flesh does not matter – for these wounded,
“their hazarded flesh” can be exposed, and as it has already been damaged, not much more can
be done to it. The timelessness of this beach is underscored through phrases like “tideless sea.” A
tideless sea is essentially unaffected time, by lunar cycles and shifts of the planet, which is to say
that on the shores of this metaphoric Acheron, there is no beginning and ending because it is a
timeless space between life and death. The wounded are in this interim space, bathing in this
timeless sea, “fingering the sand.” With this action, there is an emphasis on physicality that
would, of course, be missing in the spiritual world of the dead. In order for these figures, these
“risen-from-the-dead,” to recover from their wounds and heal their flesh, they must lay it bare to
the air, bathe or sit filtering the sand through their fingertips.

In the last stanza, the speaker moves away from the scene, to the “bigger picture.” As
with “Cerbère,” Warner finds her imagination engaged by the presence of a dead, foreign world
– a world pressing up against this space of waiting and demanding to be engaged. The speaker
describes the limitations of the rest home in the opening verses of the stanza, “But narrow is this
place, narrow is this space / of garlanded sun and leisure and colour, of return / to life and release
from living” (18-20). While she imaginatively moved closer to the wounded in the middle
stanza, the speaker definitely positions herself as an outsider here, witnessing the wounded
people’s pain and not able to intervene.

The technical elements of the last line remind the reader that this eerie scene is poetic: the
overt rhyme of place and space jars the reader after the last prose-like verse of the second stanza.
The repetition of “narrow is this place, narrow is this space” also makes the reader aware that this is a poem; in itself, it is a limited space with a limited ability to work a transformation. The triple noun phrase of the “garlanded sun and leisure and colour” works not only to return us to the first stanza, but also adds to the garish portrayal of a brightly-colored hospital and shore, a place where death and misery abound. The speaker emphasizes the tenuous hold that the wounded have on life in their “return / to life and release from living.” Many soldiers, having begun to recover and therefore “return[ed] / to life,” will be released from living, leaving the shores of Acheron and crossing the river into Hades, into death. Only a few will gain their strength back and completely return to life. The border between these is as indefinite as where sea ends and land begins.

The last lines of the poem protest the fate that awaits these wounded men should they recover from their injuries and return to the land of the living. The speaker interjects her own conflicted recommendations or instructions, stating, “Turn / (Turn not!) sight inland: / there, rigid as such a state and unforgiving, stand / the mountains – and close at hand” (20-23). To face the sea, to turn not, is to remain in a half-alive state; and while the speaker does not exactly present death as preferable, she does offers this fate to the wounded soldiers. The speaker knows that for the wounded to turn inland also means facing the “rigid as death and unforgiving” mountains. The mountains are the challenges of life, and at this moment, the mountains are the war in Spain, whose front approaches closer and closer to the hospital every day. As she is outside of this space, the speaker sees and suffers both options equally, and thus she can recommend both as viable. Pause, she says to her readers, feel the choice these men will soon have to make.
The ABCB rhyme scheme of the poem emphasizes the familiarity (through the contrast in rhyme) and yet alienation of the scene as viewed from Cerbère. The first stanza begins in medias res, “And on the hillside / That is the colour of peasant’s bread / Is the rectangular / White village of the dead” (1-4). Beginning the poem with “And” emphasizes the in-
betweenness of Cerbère’s location; like Cerbère acting as a bridge between France and Spain, peace and war, risk and safety, the “And” acts as a temporary entrance for the reader. The speaker looks out, and a location at some distance is established in the words that follow: “on the hillside / that is the colour of peasant’s bread.” Peasant’s bread is round, in the way the hillside is round, and they are the same color – the dark, grainy color of peasant’s bread. This similarity creates an allegiance between the land and an object representing the peasant, another way for the speaker to declare an allegiance to the Republicans. Dowson writes of Warner’s poetry, “Warner acts as both poet and journalist in relating the smells, tastes and sounds of Spain for those not there” (227). Her descriptions of the village and its surroundings are not necessarily journalistic, but a sort of intimacy is established between the reader and the speaker. The speaker moves closer to the village in her description, referring to the village’s intimate spaces and creating a space for herself in the dark stillness. The second stanza begins, “No one stirs in those streets” (5). “Those streets” harbor “those dark doorways no one” emerges out of and into the light (6). The speaker fully enters the town with the line, “At the tavern of the Black Cross / Only the cicada strums” (7-8). The speaker is close enough to the deserted and still village to hear a cicada. The visual contrast of the dark doorways – clear frames for silhouettes and ghosts – and the aural quality of the cicada underscore the eeriness of the abandoned landscape, the haunting quality of who once was in the village. This imagery is as dark as the hillside itself, emphasizing that the land, that the war, is without hope. The isolation of the village is clear in the last line of that stanza, where only an insect sings a funeral song for the dead.

The speaker moves away from the village in the third stanza. She writes, “And below, where the headland / Strips into rock, the white mane / Of foam like a quickened breath / Rises and falls again;” (9-12). The speaker again contrasts white on black, with the “white mane / Of
foam” from the ocean’s waves falling against the rock of the headland. The headland, or promontory, denotes another transitory border space: that of the land disappearing into the sea. At the promontory, below the village, the speaker sees the violence of the waves crashing upon the rocks. The waves rise and fall “like a quickened breath,” like a person experiencing fear or running away from a threat. Eventually, the waves will wear away at the rock and consume it; perhaps the rock stands as an alternative to the dead village of the stanza before it. The speaker suggests that although the village has witnessed these atrocities, and the enemy is as unyielding as a black cross, yet with time the “quickened breath” of the people will wear away at the solid rock and overtake it. From where she is standing, the speaker can do nothing but imagine and witness this violence of the water crashing, foam-like.

The last stanza begins much like the third: “And above, the road / Zigzagging tier on tier / Above the terraced vineyards, / Goes on to the frontier” (13-16). Aside from the cicada, no life has been mentioned in the poem, and the life in the vineyards will fall to neglect. The speaker moves away from the village, away from the ocean below it, back to Cerbère, as she follows the road that “goes on to the frontier,” where there is peace – or, at least, not the violence and risk of war. The feeling at the end of the poem is one of isolation, but of a different sort than that which permeates the village. Separated by civilization – “the terraced vineyards” – the speaker can see the war, but is outside of it and cannot intervene. But in the poem, Warner conveys what Spain is like, and the desolation of the village. The war is sketched as a black and white environment, and the transition back to peaceful land is ragged, with the road “zigzagging tier on tier.” The poem’s imagination of the landscape from Spain to Cerbère can be read as a road-map from the war to peace. There is violence and hard contrast – essentially the war itself – below the village in the
ocean. As one moves up, there is a commemoration of the dead, and then a jagged, many-leveled road to peace. The rest of the world will be there, in that borderland, waiting at Cerbère.

***

Poetry as a medium for witnessing is like Horna’s photography: a deliberate, affective impression. This is why the project is book-ended by Horna and by Ackland and Warner. With Warner, we return to disconcerting and surreal spaces that we saw in Horna’s photography. Warner’s preoccupation with border spaces in both poems indicates how, as a gendered witness, she does not feel at ease with the environment of the war and does not know how to get close to it. Warner is not figuring Spaniards in her poetry, really – she shows empty landscapes and other consequences of war...consequences she can absorb with her eyes. She wants to know the Spanish Civil War intimately, but she does not understand it, not in the intuitive way the younger artists approach their representations. Her distance and discomfort in representing the war in poetry may come from her deep investment, politically, in Spain, and because she had seen war before. In “Benicasism,” with its representations of war wounded, Warner contributes to constructing the humanitarian imagination, especially since these wounded, once healthy, may return to the front again.

For Ackland, the short poems comment explicitly on eye witnessing and what to see, and these poems have an immediacy and causticness to them that would not be evident without her going to Spain and actually experiencing the war. Ackland’s poems appeal to readers because the events alluded to – like the massacres at Badajoz – link the victims to the humanitarian imagination. In this short poems, Ackland appeals to the reader’s self-interest. She gives the reader snapshots of what the war is like or could be like for an English audience.
Warner and Ackland were dealing with a very male dominated genre and masculine atmosphere when it came to British poetry in the 1930s, as the labels MacSpaunday and Homintern suggest. These deliberately leave out women writers from the history of British poetry and politics, importantly.
CODA

My focus has been gendered witnessing, the humanitarian imagination, women artists and the Spanish Civil War. I put forth my concept of gendered witnessing, a two-fold concept involving both an embodied perspective and a way of seeing. Furthermore, I demonstrated how these gendered witnesses contributed to the humanitarian imagination by portraying war victims through a gendered lens, in textual and in visual representations of the Spanish Civil War.

But there is a question still pressing, nudging at the periphery of the my argument, that many ask upon seeing representations of atrocity and reading reports of violence: if people knew of these events, then why did they did nothing? Why did the United States, Great Britain, and other great powers not intervene in the Spanish Civil War, on behalf of the Republicans? The work these seven women artists – Taro, Horna, Gellhorn, Davis, Rukeyser, Warner, and Ackland – represented the gendered war victim across genres, using photographic techniques in both visual and textual representations. The artists themselves risked their lives to witness the war and create these works. Taro died in Spain. The work is powerful; their depictions, moving. With these risks, and the portrayals of the Spanish war victims, how could the other countries of the world stand by and watch?

The answer to this question is not central to my argument; I recognize that. My theory of gendered witnessing and my exposition of these artists do not rely on their acts of gendered witnessing being successful, provoking intervention. Underscoring this point with respect to images, Susan Sontag writes in Regarding the Pain of Others, “The photograph’s intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of diverse communities that have use for it” (39). Just so with other texts,
like poetry. The artist’s intentions do not determine the meaning of their texts, but nor do acts of gendered witnessing vanish because the viewer or reader is not moved to action.

The course of action inspired by these images may not even be clear, for what did “intervention” mean during the Spanish Civil War? Sontag lays out this dilemma, “That we are not totally transformed, that we can turn away, turn the page, switch the channel, does not impugn the ethical value of an assault by images. It is not a defect that we are not seared, that we do not suffer enough, when we see these images. […] All this, with the understanding that moral indignation, like compassion, cannot dictate a course of action” (116-117). The ethical value of gendered witnessing remains and is significant, and it is not “a defect that we are not seared” or moved to intervene

Even still. The question of intervention, or lack thereof, presses upon any analysis focused on visuality and atrocity, about questions of human rights. For what is the point of viewing these images and reading these descriptions if the audience does nothing? Even in historical moments like the Spanish Civil War that occurred before a formal, human rights doctrine was declared.

I want to address this question in my conclusion especially since I presented these women artists as making convincing cases for intervention. My answer to this question provides further insights into the dynamic of gendered witnessing and the humanitarian imagination with respect to Spain. In the case of the Spanish war, it is an important question to answer because of the ultimate non-intervention by international powers.

The acknowledged, broadly understood reasons for non-intervention are the facts that the United States was staunchly isolationist before the attack on Pearl Harbor and especially before World War Two began. No matter how compelling the argument, President Roosevelt and the
American government at large were immensely reluctant and unwilling to enter a European war, especially a conflict that was above all a *civil*, domestic war. Great Britain trod similar political lines. Even though American and British involvement in the Spanish Civil War was impressive on a grassroots level; even though some individuals were so moved by *La Causa* as to go to Spain and die fighting for the Republicans; even though convincing and moving portrayals of the need for intervention were made at various levels of government – despite all these reasons, Neville Chamberlain’s government and the British people more widely did not want to get drawn into another European war, especially one against a quickly-rising and formidable foe such as Hitler. Officially, the non-intervention pact stood for the duration of the war.

I want to add another reason for non-intervention. The dynamic of gendered witnessing as I have outlined it – that a witness, through an embodied, physical experience of “being there,” adopts a unique perspective and that their representations of war victims be *gendered* – works *against* the power of this gendered witnessing. In other words, by representing the Spanish war victims as *gendered*, the artists portrayed them as vulnerable and weak, and *needing intervention* in the first place. These gendered witnesses undermine their own endeavor by representing these subjectivities – including those of the wounded male soldier or the male refugee – as vulnerable. These individuals become non-agentic and the opposite of potential and powerful allies.

This is the tension of portraying war as anything *but* powerful, militaristic, and heteronormatively masculine and of portraying war victims at all. Gendered witnessing is necessary in wartime because gendered witnesses provide distant spectators with a holistic, profound understanding of total war’s effects on *humanity*. The problem is not gendered witnessing or the viewers – the problem lies with the fact that “humanity” has always been a
placeholder for male, Western, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc. In the capitalist and patriarchal society of the twentieth century, any individual or object that does not read to the viewer as “male” – whether the figure portrayed is female or male – is perceived as expendable. This expendability or vulnerability places the subject outside of the sphere of power.

The trouble with gendered witnessing is that these gendered portrayals of war necessitate a viewer who is, in turn, gendered feminine to affect change. These portrayals of war victims ask for the selfless gaze, the feminine gaze, the maternal gaze: a viewer who feels compelled to intervene even if they might get nothing in return. A viewer who feels impelled to give and to offer succor. This is not how politics works; this is not how looking works. This compulsory, selfless feminine gaze is simply not how we are trained to see – and certainly not how those in power are trained to see. These gendered witnesses who spent so much effort in resisting the patriarchal, masculine gaze in their textual and visual representations…did not know that they had to change their audience’s gaze, as well.

A last but vital point I want to stress is the double vulnerability of the gendered witnesses themselves. On the one hand, vulnerable to the risk they take in becoming gendered witnesses, in exposing themselves to the violence of war in order to record its impact on the people of Spain. Gerda Taro died in Spain; Frances Davis’s shrapnel wound curtailed her foreign journalism career before it really got off the ground. On the second hand, these artists are also vulnerable to the whims of the historical record, which neglected their contributions and allowed them to fall into obscurity. As the discovery of the Mexican Suitcase illustrates, a number of the photographs originally attributed to Robert Capa were actually Gerda Taro’s creations. All of these artists are vulnerable to the forgetfulness of the historical archive, to an archive that sets priority on the works of male artists and their experiences, contributions, and representations.
One of the take aways from this double vulnerability of these gendered witnesses is to pay extra close attention to the women and other individuals embodying a gendered perspective who are risking their bodies and their lives to report and document today’s wars and atrocities. The 20th – and now also the 21st – centuries have been the bloodiest in human history, with tools for destruction allowing death in conflict to be conducted swiftly and remotely. In this era of atomic bombs and drone warfare, the news reportage, photojournalism, and perspective from gendered witnesses is critical. We need to remember the dual aspects of gendered witnessing – an embodied gendered perspective and a gendered representation – now more than ever. And we must remember the cost of this embodied, first-hand witnessing and reporting. Lara Logan, South African and chief foreign affairs correspondent for CBS News, attacked in Tahrir Square, Egypt, during the Arab Spring. Lynsey Addario, American photojournalist for The New York Times, kidnapped in Libya in 2011 and held for several days with other journalists. Leila Alaoui, 33-year-old French-Moroccan photojournalist who died on January 18, 2016, after being wounded in the terror attack in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on assignment for Amnesty International. Camille Lepage, 26-year-old French photographer, killed in Central African Republic, in May 2014, the first Western journalist casualty since France sent peacekeeping troops to the country in December 2013. While we know their names and faces now, like Davis, like Taro, they are vulnerable to the whims of the archive. Losing their contributions, images, and legacy to history’s neglect simply because of their gender is hopefully not the fate of Logan, Addario, Alaoui, and Lepage. We want to celebrate their achievements and mourn their loss.

---

68 I focus here on the photographers and women of the media who were embodied witnesses to the conflicts of the 21st century. In doing so, I do not mean to lessen the sacrifices or horrific consequences toward male journalists such as Daniel Pearl or James Foley.
We need the ways of seeing that gendered witnesses present to us, now more than ever, because we need holistic ways of perceiving humanity and we need to become that feminine gaze: recognizing the vulnerable and ready to intervene to stop the killing.
Poetry Appendix

Benicasim

Here for a little we pause.
The air is heavy with sun and salt and colour.
On palm and lemon-tree, on cactus and oleander
a dust of dust and salt and pollen lies.
And the bright villas
sit in a row like perched macaws,
and rigid and immediate yonder
the mountains rise.

And it seems to me we have come
into a bright-painted landscape of Acheron.
For along the strand
in bleached cotton pyjamas, on rope-soled tread,
wander the risen-from-the-dead,
the wounded, the maimed, the halt.
Or they lay bare their hazarded flesh to the salt
air, the recaptured sun,
or bathe in the tideless sea, or sit fingering the sand.

But narrow is this place, narrow is this space
of garlanded sun and leisure and colour, of return
to life and release from living. Turn
(Turn not!) sight inland:
there, rigid as death and unforgiving, stand
the mountains – and close at hand.

From Left Review, March 1938

Original footnote: At Benicasim on the east coast of Spain is the Rest Home for the convalescent wounded of the Spanish People’s Army, and the Villa dedicated to Ralph Fox, supported by the Spanish Medical Aid.
Waiting at Cerbère

And on the hillside
That is the colour of peasant’s bread
Is the rectangular
White village of the dead.

No one stirs in those streets.
Out of those dark doorways no one comes.
At the tavern of the Black Cross
Only the cicada strums.

And below, where the headland
Strips into rock, the white mane
Of foam like a quickened breath
Rises and falls again;

And above, the road
Zigzagging tier on tier
Above the terraced vineyards,
Goes on to the frontier.

Poems for Spain, 1939. ed. Stephen Spender and John Lehmann
Works Cited


Kennedy-Epstein, Rowena. “‘Her Symbol was civil war’: Recovering Muriel Rukeyser’s Lost


---. “Women in War: Milicianas and Armed Combat in Revolutionary Spain, 1936-1939.” *The


