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Aurora G. Morcillo: (In)visible Acts of Resistance in the Twilight of the Franco Regime: A Historical Narration

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In March 2020, Spanish historiography tragically lost a powerful voice: Aurora Morcillo. Morcillo died aged 57 following an accident at home in Miami, Florida. She had spent several years before her death writing *(In)visible Acts of Resistance in the Twilight of the Franco Regime: A Historical Narration*. The book tells a story about grassroots resistance to the state through the memories of people, mainly women, who engaged in either student activism or more everyday forms of resilience in the southern city of Granada during the end of Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975). *(In)visible Acts* considers how Spaniards rejected the regime's political ideology while also posing questions about genre and the capacity of conventional methodology to grasp the realities of people's lives – themes relevant to all historians. Morcillo died before finishing the manuscript, but her husband finalised it for publication and made it accessible to all.

Oral history interviews provide the raw material for *(In)visible Acts*. The book comprises two parts, each with its own introduction and with an »intermezzo« chapter in between. Part I draws on interviews Morcillo conducted with former student activists in May 1989. Many were professors at Granada's university and Morcillo gathered the data before moving to Florida International University to undertake post-graduate study. Once there, she started researching for her first book, *True Catholic Womanhood: Gender Ideology*

in Franco's Spain. She abandoned the tapes only to return to them thirty years later, a move not commonplace among oral historians. Part II includes interviews Morcillo conducted decades later with working-class women who suffered hardship during the Franco regime. Morcillo perceived their survival as a form of defiance.

This book adds to a burgeoning body of work drawing on interview material that explores gendered activism under Franco. Mary Nash and the late Maria Carmen García-Nieto París helped pioneer oral history in Spain, conducting interviews from as early as the late 1970s. They influenced Morcillo, whose approach and ideas have in turn helped shape authors such as Eider de Dios Fernández, David Beorlegui and Sandra Blasco among others. Yet *(In)visible Acts* is unique in presenting the interview transcripts as literary works. Each one occupies a separate chapter of the book and Morcillo treats each in the manner someone might a novel or poem: placing it alongside other artworks and literature, discussing it as reflecting a historical juncture, and analysing it in relation to theory. She calls this approach »the poetics of oral history«. It is unusual for researchers to use oral histories in this manner. We tend to approach them more analytically, not letting an interview speak for itself so much as weaving it into an argument about cultural change and memory. Morcillo's method can leave us without a view of how aspects of her sub-

jects' lives either reflected or contrasted with wider trends and processes.

It is also easy to lose oneself in the dense maze of viewpoints and approaches that form the book's theoretical repertoire. Yet the introductions and the intermezzo, the most heavily theoretical parts, also give a sense that the reader is entering a live dialogue between Morcillo and thinkers she most admired, including Walter Benjamin and María Zambrano. And a certain roughness should be permitted given the book was not finished. It does fit with the sub-field's tendency, too, to yield work that playfully breaks with the norms, broadening our methodological options in the process. It reminded me of Luisa Passerini's *Autobiography of a Generation* and Benno Gammerl's *Anders fühlen* and chimed with Carolyn Steedman's autobiographical work, *Landscape for a Good Woman*.

If the two introductions are convoluted, clarity and concision mark Parts I and II. We learn first about Concha and Amalia, two women who became friends at university, and whose story conveys the complex experience of resisting Francoism that Morcillo was seeking to capture throughout. Amalia and Concha participated in social Catholic organisations, in the Spanish Communist Party and, from the mid-1970s, in local women's movements. Yet alongside their political efforts, which led the police to detain Amalia in 1978, Morcillo also describes a warm friendship. This chapter most moved me when Morcillo included extracts of an interview she conducted decades later with Amalia alone, after Concha had died, and in which Amalia extols her friend's virtues. Such moments of intimacy are echoed in the subsequent chapters forming Part I, which includes men and women who debated philosophy when doing so involved

risk, who joined clandestine movements, and who were even imprisoned for their actions.

The book's second part features interviews with women who did not attend university nor join political movements. Yet Morcillo sought to show that they also defied the status quo and the gender order in how they conducted their daily lives. Most of these women were raised in poverty, although one came from a family who had been »well-to-do« before the civil war, and another was adopted by relatively wealthy parents. Several of the women interviewed were Morcillo's older relatives on her mother's side, who had suffered significant economic hardship. When Morcillo's own mother fell ill aged twelve, with a condition cured by calcium, the only solution open to her parents was to send her to work for the family of the local milkman. This is one of several stories that capture the destitution that millions of Spaniards endured for decades under Franco.

Other themes emerge as salient through their repetition in various Part II interviews. Several interviewees were widowed prematurely: in their twenties, thirties, or forties. One husband caught tuberculosis, another sepsis, and another liver cancer, their conditions worsening from fighting in the war or being persecuted by the police. A second theme that recurs in Part II was sex, and particularly the interviewees' candid accounts of losing their virginities. The topic of emigration was also woven through several of the interviews in this section. Various women moved abroad, to France, Germany, and Algeria, either seeking work or following fiancés or husbands. Morcillo's aunt Pura moved to Oran, Algeria, as her husband worked there. The couple, their children and Pura's sister, Pepi, stayed until Alge-

ria gained independence from France in 1962. Pura explained that her husband had wanted to remain in Oran whatever the war's outcome. This chapter could have benefitted from a consideration of post-colonial theory and a deeper appreciation of the imperial apparatus and racialised hierarchy that Pura belonged to and helped reinforce. Yet Morcillo, by including this account, was drawing attention to the presence of Spaniards in Oran in the early twentieth century, a history much overlooked in narratives of modern Spain that tend to assume its imperial legacy all but ended in the early nineteenth century.

Morcillo also explored her own life and identity in *(In)visible Acts of Resistance*. As Jo Labanyi explains in the foreword: »This book is an account not only of the becoming of the individuals interviewed by Aurora, but also of the becoming of Aurora herself as a creative and caring historian.« Most oral historians are familiar with the idea that people have multiple identities – multiple selves – which an interview can draw out. This book also offers access to some of Morcillo's different selves. The introductions show us Morcillo the theorist, who was intellectually curious, creative, and playful. Parts I and II introduce Morcillo the attentive and empathetic listener, who was analytical, had an eye for quotes and could tell compelling stories. I never met Aurora Morcillo myself, but I really wish I had.

Roseanna Webster (Cambridge)