

# Narrating Memory of the Spanish Civil War and Postwar in the Autobiographical Novels of Enriqueta Antolín

Keyon Aghajan, Luis Álvarez-Castro

Department of Spanish and Portuguese, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL

## Abstract

Recent Spanish visual and literary production has had a recurring theme of looking back into the country's past, particularly its civil war and the dictatorship that followed. In terms of literary production, the historical novel is the genre of choice to explore this past. In this study, I investigated autobiographical works of fiction that question the past—specifically *La gata con alas* (1992), *Regiones devastadas* (1995), and *Mujer de aire* (1997) by Enriqueta Antolín, which function collectively as a trilogy—as autobiography and autofiction (a mixture of fiction and autobiography) are underappreciated genres in Spain. The peculiar narrative form of Antolín's trilogy, written in the second person from the perspective of a woman to her childhood double in the first two novels and again in the second person to her childhood love interest in the third, provide a new way of constructing memory by a constant questioning of one's own memory through a dialogue. This is an innovative means by which to access collective memory of the Spanish Civil War and postwar, straddling between the national narrative constructed by the dictatorship and one's own newly constructed narrative.

## Historical Context

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) was a war between the Republicans, a left-leaning group in favor of the Spanish Second Republic (1931-1939), and the Nationalists, a conservative, Catholic group led by General Francisco Franco. With the triumph of the Nationalists, this war marked the end of the Spanish Second Republic and the beginning of a fascist dictatorship led by Francisco Franco until his death in 1975. The postwar dictatorship period (1939-1975) was marked by censorship and propaganda, inscribing a national narrative of anti-communism, anti-anarchism and fierce nationalism not only in newspaper publications and radio broadcasts but also in law. In 2007, the Historical Memory Law—a law proposed by the then-Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero—was passed to recognize the victims of the Civil War and to formally condemn Franco's regime. This law functioned in various ways to temper the national memory of the Civil War, including but not limited to removing fascist symbols from public spaces, increased funding for the exhuming of mass graves, and even the expansion of the circumstances under which one obtains Spanish nationality. Art has functioned fittingly as a means by which to look into this past, whether it is in the form of television or literature.

## Autobiography and Autofiction: Relevance, Theory, and Antolín's Works

A currently well-selling genre of popular fiction in Spain is the historical novel. Far-removed from the political motives that once marked its purpose, the historical novel in contemporary Spain serves as a form of entertainment, often in the style of a detective novel, where the protagonist sets out on a mission or an investigation, usually related to the historical moment in which the protagonist is placed. These works of fiction can result in trite plots and dialogs, exposing the reader to past historical events but only one-dimensionally questioning them. Autobiography and autofiction—a mixture of fiction and autobiography—are far less popular genres in Spain. However, recent publications of autobiographical works suggest that the self-reflection of these genres is an apt starting point of cultural analysis. For instance, Silvia Nancrales' introspection on her search for motherhood in *Quién quiere ser madre* (2017) leads to discussions of Spain's currently suffering economy that delays motherhood for many Spanish women, and even Luisgé Martín's autoreflection on his homosexuality in *El amor del revés* (2016) leads to reflections on the conditions under which young gay *madrileños* performed their sexuality in the 1980s.

“The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.”  
-Aristotle, *Poetics*

Thus, Antolín's works are of great interest. Her trilogy does not fit into the traditional definitions of autobiography and autofiction. The ambiguity of the identity of the narrator means that the novels fail to form the autobiographical pact that Philippe Lejeune proposes for an autobiography, and the proportion between fiction and autobiography can be so unclear as to be unclassifiable within Gérard Genette's distinction of authentic and false autofictions, yet the novels are nevertheless autobiographical; not necessarily in the simplistic sense that they have autobiographical components—as many works of fiction do—but that these components actively function in the construction of the memory of the war and postwar. Therefore, these genres reach beyond the boundaries of the lives of the authors in which these fictions are inscribed; they serve as a means by which to question, meditate, and comment on social and political issues.

## The Construction of Memory in the Trilogy

The first two novels in the trilogy—*La gata con alas* (1992) and *Regiones devastadas* (1995)—are narrated peculiarly in the second person from the perspective of an adult woman, supposedly a reflection of Antolín herself, to her childhood double, recounting the events of her childhood in an informal “you”—referring to her childhood self—rather than an authoritative ‘I.’ The third novel, *Mujer de aire* (1997), is told directly from the perspective of the adult, yet there is a stark contrast in the construction of memory from the first two. The first two novels are filled with uncertainty and doubt concerning childhood events, particularly the disappearance of loved ones. Her child self poses questions regarding these mysterious disappearances, which are questioned and mostly answered in the third novel by her adult self. This (auto)questioning and re-questioning of intimate, personal experiences are done in tandem with the questioning of the social and political climate around her. The childhood self is exposed to the propaganda on the radio and the newspapers read to her—even the title of the first novel (*la gata con alas*, literally, “the cat with wings”) makes reference to the issue that the dictatorship transmitted so many lies that it would even declare that cats could fly. For Antolín, memory is constructed through an autoreflective dialectic that incessantly questions the past, and evolves through the passage of time.



Figure 1: “General Franco addressing a gathering of youth organizations in Madrid” [6]

## Conclusions

Antolín's construction of memory speaks to the Historical Memory Law of 2007; in her novels, Antolín questions the past, both personal and national. This line of questioning puts at stake already established narratives of the war and postwar, a goal that Zapatero sought to accomplish with the law he proposed. It also differs from the structure of popular historical novels, which often have a linear timeline that does not permit the constant act of re-questioning the past that is marked in Antolín's trilogy. Such re-questioning of established narratives contributes to a re-working of the collective memory of war, a line of thinking that is fitting for works of art such as Antolín's novels, for art can be used to inform us about historical events in a more universal way.

## References

- [1] Enriqueta Antolín. *La gata con alas*. Alaguara, Spain, 1992.
- [2] Enriqueta Antolín. *Regiones devastadas*. Alaguara, Spain, 1995.
- [3] Enriqueta Antolín. *Mujer de aire*. Alaguara, Spain, 1997.
- [4] Aristotle and S. H. Butcher. *Poetics of Aristotle*. [electronic resources]. [S.l.] : London : MacMillan, 1898, 1898.
- [5] Gérard Genette. *Fiction et diction : précédé de Introduction à l'architecte*. Points: Essais 511. Paris : Seuil, 2004, 2004.
- [6] Getty Images. 6th november 1939: Spanish dictator general franco ( francisco bahamonde) (1892 - 1975) addressing a gathering of youth organisations in madrid., 1939.
- [7] Philippe Lejeune. *Le pacte autobiographique*. Points: Essais 326. Paris : Seuil, 1996, c1975., 1996.
- [8] Luisgé Martín. *El amor del revés*. Narrativas hispánicas: 571. Barcelona : Anagrama, 2016.
- [9] Silvia Nancrales. *Quién quiere ser madre*. Alaguara, 2017.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to the Center for Undergraduate Research for funding my project under the University Scholars Program, and to my research adviser, Professor Luis Álvarez-Castro, for his suggestions in my research.

## Contact Information

Email: k.aghajan@ufl.edu

UF | University of Florida

CENTER for UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

EXPLORE  
DISCOVER  
CREATE

UF | Department of Spanish & Portuguese Studies