

## ARTICULATING POSTMEMORY IN SOLEDAD PUÉRTOLAS'S *MÚSICA DE ÓPERA*

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### Abstract

The study of representations of war beyond places of combat opens a space to consider the effects of that war on the society in conflict. Evocations of war linger through time and become articulated through the lens of postmemory, which for Marianne Hirsch (2012, 8) is “distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection”. The literary representations of life off the battleground point to a social fabric that illuminates intergenerational relationships surrounding the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and its aftermath, when society was divided across an ideological continuum. In Soledad Puértolas’s *Música de ópera* (2019), three generations of women come to terms with the effects of the Civil War on their family.

**Keywords:** Postmemory, Spanish Civil War, trauma, testimony.

### Resumo

#### Articulando a Pós-Memória em *Música de Ópera* de Soledad Puértolas

O estudo das representações da guerra para além dos locais de combate abre espaço para pensar sobre os efeitos dessa guerra na sociedade em conflito. As evocações da guerra perduram no tempo e tornam-se articuladas pelas lentes da pós-memória, que para Marianne Hirsch (2012, 8) é “distinta da memória pela distância geracional e da história pela profunda conexão pessoal”. As representações literárias da vida fora do campo de batalha apontam para um tecido social que ilumina as relações intergeracionais em torno da Guerra Civil Espanhola (1936-1939) e suas consequências, quando a sociedade se dividiu num continuum ideológico. Em *Música de ópera* (2019), de Soledad Puértolas, três gerações de mulheres lidam com os efeitos da Guerra Civil na sua família.

**Palavras-chave:** Pós-memória, Guerra Civil Espanhola, trauma, testemunho.

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## Resumen

### Articulando Posmemoria en *Música de ópera de Soledad Puértolas*

El estudio de las representaciones de la guerra más allá de los lugares de combate abre un espacio para considerar los efectos de esa guerra en la sociedad en conflicto. Las evocaciones de la guerra perduran en el tiempo y se articulan a través de la lente de la posmemoria, que para Marianne Hirsch (2012, 8) se “distingue de la memoria por la distancia generacional y de la historia por una profunda conexión personal”. Las representaciones literarias de la vida fuera del campo de batalla apuntan a un tejido social que ilumina las relaciones intergeneracionales en torno a la Guerra Civil Española (1936-1939) y sus secuelas, cuando la sociedad estaba dividida en un continuo ideológico. En *Música de ópera* (2019) de Soledad Puértolas, tres generaciones de mujeres se enfrentan a los efectos de la Guerra Civil en su familia.

**Palabras clave:** Posmemoria, Guerra Civil Española, trauma, testimonio

## Contextualizing the Literary Production of Soledad Puértolas

Born in the post Spanish Civil War period in Zaragoza, Soledad Puértolas Villanueva (b. 1947) has a distinguished record of creative publications and earned distinction as a member of the Spanish Royal Academy in 2010. Though she moved to Madrid during her teen years, she maintained connections to her natal city. She spent most of the final years of the Francisco Franco dictatorship outside of Spain, first in Trondheim, Norway (1968-1971), and then later in Santa Barbara, California (1971-1974), before returning to Spain in the final months of the dictatorship. *Música de ópera* (2019) is the latest of Puértolas’s 13 novels, some of them award-winning, such as her first novel *El bandido doblemente armado* (1979), and *Queda la noche* (1989), recipients of the Premio Sésamo and the highly prestigious Premio Planeta, respectively. She has also authored 16 collections of short stories and numerous essays as well as children’s literature.

The author’s silence on Spain’s sociopolitical climate in her early works contrasts with the portrayal of post-Civil War Spain in *Días del Arenal* (1992) and *Cielo nocturno* (2008) and the time coinciding with the end of the dictatorship in *Todos mienten* (1988), as well as with her commentary on the decades she brings to life in *Música de ópera*.<sup>1</sup> Puértolas has cultivated what was initially known in the late 1980s as the new novel (*la nueva novela*), a characteristic of which is the importance of memory. If as Sonia Mattalia (1988, 173) explains, the new novel “has turned memory and the subject – historicized, instinctual, interpersonal – into a privileged field for the genesis of fictions”<sup>2</sup>, then Puértolas’s recent novel moves from

<sup>1</sup> For Townsend (2014, 7), “her omission of explicit commentary on these national politics in the text should be expected as a symptom of the democratic transition”.

<sup>2</sup> My translation of the original text: “[H]a convertido a la memoria y al sujeto – historizado, pulsional, interpersonal – en campo privilegiado de la génesis de ficciones”.

the terrain of memory to postmemory. The author's own generational remove from the war and loose autobiographical representations in the novel shed light into her own gendered postmemory through narrative strategies that accentuate the verbal and nonverbal as well as the exploration of historical memory. The coalescence of real time with reconstructed time in pivotal moments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century relies on the feminine voice to articulate both historical accounts and fictional narratives through the lives of three generations of women. As Sarah Leggott (2015, 101) explains relating to the intergenerational stories commonly featured in Puértolas's writing, the act of postmemory is a response to "the loss of the primary bearers of memory".

### *Música de ópera* through the Lens of Postmemory

According to Marianne Hirsch (2012, 5), "'Postmemory' describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up". *Música de ópera* represents an extratextual display of postmemory as Puértolas constructs the novel, as well as an intratextual one, in which characters who belong to the generation after the war reflect on or internalize their own postmemories. The dual reading of postmemory sheds light on the ways in which the author explores questions of memory as a vehicle to combine personal inquiry with historical consciousness, thereby establishing an interplay between the universal experience of past identity constructed across time, yet particular to Spain.

Though the narrative focus on "urban middle class characters" (Townsend 2014, 4) typical of Puértolas's writing surfaces in *Música de ópera*, what stands out is that the emphasis on the individual, rather than eschewing a collective experience, relies on the postmemory experience to convey a rich *macro-fabric* of life before and during the Franco dictatorship. With this novel, Puértolas explained that she aimed, in her own words, "to communicate and novelize that feeling that has fallen on the shoulders of the people of my generation, as we have not had the data nor have we asked for it, as a form of self-censorship" ("Puértolas da visibilidad" 2019).<sup>3</sup> What sets this novel apart from others that contain memories of the characters who retrospectively look at their own lives is the temporal setting in the characters' present day as they are experiencing the events that exist as the present-day reader's past. In this way, the characters convey testimonies today's readers mediate, rather than the characters mediating the testimonies by interpreting them for the readers. The

<sup>3</sup> My translation of the original text: "[C]omunicar y novelar esa sensación que ha caído sobre los hombros de las personas de mi generación, que no hemos tenido los datos ni los hemos pedido, como un modo de autocensura".

narrative voice becomes a crucial mediator as well, given the reconstruction of history by an author decades removed from the narrated events.

Postmemory is more than a once-removed construct of events narrated from what W. G. Sebald terms a “secondhand experience” (2003, 88), but rather a deeply interconnected network that provides a frame for the reconstruction of those very events. As with memory, which manifests itself based on neurological cues and an interpretation of those cues, postmemory relies on a schema that includes storytelling, images, and tangible memory sites, and in the case of Spain, its legitimacy correlates to the Historical Memory Law (2007), granting rights to the descendants of those persecuted during and after the Spanish Civil War, inclusive of all ideological leanings<sup>4</sup>. Its objective is to uncover, remember, and acknowledge – as well as pay homage to victims of – atrocities that transpired during the war and in its aftermath. In *Música de ópera* postmemory is built upon the foundation of family provenance and is temporally and spatially contextualized among several now-historical events happening abroad as integrated in the story line.

### Cultural and Literary Frame

The novel traces the history of Rafael Claramunt’s immediate and extended family. In this novel, just as in Puértolas’s earlier novels, as Tamara L. Townsend (2014, 5) observes, “unremarkable characters are simply doing ordinary things: they travel abroad, they fall in love and break up, they interact with their family [...]. Nonetheless these mundane activities provide insight into the characters’ world”. The characters live ordinary lives, but rather than appearing as mundane, they reveal a genealogy of intergenerational relationships with the Spanish Civil War as a backdrop. For Townsend, reflection upon the past becomes “an important tool to understand and articulate personal identity” (*ibidem*).

The novel begins with a brief explanation of Rafael’s position in society as a successful businessperson who marries Elvira and has two children, Justo and Alejo. Although the city is never identified by name, it is likely based on Zaragoza. His early death, roughly coinciding with the immediate prewar years, shifts the focus to Elvira’s role as the head of household who seeks in the well-connected Antonio Perelada a suitable overseer of the family businesses. Over the ensuing decades, the novel interweaves Elvira’s life, and that of her sons and their own families, with the historical happenings of the Spanish Civil War through the 1960s. Puértolas uses memory to evoke geographic spaces to create an urban blueprint that mirrors Zaragoza, with frequent mentions of the places that foster a familiar recall of, for example, the river’s proximity to the Basilica of Pilar, the bus

<sup>4</sup> In *Memory, War, and Dictatorship in Recent Spanish Fiction by Women*, Sarah Leggott provides an overview of the law and of its repercussions, pitfalls, and significance in Spanish society (2015, 19-21).

stop at the Plaza de España, and popular street names. She also imbues her storytelling with happenings in Madrid and Valencia to add authenticity and depth to the family's experiences, with specific attention on the latter and its role during the Spanish Civil War as a Republican stronghold.

While the first half of the novel follows closely the events surrounding the war, including the dispositions of her sons during those three years, the latter half gradually constitutes the memory of war, which at times fades out of focus and takes on a role of secondary importance. As the temporal referents to war recognize it as part of the past, so too does a metatextual distancing of historical events unfold. The war, then, becomes the backdrop with signposts that appear through a feminist lens, primarily with the characters of Elvira, Valentina – Alejo's cousin – and his daughter Alba. However, in the immediate aftermath, the masculine presence takes on a more predominant role as Alejo in particular adapts to civilian life, exhibiting signs of posttraumatic stress. As the decades pass, Alba is left as custodian of the family's memories, through the metaphor of her grandmother's letters and aunt's journals that by novel's end, in the late 1960s, have reached her hands.<sup>5</sup> Since they are filled with an archaic language that she attempts to decipher, Alba is left to negotiate the meaning of her family's past through the written artefacts that preserve memory and contribute to the articulation of postmemory. Thus, the novel's conclusion is aligned with its overarching inconspicuousness of the ordinary days of the Claramunt family, with Alba on a balcony observing her mother walking in the distance.

In establishing the novel's timeline, the narrator makes clear references to political events pre-election 1936. The Claramunt family would have been reading conservative newspapers, which at the time reported on the unlikelihood of a Republican (*Frente Popular*) victory. The wedding between Justo and Anunciada in the week leading to the 1936 elections reveals the family's anticipation of the victory of their own side that did not materialize, though the election results were quickly forgotten by Elvira, who resumed her robust travels, next setting her sights on the Salzburg Music Festival in July<sup>6</sup>. The weaving of public with private plays out in influencing Elvira's choice of travel companions: her newlywed daughter-

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<sup>5</sup> The novel's conclusion coincides roughly with the Prague Spring (1968) and the attempts to foster democracy and economic decentralization. Russia's military invasion of Prague effectively ended democratization efforts in the former Czechoslovak Republic. While referencing the past, the mention of this and other historical events – such as Dwight Eisenhower's 1959 visit to Spain's Torrejón Air Force Base or the Cuban Revolution – serve to mark the narrative timeline rather than to constitute postmemory efforts.

<sup>6</sup> As Francisca González Arias (2012, xvii) points out in her analysis of Puértolas's short stories, "Travel both instigates and parallels the inner journey". For Elvira, travel abroad constitutes the ability to enjoy the experiences not afforded to her at home, ranging from her visits to the seamstress in Madrid to her cultural excursions such as the Salzburg Music Festival. While Elvira undertakes an inner journey, her travels also hint at an underlying escapism.

in-law Anunciada and her niece Valentina. Their separation from Spain upon the outbreak of war allows for the exploration of displaced travelers in need of returning home and the difficulties they encountered<sup>7</sup>. The trip is marred by the uncertainties of a tenuous trek financed solely through the selling of Elvira's family jewels that she carried with her, amidst the collapse of the Spanish banking and communications apparatuses.

### Spanish Civil War: From Pre-to Postwar, from Economy to Ideology

Postmemory narration captures the ethos of incredulity immediately preceding the outbreak of war on the part of the conservatives, while other groups anticipated such an outcome: "Some, the communists and the anarchists, preached revolution" (Puértolas 2019, 43)<sup>8</sup>. While some news outlets – especially those aligned with conservative ideology – discounted the idea of impending war, communist and anarchist groups were certain of its eventuality. As Julián Casanova (2007) states, the increasing socioeconomic unrest among the working class gradually led to a more organized labor force that tended toward communist or anarchist ideology, especially in zones in Aragon outside of Zaragoza. Workers were motivated to protest against unfair labor practices as implemented by "merchants, small industrialists, wealthy rural business owners, and militants of the most conservative political organizations" (Casanova 2007, 127)<sup>9</sup>.

Small business owners such as the Claramunts would have resisted the threat to their financial security that left-wing extremists represented. The family's multiple business afforded the widowed Elvira a steady income stream, stemming from a fabric production company (the *telar*), a wholesale textile warehouse, and a café<sup>10</sup>. With the slowing wartime economy, Alejo's decision to enlist in the

<sup>7</sup> Throughout the novel, Puértolas intersperses cultural reference to historical happenings to show not only the progression of time but to orient readers to the effects of these happenings on the characters. Though these references may only tangentially be classified as postmemory manifestations, they nonetheless orient readers to hardships and challenges. For example, the repercussions of public health issues open the space for the young Elvira to mourn the death of her friend Dorotea due to typhus, and the widowed Elvira to continue experiencing loss when her travel companion, Fraulen Katia, succumbs to typhoid fever during the wave that struck Spain in the early 1930s and continued through approximately the outbreak of the civil war, prompting the Second Republic's public safety response on a national level.

<sup>8</sup> My translation of the original text: "Algunos, los comunistas y anarquistas, predicaban la revolución".

<sup>9</sup> My translation of the original text: "[C]omerciantes, pequeños industriales, propietarios rurales acomodados y militantes de las organizaciones políticas más conservadores".

<sup>10</sup> The Claramunt textile business would have experienced a decline after 1929, following a prosperous period of Spain's neutrality during World War I and due to the protectionist policies of Primo de Rivera's dictatorship (Aranda Prieto 2017, 11).

military in support of the Nationalist cause aligns with his family's financial well-being. The financial loss is a precursor of the financial restrictions the family would endure: "The effects of the war had been devastating for their businesses" (Puértolas 2019, 85)<sup>11</sup>, although their wealth safeguarded them from financial ruin. Notably, however, taken in isolation the events seem unremarkable (selling jewelry for money to return), but the backdrop serves as a reminder that wartime permeates society with the sights and sounds of planes flying overhead and military music in the street.

Initially, the general attitude toward the war in the Claramunt family's view was that it would be over quickly. As social disorder escalated, however, Elvira feared the threat of house searches, hiding her jewelry and keeping a low public profile. Her elder son Justo sought refuge with family friends in Ax-les-Thermes, some 30 kilometers from the border between Spain and France. He remained on the margins of the conflict through his assiduous interest in war strategies, and his physical proximity to Republican refugees in France informed his view of events. Taking a different path, Alejo enlisted to fight against the Republican forces and left-wing insurgents. The contrast between Justo's turn inward to gain second-hand knowledge of events that were transpiring and Alejo's first-hand exposure to combat illustrates the brothers' two competing views of history.

For their diverging wartime experiences, Puértolas shows the after-effects on Justo as intellectual, compared to the attention to affective response in Alejo. Justo ruminates on what he perceives as the impending Nationalist victory and spends time reading and theorizing about what is transpiring in his country. Though he regularly writes to his mother and his wife, he avoids the topic of war, instead giving the air of simply studying or spending time with the antifascist French family hosting him. Conversely, the narrator dedicates more robust narrative space to detailing the younger brother's path, focusing on the aftermath of the war as it affects Alejo: "Trauma brings out in a striking way the importance of affect and its impact on memory, pointing both to traumatic memory in the form of post-traumatic effects (repetition compulsions, startle reactions, over reactions, severe sleep disorders, including recurrent nightmares, and so forth)" (LaCapra 2016, 377). Alejo walks aimlessly around the home, suffers from bouts of anger, and rants about the hardships of war, at times mumbling, at times appearing ghost-like; also, the narrator details the visual atrocities Alejo witnessed in terms of injured soldiers and bloodstained battlefields.

Overall, the Claramunts' experience highlights family fracturing in both ideological and geographical terms. Whereas Justo fled the northern border to seek refuge in the home of acquaintances, Alejo joined the Nationalists and actively fought for its values. The letters each son wrote to their mother as a vehicle to

<sup>11</sup> My translation of the original text: "Los efectos de la guerra habían sido devastadores para los negocios".

preserve historical memory fall short, however, due to the relative dearth of recounting of their experiences. Rather than discussing the war, they instead relayed banalities. The textual censure constitutes a successful attempt at erasing testimony of memory, even of the successes of the eventual victors. The minimal details Alejo did reveal during the early stages of combat point to a frenzied response to war, though he refrains from describing scenes he witnessed or his actions in combat that would later manifest themselves in post-traumatic responses. Justo's stay in France illustrates the experience of those who fled to avoid participating in the conflict or of the Republicans that took refuge in the neighboring country, though many were forced into encampments<sup>12</sup>. They reveal different experiences to a greater degree than if they had both entered the war in support of opposite sides in that the ravages of war led to devastating loss of life on both sides.

### The Cemetery as a Site of Postmemory

In addition to the effects of war on the Claramunt brothers, another significant example of the representation of postmemory in the novel relates to the fictionalization of the executions by firing squad outside of the Torrero Cemetery in Zaragoza<sup>13</sup>. In the early decades of the 20th century the cemetery's place next to a prison became central to events in the Spanish Civil War, as a site of hundreds of executions, with massive gravesites nearby<sup>14</sup>. The *tapia* or wall that showed divots and chips caused by the numerous bullets that hit its surface may be deemed a testimonial object, objects that for Hirsch "carry memory traces from the past, to be sure, but they also embody the very process of its transmission" (2012, 178). A central figure emerges in the historical narrative: one notable priest, Father Gumersindo de Estella, credited with bestowing the sacrament of last rites to over 1,700 victims. Father Estella's chilling testimonies recount with almost detached objectivity his interactions with hundreds of people sentenced to death, remaining steadfast in his commitment to offer spiritual guidance in their final moments. His benevolence comforted some, while others expressed anger or defiance, and still

<sup>12</sup> The Spanish Civil War as a precursor to World War II is subtly threaded through references to the encampments that evolved in the latter war. Rafael's brother, Maximiliano, a proclaimed pro-Hitler supporter, ultimately softens his stance and shifts to become a Germanophile, as a narrative corrective in light of the WWII atrocities.

<sup>13</sup> The cemetery has been deeply rooted in Iberian iconography since Roman times. It was used also during the Muslim occupation of the city, and archaeological findings have provided evidence of burial practices unique to each culture. Its place in Zaragozan society remained central in the ensuing centuries.

<sup>14</sup> For more on the Torrero Cemetery's legacy in Zaragoza, see Ramón Betrán Abadía's *La ciudad y los muertos* (2015).



some seemed numb to the gruesome future. Some displayed shock or bewilderment, while others were overcome with grief in the face of their looming death<sup>15</sup>.

In *La obra del miedo*, historians Gutmaro Gómez Bravo and Jorge Marco (2011) trace microhistories to systematically explain the evolution of systems of violence and repression through the lens of politics, religion, and ideology from 1936-1950, taking as one of their examples Father Estella's experiences. As the authors explain, the war councils of the Spanish military court would hand down death sentences to be carried out within the following three days, and sometimes the time lapse was a matter of a few hours (2011, 122). Firing squads executed thousands of soldiers and civilians in a juxtaposition of military action of terror that was tempered with the momentary respite afforded by the benevolence of their spiritual comforting just before the sentences were carried out. This usually entailed a conversation with a priest to administer the sacrament of last rights<sup>16</sup>. At times the executions took place in such rapid succession that the scent of recently spent cartridges still lingered in the air, dark blood stained the dirt, and stray clothing littered the ground (2011, 133). In 1979, the newspaper *Andalán* reported on the three mass graves found on the fringes of the Torrero Cemetery where victims, who perished between 1936 and 1945, "had remained in silence, more precisely, it should be said, in secrecy, in their forgotten tombs of the Torrero Cemetery" (Germán 1979, 9)<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> See Estella's *Fusilados en Zaragoza 1936-1939* (2003) for his recounting of the ways in which he interacted with the prisoners. In the prologue, Tarsicio de Azcona and José Ángel Echeverría explain the evolution of what was initially considered a clandestine series of journal entries, which Estella's friends asked him to preserve and ultimately publish. Whether journal entries or memoirs (2003, 46), the accounts relate in chronological order Estella's summary of events, his transcriptions of conversations with the prisoners, and his actions of divine guidance. He avoids a condemnation of the legislative processes, but his profound humanism underscores the horrific circumstances. In one instance, he explains that some executioners took poor aim and that one morning, when eight prisoners were readied for execution, one of them survived the initial rounds of bullets. Estella approached the prisoner, who was kneeling with his tied wrists lifted in the air; the priest steadied the man with his left arm while offering his final absolution with his right hand when the lieutenant approached and delivered the fatal bullet to the man's head, in close proximity to Estella's own head. Estella explains that he felt conflicted by what he had just witnessed but needed to carry on and tend to the remaining men (2003, 91).

<sup>16</sup> Gómez Bravo and Marco provide detailed explanation of the processes surrounding the sentencing and the carrying out of the sentences in Chapter 2 of *La obra del miedo* (2011, 117-41). Their remarks point to the dialectic of military justice and divine justice as a precursor of legislative systems in totalitarian rule, which relied heavily on the Catholic Church as a touchstone of moral conduct. Further, the church was a vital instrument in building the image of New Spain in the war's aftermath. Though the authors explain the official practices and methodical, orderly processes, events such as the massacres, for example in Seville or Badajoz where hundreds of people were executed in the span of a few days or weeks, call into question the likelihood of their strict implementation.

<sup>17</sup> My translation of the original text: "[H]abían permanecido en silencio, más exactamente habría que decir que en la clandestinidad, en sus ignoradas tumbas del cementerio de Torrero" (9).

The cemetery's literary representation through the lens of postmemory 80 years after the end of the Civil War appears twice in the novel, each time at different historical junctures, once in the early postwar years and again almost thirty years later. After the war, when Justo and his father-in-law Maximiliano are conversing in a family gathering, the topic arose of strategies across Europe as World War II was unfolding. That particular day their conversation turned to the Spanish Civil War, though they generally avoided talking about their country's political climate: "It was almost inevitable to talk about all those who died, about the nighttime questioning, the bullets to the back of the head, *the firing squads on the walls of the cemeteries*, the jails, and the sudden disappearances" (2019, 86, emphasis added)<sup>18</sup>. The very articulation of events memorializes them but, more importantly, attests to the reality that even the ideologically conservative sectors of society, which includes Maximiliano, acknowledge that these wartime atrocities took place. To note, this self-proclaimed Germanophile tempers his comments when speaking with his pacifist son-in-law Justo.

In the novel, two female characters find themselves at the Torrero Cemetery wall decades later and recognize its historical significance. In this setting, Alejo's wife Genoveva and his cousin Valentina are visiting the grave of a close family friend, Serafín Campos, who is Valentina's recently-deceased lover, a relationship they had kept private. Although they recognize the cemetery's historical significance, yet they are reluctant to describe what the wall represents. The lack of articulation here is a characteristic of Puértolas's tendency to create open-ended situations that invite readers to interpret and infer. The narrator thus negotiates the continued legacy of silence – and ways this silence may be mitigated – against the publication of the novel almost a century later. In place of words, the bullet-marked divots in the Torrero Cemetery wall are tangible remnants that serve as reminders of the violent past. The narratological constructs used to describe the wall's historical significance are shrouded in obfuscated language in the conversation between Alejo's wife Genoveva and his cousin Valentina:

On that wall, during the war years, many combatants from the losing side had been shot. According to rumors in certain circles, after the war there had still been executions. "This is the wall that..." Genoveva said. (2019, 159)<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> My translation of the original text: "Resultaba casi inevitable hablar de todos aquellos muertos, de los paseos nocturnos en la noche, de los tiros en la nuca, de los fusilamientos en las tapias de los cementerios, de las cárceles y de las súbitas desapariciones".

<sup>19</sup> My translation of the original text: "En aquella tapia habían sido fusilados, durante los años de la guerra, muchos combatientes del lado perdedor. Según se rumoreaba en determinados ambientes, finalizada la guerra aún había habido fusilamientos. –Esta es la tapia que...– dijo Genoveva".

The passive voice in “had been shot” eschews assigning culpability, and the rumors – where they originated, who transmitted them – perpetuate the clouding of events. The modal “there had still been” conveys an impersonal subject. Further, the choice in semantics conceals the identity of the combatants as (primarily) Republicans, reflecting the sociocultural currents that pitted the victors against the vanquished (*los vencedores* against *los vencidos*) in the war’s aftermath. Lastly, Genoveva’s trailing off at the end of her remarks, captured through the ellipsis, leave the gruesome details of the executions open to interpretation. The articulation of wartime violence is precisely what historical memory recovery efforts seek to accomplish, yet the narrator’s hesitation in making bold declarations demonstrates the legacy of silence that problematizes that very articulation<sup>20</sup>.

The impression of this line lingers in Valentina, who, a generation removed from events, negotiates the meaning of the past through the lens of her present, when what remains are the vestiges of loss of life in the absence of the bodies: “the walls, the bricks, the orange sun, the traces of bullets, the top of the cypresses jutting out on the other side of the wall” (2019, 159)<sup>21</sup>, elements that through their textual presence serve as testimony to the executions. There are parallels between the Republican soldiers denied sacred burial in the cemetery and Valentina’s taboo relationship with Campos outside of marriage, precipitating the visit to the cemetery only after the funeral, which underscores her marginalization in terms of the postwar societal impetus to enter into marriage and have a family. Valentina’s positioning, however, undergoes a shift when she chooses the socially acceptable entry in a convent<sup>22</sup>. She evokes a character type in Puértolas’s writing, of women who are trying to make sense of their life experiences in flux. Through the thematic thread of female solidarity that Marguerite DiNonno Intemann (2012, xiv) identifies as a key element of Puértolas’s narrative, Valentina seeks well-being under the protection of the convent.

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<sup>20</sup> The award-winning documentary *The Silence of Others* (2018) recounts the dynamics of silencing in one family’s quest to seek answers to questions about a family member killed during the war for his political activism. The realism of this documentary contrasts with stylized portrayals of history in Spanish Civil War films such as Ken Loach’s *Land and Freedom* (1995) or with a glossing over of historical tensions in films such as *The Butterfly’s Tongue* (1999) (Kosmidou 2013, 21-65).

<sup>21</sup> My translation of the original text: “La tapia, los ladrillos, el sol anaranjado, las huellas de las balas, la punta de los cipreses sobresaliendo al otro lado de la tapia”.

<sup>22</sup> After this and other vicissitudes, Valentina considers that her only option in life is to enter a convent. One of the most shocking experiences was the loss of her mother to suicide, though she only learned of this years later. The deleterious effect on Valentina of learning the circumstances surrounding her mother’s death, which was indeed not an accident, underscores the harm in the manipulation of her construct of memory.

### Custodians of Postmemory: Letters as Testimony

In turning to another way Puértolas captures memories, the legacy of Elvira's letters links narrative past with narrative present. These letters include not only those from her sons, but also those she wrote and saved. By reading through the lens of Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology, these tangible, "testimonial objects" memorialize the past. As Derrida explains, "Let us call it a *hauntology* [...] larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being. [...] After the end of history, the spirit comes by *coming back* [revenant], it figures *both* a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself again and again" (1994, 10, emphasis in the original). The presence of narrative specters evokes a connection between past and present by activating memories as a conduit of knowledge. Elvira's obsessive letter writing to her deceased childhood friend, Dorotea, is a sort of release valve for Elvira to comprehend her circumstances by devising a trusted confidante as interlocutor. The impossibility of a response – as they are "addressed to someone who lived in the afterlife, in the same imagination of the one who had dictated them" (Puértolas 2019, 148-49)<sup>23</sup> – channels the one-way communication as an outlet of expression. After grandmother Elvira's death and near the novel's conclusion, when Alejo's daughter Alba becomes the custodian of the letters, she surmises they were actually intended for Elvira's own benefit, to address her immediate need to cope with her solitude and angst. By passing her thoughts to letters, which she then saved, Elvira documents her life experiences for posterity, both to immortalize them and to "engage with the past" (Leggott 2015, 101). For González Arias (2020, 234), the letters become the legacy that preserves the intergenerational connection: Elvira, Valentina and Alba. As Elvira herself safeguarded these memoried artifacts, she also protected herself from the interloping Perelada, who unbeknownst to the Claramunt family mismanaged their finances and fled to Panama where he was later found deceased, indicative of his unsuitability in protecting the family. Alba also inherits her aunt Valentina's numbered journals that provide generational continuity in keeping the family's memories. Valentina's written documentation both transmits and witnesses memorialized experiences<sup>24</sup>. Alba's role, then, becomes central to preserving the Claramunt legacy through the safeguarding and interpreting of the letters and journals.

<sup>23</sup> My translation of the original text: "[D]irigidas a alguien que vivía en el más allá, en la misma imaginación de quien las había dictado".

<sup>24</sup> Female secondary characters who witness now historical moments also contribute to the novel's richness in constructing memory for the ways they serve as counterpart to the focalization on the male perspective of war held by Justo, Alejo, and Maximiliano. For example, Alba's aunt Otilia and friend Juliana reminisce about their daily lives during the war as "an almost happy time" (2019, 191) in which they would put on makeup and try to make themselves look older to join the social gatherings of the newly arrived Republican sympathizers who descended upon Valencia once the Republican leadership transferred to the Mediterranean city (2019, 191). Also contributing to the narrative of wartime is the secrecy among the servants in the Claramunt house, who, at times in hushed voices, talk about the wartime incarcerations, betrayals, accusations, and distrust (2019, 56).

## The Legacy of Postmemory in *Música de ópera*

The legacy of the past as commemorated through the articulation of post-memory reveals in *Música de ópera* intergenerational experiences with an indelible connection to the Spanish Civil War. The exploration of tangible and intangible sites of memory as well as testimonial objects allows for the processing of trauma a generation removed from the complexities and horrors of war. The far-reaching ramifications of the war and postwar decades – including the sociocultural, economic, and political realms – call for a repudiation of the very silence that has perpetuated injustices due to the negation or denial of those injustices. This departure seen in Puértolas's novel distances itself from the literature published in the previous decades, when the suppression of memory and the non-articulation of past traumas prevailed. Puértolas's focus on the effects of the Spanish Civil War on one family opens a space in which to interpret history by considering the role of postmemory in contextualizing and interpreting events and circumstances during and after the war.

### Conflict of interests

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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