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ARTICLE



Antonio Altarriba's *El ala rota*: remembering a woman hidden in 'the back room of history'

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Antonio Altarriba's presentation of his deceased mother's life-story in the graphic novel *El ala rota* (2016) claiming that the author's personal trauma of mourning reveals the collective trauma of non-politically-engaged Spanish women throughout Spain's 20th century. *El ala rota* contributes to the recovery of a new kind of memory by paying homage to a woman who was relegated to the private sphere and who herself believed her stories were not worth telling – a woman who was in the back room of history and lacked the means and mechanism to chronicle her life. The paper demonstrates that, not only does the content of *El ala rota* give voice to those who did not have one, thus philosophically paralleling the aims of the Recovery of Historical Memory and the exhumations of mass graves in Spain, but also, that its specific form of comics calls attention to the way society engages with the recovery of historical and collective memory specifically with regard to gender.

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Antonio Altarriba's *El ala rota*:


Remembering Women Hidden in 'the Back Room of History'

'la mujer honrada, la pierna quebrada, y en casa'

Don Quijote, Parte II, cap. V

Introduction¹

Through a masterful combination of narrative and visual storytelling, Antonio Altarriba and Kim produce in *El arte de volar* (2009) and *El ala rota* (2016) a diptych of graphic novels that reveals, respectively, biographies of Altarriba's father and mother.² In the award-winning and critically acclaimed first work, *El arte de volar*, Altarriba presents his father's history, melding it with his own voice to produce an auto/biography. The fused narrative voice of father and son tells the life-story of a man who lost the Spanish Civil War and lived through decades of a fascist dictatorship, only to die by suicide at age ninety-one by jumping out the window of his assisted living facility. In the span of Antonio Altarriba Sr.'s fall from the fourth floor to the sidewalk, the reader learns about his life in chronological order, beginning with his childhood in rural Spain during the

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monarchy of Alfonso XIII and Primo de Rivera dictatorship, moving through the civil war, post-war, Transition to democracy, and finally democracy. It is an exemplary intertwining of fact and fiction that, as (Diego Espiña Barros 2015) says in his study of the work, ‘turns an individual’s story into a collective history’ (230–231). Readers learn about the psychological plight and everyday struggles of a man who seeks meaning while living in Franco’s Spain. In this way, the graphic novel also chronicles the larger history of Spain’s 20th century.

Despite its critical and popular acclaim, Altarriba realised his award-winning graphic novel was not complete when, during a book tour in France of *El arte de volar*, an audience member asked Altarriba about his mother’s life. He acknowledged he had been unfair in depicting his mother as a ‘frigid and religious counterpart’ [contrapunto beato y frígido] to his father’s ‘epic, rebellious, and tragic’ [épico-rebelde-trágica] journey (257).³ Altarriba explicitly acknowledged that *El ala rota* was born out of ‘un afán de reparación’ [an effort to make reparations] with regard to the secondary role his mother had performed in *El arte de volar* (258). Altarriba believed that his mother’s life, in actuality, was much more than one of simply existing in relationship to her husband in what the author called the ‘back room of history’ in the epilogue of *El ala rota* (257). Moreover, the author conceded that the unintentionality of depicting his mother’s story as subordinate was perhaps more significant than the misrepresentation itself (257). *El ala rota*, then, is the complement to *El arte de volar* that recognises the woman, Petra, whose subjecthood had been inadvertently but, admittedly, explicitly disregarded. Altarriba confesses in the epilogue that there was much about his mother’s life that he simply did not know because she did not talk about it (258–259). At the same time, we must recognise that, perhaps, nobody asked. The auto/biographical narration of Altarriba’s father’s life in *El arte de volar* evolves into a researched reconstruction of his mother’s life in *El ala rota*, signalling not only the continuation, seven years later, of the relevance of the recovery of historical memory in Spanish comics, but also the need to include women’s histories in that recovery. Yet, the notion of a man – Altarriba – speaking on behalf of woman – his mother – is problematic. Altarriba literally puts words into his mother’s mouth through speech bubbles, and she exists because he writes her into being for the reader. What do we do, as a society, when, to use Spivak’s language, speaking *for* someone is the only alternative to speaking *to* them? (Morris 267).

The memory boom in Spain

Despite the fact that memory has been a theme of literary creation and academic interest in Spain since Franco’s death in 1975, numerous scholars have identified and analysed a more recent memory boom in literature and the arts, which Jo Labanyi identifies as having begun in the 1990s and defines as ‘a flood of novels and collections of testimonies on the wartime and postwar repression as well as a significant number of fiction films and documentaries’ (Labanyi 2007, 95). My goal is not to delve deeply into the sociopolitical reasons behind the memory boom (see Amago, Ferrán, Graham, Jerez Farrán, Labanyi, Mate, Morcillo, Resina, Song, and Stafford), but rather to use the phenomenon as the basis for this study. Contemporary studies move beyond the examination of canonical left-wing voices (e.g. Unamuno, A. Machado, Lorca) and Republican memories of the Spanish Civil War to include an examination of memory itself – that is, why, how, and

what we remember. The 21st century has also witnessed the recovery of women's voices (e.g. Carmen de Burgos, Neus Català, Hildegart, Dolores Ibárruri – *La Pasionaria*, Victoria Kent, Margarita Nelken, María Zambrano) as well as a consideration of the atrocities of Franco's regime as a type of Holocaust.⁴ Such a boom reveals not only a criticism of fascism, but also the growing visibility of feminist scholars both in Europe and the U.S.

As with the descendants of survivors of the Holocaust, adult children and grandchildren in Spain began to feel anxiety over losing their parents and grandparents, and with them, the opportunity to hear their stories and histories of the civil war and the Franco regime that had been heretofore unspeakable. As a result, younger Spaniards began questioning the state-sanctioned Pact of Silence that prohibited the discussion of war crimes during the Transition to democracy (1975–1978) and became the status quo. The *Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica* [Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory] was founded in 2000 and the *Ley de la Memoria Histórica* [Law of Historical Memory] was passed by the PSOE – *Partido Socialista de Obreros Españoles* [Socialist Party of Spanish Workers] government in 2007. In the media, debates abounded around public vs. private and political vs. personal memories, particularly with regard to disinterring of mass graves. With Spain's democracy on solid footing in the 21st century, the memory boom resulted in remembering as mainstream material, not just a matter unique to private, academic, or literary circles, thus giving rise to blockbuster films, best-selling novels, news coverage, and popular demonstrations. In this way, the Historical Memory Law had 'succeeded in altering the status quo regarding (non)remembrance' (Baer and Sznajder 2017).

It is no surprise that as Spain moves along its trajectory of reclaiming its past, those who were previously the most undervalued or taken for granted would be among the last to be remembered. By Altarriba's own admission, his society is one that has traditionally disempowered women (258). It is in this context of the recovery of memory and the recovery of women's voices that both *El arte de volar* (2009) and *El ala rota* (2016) were written and published. Both works demonstrate that the recovery of memory reflects the cultural climate in which it is produced, and that feminist progress is not precisely linear. While it is true that women in Spain have recovered many of their rights eliminated during the Franco years, there is still much to be accomplished with regard to their visibility as producers and actors in culture (see Laura Freixas).

The comics boom in Spain

While the 1990s saw the emergence of the memory boom in novels, film, and scholarship, comics in Spain would not experience their boom until the advent of the new century. Through the 1990s, it seemed that the commercial comics market would largely encompass violence, manga, North American superheroes, and pornography (Pérez del Solar 2014, 229). However, over the first two decades of the 21st century, the production and study of graphic novels became increasingly popular, legitimising the art form in both the literary and academic fields (see Altarriba, Francesca Crippa, Manuel de la Fuente Soler, Sarah Harris, Pedro Pérez del Solar, and Carla Suárez Vega). The production of graphic novels, the creation and awarding of comic book prizes, and scholarly interest in the genre all took off at astounding rates.⁵

With the boom of graphic novels in Spain following close on the heels of the country's memory boom in scholarship and the arts, we can explain why memory is such an important theme in Spanish comics. It is difficult to talk today about historical graphic narratives addressing the Spanish Civil War without referencing Art Spiegelman's portrayal of memory and the Holocaust in *Maus* (1986/1991) and, with it, Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory – the concept of trauma being passed from the generation that lived through the traumatic event to the succeeding generation that did not directly experience it, but who inherits the memories of it (see Hirsch 2012). At the same time, recent scholarship on graphic novels also addresses historical memory with regard to trauma and violence and their representation (see Tatiana Prorokova et al. and Hillary Chute) as well as identity and healing (see Joshua Leone, Liam Kruger, and Gillian Whitlock). While postmemory is undeniably the underpinning of both *El arte de volar* and *El ala rota*, as scholars such as Suárez Vega and Javier Sánchez Zapatero have aptly demonstrated, and both works fall squarely within the current *zeitgeist* of memory studies, the role of *El ala rota* in healing and identity have yet to be fully explored. *El ala rota* has been examined with regard to what it elucidates about the life of women under Franco (see Lydia Vázquez & Juan Manuel Ibeas-Altamira and Eefje Gyssels). What has not been considered so thoroughly is the relationship between memory studies, gender studies, and comics studies in Spain. In this paper, I demonstrate that *El ala rota* adds a new approach to the recovery of women's life stories through the form of comics. While I do not use disability studies as a frame, I open the conversation for future disabilities studies scholarship by recognising key moments in which the representation of Petra's disabled arm point to complexities of her identity. With understated visual simplicity, *El ala rota* does not show the Spanish civil war or war crimes. Nor is its female protagonist among the politically engaged young women such as the forgotten militia-woman of Dulce Chacón's *La voz dormida* or those known as 'las trece rosas' [the thirteen rosas].⁶ Rather, this graphic novel showcases a woman who appears to be an assuming apolitical housewife – though of course, even to claim to be apolitical is itself a political act, a dynamic that becomes clearer when Altarriba reveals the remarkable experiences of Petra's life that had been hidden in plain sight.

Popular, literary, and media culture often depict victims of the Franco regime as Republicans being shot at dawn before a firing squad, or women being piled on top of one another in the squalor of the Ventas prison, or bones recovered from mass graves in an attempt to seek justice for the regime's crimes of the past. *El ala rota* presents a different kind of victim of Francoism – a woman who never donned the blue jumpsuit of the militias, never shouted '¡Viva la República!', and never smuggled supplies across enemy lines. I do not mean to elide the men and women who fought in the war, their suffering, or their contributions to the democratic cause. Rather, my goal is to recognise, as does *El ala rota*, that there is a whole sector of society that continues to be forgotten and that we should also strive to remember – women whose past invisibility becomes apparent now in their present absence. In this way, *El ala rota* highlights the complicated nature of historical memory. As memory studies scholars confirm, there is not one memory but multiple memories (Baer and Sznajder 2017). Some memories, by their very intersection with the public sphere, tend to crowd out quieter but no less valid memories of private individuals.

A new kind of recovery

The story of Petra is not one of the front lines or the rearguard, but rather one of domestic battlegrounds. On his mother's deathbed, the author learns that his mother had never been able to fully straighten or raise her left arm. His ignorance of this significant fact represented for him how little he knew about his mother's life (Altarriba 2017, 259). In his quest for answers for why his mother could not bend her arm, Altarriba discovers multiple traumatic events that shaped his mother's life from the day she was born, but which she did not talk about. She was beaten by her alcoholic father at birth – out of rage that his wife had died during labour – which caused permanent damage to her arm (17–18). As an infant, she was raised by her older sister in the home of their aunts before both sisters returned to their father (20–23). As a young girl, she became motherless for a second time when her father kicked her sister out of the home for getting pregnant out of wedlock (57–59). As a young woman, she was raped by a neighbour (67–68). Later, she would become the caregiver of her angry, drunkard, and infirmed father (75–90). As a married woman, Petra would be emotionally abandoned by her unfaithful husband – the hero of *El arte de volar* (167–213). The trauma to which Petra was subjected repeatedly throughout her life was simultaneously more pervasive and less visible than war combat. Through his research of his mother's life, Altarriba gained a new awareness of why his mother had talked so little about herself (258). Petra was not merely confined to the private sphere; she was confined by a private sphere that demanded privacy. She was not being secretive; women of her generation were simply expected to be silent and submissive. Altarriba came to realise that his mother's trauma was inflicted by a sexist society at large of which he himself also formed a part (258). In looking closer at Petra's life, we learn that even the seemingly 'ordinary' is intertwined with underlying socio-political norms. In this way, the graphic novel demonstrates, as did second-wave feminists, that the private is political. Similarly, Hirsch and Smith conclude that to 'document the practices of private everyday experience' is a decidedly feminist move (12).

The silence around Petra's wounded body and the author's quest for understanding are the central metaphors of her broken wing and its mystery. Her injury is a metaphor for a different kind of victim of the Spanish Civil War – the silent victims of patriarchy. What makes *El ala rota* particularly powerful is the fact that it does not present a woman's memory or have a female author. It is a memory about a mother reconstructed by her son, who recognises his role perpetuating the patriarchy that constrained her (258). In her work on feminism and memory, Marianne Hirsch proposes that in memory work it is important to move beyond 'traditional modes of knowing the past' (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 11). Rather than telling history from the positionality of the victors, as did the fascists during Franco regime, or recovering the stories of the Republican opposition, as did the democrats after the Franco regime, *El ala rota* contributes to the recovery of a new kind of memory. It pays homage to a woman who was relegated to the private sphere and who was taught her stories were not worth telling – a woman who was in the back room of history but, unlike Carmen Martín Gaité in her novel *El cuarto de atrás* [*The Back Room*], lacked the means and mechanism to chronicle her life. Ironically, her son will take up that charge for Petra after her death, revealing not just intimate

family dynamics but also larger societal concerns. Specifically, the telling of her story foregrounds the repressive patriarchal regime of the Franco era that educated women to be selfless and submissive.

The broken wing–invisible wounds in plain sight

The title, *El ala rota*, serves as a multi-layered metaphor for issues surrounding agency, gender relations, and memory. Most obviously, it extends the metaphor of flying from Altarriba's father's biography, *El arte de volar*. Altarriba further establishes the connection in the Afterword to *El ala rota* by concluding that his mother 'No soñó con altos vuelos como mi padre ni con disponer del cielo entero para surcarlo' [did not dream of flying high like my father nor of having the entire sky at her disposal] (262). By speaking in the negative, he is calling attention to the limitations his mother faced due to both the absence of dreams and the lack of opportunities. However, he also claims that neither of these limitations hindered her accomplishments, 'Más modestamente, con su ala rota, se limitó a saltar de rama en rama. Puede que, de esa manera, llegara más lejos' [More humbly, with her broken wing, she merely leapt from branch to branch. But maybe, in this way, she actually got further] (262). What does it mean to 'go further'? Does defining Petra's life in the private sphere as 'going further' serve to justify the past? Does it relieve present players of their guilt for their past silences? The author's assessment of his parents' accomplishments raises questions about different types of contributions to society and the value afforded to the people making those contributions. If, on one hand, it reveals a romanticisation of his mother and, by extension, all women who were confined to the private sphere, it simultaneously calls attention to the difficulties that women faced even when they followed the rules set forth by society. In this way, the past is particularly useful to understand the present.

The presentation of Petra's story begins with an image but no words, the absence of which represents the silence in her life. The image is so close up that it is unintelligible. It creates a feeling of not knowing, inviting questions about its meaning (see [Figure 1](#), *El ala rota*, p.5 panel 1).⁷ Through its use of panels, the comic mode lends itself to fragmentation, partial images, and resultant enigmas. Panel by panel, the reader will witness the mystery unravel, in step with Petra's son, to discover that the image is a disembodied close-up of her inner right arm (see [Figure 2](#), *El ala rota*, p.5). The first speech bubble comes from a voice – that of Altarriba, also disembodied – asking about the meaning of the image (ibid.). Similarly, the comic form encourages the reader to construct meaning and ask the same question. The result is a double convergence: Petra and her son converge in a shared disembodiment, and the readers converge with Petra's son in ignorance. The power differential is widely disparate, however. Petra is vulnerable, passive, inert, fragmented, and wounded, yet the bearer of knowledge. Altarriba is ignorant, yet appropriates the power to act, to research and to craft a story, thereby recreating the very power dynamic the story will criticise. The reader is more than a mere witness. Comics scholars Scott McCloud and Hillary Chute affirm that the form of comics invites the readers to play an active role in the creation of the story by filling in the gaps, thus giving the readers a powerful role in the interpretation and creation of the narrative (Chute 2008, 452 and McCloud 1994, 66–67). Petra's body becomes, then, the object of the reader's gaze – a text that author/son and his readers are brought together to

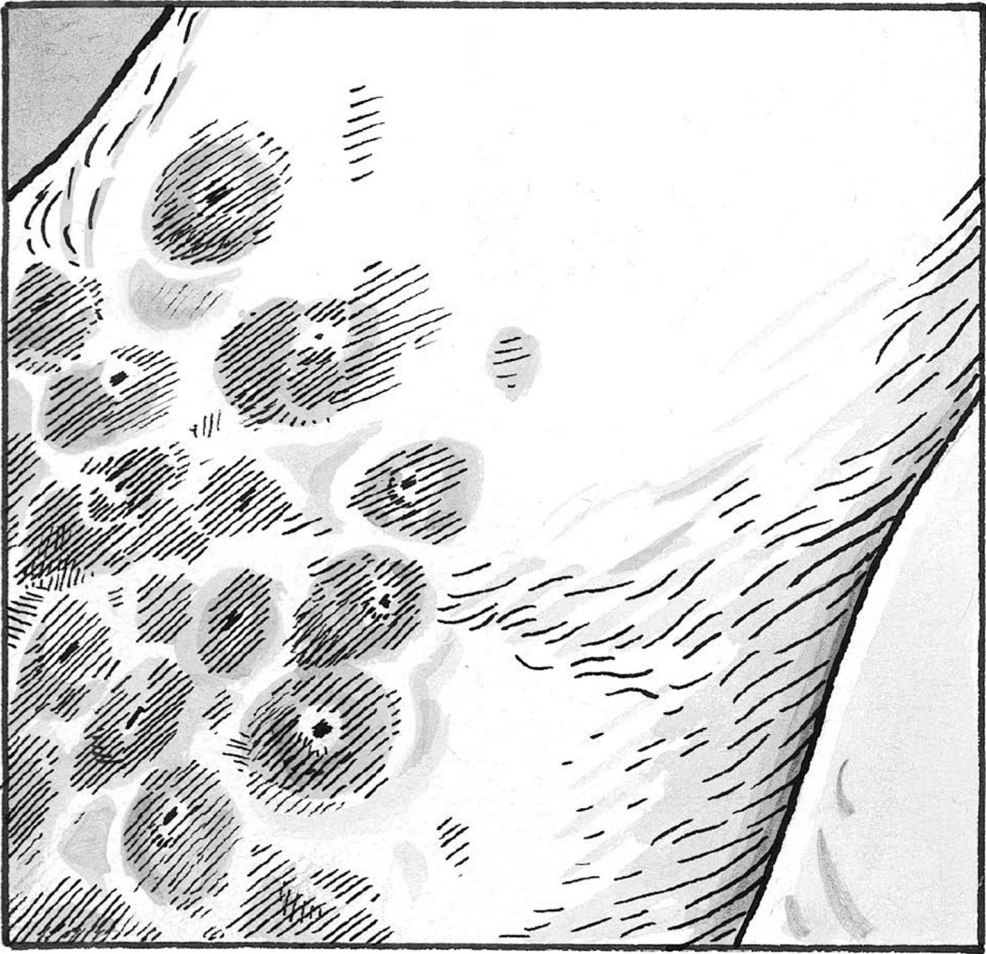


Figure 1. *El ala rota*, p. 5 panel 1. © Antonio Altarriba and Kim.

interpret and create. Petra's bruised, aged, and newly revealed disabled body and, along with it, her story will be the source not only of the readers' discomfort and compassion, but also their muse. Her mere existence, not yet extinguished, thrusts Altarriba from the revelation of his own ignorance to a quest for understanding upon which he will embark through the act of writing. Although Petra is first presented to the reader in a way that she is almost reduced her physical body, this introduction breaks with the traditional construct of a muse. Feminist disabilities scholar Susan Wendell reminds us that disabled women must struggle against oppression on two levels – that of being women in societies dominated by men and that of being disabled in ableist societies (244). In this way, Petra's body is not a reduction of her identity, rather the marker of the beginning and end of her journey. As the body is in a state of perpetual change, disability invites us to contemplate other aspects upon which identity might depend (Garland-Thomson 2006, 267). As her son's and his readers' muse, Petra's body underscores her identity as a woman brimming with complexity.

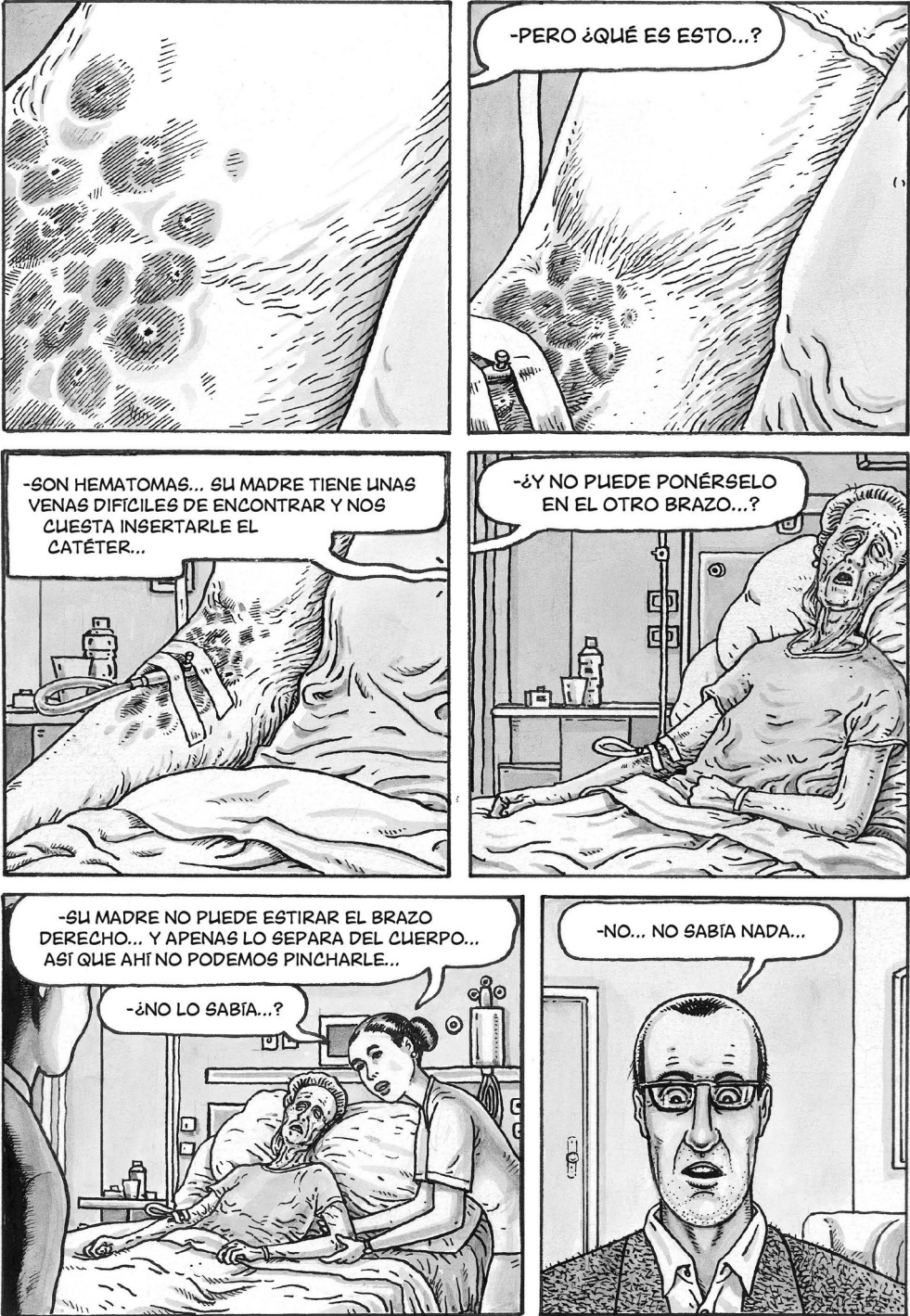


Figure 2. *El ala rota*, p. 5. © Antonio Altarriba and Kim.

Slowly the perspective zooms out as the visual and the verbal cues begin to offer partial answers: Petra's arm is bruised from multiple attempts to find her veins for an intravenous epinephrine drip (see Figure 2, *El ala rota*, p.5). The question of why her left arm cannot be used for the IV remains, until it too is partially answered: her arm does not bend. The enigma set forth in the first panel of the first page unravels in the last panel of that same page to reveal the author's ignorance about this fact, 'No, no lo sabía' [No, I didn't know] (see Figure 3, *El ala rota*, p.5 panel 6). The ultimate question as to *why* her left arm has never been able to bend will be the question that gives birth to Petra's story on her deathbed, thereby imbuing it with an urgency for the author. As his mother is



Figure 3. *El ala rota*, p. 5 panel 6. © Antonio Altarriba and Kim.

dying from heart failure, Altarriba experiences a sense of desperation as he sits next to her body, moments after her death, lamenting how little he knew about her life (Altarriba 10–11). It is a moment of momentous recognition – a profound moment in which, in an instant, he realises all that he does not know. This realisation is a first step for recovery. How did he not see his mother’s arm, and with it her history, which had always been in plain sight, yet unbeknown to him, and by extension, to us as a society? What haunts Altarriba is not an inherited memory like those examined by post-memory scholars, rather the *lack* of a memory. His shock is the recognition on his mother’s deathbed that there was a reason she could not fly, and that his own ignorance of this reason made him complicit in preventing her from flying. The intersection of emotion, memory, and trauma have been examined by psychiatrist Bessel van de Kolk and psychologist Onno van der Hart. They propose that in order to overcome trauma, a person needs to transform the experience into narrative language (1995, 176). Altarriba offers a narrative of his mother’s life that helps him process his grief and remorse on an individual level and serves as an example for how healing could work at the societal level. While the personal trauma of a son’s loss of his mother is of a different scale than the collective trauma of a nation, it is an opportunity to bring broader cultural issues to the fore. By focusing on his mother’s life to work through his loss, Altarriba de-centres himself. While his bewilderment of his ignorance of his mother’s life at her deathbed is the diegetic impetus for him to tell his mother’s story, after the opening scene, the story moves immediately to his reconstructed and imagined history of her life beginning on the day she was born. Petra becomes the focus of the readers’ attention. Furthermore, Petra takes on a metonymical role as her son pays homage to her, honouring the struggles many women faced. By adding visual language to the verbal narrative – Altarriba and Kim do not just *tell*, they *show*, making the narrative doubly powerful.

The angel of the house

At the heart of Petra’s story is the heartbeat of Franco’s nation. I propose that the broken wing suggests another figure from Spanish history – that of the angel of the house. The angel of the house is a specific type of angel: a good, Catholic woman who upholds the ideals of the Spanish Falange. The 19th century metaphor of the angel of the house was popularised by María del Pilar Sinués’s weekly magazine, *El ángel del hogar*, published in Madrid between 1864 and 1869 (Hemeroteca Digital). The metaphor was reframed in the 20th century by the Falange, now using scientific arguments in addition to religious beliefs, to describe its conception of the ideal woman. Women’s biology was now used to determine their purpose as wives and mothers. While the vocabulary changed from ‘inferior’ to ‘different’ from one century to the next, the consequence was the same: women belonged in the private sphere (Varela 2019, 142). Weeks after the end of the Spanish Civil War, Pilar Primo de Rivera, head of the *La Sección Femenina* [Women’s Section of the Falange], reminded her readers in the *ABC* newspaper that ‘the only mission assigned to women in the tasks of the country is in the home’ (qtd. in Morcillo 2013, 165). This thinking had been questioned by feminists during the short-lived Second Republic, 1931–1936 (Varela 2019, 142), giving way to new rights for women (e.g. suffrage and divorce). However, many of the legal advances enjoyed by women under the Republic were not fully accepted on the social level even during the Republic.

Scholars such as Geraldine Scanlon (1978), Shirley Mangini (2001), Mary Nash (2009), and Sarah Leggott (2015) examine how changes in attitude lagged behind for the Spanish masses and were ultimately thwarted by Franco's regime. Women under Franco were to contribute to the building of the state by remaining in the home, as Primo de Rivera insisted in her work with the *Sección Femenina*. Under Franco's rule, women's role in society was embodied in the form of an angel.

Moreover, the regime's rhetoric expressed women's mission in corporeal metaphors (Morcillo 2010, 13). For example, humanist and endocrinologist Dr. Gregorio Marañón wrote in *Ensayos sobre la vida sexual* (1951), with regard to Spanish women's maternal duty, that women were 'the grand uterus where a people are created' (quoted in Morcillo 2010, 151). We see this idea in *El ala rota* represented graphically when Kim creates a *trompe d'œil* across panels that connects women's bodies to their role as angel of the house. In the first two panels of the page, Petra lies alone in bed, unable to sleep while her husband is in town having an extra-marital affair. The artist visually merges Petra's body in the left panel with her pillow in the right panel to create the appearance of a pregnant body (see Figure 4, *El ala rota*, p.170 panels 1–2). Petra's body is turned into an object (her pillow), and her pillow is personified as her body. As Petra's head in the second frame rests on her artificial pregnant belly she becomes her own fictional mother, who exists only for the reader and not for Petra. Petra must be her own source of comfort in this play of non-existent-omnipresent-motherhood. The absence is also visually highlighted by her physical solitude in the room. The only other presence is a sound that comes from a door; a noise – rather than a human voice – is her only companion. Upon her husband's arrival, Petra acquiesces to his adulterous behaviour by remaining silent, which is also underscored visually by the lack of any speech bubbles or additional onomatopoeia. Ultimately, Petra seeks comfort in the Church, like a proper angel of the house (see Figure 5, *El ala rota*, p.170).

The cover page for the first chapter of the book also shows a woman fulfilling her role as the angel of the house: as a nurturing mother of children. The image is of a little girl

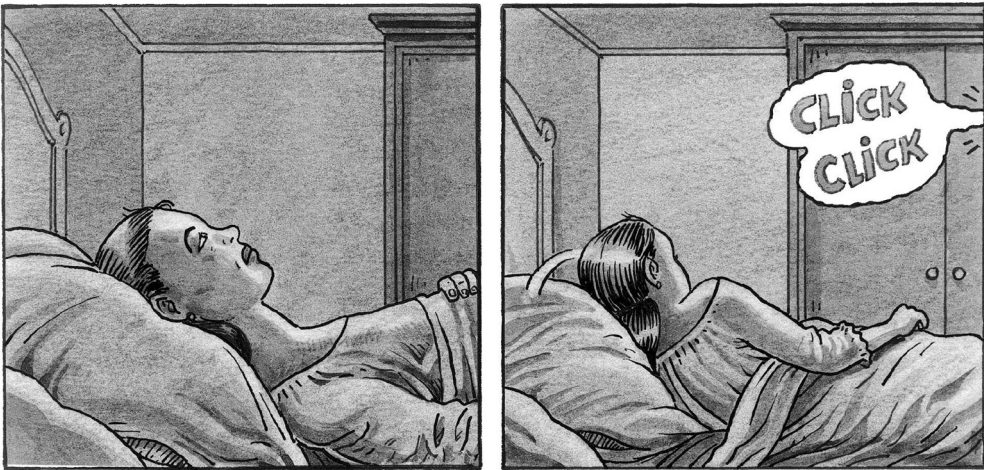


Figure 4. *El ala rota*, p.170 panels 1–2. © Antonio Altarriba and Kim.

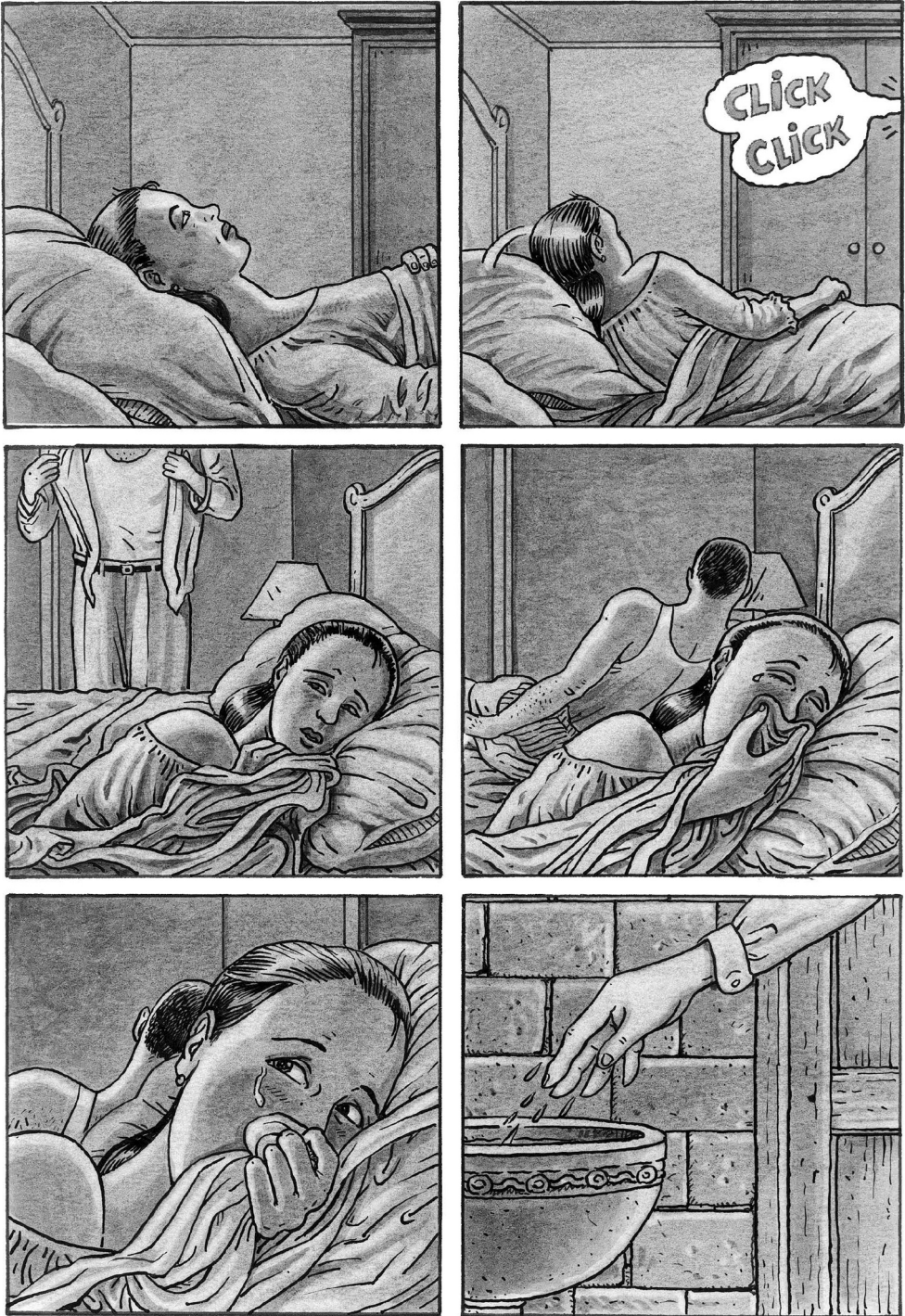


Figure 5. *El ala rota*, p.170. © Antonio Altarriba and Kim.

sleeping in the faceless bosom of a woman. We later learn that Petra is the little girl and the torso belongs to her older sister (see [Figure 6](#), *El ala rota*, p. 3 – Interior Cover Page). Once again, comics' use of framing marks this image of nurturing as a general female task. The omission of the sister's face is an erasure of her personhood and symbolises that the individual identity of the woman is not as important as the nurturing role to which women are collectively assigned. The message is that caregiving is the role of all women. Notable is the active arm that embraces the girl and comforts her while she peacefully naps. Subliminally, the message is that strong embracing arms are necessary for a woman to fulfill her duties. Curiously, by keeping her wounded arm unknown from the four men in her life that frame her narrative (her employer, her husband, her son, and her male companion from the assisted living facility), Petra takes charge of her life and resists being degraded in an ableist, patriarchal world. Wendell affirms that, 'In a culture which loves the idea that the body can be controlled, those who cannot control their bodies are seen (and may see themselves) as failures' (249). Petra, in contrast, did not allow herself to be reduced to a victim, even though she was the victim of multiple types of physical abuse that were unchallenged by her community. She did not allow the bodily marker of her abuse to define or marginalise her, as so often happens with disabled women.

In the same way that the reader does not see the individual identifying markers of Petra's sister's face, the reader never learns either of Petra's surnames. This lack of individuality accomplishes two tasks. First, it signals Petra as a stand-in for women in general. She represents the type of average village woman immersed in a patriarchal society completely removed from the feminist progress made during the Second Republic. Second, the deindividualization points to the fact that the singular identity of many women was obfuscated by their collective role as women.

Petra lived in a society where only one type of ideal woman was accepted – the one who belonged in the home and depended on men: the angel of the house. Altarriba further demonstrates this by organising the chapters of Petra's life by the men in them: her father, her employer, her husband, the love of her golden years. He uses the form of the graphic novel to visually emphasise the power dynamic by awarding them the prime space on the covers of each chapter (see [Figure 7](#) *El ala rota*, pp. 13, 95, 137, 215). In this way, he underscores that these men not only shaped and defined Petra but also determined that she could not exist independently of them. By structuring her life-story around four men, the author lays bare the patriarchal frame for his readers opening a space for criticism of this framework. While this presentation paradoxically reinscribes male power, it also draws attention to the actual circumstances of Petra's life and her ultimate strength vis-à-vis these circumstances. I propose that we can read her story as overshadowing the presence of the men who frame it and she, thus, resists marginalisation even as she is seemingly written out. Strikingly, it is only on Petra's deathbed that her life is finally analeptically framed by women, one of whom is herself as a little girl, as discussed above (see [Figure 6](#), *El ala rota*, p. 3 – Interior Cover Page). The use of analepsis is powerful here in that it re-inscribes women who had lived on the margins of politics and at the centre of the family at the forefront of their own histories. The use of an image of young Petra to frame the opening scene of dying Petra is an invitation to examine the life that occurs between these two visual moments from the perspective of the individual woman who lived it.



EL ALA ROTA

ANTONIO
ALTARRIBA
KIM

NORMA
Editorial

Figure 6. *El ala rota*, p. 3 – Interior Cover Page. © Antonio Altarriba and Kim.

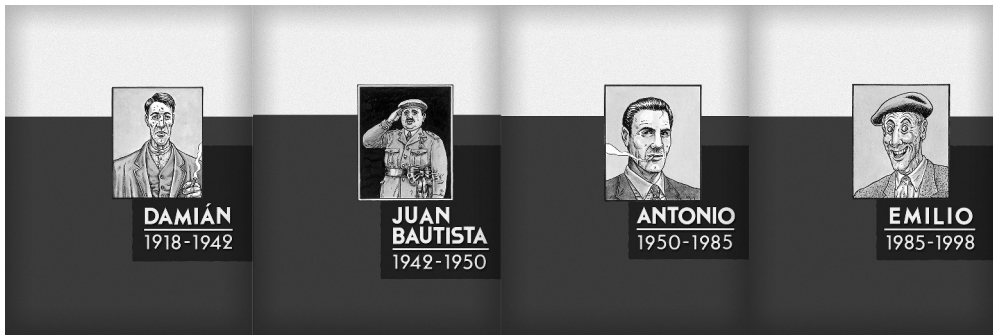


Figure 7. *El ala rota*, pp. 13, 95, 137, 215. © Antonio Altarriba and Kim.

The angel of history

In addition to Petra's literal broken arm and the allusion to the historical figure of angel of the house, the Petra's 'wing' evokes another kind of angel – that of the angel of history. For eight years, Petra worked as the head housekeeper in the home of Juan Bautista Sánchez González, one of Franco's generals. She is no longer in the back room of the house – the private area out of the public eye, but rather in the backroom where political plots were hatched, where silence was part of a mutually agreed upon project among men, and not a virtue imposed upon women by men.

In his description of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, Walter Benjamin famously describes an angel that looks upon the past and is inevitably thrust into the future by a storm (Benjamin 2007) calls progress (257). The connection between the memory movement and the angel of history has been adeptly explained by scholars who have applied the concept to the disinterring of mass graves that proliferated after the passing of the Law of Historical Memory in 2007 (see Baer and Sznajder 2017). Similarly, I propose that a third metaphorical meaning of Petra's wing is that of the angel of history.

In the same way that forensic scientists treat the disinterred bodies as objects and evidence, Altarriba offers his mother's arm as evidence of the constrictions of patriarchal society, sublimating her arm as a wing. There are striking similarities between Benjamin's description of the *Angelus Novus* and one of Kim's drawings of Petra. Benjamin writes that the painting 'shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread' (257) (See Fig. 8, *Angelus Novus*).⁸ Like Klee's angel, Petra is also staring, her mouth is open, and her 'wings' are spread (see Figure 9, *El ala rota*, Cover and p.127, panel 2).⁹ For one of a handful of times in the entire graphic novel, her disabled arm is not pinned to her body. As Petra serves food at one of Sánchez González's official receptions, the readers see her back turned to us in all four panels (see Figure 10, *El ala rota*, p.126). Petra's turn away from the reader again recalls Benjamin's description, 'His face is turned to the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet' (257). Petra is facing what is diegetically her present and extra-diegetically the past for the readers; her back is turned to us, who are her future. Visually, then, she becomes for the



Figure 8. Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*.

reader the angel of history. Furthermore, as McCloud theorises, the gutters – or the space between panels – fracture time and space (67). Consequently, the reader experiences the events at the party as a chain of events, as does Benjamin's 'we.' Petra, on the other hand, who diegetically is present at the party, overhears the women gossip and the men plot about politics all in a continuous space experiencing the events, like the angel of history, as a single catastrophe – that of the hypocrisy of those in power. According to Benjamin, the angel of history is looking at the wreckage of the past in front of him, and he would like to stay and 'make whole what has been smashed,' but 'a storm is blowing' in, and it

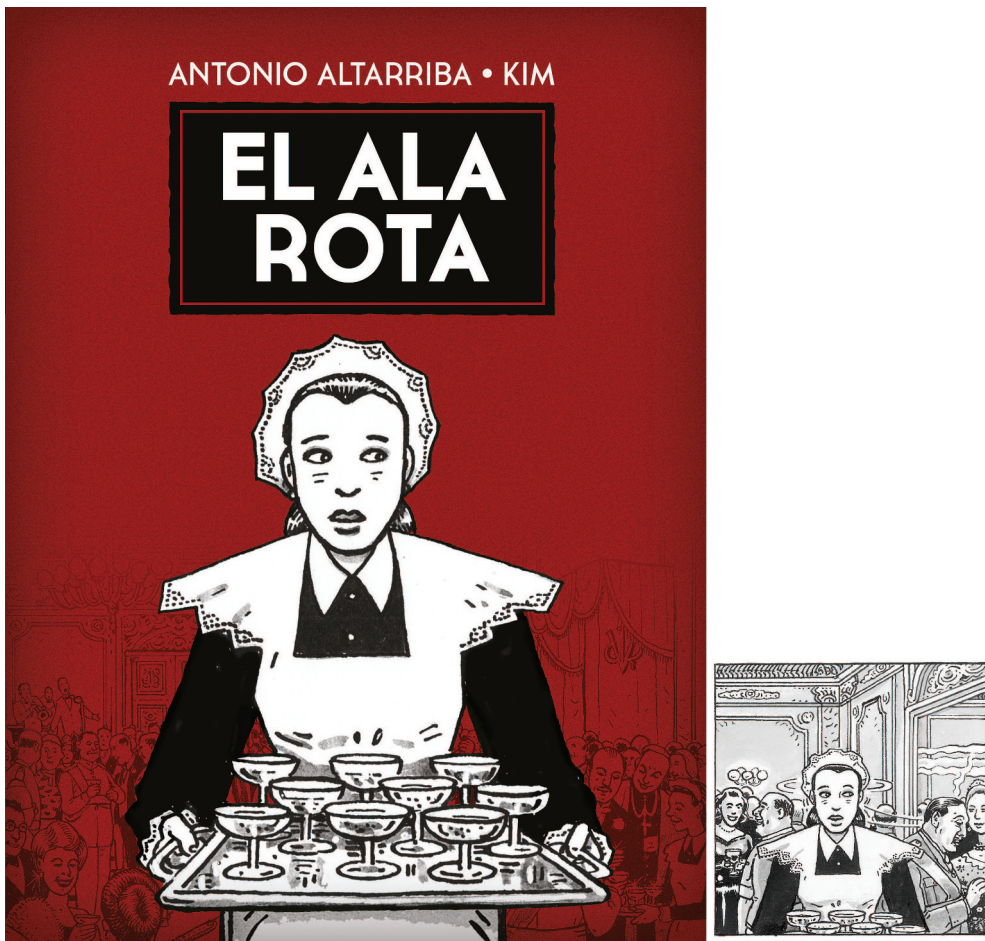


Figure 9. *El ala rota*, Cover and p.127, panel 2. © Antonio Altarriba and Kim.

will propel him into the future of Paradise (257). Petra turns and faces the reader after the captain directly implicates her in the scene by requesting that she relay a message (see [Figure 11](#), *El ala rota*, p. 127, panels 1 and 2). It is as if, like the *Angelus Novus*, the storm 'has got caught in his[her] wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him[her] into the future' causing her to turn and look at the readers, who represent the future. The comic's use of gutters works in such a way that it creates a relationship between Petra's history and the reader's present.

Extra-diegetically, because of Altarriba's use of analepsis, the reader knows that Petra is deceased. However, through her re-presentation in the graphic novel she, like the *Angelus Novus*, has 'stay[ed] and awaken[ed] the dead' – or rather, kept herself and the women of her generation alive, and made whole that which had been smashed (her arm, and, metonymically, her self and the selves of other women). By sharing Petra's story, Altarriba returns her personhood to her and, by extension, to that of women who find similarities to themselves, mothers, or grandmothers. Some readers will feel vindicated



Figure 10. *El ala rota*, p.126. © Antonio Altarriba and Kim.



Figure 11. *El ala rota*, p. 127, panels 1 and 2. © Antonio Altarriba and Kim.



Figure 12. *El ala rota*, p. 253, panels 3-5. © Antonio Altarriba and Kim.



Figure 13. *El ala rota*, p. 5, panel 6 and p. 253, panel 3. © Antonio Altarriba and Kim.

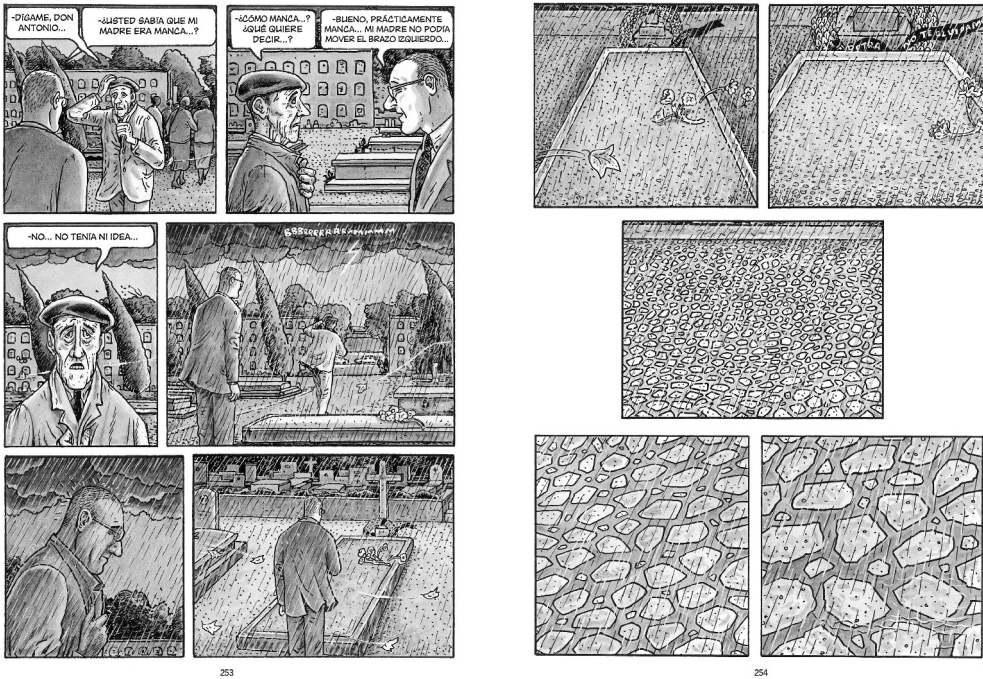


Figure 14. *El ala rota*, pp. 253–254. © Antonio Altarriba and Kim.

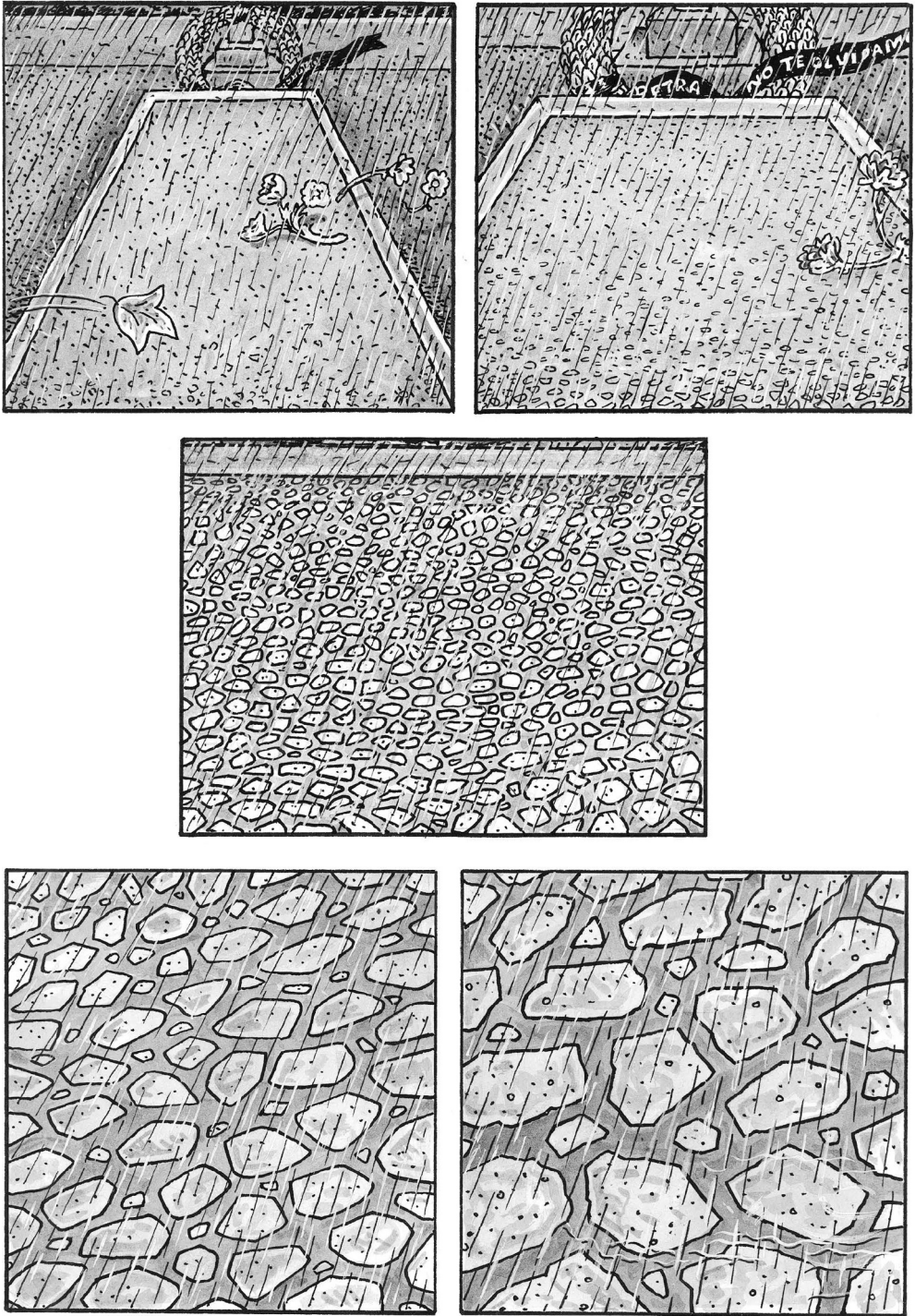


Figure 15. *El ala rota*, p. 254. © Antonio Altarriba and Kim.

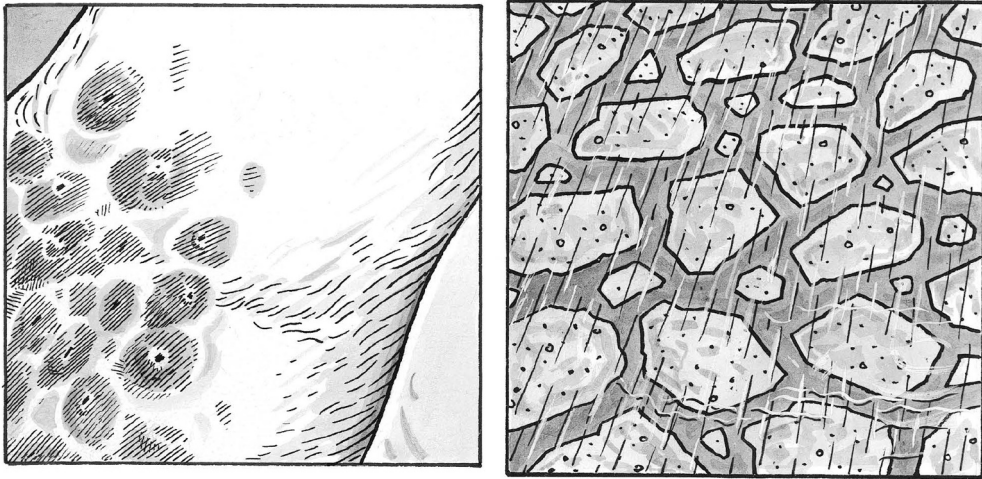


Figure 16. *El ala rota*, p. 255, panel 5 and p. 5, panel 1. © Antonio Altarriba and Kim.

by a criticism of the society that allowed women to be reduced to submissive, obedient angels of the house.

Memory Studies activists adopt the image of the angel of history because, in addition to horror, the angel's gaze also inspires hope in the awareness that memory work raises and the meaning that is ascribed to the facts it uncovers (Baer and Sznajder 2017). Political scientist Stephanie Golob suggests that 'the victim becomes a citizen of the future, recognized as a full human being and a citizen, a member of the present political community' (quoted in Baer and Sznajder, 2017). Petra is recognised as a full human on two levels – both as a human being and as a woman; while her life was lived under the thumb of authoritarian men, in her death, she will gain a visibility she did not fully enjoy in life. Like the exhumed bones of the deceased, her story is retrieved from silence and reintegrated into society through this graphic novel. As Benjamin observes, 'every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably' (255). The story of Petra's life would have been lost forever had it not been recognised by her son as a concern in time to be salvaged. In constructing a story around her arm, Altarriba engages in a powerful act of remembering that reconstructs her personhood and demonstrates that she is a whole person. In this way, Petra is not simply a passive, silent angel of the house or victim, but also a redemptive angel of history. Though a victim/example of fascist oppression in the past, her story becomes a lesson for the future. While this presentation of Petra is constructed by a man, her son, he meets the call of feminist disabilities scholars to challenge disability as a flaw (Garland-Thomson 2005, 1557).

Conclusions

El ala rota is both at the centre of the memory movement and on the margins. Its project is not overtly political in nature like that of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory. Yet, like the exhumations of mass graves, its publication (i.e. visibility) brings a personal story into the public sphere, thereby making it political in that it now plays a role in constructing collective memory for its readers. Given that graphic novels now receive national prizes, one can no longer claim that they are anything other than mainstream. Just as public exhumations fit into the 'new pattern of memory in which the moral and the political, the private and the public are constantly being fused' (Baer and Sznajder, 2017), so does the graphic novel. Furthermore, the medium of comics offers an original perspective about history to the young public, whose demands and needs are different from those of previous generations (Crippa 2017, 9).

After being prompted to learn about his mother on her deathbed, Altarriba takes his readers on a journey beginning with her birth and ending with her burial, offering a clear sense of circularity. The story ends in the same way it began – with a negative reply to an inquiry of whether or not the interlocutor knew about Petra's immobile arm (see Figure 12, *El ala rota*, p. 253, panels 3–5). The circularity is highlighted graphically through the use of a similar close-up headshot of the two men who did not know about Petra's arm – her son and her late life companion (see Figure 13, *El ala rota*, p. 5, panel 6 and p. 253, panel 3). The final question is followed by eight wordless panels (see Figure 14, *El ala rota*, pp. 253–254). The readers are brought back to the place of ignorance where they started. The closing panels are presented in the reverse of the opening panels: where we first zoomed out from Petra's arm, we now zoom in to the earth covering her casket (see Figure 15, *El ala rota*, p. 254). Like the first panel, the final panel is so close up that in isolation it is unintelligible; it is reminiscent of the disembodied, fragmented haematomas we saw on Petra's also unintelligible inner arm in the opening panel (see Figure 16, *El ala rota*, p. 255, panel 5 and p. 5, panel 1). Petra's life has come full circle and we are reminded of her pain and invited to recall the silence that surrounded her arm and her life. However, although we have returned to where we began, our optic is not unchanged. The rain – a natural, unstoppable, and commonplace phenomenon – represents our shared tears. Significantly, the blacks and whites are in reverse: where the bruises were grey on white, the stones are white on grey. The outlines of the marks no longer bleed into the background, rather each is delineated. In this new fragmentation of repeated shapes, the individuality is underscored; one of them, like her name – Petra, is singular and one that the reader now knows individually, despite there being millions that are similar yet different. Hispanists Lydia Vázquez and Juan Manuel Ibeas-Altamira consider *El ala rota* to be a narration of history with a small 'h,' proposing that Petra represents not just Altarriba's mother, but a whole generation of women (Vázquez, 3). It is true that Petra, like many women, was not a hero in arms. She was, however, a hero. In this regard, both she and her history are unique and individual among the many existent stones that *El ala rota* suggest are remaining, and whose stories deserve to be told. Instead of walking away from her grave, as one does when a burial ceremony ends, Kim's drawing zooms in and takes the readers closer to the subject, inviting us to

continue examining that which is before our eyes.¹⁰ Because we, as a society are now ready to see and hear, and because Petra can no longer speak for herself, perhaps it is acceptable that her son speak for her.

The very act of remembering is a way of recognising and criticising. Doing so allows us to move towards the next step – from the recovery *of* the memory to the recovery *from* the memory. With regard to Petra, Altarriba posits in an interview that she ‘overcame her handicap to the point of making invisible to those around her’ (262). I would suggest that this act of making invisible her body, her handicap, and her self is an act of survival taken by many women in patriarchal and ableist societies. Her resistance to the gaze of others is an attempt to create a space of her own. In suggesting that his mother ‘overcame her handicap,’ Altarriba affirms that she successfully managed the trauma in her own life and that he, too, is on the path to healing after crafting a story that shows the complex person overlooked in *El arte de volar*. It is unclear exactly which details of Petra’s life are factual and which are the product of Altarriba’s imagination. Chute, in her analysis of war trauma in graphic novels reminds us that comics call ‘overt attention to the crafting of histories and historiographies – suggest[ing] that accuracy is not the opposite of creative invention’ (2016, 2). We can apply this principal to the way Altarriba works through his personal loss. As he researches and recreates his mother’s life story, he both creates a personal history and reveals a collective historiography.

In Hirsch’s and Smith’s examination of feminist memory, they remind us that memory is situated in the present and can also be used towards the future as the mediating artists create memories for future generations (2). They note the value in feminist narratives of recuperating the ‘devalued, marginalized, or repressed cultural formations’ (9). The form of comics lends itself to the application of a feminist mode of questioning by pushing the reader to reenvision traditional modes of knowing in ways that Hirsch and Smith call us to do. Antonio Altarriba answers this call. Through recounting his mother’s life, he not only confronts the personal (his present, traumatic moment of mourning and his mother’s past extended trauma), but he also lays the groundwork for us, as a societal collective, to forge a new and different path forward. As we begin to remember the atrocities of what life was like for everyday women in a patriarchal society, we begin to take steps towards condemning it and, ultimately, changing it. In a reverse move of the disinterment of mass graves, it is upon burying Petra’s body that her story is revealed. Like in the exhumations, the ability to create a narrative around the wound leads to the healing of the trauma. Ultimately, we learn that while Petra may represent the everyday, apolitical woman, she was anything but ordinary.

Notes

1. It is an honour to dedicate this article to the Hispanic Studies majors at Davidson College who were enrolled in the Fall 2020 Senior Capstone class on Memory, Gender, and the Graphic Novel in Contemporary Spain. I am infinitely grateful to each of them for their insightful contributions to our semester-long conversations.
2. *El arte de volar* has been translated into multiple languages, among them English, as *The Art of Flying* (trans. Adrian West). *El ala rota* [*The Broken Wing*] has not been translated. For consistency’s sake, I will refer to both of the works by their original titles throughout this paper. For the purpose of this paper, I will use the terms graphic novel, graphic

narrative, and comics interchangeably to mean a narrative publication that combines word and image in a more comprehensive manner than an illustrated novel. For studies on the genre and differences between the terms, see Aurell, Kiely, and Romero-Jódar.

3. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.
4. While this list is far complete, studies by the following scholars are indispensable: Sara Brenneis, Francie Cate-Arries, Ana Corbalán, Sebastián Faber, Ofelia Ferrán, Gina Herrmann, Sarah Leggott, Ana Luengo, Aurora Morcillo, Paul Preston, and Mary S. Vásquez.
5. Some of the most notable prizes and the dates of their establishment include: Premios del Salón Internacional del Cómic de Barcelona-2000, Premio de la Crítica-2001, the Premio Nacional del Cómic-2007, Premios Expocómic-2007, Cómic Aragonés-2011, Premio Zona Cómic-2013, Splash Sagunt-2016 (El Noveno Pasajero).
6. For more information on the thirteen roses, see Jesús Ferrero's novel, *Las trece rosas* (2003); Carlos Fonseca's book of non-fiction, *Trece rosas rojas* (2004); Verónica Vigil's and José María Almela's documentary film, *Que mi nombre no se borre de la historia* (2004); Ángela López's novel, *Martina, la rosa número trece* (2006); and Emilio Martínez Lázaro's movie *Las 13 rosas* (2007), based on Fonseca's study.
7. All images are at the end of the study, after the Bibliography.
8. The clear male gendering of Klee's angel for Benjamin is worth noting. In the German original, the angel is grammatically masculine, 'der Engel', as well as culturally masculine in German imagery (Denham 2020, email). In Spanish, 'el ángel', it is also grammatically masculine, and angels are generally depicted as either masculine or gender ambiguous in Spanish religious paintings (e.g. El Greco and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo). Now, however, in the twenty-first century, society is beginning to question the male/female binary. He/she gendered pronouns are perceived by some as limiting in the same way that gendered roles are. This contemporary shift invites us to flip Benjamin's gender and reclaim female agency within history.
9. Kim's image is used both within the narrative of *El ala rota* in the scene discussed and as the cover art of the editions sold in Spain, France, Portugal, and Turkey.
10. Deepest thanks to my students in the Senior Capstone course of Fall 2020 for their stimulating conversations on Altarriba's and Kim's graphic novels and for drawing this detail to my attention.

Disclosure statement

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