

Mary Low's Feminist Reportage and the Politics of Surrealism

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I have a photograph which calls back the feeling of the first days more quickly than my recollections.

Mary Low, *Red Spanish Notebook*

In 1936, the British surrealist Mary Low and her soon-to-be husband, the Cuban surrealist Juan Breá, traveled to Barcelona from Paris to participate in the Spanish workers' revolution. Upon their return to Paris six months later, they composed one of the first English-language accounts of the conflict. In *Red Spanish Notebook: The First Six Months of the Revolution and the Civil War* (1937), Low and Breá narrate their experiences in volunteering alongside Spanish and foreign volunteers, in an effort to suppress the Francoist uprising and to transform the country's social structures. Although the text has received little critical attention in examinations of Surrealism and international involvement in the Spanish Civil War, *Red Spanish Notebook* provides a unique example of the surrealist use of documentary photography.¹ The book contains no actual photographs; however, Low periodically employs ekphrasis at particularly charged moments to undermine dominant notions of journalistic distance. Her sections of *Red Spanish Notebook* often focus on Spain's nascent women's movement in describing foreign and Spanish women on the front lines and the home front. By rendering photographs into words, and offering alternative interpretations of the images, Low illustrates the impossibility of objective reporting. In so doing, she redirects political attention away from the war, and towards Spanish women's concurrent struggle for equality. This essay examines Low's use of ekphrasis to argue that she elevates and legitimizes Spanish

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feminism by reporting social revolution in the style of war journalism. In employing and undermining the tropes of war reporting—and particularly the tropes of war photography—Low underscores the perpetual slippages inherent in even the most distanced, objective perspectives. She furthermore constructs a surrealist ethics of collective, egalitarian collaboration that foregrounds these multiple opinions and subjectivities.

The trip to Barcelona that inspired *Red Spanish Notebook* was only one of Low's many travels. Her artistic and political engagement took her all over the world; indeed, Georgiana M. M. Colvile calls her "la plus nomade des femmes surréalistes" [the most nomadic of the surrealist women].² Low's own upbringing and personal history attest to this cosmopolitan identity. Born in 1912 in London to Australian parents, she attended school in England, France, and Switzerland, and spoke English, French and Spanish fluently. While living in Paris in 1933, Low met Juan Breá, the founder of Cuba's avant-garde Grupo H, who first introduced her to Surrealism. Through their travels together, the couple soon became acquainted with an impressive list of influential artists in the movement: in Paris they met Benjamin Péret (who would also travel to Spain during the revolution and civil war), Oscar Domínguez, André Breton, Paul Eluard, Esteban Francés, Georges Hugnet, Wifredo Lam, Yves Tanguy, and Remedios Varo. In Bucharest, they met Victor Brauner, his wife, Margitte, and brother Harry. In Brussels, they visited René Magritte, Paul Nougé, and E.L.T. Mesens. And in Prague, where they visited after Spain, they met Karel Teige and Konstantin Biebl, and spent months with Jindrich Heisler, Toyen, and Bohuslav Brouk.³

Low's travels brought her into contact with more than international surrealist art and artists; she also witnessed first-hand the revolutions to which much of that art responded. She was in Russia in 1913, Greece in 1934, and after leaving Spain, would be in Cuba in 1959. But of all their trips, the couple's 1936 visit to Barcelona was the one she and Breá documented most extensively. After the Spanish workers' militias and the Republican armed services crushed Franco's revolt, Low and Breá, like many leftists around the world, quickly volunteered with the Popular Front. In Spain, the couple became involved with many different groups and individuals on the front lines of the revolution, primarily with the *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* (the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification, or POUM). Breá served with the POUM militia, and Low co-edited, partially financed, and translated the POUM English-language paper, *The Spanish Revolution*.⁴ She also worked on the POUM's English-language radio broadcasts and in its journalism and propaganda offices, and helped to organize a women's militia, a branch of the anarchist organization *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women).⁵ But Low and Breá's time in Barcelona was limited: tensions between

the different Popular Front factions mounted over the revolution's first six months. After Breá was—seemingly intentionally—nearly run over by a car while leaving a POUM meeting, the couple decided to return to Paris and record their experiences.

Low and Breá's commitment to direct revolutionary engagement is evident throughout *Red Spanish Notebook*. Each section of the text describes an aspect of life in Spain: Breá recounts his time in the towns of Aragon, Tierz, Madrid, Toledo, and Sigüenza, and his work alongside other volunteer soldiers on the battlefields. Low describes their journey to and from Barcelona, her interactions with different leftist groups, her friendships with Spanish and international volunteers, and her work with newly enfranchised Spanish women. C.L.R. James wrote the book's introduction, and the British political publishing house Secker and Warburg published the work a year before publishing James' *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*.

The Black Jacobins, like *Red Spanish Notebook*, recounts a social revolt in order to set out a theory of revolution. For James, the Spanish conflict contained echoes not only of Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, but also of the Haitian Revolution. His introduction to *Red Spanish Notebook* repeatedly commends the authors for working closely alongside other volunteers for the revolutionary cause, and without any attempt to maintain objective distance in their reporting or writing. Low and Breá's style of reportage, he suggests, endows the text with an authenticity it would lack had the two gone to Spain as traditional journalists: "Every line they have written is a record of experience lived for the sake of revolution and written down afterwards because such rare and vital experience needs to be communicated. The pulse of the revolution beats through every page."⁶ James understood that the *Red Spanish Notebook*'s significance in part had to do with its authors' proximity to the conflict. His introduction suggests that revolution can only be properly understood and analyzed through personal contact. True radical innovation comes not from isolated vanguardism but from direct participation. It develops from the symbiotic, mutually influential ideologies that both constitute and result from an individual revolution.

Although *Red Spanish Notebook* has garnered little subsequent critical attention, what notice the book has received almost invariably comments on the authors' first-hand experience of the Spanish revolution, conveyed through their vivid descriptions. For instance, a 2007 obituary for Low calls her sections of the book "snapshots of mostly everyday life in those extraordinary times."⁷ The obituary writer's use of the term "snapshots" might suggest not only the authors' frequent use of vignettes, but also Low's literary use of photography in her sections of the book.⁸ In a work of reportage so committed to first-person accounts, the few passages where Low draws back from the narrative to describe a photograph stand out for

their complex rearrangement of the relationship between the writer, her experience, and her words. Low's stories are dramatically and meticulously recounted. Her use of ekphrasis transforms her narrative presence, and turns her from a first-hand observer of the Spanish conflict into a removed viewer of photographs—photos that are nearly as lucidly described as actual images, but with an added layer of narrative distance. The repeated shifts between accounts of her own work in Spain, reports of other volunteers' work, and descriptions of photographs, indicate Low's own complicity and involvement in a movement she simultaneously documents. In other words, these infrequent narrative shifts serve as repeated reminders of the impossibility of neutral journalism or objective interpretation.

The proximity and photographic confirmation that Low and Breá emphasize in their reportage were common aspects of 1930s journalism, a field with striking developments during that decade. The Spanish Civil War received more thorough news coverage than any previous war, thanks in part to the unprecedented involvement of photographers. As printing press and camera quality improved, journalists increasingly used photographs to corroborate their stories. Automatic, handheld cameras replaced tripod cameras and film with long exposure times, and—as a result of technological improvements—newspaper and magazine editors were able to make extensive use of photographs in their layouts. Alongside these developments in traditional journalism, new genres of media began to appear, such as picture magazines that contained little text. Such innovations led to the emerging necessity for literacy in new forms of visual communication. As documentary photography rose in popularity, so too did the genre of reportage. Writers, like photographers, were expected to get as close to the action as they could. However, while reportage became an increasingly accepted genre, its categorization as literature blurred attempts to classify it as either unbiased first-person accounts or as works of political fiction. The style of war photography and reporting familiar today was born during the Spanish conflict, as a result of these developing technologies, and ensuing social reactions.

With photojournalism's advent came questions about its value. Was it objective? Was it art? Was it appropriate for public consumption? Robert Capa's famous photograph, *Death of a Loyalist Militiaman, Córdoba Front, Spain* (often called *The Falling Soldier* (1936, Fig. 1), taken while Low and Breá were also in Spain, helped gain support for the Spanish Left. Like many other photographers, Capa was known to stage photographs. While it remains unclear if the photograph of the dying soldier was one of these staged photos, Capa's attitude towards war photography dominated: he famously and possibly apocryphally stated, "if a picture is bad, you were not close enough."⁹ Predicating a photo's authenticity on the photographer's

proximity to the action further obscures objectivity, as photographers sometimes became involved in the conflicts they photographed. To remain competitive, war photojournalists placed themselves on the front lines. Peter Monteath explains, “Much of the impact of the [war] photograph lies in the realisation that the photographer was not a distanced observer but a participant. The poor focus, the scratches and the failure to centre the action all testify to this.”¹⁰ In other words, the photographer’s social role had shifted from composing planned portraits to executing dangerous action shots—or, to composing what appeared to be dangerous action shots.

Low and Breá’s work in Spain brought them close to the revolution’s action, and to issues of representation and censorship. Throughout *Red Spanish Notebook*, they both depict photography’s many uses in a country torn apart by war and revolution. For instance, during a visit to a hospital, Low writes that she discovered that hospital staff posted photos of the dead outside the building so that family members could identify them. However, the families of spies and fascists rarely claimed their relatives’ bodies. She describes the display as “rows of photographs of



Fig. 1. Robert Capa, “Death of a Loyalist Militiaman,” 1936 © International Center of Photography/Magnum Photos.

every kind of dead body which were tacked up on the wall under a pillared arcade. I longed to ask [the hospital guard who escorted her] why they all had their shoes and stockings off, but did not dare.”¹¹ Here, photographs serve as memorials to the unburied dead, and reminders of the many casualties on both sides. Low does not offer any interpretation of the photographs, or any eventual explanation of the bare feet. Photographs provide documentation, and their specific effects on the individuals who see them are left unarticulated.

In contrast, later in the book, Breá travels around Spain with a journalist friend who wants to photograph the anti-fascist soldiers. Some soldiers refuse, but one agrees, explaining “Why not? ... Isn’t propaganda a weapon, too, just the same as a cannon?”¹² Like the soldier, Low discusses photography’s potential value as propaganda. As part of her work for the POUM’s propaganda and journalism offices, Low regularly sent reports and photographs to various European newspapers, and reviewed those newspapers’ accounts of the conflict. However, newspaper editors rarely published her photographs of Spanish casualties, opting instead for less graphic shots. Most governments had adopted a policy of non-intervention in Spain’s civil war, despite the democratically elected government Franco overthrew; many newspapers followed suit, publishing articles and photographs designed to maintain public opinion on Franco’s side, and omitting mention of the concurrent revolution. Low’s writings thus serve a pedagogical purpose, and demonstrate not only how to reinterpret articles and photographs, but, more importantly, how to understand emerging journalistic practices and genres and their commodity forms.

Low’s discussion of photographs and of women’s liberation movements in *Red Spanish Notebook* undermines still-developing conventions of photojournalism and reportage and challenge assumptions about women’s role in war and their responses to it. Her narrative questions not only the mainstream British media’s treatment of the Spanish cause, but the Spanish Republic’s own self representation through photography—what Jordana Mendelson characterizes as “the truthfulness associated with photography... a moralistic claim that the Republic sought to borrow for itself.”¹³ The photos Low invokes bear some similarities to the images of “dead bodies and ruined houses”¹⁴ Virginia Woolf describes in her similarly ekphrastic *Three Guineas*. However, while Woolf’s text builds to an unwaveringly pacifist argument in favor of feminist anti-nationalism, Low’s few photographic descriptions emphasize the need for female involvement in world revolution. Low’s use of ekphrasis challenges her audience’s beliefs about the Spanish revolution, and about photography itself. In avoiding the inclusion of actual photos, she not only circumvents the photographic censorship she encountered in her journalistic work

in Barcelona, but also counters the possibility of weakening or undercutting her own reporting: recent studies have cast doubt on Robert Capa's photos and Arthur Koestler's accounts and photographic documentation in *L'Espagne ensanglantée: Une Livre noir sur l'Espagne* and *Spanish Testament*.¹⁵ But, in relying instead on unrepresented photos, Low avoids the possibility of misattribution.

Low's repeated shifts in narrative stance—from participant, to observer, to analyst—comprise a surrealist approach to destabilizing photographic objectivity by underscoring the tension between reality and representation. Ian Walker contends that the use of documentary photographs, even without overt artistic manipulation, is an under-recognized surrealist technique: surrealist documentary photography “is in fact more disruptive of conventional norms than the contrivances of darkroom manipulation.”¹⁶ Even in supposedly “straight” photographs, the surrealists shifted social reactions through captions and unexpected juxtapositions, as well as the photographs' own decontextualization in their publication. During wartime, as Walker suggests in discussing the Blitz, overt photographic manipulation was often unnecessary, as images from war torn regions were an “unsettling combination of the ordinary and the strange.”¹⁷ I argue that Low's use of ekphrasis exaggerates these tensions further. Her narrative asks the reader to imagine photographic images that she claims exist, photos that depict scenes that only she witnessed. In layering wartime imaginings, Low's thought exercise emphasizes the political underpinnings of war journalism and its investment in hegemony. While she would later go on to use photographs in her collage art, her ekphrastic writings in *Red Spanish Notebook* take part in a surrealist project of visual and political destabilization, suggesting that to question objectivity is to challenge patriarchy.

Spanish Feminism and International Participation

Before examining Low's photographic descriptions, one must define the term “feminism” in the context of 1930s Spain, in order to clarify Low's innovative methodology. In the era leading up to the Spanish Civil War, Spanish women agitated for financial, marital, and educational equality, with enfranchisement a secondary concern. Prior to the 1931 establishment of the Second Spanish Republic (which Franco eventually overthrew), women were largely illiterate and poorly educated, rarely worked outside the home, and had no financial independence. The Republican government introduced civil marriage, legalized divorce, and allowed women to maintain different nationalities from their husbands. Spanish women won the right to vote, and could even be elected to the national parliament. During the Spanish revolution, women's liberation organizations tied their ambitions to the republic's goals, and lobbied for further rights. Of these groups, Low worked most closely

with *Mujeres Libres*, which attempted to unite women of all classes and provide them with academic and health education, professional and military training, and a political voice. While the term *feminismo* was not widely used, gender equality was a fundamental tenet of the revolution in Spain.

Gender equality was also the heart of the revolution for many of the foreign women who came to Spain to add their voices to the Spanish women's lobby, volunteering as nurses, ambulance drivers, journalists, social workers, and soldiers. Low first uses ekphrasis to emphasize the POUM's internationalism and to suggest the conflict's global significance. Her first photographic description evokes her early days in Barcelona. In the section of *Red Spanish Notebook* entitled "Communal Life," she writes:

I have a photograph which calls back the feeling of the first days more quickly than my recollections, and shows some of us standing under the sun-roof of a morning. It was the third day, and I had got my militia uniform by then. The tall German girl in her nurse's costume, its white fading away into the white walls in the photo, and her head overtopping the others in the line, with straight hair and large, tender lips. Then myself, standing with my hands behind my back and the buckle on the new belt catching the light. An Italian girl with spectacles, who worked in the propaganda office, is beside me, holding the hand of an older Austrian woman in corduroy trousers. At our feet, the Belgian miners with their fair, blown hair are sitting with some boys from a factory in Marseilles. We all look fresh and conscientious, under the straight falling shafts of light from the glass roof, but what makes the picture interesting is the feeling of comradeship with everyone pressing close together, touching each other and smiling.¹⁸

Here, Low narrates from a physical and temporal distance; she looks at herself and her comrades from a visual perspective outside the group and in a different country, months after the photo was taken. Her description acts as a caption to a photo we cannot see. She also includes details that a photograph alone could not include, for instance, the Italian woman's role in the propaganda office, and each individual's nationality. Although Low explains that she relies upon the photo to aid her memory, in using ekphrasis she deflects attention from herself as a participant in the events she narrates. Rather than tying the description of her fellow volunteers to her own narrative, she inserts her editorializing of their camaraderie and conscientiousness

into a factual narrative.

Low's description provides a counterpoint to the negative images of the Popular Front coalition that were common in Europe and the Americas at that time. She details the volunteers' appearances and nationalities, but does not include their names; these vigorous, attractive, and dedicated Western European members of the POUM stand in for rest of the approximately 40,000 foreign volunteers in Spain. Foreign volunteers were frequently vilified by the governments and presses of their home countries for their efforts in Spain, and some even lost their citizenship rights as a result of participation. Low recasts them as healthy, intelligent young people by employing the rhetoric of western European beauty: the Belgian miners have "fair, blown hair," the German nurse has "large, tender lips," and everyone looks "fresh." Although primarily united by their participation in the POUM, Low emphasizes that her comrades are "touching each other and smiling." She suggests that fellow feeling and camaraderie connect the people pictured in the photo even more than enlistment. Revolutionary involvement renders national and linguistic differences irrelevant.

Low's ekphrasis emphasizes the volunteers' health and good looks, and highlights the women's femininity. During the 1930s, Spanish Republican women of all classes began to favor a more proletarian style of dress. Women stopped wearing hats and veils because of their religious associations, and many even adopted the blue overalls worn by men. Conscious of concerns in Spain that emancipated women would cease to look or behave as they had before these shifts towards equality, and of stereotypes about masculine leftist women, Low distinguishes between women's implicit femininity and their socially constructed roles. She thus mentions her friends' physical characteristics: the German nurse's feminine lips, and elsewhere, the "deep-bosomed and sweet"¹⁹ Spanish woman who works on *Mujeres Libres'* editorial board. Yet she comments that she stops scrutinizing her appearance while in Spain:

One of the things which had always annoyed me about revolutionary women up till then was the lack of care they took over their appearance. Now I realised that one only bothers over feminine coquetry because of the shortage of larger interests allowed us in the life under the capitalist régime.²⁰

Through her descriptions of other women and reflections on her evolving appearance, Low differentiates between oppressed women's efforts to attract the male gaze, and the natural, inherent beauty they possess when more concerned with larger political issues. In her reading of appearance, capitalism enslaves women

by keeping them subservient and uneducated, and by distracting them from this oppression in correlating their individual value to their appearance.²¹ A later essay co-written with Breá echoes this sentiment: “The feminine ideal does not correspond to the intellectual possibilities of women. It is a denial of them. The submissive housewife, resigned, obedient, monogamous, is not the ideal of a woman, but an ideal slave.”²² By implicating herself along with other women who bother over coquetry, Low implicitly aligns Spanish and international women in this cycle of aesthetic subjugation in *Red Spanish Notebook*. She suggests that it is not Spanish women alone who need to “grab their liberty,” as she calls it, but that women from other countries might use the Spanish example as a reminder of their own lingering oppression.²³

Low supports her argument for gender equality by highlighting fellow volunteers’ femininity, and by emphasizing how equal rights need not impinge on men and women’s separate spheres. In a section entitled “Women ...” she recounts the arguments between volunteers in the women’s battalion she helped to organize, and various men within the Popular Front who questioned the battalion’s right to exist. For instance, a French volunteer worries that women fighting alongside male members of the militia will inspire the men to endanger themselves attempting to be heroes. Low and her female comrades respond: “We don’t put it up as a principle that women ought to go to the front, we don’t think that, we only want to give a hand to all the individual cases who are good at that sort of thing.”²⁴ The women here claim they do not want to take over men’s roles or necessarily to enter their spaces, they simply want to uphold the ideals of equality that call for each person to hold a position suited to her skills.

Low’s apologetic articulation of her support for employment equity seems designed to minimize women’s potential disruption of social norms. However, in the same section of the book she also suggests abolishing the institution of marriage in favor of complete sexual liberation. And, in a later essay co-written with Breá, they argue that female oppression is the direct result of men’s engagement in war:

Ever since women, through a biological fatalism, ceased to take an active part in the principal work of men—warfare—the latter have, little by little, been denying them all participation in production, reserving domestic work for them. Men then talk about “the proper sphere of women” and keep them on a family-chore level. Ever since then, ever since women no longer work, they have been socially suppressed.²⁵

Low's vital work within the POUM, *Mujeres Libres*, and her instrumental role in writing and translating *Red Spanish Notebook*, suggests that her labor and her opinions were more visible than those of the women she describes. In other words, her own success rests upon her outspokenness and its positive reception. In spite of this, by showcasing certain other volunteers' sexual conservatism and dedication to keeping Spanish women invisible, Low demonstrates how even leftists might undermine gender equality. According to her self-representations in *Red Spanish Notebook*, while in Spain, Low downplayed the women's movement's potential to upset society in order to garner support for her cause and her friends. In print, however, she exposes the gender stereotypes held by individuals across the political spectrum. She highlights the many gradations within the Popular Front, and, through her own self-censorship, alludes to the impossibility of objective reporting. By using ekphrasis to layer different representations of women in Spain, including her first-hand interactions, other volunteers' experiences, and later analyses of her own experiences, Low underscores the many potential interpretations of a given situation, report, or photograph.

Later in the text Breá continues Low's feminist argument to expose the inextricable connections between war and the treatment of women. Throughout the book, Low and Breá write about many women at the front. However, in his lone use of ekphrasis, Breá describes a typical photograph of soldiers to foreground the Francoists' violent sexism. While recounting his time at the Sigüenza front, Breá mentions the many soldiers who requested that he photograph them. Finally, he agrees to take a photo of three soldiers who recently crossed over from the Francoist side. Breá explains,

[the photo] came out in the Barcelona papers, too, with three boys kneeling in the sun, the photo all hard black and white angles, and the boys with their bare arms up and fists clenched and saluting, and all of them smiling. Casimir [one of the soldiers] was at the end of the row. It was the last photograph he was to have taken. A few days later he fell under the Fascist bullets, young and fighting bravely.²⁶

As in Low's first use of ekphrasis, Breá employs photographic description to distance himself from the individuals pictured. After describing the photo, a typical representation of happy soldiers making the anti-fascist salute, Breá quickly explains that he remembers Casimir well because of a story the soldier told him: while still fighting with the fascists, Casimir overheard his officers laughing about having killed a pregnant woman, one of their prisoners. By appending this caption to his

ekphrasis, Breá connects the war front—a predominantly, although not entirely, masculine realm—to Low’s discussions of the home front’s feminist politics. In describing the soldier, he emphasizes Casimir’s sensitivity to fascist hypocrisy and misogyny over his bravery in abandoning the fascists for the Republicans. If Low’s ekphrases highlight the importance of Spanish and foreign recognition of women’s oppression, Breá’s ekphrasis suggests that female oppression and contempt for equality are inherent in all fascism.

Casualties and War Photography

Low’s second use of ekphrasis more explicitly critiques photojournalism’s conventions and supposed objectivity. She aligns the Spanish people’s suffering with foreign non-intervention and depicts the repercussions of the British media’s incomplete coverage of the Spanish conflict. As part of her work for the POUM’s propaganda and journalism offices, Low regularly sent reports and photographs to various European newspapers, and reviewed those newspapers’ accounts of the conflict. However, newspaper editors rarely published her photographs of Spanish casualties, opting instead for less graphic shots. Mainstream British newspapers presented a sanitized version of the war; Caroline Brothers explains that while photos of soldiers were large and clear, in photographs of the injured and dead “bodies were almost invariably bloodless, intact, clean, uncontroverted, never disfigured or in pain, and rarely in danger of death.”²⁷ Newspaper articles about Spain also treated death and injury euphemistically.

In *Red Spanish Notebook*, Low recounts a debate she had with a visiting British journalist over censorship and propaganda. The journalist—also a woman—criticizes Low for circulating gruesome photos of children killed in the war:

“Oh, how can you? Sending out photographs of those dead children! It’s too dreadful.”

“We think so, too,” I said. “Too dreadful that they should have been killed. But of course we didn’t kill them.”...

“Brutes! How can you be such brutes? Think of all the women who are going to suffer when they see that, and think of their children.”

“That would be the very best thing that could happen.”

“Oh,” she said, choking with rage. “How can you talk like that? Don’t you realise that these are the sort of things which ought to be kept decently hidden?”

“Yes. While *the Daily Mail* continues to talk about the ‘brave anti-red guards’ serving their country (because I suppose even the British

public would scarcely stand for 'brave Fascist'). Just up to us, I suppose, to keep all the things they do decently hidden."²⁸

In her account of the exchange, Low positions herself and the other workers in the propaganda office against the female journalist, yet she argues by consistently agreeing with her, responding "[w]e think so, too" and "[t]hat would be the very best thing." Low's seemingly calm concord with the journalist only makes the woman's beliefs appear more ludicrous: what is terrible is not that people will see what murdered children look like, but that the children should have been murdered at all, and what is brutish is not to publicize these images, but to willfully turn away from Spanish atrocities. The *Daily Mail* journalist's deliberate blindness is especially egregious given that she is supposedly in Spain to report the facts of the revolution and civil war. The women's disagreement is predicated on different understandings of who the conflict's victims are, and how to protect them. In recounting this incident, Low illustrates how the foreign media's notions of brutality, decency, and bravery obscure war's realities and sanitize Spanish tragedy, supposedly to protect foreign women's delicate nerves.

Low's response to the journalist demonstrates a plausible reaction to photographs of carnage. She does not imply that foreign women cannot handle the images of dead children; rather, she argues that they must see the photos in order to fully appreciate the situation in Spain. While foreign women may suffer for thinking of their own children hurt or killed, Low suggests that this emotional connection might spur political engagement and aid to Spain. Low's and the journalist's own presence in Spain indicates women's ability to witness tragedy first-hand. The journalist, however, overlooks her readers' capacity for sympathy—the very emotion that might spur them to action. She instead privileges her readers' comfort over that of Spanish women. Low highlights the journalist's hypocritical stance, that is, her conviction that she herself can travel to Spain as a reporter, but other women cannot even be expected to handle Spanish atrocities through the detached medium of a photograph. This belief furthermore causes the journalist to abandon her journalistic responsibilities to avoid possible censure. Although she is in Spain to report on a war, the journalist chooses not to report anything that she finds "dreadful." By reporting the incident, Low illustrates the biases inherent in even the most apparently neutral journalism, and the political possibilities of pathos. In fact, throughout the book, Low's lengthiest character sketches are of women who have lost loved ones in the revolution. Her account of journalistic censorship outside the POUM's propaganda office imbues her reportage with an integrity and explicitness that she suggests most foreign presses lack.

After relating the incident with the female journalist, Low continues to describe photographs of the war's victims and their reception, differentiating between the supposed propaganda of the POUM office and the actual censorship of the foreign media. She explains that of all the photographs the POUM propaganda office publicized, only one was ever published, and then only after an outcry by readers. Low describes the photo the foreign newspaper printed:

the most romantic of them all, clouds of hair covering the blood and the unscarred face turned back and up with a blank, a dark appeal in mouth and eyes. I remember others, which you never saw, with more surprised and dreadful expressions on the young faces stained and sometimes eyeless, and photographs of crowds of people lying stiff and idle on the floors of refuges, or in their beds, their hard outlines bulging the sheets.²⁹

Low's ekphrasis replaces this optimistic, sanitized vision of war's horror with what she has personally witnessed. Her reference to such vivid depictions of death evokes the earlier scene in which she examined the hospital's photographs of dead bodies. The published photograph, according to Low's description, is a sexualized and seemingly beautified version of death, the victim's hair still styled, her face unblemished, and her look vaguely seductive. Low contrasts the dead woman's face with others she has seen, covered in blood and missing eyes, the people killed in bombings after having been forced to leave their homes, or bombed in their homes, their bodies dehumanized to become "outlines bulging the sheets." Low's description of damaged bodies emphasizes not only the photo's failure to adequately capture carnage in Spain, but also the distance between the beautiful living women she describes throughout the text, and the dead, dehumanized forms she has seen both in person and in photos.

Low's discussion of photographs is also one of the few times she directly addresses the reader in all of *Red Spanish Notebook*, and the tone is accusatory. Low criticizes the foreign newspaper editors who would not publicize photographs supporting the Popular Front, and the many citizens of other countries who did not call upon their own governments to support the Spanish cause, or call upon newspapers to provide a more balanced perspective. Low's argument in favor of printing graphic photos would have been a familiar and common one for the Spanish Republic's supporters. In November of 1936, around the same time as the unnamed journalist's visit, Britain's communist *Daily Worker* printed a full page of photos of Spanish children killed by a "Nazi bomb," alongside a photo of a happily playing

British child, with a lengthy caption explaining the editorial decision to print the page. A month later, the POUM's *Spanish Revolution* printed two more photos of dead children, the only such photos the newspaper ever seems to have published. In the same issue, a cartoon shows two characters talking about a third, captioned, "He is terribly deaf, isn't he?" "Yes. Almost English [*sic*]" (Fig. 2).³⁰

By criticizing the female journalist's political passivity and then immediately implicating the reader in the continued, nearly worldwide policy of non-intervention, Low connects the atrocities she witnessed, the photographs she saw, and the ongoing revolution she supports. She emphasizes her own proximity to the conflict and the people killed in it, and asserts each individual's responsibility to actively participate in revolution, regardless of differences of nation or gender. International governmental non-intervention and supposed journalistic neutrality amount to tacit approval of fascism.

Conclusion: Revolutionary Theory and Feminist Collaboration

Low's case for proximity ultimately becomes an ethics of transcultural collaboration. Concluding her first ekphrasis of a photograph of western European volunteers, she wonders why the living quarters for foreign POUM volunteers were strictly separated from those of the Catalans: "I never understood this arrangement, which only served to cut us off from one another and prevented us from learning the language and understanding the Catalan habits of mind."³¹ Similarly, her second ekphrasis suggests foreign citizens' responsibility to involve themselves in the Spanish revolution, and to recognize Spanish women's struggles in order to understand their personal internalized oppression. Low repeatedly demonstrates connections between the photos she describes, Spanish society, and international politics. In so doing, she asserts the impossibility of an isolated revolution. Her use of ekphrasis thus encourages the reader to forge personal connections with those who are pictured, while at the same time recognizing the possibility of misinterpretation and the influence of individual bias. In emphasizing the links between women from different nations, classes, and political backgrounds, she envisions a transnational feminism working to establish a new, revolutionary society in Spain, and globally. Even as Low repeatedly found herself constrained by political divisions, this vision of feminism, in refusing political factionalism, insists on the value of Popular Front-style collaboration. Low and Breá's critique of implicit gender norms in the public sphere resists the temptation to endorse specific tactics or a single ideological position, because to do so would be to implicate themselves within a political discourse structured by patriarchal logic. Rather, by exploring hermeneutic practices through the trope of ekphrasis, their text demonstrates the ways in which human empathy can be mobilized toward explicitly political goals.

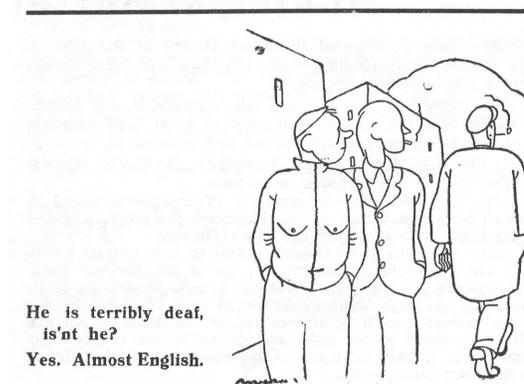


Fig. 2. Untitled cartoon, *The Spanish Revolution*, Vol. 1, No. 7 (2 December 1936): 1.

Low's emphasis on multileveled cultural exchange and connection parallels the text's insistence on the complex signification of photographs: as supposedly objective representations, as propaganda, and as art. Both Breá and Low stress that the new society they want to establish in Spain is contingent upon women's equality. The authors of *Red Spanish Notebook* propose gender's key role in revolution by foregrounding the many stories behind war photographs, and by using their ekphrases to complicate and enlarge war photography's role in the Spanish revolution. By turning photographs into extended captions, they avoid the taming of photography Roland Barthes critiques in *Camera Lucida*. Barthes contends that society attempts to temper photography's power by turning it into art, or by rendering it banal through generality. Low and Breá's photographs, however, cannot be dismissed as bland photographs of happy female volunteers and brave Spanish soldiers, or as romantic, blurry portraits of the dead. By refusing to treat camaraderie or death euphemistically, their ekphrases prevent any retreat from the images, instead forcing the reader to picture the hope and horrors of war.

Red Spanish Notebook not only provides an important feminist counterpoint to images of the Spanish Civil War publicized by the photographs and writings of Robert Capa, George Orwell, and Ernest Hemingway, among others, but also presents a significant and seemingly rare example of female-dominated surrealist collaboration. Recent studies have examined women's roles within the surrealist movement—as artists and muses, and as romantic partners and artistic collaborators.³² Renée Riese Hubert specifically discusses surrealist artistic

collaboration in *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, and Partnership*, suggesting that male collaborators frequently dominated joint works. While Hubert does not examine Low and Breá's text, *Magnifying Mirrors* usefully contextualizes their 1930s collaborations. Of Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob) and Marcel Moore's (Suzanne Malherbe) collaboration—in reference to their use of gender-neutral and masculine names—Hubert comments that, “in search of independence and identity, Cahun shared with other women artists the strategy of alternately adopting and circumventing male power.”³³ Low's use of the typically male genre of documentary war photography in her writings, specifically to undermine mainstream notions of distance and objectivity, seems a similar feminist praxis. Low appears to have held the principal role in *Red Spanish Notebook*'s production, writing eleven sections to Breá's seven, and translating his sections into English. Their shared narrative technique of ekphrasis provides an important but lesser known commentary on women's roles in both the Spanish revolution and the surrealist movement.

In 1939, two years after *Red Spanish Notebook*'s publication, the revolution and the war ended; the Spanish women's movement failed, along with the Spanish Republicans. International volunteers left the country while Franco executed and tortured many Popular Front supporters, strictly controlled other political parties, and suppressed the Basque, Galician, and Catalan languages and non-Castilian Spanish. While these events affected the whole of post-civil war Spanish society, Spanish women additionally lost the rights they had gained during the Second Spanish Republic, and found their social mobility further curtailed.³⁴

The beliefs for which Low and Breá fought in Spain continued to inform their lives. They moved to Cuba during World War II, and Low remained there long after Breá's death in 1941. As she encouraged her reader to do in *Red Spanish Notebook*, Low endeavored to establish herself in Cuba, and subsequently in the United States. Franklin Rosemont explains that Low lived in so many countries on both sides of the Atlantic “that such things as national boundaries, border guards and passports hardly signify for her anything more than examples of human alienation at its most preposterous.”³⁵ Although Low lost touch with the surrealist movement while in Cuba, she continued her political work in support of the Cuban revolution, taught English and Latin at the University of Havana, and wrote. Over her lifetime she published many books in English, French, and Spanish, including volumes of poetry, collections of collaborative essays and poems with Breá, an English textbook, and a novel about Julius Caesar. After Breá's death, she eventually remarried (to the revolutionary journalist Armando Machado), but the country's changing political situation forced the couple and their three daughters to flee because of their Trotskyist connections. They settled in Miami in 1964. Low's belief

in cultural exchange did not help her find employment in the United States where, because of concerns over her ties to Cuba, she could not gain work at any public-sector American schools, and instead taught at private schools. *Red Spanish Notebook* eventually brought her back to the surrealist movement: after discovering that City Lights Books had, in 1979, republished *Red Spanish Notebook* in San Francisco, Miami, Chicago, and Paris, Low re-established contact, and went on to publish with the surrealist Black Swan Press. *Red Spanish Notebook* was finally published in Spanish in 2001, by the Barcelonian publisher Alikornio ediciones.

Despite Low's sustained political involvement, explicit discussion of Spain and her involvement in its revolution are rare in her writings. Like C.L.R. James, who cut many references to the Spanish revolution from his 1962 edition of *The Black Jacobins* and added an extended discussion of Cuban politics, Low's later writings often focus on Cuban issues. A reference to the Spanish revolution in the 1991 *Poèmes d'alors* suggests the multilayered disappointment that might have fuelled this decision. In her introduction to the posthumous collection of Breá's work, she writes, "L'Espagne! C'était la grande espérance et pour finir, ce fut le coup de poignard au Coeur" [Spain! The great hope and in the end, the stab to the heart].³⁶ In June 1999, Low was also a signatory of "The Fight for History: a Manifesto," which criticized revisionist histories that elided the class conflict within the Spanish revolution and civil war.³⁷ She died in 2007.

Despite the Spanish revolution's disillusioning conclusion, *Red Spanish Notebook's* continuing relevance in North America and Europe after the Spanish Civil War speaks to the enduring importance of Low and Breá's model of collaborative politics. In emphasizing feminism's centrality to the Spanish revolution, not as a secondary or peripheral concern, but as an integral aspect of the new society for which the Popular Front struggled, Low's writing exemplifies the intersection between surrealist politics and international struggle. Rather than use photographs for their shocking, propagandistic value, she narrates the war as it happened. Far more sophisticatedly than a series of photos could, she forces readers to picture its participants in engaging and circumnavigating newly emergent technologies. Her critique of mainstream journalism as a product of mainstream, bourgeois society ultimately suggests the necessity of collective, feminist revolution. Although silenced by Franco's triumph and by leftist histories of the war, the Spanish feminist movement developed a characteristic radicalism to which Popular Front and pacifist discourses alike are indebted. Ongoing interrogations of war photography and feminism suggest that Low's commentary on technology, representation, and gender has much to contribute to contemporary understanding of revolutionary theory.

I am grateful to Jonathan P. Eburne and Christian Høgsbjerg, and to the audience of the “Politics of Picture Writing” panel at the 2011 Modernist Studies Association Annual Conference, for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

1 Low is discussed in some surrealist anthologies, including Georgiana M. M. Colvile’s *Scandaleusement d’elles: Trente-quatre femmes surréalistes* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1999), Penelope Rosemont’s *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998) and Franklin Rosemont and Robin D.G. Kelley’s *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from African and the Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009). Adam Biró and René Passeron’s *Dictionnaire générale du surréalisme et de ses environs* includes short entries for Breá and Low (Fribourg: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982), 63 and 250. Most recently, *Red Spanish Notebook* has been reproduced in its entirety online: Low and Breá, “Red Spanish Notebook,” *Writers on the Spanish Revolution*, n.d., http://www.marxists.org/history/spain/writers/low-brea/red_spanish_notebook.html (14 November 2011). However, outside of these short surrealist and Marxist examinations, little has been written about Low.

2 Colvile, 172.

3 It does not appear that the couple ever met Leonora Carrington, also in Spain around the time of the revolution and civil war. For an account of some of their time in Prague, see Mary Low’s “In Hitler’s Prague,” *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion*, edited by Franklin Rosemont (Chicago: Black Swan Press, 1989), 173-5.

4 The newspaper only lasted a few months. It includes no author credits with its articles, so it is unclear which ones Low wrote.

5 For more information about *Mujeres Libres*, see Mary Nash’s *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War* (Denver: Arden Press, 1995), 78-93.

6 C.L.R. James, “Introduction,” *Red Spanish Notebook: The First Six Months of the Revolution and the Civil War* by Mary Low and Juan Breá (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1937), v. The 1979 edition (San Francisco: City Lights Books) cut James’s introduction, adding a new one by E. Granell (n.p.).

7 Jim Jump, “Obituary: Mary Low,” *The Independent*, 30 January 2007, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/mary-low-434250.html> (14 November 2011). See also George Esenwein, “Testament of a Revolution,” and George Orwell, “*Red Spanish Notebook: A Review*,” both in *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion*, 176-8.

8 The term is also, as Ian Walker points out in discussing Louis Aragon’s “royaumes de l’instanté—the realms of the instantaneous, the world of snapshot” in *City gorged with dreams: Surrealism and documentary photography in interwar Paris*, associated with immediacy and authenticity: “to refer to a photograph as a snapshot usually implies one taken by an untrained amateur. However deliberately made, the photograph acquires an aura of innocence, even naivety; it is authentic precisely because its maker does not know *how* to contrive it”—a characterization that bears similarities to automatic writing (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 12; emphasis author’s.

9 Quoted in Peter Monteath, *Writing the Good Fight: Political Commitment in the International Literature of the Spanish Civil War* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 132. In *So exotic, so homemade: Surrealism, Englishness and documentary photography*, Walker also cautions against reading contemporary definitions of documentary onto 1930s photography, noting that the term then applied to “a rather narrow range of subject matter: industrialisation, urban poverty, working-class life,” although he extends it to include “landscape photography and the personal snapshot as well as scenes of industrial blight” (New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 8. For an extensive discussion of Capa’s photograph, including an analysis of its authenticity, see Caroline Brothers, *War and Photography: A cultural history* (London: Routledge, 1997), 178-85. The recent discovery of the so-called Mexican Suitcase, containing a cache

of photos by Capa, Gerda Taro, and David “Chim” Seymour, has not clarified the photo’s context either. The cache has, however, allowed archivists to establish that photographs used to illustrate the Spanish people’s fear of attacks were at times severely cropped to alter their context. See Cynthia Young’s *The Mexican Suitcase: The Rediscovered Spanish Civil War Negatives of Capa, Chim, and Taro* (New York: Steidl and the International Center of Photography, 2010).

10 Monteath, 132.

11 Low, “The Clinic Hospital,” *Red Spanish Notebook*, 112.

12 Breá, “A Last Sight of Toledo,” *Red Spanish Notebook*, 157.

13 Jordana Mendelson, *Documenting Spain: Artists, Exhibition Culture, and the Modern Nation, 1929-1939* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 147.

14 Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt, 1938), 33.

15 Arthur Koestler, *L’Espagne ensanglantée: Une Livre noir sur l’Espagne* (France: Editions du Carrefour, 1937) and *Spanish Testament* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937). For a book-length study of the images, see Robert Stradling’s *Your Children Will Be Next: Bombing and Propaganda in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008).

16 Walker, 3.

17 Walker, 138.

18 Low, “Communal Life,” *Red Spanish Notebook*, 37. It is unclear whether this photo actually exists: the Spanish edition of *Red Spanish Notebook*, *Cuaderno rojo de Barcelona*, shows a picture of Low seemingly in uniform on its cover, but she is alone, not surrounded by the group described here (Barcelona: Alikornio ediciones, 2001).

19 Low, “Women,” *Red Spanish Notebook*, 185.

20 Low, “Communal Life,” 40-41.

21 For additional discussion of Low’s, and others British volunteers’, attitudes towards physical appearance and the Spanish conflict, see Elizabeth Roberts’s *“Freedom, Faction, Fame and Blood”: British Soldiers of Conscience in Greece, Spain and Finland* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 133-47.

22 Low and Breá, “Women and Love Through Private Property,” translated by Mary Low in *La Verdad contemporánea* (Havana, n.p., 1943), quoted in Penelope Rosemont, *Surrealist Women*, 143.

23 Low, “Women,” 184.

24 Low, “Women,” 189.

25 Low and Breá, “Women and Love Through Private Property,” 140-1.

26 Breá, “Another Front: Sigüenza,” *Red Spanish Notebook*, 165.

27 Brothers, 162. Brothers also discusses British newspapers’ photographic association between war injury and camaraderie. In discussing World War Two in London, Walker similarly comments in *So exotic, so homemade* that “there are very few pictures of actual bodies, largely because of self-censorship. Rather, buildings, statues, objects and mannequins become metaphors for the destruction wrought on real bodies,” 156.

28 Low, “The Council of the Generality of Catalonia,” 209.

29 Low, “The Council of the Generality of Catalonia,” 210.

30 *The Spanish Revolution*, Vol. 1, no. 7 (2 December 1936): 1.

31 Low, “Communal Life,” 38.

32 In “The Problematics of Women and Surrealism,” Gwen Raaberg argues that the inclusion of women in studies of Surrealism is always predicated upon a revision of the movement, since surrealist women “experienced a marginalization not only in male-dominated bourgeois culture but within the ranks of the avant-garde as well,” *Surrealism and Women*, edited by Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli,

and Gwen Raaberg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 2. In contrast, in her *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism*, Katharine Conley suggests women's more ambiguous roles within Surrealism, contending that the movement "played a greater role in preparing the ground for women to assume positions of prominence in the arts and society than it ever did in oppressing them" (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 3. In "All My Names Know Your Leap: Surrealist Women and Their Challenge," the introduction to the anthology *Surrealist Women*, Penelope Rosemont also argues for Surrealism as an empowering movement, "enter[ing] their lives as a spark that ignited their self-awareness—a means enabling them to find their true voices and to learn to speak for themselves," *Surrealist Women*, 1. Her statement emphasizes that just as Surrealism allowed women to speak, so too is Surrealism constituted by what they say.

33 Renée Riese Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, and Partnership* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 2. For further critical examinations of women in Surrealism, see, as well, Patricia Allmer, *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* (New York: Prestel, 2009), Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), and Colvile's *Scandaleusement d'elles*.

34 For more information, see Nash, *Defying Male Civilization*.

35 Franklin Rosemont, "Introduction to Mary Low," *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion*, 171.

36 Low, "Juan Breá, Poète et Révolutionnaire," in *Poèmes d'alors* by Juan Breá (Arabie-sur-Seine, n.p., 1991), quoted in Colvile, 176.

37 "The Fight for History: a Manifesto" *KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library* no. 20, October 1999, <http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/wm38sh> (14 November 2011).