

## Montage and Narrative Mode in Spanish Women's Life Writing

Hannie Lawlor  
University of Oxford

### Abstract

In recent autobiographical experiments by Spanish women authors, montage cuts through façades of cohesion that obscure the power dynamics behind writing lives. Rosa Montero's *La ridícula idea de no volver a verte* (2013) and Cristina Fallarás's *Honrarás a tu padre y a tu madre* (2018) shatter singular modes of storytelling as they entwine disparate histories in the same textual space. Montero's auto/biographical account relates the life of Marie Curie to her own life and loss and to the wider effacement of women in socio-historical narratives, while Fallarás's faction draws into dialogue the incompatible halves of her family history, victors and vanquished of the Civil War. Ostensibly very different, the texts enmesh narrative modes, styles, and a hotchpotch of sources—written and visual—to similarly disconcerting effect. Through the gaps between their mismatched pieces, these montages expose the ever-partial composition of the collective histories that Montero and Fallarás seek to unpick.

En unos recientes experimentos autobiográficos de autoras españolas, el montaje agujerea las fachadas de cohesión que ocultan subyacentes relaciones de poder. *La ridícula idea de no volver a verte* (2013) de Rosa Montero y *Honrarás a tu padre y a tu madre* (2018) de Cristina Fallarás desmenuzan modos singulares de narración al entrelazar historias dispares. El relato auto/biográfico de Montero relaciona la vida de Marie Curie con su propia vida y pérdida, así como con la borradura de las mujeres en los relatos sociohistóricos, mientras que la «facción» de Fallarás pone en diálogo las mitades incompatibles de su historia familiar, vencedores y vencidos de la Guerra Civil. En apariencia muy distintas, los textos entrelazan modos narrativos, estilos y fuentes—escritas y visuales—con resultados igualmente desconcertantes. A través de sus yuxtaposiciones, estos montajes muestran la composición siempre parcial de las historias colectivas que Montero y Fallarás buscan desentrañar.

### Montage: a tool for twenty-first-century life writing

Following Theodor Adorno's description of an 'act against a surreptitiously achieved organic unity', one which foregrounds the disparateness of its parts and the process by which these are joined together (Adorno 1997: 156), montage is as relevant a technique in twenty-first-century life-writing as it was in twentieth-century Soviet cinema. Traditional conceptions of autobiography and biography rested on one such unity: the coherence of the self, the life, and correspondingly, the life-story (Olney 1980: 20). By the turn of the twenty-first century, this understanding had shifted fundamentally, in the light of postmodernist and poststructuralist reconceptualisations of subjectivity and of theoretical rethinkings of literary self-representation (Smith and Watson 2010: 204). Fragmentation, discontinuity, and hybridity are now at the fore of the practice and study of life writing alike, as illusions of unity and cohesion are dispersed increasingly on a formal level.<sup>1</sup> While this is by no means a uniquely

---

<sup>1</sup> The foundations for this formal experimentation were laid in the years following 1975 (Sheringham 2009: 202), which saw the emergence of pioneering hybrid autobiographical works such as Roland Barthes' *Roland*

twenty-first-century phenomenon, there has been a ‘recent explosion of experimentation in life-writing’ (Novak 2017: 2) whose frequent intermediality derives, at least in part, from the possibilities for self-representation that the last quarter of a century have brought, be they a matter of new developments in digital media (McNeill and Zuern 2015: vi–vii) or of growing critical openness to existing forms and media beyond the prose text as kinds of life narrative (Smith and Watson 2010: 96). This intermedial exchange brings not only new sites for self-narration, but also new techniques, and in the portrayal of autobiographical subjects as shifting, fractured, and relational, and life-stories as composite and interconnected, the juxtapositions in montage are a powerful resource.

Hybridity, in a broad sense, is constitutive of the process of life writing from the very term, and yet the ‘disparateness of its parts’ is often inevitably or deliberately obscured.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the strictly biographical and the fictional, for example, fixed boundaries are always almost impossible to establish, and the two are purposely blurred in autofiction and related modes such that it is impossible to identify where one ends and the other begins. Montage, by contrast, forces a confrontation with the clashes between its fragments and the extradiegetic editing through which they have been melded together. From this confrontation emerges what Rane Willerslev and Christian Suhr describe as the technique’s disruptive power: ‘[w]e see in the juxtaposition of montage components the opening of a gap or fissure, through which the invisible emerges’ (2013: 1). The fractures that montage effects, and the glimpses it therefore offers into what has been hidden by the whole, makes it a vital tool in the autobiographical experiments by Spanish women writers to which we will now turn. While the practice of life writing by women in Spain has long privileged hybridity, it has served primarily as a means of concealment. The masking of autobiographical content with novelistic modes is a defining characteristic (De Ros 2011: 302–03), as are unconventional genre combinations, such as the fusion of fantasy and memoir in Carmen Martín Gaité’s *El cuarto de atrás*; together, these techniques resist singular classifications of the text. The recourse to montage in Rosa Montero’s *La ridícula idea de no volver a verte* (2013) and Cristina Fallarás’s *Honrarás a tu padre y a tu madre* (2018), however, marks a turn towards revelation.

Prominent journalists as well as authors, Montero and Fallarás engage consciously with literary hybridity and overt autobiographical play across their oeuvres. Their distinctly heterogenous compositions range from the fusion of essay, novel, and memoir in Montero’s *La loca de la casa* (2003) to the pairing of impassive statistical detail with devastating personal testimony in Fallarás’s *A la puta calle: Crónica de un desahucio* (2013), and from the prose account of Fallarás’s Twitter campaign denouncing violence against women, *Proyecto #Cuéntalo*, in *Ahora contamos nosotras* (2019) to the combination of interdisciplinary reflections and personal anecdotes as Montero explores the relationship between suffering and creativity in *El peligro de estar cuerda* (2022). With the inclusion of images in *La ridícula idea* and *Honrarás*, Montero and Fallarás extend their narrative montaging across media. Both writing projects tell two rather different life-stories side-by-side: *La ridícula idea* blends autobiography and biography as Montero retells episodes from the life of Marie Curie and recounts the latter’s experience of loss, upon the sudden death of

---

*Barthes* par Roland Barthes (1975) and concepts, most notably, Serge Doubrovsky’s take on autofiction in *Fils* (1977).

<sup>2</sup> In postmodern fiction, literary hybridity plays a pivotal and patent role, serving, Joel Kuortti et al summarise, to ‘question hegemony, monologic forces, and metanarratives’ (2024: 17).

Pierre Curie, alongside the story of Montero's own grief after losing her husband, Pablo. Fallarás's self-labelled 'faction', *Honrarás*, draws together the deeply divided halves of her family history: she reimagines the story of her working-class, paternal grandparents and their devastating losses during the Spanish Civil War in one strand of the text and turns in the other to the upper-class, Nationalist experiences and accounts on her maternal side. While the life-stories differ considerably in content, *La ridícula idea* and *Honrarás* use form to similarly disconcerting effect. They enmesh not only storytelling modes but also different styles and a hotchpotch of sources—both written and visual—in a way that frustrates any overall cohesiveness.

The disjointed nature of the resulting narratives has been the source of confusion and critique in the texts' reception. Even as they acknowledge these clashes, certain readers of *La ridícula idea* seek a unifying narrative strand under which to subsume them; Francesca Coppola claims, for example, that 'al rozar el territorio de la ambigüedad, se vuelve atípica, mestiza—un singular ejemplo de pastiche literario se podría decir, pero de gran coherencia—en la cual la ciencia es puro centro' (2022: 250). Santos Sanz Villanueva goes a step further in his review of *Honrarás*, where he deems the contrasts between the two narratives a flaw of the text, arguing that they amount to two different novels (2018). The remainder of this article will propose that, instead of passing over these juxtapositions or perceiving them as errors on the part of the authors, we should interpret them as part of a deliberate narrative strategy. They are the product of a pointed use of montage, through which Montero and Fallarás underscore the subjective and selective narrative processes through which these life-stories are reconstructed. In opening gaps and fissures, to echo Willerslev and Suhr, the texts bring to the surface missing pieces not merely of these particular life-stories, but of the social, political, and historical narratives of which they form part. As they highlight what has been hidden by the angle from which these stories have been composed, *La ridícula idea* and *Honrarás* invite us to interrogate the invisible power dynamics that shape the lives we choose to write and the ways in which we choose to write them.

### **Hybrid writing projects and mixed narrative modes**

Rather than draw together the heterogenous components of their narrative projects when they articulate them, Montero and Fallarás relinquish any centralising control over the ways in which the latter will develop. Fallarás figures the narrative journey in these very terms when Cristina embarks on the search for her dead relatives 'con la sensación flotante que imprime en el ánimo la total desposesión' (20). After abdicating responsibility for her route, she drifts towards the family home in Grand Oasis Park, a direction that was determined, she claims, by the 'muertos' she seeks, and who will tell their story through her (61). Whereas Cristina thus constructs her account of the family history as being dictated by its dead subjects, Montero describes the text as assuming a life of its own, claiming that '[E]n realidad, no sé bien qué es, o qué será' and envisaging it as a zygote which grows 'orgánicamente, célula a célula, diferenciándose en tejidos y estructuras cada vez más complejas, hasta llegar a convertirse en una criatura completa y a menudo inesperada' (10). As she professes the unknowability of the end product, Montero emphasises the book's resistance to categorisation, its ability to develop independently in multiple different directions. From the fertilisation of the first idea, through an increasingly complex and unpredictable formation process, evolves an enigmatic, hybrid final product that may or may not resemble the author's original design.

This ‘especie de mezcla’ (*Revista Ñ* 2013), as Montero puts it in an interview, originates in the juxtaposition of life-stories at the centre of *La ridícula idea*. The seed for the project is planted by the editor of Seix Barral, when she connects Marie Curie’s diary, in which Curie articulates her devastation after the death of Pierre, to Montero’s own loss of Pablo, and proposes that Montero write a piece on overcoming grief. Montero positions the ensuing narrative at the intersection of biographical and autobiographical modes and, while professedly self-directed, it reaches simultaneously beyond this singular focus. As she pieces together her version of Curie’s life-story, Montero is driven by

[g]anas de usar su vida como vara de medir para entender la mía; y no estoy hablando de teorías feministas, sino de intentar desentrañar cuál es el #LugarDeLaMujer en esta sociedad en la que los lugares tradicionales se han borrado (18)

While Curie’s story takes up considerably more space in the text, Montero acknowledges that the personal lens through which she reads it makes it a tool, a ‘vara de medir’ in coming to grips with her own experiences. As she combines these auto/biographical strands, she draws on multiple different sources, interspersing her own emotive commentary with extracts from Curie’s diary (which is also included in full as an appendix) and letters and with observations from other biographers. The inclusion of these snippets from different sources physically fragments the text in a way that accentuates the overlapping perspectives that comprise the narrative, and which result in a further mixture of diverse forms and styles. Montero creates a kind of narrative montage which extends the auto/biographical fusion beyond her own and Curie’s life-story and the initial link between them, positing a cross-fertilisation process that is much broader. This process is represented in *La ridícula idea* by her use of the hashtag. Introduced on Twitter in 2007 as a symbol of cross-referencing, the hashtag has since evolved, Andreas Bernard observes, into ‘the hybrid that it is today: part network command and part symbol of collectively amplified speech’ (2019: 27). Prefiguring to some extent ‘feminist hashtag activism’ (Jackson et al. 2020: xxxii),<sup>3</sup> in which Fallarás plays a leading role,<sup>4</sup> Montero employs the symbol to expand the cross-referencing of Curie’s biography and the narrator’s autobiography to connect with the pressures, expectations, and limitations placed on women that have dictated the #LugarDeLaMujer in socio-historical narratives. At the intersection of modes and media, *La ridícula idea* shines a spotlight on shared circumstances that frame the individual life-stories on display. More than offering, from a personal angle, another account of Curie’s celebrated achievements, Montero reflects on the restrictive ways in which her and other women’s lives have been lived, written and read.

The auto/biographical hybrid assumes a rather different guise in *Honrarás* but provides a similar vantage point on the collective forces that have determined and, crucially, controlled our access to, the family histories she relays. Like Montero, Fallarás signals the personal drive behind the writing project. Cristina introduces her genealogical search in the following terms: ‘Me llamo Cristina y he salido a buscar a mis muertos. Caminando. Buscar a mis muertos para no matarme yo’ (11). The pursuit of her deceased relatives ‘para no matarme yo’ makes plain not only Cristina’s subjective investment in her search, but also the stakes of this storytelling for her own identity. Envisaged as a dialogue with the dead, this

<sup>3</sup> Jackson et al. identify the first key campaign in feminist hashtag activism as the 2014 #YesAllWomen Twitter movement, which was triggered by the university campus murders in California and responded, too, to the #NotAllMen campaign of the previous year (2020: 4–8).

<sup>4</sup> See Fallarás’s database *Proyecto #Cuéntalo* and *Ahora contamos nosotras* (2019).

impossible auto/biographical project necessarily places Cristina at the centre of the story even as she aspires to cede her position so that her ‘muertos’ might dictate their stories through her. Whereas Montero gives prominence to the first person throughout, Fallarás intersperses a highly self-reflexive writing present with fictionalised recreations of events from the grandparents’ pasts. In these sections, Cristina borrows a quasi-omniscient style that seems to suppress her subjective position and allow the reader to inhabit the perspectives of the protagonists. Since she cannot recover their voices and stories, she uses a combination of memory, research, and imagination to simulate their lived experience:

La historia de estos tres personajes—porque son tres los que me interesan—pudo ser muy parecida a esto que acabo de contar.

[...]

Habr  quien considere que los detalles son importantes, la suprema importancia de los hechos, la realidad, la *faction*. En las reconstrucciones, los detalles solo son guindas que el reconstructor crea con pelotillas de desecho de su propio organismo el ctrico (italics in original, 78)

When Cristina describes the experiences she narrates as likely very similar to those that her grandparents lived through, she articulates the amalgamation in this text of factual detail and fictional creation. Outlining a spectrum in which facts are of paramount importance on the one end and a mere finishing touch on the other, she seems to indicate that *Honrar s* lies somewhere in between. Unlike ‘autoficci n’, a term that is embedded in Spanish critical discourse, ‘*faction*’ stands out for its foreignness, one that is both linguistic and generic.<sup>5</sup> Fallar s underlines, through its inclusion, the heterogeneity of the account, but also plays on the dissension that characterises the more common use of the word as she undertakes to upset the power dynamics that have dictated the family story to date.

The grandiose ‘suprema importancia de los hechos’ carries more than a hint of irony, of course, in the context of the gaping holes with which Cristina grapples as she tells ‘[[l]a historia de c mo el silencio contagia, atraviesa generaciones y fermenta’ (34). This story of all-consuming silence conjoins familial and national histories in *Honrar s*. The erasure of F lix Chico is a microcosm of the wider suppression of the Republican side of the story by the victors of the Civil War, as Cristina makes plain when she maps the collective narrative onto the personal one: ‘No ten a un abuelo en absoluto. No ten a un abuelo por la simple raz n de que mi padre no ten a un padre. Punto. Nada. Se llama Elimina el Rencor y Olvida lo Que Pas . Se llama Rencoroso el Que se Acuerde. Se llama T  te Callas porque Perdiste la Guerra. Se llama Olvida que Existi ’ (88). Parroting this peeled-back discourse of the victors, Cristina portrays the Francoist drive to deny the very existence of the Republican dead as dictating the story of the Civil War. In the unrelenting sequence of absolutes and imperatives, she stages the narrative power dynamics behind the embedding of one side of the story and the erasure of the other.

---

<sup>5</sup> Faction was coined around 1970 to describe the ‘fiction based on and mingled with fact’ of works by North American writers Truman Capote and Norman Mailer (Birch 2009). It is an uncommon label in studies of life writing, where the ever-growing set of terms for autobiographical practices pivots generally on plays with the roots ‘autos’, ‘bios’ and ‘graphy’; it does not feature, for example, in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s extensive list of genres of life narrative (2010: 253–86).

## Conflicting histories and narrative (dis)connections

As Cristina interrogates the version of national and familial history she received as a child, she employs juxtaposition to make palpable this extreme imbalance between sides. There is a striking disjunction between the structure and sources of maternal and paternal histories throughout the text: the multiplicity of memories on which Cristina draws that circulate freely on the maternal side could not be more different from the sparse written record on Félix Fallarás's death that she eventually discovers on [liberadosdelolvido.org](http://liberadosdelolvido.org). Even as she seeks to redress this balance in *Honrarás*, Fallarás's use of form exposes the continuing dominance of the one and near invisibility of the other in a way that disrupts any cohesion as they come to be told in the same text. *La ridícula idea* also calls attention to a skewed narrative distribution as it considers how socio-historical context conditions the recording of life-stories. The vast discrepancy in visibility in this text is a matter of gender as opposed to class and politics, and a global phenomenon as opposed to a national one. While Montero's ready access to multiple accounts of Curie's life is the very antithesis of Cristina's search for sources on Félix Fallarás, she takes pains to point out that 'La magnitud profesional de Madame Curie fue una absoluta rareza en una época en la que las mujeres no les estaba permitido casi nada. De hecho, hoy siguen siendo relativamente escasas las científicas, y desde luego todavía se les escatiman los galardones' (12). She goes on to explore the discrepancy between achievement and recognition for women scientists through the stories of Lise Meitner and Rosalind Franklin, whose findings were attributed to their male colleagues. The two case studies illustrate the gender-inflected gap between advances in the field and the way that history writes them, and even as Montero celebrates the prominence of Marie Curie's story, she draws attention to the fact that there are many women who merit similar recognition. She uses the prominence of this individual story as a springboard from which to point to the stories that have gone unwritten and to begin unpicking the historically dictated 'falta de #LugarDeLasMujeres' (54). The wider links she makes with this and other hashtags produces a montage of women's life-stories, formed from unexpected overlaps that offer different angles not only onto Curie's and Montero's lives and losses, but the way in which we approach writing them. The auto/biographical angle from which she reads and re-writes Curie's life allows echoes between their stories to emerge and subsequently to resonate outwards. Through her use of second-person address, Montero also invites readers to make connections to their own life-stories, to inhabit and thereby extend this interconnected narrative.

While the connections Montero draws between the two principal histories serve in this way to include other stories in the text, multiplying narrative spaces while exposing the historical lack thereof, in *Honrarás* this link is a source of erasure. Underpinning the union of the two sides of Cristina's family, in the marriage of Pablo Sánchez (Juárez) Larqué's daughter and Félix Chico's son, is the silent consent to Félix Chico's eradication from the narrative. Cristina's analysis of the supposedly harmonious union mocks the façade of equality in this detachment from their socio-political family ties: 'Todos ellos, los unos y los otros, sin saber que con ese gesto, ambos, él y ella, los contrayentes, eligen dejar de pertenecer y por eso su amor será eterno y sin fisuras y sin contradicciones' (215). The hyperbolic language used to express this seamless amalgamation of the two families leaves the reader in no doubt as to its hollowness. This seemingly mutual sacrifice of 'belonging', the conscious and consensual forgetting of historical ties, comes at a far higher cost for those

on the losing side. In the definitive dismissal of fissures and contradictions is the echo of the imperative to forget in the discourse of the victors parroted earlier in the text. It recalls, too, the consensus to turn the page on the past that came to define the Transition to Democracy, and which is subject to biting critique by Fallarás inside and outside the text. This political accord is illustrated in *Honrarás* through the leitmotiv of the skeleton of a little bird. As Cristina tells it, a sparrow became trapped in the ventilation shaft and died, and although everyone could see the skeleton, the unspoken agreement was to act as though it were not there. Yet as she describes the walls of the family home crumbling away in the narrative present, the skeleton remains intact:

Ahora aquí ya no vive nadie y lo que fue una pretenciosa casita de dos plantas y bodega estilo ibicenco adosada a otras ha perdido el encalado. En el dormitorio principal, el que da a la vieja piscina grande ya reventada, se han abierto unas grietas por las que entran la hiedra y la humedad de este verano pegajoso y miserable, mosquitos y salamanquesas.

Todo se desmorona excepto la puñetera rejilla con su patita colgando.

Todo silencio tiene su pajarillo. (40)

The ‘grietas’ that open up in these whitewashed walls seem to be the very fissures in the foundation of the family history that were denied in the harmonious union between Cristina’s parents (Lawlor 2024: 191–94). As these cracks widen, they allow a direct line of sight onto the skeleton, which becomes the central focus in the midst of the disintegration of its surroundings.

The ruins of the family home are a narrative (de)construction on Fallarás part; she pinpoints this in an interview as the principal fiction in the text: ‘Sólo lo de la ruina del Oasis Park se transformó en algo de ficción. No está en ruina. Está perfectamente, veranean todavía allí mis hijos con su abuela’ (Clemot 2018). Faced with the unblemished real-life ‘preciosa casita’ (40), in other words, Fallarás opens through her disjointed narrative the kind of fissures that Suhr and Willerslev describe. Like the ivy and humidity she envisages, which weaken and ultimately collapse the structure from within, her design in *Honrarás* is that the discomfiting story behind the professed united front of the second generation might creep through the cracks. The visual embodiment of this union, in the parents’ wedding photograph, is the site at which Cristina starts to prise it apart: ‘Tengo ante mí la fotografía. Me estremezco. Miro al coronel./ Miro a Presentación, la viuda de Félix Fallarás. Me estremezco’ (154). In place of the family photograph itself, which is included eventually in the antepenultimate chapter of the text, is the description of Cristina’s uncomfortable reaction to it.

[INSERT PHOTOGRAPH]

As she describes the photograph, she re-writes the story behind it, shifting the focus from the married couple onto the fatal previous meeting of their fathers against the firing squad wall. Cristina’s version of this union reinstates the deeply destructive socio-political divide between the two families in a microcosm of her wider narrative approach. Her repeated shuddering is a response that she endeavours to recreate in the reading of *Honrarás*; an

unsettling experience that will cut through the cohesive story of an ‘amor sin fisuras’ created by the second generation.

If we compare Fallarás’s splitting apart of these stories to Montero’s emphasis on making connections, the two writers seem to take the opposite tack when it comes to drawing different histories into the same textual space. The reading experiences that result are, however, surprisingly similar. Even as Montero constructs the network of correspondences with Curie’s life-story, the links she makes and the way in which she makes them reveal the often tangential and ever-subjective nature of these relationships. These connections are unanticipated by the reader but carefully curated in the text, a process to which Montero gives prominence in her insistence on the highly personal position from which she narrates. While the account of Curie’s life is broadly chronological, this narrative materialises from Montero’s digressions across a vast range of stories and examples which bear little to no immediate significance to the auto/biographical storylines. Montero herself assumes an ironic stance towards the more contrived of these connections, as when she spots excitedly that Curie’s ring finger, like her own, is longer than her index finger:

en la foto anterior de Marie anciana, esa en la que está acodada en una barandilla y enseña su mano abrasada, he podido constatar que Madame Curie tiene el dedo anular más largo que el dedo índice [...] La mayoría de los hombres tienen el índice más largo que el anular. Pero algunas y algunos incumplen esta regla: David Beckham tiene las proporciones al revés, por ejemplo. Y Madame Curie. Y yo.

[INSERT IMAGE IF POSSIBLE]

Otro montón de investigadores han estudiado las posibles consecuencias que eso puede conllevar, en el comportamiento o en la salud. Y así, las mujeres con el anular más largo, como Marie o como yo (¡qué maravilla tener algo en común con ella!), supuestamente poseen un cerebro más *varonil*, si es que eso existe (italics in original, 132–33)

Rather than portray these links as emerging naturally, Montero makes visible here the selective attention at the centre of this process. She points firstly to her own scrutiny of Curie’s photograph, which confirms what she went looking for, and secondly, to the investigators that seek shared characteristics to generate collective narratives. There is more than a hint of irony, therefore in the wonder that Montero exclaims at the discovery of this shared feature. Together with the picture of Montero’s hand, the parenthesis reinforces the unabashedly subjective drawing of connections that underpins the narrative process.

Yet at the same time as Montero uses the discussion of finger length to make and extend these links between life-stories, she exposes their limitations: the point at which they join together is also the point, after all, where the wider physiological narrative of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ hands comes undone. The way in which these connections not only create, but also question, collective narratives offers insight into Montero’s wider approach to these narrative links. Her emphasis on connecting life-stories is by no means a drive towards a cohesive overarching narrative; in fact, the use of the hashtag as the symbol of these broader relationships points from the outset to the opposite effect. In its conjoining of different media and their modes of expression, the hashtag signals the hybrid make-up of the narrative; Montero describes it in an interview as ‘un signo que avisa al lector de que hay un tema en construcción’ (Velasco Oliaga 2014). By prefacing the points of connection to the

wider socio-historical narrative in this way, Montero directs our attention to the process of combining the different narrative components, dissipating the illusion of a seamless fusion by accentuating the joins between the miscellaneous material she includes. When combined with the tangential nature of the associations, the prominence of these points of connection brings into even sharper relief the many places where these stories diverge. From the frequent and arbitrary jumps that are required to bridge these gaps and so make the narrative links, a deliberately disjointed narrative takes shape which cannot but wrongfoot the reader.

### **Unsettling images and skewed narrative space**

It is no coincidence that the narrative disjoints we have discussed are linked in both cases to a photograph: a sporadic, and often strange, use of images is the most striking shared feature of the two texts. Family photographs have been a staple of autobiographical writing since the early twentieth century,<sup>6</sup> and we might anticipate that there is little worthy of note about their inclusion in these texts. Indeed, for Marianne Hirsch, the invention of the “Kodak” saw such photographs become the very vehicle through which the family story is constructed, transmitted, and perpetuated (1997: 6–7). The narrative they serve to form, however, is by no means a neutral one. Ideologically bound, Hirsch argues, the family album ‘both displays the cohesion of the family and is an instrument of its togetherness’ (1997: 7). Visually, it fashions a shared history around the illusions of unity and coherence—‘myths’ (Smith and Watson 2010: 61) in this case, of social rather than individual identity—that have long been dispelled in literary practices of writing lives. Fallarás’s and Montero’s use of images shatter rather than sustain this ‘imaginary cohesion’ (Hirsch 1997: 7). No matter how seemingly conventional some of the pictures themselves—the photographs of Marie and Pierre Curie, for example, which have already been printed in the biographies on which Montero draws—the combination, placement, and distribution of these images has a distinctly disruptive effect.

For Arnaud Schmitt, ‘the notion of imbalance is constitutive of text/image hybridity’ (2024: 1), and Montero and Fallarás reaffirm and mobilise this on multiple levels across the two texts. Classic portraits are interspersed with shots of settings and close-ups of objects, and these images differ considerably in number and variety. Whereas *Honrarás* includes thirteen pictures, all of which are photographs directly related to Fallarás’s family history, there are three times the quantity in *La ridícula idea*, which features forty-two images ranging from traditional portraits to glossy magazine shots, internet adverts to cartoons. These pictures appear at similarly odd intervals: the total number per chapter in *La ridícula idea* varies between zero and nine, while in *Honrarás*, the three sections feature six, three, and four photographs respectively. Characterised by this pointed lack of coherence, these visual montages put the familial and, crucially, the socio-historical narratives that Fallarás and Montero interrogate under further strain. Photographs of the protagonists of the auto/biographical narratives in *La ridícula idea* make up less than half of the total images; the majority illustrate the miscellaneous stories to which Montero makes wider links. In fact, they frequently accompany the most unexpected and digressive of these connections: the butcher of Milwaukee, Our Lady of Fatima miniatures, medieval armour, and Lady Gaga and

---

<sup>6</sup> Laura Marcus observes that photographs have been a regular feature of biographies ever since the rise of the Romantic cult of the author and of celebrity culture in the nineteenth century, and that from the start of the twentieth century they also became a ‘habitual presence’ in autobiography (2022: 311).

the infamous meat dress are notable examples. Since the links are written in through Montero's account, from which these unexpected images are disconnected when we first turn the page, readers cannot but be struck by the question of how they can possibly relate to the discussion at hand. The visual montage, accordingly, does not serve to facilitate these narrative connections; it seems instead to stretch them to breaking point.

There is a similar disjunction between the written and visual narratives in *Honrarás*. The wedding photograph is a case in point: the very bind, of course, of the traditional family album, the image is included only belatedly, when Cristina reiterates and expands her original description. This reiteration consolidates Cristina's re-shaping of our response as readers to the photograph, which shifts in our perception from signifying a happy occasion to an unsettling union. The same process is repeated in relation to another image in the text, of Cristina as a child with her maternal grandfather, although this photograph is not included; he is pictured in front of a swimming pool at Grand Oasis Park in which a young Cristina is floating. She uses identical terms in a condensed description of this photograph, but on this second iteration, she reflects on the narrative power dynamics behind the choice of images. She observes that while she had narrated her first memory of the colonel, she had failed to do the same for the equivalent photograph of herself with Presentación, her paternal grandmother: 'Esto ya lo he dicho:/ Mi primer recuerdo del coronel Pablo Sánchez (Juárez) Larqué está ligado a una fotografía [...] Esto no: Mi primer recuerdo de Presentación Pérez también descansa en una fotografía' (201) [INSERT IMAGE]. The identification of herself in one photograph and not the other, Cristina suggests, points to the prominence of the memories and relationships with one set of grandparents compared to the other. It forms part of a broader acknowledgement of guilt on Cristina's part in 'La familia' of her so-called choice as a child to belong to the maternal side of her family; a neglect she portrays as seeping into her account of the family history. She follows the photograph of Presentación—its unidentified suburban background a stark contrast to the luxurious garden scene—with a reminder of the missing piece of the story: 'No tengo un primer recuerdo de Félix Fallarás hijo, el Félix Chico' (202). Fallarás uses this sequence to force us as readers, and herself as narrator, to look again, to see past the customary inclusion of these photographs onto the choices they reveal. The front cover of the text, which features only the maternal grandparents, sets in motion this use of photographs to expose the power imbalance between the two halves of Fallarás's family; it indicates their domination of the story that follows and the way in which it expunges the paternal side. Fallarás uses visual montage not only to illustrate this domination, however, but also to disrupt it. By including the photograph with Presentación but not the one with the grandfather, she undertakes to redress the skewed narrative dynamics that she unveils. The only related image that is included earlier in the text, of an empty swimming pool, strips out the people from the memory she describes: she and her grandfather are made temporarily invisible, it seems, in a way that resonates with the effacement of Félix Fallarás. This sequence offers insight into the disruption effected by the visual montage in the wider text. The fact that the portraits of the members of the maternal side far outnumber those of the paternal side (which features only two pictures of Presentación) replicates initially the imbalance suggested by the front cover. Yet by interspersing a heterogenous assortment of images of places and objects that represent Félix Chico's death—the firing squad wall, the named plaque in the memorial to the victims of the Civil War and postwar in Cementerio Torrero in Zaragoza—Cristina restores the traces of his life and death into the family album at the same time as she testifies to his exclusion from it.

The distribution of photographs in *La ridícula idea* also illustrates and interrogates an imbalance between life-stories, albeit one of a different kind. The narrator addresses the notion of skewed narrative space directly when she discusses a criticism from one of the first readers of her manuscript, who claims that ‘«En este libro están Marie y Pierre, y por otro lado estás tú. Pero Pablo no está. Hay un desequilibrio»’ (193). This imbalance comes to the fore when we compare the number of images that are connected to the biographical and autobiographical strands of the text. The most significant discrepancy in this account of shared loss are the numerous shots of Marie and Pierre Curie together and the lack thereof of Montero and Pablo: as Deirdre Kelly notes, not a single image of the latter couple is included, and Pablo only appears once, in a childhood family photograph (2018: 31). Yet Montero’s response to her friend’s concern over the narrative ‘desequilibrio’ posits a different relationship between visibility and invisibility in *La ridícula idea* compared to *Honrarás*: ‘Dice mi amigo que Pablo no está en este libro, y a mí me parece imposible que esté más’ (195). The divergence between these accounts of the text, in which Pablo is absent in the one and omnipresent in the other, highlights the very different angles from which it can be read. On the face of it, Pablo is indeed a minor figure. The lack of photographs corresponds to the lack of biographical detail: there are no dates and very little personal information relating to either his life or his death. Montero argues, however, that ‘su lugar está en el centro del silencio’; he is everywhere in the memories in her head, but since literature cannot penetrate what she describes as ‘esa zona interior’, ‘se dedica a dar vueltas en torno al agujero; con suerte y con talento, tal vez consiga lanzar una ojeada relampagueante a su interior’ (195–6).

From Montero’s perspective, gaps and silences, into which narrative can offer only brief glimpses, thus become crucial in piecing together a fuller picture of someone’s life. She uses the end of Curie’s story to discuss this phenomenon in biographical writing practices more broadly. Observing that old age is often a missing piece in biographies, she proposes that the less visible parts of someone’s life are a blind spot in life-writing practices. The failure to pay attention to these less prominent parts of a life-story, she suggests, are a matter of not seeing what we are looking at:

Quién sabe: quizá todos esos biógrafos que no prestaron ninguna atención a los últimos años de sus personajes no supieron ver lo que miraban. En la #Ligereza, la vida flota irisada y sutil, transparente y casi imperceptible, como una pompa de jabón al sol. Quizá los humanos estemos tópicamente acostumbrados a fijarnos sólo en los grandes hechos, en los actos pesados, en la solemnidad y en el afán. En cosas tan obvias y ruidosas como el descubrimiento de la radiactividad y la penicilina, o la llegada a la Luna, o el auge y la caída de los imperios. Que, por supuesto, son sucesos memorables y es lógico que nos llamen la atención. Ahora bien: eso no es todo lo que hay. Pero supongo que hace falta vivir mucho, y lograr aprender de lo vivido, para llegar a comprender que no hay nada tan importante ni tan espléndido como el canto de una niña bajo una higuera (206)

[INCLUDE IMAGE IF POSSIBLE]

The weightier achievements which form the focal point when writing lives, Montero indicates, are but a part of the whole, and obscure aspects that appear less consequential, but which in fact offer more profound insight. She connects this theory in the closing line to the role that Pablo has played in the text, when she repeats his cherished childhood memory of the girl singing beneath a fig tree. The importance he afforded—and that she now affords in

turn—to this memory is an example of the ‘ojeada relampagueante a su interior’ that she describes. Pivoting around his absence (he is, after all, not mentioned directly in these final lines), it evokes his way of seeing the world, as well as the profoundly different outlook this offers on lives, life-stories, and the parts that merit our attention. The image of a fig tree with which the text ends, its significance only apparent through the lens of Pablo’s anecdote, represents this change in angle. It reminds us to see what we are looking at, that is, his vital presence in the text through the impact he has had on Montero.<sup>7</sup> The reminder with which Montero concludes her reflection on writing lives also corresponds to her broader discussion of the #Lugardelamujer. There, too, she draws attention to the many ‘heroínas’ who are missing from historical narratives, be it because of active erasure, as in the cases of Franklin and Meitner; limited opportunities and lack of recognition, like for women in science more broadly and for composer Minna Keal;<sup>8</sup> or, as she suggests here, the limiting way in which we look at, and consequently fail to see, other lives. As she underscores in this conclusion the crucial importance of often invisible actors, she carves out space for the stories of many more women to be researched and written.

### Limiting lines of sight and alternative angles

The visual montages in these twenty-first-century texts are a long way from Roland Barthes’s winter garden photograph in *Camera Lucida*. The missing photograph of his mother, aged five, standing with her older brother in a glassed-in conservatory, is both the one that for him captures ‘the truth of the face [he] loved’ (Barthes 1982: 67) as he grapples with her recent demise, and the one that, in a text full of images, he can never reproduce. For all its irretrievability, and whether taken or imagined, the Winter Garden photograph forms an ever-elusive centre-point of Barthes’s representation of his relationship with his mother, of his loss, of the indexical relationship between photography and narrative. In *La ridícula idea* and *Honrarás*, even the fantasy of a singular missing piece cannot be sustained. The randomness with which images appear in the two texts—and with which they often seem to be selected, in the case of Montero’s work—resists any cohesive, visual narrative. In place of Barthes’s missing piece are a proliferation of mismatched pieces, which preclude the pretence that they might be put together to form a complete or unified picture. Instead, they work in tandem with the narrative montage of styles, sources, and modes to expose what is erased when producing such a picture. By drawing attention to the gaps between and within stories, Fallarás and Montero make readers alert to these invisible power dynamics and how they shape the parts of the story that we see (or choose to see).

These disjointed narratives jolt the reader between multiple and ever-partial points of view as the narrators unpick the histories that have already been written. In *Honrarás*, Fallarás’s juxtapositions of subjective and objective narrative modes, past and present, and

---

<sup>7</sup> For Kelly, this photograph encapsulates Barthes’s notion of the *punctum*—that is, the impact whose intensity, binding together love and loss, uniquely pierces the spectator (Barthes 1980: 115; 148)—and thus serves in the text to convey the ‘emotional intensity of Montero’s feelings for Pablo’ (2018: 32).

<sup>8</sup> Montero includes the story of British composer Minna Keal (1909–99), one of her ‘heroínas preferidas’, as an uncommon example of a woman whose advanced years are the most celebrated part of her biography. Keal became an eminent composer only after she retired, having left her studies at the Royal Academy of Music at the age of 19 to support her family and worked in administrative posts for most of her career. She was 80 when her first symphony premiered at the BBC Proms and was recognised subsequently, in the final decade of her life, as one of the most important contemporary composers in Europe (Montero 180).

perspectives of victors and vanquished, open up the kind of fissures in the family story that make the skeletons at its centre impossible to ignore. Montero, for her part, probes beyond the most visible parts of Curie's life-story to the personal experiences behind it, experiences which both connect to and challenge the broader socio-historical narrative of women's lives. As she links together this approach to Curie's biography to the representation of her own love and loss, she suggests that the least conspicuous components of a life, often obscured by the peaks around which the story of it pivots, can offer the most insight. In the interplay between public and private narratives, between personal, familial, and national histories, Fallarás and Montero shed light on the blind spots that are created by, and that we create in, socio-historical narratives when it comes to our 'traditions of representation' (Hirsch 1997: 8); in these texts, that is, the lives we choose to write and the angle from which we write them.

As they use montage to highlight these selective processes and limited sightlines, both writers compel readers to step back from these stories and reflect on the subjective practices of history-making and life-writing, but also to recognise the ways in which we are ourselves shaped by them. In *Honrarás*, Cristina equates present identity with fictions of the past:

Nosotros, los vivos, solo tenemos pequeños huesecillos del esqueleto de la historia, de esta historia, y con ellos la construimos, evidentemente falsa. No cambia en absoluto lo que sucedió. Lo que sucedió, sucedió, y jamás tendremos idea. Pero el relato sí cambia, y eso, el relato, es lo único que nosotros tenemos. O sea, nuestro propio relato. Nosotros somos el relato (194)

While the few fragments on which we rely make an accurate picture of the past impossible, according to Cristina, the way in which we piece it together produces the people that we are. Montero makes a similar claim in an interview about *La ridícula idea* when she sets out the relationship between identity, memory, and fiction: '[s]omos narración, somos palabras en busca de un sentido. Nuestra memoria es un relato en construcción porque lo vamos cambiando. Y si nuestra memoria es una ficción, entonces nosotros también, porque nuestra identidad se basa en la memoria' (Frieria 2013). Like Fallarás, Montero suggests that the story of our past cannot but be a subjective, fictional construct, and that this changing narrative produces our identity. For both writers, this symbiotic relationship is thus a potential source of agency, whereby our re-telling of this story also reshapes our selfhood. In *La ridícula idea*, Montero considers this process central to re-writing the #Lugardelamujer. She calls on the reader to follow Curie's example in breaking free from the social narratives that seem to shape women's identity:

Y ahora dime: ¿No has sentido nunca la insidiosa tentación de dejar de ser quien eres? ¿De liberarte de ti mismo? [...] Bastaría con ir soltando lastre. Con irse desnudando de las capas superfluas. Fuera la dictadura de #HacerLoQueSeDebe [...] Se acabó la #Culpabilidad y el ciego mandato de #HonrarALosPadres.

Al final, en efecto, es una cuestión de narración. De cómo nos contamos a nosotros mismos (204–5)

Here, the hashtags designate collective constraints by which women's life-stories have been bound; they refer back to the points in Curie's own story where gendered social narratives put her place in history under threat. Yet this hybrid expression also draws attention to the fact that these narratives are a 'relato en construcción'; the many layers that give this imposed identity its weight form from the composite story that, collectively, we produce.

Stripping back these layers by changing the way in which we tell the story of ourselves, Montero implies, frees up a new formation. The language she uses to conceptualise this process is strikingly similar to Cristina's embarking on her narrative journey in *Honrarás* 'desnuda de todo' (70), which she describes as essential to uncovering the censored components of her family history: 'sin haber echado a andar desnuda de las cosas y las personas, nada de todo esto habría sido relatado' (167). By freeing herself as far as is possible from the trappings of her existing identity—formed at least in part from the fictions of the past she was fed as a child—she strives to extricate herself too from familial ties, from the mandate #HonrarALosPadres which in this text not only blinds, but also silences. We can read the 'sensación flotante' and '#Ligereza' that Fallarás and Montero conceptualise, and move towards creating, in these texts as a shared call for a new narrative position. More detached and yet no less subjective, this position seems to privilege the shifts in perspective and critical reflection that bring a less cohesive but more complete story into view. As Montero and Fallarás peel back the layers of the collective histories with which they grapple, using montage as a tool through which to expose the process of their construction and the partiality of their composition, they foreground both the necessity and the possibility of finding a different way in twenty-first-century life-writing to '[contarnos] a nosotros mismos'.

## Works cited

### Primary sources

- Fallarás, Cristina. 2018. *Honrarás a tu padre y a tu madre* (Barcelona: Anagrama).
- Montero, Rosa. 2013. *La ridícula idea de no volver a verte* (Barcelona: Seix Barral).

### Secondary sources

- Adorno, Theodor. 1997 [1970]. *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno, and Rolf Tiedemann and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press).
- Barthes, Roland. 1982. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc.).
- Bernard, Andreas. 2019. *Theory of the Hashtag*, trans. Valentine A. Pakis (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- Birch, Dinah. 2009. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. 7th edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Clemot, Fernando. 2018. ‘Cristina Fallarás: “Si yo no lo hubiera perdido todo no me hubiera puesto a escribir esta novela”’, *Quimera. Revista de Literatura*. <https://www.revistaquimera.com/entrevista-cristina-fallaras-no-lo-hubiera-perdido-no-me-hubiera-puesto-escribir-esta-novela/>. Accessed 07 August 2023.
- Coppola, Francesca. 2022. ‘Tras los pasos de Marie Curie: *La ridícula idea de no volver a verte* Rosa Montero’, *Rassegna iberistica*, 118: 237–51.
- De Ros, Xon. 2011. ‘The Mother and the Nation’, in *A Companion to Spanish Women's Studies*, eds. Xon de Ros and Geraldine Hazbun, 301–16 (New York: Tamesis).
- Fallarás, Cristina. 2019. *Ahora contamos nosotras* (Barcelona: Anagrama).
- Proyecto #Cuéntalo*, n.d. <http://proyectocuentalo.org/>.
- Friera, Silvina. 2013. ‘Rosa Montero presenta hoy *La ridícula idea de no volver a verte*’, *Página 12*, 4 May. <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/espectaculos/4-28548-2013-05-04.html>. Accessed 07 August 2023.
- Hirsch, Marianne. 1997. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Jackson, Sarah J., Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles. 2020. *Hashtagactivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press).
- Kelly, Deirdre. 2018. ‘Aesth/ethics of Distance: (Un)Veiling Grief in Rosa Montero’s *La ridícula idea de no volver a verte* (2013)’, in *New Journeys in Iberian Studies: A (Trans-)National and (Trans-)Regional Exploration*, eds. Mark Gant, Paco Ruzzante, and Anneliese Hatton (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), pp 19–34.

- Kuortti, Joel, Jopi Nyman, and Medhi Ghasemi. 2024. *Engagements with Hybridity in Literature: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge).
- Lawlor, Hannie. 2024. *Relational Responses to Trauma in Twenty-First-Century French and Spanish Women's Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Marcus, Laura. 2022. 'Autofiction and Photography: "The Split of the Mirror"', in *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, eds. Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan), pp 308–25.
- Montero, Rosa. 2013. *La ridícula idea de no volver a verte* (Barcelona: Seix Barral).
2013. Rosa Montero: "El dolor, cuando es muy agudo, te deja sin palabras", *Revista Ñ digital*, 4 May. [https://www.clarin.com/feria-del-libro/rosa-montero-ridicula-idea-no-volver-verte\\_0\\_Hywl5YOoP7g.html](https://www.clarin.com/feria-del-libro/rosa-montero-ridicula-idea-no-volver-verte_0_Hywl5YOoP7g.html). Accessed 07 August 2023.
- Novak, Julia, and Lucia Boldrini. 2017. *Experiments in Life-Writing: Intersections of auto/biography and Fiction* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Olney, James. 1980. 'Autobiography and the Cultural Moment', in *Autobiography, Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Sheringham, Michael. 2000. 'Changing the Script: Women Writers and the Rise of Autobiography', in *A History of Women's Writing in France*, ed. Sonya Stephens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp 185–203.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. 2010. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd edn. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- Suhr, Christian and Rane Willerslev. 2013. 'Introduction – Montage as an Amplifier of Invisibility', in *Transcultural Montage*, eds. Christian Suhr and Rane Willerslev (New York: Berghahn Books), pp 1–15.
- Velasco Oliaga, Javier. 2014. 'Entrevista a Rosa Montero, autora de "La ridícula idea de no volver a verte"', *Todo literatura*, 23 October. <https://www.todoliteratura.es/noticia/6977/entrevistas/entrevista-a-rosa-montero-autora-de-la-ridicula-idea-de-no-volver-a-verte.html>. Accessed 07 August 2023.
- Villanueva, Santos Sanz. 2018. "'Honrarás a tu padre y a tu madre'", *El español*, 16 March. <https://elcultural.com/Honraras-a-tu-padre-y-a-tu-madre>. Accessed 07 August 2023.