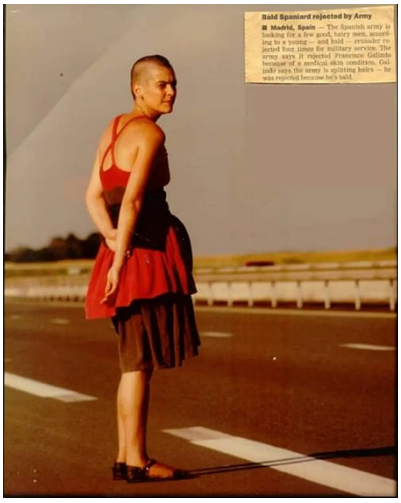
LANGUAGE & TEXTUAL AWARENESS: words in other languages go in *italics*. Words in grey are the alternative in UK English to the previous US American English choice. (About amazing / awesome, it's funny!) Words in green are additional vocabulary. Words in blue are alternative wording related to grammar or textual choices (not geosocial varieties of English). In brown, tips for reading aloud. Words in **bold** are just visual help to track themes. About hy-phen-a-tion, sep-a-rat-ing words at the end of a line: Spanish & English do it dif-fer-ent-ly (though it's not a good idea to leave just to letters in the new line). Because this narrative is created as an ORAL TEXT, you will see my language use matches that. I am using an informal articulate oral register, rich in vocabulary and structures. As a writer, I make us of literary strategies to maximize reaching the audience. The text is literally autobiographical, but as it is based on a photo it would be in a MEMOIR. Read Helen Mirren's, based on photographs, or Marilyn Monroe's *My Story*, based on particular memories. (AUTO)BIOS are more continuous, following someone's life.

The Talking People Podcast at talkingpeople.net

Before you listen to the text, imagine the story behind this photo. If you wish to practice academic narratives, start by giving a physical description of what you can see before you share your interpretation or what you imagine! Wrap it all up by offering some sort of comment that feels like an ending.

The Story behind the Photo

By michelle. Photo: Andrés



In the foreground, on the left, this color / colour photograph presents a young woman in her twenties by the side of a road with no traffic. She is holding her hands at her back. She seems to be waiting for someone or something to happen. She might be there to stop a car. The woman's head is partly shaved. She is wearing a strap dress in red and black – a girly dress that doesn't match her hair style or her sandals, made with two flat pieces of tire / tyre rubber. In the background you can see a narrow fringe of fields that look like ripe wheat, a cluster of dark trees on the left, and the expanse of a cloudless sky occupying the upper half of the print. You will be surprised to know the woman is me.

To read the newspaper clipping go to talkingpeople.net – Nature & Culture – People

It is 1991, before cell phones / mobile phones and computers with windows in many households. Vicky, Ana, Andrés and I are heading back home, to Spain, from Namur, Belgium, in an old van they borrowed for this trip. We have just attended an international meeting organized by **War Resisters International**, *la Internacional de Resistentes a la Guerra* (WRI-IRG) – my three sisters as members of the Spanish section known as **MOC**, *el Movimiento de Objección de Conciencia* (conscientious objectors or COs), and me as an individual member of the international network.

Because our **humanstories** are erased in History and the mass media, let me tell you about an important achievement resulting from people's nonviolent struggle. This is the setting: Spain, 1970s and 1980s. In spite of being sent to prison, some men refuse to do *la mili*, the compulsory military service. Some for religious reasons, some others for sociopolitical reasons, this is, not believing violence protects or solves problems. An

antimilitarist movement grew from there. As more COs joined (including women, though they were not eligible for military conscription), and as society started to care, Spanish institutions were forced to accept the human right to refuse to bear arms, the right to be a CO. But MOC activists were pursuing the abolition of armies. So to press further, they created the campaign called *insumisión* (total resistance) and developed a nonviolent strategy that increased their numbers, their social support, and made repression impracticable: *autoinculpaciones* (self-incrimination). You see, the law punished people who convinced a man to reject the military service, so four people, *objetoras* and anyone wanting to offer this support, would declare to the authorities they had convinced a man to reject military service. The – say – 4,000 *insumisos* became 16,000 *personas insumisas*. In 2001 the *mili* was suspended. Joining the military would be voluntary.

Now this had a still-unacknowledged impact: all men not doing *la mili* meant all men would not be socialized into the education it gave for **the construction of manhood**, which was terrible. It included brutal things like finding funny male rituals torturing all new soldiers (*novatadas*), particularly those men seen as homosexual or "weak," and of course misogynist education, mostly related to the construction of rape culture. In my teenage, bumping into a group of soldiers "going home" was terrifying. To illustrate, I heard some tell this joke on the train one day: "You know how you can fuck a woman and not leave her pregnant? Lock her up, fuck her for two weeks and then kill her! Hahaha…" After 2001, this situation began to change: the most visible sign was young women contesting men engaged in street harassment (catcalling).

1991 was also the year the Balkan War broke, the split of Yugoslavia into five of the nationalities that had formed it. **Zene U Crnom, Women in Black, Mujeres de Negro** had been analyzing how this was going to happen two years prior. There were translator activists helping spread ZuC's (read /red/ "Zene U Crnom's") feminist antimilitarist analyses in different countries. This courageous multicultural feminist pacifist group helped "deserters" escape (they were objectors, really) and developed nonviolent struggle to stop the war and create a network of support, all in the midst of that civil war. (After the war, following sisters in Africa and Asia, they organized the first European Women's Court to persecute war criminals.)

So, I mean, this was a very busy time for the **development of NVDA** (read /red/ "nonviolent direct action") in wars or in societies not at war (peacetime). How many of you knew about all this? This past not taught by History or in the education system is one of two key elements explaining the extraordinary growth and diversification of **social movements** in the 21st century, the growth of people's nonviolent struggles.

Back to the photo, I can't remember what happened to the van, if it broke down or ran out of oil / petrol or had a flat tire / tyre... I walked to the side of the road to contemplate where we were. Andrés saw me and took this picture, me unawares. Unlike most photographers, he kindly gave me the photo when he developed it. It's an image people have found very interesting. Also my friend Cristina, an artist like Andrés, who, in any case, found something that could have been improved to make the photo even better. Art is such a thrilling ground for discovery and experimentation!

For me, this photo reminds me of the precious time I spent with other social activists. At the end of the 1990s, as I was growing older, I had to find a paid job for more regular income. Renting a house, even if you shared, was becoming really expensive. So I had to leave the daily company of activists to study and become… what? **A teacher in Public Education**! – a great place to be if you are fighting for a juster, less violent and

destructive world. A place where laws support the development of curiosity, imagination, critical thinking and communication for empathetic reasoning in problem-solving, even if this is ignored daily by the traditional Exam Culture. A place where we can practice learning all kinds of things, while experiencing ways to coexist in our amazing diversity as individuals; to teamwork, to construct community!

This would be a nice closure for this episode, but I am only half-way through. Let me tell you the stories behind the dress, my hairdo and the newspaper clipping!

The story about the dress relates to a more complex and private set of emotions, going from love in its multiple ways to internal suffering or kinder sadness (also a bit like kryptonite to me!). The dress was a present / gift from my mother, on one of the last occasions I saw her. I was very upset when she gave it to me. It was Christian Dior! How had she spent that money! She was heavily in debt! The story is more than sad, it is tragic. Her brother had asked her to borrow money against the value of her house and give it to him. He would pay the monthly mortgage receipts she got. She asked for the mortgage right away. Her little brother needed her to do so. But a few months later, he sent her a letter saying his business had not worked out. He was sorry but (he) couldn't pay. He was going to commit suicide. Desperate, my mom / mum drove to hospitals, morgues and called everybody to find him. No trace. Eventually, it turned out he had been hiding! in our grandmother's house. How loveless. How brutal. My mother was so relieved her brother was alive, she didn't care about the debt. However, the debt continued tossing soil on her.

And my **mom died**. On March 30, 1990, alone, in a hospital corridor because there were no spare beds in the intensive care unit where she should have been. (She) Died about 12 hours after a doctor told her to go home and recover there of the blood clot in her leg. Just as my brother and I had feared when we had desperately pleaded the doctors and nurses to keep her in hospital: "She will not remain motionless in bed. She will go to the hairdressers' and then to the bank. She needs more time to pay for the loan! Please! Let her stay!" "She only has to not move the leg. She will be OK" was the reply. After having to walk down the hospital entrance stairs, she bumped her legs against cars in the parking lot / car park. She could not hear us. When we arrived to (at) her home, she lay for a bit on her bed and called the hairdresser for an appointment. Next I was trying to hold her down. When she stood, I even pushed her back... She would not be restrained. Desperate, shocked, I left, instead of staying to call the ambulance when she returned. I fled to my shared apartment / flat and fell asleep. So trapped in sleep was I that my flatmate had to shake me hard to wake me up. "It's for you... About your mother." I rushed out of my house thinking my brother had found her dead in bed.

This story behind the photo is too painful. However, the human mind is amazing / awesome. This photo has always comforted me. You see, until things started to go wrong, a deadly knot, my mom led a r-evoLutionary life, made so many people happy... Her lonely frightening **death cannot erase all she was** and her impact on making this world a better place, also for women. No man and no dictatorship could tell her how to live. She trusted better her own intelligence, empathy and vitality, her breakneck courage. And when I look at the picture, I can see the bit of her in me staying longer in this world, feel it keeping me company, keeping me strong. Actually, it makes me smile to see she managed to make me wear a Dior dress! That dress was connecting us.

After my mom's death, I flew back to camp to gain time and strength to stand the blow. "Camp" was Blue Gate at **Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp**, Berkshire, England, the UK. Camp meant empowerment. Before mom's death, I (had) started wearing the Dior dress there. We slept clothed in a bender by a road, next to the forest and a U.S. military airbase illegally built on Common Land (as the Supreme Court would rule in 1992). Underneath the dress I wore a long-sleeved t-shirt that I could change. Over the dress, a wooly jumper. The full outfit included a pair of leggings, two pairs of socks, boots strong enough for the pouring rain and the mud, and a purple overcoat I (had) bought in London with a dear WRI friend, Howard, in his much-appreciated Bricklane street market. The coat was warm and very light and you could fold it in a perfect rectangle to make a pillow. In our NVDAs, passing through cut wire or crawling over mud with the Dior dress was like taking mom on adventures!

I was on and off at the Greenham because I was on an off at the **WRI London office** too. In London, I stayed for free at Myrtle Solomon's house (donated after her death to WRI and used by the community of volunteers). I helped out with the Spanish translation of the newsletter the *Broken Rifle* (who featured news and articles about Spanish MOCs), with the Prisoners for Peace campaign, and with what would be the last WRI Women's Gathering in Thailand, Women Overcoming Violence, in 1992.

It was at the WRI office where Ken, a Canadian activist working as editor of *Peace News,* gave me the **clipping** you see attached to the photo. The news headline says: "Bald Spaniard rejected by the army." Hilarious! Also because "Spaniard" is a genderless word in English, but our androcentric minds make people expect a male, so there is that plus of surprise. About my **hairdo**, I got my head shaved in Namur by Jorgen, a Swedish activist. He had brought his hand sheep shears with him because before the meeting he had been busy shearing his sheep. I asked him to leave a line of hair resembling a snake in motion. The next morning I looked at a mirror and was horrified! I looked like a reptile! I decided to hide outside the conference hall. It was our last plenary meeting, but I couldn't muster courage to enter a room with 300 people who had depended on me for their meal tickets!

Someone sits next to me on the ground. It's an activist I don't know. Under her colorful Bogalan headwrap, she shows me her head. It's shaved, too. She is curing a skin infection. We talk and laugh and after a while, my worries have vanished into thin air. Together, we walk into the conference room: she, with the elegance of an African queen; me, trying to look dignified. Everyone turns and shushes for a bit. How powerfully can a gesture of **sisterhood** lift you from your miseries!

It's beautiful to **work for a better world**. This doesn't "save" us, but it helps reduce and avoid sufferings while creating a sociocultural evolution to drive us away from the madness of violence and injustice. It's beautiful to help build a world where people don't have to die because they can't find enough money to live. A world where people do not fear each other but support each other, consider life and coexistence their priorities. A world where we make it harder for the most violent to force us to destruction and extinction.

This photo, with all of its stories behind, is an excellent demonstration of what it means life is full of all kinds of things, and how we can still find our own way, don't you think?