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Los Angeles

The Basque Exception: Post-Democratic Structures of Feeling in Contemporary Basque Culture

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Hispanic Languages and Literatures

by

Nicholas Benjamin Smith

2025

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Basque Exception: Post-Democratic Structures of Feeling in Contemporary Basque Culture

by

Nicholas Benjamin Smith
Doctor in Philosophy in Hispanic Languages and Literature
University of California, Los Angeles, 2025
Professor María Teresa de Zubiaurre, Chair

This dissertation undertakes a cultural materialist approach to analyze residual and emerging feelings toward metanarratives of Basques and Basque-language culture as somehow innately radical, in light of the idea that we live in a time in which there is no alternative to the current late capitalist modes of production. What does it mean for one's identity to embody resistance when resistance is seemingly futile? In the post-crisis context in which hegemonic power increasingly relies upon a precariously maintained consensus, what feelings of pride, confusion, cynicism, and hope are emerging? The objective is not to verify the truth behind such metanarratives of Basque exceptionalism, but rather to acknowledge their presence in political discourse and ideology, and to trace ways in which structures of feeling are being reshaped in the ongoing post-crisis, post-ETA context of the Basque Country.

The first chapter begins by tracing the nature and origins of both Basque exceptionalism and Basque ostracization, focusing in particular on the development of a counter-hegemonic Basque political and cultural movement in the 1960s and its evolution up to the current period. I then introduce Jacques Rancière's concept of post-democracy and his critiques of consensus politics as theoretical tools for understanding how dissent and political contestation are neutralized within the Basque context, providing a panoramic, materialist perspective on contemporary cultural production and establishing the context for the subsequent chapters. The second chapter analyzes Fermin Muguruza's Black is Beltza transmedia project (2014–2022), exploring its affirmations of a singular and radical Basque solidarity with ties to the African Diaspora and Third World liberation struggles. The third chapter looks at the clash of cosmopolitanism, professional-managerial class identity, and post-ETA Basque politics in Katixa Agirre's novel *Los turistas desganados* (2017) and Aixa de la Cruz's novel *La línea del frente* (2017), examining how both texts shed light on generational shifts in Basque identity, public perception of radical activism, and the cultural logic of late capitalism. The fourth and final chapter compares the music of the Pamplona-based groups Chill Mafia and Tatxers, focusing on how their work reflects generational critiques of neoliberalism and post-ETA consensus politics, as the former group highlights the contradictions underlying metanarratives of capitalism and Basque exceptionalism through meta-ironic humor and hedonism, while the latter group has led a post-punk revitalization of the Basque underground scene, emphasizing aesthetic innovation and appeals to material politics over Basque ethnocentrism.

The dissertation of Nicholas Benjamin Smith is approved.

Larraitz Ariznabarreta

Iker Arranz Otaegui

John C. Dagenais

Javier Patiño Loira

María Teresa de Zubiaurre, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2025

To Mom: You are an inspiration. Thank you for your unwavering support. This will be the best year ever.

To Mallory: You gave me a life to come back to and a reason to keep going.

A mis primos, tanto en Peñaranda como en Trapagaran: gracias por tratarme como un primo no-tan-lejano y enseñarme el país del que me enamoraría

To Danieltxu: I promise to read your novel now that I have some free time. You are family to me.

Tesi hau azken urteotan genozidioaren, zuzengabekeriaren, eta faxismoaren aurka egin duten guztiei eskainia dago. Bai Euskal Herrian bai nire unibertsitateko campusean.

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Notes on Language, Place Names, and Orthography

This PhD thesis was done for the Department of Spanish and Portuguese for a degree in Hispanic Literature, and therefore assumes the reader's proficiency in Spanish. However, I also analyze texts in the Basque language, Euskara, which many readers will not have familiarity with. As it is my intention to question the marginalization of the Basque language in discussions of Basque Culture, citations from Basque sources will be cited in the original Euskara, with English translations. I apologize for any difficulties this may cause in navigating the text.

In referring to the Basque language, I use the Basque spelling "Euskara," rather than "Euskera," which is standard in Spanish. Places will be referred to primarily by their common names and spelling in English, (Therefore Gipuzkoa rather than the Spanish Guipúzcoa, Pamplona rather than the Basque Iruñea, Navarre rather than Navarra or Nafarroa, etc.). The term "Basque Country" shall be understood as the greater Basque Country encompassing the provinces of Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, Alava and Navarre within the Spanish state, and the "French Basque" provinces of Lapurdi, Lower Navarre, and Zuberoa—although I must admit that the dissertation focuses almost exclusively on the Spanish, or "Southern" Basque Country (Hego Euskal Herria, in Euskara). An alternate term used in this dissertation for the Greater Basque Country is Euskal Herria. The Basque Autonomous Community, often referred to in English and Spanish simply as "The Basque Country" will be referred to as The Basque Autonomous Community or Euskadi for the sake of clarity. "Euskadi," while originally conceived as a neologism referring to the greater Basque Country, has fallen out of favor among many Basque

speakers and is now primarily used as a politically neutral term for the Basque Autonomous Community.

Finally, it is important to note that since Euskara does not use accent marks, many Basque public figures with names of Hispanic origin omit diacritics in their spelling (e.g., Fermin Muguruza, Eider Rodriguez). I have made an effort to represent the preferred spelling of these names as accurately as possible.

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This dissertation is the product of over five years of research carried out between Los Angeles, The Basque Country, and the Bay Area, while having to both learn a new language and scrap approximately three or four different ideas for what this dissertation would ultimately be. None of this would have been possible without the guidance, support, and encouragement of those who believed in me along the way.

First and foremost, I owe a tremendous gratitude to my mentor and committee chair Maite Zubiaurre for allowing me to follow my intellectual instincts while always demanding the best of me. The generosity and insight of Larraitz Ariznabarreta has also been vital to my academic journey over the past half decade, both by helping me begin this dissertation and offering me her home during my journeys to Euskal Herria. Iker Arranz has been one of the key figures of Basque studies in California over and it has been an honor to include him in this process. Our conversations over the past year have helped me not only to complete this dissertation, but also given me inspiration to continue my work into the future. Moitas grazas/Moltes gràcies to Javier and John for rounding out this committee. You are two of the best scholars and educators I have had the pleasure of crossing paths with, and your classes were the highlights of my time at UCLA. Gloria also deserves so much credit for navigating the paperwork and administrative processes required to sort out my registration status since 2021. I must also thank Joseba Zulaika for participating in my qualifying exams and giving me the confidence to carry out this dissertation when we first met at UNR. Azkenik, eskerrik asko Facebookeko lagun eta ohorezko seigarren batzordekide Joseba Gabilondori.

Zure iritziek beti nire konfiantza hausten zuten, baina beti niretzat harro egoteko moduko zerbait idaztera bultzatzen ninduten.

Having written most of this dissertation while living in the Bay Area, I cannot help but reflect on my undergraduate experience at UC Berkeley and those who helped prepare me for my time at UCLA. Donna, Dru, and Alex, you inspired and empowered me through your classes during my final year of college, and ultimately changed my life in the process. Ana Belén, gràcies per deixar-me participar a la teva classe de català, tot i que vaig acabar aprenent basc. Also, thanks to Philippe and Etch from the Basque Educational Organization for giving me an opportunity to share my love of Basque culture with the local diaspora community.

Eta amaitzeko, eskerrak eman behar dizkiet Euskal Herrian egon nintzen garaian aholkatu eta parekide gisa sentiarazi ninduten guztiei. Ion Andoni, nire bizitzan, gutxik egin dute zuek bezainbeste niri laguntzeko maila pertsonalean eta profesionalean, eta benetan eskertzen dut hori. Karmele Artetxe, eskerrik asko aholkuengatik, animoengatik eta “pandaren aita”-ri buruzko liburuagatik. Juan Gartzia, anfitrioi, euskara irakasle eta roadtrip-kide zoragarria zara. Zorionak zure balea zuria harrapatzeagatik. Magda: A ze mundua, gu bezalako bi atzerritar elkarren artean euskaraz hitz egiten Donostiko kaleetan. Eta eskerrik asko Euskal Herrian ezagutu nituen guztiei—Nahia, Sali eta Martin bereziki—gaur egungo Euskal Herrian sortzen ari den eszena zoragarriari buruzko elkerrizketengatik.

VITA

EDUCATION

University of California, Los Angeles

2020 C. Phil. in Hispanic Languages and Literature

2018 M.A. in Spanish

University of California, Berkeley

2013 B.A. Spanish

PUBLICATIONS

Ion Andoni Del Amo, Nic Smith, and Natxo Rodríguez. "Non-heroic DIY in the (New) No Future: Reflections from the Basque Country." *DIY, Alternative Cultures & Society,* vol. 2, no. 2, 2024, pp. 178-190. https://doi.org/10.1177/27538702231223581.

PAPERS PRESENTED

"Euskopunk: Exploring the Political Dimensions of Basque Punk." *Do They Owe Us a Living?: Punk, Nihilism, and Going Analog in the End of Times*, Fullerton, USA, May 2024.

"Re-escribiendo el futuro de Euskal Herria: Posnacionalismo y solidaridad en *FM 99.00 Dub Manifest* de Fermín Muguruza." *Kantatzen duten herriak,* Leioa, Basque Country, December 2021.

"Rewriting the Basque Country's Past and Future in Black is Beltza." Fuera de lugar: Cuerpos (In)tangibles en las culturas minorizadas de la península ibérica, Warsaw, Poland, November 2019.

OTHER PRESENTATIONS

"Basque Film Series: *Black is Beltza II: Ainhoa.*" South San Francisco, USA, October 2024.

"Basques of Late Capitalism: Identidad y posmodernidad en la cultura vasca actual." Leioa, Basque Country, May 2022.

"Black is Beltza: A Journey Through Civil Unrest." *Basque Cultural Day,* Online, October 2021.

OTHER ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES AND SERVICE

2025-Present Coordinator, UC Basque Research Group

2024-Present Board of Directors, Basque Educational Organization

2021-2022 Visiting Scholar, University of the Basque Country, Leioa

2019 Co-organizer, 7th Annual UCLA Latin American and Iberian Film Festival

Introduction

The Basques, who live in the green hills and smoky towns quite differently from other Spaniards, are independent, passionately democratic and devoted to choir singing, strenuous exercise, the sea and their peculiar and difficult language.
—*The New York Times*, December 4, 1970

There is no alternative.
—Margaret Thatcher

1.1 "Ez da krisia, kapitalismoa da"

April, 2022. In the Indautxu neighborhood of Bilbao, the graffiti reads "Ez da krisia kapitalismoa da!"—"It's not a crisis; it's capitalism!" This slogan, tucked away between tourist sites and American fast-food chains, on a street that reflects the contemporary realities of global capitalism as well as any, recalls Jacques Rancière's assertion that "politics, before all else, is an intervention in the visible and the sayable" (*Dissensus* 37). Whether in the form of political graffiti and banners, the txosnas of local festivals, the radical bars of city centers, small town city halls dominated by leftist parties, and the gaztetxes and self-managed social centers that have emerged in the post-industrial margins, it is clear that anticapitalist ideology and political action are a part of Basque public life to an extent unparalleled anywhere else in the Global North, and that its primary vernacular is the Basque language, Euskara. Undoubtedly, a large part of the relative success of radical thought lies in the way in which it is tied to ethnolinguistic identity, whether one believes in an innate libertarian Basque spirit or tradition extending back to a mysterious and unknowable past, or sees such a cultural identity as the result of a historically contingent movement that emerged in response to the repressive Franco regime. For many Basques, Euskal Herria is an exception, if not

in its ability to dislodge or even challenge capitalist institutional hegemony, but in its ability to question consensus and contest what is considered sensible or moral. This has been the case since the 1960s, when the counter-hegemonic potential of the Basque language and culture coalesced with radical thought regarding social and economic issues in a mutually reinforcing way. Since then, according to radical scholar Ibai Atutxa,

> Euskara erabili duten bakoitzean, euskaldun basaren eremuan sartu dira mugimendu okupa, antiarrazista, antikapitalsita, ekologista, feminista, kuirra eta beste hainbeste. Hizkuntza erabili dute gatazkarako. Barbarizazioak zalantzan jartzeko hizkuntzaren apropiazio eraldatzaileak jarri dira martxan. Euskara bilakatu da askapenetarako borroka eremua.[1] (Barbaroak 92)

In this sense, little has changed since the 2008-financial crisis, which exposed both the critical flaws and entrenched nature of late capitalism. Nor did this dynamic fundamentally change in the wake of ETA's definitive ceasefire[2] in 2011, which not only formalized the end of clandestine political violence in the Basque Country, but also led to the incorporation of leftist Basque nationalist parties into the political framework of the Spanish state. Yet these two events—the 2008 crisis and the end of ETA—, which mark the end of what Joseba Gabiliondo dubbed "the long Basque 20th century" ("Saizarbitoria y el ángel de la historia vasca" 295), undoubtedly impacted the way Basques view and interpret their supposed "exceptionality" (Galfarsoro "Credenciales democráticas" 45) and its relationship with emancipatory ideologies. Following

---

[1]"Each time they utilize Euskara, the *okupa*, antiracist, anticapitalist, ecological, feminist, and queer movements enter into the [discursive] realm of the wild and barbaric Basque. They use the language to fight. Transformative appropriations of the language have been established to challenge the barbarization [of Basque culture]. The Basque language has become a battleground for liberation."

[2] While ETA did not fully disband until 2018, its announcement of a definitive cessation of its armed activity in October 2011 is considered to be the effective end of the organization.

arguments put forth by David Becerra Mayor, we see that the 2008 crisis exposed what Rancière referred to as the post-democratic nature of Western liberal democracy, particularly in its current neoliberal iteration. And while ETA hardly represented a democratic movement, politicians' continued invocation of the armed group in order to denounce leftist activism and separatist parties—both in the Basque Country and in other parts of the Spanish state—represents one of the key ways in which consensus has been maintained, as the Basque separatist organization's defeat has been hailed in both political and cultural discourse as evidence of the virtue and inevitability of liberal democracy, even amidst the backdrop of persistent economic and political crises.

This dissertation undertakes a cultural materialist approach to analyze residual and emerging feelings toward metanarratives of Basques as uniquely "passionate" and "democratic"—somehow innately radical—in light of the consensus view that we live in a time in which there is no alternative to the current late capitalist modes of production: What does it mean for one's identity to embody resistance when resistance is obstructed at every turn, not only by the police state and legal structures, but also by the market ideology and incentives of capitalism? What faith remains in the Basque radicalism forged in the 20th century and its capacity to create alternatives to present-day neoliberal decadence? What feelings of pride, confusion, cynicism emerge from this new context, the beginning of the Basque 21st century? The point is not to verify the truth behind such metanarratives of Basque exceptionalism, but rather to acknowledge their presence in political discourse and ideology and to trace ways in which structures of feeling are being reshaped in the ongoing post-crisis, post-ETA context of the Basque Country.

1.2 The Basque Exception, Part 1: "Passionately Democratic" Basques and Metanarratives of Difference

This dissertation is concerned with contemporary left-wing conceptions of Basque exceptionalism and resistance to capitalism, but these ideas are ultimately rooted in notions of Basque difference which originate in the Middle Ages. The idea of Basques as somehow uniquely different has taken on distinct meanings depending on the time and place, culminating in euphemistic descriptions such as when, in an article about the trial of 16 ETA members in 1970, *The New York Times* described them as living "quite differently from other Spaniards (…) independent, passionately democratic and devoted to (...) their peculiar and difficult language." This essence, representing the source of both fascination and fetishization, not attributable to either Spanish or French identity, is referred to by Joseba Gabilondo as *materia vasconica*. This term describes the symbolic weight ascribed to Basque uniqueness, while also serving as a site of projection for European anxieties about identity and origins. Euskara is famously the only non-Indo-European language in Western Europe, suggesting that the predecessors of modern Basques inhabited the area around the western Pyrenees before the arrival of major Indo-European ethnic groups during the Iron Age. The Basques only enter into written history with the arrival of the Romans in the 1st century BCE, and because of this, the Basques and their language are implicated in broader narratives about Europe's prehistory and cultural genesis. As Joseba Gabilondo writes:

> The tension between the possibility of being able to ascertain 'the origin of Western Europe,' on the one hand, and the realization of not being able to explain fully a heterogeneous body of (pre)historic data and objects, on the other,

> makes the Basque Country the perfect object for many Western political fantasies and anxieties about Europe's origins. (*Before Babel* 17)

Such is the weight of exoticizing anthropological frameworks that even many left-wing-identifying Basques find themselves reproducing essentialist narratives about their own culture, framing Euskara and Basque identity as timeless relics of a mythical past rather than dynamic, historically situated phenomena. Given the persistence of these narratives—within Euskal Herria and beyond—and their role in reinforcing Basque exceptionalism, *materia vasconica*, etc., Gabilondo arrives at the conclusion that the best approach is to adopt a form of strategic essentialism:

> The persistence of *materia vasconica* makes clear that the (...) pre-Babelian or Paleolithic position cannot be pushed aside as a non-scientific myth, for it comes back with the unbound force of the uncanny (...) Basques cannot simply deny a (pre)history that takes them/us back 35.000 years to a position that always risks becoming a non-historical essence; they/we must adopt it strategically, fully aware that it is the result of a historical discourse (...) that originates in the Middle Ages as Castile (Spain) and France begin to expand as empires. (*Before Babel* 19)

What makes Basque difference more than just a sociolinguistic anomaly, however, is the way in which it has become tied up with vague notions of an anti-authoritarian spirit, which is itself a product of a distinct political trajectory of the Basque provinces—particularly those now situated within the Spanish state—beginning in the Middle Ages. By the end of the Early Middle Ages, the inhabitants of what is now much of the Basque Country adhered to oral law that was not written down and varied from valley to valley. As the medieval kingdoms of Navarre and later Castile began to consolidate in the north of the Iberian Peninsula, these customary laws were incorporated through charters, or fueros, which assured a degree of self-governance,

tax exemptions, and protection of local traditions in exchange for allegiance to the crown. Furthermore, Basques in Gipuzkoa, Bizkaia, and parts of Alava and Navarre were given universal nobility, which gave them the right of habeas corpus and exempted them from military conscription. Basques in turn, enjoyed and took great pride in their special status, and in the 17th and 18th centuries would often revolt against perceived violations of the fueros. This is where the idea of Basques as "passionately democratic" finds its origins. Ramón Zallo explains that while few today would argue in favor of autocratic monarchy, the particular arrangement the Basque provinces maintained under the fueros stands out as remarkable for its time, and later opposition to liberal reform in the region cannot be explained entirely by reactionary sentiment.

> When the less attractive ideological components of the *Ancien Régime* are left aside, these (...) traditions—communitarian and democratic—are doubly entwined with the different forms of self-administration and empowerment (...) when it comes to tackling different problems and political forms that lie on the borderline between representative and participative democracies (Zallo 87-88).

The privileges imbued by the fueros were tolerated by Castile throughout the Early Modern Period in part because of the economic contributions of the Basque provinces to its burgeoning global empire, particularly through shipbuilding, whaling, ore exports to the New World, and thousands of second sons who would serve as sailors and mercenaries. But there was also an ideological explanation for the material privileges that Basques enjoyed under the fueros. As the Basque language was viewed as a pre-Babelian relic of ancient purity, Basque nobility was justified on the grounds of their supposedly untainted lineage. Because of this, foreigners and those who could not prove their 'pure' Christian ancestry were barred from lower nobility status. This is the

origin of racialized notions of Basqueness that would become relevant again at the end of the 19th century.

While the anomalous persistence of Euskara was used in part to justify the region's autonomy and economic privileges, it nonetheless remained a source of ostracization. The Basque language was at best deemed to be antiquated and unsuitable for intellectual or administrative use, and at worst, associated with barbarism and witchcraft, as was evident in the witch trials of Zugarramurdi in the early 17th century. Even within the Basque provinces, local elites helped perpetuate the stigmatization of Euskara through the implementation of measures requiring knowledge of Castilian/Spanish to attain certain positions, effectively marginalizing Euskara speakers and limiting social mobility (Zallo 88).

Over the course of the 19th century, as Enlightenment-era liberal reforms were implemented slowly and unevenly within the Spanish state, Basques slowly began to lose the institutional peculiarities that had defined their existence south of the Pyrenees for hundreds of years. While the Carlist Wars (1833–1840, 1872–1876) were ostensibly civil wars over claims to the Spanish throne, they also represented a deeper clash between traditionalist and liberal visions of society, as well as resistance to centralizing forces threatening regional autonomy. Because of this, the fighting in both wars was heavily concentrated around the Basque provinces, with the majority of the population supporting the Carlists, while support for liberals was mostly confined to the cities. With the Carlist defeat in 1876, the few remaining autonomous fiscal and administrative systems under the fueros were abolished by the Spanish state, marking the end of an era of Basque self-governance.

A sense of melancholy over Carlism's defeat, coupled with the romantic spirit of the era, gave birth to a Basque-language folk tradition exemplified by the music of renowned bard and former Carlist soldier José María Iparragirre. His work played a pivotal role in laying the groundwork for Basque nationalism by crafting and reviving symbols that would later become central to the emerging national movement (Roman 6; Haritschelhar 123). Meanwhile liberalizing reforms brought development in the form of large-scale industrialization and a rapidly growing banking sector, both based primarily around the Bizkaian capital of Bilbao. This economic transformation not only changed the landscapes of the region, but also its demographics, as waves of migrant workers from other parts of Spain arrived to fill the labor demands of the burgeoning industry.

When Basque nationalism finally did emerge at the end of the 19th century with the founding of the Basque Nationalist Party, or PNV (Partido Nacionalista Vasco, known in Basque as Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea) by Sabino Arana, it primarily served as a reactionary, middle-class movement that sought to uphold the supposed ethnic superiority of Basques and resist the liberalizing reforms associated with Madrid (Roman 236). While the party's slogan, "jaungoikoa eta lege zaharra"—God and the old law—referenced the traditional Catholic values and monarchical loyalties of Carlism, Basque nationalism broke from the Carlists in advocating for an independent Basque state. While the movement went through several excisions during its first three decades and was banned from political action under the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera (1923-1930), it was effectively reconstituted as a traditionalist, nationalist party in 1930 and was voted into power during Spain's Second Republic. Meanwhile, Acción Nacionalista Vasca (ANV) was founded in 1930 as a left-wing breakaway party from the PNV, and

while never a major electoral force, it demonstrated that the relatively new Basque nationalist ideology was compatible with socialist and progressive causes.

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), like the Carlist Wars of the prior century, was influenced by polarized ideologies surrounding Basque identity and autonomy. The Basque Country, led by the PNV, aligned with the liberal- and leftist-aligned Republic, seeing it as the best chance to secure autonomy. Months after the outbreak of the war, the first Basque Statute of Autonomy was passed, granting limited self-governance to the Basque provinces under Republican control. This autonomy would last for less than a year and was mostly limited to Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa, as these provinces found themselves surrounded by Nationalist forces from the onset of the war, all the way until the surrender of the Basque Government in the summer of 1937. During the hostilities, the German Luftwaffe's aerial bombing of the Bizkaian town of Gernika, an important symbol in the traditional Basque nationalist imaginary, contributed significantly to perceptions of the Basque public as the target of repression and fascist violence.

In the provinces of Alava and Navarre, where separatist Basque nationalism had failed to displace the regionalist Carlist movement as the leading movement in support of Basque autonomy, Carlist paramilitary units were among the first to mobilize against the Republic and proved to be crucial to the Nationalist victory. Carlism's support for the Nationalist side was based on shared opposition to the Spanish Republic and leftist ideologies rather than full agreement with Franco's vision for Spain, and many within the Carlist camp would later grow disillusioned with Franco's centralized and authoritarian regime, which sidelined their vision of a traditionalist monarchy and forcibly merged their movement with the fascist Falange party in 1937.

Under Franco, the Basque language and symbols of Basque nationalism were banned from public life as a means of enforcing the cultural unity of the Spanish state. While Euskara managed to survive through clandestine use and rural communities, the legally sanctioned stigmatization of the language led to a decline in intergenerational use. Academic study of the language quietly resumed in the 1950s, and public exhibitions of traditional Basque folklore, such as improvised poetry in Euskara (bertsolaritza), began to reappear in the 1960s. These activities were permitted under the regime, insofar as they were considered apolitical, or underscored perceptions of the Basque language as quaint and folkloric.

The 1950s and 1960s also saw a second wave of industrialization—this time throughout all four Basque provinces south of the Pyrenees—as factories for the manufacture of consumer goods proliferated, attracting more economic migrants from other parts of the Spanish state. Rapid urbanization pushed the centuries-old lifestyles of Basque society to the margins, while the population of cities exploded, such that 75% of the population lived in localities of ten thousand inhabitants or more.

Despite its unique historical and political trajectory, the Basque provinces were politically demobilized at the beginning of the 1960s. The Franco regime believed that economic development and low unemployment would foster political stability, while right-wing Basque and Navarrese politicians and elites occupied many positions of political and economic power. San Sebastián remained the dictator's preferred vacation destination (Fusi 37). The regime's confidence in its political and economic control, however, masked growing tensions that would coalesce into a new sociopolitical cycle, reshaping Basque identity and resistance well into the 21st century.

1.3 The Basque Exception, Part 2: The Radical Basque Country (1960-2011)

The conflicts of the 1960s revived old notions of Basque socio-political exceptionalism while also giving rise to new ones. Historian Juan Pablo Fusi divides the upheavals of this era into the labor struggles and the resurgent militant nationalism of ETA, although these movements were in many ways connected or otherwise mutually reinforcing. The first visible manifestation of a conflictive Basque Country occurred when 50,000 workers across Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa went on strike in 1962, leading the regime to declare the first of several states of exception in the region. Despite government repression, periodic strikes would continue throughout the decade, as clandestine labor unions formed in Bizkaia, and Gipuzkoa became the most conflictive province within the Spanish state, registering 16% of all strikes in 1964 (Fusi 39).

ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna; “Euskadi and Freedom”) was founded in 1959 by a group of youth linked to the then-clandestine PNV, with the aspiration of creating a nationalism capable of responding to the new realities of Francoism and industrial development (Fusi 39). The organization initially defined itself simply as a patriotic, non-religious movement, but with the influence of national liberation movements in Cuba, Algeria, and Vietnam, it evolved towards an ideology which combined nationalism and Marxist-Leninism. The group’s first targeted attack on an individual affiliated with the regime was the assassination of the Francoist secret police chief Melitón Manzanas in 1968, and the particularly harsh response by the regime in the form of states of exception and violence against the population played a role in legitimizing ETA’s turn to violence and reinforcing the idea of a bilateral conflict. The 1970 Burgos trials, in which

16 ETA members were charged with murder and terrorism, were intended as a show of Francoist strength. Instead, the trials backfired, attracting international attention and generating widespread public sympathy for the accused, who were increasingly seen as representatives of Basque resistance to dictatorship. For many Basques, Spanish leftists, and international observers alike, the myth of an exceptionally honorable, freedom-loving—but also potentially violent—Basque subject had been revived in the modern context.

An additional factor that influenced these conflicts was the alignment of many figures within the Catholic Church with emerging social and nationalist movements. Between the Church's historical connection with Basque culture and language and the reforms of Vatican II urging clergy members to address social causes of suffering, segments of the clergy began to support labor struggles and nationalist aspirations, further galvanizing political resistance and legitimizing nationalist perspectives. In Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia, radicalized priests and seminarians became some of the most outspoken critics of the regime, while also helping coordinate the clandestine activities of ETA and labor organizations. Even in the former Carlist strongholds of Navarre and Alava, the Church played a role in converting the children of traditionalist families into pro-labor Basque nationalists through moral and cultural appeals. Ironically, the Church's historical influence over traditional identity became a gateway to new, radical ideas tied to socialism and, eventually, anti-clericalism.

It was against this conflictive backdrop that new aesthetic conceptions of Basque identity emerged. By the late 1950s, the Basque sculptors Eduardo Chillida, Jorge Oteiza, and Néstor Basterretxea had already received international recognition, and by

the 1960s had begun using their art to explore themes of Basque culture, history, and identity and their relationship with modernity. Their works, while rooted in contemporary modernist traditions, dialogued with Basque folklore, "[profundizando] entonces en el sentido de lo vasco, popularizando con sus aportaciones la difusión de una fuerte identidad marcada por todo un muestrario de rasgos que abundaron en el carácter singular, misterioso e indómito de este pueblo" (Fusi and Pérez 17). However, Elixabete Ansa Goicoechea argues that this cohort's work was radical not solely because it represented a revival of Basque identity after decades under Franco, "sino porque desarticula los lugares establecidos de enunciación cultural para acercarse y articular el potencial transformador del arte" (Ansa Goicoechea 41). Oteiza in particular viewed his work as a form of political and cultural activism, with his writings during this period reflecting on the idea of the Basque soul coming to represent a compelling argument for a new Basque modernist tradition.

Oteiza's prominence as an intellectual also served to shape other contemporaneous artistic movements, as he is credited with inspiring and coming up with the name for the influential folk music collective Ez Dok Amairu. While the French Basque Michel Labéguerie became the first modern folk singer in Euskara in 1962, the emergence of Ez Dok Amairu and the Euskal Kantagintza Berria ("New Basque song") movement south of the Pyrenees three years later had a profound impact that resonates to this day. Like Oteiza's writings and work in the plastic arts, the cohort led by singer-songwriters Mikel Laboa, Benito Lertxundi, Xabier Lete and Lourdes Iriondo sought to revive and redefine Basqueness in the context of modernity. While their musical stylings were heavily influenced by contemporary folk musicians across Europe

and the Americas, they also incorporated elements of traditional Basque oral tradition by performing improvised verses (bertsos) and playing older folk songs that had been lost to Basques living in the Spanish state (Delgado 302). Amidst this fusion of aesthetics and signifiers, was a common theme of the youth—“gazteok”—creating their own path through innovation, and this drive to reinterpret tradition and modernize culture was initially rejected by some within PNV-aligned circles who saw it as a departure from conservative values tied to the Basque rural ideal. On the other hand, the musicians and cultural activists of this time also had to contend with censorship, bans on their music, and police harassment. While many of the performers attempted to avoid censorship through metaphorical lyrics, the politics and repression of the time often led audiences to interpret popular songs as allegories of the Basque people or working class (Delgado 311).

Meanwhile the distribution and underground dissemination of this new scene, maintained through private concerts and the release of LP’s and singles, represented the beginning of a Basque-language consumer culture. This new phenomenon of consumption in Basque was viewed as subversive and radical, as “muchas acciones que tienen lugar en el ámbito de la cultura son privadas pero con vocación pública, de mercado pero con una intención nacional-activista” (Del Amo *Party & Borroka* 38). The collective yet clandestine nature of this culture yielded a very particular form of countercultural ethnogenesis, in which the cultural logic of this underground scene came to redefine Basque ethnic identity itself. Regardless of whether one was ethnically Basque or the child of Castilian immigrants, participation in this oppressed and criminalized cultural movement through collective consumption and political

identification were enough to make one Basque (*Party & Borroka* 39). As Francisco Letamendia explains,

> El hecho de ser detenido—o víctima de cualquier represión—no solo no es un estigma, sino que se convierte en timbre de gloria y capital de prestigio social. Los mecanismos de la solidaridad modifican los límites de la identidad del grupo; surge un "nosotros" nuevo, el "nosotros" objeto de la represión y generador de solidaridades. (…) modifica, y de modo irreversible, las señas de identidad del nacionalismo vasco tradicional (…) [que] quedarían irremediablemente ligadas a la solidaridad anti-represiva y a la oposición a las Fuerzas de Seguridad del Estado." (F. Letamendia 335)

In this way, the countercultural folk music scene, with its clandestine celebration of Basque identity within a distinctively modern framework, coalesced with the equally suppressed labor and nationalist struggles of the era to foment "un nuevo marco cognitivo, euskaldun y joven, moderno" in which Euskara broke from its traditionalist confines and became a symbol of progressivism and resistance (*Party & Borroka* 41).

Following the economic expansion of the 1960s and early 1970s, the latter half of the 1970s was marked by a period of economic contraction that led to the dismantling of much of the industrial base that had fueled earlier prosperity, especially in the Greater Bilbao area. Youth unemployment in the region would skyrocket to levels over 40 percent, and the quality of life in the hastily built neighborhoods meant to accommodate the influx of immigrant workers began to decline. These were also the years of the Spanish transition to democracy following Francisco Franco's death in 1975. Rather than a revolutionary overturning of the Franco regime, the transition was largely a negotiated process between the monarchy, the military, and political elites, aimed at preserving the status quo. The political culture of the Spanish state during this period was marked by political pragmatism and compromises, with openly critical attitudes

suppressed and culture coming to represent a space of celebration, totally separated from social and political tensions (*Party & Borroka* 52).

Against this backdrop, the punk movement that had originated in England several years prior began to take hold in Euskal Herria, where this culture of the transition was met with skepticism and discontent. Both in the working-class outskirts of Bilbao and the smaller industrial towns and suburbs across the other Basque provinces, punk bands began to emerge and gain traction throughout the early 1980s. While many activists on the Basque left initially saw it as a foreign and apolitical import, punk subculture soon came to be a powerful expression of abertzale resistance and radical Basque culture. While some groups—particularly those singing in Spanish, such as La Polla Records—represented a generally skeptical attitude that was agnostic towards Basque nationalist projects, other groups such as Kortatu and Hertzainak wrote songs that explicitly took the side of abertzale radicals against the Spanish state. This process was less a co-optation than recontextualization, by which punk came to be associated with Euskara and Basque identity through a system of equivalences—punk:radical; Euskara:radical; punk:Euskara (Lahusen 275). Consequently, the street came to represent a place of cultural identity and autonomy, equally as valid as the rural baserri (Kasmir 193). While each band had their own take on the meaning and aesthetics of this new urban form of Basque rebellion, the movement as a whole would come to be known by the label coined by *Egin* journalist Jose Mari Blasco: Rock Radical Vasco.

Beyond influencing the aesthetics, language, and imaginary of Basque nationalism and identity, the punk movement also represented a change in praxis, as

politicized expressions of an again renewed Basque identity began to dominate many aspects of public life, especially during local fiestas/jaiak

> From the nineteen-eighties, popular fiestas would become politicised: politics, instead of being amputated, was to be present at these fiestas as another part of its social nature. Festive practices and songs created other celebratory spaces or added a new narrative to those already existing, reinserting them in the radical space, in which rejection and pleasure constantly mingle. Different movements and subcultures mixed in bars and txoznas: punks, independentists, skinheads, middle-class hippies, ecologists, artists, feminists... (Del Amo, “When Underground” 26)

By the 1990s, the Rock Radical Vasco movement had been fully assimilated into the Basque tradition, with punk rock bands—even the ones that sang in Spanish—becoming essential parts of the Basque cultural canon alongside the Basque-language folk musicians of the prior generation. The endurance of RRV was only strengthened through its partial institutionalization, as the punk subculture retroactively came to be seen by many as yet another manifestation of transcendental, quasi-millenarian Basque resistance: “A pesar de lo que pueda parecer, el punk vasco no es tan solo una moda (como el europeo) y la razón la encontramos en sus componentes subversivo-creativos que centran la pelea por la cultura y una sociedad diametralmente opuesta a la vigente (...) los punks de los 80, son hijos del alma antiautoritaria vasca” (Pascual 49-50).

The Transition also saw the ratification of a new Spanish constitution as well as the establishment of the Basque Autonomous Community and Chartered Community of Navarre as separate political entities within the Spanish state, each with a high degree of self-governance rooted in historical privileges of the fueros system. Notably, the 1978 Spanish constitutional referendum was marked by significant opposition in what would become the Basque Autonomous Community, which saw by far the highest rate of

abstention (55%) and the highest percentage of no votes (25%)[3], signaling a deep-seated discontent with the ongoing process. In spite of political reforms, the years between 1975 and 1982 saw the intensification of both political violence and police killings of protestors. The Vitoria Massacre of March 3rd, 1976, where police killed five striking workers and injured over a hundred more, as well as the killing of an activist during a protest at the 1978 San Fermín festival, reinforced the perception that liberal democratic reforms would not alter the authoritarian nature of the state, and that Basques would continue to be targeted by security forces. Meanwhile, ETA intensified its campaign against state officials, police, and other representatives of Spanish authority, and right-wing paramilitary groups such as the Batallón Vasco Español carried out attacks targeting Basque nationalists and leftist activists—although on a much smaller scale than ETA's violence.

The atmosphere of continued violence, coupled with widespread disillusionment with the reformist trajectory of the Spanish Transition, created a fertile ground for radical political alternatives in the Basque Country. Among these, the Alternativa KAS, put forward by the abertzale coalition Koordinadora Abertzale Sozialista in 1976, served as both unifying revolutionary platform for independence and socialism, as well as the preconditions for ETA to give up on their armed struggle. This revolutionary framework would find political expression in Herri Batasuna (HB), a coalition of radical leftist and nationalist groups founded in 1978, which rejected the Spanish Constitution and the autonomy statute as insufficient concessions, instead demanding full independence for Euskal Herria. The party's proximity to ETA and its refusal to condemn the use of

[3] As compared to the overall abstention rate of 33% and 8% of votes against.

violence made it deeply polarizing, even within the Basque nationalist movement. Despite this, it garnered significant popular support in smaller localities in Gipuzkoa and became the largest Basque nationalist faction in Navarre. However, support for ETA was far from unanimous within the Basque left. Euskadiko Eskerra (EE; "The Left of Euskadi"), a breakaway reformist faction, emerged as a notable alternative. Initially, it found substantial electoral backing, consistently securing around 10% of the vote in the Basque Autonomous Community throughout the 1980s, before eventually merging with other regional social-democratic parties.

Ultimately, the consensus-based nationalism of the reconstituted PNV would become the hegemonic political power in the Basque Autonomous Community, with the party quickly solidifying its influence over the region's governance and economic trajectory. Through its dominant institutional control, it naturally developed close ties with the Basque banking sector, local energy companies like Petronor and Iberdrola, and key industrial actors, while seeking to maintain the interest of local businesses through public-private partnerships. In this way, even as the newly autonomous region embraced Basque identity and nationalism on a governmental level—even adopting the ikurriña designed by Sabino Arana as the official flag and establishing Basque a co-official language of public institutions—its status as an economic motor within the Spanish state continued unabated, even amidst the terminal decline of heavy industry in the PNV's electoral stronghold of Bizkaia.

This strategy of supporting the private sector while at the same time discursively foregrounding Basque difference would culminate in the Guggenheim Museum project in Bilbao, approved in 1991 and inaugurated in 1997. Spearheaded by PNV leadership,

the project aimed to revitalize the declining industrial city by transforming it into a cultural and tourist hub. The international acclaim and increased tourism, dubbed the "Guggenheim effect," became a symbol of the region's shift toward a globalized, service-oriented economy, blending modernity and Basque cultural identity with the demands of neoliberal globalization. The success of the Guggenheim project also underscored the PNV's ability to harness international networks and capitalize on cultural branding as a tool for regional development. In this way, Euskadi became "la vanguardia de la monumentalización y legitimación de la globalización y el neoliberalismo en el Estado español" not just in spite of political violence and the region's reputation, but by using that reputation in part as a selling point, turning its past and identity into marketable assets within the global economy (Gabilondo "Turismo-pornografía postimperial y terrorismo: el fenómeno *Patria*" 79).

Amid this focus on economic stability and upholding the status quo, the demand for outright independence all but vanished from the PNV[4], replaced by the narrative of Euskadi as a "nación foral," which prospered socially and economically under the autonomy of the fueros and modern democratic self-governance, in the process providing a sense of historical continuity to the party's neoliberal turn. Through this new framing, notions of Basque difference take on a new meaning, as they are reinterpreted through the market and in turn emphasize a sense of *economic* exceptionalism, demonstrated in positive GDP and development statistics relative to the Spanish state. This idea of Euskadi as a "Basque oasis" has to date been a largely effective strategy,

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[4] The tenure of Lehendakari Juan José Ibarretxe (1999-2009), who proposed reforms to Basque autonomy that would have effectively granted commonwealth status to Euskadi, could be considered the sole exception to the PNV's pragmatic stance towards Madrid.

creating a narrative of Basque exceptionality and agency in a late capitalist context in such a way that gives credit to the management of the PNV (Gabilondo "Turismo-pornografía" 96).

The final political force relevant to the context of Basque difference and exceptionalism in (post)modernity is the hegemony of Spain's two dominant parties, the center-left PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español) and the center-right Partido Popular. Under Felipe González, the PSOE's rule (1982–1996) marked a period that saw the government take up contradictory approaches to combating ETA and suppressing radical political dissent in the Basque Country. On the one hand, González's government covertly funded the paramilitary group GAL (Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación), a counterinsurgency force responsible for kidnapping, torturing, and killing suspected ETA members and their sympathizers. This illegal and violent campaign was meant to destabilize ETA's operations, yet it also contributed to further political repression and yielded a deep distrust of many Basques leftists towards the nominally socialist PSOE. At the same time, González's government made democratic steps towards defeating the pro-ETA Basque left, including the Ajuria Enea Pact of 1988, in which all major Basque political parties besides HB agreed to reject violence in an attempt to politically isolate ETA and its supporters. That same year saw negotiations between the Spanish government and ETA leadership in Algeria. After the failure of these talks, increased police pressure and collaboration with the French government would lead to the arrest of much of ETA's leadership by the early 1990s, irreparably damaging the organization's capacity to carry out attacks.

The period under the PP government of José María Aznar (1996-2004) represented, more than anything, a shift in the Basque conflict to the cultural sphere. This was in large part due to the unsuccessful strategic changes on ETA's part during the 1990s, which included escalating the use of organized rioting by young ETA supporters, dubbed "kale borroka" ("street fight/struggle"), and the targeted assassinations of politicians and other public figures, culminating in the 1997 kidnapping and murder of Miguel Ángel Blanco, a local councilor from the PP. Blanco's death sparked an unprecedented wave of public outrage, with mass demonstrations and a broader national mobilization against ETA. However, the political impact of this moment went far deeper than Basque and Spanish society's rejection of political violence, reflecting broader transformations in the conflict and its central role in Spanish politics.

The economic project of Aznar's first term consisted of implementing the neoliberal reforms that had begun under the PSOE government in the early 1990s, with the goal of joining the European Economic and Monetary Union. This involved accelerating the process of privatization to facilitate the accumulation of both foreign and domestic capital. Ideologically, Aznar's neoliberal project was accompanied by a vision of Spain as a world power, serving as the political and economic nexus between Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, with free market capitalism enabling this role. This vision dovetailed with triumphalist attitudes following the 1992 Barcelona Olympics and Seville's Expo '92, which symbolized Spain's return to the global stage. Rounding off a process that had begun during the Transition, Spanish nationalism was discursively reoriented along liberal lines, framed as a form of civic pride rooted in a modern democratic state that sought economic development through consensus

policies. Under Aznar, neoliberalism was implicitly positioned as the antidote to societal ills and as the guarantor of welfare, claiming it as the only system capable of improving the economy while ensuring citizens' safety and freedom. Yet, to sustain this framework, neoliberalism also required the construction of a constant sense of threat—an external or internal enemy to reinforce its ideological hegemony (Cabañes 96).

Following David Harvey's writings on the relationship between neoliberal economics and neoconservative ideology, Aintzane Cabañes argues that the Aznar regime came to rely upon a melodramatic discourse on ETA's terrorism in order to create "a moral economy of good vs. evil" that in turn legitimized the PP's political project of neoliberalism and nostalgic post-imperial Spanish nationalism (Cabañes 53). Just as the Global War on Terror would become a dominant ideological framework for American foreign and domestic policy under President George W. Bush after the World Trade Center attacks of September 11th, 2001, the fight against ETA was framed under Aznar as the moral and existential struggle against which other political concerns were subordinated. The central role of anti-terror discourse in the PP's neoconservative project was underscored by Aznar's statement in January 2002 that the killing of Miguel Ángel Blanco in Ermua was Spain's 9/11 ("Aznar: 'Ermua fue nuestro 11-S'"), thereby situating Spain within a global struggle of democracy vs. terrorism, but with the caveat that its particular terrorist threat was rooted in a regional nationalism within its own borders. Such was the PP's determination to situate its campaign against ETA within a transcendental and globalized framework of anti-terrorism that it initially blamed the organization for the March 11, 2004, attacks on Madrid's commuter trains, in spite of evidence pointing to Islamist extremists. This incident exposed the tenuous and

politicized nature of the PP's anti-terror narrative and is widely considered to have contributed to the party's surprise defeat in national elections held three days later.

This approach to framing ETA terrorism as an all-encompassing threat extended beyond the organization itself to encompass its perceived social and political "ecosystem," creating a broad and ambiguous category of culpability that blurred the lines between armed militancy, political dissent, and cultural expression. This obfuscating political paradigm—situating many Basque institutions firmly outside the realm of legitimate politics—retroactively came to be known as "todo es ETA" in reference to remarks made by the Judge Baltasar Garzón. As Cabañes explains:

> the idea of "Todo es ETA" was assembled by the Aznar administration since 1996 and was first articulated by Judge Baltasar Garzón on December 11th 2001 during the presentation of the second number of the magazine *Papeles de Ermua* organized by the Foro de Ermua where he stated that "no existe entorno de ETA, sino que todo es ETA," and added that "ETA, además de las armas, ha sabido utilizar la palabra para hacernos creer la 'mentira' de que su complejo político y social no es terrorismo." That is, Garzón judicializes Aznar's anti-terrorist politics (…) according to which ETA, the terrorist group itself, will not be the sole objective of the government and the Spanish justice system, but also everything and everyone that they consider associated to or supportive of ETA. (Cabañes 49-50)

In practice, the application of the "todo es ETA" framework was exemplified in the Macro-trial 18/98 of 1998, in which Judge Garzón ordered the arrest of 76 individuals and implicated the Basque language education organization AEK and the newspaper *Egin* as part of ETA's broader social network. In spite of condemnations from Amnesty International, the Spanish government followed up with the 2003 forced closure of *Egunkaria*, the only Basque-language newspaper at the time. While Spain's Supreme Court would retroactively declare the closure of *Egin* illegal in 2009, *Egunkaria* director

Martxelo Otamendi reported having been tortured and held in isolation, while *Egin* director Jabier Salutregi would not be released from prison until 2015. This period would also see abertzale political parties effectively banned and their leaders subject to imprisonment on various charges.

More than just an overreaching counterterrorism strategy, the paradigm of "todo es ETA" found fertile ground in the consensus politics and culture of the rest of Spain. Its repercussions in 21st-century discourse can also be understood as the neoliberal mutation of a historical anti-Basque sentiment, framing cultural and political resistance to state policies as existential threats to democracy, economic stability, and Spanish national unity, which represent the basis of the country's modern identity and global legitimacy. And while the Basque language has been associated with a savage and anti-democratic existence throughout modernity, this stigma has taken on new forms in an era in which Basque language institutions have been criminalized and elites view the notoriously difficult language as an obstacle for economic development (Atutxa, *Barbaroak* 21). As the editorial board of *Arteka* wrote in 2020, "Si bien los ataques contra el euskera y su resistencia transmiten un odio irracional, al fin y al cabo esa irracionalidad encuentra su razón en la creación de relaciones capitalistas de producción" (*Arteka* "Euskera: cuestión social" 7). Through the lens of neoliberal consensus politics at the level of the Spanish state, the conscious choice to speak a minority language such as Basque and participate in associated cultural or political movements comes to be seen as irrational or contrarian, while old perceptions of Euskara as a primitive or otherwise antiquated language are revived in order to frame

free market capitalism and the Spanish language as inherently progressive and uniting forces.

Historically perceived as a political and cultural anomaly in the Iberian Peninsula, the Basque Country underwent a profound transformation in the 1960s with the coalescence of a reinvigorated Basque culture and militant political struggles in opposition to the Franco regime. This shift, immediately followed by the uneven and violently contested process of the Transition in the late 70s and early 80s, has resulted in a grassroots countercultural infrastructure that continues to challenge mainstream political and cultural paradigms. The central importance of collective solidarity is evident in a variety of spheres, whether through labor organizing, social activism, or the DIY culture of the underground folk scenes of the 60s and 70s and the punk tradition of the 80s that lives on to this day. Across these overlapping networks that span urban and rural areas alike, Euskara, formerly a language with no official status and limited cultural capital, has become a key vehicle in both organizing and communicating anticapitalist and emancipatory messages to the public. Even under the framework of consensus democracy that obfuscates deeper systemic inequalities, Basque remains a language of resistance outside of the dominant narratives of neoliberalism. This is not because the language of consensus somehow does not translate to Basque, but because a minority language with such historical and symbolic ties to collective struggle cannot be easily assimilated into the neoliberal framework of free markets and individualism.

This reality endures in spite of the region's relatively high standard of living and Basque elites' interest in establishing a middle-class consumer culture in Euskara, with both the PNV in Euskadi and the PSN in Navarre frequently appealing to supposed

liberal virtues and openness to diversity while cracking down on alternative modes of production and consumption, such as gaztetxes, self-managed markets, and solidarity dinners for the poor and unhoused. As Atutxa argues, Euskara serves as a litmus test for the neoliberal co-optation of progressive politics, as its potential to resist commodification persists: "Euskara bilakatu da *pinkwashing*-en, *greenwashing*-en, *basque washing*-en, eta *washing* neoliberal guztien aurkako borrokarako tresna" ("Euskara has become a tool for combatting pinkwashing, greenwashing, Basquewashing and all other forms of neoliberal '-washing'") (*Barbaroak* 92).

In this sense, the sociopolitical reality of the Basque Country is a product of the political cycle taking place between approximately 1960 and 2011, although many Basques attribute the exceptional resilience of their society to an inherently anti-authoritarian and democratic nature deeply rooted in their culture and traditions, believed to predate historical documentation. And yet, Euskal Herria is hardly an insular place, and it has not been immune to the broader upheavals of the financial crisis of 2008, austerity measures and the erosion of democratic norms, the rise of both right- and left-wing populisms across the Global North, and the prevailing sense of polycrisis that has deepened in the first years of the 2020s. This atmosphere of uncertainty and upheaval has not only put the stability and sustainability of the global capitalist system under increasing scrutiny, it has also consequently tested the adaptability and significance of Basque political movements and countercultural institutions amidst the complexities of the 21st century. It raises the question of whether a resistance identity shaped by late 20th-century radicalism can effectively challenge the growing dominance of the police state and a late-capitalist culture dictated by market-driven imperatives.

1.4 Post-democracy: The Violence of Consensus and the Erasure of Dissent

The term “post-democracy” was first coined by Jacques Rancière in 1995, in the book *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. While Rancière’s observations and analysis were based in late-capitalist phenomena of the 1980s and 1990s (neoliberalism, Third Way politics, globalization, etc.), it is important to note that the 'post-' in post-democracy does not reflect a teleological view of capitalist development, but rather a shift in how political subjects conceive of democracy and justify the exclusion of true egalitarian politics. Rather than implying the end of democracy, Rancière’s term signals a change in its meaning from a metapolitical perspective:

> Postdemocracy is the (...) conceptual legitimization of a democracy after the demos, a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests. (*Disagreement* 102)

Rancière’s theory is based on a distinctively narrow understanding of politics as being something beyond these technocratic “state mechanisms” and fluid “combinations of social energies.” For Rancière, true politics only occurs when the naturalized hierarchy or order of a society is contested.

> The essence of politics resides in the modes of dissensual subjectivation that reveal a society in its difference to itself. The essence of consensus, by contrast, does not consist in peaceful discussion and reasonable agreement, as opposed to conflict or violence. Its essence lies in the annulment of dissensus as separation of the sensible from itself, in the nullification of surplus subjects, in the reduction of the people to the sum of the parts of the social body and of the political community to the relations between the interests and aspirations of these different parts. (*Dissensus* 42)

In this sense, consensus, instead of being a sign of harmony and general agreement, is precisely that which makes politics impossible. Those whose political positions and discourse cannot be assumed by the consensus logic are interpolated not politically, but judicially; as delinquents rather than political subjects (*Después del acontecimiento* 75).

The present analysis recalibrates the scope of Rancière's theory, which has proven to be especially prescient in the decades after its initial publication. Here, following critic David Becerra Mayor (*Después del acontecimiento*), post-democracy and its related concepts become the lens through which we understand politics and culture in the aftermath of the financial crisis. As Gabilondo highlights, 2008 represents a significant shift in the way neoliberal management and the erosion of the welfare state are *perceived*:

> Aunque el proyecto neoliberal ya puesto en marcha en la década de los 1980 en países como Chile tenía por objetivo destruir el estado socialdemócrata del Norte Global, así como cualquier forma de nacionalismo progresista poscolonial del Sur Global, la crisis de 2008 ha supuesto un paso cualitativo en el sentido de que la mayoría de las clases medias y trabajadoras del Norte Global ha comenzado a percibir que el Estado socialdemócrata del bienestar es una realidad pasada y que, por tanto, es la precarización el nuevo horizonte al que la mayoría está abocada. (Gabilondo, "Apocalipsis, biopolítica y estado destituyente" 159)

The post-2008 political horizon is one marked by precarity, inequality, and beyond that, the potential of ecological collapse. And yet, the seemingly apocalyptic urgency of the political moment has been met with a doubling down on the consensus policies of free market capitalism and austerity. While the early 2010s saw the eruption of massive protest movements (Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, Indignados/M-15, etc.), their prioritization of autonomy and skepticism of organizing structures impeded their ability

to pursue strategic goals (Dean 210). The institutional legacy of these years lies in a handful of parliamentary parties such as Spain's Podemos, which thus far have had less staying power and institutional coherence than the far-right parties that also came to prominence amid populist backlash during these years. For the left, then, there is the nagging existential question of whether politics can be reimagined and mobilized in an atomized, postmodern society where structural inequalities persist but collective action seems increasingly fragmented and elusive.

The 2008 crisis also fundamentally called into question the strategies and aims of the Basque nationalism. As Gabilondo points out, both the PNV and abertzale coalition EH Bildu fundamentally derive their legitimacy from their relationship to the Spanish state, and are therefore incapable of accounting for the global issues exposed by the crisis. On the right, the PNV has maintained its hegemonic status within the Basque Autonomous Community in large part through its discourse of the "Basque Oasis," which cites Euskadi's relative economic prosperity and high standard of living in comparison to the rest of the Spanish state as evidence of the party's exceptional management. While the narrative of Basque economic exceptionalism has bolstered the PNV's image as a stabilizing, competent, and at times even socially liberal force, Gabilondo argues that this popular strategy is vulnerable to future economic shocks and the further deterioration of the welfare state, conditions which could give rise to more reactionary forms of right-wing Basque populism (*Populismoaz* 231). Then there is the EH Bildu coalition, which, like the PNV, derives its legitimacy from opposition to the Spanish state, except focusing on democratic deficiencies, rather than economic ones. The abertzale left's political horizon of establishing an independent, socialist Basque

state is, in Gabilondo's view, both fetishistic and irrational, as it constructs its platform on "socialism" even though it is not clear what socialism actually means in the current moment, and the neoliberal response to the 2008 crisis has shown that even sovereign states do not necessarily have economic sovereignty (*Populismoaz* 233).

In this sense, an independent Basque state within a neoliberal Europe would be unlikely to bring about economic emancipation, and would find more immediate success as a middle-class project, reflecting the perceived transcendental virtues of Basque society on the world stage. Both Gabilondo and Imanol Galfarsoro have signalled ways in which the political horizon of independence-for-independence's-sake has actually had a deradicalizing effect on the left. Gabilondo identifies a certain cultural impulse of linguistic purism and political correctness (*jatorrismo*)—tied to middle-class aspirations of a culturally and economically independent Basque state—, which reject marginal or hybrid forms of Basque identity and alienate some sectors of the working class ("Posimperialismo", "Independentiza eta gero"). Galfarsoro, meanwhile, argues that a fixation on exceptionalism and the politicization of history yields a vulgar nationalism for which "el resto de las luchas y confrontaciones no tienen importancia—las luchas por la justicia social, por la igualdad de género, las luchas ecologistas, las problemáticas de jóvenes y mayores… son pequeñeces intrascendentes" (Galfarsoro "De nación sin estado, a estado sin nación" 291-292). These questions of shifting ideology within the Basque left are compounded by demographics, as the standardization of Euskara in the Basque Autonomous Community, the economic pressures of learning foreign languages in a globalized economy, and even immigration from abroad have led to a situation in

which competency in Euskara has increasingly become a marker of the urban middle class (Castillo; Beitia "El euskera y el nivel socioeconomico").

So even with electoral gains of the Basque left since ETA's final ceasefire and the legalization of abertzale parties—evidenced by EH Bildu almost pulling even with the PNV in the 2024 Basque elections, Bildu twice winning the mayorship in the city of Pamplona, and gains across the province of Alava—there is uncertainty about how much these coalitions of progressives, socialists, and cultural activists can achieve or change within the existing framework of the state. In this sense, many Basque radicals now accuse the institutional Basque left of adopting a self-defeating strategy as they moderate their views towards platforms more rooted in social democracy than confrontation with the contradictions and inequities of capitalism (Beitia "Algunos puntos" 41). The 2019 founding of the new Mugimendu Sozialista ("Socialist Movement") and its affiliate organization GKS (Gazte Koordinadora Sozialista; "Youth Socialist Committee")—a communist youth organization that split off from the institutional abertzale left and rejects social-democratic reformism—reiterated the fact that the Basque Country continues to be a stronghold for radical activism, with the organization emphasizing material politics and the economic precarity faced by younger generations.

With regards to the end of ETA, it must be said that the group's decision to give up on armed struggle was both a benefit to Basque society and long overdue. It was an anachronism, and its increasingly violent and counterproductive tactics from the 1980s through the 2000s—killing scores of civilians and pursuing the "socialization of suffering"—signaled its decadence and ineffectiveness. However, ETA's nature as a

relic of 1968-style radicalism and its refusal to lay down arms during Spain's tumultuous transition to democracy exposed the way in which this process sought above all to guarantee the continuation of power amidst demands from the left and regional nationalist blocs (Zelik 80). In light of this, Elixabete Ansa Goicoechea has argued that the state's framing of ETA as "el Mal absoluto de España" has served the strategic effect of erasing "el horizonte de emancipación universal que animó el entusiasmo de la política en la década de 1960" while enshrining the 1980s political consensus of market democracy (Ansa Goicoechea 24-25).

David Becerra Mayor, meanwhile, connects the removal of political ideology from discussions of ETA in Spanish political discourse with Rancière's theory of post-democracy:

> Si la ausencia de lo político es uno de los rasgos que define la post-democracia o la democracia consensual definida por Rancière, el relato de la despolitización de ETA posiblemente sea su ejemplo más claro. Esta despolitización [...] es uno de los elementos constitutivos del consenso democrático español. El modo de informar sobre la actividad armada de ETA ha respondido a este mecanismo de despolitización. Esta operación ideológica se hacía imagen en los informativos de La Sexta, la televisión privada del grupo Atresmedia, cuando trataban una noticia sobre el conflicto vasco y mostraban, en la pantalla de fondo con la que se ilustra la noticia, el sello de la banda, pero sustituyendo su nombre, "Euskadi Ta Askatasuna", por "Banda de Asesinos". Por medio de este desplazamiento semántico se interpretan los actos cometidos por ETA no como actos políticos que tienen una causa y una explicación política sino como asesinatos, esto es, como actos desprovistos de ideología, que no realizan militantes de una causa política concreta sino simplemente asesinos o criminales. Este relato nos dice que los atentados de ETA no tienen explicación política. Esta resistencia al análisis, o esta suspensión de lo político, define en buena medida el modo en que opera el consenso en la democracia española. (*Después del acontecimiento* 74)

Even as the era of Basque institutions being forcibly closed by government order is seemingly a thing of the past and the threat of political violence has all but disappeared since 2011, the doctrine of “todo es ETA”—adapted for the current iteration of post-democratic governance—, continues to influence political discourse and policy. The Basque Country and Navarre remain among the most heavily policed zones in the Global North (Agirrezabal and Intxusta 100), and both local and state-level police forces, as well as the Spanish judiciary, continue to apply anti-terror measures to crimes deemed to be of a political nature. On a global level, one of the more concerning patterns in austerity-era governance has been the application of laws developed during the height of the war on terror against organizations that directly challenge the status quo, whether they be anti-war demonstrators or environmental activists. In Spain, this instrumentalization of the judiciary and the police state as a means to tamp down on dissent was particularly severe under the PP government of Mariano Rajoy between 2011 and 2018. This period saw the passage of controversial legislation curtailing freedom of speech and assembly, as well as the controversial imprisonments of rappers Pablo Hasél and Valtònyc for lyrics deemed offensive to the monarchy and glorifying terrorism. In light of this, Joseba Gabilondo has polemically claimed that, in the current environment, “todos los españoles son ETA.”

> ETA ya no es necesaria: todos son sospechosos de terrorismo o actos similares de violencia contra el Estado. Desde la aprobación de legislación como la ley “anti-escrache” (2013) y la “ley mordaza” (2015), o la aplicación indiscriminada de acusaciones de ‘delitos de odio’ o ‘rebelión y sedición’ a actividad política pacífica, es probable que cualquiera en España termine en la cárcel solo por expresarse o tratar de tener una vida digna (vivienda, trabajo, etc.). En España, el simple *retweeting* de otro usuario puede constituir delito. (“Posimperialismo” 102)

But even if the armed organization and its violence are no longer *needed* to justify the excesses of the state, ETA and the specter of the violent Basque radical continue to loom large in contemporary political discourse as the symbolic antithesis of Spanish liberal democracy. Such is evident in conservatives' invocation of ETA to denounce the participation of EH Bildu in Spain's governing coalition government (Aduriz), or even the unrelated Catalan push for independence (2012-2022). Meanwhile, the frequent use of the term "cachorros de ETA" in the conservative press to refer to youth activists associated with the Basque radical left reveals a worldview that sees currently existing forms of militant political expression as though they were the young of a deadly wild animal, which must either be tamed or killed before they mature.

The centrality of ETA and Basque politics within the post-democratic environment of the wider Spanish state has been most evident in the wave of post-ETA media that began in 2014 and continued through the early 2020s. This phenomenon began in earnest with Emilio Martínez-Lázaro's romantic comedy *Ocho apellidos vascos* (2014), which became the highest-grossing Spanish film of all time while parodically depicting Basques as race-obsessed, easily swayed by meaningless slogans, and eagerly awaiting the return of ETA (Miguélez-Carballeira "*Ocho apellidos vascos*"). Other films centered on ETA and Basque nationalism would feature at the Spanish box office throughout the 2010s and early 2020s, including the comedies *Fe de etarras* (2017) and *La pequeña Suiza* (2019) and the Award-winning dramas *Maixabel* (2021) and *La infiltrada*. In the world of television and streaming, HBO's adaptation of *Patria* (2020), Movistar+'s miniseries *La línea invisible* (2020), Amazon's docuseries *El desafío: ETA*

(2020), and the Netflix documentary *No me llame Ternera* (2023) represented the tail end of the post-ETA media cycle.

While the films and series mentioned above left a significant mark in popular culture, it was the field of literature that would have the greatest impact in political and academic discourse during this time, with the unprecedented commercial and critical success of Fernando Aramburu's 2016 novel *Patria* leading the way. Immediately upon the book's release, it was clear that Aramburu had conceived his work as a definitive statement within a "batalla del relato" against the abertzale left and ETA apologists, and literary and political establishments quickly embraced it as such, with even Prime Minister Rajoy hailing the novel as "the triumph of the truth" (Vega). Aramburu's sudden turn as a public intellectual echoed the Aznar-era popularity of Basque "anti-nationalist" thinkers such as Jon Juaristi, Fernando Savater, and Mikel Azurmendi, whose essayistic work vilified Basque nationalism as regressive and violent while framing Spanish unity as modern and rational. In particular, the themes and plot of *Patria* seem to be influenced by Juaristi, whose psychoanalytic framing of politics pathologized Basque nationalism as a "deficiency of masculinity" (Mueller 40). While Aramburu's novel has been criticized by Basque critics for many reasons, including its anachronisms, reliance on stereotypes, and its disdain for Basque language literature (Zaldua); perhaps the most salient criticisms it has received have been those pointing out its conservative and patriarchal ideology, evident in the novel's structuring around the archetypes of phallic mothers, sexually rebellious daughters, and castrated fathers and sons ("Posimperialismo" 104). While the novel self-consciously presents itself as a definitive tale of the worst years of ETA's violence, this narrative is shrunken down to

the scale of melodrama and inter-familial conflict (two neighboring families; a misguided son of one family joins ETA and helps kill the successful patriarch of the other; children of both families grow up to be repressed adults with dysfunctional love lives; the two matriarchs of the families reconcile in the end). As a result, the nationalist politics of the novel's characters are presented merely as misguided forms of love and masculine homosociality, and are not even recognized as political. Meanwhile, Bécquer Seguín has noted the ways in which the novel's fixation on patriarchy feeds into neoliberal and anti-labor themes, with its martyr protagonist presented as a benevolent job-creator while his unionized employees are associated with "scumbaggery, mediocrity, and laziness" (Seguín 208). In spite of any literary merits the novel may have, its pretensions of being the definitive tale of Basque political violence are undermined by its politically conservative quirks and biases that often come off as editorializing on Aramburu's part (Seguín 221)—features that were ignored by most liberal commentators, but embraced by much of the neoliberal and right-wing establishment.

The success and discourses surrounding Aramburu's novel in turn led to the elevation of other writers who addressed the topic of ETA, creating other literary events and feeding into a greater metanarrative about the cultural processing of violence and historical memory in post-ETA Basque society. The Madrid-based social media analyst Gabriela Ybarra would earn a Euskadi Literature Prize and an International Booker Prize nomination for her autofictional novel *El comensal* (2015), which, among other things, details the assassination of her grandfather, the Francoist former mayor of Bilbao, by ETA in 1977, as well as the politically motivated threats that forced her family to abandon the Basque Country in the 1990s. The following year, the Santurtzi-born

writer Edurne Portela emerged as a leading voice on the topic of Basque historical memory after the publication of her 2016 essay *El eco de los disparos*, analyzing the emerging discourses of justice and historical memory in post-ETA film and art, and her 2017 novel *Mejor la ausencia*, which portrays political violence and urban decay in the industrial suburbs of Bilbao in the 1980s. In 2018, short-fiction writer Iban Zaldua—who had previously criticized Aramburu's novel for its anachronisms and overemphasis on private life (Zaldua)—published *Como si todo hubiera pasado*, a collection of stories about Basque political violence translated into Spanish for the first time.

While emerging out of the media cycle begun by *Patria*'s success, these writers and their works were often sold as more even-handed and less melodramatic in their framing of conflict than Aramburu. This is especially the case of the latter two authors, whose Basque origins and academic bonafides gave them an aura of authenticity. However, as Helena Miguélez-Carballeira argues, even this less vascophobic genre of post-ETA literature was replete with

> posturas manifiestamente autocríticas o auto-patologizantes [que representan] las diversas formas de participación en el conflicto por parte de la sociedad vasca (entiéndase por ejemplo la militancia política o lingüística) como actos históricamente arbitrarios, irreflexivos o meramente performativos. (Miguélez-Carballeira "La cultura del consenso" 65-66)

In this way, these works often fell into the same type of ahistorical and psychologizing narratives, which denied the Basque left recognition as political subjects. At the same time, the authors leveraged their familiarity with Basque society to present a form of self-criticism that appeared less overtly reductive than the "todo es ETA" rhetoric, yet ultimately reinforced similar ideological positions of Basque culpability.

While a reckoning with the decades-long violent conflict that impacted thousands of lives was both necessary and inevitable, we see in the cases like *Ocho apellidos vascos* and *Patria* that these narratives have served as convenient vehicles for conservative ideology and attacks on Basque culture, at times even coming to resemble "todo es ETA" discourse. This is not to say that the wave of post-ETA media was an artificial phenomenon, or simply the product of a few state-sanctioned public intellectuals. On the contrary, voyeuristic narratives of radical Basque resistance and the defeat of ETA resonated with Spanish audiences on a profound level. In the mass appeal of these books and films, Joseba Gabilondo identifies a Spanish fetishization of Basques as a violent and irrational Other. Through a discourse referred to alternatively as "terror tourism" and "political pornography,"[5] depictions of Basque terrorism, violence, and extremism can be enjoyed in the wake of the global war on terror and the defeat of ETA, while at the same time sublimating the Spanish state's own loss of sovereignty amidst globalization and neoliberalism. Through the consumption of texts like *Ocho apellidos vascos*, *Patria*, or even Dolores Redondo's Baztan Trilogy, the Spanish audience finds the sovereignty of the Spanish state and its normative subject reassured through its ability to vanquish terrorists and barbarians that pose a threat to the global order, in a maneuver that simultaneously normalizes state violence carried out in the name of a neoliberal elite. In Gabilondo's view, these novels and films

> permiten ver cómo funciona la lógica posimperial en la nueva Restauración (1978-2018) de un Estado español que está sufriendo un segundo momento de pérdida de soberanía provocada por la globalización y el neoliberalismo. Pero

[5] "Utilizo el término pornografía porque este discurso se define por su 'obscenidad, secreto, disfrute y naturaleza casi ilegal'. Y es que este discurso de vascos para no vascos, contiene el mismo deseo por una violencia obscena que sólo se puede disfrutar de manera ilegal." ("Posimperialismo" 103)

> ahora esta segunda pérdida solo puede leerse como posimperial: movimientos que desafían al Estado español, como el movimiento de los indignados del 15M o el proceso de independencia de Cataluña, pueden ser sublimados a través del País Vasco. El País Vasco y su historia violenta reciente, convertidos ahora en turismo pornográfico, sirven como afirmación de una victoria posimperial española contemporánea que reafirma la primera «victoria» de finales del siglo XIX, después de que las fuerzas carlistas fueran finalmente derrotadas en 1876. Así el País Vasco sirve como sublimación de todo conflicto contemporáneo español que atenta contra el orden de la nueva Restauración. ("Posimperialismo" 106)

What makes this discourse truly "pornographic," however, is the way in which the audience can also identify with terrorist characters and their ability to carry out acts of violence against the post-democratic system: "el País Vasco se ha convertido en un espacio donde los españoles se buscan a sí mismos, como en un espejo o reflejo, para comprender su nuevo estatus de sujetos sospechosos de terrorismo o violencia contra el Estado español" ("Posimperialismo" 103). The figure of the violent Basque Other in these texts therefore functions as a repository for Spanish political anxieties, becoming both the subject and object of global violence.

While Gabilondo understands this phenomenon as consisting primarily of discourses about Basques for non-Basques, this does not mean that the "batalla del relato" has not been internalized within Basque literary and academic circles. Amidst the wave of post-ETA literature, and terrorism consequently coming to be widely seen as the defining theme of Basque cultural production, the discourse on historical memory and political violence has become, for some Basque critics, the method to prove the *democratic* exceptionalism of the Basque Country. In this way, coexistence and consensus building are framed as an ambitious and unprecedented project undertaken by Basque cultural institutions—the Guggenheimization of historical memory, as it were.

Such attitudes are often reflected in the writings of critic Mari Jose Olaziregi, whose body of work celebrates the establishment of “una literatura vasca sobre la memoria ampliamente canonizada por los premios más prestigiosos de nuestro campo literario: los Premios Euskadi” (“Literatura vasca y conflicto político” 10). Citing the same article by Olaziregi, Ibai Atutxa and Iratxe Retolaza argue that the implicit framing of terrorism vs. the commonsense pursuit of peace and consensus belies a latent technocratic desire to neutralize dissent and whitewash the image of the Basque Country.

> Terrorista perbertsoaren kategoriak, beraz, normaltasun jakin bat eraikitzeko balio du: "La lógica política que alienta la actual cultura vasca persigue (...) el consenso y la normalidad". Argudiatzekoa da ea egungo euskal kulturak hain justu kontsentsu eta normaltasun horiek bilatzen dituenetz. Zalantzan jartzekoa da, baita ere, dudaezina balitz bezala kontsentsua eta normaltasuna batera bitartez gatazkaren existentzia bera ukatzen duen normaltasunaren indarkeria.[6] (“Gogoeta-leku dantzagarriagoak” 12)

Ibon Egaña’s recent article, “Desplazamientos de lo político: Del conflicto armado a los discursos feministas,” presents what could be considered a synthesis of these two opposing views, as he agrees that a consensus is emerging within Basque literature while rejecting the depoliticizing framing of normality: “El antagonismo radical de décadas pasadas ha dado paso a un tiempo en el que el consenso, el acuerdo y la convivencia son los ejes en torno a los que se articulan los discursos y las prácticas sobre el conflicto (y no solo sobre el conflicto)” (Egaña 222). In this view, the consensus found in post-ETA Basque literature does not constitute a goal in itself, but rather a

[6] The category of perverse terrorist, therefore, serves to construct a certain normality: "La lógica política que alienta la actual cultura vasca persigue (...) el consenso y la normalidad". It is worth arguing whether current-day Basque culture is seeking such consensus and normality in precisely this way. It is also worth questioning the violence of a normality that denies the very existence of conflict, as if consensus and normality were indisputable.

general acknowledgement that the end of ETA’s clandestine political violence represents a new political cycle in which political confrontation is simply carried out in new ways.

With respect to the local Basque-language culture industry—and moving beyond political violence as a defining theme—we find that the influence of consensus politics in the Basque mainstream is overdetermined by the unique challenges of being a minority language culture in a globalized society. In practice, this often means that literature and cinema in the Basque language must justify their existence either by emphasizing Basque difference or, alternatively, striving to achieve a legitimizing sense of parity with the cultural production of other nations and cultures in the Global North. Basque culture thereby becomes a site of managed visibility—valued insofar as it aligns with dominant frameworks of identity and cultural legitimacy—while the disruptive, emancipatory potential of Basque cultural expression risks being subordinated to the imperatives of normalization and marketability.

In the small but diverse world of Basque language literature, the weight of consensus politics is hard to pin down, given the presence of independent publishing houses that cater to more left-wing audiences. While this industry is bolstered by public subsidies, particularly from the Basque autonomous government, these institutions have little influence over the ideological content of literary output beyond the ability to elevate writers through awards such as the Euskadi Literature Prize, which does often skew towards liberal perspectives. Amidst the post-ETA decline in radical antagonism towards the state, Egaña notes that feminism and concerns over economic precarity have overtaken the national question as defining activist themes. The Basque language

literature of the 2010s was characterized by the emergence of feminist writers like Eider Rodriguez, Uxue Alberdi, and Karmele Jaio, whose short stories and novels have simultaneously tackled post-2008 insecurity and the gendered division of labor through representations of care work (Egaña 231-232). Other authors, including Aixa De la Cruz and Katixa Agirre, have found commercial success in the Spanish state (and in Agirre's case, also abroad) through explicitly feminist works, including De la Cruz's 2019 essay *Cambiar de idea* and Agirre's 2018 novel *Amek ez dute* (*Mothers Don't).*

Another, perhaps more visible, pattern over the past decade and a half has been the rise of a "neoliberal and global model geared towards spectacle and media-promotion," epitomized by celebrity authors Kirmen Uribe and Harkaitz Cano (Gabilondo, *Introduction to a Postnational History* 300). Both have earned acclaim outside of Euskal Herria through translations of their works into Spanish and English, and each has, to a degree, been ordained as an ambassador of Basque literature. Cano's commercial appeal has come from his brand of historical fiction novels based on real stories—namely, GAL's killing of ETA members Lasa and Zabala (*Twist*, 2011) and the life of folk singer Imanol Larzabal (*Fakirraren ahotsa*, 2018)—that recount violent events from the Basque Country of the 1980s through a stylized prose that at times obfuscates the conflictive themes of these works (Egaña 224). Uribe's work, meanwhile, revolves around a nostalgic, neo-rural framing of the Basque Country and its history (Gabilondo, *Introduction* 298), which like Bernardo Atxaga's novel *Obabakoak* (1988) two decades prior, "strategically [represents] the Basques as a modern nation and subject endowed with an anti-modern essence" (Gabilondo, *Before Babel* 249). Unlike Atxaga, however, Uribe foregrounds his own function as a conduit between the

cosmopolitan, 21st century Global North and the pastoralized Euskal Herria, both in his role as a public figure and as the autofictional protagonist of his canonical novel *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao* (2008). The centrality of this essence to his international popularity is evident in reviews of *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao* from major American and Japanese media outlets[7][8] which reflect the way in which his literature and public persona have given the impression that he is the first modern Basque writer. In this way, his success in validating Basque literature on a global stage carries with it the consequence of positioning it as based in a "spoken culture" from a "small country." Therefore, while Uribe has voiced progressive and left-wing political beliefs, his literature and persona nonetheless thrive within a neoliberal cultural logic that prioritizes international marketability. As such, Christian Claesson argues that Uribe's ambassadorial pretensions create the sensation that his works are addressing a non-Basque readership (Claesson, "Nongoa da Kirmen Uribe?"). For Basque readers, the appeal lies in a Basque literature of globalization that mostly bypasses contemporary local politics and instead validates Basques as participants in a cosmopolitan, transnational cultural sphere—one that emphasizes identity as an asset rather than as a site of political struggle. Such literature reflects the "clasemedianización del euskera" that has taken place since the early 2000s, as Euskara's use as an administrative language spoken by the middle class of the Basque Autonomous Community has threatened to

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[7] "Uribe has succeeded in realizing what is surely an ambition for many writers: a book that combines family, romances and literature, anchored deeply in a spoken culture but also in bookishness—and all without a single note of self-congratulation"-Times Literary Supplement

[8] "This writer who comes from a 'small country' begins its journey through the field of universal literature, searching for transnational communications"-Mainichi Shimbun (Both quotes can be found at https://kirmenuribe.eus/en/argitalpenak/bilbao-new-york-bilbao-en/)

eclipse the language's associations with working-class and rural contexts (*Arteka*, "'Todos lo vemos: el euskera se ha perdido'" 52).

In recent Basque cinema, political questions of Basque difference, autonomy, and political contestation are often displaced onto historical events, taking place during periods such as the Carlist Wars (*Handia*, 2017), the Basque witch trials of the 17th century (*Akelarre,* 2020), or the foundation of the Kingdom of Navarre in the Early Middle Ages (*Irati,* 2022). Such films can be marketed to Spanish and international audiences by appealing to Basque exoticism while also allowing for genuine examinations of Basque identity and *materia vasconica*. Meanwhile, Basque films set in the present frequently revolve around a juxtaposition of rural landscapes and nontraditional identities, whether the protagonists be LGBTQ+ (*20.000 especies de abejas*, 2023), immigrants (*Oreina*, 2018), or nonconforming feminists (*Amama*, 2015). These more meditative films invite reflection on evolving conceptions of Basque identity, however, they rarely invoke material politics in doing so. Interestingly, one of the few recent feature films to directly deal with economic precarity, *Ane* (2020), takes a clear political stance in its portrayal of radical resistance to the PNV's controversial high-speed rail plan as nothing more than juvenile rebellion that only serves to hurt social and economic progress.

It is television—effectively monopolized by EITB (Euskadi Irati Telebista) and its ETB1 channel—that best encapsulates the cultural logic of consensus, as most programming reflects a middle-class, liberal worldview. After the rise of streaming platforms and so-called prestige dramas in the 2010s, EITB began to invest more in scripted programming, in an attempt to create high-brow entertainment that provided

both high-stakes drama and complex themes. While two early Basque-language dramas depicted historical events pertaining to Basque political conflict, *Ihesaldia* (2019) and *Altsasu* (2020), these programs sought to avoid controversy by omitting explicit references to political ideology and framing their conflict as being between a linguistic minority and a Spanish state that misunderstands them. Otherwise, contemporary EITB series such as *Itxaso* (2023) have tended to depict comfortably middle-class characters living in purely euskaldun communities, thereby erasing both class tensions and the diglossia that is a defining feature of Basque daily life. This clearly reflects a desire for a cultural parity, as though the emphasis on middle-class liberal subjectivity somehow redeems or legitimizes Basque society. The Basque Country can therefore be portrayed as exceptional for its standard of living or its scenic landscapes, but never as politically exceptional. While socially liberal attitudes towards feminism and immigration are often highlighted in Basque programming, these ideas are portrayed as within the domain of respectable mainstream politics, erasing the decidedly leftist activist groups at the forefront of social struggles in the region. If Basque television storytelling has any ideological perspective, it is that Basque language and identity are not inherently political, and that living one's life in Euskara is not incompatible with consumerism. Of course, this should come as no surprise, given that the public broadcaster and its networks are the largest platform for advertising in the Basque language.

Popular music, in contrast, has proven to be fairly amenable to political contestation, even if we ignore the ways in which the lines between underground and mainstream are often blurred in the Basque context. Huntza and Zetak, the two most

commercially popular Basque pop bands of the 2010s and 2020s, respectively, have both been criticized for incorporating idealistic portrayals of Basque folk culture into their commercially palatable music and aesthetic, and yet both have voiced support for causes that fall outside of neoliberal consensus politics, such as support for self-managed spaces in songs such as Huntza's "Gaztetxeak bizirik" ("Gaztetxes Live"). Even the reggaeton artist Kai Nakai—who many believe to be an industry plant with connections to the PNV—was forced to apologize after going on a podcast hosted by PNV politician Beatriz Artolazabal in 2023, later writing on Twitter "Si mi colaboración en el podcast ha ofendido a alguna persona o ha generado dudas sobre mi compromiso y mis valores, pido disculpas" (López de Pariza). Even in this Basque pop space, which is becoming increasingly commercialized through the emergence of the Airaka and Oso Polita pop record labels, EITB's redoubled efforts to reach a youth audience, and the consolidation of event coordinating and management agencies (Ortiz de Villalba 26), artists are expected to at least pay lip service to radical politics—particularly as it pertains to gaztetxes and financial precarity facing youth—even if their music itself may not be activist in nature.

Finally, while the countercultural scene continues to be a vital incubator of Basque-language art and music, it has had to contend with two parallel crises since the turn of the millennium. The first crisis relates to the aesthetic exhaustion of the Basque punk music scene that has been at the forefront of youth culture and political expression since the 1980s, as straightforward punk and hard rock with populist lyrics became a trademark of the Basque music, often to the detriment of emerging styles and genres (Del Amo "Cambiando el ritmo" 100-101). From the late 1990s through the 2010s,

performances of non-rock genres, particularly electronic music, would often be met with chants of “hau ez da gure estiloa!” (“This is not our style!”), while bands seeking to follow and build upon contemporary trends in alternative rock or dance music ultimately found more success performing in English or Spanish and marketing themselves to a more global audience (Del Amo “Las gentes vascas también bailan” 96). Beyond aesthetics, the repetition of politically radical messages and posturing had the effect of diluting their impact over time. While politically conscious hip-hop music in Euskara initially seemed to have potential when Fermin Muguruza’s band Negu Gorriak first included a handful of rap-inspired tracks on their 1989 debut album, it never amounted to more than a marginal presence within the counterculture. Overall, the continued dominance of hard rock and punk at the expense of new styles or genres came to represent yet another manifestation of an uncanny Basque exceptionalism. And yet for many, the idea of a uniquely radical Basque culture being associated with a music scene embodying such stylistic conservatism was a paradox and a sign of failure.

The other, still ongoing, crisis is the decline in the number of countercultural spaces, as a combination of gentrification, urban redevelopment, and political targeting have led to the closure of radical bars and gaztetxes throughout the Basque Country, with larger cities the most acutely impacted. This has resulted in a shift in the landscape of Basque counterculture, forcing these spaces to adapt by becoming more transient, decentralized, and reliant on grassroots networks to sustain their activities. As we will see in the final chapter of this dissertation, the shock of the Covid-19 pandemic had the unexpected effect of leading to aesthetic breakthrough, while the underground scene

has redoubled its focus on political organization and self-management as a response to the rising cost of living and general precarity facing Gen Z youth.

Rancière's theories of political contestation and the structural violence inherent in political consensus offer a valuable framework for examining how identities and ideologies may be constructed, labeled, or delegitimized within the Basque context. Post-democracy here operates through the dual mechanisms of framing Basques as a violent Other—against whom the Spanish state defines itself as civilized—and through the erasure of radical politics from Basque-language media. This erasure reflects an inability or unwillingness to confront the contradictions of late capitalism, with major Spanish political parties instead prioritizing the unity and sovereignty of the Spanish state and Basque parties either insisting on exceptional technocratic governance of the Basque Autonomous Community or promoting a form of socialism that remains largely symbolic and struggles to articulate a viable alternative within the constraints of the existing political and economic order.

On the level of the Spanish state, post-ETA media has functioned not only to legitimize repressive political actions and legislation but also to constrain the space for broader cultural and political expressions of Basque identity. In the Basque Country itself, narratives of coexistence promoted in the wake of ETA's dissolution often align with financial interests and the pursuit of political normality, creating a culture industry deeply enmeshed in consensus politics and market-driven imperatives. This is particularly evident in high-cost sectors such as television and film, where the need for external funding often curtails the potential for more subversive or groundbreaking content. Yet, many artists and creatives working in Euskara seek to resist these

pressures, striving to use Basque culture as a means of questioning dominant ideologies and advancing alternative visions of art and politics. This ongoing tension reflects the incongruous coexistence of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces in Euskal Herria, a dynamic further exacerbated in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and the end of ETA, which have profoundly reshaped the region's political landscape.

1.5 Structures of Feeling: Cultural Materialist Approaches Toward Late-Capitalist Culture

This dissertation follows proposals such as that of Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen in applying a cultural materialist framework to analyze society's reactions to the post-2008 order, in which the contradictions and sclerotic nature of late capitalism have been laid bare, and ideological formations are undergoing a process of change, adapting to the new context of pervasive crisis and weakening neoliberal hegemony. Tendencies in contemporary artistic and cultural production are therefore read symptomatically to identify emerging feelings, hopes, and tensions. In cultural studies, the (notoriously slippery) term for these patterns of thought and affect is "structures of feeling," a concept formulated by Raymond Williams. Building upon Gramscian notions of hegemony, Williams's theory is based in the idea that "no dominant society or order of society, and therefore no dominant culture, in reality exhausts the full range of human practice, human energy, human intention" and that nascent patterns of thought will always arise in opposition to dominant or residual ideologies (*Culture and Materialism* 43). In his own words:

> The term is difficult, but 'feeling' is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of 'world-view' or 'ideology'. It is not only that we must go beyond

> formally held and systematic beliefs, though of course we have always to include them. It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable (including historically variable), over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences. (*Marxism and Literature* 132)

Williams also emphasizes that structures of feeling are not a monolithic or uniform phenomena shared identically by all members of a community. Rather, they represent unevenly distributed sensibilities or orientations, shaped by collective experiences yet interpreted and lived through in distinct ways by individuals.

> One generation may train its successor, with reasonable success, in the social character or the general cultural pattern, but the new generation will have its own structure of feeling, which will not appear to have come 'from' anywhere. For here, most distinctly, the changing organization is enacted in the organism: the new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting, taking up many continuities, that can be traced, and reproducing many aspects of the organization, which can be separately described, yet feeling its whole life in certain ways differently, and shaping its creative response into a new structure of feeling. (*The Long Revolution* 48-49)

In this sense, this dissertation's analysis of works from three distinct age cohorts—Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z—, while incidental, is worth contemplating, as the works speak to the lived experiences of several generations of Basques over the course of the 21st century.

Also key to Williams's theory is its connection to changes in modes of production and how people relate to them: "At times the emergence of a new structure of feeling is best related to the rise of a class (…) at other times to contradiction, fracture, or mutation within a class" (*Marxism and Literature* 134-135). In the Basque context, we observe such mutations in the origins of radical Basque counterculture during the 1960s, as new feelings of national and class identity coalesced around a militant labor

movement, resurgent nationalist sentiment, and the reinvigoration of Basque culture. As Ion Andoni Del Amo argues, that social cycle of politicized Basque culture effectively came to an end at the beginning of the 2010s, giving way to something new, yet undefined (*Party & Borroka* 306). This post-ETA transition and re-evaluation of strategies coincides with the emergence of the precariat, described by Guy Standing as a social class characterized by precarious employment, economic instability, and a lack of social and political security following the 2008 financial crisis (Standing). Amidst the resulting collapse of the Millennial age cohort's expectations of upward mobility (Lascity) and a general pessimism among Generation Z towards the possibility of systemic change and long-term stability, one would expect new forms of expression and self-identification to emerge, reflecting the frustrations and uncertainties of these precarious conditions.

In approaching the interrelated concepts of post-democracy, late capitalism, and postmodern culture in the post-2008 context, it is essential to consider the influential contributions of English political theorist and music critic Mark Fisher, whose work closely aligns with the principles of cultural materialism. In particular, his concept of capitalist realism confronts a reality in which "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (*Capitalist Realism* 2) in order to highlight the ways in which feelings of dread and malaise manifest themselves in postmodern culture, with detached irony becoming the last refuge from nihilism. Fisher's concept of hauntology—appropriated from Jacques Derrida's later writings—further deepens this analysis by examining how cultural production is haunted by "lost futures"—possibilities for social and political transformation that have been foreclosed under neoliberalism.

While the austerity and technocratic governance of the post-crisis years underscored the entrenched nature of capitalist realism as the dominant logic of liberal democratic governance, this does not mean that resistance or critique has disappeared. On the contrary, vague feelings of frustration and discontent have begun to crystallize into subtle critiques of postmodern stagnation and its inability to account for our shifting social realities. Capitalist realism and postmodern ironic detachment are not inevitable, but features of contemporary life that can be acknowledged and confronted, even as we ourselves may be products of this environment. As van den Akker and Vermeulen argue in their proposal of an emergent 'metamodern' cultural logic, "Now that History appears to have, once more, been kick-started, the postmodern vernacular has proven increasingly inapt and inept in coming to terms with our changed social situation" (2).

In this sense, the texts analyzed in the following chapters are notable not only for their implicit and explicit critiques of post-democratic political logic under late capitalism, but also for their aesthetic approaches, which carry latent forms of political critique through their approach to postmodernity. As Fredric Jameson observes, "every position on Postmodernism in culture—whether apologia or stigmatization—is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today" (*Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 3). In the chapters that follow, we will find that the selected texts exhibit a complex relationship with postmodernity—whether by subverting the culture of spectacle and celebrity towards anticapitalist ends, portraying characters whose postmodern self-awareness becomes a source of existential paralysis, or attempting to short-circuit

postmodern logic through a barrage of ambiguous signifiers and blend of meta- and post-ironic humor.

1.6 Contemporary Basque Culture: On the Selected Works

The texts I have chosen to analyze here represent a heterogeneous and even eclectic ensemble, with works from different media, authored by members of varying age cohorts with distinct life experiences. There is no pretension of these chapters representing apples-to-apples comparisons: a transmedia project is not comparable to a pair of novels, nor do either of these elicit easy comparisons to the musical catalogs and videos of two popular groups that themselves diverge in their approaches to music and politics. What they represent in the aggregate, however, is the dynamic nature of contemporary Basque cultural production, and it is one of the activist aims of this dissertation to highlight this. While selected works and authors all offer broadly left-wing Basque perspectives, they represent different generations, and more importantly, starkly contrasting visions of what Basque identity and (counter)culture represent in the 21st century.

The chapter “The ‘Beltza’ Mirror: Reinterpreting Radical Basque Exceptionalism Through Blackness in Fermin Muguruza’s Black is Beltza Transmedia Project” analyzes the way in which the punk-musician-turned-director seeks to reaffirm the notion of an innately radical Basque spirit through the politically combative narratives of his animated films *Black is Beltza* (*2018*) and *Black is Beltza II: Ainhoa* (*2022*), as well as his feature-length documentary *NOLA?* (*2015*). The activist themes of the project are underscored in Muguruza’s conception of the films as part of an innovative transmedia project that

subverts the neoliberal culture of spectacle and marketing. Black is Beltza is essentially a large-scale, cooperative DIY project, centered on in-person participation and the collaboration between Muguruza, left-wing actors from the Basque Country and abroad, and the independent Basque organizations that financially sponsored the film. The making-of documentaries *Beltza Naiz* (2018) and *Ainhoa: Making Of* (2022) not only highlight this rejection of market ideology but also present the wider project as a reflection of the Euskal Herria itself, inferring that Basque society is uniquely capable of building counter-institutions based in principles of solidarity and social justice.

All of this is structured through comparison of the Basque experience to that of Black Americans, the wider African Diaspora, and the postcolonial struggles of the Third World. This paradigm of Basqueness *qua* Blackness, emphasized in the title of the project, operates through the lens of what sociologists Ion Andoni Del Amo and Josu Larrinaga have dubbed countercultural ethnogenesis—the emergence or reinvention of ethnopolitical identities through countercultural production. In portraying the protest music of the late 1960s in *Black is Beltza* and the jazz scene of post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans in *Nola?*, Muguruza links Black music with the struggle for democratic and economic emancipation, and in doing so, creates parallels with the radical Basque music tradition of which he himself is a canonical figure.

The following chapter, titled "Listless Tourists: Postmodern Basque Subjectivities and the Specter of the Radical in Katixa Agirre's *Los turistas desganados* and Aixa de la Cruz's *La línea del frente*," analyzes two novels published in 2017, featuring uncannily similar plots and centered around the very particular subjectivity of progressive, middle-class, cosmopolitan Basques who are profoundly ambivalent about radical Basque

nationalism. Frequently discussed within the scope of a post-ETA literature of coexistence and historical memory, these novels are perhaps better understood as post-crisis narratives that simultaneously account for the post-ETA context of the Basque Country. While themes of political violence are certainly present, I argue that the identity crises at the heart of both novels are based more in anxieties about class mobility than national identity. Meanwhile, the protagonists' sensitivity to stigmatizing "todo es ETA" discourses in politics and media further obliges them to question their faith in liberal democratic institutions that they have bought into their entire lives. And yet, in these texts, the figure of the Basque radical amounts to nothing more than a specter, reflecting the societal contradictions that the protagonist struggles to reconcile with their inability to imagine an alternative to capitalism. While they believe Basque radical resistance to be an emancipatory force in many ways, the protagonists of both novels seemingly arrive at the conclusion that their postmodern, technocratic, and cosmopolitan outlook is incompatible with the marginality that radical activism entails.

Finally, recent trends in Basque popular music and their relation to emerging structures of feeling among working-class Basque youth are the focus of "Everyday Youth: Chill Mafia, Tatxers and the (Meta)music of Basque Gen Z." Here, I argue that the simultaneous eruption of both a Basque urban/pop music scene led by the collective Chill Mafia and a new underground post-punk scene led by the band Tatxers reflect a decline—or at the very least, a mutation—in the idea of Basque exceptionalism as an anchoring principle of radical politics. As members of both of these Pamplona-based groups are wont to point out, their generation, born in the late 1990s and early 2000s, has grown up amidst multiple structural crises, and as a result have little hope for

upward mobility or economic stability. At the same time, growing up within a working-class, Basque-speaking milieu saturated with radical messages in local politics and culture, they have naturally come to question the efficacy of a Basque radical politics against a system whose mechanisms of oppression are global in scale. In analyzing the ways in which these attitudes are reflected in the music of these two groups, I borrow Ernesto Castro's concept of 'metamusic'—a genre or movement that transcends aesthetics and comes to represent a distinct perspective about the ethics and politics of musical production.

Chill Mafia are the group most responsible for bringing contemporary trends in pop music to the insular world of Basque music. While they don't neatly correspond with the trap music subgenre, as some critics initially labeled them, they nonetheless introduced the *cultural logic* of trap music to the Basque Country, repackaging Basque difference through meta-ironic humor and hedonism in order to explore feelings of nihilism and working-class dignity in times of perpetual crisis. Tatxers, meanwhile, reject four decades of Basque punk orthodoxy to draw inspiration from the post-punk movement of the late 70s and early 80s. This revival is based less in nostalgia than in a conscious attempt to return to a music that is radical in both politics *and* aesthetics, in the hopes of disrupting cultural stagnation and fostering a renewed spirit of experimentation and dissent. Overall, both projects can be considered a return to material politics, at the expense of metanarratives of an inherently radical Basque spirit. The distinct yet interrelated musical projects of Chill Mafia and Tatxers are a reminder of Raymond Williams's notion that no hegemony can encompass the whole of human expression, and that alternatives in the form of emerging affects and ideologies are

inevitable and may seem to arise out of nowhere, particularly in times of transition or uncertainty.

Chapter 2: The ‘Beltza’ Mirror; Reinterpreting Radical Basque Exceptionalism Through Blackness in Fermin Muguruza’s Black is Beltza Transmedia Project

‘Black is Beltza’[9] is the name of the transmedia project by the musician, filmmaker, and activist Fermin Muguruza, spanning from 2014 to 2022. During this time, Muguruza’s entire creative output was dedicated to imbuing this slogan with meaning through the creation of original music, graphic novels, animation films, and documentaries, along with a slew of in-person events including museum exhibitions, concerts, music workshops, and film screenings. Through its disparate texts and spectacles, the Black is Beltza project operates on two levels. First, it seeks to create new ways of conceptualizing a politicized, radical Basque identity by looking back at the historical emergence of counterculture and liberation movements worldwide during the second half of the 20th century. On a second level, the explicitly anticapitalist nature of the project is emphasized in both the overt message of the fictional texts, as well as through the production of the films, which itself is depicted through documentaries that highlight the collaborative, cross-cultural nature of Muguruza’s work. On the whole, Black is Beltza serves as a mirror in which a Basque audience may view the recent political and social struggles of the African Diaspora and the Third World and see the radical potential of an exceptional, anticapitalist Basque identity reflected back at them.

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[9] ‘Black is Beltza’ is the title of a 2014 graphic novel and its 2018 film adaptation. It is also the title of a 2014 song by Muguruza. To avoid confusion, the remainder of this analysis will refer to the wider transmedia project without italics or quotation marks. *Black is Beltza* (italicized) may refer to the graphic novel, film adaptation, or both, depending on the specified context.

This chapter will focus primarily on Muguruza's film output during this eight-year period, including not only the animated feature films *Black is Beltza* (2018) and *Black is Beltza II: Ainhoa* (2022), but also his documentary on the New Orleans jazz scene *NOLA?* (2015) and the films *Beltza Naiz* (2018) and *Ainhoa: Making Of* (2022), which document the development of the animated films and the wider transmedia project. These films represent a heterogeneous ensemble, but even on an individual level, they are eclectic, dense, and at times overburdened by an excess of details. Because of this, they are best understood when holistically viewed within the context of the overall project. This is especially true in the case of the animated films, whose curious use of specific signifiers and intense focus on historical minutiae—often having little to do with the plot—at times render them practically unintelligible to those not already familiar with Muguruza and the sources he draws from in his work. This speaks to the transmedia nature of the project, a term that Muguruza insists on, as opposed to multimedia. While the films mostly function as coherent standalone narratives, they also serve to direct the viewers to ideas beyond the immediacy of the text by introducing as many concepts as possible, oftentimes through shoehorned dialogue or oblique visual references. So even as they undoubtedly represent the centerpiece of the project, the plot of the films is less central to the project than one might assume, as the stories serve as a vehicle for Muguruza's musings on history, identity, revolution, music, and even his own career as a cultural activist. The parallel events and artifacts of Black is Beltza therefore do not exist merely to promote the film, but rather are themselves conceived as part of a larger text, meant to give additional context and meaning to the wide array of ideas expressed in the films. Because of the interconnected, (self-)referential nature of Black is Beltza, it

is necessary to review both Muguruza's career before *Beltza*, as well as the trajectory the project took over its eight-year run, before delving into an analysis of the films on an individual level.

2.1 Fermin Muguruza's Career 1984-2014

Born on April 20th, 1963 in the border town of Irun, Muguruza began his career in music by founding the band Kortatu with his brother Iñigo in 1984. Inspired by English bands such as The Clash and The Specials, Kortatu blended punk and ska music, with song themes alternating between the ongoing Basque conflict and international struggles in Apartheid South Africa and Nicaragua. Recording three studio albums between 1984 and 1988, Kortatu came to represent a vanguard of the Rock Radical Vasco movement, which encompassed a wide range of bands from the Basque Autonomous Community and Navarre, singing in both Basque and Spanish, united by their critical disposition towards authority during a time in which the Movida Madrileña and its celebratory, liberal sensibilities dominated youth culture in the rest of the Spanish State.

After dissolving Kortatu in 1988, Fermin and his brother would establish the band Negu Gorriak in 1990. This group distinguished itself from its predecessor not only by singing exclusively in Euskara, but also incorporating the sounds and aesthetics of African American music, especially politically militant hip-hop groups such as Public Enemy and N.W.A. The Negu Gorriak project would also represent a shift in focus towards self-management and DIY principles, as Muguruza created the record label

Esan Ozenki ("Say it Loud") to distribute the band's music as well as support other groups producing music in the Basque language.

After Negu Gorriak, Muguruza embarked on an eclectic solo music career that would be defined by collaboration with like-minded artists, both in the Basque Country and abroad. This began in 1997 with Muguruza joining the Basque hardcore band Dut, recording one album and embarking on a tour of Latin America and Europe. The album *Brigadistak Sound System* (1999) was recorded in 11 separate cities across 8 countries in collaboration with local artists. *FM 99:00 Dub Manifest* (2000) explicitly dealt with themes of globalization and the defense of Basque-language institutions. *Euskal Herria Jamaika Clash* (2006) was recorded in Jamaica with the collaboration of Jamaican reggae artists and producers.

The production of *Euskal Herria Jamaika Clash* also served as the beginning of Fermin Muguruza's career as a documentary filmmaker, as the behind-the-scenes film *Bass-que Culture* (2006) would be released alongside the album. This would be followed by *Checkpoint Rock* (2009), a film about Palestinian musicians in various musical genres and their lives in the occupied West Bank and Israeli state. The success of *Checkpoint Rock* would lead to Muguruza creating a docuseries for Al Jazeera, *Next Music Station* (2011), about contemporary music in the Arab world. *Zuloak* (2012) a mockumentary about an all-women rock group, was co-written by Eider Rodríguez and represents Muguruza's first foray into scripted storytelling. Finally, *No More Tour* (2013) documented Muguruza's world tour as he and his band played shows across five continents.

Throughout his career, music has gone hand-in-hand with political activism, as Muguruza has sought to make an impact beyond the message of his lyrics while demonstrating his values through his actions. At the height of Kortatu's fame and influence, Muguruza and his brother enrolled in Basque language classes so that they could write more lyrics in Euskara. Negu Gorriak's first concert was held in front of the maximum-security Herrera de La Mancha prison in Ciudad Real as part of an event held in solidarity with the families of ETA prisoners. While he denounced the use of political violence as a means for Basque independence in the 90s, Muguruza has had concerts in Madrid canceled due to bomb threats and protests by terrorism victims' associations. At the 2003 Premios de la Música in Madrid, Muguruza accepted the award for best song in the Basque language while clad in an *Egunkaria* t-shirt, a gesture in solidarity with the Basque language newspaper that had been closed down by the Spanish government due to tenuous accusations of collaboration with ETA. At the podium, Muguruza denounced "el cierre por las armas de un periódico, el único que teníamos en euskera, el único que teníamos para defender la música en euskera" and declared his solidarity with the former employees of the recently shut down newspaper. His protest was greeted by loud jeers from the crowd, and he was later confronted by journalists in the pressroom and accused of "apología del terrorismo" (Sotero). Yet, as Luís Saenz de Viguera notes,

> La vinculación constante y unívoca con ETA en la que los medios de comunicación hegemónicos estatales le relocalizan constantemente plantea una serie de paradojas relevantes (...) por un lado, si bien probablemente será uno de los músicos estatales que a más lugares haya llegado en sus giras contraglobales. (Saenz de Viguera 304)

Indeed, Muguruza's bands have held concerts and events in places where few pop artists dare to go on their world tours, including El Salvador, Western Sahara, the West Bank, Kurdistan, and Vietnam. Such stops represent less an opportunity to expand his fan base than a symbolic bridging of Basque culture with leftist causes and movements for stateless minorities. As global culture has become increasingly dominated by Western corporations that disseminate art through digital spaces, Muguruza has consciously gone against the current by prioritizing in-person events and collaboration with non-Western artists.

By framing himself as a cultural ambassador of the Basque Country in his trips and projects abroad and pursuing alternative, self-managed models of production and distribution, Muguruza self-consciously takes on the mantle of representative of a radical Basque identity that exists beyond the dictates of capitalism and market ideology. While his music has not been a centerpiece of Basque youth culture since the 90s, he has been able to maintain relevance and the respect of his Basque audience by pursuing ideals and his own unique artistic vision rather than trying to keep up with contemporary trends. Black is Beltza represents the culmination of this ethos.

2.2 The Black is Beltza Project 2014-2022

The genesis of the Black is Beltza project and the fictional story around which it revolves can be traced to a photo from the municipal archive of Pamplona, showing the *gigante* and *cabezudo* carnival figures of the San Fermin festival parading through New York's Fifth Avenue as part of an event on October 10th, 1965. The photo had a handwritten note on it, explaining that the Black giants (the eight San Fermin giants are

comprised of four pairs meant to represent the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa) were excluded from the event due to racial tensions in the US. This unexpected historical connection between these symbols of Basque folk culture and the American Civil Rights movement would linger with Muguruza until years later in Cuba, when he heard a story from a former Cuban spy about a mission to help a member of the Black Panther Party escape from the US and receive political asylum in Cuba. Reflecting on the world historical events that unfolded in the years following that forgotten day in New York, Muguruza began to piece together a narrative that combined these two anecdotes into a single story through the lens of his radical Basque internationalist perspective.

> The parade in New York, the secret operation led by Cuba, and the cities involved in the story set in 1967 started to twist and turn around our narration like the giants in the Pamplona parade during the San Fermin Festival: New York and The Factory, Harlem and the racial disturbances sparked by the death of Malcolm X, the Apollo Room and soul, with Muhammad Ali floating like a butterfly, stinging like a bee, Cuba and its Yoruba rhythms, Mexico and the infinite Juan Rulfo, Los Angeles and Tin Tan, the Monterey festival, the final of the Basque verse-making competition featuring Xalbador, San Francisco and Black Power, the Expo in Montreal and Charles de Gaulle, Algeria and Cheikha Rimitti, Madrid under the decrepit Franco dictatorship and the presence of Che, always Che. An intriguing story combining fiction with reality; one that speaks of espionage, revolution and love and hovering over everything was Vietnam, the 6-Day War, the KGB, the CIA, Mossad, the guerrillas in Bolivia, the liberation movements across the world, psychedelic drugs, sexual liberation and the revolution of orgasm, and above all, the music of Otis Redding: “Respect”. (“Director’s Statement”)

The eventual result was the 2014 graphic novel *Black is Beltza*, co-written with the Basque novelist Harkaitz Cano and illustrated by the Argentinian Jorge Alderete, which connects the dots between all these disparate people, places, organizations, and ideas by taking the form of a comic inspired by *Corto Maltese*, a swashbuckling adventure series featuring frequent cameos from real-life historical figures. The influence of Hugo Pratt’s comic is especially evident in the background and character design of *Black is*

Beltza's protagonist, who like Pratt's titular character, is the son of an English adventurer and sports an earring and pronounced sideburns. The story's daring and handsome comic book hero, Manex Unanue, serves as the link between the fateful San Fermin parade in New York and the secret mission that took place several years later, as Muguruza imagines a fantastical scenario in which one of the parade participants was also the Cuban spy who helped rescue a Black Panther activist. Set against the political violence of the Cold War and the emergent countercultures of the 1960s, the story is filled with over-the-top action as well as sex, drugs and rock n' roll. Rather than just serving as cheap thrills, these elements of the text are intended to represent the evolving attitudes towards consciousness, culture, and sexuality during the latter half of the 1960s and the role of music in expressing and influencing these attitudes. Even though very little of the story takes place in the Basque Country, it is fundamentally about the global historical context of revolution and counterculture that made a radical Basque identity possible.

Because of the abundance of themes and historical context contained within the story, Black is Beltza was conceived as part of a transmedia project from the outset. The defining feature of this transmedia approach of Muguruza's is the way in which it repeatedly approaches the same story and themes through different audiovisual platforms and experiences in order to expand upon ideas that may only be alluded to in the narrative. One early example of this is the song and music video "Black is Beltza" (2014), featuring the American rapper and activist Boots Riley, which reinterprets the story of the graphic novel through music, with lyrics about the San Fermin giants and civil rights icons sung over a 60s soul music-inspired track. The original centerpiece of

the wider Black is Beltza project, however, was an exhibition in Bilbao's Azkuna Zentroa explaining the different historical events and periods depicted in the graphic novel and their relevance to Muguruza's internationalist conceptualization of history, culture and identity. The exhibition also featured a series of interviews with the graphic novel's creators, musical performances, screenings of the films *Free Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners* (2012) and *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), and workshops related to hip-hop dance and DJing.

The year following the release of the graphic novel, Muguruza traveled to New Orleans, Louisiana to record the album *Nola?: Irun Meets New Orleans* (2015). The album was produced along with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band and featured a tracklist that included hits from throughout Muguruza's entire career, in addition to two covers of local jazz songs. During the production of the album, Muguruza also shot the documentary *Nola?* (2015), and did a brief tour of Madrid, the Basque Country and Catalonia with his "New Orleans Basque Orkestra." The band's concert in Bilbao's Kafe Antzokia featured an appearance by famed African American activist Angela Davis, in commemoration of the Black is Beltza project.

In 2016, as Muguruza began work on the film adaptation of the graphic novel, the center of the Black is Beltza universe temporarily shifted to the Arts Santa Mònica complex in Barcelona, which hosted a renewed edition of the exhibition on the graphic novel that Summer. Muguruza's residency in Barcelona also led to two collaborations with local music artists. First, there was the album *Black is Beltza ASM Sessions* (2016) recorded at Arts Santa Mónica with the Catalan reggae artist Chalart58, composed entirely of songs inspired by the plot of the graphic novel. The following year Muguruza

teamed up with the Barcelona-based techno group The Suicide of Western Culture to record the album *B-Map 1917+100* (2017), with each song dedicated to a city associated with radical left politics, liberation struggles, or Muguruza's own travels ("Berlin - Ulrike Meinhof," "Beirut - Never Dies," "Baton Rouge - Black is Beltza," etc.).

2018 represents the high water mark of the transmedia project, with the animated feature film edition of *Black is Beltza* premiering at the San Sebastian Film Festival that year. The Gipuzkoan capital also hosted a new, updated exhibition on both the making of the film and the graphic novel at the San Telmo Museum. In conjunction with the film's release, Muguruza produced and directed the making-of documentary *Beltza naiz* ("I am Black"), about the origins of the transmedia project and the production of the animated film. The documentary prominently featured Amaia Jackson, a Basque woman of Tanzanian descent, as both a narrator and symbol of the project's conceptualization of an Afro-Basque identity. In addition to the documentary, there was also a coffee table book *The Art of Black is Beltza*, which featured images from the 2018 exhibition as well as writings from Muguruza and Eider Rodriguez about the transmedia project. Finally, Muguruza teamed up with the Bizkaian brewery Boga to release a Black is Beltza stout, with the proceeds from the beer's sales going to organizations aiding migrants in the Basque Country.

After touring with the film and holding in-person screenings and concerts across Spain, Germany, France and Mexico, Muguruza began work on a second Black is Beltza film in 2019. Co-written by Harkaitz Cano and Isa Campo, *Black is Beltza II: Ainhoa* (2022) follows the adventures of the daughter of the first film's protagonist. Taking place in 1988, the sequel depicts the conflicts of the late Cold War era, as well

as the Basque counterculture scene that launched Muguruza's career, with Muguruza and his brother Iñigo even appearing as characters in several early scenes. A *Black is Beltza II* graphic novel, illustrated by Susanna Martín, was adapted from the film's screenplay and published concurrently with the movie. Overall, the release of *Ainhoa* featured fewer transmedia events and artifacts than had accompanied the first film, as there were no exhibitions, concerts or interactive workshops held in conjunction with the film's release. However, Muguruza did travel extensively in order to present screenings of the film at theaters and festivals across Spain, France, Switzerland and Colombia. The sequel's most notable spinoff was its soundtrack, released as a double album on vinyl and featuring an eclectic mix of Basque folk, iconic 80s punk hits and Middle Eastern music representative of the film's settings. Boga brewery, now an official sponsor of the film, crafted a second commemorative beer that, appropriately enough, was a double stout. Overall, the lack of will to continue the project past the second film was evident in *Ainhoa*'s corresponding behind-the-scenes film, *Ainhoa: Making Of* (2022), which was based largely around a sit-down interview between Muguruza and Amaia Jackson, marking the first time that Muguruza had appeared as an interviewee in his own documentary.

By 2023, Muguruza had debuted his new documentary, *Bidasoa 2018-2023*, about the deaths caused by the French government's policy of not allowing African migrants to cross the river that forms the border between the French state and Muguruza's hometown of Irun. While the film features some of the themes present in the Black is Beltza project, and Muguruza has hosted dual screenings of *Ainhoa* and *Bidasoa*, the latest film nonetheless marks a new chapter in Muguruza's career as a

cultural activist, and a transition out of what could be considered the most productive stretch in his 40-year career. While the Black is Beltza transmedia project did not have the same generation-defining impact as his music did in the 80s and 90s, it nonetheless stands as a testament to the singular vision of Muguruza and the Basque society that is both his inspiration and largest audience.

2.3 The Themes of Black is Beltza

It is evident that Muguruza has always seen his work as a form of activism and that the political discourses transmitted through both his lyrics and DIY practices are his primary focus. Black is Beltza is no different in this regard, but because of its unique nature as a transmedia project that blends history and fictional narrative across multiple platforms, the activist intentions of Muguruza manifest themselves in striking—and at times, distracting—ways. In the case of the animated films, it is apparent that Muguruza conceives of the narratives in the same way he would one of his albums: while there are overarching themes and aesthetics, each scene taking place in a different city with new characters represents more specific topics, functioning as though they were discrete songs within an LP. This approach is even more clear in the documentary *NOLA?*, in which the songs that Muguruza-the-musician records with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band feature lyrics that mirror the stories that Muguruza-the-director tells about the city of New Orleans.

This conceptualization of the films as albums creates an ever-present tension between the transmission of ideas and development of cohesive narratives, most noticeable in the presentation of the fictional characters as flat and unchanging, not

existing as individuals but rather as representatives of a particular ethno-political perspective. Because of this, a large portion of the dialogue in the films is dedicated to characters explaining the culture and political struggles of their ethnic group, even as these discussions typically divert from the immediate events of the story. Meanwhile in *NOLA?* this tension is felt in the strained segues made by the radio-host-turned-narrator George Ingmire, who must transition between such disparate topics as voodoo and gentrification.

The digressions, awkward dialogue, and lack of character depth that present themselves as flaws within the standalone films can therefore be understood as necessary sacrifices Muguruza makes in order to suit these works to the pedagogical, activist aims of the overall project. Ultimately, the presentation of a coherent, linear narrative is less important than the films' ability to transmit the core themes of Black is Beltza. In the films' numerous non-sequiturs and oblique references, we can identify four core themes of the project: Black subjectivity, revolutionary struggle, music as a vehicle for activism, and Basque exceptionalism. These themes serve as politically radical lenses through which the Basque audience may reexamine their identity and history, functioning in parallel but at times overlapping, dialoguing with, or even contradicting one another.

The most striking feature of both the original narrative of the comic/animated film and the overall project is its focus on Blackness and Black identity, conveyed immediately through its title, which comes from a question asked by the story's Black Panther protagonist at the end of the graphic novel: "How do you say 'black' in Basque?" The slogan "black is beltza" thus interpellates a Basque speaker and a Black

addressee who seeks to reinterpret their identity in a small way, through a Basque lens. But Blackness and the Black Power movement, much like the postcolonial struggles and counterculture depicted in the narrative, also become a mirror in which the Basque audience may recognize some elements of themselves: a historically oppressed ethnic minority that gained a greater sense of political and cultural identity amid a popular movement against state oppression. Of course, a direct comparison between the Basque and African American experiences cannot be made, nor is that Muguruza's intention. Instead, the Afrocentric themes in his work serve to draw parallels to the successes of African Diaspora and Basques in creating influential culture and political thought as a response to systemic oppression. Furthermore, this tentative association with the marker of blackness in the context of the Basque struggle parallels Stuart Hall's analysis of the ethnogenesis of South Asian-descended people in the Caribbean. Hall describes how they appropriated the term "Black" in the 1970s as a way to challenge power structures, foster solidarity, and come to new understandings of their ethnic identity:

> What these communities have in common, which they represent through taking on the 'black' identity, is not that they are culturally, ethnically, linguistically or even physically the same, but that they are seen and treated as 'the same' […] by the dominant culture. It is their exclusion which provides […] the common 'axis of equivalence' of this new identity. However, despite the fact that efforts are made to give this 'black' identity a single or unified content, it continues to exist as an identity alongside a wide range of other differences. […] 'Black' is thus an example, not only of the political character of new identities—i.e. their positional and conjunctural character (their formation in and for specific times and places)—but also of the way identity and difference are inextricably articulated or knitted together in different identities, the one never wholly obliterating the other. (Hall 308-309)

This key element of the Black is Beltza project represents a culmination of an artistic vision of Muguruza's dating to 1990 and the formation of his second musical group, Negu Gorriak, which sought a new form of militant expression through hip-hop sounds and aesthetics. In the Black Power discourses of Public Enemy's music and Spike Lee's 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*, Muguruza saw not just a new and exciting aesthetic, but also "a language, a set of resources, and knowledge with which to articulate similar but not identical struggles and concerns" (Urla 3). Their songs go beyond merely adapting Black Nationalist discourse by paying homage to historical icons of Black pride such as Malcolm X, James Brown, and the Black Panthers, openly acknowledging their ideological and discursive debt to African American culture dating back to the 1960s. This often took the form of appropriation of well-known songs and lyrics from legendary Black musical artists. The rap song "Esan ozenki" ("Say it loud"), from the group's 1990 debut album, features a chorus that translates to "Say it loud, I'm Basque and I'm proud," thus echoing lyrics made famous by James Brown decades earlier. Six years later, they would record "Errespetua" ("Respect"), a cover of Otis Redding's song of the same name, which would feature prominently in both the graphic novel and film adaptation of *Black is Beltza*.

Muguruza's vision of Basqueness as Blackness in the music of Negu Gorriak was not limited to appropriation, however. Their songs often featured a complex discourse that seemingly conflated Basque and Black identities. The best example is perhaps the group's 1993 antiracism anthem "Kolore bizia" ("Living Color"), which features the lyrics "Txanpona botatzea bezala balitz, iparra ala hegoa, gerla kulturala, anai-arrebak defendatuko ditugu. Afro-euskaldunak garela ez ahaztu" ("Like flipping a

coin, north or south, the cultural war, we'll defend our brothers and sisters. Don't forget that we are Afro-Basques"). Jacqueline Urla's 2001 essay "We Are All Malcolm X: Hip Hop and the Basque Political Imaginary" helps us make sense of this conjunction of seemingly disparate racial signifiers:

> In appropriating rap, in calling themselves "Afro-Basques," and becoming, for a moment, the outlaw rapper, Negu Gorriak's members are not pretending they are black. Nor are they saying, our struggles are identical. Theirs is not a claim to a blood tie, or even a common identity (...) They are asserting a claim of identity based on (...) a shared identity of passions, not biology. Negu Gorriak's performances of hybrid Basque hip hop may be better understood not as "Americanization" or imitation but as a strategic deployment of signifiers that affords youth a window into their own situation and what it might share with that of racialized minorities. (Urla 12-13)

As with the lyrics and aesthetics of Negu Gorriak, Black is Beltza employs references to African American cultural history and a "strategic deployment of signifiers" to articulate a vision of Basque-Black brotherhood. However, it goes farther in its elaboration of the idea of Afro-Basque identity by featuring actual Basques of African descent, in the form of the fictional character Ainhoa and the protagonist of the making-of documentaries, Amaia Jackson. Therefore, through both fictional and real-life narratives, we see Black is Beltza develop an updated understanding of Afro-Basqueness that corresponds with the presence of African immigrants and their children in the Basque Country today, something that in 1990 was more of a theoretical scenario than an everyday reality. In centering Black Basques, Muguruza emphasizes the ways in which their perspectives enrich the Basque ethno-political imaginary by incorporating experiences of economic colonization and racial discrimination.

Beyond the theme of Blackness as a subjectivity and aesthetic, Black is Beltza also features a multitude of references to anti-fascist and anti-imperialist struggles,

which serve as both a form of commemoration, as well as a way in which to recontextualize Basque political struggle. *Black is Beltza*'s setting in the 1960s provides opportunities to represent the height of the Third Worldist movement that inspired leftist Basque nationalism, represented by Che Guevara and post-independence Algeria. Meanwhile *Ainhoa* depicts the political struggles of the 1980s as interconnected, portraying the ways in which the United States profited from clandestine proxy wars in Latin America and Afghanistan and used the drug trade to destabilize radical movements in the West. Throughout both films, characters shout revolutionary slogans and go out of their way to explain the stakes of their particular political struggles, whether it is the right to speak one's native language in 1960s Quebec and Algeria, or freedom from foreign military intervention in Lebanon and Afghanistan. Even *NOLA?* depicts a 21st century form of imperialism in the form of the neoliberal "shock doctrine" that was applied in New Orleans's post-Katrina recovery. In the historical struggles of other groups, ranging from African Americans to Kurds and Nicaragua's Sandinistas, Muguruza sees a series of parallels and connections with recent Basque history that are reflected throughout the Black is Beltza project.

The third central theme of Black is Beltza is the importance of music as a tool for political organizing and expressing unique ethnic identities—things that for Muguruza are two sides of the same coin. While the San Fermin parade in New York and the secret Cuban mission inspired Muguruza to write a story taking place between 1965 and 1967, the emergence of countercultural music scenes during this time is just as vital to the original conception of the graphic novel and transmedia project. As Tim Blanning notes, these years saw the evolution of soul music into a "mighty mouthpiece for civil

rights" as the self-consciously Black sounds that originated in Sunday church services came to produce popular songs seen as demands for African American dignity and equality, such as Aretha Franklin's cover of Otis Redding's "Respect" and James Brown's "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud" (Blanning 307). This occurred in parallel with a similar phenomenon in the Basque Country, as folk music sung in Euskara came to represent a cultural and political movement for a new Basque national consciousness, beginning with the foundation of the Ez Dok Amairu collective in 1965 (Del Amo, "When Underground" 24; Larrinaga 102). *Black is Beltza* attempts to create a subtle association between these two parallel cultural movements through the protagonist attending live shows by James Brown[10] and Otis Redding, presenting these performances as transformative and politically radicalizing experiences. The documentary *NOLA?* speaks much more directly to the theme of music as a vehicle for the expression and political demands of minority groups, as jazz music is used as a framework for understanding the unique culture of New Orleans's Black community and their struggles to maintain their traditions amid the economic hollowing out of the city.

In this way, the theme of music is deeply intertwined with that of Blackness, as music becomes a central representation of Black culture and identity in Muguruza's understanding. Sociologists Josu Larrinaga and Ion Andoni del Amo coined the term countercultural ethnogenesis in the 2010s to describe the emergence of Basque counter-hegemonic culture in the 1960s, emphasizing the role of the clandestine folk music scene in shaping a modern Basque ethnic identity and asserting Basque agency

[10] James Brown's performance at Harlem's famed Apollo Theater is a prominent part of the 2014 graphic novel and corresponding exhibition in Bilbao. The film version however, replaces him with the Motown group The Velvelettes.

through cultural production and consumption. However, this idea extends beyond Basque culture, as jazz, soul, R&B, and hip-hop have played similar roles in shaping Black cultural identities, not to mention the influence of reggae and dub in Afro-Caribbean culture. In contrast to the Basque folk and punk scenes of the 20th century, which had relatively little resonance outside of Euskal Herria, these African-diaspora-associated genres serve as vehicles for resistance and identity formation throughout the world, including the Basque Country itself.

All of this emphasis on ethnogenesis and the transformative power of music is of course not surprising given Muguruza's storied career as a musical artist whose work greatly influenced notions of Basque identity in the 80s and 90s. Beyond the storyline of the original *Black is Beltza*, Muguruza's own music career becomes a focal point for the presentation of this theme. While Muguruza never speaks in the *NOLA?*, he is undoubtedly the film's protagonist, as much of the talking head commentary revolves around the virtues of his cross-cultural project as footage of Muguruza at work in the recording studio dominate the film. Meanwhile, an animated version of Muguruza and his brother Iñigo appear at the beginning of *Black is Beltza II: Ainhoa*, with Kortatu's 1988 farewell concert "Azken guda dantza" representing the countercultural scene of the 80s Basque Country. Ultimately, while Black is Beltza represents a departure from Muguruza's prior work due to its transmedia nature, it continually refers back to Muguruza's earlier days as an activist musician and the example he has been trying to set since the 1980s.

Finally, Black is Beltza frequently affirms the idea of a unique and exceptional Basque spirit, either by insinuating that the exceptionality of certain protagonists is the

result of their Basque origins, or by highlighting figures from the Basque Country and Basque diaspora that have played an outsized role in history. This idea underpins the logic of the animated films, as the Basque protagonists carry out incredible acts of bravery, ingenuity, and selflessness. For the most part, the films rationalize this idea of Basque exceptionalism by linking knowledge and use of Euskara to a minority subjectivity, as the very act of speaking and living in their own language comes to represent an act of transgression against repressive authorities. As one character puts it in *Black is Beltza II: Ainhoa*: "Hizkuntza txikiek erraldoi egiten gaituzte"—small languages make us giant. There are many instances, however, where there is no material explanation for this intrinsic Basque character, particularly in references to historical figures of Basque descent. While some of the historical figures that Muguruza claims as Basque, such as Che Guevara, correspond with the project's thesis of Basques as inherently radical, other references only appear in order to point out links between the Basque Country and the various cities depicted in the films, betraying a Basque pride that is perhaps prepolitical. At times, these references clash with the other themes of the project, such as when Muguruza dedicates a segment of his documentary *NOLA?* to the possible Basque origins of Louisiana folk hero Jean Lafitte, a pirate who began his career as a slave trader in the Caribbean.

While the affirmation of a radical, internationalist Basque identity vis-a-vis the experiences of other persecuted groups is of course the central unifying idea, Muguruza draws from a wide array of historical sources and discourses that have impacted him over his long career. This ideological diversity leads to contradictory messages within the films: Is the ideology of leftist Basque nationalism a modern manifestation of an anti-

authoritarian Basque spirit, or a historically contingent phenomenon inspired by struggles in the Third World? Is revolution through culture sufficient to bring about political change, or is violent resistance necessary in confronting oppression? Is the life of a political activist defined by self-sacrifice and austerity, or do expressions of joy in the face of oppression carry more revolutionary impact? For each of these questions, the films seem to take both sides, as Muguruza seemingly cannot resist discourses of Basque exceptionalism regardless of their inconsistencies. The themes of Black is Beltza therefore represent distinct invitations for the audience to radically reevaluate their ideas about Basque identity and draw their own conclusions. Intentionally or not, Black is Beltza presents these contradictions as key to understanding the culture and politics of the Basque Country within a global context.

Beyond these four themes that manifest repeatedly in the dialogue and images of the films, there is also what could be considered a fifth theme of collaboration and solidarity across cultures, not only as a means to arrive at new forms of artistic and political expression outside of capitalist frameworks, but also the way in which it provides insight into one's own identity. This theme is touched on in both directly via documentaries detailing the evolution of the Black is Beltza project, as well as allegorically through the animated films, which depict the collaboration of activists from the Basque Country, Middle East, Africa, and the Americas. Not unlike like his fictional protagonists, Muguruza travels the world and aids others in their particular struggles out of a sense of righteousness that is informed by his understanding of what it means to be Basque. In this sense, Black is Beltza does not just comment on or pay homage to Muguruza's career; it also retells his story metaphorically by equating the figure of the

politically engaged DIY punk rocker with that of the armed freedom fighter, redeeming both in the process.

2.4 A Modern Basque Mythology: *Black is Beltza* (2018)

As the ur-text of the Black is Beltza project, the film adaptation of *Black is Beltza* merits the most analysis of any of the films in the series. What began as Muguruza learning about two unrelated historical anecdotes—one about a tenuous Basque connection to the American Civil Rights Movement and the other about the collaboration between Revolutionary Cuba and Black radicals—ultimately transformed into something resembling a new mythology, complete with its own pantheon of idols, messiah figure, and a call-and-response blessing: “Black is Beltza! Beltza Power!” Conceived initially as a film before Muguruza opted to create a graphic novel, the ideas contained within the original narrative were productive enough for Muguruza to develop an entire transmedia project that eventually led to the production of *two* animated feature films. The *Black is Beltza* story establishes the themes, language, and aesthetics of the wider project, and the film adaptation has assumed the role of the definitive version.

The film itself is a faithful adaptation of the 2014 graphic novel, with much of the dialogue copied directly from the original text and the key elements of the narrative unchanged. The story follows Manex Unanue, a Basque photographer who has come to New York to participate in the parade as one of the Black giants. When he is prohibited from participating, he develops a curiosity for the nature of racial oppression and African American resistance to it. He travels to Harlem, making friends among New York’s Black community and counterculture scene, in the process falling in love with an Afro-

Cuban revolutionary named Amanda Tamayo. Manex then accompanies Amanda back to Cuba, where he joins the Cuban Intelligence Directorate as an agent. After almost two years of training, Che Guevara assigns him to help Wilson Clever, a Black Panther Party activist, escape from the US with a list of FBI and CIA assets that have infiltrated left-wing organizations as part of their counterintelligence programs. Manex and Wilson's journey takes them through a series of real life events and places that relate directly to the radical cultural and political movements of the 1960s, such as the Monterey Pop Festival, San Francisco, Quebec's Quiet Revolution and Expo '67, and post-independence Algeria. After delivering Wilson to the Cuban embassy in Madrid and completing his mission, the story ends with Manex returning to the Basque Country to become a smuggler of contraband Basque-language music, having learned firsthand the transformative power of counterculture.

The most impactful departure from the original graphic novel is the expansion and addition of several scenes, including a new timeline that both opens and closes the film, depicting Manex's encounter with the Spanish Civil Guard as he tries to smuggle contraband records across the border with his companion Xebero. Other additions, such as a Catalan anti-Francoist activist named Laia or a flashback scene depicting the film's FBI antagonist as a member of the Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Louisiana, are likely nods to Muguruza's musical residencies in Barcelona and New Orleans during the previous three years, however they also serve to amplify the manichaean portrayal of a diverse front of leftist activists vs. the monolithic and racist FBI and Franco regime (Pouzol).

The other major alterations we see in the film revolve around the portrayal of Manex. In abandoning the monochrome palette and subtle character designs of the

graphic novel in order to imitate the styles of contemporary adult animated films, the movie amplifies the emotional range of all of its characters, but this change is most noticeable in the protagonist. Whereas the Manex of the comic maintains a calm, almost passive face in reaction to the world historical events that unfold before him, the film's Manex expresses much more visceral reactions that underscore his righteous nature. The subtle changes to the film's script and plot show that the amplification of Manex's righteousness is no accident, as the protagonist is given the lines attributed to other characters in the graphic novel in order to express even more anger over American racism and the Franco regime. The film announces this change very early on: whereas the Manex of the graphic novel watches from the crowd as six of the eight San Fermin giants parade through Fifth Avenue, the film has him interrupt the procession and confront the leader of the troupe, asserting that he is just as racist as the Americans for allowing the event to be held without the Black giants (3:55). Given the film's doubling down on the protagonist's righteousness and heroism, we must begin our analysis of the film by looking at the central role he plays both within the narrative and the mythology that emanates from it.

2.5 Radical Essentialism and the Basque Messiah

Throughout a fast-paced narrative that traverses a new country every ten minutes, the only constant is the perspective of the movie's Basque protagonist. While synopses of the film state that Manex is radicalized by the American Civil Rights

Movement[11], it is clear that he has been politically radical since long before the events of the film. From the moment Manex interrupts the procession in New York, the protagonist is shown to be righteous and driven by solidarity with other oppressed peoples. This uncompromising moral clarity at times seemingly gives Manex the ability to see into the future. After leaving the parade, as Manex and his companion Xebero watch the Black giants being loaded back onto the cargo ship for their return to Spain, Manex remarks that they look as though they are being lynched, and that this is a sign that in spite of recent progress in the US, the Ku Klux Klan is effectively still in power. Later in the film, the FBI agent tasked with hunting down Manex is revealed to be a KKK member who views his mission as upholding "invisible empire" of white supremacy. In a later scene at the docks, when Manex decides to remain in New York rather than return to Pamplona, Xebero tries to change his mind by alluding to the *borroka* (struggle, fight), implying that the two are involved in some sort of resistance to the Franco regime. Displaying his clairvoyance yet again, Manex scoffs at the idea, saying that "Jende horrekin, Franco ohean hilko da," ("With people like this, Franco will die in bed") in reference to his colleagues that showed their racism and conformism by participating in the parade (10:15). This vague allusion to *borroka* calls attention to the fact that no information is ever given about Manex's adult life prior to arriving in New York. Manex is essentially a blank slate, with the only pertinent details about him being that he is

[11] From Netflix: "A young Basque man is radicalized in 1960s America after being forbidden from participating in a parade on racial grounds."

Basque and that he is righteous. Indeed, the film seeks to depict these two features as being more or less synonymous with one another.

Born and raised in the French Basque Country by a Gipuzkoan mother and having lived in Pamplona since the age of 16, Manex's origins connect what are today the three administrative regions of the greater Basque Country (the Basque Autonomous Community, the Foral Community of Navarre and Iparralde/the French Basque Country), such that he identifies with the entire Basque territory, not just a particular province or region. While he has a French passport and is fluent in French and Spanish in addition to his native Euskara, he is quick to anger whenever anyone calls him French or Spanish. Essentially, Manex sees himself as stateless, an ontological Basque nationalist, yet not beholden to a notion of Basque identity tied to blood. This cultural-linguistic notion of Basqueness is notable because Manex is actually half-English, his father a Manchester-born antifascist volunteer in the Spanish Civil War. Manex explains that his parents fled to the French Basque Country at the end of the war and that his father joined the French underground resistance soon after, never to return. While his father has long been presumed dead, Manex seems to believe that he is still alive, working as a war photographer in Vietnam. This absence has not deterred Manex from idolizing and seeking to emulate his father, citing his decision to remain in New York rather than return to Pamplona as proof that he is his father's son. As noted by N.M. Murray in her analysis of the graphic novel, the narrative's focus on Manex's family history and unique heritage only serves to deepen

the protagonist's characterization as a messiah-like figure (Murray 172), rather than someone who has been born into historically contingent circumstances.

And yet, the film is also replete with instances implying that revolution is an essential characteristic *in Basques specifically,* seemingly rendering the focus on Manex's antifascist father redundant. After jumping forward to a year after Manex's departure from New York with his lover Amanda, we find him training as a soldier in the Cuban military's special forces. In one drill, soldiers must run across a log while holding a machete in each hand. Whereas all the Cuban trainees slip and fall, Manex not only crosses, but does so while doing the *ezpata dantza*, a twirling Basque folk dance involving two swords. By conflating an image of rural Basque masculinity with that of the Latin American guerrilla fighter, the film portrays Manex's traditional Basque upbringing as a form of practice for his life as a revolutionary. This idea is repeated in a later scene when Manex places an international call to Xebero and the FBI agents who have tapped the phone believe their Euskara to be some sort of unbreakable code language.

This heavy-handed conflation of Basques and revolution is repeated throughout the film by characters recalling the Basque heritage of various figures involved in revolutionary or antifascist struggles. In the scene following Manex's ezpata dantza recital, the protagonist meets Che Guevara, who goes out of his way to mention his own Basque roots and ask Manex the meaning of his surname. In Mexico, Manex learns that Pancho Villa was of Basque heritage, and likely spoke some Euskara in his youth. Later, during a speech by Charles de Gaulle in Montreal, Manex credits the liberation of

Paris to the Gernika Battalion, a fighting unit made up of Basque exiles. On top of these tangents, the film is filled with allusions to an outsized Basque presence in the world, whether it is mention of the Goodrich-Euzkadi tire company in Mexico, the characters staying at a Basque Hotel in San Francisco, or an Algerian nightclub named "Biarritz," after the French Basque town. By the end of the film, even Manex's Black Panther comrade is left bemused by this global influence: "Basques? I didn't even know they existed, and now they're everywhere!" (61:20).

While this focus on Manex's pedigree and an essentialist portrayal of Basques as revolutionaries, or at least having a disproportionate global impact, does seem to undercut the film's themes of collaboration and solidarity, it does eventually tie back in with the historical context of the film. When Laia, a Catalan political exile living in Mexico City, tells Manex that she plans to return to Spain to join the fight against the Franco regime, he is skeptical: "Hay que tener mucha fe para eso, y yo soy muy ateo" (31:00). Feeling that he is mostly surrounded by conformists in Pamplona, Manex's decision to remain in New York is in part influenced by his pessimism towards the resistance that was being waged against the Franco regime in the Basque Country and the wider Spanish State prior to 1965. While he *is* a messiah-like figure whose innate Basqueness and radical politics serve to explain his exceptional qualities, he lacks a suitable socio-political movement to which he can dedicate his talents. In this sense, Manex's character arc—to the extent that he has one—is defined by his discovery of new frameworks through which to channel his inherently radical spirit. First, there is his encounter with new forms of political and cultural expression in the form of African

American culture during the Civil Rights Movement, epitomized by the iconic figures of Malcolm X and Otis Redding. Beyond the experience of Black Americans at this time, a wider context of 1960s radical politics and counterculture is portrayed in the film, such that the idea of “Beltza Power” at the end of the film transcends Black or Basque ethnic identity and instead comes to represent a revolutionary attitude manifested through both culture and direct action.

2.6 White Skin, Black Masks

The original *Black is Beltza* narrative of the 2014 graphic novel and 2018 film is both unique and vital to the wider project in its use of cultural and political symbols of Blackness, with promotional materials for the 2014 exhibition in Bilbao juxtaposing images of famous soul singers and the Black San Fermin giants, and posters for the 2018 film prominently featuring Black characters alongside the Basque protagonist. In the story itself, this association of Basqueness and Blackness is explored in depth through myriad ways, particularly in the first act, as Manex decides to remain in Harlem and integrate himself into the Black community there. Arriving there not long after the assassination of Malcolm X, the film seems to herald Manex’s presence as some sort of second coming, or at least a compensation for the civil rights icon’s death. As N.M. Murray notes in her study of the graphic novel,

> *Beltza* seizes the outspoken, polemical figure of Malcolm X as the hope of the black community in Harlem, and his demise supposedly represents the loss of a [young, brave champion] for a community that is [under siege, in despair]. The reader intuits that the new champion the graphic novel will offer is the young, brave, Basque Manex, the unexpected black giant. (Murray 170)

This link is immediately hinted at through the protagonist's name, a relatively uncommon Basque given name, which begins with 'Ma-' and ends with an 'X'. The connection runs deeper than that, however, as Manex's intimate identification with the giant he was meant to parade through New York is implied to give him insight into Black experiences. This connection between Manex, Malcolm X and the Black San Fermin giants is underscored in a sequence in which Manex dreams that he is running in San Fermin's famed Running of the Bulls while adorned in his *gigante*—except this Black giant has the face of Malcolm X, and it is flanked by a Muhammad Ali *cabezudo*. The dream then turns into a nightmare as Manex sees his long-lost father among the crowd just as he is violently gored by one of the bulls, calling back to the risks and sacrifices faced by the antifascist militants of the 30s and 40s and linking them to the martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Harlem arc of the film also functions to establish Manex's identity as "the Black giant." Living in a room inside an all-Black boxing gym, Manex encounters teary-eyed boxers still in mourning over the death of Malcolm X. When Manex's friend Rudy shows him a highlight reel of Muhammad Ali, he mutters "That's *our* Black giant," appropriating the words Manex had used to introduce himself and explain his visit to New York (11:55). This phrase—"Black giant"—becomes somewhat of a nickname for Manex throughout the movie, one used by both his Black companions as well as Manex himself. Beyond signaling the Black community's acceptance of Manex, their borrowing of his phrase serves to show that Manex has made an impact on their understanding of interracial solidarity.

Apart from Manex's inextricable link to the Black San Fermin giants, there are several other ways in which the film recontextualizes symbols of Basque folk tradition in order to create metaphors for solidarity and Black liberation. After the fateful parade, it is revealed that the organizers had to hire local Black dockworkers to don the oversized *cabezudo* masks and accompany the giants, thereby not only undermining the ban of the Black giants, but doing so while dressed as caricatures of Basque men. There is another instance, when Manex first meets Wilson and the latter asks him what kind of name "Manex" is. The protagonist responds by saying that the name is "that of a white sheep with a black head" (38:55), in reference to the Latxa sheep breed. A symbol of the Basque countryside, this animal also becomes a metaphor for Manex as a White man who has adopted a Black perspective. The film's final shot of a flock of Latxa sheep in the rain therefore closes out the story by reiterating this idea of Basqueness entailing a certain Black consciousness.

Otis Redding is another African American icon whose presence looms large over the film, a stand-in for the revolutionary changes in Black culture at the end of the 60s and the impact this has on Manex. During Redding's performance at the Monterey Pop festival, Manex takes acid and hallucinates that he is on stage with the singer. Due to Manex's hallucinatory state—and, presumably, the prohibitive cost of licensing Otis Redding's music for the film—, the song that plays during the concert scene is not Redding's but rather Negu Gorriak's 1996 song "Errespetua," a cover of Redding's "Respect." The trip continues well into the next day, as Manex and Wilson hitch a ride to the San Francisco Bay on Otis Redding's tour van. Manex continues dancing and singing the lyrics of "Respect" in Basque while imagining that he is a Basque Otis

Redding. When one of the band members declares “There’s only one Otis Redding”, Manex retorts, “Wrong! There are many Otises!” This idea that Manex feels somehow spiritually connected to Otis Redding is given a great deal of emphasis, as the title sequence of the film opens with a French-Basque radio program announcing the death of the “King of Soul” over a black screen. Later, towards the end of the film, as Manex prepares to begin the next phase of his life, he mentions to Xebero that “Otisekin hil egin nauk, nolabait” (“In a way, I’ve died along with Otis”) (76:10). What this profound connection means is somewhat unclear, as Manex does not develop any sort of personal relationship with Otis Redding in the film. Like many aspects of Black is Beltza, it is perhaps best understood as a commentary on Muguruza’s own career, an allegorical vindication of the ways in which he appropriated Black aesthetics and slogans and incorporated them into the Basque political imaginary.

Manex does develop a personal relationship with another Black radical however, as he gets to know and learn from his Black Panther counterpart, Wilson. While Manex’s empathy and sense of solidarity with African Americans is established early on, both through his righteous anger over the exclusion of the Black giants from the parade in Manhattan and his adoption by the Black community of Harlem, his relationship with Wilson over the last two-thirds of the film communicates the differences between Black and Basque communities and challenges of respectful collaboration among people of disparate ethnic groups, as Wilson had no prior knowledge of Basque people, while Manex had no point of reference for the kind of racial discrimination that Blacks faced in the Jim Crow South. Wilson’s initial distrust of Manex eventually gives way in a moment in which the Black Panther recalls the lyrics of Billie Holiday—“Southern trees bear

strange fruit”—and confides in Manex over the death of his father, who was refused treatment at various clinics because of his race before succumbing to an illness: “My father wasn’t killed by pneumonia. He was killed by the city of Birmingham, Alabama” (53:27).

This earned trust eventually leads to the scene to which the film and the wider project owe their name. As Wilson finally leaves Madrid to escape to Cuba towards the end of the film, he calls out to Manex: “Before I leave, I want to know how to say something in Basque (...) Black. How do you say ‘black’ in Basque?” Manex tells him that the word is “Beltza,” to which Wilson responds, “Black is beltza! Beltza power!” with his left fist raised in the Black Power salute. Manex then raises his fist in return and shouts, “Beltza power! Power to the people!” (72:30). This scene represents yet another example of Black characters expressing respect for the protagonist by appropriating his language, but it also goes further by portraying a Black political dissident imbuing the Basque language with radical connotations.

As though to signal a definitive end to Manex’s rediscovery of his identity through activism and counterculture, the story’s ending attempts to bring together the internationalist and Black discourses. While we learn that Manex’s lover Amanda was killed alongside Che Guevara in Bolivia while pregnant with Manex’s child, it is revealed at the end of the film that their baby survived and was returned to Cuba. Named after Manex’s birthplace, Ainhoa is both Black and Basque, and will presumably be raised by people working for the revolutionary Cuban government. She represents a flesh and blood manifestation of the cultural and political commitments that have shaped Manex’s life and outlook on the world. She is “Black is Beltza.” However, like his own father, he

decides not to raise her and instead devotes himself to promoting change in the Basque Country: “Ojalá pueda verla pronto, pero tras recorrer medio mundo me he dado cuenta de que apenas conozco mi tierra. La revolución está en casa, y tengo que ser parte de esto” (75:50). With the film’s emphasis on Blackness and Basqueness as distinct yet equivalent identities, imbued with their own anticolonial/antifascist perspective and politics, the existence of Manex’s Afro-Basque daughter secures a lasting legacy for his globetrotting antifascist adventure, a legacy that would eventually be further explored in the sequel, *Black is Beltza II: Ainhoa,* following the antifascist adventures of Manex’s offspring in the late 1980s. As for the immediate future of the revolution that the protagonist alludes to, and what this means for the Basque Country, we must also look to the film’s depiction of a wider revolutionary sentiment beyond the American Civil Rights movement to understand the importance of this statement.

2.7 Prelude to The Long 1968 and the New Basque Identity

Beyond the exploration of Blackness as both a political subjectivity and unique aesthetic, the film’s message also relies upon the idea of a global political and cultural revolution taking place at the end of the 1960s. In addition to the large role played by revolutionary Cuba and Che Guevara on one hand and the Black Panthers on the other, the film also prominently features two other left-wing nationalist, or otherwise anti-colonialist, organizations. After escaping the US, Manex and Wilson depend on assistance from the FLQ[12] and FLN[13] to move through Canada and Algeria while

[12] The *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ) was a Quebecois separatist group, operational from 1963 to 1970, that sought the foundation of an independent socialist French Canadian state.

staying one step ahead of the American authorities. These arcs within the larger story serve to provide a panoramic depiction of radical groups combining culture and Marxism during the 1960s, but more importantly, they highlight the contradictions that must be overcome to reconcile nationalism with other liberatory ideologies.

In Montreal, after experiencing racism from Canadian customs authorities, Manex and Wilson are hosted by Laurent, a young FLQ activist who seemingly would prefer to discuss Manex's European French accent than Quebecois racial prejudice. The three of them attend Charles de Gaulle's famous "Vive le Québec libre" speech, where Laurent's adoration for the French leader is contrasted with Manex's skepticism over de Gaulle's unfulfilled promises of liberating Spain from Fascism after WWII. Laurent is dismissive of Manex, insisting that Quebec's fate will be different because they speak French there (52:35). Meanwhile in Algeria, the protagonists discuss the role of language and culture in revolutionary struggles, as the Algerian FLN members point out that the Arabic language was on the point of disappearing in major cities. Having recently arrived from Quebec and its French-nationalist Quiet Revolution, Wilson comments on the difficulty in reconciling the struggles of the FLN and FLQ: "The anti-imperialist struggle is contradictory, you free yourselves from French colonialism and the FLQ wants a socialist republic that's French!" (60:40). More than anything, this contradiction serves as a commentary on the nature of nationalism as a vehicle for liberation ideology. Quebecois nationalism as represented by the vapid, blonde-haired Laurent, is held up as inadequately revolutionary because it is ultimately based in a

[13] The *Front de libération nationale* (FLN) was the leading nationalist movement during Algeria's war for independence and has been the main governing party in the country since it became independent in 1962.

French chauvinism that excludes or is otherwise indifferent to non-French minorities[14]. Meanwhile, the more explicitly anti-imperialist Algerian movement for national liberation is portrayed in a more sympathetic light, with followers whose activism is based more in principle than an uncritical ethnic pride. The film's deliberate contrast between the eurocentric nature of French Canadian nationalism and the Arab nationalist ideology of the FLN therefore functions to affirm the necessity of antiracist discourse within ethnonationalist movements.

The presence of the FLQ and FLN in the film also has the impact of drawing attention to the various left-wing paramilitary groups operating in the West at this time, along with the role of Arab nationalist movements in supporting them. The FLN agents in Algeria mention the German *Rote Armee Fraktion* (RAF) and their training with the PLO in Jordan, before also alluding to the presence of Basques in Algeria. While this is undoubtedly a reference to ETA militants receiving training from the Algerian government, Manex seems to have no knowledge of ETA's presence there. The FLN activists even express surprise over Manex's ignorance: "It's strange that we're telling you and you're not telling us" (61:25). The Algerians' incredulity, coupled with Manex's naive assumption that the Basques in mention were there to learn Arabic, gives the impression that the protagonist has never even heard of ETA, even as this is all but

[14] The character of Laurent represents one of the more subtle, yet significant changes from the graphic novel, as the original story featured a middle-aged woman in the role of the FLQ agent. Overall, the film's critical portrayal of Quebecois nationalism is strongly influenced by later predominance of conservative factions within the sovereigntist bloc. The perception of Quebecois nationalism as a conservative, Catholic, and even racist movement was reinforced following comments by premier Jacques Parizeau blaming non-white minorities for the narrow defeat of Quebec's 1995 independence referendum.

impossible, given his political ideology and alluded-to involvement in activism against the Franco regime. Even if one accepts that Manex had no knowledge of ETA prior to beginning his secret military training in Cuba, the fact that ETA is never directly mentioned in the film stands out as a glaring and deliberate omission in a film about a radical left-wing Basque nationalist in the 1960s.

And yet, the film version undercuts the decision to exclude direct references to ETA by featuring two scenes, not present in the original graphic novel, alluding to high-profile ETA assassinations that would take place in the years after the events of *Black is Beltza*. First there is a newsreel playing in a Spanish cinema about the appointment of Luís Carrero Blanco to the role of Deputy Prime Minister, in which the narrator explicitly highlights the role Carrero Blanco was intended to take in the matter of Franco's succession and the continuation of his regime. Of course, Carrero Blanco would be the victim of the infamous ETA attack in which a bomb blew his Dodge 3700 over the roof of a five-story building. To this day, the assassination is widely believed in the popular imagination to have hastened Spain's liberalization process and transition to democracy. The second allusion to ETA's violence under the Franco regime occurs at the very end of the film, when Manex and Xebero are caught smuggling contraband music into Spain by a Civil Guard patrol. While the officers express their desire to detain and torture the duo, they are given an order to release them by Melitón Manzanas, a high ranking officer in the Francoist secret police who oversaw the torture of political

dissidents in Gipuzkoa, and would become the victim of ETA's first targeted assassination in August 1968.

While these allusions to ETA's tyrannicide at the end of the Franco Regime seem to clash with the Manex's ostensible decision to focus on nonviolent activism at the end of the film, Camille Pouzol notes that the transmedia nature of the Black is Beltza project invites readers/viewers to reflect on themes beyond the texts themselves, and that "las escenas añadidas o extendidas en la adaptación invitan al espectalector [sic] a sobrepasar el marco de la recepción para volverse actor de su propio saber y de su propio compromiso" (Pouzol 241). In this sense, the added scenes in the film appeal to a Basque or left-leaning audience familiar with the events that occurred after the timeline of *Black is Beltza* and invites them to connect the dots, as the film alludes to truly revolutionary events—both violent and nonviolent, cultural and political—that took place soon after the end of the film and re-examine them through the themes of Black is Beltza. Ion Andoni del Amo notes the significance of the post-1967 years for the Basque Country:

> The creation of a new Basque community nationalism took place particularly in the three years from August 1968 to mid-1971, being defined especially in anti-repressive terms, above all after the Burgos court case and the wave of solidarity that occurred around Europe. Although clandestine, this new nationalism became hegemonic; its identity is fundamentally transgressive and anti-repressive (...) The Basque language, group consumption and reproduction of elements of Basque culture—whether traditional or in its new manifestations—and the Basque flag, the Ikurriña, banned since 1939, became symbols of this new identity. This identity had a particularly emotional expression in music, and so music festivals turned into a kind of collective catharsis. ("When Underground" 24)

While *Black is Beltza* ends right as this clandestine, counter-hegemonic Basque nationalist movement was beginning to come into its own, and very little of the Basque Country is shown on screen, the film nonetheless alludes to the radical changes that took place there in the 1960s through the character of Xebero, Manex's friend who accompanied him to Harlem before deciding to return to Pamplona. Xebero's experiences in Euskal Herria are first alluded to in a phone call between Manex and Xebero, in which the former describes the legendary 1967 Monterey Pop festival, where he saw the Who destroy their instruments and Jimi Hendrix set his guitar ablaze at the end of their performances. Meanwhile, Xebero recounts the experience he had in San Sebastian at the *Bertsolari Txapelketa Nagusia*, the annual championship for improvised poetry in the Basque language. The 1967 edition of the competition is remembered to this day as among the most iconic, as the French-Basque bertsolari Xalbador won over a hostile Gipuzkoan crowd that struggled to understand his accent by improvising a verse in the local dialect in order to make light of the attendees' whistles and jeers: "Zuek ezpazarete kontentu, errua ez daukat ez nik / txistuak jo dituzute bainan maite zaituztet orainik" ("If you are not happy, I'm not to blame, not me / You whistle, but I still love you"). The phone call scene then plays out as an unexpected fusion of the two events, as Manex and Xebero, both giddy with excitement, take turns describing the performances while black and white photos of Jimi Hendrix, The Who and Xalbador alternate on the screen and audio of Xalbador's celebrated verse is juxtaposed with wailing guitar noises. While the performative destruction of rock stars

like Jimi Hendrix and The Who cannot be easily reconciled with the performance of traditional poetry by a shepherd from the rural Basque Country, both legendary performances speak to forms of cultural transgression that resonate within Muguruza's unique political imaginary.

Xebero's presence in the film also serves to introduce allusions to the ongoing political conflicts taking place in the Basque Country during Manex's travels. In the same phone call scene, Xebero mentions that a state of exception has been declared, in reference to the Franco regime's reaction to labor struggles in Bizkaia in 1967. Later on, there is a scene in which Manex discovers while listening to the radio that Xebero has been arrested for taking part in the 1967 *Aberri Eguna*[15] protest that saw Basque nationalist and leftist dissidents defy the Franco regime by tossing Basque flags attached to parachutes from the tops of buildings into the city's main square, a scene represented in the film by an archival photo of one of the ikurriñas flying through the air. Through these references to political resistance, as well as his witnessing of important cultural events during this time, Xebero takes on the odd role of Manex's counterpart and sidekick *in absentia*: the Basque who was not adventurous or open-minded enough to accompany Manex on his globetrotting adventures, but nonetheless managed to play a role in the burgeoning cultural and political renaissance in their homeland. In a sense, Xebero's off-screen experiences redeem the Basque Country in the absence of the

[15] Literally "Fatherland Day," Aberri Eguna is an unofficial national holiday celebrated yearly by the PNV on Easter Sunday.

film’s messianic radical Basque protagonist. Once again capable of asserting its cultural identity and mounting a destabilizing political resistance to the fascist regime, the Basque Country becomes worthy of Manex’s assistance, as highlighted in the protagonist’s declaration that “la revolución está en casa.” The reveal at the end of the film that Manex and Xebero were smuggling records by the folk singer Mikel Laboa signals the way in which a new Basque identity and clandestine activism went hand in hand. While the significance of the records is not directly explained in the film, Mikel Laboa was the most famous member of the Ez Dok Amairu folk music collective that is credited with “launching new messages of hope, justice, peace and freedom, of reconstruction and dissemination of a renewed culture in the Basque language and a new identity” (Del Amo, “When Underground” 24). Manex and Xebero’s mission therefore carries with it the significance of risking their lives for the cause of a new, politically radical, Basque culture.

The biggest change from the graphic novel, then, is the film’s desire to strongly allude to the radical evolution of Basque identity that began to accelerate tremendously soon after events of the story, in order to emphasize the implied association with Manex’s experiences in the film. The increased prominence of this part of the text, paired with the film’s continued refusal to mention ETA by name, underscores the ways in which *Black is Beltza* presents itself as if it were a foundational myth for radical Basque nationalism, in which the *innate* Basque nationalist, antifascist attitudes of a single individual, conditioned by his experiences in observing other liberation struggles,

overrides or otherwise bypasses the emergence of ETA as a political and cultural vanguard of Basque nationalism and the intellectual debates that led to the movement's adoption of socialism and Third-Worldist ideology in the 1960s. Manex becomes the ideal Basque nationalist and activist seemingly without ever having participated in the burgeoning movement, even as this seems impossible. And yet, the film does not go as far as to delve into historical revisionism and present Manex as a fictional founder of a new Basque nationalism, as the allusions to Xebero's experiences in Pamplona and San Sebastian signal the ways in which radical energy and national consciousness were beginning to coalesce in the protagonist's absence.

Two years before Manex's fictional escapades would take place, Federico Krutwig, a Basque of German descent, published *Vasconia* (1963), an influential manifesto that reoriented Basque nationalism along a framework of Third World liberation and an identity based on Euskara. Writing under the pseudonym Fernando Sarrailh de Ihartza, Krutwig argued that Basques were a colonized people compelled to violently resist the castrating "denationalization" they were subjected to by the Spanish and French states. The preservation of the Basque language was a key element of this resistance, as Krutwig's belief in linguistic determinism informed his opinions on an essential Basque character: "El idioma crea el alma del individuo y el alma de los pueblos. El estado psíquico nace del cerebral" (Sarrailh de Ihartza 30). For Krutwig and the many Basques who read his work in the 1960s, to be Basque was to be anti-reactionary, as the Basques of pre-modernity had supposedly been democratic,

progressive, and revolutionary in nature, living in a libertarian communist society whose main mode of expression was Euskara (Alemany Sureda 36).

While *Black is Beltza* doesn't lean into linguistic determinism to the same extent as Krutwig's manifesto, it does present an essentialist vision of revolutionary Basque identity that is heavily influenced by Euskara. In this way, *Black is Beltza* vindicates some of the ideas behind 1960s abertzale ideology by dramatizing them in a fictional narrative, while also minimizing the historical influence of early theorists like Krutwig by presenting the adoption of radical politics by Basques as something organic and inevitable. This ambiguous relationship between the theoretical/fictional nationalism of Manex and the real/historical nationalism of ETA is epitomized by the film's Algeria story arc, where Manex collaborates with the FLN and learns about anticolonial and socialist ideologies, and yet is seemingly unaware that the very same organization is providing training to ETA militants elsewhere in the country. Overall, while the story of *Black is Beltza* can be understood as the mythologizing of a newly emerging Basque identity, told through an uber-Basque protagonist and his ahistorical contact with the Black Panthers, Otis Redding, and rock n' roll, this is not to say that it contradicts or obscures the ideology of ETA or the radical Basque movements of the 1960s. On the contrary, elements of the story consciously mirror the ideological and historical trajectory of Basque nationalism as it was influenced by contemporary anticolonial and socialist movements around the world.

When considering *Black is Beltza*'s confusing relationship with history and the causality behind the radical views of Manex and Basques in general, it is important to note that Muguruza's focus extends beyond historicization. *Black is Beltza* is just as

much about what Muguruza holds to be eternal truths as it is a reevaluation of the disparate events and figures of the 1960s that influenced Basque radical politics. Specifically, the power of music as a vehicle for ethnic and political expression, as well as Basques' relationship to politically conscious music from the 1960s until today, are key elements of all of the *Black is Beltza* texts. Given Muguruza's key role within this tradition over the course of nearly four decades, it is only logical that the film serves as a commentary on his own career in some way.

2.8 Music as Activism, Activism as Music, and Manex as Allegory

To conclude our analysis of the first Black is Beltza animated film, we must look at the ostensible message that is inferred through the film's ending. After the film opens with Manex and Xebero getting caught by the Civil Guard patrol, the film flashes back and forth between Manex's adventures abroad and scenes depicting the officers interrogating the duo and searching their car for contraband. The dual timeline has the effect of establishing the expectation that Manex is taking part in *some* illicit act of rebellion against the Franco regime, and that this rebellion has been in some way inspired by his experiences in New York, Cuba, Algeria, etc. When it is finally revealed that Manex and Xebero had not been smuggling weapons or explosives, but rather Mikel Laboa records, even the Civil Guard officers express their surprise: "¿y por unos discos censurados de mierda habéis montado todo esto?" (1:17:09). Yet for the viewer, the significance of the banned records is clear, as Manex's connection with music and counterculture is touched on repeatedly throughout the film. After spending two years training as an armed militant in order to combat the American military and intelligence

agencies, it seems as though Manex has now opted to pursue a (counter)cultural revolution in the Basque Country.

This in itself does not mean that Manex has suddenly become a pacifist. As Arkaitz Letamendia notes, Basque language music has served as a powerful mobilizing tool in political movements—both violent and nonviolent—since the late 1960s where *Black is Beltza* leaves off:

> En Euskal Herria las dinámicas de lucha y reclutamiento militante, desde los años sesenta del siglo XX hasta hoy, adquieren mayor sentido teniendo en cuenta el componente emocional que expresiones culturales y artísticas populares ofrecen a las personas, en paralelo a un repertorio musical con el que se retroalimentan. El componente fuertemente emocional de la lucha, tanto individual (el compromiso personal pro-transformación social) como colectivo (la lealtad y solidaridad de grupo) nutre de letras a las canciones, y viceversa; las emociones que derivan de las melodías y letras de las canciones pueden remover sentimientos y ser un aliciente para ciertas personas a participar en la lucha. (A. Letamendia 169)

The undeniable role that music has played in Basque radical politics from Ez Dok Amairu until today, coupled with Manex's decision to influence politics through music, prompts the viewer to understand the film's ending beyond the immediate context of the 1960s. In this sense, it is difficult to not read Manex as some sort of avatar of Fermin Muguruza, with his adventures serving as an allegory for Muguruza's musical career. The clearest indicator of this is the central importance of Black political activism in the 1960s narrative of *Black is Beltza*, which is not based in anything resembling historical fact. While Black artists and activists didn't play a significant role, directly or indirectly, in the development of the Basque nationalism of the 1960s, it could be argued that they did in the 1980s and 1990s via their influence upon Muguruza's own music, as Kortatu's reggae influences and the militant hip-hop aesthetic of Negu Gorriak introduced new

discourses into the Basque political imaginary while connecting Basques to global struggles through their lyrics. Manex's "discovery" of Black music in the 1960s and its power to affirm ethnic identity and articulate political anxieties therefore functions as a projection of Muguruza's own musical career onto the historical context that gave rise to countercultures as a phenomenon.

The parallels between *Black is Beltza*'s protagonist and its rock musician creator are not limited to the former's anachronistic love of soul music, however. The plot structure itself resembles one of Muguruza's world tours from the previous decades: traveling around the globe—particularly to places of anti-imperialist significance, or where an ethnic group has resisted systemic oppression through culture and music—and collaborating with locals as an act of solidarity and cultural exchange. The presentation of Manex's travels and secret mission as a sort of world tour is underscored in both the graphic novel and film, which both prominently display maps showing the routes the protagonist takes between cities.

Manex's role as an avatar for Muguruza becomes clear in scenes where the protagonist is depicted enjoying himself in a touristic-voyeuristic manner. While Manex is a morally righteous and self-assured militant, he is also remarkably passive, as his journey is governed by the duties of his mission and choices are made for him by his handlers. And in spite of his responsibilities, his mission always involves fun activities, often involving international celebrities. In Mexico, Manex meets with the writer Juan Rulfo and goes on a road trip with the comedic actor Tin Tan; in California, Manex and Wilson rendezvous with other Black nationalists at the Monterey Pop Festival and

mingle with Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin; they attend Montreal's Expo 67 and ride the monorail. Along the way, Manex's new friends offer him psychedelic drugs, which he never turns down. Women also seem eager to sleep with him, and the film features excessively graphic sex scenes with three different female characters. While the protagonist's hedonistic enjoyment of sex, drugs, and rock n' roll are meant to evoke the radically evolving societal norms of the 1960s, these features of the text have the effect of turning Manex into a sort of time-traveling tourist, going to as many iconic events and doing as many clichéd 1960s activities as possible.

Manex's cover job as a photographer further underscores his passive and indulgent relationship with the events unfolding around him. We see Manex with a camera hanging from his neck for much of the film, and he often snaps photos of iconic events immediately before stylized reproductions of black and white photos appear on the screen. More often than not, the film seems to attribute these photographs to Manex, even in the case of some well-known and iconic images of political rallies and concerts. Even as the use of historical photographs is intended to incorporate historical images and highlight the story's many intersections with real-life events, the strict adherence to a historical timeline and visual references to recognizable photographs also call attention to Manex's existence as a fictional character passing through a series of pre-determined events, unable to impact what is going on around him. Ultimately, the protagonist's cataloging of iconic images and moments from the 1960s betray the perspective of someone in the present day looking back on that era with nostalgia.

Of course, like many of the quirks of the *Black is Beltza* narrative, this tension is a symptom of Muguruza's transmedia conception of the wider project, as these images

would play a role in the accompanying museum exhibit for the film, each one serving as a potential jumping-off point for a discussion of 1960s politics or music. Still, this attention to events from a half century prior, along the way in which the film views history through the perspective of a nostalgic punk rocker, ultimately reduces the film's sense of urgency. Overall, because of its perspective and the historical moment where it ends, *Black is Beltza* mostly functions as a framework for reinterpreting the origins of a specific Basque subjectivity, and does not fully reflect the nature of Basque nationalist activism in the present. It would not be until Muguruza and company would write a sequel to the film that the Black is Beltza project came to depict a more timely representation of political conflict in the Basque Country and the role of its Basque audience in fighting for change.

2.9 "This Animation Film Kills Fascists": *Black is Beltza II: Ainhoa* (2022)

Whereas the origins of the first *Black is Beltza* film can be traced to the curious anecdote of the Black San Fermin giants being excluded from an event in New York City on racial grounds, its sequel is based upon a somewhat darker historical fact: that for a time in the 1980s, San Sebastian was the most heroin-addicted city in the world, and many believed—and still believe—that the Spanish government was behind the local drug trade, using heroin as a method for suppressing dissent. As a result, *Black is Beltza II: Ainhoa* is a much darker, more violent film than the original, which builds upon the Black is Beltza mythology through protagonists who, by virtue of being non-white Basques involved in Third World struggles, represent the embodiment of the "Beltza" identity. In this sense, the film serves as a coda to the larger Black is Beltza project, as

its main characters and their subjectivity represent a distillation of the themes of the first animated film—the aesthetic combination of Basqueness and Blackness, identities forged through political struggle and counterculture, solidarity across cultures—, rather than a deeper exploration. Furthermore, the film's primary setting in the Basque Country of the late 1980s betrays the manner in which this film serves as a retrospective on Muguruza's own origins. If the first film could be understood in part as a projection of Muguruza's trajectory as an activist musician onto the political and cultural context that birthed the modern Basque left, then this film serves as a culmination of the Black is Beltza project, set against the background of Muguruza's own career origins.

The film opens with Kortatu's 1985 concert at Martutene prison in Donostia-San Sebastian, then jumps forward several months to the concert at the same prison by the Basque folk singer Imanol, after which the former ETA member and famed Basque-language poet Joseba Sarrionandia escaped inside a hollowed out speaker and fled to exile in Cuba. In Cuba, we are finally introduced to Ainhoa as she overhears Sarrionandia use the word "beltza" while speaking in Euskara. With Sarrionandia not wanting his status as a Basque political exile to be known, Ainhoa asks him to teach her the language of her father in exchange for her keeping his secret. The story then jumps forward three years, with Ainhoa now fluent in Euskara and visiting her father's homeland for the first time. While looking for her grandmother's home in the old quarter of Pamplona, Ainhoa is attacked by police conducting a sweep of the neighborhood, before they are eventually are scared off by a group of punks hurling rocks. Immediately after, Ainhoa befriends Josune, a journalist for the left-wing newspaper *Egin*, and her boyfriend Diego, a squatter's rights activist, and becomes a member of the underground

scene, discussing politics with Basque radicals and going to see Kortatu's farewell concert. But when Diego dies of a heroin overdose, Ainhoa and Josune make a pact to travel together—first to visit Ainhoa's stepmother in Lebanon, then to Afghanistan as part of Josune's investigation into the global drug trade.

In Lebanon, it is revealed that Manex reunited with Iman, a love interest from the first film, and moved with her from Algeria to Beirut less than a year after the events of *Black is Beltza*. Manex and Iman's son Hamid, has grown up amidst the Lebanese Civil War and has become a left-wing activist and freedom fighter like his father. As far as the first film's protagonist is concerned, it is revealed that he spent several years traveling between Lebanon and Nicaragua, fighting with both the National Liberation Movement and the Sandinistas in their respective conflicts, before supposedly being killed in a Contra attack on the Nicaraguan city of Corinto in 1983.

Through the second and third acts of the film, Ainhoa and Hamid infiltrate a ring of CIA-affiliated assets working to smuggle drugs out of war-torn Afghanistan, including a French mercenary who is implied to have been involved with GAL[16], a right-wing Cuban exile who participated in the killing of Ainhoa's mother in Bolivia, a French drug kingpin, and an agent for the Spanish Ministry of the Interior seeking the assassination of a Basque nationalist politician. Eventually, these men all face gruesome deaths, and Ainhoa and Hamid's efforts lead to Josune publishing a story in *Egin* uncovering the CIA's use of drug money to fund black operations and terrorist groups.

[16] Grupos Antiterrorista de Liberación (GAL) were a paramilitary group financed clandestinely by the Spanish government to kill ETA militants and Basque nationalists within the borders of the French state between 1984 and 1987. Its members were largely French far-right mercenaries.

Overall, *Ainhoa* is more narrow in its scope and themes than its predecessor, in part because it was written first as a movie, rather than being adapted from a graphic novel that lacked a clear three-act structure and featured a corresponding museum exhibit. Additionally, whereas the first film focused heavily on Manex's complicated family background and then sought to relate this to Black identity and global anti-imperial struggles, the sequel treats Ainhoa—and to a lesser extent, her brother Hamid—as ready-made symbols of "Beltza" identity. Both are non-White characters who choose to speak Basque, and they are both righteous, open to other cultures, and willing to risk their lives on behalf of others without hesitation, just like Manex in the first film. While the focus on the family histories of the characters is still a feature, with Ainhoa and Hamid being preternaturally compelled to fight injustice both because of their antifascist father and a perspective informed by the struggles of their formerly colonized homeland, the film does not linger on their backgrounds to the same extent as the original film.

Perhaps the most significant way in which the sequel adds to the message of the Black is Beltza film series is the way in which it presents an intersectional feminist perspective[17]. The pervasive feminist themes of *Ainhoa* can be understood in part as a response to or compensation for the first film, which features sexualized portrayals of female characters and gratuitous sex scenes that seem to fetishize Black and Muslim women. In this regard, *Ainhoa* comes off as a self-conscious attempt to correct these mistakes, something immediately evident in the designs of the female characters that

[17] It is worth noting that the Black is Beltza transmedia project did feature some in-person events with explicitly feminist themes prior to 2022, including the "Hip hop és dona" dance workshop in Barcelona and concerts by an all-women brass band in San Sebastian and Barcelona.

have much more realistic bodily proportions and clothes that don't emphasize their cleavage. Furthermore, Ainhoa and a number of other characters are bisexual, further distancing the Black is Beltza project from heteronormative conceptions of sexual liberation and correcting the original film's indulgent male gaze. The film even touches on the idea of body positivity through the lens of political militancy and self-sacrifice, as two of the women that Ainhoa sleeps with—Josune and Yady, a Kurdish militia member—have prominent scars that are the result of the state violence they have had to confront as activists. Although belatedly, *Ainhoa* fulfills the potential of the Black is Beltza ethos by focusing on both racial and gender equality, with the titular protagonist herself declaring: "Emakumezkoen askapenik gabe ez dago iraultzapenik"—without women's liberation, there is no revolution—(55:30).

As the feminist message comes to define much of *Ainhoa*, the first film's central theme of music as a form of resistance is relegated to the background, with just a few instances of characters remarking on the importance of music in revolutionary politics. Instead of being driven by the story, the connection between music and politics is communicated primarily through needle drops: Kortatu's famous "Sarri Sarri" plays during the scene depicting Joseba Sarrionandia's escape from prison; Basque punk group RIP's "Terrorismo Policial" plays as Ainhoa is assaulted by police in Pamplona; The Pogues' "Turkish Song of the Damned" is heard as Ainhoa infiltrates a shipment of heroin through Turkey. The soundtrack's ability to speak to the events taking place on the screen therefore serves as a subtextual commentary on the politicized punk music scenes of the 1980s and their canonical presence in Basque culture to this day. The

film's impressive music licensing even appears in the graphic novel version, with the lyrics from these songs overlaid onto the panels of the comic.

Apart from these notable ideological shifts from the first film, *Ainhoa*'s function within the wider project is primarily defined through way in which it inverts the plot of its predecessor: whereas *Black is Beltza* featured a Basque working on behalf of Black- and left-coded organizations (Revolutionary Cuba and the Black Panthers), the sequel revolves around a Black woman working with a Basque leftist institution (the newspaper *Egin*). Because of this the Basque Country has a much larger presence compared to the first film, with the city of Pamplona and *Egin* headquarters in the Gipuzkoan town of Hernani featuring prominently. Because of the larger role that the Basque Country of the 1980s plays in its narrative, *Ainhoa* functions as tribute to the milieu from which Muguruza emerged, representing the perspective of Basque activists in the face of state violence and a drug epidemic.

The focus on the Basque Country is perhaps most immediately noticeable in its representation of real people and events. Whereas the narrative of the original *Black is Beltza* features countless appearances by real life historical figures from around the world, *Ainhoa* limits itself to a select few individuals from the Basque Country who were of direct importance to Muguruza. In addition to the Muguruza brothers and Joseba Sarrionandia, the film also features appearances by Muguruza's former manager Amaia Apaolaza and Jabier "Salu" Salutregi, co-founder and director of *Egin*. Whereas the inclusions of Iñigo Muguruza and Apaolaza are included as a tribute to two close collaborators of Muguruza's who had recently passed away, and Sarrionandia's escape to Cuba serves to set the plot of the movie in motion, Salu plays a relatively large role in

the story as Josune's boss at *Egin*, appearing in numerous scenes direct her investigation and encourage her to give a voice to the voiceless (34:25). The film's portrayal of *Egin* as a committed truth-seeking institution plays a metonymic role in representing the Basque left, as Muguruza seeks to imbue it with the values of the Black is Beltza project and establish the importance of Basque media in the real world. Josune touches on this idea when she reveals that the scars on her back are the result of being detained and tortured by the police, and that her decision to become a journalist was based in the idea that the public would change their mind about the Basque conflict if such atrocities were shown on television (38:00).

In regards to the Basque conflict itself, the film takes place during a ceasefire period as ETA began negotiations with the Spanish government in Algiers, and the characters' expectations that the armed conflict would soon end is an important factor in the narrative. When news breaks that the ceasefire has officially been declared, Salu calls Josune and the two share an elated moment of celebration as Josune shouts "Gure bake prozesuaren ordua heldu da!" ("The time for our peace process has arrived!") (38:58). While most of the Basque characters want to see an end to ETA's violence, Muguruza does not attempt to whitewash or otherwise portray all Basques as pacifists. Early in the film, Josune's boyfriend Diego and Mikel, the son of the character Xebero from the first film, get into a heated argument about the effectiveness of political violence and assassinations as a means to bring about political change. Mikel asserts that the new Spanish democratic monarchy is fundamentally the same as the Franco dictatorship, and peaceful demonstration will not prevent activists from being tortured or murdered in cold blood; meanwhile Diego believes that the unity of the Basque

population against antidemocratic policies is sufficient and that in spite of what he and Josune have suffered, “heriotzak ez du atzerabiderik (...) bortizkeria guztiekin amaitu behar dugu” (“There is no coming back from death... we have to put an end to all forms of violence”) (19:45). Although Mikel’s beliefs about Spanish democracy are largely proven to be true by the events of the story, Diego’s pacifism and desire for the Basque left to unilaterally put an end to their violence is framed as the more morally clear perspective. The contrast of Mikel’s worldview with that of Diego, the journalists at *Egin*, and even a fictionalized Fermin Muguruza serves to separate the notions of Basque leftist activism and unconditional support of ETA. While the characters in the film regard ETA as a legitimate combatant in a bilateral conflict, the vast majority of them see the organization as a counterproductive force for bringing about change and desperately want a democratic solution to the political conflicts of the Basque Country. The fact that it is the pacifist Diego who dies of a drug overdose in the scene following their argument then becomes a commentary on how the Basque heroin epidemic of the 1980s—which the film argues was an intentional effort by the Spanish and American governments—led to instability that perhaps prolonged the Basque conflict.

Not unlike the first film, *Ainhoa*’s depiction of Basque society is filled with sly allusions to events that would occur in the years following the end of the film. The most notable of these occurs in an early scene when Josune and Ainhoa interview the Kortatu for *Egin*, and Fermin Muguruza mentions that they should write a song about the real-life disappearance of 150 kilos of cocaine from a police department in their hometown of Irun. This moment serves to introduce the film’s argument that Western governments were involved in the drug trade, but it also alludes to a song that the duo

would write for their next band, Negu Gorriak. “Ustelkeria” (“Corruption”; “Rot”), the thirteenth track on that band’s 1991 album *Gure Jarrera*, takes the form of a phone call between Fermin Muguruza and the band’s guitarist Kaki Arkarazo, with the former talking about how he has just read in the newspaper that Civil Guard Lieutenant Colonel Enrique Rodríguez Galindo was behind a drug trafficking operation. Two years later, Galindo would sue Negu Gorriak for defamation, and the court case would not be thrown out until 2001.

Another major event that the film alludes to is the 1989 assassination of Basque politician and former Egin editor-in-chief Josu Muguruza (no relation to Fermin) in Madrid. While Josu Muguruza is never mentioned by name, there is a scene depicting a meeting between a Spanish Interior Ministry official, a French drug kingpin and the French mercenary Didier on a boat somewhere in the mediterranean. The Frenchmen indicate that they have worked with the Spanish government before in assassinating “refugees,” a reference to GAL’s periodic attacks on Basque dissidents and ETA members in the French Basque Country. The Spanish official clarifies that this case would be different, and that he needed Didier and his men to take out a member of parliament in Madrid. While the film utilizes artistic license in referring to the politician Muguruza’s assassination (he would not be elected to serve in Spanish parliament until the following year), it nonetheless stands as an example of the dirty war tactics the film accuses the Spanish government of carrying out in order to prevent a peace on Basques’ terms.

Unlike the first *Black is Beltza* film, *Ainhoa* explicitly acknowledges its references to real-life events that would occur after the story’s end through a montage that plays in

the film's credits. All of the events mentioned above are cited in chronological order via collages of photos, video, newspaper clippings and original art which detail ETA's breaking of the 1988 ceasefire, the assassination of Jose Muguruza, the Galindo trial, the government-enforced closures of *Egin* and *Egunkaria*, and Salutregi's 2015 release from prison. ETA's 2011 definitive ceasefire stands out within the montage, as it is not represented by a collage, but rather an image of the animated characters Xebero, Tere and Joseba Sarrionandia looking at a wall plastered with newspaper headlines celebrating the end of ETA, apparently in tribute to those who lived through the entirety of the armed conflict.

The final way in which *Ainhoa*'s portrayal of the Basque conflict and Basque society differs from its predecessor is its presentation of the violence in Euskal Herria as *directly* tied to conflicts around the world. The film's thesis in this regard is laid out by the character Iman: "Munduko xake taulan aldibereko partida asko daude, eta denak daude lotuta" ("There are many simultaneous games on the world chess board, and they are all connected.") (32:55). Whereas the first film frames several of the global conflicts of the 1960s as being linked in spirit to the Basque Country, the conflicts that the sequel depicts or alludes to are conceived of as parts of an interconnected network administered by the US government to crush socialism and movements for national liberation worldwide. From the very beginning of the film, the characters all take for granted that the trafficking of drugs out of warzones and into minority communities is straight out of a "counterinsurgency handbook," and cite the shipment of heroin in dead soldier's coffins during the Vietnam War as an example (15:50). Everywhere the protagonist goes, locals tell her about the way in which the U.S.'s proxy wars in

Nicaragua and Afghanistan serve the dual purpose of destroying socialism in those countries while also creating a market for drugs that can be used to devastate activist communities and generate profits for other clandestine operations. In the film's perspective, the French Mafia, GAL, the Lebanese Phalange, the Taliban, the Contras and many other disparate groups and factions represent little more than manifestations of the core issue that is American imperialism and the violent enforcement of capitalist systems and ideologies.

The noticeable shift towards portraying violence as an inevitable consequence of state oppression leads to what is one of the more surprising moments of the Black is Beltza saga. In a scene in which a now-elderly Xebero begins to tell Ainhoa about his adventures with Manex in New York, his son Mikel—who has been established as supporting ETA's use of political violence—interjects by telling him to talk about a different exploit of Manex's: "Balentriak kontatzen hasita, zergatik ez diazu kontatzen ETAk Melitón Manzanas hil ondoren, ez zela Euskal Herrira itzuli? (...) Aitak eta Terek ondo ezagutu—" ("Since you're already talking about exploits, why don't you tell her about how after ETA killed Melitón Manzanas, [Manex] never again returned to the Basque Country?... Dad and Tere know well—") (23:20). Before Mikel can finish this thought, Manex's mother Tere interrupts him and insists that he drop the subject. This meaning of this scene could be construed as ambiguous: Mikel spends time explaining that Manzanas was a collaborator of the Nazi Gestapo as well as a torturer during the post-war years, so when he says that Xebero and Tere know *something* well, it is plausible that he is insinuating that they were tortured for their acts of political dissidence, and that Manex perhaps left the Basque Country in protest of ETA's turn to

violence. However, given Mikel's emphasis on "balentriak" (acts of bravery; exploits), the fact that he seems to be referring to Manex specifically, and the timeline established within the film indicating that Manex left for Algeria almost immediately after the date of Manzanas's assassination, the most likely explanation is that Manex played a role in ETA's first targeted killing.

This exchange, which occurs so suddenly and with so little foreshadowing that viewers may not understand its meaning or significance, seemingly revises the ending of the first animated film, which heavily implied that Manex had set off to become a cultural activist and had no direct links to ETA. Furthermore, Manex's quote at the end of *Black is Beltza* that "(l)a revolución está en casa, y siento que tengo que ser parte de esto"—a line meant to both allude to a grander adventure yet to come and explain his decision not to raise Ainhoa—is undermined by the idea that he had to flee into exile less than a year later. While this revelation does seem to at least partially contradict the message of the first animated film, it does correspond with the Black is Beltza fictional narrative becoming increasingly more radical in its tone over the course of the project, something that we see in the first film's overhauling of the protagonist as much more militant in his outlook and demeanor.

Ainhoa continues in this vein by giving its protagonist more hand-to-hand combat scenes and allowing her more autonomy within her own story. Unlike the first film, in which Manex was limited by his role of providing a parallel narrative of Basque social awakening, serving primarily to bear witness to social and political revolutions, Ainhoa has more agency as a protagonist. This is in part because the film is less focused on hewing the plot to specific historical occurrences, with Kortatu's farewell concert being

the only real-world event that Ainhoa directly experiences on her journey. This allows the protagonist to actually impact the much more heavily-fictionalized plot, as Ainhoa not only kills CIA assets and drug-running mercenaries, but she also uncovers evidence that leads to Josune publishing a front-page story in *Egin* uncovering the US's links to Al-Qaeda and international heroin smuggling operations. Whereas the first film's message highlighted the radicalizing potential of music and counterculture, the sequel seems to assert that once radicalized, a people can take on the oppressive powers of imperialism and win—something that might read as fantasy in the present-day context.

The film's aim of being a call to action is emphasized in the final shot of the film, as a Christmas parade featuring the Basque folk figures Olentzero and Mari Domingi passes in front of the protagonists, revealing on the other side of the street a crowd of riot police who are apparently at the parade for no reason other than to attack the Basque crowd. Tension builds as the theme music from the first film begins to swell, then police charge directly at the screen, breaking the fourth wall as the screen cuts to black and the credits roll. This ending asserts one last time that to be Basque, let alone an abertzale activist, one must expect to confront state violence and repression. While Muguruza invents a fictional victory for the characters to celebrate at the end of the film, the film's credits acknowledge the setbacks the Basque left faced in the form of violence and attacks via the Spanish judiciary, from the 1990s to the present day. By connecting the struggles depicted in the film with more recent events, Muguruza honors the past without foreclosing the potential for justice in the future.

Overall, *Black is Beltza II: Ainhoa* serves as a tribute and vindication of the liberation struggles and activists of the 1980s, particularly in the Basque Country. At the

same time, the titular protagonist serves as an embodiment of Black is Beltza and 21st century progressive values—representative of feminism and immigrant Basque identities—projected onto Muguruza's youth, serving as the catalyst for achieving a moment of justice that could vindicate that generation of punks and activists that had been ravaged by state violence and addiction. As the final work of the Black is Beltza transmedia project, *Ainhoa* both looks to the past that inspired it while attempting to inspire a more radical perspective in its present-day audience.

2.10 "A Nation That Sings Will Never Die": *NOLA?* (2015)

Released a year after the original *Black is Beltza* graphic novel and the launch of the wider Black is Beltza project, *NOLA?* (2015) further explores Muguruza's vision of Basques' solidarity and collaboration with African Americans and the wider African diaspora, this time through the city of New Orleans and its rich Afro-Caribbean traditions. It is simultaneously the most unique film of the Black is Beltza project and a continuation of Muguruza's prior work as a documentarian. As in *Bass-que Culture* (2006), the film covers the production of a studio album in a foreign country, with Muguruza this time recording a compilation album of his greatest hits and classic jazz standards at the city's famed Preservation Hall. Meanwhile, the film draws from 2009's *Checkpoint Rock* by interviewing his collaborators about the interconnectedness of their music, activism and ethnic identity. More than just a nickname for the city of New Orleans, the film's title refers to the Basque word *nola*—"how?"—and it seeks to understand exactly *how* the jazz music scene in New Orleans has been impacted by

Hurricane Katrina amidst the displacement of much of the Black community and the subsequent process of gentrification.

The film draws upon one of the key motifs in Muguruza's work by utilizing a live radio broadcast as a framing device, as New Orleans radio host George Ingmire segues between themes ranging from the US government's dismal response to Hurricane Katrina to Black Mardi Gras traditions and voodoo. The film's eclectic range of topics serves to contrast the city's rich African American culture with the US government's neoliberal response to the crisis caused by the flooding of the city, which saw little relief go to the Black community as housing speculators reaped immense profits. In this context, the New Orleans jazz music scene becomes a platform from which to go beyond a simple ethnographic study of the city's history and identity, and investigate the ways in which local Black culture informs and inspires resistance to capitalism.

After a title card sequence featuring a montage of archival footage of Black jazz performers, 1920s cartoons, and the KKK set to the song "Kolore bizia," the film opens with a series of quotes from local musicians explaining the way in which jazz music reflects the city of New Orleans, with one drummer saying the slow, thick rhythms evoke the humid atmosphere of Louisiana, and a cellist noting the way in which the humidity impacts the way sounds travel and resonate in the city (2:25). After establishing the genre's link to an ineffable Louisiana atmosphere, George Ingmire addresses the topic of Hurricane Katrina and the ways in which the city was abandoned by the US government, both in its response to the disaster and in its prior neglect of the levee system which led to the flooding of the city. After showing images of the hurricane's destruction, the film presents Muguruza in the Preservation Hall recording studio

performing the song “Etxerat!” (“Coming Home!”), and the topic of the talking head interviews segues to the individual musicians’ decisions to return to the city so that the jazz culture of the city could survive. Drummer “Oops” Moss notes how upon his return to the city to play a gig, there was still debris in the streets and on the roofs of homes, and yet the line for the club stretched around the block (5:55). While hailing the triumph of jazz music and culture in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the film also stresses that this was a political battle in which the working-class, mostly Black community saw opposition from pro-business interests who did not want to see them return, as George Ingmire quotes Republican politician Richard Baker’s infamous remark: “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans” (9:45).

The film then transitions into an ethnographic study of New Orleans jazz culture, with Ben Jaffe, the director of Preservation Hall, commenting on how the club was the only non-segregated venue in the city’s famed French Quarter in the early 20th century and was a symbol of integration and cultural exchange. Jaffe then continues by delving into the city’s history of trade, particularly with Cuba and Haiti, and the role that slavery had in creating the city’s culture. For Jaffe, jazz music is an emblem of both the city’s history of being open to the world, as well as a way of honoring the suffering that Blacks had to endure for centuries under slavery and segregation (18:45). The film provides an example of the legacy of slavery in contemporary New Orleans culture in the form of the “Indian” costumes of Mardi Gras. As explained by New Orleans filmmaker Aaron Walker, the monochrome feathered costumes, complete with Native American headdresses, are intended to honor the slaves who escaped bondage and sought refuge among the local indigenous tribes. The film then cuts to a scene from Walker’s

documentary *Bury the Hatchet* (2010) that shows a group of police attempting to stop a late-night parade of "Indians" as the paraders shout "Why you wanna fuck with our tradition?" and begin chanting "Nobody run when the police come!" (24:10). The act of defiance from Walker's film comes to represent another example of the ways in which the historical traditions of New Orleans exist in an antagonistic relationship with the city's authorities, while also echoing the resistance of enslaved people centuries prior.

Even as the film maintains a narrow focus on the city of New Orleans and its unique African American culture, Muguruza finds unexpected ways to relate the historical experiences of Basques to the particular experiences of African Americans. In one segment, Ingmire begins to explain the ways in which Jazz was originally influenced by West African spiritual beliefs, particularly voodoo. The film then cuts to Muguruza and company playing the opening of "Zugarramurdi," a song originally written for Álex de la Iglesia's horror comedy *Las Brujas de Zugarramurdi* (2013), as Ingmire shifts from African folk religion to Basque pagan traditions: "The Spanish Inquisition persecuted heretics, especially in the Basque Country, where the Akelarre gathered the witches. This track speaks about the witches' town, Zugarramurdi" (27:37). As the song continues to play and Muguruza sings lyrics about the Basque god of nature Mari and the summer solstice, the film cuts to an interview with the band's accordion player, Bruce Barnes, who explains the origins of New Orleans voodoo and clarifies that the practice in reality does not resemble its negative portrayals in popular culture: "We use voodoo to heal people and bring about good things in their life (...) using plants, herbs, and prayer" (28:38).

As “Zugarramurdi” continues, we see Muguruza looking over song lyrics with the Black transgender rapper Katey Red. The film then cuts to her in the recording booth singing an English translation of the song’s refrain “Call me a witch, ‘cause I’m a witch. From the black hole, the fireball” (29:15). As the song ends, the film cuts to an interview with Red, who describes how over her 17-year career the city of New Orleans has become increasingly accepting of the LGBTQ+ community. As footage of her performing at a nightclub begins to play, she continues: “New Orleans is a do-what-you-want city (...) because you can do what you want, it makes them crazy. Just don’t get caught by the police, because you can go to jail” (30:42). The “Zugarramurdi” segment of *NOLA?* is a perfect example of Muguruza’s discursive strategy of building a sense of solidarity and connection with Black communities through comparisons with historical examples of Basque oppression, even if the similarities are not immediately evident. Within the logic of Black is Beltza, songs about Basque experiences can be reinterpreted and used as platforms to discuss disparate topics such as voodoo, transgender rights, and the often antagonistic relationship they have with mainstream culture and authority.

This scene serves as the transition to the film’s second half, which primarily focuses on establishing a dichotomy between Louisiana cultural traditions and neoliberal free market policies. Ingmire establishes the political stakes for the city, stating that “New Orleans has become gentrification ground zero” before citing Naomi Klein’s “shock doctrine” theory from her 2007 book of the same name. Much of the film’s perspective on economics is voiced through music producer Mark Bingham, who also cites Klein (“Disaster capitalism is big business” 40:30) and directs anger towards those

who profited from the rebuilding effort at the expense of the community ("The world has become one big shopping mall" 44:40).

The film then shifts focus to the question of gentrification and the potential loss of the city's African American roots. As explained by Ingmire and several of the band's members, second lines are a quintessential New Orleans tradition involving a freeform parade of brass and percussion musicians that traditionally would follow behind the regimented first line of a funeral procession. The spontaneous nature of these performances often incites large groups to dance, and their ability to bring the community together is described by the interviewees as "transcendental" (48:22) and "for the community" (49:13) as a long montage of street parades plays. After establishing the central importance of this tradition to New Orleans culture, the interviewees begin to express their disgust and frustration with the new gentrified neighborhoods and their residents, who have sought to end second lines over complaints of noise pollution. Guitarist Jonathan Freilich laments that people who "buy a house, or buy many houses" seem to believe that "property is better than something that took hundreds of years of a (…) subtle brilliance that they can't understand to generate" (50:05). Meanwhile, a tuba player, who has cleverly repurposed a "no noise pollution" sticker by placing it on his instrument, remarks that food, culture, and music are all deeply interconnected highlighting the irony of people moving to the birthplace of jazz only to campaign against the very culture that defines it. When Bingham bluntly refers to the anti-second line movement as representing "all the fascist elements of America" (50:37), the film clearly takes his remarks at face value.

The final two scenes of *NOLA?* conclude the film by directly tying it into the Black is Beltza transmedia project. First, as the band plays the Negu Gorriak song “Gora herria!” (“Power to the people”), the various musicians and producers express the meaning of music to the city of New Orleans and its role in maintaining the city’s African roots while also helping the community to overcome adversity. Amongst the reflections of the New Orleans residents, we see Muguruza sing the song’s refrain: “Kantatzen duen herri bat ez da inoiz hilko” (“A nation that sings will never die”) (55:05). Then the topic shifts to the artists’ views on Muguruza’s cross-cultural project and the value of opening up one’s own culture to outside influences and perspectives, as Barnes says that “Gora herria!” has “become a part of Louisiana” (56:45). Ben Jaffe, the creative director of Preservation Hall puts it another way: “You, Fermin, and your music and your world… That’s as important for us as it is for you. Not only are you getting to introduce us to your world, we get to introduce you to our world… Two-way street” (1:02:15). As Jaffe finishes his reflection, the drums of the song “Black is Beltza” begin to play and we see the last studio recording session for the film, in which Muguruza and a backup singer belt out the chorus of “How do you say ‘black’ in Basque?” The film finally cuts back to George Ingmire who closes out the film by responding: “Beltza. That’s it. How do you say ‘black’ in Basque? Yeah, black is beltza. We are out of time” (1:04:09).

Given the format of Muguruza’s prior two documentaries and his lifelong fascination with Black music, it is easy to imagine him making *NOLA?* even if the Black is Beltza project had never come to fruition. And yet the film’s themes resonate with the project so well that it inevitably became subsumed by Black is Beltza, such that Muguruza found it necessary to end the film with this slogan. While *NOLA?*’s focus on

the city of New Orleans means that it doesn't feature the global perspective and daring adventures of the Black is Beltza animated films, Muguruza's role as a musician-protagonist at the heart of the documentary, tying together the topics of the film through his songs, serves a similar purpose as Manex's visit to Harlem in *Black is Beltza.* In both instances, a Basque man arrives at a historic hub of Black culture to express his solidarity and learn about forms of cultural resistance, and in the process leaves a mark in that community through the Basque language and culture that he brings with him.

2.11 "Animation is an exercise in resistance": *Beltza Naiz (2018)* and *Ainhoa: Making Of* (2022)

In an interview from his 2022 documentary *Ainhoa: Making Of*, Fermin Muguruza points out to the documentary's presenter Amaia Jackson that at the end of the first *Black is Beltza* movie's credits, there is a quote from the Basque cartoonist Juanba Berasategi, rendered in Basque, Spanish, French, and English: "Animation is an exercise in resistance." Berasategi, who had died a year prior to the film's release, is best known for illustrating and directing the first ever feature-length animated film in the Basque language, *Kalabaza Tripontzia* (*The Magic Pumpkin*, 1985) and is considered the father of Basque animation. In creating the first animated films in Euskara for an adult audience, Muguruza clearly saw himself as following Berasategi and offering his own resistance. And while every project Muguruza has embarked on throughout his career has been conceived of as a form of resistance or activism, his move into animation in particular stands out as a new frontier in politically conscious cultural production. The making-of documentaries *Beltza Naiz* (2018) and *Ainhoa: Making Of*

(2022), released around the same time as their corresponding animated films, turn their gaze on the origins and production of the Black is Beltza project to define, in Muguruza's terms, what exactly makes the animated films and surrounding project an act of resistance.

Both documentaries prominently feature Amaia Jackson, a Basque woman of Tanzanian descent, who serves as a host, interviewer, and ambassador of Afro-Basque identity, particularly in *Beltza Naiz*. The first documentary opens with Jackson, sporting a large afro hairstyle, performing a traditional African dance as a song chanting "power to the people" plays in the background. As the song ends, Jackson looks into the camera and declares "Beltza naiz eta harro nago"—I'm Black and I'm proud—(*Beltza Naiz* :35), simultaneously referencing both the song by James Brown as well as Fermin Muguruza's appropriation of the phrase in the Negu Gorriak song "Esan Ozenki." We then learn more about Jackson, a fan of Muguruza's who had been intrigued by the "Black is Beltza" t-shirts Muguruza's band had been wearing on their 2013 world tour as teaser for Muguruza's next project. When the transmedia project was announced in 2014, Jackson traveled to Bilbao to participate in the exhibition and purchase the graphic novel. As footage of Jackson flipping through the pages of the graphic novel plays in the present, she narrates that "when I read *Black is Beltza* I felt a shiver. I saw my life reflected in the story, to a degree" (3:10). She then explains that her Tanzanian father was killed in a traffic accident before she was born, and that her paternal grandmother, who had been estranged from her father, traveled from Tanzania to Zarautz to meet Jackson. Ever since, Jackson has periodically traveled to her father's homeland to keep in touch with her roots, and we then see video and photographs of

Amaia and her Basque mother with her family in Tanzania. Returning to her memories from reading the graphic novel in 2014, Jackson recalls declaring to her friends "Ni 'Black is Beltza' naiz"—I am 'Black is Beltza'—(4:20). She and her friends then took photos of themselves holding up "Black is Beltza" signs to send to Muguruza, and it is inferred that Muguruza then invited her to become a collaborator on the project.

For the second part of *Beltza Naiz*, which deals with the making of the *Black is Beltza* film and takes up over an hour of the documentary's 84-minute runtime, Jackson serves as an interviewer who meets with many of the film's collaborators. Even as the documentary becomes much more focused on the production behind the animated film, Jackson's continued presence, nodding along to the answers from the numerous interviewees, reminds the viewer that this film is fundamentally from her Afro-Basque perspective. When interviewing the Sey Sisters, a soul music trio from Catalonia made up of three sisters of Ghanaian descent, Jackson mentions her own ethnic background before asking "you're from Ghana and Catalan. How would you explain your identity to the world?" The sisters, who respond to all their questions in Catalan, reply that their "roots are Ghanaian and Catalan (...) It's easy. Our parents are from Ghana and we're from Catalonia. It's actually very simple" (40:25).

Beltza Naiz's final scene features Jackson sitting on the beach in Zarautz, surrounded by a diverse group of children, approximately ages 6-12 and of different ethnic backgrounds and skin colors. Addressing the children, Jackson says "Today, (as) they try to close the borders and the seas to people coming from other places, I want to teach you a word in Swahili, my father's language. Welcome is 'karibu'" (1:19:33). She then spells out the "karibu" in the sand with her finger, and the children do the same.

When they are done, the oldest child then says “Amaia, I’m ‘Black is Beltza’ too!” and the entire group then gets up and runs towards the water. The film then cuts to its final shot of the word “karibu” written in large letters on the beach as the tide begins to wash over it.

Overall, Jackson’s role in *Beltza Naiz* serves to reframe the Black is Beltza project, defining its meaning not through the overt messages of the graphic novel or film—the plot of *Black is Beltza* is never discussed in depth in the documentary—, rather, it approaches these texts through an anticipated audience reaction, turning the film’s supposed radical potential into the ultimate focus of the documentary. The unique Afro-Basque perspective of Jackson serves to model an audience adoption of the project’s “X is Y” formula for intercultural and interracial solidarity through language: black is beltza, karibu is ongi etorri, etc. While the first *Black is Beltza* story is not about immigration or interracial identity, *Beltza Naiz* stakes a claim to these topics through the presence of Amaia Jackson. In doing so, the documentary builds upon the project’s activist aims of affirming Blackness and Black identities, specifically from a Basque perspective.

Apart from these moments from *Beltza Naiz* exploring Amaia Jackson’s identity and perspective, the majority of both documentaries is dedicated to presenting either the parallel Black is Beltza events or the making of the animated films. In the case of the former, the documentaries serve to highlight the ways in which Black is Beltza has been conceived as being based around in-person participation, whether through its exhibits or through ephemeral experiences like concerts or dance workshops. The first documentary explicitly highlights this via a title card “1. Zatia: Black is Beltza

Transmedia Unibertsoa" (:40), which precedes the section detailing the Bilbao exhibition and its numerous events. Compiling clips of performances by the folk rocker Ruper Ordorika, the African-Basque singer Afrika Bibang, and others, in addition to scenes from the hip-hop dance and DJ workshops from Bilbao, the film attempts to capture the way in which the graphic novel's themes of music and Black subjectivity were represented through the project's ephemeral experiences.

Beyond its documentation of the official in-person events from the 2014 exhibition, the "Transmedia Universe" section of the documentary also delves into some of Muguruza's actions in Barcelona from 2016 and 2017. One scene portrays Muguruza's idea of holding a "cercavilas" (a festive street procession; equivalent to the Spanish term "pasacalles") in Barcelona to commemorate the first day of the San Fermin festival. The event, titled "Gora Black Fermín" would unite various texts of the Black is Beltza project, first by drawing upon New Orleans traditions of brass bands taking the streets in "second lines," then by featuring a *gigante* not unlike the San Fermin ones central to the plot of *Black is Beltza.* However, unlike the Black giants represented in the graphic novel, the giant they used was an unusual one—"the only political giant in Catalonia" (16:38)—from the town of Sallent, representing a maquis, an anti-francoist guerrilla fighter. We then see the spectacle unfold onscreen, with Muguruza's New Orleans brass band escorting the giant through the Ramblas of Barcelona, mixing signifiers of Black music, Catalan tradition and the San Fermin festival to "subvert the accepted order" (17:08).

In spite of the 2022 release of *Black is Beltza II: Ainhoa* being accompanied by fewer transmedia texts and spectacles, its corresponding making-of movie nonetheless

stressed the importance of viewing the wider project through a holistic perspective. At the end of the film Fermin Muguruza himself explains the idea behind Black is Beltza: "It's what's called a transmedia project (…) with the previous film we began with the comic, then the exhibitions, the activities parallel to these exhibitions, then the film, the documentary on that film" (59:30). The film then cuts to an interview with the Basque street artist Balü, who reveals that he had done a series of graffiti in San Sebastian in parallel with the premiere of the first *Black is Beltza* film, as the audience is then encouraged to be on the lookout for similar art pieces amid the release of the sequel. Muguruza then closes out *Ainhoa: Making Of* by stressing the importance of seeing the film in theaters and telling viewers to "ideia zabaldu"—"spread the idea," a reference to the title of Negu Gorriak's 1995 album—through their in-person participation in the project.

Meanwhile, when the documentaries' focus turns to the collaborative effort behind the making of the films, the feature that immediately stands out is the number of interview subjects. The runtime of both *Beltza Naiz* and *Ainhoa: Making Of* is dominated by long series of talking head interviews that make up the films' middle section, as dozens of the animated films' collaborators are interviewed, ranging from animators and sound designers to the lawyer in charge of securing Otis Redding's image rights. Even Muguruza's son, who designed several posters that appear in the background in *Black is Beltza II: Ainhoa*, has a 30 second section highlighting his effort. As both films at times seemingly devolve into documentaries on the art of animated filmmaking—with both featuring staggering amount of interviewees talking about animation methods, sound design, scheduling and other practicalities of creating an animated film—*Beltza*

Naiz and *Ainhoa: Making Of* indirectly speak to the complex and collaborative nature of the project. For much of these films, the protagonist is not Muguruza nor Amaia Jackson, but rather an ensemble of filmmakers who express an excitement and ideological commitment to develop the Black is Beltza films. In honoring so much of the team, the documentary becomes a commentary on the act of collaboration itself.

Not unlike *Beltza Naiz*'s portrayal of Amaia Jackson's personal identification with the Black is Beltza project, the interviews with the films' actors mostly revolve around their attraction to the themes of the movie or their role in particular. In *Beltza Naiz* the Algerian-French actor Hamid Krim recalls his excitement to play a character involved in the FLN, as his uncle had fought in Algeria's war for independence. Meanwhile Angelo Moore, a famed American jazz musician who voices the character Rudy, expresses his interest in the film's portrayal of the riots that took place the year of his birth. In the case of *Ainhoa: Making Of*, the animated sequel's greater focus on the Basque Country and its large cast of Basque voice actors means that the film's primary use of Euskara and its portrayal of Basque history become the main topic of discussion. Eneko Sagardoy, star of some of the most commercially and critically successful Basque language films of the past decade, stresses his commitment to working on films in Euskara and the importance of questioning the supposed limits of creating films in minority languages. On the other hand, the actor Ramon Agirre stresses the importance of *Ainhoa*'s perspective on recent Basque history while alluding to the politicized media discourses surrounding it:

> Our country's history can be told from many positions and in many ways but, unfortunately, in recent times in fiction, only one narrative is being imposed, the

> "official" one, and it's crucial to explain other approaches and narratives. And *Ainhoa* provides another vision, closer to my sensibility. (*Ainhoa: Making Of* 29:59)

These ideas are explored further in *Ainhoa: Making Of* through a section about the sequel's "associate producers"—in this case, local businesses and organizations that effectively sponsored the film so that it could be independently produced. On the one hand there is Elkar Taldea, an organization that promotes the Basque language by producing media in Euskara and operating a chain of bookstores. The Pamplona bookstore and co-op Katakrak is also prominently featured as a collaborator. Then there is Boga brewery, which we learn was originally founded to supply beer for gaztetxes, but eventually evolved into a full-fledged co-op that nonetheless remains committed to the idea of "alternative consumption" (55:12). Of all the film's producer-sponsors, the one which stands out the most is the restaurant Aratz, owned by the chef Iker Zabaleta, whose son Aitor was killed by right-wing hooligans in 1998 after a football match in Madrid. Referring back to his son's murder and Muguruza subsequently dedicating a line from the song "Urrun" to him, Zabaleta explains that he was able to give feedback on the film, ostensibly in exchange for catering services (57:20).

This penultimate section of the documentary, immediately preceding Muguruza's encouraging the audience to enjoy the film in theaters and enjoy the project beyond the film, serves to highlight the unique nature of the Basque society that made the film possible. The activist outlook behind the production of the films is framed as not just a question of Muguruza's unique vision and influence as an iconic musical artist, but rather as part of a defining feature in Basque society—particularly among Basque-

language institutions—by which co-ops in favor of promoting local culture can flourish and even successful restaurateurs can be expressly antifascist. For Muguruza, the film's associate producers and their role in financing the second film stand as proof of a Basque ethos that does not obey free market capitalist logic, and instead prioritizes the dignity and tradition of its community on the local level. While the *Ainhoa: Making Of* documentary was released before the animated film's premiere at the San Sebastian's *Zinemaldia* Film Festival before a crowd of 3,000 people, and therefore was not able to capture this triumphant moment for the Black is Beltza project, an online article by Xalba Ramirez about the premiere captured the Basque audience's eagerness to have their values reflected back at them and in turn become part of the spectacle. Referring to the audience's reactions as the sponsors of the festival and film were read out before the film, Ramirez writes: "Zeren, bai, Zinemaldian gaude. Baina jendea ez dator hona balioak etxean utzita. Kontraesanekin koherente, erakunde publiko, multinazional eta banketxeei txistu. Artistei, Aratz jatetxeari eta Katakraki, txalo. Eta hala behar du, zer demonio" ("Yes, we are at *Zinemaldia*, after all. But the people haven't come only to leave their values at home. Coherent before [the festival's] contradictions, there were jeers for the [Spanish] public organizations, multinational companies and banks. Cheers for the artists, Aratz restaurant and Katakrak. And dammit, that's how it should be.") (Ramirez).

2.12 Conclusions: The Spectacle of Countercultural Resistance

In *Black is Beltza II: Ainhoa*, a fictionalized 23-year-old Fermin Muguruza declares: "Puto Disney! Hori da benetako etsaia, umeei kapitalismoa txertatzen!" ("Fuck

Disney! That's the real enemy, indoctrinating kids with capitalism.") (16:23). Among the five films of the Black is Beltza project, each filled with references to each other and esoteric allusions to history, this comedic moment stands out as perhaps the only instance of irony or metacommentary, with the film slyly acknowledging its existence not only as a cartoon, but as an anticapitalist one in particular. Ironically, Black is Beltza's transmedia development has partially mirrored Disney's business strategy over the same decade, as it came to expand the presence of its intellectual properties across numerous platforms and media—film, television, theme parks, toys, etc.—in order to maximize profits and reach a monolithic status in popular culture and at the box office. While the self-financed nature of Muguruza's project means that he is not immune to the pressures of turning a profit, the quote from *Ainhoa* signals the way in which the many artifacts of Black is Beltza self-consciously present themselves as an antidote to capitalist alienation by appropriating this corporate model towards activist ends. Part of this presentation of the project relies upon its status as a boutique operation, produced mostly in the Basque Country and led by a respected local figurehead whose fanbase and influence in parts of Latin America and Europe helped to ensure the project's viability. Beyond this, the very way in which Black is Beltza is intended to be consumed—in person and as a collective, in turn reflecting the values of Basque radicals, promoters of culture in the Basque language, or communities elsewhere in Spain and abroad that sympathize with these causes—models an alternative to individualistic forms of consumption and relationship with media. Muguruza's dedication to presenting the graphic novels and films in person and organizing one-off concerts and spectacles throughout Europe and Latin America serves as a statement that the

Black is Beltza project represents the public's retaking of the public sphere, rather than a retreat from it.

While the nominal subject of Black is Beltza is the struggles of the Third Word and minority communities in the West, the project is fundamentally a celebration of a Basque perspective. Even as two of the three words in its title are "black," the phrase itself interpellates a Basque identity that is inexorably linked to political struggle, with Euskara carrying the symbolic weight of a language that is inherently in resistance to the hegemonic capitalist order. Throughout the many discourses about Black subjectivity, liberation movements, music, and Basque history that it developed over eight years, the Black is Beltza transmedia project maintained the ultimate horizon of a radical Basque perspective in the present. While the diverse themes of the project and its texts undoubtedly give them an appeal beyond the borders of the Basque Country, their self-conscious presentation as the manifestation of an exceptional national spirit carries with it the idea that Muguruza wants to express more than any other: Something like this could only be made in Euskal Herria.

In this sense, Black is Beltza represents a broad and emphatic reaffirmation of Basque exceptionalism as a bulwark against the accelerating encroachment of markets and the resulting atomization of society. While Muguruza's music and activism have always maintained an internationalist outlook, the comprehensive scope of Black is Beltza seeks to capture the radical energy and optimism of 20th-century liberation movements as a means to inspire resistance against the more opaque structures of power characteristic of late capitalism.

It is worth noting that the fictional narratives around which the project revolves are set in 1967 and 1988—one year before the radical watershed of 1968 and the fall of the Berlin Wall, respectively. Yet, despite many of the activist protagonists appearing destined for failure or even death shortly after the stories conclude, the films fundamentally resist being haunted by the 20th century's leftist failures. Instead, they focus on the glory and emancipation inherent in the act of resisting capitalism and the global violence it perpetuates. While this perspective carries a palpable sense of nostalgia, it avoids melancholic fixation on so-called "lost futures" (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*), instead placing faith in the enduring radical energies of Basque culture and society.

One could argue about the extent to which Muguruza idealizes Basqueness by portraying Basque radicals in such an unequivocally positive and exceptional light. However, the project is anchored in a material understanding of Basque culture through the lens of countercultural ethnogenesis, wherein Basque nationalism and its associated countercultural music scene emerge as responses to the experience of being a linguistic minority denied full cultural and political autonomy. While Black is Beltza adopts the aesthetics and delivery of a postmodern media spectacle, its content is ultimately rooted in the belief that local culture is what forges solidarity. Far from being commodified or mediated by the market, it is presented as the very foundation for launching radical opposition to capitalist hegemony and the global inequalities it sustains.

Chapter 3: Listless Tourists; Postmodern Basque Subjectivities and the Specter of the Radical in Katixa Agirre's *Los turistas desganados* and Aixa de la Cruz's *La línea del frente*

The 2017 novels *Los turistas desganados*[18] and *La línea del frente*, by Katixa Agirre and Aixa de la Cruz, respectively, are unique in that they feature protagonists who were born and raised in the Basque Country, but because of their unique upbringing, have grown up detached from the political and social realities of the region. In both novels, the protagonist's comfortable life in 2010s Spain is disrupted when conflict between the Spanish state and Basque protestors hits close to home. While neither novel presents a truly radical thesis, with political conflict subsumed into family melodrama that seemingly gets resolved at the end of *Turistas desganados* and the protagonist of De la Cruz's novel ultimately descending into an impotent nihilism, a materialist reading of the novels shows the ways in which the contradictions of the their respective narrator-protagonists—Basque yet cosmopolitan, materially comfortable yet financially dependent, sophisticated and modern yet associated with those whom the hegemonic Spanish culture and politics have branded as violent and atavistic, tourists in their own homeland—open new avenues for reflecting on the impact of globalization and neoliberalism on Basque identities in the 21st century.

Furthermore, both novels are notable for the way in which they upend established tropes found in literature about the armed conflict in the Basque Country.

[18] Originally published in Euskara as *Atertu arte itxaron* ("Wait Until the Rain Clears") in 2015. This chapter will primarily cite the self-translated 2017 Spanish version.

While Agirre and De la Cruz are hardly the first novelists to portray this conflict, or the way in which Basques may reflect on their identity amidst contention and violence, these novels nonetheless stand out as works that don't fit neatly within the predominant literary and academic discourses on these topics. The contemporary works to which these works are most often compared, such as Gabriela Ybarra's *El comensal* (2015), Fernando Aramburu's *Patria* (2016), and Edurne Portela's *Mejor la ausencia* (2017), primarily focus on the violence committed by ETA and its supporters from the late 70s through the mid 90s and present the period following ETA's 2011 definitive ceasefire as a moment for reflecting on trauma and memory, and this in turn has lent itself well to not only academic discourses on historical memory, but also arguments from public intellectuals calling for the "literary defeat of ETA"[19]. While themes of historical memory and political violence are undoubtedly present in Agirre and De la Cruz's novels, they tend to be of secondary importance, and are accompanied by an explicit questioning of the way such discourses are articulated and deployed. Rather than having a privileged perspective on the most violent and contentious years of the Basque conflict, the protagonists of these novels are defined precisely by their relative distance from those events. For them, reflecting on the past is not a means for acknowledging or overcoming trauma, rather, it is a way to contextualize and understand the *ongoing* political conflicts of the 2010s: the dispersion of Basque prisoners, freedom of speech, accusations of terrorist sympathies, police brutality, and even skewed media portrayals of protest movements. And yet, despite all the questions raised in these novels, these

[19]This term—"la derrota literaria de ETA"—was frequently used by Fernando Aramburu during the press tour for his 2016 novel, but can just as well be attributed to "anti-nationalist" intellectuals such as Mikel Azurmendi, Jon Juaristi, and Rogelio Alonso.

are not politically radical texts, as their narratives follow in the wake of left-wing Basque counterculture and protest movements without engaging directly with radical thought. While archetypal figures of abertzale politics and activism loom large in both novels, they exist only as a spectral presence with no influence beyond being a symbol of either terrorist barbarity or Spanish state repression, depending on one's perspective. The political questions of the post-ETA Basque Country are instead synthesized through characters who have been defined by their lack of political commitment. The narrator-protagonists at the center of these stories are ultimately portrayed as listless, middle-class Millennials with an abundance of self-awareness and insight, yet lacking the motivation and political imagination to actively engage with ideas or projects that genuinely challenge or seek alternatives to the status quo. This chapter will analyze the two novels side-by-side, as they share so many narrative, thematic, and stylistic similarities that to analyze their content separately would be redundant.

3.1 *Los turistas desganados*

Agirre's novel centers on Ulia, a 27-year-old musicology graduate student and former opera singer, originally from Vitoria-Gasteiz but having lived her entire adult life in Madrid, who finds herself on a road trip through Euskal Herria in the summer of 2011 with her Castilian husband Gustavo. The sightseeing and the narrator's ironic musings on her career and marriage begin to give way to profound anxiety and neuroticism. It is eventually revealed that Ulia's worries stem from having recently learned that her mother Mariluz has rekindled a romantic relationship with Ulia's biological father José María Ortiz de Zárate (or Jota, as Mariluz calls him), an ETA prisoner incarcerated since

1987 for the bombing of a Guardia Civil barracks that killed two children. He has become the center of a national controversy surrounding the ex post facto extension of his prison sentence and massive protests against the inequitable treatment of Basque prisoners by the Spanish judiciary. When Gustavo's acquaintance Sarah, a tabloid journalist working on a series of articles portraying the protestors as extremists, begins to invite herself on Ulia and Gustavo's outings, Ulia begins to worry that she and her mother may end up as the subjects of a sensationalist exposé. Meanwhile, she tries to find the right words to confess to her husband that her father is a convicted killer whose face is currently gracing both the evening news and posters plastered on walls throughout the Basque Country.

The text is presented as a long-form confession written by Ulia for Gustavo, with much of the narration addressed directly to the latter in the second person. In addition to the primary plot thread of the couple's Basque vacation, there are two other storylines woven into the text, mostly narrated in the third person with occasional appeals to Gustavo. First there is Ulia's retelling of her mother's romantic and political involvement with Jota, beginning with their first encounter during the events of the March 3rd, 1976 massacre of striking workers in Vitoria-Gasteiz (3-M), following with their clandestine involvement with ETA, and eventually arriving at Mariluz's steps towards reconnecting with Jota after her divorce from Ulia's stepfather Joseba decades later. Then, in what is ostensibly part of Ulia's doctoral thesis on Benjamin Britten, the novel is interspersed with a series of chapters recounting the English composer's encounters with artists and intellectuals of the 1930s and 40s, as he and his partner Peter Pears move around America and Europe in an attempt to avoid the conflict of World War II and continue

their music careers. The Britten chapters take on an essay-like quality as Ulia questions the legitimacy of his pacifist beliefs, in the process permeating the rest of the text with questions of how individuals rationalize their indifference towards or avoidance of mass-scale conflict and violence.

The novel ultimately ends at Britten's former home in Aldeburgh, England, with Ulia having been awarded a fellowship by the Britten-Pears Foundation for the fall of 2011. Months after her attempt to confess to Gustavo had gone awry, interrupted by Gustavo's own confession of an affair with Sarah, immediately followed by a serious car accident, Ulia finally signs off on her book-length message to her husband, signaling that she is ready to make both peace with Gustavo and—given ETA's formal cessation of armed activity—finally meet with her biological father.

3.2 *La línea del frente*

Aixa de la Cruz's 2017 novel *La línea del frente* takes its title from a 1986 song by Kortatu whose chorus could very well be used to describe one of the core conflicts of the novel: "Es el rock de la línea del frente, que se note que estás presente." Sofía, a 29-year-old graduate student of literature from Bilbao living in Barcelona, discovers via the evening news that her high school boyfriend Jokin has been arrested for attacking a Basque police officer during a protest in the year 2014, and he is subsequently sentenced to a lengthy prison term due to aggravated charges of terrorism. Now feeling shame for being ignorant of social justice and having avoided politics and activism her entire life, she breaks up with her wealthy, conservative fiancé and moves to her parents' summer home in Laredo, Cantabria to rekindle her relationship with Jokin, now

incarcerated in the nearby El Dueso penitentiary. Meanwhile, she channels her newfound interest in Basque radical politics into her doctoral thesis, which centers on the work of the (fictional) Basque writer and former ETA member Mikel Areilza, who killed himself in Buenos Aires while collaborating on an experimental theatrical production about his life. As part of her research, Sofía reads from the diary of an Argentinian playwright who unwittingly recorded Areilza's final days. Locked away in a seaside gated community that is practically abandoned during the winter months and only able to visit Jokin once per week, Sofía becomes increasingly isolated, compulsively reflecting on her privileged upbringing and obsessing over the idea that memory and history are nothing more than subjective constructs. This notion that truth and reality are subordinant to individuals' instinct to form cohesive narratives becomes central to the novel as Sofía realizes that Jokin was not the virtuous musician-turned-activist she had imagined him to be, and that the play Areilza was working on likely provoked an identity crisis that led to his suicide.

Sofía eventually has to confront her own sort of self-annihilation, as she is left spiraling when Jokin finally confesses that he had been a drug addict in the years leading up to his arrest and that his participation in the fateful protest was in reality nothing more than a withdrawal-induced panic in the wrong place at the wrong time. Having believed that her solidarity with Jokin "inoculated" her against the guilt she felt over her privileged upbringing, the senseless true story behind his imprisonment lays bare the truth that she perhaps knew all along: that her reverence for Jokin and what she believed to be his sacrifice was nothing more than a way to alleviate her existential guilt. Sofía's story ends at a crossroads, as she briefly considers returning to her old

bourgeois lifestyle by moving in with her parents or reuniting with her ex-fiance. Instead, however, she impulsively gets drunk and high with her drug-addicted neighbor, who in a story mirroring Jokin's, became an addict after a case of mistaken identity and police torture ruined his life and saw him blacklisted from his successful professional career. Walking home in her altered state of mind, Sofía can no longer tell if she belongs among the cosmopolitan elites or the margins of the Basque country, represented by Jokin: "lo marginal contagia y éste es el motivo por el que lo marginal no acepta el turismo, yo no soy turista, ya no, sigo siendo el adversario, pero lo soy del otro bando, adversario del término medio y medio objetivo, digna de Jokin, indigna" (173).

3.3 Narrating the 2010s Basque Country

In spite of some notable differences between the two novels, they could very well be summarized as though they were the same story: a graduate student from the Basque Country residing in one of Spain's metropolitan capitals returns to an important place from her youth as a loved one or relative is subject to a controversial prison sentence for acts of political violence. In the process, she reevaluates what being Basque means to her, particularly in the context of left-wing Basque politics and the negative image of Basque radicals and protestors that is perpetuated in hegemonic Spanish political and media discourse. Beyond these broad similarities, we also find a high degree of overlap in specific themes and plot points. The ambiguous financial situation of the protagonist brings questions of class and economic precarity to the fore, as both Ulia and Sofía are married or engaged to men from wealthy, conservative backgrounds and are dependent upon wealthy family members for housing.

Furthermore, between *Turistas*'s purported framing as a road trip novel and Línea's setting in an empty gated community of summer homes "[denoting] the superficial splendor of mass tourism" (Olver 213), tourism becomes a common motif in both works, and it is used to touch on topics such as class, cultural capital, and cosmopolitanism. Most notably, both novels are situated in the context of post-ETA Basque politics, with the armed organization and its threat of violence definitively portrayed as a thing of the past. The presence of the armed conflict in these novels is instead limited to nuanced portrayal of ETA members during the years of the Transition, with both *Turistas*'s Jota and *Línea*'s Areilza presented as intellectuals that were radicalized into committing ineffectual acts of violence that ultimately left them impotent and isolated. In this way, both novels offer unorthodox critiques of both the excesses of the police state and media apparatus, as well as the failures of the radical nationalist movement, which in turn are informed by the more materialist, class-based themes.

There are also many striking formal and stylistic similarities that underscore the postmodern sensibilities of the narrator-protagonists. Both narrators frequently bring their own authority into question and reflect on the act of narration, while constantly inserting intertextual references to both high and low culture. In terms of their form, the texts play with genre boundaries, primarily through chapters comprised of "found" media such as journal entries and newspaper articles, and the use of ekphrasis (the penultimate chapter of *Turistas* is written as an opera; *Línea*'s meetings between Sofía and Jokin are written like a work of theater, complete with stage directions). These postmodern elements of the texts themselves are presented as organic outgrowths of the characters' worldview, practically existing within the diegesis of the text rather than a

mere aesthetic choice imposed by the author. In the case of Turistas, author Katixa Agirre has gone as far as to reject the postmodern label that critics and scholars have used to describe her novel, instead insisting that her book contains a parody of the postmodern (Pérez Isasi). It is also worth mentioning that both protagonists seem to be heavily based on the authors themselves, particularly in terms of their age, background, and profession. All of this is to say that these are works that can be considered either postmodern novels or, conversely, attempts by their respective authors at a critique of postmodernity through alter-ego narrators with accentuated postmodern characteristics.

Aggregated together, this long list of shared narrative and stylistic elements point to a particular perspective that separates these novels from the contemporary works to which they are most often compared. The first distinctive trait is a concrete focus on capitalism that transcends the particular context of the Basque Country. Whether it's the protagonist of De la Cruz's novel ruminating on her upper-class privilege and ingrained elitism, or the upwardly mobile protagonist in *Turistas* developing a concern for her husband's hedonistic and conservative tendencies, the protagonists' relationships with the ideologies of capitalism are just as central to the stories as their ties to the Basque Country. Secondly, the decidedly postmodern style and structure of the novels, with their self-aware and compulsively introspective narrators, stands out among contemporary Basque fiction about political conflict. On a superficial level, the protagonists appear as *individualized* subjects, who are driven to reinforce their sense of individuality through their thoughts and actions (*La novela de la no-ideología* 36). David Becerra Mayor identifies this very sort of subjectivity as one of the main depoliticizing elements of postmodern literature, as

> (t)oda forma de conflicto en la literatura actual no responde sino a la lógica de la privatización del sujeto: no se reproduce en su discurso la forma del conflicto colectivo; al contrario, todo conflicto se reduce al yo, situado entre el desnudo o la transparencia de los espacios íntimos y la construcción constante de la identidad (*La novela de la no-ideología* 36-37)

In many ways, Agirre and De la Cruz's novels subvert the postmodern convention of the individualized subject, as their protagonists are drawn into political conflict and prompted to take sides. Not only do the protagonists seek to understand and even challenge the ways in which hegemonic framings of political conflict—violent and irrational radicals against the civilized democratic order—are used to maintain consensus, they also are forced to confront the ways in which they themselves have been shaped by that system. These novels are less narratives about conflict itself than they are about how the individualized postmodern subject relates to narratives of conflict within a society they increasingly perceive to be post-democratic.

In these works then, the focus on the intimate lives and relentless self-examination of the protagonists does not serve a depoliticizing function, but rather highlights the way in which ideological reproduction under late capitalism is detached from material politics. In the case of the two novels' main characters we find that the authors pay particular attention to crafting protagonists whose worldviews and character traits are explained by various factors, including their social class, profession, gender and their upbringing in the Basque Autonomous Community at the turn of the millennium.

3.4 The Protagonists as Basque Millennials: Cosmopolitan Values and PMC Aspirations

"Nací en el siglo XX, pero no le pertenezco" (De la Cruz 119). This reflection by Sofía in *Línea* is one of many reminders in both novels that the characters came of age in the Euskadi of the 1990s. As Millennials, the protagonists are part of "una generación que, por distintas razones, sale cada vez más al extranjero, ha llegado a adquirir una sensibilidad posnacional, teniendo una vida seminómada y una 'identidad migrante' que relativizan fronteras y caracteres nacionales" (Claesson "Introducción" 15). Between access to international travel for both work and pleasure, and immersion in a globalized popular culture dominated by American films and music, a broad cultural sensibility is therefore practically a given for members of this generation of Western Europeans. As Myles Ethan Lascity highlights, however, this worldly engagement also often entailed a certain "vapidness," as the global culture of this era framed the booming consumer culture of the era as "a tool to make political, social, and cultural change," in turn fostering a middle-class faith in institutions and the promise of upward mobility (Lascity xi-xii).

In the particular context of the Basque Autonomous Community, they grew up amid the institutionalization of Euskara, and through the 1990s simultaneously experienced the encroachment of global mass media as well as the consolidation of counter-institutions, which was most visible in the increasingly close relationship between the Basque punk and hard rock music scenes and organized radical politics (A. Letamendia 166). Meanwhile, the transition from heavy industry to a service economy took physical form at the end of the decade via the construction of high-art

landmarks such as the Guggenheim art museum in Bilbao and the Kursaal Congress Centre in San Sebastian, as the Basque Country witnessed increased tourism and a revived international reputation for quality food and culture. The Basque Country was seemingly becoming more associated with the use of Euskara, left-wing politics and activism on the community level, and yet it was also changing in order to pursue international flows of capital and economic growth amidst globalization. The contradictions that emerged during this period—simultaneous tendencies towards the local and the global—are embodied in the novels' protagonists, who are defined as much by globalized culture and neoliberal ideology as their Basque origins. Consequently, the cosmopolitan Basque subjectivity portrayed in both novels is at once a realistic representation of the contemporary Basque Country and a commentary on postmodernity itself.

Towards the beginning of both novels, the protagonists go out of their way to explain that they are euskaldunberriak—literally, "new" Basque speakers, meaning that they have learned Euskara as a second language. Their relationship with the language serves to anchor them to the Basque Country, no matter how cosmopolitan they may be, but it also contextualizes their upbringing in the Basque Autonomous Community, where Basque language education is the norm in public education and proficiency in Euskara is mandatory for most public sector jobs (Castillo). In the case of Ulia in *Turistas*, she learned Basque as a child alongside her school teacher mother: "Hubo un tiempo en que también era el idioma que usaba con mi madre. Fue durante los años en los que estuvo liberada para aprenderlo. Fue una condición que ella me impuso y fue inflexible. Una vez hubo aprobado los exámenes, la cosa empezó a relajarse" (42). In

the case of *Línea*'s Sofía, however, the context in which she came to learn Basque in the 1990s is influenced more by her family's elitism than any sort of solidarity:

> Hoy sería impensable, porque las élites no quieren que sus hijos se mezclen con la escoria, con inmigrantes sudamericanos y marroquís en grupos de cuarenta y cinco alumnos por aula, con las cámaras de televisión que reportan el último suicidio por acoso. Pero a finales de los ochenta, cuando se implantó el modelo de inmersión lingüística en vasco, los colegios públicos se llenaron de clase media-alta, de la prole de abogados y políticos nacionalistas que querían predicar con el ejemplo. Mis padres, a quienes era indiferente aquella lengua que jamás aprendieron, se dejaron llevar por la moda (…) Querían que me codeara en clave laica con las sobrinas del Lehendakari. (19)

With both characters coming from Spanish-speaking families, their childhood education in Basque is significant, as it marks them as members of the first generation to have lived their entire lives with Basque as a language of administration and middle-class job security, while also implying that they have had linguistic access to the full panorama of Basque society and culture. However, while the two characters share the experience of growing up during a time in which education in Euskara was becoming increasingly normalized, their reasons for learning it are indicative of their disparate socioeconomic backgrounds. Whereas Sofía comes from a bourgeois family that saw Euskara as a gateway to the social circles of the political elite, Ulia's working-class mother likely had to learn the language in order to work in public education, and is implied to have valued knowing Euskara, either as a means of connecting with her culture or out of a sense of solidarity.

In spite of their class differences and reasons for knowing Euskara, in both novels we see the Basque language, particularly Basque-language music—as a sign of identity for the protagonist. This is most apparent in *Línea*, where the protagonist seeks to reconstruct her identity against the disconnectedness and elitism of her family. Sofía

recalls her former father-in-law asking during dinner, “pero el vasco que habla la gente joven es el híbrido ése que se inventó Sabino Arana, ¿no?,” reflecting vascophobic and reactionary attitudes on the Spanish right that assert that standard Basque is artificial, and therefore somehow illegitimate. This episode prompts her to abruptly leave the table and spend the evening listening to the Basque-language rock music of her youth— “Berri Txarrak, Kortatu, Su ta gar…”—in an attempt to recapture the sincere feelings that the language once evoked in her (94). Indeed, Sofía’s love for Basque rock music is shown to be a major part of what she considers to be her authentic self, and it is implied to be the primary reason for her reverence for Jokin, who had been in an up-and-coming rock band before his arrest.

In *Turistas*, Ulia’s relationship with Euskara during her travels through the Basque Country is somewhat more ambiguous, as Gustavo’s exoticizing fascination with the language is presented more often than not as a source of exasperation for the protagonist. Ulia’s preference for reading Basque-language news outlets indicates that she is hardly indifferent to the language, and yet it is something she does in secret, apparently out of a fear of attracting unwanted curiosity from her husband. However, towards the end of the novel, Gustavo stumbles upon the song “Gure mundua” by the Basque alternative rock singer Anari on the car radio, and while the classical music-loving Ulia is apparently unfamiliar with the song, its haunting lyrics move Ulia to finally try to confess to Gustavo her father’s identity in one of the novel’s pivotal moments.

And yet, while Euskara is portrayed as a totem of these characters’ identities, it is clear that they have a fraught relationship with their Basque identity. Notably, both have spent virtually their entire adult lives living in one of Spain’s metropolitan capitals and

neither seems to have any remaining Basque friends. In both cases, the character was eager to move to a bigger and more dynamic city: “De aquí hui con impaciencia,” recalls Ulia upon the couple’s arrival in her home city of Vitoria-Gasteiz (26).

In the case of *Línea*, Sofía’s identity has largely been shaped by her family’s social class. She looks back with nostalgia on her pre-teen years as a rambunctious child who would skin her knees and make bombs with Mentos and Diet Pepsi, but realizes that with age she has increasingly come to resemble her mother, who only cares about prestige and won’t step foot even in the parts of Bilbao that are already in the process of gentrification (160). Her adulthood represents a continuation of this trend, as Sofía describes her life in Barcelona as being defined by conformity to conservative upper-class gender roles. Living in a wealthy neighborhood, she would spend her time ironing the shirts of her fiancé Carlos, only for him to send the shirts to the dry cleaners anyways (41). To the extent that she had a life outside of home, she was limited to the role of trophy partner, a mere symbol of high society elegance:

> éramos el decorado perfecto en las fiestas elegantes. Nos invitaban a muchas: recepciones de embajada, galerías de arte contemporáneo, entregas de premios (...) Siempre discretos, nos retirábamos temprano y al llegar al hotel, me quitaba los tacones y el vestido, cubría mi pelo con una redecilla para que el peinado amaneciera intacto, y me quedaba dormida. (113-114)

It is only when she sees Jokin being arrested on TV that Sofía begins to take a critical view of the path she had taken in life, realizing that she had let herself get carried away by gender norms and the pursuit of prestige: “Todo *aquello* había pasado, existía en nuestro mundo, en la adolescencia que pasé junto a Jokin. Mientras a mi alrededor la gente elegía un bando u otro yo elegía universidades y montaba a caballo en el club hípica” (66). Looking back at her teen years, Sofía retroactively views her upper-class

coded pastimes and the assumption that she would move away for college not only as signs of her privilege and isolation, but also as barriers between her and her public school peers. While she was at least partly socialized within a working-class milieu, and in the process developed a genuine love of Basque counterculture and rock music, she now realizes that her involvement in that scene was superficial, that she participated "no como militante, sino como el colono iluso que ayuda a los caníbales a preparar el fuego sin saber que la carne del banquete es humana" (65). Now, in pursuit of an authenticity that has eluded her as a member of the wealthy elite, Sofía strives to identify more with the cannibals than the colonists, as it were. Jokin's violent actions at the protest and subsequent imprisonment convince her political struggle is—or rather, should be—part of her identity as someone who grew up in the Basque Country.

It is telling, however, that she does not do this by moving back to Bilbao or becoming an activist, but instead makes the Basque conflict the subject of her PhD thesis, (re)discovering the recent political history of the Basque Country "de la única forma que sé, como una estudiante modélica" (94). Therefore, even as she adopts a more critical perspective on Basque nationalism and class politics, she does so in a way that conforms with her elitist tendencies:

> Estudié una filología porque me educaron para pensar que los libros confieren prestigio, como una foto con el rey, como dos apellidos vulgares unidos por un guion, como una casa de veraneo en primera línea de playa. Y porque mi hábitat natural son las burbujas (...) La mayoría de mis compañeros se equivocó al elegir estudios, pero no fue mi caso. Lo supe enseguida. Estoy hecha para esto. (131)

After reading all the books she could find on the history of ETA and being underwhelmed by their Manichaean portrayals of "víctimas intachables y etarras

malísimos" (94), Sofía ultimately becomes fixated on the works of a former ETA member named Mikel Areilza, whose work provides a painful yet comforting account of political militancy that inspires Sofía to break up with Carlos and reconnect with Jokin (95). However, despite her newfound dedication, her research leads to her most isolating bubble yet: living in her parent's seaside chalet in an empty gated community in Cantabria as she reads the diaries of an Argentine playwright for clues as to why Areilza committed suicide while exiled in Buenos Aires. This absurd level of abstraction seems to be at odds with Sofía's ostensible desire to comprehend the social and political realities of the Basque Country, but it is indicative of Sofía's tendency to view everything as a text to be interpreted.

Given that Sofía never states what exactly her thesis is about, and it is unclear whether she wants to put her academic work and skills toward activist causes, there is an impression that her thesis represents a validation of her academic skills, as opposed to an attempt at a personal transformation. Olga Bezhanova notes that Sofía's frequent use of technocratic language to describe her talent as a researcher and critic—"lo perfeccioné," "soy experta"—reflect a neoliberal subjectivity, in which one's worth is measured by marketable skills (Bezhanova 10). Even as she seeks to understand and empathize with the experiences of someone like Jokin, this attachment to a sense of self-worth bound up with her expertise and private college education prevents her from accepting the contradictions in her project. As a result of this, Sofía unknowingly puts Jokin on a pedestal in order to make him someone worthy of learning from, citing the relatively anodyne political views he espoused in his letters and his down-to-earth demeanor as a sign that he has access to a particular knowledge, which he expresses

"como las buenas letras de rock" (67). And yet, in the vis-à-vis scenes—rendered purely as dialogue, thereby presenting the characters in a more objective light—the Jokin we see is fairly unsophisticated, more interested in reading pop history books about Nazis than politics or social justice. It is clear to the reader that Jokin is not what Sofía had imagined him to be, but the fact that he was arrested at a protest and had been in a rock band is sufficient for Sofía to maintain the belief that he is hiding some more profound truth, even as he consistently points out ways in which she misremembers moments from their relationship. Towards the end of the novel, Jokin has to remind Sofía that she had in fact broken up with him after high school "porque no estaba a la altura, no entendía tus libros, ni tu cine de autor, y te avergonzaba ante tus colegas, que me trataban como si fuera un chucho que habías rescatado de la protectora" (146). The fact that Sofía so often mischaracterizes him, both in her memories from high school and in the present, shows that for her, Jokin represents little more than a living text about post-ETA political activism, based more in her assumptions than in her lived experiences. On the whole, her engagement with the radical Basque Country she supposedly wants to learn from is carried out not only from the physical distance of a Cantabrian vacation home, but also from an analytical distance, defined by a faith that technocratic skill can compensate for a lack of firsthand experience.

In *Turistas*, Ulia similarly exemplifies a highly educated professional-managerial class outlook that gives her a more detached perspective on the Basque Country. Unlike Sofía, however, her tastes and outlook stem from growing up in a working-class household that nonetheless placed a great emphasis on education, cultural awareness, and the arts. The entirety of Ulia's recollections from her childhood and adolescence

revolve around her family's frequent road trips through Europe, her visits to the opera with her stepfather Joseba, and recollections of her ballet and music classes as a teenager. Even as the family's economic limitations were apparent in the fact that they would camp in tents instead of staying at hotels, Ulia's upbringing seems to have shaped her into someone with sophisticated tastes, at home in a range of settings. In the present, Ulia and Gustavo represent the epitome of a jet-setting cosmopolitan couple. Gustavo has a law degree from Stanford and has recently returned from the Dominican Republic after teaching a course on international litigation. As they set off on their journey in Gustavo's brand-new BMW, Ulia notes the irony that while they've never traveled together through her home region, they have already traveled around the world to places like Turkey, the Mojave Desert, Greece, and New England. Both Gustavo and Ulia seem to be fluent in English, and their conversations with one another are littered with English words and references to international film and pop culture.

In regards to being Basque, Ulia often displays indifference or even annoyance at the thought of being somehow defined by her place of birth. Recalling the moment she first introduced herself to Gustavo, she seems to look back on her future husband's fascination with her Basque origins with some degree of embarrassment: "Ulia, qué bonito nombre, es vasco, ¿verdad? ¿De dónde eres? ¿De Bilbao? Pues mira, no, de Vitoria. Supe que eras vasca desde el principio, tu acento te delata. Era la primera vez que alguien me decía que tenía *acento*. Y creo que la última" (55, emphasis in original). It is clear that Ulia would much prefer to see herself and be seen as a worldly and educated person, who cannot be tied to stereotypes about the Basque people. Throughout the novel, every reference to the Basque Country being her homeland is

tinged with irony, with Ulia typically referring to it as "la Patria." We find another example of this attitude in the opening pages of the novel, when Ulia writes to Gustavo, "Quieres empaparte de mi tierra, mi terruño, mi tierrita. Mi ruina, por decirlo claramente. Pero tú eso aún no lo sabes. Ya lo sabrás. A su debido tiempo" (11). While the ironic use of "la Patria" insinuates a certain ambivalence about being Basque, referring to Euskal Herria as her ruin foreshadows the way in which her return amidst the discovery that her father is an infamous ETA militant and prisoner represents a challenge to her self-perception. The idea of being associated with not simply the Basque Country, but its radical element in particular, constitutes a legitimate crisis for Ulia, one that she fears could even end her marriage. Therefore, Ulia would much rather Gustavo see the touristic, globalized side of the Basque Country, with its gourmet food scene and international festivals, than the one associated with political struggle and mass protests. Even as she views her husband's fetishization of Basque products and culture with a mix of bemusement and annoyance, his attitude at least reinforces the couple's self-perception as world travelers with discerning tastes.

Finally, while the narrator-protagonists of the two novels have become accustomed to upper-middle-class lifestyles, we find that both are nonetheless exposed to a degree of financial precarity that forces them to confront their class identity and ingrained ideologies in a critical way. In *Línea*, although Sofía often references her privilege or her ingrained elitist attitudes, the fact of the matter is that her family's financial situation has become somewhat dire. Explaining that the spice business founded by her maternal grandmother has become unprofitable and that her parents now struggle to loan her even fifty euros, Sofía lives off of modest grants and

scholarships. While she still owns the expensive clothing she purchased while living with Carlos, and is staying in her parent's seaside vacation home as she writes her thesis, she only has these few remaining trappings of wealth. Proud of having left her rich fiancé, Sofía initially takes her loss of status with humor as she half-jokingly toys with the idea of a prison wedding with Jokin, but once Jokin admits that he was never an activist and she becomes disillusioned with her attempt to learn from him, she is hit with the reality that she only has forty euros to her name. For a moment, she toys with the idea of returning to Carlos, or even "volver al chalet de las afueras donde viven mis padres (...) sonreír como castigo cada vez que me pregunten qué vas a hacer con tu vida" (158), before ultimately getting high with her addict neighbor in the street, as though she needed to know what it is like be on the absolute margins of society.

Meanwhile, in Agirre's novel, Ulia and Gustavo's lifestyle is largely dependent on them living in the upscale apartment that Gustavo's parents used to own, with his father paying all their utility bills and expenses. While Ulia feels that their current home is perhaps too immodest, she realizes that moving out would entail a drastic change in their way of life:

> Las perspectivas económicas de una cantante frustrada son más bien dudosas. Casi tanto como las de una cantante profesional. En fin, que podría bajarte de clase social sólo por apaciguar mi conciencia, es decir, por puro capricho, y además me convertiría en una carga. Así que seamos realistas, a día de hoy nos podemos gastar tu sueldo y mi beca, íntegramente, en caprichos. (140-141)

In spite of her high standard of living and insistence that she and Gustavo share a happy marriage, it is clear that Ulia feels somewhat stifled by her dependence on her successful husband and his family. And yet, it is unclear what alternatives Ulia would like to explore if the couple were to be more independent and live within their means.

All in all, both protagonists represent remarkably ambiguous class positions, as they are at once defined by their education, cosmopolitan social capital, and distance from political conflict, but are also exposed to a degree of financial precarity or uncertainty that prevents them from being fully comfortable with their status. Furthermore, both novels go to great lengths to tie these characteristics to the implementation of neoliberal policies and PNV political hegemony that defined the Basque Autonomous Community at the turn of the century, with both characters seemingly having been brought up to value advancement through technocratic excellence. In this way, both works subtly provide materialist critiques of postmodernity through the existential crises of professional-managerial class characters. As Fredric Jameson argues, this particular subjectivity is itself a development intrinsic to late capitalism:

> (O)ne can only plausibly assert that 'postmodernism' as an ethos and a 'life style' (…) is the expression of the 'consciousness' of a whole new class fraction that largely transcends the limits of [categories such as bourgeoisie, the youth, or working-class consumer]: this larger and more abstract category has variously been labelled as a new petty bourgeoisie, a professional-managerial class, or more succinctly as 'the yuppies' (…) This identification of the class content of postmodern culture does not at all imply that 'yuppies' have become something like a new ruling class or 'a subject of history'—merely that their cultural practices and values, their local ideologies, have articulated a useful dominant ideological and cultural paradigm for this stage of capital. (*The Cultural Turn* 45-46)

Therefore, while the protagonists of Agirre and De la Cruz's novels may seem anomalous in their psychological distance from the political conflicts of the Basque Country in which they grew up, they are in fact ideal representatives of the class that Jameson identifies as defining this stage of capital. Extrapolated further, their personal crises and anxieties about economic mobility resonate with general anxieties of a

Millennial generation who were raised amid the “end of history” and the promise of economic growth, only to have that paradigm collapse in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Because of this, the political content of the novels cannot be isolated to issues of Basque nationalist contention, and must be understood in a more broad context that accounts for the post-crisis political context and the increasingly evident contradictions of late capitalism and neoliberal governance.

3.5 Ambiguous Politics: Meanings of Radical Activism in Late Capitalism

It is clear in both novels that the protagonist has begun to question the ways in which her identity is tied up with her upper-middle class lifestyle, whether it is Sofía fearing that she will become an out-of-touch elite like her mother and ex-fiancé, or Ulia suppressing her desire to move out of Gustavo’s family’s apartment and live a more modest lifestyle. The protagonists’ return to the Basque Country—either physical in Ulia’s case, or for Sofía, a spiritual return via literature and her reunion with her Basque ex-boyfriend in the neighboring province of Cantabria—is not so much a homecoming as it is a (re)encounter with a politicized side of the region that they had not previously been fully exposed to, as they had spent their adolescent years focusing on education and meritocratic advancement in order to eventually move to more metropolitan areas. Seemingly not having put much thought into politics or their identity until the present moment, their thoughts now linger on the political connotations of Basque identity and the recent history of political contention and violence as they try to make sense of their personal identities and political beliefs. In the case of De la Cruz’s novel, Sofía is radicalized after Jokin is arrested and labeled a terrorist, prompting her to reevaluate

her views about leftist politics and try to understand what motivates someone to put activism before self-interest. Meanwhile, the protagonist of Agirre's novel is defined by her inability to articulate a political worldview, as she feels trapped between her and her husband's bourgeois lifestyle and the revelation that her mother has gotten back together with her biological father, a former ETA militant. All in all, both novels eschew established archetypes of political allegiance in the Basque context in favor of nuanced portrayals of subjects whose personal politics are ambiguous and overdetermined by class and historical circumstance.

While it's immediately clear that Sofía's newfound embrace of a more left-wing conception of politics centered on working-class struggles and opposition to state violence is a reaction to the politics of her conservative family, it is significant that their particular brand of conservatism is more neoliberal than reactionary in nature. Unlike the more explicit conservatism of her ex-fiancé and his family, Sofía's mother's politics revolve around an avoidance of any conflict that could upset the status quo. Sofía recalls receiving a wallet embroidered with a map of the greater Basque Country, with Navarra and the French Basque provinces included, only for her mother to immediately confiscate it because "(a)quello simbolizaba una lucha que no era nuestra. Porque ninguna lo era" (63). It is also revealed that although Sofía did have an uncle who was involved with ETA and was imprisoned for many years, her parents hid this fact by writing postcards from around the world that were supposedly from the uncle, in order to explain his absence and further prove to Sofía that their family was one of rich cosmopolitan elites. Looking back at such moments, Sofía now resents her family for raising her in an elitist bubble: "Hay lazos familiares que contagian por el mismo motivo

por el que los hijos heredamos los pecados de nuestros padres. Los míos tuvieron mucho cuidado de mantenerme al margen de cualquier conflicto que pudiera ensuciarme de realidad" (64). And while her family is perhaps an extreme example cloistered of upper-class detachment, De la Cruz's protagonist also identifies this resistance to material politics and "reality" in elite educational institutions and consumer culture:

> El terrorismo es sinónimo de barbarie, toda vida es sagrada, se pueden cambiar las cosas sin romperlas. Eso decíamos en la piscina de la residencia de estudiantes, en el salón con vistas al mar de Barcelona, en los pasillos de la universidad privada en la que estudié el posgrado. Y nos lo confirmaban las canciones, blandas y envolventes como una alucinación de éter; las pancartas contra la guerra, los pareados de cuarto de baño, las marcas comerciales solidarias. (63)

In this sense, Sofía's particular rebellion is not in direct opposition to reactionary Spanish attitudes towards Basque counterculture and radical politics, but rather depoliticization and elite capture of progressive messaging. In this process, she begins to question the idea that being above conflict is always a virtue and that violent resistance always constitutes an irrational and barbaric act. On multiple occasions, Sofía equates the idea of sin with apathy and the tendency to view political action as no more than mere aesthetics:

> Mi gran pecado ha sido siempre la inacción, la parálisis. Durante veintisiete años no hice nada heroico ni ruin salvo dejarme contagiar por aquellos vivas a ETA que se coreaban al final de los conciertos, mirar hacia otro lado, pero sin saber, siquiera, que lo hacía. No tengo derecho al examen de conciencia del que tanto se habla últimamente; nadie quiere que yo pida perdón. El cómputo suma cero. Y aunque es paradójica esta culpa por no haber cometido ninguna falta, es culpa, después de todo. La culpa inútil del empresario al que atormentan las hambrunas, la culpa que me inoculó Jokin cuando irrumpió en mi burbuja a través de una pantalla de plasma. (114)

Beyond articulating Sofía's complicated sense of guilt for having avoided politics her whole life, the above excerpt also highlights the two contradictions at the center of her new political consciousness. First, it is insinuated early in the novel that Sofía is not entirely "inoculated" against the futile guilt of the upper class, and that she struggles to reconcile her sympathy for activists and the working class with her ingrained elitist attitudes. When she first encounters her drug addicted neighbor passed out in the street next to her parent's home, her reaction is to immediately run inside and stare at the man from an upstairs window: "deberia haberlo despertado, igual está muriendo ahora, en estos instantes, no quería tocarlo, no me importa, me gusta mirar, no tengo remedio, así soy, nada cambia, un novio en la cárcel no cambia el barrio en que naciste, ni la vergüenza" (41). Although she has already made the radical change of leaving her rich fiancé in order to reunite with an imprisoned working-class ex, she still admits with a certain ironic amusement that she is incapable of truly escaping her elitist tendencies. And in spite of how eager she is to reexamine her given political assumptions, her impotent self-awareness in regards to her own behavior reveals that her political commitment is still circumscribed by a latent conservatism.

The second paradox hinted at in the above quote is her attitude towards ETA and the use of violence for political ends. The language in this paragraph certainly indicates an opposition to the organization ("dejarme contagiar," "mirar hacia otro lado"), and Cristina Ortiz and María Pilar Rodríguez have honed in on these phrases in order to assert that this paragraph and the novel on the whole represents an indictment of Basque society's complicity in ETA's violence (Ortiz and Rodríguez). And yet Sofía's fixation on the writer Mikel Areilza—who never renounced his involvement in ETA and

even romanticized his time in the organization through his novels and memoirs—shows us that her attitudes are in fact much more ambivalent. The reality is that Sofía's relationship with the legacy of ETA doesn't represent either extreme, and instead represents a somewhat contradictory structure of feeling that only makes sense in the post-ETA context.

Talking about her correspondence with Jokin, she specifically cites his *opposition* to nationalism as a reason why she became fascinated with what he has to say.

> Jokin nunca estuvo del lado de los aplausos y los vítores, que las banderas le parecían algo absurdo por lo que matar y que su causa era menos incómoda, más para todos los públicos. Decía 'libertad de expresión', decía 'rechazo a las persecuciones', decía 'estamos en tiempos de paz y arrastramos automatismos de los tiempos de guerra'. Me pareció convincente y me gustaban sus frases porque eran fuertes y fáciles al mismo tiempo (...) Las leía una y otra vez hasta memorizarlas, hasta enamorarme de ellas. (66-67)

Ultimately, Sofía's conception of Basque activism and the abertzale left does not involve notions of ethnic identity or a millenarian nation but rather the capacity of Basques to speak truth to power and oppose state oppression through a counter-hegemonic culture situated outside of bourgeois ideology. Sofía's interest in ETA therefore has much more to do with its role in defying Spain's democratic political structures that portray political resistance as deviant or associated with terrorism. While her immediate reaction to seeing Jokin being arrested on TV was one of shock and disbelief ("Me habría sorprendido lo mismo que se inmolara a favor de ISIS, pero el mundo proetarra con el que lo asociaban los medios no tenía su cuartel general en Siria." 65), her obsession with the clear injustice carried out against the protestors and the ridiculous situation that led to the protest in the first place (the police were attempting to arrest a rapper for satirical lyrics about the conservative Spanish government needing ETA to return)

prompts her to reexamine her assumptions about the media's conflation of radical protest and terrorism.

> He visto vídeos, he leído las versiones de uno y otro bando. Lo único que les importa es quién arrojó la primera piedra y no por qué lo hizo. A mí lo que me importa es la proporcionalidad. Cincuenta manifestantes contra ocho furgones, un muerto contra un par de heridos, años de diferencia entre un delito de agresión y otro de terrorismo (97).

Contemplating this kind of injustice for the first time, Sofía believes that she has become radicalized and cannot return to her old worldview. She feels motivated, but does not know how to channel her newfound energies in any other way besides fetishizing the idea of "heroes" like Jokin and Mikel Areilza, who are compelled to sacrifice their well-being for their values: "Me enorgullezco de mi rabia, porque me hace estar despierta. Sólo han sido héroes los que alguna vez sintieron rabia" (97). While she condemns ETA's indiscriminate and ineffectual violence during the 80s and 90s, the iteration of ETA from the 1970s, illustrated in Areilza's works depicting "la fé en un enemigo claro; la intemperie; la barba crecida, la capacidad de sacrificio" (95), nonetheless holds some appeal for her. This romanticized and nostalgic portrayal of revolutionary action becomes the lens through which Sofía understands the rage and righteousness that she feels in the wake of Jokin's arrest and imprisonment, even as this vision of commitment is both anachronistic and at odds with Sofía's current situation, residing in seaside vacation home.

This reverence Sofía has for the failed freedom fighter Areilza then brings us back to the question of Sofía's guilt in not having taken a side in the Basque conflict earlier in her life, as Areilza clearly belongs to a wholly different historical context. While she admires Areilza's autobiographical prose about clandestine meetings and sincere

political convictions, Sofía describes the Basque political environment of the 90s and early 2000s that she lived through firsthand as one characterized by juvenile glorification of violence, and this seems irreconcilable with the lofty ideals she now wants to live by. There is then an obvious paradox at the center of Sofía's radicalization and regret for not having engaged in activism in her youth: why does she wish she had taken a side during a moment of the Basque conflict when the vanguard of the abertzale left was clearly decadent and obstructing progress by perpetuating an environment of fear and violence? Even if she believes, as Jokin claims to, that flags are not worth killing for, she still sees Jokin's violent act—beating an ertzaina so badly that he lost an eye—as an appropriate response to a protestor being killed by a rubber bullet, and therefore supports *some* forms of political violence. On the one hand, it is evident that her shame over her privileged upbringing, at a distance from any sort of conflict, now has her believing that "es mayor la culpa por no haber actuado en absoluto que por haberlo hecho desde el error" (67), but then again, the ethics and consequences of this stance are not clear. The best explanation is that, in the post-ETA context of the novel (taking place between 2014 and 2016), the "proportionality" of violence has shifted even as the state continues to charge Basque activists with terrorism, such that the state has once again become the clear antagonist in Sofía's view. One could also consider the opaque structures of power under late capitalism, in which systemic violence is diffused and depersonalized, making it harder to identify clear agents of oppression. In this sense, Sofía's yearning for a clear enemy is made possible by the disarmament of ETA and post-2008 populism that have given her some insight into the ideologies of post-democracy.

Unlike De la Cruz's protagonist, Ulia is much more reticent about her political views. However, from what we can piece together through Ulia's attitude and actions, we see that her politics are no less ambiguous and contradictory. On the one hand, Kortazar and Rodríguez-Miñambres identify her with the abertzale left, citing her preference for the left-leaning Basque language press (Kortazar and Rodríguez-Miñambres 81). And yet, while it's apparent that she was raised in a progressive, feminist household, and holds deeply critical views towards the Spanish press's treatment of Basques, it is unclear whether the politics of the Basque Country have ever significantly mattered to her. All the memories that she recalls from her childhood and adolescence are limited to family vacations and her training in classical music, completely omitting the turbulent political environment she would have borne witness to in the Basque Country of the 1990s and early 2000s. Like Sofía in *Línea*, Ulia seems to have been indifferent to—or otherwise, untouched by—political conflict. Except, unlike in De la Cruz's novel, we are never given an explanation as to why. The only instance in which she expresses political opinions is via a flashback to when she and Gustavo participated in a protest shortly after meeting, however Ulia admits in hindsight that her primary motivation for going was to spend time with an attractive man she had just met. There is a clear impression that Ulia's life since the beginning of their relationship has been dictated by the needs and desires of her husband, whether it was getting married early so that his terminally ill mother could attend their wedding, them moving into the upscale Madrid apartment owned by Gustavo's father, or letting Gustavo decide the day-to-day activities during their Basque vacation. But while Ulia is characterized by her passivity and the tendency to defer to her husband, her constant criticism of Gustavo's

conservative tendencies as the novel's narrator indicates that she does have principles that she contemplates and yearns to express openly. However, paralyzed by the dual fears of her husband growing conservative with age and her mother being outed as the partner of an infamous ETA prisoner, it seems as though Ulia is awaiting the resolution of her personal problems—themselves intertwined with issues surrounding class politics and the Basque conflict—before she voices her beliefs or takes any political stand.

Whereas Ulia seems paralyzed by the contradiction between her progressive leanings and the bourgeois lifestyle that allows her to indulge in her refined tastes, we find that the characters of Gustavo and Mariluz are in the midst of their own political transformations that reflect on a personal level the decline of class politics since the beginning of the neoliberal era. On one hand, Gustavo's "crisis de los cuarenta con cinco años de antelación" (12) represents the self-satisfaction and lack of intellectual curiosity of those who accept the individualist ideology of neoliberalism. Meanwhile, Marluz's story depicts the trajectory of those who turned away from radical politics and activism after the potential of the Spanish Transition went unfulfilled. Through these two characters, Agirre contextualizes the passivity and listlessness of her protagonist while portraying a pervasive postmodern condition that undermines and erases materialist understandings of politics.

In the case of Gustavo, Ulia at different points seems to alternate between viewing her husband as either a principled progressive or oblivious conformist. In her second-person narration directed towards Gustavo, she praises him for his past activism: "Ya sé que en tus tiempos de instituto fuiste un orgulloso miembro de la Juventudes Anarquistas de Ávila, y que eso, en una ciudad como la tuya y con padre

como el tuyo, tiene mucho mérito” (46). Activism and protest are part of their origin story as a couple, with their first “date” happening at the protest in front of the Partido Popular headquarters in the aftermath of the 11-M bombings, when the conservative government continued to blame ETA for the attack despite evidence to the contrary: “Con tu silbato. Quién-ha-sido. Que-re-mos-la-ver-dad” (47). Ulia credits her husband for prioritizing career fulfillment over the pursuit of money, as he works for a good, but not extravagant salary as a law professor, making less than his father in exchange for some degree of prestige and the ability to travel, but it’s clear that his comfortable upper-middle class lifestyle is nonetheless eroding whatever political consciousness he may have had.

It is evident throughout the novel that Ulia fears her husband has become more conservative with age—or that perhaps he was always somewhat conservative at heart. The first example of this is Ulia’s condescending attitude towards his budding consumerism, which is apparent from the very beginning of the novel: “Se te ve feliz en el coche, conduciendo. En estos últimos tiempos has hecho un descubrimiento asombroso: el amor hacia los objetos” (12). In her second person narration addressed to Gustavo, Ulia openly expresses concern that he is becoming a self-satisfied elite, living only to enjoy material comforts and harboring a secret terror of his own decadence, but she holds onto the belief that his playful spirit ultimately redeems him (74). And yet in spite of this light-heartedness and adaptability that Ulia admires in her husband, she also sees conservative tendencies in him that she dislikes. At one point, Ulia enumerates a list of Gustavo’s supposed defects, all reflecting different flavors of conservatism: 1) a reverence for the Catholic Church, in spite of not being religious; 2)

paternalism and false humility towards people without college degrees; 3) being a heavy drinker, but not respecting anyone who uses illegal drugs; 4) having to always be happy; and 5) a lack of introspection, coming from the belief that he already knows perfection (70-71). While Ulia seems to be at ease with their cosmopolitan, professional-managerial class lifestyle, it is clear that she believes that this way of life may be changing her husband and encouraging his tendency—as someone who came from a conservative, relatively privileged background—to believe that the status quo represents the way things are supposed to be (75).

Ulia seems to also be unsure of Gustavo's political views regarding the Basque Country, and this has been the case since they first met on the Madrid Metro on the day of the March 11, 2004 train bombings. After evacuating their train together and calling their families from a nearby café, the two exchanged numbers, and Ulia, fearing that Gustavo would reject her for being Basque, thought "si finalmente no ha sido ETA puede que me llame, puede que lo vuelva a ver" (61). Ulia faces a similar fear during their Basque vacation, as she waits to find the right time to reveal the identity of her father, but is discouraged whenever Gustavo displays an ignorance of Basque politics or speaks about ETA's violence. For the most part, Ulia convinces herself that Gustavo has no interest in Basque politics, to the extent that she asserts that the Christian democratic PNV and the radical socialist Herri Batasuna parties must seem similar to him (130). Whenever the topic of ETA does come up, the conformist Gustavo does not so much display a reactionary Spanish nationalist attitude so much as a willingness to accept the consensus-driven narrative that ignores the political context that led to ETA's emergence and continuation through Spain's democratic restoration. This is most

apparent in an argument that Gustavo initiates over what he considers to be Basque arrogance, during which he condescendingly refers to ETA's failed campaign of violence as "vuestra pequeña desviación" (96). However, what Ulia clearly finds most insidious and worrying is Gustavo's seeming interest in the journalist Sarah's project on the end of ETA, in which she portrays Basques as insidious and threatening.

Somewhat anticlimactically, all it takes for Ulia to regain trust in her husband is him pushing back on Sarah when she complains that ETA prisoners such as Jota always have their way in the judicial system: "Bueno, no me negarás que la manera en que le han alargado la condena es poco ortodoxa, por decirlo finamente…" (171). This single comment undoes Ulia's "fantasy" that Gustavo was completely uninformed on the case, when in fact it was always likely that a law professor from Spain would be up to date on a controversial case involving retroactive extension of an ETA prisoner's sentence. While he still sees the world of Basque nationalism and ETA as something alien, the fact that he has an even-handed view of her father's case is enough encouragement for Ulia to believe that she can reconcile with both her husband and her biological father at the end of the novel.

Finally, Mariluz is yet another character whose ambiguous politics and life trajectory illustrate a loss of political compromise and a turn to consumerism as a way to validate one's identity. In the novel, Ulia narrates from Mariluz's perspective[20] during two distinct periods in her life: her romance with the ETA member Jota from approximately 1976 to 1983 and her reuniting with Jota some time around 2010, staying

[20] While it is eventually confirmed in the novel that Ulia is the intradiegetic author of the Mariluz chapters, it is never made clear whether the events that happened without Ulia present were told to her by her mother or whether they are merely imagined by the narrator-protagonist.

by his side as he fights cancer and demands his release from prison. Based solely on these two elements, one would assume that Mariluz's life has been heavily influenced by participation in politics. On the contrary, Ulia's recounting of her mother's life tells a story in which Mariluz turned her back on activism upon becoming a mother.

In the present timeline, Mariluz appears to be a typical baby boomer mother with bohemian tastes and progressive feminist attitudes, as her apartment features "detalles *hippies* (...) una *pashmina* colgada en la pared, un par de cojines coloridos confeccionados al estilo patchwork, un incensario de madera sobre la cómoda, sin rastro de incienso," while the floor is covered with literature such as "Mujeres viajeras, libros para perder peso, biografías de Mata Hari y Mary Pickford" (27). A poster that she put up in Ulia's room, depicting a young girl pretending to direct an orchestra and text reading "No limites su educación: es una mujer del siglo XXI" further shows Mariluz's commitment to feminism and instilling progressive values in her daughter. This topic comes up again when Ulia recalls her mother disapproving of her not only getting married at a young age, but doing so in a Catholic ceremony ("durante toda la ceremonia tendré que aguantar su mirada de para-esto-hicimos-la-revolución-feminista clavada en mí" 98). However, apart from that and Mariluz's insistence that Ulia learn Euskara at a young age, we aren't given many clues into her present-day commitment to social or political causes.

We are first introduced to Mariluz in a flashback chapter taking place during the events of the March 3rd, 1976 massacre of striking workers in Vitoria-Gasteiz, when she was a young, politically engaged school teacher. Her excitement and political hopes were in part tied up in the man she would later know as Jota, whose voice carried "la

emoción de aquellos días" (24). Clearly, she fell in love with him because of his leadership in labor organizing, but she may have been aware of his clandestine dealings as well, since every time she asked someone what his name was, she received a different answer: "Realmente ni siquiera parecen nombres. Apodos. Alias" (22). Once the police begin firing live rounds into the church where the workers and protesters were sheltered, Jota rescues Mariluz and they begin dating soon after.

Through later flashback chapters, the story of Mariluz's life with Jota and the birth of Ulia eventually emerges. Jota's activism during the Transition eventually leads him to pursue violent action as an ETA militant, and he begins living clandestinely in the French Basque Country. Mariluz supports him and spends the ensuing years traversing the Spanish-French border while posing as a tourist and living with him in a Saint Jean de Luz safehouse. Mariluz's political convictions and love for Jota begin to falter as the constant fear of him being killed leaves her wracked with anxiety. While she can't bring herself to abandon Jota for her own sake, when she finds out that she is pregnant on the same day a fellow ETA member is killed by GAL, she decides to leave without saying goodbye. After Ulia is born in 1984, Mariluz meets the mild-mannered music teacher Joseba and they marry soon after. In 1987, Jota is arrested and imprisoned, and Joseba convinces Mariluz to keep the identity of Ulia's father a secret by telling her that he died in a car accident. It wouldn't be until they divorce and Mariluz rekindles her relationship with an imprisoned Jota that Ulia learns the truth about her parentage.

If Mariluz and Jota's love story—and the trauma and disillusion that accompanied it—can be seen as representative of the violent and chaotic way in which the Transition and the early years of Spanish democracy were experienced in the Basque Country,

then her marriage with Joseba and their raising of Ulia represents a wholly different narrative of recent Basque history. Specifically, Ulia's childhood and adolescence coincide with processes of Spain's entry into the European Union and Basque urban renewal centered on investments in high art projects with international appeal. While Mariluz and Joseba both seem to fit the ideological and aesthetic profile of the abertzale left, they don't seem to have been at all concerned with the politics of the Basque Country—likely due to Mariluz's lingering trauma—and instead refashioned themselves as cosmopolitan Europeans. It is telling that Ulia's only preteen memories seem to be centered on international road trips with her mother and stepfather, traversing Western Europe and sleeping at camping sites (62) so that they could experience other cultures while living off teachers' salaries. Even more revealing is that while her mother is an incurable Europhile, she holds on to an unexplained hatred of France: "La gran Europa nos esperaba tras aquel país que tanto odiaba mi madre" (136). This lingering aversion to France and longing for "la gran Europa" on the one hand signals the ways in which international travel represents a sublimation of whatever political desires Mariluz might have had in her youth, but it also echoes of her traumatic years spent in love with an ETA militant and hiding from authorities in the French Basque Country.

In this way, Mariluz and Joseba's love of travel and their desire to instill in Ulia a value of cosmopolitan culture can be understood as a reaction to the unfolding political realities of the 80s and 90s. The radical potential of the Transition was foreclosed from the outset, as the process was led by figures from the Franco era and even the erstwhile leftist parties began to embrace neoliberal, market-based ideologies as part of Spain's national pact of elite interests (Vilarós). For a working-class family like Ulia's,

with a modest degree of disposable income, the most radical changes would come in the form of opening borders and markets in Western Europe. It was simply easier to view the world as a place to be experienced and enjoyed, rather than return to the political struggle that saw her put her life at risk and led Jota to commit at least one heinous act of violence. Even Mariluz's choice to radically change her life and renew her relationship with Jota, then incarcerated in the Canary Islands, is framed as a touristic experience, as her decision to visit him in prison partially hinges on the famed local climate: "En el mejor microclima de *Europa*, al fin y al cabo. Se aferra a esa idea para no pensar en nada más" (90).

Between Ulia's birth and her divorce from Joseba, Mariluz seems not to have had even a passive familiarity with radical Basque politics in her home city of Vitoria-Gasteiz. This is clear when we are first introduced to the Mariluz of 2010, in her mid-fifties, "(a)ños después de la guerra, después de la boda, de la hija, del divorcio" (37). She and her fellow teachers are celebrating the retirement of a colleague in what is implied to be a herriko taberna, adorned with photos of Basque prisoners and the mailing addresses of their respective prisons. After seeing Jota's face among the portraits behind the counter, Mariluz "querría quedarse en este bar. Aprender cómo es la vida en este lugar. Esperar a que se pasen por aquí familiares y amigos de los otros presos, de las otras fotos" (38-39). More so than the fact that she had never been to this bar before, what stands out in this scene is Mariluz's sudden curiosity towards this typical abertzale space. Her apparent distance from Basque activist causes and social circles does not seem to have been due to any conscious animosity or cynicism.

Rather, her interest is something that has lied dormant, along with her affection for her former partner.

It's never made clear whether Mariluz considers her relationship with Jota to be a political act. When she first begins exchanging letters with him, she sees him as no more than "un espiritu que probablemente nunca saldrá de la cárcel," but upon learning about other Basques who frequently visit prisoners in remote places throughout Spain, she realizes that "Jota no es sólo un espíritu, en realidad sigue formando parte de una red invisible y ella está a punto de caer de nuevo en la tela de araña. Pobre mosquita muerta" (89). This metaphor is ambiguous in two ways. First, does this "invisible network" refer solely to informal communities composed of Basque prisoners' friends and family, or are more formal organizations and advocacy groups included? Secondly, the metaphor of the "mosquita muerta" falling into a spider's web (*again*) raises another series of questions: Is she committing to this against her better judgment? Does she consider her years dating Jota while he was in ETA to be a mistake? Does she believe *that* phase of their relationship comprised a form of activism, or was she just following her lover wherever he went? Mariluz falling back in love with Jota and committing herself to his release from prison is the closest the novel comes to answering any of these questions.

By the time she tells Ulia about the identity of her father, Jota has been moved to a prison in Granada and Mariluz seems to have settled into her role as the partner and frequent visitor of an ETA prisoner. When Jota asks to meet his daughter, Mariluz seems to implicate herself when she says that "Ella no sabe nada de este mundo (...) la cárcel, tu vida, todo esto" (155). Again, there is a great deal of ambiguity in Mariluz's

words. She could simply be referring to the experience of visiting someone in prison and knowing what it is like to live behind bars, but we could also interpret this to mean involvement with prisoners' collectives or radical activist causes. Alternatively, she could also be talking about Jota's life in ETA and guilt in accidentally killing an innocent family. If we focus on Mariluz's involvement in "este mundo," then there is one scene in particular in which Ulia realizes that her mother has become part of a network comprising Basque prisoners, their loved ones, and in a broader sense, the *abertzale* left. This moment occurs in a bar in Tolosa, where Ulia encounters some posters in support of Jota and his hunger strike featuring a photo of the prisoner in dire condition, his body destroyed by cancer, a hunger strike and a life in clandestinity and prison. Upon seeing this image of her father, Ulia's first reaction is to wonder "quién habrá hecho esta foto, cómo habrá llegado a este bar" (132). Of course, the answer to this question is almost certainly her mother, as the publication of the photo in *The Guardian* alongside an interview of Jota, leads to the revocation of his visitation rights. For Ulia, the most haunting aspect of the image is not the ghoulish appearance of Jota, but rather the fact that it places her mother at the scene and implicates her in this plan to appeal for Jota's release from prison through the international press. Beyond this, the pro-prisoner slogans accompanying the photo indicate that the image also represents a symbol of the vindictive treatment of Basque prisoners by the Spanish judicial and carceral systems. Mariluz's actions have political impact, and they situate her in the camp of Basque protesters and activists that Ulia does not fully identify with. Even then, it's not totally clear whether Mariluz considers herself to be truly part of this movement, or whether she simply is acting out of her lover's interest. The novel's ending implies

that with the end of ETA’s armed activity, the Basque left may be able to incorporate itself into the Spanish liberal democratic framework. This in turn would suggest new avenues for Mariluz (and perhaps even Ulia) to adopt political stances without having to sublimate their political anxieties and desires through cosmopolitan enjoyment.

In both Ulia’s recounting of her relationship with Gustavo and her uncovering of her mother’s past, there is a common theme of equating material comfort and a certain kind of bourgeois cosmopolitanism with a loss of political commitment. Whereas Ulia’s politics are defined by a profound ambiguity—is she simply a conformist, or do her critiques of Spanish politics and media bely a more radical streak?—Gustavo and Mariluz serve as examples of individuals whose early participation in radical politics was supplanted by a cosmopolitan consumer ethos. What the representations of all three of these characters have in common is the ambiguity of their beliefs and the extent to which they see their actions as ideological. While this ambiguity could be attributed to a desire to avoid conflict or controversy—either from the perspective of the character’s own motivations or even on the part of the author—it nonetheless has the effect of centering depoliticization as a phenomenon, so that the opting out or ignoring of political conflict is not naturalized, but rather contextualized within a global narrative of the decline of radical, class-centered political movements and the sublimation of political desires through more mainstream liberalism.

3.6 The Absent Radical

In contrast to the protagonists of these novels, the supposed radical characters are surprisingly lacking in political thought or agency. Rather than an ambiguity in

relation to contemporary capitalism, they are marked simply by a lack of defined ideology or agency. If one of the common complaints made by radical-leaning scholars of Basque literature is that the terrorist has become the subject for armchair psychology in contemporary fiction (Atutxa and Retolaza, “Gogoeta-leku dantzagarriagoak” 11), then these novels are an exception in that they offer no window into the minds of those whom society deems as threats to public safety. While in both novels, the protagonist is interested in understanding the figure of the radical/ETA militant, the characters who have actually faced arrest, imprisonment and even torture for their actions against the state are portrayed as either being devoid of clearly defined political beliefs—with *La línea del frente* featuring two characters who were mistaken for radical activists—, or as recluses who only long for personal satisfaction after sacrificing their youth for a losing cause. While actual radicals, activists, and protestors do exist in these novels, they are relegated to a background presence via their appearance in news media, which portrays them either as the epitome of Basque solidarity or irrationally hateful “etarras,” depending on the outlet. Therefore both novels are characterized by a profound contradiction, namely the way in which they move in the wake of radical politics and yet are absent of actual radicals. The book cover of *La línea del frente*—a photograph of a balaclava washed up on an isolated beach—serves as an apt metaphor: there is a specter of the violent radical, but there is ultimately no one behind the mask, as it is washed of human presence and intent.

Centered on the overarching theme of how the stories we tell about ourselves and others blur the line between reality and fiction, De la Cruz’s novel follows three characters who have endured imprisonment or torture for alleged crimes against the

state. Each must grapple with the lasting consequences of being labeled either a freedom fighter or a terrorist, regardless of whether these narratives are rooted in truth or fiction. The most important of these characters is of course Jokin, Sofía's working-class high school boyfriend who was arrested for attacking a Basque police officer at a protest that turned violent. After he is sentenced to prison on aggravated charges of terrorism, Sofía puts together the official narrative (that Jokin had attacked the police officer in retaliation for a protestor being killed by a rubber bullet at the protest) and her own personal knowledge of Jokin's life (that he had been in a rock band that had won a contest to record a studio album not long before his arrest) and assumes that he had been an activist musician who "grababa discos y escribía canciones que denunciaban lo que está mal e importa" (41) and, when witness to the police murder of a protestor, carried out an act of righteous violence: "Sólo han sido héroes los que alguna vez sintieron rabia" (97).

However, after weeks of dodging questions about what exactly happened on the day of the protest and hinting that he doesn't have strong political convictions, Jokin eventually calls Sofía from prison in order to confess that he had never been an activist, but rather a cocaine addict who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Explaining that his band was amateurish and never very political ("Éramos cuatro idiotas que tocaban en gaztetxes, on en las fiestas del barrio, teloneando grupos de versiones (...) En fin, la puta nostalgia" 147), the sudden success of the group led him to use cocaine as a means of combatting his stage fright. Once his habit became a full-blown addiction, he began stealing equipment from his bandmates and was kicked out of the group. On the day of the protest, Jokin was dealing with severe withdrawals and searching for his

dealer who happened to live in the squat where the protest was taking place. As he tried to enter the building through a side entrance, he was stopped by police and panicked. Once the police began beating him, he attempted to defend himself with his keys and accidentally stabbed one of them in the eye, and it was *this* that provoked the police to begin firing rubber bullets at the peaceful protestors.

While Jokin may have at one point considered himself a socialist or supported Basque independence, it is implied that he only did so because it represented youthful rebellion or an impossibly utopian fantasy: "En el instituto pensábamos que a estas alturas Euskadi sería una república socialista independiente y que nosotros viviríamos en la playa, vendiéndoles productos ecológicos a los turistas," he says during one of their meetings. (83-84). From when he is first introduced, it is clear that he is not particularly articulate, contemplative, or interested in politics. And yet because of the circumstances of his arrest and the nature of Sofía's guilt for being ignorant of what she thought was his cause, she maintains the belief that he is hiding some profound wisdom from her until the very end, even as he insists that "no soy el puto Che" (107).

Then there is Mikel Areilza, the ETA member and writer from the 1980s who escaped prison and resurfaced in Buenos Aires, Argentina in the early 2000s. Whereas Sofía is familiar with his literary work, particularly his memoir about his time in ETA and life after prison, her knowledge of his personal life is limited to the fact that he committed suicide by drowning himself in the Río de la Plata shortly after the debut of an autobiographical stage performance. For insight, Sofía has borrowed the journals of Arturo Cozarowski, the director of the play, and she slowly begins to see Areilza through the skeptical eyes of the Argentinian playwright.

Through Cozarowski's journals, we learn that he had been toying with the idea of developing a biodrama—"es fruto de los tiempos, como el terrorismo en vivo, como el auge del documental. Pero nuestros tiempos son los del reality show" (25). Upon meeting Areilza, who had recently entered the literary and intellectual scene of Buenos Aires after the statute of limitations on his crimes had passed, Cozarowski realizes that he has found the perfect protagonist for his play in "ese gallego que me presentaron como refugiado político y que resultó ser un simple y prosaico terrorista. Vasco, de la ETA" (36). While the playwright displays an utter cynicism towards Areilza's politics and literary output, he is intrigued by the way in which the former ETA member has made a spectacle of himself in various events and colloquiums by retelling his stories of being a self-sacrificing freedom fighter: "Siempre son las mismas y siempre las cuenta igual. No digo que sean falsas, pero las repitió tantas veces que se le volvieron ficción, cantar de gesta. Si me aprendiera sus líneas, sonarían más convincentes en mi boca que en la suya" (36). Cozarowski then becomes obsessed with the idea of uncovering the self-mythification behind Areilza's life story, focusing not on his militancy in ETA, but rather the parts of himself that he suppresses, such as when he was asked to administer medicine to a child when he as a teenager and accidentally killed the boy by giving the wrong dose.

> Imagino con cierta ternura la llegada a la cárcel de los integrantes del comando, todos ellos amateurs, universitarios de buena familia. Abogados y lingüistas, todos ellos. Todos inflamados de discurso. Relativamente inocentes, comparados con los que vendrían. Sin delitos de sangre, por lo menos. La mirada limpia, la conciencia en calma. Todos héroes, salvo Areilza. Porque Areilza mató a un nene. (82)

In order to "unmask" Areilza, the play was planned such that the protagonist would enter the stage nude, dress himself, then read his biography from the back cover of one of his novels. Then, Areilza's participation would effectively end, and a psychotherapist, an historian and a priest would then enter and ask him a series of questions, only to provide the answer themselves after a brief pause, emphasizing that Areilza's life story was not truly his to tell. However, in what turned out to be the only live performance of the play, Areilza would go off-script, answering the questions and entering into a monologue and alluding to his intent to commit suicide after the performance. Just as Sofía had rebuilt her life around the idea of Jokin as a selfless and principled activist only for that reality to collapse around her, Areilza's very existence seemed to have depended upon the myth he had cultivated around himself, and the direct challenge of the play led him to take his life: "La culpa es del experimento asesino que diseñaron. Y digo asesino porque estos días no me parece impensable que alguien se suicide por culpa de algo que parecía tan real como la propia vida y que acaba convirtiéndose en una farsa" (158).

Finally, there is the third example of Andrés, the addict neighbor with whom Sofía shares beer, weed, and a drug-laced kalimotxo at the end of the novel. While Sofía has seen him in his home and passed out on the street, she doesn't formally meet him until the penultimate chapter of the novel, when Sofía is attempting to find a bar to get drunk and drown her misery in the days after Jokin's confession and instead joins her neighbor in an afternoon of getting drunk and high on the pavement. When their conversation turns to the scars Andrés has as a result of a police beating, Sofía mentions that her boyfriend is in prison for attacking an ertzaina, but that he's not

exactly a hero either, to which the drunk neighbor responds: “Qué héroes ni qué hostias. ¿Sabes quién es héroe? Yo soy héroe (...) Sí, sí. Un gudari. Tú *rite*, *rite*, que ya verás cómo no tiene ni puta gracia” (165). Andrés then goes on to explain that he had once been a successful consultant for Deloitte in Bilbao, and that because of a mixup that led the police to believe he was an ETA member, he was arrested and tortured for several days. The story only becomes more surreal once he is released, as he returns home to find his home “lleno de carteles e ikurriñas y como cincuenta histéricos que gritan gudari y no sé qué hostias en vasco (...) yo de anfeta un rato, pero de la ETA, ni pijolera, ¿me sigues?” (167). With everyone believing that he had been in ETA all along, he was let go from his job, then forced to sell his expensive Bilbao apartment and move to his summer home next to Sofía’s parents’, where the money from the sale was mostly put towards his worsening drug habit. As the beer, weed, and other substances begin to take effect, Sofía’s bewilderment over the absurd coincidences between Andrés and Jokin’s stories eventually gives way to an appreciation for a form of consciousness beyond narrative and temporality that only an altered state of mind can grant her:

> Ojalá pudiera recostarme sobre Jokin y mirar las estrellas y escuchar la música, pero no puedo, aunque quizás pueda, si olvido, o si recuerdo siempre este instante donde nada es crucial, donde sólo existe el tacto de mis dedos y no la historia de mis dedos, que han estado en tantos sitios, se han movido como arañas por una tela que se desintegraba a su paso. (170-171)

In the case of Agirre’s novel, the radical figure at the center of the controversies surrounding the end of ETA and the treatment of Basque prisoners is José María Ortiz de Zárate—aka Jota—, Ulia’s biological father and a former ETA militant imprisoned for over two decades after his bombing of a Civil Guard barracks in Madrid that caused the

deaths of two children. In many ways, Jota resembles Areilza from De la Cruz's novel, in that he began as a young revolutionary intellectual who "impresionaba a todos con su voz profunda y sus finas manos de estudiante de filosofía" (90). After saving Mariluz's life during the 1976 3-M massacre in Vitoria-Gasteiz, his radicalization would take a violent turn, as he went on to make bombs in clandestinity and then eventually lead a Madrid commando that is inferred to have killed several people. While Agirre's novel unequivocally addresses Jota's complicity in the "años de plomo," his actions carried out against Spanish security forces are treated as an afterthought, since the only murders he was charged with were those of the twin toddlers Pablo and Fabián, whose parents' car was driving past the Civil Guard barracks as the van Jota had loaded with explosives detonated. In an article written by tabloid journalist Sarah, it is explained that the parents, a doctor and a nurse, missed the funeral due to being in a coma. Furthermore, the article states that the mother would tragically take her own life three years later, while the father would never resume practicing medicine and passed away from cancer just a few years afterwards. Ironically, the morbid and heartbreaking circumstances of this crime both cement Jota's status as an "hombre muy, muy malo" in Ulia's view (174), while also erasing the military and political goals of his violence. As far as what is revealed in the book, Jota is guilty of *accidentally* killing children, but not guilty of killing police in the name of Basque independence, as his bomb wounded, but did not kill, any of its intended targets. While his bombing resulted in a hyperbolically tragic scenario, it is uncoupled from its intent as an attack against the agents of the Spanish state. So while the bombing and its aftermath serve the purpose of repudiating

ETA's violence through a tragedy involving innocent victims, it also dodges questions about the morality of political violence.

While it is evident that Jota had strong political convictions in his youth—"En sus mejores tiempos," in Mariluz's words (90)—and that he must feel a profound, complicated sense of guilt from the knowledge that his career as a revolutionary amounted to nothing more than the death of a young family, neither of these aspects of the character are ever explored. Rather, the Jota that is represented in the later Mariluz chapters is a lonely and pathetic figure, whose only desire is to make up for the time he lost in prison by reuniting with his former lover and meeting the daughter he only recently learned existed. This intimate side of Jota is echoed in a flashback chapter in which Mariluz shows a young Ulia an old photograph of them together in the forest—presumably when the couple were living clandestinely and avoiding the Spanish authorities—so that Ulia could see the face of her father.

> Un hombre, algo aterrador al primer golpe de vista, la abrazaba desde detrás como un oso. Era la barba lo que le daba ese aire salvaje. Camisa de leñador, remangada hasta los codos. Un oso. Un leñador. Uno oso leñador. Su cara, sin embargo, era tierna: abrazaba a la madre como un niño abraza a su peluche favorito. Los ojos cerrados, temblores de amor. (146)

While Jota looks every bit the part of the ETA militant ("aterrador," "aire salvaje"), Ulia's infantilizing language softens this image and presents him as someone capable of embracing and loving others. It is no coincidence then, that in the following chapter, Ulia stumbles upon an article by Sarah titled "Ortiz de Zárate, Mirada de un asesino" (148), which describes those same eyes, now hollowed out by cancer and a hunger strike, as those of an irredeemable monster (150). This clearly intentional juxtaposition serves to

center Jota's relevance as a symbol onto which others project their politics, rather than his objective qualities.

While Jota's hunger strike against the controversial extension of his sentence amidst his fight with prostate cancer—and the fact that all of this is taking place during what the left-leaning Basque language press is referring to as the definitive "process towards peace" (Agirre 45)—means that he is necessarily implicated in politics, this public-facing side of Jota is only represented in the Basque and Spanish press, which either present him as an example of solidarity or as a cold-blooded killer. To the extent that Agirre's portrayal of Jota represents a political argument, it is that Basque prisoners—including former ETA members that have committed heinous crimes—deserve to have their humanity acknowledged, and that it is the responsibility of the Spanish government to contribute to the peace process by ending its policies of prisoner dispersion and the ex post facto extension of sentences for those guilty of acts of terrorism[21]. This opinion is expressed directly in the two articles from the Basque language press that are reproduced in the novel, which cite the deaths of other incarcerated ETA members and quote Jota's assertion that the extension of his sentence and the refusal to let him return home as he fights cancer "no era justicia, sino venganza" (132). The argument put forward in these articles, which the novel seems to validate without any reservations, is that the abertzale left's decision to call for the

[21] The so-called Parot Doctrine was based on a 2006 Spanish Supreme Court decision that effectively allowed for life sentences beyond the statutory 30 year maximum. It was overruled by the European Court of Human Rights in 2013 for not complying with articles 7 and 5.1 of the European Convention of Human Rights and for being considered cruel by not providing the option of rehabilitation and reintegration for prisoners (Cabañes 191). The Parot Doctrine's abolition is alluded to in the final page of the Agirre's novel, where it is implied that in the story's fictional narrative, it is Jota's appeal that leads to the overturning of the law.

disarmament and dissolution of ETA, represents the definitive end of the armed Basque conflict, and that a new democratic norm, in which the state and media institutions cease to associate Basque activism with terrorism, is needed.

This necessity for a new attitude towards the Basque left is reflected in the fleeting portrayals of actual activists in these novels, who are a peripheral presence in the media that Sofía and Ulía consume. In Agirre's novel, Ulia sees "pancartas, niños sobre los hombros de sus padres" in the TV news coverage, and even the negative articles by Sarah accidentally manage to portray the protestors in a positive light, whether it is the elderly mother of an ETA prisoner who (rightfully, in this case) does not trust the press, or the "indoctrinated" youth whose vocabulary is filled with words like "*represión*, *proceso democrático* y *derechos humanos*" (87-88). Meanwhile, in *Línea*, Jokin describes the atmosphere of the protest before he provoked the police charge as peaceful and diverse: "Los manifestantes, cogidos de la mano, hacían cadeneta rodeando el edificio y eran peña de lo más distinta, punkis, jubilados, señores con traje y corbata…" (150). In these brief moments of the novels, we see an image of Basque leftist activism that goes beyond the standard, typically masculine, portrayal of angry delinquents or fanatics to show that those who make up the bulk of protests are not reducible to the derogatory "proetarra" label that right-wing discourses perpetuate.

3.7 "Todo es ETA" and State Violence

Given the lack of substance given to these ostensibly radical characters in both novels, it is clear that the authors are less concerned with apologias of the abertzale left or articulating radical ideals and instead focus on the efforts from the Basque left to

bring an end to strategies of violence and work within a democratic, electoral framework. And yet, both works nonetheless put forth scathing critiques of Spanish state apparatuses, particularly in the post-2011 context. While the political focus of Agirre and De la Cruz's novels is clearly forward-looking, raising questions about the future of Basque and Spanish politics after the end of ETA, the narrator-protagonists occasionally refer to their own experiences growing up during the years of the Partido Popular government of José María Aznar, which saw massive popular mobilization against ETA's terror as well as the rise of the political-judicial doctrine of "todo es ETA" that saw stricter sentences for crimes associated with Basque nationalism and the controversial state-enforced closure of several Basque media outlets. While the protagonists of these novels perhaps hold an ambivalent relationship with being Basque and the particular social and political baggage that it entails, they are unequivocally critical of anti-Basque discourses and their political use. Indeed, there is a general questioning of the logic by which the Spanish state and media labels individuals and movements as enemies of the state, echoing arguments of Joseba Gabilondo:

> Todo ciudadano es sospechoso de terrorismo en el sentido literal de la palabra: el ciudadano-terrorista alberga la intención de defenderse de un Estado que, en la globalización, responde a intereses no ciudadanos y no lo representa, de tal manera que cualquier defensa ciudadana es construida por los aparatos del Estado como un atentado, un intento de crear terror, contra el mismo. (…) Históricamente, cualquier vasco sabe, sobre todo en el País Vasco peninsular, que la palabra "terrorista" puede ser aplicada fácilmente a cualquier persona o actividad vasca y que, como consecuencia del uso indiscriminado de la ley de "apología del terrorismo", la mayoría de los vascos ha interiorizado traumáticamente la identificación "vasco=terrorista." (*Globalizaciones* 131)

While the protagonists of the novels are not themselves activists and, at most, consider themselves passive allies, there is a clear sense that the intransigence of the Spanish

legal system, as well as the identification of Basques as terrorists among much of the Spanish public is a significant concern in both narratives. In *Línea*, Sofía reflects on how she would never talk about her Basque origins, because from the perspective of her private college peers, “me escolaricé en un idioma impregnado de términos de lucha” and “los libros de historia me señalaban con el dedo” (65). She also recalls an episode from her childhood in which a shopkeeper insulted her for saying goodbye in Basque, likely because it was not long after the assassination of Miguel Ángel Blanco (66). Meanwhile, Agirre’s novel represents the anti-Basque backlash in the immediate aftermath of the 11-M train bombings in Madrid, when the conservative Partido Popular government maintained that ETA had been responsible for the attacks while withholding information that signaled that they had actually been carried out by Islamist terrorists. As Ulia and Gustavo called their parents from a café to let them know that they had not been harmed in the attacks, two bartenders rushed to print out makeshift posters reading “ETARRAS PENA DE MUERTE” (66). While Ulia does not immediately react to the poster while with Gustavo, it is clear that she understands its slogan as referring to a wider swath of Basques than just those who kill in the name of independence. This pervasive association between Basque nationalism and ETA, as well as the weaponization of this narrative within Spain’s political and cultural strategies, underscores the experiences of Sofía and Ulia in their respective stories. Both characters navigate a social environment where being Basque often comes with presumptions of guilt or complicity in violence, a dynamic that Ansa Goicoechea critiques in her analysis of the broader sociopolitical context:

> el nacionalismo vasco es igual a ETA y esta es moneda de cambio en las principales estrategias políticas y culturales que alienan la dinámica nacional vasca de liberación, a la vez que invisibilizan las gestiones económicas de orden neoliberal. No deja de ser importante recordar que es en este ambiente oposiciones afirmativas cuando Aznar convierte el atentado del 11M de la Estación de Atocha en un atentado de ETA, dejando en evidencia (...) la relación intrínseca entre la dominación del Estado neoliberal como "neutro", los medios de comunicación y la cultura. (Ansa Goicoechea 24-25)

While these brief episodes of anti-Basque attitudes and "todo es ETA" ideology were in part a reaction to the particularly tense atmosphere provoked by a series of particularly heinous actions by ETA, the way in which Sofía and Ulia look back on them in order to understand the present post-ETA moment and the ways in which Spanish institutions maintain a hardline stance against Basques and Basque institutions.

On the subject of repression and state violence, both novels offer unequivocal criticism of the Spanish and Basque governments' continuation of anti-terror tactics. To the extent that these stories have inciting events, both the massive protests against the treatment of Basque prisoners in *Turistas* and the circumstances leading to the protest and police riot in *Línea* are examples of incidents ripped straight from the headlines of the 2010s Basque Country reflecting the erosion of democratic norms and the rise of post-democracy. In De la Cruz's novel we find an amalgamation of several hot button issues from that decade, beginning with a the application of anti-terrorism laws to the fictional rapper AveRaris, a sort of Basque Valtonyc or Pablo Hasél[22] who is wanted by the police for glorification of terrorism after releasing songs that "lamentaban, en clave irónica, la disolución de [ETA] en el momento histórico en el que España y sus políticos

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[22] Valtonyc and Pablo Hasél are political rappers known for their stints in prison, stemming from lyrics that praised leftist paramilitary groups and accused the Spanish monarchy of stealing public funds.

más la necesitaban" (45). The rapper then sought refuge in an occupied building in the Bilbao neighborhood of Rekalde, and upon posting on social media that his arrest was imminent, approximately a hundred protestors came to form a human chain and prevent the heavily armed Basque police forces from entering. The ensuing police riot would lead to the death of a young protestor when he is hit in the head by a rubber bullet, echoing the 2012 random police killing of the Athletic Club Bilbao fan Iñigo Cabacas not far from where the fictional events of the book took place. Finally, Jokin's assault of the ertzaina is tried as an act of terrorism by virtue of it seemingly being a politically charged attack by a member of the abertzale left, a situation reminiscent of the Altsasu case, in which eight youths from Navarre were tried before the Spanish National Court in Madrid on charges of terrorism after participating in a bar fight with two off-duty Civil Guards. Sofía's indignation with the way in which justice was carried out in the aftermath of the police riot therefore reads like a list of the most common grievances of abertzale activists from the past decade:

> Me importa una mierda el ojo de aquel ertzaina. Actuasteis en defensa propia y os estáis pudriendo aquí dentro mientras que ninguno de los responsables de la muerte de aquel chico ha sido sancionado. Por favor, ¡si los han ascendido! ¿Y sabes qué pena le acaban de imponer a un tipo que pegó a un guardia civil en Salamanca? ¡Año y medio! ¡Ni irá a la cárcel! (86).

Meanwhile in Agirre's novel, the treatment of Basque prisoners and the retroactive extension of their sentences is the primary topic of political debate. Even before Ortiz de Zárate's case is introduced, an article implied to be from a Basque-language news outlet, titled "Una 'marea popular' contra la política penitenciaria," reports on the death of a 35-year-old prisoner, incarcerated for participation in kale borroka street riots (44-45). The article highlights that the prisoner was initially denied

care and died on the way to the hospital, and lists the various prisons throughout the Iberian Peninsula in which he has been held, insinuating the toll his imprisonment has had on his health. Finally, the fact that his family has hired “un médico de confianza” (45) to conduct a second autopsy conveys much of the Basque public’s ingrained distrust of the Spanish government and legal system.

Then there is of course Ortiz de Zárate/Jota, whose case has become a national controversy. The Basque language press in the novel points out the double injustice of his sentence being extended by seven years immediately before his scheduled release, even as he suffers from prostate cancer. Later, after Jota begins a hunger strike and grants an interview to *The Guardian*, he is denied visitation rights and put on a feeding tube. Ultimately, the novel undeniably sides with the Basque press’s assertion that the Spanish government, particularly the Partido Popular, as driven by a logic of revenge against Basque prisoners, regardless of the severity of their crimes, and that only recourse is to appeal to European institutions to force changes in Spanish policy.

The perpetuation of the “todo es ETA” doctrine in contemporary Spanish media is also represented in both novels. In *Línea*, Sofía reflects on the ways in which her views on protest and Basque radicals have been influenced by mainstream media coverage, highlighting the ways in which consumers of the news are complicit in constructing a narrative that flatters their own sense of democratic virtue while converting those who oppose the actions of the state into a faceless terrorist Other. Recalling the moment when she first saw the case of AveRaris’s arrest and the ensuing police riot on the news, Sofía confesses that

> yo me mantenía equidistante. Tal vez su condena resultara excesiva, pero el rapero no era más que un imbécil con faltas ortográficas, quienes lo apoyaban, terroristas, y la violencia en pantalla, precisamente eso: violencia al otro lado, violencia de otros, y contra otros. (46)

In spite of having grown up in Euskadi, shouting “Gora ETA” at rock concerts, Sofía realizes that her relationship with the radical element of the Basque Country has been conditioned by media discourse, with its framing of the AveRaris case and the ensuing police riot as “*el último coletazo de un conflicto que no muere*,” a conflict that is inferred to be the fault of the protestors via loaded terms such as “*apología*” and “*lucha callejera*” (45-46, italics in original).

Agirre’s novel pays particular attention to the media, as it features reproductions of articles from both the (right-leaning) Spanish and (left-leaning) Basque news, with Ulia reflecting on the way in which a protest can be framed either as an “acto de solidadridad” or “Sabotaje proetarra” depending on the outlet (165). It also goes a step further in its portrayal of the Spanish media’s role in perpetuating the discourse of “todo es ETA” through the inclusion of a journalist character, Sarah Blagrove, who is writing a series of articles about the end of ETA’s violence and the protests surrounding the extension of Jota’s prison sentence. While it would be easy for Agirre to represent a journalist interviewing ETA victims in a sympathetic manner, Sarah is nothing more than the caricature of an unethical hack journalist, as she writes in a comically pretentious style (“los turistas extranjeros comienzan a buscar un bar de *pintxos* o un restaurante para, atendiendo a sus propios horarios, degustar una suculenta cena” 87) and openly admits in her articles that she uses her English father’s surname to present herself as a member of the foreign press (“Quieren que esta correspondal *extranjera* apunte

cuidadosamente cada palabra que sale de sus adoctrinadas bocas" 87, italics in original). As narrator, Ulia's contempt for Sarah and her work is evident, as she inserts a "(*sic*)" every time Sarah uses awkward jargon such as "el punto caliente" (171) or "los escenarios del terror" (170). In the original Basque-language version of the novel (*Atertu arte itxaron*, 2015), Sarah's articles are rendered completely in Spanish, as if to underscore the idea that Ulia rejects her anti-Basque rhetoric like a body expelling a foreign antigen.

In spite of the fact that both novels ultimately avoid direct representations—either positive or negative—of outspoken political radicals, they do not sidestep some of the most controversial issues of the post-ETA period, nor do they hesitate to unambiguously criticize the logic of "todo es ETA" that continues to define policy. While the ostensible radical/prisoner characters are not given a voice, their persecution and maltreatment by the state serve as the catalyst for the non-nationalist protagonists to question the system and, in the case of Sofía in Línea, adopt some fairly radical stances. With both novels treating political violence such as ETA's as a thing of the past, it is state violence and repression in the name of democracy, and the Spanish association of the Basque language with extremism that are presented as overdetermining the current political atmosphere of the Basque Country.

3.8 Terror Tourism and the Commodification of Basque Difference

In the final chapter of *La línea del frente*, Sofía, lying drunk and disheveled in Laredo's seaside promenade, muses that "lo marginal contagia y éste es el motivo por el que lo marginal no acepta el turismo" (173). This idea that tourism exists in opposition

to the marginal—specifically, political radicals and protestors—is echoed several times in *Los turistas desganados* by the character Sarah, first when she writes that, “Hay un Bilbao para los turistas y un Bilbao más oscuro. Un Bilbao de Guggenheim y otro de andares torvos y miradas desafiantes” (86), and then again when she remarks “Menuda postal para los turistas, ¿verdad?” (171) after telling Ulia and Gustavo about a protest in Bilbao that ended with two trash containers being set ablaze. While perceptions of conflict and instability can of course have a negative impact on tourism, Sarah’s own behavior in the novels belies the ways in which a fascination with the violent Other can be a source of morbid attraction rather than a repellant.

While Joseba Gabilondo has put forward the theory of political pornography/ terror tourism as a model for understanding the recent popularity of media about ETA and the Basque Country, Katixa Agirre may be the first author to critique this discourse and its ideology through fiction by depicting the character of Sarah Blagrove as a literal terror tourist. Beyond her duties writing sensationalist articles about the Basque Conflict and the forthcoming end of ETA, Sarah’s travels through the Basque Country display the pleasure she gets from encountering and infiltrating Basque nationalist spaces and presenting her work as a journey into a Conradian heart of darkness.

> Y mientras apuramos la segunda ronda Sara [sic] vuelve a convertirse en el centro de la conversación. Nos cuenta cómo se ha infiltrado ya en los pueblos más pequeños y herméticos de la Patria, muchas veces mintiendo a los aborígenes sobre el medio para el que escribe (lo tiene fácil utilizando el apellido de su madre, enseguida la creen cuando les dice que trabaja para un periódico en Londres) y una vez dentro *le toma el pulso a los nuevos tiempos*. Habla con madres recientes que pasean a sus bebés, queriendo saber cómo ven el futuro de la prole. Contacta también con esos votantes del PP que viven en las catacumbas. Se ha metido en *esos bares*. Incluso ha estado en manifestaciones. No podríamos imaginarnos la cantidad de manifestaciones que hace *esa gente*. Es una verdadera locura. Siempre con los presos arriba y abajo. No se cansan. (84-85)

While the words that evoke a sense of barbarity ("catacumbas"), danger ("infiltrado"), and even a neo-colonial gaze ("aborígenes") could be attributed to Ulia's mockery of Sarah and her glib, exoticizing view of Basques, the italicized phrases *esos bares* and *esa gente* are implied to be Sarah's own words, and they still convey a perception of Basques as an Other, inhabiting forbidden spaces and engaging in taboo activities. Even though her articles ostensibly center on the end of ETA and its impact, she insists that certain Basques continue to be a looming threat to Spanish democracy and the still-tentative peace: "En fin, el tema no es nuevo, lo nuevo es simplemente el contexto. Los pueblos de Euskadi. El fin del terror. La normalidad. El primer verano libre. Ese tipo de cosas. Aunque lo cierto es que las cosas no han cambiado tanto como nos quieren hacer creer" (81). This quote, with its implication of a "they" and an "us," also highlights the way in which terror tourist discourse interpellates a dichotomy between the lawful Spanish subject and the Basque subject characterized by irrationality, violence, and deceit. But what makes terror tourist discourse so captivating is its capacity to enjoy both sides of this dichotomy, and this is more evident when Sarah inserts "los detalles más morbosos" (106) of ETA attacks into normal conversations and publishes articles highlighting the violence of José María Ortiz de Zárate. The idea of future violence and retribution therefore represents a titillating fantasy for Sarah:

> Ayer mismo hubo bronca en la parte vieja, ¿nos habríamos enterado? Los radicales quemaron dos contenedores. Menuda postal para los turistas, ¿verdad? Pues podemos imaginar lo que pasaría si el preso muriera. Se quemarán cosas más grandes que unos contenedores. En cambio, si lo liberan, las protestas se moverán a otro sitio, ¡y sin duda crecerán! (171)

Here, we get a sense of Sarah's perverse enjoyment of violent street protest, but in addition to that, there is the extra enjoyment brought on by the fantasized destruction of

these protests and the response it would provoke, as Sarah seems to imagine even bigger demonstrations taking place in other parts of Spain upon Jota's release, in which Spanish masses would validate the State's ongoing repression of Basque nationalism, and by extension, the Spanish national project.

Just as with her journalism, even when Sarah otherwise could be seen as doing a commendable act in promoting peace or historical memory, her exaggerated discourse and performative behavior exposes her ideological motivations and—at least as Ulia sees it—undermines any point she may have about the legacy of violence in the Basque Country.

> Ha pasado aquí, en la ciudad, los últimos días, recorriendo los escenarios del terror (*sic*). ¿Sabíamos que después de Madrid, San Sebastián es la ciudad que más asesinatos de ETA ha presenciado? Noventa y seis muertos, ni más ni menos. A lo que se ha dedicado es a visitar algunos de estos puntos negros, para después dejar una rosa y hacer una foto. El antes y el ahora de esos aparcamientos, restaurantes, jardines, bares, estaciones. Ha estado en todos. En todos ellos se ha derramado sangre. Hoy, en cambio, la gente pasea como si nada, nadie se acuerda, nadie quiere acordarse. (170)

The way in which Sarah moves from solemnity and incredulity to then lightheartedly complaining that she probably won't get reimbursed for her rose expenses (171) reveals her fundamental unseriousness. While photographically recording the sites of ETA killings might be a respectable and interesting concept, the gravity of this project is undermined by the overly sentimental placement of roses and Sarah's insistence on terms like "escenarios del terror." Overall, Agirre's novel unequivocally portrays the journalist's project as a pilgrimage of melodrama carried out via hackneyed rituals.

Sarah's travels can be understood as a parallel to the relatively listless tourism of Ulia and Gustavo. It is clear from the beginning of the novel that while Ulia may be the native Basque, it is mostly Gustavo who is planning and enjoying the trip. Through her

second-person narration directed to Gustavo, Ulia frequently teases her husband over his typical tourist behavior and search for authentic experiences, whether it's his wanting to hear Basque spoken in public, a desire to visit the museum of Basque nationalism, or an obsession with eating "Eusko Label" food products: "Si el Departamento de Comercio y Turismo del Gobierno Vasco necesita una prueba viviente del éxito de sus campañas publicitarias, aquí estás tú Gustavito, ven y cómelo" (31). This teasing belies Ulia's concern over not only Gustavo's consumerism, but also the ways in which her husband has internalized ideologies surrounding Basque difference.

In his articles describing discourse of political pornography/terror tourism, Gabilondo often also highlights its counterparts within ideologies of Basque exceptionalism, the ideologemes of the "la nación foral" and the "Basque Oasis." Whereas the discourses highlighted above reinforce the hegemonic position of the Spanish political elite, these concepts serve to bolster the control that the PNV maintains over the institutions of the Basque Autonomous Community by historicizing Basque self-rule within Spain and promoting the belief that the Basque Autonomous Community's relative prosperity is a result of the PNV's neoliberal policies ("Turismo-pornografía" 95-96). This latter idea, that of the Basque Oasis, resonates with Gustavo, who as a well-traveled professor of international business law seems to appreciate narratives of efficient governance and liberal economic policy. And while the Basque Autonomous Community may continue to suffer from corruption and social disparity—just as any other part of Spain or the Global North—its statistical performance relative to

the Spanish national averages feeds the fantasy of a social democratic oasis in the desert of the Spanish State (“Posimperialismo” 21).

In one chapter, as the couple are stuck in a traffic jam, Gustavo realizes that the Basque Oasis is just that—a fantasy—and in his frustration, he picks a fight with Ulia, complaining that the Basque Country has an exaggerated reputation: “Oyendo a algunos vascos hablar parece que nunca hay atascos (...) y que vuestra mierda huele a fresas (...) la región europea con más titulados universitarios (...) el lugar donde se leen más periódicos per cápita… joder, ¡es que algunos se creen que esto es Finlandia!” (94). Ignorant of the load-bearing role it plays in PNV ideology and electoral politics, Gustavo sees the narrative of Basque prosperity as a matter of vanity on an individual level: “la tendencia a miraros el ombligo sin descanso (...) de rebuscar en las estadísticas más absurdas a la caza de una que os deje en buen lugar” (94-95). His diatribe then takes an unexpected turn, as he credits ETA and political violence as having inflated Basques’ sense of importance on the world stage:

> Y diría más, cariño: ¿no has pensado que si no fuera por ETA nadie habría oído hablar de los entrañables *Basque people*? Sí, sí, nuestros jóvenes anduvieron una temporada reventando tripas y pegando tiros en la nuca, pero a cambio, aquella vez que fui de vacaciones a Cerdeña, en un pueblo perdido, me encontré un bellísimo mural internacionalista con una ikurriña bien grande. ¿El precio ha sido demasiado alto, quizás? Eso tendrá que decidirlo la historia. Veremos si de aquí a cien años existe siquiera la palabra *Basque*, más allá del corsé ese que lleva vuestro nombre. (95)

Whereas Sarah views Basque nationalists as the barbarians beyond the gates of metropolitan, democratic Spain, Gustavo sees them as very much products of the globalized world order. Not only do they feel the need to compete with Spain and the rest of the world, but they also get to enjoy their mystified reputation as an independent and persevering minority. This line of thinking comes close to questioning the paradox

behind the Basque Country's reputation as both an oasis and site of socialist contestation, but Gustavo's post-political worldview (Ulia apparently believes that he does not know the difference between the PNV and the abertzale left, after all) steers him instead towards a politics of self, grounded in stereotypes of Basques as arrogant and defiant. In Gustavo's opinion, the media's perpetuation of the Basque Oasis discourse is a direct reaction to the years of negative coverage over ETA and violent protest, and for Basques themselves, those years of disproportionate media coverage inflated their ego to the point where they now must compensate via the pursuit of international prestige.

While the novel's focus on the media's continued weaponization of "todo es ETA" discourse indicates that Gustavo's argument is largely based in ignorance, his linking of those two seemingly contradictory conceptions of the Basque subject indicates at least some perceptiveness on his part. For Gabilondo, the "positive otherness" employed by Basque elites relies in part upon negative depictions of Basques in media, insofar as they reinforce notions of Basque difference that legitimize the Basque Nationalist Party.

> De este modo, la alteridad vasca puede ser reivindicada y redistribuida por el PNV como una realidad mítica que desafía incluso la imprevisible y cambiante historia global, al tiempo que señala que, mas allá de una pornografía vasca de la violencia terrorista, existe un goce más perverso, astuto y amenazante que todos los españoles envidian: la supuesta capacidad de prosperar económica y culturalmente más allá, incluso, de la historia de España (...), como resultado de su capacidad de ejercer violencia contra el Estado español. ("Turismo-pornografía" 96)

Even as Gustavo's theory fundamentally mischaracterizes the links between myths of Basque economic exceptionalism and the politicized Othering of Basques, and is overly dismissive of anti-Basque prejudice in Spanish media and politics, it nonetheless highlights their counterintuitive relationship. Notably, he calls attention to the ways in

which Basque identity has had to rearticulate itself amid a new context of globalization, referring to “los entrañables *Basque people*” in the global vernacular of English before insinuating that Basque culture may not have a future (at least as far as the outside world is concerned) unless it can remain a vehicle through which people in the Global North can project and sublimate their anxieties about globalization and neoliberalism. Gustavo may not understand how they connect, but he nonetheless identifies both sides of the Janus-faced Basque Country of the 21st century: part aspiring oasis, part fodder for internationalist murals.

Overall, Agirre’s novel displays an acute awareness that association of the Basque Country with terrorism has carried with it the unexpected cultural phenomenon of a voyeuristic obsession with the region. Through the eyes of outsiders such as Sarah and Gustavo, Agirre explores the ideologies behind the commodification of certain images of the Basque Country, while revealing the libidinal desires behind both anti-Basque ideology and myths of Basque exceptionalism.

3.9 Projecting Consensus: “Non-ideological” Readings and Post-ETA Critical Discourse

Through unconventional protagonists with distinctly millennial Basque identities and historicized portrayals of a political conflict overdetermined by matrices of class and culture, Agirre and De la Cruz’s novels go beyond the political realities of the post-ETA, post-crisis Basque Country, to examine the ideological lenses through which Basque culture and political resistance is either vilified or put on a pedestal by different sectors of Basque and Spanish society. However, in the academic literature on these two

novels, we see that such critical elements are either overlooked or misinterpreted, and this is largely due to factors external to the texts. Between the publication of the original Basque-language version of *Turistas* (*Atertu arte itxaron*) in 2015 and the release of its Spanish edition and *La línea del frent*e in 2017, there was the unprecedented publishing phenomenon of Fernando Aramburu's *Patria* (2016), which generated much debate around the topic of the Basque conflict and its portrayal in literature and consequently had the impact of attracting new readers to Basque literature. As Santiago Pérez Isasi and Aiora Sampedro point out, there also was a negative side to this novel's impact, as *Patria* and its manichaean presentation of the Basque Country of the 80s and 90s "vino a ser definido, desde los ámbitos cultural y político, como la narración preferente, si no única, de dicho conflicto, anulando así o imponiéndose a otras posibles narrativas alternativas y quizás más complejas" (Pérez Isasi and Sampedro 181).

David Becerra Mayor situates Aramburu's narrative within a wider context of "non-ideology novels" that have defined much of the literary output in Spain since the Transition:

> Incluso en textos que tratan temas que podríamos tildar de políticos—como la Guerra Civil o el conflicto vasco—opera un mecanismo de despolitización donde lo político queda de nuevo desplazado por conflictos de corte individual, psicologista o moral, fácilmente conciliables por la ideología dominante. (*Después del acontecimiento* 71)

The insinuation here is that novels such as Aramburu's have been embraced by the political and literary establishment precisely because they reframe political struggles into ways which are much more easily assimilated into the dominant logic. Becerra Mayor puts forward the thesis that the financial crisis of 2008 and the anti-austerity protest movement of 2011 (15-M) marked the first significant fractures in the ideological

framework of post-Franco Spain, exposing capitalism's inherent contradictions and opening space for alternative societal visions. Thus, literature that challenges the discourses of this "non-ideology" becomes a valuable lens for understanding how consensus polices and limits our political imagination.

> Si el discurso literario hegemónico (...) presenta que todo conflicto—todo lo que nos pasa—encuentra su causa en nuestro interior y, en consecuencia, es el *yo*—incapaz de individualizarse y ser plenamente autónomo—quien debe transformarse para adaptarse o sobreponerse a la situación, tras el *acontecimiento* [15-M] surge una nueva narrativa que pone este discurso boca abajo, que lo invierte, y narra que lo que nos pasa debe encontrar su explicación fuera del sujeto, esto es, en la realidad histórica y social, en el capitalismo, en las relaciones sociales y de producción en las que, como sujetos, estamos insertados, y que nos constituye. No se sustituye—o desplaza—el conflicto por otro asimilable, o que pueda armonizarse o neutralizarse ideológicamente, más bien se nombra, mostrando que nuestra vida precaria y nuestra derrota tienen una causa externa al *yo*. (*Después del acontecimiento* 25)

Although no one would mistake Agirre and De la Cruz's novels for works of social realism, they nonetheless belong in this category of politicizing narratives. Their respective protagonists, while hardly models of solidarity or social marginalization, consistently identify their problems within the context of contemporary capitalism. In contemplating ideas such as the erasure of class consciousness among self-styled progressives and the reframing of political conflict as a matter of irrational agitation, both protagonists display a material understanding of the world and their place in it. They possess self-awareness that allows them to examine their existence as postmodern subjects and to question the ideology and motivations behind political and media discourses. The novels are in large part about how the individual relates to ideology and prevailing narratives. In this sense, Agirre and De la Cruz's novels represent an intersection between the politicizing narratives of the post-crisis context and the post-

ETA literature that has been influenced by discourses of political neutralization that reduce/displace the Basque conflict to the realm of the (inter)personal.

In the Basque context in particular, the recent focus on historical memory and coexistence has played an important and necessary role, not only in contemplating the literature that has been published since ETA's ceasefire in 2011, but also in making sense of the cultural and political discourses that now remain in the absence of violent conflict. However, Ibai Atutxa and Iratxe Retolaza have pointed out that critics run the risk of turning coexistence discourse into a depoliticizing mechanism, as it often ends up becoming a goal rather than an interpretive tool for understanding literature as a reflection of material reality and structures of feeling:

> azken hamarkadetatik hona asko entzuten ditugun hitzak dira *elkarbizitza*, *kontsentsua*... Horiek ere maileguan hartutako hitzak dira, Espainiako Estatua trantsiziotik hona eraikitzeko erabili direnak. Eta, Euskal Herriko gatazka armatuaren testuinguruan erabiltzen direnean, bat-batean erabiltzen ditugu helburu bezala.[23] ("Pentsamendu kritikoak")

Their assertion that consensus is used as a target by commentators and critics in discussions of post-ETA literature is substantiated in the academic discourse on Agirre and De la Cruz's novels. Given the ambiguous politics of the main characters and their unsubtle critiques of dominant media and literary representations of the Basque conflict, neither work corresponds neatly with the post-ETA literature of memory, consensus, and Basque culpability epitomized by writers like Aramburu and Edurne Portela. Nonetheless, several analyses of the novels have projected this discourse onto the text,

[23] "The words we've heard a lot in recent decades are *coexistence*, *consensus*... These are also borrowed words that have been used to build the Spanish State since the Transition. And when they are used in the context of the armed conflict in the Basque Country, we suddenly use them as targets."

by either misinterpreting or ignoring key aspects of the characters and plot. Reading these analyses symptomatically, we see the pitfalls of consensus-seeking readings that narrow the definition of political conflict, displacing present tensions onto ETA's most unethical actions during the 80s and 90s. In this way, the prescient, politicizing narratives of Agirre and De la Cruz become a litmus test for retrospective, depoliticizing interpretive frameworks.

In the case of *Los turistas desganados*, we see a fixation on the theme of collective guilt and the collateral damage of ETA's violent campaign. In her article "Cualquier tiempo pasado fue peor: Reflexiones sobre la narrativa vasca post-ETA," María Jose Olaziregi cites the passage "Las culpas del padre. Las cargas de la hija. Cargaré con la culpa de mi padre" (Agirre 176) in order to assert that this phrase in particular represents

> la reflexión que realiza la novela sobre el legado que recibirá parte de la sociedad vasca. Un pasado desconocido para Ulia, pero que le asedia durante el viaje por las continuas imágenes y noticias que tanto en los medios como en los lugares que frecuentan (bares, etc.) le recuerdan a su padre." ("Cualquier tiempo")

Olaziregi's conclusion here is not totally wrong. Several times in the novel, Ulia reveals that she has visited the site of the bombing carried out by her father and conveys the guilt she felt as she was "perdida en pensamientos morbosos" (150). However, the quote that Olaziregi singles out as conveying a key message of the text is taken out of context, as the line is not an earnest reflection on the legacy of ETA's violence, but rather an expression of Ulia's bitterness over the thought of Sarah writing an article about her family: "Seguro que en su cabeza ya ha redactado el titular. Antes siquiera de

preguntarme nada. Las culpas del padre. Las cargas de la hija. Cargaré con la culpa de mi padre. No, demasiado poético" (176-177).

While Ulia undoubtedly does feel burdened by her father's violent acts, her exploration of moral and political guilt in the Basque Country is articulated alongside an explicit questioning of who has the authority to determine and ascribe that guilt. Through both Sarah's ethically dubious journalism and the case of the Spanish government and media's handling of the 11-M train bombings, the novel repeatedly indicates that these discourses are often no more than justifications to perpetuate the archetype of the antidemocratic Basque radical against which Spanish liberal democracy can define itself and justify its excesses. Olaziregi approaches this topic in the following paragraph of her article in which she describes the depiction of Spanish media as a notable element of the novel and cites sensationalist media coverage as a factor in perpetuating the stigma of Basques as "proetarras." However, she only goes as far as to ascribe all of this as examples of sensationalist journalism and does not connect it with a wider political context or ideology associated with Spanish institutions.

While Olaziregi is one of the more influential scholars of contemporary Basque literature, Ibai Atutxa and Iratxe Retolaza have criticized her approach towards literature on the Basque conflict, which focuses on discourses that promote conflict resolution and coexistence in the wake of ETA's 2011 ceasefire. They argue that while coexistence is of course a laudable goal in the political field, literary criticism with the fixed goal of reconciliation and consensus can inadvertently set in motion new mechanisms of violence ("Gogoeta-leku dantzagarriagoak" 11). According to Retolaza,

> Elkarbizitza eta kontsentsua aipatzen direnean aipatzen da "ados dezagun marko bat, eta ez dago eztabaidatzerik". Eztabaidatzen jartzen baldin bazara ari zara bake kolektiboaren kontra, eta horrek sortzen du biolentzia egoera bat, ari delako esaten ahots eta ikuspegi batzuk besterik gabe isilarazi behar direla, zerbaiten izenean. Eta ahotsa isilaraztea biolentzia da: berdin du zein modutan eta zein testuingurutan, eta berdin du ahots horrek zer esaten duen.[24] ("Pentsamendu kritikoak")

Consequently, this taboo of interrogating the nature of the consensus obstructs truly critical discourses, as its outright rejection of conflict or debate precludes any examination of its underlying framework or the political reality that it presupposes. Although well-meaning, Olaziregi's reading of the novel is limited by an ethics that is stripped of sociopolitical context. Ulia's sense of victimization by the right-leaning Spanish press cannot be fully explored because this opens the door to an analysis of ongoing (and hotly contested) questions of the Spanish political and media establishment's treatment of the abertzale left, Basque language institutions, public education in Euskara, etc. Within this restricted scope, the media bias portrayed in the novel represents nothing more than mere failures of journalism within a liberal democratic society, because asserting that it may be an inherent feature of a conservative, Madrid-based media apparatus would then undermine the assumption of a consensus that applies equally to Spanish and Basque perspectives. The only conflict which *can* be admitted is that which has either already been resolved and can be reduced to mere platitudes. Accordingly, Olaziregi closes her analysis of the novel by pivoting from isolated examples of media malpractice back to the question of Basque

[24] "When coexistence and consensus are mentioned, they say 'let's agree on a framework, and there is no need to discuss.' If you argue, you are against collective peace, and this creates a situation of violence, because it assumes that some voices and views must simply be silenced, in the name of something. And silencing the voice is violence: it doesn't matter in what way and in what context, and it doesn't matter what that voice says."

guilt: “En resumen, *Los turistas desganados* busca reflexionar sobre la responsabilidad colectiva heredada por décadas de terrorismo, y por la injusticia de cargar con la culpa de las acciones cometidas por otros” (“Cualquier tiempo”). While this interpretation is not incorrect in the sense that these themes are present, it mischaracterizes the novel and sets aside its more pointed critiques in order to arrive at a (predetermined) conclusion that Agirre’s book is yet another example of an emerging cultural and political consensus regarding the Basque Conflict.

Meanwhile, in *Ellas cuentan: Representaciones de la violencia en el País Vasco desde la perspectiva de género*, by Cristina Ortiz and Maria Pilar Rodriguez, we find another example in which a coexistence-centered reading results in a misinterpretation of a novel’s message and scope, this time in the case of *La línea del frente*. In describing Sofía’s confused political beliefs and her guilt for not having taken a side in political issues during her teen years in the 2000s, the authors of *Ellas cuentan* claim that the narrator

> alude a la ya anteriormente mencionada pasividad de la sociedad vasca e incluso a su complicidad con ETA durante las décadas de los setenta y de los ochenta especialmente. Sofía ni siquiera puede situarse del lado de quienes apostaron por la defensa activa de la causa terrorista, pero la descripción de su comportamiento resulta cercana a la de muchas personas que vivieron en Euskadi en los tiempos de mayor violencia simplemente en la pasividad, sin cometer ninguna falta, en formulación de la narradora, culpables al fin y al cabo. (173)

Here, the emphasis on Basque society’s “complicity” in the 70s and 80s is conspicuous, as the protagonist was born around 1987, and has no memory of that time period. The social and political reality of the 70s and 80s only appears via a single section in which Sofía describes her research on the history of ETA and literature about the conflict, and

even then, Sofía claims that while she was an "experta en la historia reciente de Euskadi (...) seguía sin entenderla" (94). Therefore, the allusion that Ortiz and Rodriguez are claiming here is a purely allegorical one, in which Sofía's passivity is a stand-in for, or at least comparable to, Basque society's complicity with ETA in the decade before her birth. This particular understanding of the novel does not hold up to scrutiny.

Specifically, Ortiz and Rodríguez cite Sofía's shame as she recalls joining the crowds in chanting "Gora ETA" at rock concerts as representing the shame of post-ETA Basque society looking back on the worst years of violence. They misinterpret that shame by ignoring two important factors. The first is historical context vis-à-vis the armed element of the conflict, as the ETA of Sofía's youth had long been pursuing ineffective and unjustifiable strategies that led many Basque leftists to voice opposition against the organization. She alludes to the moral decline of ETA in the 80s, meanwhile ETA's infamous 90s strategy of "the socialization of suffering" is referred to as "la frase más temible que he escuchado nunca" (94). Sofía's view on ETA's actions during the Transition, however, seem to be much more ambivalent, to the extent that she feels the need to read the autobiographical literature of an ETA member like Areilza in order to understand not just the sociopolitical context of the 80s, but also that of the present. She seemingly envies Areilza's "faith in a clear enemy" and "capacity for sacrifice" (95) and begins to associate these political attitudes with the (ultimately untrue) narrative of Jokin attacking the police officer after a protestor is killed by a rubber bullet: "decidió actuar donde otros preferirían ser testigos" (96). While she doesn't go as far as to directly endorse ETA in its earlier forms, this ambivalent attitude towards what she

considers justified political violence indicates that Sofía's regrets about chanting pro-ETA slogans have less to do with pacifism than the organization's failure and senseless continuation of violence during her lifetime.

The second factor is the aforementioned relationship between Sofía's lack of political commitment and her upper-class upbringing, and the guilt she feels over this. In chanting "Gora ETA" at concerts during her adolescence, in spite of being from a rich, conservative family, Sofía exposed her ignorance and total lack of political consciousness. The shame she now feels is as much a matter of embarrassment for her general obliviousness—itself a symptom of the class privilege she now feels ashamed of—as it is a question of her moral guilt or complicity. Sofía's unique upbringing also complicates Ortiz and Rodríguez's notion that her experience functions as allegory, since her particular experience of growing up in the Basque Country and the evolution of her political beliefs cannot be considered representative of any part of Basque society, and in any case, are overdetermined by her family's wealth and refusal to acknowledge any form of conflict. In a radio interview on Radiotelevisión Española's *Efecto Doppler* program, De la Cruz commented on her main character's unlikely lack of political engagement:

> A mí, cuando me planteaba este personaje, me gustaba como reto porque me parecía a priori imposible, o casi inverosímil, que alguien hubiera crecido en esos años en Euskadi y que hubiera permanecido al margen, porque yo, al menos, hablaba de política en los bares, en el instituto, en casa. Me parecía que estábamos todos absolutamente permeados por la política. Y claro, pues Sofía es una especie de alter ego porque tiene muchos paralelismos conmigo, pero el más radical es ese, es una persona que estuvo en Euskadi (…) sin haber visto ni participado en nada. (Ferrero)

Essentially, Sofía is better understood as a thought experiment than a realistic archetype from which allegories of Basque political struggle are to be extrapolated. And

while authorial intent hardly represents the definitive way of interpreting a text, De la Cruz has commented on the prevailing themes in post-ETA literature and asserts that *Línea* approaches the topic from a wholly different perspective. In the same interview, De la Cruz contrasts her novel with the contemporaneous works of Edurne Portela, saying that while the latter's books deal with the guilt of passivity in the face of political violence, the guilt of her protagonist "es una culpa más inocente (...) de una niña rica pija que no se enteró de nada y que ahora ni siquiera siente que pueda formar parte de esa especie de memoria colectiva." It is clear then, as we see in both the text and the author's stated intentions, that not only does *Línea* not serve as an allegory for the particular violence and tensions of the 70s and 80s, it doesn't even deal with the sort of guilt Ortiz and Rodríguez attribute to it in the present.

Rather than this association between the Sofía's lived experience and the violence of the 1980s being based in any textual evidence, it seems that the authors arrive at this allegorical understanding of the novel's conflict through pure compulsion. In an error similar to the one we see in Olaziregi's misappropriation of a quotable line from *Turistas*, they too ignore much of the text in order for it to suit the prevailing literary and academic discourses on Basque culpability, coexistence, and the goal of political consensus. It betrays an unconscious desire to hold onto a particular discourse, in which conflict is spoken of only in the preterit. All present-day contention is displaced onto ETA's most unjustifiable and bloody actions, carried out a generation prior yet serving as a symbol of barbarity that automatically delegitimizes the Basque left's critical positions towards the status quo in the present.

Agirre and De La Cruz's novels resist this type of interpretation by presenting their post-ETA political discourse through characters or media outlets who are either mocked or viewed with disdain by the narrator, or by having the narrator explicitly defend certain forms of violent resistance as a way to confront state violence. Given the prominence these views are given in the novels, it is therefore unsurprising that some critics have read the protagonists of these novels as being firmly in the camp of the abertzale left (Kortazar and Miñambres; Bezhanova). And yet, in spite of all of this, these novels do not necessarily contain radical theses for understanding the political horizons of the post-ETA Basque Country. While the progressive main character's upper middle-class perspective is challenged by political conflicts unique to the Basque Country of the 2010s, she is ultimately unable to assimilate the worldview of the radical activists and protestors that inhabit the margins of these texts.

3.10 Conclusions: Sins of Late Capitalism

Given the many ways these two novels stand out from other contemporary works of Basque fiction, along with scholars' difficulty in making sense of their ethics and political messages, what conclusions can be made if we analyze them in their totality, setting aside limiting interpretive frameworks? While it would not be wrong to place these novels under the wide umbrella of Basque fiction about political violence, trauma, and the legacy of ETA's campaign of violence, this categorization is complicated by the fact that neither text seems to prioritize these themes, and to the extent they are present, we find the narrator often questioning the consensus-based discourses surrounding them. They also offer unrelenting critiques of state violence and inequities

in the Spanish judicial system, portraying the controversial political debates of the post-ETA Basque Country from a decidedly Basque perspective. And yet, it could be argued that both novels play it safe in their depiction of ongoing political conflict. The critiques of Basque and Spanish society that we find in these novels are not being launched from the perspective of activists, victims, or any other sort of marginalized perspective, but rather by characters who could be said to have lived fairly comfortable lives, unaffected by political persecution or economic hardship. Moreover, the protagonists are presented as hypereducated, cosmopolitan and profoundly postmodern in their sensibilities, viewing nearly everything—including their own identity—through a detached perspective that skews either ironic or analytical. In order to derive a sense of what these novels tell us about the contemporary Basque Country, it is important then that we not only analyze them for their ostensible meaning, but also take into account the ways the postmodern logic by which they operate represents a latent critique of late capitalism.

Aixa De la Cruz's novel reveals its central theme before the actual narrative even begins, through an epigraph quoting critic and friend of the author Santiago Pérez Isasi:

> Sabemos (...) que cualquiera que hable del pasado miente, porque para contar el pasado con cierta fidelidad haría falta repetir el pasado y eso no es posible porque repetir el pasado punto por punto no sería repetirlo sino representarlo y representar es mentir, y porque nadie tiene suficiente presupuesto ni decorados lo bastante grandes. Todo es texto, todo es ficción, todo es literatura (menos la literatura). (9)

Indeed, this idea is expressed in various forms throughout the novel, both in Sofía's narration and in the diaries of the playwright Cozarowsky. In the diary chapters detailing the genesis of Cozarowsky and Areilza's theater project, we see that the playwright is fascinated by the way in which the former ETA member has turned his life's story into a

performance, and Sofía begins to suspect that their project led directly to Areilza's suicide. The delusional nature of Sofía's vision of Jokin as a brave and principled activist is foreshadowed throughout the book as well, with the protagonist musing on Cozarowski's insistence that one's life and legacy are no more than works of fiction and admitting that her own subconscious "se rige por una lógica narrativa" (31), even as she insists that "lo que un hombre no puede ser, bajo ningún concepto, es lo que nosotros inventamos que ha sido" (109). In this way, the book is a glass onion, with the limitations and contradictions of the main character's perspective evident from the outset. Sofía reflects on these ideas without arriving at the necessary conclusion that she does not truly know the men upon whom she has based this radical change in her life and political views. Between the characters of Jokin and Andrés, whose lives are ruined because they are mistakenly labeled as radicals, and Areilza, whose life was seemingly dependent upon this perception that others had of him, the novel's main argument is that individuals' identities are built upon narratives that are no different from fiction.

As a consummate literary critic, Sofía confidently maintains the belief that real life and fiction must be held separate, and that her ability to distinguish one from the other is a skill that both sets her apart and validates her intelligence:

> Estoy hecho para esto. La doctrina del canon. El placer de elogiar lo irrefutable. Pero también las herramientas del forense, porque para el crítico, cualquier texto es un cadáver. La primera enseñanza, la más básica, la más importante, es que la literatura imita la vida, pero despojándola del caos. La segunda, la que a ratos ignoro, es que aun despojada del caos, la vida no se inspira en la literatura. Por tanto, las técnicas de análisis literario no son válidas fuera de la ficción. (131)

Of course, Sofía ultimately realizes that the reality around which she had rebuilt her life, that of solidarity with her political martyr boyfriend, was itself a work of fiction that she had conjured up by filling the gaps in her knowledge with tropes borrowed from the literature of Areilza. This in turn forces Sofía to view her actions in a completely different light. In hindsight, she realizes that she has been motivated more by voyeurism than sincere commitment, and that her whole adventure in Laredo visiting Jokin and reinventing herself as a politically conscious individual had been the ultimate example of bourgeois arrogance: “Lo máximo a lo que aspiro es al rol del topo, el joven príncipe que se sumerge en las cloacas para aprender la jerga del paria, el espía que se enamora de la terrorista y llora antes de enviarla a Guantánamo, pero qué remedio, si es lo que es, si somos lo que somos” (156). But even this pessimistic view of unchanging identities is upended in the final pages of the novel, when Sofía gets high with her addict neighbor in the street, wearing rubber boots and sweatpants, with only 40 euros to her name. As her stream of conscious narration becomes progressively less coherent, Sofía lets go of her identity and compulsive need to categorize and explain. She experiences a sort of ego death and claims that she now understands what it is like to live on the margins of society like Jokin had done as an addict. As the novel comes to an end, Sofía eventually settles upon a relativistic nihilism, as she realizes that her perspective will once again change once she sobers up. Walking back home, she decides to lock herself inside her apartment until the summer, “porque hoy he visto muchas luces (...) pero mañana veré la luz del día, y el dibujo será otro, la explicación será otra, y entonces, quién sabe” (175).

Given that all of the ostensibly political themes of the novel ultimately devolve into a very postmodern interrogation of the nature of truth and identity, it would be valid to ask whether *La línea del frente* is truly a novel *about* Basque politics, or even a politically engaged novel, for that matter. The novel can be read as apolitical in the sense that political commitment and activism serves as the incidental means for the novel's questioning the barriers between reality and fiction. And yet, Sofía's eventual disillusionment does not negate the novel's repeated condemnations of the Spanish legal system and police violence. Ultimately, the best way to understand the politics of this novel while taking its decidedly postmodern logic at face value is to read it as a critique of ineffective political engagement, as Sofía stops short of actual activism and solidarity and instead engages with the mere narratives of resistance in isolation, so that she may have a cleaner conscience, or in her own words, be inoculated from guilt.

Any attempt to attribute a holistic meaning to *Los turistas desganados* is complicated by the inclusion of the chapters about the pacifism of Benjamin Britten. These excerpts from Ulia's PhD thesis have little relation to the story of her and her family, and ostensibly only exist for the narrator to muse on the legitimacy of pacifism in the context of the Second World War. However, Ulia never gives any indication as to *why* she includes these chapters in her text, with the narrator even describing the decision to write her dissertation on Britten's pacifism as somewhat arbitrary; an uncomplicated selection of a familiar composer so as to complete her dissertation as quickly as possible (99-100). In terms of their content, the Britten chapters unfold achronologically and often abandon the topic of pacifism to digress into mere biography, listing his personal defects and delving into the personal lives of other influential

composers, poets, and intellectuals in his cohort. The plot synopsis on the novel's back cover suggests that Britten's brief adoption of a Basque refugee child in 1938 might serve as a unifying thread for the novel's disparate narratives. However, this episode occupies only two or three pages and primarily underscores Britten's portrayal as an aloof figure, more invested in symbolic displays of virtue than genuine action, as he largely neglects the boy before returning him to a refugee camp just days later.

In any case, the conspicuous inclusion of these chapters raises a number of questions about how they relate to the themes of the novel. How does pacifism relate to Ulia? What does Britten's refusal to serve in the military during the height of World War II have to do with a Basque Country that had already seen the end of ETA's violence by the time the novel takes place? Does denouncing ETA count as pacifism, and if so, how are we to interpret the indication at the novel's end that Ulia has accepted her mother's relationship with a former ETA member? Even if we take the Britten chapters at face value, as an exploration of the ethics of pacifism, there is a clear dissonance between this part of the book and the Ulia and Mariluz storylines.

In order to reconcile Britten with the rest of the novel, we must focus on how Ulia relates to the British composer and his shunning of conflict. In Ulia's writings, there is a concern not only with the objective legitimacy of his pacifism, but also how he justified it to himself and whether he felt any guilt over his stance: "Lo que está claro es que Britten nunca se avergonzó de su posición" (105). She also imagines some of the criticisms he and Pears must have faced upon leaving England during the outbreak of the war: "¿Con qué derecho se refugiaban en el extranjero, en el momento en que su patria más los necesitaba? ¿No serían simplemente traidores? ¿O lo que es peor:

pacifistas inmundos?" (59). It is in this interrogation of Britten's guilt that we find a parallel with Ulia's own struggles in confronting both her father's past in ETA and the incipient bourgeois conservatism of her husband. While the historical contexts differ wildly, Ulia and Gustavo resemble Britten and Pears in the sense that both couples are characterized as cosmopolitan bon-vivants who are compelled to believe that their lives' pursuits exist outside of politics. Their status grants them both the ability to opt out of conflict, even as they have the right to opine on it as members of an educated elite. This idea is further underscored when Ulia writes about yet another British intellectual who avoided the war by fleeing to New York, W.H. Auden. Describing the poet as ideologically fickle—"dispuesto a darle una oportunidad al cristianismo, con el mismo entusiasmo con el que había probado antes el marxismo y el psicoanálisis" (57)—Ulia focuses in particular on his poem "September 1, 1939." In a lengthy footnote, she reflects on the irony that the poem experienced a resurgence in popularity in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, in spite of the fact that the poet himself renounced his poem about witnessing the eruption of global conflict, deeming it "infectado de una falta de sinceridad incurable" (56). This digression creates a subtle yet direct thread between the well-meaning but insincere anti-war sentiment of a cosmopolitan elite during WWII and 21st century War on Terror discourses, and it is the closest the novel comes to connecting the Britten timeline with the events taking place in 2011.

It becomes evident in scenes involving figures such as Auden that while Britten is the nominal subject of these chapters, they are less an academic investigation of the pseudo-pacifist beliefs of a particular individual than they are a window into a cohort of transatlantic intellectual elites, whose social capital makes up for what they may lack in

monetary wealth or political power, not unlike Ulia and Gustavo. Their subjectivity aligns with that of Ulia and Gustavo's in that they must make sense of their relative safety from the consequences of a conflict that they nonetheless cannot ignore.

Of course, the two conflicts referred to in the novel could hardly be more different, as the global conflicts of the 1930s and 1940s don't elicit many comparisons to the 2011 Basque Country, as the novel goes out of its way to stress that even with ETA's unilateral ceasefire still pending, the end of the armed conflict is a foregone conclusion. Whether it's Sarah speaking of "el fin del terror… el primer verano libre" (81) or Ulia sarcastically referring to the Basque Country as "el París recién liberado" (95), it is clear that the conflict that Agirre's novel seeks to portray is not the armed one between ETA and Spanish security forces, but rather the emerging political conflicts of the post-ETA Basque Country, which are tied up with global anxieties over the decline of democratic norms and continued application of anti-terrorism laws to combat peaceful political dissent. In this sense, the moral conundrum at the heart of *Turistas* is the same as that faced by Sofía in *Línea*: the protagonist is not asked or expected to become an activist, but instead simply *acknowledge* the conflict that is obscured by politics of consensus and respectability. She is obliged to see the Basque activists not as violent sectarians who must be marginalized, but rather a group capable of formulating societal critiques from outside of the depoliticized consensus. Unlike the protagonist of De la Cruz's novel, however, Ulia does everything she can to *avoid* discussions of politics, as she fears disrupting both her relationship with Gustavo and her sense of self.

Throughout the novel, the defining feature of Ulia as a character is her tendency to avoid conflict, either by fleeing or displaying a passive and ironic attitude towards

virtually everything. In the opinion of Kortazar and Rodríguez-Miñambres, Ulia is a one-dimensional character that "no muestra complejidad, ya que mantiene un único perfil caracterizado por sus comentarios irónicos, mordaces con el entorno" (81). While Ulia's tendency to deflect and defer any sort of conflict through ironic remarks is perhaps frustrating, Katixa Agirre's insistence that her novel is a critique of the postmodern reminds us that it is possible to view the apparent character flaws of the protagonist through a critical lens. In *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher argues that

> this turn from belief to aesthetics, from engagement to spectatorship, is held to be one of the virtues of capitalist realism. In claiming (…) to have 'delivered us from the "fatal abstractions" inspired by the "ideologies of the past"', capitalist realism presents itself as a shield protecting us from the perils posed by belief itself. The attitude of ironic distance proper to postmodern capitalism is supposed to immunize us against the seductions of fanaticism. (*Capitalist Realism* 6)

If we view Ulia's flaws as a function of the novel's political critique, the disjointedness of her perspective and her inability to act or even articulate her intentions correspond with the inability to imagine a subjectivity that suits her, as she fears that being associated with radical elements of the Basque Country, either by voicing dissent or having the identity of her father discovered, will interfere with the socially progressive PMC image that she and her husband have cultivated for themselves. Her ironic distance towards the Basque Country and the tensions between her and her husband can be understood as coming not from a place of ignorance or nonchalance, but rather a latent belief that it is better to intellectually probe at issues within the confines of the status quo than open oneself to confrontation and risk being labeled a fanatic.

If we indulge the temptation to read the novel's ending allegorically, positing Ulia and Gustavo as postmodern representatives of the Basque Country and Spain, respectively, then Ulia's English sabbatical in the novel's epilogue—living with 5 other

fellowship awardees, “escogidos según estrictos criterios de igualdad de género y eje norte/sur (...) subvencionados, blancos y europeos” (196) in Britten’s home in Aldeburgh in commemoration of the composer’s 100th birthday—represents not only an assertion of Ulia’s agency within her marriage, but also the role of the 21st century Basque Country in a wider European framework. For their part, Ulia’s parents (Jota especially) represent a generation of Basques whose radical opposition to the regime that emerged out of the Transition ended in failure and trauma. However, they are redeemed through their commitment to the abertzale left’s unilateral decision to abandon political violence. They are ready to begin a new political cycle, working towards Basque autonomy from within the legal frameworks of the Spanish State and, more importantly, Europe: “El caso está en el Tribunal de Estrasburgo. Que ETA haya puesto punto y final a su actividad este otoño puede que ayude a que todo se resuelva. Eso cree mi madre” (198). This line from the novel’s final page reveals its underlying ideology, showing that in Ulia’s cosmopolitan Basque perspective, supranational institutions and European liberal democracy are regarded as unquestionable and monolithic sources of moral and political authority. This ending implies that the end of ETA allows for the (re)alignment of Basque and Spanish progressive political interests through a new political dialogue (“Aún tengo muchas cosas que contarte” 198), unburdened by political violence and underwritten by liberal European institutions. In this post-ETA political fantasy, the worldly and progressive Basque subject, represented by Ulia, comes to occupy the role of mediator between the abertzale left and Spanish progressives and liberals (represented by Gustavo), while also possessing the

education and respectability to rebuke the more reactionary discourses of the Spanish right (exemplified in Sarah's exploitative journalism).

Even if we discount this allegorical reading as being too reductive, there is no ignoring the fact that the novel's conclusion embraces optimism by suddenly abandoning some of its key conflicts, while deferring the solution of others to an unspecified future moment. Gustavo's bourgeois mid-life crisis is curtailed by the destruction of his beloved car, while Ulia's concerns about his budding conservatism are seemingly assuaged by his opinion that not even ETA prisoners should have their sentence retroactively extended. The perceived threat of Sarah's investigation dissipates when it is revealed that she and Gustavo had slept together and that her pursuit of them was likely driven by a vague, sadistic impulse. Finally, any shame Ulia might have felt about the identity of her father seems to have been alleviated by the definitive end of ETA's violence. The ending of *Los turistas desganados* therefore does not represent a true synthesis of the personal and political conflicts of the novel, as it is implied that these issues will cease to matter once the new post-ETA political reality is assimilated into the status quo. Or perhaps they were never true problems in the first place, but rather a failure of communication worsened by toxic political and media discourses. If Ulia's passivity and inability to sincerely commit to anything can be attributed to a feeling that she does not fit in amongst the bourgeois Madrid professional managerial class nor the rebellious Basque Country, then her rediscovery of personal agency at the end of the novel indicates that the only thing that has radically changed is how Ulia sees *herself*, as she seems to conclude that being a detached cosmopolitan

does not make her an outsider, but rather the kind of technocratic bridge-builder that is required in the 21st century public sphere.

In their article “Katixa Agirre y *Los turistas desganados*: las dos caras del País Vasco,” Jon Kortazar and Paloma Rodríguez-Miñambres reflect on whether it is possible for a text as stylistically postmodern as Agirre’s to provide an effective critique of the postmodern condition:

> ¿Existe, es posible una obra postmoderna que mantenga una idea de rebelión sobre el estado de la sociedad amparado por el capitalismo? ¿Puede ser posible una postmodernidad y una estética postmoderna comprometida con los valores de la solidaridad y la crítica a la sociedad creada por el consumismo y los medios de comunicación? (…) Es probable que la obra de Katixa Agirre pueda entenderse en tal paradigma de conocimiento estético. (Kortazar and Rodríguez-Miñambres 85)

Of course, this question could just as well be applied to De la Cruz’s novel, with its equally postmodern style and portrayal of characters that are themselves products of late capitalist culture. And in both texts, Kortazar and Rodriguez-Miñambres’s assertion that the postmodern aesthetic does not preclude politics holds true. In both novels, the postmodern self-awareness of the characters facilitates a sort of class consciousness, as they speak of the ways in which their upbringings and lifestyles restrict their behavior and compel them to view the status quo as natural. However, the characters’ capacity to reflect on socioeconomic realities ultimately amounts to little at the end of both works, with neither protagonist able to fully transcend their ingrained ideologies and hangups. In this sense, Agirre and De la Cruz’s literary approach could be understood as a form of what Lee Konstantinou dubs *motivated postmodernism*, which portrays the postmodern aesthetic project as the new normative mode of registering and depicting

reality, in turn highlighting the fear that the critical functions of postmodernism have been absorbed into power (Konstantinou 92).

While the novels mostly exclude radical perspectives, they nonetheless deftly portray the political conflicts and tensions of the post-ETA Basque Country in ways that break with the liberal consensus. Both Ulia and Sofía unequivocally criticize the Spanish government's continued application of anti-terror strategies to both Basque prisoners and protestors alike, and in both cases we see the ways in which the logic of "todo es ETA" weighs upon even the most cosmopolitan Basque subjects. They allude to the worst years of ETA's violence and strategies of terror without treating Basque political contention as a closed case, instead looking with concern towards the future as the Spanish media and political establishment continue to label certain forms of dissent as terrorism.

However, there is also an inescapable sensation that these characters' feelings and opinions on these topics are framed as important precisely *because* of their postmodern, Basque-cosmopolitan perspective. They feel they have an insider perspective as Basques who grew up there and speak Euskara, and yet are capable of looking at the political realities of the Basque Country in a more dispassionate manner because of their education and worldly sensibilities. They are able to bypass vascophobic narratives and ideologies by passing as normative Spanish subjects. After all, they don't articulate many clear thoughts on actual Basque nationalism, but rather focus on the excesses of the Spanish state and the legitimacy of opposition to state violence. Therefore, the characters' own criticism of the system carries with it a naturalization of their PMC, cosmopolitan subjectivity.

Furthermore, they are presented as individualized subjects, uncoupled from anything resembling a collective and seeming to lack any remaining friends in the Basque Country that might share or even challenge their perspective. In centering their narratives on this detached cosmopolitan subjectivity, seemingly at the expense of perspectives more grounded in the day-to-day realities of the Basque Country and its politics, Agirre and De la Cruz instead speak to the dialectical contradictions of the Basque Country under late capitalism. In the case of Agirre's novel, Ulia's very birth comes to mark the abandonment of radical resistance by her mother. Her childhood and adolescence of cultural immersion, travel, and meritocratic advancement in the world of classical music mirror the Euskadi of the 1990s, marked by the PNV-led effort to redefine Basque difference through symbols of European high culture and the veneer of cosmopolitan excellence. Sofía, in turn, embodies the neoliberal Basque Autonomous Community in that she is the child of an indifferent, non-Basque-speaking elite that nonetheless relies upon myths of Basque difference and exceptionalism as a justification for the Basque Nationalist Party's nearly unrivaled institutional control of the region.

In this way, we can understand the political content of these novels as existing in two layers. First, there is the explicit and thorough critique of "todo es ETA" ideology from the perspective of these worldly, educated, and middle-class Basque protagonists with a claim to impartiality and political ideologies that are not so progressive so as to be dismissed as too extreme. Beyond this, however, there is a deeper analysis of that very subjectivity that is reproduced under late capitalism, influenced by bourgeois ideology, globalization, and an individualistic conception of the self. Ulia and Sofía are

subjects whose thoughts, desires and expectations are dictated by capitalist realism, that is, the inability to imagine or conceive of political alternatives to capitalism. Even when confronted with anti-Basque ideology and what they see as the systemic repression of the abertzale left by both the national and autonomous governments, they do not speak up in any meaningful way. Rather, *Tursitas*'s Ulia copes via passivity and ironic detachment, whereas Sofía attempts to alleviate her sense of guilt through an individualistic cultivation of virtue, isolated from everyone except her prisoner boyfriend.

Amongst all the uncanny similarities between the two novels, there is one that is subtle, yet perhaps key for understanding the way in which the gap between a longed-for radical democratic alternative and actually existing political options is felt by the protagonists. Specifically, in both novels we find references to the notion of original sin. In *La línea del frente*, Sofía identifies her original sin as being born into a class that isolates itself from the "reality" of class politics via prestigious institutions and a hegemonic logic that delegitimizes those who oppose the system they sit atop of, such that even nominally progressive elites are not even conscious of the ways in which the ideology of the ruling class perpetuates injustice. In Agirre's novel, the term is mentioned not by the protagonist, but by her stepfather Joseba, as he reveals that it was his idea to lie to Ulia about the identity of her father. Afraid that Ulia's life would be tainted by the knowledge that Jota was an ETA member responsible for the death of an innocent family, he explains that "todo lo hacíamos por tu bien, bebé nacido sin pecado original" (185). While the burden of her father's crimes does weigh on her now that she knows the truth, it is clear that Ulia experienced her Basque identity as a sin much earlier than that, particularly in the early 2000s as the judicial doctrine of "todo es ETA"

effectively institutionalized vascophobia. As indicated by her questioning of Benjamin Britten's pseudo-pacifism, it seems as though the path her parents set for her—towards cosmopolitan idealism and away from any political conflict—has brought with it its own form of guilt that Ulia now struggles with. Stuck in a cycle of bourgeois ennui, consumption, and passive spectatorship, Ulia's biggest sin is her inability to relate earnestly and meaningfully with the world, feeling as though her decisions are of little consequence and knowing that she will be rewarded for her adherence to mainstream liberal values with a lifetime of wine tasting, jazz festivals, and international travel with her husband. In both novels, the protagonist's distance from political conflict was predetermined, decided for them at birth. Their reckoning with this privilege amidst the shifting political landscape of the early 2010s was equally as inevitable.

Questioning the system they have benefited from throughout their lives, the protagonists of *Los turistas desganados* and *La línea del frente* see the Basque Country as a politically exceptional place where (neo)liberal consensus is openly contested through local culture and activism. The post-crisis, post-ETA political landscape sets the stage for addressing their anxieties about the suppression of radical political alternatives under post-democracy and examining how post-democratic ideologies influence their own ingrained elitist tendencies. Yet in spite of growing up there, this side of Basque culture and politics is foreign to them as individuals who have spent their adult lives in metropolitan cities outside of their homeland, living in relative comfort. For both protagonists, the persecution of the Basque left exposes the democratic deficiencies of 21st century Spain, and yet in both cases the Basque radical is a spectral presence that is never fully understood or engaged with. While the two novels end in dramatically

different ways, their resolutions both point to the limits of political imagination in an atomized, late capitalist society. The postmodern Basques depicted in these novels may agree with many of the negative political critiques posed by the abertzale left, but they are unable to transcend cultural and class boundaries to arrive at a true solidarity, let alone a positive vision for change. While the novels signal the necessity of grassroots political engagement amid the urgency of the current political moment, it seems as though the only paths forward for their protagonists are to either enjoy their status atop a system they know to be unjust or wallow in impotent nihilism.

Chapter 4: Everyday Youth; Chill Mafia, Tatxers, and the (Meta)music of Basque Generation Z

This chapter analyzes the creative output of the Pamplona-based music groups Chill Mafia and Tatxers, highlighting their representations of Basque identity and activism in the context of neoliberal crisis and the political demobilization of the working class. While they represent seemingly opposing sides of the Basque music industry—one specializing in a blend of pop, electronic and "urban" genres and signed to a commercial label, the other a darling of the countercultural scene of punks and artists—both groups correspond with the same cohort of Pamplona youths born in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as they react in distinct ways to the precarity faced by members of their generation, particularly those wanting to pursue an independent living in music and the arts. With the dual legacies of the Basque-language folk music of the 60s and 70s and the bilingual Rock Radical Vasco punk scene of the 80s and 90s having attained an unquestionable, almost sacrilegious, status within the understanding of a counter-hegemonic Basque identity by the 21st century, the music of Chill Mafia and Tatxers represent Basque society's reckoning with the realities of a post-democratic political landscape, in which appeals to essentialist notions of Basque resistance seem trite or quaint in the face of unresponsive political institutions, globalization, and mounting economic pressures.

On the one hand, the music of Chill Mafia, with its gleefully reckless appropriation of disparate musical genres and symbols of Basque identity, represents an outlook immersed in postmodernism, in which cultural signifiers of Basque difference and

defiance are liquidated for the sake of irony, provocation, and broad appeal both within the Basque Country and throughout the Spanish state. Although they have alienated many potential fans in Euskal Herria—whether through their ironic portrayals of Basque identity, criticisms of left-wing activism, or lyrics about recreational drug use—Chill Mafia and their music are not nihilistic nor apolitical, as their critics suggest. While their music and aesthetic reflect a Generation Z worldview dressed up in “seven layers of irony” (Weedianaut), the group nonetheless betrays a material understanding of their community and the world at large. Ultimately, the ambivalent, (meta)ironic quality of their work, with its mix of internet-meme influenced discourse and sincere critiques of contemporary Basque politics, serves to question the notion of Basque radical resistance while on a personal level confronting “la ansiedad de vivir en un mundo en el que ‘todo lo sólido se desvanece’” (Virizuela).

Meanwhile, Tatxers have become possibly the most popular Basque group outside of the government-subsidized mainstream by leading a post-punk reinvigoration of the Basque underground music scene that thrives in gaztetxes, leftist bars, and small-town venues. While they sing exclusively in Euskara, they seem to consciously avoid direct references to the politics of the Basque Country and its legacies of leftist organizing, instead focusing on feelings of alienation under neoliberalism, the yearning for a post-capitalist society, and the search for meaning through community and artistic expression. The inspiration Tatxers draws from British post-punk bands of the early neoliberal era—reflected first and foremost in their name, a reference to Margaret Thatcher—is neither rooted in nostalgia nor an attempt to disengage from the political realities of the Basque Country. Instead, their musical project revitalizes the modernist

ideals of the original post-punk movement, aiming to reshape Basque resistance identity by addressing the alienation inherent in late capitalism and encouraging listeners to envision societal alternatives through active participation in the Basque underground and DIY scene.

In spite of their evident differences, the members Chill Mafia and Tatxers are all from the same city, age cohort, and socioeconomic background. In some cases, they are friends that have known each other for much of their lives. They have collaborated on musical projects and their respective moments of breakout success will forever be linked. As music critic Jon Urzelai writes, the divergent paths of these groups and the spaces they now occupy in the Basque cultural landscape are ultimately part of a single story of Basque youth reacting to the atomization of daily life and culture under late capitalism:

> Aldeak alde, bi taldeetako kideak lagunak dira, featuring bat egiteko beste. Arazorik ez horretan, nola ba! Auzia gehiago da egungo panoramaz aritzea: rockismo-aren garaiko etika indie-az—ai, etiketak—eta popismo-aren “denak balio du” paradigmaz. Dena ez da horren sinplea, ordea; mugak lausoak dira, zalantzak hamaika. Normaltasunik eza omen normaltasun berria; dena da kaotikoa, oro aldakorra eta hauskorra. Aldarriak, festa, unean unekora kondenatua izan eta berau zukutu nahia, bizimodu duin bat izateko gosea, mundua aldatu beharra, ezina edo ezaxola. Pop izarra, gangsterra, iraultzailea, arduratsua, denak batera nahas-mahasean.[25] (Urzelai)

In this postmodern context, in which the lines between such categories are increasingly blurred, the perceived relationship between emancipatory ideologies and Basque

[25] On the other hand, the members of the two groups are friends, such that they even collaborated on a song together. And there’s no problem with that! It's more a matter of the current landscape: the indie ethics of the rock era—oh, the labels!—and the "everything goes" paradigm of the pop scene. Not everything is that simple, however; the boundaries are vague, the doubts are numerous. The absence of normality seems to be the new normality; everything is chaotic, everything is changing and fragile. The clamor, the partying, the desire to seek controversy, the hunger to have a decent life, the need to change the world; powerlessness vs. indifference. The roles of pop star, gangster, revolutionary, activist, all mixed together.

language and identity ceases to be taken for granted and instead becomes an inspiration for reflections on the systemic failures of contemporary Basque society, as well as possible avenues for cultural and political renewal. In this sense, the 2008 economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic have been key catalyst, as the number of young adults in the Basque Country living with their parents doubled between 2020 and 2022, and finding a steady job has become more difficult than ever (Barcenilla et al). The works of these two groups, and the feelings they inspire in their audiences, provide a window into evolving notions of Basque identity among Gen Z youth, during what they view as times of perpetual crisis.

4.1 2021: The Year Basque Music Broke

On January 31st, 2021, Chill Mafia uploaded the music video for the song "Gazte arruntaren koplak" ("Verses of the Everyday Youth") to YouTube. Within a week, the video had received over 100,000 views, and the group's two lead vocalists Beñat Rodrigo (aka Kiliki Frexko[26]) and Julen Goldarazena (Flakofonki) had been interviewed live on the public Basque television channel ETB 1 ("Chill Mafia: 'Lete, autotunea eta ketamina nahastu ditugu'"), while a 27-minute debate on the group's music and aesthetics had featured on Basque public radio ("Chill Mafiaren inguruko eztabaidaren gogoeta aberasgarriak"). It is likely the first case of the online virality of a video in Euskara becoming a news story in its own right. Seemingly out of nowhere, amidst the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic, a group of youths living with their parents had

[26] "Kiliki" is the colloquial term for the big-headed processional figures of the folk festivals of Pamplona-Iruñea (*buruhandi* in standard Basque; *cabezudo* in Castilian).

created something that simultaneously shocked and fascinated Basque establishment media.

The video in question opens with Flakofonki, clad in a bright red tracksuit and sporting a bleached blonde mohawk, standing atop a snowy hill in the Basque countryside, flanked on both sides by a digitally cloned Martín Cervantes (one of the group's producers, who goes by the alias of Tulipump) playing guitar and electronic keyboard on either side of the screen while dressed in a blue tracksuit and red beret. The video then progresses to other areas symbolic of the rural Basque Country—the cluttered basement of a baserri (a traditional Basque farmhouse) and a frontón (a public court for pilota, or Basque handball)—as Flakofonki raps his verses with a snarling delivery while pouring himself a glass of wine and standing next to young men wearing balaclavas. The song itself is actually a cover of the 1976 song "Gizon arruntaren koplak" ("Verses of the Everyday Man") by the singer-songwriter and Ez Dok Amairu member Xabier Lete, with lyrics adapted to represent the everyday life of Gen Z Basque youth, including references to internet culture, recreational drug use, university studies, and harassment by municipal police.

The semiotic juxtapositions presented in the video were as numerous as they were stark: a song by a revered folk singer reinterpreted through autotune and irony-laced hip-hop aesthetics; urban street fashion against the backdrop of a rural town; the singer's masculine posturing and balaclava-wearing friends undermined by the playful and ironic tone of the video. These symbolic clashes were the main reason for the video's resonance, not simply because they were striking, but because they spoke to

deeper anxieties about the Basque culture in the global context. Larraitz Ariznabarreta states that

> no other dichotomous tension is more central to the contemporary Basque cultural realm than the ambivalent strife between distinctiveness (the quality of being unique, singular) and the compelling yearning for global equivalency and legitimation. This double consciousness is, in fact, the essential quality of Basque culture today. (Ariznabarreta 65)

The viral phenomenon of "Gazte arruntaren koplak" and the debates it conjured in Basque media is perhaps a perfect example of this tension. Beyond the distinctiveness of the video's setting, the very premise of the song called attention to Basques' special relationship with their autochthonous musical canon: "Where else in the world would it occur to young urban music artists to cover a folk song from the 1970s?" In terms of the music video representing a legitimation of Basque popular culture's ability to emulate global trends, the media's initial appraisal of the song as a leap forward for Basque hip-hop is complicated by the fact that the song's shuffling beat and peppy organ riffs had nothing to do with contemporary trends in hip-hop music. Along with its pure novelty, the inscrutable irony of the song and video—interpreted as an affirmation of Basque identity, a parody of it, or a mix of both—allowed for the Chill Mafia phenomenon to become something upon which Basques of varying generations and political ideologies could project their interpretations. While some saw the group's irreverent attitude as a continuation of the Basque punk tradition, others saw them as ushering in the end of "los oxidados restos de eso que se llamó Rock Radical Vasco" (Virizuela).

Two weeks after the premiere of "Gazte arruntaren koplak," Chill Mafia would publish their provocatively titled debut album *Ezorregatik X Berpizkundea* ("Urwelcome

X The Rebirth[27]"). Four days later, on February 18th, the video for the single "31014" (the postal code for the Errotxapea neighborhood of Pamplona) would be released on YouTube, this time featuring Kiliki Frexko as the protagonist. The video is shot against the background of the city of Pamplona, with Kiliki singing a reggae-inspired ballad about growing up amidst the political unrest and drug trade endemic to his working-class neighborhood. While the music video for this song would not achieve the same viral status as its predecessor, the song itself would quickly surpass "Gazte arruntaren koplak" on the music streaming platform Spotify and cement itself as the most popular track from their debut album.

The success of these two singles/music videos established Chill Mafia as a Basque pop sensation capable of not only attracting an audience through the novelty and irony of its reinterpretation of the Basque musical canon, but also speaking to the sociopolitical realities of their city and cultivating an aura of authentic Basque urban identity. However, these were not their first singles. On January 10th—three weeks before the premier of "Gazte arruntaren koplak"—Chill Mafia uploaded their first single/music video to YouTube, "Zure kebapa" ("Your Kebab") a song about sex and dating from the perspective of young people with no disposable income, featuring the collaboration of the band Tatxers. This group, a trio formed in Pamplona in 2019, had released their debut album the year prior to relatively little fanfare. However, their four-song EP *Hiruzpalau amets larri* ("Three or Four Urgent Dreams"), released in June 2021, would quickly gain traction through word of mouth and the band's association with

[27] "Berpizkundea" could alternatively be translated as "renaissance," "resurrection" or "reignition." The prefix "ber-" is analogous to "re-," while the root "piztu" corresponds with the Spanish verb "encender"—to light or to turn on.

Chill Mafia. The band's rise was also marked by the success of the single "Goizean oskorri" ("Morning Glow"), a post-punk anthem with lyrics about overcoming failure and finding determination to carry on. Much like "31014," this song would strike a chord with working class Basque youth, eventually amassing over a million listens on Spotify, even as the group received little attention from mainstream Basque public radio and television. On June 27th, Tatxers would release the music video for "Urte kontua" ("Year Count"), directed and edited by Chill Mafia's Flakofonki/Goldarazena and featuring Chill Mafia's two lead vocalists in starring roles in the video. With Tatxers breaking out right as the Basque media's fascination with Chill Mafia was at its height, it was clear that a major shift was taking place in Basque music, although it was not immediately clear where it would lead.

With the release of the Covid-19 vaccine in spring 2021 and the reopening of concert venues across Europe, both groups would begin touring while continuing to produce original music. Tatxers would tour the gaztetxe scene and release the successful single "Bihotz motel" ("Slow Heart") before the end of the year. Meanwhile, Chill Mafia would stoke controversy in the Basque Country by charging large fees to play at local venues and gaztetxes, then eventually signing with the Oso Polita record label, a company with ties to the political and business elites of the Basque Country. Chill Mafia's greatest controversy that year, however, would come from their third post-*Ezorregatik* single, "Barkhatu" ("Sorry"), featuring the Pamplona rapper-DJ duo Hofe and 4:40, with the song's lyrics satirizing both the Basque activist left and the vascophobic Spanish right, culminating in Chill Mafia member Irene Cervantes (Irenen3s) rapping the infamous line "muevo el culo y gora ETA" at the end of the song.

With the group touring outside of the Basque Country for the first time, the group sought further controversy and provocation by granting an interview to the right-wing Spanish newspaper *El Mundo*, which predictably went with the headline “Chill Mafia: ‘Si se les ocurre llevarnos a la Audiencia Nacional a declarar nos van a dar una publicidad del copón’” (Luís). Several days before the publication of the article, the group had performed in the Castilian city of Valladolid—considered a bastion of Spanish conservatism—and videos of the crowded audience excitedly chanting “gora ETA” had circulated on YouTube and social media networks[28].

In the years since their 2021 breakout, the two groups have drifted further into their assigned roles at the forefront of the Basque mainstream and underground circuits. Chill Mafia have sold out shows throughout Spain and participated in major festivals in the Basque Country, such as Bilbao’s BBK Live and San Sebastian’s Jazzaldia. Over three years, the collective would periodically release singles in various genres while also collaborating with avant-garde artists outside of the Basque Country, in the process carving out a unique space for itself that bridged Basque pop culture and Spanish countercultural scenes. Within the Basque Country, the group shored up their position in Basque scene by leveraging their relationship with Basque public broadcasters and the Oso Polita record label—the “establishment” of the Basque music industry (Virizuela)—while also maintaining their aura of spontaneity and authenticity through the release of eclectic singles and their sometimes erratic behavior on social media.

Ultimately, however, the pressures and contradictions of their project proved to be unsustainable, as the group abruptly announced in September of 2024 that they

[28] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2yFyS8Ox70

were releasing what would be their final album, *Agur eta ohore X Allá va la despedida* and that they would disband in 2025 after a farewell tour of the Basque Country, Madrid and Barcelona. Citing the difficulties of managing a large collective, the reluctance of some members towards becoming professional musical artists, and the sense that Chill Mafia had reached its artistic ceiling as the motives for ending the group, they expressed the hope that fans would remember the group for their authenticity and amateur spirit:

> Lo más importante es que la gente disfrute de lo que hemos hecho y perciba la naturalidad con la que lo hemos hecho; desde lo más cotidiano, desde el disfrute del día a día. No hace falta haber estado en el conservatorio para juntarte con gente y hacer música, pueden pasar mil cosas. (Escorza)

Meanwhile, Tatxers have released two full-length studio albums since 2021, while consistently doing shows throughout the Basque Country and carrying out brief tours through Spain, France, and Germany. The eponymous *Tatxers* LP (2023) continued the band's exploration of the British post-punk scene, incorporating more diverse melodies and a guitar sound influenced by the "jangle pop" sound that emerged from post-punk in the mid-80s. In doing so, Tatxers aimed to emulate both the sound and career trajectory of bands like The Jam, whose music became increasingly pop-oriented while incorporating more political themes and abstract lyrics. Even the album's cover art referenced that of the 1979 record *Entertainment* by the British post-punk band Gang of Four, as it featured a small three-panel comic situated in the corner of a blank monochrome background. Like Gang of Four's iconic album, the comic serves as an extension of the record's themes, while also introducing the motif of flower bouquets that would be present in Tatxers' lyrics and music videos for the next year. The sound and artwork of their 2024 follow-up album, *Ezpatei disdira!* ("Swords Ashimmer!"), also

aimed to merge modern art with punk, as the band embraced further experimentation and aesthetics that evoke the early 1980s while still feeling unexpected and original. When asked about their relationship with the music of that era, the band rejected the idea that it reflected a nostalgic attitude towards the past, arguing that today, “zernahi estilorekin, baliabiderekin eta erreferentziarekin egiten da musika. Gu gaurkoak gara” (“music is made with any style, resources, and references. We’re contemporary”) (Rey Gorraiz). While the band’s adoption of 80s post-punk represents a reevaluation of a road not taken by the Basque punk scene, they band themselves see their influences and style more than anything as a discursive strategy suited for the current moment.

Beyond the trajectories of the groups themselves, it has also become clear that both have made immediate impacts in the music scenes of the Basque Country, influencing other artists and kicking off new trends and subgenres. In the world of Basque pop music, Chill Mafia collaborators and Oso Polita labelmates Hofe and Euskoprincess have found a reliable market niche by combining urban and pop genres with frequent references to Basque language and identity, effectively marketing their difference to both Basque and Spanish audiences. Meanwhile, bands like Nakar, Vulk, and Sal del Coche have succeeded Tatxers in incorporating some of the sounds, political lyrics, and avante-garde aesthetics of 80s post-punk and applying them in the context of the Basque-language underground music scene.

In the case of both groups then, their ability to speak to contemporary cultural and sociopolitical issues, along with their music’s implicit reevaluation of Basque Country’s relationships with past musical genres and movements, have tapped into something in the zeitgeist, or otherwise fulfilled a preexisting desire for new modes of

expression in Basque language culture. And yet, the changes that these groups have come to represent through their appropriation of previously underexplored modes of music—hip-hop, reggaeton, and hyperpop in Chill Mafia's case, or post-punk in Tatxers'—do not represent a hunger for global equivalence, but rather new forms of expressing what the musicians self-consciously view as uniquely Basque perspectives.

4.2 Chill Mafia

Chill Mafia is an urban and pop music collective from Pamplona that consolidated during the Covid-19 pandemic. Made up of longtime friends from the working-class outskirts of the city, members often refer to the group as a koadrila (or cuadrilla, in Spanish), the Basque term for a close-knit friend group. The collective's two most visible members are Beñat Rodrigo (Kiliki Frexko) and Julen Goldarazena (Flakofonki), who perform lead vocals on most of the group's tracks. Beñat Abarzuza (Ben Yart) is a popular artist in his own right within Spain's trap music scene, but has become an integral part of Chill Mafia after the release of their debut album, appearing on most of Chill Mafia's songs since mid-2021 and touring with the group while continuing his solo career. Irene Cervantes (Irenen3s) performs lead vocals on a handful of pop-oriented tracks. Rounding out the collective are the producers Martín Cervantes (Tulipump) and Alessandro Martins (Suneo), the DJ Sara Losúa (Sara Goxua) and the graphic artist Mikel Jara, who also performs vocals on the satirical cumbia song "Speederman."

The casual and fluid nature with which the group regards its makeup extends to the music itself. While many critics reductively labelled Chill Mafia as trap music, using the term as a shorthand for urban music novelty, the reality is that the collective draws

upon such diverse genres as reggaeton, punk, reggae, new wave, electronic dance music, hip-hop, and even regional folk music such as jota. For Kiliki Frexko, Chill Mafia's diverse influences are indicative of the fact that "en esta generación nuestra hay menos complejos para mezclar géneros. El *cani* ha asumido que hay buenas guitarras y el *hardcoreta* que Daddy Yankee tiene buenos temas" (Pato Lorente). Even if Chill Mafia is indicative of a global trend in Gen Z music to mix genres that had been previously considered to be incompatible, their unique blend of such disparate styles makes them one of the more eclectic and category-defying groups in the Spanish state today.

However, the media and critics' labelling of Chill Mafia as "trap music" is perhaps a case of being right, but for the wrong reasons. In musical terms, trap is a subgenre of hip-hop characterized by its complex hi-hat drums, atmospheric beats, and hypnotic flow. Particularly since the early 2010s, its increasingly frequent use of autotune and simple lyrics exploring the dichotomy of hedonism and depression have represented a radical break from the rap of lyrical virtuosity and sincere messaging that had been especially predominant in Spain and even the Basque Country[29] up to that point (Castro 66). In this sense, while the solo music of Chill Mafia member Ben Yart is representative of contemporary trends in the subgenre, only a handful of songs by Chill Mafia fall squarely into the category of trap music, while their use of autotune across most of their music represents their only characteristically "trap" attribute. However, the Spanish

[29] The groups Selektah Kolektiboa and Norte Apache, popular in the 2000s and 2010s respectively, are perhaps the most notable examples of socially conscious, orthodox hip-hop in Euskara. However, their success was limited, as neither group gained more than a marginal following within the Basque counterculture.

philosopher Ernesto Castro argues that trap is more than just a sonic aesthetic, as it has come to represent the defining "metamusic" of post-2008 Spain. Defining metamusic as "aquellos estilos de vida o aquellas actitudes ante la vida que, surgiendo de la música, van más allá de ella," Castro sees trap music—with its eschewing of virtuosity and nihilistic attitude—as a 21st century parallel of the punk music explosion that marked the decline of the Western welfare state in the late 1970s (Castro 14).

In this sense, while the trap music label does not necessarily apply to Chill Mafia, one can attribute to the group a certain trap outlook and praxis that are manifestations of a pervasive malaise felt by members of their generation and social class. At times, these feelings are articulated through songs that are explicitly about socioeconomic issues, but more often than not it takes the form of a flippant and ironic allusions to Basque culture and references to hedonistic drug use, forming a meta-ironic collage of contemporary Basque life that "carries with it an aura of unreality, in which it is not always simple to tell if what is said or visualised is meant to be taken seriously," in the process "break[ing] radically with the tradition of authenticity in music, of the musician as truth-bearing, cultivated in Basque folk and rock music in prior decades" (Del Amo et al. 9).

Chill Mafia's breakthrough also represents a split from the strong tradition of DIY and counterculture that represent the public sphere of Basque activism and youth culture. Released online while gaztetxes and concert venues were shut down by government mandate, *Ezorregatik X Berpizkundea* offered a new, more individualistic model of Basque DIY music, as it was recorded in the collective members' bedrooms during the Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020, amongst a group of friends seemingly brought

together more by their aesthetic tastes than a desire to enact class-conscious values. Del Amo et al. note that

> Through platforms like YouTube, user-generated content characterised by expressivity, performativity and collaboration leads to the emergence of audio-visual cultural artefacts that are shared on digital networks. Musical self-production and self-communication acquires a more potent dimension. It is also much more individualised: unlike the DIY movements of previous decades, the goal is no longer to collectively construct alternative media (independent labels, independent radio stations, fanzines, etc.) but rather to utilise commercial digital platforms to allow for a DIY in which the 'yourself' – 'not together' – element is key. The home has become a recording studio. (Del Amo et al. 6)

Because of this, more than just a novelty, the group's aesthetic and way of producing music represents a challenge to the "heroic DIY" that had become a pillar not only of Basque music, but also Basque identity, going back to the 1960s. For many committed activists and leftists, then, Chill Mafia's acceptance of the individualistic framework of late capitalist cultural production is perceived as contrary to the ideals of political contestation and revolution that are uniquely present in Basque counterculture. While Chill Mafia's music does contain political and class-conscious elements that may appeal to the left, it has proven to be unassimilable within the orthodox politics of contestation that define the local countercultural scene.

The third and final reason why many Basque activists have been wary of Chill Mafia is simply the genres of music they perform, which had been marked as problematic before they had even taken hold in the Basque Country. By the early 2010s there were already debates emerging around the role of pop and urban genres, particularly reggaeton, in radical spaces. Kattalin Miner's 2013 opinion article "Papito eta mamitak txosnetan" ("Papitos and Mamitas in the *Txosnas*") describes the increasingly commonplace phenomenon of radical leftist booths at festivals playing

reggaeton in order to meet demand for danceable party music, and voices concern over the way it was being implemented in ways that didn't take radical politics into account.

> Herri honetan, eta feminismotik ere bai, askotan aldarrikatu dugu parranda eta gaua borroka eta aldarrikapen espazio modura. Eta halaxe izaten jarraitzen duelakoan nago. Betiko parranda ereduak iraultzearen alde nago, eta, hor noski, musika ere sartzen da. Nik ez diot reggaetoiak (eta haren eratorriak) ezin dutenik eraldaketarako tresna izan, guztiz kontrakoa; baina nago ez dugula gehiegi pentsatu horretan. Nago aldaketa hau era hotzean eta azalekoan egin dela. Ez ditugula bestelako errepresentazioak sortzeko erabiltzen.[30] (Miner)

While Miner is open to the possibility of a socially conscious reggaeton, the article also reflects the way in which the genre was perceived as a cheap and potentially problematic foreign import during the 2010s. Yet it was simultaneously viewed as something inevitable, the definitive party music of the times, that therefore must be danced to with a dose of self-conscious irony. Even with Kai Nakai becoming the first breakthrough reggaeton artist in Euskara in 2020, her project was viewed by many as an artificial creation of Basque mainstream institutions, attempting to profit from the sheer novelty of Basque reggaeton and espousing a shallow liberal feminism. Chill Mafia's emergence was the moment that these anxieties and questions over the role of party music genres and their relation to Basque resistance identity finally came to the fore, and it became clear that their approach to music and self-expression clashed with the Basque counterculture's imperative of "always saying something, and saying it well" (Del Amo "¿Es que siempre…?").

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[30] "In this country, and in feminist thought more broadly, we have often claimed partying and nightlife as a space of struggle and emancipation. And I think it will continue to be so. I'm all for overturning the old ways of partying, and of course that includes music. I am not saying that reggaeton (and its derivatives) cannot be a tool for transformation, quite the opposite; but I'm sure we haven't thought too much about it. I am convinced that this change has been made coldly and superficially; that we don't use this music to create other representations."

4.3 *Euskal Tradizioa* or *Euskal Traizioa*: Post-Irony and the Basque Musical Canon

Two weeks after the release of *Ezorregatik X Berpizkundea*, the Basque novelist Lander Garro pointed out on Twitter that while Chill Mafia were being credited for ushering in a paradigm shift in Basque music (Erostarbe), Kai Nakai and the trap-influenced duo Dupla had been producing similar music in Euskara and had been getting played on Basque pop radio since at least a year before, and that the only difference was that the Pamplona collective had covered a famed folk artist (@landergarro). While this overlooks the ironic humor and class politics that give Chill Mafia an air of authenticity and relatability that these other artists lack, journalist Miguel Virizuela likewise conceded that the group's updated cover of Lete's song represented a "tremendo caballo de Troya" that allowed them to rise to the top of the Basque pop music scene overnight (Virizuela). While much of the group's current prominence largely owes itself to the initial viral success of the "Gazte arruntaren koplak" music video and the media cycles it sparked, it would be wrong to label the cover and other references to the Basque musical canon a mere gimmick. And while there is certainly an ironic dissonance in "mixing Xabier Lete with autotune and ketamine" ("Chill Mafia: 'Lete, autotunea eta ketamina nahastu ditugu'"), it is likewise incorrect to assume that such performances represent a parody or satire of older genres. Indeed, perhaps the most unique aspect of their project is the way in which it engages in a metacommentary on the Basque tradition, approaching it as "a version of the past which is intended to connect with and ratify the present" (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 116) through constant references to both the Basque Country's folk(loric) music and countercultural

scenes. Viewed through this lens, their music represents a renaissance *within* this Basque tradition, rather than a departure from it.

Through covers, samples, and lyrical references, the group's rap and reggaeton-inspired music dialogues with much of the Basque musical canon, ranging from the pioneering folk music of the 60s and 70s and pastoral ballads to the punk and reggae bands of the 80s and 90s. In the case of folk and traditional music, the group's references run particularly deep. Beyond their cover of "Gizon arruntaren koplak," the group has also referenced the verses of the 20th century bertsolari Xalbador in the chorus of "No Se Ke Me Pasa" and the 19th century French-Basque bard Etxahun in the opening line of "31014" ("Ürxapal bat badugu, kaloian trixterik"). The song "Puta Ripagaña" uses trikitixa and tambourine sounds, with some verses taking the form of traditional Navarrese jotas.

Meanwhile in the realm of 80s punk and ska, the song "cicatriz.mp3" samples the guitar riff from "Hay Que Joderse Que Bien Se Está Tumbao" by the Rock Radical Vasco pioneers Cicatriz, while "Hire Mixeria" ("Your Misery") alternates between hip-hop verses a hardcore punk-inspired chorus. "Marmitako x Punki Reggae Party" is, like "Gazte arruntaren koplak," a cover/rewrite of the song "Inde Kuestion (Punki-Reggae-Party)" by the Vitoria-Gasteiz reggae group Potato, whose version was itself a cover of Bob Marley's "Punky Reggae Party." Finally, while the Mexican folk ballad sounds of "Mus Corrido" might not immediately seem typically Basque, the song connects the group to the so-called "Naparmex" scene that began in the late 80s, in which Pamplona bands such as Tijuana in Blue and Kojon Prieto y los Huajolotes have combined the corrido genre with punk rock and lyrics about Basque-Navarrese politics (Aperribay-

Bermejo). Transcending the barriers of genre, language, two centuries of history and the borders of the Basque Country's seven provinces across the Spanish and French states, Chill Mafia's references presuppose a Basque ethnic and national identity tied to a distinct and singular cultural canon. .

In his 2011 book *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past*, Simon Reynolds noted the ways in which artists were already beginning to view the act of curation as key element in both producing and making sense of music, with new online media only accelerating this trend:

> The young musicians who've come of age during the last ten years or so have grown up in a climate where the musical past is accessible to an unprecedentedly inundating degree. The result is a recombinant approach to music-making that typically leads to a meticu-lously organised constellation of reference points and allusions, sonic lattices of exquisite and often surprising taste that span the decades and the oceans. I used to call this approach 'record-collection rock', but nowadays you don't even need to collect records any more, just harvest MP3s and cruise through YouTube. (*Retromania* xx)

In Chill Mafia's music, these 21st century modes of music discovery and consumption are themselves directly referenced in the title of the song "cicatriz.mp3," or even through their collaboration on the song "Kolakao" with the middle-aged YouTuber Gabi De la Maza, whose channel features karaoke videos for popular Basque songs, and has become a resource both for learners of Euskara and those interested in the Basque musical canon. At the same time, the past decade's revival of vinyl as a medium for music listening has also played a role in Chill Mafia's formation, with Kiliki Frexko has citing his mother's record collection as a personal inspiration and claiming that he spent the Covid-19 lockdowns listening to records by the 70s Basque folk-rock band Oskorri for hours on end. In his telling, Chill Mafia's referencing of canonical Basque music as is not unlike the ways in which 1980s hip-hop represented a step forward within the Black

musical tradition of the U.S. through its sampling of the jazz music that had been popular among prior generations of African Americans (Otamendi “MusikaZuzenean TB #149” 4:00).

In the context of the Basque Country, this practice does have some precedence, with some notable examples being the 80s punk band R.I.P. covering the 70s nationalist folk song “Lepoan hartu ta segi aurrera” (“Put it on Your Shoulders and Carry On”) by Pantxo eta Peio, or Fermin Muguruza’s incorporation of bertsolaritza into his early attempts at Basque hip-hop with Negu Gorriak in the early 1990s. But Chill Mafia’s strategy is not simply a matter of sampling or reappropriating aesthetics, nor is it intended to highlight a shared political struggle across generations. Instead, we find them covering entire songs to give them new meaning, or taking a verse such as Xalbador’s famous improvised line “txistuak jo dituzute bainan maite zaituztet oraindik” (“you jeer me, but I still love you”) and resignifying it as a slogan for dismissing one’s haters on social media. Chill Mafia remove the original song’s musings on the banalities of adult life and replace them with contemporary youth struggles of living with one’s parents, studying in college, and antagonistic encounters with police. “Marmitako x Punki Reggae Party” takes images of festive punk and rasta unity from Bob Marley’s original and Potato’s cover to make a nod to “todos las formas de ser y estar que habían quedado fuera de una asfixiante representación estética del ser vasco” (Virizuela). These songs about 70s and 80s social realities are turned into songs about contemporary youth, with the dissonance with the context of the original song hightening the impact. While it outwardly appears ridiculous or as parody, it belies an authentic love of the original music and a desire to ground their new Basque urban/pop

music in the 20th century tradition. Kiliki Frexko and Chill Mafia are well aware of the symbiotic relationship between music and ethnic identity, and believe themselves to be disrupting the Basque musical tradition in good faith: “Trapa edo *reggaetoia* egiten dugunean ez dugu hiri musika, musika urbanoa egiten, baizik eta musika beltza edo latinoa. Baina saiatzen gara hori guztia egiterakoan euskal tradizioan oinarri bat izaten. Ni egun eroso sentitzen naiz erranez musika tradizionala egiten dugula” (“When we create trap or reggaeton music, we’re not making city or urban music, but rather Black or Latin music. But in the process of doing that, we try to base it in the Basque tradition. I’m comfortable saying that we make traditional music”) (Lakasta). Likewise, in other media appearances, the group has highlighted what they view to be the difference between “folkloric” music and “traditional” music, with the former essentially rooted in a mythic past and rural aesthetics while the latter necessarily evolves alongside contemporary tastes and perspectives (Madariaga 5:00).

With the sincerity behind their desire to make a uniquely Basque urban music contrasted and muddled by the resulting clash of signifiers, Chill Mafia’s relationship with the music of the past takes on a post-ironic attitude. While some scholars have defined post-irony as a simple rejection of irony or a conscious return to sincerity, I use the term here to refer to a higher order of irony, which Dina Stoev describes as “making a true statement, [with] the irony being the act of articulating it itself” (Stoev 6). In other words, it is sincerity that superficially presents itself as ironic. Through post-irony, ironic dissonance becomes an affective tool, infusing Chill Mafia’s music with an ambiguous humor that resonates with the sensibilities of Gen Z youth while confounding older generations less accustomed to the multi-layered irony of contemporary online culture.

So while Kai Nakai and Dupla had indeed been producing self-consciously Basque reggaeton- and trap-influenced music for at least a year before Chill Mafia, the Pamplona collective were able to seize the cultural moment in a way these other performers couldn't by employing complex, multi-layered discourses of post-irony and meta-irony that reflected not only the comedic tastes of Gen Z, but also the fundamental uncertainty and anxiety faced by a generation that came of age in the decade after the financial crisis. It could therefore be argued that this incorporation of new registers of expression represents the true innovation that Chill Mafia have brought to the Basque musical tradition.

And yet there are many who see this sort of attitude as anathema to Basque identity. Perhaps even more than their controversies stemming from criticism of leftist parties or charging gaztetxes exorbitant rates to perform shows, Chill Mafia's seeming embrace of their postmodern subjectivity—whether via all-encompassing sense of irony, or their curation-as-creation approach to the creating Basque music that comes to resemble a "practice of ele-vated consumerism" (Reynolds, *Retromania* 138)—has alienated a subsection of Basques who see their cultural identity as tied up with certain emancipatory principles that have been embodied throughout the past six decades through the sincere moral language of folk and the aggressive anti-system discourse of punk. While Chill Mafia's music carries its own complicated politics and notions of what it means to be Basque, its interactions with these other genres in the Basque tradition can be seen as decontextualizing them and relegating them from symbols of a Basque essence to mere signifiers to be played with in a nonchalant and ironic way.

4.4 “Muevo el culo y gora ***”: Meta-Irony and the Memeification of ETA

Along with their reevaluation of the Basque musical canon and folklore, Chill Mafia has attracted much attention within the Basque Country and the wider Spanish state through their references to contemporary Basque politics, including jokes about such taboo subjects as ETA. Audiences were first introduced to this side of the group in the video for “31014” in which Kiliki Frexko describes growing up in Pamplona during the 2000s via the lyrics “Unos llevaban machetes otros tiraban piedras / Unos querían ser el Chapo otros Josu Ternera.” The latter line, which references—and ironically equates—the infamous Mexican drug kingpin and the former leader of ETA, appears as subtitles at the bottom of the screen, seemingly to underscore the potential controversy of the lyrics. The group’s next music video, for the reggaeton-inspired “Doraimon,” featured yet another nonchalant reference to the armed group, in which Kiliki Frexko declares his intentions to dominate the Basque urban music scene in the line “No soy cantante, prima, tengo duende / Os mato a todos, hacha y serpiente,” referencing ETA’s symbol of a snake wrapped around an axe. In the music video, this part of the song is punctuated by Kiliki and Irenen3s dancing against a blue camouflage background resembling the pattern that would often accompany the ETA symbol.

Jokes about ETA, and more broadly, Basques as a violent and dangerous Other, have become a common motif in the music of Chill Mafia since their debut album. The most (in)famous example is the song “Barkhatu” (“Sorry”) and its corresponding viral music video, in which Chill Mafia and featured rappers Hofe and 4:40 attempt to one-up each other with increasingly offensive references to ETA and Basque political violence that all but challenge the Spanish government to charge them with glorification of

terrorism. The video, depicting the Chill Mafia koadrila having a picnic in the countryside of Navarra, opens with a brief shot of the group attempting to recreate the ETA logo by wrapping two bananas around a hatchet and pouring beer over it. The song quickly devolves into a chaotic succession of obscure cultural references punctuated by jokes connecting the group to aspects of Basque nationalism that listeners might find threatening or offensive, with Ben Yart referring to Chill Mafia as an "armed group" equipped by the Gipuzkoa-based sports clothing company Astore, Hofe comparing them to the violent "Microbotas" football hooligans of Pamplona, and 4:40 rapping "soy tu aita: Sabino Arana."

Two references in the song specifically revolve around the anxiety produced in Spaniards by the term "zulo," the Basque word for "hole" that has entered the Spanish lexicon as the term for an ETA safehouse, but is also the name of a popular dive bar in Pamplona. First, Flakofonki refers to a night out drinking in the line "De liada en el Zulo, soy Ortega Lara," referencing the far-right politician and former prison officer José Antonio Ortega Lara, who was kidnapped and held captive by ETA for 532 days. The track makes a point of acknowledging the potential controversy of this line by bleeping out "Lara," but ironically undercuts this by layering the word "Lara" over the bleep sound, rendering it pointless while ostensibly exposing the group to potential legal action or charges of glorification of terrorism. In a later verse, Hofe mentions the same tavern in the line "Siete Balas en el Zulo, eso si era trap," this time referencing the Pamplona punk band Siete Balas, while also evoking the image of weapons in an ETA safehouse.

Finally, Irenen3s closes out the song with verse that at first seems to be about sex and flirting, but then abruptly ends with the non sequitur “muevo el culo y gora ETA,” repeated three times. As in the reference to Ortega Lara, the song places a bleep sound over the word “ETA”, yet undermines its own self-censorship, this time placing the bleep over different syllables of the word so that the “E” and the “-TA” can be heard at different points. Still, when asked about this line by media outlets such as *El Mundo*, the band has feigned ignorance and insisted that they’re actually saying “gora Kepa,” supposedly in reference to a player from the Athletic Club Bilbao football team (Luís).

While these references to ETA, street violence, and even the racist founder of the PNV of course have political implications, Chill Mafia’s motivations for including them in their lyrics have little to do with their actual opinions on these topics. Whereas Chill Mafia’s sampling of the Basque musical canon and dabbling in folkloric aesthetics could be characterized as post-ironic in nature, evoking the group’s sincere but perhaps complicated affection for traditional music through discourses or aesthetics that are only superficially ironic, many of their more controversial references to Basque politics assume a meta-ironic posture, in which the inscrutability of the irony itself becomes the focus and no discernable point is made. As Stoev explains,

> Meta-irony is a distinctive mode of irony—the statement it contains cannot be clearly deciphered, it is potentially both sincere and ironic at the same time. The creation of meaning depends as much on the originator of the content, as on the viewer. Interestingly, if a person is unfamiliar with this type of irony, they usually reach a conclusion that the statement is either ironic or sincere. Conversely, people who are familiar with the usage of meta-irony typically do not feel the need to ascribe a concrete meaning pertaining to either category. Most often, the point of meta-irony is that it embodies both irony and sincerity. Of course, the meta-ironic can be present within a variety of contexts and it can contain different layers, which can tip the scales of meaning but it never states which one is the “real” meaning. (Stoev 6)

Stoev also argues that such meta-ironic humor represents a "symptom of the process of legitimisation of new thought patterns," whose most visible manifestation is the emergence of internet memes as the dominant medium and social capital of online humor and culture (6). In the specific case of Gen Z Basque social milieu, we find a particular culture of online memes that explains the origins of and motivations behind Chill Mafia's meta-ironic discourse, including their controversial references to Basque nationalism and political violence.

Amaia Rojo situates the origin of meme-making in Euskara—known as *memegintza* by its Basque-speaking practitioners—in the year 2015, when the San Sebastian-based Bagera association began an initiative to support Basque internet culture under the slogan "ez izan memelo, eta izan memelari" ("don't be stupid, be a memer"). However, 2020 would see a proliferation of meme accounts on the social media platform Instagram, with the most popular themes being the Basque language itself, drug use, and politics (Rojo). Perhaps even more so than their jokes about ETA, the peculiar use of language in Chill Mafia's lyrics displays the extent to which their music reflects an online influence. While the group claims that their use of "Euskañol" and frequent code-switching is representative of the failings of Basque language institutionalization in Navarre and the difficulty of living in Euskara in their home city, the way in which they employ diglossia for comedic effect is borrowed directly from Instagram meme pages like @xolomogangstak, where words in Euskara are often crudely copied over pre-existing Spanish- or English-language meme templates, and use of all three languages in a single sentence is commonplace (Rojo). In this way,

trilingual *euskanglish* lyrics like "*Now we are como* Juanito[31] zuzen [straight] pa' la cima" ("La Gaztea") betray the fact that Chill Mafia's linguistic quirks are often more about emulating online humor than everyday speech. Even the song "Zure kebapa" features ridiculous neologisms like "¡daflipank!" and "¿dautsagu?" (hyper-literal translations of Spanish slang phrases "¡tú flipas!" and "¿echamos un polvo?"), which originated in a 2010 satirical blog post titled "21 aditz trinko XXI. menderako" ("21 Synthetic Verbs for the 21st Century") and had been circulating as a meme on Twitter for a decade by the time of the song's release. Almost a year before the debates surrounding Chill Mafia's use of Euskañol in their lyrics became a main pillar of the discourse surrounding the breakout group, Rojo voiced her own ambivalent attitudes about such language in meme culture, ultimately arguing that meme pages operating in Euskañol were indicative of the reality of the Basque spoken in the streets, and therefore a positive sign that the language was thriving outside of sanctioned spaces.

Ultimately, the meta-irony employed in Basque meme culture and Chill Mafia's meme-inspired musical project is used towards the end of dislodging Euskara from its place as a language of education, Basque nation building, or activist discourse. It corresponds with a desire to assert ownership of the language on behalf of the youth and working class, who may be indifferent to the respectability politics of the Basque middle class in charge of the region's institutions, or the orthodox and ascetic attitudes of Basque activist groups. Simultaneously, it can be used to disarm broad attacks against Basques by reactionary Spaniards, who often dismiss Basque language and culture as an artificial invention of a fanatical nationalist movement. Through layers of

[31] Juanito Oiarzabal, a famous Basque mountaineer.

irony, Basque youths in the 2010s and early 2020s have learned to navigate the politicization of Basqueness, alternating between ironic detachment and provocation to reject the hegemonic Spanish discourses that condition the Basque social sphere.

In an anonymous 2020 opinion article for *Mundo Gris*, a self-described *memegile* (meme-maker) giving explained the way in which the meta-ironic discourse of memes—particularly those featuring references to ETA—created a space for Basque youths to vindicate their worldview through the seeming inanity of shitposting.

> Un español que se ríe de un estereotipo vasco no está haciendo autocrítica, no está ridiculizando su propia cultura, está haciendo un chiste fácil que llevo oyendo desde que tengo 6 años. No digo que lo contrario esté justificado, simplemente un vasco que se ríe de un español, *o lo que es mucho mejor, un vasco que se ríe de cómo los españoles se ríen de los vascos, es algo más novedoso, menos explotado, y con implicaciones políticas y sociales más profundas*, por no mencionar la terrible diglosia lingüística que ocurre entre estas dos comunidades, lo cual favorece al bando minoritario (...) I don't want to get all political, pero la Memegintza demostró que los vascos, al igual que el resto de comunidades, tenemos derecho a dar nuestra versión de la realidad, y a confrontarla en igualdad de condiciones junto con todas las demás. ("Memegintza: Cuando los memes hablan de ETA", emphasis added)

In this sense, internet memes about ETA—and by extension, Chill Mafia's deployment of ironic, meme-inspired discourse and lyrics—are not necessarily to be be interpreted as an endorsement of political violence, but a rather a means of coping with stereotype-based comedy is often the basis for dismissive attitudes about Basques, serving as a means to paint them not only as radicals who hate Spain for irrational reasons, but also as a crude, atavistic, and race-obsessed people. The incoherent conflation of left-wing radicalism and Aranista racial politics in Spanish political discourse then becomes fodder for a meta-ironic discourse that sabotages such stereotypes while also serving as validating in-joke for Basques.

The music video for the 2023 single “Puta Ripagaña” displays the full gamut of meta jokes about the supposed racism and intolerance of Basque nationalism, while also referencing the online culture and *memegintza* tropes that Gen Z Basque youths have grown up immersed in. The song comically addresses the division between Navarre’s Basque-speaking and majority nationalist north and it’s generally conservative, proudly Spanish south, assuming the perspective of a stereotypically hispanophobe Basque and insinuating that going from one part of Navarra to another—or even travelling between neighborhoods in Pamplona—is akin to going to “puta España” or even somewhere as remote as the tropics. Shot against a green screen backdrop, the video is filled with references to Japanese anime and internet meme culture, along with Navarre-specific visual gags such as a Pamplona city bus driving through a futuristic metropolis and pixelated images of tropical fish overlaid with a traffic sign for the city of Tudela in the south of Navarre. In essence, “Puta Ripagaña” is presented as an esoteric internet meme in the form of a 2-minute videoclip.

In terms of the song’s lyrics, the references to Basque-Navarrese identity begin in the second verse, with Ben Yart purporting to show off his Basque bonafides by claiming “Sé decir ‘zorzico,’ y cantar: ¡gora!.. ¡iepa!... (militar)” as the beat pauses in anticipation while the rapper slowly shouts “gora,” then subverts listener expectations by following with the greeting “iepa” instead of “ETA.” This subversion is then itself subverted when Ben Yart quickly mutters “militar” as an ikurriña flashes for a half-second on the screen behind him, making the reference again explicitly about ETA’s paramilitary wing. After insinuating that chanting “gora ETA” is part of Basque folk culture, he goes on to reference the stereotypical Basque obsession with racial and

ethnic purity, declaring that “Tengo el abizen [surname] que a tu hijo más le va a encajar / Tengo el RH negativo que lo salvará.” Even as this line seems to confirm the suspicions that reactionary Spaniards have about Basques, this idea is immediately undermined through its framing as a ridiculous pickup line.

Later in the song, Flakofonki does a similar rhetorical maneuver. Referencing the popular Navarrese jota ballad “No te vayas de Navarra,” he sings “No te vayas de Mendillorri a la puta de España / A la puta de la España yo le beso las *ezpainas,*” at first seemingly playing the role of a Spain-hating Basque as a Spanish flag burns in the background of the video. But the meaning of “la puta de España” is then immediately inverted through cheap wordplay, as the Basque word for lip, *ezpaina*, sounds very similar to “España.” And so, out of nowhere and for no discernable reason, the Spanish state goes from being the object of condemnation to one of sexualization, and the Rojigualda re-appears in the background behind the singer, now engulfed floating hearts instead of flames. Ben Yart then glides into the frame to repeat the refrain, now against a backdrop of Osborne bull flags and confetti.

To the extent that Chill Mafia’s humor about the Basque conflict is political, it functions as a form of ironic detachment, dismantling essentialist stereotypes of Basques—whether as inherently violent, business-savvy, or noble—by juxtaposing these narratives in a deliberately incoherent and irreverent way. However, this irony does not suggest that the group equates Spanish conservatives, PNV neoliberals, and radical activists as fundamentally the same. In a podcast interview on *Estamos Dentro*, Kiliki Frexko (Beñat Rodrigo) remarked, “Somos la primera generación que puede hablar con un puto facha sobre el tema de la ETA sin que acabe a hostias (...) No es

una causa que nos pertenezca" (Martija 17:05). While his choice of words makes it clear that he holds opinions on the issue, his emphasis on the absence of violence rather than relitigating ETA's legacy reflects a generational shift. For Chill Mafia and many Gen Z Basques, ETA is less a direct influence and more a symbol of a past conflict they were too young to experience. Yet, its continued invocation—used to justify aggressive policing and institutionalized vascophobia in Spanish politics—remains a frustrating presence in their lives, even as they focus on more pressing systemic concerns, such as austerity and the rising cost of living.

Rodrigo further commented, "Están ahí los fachas todo el día diciendo que 'los Bildus' son etarras, pero son ellos los que más nostalgia tienen de aquello. Parece que les gusta sufrir" (18:45). His frequent use of "facha" to describe vascophobic Spaniards and right-wingers broadly signals a sense of identity defined in opposition to such ideologies, even as he expresses skepticism toward segments of the Basque left. The members of Chill Mafia are particularly frustrated by how much of Spain conflates Basque speakers with left-leaning beliefs into a radical monolith, denying the agency of many young Basques with ambivalent feelings about nationalism and socioeconomic policy. At the same time, currents within the Basque left itself often seek to impose ideological conformity, a dynamic Chill Mafia critiques through their music and artistic expression.

The post-2020 meta-ironic humor of *memegintza*, which has deeply influenced Chill Mafia, offers them a way to reject these external impositions. As Stoev explains, "[meta-ironic humor] can presuppose a duality in opinion. When used in everyday life, usually the joke is found in the act of it and the uncertainty of meaning; when used as

an artistic approach, it can imply a balance between opposing viewpoints or the acceptance of opposition as part of a whole" (Stoev 6). Chill Mafia's music and broader artistic vision leverage this humor to deconstruct essentialist notions of Basque identity, framing debates about ETA's legacy or the effectiveness of radical activism as inherent to the Basque experience without prescribing ideological boundaries. Their work also critiques the way Spanish conservatives and liberals alike frame Basque nationalists as irrational and anti-democratic, using irony to expose the limitations of these hegemonic discourses. Rather than offering concrete political alternatives, Chill Mafia situates contemporary Basque life and politics within a context of generational and ideological conflict, confronting impasses by mocking the outdated paradigms of the Spanish state, autonomous governments, and grassroots movements that continue to dominate aspects of daily life.

4.5 "Boomers no lo entienden": Chill Mafia vs. The 'Jurru' Middle Class

In "Gazte arruntaren koplak," Flakofonki raps that "Memi bat egiteko ez noa oso mantso / Sei kolektibo jo egin nahi ninduten atzo" ("When it comes to making memes, I'm not that bad / Six collectives wanted to beat me up yesterday"). When asked about whether this line represented his actual relationships with Basque activists, Flakofonki/Julen Goldarazena admitted that it was partially true, before Kiliki Frexko/Beñat Rodrigo insisted that *"Jurruekin* oso harreman ona daukagu. Baina batzuetan dira pixka bat *txapas (...) ernaitxuak* etortzen dira erranez independentziaren aldeko haien manifan sartu behar dugula. Eta GKSkoek *Twitterren* sekulako totxoa jartzen dute…" (We have a good relationship with the *jurrus*. But sometimes they're a bit

tedious [...] The people from Ernai[32] come to you telling you to join their pro-independence march. And the people from GKS are writing manifestos ["totxos"] on Twitter…") (Kruz Lakasta). While the members of Chill Mafia undoubtedly have connections to the abertzale left and are not inherently opposed to its politics, their musical project draws a clear distinction between their own irreverent embrace of libidinal pleasure and the ascetic, self-serious political commitment of dedicated activists. From Chill Mafia's perspective, this activist ethos has evolved into a form of exclusionary respectability politics.

According to members of Chill Mafia, the term jurru refers to "(u)na persona del entorno de la izquierda abertzale. Viene de los antiguos *jarraitxus*, gente de Jarrai, que los gitanos de Pamplona hicieron evolucionar a *jurrustrus* o *jurrutus*. Nosotros podemos decirlo de manera despectiva pero como venga alguien de Madrid a decirlo, cuidado. Es la *J-word* navarra" (Pato Lorente). In the group's lyrics, the jurru is presented as an archetypal figure of the Basque-speaking middle class, whose taboos and consumer tastes influence much of Basque culture and politics, even as they may present or perceive of themselves as radical outsiders. Although many Basque nationalists and activists undoubtedly do face forms of precarity and are attuned to the struggles of younger generations, Chill Mafia uses the archtypal figure of the jurru to represent a what they view as a pattern of ineffective middle-class pondering and moralizing. As Flakofonki/Goldarazena puts it, "Las personas que hacen mogollón de vainas reivindicativas al final están en no sé si una clase media o algo así, no sé cómo

[32] Ernai is a political youth organization founded in 2013 as an affiliate of the Sortu political party, the largest faction within the EH Bildu coalition that has represented the abertzale left in Spanish parliament and guided the movement towards a more social democratic horizon.

llamarlo. Y hablan como desde fuera: ‘Organízate, por la revolución, por los chavales, ¡por la pobreza!’ Pero sin estar en la pobreza” (Kruz Lakasta).

In positioning themselves as the new torchbearers for the Basque urban working class, Chill Mafia have turned jurrus into a punchline, at times criticizing them for being self-righteous scolds, or having conservative taste in music. Flakofonki’s line from “Barkhatu” that “Los jurrus si chapan Aitzina van directos al Cavas,” conjures a comical image of piercing- and keffiyeh-clad Basques leaving the famous radical tavern to go to the night club on the opposite end of Pamplona’s old town, ironically insinuating that Chill Mafia’s emergence has turned them into participants in mainstream culture. There are other instances, however, when the group uses humor to directly criticize the hypocrisy of self-styled socialist activists who fail to live up to their own values, with Kiliki rapping “Te odio cuando eres mala; si me quieres, te amo / Como esos jurrus amando a Euskadi, pero odiando a los gitanos” (“No se ke me pasa”) to accuse them of harboring classist or ethnonationalist tendencies.

The group’s harshest critique of the institutional Basque left comes in Ben Yart’s verse in “Barkhatu,” where he insists that, despite Chill Mafia initially identifying as allies of the abertzale left (“gure kabian [in our nest], hueco había”), jurrus rejected and attempted to “cancel” them. In response, Ben Yart accuses the culture surrounding Basque activism of being out of touch and rooted in nostalgia, referencing the nearly 40-year-old music of Kortatu and tired jokes about ETA’s 1973 assassination of Carrero Blanco, which famously described the Francoist minister as the first Spaniard to reach outer space.

> Huyendo de tus barras de mierda, Sarri Sarri
> De tus manis de mierda, de comernos tu mierda

> (...)
> Llámanos Non Servium[33] porque estamos hartos
> de tanto, puto calvo pesado
> Boomers no lo entienden, claro
> No es un puto chiste del pesado, Carrero Blanco
> Volando, volando, volando ("Barkhatu")

In general, the music of Chill Mafia reframes much of the institutional abertzale left as a comfortable middle class more immersed in Gen X nostalgia than contemporary realities, and as a result mistake the celebration of Basque resistance for class politics. They come to represent "a certain ethnocentric moral superiority" that ultimately hinders political and cultural development (Del Amo "When Underground" 28) by alienating marginal urban communities that struggle to identify with idealized notions of Basqueness, while clinging to the same songs and jokes from decades prior as a sign of identity. While there is some ambiguity in what specific groups or causes they are referring to, or the degree to which their grievances extend to members of their own age cohort, the use of the term "Boomer"—traditionally referring to members of the Baby Boomer generation but now commonly employed in online discourse as a dismissive insult toward older generations (e.g., "OK, Boomer")— suggests their primary criticism is that the Basque left has become increasingly out of touch. For Chill Mafia, the stereotypical Basque activist jurru figure is an anachronism, able to derive libidinal enjoyment from the remnants of 1990s modes of culture and activism. Their apparent disconnect from present-day economic issues and culture is indicative of not having faced the same challenges as the youth today, and their judgement of Chill Mafia and

[33] A reference to Non Servium, a Madrid-based Oi! punk band formed in 1997 whose song "Bronca" features the lyric "Ya estamos como una cuba, todos hartos de beber."

their fans for reacting to their unique socioeconomic conditions in ways they deem problematic is ultimately rooted in privilege and self-righteousness.

As Joseba Gabilondo explains, the emergence of Chill Mafia as a breakthrough for globalized pop music in the Basque Country has exposed bourgeois attitudes within segments of the institutional left, which have seemingly become more concerned with aspirations of nation building and maintaining a pure and idealistic Basque culture than reconciling the perspectives and tastes of urban youth:

> Errotxapeako klase prekarizatuen kontsumoko musika (regetoia eta antzeko genero ugari) eta honi askotan loturik datorren maskulinitate toxiko indibidualista baina era berean erreibindikatzailea hartu dute beren musika eta jarreren inspiraziotzat, beren Twiterreko diskurtso agresibo, harro eta iraintzailean argien azaltzen den bezala. Erabiltzen duten euskara hibridoa edo “euskañola” ere prekarizazio horren adibide da, klase ertaineko euskaltzale ugariri erreakzio histerikoak eragiten dizkiena hain zuzen, “euskal hizkuntza nazionalaren” proiektua euskañolak prekarizatzen duelako. Hots, taldeko partaideek klase ertaineko feminismoak (eta klase ertaineko beste euskal subjektu abertzale ugarik) onartu ezin duen kontsumoko kultura indibidualista eta prekario bat ekarri dute euskal musikara.[34] (“Independentzia eta gero”)

From this perspective, the pursuit of strong Basque-language institutions and the aspiration of establishing a nation-state risk becoming less a pathway to liberation and more an expression of essentialist Basque virtue. At the same time, as Gabilondo observes in the same article, even staunchly anticapitalist groups like GKS, which reject Basque independence as an end in itself, continue to uphold the notion of an ahistorical,

[34] The consumer music of the precarious classes of Errotxapea (reggaeton and many similar genres) and the individualistic but also socially conscious toxic masculinity often associated with it have taken as inspiration for their music and attitudes, as is most clearly explained in their aggressive, proud and offensive Twitter discourse. The hybrid Basque or "Euskañol" they use is also an example of this precariousness, which causes hysterical reactions in many middle-class Basque fans precisely because Euskañol puts the project of the "Basque national language" in a position of uncertainty. In other words, the members of the group have brought to Basque music an individualistic and precarious consumer culture that cannot be accepted by middle-class feminism (and many other middle-class Basque nationalist subjects).

essentialized subject that is inherently radical simply by being a Basque speaker. Chill Mafia's skeptical outlook and meta-ironic humor challenge both of these approaches, disrupting the narratives of virtue underpinning them.

Chill Mafia are not the first Basque musical act to pose critiques of middle-class Basque nationalism and the abertzale left through the use of irony and references to drugs and street life. The punk band Hertzainak famously sang about getting high while learning Euskara in the 1991 song "Drogak AEK-n" (Atutxa *Sabotajes*; Kasmir), and Pamplona's Lehendakaris Muertos have portrayed political violence through a meta-ironic lens in songs like "Veteranos de la kale borroka" and "ETA, deja alguna discoteca" since 2004 (Del Amo "Las gentes vascas"). What distinguishes their discourse from that of these earlier politically edgy bands is the degree to which it is immersed in a late capitalist social context. Comparing the seemingly nihilistic elements of contemporary groups like Chill Mafia to those of the original punk movement, Ion Andoni Del Amo et al. highlight the role technology and online culture has played in consolidating postmodern sensibilities among generations born in the 1990s and 2000s, especially as they have come of age amidst the shocks of the 2008 financial collapse and the Covid-19 pandemic.

> Today, the collapse of expectations and future horizons, the new no-future, takes place upon a more intense spatial-temporal compression, further intensified by new technologies, that makes it increasingly difficult to think of the future in a late capitalism in which nothing is long term. Additionally, it no longer takes place upon the remains of the old working class culture and organisation, but rather upon a social scenario of social, cultural and temporal fragmentation. (Del Amo et al. 10)

Rather than nostalgically trying to recover the radical energy of the 80s and 90s, embodying an inherently revolutionary Basque subject, or even side-stepping politics

altogether through feel-good pop music, the music of Chill Mafia leans into the fragmented nature of late capitalist society and online culture, finding avenues for libidinal expression through a combination of memes and drug-fueled partying. The fragmented subject they embody, untethered from hegemonic understandings of Basque politics and history, cannot be easily assimilated by the revolutionary left that is still oriented along modernist ideals, nor the reformist social democratic left fixated on building a progressive euskaldun culture through institutions, both of whom driven by the validating sensation of political exceptionalism that Chill Mafia puts into question.

4.6 "No hace falta robarle barras a Lenin para ser político": Trap Praxis and Post-Crisis Politics

In spite of their ironic disposition and disillusion with institutional Basque politics, the group insists that their music has a political component, albeit one that doesn't correspond with traditional concepts of what constitutes political or protest music. When asked about whether the song "Zure kebapa"—with its lyrics about young people not having anywhere to have sex, and trying to be stylish without having any money—was intended as a protest song or mere observational comedy, Kiliki Frexko and Flakofonki responded without hesitation that it was both, with Flako clarifying that "Ez genuen protesta moduan egin, baina gure errealitatea kontatzea ateratzen zaigu" ("We didn't make it as a protest, but telling our reality comes naturally to us") (Kruz Lakasta). Even in the case of the idiosyncratic code-switching and "Euskañol" that defines much of Chill Mafia's lyrics, the group cites their imperfect Euskara as reflective of a "conflict" around the language in Navarre, where their members of grandparents' generation suffered

harassment for being monolingual Basque speakers and the lack of institutional will creates barriers to learning and living in the language (Pato Lorente). Particularly in the context of the Basque language music scene, where left-wing activism and support of Euskara have been intertwined with musical production since the 1960s, the idea that a group would defend the political content of their music while denying having a clear political *intent* comes off as a contradiction. This, coupled with the group's criticisms of various sectors of the Basque left, has forced them to defend the perspective put forward in their music. Kiliki Frexko in particular often puts forward a materially grounded argument in interviews, insisting that all cultural production is inherently political in that it reflects broader social conflict: "Ezin zara egon politikatik kanpo. Are gehiago zurea auzoan egindako zerbait dela argi eta garbi utzi nahi baduzu. Ez gara saiatzen politikoak izaten gure letrekin, baina bai gure jarrerekin: non egiten dugun, norekin…" ("You can't be outside of politics. Especially if you want to make it clear that your [art, music] is something made in the neighborhood. We don't try to be political with our lyrics, but instead with our attitude: where we do it, with whom…") (Kruz Lakasta).

For Chill Mafia, the representation or channeling of their social reality—encompassing their precarity, humor, vices, and everything in between—conveys a deeper form of authenticity than overt political messaging, particularly in a sociopolitical context in which they struggle to imagine conditions ever improving. As Kiliki Frexko explains, the fatalism and irreverence of contemporary Spanish trap music simply resonates on a more profound level than the traditional sloganeering of Basque punk music, or the political hip-hop that was predominant in Spain before the emergence of trap: "En los 2000, antes de que llegara la crisis de 2008, que hicieras letras

explícitamente políticas era rompedor. Pero hoy por hoy es mucho más político que hables de tu realidad. Que salga Yung Beef diciendo 'aquí no llega la beca para la universidad, papi' es más político que decir '¡Organízate! ¡Por la causa!'" (Soldevila).

While trap music as a particular sonic aesthetic is just one influence among many in Chill Mafia's repertoire, their frequent citing of the Spanish trap pioneer Yung Beef as an both a direct reference and an artist whose music best captures the current zeitgeist corresponds with Ernesto Castro's theory of trap as the defining "metamusic" of post-crisis Spain, carrying with it a set of attitudes and ways of life that go beyond music. In his 2022 essay on the politics and aesthetics of Spanish trap music, Alfonso Ollero Gavín argues that the hip-hop convention of "realness" as expressed in contemporary Spanish urban music is based upon the socioeconomic and cultural impact of the 2008 financial crisis, as it constructs a new identity based in a common irreverence and the sense of belonging to a lost generation. This discourse, centered in local identity and shared experience, becomes a tool for confronting the erasure of their alterity.

> Así pues, el *realness* implica la ostentación del "barrio" como *locus* (no tan *amoenus*) en el que se engendra el trap y el sentido de pertenencia a la ecléctica comunidad millennial. A raíz de esto, el *realness* de la Praxis Trap implica que la acción y el compromiso ético emanen desde un panorama de marginalidad social encontrado en el barrio; consecuentemente, la comunidad de espectadores debe decidir si toma al pie de la letra los contenidos textuales producidos en este contexto (que abordará temáticas de sexo, drogas, o comunidades cerradas) o si, postirónicamente, atiende a ellos desde un punto de vista formal como modo de rebeldía ante las dinámicas de consumo neoliberales. (Ollero Gavín 185)

The implicit critique behind the music of Chill Mafia then, lies in its articulation from the vulgar margins of Basque and Navarrese society, centering and vindicating experiences, perspectives, and forms of speech that are typically excluded from respectable political discourse. Viewed through this lens, vulgarity and the rejection of

norms are not mere deviations from political discipline, but rather a means of breaking through rigid political frameworks. As Kiliki Frexko puts it,

> el macarreo siempre es una respuesta acertada (...) Tampoco hace falta robarle barras a Lenin para ser político. No tienes que construir un panfleto con tu música, eso ya lo hizo él. Hablamos de nuestra realidad, de nuestro barrio, que por cierto estoy muy enamorado de toda su gente… Que en los barrios pijos no es tan buena la gente. (Najibi Goñi)

While the group's pride in their working-class alterity is evident in their irreverent demeanor and striking appearance—tracksuits, bold haircuts, hoop earrings, and more—three songs from their debut album stand out for directly addressing the post-crisis economic realities of Pamplona. These tracks tackle themes like unemployment, gentrification, and the precarity of daily life in the wake of austerity, doing so with a depth of pathos and dignity that contrasts with the more playful tone found in much of their other work.

The two tracks from *Ezorregatik X Berpizkundea* that most neatly correspond with the trap subgenre, "Papi" and "Atzerrian" ("Abroad"), both deal with sorts of economic precarity that have become especially pronounced in the post-2008 landscape. "Papi" stands out as the Chill Mafia song most rooted in an unironic, social realist representation of urban poverty, as it tells a story from the perspective of a member of the lumpen underclass of Pamplona, addicted to amphetamines while earning a living off various hustles and scams. One scene finds the narrator describing the inside of a casino inhabited by hustlers, immigrants, and gamblers, a synecdoche of a wider society that leaves people desperate, exploited, and expendable.

> Que le den a la ruleta
> A ver si el más yonki la revienta
> Prefiero gastarmelo en anfeta

(...)
El chino en la tragaperras
El negro de gafas en las apuestas
Un niño blanco se gasta la paga
Lo que roba, lo que saca de petas [joints/marijuana]
Todo el mundo esta en la ruleta

A later verse vividly captures the feeling of being trapped in a cycle of desperation and criminality, as the narrator seems to accept his picaresque lifestyle despite its inescapable, repetitive nature: "Tratos, saco, gasto, pierdo, repito / Gano, pierdo, tonto, listo / Ya está el timo todo listo / Money, droga, negocio mixto." The song concludes with a repeated coda, the rapper's vocals pitch-shifted upward to sound almost bug-like, amplifying the sense of urgency and despair. In this final moment, the narrator pleads with his father for a share of his pension money, insisting, "Hago un par de business y me resucito."

Meanwhile, "Atzerrian" differs from "Papi" in that it doesn't tell a clear or linear story, with Flakofonki instead rapping evocative lyrics about travel, anxiety, and alienation, all punctuated by the refrain "guztiak atzerrian" ("everyone [is] abroad"). In the context of a post-crisis Basque Country/Spain, it is difficult not to read lyrics like "Aste pare bat pasata herritik aldatu behar" ("A few weeks ago I had to leave town/the country") or "Atzerritarra ni izango beharko naiz" ("I'll have to become a foreigner") as references to those who have had to emigrate for the sake of economic necessity. Meanwhile, the lines "Ez banago adi arazoak izango dira argi / Ez da gauza berririk" ("If I'm not careful there will clearly be problems / but that's nothing new") and "El dia de la marmota así me voy acostumbrando a lo que va a venir / Sin ponerme una bolsa en la cara" signal a more generalized anxiety and feelings of have to resign oneself to a cycle of work and alienation.

Unlike the album's other pure trap song, the anxiety and precarity described in "Atzerrian" is not that of the urban underclass, but rather an educated working class enmeshed in a global capitalist system, in which having marketable skills does not necessarily ensure security, and finding dignified or well-paying work often requires moving to urban centers or even abroad. The vocal sample that plays at the end of the track, from the folk song "Oriko xoria" ("The Bird of Mount Ori") by the French-Basque folk singer and shepard Erramun Martikorena, is employed not solely for ironic juxtaposition, but also tragic affect, as the original song's lyrics evoke a bygone, pastoral world in which people's identities were rooted in a particular place:

> Han zen sortu
> Han handitu
> Han ari zen maitatzen
> Han bere umeen artean
> Goxoki du kantatzen.[35]

Chill Mafia's most famous song about contemporary struggles and urban working class identity however, is not in the trap subgenre, but rather a Jamaican reggae-inspired anthem about growing up during in Pamplona during the 2000s, amidst the end of kale borroka street violence and the impact of the 2008 financial crisis. In "31014" (often referred to simply as "Errotxapea") Kiliki Frexko describes his neighborhood and upbringing through images of delinquency and *macarreo* that are epitomized in the song's chorus: "*I was born* Errotxapean / Ibai ertzean ta erdigunepean / Goxokiak lapurtzen xoxik etzenean / Y en jaias del barrio siempre había pelea" ("I was born in Errotxapea / On the river, beneath the city center / Stealing candies when I had no

[35] He was born there / He grew up there / He found love there / There, amongst his children, / he sings sweetly

pocket change / And in the neighborhood festivals there were always fights”). Lyrically, the song borrows heavily from tropes of hip-hop and trap music, particularly in the first verse, where Kiliki imagines the rags-to-riches scenario of winning the lottery (“Cuando nos toque la primitiva…”), then sharing the money with his neighbors, buying his mother a house, and putting a necklace around her neck that will illuminate the darkness of the neighborhood. At the same time however, part of what makes this song “el himno del barrio para mi entender” (Martija 16:20) is its references to the song “Yo solo” by the punk group Suntsiketa, which describes the Errotxapea neighborhood of the 2000s through the eyes of a young man who participates in the kale borroka street riots and starts a punk band. The influence of Suntsiketa’s lyrics (“Yo solo tiraba piedras,” “ardió un Villavesa[36]”) are particularly noticeable in the second verse, which chronicles the decline of more visible—and even violent—forms of political radicalism in the neighborhood, with blatantly predatory casinos now proliferating in their absence.

> Cuando era txiki en mi barrio se quemaban Villavesas
> donde ahora hay casas de apuestas
> Cuando era txiki en mi barrio los haundis [big kids; adults]
> llevaban un coco [molotov cocktail] en la mano y en la otra una pocheta
> Pero ahora el coco ya no está
> Y a los chavales no les culpo de nada
> Y no me culpo de nada
> Gerora begiratuz ilun baitago dena [Looking to the future because everything is dark]

Beyond the personal narrative from the singer’s first-person perspective, the song is also a requiem for the class-conscious rage and subculture of punks and radicals that now seems to be on the wane, as it details the lumpenization of a neighborhood where recreational drug use has become the only remaining escape from alienation and ennui.

[36] Pamplona city bus.

Another lyric highlighting the post-radical environment is the line “Soy de un barrio de bajeras, txiki ¿que te esperas? / solo uno de doce sale bueno en verdad.” Here, the term “bajeras” refers to Pamplona’s “locales menores de ocio,” or ground level apartment units that are given licenses by the city government to operate as youth leisure centers. While this initiative has been supported by leftist and progressive politicians as a means of providing young people with a non-commercial means of socializing, they have also earned a reputation as a place where teenagers are first exposed to sex and drugs (Benítez). Chill Mafia member Ben Yart introduced the term “barrio de bajeras” to the world of Spanish trap in his 2020 song “Barriobajero,” in which he describes drifting in and out of different bajeras while high on pills: “Yo no soy barriobajero, yo soy de un barrio de bajeras / Y si en esta no me quieren / voy a otra en la que me quieran.” As Ben Yart’s song suggests, there is a distinction to be made between a “barrio bajo” and a “barrio de bajeras.” Whereas a barrio bajo would be characterized by dilapidation and poverty, the term barrio de bajeras refers specifically to disaffected and listless youth, smoking and playing video games on secondhand couches in the peripheral neighborhoods of Pamplona. In both Ben Yart’s music and “31014,” the bajera represents a space of both delinquency and autonomy, assuming the role similar to that of the traphouse in the imaginary of African American trap music. And yet, amidst the political demobilization of the working class, Kiliki’s lyrics seem to cast doubt on whether the autonomy offered by bajeras serves any purpose other than escapism, and whether apolitical delinquency is any better than the violent radicalism of prior generations.

In "31014," the fusion of hip-hop and punk genre conventions—each offering its own vision of urban resistance and escape—is conveyed with an emotional depth unusual for Chill Mafia's music, as themes of guilt and hope are expressed with undeniable sincerity. Yet, the group's signature meta-ironic humor remains evident in the song's references to machetes and El Chapo, which simultaneously evoke the abertzale left and allude to drug use and dealing. Even in what appears to be an anthem for a specific place and time, their lyrics maintain a degree of irony and ambiguity. However, rather than diluting or obscuring the song's message, this playful exaggeration becomes one among many (sometimes contradictory) urban working-class signifiers, each reflecting a facet of contemporary life in Errotxapea.

When asked if he identifies with any collective group, Kiliki immediately responded that he belongs to the working class, the region of Navarre, and the Basque-speaking community—in that order (Madariaga 28:40). At its core, Chill Mafia's music seeks to redefine working-class and Basque-Navarrese identities at a time when class consciousness is underrepresented in both politics and culture. Ernesto Castro has described the political content of trap music as "impolitical," drawing on Roberto Esposito's concept of the term to refer to aspects of human existence that resist complete control by political powers or structures, creating a negative image of politics rather than outright rejecting it (Castro 192). By incorporating elements from the hip-hop/trap genre into the Basque context, Chill Mafia introduces new impolitical discourses that challenge established views not only on Basque aesthetics but also on the social realities of Euskal Herria.

One example of this across the group’s music has been their claiming of the street drug speed as a symbol of Basque identity, consistently referring to the drug and its effects in a way that parallels American trap music’s depiction of the codeine cough syrup concoction known as lean or purple drank. Considered a cheap alternative to cocaine, Chill Mafia typically refer to the drug by its slang term in Euskara, *pitxu*, and in the reggaeton song “Doraimon” claim that it has the “Eusko Label” designation for quality food and agriculture products produced in the Basque Autonomous Community. While this may initially read as a joke that plays purely off of ironic dissonance, one may also read into this line an affirmation of cheap recreational drug use as a legitimate pastime, or even a critique of the gentrification of Basque culture through the marketing of the region as an international gourmet destination, both of which fall outside of normative discourses on policy.

Chill Mafia’s political content emerges from their deliberate oversaturation of recognizable, often negatively stereotyped markers of working-class and Basque-Navarrese identity. They weave these symbols together through ambiguity and layers of irony, creating novel connections that their audience—adept at navigating irony—can interpret in ways that resonate with their own experiences. The emancipatory potential attributed to the group (Virizuela; Del Amo et al.) does not stem from their ability to present clear political arguments, but rather from their ability to reframe debates by inhabiting and deconstructing various marginalized perspectives—lumpen, punk, delinquent, drug user, or college-educated precariat—without apology. By doing so, they represent the social and economic uncertainty that shapes their daily lives while asserting their dignity in the face of these challenges. Chill Mafia’s vision of working-

class Basque identity transcends both the PNV's liberal concept of Basque exceptionalism, which is legitimized through the market, and the abertzale left's modernist myth of a Basque spirit untouched by contemporary capitalism.

4.7 "La Gaztea me paga los taxis": Earning a Living Through the Basque Mainstream

In part because of the economic precarity that is the focus of many of their lyrics, Chill Mafia have not been shy or ashamed about their intention to profit off of their status in the Basque mainstream, announcing their desire to collaborate with various musical artists and brands to promote their music and earn secondary streams of income. After the group had helped to revive interest in the Gipuzkoa-based Astore sports clothing company by wearing vintage 90s football shirts and tracksuits in music videos and live performances, the topic of the group signing a sponsorship deal with the brand became a repeated joke in their work. In the deal that eventually materialized, Astore would release a limited-edition Chill Mafia football shirt in 2021, followed by an entire clothing line designed by the collective in the summer of 2022. The collective's relationship with Astore represented their stepping out into the Basque mainstream with the goal of becoming not only artists, but also trendsetters, with Kiliki arguing at the time that fashion was the only Basque cultural industry that showed any sort of responsiveness to contemporary trends: "Está más al tanto de lo que se hace Astore (...) que la propia industria de la música. Bueno, que yo creo que no se puede considerar ni industria. Creo que son cuatro chiringuitillos que además no funcionan muy bien. No tienen ninguna visión" (Soldevila).

Several months after giving this quote, however, Chill Mafia would seek to consolidate their place in Basque mainstream culture by signing with the Oso Polita record label. Specializing in promoting musical acts from the Basque Autonomous Community and Navarre to the rest of Spain, Oso Polita is a subsidiary of Last Tour, a Basque company that organizes international music tours and macrofestivals such as Bilbao's BBK Live and Lisbon's Kalorama. While Oso Polita was perhaps the only Basque music label capable of managing a pop group with aspirations beyond Euskal Herria, its connections to the hyper-capitalist world of music festivals and the Basque Country's elite business and political classes left many Basque listeners—who had already been wary of Chill Mafia's ironic treatment of Basque identity and lyrics critical of leftist activists—permanently estranged from the group. For many Basques, particularly those living in Bilbao, Last Tour and their festivals not only operate as a scheme for diverting millions of euros in public funds to the private sector, but also contribute to gentrification by marketing these high-priced festivals to foreign tourists. A 2022 exposé by investigative journalists Luis Miguel Barcenilla, Ekaitz Cancela, and Ahoztar Zelaieta articulates many of the motives for opposing this publicly subsidized model of for-profit cultural events and spectacles.

> La música, antes radical y subversiva, era la alternativa a la explotación del trabajo o el hastío del paro. Ahora el valor se ha puesto en manos de Last Tour para apostar por un modelo cultural homogeneizante pero muy rentable: festivales, precariedad, mucha pasta pública, ingeniería fiscal y *bilbaocentrismo*. Una expresión más, otra vuelta de tuerca, sobre la misma pobre idea de un museo de titanio. Y la urbe queda reducida a eso: una postal. (Barcenilla et al.)

The authors go on to cite the signing of Chill Mafia to Oso Polita as an example of Last Tour capitalizing on and even commodifying the declining living standards that the company itself contributes to, selling the precarity faced by Basque youth back to them

in the form of Chill Mafia's authentic urban aesthetic. Aware of these criticisms and the gentrifying effect the Last Tour has had in the Basque music sphere, Chill Mafia would criticize their label's parent company, inserting the line "le follen a Last Tour" in their popular 2022 single "No Se Ke Me Pasa."

The other notable mainstream institution that has established close ties with Chill Mafia is EITB (Euskal Irrati Telebista), whose early interest in the group in the wake of the "Gazte arruntaren koplak" video helped fuel the group's breakout success. The EITB media group, which is funded and run by the Basque autonomous government, constitutes the mainstream of Basque language culture, operating three Basque-language radio stations while maintaining a near monopoly on televised content produced in the Basque language via the television channel ETB 1, in addition to its Spanish-language ETB 2. While publicly funded, the PNV's institutional control, along with the broadcaster's role in advertising for and awarding contracts to Basque private sector companies, means that its news and programming often skews toward (neo)liberal perspectives. In spite of their open drug use and tendency to curse on air, Chill Mafia was attractive to EITB in that they seemed to represent the perfect synthesis of the dichotomy between global equivalency and Basque distinctiveness that is singularly relevant to the institution. On the one hand, they seemed to represent a (belated) acceptance of the "reggaeton/trap binomio" (Erostarbe) that had already conquered much of Europe and North America the decade prior, defying preconceptions of Basque culture and media as something provincial. Yet simultaneously, their references to Lete and Cicatriz served to reinforce the idea of a unique Basque musical and cultural canon, of which the public broadcaster deems itself

to be the de facto arbiter. In this way, Chill Mafia not only attracted a younger, broader audience to EITB but also helped justify the broadcaster's relevance in Basque cultural life.

While ETB 1 had featured the group's two lead members in a live interview via Zoom within a week of the release of the "Gazte arruntaren koplak" music video, the first clear instance of the Basque media trying to incorporate Chill Mafia into their curated mainstream emerged out of a Twitter feud between Kiliki Frexko and the Basque-language reggaeton singer Iratxe Aguilera, known as Kai Nakai, who had received a $15,000 grant from the Basque autonomous government to further her music career. Ironically calling her a "puta yonki" and implying she spent the money on drugs, Kiliki's post also carried implications that Kai Nakai had only won the grant because of her middle-class background and connections within the Basque entertainment industry. EITB then sought to turn this beef into a media event by inviting both musical artists onto a program to talk about finding success in the Basque music industry and debate each other on a stage dressed up to look like a boxing ring[37]. Both artists would follow up with diss tracks directed towards each other, with Kiliki writing and performing the song "Bedeinkatua" ("Blessed") and Kai Nakai following up with a slickly produced music video for her Chill Mafia diss "15k" a month later. Even at the time, the feud smacked of artificiality, with it appearing as though EITB sought to leverage Chill Mafia and their issues with Kai Nakai's musical project to promote and legitimize the aspiring Basque pop star.

[37] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NuCayMtARxs

The relationship between EITB and Chill Mafia continued to develop in the following years. EITB commissioned the group to write and perform the theme song for their new Basque-language teen drama *Irabazi arte!*, which featured a soundtrack predominantly made up of artists from the Oso Polita record label. Chill Mafia also appeared on ETB 2's Spanish-language talk show *Akelarre* and would often make heavily publicized live appearances on ETB 1, often performing with unexpected guests such as the folk singer Gontzal Mendibil. Soon after the announcement of Chill Mafia's planned dissolution, Flakofonki was given a recurring role on EITB's new Basque-language talk show *Barraka*, although the program was put on indefinite hiatus after just two episodes following allegations of sexual misconduct against the show's host.

As part of EITB's efforts to promote Chill Mafia as the irreverent voice of Generation Z, the media organization leaned heavily into presenting the group's de facto leader and spokesperson, Kiliki Frexko/Beñat Rodrigo, as a 21st century working class organic intellectual. Between 2021 and 2022 Kiliki/Rodrigo would appear on some of ETB 1's flagship original programs to discuss themes relating to the role of music in Basque society and the socioeconomic struggles of Basque youth. In May 2021, he would appear on the investigative and current events program *Ur Handitan* ("In Big Water"), where, in an episode on 21st century Basque identity, he debated the veteran folk singer Amaia Zubiria about the meaning of the Basque musical tradition and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on Gen Z Basques. In March of the following year, he made a guest appearance on the history show *Itxi liburuak* ("Close Your Books"), in which he was tasked with giving a lecture about Ez Dok Amairu the euskal kantagintza berria folk music movement of the 1960s to a group of college students. In the years

since, Kiliki/Rodrigo has been interviewed by numerous EITB-affiliated radio programs and podcasts, being the only member of Chill Mafia to engage in solo interviews about the collective's music and political outlook.

Given his frequent media appearances, it is unsurprising that Kiliki has sought to establish a career in media beyond the collective. In an October 2022 interview with the Pamplona-based independent radio station Euskalerria Irratia, Kiliki stated that his intention was to pursue a larger role in the Basque mainstream, although he had no plans to leave Chill Mafia (Argiñarena). When the plan to dissolve Chill Mafia after their 2024-2025 farewell tour was unexpectedly announced in September 2024, Oso Polita immediately put out a statement indicating that both Kiliki Frexko and Ben Yart would continue as solo artists under their label. And while Kiliki's debut album has yet to be released, he has appeared as a featured artist on tracks for a wide array of artists from around the Basque Country and Spanish state, including collaborations with the Catalan synth-punk duo La Élite, the Basque drill rapper Delakuria, and the Bilbao-based indie rockers Kokoshca, among others. Through the sheer unexpected nature of these collaborations, along with Kiliki's surprising predilection for new wave-inspired songs, have helped to cultivate a brand as an irreverent nonconformist with eclectic tastes, fitting in amongst young punks, rappers, and artists from older generations.

During this time, reflections on his career trajectory and the impact of being a breakout star in the limited sphere of Basque popular culture have become an increasingly present theme in his lyrics. In three subsequent singles/music videos released between 2021 and 2023, Kiliki would return to the topic of the group's success and potential for growth, beginning with the line "Si saco pasta con esto mucho no va

durar" ("Barkhatu"), which then evolved to "Cuando haga pasta haré una gira por Cancún" ("No Se K Me Pasa"), before finally appraising the group's headway in the Spanish market and reaffirming his hopes of touring abroad: "No fui a Cancún, pero a Sevilla sí (...) En un año acabamos en Japón / Berri Txarrak[38]" ("Puta Ripagaña)**.**

Behind these ironic and self-depreciating boasts about his group's success, there is an acknowledgement that he has still not escaped financial or professional uncertainty. In an interview with EITB's *Lore Hostoak* ("Flower Petals") podcast, Rodrigo admitted that the money he had earned from his music career had gone as far as to afford him his own apartment and recognized that, if not for Chill Mafia, he'd probably be working at a supermarket or in the hospitality industry: "No digo que no sea digno ni nada, pero es una explotación de puta madre" (Martija 10:50). Del Amo et al. note that given the limited market for music and cultural production in Euskara, the musical artists of the Basque Country's emerging urban music scene have more humble ambitions than one might assume:

> The idea of 'being rich and famous', in any case, must be qualified. It is rather a discursive formula typical of trap aesthetics than a goal to be achieved at all costs. It's even used provocatively to set itself apart from the collective heroic DIY of previous decades. Rather, they are more interested in using DIY as a means of generating sustainable income from music, whole or in part. In fact, being rich and famous in the Basque social space means little more than getting space on public radio and television and, precisely, entering the DIY spaces and circuits that had been reluctant to aesthetic innovation. Getting rich and famous does not go much further than a space in the local Basque scene or in the Spanish State. (Del Amo et al. 7)

[38] Berri Txarrak ("The Bad News") was the most popular and critically acclaimed Basque rock band of the 2000s and 2010s, achieving some level of international attention through tours and collaborations with the popular American rock group Rise Against.

In this sense, the group's signing to the Oso Polita label is justifiable on their terms, even as it goes against the ethos of DIY and working-class community that many Basque music fans see as setting the local scene apart from global trends in pop music. With the group's ceiling firmly set at mainstream popularity within the Basque Country, and modest success in the rest of the Spanish state, Oso Polita and Last Tour's connections with Basque regional and city governments ensured Chill Mafia a presence in lucrative music festivals and provided the key members with opportunities for their post-Chill Mafia careers.

Amidst the struggle to maintain relevance in the Basque mainstream without coming off as sellouts, Chill Mafia—and Kiliki/Rodrigo in particular—have had to balance the need to be taken seriously and the ability to shock and surprise their audience. The song "La Gaztea," written and performed by Kiliki, represents a reckoning with his modest fame and assigned role as both the voice of the Gen Z Basque working class and as a provocateur brought onto shows for his spontaneity. The title of the song refers to Gaztea, an EITB-operated radio station and series of branded audiovisual programming aimed at a young Basque-speaking audience, similar in its presentation to MTV, but on a much smaller scale. In the song's repeated chorus, Kiliki boasts about the minor perks of his collaboration with the media establishment, while at the same time maintaining that he is rooted in his neighborhood and Basque protest culture.

> La Gaztea me paga los taxis
> De liada con mi manin
> En la mani puesto de M
> Escuchando a Yung Beef

Con pintas de ser de Segi[39]

Indeed, each line of the chorus corresponds with a different aspect of Kiliki's public persona and the life he hopes to lead: the minor perks of being a local celebrity and entertainer, spending time with lifelong friends, retaining his Basque identity by going to protests and having a radical appearance, all while subverting expectations around Basqueness by doing party drugs and listening to Spanish trap music. The song is a statement that while he hopes to become a major presence in Basque media, he has no intention of changing or even moving out of his neighborhood. It can also be interpreted as his way of pushing back on the idea that collaborating with the Basque media establishment will necessarily soften Chill Mafia's image and erase their working-class identity. As Virizuela argues, the Basque mainstream is perhaps the only circuit that can accommodate a group like Chill Mafia, despite its evident drawbacks.

> Aunque, como pasará con el hip hop, el riesgo de que su potencia quede subsumida por el capital—como demuestra la necesidad de girar en el circuito de salas comerciales o su acuerdo comercial con Last Tour—no es tanto por la falta de elementos emancipadores en su propuesta estética, sino por la ausencia de circuitos políticos autónomos a los que se puedan acoplar. Tan hartos de la estulticia musical de los ecos zombis del RRV como de la cultura oficial subvencionada, cargan contra todos ellos con el descaro y la rabia que solo la juventud puede. Son urbanos, de barrio, su realidad material y su mundo social nada tiene que ver con las idealizaciones de caserío de cartón piedra presentes en Huntza o el buenrollismo rosa chicle de los productos como Zetak o Kai Nakai. (Virizuela)

The lone verse of "La Gaztea" then seeks to reaffirm Kiliki's antagonistic stance toward various figures of the Basque mainstream music scene, including competing pop acts and the "bourgeois" critics that he sees as overanalyzing his work. Riffing on the Yung

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[39] Segi was the youth wing of the abertzale Batasuna political party founded in 2001. Both organizations were shut down by the Spanish government in 2002.

Beef line "He creado una escena porque no tenía pa' cena" ("Intro"), Kiliki stakes a claim on behalf of Chill Mafia as the original—and only truly organic—Basque urban music act, both independent from and standing atop of the mainstream.

> He creado una escena porque me aburría en la cuarentena
> Zure taldea negarrez, dais pena, penita, pena
> Hamaika aldiz entzun dizuet kanta bera
> Intelektual puta hoien izterbegi
> Burges ttipi hoiek gure atzetik
> Si nos quieres son mínimo diez mil
> Sociedad anónima; la Chillma
> Vendiendo música, antes maritxu en la esquina[40]

Ultimately, Chill Mafia's trajectory has carved out an influential niche within the typically small and risk-averse Basque mainstream. They have largely managed to sell themselves on their own terms, maintaining their class consciousness and critical perspective toward the very mainstream institutions that provided them with a platform. This authenticity, combined with their irreverent style, has positioned them to inspire new conversations about what it means to be Basque in the 21st century. However, the expectation that their music must always be provocative or offer commentary on evolving Basque identity began to feel burdensome, risking becoming formulaic or devolving into a mere gimmick. Thus, while their decision to end the group in 2025 was a surprise, it came at a time when many felt uncertain about their next steps, and the possibility that they had reached a creative plateau seemed increasingly plausible.

Their surprise farewell album, *Agur eta ohore X Allá va la despedida* (2024), in many ways marked an aesthetic departure for the group, abandoning what little trap

[40] I created a scene because I got bored in quarantine / Your group crying, so pathetic / Eleven times I've heard you with the same song / Adversary of those fucking intellectuals / Those petit bourgeois behind us / If you want us [to play] it'll be at least ten thousand / "La Chillma" Inc. / Selling music, before that, marijuana on the corner

music influence they maintained in favor of more electronic and hyperpop sounds. However, the thrown-together and disjointed nature of the album also gave the impression that they were running out of inspiration—or, at the very least, had become self-conscious about the expectations surrounding their work. Of the album's nine tracks, two had been released as singles months earlier ("Puta Ripagaña" and "Mus corrido"), two are brief tracks relying more on comedic effect than musical substance ("La del perro" and "Speederman"), one is a remix of an old demo that had been uploaded to YouTube years prior ("Animal Crossing"), and two are word-for-word covers of relatively obscure songs by Basque musical artists ("Merezi ote" and "Ídolo caído").

One of these covers, "Ídolo caído"—a hyperpop rendition of the 2005 song "Mi ídolo caído" by the Basque punk band Brigada Criminal—stands out as the only song on the album where Kiliki performs as the sole vocalist, which itself represents a major difference from their debut album, which featured no fewer than three Kiliki solo tracks. In spite of the fact that the words of the song are not his own, the lyrics about a former punk rocker's pitiful decline into obscurity read as an intensely personal confession by Chill Mafia's de facto leader, as he contemplates his fears of their act becoming a gimmick and struggling to recapture the glory of their heyday. The song's second verse in particular reflects a anxiety that Chill Mafia will wear out their welcome, as the lyrics take on a decidedly harsh and critical tone, and insinuate that forcing the group to continue would only tarnish their legacy:

> Nos aburrimos de escuchar tus historias
> Y de ver tu cara de pavo real
> Fuiste algo por nuestra estupidez
> Y no por tus superméritos
> La fama te duró lo que dura un burdel
> Con prostitutas que vienen y van

La masa ya dejó de estar a tus pies
Y ahora a los pies de la masa estás ("Ídolo caído")

The song's refrain, "Dime dónde estás antiguo amigo del alma / no quisiera verte apagándote," then reads as Chill Mafia addressing their fans and explaining their motivations for disbanding. It tacitly acknowledges their desire to bow out gracefully rather than risk a decline into irrelevance, while ensuring that the collective's legacy remains intact as they start fresh with new projects that will likely focus more on musical innovation than attempts at elaborating a Basque Gen Z identity.

In the wake of the news of Chill Mafia's dissolution, it has become clear that they changed the Basque mainstream more than the mainstream changed them. While their music relied heavily on provocation on multi-layered irony and offended many Basques in the process, it accomplished its ambitious goals of bringing contemporary pop genres to the insular world of Basque music. Moreover, it did it in such a way that connected these global trends to material realities and marginal perspectives that they felt were being ignored by hegemonic political and media discourses. While this desire to faithfully reflect the humor and anxieties of Pamplona's working-class youth was a critical factor in the decision to end the project, it is also what shot them to regional fame in the first place, as their project ignited countless debates over Basque identity, linguistic and ideological purity, the local music tradition, and the efficacy of nationalist politics in the era of globalization and economic uncertainty. In the end, the polemics and self-examinations were as vital to Chill Mafia's trajectory as the music itself.

4.8 Tatxers

Founded in 2019 by core members Jon Salinas (bass and vocals) and Martin Ziriza (guitar and vocals), and featuring Iñigo Soria (2019-2023) and Sergio Devesa (2024-present) on drums, Tatxers have become possibly the most popular contemporary Basque musical act outside of the EITB and Last Tour-influenced mainstream during the first half of the 2020s. While their self-published debut LP, *Garaipen kutrea* ("Shabby Victory," 2020) was released to little fanfare, their appearances on the punk compilation albums *Kaosa Euskal Herrian* (2020) and *Chaos in the Basque Country* (2021) published by Tough Ain't Enough Records, saw them gain traction within the Basque punk scene, where their pop melodies separated them from the hardcore bands that made up the majority. Their breakthrough would come via their four-song EP *Hiruzpalau amets larri* ("Three or Four Urgent Dreams") whose success was partly influenced by the group's association with Chill Mafia, with whom they had collaborated on the song "Zure kebapa" and the music video for Tatxers' "Urte kontua." This link with Chill Mafia, when media discourse around that group and its radical new perspective on the Basque musical tradition was at its height, undoubtedly added to the perception that Tatxers were similarly part of a looming sea change in Basque popular music.

While many within the Basque left would eventually reject Chill Mafia because of their perceived apathy towards politics and openness to mainstream attention, Tatxers have come to represent a new generation of politically engaged Basque music, even as they have abandoned many of the discourses and aesthetics associated with Basque punk in the 21st century. Much of the love and respect for the group is a result of its

members' dedication to cultural and DIY initiatives in the Basque Country. Salinas is a freelance painter and illustrator who creates cover art for bands and independent Basque language publishing houses. Both Salinas and Ziriza host weekly radio shows (*Twist Titi* and *Losing Control*, respectively) where they showcase their favorite music and chat with friends and guests from the local arts scene. They have helped to establish the Egun Motelak ("Slow Days") collective, which organizes self-managed concerts at gaztetxes and local bars throughout Navarre. Finally, both have relatively successful musical side projects in collaboration with members of other Basque bands, with Ziriza also leading the pop punk trio Borla and Salinas performing bass and backup vocals in the experimental bands Sei Sega and Kotoi. Undoubtedly, their involvement across various simultaneous projects comes in large part out of economic necessity, as creating and performing music in a language with just under a million speakers sets a certain limit on a band's potential audience and financial success. Regardless, their insistence on earning a living through art produced within/for the community of young Basque speakers is indicative of an activist ethos that governs both their actions and their art. As Salinas asserts in one interview, "musika talde baten politizazio maila kantatzen dituen mezuekin lotu ohi da, baina, egiaz, beste nonbait dago: non jotzen duzun, nola jokatzen duzun… halakoetan gelditzen da agerian zure politika" ("A band's politics tend to be linked with the messages in their lyrics, but actually it's located elsewhere: where you play, how you play… that's where your politics really lie.") (Matxain).

While Tatxers is hardly the first band in the Basque Country to espouse an activist approach to their musical career, their conscious effort to center extra-musical

ideals such as praxis and community, while largely eschewing heavy-handed political lyrics, represents a major break from the orthodox attitudes that had defined Basque punk for nearly four decades. Writing on the aesthetic and even thematic stagnation within the Basque underground scene after the Rock Radical Vasco movement of the 80s, Ion Andoni Del Amo claims that

> Los circuitos contraculturales aparecen saturados por la pesada sensación de tener que decir siempre algo, y hacerlo además bien, de forma correcta, bonita y poética, cuando no instalados en la retromaniaca recreación constante de los temas y ritmos de los 80 y 90. Pareciera que el rock vasco ha alcanzado el nivel de solemnidad de los cantautores, contra el que el punk reaccionó. La repetición de los mensajes políticos, en muchos casos en un contexto social bien distinto, acaba, por saturación, despolitizándolos, vaciándolos de sentido. ("Cambiando el ritmo en Euskal Herria" 101)

While it would be untrue to claim that Basque punk and hard rock remained entirely static from the 1990s through 2010s, it certainly continued to operate by the unwritten rule that bands must sing about nationalist themes in an unpretentious style that spoke to the pride and discontent of Basque radicals living in both city centers and small towns.

Immediately prior to the emergence of Tatxers, the most prominent subgenre of Basque punk had been Oi!, a genre closely associated with skinhead subculture. The 2010s in particular saw the emergence of Oi! groups such as Kaleko Urdangak, Iheskide, Nafarroa 1512, and Orreaga 778, whose lyrics and aesthetics simultaneously represented a revival of the SHARP (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice) movement as well as an appeal to notions of historical Basque independence and rebellion, as is evident in these bands' frequent references to the medieval Kingdom of Navarre and nationalist revisionist histories that frame the kingdom as a Basque nation-state erased by Castilian imperialism. While this scene's fetishization of medieval Basque history and

symbols represents an attempt to represent Basque resistance identity as something eternal and immutable, it is also illustrative of the way in which nearly 40 years of punk hegemony and resistance to change had led to a high degree of abstraction away from contemporary, everyday life.

Tatxers could be said to have originated within this Basque Oi! scene, as their first live performance was opening for Kaleko Urdangak in Pamplona's Aitzina Taberna, and several of their early concert posters referenced the antiracist skinhead subculture. In spite of having little to do with Oi!'s straightforward lyrics, rowdy posturing, and chant-along vocals, the band would half-ironically refer to their aesthetic as "Pop Oi!" as late as 2021 (Silva), before claiming that they had never considered themselves an Oi! band, and rather admired the genre while themselves having more pop-oriented sensibilities (Weedianaut). After the breakthrough success of *Hiruzpalau amets larri* and their collaborations with Chill Mafia, Tatxers began to embrace the label of "post-punk" and conceive of their musical project as a break from the tradition of the previous decades. As Ziriza states:

> eszena berri honen atzean gogoeta kolektibo asko daude, ordu luzeetako elkarrizketak musikari buruz, inguruan gertatzen zenari buruz. Eta denok ados ginen diagnostikoan: gabezia bat zegoen estetikoki, gogoetetan, letretan. Gazteak gara, baina badugu maitasunean esperientzia, eta, adibidez, horri buruz ez zuen inork abesten. Dena zen panfleteroegia, eta jakina denez, aldarrikapen zuzenek konbentzituak konbentzitzeko baizik ez dute balio. Egungo errealitatea islatzen saiatuz, aldiz, jende gehiagorengana iritsi zaitezke. Guk letra politikoak egiten ditugu, baina ez nahita, hortik ezin garelako atera baizik. Gainera, ikusi da jendeak aldaketa eskatzen zuela. Amaitu da betiko musikaren hegemonia. Begiratu Chill Mafiari: uste zuten Iruñea ingurukoengana bakarrik iritsiko zirela, eta ikusi da sekulako entzuleria potentziala zeukatela.[41] (Matxain)

[41] Behind this new scene there are many collective reflections, long hours of conversations about music, about what was happening around us. And we all came to the same conclusion: there was a deficiency aesthetically, in the ideas, in the lyrics. We are young, but we have experience in love, and, for example, no one sang about it. It was all too heavy-handed [*panfletero*], and as we all know, such direct messages

While the success of Tatxers did not end Basque Oi! as a genre, nor was it indicative of any rivalry or animosity between them and more orthodox punk groups—Tatxers continue to play shows with Oi! and hardcore punk bands, after all—it did establish Tatxers' approach as a new vanguard of the underground scene. Even in the politicized Basque countercultural circuits, direct appeals to nationalist sentiment have given way to novelty, experimentation, and lyrics more grounded in quotidian life.

As representatives of a cohort of young creatives and art school students operating out of post-industrial spaces, looking to push beyond the tired themes and formal boundaries established by a more orthodox punk rock scene that had preceded them, Tatxers' artistic project shares striking parallels with the English post-punk scene of the late 70s and early 80s. Beginning in 1977, that era saw the outwardly directed rage and unpretentious musical stylings of first-wave punk bands like the Sex Pistols followed by a new and diverse cohort of groups such as Joy Division and Gang of Four, who rejected punk's claim to accessibility in order to explore working-class and youth subjectivities through inward-looking lyrics and avante-garde aesthetics (Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again* 1).

Across his melancholic writings on "lost futures" and the emergence of neoliberalism as the unquestioned governing logic of liberal democracies, Mark Fisher identifies "a tendency, a virtual trajectory" in the musical production of Britain immediately prior to the Thatcher era that he refers to as popular modernism. In Fisher's

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only serve to preach to the choir. By trying to reflect the current reality, however, you can reach more people. We write political lyrics, not on purpose, but rather because we can't escape it. It was also evident that people were hungry for a change. The hegemony of the same old music is over. Look at Chill Mafia: they thought they would only reach people around Pamplona, and it turns out they had a huge audience.

analysis, popular modernism consisted of particular set of circumstances, in which young, working-class creatives were granted “access to the resources of so-called high culture and time to produce their own sound, fiction and art” through the socialdemocratic infrastructure of social security, grants, squatting, art schools, etc. (*k-punk* 609), in turn leading to the dissemination of radical and experimental art in popular media. As Fisher explains:

> In popular modernism, the elitist project of modernism was retrospectively vindicated. At the same time, popular culture definitively established that it did not have to be populist. Particular modernist techniques were not only disseminated but collectively reworked and extended, just as the modernist task of producing forms which were adequate to the present moment was taken up and renewed. (*Ghosts of My Life* 22-23)

As artists from that era began to incorporate high modernist literary elements and references to radical political theory into their work, the resulting cultural production transcended mere novelty and represented an ability to shape reality through innovative ideas and imagine radically different futures. Ironically, the energy and radical nature of this cultural moment was in part a response to the early stages of neoliberalism and the dismantling of the socialdemocratic framework that had made it possible in the first place. The music of popular modernism came to represent the soundtrack of its own demise, with Joy Division’s haunting, industrial sounds coming to represent the deindustrialization of their home city of Manchester and The Jam’s mockery of aristocriatic British elites in songs such as "The Eton Rifles" presaging the decade of Tory dominance in U.K. politics.

While it may not be explicitly referenced in their music, the cultural moment of British post-punk and the neoliberal takeover from approximately 1977 to 1984 is something that looms over Tatxers’ musical project. This is most evident in the band’s

name, an euskarized spelling of "Thatchers," in reference to that Tory prime minister who has come to symbolize the liquidation of the welfare state in Europe. With their name and promotional materials dedicated to mocking the legacy of the ur-neoliberal—many of their concert posters, merchandise, and even the vinyl disc for *Hiruzpalau amets larri* feature defaced images of Margaret Thatcher, either with facial tattoos or donning a balaclava—Tatxers as an artistic project represents a very particular questioning of the political status quo that not only criticizes current structures of power, but also looks back at their origins. While they have cited their love of early 80s British music as the origin for the band's name[42], their connection to the post-punk of the early Thatcher era goes beyond mere aesthetics and carries clear political implications, as Tatxers and their musical project resonates with Fisher's concept of popular modernism in several key ways.

First, Tatxers and the new generation of Basque post-punk echoes the outlook and material conditions of the young British creatives of the late 1970s. If we consider popular modernism to ultimately be about the creation and maintenance of spaces of refuge from market forces, then Basque artists and musicians do have several factors working in their favor to help foster similar conditions in the 21st century. While the Basque Autonomous Community and Navarre have not been immune to the slashing of funds towards public education and the arts, these autonomous communities do tend to outperform most of Spain in terms of public spending, and the presence of Basque nationalist parties in their regional and local governments ensures the subsidization of

[42] The band's name and Basque spelling was also likely inspired by the song "Tatxer" from the 80s Basque punk band Baldin Bada, although the group have never confirmed this.

art and culture in the Basque language, albeit on a modest scale and with most funds directed towards either high art (literature) or projects with at least a patina of commercial appeal (film, television, pop music). And even as many squats and gaztetxes have been forcibly shut down in recent years, particularly in urban centers like Pamplona, a not insignificant number of local governments led by the leftist parties have worked to accommodate self-managed spaces and cultural events hosted by radical leftist youth organizations, albeit not without occasional moments of factional tension. Finally, many bars and music venues appealing to Basque speaking youth, particularly in smaller towns, help to round out a concert circuit that helps keep Basque language music viable. To paraphrase the Basque music critic Udane Barinagarrementeria: the margins are themselves an epicenter of Basque popular culture (Barinagarrementeria).

In spite of all of this, the Basque-speaking creatives and youth who participate in these circuits—themselves disproportionally left-wing—view the PNV-managed "Oasis" of the Basque Autonomous Community and the current center-left governing coalition in Navarre as embedded within a neoliberal framework, only capable of ceding territory to capital at a slower rate than other regions of Western Europe. This in turn leads to anxieties not only over the precarious status of Basque cultural autonomy, but also the future of the social safety net and liberal democracy's capacity to serve the majority of the population and respond to economic crises. In Ziriza's view,

> Sozialdemokrazia instituzionalak ez du gizartearen ehuneko handi bat ordezkatzen (...) Gu 1999an jaioak gara, eta krisia besterik ez dugu bizi izan: 2008koa, gaur egungoa, eta etorriko diren guztiak. Ikusten da hau ziklikoa dela, eta Ongizate Estatua ez dela existitzen. Agian ikuspegi partziala daukat eta ingurura begira bakarrik ari naiz hizketan, baina sentsazioa daukat gure belaunaldiak gero eta garbiago ikusten duela indar guztiak politika

> instituzionalera bideratzeak zer muga dituen, eta joera izango duela, adibidez, gero eta gutxiago bozkatzeko.[43] (Matxain)

This anxiety over the precarious economic and political prospects of their generation—let alone their ability to create art—is perhaps what most attracts Tatxers to the post-punk scene of the Thatcher era, which after four decades of neoliberal hegemony has come to represent both wasted radical potential as well as Western society's failure to hedge against the socially corrosive aspects of capitalism. Having seen the once unquestionable liberal consensus slowly erode over their lifetime, through the 2008 economic crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the current cost of living crisis, the need to combat the adverse effects of capitalism has become more prescient than ever for Gen Z Basques.

This occurs precisely as the institutional abertzale left, represented by the EH Bildu coalition, has transitioned into Spanish electoral politics, moderating its discourse and parts of its platform in order to participate in the PSOE-led governing coalition in Madrid and contest the PNV for hegemonic control of the Basque Autonomous Community. Simultaneously, the pervasive sense of political stagnancy and impending crisis has laid bare the sclerotic nature of the Basque punk music tradition inherited from the 80s and 90s. While the Basque punk of earlier decades contributed tremendously to Basque leftist ideology and discourse by reinforcing the perceived dichotomy between imperialist state power and the insurgent Basque community, it was

[43]Institutional social democracy does not serve a large percentage of society (...) We were born in 1999, and we have lived through nothing but crises: 2008, the current one [the Covid-19 pandemic], and all the ones to come. It turns out that this is cyclical, and the Welfare State does not exist. Maybe I have a partial view and I'm only talking about my immediate surroundings, but I have the feeling that our generation sees more and more clearly the limits of directing all our energy towards institutional politics, and that we will eventually vote less and less.

ill-equipped to speak to the political nature of everyday life—the ways in which austerity is not just imposed, but also internalized on an ideological level. While written from a Basque perspective for a Basque audience, Tatxers' music touches on universal experiences under late capitalism, creating avenues for breaking through the impenetrable barrier of capitalist realism. In recovering the post-punk approach that coincided with neoliberalism's ascendency, they now seek to create the music that will mark its collapse.

4.9 There is No Alternative: Capitalist Realism and the Revisiting of Basque Radicalism

With Tatxers' lyrics have become increasingly centered on subjective experiences under late capitalism, much of their earlier output from 2020 to 2021 presents a clear political argument against the present status quo. Out of the band's entire musical catalogue, the song that most directly speaks to the ongoing erosion of the neoliberal consensus is the 2021 single "Bihotz motel" ("Slow Heart"). Here, Salinas directly addresses the listener in the chorus "Ez zara teknokrata izango" ("You won't be a technocrat"), before expressing his generation's distrust of "progress" in the second verse:

> Gizarte(!)
> aurrerapenak nork nahi dituzte?
> Pikutara bidal itzazue
> Gero arte!
> Buru berri eta bihotz motel
> Ez dugu zugan sinisten[44]

[44] "Social progress, who wants it? / Tell them to go to hell / See you later! / New head and a slow heart / We don't believe in you"

The song's bitter skepticism in the idea of "progress" as sold to the public by a technocratic elite evokes Zygmunt Baumann's critique of late modernity. In *Liquid Times*, the Polish philosopher and sociologist declares that "'progress', once the most extreme manifestation of radical optimism and a promise of universally shared and lasting happiness (...) now stands for the threat of a relentless and inescapable change that (...) portends nothing but continuous crisis" (Baumann 10). The appeal to "a new head and a slow heart" can be understood therefore as an assumption that the youth are ready to assume new attitudes that will replace the technocratic values that pursue an ideal of progress detached from well-being.

However, with no path for a post-capitalist alternative and no mass-political movement capable of harnessing this disenchantment to affect policy changes, many of their songs deal with feelings of generational pessimism or listlessness. "Itxoiten dugun bitartean" ("While We Wait") reflects on the impossibility of change in the present and how insufficiency of sublimating one's struggles under late capitalism just deepens one's sense of shame and impotence. The track opens with a sarcastic reference to Fukuyamaist notions of "end of history"—"Azkenean hemen amaitu dugu" ("At last we're finished here")—before alluding to the alienating consequences of free market capitalism's triumph through a Baumannian "liquid" lens—"Ezohiko giro honetan / Errealitate likidoan / Edozer gertatu ahal da." (In this unusual environment / In liquid reality / Anything can happen"). The second verse then paints a more explicit image of what "liquid reality" entails, with daily life being governed by the indivdualized imperative to work around systemic problems: "Arazo sistemakoek gure bizitzak zapuzten / Partxeak jartzen dizkiogu gure egunerokoari / Bizitzak emandako plazer txiki horiengatik

ez balitz" ("Systemic problems ruin our lives / So we put patches on our day-to-day / If it weren't for life's small pleasures"). In a world in which the governing system cannot be questioned or politicized, the individual subject can only retreat into the private sphere to sublimate or compensate for the grievances they cannot express openly.

Unlike the defiant rejection of neoliberalism in "Bihotz motel," "Itxoiten" betrays a fatalistic attitude, depicting humanity as having backed itself into a corner it cannot wrest itself out of. The chorus then describes these feelings of political impotence through images of the collective "we" on our knees or sitting down, lacking any vitality or agency.

> Aurretik akatsak egin ziren
> Baina orain
> Erabat belauniko gaude
> Eta orain, eta orain
> Norabidea ez dakigu zein den
> Eta zer?
> Exerita itxarongo dugu guk
> Zerbait gertatu arte[45]

Part of what makes Tatxers' political message unique—particularly in the context of the Basque punk tradition—is that it is centered less on fighting the powers that be than the impossibility of even mounting a fight, given the nature of postmodern society. While this discourse can serve to reorient critical discussion of what it means to participate in politics, the lack of a clear horizon means that fatalism is an ever-present obstacle.

This balancing of pessimism and the abstract possibility of renewal is also the subject of "Ederregia" ("Too Beautiful"), written and sung by guitarist Martin Ziriza. The song opens with a bleak depiction of Pamplona as a city hollowed out by austerity,

[45] Mistakes were made before, / but now/ we are completely on our knees / and now, and now / we don't know the way / so what? / We'll sit here waiting / until something happens

evidenced by homeless people in the streets: “Porturik gabeko hiri batean / Batzuk arrantzatzen dute zakarrontzietan / Ez daukagu hondartzik, ez dugu behar, / jendea botata ikusteko dago kalea” (“In a city without a port / some go fishing in dumpsters / We don’t need beaches / the people lay out in the street”). While Ziriza’s lyrics reaffirm the dignity and perseverance of the people living there—“Baina ez ditu izoztu egiten duen hotzak, / gazte horrek kantatzen dituen koplak” (“But this cold doesn’t freeze / the verses sung by the youth”)—the song’s narrator cannot envision a better future for his home city: “Esan zer dago etorkizuna eraldatzea baino ederrago / Nonbait balego ametsetan ikusitako errealitate hori, / ez zen gure hirian izango” (“Tell me what’s more beautiful than changing the future / If the reality of our dreams were to exist somewhere / it wouldn’t be in our city”).

Although Tatxers’ lyrics are notably characterized by universal struggles under late capitalism and austerity, therefore avoiding direct references to Basque politics, “Ederregia” and other songs offer glimpses into the band’s perspective on the specific political context of the Basque Country. The two most popular tracks from *Hiruzapalau amets larri*—“Urte kontua” (“Year Count”) and “Goizean oskorri” (“Morning Glow”)—seem to at least allude to past legacies of nationalist politics and grassroots organizing, framing these past movements as perhaps noble but no longer suited to the present moment. Both the title and the opening verse of “Urte kontua” allude to a tension between present and past generations, as well as an ambivalent attitude towards the symbols and slogans of a previous era.

> Garai bateko ardiak
> Tabernetatik kalera atera ziren
> Guda amaitu ezina
> Ikur guztien kontra suertatu zen

Aitaren ilea haizeak eraman zuen
Gaur egun kaleetatik iraganeko esaldiak
Margotzen dituzte[46]

The song's final lines then evoke not only a lack of political direction, but a sense of confusion in the aftermath of political failure: "Zein da bidea? / Galdetzen dut etxera bueltan / Non ote da azken urteotan ikasi behar genuen irakaspena?" ("What's the way? / I ask on the way back home / Where is the lesson we needed to learn from these past few years?"). There are seemingly lessons to be learned from the experiences of the prior generation—now rendered as sheep or fathers who have lost their hair—and yet there is seemingly no capacity to reflect on these lessons, with the slogans of the past still dominating the current countercultural discourse.

While "Urte kontua" seemingly paints a harsh picture of a politics guided by nostalgia, "Goizean oskorri" redeems the activism of the past and ultimately asserts that the energy of past movements will be needed for Basque society to move forward. The song begins on a sympathetic note, with Salinas singing in the second person to express pride that, although they are now again "at the starting point," the activism of years past was nonetheless a source of pride.

Asotsa egin duzu hain txikia izanik
Dena aldatu nahian
Erreferentea izan zinen
Eta orain zer zara?
Inork ez dezala esan
Saiatu ez zinela
Askoz gehiago mereziz

[46] "Sheep from another time / exited the bar into the street / The endless war / happened to be against all symbols / The wind blew dad's hair away / Throughout the streets of today / they paint the sayings of the past."

Berriz abiapuntuan[47]

The second verse then incorporates the first-person perspective, as the speaker reflects on how his own feelings of depression amidst his “home” having another “owner.” Salinas’s lyrics also convey a deep sense of ambivalence by expressing seemingly conflicting desires to both flee from failure and express gratitude.

Zu zara nire etxea
Baina baduzu jabea
Ni baita ere triste nabil
Zutaz oroitzean
Ihes egitea zilegi denez
Ihes egingo dugu
Ni eraiki nauen bazterrei
Mesedea bueltatuz[48]

The ambiguous framing of the song’s second-person addressee—simultaneously the speaker’s home, inspiration, and source of melancholy—indicate that the “you” mentioned throughout the song is not necessarily someone or something external to the song’s narrator, but part of his own identity that he now grapples with. It represents his own commitment to activist ideals and desire to change the world, along with an awareness that these things have in turn made him into the person that he has become. At the same time, however, there is a realization that things have not changed for the better, and that any mass political movement with prospects of making a large impact would essentially be starting from zero. The song’s closing lines, “Zerk ematen dizu indarra? / Horrekin joan beharko aurrera” (“What gives you strength? / We’ll have to

[47] “You made a lot of noise, even being so small / wanting to change everything. / You were an example / and now what are you? / Don’t let anyone say / that you didn’t try. / Deserving so much more, / back at the starting point”

[48] “You’re my home / but you already have an owner. / I’m also sad these days / remembering you. / Since fleeing is alright, / we will flee. / Returning the favor / to the places that built me up.”

move forward with that”), represent words of encouragement directed simultaneously to himself, other like-minded Basque youth, and Basque society as a whole, to leave the burdens of past political movements behind while holding fast to whatever it is that drives them to resist the status quo.

Notably, the music videos for “Urte kontua” and “Goizean oskorri” both feature imagery and symbols that seem to support the interpretation of these songs as requiems for Basque political resistance and the need for self-examination. The music video for “Urte kontua,” featuring Chill Mafia’s Julen Goldarazena (Flakofonki) and Beñat Rodrigo (Kiliki Frexko) in a co-starring role and directed by Goldarezena, stands out amongst Tatxers’ works as the only song or video to blatantly feature symbols of traditional Basque identity. The influence of Chill Mafia’s irreverent collage of Basque signifiers is clear, with Goldarazena and Rodrigo wearing 90s vintage Basque national football team shirts and the members of Tatxers dressed as traditional, red beret-clad San Fermin festival musicians in several shots. Meanwhile, the entire video is interspersed with clips of the 1990s EITB cartoon series *Fernando Amezketarra*, about a Basque farmer and *bertsolari* from the 18th century. What frames all these images as political is the opening shot of the video, which zooms in on a black war banner with the slogan “victoria o muerte” above a skull and crossbones, with the skull replaced by an image of the Japanese cartoon character Hello Kitty. This banner, waved by drummer Iñigo Soria throughout the video, represents an ironic take on political militancy and symbolism by incorporating Chill Mafia’s meme-influenced humor to symbolize the “unending war” and “slogans of the past” referenced in the song’s lyrics.

In the case of “Goizean oskorri,” the final seconds of the video feature Salinas and Ziriza on a beach holding up what appears to be a black and white ikurriña, before running the across the sand and into the crashing waves of the ocean, each holding the flag from one corner. To the extent that Basqueness plays a role in the politics of Tatxers, it is implied that it must be purged of excess meaning and signifiers—particularly the fetishized aspects that are more ethnocentric than materialist, more nostalgic than constructive. In this sense, the Basque flag stripped of its colors may symbolize the “starting point” that the song refers to, while the joyful image of the pair running into the water, accompanied by the song’s closing message of taking what gives you strength in order to move forward, sums up the radical optimism behind Tatxers’ musical project: going head-on into to a seemingly untraversable horizon, carrying a symbol of identity that has been stripped down to its essential structures.

4.10 “What I Want”: Labor, Alienation, and Human Potential in *Tatxers* (2023)

While virtually all of Tatxers’ musical catalogue features consistent themes of life under late capitalism, the band’s two singer-songwriters display distinct approaches to this topic that became especially clear on the 2023 *Tatxers* LP. Bassist and lead singer Jon Salinas’s lyrics in particular focus on social alienation in a world whose social relationships are mediated by market forces, and even as he claims to prioritize the sounds of words over clarity of meaning (Rey Gorraiz), the abstract nature of these lyrics almost always serve the purpose of elaborating on these themes and sensations. At times, Salinas takes aim at the alienating effects of the mass media and postmodern culture that his band wants to build an alternative to, with songs about his inability to

enjoy mainstream pop music in “Saiatu nintzen” (“I Tried”) and the performing of one’s identity on social media in “Harri hura” (“That Stone”). More often than not, however, alienation is expressed in the more Marxian sense, describing feelings of estrangement from labor and wasting one’s human potential. The album’s opening track, “Audio luze bat” (“A Long Audio Message”) ends with the line “Zer inporta zaidan galdetzen didazunean / Ze hostia inporta zait, ez dut lan egin nahi ardiek bezala” (“When you ask me what it matters to me / What the hell does it matter to me? I don’t want to work like a sheep”). Meanwhile, the song “Zilarrezko hegalak” (“Silver Wings”) is an ode to working class dignity, imagining himself and the song’s addressee on a first-class flight on a silver-winged plane, insisting that “Ekoizten duguna baino gehio gara / Zintzo ibili ta berriz jipoituak” (“We are more than what we produce / Be sincere, again beaten down”).

Perhaps no two tracks from the *Tatxers* LP encapsulate this spirit better than “Nik nahi dudana I” and “Nik nahi dudana II” (“What I Want I & II”), two stylistically distinct songs that trace a trajectory from feelings of workplace alienation and financial stress to one of solidarity and emancipation. “Nik nahi dudana I,” with its upbeat and reverb-heavy guitar, begins with the speaker ruminating on the need to work to live, before realizing that pursuing his passions would be more worthwhile: “Beti bezala autobusa joan zen / Ta oraindik ez dakit lana zer den / Ikusi ditut umeak kaleetan ametsak akatzen / Ta orain ez dakit zertan ezberdintzen naizen” (“The bus went off like always / and I still don’t know what the job is. / I’ve seen kids in the street chasing their dreams, / and now I don’t know how I’m any different”). The song’s chorus then sees a shift to the second person, as the speaker announces his intent to save the addressee from their

life of toil and economic precarity: “Banoie! / Itsulapikoetan zinen / Aurpegia lur azpien / Gu biok hor sartu ginen” (“I’m coming! / You were in the piggy banks, / face underground. / We went in there together”). The second verse then seeks to further denaturalize the daily grind of wage labor—“Gure kultura laburbiltzen dute / Buseko bidaiek ta zizareek.” (“Our culture is summed up by / bus rides and worms.”)—and calls out the impulse to give into depression and pessimism—“Mundua etxera etorri da ta zu oraindik negarrez / Mundua etxera etorri da ta zu ohean zinen” (“The world has come home and you’re still crying. / The world has come home and you were in bed”). Finally, the song’s coda refers back to the three panel comic on the *Tatxers* album cover, reminding the listener that in spite of life’s struggles, there are fleeting moments of beauty and creativity that give life meaning beyond the accumulation of capital: “Mila aldiz erori gara / Gurea da lore sorta bat / Disko baten / Hauxe duk hauxe” (“We’ve fallen down a thousand times / Our [life] is a bouquet of flowers / On an album / *hauxe duk hauxe*[49]).

As “Nik nahi dudana I” ends and phases into “Nik nahi dudana II,” the distinct style of the latter evokes a shift from feelings of ecstasy and manic energy to one of inner peace and moral clarity. One of the group’s more experimental songs, the 84-second-long track is characterized by a lack of percussion and an atmospheric, synth-like guitar sound that is much more evocative of 90s indie pop more than 80s post-punk. Its repetitive lyrics build upon the message of “Nik nahi dudana I” by encouraging the listener to spread the prior song’s message of dignity and emancipation:

Esaiozue, esaiozue, esaiozu nahi duzunari

[49] The saying “hauxe duk hauxe” (literally “this is this”) carries roughly the same meaning as “That’s life!” or “C’est la vie.”

Esaiozue, esaiozue ez daitezela hutsera erori
Esaiok, esaion
Esaiozu aita amari, urrezko zalduntxoari
Esaiozu presoari, burua preso daukatenei[50]

The lucidity, certainty, and optimism communicated in the speaker's commands to "tell whomever you want" is both striking and illustrative of the kind of subjectivity that Tatxers hope to communicate through their music. Unlike the many-faced, meta-ironic Basque subject presented in the work of Chill Mafia, borne out of and adapted to liquid modernity, Tatxers' Basque subject has a coherent sense of self: it knows what it wants, understands its opposition to social atomization and economic precarity, and views the act of selling one's labor as something inherently alienating. This assertion of the self as autonomous, existing within a community bound by solidarity rather than the market, is the source of radical hope for the future of the Basque Country.

4.11 Paper Tigers: Imagining a Post-Capitalist Future

In contrast to the tracks written and performed by Salinas, the handful of songs by guitarist Martin Ziriza stand out for their more concrete political themes and lyrics; less about the subjective feelings of late capitalist alienation than overt attempts at imagining an alternative society. This was demonstrated early on in the band's trajectory, especially in the song from "Bidean galduta" ("Lost on the Path") from their 2020 debut album, in which Ziriza decries the abandonment of the working-class

[50] "Tell them, tell them, tell whomever you want / Tell them, tell them not to fall into the void / Tell them, tell them [separately singling out male and female addressees using the gendered *hika* form of address] / Tell your mom and dad, and the golden *zalduntxo* / Tell the prisoner and those who are prisoners in their head" [*Zalduntxo* literally means "little knight" ("caballerito" in Spanish), but could be understood as having class connotations or even possibly referring to the "caballeritos" of the Real Sociedad Bascongada de Amigos del País, a liberal organization devoted to scientific and economic progress founded in Gipuzkoa during the 18th century.]

struggle and declares that “alternatiba sortzea beharrezkoa da” (“we must create an alternative”). While Ziriza would later express embarrassment over his early songs reading too much like a political pamphlet (Matxain), his later work would nonetheless delve even further into the possibilities of an alternative, post-capitalist society.

His two songs that make up the B-side of 2021’s *Hiruzpalau amets larri* offer contrasting perspectives on the potential for remaking society: one pessimistic, the other utopian. While in the aforementioned “Ederregia” he declares that a brighter future is simply ‘too beautiful” for his city of Pamplona, the final track of the EP, “Zu ta biok” (“You and I”), paints a picture of a small town or tight-knit urban neighborhood in a post-capitalist future. Looking down from a window, the song’s narrator describes locals talking about the end of the old world over cigarettes and glasses of white wine. In Ziriza’s words, the song represents “Etorkizuneko bizitza bat (...) zu eta biok mundu zaharraren erorketari buruz hitz egiten ari gara, lasai, aurreko bizitzatik urrun, eta horri buruz hitz egiteko denbora dugu” (“A future life [...] you and I are talking about the fall of the old world, relaxed, far away from that previous life, with the free time to talk about it”) (Eslava). The chorus then transitions to images of gardens full of fresh vegetables (“Barazki freskotako baratza erotzeko”) and free bottles of cider to toast with (“Sagardoa dohainik gero topa egiteko”), as the speaker and his addressee share a room with large windows to let in the daylight (“Etxean leiho zabalak argia sartzeko / Ta gela bakar bat zu ta biontzako”). Finally, the closing coda of the song makes explicit Ziriza’s dream of a revamped, worker-owned society centered on local culture and economic production: “Gure herriko eliza / Kontzertu toki berria / Fabrika zaharra jabetza / Langileei eskeinia”

(Our town's church: / the new concert venue. / Ownership of the old factory / given back to the workers).

As for Tatxers' eponymous 2023 album, Ziriza's framing of post-capitalist societal alternatives shifts from one located in fantasy to one being shaped by ongoing processes in the real world. In the track "Iruñea" ("Pamplona"), Ziriza returns to the themes of destitution and hopelessness in his hometown, only to subvert them as the song's narrator finds salvation in the city's music scene. The opening verse alludes to police chasing young men through the street, implying that such a scene is now commonplace: "Beste behin ere argi urdinak hiriko paisai bihurtu ziren. / Gazte batzuen atzetik korrika daukaten ihesbidea kenduko diete" (Once again, the city landscape turned into blue lights. / Running behind a group of youths, they'll cut off their escape"). Then, switching to the first person, the first chorus describes the narrator finding refuge from the city inside a small concert venue: "Lurrazpira noa, ez naute aurkitzen / Kamararen fokoak hona ez dira iristen / Hasi berri omen den taldea dago jotzen / Etorkizun oparoa dutela esango nuke" (I'm going underground, they can't find me / The camera lenses don't reach down here / There's a new band playing / and I'd say they have a bright future").

Adding another layer of meaning to "Iruñea" is the way in which it references the song "Going Underground" by the British punk/post-punk band The Jam[51], in which singer Paul Weller expresses feelings of defeat, bemusement, and resentment over

[51] The Jam's influence on Tatxers is worth noting. First, it is clear that their jangly guitar sounds and pop melodies have been a clear inspiration for the Pamplona-based band, particularly on the *Tatxers* album. Secondly, The Jam's career trajectory—emerging out of a punk scene but defined by their pop sensibilities, then embracing their pop elements even as their lyrics became increasingly more political—resembles Tatxers' to some extent, and provides a blueprint for the Basque group's shift away from orthodox punk sounds.

public support for militarization and police crackdowns in the early Thatcher era, vented through bitterly sarcastic lines such as "the public wants what the public gets / But I don't get what this society wants / I'm going underground." In "Iruñea," Ziriza's translation of The Jam's original phrase—"lurrazpira noa"—doesn't necessarily carry connotations of an underground music scene, just as "Going Underground" uses the term to metaphorically describe an individual's retreat from an increasingly repressive political environment. Describing the significance of "Going Underground" as a turning point in British post-punk, Mark Fisher argues that that the song represents

> a very early response to Thatcherism, or, perhaps more pertinently (...) an analysis of why the working class was too exhausted and disillusioned to muster a concerted response to Thatcher's neoliberalism. The song sees the working class retreating into embattled private space, becoming a silent majority of individuals fatalistically watching as everything gets worse. ("Going Overground" 108)

However, while The Jam's original song was an "anthem of de-activation," the subterranean refuge that the speaker of Tatxers' song finds is one of political and personal *re-activation*: it is the site from which the subject emerges with a newfound sense of agency. Accordingly, as the song's narrator leaves the show in the second verse, the city that had been dominated by the presence of police now feels as though it belongs to him and his peers: "Kale ilun honetatik atera gara / hiria gurea balitz bezala" ("We exit out into the dark street / like the city was ours"). As the speaker enters another radical bar, the non-commercial music played over the speakers becomes a source of catharsis and community building for Pamplona's young punks and radicals: "Malda bat igo eta inoiz / egon ez naizen tabernan nago sartuta. / Royal jartzen dute, denok abesten / Barruko guztiaz hustuta" (Up a hill and now / I'm inside a bar I've never been

to. / They play Royal[52], everyone sings, / emptied of everything inside"). Ultimately, "Iruñea" is a cathartic celebration of spaces of refuge from the capitalist state, common in Basque cities and towns but threatened by political repression and gentrification. Here, Pamplona's existing countercultural infrastructure becomes the path towards transcending the barriers of contemporary society, with a line from the final verse of the song framing the speaker's night out in the Navarrese capital as having almost cosmic consequences: "Atarian gaude 100 mundu salbatzen" ("We're at the doorway, saving a hundred worlds").

Ziriza's other explicitly political song on *Tatxers*, "Paperezko tigrea" ("Paper Tiger"), likewise converts the pessimism of his earlier songs into a radical optimism for a post-capitalist future, presenting a perspective that evolves from one of pessimism towards a culminating message of radical optimism. The song begins with Ziriza reflecting on defeatism, both in the current political context as well as in his own music:

> Ez dakit zertara hurbildu zaren
> ez baitago hemen garaipenen seinale.
> Porrotari buruzko beste abesti bat izan daiteke
> agurtu ordurako burua ez daukat hemen…
> Burua ez daukat hemen.[53]

The second verse then opens the door to the idea that change is possible, questioning the idea that the lack of outward political conflict in the present necessarily implies a political consensus or the surrender of the left:

> Adio asko izan dira eta orain niri
> berriz etxean nagoela galdetu dit:

[52] A reference to Royal Headache, an Australian garage rock band from the 2010s that has attained a cult following among Basque punk music fans in the past several years.

[53] I don't know what you're moving towards / if there's no sign of victory. / This could be another song about defeat. / When it's time to say hello, my head's not here… / My head's not here.

ba al da hau bakea? oraindik
ez da amore ematea, atsedena baizik…
Atsedena baizik.[54]

Finally, the song's chorus arrives at the affirmation of radical optimism, admitting that while it may seem like a foolish thing to believe, the current systems of domination are likely not as entrenched nor as stable as they may appear:

> Hau ez al da izango mundua onera
> aldatzeko halako ilusio ero bat, ero bat.
> Paperezko tigreak ote dira aurrean digunak
> haizeari aurre egiteko
> gai ez direnak.[55]

Of course, what immediately stands out about this song is its obvious allusion to a quote attributed to Mao Zedong, in which Chinese communist leader described American imperialism as "outwardly a tiger, [yet] made of paper, unable to withstand the wind and the rain." However, in the 21st century context of Tatxers' work, the particular use of this phrase and the song's broader message evoke Mark Fisher more than they do Mao, with the unquestionable dominance of free market capitalism replacing Cold War geopolitics as the tiger in question. In his lecture on the music of The Jam and the rise of Thatcherism, Fisher would argue that the neoliberal consensus is "now as outdated as it is discredited," questioning whether

> Perhaps now is the moment when New Times can finally happen—if we can emerge, blinking, from our barricaded (but now extensively connected) cellars, and step out into the desert of a destituted public world, into a mass culture reduced to bland hedonic homogeneity by corporate depredation. Yes, this is hostile country; occupied territory. But how well defended is it? What possibilities

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[54] There've been many goodbyes / and now that I'm back home I'm asked: / is this peace? / it's still not giving up, just taking a rest… / Just a rest.

[55] Could this be just a crazy dream / to change the world for the better? / Maybe what confronts us are paper tigers / unable to face the wind.

> are there for us here, now? What could happen, that is to say, if we go overground? (“Going Overground” 110)

While Fisher was not a direct influence on Salinas and Ziriza’s songwriting or personal politics, it is telling that the overriding messages of their musical oeuvre seem to coincide with the writings of the late philosopher and music critic, whose work similarly diagnosed contemporary cultural and political malaise as symptomatic of an inability to envision a future without capitalism’s inequity and alienation. Furthermore, the way in which the band’s worldview coincides with that of Fisher in its stated desire to see a popular culture reflective of dignity and creativity of the working class is downright uncanny. Independently of one another, both the Pamplona natives Tatxers and the Leicester-born Fisher have identified the particular post-punk ethos of an earlier era as road not taken by Western society, which nonetheless remains open to future generations: “popular modernism isn’t dead: it has merely had a [forty]-year hiatus” (*k-punk* 609).

Tatxers can be considered part of several traditions: the Basque DIY punk tradition, the post-punk tradition, and even part of a long line of radicals perpetually caught between nihilism and radical hope amidst the late capitalist “end of history.” And yet, their music captures a feeling of urgency, as their generation confronts political and cultural stagnancy during a moment that seems to be defined by continued crisis. Reflecting on the balance of recovering the past and the desire to innovate, Salinas mentioned a saying that he had once heard: “Zeure garaiaren itzala izan behar duzu, baina ez argia” (“You have to be the shadow of your time, but not the light”) (Rey Gorraiz). This idea serves as a reminder that, in the end, Tatxers’ music is fundamentally

reactive to the social conditions of the post-crisis, post-pandemic Basque Country, in which banners and graffiti with anticapitalist messages adorn the streets, but the ability create societal alternatives beyond the realm of culture remains largely out of reach for the left. They can only trace the shadow of their reality, using sounds and discourses recovered from another country and a previous generation. And yet their work betrays an underlying faith that in representing what they see as the exceptional side of the Basque Country, they can create a path forward: a popular music that recovers a radical horizon lost over four decades ago.

4.12 Conclusions: The Basque Metamusic of the Neoliberal Crisis

In spite of the evident differences between Chill Mafia and Tatxers, they are both symptomatic of an underlying cultural and socioeconomic context of Basque youth, eager for a reimagining of the Basque community's relationship with capitalism and radical resistance. Particularly in their early interviews from the Spring and Summer of 2021, we find both groups often giving statements to the effect of “we don’t go out of our way to be political,” “we’ve grown up during two crises and counting,” or “explicitly political lyrics are no longer radical.” While Tatxers’ responses were almost certainly influenced by interviews Chill Mafia were giving at the time, this uncanny overlap reflects a palpable feeling that emerged out of the Basque music community in 2021, that new styles and perspectives were both inevitable and sorely needed. Writing in the Basque communist publication *Arteka*, Paul Beitia states that given the degree to which market ideology has come to dominate in the absence of revolutionary perspectives and alternatives, appeals to the autonomy of art at the expense of political engagement are

a natural outcome: “es entendible que ante la carencia de una sólida cultura política que pueda motivar la voluntad crítica y artística—y en oposición a un débil modelo artístico heredado—, los artistas tiendan al apoliticismo, a una incredulidad que nace de la inestabilidad” (Beitia "Algunos puntos” 42). While I believe that Beitia’s judgments on subjectivity and cultural production under late capitalism hold true, this chapter has shown that the recent break from the explicit political messaging of prior Basque music movements does not necessarily presuppose an apolitical approach.

As musical projects, both Chill Mafia and Tatxers are concerned with the crises of late capitalism and finding novel modes of expression for what they see as the beginning of a new political cycle, with their music betraying an anxiety over political and cultural stagnancy in the Basque Country and their city of Pamplona in particular. Their music speaks in distinct ways to the sense of frustration with that status quo that has virtually no outlets in institutional politics. On the one hand, Chill Mafia sees itself as caught between Spanish hegemonic politics that uses ETA as a cudgel, and Basque politics that has become marked by ethnocentric arrogance. Meanwhile, Tatxers’ songs reflect the post-democratic condition of contemporary liberal democracy, with alternatives to capitalism not up for discussion and the only remedies being the combatting of individualism and alienation through small pockets of cultural resistance.

In addition to speaking to the failures of contemporary politics, both have come to represent forms of do-it-yourself culture that present an intrinsic critique of the Basque cultural industry. Through both their lyrics and frequent collaboration with peers from the local art and music scene, Tatxers represent the old DIY of building a community by going to shows, meeting like-minded people and putting together a band or collective

with the intention of doing or saying things that are not represented in the mainstream culture. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Chill Mafia's impactful debut record has come to represent the new DIY of producing music digitally at home and disseminating it through online platforms, which overlaps with a broader internet culture of posting on social networks, making memes, and forming online communities mediated by anonymity and multi-layered irony. In each case, the ideology showcased in both their lyrics and their ways of producing and performing music corresponds with a greater "metamusic" as defined by Ernesto Castro, with musical practices becoming manifestations of emerging structures of feeling. If the impolitical trap praxis embodied by Chill Mafia represents "los últimos estertores de ese largo ciclo que se inicia en los setenta y que continúa en el presente" (Castro 44) in which the downwardly mobile lumpen and precariat classes can only point to the consequences of austerity, then Tatxers' post-punk is a time machine back to the beginnings of the neoliberal era, to recover not only aesthetics but, more importantly, the popular modernist ideals that allowed for a politically radical popular music. While Tatxers borrows heavily from the bands and genres of the early 80s, their attitude is not one of nostalgia, but rather "la de mirar hacia adelante [para] aprender de lo que se ha hecho antes" (Basaguren-Duarte).

Both groups are caught in a dialectic between tradition and the status quo on one side and the need to create something new on the other, which is something that could be said to weigh on all youth, but has been particularly acute in the Basque Country of the early 2020s. Ultimately, Chill Mafia has represented a reluctant embrace of capitalism and ironic sensibilities attributed to postmodernism, but only as a means toward creating new Basque political and cultural identity that can begin to transcend

the pitfalls of late capitalist society. They have disrupted and worked through the existing system via their post-ironic attachment to the trappings and traditions of Basque culture and their meta-ironic approach towards taboo political topics. This attitude accepts the idea that "uncertainty is no longer seen as a conclusion, but rather as a natural background to life" (Stoev 6), while disputing the idea of Basque community as intrinsically immune to the ideologies and alienation of this era. For Chill Mafia, the fetishistic ideas of Basque essentialism have allowed for Basque resistance to be uncoupled from true material politics, and their response has been to stake out an (im)political stance that critiques shallow activism and ethnocentric attitudes.

While Chill Mafia's detractors may view them as vapidly postmodern or even nihilist, their class consciousness and earnest desire to initiate a renaissance or revolution of the Basque musical tradition indicate that their project goes beyond the postmodern, embodying a Gen Z structure of feeling not yet definitively labelled by critics and theorists. One potential framework is Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen's interpretation of *metamodernism*, which is characterized by the impulse to reconcile or move beyond the modernism/postmodernism dichotomy, motivated by a latent understanding that neither of the previous paradigms adequately addresses the complexities and uncertainties of contemporary life.

> Metamodernism oscillates between (…) irony and enthusiasm, between sarcasm and irony, between eclecticism and purity, between deconstruction and construction and so forth. Yet ultimately, it points to a sensibility that should be situated beyond the postmodern, one that is related to recent metamorphoses or qualitative changes in Western capitalist societies. Importantly, in moving back and forth between positions (…), metamodernism does not combine 'the best of both worlds' so to speak. A structure of feeling may amount to a 'world' or realm, but it is not better or worse. It is a discourse that gives meaning to our

> experience, such as what is good and what is bad in the first place. (van den Akker and Vermeulen 11)

In this sense, Chill Mafia and their impact could be understood as the introduction of a new cultural logic in the Basque sphere, one that “employs scepticism through irony, and in place of postmodernism’s cynicism and rationality, (...) employs a sense of hope through sincerity” (Stoev 22). Such a project represents an attempt to work through the cultural logic of late capitalism, rather than rejecting the postmodern on the grounds that it is somehow incompatible with Basque identity.

Tatxers, meanwhile, embodies a (neo)modernist approach that rejects the aesthetic conservatism of the Basque punk rock tradition in order to build a metamusic from scratch, all while embracing and seeking to strengthen the countercultural scene that has is undeniably both a symbol of and safe haven for Basque cultural and linguistic autonomy. For them, Basqueness and its associations with emancipatory ideals are manifested in—and go no further than—this counterculture. Resistance no longer lies in ethnic identity, but rather a set of cultural practices that just happen to have strong roots in their community. With no revolution on the immediate horizon, the artistic and economic autonomy of this scene provides the means for combatting the corrosive social effects of neoliberal ideology and rediscovering a radical horizon.

The dichotomy between Chill Mafia and Tatxers is not merely one of mainstream vs. underground, irony vs. sincerity, or indifference vs activism, although these are certainly distinguishing features of their respective bodies of work. Rather, it represents a decision of whether to take part in the globalized, postmodern landscape they have inherited—pushing these frameworks to their limit—, or to build something new and

attempt to recover the modernist ideals of self-actualized human beings pursuing critically engaged artistic expression and acts of community-building. What they have in common is a concern for their economic future and a sense that being Basque alone won’t save them. The failures of liberal democracy in the wake of the 2008 crisis and Covid-19 pandemic not only influenced their views on capitalism and liberal democracy, but also their ideas of what it means to be Basque and inhabit a radical, working-class milieu in the 21st century.

Conclusions

In this dissertation, I have analyzed emerging and residual patterns of thought and self-identification in the Basque Country of the 2010s and early 2020s, focusing in particular on how the idea of an exceptionally anti-authoritarian or anticapitalist Basque identity is maintained or challenged in a post-democratic context. In short, I proposed that Fermin Muguruza's Black is Beltza transmedia project reasserts essentialist and transcendental notions of a radical Basque identity through its themes of Black subjectivity, anti-imperialist struggle, music as a vehicle for activism, and Basque exceptionalism. I then explored the postmodern subjectivities on display in Katixa Agirre's *Los turistas desganados* and Aixa De la Cruz's *La línea del frente*, as the progressive and cosmopolitan PMC protagonists who have benefited from, or otherwise bought into, the status quo and consensus politics are forced to confront the democratic deficiencies and economic anxieties of the 2010s Spain from the perspective of marginalized Basque activists. Lastly, I analyzed the emerging trends in Basque popular music, exemplified by the groups Chill Mafia and Tatxers, and the ways in which they signal a shift in perceptions of an inherently radical Basque identity and a renewed focus on class and economic precarity.

I have maintained that in the 21st-century Basque Country, understandings of Basque identity as inherently counterhegemonic inevitably undergo changes and scrutiny as the very foundations of capitalist hegemony are questioned. Through the lens of Rancière's theory of post-democracy, we see that the sclerotic and fundamentally unresponsive nature of contemporary liberal democracy has been

exposed by consistent failures to redress economic inequality and the expansion of surveillance, police, and carceral powers of the state. In the Basque Country, this post-democratic reality is manifested through Spanish state and media institutions' perpetuation of "todo es ETA" discourse and the criminalization of dissent; the PNV and Basque elites' political posturing that emphasizes Basque exceptionalism while embracing neoliberal ideologies and policies; and the institutional abertzale left's transition from radical opposition to electoralism and strategic cooperation with state institutions. Through the resulting tensions, contradictions, and omissions of these three institutional political ideologies, we find that new subjectivities and structures of feeling emerge, not yet fully theorized or accounted for in the current scholarship.

Although the works analyzed in this dissertation span different genres, media, age cohorts, and class perspectives, they all reflect on the role of Basque identity in confronting the post-democratic ideology of current power structures and the struggle to envision societal alternatives. In this sense, both the novels of Agirre and De la Cruz and the music of Chill Mafia grapple with the ideological constraints and limitations imposed by capitalist realism, albeit in differing ways. In *Los turistas desganados* and *La línea del frente*, the protagonists are unable to reconcile their middle-class sensibilities with the radical contestation represented by the Basque activist left, leading them to ultimately suppress their desire for the radical change. Chill Mafia, on the other hand, presupposes the inevitability of late capitalist alienation. Instead, they aim to assert the dignity of downwardly mobile Gen Z Basque youth through a meta-ironic discourse that celebrates their postmodern Basque identity while undermining the narratives of Spanish consensus politics and the social democratic Basque left, whom

they view as incapable or unwilling to address structural issues. Meanwhile, Fermin Muguruza's Black is Beltza project and the popular modernist revival of Tatxers represent novel attempts to break through the ideological stagnation of capitalist realism by harnessing the existing countercultural institutions and energies of Euskal Herria to imagine alternative forms of cultural productions that are community-centered and explicitly anticapitalist.

In regards to whether these works present Euskal Herria and its counterhegemonic, Basque-speaking subcultures as an exception to late capitalist alienation and market ideology, the perspectives represented in the selected texts vary. Black is Beltza unequivocally and unabashedly portrays Basques as exceptional, projecting the supposedly intrinsic Basque values of solidarity and radical democracy onto an uncertain future. Agirre and De la Cruz's novels seem to tacitly put forth the idea that political resistance and opposition to liberal consensus is an inherent feature of the Basque public sphere, with the qualification that attitudes about the nature of Basque difference are heavily influenced by class and the fear of being considered provincial in a globalized world. Finally, Chill Mafia and Tatxers represent reactions to the outmoded and out-of-touch Rock Radical Vasco and pop music scenes that were able to endure for so long in part because they reflected a sort of Basque aesthetic exceptionality. In distinct ways, the groups' projects both reflect a Gen Z skepticism towards the idea of inherent Basque exceptionalism, instead focusing on present-day material concerns.

The relevance of this materialist approach to 21st century discourses of Basque identity and exceptionality poses a series of related research opportunities pertaining to

contemporary Basque literature and cultural studies that scholars are only beginning to touch on. Ibon Egaña's 2024 essay "Desplazamientos de lo político: Del conflicto armado a los discursos feministas" similarly approaches Basque narrative fiction from a dual post-ETA/post-crisis perspective, highlighting the gradual displacement of "national oppression" as the structuring axis of Basque activism in favor of fourth-wave feminism and economic justice. Meanwhile, Thomas Olver and Olga Bezhanova have applied the framework of post-crisis Spanish literature in their respective analyses of Aixa De la Cruz's *La línea del Frente*. What these analyses overlook, in my view, is the irreducible link between political contestation and Basque identity, something that has persisted since at least the 1960s. Whereas these scholars seem to frame national identity, material politics, and feminism as discrete struggles, this dissertation has argued that within Euskal Herria, support for such emancipatory movements is automatically marked as Basque, such that Euskara becomes the language in which activists voice their demands, despite knowing that many of those in power cannot understand them. In the introduction of this dissertation, I posited that the graffiti "Ez da krisia, kapitalismoa da," while speaking to perhaps the most transcendental issue of them all, was articulated specifically from a Basque-speaking perspective that self-consciously stands in contrast to the global business and tourism hub of urban Bilbao. While nationalist- agnostic forms of anticapitalist dissent undoubtedly exist in Euskal Herria, the role of Basque identity in conditioning and fostering alternative modes of thought and being cannot be overlooked.

Of course, countless scholars have engaged in materialist and metapolitical critiques of Fernando Aramburu's *Patria* and similar post-ETA media phenomena,

highlighting the Manichaean and neoliberal framings of Basque society and the ways in which these both inform and are shaped by the consensus political discourse of the Spanish state. However, this approach largely focuses on the maintenance of hegemonic ideologies while largely ignoring or neglecting to engage with emerging counterhegemonic thought within Basque culture. Instead, discussions of post-crisis/post-ETA politics in Basque literature have been largely confined to postmodern appeals to the inherent value of coexistence and the plurality of subjectivities in Basque society. Instead of fostering a greater understanding of the underlying contradictions of society, this approach reflects the aim of some Basque academics and literary figures to defend the democratic virtues and cultural relevance of Basque cultural production to receptive liberal audiences in Spain and abroad, emphasizing narratives of coexistence that are supposedly more nuanced—and a priori of more literary value and academic interest—than those found in works like *Ocho apellidos vascos* or *Patria*. While the promotion of Basque literature and cultural institutions is of course vital in both academic circles and the world of publishing, I would argue that the impulse to frame contemporary Basque culture as defined by the pursuit of post-ETA consensus is ultimately harmful and serves to obfuscate ongoing political debates. In light of this, I have attempted to demonstrate with this dissertation that politically radical analyses of contemporary Basque literature are not just possible, but also profoundly relevant, given recent academic attention to the "return of the political" in peninsular literature and the possible intersections with the legacies of Basque political militancy that this entails.

Finally, another key theme that this dissertation has shed light on is the tension between entrenched countercultural institutions and practices and the accelerating

processes of privatization, gentrification, and touristification in the Basque Country, and how this tension then informs perceptions of Basques and their homeland as somehow exceptional. Whether one sees the Basque Country as a business friendly "oasis," a site of profound political contestation and solidarity, or something in between, its immediate economic horizon is clear, with policy increasingly determined by technocratic and market-driven logic. At the time of writing, some of the most heated political debates in the Basque Country relate to what is essentially a second phase of Guggeheimization taking place in the city of Bilbao and the wider province of Bizkaia. On the one hand, public funding of music festivals hosted by the company Last Tour has come under increasing scrutiny from investigative journalists and figures from the Basque music community, who see such events as accelerating gentrification and competing directly with countercultural circuits (Cancela). Meanwhile, the Guggenheim Museum's current proposal to build two outposts near the Urdaibai biosphere reserve has raised concerns about potential environmental harm as well as the impact of mass tourism in this relatively undeveloped corner of Bizkaia.

In this context, (counter)culture centered around the Basque language and the cultivation of local, self-managed networks will be increasingly perceived as an alternative and bulwark against this new wave of encroaching commercialization. Such arguments have been put forward in the essayistic work of Ibai Atutxa and Jon Urzelai (*Su festak*, 2023). In a presentation of his book, Urzelai reiterated the idea that the free market can only harm cultural production in Basque, in spite of local elites maintaining that professionalization, profit motives and increased tourism will bring economic benefits and minimal consequences.

> La red de Gaztetxes, centros sociales y cívicos, el propio Kafe Antzoki… Meterlos dentro de los parámetros del mercado no es realista. La cultura euskaldún no puede existir exclusivamente en ese entorno comercial. Grupos que nacen gracias al movimiento feminista y autónomo. Todo lo que da oxígeno a esa escena surge desde abajo. Esperar que se vaya a mantener gracias al mercado no es muy realista. (Cancela)

Caught between the growing commercialization of Basque culture (Ortiz de Villalba) and this renewed pursuit of international tourism and investment, grassroots Basque culture will necessarily have to take on a more critical stance towards capitalist ideology in order to preserve its autonomy.

Notably, as Ibon Egaña points out, the perspective of the emergent Basque communist left—Mugimendu Sozialista, GKS, the online publications Gedar and *Arteka*, etc.—has to date been conspicuously absent from literary production, seemingly indicating an uncertainty in how to express this new wave of Basque anticapitalist ideology (Egaña 237). While the post-crisis Basque communist novel has yet to be written, it could be argued that this ideology has already permeated the Basque post-punk music scene analyzed in the final chapter of this dissertation, as bands like Nakar and Sal del Coche have followed Tatxers in creating aesthetically radical music that explicitly reflects on capitalism's decadence and the possibility of a renewed communist horizon. In a 2024 interview with *Hamaika Telebista*, Nakar lead singer Jone Laspiur may have even inadvertently come upon a name for this movement—*poz-punk*—a play on words that combines post-punk with the Basque word for joy ("poz") (Otamendi "MusikaZuzenean TB #272" 5:15). This innovative and upbeat approach to Basque music that has emerged in response to the ongoing neoliberal crisis may serve to frame Euskara—and by extension, Basque counterculture—"como respuesta positiva al

proceso de proletarización, esto es, como elemento que se contrapondrá a la actual tendencia de crisis y empobrecimiento del capitalismo" (Castillo).

Looking towards a future that seems to portend both further economic and political turmoil and the continued doubling-down on the neoliberal policies that drive economic inequality and social resentment, the study of counterhegemonic Basque culture—and Basques' ideological identification with such resistance—offers unique insight into late capitalist culture in times of crisis. While Basque society offers countless challenges and alternatives to neoliberal consensus, it remains as susceptible to the dictates of capital as anywhere else. This dissertation has explored just some of the ways in which idealized and aspirational notions of Basque exceptionalism are evolving in light of this reality.

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