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Reaching Out: The Basque Transnational Body in the Poetry of Kirmen Uribe

Abstract

In this paper we explore the contribution of Kirmen Uribe, a Basque writer, artist and cultural activist, to the process of political reconciliation in the Basque country, a socially transforming compromise brought about by the dissolution of the Basque terrorist organization ETA in October 20th, 2011. Uribe achieved literary recognition and public notoriety within the Iberian cultural landscape with the publication of his novel *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao* in 2008, for which he received the Spanish National Literature Prize for Narrative in the following year. However, we argue that it is with his earlier collection of poems *Bistatean Heldu Eskutik* 'Meanwhile Take my Hand,' originally published in Euskara—the Basque language—in 2001, that Uribe initiates a strong, symbolic act towards reconciliation in Basque social relations. Using a methodological framework built on the juxtaposition of transnational and affect studies, we analyze the transformational thrust of an affective, reconciliatory language in Uribe's poems. Building on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a minor literature, we first consider how this affective language overflows and deterritorializes the traditional geographical and discursive boundaries of Basque cultural nationalism; then, we analyze the production of Uribe's poetic expression within a specific temporality, in which Basque society demanded the end of violence in the Basque country; and, finally, we argue that this poet's self-conscious poetics of affect provides a cultural model for the democratization of the Basque social body reterritorialized in the transnational realm.

Keywords

Basque Poetry, Iberian Cultural Studies, Affect, Transnationalism

Reaching Out: The Basque Transnational Body in the Poetry of Kirmen Uribe

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The dissolution of the Basque terrorist organization ETA on October 20th, 2011 made it possible to open a period of political reconciliation within Euskadi, the Basque Autonomous Community in Northern Spain, and with the rest of the geographical areas that comprise the territorial organization of the Spanish State. Not so long ago, the Mayor of Renteria and a militant of a political party with close ideological ties to Basque separatism, staged a meaningful act of appeasement with one of ETA's surviving victims in front of the Spanish media.¹ These two people, coming from opposing sides of the Basque political spectrum, planted an olive tree together in exactly the same location where the victim's father had been murdered in a terrorist attack perpetrated by ETA in 1982 (Gorospe).

From the realm of Basque literature written in Spanish, Fernando Aramburu's highly successful 2016 novel *Patria* ('Country'), has been read, not without controversy, as the textual performance of the reconciliatory agreement that had been brought about by the end of ETA's armed struggle against the Spanish state. Notwithstanding Aramburu's timely literary documentation of reconciliation in Basque society, we would argue that the earlier work of Kirmen Uribe, a younger writer, artist, and cultural activist, had already anticipated an important ethical positioning a decade earlier. Indeed, a strong, symbolic act of affective restitution from the domain of literature can be found in his collection of poems *Bistatean Heldu Eskutik* ('Meanwhile Take my Hand') originally published in Euskara—the Basque language—in 2001.² In that year, this book received the Critic's Award for a collection of poetry written in an official language other than Spanish.

From his very title, Uribe offers a touching gesture of approximation, a corporeal sign of loving coexistence duly noted by Jon Kortazar, the critic that has been carefully charting the development of his work and its anchoring within recent stylistic and thematic trends in Basque literature. Although Kortazar reads this title as an indication of the inevitability of human death, he also claims that Uribe's lyric poses a desire for life, love, and protection that underscores the autonomy of poetic expression in Euskara. As such, he breaks away from a previously established thematic continuity between Basque poetry and Basque country (94, 96). Indeed, in a society indelibly marked by long decades of institutional violence, bloody terrorist responses, and all sorts of everyday excesses against peaceful living—what

¹ Renteria is a community of 40,000 located in the Basque province of Gipuzkoa.

² All citations from Uribe's verse included in this article are taken out of the bilingual Euskara/Spanish edition of this book (Visor, 2004). All English translations are our own unless otherwise noted.

has been euphemistically referred to as the Basque “conflict” or “The Thing” as writer Iban Zaldúa and friends have ironically called it (96)—Uribe’s thematic break, a discontinuity determined by his unambiguous poetics of love and affection, should not be underestimated.

Given the complexity of the social and historical contextualization that frames Uribe’s poetic expression, the sentimental and affective risks the author ran in his poetry within an ideologically divided social milieu surpass the realm of metaphor into discursive functionality, albeit of a kind different from that which has been normally understood as political activism in Basque literature. Indeed, what can be described as the affective functionality of Uribe’s writing has become a trademark of his literary output. For instance, following the reconciliatory line initiated in *Bistatean Heldu Eskutik*, Uribe chose another meaningful title for his latest novel: *Elkarrekin Esnatzeko Ordua* ‘The Hour of Waking Together’ (2016). This title is taken verbatim from the last line of Ezra Pound’s famous poem “The Garret,” a modernist text included in *Lustra* (1916), a book of poetry that has been deemed “remarkable for perfectly paced endings” (Stock). Aside from its prestigious aesthetic pretext, Uribe focused on the transformative potential of his writing when, in an interview to promote the publication of this novel in Spanish translation, he declared that: “No podía quedarme callado. Ha sido un acto de confesión y de querer decir claramente que la sociedad vasca ha fracasado. Es el momento de bajar a la calle y escuchar a todos los que han sufrido y hablar con ellos. Ese es el camino” (Riaño) ‘I couldn’t remain silent. It [his commitment to social reconciliation through writing] has been an act of confession and of saying loud and clear that the Basque society has failed. It is high time we go down the street to listen to all who have suffered and talk to them. That’s the only way.’ Uribe’s active mediation into Basque socio-cultural relations is particularly relevant for a writer whose name appears from time to time associated by some critics with contemporary strands of Basque cultural nationalism (Zaldúa 95, 98; Delgado, *La nación* 178; Perret, “The Movement” 25). Therefore, the appropriation of Uribe’s name as an author linked to the discourse of Basque national identity fulfils an important function in the construction of the Basque imagined community in the new millennium.³

Transnational Mediations: Breaching the Disaffected Gap

Our readings of Uribe’s poetic texts are grounded on the connection between transnational and affect studies in order to deconstruct and question the

³ We follow here Michel Foucault’s theorizing of an author as “a function of discourse” (1400). Foucault claims that authors are first “objects of appropriation” (1401); he then adds that “this ‘author-function’ . . . results from a complex operation whose purpose is *to construct* the rational entity we call an author” (1402; our emphasis).

ossification of the discursive limits normally applied to the analysis of cultural nationalisms. In particular, those rhetorical and critical moves that intentionally favor one linguistic code over the other in bilingual geographical areas with nationalist claims. That is, these critical moves normally apply an already decided cluster of territorial, historical and affective parameters of what should be considered, or not, of national suitability. The demarcation of geopolitical limits as theorized in transnational studies, allows for an innovative approach to the study of national cultures beyond the critical premises rigidly harnessed to their evaluation. Interestingly, the transnational methodology makes use of an optical trope in order to explain its working hypothesis: “an optic or gaze that begins with a world without borders, empirically examines the boundaries and borders that emerge at particular historical moments, and explores their relationships to unbounded arenas and processes” (Khagram & Levitt 5).

Similarly, we need to consider that the explicit, affective move expressed by Uribe’s title ‘Meanwhile Take my Hand’, implies to offer one’s hand within a specific, historically contextualized timeframe; in other words, ‘meanwhile’ something else happens. This corporeal move also indicates a transformational reorientation of the (social) body. Sara Ahmed argues that disorientation in social space can be experienced as a negative bodily feeling, a shattering sensation of “one’s belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life livable” (*Queer* 157). Within such a disruptive context of the living experience, Ahmed adds that “the body might be reoriented if the hand that reaches out finds something to steady an action” (*Queer* 157). We read Uribe’s poetry as the textual intervention of an action that seeks to reorient and transform the living conditions of experience of the Basque social body. This action both constitutes and its constituted by an emotional and, indeed, ideological move that has been effectually summarized in the title of the collection by the tendering of the hand.

Written for the most part in a conversational and direct tone, Uribe’s speakers establish a meaningful dialogue with the body’s physical caducity. It is also true that this dialogue determines a poetic discourse in which different issues related to cultural identities, historical memory, autobiographical experiences, and the biodiverse demographics of a society immersed in global flows of human capital also become active interlocutors. Significantly, Uribe launches this discussion through a profusion of culturalist quotes and inner and outer transnational crossings, all of which occur within the sentimental borders of the Basque imagined community as well as within the territorial organization of the Spanish State. Uribe opens in this way the possibility of a fruitful, ontological exchange between Basque cultural nationalism and its constitutive others.

Uribe’s intertextual dialogues with other cultural traditions decide a substantial transformation of the discursive fences that had until then marked the thematic limits of Basque literature written in Euskara, which had been defined, as

Kortazar has noted, by an explicit ideological engagement with Basque nationalism (24, 32). Taken from this angle, Uribe's lyric questions the existence of an unsurmountable gap only filled with disaffection among Basque and Spanish cultural relations, as Luisa Elena Delgado has argued. In order to best address the specific differences among Iberian national cultures, Delgado also recommends the use of an optical trope, an "astigmatic [critical] vision," to be applied to the study of Galician, Catalan, and Basque literatures within Peninsular cultural studies. According to her otherwise compelling argument, our critical understanding of cultural differences among Peninsular literatures must be guided by an optical metaphor—that of the astigmatic eye—which "literally has different focal points in different planes" ("Astigmatic" 142). Following this model, she identifies an irreconcilable distance between these two focal points of cultural interests that function as a "parallax gap." As Delgado explains:

The parallax gap is the space that separates two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible (and the visual parallax often points to a political parallax, a social antagonism that allows for no common ground). In my opinion, the only possible way of studying literatures belonging to different linguistic, cultural and political contexts is to start with the premise that such gap might indeed exist and accept it with all its consequences (including political ones). ("Astigmatic" 143)

Clearly, as we hope that our work also demonstrates, we agree that an optical realignment that would account for different insights within Peninsular cultural studies is not only desirable but at this point utterly necessary; that is, we also stand with Delgado's call that "we might begin to engage with what has hitherto remained out of (our) sight" ("Astigmatic" 145). However, we also believe that our critical engagement need not exclude other possible ways to interrogate the historical, socio-cultural, and ideological gradations that have constituted specific works of Basque, Galician or Catalan writing as national literatures to begin with. Following Delgado's own assessment on the need to always historicize our readings of these texts, and taking into account the history of political excesses committed in the name of the nation (both Basque and Spanish), some might consider Delgado's consequential warning—"accept [the social antagonism between Basque and Spanish cultures] with all of its consequences (including political ones)"—a dire resolution and, therefore, undesirable, within important segments of Basque society.

From Minor to Small Literatures and Back Again

In staking out stylistic and thematic development in contemporary Basque literature, Kortazar identifies 1969 as the year that marked the beginning of its process of cultural modernization. For Kortazar, Basque literature is a “small literature” in which the adjective “small” refers not only to the number of native speakers or potential readers, authors, and works produced in a given year, but “a feature that can affect the way in which literature itself is produced” (11). By this critical move, Kortazar seems to distance himself from Mari Jose Olaziregi’s approach to Basque writing as a minor literature, an analytical method that would follow Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s foundational notion of the concept as “that which a minority constructs within a major language” (Deleuze and Guattari 16). Olaziregi’s pioneering work on the position of Basque literature within global literatures follows Deleuze and Guattari’s premise, given that Basque authors, “are located in that ‘in-between’ of different cultural and identity communities and subjected to constant exchange and recognition of difference” (Olaziregi 11). Alternatively, Kortazar argues that output in Basque literature does not fit Deleuze and Guattari’s model because “the dialectic between ideology and literary autonomy would seem to be one of the axes around which the day-to-day life of writers in that language revolves” (12). In order to support his point, this critic adds that “there are debates over commitment as opposed to autonomy, over a literature committed to the national idea as opposed to what is deemed a more personal literature, and over a national or what is called here an identity literature and a literature that seeks to be cosmopolitan” (12). Notwithstanding this pertinent argument regarding the politics of the everyday life and the debates around (national) commitment versus (personal) autonomy in contemporary Basque literature, Kortazar’s line of reasoning seems to be constrained by different sets of irreconcilable binaries such as commitment against autonomy, cultural nationalism against personal creativity, and the local against the global.

Yet, we understand that the study of contemporary Basque literature can still be productively undertaken beyond binary hurdles through the notion of a minor literature as the condition of possibility of its own recognition. In the foreword to the English edition of Deleuze and Guattari’s work on Kafka, “The Kafka Effect,” Réda Bensmaïa provides an important clue on how we can carry out this kind of textual inquiry. As Bensmaïa argues, the concept of a minor literature “permits a reversal” that would go beyond preestablished categories into “certain texts and ‘bi-lingual’ writing practices that . . . had to pass through a long purgatory before even being read, much less recognized” (Deleuze and Guattari xiv). His point about bilingualism is particularly pertinent for Basque writers who, as Zaldúa has reminded us, need to make important decisions as to the linguistic code in which they choose to write because they are coming from bilingual and sometimes

trilingual communities (Euskara, Spanish, and French). Not to mention the choices they also need to make about ideological engagement with political struggle (Zaldua 90, 93-94). Likewise, literature written in Euskara necessarily relies on translation and bilingual editions in order to reach a wider readership. Furthermore, and most importantly, Bensmaïa adds that a minor literature allows us “to dispense with dualisms and rifts—whether linguistic, generic, or even political” that would constitute some sort of restriction to evaluate a specific era (xv).

Therefore, in order to describe our approach to Uribe’s functional interventions in the Basque cultural field, we now return to the three major features that Deleuze and Guattari attribute to a minor literature: “deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation” (18). From the juxtaposition of transnational and affect studies, superimposed on the formative parameters of a minor literature, we can explore the transformational possibilities of an affective, reconciliatory language in Uribe’s poems. We can first consider how this language overflows and deterritorializes the geographical and discursive limits placed on the Basque national subject. Second, we can study the production of this language within a specific, unescapable historical context that demanded the end of violence in the Basque country. Finally, we could argue that Uribe’s self-conscious poetics of affect provide a cultural model for the democratization of the Basque social body reassembled and reterritorialized in the transnational realm.

Cultural Transnationalism *Avant-la-Lettre* and the Move Beyond Political Realism in Basque Literature

As noted by Olaziregi, one could argue that the Basque language “was born with a clear universal vocation” (13). To ground her argument, she mentions that the very first book published in Euskara, Bernard Etxepare’s *Linguae Vasconiae Primitiae* (1545), includes a refrain that reads “*Euskara, jalgi hadi mundura!*” ‘Basque language, open up to the world!’ (13). Therefore, as Olaziregi also points out, Etxepare’s *Linguae* “sought to transcend the local arena” (13). Uribe’s writing locates itself within this cultural tradition whose development in contemporary Basque literature is unquestionable. For example, a more recent precursor of the reterritorialization of the Basque social body in a transnational context can be found in Bernardo Atxaga’s work. Both his 1978 long poem *Ethiopia* and his 1989 *Obabakoak*, a collection of interrelated short stories constructed out of Basque legends and oral tales, have moved Basque literature from local concerns into global understandings of the human experience. For instance, as Kortazar makes clear, Atxaga’s *Ethiopia* implied not only a substantial modification of the artistic boundaries associated with Basque writing, but a radical transformation of the formal and the geographical coordinates traditionally linked to Basque national

identity (24). Indeed, Atxaga inscribes in this text the shattering of the subject through the fragmentation of language and the attendant dissolution of a national core, marking the entrance of Basque literature into postmodernity (Kortazar 24). Similarly, *Obabakoak*'s editorial success and international projection materialized on social, literary, and psychological consequences that fostered the autonomous community's development. The publication of this book also moved Basque writing beyond the constraints of political realism, and reinforced the self-confidence of the Basque reading public while shaping the Spanish National Literature Prize system (Kortazar 34-35). In any case, the success of Atxaga's book made Basque writers aware that the term "realism" in the Basque literary system implied "positions close to those of Basque nationalism and politics understood as an examination of identity and pro-independence ideological markers" (Kortazar 36).

In order to contextualize Uribe's lyric within recent developments in Basque poetry, Kortazar mentions three characteristics: "simple language, a narrative treatment of poetry, and the importance of an auto-biographical past" (55). This cluster of stylistic traits points in turn towards a realist register in his poetic expression. It should be noted here that the development of Basque literature of the nineteen-eighties manifests an unavoidable, stylistic bond between a realist design and the political objectives of a radical, cultural nationalism in its non-violent form (Kortazar 32). But we should also recall, as Kortazar does, that the decade of the nineteen-eighties was marked by extreme violence and some of the bloodiest episodes of ETA's terrorist attacks. If Uribe's poetic realism departs thematically from the ideological activism characteristic of the Basque cultural landscape of the nineteen-eighties, he seems to have chosen to establish an explicit, discursive distance with the political objectives of Basque nationalist writing that preceded his work. The political context in the Basque Country, a shattered social body that at the turn of the last century was overwhelmed by the excesses of political violence, provides the historical framework within which Uribe's thematic departure from explicit nationalist engagement could be explained.

The Spirit of Ermua and its (Controversial) Political Legacy

ETA's capture and cold-blooded assassination of Miguel Angel Blanco, a twenty-nine-year-old town councilor of the conservative *Partido Popular* 'The People's Party,' in the city of Ermua on July 13, 1997 triggered a radical change in the affective disposition of Basque society. As Jokin Lecumberri reports for *La Vanguardia* on the twentieth anniversary of Blanco's murder, "el silencio y el miedo mayoritarios en la sociedad vasca saltaron por los aires a esa hora" 'the silence and fear predominant in Basque society went through the roof at the time.' Lecumberri also quotes Carlos Totorika, the socialist Mayor of Ermua, saying that

“a partir de ese momento se empezó a superar la respuesta pasiva al terrorismo” ‘from that moment onwards passive answers to terrorism were to be overcome.’ Likewise, as reported by *El País* on the same occasion, there were forty-eight hours of tension that shook Spanish society to the core, marking a before and an after in the political struggle against Basque terrorism (*El País* 12 Jul. 2017). Even *Naiz* a newspaper that proudly displays an editorial line sympathetic to Basque separatism, reported on the anniversary of Blanco’s killing. The editorial includes a quote by a representative of EH Bildu—a Basque political party that pursues a clean-cut institutional severance from Spain—as saying, “en este proceso de empatía no podemos quedarnos ninguno al margen” (*Naiz* 11 Jul. 2017) ‘within this process of empathy no one should remain on the sidelines.’

As a response to Blanco’s capture and assassination, thousands of people took over the streets of cities in and outside the Basque Country to the cry of *basta ya!* ‘enough,’ and most importantly for our purposes here, raising their hands painted in white (Fig. 1).



(Fig. 1). A political demonstration asking for the liberation of Miguel Ángel Blanco in July 1997. Image by Rafa Rivas (*La Vanguardia*).

During those days, many members of the *ertzaintza*, the police body operating under the governance of local Basque authorities, took off their helmets and showed their faces defiantly to ETA as a gesture of protest and in solidarity with the victims (*El País* Jul. 12, 2017). Around the same time, and with a similar objective, those attending the popular festivities of *San Fermín*—the running of the bulls—in the nearby city of Pamplona, overflowed the doors of the City Hall with red neckties (*El País* Jul. 12, 2017). This general feeling of rejection towards Basque terrorism provides the ideological grounds of the *Espíritu de Ermua* ‘the Spirit of Ermua.’ This is a political movement that, regardless of its rightful claim to the defense of human rights in the Basque Country, has chiefly defined its main ethos in fierce opposition to Basque political nationalisms of any kind, both within Euskadi and in Spain at large.

To be sure, it would be incorrect to frame Uribe's poetic work squarely within the cultural politics of the Spirit of Ermua, due to the fact that this self-proclaimed spirit has allowed itself to be ideologically manipulated to serve the political ends of a reified, ultra-conservative strand of Spanish political nationalism. At the same time, however, it would not be risky to affirm the existence of a contextual, semiotic continuity between the rising tide of hands protesting the killing of Miguel Angel Blanco in the streets of Bilbao or Donostia in 1997, and the affective move implied by Uribe's generous tendering of his own poetic hand shortly thereafter. That is, we notice that Uribe's proffering corporeal gesture occurs while a crucial moment in social relations is literally taking place in Basque public spaces. Consequently, the publication in Euskara of his poetry in 2001 could be read as a cultural manifestation representative of a linguistic community that has just had enough; that is, the cultural sign of a community emotionally saturated by both political conflict and the co-option of Euskara towards nationalist ends of a violent kind. If so, we believe that it would be legitimate to ask the following question: how does Uribe's affective move at the turn of the new millennium contribute to a new understanding of Basque cultural nationalism beyond the sentimental borders that had, until then, marked the political boundaries of *Euskal Herria*?⁴

Reaching Out: Culturalist Dialogues and Affective Intertextuality

In Uribe's poetry the modes of transnational intersection are diverse in aims and form: geopolitical, historical and literary, extrinsic (they involve other nation-states), or intrinsic (they occur within the political borders that define the territorial organization of the Spanish State). However, all of these are somewhat related through the semantic networks established by the self-conscious mechanisms at work in poetics. And by "poetics" we mean, with Jonathan Mayhew, "the idea of language that is explicitly or implicitly articulated in the poet's work" (11). In this sense, literature truly becomes a powerful, ideological device of communication. As noted by Kortazar, Uribe's poetics are characterized by an explicit intertextual dialogue with important referents in Anglo-American literatures that implied the opening of Basque literature to new forms of expression (125). Indeed, a close reading of Uribe's intertextual dialogue in the bilingual Euskara-Spanish edition of his poetry (Visor 2004) shows no less than thirteen explicit references to other national literatures—including names as relevant as Clarice Lispector, Margaret Atwood, Carlo Emilio Gadda, or Rainer W. Fassbinder—as opposed to just three

⁴ *Euskal Herria* 'Basque Country/Fatherland' designates the territory claimed by Basque political nationalism. This territory includes the *Foral* Community of Navarre in Spain and *Iparralde*, as the French Basque Country is known, a compound of three provinces, Labort, Lower Navarre, and Sola, located in the southwestern corner of France.

coming from Basque traditional literary sources: Bernard Etxeparre, Gabriel Aresti and Imaz de Alzo.

However, an attentive critical eye would also identify in Uribe's work some implicit, stylistic poetic references to selected heavy-weights of the Spanish literary canon, such as Miguel de Unamuno, Federico García Lorca, and Luis Cernuda. Unlike the more literal guidance of explicit intertextual references manifested in outer and inner culturalist crossings, Unamuno, Lorca and Cernuda emerge at the symbolic plane of Uribe's poetics, providing, nevertheless, a unique esthetic blend to the spatial form characteristic of his writing.

In the poem "Saguzarra" 'Bat,' Uribe's speaker claims that he feels a bat housed in his belly: "saguzar bat dut sabelean" (74) 'I have a bat in my belly.' An informed reader would immediately find a literary pretext in Unamuno's famous sonnet "A mi buitrea" 'To my vulture':

Este buitrea voraz de ceño torvo
que me devora las entrañas fiero
y es mi único constante compañero
labra mis penas con su pico corvo. (311)

This hungry vulture, with his severe
frown who voraciously devours my entrails
and consumes my sorrows with his curved
beak, is my only constant companion.⁵

Similar to what happens in Unamuno's poem, Uribe's speaker cannot find a rational means of explaining the presence of whatever is causing the existential anguish lodged inside his body, metaphorically figured by the bat dwelling in his belly: "saguzarra kanporatzeko nire garuna ez da nor" (74) 'my mind cannot displace the bat.' Uribe's text concludes in what it seems to be a hospital bed where the speaker lies down in order to undergo surgery to empty his insides, which in turn will metamorphose him into a bronze statue to be ultimately placed in the park. Once the bat has been removed from his body, this new sense of self is ultimately left feeling "huts-hutsik eta geldirik" (74) 'completely emptied and still.' Although Uribe's bat metaphor certainly allows for hermeneutic flexibility, it appears to be related to an emotional, personal condition that additionally bears public recognition, which might be perhaps equally related to some kind of anxiety felt by an aspiring (national) poet.

Additionally, Uribe makes use in his writing of a famous, avant-garde poetic image—"caballos azules" 'blue horses'—created by Federico García Lorca to

⁵ We use Armand F. Baker translation of Unamuno's poem.

conclude the second section of his “Nocturno del hueco” ‘Noturne of Emptied Space,’ a poem that features in his acclaimed collection of surrealist texts, *Poet in New York*. García Lorca’s celebrated lines read as follows: “No hay siglo nuevo ni luz reciente. / Solo un caballo azul y una madrugada” (703) ‘No new age. No enlightenment. / Only a blue horse and dawn.’

Uribe’s blue horses appear in two poems: “Ezikutuko Maitea” ‘Secret Love’, associated to the inscription of an idealized experience of love, and “Bidaztia Sorterriaz Mintzo Da” ‘A traveler speaks of his homeland,’ about the speaker’s feeling of inner displacement within a given, im/possible geography. The former includes the following line: “Giraldak, zaldi urdinen urrezko iduneria” (70) ‘Garlands, blue horses of golden harness,’ as the joyful celebration of the title’s understanding of love; the latter reads, “Gure itsasoan ez da urik. / Mila zaldi urdin ziren uhinak” (84) ‘Our ocean is waterless. / A thousand blue horses made the waves up.’ The oxymoron “a waterless ocean” connotes a space bereft of the condition of its own possibility—as in the case of a stateless nation—which in turn constitutes an ontological lack compensated by the metaphorical strength of the blue horses as waves. The first poem does not include an epigraph but the second does, framed by a few lines by Portuguese contemporary writer Sophia de Mello Breyner: “The perennial distant memory / of the lost homeland. We don’t know / when we lost it: yesterday or tomorrow” (Macklin 63). In these lines, de Mello Breyner reminisces about a long-lost nation that forever remains in the speaker’s memory. The national subtext in Uribe’s poem gets thus obliquely inscribed through the articulation of an experience of inner exile that occurs within the geopolitical boundaries of the nation.

However, both of Uribe’s titles do in turn recall two of Cernuda’s signature poems of personal and geographical exile: “Amor oculto” ‘Hidden love’ and, most importantly, “Un español habla de su tierra” ‘A Spanish man speaks of his homeland.’ In the first poem, an impersonal voice talks about the liberating strength of an experience of love that needs to remain forcefully hidden. Cernuda naturalizes the emotional intensity of this forbidden love through its symbolic association with components of elemental matter, such as water, earth, and fire (184-5).

Unlike Cernuda, Uribe’s poem describes in the first person a dream about a secret love experienced in childhood, and a later, everyday encounter in the street with the same girl, now an adult woman. Still, the ordinary nature of this love contrasts ironically with an intensive expression of affect symbolically figured by the blue horses: “Ametsetik astebetera / elkarrekin topo egin genuen kelea / Giraldak, zaldi urdinen urrezko iduneria” (70) ‘One week after the dream / we bumped into each other on the street / Garlands, blue horses of golden harness.’ Also, we should like to point out that Cernuda’s second title, “Un español habla de su tierra” (186) ‘A Spanish man speaks of his homeland,’ constitutes one of his most celebrated texts of exile. In this poem, he launches a fierce response against

the Francoist regime, the self-proclaimed “nationalists” of the Spanish Civil War, who are guilty of the poet’s political and geographical displacements. Therefore, both Cernuda’s and Uribe’s texts of inner (within the political limits of the nation-state) and outer (beyond the geographical limits of the nation) exile resent the rigidity of a totalitarian idea of a nation-state that excludes them both as citizens and as political subjects. We conclude then that Uribe’s self-conscious poetics of affect through intertextual exchanges with Unamuno, García Lorca, and Cernuda demonstrate an anxiety of influence that determines his position as an aspiring Basque national poet in dialogue with, rather than in opposition to, the Spanish national canon.

The Geopolitics of Dis/Placement: From a Deterritorialized Language to the Language Self/Deterritorialization

Uribe’s writing has drawn analytical attention with the publication in 2008 of his first critically acclaimed novel *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*. Significantly, this novel won the Spanish National Literature Prize for Narrative in the following year. Sally Perret, who has studied the ideological mechanisms at stake in awarding national literature prizes in Spain to works written in official languages other than Spanish, claims that: “the list of minority writers who have won the [national literature] prize exclusively includes writers who mesh well with the state’s preferred image of itself” (“In the Name” 83). Perret’s argument fits well with what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s refers to as “state-authorized marginality.”⁶ As Christian Claesson explains, “according to Perret’s study, the state appears to promote literary diversity by making literature in all four languages eligible for the award but, at the same time, it controls this diversity by appropriating it and making it a part of state-sanctioned culture” (767).

Yet, as Luis Martín-Estudillo and Nicholas Spadaccini noted, it is precisely the democratization of the Spanish state that, however faultily, has fostered a thematic shift from restricted political commitment to autonomous creativity in contemporary Basque literature:

The infrastructure needed for the full development of a Basque literary system was created only after the process of devolution following the recovery of democratic freedoms in the 1970s. Interestingly, with the change in juncture the resistance that was shown against the monolithic identitarian model of Francoism was to shift inward, as some of the most

⁶ Spivak used this concept to describe the position of a Sesotho writer whose work has been recognized within the cultural politics implemented by the South African state. Heard during her presentation as part of the panel “The Human Caught in the Spinning of the Global” at the 134th MLA Annual Convention, Seattle, 9-12 January 2020.

prominent Basque writers felt a need to question the kind of rigid identitarian discourse promoted by certain nationalist sectors, both Basque and Spanish. (xiii)

Furthermore, the cultural fostering of autonomous identitarian differences in minor Peninsular languages promoted by the Spanish democracy has also been acknowledged from the very core of Basque cultural criticism. For instance, Olaziregi recognizes that, unlike what seems to be the case in *Iparralde*, the Basque provinces in the south of France, the speakers of Euskara provide, “a political framework that (*at least in Spain*) defends, subsidizes, and legislates on measures intended to promote it and normalize it . . . Euskara still forms one of their [speakers of Euskara in Spain] most important identity markers” (12, emphasis added).

Uribe’s novel was originally written in Euskara but, following the logic of the editorial market for minor literatures, it was soon translated into Spanish. In this seemingly biographical narrative, Uribe’s protagonist-narrator flies from Bilbao to New York and back while reminiscing about his family’s past. It is through this mnemonic exercise on family foundations that he addresses important issues related to various strands of contemporary Basque identity, some of which are conspicuously associated with new understandings of Basque cultural nationalism. For example, Delgado claims that the novel avoids engaging the institutional limits established by the state by setting the narrative “literalmente suspendida en el aire” ‘literally suspended in mid-air,’ which in turn constitutes Uribe’s “visión integradora de la identidad vasca” ‘an integrating vision of Basque identity’ (*La nación* 179). Likewise, for Perret, the novel promotes a new approach to Basqueness that underscores its presence in the global scene as “a separate and unique culture” (“The Movement” 31). For this critic, the move from the local to the global and back again constitutes a call to promote Basque culture in an innovative, active way that “produces and encourages its constant (re)configuration” (“The Movement” 40).

In order to support her claim, Perret provides two meaningful examples. The first involves the closing image of the novel: a Senegalese girl speaks Euskara with another little girl while chasing butterflies. This image, “urges the reader to understand that Basque culture is influenced and shaped by actual people” beyond “rigid ideologies and or utopian notions of what it ‘should be’” (“The Movement” 40). In Perret’s second example, Unai, the fictional Uribe stepson, builds an ideal lineup with players of different nationalities for the famous *Atlético de Bilbao* ‘Athletic Club of Bilbao’ (“The Movement” 41). This is a local soccer team that has traditionally prided itself on always using players coming from its own local training ranks. Indeed, as Perret claims, “being Basque in the twenty-first century means having to negotiate with the globalized nature of our modern world” (“The Movement” 41). Perret duly notes that Uribe includes provocative images like these

in order to demonstrate the complex position that a writer of a minor literature occupies in the midst of twenty-first century transnational flows of human capital (“The Movement” 42).

Current trends in movements of human capital, and its transformational effects on the Basque social fabric, are also present in Uribe’s poetry. This presence that has yet to receive as much critical attention as his prose, even though it was produced well before the publication of *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao* in 2008. Indeed, Uribe’s lyric has opened a space of representation to immigrants coming from outside the political borders of Spain by situating them at the center of his poetics on Basque cultural identity. In doing so, his poetry also documents the transformation undergone by senses and structures of feeling that normally stuck to Basque cultural nationalism, particularly those traditionally attached to the geopolitical and sentimental borders of *Euskal Herria*.

The presence of the ‘other’ in Uribe’s poetry responds to outer and inner currents of geographical alignments and national allegiances. For example, in poems like “Supermerkatuan” ‘The supermarket,’ “Mahmud” ‘Mohammed,’ and “Bidaia kaiera: Asilah” ‘Travel Book: Asilah,’ the objects of attention are immigrants clearly identified as coming from Northern Africa. By addressing issues related to historical and personal experiences from the immigrants’ perspectives, these texts reduce, while establishing, the cultural distance between self and other as pertaining to the contemporary Basque national subject.

In “Supermerkatuan” the estrangement between self and other can be detected through the narrative structure of the text, divided into two clearly identifiable thematic sequences. In the first half of the poem the speaker addresses the everyday, describing through the use of irony how local people continue with their lives despite the air raids that supposedly are taking place in the village. The choice of a spatial metaphor—air raids and bombings to describe the everyday life in the marketplace—is not gratuitous or simplistic if we take into account episodes of violence related to Basque and Spanish contemporary history. The first and obvious connection would be to the bombing of Gernika, carried out by Hitler’s Condor Legion with Franco’s acquiescence in the morning of April 26th, 1937. As is well known, this was a market day in the small Basque community. A further historical event connoted by this text, and perhaps a much less recognizable one, links Uribe’s poem to ETA’s terror campaign in the nineteen-eighties and, in particular, to the bombing of the *Hipercor* market in Barcelona in June 19th, 1987 in which twenty-one civilians lost their lives.

In the second half of the poem, the narration focalizes on cultural otherness and how the locals, including the speaker of the text, react to it, somewhat fearing the presence of the other in the midst of their everyday life. The entrance of two Maghrebi in the supermarket provokes some distress amongst the clients, figured in the text by the noise produced by a broken bag, the contents of which are

scattered all over the floor. Ironically, the violent blasts of air raids and bombings are not even acknowledged. Uribe masterfully connects the two worlds in the last line of the poem through a further metaphor taken out of everyday experience: “beaten pears” linked figuratively to the suffering body. The line in question reads as follows: “Madari mailatuen zauriak ezin dira itxi” (28) ‘The wounds of the beaten pears cannot be closed.’ An intratextual reference provides a definite clue to ground our reading of this text. In “Irla” ‘The Island,’ a poem about a happy day spent at the beach and strategically placed at the start of the collection, Uribe transforms the freshness of naked bodies near the sea into peeled pears: “Udare zurituak gure gorputzak” (22) ‘Our bodies are like recently peeled pears.’ The image of the beaten pears in “Supermarketuan” metaphorically connects the local, political conflict in Euskadi with the neoliberal policies responsible for global flows of human capital. In Uribe’s writing, the poetic inscription of this connection constitutes an ethical imperative that points towards a (national) compound of wounded bodies associated by pain and suffering of a different kind.

“Mahmud” and “Bidaia Kaiera: Asilah” are also texts featuring North African immigrants. In “Mahmud,” a long poem of 59 lines, Uribe provides a voice in the first person to an incarcerated young man who recounts the hardships of his journey from Tangiers to Bilbao as a victim of human trafficking (30-35). Significantly, Uribe frames the narration of his predicament with the story of the fall of Toledo to the Muslim forces of Tariq Ibn Ziyad in the Middle Ages, as recounted in the myth of “La casa de los cerrojos de Toledo” ‘The House of the Padlocks of Toledo.’ This is a tale of great significance in the Arab cultural imaginary, as it explains, in order to legitimize, the presence of Islamic culture in the Iberian Peninsula, a story that also found in the narration of Scheherazade in *A Thousand and One Nights* (Tomo 14). In Uribe’s poem, the speaker describes the myth as narrated by his father, a man, we are told, who lost his arm fighting in a European war (32-33).

As the title of the poem “Bidaia Kaiera: Asilah” implies, the genesis of the text can be traced back to some travel notes taken in the city of Asilah, a touristic enclave on the north coast of Morocco. An impersonal, supposedly western, European voice describes a group of people, men and women, who nervously stride over the rocks as they disembark on the coast. Said, a local man, explains that these people are southern Moroccan peasants seeking to improve their lives in Europe, but they don’t even know that they have been tricked by the helmsmen of the *pateras* (small boats) in which they were supposed to arrive in Spanish territory: “Lehorrekoak izaki ez dira konturatzen / Marokkoko uretatik atera ere ez direla egin” (92) ‘They come from inland, and they do not realize / that they have not even left the waters of Morocco.’

Sometimes, in Uribe’s poetics of displacement, the banished other is not placed within a specific geographical setting. As we have already seen in “Bidaztia

sorterriaz mintzo da” ‘A traveler speaks of his homeland,’ an anonymous voice reminisces about a collective “we” lost in (im)possible, oxymoronic spaces, a waterless ocean and a desert without sand, in order to inscribe an existential dilemma that nevertheless seems to get resolved in the concluding lines of the poem: “Gure desertum ez da urik. / Gure itsasoan ez da harearik” (84) ‘There is no water in our desert. / There is no sand in our sea.’ However, as we mentioned earlier, in dialogue with Sophia de Mello’s epigraph that initiates the poetic discourse, this text suggests an inner transnational crossing that occurs within the political borders of the Spanish nation state.

On occasion, the other remains utterly unassimilable and irreducibly estranged from the integrating, affective moves of Uribe’s poetic speakers, as in the case of “Arrotza” ‘The Stranger.’ This poem describes an unknown, ungendered body who, uninvited, sleeps inside the speaker’s car but refuses a written note the speaker has left in the vehicle to make contact with the ‘stranger’. Significantly, this ‘stranger’ is not assigned a specific national background, although the poetic voice explicitly Orientalizes this body while fantasizing about the skin color: “Nongoa ote zen galdetzen nion neure buruari, / nolakoa, beltza ala ezti kolorekoa” (106) ‘I asked myself about this person’s origin / about the color of the skin, was it black or of the color of honey?’

Uribe’s poetics of displacement engage in several processes of national and cultural unbounding and reconfiguration, which take place at different geographical scales: regional, national, and intercontinental. First, at the regional level, the existential predicament of the displaced other occurs within the political limits of the nation-state. Second, the question of relationships between self and other posed by these texts also involve the reconsideration of inner and international borders. Third, Uribe’s immigrants bring to the forefront movements of human capital at an intercontinental level between (Northern) Africa and (Southern) Europe, and the relocation of this human work force within the affective parameters of the Basque social fabric. Finally, and most decisively, Uribe’s poetry questions the clash between Western/European and Eastern/Islamic cultures and civilizations as it forcefully enters into the cultural imaginary of Basque national identity. Therefore, we argue that through its multiple dialogues with cultural others, Uribe’s lyric transforms the deterritorialization of language, characteristic of a minor literature, into a willful language of self-deterritorialization.

Affective Poetics of Historical Memory

According to Perret, the themes prevalent in Uribe’s *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao* are “memory, forgiveness, and the power of art to capture and transcend violence and exclusive forms of identity” (“The Movement” 43). Regarding

memory, Jo Labanyi has shown that the recovery of historical memory has been a question of particular relevance in Peninsular Spanish literature since the late nineteen-nineties (73). Following up on this literary trend, Uribe's poetry has also engaged with the historical trauma caused by the Spanish Civil War in the Basque society. As we argued earlier, the air-raids in the poem "Supermerkatuan" provide an inexorable semantic link to the bombardment of Gernika in April 1937. Uribe also addresses the traumatic experience of the war in "Amesgaiztoa" 'Nightmare' and "Memoria historikoa" 'Historical memory.' In "Amesgaiztoa" he provides an implicit reference to the evacuation of Basque children ordered by the recently formed Basque autonomous government led by Jose Antonio Aguirre in May 1937, fearing the advance of Franco's army in the north front of the Spanish Civil War. Under the non-intervention agreement, the European democracies initially refused to accept refugees coming from the Spanish conflict. However, after the destruction of Gernika, the British government reluctantly allowed a boat of 4,000 refugee children and some accompanying adults to enter the UK on May 21st, 1937 (BCA'37 UK, Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Basque refugee children of the Spanish Civil War. (Photo credit: BCA'37 UK Archive)

In Uribe's poem an ironic performance of emotion transforms adult anxiety into infantile excitement about travelling towards an unknown destiny. Although the speaker insists on the nightmarish quality of the dream, the text concludes by focusing on the innocent happiness of the children:

Hurrekin egin dut amets. Gerrako hurrekin.
Neu ere haurra nintzen. Eta ihes egiten genuen,
Mugarantz, kantari:
"Nora goaz? Ez dakit!"

Nora goaz? Gu pozik!?” (86)

I have dreamed about children. About the children of war.
I was a child too. And we were running away
towards the border, singing:
“Where are we going? I don’t know!
Where are we going? Glad to go!” (Macklin 65)

Uribe addresses the issue of historical memory explicitly in a poem of the same title, “Memoria Historikoa.” Narrated in a colloquial, conversational tone, the speaker describes an evening spent in London with some Japanese friends during which the traumatic experience of the Second World War is discussed over dinner. Through an implicit correspondence with the obliteration of pain caused by the Spanish Civil War in Spanish society, this poem addresses how historical trauma has also been erased from collective memory in Japan: “Japoniako zaharrek horri buruz ez dute ezer esaten, / kontaku du batek” (94) ‘The Japanese elders do not speak about it, / one of them mentions.’ As the poem makes clear, the utter destruction caused by war has been reduced to a single line in a text book: “The Second World War / took place between 1942 and 1945 and / ended with the bombs at Nagasaki and Hiroshima” (Macklin 69). Uribe concludes this text in midair with a preceptive impression of a Basque landscape determined by its smallness: “Hegaldian noa Bilbora. / Txiki-txikiak dira hemendik Bizkaiko etxeak” (94) ‘I’m flying now to Bilbao. / From my window the houses of Vizcaya look tiny.’ This impression involves an affective transformation of the local by the global as well as a sense of vulnerability in the personal experience of the speaker.⁷ That is, confronted with the destruction produced by nuclear warfare at a global scale, the text effectively resignifies the local experience of historical trauma while enhancing a sense of vulnerability in regard to Basque cultural identity. In either case, it is difficult to avoid the thorny questions that this transnational dialogue about the recovery of historical memory poses within Iberian cultures at large.

Conclusion

Uribe’s *Bitartean Heldu Eskutik* concludes with a hopeful poem significantly titled “Maiatza” ‘May.’ The temporal and spatial parameters of the text—a bright blue spring day spent near the sea—construct a poetic discourse of personal and collective renewal. This discourse constitutes an invitation to dialogue

⁷ We follow here Sara Ahmed’s notion of impression as an “act of perception and cognition as well as an emotion.” For Ahmed, an impression “allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace” (*The Cultural* 6).

with an old friend who has been recalled to the speaker's side in order to start a new life in another (kind of) country: "Erdu nirekin, herriz aldatu nahi dut, / Nire gorputz hau albo batera utzi / Eta maskor batean zurekin sartu / Gure txikitasunarekin, mangolinoak bezala" (148, 150) 'Come with me, I want to change the country / To leave my body aside / and get in with you in a seashell / with our own smallness, like sea snails.'

Uribe's bodily reorientation towards the other in the midst of a social upheaval in Basque society at the turn on the new millennium implies a resignification of the political and sentimental boundaries of Basque nationalism. We have earlier asked about the textual parameters whereby Uribe's poetic expression contributes to a new understanding of Basque cultural identity. As our analysis of Uribe's texts demonstrate, the implicit intertextuality with the Spanish national canon, the dialogue with the displaced others in Basque society, and the transformative recovery of historical memory, together become a powerful instrument of reterritorialization of the Basque national subject in a transnational, affective geography bereft of political and cultural limits.

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