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**Face to Face:
Painting Basque Identity in the Diaspora**

Zoe Bray, PhD

Introduction

Over the years, while living and working in different countries, I have painted the portraits of people who in one way or another are linked to the Basque Diaspora. In its widest definition, the Basque diaspora refers to people who identify with some form of Basque lineage and who live outside of the Basque Country. My portraits of such people has grown as I meet them through Basque cultural associations, through common friends back in the Basque Country, or simply through “non-Basque” people who introduce us, believing that, as fellow Basques, we must have something in common. We are thus brought together through the networks that typically define a diaspora. Ultimately, the reason for painting these specific individuals was personal and subjective: I asked to paint them because I found them interesting and wished to get to know them better. As for them, I like to think that the feeling was mutual, as well as being curious about the experience of posing for a painted portrait.

I consider myself today part of the Basque diaspora, although it took me time and life experience to realize it. I think encountering other people across the world with Basque links, and portrait-painting some of them, assisted me in this process. I was born in Paris and, growing

up, lived with my family in various European countries. We would return regularly to the Basque Country to visit my grandparents. My maternal grandmother was born in Ahatsa, in the northern part of the Basque Country, *Iparralde*, to a Basque-speaking family. Her father, as a young man, emigrated to the western United States to work as a sheepherder, before returning to the Basque Country to marry. While my grandmother spoke Basque - *Euskara* - as her first language, she chose to speak to her children in French, which, like so many of her contemporaries, she viewed as the vehicle for social and professional success. One of her sisters however, who emigrated to California, continued to speak to her children in Basque, and so now I have bilingual Basque-English American cousins. As for me, my mother-tongue is French and, as my father is British, my father-tongue is English. As a young adult, I took the initiative to learn *Euskara*. Today, I live in Jerusalem together with my German husband and our two children, where I work at the Hebrew University, and learn to also communicate in Hebrew and Arabic.

In this article, I discuss some of the portraits I have painted, and the individuals they represent. As I am an anthropologist as well as a painter, I wish here to look again at these paintings, this time from an ethnographic point of view. As anthropologists go about doing ethnography, they think about how personal and collective identity are constructed and expressed by people in their everyday lives, and my own work has focused on such dynamics in the Basque Country (2011; 2015). My painting technique is what can generally be called realistic or naturalistic, based on techniques developed towards the end of the 19th century, before the advent of photography. This way of painting requires the model to pose for a significant length of time, typically sessions of two to three hours for at least three days, and sometimes for more than a week. This amount of time offers the possibility of developing the work into more depth. The model and I get to know each other; we talk, but also spend many moments in silence, each engrossed in our respective tasks of painting and posing, facing each other and looking at each other in the eyes. We also of course get to spend exclusive time together outside the painting sessions. Through this overall intimate collaboration, something more than just an objective representation of the person comes out on the canvas (Bray 2015). In this article, I ask myself: what do my paintings of these people show with respect to the Basque diaspora today?

It may appear as a platitude today to say that what comes across most strikingly to me in the portraits is the individual uniqueness and plurality of the people. However, given the past politicization of the Basque diaspora with the prominence of national narratives and the consequential tendency to homogenize characterization of its members, it is important to insist on how each individual can and does relate in different ways to being Basque. It is helpful to be

reminded that the Basque diaspora, as any permeable community, is a social construct and as such is multi-layered and complex, where feeling Basque is personally negotiated in different social and political contexts and changes over time. The boundaries also between being Basque and any other nationality which a member of the Basque diaspora holds, are fluid; they are as much vibrant - "living" (Bray 2011) - as those visible in the processes of identity construction of people 'at home' in the Basque Country, where definitions of what it means to be Basque are also changing in an increasingly globalized and transnational world (Zulaika and Douglass 2007: Chapter 36). Similarly to Etulain and Echeverria's book *Portraits of Basques* (1999), I found my painted portraits can offer a rich and nuanced "mosaic of Basque experiences" (1999: xiv). In this article, I add further - textual - information about the individuals I originally intended to just portray in paint, as part of an effort to provide a richer and intersubjective (Bray 2015: 219-221) picture, and also some images at the end of the subjects.

For the purpose of this article, I focus on six portraits with personal anecdotes that I believe best illustrate my overall experience of painting and encountering the plurality of the Basque diaspora. In chronological order, they are of Nestor Basterretxea and Filipe Oyhamburu, who posed for me in July 2010 in their homes in the Basque Country, Maria Jauregui and Unai Lauzirika, who posed for me in Berlin in May and June 2011, and Marie-Louise Lekumberry and Joan Arrizabalaga, in Reno, Nevada, in November 2011 and December 2012.

A methodological comment: this article is based on my personal notes documenting the process of portrait painting and the moments spent together with the individuals who posed for me. Although the information about the individuals was later double-checked with them directly, the perspectives on the anecdotes recounted in this article are exclusively mine - and I alone can be held accountable and be challenged for what I make of my experiences in terms of conclusions, insights and claims.

Nestor Basterretxea

Nestor was a famous figure in the Basque Country, celebrated for his contribution to the creation of what is known today as Basque modern art. He was born in 1924 in Bermeo, Bizkaia, and his father was a key member of the Basque Nationalist Party in the 1930s. At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, his family took refuge in France and then Argentina. He grew up there and married Maria-Isabel Irurzun, the daughter of a wealthy landowner originally also from the Basque Country. In 1952, encouraged by the Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza, he returned to

pursue his career as an artist in the Basque Country, where he died at home in Hondarribia in 2014.

Despite living most of his life in the Basque Country, he continued to manifest strong identification with the Basque diaspora. One of the most notable manifestations of this was his participation in the project to create a national Basque monument in Reno, Nevada. The sculpture *Bakardade*, or “Solitude” which he inaugurated in 1989, depicts a shepherd, but he conceived it to honor all Basques who had emigrated to the American West and who all, at some point, suffered homesickness, hardship or isolation. He produced other sculptures in honor of the Basque diaspora, for example, *EuskAmerika* in Gotein-Libarrenx in the Basque province of Xiberoa, inaugurated in 2009. Based on our conversations, I gathered that his exile as a child had contributed to this sense of identity. As a result of both his upbringing in exile and his dedication to the theme as an artist, it seemed to me that despite then being settled the remaining sixty years of his life in the Basque Country, he can be considered an active member of the Basque diaspora.

As a young artist, I knew of Nestor’s work and the struggles that he and fellow artists such as Oteiza had during the Franco dictatorship to bring out what they thought could be a Basque spirit in local art. Nestor visited my village, Izura, in the northern, French part of the Basque Country, when he exhibited some of his sculptures there in 2000. But I formally met him for the first time through a common friend, Juan-Pablo Zabala, in 2010. Our encounter took place in Nestor’s home, Idurimendieta, a former farmhouse outside the town of Hondarribia, in the province of Gipuzkoa, a few kilometers from the border that divides the Basque Country between Spain and France. From outside, it looked like a typical well-restored *baserri*, or Basque farmhouse. Inside, however, it was clear that this was the home of an artist. Large metal sculptures adorned the garden. Inside, maquettes decorated the tops of furniture, and framed prints and drawings by Nestor covered the walls. I got a sense of his aesthetics as I noted the objects on shelves and tables; a pre-Columbian sculpture here, a fossil and an ancient ceramic pot there. The interior of the house was sensitively preserved in its original style, with the wooden beams exposed. We sat in the living room, where Nestor and Juan-Pablo did most of the talking as old friends, and I made a quick sketch of Nestor with pencil and paper. We then discussed the possibility of my returning to work on a big portrait of him. We agreed to start in a few months’ time when I would return from Italy, where I was then living.

On the first day, Nestor and I walked around the house, looking for an appropriate place to launch our project. We opted for the ground floor, where natural light entered through the main

north-facing doorway. In a 2009 newspaper photograph of Nestor at the inauguration of his sculpture *Oroit Mina* in Sempere, I had seen him wearing a painterly combination of black shirt and trousers and a red scarf, which matched the colors of the sculpture. I was curious about the scarf, having seen photos of his friend Oteiza wearing a similar red scarf - and with which he is often featured in archived photographs. Nestor told me that his first red scarf was given to him by his friend Leopoldo Rodès, the founder of MACBA the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona, also a friend of Oteiza. Nestor agreed to wear the same combination of black and red for the portrait. He also wanted to be depicted holding a pyrite, which he had bought years ago at a fair in the Basque Country, inspired by its natural beauty.

He stood posing in the doorway, with one of his big wooden sculptures behind him inside the *eskaratza*, or main hall. I propped up my canvas alongside him and stood a few meters away on a spot where I could look at both him and the canvas. I would walk up to place my brushstrokes, then step back again, look, and return to the canvas to paint (see Figure 1). Noting Nestor's surprise at this walking back and forth, I explained to him that I had learned this technique, called sight-size, as an art student in Florence, Italy. Its advantage is that you can see your subject and your painting at the same time and so compare the two.

Together we discussed the different aims and motivations of painting and art. Nestor was inclined to associate himself with the idea that to paint is to follow your personal inspiration, using the object that you are painting merely as an excuse to explore your creativity. I explained to Nestor that, in my case, I was also concerned with trying to paint as accurately as possible what I was seeing, that is, to be as objective as possible, all the while aware of my subjectivity, and, in the case of painting someone, also of his or her subjectivity. Nestor seemed then to mull this over. As I came to discover, he was curious about other people and artists, and interested in the craft of drawing, and he continued to observe with attention how my painting of him developed.

Through our work together, I gained insight into his thought process and sensibilities. He expressed a liking for bold strokes and colors, and often referred to the art of the German, French and Russian avant-gardes. He also mentioned liking the work of the early 20th century Spanish painter José Gutiérrez Solana. This surprised me, as Solana was a figurative painter, and the Basque avant-garde, of which Nestor had been a leader, explicitly rejected figurative art. Nestor explained that he enjoyed Solana's work for its sense of mood, with intense use of black. This, amongst other things during our painting sessions, bore out to me his ability to appreciate the aesthetics of different kinds of artworks, regardless of their political or ideological

associations. I observed how he was able to look and see things from an artistic point of view. He was also committed to our project, always available to pose and, despite his 87 years, ready to do so for long stretches of time. I was often more exhausted than he was at the end of each session.

Nestor and I spoke to each other in Spanish. A couple of times we exchanged in French, which Nestor spoke well, having spent five years in France as a child. He seemed to enjoy speaking French and to keep a particular affection for *Iparralde*, where he had friends and professional relations. By contrast, he expressed regret that he did not speak *Euskara*, a result of his childhood abroad. However, he engaged in Basque culture in other ways, from serving in the Basque Government to producing artworks referencing Basque folklore and mythology. He was also an active member of the Basque nationalist party *Eusko Alkartasuna*. During the time of our portrait painting, he was involved in the party's efforts to join forces with the left-wing Basque separatist party *Batasuna* in an initiative called *Lortu Arte* to build a Basque state through explicitly peaceful and democratic means.

It took about three weeks for the big portrait to be completed. After this, Nestor was amenable to more posing. And so in January 2011, when I was again in the Basque Country, we met for a few days to continue with more painting projects. By this time, I had received the offer of a position as professor at the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno. I told Nestor and he responded with enthusiasm, recalling his own stay in the region for the creation of his monument *Bakardade*.

Filipe Oyhamburu

That summer, I also embarked on a painting project-with the dancer and choreographer Filipe Oyhamburu, known in the Basque Country for the innovative Basque choirs and dance groups that he had created and led over a long and active life. Part of his innovative approach was to mix different styles of dance within the Basque repertoire and to switch traditional male and female dancing roles. He also brought in influences from dances of other regions of the world. Nestor Basterretxea even collaborated with him, designing the stage set and the costumes for his ballet "Sorgin-gaua" – Night of Witches" in 1969.

Born Philippe Doyhamboure in 1921 in the Hautes Pyrénées département (Oyhamburu is his *nom d'artiste*), he emigrated with his parents to Uruguay at the age of three. Some years later,

the family returned to France and went to live in Paris. His father had been born in Miarritze, and he told me his interest in Basque identity was awakened in 1939, when he encountered Basque refugees from the Spanish Civil War during a visit to Hendaia, where his father's brother and sister lived. During the early 1940s, he lived in Miarritze and trained as a dancer under the Bizcayan choreographer Segundo Olaeta, another refugee from Franco's Spain. For many years Filipe also pursued political activities as a member of the French Communist Party and an exponent of Basque nationalism. He also speaks good Spanish and Italian. The international tours he did with his various dance groups and choirs deliberately included places inhabited by the Basque diaspora.

In the 1980s, Filipe lived with members of his dance group *Etorki* in the village of Ibarrola, in Lower Navarre. This was not far from my family home in Izura and I remember seeing *Etorki's* powerful performances as a child. I also recall how sometimes Filipe and his family, together with fellow dancers and musicians and singers, came for dinner at our house. These evenings were entertaining revelries, with much singing and dancing. Years later, when I lived in Florence, I heard that he was coming to Tuscany on a tour with his choir group *Etorburu*. I made the trip to Viareggio to see them perform in the local church. I joined them afterwards for dinner and more revelry. I remember feeling there was something very Basque about that evening.

Over the following years, I would bump into Filipe at cultural events in *Ipparalde*, and in 2010 I asked if he would be willing to pose for me. With his usual spirit of openness and enthusiasm, he accepted, and when I was not working with Nestor, I drove northwards across the Franco-Spanish border to Filipe's house in Miarritze. We set up in his study that was an extension of the dining room. He stood propped up at his desk, and I at the other end of the dining room where I could look at both him and the canvas. From there I could see Filipe in his study, clearly the retreat for his intellectual work, with its walls covered with shelves filled with books and files.

Our choice of his clothing was determined by my need to find something painterly that went harmoniously with his skin tone and hair color, the quality of the light coming through the window and the colorful environment of the study, and with which Filipe could identify. As an essential part of him is his life as a dancer and choral director, which is also how I principally knew him, we agreed that one of his choral uniforms would be most fitting (see Figure 2a). Because of both our schedules, we were not able to spend as much time on the portrait as we would have liked. I think we worked together not more than five days. Filipe's tenacity and

energy during all our sessions were impressive, even more so as he had already reached the age of 89.

Filipe and I for the most part spoke to each other in French, but we also spoke in *Euskara*, which Filipe had learned as a young man, becoming very knowledgeable in Basque philology and even publishing books in the language. We talked about this during our painting sessions, as well as other topics relating to contemporary politics and culture in France. Like Nestor, the first years of Filipe's life abroad seemed to have shaped his identity as someone international at the same time as maintaining a strong Basque attachment.

I was impressed to see how, after retiring, he continued to retain his international connections as an artist and showman with his various dance and choir groups. In June 2011, I had the honor to be present at his 90th birthday party and witness his large group of friends and admirers from different parts of the world, many of whom had their own Basque connections. A few days later, he attended the opening of my solo show at the Biarritz Historical Museum, where I showed his freshly finished portrait (see Figure 2b).

Filipe appeared to me then to represent the richness that can come with feeling both rooted and international or, more precisely, *transnational* as he seemed to shift at ease from one context, language and culture to another (Levitt 2001; Totoricaguena 2005). Like Nestor, Filipe is not a conventional member of the Basque diaspora if that term is restricted to people who have a personal and kin relation to the Basque Country but live outside it, as both had been based now for many years in the Basque Country. Both seemed to me to still identify strongly with the diaspora as a community and an extension of themselves.

Maria Jauregui

In April 2011, I went to live in Berlin, Germany, where, through my friends from Hondarribia, Juan-Pablo Zabala and Elena Ponte, I met Elena's daughter, Maria Jauregui, a photographer and artist in her late thirties who was living in Berlin already since 1996.

I already knew Maria's artwork from exhibitions in the Basque Country. Her pictures looked to me like zoom-in shots of a surface, texture or edge of something, re-worked with a sensitive touch that I was immediately drawn to. They are strongly chromatic while at the same time subtle, emanating what to me seemed an ethereal quality. Maria also knew me originally only

through my artwork, which she had seen in her mother's house as part of a collection she has created with Juan-Pablo.

Maria seemed to me well settled in Berlin, where she shares a flat with her German partner, Philipp, in the neighborhood of Friedrichshain. She speaks fluent German and, when I met her, she had just completed her studies at the Berlin New School for Photography. Her and Philipp regularly volunteer at the nearby church, helping out with the needs of homeless people, new immigrants and refugees. Thanks to Maria and Philipp, I was able to find a studio, located on the upper floor of a factory where Philipp works as a carpenter, near the train station of Südkreuz.

Occasionally Maria would come to help Philipp with his work in the factory, and we would meet in the common area for coffee. In between this and all her other work, I asked Maria whether she could fit a couple of posing sessions. Maria kindly accepted and we arranged for her to come to the studio four times. We opted for a seated position and so I found a chair in a nearby dump and a wooden platform on which to place it so that our eyes would be at more or less the same level (see Figure 3a). Maria chose to pose in her usual clothes, blue jeans and a plain cozy sweater. During our sessions, we talked about our personal lives and about art, what interesting exhibitions were on in Berlin and in the Basque Country. We spoke Spanish with each other. Although Maria grew up in Hondarribia and understands *Euskara*, she said she does not speak it often as it was not the main language in her family. She attended school on the other side of the Basque Franco-Spanish frontier, in Donibane Lohitzune, and so French was her main language for primary and secondary education. She then went back onto the Spanish side of the border for further studies, attending the Basque university in Gasteiz. In 1994, Maria left for Germany to work as an *au pair* with a family in Cologne. It was there that she met Philipp and they moved to Berlin two years later. Unlike some other people of Basque origin that I met in Berlin, she did not actively seek contact with the Basque community of Berlin. She tries to return at least twice a year to Hondarribia, and hopes to exhibit more in the Basque Country. In 2016, she showcased her "Nocturnal Series" at the Photomuseum of Zarautz, in the Basque province of Guipuzcoa, a collection of what I found to be very powerful and evocative pictures of nature, which she photographed at night illuminated only by her hand-torch.

Before vacating my studio in June 2011 and preparing to leave Berlin for Reno, Maria helped me organize a finissage in which I showed her freshly finished portrait (see Figure 3b), together with the other paintings I had done during these three months in Berlin.

Unai Lauzirika

I met Unai at the *Euskal Etxea* in Berlin, where I went, soon after my arrival in the city, to take Basque dance lessons. At the lessons, there were about twenty of us, many in their late twenties and newly arrived in Berlin from the Basque Country. Amid the economic crisis that hit Spain as of 2008, numerous young people were leaving Euskadi and Navarre to seek work in Germany. On arriving in Berlin, their first action in many cases was to contact the *Euskal Etxea*.

Unai, originally from Lekeitio and then in his early thirties, had arrived in Berlin less than a year ago. Previously, he had been living in Bilbo where he had worked amongst other things as a Basque-language teacher. He had decided to embark on the new adventure of living in Berlin, where he was teaching himself German while working as a waiter. In contrast with Maria, who thanks to her established relationship with a German national possibly felt less need to seek out other Basques, Unai mixed with other Basques. He helped out with activities at the *Euskal Etxea*, including organizing the *Korrika* for the first time on German soil. But Unai was also actively branching out, making new German and international friends. When not involved with the Berlin *Euskal Etxea*, Unai spends more of his time in the local gay and rock scene.

Unai came to pose in my studio about seven times. He was happy to pose standing, with his hands just hanging down (see Figure 4a). We spoke to each other in Basque. As he spoke the *Euskara* of the southern part of the Basque Country, which differs in sound and form from that of the north, with which I am more familiar, I often had difficulty following him. At times I wished we could switch to Spanish so that I could be sure I understood him and that I could better express myself to him (German was not an option as I had zero knowledge of this language at the time), but it was clear that speaking *Euskara* with each other was also a question of principle: he is an *euskaldun zahar*, or first-language Basque speaker, and a self-declared *abertzale* and *euskaltzale*,¹ and me, as a person from *Iparralde* and an *euskaldun berri* (new Basque speaker) who needed to practice, it was only normal that Basque should be our default language with each other.

Unai introduced me to a left-wing bar in Kruezberg where Basque alternative and *abertzale* bands would play, its grubby walls covered with now-vintage Basque separatist posters. One of our conversations touched upon nationalism. In Germany, Unai said he had to confront the fact

¹ These terms in Euskara translate as a Basque nationalist and a Bascophile, committed to speaking the Basque language and invigorating Basque culture. More discussions on these terms can be found in Chapter 3 of *Living Boundaries* (2011).

that nationalism tended to be seen negatively by liberal and left-wing Germans who, partly due to their country's Nazi past, would associate it with right-wing politics, xenophobia and racism. Unai had to figure out how to make the case for Basque nationalism as a different kind of nationalism, that could be inclusive and civically-based. With the Berlin Euskal Etxea, Unai could focus with what he felt was most important, organizing events that celebrated Basque culture in its diversity without getting caught up in politics. What he also likes about the Berlin Euskal Etxea is that it was originally an association created by a group of Germans who wanted to commemorate the bombing of the Basque city of Gernika by the German Legion Condor and to strengthen relations between Germany and the Basque Country today and promote Basque culture; And many of its members are German, although since it became officially an Euskal Etxea in 2010, membership increasingly consists of Basque newcomers to Berlin. There are also in Berlin more politically-oriented groups, such as the Euskal Herriaren Lagunak, Basque for 'Friends of the Basque Country', which organize more separatist and militant-type of gatherings. Unai is not involved with them, happy, in Germany, he says to have left behind this "political noise" in the Basque Country.

At an exhibition of my paintings at the Historical Museum in Miarritze a few weeks later, I showed Unai's portrait (see Figure 4b). Unai helped me to write up the exhibition pamphlet in standard *Euskara*. After I left to take up my new job at the Center for Basque Studies in Reno, Unai and I continued to correspond in Basque via email. A year later, he told me of a new opportunity that had come to him in Germany: through the Etxepare Basque Institute, he had got a position as lecturer in Basque Language and Culture at the University of Leipzig.

An important aspect of what Unai's identity seemed to me to be is his *abertzale* commitment. Many of my conversations with Unai revolved around Basque-related topics, which was less the case with Maria. Unai also eventually managed to find new professional opportunities in Germany specifically thanks to his Basque connections. I would thus describe Unai as a particularly active member of today's Basque diaspora, with a more explicitly *nationally* defined sense of his Basque identity at the same time as including further strong identifications as he defined himself "a gay male migrant in his thirties, and many other things".

Marie-Louise Lekumberry

From Berlin and Miarritze, I left for Reno, where I encountered the Basque diaspora of the New World. It is communities such as this, well-known and long-established, that tend to represent

the conventional idea of the Basque diaspora as composed of people who emigrated from the Basque Country to the Americas, for reasons ranging from economic needs to political necessity, and their descendants. Among the local members of the Basque diaspora in Nevada, I met Marie-Louise Lekumberry, the co-owner of J.T. Basque Bar and Dining Room, in Gardnerville. The occasion was the famous annual Basque picnic bringing together families and individuals from locations across the Western United States.

On a hot evening in August 2011, the picnic was followed by a concert at the town hall with Amuma Says No, a Basque rock band from Boise, Idaho, and Urko Menaia, a musician from San Sebastian-Donostia who was touring the North American *Euskal Etxeak* with the help of the North American Basque Organization (NABO). Those who wanted to have dinner, including myself and some colleagues from the Center for Basque Studies, gathered next door at the J.T.. From the outside, J.T. looks like a typical end-of-the-nineteenth century Western saloon, with a handsome white-washed colonnaded front where cowboys could once tie their horses. Inside, it was impressive to me to hear so much Basque being spoken; it was almost like being back in the Basque Country at a village festivity.

As I looked at pictures on the wall, I realized that the owners, the Lekumberry family, originally came from Ortzaze where, as a student in the late 1990s, I had done anthropological fieldwork and lived with a family with the same name in their farm, Indarborda, up in the hills. As I was soon to discover, when Marie-Louise, smartly dressed in her working uniform of white shirt and black dress, came to our table to greet us, the family of Indarborda were her first cousins. I was moved to learn that her father Jean was the brother of Battita, the old man whom I remembered sitting by the hearth in Indarborda's kitchen just fifteen years earlier. Battita would speak to me in English, having learnt it whilst working in the American West in his youth. At the time, I was not used to the American accent, and I couldn't quite understand him. Marie-Louise explained that Battita had gone to the U.S. together with Jean and another brother, Piarres. They first worked in shepherding and then Jean and Piarres bought the J.T. from another family originally from Lower Navarre. Battita and Piarres eventually returned home, while Jean, who had married a local woman, stayed on. When Jean passed away in 1993, Marie-Louise took over the J.T. with her brother Jean-Baptiste, known as J.B.

A few weeks later, Marie-Louise and I bumped into each other in Reno, and I asked whether she would pose for me. I hardly expected her to say yes, given her busy schedule running the restaurant, but she agreed to make the one-hour journey from Gardnerville a couple of times a week to pose in my studio at home. After experimenting with a small portrait of head and

shoulders, we opted for a big portrait for which she was ready to pose standing (see Figure 5a). We considered portraying her in her restaurant uniform but in the end decided on her more personal casual clothes. It was interesting for me to note that her casual look was a clearly American Western one: rancher boots and bootleg jeans, with her personal touch of a floral top and light shawl (see Figure 5b).

Many of our conversations were about the Basques of Nevada. I was curious about them and asked her many questions. I told her that my great grand-father had come here also to work as a shepherd but that my family didn't know much about his time here other than that, at one point, he was kicked in the head by a horse, which left him blind in one eye.

Marie-Louise was born in Nevada. Her mother Shirley is American, not of Basque descent. From what I gathered, Marie-Louise and her brothers J.B. and Robert were established members of the Basque community through their father, Jean. As a former shepherd, Jean knew his natural surroundings intimately and Marie-Louise told me that she and her brothers grew up in close contact with ranching and the wild outback of Nevada and nearby California. They knew the places where Jean had roamed with the sheep and where he had carved his name on the aspen trees, like so many other lone Basque shepherders. When Jean bought the J.T., Marie-Louise said that he continued its tradition as a gathering place for the local Basque community and lodging for many single and retired shepherders. Growing up, Marie-Louise often helped out serving the customers. When she and her brother decided to continue running the restaurant after their father passed away, she said she was aware that they were handling an important part of the local Basque heritage. As she explained, the restaurant played a crucial role in the community, not just as a social place to gather, but as a beacon of their identity and a place of security. For many years, they continued to provide a home to those shepherders who had not settled with a family or returned to the Basque Country.

Jean was very present in my conversations with Marie-Louise, and so we decided to include him in the portrait. Marie-Louise brought with her pictures of her father, many of which hang in the restaurant. In all of the photographs, I could get a sense of what a jovial character Jean must have been. He is grinning, with a smile that is, I think, very evocative of the Basque humor with which I am familiar, especially with older people in the rural hinterland of *Iparralde*, teasing in a friendly good-natured way. As Marie-Louise recounted amusing anecdotes about the American Basques, I could see that she had inherited this sense of humor and playfulness.

Marie-Louise and I always spoke in English, although Marie-Louise has a good knowledge of French and *Euskara*, having picked up these languages from her father and from regular visits to family and friends back in the Basque Country. English is her mother tongue, and also the main language that she spoke with her father. In the late 1980s as a student at the University of Nevada Reno, Marie-Louise spent a year in Donostia and studied *Euskara* thanks to the Reno-based University Studies Abroad Consortium (USAC) (founded and run by Carmelo Urza – also a second generation Basque - who was, incidentally, also involved in commissioning Nestor to create the monument *Bakardade*). Marie-Louise kept up-to-date on the current affairs of Orzaizte and the Basque Country. She posed for me for a total of about eight days over the course of a couple of months (Figure 5c).

In the context of the Basque diaspora, it seems to me that Marie-Louise exemplifies in many ways the second generation of Basque immigrants to the American West. Brought up with a sense of Basque belonging which she also feels deeply, she remains a pillar of the Basque community with the restaurant, maintaining its Basque décor and links with the aging Basque clientele, while retaining strong connections with relatives in the Basque homeland. At the same time, I found Marie-Louise very Nevadan in her attachment to the region and its way of life. As such, she also confirmed to me the strong existence of an autonomous Basque-American identity. This stands I think in contrast to the next person I was privileged to paint in Reno who also has Basque origins but who I think is also especially Nevadan in her own way and for whom links to her Basque heritage seem to be a small detail in her sense of self.

Joan Arrizabalaga

When I told locals in Reno that I was Professor at the Center for Basque Studies, I was often asked if I had met the artist Joan Arrizabalaga, one person also exclaiming “she has an awesome surname!” I finally did meet Joan at a street fête in my neighborhood in the spring of 2012. We would then bump into each other at local events, and so one day I asked her if she would pose for me. She was surprised by the proposal but we agreed to meet at her home to discuss further.

Visiting Joan’s house, an old building for Reno dating from 1902, was an enchantment. Her artwork and that of her artist friends adorned every bit of space, from the walls and the furniture to the ceilings, where she had even painted her own fresco decorations in the style of Venetian palazzos. We wandered around her house, where every detail was as fascinating as Joan and her conversation. In the living room, she also had parts of the walls covered with

signed photographs of celebrities, some with personal notes to her. They were all people she had worked with during her time as wardrobe master for Harrah's Casino, which was the center of high-class entertainment in Reno up until the first years of the 21st century – and where Joan collected discarded objects such as fabric from old gaming tables, dices, cards and slot machines for her artwork.

We discussed her art, which I found not only powerful but humorous. I was particularly impressed by the sculptures of Nevadan wildlife, which towered above us hanging on the walls. They were noble, like the animals themselves, and fun, made from old material from the casinos. More recently, she had got into *raku*, making sculptures from such things as slot machines, each with a personal comic twist, like having a sound-box inside with a detector that would make the chink of coins falling every time you walked past. She was fascinated, she explained to me, by the human obsession with the idea of luck and the thrill of gaming, how some people were ready to put their whole life at stake for the narrow possibility of a win.

To discover Joan in her personal and artistic universe was inspiring. We agreed that I would paint her in her home, rather than have her come to my studio. After working on a small sketch, we set up the big portrait in her living room. As with Nestor, Filipe and Maria, it was clear that her artwork is a fundamental part of who Joan is and I needed to fit it in somehow in the portrait. Fortunately, this came naturally as her artwork was literally all around us (see Figure 6).

As we worked, we chatted, often about art and art history. She was interested to hear about the research I was doing at the time on art in the Basque Country. A few times, I gave public lectures in Reno, and Joan came to listen. We also exchanged common observations about politics and current affairs. As a keen drawer, Joan was also curious about my technique and was attentive to my step-by-step process. We got together a few times to sketch together. I had recently given birth to my first child, and we used him as a model. Another time, Joan took out an old skeleton she kept in a closet. We propped it up in the middle of her sitting room and stood around it with our easels. For the birth of my son, Joan restored the lace of a crib she had used for her children in the 1970s and passed the crib on to me. It also served as model for our drawing projects.

I had originally told her that the big portrait project would only require about four or five days of her time. I depicted her sitting in the sofa, wearing a simple shirt and pants, as she is normally dressed. But as our friendship developed, and she could grant me more time, I became more ambitious with the painting. I got into the details of her strong and slender hands resting on her

lap, and of her artwork in the background (see figure 6a). In total we must have worked over three weeks more.

Joan's Basque connections were only a very small subject of our conversations. It was only later, when I knew I would be writing this article, that I asked her to explain more about her Basque side of the family. Joan was born in Ely, Nevada, and grew up in Fallon, a small desert town close to Reno. It was her father, Ramón Arrizabalaga Erquiaga, who was Basque. His parents had come from somewhere in the rural parts of Araba – Joan isn't sure exactly where – to find work in the USA. They first worked in sheep camps, including near Austin, Nevada, which is where Ramón was born. His parents then moved to Fallon where they opened the Grand Hotel. Ramón married a local woman of Irish origin, and so Joan and her brother, also called Ramón, were born. Joan recalls visiting her grandparents in their hotel, where there was a clearly Basque atmosphere. Her father spoke Spanish - rather than Euskara - with his parents, and English with Joan and her brother. He didn't continue with the hotel, which closed after her grandparents retired. It now no longer exists, like so many Basque hotels in the area.

Joan studied Fine Arts at the University of Nevada Reno and, in the 1970s, went to live in London with her two small children for three years. There, she worked in a vintage clothing store off the King's Road. She later went to Florence to learn Italian and immerse herself in the city's art history. During visits to Europe, the Basque Country wasn't a destination. Joan chose to not take on her American ex-husband's name but to keep her 'maiden' name, not a usual thing to do at the time; "I love the sound of my name, Arrizabalaga!" Joan once said to me.

I showed Joan's final portrait in a solo exhibition at the University of Nevada Reno's Sheppard Contemporary Art Gallery in February 2013 (see figure 6b), which Joan attended. We also exhibited together in various local group shows. In the Fall of 2014, when I prepared to move to Jerusalem, I was nostalgic to leave Nevada, but Joan's encouragement, evoking the new wonderful experiences I would be having, were consoling. From my new home, we continued to correspond by email, and I enjoyed reading her descriptions of her daily activities, often revolving around the ceramics studio, working on new sculptures, and new challenges with the technique, devoted to her art.

Conclusion

Overall, my portraits, show different ways that one can be part of the Basque diaspora in the early 21st century. Membership is not merely something that one inherits by birth but that one constructs in different ways, in reaction to the context in which one lives and in relation to personal necessity. Identity is not set, but a *process* of construction (see also MacClancy 1993). Each of us cultivates our identity in one way or another according to personal and emotional needs. While some people might be inclined to give importance to some aspect of their family, others might want to ignore them as unfit for their needs. With generations, references to past collective identities might also feel less relevant for oneself. Immigrants from poor or uneducated backgrounds to the American West could be very conservative and traditionalist. This might be taken as tedious and cumbersome for some of their descendants, especially those who considered themselves artists and wanted to create their own identity, free of conventional constraints.

Thinking about the six individuals I talked about here, while I would have originally claimed they were all fortuitous encounters I was lucky to make, in the end, I realize we were all already connected. From my meeting Juan-Pablo Zabala, Elena Ponte and Nestor Basterretxea in Hondarribia to Maria Jauregui in Berlin, from my childhood in the Basque Country to my research later on Basque identity and my encounter with Filipe Oyhamburu in Tuscany, from the Berlin Euskal Etxea to Unai Lauzirika and the Etxepare Basque Institute, and from my encounters in Ortzaize to Marie-Louise Lekumberry in Gardnerville, and my work at Reno's Center for Basque Studies to Joan Arrizabalaga, such interconnections are what it seems make the Basque diaspora today. Each of the people I painted, I think, gives a powerful picture through their portraits of the fluidity and vibrancy of the diaspora.

In this vein of continuous interconnections, it was a brilliant 'coincidence' for me to discover that one of the Berlin *Euskal Etxea's* initiatives in 2016 was to host a conference with the participation, amongst others, of the Center for Basque Studies and the Etxepare Basque Institute, on the topic of José-Antonio Agirre, the first president of the provisional Basque government in the 1930s and of his time hiding in Berlin during the Second World War. The director of the conference was none other than Unai Lauzirika.

Such connections highlight how things can come full circle in terms of migration and community, a thought that is made particularly poignant by the struggle of yet more refugees fleeing war and discrimination today. In a recent article, the former director of the Center for

Basque Studies, William Douglass, argued that the future of Basque identity outside the Basque Country resides with the younger generations and their willingness to retain Basque awareness and be culturally involved *by choice* rather than simply passively through birth (2013:12). Basque identity today indeed exists as an active identity, but, as I think transpires in the portraits recounted in this article, it does not have to be forced or exclusive: it can also thrive without necessarily being explicit. It can reveal itself subtly by just being present in human relations and exchanges, as I came to understand with the special individuals I met and painted.

Illustrations



Figure 1: Painting Nestor Basterretxea in his house, Hondarribia, *Hegoalde* (Northern Basque Country), Spain, 2010. Photograph by Juan Pablo Zabala.



Figure 2a: First stage of the portrait painting with Filipe Oyhamburu in his house, Miarritze, Iparralde, France, 2010. Photograph by Zoe Bray.



Figure 2b: Filipe Oyhamburu with his finished portrait at the Biarritz Historical Museum, 2011. Photograph by Zoe Bray.



Figure 3a: Painting Maria Jauregui in my studio in Berlin, Germany, 2011. Photograph by Zoe Bray.



Figure 3b: "Maria Jauregui", oil on canvas, 47x31 inches, 2011.



Figure 4a: Painting Unai Lauzirika in my studio in Berlin, Germany, 2011. Photograph by Zoe Bray.



Figure 4b: "Unai Lauzirika", oil on canvas, 47x31 inches, 2011.



Figure 5a: Painting an oil sketch of Marie-Louise Lekumberry in my home in Reno, Nevada, USA, 2011. Photograph by Zoe Bray.



Figure 5b: Painting the big portrait of Marie-Louise Lekumberry. Photograph by Zoe Bray.



Figure 5c: "Marie-Louise Lekumberry and her father Jean", oil on canvas, 48x60 inches, 2012.



Figure 6a: Painting Joan Arrizabalaga in her home in Reno, Nevada, USA, 2012. Photograph by Christian Thauer.



Figure 6b: "Joan Arrizabalaga", oil on canvas, 36x48 inches, 2012.

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