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Gernika, Guernica, *Guernica*? Contested meanings of a Basque place

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Abstract

The town of Gernika/Guernica is the center for meaning and territorial continuity of Basque nationalist identity. The town and its symbolism represent the history of national conflict with the Spanish state. It is also the focal point of local disagreements; within Basque nationalism itself and between regional urban centers. The town's significance in the Spanish Civil War, representation in Picasso's painting *Guernica*, and commemoration in the Americas by Basque emigrants has made it a globally significant place. The contest of meanings related to Gernika/Guernica underscores the significance of naming, monuments, ritual, resistance, oppression, and conflict in the creation and maintenance of national identities. In its examination of the politics of a Basque place, the joining of the forces of geography and history proves to be useful in the analysis of meaning in place- and time-specific political processes. From this perspective, the recent development from conflict toward harmony in Basque politics is reviewed. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Basque Country; Gernika; Guernica; Identity; Nationalism; Place-politics

Glossary

EA	Eusko Alkartasuna
ELA	Eusko Langileen Alkartasuna
ETA	Euskadi Ta Askatasuna
HB	Herri Batasuna
KAS	Koordinadora Abertzale Sozialista

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LAB	Langile Abertzaleen Batzordeak
PNV/EAJ	Partido Nacionalista Vasco/Eusko Alderdi Jeltzalea
PP	Partido Popular

Introduction

In January 1998, during a junior league soccer game in the Spanish Basque Country, Aritz Zearra, a member of team Gernika A, was cautioned by referee Jessica Martínez Pérez for “coming to me speaking in Basque, having previously warned him not to do it” (Torrelaldi, 1998: 220). The incident immediately raised controversy, in part fueled by the symbolic confrontation between Basque- and non-Basque-speaker, between stateless nation and central state. That the same incident involved a player from Gernika (in Spanish, Guernica) only multiplied the significance of the confrontation, because for Basque nationalists, the town is the “embodiment of the life” (Tuan, 1975: 240) of Basque history and culture.

The location of this confrontation suggests that not only monuments or other singular elements of landscape but entire cities can be centers of meaning for the cultural and territorial continuity of an identity. “The essential point is that location, not necessarily remarkable in itself, nonetheless acquires high visibility and meaning because it harbours, or embodies, spirit” (Tuan, 1975: 237, also 239). Thus, space like this is meaningful in creating local and national pride and in offering a reference point for collective group identity.

Gernika is a secondary regional center of some 16,000 inhabitants, situated in the province of Bizkaia (Vizcaya) in northern Spain, some 130 kilometers from the international border between Spain and France (Fig. 1). For nationalists, the town, its history, and its monuments are the sacred core of Basque identity and a focus of political resistance against the Spanish state. Gernika supports the Basque nationalist interpretation of history, which is used for both explaining the past and justifying the present in the nationalist ideology. Although Basque nationalist groups may appear to be rhetorically unanimous over a Basque national future, they disagree strongly over the acceptable goals of ‘Basque national self-determination’ (autonomy vs. independence) and the means of achieving it (relationship with non-nationalist political parties and with violence) (see Clark, 1984). Therefore, Gernika embodies various geographical, historical, and political scales of conflict — in addition to the conflict with the state, Gernika reflects competing interests within Basque nationalism. Due to its significance in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), representation in Picasso’s painting *Guernica*, and commemoration in the New World by Basque emigrants, Gernika has also acquired a metaphoric meaning that finds a global resonance.

These connections between local, national and global contexts of identity, commemoration and conflict make Gernika an ideal case for examining how different political perspectives are articulated through spatial practices and how meaningful space, a *place*, is produced and reproduced through those practices (Hershkovitz, 1993; Kaplan, 1999). Gernika illustrates the complex interplay of spatial practices

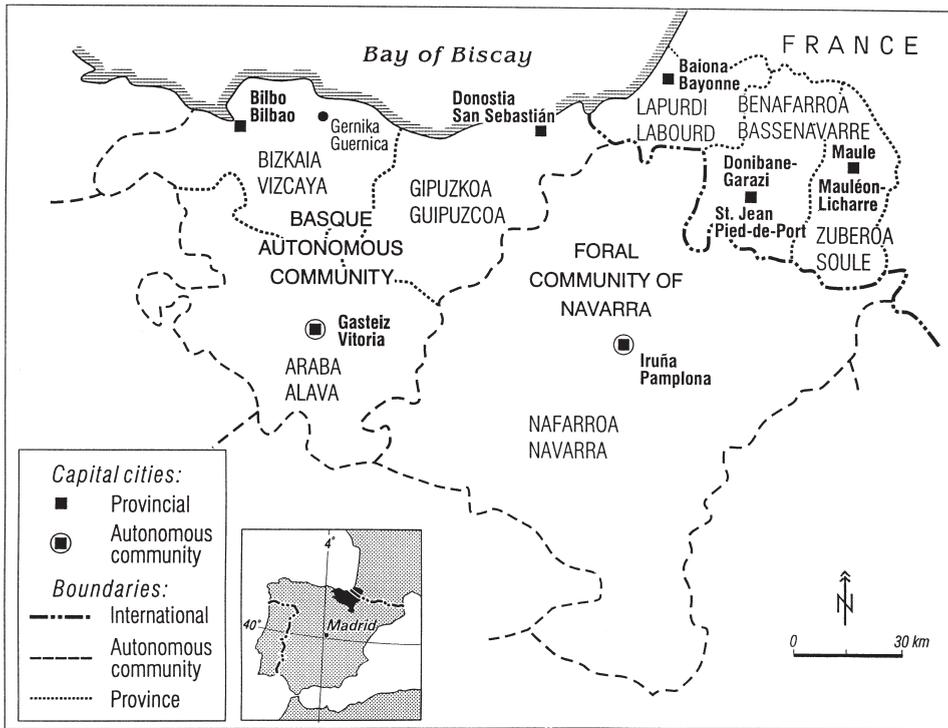


Fig. 1. The location of Gernika/Guernica and the seven historical Basque provinces in Spain and France.

and elements usually discussed separately in academic literature — the significance of naming, monuments, ritual, resistance, oppression, and conflict. In the case of Gernika, these practices and elements converge locally in one place and carry with them strong temporal considerations as the significance of this place has been produced politically through space- and place-specific dialectic practices over time. Crucial moments in Basque history have added to the multiple meanings of Gernika, and it has gained further importance through the recreation of its historical associations and cultural symbolism (Hershkovitz, 1993: 397–398). By examining Gernika “as a historical reference and as spatial designation” (Azaryahu, 1996: 312), we explore the advantages of joining the forces of geography and history in the analysis of meanings in place- and time-specific politics and culture. The goal is to make an empirical contribution to the limited geographic literature on the Basque Country.

As Aritz Zearra’s caution and the following discussion suggest, the question of language is highly sensitive and politicized in the Basque Country. Therefore, it is necessary to state that our decision to favor the usage of Basque spelling (Gernika) over its Spanish counterpart (Guernica) is both conscious and deliberate. In many respects, as we will demonstrate, the name has come to be associated with Picasso’s painting (*Guernica*) more than the town itself and its destruction in 1937. By way of emphasizing the *politics of place* as the main focus of this work, we adopt the

Basque form as a means of distancing the place from the painting. Likewise, we use the terms ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ nationalist in accordance with Anglo-American literature on nationalism. The terms ‘region’ and ‘territory’ are not intended in our treatment to be as politically charged as they would be in the Basque and Spanish contexts.

Politics and place

In modern political culture, settings of political acts and commemoration of shared historical experiences in particular places have become increasingly important. These settings are more than mere containers in which the act takes place. Rather, due to the feelings they evoke and the specific meanings people assign to them, these settings play a central role in the social interaction related to the event and its participants (Edelman, 1964; Giddens, 1979: 207). Those who are able to control the meanings related to that particular space hold important power (Entrikin, 1991: 52). Through the act of commemoration and distinguished elements of the physical environment, such as monuments and heritage museums, space is recreated as significant place.

Much of the literature about spatial representation of political meaning focuses on distinguished celebrations, commemorative acts and other ‘extraordinary’ events. There is a growing body of literature that discusses such spectacles as parading (Davis, 1986; Marston, 1989; Goheen, 1992, 1993; Kong & Yeoh, 1997), mass demonstrations (Routledge, 1992; Hershkovitz, 1993; del Valle, 1994; Raento, 1997b), and funerals (Douglass, 1969; Aretxaga, 1988; Gal, 1991) as political rituals of resistance. As Paul Routledge (1996) (p. 517) aptly puts it, “a terrain of resistance is both metaphoric and literal” because it brings the act and the site together with the meanings represented by the significant space (see Marston, 1989: 265–266; Staeheli, 1994; Kong & Yeoh, 1997: 220).

Increasing attention is being paid to those spatial elements that carry specific political meaning in the everyday landscape. Examples include the usage of public art — political murals and *graffiti* — “within the context of social antagonism and conflict” for the maintenance of identity (Marston, 1989: 260; Rolston, 1987, 1991; Chaffee, 1988; Raento, 1997b). Similarly, public monuments, museums, cemeteries and other memorial sites have gained popularity as foci of academic study regarding feelings of belonging (Harvey, 1979; Davis, 1982; Schwartz, 1982; Lefebvre, 1991; Sturken, 1991; Wagner-Pacifini & Schwartz, 1991; Hershkovitz, 1993; Katriel, 1993; Sherman & Rogoff, 1994; Johnson, 1994, 1995; Robin, 1995; Cartier, 1997; Azaryahu, 1999). This perspective is a point emphasized in Benedict Anderson’s influential work *Imagined communities* (Anderson, 1983). Naming of places as acts of commemoration and contests of power has likewise opened new insights into the spatio-temporal aspects of identity politics (Zelinsky, 1983; Cohen & Kliot, 1992; Palonen, 1993; Azaryahu, 1996, 1997; Berg & Kearns, 1996).

As these examples suggest, “the geographical enterprise has remained largely a visually orientated one” and relatively little attention has been paid to other senses,

such as “smell, touch, taste and hearing” (Kong, 1995a: 184). Increasingly through the 1990s, however, the obvious importance of other ‘sensescapes’ in creating feelings of belonging and resistance has inspired academic research into communication, identity, and political resistance (Porteous, 1985, 1990; Smith, 1994; Kong, 1995a,b; Raento, 1998). It is therefore important to note that while the reproduction of a politically significant Gernika relies very heavily on visibility, visuality, and visual culture, other sensescapes are not entirely absent. Throughout the Basque Country, for example, feelings of resistance and belonging are evoked through music in grassroots Basque radical nationalist gatherings, particularly in youth events and street demonstrations (see López Aguirre, 1996). However, as this is not directly tied to the specific context of Gernika, this broader topic remains outside of the scope of this paper.

Indeed, in relation to the meanings of Gernika, the modern world is very much a ‘seen’ phenomenon. We hope to show that Basque nationalist resistance to Spanish central governmental authority in relation to this place “is guided by a visual paradigm” so that “looking, seeing and knowing have become perilously intertwined” (Jenks, 1995: 1). Through the legacy of the Spanish Civil War, Picasso’s painting *Guernica*, and the struggle over language in the local landscape, the most significant of Basque places is defined by its empowerment through visuality (see Foster, 1988; Fyfe & Law, 1988). In the modern context, this highlights the ‘centrality of the eye’ in the increasing importance of the visual media in prompting, cajoling, and shaping social, cultural, and political opinions.

In studies that focus specifically on the Basque case, the significance of space and place in general are still overlooked despite the increasingly strong emphasis on spatial dimensions in social studies (see Agnew, 1987; Agnew & Duncan, 1989). Although some valuable exceptions exist (Douglass, 1969; Ott, 1981; Aretxaga, 1988; Zulaika, 1988; del Valle, 1994), the focus has been usually limited to the anthropological discussion of ritual and symbolism, the action or the event, instead of a more comprehensive treatment of space or setting. In particular, what is missing is a more profound examination of the significance of where and in what kind of setting these rituals take place, and how the setting interacts with the act.

The making of a Basque political place

Gernika emerged as a politically significant place in the Middle Ages, when the town developed into a thriving strategic, commercial and manufacturing center as a crossroads between east and west and with a navigable estuary and important port facilities. In its province, Gernika soon became a central site in the system of local rights and economic and political privileges agreed to with the King of Castile and codified by charters known as the *fueros*. They formed the basis for Basque political, economic, and social life, particularly during the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. The *fueros* thus gave the region considerable autonomy and created strong local and regional identities (Payne, 1975: 17–21; Corcuera Atienza, 1979: 23–24).

Within Gernika, the focal point of these rights was an oak tree, the historical

meeting place of the town elders and *foral* councils (Fig. 2). In 1476 and 1483, Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic monarchs responsible for initiating the process of proto-state integration in the Iberian peninsula, each visited Gernika to swear loyalty to its famous tree and the *foral* rights of the Basques (Douglass & Bilbao, 1975: 65–66). Already, then, prior to the beginnings of the state-building process in Spain (1479–1512), Gernika and the Basque provinces enjoyed a distinct status best defined as an associated territory with specific autonomous rights within the Kingdom of Castile. Perhaps most beneficially, the *fueros* set the commercial frontier of the embryonic Spanish state at the southern extent of the Basque Country, thus freeing Basques from paying import duties and taxes (Cava Mesa, Silvestre & Arranz, 1996: 31–36; Vidal, 1997: 87–88).

During this time, there was little conflict between Spanish and Basque identities



Fig. 2. Gernika's famous oak tree is a central element in the coat of arms of the *fuero* of Bizkaia, Gernika's province. The wall cloth is on display at the Basque Assembly House in Gernika (photograph: Pauliina Raento).

(Corcuera Atienza, 1979: 14–15; Sahlins, 1989). In fact, many Basques were closely involved in the Spanish administration and foreign expeditions. This involvement, however, took place through an explicit recognition of local, regional, and linguistic differences within the state (Douglass & Bilbao, 1975: 65–67).

Between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, the fortunes of Gernika paralleled those of the Basque Country in general. For example, in 1718, Gernika experienced a violent protest, known as the *Machinada*, directed against the resident central authorities (Cava Mesa et al., 1996: 36–37). A royal decree of 1717 had extended Spain's commercial frontier to the coastline proper of the Basque Country in order to offset the heavy costs of the War of the Spanish Succession (1702–1713). This deprived Basques of their special status within the kingdom and forced them to pay import duties as did the rest of the King's subjects. The popular uprising in Gernika and elsewhere in the Basque provinces was successful enough to force Madrid to rescind its decision. The traditional Basque tariff regulations were restored in 1722 (Payne, 1975: 25), and did not revert to Spanish authority until 1876 (Clark, 1979: 23).

This confrontation highlighted a change in the relationship between the Basque provinces and royal authority in Madrid. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Bourbons ascended the Spanish throne and immediately sought to tighten control over the peripheries. The Dynasty's attempt to turn Spain into a unitary state according to the principles of eighteenth-century rational liberalism failed, partly because this aspiration to incorporate the peripheries relied solely upon institutional and political influence, as well as military power. Thus, it was not capable of accommodating the cultural distinctiveness and relative economic power of the Basque and other minority regions.

The tensions of the Spanish state were crystallized in the nineteenth-century Carlist wars (1833–1839 and 1873–1876) that assumed the mantle of civil wars. The majority of rural Basques rallied to the cause of Carlism, a politico-religious ideology in defense of tradition and against the dangers of secular liberalism. For this Carlist majority, the *fueros* were a way of maintaining traditional Basque lifestyle.

To underscore this, local intellectuals began to symbolically separate Basques from Spaniards by mythicizing their historical political autonomy, their language, and alleged racial distinctiveness. These formulations claimed that the distinct status of Basques within the Spanish state was *recognized* instead of granted by the monarchs. Therefore, they would not have a right to deny the privileges which, according to some, were based on racial purity (for a widely accepted, but somewhat questionable interpretation among Anglo-American authors, consult Greenwood, 1977; Heiberg, 1989). The governmental practice based on the *fueros* was described as 'democratic' and was used to contrast Basques with Spaniards. These arguments united the Carlist majority internally, and created hostility toward Madrid in a way that could be called *proto-nationalist* (Hobsbawm, 1990: 46–79; also, Corcuera Atienza, 1979: 52–58).

Given its historical connection to the *fueros*, Gernika was a solidly Carlist town. Yet, the Carlists lost their wars and the last Basque *fueros* were abolished in 1876, except for certain economic rights, known in Spanish as *conciertos económicos* (see Postigo, 1979). This meant the destruction of Gernika's *foral* identity. At the same

time, rapid processes of industrialization and immigration from other parts of Spain were taking place on the Basque coast, particularly in the city of Bilbo (Bilbao). This development transformed the social and political composition of the industrializing periphery and created unrest that was often structured along ethnic divisions.

Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Bilbo, like most large urban centers, remained a liberal city, with an increasingly important socialist (and only later nationalist) minority. At the same time, Basque nationalism gradually superseded Carlism as the principal focus of loyalty for rural Basques. Concomitantly Gernika, as a pre-industrial rural location, became a central site of Basque nationalism, protest, and confrontation (Watson, 1996b: 182–184). If Bilbo looked ahead to the potential material rewards of modernization, Gernika's identity remained rooted in a mythological past. That this spatio-temporal importance was increasingly linked to the cause of nationalism as something distinct from Carlism invoked a specifically Basque identity. By the late nineteenth century, then, Gernika not only came to represent 'Basqueness' or a Basque ethnic identity, but also its political expression, Basque nationalism. The development also created new tension between the province's urban centers. This was the legacy which Gernika carried into the twentieth century.

The 'national' contest of an 'international' event

No discussion of Gernika could avoid the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). Joseba Zulaika (1988) (p. 16) describes the war as "the great divide," a critical moment in time by which people judge their own lives and experiences. At the level of Basque society, the war also marked a critical watershed: a moment when all the tensions of a rapidly transforming society were expressed through violence. Indeed, the symbolism of Gernika through its genocidal destruction goes some way to 'explaining' the contemporary manifestation of Basque political violence, the terrorism of ETA (see Glossary).

For many Basques, Gernika is the symbol of intervention and destruction caused by the Other. The *fueros* were abolished in 1876, but more importantly, Gernika reminds the Basque collective memory of both genocide and the beginning of the dictatorial rule of Francisco Franco in Spain (1939–1975). Unlike the cities of Oxford and Kyoto, which during World War II were excluded from aerial attacks because of their historical and cultural significance (Tuan, 1975: 239), Gernika experienced this recognition of symbolic value in reverse.

On Monday, 26 April 1937, a busy market day, the town became the experimental site of the second aerial bombardment of the Spanish Civil War targeted specifically against Basque civilians. The result was a high number of casualties and the physical destruction of the entire town center. According to the acknowledged Spanish Civil War historian, Hugh Thomas (1961) (p. 149; see also Clark, 1979: 70–71; Cava Mesa et al., 1996: 143–154), out of a population of 7000, 1654 were killed and 889 wounded. These figures are contested and form another site of conflict associated with the symbolism of Gernika. Some observers put the death rate at a much lower number, perhaps between 250 and 300 (Vidal, 1997: 101–103).

The details of the attack are also widely disputed. From the beginning of their rule, the Spanish nationalists were unconditional in denying that the town had ever been bombed. The silence regarding Gernika maintained during World War II in Spain, Nazi Germany, and Fascist Italy was broken gradually by the 1950s, when the first testimonies by foreign eye-witnesses of the bombardment were translated into Spanish. This, however, only added to the confusion, because these translations contained errors and misinformation and were heavily censored or adapted to propagandistic purposes (Southworth, 1977: 239–325, 387–398). In the context of state oppression, the subsequent myths of what really happened only amplified the political significance of Gernika.

In the aftermath of General Franco's death in 1975, and again on the fiftieth and the sixtieth anniversary of the bombardment in 1987 and 1997, there appeared an outburst of publications on the destruction of Gernika in Spanish, Basque, and English (Thomas & Morgan-Witts, 1975; Maier, 1976; Uriarte Aguirreamalloa, 1976; Southworth, 1977; Bernecker, 1987; Garitaonandia, 1987; Onaindia, 1987; Salas Larrazabal, 1987; Talón, 1987; Cava Mesa et al., 1996; de la Granja & Echániz, 1998). These publications recorded the details of the attack, launched a debate of the several circulating interpretations of the events, and commemorated the moment of collective suffering. In the context of this literature, our argument that Gernika was not selected to be the target of the attack for operational and military reasons, but *primarily* because of its profound symbolic significance as a sacred place in Basque culture, remains controversial, at least in Spain.

Of the many personal accounts describing the bombing of Gernika, that of Joseba Elozegi, an activist of the moderate Basque nationalist party PNV/EAJ, remains one of the most pertinent. In 1970, Franco attended an international sporting event in the Basque city of Donostia (San Sebastián). Elozegi, a witness to the destruction of Gernika, set his own body on fire and, in an act of self-immolation, threw himself before the General shouting, in Basque, "Long Live Free Basque Country!"

He survived, and later recalled that the incident represented the last desperate act of a former Basque soldier who had obsessively remembered the scenes he saw in Gernika for over thirty years, before feeling the compulsion to repeat in his protest the flames he had witnessed. In throwing himself before Franco he had "symbolically wanted to convey to him the fire of Gernika" (Elozegi, 1977: 32), for its destruction represented for the Basques a holocaustal attack on their very existence.

Elozegi's final thoughts on the destruction of Gernika are perhaps the most telling of all. They recall the common trauma of the Basque nationalist community and its response to the defeat of war:

The Basque... could not easily forgive, and certainly not forget, the serious wrong inflicted on his people. ... We understand that there is always slaughter in war, but genocide, the methodical destruction of an entire people, fully enters the realm of crime and barbarism. Violence engenders violence, especially when it is promoted by the masses, and we know the consequences that bring with them the infection of rage among the people. ... The civil population suffered severe consequences and...those bombs produced a depressing effect in the morale of resist-

ance. ... It was not difficult to see different changes in disposition and vigor among the *gudaris* [Basque soldiers], after suffering the bombardment of Gernika; some reported depression and disinclination; others rage and desperation which made them more fearsome in the struggle. (Elosegi, 1977: 141–142)

In the minds of many contemporary Basque nationalists, the analogy with brutality and ongoing war is still valid. In an interview conducted in 1995, the collective nightmare was explained by a radical nationalist resident of the French Basque Country:

There are many Gernikas afterwards, and there were some before, too. It is sad, because it is the symbol of the *barbarie* of the states, of the Spanish state, or of some powers within that state. The French state has also done this, not in the Basque Country, but in its history, the French state has done these things, these things of the *barbarie* of the states. But, also, it is very important that for one thousand years, we are losing. Namely, *we are losing wars*. There are people who are very dedicated to the struggle, who are capable of giving their lives for their country, which is something remarkable in the Basque Country. But there are so many lost wars, and I would like to win this one. (cited in Raento, 1996: 267)

Both stories reflect individual projections of the collective mentality of the Basque nationalist community during the Civil War. They are part of the war experience that shaped the development of Basque nationalism. The testimonies stand as evidence to what James Clifford (1988) (p. 341) describes as the ongoing process of a collective culture's reinvention, where its periodic encounters (in this case, war) are essential to its continuity and survival. Joseba Zulaika (1988) (p. 35) contends that

For the people who actually experienced it, war was the source of dreadful memories to be turned into 'stories' that are meant to embody the essence of the antisociety's complete lack of ordinary rules and values. For them, from the present perspective, the meaning of war is the projection of a past history replete with tragedy and defeat.

War can, therefore, be regarded as a work of memory for the Basque nationalist community; that is, an event conceived of in such a way as to serve the future needs of that community. Its representation would serve as witness to both present and past while serving to construct the basis of the future (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994: 101–102). While the Civil War stands as testament to the defeat, agony, sacrifice, or heroism of the Basque nationalist community, it also served as a projection of internal and individual contexts.

It was this individual interpretation that came to change the face of Basque nationalism in the postwar era. The founders of a new radical Basque nationalism saw the Basque essence itself as being under threat from the repressive nature of Franco's government. According to them, this had been ably demonstrated already in 1937. The collective trauma effected by Gernika's bombardment, and its internalized

projection into postwar radical Basque nationalism, did much to sustain the birth and development of ETA (for general history, see Clark, 1984; Jáuregui Bereci-artu, 1985).

That said, ETA itself, although formed in 1959 and with origins stretching back to student movements of the 1940s, remained a highly localized force. Not until the early 1970s would this particular manifestation of radical Basque nationalism assume a more international prominence, specifically with the Burgos Trial of sixteen ETA members (1970) and the assassination of the Spanish Prime Minister and Franco's chosen successor, Admiral Carrero Blanco (1973). Similarly, the profound trauma expressed by Elosegi remained very much a localized event. By contrast, what really elevated Gernika to a status approximating a universal war memorial was the Picasso painting, *Guernica*. It was not, however, painted specifically for the Basques. Instead, it represented a universal recognition, and rejection, of the horrors of war, underscored by a particular political context.

The 'local' and 'national' contest of an 'international' product

In 1937, Pablo Picasso was commissioned to design a mural for the Spanish Republican pavilion at the Paris International Art and Technical Exhibition. By placing the resulting painting, *Guernica*, inspired by the bombardment of, and named after, the town, opposite the German pavilion at the exhibition, the Republican government was specifically protesting against the destruction of the Basque town. Although the content of the message largely escaped the exhibition audience, the painting's subsequent world tour and spreading news of the bombardment quickly made *Guernica* Picasso's most famous work and an acknowledged masterpiece of twentieth-century art (Sebastián García, 1998: 116). Through its representation in a painting, Gernika was thus elevated from being primarily a locally and regionally significant place (with historical national importance in Spain) to a nationally and universally recognized symbol of the horror of war. In this way, the entire town became a war memorial.

Whereas up to 1937 Gernika was associated, in the Basque Country and in Spain, with the *fueros*, and for Basque nationalists with 'democracy' and the 'rights of people', after that year the name gained a universal resonance through an association with 'genocide', 'brutality', and 'repression'. During World War II, in both the Americas and France, representatives of the exiled Basque autonomous government published various magazines under the name 'Gernika/Guernica' to commemorate the Basque people's collective suffering and to create a sense of community outside the homeland. Similarly named institutions also emerged to promote the Basque language and Basque culture in general. And the Basque resistance movement in France adopted the name for a clandestine information network (Sebastián García, 1998: 123–125). Indeed, the exiled Basque government often "used the name 'Gernika' synonymously with 'the Basque Country'" (Sebastián García, 1998: 132). Thus, as a war memorial, the town represents an important insight into the Basque nationalist conception of the past as oppression and suffering and, more generally (and perhaps neutrally), into humankind's shared history of conflict.

However, just as Picasso is the quintessential exponent of modernist art, so modernism itself — an aesthetic ideology that transforms content into form — acted as a distancing mechanism. More specifically, increasingly after 1937, the self-referential dimension of the painting (*Guernica*) distanced the town's representation from the reality of the place and the event, creating in effect a difference, measured in both space and time, between Gernika and *Guernica*. Today, mention of the name 'Gernika' mostly elicits responses to the painting (*Guernica*) — to its aesthetic properties or famous creator — more than the place (Gernika/*Guernica*) or the event (genocide/holocaust). This, in part, explains the ease with which modern culture has appropriated *Guernica* as a best-selling print adorning the homes and offices of the Western world, instead of recalling the genocide associated with the original event.

We believe that this relative 'failure' of the town to achieve a lasting recognition beyond the Basque Country is partially explained by the fact that the genocide predated the rise of the visual media. "The visual experience of the real is often second(hand?)," argues Chris Jenks. "Indeed, in late-modernity, we anticipate that it should be with TV, film, video, photography and advertising providing our most immediate access to 'other' through frozen, stored, contrived, and re-presented images" (Jenks, 1995: 10). In the aftermath of the bombardment of Gernika, erudite, text-based reports conveyed media responses in a less visual way. For example, *The Times'* London correspondent, George Steer, recorded afterwards: "I had a very intimate window on the [Spanish Civil] war: an umpire's view... I could go without hindrance or escort to any part of the [Basque] front at any time" (Steer, 1938: 14). Steer concluded that "history will show, that this oppression will not last forever... their [the Basques'] symbol, and their history, is Gernika's tree." (1938: 395) Yet for all the impassioned writing of Steer, a thousand carefully crafted words can never compete with the impact of a visually stunning image in the modern world. One might highlight, for example, the impact that places such as 'Bosnia', 'Rwanda', or 'Kosovo' and terms like 'ethnic cleansing' have had in recent times. Possibly, their imaging today is a legacy of the stark, horrific newsreel footage emerging out of the concentration camps in post-World War II Europe.

Despite this relative 'failure' to imprint *Guernica's* place- and time-specific context in people's minds internationally, the painting carried a strong symbolic value in Spanish politics. In the 1970s, the image became a frequently used symbol of the progressivist opposition to the eroding dictatorship. The 'return' of the painting to Spain (where it had never been) in 1981, six years after the death of Franco, was interpreted as an "international recognition of Spanish democracy" in the context of political transition (Sebastián García, 1998: 117). To commemorate the event, the painting was reproduced in a 200-peseta stamp in the same year.

In the Basque Country, Picasso's representation of Gernika's bombardment added a special emphasis to the visual dimensions of the politically significant place. In 1947, for example, the exiled Basque writer, Juan Larrea, wrote that "if... at the beginning was *Guernica*, soon afterwards it was Warsaw, Rotterdam, Nancy, Coventry — down to the day when all of Europe was only one immense material and moral ruin... On that terrible day, the *Guernica* [i.e. the painting; italics added] turned out to be, of all known paintings, the most European" (Larrea, 1947; cited in Cooper,

1988: 282). This visuality was further underscored by a plethora of propagandistic films on the bombardment of Gernika, Picasso's painting, or both. Many of these films, created by Basque and Spanish film-makers and some international pacifist organizations, were released to commemorate the bombardment's anniversary at ten-year intervals. In addition to film-makers, the theme also inspired playwrights, composers and sculptors (Sebastián García, 1998: 117–118), thus adhering some importance to senses other than vision in transmitting Gernika's spatial symbolism. Recently, however, the emphasis has returned to a visual representation of spatial symbolism through the discussion concerning *Guernica's* possible transfer from the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid to the new Guggenheim Museum in Bilbo. This discussion also returned the town of Gernika to the focus of regional tensions between the economically and politically strong Bilbo and secondary urban centers within the region.

In April, 1991, the Autonomous Basque Government authorities invited Thomas Krens, Director of the Guggenheim Foundation in New York, to the Basque Country in order to convince him of the suitability of Bilbo as a potential location for the first of the Guggenheim's franchise museums in Europe. On arriving at Bilbo's Sondika Airport, Krens was whisked away from the city itself, first to Gasteiz (Vitoria; the capital of the Basque Autonomous Community) and thence on to Gernika. "It is here, in Gernika, Krens is in the habit of recounting, where he first began to realize that the influence of his hosts was having a profound effect on him" (Zulaika, 1997: 63). In many ways, then, Gernika effectively helped to 'sell' Bilbo to the global art industry. The Guggenheim museum opened in the fall of 1997 and has been an unqualified success, placing both Bilbo and — to a certain extent, at least — the Basque Country on Europe's tourist map.

These regional tensions also partly explain the recent political squabbling over Picasso's painting in Spain. Through 1997, PNV/EAJ, the hegemonic political party within the Basque Autonomous Community, attempted to secure a temporary transfer of *Guernica* from Madrid to Bilbo's Guggenheim to coincide with the museum's opening in October. Not only did the heated debate between Madrid and Bilbo (PNV/EAJ headquarters) and Gasteiz reflect the political importance of cultural representation but, curiously, the town of Gernika remained absent from much of the debate. At the local level, the town's nationalists used this context to renew their claim that the only justified location for the painting was in Gernika itself (Fig. 3).

For the contemporary international Basque community, the local-level place-specificity of Gernika operates in another way, since it is the town that transcends even the Basque Country. The Basques are "one of the least-studied elements in the pluralistic social fabric of the Americas despite the fact that they were among the first Europeans to emigrate to the New World" (Douglass & Bilbao, 1975: 1). If there is one cultural symbol which connects the Basque diaspora to its homeland, it is Gernika.

For example, oak trees grown from seedlings taken from Gernika face both *La Casa Rosada* (the Presidential Palace) in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and the State Capitol of Idaho in Boise. One could, furthermore, travel the Americas from south to north by way of the *Gernikako Arbola* (Tree of Gernika) Basque Center in Junin



Fig. 3. Gernika's nationalists have placed their claim over Picasso's painting *Guernica* in the local landscape (photograph courtesy of Klaus Vesama).

(Argentina), the *Restaurante Gernika* in Oaxaca (Mexico), the *Guernica Restaurant* in Sausalito (California), and the *Bar Gernika* in Boise (Idaho) (see Urrutia, 1992). The symbolic power of the name 'Gernika' reinforces a connection with the Old Country to the extent that, for many within the Basque diaspora, Gernika is the Basque Country. And if there is one focal point of this international allegiance, it would have to be the Tree of Gernika. It is important to note, however, that this commemoration of Gernika rests mainly on a symbolic representation largely prior to the most important twentieth-century political developments in Spain. Thus, this connection underscores the characteristically folkloristic content of Basque identity overseas. Indeed, it is perhaps through the Tree itself that Gernika first achieved an international resonance. For example, the English poet William Wordsworth wrote in 1810: "Oak of Guernica! Tree of Holier Power, Than that which in Dodona did enshrine, (So faith too fondly deemed) a voice divine" (Wordsworth, 1981: 839).

Home is where the heartland is

A landscape that represents both shared and contested history is an essential participant in this history and its symbolism. In Gernika, the relationship between landscape and history reproduces meaning through the physical environment of the place (Azaryahu, 1996: 320). This is exemplified by the famous Tree of Gernika

(Gernikako Arbola/Árbol de Guernica), under which Basque decision-makers gathered to exercise their *foral* rights. Today, the remains of the oak, preserved in front of the more recent Basque Assembly House (Batzar-Etxea/Casa de Juntas), represent this history of self-government (Fig. 4). Nearby grows the new oak, whose offspring was planted for the future in 1979, the year of creation of the Basque Autonomous Community according to the Spanish Constitution of 1978. To Basque nationalists, Gernika and its oak represent the old Basque institutions and the historical right to, and practice of, national self-determination and equality with the Other, namely, the Spanish state and Basque non-nationalists. That this history is carried on by a living organism emphasizes the bringing together of past and present in the same space and in the same time.

From a distance, the Tree is watched over by a monument named ‘Nire Aitaren

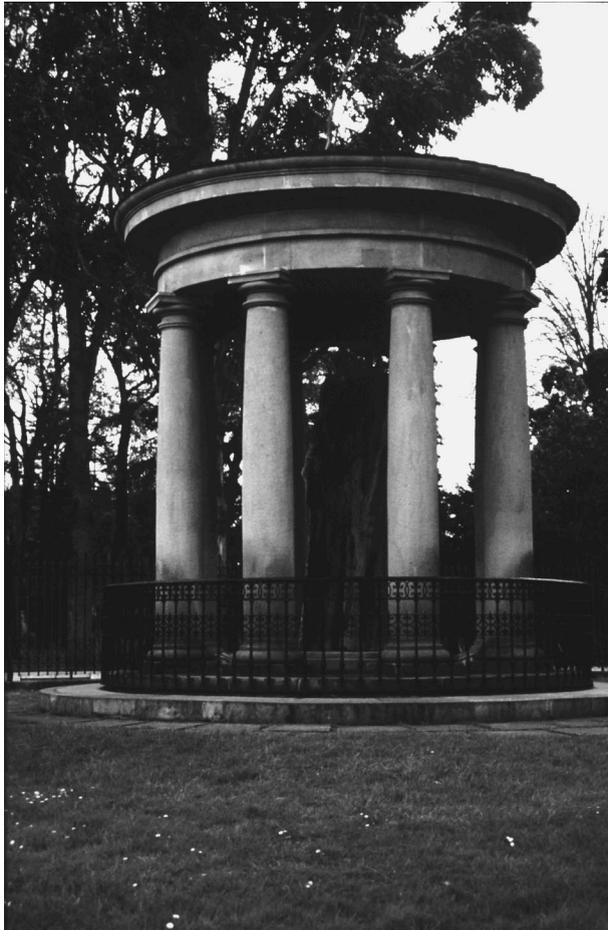


Fig. 4. The remains of the old Tree of Gernika at the Basque Assembly House in Gernika (photograph: Pauliina Raento).

Etxea' (My Father's House), a creation of the internationally acknowledged Basque sculptor Eduardo Chillida (Fig. 5). The name of the monument and its positioning in relation to the oak and the Assembly House are charged with what Basque nationalists consider sacred. The name makes a reference to one of the most cherished pieces of Basque nationalist art, the poem 'Nire Aitaren Etxea' by Gabriel Aresti (1964) (p. 44). At the core of this sacredness lies the symbolic value attributed to the Basque concept of *etxe*, which, in addition to 'house' also translates as 'home', the most private space of Basque life (see Douglass, 1969; Ott, 1981; Arpal, 1985).

In its idealized, nationalist form, *etxe* is represented by the Basque rural farmstead. It is an entity formed by the building, its people and livestock, land and other property, and their history. According to traditional Basque customs of inheritance, its preservation as an undivided whole from one generation to another is considered vital. This continuity is carried forward by the people, who often are identified by the name of their house instead of their surname, even in the graveyard. To many, this institution carries a profound personal meaning, and its deterioration in the changing economic context represents the change, and loss, of a lifestyle (Douglass, 1969; Ott, 1981; Aretxaga, 1988).

Radical Basque nationalism draws a direct analogy between *etxe* and *aberri*, 'fatherland'. As with *etxe*, the Basque (radical) nationalist concept of *aberri* is considered an indivisible unity (Fig. 6). According to radical nationalists, the current division of the historical Basque territory into the jurisdiction of two states and, within Spain, into two autonomous communities, has been imposed on the Basque



Fig. 5. The view from the sculptor Eduardo Chillida's monument 'Nire Aitaren Etxea' (My Father's House) is directed at the Basque Assembly House and the Tree of Gernika (photograph: Paullina Raento).



Fig. 6. The symbolism of the rural farmstead and the Basque fatherland is portrayed in a radical nationalist commemorative poster that claims “struggle, independence and socialism” to be “the way.” The left bottom corner of the poster reads, in Basque, “I will defend/My father’s house,” thus citing Gabriel Aresti’s nationalist poem ‘Nire Aitaren Etxea’ (photograph: Pauliina Raento).

people against its will, by the Other. In the ideology, both *etxe* and *aberri* represent the common identity shared by a single people, who both individually and collectively belong to the same linguistic, cultural, social, and — fundamentally — territorial unity. In reality, the cultural, linguistic and social composition of this population is considerably more heterogeneous.

The defense of the most sacred and the most private also justifies the use of direct physical force in the minds of those who accept the use of violence in pursuit of political objectives. This concept of history as justification is clear in the words of an interviewed radical nationalist (1995):

I believe that in your home, no matter how progressive you are, you would not let anybody enter, especially if this person began to carry out the refrigerator, the computer, the washer, just because he feels like doing it. To enter, okay, to be in my home, okay. While there, do not abuse, eh? In other words, if he begins to carry out everything you have, *even the books you have...* No. Then, there arrives a moment when you grab a knife from the kitchen, if you only have a knife, or you call someone, to the neighbors or for help or whatever, which in this case would be international help. This is so obvious that I do not believe we need to discuss it. (cited in Raento, 1996: 280–281)

For the founders of ETA, the destruction of Gernika represented more than just an

‘entrance’ into a Basque space. It was an ‘abuse’ that served to underscore what radical nationalists considered to be a genocidal attempt to eradicate an entire culture. In their opinion, a violation of the sacred ontological space of Gernika justified a counter-demonstration of political violence. In the words of one of ETA’s founding members, for “the young patriots that did not know the war of 1936, but only Francoism...for those born in 1930s and even 1940s...[the war’s] sensational events...inflamm us...move and later destroy us in the deepest of sadness” (Alvarez Enparantza, 1994: 204).

Location matters: the conflict over language in landscape

Naming and language bring “hegemonic structures of power and authority” (Azaryahu, 1996: 312) into the everyday environment. In this way, they imply active nation-building and the formation of “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983). In a local environment of conflicting interpretations of territory, history, and culture, the struggle against this authority is an empowering act of resistance. By challenging the existing names, their spelling, and the language used, the act of renaming becomes a challenge to “the symbolic control of the public domain” (Azaryahu, 1996: 313) and a claim of ownership (Berg & Kearns, 1996: 100). By making themselves visible in the everyday context, both the hegemonic authority and its challengers efficiently demonstrate their presence and interpretation of history and politics. Most importantly, immediate action suggests a promise (or threat) of change:

A revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed, it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions and political apparatuses. A social transformation, to be truly revolutionary in character, must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on space — though its impacts need not occur at the same rate, or with equal force, in each of these areas. (Lefebvre, 1991: 54; also, see Dirlik, 1989: 28–29)

This presence at the grassroots is particularly significant because it is the local space of everyday experiences where the meaning is created. It is there where “people’s lives are lived, economic interests are defined, information from local and extra-local sources is interpreted and takes on meaning, and political discussions are carried on” (Agnew, 1984: 192; see Agnew, 1987). Because names are signifiers of places and the memories and experiences attached to them, they evoke strong feelings. Therefore, names “conform to the most classic definitions of symbolism” (Cohen & Kliot, 1992: 655) and form an essential ingredient in “the iconography of landscape” (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988; see Watson, 1996a: 28).

The struggle over the language of names in the Basque landscape is an illustrative example of a national conflict fought over in local space. The penetration of the Spanish state and language into ‘Basque’ space is seen by Basque nationalists as a forced contamination of the politico-cultural essence of ‘Basque home’. The struggle

over the control of linguistic details of the local landscape deserves particular attention also because it, too, emphasizes the ‘centrality of the eye’ in the political making of place in Gernika. The following two examples illustrate the symbolic significance of language in relation to naming in the Basque conflict. The first discusses General Franco’s motives for the linguistic repression in Gernika. The second explores the contemporary radical Basque nationalist campaign of traffic-sign repainting in contested places.

Following the fall of Republicans in the Basque Country in 1937, the Francoist state abolished the special economic rights the Basque provinces had enjoyed since 1876. Furthermore, Franco declared the Basque provinces of Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa (Guipúzcoa) as “traitorous.” They had not only declared themselves against Franco from the outset, but fiercely defended their territory to their maximum capacity and underpinned their resistance by a strong nationalist fervor which rejected Franco’s vision of a unitary Spain, “One, Great, and Free” (Payne, 1987; Preston, 1993).

The declaration continued to prolong a state of war in the Basque Country and legitimize a continued policy of terror. This did not represent an attempt to castigate a specific group of perceived “traitors,” people sympathetic to the Republican cause, as in the rest of the country, but rather to punish the provinces *as territorial symbols*. From the outset of the new state, there was an attempt to separate the two Basque provinces from the policy of national integration pursued elsewhere, simultaneously allowing for a sustained period of repression, persecution, and discrimination (Pérez-Agote, 1984: 79). Although this persecution was by no means limited to Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa, it did assume there a peculiarly ethnic tone. Where opponents of the regime elsewhere were broadly lumped together under the generic term of “reds,” those “traitors” in Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa were immediately perceived as ‘bad’ Spaniards. One could change political allegiance but, short of migration, the place-specific identity of Bizkaia or Gipuzkoa was difficult to hide in Franco’s Spain. It would seem that Franco’s view that Spain was “better Red than broken” remained the principal obsession of the regime (see Gara, 2 May 1999).

Central in Franco’s attack on the “traitorous” provinces and Basque culture, and in the establishment of the new rule, was a ban on the usage of the Basque language, a “central pillar of anti-Spanish sentiment” (Clark, 1979: 81), in all public spaces. Education, religious ceremonies, and radio broadcasts were to be conducted in Spanish only, and street conversations in Basque often led to imprisonments. Civil registry entries were rewritten in Spanish to discourage the Basque spelling of names. Through this policy, Franco sought to erase the minority language from all the sense-scapes: Basque was not supposed to be seen, heard, or learned.

The repression was made most explicit in Gernika and in other centers of symbolic importance. There, in addition to the above-mentioned policies, it is frequently claimed that “Basque inscriptions on tombstones and public buildings” were replaced with their Spanish counterparts or destroyed (for example, Clark, 1979: 81, see 82; *Conflicto lingüístico en Euskadi*, 1979: 25). Although the details of the Francoist government’s repressive acts in the Basque Country are generally well recorded in both academic and local popular literature, what remains striking is a lack of any discussion that would go beyond mentioning the renaming of Gernika. The data of

its details regarding the tombstones, in particular, seem to be either nonexistent or very difficult to access, and none of those academics who mention Gernika's renaming cites a source. Therefore, it is somewhat unclear to us to what extent the renaming of Gernika's graveyards really happened, and if it did, who was behind it. Most important, however, is that the alleged violation of Basque tombstones in Gernika by Franco is commonly believed in the Basque Country to be a historical fact and yet another example of state oppression against the minority.

For the purpose of this study, the meaning of the linguistic oppression in Gernika's local landscape and the related beliefs are more important than the specifics of the alleged renaming. Through the cultural oppression, Franco denied both the value of Basque culture and language and the nationalist claim of Basque national self-determination. This focus was particularly important for the future development of Basque nationalism, since the (perceived) erasing of names from the local landscape was seen as an attempt to 'take away history' — forceful renaming suggests a rupture in memories attached to the name, perhaps meaningful over generations (Azaryahu, 1996: 317). Whereas renaming of public buildings intrudes collective politico-cultural space and demonstrates control over public space and the people as a whole, tombstones are more personal. The (alleged) replacement of their inscriptions insulted directly the integrity of individuals and their loved ones. Because Basques considered their tombstones part of *etxe*, Franco's (alleged) tampering with graves violated the concept of indivisible unity and the essence of a Basque sense of 'home'. It was the same kind of violation as that witnessed by Elosegi during the destruction of Gernika in 1937, which ultimately led to his individual attempt to take revenge against the oppressor.

With Basque autonomy, the situation of the minority language has improved considerably. It is now widely used in the public sphere, including all levels of government and education, the church, and the media. Together with Spain's other minority languages, the status of the Basque language is defined in the Spanish Constitution of 1978. Despite these improvements, and despite the gradual increase of the language's usage and the number of its speakers, the issue remains highly controversial. The Constitution's definition of linguistic rights, that makes the minority languages secondary to Spanish, is, in particular, a constant source of conflict. Although Clause 2 of Article 3 of the Constitution recognizes the right of certain regional languages to a certain official status in specified territories, Clause 1 still maintains that Spanish is the official language of the state and that all Spaniards must know it and have the right to use it within the boundaries of the state (La Constitución Española, 1978; Díaz López, 1985; Cotarelo, 1989). According to Clare Mar-Molinero (1996) (pp. 82–83), this is a "highly prescriptive constraint of limiting [the minority languages'] official status to their own territorial space. This clear geographical limitation means realistically that the future role of minority languages will always take second place to Castilian. It could even be argued that it contravenes the spirit of later articles which claim equality for all Spanish citizens. Those Spanish citizens whose mother-tongue is not Castilian could argue that they do not have equal linguistic rights with those who are Castilian mother-tongue speakers." In practice, the frequent dominance of Spanish in quotidian situations has created further controversy and conflict at the

local and personal level. For radical nationalists, the only acceptable goal is still a monolingually Basque-speaking Basque Country.

In this context of continuous friction, the symbolically most significant expression of the “meaning” and “spirit” (Tuan, 1975: 237) related to the visualization of the linguistic conflict is the radical nationalist campaign of traffic-sign repainting in Gernika and its general vicinity. Repeatedly, the Spanish place names of the signs are erased with black or red paint to highlight their Basque counterparts (Fig. 7). In the intersections surrounding Gernika, the Spanish spelling of ‘Guernica’ in traffic signs is deleted systematically to highlight its Basque counterpart ‘Gernika’. This linguistic redesign constitutes a direct challenge to the authority of both the Spanish state and the moderate nationalist concept of Basque society, politics, and culture.

The campaign is absent in large parts of the historical Basque territory, but again very prominent at the other focus of territorial political contest: the international



Fig. 7. An example of the radical nationalist traffic-sign repainting campaign near Gernika (photograph courtesy of José Javier Aretxabaleta).

border zone between Spain and France. Despite its weakening political and economic importance in an integrating Europe, in the Basque radical nationalist ideology, in particular, this boundary still represents an imposition of power by the Spanish and French states over the Basque people and their historical territory (Raento, 1997a; b: 198).

The power claimed through the tampering of the traffic signs implies “power to call something into being, to render the invisible visible, to impart a certain character to things” (Tuan, 1991: 688). Both in Gernika and at the international border, the radical nationalist campaign “responds to the states’ control over the claimed Basque territory, its language and [in the latter case] the movement of its people” (Raento, 1997b: 198). In this way, “the radical nationalists sustain their interpretation” of a unified Basque national future “in the local landscape” (Raento, 1997b: 198; see Davis, 1986: 6; Kong & Yeoh, 1997: 216). In Gernika, this radical nationalist vision regarding the desired internal development of the claimed territory is brought to the fore by highlighting the wish to create a monolingually Basque-speaking Basque Country. At the international border, the denial of the state’s “right to delimit, demarcate and control the Basque territory and its inhabitants” is underscored (Raento, 1997b: 198). In the international zone, the states respond by cleansing or replacing the signs, which for the radical nationalists exemplifies the ongoing “Spanish and French colonialism over the Basques” (Krutwig, 1973). In Gernika, within a strongly nationalist local environment, the repainted signs are usually left untouched.

The selective campaigning and the responses it provokes show that location matters. The motives behind the choice of location become evident by connecting the question ‘Why there?’ to Basque history, culture, and politics. Similarly, public art campaigns vary in appearance across the historical Basque territory. The local political, economic and linguistic environment, degree of confrontation, and historical significance of the site all influence the style and number of public art and *graffiti*. Moreover, the political content and style of the messages adjust to each site’s characteristics (Raento, 1997b: 196–197; 1999: 224–228). This type of expression “suggests a conscious strategy and a detailed local knowledge of the social valuation of space” (Goheen, 1993: 129). Naming and re-naming are strategies of power, and location matters, because this power is only truly exercised when it is ‘seen’ in the appropriate place. Likewise, the visibility of the campaign conditions the authorities’ response to the act. At the international border, the national and regional authorities are more likely to counteract than they are in Gernika, which is a local environment with predominantly nationalist worldviews. This highlights the impact of visual imagery and the response that such imagery elicits so that “the staring optics of humankind act as the final arbiters of truth, beauty, desire and goodness” (Jenks, 1995: 12).

As a further confirmation of the importance of ‘the centrality of the eye’ in the Basque context, the nationalist claim is visualized through titles and emblems of organizations. The peace research institute Gernika Gogoratuz (Remembering Gernika) makes a heavy usage of its symbolism, and a leaf of oak has been chosen by both the radical nationalist organization KAS and the moderate nationalist political party EA as the core element of their symbols. *Ertzainak*, the Basque Autonomous Community’s police officers, carry a red oak leaf on the shoulders of their

sweaters. “Visualising is variously apprehended as a compound of strategies for knowing, desiring and for the exercise of power” (Jenks, 1995: 16).

Ceremonial Gernika: ritual and conflict

From the inception of the Basque Autonomous Community and an associated leadership of moderate Basque nationalism since 1980, Gernika has played a central role in the spatial practice of politics of the new regime. Its historical role in Basque self-government is openly underscored and it is used in building a sense of identity and belonging in various ways (see Schwartz, 1982: 377; Azaryahu, 1996: 312). This emphasis on Gernika’s ceremonial qualities reinforces “the transfer of meanings, and their internalization” (Azaryahu, 1996: 320).

For example, Gernika serves as a site of high-prestige decision-making and political acts. The ratifying vote concerning the text of the Basque Statute of Autonomy — or the Statute of Gernika, as it is called — took place there in 1979. Each new autonomous government, before taking office, swears its oath under the sacred oak. The formal ceremonies usually include some elements of the ‘(h)earscape’ to emphasize the event’s national significance in the Basque context. The oath ceremony, for instance, includes the singing of the Basque ‘national’ anthem. Furthermore, moments of silence have become a moderate nationalist and non-nationalist form of protest against Basque political violence. The celebration of this protest in Gernika, at the Tree of Gernika, imparts a strong message and highlights the internal conflict in Basque politics.

Indeed, in addition to those in power, the value of Gernika is recognized by other political parties and organizations. This has made the town the focal point of competition over political space between various interpretations over what is Basque, and where it should lead the people. For example, during the electoral rallying for the Autonomous Parliament in 1994, the Spanish conservative party PP launched its campaign in Gernika and concluded it in Gasteiz. To an interviewed PP representative (1995), this was “a natural choice”:

[We launched the campaign there] because we are Basques, and it is as simple as that. Let’s see: the patrimony of what is Basque does not belong to the Nationalist Party [the moderate nationalist PNV/EAJ], nor to the nationalist world in general. We, who work for the Basque Country, and in the Basque Country, are all Basques. I have four Basque surnames. If we look at our surnames, all of mine are nothing but Basque, *but not in Euskara* [Basque language]. And, nonetheless, what am I? Chinese? Australian? No, for God’s sake, I am Basque! So, what is Partido Popular doing? Partido Popular acts as a consequence of what its people are, and its people are Basque. They are Basque. (cited in Raento, 1996: 268)

The statement makes skillful usage of the classic nationalist rhetoric of defining ‘true’ Basques. The reference to those “who work for, and in, the Basque Country” reinterprets the radical nationalist comprehension of Basqueness as a state of mind

dedicated to the radical nationalist concept of nation-building towards independence. In turn, “Basque surnames” refer to the original, racially informed formulations by the founders of PNV/EAJ (see Corcuera Atienza, 1979). The nationalist world, however, strongly rejects these reinterpretations and any support for PP. Consequently, the party’s choice of campaign sites was met with some hostility, as expressed by an interviewed member of HB (1995):

It makes one dubious to see PP, a party as *españolista* [Spanish nationalist] as it is, utilizing this historical place for its electoral campaign, knowing that the origin of PP is Alianza Popular, and Alianza Popular was a Francoist party whose MPs, many of them, had demands similar to Franco’s. (cited in Raento, 1996: 269)

Here, PP is excluded from Basqueness through a spatio-temporal reference to Spain during Franco and by suggesting that Spain has not changed much since those days. In Basque politics, then, *legitimacy is defined fundamentally in spatial terms* (Herskovitz, 1993: 407; Berg & Kearns, 1996: 113). For Basque nationalists, political affiliation must lie within the building of a Basque nation, although they cannot agree upon its specifics. Generally, however, acceptance of any configuration wider than ‘the Basque Country’ (irrespective of how it is defined) is equal to betraying Basque identity and the national cause.

From a more apolitical perspective, the symbolic value of the sacred site is being ‘overdone’. As one of the interviewed moderate nationalists cynically remarked in 1995, referring to the importance addressed to, and to the conversation concerning, Gernika: “Today, it is not possible to be Basque without doing your *árbol laboral*, without spending some time under the Tree, even if it was only ten minutes per year” (cited in Raento, 1996: 269).

This ‘overdoing’ is explicit in the escalation of rumors and blunt accusations typical of the antagonized Basque political atmosphere of recent years. This touched Gernika in late 1994. On 27 November, the PNV/EAJ-affiliated daily newspaper *Deia* reported that the Assembly building had been attacked with a Molotov cocktail (*Deia*, 27 November 1994: p. 13). By the next morning, the PNV/EAJ leader Xabier Arzalluz’s quick response had reached the headlines of *Deia* and other newspapers all over Spain:

This is something that even Hitler did not do, who was the one who bombed Gernika but left [the Assembly] intact. Even the French Revolution and the Germans knew what it is. Even Franco did not touch it. And then along come these *tipejos* and do it. These street people, often because they are still legally minors, while those older than 20 stay in the rear guard. And they do not know even where to toss it, nor do they care whether they hit the Tree of Gernika or the pine next to it. What kind of Basque is able to throw a Molotov cocktail at the Assembly House? (Xabier Arzalluz in *Deia*, 28 November 1994: 4; cited in Raento, 1996: 269–270)

To PNV/EAJ, the answer was clear. In the party’s opinion, expressed by the Con-

gress spokesman Iñaki Anasagasti (quoted in *El Mundo*, 28 November 1994: 7) and Xabier Arzalluz (*Deia*, 28 November 1994: 4), “HB, KAS and ETA” had shown that they were no longer worth being considered “political adversaries” but “enemies,” because “the only program these gangsters have to offer to the Basque people is destruction.” Arzalluz had thus responded in the classic manner of exclusion, of positing otherness (“gangsters”), of radical nationalists as contemporary ‘folk devils’.

The radical nationalist silence was broken on 2 December, when their newspaper *Egin* published an article titled “Ertzaintza [the Autonomous Basque Police Force] recognizes that the Tree of Gernika was not attacked” (*Egin*, 2 December 1994: p. 10). In the article, the angry reactions led by PNV/EAJ and the investigation conducted by the Autonomous Community’s police were reviewed in detail with a carefully designed calmness of style. According to the investigation results, “The police doubt that the attack was directed against the institution [or] that a Molotov cocktail” was actually used. Instead, the target was possibly “the police officer who was guarding the place” (*Egin*, 2 December 1994: 10). After this, as so many times before, the sensitive topic was buried in silence: nobody wrote anything else, nobody apologized, and nobody asked for more public scrutiny.

The contested ‘right’ to use Gernika as a site of political activities and the (not unique) Molotov incidence suggest that Gernika today is a site of conflict among Basque nationalists themselves. History is disputed not only at the state level, between a regional nationalist minority and a central government, but, increasingly, at the regional and local levels, between different segments and subgroups of that minority. More specifically, the dominant (moderate) cultural values of Basque nationalism have come into conflict with their radical subcultural counterparts, who challenge the ‘inevitability’ of these values by both reiterating and distorting the focal concerns of a parent culture. As such, one should not confuse a breaking of rules with an absence of rules (Hebdige, 1979: 76–77, 92). As Dick Hebdige (1979) (p. 79) maintains, “if we emphasize integration and coherence at the expense of dissonance and discontinuity, we are in danger of denying the very manner in which the subcultural form is made to crystallize, objectify and communicate group experience.” Had the ‘sacredness’ of the Tree truly been violated, as initially suspected by the PNV/EAJ, one might emphasize that this only confirmed the aesthetic of rebellion favored by historical youth subcultures. “The boundary between artist and audience has often stood as a metaphor in revolutionary aesthetics,” contends Hebdige, “for that larger and more intransigent barrier which separates art and the dream from reality” (Hebdige, 1979: 110).

Conclusion: Gernika as a space of harmony?

After the battle of Waterloo, Napoleon is reported to have observed that ground could always be recovered but time never (Nairn, 1998: 41). This is equally applicable in defining the political trajectory of Gernika. Today, Gernika stands as the symbol of both the external and internal conflict over the historical Basque territory, national future, and definition of Basque identity. Increasingly, the focus has shifted

from being primarily a ‘national’ matter towards local levels, emphasizing regional and political rivalries within the historical Basque territory. These tensions emphasize the problematic nature of Basque identity and Gernika’s significance in its politico-cultural construction. Simultaneously, this local focus finds global resonance through the town’s status as a war memorial and its representation in a world-famous painting and cultural expressions of Basque emigrants. More than any other place, Gernika remains *the* symbolic location of Basque national identity in each of the discussed, strongly intertwined geographical contexts.

Gradually, Basque political culture has grown tired of old platforms such as continual argument with Madrid and political violence. The most recent development in the Basque Country indicates that Basque political culture is significantly changing in its attempts to transcend the old stalemate, constructed specifically vis-à-vis a conflictive relationship with the Spanish central government and maintained by the fragmentation of Basque nationalist political parties within their own territory.

Among the various ways Basque nationalists have sought to withdraw from this political scenario have been a greater reliance on the promise of a ‘new’ Europe and a keen interest in, and support of, the peace process in Northern Ireland. From the latter has emerged the idea that political identities *can* be multiple, that old enemies *can* pursue dialogue, and that governments *can* talk to “terrorists”. While Madrid still seems hostile to such ideas, they have had a tremendous resonance in the Basque Country.

With the benefit of hindsight, we believe that it was a political demonstration in Gernika that ultimately led to the creation of a new political landscape in the Basque Country. On 19 October 1997, the secretaries general of the two Basque nationalist labor unions, ELA and LAB, united to propose a ‘third way’ out of the political stalemate. The meeting was significant for two other reasons. Firstly, representatives of all the Basque nationalist political parties (PNV/EAJ, HB, and EA) as well as members of various social organizations attended the meeting. Secondly, a moment of silence was observed for a Basque police officer and ELA member killed the previous day by ETA in a bungled attempt to sabotage the opening of the Guggenheim museum in Bilbo. That all the people present observed the silence, including those of HB and LAB, the two radical groups theoretically supportive of ETA, was significant. That there emerged an agreement to pursue closer contacts among the disparate Basque nationalist groups was extraordinary, especially given the highly conflictive political atmosphere of the Basque Country. We view this meeting, held for many obviously symbolically important reasons in Gernika, as a precursor to the ceasefire ETA proclaimed in September of 1998.

Consequently, despite a slight shift of focus, Gernika remains at the forefront of political, social, and cultural developments in the Basque Country. We believe that its continuing importance as a site of political significance is due to a combination of its temporal and spatial power, and, more specifically, to how this power continues to resonate politically.

In the wake of the news that a Basque-speaking youth had been cautioned during a game of soccer in Gernika for using his first language, it emerged that the referee was a novice and that she had, in effect, committed a mistake. The controlling feder-

ation of the soccer league withdrew the punishment and publicly stated that no such rule existed within its laws. It would appear, then, that a resolution was established on the grounds of plurality, even harmony, between the use of Basque and Spanish in Gernika. That the incident occurred in 1998, does, however, demonstrate that conflictual issues do persist in the Basque Country. The road to harmony is insecure and remains unexplored. We believe that Gernika endures in time and space through this very dynamic of conflicting interests and interpretations and that they are fruitfully explored only through a combination of geographical and historical perspectives.

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