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Disability and Post-ETA Poetics

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Abstract:

In this article, I explore the use of cultural emotions in state-aligned post-ETA poetics by analysing the role that illness and disability play in post-ceasefire filmic - *Fuego/Fire* (Luis Marías, 2014) - and literary - *Patria/Homeland* (Fernando Aramburu, 2016) - representations of the Basque national conflict. Recent critical discussions interpret disability in Spanish film and literature as harbingers of inclusivity and cultural pluralism (Fraser, 2013; Marr, 2013). However, if placed in the intensely polarised context for media and cultural representations of the Basque conflict in Spain, disability plays a less salutary role. Concretely, I argue that the possibility of post-ETA closure is often envisaged via the spectacularisation (and thus the instrumentalisation) of disabled and ill bodies, which are used to 'mobilise affect' towards a series of state-sanctioned positions with regard to victimhood, forgiveness and post-conflict reconciliation.

Keywords:
Basque conflict; ETA; disability; illness; Basque cinema; *Patria*

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In recent years disability has become a preeminent theme in contemporary Spanish culture. In 2018 alone, two of the most widely acclaimed cultural events of the year dealt head on with disabilities, interrogating questions related to citizenship, state power

and diversity politics. Javier Fesser's comedy-drama *Campeones/Champions* (2018) tells the story of assistant basketball coach Marco Montes on the road to personal maturity. After being assigned the training of a team of people with disabilities as community service for drink-driving he becomes a better partner to his estranged girlfriend, a better son to his detached mother and a better citizen overall in a fully modern and diversity-savvy Spanish society. Selected by the Academia de las Artes y Ciencias Cinematográficas to represent Spain in the 2019 Academy Awards but not making it to the nominations, *Campeones* was received in Spain as a film about inclusion and against prejudice, even if it appeared to rely on the seemingly inherent comicality of disabled subjectivities for its pedagogical message. Notwithstanding *Campeones*' positive reception in Spain, where it won three Goyas, including for Best Film, it can also be interpreted as an example of 'the neoliberal effort to normalise the non-normal body' (Snyder and Mitchell 2010: 124), a transnational project that instrumentalises disabled bodies in the reinforcement of neoliberal individualism and heteropatriarchal biopolitics. In *Campeones*, representations of disability are structured around an ableist perspective. It is the unquestioned otherness of disability, its peculiar quirks and variegated accidents of form and manner that punctuate what is essentially a story about an abled-bodied man's path towards self-growth. In the film, Marco's self-growth is unequivocally equated with his capacity to perform long-term monogamous commitment and concede, after some existential hesitation, to his female partner's desire for motherhood. In this tale of personal acceptance of the rules of the game, it is the disabled characters' self-acceptance of their condition – that is, their overcoming of the medical understanding of disability as 'a tragic and pitiful "abnormality"' (Gámez Fuentes 2005: 307) – that teaches a life lesson to the able-bodied. The trope of disability as the epitome of virtue acts as the model for the new masculine tenderness that the

abled-bodied patriarchal subject needs to learn. In other words, it is only by realising that the disabled need none of his pity, and by committing to a shared project of personal self-improvement, that the male protagonist can leave behind his former competitive, callous and careless self to embrace a life in consideration of others, and thus, show his readiness for fatherhood and heteronormative affective commitment. In exchange for this valuable lesson, the team of disabled people he has coached as a penalty for drink-driving are happy simply to watch him go and continue with his life, having served as stepping-stones in his journey towards societal conformity. Therefore, the disabled subjects of *Campeones*, who are seen enjoying salaried work, playing sports, riding bikes and having sex just like everyone else, are represented as the fully functioning beneficiaries of a successful Spanish democratic modernity and its diversity and inclusion policies. It is from this stance that they teach the abled-bodied a lesson in contentment and gratitude for life's simple pleasures. For their efforts, though, the names of the non-professional disabled actors appear on the film's final credits after just about every able-bodied actor and actress in the film.

Also appearing in 2018, the novel *Lectura fácil/Easy Reading* (2018) by Cristina Morales shatters the consensus about disability and good citizenship on which *Campeones* relies. The novel, which received the 2018 Premio Herralde de Novela (Herralde Novel Prize) and the 2019 Premio Nacional de Narrativa (National Narrative Fiction Prize), is the third by the Granada-born writer and has been described as signalling one of the 'caminos sin retorno' (paths of no return) of Spanish contemporary fiction (Pardo 2019, my translation). The champions of *Lectura fácil* are four women with varying degrees of mental disability speaking from a perspective of radical self-emancipation. Their emancipated subjectivities have not been acquired, however, by virtue of having been the beneficiaries of Spanish disability inclusion policies in the

post-Francoist period, but rather, in spite of them. Living together in one of the Generalitat de Catalunya's supervised flats after years spent in nursing homes mostly in rural locations, these four women find themselves facing the representatives of institutional power (a conglomerate of judges, social workers, civil servants and educators) who have filed a case for the contraceptive sterilization of Marga, one of their group. Through the interweaving of their distinct first-person voices, which are lucid in comparison with the hypocrisy, equivocation and ultimate violence exerted by the 'profesionales de la discapacidad' (disability professionals) (Morales 2018: 152, my translation), *Lectura fácil* mounts a full-scale indictment against the discourses of disability on which Spanish democratic modernity has relied. Further, Morales' novel criticises how this modernity has continued to operate on the basis of medical, custodialist and sexist principles in their advocacy of diversity and inclusion, whilst failing to dislodge a politics of emotion premised on 'impairment as a tragic and pitiful 'abnormality' that hegemonic disability organisations in Spain such as ONCE (Organización Nacional de Ciegos Españoles/Spanish National Organization of the Blind) have fostered since the Francoist period (Gámez Fuentes 2005: 307).

Cristina Morales' novel therefore acts as a critique of the spirit that has motivated much of the work emerging from the encounter between Disability Studies and Spanish Cultural Studies. A significant part of this critical corpus has tended to interpret the growing cultural engagement with disabilities in post-Franco Spanish literature and film as an indicator of the country's salutary diversity politics and democratic credentials. The existing literature on *Carne trémula/Live Flesh* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1997) is instructive in this regard. From Madelaine Conway's chapter on the representation of disability in contemporary Spain, included in the pioneering volume *Contemporary Spanish Cultural Studies* (Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas 2000:

251–259), to later appraisals such as Julie Minich's 2010 article on disability, democracy and political inclusion in *Carne trémula* and *Mar adentro/The Sea Inside* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2014), the correlation between the increasing presence of disability in Spanish cinema and the country's process of political democratization after Franco is celebrated (Minich, 2010). This correlation between disability, visibility and democracy is similarly celebrated at the end of *Carne trémula*, when Víctor congratulates his soon-to-be-born child about his imminent birth in a country where 'hace ya mucho tiempo que hemos perdido el miedo' (we have shed our fear a long time ago) (Almodóvar, 2014, my translation). Similarly, in *Disability Studies and Spanish Culture* (Fraser, 2013) and *The Politics of Age and Disability in Contemporary Spanish Film* (Marr, 2013), the study of disabilities in Spanish culture is framed within 'the broader discourse of cultural pluralism' that the field 'has now firmly established as a prime theoretical focus' (Marr 2013: 5).

This article's critical engagement with the representation of disabilities in contemporary Spanish film and literature distances itself from discourses which link disability with ideas of cultural pluralism and democratization. As disability scholars have stated, '[W]hile important, celebration of difference is only part of the equation' (Ellis and Goggin 2015: 22). Concretely in the context of contemporary Spain, as the link between disability and social conformity the film *Campeones* suggests, the political meanings of the correlation between cultural representations of disability and Spanish politics are better approached from a cautious, if not sceptical, perspective. Echoing Robert McRuer's postulation that it is important not only to engage with the questions Disability Studies is asking but, more importantly, with what questions Disability Studies can ask (McRuer 2010: 163), this article proposes that Disability Studies can help us ask deeper critical questions about democracy in post-Francoist Spain.

Examining how disabled bodies are being used for their particular symbolic utility in post-2011 filmic, literary and media products on the Basque national conflict can shed considerable light on the politics of Spanish state-aligned memory discourses about the violent national conflict in Spain and the Basque Country after ETA.

In previous work, I have argued that ETA's ceasefire in October 2011 allowed for the appearance of newly inflected cultural engagements with political violence in Spain. The blockbuster *Ocho apellidos vascos/Spanish Affair* (Emilio Martínez Lázaro, 2014) initiated a post-ETA poetics that engages with the present memory wars on the Basque national conflict from a state-aligned perspective. Such a perspective, also perceptible in the rash of films, TV series and books produced after *Ocho apellidos vascos* and facilitated by its success, is characterized by the use of soft metaphors related to romantic or familial love as a way of condensing the complexities of Spain's internal national conflicts; the privileging of individual forms of memorialization over collective ones; the fetishization of emotions such as forgiveness and the erasure of politics and history.[1] A further inflection in the landscape of post-ETA cultural poetics, focuses on the particular politics of representation of disability and illness in literary texts and films in the post-ceasefire period. In focusing on the politics of representations of disability and illness, this article follows Snyder and Mitchell's call to consider a geopolitical framework for the study of disabilities in culture, paying particular attention to the diversity of national and transnational variations of what they term 'the new rhetoric of exceptional inclusiveness offered by states to affirm their superior modernity' (2010: 124). Indeed, the considerable media and institutional promotion of films like *Campeones* are readable as part of the project of strengthening Spain's (inter)national brand as a fully inclusive, modern and democratic society. However, a different facet of the relation between the representational politics of disability and the

state emerges when we consider how disability and state-aligned narratives of victimhood come together in the construction of a state-aligned post-ETA poetics based on 'cultural emotions,' In this formation, the politics around forgiveness acquire a central role.

Disability, Revenge and the Possibility of Post-Conflict Closure: *Fuego*

Justin Crumbaugh's pioneering work on the politics of victimhood in Spain proposes that it is nothing less than a 'metric of intelligibility' for the contemporary Spanish public sphere (2010: 658). In trying to unpack what he calls 'Spain's fixation with victimhood' as well as the spectacularisation of that victimhood (2010: 660), Crumbaugh states that any 'uncritical approach to victims […] obscures the fact that people do not become victims through acts of aggression alone [but] must be made – that is, fashioned – into victims through conventions of representation' (2010: 661). Following Crumbaugh's work on the spectacularisation of victimhood in the contemporary Spanish public sphere, in this article I propose that disability acts as one of the cultural locations of such spectacularisation in the post-ETA period. Specifically, as a discursive space where questions of embodiment, emotions and social ideology coalesce, disability has the capacity to do the symbolic work necessary to consolidate the 'undemocratic socio-political power' that arbitrates discourses on political violence and victimhood in Spain (Crumbaugh 2007: 367; 368). This capacity of disability vis a vis this symbolic work has become a pertinent, and perhaps even more prominent, matter in post-ETA and post-15-M Spain. Cases such as the conviction of Basque youths in the town of Altsasu, as well as the sentencing of activists and artists such as the rappers Valtònic and Pablo Hasel in 2018 and 2021 respectively, demonstrate that discourses on terrorism and selective victimhood continue to play a role in the legislated

criminalisation of protest brought about by the Spanish public safety law of 2015, dubbed the 'ley mordaza'.[2]

The above reference to 'symbolic work' is meaningful if we consider Snyder and Mitchell's seminal contribution to the study of disability in culture as 'narrative prosthesis' (2000). In these scholars' influential theory, disability in culture acts not only as 'an opportunistic metaphorical device' to which a variety of different meanings can be assigned (2000a: 47), but also as a narrative prop 'inciting the very act of meaning-making itself' (2000a: 6). In the Spanish post-ETA context, where the differential distribution of how much one can grieve for the victims of political violence is still so deeply polarised (Fernández-Vázquez 2018: 228), the appearance of disability in certain cultural products gestures towards meaning-making processes in the realm of state-sanctioned perspectives on conflict resolution, determining the frames of intelligibility for how closure after political violence should be conceived.

We may start our analysis by testing Snyder and Mitchell's hypothesis through a reading of *Fuego*. The film is a revenge-tale centring on the character of Carlos, a police officer devastated by an ETA bomb attack which killed his wife and blew off his daughter's legs in 2001. In 2014 in an explicitly post-ceasefire period, Carlos is living in Barcelona with his disabled daughter but is still consumed internally by a thirst for revenge. As a result, he orchestrates a move to the Basque Country with the hidden intention of locating the ex-wife and son of the ETA member that had been involved in the attack that killed his wife and maimed his daughter to make them go through the same traumatic experience. In his mind, revenge will be exacted when he has finally killed the ETA member's ex-wife and broken their son's legs, so that the kid is left maternally orphaned and disabled for life, just like Carlos' daughter. Carlos plans to exact his revenge by entering the lives of mother and son as a 'literary author' in search

of a Basque-language translator for his novel. The ETA member's ex-wife, Ohiana, and Carlos gradually become intimately involved. Carlos also manages to strike up a personal rapport with her teenage son, leading to a denouement where his true intentions are revealed and his violent plans attempted.

Upon a first reading, *Fuego*'s overall message seems to be to denounce the thirst for revenge as a destructive emotion that creates a vicious circle of violence in its wake. However, the film frames Carlos' sinister plan as largely understandable. Such a reading is facilitated by the cultural and emotional politics associated with female disability, which perceive 'disabled women as asexual or outside of the heterosexual economy of representation' (Wates and Byles 2015: 108). Within this grid, Carlos' unquenchable need for revenge is made legible by the film's representation of his daughter's disability as a tragedy of truncated femininity. The film's opening scenes representing the traumatic event that crushes the protagonist's family forever centre upon an image of the girl's dismembered leg, which both parents notice lying on the parking lot grounds before Alba's mother dies in her husband's arms. As a disabled young woman, Alba lives a life in seclusion from the outside world, choosing to use a wheelchair even though she can walk with crutches. Because of her disability, it appears, she has chosen never to leave her father's flat, an ultra-modern, spacious and luxurious home that has been thoroughly adapted to her needs. In conversation with the male carer her father employs for the time he'll be in the Basque Country, Alba confesses that the worlds of seduction and sensuality are entirely out of reach: 'ligar. Salir con las amigas. Ir de fiesta. Comprarme ropa escandalosa' (flirting. Going out with friends. Partying. Buying myself a racy dress) are all activities denied to her by her disabled status. The film's message that disability and heteronormative female sexuality are naturally incompatible uncritically disseminates the idea that this is Alba's greatest

calamity and, consequently, the framework that renders her father's revenge fixation intelligible, relatable and, also, justifiable.

It is the disability of another character in the film that functions as a decentring mechanism in this seemingly acceptable retaliatory framework for conflict resolution in post-ETA Spain. Once settled in the Basque coastal village of Lekeitio so that he can insert himself in the life of Ohiana, Carlos soon learns that Aritz, her adolescent son, is disabled. The scene when Carlos, and therefore viewers, learn that Aritz has Down syndrome pries apart the system of meaning on which the film's revenge fantasy rests: Carlos is unable, in fact, to greet Aritz properly when they are both introduced, and instead retires in distress to the restored *caserío* (traditional Basque farmhouse) he has rented as an operational base for his plan. From this point onwards, Carlos' desire for personal revenge on ETA becomes hesitant and less easily codifiable according to the polarised framework informing post-ETA memory politics on the Basque conflict (Portela 2016: 20). Carlos' distress at the knowledge that one of his future victims has Down syndrome, which unleashes a fit of fury in him, may account for some viewers' description of *Fuego* as an example of 'equidistancia' (equidistance) (Filmin 2018), a term used in the Spanish public sphere as a by-word to attack any position on the Basque conflict that is not unequivocally condemnatory of ETA (Portero 2020). The trope of female disability as the symbol of truncated femininity (and therefore utmost tragedy for the young female subject) is invoked as the justificatory basis for her adoring father's violent plan through Carlos' highly dramatised memory flashback of his daughter in the operation room, imploring him not to allow the doctor to proceed with a second operation to amputate her leg. The scene's intense theatrical quality – which perforce recalls the case of Irene Villa, an ETA victim who suffered the amputation of her two legs after a bomb attack in Madrid in 1991, when she was twelve

years old – enhances the already charged affective politics of disabled girlhood. In the face of his daughter's unspeakable distress, the revenge obsession of the *pater familias* is presented as defensible, even if it entails making another young man with Down syndrome twice disabled.

However, it is also the affective politics of mental disability – symbolised by the character of Aritz, who is, after all, the son of an imprisoned and unrepentant ETA member – that opens up the possibility in the film of a model for conflict resolution in post-ETA Spain that could contemplate 'decontestation' (Freeden 2013: 77). In their introduction to a special issue on 'Memory in Post-Conflict Societies', Cillian McGrattan and Stephen Hopkins explain that the glimpse of conflict resolution is likely to take place 'at oblique angles' (2017: 489). *Fuego* uses the grammar of cultural emotions around disabilities in contemporary Spain to hint at the possibility of conflict decontestation (or at least a glimpse thereof) in the post-ETA period. More concretely, it is the affective politics of vulnerability and pity, culturally invoked by Aritz's Down syndrome, and viewers' anticipation of the violent attack looming ahead for him, that facilitate the film's attempt to disrupt the hierarchies of victimhood, retribution and forgiveness that underpin state-sponsored discourses on the Basque conflict. Put succinctly, it is by characterising Aritz as disabled that the film seems to allow for the possibility that viewers may identify with the descendant of an ETA member. The 'oblique angle' (McGrattan and Hopkins 2017: 489) through which de-escalation and de-polarisation may occur, therefore, is supplied by disability as 'narrative prosthesis' (Snyder and Mitchell 2000).

Nowhere is this rationale more apparent than in the film's disquieting denouement. Having arrived with mother and son to spend a weekend away in a restored Basque *caserío* with the pretext of collaborating more closely on the Basque

translation of his novel, Carlos wastes no time in disclosing his real intentions to the pair. The violent scenes that ensue include Carlos breaking her son's legs with a hammer before bashing her to the ground and dragging her outside of the house by the hair and shoulders, where he tries to shoot her. This he does in a visually horrifying scene, where the viewer is nevertheless meant to appreciate the perpetrator's inner doubt, generated by the symbolic concomitance between the boy's disability and his vulnerability. The verbal interactions among the characters accompanying this scene are significant: realising that Carlos' inner pain is so intense that he is going to shoot himself on the spot after having bashed Aritz's leg with a hammer, the boy's mother implores: 'No le dejes morir, sálvale' (Do not let him die. Save him!) (Marías, 2014). The scene ends with Carlos kneeling down to the boy's level and embracing him in tears. The tragic narrative thus reaches its catharsis, where Aritz, the disabled character, becomes the metaphor for the Basque Country after ETA, a nation and society devastated by decades of internecine violence and vindictive state anti-terrorist legislation which perhaps, as the film appears to suggest, can start being treated according to a differently inflected politics of compassion, and not just blind revenge. This is the film's 'inarticulable insight' (Quayson 2007: 49) and one that, in the deeply polarised ideological landscape of post-ETA Spain, seems only to bear representation through the cultural work carried out by Aritz's intellectual disability. Yet the ethical and political meanings of the film can be further unpacked if we consider the hierarchical politics of empathy it reinforces, also through disability as metaphor. After Carlos' failed (yet still gruesome) attempt to complete his revenge fantasy, members of the Ertzaintza (the Basque regional police) present themselves on the scene and ferry the injured to hospital, including Carlos himself. There we learn that Aritz's mum does not intend to sue Carlos for trying to kill her and fracturing her son's knees. 'Tu hijo va

a volver a andar y a correr' (your son will walk and run again), the doctor reassures her, confirming that the presage of Aritz's double disability will not be fulfilled. Aritz's body never returns to the screen, the narrative instead focusing on Carlos' climatic rapprochement with his daughter, who has rushed to the Basque Country with her carer (and now also boyfriend) after having realised her father's plan. With the metaphor of female disability as truncated sexuality now partially overcome, it is Aritz's disability that comes to stand in for (and erase) the violence suffered by Basque society in the hands of the Spanish state, represented in turn by Carlos' violent acts and his numb emotional state. Yet while his brutal actions still win Carlos the forgiveness of the two main ethical pivots in the narrative (incarnated by the ETA victim, his daughter, and the repentant pro-independence left activist desperate to leave behind her past, Ohiana), the violence perpetrated on Aritz appears to warrant no apology. This differential politics of forgiveness have implications for how disability is instrumentalised in the film, from an able-bodied perspective, as a mere symbolic aid to a state-centred post-ETA memory politics, based on a strict hierarchy of victimhood where the victims of state-sponsored violence, if they are recognised at all, occupy the lowest echelon. Therefore, the discrepant treatment afforded to the two disabled subjectivities in distress in the film (Alba and Aritz) leaves little doubt as to which modality of victimhood can expect to be overlooked in the Spanish state framework for post-ETA memory politics. Aritz, although disabled and maimed by a gruesome act committed by a Spanish police officer, is after all the son of an unrepentant ETA member and therefore his ordeal should not stir the same outrage as that of Alba, who is a victim of ETA's violence. The film's ultimate message with regard to post-ETA memory politics is that the model of victimhood that Aritz incarnates – that of Basque victims of Spanish state violence – calls for a lesser form of compassion. Some of the highest-profile literary, filmic and

media products of state-centred post-ETA poetics reinforce this message, again relying on disability as a central metaphor.

Disability, illness and forgiveness in *Patria*

Representations of illness and disability recur in post-ETA cultural products.[3] More concretely, ill and disabled characters populate literary narratives that engage with the legacies of the violent Basque-Spanish conflict from fictionalised or testimonial first-person perspectives that tend to emphasise ETA's demise also as a 'derrota moral' (moral defeat) (Cosidó 2011, my translation). This is one of the flagship nomenclatures of the post-ETA Spanish public sphere, as promoted by think tanks such as the Grupo de Estudios Estratégicos (Strategic Studies Group) (GES), whose position on ETA's disbandment is that it must be buttressed by 'el reconocimiento de culpa por parte de los asesinos y el resarcimiento moral de sus víctimas' (the acknowledgement of guilt by the murderers and the moral compensation of their victims) (Cosidó 2011, my translation). To varying degrees, examples of this discursive framework can be found in both Basque- and Spanish-language cultural products, so long as they are written in the shared ideological code (also a filmic and literary language) of the consensual national politics of the Spanish transition (Miguélez-Carballeira 2022). For instance, Anjel Lertxundi's novel *Etxeko autsa/House Dust* (2011), published in Spanish in the same year as *Los trapos sucios/Dirty Laundry* (Lertxundi 2011), is a fictionalised first-person account of a man who participated in one of ETA's actions during the final years of Franco's dictatorship, now recalling (and fully disowning) his experience verbally to his ageing father with Alzheimer's disease. The father's state of enforced silence through illness acts as the emotional trigger for the testimony of the narrator, who reneges on the revolutionary idealism of his youth, now presented as quasi-religious bigotry, while people with Alzheimer's are represented in this framework 'as empty shells deprived of

selfhood' (Medina 2014: 366). In her opera prima *El comensal*/*The Dinner Guest* (2015), Gabriela Ybarra interweaves her real-life testimony as the granddaughter of the Basque empresario Gabriel Ybarra, kidnapped and killed by ETA in 1977, with the experience already as a young woman of losing her mother to cancer. In Ybarra's testimony of double family loss, first in the context of violent political conflict and then through cancer, one of the most culturally connoted illnesses of contemporary times (Sontag 2009: 259–68), historical and subjective memory narratives are conflated, generating a third space that erases the political dimension of historical conflict. This tendency to efface the political from the centre of cultural discourses on ETA's violence is also appreciated in Irene Villa's memoirs, *Saber que se puede: recuerdos y reflexiones de una víctima del terrorismo/ Knowing that You Can: Memories and Reflections of a Victim of Terrorism* (2004), reprinted in the post-ceasefire period as *Saber que se puede, veinte años después/Knowing that You Can, Twenty Years after* (2011). While maintaining a strong focus on rewriting her traumatic experience of amputation and disability as one of personal triumph over victimhood, away from the negative emotions associated with it in the Spanish public sphere (hate, resentment and a desire for retaliation), Villa's inspirational memoirs also centre on disability as a dehistoricised category. Foregrounding the unspeakable horror of a girlhood truncated by terrorist violence – and invoking the memory of Begoña Urroz, the two-year old victim of a bomb attack by the Directorio Revolucionario Ibérico de Liberación (Iberian Revolutionary Directory of Liberation) on 27 June 1960 who was, until 2019 erroneously described by Spanish state institutions as ETA's first victim – Villa's personal experience showcases political violence as an absurdity. 'Como es inútil preguntarse los motivos que llevan a alguien a hacer algo así, optas por ignorar su procedencia' (since there is no point in asking yourself about the reasons why someone

can do something like that, you choose to ignore its origin) she declares (2011: 268). By dehistoricising political violence, peace (including mental peace) wins over hatred, a premise that situates Villa's enunciating position as a disabled subject at a distance from the retaliatory approach mobilised by more hegemonic uses of disability in the post-ETA landscape.

Aramburu's literary blockbuster *Patria*, as well as its expanding conglomerate of transmedia adaptations, represents hegemonic uses of illness and disability as cultural categories with which to bolster state-centred, retaliatory memory politics after ETA. Spain's 2017 best-selling book, *Patria* rapidly became a literary phenomenon in the same year, receiving the Premio de la Crítica (Critics Award), the Premio Nacional de Narrativa (National Narrative Fiction Prize), the Premio Euskadi de Literatura (Euskadi Literature Prize) and the Premio Francisco Umbral al Libro del Año (Francisco Umbral Book of the Year Prize), attracting sustained media coverage and positive reviews by high-profile writers such as José-Carlos Mainer (2016) and Mario Vargas Llosa (2017), and even receiving an endorsement from the then-Spanish Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, who said in an interview that the novel 'refleja muy bien el conflicto vasco' (reflects the Basque conflict very well) (*Faro de Vigo*, 2017, my translation). At the time of writing, *Patria* has sold over 800.000 copies; has been translated into more than a dozen languages; has been adapted into an HBO Spain TV series (Aitor Gabilondo, 2020) and into a graphic novel (Toni Fejzula, 2020).

The exploration of emotional perspectives on violence in the Basque Country, including trauma, guilt, forgiveness and the desire for revenge, as well as the exploration of the different configurations of victimhood generated by the violence, were central motifs in Aramburu's earlier literary texts including his short-story anthology *Los peces de la amargura/ The Fish of Bitterness* (2006). These themes are

central in *Patria* (2016) and are worked out in a reinforcement of a retaliatory dichotomy that places the positions associated with the Basque pro-independence left in the aberrant extreme of the morally corrupt, either as the perpetrators of violence or as members of a society that connived for decades with the perpetrators' political worldview. As I have argued in previous work, the families of Miren and Bittori, the two Basque maternal figures around which the narrative revolves, undergo markedly different characterisation techniques. Miren's circle (associated with the Basque pro-independence left) appears as the most wanting in endearing features (Miguélez-Carballeira 2018). Disability is a key instrument in this design. Several of the characterization techniques that go into the profiling of Miren as possibly the most morally broken character in the novel are linked to her relationship with her daughter's disability. For instance, she employs a South American woman, Celeste, to help her with the day-to-day caring of Arantxa, but pays her only ten euros per day. 'Son pobres. Ella sabrá agradecerlo' (They are poor. She will be grateful for it), she says curtly to her husband when he objects to Celeste's salary being so low (Aramburu 2016: 66, my translation). Upon arriving in Mallorca where a young Arantxa had been spending a brief holiday away from her abusive husband and has suffered the double ictus that will leave her paraplegic for life, her mother Miren's main worries seem to be of a financial nature (Aramburu 2016: 90–91). The fact that Miren does not appear emotionally responsive to her daughter's disabled condition, focusing instead on the practical dimension of her caring responsibilities, makes her an unsympathetic figure in the novel's ethical scheme of disability as something that should naturally stir the expression of pity in others, a notion largely contested in disability studies (Shapiro 1993). Thus, the characters who react with overt forms of commiseration to Arantxa's disabled condition (her immigrant carer Celeste, her emasculated father Josian, her

homosexual brother Gorka and Bittori, the ETA victim's widow) form the emotional community with which the reader is meant to identify through a shared politics of pity around female disability. This is the community that will eventually propel the narrative's fundamental aim: Joxe Mari's (Miren's son, Arantxa's brother and the ETA prisoner currently serving his sentence in the Puerto de Santa María prison in Cádiz) apology to Bittori for her traumatic loss.

This once unimaginable apology is just about made possible in the post-ceasefire context by the emotional politics mobilised not only by Arantxa's disability but also by Bittori's illness – since, as the reader soon learns, she has recently received a biopsy result confirming that she has cancer. In the case of Arantxa, the literary text indulges in spectacularised representations of her condition, described in detail from an able-centric perspective to satisfy what critics have termed '[P]rurient ablist scopophilia' (Boyd 2016: 1330). Arantxa, who cannot speak but communicates through an assistive writing device, is described in the novel as the begrudging recipient of her mother's caring chores, her disabled body and habits being portrayed as slightly grotesque, and thus as pitiable, even laughable. In a routine dinner scene, for instance, we are told that '[l]e resbaló algo de líquido por la barbilla' (some liquid ran down her chin), which her mother hastes to wipe with a napkin, a gesture that triggers in her the memory of her daughter's full-bodied femininity before her ictus and in the readers commensurate sympathy: 'Una chica tan guapa, tan sana, con tanto futuro, madre de dos criaturas, y ahora esto' (such a beautiful girl, so healthy, with such a future, mother of two children, and now this) (Aramburu 2016: 26, my translation). Similarly, the caring responsibilities that involve Arantxa's daily hygiene are described with a level of detail that is meant to cause discomfort in an able-bodied readership. This discomfort is captured by her father Josian's request to Miren that she spares him the details of how

their daughter, whose disability has also caused her to put on weight, needs to be undressed, sat on her disabled shower seat, lathered with soap, rinsed, dried and dressed (Aramburu 2016: 65). The novel's representation of female disability as utterly dependent and grotesquely desexualised is further exploited in the chapter that narrates Celeste's first day at work as Arantxa's day-time care assistant. Here the narrative centres on Miren and Celeste's choreography of care around Arantxa, as her body is helped out of bed, sat on the toilet and then on the disabled shower seat. Celeste is later described as combing the young woman's ungraciously short hair, which, the novel's wavering narrative voice (Miren's in this case) tells us, had been cut by hospital staff without her express permission, as she could have communicated only by moving her eyelids during those days (Aramburu 2016: 76). It is interesting to note that the online TV adaption does not exploit these scenes or Arantxa's disabled nudity to the same extent. The graphic novel adaptation on the other hand does, featuring Arantxa's full nudity in several vignettes which in turn maximises the effectiveness of the visual component in the portrayal of Arantxa's disabled body as *Patria*'s prosthetic ideological symbol (Fejzula 2020: 41).

It is precisely the visuality of Arantxa's disabled body that catalyses the process of ideological disavowal that will lead to her brother Joxe Mari's written apology to Bittori, the novel's quintessential ETA victim. After receiving a letter from Arantxa in prison which encloses a photograph of herself in her wheelchair (the sight of which Joxe Mari had been shielded from, for the duration of his time in prison), he decides secretly to leave ETA. The impression made upon him by seeing his sister in a wheelchair and smiling in the manner of someone who 'no está en condiciones de gobernar los músculos de la cara' (is in no position to control her face muscles) (Aramburu 2016: 226) is described by Joxe Mari's stream of consciousness as 'el

hachazo que derribó el árbol' (the axe blow that felled the tree) (625, my translation). This epiphanic moment is nevertheless articulated through the same cultural emotions around female disability as tragic loss of beauty that the novel (and the previously analysed film *Fuego*) reinforces throughout – symbolised in this passage by Joxe Mari's noticing of Arantxa's unbecoming short haircut and orthopaedic socks, while experiencing a sense of deep pity for his sister that acts as a catalyst for the dramatic transformation of his political subjectivity (626). Momentously, by sharing in the catalogue of cultural emotions activated by female disability in *Patria*, the character of Joxe Mari decides to repudiate his revolutionary ideas and actions of the past, thus becoming humanised and entering the sentient community of state-sanctioned post-ETA discourses. Such a reading is reinforced by the additional narrative pressure exerted on the text by Bittori's cancer, which is meant to act as a further catalyst to the final undoing of Joxe Mari's terrorist subjectivity. Thus, as the reader finds out, Joxe Mari's trajectory from full renunciation of ETA's ideology to his decision finally to apologise to Bittori is expedited by Arantxa's revelation in another letter to him that Bittori has cancer and 'aguanta viva a duras penas porque espera un gesto humano de tu parte' (barely stays alive because she expects a human gesture from you) (627, my translation). Arantxa's letter to Joxe Mari, which her migrant carer Celeste hand-writes on her behalf, encloses a photograph of Bittori pushing Arantxa's wheelchair while on a walk around town together. Bittori is now, as Arantxa confides to him, her 'mejor amiga' (best friend) (Aramburu 2016: 627, my translation). The novel thus collapses the rhetoric of victimhood through disability and illness with that of victimhood through political violence, to bring forth a vision of post-ideological reconciliation between the two sides of the conflict that negates historical and political conditions, both past and present. In this cultural-emotions approach, it is clearly the affective community that

emanates from – and consolidates around – the shared emotion of pity towards the female sick and disabled body, that grants entry into the new landscape of state citizenship after ETA. In this landscape, the readers of *Patria* are expected to identify with the values of a progressive humanitarianism that leaves behind strident revolutionary doctrines and anachronistic ideals, even if these have caused their representatives also to suffer violence by other perpetrators – on the theme of torture of ETA members by Spanish state forces, for example, the novel persistently resorts to the softened term 'maltrato' (maltreatment) (Aramburu 2016: 627, my translation).

Reinforcing ableist views in Spanish culture and society, post-ETA films and literary texts *Fuego* and *Patria* rely on disability and illness to perpetuate a hierarchical rationale of victimhood, as well as a one-directional politics of forgiveness and reconciliation in the post-ETA Spanish public sphere. An embittered Miren, failing to share in the collective emotional release caused by her son's disability-induced ideological softening and his subsequent apology to Bittori, wonders at what point the Basque people will receive an apology for the forms of state-sponsored violence practiced under the aegis of anti-terrorist law in the democratic period (Aramburu 2016: 637). In the emotional politics of reconciliation after ETA represented in *Patria*, however, she is only a lone and rancorous voice.

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[1] The number of post-ETA cultural products about national conflict in the Basque country has increased considerably in the past ten years. This corpus includes, among others, films such as *Negociador*/*Negotiator* (Borja Corbeaga, 2015), *Fe de etarras*/*Bomb Scared* (Borja Corbeaga, 2017), *Maixabel* (Icíar Bollaín, 2021) and *Érase una vez en Euskadi*/*Once upon a Time in Euskadi* (Manu Gómez, 2021); and literary publications such as Gabriela Ybarra's *El comensal*/*The Dinner Guest* (2015), Karmele Jaio's *La casa del padre*/*The Father's House* (2020) and, of course, Fernando Aramburu's *Patria*/*Fatherland* (2016), which was adapted into an HBO series by Aitor Gabilondo (2020).

[2] The Spanish Citizens' Security Law (known as 'Gag Law') was part of the 2015 reform of the Spanish penal code. It was passed during Mariano Rajoy's first right-wing government (2011–2015) to prevent the glorification of banned armed groups such as the Basque separatist ETA. Since then, the law has brought about an exponential rise in convictions related to freedom of speech in the country. These have included the case of the eight youths of Alsasua (in Navarre), accused by the Spanish High Court of terrorist offenses following an alleged assault of two off-duty police officers during a bar fight and the case of Catalan rapper Pablo Hassel, accused of glorifying terrorism and slandering the Spanish monarchy in his song lyrics and social media. Mallorca-born rapper Valtònic left for exile following his sentencing by the National Audience in 2017 to three and a half years in prison for slander to the former Spanish king Juan Carlos I. At the time of writing, the law remains in force.

[3] The relevant corpus analysed in this article includes Anjel Lertxundi's novel *Etxeko autsa/House Dust* (2011), Gabriela Ybarra's *El comensal*/*The Dinner Guest* (2015),

Irene Villa's memoirs (2011) and the *Patria* conglomerate. Other post-ETA cultural products where disability and/or illness function as narrative prostheses include: Aitor Arregi and Jon Garaño's film *Handia*/*Giant* (2017) and the novels *Artetu arte itxaron*/*Unwilling Tourists* by Katixa Agirre (2015), *Poz aldrebesa*/*Confused Joy* by Juanjo Olasagarre (2017) and *La casa del padre*/*The Father's House* by Karmele Jaio (2020)