

Before Babel: A History of Basque Literatures

Joseba Gabilondo

Introduction

1. Writing Difference²
2. Postnationalism and Multiculturalism **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
3. History
4. Literature
5. Postnational-Multicultural Literary History

1. Middle Ages: The Age of Differences

1. Travelers and Outsiders (Picaud, Ibn Hayyan, Al-Makkari)
2. Jewish and Arabic Literature (Halevi and Benjamin of Tudela)
3. Political Literature (Jiménez de Rada, Pactist Literature)
4. Ballads, Improvisational Poetry, and the Cultural Language of the Nobility (Lazarraga)

2. Imperial Difference and the Atlantic

1. The Renaissance: Linguistic Apologies (Poza, Garibay, Echave, Etxepare, Oihenart)
2. Baroque Culture, Manuals, and Subalternity (Loyola, Axular, Oihenart, Erauso, Agirre)
3. An Atlantic Enlightenment (Larram., Munibe, Samaniego, Barrutia, Etxeberri, Mogel)

3. Colonial Difference and the Nation

1. Romanticism and the Tradition of Invention (Humboldt, Mogel, Chaho, Hugo)
2. Anthropology, *Bertsolaris*, and Subalternity (Broca, Abbadie, Iparragirre, Etxahun)
3. Foundational Fictions and Tourism (Navarro Villoslada, Araquistáin, Trueba, Loti)
4. Basque and Spanish Nationalisms (Arana, Unamuno, Agirre, Baroja)

4. State Difference and Nationalist Essentialism

1. Modernism (Lizardi, Lauaxeta, Orixe, Larrea, *Hermes*)
2. Diasporic and National Allegories (Txillardegi, Laxalt, Martín Santos, Celaya)
3. Neolithic, Industrial, and Atlantic Basques (Krutwig, Oteiza, Aresti, Otero)
4. Modernity's Failure and the Literary Field (Saizarbitoria, Lertxundi, Guerra Garrido)

5. Global Difference and Multiculturalism

1. The Globalization of Basque Otherness (Atxaga, Irigoien, Pinilla)
2. Women's Literature and the Critique of Nationalism (Urretabizkaia, Mintegi, Borda)
3. Postnational Literature and Hybridity (Epaltza, Sagastizabal, Osoro, Urza, Uribe)
4. Neoliberal Literature: Intellectuals and Autobiography (Juaristi, Savater)

Notes

Cited Works

“The past isn’t dead; it isn’t even past”

William Faulkner

Writing Difference

To this day, there is not a history of Basque literature in English. Furthermore, it would not be too difficult to translate some of the most accomplished ones written in Basque or Spanish (Aldekoa, *Historia*; Urkizu; Kortazar, *Literatura*). Although there is an immediate need for such a history, this book is not yet another traditional history of Basque literature; rather, it intends to be a cultural history written against the nationalist grain that has informed Basque literary history to this day. So far, Basque literature has been considered to be the one solely written in Basque language or *euskara*; conversely literature written by Basques in state languages, such as Spanish, French, or English, has been relegated to their respective state canons: Spanish, French or North-American literature. This tendency to equate language and state in the name of a putative cultural and historical unity, the nation, is prevalent not only in the Basque Country but in Europe and the world at large. Surprisingly enough, it shows how dominant nationalist ideology continues to be in literary studies since its initial elaboration by the Schelegel brothers at the beginning of the 19th century in Germany. Thus, the following is a postnational history of Basque literature(s): it encompasses all the literature written by the Basques in all their languages, while also showing the tensions, conflicts, and differences that literature creates, represents, and reflects. Here, thus, “postnational” means a position critical of nationalism and, therefore, a way of historicizing that comes after nationalism and nationalist history. Yet, the reference to “national” in “post-national” intends to emphasize the fact that nationalism has neither disappeared nor has been superseded. As Benedict Anderson still claimed in 1989, “the ‘end of the era of nationalism,’ so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (12); his claim still holds true these days.

At this point, there is not enough information and discussion to complete a comprehensive postnational history of Basque literatures. This book is only a first step towards

such a postnational literary history; its completion made me realize that further research, writing, and translation is required. Here, I simply advance several ideas and hypotheses that I would like to bring forward, so that readers can discuss, criticize, and implement them, and, thus, turn this book into part of a larger collective effort. The reader is encouraged to contact me (joseba@joseba.net) and provide comments, suggestions, and criticism. The reader will also be able to see further developments and translations at my website: www.joseba.net.

To my knowledge, no postnational history of literature exists in Europe—and in this sense this project presents innovative ideas that might affect or change most literatures in Europe. The concepts of “literatures of the Americas” (Jordan, Brotherson, Pérez Firmat), “Latin American literature” (Rama, González Echevarría and Pupo-Walker; Valdés and Kadir), African literatures (Olaniyan and Quayson; George), or “Indian literature” (Chauduri, Gupta) come closest to a postnational understanding of literature in the western and southern hemispheres—and yet, even in these cases, minority literatures written in other languages than Spanish, Portuguese, French, and English are still marginalized or omitted *tout court* under the umbrella theory of postcolonialism, which gives preference to imperialist languages with terms such as Francophone, Anglophone, Lusophone, etc. As Gayatri Spivak has noted, “[I]n the field of literature, we need to move from Anglophony, Lusophony, Teutophony, Francophony, et cetera. We must take the languages of the Southern Hemisphere as active cultural media rather than as objects of cultural study by the sanctioned ignorance of the metropolitan migrant” (9). Obviously, Basque literature is, in the northern hemisphere, part of what Spivak only locates in the southern—although even Basque has been written in countries such as Argentina in the 19th century.

The main goal of writing a postnational literary history is to walk away from the narrative and teleology of a single nationalist subject, which, very much in a Hegelian fashion, celebrates the formation, development, critical moments, and final maturation or self-realization of such a national subject within its state. Basque culture and literature have been marked by diglossia, internal conflict, external repression, and stereotyping (Orientalism, Occidentalism, and primitivism). Therefore to approach Basque literature as one solely written in a single language betrays, in its nationalist zeal, the complex, heterogeneous, and divided history of Basque culture. The goal of this postnational history, thus, is to be *historical* by stepping outside the

prefixed box of a putative Basque nation that gains historical consciousness by writing itself into its national language.

Conversely, the other goal of this history is to question the even more hegemonic ideology of state nationalisms that posits every subject as national and, therefore, as writing on behalf of and for the nation-state: Basque difference shatters the idea of Spanish, French, or (North) American nationalist ideologies. This is a state-nationalist tendency that most literary histories in the first world continue to support with the institutional and economic support of the state (as it is the case of France and Spain). Yet, this is not a specifically Basque, Spanish, French, or American problem; it is a nationalist problem *tout court*.

Although Basques might not read much literature, especially in times of globalization, Basque literature—or literatures—is more than a literary corpus, a reading practice, a cultural dominant ideology, or even a private pleasure. Basque literature is at the core of Basque politics and history, for Basque difference has been formed around certain texts, read by few but discussed by most. A history of Basque literatures is more about the writing of a difference, one that is not ethnic, properly speaking, neither simply cultural nor political, nor even singular: there are many Basque differences.

At least since the Renaissance, Basque language has been written and summoned in other languages to articulate a geopolitical difference(s) in so many ways that Basque difference(s) has to be rethought retrospectively from our new situation. In our globalized history, the nation-state is in crisis, the state is being reorganized according to new neoliberal ideologies (including neonationalism), and differences such as gender, sexuality, and race are emerging independently of the modern nation-state in a global scale. It is here that Basque difference(s) must be located and historicized.

Basque difference(s) has always been traumatic to the surrounding states (specially Spain) and, more generally, to Europe and the Americas, and, therefore, it allows us to understand not only the formation of the Basque Country, but also the imperialist history of states such as Spain and France. Basque difference(s) is at the core of the colonial and nationalist formation of Europe and the Americas, in which Basques played the role of the “oldest Europeans,” “the true European natives,” “the first Oriental (=Spanish) people that the romantic, northern-European traveler encounters,” “the last remnants of Atlantis,” and even “the true imperialist Spaniards.” Even when it came to theorize such a fundamental concept as democracy,

as in the case of Rousseau (*Instrucción*), Basque difference was summoned quite conveniently. John Adams in his *A defense of the Constitution of the United States* also mentioned the Basques, people of “Celtic extraction” (310), as an example of republicanism and anti-colonialism. In short, Basque difference has been mobilized to legitimize very different political agendas.

Similarly and in the Basque Country, Basque language and literature were invoked and historicized, willingly or unwillingly, as the political and cultural heart of the nation in the 20th century (Krutwig). Literature was basically the textual representation of Basque national identity: an identity that would go all the way back to the Renaissance and, sometimes, further back to an oral culture that supposedly originated in the Neolithic (Oteiza). However, this literary practice and interpretation have reached a standstill, a crisis, in the Basque Country, Spain, France, and the diaspora. Because of globalization, we are entering a new phase that is reminiscent of the Renaissance when differences were not yet understood nationally.

Therefore, we have to revisit Basque literature, not as the chronicle of a hypothetical “Basque nation,” but rather as the historical witness of a Basque difference(s) that, these days, we know is historical but, nevertheless, we are not sure yet how to interpret, since it no longer is nationalist. This situation requires that we rethink Basque difference(s) anew, altogether, in its historicity from the eruption of globalization. Perhaps the goal is to conclude that there no longer is such a thing as Basque history or Basque difference(s)—or Spanish, French, and American histories. Perhaps the goal is to conclude that other geo-biopolitical formations are defining our desires and politics. Yet, a new global and postnational exploration is necessary in order to determine what a new, negative or positive, history of things Basque would be. Thus, a new postnational and global history of Basque literatures is crucial to situate ourselves, the Basques, as either Basque or otherwise, historically and globally, while, at the same time, offering a Basque reading of globalization and the neoliberal states that constitute the Basque Country in Europe and the Americas.

Since this book has as its goal to promote a more extensive postnational discussion of Basque literatures, I decided to present it, not only as a historical monograph, but also as a pedagogical text with guides and questions (see the last section, “Study Notes”). I do not think that a theoretical and historical presentation should require of a monograph, such as this, to forgo a pedagogical dimension. Therefore, this book is meant to grow as both a research project and a

pedagogical model. Minority literatures such as the Basques cannot afford to dismiss any of their potential readers or venues of dissemination.

Since I assume a minimal familiarity with the Basque Country on the part of the reader, I have resisted the traditional, introductory description that deters most readers familiar with *materia vasconiae* (things Basque) from continuing to read the text. From Mark Kurlansky's work to that of Cameron Watson, there is a wide range of publications already available for those that seek an initial introduction to the Basque Country. Needless to say, the internet and the web are even faster and more popular venues for such information.