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Founding Fathers, Patrons, Mothers, and Other *Bertso*-School Groupies

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In March, 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic forced hundreds of thousands of Basque citizens into full lockdown,[1] the electronic revolution in communications allowed the Association of the Friends of *Bertsolaritza* (Bertsozale Elkartea)[2] to extensively share, advertise, and disseminate their online offerings. (*Bertsolaritza* is the Basque cultural practice of singing improvised verses.[3]) The scheme presented *bertso* followers with an occasion for much looked-for collective engagement amidst the anxiety created by "physical distancing" in a country where

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[1] On March 10, 2020, the Spanish government passed a decree to close all educational facilities around the country. They also recommended avoidance of travel in high-transmission areas and called for people to work from home. A week later, a total lockdown was declared. The peninsular Basque Country was severely hit with coronavirus.

[2] The Association of the Friends of *Bertsolaritza* was first created as the "Association of *Bertsolaris* of the Basque Country" in 1987, after a dispute between the organizers of a championship and some *bertsolaris*. The founding of the Association and its gradual institutionalization have been instrumental in the modernization of *bertsolaritza*. An important aspect of this modernization entailed the establishment in 2006 of Bertso Plaza Digitala ("digital *bertso* plaza," a comprehensive internet project that offers creative and informative content on *bertsolaritza*), and the creation of the Xenpelar Digital Archive where the Association files and catalogues its collections. The main objective of the digital archives is the dissemination of its contents and the promotion of research. The creation of the digital corpus may be deemed as the beginning of the "electronic revolution" of *bertsolaritza*. Other significant steps in this "revolution" were the creation of new websites for Bertsozale Elkartea (http://www.bertsozale.eus); Lanku, a company created by Bertsozale Elkartea to offer editing services and organization of performances and events (http://www.lanku.eus); and Bertso Plaza Digitala (http://www.bertsoa.eus).

[3] *Bertsolaritza* can designate both the Basque crafting of oral improvised verses and the social movement created around it. As such, *bertsolaritza* is a deep-rooted cultural practice. *To talk, not in free regular sentences, but following the constraints of a melody, meter, and rhyme* could stand as the basic definition of what a *bertsolari* (improviser) does; the verses composed by such an improviser are referred to as a *bertso*. *Bertsolaritza* is highly popular in the Basque Country, a territory, largely defined by the Basque language, on both sides of the Pyrenees, opening to the Bay of Biscay. The Basque language, an isolated language, is the only remaining vestige of a non-Indo-European language in Western Europe. Labeling *bertsolaritza* as (nonstandard) literature has helped to furnish the phenomenon with social and cultural prestige by means of elevating the popular, once unfashionable, cultural practice, although *bertsolaritza* is mostly a live performance enacted in front of an audience. *Bertsolaritza* requires highly skilled performers who are able to juggle the formal constraints of the melody while swiftly responding to a cue or following another improviser's train of thought. For a detailed description of impromptu oral poetry and the formal artistic craftsmanship it entails, see the short documentary *What is Bertsolaritza?* (2018), which was created by the Etxepare Basque Institute to introduce the Basque cultural practice to the international arena.

public communal life is at the very core of social habits and cultural rites. *Bertso* fans were provided a chance to engage in a communication network of Basque speakers while taking solace in an ecosystem shared by *bertso* devotees of all ages and diverse walks of life.[4] The ancient tradition of Basque improvisational verse singing had unearthed a new way to keep itself timely.

The online collection offered by Bertsozale Elkartea provided "cultural sustenance throughout the quarantine"[5] and included performances in which well-known improvisers collaborated from the seclusion of their homes; documentaries to learn more about the art and craft of *bertsolaritza*; on-demand sessions; links to festivals and championships; access to archives of traditional verses; and a repertoire of pedagogical approaches to improve *bertso*-singing techniques. The webpage further encouraged people to "take advantage of the *imposed change of pace*, deepen appreciation for the traditional art, and explore new paths in its development." Acting as a chronicler, the young improviser Ane Txoperena even contributed with the first verses ever to be sung about the deadly virus:

Erreparatuz telebistako	As we watch TV
mila gertaera beltzi	a myriad of black episodes
sofan jarrita etxean preso	We are prisoners at home sitting on our couch
ta gaude ezin sinetsi	and we can hardly believe what we see
bertso sorta bat egin nahi dizut zuri, COVID-19	I want to sing you a bunch of verses, COVID-19
eragin duzun dena oroitu	so we remember everything you caused
dadin bihar eta etzi.	in days to follow.[6]

Hundreds of Basques connected, sang along, and made practical use of Bertsozale's educational summons. The anecdote is indicative of *bertsolaritza*'s continuing relevance amidst modern crowds of Basque-speakers and serves as a contemporary example of the capacity of *bertsolaritza* to adapt to new times and subject matters.[7]

Though most opportune in troubled times, adaptation, technologies of communication, and comprehensive educational proposals were not unknown allies to the Basque popular cultural tradition. The movement leading to the 1987 establishment and subsequent

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[4] When referring to the vigor of Basque improvisational singing and its environment, it must be underlined that such vigor occurs in the context of a minoritized linguistic and cultural community. *Bertsolaritza* is weak in terms of general cultural consumption. "Statistics allow us to infer that the true enthusiasts constitute around forty percent of the total amount of Basque speakers around the country; but while that number might chime a bell of satisfaction in many ears, it must be brought to the reader's mind that less than half of the population in the Basque Country is, in fact, a Basque speaker. Hence, *bertso* enthusiasts account for a much smaller number: 11% of the total population of the seven Basque provinces" (Ariznabarreta 2019:130).

[5] "Bertso Ikasgela," Bertsozale Elkartea, accessed March 21, 2021, www.bertsozale.eus/eu.

[6] I propose this translation with awareness that much has been written (Fine 1998) about the fact that the skill of the improviser is lost in translation, and even at the risk of rendering it in a rather flat manner (without the original rhyme and other subtle stylistic features).

[7] Many scholars (Retortillo and Aierdi 2007) have explained the evolution and maintenance of *bertsolaritza* in terms of its capacity to adapt and reformulate.

institutionalization of the Association of the Friends of *Bertsolaritza* is to be credited for the general success and the current attention to *bertsolaritza* in digital media and the official Basque school circuit.[8] These days, the Bertsozale Elkartea reaches a total of 28,500 children and teenagers in sixty-three Basque schools. These remarkable figures alone demonstrate that the transmission into modern culture of a folkloric tradition once considered old-fashioned is now, at least marginally, present in the Basque educational curriculum and that many youngsters get a chance to have access to the *bertsolari* phenomenon and the collective vitality adhering to it.

Notably—and as opposed to what has generally been the case in the context of industrialized Western societies—to discuss the modernization and mainstreaming of improvised verse singing (*bertsolaritza*) in the Basque Country is to examine the process of its institutionalization. By educating larger numbers of more appreciative, artistically-minded practitioners in the art of improvisation, *bertso* schools have become the main nuclei of that process, which has, in turn, influenced the heralding of *bertsolaritza* as one of the most salient modern markers of Basque cultural identity.[9]

Through analysis drawn from archival work, key findings from the most important academic literature in both Basque and English, analysis of previously unexamined primary sources, personal interviews, and firsthand experience,[10] this article helps to show how the network of *bertso* schools has contributed to this evolution and provides evidence that these educational schemes were instrumental to the development of *bertsolaritza* into a progressive cultural movement—so much so that "oral artistic activity has become a touchstone for other aspects of contemporary Basque culture" (Garzia 2007:80).

Bertsolaritza is now recognized as the most significant ritualized expression of cultural solidarity in the minoritized realm of Basque speakers, and, as such, it has acquired a privileged position in the contemporary Basque cultural scene. The presence of young, university-educated improvisers, media attention, and academia's conferral of prestige on oral culture have turned *bertsolaritza* into a trendy art. As such, Basque improvisational verse singing now enjoys an appreciative, knowledgeable audience that over time has come to share a symbolic inventory bearing a certain sacred quality: words, special knowledge, puns, references, memories,

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[8] "[*Bertsolaritza*'s] found backbone of recent times up to the present lies in the Bertso Elkartea association and the network of bertso schools. . . . [These are] unquestionably the drive of contemporary bertsolaritza" (Ariznabarreta 2018:137).

[9] I am grateful to the journal's anonymous referee for suggesting this framing of my argument.

[10] Personal relationships with several former *bertso* instructors have allowed me to access non-systematized compilations of previously unexamined materials kept by these individuals and to conduct in-depth interviews with them. I am particularly grateful to Rosa Lertxundi Esnal and Juan Garzia Garmendia, whose expertise as forerunner *bertso* instructors in the early years of these educational programs pairs with their vast theoretical knowledge of the art of Basque improvisational singing. Many of my findings are the result of long conversations with them and their generosity in allowing me to use their private libraries and notes. Access to other archival documents, articles, and original books in the Basque language was facilitated by Iñaki Arrieta Baro, librarian at the Jon Bilbao Basque Library (University of Nevada, Reno). My own intimate experience as a young attendee at *bertso* schools in the seventies has no doubt contributed to my research interest.

experiences, and other resources that link and mark the members of the *bertso* singing circuit.[11] Indeed, the unified social body that the *bertso* singing circuit—or *bertsogune*—constitutes "has drawn up its pathway with a rejuvenating and modernizing thrust" (Ariznabarreta 2018:118).

Early Intuition: Visionaries and Patrons

However, the shift toward modern relevance did not occur overnight, or, for that matter, without the superlative and enthusiastic effort of a few visionaries, hundreds of patrons, and thousands of volunteers. The reinvigoration of Basque improvisational singing was the result of the joint effort of a crowd of enthusiasts who, in the early seventies, became persuaded that *bertsolaritza* was not a relic of the past that had lost its communicative genius and needed to be preserved as a folkloric remnant. Rather, the grassroots *bertsozale* movement regarded improvisational verse singing as a collective, living ritual that needed to be passed on to new generations. The tradition, they believed, would provide younger generations with a means of self-referentiality and act as a transmitter of idiosyncratic cultural values.

The first educational methods that were used in an attempt to transform *bertsolaritza*—considered until then as an innate talent that could not be learnt, and as a humble popular tradition—came by the hand of the *bertsolari* and writer Xabier Amuriza (born in 1941), the undisputed path-finder and guide for a renewed crowd of verse improvisers and theorizers. Amuriza, an ordained priest and political activist who was born and bred in a rural environment, was the first to connect the knowledge gained in the traditional atmosphere of the *bertsolari* with the intellectual ethos of the Basque seminaries of the 1960s. In 1980, Amuriza's own ability as a *bertsolari* secured him, in what was an impressive triumph, first place in that year's championship.[12] The 1980 championship has been recognized ever since as the inaugural landmark in modern Basque improvised verse singing.

One of the prominent anti-Francoist nationalist rebels, Amuriza was not a folklorist or a scholar jostling to collect rural folklore, and his involvement was not confined to the abstract sphere of academic studies. Rather, in the later years of Francoism, Amuriza's challenge was political:[13] he aimed to provide people with a way to gain access to a repressed culture and to offer a means for self-liberating expression. In a lecture delivered in the late seventies, Amuriza conceded, "it is clear that improvisational singing was—and still is—an escape from the narrow

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[11] As Zulaika suggests: "The *bertso* is indifferent to contradiction—as the argument of the song will deliberately seek contradictory words and images, ambiguity and paradox, to create a pun or suggest an analogy" (2018:166).

[12] The *bertso* championship is held every four years, and it is not a mere one-day event. It begins months before the Final, and it involves approximately fifteen sessions, for which forty-five *bertsolaris* qualify through regional championships previously organized in smaller local venues. Apart from these competitions, there are around 1,800 extemporaneous verse-singing performances that take place in several settings all around the Basque territory: town plazas, restaurants, cider houses, theaters, cultural venues, and *gaztetxeak* ("youth houses," semi-official, self-managed associations of young people who occupy unoccupied buildings and organize events).

[13] For a short biographical sketch and Amuriza's relevance in Basque culture during the 1980s, see Ariznabarreta 2019:49-53.

and almost hermetic forms of society . . . an escape from social pressure, a break from repression" (Amuriza et al. 1988:76). Amuriza eloquently narrates the story of a native English speaker who became acquainted with the Basque language and later took up the craft of *bertsolaritza*. The Englishman admitted: "I've noticed that through verses I say things I wouldn't say otherwise. It also helps me discover feelings I don't even know I have inside" (Amuriza et al. 1988:76).

The markedly political stance taken by Amuriza in those early years attempts to describe an art that "provides a free space to create new language, meanings and visions for the future" (Duncombe 2002:8). Amuriza's first intuitions are remarkable in that they come close to several critical approaches to oral tradition with which, we assume, the Basque *bertsolari* was not familiar at the time. His perception echoes an approach to orality whereby spoken narratives are important sources of information and transmission (Boas 1935). Amuriza's reflections also resonate with Geertz's symbolic interpretation of oral tradition, which stresses the cultural significance of the performance itself: *people telling themselves a story about themselves* (1973:448). Equally, one can make obvious links between Amuriza's early theorization and a psychological approach presenting orality as a socially legitimate means of expressing one's social and personal anxiety (Dundes 2005).[14]

The following excerpt from a longer chapter in which Amuriza reflects on the values of improvisation clarifies the instinctive resonances alluded to above (Amuriza et al. 1988:77):

> The pedagogical and liberating values of improvisation are many and precious. It [improvisation] strengthens the group by providing enjoyment to its members. It creates a community. It generates new and different relationships, as well as deep feelings. It opens people up and refreshes them internally, allowing them to dispel feelings and heartache that they would not otherwise express, and to discover their inner self. *Bertsolaritza* allows for the development and dissemination of the imagination and other talents. It teaches us to love life spontaneously; because that is, precisely, what improvisation is. . . . And all this while playing and having fun, practicing art and (mental) sport. How could such a tool not have this power if people themselves need it to oppose the formalities of society?

Amuriza's strong identification with the social and political context of the time contributed to the success of his proposals. First known for his political activism and engagement, Amuriza was one of the preeminent anti-Francoist nationalist rebels that defended radical policies. The pursuit of ideological supremacy in cultural environments was crucial, and *bertsolaritza* started to acquire markedly political liturgic symbolism. *Bertsolaritza* managed to

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[14] According to Dundes, "folklore offers a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of taboo and anxiety-provoking behavior. One can do or say in folkloristic form things otherwise interdicted in everyday life" (2005:359).

identify itself with a community with which it shared a system of difficulties, a system of risks.[15] The young improvisers coming out of *bertso* schools were proof that that Basque culture did, in fact, have a chance to survive. In short, as a young *bertso*-school attendee of the time later suggested: "they needed young people, to renew the practice, to attract new audiences, to create points of reference in areas in which *bertsolaritza* was losing its grip" (Lujanbio 2018:90).

Nationalist politicians in the newly appointed local administrations also supported the scheme and acted as essential patrons. Imanol Murua Arregi (1935-2008)—Deputy of Culture of the Government of Gipuzkoa (1983-85), later appointed Deputy General (1985-91)—stands out as a powerful supporter of the new improvisers, and his funding and ubiquitous presence in young *bertsolaris'* performances bestowed prestige on them (A. Agirre 1999). Roaring political and cultural enthusiasm in the final breaths of Franco's regime allowed *bertso* schools to grow and blossom.

Nevertheless, the accomplishment was probably more qualitative than quantitative at an early stage. At the same time, this very fact allowed *bertsolaritza* to expand beyond its traditional, rural domain, thus making a phenomenal contribution to the standardization and normalization of the Basque language in urban areas. The charting of new territories, of course, required the identification of and adaptation to a new situational context. From the outset, informal educational settings linked *bertsolaritza* with students' everyday lives and were fueled by comprehensive theories of social/critical pedagogy: active learning, student-centeredness, critical thinking, and free argumentation were allowed and encouraged (Rodríguez 1984). Many years later, Estitxu Eizagirre, an adult *bertsolari* and journalist, advocated in favor of such pedagogical approaches in *Argia*, a current events magazine published in the Basque language. Amid the largely rule-bound, official—and textualized—world of the everyday school environment, *bertso* schools remain a milieu where performance is the principal instrument of communication, an instrument that allows for self-expression and horizontal collaboration (Eizagirre 2006):

> *Bertso* schools give students a voice. Students are allowed to share their concerns through song, to show what they really think, to reflect about everyday situations, to express themselves. Students are encouraged to speak in public and they are persuaded their opinion matters. Fortunately, *bertso* schools are not schools. If only schools were more like *bertso* schools, what a difference that would make!

Dissenting Voices

Many early volunteers championed the cause of a new pedagogical approach that would deepen appreciation for the ancient tradition through new methods. However, many also opposed

[15] As Mouillot contends (2009:6): "Being Basque has also come to signify the very idea of a struggle to maintain a cultural singularity based not only on the language but also traditions and values. If one perceives the Basque Country as a region opposing and resisting the overpowering, assimilative cultural values of a global superculture, then the intercorporeality of *bertsolaritza* reaffirms local Basque identity, while its institutionalization confirms the singularity of Basque culture as a whole."

it. On July 7, 1981, Iñaki Eizmendi ("Basarri") (1913-1999), a highly qualified *bertsolari* who had won the national championship on two occasions—the first one right before the 1936 war, the second in 1960, after the restoration of the championship—wrote an essay highly critical of modern instructional attempts to train novice *bertsolaris* (Eizmendi 1984). Basarri was not alone in his censure. Many other honored improvisers had, in fact, mistrusted such a modernizing thrust, believing that *bertsolaritza* would lose its popular drive and turn into folksy, phony mimicry. What appeared unusual in Basarri's bearing was the fact that he himself was credited with efforts to unshackle Basque improvisational singing from the rural atmosphere of cider-houses and bars. Misgivings against *bertso* schools also stemmed from those bidding to intellectualize and modernize *bertsolaritza*. Basarri's skeptical words expose the mistrust held by many *bertso* devotees prior to the institutionalization of the educational schemes:

> It would be a great victory to have a good *bertsolari* in a school where two hundred young boys gather. If just one out of two hundred would turn out to be a *bertsolari*, then we would have a flood of them in a few years. Unfortunately, this will not happen. You cannot make a crab walk straight. Rather than attempting to "manufacture" *bertsolaris*, we must strive to create a Basque atmosphere and a popular atmosphere, creating an atmosphere and an audience, for *bertsolaritza* performances.

The philosopher and prominent researcher of Basque culture Joxe Azurmendi shared similar concerns about the manufacturing of improvisational singers. In a roundtable held at the School of Educational Sciences at the University of the Basque Country in 1983, Azurmendi emphasized his reservations about the excessive streamlining of a popular rite which had served a quotidian, ordinary function in the traditional world (1988:60):

> We have to be on the watch if we do not want robots; that is, those who learn the craftsmanship of verse making: all the mechanisms, all the rhymes, "*bertso*-makers" who have learned everything which is combinatorial but not creative.

In short, early voices warned that enhancing the accessibility of *bertsolaritza* and boosting its social prestige could detach it from its roots and popular drive.[16] These concerns were, in fact, sustained in time by many other scholars and *bertsolaritza* pundits. One of the ideas central to Juan Garzia Garmendia's book *Txirritaren baratzea Norteko trenbidetik* (1997) is that, paradoxically, the *written* pieces by the genius improviser Txirrita[17] are somehow *more oral and spontaneous* than many of the allegedly extemporaneous—and more sophisticated—*modern*

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[16] Although the quote below does not directly refer to the schools of *bertsolaritza*, it is interesting to note that a claim about the necessary spontaneity of the *bertsolari* artist was also made by the Basque sculptor and cultural icon Jorge Oteiza (1908-2003) in his book *Quousque Tandem . . . !*: "This is what we have to discover in our *bertsolari*, that their style is not based on intent but on what comes out" (Oteiza 2003 [1963]:350).

[17] Txirrita was the nickname given to the master *bertsolari* Jose Manuel Lujanbio (1860-1936), who is regarded as an icon of the traditional *bertsolari* (belonging to the world of orality). Apart from improvising in town squares (plazas) and other popular venues (bars and banquets), Txirrita is also well known for his penned *bertsos*, sometimes written under the commission of outside funders.

ones. Similarly, Juanjo Uria, one of the early advocates and sponsors for *bertso* schools, recently revealed a certain skepticism regarding the spontaneous nature of the art of contemporary, elite verse improvisers, remarking, "I find it difficult to believe modern day *bertsolaris* are improvising" (Uria 2018). Surely the gains made in the efforts of these early advocates were not achieved without a price. In that line, many of these divergent voices also underscored the fact that one of the chief shortcomings of *bertsolaritza*'s rise in social acceptance was the loss of its initial freshness and popular exuberance.[18] All in all, the words of Imanol Lazkano, president of Bertsozale Elkartea between 1987 and 2005 and a traditional improviser himself, eloquently speak for themselves (quoted in J. Agirre 2017):

> Basque improvised verse singing has never done as well as today. There is a tremendous level, mainly thanks to the work done in the verse-schools. But *bertsolaritza* has lost its salt and pepper along the way. Whoever takes a step forward always leaves something along the way, and we did lose something. We have gained a lot all along the way, but we have jettisoned some advantages.

In some cases, the opposition to the paradigm shift also hid a somewhat ideological slant. The period between 1960 and 1970, in which generational reinvigoration occurred, had brought a breach of mentality, a radical change in ways of life. And, surely, culture does not occur in a vacuum. The ideas touted by the era—namely rationalization and widespread secularization—had permeated among a large part of the Basque youth, whose scruples against the "essentialism" of Basque culture led them in search of "more universal" perspectives that would open up the *traditional and ritualistic coterie* and make it accessible to, among others, new speakers of Basque. These new speakers had resulted from both the incipient attempts to normalize Basque among the sons and daughters of immigrants, and the standardization process that the language underwent in the 1960s. The new theorizers and practitioners of Basque culture attempted to project it into a new social order.[19] In this light, many voices echoed that of the poet Gabriel Aresti, who deemed *bertsolaris* to be *social poets*. The push to modernize improvisational singing encompassed, in that sense, a transformational social and political strategy.

Unacknowledged Advocates

However, applying theory to practice was not an easy task. It was the interaction between the visionaries and the practitioners that drove *bertsolaritza* from the prophecies auguring its disappearance to a rejuvenation that may be regarded as extraordinary. As a *bertso*-school instructor in the early years proclaimed: "Utopia is not what cannot be achieved, but what has not yet been achieved" (Dorronsoro 1988:87). Although most of the hundreds of individuals involved in the effort remain little known beyond their local realms, there are a few names that stand out. The prodigious and tireless efforts of Patxi Goikolea, Juanito Dorronsoro, Joxerra

[18] See Zavala 2005:16-17 and the various reflections covered in Rodríguez 1988.

[19] The artist Jorge Oteiza defended the notion that "Art, the school of art, is a political school for the development of consciousness. It is a dialectical process of questions and answers . . . " (2005:452).

Etxeberria, Pello Esnal, Juanjo Uria, Trino Azkoitia, and Andoni Iriondo, among others, resonate as emblems of a vibrant educational dynamic that managed to modernize Basque improvisational singing and facilitated its seamless continuum with the past. These early pioneers understood, often intuitively, that the abilities required for the spread of *bertsolaritza* transcended the development of individual skills. It was essential to prioritize socialization over technique.

Today few would argue with Dorronsoro's adage. According to Roxa Lertxundi, a primary school teacher who started a *bertso* school for young enthusiasts in Zarautz, a coastal town of the province of Gipuzkoa, it was the first goal of *bertso* schools to provide an atmosphere of camaraderie. She refers to the first group of *bertso* students she guided—jointly with Pello Esnal—as their "flock."[20] The metaphor immediately echoes the idea of an organic and dynamic venture in which a group is drawn together around joint interests. According to Lertxundi, the *Etxe-Beltz bertso* school was such an occurrence. She poignantly refers to herself as the "mother" to the "*bertso* flock." Although all were aware that high-end *bertso* performances were rated for skill and technique, they also understood that no superb talent could flourish without an atmosphere of self-confidence and collective support.[21] Since Lertxundi herself had been a *bertso* aficionado from an early age, she understood that singing was, most importantly, a means to communicate feelings, and that it in fact served a liberating purpose. Some of her first students would later become highly rated improvisers themselves, while some took different paths, but all remember the self-confidence that the *bertso*-school atmosphere granted them. Ainhoa Agirreazaldegi, a former *bertso*-school student, reminisces on the environment of freedom that was provided by the early schools of improvisation (Agirreazaldegi and Goikoetxea 2007:66):

> An atmosphere of self-assurance, an atmosphere in which anything could be said, in which you knew you would not be judged, in which you were able to make a fool of yourself. An atmosphere where you could talk about things that could not be talked about anywhere else.

Lertxundi was one of the few women who led a *bertso* school. Given the claims to modernity touted by *bertsolaritza*'s pioneers, the scarcity of women practitioners is revealing of the absence of any gender-awareness among the early theorizers of modern *bertsolaritza*. Whereas female participation was the result of the "crucial mindset of a culture that was in a life-or-death position" (Lujanbio 2018:81),[22] the allegedly cutting-edge pedagogical principles reviewed above were lacking any gender-egalitarian—let alone feminist—premises. Although many witnesses to the times would argue such premises were redundant and unnecessary, the recent publication of the memoir *Kontrako eztarritik* by the *bertsolari* and writer Uxue Alberdi (2019) tells us a different story: young girls did in fact struggle to make it through in a male-dominated environment and were pervasively misinterpreted and misrepresented. Whereas, as

[20] Roxa Lertxundi, interview by Larraitz Ariznabarreta, Zarautz, January 10, 2020.

[21] For an article and graphic background on the *Etxe-Beltz bertso* school, see Agirreazaldegi 2002:375-84.

[22] As Lujanbio notes, "when you have little left to lose, inevitably the general attitude is one that embraces risk-taking. And since bertsolaritza was at risk of disappearing, it was everybody's job to save it, including women" (2018:81).

early as the 1980s, young girls made up a remarkable fifty percent of students in *bertso* schools, only twenty percent of them made it to the *fore*, to actual remunerated performances in town squares and festivals. Arguably, this blatant injustice was perversely conditioned by the fact that the young *bertsolari* girls themselves had grown "a thick skin for oblivion" (Lujanbio 2018:90). The two-time (2009 and 2017) champion Maialen Lujanbio, an attendee at her local *bertso* school in Hernani since its inception, recalls the days when split and Manichean ideological factions offered "no room for nuance" (2018:93). Lujanbio's words are expressive in the way that they uphold a shared accountability for the utter lack of a feminist perspective in the early years (2018:93):

> Besides, feminism had a bad reputation at the time. Even in that left-leaning and totally Basque-loving section of society we belonged to. All of us young girls, we did not think of ourselves as feminists . . . . [I]t was a difficult time politically. There was an armed conflict, a lot of tension in our society, and very intense "positioning" among us. Society was very much split in half. . . . Power looked on folk culture with disdain, because it was not at its service, because it was critical, among other things. The opposition, on the other hand, tried to take ownership of everything that was in its interest.

New Bounty

Over the course of the past forty years, several noteworthy paths have opened the *bertso*-school movement to gender inclusion and other urban, modern-day ideological nuances. Arguably, many of the changes were facilitated by other novel, contributing factors: the renovation of tropes and motifs; increased breadth in the range of subjects; reconsideration of the cues provided by prompters; a new world in metaphors. Tellingly, Lujanbio observes that, amidst the new breeds of modern verse improvisers, the most successful ones have been those "who have drunk the least from the goblet of tradition" (2018:89, 92):

> We bertsolaris of this young generation . . . have been raised by bertsolaritza. The world of improvised-singing put the questions to us before life itself did: about identity, ethics, love, and sex; about politics and conflict . . . equality and feminism.

Young *bertsolaris* slowly "felt a spontaneous sense of kinship, a sense of being part of a generation and the budding conscience of a desire to infuse new blood into" tradition (Lujanbio 2018:88). *Bertsolaritza* gradually developed into a progressive cultural movement that was well-suited for the changing times, and *bertso* schools, their environment, and their dogmas were instrumental in that change. In parallel, and propelled by this change, the configuration of *bertso* schools also grew, and the programs were altered accordingly. Verse schools became comfortable spaces for the development of trendy, hip, youthful individualities. As Lujanbio notes (2018:88):

> Those little droplets of bertsolaritza renewal became rivulets, and the rivulets, with the new generation, would become a wave. We caught the wave, or maybe the wave caught us. Young

> bertsolaris modernized and adapted bertsolaritza to their times. They introduced new attitudes, aesthetics and subjects: drugs, alternative discourses about love and sexual relationships, different cultural references, different ways of singing, of using the language, and so on.

Unlike their forerunners, those *bertso*-school debutants of the late seventies and eighties are now, for the most part, university graduates who have traveled a long path in other intellectual and cultural fields and are socially highly valued. As Zulaika divulges: modern *bertsolaris* are "endowed with the enigmatic agalma by which he or she is admired and loved, the owner of an uncanny treasure that will sparkle and satisfy the audience's desire" (2018:168). In that line, Basque improvisers' sphere of influence is no longer confined to the world of *bertsolaritza*: their intellectualization and benchmarking status "has given way to a hybrid wide-ranging cultural phenomenon" (Ariznabarreta 2018:126). One could contend that this ongoing trajectory of the once unfashionable art towards an ideologically dominant position is strongly associated with the ever-increasing tendency towards the institutionalization of formal training in *bertsolaritza*. Intuitively at least, certain shared values can be noted amid the new generations of *bertso* followers—and instructors—that stemmed from the original educational schemes: they all perceive the cultural capital of *bertsolaritza* as unique and recognize it as symbolic wealth that needs to be protected and transmitted. In that sense, a common focus and a sense of ideological righteousness about shared cultural symbols become advantages of group membership for the growing *bertso* community.

A Coda

Indeed, as Lujanbio conceded in an interview, "a change in aesthetics implies a change in *bertso* prompts" (Aristorena Lasa 1998:85), and, as a result, we may infer: *a shift in the reaction of* bertso *followers*. The expertise applied to improvisation by former *bertso*-school children—now college-educated *bertso* instructors who deliver their know-how to new generations of *bertso*-groupies-to-be with a high degree of intellectualization and through digital means—has probably changed their new apprentices' very perception of what constitutes a good *bertso*. Oihana Iguaran, a young female *bertsolari* and researcher, reflected on these changes as perceived by the performers themselves on the occasion of the most recent (2019) championship tournament (Ugarte 2019):

> We have felt a different way of listening. Especially in the semi-finals, where issues of contradiction have been raised, we have seen doubts about the messages that have been sung, we have heard empty applause, sometimes even silence.

Admittedly, the institutionalization of *bertso* schools as intergenerational transmitters of the ancient craft—together with their role as supportive hubs of socialization—has been pivotal in the current appreciative expertise of the *bertso* audience, which has been molded by former

bertso-school attendees themselves.[23] This whole movement is to be credited for the contemporary appeal of improvisation in the Basque Country.

In fact, many of the ideological nuances brought about by the initial *bertso* schools have now permeated the Basque collective ethos; thus, these early educational schemes serve as a significant synecdoche of the evolution of Basque society in the last four decades. The contributions made by the patrons and early visionaries of *bertso* schools not only reformed and protected the ancient oral tradition and its transmission, but also favored an awareness of the fallaciousness of long-held irreconcilable tensions in the old-style Basque imaginary. Several binary oppositions—male/female (roles), individual/collective (worldview), rural/urban (identity), cosmopolitan/nationalist (ideology), folk/contemporary (culture)—slowly began to be surmounted following the hands-on contributions of these forerunners.

Improvisation remains a powerful means for collective self-expression and celebration in the realm of contemporary Basque culture and its enthusiasts. The pervasive online presence of *bertso* followers during the COVID-19 pandemic provides another significant indicator of its adaptability. Can the lessons extracted from recent experiences suggest wiser ways to deal with inexorable global issues through local creativity and know-how? The example provided by the *patrons*, *fathers*—and *mothers*—of the reinvigoration of *bertsolaritza* in the seventies allows us to look forward to such a utopian scenario, as the saying goes, "with hope, if not with confidence."

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[23] As Arin and Satrustegi note, "Most of the young people who go through *bertsolaritza* school then become *bertso* fans, whether they are following *bertsolaris* or learning about *bertsolaris* from near or far, as listeners" (2019).

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