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Hotel Heterotopia: The Locus of Crisis in *El hombre solo* and *Esos cielos* by Bernardo Atxaga

En esta investigación, amplío la investigación fundamental de Olaziregi sobre las heterotopias en El hombre solo *(1994) con el fin de profundizar en la función del sitio del hotel tanto en esta como en la siguiente novela de Atxaga,* Esos cielos *(1995). A través de un análisis comparativo de estas novelas – ambas fundacionales en el desarrollo de la nueva narrativa del conflicto vasco en los años noventa – sostengo que el hotel funciona como una heterotopia de crisis y que la presencia de los protagonistas allí cataliza el dilema central de la identidad vasca contemporánea en ambas novelas.*

Palabras clave: *Conflicto vasco, novela contemporánea peninsular, heterotopia, identidad*

In this article, I expand upon Olaziregi's foundational investigation of heterotopias in El hombre solo *(1994) in order to further elaborate on the function of the hotel site in both this and Atxaga's subsequent 1995 novel,* Esos cielos*. Through a comparative analysis of these novels – both foundational texts in the development of new narrative of the Basque conflict in the nineteen-nineties – I argue that the hotel functions as a heterotopia of crisis, and that the protagonists' presence there catalyzes the fundamental dilemma of contemporary Basque identity lying at the heart of both novels.*

Keywords: *Basque conflict, contemporary Peninsular novel, heterotopia, identity*

In her 2005 monograph *Waking the Hedgehog: The Literary Universe of Bernardo Atxaga,* Mari Jose Olaziregi applies the Foucauldian concept of the heterotopia to Bernardo Atxaga's (1951-) novel, *El hombre solo*, to argue that the protagonist, Carlos, occupies a heterotopic counter-space due to his self-

imposed exile from his native Basque Country. I expand upon Olaziregi's foundational investigation of heterotopias in *El hombre solo* (1994) to elaborate further on the function of the hotel site in both this and Atxaga's subsequent 1995 novel, *Esos cielos*.[1] I define Foucault's heterotopia as simultaneously an unreal construction existing within the bounds of literature *and* a real counter-site, an inversion "outside of all places" where disparate elements collide. Through a comparative analysis of these novels – both foundational texts in the development of Basque realist narrative in the nineties – I argue that the hotel functions as a heterotopia of crisis, and that the protagonists' presence there catalyzes the fundamental dilemma of contemporary Basque identity lying at the heart of both novels.

The protagonists of *El hombre solo* and *Esos cielos* – Carlos and Irene, respectively – are forced to come to terms with the fragmentation and dissolution of their identities and ideologies that result from their displacement from their Basque homeland into the hotel site. In Atxaga's novels, the hotel serves as a vehicle to confront what Homi Bhabha describes as "[t]he problem of signifying the interstitial passages and processes of cultural difference that are inscribed in the in-between" (217). Here, it encapsulates the ontological uncertainties experienced by ex-militants in post-Transition Spain as they navigate the complexities of reintegrating into a new and precarious democracy. In *El hombre solo* and *Esos cielos*, the hotel becomes the interstitial, disjunctive space from which new subjects, beings in crisis, emerge.

The heterotopia is an alternate space, the binary of the utopia, in which several sites coexist. It contains a systematized entrance and exit, with other related components shifting, based on time, culture, and position. Its flexibility is emphasized by Foucault's statement that the heterotopia consists of "a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (12). In short, it is an interstitial site of diverse applications to spaces both real and imagined. The heterotopia's utility resides in its inherent duality as a space that is simultaneously concrete and symbolic; this perspective, then, invites an interpretation of the hotel space in *El hombre solo* and *Esos cielos* through a heterotopic lens. It emerges as a palimpsest, embodying dual identities as both the "other space," a realm beyond conventional bounds, and a tangible counter-site, challenging the binary of utopia and reality.

Specifically, the trajectories of both novels have their protagonists moving from a heterotopia of deviation – the prison, a space "in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" – into the hotel, a site soon marked as a heterotopia of crisis for Carlos and Irene (Foucault 12). Foucault defines the heterotopia of crisis as a "privileged or sacred or forbidden place, reserved for individuals

who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly" (15). Carlos and Irene move laterally between heterotopias. The prison's physical isolation from their homeland has irrevocably distanced the protagonists from their past selves; once freed, they enter into their new hotel environment, which continues the internal crisis begun in the prison space. In the hotel space, both characters face the disintegration of their core values and its effect on their identities as (ex)militants and civilians. The hotel's heterotopic essence deeply influences the consciousness of both protagonists, highlighting the pivotal role of heterotopias in driving the critique of nationalist terrorism within the novels. Here, the heterotopic space serves as the stage for the implosion of the radical Basque nationalist project, compelling its former defenders, Carlos and Irene, to face the impracticality of violent nationalism in a democratic setting.

Atxaga's 1993 novel *Gizona bere bakardadean [El hombre solo]* narrates the internal struggle of protagonist Carlos, the titular lone(ly) man. Beginning on June 28, 1982, the novel spans the five tense days that become Carlos's last on Earth. Anxious and plagued by conflicting inner voices that seek to counteract the resolve of the now middle-aged militant, Carlos is fundamentally unable to connect with the small band of former nationalist militants with whom he shares both a business – a thriving hotel outside of Barcelona – and a complex history. Such a history involves the group's past crimes on behalf of the organization that is obliquely referred to, namely, the radical Basque nationalist terrorist organization, ETA. Carlos and his companions have been released from prison under the auspices of the polemical 1977 Amnesty Law, which freed Franco's political prisoners.

Five years later, Carlos's individual decision to allow two active members of ETA to take refuge from Spanish police beneath the hotel's bakery provokes an inexorable chain of dramatic events that play out alongside the 1982 FIFA World Cup. An atmosphere of cutthroat competition and increasing tension between rival factions permeates the novel – not just because the Polish national team is lodged at the hotel. As the police's suspicion that the activists are hidden at the hotel grows, Carlos chooses to act alone to save them and, in so doing, inadvertently causes the death of an innocent victim, as well as his own. In Annabel Martín's estimation, *El hombre solo*'s significance lies in that it is "una de las primeras novelas escritas en euskera sobre el mundo sociológico y psicológico de ETA" and thus "genera preguntas políticas que aún siguen vigentes por las insuficiencias de la democracia española" (109).

Atxaga's 1995 novel *Zeru horiek* [*Esos cielos*] likewise poses serious doubts about the realities of the post-Transition Spanish state. It has been well-reported that Atxaga felt inspired to write the novel after watching two young men write graffiti calling someone a traitor; he later decided to write the story of that traitor's return home (Kortazar 53-54). In a 2018 interview, Atxaga cited the fact that "[d]entro del País Vasco, de ese mundo que yo cuento, el tema de la traición es tabú" as a catalyst for his interest in the topic ("Tensión" 26). *Esos cielos* is the story of thirty-seven year-old Irene's return to Bilbao after four years of imprisonment at an unnamed women's prison in Barcelona.[2] Irene, a Yoyes-like figure,[3] is a former ETA militant released after her participation in the Social Reinsertion Plan, begun in 1981 under the government of Leopoldo Calvo Sotelo and still active in 2020 (Quílez). The Plan invited imprisoned militants like Irene to abandon violence and all ties with ETA; those who participated were rewarded with better conditions, imprisonment closer to home, and pardons. The narrative opens on her first night of freedom, which she spends in a cheap hotel in Barcelona, and continues during the course of her journey west from Catalonia to the Basque Country the following afternoon.

The novel features even stricter temporal limitations than *El hombre solo*, exchanging a period of several days for a compact twenty-four hours, with the bulk of the narration centered on Irene's bus journey. Her encounter with a number of strangers on the bus, among them several nuns, an ill older woman, and, most significantly, two undercover police officers in the Antiterrorist Brigade marks her journey home as a person haunted by a growing sense of fear as she nears her destination. In this sense, *Esos cielos* is a novel that, above all, is recognized by its decision to "no intenta[r] resolver las tensiones sociopolíticas que retrata," instead leaving them, like the text itself, "siempre … en movimiento" (Perret 127). Indeed, this movement underlies the essential instability that permeates the heterotopic hotel space in the novel.

Contextualizing these works within both contemporary history and Atxaga's expansive literary production is critical, given the wide breadth of work by an author that began to publish upon the eve of Spain's Transition. Although written and published in the early nineties, both *El hombre solo* and *Esos cielos* attempt to realistically portray the political instability of the Transition period, in which the newly elected democratic government and the 1978 Constitution were at their most fragile. As Giles Tremlett explains,

> Democracy did not appear in Spain overnight – though the period in which it emerged is often viewed through rose-tinted glasses… The *Transición* was a period of high political drama… In the five years after Franco's death, more than a hundred demonstrators, left-wing activists, students and separatists were killed by the police

or the "*ultras*," the far-right. Many more were killed by ETA and other left-wing or separatist terrorist groups. (72)

Compounding the violence that plagued the country during this period were several key factors that weakened public faith in the nascent Spanish democracy and its ability to maintain order. Among these factors were rampant inflation and unemployment resulting from an economy in shambles; growing political regionalisms in the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Galicia legitimized by the autonomy statutes created in Part VIII of the 1978 Spanish Constitution; and most ominously, a failed coup d'état spearheaded by the forces of Neo-Francoist Antonio Tejero on February 23, 1981.

Despite the ultimate preservation of constitutional order after 1981 and Calvo Sotelo's subsequent inauguration as Prime Minister (though his term would be but brief), anxiety about the new democracy continued, and the feeling "Franco's legacy had not fully disappeared" persisted among citizens (Tremlett 95). In the case of the Basque Country, this period of dramatic political transformation was only intensified by the exponential growth of "the appeal of 'neo-regionalisms" (Núñez 75). These regionalist ideologies were hardly unfamiliar in the region – the modern founding father of Basque nationalism, Sabino Arana, began to openly preach a doctrine of Basque independence as early as 1893 – but new interest saw their consolidation in the form of political organizations during the 1980s and first half of the 1990s, bringing regional identity-based politics and related nationalist movements to the forefront of public awareness (74-75).

Set in 1977 and the mid- to late 1980s, respectively, *Esos cielos* and *El hombre solo* reify these anxieties through their realist narratives. *El hombre solo* is the first major work in what is now considered Atxaga's realist period, which Jon Kortazar situates between 1988 and 1995. Both *El hombre solo* and *Esos cielos* were published during this time, a period that mirrors a greater movement towards realism in Basque literature overall. As novels at the forefront of a new literary zeitgeist, both were received with great critical acclaim. Prior Basque literary production had been dominated by a number of competing movements whose main goal was to break with *costumbrismo*, which had long dominated Basque letters. The works of Atxaga's contemporary, Ramon Saizarbitoria (1944-), who began to publish avant-garde novels in 1969 with *Egunero hasten delako* [*Porque empieza cada día*], in large part inaugurated the realist mode in Basque letters. Saizarbitoria's publications in the second half of the twentieth century are credited with the modernization of the contemporary Basque novel, as they

employed a more (although not always) realistic approach to form and content (Kortazar 13-15).

The significance of Saizarbitoria's work – and not long after, Atxaga's – went beyond his embrace of the new realist zeitgeist, addressing the very real issues facing the Basque Country after the Transition period. Writing in 1998, Joseba Gabilondo cites Saizarbitoria, alongside Atxaga, as the new faces of Basque literary production due to their unflinching ability to embrace contemporary political violence in their realist narratives. Although there was no shortage of politically-inspired violence across post-Transition Spain, Atxaga's and Saizarbitoria's novels focus specifically on the quandary presented by the radical separatism of ETA and the state-sanctioned counterterrorist response (of the Civil Guard, the Francoist Secret Police, and the GAL) in and around the Basque Country during this period, that of how to respond to the violence of both ETA and the state anti-terrorist apparatus without undermining Spain's fragile democracy. Referring to *El hombre solo* and Saizarbitoria's 1995 novel *Los pasos incontables*, Gabilondo writes that

> [t]he latest literary texts by key Basque writers Bernardo Atxaga (1951-) and Ramon Saizarbitoria (1944-) exemplify Basque literature's own turn to history. This turn represents a radical departure from previous production, for this time around Basque literature addresses the issue of terrorism, the problem at the core of Basque society, head on in its historical complexity…They constitute the first attempt to write historically about ETA without either endorsing or marginalizing it. (114)

As made evident by these narratives, the foundational role of terrorism in the Basque realist narrative of the nineties cannot be overstated. In the eighties, radical Basque nationalist terrorism had hit new highs across the Iberian Peninsula. In 1980, ETA's deadliest year, ninety-three people – political enemies and civilians alike – were killed by its terrorist attacks. It is notable, too, that the previous two years were likewise *each* the deadliest on record, with eighty-six and sixty-five deaths in 1979 and 1978, respectively. The highest death tolls caused by the organization took place over the course of the 1980s with a total of 412 victims. The grim symbol of this bloody decade became the car bombing attack at the Hipercor shopping center in Barcelona on June 19, 1987. The Hipercor blast stood out as ETA's deadliest assault on Spanish soil at the time, with twenty-one civilian victims killed by a powerful car bomb. This attack and others like it infused the realist aesthetics of Basque authors with tones of cynicism and despair.

These writers found that they could hardly avoid the brutal violence on their doorstep, as the car bombings and shootouts continued, seemingly unabated, into the nineties and the second millennium. The first novel of the

Basque nationalist conflict, *Ehun metro* [*Cien metros*] published by Saizarbitoria in 1976, is heralded as the inaugural modern literary testimony to the Basque Country's profound political discord. However, it wasn't until the nineties that the mass publication of realistic literature reflecting this crisis truly began. Olaziregi tracks this tendency in part to a boom in memory studies beginning in the last three decades of the twentieth century as well as real-life inspiration in the case of authors like Atxaga ("Literature" 254, 258). For his part, Gabilondo notes that by this time, "Basque literature has abandoned its spatial, allegorical thrust of the 70s and 80s and has moved into the 90s to explore the historical foundations of its community," a shift that created new relationships between authors, narratives, and the violence suffered by Basque communities (122). This statement holds true for Atxaga, whose publications in the eighties did not address the violent political conflict plaguing his homeland. In fact, it wasn't until the nineties that the author would turn the recent events of the last decade into the basis for his writing.

Prior to the nineties, Atxaga's writing had followed general literary trends across the Iberian Peninsula while simultaneously carving out a space for the author in the field of Basque letters. Within its curious melding of the fantastic, the mysterious, and often the experimental, in 1988 Atxaga published what many consider to be his most important novel to date, *Obabakoak* [*Los de Obaba*] which would launch him to fame in the realm of Basque letters. The novel features a vast mythologized narrative that mixes genres, space, and time to create a hybrid text in which "two symbolic worlds coexist, the world of childhood and the world of modernity" (Kortazar 48). Neither are particularly realistic. The novel's diverse influences hint at traditional Basque themes and intertexts alongside Latin American magical realism and dark ruralism. *Obabakoak* is thus an appropriate emblem of the state of pre-realist literary production in the Basque Country that looked abroad to Latin America, rather than to the political conflict at its doorstep, for inspiration.

Yet, despite brilliant praise from critics like Manuel López de Abiada and the novel's sustained success over the years – in 1989 it received the Critic's Prize, the Euskadi Prize, and the Spanish National Prize for Narrative – all was not well in the field of Basque letters after *Obabakoak*'s publication. Certainly, not all members of the Basque literati were in support of the aesthetics of fantasy over that of reality, as evinced by Lasagabaster's infamous 1990 complaint: "[i]n the end, one has the impression that our narrative writers have not yet told us what we were, what we are, or what we would like to be. The Stendhal-like mirror of the Basque novel has barely

begun to reflect the path of our dreams and our experiences" (23). Interestingly, Lasagabaster's lament of the lack of realist narrative production in the Basque Country seems to have foretold its later explosion just a few years later.

In the case of twentieth century Basque literary production, the nineties were a moment of particular significance. Kortazar notes that by 1993, the year in which *El hombre solo* was published, a meaningful aesthetic "shift had been completed and [Basque] authors consciously strove to connect with reality" (50). Among those participating in the incipient realism of the nineties were, alongside Atxaga, the authors Itxaro Borda, Aingeru Epaltxa, Edorta Jimenez, Joan Mari Irigoien, and Luis Mari Muxika, all of whom published realist narratives that same year. For these and others experimenting with this inchoate (in Basque literature, at least) aesthetic, realism implied a more straightforward, linear narrative experience that was often tinted with pessimism, given its close relationship to the violent political turmoil that marked the late eighties and early nineties (50).

The result of this general movement in Basque literature in the nineties was an entirely heterogenous set of novels published where realist inclinations manifested differently in each author. That this realism would be heterogenic and unstable is no surprise, given, as Lasagabaster explains, the uneven development of the Basque novel in the twentieth century.[4] In any case, Atxaga's *El hombre solo* – and, to a lesser extent, his 1992 children's book *Memorias de una vaca* (published originally as *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* in 1991) – represent a new embrace of realism in the author's production that breaks with the fantastical *Obaba*. As realist texts, both *El hombre solo* and *Esos cielos* can be understood as intense psychological portrayals of their protagonists' inner states, with interior monologues in the second and third person dominating throughout, accompanied by vivid descriptions of the characters' thoughts and feelings.

In the following pages, I examine what Olaziregi has termed the "heterotopic spaces of crisis or digression (the hotel or the prison)" that occur due to the hotel's fundamental role as a catalyst of the characters' crises of identity in exile ("Literature" 258). With the hotel, Atxaga creates a space whose inherent conflict marks it as significant: its liminality rejects both the permanent spatial displacement of the prison, an experience shared by both characters, in addition to the idealized homeland out of their reach within their narrations. The psychic consequences of this fragmentary and jumbled space continue to erupt, like aftershocks, throughout each novel for Carlos and Irene, as their identities merge and ultimately collapse within its bounds. The loss of the protagonists' identity within the hotel thus gestures to the impossibility of these ex-militants' adaptation to civilian life in the context of post-Transition Spain's potent political instability.

The hotel's presence as the principal frame of *El hombre solo* is offset by a more limited presence in *Esos cielos*, whose locus is primarily the bus that conveys Irene from Barcelona to the Basque Country. However, the "very limited … time/space coordinates" spanning only few days in each novel mark Irene's twelve-hour stay in a cheap Barcelona hotel as a significant portion of the overall narrative arc (Olaziregi, *Waking* 218).[5] Both are equally constrained by their narratives and in fact, it is the reduced "spatial-temporal elements" of *El hombre solo* and *Esos cielos* that reinforce the hotel site in both as fundamental, given its inclusion in two novels where "the places in which the action takes place are few" (258, 219). Both hotels in *El hombre solo* and *Esos cielos* correspond to key indicators of the heterotopic space as highlighted by Foucault. Hotels have a privileged system of ingress and egress that are privileged and controlled: in *El hombre solo* by the police checkpoint and in *Esos cielos* by Irene's would-be paramour, alongside the guest reception in both, presumably managed by a receptionist (Atxaga 378, 27).

The hotel is also the site of an asynchronous experience of time. In *El hombre solo* – specifically, during days one through four of Carlos's narration – time is mainly experienced by the protagonist as endless, atemporal, as he is dominated by lengthy excursions into his distant past memories, something he only becomes aware of upon leaving the hotel: "[c]uando consiguió atravesar la maleza y salir del edificio, caminó hasta la farola donde volaba el pequeño murciélago y se detuvo a respirar. Se sentía como un nadador que ha permanecido demasiado tiempo bajo el agua" (Atxaga 71). On the fifth day of his narration – the last of his life – the memories are replaced with a feeling of inexorability as time suddenly rushes forward; as his mental countdown winds down, Carlos experiences its end like a blow upon his back (439). Irene's experience at the cheap hotel in Barcelona is likewise ephemeral. She only spends the night before continuing west to Bilbao (37). The fleetingness of the brief night she spends in the hotel is contrasted by its persistence in her thoughts, as Irene revisits the encounter in her letter to her friend Andoni (25-27) and again as the basis of her persistent fear of being arrested by the Antiterrorist Brigade for the events that have taken place there.

Both hotels are defined by their interstitiality, characterized by their transitional nature and their housing many spaces in one. In *El hombre solo*, Atxaga's description of the establishment that Carlos runs with his ex-militant companions, located a few hundred meters from the highway to Barcelona, offers relevant details to the spaces that intervene within the greater site:

El hotel era un edificio blanco y de corte racionalista formado por un pabellón rectangular de 60 habitaciones al que se unía, en uno de sus extremos, la torre cuadrada donde se hallan los apartamentos de los socios del mismo hotel, así como el restaurante y otros servicios … [Carlos] se dirigió a la parte reservada a restaurante y cocina. Ésta quedaba a la derecha de la escalera, al otro lado de la zona de recepción del hotel, y al otro lado, también, del salón donde en aquel mismo instante comenzaba a celebrarse la fiesta. (27)

This description highlights the confluence of many spaces in one: the guest rooms, the staff living quarters, the restaurant, the kitchen, the reception area, and the salon, alongside various other related sites mentioned later (the hotel pool, the garage, the bakery). These diverse spaces affirm a variety of different uses, ranging from public to private, to the satisfaction of basic physiological needs (the kitchen, the restaurant, the guest rooms) to more complex psychological needs for the characters (such as in the bakery, where Carlos finds relief from mental torment of his voices). Given this potent incongruence, a site such as the hotel – in which the elite athletes of the Polish national soccer team derided by their translator as materialist are brought together with a handful of failed ex-militants – can be nothing other than a heterotopia. The hotel is a counter-space, one that negates easy separation by juxtaposing inherently dissimilar elements within its walls.

The description of the hotel offered in *Esos cielos* is more circumscribed, given the novel's protagonist spent the previous night in "cuatro o cinco bares" drinking beer in bad company (Atxaga 13). Her inebriation limits her description of the space to the few fleeting details she repeatedly remembers, namely that the place was "un hotel barato" (12, 37), writing in her letter to Andoni that it "debía de ser el más barato de Barcelona, hasta las sábanas estaban sucias" (27). Regardless of these constraints, the reader may safely assume that, like in any other hotel, multiple spaces conflict and collide within. When Irene slashes her unnamed would-be paramour with her handmade "punzón" after he threatens her, he flees deeper into the hotel in search of aid: "[e]nloquecido por el dolor, aterrorizado por la sangre que surgía de las heridas y comenzaba a manchar las sábanas, huyó corriendo de la habitación. No hacia la calle, puesto que estaba desnudo, sino hacia algún punto del hotel" (38). An important heterotopic implication lies behind this tragicomic scene. In his flight from the danger of the hotel room, Irene's casual lover seeks to escape from a semi-public space to a private one while remaining under the same roof, so as to not endanger his masculine pride with full-on public nudity nor risk more physical violence from Irene.

Where could he have gone? One imagines to tend to his wounds in an available bathroom, or to hide in another guest room; this unnamed man, like Carlos and Irene, has a multiplicity of intermingled spaces to choose from, each affirming multiple functions. Perhaps the man even sought out the hotel's coat check to shield his nudity before calling for aid. Like the curious juxtaposition of Polish soccer players and retired nationalist ideologues in *El hombre solo*, here another occurs, between an embittered, hostile ex-militant and a would-be lover. As spaces in which many different elements are placed in proximity despite incongruity, the heterotopic hotels in *El hombre solo* and *Esos cielos* open their physical and metaphorical doors to the cohabitation of discord and contradiction within the same site.

While I have just demonstrated that hotel is always a heterotopia, it is not always a heterotopia of crisis. What distinguishes a heterotopia of crisis from the general term is its nature as a privileged space reserved for those in crisis with their greater environment. In brief, it is Carlos and Irene's fraught relationship with their identities, political and personal, further fragmented through their exile (which, in the case of the former, is self-imposed), that transforms them into beings in crisis. In turn, this internal turmoil transmutes the hotel into a heterotopia of crisis. The hotel is not far off from the example of a heterotopia of crisis originally offered by Foucault, that of the boarding school. Just as adolescents, isolated at boarding schools, must struggle with manifestations of their maturing selves that occur at this "elsewhere," likewise Carlos and Irene find themselves struggling with ontological doubts that surface at the hotel.

For the protagonist of *El hombre solo*, ontological doubts manifest through his involvement with Jon and Jone, the alias of the radical nationalist militants that he has hidden underneath the hotel's bakery. Jon and Jone are on the run after a planned backpack bombing killed an innocent child rather than its intended target, the police (Atxaga 120). Carlos's identity crisis comes to the forefront of the novel upon his initial encounter with Jone. During their conversation, he repeatedly identifies himself, both externally to Jone and internally through the Rata's interior monologue, as an ex-militant: "[h]acía años que no pertenecía a la organización. No era más que un colaborador ocasional, un militante retirado que se había prestado a hacer un favor" (38). Jone presses Carlos on this seeming case of cognitive dissonance – how can he claim both his retirement from, and his present collaboration with, the organization? – yet the autogenic equivocations he offers do not satisfy her. Requesting Carlos's opinion on "la línea que lleva la organización esta última temporada," Jone is nonetheless deeply offended when he labels it absurd:

"Entonces, ¿por qué nos escondiste? ¿Viste mi foto en el periódico y quisiste contactar conmigo? ¿Fue por eso?"
Carlos tuvo la impresión de que, realmente, le hablaba desde el fondo de un túnel. "No nos enfademos," dijo hablando con autoridad. "Ahora os escondo, de acuerdo, porque cuando me lo pidieron me pareció que debía hacerlo. Pero no es una decisión que valga para siempre. Quizá la próxima vez no acepte la propuesta. Tenéis que convenceros de eso. Yo no pertenezco a la organización. Lo siento, pero es así." (Atxaga 51-52)

With the threat of future perfidy, this conversation reveals that Carlos's most portentous political and criminal action since his release from prison – at least, since the bank robberies and money laundering he had committed with the other ex-militants to open the hotel – has not been encouraged by any real ideological zeal for ETA. As the reader discovers through his narrative, it was shame of his petit bourgeois lifestyle that encouraged his decision to shelter the militants.

In a conversation with another ex-militant/hotel employee, Mikel, Carlos voices his fear of having become utterly middle-class, realizing that "[q]uizás se debía a aquel sentimiento que Mikel había acertado a expresar, 'yo siento vergüenza, Carlos, me parece que me he aburguesado mientras los otros siguen en la lucha, y eso me acompleja.' Era verdad también él pudiera percibir aquel sentimiento en su interior" (Atxaga 386). Ironically for Carlos, his fear of others' perception of him as petit bourgeois had already come to pass long before this conversation with Mikel, given that the protagonist had participated in civilian life via the hotel business since 1977. It is fear of scorn, then, that motivates him to hide the active militants more than any burning desire to promote an independent Basque state.

Carlos's further reflections continue to call attention to the distance between himself in 1982 and his militant past self: "[l]e preocupaba mucho lo que de él pudieran pensar Jone y los demás de la organización[.] No quería que le tomara por un flojo. Y quizá ahí residía la clave, en la servidumbre que aquella preocupación ponía de manifiesto, ya que haber sido indiferente aquellas opiniones jamás habría entrado en el juego" (Atxaga 386). These two factors – the shame of self-gentrification and of perceived weakness – convinced Carlos to hide the fugitives. In the bakery, listening to the young militant as if from the end of a long tunnel, Carlos and Jone are separated by the vast metaphorical distance of belief and identity, and his rupture with his past militant self becomes clear. But if Carlos is not the militant ideologue he used to be, who is he?

The protagonist has not the faintest clue, catalyzing his crisis of identity. The struggle of the protagonist of "Atxaga's novel is that of the lone man

consumed by his indecision, which vacillates between disillusion and nostalgia, between guilt for the horror of his past and for his present inactivity" (Ballesteros 304). The disintegration of the political principles that Carlos once held dear, rendered crystal clear in the previous discussion with Jone, becomes a leading theme throughout the rest of the novel as Carlos's lack of separatist and nationalist convictions intensifies his indeterminate identity. By his own admission, almost half of Carlos's forty years have been spent as a militant in ETA or in jail for crimes committed at its behest (Atxaga 48). Yet he feels he has little to show for his toil on behalf of an independent Basque state[6]:

> Cuando repasaba su trayectoria vital ... le parecía que lo único que podía salvarse eran los cinco años que llevaba en el hotel trabajando por puro capricho y sin otra finalidad que la de hacer un pan de calidad… "Maravilloso," le decía entonces la Rata. "Casi cuarenta años luchando en este mundo y luego resulta que el fruto de tanto esfuerzo es el pan que un pequeño burgués usa para rebañar la salsa de tomate que le queda en el plato." (Atxaga 49)

Carlos is in a state of crisis. His past militancy has achieved little (other than the murder of a supposed ideological enemy), and his present role as the hotel baker has only solidified the unwanted identity as petit bourgeois. Carlos does not belong in armed nor civil circles, and he only has a symbolic loaf of bread to show for decades of inner toil and political turmoil. Isolated, the lone man's narrative is one that reflects the broader trajectory of this figure in the eighties, when

> [t]he *etarra* has stopped being the effective vehicle of opposition to the national State and, with the exception of the Basque radical nationalism which demands independence for the Basque Country and has ETA as its armed wing, has lost the sympathy and identification of citizens and political parties that it enjoyed during Francoism and the first years of the political transition … The *etarra*'s marginality must thus be understood as a reflection of the loss of acceptance in the Basque and Spanish societies. (Ballesteros 301)

Vocalizing this communal distaste cited by Ballesteros, Carlos openly and repeatedly decries the actions of ETA from where it has left him: on the margins in exile. Yet he does this while simultaneously protecting and providing for the outlaws, despite the increasing police presence at the hotel and the growing suspicion and hostility of his fellow ex-militant and hotel owner, Ugarte. Carlos knows he is not the militant he once was, yet his

complex relationship with his past self prevents him from embracing his present identity.

Thus, Carlos is trapped by his own "ambivalence and ideological (in)definition," which intensify within the hotel's walls, creating within them a heterotopia of perpetual crisis (Ballesteros 291). The hotel is an "elsewhere," rather than a singular, identifiable space. It is the site upon which converge the intense ideological and ontological doubts of the protagonist and the site from which he broadcasts his hopes for the future outwards towards Barcelona. Carlos recognizes that leaving this heterotopia of crisis is the only way to form a cohesive identity:

> [a]lquilaría un apartamento en el centro de Barcelona…Y una vez en Barcelona, por qué no, recuperaría su verdadero nombre, y al fin abandonaría el seudónimo de Carlos... además debía emprender el nuevo modo de vida cuanto antes, cuánto se resolviera el problema del Jon y Jone. (Atxaga 113)

Yet Carlos dies without fully escaping from the bonds of the heterotopia of crisis as his identity collapses under the weight of self-negation (Atxaga 397). Carlos is no militant, but neither is he a baker nor a businessman.

Upon his violent death in an ambush by the Antiterrorist Brigade on the fifth and last day narrated in the novel, Carlos's crisis crystallizes. The protagonist is "[c]ondemned to living in a place that is a nonplace… a man exiled from his country and his people, a man whose identity has been denied … and who is in a perpetual state of melancholy" (Olaziregi, *Hedgehog* 224). That his death is deeply ironic is no surprise, given that Carlos had been unable to create an identity that neither admitted nor contradicted such political ideologies. As such, the Polish football team's Spanish translator, Danuta, whom he had befriended, gave Carlos up to the police for the large financial reward, despite having persistently fashioned herself as an anti-materialist socialist revolutionary.[7] Within the heterotopic hotel of crisis, Carlos dies when the weight of the many incongruous identities and ideologies inside him – baker, businessman, militant, socialist, separatist, pacifist – collapse upon him. Unable to escape the heterotopia of crisis, it becomes a black hole, subsuming both the protagonist and his inherently unreconcilable identities into a nothingness in which all converge.

Like *El hombre solo, Esos cielos* opens with a protagonist in the throes of an identity crisis, evinced by her meandering bacchanal through Barcelona upon her release from prison. Her willing participation in the Social Reinsertion Plan has freed Irene, but doing so has robbed her of the only home she has known for four years, leaving her "deambulando" endlessly through the city (Atxaga 7). The only immobile refuge she visits – albeit

briefly – is an unnamed, cheap hotel, a characteristic heterotopia of crisis. Olaziregi has previously argued that the hotel site in *Esos cielos* is a heterotopia of crisis, given that it is in this space that Irene recovers the sexual identity long denied to her in prison (*Hedgehog* 235-38). However, I do not limit Irene's crisis in the hotel to just the failed recovery of her sexuality. Her stay in the hotel, coupled with the violent encounter that occurs there, is the impetus for a much larger systemic collapse of the protagonist's identities.

The disintegration of the self continues to torment Irene through the rest of the novel, as she seeks to remedy her displacement by taking stock of her troubled reality; eventually, she decides to return home to Bilbao. The letter Irene writes to her friend Andoni immediately after her hotel experience makes clear the depth of her internal confusion, one explicitly triggered by her night in this heterotopia of crisis: "era evidente que la carta materializaba un estado de ánimo muy concreto, el de aquella mañana, el que había seguido a la desagradable experiencia sexual con el hombre que la había abordado en un bar" (Atxaga 27). Irene's letter can be understood as an epistolary testament to her experiences of exile, both in the heterotopia of deviation (the prison) immediately afterwards in the heterotopia of crisis (the hotel).

In Irene's case, given that "[t]he experience of being in exile affected both the content and style of exiled writers," particularly in the case of the "complexities and ambiguities of identity," the letter demonstrates the protagonist's struggle to mediate critical issues of identity raised through writing (Throndset 52). In this sense, the letter can be understood as a discursive tool by which Irene, freed from imprisonment but still exiled from her homeland, may actively fashion a new self, one whose identity no longer hinges on her active participation in ETA. Thus, the letter's caustic attack on Andoni for disowning her, after her disavowal of ETA and her subsequent pardon, functions as a symbol of the deep emotional turmoil Irene experiences as she confronts the challenge of creating a new identity separate from her past, one that will be only complicated by her experiences in heterotopical spaces. In this sense, Irene's caustic reflection on Andoni's limited commitment both to their friendship and to ETA, which he professes to love (but, Irene implies, for which he has never suffered any real consequences), provokes an explicit disavowal of the former relationship and thus a metonymic rejection of the organization. With both comes an opportunity, if painful, for Irene to develop a new identity separate from the moorings of her past self.

Indeed, it is her break with ETA that has most shaken Irene's core sense of self. This is easily understood as her epistle deftly transforms Andoni into a culpable, physical metonym of ETA, guilty on both a personal and global level for treating her as a traitor of her own kind:

> Tú tenías que haberme dicho, sí, sal de la cárcel, no importa si los demás te acusan de traición … Pero no fue eso lo que hiciste. Hiciste lo contrario…yo te responderé que sí, necesitas un saco para echar en él todas tus penas y tus malas noticias, pero a partir de ahora no voy a ser yo ese saco, ya puedes ir buscándote otro. (Atxaga 26)

Reading Andoni as a metonymic symbol of ETA provides insight into the depth of Irene's ontological conflict with the group. Her past role as a militant has both landed her in prison and branded her a traitor when she sought her freedom. Thus, her core identity is no longer valid; it cannot provide her with any refuge from the enemies that actively antagonize her person and her mind on her journey west. As this letter demonstrates, Irene's adversaries are not limited to ETA's traditional foil (the police), but now include ETA itself, whose policy of brutally murdering those who left the organization became (in)famous after the public assassination of ex-militant leader María Dolores González Katarain, alias Yoyes, in 1986.

Given that immediately after *Esos cielos'* publication, Atxaga repeatedly spoke out against what he considered "the excessive romanticization of politics, which, in his opinion, tainted the attitudes of nationalist politicians in the Basque Country," it is not difficult to connect Irene's furious treatment of Andoni to a greater criticism of ETA's tendency to glorify its violent ideologies in spite of their cost to its many victims and their families (Olaziregi, *Hedgehog* 233). Once again, the novel attests to the grim outcome of those who fall prey to the romantic call of the radical Basque nationalist cause. As Carlos laments in *El hombre solo*, "la organización … no ofrecía más que la cárcel, el cementerio o el desprecio de gran parte de la sociedad" (Atxaga 47). In the case of *Esos cielos*, a fourth option exists as well: the eternal displacement of one who, branded as a traitor by her own people, has "lost her illusions and who returns, alone and as a failure, to reclaim her place in a story that remains to be completed" (Kortazar 55).

That the hotel sparks an intense self-examination by Irene is evident through her letter to Andoni. In this manner, the heterotopia of crisis has exacerbated the incoherence of the protagonist's identity. Throughout her letter to Andoni, she self-fashions, in Stephen Greenblatt's term, by way of negation. Her satire of Andoni as a "militante serio," and the ideological deception it reveals, disallows any continued association with ETA. Buying a pack of cigarettes in the station before her journey, she reflects on her adolescent self:

> Llevaba varios años sin poder fumar regularmente aquella marca, Lark, la que durante su adolescencia había elegido casi como un emblema de su forma de ser. Ella había sido "la chica que fumaba Lark," y ahora, después de pasar cuatro años en una celda de la cárcel de Barcelona, tenía la posibilidad de volver a hacerlo. (Atxaga 14)

Yet the optimism trigged by this brand nostalgia is limited when, only a few moments later, Irene puts out her cigarette and suffers from a painful realization. Despite securing an early release, no friend or family member has come to fetch her from prison. Irene bitterly concludes that "muchos de ellos la despreciarían por desentenderse de la organización y actuar como una arrepentida, pero le resultaba duro aceptar que aquella actitud fuera la de todos, la de todos sus amigos de antes sin excepción" (Atxaga 29). Irene is no longer a militant, as her criticism of Andoni has made clear. However, her family and friends' absence from her moment of triumphant release demonstrates that her decision to pursue freedom over loyalty to ETA has irrevocably altered her intimate relationships, taking with it the secure sense of self that she would gain from them.

Irene cannot recuperate the past identity of the young woman who smoked Lark, despite obtaining the longed-for cigarettes. Nor can she recover the self who loved and lost in past romantic relationships with an ex-husband and another young militant through her frightening one-night stand with the unknown man.[8] She concludes her epistle to Andoni sardonically referencing the unsuccessful encounter: "[m]e he acostado con un hombre que no conocía de nada. Y, la verdad, ha sido humillante. Me ha tratado como a una puta, y encima le he resultado más barata que cualquier puta, porque yo he pagado casi todas las cervezas" (Atxaga 27). That this aborted attempt at establishing a sexual connection with a stranger has resulted in disaster is no surprise; it is just one facet in a crisis of identity of profound proportions. As Perret explains, "[e]n definitiva, toda su identidad se reduce a lo que no es: ya no es terrorista, ya no es prisionera, ya no está dispuesta a ayudar a la policía ni a 'la organización'" (135). Catalyzed by her night in a heterotopia of crisis, Irene cannot recover any remaining vestiges of herself to present a unified identity to others and thus continues to fragment during her journey to Bilbao. Like Carlos, she is entirely devoured by a vacuum set into motion by her stay at the hotel heterotopia of crisis.

As a narrative space, the hotel catalyzes the inner turmoil of those present. Engaging it thus through a heterotopic lens demonstrates its persistent role in Atxaga's novels as an impetus for characters' fundamental existential doubts. Specifically, in *El hombre solo*, the hotel is the locus for

the negotiation and eventual collapse of Carlos's competing selves. Within its apartments, its bakery, its hallways, the protagonist attempts to delineate his past identity as a militant from that of the paradoxical present, in which he openly derides ETA while simultaneously providing refuge to two militants whose most recent act of violence appalls him. Yet in his attempt to save Jon and Jone, he sacrifices himself and, in an accident laced with dark irony, the life of a child – Pascal, the five-year-old son of his hotel companions. Its repercussions unknown (the novel ends with Carlos's death), the protagonist's final act should be understood alongside his ambiguous death as the coda of crisis of a character whose true identity is so lost to him that the novel never even reveals his real name.

Esos cielos likewise pits its protagonist against the unforgiving displacement of a country and society in transition, one in which she fundamentally no longer belongs. Her sojourn in the cheap Barcelona hotel marks Irene's first attempt to recuperate past iterations of the self. Yet like Carlos, the destabilizing effects of exile from the Basque Country, combined with the aftereffects of many years spent in a heterotopia of deviation, mean that the protagonist enters the hotel as one would a crucible, to be remade under extreme conditions within. Irene runs the risk, however, of completely melting away, of being incinerated to nothing under the sheer force of her competing identities from which she cannot fashion a cohesive self. Although Atxaga later provides a conclusion to Irene's journey in the posterior short story "Declaración de Dorotea," the author notes that her story, like Carlos's, was meant to end in crisis:

> Cuando terminé de escribir *Esos cielos* tenía la certeza de que no podía haber otro punto final. La novela debía acabar con la llegada ya del autobús, porque su territorio era la autopista, una tierra de nadie situada entre la cárcel y la sociedad. Se trataba de la historia de una mujer que, literalmente, no tenía a dónde ir. (151)

Esos cielos is in this manner understood as the portrait of a character in turmoil who, given her ontological equivocality, cannot claim repatriation to any homeland other than the utopias she imagines in her dreams.

It is worth noting that the crisis of identity experienced in both novels is first and foremost masculinist. While neither character escapes the disruption of their identity begun in the hotel space, Carlos dies as a martyr to the Basque nationalist militant ideal, which casts its fighters as male, while Irene, whose femininity has been nullified by her militancy and subsequent imprisonment, evades both the sanctification of her counterpart as well as the liberation of a free woman. Instead, she is forced to seek out yet another heterotopia of crisis in a convent – a space that, like the prison from whence she came, simultaneously combines a controlled

system of entrance and exit with the demand for the individual within to submit to rites of purification, in this case religious. With Irene's journey between diverse heterotopic spaces leading to her final enclosure within one, Atxaga offers a sharp criticism of the ontological demands placed on the revolutionary subject, who must surrender the entirety of their selfhood to a cause. Carlos surrenders his life in the same way that Irene surrenders her freedom, and Atxaga asks: for what?

Coupled with the fragmentation and collapse of these characters, the negative outcomes of Carlos and Irene serve Atxaga in his censure of the mythologization of radical Basque nationalist militancy. His characters' failure to escape the existential pressures of conflicting past and present identities and ideologies reflects the gaping chasm between ETA and the public it professed to liberate through violent acts of terrorism. Both *El hombre solo* and *Esos cielos* should be understood as critical testimonies addressing the crisis of Basque identity in the region's post-Transition turmoil. As realist texts, these novels directly link the devastating effects of radical separatist ideology to the individuals it harms, demonstrating its profound effects on the Basque self. Atxaga explicitly describes how this danger creates "el que solo tiene ideología y va por la vida con las puertas y ventanas cerradas" ("Tensión" 38). This threat is writ large in the characters of Carlos and Irene, who find themselves trapped in heterotopias of crisis from which there is no escape other than displacement and death.

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NOTES

1 For simplicity's sake, I refer to these novels by their Spanish titles throughout the analysis, unless otherwise noted.

2 Likely the Centre Penitenciari de dones de Barcelona. Inaugurated in 1983, this prison is located in the neighborhood of La Vila Olímpica del Poblenou at the eastern limit of the city. From there, Irene would have been easily able to travel on foot to the bars, hotel, and station she visits in the novel. In fact, the Estació del Nord is only a twenty-minute walk from the Centre Penitenciari.

3 ETA militant Dolores González Catarain, better known as Yoyes, rose through its ranks to become its first high-ranking female militant, only to be murdered by the organization in 1986 after accusations of betrayal surfaced. The murder was meant to punish Katarain for being a "traitor," that is, for abandoning the organization.

4 Writing in 1990, Lasagabaster notes, "The Basque novel has not gone through the experience of fictionalized realism, since it has necessarily had to go from prerealism (or strongly regionalist literature which some of today's scholars define as essentially "anti-novel") to the most modern and avant-garde forms. In thirty short years the Basque narrative has had to traverse a path that was so complicated that it could not avoid being affected by the process. Perhaps it is like a child who grows prematurely and, having grown tall before his time, still cannot hide certain … inadequacies. The Basque narrative is experiencing a growth crisis, which is the basis for explaining its many virtues and undeniable limitations" (19).

5 To this point, Olaziregi writes that in *Esos cielos*, "the events take place in the two days following her [Irene's] release from jail. In this sense, Atxaga's use of the spaces in the novel is extremely important" (*Hedgehog* 234).

6 This is, of course, an understatement. Carlos has killed at least one person on ETA's orders, a businessman deemed enemy of the organization for unspecified reasons. Yet despite memories of this event haunting his thoughts, he does not list it as one of particular importance when reviewing his life so far in 1982.

7 The only consistent belief that Carlos expressed throughout the novel was, in the end, the one that killed him. As Carlos informs Danuta, "[e]l socialismo, o cualquier otro movimiento revolucionario, no hace nada si sólo responde a lo verdaderamente importante. Tiene que dar respuesta también a las cosas que no son importantes, a los caprichos y demás. Si no, está perdido, no puede sobrevivir" (Atxaga 284). Danuta's *caprichos*, her whimsical desire for real emerald earrings, leads her to give Carlos up to the police, and thus to his ambiguous death that, depending on its reading, is either suicide or murder.

8 It is worth noting that two important secondary characters in *El hombre solo* and *Esos cielos* bear the names of famous scions of Basque literature and language: Sabino, in the former, after Sabino Arana, the nineteenth-century father of Basque nationalism; Larrea, in the latter, after Juan Larrea, the twentieth-century poet born in Bilbao. Although these could be coincidences, given Atxaga's demonstrated tendency towards intertext, especially in *Esos cielos*, I conclude these are most likely references to these personages.

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