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# “WE ARE ALL MALCOLM X!”: NEGU GORRIAK, HIP HOP, AND THE BASQUE POLITICAL IMAGINARY

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POLITICAL IMAGINARY

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## “WE ARE ALL MALCOLM X!” NEGU GORRIAK, HIP HOP, AND THE BASQUE POLITICAL IMAGINARY

If you want to draw lines and mark yourself off, you have to be willing to reconnect; if you want to celebrate borders, you have to learn how to build bridges and know about the alternatives.

Juan Flores (1994)

For Basques, and for many other diasporic, indigenous and minority groups, music has been an important terrain of cultural politics. In many different contexts across the globe, music is “a weapon in battles to create a cultural basis for new nations, to transform alliances and identities within already existing states, and to unmask the power imbalances that give regions, languages, and ethnic groups very different relations to the state they supposedly all share” (Lipsitz 1994:151). In the Basque Country, musicians of various genres, from folk to heavy metal, have played dual roles as activists in the ongoing struggles for autonomy and basic cultural rights. While a full exploration of this rich history remains to be written, for our purposes here I will be focusing on the musical vision, lyrics, and style of one particular band, Negu Gorriak. One of the most popular bands of the early nineties, Negu Gorriak has always been clear about its strong affinity with Basque nationalism and Basque language revival – which it supported by singing exclusively in Basque. Disbanded in 1996, one of the distinctive features of this fiercely anti-state, anti-capitalist group was the way they drew upon the visual codes and musical forms of “nation conscious rappers” in African American hip hop, as well as punk, ska, reggae, and rai music. In seeking to cultivate political awareness and cultural pride, Negu Gorriak used these resources to fashion a new image of a militant Basque nation that was simultaneously transcultural, hybrid, and media-driven.

What Negu Gorriak accomplished takes on added importance because they not unique. Many politicized white groups like Negu, are tapping into the global attraction of youth for the sounds and signs of hybridized African American and diasporic music. Some are more hardcore and politically confrontational like Negu Gorriak; while other “ethnorap” groups like “Les Fabulous Trobadors” from Toulouse are more playful.<sup>1</sup> We are clearly faced with a practice that is quite extensive. How do we understand these kinds of formations? More specifically, what politics are at stake in these hybrid forms of minority cultural expression? To date, the most common framework has been that of cultural imperialism. Such theories often represent linguistic or cultural minorities as victims of a relentless and inescapable process of cultural homogenization promoted by the international marketing of mass produced popular music.<sup>2</sup> It is important not to underestimate the power of the industry; minority language musicians talk about it and the pressure to reproduce Anglophone musical formulas all the time. While there is no doubt that a small number of multinationals exercise a great deal of control over the cultural pleasures and tastes available to us in mainstream culture,<sup>3</sup> this chapter sides with a growing body of work in cultural studies that argues for a more paradoxical and complicated state of affairs. At the same time that mass mediated images and aesthetic or musical forms may be contributing to uniformization, they are also affording an array of semiotic resources to be appropriated and reworked into a new synthetic or creolized cultural forms. Rather than assume cultural difference or identity to be a pre-existing entity that is eroded or defended in response to foreign dominated media, I want to suggest that we might more fruitfully look to the alternative music scene as an arena where political imaginaries are tentatively forged – sites where differences and affinities are produced, and power relations illuminated, in and through various mechanisms of what Néstor García Canclini (1995) calls cultural reconversion. Far from being an example of how Basques “losing” their tradition, I want to argue

that Negu Gorriak is an example of how young people are engaged in a dynamic conversation about tradition, exploring and defining for themselves what it means to be Basque in the present. And I want to specifically look at how inter-cultural borrowing affords the radicalized youth of post-industrial Basque cities a means of rearticulating the project of Basque national liberation in synch with other progressive social movements and international struggles for social change.

Global flows of people, media, music, have made processes of cross-cultural borrowing -- hybridity if you will -- a salient issue for theorists who want to understand their complex and often contradictory cultural and political significance. If cultural theorists' love affair with hybridity and transnationalism has taught us anything, it is that meanings do not reside solely in operations of the signs themselves. Rather, they are generated in the interactions that local actors, located in specific historical, social, and political circumstances, have with translocal and mass marketed commodities, images, and processes. Hip hop is a good example. Rap travels, not only among youth of the African diaspora, but beyond as well. And as it travels, it is picked up by youth of many different social strata -- including ethnic minority Basques, war-torn Croatians, north African immigrants in France -- people who may share no historical relationship with blacks, but who find in hip hop a language, a set of resources, and knowledge with which to articulate similar but not identical struggles and concerns. At the same time, as hip hop travels the global circuit and gets incorporated into distinct musical forms and contexts, it too is transformed. "Hip hop" does not sound the same or mean the same thing in the Basque Country, Paris, white suburban United States, or Puerto Rico. Understanding how the mass mediated sounds, images, and signs of hip hop acquire the social and political messages that they do for Basque youth requires contextualization. It requires looking at the social struggles, the ethnic tensions, the texture of social life, class and gender interests that musicians and their audiences bring to the music. Secondly, we want to understand how these local

circumstances place constraints on fusion. Post colonial and minority theorists have argued with clarity that culture is not a grab-bag for everyone. As the case of Negu Gorriak will show, appropriations and border crossings are always inflected by histories of power that shape when cultural, ethnic, or linguistic boundaries get asserted, when they get transgressed, and when they get misunderstood.<sup>4</sup>

## ROK RADIKAL EUSKALDUN

When Negu Gorriak emerged in the late eighties, they were building upon two and a half decades of an active popular music movement that began with the singer-songwriter movement of the sixties and seventies and was followed by the musical phenomenon that came to be known as Basque Radical Rock (Rok Radikal). The band takes inspiration from both of these movements. Negu Gorriak's name (The Crude Winters) is taken from a song by Mikel Laboa, one of the most innovative figures of the New Song movement, and shares in Laboa's penchant for experimenting with musical style as well as his commitment to the Basque language.<sup>5</sup> Musically, the band is clearly related to the combative punk rock bands that preceded them – in particular Hertzainak, Baldin Bada, and Kortatu. Two of the band members, the Muguruza brothers, had played in Kortatu while guitarist Kaki Arkarazo had played in the eclectic, but short-lived band M-AK prior to forming Negu Gorriak. With the exception of the bass guitar player, Mikel Cazalis, a.k.a. Anestesia, who wears the long hair of a thrasher, the rest of the band members have the close-shaved hair, bombers jackers, jeans, and army-style boots associated with punks. And, like radical rockers before them, their songs would address many of the social problems facing their generation – problems of unemployment, drugs, alienation. But they differ

from a large segment of the punk rock scene in that their politics are not nihilistic nor anti-social (Lahusen 1993). Rather than opting out of participation in civil society, theirs is a call for activism, militancy, AND Basque cultural pride. Indeed, to call them "punk" as some authors do, is problematic at best. For while Negu would continue to reflect the musical influence of punk, thrash, and hard rock music in their work, in their political rhetoric and iconography they shifted the frame of reference, aligning themselves more with "nation-conscious rappers" like Public Enemy, Ice-T, and the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy.<sup>6</sup>

This was emphatically announced in their debut album, Negu Gorriak, released in 1989. The influence of Public Enemy, at the height of its popularity in 1987-1990, was everywhere on the album, as was also Spike Lee's film about race conflict in New York City, Do the Right Thing. As Fermin explained, "we had been listening to a whole lot of music, especially linked to the rap explosion. We were shocked by Public Enemy, by the force that the rap movement had, its power to criticize in the same way we had been by the punk movement in 77" (quoted in Ross 1993). In militant rap and its denouncement of North American race relations, these young Basque radicals found a new and potent language of protest. In a society deeply divided over the question of armed struggle, young militants found meaning and lessons in the African American community's debate over Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. If any of their songs could be called the anthem of the group, it would be "Esan Ozenki" their adaptation of James Brown's funky declaration of cultural pride: Say it loud: I'm Basque and I'm proud [*Esan ozenki: euskalduna naiz eta harro nago*]

Negu Gorriak was not only saying it loud, they were saying it in Basque. Negu Gorriak is one of a handful of bands of the Rok Radikal Basko movement to extend its nation conscious radicalism to language. Although most of the radical bands gave themselves Basque names -- Zarama, Eskorbuto, Kortatu, Kontuz – and would include some identifiably Basque words in their

album packaging, and possibly even include an occasional song in Basque, few actually sang much in Basque (for an exception, see Espinosa and López 1993 on Hertzainak, one of the earliest euskaldun punk bands). Token use of Basque is very common throughout alternative youth culture. Sprinkling in a few Basque words, talking about the txakurak (dogs, police), going to the gaztetxe (youth house), or using Basque spelling conventions in Castilian words (e.g. k for c, or tx, for ch) in barrikada, or la martxa, functions as a badge of oppositionality, allowing speakers to speak Castilian while distancing themselves from its associations with the language of the state (Urla 1997). When Negu Gorriak appeared singing only in Basque, it made a huge impact. In part, this was because two of the band members, Fermin and Inigo Muguruza, had up until then been singing primarily in Spanish in the band Kortatu. The Muguruza brothers' language background was not unlike that of many Basques living in the predominantly Castilian speaking cities of the industrial north. Basque (Euskera) was spoken by their grandparents, but they grew up erdaldunak (Spanish speaking) and had to learn Basque by attending a community euskaltegi (adult Basque language school). The group's decision to dissolve Kortatu at the height of its popularity, and to reemerge as euskaldun berriak, the term for new Basque speakers, was a deliberate political choice aimed at bringing together language militancy and nationalist pride with the oppositional cultural of radical rock and rap. This was visually literalized in the way they printed the lyrics to their songs of their first album. The words to "Radio Rahim" (a reference to a character in Do the Right Thing) and "Esan Ozenki" (Say it Loud), were superimposed on a facsimile of a newspaper carrying a review of Public Enemy's It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back, by Xabier Montoia, a well-known Basque musician and poet from the band, M-AK. Also in the background were: a review of Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing, two articles on black/white relations in the U.S., and two articles reporting on Basque/Spanish language politics. The parallels were intentional and the effect on the youth



music scene was explosive. Fermin, the charismatic spokesman for the band explained their decision to the press as a question of principle: how could they continue to hold themselves up as abertzales, Basque patriots, and not use the language of the Nation?

In the first chapter to Black Skins, White Masks, entitled “The Negro and Language”, Frantz Fanon writes that every colonized subject must face the problem of language: “Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation” (Fanon 1967:18). Indeed, it was precisely Fanon’s goal in this path breaking book on colonialism to describe how this sense of inferiority becomes attached to and expressed in everyday uses and attitudes towards language. To the degree that the colonized subject comes to perceive the language of the colonizer as more civilized, beautiful, sophisticated or elegant than her own, she is on the path towards the profound alienation and sense of lack which, for Fanon, were defining features of a colonized psyche.

Negu Gorriak’s analysis of Basque language politics follows in a very similar vein. By singing exclusively in Basque, they were throwing down the gauntlet, challenging self-identified radicals to take language domination seriously and to view it as an integral part of the struggle for Basque cultural pride and independence. In virtually every interview, they get asked about this choice. What will it [Basque] mean for their distribution possibilities? How will singing in Basque affect their ability to tour or reach broader audiences? In their interviews and in their praxis, band members challenge the assumption that Basque is an obstacle to communication. “For me,” says Anesthesia, the bass guitar player, “Euskera is a symbol of identity. I like that we can carry Euskera from place to place via our music. When we did our tour in Italy, Switzerland, France, and Norway, we flipped out at finding that people knew the words to our songs”. As other band members point

out, people are used to hearing music in languages they don't understand, why should Basque be any different?

Nevertheless, from its formation, Negu Gorriak understood that its music would probably not be marketable through any of the normal commercial recording houses. Nor did they want it to be. From its beginnings, the band has had a keen sense of the importance of financial autonomy for maintaining their political vision. They have opted for the D.I.Y. (Do it yourself) movement growing among other alternative bands. As Fermin Muguruza explained to a British journalist:

In the end, we record our records ourselves, release them ourselves and decide how to promote them, and we decide when we go on tour. We are the masters of our own labour. And instead of buying shares in the arms industry or in petrochemicals, as most multinational corporations do, we invest the small profit we make in our record company, Esan Ozenki, to support other bands singing in the Basque language. In order to see how different we are from the dinosaurs of rock, you have to see us play live. Nothing we've done has ever appeared on MTV. I can't imagine why (Bousfield 1994).

In organizing their own tours through Europe, Latin America, the U.S., Quebec, Japan, and Cuba, Negu Gorriak cultivates an audience in self-governing alternative communities, free radios, squatter's buildings, and at political rallies. In San Francisco, they played at the Basque Community House, while in Washington D.C. they played at a benefit concert with Fugazi and British group Chumbawamba and stayed with Positive Force, a non-profit collective helping inner city youth. They give interviews to alternative magazines, music zines (*Maximum Rock and Roll*), and local radio stations. They tend to tour and play with bands that share their political vision-- Banda Bassotti from Italy, Mano Negra (now Radio Bemba) from Paris, Urban Dance Squad from

Amsterdam, and Wemean, a women's rock band from Switzerland. They have also played with the Occitan band, Massilia Sound System, and Anhreïn, the Welsh language political rock band. Esan Ozenki has also helped to create a new label, Gora Herriak, to distribute the work of alternative international bands like Wemean within the Basque Country.

In keeping with their understanding of music as a tool of consciousness raising and counter-information, Negu has come up with an interesting strategy for turning music consumption into political organizing. They do this by encouraging fans to form themselves into "brigades" rather than fan clubs. Brigades have formed in Irun, Madrid, Valladolid, Galicia, Paris, Rome. The largest of them, Catalan nationalists in Barcelona, raises money selling tee shirts and buttons with Negu logos, and they produce a zine that carries interviews with the band members, newspaper reports from various parts of the world about their tours, articles about language politics, and comics. Unlike the notion of fans as a passive consumers of a pre-packaged image, brigade members are encouraged to take part in analyzing, extending, and carrying forth the task of radical social critique, to not be passive consumers, but, to use one of their slogans, "get out of the ghetto, organize your hate!" Negu Gorriak's praxis, then, is more like a free radio than a music band. As conceptualized by anarcho-theorists like Felix Guattari, the idea of the free radio was that of a creating a communal space of discourse that would turn consumers into producers of counter-information capable of creating sodalities that cross-cut boundaries of state, race, and nation (Urla 1997).

IDEIA ZABALUDU/ SPREAD THE WORD

Negu Gorriak is decidedly nationalist and very pro-Basque language revival. But the kind of nationalism supported by the group is one based on anti-imperialism, class consciousness, and solidarity with other national liberation struggles. Through the lyrics, music, and visual imagery deployed by these young musicians the Basque struggle for self determination and language revival is placed into a broader dialogue with other social movements within and beyond the Basque territory. Their songs address a wide ranging set of issues, from police repression and the torture of political prisoners, to the alienation of life under the rule of time clocks, mortgages, and consumerism. Their song, "Stop Hipokrisy", for example, speaks to the persecution of communists and homosexuals. Franco, the Church, and the Spanish state are clearly some of their targets. But the band makes clear that it is Spain, the state, not the Spanish people that are their enemies. And their tours reveal that they have sympathizers despite the deluge of anti-Basque press (see Bousfield 1994).

Their critiques brought them trouble as well as fame. Taking on corruption in the Spanish Civil Guard as they did in one of their earliest songs, Ustelkeria, (Rottenness) landed the group a lawsuit and a large fine of 15 million pesetas (approx \$125,000) for defamation of character of the Lieutenant Colonel (now General) named in the song. Prohibited from singing the song in public, the band fought back with a new CD by the same title and a mega-concert in October 1995 entitled "Hitz Egin!" (Speak) to raise money for the fine and legal costs they expected to incur as they took their appeal to higher courts. Their efforts have met with a large popular outpouring of support from Basque and non-Basque writers, intellectuals, journalists, and musicians against this infringement of freedom of speech.<sup>7</sup>

Like African American rappers, Negu urges their audience to not believe the hype. Like many Basque radicals, they have a deep suspicion of what comes to pass as official knowledge.

Radicals sympathetic to the goals of ETA have found themselves maligned in the press and victims of a state sponsored “Dirty War” that for years was officially denied. Songs like, "What History has Taught Us" from their first album speak to this history of distortion and call upon Basques to remember that History is always written by the victors. As the song tells us, to "fight the power", History must be unlearned and the enemies must be identified. These multiple enemies are described in all of their albums, but especially clearly in their 1993 release, The Executioner Has a Thousand Faces. In place of corrupt official knowledge, Negu Gorriak's songs celebrate popular knowledge and alliances gained through common experiences with oppression. "JFK", written by Fermin, is a song about rejecting Kennedy, who many Basques had looked to as "our American friend". In “JFK”, the "America" that Kennedy represented is cast aside as a media fiction, and new American friends emerge: Angela Davis, Che Guevara, Simon Bolívar, among others.

This strategy of aligning themselves with others is not new. Radical Basque nationalists have a long history of linking themselves to other liberation struggles. ETA political papers from the fifties and sixties frequently drew examples and lessons from the Cuban and Algerian Revolutions. Negu Gorriak continues in this tradition establishing through their lyrics and visual imagery solidarity between the Basque struggle and the contemporary liberation struggles they perceive around them: that of blacks in the U.S. and South Africa, Native Americans, Zapatistas and liberation movements in Central America. The song “Napartheid” from their first album, for example, was written at the time of mass mobilization against apartheid and seizes upon the salience of this issue to draw attention to the provincial borders and language zoning that segment the Basque speaking population. Through a complex layering of metaphors, the Basque towns of Navarre are renamed Soweto and Pretoria, while the white man has become the representative of Spanish nationalism and language domination. In so doing, radical youth offer up a new way of

“seeing” language domination and juridical borders. Expressions of solidarity and identification with blacks appear repeatedly in their subsequent albums, like The Executioner has a Thousand Faces, in songs such as "Living Color" [*Kolor Bizia*], a speak-out against racism, xenophobia, and fascism in which they call out “Let’s not forget that we are Afro-Basques and that we will defend out sisters and brothers: Ali, Mohamed, Kepa, Ismael and all the tribes of Zimbabwe. We will attack the misery”.

Lahusen (1993) has argued that the achievement of punk-inspired Basque radical rock was to semiotically create a syllogism between the oppositions punk:society and Basque:Spain. Negu Gorriak as euskaldun radicals has added to this equation not only Euskera:Erdera [Basque:Non-Basque] but also, to some extent, a fourth pairing, non-white:white. Blackness, which most often stands in as the signifier of the non-white, works here as a key symbol of the militant. In other instances, we find the Native American in battle, as an equivalent signifier of militancy. In both cases, Blackness and Aboriginality function as signs of oppositionality, more than race.

In appropriating rap, in calling themselves "Afro-Basques", and becoming, for a moment, the outlaw rapper, Negu Gorriak’s members are not pretending they are black. Nor are they saying, our struggles are identical. Theirs is not claim to a blood tie, or even a common identity. In fact, in some of their songs, like, "We are all Malcolm X" (a collaboration with the Galician group, *Os Resentidos*), they even laugh at the whole idea of "blood" -- the infamous Rh negative factor that presumably differentiates Basques and has made them of such interest to human genome researchers. Like the black youth in Spike Lee's film who cry out, "we are all Malcolm X", Negu Gorriak is engaging in what Lipsitz (1994) has called “strategic anti-essentialism”. They are asserting a claim of identity based on what Ralph Ellison called a shared identity of passions, not biology (quoted in Gilroy 1987:159). Negu Gorriak's performances of a hybrid Basque hip hop may

be better understood not as "americanization" or imitation but as a strategic deployment of signifiers that affords youth a window into their own situation and what it might share with that of racialized minorities.

In borrowing the image or sounds of rap, the group is also "spreading the word" to youth for whom issues of racism, like homophobia, may not seem relevant to their concerns with independence. When two members of the Malcolm X Foundation in the U.S. visited the Basque Country, Jarrai, the radical nationalist youth group that sponsored their visit, asked Negu Gorriak's singer, Fermin, to interview them (with the assistance of a translator) at a local free radio station. In several of their interviews, the group mentions that the touring they do helps them not only spread the message of the Basque struggle abroad, but also helps them to better understand struggles going on in other parts of the world. Through touring, the group built a "spider web" of contacts with small independent producers, concert promoters, and bands who "share a common wavelength, even if we have different musical styles".<sup>8</sup> Are these the signs, asks rock critic Jakue Pascual, of a *Frente Popular Rockero*? Perhaps, says Fermin. The groups communicate, help each other in organizing concerts and in distribution. Negu also makes direct contact with political groups. In 1994, the group went to El Salvador invited by the FLMN where they played under armed protection to appreciative crowds. Keenly aware of how their activities are ignored by mainstream media, the band and its brigades have been engaged in meticulous self-documentation and in so doing, creating a record of their politics and their tours. They regularly produce a zine with press clippings and interviews with foreign journalists that convey a sense of the larger international dialogue they are engaged in and the inter-cultural alliances they form. They also boast about the positive reception they have outside of Euskadi even in the Spanish state despite the fact that their music gets virtually no air play.

Through what they learn, and through the status that Fermin and his group have cultivated among politicized youth, Negu Gorriak brings to Basque youth an understanding of these other struggles and modes of domination taking place beyond their borders or even in their own backyard. In an interview about the band's most recent album, *Ideia Zabaldu*, Fermin explains:

On our tour, Stop Hipokrisi, we spent two months in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, even El Salvador. I started writing in Tijuana, Mexico. It was a few days before the Zapatista uprising began. We've traveled over most of Europe and a good part of America too. We've developed close relations with the Arab community in Europe. The lyrics talk about the Arabs we have in Euskal Herria and the ones we came to know in other parts of Europe. I had a ton of material in my head so I just started writing (Agirre 1995:25).

This influence is reflected in their song, "Salam, Agur" a song dedicated to the Arabic speaking workers who cross by the thousands through the Basque Country en route to jobs throughout Europe, or who are now increasingly settling in Basque towns like Tolosa. Although tension with Gypsies has been long-standing, racial conflict has not been as salient an issue in the Basque country as has been in Barcelona, Paris, Marseilles, or London. Negu Gorriak is probably one of the very few groups to bring questions of racism to the attention of Basque youth. The song begins with Sadia Aitelkho, a young woman from Casablanca the band members met via SOS Racism, a European anti-racist organization. Though Sadia is neither a singer nor a musician, the band was nevertheless very keen on including her on the album. "These last years we have developed close relations with the Algerian community of Tolosa and Paris and we wanted to include the problems of the Arabic-speaking community on the album" (Agirre 1995:24). Echoing the style of "JFK", "Salam, Agur" ends by calling out the names of Arab nations - Morrocans,



Libians, Algerians - saluting them with a bilingual Arabic-Basque greeting (*salam* and *agur*) and bringing them, effectively into the transnational community of friends and comrades Negu draws around itself.

These intercultural alliances are claimed, as we have seen, through the content of the lyrics and through the incorporation of other voices on the album. They are also evoked through a hybrid set of visual and musical codes. Visually, the group borrows, as we have noted, from the iconography of black militancy. This is visible throughout their zines and especially in their identifying symbol the X. If we look closely, the X is formed by two axes. The ax, *aizkora*, was originally a farm tool and is used today in Basque log-chopping competitions. It is also widely associated with ETA whose symbol is an ax encircled by a snake (see Zulaika 1988). Negu Gorriak's X visually unites the symbol of militant Basque nationalism with the X of Malcolm X, about whom they sing and whose ideas of violence as self-defense they find instructive. The cover to their latest album is an equally dense reconfiguration of symbols. We see the figure of a woman holding a *laia*, or two-pronged spade. Like the *aizkora*, the *laia* is traditional tool of Basque farming, here reconfigured into an emblem of resistance. The outline of a woman's body is covered with designs like the *lauburu*, (a symbol of Basque identity that many people wear as a pendant around their neck) the black eagle, and the axe -- all recognizable symbols of Basque nationalism. But these are painted in a design that might recall an African cloth print. The colors are those of the Basque flag (red white and green) with black and yellow, colors from the Black nationalist flag added in. Inside the CD, the design is modeled on the work of artist/AIDS activist Keith Haring. On the back cover of the album is one of Negu's favorite images: a Yanomami man, woman, and young boy, sporting a Negu Gorriak tee-shirt.

Negu's visual borrowings transgress boundaries of the urban and the rural, first world/third world; tradition and modernity to create new hybridized context in which to articulate their concerns and alliances. Rhythmically, the group knows no bounds. They borrow liberally from rap, soul, ska, reggae and ragamuffin without relinquishing their more classic hard rock origins. Overall, they have expanded the musical boundaries of radical rock, and seem willing in their later work to let go of the more aggressive, rough sound to make room for more ballads and melodic tunes. Negu, like many other groups today, refuses categories, preferring to mix rhythms and genres on their albums. Borreroak (1993) was described in one interview in the following way: "its core is still rap, but there is soul, ska, salsa! heavy metal..." In their latest album, hip hop still figures as an important component, but now there is more funk, fandango, and salsa. There are even some Curtis Mayfield-style falsettos from Javier Pez, a house music/acid jazz style performer from the group Parafunk. The group is also known for the way in which they have inserted "traditional" Basque music and instruments, like the button accordion (*trikitixa*) into their songs, and created new mixes by combining Basque improvisational poetry (*bertsolaritza*) with rap into their well-known song, "Bertso Hop." They have toured with Tapia and Leturia, one of the most innovative accordion-tambourine duos, and they have promoted the group Lin Ton Taun, a band that is also creating a new fusion of pop rock and *trikitixa*.

Rebelling, against the constraints of "tradition" that have relegated Basque musicians to the realm of folklore, Negu Gorriak exemplifies what Flores and Yudice (1990) have called "the art of brazen neologism", mixing rhythms and styles at will. The list of acknowledgments on their second album give thanks to musicians as diverse as Juan Mari Beltran, a Basque ethnomusicologist, to De La Soul and Aretha Franklin, clearly attention to the transnational nature of their musical heritage.

While the band sings in Euskera, the album as a whole is a heteroglossic speech community of social movements who speak a common language of social liberation in multiple tongues. We hear this most clearly in the opening to their latest album. Assisted by Mano Chao, a friend and frequent collaborator of the group, Negu begins their first cut, "Hitz Egin" [Speak] with a 30 second "*errefrito*" [stir-fry] called "Hitzaurrea" [Preface], consisting of a collage of voices -- African, Basque, English -- and sounds layered on top of one another. Also on this album we get a short sampling of Spanish language music -- Silvio Rodriguez, a key figure of the Cuban New Song movement. English is everywhere -- in the titles of songs and injected as spoken and written slogans like "Power to the People" or "Do the Right Thing" in their lyrics, zines and in the videos of their tours. The voices of African Americans are also audibly present through sampling of songs like En Vogue's "Free your mind", and other pre-recorded bits of rap, blues, r & b, and soul music. The number and type of collaborators and hence voices on their albums is also expanding. Most notable is the inclusion of female vocalists -- until now markedly absent from the world of Negu Gorriak, as they have been from Basque Radical Rock as a whole. On their latest album, Spread the Word, we find Irantzu Silva, Sorkun "Kashbad", and Sadia Aitelkho, an Algerian singer who sings in Arabic on the cut, "Salam Agur", singing vocals. We also have a fiercely angry critique of sexist men, "Petroengatik"<sup>9</sup>, written by the 20 year old female bertsolari, Estitxu Arozena.

## CONCLUSION

How do we assess the new meanings hip hop acquires as it travels to places like the Basque Country and gets incorporated by musicians in various settings? How do we describe the

recombinant cultural signs that get generated in the hybrid forms of rap we encounter? Are youth “drawing upon”, “resorting to”, “appropriating from”, “assimilating”, parodying”, “distorting” or “subverting” hip hop? Are these eurorappers, as one *New York Times*’ writer suggested, simply poor imitations of a fashion trend?

Perhaps some are. But it seems that the more fruitful questions can only be asked if we stop trying to separate what is authentic from what is not; these are categories that make little sense in the current cultural context, and probably never did in the past either. Cultures in and of themselves are neither authentic nor contaminated; they are meaningful systems that are constantly evolving and contested. “Who is to say,” as guitarist Kaki Arkarazo told me, “what is and is not our musical patrimony? John Mayall or Eric Clapton are as much a part of my musical culture as the trikitixa accordion.” Rather than try to sort out the autochthonous from the borrowed, we need to consider the uses musicians make of hip hop, how they understand its relationship to their own condition, and what new meanings get generated by its use.

It is important to be clear. Negu Gorriak was never trying to be a Basque rap group: their musical influences are much too eclectic and evolving. But they do feel an affinity not just for the music, but also for the social struggle out of which hip hop emerged. “We admire black culture a hell of a lot. And we identify with black nationalism.” But, they go on to say in a 1993 interview, “We [also] like hardcore groups a lot. There’s a spirit in common between what they do and what we do. (...). Anyway, we’re closer to, say, Fugazi, than to any rap group” (Ross 1993).

Negu Gorriak is attracted to a bit of the musical style and some of the imagery of hip hop. But not all forms of hip hop, and not just its style, but the social struggle to which hip hop gives voice. In his study of African American hip hop, Jeffrey Decker (1994) has argued that we might look upon “nation conscious rappers” like Ice T or Chuck D as something akin to what Gramsci

would call an organic intellectual. Straddling the boundary between entertainers and community spokesman, these rappers retain strong ties to their communities of origin and the struggles of the urban poor. They see their music as a form of political speech against the distorted representation the mainstream media regularly puts out about African Americans. This is something Negu Gorriak and their brigades can relate to. The band had its roots in and remained connected to the social institutions and concerns of radical Basque youth culture – *gaztetxes*, (youth houses) free radio, the anti-military movement -- both by doing surprise concerts to promote these causes, and by supporting smaller bands that continue to emerge out of this milieu. What makes the appropriation of rap, or reggae and rai for that matter, oppositional in the work of Negu Gorriak is precisely that this historical context of struggle is not erased. Rather it is used to help illumine power relations in the Basque situation and recognize similarities across differences.

If militant rappers have had appeal, this probably should come as no surprise. One can easily understand why, after years of armed conflict with the state's repressive forces, young Basque radicals, especially males, were would find the militaristic, anti-police imagery of Public Enemy appealing. One can see how they might find notions of black pride a particularly meaningful discourse exportable to their own cause, particularly at a time when the legitimacy of the radical Basque political position has come under such sustained attack in the press and by government institutions. The support the Basque nationalist left once had from Spanish socialist and communist intellectuals and parties at the end of the Franco regime has steadily diminished and government inquiries have revealed that under the Socialist government of Felipe Gonzalez, the Spanish Ministry of Interior was pursuing a "dirty war" of illegal assassinations of presumed ETA members throughout much of the eighties. *Egin*, the daily newspaper of the nationalist left, created in 1978 during the optimism and liberalization of the immediate post-Franco years, suffered years boycotts

and police harassment in the nineties to keep the perspectives of the radical left and youth movements in the public sphere. It has finally been closed. The turn to the right in Spanish politics does not promise to bring any improvement. Youth inclined to radical left politics throughout the eighties and nineties frequently found themselves criminalized, censored, and harassed by the police as breeding grounds for future “terrorists”. In this immediate context and looking at the social problems of racism and inequality that loom large in the rest of Europe, Basque radicalized youth, like many other youth in Europe, find in the language and iconography of militant hip hop a set of concerns with police violence, nationalistic aspirations, and the media that speaks to their frustrations. Rap, as Juan Flores writes, provides a mortar of remarkable intensity. “Its unifying potential has certainly been one of its strongest legacies and source of appeal among youth in countless settings across the world” (Flores 1994:93, see also Greenawalt 1996). Using a common set of codes allows youth to literally ‘pump up the volume’ and feel like they are part of a larger social struggle. Aside from their imagery and political messages, hip hop artistry also offered a stance towards mass culture that is uncommon in the nationalist left. Sampling and juxtaposing sounds and images from popular culture, t.v., and so on, hip hop artists have turned elements that circulate in commodity culture into a resource to be exploited – used rather than refused.

The consequences of this are not without potentially paradoxical consequences. Some observers might feel that the connections drawn with hip hop or Black struggles are inappropriate. The recycling of cultural signs initiated by the globalization of hip hop inevitably brings about decontextualization – hip hop surely does not resonate with the same meanings in the Basque Country as it does in New York. But it also brings about recontextualization and processes of indigenization, new uses and meanings to which we need to pay attention. Our consideration of the politics of hip hop appropriations should lead us to ask how elements of hip hop incorporated into

an eclectic musical mix have afforded this radical band a means of refiguring the Basque political imaginary. A fusionist strategy of musical expression does not, in the view of these abertzales, undermine their self understanding as patriotic or authentically Basque, but it does change what being patriotic or authentic might mean and what its cultural signifiers might look like. And this is of critical importance for the larger Basque social movement. Negu Gorriak expands the boundaries of membership in the radical Basque political community both by going beyond the borders of the Basque Country to name friends and allies in other social struggles, and by transgressing internal borders. Negu Gorriak's music invites nonethnic Basques, the children of Spanish immigrants who were born and live in the deindustrialized cities of the Basque north, into the Basque nation by affirming that membership is not based on ethnicity or blood, but adherence to a cultural, linguistic, and working-class struggle. In their lyrics, in their performative style, in their practice, they demonstrate that being Basque does not mean closing oneself off to a larger world of cultural tastes and social concerns. It does not require renouncing bomber jackets for berets, or trading in Fishbone CDs for Benito Lertxundi. But it does mean speaking Basque, or at least learning Basque, and it means understanding the interconnections between economic, cultural, linguistic, racial and sexual forms of domination. Ethnic and nonethnic Basques become part of the radical vision of the Basque nation not simply by sentiment, but by participating in these struggles and carrying them into daily life through practical commitments to language revival and social justice.<sup>10</sup>

Domestication, rather than imitation, might be a useful way of describing how some musical transplantations do their semiotic work. As Marc Slobin writes, domestication "literally means bringing into the house" (Slobin 1993:90). The term could not be more appropriate one for describing the semiotic work of Negu Gorriak. House is a term that has rich multivocalic resonance

in African American hip hop culture and Basque nationalism where house stands metaphorically for the nation (Aretxaga 1988). Through their music Negu Gorriak brings Black activists, Zapatistas, Arab guest workers, ethnic and nonethnic working class youth into their house. The house of Negu is a different house from that of the Basque bourgeois nationalists who have held governmental power. Patriotism in most bourgeois nationalist imaginaries is about drawing and defending borders. In Negu's vision, the nation is imagined as a permeable sodality, built upon and strengthened by intercultural and working class alliances with others.

These alliances are figured through performances and forged through touring. But, as George Lipsitz reminds us, popular music is a crossroads of collisions as well as connections. Negu Gorriak was to find this out in a dramatic way when Public Enemy, their heroes, came to give a concert in Bilbao and greeted the enthusiastic audience with a big, "Hello Spain!" Their disappointment with Public Enemy as a result of the Bilbao concert was clear in an interview they gave to Paul Ross, from the San Francisco based zine, *Maximum Rock and Roll*. Having organized a bus to go see the rappers in Paris a few years back, Fermin angrily described to Ross Public Enemy's much anticipated performance in the Basque Country as armed robbery: "They came to take the money and run. If they are really a group that is trying to put forward some ideas, they should find out about the place where they are playing, what kind of people go to see them beforehand. I think it's essential that there be some kind of communication" (quoted in Ross 1993). Negu was even more disappointed when Public Enemy expressed their dissatisfaction at playing to what they perceived to be a white audience, and announced to the press that they preferred to play at the U.S. Army base outside Madrid, where they would have more of a black audience. The gulf between the two groups revealed by this incident seemed unbreachable. For Public Enemy, race solidarity proved to be the stronger of the bonds. For Negu Gorriak, it was hard to understand or



sympathize with the race and class politics that drive many African Americans into the enlisted ranks of the Army. It was harder to accept that these militant rappers did not perceive a U.S. Army base in Spain to be a symbol of U.S. imperialism. And it was a disappointment that their Black nationalist politics did not lead Public Enemy to embrace white Basque nationalists as their allies. As Kaki Arkarazo explained it to me, "what I think happened with them is a problem you see in the U.S. as a whole. The people there see themselves as the center of the universe and everyone else's struggle is insignificant. I don't know if it's misinformation, lack of information, or not wanting to be informed."

In closing, we might recall the warning that cultural critics Greg Tate and Angela Davis have issued to the African American community against rushing to proclaim hip hop as the political revolution/solution. The political role (if any) played by music and musicians in a social movement is both complex and sometimes contradictory. Musicians can be spokespersons for certain causes, singing about issues and "spreading the word". They can do this through their lyrics, but as I noted in the case of this band, it is critical to look more broadly at the attendant social practices—brigades, tours, youth houses, and new networks of communication that have been generated. I have tried to suggest that the political agency of a group like Negu Gorriak lies also in the role they play in shaping the Basque political imaginary. The way in which the band musically and visually figures Basque nationality and alliances with other forms of social inequality and struggles, shifts the terms in which activists understand themselves, their social reality, and their own political subjectivity. And shifting the terms under which social actors understand their reality and their own agency is a critical dimension of any struggle for social change (Aretxaga 1997:8-9). Rather than dismiss popular music as not "real" politics, we might more fruitfully "explore the potential of popular culture as a mechanism of communication and education, a site for experimentation with

cultural and social roles not yet possible in politics" (Lipsitz 1994:17). Public Enemy's visit to the Basque Country made clear that the figured intercultural alliance between Basque radical youth and North American blacks has yet to become a political reality. Among other reasons, unequal relations between the United States record industry and Basque radical music make it so that Public Enemy's message reaches the Muguruza brothers in Irun and not vice versa. Nevertheless, in the connections these youth make with Spanish working class youth in their own country and with other social movements through their tours, in the information they spread, and in the heteroglossic imagined community they call into being via their albums, performances, and videos, they are contributing to a reshaping of what it could mean to be Basque and speak Basque in the years to come.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For a sense of some of the enormous variability in European adaptations of rap, see Gross and Mark (1994), Gross, McMurray and Swedenburg (1996) and Mitchell (1996).

<sup>2</sup> For critiques of this view relating specifically to music, see Robinson et al (1991); Slobin (1993); Lipsitz (1994).

<sup>3</sup> As ethnomusicologist Steven Feld (1994:262) notes: "exotic world musics will always be financially and aesthetically remote from the historical loci of international recording consolidation – control and ownership of approximately ninety-three percent of the world musical sales market is now concentrated among six European-North American-Japanese companies: Time-Warner, CBS-Sony, MCA, Thorn-EMI, BMG/RCA, and Philips-Polygram."

<sup>4</sup> On this critical point, see Coco Fusco, "Whose Doin' the Twist? Notes Toward a Politics of Appropriation" (1995). Fusco's essay warns against purely formalist analyses of inter-cultural borrowing which, in focusing on the operations of the sign, run the risk of forgetting the historical circumstances that make *formally* similar acts of recontextualization take on very different meaning for distinct audiences. Only by bringing into the framework of analysis the historical relationships between peoples can we begin to understand, for example, why it is that artists and activists of color often perceive Anglo-European "borrowing" as "rip off". See also Kobena Mercer's influential essay, "Black Hair/Style Politics" (1990).

<sup>5</sup> On Laboa and the New Song movement in the Basque Country see Aristi (1985) and Urzelai et al (1995).

<sup>6</sup> In some respects, Negu Gorriak's clearest predecessor is Hertzainak, a band that sought to forge an alliance between the hard core sounds of punk and radical Basque nationalism. Like Negu Gorriak, Hertzainak served to unsettle the provincialism associated with abertzale (radical nationalist culture) which was often mocked by punks as being musically conservative and tied to folklore (see Espinosa and López 1993). On the tension between punk rock and Basque nationalism in Basque radical rock, see also Lahusen 1993:266-267. For more general discussion of the radical rock movement, see the special issue of *Punto y Hora* (1986). The newspaper *Egin* is an important source on the music movement (see especially the insightful contributions of journalist Pablo Cabeza), as well as *El Tubo: Euskal Herriko Musika Aldizaria*.

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<sup>7</sup> The public outcry against this act of censorship was immediate and widespread. Not only was there virtually unanimous support from the Basque music world (everyone from Mikel Laboa, Txomin Artola, to La Polla Records), but well beyond it as well – Lluís Llach, Fugazi, Body Count, the various free radios of Euskadi, rising stars of the new Basque cinema (Juanma Ulloa, Julio Medem, Alex de la Iglesia), well-known bertsolaris, and the world of literature, including Bernardo Atxaga and Alfonso Sastre, both of whom wrote short statements for the CD, *Ustelkaria*. Although the concert was ignored by the Spanish and international press, it was not by ignored by youth, selling out two days before it began. Pablo Cabeza, long-time observer of the Basque music scene declared the concert of 15 bands of wide ranging styles the "artistically most complete festival in the history of our rock (...)" Saturday evening and night something special took place underneath the tent. A mysterious spirit exacted the best of each band (Cabeza 1995). Whether a mysterious spirit or not, the concert was yet another demonstration of the band's capacity for mass mobilization and strong support in the world of Basque culture, arts, and alternative politics and their ability to merge music with political protest.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Fermin Muguruza by Jakue Pascual for *El Tubo: Euskal Herriko Musika Aldizaria*. Reprinted in *Negu Gorriak* (no.10), the zine of the group produced in conjunction with their latest CD, *Ideia Zabaldu*.

<sup>9</sup> This title has no easy translation to English. The album gives "Por Cojones" as the Castilian translation, and "Damn Right!" for the English. Given that the song is said to be "inspired by those who have cocks for brains" (CD liner), we might want to translate it as "Cock Sure".

<sup>10</sup> Negu Gorriak's vision is exemplified more broadly in radical Basque youth culture. For a very insightful discussion on the classed nature of the national imaginary in radical Basque youth culture, see the forthcoming work by Sharryn Kasmir "Classing National Identity: Radical Nationalist Bars and the Basque Working Class in Mondragón" in *American Ethnologist*.