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The Basque big boy? Basque masculinities in *Vaya semanita*

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Abstract

This article argues that the television show *Vaya semanita* portrays a specific Basque masculinity, different from the Spanish or Mediterranean ones. The traditional Basque masculinity shares some values with the most accepted forms of Spanish masculinities –including manhood as a challenge to be overcome, physical strength, intemperate drinking, and gluttonous eating – but differs from them in the way men behave in relation to women and sex, and the way they maintain close friendships with each other. Basque men appear as dependent on their mothers and wives, making them look emasculated and infantile. Their male bonding is also interpreted as homoeroticism and/or homosexuality. Furthermore, one of the main stereotypes that the show repeats is the difficulty in having sex in the Basque Country. Therefore, Basque men tend to adopt more of a dominant behavior among other males and in the public space, while they act more submissively in relation to women in their families. Through comedy, *Vaya semanita* deconstructs traditional masculinity, but at the same time, the constant appearance of traditional Basque men and the sympathetic lens through which they are portrayed can act as a reinforcement of the hegemonic Basque masculinity during this time of globalization.

Keywords: Masculinities, Basque Country, homoeroticism, male bonding, *Vaya semanita*, humor, television

In one sketch of the Basque television comedy *Vaya semanita*, four men form a street patrol to find the burglar who broke into a bar. In the introduction to the sketch, the narrator states that these men fight to maintain “authentic” masculinity in society and testosterone in “our streets.” Even the type of cigar that the men smoke, the namesake of the segment, “Los hombres del Farías,” symbolizes toughness and masculinity. In a similar way, these men’s professions – taxi driver, barber, construction worker, and barman – have usually been linked to traditional masculine roles. Their conception of masculinity makes them believe that they must find the burglar, taking justice into their own hands instead of calling the police. While they patrol the streets, they physically restrain a disreputable looking young man with earrings, tattoos, and shopping bags. At the end of the sketch, the barman’s grandmother reveals to the four speechless men that it was *she* who took the money from the bar to play cards. Even after this admission, she takes the car of one of the men to meet her friends.¹ Though the four men proudly embody traditional masculinity based on physical strength, assertiveness, and independence, the sketch showcases their submission to female relatives.

This sketch clearly exemplifies the issues of masculinity portrayed on the weekly television show *Vaya semana*. Male characters confront several types of masculinities, demonstrate the importance of male friends, need to prove their own masculinity, and struggle to maintain their manly role in their own homes and relationships. In this sense, the show counteracts the conventional view of Basque men as strong – *chicarrones del norte* – and questions whether they are as “big” as their physique suggests.

In this article, I will analyze the stereotyped representations of Basque masculinities that appear in *Vaya semana*. Some of the characteristics of traditional Basque masculinities portrayed in the show are universal and are common in depictions of Spanish men: physical strength, manhood as a challenge to be overcome, intemperate drinking, and gluttonous eating. Nevertheless, I argue that the show illustrates that Basque men have other specific traits, unique to them, which are easily distinguished from Spanish or Mediterranean masculinities. Their distinctive character can be most clearly seen in their close friendships with other men and particular behavior in relation to women and sex. In the show, Basque men are frequently depicted as being emasculated, infantile and dependent on mothers and wives, unlike Mediterranean men, who tend to be portrayed as autonomous (Gilmore 1990, 50). Furthermore, male bonding between Basque men is also interpreted in the show as homoeroticism and/or homosexuality. Another stereotype often illustrated in *Vaya semana* is sexual incompetence among Basque men, while the Mediterranean gender model emphasizes men’s sexual prowess and potency (Gilmore 1990, 48). In this article, it is not my intention to establish that these characteristics of Basque men are referential truths; the connection between the show’s stereotypes and the reality of Basque masculinities need not be a direct one.

However, several critics have stressed the uniqueness of Basque masculinities, thus compiling and/or helping to create the ideas about Basque maleness that circulate in the popular imagination. For example, Juan Aranzadi highlights many of the male characteristics displayed in *Vaya semana*. He notes that Basque men have “una notable dificultad en la relación con la mujer, que incluye desde una inicial timidez erótica a la hora de tomar la iniciativa hasta una frecuente impotencia sexual, y que ha estado en el origen del gran porcentaje de varones solteros existentes, de la formación de cuadrillas exclusivas de hombres, de la abundancia de vocaciones religiosas y de la generalización del alcoholismo” (2000, 536). Anthropologists William Douglass and Joseba Zulaika make a similar argument, using Don Juan as a contrasting example. Don Juan, a traditional Spanish figure whose skillful seductions of women demonstrate his manhood, serves as a foil to rural Basque men, who are not exhorted to sexual conquests (2007, 240–1). In fact, Douglass and Zulaika state that in rural Basque society there exists “a considerable reticence about sexual matters” and that sexual behavior cannot be discussed or even mentioned (241–2).

Joseba Gabilondo also stresses impotency when analyzing Basque masculinity, connecting it with the figure of the castrating mother: “apaizak eta ama kastratzaile-neurotikoak euskal kulturaren imaginarioaren zentroan ezarri baditugu, berauok hegemonia nazional maskulinista kastratu eta ikusezin baten erreferente eta adierazle ikusgarri bakar bihurtu ditugulako izan da” [if we place priests and castrating-neurotic mothers at the center of Basque cultural imagination, it is because we have turned them into unique and noteworthy models and indicators of an invisible and castrated masculinized national hegemony] (2010, 173). This critic believes this is the reason why there is not a Basque Don Juan after the nineteenth century (173). Josep Armengol-Carrera extends the uniqueness of Basque masculinities to other peripheral masculinities in Spain, such

as those in Galicia and Catalonia. He argues that in these nations there are “other styles and figurations” of masculinity which differ from the conventional ideology of the Spanish *macho* (2012, 1). In a similar vein, Begoña Regueiro-Salgado views both Basque and Galician masculinities as more gender egalitarian, giving as an example the Basque Romantic author Antonio Trueba’s rejection of “traditional” male behaviors such as infidelity and violence (2012, 54). Regueiro-Salgado explains this situation as a result of men’s migration and women’s work beyond domestic tasks in both the Basque Country and Galicia (46–7).

Vaya semanita ridicules the inconsistency of Basque men’s public hypermasculinity when contrasted with their subservience to their mothers and wives. The parody of Basque men’s representation allows for ambivalence and multiple interpretations, ranging from harsh criticism to sympathy and identification. Margaret Rose observes in this regard that parodies may be created to mock the subject or, on the contrary, to imply an attitude of admiration (1993, 45–6). In the case of *Vaya semanita*, I believe that the prevailing attitude is one of admiration. While the show deconstructs traditional Basque masculinity, it also reinforces those same values during this era of globalization by portraying traditional men in a sympathetic manner. Basque viewers are reminded, from a humorous perspective, of traditional Basque masculinity and its characteristics. Indeed, Laura Stempel Mumford maintains that television reflects, reinforces and mediates existing “ideas about how gender is and should be lived” (1998, 117).

***Vaya semanita* and Basque culture**

The minor position of Basque culture within the Spanish State is key to understanding the role of *Vaya semanita*. Christie Davies claims that members of dominant cultures tend to tell jokes mainly about minorities; however, minorities and peripheral nations typically tell more jokes about their own group (2002, 46). In this sense, the humor of *Vaya semanita* can be read in the same way that Davies interprets Scottish and Jewish self-mockery: as a form of self-congratulation and self-promotion, as a mark of distinction (53). Therefore, we can interpret the show as an expression of pride in the uniqueness of Basque culture and its distinctive gender roles. At the same time, through humor, Basques strike outsiders as approachable and friendly people, which is a very different image from the traditional association of the Basque Country with violence and terrorism.

There is no doubt that *Vaya semanita* appeals to a wide spectrum of Basques, which explains the consistently high viewership since its first broadcast in 2003 on the second channel of the Basque Autonomous Television (ETB-2). The show appeared for nine seasons and received considerable attention in the Spanish media, before being temporarily suspended in February 2012. Nevertheless, few academics have devoted critical attention to this show, and to date no study has explored its representation of masculinities. In fact, with a few exceptions, the field of Hispanic studies has deemed Spanish television to be unworthy of attention, probably because, as Paul Julian Smith points out, it has been associated with low quality programs, commonly known as “teletonta” or “telebasura” (2000, 177).² In the case of Spanish autonomous television channels, their peripheral existence equates to critical oblivion.³

Due to the popularity of *Vaya semanita* in the Basque Country, the Spanish national television channel (TVE) created a similar show, using the same team of scriptwriters and the same actors,

led by Óscar Terol. However, the new comedy show, *Made in China*, was not well-received by its Spanish audience and it was cancelled in 2006 after only a few months on air. Similarly, at the end of 2009, the Spanish television channel Cuatro premiered *Vaya tropa*, the Spanish version of *Vaya semanita*, with the same dismal result – cancellation due to low ratings in February 2010. The failure of both of these shows on Spanish television is significant, since it might point to the existence of a specific Basque sense of humor and gender system that Spanish viewers neither understand nor value. Simon Critchley notes that humor is highly context-specific, making it “terribly difficult to translate” (2002, 67). He relates humor to national culture: “jokes are reminders of who ‘we’ are, who ‘we’ have been, and of who ‘we’ might come to be” (87).

Once the original team of actors of *Vaya semanita* left for TVE after the second season, a new group of actors stepped in, led by Andoni Agirregomezkorta, who also served as host of the show until 2011. Despite the change, the content of the show continued to be very similar, apart from periodic modifications of characters.⁴ The catchphrases of several characters became popular with young Basques, for instance, the “aficionado, que eres un aficionado” of the pensioners, and “ese mangarrán” and “kabenzotz” of the recurring sketch “La cuadrilla.” The integration of these expressions into everyday speech illustrates the show’s influence on society and, at the same time, the creation – through the Internet and social networks – of an imagined Basque community that shares the show’s worldview. Humor, then, functions as a force of social cohesion and cultural pride.

Vaya semanita was a great novelty on Basque television because, until its launch, it was uncommon to tackle Basque reality and society from a humorous perspective. Basques are often characterized as quiet and introverted people. Miguel de Unamuno considered this idea in a 1904 article entitled “Alma vasca”: “Porque el vasco, por arriesgado que sea ante la naturaleza, suele ser tímido ante los hombres, vergonzoso” (par. 4). For this reason, Basques employ humor to express their feelings and opinions. In his examination of *bertsolaritza* (improvised oral poetry in Basque), Gorka Aulestia observes that Basques “use humor and irony as a defense mechanism against the embarrassment and shyness they feel” (1987, 39).

Vaya semanita addresses a wide array of topics with humor, including unemployment, young people’s housing problems, slow and disorganized bureaucracy, and the difficulties of learning the Basque language. Likewise, politics is dealt with in a light-hearted manner, despite a distinct tendency in the Basque Country to treat political information seriously, due to the continuing terrorist violence of ETA – the Basque separatist organization, which announced a cease-fire in October 2011. By mocking all the political parties and displaying a multiplicity of ideologies, the show enjoys a broad appeal with a varied Basque audience. Given that humor allows people to deal with complicated and troubling matters (Berger 1993, 156), *Vaya semanita* helps to appease terrorism-related anger and anxieties. For this reason, guests as diverse as Fernando Savater and Arnaldo Otegui have appeared in the show’s interview segment. In this sense, the show “reconcile[s] the divisions that come with differences,” which, according to John Ellis (2000, 72), is one of the key functions of contemporary television.

Despite its appeal to a diverse audience, *Vaya semanita* underscores the uniqueness of Basque culture, and, therefore, it could be linked to a nationalist agenda (Moreno del Río 2007). The show serves Basque democratic nationalists, Carmelo Moreno del Río contends, by depoliticizing national issues in order to repoliticize them from a neutral, humorous perspective (11).⁵ Although *Vaya semanita* sometimes ridicules the ideology of Basque nationalism, it also reinforces those



Figure 1. The four *txikiteros* of the segment “La cuadrilla.”

principles through the performance of Basque nationalist characters on the screen. The channel that broadcast the show, ETB-2, was under the ministerial control of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) until 2009.⁶ However, I believe that, rather than favoring the PNV and forcing a political agenda *per se*, *Vaya semanita* simply takes pride in Basque culture and emphasizes its singularity.

Vaya semanita offers ample opportunity to study not only Basque identity, but also Basque masculinities and sexuality. During its nine seasons, the show has focused mostly on male experiences, and although it has progressively incorporated more female characters, male characters still outnumber them. More importantly, the sketches are presented from a predominantly masculine perspective. The leading actor and scriptwriter of the first two seasons, Óscar Terol, portrays these same views of Basque gender roles in several comedy books published after the show became well-known. In this sense, his writing mirrors the comic stereotypes of Basque men shown on *Vaya semanita*. In *Todos nacemos vascos* (2005a), his first book, Terol explains that everybody is born Basque because every child enjoys playing soccer and the soccer ball is related to the Basque *pelota*: “la pelota es a lo vasco como la guitarra a lo andaluz, o la gaita a lo gallego” (20). In constructing this amusing theory, the author privileges the male sex through men’s cultural relationship with balls, which are connected with sexual prowess and normative masculinity through the book’s cover. On it, Terol, with a primitive expression on his face, holds two Basque *pelotas* – used to play in a *frontón* – over his genital area.⁷

Basque men’s traditional masculinity

Vaya semanita connects Basque men with primitivism in numerous sketches, portraying them as hearty eaters and drinkers, physically strong, coarse, proud, stubborn, introverted, true to their word, and noble. These portrayals of Basque masculinity are not new; as Jorge Echagüe Burgos (2003) demonstrates, the archetypal Biscayan character has played a humorous role since the sixteenth century.⁸ In the early twentieth century, Basque authors such as Joaquín Guerricagoitia and Alberto San Cristóbal entertained the bourgeoisie in Bilbao with anecdotes of the *baserritarra* – a



Figure 2. The four men of “Los hombres del Farias.”

rural Basque man. The authors emphasized his difficulty in pronouncing the voiceless interdental fricative sound (e.g. “haser,” “dises”) and his constant use of the phrase “pues” (Echagüe Burgos 2003, 39). These speech characteristics are still considered humorous by today’s mostly urban Basque population and are used quite frequently in *Vaya semanita*. A classist joke underlies this portrayal of rural Basque men. However, in *Vaya semanita*, such men are patronized and treated as picturesque elements of the nation.

One common activity among middle-aged Basque men in both urban and rural areas is drinking small glasses of wine, called *txikitos*, in bars with their male friends. *Vaya semanita* repeatedly depicts this type of man: the *txikitero*. Basque men’s love of wine is the main theme of the promotional commercial for the 2007 season, and all sequences of the commercial feature Basque men in traditional clothing, wearing berets and checked shirts and occupying traditional Basque spaces, such as the *pelota* court, the village square, the church and the street. Every space in the commercial is a public male space, with the exception of the bedroom. However, the bedroom sequence depicts an obviously disgruntled woman in bed while a man dresses, presumably after sex. Two more men stand in the closet in their underwear, leading viewers to believe that they too are the woman’s lovers. The woman’s demeanor implies sexual dissatisfaction, reinforcing the stereotype of the Basque man as an inept lover. Despite problems in the bedroom, Basque men are shown exuding confidence, brashly singing a song that deifies wine. The *txikito* is powerful enough to revive the dead, as we see in the funeral sequence.

The commercial melody is taken from a popular electronic dance song, “Así me gusta a mí” (1991), by Chimo Bayo. In this way, traditional Basque masculinity is connected with global culture and, at the same time, the commercial’s catchy song facilitates viewers’ recall. The desire for wine unites Basque men, who form “a deep, horizontal comradeship” that constitutes the nation (Anderson 1991, 7). The *Vaya semanita* commercial portrays the Basque nation as a horizontal fraternity, since the few women who appear do so exclusively in the background. As happens in most national ideologies, women are not represented in the commercial as active members of the Basque nation, in spite of their role as the biological, cultural, and symbolic producers of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997, 2). Thus, the nation is always imagined as a fraternity (Eisenstein 2000,

41), as a masculine project in which women merely play a supportive role.⁹ As Andrew Parker et al. state, national ideologies tend to represent women “as chaste, dutiful, daughterly or maternal” (1992, 6). This depiction of women can be clearly seen in one of the scenes of the commercial, in which a young woman pushes a wheelchair to help a standing older man who still has sufficient energy to join the national brotherhood.

When the men of the commercial utter a war cry and attack the wine truck, they are united and the traditional male values of violence and physical strength are ascribed to Basque masculinity. As Margaret Bullen points out (2003, 119–21), physical strength, known in Basque as *indarra*, has been highly valued by Basque society because it was needed in order to work on the *baserri* (farm). Basque rural sports, such as wood-chopping (*aizkol-joko*) and stone-lifting (*harri-jasotze*), which exemplify the historic occupational activities on farms, celebrate a person’s capacity to exert or resist great force (Bullen 2003, 119). In her analysis of Basque textbooks, Begoña Echeverría complains about men’s stereotypical displays of strength in the public sphere through activities such as rock-lifting, while women are confined to the private sphere and the care of others (2001, 343–4). In all these instances, strength becomes a core value of masculinity because softness and weakness are associated with femininity. As Victor Seidler observes, men must constantly demonstrate their strength publicly in order to prove that they are not weak, and the inner fear of being or appearing weak remains with them throughout their adult lives (1997, 42).

This emphasis on public displays of strength is closely connected to the idea of challenges and competitions, as shown in the commercial, when one of the characters threatens the wine truck driver by saying: “Trae el tinto o te tumbo.” In another sketch, four *txikiteros* verbally confront other bigger men at a bar because they order fruit juices instead of wine (Figure 1). The altercation escalates into a sporting challenge – an American football game between the two groups of men. Despite being clearly smaller, the *txikiteros* accept the challenge and finally achieve a victory, but only when one of them, enticed by good wine, reaches the end zone. Besides underscoring the wine-induced strength of Basque men, this sketch highlights their need to accept a challenge in order to appear manly. For this reason, Michael Kimmel describes masculinity as a homosocial enactment, as the need to look for other men’s approval: “We test ourselves, perform heroic feats, take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us our manhood” (1994, 129). Although this is a common tendency in normative masculinities, in the Basque Country this behavior has traditionally assumed many different forms. It is what Joseba Zulaika calls “the *burruka* model”: a fight or wrestling match between two males to show off their physical and psychological strength. This competition also includes betting, singing *bertso* (verse), and athletic competition (1988a, 170–1). Zulaika connects this type of male behavior with tavern life and drinking.

In one sketch of the segment “Los hombres del Farias,” one of the characters wishes to prove his masculinity to the group by engaging in painful and difficult tasks. He did not complete the period of compulsory military service, which was abolished in Spain in 2001, and the other men believe that *la mili* is necessary to become a true man: “pasarle mal es algo fundamental para hacerse hombre.” This need to experience stress – physical pain or psychological danger – as a means of proving one’s manhood and conferring superiority on men is what Timothy Beneke calls “compulsive masculinity” (1997, 36). The men in the group help their friend by devising challenges that he must overcome, such as being nude in public (known as *novatada*), being awakened early in the morning, peeling potatoes, and cleaning floors. The man finally achieves the respect of the

group when he publicly proclaims that he has had sex with a prostitute. Young military men commonly visit brothels in order to prove their masculinity (Zulaika 1988b, 32). In this sketch, sexual activity with a woman is regarded as the biggest proof of masculinity, while service in the military functions as a rite of passage into manhood.¹⁰

The “hombres del Farias” believe that their type of masculinity is being lost in today’s society so, in another sketch, they establish a new political party with the slogan “Todos los hombres tienen que ser de pelo en pecho y mear en pared” (Figure 2). This slogan equates real masculinity with primitivism and natural bodies – the “hombres del Farias” complain about men who use deodorant or moisturizers. In the beginning, they decide to call their party PSH (Partido Sólo Hombres), but when a group of gay men tries to join it, they hastily change the name to CDC (Con Dos Cojones). As seen earlier, male genitalia are linked to “real” masculinity, which is demonstrated by a man’s public heterosexuality, strength, assertiveness, and superiority over women and other men. After losing the elections – garnering a paltry one vote – the men have to admit that they did not vote but instead went to a brothel, an explanation their leader happily accepts. As in the previous sketch, sex with a prostitute is laudable within the male group; women, however, are objectified and considered inferior on account of exchanging sex for money.

The most relevant aspects of this sketch are the ways in which these men wish to impose their ideal masculinity on society, exemplifying the tensions between different coexisting masculinities within the same culture. According to R. W. Connell, a hegemonic masculinity occupies the leading position in society and is culturally exalted above subordinated and marginalized masculinities, which are expelled from the circle of legitimacy (1995, 76–9). The two masculinities of the “hombres del Farias” and of the *txikiteros* can be seen as hegemonic, but the former is more aggressive than the latter. Another important difference is that, while the *txikiteros* are clearly connected with Basqueness, the national identity of the “hombres del Farias” is less obvious because their professions, especially taxi driving and construction, are usually associated with Spanish hypermasculinity.

Nevertheless, the *txikiteros* also wish to pass on their traditions to younger generations. In another sketch, a middle-aged *txikitero* sells a male doll representing his masculinity. The doll, called “Txikiterito,” utters phrases typical of *txikiteros*. The toy is given to a young boy, who is told that he had better like it. In spite of the humorous tone, this sketch shows how national customs and hegemonic notions of masculinity must be conveyed to children. References to testicles (“sí, señor, con un par”) teach the boy how he must behave in order to be accepted by men and belong to the hegemonic male community. As David Plummer (1999) has studied, homophobic comments also play an important role in enforcing hegemonic masculinity and heterosexism. Boys are told that they cannot share characteristics with girls and that they must be brave, clearly heterosexual, and express allegiance to male peer groups (78–9). The ironic and ambivalent aspect of the sketch is that dolls are stereotypically girls’ toys whereas here they are promoted as an integral part of boys’ education.

Alcohol use by young people is another recurrent theme in *Vaya semanita*. In several sketches, the show portrays the tradition of the *botellón*. Because it is cheaper than drinking in a bar, young people buy alcohol in grocery stores and drink in public areas.¹¹ Public drinking is also a means of socialization and bonding, a prevalent idea in the Basque Country. The social aspect of drinking is considered by Basques as a defining cultural trait (Kasmir 2005, 207). Thomas Wilson points out that drinking is “one of the most noticeable, emotional and important ways in which people



Figure 3. Jota and Ke, the Batasunnis.

express and discuss their identities and cultures” (2005, 7). This is especially true in the Basque Country, where radical Basque nationalists use bars as meeting places where they learn about political events and congregate before and after demonstrations (Kasmir 2002, 60).

The *txikitero* does not normally drink alone, but instead is accompanied by his group of friends, *la cuadrilla*. Kasmir describes *la cuadrilla* as a close-knit group first formed in childhood among neighborhood or school friends (2005, 207). The *cuadrillas* go from bar to bar drinking *txikitos* and may set up a *caja* or kitty to buy drinks. Although there are *cuadrillas* that include males and females, many of them are exclusively male, especially among middle-aged men, as in the case of *txikiteros*. This situation appears in the segment “La cuadrilla,” in which four men meet in a bar to drink together and play cards. Although they are close friends, in several sketches rivalries arise and one of them usually dies because of the others. This portrayal of the *cuadrilla* shows that, despite belonging to the same group of friends, men may fight amongst themselves due to their masculine egos.

Aside from drinking, gluttony is another characteristic of the stereotypical Basque man. Food is highly valued in the Basque Country because, among other reasons, it is the means by which men acquire physical strength. *Vaya semanita* mocks Basque men’s gluttony in several sketches, such as “Tiburción,” in which a young man eats all the food in the village. In the end, several village people prepare a huge feast, causing the glutton to explode. The animalization of Basque men is obvious in this sketch; the title references Steven Spielberg’s movie *Jaws* (1975), translated into Spanish as *Tiburón*, while the main character dies in a similar manner to the shark.

On other occasions, *Vaya semanita* portrays eating as a skill and as a mark of cultural distinction. Jeremy MacClancy indicates that Basque men are depicted as trenchermen with taste – they eat a lot but have a refined palate (2007, 76). Óscar Terol ridicules this custom, while simultaneously taking pride in it, when he states that a Basque man’s belly is a symbol of happiness (2007, 170). The belly’s importance is featured in a sketch called “Pintxotxo,” a reference to Pinocchio. In the sketch, a Basque man lies to his doctor about his eating habits, which consist of devouring many *pintxos* or bar snacks. His gluttony makes his belly grow until he finally must undergo stomach-reduction surgery. Afterward, he attracts more women, but ultimately he decides that eating *pintxos* is more pleasurable than sex and he returns to his previous habits. Thus, Basque men are portrayed as insatiable eaters, and food is equated with enjoyment and satisfaction.



Figure 4. El Jonan and El Txori.

Basque men's homoeroticism and emasculation

In the popular imagination, Basque men not only love eating, but also cooking food. Normally, men cook in private gastronomic societies called *txokos*, from which women have traditionally been excluded. In the past decade, some *txokos* have allowed women entrance on specific days or even with no restrictions. Many of these societies were started by a group of male friends.¹² *Txokos*, which in the Basque language literally means “meeting places,” contain an expansive kitchen and an open area with wooden tables. They are normally sparsely decorated with the Basque flag (*ikurriña*) and memorabilia of regional soccer teams. Óscar Terol suggests, from a humorous perspective, that *txokos* provide a male shelter, the only place where Basque men are free from women's reproachful gaze (2009, 206).

Vaya semanita satirizes the *txokos* by turning them into clandestine gay clubs. In one sketch, men at the *txoko* admire the physique of soccer players, sing songs by the Village People, and hide their dildos in the kitchen. Thus, Basque male bonding is transformed into homosexuality. In fact, male-only associations, such as seminaries, fraternity houses or armies, exhibit cross-culturally a continuum from homosociality and homoeroticism to homosexuality.¹³ In order to avoid any possibility of an erotic bond between men, Michael Messner observes that overt homophobia, sexual talk about women and their objectification are common within male groups (2001, 258). However, as happens in *Vaya semanita*, there are occasions when a homosocial bond may allow for a homoerotic interpretation. Martí-Olivella cites as an example the relationship between the characters Tasio and Luis in Montxo Armendáriz's film *Tasio* (1984), set in the Basque countryside (2012, 87).

Homoeroticism is also present in the friendship between two famous characters from *Vaya semanita*: the Batasunnis, a puppet duo (Figure 3). The puppets' name refers to “Los Lunnis,” who are puppets on a children's program on the second channel of Spanish national television (La 2). In addition, the Batasunnis resemble Bert and Ernie from *Sesame Street* (“Epi y Blas” in the Spanish version, called “Barrio Sésamo”). “Batasunnis” also connects with one of the many names of the Basque pro-independence political party, Batasuna, established in 2001 and banned in 2003 for its connections with the terrorist group ETA.¹⁴ The two puppets' names, Jota and Ke, are associated with the slogan of the left-wing movement for Basque independence, “Jo ta ke,” which means “with no rest.” *Vaya semanita* mocks Jota and Ke's Basque pro-independence patriotism and their

hatred for all things Spanish. This humorous approach aims to release the negative emotions associated with street violence in the Basque Country, a violence that Begoña Aretxaga calls spectral because it stems from the fear and the harassment that both *kale borroka* members and *ertzainas* experience (1999, 117).

Just as Jota and Ke embody the figures of *gudaris* or Basque soldiers, political activism is also portrayed as a male activity. Basque radical nationalism developed on a strict, gendered binary model: the female *ama lur* ("Earth Mother") and the male *gudari*. The representation of Basque women as passive and motherly alleviated the fear of castration by Francoist forces (Stone and Jones 2004, 48). Carrie Hamilton notes that the most common female image in Basque radical nationalism has been that of mothers of male ETA activists, and, in particular, mothers of the "fallen" (2007, 100). According to Aretxaga, the presence of the mother at her *gudari* son's funeral validates the struggle for which he has died and links the past and the future of the political fight for independence (2005, 159–60).¹⁵

Vaya semanita challenges the *gudari*'s tough, traditional masculinity by insinuating homoeroticism in the relationship between Jota and Ke. For instance, in one sketch, Ke goes on vacation with a girl, and Jota misses him, declaring: "Todo lo que veo me recuerda a Ke." Upon Ke's return, Jota admits having missed him, and Ke is moved by his friend's feelings. Another sketch features the two quarreling like a married couple, exchanging reproaches such as "siempre hay que hacer lo que tú dices." Even the policeman who arrests them compares their quarrel to an episode from *Escenas de matrimonio*, a Spanish television show in which three heterosexual couples constantly argue. After being separated, Jota and Ke are finally reconciled while, in the background, the group *Queen* plays the song "Friends Will Be Friends." Thus, the friendship between Jota and Ke hints at a more fluid Basque masculinity and points to new relationships between masculinity, terrorism and violence. The traditional toughness and assumed heterosexuality of the *gudari* are questioned.

In Basque culture, there have been previous attempts to subvert the heteronormativity of Basque nationalist masculinity. The most significant effort was Imanol Uribe's film *La muerte de Mikel* (1984) – which Martí-Olivella calls "one of Euskadi's most unsettling and enduring family metaphors, or national allegories" (2003, 70) – with its portrayal of a homosexual *abertzale*. As regards this film, Isolina Ballesteros connects homosexuality and Basque nationalism as marginal identities that are recognized in the period of Spain's transition to democracy (2001, 134). However, as this critic points out, Mikel's expulsion from his political party – and his final death – signals the impossibility of a homosexual representing the Basque nation (98). Martí-Olivella supports this idea by describing Mikel "as the sacrificial victim, the scapegoat that binds the community together" (2012, 93). Gabilondo (2013) also finds the same attitude towards homosexuality in the Basque narrative of the 1980s and 1990s. According to him, the death of the homosexual character is the result of his desire, which needs to be repressed before it spreads throughout society (35).

Nevertheless, more recent Basque cultural manifestations portray homosexuality in a more positive light. Martí-Olivella analyzes, in this regard, Roberto Castón's film *Ander* (2009), which transgresses the heteronormative ideology of the nation by configuring an alternative family formed by a homosexual Basque farmer, his Peruvian boyfriend and a Galician mother-prostitute (2012, 94). Similarly, in the last few years, Basque transvestite performers, such as Las Fellini, Asier Bilbao and La Otxoa, have helped promote and give visibility to the combination of homosexuality and a strong Basque identity. One of the members of Las Fellini, Yogurinha Borova, achieved considerable success with her single "Esnekiak gogoko ditut" ("I Feel Like Having a

Dairy”), the video clip of which shows her having an affair in a Basque rural house with a black male wearing a traditional Basque costume. Although *Vaya semanita* is not as transgressive as *Ander* and the Basque transvestite performers, it shares with them the depiction of the fissures of traditional Basque masculinity and the suggestion that more fluid gender models in relationships between men are possible.

Male bonding and homoeroticism are also present in the relationship between El Jonan and El Txori, who are the two main characters of one of *Vaya semanita*'s most popular segments from the final seasons (Figure 4). El Jonan is a young, unemployed raver, dedicated to techno music and his *buga*, or customized car. El Jonan embodies an assertive and arrogant masculinity based on homosociality. Thus, when El Txori finds a girlfriend, El Jonan tells him that girlfriends are only for “losers.” The girlfriend succeeds in changing El Txori, since due to her influence, he dresses differently and becomes an intellectual. As a result, El Jonan seduces El Txori's girlfriend in order to drive her away, enabling his old friend El Txori to resume his old personality. Then, the two young men recover their close friendship and regain their strong connection in her absence, positioning women as a threat to homosocial bonding and male independence. This disregard for women is also apparent when El Jonan himself looks for a girlfriend with the sole objective of accessorizing his car. He chooses his girlfriend only because she improves his car's appearance and because her eyes match the leather upholstery. The car is, in fact, El Jonan's only true love. When his mother asks him to sell it, the car is shown in several romantic scenes with El Jonan, accompanied by Glenn Medeiros' ballad “Nada cambiará mi amor por ti.” The sketch ridicules men's attachment to their cars, but, at the same time, it highlights their fear of, and disdain for, women. El Jonan focuses on his car in order to avoid relationships with real women.

El Jonan's masculinity is similar to that of the *txikiteros*: in both cases, men show off their masculine attributes, enjoy close friendships with other men, and are afraid of women. However, El Jonan represents a more global, more urban masculinity in comparison to the *txikiteros*' traditional Basque masculinity. Even the character's name points to the influence of American culture: he rejects his given name, the Basque “Jon Ander,” in favor of “El Jonan.” The show's writers probably wished to locate Basque culture in a more global context and appeal to younger viewers. In fact, El Jonan has become a very popular character with many followers and even impersonators. At one time, *Vaya semanita*'s website featured a blog written by El Jonan and a section entitled “Colegas del Jonan,” in which young men met him in person, faced challenges and behaved like him in order to become his best friend. His Facebook page also had close to 20,000 followers. Despite the scriptwriters' humorous treatment of El Jonan, this character has somehow become a role model for certain young Basque men, reinforcing and validating homosocial values in today's Basque society.

Basque men's homosociality is connected with and considered a consequence of the active role that mothers and wives play in Basque homes.¹⁶ A common stereotype is that Basque women are strong and dominant in their households – historically, in rural areas, women worked the land as hard as men – and *Vaya semanita* reinforces this belief. Terol develops this idea in his comedy book *Técnicas de la mujer vasca para la doma y monta de maridos* (2009). He portrays Basque women as masculine because of their short hairstyles, dismissiveness or outright hostility toward compliments, and dominant personalities. He claims that they are able to emasculate their husbands through sarcasm and demeaning facial expressions. Although Terol misogynistically exaggerates

the stereotype for the sake of humor, Bullen suggests that powerful Basque women are “a source of pride for the Basques as a whole” (2003, 111).

For all these reasons, several critics, among them Txema Hornilla (1989), Andrés Ortiz-Osés and Franz Karl Mayr (1980), have argued for the existence of a Basque matriarchy.¹⁷ Other critics, however, including Mercedes Ugalde (1993), Teresa del Valle et al. (1985), and Juan Aranzadi (2000), disagree with this theory and make a distinction between matrilineality and women’s lack of political and economic power over men. Bullen therefore proposes the designation of a “domestic matriarchy” and a “political matriarchy” (2003, 126). Del Valle et al. believe that the premise of a Basque matriarchy was promoted by Basque nationalists to underscore the uniqueness of the Basque Country, as well as its ancestral character (1985, 48).

In any case, in the popular imagination, the dominant behavior and influence of Basque women in the private domain differentiates Basque from Spanish and Mediterranean masculinity. David Gilmore claims that one of the main characteristics of Mediterranean masculinity is personal autonomy: “To be dependent upon another man is bad enough, but to acknowledge dependence upon a woman is worse. [...] There is indeed no greater fear among men than the loss of this personal autonomy to a dominant woman” (1990, 50). However, Basque men are depicted as being reliant upon, and controlled by, women. *Vaya semanita* emphasizes the power of the Basque mother over the men in her family. By representing men as the innocent victims of phallic mothers, the show reproduces the universal misogynistic image of the castrating woman.

In addition to depicting *txikiteros* as hypermasculine, some sketches in *Vaya semanita* portray them as opposing normative masculinity, as weak men dependent on their wives. For instance, in a sketch entitled “Txiki-Park,” *txikiteros* are identified with the children who visit the playground of the same name each Christmas. Women bring their *txikitero* husbands to the playground so that they may drink, eat, gamble, and play cards in a safe place, and at night they pick them up. This infantilization of the *txikiteros* emphasizes their inability to function as adults, referencing the common stereotype of men behaving like children with their toy-like cars and tools. At the same time, Basque masculinity appears incomplete, since hegemonic masculinity is considered “a revolt against boyishness, against the eternal child within” (Gilmore 1990, 29).

In another sketch, a mother accompanies her young adult son on a shopping trip, shaming him in front of the shop assistant by treating him as a child. She talks to the shop assistant about her son’s ugly rear, publicly reminds her son of how she breastfed him, and she then complains to the cashier about the price of her son’s CD. Another sketch features a mother constantly asking her son to find a girlfriend. However, as soon as he finds one, his mother whines about how selfish he is to leave her alone. As the relationship progresses, the mother feels replaced by her son’s girlfriend and on his wedding day, she even exclaims: “¡me lo ha quitado para siempre!” In fact, in Basque society, as in many others, the enmity between a mother and her daughter-in-law is a recurrent theme. Here, Basque men appear as emasculated and dependent, as children who have never grown up.

Basque men’s infantilization and subordination to their dominant mothers may be interpreted as a result of the Oedipus complex. This is the argument that Marsha Kinder (1993) offers when analyzing the representation of the family in contemporary Spanish film. For Kinder, in movies such as Agustí Villaronga’s *Tras el cristal* (1986), “mothers frequently stand in for the missing father as the embodiment of patriarchal law” (198), symbolizing for their sons “both an object of desire and the instrument of its repression” (200). Kinder believes that sons’ emasculation in these

movies is due to the fact that they “have been traumatized by personal and collective history” and, therefore, “grow up to be infantilized adults” (214). Martí-Olivella (1997) proposes a similar explanation for the overrepresentation of Oedipus narratives in Basque films. For this critic, movies such as Julio Medem’s *Vacas* (1992), Juanma Bajo Ulloa’s *La madre muerta* (1993) and *Alas de mariposa* (1991), and Imanol Uribe’s *La muerte de Mikel* portray what he calls “(m)otherly monsters,” not only as a reflection of the obsession with death related to the historical violence in Basque society, but also as an illustration of the power of masochistic desire (98). Curiously enough, Gabi-londo also articulates masochism as a central characteristic of Basque masculinity. According to this scholar, Basque canonical authors such as Bernardo Atxaga and Ramón Saizarbitoria, unlike their Spanish counterparts, populate their stories with self-sacrificing “male subjects that stand for masochist representations of castrated masculinity” (2011, 83). However, as Ballesteros reminds us, a weak or masochist masculinity does not necessarily entail the suppression of patriarchal privileges (2001, 145).

The masochistic Basque male, along with the phallic patriarchal mother, may be the outcome of the repression and disavowal of desire in the Basque Country. The lack of sex in *Vaya semanita*, one of the show’s most frequent topics, challenges traditional masculinity, which, as Gilmore explains, is normally based on men’s reported sexual prowess. Gilmore observes that: “El varón debe ser sexualmente agresivo y, obviamente, la mujer es el objeto de la conquista. Él tiene que ser un conquistador en el sentido sexual, lo que comúnmente denominamos ‘donjuanismo’” (2008, 34). Furthermore, Gilmore states that hegemonic Mediterranean masculinity requires competence in reproduction: “a man’s assigned task is not just to make endless conquests but to spread his seed” (1990, 41). However, Basque men do not follow this model.¹⁸ In one sketch of *Vaya semanita*, a group of men are in line at a drugstore to “renew” their condoms, as if condoms were their identification cards. The condom is seen on the show as a unique object that is never used. One of the men must “renew” the condom because, after three years of celibacy, it has expired. The man says that, unlike Basque men, immigrants use their condoms all the time, thus reinforcing the stereotype of immigrant men as hypersexual. Another man asks for a condom because his birthday is approaching and it is the only day of the year when his girlfriend agrees to have sex with him. In this case, men’s lack of sex is blamed on women.

On other occasions, men are the ones who show no interest in having sex. In one sketch, a young woman asks her boyfriend to have sex with her, but he responds that he is looking only for love, because he was hurt tremendously in a previous relationship. The woman complains about men and the way they think only of their hearts. Another woman then appears, reproaching the same man for using her only for love instead of sex. In this sketch, men display a stereotypical woman’s fixation with romantic love.

Another sketch of the “La cuadrilla” segment deals with Basque men’s problematic sex life. When one of the characters admits that he is a virgin, despite having been married for 20 years, his friends arrange a meeting with a prostitute for him. They are proud of him when they hear the squeak of a mattress from the brothel bedroom, but upon entering, they realize that he is alone and has not had sex with the prostitute. He must explain that his failure to perform – and indeed, his failure for the past 20 years with his wife – is due to the noisy mattress and his fear that the neighbors will hear him. Here, men’s anxiety about sex appears clearly. Stephen Whitehead and Frank Barrett claim that men fear the embarrassment and humiliation of appearing unmanly due to sexual incompetence (2001, 19). Lynne Segal also notes that sexual experiences often generate

confusion in men because they feel that they cannot satisfy women (2001, 105). Although the character in *Vaya semanita* does not mention his wife's sexual (di)satisfaction, his inability to perform stems from the pressure of having to please her sexually. He is likely to be afraid of the sexual act itself because, as Beneke writes, the experience of having sex with a woman "threatens many men with a deeply repressed desire to return to the safety of their mothers' arms" (1997, 99).

Conclusion

The television show *Vaya semanita* offers many opportunities to analyze the cultural construction of Basque masculinity. Rural Basque men are humorous, not only because they speak poor Spanish, but also because they present a traditional masculinity that must always be proven publicly, particularly before other men. The show deconstructs traditional Basque masculinity based on traits such as pride, physical strength, and courage when men fail in their tasks and do not succeed in imposing their old-fashioned values on society. *Vaya semanita* also portrays the importance of male bonding and *cuadrillas* in Basque culture but insinuates homoerotic feelings and sometimes even closeted homosexuality into male friendships. Furthermore, the relationship of Basque men with women becomes a source of male anxiety, a metaphorical emasculation. Women appear as strong and dominant in the private domain, while men are turned into *guixajos*, weak individuals with infantile characteristics. The figure of the mother is especially significant because mothers control their sons' lives and, at the same time, spoil them by doing everything for them. Finally, a lack of sexual relationships positions Basque men in a conflicting hierarchy in relation to hegemonic masculinity in Spain and Mediterranean cultures. Basque men are perceived to lack sexual prowess, and, therefore, do not seem to fulfill one of the main requirements of traditional masculinity.

These stereotypical characteristics of Basque masculinity refute the view of Basque men as *chicarrones del norte* or *morroskos*, strong men who possess strength and stamina. *Vaya semanita* mocks traditional Basque hypermasculinity and questions whether Basque men are as "big" as their physique suggests. However, the recurrence on television of this diminished masculinity – strong and brash in public, but meek, submissive, and even fearful in private – reinforces the idea of the existence of a unique masculinity in the Basque Country, quite distinct from that found in the rest of Spain, where it is more common to boast of sexual conquests. Hence it is possible that the scriptwriters of *Vaya semanita* intend to remind Basque viewers of the national traditions that are quickly being lost to globalization – especially traditional Basque masculinity. In this sense, the program exudes pride in the specificity of Basque culture and gender roles. At present, Basque men embody the frictions and confrontations between traditional masculinity and newer, more fluid models of masculinity.

Notes

1. The humorous tone of the sketch is heightened by the tension between the grandmother's dominant behavior and the song being played in the background of the bar, El Fary's "El torito bravo." El Fary, a popular singer during the Francoist years, represents a traditional concept of gender roles and is often seen as an idol by conservative men, such as Torrente, a character played by Santiago Segura in several contemporary Spanish comedies.

2. Janet Wasko asserts that critics have largely disparaged television as being valueless and vulgar, blaming it “for everything, from passivity and obesity to stimulating aggressive and violent behavior” (2005, 4). However, Wasko also indicates that other critics have praised television for being a valuable source of information, education and entertainment, as well as for allowing people to share cultural experiences (4).
3. A notable exception to the marginalization of Spanish autonomous television programs in Hispanic studies is the work by Hugh O’Donnell (2001–2), who has analyzed the popular Basque soap opera *Goenkale* (“Up the Street”), broadcast on ETB-1. This critic has noted in *Goenkale* the creation of an imaginary Basque community through the diversity of its characters (193).
4. The two most famous segments of *Vaya semanita* during the first two seasons were “La cuadrilla” and “Los Santxez.” The latter focuses on the life of a family living in Bilbao but originally from Salamanca, a city in the middle region of Spain. The family’s two sons represent opposing political ideologies, since one works as an *ertzaina* (Basque autonomous policeman) and the other participates in the *kale borroka* (street fights in support of Basque independence). In the third season, “La biblia contada a los vascos” and “Los jubilados de la valla” were the most celebrated segments, and after the fourth season, “Los cuentos del aitite Arzallus,” “Euskolegas,” “Los Batasunnis,” “Euskaltegi,” and “El Jonan” have received most attention.
5. For instance, *Vaya semanita* mocked the self-government plans of *lehendakari* Ibarretxe, the President of the Basque Government, so that the audience would not consider his proposals in a serious or judgmental way (Moreno del Río 2007, 13).
6. In the opinion of Emeterio Díez Puertas (2006), the Spanish autonomous television channels, which were created in 1983, became the political instruments of their respective governments. However, the scriptwriters of *Vaya semanita*, such as Diego San José, deny any political intent whatsoever (López, par. 5), and, according to Óscar Terol, the main objective of the program is humor (2005b, 2). Agirregomezkorta also pointed out in a 2010 interview that, despite the government change with the election of Basque socialists, the program continued to discuss the same topics (par. 8).
7. In his other comedy books about Basque culture, Terol reveals a greater awareness about women’s issues. The content of *Ponga un vasco en su vida* (2007) is more equal in terms of gender. The book includes two sections that explore the benefits of a relationship with a Basque man and a Basque woman, respectively. In *Técnicas de la mujer vasca para la doma y monta de maridos* (2009), Terol discusses Basque patriarchy and explains the agency and dominant role of Basque women in their relationships with men.
8. In chapters eight and nine of Miguel de Cervantes’ masterpiece *Don Quixote* (1605), the character of the Biscayan squire is portrayed as courageous and aggressive when fighting against Don Quixote. In addition, his poor Spanish, influenced by the Basque language, was a source of humor at that time, much as it is today in some of the characters of *Vaya semanita*.
9. Although women have begun holding important political positions in the Basque Country, as proved by the recent appointment of Laura Mintegi as the leader of EH Bildu, the Basque nation is still constructed mostly as a male undertaking.
10. In many cultures, service in combat or the military becomes a common rite of passage into masculinity and is the means by which a young man turns into a “real” man in society (Woodward 2003, 43). For this reason, governments appeal to the promise of masculinity in order to attract young males into the army.
11. Although the practice of drinking in the streets occurs in other areas of Spain, it is very common in the Basque Country. In one sketch of *Vaya semanita*, a young male is regarded as the hero of the *botellón* because of two exceptional abilities – drinking excessively and befouling the streets with litter and urine. The sketch is humorous but it draws attention to young people’s heavy drinking, their apathy and their lack of opportunities in the job market.
12. MacClancy explains that the first gastronomic societies appeared in San Sebastián in the early twentieth century, proliferating during the 1960s and 1970s as a response to the constraints of Franco’s dictatorship (2007, 79).
13. In the army, physical and emotional proximity creates strong emotional ties between soldiers. According to R. Claire Snyder, the fraternal bonding in military organizations entails a certain amount of homoeroticism,

- “even if unrecognized or explicitly denied by participants and others” (1999, 152).
14. Due to legal banning, the political party that supports Basque independence and is related to the terrorist group ETA has changed names on multiple occasions: Herri Batasuna, Euskal Herritarrok, Batasuna, Acción Nacionalista Vasca, Partido Comunista de las Tierras Vascas, Sortu, Bildu, Amaiur, and Euskal Herria Bildu.
 15. Despite the increase in the number of female terrorists, motherhood and armed militancy have been seen as incompatible in the Basque radical nationalist movement (Hamilton 2007, 119). Furthermore, female activism in ETA has been explained as a result of women’s love for a Basque male terrorist – a phenomenon known as “couple terrorism.” Although Hamilton argues that women join ETA not only for personal reasons, but also for their own political beliefs (106), Basque culture has been reproducing these traditional ideas on gender. Gabilondo points out that Basque literature tends to construct female characters as either apolitical sexual objects or non-desirable political subjects (1998, 131), while in Basque cinema, movies such as Imanol Uribe’s *Días contados* (1994) present female terrorists as masculine-looking, unappealing to men, and responsible for mistakes in terrorist attacks (Rodríguez 2002, 146–8).
 16. An example of the symbolic importance of motherhood in the Basque Country is that the term *ama* (“mother”) is used in Basque as a prefix to the following words: language, native country, land, church, and the Virgin (Zulaika 1988a, 273).
 17. Terol is aware of the difference between matriarchy and matrilineality and points out that the real term to describe Basque society is the latter (2009, 19–20). However, he decides to use the term “matriarchy” because it is more common and his book, *Técnicas de la mujer vasca para la doma y monta de maridos*, is addressed to a general audience. Despite the humorous nature of the book, Terol mentions the discrimination that Basque women suffer in the public arena in relation to men (67).
 18. In contrast to Mediterranean hegemonic masculinity, in Spanish culture there are also some examples of incompetent male lovers. For instance, during Franco’s dictatorship, some comedy films from the era of the *españolada* depicted typically short, balding and unattractive male characters unsuccessfully pursuing tall, beautiful foreign women.

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