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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Claiming Breathing Space during Basque Plaza Dances

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Abstract

Maintaining minoritized expressions in the face of persecution has long been a subject of scholarship. In the Basque Country, dancers whose lives were deeply marked by the Franco dictatorship and its aftermath regularly attend plaza dances. Drawing on extensive ethnographic research in Donostia-San Sebastián, I argue that (through strict adherence to norms) these events become "breathing spaces" for participants: spaces in which language, music, and dance are vehicles for social life. Breathing spaces allow people to temporarily create the world in which they want to live, one in which the Basque language, music, and dance are predominant and secure.

Laburpena

Denbora luzez, jazarpenaren aurrean kultura-adierazpen minorizatuei eusteko modua izan da aztergai akademikoen artean. Euskal Herrian diktadura frankistak sakon markatu zituen adineko pertsonak plaza dantzetara joan ohi dira. Donostian hogei hilabetez egindako ikerketa etnografikoan oinarrituta, ekitaldi hauek (diziplinaren, uniformetasunaren, eta zurruntasunaren bidez) parte hartzaileentzako "arnasgune" bihurtzen direla defendatzen dut: euskara, euskal musika, eta euskal dantza bizitza sozialerako bide diren eremuak. Arnasgune hauei esker, pertsonek bizi nahi duten mundua sortzen du: non euskal adierazpenak nagusi eta tinko diren.

Resumen

Por mucho tiempo, los académicos han investigado como se mantiene expresiones minorizadas ante la persecución. En el País Vasco, personas mayores cuyas vidas estuvieron profundamente marcadas por la dictadura franquista asisten regularmente a los

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bailes de plazas. Basado en veinte meses de investigación etnográfica en Donostia-San Sebastián, sostengo que (precisamente con disciplina, uniformidad, y rigidez) estos eventos son "espacios de respiración": espacios en que el idioma, la música, y el baile son vehículos para la vida social. En estos espacios la gente crea el mundo en que quiere vivir: en que expresiones vascas son seguras.

Keywords: Basque; breathing space; arnasgune; plaza dance; discipline

In Donostia-San Sebastián, plaza dances constitute an audible and visible part of local life for a passionate subset of the Basque population.[1] To take part in these events, one is expected to have a high level of prior linguistic, physical, and social knowledge. This includes speaking or at least understanding the Basque language with ease, being very familiar with the dances that will be practised during the event, and understanding the social norms guiding participants' behaviour.[2] But prior knowledge and uniformity are not the only defining characteristics of plaza dances. I argue that these events are "breathing spaces" for participants: spaces in which the Basque language and other cultural expressions such as music and dance are vehicles for social life. Given that these are minoritized expressions, long dominated in this city by Spanish and/or globalized mass culture, such spaces in which Basque expressions are predominant are deeply meaningful to people.[3] While at first glance the kind of physical and social requirements that are central to these events might seem to be at odds with the freedom implied by the idea of the breathing space, the relationship between disciplining and breathing at these events is far more complicated.

To set the scene, here is a brief vignette from one of these plaza dances hosted by Trebeska, a local Basque dance school in Donostia's Egia neighbourhood. While similar to the regular monthly plaza dances that occur in the Boulevard, a central tourist area in Donostia, this dance also served as an alternative to them (Figure 1).

On a grey Monday in May, I made my way to a plaza to dance. I arrived and put my coat with a pile of others under a large overhanging roof; in the Basque Country,

[1] This city is called Donostia in Basque and San Sebastián in Spanish. Most place names in the Basque Country have different names or at least different spellings in at least two different languages, Basque and Spanish or Basque and French. Henceforth I will use the Basque name, Donostia.

[2] The uniformity seen at plaza dances is not necessarily seen at all Basque social dances. For example, at *erromeriak*, another kind of Basque social dance event in which other group dances (*fandangoak* and *arin-arinak)* are the most practiced, the ways people dance vary wildly. Dancers both make use of completely different steps from one another and give those steps their own style.

[3] I use the term minoritized rather than minority to emphasize the ways in which being seen as a minority is something that is done to small population groups, not something inherent or essential about them. For people living within these groups, they are their majority. Basque poet, lyricist, and activist Koldo Izagirre (1997) argues that the Basque language should be discussed as an inferiorized rather than minoritized language given that it has been strategically made lesser throughout the centuries in which other peoples (most recently the Spanish and French) have dominated the area. However, I continue to use the term minoritized as I believe it to be more useful in describing the dynamics that I explore.

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Figure 1. Dancers at the plaza dance described here, Donostia, May 2025. Photo by the author.

they're always prepared for the ever-possible rainstorm. A "jauzi" dance tune started playing through the speakers and people quickly formed a circle and started moving counterclockwise, following the steps through calls that were recorded along with the music. A friend smiled and waved from across the circle as she caught my eye and I went to greet her after the piece ended. She was an older woman I had seen at the plaza dance in the Boulevard the day before.

"This is great, there are so many young people!" she exclaimed after we exchanged kisses on the cheek. "Why don't they come to the big monthly dance at the Boulevard? I wish they did... Thank you so much for telling me about this, I hadn't heard about it!"[4]

The next few tunes were simple jauzi dances and then the organizer took the microphone and announced that we would do the bourrée, a dance done in two lines facing a partner and moving in and out between and amongst the lines in a series of galloping steps.[5] *Many of us had studied this dance in plaza dance classes. My friend gestured for me to join her, and we took our place next to two young men, one of them sporting fashionably black fingernails and one long dangly earring, the other looking as if he had just come from a country church service with creased trousers and a tidy buttoned up shirt.*

[4] All dialogue took place in Basque and has been paraphrased and translated into English by the author.

[5] This *bourrée* done in the Basque Country is similar to French *bourrée* dances done in folk dance circles throughout the world.

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Before the dance started, she asked me, "you know how to do this dance, right? You'll start this way." She pushed me into the correct position before I had a chance to answer.

When the first moving step started, the young men who were partnered and dancing to our right collapsed into good-humoured giggles. Both had managed to go the wrong way and they nearly crashed into one another.

"No!" shouted my friend and stepped out of line to physically move the two young men back into place. "This way!"

Throughout the rest of the dance, she continued to correct them verbally and physically, getting everyone ushered into the right directions as we moved through the steps.

The experience at this event and other plaza dances provoked me to think about how bodies are disciplined in the Basque Country. I contend that for the people who most commonly attend such dances, mostly older dancers whose experiences and worldviews were deeply affected by the Franco dictatorship in Spain and its aftermath, disciplining is a necessary part of what allows these events to become breathing spaces for them.

In this article, I highlight the complications that arise in situations in which populations with different languages and cultures exist in the same geographic space. In the part of the Basque Country that I consider (the southern side, which lies within the bounds of the Spanish state), these are Basque- and Spanish-speaking locals, immigrants from outside of the Basque Country, and visitors. Deep inequities mark relations between such populations. Economically, both Basque- and Spanish-speaking locals tend to have more means than recent immigrants from outside of Europe. Wealthy tourists drive prices up for everyone. Politically, Basques do not enjoy full sovereignty. They have existed under the reign of the Spanish or French since the solidification of the nation-state system in Europe between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Due to this lack of political self-determination, the need for breathing spaces has taken on heightened significance for Basques in the area.

The Basque Country: A brief history

The Basque Country comprises about 20,000 square kilometres along the Bay of Biscay and in the Pyrenees Mountains within the nation-states of Spain and France. Donostia is the city where I conducted the twenty months of ethnographic research that formed the basis of my PhD dissertation in ethnomusicology at the University of California, Berkeley. It is located on the coast at the mouth of the Urumea River, just twenty kilometres southwest of the border that marks the boundary between the Spanish and French states. Donostia is the capital of the province of Gipuzkoa, the most Basque-speaking area of the Basque Country (Figure 2).

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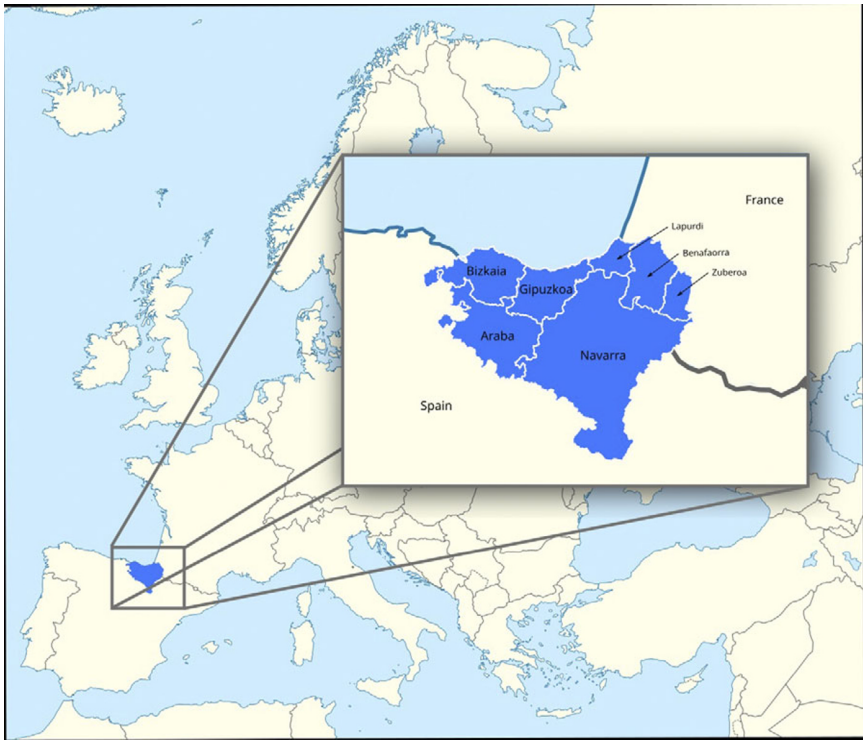


Figure 2. Location of the Basque Country with labeled provinces, courtesy of Gabriel Trisca, licensed under the Creative Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Basque_Country_Location_and_Provinces_in_Europe_Map.svg).

Although proto-Basque languages, and therefore what could be thought of as Basque people, are believed to have existed in the area since 3,000 B.C.E., what might be considered a Basque identity (given current understandings of ethnic, racial, or national group identity) could be said to have emerged in the nineteenth century along with the rising importance of nationalism throughout Europe. Towards the end of that century, in keeping with broad European trends, Sabino Arana (known as the father of Basque nationalism) solidified an idea of Basqueness as representing a pure and noble racial group that corresponded to a geographical area, linguistic background, and "nation." At this time, dance was adopted as a symbol of Basque identity and a powerful folkloric dance revival emerged linked to Basque nationalism. Arana's thought reflected a rising concern about the dangers of miscegenation as immigrants from other parts of the Iberian Peninsula flocked to the Basque Country during industrialization. While these xenophobic tendencies have been strongly contested by many Basques, such exceptionalist and isolationist attitudes reverberate in Basque culture and identity to this day.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, during both the authoritarian rule of Primo de Rivera (1923–1930) and the much longer and harsher rule of Francisco Franco (1939–1975), many Basque cultural expressions were subject to

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strict censure and control. Speaking the Basque language, singing Basque songs, or dancing Basque dances outside of officially sanctioned folkloric presentations could be cause for severe punishment by the Spanish state.[6] Therefore, Basque expressions were forced underground. While there was never an abandonment of such expressions, for the most part, people only spoke, sang, or danced privately and secretly in small communities in which everyone was a known and trusted insider.

Especially in cities like Donostia, there was a rupture in intergenerational transmission of cultural expressions because of political persecution during the Franco dictatorship. People were afraid to practice or teach the Basque language, Basque music, and Basque dance, and therefore, some intergenerational knowledge was lost. Most of the people I encountered attending plaza dances in Donostia had learned to dance through official dance classes rather than from family or friends. They were making a conscious choice and intentional effort to reclaim the practices that were denied to them because of the dictatorship.

People in the Basque Country have long resisted outside domination and oppression. In the 1950s, at the height of the Franco dictatorship, an organization emerged dedicated to creating an independent Basque Marxist state: *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA) or in English, Basque Homeland and Liberty. While ETA started as a nonviolent organization, it later adopted violent tactics, primarily bombings and targeted assassinations. Outside the Basque Country, throughout Spain and much of the rest of the world, ETA was seen with abhorrence and fear. Within the Basque Country during the Franco dictatorship, attitudes towards ETA were deeply mixed.[7] With the transition to democracy in Spain, Basque public opinion broadly turned against ETA, but the group continued to function into the twenty-first century, only fully disarming in 2018.

The suppression of regional linguistic and cultural expressions in Spain, so prevalent under Franco, lessened toward the end of the dictatorship as the regime was losing power. Peripheral nationalist movements drew upon and utilized language and other cultural expressions while simultaneously working to strengthen them as part of their attempt to resist oppressive Spanish nationalist rule.[8] In the 1970s, especially after the transition to democracy in 1978, it became more common to encounter Basque language and cultural expressions in public spaces. This decade saw a boom of Basque dance and other cultural expressions as a part of the Basque artistic movement initiated by sculptor Jorge

[6] Since Basque expressions are associated with the desire for Basque political self-determination, people caught speaking Basque or engaging in other Basque practices during the Franco dictatorship were assumed to be dangerous Basque separatists and/or terrorists. They might be arrested, imprisoned, and/or tortured. At the same time, the female section of the Spanish Fascist Party (*Sección Feminina de Falange*) organized folkloric shows that included traditional music, dance, and costumes from areas throughout the Spanish state including the Basque Country (Ortiz García 2012).

[7] For nuanced explorations of attitudes towards violence and resistance in the Basque Country, see Zulaika (1988). For an in-depth look at public opinion towards ETA, see Murua (2016).

[8] I use the term peripheral following the ways it is used in the Basque Country and throughout Spain to indicate regional areas not associated with what is often seen both inside and outside the country to represent it as a whole. For example, peripheral areas of Spain are understood to be the regions with distinct cultures and languages such as the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Galicia.

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Oteiza in which dancer, choreographer, and founder of the company Argia, Juan Antonio Urbeltz, played a central role (Corcostegui 2006:56–57).

However, to this day, the power and novelty of being able to speak Basque, sing Basque songs, and dance Basque dances has not worn off for those who personally experienced the Franco dictatorship or whose lives were deeply marked by it. Many people with whom I spoke, who are regular participants in plaza dances, speak of a deep sadness that they were not able to learn and practice these expressions as children or young people. For them, it is incredibly important and meaningful to make sure that such events continue to take place.

Arnasguneak: Breathing spaces

Originally referring exclusively to language, the term "breathing space" was coined by socio-linguist Joshua Fishman as a "demographically concentrated space where *Xish* [the language in question] can be on its own turf, predominant and unharassed" (Fishman 1991:58). Basque socio-linguist Mikel Zalbide translated the idea into *arnasgune* in Basque and defined it as follows: "An *arnasgune* has a large demographic concentration of Basque speakers: all or the majority of citizens know Basque and, what's more, within the *arnasgune*, amongst themselves, all or the majority's daily general language is Basque" (2019:18).[9] In its original socio-linguistic usage as both "breathing space" and "*arnasgune*" this idea specifically refers to fixed socio-linguistic and socio-geographic areas. In both cases, breathing spaces and *arnasgune* refer to spaces in which one can live in a little-spoken language without having to think about it, eliminating the linguistic stress that many speakers experience in their daily lives. Zalbide emphasized that, in the Basque Country, an *arnasgune* is a space in which the Basque language can exist as the assumed language of communication, where most people in the area are in favour of supporting the language, and where many are native speakers who have learned and continue to teach the language through intergenerational transmission. In a breathing space, the idea of a minority does not make sense because the group is the majority within that space. These spaces allow a globally small population group to be the unmarked category (Brekhus 1998).

Along with Zalbide's concept of *arnasgune*, two related concepts have been developed by scholars in the Basque Country. As explained by Basque sociolinguist Maddi Dorronsoro Olamusu, these are "the *babesguneak* [tr. safe spaces], the safe spaces for speaking Basque in the areas where either Spanish or French predominates; and the *arnasuneak* [tr. breathing moments], the events or activities to promote the community of Basque speakers" (2025:20). I am deeply indebted to the work of the scholars who have developed these concepts in Basque.[10] The plaza dances I explore are both *babesgune* in that they are protected spaces for speaking the Basque language and *arnasune* in that they are temporary.

[9] Translated from the original Basque by the author: *"euskal kontzentrazio demografiko handia du arnasguneak: euskaraz dakite bertako herritar guztiek edo gehienek eta, bereziki, eguneroko mintzajardun arruntean herritar guztiak edo gehienak euskaraz ari izaten dira beren artean, arnasgune barruan"* (Zalbide 2019:18).

[10] See: Amonarriz Gorria 2019; Artetxe Sarasola and Labaka Mayoz 2019; Hernández García et al. 2021a, 2021b.

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Throughout this article, I use "breathing space" in English as an umbrella term that incorporates elements of all three Basque language concepts.

Beyond its original sociolinguistic meaning, I expand upon the concept of the breathing space to mean a space in which Basque cultural expressions, always including language, but also music and dance can (to paraphrase Fishman) be on their own turf, predominant and unharassed (1991:58). These breathing spaces are transient; they come into being and disappear with the people, sounds, movements, and activities that fill them. In breathing spaces, cultural expressions constitute social life; people live through them rather than performatively present them.[11]

Participation is crucial in all events that I consider breathing spaces: they cannot be performances for a passive audience but rather necessitate immediate and relatively intimate interaction between individuals and groups through language, music, and/or dance. Participatory music and dance, as described by ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino (2008) who uses the term "participatory performance," is a fundamentally different kind of practice than presentational performances or recorded music. Turino defines participation as:

> ...actively contributing to the sound and motion of a musical event through dancing, singing, clapping, and playing musical instruments when each of these activities is considered integral to the performance. In fully participatory occasions there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants... one's primary attention is on the activity, on *the doing*, and on the other participants, rather than on an end product that results from the activity. (2008:28)

Plaza dances are public and therefore often include people who are passively watching the music and dance. However, the goal of the event is participation. Those who intentionally attend (as opposed to those who might happen to pass by and stop to watch for a moment) actively contribute to the sound or movement of the event.

Many characteristics of participatory performance can lead to the experience that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) famously described as flow, a state in which one's concentration on the task at hand is heightened so that one is fully present in the moment. As dance scholar Janet O'Shea explains, while experiencing flow, "we lose consciousness of the self as separate from the environment and our actions" (O'Shea 2019:92). Participatory music and dance can also lead to an experience of "wholeness," or the integration of the self in which people's inner life is balanced with their reason and senses. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1972) argues that artistic experience is particularly conducive to the

[11] When using "performative" in contrast to "participatory" or "social," I refer to presentational arts such as theater pieces, folkloric dance performances, or formal concerts. I am not using performative to mean the repeated actions that form one's sense of self and identity that have been famously explored by Judith Butler (1990) along with myriad scholars in performance studies, psychoanalysis, and other disciplines.

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development of integrative wholeness for individuals through "grace": the integration of the conscious and unconscious along with the attunement of the heart and mind (Bateson 1972:138). Breathing spaces, such as Basque plaza dances, allow participants the possibility to experience flow and wholeness.

An important aspect of a breathing space is that the language, music, and dance practised are contemporary and living, not recreations or recuperations of the past. Making sure that Basque cultural expressions are current and living has long been a preoccupation amongst Basque cultural advocates. As language activist José María "Txepetx" Sánchez Carrión puts it, "[a]dvocacy had to give priority not so much to making Basque into a national language, but to ensure it was a *biziaren hizkuntza*, meaning literally 'a language of life,' a language for living" (quoted in Urla 2012:147). Although the music and dance practised at plaza dances are seen as having links to the past, the fact that they are participatory and social integrates them into people's contemporary lives. This is in contrast to folkloric shows that offer a more static presentation of an imagined past.

As a spatial and somatic metaphor, breathing spaces allow me to explore how space, movement, sound, and breath interact to create a social environment. Breathing spaces are inherently relational. In a literal and material sense, the same air moves through different bodies while people inhale and exhale, making blatant the ways in which individuals are inseparable. This is akin to the ways in which various influences move through and amongst practices and communities, causing them to ebb and change. As gender studies scholar Magdalena Górska (2016) explains, breath is physical and cultural, material and discursive. I take a breathing space to be all of these things.

I contend that the expansion of the term breathing spaces that I employ here does meaningful work to maintain the vitality of minoritized cultures by exploring some of the ways in which people are creating spaces in which such cultures can thrive. The participation that makes up a breathing space is "radical within the capitalist cosmopolitan formation in that it is *not for listening apart from doing* – and we still tend to think of music as something meant for listening. Participatory performance is also radical in that it hinders professionalism, control, and the creation of commodity forms" (Turino 2008:77). Breathing spaces constitute one way in which people create an alternative world in which they want to live, to the side of governmental and market machinations. These spaces exist in logics outside those of globalized capitalism, in which bigger is always better, the consumer is always right, and relevance means following trends. Plaza dances are one manifestation of breathing spaces in the Basque Country.

Dancing in the plazas

At plaza dances, called *Plaza Dantzak* or *Muxikoak* in Basque, predominantly Basque group dances are done. *Jauziak*, a particular kind of group dance originally from the area around the Baztán Valley in the northern Basque Country and Navarre but now popular throughout the Basque Country, are the most common, but other Basque group dances, such as *fandangoak* and *arin-arinak*, also appear.

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These dances are all done in circles without partners and generally without touching. Some partner dances from other parts of Europe are also often included in plaza dances: waltzes, schottisches, polkas, and mazurkas. Additionally, a few group dances (such as the *bourrée* described at the start of this article) that were not originally Basque have made their way into the regular plaza dance repertoire. While many of these events happen with a live band, recorded music might also be used (Figure 3).

Jauziak are "called" group dances; that is, either on the bandstand or dancing with the crowd, one person uses a microphone, saying the names of each step just before it is done. If there is recorded rather than live music, these calls are often part of the recording. The *jauzi* dance moves consist of small steps, skips, hops, taps, and turns. Dancers' feet move quickly and lightly across the ground while the upper body remains rather still. Most people maintain their head at a relatively fixed height while dancing, not bouncing, tilting, or dipping lower into certain steps. Slight variations in steps are accepted. For example, for the call "*erdizka lauetan*" most dancers take two two-beat steps forward, then (twice as fast) step on their outside foot while turning 180 degrees, bringing the other foot in to tap against their ankle and then stepping it forward. This is repeated three more times. However, some dancers do this entire sequence while spinning 540 degrees during the first two slower steps. Despite acceptance of variations such as this, most people do all of the *jauzi* steps in exactly the same way. The few variations that are accepted are taught in classes.



Figure 3. Dancers during the plaza dance described at the start of this article. Photo by the author.

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During plaza dances, announcements, dance calls, and most social communication happen in the Basque language. If outside observers come up to ask dancers a question about the event in Spanish or English, I have seen these dancers politely answer and quickly turn away. Participants sometimes speak amongst themselves in a mixture of Spanish and Basque, but the dominant language of communication in the space is Basque. Given that (based on the most recently released statistical data from 2021) 47%, less than half of the population of the city, is fully bilingual, and the use of Basque in the streets is 15.3%, having spaces in which Basque is the assumed language of communication is deeply meaningful for those who would like Basque to be the main language of the Basque Country.[12]

Participants in plaza dances are expected to come already possessing the knowledge and sensibility to be able to participate with the physical aesthetic, linguistic familiarity, and social comportment expected at such events. People who participate are generally quite familiar with *jauzi* dance steps and calls. Very rarely will a musician or dance caller explain a dance during an event itself. While experienced dancers have stated that they are happy to help those who do not already know the dances even during the events, my observation of and conversations with people who are not regular participants at such events show that this is not a common practice.

The physical location of plaza dances, however, creates different expectations in terms of dance precision and pre-existing knowledge and skill. The dance described at the start of this chapter took place in the historically working-class neighbourhood of Egia. At the regular monthly plaza dances in the Boulevard, a high degree of dancing proficiency is expected, probably at least in part because the Boulevard is a central high-end shopping area in Donostia, which is the home to the city hall, the municipal library, and often hosts official functions. Due to these factors, dancers in the Boulevard might feel more of a need to perform the dances exactly according to the norms by which these dances are taught.

Participatory and social dance has been given little attention in Basque dance scholarship until recently. These practices were long assumed to be an important part of Basque life and neither deserving of, nor in need of, academic research. As early as 1775, Basques were described as "The people who dwell or rather dance at the foot of the Pyrenees" (Voltaire [1775] 1954:428).[13] In the twentieth century, Basque scholars began to write about Basque dance, documenting dances mostly in terms of their meaning, origins, and the context in which they were performed (including costumes, music, and social functions), so that they would not disappear.[14]

[12] The data on the number of Basque and Spanish bilingual speakers comes from the Basque Institute of Statistics, *el Instituto Vasco de Estadística (Eustat)*, provided on the municipal government's webpage: https://www.donostiaeuskaraz.eus/datu-soziolinguistiko/ezagutza/lang/es. The data on language use in the streets comes from the Sociolinguistic Cluster's 8th Competition for the Use of Languages, the *VIII Concurso de Uso de las Lenguas realizado por el Cluster de Sociolingüística.* This information is also available via the municipal government's website at: https://www.donostiaeuskaraz.eus/euskaraz/euskara-donostian/sekzioak/datos-sociolinguisticos/lang/es.

[13] Translated into English and quoted in Corcostegui (2006:96).

[14] See: Antequera and Gamboa (2000); Aranburu Urtasun (2000); Araolaza Arrieta (2011); Barandiaran (1963); Bengoa Zubizarreta (1966); Esparza Zabalegi (1994); Etxebarria y Goiri

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Basque dance performances and competitions also began to proliferate. Participatory social dancing only recently began to gain scholarly and public attention. Dance schools that were started in the twentieth century to teach performance and ritual dance only later began to teach the social dances (Corcostegui 2006). The attention of both scholars and teachers to social dance points to the need to more formally teach that which was previously learned informally through intergenerational transmission. This reflects the increasingly felt lack of community in Basque society and the consequent need to intentionally cultivate it. Given the widespread repression of Basque cultural expressions and the extensive violent conflicts in the area throughout the twentieth century, it makes sense that increasing interest and attention started to be given to personal and physical group socializing through participatory dance as a way to recover and revitalize Basque communities.

The fact that these dances are taught in official classes rather than through intergenerational transmission augments dancers' aesthetic uniformity. Such uniformity, which some may view as rigidity, can stifle creativity and individual expression, but it can also foster a strong sense of belonging amongst dancers. Having a fixed repertoire allows people to participate with the understanding of what they should expect and what kinds of knowledge and familiarity they need. This is especially important for older participants who might not have been able to learn the dances with family or friends during the Franco dictatorship.

Although people who identify as Basque and live in or are from the Basque Country are heterogeneous, those who regularly attend plaza dances are generally over 60 years old, Basque speaking (either through intergenerational transmission or intentional adult learning), and Basque nationalists. Older adults often say that they don't understand why younger people don't attend plaza dance events, while younger people often state that the general age demographic is the reason why they are not as interested in attending.[15] As Itziar Navarro Ibañez, a musician and dancer in her early thirties, put it, "it's over 55, over 60. The organizers are normally that age. And the times that I've gone with Eneko, they came to us, 'you're very young, who are you? You're new!' It's a little bit embarrassing, I don't know. I would prefer if it was more mixed, young people, old people. But still, it's nice" (Itziar Navarro Ibañez, interview, 3 March 2025). Another young musician and dancer, Teresa Jareño Querejeta, also emphasized that she doesn't regularly attend plaza dances "because of age... I would go, but often it's all over sixty and that determines what kind of dances they do as well... no more than three *fandangos* and *arin-arins.* But I also really enjoy those dances!"

(1969); Guilcher (1984); Irigoien (2000); Jorda (1978); Lamarca (1977); Sagaseta (1977); Sánchez Ekiza (1997); Urbeltz Navarro and Ayerbe Echebarria (2001); Urbeltz Navarro (1978).

[15] The fact that younger dancers do not often attend the regular public plaza dances in the Boulevard and in other parts of Donostia does not mean that they are not participating in Basque dance. Many attend other kinds of social dances (including the dances called *errromeriak* that are mentioned in footnote 2 at the start of this article) and perform in Basque performance dance ensembles. The younger people with whom I have spoken who take part in Basque dance often discussed being motivated by the healthy, safe, and pleasant social atmosphere that they find in Basque dance environments. Although the motivations and experiences of younger dancers merit attention in understanding the events that I explore here, a thorough exploration warrants another study.

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(Teresa Jareño Querejeta, interview, 28 January 2025).[16] Not only are these events not necessarily the social scene she wants to be a part of, but they also don't do as many of the aerobically demanding *fandangoak* and *arin-arinak* that she would like to do because those dances are too physically exhausting for many of the older dancers.

Beyond the general trend of older people attending and the practice of less aerobic dances being deterrents to younger people's participation, I believe that the need to conform strictly to an unchanging repertoire, along with a specific and highly controlled physical style, makes these events less appealing for some younger dancers. One of the reasons why I think many young people attended the plaza dance described at the start of this article and less often attend the larger regular monthly plaza dances in the Boulevard is precisely because it is an environment in which they can generally make mistakes and physically experiment without fear of censure or ridicule. While regular older participants at plaza dances who often correct newer dancers do not wish to discourage participation, their actions can.

For older dancers at plaza dances, embracing uniformity of style can be a way to further heal their past and bring it into their present and future. Plaza dances create opportunities for older participants to demonstrate their ability to publicly practice Basqueness, something that they were denied in their youth under or directly following Franco. By dancing in prominent public places, they also force non-Basques to recognize that Basqueness exists (Figure 4). However, none of this makes sense for younger dancers who were born long after the fall of the dictatorship and don't have these motivations.[17]

Even though many plaza dances happen in highly trafficked tourist areas of Donostia, many interlocutors have stated that it feels better for them to do these dances in Basque environments than in those dominated by non-Basques. Lourdes Querejeta emphasized that there is a very different feel when she is doing something explicitly for outsiders or tourists. She has strongly disliked being a part of performative presentations for outsiders, stating that she has felt herself to be akin to a zoo animal presenting a spectacle of Basqueness for observers. Itziar echoed this sentiment, speaking about the ways in which presentations for outsiders feel jarring. "You know in Greek there is a verb, *ksenerono.* It takes me out of the water, like a fish out of water. *Kserenosis.* You feel like this makes no sense" (Itziar Navarro Ibañez, interview, 3 March 2025)[18] Plaza dances are often located in areas with a lot of outside observers, but the event is still directed towards the participants. As Lourdes said, "it's not for them, it's for us" (Lourdes Querejeta,

[16] Translated from the original Basque by the author: *"Adin bideagatik... joango nintzateke, baina askotan hirurogei plus eta baita horrek ere baldintzatzen du ze nolako dantza motak ere bai... ez hiru fandango, arin-arin baina gehiago ez. Baina hau dantza hauek sortu dizkit eta gozatu ere baita!"*

[17] As has been explored in Basque sociolinguistic scholarship (see Ortega et al. 2015), compared to older people, younger people often perceive the Basque language to be less at risk and tend to be less motivated by Basque nationalist concerns.

[18] Itziar explained that this word is "ξενερώνω" in the Greek alphabet and offered ksenerono or xenerono as possibilities to express this sentiment using the Roman alphabet.

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Figure 4. Plaza dance participants and onlookers at the large monthly dance at the Boulevard in Donostia. Photo by the author.

interview, 30 January 2025).[19] However, the fact that these dances are often done in places with many outside observers points to the need of these dancers to be seen, to assert Basque existence, and to claim space as Basque.

Disciplining the body and claiming space

The strict adherence to bodily norms followed during plaza dances is part of the long history of disciplining physicality in the Basque Country. In my estimation, two of the most important factors in this disciplining have been the history of Christianity in the area and the ways in which political power has been consolidated into nation-states. Christianization and nation-state formation both propel and promote uniformity, and both have been part of the biopolitical processes by which population groups have been not only organized but also controlled.

There were long-held pagan belief systems in the Basque Country, and compared to other parts of Western Europe, Basques were late to fully adopt Christianity. The Inquisition sought to change this. This Catholic system of tribunals to combat heresy starting in the 13th century was deeply related to the Reconquista in Spain, the process by which Christian monarchs on the Iberian Peninsula worked to regain territory from Muslim rule. Anyone who was not fully Spanish or not fully Christian was seen as a threat.

In the early seventeenth century, in efforts to combat any non-Christian beliefs, a frenzy of witch hunting began in Europe. While witches were "found," tortured, condemned, and executed (often by being burned alive) in many parts

[19] Translated from the original Spanish by the author: *"Pero no es para ellos, es para nosotros."*

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of Europe, the witch trials in the Basque Country were among the most extreme. After visiting the Basque Country, it was said that "the witch judge, Pierre de Lancre... returned to his home with the conviction that the entire Basque population formed one vast sect of witches" (Henningsen 1980:xxvi). In 1610, there was an *auto da fé* (a ritual of public penance) in Logroño, Spain in which the vast majority of witches tried came from two Basque villages: Zugarramurdi and Urdax. The Inquisitors found that "a quarter of the adult population of the two remote mountain communities" were witches (Henningsen 1980:27). Given the view that Basque people were fundamentally different from the Europeans around them and shaped by pre-Christian beliefs, it is not surprising that the Basques were over-proportionally persecuted during the European witch trials.

Music and dancing were long looked upon with suspicion by the Catholic Church. As Basque ethnomusicologist Karlos Sánchez Ekiza explains, in the Middle Ages "dance was converted into something immoral and maligned. Basque dances were especially seen in this way" (2005:82).[20] Dancing and drums were thought to be persistent features of the Basque *akelarreak*, or witches' sabbaths. The demonization of music and dance was political as well as religious. As Sánchez Ekiza states: "This satanization of the dances and their instruments... wasn't only about social differentiation. There was also a political satanization of difference: the Basque is more immoral and satanic than the French" (Sánchez Ekiza 2005:84).[21] Again, one sees that the fear of Basques as a non-Christian, non-Spanish and French "Other," was extreme.

The image of the Basque as anti-Christian and with sinful music and dance practices held sway until the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century. At this time, the idea of the natural, rustic, honourable, and authentic Basque man of the *baserri*, the Basque farm, came into prominence. Stereotypical ideas of Basques changed: they were no longer assumed to be pagan witches, but rather to be hardworking, devout Catholics. Belén Altuna explained that, "to be a good Basque meant primarily being a faithful and strict Catholic, and that, actually, being so was indistinguishable from being Basque" (2012:17).[22] The phrase "*euskaldun, fededun*" in Basque or "Basque person, full of faith," directly associating Basqueness with religious devotion, is popular to this day.[23] The association with Basques and Catholicism became so robust that, as Koldo Mitxelena put it in a 1992 dictionary, "He who says Basque, says believer" (quoted in Altuna 2012:23).[24]

[20] Translated from the original Spanish by the author: *"la danza se convertió en inmoral y maligna. Las danzas vascas lo son especialmente"* (Sánchez Ekiza 2005:82).

[21] Translated from the original Spanish by the author: *"Esta satanización de las danzas y sus instrumentos... no queda en mera diferenciación social. También hay una satanización política de la diferencia: lo vasco es más inmoral y satánico que lo francés"* (2005:84).

[22] Translated from the original Spanish by the author: *"ser un buen vasco significaba en primer lugar ser un fiel y estricto católico, y que, de hecho, el serlo era indiscernible del ser vasco"* (Altuna 2012:17).

[23] These two words utilize parallel structure in Basque. The suffix "-dun" indicates possession: someone or something who has something, is with something or is filled with something. This phrase literally translates to: "possessing Basqueness, possessing faith."

[24] Translated from the original French by the author: "*Qui dit basque, dit croyant*" (quoted in Altuna 2012:23).

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As Basque dances were strategically modified to align with the vision of the noble Catholic Basque, elements understood to be either potentially sinful or foreign, that is, non-Basque, were eradicated. This was part of the attempt to consolidate an identity of Basques as a national people, deserving of rights commensurate with those of other national peoples of Europe. Eliminating physical touching was one way in which Basque dances were modified. In the early 20th century, the Basque music and dance journal *Txistulari* published that "[f]or a dance to be authorized, it is necessary and of utmost importance that no inconvenient gesture, no indiscreet contact, no intimate proximity between adults of the opposite sex, no dishonest posture, no union nor embrace which could incite carnal passion, should ever take place" (quoted in Bikandi Belandi 2009:102). Basque music and dance scholar Sabin Bikandi Belandi emphasizes, "and woe betide anyone who tries to perform a foreign, impure dance such as the paso doble or waltz" (Bikandi Belandi 2009:103). Throughout this process, Basque folk dancing came to be seen as a pure, moral, and upright expression of Basqueness.

As people's perception of Basque dance changed, dancers were seen to naturally embody what was considered authentic Basqueness. At the same time, both as dancers and as members of the community, they were expected to cultivate behaviour that would uphold the image of the authentic Basque dancer. As Lisa Corcostegui writes, "In addition to language, the dancer must understand the transcendental mentality of the Basques, their culture, art, political attitudes, traditions, culinary preferences, and values in general" (2006:67). This was also stressed by Bengoa Zubizarreta in the magazine *Dantzari:* "Our dance groups must not concern themselves only with dancing stupendously (although that is very important), but they should strive to have and maintain the authentic spirit of Basque folklore" (quoted in Corcostegui 2006:67). Creating a uniform idea of what Basque dance was and aligning it with Catholic values and an idea of essential Basqueness was a way of solidifying Basque identity and therefore the Basque nation.

Currently, plaza dances in the Basque Country are a way to claim space as Basque in this contested area. Throughout the Basque Country, there are almost always two or more languages and cultures present. Donostia, internationally recognized as within Spain, is an area in which Spanish language and culture have existed alongside Basque language and culture for centuries. In this city, different social and linguistic worlds sometimes exist in the same physical space, and sometimes next to one another, but they often maintain a strict separation. Although Basque people function within both cultures (all Basque speakers living within the Spanish state are currently fluent in Spanish and, unless they are making a concerted effort not to, can function with relative ease within Spanish speaking and culturally Spanish environments), the cultures themselves commonly remain separate. A person might go to an event in which most people are speaking Spanish, and the cultural references are those of the Spanish-speaking world (including Spanish and Latin American music, Spanish language television, and literature) and the next day, go to a Basque event in which the language of social communication is Basque and many references are to Basque cultural expressions (such as music and television). Even as people move between these

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two cultural and linguistic spaces, the spaces themselves generally remain separate. I have been to events in which some people switch between Spanish and Basque, showing that they can exist in a kind of hybrid space, but the fact that many native Spanish speakers do not comfortably speak Basque makes a true integration of the two spaces very difficult (Figure 5).

Any activity that is culturally marked (such as language, music, or dance) can be used as a way to claim space. During plaza dances, the sounds that fill the space (language, music, dance calls, and conversations), along with the movements of the dance itself, are all quickly and firmly identified as Basque. Therefore, at least for the duration of the event, plaza dances claim public space as Basque. The fact that this is done not only through movement, but also through sound, is particularly significant. As ethnomusicologist Marié Abe asserts, "space *comes into being* through the dynamic interrelations of multiple sounds, social encounters, and histories... space is produced through sonorous practices and encounters, and... sound does not simply happen in space, or across space, but dynamically produces space" (2018:29). Sound can pass through structures and bodies and "reroutes the making of identity by creating a greater and more suggestive weave between self and surrounding" (LaBelle 2019:xvi). Therefore, marking territory as Basque through sound and bodily movements creates a deeply intimate connection between identity and space.

The existence of Basque plaza dances reveals that participants refuse to assimilate into the Spanish world. They are unwilling to accommodate those unfamiliar with the language, music, and dances practised at these events. This has much in common with anticolonial and social justice tactics pursued around the world. When mutual recognition is impossible given unequal power dynamics, attempting to appease or accommodate those outsiders who are part of more dominant groups can become harmful. Refusal, as articulated by scholars Audra



Figure 5. A plaza dance in the old part of Donostia (Alde Zaharra in Basque or Parte Vieja in Spanish) in which the Basque flag featured prominently. Photo by the author.

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Simpson (2007) and Glen Sean Coulthard (2014), is an alternative tactic to the politics of recognition. In the Basque Country, I see refusal in the ways that people are uncompromising in their use of the Basque language and unwavering in their expectations of technical proficiency, along with conformity to a certain aesthetic and style for those participating in plaza dances.

In plaza dances, the multiple and uncompromising expectations that discourage participation for some are part of why these events are so meaningful for their regular participants. The necessity for prior knowledge can exclude non-Basques and can also deter locals, both Basque and Spanish, who do not perceive their knowledge or skills (in dance or language) to be sufficient. I have heard people express feeling uncomfortable and fearful of being shamed or reprimanded if they do not participate in exactly the same way that everyone else does. However, the fixed demands for participation at plaza dances mean that people will know what they can expect and what kinds of knowledge and familiarity they will need to take part. People can take dance classes and then attend plaza dances, knowing that what they have studied will provide them with the skills needed to participate publicly. Formal methods of learning the dances are especially important for older participants who did not have opportunities to learn them at a younger age. Additionally, these events provide them with a setting in which the Basque language is guaranteed to be the assumed language of communication in a prominent public space.

Breath, discipline, and hope

Breathing spaces are spaces in which cultural expressions are vehicles for social life; they are the means through which a culture and its people live and breathe. I argue that breathing spaces are necessary for cultural practices to maintain their vitality and for cultures to remain relevant to members' daily lives rather than being relegated to the museumified halls of folkloric performance. Within breathing spaces, cultural practices integrate new influences, change in response to the demands of the moment, and allow people to interact with one another through the medium of a given cultural expression: language, music, and/or dance.

Basque breathing spaces are spaces of wonder and hope. They show that people can create their own social world through actions, even in a physical space shared with others. They hold the hope that now and into the future, a world seemingly destined for extinction (through logics that contend that minoritized languages and cultures will always die out and be replaced by larger ones) can indeed thrive. German philosopher Ernst Bloch spoke of hope as utopian, arguing that it could play a key role in political struggles through helping people understand the limitations of their reality and imagine a better world (Bloch 1986). But the breathing spaces created during Basque plaza dances are not solely about the future. They are like the electronic dance music scenes that ethnomusicologist Luis Manuel Garcia-Mispireta described in that they "are not only dress rehearsals for better days to come; they can also create small, temporary pockets of living utopia" (Garcia-Mispireta 2023:14).

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However, given the uniform aesthetic and behavioural expectations demanded at plaza dances—most clearly seen during the monthly dances at the Boulevard—one could argue that plaza dances are not breathing spaces. The strict disciplining of the body during these events allows very little (if any) room for innovation. The dances are expected to be done in an inflexible way—they are not allowed to breathe in new influences, to adjust or change. However, I contend that these events are breathing spaces, but that it is not the practices but rather the people who are able to breathe freely during them. And for people to breathe freely, both a disciplined body and a space of one's own are necessary. For a dancer to continue to move with ease for hours and long into old age, they need to train. The fixed repertoire and strict disciplining of movement during plaza dances are a means for their older participants to physically breathe freely while moving. The ways in which space is claimed through these events also allow them to emotionally breathe freely through Basque expressions after the suffocating years of oppression under the Franco dictatorship.

Glossary of Basque terms.

Note: Basque is an agglutinative language that uses declensions: ways of changing the word to indicate articles, grammatical case, and/or number. Basque words are included with the declension appropriate to the word's position within the English language sentence: the suffixes that indicate the singular ("–a") or plural ("–ak") article are used as appropriate.

Akelarre: This is the name for witches' sabbaths in the Basque Country, originally thought to be gatherings to worship and celebrate the goddess Mari (considered the central figure of the Basque pantheon), Aker (the goat deity who was the head of the lesser spirits), and the moon (Bullen 2003). *Akelarre* comes from two Basque words: *aker* or goat, and *larre*, or meadow. With Christianization, the goat was perceived to be an embodiment of the devil.

Arin-Arin: The *arin-arin* is a popular Basque music and dance type. Musical pieces in this style are in duple meter, up-tempo, and traditionally follow a regular form with two or more eight-bar parts. *Arin-arinak* with lyrics are sometimes called *porrusaldak.* The dance is done in groups of two or more people in circles and consists of different steps depending on the region. Generally, the *arin-arin* has four different steps made up of different combinations of quick hops, turns, and flicks of the feet. *Arin-arin* literally means "light" or "quick" and is traditionally done immediately following a *fandango*.

Arnasgune: *Arnasgune* literally translates to a "place of breath" in English. *Arnasgune* is a term used by sociolinguists to refer to places in which Basque is the assumed language of social interactions, in which Basque speakers can live in Basque with no linguistic stress.

Arnasune: Rather than "places of breath," *arnasune* literally translates to a "moment of breath" (Dorronsoro Olamusu 2025). *Arnasuneak* are distinguished from *arnasguneak* in that they are fleeting and might occur in larger geographical areas dominated by Basque, Spanish, or French speakers. Any event or activity in which the Basque language or the community of Basque speakers is supported can be an *arnasune.*

Babesgune: *Babesgune* literally means a safe or protected space (Hernández et al. 2021a). It has been used in Basque language activism to refer to spaces where it is safe to speak the Basque language within a larger area dominated by Spanish or French.

Baserri: This is the term for a Basque farm and/or farmhouse. While fewer and fewer people live in *baserriak*, their cultural and symbolic importance through connection to and identification with place holds great cultural weight. Historically, families were named for their house and people refer to their family as "those of the house" (*etxekoak* in Basque).

Erromeria: An *erromeria* (*romería* in Spanish) is an open-air dance. Historically, these were short Catholic pilgrimages that ended at a hermitage, at which often there would be music and dancing. Today, many different kinds of dance events can be called *erromeriak*: any kind of outdoor

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participatory dance party where Basque traditional and popular music is played. The most traditional *erromeriak* occur in the mountains at hermitage sites. At these events, the music is generally provided a *trikitixa* (Basque diatonic button accordion) player and *pandero* (Basque tambourine with a drumhead) player. The most common dances at these *erromeriak* are *fandangoak* and *arin-arinak*, although other dance types such as polkas or waltzes are also included.

Fandango: *Fandango* is a popular Basque dance and tune type. As a musical style, *fandangoak* are in triple meter, generally written out in 3/4. They traditionally follow a regular form with two or more parts of 8 bars each. Sung *fandangoak* are sometimes called *jotak*. The dance is done in groups of two or more people in circles and consists of different steps depending on the region. Generally, the *fandango* has four different steps with different combinations of quick hops, turns, and flicks of the feet. A *fandango* is traditionally followed by an *arin-arin*.

Jauzi: *Jauzi* literally means jump or hop and refers to a tune and dance style originally from the northern Basque Country (currently within the French state) and parts of Navarre, but now popular throughout the Basque Country. These group dances are generally done in counterclockwise-moving circles. They consist of different steps, which are either called (announced) in real time or memorized. *Jauziak* are also sometimes called *muxikoak* or *sauts basques* (Bikandi Belandi 2009).

Muxikoak: *Muxiko* is another word for *jauzi* and also a term for a participatory dance event in which many *jauzi* dances are danced. In Donostia, participatory dances in plazas in which *jauziak* are danced are generally called *muxikoak*.

Plaza Dantza: A *plaza dantza* is a participatory dance event which can also be called *muxikoak*. In Donostia, *plaza dantzak* are generally called *muxikoak* and are midday dances at which *jauzi* dances are most commonly done.

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