

# GASWORKS

## Weaving Past and Future: Panel Discussion



**Sabel Gavaldon:** This is Sabel Gavaldon, curator at Gasworks, and today we are presenting *Weaving Past and Future*, a podcast about Catalina de Erauso and the construction of history.

Today's panel discussion features contributions from researchers at University of the Basque Country. The podcast features contributions from Catalina de Erauso expert and literary historian **Amaia Alvarez-Uria**, archaeologist **Sergio Escribano-Ruiz**, and art historian **Haizea Barcenilla**.

Thanks so much for being here today. I would also like to thank exhibiting artist Mercedes Azpilicueta whose exhibition, *Bondage of Passions*, just opened at Gasworks after a long period of lockdown. Mercedes is also here today and she will join me in moderating the discussion.

*Bondage of Passions* is the first UK commission by Mercedes Azpilicueta. Mercedes calls herself a 'dishonest researcher', and she creates work in conversation with archives and libraries, myths and legends. Hunting for traces of elusive historical figures from South America's colonial past.

The exhibition at Gasworks offers a speculative vision of Catalina de Erauso, also known as the Lieutenant Nun. In the early 1600s, Erauso escaped convent life in the Basque Country and travelled to the New World, where he or she lived under several male identities and became a ruthless conquistador at the service of the Spanish Empire, obtaining the Pope's blessing to pursue life as a man.

Larger than life and always on the move, Erauso adopted no less than five different names and claimed many lives before compiling his or her adventures into a published memoir that became the stuff of legend. The exhibition at Gasworks offers a glimpse into the fears and desires of a contested historical figure that resists categorisation.

Mercedes' exhibition also adds a new chapter to Gasworks' commissions exploring colonial and post-colonial histories. Recent examples of this include commissions by artists like Patricia Domínguez, Libita Sibungu Clayton, Kudzanai Violet-Hwami, Monira al Qadiri and Candice Lin.

The public programme for *Bondage of Passions* aims to make visible the networks of collaboration and complicity that are central to Mercedes' practice. The three academics invited to take part in today's discussion have been in conversation with the artist throughout the production of the exhibition and have shaped in different ways the thinking towards the show.

The first of our contributors is Amaia Alvarez-Uria. She is a literary historian at the department of Language and Literature at the University of the Basque Country. With a focus on gender, her PHD revolves around Catalina de Erauso as a historical figure that resists categorisation.

Thanks for being here today Amaya. To open this conversation can you tell us a bit more about the figure of Erauso.

**Amaia Alvarez-Uria:** Good morning everyone and thanks a lot for inviting me to this discussion. Well, how do we know Catalina de Erauso? Or how do we know Antonio de Erauso?

We know her as a nun to be, but who wasn't. We know him as a soldier fighting for the Spanish Empire. We know this character as the *Lieutenant Nun*. This is because of the autobiography by her or by him. But there are some doubts about the author because we don't have the original, we have copies and the copies aren't signed. Besides we have discord, we have contradictory dates and facts. This is why some researchers have doubts about the author. But from a feminist point of view, we can say that a reason can be that a woman was writing or publishing. Who is the genius? Who is the author? Who is the subject in the cultural arena? That's why they have doubts.

The other fact is, the text isn't very easy to categorise. It is hybrid as the author. We have fiction and fact. We have history. We have autobiography. We have romance and we have memoir.

So, the second point is the most juicy one. It is about gender identity. We have a female born person who has lived as a man in an age, in a century when we have the colonies in Spain, we have the Baroque and we have the one-sex theory. And the one sex is the man. And then we have woman and, the woman was the imperfect man. That is because of the humours theory, the female humours weren't as strong. That is why they didn't succeed in becoming man. So the man was the perfection of the human being.

What do we have with Catalina or Antonio de Erauso? She was born a woman and she was taken to the convent and she was meant to be a nun but she didn't want this life and then she became a man. That's why we say that in that period of time it was possible that acting like a man transforms you into a man. So, Catalina became Antonio, with different names that he used, and he was acknowledged, recognised as a man because of his acts, because he was a soldier, because he was a trader, because he was a manly man.

The last point is related to class and nature. Catalina de Erauso became Antonio de Erauso with the permission of the king and the pope, why is that? This is because he had a high status. Catalina de Erauso or Antonio de Erauso was noble, the Basque people were "hidalgos"

[gentlemen] and “hidalgas” [ladies] at that time and his family was a good family and it was a known surname. Besides, he was a Christian and a soldier and fighting for the Spanish Empire.

He was a historical character and literary myth. There were theatre plays written in the 17<sup>th</sup> century about him – comedies related to adventure and romance, and we have the text in several languages.

**Mercedes Azpilicueta:** Amaia thank you so much for this brilliant presentation. I was just thinking while you were speaking that I have read so much about Erauso but I never learn so much as when I listen to you. You put it in a beautiful way. Very well-articulated so thank you. I was thinking – you mentioned the lack of writing about Erauso in the Basque language and I was wondering is that is because Erauso is such a difficult figure to reclaim? And why do you think Erauso’s figure sits so uncomfortably with projects of national construction and historical reclamation.

**Amaia:** Thank you Mercedes for your question. We have spoken a lot about Erauso’s sex and gender but what is really interesting is the colonial perspective. There are very few publications about the coloniality of his acts and there are only four texts published in Basque about Erauso, and that is strange because a lot of papers and books and doctoral thesis have been published. But in Basque we have very few texts. Mexico, Chile, Peru have reclaimed Erauso as part of their histories. So why that Basque people didn’t reclaim Erauso? This is because of her or his dark past. His colonial past. His Spanish Empire past. So Basque people, some of them, have preferred not to publish, not to reclaim Erauso as a historical character of the Basque history and Basque literature.

If we look in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, we can find different portrayals of Erauso and they are contradictory. We have on the one hand the patriotic Spanish figure and we have Erauso as a defender of the Christian faith and this is what some Basque people liked from Erauso and this is why she was vindicated by some of them. Because she was a rebellious nun but never the less a virgin, and Christian. And so, it is very controversial, this figure.

**Sabel:** Thanks so much Amaia for framing Catalina’s life for us. Your contribution has touched upon important questions about the limits of historical knowledge and our limited access to any truth about Erauso.

In order to address these epistemological questions now I would like to introduce Sergio Escribano-Ruiz. Sergio is a historical archaeologist in the department of geography for history and archaeology at the University of the Basque Country. He is a member of the research group in Built Heritage and the UNESCO chair on cultural landscapes and heritage.

Sergio how much would you say we can actually know about the past and about the figure of Catalina de Erauso in particular?

**Sergio Escribano-Ruiz:** Thank you Sabel, and thank you Gasworks, and Mercedes I would like to join Amaia and acknowledge the opportunity you gave us to think about stuff that is quite important for us and the opportunity to meet for the first time.

Just trying to answer your question... the first thing I said to Mercedes was that I couldn’t come to know a person in the past as an archaeologist. I am sorry maybe I am not the guy that will help you [laughs]. Thanks to my condition of historical archaeologist, I am used to dealing with both the scales. With a general scale and with concrete and specific scales. As we normally work with both bodies of evidence, both texts and materials things.

This plurality of ways of reaching the past explains why we have so many different visions of the same character, in this case of Catalina. The evidence depicts a different vision of the same process. We can ask then who were those writing? What were they specifically writing about? And what they were writing for?

Every person has a specific perception of the past that is projected when creating it. We have several people and different evidences - all of this is creating a different vision of the same event or process. Indeed, every group of people in society are choosing what characters or specific event is representing them. This is a continued process of selection of how we want to see ourselves. How we can use the past for recreating our interests, how we can try to construct our identity.

That is why we can also decide to avoid remembering something. This is the case for example of Basques and colonialism. This particular relation that has much to do with what we are talking about. Because it may not be seen as a contradiction. That Basque society assumed the role of colonisers to Spain. We don't see ourselves as colonisers. We have been colonised by Spanish, Spain has colonised half of the world. That is the stereotype of the Basque thinking, regarding colonialism. We usually forget, maybe deliberately, the key role the Basques played in Spanish colonialism. We played a crucial role in that. For example, go for a walk through any Latin American cemetery and we see how most of the renowned soldiers had a Basque surname. I strongly remember going to the Recoleta and checking all the big Mausoleums and seeing them full of Basque surnames. Most of them were militias. Have a look into any historical account and we see how the same is happening with every single process. From the beginning from the exploration to the independence of those countries. Basques were active players of the Spanish colonial process.

From this point of view, it is not surprising that the figure of Catalina de Erauso has received almost no attention from the Basques – is practically an unknown figure for the public. This contrasts sadly with the importance she or he has gained in other countries.

It reflects both the above mentioned, forget about submission to Spain, but also the strong Catholic nature of Basque mainstream idiosyncrasy. We are known as one of the most Catholic areas in the surrounding countries. It has been less visible to us than to a Spanish or a Mexican because we did not want to remember her story, nor recognise the importance of his or her figure. But we are still on time to make it visible and I wish this exhibition to be a turning point.

**Mercedes:** Sergio thank you so much for this wonderful presentation and I think your contribution to this discussion is so valuable. Indeed, because you seem to come from a totally different field but the counter argument brings a lot to the discussion. I remember after you shared with me some of your research and papers. I wanted to ask you in relation to Basque colonialism if you can tell us about some of your research around the fishing activities in the North Atlantic sea and how this has shaped the identity of the Basque country.

**Sergio:** Thank you Mercedes. Thank you for your comments and thank you for letting me expand my ways of thinking about colonialism. Mainly what I have said is based on those case studies, I mean on research on colonialism in Argentina and Canada. That of Canada is related with Basques. From the viewpoint of ideology and how we see Basques relate with this part of the past... is supposed to be a better case of colonialism than others because there had quite good relations with natives. "We are not so bad as the Spanish", we used to say, "because the Spanish are killing people and we are just teaching them Basque". But if you look deeper the concept was the same, as colonialism was in most of the cases. We were there to

take resources and bring them to the Basque country. We were not doing things too differently and this is what I learned from these case studies.

**Sabel:** Thanks Sergio. Your contribution has addressed the limitations and the obstacles historians and archaeologists face when accessing past historical events.

Our next contributor is called Haizea Barcenilla. Her research has addressed these questions of visibility and representation with a focus on the idea of translucency. Haizea is an art historian and curator in the contemporary art and museum studies department at the University of the Basque country. Her research revolves around the politics of visibility and gender studies. She is also a member of the research project in genders and subjectivities at the University of Malaga. Can you tell us about your research around opacity and translucency?

**Haizea Barcenilla:** Thank you for the introduction Sabel. Thank you – I also have to sum up to thanking you for giving us the opportunity to be here with you today and to meet in person. We didn't know each other even though we work very close.

When I started talking to you, Mercedes, about your work something that came to my mind quickly was the idea of visibility that I have been developing in some of my papers and some of my research.

I am interested in questions of how things are made visible – which things are made visible, which are not, and by whom. Who has the power to be visible, to make visible, and who doesn't. In that sense how does visibility act as a political tool? We know by Peggy Phelan and other people who have talked about this, that visibility is something at the same time can be used as a political tool. It can be used as a weapon to become a political subject – to have a presence in a public space. At the same time it can be a dangerous tool that can be used against us. In the sense that it can make us be in controlled by powers or can make our image be manipulated by others. Visibility is something that the powerful can use very easily but those who are subjects to that power have more difficulties to apply to themselves.

I am saying that because for me it was interesting to think about Catalina de Erauso in terms of visibility too. I have known the figure for a long time as she is from the same region as I am – we used to go and see her portrait at the museum and she is not new for me. But I never thought about her in terms of visibility. I find interesting for example that there is a picture of her and there is this autobiography of her. Actually, she did try to go from the group of the vulnerable, a group of those who cannot be represented and a group of those who did not have who did not have control of their image, women in this case, to that of those who could control their future, their image and their possibilities to be public. I am not going to go deeper into that as I haven't had time to really think about it, but you really brought that way of thinking to me that was very interesting.

In that sense and in your work, I have been working with the idea of translucency. This idea of translucency applies... well I was thinking about what the relationship between can be seen and what cannot be seen. How can we become public, have a public image, reclaim that image without exposing ourselves to the control of power? I developed this idea of translucent strategies which are ways in which contemporary artists try to bring up the images or voices of people who are normally underrepresented and whose image has been taken from them and try to make them visible but without exhibiting them, exposing them or giving them to the power.

So, this kind of strategy, in some works of art of different people – one of them is Eileen Gray – maybe we can go back to her as there are some similarities with your work that I saw. But, I saw this in your work Mercedes, very much, the idea of showing, bringing up stories but without giving a transparent and direct response to the questions you were posing.

And unfortunately we have not been able to go and see your exhibition but I saw the pictures of it which were amazing and I really liked. I saw how you were playing with these images which are not extremely clear in that they don't bring a direct answer, but they do mix images which could not have existed together. Mix them in partial way but in a way – in a construction of images that becomes something new. Not transparent, but that opens up in contradictory ways. They need to be contradictory because this character is contradictory.

I also found very interesting that you decided to do this by using textiles. I found tapestry a very intelligent way of addressing many questions around the historical time but also about the nature of the high and low wards. We know that textile is something that has been used by feminist artists very often to reclaim a way of art that had been left in a second level, an 'under-art' so to say. But I also found it very interesting, coming back to this idea of translucency... Tapestry was something used in the time of Catalina de Erauso inside spaces to decorate to bring images, to show power but also to isolate from the cold for example but to divide space in the military camps. It was a way to move from the public to the private, from private to the public again. I could go for hours thinking about how these tapestries play with the idea of translucency.

How they are installed in Gasworks is very interesting because they are in a kind of curvy shape that allows the tapestry to be seen from both sides. Like two sides of history or the two sides of the character. You have the bright side and the clear side and you don't see any of the seams, then you go to the other side and there is the work, the contractions, the things we hide behind that give us the structure of what the work is by itself. In that sense for me your work was very fascinating from the point of view how to visualise a history that is so complex, like the one we are dealing with. Like any history it has not one direct answer but a lot of possibilities and open doors.

**Mercedes:** thank you for your amazing contribution, it is inspiring to listen to you. I think I would like to hear a bit more about Eileen Gray's work as a designer. She is someone we looked into together when we started our conversation a few months ago. I thought maybe we could talk a bit more about her. Especially in relation to the "biombos", or dressing screens which were an inspiring element in the exhibition. These type of objects arrived to Europe, to Spain via Mexico, coming from Japan in the 1600s. The folding screens, *Biombos* in Spanish, create spaces of intimacy in private domestic interiors – they also create a fluid interplay between visibility and invisibility which is something that you work with. Not sure if this is a question maybe just a comment... maybe we could expand a bit on Eileen Gray's work as a designer, and her dressing screens as an objects that queer spaces.

**Haizea:** Thank you for your question Mercedes because we were talking about this for a long time. It was a fascinating issue that we found, because I mentioned that your work reminded me of Eileen Grey and then you brought all this colonial story about the screens that I didn't know. I thought they came from Japan but I never thought of how they came to Europe - and I never thought it had been through Mexico. It makes a nice link to our story.

Eileen Gray is a fascinating figure who fits well with what we are talking about. She was a designer working in the 1920s in Paris, as we discussed. Her first work, before her architectural work, was doing screens in a Japanese style but in appropriation and they were famous and they were accepted in a specific circle in Paris. So called circle of Sapphist circles.

Groups of lesbian women who were independent and who in the 20s had the opportunity for the first time to live their sexuality in a bit more of an open way. Not complete liberty but a bit more open. They were able to dress in a manly way and not be looked at in the streets. They were able to be independent. They were able to have friendships, that were love relationships but that were more or less accepted for about a decade in Paris at the time. Eileen Gray was probably a lesbian woman, or at least she was a bisexual woman, and she had a strong relationship with this circle.

There is a very fascinating study of Jasmine Rault who compares her work with Romaine Brooks, who was a painter in the same circle. Who has a number of paintings in which nude models are posing, getting dressed or undressed behind a screen and she was thinking about how the screen was an important element in the house of a lesbian woman at the time, because it allowed them to have some spaces that were not completely visible or to change the use of spaces from public to private depending on the people that were there.

So if it was a lesbian community they could be more open because there was nothing they needed to hide. If it was a more mixed community in which they were trying to be more ambiguous with their sexuality, then they would use the screens to separate. She was talking about this idea of visibility or invisibility and how to show yourself partially or in an unambiguous way. So, it came to the conversation very naturally and fit really well with the kind of work you are doing. It was enriching to know that there was this side of the screens coming through Mexico – a lot to think about.

**Sabel:** Thanks for your brilliant contributions. Now I would like to open the discussion by posing a question about Catalina de Erauso, but it is also a question more generally about historical knowledge and the construction of history. today we have seen how Erauso pushed gender boundaries in a way that defies categorisation. but I wonder is, what are the risks when dealing with Erauso's gender from a present perspective. can we really talk about Erauso's queerness in the 1600s, knowing that their life preceded the establishment of a heterosexual regime as we know it since modernity, as the result of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century medical science. So if we are discussing Erauso's gender identity how can we deal with this huge epistemological gap between Erauso's world and ours? Any thoughts about this?

**Amaia:** The three of us are historians and the three of us look at history from a critical point of view. So when we are face to face with Erauso we have the problem of writing history. Previously Sergio has told us that we create the past and I think this is a very beautiful way because the most important thing for me is to know who is speaking about Erauso. Because we have different discourses from a feminist, LGBT or queer point of view. Erauso is a very interesting character to speak about, or to speak about non-binary ways of being.

We have also the history of the nations and we know for example that Spain or Chile or Mexico have spoken about Erauso as a role model. And finally, we have the religious texts and they vindicate the virtuous and virgin Erauso. So we have a lot of readings, what do you think about this?

**Haizea:** Well, Catalina de Erauso resists categorisation and I think it's the most descriptive way to talk about this. I am not an expert on how to talk about queer issues regarding the past. But of course its quite difficult to use the same terminology or to say clearly that Erauso was this or that because we don't know if she was a woman who wanted to live the role of men in society but had no problems with her sexuality and she was obliged to act as a man because she wanted to have the life of a man. Or if she was a he, who really felt that he was a man. So that makes it completely impossible to give a close answer to this. But what is true is that, regarding it from an art history point of view what was said by Amaia is very important.

which is that she is very useful as a figure to look back from today and to understand how all these ambiguous figures that have existed before have shown themselves, how they have gained visibility, how they have performed their lives and they can be read from the present. Because when we are doing history we are always reading from the present, that's something we cannot escape. So, since we are reading it from now we can read it using our words but always be very clear that we cannot define these people in a closed way. Its always like an open book for me. But if its useful for us from a queer perspective or a feminist perspective, to bring back these characters like Erauso and read them and they can help us to think of other ways of making history and of the future. I think that is very useful to us and we should do that.

**Sergio:** From my perspective and going back to the construction of history, or I prefer to say "the past", several decades ago women were not part of history. We had erased them from the past and in recent years we have realised that everything that's not binary also has non present narratives. We're not comfortable with things that are actually complex. I always say that its very difficult to describe the present so in my describing a past that does not exist and we don't have the clues for, that's why these characters are so difficult to face because we tend to create static, dual narratives. We have people like this in the past, but they are not in our stories, they are not in our narratives. I think that Catalina is pushing us to say 'you have to let these people in to our past' because they're in limbo. Sorry for the catholic terminology. So, its contradictory and I think that's what makes it fascinating.

**Haizea:** We've mentioned many times that this is also a character that's also very difficult to assume in her totality. For example, if you look at it from a queer, feminist point of view its great that she or he decided to change her life and make something different, take another role. But then she happens to be a colonialist who killed a lot of people, which is also not so nice. So, none of the readings you can do are an ideal or icon of what it should be because there's always something dark about her, it doesn't matter where you look from. And that makes her a very complex historical character and for us, that is fascinating. But of course its very difficult to put into an official nice beautiful pink history of somewhere.

**Sabel:** I was really interested when Haizea was saying, "Is Catalina's claim of a male identity just a way of moving up in society or did he actually feel like a man? What is the truth behind Erauso's gender identity?" I think this reminds us how difficult it is to use this vocabulary when we are talking about a person who lived in the 1600s. Its obviously much later in modern times that biology became the grounds of gender, but Erauso lived in pre-modern times and here someone like Thomas Laqueur comes to mind. For those who are not familiar with him, Thomas Laqueur is a historian of science, sex and gender. Amaia was quoting him earlier in her intervention when they were talking about the one-sex theory, this idea that before modern times there was only one sex. Well my point here is that Laqueur had established that before the 18<sup>th</sup> century sex and biology were seen always as the expression of gender hierarchies, not the other way around. So suddenly the very ontological question about gender –"what is really Erauso's sexual identity?", this question– seems a very modern one. Which is kind of alien to the world of Erauso. So, in my mind this poses again the problem of how do we approach historical moments in which the very vocabulary we're using seems not to work anymore. And it becomes messy complicated problematic. So how do we do this? What do you think.

**Amaia:** Well I think it's a fascinating subject for me, because we are speaking about sex and gender roles, and not only that but social roles. How to behave, to act, what appearance we have to have to fit in our society. So, Erauso has two faces or two sides; the light and the dark. Erauso followed the roles because she has virtue as a female and he has honour because he was a fighter and soldier. So we have a virtuous woman, an honourable man and someone

who follows the rules. But at the same time he went beyond the limits of sexual relations and of gender identity, so this is the picture of Erauso and we can find it as a fragment in the dressing screen or the tapestry of the exhibition. And we have a picture that shows an angry man, an angry soldier. So what can we see? How did they portray him? It is unpleasant. We can link it with the freak shows of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Look at this, this is different, this isn't following the rules, this is a monster. So, this is the person I think of as Erauso.

**Sabel:** Mercedes I was wondering to what extent you identify with all these problems and obstacles that historians seem to face when dealing with a contested historical figure like Catalina or Antonio de Erauso. Or if maybe as an artist you feel that your position is very different, maybe because of that you deal with other problems and other obstacles. I guess my question is whether you could tell us a bit more about your approach but also what is your responsibility when tackling a contested historical figure like Erauso.

**Mercedes:** Yes, well I was always a bit careful when it came to Erauso because indeed as we have said it's such a difficult character. Even though they could be seen as a queer figure through nowadays eyes, at the same time there's something wrong about him or her. I thought that that would be quite a challenge to work with, but I also believed that change goes hand in hand with uncomfortable situations or positions. So maybe Amaia, Haizea, Sergio, myself, we work from different fields but we do a similar type of practise, which is stepping out of our comfort zone and working with these difficulties and obstacles. When it comes to change history and to rewrite history and to retell ideas and images, there is a need to change our positions, to change our point of view or our perspectives and figures whether fictional or real, like Erauso, they facilitate that because already from the very beginning trying to understand the life of such a character it's a mess, it's difficult, it's complex. I find that challenging and it's kind of the spine of what I do, there has to be some sort of discomfort when it comes to being an artist or a researcher. We need that I feel.

**Sabel:** I think this fantastic comment by Mercedes about engaging with uncomfortable positions as researchers which is an invitation to stay with the trouble as Donna Haraway would say, it feels to me like a great final note to close this discussion today. Thanks to all of you Amaia, Sergio, Haizea, Mercedes for your brilliant contributions to this podcast. In the introduction I was posing the question of how much we can actually know about a historical figure like Catalina or Antonio de Erauso. It's been such a privilege to host an encounter between your very different research perspectives and backgrounds when approaching this question. So thanks again, also to our listeners, we hope to see you soon at Gasworks.

Mercedes exhibition *Bondage of Passions* is now open to the public and running until July 4<sup>th</sup>, you can book your visit at [Gasworks website](#), we hope to see you very soon.