Leopoldo Savignac and Basque Photography in the first half of the 20th century: an autoethnographic investigation

Rae, Ines

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My concern as a writer is with memory, both personal and collective: with the restless dead asserting their claims. My own family history is meagre. An audience member once said to me, “I come from a long line of nobodies.” I agreed: me too. I have no names beyond my maternal great-grandmother – but let me introduce her, as an example, because she reached through time from the end of the 19th century to form my sense of who I am, at this point in the 21st: even nobodies can do this.1

My grandfather has a long rather lean face obscured by a thick ornate moustache. He wears a broad brimmed black hat and looks directly at me.

I pass the image to my mother and after a while she smiles broadly. “This is my father. This is Leopoldo.” I nod. “Yes. I found it on the internet”.

Her thin arthritic fingers caress the blue-black ink of the photocopy carefully. “Is it possible to find out more about him?” she asks, “He was an artist, like me.” She gazes down at the picture.

I have called this project *Portrait of a Woman* after a photograph by Leopoldo Savignac, my grandfather. A young woman of about 18, long curling hair falling over her shoulders, it is a relaxed, naturalistic picture for the time. Published in 1921 it could be a picture of my grandmother, or it might be a portrait of my grandfather’s eldest daughter as they were both born in the same year of 1903 (my grandmother was his mistress not his wife).

I speculate. It may be an image of a stranger, a friend’s daughter perhaps who has come to sit for a portrait from a talented photographer.

*Figure 1: Savignac. 1921. Retrato de mujer*

The portraits, and arguably self-portrait I am attempting to explore here include my grandfather, his daughters (one of whom is my mother), where the other daughter is
invisible and so far, impossible to find but potentially continued his photographic work into the 1960s in Madrid.

In terms of evidence when I started, I hardly knew more than their dates of birth and death. I grew up in silence. This silence or void is what I am partly trying to recapture with my project.

I am creating photographs and writing a narrative about my search, which creates a space in which the findings from the archive and other documents can resonate with my own experience as a woman, as a reader, as a writer, as an image-maker. I am trying to find a language to tell a story.

Figure 2, Rae. 2021. Isobel

Archives

Leopoldo Savignac Batistini was born in Venezuela in 1880 of a family originally from the Gironde area of France. One of several siblings he is the second eldest. He had at least six brothers, one of whom, Luis, was also a photographer. And even better known is his son Pedro “Pellin” Savignac Giovannetti, both based in Isla De Margarita, Venezuela. But for Leopoldo Europe is the place to go. In France at the turn of the century he marries Gabrielle Valette Gros, and they have one daughter, Germaine Savignac Valette, born September 1903.

Leopoldo and his family arrive in Spain in 1909 on the back of his brother running a chocolate shop in San Sebastian. He enters his photographic images into various competitions and makes a name for himself and his work quickly. His work is at a high around the early 1920s with several photographs published in Photograms of the Year, notably Retrato de mujer of 1921, Las Bailarines and Dialogo Interesante of 1923.

The work is beautiful and engaging. He has a skill with the darkroom processes of the time such as carbon and bromoil. His images range from views of his new country to studies of people with an eye for a strong composition and engaging light.
In *Historia de la fotografia espanola 1839-1986* two photographers Savignac and Ortiz Echagüe are both described as ‘nationally significant’ but that does not bear out in the evidence of the archives.

..... two photographers of great national prestige arrived in Aragón to record photographic images, they were Savignac and José Ortiz Echagüe. His work was quickly imitated by local fans, and although the first of them is known to have opened a studio in Zaragoza and moved to Madrid, the whereabouts of his archive being unknown, Ortiz Echagüe's collections on types and landscapes remain.²

Echagüe was very prolific, as a visit to his very large archive at the University of Navarre testifies. Savignac’s archive is lost, perhaps not considered seriously as he was much less prolific, not Spanish, moved around from place to place...and has no heir who appeared to consider the future. (Germaine his daughter seems to disappear in official records after 1965). Echagüe also came from a more privileged background.

As there is no coherent archive as such, revisiting the available documents in different places, on auction sites on the internet, in people’s private collections, revisiting the documents with a different methodology is the only approach that is left to retrieve a life, the different versions and possibilities of a life that had once been lived.

Thus, along the limits and uncertainties of the archive, memory enables a reconstruction of the past by exploring a universe of traces, fragments, erasures, gaps, and silences, through a complex excavation process where meaning is gradually rearticulated and transformed.³

I repeatedly experience frustration: with the limitation of the archive material, with accepting that perhaps I cannot know.

I was eager to drag up new details that others had overlooked, I was secretly longing for unambiguousness. This tension soon turned into a question which I needed to find answers for. How can ambiguous, missing, or non-existent material in a personal, archival context like Leopoldo’s be challenged, and replenished with literary and photographic means?
The project is a focus on creative writing as a method in the context of artistic research. Writing is an interest, the echoes, the discoveries. The project is an encounter with my grandfather’s photographs. I explore strategies of making pictures through recreations and reimagining’s of images which Savignac has taken.

I am one of the first people to try to put together his archive, which is spread all over Northern Spain. This exploration feels like a series of fragments, and this becomes a form of inquiry.⁴

In the words of Maria Tamboukou, “archival documents are often assemblages of fragmented, broken, and discontinuous stories, traces of the past rather than representations or mirrors of it...”⁵ What might be the benefits of using fragmentation as a strategy; to use silences and gaps and the unknowable?

**Life writing and autoethnography**

“Life writers...are accorded only a sort of immigrant status in literature: admired for their ‘investigative skills’, but only rarely noticed for the quality of their writing.”⁶ Michael Holroyd and Richard Holmes have both come up with the same metaphor for biography: the unwanted offspring” of the novel and history (Holroyd), a ‘bastard form’ resulting from the ‘Unholy Alliance’ of fiction and fact (Holmes). The result of this awkward marriage is an awkward child.⁷

Embarking on this project I was struck by both these observations. My mother was literally both an immigrant and a bastard, arriving in the UK to work for a green card in the early 1960s. So according to these conclusions she is most certainly an awkward child. My grandfather too was an immigrant from Venezuela who came to Spain at the beginning of the 20th century.

As scholarly research was no longer thought of as separate from life, private trauma, and personal stories, they could do other types of research—focused on experience rather than observable behaviour and acknowledging different world views and perspectives.
The narrative turn is intertwined with the development of autoethnography, And in the words of Carolyn Ellis an “approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” 8

To explore my grandfather’s work and life in Basque Spain is to also acknowledge the complexities of history and context in a wider sense. The cultural history is as much motivation for writing and takes the project beyond memoir or autobiography. Researchers are viewed as storytellers, engaging the reader with literary means.

**Monte Iguelde, San Sebastian 2021**

Last summer I became an orphan.

I am driven to go in search of a man I have never met, who I know only through stories told to me by my mother.

For Richard Holmes: the footstep model helps to embody the search for the other. “You would never catch them...But maybe, if you were lucky, you might write about the pursuit of that fleeting figure in such a way as to bring it alive in the present.” 9

It was evening and starting to go dark. I had reached the top of the hill on the outskirts of San Sebastian late in the evening by cable car. An excursion earlier in the day had confirmed I’d previously been in the wrong location for my attempt to re-create a photograph of my grandfather’s. I was excited to be in the right spot this time.

The image of Playa La Concha by Savignac is made perhaps for tourists, a black and white image of the Bay of Biscay made around 1910-15. I slowly make my way down until I am more or less at the right place for a similar view. It is more overgrown now, there is lush vegetation and tall trees. The town is more built up and there are a lot more boats moored in the bay today. To reach the right view I climbed over a closed off section of the path. I looked around, there was no-one watching. I walked carefully looking for reasons for closing the path. There was a smell of urine and a stray cat regarding me. I take some more shots. Just a bit further and maybe the angle of the island will be closer to the original image.
As I attempted to make my way down, I realised the shortest route was cut off by a tall, locked gate. I would have to go round the other side of the hill. I realised how badly I’d underestimated how long it would take me to return to the town. At least an hour. It was getting colder, and darker, I was hungry, I didn’t have my coat. I was annoyed with myself for overdoing it, for over-reaching when I was unfamiliar with where I was. The theme park at the top of the hill was out of season and deserted. The car park was empty. The other tourists that had accompanied me to the top in the funicular cable car had sensibly all taken the last one back down again too. As I walked along the dark road, lined by tall fir trees, all felt very still and quiet. I felt terribly alone.

Occasionally a car goes past. I get to the road and there is a bus stop on the corner, and I wait there, cars rush past and down into the darkened hillside path. I don’t know where I am or how far it is back to town or whether there is any pavement on the other side.

My thoughts were entirely in the present, in that moment of discomfort until another person arrived at the bus stop too and I confirmed it was likely to turn up. I spoke to the person, and they were an English tourist, which was a surprise but also an immense relief. I could afford to laugh at myself.

I got to the bottom of the hill, walked along the beach, and went into a restaurant. When I sat down at a table someone asked me to join him and clearly not having enough adventure for one night, I did.

Figure 3: Savignac, Leopoldo. 1923. Las Bailarines

Las Bailarines, San Sebastian 2021

I set off to find the address of the covid test clinic. It is a cool morning, the streets wet from overnight rain.

At the corner of the intersection, I wait for the streetlight to change. As I wait, I recognise the statue on the corner as the dancers from Savignac’s image Las Bailarines. Here it is, it was on my list as something to look for. In a completely unexpected place. Not next to the
building – the casino in the photograph - but definitely the right sculpture of three women, sometimes affectionately known as the three graces.

I take my camera and make some images from behind. Savignac has the middle dancer reaching with her castanet to touch the sun. Today there is no sun, there is no town hall or casino, just the traffic intersection, the morning commute, the corner of the furniture store and the overcast sunless sky.

I text my colleague Maddi with excitement that I have found the statues and she replies with a yes Savignac’s image could be a montage, but the dancers were once on the Boulevard in front of the town hall. She sends me a prosaic image from an archive and an Instagram link. The documented image shows the sculpture in the grounds which are close to the town hall/casino. This makes sense as there are no other images I have come across where Savignac has made a montage. So perhaps this is all I can know, the past is gone, the statue no longer in the place that Savignac would have experienced it.

If I re-create it what does this mean? What is the point of comparing then with now? To deal with my own sense of loss...as a way into knowing a city which is new to me? Richard Holmes is very evocative in describing his romantic inclinations to follow in the footsteps of Stevenson. “There was no way of following him, no way of meeting him. His bridge was down. It was beyond my reach over time, and this was the true sad sign. “

There is a sense that I will never have the same experience of course but I have his photograph, or a copy of it. My experience of the city is different because of it. And going in search of the views sometimes reaps more rewards. Monte Iguelde is made a richer experience for having seen Savignac’s picture of it. It led me on an adventure I might not otherwise have taken. Finding the dancers helps me look more carefully at my surroundings and think about how the photograph was made, how the city changes over time. When Savignac took the photo of Las Bailarines in front of the town hall in 1923 the building was in fact the Gran Casino until gambling was banned in 1924 by Primero de Rivera.
Hermione Lee acknowledges the temptations of the footnote model and the moments when it yields results:

Monk’s House is haunted by Virginia Woolf’s writing. Because she turned it so vividly and lovingly into her words, her readers have the illusion that they can cross the broken bridge into the past and see it as she did. This illusion is the more tempting because the house has been preserved and the village of Rodmell is ‘unspoilt’. They seem to have withheld something from the extreme, complex changes of the century.11

Figure 4: Savignac, Leopoldo. 1937. El Caudillo

Leopoldo meets Francisco

On a warm sunny day, I take a short bus ride from San Sebastian, to Zarautz. I walk along the seafront of the small town. There is a pleasant breeze. The museum sits apart from its surroundings in a tall cream coloured building a short way inland. I have an appointment with Marcellin to view some old photographic magazines from the 1920s which feature my grandfather’s work.

I am sitting in the archive with the copy of the journal which contains the portrait of Franco which Leopoldo Savignac took in 1938 for the National Propaganda Service. The book is old and somewhat fragile. It is covered in crinkly tracing paper to protect it, the papers yellow and speckled with age. The pages need to be turned carefully; they smell a little musty as if stored in an airless room for a long time.

I am shocked and surprised to find the image in the frontispiece of volume three of Estampa de la Guerra. Savignac’s portrait is the first image I see.

In the photograph ‘El Caudillo’ looks tired, it is nearing the end of the war and he is almost triumphant. The photograph shows the bags under his eyes, he is forty-seven years old, with a receding hairline. The clipped moustache that was a fashion of the time now seems permanently linked to the dictators of that era. Looking slightly upwards from under dark thick brows, towards the future, optimistic, dressed in a tightly fitting military uniform with
prominent medal on his breast. The portrait is followed by photographs of soldiers in action in the mountains of Aragon, the ruins of buildings. Contrasty black and white images of the scenes of destruction and the aftermath of bombings fill the remainder of the book. The text is a diary of activity on the Aragon front in 1937. Crude captions admonish the enemy as “the red rage”, “the horde”, “the Muscovite beast”. 12

I know my grandfather took the portrait; his familiar signature is recognisable on the right-hand side of the image. It intrigues me to imagine what might have happened. Did Leopoldo touch the sleeve of Francisco at a certain moment? I know he must have stood in front of Franco and made this image, probably spoke to him, asked him to turn his face a little more to the right perhaps to get a flattering portrait? Where did he take it, at Franco’s residence, or in his own studio in the centre of Madrid?

I speculate. The security around El Jefe will be intense. People fuss around him, making sure all his needs are taken care of. The picture will be taken in El Pardo under maximum security. Leopoldo arrives under escort to prepare his equipment in a room set aside for the purpose. He is very carefully dressed in a dark suit and his habitual silver-topped cane, an established, respectable middle-aged man entrusted with the care of El Jefe’s image. He is well prepared for the task.

I don’t know enough about Leopoldo to sense his political leanings entirely, but the 1930s seemed to change things for him in his life and work. Gone are the creative, pictorial, carefully composited images of the early years. He is now an established studio portraitist in Spain’s capital city, but the difficulties of the time have meant that as an immigrant from Venezuela he must prove his worth. He moves from the red zone to the nationalist zone on the strength of a report from his landlady who states that he has “observed good socio-political behaviour.” 13 There is evidence of a testimony from him in 1939 that the war has taken him by surprise. I immerse myself in reading about the tensions of that time to understand the need he may have felt to protect his family and at what cost.

Perhaps he was coerced, perhaps it was a choice. I know he is a religious man; his grave is marked with a large stone cross. I found on eBay an intricate image in pencil he made of the
Christ figure from Limpías, a favourite religious pilgrimage in the 1920s. He was a traditionalist, both more vulnerable and more cautious.

Many people in Spain supported Franco, my mother often spoke of the support and help she had from the Falange. I recall Mum telling a story from the late 1940s, a lifetime ago, but she felt the emotions of the time still, acutely. “They helped me to escape my mother’s house when no-one else would,” she said. “They found me a place to live in a hostel in Madrid and found me a job. They were good people.”

It is difficult to speak about this part of Spanish history. There was a period of forgetting, which seems to have been replaced more recently by a sort of reparation. A conversation with a Spanish-born friend living in the UK confirms this. We both have families who generally sympathised with the side of the Francoists. How to sit with this news now so early in my search? It isn’t what I would like. I have a more romantic notion of my own pilgrimage and this discovery puts questions in my way that I must untangle.

Embodied experiences are an important part of the research – through pilgrimages, adopting the footstep model, visiting sites of studios, sites of Savignac’s photographs, of taking photographs, of writing by hand in a notebook while I am out and about, travelling, seeing buildings and streets, walking, sitting in the cafes. Looking through old magazines in a library, touching old photographs, the smell of musty journals. Haruki Murakami in his book What I talk about when I talk about running writes “I’m the kind of person who has to experience something physically, actually touch something, before I have a clear sense of it. No matter what it is, unless I see it with my own eyes I’m not convinced”.

**Valle de los Caídos 2022**

I almost miss the tour bus as I am in the lavatory. The guide must speak in English, then French, then Spanish. I am slightly over-awed by this. We have the radio mics in our ears for show as they do not work. It confirms another theatrical spectacle that makes up modern life. Like the need to undress for the body scan in
the airport because my sandals have metal buckles. The need to drain away the water bottle before going through security. The need to decant toiletries into tiny 100ml bottles. The need to wear masks on the plane and on the bus and on the subway but not in the waiting room or the platform or the airport queue.

The cross at the Valle de los Caídos can be seen for miles. It sits defiantly on a hilltop covered in fir trees. The road which approaches the monument is winding and reveals glimpses of what is to come. I read in my guide about El Camino de la Cruz or the Way of the Cross, a path which takes a pilgrimage walk across the dramatic landscape showing discreet views of the imposing structure at various points along the way.

But it is far too hot for that today. I have a hat, sunglasses, sunscreen, and water. The sun is blindingly bright as it bounces off the white-paved ground and the air is thick and dry. I sip water regularly. I travel lightly with just a camera hanging from my neck.

The Japanese man who sat across from me on the bus has a very new Fuji camera. He stops to take a shot, not of the view or the monument but of a gnarled hole in a large tree along the route. He takes his time. He and I are the slowest of the group, stopping constantly to document the experience through our cameras. “Me recuerda a la Acrópolis en Grecia,” he says to me. “It reminds me of the Acropolis in Greece.” I nod. Yes. The enormous esplanade stretching off into the distance offers views down to the valley below, much as I imagine the ancient Greek ruin might too.

His wife waits patiently further along the track. Small and slight she wears bandages along her arms. At one point she holds onto his elbow wearily and kisses his sleeve spontaneously. I am travelling alone again.

I take some photographs of the dramatic and imposing architecture. I could take more pictures which emphasize the tourist aspects of this experience. Or consider instead how to describe the things we cannot see – no-one here can see how the prisoners of war were treated in the building of this structure.

Once inside it is forbidden to take photographs. Even so there is a rush to find the spot where Franco was recently exhumed. The public who visits here are not meant to know the
exact place. But there in front of the altar is a patch of marble which is grave-sized and much darker than the other slabs around it. A couple of people take surreptitious images of the spot with their phones. And are immediately reprimanded by security, who are clearly watching carefully for this very activity. The visitors look guilty but, in the end, they have their evidence intact to take away.

I ask Mayte the tour guide where Franco’s body is now. ‘En El Pardo en un cementerio público,’ she replies. El Pardo was his official residence at the time of his rule.

I mention the reason for my visit, and she says that many families are hugely divided still by the complications of the civil war. That perhaps this history is still too close to make proper sense of it.

As a complex relation between religious, regional, and social confrontations, the war seems now to have been made up of many wars.

I think about Orwell’s words in Homage to Catalonia; “It is very difficult to write accurately about the Spanish war, because of the lack of non-propagandist documents, I warn everyone against my bias, and I warn everyone against my mistakes.” 15

I think I feel a bit like this myself. So many encounters in Spain point still to the war and the implications of it and the work still to be done unpicking the relationships, the tensions. Mayte mentioning that many families are split by the differing loyalties is a poignant one. It feels like what we have been going through in the UK over the last few years watching politicians convince us, the public, through lies and manipulation to commit a form of self-harm upon ourselves in the form of Brexit.

Later that evening I watch Parallel Mothers because I am in Madrid, and I love Almodóvar’s films, and I haven’t yet seen it. And it is one of those coincidences where so much that I have been thinking about comes together. Touching on the focus on historical memory in Spain since the early 2000’s, it also touches on the significance of evidence. The importance of knowing where we come from, what our heritage really might be. Two parallel stories run alongside each other – of the two mothers in the present – looking to the future, and the work of reparation– looking to the past, to move forward. Although the stress on
biological connection can sometimes be over-valued, I think I picked the right moment to watch it. There is a quote at the end of film by Eduardo Galeano the Uruguayan writer; “No hay historia muda.” “There is no silent history.”

The next day the security guard at the Biblioteca Nacional recognizes me from a few days ago. “Buenas dias, Inés,” he smiles.
I am more familiar with the process now and coming and going here feels comfortable.
The book I particularly want to consult today is entirely in Spanish, so it is a slow morning.
There is a very helpful list of names of all the photographers of “the blue gaze” of the civil war and Savignac is there.
When I check my email mid-morning, I see the reply from Beatriz has come through and I have the scan of his id card for the Delegated Board of Defense, Secretariat of Propaganda, Photography Section. I stare at the card but cannot make out the signed date. It must be 1937 but the handwriting doesn’t help it look much like a three. As an academic writing about the civil war Beatriz has had to trawl through thousands of documents to find this for me. I am grateful.
The id card proves he was a named photographer on the Francoist side during the civil war. Yet this image of Franco is the only evidence I find of this. Everything else is from his early creative pictorialist period from 1909 until the late 1920s. Then he becomes a more commercial high-street portraitist in the 1930s and 40s. Images of first communions, weddings, women in mantillas. The only other sign of his political sympathies are the military portraits of members of the civil guard.

It was enough that anyone – any neighbour or coworker, any widow or relative of someone killed by the “Reds” – walked into a police station, the civil guard barracks, or a Falange office, vaguely denouncing the ideas or actions of someone, for that person to be detained, mistreated, and sent to rot in prison.

It would seem beneficial to have kept a low profile in these conditions.
I start to put together the fragments to write Leopoldo and his daughters back into the world.
Germaine is the elusive daughter and half-aunt.

Germaine works with her father Leopoldo in the studio for all her adult life. After his death she remains the head of the household, and the head of the Savignac photo studio until she disappears in 1965.

There are many invisible women in these records whose name changes make them harder to find.

With no image and very little information I resort to re-creating a portrait of a woman holding a camera so she can stand in for her.

My model Isobel is also an immigrant, by way of Portugal and Venezuela. She studied photography; she is a single mother. The link back to the past and to the lineage I am attempting to unpick is presented to me fully in the present in our relationship as photographer and model.

There are many gaps in the search. Dead-ends, loose ends, records which are incomplete. It is the way of things. Names are changed or misplaced, dates are not correct. Women having children without a father named on the birth certificate.

This is a project about what we might call post-memory – the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural traumas of those who came before. My imaginative connection to the past becomes one of re-creation and re-invention.

Inés Rae 2022

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