

Between Memory and Uprooting: Identity, Old Age, and Documentary Representation in “Yo no soy de aquí”

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ABSTRACT:

This essay analyzes “Yo no soy de aquí” (2016), a short documentary film co-directed by Maite Alberdi and Giedrė Žickytė, through the lens of the relationships between memory, identity, migration, language, old age, and uprooting. The film follows Josebe, an 88-year-old Basque woman living in a nursing home in Santiago, Chile, who, despite suffering from Alzheimer's, retains vivid emotional memories of Rentería, her hometown in Spain. Through an interpretive analysis of the documentary's narrative and audiovisual structure, this study examines how the film portrays cognitive decline not only as memory loss but also as a rupture between the protagonist's institutional present and the biographical, linguistic, and emotional territory through which she continues to recognize herself. It is argued that the documentary avoids reducing Josebe to a clinical condition or a figure of passive vulnerability. On the contrary, it presents her as a person who attempts to maintain her sense of belonging through memories, repeated questions, and the occasional use of Basque, a language for which she no longer finds speakers in her surroundings. The nursing home thus appears as an ambivalent space that guarantees material protection but fails to bridge the gap between the place where Josebe physically resides and the cultural world she continues to inhabit in her memory. It is concluded that “Yo no soy de aquí” constructs an ethic of listening that makes the experience of estrangement palpable and argues that dignified care requires

Keywords: Maite Alberdi, Giedrė Žickytė, Alzheimer's, migration, Basque.

1. Introduction

“I'm not from here” is a simple phrase, but in the documentary by Maite Alberdi and Giedrė Žickytė, it takes on an emotional, territorial, and temporal depth that is difficult to reduce to a mere statement of origin. Josebe, an 88-year-old Basque woman living in a nursing home in Santiago, Chile, finds herself in a state of radical dissonance: while her body is in Chile, her

memory keeps bringing her back to Rentería, the town in the Basque Country where she spent her youth and the years that still shape her perception of the world. Affected by Alzheimer's, Josebe loses her connection to the immediate present, though she retains an emotional and linguistic memory that insists on staying alive.

The short film does not portray Alzheimer's through the clinical lens of its cognitive losses.

Alberdi and Žickytė shift the focus to what Josebe still remembers, desires, and seeks to share. The protagonist is not portrayed as a person stripped of her identity, but as someone trying to make her world intelligible to others who do not share her geographical, generational, or linguistic references. When she asks the other residents where in the Basque Country they come from, or when she begins to speak in Basque, the film reveals a unique form of loneliness that has nothing to do with being physically alone, but rather with not finding a community capable of recognizing the time and place in which she still subjectively lives.

Released in 2016, “Yo no soy de aquí” is a 25-minute, 50-second documentary short film, co-directed and written by Alberdi and Žickytė. It is a co-production between Chile, Lithuania, and Denmark, shot in Santiago, produced by Micromundo Producciones, and developed as part of the CPH:DOX Lab. The film had its world premiere at Visions du Réel in Switzerland, where it won the Sesterce d’Or for best international short film. Its subsequent festival run included awards at DocumentaMadrid, the Krakow Film Festival, Sheffield Doc/Fest, the Huesca International Film Festival, and the Pedro Sienna Award for best documentary short film in Chile, among others.

2. Analysis

This essay argues that “Yo no soy de aquí” constructs a representation of Alzheimer’s as an experience of estrangement. The disease is portrayed not merely as a deterioration of cognitive faculties, but as a rupture between memory and the present, between one’s homeland and place of residence, and between one’s native language and the community that listens to it. The power of this documentary short film lies precisely in the fact that it transforms that rupture into an audiovisual experience, in which the viewer does not observe from the outside a woman who confuses places and times, but is instead led to recognize the emotional coherence of a world that persists even when her surroundings can no longer respond to her.

Josebe’s narrative is not organized according to the coordinates of the institutional present in

which she lives. Her residence in Santiago, the other residents of the home, and daily routines do not constitute the center of her experience. The distant past, on the contrary, emerges with an intensity that should not be confused with mere nostalgia. Josebe remembers Rentería, recalls her youth, and navigates using an emotional map that remains active, even though it no longer aligns with her current circumstances.

The film thus finds itself in a temporal paradox. Josebe is in Santiago, but she feels like a newcomer or out of place. Her peers try to remind her that she lives in Chile, but she stares into space, insists, or asks again. The conflict remains unresolved because the documentary does not seek to correct the protagonist’s perception or place the viewer in a position of clinical superiority. On the contrary, it brings to the fore the discrepancy between two forms of reality, blending the objective reality of the Chilean nursing home with the subjective reality through which Josebe continues to interpret her surroundings.

Its director, M. Alberdi, explained that the purpose of the short film was to address Alzheimer’s from the perspective of what is remembered, not necessarily from what is forgotten. This choice is crucial, since rather than presenting the disease as a progressive disappearance of the person, the film observes the persistence of a distant memory and the force with which that memory shapes identity. The filmmakers sought, in fact, a person at a stage of the disease where the past and the present no longer intersect, but where the past remains fully alive in memory.

This formal and ethical decision transforms Josebe’s status before the camera. She is not presented as the subject of a diagnosis, nor as an example of a pathology. She is a woman who maintains a deep connection to a city, a language, and a life experience. The illness does not erase that biography; rather, it alters the conditions under which it can be shared and recognized.

In this sense, the phrase in the title functions as an affirmation of belonging. Saying “I’m not from here” is not merely a rejection of Chile as a place of residence. It expresses a deeper need, in which the present acknowledges the continuity of

a life that began in another territory and is still conceived from within it. Josebe's statement reveals that identity does not depend solely on the place where one physically lives. It is also grounded in the memories, attachments, languages, and relationships that allow one to say, "I am from somewhere."

The Basque Country does not appear in "Yo no soy de aquí" through archival images, maps, or visual reconstructions. It exists, above all, in Josebe's voice. Rentería is an evoked geography, a remembered city, and an emotional horizon that shapes her relationship with others. The absence of direct visual representation intensifies the subjective nature of that territory, because it is no longer about the Basque Country as a tourist or historical fact, but rather about the Basque Country as it persists in the memory of a woman who emigrated to Chile during the Spanish Civil War and who has been completely abandoned.

Migration adds a significant layer to the documentary. Josebe is not just an elderly resident with Alzheimer's; she is a woman displaced from her place of origin, whose life story has unfolded across territories. For decades, Chile was her home, yet the progression of the disease transforms that transnational journey: the Chilean present fades, and her country of origin regains an immediate presence. Migration, which once entailed an actual movement between places, has now become an internal condition. Josebe lives in Chile, but her experience of the world has retreated to Rentería, from where she recalls her childhood and adolescence.

This return should not be understood as an uncritical idealization of his homeland. Josebe's memory does not reconstruct a complete geography or an orderly history. It recovers fragments, affections, questions, and ways of recognizing the world. What matters is not the factual accuracy of each memory, but the function they serve, which is to sustain a sense of continuity in the face of a world that no longer offers him stable points of reference.

From this perspective, Rentería becomes an emotional homeland. It is not merely the place where he was born; it is the space from which Josebe can still shape his identity. When he asks other residents which part of the Basque Country

they are from, he is not simply seeking to exchange information; he is seeking to verify whether the world he remembers is shared by others. A negative response creates a breakdown in communication that the documentary does not dramatize with melodramatic emphasis, but makes palpable through repetition and silences.

The nursing home is a place of physical protection, but it cannot replace the protagonist's emotional landscape. The institution offers physical companionship, routines, and care; however, it lacks the cultural, linguistic, and biographical codes that would allow Josebe to feel recognized. The short film thus depicts a form of rootlessness that cannot be resolved by the physical proximity of others. Being accompanied does not guarantee a sense of belonging.

The Basque language plays a brief but fundamental role in the documentary. Josebe begins to speak occasionally in that language, and no one around her understands her. This becomes a central part of the story, in which the protagonist wants to share her memories of the Basque Country, asks the other residents where they are from, and suddenly speaks in Basque without anyone being able to understand her. The language functions simultaneously as a refuge for identity and a barrier to communication. By speaking Basque, Josebe is not merely expressing a cognitive difficulty or an automatic return to the language of her childhood. She is rekindling a sense of belonging that remains alive within her. The language shapes a bodily and emotional memory; it is the place where her family, her youth, her hometown, and a previous way of being in the world resonate.

But that very language isolates him. The Basque language finds no audience at the nursing home in Santiago. Josebe's voice thus becomes a voice that cannot be translated or echoed. The language that preserves a part of his identity is also what reveals that the community to which he belongs is not present.

The scene carries implications that go beyond this individual case. Identity is not sustained solely by private memory; it requires dialogue. Remembering, recounting, and speaking are acts that require an audience. When a listening

community is absent, memory may persist, but it becomes painfully solitary. The documentary portrays this solitude without turning it into a dramatic spectacle. Misunderstanding need not be verbalized to be visible; it manifests in the absence of a response, in the faces that do not know how to follow the conversation, and in the language's inability to forge a shared connection.

The Basque language also allows us to challenge a homogeneous view of old age and institutionalization. Josebe is not merely an elderly woman or a resident with Alzheimer's. She is Basque, an immigrant, a speaker of a minority language, and the bearer of a situated historical memory. The film avoids reducing her to a clinical category because it allows those layers of identity to emerge through her own voice.

The nursing home is the central setting of "Yo no soy de aquí". At first glance, it is a place of care—a large house where older people live, with shared routines and attentive staff. However, Alberdi and Žickytė portray the home as an ambiguous space. It is a place of refuge, but also a territory where Josebe cannot find the signs of belonging she needs.

The tension between care and recognition proves decisive. It is possible for an institution to guarantee food, safety, hygiene, and basic support, yet fail to meet the cultural, emotional, and biographical needs of its residents. The documentary does not directly accuse the nursing home nor does it structure its narrative as an indictment of negligence. The most painful absence is not the lack of material care, but the impossibility of sharing a past that, for Josebe, remains very much present.

The film forces us to ask an uncomfortable question: What does it mean to care for someone whose subjective reality does not align with the space in which they find themselves? The answer cannot be limited to correcting her, reminding her that she is in Chile, or insisting on the facts of the present. Caring could also mean listening to the stories that resurface, recognizing the value of a language that others do not understand, and accepting that a person's identity is not reduced to the institution's administrative timeline.

In this regard, "Yo no soy de aquí" engages in a fruitful dialogue with "El agente topo" (2020), also by Alberdi. Both works are set in long-term care facilities, but their emphases differ. "El Agente Topo" explores the emotional quality of institutional care and the residents' loneliness; "Yo no soy de aquí" focuses on the cultural and temporal disorientation of a woman whose memories find no one to share them with. In both cases, the institution proves inadequate when care is understood exclusively as the provision of services.

The film does not offer a programmatic solution. Its strength lies in making perceptible a lack that often remains outside institutional assessments: the need to be recognized through one's own history. Josebe does not explicitly call for a policy of intercultural care or a memory program. But his presence before the camera makes it clear that dignified care requires more than just assistance—it requires attention to the worlds that each person carries within them.

The concise format of "Yo no soy de aquí" is one of its greatest achievements. In less than twenty-six minutes, the film constructs a complex experience without resorting to medical explanations, expert interviews, or a narrative voice that imposes meaning. Information about Alzheimer's, migration, and Josebe's Basque past is organically integrated into his words, the reactions of the other residents, and the arrangement of the space.

This decision prevents the documentary from taking a conventional pedagogical stance. The viewer is not given a diagnosis but must listen and observe. The absence of an external voice explaining Josebe forces the viewer to confront the intensity of her experience head-on. The documentary does not seek pity, but attention.

The camera stays close to the protagonist but does not invade her world with sensationalist imagery. This closeness serves as a form of companionship. The framing allows us to observe her face, her pauses, her questions, and her moments of disconnection, but also her gestures of humor, lucidity, and determination. Josebe is not filmed as a purely fragile figure. The film captures her vulnerability without stripping her of her presence.

The editing plays a decisive role. By alternating Josebe's words with the surroundings that cannot respond to her, it highlights the contrast between memory and the present. The repetition of certain questions is not used to ridicule her illness or to emphasize her decline. On the contrary, it creates a rhythm that allows us to understand the persistence of a need—her attempt to find someone who shares the world she remembers.

In documentary terms, this approach can be understood as an ethic of listening. Filming Josebe implies recognizing that her memories do not need to be verified to be meaningful. Her memory may be fragmentary or anachronistic, but it expresses an emotional truth—in this case, the need to belong, to be understood, and not to be reduced to a body out of place.

The international co-production between Chile, Lithuania, and Denmark adds another thought-provoking layer. The documentary about a Basque migrant in Chile was created by a Chilean filmmaker and a Lithuanian filmmaker who had never met before the project, as part of CPH:DOX Lab. The very nature of the production indirectly reflects a transnational logic: different cultural backgrounds collaborate to film an experience marked by displacement, language, and the impossibility of belonging to a single place.

The portrayal of Alzheimer's in "Yo no soy de aquí" avoids two clichés. The first is the reduction of the disease to total memory loss. The second is the sentimentalization of cognitive decline as a spectacle of vanishing subjectivity. Alberdi and Žickytė offer a different perspective, in which Alzheimer's alters the temporal and spatial coordinates through which Josebe recognizes herself, but does not erase the richness of her inner life.

The past does not appear as an archive that is activated at random. It has an emotional logic. Youth, Rentería, the Basque language, and questions about one's origins are not disparate elements; rather, they form a constellation of identity. Josebe lives in a present that has become alien, and that sense of alienation causes the past to serve as a refuge, a source of guidance, and an affirmation of the self.

This portrayal offers an implicit critique of discourses that associate Alzheimer's with the loss of personhood. The film shows that cognitive decline does not eliminate the need for recognition. On the contrary, it can intensify that need when shared points of reference weaken, making listening to others all the more important.

Josebe's experience can also be understood as an extreme form of dissonance between identity and context. All individuals organize their lives around stories, places, languages, and connections that allow them to recognize themselves. In Josebe's case, these reference points survive, but the present does not confirm them. The documentary brings this fracture to the surface, where the viewer realizes that the protagonist has not only forgotten where she is but has also lost the ability to find, in the place where she is, a cultural reflection of her identity.

At this point, the title reaches its full power. "I'm not from here" is not a denial of reality, but rather a way of articulating the disconnect between the external world and the internal world. Josebe is not from "here"

because the "here" of the residence does not encompass the city, the language, or the relationships that his memory recognizes as his own.

3. Conclusion

"I'm Not From Here" is a short film, yet one of remarkable complexity. Its apparent simplicity—an elderly woman talking about her hometown in a Chilean nursing home—contains a profound reflection on memory, identity, migration, language, and belonging. The documentary does not merely depict the experience of a person with Alzheimer's; more broadly, it creates a way of listening that allows us to recognize the emotional coherence of a life whose sense of time no longer aligns with the present.

Alberdi and Žickytė's decision to film from the perspective of what is remembered shifts the usual portrayal of the disease. Josebe does not appear as a figure defined by her deficits, but as a woman who preserves a world—one in which Rentería, the Basque language, her youth, questions about her origins, and the desire to find someone to talk to all remain. That world is not

fully accessible to those around her, but the camera makes it visible to the viewer.

The nursing home embodies the film's central contradiction. It protects Josebe, but it cannot offer her a sense of shared belonging. Material support is not enough when a person needs their language, history, and memories to be recognized. The documentary suggests that care also involves attending to the emotional realms through which each individual understands themselves.

Ultimately, "Yo no soy de aquí" is not just about a woman reminiscing about the Basque Country from Chile. It is about the fragility of any identity when it loses the ties that define it. The film reminds us that belonging is not merely about being in a place, but about being able to speak from that place and be heard. Josebe is surrounded by people, yet her world remains far away. The ethical gesture of the documentary lies in bringing us closer to that distance without attempting to resolve it.

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