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Front Cover: Basque Boarding Houses in Nevada - French Hotel, Reno; Louis' Basque Hotel, Reno; Santa Fe Hotel, Reno; Winnemucca Hotel, Winnemucca. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

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Interstitial Culture, Virtual Ethnicity, and Hyphenated Basque Identity in the New Millennium

WILLIAM A. DOUGLASS

International migration studies, regarding European emigration and defined broadly across the humanities and social sciences, are certainly living through interesting times. Until recently, the overriding emphasis was upon the more or less permanent displacement of populations from sending areas to receiving ones with subsequent considerable, if not absolute, discontinuity between the Mother Country and its prodigal sons and daughters. While at least some of the emigrants might display considerable nostalgia for, and loyalty toward, their natal homeland, such tendencies were inhibited and relegated to sentimentality by what the Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey (1977) has called the tyranny of distance, given the rather cumbersome communications and transportation technologies prior to World War II. Consequently, the overwhelming majority became immigrants and then (along with their descendants) ethnics within host or receiving societies. This human drama, concentrated primarily, though not exclusively into the century between the 1850s and 1950s (with that decade's final resettlement of the millions of refugees from the World War II) generated a vast literature of the push-pull and travails-of-the-transatlantic-crossing variety, on the one hand, and the creation and subsequent assimilation (or not) of ethnic groups within host societies on the other.

In short, the study of this "traditional" migration tended to treat the human actors themselves as passive agents being acted upon, when not being victimized, by historical circumstances. It tended toward trait listing of the aspects of the emigrants' Old World cultural baggage that were exportable, as opposed to those that were expendable. This trait-listing approach informed and translated into ethnic studies in the New World contexts, triggering lively debate over the continued viability of immigrant/ethnic cultures over chronological and generational time.

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The work *Amerikanuak: Basques in the New World* (1975)—which I, an anthropologist, and Jon Bilbao, an historian, co-authored—is both a representation and summation of this scholarly approach as applied to the Basque-American case (both North and South American). Regarding Basque settlement here in the American West, the argument may be summed up as follows:

Basques entered the country as part of the California Gold Rush, many coming from the established Basque colonies of Argentina and Chile. When most failed as prospectors they quickly turned their attention to the stock-raising opportunities afforded by the vast, largely unoccupied range in southern and central California. Applying a southern South American, rather than Pyrenean, paradigm, during the 1850s and 1860s Basques established themselves as the prime ethnic element in the region's emerging open-range sheep industry. As California became more crowded, Basque sheepmen, in their several guises—as the preferred shepherders in the employ of others, the entrepreneurial “tramps” or itinerant small-scale operators with no land or home base, as well as the more substantial sheep ranchers—had by 1900 spread to all thirteen western states. As we entered the present century, Basques either dominated or were significant in every open-range sheep district of the American West with just a few notable exceptions, such as Navaho Country, the Mormon districts of Utah, and the isolated pockets where Scots, Irish, Portuguese, Greeks, Mexicans, and even Chinese dominated herding. The point, however, is that Basques, as much as any and more than most hyphenated Americans, were identified with a single activity—sheep husbandry. There were, to be sure, exceptions. We could speak of Basque miners, cattle ranchers, construction workers, and, in more recent times, dairymen, gardeners, and bakers—not to mention schoolteachers, attorneys, and politicians. But the fact remains that Basque immigration and the formation of Basque-American identity were driven largely by the group's involvement with the sheep industry. There were several consequences:

The Basque immigrant was typically a young man of Old World rural origin and limited education. He was typically a sojourner, that is, he had little intention of seeking a New World future; rather, he wanted to acquire a stake with which to establish a better life back in Europe.

The prime ethnic institution during this first phase of the Basque-American experience was the boarding house or hotel. Usually established by an ex-herder in one of the servicing centers of the open-range districts, the Basque hotel depended, at least initially, exclusively upon a herder clientele. In particular, it provided unemployed Basques with a haven during the several months of seasonal layoff between the time that one year's lambs were shipped to market and the ewes gave birth to the next year's lamb crop.

To the extent that Basque women immigrated in the American West at all, most were recruited for domestic service in the Basque hotels. Given the bachelor status of most of the shepherd clientele, few of the Basque domestics remained single for long. Such unions provided one of the foundations of Basque-American family formation. The other was the union between the Old World herder and the Basque rancher or hotelkeeper's daughter.

During this first, or immigration, phase, Basque ethnicity was more a fact of life, a lived reality, than a project. The immigrants were short on English and insulated from the opportunity to learn it by their solitary lives as shepherders. Basque was the vernacular on many a sheep ranch, as well as in the Basque hotels—the safe ethnic havens for the herder when he was in town. The hotelkeeper was his banker, his advisor, his employment agent, and his translator for the visit to a doctor or even to a store to buy new Levis or a pair of boots. In

short, it was possible, indeed common, for a young Basque to travel from the Pyrenees to Boise or Elko, sojourn in the American West for several years, and then return to Europe without ever stepping outside an established Basque ethnic network.

This circumscription of the immigrant's experience was further reinforced by a degree of anti-Basque prejudice in the wider society. I do not want to overstate this since, at all times during their involvement here in the United States, Basques have had their admirers who regarded them as hardworking and honest residents if not citizens. However, it is equally true that beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and lasting until at least the 1930s, many westerners saw the Basques as interlopers who were uncommitted to an American future. That such prejudice could go beyond simple economic resentment is reflected in the epithet *Black Basco* which triggered more than one barroom and school-yard fistfight.

Such dynamics were, of course, common to the Euro-American immigration experience in general. American English has a rich racist lexicon of terms such as *Micks* and *Spics*, *Dagoes* and *Frogs*, *Polacks*, *Bohunks*, *Krauts*, and *Kikes*. The first or immigrant phase of virtually every Euro-American ethnic group was not particularly easy for either the ethnics themselves or the host society.

There is a common theme in the comparative literature of the initial accommodation of the several immigrant groups. It regards the rejection of their Old World cultural heritage by the first-generation American-born children of the immigrants. Many were downright ashamed of their parents' attitudes, dress, and accents. They were encouraged in this rejection by the country's official and pervasive policy that America was a melting pot in which immigrants from throughout the world were to be cooked into a common stew. Nor was the heat to be set low or on simmer. Rather, institutions such as the school system, the churches, and the military were all geared to produce "good Americans" and tolerated precious little else in the first generation of the American born. If they were going to eat spaghetti at home, they had better talk English while doing so.

While the intent was clear, the success was less so, at least in some groups and in segments of others. In 1937, historian Marcus Lee Hansen identified another phenomenon emerging within American society that the assimilationist model failed to predict, namely, that "what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember" (Hansen 1987:15). That is, the children of the immigrant's children were manifesting curiosity regarding their grandparent's cultural legacy and were even blaming their parents for squandering it. Labeled the third-generation phenomenon, this ethnic resurgence was discernible among many of America's Euro-ethnics, and this well before the "roots" phenomenon of the 1960s and 1970s. Basques were no exception, and shortly after World War II there was a conscious effort to both "recapture" and display



These young men are performing a crowd pleasing dance in honor of the fallen Basque warrior. (*Basque Studies Library, University of Nevada, Reno*)

one's Basque ethnic identity, developments that initiated a second phase of Basque-American history.

It first manifested itself in the formation of a social club and dance group in Boise in 1949 and was further catalyzed and disseminated by publication of Robert Laxalt's book *Sweet Promised Land* (1957). This story of Laxalt's sheepherding father's life in the American West and his subsequent return to his natal village in the French Basque Country became a kind of Basque-American manifesto while providing the ethnic group with its literary spokesman. The Basque cultural resurgence was then further stimulated by celebration in 1959 of the first truly regional Basque festival, in Sparks, Nevada (Douglass 1980a). Consequently, the decade of the 1960s was a period during which some Basque-Americans formed social clubs and folkdance groups, even sponsoring their own annual festivals.

A few Basque-Americans engaged in language study and expressed an interest in learning more about their Old World heritage. Partly as a response to this demand, in 1967 the University of Nevada System established the Basque Studies Program, the only one of its kind outside the Basque homeland. Among its many activities, there was a study-abroad initiative in which over the years more than a thousand Basque-American students have spent significant, academically structured time in the Basque Country. Given that the Basque-American community as a whole was placed at about fifty thousand in the 1990 census, this is obviously a substantial number. Today many of the leaders of the

Basque-American community are alumni of those University Studies Abroad Consortium's courses.

Thus, during phase two ethnicity maintenance became a salvage operation, something that had to be worked at, a project rather than a lived daily reality. As such, it also became a compartmentalized part of each participant's larger social persona. In the case of the Basque-American, it expressed itself in membership in one of the more than twenty Basque clubs in the United States, possibly participation in its dance group, volunteer labor (dressed in appropriate folk costume to be sure) during the club's annual festival, attendance at one or two festivals hosted by other Basque clubs, possibly a failed attempt somewhere along the line to learn Basque, a periodic meal and ethnic evening in a Basque hotel, and display of a bumper sticker proclaiming "Basque Power" or "Basque is Beautiful." In a few places, such as Boise, Idaho, and South San Francisco, it even culminated in bricks and mortar, edifices housing multifaceted Basque centers.

Such, in my view, and in overly simplistic broadstroke, are some of the key characteristics of recent and contemporary Basque-American reality, the second phase of Basque-American history. I note, however, that the phases are themselves far from pure or discrete. Implicit in Hansen's paradigm is the assumption that there is an immigrant generation that produces a second generation of rejectors which in turn produces a third generation of seekers.

In the real world, immigration is scarcely limited to a single generational time frame. In the Basque case, immigration transpired in largely unfettered fashion for three quarters of a century, between 1850 and the mid-1920s. It was interrupted by the anti-southern-European bias in America's quota system implemented in the 1920s, by the 1930s legislation, that brought the western ranges under federal control and excluded aliens from access to them, as well as by the Great Depression and the World War II. Beginning in the 1950s, there was purposive recruitment of Basques to replenish the all-but-depleted ranks of sheepherders—a window that lasted until the mid-1970s, at which time the decline in sheep numbers and the shift in herder recruitment from the Basque Country to several Latin American nations all but eliminated the familiar figure of the Basque sheepherder from the western ranges (Douglass 1980b).

What this means is that Basque immigration waxed and waned but was constant over the last century and a half. Consequently, by the beginning of the twentieth-century, Hansen's first, second, and third generations were *all* present together on the stage of the social drama, and Basque immigration would continue to renew the pool right down to the new millennium (although to only a slight degree since the 1970s). Nor did Hansen's model address the fourth, fifth, and *n*th generations, which is another way of posing the question—what is the staying power of America's hyphenated ethnic heritages over time? I have no certain answer but am full of speculation. However, before I venture my leap into the dark, I will first state that I believe that we are in the

final throes of phase two with respect to Basque-American history.

The signs are many. Several Basque clubs are now struggling to maintain membership and momentum. Attendance at the festivals has declined. With the passing of the herder, the Basque hotels have evolved into ethnic eating houses reliant more upon a non-Basque clientele than upon Old World boarders and Basque-Americans seeking an ethnic fix. The language no longer serves as the vernacular of everyday discourse on the sheep ranches or in the hotels. Ethnic-group endogamy is all but gone—meaning that the genetic credentials of future generations of Basque-Americans will likely be computable in ever-declining fractions. And then there are the commemorative signs such as the dedication of a National Monument to the Basque Sheepherder in Reno in 1989, and creation of a Basque-American culture exhibit in Bend, Oregon, at the High Desert Museum in the mid-1990s. Both efforts evoke the past so that we can learn from it. But also, lest we forget, the Basque-American experience as we have known it is now being preserved in bronze statues and the museum case.

None of this, of course, is unique to the Basque-Americans. Indeed, there is currently an active debate among scholars of American immigration and ethnicity over the future or fate of the country's Euro-ethnic groups. Will there be a phase three for Basque-Americans and other Euro-American hyphenates? The question is posed against the backdrop of the roots movement of the 1970s, which was the outburst of ethnic pride among America's nonwhite minority groups in the wake of their victorious civil-rights movement of the 1960s. Nearly all of America's Euro-ethnic groups responded with intensification of the public expressions, both associational and individual, of the ethnic pride that we considered when discussing phase two. However, this resurgence of ethnic awareness flared and then fizzled, causing many scholars to change their opinions regarding what had been labeled the new ethnics. Rather, sociologists like Richard Alba (1985) began to speak of the twilight of ethnicity in American life—a kind of Indian summer of ethnic expression before the nation's Euro-ethnics were plunged into the endless winter of historical oblivion—leaving behind, to be sure, certain bronze monuments and museum-case displays to mark their passing. Others, for instance literary critic Werner Sollors, declared the race to be over by writing works with titles like *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986).

While it should be noted that such judgments were written before, and failed to account for, the global resurgence of ethno-nationalism, largely in East bloc countries in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the rise of religious fundamentalism in several parts of the globe—both of which reinforce ethnic particularism and essentialism—it is also true that America's Euro-ethnic groups were unaffected by those developments.

The view that Euro-American ethnics are on an ineluctable course leading toward certain demise in the trashbin of history remains convincing, at least for some scholars. The logic is certainly persuasive as far as it goes. In a nutshell, the argument is that time and circumstance militate against preservation



Contests of strength and endurance, such as wood chopping races, are popular events at Basque festivals. (*Basque Studies Library, University of Nevada, Reno*)



Basque festivals would not be complete without their traditional barbeques consisting of lamb chops, stews, Basque beans, salad, bread and wine. (*Basque Studies Library, University of Nevada, Reno*)

of the newcomer's cultural legacy from the moment he or she sets foot in the host society. Whether it takes one, two, or x generations, eventually the unique peaks of Old World distinctiveness are eroded and washed to the sea by the assimilatory waters of the host society, where they commingle with the sands of other cultural traditions similarly leveled. Given time, as in geologic nature, the raindrop of assimilation is mightier than the granite of ethnic tradition, everything else being equal.

This view is informed by two assumptions. First, that assimilation is inexorable and irreversible from a group standpoint once immigration ceases. Stated differently, insofar as the ethnic heritage in question is being renewed by the arrivals of new immigrants from abroad, assimilation is likely to be slowed or even arrested. Second, during my phase two, or the latter half of the twentieth century, there has been considerable reduction in Blainey's tyranny of distance. Given jet aircraft, cheap fares, rapid mail service, and readily affordable international telephone rates, the conceptual distance between—to stick with Basque examples—Boise and Bilbao or San Sebastián and San Francisco, has imploded considerably. This is obviously a time in which the individual can pursue a personal agenda of contacts with relatives in the Old Country possibly punctuated by the occasional return trip, or even by the tourist visit here in America by one's European relatives.

Furthermore, in post-Franco Spain there is now an autonomous Basque government of Euskadi embracing the three traditional provinces of Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, and Araba. It enjoys considerable political autonomy under the new Spanish constitution. While its "foreign relations" are supposed to be articulated through Madrid, the Basque government has, in fact, a Secretariate of Foreign Affairs. One of its main activities is to energize ties between the Mother Country and the various Basque diasporas around the world. To this end, the Basque government sends out political and cultural emissaries, publishes a magazine in both English and Spanish designed to inform Basque emigrants and their descendants of developments in the homeland, and facilitates the visits of Basque-American, Basque-Argentinian, and Basque-Australian schoolchildren to the Basque Country. Euskal Telebista, the official government Basque television channel, now beams Basque-language telecasts by satellite throughout Latin America and to parts of North America as well.

In 1995 and again in 1999 the Basque government convened the Congress of Basque Collectivities in the World, bringing delegates from countries in Europe, North and South America, and Oceania to the Basque capital of Vitoria-Gasteiz for several days of deliberations regarding the future of the various Basque diasporas and the ways in which the homeland could facilitate their survival. Consequently, it is fair to say that Euskadi is among the most proactive territories on the planet with respect to maintaining ties with its emigrants and their descendants.

It is at this juncture that my analysis becomes wholly speculative. I accept

the view that, everything else being equal, few if any of America's Euro-ethnic groups are likely to survive the transition from phase two to some sort of phase three of ethnic expression *if phase three is premised upon survival of phase-two institutions*. To be specific, if in the Basque case persistence of meaningful Basque-American ethnicity during the new millennium requires the survival and prospering of Basque clubs, festivals, dance groups, and hotels, then I am pessimistic.

In the early 1980s, anthropologist Micaela di Leonardo decided to study her own Italo-American community in the San Francisco Bay area. From the outset, she was totally befuddled and frustrated, given her assumption that there was something out there that could be discerned and called the Italo-American community. Her target proved to be elusive. There were few ethnic associations, and the ones she could identify seemed moribund. Within any given family she encountered not only marked generational differences in interest in the ethnic heritage, but also a marked disparity among family members of the same generation. It seemed that "Italianness" assumed as many guises as there were informants. At the same time, for many it informed important parts of their personas. It was only after despairing and then accepting that she was unlikely to find the structures and cultural patterns so dear to the social scientist's heart that she became open to the possibility of understanding ethnicity in an entirely new fashion—that is, as more of an individual than a group phenomenon, at least at this point in our history. She entitled her extraordinary work *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience* (1986).

What neither di Leonardo nor her informants could anticipate were the technological advances that were to fashion our brave new world, sometimes referred to as the information superhighway, with its many challenges and opportunities. Enter the possibility of a new synthesis—my title's "virtual ethnicity" of a Basque interstitial culture—predicated upon the latest advances in electronic communications, called the Internet, on the one hand, and virtual-reality technology on the other.

While the full consequences of the information and electronic revolutions remain as yet unclear, it is obvious that there is no longer *any* conceptual distance between Boise and Bilbao, San Sebastián and San Francisco. Nor in the future is it likely that interested Basque-Americans will find the main resource for recharging their ethnic batteries to be the Basque club or hotel, or even a Basque television program for that matter. Rather, one can contemplate a day in which each individual can sit at home before a personal computer screen and study Basque, peruse the world's store of knowledge about the Basques, contact persons of similar interests in the Basque Country and throughout the Basque diaspora, and even take a virtual-reality trip to the Basque homeland. In short, it is now, or soon will be, possible for each Basque-American to construct his or her own desired variety of the Basque ethnic experience and reinforce it by visiting electronic chat rooms. At that juncture there will exist a



With short breaks between tasks in the Basque sheepherder's day, herders took time to leave their marks on nature's available canvas, the quaking aspens. Here is a tree carving reflecting a herder's nationalistic views, illustrating the beloved oak tree of Gernika and the ancient council chambers of Bizkaian democracy. (*Basque Studies Library, University of Nevada, Reno*)

Basque cyberspatial cultural reality that is the result of an interplay of selected Old World and diasporic Basque cultural referents, yet subject to individuated kaleidoscopic recombination by empowered consumers who fashion their own Basque products in accord with their personal preferences. Where, if anywhere, such virtual ethnicity might take us is as yet more science fiction than social science—but the force is definitely now with us!