Frank Bergon’s Fiction: From Black to White

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Abstract:

Frank Bergon’s Fiction: From Black To White Basco. That is the how Basque Americans in the US West are referred to nowadays. Basque Americans enjoy not only the acceptance, but rather the fascination of the American community. However, it was not always so. For decades Basque Americans were derisively called Black Bascos. Basque children were frequently picked on at schools or playgrounds. Adults were often ruthlessly rejected by the mainstream and were given jobs that no one else wanted, such as sheep herding. The aim of this presentation is to analyse how the term Basco has shifted from being demeaning to entailing pride. To do so, the fiction of the Basque American writer Frank Bergon will be analysed. His novels, Shoshone Mike (1987), The Temptations of St. Ed and Brother S. (1993), Wild Game (1995), and Jesse´s Ghost (2011) comprehend the identity variations over four generations. So far, Bergon is the only writer to have illustrated the linear history of Basque Americans in the West and how they have shifted from being The Other to being part of the US community. Bergon´s four novels, based on true events, capture the essence of the West through the writer´s first – hand experience as a Basque American. Bergon, a third – generation Basque, is proud of his ethnic heritage, as he expresses through the character, Jack Irigaray, in Wild Game. Shoshone Mike recreates the killings of three 460 Basque shepherds in the hands of a Shoshone family. Through this novel, we learn about first – generation Basques, who usually gathered in close circles and whose interaction with Anglos was scarce. Bergon´s second novel recreates the nuclear conflict of Yucca Mountain, 100 miles from Las Vegas, through the monk St. Ed Arrizabalaga. Jesse´s Ghost reveals, for instance, how countless Basques were obliged to shorten/ modify their surnames to sound more Anglo.

Keywords: Basque Americans, Bergon, Novel

Frank Bergon is an essayist and novelist, born in Ely, Nevada (USA), in 1943 and is considered "one of the most significant voices in contemporary western American writing" (Río 57). This essay surveys Bergon´s Basque American universe through an analysis of his four novels: *Shoshone Mike* (1987), *The Temptations of St. Ed and Brother S* (1993), *Wild Game* (1995) and *Jesse´s Ghost* (2011). Its aim is to examine Basque identity and its variations over four generations, ranging from the early twentieth century to the present time. It reveals how the implication of the term "Basco" has evolved from [being] a slur to an expression that blossoms with ethnic pride (Bergon *Introduction* 2020, p.10).

Bergon´s first novel, *Shoshone Mike*, was listed in 2001 among the top-twelve westerns by Oxford University Press´s *Good Fiction Guide* (Rogers et al. 2001, p. 136). Therein, he fictionalises the so-called Last Indian Battle, also known as the Last Indian Massacre. The novel recreates the tragic incident that occurred in northwest Nevada in 1911, in which Shoshone Mike and most of his band/family were killed in revenge for the murders of four stockmen. Three of the ranchers were Basque shepherds; the fourth was an Anglo cattleman. Jean Erramouspe is the fictional son of one of the deceased Basque shepherds and one of the main characters in Bergon´s polyphonic novel.

The Temptations of St. Ed and Brother S is set in the nuclear age. Bergon´s second novel centres on St. Ed and Brother S, two monks whose attempt to run the Hermitage of Solitude on the edge of the Nevada Test Site is menaced by federal plans to build a nuclear waste disposal repository at a nearby mountain. Although the story of the monks is not based on actual events, the novel recreates the increasing opposition in Nevada to the federal government´s proposal for a nuclear repository at Yucca Mountain – termed Shoshone Mountain in the novel. Father Edward St. John Arrizabalaga is the main character. He is of mixed heritage; half Basque and half English.

Bergon´s third novel, *Wild Game*, also based on actual accounts, revives the story of Claude Dallas in the 1980s. Dallas murdered two Idaho state fish-and-game wardens in the Owyhee Desert, near the Nevada border. He was arrested after a fifteen-month manhunt. He became a controversial character in the American West; while to some he was merely a cold-blooded murderer, others lionized him as the quintessential western free man.

Not only that, but he is still widely glorified as such in contemporary Idaho. Bergon invented a character, Jack Irigaray, a third-generation Basque, as a literary artefact to tell the story.

Jesse´s Ghost is the first volume of Bergon´s California trilogy. Set in California, this novel is inspired by Bergon´s experiences growing up in the Central Valley. In this case, however, and in contrast to his previous fiction, the main character is not of Basque ancestry, yet Bergon does include a Basque fictional figure. This character, Mitch Etcheverry, plays the role of a celebrated San Francisco journalist who wants to publish a story about two best friends and find out why one, Sonny, killed the other, Jesse.

The origins of *Shoshone Mike* take us back to Petra Mendive, Bergon´s maternal Basque grandmother. She was born in the province of Bizkaia, the Basque Country, and settled later in Battle Mountain, Nevada. As a child, Bergon heard many tales of the Last Indian Massacre and the three Basque men while visiting his grandmother. Besides, Lina, Bergon´s mother, was born in 1911, which enhanced the family´s connection to the tragic events. When Dayton O. Hyde's *The Last Free Man: The True Story Behind the Massacre of Shoshone Mike and His Band of Indians in 1911* was published in 1973, Bergon was infuriated because of its unsubstantiated accusations against the Basques. Hyde over-romanticized the image of the Native Americans, while his allegations towards the Basque reveal Anglo-versus-Basque friction of the time. In his book, the Basque are accused of sexually molesting Shoshone´s young daughters. Hyde´s account seems to reproduce an earlier stereotypical view of Basques, who had just become visible in the American mainstream (Madinabeitia, 2020, p. 17). Although Basques were not the main target of the violent regeneration of the American expansion, some were unfortunate victims of marginalization. As recreated in *Shoshone Mike*, first– and second-generation Basques were derogatorily called "Basco" or "Black Basco." The following examples illustrate the connection between Basques and sheep herding, and how they were denigrated because they undertook a job that was disdained by the Anglo community, as is evident in the following examples: "What's for dinner today, Basco boy? Bound to be sheep's balls one of these days?" (Bergon *Shoshone* 1987, p.102); "all he knows is sheep talk. *Baaaa, baaaa*" (ibid 103); and "Everyone knows they put Bascos out with the sheep 'cuz the smell keeps the coyotes away" (ibid 108).

This attitude was the result of a widespread view that Basques were only shepherds, and cattlemen blamed sheep herding for ruining their own

grazing, hence their dislike and distrust of the immigrants. However, even though many Basques were shepherds when they first came to the United States, others had little to do with this occupation, especially in subsequent generations. Jean Erramouspe, for example, does not follow his father's shepherding tradition, a disruption that was common in second-generation Basques – mainly manifested in *Wild Game* and *Jesse's Ghost*. Instead, Erramouspe works for a mining company. Nonetheless, regardless of his occupation, he is picked on because of his Basqueness, and hence homogenized within those regarded as deviant and unwanted. Erramouspe is not even allowed to participate in the posse that chased the Shoshone that had killed his father, possibly because he is Basque, as suggested in *Shoshone Mike*.

Shoshone Mike captures many ethnic customs of first-generation Basques. It was a close-knit community which had very little interaction with the Anglos. Almost none were fluent in English, which limited their socializing and employment options. Herding sheep did not require any linguistic skills and was a tough solitary job that no one else wanted, which opened up job opportunities for the Basques. This is the case of Pete, Jean´s father, who was hired to herd a flock of sheep. Pete knew nothing about herding sheep upon his arrival in the American West, but because of the established connection between Basques and sheep herding, Pete´s boss assumed he was skilled merely because he was a Basque, a Basco. Contrary to the widespread stereotypical imagery of Basques, Pete, like many other Basques in the West, learnt everything he knew about sheep "after coming to America" (Bergon *Shoshone* 1984, p.24).

Pete left his hometown, Banca, in the late nineteenth century. He married another Basque, as was customary at that stage of Basque settlement in the West. Jean Erramouspe was hence born in a Basque home of the American West. Because of the defamation experienced by first-generation and American-born Basques, it was not uncommon for the second generation to reject their roots and try to embrace solely the American identity. At this stage, they were Basques, but not because they had chosen to be so. They went to school with other children and often ended up in fights because they were called "Basco". Therefore, it was normal for many of them, like Jean Erramouspe, to feel ashamed of their roots and thus reject them. They wanted to assimilate into the mainstream as soon as possible. In the novel, Erramouspe desperately cries "I´m as American as anyone else" (Bergon Shoshone 1987, p.46), which clashes with what Jack Irigary, in Wild

Game, feels and represents. In fact, Irigaray embodies the effort of many third-generation Basques to connect with their Basque ancestry. As opposed to Erramouspe, Irigaray´s American identity is acknowledged by the mainstream. In his case, he claims his hybrid identity, which is also transmitted through Bergon´s choice of the character´s name and surname, which are a combination of an Anglo first name and a Basque surname. Nowadays, it is common to come across people in the Basque American diaspora whose children have been given a Basque first name and whose car registration numbers proudly vindicate the owner´s Basque heritage.

Wild Game describes "New Basques" (Douglass 262) and explores their changing roles as opposed to those of previous generations. Contemporary Basques are assimilated into the mainstream, they are fully Americanized, do not speak the language of the old country and are not married to other Basques, like Irigaray, or even St. Ed Arrizabalaga, in *The Temptations*. At present, Basques are ethnically tied by cultural events, such as dancing and singing. Although the uniqueness of the Basque language is a source of pride for many Basque Americans, younger-generations have largely abandoned attempts to learn Euskara (Basque), mainly due to the disproportionate ratio of effort and reward. As expressed in *Wild Game*, there is a saying that even the Devil himself spent seven years trying to learn Basque, but then gave up (85). This expression is also recollected in *Jesse's Ghost*, when Etcheverry explains that he cannot speak any Basque. His "folks know some, but it's too late for [him] to learn. They say the Devil tried to learn Basque by listening outside a farmhouse, but after seven years he could only say two words: 'Yes, ma'am'" (73). Uncle Pete, in *Wild Game*, recalls how Basque was his mother tongue when he was a kid, but that he had completely forgotten it (85). The death of parents or a fluent Basque-speaking community unfavourably impacted on the maintenance of Basque. Equally, many were born into families that had been offended because of their heritage, which led to a wish to disassociate themselves from their roots. As recreated through the character of Jean Erramouspe, many second-generation Basques worked hard to assimilate as soon as possible. The outcome was that English prevailed in many families and that Euskara was no longer spoken. In addition, because of the hardship that the sheep industry went through, plus the fact that the Basque Country was flourishing economically, emigration became less and less popular. That meant that the influx of fluent Basque speakers shrank significantly.

For third-generation Basques, like Jack Irigaray, who represents Bergon´s experience as Basque American, Basque cultural rituals and hubs have become means to re/connect with Basqueness, regardless of whether they speak Basque or not. For example, Irigaray takes his daughters to the local Basque Club so that they may participate and learn about their culture by means of Basque dances and songs. However, these ties connect contemporary Basques to their homeland nostalgically, but do not significantly impact on their daily lives (Corcostegui, 1999, p. 249), as opposed to the scenario in earlier generations. Similarly, Basques are no longer intimately attached to rural jobs. As a matter of fact, during the 1950s most Basques turned from rural to urban occupations. Irigaray explains that "[m]ost of the Basques [he] grew up with peaceably sold cars, taught school, ran banks, wrote books, even hobnobbed with the president" (Bergon *Wild* 1995, p.3). The western American open-range industry declined substantially during the 1970s, which symbolized the end of the Basque shepherd in the American West (Lane and Douglass, 1985, pp. 24-25). Wool was being replaced by synthetic materials and pasture land availability was increasingly limited, which meant that many Basques were forced to take to other occupations; "Laxalt, Arrizabalaga, Ybarguengoitia were familiar names around Reno, but no longer of sheepherders. The solitary Basque herders of previous generations – those tough 'Black Bascos' as they were derisively called – had pretty much vanished... Most of the Basques Irigaray grew up with sold cars, taught school, ran banks" (Bergon *Wild* 1995, p.3). This bygone era of the archetypal Basque is highlighted with the death of Uncle Pete, "an outmoded figure tottering on the rim of extinction" (1995, p.80). His death personifies the end of "the tough, lonesome world of Basques herding sheep in desolate hills and buckaroos following chuck wagons and sleeping in bedrolls" (ibid.) – also applicable to the figure and death of Sam Etcheverry, Mitch´s father. Indeed, these two novels overtly embed the changing roles of Basques in the American West and capture the growing economic success of further generation Basques.

Irigaray conveys the pride that contemporary Basques feel towards their ethnic roots. They wish to cling to their heritage by participating in rituals and social events, which would include dancing, eating and festivals in general. Through these cultural gatherings, Basques reassert their ethnic pride while acknowledging their membership of broader American society (Douglass and Bilbao, 1975, p. 391). They proudly and publicly manifest

their Basqueness, which clashes with Erramouspe´s rejection and his attempt to keep a low profile as a Basque. The American civil rights movements in the 1950s and 60s influenced the growing ethnic diversity of the US; ethnic awareness was fostered and pride seeped into the American mainstream. During the 1960s, and afterwards, it became increasingly popular, even fashionable, to be *from* somewhere else, rather than just American (Bieter and Bieter, 2000, p. 5). Two major events in the Basque diaspora also triggered this growth in ethnic pride. One of them was the success of Robert Laxalt´s book, *Sweet Promised Land* (1957). The book talks about the journey of the author´s father, Dominique, to his homeland, after forty-seven years as an immigrant shepherd in the American West. The book focuses on the challenges that any newcomer must face during his early years in America, as did Dominique, and his struggle to adapt to a new setting, which has nothing to do with that in the Old World. *Sweet Promised Land* also tackles the successful assimilation process of Dominique, which represents the biographies of many other Basque immigrants. That is why many Basques at the time identified with Dominique. Other immigrant communities also experienced similar patterns on their arrival and during their assimilation process. This book gave them visibility and pride, which is why the Basque community stopped being hidden in plain sight.

The other historic event was the First Western Basque Festival (1959), which took place in Sparks, Nevada. This festival, in whose organization Laxalt also participated, attracted around 6,000 people – Basque and non-Basque alike. The festival "had positive effects on Basques´collective imagery and their integration into a national collectivity" (Saitua). Basques were able to publicly manifest their Basqueness while still expressing their affiliation to their American identity. This first major festival can also be conceived as a public expression that they were good immigrants, good American citizens. Not only that, this festival and others that followed were originally organized to change the status of Basques from purely immigrant to ethnos, from the mountain to the city, that is, to American citizens. These festivals are hence regarded as a rite of passage of a collective that changed its status (Fernández de Larrinoa, 1997, pp. 114-115). Now that Basques are fully assimilated and have proved to be good Americans, they are trying to hold on to their Basque identity and are reinventing means that will enable them to maintain and showcase their ethnicity. Nowadays, there are festivals all over the West, which are held as a celebration of Basque culture (Zubiri).

Basque festivals bring people from different states together and have become a key social event for the Basque community (Corcostegui, 1999; Douglass, 1980).

Basque family-style restaurants are also a haven for Basques to re/connect with their ancestry. Mitch Etcheverry and his family frequently go to the Basque Hotel in Fresno, as did Bergon himself when he was growing up. Bergon explains that "Eating family style in California's San Joaquin Valley … meant sitting at a long, noisy table with people you might not know and eating food you hadn't ordered" ("Gastronomica"). As he further points out, Basque hotels served as cultural havens and transitional zones of assimilation for Basque immigrants. Usually, they operated as "a rooming house, post office, card room, dance hall, convalescent ward, unemployment hospice, and retirement community … business centers and hiring halls for traveling Basque sheep owners … Eventually the hotels opened up their boarders' tables to the public" (ibid.) Family style eateries are an instrument of social relations and ethnicity in the Basque diaspora; in short, they serve as social rituals. Members of the diaspora can highlight their Basque attachment without having to have a solid commitment to the culture. They may still feel Basque, regardless of whether they are part or not of Basque clubs or the like. That is, unlike Irigaray, who is passionately engaged with the Basque community in Nevada, other Basques may decide to participate in other ways or even be more passive ethnically.

Incidentally, another possibility within the gamut of Basqueness is not to embrace it at all; even to ignore it. St. Ed Arrizabalaga does not show any explicit attachment to his Basque heritage; his surname is the only clear indication of his ethnic roots, but not of what he feels. One interpretation of this absence of Basque ethnic markers would be his voluntary choice not to be associated with the Basque community. He may even be ignorant of his ethnic ancestry, or does not consider it relevant or a source of pride. Basques in the diaspora show different degrees of affection for and affiliation with their cultural heritage, which may range from total to non-existent. An absence of public manifestations of this heritage does not necessarily mean that one does not feel Basque, since one may feel associated with Basqueness in a more private and individual way, without necessarily participating in the current rituals or events.

Today, Basque Americans have planted deep roots in America, but they proudly express their ethnic culture. They live their Basqueness and

embrace it in different degrees and alternative ways, as conceived in Irigaray, Arrizabalaga and Etcheverry. In contrast to Erramouspe, they can choose to be Basque at no risk of being harassed. They can claim with pride that they are Basque, or Basco, as they are referred to at present. Irigaray claims that "he has grown used to the nickname [Basco], although it had come about only in recent years" (2), which highlights the transformation and recalibration of the term Basco and its positive impact on the re/construction of Basque American identity.

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