Beyond Stereotypes: The Image of Basque Immigrants in Robert Laxalt's *The Basque Hotel* and Martin Etchart's *The Last Shepherd*

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Abstract

Early attempts to bring the Basque-American experience to literature were not rewarded until the success of Robert Laxalt, whose recognition helped to organize the public display of the Basque identity and culture in the United States. Indeed, the impact of his *Sweet Promised Land* in 1957 put an end to the invisibility of the Basques in America and became a vital piece in the visibility of the Basque immigrant sheepherders. This new attention was also extended to the American literary field where, a few years later, authors such as Martin Etchart would take Laxalt's legacy. In such context, this paper is focused on the analysis of the representation of Basque immigrants in Robert Laxalt's *The Basque Hotel* (1989) and Martin Etchart's *The Last Shepherd* (2012). The essay firstly introduces the historical background of the Basques in the American West in order to provide an overview of the Basque Diaspora, as well as this minority community's role in western American literature. Afterwards, Basque immigrants in both novels are analyzed from the point of view of cultural studies, focusing on two main critical categories in both books: ethnicity, with an emphasis on the struggles of a generation marked by the difficulties of assimilation and the dilemma of a self-identity; and class, revealing the obstacles that the Basque newcomers encountered when trying to rise in social status in order to achieve their "American Dream." It is argued that Laxalt's and Etchart's works can be seen as narratives of conflicting identities in which their main characters display a sense of dual identification both with the Basque Country and with the American West.

Keywords: Basque immigrants, American West, western American literature, identity, ethnicity, class.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

The development of a Basque identity occurred principally in the west of the United States, where numerous Basque immigrants became a distinguished group in sheepherding. This job precluded the newcomers from daily communication with American society, but it helped them acquired a reputation as skilled sheep farmers. In general, the isolation in which they lived as well as their lack of social assimilation (since they tended to communicate only with other Basques), contributed to a perception of them as unusual or mysterious (Saitua 83-84).

These immigrants were not a prominent minority from a demographic and social point of view, and writing was not a common activity among the early Basques whose main priority was economic survival and success. As a result, their portrayals in American newspapers and magazines were hackneyed, romanticized and usually inaccurate. In fact, writers' lack of information as well as the pejorative image that prevailed in non-literary sources made Basques be seen as "foreigners and cultural parasites" who did not want to learn English or adapt to American society (Etulain, "The Basques in Western American Literature" 8). Besides, because of their connection with sheep farming, an occupation that did not have an esteemed social status due to the solitude and physical work it required, they "remained a 'phantom-like' element within the society of the American West, largely ignored by the literati" (Douglass and Bilbao 367).

At the turn of the twentieth century, some well-known American authors constructed certain specific stereotypes of Basques in formula westerns. Including Basques as examples of "local color" (Río, "The Treatment of Basques" 46), novelists such as Harry Sinclair Drago, whose works had popular reception in the early years of the 1920s, utilized these characters to give their writing "a sort of exotic novelty in a genre that was rather formulaic" (Arostegui 3).

It was not until Robert Laxalt's *Sweet Promised Land* was published in 1957, that Basques were accurately depicted and gained status among the US readership. Indeed, Laxalt's work became the model for other memoirs by Basque Americans who decided to narrate their own life lessons and accept their ethnic heritage (Río, "Far from the Pastoral Myth" 246). Representative examples of that are Robert Laxalt's *The Basque Hotel* (1989) and Martin Etchart's *The Last Shepherd* (2012). Both are *bildungsroman* narratives, which apart from exploring the space and the interaction between the

American and Basque cultures, focus on Basque-American characters in different historical and social contexts.

Despite the existence of previous studies on Basque immigrants' stereotypes, scarce attention has been paid to comparative approaches emphasizing ethnicity and class in Basque-American literature. Consequently, this paper aims to discuss the image of Basque immigrants in Robert Laxalt's *The Basque Hotel* and Martin Etchart's *The Last Shepherd.* Framed in the area of American cultural studies, special attention will be paid to ethnicity and social class as central critical points to be explored in each novel. For this purpose, I will first introduce the historical context of the Basques in the American West by offering an overview of the Basque Diaspora. In the following section, I will briefly explain their role in western American literature. Finally, the main section of this paper will be devoted to the analysis of the representation of Basque immigrants in both novels.

2. Basques in the American West

The presence of Basque immigrants in the United States has an enduring history. As citizens of Spain and France, two of the principal colonizing powers that established their imperial jurisdiction all over America, Basques became part of the European settlement's process in areas such as Florida, the Mississippi Valley, and afterwards, the South-Western regions of Arizona and California between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (Álvarez-Gila, "Western Gypsies or Eastern Mexicans?" 286).

After both empires' decadence, a new wave of Basque immigration arrived in the United States. Beginning in the 1850s because of the California Gold Rush, these newcomers hoped they would be successful in America. Nonetheless, the increasing demand for sheepherders because of the growth of cities as well as the emergence of Basque boarding hotels became the reasons for which they finished staying in the American West (Álvarez-Gila, "Changes on Perception" par. 8).

Throughout the following years, Basques' profession became more heterogeneous, as they started working in other activities such as the mineral industry, construction, and small-scale commerce. Still, there was a permanent association between sheep farming and the Basque identity. Indeed, it was for decades that the word "sheepherder" remained linked to them. According to Álvarez-Gila, there were two main explanations for this point of labor specialization: firstly, the high rates of masculinity

within the Basques, as the average settler used to be a disinherited young son of a rural Basque farmstead, single, and scarcely literate; and secondly, a sense of cultural isolation that to a certain extent prevented them from the interaction with the local community. The wide distribution of the Basque boarding-house as the "home" of unmarried immigrants during the period they were not shepherding also contributed to the latter consequence ("Changes on Perception" par. 8).

Mainly concentrated in the states of Nevada, Idaho, and California, they were identified as Spanish or French. As a matter of fact, Álvarez-Gila states that Basques were included in a powerful stereotype that acted as a barrier for "their visibility as a separate group during the first years of their immigration process" ("Western Gypsies or Eastern Mexicans?" 288).

Nevertheless, the development of a new Basque identity was quickened by the Spanish-American War of 1898. In a context of extreme anti-Spanish attitudes, they kept their political citizenship in secret and emphasized their ethnic identity. It also helped the fact that they were proficient in a different language, Basque, and that their knowledge of Spanish was often quite limited (Álvarez-Gila, "Changes on Perception" par. 9).

During the first half of the twentieth century, even when the American authorities closed the emigrant quotas[1], the migratory flow continued active. Not only that, but little by little, the Basque-American generations made their way into US mainstream society, occupying positions of responsibility in distinct fields of public life and business[2]. Besides, in the 1940s, the first Basque picnics took place. These feast days soon became cultural festivals that enhanced the community's relationship and transmitted children some Basque traditions; particularly, those related to dance, music, and gastronomy (Gobierno Vasco-Secretaría General de Acción Exterior 5).

As a result of the increasing visibility of the Basques in America after the immense success of Laxalt's *Sweet Promised Land* in 1957 and the ethnic diversity movements of

[1] Between 1917 and 1924, Congress approved measures to limit immigration from Europe. In February 1917, before the United States entered the First World War, an act that established rigorous criteria was implemented. They further tightened immigration laws in 1921 with the "Emergency Quota Act", and later on, in May 1924, with the so-called "Johnson-Reed Act" (Saitua 109-110).

[2] The Laxalt brothers, Pete Cenarrusa, the Ysursa's, and the Bieter family are among the most prominent examples (Gobierno Vasco-Secretaría General de Acción Exterior 5).

the 1960s, the Basques began to open their activities to the non-Basque people, celebrating the first National Basque Festival in Sparks, Nevada in 1959. For the first time, in an event that attracted approximately 3,000 participants, Basques did not try to hide their heritage, but to display it as precisely and appealingly as possible. This way, they showed that they were no longer newcomers, but second and third-generation Americans whose commitment to the US was "beyond doubt" (Álvarez-Gila, "Changes on Perception" par. 13).

In 1962, the Desert Research Institute of the University of Nevada committed to designing a Basque Studies Program "within the scientific agenda of its new Center for Western North American Studies" launched in 1967 (Douglass 8). Six years later, in 1973, the North American Basque Organizations (or NABO) was established. Hence, Arostegui asserts that by consolidating Basque centres throughout the country, Basque identity was accepted as a larger phenomenon and that they became a part of the multicultural society that characterizes the United States (9).

Other activities such as the *Jaialdi*, first held in 1987, second in 1990, and later celebrated one every five years (except last year because of the COVID-19), have become the most ornate public display of the Basque-American cultural legacy, attracting visitants both from throughout the world's Basque diaspora and the Basque Country itself (Douglass 8).

Nowadays, socialization and culture celebration has happened to be Basque clubs' exclusive purpose. Through folkloric festivals, they intend to guarantee the transmission of the Basque identity to the succeeding generations (Álvarez-Gila, "Changes on Perception" par. 14).

3. The Role of Basques in Western American Literature

The literary activity among Basque immigrants was a minority phenomenon, particularly until the second half of the twentieth century, when, coinciding with the spread of multiculturalism in the United States, Robert Laxalt's *Sweet Promised Land* (1957) was published. As stated earlier, writing was never a primary purpose for the first-generation of the newcomers. Indeed, whether they were thinking of returning to the Basque Country or achieving their particular "American Dream," Basque settlers only sought economic survival and prosperity. Their restricted cultural profile did not help

either. Consequently, the few western novels in which Basques were present were written by non-Basque-American authors like Harry Sinclair Drago. As a matter of fact, such was the scarceness of Basque-American literary production that only two works by Miriam Isasi, a Basque author exiled in the United States, can be cited as relevant testimonies during the first half of the century: *Basque Girl* (1940) and *White Stars of Freedom* (1942) (Río, "Escritores de Origen Vasco en Estados Unidos" 676).

Nonetheless, Etulain indicates that the rise of movements for the vindication of ethnic diversity in the late 1950s, the growing prominence of writers focused on the projection of a multicultural imaginary, and changes in approaches to literature[3], originated a more favourable panorama for Basque immigration narratives within the West itself ("Beyond Conflict, Toward Complexity" 25). Thus, as previously specified, the first attempts to bring the Basque-American experience into literature were rewarded by the success of Robert Laxalt, the son of a family of Basque immigrants in the American West. Managing to establish himself not only as a writer, but also as a spokesman for his community, Laxalt paid homage to his father and portrayed the history of a large part of the Basque diaspora in his first published non-fiction (Río, "Escritores de Origen Vasco en Estados Unidos" 676).

The positive reception of *Sweet Promised Land* by US readers led to an increase in interest in Basque themes. Hence, during the following decades, other authors of Basque origin began to write both about their experience of immigration in the "New World" and/or about their past in Euskal Herria. These were predominantly autobiographical stories centred on the figure of the immigrant Basque shepherd, who progressively consolidated as a literary archetype. Such was the case of Louis Irigaray and Theodore Taylor's *A Shepherd Watches: A Shepherd Sings* (1977) or Beltran Paris's *Basque Sheepman of the American West* (1979). Other accounts, in contrast, presented a greater plurality, such as Joseph Eiguren's *Kashpar: The Saga of the Basque Immigrants to North America* (1988). Besides, Laxalt's semi-autobiographical trilogy of the Indart family, consisting of the novels *The Basque Hotel* (1989), *Child of the Holy Ghost* (1992), and *The Governor's Mansion* (1994), and which addressed the impact of immigration on

[3] Scholars began to include issues such as race, gender, or ethnicity in their analyses (Etulain, "Beyond Conflict, Toward Complexity" 25).

the first and second-generation of Basque-Americans, allowed him to consolidate his literary reputation (Río, "Escritores de Origen Vasco en Estados Unidos" 677-678).

By the end of the century, Basque-American writers benefited from a more favourable environment for minority literature and narratives that broke with the western formula. In a context of transition towards a plural society, we can first find the early works of writers such as Frank Bergon, whose impressive novel *Shoshone Mike* (1987) recreated the killing of three Basque sheepherders and an Anglo in Nevada in 1911 by a Shoshone group as well as the retaliation of a white posse on these Native-Americans. There was also a novel whose contribution in terms of female representation was unprecedented in this literary genre: *The Deep Blue Memory* (1993) by Monique Urza. This semi-autobiographical work told the story of four generations of a Basque-American family, showing the challenging coexistence between loyalty to the inherited legacy and the assimilation of the values of American society. There were other Basque-American authors who did not directly incorporate the dialectic of Basque identity but that are worth mentioning: the poets Frank Bidart, who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Half-light: Collected Poems 1965-2016* (2017), and Bruce Laxalt, whose poems were collected in *Songs of Mourning and Worship* (2005) (Río, "La Literatura Vasco-Norteamericana del Siglo XXI (I/II)" 1-2).

As for the evolution of Basque-American literature in the twenty-first century, it is noticeable the fact that authors have broken with the traditional omnipresence of the figure of the Basque immigrant shepherd in the West and have paid more attention to the exploration of the ethnic and personal identity of the new generations of Basque-Americans. Some of the most relevant examples are Gregory Martin's *Mountain City* (2000) and Martin Etchart's *The Good Oak* (2005) and, its sequel, *The Last Shepherd* (2012). The journey to Euskal Herria in search of Basque roots is the central motif of Vince J. Juaristi's *Back to Bizkaia* (2011), a non-fiction story that in some ways bears similar characteristics to Robert Laxalt's iconic work, *Sweet Promised Land* (Río, "La Literatura Vasco-Norteamericana del Siglo XXI (I/II)" 1).

The presence of Basque-American women authors is still quite limited. However, Río points out that in the last decade some interesting titles by women writers such as Joan Errea's *My Mama Marie* (2013) and *A Man Called Aita* (2017), Begoña Echeverria's

The Hammer of Witches (2014) and Gretchen Skivington's *Echevarria* (2017) have been published ("La Literatura Vasco-Norteamericana del Siglo XXI (II/II)" 1-2).

Moreover, in recent years, some other new voices have emerged in Basque-American literature. For example, we can mention two young authors who seem to anticipate an interesting future for this literature: Sean Bernard and Gabriel Urza, with their *Hereafter* (2015) and *All That Followed* (2015), respectively (Río, "La Literatura Vasco-Norteamericana del Siglo XXI (II/II)" 2).

Overall, the widening recognition achieved by minority communities in the western literary panorama has also been extended to non-Anglo white groups who were traditionally neglected by monocultural restricted conceptions of the frontier experience. Such is the case of Basque-American authors, who have gradually moved away from traditional and limited stereotypes usually associated to Basque-American immigrants, focusing on other approaches and themes to make Basque characters, motifs and settings the central element of their works (Río, "La Literatura Vasco-Norteamericana del Siglo XXI (II/II)" 2).

4. Ethnic Identity

Anthony Smith defines ethnic groups as "a type of cultural collectively, one that emphasizes the role of myths of descent and historical memories, and that is recognized by one or more cultural differences like religion, customs, language, or institutions" (qtd. in Álvarez-Gila, "Changes on Perception" par. 4).

As part of a minority in the American West, Basque-Americans' ethnic identity presents a clear evolution, which follows social theorist Jean Phinney's approach: it goes from the first-generation's "given identity," to the second-generation's ethnic identity search, and to the third and later-generations' accomplishment of that exploration (66-76). In other words, each generation displays particular features, starting from a purely Basque immigrant group to a dual Basque-American generation, and finishing with a generation that is often interested in the revival of Basque heritage.

Robert Laxalt's *The Basque Hotel* (1989) and Martin Etchart's *The Last Shepherd* (2012) portray the struggles of that second-generation to create a hybrid in a society that is not yet talking about multiculturalism. As a matter of fact, immersing the main characters in a journey into the past to find their ethnic roots, both authors analyze the

space between immigrant culture and the conventional ideas of mainstream American society. These novels, as diasporic texts, display a cultural transmission marked by the problems of acculturation and the concern of the crisis of a dual identity, in which the first and the second-generations are in constant dialogue with their new environment and their cultural heritage to choose the elements of identity that will allow them to live in harmony with their new compatriots.

4.1 The Search for One's Individuality

The Basque Hotel is a semi-autobiographical *bildungsroman* novel, nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, where Robert Laxalt narrates Pete Indart's story of apprenticeship, a teenager whose parents run a Basque hotel in Carson City (Nevada) during the 1920s. Through the eyes of the protagonist, three processes of an initiatory nature may be distinguished: Pete's path to maturity, his progressive assimilation of the meaning of his Basque family origins, and the gradual transformation towards modernity of the American West (Río, "Retrato de Un Escritor Vasco de Nevada" 608).

Discovering the world of violence, sex, and the power of money, Pete embarks on a journey full of contradictions in which discrimination is a tool of the dominant mainstream. As a result, he will not only have to come to understand his parents' ethnic heritage, but he will also have to learn to place that legacy within a foreign environment whose values often clash with those of his relatives.

This process of emancipation and maturation, however, should not be mistaken with the usual coming-of-age of any individual. Pete's growth is marked by a constant negotiation between values that do not conflict with mainstream expectations and those that lead to negative situations such as segregation. Even if he feels closely tied to American citizens, Pete represents the main identity complex between immigrant heritage and the host country culture. This way, the novel emphasizes difference as a source of shame and discrimination. It is Pete himself, particularly, the one who feels embarrassed of his uncle Joanes because of his foreign customs and actions. This situation is illustrated, for instance, by an episode in which the attention of the whole back of the church is fixed on their pew because Joanes has started saying his prayers out loud in Basque (Laxalt 107). Even so, this is not the sole scene in which Pete feels teased by western US society. As a matter of fact, he becomes the victim of bullying at school because his family sells alcohol during the Prohibition, making him feel both confused

and rebuffed (Laxalt 30). These two examples do not only illustrate the plurality of the adaptation process, but also a series of cultural confrontations.

Nevertheless, Pete's rejection of his origins is not only related to mainstream prejudice against his ethnic identity, but also to his attempt to assimilate new customs. His unease about his heritage is especially intense when the lifeways of the Basque Country depart from American traditions. Such clash causes the accident that he suffers when he ventures into the forest in the middle of winter to cut down a tree for Christmas. The narrator explains that Pete's motives for believing he needs a tree include his immaturity and his need for psychological separation from his family: "It was just that neither his father nor his mother seemed to know that a Christmas tree went with Christmas, and the reason was tied up somehow with all the other unexplained things that came out of what they called 'the old country'" (Laxalt 42).

Over the course of the novel, and particularly, in chapter 19, Pete's unawareness of his roots is revealed. When his mother shows him photos of the Basque Country, which are kept in a metal box, his initial lack of interest is gradually replaced by his curiosity to know if he has relatives in the "old continent:"

> They went hurriedly then through what she said were pictures from the Basque country of France. Too hurriedly, Pete thought later, but he was not that much interested in them, anyway. His mother paused once, however, to look at one picture longer than the others. It was of two girls, one standing and the other sitting down in a fancy chair. […] The idea of relatives in a foreign land was new to Pete. It was something he would have to think about later (Laxalt 57).

At this point, it is important to emphasize that both parents participate as guides of Pete's learning process about his ethnic roots. Indeed, Laxalt shows their apprehension to lose their identity in search for integration, though these characters are conscious that they have to restrict the customs of their home country to a familial context. In this regard, Pete's mother, who plays a supporting role and is the caretaker of the family, is portrayed as a strict person who seems to evade talking about the Basque Country and her relatives (Laxalt 58), but who is still attached to the "old continent's" discipline. On the other hand, his father, who has also experienced problems as a Basque immigrant, is the one who makes Pete conscious of the prejudice towards Basques as bootleggers and shows his lack of understanding towards the host country: "'I can't figure this country out,' he said. 'If

you don't serve booze, you go broke. And if you do serve it, you get into trouble.' […] 'If giving people a little wine for dinner and a couple shots of whiskey beforehand is being a bootlegger, then I guess we are bootleggers'" (Laxalt 36).

Towards the end of the work, even though he is aware of its problematic dimension, Pete recognizes that he is discovering a part of himself linked to his ancestors whose meaning is still uncertain for him: "He reflected wryly that the secret part of his life was beginning to assume the proportions of a burden" (Laxalt 118). Such scene may suggest that Pete is still trying to develop his own personality.

Thus, the Basque-American writer explores the creation of a hybrid of the ancestral culture and the host country, acknowledging the tension between loyalty to family ties and the search for one's individuality. Nevertheless, as Robert Laxalt himself admitted in an interview with David Río, *The Basque Hotel* simply shows a youngster's experience growing up, and specifically, such youngster's lack of comprehension of what immigrants are supposed to be. In the end, in the author's words, "it's a kid not denying his ancestry, it is just he can't understand it" (Río, "A Clean Writer" 26).

4.2 The Clash between Two Distinct Worlds

Written by Martin Etchart and published in 2012, *The Last Shepherd* is a fiction narrative in which Matt Etcheberri leaves Arizona behind to try to find his identity in a small Basque village in the French Pyrenees. Portraying the pastoral setting of the "old continent" and uncovering the family secrets that have been kept for years, this coming-of-age novel explores "the tensions between what Werner Sollors called consent and descent relations, emphasizing the interaction between two different worlds, the US one and the traditional lifestyle of the Basques" (Río, "Review of *The Last Shepherd*" 476).

With such purpose, Etchart portrays a situation in which the cultural and ethnic distinctiveness of the Basque immigrants are distinguishable. In a world that Matt appears to feel like he does not really fit into its standards, the author takes advantage of the circumstances to underline various fables representing the Basque identity and to include an important number of Basque terms and expressions throughout all the work. A noteworthy example of this is a conversation that Matt has with his grandfather (*Aitatxi*) and his grandfather's brother (Oxea), in which they remark the origins of the Basques, explaining that both brothers have Basque hands, which at the same time are God's hands (Etchart 14). Later on, in another dialogue with his *Aitatxi*, the previously commented

idea is reaffirmed as Matt is told that God created the Basques and gave them *pilota* to remind the *Euskaldunak* of who they are (Etchart 89-90). Both his *Aitatxi* and Oxea also allude to the *lamiak*, typical mythological characters of the Basque culture (Etchart 107). In these memories, we can see the atmosphere in which Matt has grown up and that uniformly connects him to an ancient legacy that he is often incapable to comprehend.

Associated with the aforementioned, in terms of tradition, Etchart includes two of the most significant symbols of the Basque folklore. The first one is the *lauburua*. Thus, Matt says that "I saw a *lauburua* carved into the cabinet's front – the four heads of the Basque cross forming a pinwheel that looked like a good breeze would set spinning (Etchart 159)". The second one is the *ikurrina*. In *Aitatxi*'s words, "the Basques called their flag *Ikurrina*, and that it was the symbol of Euskal Herria, the Basque Country" (Etchart 282). Furthermore, the novel explores the relationship between family history and property, symbolized by Basque surnames alluding to houses and implying both heritage and a sense of belonging. Several instances are, for example, when Matt says that he is going to sell *Artzainaskena*, his family's Arizona ranch (Etchart 36), or when he discusses with Mr. Steele the name of his family's house in the Basque Country, *Gorrienea* (Etchart 68). All these may show how the first-generation of the Basque community continues to resist the dominant culture, while the second-generation (Matt, in this case) feels a constant pressure to eliminate certain traits of Basque "otherness."

The Last Shepherd also remarks the pride of Matt's ancestors in their Basque heritage several times: "I was ten at the time and already used to *Aitatxi* giving credit to Basques for everything worthwhile that had been invented, accomplished, or said in the history of the world" (Etchart 33). However, these feelings of the first-generation contrast with the process of "Americanization" undergone by Matt's generation, who seems to be seeking the "approval" of the predominant society. Although the story takes place in times much more favorable to the recognition of ethnic diversity (in the 1980s, specifically), Etchart suggests that such distinctness is still viewed as an impediment for proper integration into American society. In that sense, we can see how Matt rejects his grandparents' culture, and even its language. As a matter of fact, he is ashamed of his original French-Basque name and calls himself "Matt" to show that he is purely American. Evident from the very beginning of the novel, Matt asks his dad not to call him "Mathieu" (Etchart 13). This way, he is creating a new identity, and hence rejecting his roots. Yet, he is not the only one who does it. His father also changes his name in order

to achieve "greater professional success:" "'I advised Fred to just be a… a candid about the situation with you, son,' Mr. Steele said, waving the red plastic ice cream in the air. And I thought about telling him that my father's name was Ferdinand, not Fred" (Etchart 68).

Despite Matt's efforts for integration, several scenes in which he is teased and insulted because of his immigrant family's background can be identified (Etchart 20). Consequently, aware of both countries' cultural differences, we can observe how at some point of the novel he states that he hates sheep, the ranch, his father, his fingers, and every part of his Basque hands because "the skin was too callused and the palms too fat and the wrinkles too deep. But mostly, I hated my hands because they were just like *Aitatxi*'s and Oxea's" (Etchart 14). Overall, through such thoughts, he seems to reject everything that has to do with his Basque heritage, as all these examples represent different attempts to achieve acceptance within the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture.

While Matt's initial reaction presents a threat to the maintenance of the Basque-American hybrid because he does not think of the "old continent" either as his "homeland" or a place to reconnect with his family's origins after his father's death (Etchart 130), by the end of the journey he matures in such a way that he comes to accept his Basque heritage and is proud of it:

> And I did want that—to live in that other world, far away from the sheep and ranches and fallow fields and small towns. To just walk down the road and never look back. Or at least part of me wanted that. Maybe it always would. But another part of me, the bigger part, well, it wanted just the opposite (Etchart 327).

Thus, we can see how Matt's initiation process progressively transforms his point of view about his Basque heritage. At the beginning, Etchart accentuates Matt's failure to come to terms with his family's background, as his wish is to grow up like most of his friends. It is only when he learns about the history of his relatives that he really starts to understand his motherland's values and traditions.

5. Class Identity

Both *The Basque Hotel* and *The Last Shepherd* address class identity, offering several interesting social and cultural perspectives on this issue. Moving beyond established frontier mysticism, which stresses the cowboy figure, both Laxalt and Etchart

bring recognition to sheepherding and Basque boardinghouses, two realms traditionally associated with this ethnic group.

The economic struggle is a reality portrayed in both novels, as the authors are explicit about the obstacles the main characters have to face to achieve their "American Dream." Moreover, when examining the sheep farming occupation, it is relevant to underline the prevailing antipastoral style in Laxalt's work. He certainly refuses to glorify the agrarian world in *The Basque Hotel*. In *The Last Shepherd*, on the contrary, Etchart concentrates on maintaining the tensions between pastoral and antipastoral ingredients (Río, "Far from the Pastoral Myth" 247, 255). Thus, Laxalt and Etchart do not only illustrate the widening visibility of Basque sheepherders in contemporary western American literature, but also the diminishing negative attitude towards them.

5.1 Two Basque Realms: Hotel Owning and Shepherding

The Basque Hotel explores the social rise of the Indart family, who goes from prejudice and rejection from their role as the owners of a Basque hotel to living in the most pleasant part of Carson City and sharing neighborhood with wealthy people.

In the first part of the novel, as mentioned, Pete's parents run a Basque hotel which is located near the train station. It is the time of Prohibition (1920-1933), and there is a nationwide constitutional amendment that bans the manufacture, transportation and sale of alcoholic beverages. Still, noticeable from an early stage in the novel, we learn that Pete's relatives have continued to sell liquors in secret so as to stay in business and not to have to close down. Indeed, it is his father himself the one who admits that they may be bootleggers (Laxalt 36). For such reason, and because of their ethnic identity, they face discrimination from mainstream society. This can be seen, for example, when Pete tries to help Romy, an Indian colleague, and he is called "little shit of a bootlegger" (Laxalt 32).

Nonetheless, discrimination is not the only problem Pete's family will have to deal with. In fact, as Richard Lane claims, it seems that Basque immigrants were frequently the victims of the authorities when it came to issues involving this illegal but widely permitted activity (qtd. in Río, "A Basque Pioneer" 74). Even if they were not the only ones who participated in this business, *The Basque Hotel* shows how the Indarts are going to be constantly suspicious for the authorities. Indeed, the "Prohis" will visit their boarding house several times during the story. Such inspections will be different as the

story unfolds: while the first ones are, in a way, peaceful, because they cannot prove that Pete's parents serve alcoholic spirits, the last one will finish with the "Prohis" and his father confronted (Laxalt 59-60).

Another remarkable detail of this first section is that the customers who frequent the establishment are influential citizens from the high-class. The people that Pete's family mostly mixes with, however, will belong to the low-class, such as his own friends (Laxalt 20-21). Hence, the Basque-American author seems to imply that the polarization of society into wealthy and poor can clearly be seen through the interaction of the main characters of *The Basque Hotel*.

By the second part of the book, we discover that Pete's parents have sold the hotel and purchased a new house (Laxalt 63). Situated in a respectable and rich area, we may see that prejudice remains in the beginning as a result of the family's background. Indeed, Pete mentions that he has heard expressions like "foreigners of some sort" and "Basque, I think, whatever that is." Still, there is a quick integration, mainly symbolized by Leon's (Pete's older brother) interaction with moneyed people (Laxalt 65). Such circumstance is connected with Pete's mother's aspirations for her first-born son, as pointed out by Pete himself earlier in the novel: "His mother had told their father to go for Leon's sake. She really meant her sake. It had become clear to Pete that she had some pretty big ambitions for Leon, which Pete thought were ridiculous" (Laxalt 33).

Sheepherding themes and issues also come to play a notable role due to the decision of Pete's father and Uncle Joanes, after trying other jobs, to run sheep again. Indeed, we find several rural descriptions of the life in lamb camps, after returning to the mountains (Laxalt 68). Yet, his mother is concerned about the future as she thinks that the sheep will ruin them again (Laxalt 69), and such belief nearly becomes a reality when Pete indicates that there is some regular payment money coming in from the new owners of the hotel, but none from his father's sheep (Laxalt 104). At this point, it should be noted that this is not the first time Pete's relatives work in sheep farming. As a matter of fact, as his father points out during the first part of the novel, they were rich until the livestock crash happened and consequently lost everything. He also adds that this did not bother him because he had nothing when he arrived to Nevada, but that Pete's mother was differently raised as she came from a family with property (Laxalt 35). Thus, we can see a clash between their different social backgrounds.

The main protagonist ends up getting involved in his father's sheepherding world. Nonetheless, Laxalt, who refuses to romanticize it, focuses on describing unpleasant tasks such as plucking the wool of the dead sheep and putting it into a sack (Laxalt 120). These new responsibilities, as Río highlights, will offer Pete realistic panoramas both on adult life and on Basque sheepmen's life ("Far from the Pastoral Myth" 247). Still, as a consequence, it is noteworthy the fact that Pete will have to continue enduring various mocking about sheepherders' activities from his old friends, as manifested when Jimmy Secombe asks him if he wears hip boots when he chases sheep and finishes adding "you know what they say about sheepherders" (Laxalt 92). This shows, once again, the author's commitment to avoid pastoral idealization in his depiction of Basque sheepherders.

In the end, the reader witnesses how Pete himself goes from rejection of his family's new class identity, which is epitomized by their wealthy neighbors (Laxalt 64-65), to acceptance of both the new house and his family's new social role. This change in social status will also be illustrated by his repudiation of his old friends, who belong to the low-class, and his past downtown, an idea highlighted at the end of the book by the burning of the Basque hotel:

> Pete did not stay to see the rest of the little hotel burn down. He made his way through the crowd and across the V & T railroad tracks and over the fence to the lot where they once had played at war. The old barn was still standing, but he guessed it would not be too long before it would burn down mysteriously like the abandoned shanties in Chinatown. Carson City was changing. Everything was changing. And he wondered if he had begun to change, too (Laxalt 124).

Therefore, we can see how, throughout all the work, Laxalt emphasizes the effort and triumph in the face of financial adversity of many Basque immigrants in the American West. This way, he shows the importance that Basques gave to the construction of a prosperous future in their host country.

5.2 Recognition for the Sheep Farming World

Etchart's *The Last Shepherd* addresses distinct but common stereotypical approaches to the sheep farming world, "making more complex the traditional perspectives on the life of the sheepherders" (Río, "Far from the Pastoral Myth" 261). Here, specifically, Matt seems to envision a future where a rise in social and economic status, symbolized by university education, does not mean rejection towards his family's

heritage. For that, he embarks on a journey in which the Etcheberri's long-established connection with the sheepherding world will be a constant issue.

In a story that follows the well-known *bildungsroman* pattern, Matt's evolution from ignorance to experience correlates the one of his approach towards the herdsman' lifestyle. As a matter of fact, we learn from the very beginning that his desire is nothing more than to leave his family's Arizona sheep ranch and go to college. He believes that by doing so, he will no longer be seen as just a lower-class farmer and will have more possibilities to prosper in life. His father's plans, notwithstanding, are other: he insists that Matt takes over the farm and the lambs, as he thinks that combining a university degree with the life of a shepherd may be a complicated task (Etchart 12-13). In other words, this could be taken as his father's longing to continue with their family's sheepherding legacy. Still, Matt loathes that occupation, and such affair is depicted various times throughout the novel, as when Matt remarks that he hates livestock and the ranch they live in (Etchart 13). Hence, aware of his son's ambition, Matt's father ends up making an effort and gifting him a truck so he can attend a community college that has night classes (Etchart 16).

Matt's dreams, however, are dashed, and obstacles appear when his father dies, and he decides to sell the ranch so that he has enough money to go to university. At first, he admits that:

> Now, instead of thoughts of broken fences to be fixed and flocks of sheep to be tended, my head filled with entrance exams to be taken and class schedules to be arranged. In the fall, I would start at the university. And I could go there without feeling guilty because losing the ranch wasn't my fault. In the end, the home I thought was mine wasn't really mine to lose (Etchart 76).

Here, Matt beholds an opportunity to rise in social and economic status without having to lose his ancestors' heritage. Nevertheless, such "favorable" circumstances are not as easy as they may seem, since the ranch does not belong to him, but to Isabelle Odolen, his aunt (Etchart 38). As a result, with the purpose of fulfilling his dreams, he travels to the Basque Country.

By the second half of the novel, commitment to Matt's ethnic heritage appears to win. He confesses that part of him wants to live far away from sheep and ranches and to never look back. Despite this, he is aware that he also wishes the opposite. In fact, he

accepts that his view toward the sheep and sheepherders has improved as the lifestyle that had started ruining out his life has become his center (Etchart 327).

At this particular point, it is important to stress that Etchart's aim is to promote the integration of polarities and the necessity to search for an agreement between, allegedly, the two opposing forces that have been previously observed. This idea is represented by Matt's final admission that the sheep and university might not be able to be on the same list, but that he believes that he "can make sheep and the community college work" (Etchart 332). This way, we can see, on the one hand, how his initial revulsion toward lambs and his relatives' attachment to them is progressively replaced by an increasing appreciation of the skills and benefits involved in this job; and, on the other hand, how he has found a way to fight for his dream of obtaining a tertiary education to rise his status higher without having to give up his family's legacy.

Accordingly, *The Last Shepherd* illustrates the problematic relationship a young Basque-American has with a cultural legacy that is closely connected to the sheepherding realm and the dilemmas it causes when balancing it with the protagonist's future goals. In particular, Etchart offers proof that Matt's newly aspirations can be combined in a harmonious way.

6. Conclusion

This paper's purpose has been to analyze, in spite of the fact that their stories take place in distinct periods and environments, the image of Basque immigrants in two significant works of Basque-American literature: *The Basque Hotel* and *The Last Shepherd*.

Emphasizing the space and interaction between the American and Basque customs in a country increasingly oriented towards a multicultural environment, we have found two protagonists' journeys from innocence to experience that correlate their journeys from ethnic ignorance to ethnic consciousness. The integration of these sons of immigrants in the American society is described as a gradual process in which their desire for approval and their reluctance to lose their ethnic identity often function as opposing forces. Due to this conflict, Pete and Matt's generation falls into a process of acculturation that leads to the creation of the so-called Basque-American hybrid. This way, their families' traditional values are threatened by a mainstream society that tends towards

individualism. Particularly, Laxalt's *The Basque Hotel* not only portrays Pete's difficulties in assimilating such familial heritage, but it also shows how this adolescent does not become aware of his ethnic background until he experiences a series of formative life lessons. *The Last Shepherd* also gives an insightful account of Matt's self-discovery. Still, Etchart includes a new aspect to take into account when analyzing the cultural legacy: the role of Basque mythology in the transmission of cultural heritage. Even if both protagonists undergo a process of cognitive separation from their relatives, the phenomenon coexists with a growing understanding of their roots and their heritage.

When discussing class identity, a major challenge that immigrants had to face was economic survival, which is a subject that plays a significant role in both novels. In addition to illustrating the increasing visibility of Basques sheepherders in contemporary western American literature, both authors emphasize the obstacles that Basque immigrant families faced to achieve their "American Dream" and rise in social status. *The Basque Hotel*, on the one hand, explores the social rise of the Indart family, who goes from a hostile atmosphere as a result of their role as the owners of a Basque Hotel, to mingle with wealthy people due to their moving to the most charming part of Carson City. Nevertheless, it is important to remark that such experience is marked by adversity and prejudice. *The Last Shepherd*, on the other hand, shows Matt's desire to prosper in life by attending university. With such aim, he embarks on a journey in which he finishes finding a balance that permits him to fulfill his dream without rejecting his family's heritage.

Overall, these two novels demonstrate that diaspora literature often focuses on narratives of hybrid identity in which the authors reveal a feeling of dual identification with their motherland and their host country. Laxalt and Etchart do not perpetuate the identity of Pete and Matt's ancestors. Instead, they succeed in modifying the ingredients of that original inherited culture, rejecting the ones opposite to those valued by American society, and incorporating others that display their history as members of a community both proud of their legacy and their process of Americanization.

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