



Continuity, Change and Innovation in Basque Culture

2025 CBS Annual Conference

*William A. Douglass Center for Basque
Studies, University of Nevada, Reno*

PROGRAM

Conference Organizer:
Sandy Ott



A Santazi shepherd after the morning milking (June 2024)

FRIDAY, APRIL 18TH

9:15am Welcome: Sandy Ott

9:30-10:00am

The Cuadrilla: An Anthropology of Basque Friendship

Presenter: Mariann Vaczi, Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno

The Basques are known for their vibrant social life based on diverse networks of solidarity, sociality, and mutual aid: gastronomic societies (txokos), sport fan clubs (peñas), festival groups (konpartsak/comparsas), sport and hiking clubs, civil groups organized around various social and political causes are social spaces that lend the culture its human warmth. At the basis of these micro-societies is the cuadrilla: the age-grade friendship group that usually forms during childhood and consists

of 5-20 members. Cuadrillas are a form of friendship that is unique to the Basque Country: they have a social weight comparable to family units, and have provided the basis for other social formations and political activism. Framed by the anthropology of friendship, this paper will explore cuadrillas as social institutions that provide unconditional belonging as well as social control. It explores the formation, interpersonal dynamics, in-group/out-group boundaries, the unwritten social rules of Basque friends-

hip, and its social and political importance. This paper will discuss what has changed and what remains the same in Basque cuadrillas across historical epochs and events like the Franco dictatorship, the Transition and post-industrial, post-modern transformations, the virtual era, and the social restrictions of the global Covid -19 pandemic.

10:00-10:20am

Discussion Moderator: Asier Amezaga Etxebarria, University of the Basque Country, UPV/EHU

10:30-11:00am

The Basque New Speaker: Evolution and shifts in sociolinguistic research

Presenter: Jacqueline Urla, University of Massachusetts Amherst

The future of Euskara has been a perennial question in Basque Studies. As numbers of Basque speakers rapidly declined in the 20th century, it became clear that the continuity of Basque would depend on the acquisition of new speakers, on the one hand, and the normalization of its public use on the other. In the context of the language and literacy movement that re-emerged in the last Franco

era, the term euskaldun berri emerged to describe a new cadre of Basque learners, among whom could be found well-known Basque activist (euskalzale) leaders, linguists and writers. With time, new speakers have shifted from being emblematic political subjects to objects of intensified sociolinguistic research. In this paper, I will trace the analytical questions and methodologies in new speaker

research that I have observed and been involved with in the past 15 years. From early studies that centered largely on demographic data, we have seen a move toward speakers' sense of authenticity and belonging in the euskaldun community, as well as a concern with identifying the factors that help learners become 'active speakers' of Basque. We see an increasing focus on the nuances of

linguistic subjectivity, critical sociolinguistic awareness, and agency. And we find an unprecedented amount of comparative research projects with other minoritized language scholars that has led to rich collaborative theoretical exploration and the adoption of more ethnographic and “participatory action research” methodologies. I propose to identify some of the implications of these shifts of methods and questions and end with reflections on new directions and challenges for Basque sociolinguistics.

11:00-11:20am

Discussion Moderator:
Maggie Bullen, University of the Basque Country, EHU/UPV

11:30-12:00pm

Basque ethnic institutions in the United States: Continuity and change in three generations of leadership

Presenter:
Eduarne Arostegui, Ph.D., Independent Scholar

This paper seeks to explore the role of generational leadership in Basque ethnic institutions in the United States with a focus on gender and volunteerism. North American Basque Organizations (NABO), established in 1973, is a federation of Basque clubs and institutions that promotes Basque culture by facilitating networking among members. Having celebrated



Photo: Pierre Etcharren and Valerie Etcharren Arrechea

its 50th anniversary in 2023, NABO faces new challenges, primarily the recruitment of younger generations in leadership and how to encompass differing realities of Basque identity and contemporary migration.

Pierre Etcharren was born in Uharte-Garazi, Nafarroa Beherea, in 1941 and migrated to the United States in 1958, in his sister Marcelle's footsteps. He was a founding member of the San Francisco Basque Club, and by 1973, he was one of two San Francisco delegates to the First Western Basque Convention, which paved the way

toward the creation of NABO. Within NABO, he served as president and chair of many committees, including Udaleku, a children's camp, and Mus, a card game. His daughter, Valerie Arrechea grew up alongside the creation of NABO, and has held various leadership initiatives, including eight terms as NABO president, Udaleku chair, and leadership in various clubs and committees. Her daughter, Joana Arrechea is currently the president of the San Francisco Basque Club, and part of the youth that NABO hopes to engage for the preservation of Basque ethnic institutions.

By presenting three generations of Basque leadership, this paper seeks to understand how NABO has evolved due to tireless volunteerism passed on within families and communities. As women leaders, Valerie and Joana represent a case study in understanding the role of gender and its intersection with leadership in Basque ethnic institutions. Expanding upon the work of Argitxu Camus Etchecopar by bringing it into the present, this paper will analyze the gender dynamics in NABO and member clubs.

12:00-12:20am

Discussion Moderator:
Mariann Vaczi, Center for
Basque Studies, UNR

12:30-1:30pm

LUNCH

1:30-2:00pm

Challenging tradition: Three decades of innovation, resistance and change on the Basque festive scene

Presenter: Maggie Bullen, University of the Basque Country/UPV/EHU (AFIT)

Over a quarter of a century has passed since I was last in Reno at the turn of the century conference, “Basques in the Contemporary World: Migration, Identity and Globalization,” in 1998 (Bullen, 1999). There I shared some incipient work on a controversy that had sprung up in 1996 over the participation of women in the alardes of the border towns of Irun and Hondarribia. Nearly three decades later, this conflict has still not been solved and in the surrounding region it has become a reference of what to avoid and a catalyst



Modern shepherd: Jüje in front of his house in Xiberoa (April 2022)

for what to achieve in terms of gender equality in many other Basque festivals and in specific areas of immaterial cultural heritage such as dance. More recent research for Emakunde (the Basque government's department of women's affairs) has enabled us to document such changes in search of strategies to facilitate the implementation of change (Bullen, Montesinos & Pecharromán, 2021).

This research throws up unsettling questions that manifest the awkward relationship between feminism

and anthropology, to use Marilyn Strathern's famous phrase. Such questions relate to the defense of monoritized cultural practices in the face of globalizing forces or universalizing principles that are feared to crush particular identities and deny the right for local communities to decide for themselves. At the same time, such resistance confronts us with the problem of delimiting “Basque culture” or the community itself and unraveling the power relations that influence who gets to play in the public space, who gets to decide.

Recent developments, both in theory and policy, have added to the complexity of the issue of tradition and change in the Basque region. Today, we are dealing not only with equality for women but for all genders (as manifest by the first man to be a cantinera in the Alarde of Irun in 2023). But also with other aspects of inclusivity such as “race” as

in the black-face representation of the Moor in the Alarde of Antzuola (Gipuzkoa) where we carried out a historical and ethnographical study in 2006. Today, there are many other issues that impinge on the celebration of certain festivals and traditions, such as animal welfare or the use of arms.

This paper, then, will give an overview of the changes occurring in the festive scene of the Basque Country over the past thirty years (Bullen, 2021), looking at the reasons for and against change and analyzing the implications of the continuities and the breaks with tradition (Esteban, coord. 2016).

2:00-2:20pm

Discussion Moderator: Iñaki Martinez de Albeniz, University of the Basque Country, UPV/EHU



San Marcial

2:30-3:00pm

Lines of Flight in Basque Gastronomy: Culture through the lens of Mugaritz

Presenter: Asier Amezaga Etxebarria, University of the Basque Country, UPV/EHU

Located in a traditional Basque farmhouse (baserri) in Renteria (Gipuzkoa) and included among the best restaurants in the world, Mugaritz is well known for its avant-garde approach to cuisine, emphasizing creativity, experimentation, and the blurring of boundaries between disciplines. Based

upon ethnographic work on the restaurant's creativity process conducted in 2019, the presentation will use Mugaritz as a lens through which to examine change, continuity and innovation in Basque culture. My approach to this topic will transit from text to texture, from myth to mycelium, and from vanishing

points to points of flight.

First, I will seek to understand culture as texture rather than text and to illuminate the way that the cultural artifacts they produce function, particularly in the process of creating and experiencing the plates. The plate epitomizes the articulation of different agents

and the layering of diverse formats and sensations. By analyzing the creation of certain dishes and their journey into the diners' hands and mouths, plates work as a texture that escapes its textual codification, becoming an elusive object within an ineffable experience. Whereas the linguistic turn often leans towards a pansemiotic approach to cultural artifacts, these artifacts remind us of the irreducibility of matter.

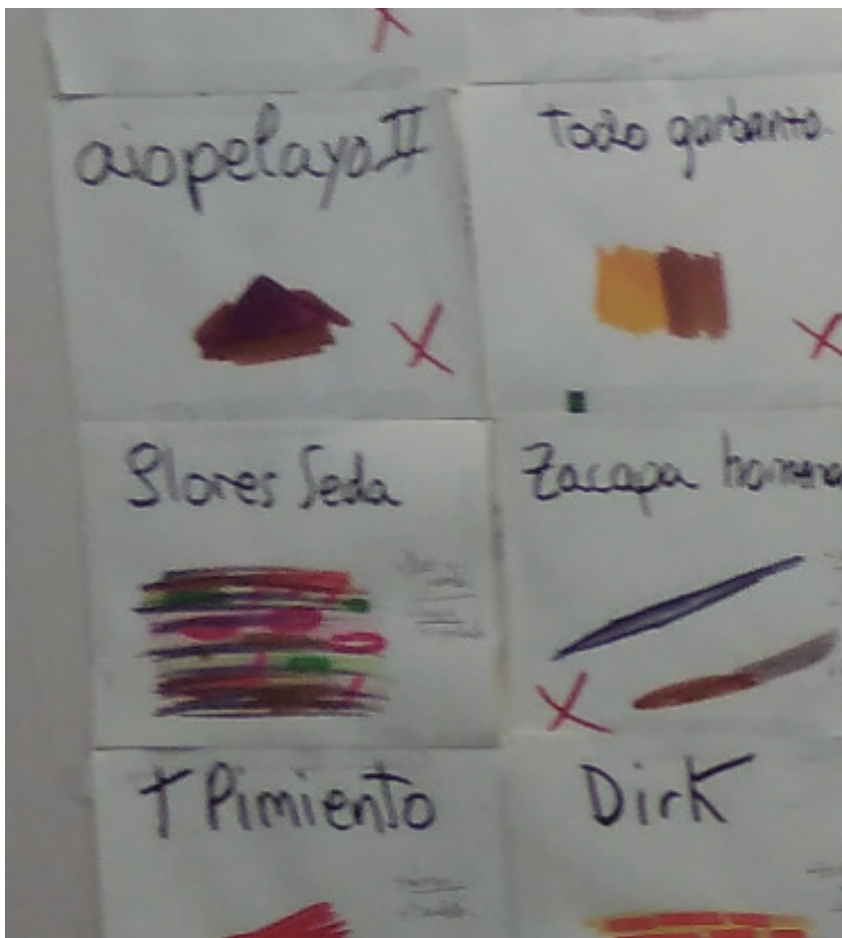
Second, I argue that the model of reproduction is reflected in the way that plates operate. Basque gastronomy enacts a kind of myth by reproducing certain mental structures. R. Barthes explicitly identified the *baserri* (the Basque farmstead) as a myth of Basqueness. Similarly, he

demonstrated how certain dishes, such as steak and chips, function as a sign of Frenchness, linking everyday elements to the mythical reproduction of ideology. Accordingly, at first glimpse, Mugaritz could be read as myth: surrounded by an idyllic landscape and located in a *baserri*, it seems merely to reproduce Basqueness through the language of *hau-te* cuisine. However, upon closer examination, Mugaritz transitions from the mythical *baserri* to the mycelial ecosystem, especially in terms of how reproduction is performed. Mugaritz moves from the garden to the forest in search of flowers and wild herbs, from the fire (*sua*) of the kitchen to the laboratory's tubes in the fermentation process. As with mycelium,

Mugaritz embraces the local and contingent alliance of different living organisms, always open to cross-contamination from anyone who passes through and brings spores with them. Finally, Mugaritz engages with the concept of *punto de fuga*, which can be translated as either vanishing point or point of flight, each offering a distinct approach to innovation. Sourcing from the Renaissance linear perspective, the vanishing point of a picture is the point where parallel lines converge, creating the illusion of depth and distance in a landscape. Accordingly, the innovation here lies in deception. For instance, the automatic association between Basque gastronomy and the *baserri* in such an industrialized and urbanized context is only possible by making the conditions of production and consumption of the food vanish at a point. However, taking the second translation, the point of flight refers to the void given to the participant, allowing them to move beyond the picture, a space for imagination and a promise of another dimension. Despite the persistent tendency toward textualization and mythification that brought about the restaurant's success, what the staff at Mugaritz strive to do is to create points of flight that take diners beyond these narratives, as they assert: "To flee is not to escape, to flee is to end up somewhere else."

3:00-3:20pm

Discussion Moderator:
Mathilde Morin, D.Phil.
candidate, University of Oxford



Asier Amezaga. These sketches are ideas chef interns had for "plates" at the restaurant

3:30-4:00pm

Book presentation by Professor Julian Zabalbeascoa, *What We Tried To Bury Grows Here* (2025)

4:00-6:30pm

FREE TIME

6:30-8:00pm

DINNER at Louis' Basque Corner

SATURDAY, APRIL 19TH

9:30-10:00am

Arantzazu: Possible futures of a culturally disruptive space

Presenter: Iñaki Martinez de Albeniz, University of the Basque Country, UPV/EHU

Arantzazu is currently going through a period of great uncertainty. The Franciscan monastery, the central nerve of the place, is home to a few very elderly monks who predict a complicated future for its subsistence. This fact would not be relevant – in fact, the same thing is happening in many other religious centres in the Basque Country – if it were not for the fact that under the protective umbrella of the Franciscan order, Arantzazu has been one of the epicentres of Basque cultural life since the end of 1950s. As proof of its incessant cultural activity, the Basilica of Arantzazu houses a compendium of masterpie-

ces by various contemporary artists, some of them Basque: Jorge Oteiza, Eduardo Chillida, Lucio Muñoz, Nestor Basterretxea, Javier Álvarez de Eulate and the architects Francisco Javier Sainz de Oiza and Luis Laorga, among others. Another of the cultural milestones that Arantzazu witnessed is the celebration of the Congress of Euskaltzaindia that led to the establishment of the basic rules of unified Basque (Euskera batua) in 1968. Only because of these two events – there are more – Arantzazu is a place that has always attracted disruptive proposals in terms of cultural innovation.

It is worth speculating about the possible futures of the sanctuary of Arantzazu in a context of profound secularization that has opened the space to new uses and meanings. Arantzazu is right now a space in dispute in which initiatives of all kinds "appear", not in the sense of the apparition of Andra Mari (the virgin that gives name to the place), but in the secular sense of Hannah Arendt.

Since it has always been, as the Franciscans who inhabit the place say, a space for meeting between different people and also for encountering oneself, today there are many and very diverse

projects that converge in Arantzazu: Topagunea, a new building in which nature and society, respectively, coexist; the hostel of the Aizkorri-Aratz Natural Park and ArantzazuLab, a social innovation centre associated with the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, also coexist in a precarious balance; the Gomiztegi Shepherds' School and the Zegama-Aizkorri mountain race, scoring for the mountain trails world championship. Arantzazu is a multifaceted place: it has a long mountaineering tradition (mendigoizale), but it is

also a place of deep spiritual charge. It is a place of gastronomic offer and a space for meeting and meditation. It receives tourists and pilgrims, politicians and mystics, intellectuals and entrepreneurs.

It is not a question of looking for formulas through which to promote Arantzazu in the future. Nor is it about projecting the desires of multiple agents as if the place were an empty box that can contain everything. In fact, Arantzazu is often asked too much: to be a place of spirituality, culture, peace, political agree-

ments, nature, among other things. Among all the possible futures of Arantzazu, we will deepen its not contradictory but dialectical condition as an "infrastructure of/for spirituality". We believe that Arantzazu can be a place in which to observe the new ways in which a spirituality is articulated that does not necessarily involve religion and that points rather to a new disruptive nature-cultural ecosystem to which you have to know how to listen.

10:00-10:20am

Discussion Moderator:

Sandy Ott, Center for Basque Studies, UNR



The Virgin of Arantzazu is a vestige of the future, a permanent reminder that, beyond religion, culture and politics, we are one with the environment.

10:30-11:00am

“Disappearing World”? Unwriting The Circle of Mountains

Presenter: Sandy Ott, Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno

In 1985, Granada Television released the documentary film, “The Basques of Santazi,” in its (then) innovative series, “Disappearing Worlds.” The series marked a turning point in the sub-discipline of visual anthropology. As the ethnographer who proposed the film to Granada, I wanted to produce an alternative, visual and audio ethnography to complement my first book, *The Circle of Mountains: A Basque Shepherding Community* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1981). I proposed continuity and change as central themes of the film. I wanted to show some of the ways in which the French Basque mountain community of Santazi had changed since my arrival there in 1976. I also wanted to illustrate ways in which the local culture had maintained certain key social institutions, practices and values. The film focused on two particular households at opposite ends of the valley: the house Junet and the house Goillart. Forty years have now passed since the Granada crew and I made that film. Having returned to Santazi every year since 1976, I offer new reflections in this paper on continuity and change in that Basque community, primarily but not exclusively through the lens of one household, Goillart.

By 1985, the abandonment of houses had already begun; and that process accelerated as Santazi’s population steadily declined to under one hundred people today.

The shepherding and cheese-making syndicates that thrived in the 1980s have largely become defunct. Only a few households in the entire community continue to take their flocks to the high pastures every summer. No one makes the once prized “mountain cheese” any more. With so many empty houses and radically different agricultural practices, the once vibrant institution of “first neighbors” no longer operates, although its values are sometimes manifested during times of community crisis and in some traditionally minded households. The local form of Catholicism has all but disappeared. Santazi no longer has a priest. Mass is held only a few times a year in its twelfth century church. Far more tourists than parishioners now enter its cool, dark interior. Marriages and births are rare. Funerals are far more common.

This paper not only traces such changes across the decades; it also illuminates contemporary contexts in which the traditional, neighborly values of mutual aid and mutual respect re-emerge as reminders of a world that has disappeared. The paper also explores local and regional efforts to recuperate a collective memory of that past by showing “The Basques of Santazi” every five years or so in Xiberoa’s only cinema. Every year Xiberoans ask me where they can buy a copy of the French edition of my first book, now long out of

print. Even as people forge new identities, create new socio-cultural and economic practices, and develop new ways of embracing the beautiful mountains and valleys of Xiberoa, they also sometimes look back with a mixture of nostalgia and relief at (to borrow a phrase from the anthropologist Kepa Fernandez de Larrinoa) who they once were but no longer are.

11:00-11:20pm

Discussion Moderator:
Jacqueline Urla, University of Massachusetts Amherst



Life in the pastures: sheep grazing in the morning light (July 2023)

11:30-12:00pm

A palimpsest on Soule/Xiberoa: Ethnographic stories overlaid on a small valley of the Basque Pyrenees

Presenter: Mathilde Morin, D.Phil. candidate, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford

I first set foot in Xiberoa in 2021. Not long after discovering this hidden valley of the northern Basque Country, I read Sandra Ott's book, *The Circle of Mountains*. I decided it would be a heuristically rich opportunity to re-write an ethnography, in light of Sandra Ott's book, 50 years later. More than just conducting ethnographic research on the contemporary realities of a small valley in Soule/Xiberoa, my work takes up the challenge of weaving a new text with an older one. Therefore, I hope to produce an anthropological palimpsest by working upon Sandra Ott's monograph. In this paper, I would like to show some of the possibilities offered by this re-writing approach, which is uncommon in anthropology. Above all, Sandra Ott writes about impending disappearances in *The Circle*

of Mountains. By conducting fieldwork in one commune in the valley during the 1970s, she captured the last breath of the Souletine peasant world before it vanished not long after her departure. As such, her book was a precious historical source for me, as it revealed how much Soule had changed in 50 years. But more deeply, it posed deep epistemological questions regarding what was left for me to do as an anthropologist who had somehow "missed the action" of tradition in Soule. At the same time, in a somewhat paradoxical manner, in-depth fieldwork led me to observe that some "structures" of the pastoral life of Soule were still standing, against all odds. As such, in this paper, I would like to reflect on the question of form. In different ethnographic instances that

I will analyze — including transhumance, an important ritual in the valley — I hope to show how some forms of the "traditional" pastoral life in the valley are maintained while being invested with new meanings and practiced by different people, therefore unraveling the symbolic order that existed 50 years ago in Soule. This will then lead me to reflect more deeply on the hidden discursive matrix of anthropology revolving around continuity and change. How and why does this underlying narrative structure our work? Might the current challenges faced by the all-mighty powers of modernization and progress change the arc of our stories?

12:00-12:20pm

Discussion Moderator:
Edurne Arostegui, Ph.D.,
Independent Scholar

12:30-12:45pm

CLOSING REMARKS: Sandy Ott

12:45-1:45pm

LUNCH

1:45-6:00pm

Free time to explore Lake Tahoe/Reno/Virginia City/Pyramid Lake

6:00-8:00pm

DINNER at the Ramsay's Kitchen in the Silver Legacy

Courtesy of Mathilde Morin (Xiberoan Shepherd)
Sandy Ott and Maddi Goillart, Summer 2023



Sandy Ott and Maddi Goillart, Winter 1984



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