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BASQUE SCHOLAR FEATURE

Oscar Alvarez Gila, PhD
Historian

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Photo: L. Corcostegui

Editor's note. This is an ongoing series of profiles of Basque scholars. Oftentimes scholars in general--and Basque scholars specifically--toil in seclusion and general anonymity, so this is an effort to introduce the scholar and his/her contribution to Basque Studies.

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ou might have heard of “Doctors Without Borders,” the international medical group that transcends borders to share their expertise. In a way, the same applies to our featured Basque scholar this issue: he too has traveled well beyond his home and faculty position at the University of the Basque Country, traveling to many corners of the world to share his expertise. He has succeeded in two related by distinct endeavors: that of the academic scholar producing specialized research making significant contributions in his field populated with fellow PhDs, and also as a public intellectual offering “use-inspired research.” All together his efforts have gone far in the promotion of Basque Studies and that is why we have chosen to feature Professor Oscar Alvarez Gila.

Professor Alvarez Gila is a native of the Basque Country, where he earned a Ph.D. degree in History at the University of the Basque Country. Later he has assumed the responsibility of teaching the History of the Americas at the same university. His main research interest is the study of international migrations during the 19th and 20th centuries, especially the mass migration from the Basque Country in northern Spain and southwestern France to the Americas. He has been involved in research about the linkages between environment and migration from a historical perspective. Facilitating all this are his tri-lingual skills in Basque, Spanish and English.



Professor Alvarez Gila is in the top tier of scholars working in the field of Basque Studies. His academic credentials are quite impressive with over forty articles and nine published books, numerous presentations at scholarly conferences, among other highlights that stretch across more than fifty pages of his curriculum vitae (see <https://ehu.academia.edu/OscarAlvarezGila>). He is always at work on some article or book manuscript for publication, developing a presentation for a conference or completing a successfully funded research project, with a keen eye on developing the Basque angle.



ACCOMPLISHED RESEARCHER & WRITER. Professor Alvarez Gila is the author of over forty articles and nine books (image at left), but his Curriculum Vitae goes on to demonstrate wide-ranging teaching and presentations, based on extensive travel throughout the Basque Diaspora. One such stop is at the restored handball court in Jordan Valley, Oregon (USA) built in 1915 when this locale (presently 178 inhabitants) hosted a large Basque community that revolved around the sheep industry in that era.

Our “doctor [in history] without borders” is an accurate label literally and metaphorically for Professor Alvarez Gila. During the academic year 2008-2009 he was Visiting Fellow at the European Studies Centre of the University of Oxford, U.K. He was selected as the W. Douglass Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the University of Nevada-Reno for the academic year 2010-2011. Currently (Spring term 2014) he is the visiting Elena Diaz-Verson Amos Eminent Scholar in Latin American Studies at Columbus State University in Columbus, Georgia. These are just some of the many places he has traveled for extended stays, not counting the dozens of other shorter visits he has made as an invited scholar for teaching, research and writing.

But he is also a public intellectual of sorts in the Basque world. Today a public intellectual is a person often trained in a particular discipline, such as linguistics, biology, history, economics, literary criticism, and who is on the faculty of a college or university. When such a person decides to write and speak to a larger audience than their professional colleagues, he or she becomes a “public intellectual.” A first rate scholar in academic circles, Professor Alvarez Gila has managed to recontextualize his research to make it readily available to non-specialists as well. He easily

transitions from the university classroom or formal conference setting, for example, to an impromptu assembly at many a Basque club in the Americas—North and South. A portion of his work is thus “use-inspired research.” In this model of education, the aim is to not only discover new knowledge but to also enable society—in this case the Basque community—to put that knowledge to use.



PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL.
In his role as a public intellectual in Basque Studies, Professor Alvarez also employs the “use-inspired research” model wherein the aim is to not only discover new knowledge but to also enable society—in this case the Basque community—to put that knowledge to use. Here he is pictured giving a presentation at the San Francisco Basque Cultural Center to interested members who labor to keep Basque identity alive at the grass-roots level in the Basque Diaspora.

While a visiting scholar at the Center for Basque Studies, for example, he made contact with the North American Basque Organizations (a federation of Basque clubs and entities of Canada and the United States) to offer his services to any club, offering several topics of general interest to choose from in offering an educational event. Meanwhile, he has also traveled to teach and learn about the largest community of the Basque Diaspora in Argentina. His academic work has also been characterized by a willingness to collaborate with others on projects large and small, including an article he co-wrote in this present issue.



COLLABORATOR.
Professor Alvarez has worked with many other scholars in collaborative projects including research and writing, but also conferences as illustrated here in New York City (2013) along with his co-author in this issue.

About a century ago Rodney Gallop referred to the Basques as a “living museum.” While little apart from their language was unique to the Basques, they distinguished themselves by keeping old traditions alive while other neighboring peoples had let things disappear. Now in the first part of the 21st century, this cultural memory is severely challenged. In a matter of speaking, to keep Basque culture from becoming a bygone, static museum, a concentrated effort will be required to sustain Basque cultural memory. A key role in this is being played by scholars like Professor Alvarez Gila. He is putting into practice what his colleague at the University of the Basque Country, Durk Gorter, refers to as the three “A’s of the researcher: academic, advisory and activist. As a solid academic, he continues to discover new knowledge and his list of published works is destined to grow. He is also driven by “use-inspired research,” which he has used in mentoring students and assisting others—including this journal—in an advisory role. Finally, he is an activist for Basque Studies. For example, he has been instrumental in helping to organize conferences in Basque Studies with several “Mugaz Gaindi” scholarly events.

For those who wish to see Basque Studies flourish, gratitude is due scholars such as Professor Alvarez Gila who find ways to transcend borders--real and imagined--to fulfill the mission statement of this journal which is “to encourage interaction among academics from various learning traditions to forge ‘Learning Links’ via collaboration with other institutions and individuals in a mutually supportive global network.” ***Eskerrik asko—many thanks Oscar!***

