

## Looking from Both Sides

### *Author's Note:*

In my previous essay, "Looking for Shiny Bits," I described how, when I was a child, every summer my parents would take me and my three brothers from our home in Pennsylvania to visit my grandparents in Gatesville, Texas, and how hunting for rusty nails in the gravel drive that ran through Grandpa's lumberyard and searching for Late Cretaceous fossils in the limestone ridge behind Mamaw and Grandpa's house laid the groundwork for my becoming an archaeologist and set the foundations for my life-long penchant for picking up "shiny bits" wherever I go.

In this follow-up memoir, I want to explore how my childhood experience of spending every summer vacation away from my Northeastern suburban home and living in a "foreign" Texan Hill Country town as well as later experiences I had as an adolescent helped me to develop an anthropological worldview and to influence my decision to live abroad.



### *Explanatory Note:*

In 1954, the linguist Kenneth Pike coined the terms "emic" and "etic" to denote alternative methods of explaining cultural behavior. As "phonemic" is the linguistic term describing the meaning(s) culturally embedded in a word, an "emic" description of a culture is one that tries to understand cultural behavior from the point of view of a "subjective" member of that culture; and as "phonetic" is the linguistic term to describe the actual sounds one makes in pronouncing a word, an "etic" understanding of a cultural behavior is one that explains it from the point of view of an outside, "objective," observer of that culture.



Dave Coverly, *Speed Bump*, 29 July, 2009.

Pike's emic/etic dichotomy encapsulated how cultural anthropology had been practiced since the time of Franz Boas and his student Margaret Mead, with ethnographers going out to live among "natives," reporting on how those indigenous people explained their behavior, and following that up with the ethnographers' own, scientific, "objective," explanation of that behavior. The cultural anthropologist and best-selling author Marvin Harris, in such works as his 1975 *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches: The Riddles of Culture*, helped to popularize the emic/etic approach. But, over the past few decades, the emic/etic dichotomy has come under attack. In addition to the debate over the degree to which "emic" participants in a given culture are themselves capable of giving an objective, "etic," analysis of their own culture, there has been an increasing awareness that all descriptions of cultural behavior—whether by a participant or an observer—are themselves subjective, and that to claim only Western ethnographers can give an objective account of another culture is chauvinistic and smacks of neo-imperialism.

The humorous incongruity in Dave Coverly's 2009 *Speed Bump* cartoon plays on this new uneasiness with the emic/etic dichotomy. The common assertion that "Eskimos" (i.e. the

Yup'ik and Inuit peoples) have hundreds of words for snow seems to have originated with Franz Boas, and was promulgated by Benjamin Whorf, the originator of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—the linguistic relativism that maintains the vocabulary of a language determines how its speakers view the world. The joke here is that the “Eskimos” are the ethnographers and suburban White males are the “natives.”



I spent my childhood living in two worlds like a mini-ethnographer, for several months every year emically immersed in central Texas culture while at the same time etically observing it from an outside East Coast perspective.

As I described him in my previous essay, my maternal grandfather was a tough old central Texan farmer, rancher, and lumberyard owner; my mother was his only child, and he clearly loved having a pack of rough-housing boys around when we came to visit. Grampa would often drive me and my brothers in his beat-up pickup truck out to his ranch, where we would shoot jackrabbits, armadillos, and rattlesnakes with our 22's and 16-gauge shotguns—something that my schoolmates back at home could scarcely imagine doing. I learned to love eating big round slices of chilled watermelon on a warm summer evening—putting salt on it as I got down towards the rind and saving the sweet heart for last. And then there were the times when Grampa would bring a docile mare in from the ranch, stabling her in the barn and the small fenced-in strip of land behind the house. We would saddle up that mare and ride her down the dirt roads below Grampa and Mamaw's house; when I was younger, I would have to ride in tandem with one of my older brothers, but eventually I got to know the joy of riding on my own, guiding my horse with the reins and nudges from my feet.

And the nasally central Texan dialect of English at first seemed like a foreign language to me. But eventually I could mimic it well enough to pass for a native—developing a linguistic skill I would later use when I was digging in Jordan, Libya, and Egypt (although my Arabic was never good enough to be taken for a native), and during the years when I lived in Greece and was excavating on Cyprus. (One special moment for me was when I was taken for an Athenian when conversing in Greek with some people in Cyprus!) Now that I have retired and moved to Spain,

I am still drawing on that linguistic skill of balancing two languages in my head—although, at my advanced age, that is becoming increasingly difficult.

And, in those Jim Crow days in central Texas in the 1950's, I got to see racism up close in a way that I could never have back in the relatively liberal Northeast. There were “Whites Only” signs at the drinking fountain at Gatesville’s stately courthouse. Blacks were not allowed to swim in the public swimming pool, and could only live in a run-down part of town that was known as “N-town.” I got to know Mattie Snow, a Black woman who used to be my mother’s nanny and who, though elderly, would still come to Grampa and Mamaw’s house to cook us Sunday dinner. I remember seeing Mattie’s extremely old father drive a mule-cart around town picking up garbage; I was told that Mattie’s father had been born a slave. Having observed first-hand (but not having been subjected to) Gatesville’s overt racism has made me a little more humble about my own privileged upbringing, and has made me loath the white supremacy movement that is again raising its ugly head in the US.



We didn’t spend every summer vacation in Gatesville, Texas. As I was growing up, I was afforded many other opportunities to travel and see the world, experiences that also helped chart the life paths I have taken as an adult.

One summer, after stopping in at Gatesville to visit the grandparents, our parents drove us on to tour around Mexico. I remember being especially taken with the floating islands created by the Aztecs at Xochimilco, and with the ancient city of Teotihuacan, where my brothers and I insisted on climbing all up 248 uneven steps of the Pyramid of the Sun. I was also enamored with the newly opened Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City, especially with the magnificent Aztec calendar stone. If other events in my life had gone differently, I could easily see how I might have pursued a career in Pre-Columbian archaeology.

Another summer, my mother drove us by herself across the country so we could see the United States, starting in Texas and taking a southern route through Las Vegas to California, and a northern route through the Dakotas back home to Pennsylvania. We four boys would jostle with each other to be in the front seat of the station wagon as we approach a state border so we could thrust a foot forward and claim to be the first to cross into that state. (Years later, when we

were driving my younger brother to a summer camp in New Hampshire, I begged our parents take a detour across the border into Maine so I could say that I had been in every one of the 48 contiguous states of the lower US.)

When I was 12 years old, my parents took us on a European grand tour. After visiting London and Paris, we rented a car and drove through France, into northern Spain, and then on through Italy down to Naples, where we took an ocean liner back to New York. Of all the places we visited, I was especially taken with Barcelona and Rome. I remember eating watermelon slices one night at a stand in a little plaza in Rome, trying to explain to the Italian kids around us that you should put salt on the parts near the rind; also while in Rome, the hours I got to spend wandering around the *Forum Romanum* with no one else around other than my family, picking up sherds below the Temple of Saturn, had a transformative effect on my life, directly impacting my decision to pursue a career in Classical archaeology. I have never gotten over the feeling of awe when standing on a spot where someone like Socrates or Julius Caesar once stood, or in handling the fragments of something that a person made millennia ago.

In the summer after my junior year in high school, my folks paid for me to go to an immersive Spanish language summer school in Saltillo, the capital of the northeastern Mexican state of Coahuila. The school arranged for the American students to live with Mexican host families, and it was an eye-opener for me to see up close a family from another culture—much more formal than my own. Often, after our daily classes, I would stroll around town with the Mexican student partner the school had assigned me. Once I saw an advertising poster that said “*Coca Cola es buena para su alma.*” I asked my student host what an “*alma*” was, little knowing how difficult it would be for him to try to explain a theological concept that has baffled humanity for millennia. Another time, as we were enjoying the evening *paseo*—the ritualistic strolling around Saltillo’s central square, with clusters of *chicas* going around in a clockwise fashion on the inside and admiring groups of *chicos* going around counter-clockwise on the outside—I got up the nerve to ask a particularly good-looking *chica* I had passed several times if she wanted to go to the movies with me the following evening. When she surprisingly said *sí*, I had visions of a hot make-out session in a darkened theatre; the next night, however, my hormonal adolescent fantasies were dashed when she showed up with her parents, two older brothers, and an aged great-aunt, who I ended up sitting next to in the movie theater while the *chica* was at the other end of the row of her family.

The following summer, after my senior year in high school, I went on a school-sponsored trip to Spain, led by my Spanish teacher. We were based in Madrid, and took tours down to Cordoba and Granada. Most nights we American 18-year-olds would slip out from under the gaze of the adult chaperones and go out to enjoy Spain’s vibrant nightlife culture. One night, in a bar in Cordoba, as I was filling out a conscientious objector form for the US Selective Service (I had had to sign up for the draft a few months earlier), I asked all the other patrons in the bar to sign it, which caused great hilarity all around. (The Selective Service denied my application, not because it had been mailed from Spain and witnessed by a random dozen Spaniards, but because I did not check “yes” on the first question, “Do you believe in God?” Apparently, the US government maintained that atheists could not have consciences.)

Looking back on it now, I am astounded that my parents seemed unconcerned that after my summer school in Mexico and, again, after my study tour in Spain, I spent a month wandering around Mexico and a month wandering around Europe on my own, a totally unsupervised teenaged American boy. Back in that pre-iPhone, pre-internet era, I was virtually incommunicado while I was traveling around; my parents and I did occasionally communicate via letters whenever I could check in at an American Express office in a major city to see if there were any *post restante* letters for me from the States, but otherwise I was left to my own devices. In our current age of “helicoptering” parenting, it is difficult to imagine allowing a 17- or 18-year-old child the freedom to wander around a foreign country with no supervision and with plenty of opportunities to get into trouble; it is sad to think of a whole generation of adolescents who are not given the chances to accrue life-altering experiences as I did in those summers of 1969 and 1970.

And get into trouble I certainly did.

[But I will save describing some of the weird things I did during those summers for another essay.]



Given my childhood and adolescent experiences, it is hardly surprising that I would have chosen a career that would take me out of my home in the Northeast of the United States every year.

As graduate students, my girlfriend (and later wife) and I spent four years studying at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens. During those years, I returned to the US a couple of times (once to get married!), and each time I experienced profound culture shock. The America I returned to was completely familiar while, at the same time, completely foreign. Big cars, everything moving so fast, everyone an important person with places to be. Of course it was I who had changed, but the commercialism, materialism, and militarism of the States is particularly pronounced when one has been away from it for an extended period of time.

I remember once, when I was living in Greece, I went to the Hilton Hotel in Athens to see the results of the 1980 Presidential election that were being shown on a TV in the bar. I was shocked to see a group of paunchy, white, American businessmen cheering when it was announced that the winner was Ronald Reagan—someone who I only knew as a hack actor who had made some bad movies with chimpanzees.

While I was in Greece, I began to participate on some digs in Kalavassos, Cyprus. Kalavassos is a small village of some seven hundred souls located on the Greek-speaking side of the island in the foothills of the Troodos mountains, and it would come to be my second home after my wife and I had returned to the US to take up academic positions, returning every summer over the next seventeen years to excavate at the Late Bronze Age site of Kalavassos-Ayios Dhimitrios and, later, to start my own excavation project at the Late Roman site of Kalavassos-Kopetra. In many ways, I was reliving my childhood experience of leaving the urbanized, Northeast to spend an entire summer in the foreign culture of a small rural community. And, what initially seemed foreign and exotic eventually became “emic” to me. In 1985, I had a post-doc Fulbright year in Cyprus, much of which I spent living in Kalavassos. And I came to really know the villagers of Kalavassos, with the men sitting in the afternoon sun drinking their coffee at the one kafaneion in the village or the whole village gathering in the village square for an all-night party whenever there was a wedding; (my “etic” self would describe these weddings as a culminating ritual of a matrilocal culture, with the groom leaving his village to live in the village of his bride, where the bride’s father was expected to build a new home for his daughter and her husband.)

But the more I came to look at Kalavassos from both sides, both as a participant and as an observer, the more I came to see that what I had first taken to be a “quaint” and

“exotic” was in fact mostly banal. To a large degree, the villagers of Kalavassos were poorly educated peasant farmers, mostly concerned with when the next rains were coming and prone to feuds with other families that could last generations.

[I should note that in the past decade Kalavassos has become a much more cosmopolitan place, transforming itself into a vacation spot with a hotel, fancy B&B’s, and several restaurants for foreigners.]

Towards the end of my career as an academic archaeologist, I started to undertake projects in Spain. When I first began working at the ancient Greek and Roman site of Empúries to the north of Barcelona, whenever I tried to recall my high-school Spanish and speak in Castilian, only modern Greek would come out! Later, when I was excavating with Spanish colleagues at a Tartessian site in Andalusia, the engrams of my Spanish slowly returned, although never to the degree of fluency I had as a teenager.

In 1999, I spent a sabbatical year undertaking an archaeological survey of the US Navel base in Rota, near Cádiz. That was a schizophrenic year for me, living in the Spanish city of Rota and every day going through the security check into the base, which was totally Americanized. In the morning I would have my *café con leche y biscote* in my Spanish *pisos*, and then have an American burger or pizza for lunch at the cafeteria on the US base. On my way home, I would stop by the PX and buy milk, bananas, and Dr. Peppers—all imported to Spain from the US. A daily anthropological head spin.

After I had begun to dig in Spain, my wife and I knew that we would eventually retire there, and from 2012 to 2016 we made a number of trips to the country to check out places where we might want to spend our retirement years. But then, to our dismay, Donald Trump was elected President and we decided to accelerate our plans, take early retirement, and flee the US. (I have blogged about this in “[Fleeing the Death Star Part I](#)” and “[Fleeing the Death Star Part II](#).”)

We ended up choosing to live in Oviedo, the capital of the province of Asturias, in the north of Spain. A half-hour drive to the Cantabrian sea on the north, with its dramatic cliff-lined beaches, and a half-hour drive to the foothills of the snow-covered Aramo mountain range to the south, Oviedo is a cosmopolitan city of some 200,000 residents, with great art and archaeology museums, two concert halls where there are weekly Classical music performances, and a Medieval city center with narrow, winding, pedestrianized streets.

And, unlike the southern, Mediterranean, coast of Spain, the charms of Asturias remain virtually undiscovered outside of the country; there are no hoards of British tourists, and one only very occasionally hears someone speaking English, or French, or Japanese. (Like the rest of Spain, there are a fair number of refugees from Africa, and one does often hear Arabic and, to me, unidentifiable African languages being spoken.)

And so, after many months of jumping through the hoops of Spanish bureaucracy to obtain our residency visas, and after shipping two tons of books and personal belongings to Oviedo, we boarded the Queen Mary II in September 2017 with six large suitcases in hand, reverse Pilgrims fleeing a hostile country for a promised land—in our case, back to Europe. But, truth be told, rather than just fleeing the offensive politics of the States, we were really self-deporting to enjoy the pleasant European lifestyle that Spain has to offer.



In the four-and-a-half years since my wife and I moved to Oviedo, we have been living a life that is very familiar to ex-pats. We are neither completely Spanish (or Asturian!) nor are we really Americans any longer. The US is increasingly a mystery to me, and the culture shock in the two return trips to the States that we have made since we moved to Spain was even greater than what we would feel when we would return after a summer or sabbatical year abroad. The gas-guzzling SUV's and pickup trucks have grown insanely huge, the flag-waving and praising everyone for their military service has become particularly fascistic, and the capitalistic commercialism appears out of control. In the US it seems that everyone lives to work; in Spain, people work to live—to go out with friends for an evening of *copas de vino y tapas* at a local *taberna*.

[I should add that, lest my portrait of Spain seem overly romantic, I am fully aware that as an advanced capitalistic society the country faces an array of problems, from economic inequality to crippling joblessness among the young, that political divisions between the left and the right are as severe as they are in the US, and that xenophobic right-wing movements are on the rise here as well.]

Conditioned by my childhood, here in Spain I have become an emic/etic Janus. On the one face, I have fully adopted much of the Spanish lifestyle. I would never think about

taking my main meal of the day before 2 pm, I insist on my daily siesta after my *comida*, and I never have my light evening supper before 9 pm. And, at least in our pre-pandemic life, we would go out every day to do our daily shopping, stopping in at Oviedo's covered market to tell the fish-monger or the butcher exactly how we wanted our fresh *lubina* or grass-fed Asturian beef cut, and then stopping for a café before heading to the bakery to pick up a loaf of warm bread. On the other face, the American in me is still not adjusted to many aspects of life in Spain. I can't get over the fact that Spaniards never greet passersby on the street, only giving a slight sideways—and usually disapproving—glance as they walk by. (If they see someone that they know, Spaniards might grunt out an incongruous “*Luego*” greeting, which here in Asturias is pronounced with a single-syllable guttural “*Luug*.”) And my American self is still irked by how people in Oviedo will suddenly stop right in front of you in the middle of the sidewalk, to check their cell phone or to make a point with gesticulating hands to a companion.

If one's nationality forms, even if subconsciously, an important part of one's self identity, what happens when one intentionally cuts the ties to one's natal land yet does not replace them with another national identity? Where is one's place in an emic/etic no-man's-land?

As Joni Mitchell put it in “Both Sides, Now”—the song that Judy Collins popularized in 1968:

...  
Oh, but now old friends they're acting strange  
And they shake their heads and they tell me that I've changed.

...  
I've looked at life from both sides now  
From win and lose and still somehow  
It's life's illusions I recall  
I really don't know life at all.