

Unlearning

Rethinking Poetics, Pandemics,
and the Politics of Knowledge

Charles L. Briggs

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Introduction

THIS BOOK BRINGS TOGETHER EFFORTS TO OPEN UP new ways of thinking, reading, writing, and practice. Focusing on core assumptions and theoretical approaches in folkloristics, linguistic anthropology, medical anthropology, and psychoanalysis, I try to build a deeper and broader dialogue by linking classic perspectives on poetics and performance with challenges presented by colonialism and the politics of knowledge in exploring new points of departure for researching cultural forms, health, media, mourning, and the more-than-human.

This work extends the relationship between two of the things I hold dearest as a scholar: theory and ethnographic engagement with the worlds around and within us. This dual orientation is characteristic of much work in anthropology, folkloristics, and other fields. A difference lies in my sources of theoretical inspiration. Some are academic. Starting long before I first conducted ethnographic research at nineteen years of age and continuing through the present, however, many of the people who have affected my thinking the most are not scholars, never published, and, in some cases, never had access to formal schooling. Mentors in New Mexico and the Delta Amacuro rainforest of eastern Venezuela were some of the most profound, abstract, subtle, and creative thinkers I have known. In conversations that ranged from two hours to two decades, they criticized my core assumptions about knowledge and the world and opened doors to ways of thinking, feeling, writing, and being that, without them, I would never have imagined. Here again, I don't think that I am alone: I would assert that folkloristics, anthropology, ethnomusicology, and other fields gain their analytic power, in part, by appropriating theoretical insights developed by people outside the academy. The problem is that scholars often then take the credit for their insights and eliminate the challenges to scholarly authority that often come with their ideas. My practice has long been to acknowledge synergies between insights coming from academic domains and farmers, healers, forest dwellers, and wood-carvers.

Introductions are charged with announcing the principal concerns advanced by the author and placing them in broader contexts; that is exactly what I do here. In academic books—and this is surely one—this work of contextualization emerges through business-as-usual scholarly rhetorics,

distanced orchestrations of authors and frameworks. Introductions are metatexts or, in Jacques Derrida's ([1967] 1976) terms, subtexts that tell origin stories about how a particular book came into being, thereby seducing readers into interpreting it in particular ways. Telling an origin story whose characters are all prominent academics would imbue this book with a fatal contradiction from the start. If the succeeding chapters are to challenge practices enabling researchers to appropriate analytics produced outside scholarly domains and claim them as their own, an introduction that presents a dialogue only with other academics would be metacommunicative, in Gregory Bateson's (1972) sense: it would signal that I really don't mean it, that only academic interlocutors really count. The task that I have set for myself in this book centers, as the title suggests, on *unlearning*; starting with a purely academic genealogy would limit the scope and traction of the unlearning process in advance.

I have no magic wand that would transform the parameters of the introduction genre. Nor do I wish to do so. I want to tell you an origin story, a tale that purports to recount not just how this book came into being but my own circuitous route to becoming a strange mix of scholar and practitioner. It is not a story of *self*-fashioning, but rather one of the people, non-humans, ideas, and experiences that shaped me. Some of the characters I introduce are scholars who are probably known to you, personally or at least through their writings. Others you may know through cultural productions, such as wood carvings that grace major museums. Others are people you've never met, because their extraordinary contributions to global knowledge have been stopped in their tracks by boundaries of language, education, mobility, race, and class. Nonhumans include aspen and palm trees, vampire bats, bacteria, viruses, and nonhuman entities that fall so far outside of dominant ontologies that they get lumped into the category of "spirits."

My story doesn't start when I got a PhD or even when I entered college but rather in my childhood. I place some of my most important mentors in dialogue, taking the sorts of horizontally organized, creative exchanges of knowledge that I think lie at the heart of transformative scholarly endeavors out of the realm of the unsaid. Here I need to make a confession. I wanted to finish this project three years earlier. Everything was in place, except this introduction. Frankly, I've shielded myself with academic styles of writing for so long that the task of "writing an introduction" put me on autopilot, into construct-an-academic-genealogy mode. And then came the resistance—I could not force myself to start writing it. Well, if you think a lot about psychoanalysis, sometimes you just cannot help looking inside, even though you know that self-analysis is tricky. Fortunately, I remembered

my experience in writing the essay that appears as chapter 6. There a failed attempt to place Sigmund Freud's classic essay "Mourning and Melancholia" in dialogue with the laments and narratives of Delta Amacuro women who lost children in a rabies epidemic prompted me to experiment. I thus developed a new rule of thumb; when something inside you says no, when there is fundamental resistance to a writing project: Stop! Think! Resist the sense that it is your own personal failing. Ask yourself if the generic structures of academic writing are getting in the way. If so, experiment! Create a new way of writing and see how it feels, if words not only begin to flow but break apart the conceptual, rhetorical, and emotional constraints getting in the way. And, once you have finished, think about whether your breakthrough might be of value to your readers. (I do just this at the end of this introduction.)

So, I want to try something different, even if I'm feeling a bit vulnerable as I begin. Many of the points of origin I recount here are not authorized by academic genealogies. Rather than projecting singular, bounded points of origin and linear progressions of ideas and perspectives, each gets multiplied as I recount synergies and long-term effects of what these individuals taught me. The times I have confronted the most profound philosophical challenges have often come when friends demanded that I join them in helping people keep their family members and neighbors from dying in epidemics or enlisted my help in confronting governments and corporations that steal the land and destroy the environments in which they live. These engagements forced me to identify the commonsense frameworks and practices that produced and normalized these profound inequalities and ally with others in imagining alternative futures. This introduction consists, in short, of a memoir, admittedly one that is as idiosyncratic as the life and mind upon which it reflects. Participating in current efforts to stop perplexing pandemics and confront pervasive and entrenched forms of racism and racialized violence, I find that my *un*learning curve grows steeper every day. This introduction retraces some of my steps in unlearning assumptions that I thought self-evident and rethinking the politics of knowledge making. It ends in a set of proposals for using these sorts of quirky, often disconcerting encounters in developing theoretically innovative intellectual practices.

**ON FRUIT TREES, BEES, AND ALFALFA:
MULTISPECIES ONTOLOGIES AND RELATIONS**

Stories, memory, and landscape haunted my childhood. I spent a lot of time with elderly people, and, I liked talking with them. My maternal

grandparents, John Donald and Harriet Robb, lived on one end of a small street, and my paternal grandparents, Leslie and Edith Briggs, on the other, two blocks apart. During periods when my parents were separated, my father Bill Briggs, my older brother Chris, and I with lived with my paternal grandparents. John Robb was a composer, conductor, and professor of music at the University of New Mexico. He was also an avid collector of folk music, and I'll say more about that shortly. Leslie Briggs worked for years as a county extension agent, teaching ranchers and farmers in south-eastern New Mexico how to grow fatter cattle and more abundant crops. His job was to transform complex "traditional" relations between humans, plants, animals, machinery, and environments, displacing "outmoded" multispecies ontologies in favor of modern, scientific, profitable ones. A century later, the sustainable agriculture movement is trying to counter the perspectives and practices he promoted. Born a city slicker, one of the ways he built street cred with rural residents was by using proverbs often and skillfully. I remember times that his proverbs stopped my childhood pretensions in their tracks. He and my father were both remarkable storytellers and my father was a good ballad singer—memories and histories constantly inflected their words in unexpected ways.

Most of the time I lived with my parents in the Los Candelarias section of the North Valley of Albuquerque, a mile east of the Rio Grande. Much of the land around our home was still agricultural, and many houses were built of sun-dried adobe mud bricks and occupied by the Chicano families who had built them. I attended the local high school, Valley High; the students were predominantly Chicano/a and Native American. Many of my friends' grandparents were Spanish speakers, and their parents were symmetrical bilinguals, as comfortable in English as in Spanish. They had been told, however, that their children would "speak with an accent" if they taught them Spanish, so most of my peers spoke only Chicano English, which certainly did not vaccinate them against racism.

The neighborhood was in the middle of a slow process of urbanization, resulting in spaces—from a half acre to over a square mile—that reinserted fragments of the North Valley's agricultural past into the increasingly middle-class, white, gentrified present. In the 1950s and 1960s, middle-class families leaving already urbanized parts of the city bought a few acres from working-class Chicano/a families. The new owners nostalgically viewed the semi-rural landscape they were displacing in romantic terms, somehow overlooking their own role in disrupting its historical cartography. My family formed part of this racialized political economy, and my experiences with neighbors and classmates often made me aware of my own positionality.



Figure 0.1. Dump rake (photograph by Sharon Turner; courtesy of the Monterey County Agricultural and Rural Life Museum)

That's how I met Señor Olguín, my first mentor in the neighborhood. I saw him when he came down the dirt road beside our house atop an alfalfa dump rake, a rusted contraption with metal wheels and large arching loops bouncing behind a horse that seemed just as ancient as its owner (see figure 0.1). In my child eye's view, he was very old, probably in his seventies, tall and thin, with an erect posture, dark black hair, an angular nose, and eyes that seemed to suggest both warmth and an otherworldly vision. He was, as all the other times I saw him, wearing jean overalls. Struggling to maintain an economic foothold in this increasingly alien landscape, he contracted with several neighbors to keep the fields around their adobe houses—now refitted to suit middle-class white tastes—green and pastoral by planting alfalfa. My family situation left me with too much unsupervised time, and I impulsively ran after him as he approached an adjacent field. I caught up when he got down to open the gate, and my wide-open eyes danced between horse and rake. *Buenos días*, he greeted me. Señor Olguín knew very little English. Elementary-school classes in a juridically bilingual state had provided me with a foundation in Spanish (although certainly not much agricultural terminology), and we began a conversation that lasted half a decade.

When Señor Olguín invited me to join him in the field, I probably figured that I could perch alongside him, maybe even take the reins. But the device had only one seat, and hindsight suggests that the last thing he

wanted was to have a young gringo fall off and get mangled by the rake. So I could only lean up again the wooden fence and watch as he dropped the long curves of the rake until they scooped up the alfalfa he had cut a few days earlier and allowed to dry. I was enthralled by the ballet unfolding before me: the horse's head, Señor Olguín's body, and the gap between the rake's metal fingers and the soil seemed to move up and down in perfect synchrony, magically drawing the pungent, fresh-cut alfalfa along. Once the rake was full, he would pull a lever that used the turning of the metal wheels to raise the hay and then dump it in a line. As I watched him follow the curved contours of the adjacent fence and irrigation ditch, I could see that the perfect coordination between Señor Olguín's hand and eye, his horse, and the dump rake was leaving straight lines at equal intervals. My amazement grew as I saw that on his return from the end of the field he traced a perfect parallel line and dumped each load of alfalfa hay with precision; soon straight, parallel lines cross-sected the field. Fortunately, the field—just under two acres in total—was small enough that I could watch the entire operation. If he thought that his young visitor would soon grow bored and return home to watch television, Señor Olguín had underestimated my patience, curiosity, and idiosyncrasy. I was there when he finished, my head bursting with questions. Where did he live? Did his horse eat all that alfalfa? How had he cut it? What would happen next? He stopped before opening the gate, probably as much through curiosity about my persistence as resting. I didn't immediately pester him with my questions—living with my grandparents had taught me that you can learn more when knowledge emerges from the rhythms of work, interaction, memory, and a mentor's sense of what is most worthwhile to impart, how and when to tell it.

All of my questions were answered in the ensuing years. I saw him return with his sons to bale the alfalfa and load it onto a pickup. I missed Señor Olguín and his horse when winter came. Early the next spring, when he returned, he stopped next to our house. When I wasn't in school, I ran down the driveway—as fast as my uncoordinated, chubby body could carry me—to walk beside him to the field. I tried to help him shake off the winter's legacy of immobility and turn the rusty metal circular handle to liberate the first stream of water from the *acequia*, one of the ditches bringing water from the Rio Grande. His gaunt face lit up as the brown liquid flowed—first hesitantly and then with steady force—into what seemed a moribund field.

Señor Olguín loved to tell stories, punctuating the work his increasingly frail body performed by leaning against a fence or rake to reveal hidden worlds. He served for decades as the *mayordomo*, or ditch boss, a position that became a friction point for multiracial and cross-class tensions in a

changing landscape as he divvied up the hours available for irrigation. His stories of the shifting histories of conflicts between subsistence agriculturalists, small-scale market-oriented producers, middle-class gringos and, increasingly, the land-grabbing demands of developers and urban planners fused with smells (as much of fresh horse manure as of fresh-cut alfalfa), sights, sounds, and textures emerging from his interactions with horse, land, plants, and water. The way I saw the landscape became increasingly layered as the fields were reanimated by the people, animals, buildings, technologies, and activities he brought to life through words.

Not all of my mentors opened floodgates of words like the first spring gush of irrigation water. One of the people from whom I learned the most lived right across the tall ditch bank that separated our house from the paved street on the other side. For years I walked most afternoons along our driveway, did a U-turn around the ditch, and proceeded to the second house on what had become a small, peri-urban, dead-end street to play with the children of a medical student. They were a Mormon family; their kids were two boys who were roughly my age and, magically to me, lacking sisters of my own, two girls. I can only guess that they moved to a more affluent neighborhood after the father graduated or finished his residency, but all I remember is learning that they would be moving. I missed them. One day, bored, I took the same route but continued fifty feet past my friends' old house. My eyes were arrested by a man surrounded by trees and—strikingly—bees. A human body, wearing ordinary clothing, was ensconced amid some ten white wooden boxes and thousands of bees. It was his warm smile that stung me.

I was a couple of decades away from being bitten—again with apologies—by Antonio Gramsci's (1971) notion of resistance, but here lay the property of a couple that refused to sell to the developers who had plopped small, nondescript cinderblock houses on either side of the small orchard. My only point of reference for making sense of this scene was A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*, which my father had read to me often and then used in spinning the myriad imaginative worlds that we inhabited as we walked each evening with our Labrador in the surrounding fields. Señor Olguín's map of the neighborhood contrasted the wild space on my eastern side of the ditch with paved streets on the west side populated with houses, an area that extended nearly to the Rio Grande. Thus, seeing a man surrounded by trees and bees in what I classified as urban space transfixed me. Maybe it was his warm smile or perhaps the loneliness induced by losing my friends, but I stepped off the sidewalk and walked—ever so slowly—toward him, stopping as my approach began to attract the bees'

attention. I stood there, watching, my face alternating between reflecting his smile and a look of terror.

Without saying a word, the mysterious man disappeared into the small house nestled into the trees to his left. I lingered, refusing to let his departure squash my curiosity or exacerbate my solitude. And then he returned. As bees buzzed around him, he gently—and wordlessly—placed a full-body covering and white screened hood on me and handed me a pair of gloves. My body was transformed. And then he walked back toward the hives. Suddenly, two human bodies were sharing space with bees, honey, hives, and fruit trees. Like Señor Olguín's, the words he spoke were all in Spanish; they emerged, however, not in long, well-crafted stories but slowly, parsimoniously, tied to bees, hives, and trees. Stepping closer to the hives, he slowly lifted the frames, which were filled with wax and honey, using his eyes and shoulders to suggest to me how I should help extract them. In the coming months, my eyes and body came to accept the rhythms of approaching bees, their sometimes frenetic energies, and their relationship to the honey we extracted, but I never took off the garb, even as I began to fathom why my mentor needed no protection.

Señor Olguín never took me to his house, nor did I meet his wife, but the beekeeper led me through the small grove to his tiny house. His wife, who had probably been watching from the start, showed me rows of jars of honey and honeycomb they would sell. Her homemade bread with honeycomb was one of the most delicious childhood treats I remember. She was less taciturn, telling me stories of children who had left for Colorado and Wyoming, who followed harvests and never returned to a neighborhood whose future did not seem to include them. I was probably about the age of her grandchildren, but I never met them. And she told me about constant pressure from developers to sell their tiny enclave of resistance to urbanization, first with sweet talk and cash offers and then with threats. The beekeeper chimed in, angrily: “No, we'll never sell! Now they're just waiting for us to die!”

I'm embarrassed to say that I never learned their names, or at least I don't remember them if I did. Now I have big words to convey what I learned in that orchard—*materiality*, *embodiment*, and *multispecies relations*. As when I watched the ballet Señor Olguín danced with horse, water, and alfalfa plants, I learned how human lives come to be defined and transformed through intimate relations with other species. I continued to learn this lesson in a Venezuelan rainforest decades later, as I explore in the final chapter of this book.

Not all of my mentors spoke Spanish. I met Old Man Hawkins when I was about ten through my friends, indirectly. We roamed on top of the

larger acequias, moving between each other's houses, the small general store on Rio Grande Boulevard, and sites where adventures might lurk. The streets belonged to cars, parents, and the city, but boys ruled the ditch banks. We sometimes accompanied a friend home in the late afternoon to watch his mother milk the goats; she would give us a glass of the warm, thick, frothy liquid. Most trips took us past Old Man Hawkins's small house and orchard, which lay only a few hundred yards south of my home. A new story about him seemed to emerge each time, each one more terrifying than the last. Old Man Hawkins was mean and he was dangerous. He hated children, and he would shoot them if they tried to steal his fruit. He had killed his wife and buried her under the big apple tree; there were probably neighbor children there too. He usually sat in a chair next to his front door, and sure enough, he was cradling a rifle. When we saw him, we would either detour out of range or run breathlessly along the soft, brown, sandy soil on top of the acequia until we had passed his house.

Frankly, I didn't like those stories. Old Man Hawkins looked lonely, and he lived a meager life. My curiosity was getting the better of me. Walking the ditch alone late one summer afternoon, I saw him in his chair, and—impulsively and a bit scared—slid down the deep sand onto his property. As I walked slowly up to him, he didn't raise his gun but rather disappeared with it into his house. I began to think, maybe he does hate children. Maybe I will never find out what he's like. Maybe he would . . . Then he emerged with another simple wooden chair and two delicious peaches, one for each of us. If I had been a fieldworker with a tape recorder, I could have published a rich collection based on the stories he told me during the next several hours. Living practically next door, he gave me new perspectives on the history of my neighborhood, on who had owned the large expanse of agricultural land and how it had been farmed.

Old Man Hawkins also introduced me to his family: the pear, apple, and apricot trees he had planted decades earlier. The study of multispecies relations, including the ways that people fashion themselves and their worlds through intimate, nurturing, and sometimes destructive relations with plants, now forms an important focus in the social sciences and humanities. Looking back, I understand he was teaching me that lesson fifty years ago. Old Man Hawkins did not trace his life through human kinship (he had never married), nor through his work history (he had always been a small-scale farmer), but through decades of intimacy with the trees we were seeing, smelling, touching, and tasting. I learned that plants have social lives, individual biographies, and—at least in his view—personalities. Even trees obtained from the same source and planted simultaneously grew at different

rates, not all equally willing to afford the fruit that provided his source of income. I came to see that he was as enmeshed in their lives as they were in his actions, sense of self, time, and place, and economic well-being.

Multispecies relations also explained the presence of the gun, a .22 caliber short. It reappeared suddenly when he was visited by the species that evoked the anger the boys had mistakenly attributed to his relations with other human beings: crows. The erratic descent of dozens of crows was highlighted by the valley's level landscape and the 5,000-foot rise of the Sandia Mountains. A crow invasion could wipe out his source of livelihood. Old Man Hawkins was a good shot: each time a crow perched in one of his trees, it lay, seconds later, in a pile of black feathers and bright red blood. The other side of an act of arboreal care was violence directed at "those damn crows." I finally got it: Old Man Hawkins was socially isolated but not alone, living in a world of intimate relations, of complex and opposing affects, crafted anew each day as he cared for trees, shot crows, and watched changes in the world around him.

Old Man Hawkins talked about growing struggles with age and poverty, feeling isolated from other people. He scrutinized me while saying, "I know the kids tell wild stories about me. They even say I killed my wife—even though I never married." I looked at the ground. In graduate school, I would embrace Richard Bauman's (1977) performance-centered approach, which emphasizes the role of audience members as coauthors of narratives, shaping how they unfold through their bodily, verbal, and nonverbal engagement. I recalled all the times that I had repressed my urge to challenge Old Man Hawkins stories. My silence signaled complicity, helping stories circulate. Subsequently, I became a raconteur of a new repertoire of Old Man Hawkins stories; they mirrored stylistic features of the Scary Old Man Hawkins legends they were designed to crowd out, told with a similarly animated voice, face, and body, just as aesthetically marked and communicatively heightened, just as much designed for display for an audience (Bauman 1977). To use a term I later colluded with Dick Bauman in crafting, my stories were equally designed to be extracted and recontextualized, inserted into conversations with other kids, parents, and neighbors.

Maybe it was less the power of my narratives than the sensory appeal of tree-ripened peaches that convinced several friends to visit Old Man Hawkins. He only had two chairs, so pairs and trios of boys periodically populated the steps in front of his front door. Some neighborhood kids never descended the ditch bank. Maybe they preferred the Scary Old Man Hawkins legends, or maybe their parents were as distrustful of an elderly man living alone in what seemed like a bygone world as fearful of the .22 that retained its prominent role in new Old Man Hawkins stories.

Here we have painful evidence of the power of narratives. Just as years of Scary Old Man Hawkins stories led him to be shunned, new stories—and peaches, apples, and pears—turned Old Man Hawkins into a sort of communal grandfather. Even when kids didn't interrupt the important missions that prompted their passage in front of his house, detours and frightened sprints gave way to waves and friendly greetings: "Hey, Old Man Hawkins, got any peaches?" The fruits of mentorship, as I have come to learn, are not unidirectional: our relationship transformed his world even as his stories opened up mine.

In high school, I grew close to the family of Peter Griego Jr., the best friend I have ever had. I spent time in Peter's room, generally in the company of our group of eight adolescent boys, representing the ethnic mix of our neighborhood: four Chicanos, two Native Americans (Laguna), and two gringos. I also sat around the kitchen table with his parents and grandparents. My appreciation for space, species, environments, and history grew as Peter and I helped his grandfather cultivate the family garden. One of my favorite events was the annual pinto bean harvest on the driveway of the Griegos' home: shelling them, removing sticks and stones, filling the burlap bags as tightly with stories as with beans. From Señor Olguín, Old Man Hawkins, Peter's grandfather, and a Lebanese family that lived next to my paternal grandparents, I learned a fair amount about gardening. Starting around thirteen years of age, I cultivated fruit trees, a strawberry patch, several species of melons, vegetables, and other crops in the valley's rich brown soil and plentiful sunshine.

During my senior year, the world suddenly snatched away the ideas about life and death that the Griegos and I had held. Peter, school president and star student, had graduated the previous spring and started University of New Mexico summer classes. He was killed when his motorcycle was struck from behind. Another Valley High student, driving his dad's pickup, had his head turned to the left, surveying the current occupants of the local hangout, a drive-in hamburger joint. The Griegos lost their only child. Mr. Griego's grief largely unfolded in the form of a burning rage directed against the adolescent, played out in angry monologues and glaring looks delivered silently in courtroom hearings. Mrs. Griego's grief became pain articulated through the poetics of mourning. She performed grieving practices that, I would see decades later, embodied Sigmund Freud's ([1917] 1957) insightful account of the twofold, contradictory aspects of mourning. She sought to hold onto her son, to bring him back to life, a process that Freud refers to as hyper-cathexis. Recruiting me in this process, she asked me to take the role of her son temporarily. For a week, I accompanied

the family almost constantly. (I spent time in Peter's room, but didn't sleep there, which she would have liked. That, I felt, would have crossed an unsettling threshold.) Mrs. Griego's parents-in-law were feeble; caring for them forced her to find new ways of getting on with life, part of the work of mourning that Freud called reality-testing. I accompanied the Griegos in a week of masses and rosary services at the nearby Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, my first lesson in how bodies and voices, some no longer physically present, come together through recurrent patterns of words, sounds, gestures, objects, and bodily movements. An appreciation for the poetics of mourning that Peter's mother instilled in me would resonate decades later with what I learned from women in a Venezuelan rainforest.

LEARNING TO LEARN IN CÓRDOVA, NEW MEXICO

Now it's time to bring my maternal grandparents back into the story (see figure 0.2). A giant standing six foot four and weighing well over 200 pounds, John Donald Robb periodically towered over an assembly of grandchildren, declaring: "I'm going to collect folk music. Who wants to come along?" Cousins looked anxiously at one another or their parents, asking silently, "Do I have to go?" My hand shot up, accompanied by an excited "I'll go!" My mother, Nancy Gay, loved these trips, so we would pile into the back seat of my grandparents' Rambler station wagon. I particularly remember the first time my grandfather took me to Córdoba, a community of about 400 inhabitants near the famed pilgrimage site of the Santuario de Chimayó (see figure 0.4).¹ Accessible by a short spur off the picturesque "High Road" (State Highway 76) between Santa Fe and Taos, it is bordered on the east by the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Lying in a small canyon, Córdoba was founded between 1725 and 1743; modest harvests of corn, wheat, beans, legumes, and other crops were supplemented by raising goats and sheep (Briggs 1987).

When I first saw Córdoba, nearly all of the houses were grouped around the chapel on the hillside. My grandfather visited Córdoba many times, principally to see George López (see figure 0.5), known as the leading practitioner of the Córdoba style of wood carving started by his father, José Dolores López (see figure 0.6). Middle-class white artists, writers, art patrons, museum professionals, and tourists came to see George and his wife Silvanita. My grandparents purchased several of their carvings. I made a number of trips with them, but I particularly remember the first, when I was eight or nine. Perhaps it was my own diminutive size, the low height of the doorway in which he was standing, or the stories my grandfather told us during the trip from Albuquerque, but George struck me as a tall and



Figure 0.2. John Donald and Harriet Robb (date and photographer unknown)

compelling figure, despite the fact—I realized later—that he was actually fairly short.²

My grandfather and George shared an interest in music. Like many Córdovan men, George was a member of a lay religious organization called La Cofradía de Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno (The Confraternity of Our Father Jesus the Nazarene), pejoratively called the Penitentes by English speakers, thereby exoticizing their ritual enactments of the Crucifixion during Holy Week. The brothers' Lenten practices included collective singing of *alabados*, hymns whose textual and musical features evoke the passion of Christ and the Virgin Mary's suffering. My first extended encounter with the Lópezes came in 1966 when my grandfather recorded *alabados*. Their interaction intrigued me. George spoke virtually no English, and my grandfather's



Figure 0.3. Córdova, New Mexico

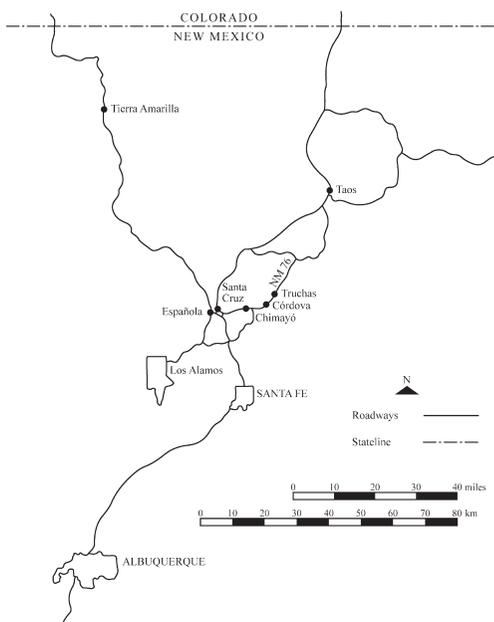


Figure 0.4. Córdova and
Its surroundings

Spanish was hardly fluent. They were, nevertheless, intensively engaged. As George began each alabado, the remarkable musical features and the expression on his face and in his eyes seemed to transport him to a distant, sacred, and affectively charged realm. As a musician, my grandfather seemed to register each note in his facial expression, even if the alabados' acoustic parameters did not prompt a similar spiritual journey. My grandfather collected



Figure 0.5. George López—Woodcarver of Córdoba, 1945. (Laura Gilpin [1891–1979]. Gelatin silver print. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Bequest of the Artist. © 1979 Amon Carter Museum of American Art, P1979.134.335.)

some nine songs that day; several figured prominently in his massive tome *Hispanic Folk Music of New Mexico and the Southwest* (Robb 1980).

My return to Córdoba six years later was influenced by a new mentor. During my first year in college, I fell in love. I was eccentric to the core—my affair was with an Austrian-British philosopher who died two years before I was born, Ludwig Wittgenstein. I was fascinated by the microphysics of language, how sounds and words get put together and enter into complex syntactic relations, but it was Wittgenstein’s discussion of “language games”

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that opened my mind wider as I read each of the book's sections. Wittgenstein articulated how languages constantly come into being as they shape and are shaped by daily life. The voices of the beekeeper and Señor Olguín resonated within me: they had not just helped me learn New Mexican Spanish but allowed me to enter social worlds where words invited new relations to material objects, nonhumans, environments, history, and people. Old Man Hawkins taught me a language game that seemed to push beyond those analyzed by Wittgenstein, where fruit trees spoke to human beings and vice versa. Wittgenstein thus reanimated the words of the "vernacular" philosophers with whom I had grown up and led me back to the Lópezes. Planning for a week, I stayed fourteen years.

I slept on a cot next to the folding tables on which *los carvings* were displayed to visitors in the Lópezes' new home on the valley floor. The Lópezes seemed to dance behind the table; visitors lined up on the other side, picking up carvings or stooping to look more closely (see figure 0.7). I occupied neither space. The visitors' scrutinizing eyes suggested that I was matter out of place. The Lópezes were friends and mentors, but I looked more like the clients. Childless in a family-centered world, the Lópezes adopted a niece, Savinita, who married Cristóbal Ortiz. With the Ortizes and their five children, the Lópezes created a small enclave, its size increasing as each child married and built a house. Savinita and Cristóbal carved, and each Ortiz child became proficient at producing first trees and birds and then images of the saints, all in



Figure 0.6. *Our Lady of Light* by José Dolores López, created through the Public Works of Art Program (photograph courtesy of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center)

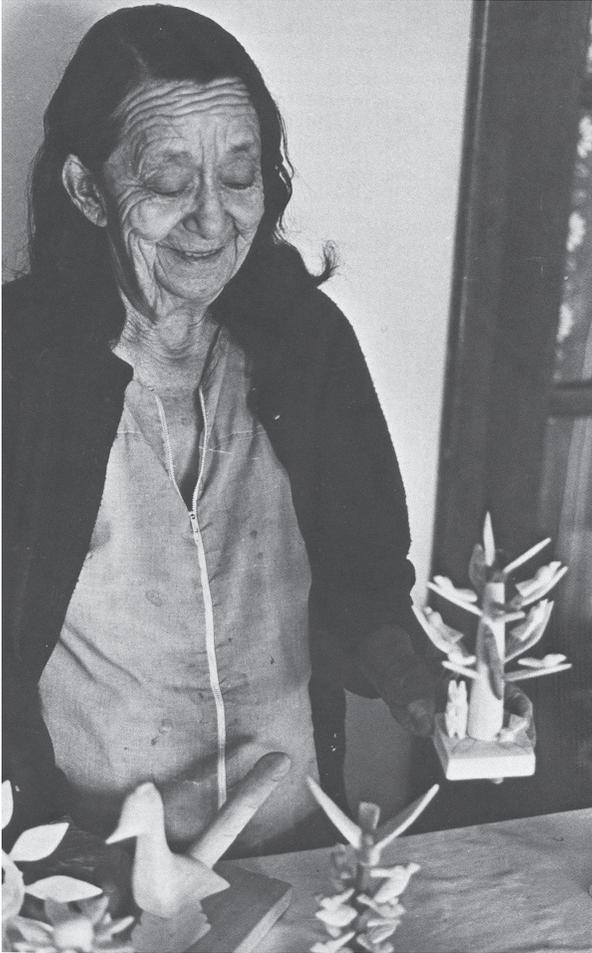


Figure 0.7. Silvianita López shows a carving to customers from her position behind the “table”

roughly the same style, and nearly all signed “George López”—“Otherwise the tourists won’t buy them.” We talked as I watched them carve. I especially befriended Alex Ortiz, who was my age.

Two things that happened in that initial week changed my life. First, I accompanied George on his daily walk to Córdova’s post office. His visits were timed to coincide not just with the arrival of the mail but with that of some two dozen Córdovans who clustered outside, enjoying the April sunshine. This was, I realized, the folkloric nerve center of everyday life in the community. *La plática de los viejitos de antes* (the talk of the elders of bygone days) that unfolded there included proverbs, biblical allusions, jokes, and legends, folded in with commentaries on news and

specials at the Piggly Wiggly supermarket in Española. For me the experience went beyond meeting a cross-section of residents; I realized that Córdovans and I were equally fascinated with the rhythms of conversation and how stories, histories, and personalities were woven into landscapes. Wittgenstein soon joined us there as the complex choreography of words, bodies, gestures, facial expressions, landscape, and mail, interrupted occasionally as a loud truck or vintage car passed by, illuminated his insight that “uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination” ([1953] 1972:§6).

Second, the Lópezes had plans for me. When visitors asked to see the spectacular polychrome images in Córdova’s San Antonio Church, George—as sacristan—obliged. Specialists sometimes brought books with photographs of work by José Rafael Aragón and other nineteenth-century artists, so George knew that “traditional” carvings had been the focus of countless museum exhibitions and publications. Although the Lópezes’ carvings appeared in major US and foreign museum collections, no one had asked Córdovans for their stories of how they became carvers, why they carved, and what the carvings and interactions with visitors meant to them. George cast me as a mediator. I was a product of the urban, gringo world. Nevertheless, the Lópezes and Robbs had cultivated a relationship for over two decades. I was fluent in New Mexican Spanish, and they could see that my eyes opened wide and my head moved to the rhythm of older people’s narratives. George pitched me the project: I should come back, spend more time listening, and write a book about Córdova’s *contemporary* carvers, one that would tell *their* side of the story.

I was dumbstruck. Intellectual firecrackers had been going off in my head all week as the words of childhood mentors, Wittgenstein, the post office crowd, and the Lópezes’ teachings about life, land, work, spirituality, and aesthetics collided. But I was nineteen years old. I felt inadequately prepared for the project. And I had other, more nineteen-year-old interests. I was becoming a highly proficient rock climber. I had fashioned a reputation as a popular radio disc jockey in high school and college. I went to the Museum of New Mexico to visit the leading authority on saint carving, the remarkable E. Boyd, hoping she would confirm my self-assessment, providing me with an escape route. Hearing me out, she told me what I least wanted to hear: “The Lópezes are right: scholars have only taken the ‘traditional’ carvings seriously.” Dr. Boyd continued: “You are in the perfect position: you know Spanish and you know the Lópezes. You must do it.” I protested, noting that I was just finishing my first year in college, I was ill-prepared, and that I needed to get on with my classes, but I could not

dissuade her. “I’ll help you, and so will a friend, Marta Weigle.” Writing about the wood-carvers suddenly seemed like fate.

I had already accepted a summer internship in Gallup, New Mexico, but I spent two fall months in Córdova, enabling me to enjoy northern New Mexico during its most beautiful season, as aspens and cottonwoods turn gold and vines scarlet, residents harvest chile and other crops from small garden plots, and frost brings plumes of piñon and juniper smoke from wood stoves. I rented a trailer near the Lópezes’ house. I spent most days with them. I had prepared: I borrowed a cassette recorder, purchased a small microphone, and typed up a dozen questions. The first evening we sat in their living room, positioned between the carvings table and a wood stove that provided warmth and a beautiful yellow glow. I turned on the recorder, grabbed my list of questions, and launched my career.

Having read up on interview techniques, I began with an easy, broad question designed to elicit a story: “Please tell me how you became a carver, how you began to carve.” Instead of launching into the lengthy, detailed narrative I had assumed would be forthcoming, George tilted his head back, looked upward, and responded, almost musically, “Uuh, pues, quién sabe!” (Oh, well, who knows!). Dumbstruck, I just looked at him for some time, then retreated to my neatly typed list and tried the second question: “Could you please tell me how your father, José Dolores López, began to carve images of saints?” As if by instant replay, he looked up and intoned, “Uuh, pues, quién sabe!” You might think I am drawing on a vague recollection of our exchange, but that would be mistaken. I still have the recording of that abbreviated encounter. But frankly, I don’t need it. Although nearly fifty years (horrors!) have passed, I can still hear the sound of his voice and see the way his head tilted upward. I sat still and looked down, but not at my list of questions. I was defeated. My scholarly career had ended almost before it had begun. We made small talk. I said that I was tired. I walked slowly back to the sanctuary of my trailer. For once in my life, I didn’t even look up and wonder at the stars.

The next morning, I returned to the Lópezes’ house. We acted as if nothing had happened. I sat across from them, enjoying the warmth of their wood-fire kitchen stove, sitting on a hard wooden bench. As I settled in, so did the feeling of profound discouragement that had emerged the night before. There was little talk. They carved as I vaguely watched. Finally, George grabbed a block of aspen and placed it in my hands, along with a penknife. It would be a lie to say that I had never carved. As a child, I explored numerous crafts. I learned to knit, driving my paternal grandfather to homophobic distraction: “Boys don’t do that!” I bought a set of carving

tools and tried my hand at wood carving. I became a fairly accomplished potter by the age of about thirteen, owning a kiln and wheel and even selling some of my work. Accepting George's offer, I therapeutically buried my desperation into how the knife cut through the soft layers of aspen.

After about an hour, George walked over, snatched the knife and wood away, made several demonstration cuts, and exclaimed: "You cut *with* the grain, not *against* it." Wood, knife, shock, and self-denigration merged anew. I persisted. A week passed, ever so slowly. I finished small birds and trees. Then I grew more ambitious, remembering George's beautiful image of St. Isidore that I had seen the previous Sunday during Mass in Córdoba's church (see figure 0.8). Now *he* was watching *me*. "What are you carving?" "St. Isidore," I replied. He nodded. Perhaps an hour later, he suddenly burst forth with the *alabanza* (hymn of praise) for St. Isidore. Then George, as if talking to the world at large, told the legend of St. Isidore. A shorter pause. He recounted the time he first carved an image of St. Isidore and then, without a moment's hesitation, his father's first foray into the subject. No questions. No tape recorder. No desperation. A new beginning.

Confronting this initial failure—both emotionally and intellectually—did not prompt me to resurrect a preconceived research design: it transformed how I perceive, undertake, teach, and write about research, right through to the present. Still in my academic infancy, I had assumed that asking me to write a book automatically granted me rights to claim the role of researcher and positioned the Lópezes—and other carvers—as research subjects. Fieldwork came with a preset language game that all participants would know and would accept as legitimate: the interview. As the researcher, I would ask questions and they would answer them. Words, captured on tape, would enable me to produce knowledge. The concept of research and the presumed right to ask lots of questions had never limited my engagement with Old Man Hawkins, Señor Olguín, or the beekeeper and his wife, but it suddenly became a major obstacle to learning.

By refusing the interview language game and a subordinate role in the associated hierarchical structure, the Lópezes rejected the role of research subjects and claimed that of mentors. Part of the lesson they were imparting—and the power they were asserting—was to teach me how to learn; in terms of conducting research, I had to unlearn the "research techniques" that I was beginning to acquire. If it had not been for George's refusal to answer my questions, I would not be writing these lines today, nor would I be writing a book that traces the importance of mentorship in fieldwork and theorizing. I knew that images of the saints are more than objects, if the latter are seen as stable, bounded, passive entities defined by



Figure 0.8. George López's first image of St. Isidore, 1949 (from a private collection)

human actions and imaginations. Growing up in New Mexico and visiting friends' homes and the Santuario de Chimayó had taught me that objects have not only social lives and biographies (Appadurai 1986) but spiritual lives too. But I had envisioned the study as a conversation between humans *about* objects. And Mr. López's "Uuh, pues, quién sabe!" demanded that I unlearn racialized assumptions about the politics of knowledge: nascent study of social science methodology entitled me—as a member of the urban, white middle class—to position myself as the knowledge producer and the Lópezes as requiring my ethnographic authority (Clifford 1988) to make their stories legible and significant.

Silvianita and George López taught me lessons that would be articulated decades later in the guise of the "new materialisms" and science and technology studies: objects have forms of agency that can shape human ways of knowing, acting, and relating. Gaining the ability and the right to write about carving involved holding a block of wood and learning to move a hand-knife assemblage in such a way as to find an artistic design and religious imaginary in the unique possibilities and forms of resistance offered by that particular chunk of aspen. It involved watching the Lópezes carve as much as examining the carvings on their table and in museums and, injuring

my adolescent ego, having George snatch my block of wood out of my hands and show me what I was doing wrong. David Esterly (2012:64) wrote about carving: “The wood is teaching you about itself, configuring your mind and muscles to the tasks required of them. To carve is to be shaped by the wood even as you’re shaping it.” This process included aspen, words, songs, and stories—along with facial features, hagiographical attributes, decorative designs, and more than human (“spiritual”) connections—as wood, knife, sandpaper, vocal cords, hands, arms, eyes, and imaginations continually intersected as if refracted in a kaleidoscope. Connections between craft and story became clearer to me later when I gained another mentor, German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1968), and read his essay “The Storyteller.” The Lópezes pushed me to relate to scholarly research methodologies in more critical and experimental ways—to deny them any a priori authority; a decade later, I wrote a book entitled *Learning How to Ask* designed to pass along these lessons (Briggs 1986).

My initial acceptance of social science methodologies had prompted me to forget what living with my grandparents and my relationship with my neighbor Old Man Hawkins had taught me years before. In keeping with what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004) calls a naturalist perspective, I perceived aspen in instrumental, abstract terms as a medium for revealing human imaginaries and histories and connecting carvers and customers. After the Lópezes slowed down my research, I traveled with them on trips to the mountains, learning to perceive aspen trees through a carver’s eyes: which trees were of the right size and health and sufficiently free of knots to harvest, how long to dry the wood, and how to cut, split, and dry them in the sun.³ Researchers rely on what science and technology scholars call affordances (Gibson 1997), aspects of the environment that enable particular ways of producing knowledge and action and impede others; affordances thereby significantly shape particular configurations of the politics of knowledge. The little social science I had learned led me to believe that books, tape recorders, microphones, lists of questions, and roles of interviewer and interviewee provided the only affordances I needed to learn how the Lópezes carved wood and worlds. The Lópezes had a different plan. For them, a block of aspen and a penknife provided the affordances required to begin to enter a multispecies universe in which trees were key players and their grains, irregularities, and textures played active roles in shaping human-human and, for blessed images, human-deity relations. The camera became a crucial affordance. I had to become a quasi-professional photographer, learning from such gifted artists as Laura Gilpin. Mastering use of a four-by-five-inch view camera and installing a tiny darkroom in the

house I purchased in Córdoba, I aspired to take photographs that conveyed the artists' vision of their work.

Working on the project over the next six years, I grew in other ways. E. Boyd's suggestion that Marta Weigle could help me was crucial. I often wondered why Marta was so generous with her time and knowledge with a young undergraduate who should have been bothering his own teachers. Marta was my first mentor in folkloristics. Her University of Pennsylvania training and deep knowledge of New Mexican folklore shaped frequent encounters that included a glass of wine (the legal age was eighteen at the time), reading lists, suggestions for building greater analytic sophistication, and a gentle scolding—always laced with good humor—when common sense and particularly gendered assumptions shaped my thinking. Marta took me back to the post office, challenging me to explore how proverbs, legends, folktales, jokes, gossip, hymns, and prayers were ingrained, as it were, in wood carving. She challenged me to let feminist approaches disrupt my thinking in ways that slowly induced two sets of realizations. First, I could see that women's performances were deeply gendered in relational terms. In other words, they critically engaged my gendered and racialized identity as a young white man, often performatively enacting stereotypes of older Latinx women—only to explode them (see Briggs 1988). Second, Marta's challenge to perceive how patriarchy shapes research prompted me to reflect on the problematic symbiosis that emerges as male fieldworkers often hybridize forms of male domination emerging in field sites with androcentric analytic perspectives.

The historical and political-economic scope of my research expanded. George articulated why he turned full-time to wood carving. Wage labor became a necessity for Córdobaans when the US Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management and private landowners seized lands that Spain and Mexico had granted centuries before. Córdobaans lost the right to graze goats and sheep in the surrounding hills and mountains. Many residents traveled daily across the Rio Grande Valley to work as janitors and maids at the Los Alamos National Laboratory or in the scientists' houses; traffic jams emerged weekday mornings as cars and trucks began a mad dash down the treacherous road toward Española and up the Pajarito Plateau. George did not like being stuck at the bottom of a racialized labor market or missing out on the collective daily life of the community. Wood carving enabled him to quit Los Alamos.

Córdobaan carvers did not regard making images of the saints for sale to outsiders as a religious act, as their customers assumed. Some of their neighbors accused the carvers of "selling the saints to nonbelievers." Starting with José Dolores López, carvers developed a crafty dodge: they

asserted that if images had not been blessed, they were just blocks of wood; their sale was thus not a sacrilege. Artists and buyers thus collaborated in positioning wood carvings on a racialized border that relationally defined working-class Mexicanos vis-à-vis middle-class whites. Buying carvings enabled the latter to decorate their modern, secular, often wealthy homes with what they deemed fragments of an exotic world inhabited by quaint, backward, simple people who were “close to nature” and exuded a “primitive religiosity.” They preferred unpainted, “natural” wood surfaces to the bright colors of nineteenth-century polychrome and contemporary plaster of Paris images. Embodying the aesthetic values of patrons, the carvings became small-scale wooden models of the racist stereotypes held by white customers. The carvers thus reversed the attribution of naiveté, suggesting that tourists and connoisseurs were fooling themselves into thinking that they were buying an Other culture when they were actually consuming their own. Years later, I was pleased to see James Clifford (1988), Michael Brown (2003), Fred Myers (2002), and others explore how arts produced by Indigenous, Aboriginal, and other artists primarily for sale to whites constructed and complicated relations of race, class, colonialism, and nation. My disappointment in seeing that they failed to acknowledge the precedent set by *The Wood Carvers of Córdoba* (Briggs 1980) was not personal; rather, they had missed the analytic insights generated by my mentors.

Córdovans changed my sense of identity as much as my scholarly instincts. Let’s put it right out there—I was a Chicano wannabe. In high school, I spent a lot of time hanging out with my Chicano and Chicana friends and their families. An unconscious desire to be accepted as a Chicano deepened in Córdoba, which I envisioned not as a “field site” but as my home. My dream job was commuting to the University of New Mexico, helping open up pathways to higher education and critical inquiry for students coming from under-resourced public high schools like mine. (Applications to UNM made over the next three decades never met with success.) I became increasingly engaged with the land struggle, joining community activists, progressive lawyers, and historians in organizing the Center for Land Grant Studies.⁴ I became something of a celebrity in the region while finishing my doctoral fieldwork in 1978–1979. I went to the local Spanish-language radio station, Radio KDCE (*¿qué dice?*), to purchase a used desk. Having worked as a radio disk jockey, I asked about a sign advertising DJ positions. They hired me. I took my show’s name from how friends made fun of me. One person would ask: “What is a *gabacho* doing here?” (“Gabacho” is a more derogatory term for gringo.) Another friend would ironically respond: “¡Debe estar perdido!” (He must be lost!), implying that

I was lost in body, mind, and spirit. I thus named my show “El Gabacho Perdido” (The Lost Gringo).

Chicano/a activist friends convinced me that I would be more useful if I stopped playing defective Chicano and embraced my location along a racial borderline and my status as a border thinker (Anzaldúa 1987). I thus had to transform my race, class, and gender privilege into a means of contributing to efforts to identify and challenge racism and its effects. I deepened the carving project by asking white, upper-middle class patrons why they bought carvings and what they meant to them, and I studied how images were displayed in homes and museums. For the land grant struggle, I complemented my research on the politics of knowledge in Mexicano historical narratives by scrutinizing the “rules of evidence” that shaped why oral history was largely excluded from courtrooms—as hearsay (Briggs 1987).

I learned to listen, in short, to people who defined me by relationally projecting historical and contemporary links between our opposing racial identities. By 1978, I was in full swing with a broader study that was shaped by ethnography of speaking (Hymes 1974) and performance-centered perspectives (Bauman 1977; Hymes 1981). I had the luck of finding another mentor, who similarly became one of my best friends and interlocutors as well as a coauthor—Dick Bauman. Although I was a new kid on the block and he a scholar celebrated in several disciplines, we shared fundamental misgivings about foundational scholarly truths. By the 1990s, syntheses of John Austin’s (1962) insights on performativity, Bronislaw Malinowski’s (1935, 1948) positioning of language and folklore as central to daily life, Kenneth Burke’s (1941) take on literature “as equipment for living,” and Roman Jakobson’s (1960) approach to poetics had become fixed frameworks that were often unreflexively imposed on cultural forms. Getting together at annual meetings, conferences, and each other’s homes, we tried to figure out where received theoretical presuppositions and modes of analysis got in the way. We thus launched a joint unlearning project, working our way back to seventeenth-century foundational separations between language, tradition, science, and politics. Where Richard Dorson (1968) found disciplinary heroes, such as John Aubrey, we located ways of thinking and researching that relegated folkloristics to a provincial, subordinate scholarly corner. We shared an attraction to what Dick called vernacular philology (Bauman 2008), attention to how performers who produce aesthetically elaborated forms also devise insightful ways of thinking about them. Our collaboration in crafting a framework that emphasized entextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization—even as it probably tested the morphological limits of the English language—helped me attend to ways that Córdovan

performers created pasts, presents, and futures and how they were teaching me to think about them. Conversations with Beverly Stoeltje about women and horses in West Texas (1988) and queen mothers in West Africa (Obeng and Stoeltje 2002) resonated with Marta's warnings about taking men, male perspectives, and male-dominated cultural forms as preconceived research objects and analytic perspectives.

Some folklorists and anthropologists were then interpreting performance-centered approaches in scientific fashion as requiring erasure of traces of the fieldworker's presence. Linda Dégh's account of studying Hungarian legends is a classic: "The text below does not involve the collector . . . The tape recorder was outside of the room, and the microphone was camouflaged with a shawl; only the hostess knew of its presence" (Dégh and Vázsonyi [1969] 1976:103). Joel Sherzer proposed a "discourse-centered" framework that privileged "naturally occurring and recorded speech" (1983:10). I remember a prominent folklorist at the American Folklore Society's annual meeting asking me if I was present when the recording was made and if my presence had affected what unfolded. I responded affirmatively. He then informed me that my example "was not really a performance," suggesting that such contaminated materials were of little value.

When life gives you lemons, make lemonade! His dismissive comment motivated me to forge a distinct, reflexive approach. Trying to erase my presence would have produced an *unnatural* discourse, missing the basic thrust of these performances and their role in shaping naturalcultural life. Performances of proverbs, legends, and personal narratives did not transparently reproduce the sort of pasts that Raymond Williams (1977) called archaic but rather created pasts, presents, and futures and connected them in dialogic and dialectical ways. For example, one night a group of Córdovan youths invited me on one of their all-night excursions. The next day things were different when I walked the quarter mile to the Lópezes a bit later and—shall we say?—more slowly than usual. The three of us began to carve wood. Silence alternated with small talk about the signs of fall. Silvianita began speaking about youths she referred to pejoratively as *la plebe*, their misdeeds, and how they drew the unsuspecting into what she projected as their lack of respect for collective well-being. I was, to repeat, nineteen, and I did not accept the role of the *inocente* readily. I attempted to extricate myself by suggesting that the youths seemed a lot like many kids in my predominantly working-class, Latinx high school, meaning that I thought I knew what was going on and could take care of myself.

Then Silvianita hit me between the eyes with a rhetorical two-by-four: a proverb. She repositioned our discussion from Albuquerque to neighboring

Truchas by invoking *un viejito de antes*, an elder of bygone days (thereby signaling a switch to performance). The somewhat enigmatic proverb suggested that even though Truchas's local ecology favored horsebean cultivation, this crop was part of broader ecological systems. (Here Silvianita anticipated current folkloristic interest in how plant-human relations are often used to performatively restructure human-human relations.) The relations in question were distally between miscreant youths and yours truly and, quite proximally, my attempt to challenge her authority. What had I learned? The proverb performance left me speechless, with no choice but to join George in accepting how Silvianita had cemented her position. I never hung out with the kids again, and I henceforth watched more carefully how my actions would affect their reputation and Córdovans' willingness to accept a gringo. Performances of treasure tales and other narratives similarly positioned me precariously along a racialized border.⁵ Was I one of those gringos who came to steal Córdovans' few resources? Or would I reject claims to race and class privilege, distance myself from the gringo bosses, bureaucrats, and swindlers who enforced racialized labor hierarchies on Córdovans, and help build collective futures not undermined by racism and expropriation? If I had hidden my role in these performances, I would have missed the opportunity to convert the positionality they forged for me into an analytic that could produce insights into the politics of knowledge, performance, racialization, and inequality.

VENEZUELA

Over a decade and a half, I tried to honor my Córdovan mentors' insights in a number of books and efforts to turn racial inequalities into social justice. I got the sense that I had done what I could as a scholar and activist in northern New Mexico. Growing up around speakers of Navajo and Puebloan languages and subsequently studying Navajo, I was fascinated with the way words, grammar, and poetics that had resisted linguistic oppression for half a millennium struck the keyboard of the imagination. Nevertheless, my childhood friends had impressed upon me that their language and ceremonial life was not something they wanted to share with outsiders. I was also deeply interested in Latin America and wanted to spend more time there. I first thought about going to Colombia, but in 1985 I heard President Betancourt give a speech in which he elegantly cited Plato and Nietzsche and remarked that he planned to kill each and every guerrilla. I traveled around Venezuela instead, asking one question of representatives of Indigenous communities, scholars, and officials: where might my training be of value?

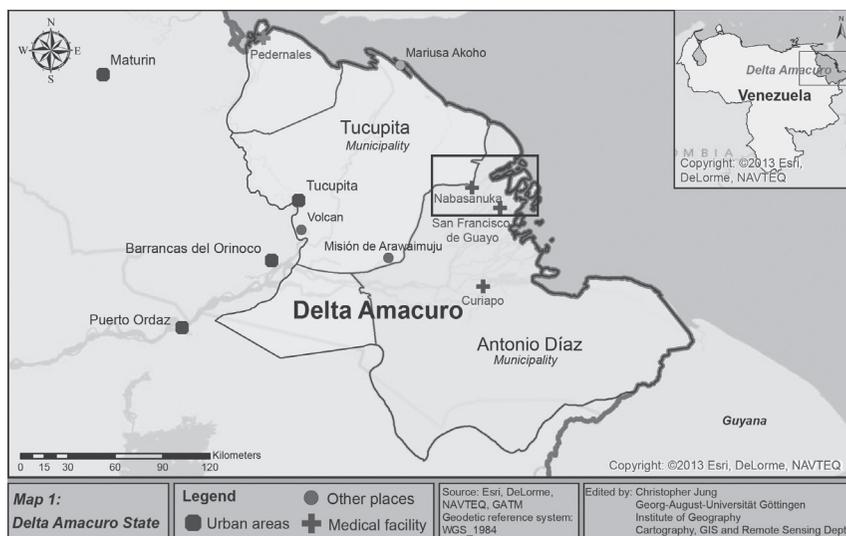


Figure 0.9. Delta Amacuro State, Venezuela

I almost ended up working with Kariña people in Monagas State. I was fascinated by their cante fables, beautiful narratives with embedded songs. They introduced to the community by interviewing me on their radio station, which made me feel right at home. Nevertheless, the place made me feel sad. After oil was discovered on their ancestral lands, Kariña people had been forced to live on small asphalt-covered islands. The painful effects of land expropriation and environmental degradation were still too fresh from my experience in New Mexico.

Neighboring Delta Amacuro State, on the other hand, was perfect (see figure 0.9). The Delta, approximately 40,000 square kilometers, was formed by the vast Orinoco River where it entered the Caribbean, creating swampy islands accessible by navigating myriad tributaries and the smaller waterways that connect them (see figure 0.10). For a kid from New Mexico, which has almost no water, the fluvial landscape was fascinating. Missionaries prompted many residents to establish permanent settlements on riverbanks and to supplement fishing and hunting with agriculture, particularly taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) cultivation. Others continued to live in the forest, moving seasonally to sites where moriche palms, fish, game, and other resources abounded. Some 35,000 people were classified as “indigenous members of the Warao ethnic group,” and nearly all spoke the Warao language.⁶ The phonology and morphology had been analyzed, but no linguistic anthropology or sociolinguistic work had explored its social dimensions.⁷ Anthropologists



Figure 0.10. Hana Hubasuhuru, a stream that connects two Orinoco tributaries, Delta Amacuro, Venezuela

had documented Warao ritual and healing. And missionaries and anthropologists had compiled extensive collections of myths and folktales, presented largely as decontextualized, objectified texts; they had not studied them ethnographically.⁸ Many areas lacked schools and health facilities. Given the absence of potable water and sewage facilities, health conditions were abysmal. Malaria, tuberculosis, measles, and pertussis were common, and between 26 and 36 percent of children died before the age of five.⁹ People I met during my 1985 trip to the area told me that documenting the social life of language, oral genres, and the interface between biomedical and vernacular healing might be of value for strengthening educational and health programs. So I returned in 1986 and stayed for a year. Purchasing a fifty-foot dugout canoe and a forty-horsepower outboard motor, I learned to find my way through mazes of tributaries without getting lost—and thus possibly ending up as crocodile food (see figure 0.11).

My first mentors were members of the Moraleda family in Nabasanuka, a town of 453.¹⁰ Teodoro (see figure 0.12), then in his seventies, taught me both about life in the forest, where he grew up, and the experience of being “recruited” to live in a Catholic boarding school.¹¹ He was a leading member of the local Catholic congregation and a practicing healer. I became close to three of Teodoro and his wife Tomasa’s sons: Librado, Conrado, and



Figure 0.11. The author and son Gabriel operating their motorized dugout canoe (photograph by Barbara E. Fries)

Enrique. Librado and Enrique, two of the Delta's most visible and respected leaders, had joined the socialist party (Movimiento al Socialismo) as teenagers. Librado, a schoolteacher with tremendous charisma and intelligence, became the first president of the Delta's Indigenous social movement (see figure 0.13). Before President Hugo Chávez Frías launched the Bolivarian socialist revolution in 1998, Librado founded Muaina, a coastal community, as an experiment in Indigenous socialism. He spearheaded efforts to outlaw politically powerful palm heart factories and sawmills, arguing that they damaged the rainforest and brutally exploited workers. Despite death threats, he succeeded. Enrique helped the Delta's first Indigenous elected municipal official form a government. Conrado (see figure 0.14) became the president of the health committee, working with physicians and nurses in the local clinic; he played a crucial role in resolving a mysterious epidemic (which I describe in chapters 6 and 10) that killed scores of children and young adults in 2007–2008.

I was staying with the Moraledas when they received an invitation to attend the elaborate *nabanamu* festival in Mariusa. Preparations for the *nabanamu* center on cutting moriche palms, extracting the starch, and placing it in a giant basket under a temple structure. There *wisidatu* healers invited *hebu* spirits, which are deemed responsible for many respiratory and other illnesses, to bathe in the palm starch and enjoy the singing and dancing



Figure 0.12. Teodoro Moraleda playing a bone flute

performed on a nearby dance platform, exhorting them to refrain from causing illness. The Moraledas invited me—and my canoe—along. There were no stores, missions, schools, or clinics in Mariusa. Rather than practicing agriculture, Mariusans alternated between fishing on the coast and living deep within the moriche palm groves, gathering palm starch and other forest products and hunting. At the festival I met Santiago Rivera, a remarkable healer and leader who became a key mentor—and my student. Frankly, my first experience in the rainforest wasn't easy. There was little food, mainly tiny swamp fish, palm starch, grubs, moriche fruit, and palm hearts; I lost fifteen pounds in two weeks. Trying to stay awake as healers chanted and people sang and danced nearly all night and then worked in the forest during the day was exhausting. My Warao language skills grew rapidly.

Seeking entertainment, leader Santiago Rivera called a woman up to the dance platform one afternoon, then commanded me: “Thi, hotarao,

nao! Hoho!” (Hey you, white guy, come here! Dance!)¹² He handed me the healer’s sacred rattle, probably expecting me to stand there waving it. Little did he know that I had taken ballet, modern, and jazz dance classes, or that my interest in performance had prompted me to watch closely the wisidatu healer who served as the nahanamu’s father (see figure 0.15). I replicated his actions, right down to how he rotated his eyes and head. Santiago stopped the dancing and called me over. “Do you know Spanish?” he asked. Having learned Warao speech styles, I replied, “A little.” “Do you know English?” “A very little,” I replied. “Then you will come back and live in my house; you will teach me English and I will teach you Warao.” Given that Trinidad lay seven miles across the Caribbean, a major source of cash for Mariusans was selling crabs to Trinidadians, who spoke only English; the two parties could barely communicate. Santiago wanted the language skills to negotiate a better price.

I lived with Santiago and his three wives in the forest and on the coast off and on for several years. It is hard to sketch all he taught me. The universe was suddenly enlarged for me as I watched and listened as his voice, hands, face, and body brought unseen worlds into being by performing myths. His renditions taught me that the same myth can be performed in radically different ways (Briggs 1993a). One night, Santiago challenged me with “your myth, the myth of the *hotarao*” (non-Indigenous people); he used the performance to insert me into the struggle for Mariusan land, rights, and dignity (Briggs 2000). He also performed the myth of Daunarani, Mother of the Forest, that figures centrally in chapter 10.

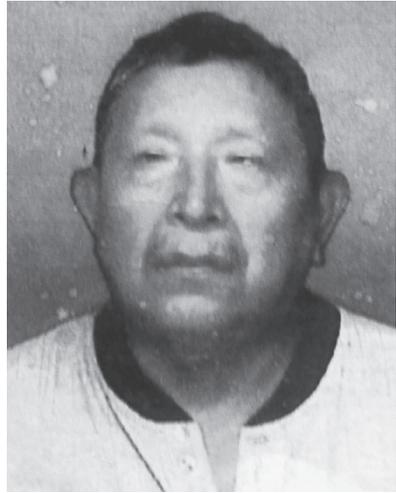


Figure 0.13. Librado Moraleda (photographer unknown)



Figure 0.14. Conrado Moraleda



Figure 0.15. A wisidatu healer performing in the nahanamu festival

One afternoon Santiago visited his close friend Manuel Torres. They sat, gossiped, and told a myth. My relationship with Manuel that began that day would change my life. A *hoarotu* healer who outranked even Santiago, he called me his son and decided to train me as a healer. Distrusting the motives of white North Americans who traveled to South America “to become shamans,” I declined. He insisted. I eventually gave in. Manuel blew healing spirits into my chest, causing me spiritual consternation. He taught me scores of exquisitely beautiful healing songs. And he prepared cigars of

pungent local tobacco rolled in palm leaves, often two feet in length and over half an inch in diameter. Having never been a smoker, I became so intoxicated that I could only crawl back to my hammock at night. Becoming a hoarotu requires dreams that enable candidates to visit spirits who impart songs and knowledge. I may have had such dreams, but the intoxication was so intense that I could remember nothing. Each morning Manuel whispered the same question in my ear: “Did you dream a little?” I was not inclined to lie, to fake it. He became increasingly disappointed by his failing student.

Finally, I had one of those dreams and then my repertoire grew. Manuel began to position me beside him, pushing me to ask diagnostic questions of patients and, laying them in a hammock, use my hands to search for pathogens. I cannot adequately convey how I felt the first time I sang a song that embodied my diagnostic hunch and felt a mass in the patient’s abdomen “stand up” when I intoned its magical name; it departed when I ordered it back to its home. Like the times I heard Santiago bring invisible but co-present worlds inhabited by mythic beings close and palpable through performance, this experience provided an analytic challenge to stretch John Austin’s notion of performativity, Wittgenstein’s work on language games, Bauman’s and Hymes’s work on performance, and my ontologies of disease to where I could begin to comprehend what I was experiencing. I’ve gotten closer, but I’m not there yet.

Santiago’s sister María Rivera also became my mentor, teaching me about phytotherapy. A remarkable woman, she was renowned for the skill she gained through looking at, smelling, touching, and harvesting plants and watching, listening to, and smelling human bodies. In both Mariusa and Nabasanuka, I watched and listened to her as she gathered plants and treated patients. María challenged gender barriers, as did the two transgender siblings with whom she lived. Women are only allowed to learn the powerful techniques for treating patients with *hebu*, *hoa*, or *babana* sickness when postmenopausal; male healers avoid menstruating women altogether. Even postmenopausal women confront great obstacles recruiting a teacher and establishing a reputation. In her mid-fifties when I met her in the 1980s, María was training as a hoarotu healer. It was fascinating to see her combine plant- and hoa-based systems, ordinarily separated by ontologies of healing and by gender. She was the only woman I met who became a *deberotu*, a performer of myths; I watched several times as she began to perform a myth, only to be drowned out by a male *deherotu*. Chapter 10 draws on experiences with María and other phytotherapists.

Life in the Delta seems to be precariously positioned on the border between life and death. In 1987, I watched people wrapped in blankets

in 100-degree weather shiver violently during an outbreak of malaria. Murako and Kwamuhu were particularly struck by tuberculosis, and I was there when several young adults died.¹³ The area has an unconscionably high rate of child mortality; I was present as many babies died. I watched mothers, grandmothers, and aunts gather around corpses and collectively perform ritual laments. The effect was overwhelming as their words constituted poetic evocations of their relationship to the deceased, speculation as to what might have killed them, and the depth of the pain and rage the mourners were experiencing. The musical features amplified the affective charge in such a way that the laments seemed to rise up from within the bodies and psyches of the performers and enter my own. I recorded laments in Kwamuhu in July 1987. Two years later, María Fernández asked me if she could hear the recording of the laments she performed for her son José. Soon the entire community had gathered in her house—so many that its muddy foundations partially collapsed—to listen to my small cassette recorder.

I spent a week with María, her mother, and other women as they taught me about the poetics of mourning. Remarkably, they could still remember their laments. This experience brought me back to two of my mentors, Sigmund Freud and Mrs. Griego. In the laments, I heard echoes of Mrs. Griego's rosary, the iterative words that seemed to call on the Virgin Mary and Jesus to bring her Peter back. Like the healing songs I sang and the imaginative power of mythic performances, psychoanalytic theory helped me think about ways that sounds, words, gestures, and images circulate between bodies—living and dead—and minds, linking them through multiple semiotic, corporeal, and political modalities. I extend these reflections in chapters 6 and 7.

Death seemed to have completely overwhelmed life in the Delta when I arrived in November 1992. Traveling to Caracas for the defense of a PhD student of mine, I decided to take the overnight bus to Tucupita, the capital of Delta Amacuro State. There I found that thousands of rainforest residents were living on the streets in appalling conditions. The cholera epidemic that had begun in western Venezuela the previous December had caused hundreds of deaths, including that of Santiago Rivera. I returned the following summer for a month, trying to figure out if there was anything I could do to help. There I met a Venezuelan public health physician, Dr. Clara Mantini (see figure 0.16). I decided that if my scholarship were ever to be of value, that was the time and place. I took a year's leave and returned in 1994–1995. Clara and I visited all parts of the vast Delta, working with local residents to determine why some 500 people had died from



Figure 0.16. Clara Mantini-Briggs with healer Paulino Zapata at the Arawabisi Clinic

a preventable and treatable bacterial infection, doing health education, providing healthcare. In Mariusa, Clara trained a bilingual nurse and established a nursing station. We documented the circulation of narratives told by public health officials, physicians, nurses, and politicians about the epidemic to rationalize unhealthy public health policies and of the counter-narratives told by residents that sought to disconnect what were being construed as natural relations between race, space, and germs and explore decolonial, anti-racist alternatives (Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2003). The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic is unfolding as this book goes to the printer. The much higher rates of infection, serious illness, and death among US Black, Latinx, and Native American populations have provided a grim reminder of the lesson that cholera taught me: epidemics X-ray society in such a way as to not only reveal deep fractures and inequities but—altogether too frequently—render them lethal.

During this period, I would encounter another mentor under quite different circumstances. I met Herminia Gómez in July 1994 in a jail cell on the outskirts of Tucupita. The context was not research or health intervention; rather, Clara and Héctor Romero, a progressive lawyer, recruited me as a translator for Herminia, who was accused of killing her newborn daughter. I was asked to help her retell a narrative. “Herminia is ‘indigenous,’” they informed me, “so she didn’t understand what the police and judge told

her”; her conviction on infanticide charges was thus the result of a misunderstanding. If I could elicit her story in Warao, problems of language and translation would vanish and the real story would set her free. She was to provide a simple, linear narrative of her daughter’s birth and death. This simplistic account of the politics of bilingualism and racial inequality made me uncomfortable, but I trusted my friends’ political commitments. I thus sat in a prison cell on a metal chair opposite Herminia, surrounded by her aunt and uncle (whom I had known for years), Héctor, and Clara. Outside this circle, menacingly, three guards watched.

But Herminia did not want to supply content for yet another imposed narrative form. Denying the premise of linguistic Otherness that predicated the encounter, she noted: “I understood perfectly. How could I not know Spanish? I went to school, and I worked [as a maid] in *criollo* [non-Indigenous] houses for more than two years.” Refusing to accept the narrative temporalities imposed by police, prosecutor, defense attorneys, and supporters alike, her story began not with her child’s death but with her own birth and her mother’s death. Expressing her inability to tell the solicited narrative, hers became a story about other people’s stories, her own constraints as a narrator, and the profound consequence of these stories—her conviction on a count of first-degree murder, for which she faced eighteen years in prison. She had no illusions that a gringo anthropologist who could shift inexplicably into a language that stigmatizes its speakers could magically end her nightmare; rather, she used Warao to talk about her mistreatment by the glaring but uncomprehending guards. Crucially, she asked me to help her figure out how the narrative used to convict her had been constructed and to devise a different way of talking about violence that could enable her to gain her freedom, including from sexual violence, labor exploitation, and dehumanization.

I never saw Herminia again. The prison door was soon shut to us. We learned why. Herminia had been repeatedly raped by one of the three overhearing guards who then tried to cover up the crime by forcing an illegal and nearly fatal abortion. When she landed in the hospital, rumors proliferated, enabling a supporter to find her and denounce what had taken place, leading to a grant of clemency—for the rapist—and a shortening of Herminia’s sentence and her release into a stigmatized life as “that crazy Indian girl who killed her baby daughter.” After wandering the streets of Tucupita, she disappeared.

It may seem odd to refer to Herminia as one of my mentors, given the brevity of our encounter. For people on both sides of the racialized Warao versus non-Indigenous chasm, she symbolized not power and wisdom but

abjection and stigma. But she changed my life, not so much on a single day as through years of reflection on our conversation. The plethora of stories about her that circulated as gossip, journalism, police records, court documents, and pro-Indigenous activist discourse were all incarcerated within the narrative forms, temporalities, spatializations, and actor networks that structured each site of knowledge production. Herminia forced me to think about the politics of translation, of how the seemingly practical need for translation permits ideological constructions of bounded and opposed races, languages, cultures, spaces, and forms of cognition and action to be produced, naturalized, and policed. She deconstructed narratives of violence, leading me to see how they presuppose problematic understandings of what sorts of acts of violence require narratives and what sorts of narratives are deemed adequate means of representing violence, not to mention the ways they incarcerate particular types of people. The questions she posed just wouldn't let go of me, and I began to trace the lives of other Venezuelan women who had been convicted of infanticide, exploring how these narratives shape national imaginaries of motherhood, stigma, violence, and ethics even as they dehumanize the individuals they turn into monsters. More than a quarter century later, I am just beginning to get a sense of how we can develop strategies for disrupting these problematic connections.

Clara and I worked elsewhere in Venezuela for a number of years, documenting the public health system created by President Hugo Chávez's socialist government and how revolutionary news media reported health issues. We returned to the Delta in July 2008. Sadly, Manuel Torres, María Rivera, and Teodoro Moraleda had died. The book that Clara and I wrote about the epidemic, *Stories in the Time of Cholera*, had won several awards and garnered royalties (Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2003). We decided to use these funds to work with residents in devising a new kind of health-care delivery model. But Conrado Moraleda stopped us in our tracks. He was waiting for us in Nabasanuka, where we had traveled to ask the doctor about some strange deaths: Conrado told us that a mysterious epidemic had been killing children and young adults for a year, but doctors had not succeeded in diagnosing it. After failing to get health officials to act decisively, Conrado and his brother Enrique launched their own investigation; they asked us to join. They also recruited Tirso Gómez (see figure 0.17), a healer who worked with us during the cholera epidemic, and his daughter Norbelys Gómez, a nurse (see figure 0.18).

In order to succeed where clinicians and epidemiologists had failed, we needed a wide spectrum of evidence. Having studied narratives, dispute



Figure 0.17. Tirso Gómez



Figure 0.18. Norbelys Gómez

mediation, oratory, healing, laments, clinical medicine, and epidemiology, I realized that each was associated with different ways of producing knowledge. We used what residents jokingly refer to as “Warao Radio,” the oral circulation of narratives about recent events, to locate communities in which the strange deaths had occurred. We held meetings in fourteen such communities, giving parents the chance they had demanded to tell publicly the story of their children’s illnesses, how they sought to obtain the care that might save their lives, how they died, and the impact of their loss. Healers and nurses related how they lost one patient after another, sometimes leading them to question their skills. Narratives elucidated the broader social and political context, including problems with government officials and businesses operating in the area. On two occasions, we listened to laments sung over the corpses of young adults. Enrique and the parents asked me to draw on the skills I had developed as a photographer while researching Córdovan wood-carvers: “We want lots of people to know about our children!”

Soon a common set of symptoms—fever, headache, generalized pain, hypersensitivity to touch, tingling in the extremities that turned into paralysis, hallucinations, inability to swallow first food then water, hydrophobia, excessive salivation, and death—became apparent. Clinical examination of a patient, Elbia Torres Rivas, prompted Clara to provide a presumptive diagnosis of rabies. The parents’ testimonies revealed that most patients had been bitten by vampire bats one to two months before symptoms began,

providing a likely route of transmission.¹⁴ The team drew up a report and took it to national health officials. Political controversy and international attention by journalists erupted as four Indigenous people—commonly stereotyped as too incarcerated by culture to understand what doctors tell them and unable or unwilling to follow guidelines—took the lead in diagnosing a mysterious epidemic and demanding justice in health.¹⁵ Decades of fieldwork and community-based collaboration proved crucial in creating an open-ended, horizontally organized process of knowledge exchange and collective action.

This experience was not framed as research, and Clara and I did not initiate or direct the investigation. Listening to the parents' stories and watching Elbia die from a preventable disease was one of the most difficult experiences of my life; it took awhile to recover. Community-driven throughout, the team's work was oriented toward confronting stereotypes, demanding justice, and shaping health policies. Conrado, Enrique, Norbelys, and Tírso wanted to share their experience and their vision with people who also face structural violence. Transforming the creative and collaborative nature of the investigation into a writing strategy, we recorded more than sixty hours of conversations over three years, transcribed them, turned them into narrative that was structured as a dialogue about the epidemic and our work, and published it in a leading critical public health (*salud colectiva*) series in Argentina (Briggs et al. 2015). Clara and I wrote a book (Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2016) that attempted to bring what we had learned from parents, leaders, nurses, healers, doctors, and epidemiologists to academic audiences. I return to these experiences in chapters 6 and 10.

DRAWING IT BACK TOGETHER

In some sense, the trajectory I traced here is not unique: learning to create dialogues between lessons garnered from mentors within and beyond the academy is, I think, a hallmark of knowledge production in anthropology and folkloristics and its greatest source of creativity. What is less common, I suspect, is how many of these relationships unfolded and the ways they shaped me as a scholar and person. From my meeting with Señor Olguín right through the 2008 experience in a rabies epidemic, I did not inaugurate or control most of these experiences. I did not sign up to work in cholera or rabies epidemics; once I stumbled into the middle of them, however, I could not simply turn my back on requests to contribute my modest skills to efforts to save lives and achieve justice in health. These experiences, as well as working with communities in New Mexico that were devising ways

to recover lands and livelihoods that had been stolen from them and my encounter with Herminia, were unexpected and disconcerting, producing forms of vulnerability that pushed me beyond my personal and intellectual limits. I want to stress here not the personal effects of these encounters, which were sometimes acute, but the way they disrupted business-as-usual research techniques. Take the failed initial interview with the Lópezes. It was supposed to launch a long series of encounters between human beings that would be structured by the unequal roles of researcher and subject, interviewer and interviewee. By refusing to be interviewed and inviting me to develop a relationship with aspen wood and a penknife, Mr. López turned the tables on assumptions about knowledge production and the hierarchical ordering of relations between participants. What made the difference in my process of becoming a scholar is that years of reflection placed experiences and mentors located on and beyond the borders of research at the center of my own particular approach. These experiences' refusal to stay within easy borders was tied to the fact that they had real-world stakes for people, stretching from the Lopezes' ability to reshape the racialized borders that determined how their customers treated them to Herminia's fight for freedom and dignity to efforts by cholera and rabies patients to confront death, social and biological.

As I have suggested, these experiences had profoundly transformative effects on me in personal and scholarly terms, but none of these occurred overnight. Indeed, it took years for me to allow them to uproot the business-as-usual research concepts and techniques I had learned. They also unfolded synergistically as each new experience interacted dialogically with the disruptions and insights that had emerged from past encounters, linking vastly different types of events in quite different settings. Crucially, my mentors have included people trained as folklorists, anthropologists, philosophers, nurses, physicians, epidemiologists, and art historians; others skilled as healers, beekeepers, and agriculturalists; and others—like Herminia—who lacked such special skills. They interacted within me, as exemplified by the way Wittgenstein shaped how I listened to the Lópezes and how their teaching inflected my reading of Wittgenstein. Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" ([1917] 1957) similarly equipped me to listen to laments in Kwamuhu, Muaina, and elsewhere and to what women like María Fernández, Florencia Macotera, and Anita Rivas were teaching me, even as their laments and reflections left me with the questions I ask Dr. Freud in chapter 6.

As I draw this introduction to a close, I think that the particular, somewhat quirky experiences and relationships I describe here might be of value

to others, particularly those who are just beginning to shape their own paths. Since I myself am getting to be one of those *viejitos*, although not quite yet *de antes*, let me recast my reflections in the form of advice; let's call it "Briggs's Principles for Unlearning":

- Don't limit yourself to safe, predictable situations that are under (your) control.
- When you find yourself in an edgy, disconcerting situation, including one that may feel like a colossal failure, embrace it—don't run away.
- Surrender to the uncertainties, the doubts; let them sink in deep.
- Keep asking yourself, "Why does this disconcert me? What is this situation trying to tell me?"
- Turn these reflections into sources of theoretical and methodological creativity by allowing them to call standard assumptions and operating procedures into question.
- Keep a chorus of your mentors' voices going inside your head, thereby permitting different perspectives and insights to come together in novel ways.
- When such experiences offer forms of resistance as you attempt to submit them to conventional rhetorical forms, devise experimental forms of writing that enable you to more adequately (if never perfectly) bring the disparate and sometimes clashing voices of mentors and the call of contrasting experiences into dialogue.
- Repeat the above steps for a few decades.

Given that the neoliberal university exerts more and more pressure on us to shorten "time-to-degree" and both it and many nonacademic organizations impose metrics for generating research "products," I certainly don't want to give the impression that I am suggesting you should reflect on such experiences for decades before writing about them. Indeed, my point is more that all fieldwork is long term in the sense that its capacity to uproot sedimented ways of thinking can continue to emerge over long periods of time and in unpredictable ways—if you let it. And even as you produce texts that respond to the complexity, power, and disconcerting qualities of such conversations and experiences, keep some in your back pocket for a few years or a few decades, letting their disruptive effects continue to operate on you as new conversations and encounters unfold.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

I have greatly enjoyed recounting the experiences that brought me to write this book and shaped the perspectives it presents, and I hope that you have enjoyed reading about them. For those of you who have kindly followed my work over the years, I hope that these words have given you a better sense of the unlearning process that informs what I have written about poetics, pandemics, and the politics of knowledge. And for students, my reflections may help illuminate the tremendously complex process of choreographing dances between ethnographic experiences and theory.

But now it's time for the more mundane task of telling you what you will encounter in this book. The chapters draw on what my mentors have taught me in attempting to intervene in scholarly conversations in particular ways. Although my concerns are multiple, they center around three themes.

One focus, which I develop in part 1, pertains to issues of what science-technology-society studies scholar Thomas Gieryn (1983) refers to as boundary-work, designs for separating scholarly (or scientific) from “popular” ways of knowing, for keeping members of a particular discipline in and others out; chapter 1 focuses on this issue. Chapter 2, written in response to essays by linguistic anthropologists who were rethinking ethno-poetics, prompted me to reflect on how cultural forms come to be seen as intrinsically mobile or immobile. I question core beliefs about mobility, ideas that represent cultural forms as imbued with immanent capacities to move, scrutinizing often-unquestioned assumptions in arguing that performers and scholars alike imbue some cultural forms with features that make them seem intrinsically mobile at the same time that other features and forms are fashioned in such a way as to make them seem trapped in “local” spaces. This chapter sets up issues that I address in later chapters. In chapters 3 and 4 I join respectively Américo Paredes and Sadhana Naithani, the first as perhaps my most important scholarly mentor and the second as coauthor, in challenging the foundational Eurocentrism of folkloristics, anthropology, and related fields. The two essays reflect on the course that scholarship might take if culture and folklore were defined in terms of difference, borders, and colonialism, rather than assuming that they consist of shared ideas and forms that exist within bounded social groups.

Part 2 focuses on my long love affair with psychoanalysis. Even as I advance Alan Dundes's claim that psychoanalysis has much to offer folkloristics, I embrace, as it were, a different relationship with psychoanalysis. Chapter 5 engages a broader range of psychoanalytic works and ideas, looking at some of Sigmund Freud's foundational texts through the lens of poetics and performance and incorporating other psychoanalysts, such

as Jacques Lacan, Melanie Klein, Julia Kristeva, Jean Laplanche, and Juan-David Nasio. Dundes fashioned psychoanalysis as a stand-alone theory, even explicitly at times walling it off from contamination by other theories that folklorists have found productive (see Dundes 2005), including feminist and performance-centered approaches. This was, I think, one of the sources of folklorists' resistance, as it were, to psychoanalysis, about which Dundes frequently complained. To the contrary, here I use poetics and performance to rethink psychoanalysis, and I use psychoanalysis as a prompt for reconfiguring scholarly approaches to the study of cultural forms.

Chapter 6 uses an experiment in ethnographic writing to cut to the heart of the project I developed in this introduction. It joins my efforts to create synergies between what I learned from different mentors with the task of the preceding chapter—creating new sorts of dialogues between psychoanalysis and performance and poetics. For several years, this project had met with massive resistance within me. I tried to bring together a mentor whom I had never known but who influenced me deeply, Sigmund Freud, with several Delta women who taught me so much about the pain of losing a child. My initial efforts created a terrible imbalance, given that Delta mourners impacted me greatly through their laments, narratives, comments on the process, and their friendship, not to mention their demands that I join their efforts to figure out what killed their daughters and sons and help them keep their remaining children alive. Freud's role, on the other hand, was more distant, reduced to a discussion of his famous essay, "Mourning and Melancholia" ([1917] 1957). I only grew increasingly frustrated with myself, knowing that within me their relationship was more balanced and intimate than my writing was capturing. It suddenly struck me: "I'm going to write Freud a letter!" Leaving the constraints of academic genres aside and embracing the more personal and evocative style invited by this epistolary form enabled me to reconnect emotionally and intellectually with the essay and opened up new analytic possibilities. Rather than writing experimentally for the sake of experimentation or in an effort to project creativity, in that chapter I struggle to break through the analytic and ethnographic constraints that often thwart attempts not only to acknowledge but to take account of the impact of diverse sources of inspiration.

Part 3 centers on attempts to unlearn assumptions that shape how three scholarly topics are addressed. The first two chapters, which are analytic in focus, break with ways that "folk medicine" and the study of "folklore and the media" have been framed. After a brief history of research on "folk medicine," chapter 7 draws on ways that medical anthropologists have moved from an ethnomedical focus on the health-related "beliefs" of

subaltern populations to join medical sociologists and historians and scholars of science-technology-society studies in researching how medicine, healing, bodies, physicians, patients, and technologies are constructed in clinics, laboratories, marketing firms, the homes of patients and healers, and other sites. The essay proposes a set of principles for what I call “the new folkloristics of health,” suggesting how it can contribute to concerns of scholars who have never been interested in “that medical stuff.” Chapter 8 addresses foundational assumptions that underlie work on “folklore and the media.” I bring together traditionalization and mediatization, frameworks drawn respectively from folkloristics and media studies, in suggesting how media ideologies and sets of practices for producing and interpreting media forms lie at the heart of both folklore and folkloristics.

If my discussion stopped there, I would leave received boundaries between media- and medical-oriented analytics in place. I rather use the frameworks that I develop in these chapters to experiment with new ways of approaching, respectively, the study of pandemics and nonhuman-human (and specifically plant-human) relations in the following two chapters. Chapter 9 thus juxtaposes concerns with media and health through a focus on news coverage of health issues. It scrutinizes a highly visible genre of mediatized health narrative—news stories of pandemics. Ethnographic work with public health officials, journalists, clinicians, and others permits detailed analysis of how they collaborated in co-producing the story of “the swine flu pandemic” in just twenty-four hours in April 2009; it ends by comparing H1N1 with the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter 10 returns to the rabies epidemic, looking at how discrepant and often conflicting perspectives on the deaths played out through plant ontologies expressed by engineers, healers, and phytotherapists. Creating a dialogue with plant philosopher Michael Marder, it traces how Delta residents went beyond confronting a disease to offer the Bolivarian government of Venezuela a new vision of socialism, based not on the environmentally destructive extraction of fossil fuels by large corporations but a “phyto-socialism” in which plants are not only respected but help create more ecologically, socially, and politically sustainable designs for life. This chapter finally brings me closer to actually getting what Old Man Hawkins, Señor Olgúin, the Lópezes, and Delta women and men have been teaching me for over half a century about ways that humans and nonhumans become co-creators and co-performers in crafting new ways of thinking about life and death.

This introduction should provide you with a sense of how these essays are informed by a common set of deeply rooted experiences and analytic concerns. Although I have reworked most of the essays in such a way as

to extend their logics and develop common threads, I have not attempted to impose a single totalizing approach. I have tried to minimize what might seem like distracting overlaps of, for example, quoted material; nevertheless, I hope that remaining points of intersection will indicate how I keep thinking through events, issues, and provocations. My hope is that this book will inspire both seasoned scholars and those just starting to develop their own perspectives to unlearn accepted points of departure and conjure new futures.

NOTES

1. According to the US Census, *Number of Inhabitants, New Mexico* (<https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1950/population-volume-2/26082967v2p31ch1.pdf>).

2. I addressed them, in accordance with local usage, as Mano George and Mana Silvianita (from *bermano* and *bermana*, meaning “brother” and “sister”).

3. See Stengers 2005 on slow scholarship.

4. See Briggs and Van Ness 1987.

5. See Briggs 1988; Briggs and Vigil 1990.

6. This population figure is taken from the Indigenous Census of 2001 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2003).

7. The key work on the structure of the Warao language is by missionary Henry A. Osborn, as presented in a doctoral dissertation at Indiana University (1962). For an excellent analysis of the politics of missionary Warao linguistics, see Rodríguez 2008. Barral (1979) compiled a dictionary.

8. I discuss much of this work and provide references in *Poéticas de vida en espacios de muerte* (Briggs 2008). For a few key works by missionaries on Warao folklore, see Barral 1961 and Lavandero 1991. The classic ethnographer of the Delta is Johannes Wilbert (1987, 1996); also see Dieter Heinen 1988; Dale Olsen 1996; and Ayala Lafée and Wilbert 2001, to mention just a few.

9. A study conducted from the 1950s to the 1970s by Miguel Layrisse, Johannes Wilbert, and their colleagues placed prepubescent mortality at 50 percent (Wilbert 1980). Research in the northwestern Delta in the late 1990s, led by Jacobus De Waard, calculated that 36 percent of children die in their first year of life (Servicio de Apoyo Local 1998). The most recent—and probably most reliable—study (Villalba et al. 2013) put this figure at 26 percent in 2011.

10. From the 2001 Indigenous Census (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2003).

11. I use first names here. I was thirty-three years old when I began working in the Delta, and I was on a first-name basis with my Delta mentors, except where kinship terms or honorifics were required.

12. *Hotarao* actually means non-Indigenous person, but I opted for a more evocative translation here.

13. According to Maes et al. (2008), the Indigenous population of Delta Amacuro has the highest tuberculosis incidence in Venezuela and the lowest life expectancy. Abadía et al. (2009) estimate tuberculosis incidence among the population in general at 450 per 100,000. Tuberculosis specialist Jacobus de Waard of the Institute of Biomedicine confirmed that

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Murako and Kwamuhu were tuberculosis hotspots where the incidence was much greater (personal communication, 1995).

14. Nocturnal bites by vampire bats often do not leave visible bite marks or blood and are thus commonly missed.

15. The phrase “incarcerated by culture” is Arjun Appadurai’s (1988).