

BOOK REVIEWS

Books in Translation

Poéticas de vida en espacios de muerte: Género, poder y estado en la contidianeidad warao [Poetics of life in spaces of death: Gender, power and the state in Warao everyday life]

Charles L. Briggs. Quito, Ecuador: Abya Yala, 2008. 460 pp.

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In this book Charles Briggs brings together a series of ethnographic studies based on many years of research with the Warao people of the Orinoco Delta region of Venezuela. Some of the chapters have previously appeared elsewhere in English, but with so much emphasis on academic publishing in English it is rare that foreign researchers make their work available to a Latin American readership through publishing Spanish volumes like this one. Here Briggs offers a good model of how to open dialog with Latin American researchers and also for how to encourage Warao people to read the results of his research themselves (although a relatively high instance of typographic errors and translation issues and the usage of heavy academic language sometimes make the text less accessible). The major contribution of *Poéticas de vida en espacios de muerte* is its combination of the analysis of discourse, poetics, and speech genres with a social analysis of power, inequality, and topics like race and gender. Briggs points out that “discourse is frequently seen as an intrinsic component of indigenous communities instead of as a dynamic site of competence, struggles of power and inequality, relations with the State, capitalism, and international institutions” (p. 62). There has been sustained interest in poetics in the linguistic anthropology of indigenous languages of the Americas, but this work has seldom engaged with more political elements as Briggs sets out to do here.

The book reads more like a collection of articles than a single narrative, but a common thread in all the chapters is the connection of sociopolitical themes with discourse forms. These include narrative, gossip, curing songs, ritual wailing, and more, treated both at the scale of the speech event as well as the broader scale of socially circulating

discourses. Speech genres play a large role throughout the book, not conceptualized as static sets of linguistic features but instead as sites of social negotiations. One chapter describes gossip not just as a Warao speech practice but also as a contested space where men can seek to legitimize their own discourse while delegitimizing that of women. In one of the more detailed analyses of a speech genre in the book, a shamanic song to cure a ray sting, Briggs argues against a simplistic view that shamanic practices function to reinforce symbolic cultural consistency, offering instead an account in which shamans negotiate power over bodies—individual as well as social and political. In a similar way, a chapter about women’s ritual wailing argues against a clichéd description of wailing as “resistence,” instead giving a more complex account of how this speech genre offers “an important forum for unmasking social hierarchies, including those that sustain the power of postcolonial institutions and the Nation-State” (p. 291). Two of the most powerful chapters describe a cholera epidemic in the Orinoco Delta in which official racializing discourses casting Warao people as premodern, ignorant, and unsanitary come into tension with other ways of narrating, illustrating how the linearization of events in narrative is a situated social achievement that mediates collective memory. Briggs shows how conspiracy theories about the epidemic’s origins “read the bodies of the sick as signs of sick political bodies, showing how racialization contributed to an epidemic that resides in the nucleus of a sick racial project” (402–403). Once these kinds of insights have been registered, it is difficult to return to the paradigm of describing discourse forms like these different Warao ways of speaking simply as stable elements of traditional culture and not as negotiated sites of social processes.

The book has no conclusion section, so the larger significance of the work is not explicitly summarized for the

reader. However, the chapters cohere well thematically, and Briggs certainly succeeds in showing by example that a more politicized study of poetics is indeed possible. In fact, it seems that this approach could be pushed even further. There is a notable absence of linguistic analysis proper in the book, and the texts are unglossed, leaving the Warao lines largely useless, at least from the point of view of the non-Warao-speaking reader. When one chapter does develop a more formal analysis, applying phonetic measurements to

ritual wailing, this just seems out of place in the book as a whole. Interactive sequential structures and visual behavior could have also been considered (although the data were limited to audio recordings). Researchers who agree with Briggs that discourse genres should not be essentialized as features of indigenous cultures but, rather, understood as parts of sociopolitical processes could follow his lead and further develop this project with an expanded toolkit in hand.

Searching for Africa in Brazil: Power and Tradition in Candomblé

Stefania Capone. Durham London: Duke University Press, 2010. 316 pp. [republished in English]

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Over the past two decades scholarship on Brazilian Candomblé has undergone a foundational paradigm shift. Although the extensive corpus of studies on Candomblé that was produced between the late-19th century and the 1980s focused on examining the religion's continuities with African ritual practices and belief, more recent scholarship on Candomblé has sought to understand how the religion's celebrated status as an African survival in the Americas came into being. This new scholarship has not only reconfigured the study of Candomblé but it has also broadened our understanding of the dialogic character of anthropological knowledge more generally. Through fine-grained analyses of the relationships between anthropologists and practitioners that undergirded the production of earlier scholarship on Candomblé, and of the role these studies subsequently came to play in legitimizing the practice of particular temples, this new scholarship raises provocative questions about how anthropologists and the research they produce may be entangled with central debates in the communities they study. Fortunately for English-reading audiences, several of the key works in this primarily Portuguese and French-language literature have been translated into English over the past few years.

Stefania Capone's *Searching for Africa in Brazil* marks a milestone in this newer scholarship on Candomblé. First published in French in 1999, and now excellently translated into English, Capone's detailed and careful reanalysis of earlier scholarship on Afro-Brazilian religions as well as her ethnographic focus on less-studied religious communities continue to provide an original and stimulating model for the study of Candomblé. Although many of the questions introduced by Capone have since been taken up and investigated further by other scholars (most notably J. Lorand Matory, Luis Nicolau Parés, and Lisa Earl Castillo),

her study still constitutes one of the richest and most comprehensive analyses of the debates that organize both the scholarly and religious fields of Afro-Brazilian religiosity. In this regard, it provides both an excellent introduction to students and scholars unfamiliar with these discussions and a very useful resource for those who wish to delve deeper into the field.

The study is organized around two central questions. First, it seeks to understand why and how a particular model of African religiosity came to be valorized as the ideal form of Candomblé by anthropologists and practitioners alike. Through a close analysis of prior scholarship on Candomblé, Capone demonstrates how these depictions were influenced by both their authors' intellectual commitments to document the "most sophisticated," "pure," and "authentic" forms of African culture and religiosity, and individual practitioner informants' concerns with legitimizing particular religious practices. As her analysis highlights, it was the convergence of the intellectual and political projects of anthropologists and their practitioner informants that established the practices of a small number of Bahian Candomblé temples as the ideal against which other Afro-Brazilian communities came to be judged.

Second, the study examines the ways in which religious practitioners in Rio de Janeiro engage with and negotiate these Bahian ideals. Here it is worth noting that the ethnographic perspective Capone brings to bear on this question is pioneering for the field. In stark contrast to earlier analyses of Afro-Brazilian religiosity, her ethnography focuses on the ways in which the boundaries between Candomblé and other religious practices are negotiated by practitioners. Her analysis is at its most provocative when it examines practitioners' engagements with ethnographic scholarship on Africa. As Capone demonstrates, Candomblé practitioners in Rio de Janeiro do not only study the works of anthropologists and take courses in African languages and civilizations in attempts to correctly worship the religion's