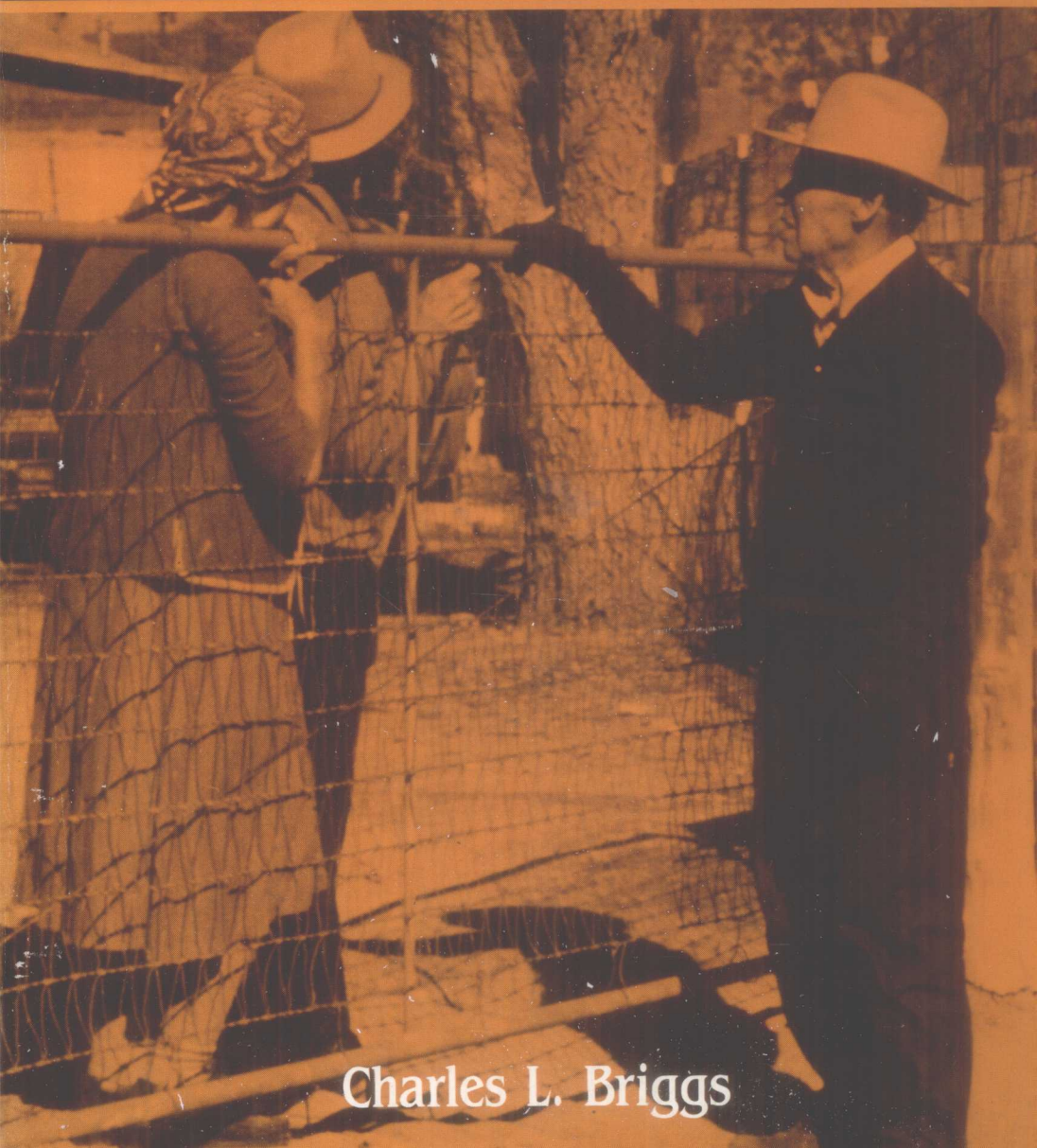
COMPETENCE IN PERFORMANCE

The Creativity of Tradition in Mexicano Verbal Art



Charles L. Briggs

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THE CREATIVITY OF TRADITION IN MEXICANO VERBAL ART

CHARLES L. BRIGGS

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Designed by Adrianne Onderdonk Dudden

for Dean John Donald Robb
composer, scholar, and grandfather

and for my wife, Barbara Fries,
and my children,
Feliciana, Jessie, and Gabriel
beloved fellow travelers

PREFACE

My focus in this work is on the verbal art of Spanish speakers in New Mexico. Historical discourse, proverbs, scriptural allusions, jests, anecdotes, legends, hymns, and prayers are analyzed in arguing that performers create complex poetic forms in conveying provocative interpretations of themselves and their society. My goal is to draw on a host of particulars in addressing a basic problem. Folkloric performances are not simply repetitions of time-worn traditions; they rather provide common ground between a shared textual tradition and a host of unique human encounters, thus preserving the vitality and dynamism of the past as they endeavor to make sense of the present. This raises the general question that is addressed in the following chapters: What do performers need to know in order to be able to bring these two spheres together creatively in performance? Addressing the issue in this way places the folkloristic enterprise of exploring the form and meaning of oral genres within the context of ongoing attempts by linguists and others to explore the nature of the communicative competence that enables us to use language in creating and sustaining human communities.

We now stand at a particularly opportune juncture to be able to take up this question, because two recent theoretical advances have suggested means to celebrate rather than obscure the creative and complex interplay of voices that constitutes verbal art. Under the aegis of ethnopoetics, scholars, performers, and poets have worked together in forging new means of appreciating the aesthetic form and cultural significance of myths, folktales, and other genres. New methods of transcription have been developed in attempting to preserve the prosodic and grammatical structure of the spoken word as it is transformed into written texts. Attention has also been directed to the variable ways in which verbal art forms are performed within communities. Influenced by Bateson, Goffman, and the ethnomethodologists, the performance perspective emphasizes the interaction among performers, audiences, creative uses of language, and the social situations that connect them.

This study attempts to extend ethnopoetics and performance theory in two ways. First, I will look at a range of genres that are performed by the members of a particu-

lar speech community and at the relationships among these genres. Such a focus places this work closely in line with three studies: Glassie's *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, Gossen's *Chamulas in the World of the Sun*, and Sherzer's *Kuna Ways of Speaking*. I will argue that comparison of systems of genres is essential if we are to gain a more in-depth understanding of the nature of competence that underlies performance. Second, the Spanish-language folklore of the Southwest is particularly rich in conversational genres, such as historical dialogues, proverbs, scriptural allusions, jests, and anecdotes. I hope to show that research on the contextual or situated dimensions of conversational folklore must complement studies of myths and folktales if we are to achieve an adequate understanding of the way that linguistic form and cultural significance, textual tradition and social interaction become one in performance. Exploring this facet of performance is similarly necessary if we are to appreciate the way that the study of verbal art can contribute to our understanding of the nature of communication.

I do not mean to suggest, however, that my concern with these issues springs from theoretical sources alone. I have spent a great deal of time over the last fourteen years in Córdova, a small community in northern New Mexico, and have recorded performances in a number of other communities in the region. I will refer to the performers and their neighbors as *Mexicanos;* my rationale is simply that this is the term they most frequently use in reference to their own ethnic group. This area was part of Mexico until 1846, at which time it was invaded by the United States; since then a culturally and linguistically distinct population, which is usually called Anglo-American, has joined Native Americans and Mexicanos in the region. Mexicanos have tried to create a dialogue with the newcomers in order to express their vision of themselves and the land that surrounds them. Mexicanos have been particularly concerned with the need to help Anglo-Americans see what a profound impact their presence has had on life in communities such as Córdova.

Performances of historical discourse, proverbs, scriptural allusions, jokes, and legends play an important role in creating this dialogue, as means both of portraying Anglo-Americans and of engaging them in conversation—when they will listen. Verbal art also provides a central forum for discussions between Mexicanos in which the past is used in critically reflecting on the present and future. Appreciating the complexity and flexibility of this process has prompted me to draw heavily on performance theory and ethnopoetics in developing a dynamic, context-sensitive approach that is sensitive to stylistic detail; it has also motivated me to question certain limitations of this body of theory and method in order to adequately interpret the performances that are transcribed on the following pages. This effort has also drawn me beyond the confines of my background in linguistics, anthropology, and folklore in exploring issues raised by literary critics, sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, and others.

The goal of adequately interpreting the contextual dimensions of these performances brings me into the picture, since I was a participant in nearly all of them. I have not mustered a notion of "scientific objectivity" to the task of writing myself out of the analysis, hiding the effects on my presence on what was said and done. My own responses, even the many yes's and uh huh's, are faithfully recorded in the transcripts. This book is not, however, about me; my own actions and reactions are relevant only insofar as they affect the course and the meaning of the performance. This procedure is not always comfortable, since a great many examples over a fourteen-year period give rise to a fair number of faux pas. But failing to treat my own involvement with the critical attention that I accord to that of other participants would obscure the reflexive manner in which performances comment on the situations in which they emerge.

I alluded earlier to the fact that the research on which this book is based was carried out over a fourteen-year period. This means that adequately expressing my appreciation for the help that I have received along the way is not an easy task. My greatest debt is to the people of Córdova, New Mexico. The insistence and clarity with which they taught me what it means to be Mexicano has been the strongest force behind my research. They allowed me to become a member of their community and tolerated (often with great interest and humor) the way in which I filled my rather peculiar niche. I thank them for showing me how effective language and folklore can be in resisting hegemony. Especial credit is due three couples: Lina Ortiz de Córdova and Federico Córdova, Silvianita Trujillo de López and George López, and Costancia Apodaca de Trujillo and Aurelio Trujillo. They taught me so much while I was still so young that it is hard to imagine who I would be if I had never met them. I am pleased that they asked me to use their names in this book, since this enables me to help extend their reputations as performers. It is sad indeed that Federico Córdova and Aurelio Trujillo died before I could show them what I did with their words.

Outside Córdova, Fabiola López de Domínguez and Benjamin Domínguez of Chamisal gave me a pointed lesson as to how one can use the past in confronting injustice in the present. Lilia Pacheco de Vigil and Lázaro Vigil, their son Julián Josué, and Julián's wife Irene Gurule de Vigil were more than warm friends and kind hosts. Lilia Vigil taught me how humor can be used in subverting gender-role stereotypes. Julián worked with me a year, lending his fine ear and impressive knowledge of New Mexico Spanish and Mexicano folklore to the task of transcribing a number of performances; he made several of the transcriptions and translations that are used in this book. Since I have revised them in keeping with an ethnopoetic format (explained below), final responsibility for any imperfections must remain my own. I am also grateful to the many performers throughout northern New Mexico whose words

are not included in these pages (due to limitations of space). Others do appear here, but not by name; in such cases one or more of the performers died or became seriously ill before I was able to ask whether or not they wished to have their names appear in print.

Several institutions generously supported the research financially. The International Folk Art Foundation funded the 1972–1973 fieldwork. The National Science Foundation supported my doctoral research in 1978–1979 as well as a summer in the field and time for analyzing the data in 1983–1984. Additional funds for doctoral research were provided by the National Institute of Mental Health. Vassar College has provided a number of small grants in assisting both the research and the publication itself. I am particularly grateful to H. Patrick Sullivan, Dean of the College, to Colleen Cohen, Walter Fairservis, Judith Goldstein, Lucy Lewis Johnson, and Lilo Stern in the Department of Anthropology, and Michael Murray in the Department of Philosophy. Harvard University provided me with an Andrew W. Mellon Faculty Fellowship in the Humanities in 1983–1984. My time there was rendered more stimulating and enjoyable by virtue of the chance to work in the Committee on Degrees in Folklore and Mythology with Hugh Flick, Albert Bates Lord, and Gregory Nagy.

Quite a number of individuals have criticized my initial formulations. Roger Abrahams, Richard Bauman, Iain Boal, Thomas Buckley, Paul Friedrich, Barbara Fries, Kenneth Goldstein, Bill Hanks, Dell Hymes, Virginia Hymes, Joel Kuipers, Enrique Lamadrid, John McDowell, Michael Murray, Michael Silverstein, Thomas Steele, Julián Josué Vigil, and Marta Weigle provided valuable comments on specific chapters. The ideas were also presented in papers given at the Universidad de Oriente (Cumaná, Venezuela), the University of California at Santa Cruz, the International Summer Institute for Structural and Semiotic Studies (at Indiana University), the Center for Psychosocial Research (Chicago), the University of Arizona, the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University, the University of New Mexico, and the Mellon Faculty Seminar on Literary Criticism at Vassar College; I thank my interlocutors at all of these institutions for their critical attention. Nancy Smith Hefner, Joan O'Donnell, and Catherine Hiebert Kerst provided stimulating responses to early versions of the chapters as they unfolded in lectures at Harvard University.

A number of individuals have played special roles in bringing this work to completion. Enrique Lamadrid and Greg Accialoli uncovered last minute bibliographic materials and sent them to me in South America. Enrique Lamadrid also provided a close reading of the Spanish transcriptions. James Armstrong, Jr. kindly checked the musical transcription that appears as Figure 6. Marta Weigle has used her folkloristic expertise and bibliographic wizardry countless times over the years in challenging me to broaden the folkloristic base of my research. Michael Silverstein taught me a good deal of what I know about language; the challenge with which he presented me—to

grasp the pragmatic dimensions of performances—was crucial. Dan Ben-Amos, Dell Hymes, and Jeff Opland read through every line of the manuscript. Preparing the final version gave me the feeling that I was engaged in an ongoing, high-geared dialogue with these three individuals. Their comments enabled me to work on a number of weak spots in the argument as well as to broaden its theoretical breadth. Dan Ben-Amos and Dell Hymes also provided crucial encouragement and offered suggestions that pushed me to consider crucial implications of performance theory and ethnopoetics for my research. At the University of Pennsylvania Press, Alison Anderson, Carl Gross, and Patricia Smith gave generously of their time and expertise in seeing this manuscript into print.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my grandfather, Dean John Donald Robb. He has provided a model of artistic creativity, as a composer and conductor, as well as of scholarly dedication, as a student of Southwestern folk music. I owe much of my interest in the study of verbal art and the confidence that I could bring such work to fruition to him as well as to my parents, Nancy Robb Briggs and Bill Briggs. The dedication also points to the role of my wife, Barbara E. Fries, and our children, Feliciana, Jessie, and Gabriel, in making all of this worth the effort.

Nabaribuhu
Caño Mariusa
Territorio Federal del Delta Amacuro
Venezuela

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1

INTRODUCTION

Imagine that a number of individuals are sitting in a kitchen, crossing a field, or driving to town. Their talk is unfocused, touching on recent events or tasks to be accomplished. When one of the participants, an older person, begins to speak, the tone shifts. Her voice rises suddenly, then falls. Her eyes become fixed on a younger person, her grandson, who has just spoken, and he responds in kind. Her words break the hold of the here and now, drawing the group through the window of the community's past. The words are no longer hers alone, for they have taken the shape of a quotation. The expression embodies a familiar form and content. All watch and listen closely as the pace and the pitch of her speech rise to a peak, then suddenly descend. She continues, more slowly now, with a relaxed and even tone; the family members laugh or smile, and their gazes become unfocused. As she finishes speaking, most murmur words of assent. The grandson is the last to respond, nodding and replying, *sí, es cierto* 'yes, it's true'.

The talk returns to the present, but it is no longer the same. This is the power that lies in the grandmother's words. She has not *described* the past—she has *quoted* the words of the people who lived it. She ceased speaking in her own right at this point and became instead a sounding board for a chorus of innumerable voices. The elderly woman has advanced her own position on an issue at hand by revealing the moral questions it raises. As a result, the present can stand alone no more, bearing a false self-sufficiency and limiting the imagination to seeing what is present to the senses. The ghosts of *los viejitos de antes* 'the elders of bygone days' linger, interpreting what they see in terms of the values that they themselves represent. The landscape now evokes the historical events to which it once played host more strongly than it does the houses, cars, and fences visible today. These voices use their historical force to confront the present with a value-laden interpretation of itself.

This family portrait of a moment in a Hispanic community in northern New Mexico may seem quite divorced from the experience of the reader. An analogy may bring it closer. Whether alarmed by the ever-increasing threat of a nuclear holocaust

or plagued by a personal crisis, we sometimes feel oppressed by our own present. As literati, we often find solace in fiction. Neither Woolf nor Shakespeare nor Cervantes lived in our time or faced our specific problems. Yet one of the marks of a masterful writer is the ability to use language in such a way as to take a dated situation, one that may hold no intrinsic interest for us, and reveal the basic human dilemmas that lie within. Retreat into a fictional world does not give us clear answers to our problems any more than Woolf, Shakespeare, or Cervantes presented unequivocal solutions to their characters' tribulations. Still, when the book is closed and we are confronted anew with the same old problems, our preoccupations may bear the traces of another world. Literature presents us with the opportunity to broaden our understanding of the recurrent existential questions and social dilemmas that face the members of Western society. We thus bring a broader frame of reference to the interpretation of our own particular situation.

The problems facing the bearers of a folkloric tradition are really not so far removed from the process of creating a great work of literary art. One part is imaginative. The artist uses the spoken word to transport her or his audience to another world. Skillful use of stylized language prompts the hearer to look beyond appearances to grasp the meaning with which the creator has imbued this world. Such artists also have the ability to "read" the "real" world in which their audiences live and thus to find the sorts of imaginary scenes and existential problems that will fit the experiences of their interlocutors. The interpretive task that confronts the artist is thus twofold—interpreting both an imaginary sphere and the perceiver's own world. But oral performance has a third component as well. The gifted artist uses stylistic devices in such a way that the form and content of the performance reflect the artist's view of the way these two worlds, imaginary and real, are connected.

To seek an understanding of the nature of this gift, I have focused on a small group of artists who live in a small rural community in northern New Mexico. I refer to these people, in keeping with their own usage, as *Mexicanos*.[1] Their primary language is Spanish, and their predominant medium for verbal artistry is the spoken word. A great deal of respect is accorded to those members of the community who are skillful in using language aesthetically and persuasively, particularly to those who can perform in such genres as proverbs, scriptural allusions, jokes, legends, hymns, and prayers. By and large, only the oldest members of the community are believed to have the *don* 'gift' needed to perform in these genres, and few are endowed with the 'gift' to use different genres. My goal is to reach an understanding of these gifts or, in other words, to explore the *competence* that underlies the ability to perform verbal art.

This chapter presents a theoretical framework for the study of competence in performances of verbal art. My goal is to establish the importance of this approach to performance and to draw together the various scholarly traditions that have informed my perspective. I must admit, however, that my initial realization of the importance of competence was catalyzed not by this body of theory but by the failure of my efforts in understanding Mexicano verbal art performances.

I conducted a preliminary study of Spanish-language folklore of New Mexico in 1974,[2] when investigating the production of images of Catholic holy personages, particularly in the community of Córdova (see Briggs 1980). Because of my related interest in verbal art, I had collected scattered examples in various genres. My initial efforts were informed by study of the wealth of folkloristic texts from New Mexico and southern Colorado. The work of Campa (1946, 1963), Aurelio M. Espinosa (1910–1916, 1953), José Manuel Espinosa (1937), Lucero-White Lea (1936, 1953), Rael (1937, n.d., 1951/1957), Robb (1954), and others had yielded a large collection of proverbs, jokes, folktales, ballads, hymns, riddles, folk dramas, legends, and other genres. Having read this literature, I thought I knew what this body of folklore was and how to find it.

In my initial study, I sought to apply a contextual or ethnography-of-speaking-folklore approach in illuminating the way proverbs are used in social life.[3] For two years I had been working closely with Costancia and Aurelio Trujillo, who were skilled in using various types of verbal art. I asked them to provide me with examples of situations in which proverbs might be used and how they would be performed. Mr. Trujillo replied most apologetically that he could not recall a single one, even though he had heard them all his life. Mrs. Trujillo concurred.

Later in the conversation when Mr. Trujillo used a familiar proverb, *hay gente pa' todo* 'there are all kinds of people' or 'it takes all kinds', I asked him if this expression was not a proverb. He refused to accept the idea that this counted as a proverb, adding that *no más palabras es* 'these are just words.' He then suggested that I speak with the two elders who enjoy the greatest reputation in the community as proverb performers.

Frustrated and confused, I turned to one of the proverb specialists, Federico Córdova, who was already a good friend. Exploring the 'just words' phenomenon, I provided him with a text found in the literature (cf. Cobos 1973b; Aranda 1975): *por dinero, baila el perro* 'for money, <even> the dog dances'. He noted, however, that 'they rather used proverbs that conveyed the sense, significance, or meaning' (*traiban el sentido*) of a given situation. Thus, according to both Trujillo and Córdova, the mere utterance of a proverb text does not illuminate the participants' understandings of a particular conversation. Mr. Córdova focused on the ability of elderly performers to use proverbs in convincing their interlocutors of the validity of their own point of view.

The concept of *sentido* extends simultaneously in two directions. The best speakers in this community can command a vast range of the textual tradition of their society. This ability is measured in terms of both the number of genres in which they can perform and the variety of examples that they can draw from each type. In addition to a range of knowledge, it is equally important to be able to select just the right genre to fit a given situation and then choose an item that speaks to the problem at hand most directly. The form of the text is then shaped in such a way that it fits the most minute details of the interactional context of its performance. Sentido thus

points to the manner in which performances integrate elements of the Mexicano *conscience collective* and the unique, fortuitous circumstances of a particular moment in time.

What had I learned in these two encounters? Mr. Trujillo and Mr. Córdova rejected my a priori, text-centered view of folklore—my assumption that I could start with a set of proverb texts and then see how they might be used in social interaction. They emphasized the difficulty of producing a proverb text apart from a social context that provided a raison d'être. Isolating a text from the discourse that surrounds it simply produces 'just words.' Mr. Córdova went on to argue that the nature of performance lies not in repeating texts but in developing the competence to embed textual elements in an ongoing interaction.

This book is an attempt to understand *trayendo el sentido*. My focus will remain fixed on performances of Mexicano folklore. I will present the reader with transcriptions and translations of tape-recorded or videotaped performances. In each case, I will take an interaction that may seem either opaque or seducingly straightforward and try to reveal the richness of structure and meaning that lends rhetorical force to such performances. Once a number of such instances have been explicated, I will outline the basic features of the genre. The scope of the study will extend beyond proverbs to include other genres, particularly historical discourse, scriptural allusions, jokes, legends, hymns, and prayers. Together these form *la plática de los viejitos de antes* 'the talk of the elders of bygone times'. One major thrust of this book is thus descriptive. I hope to isolate the features that characterize each body of performances as a genre as well as the commonalities that they share as varieties of this 'talk.' In other words, I am interested both in the fact that trayendo el sentido plays a key role in all of these genres and in the substantial differences in the way this process works in each case.

A second thrust of the analysis is theoretical. The analytic core of the work lies in the new field of ethnopoetics. Ethnopoetics focuses on the way in which formal or stylistic elements go hand in hand with meaning in verbal art traditions. Researchers have explored new techniques of transcription and analysis in attempting to interpret performances on their own terms. Work in ethnopoetics has focused primarily on the study of the myths and tales of native North and South Americans. The present work expands the scope of ethnopoetics by comparing the form and meaning of narrative genres with the form and meaning of shorter, more conversational genres, such as proverbs and scriptural allusions, and by dealing with Romance language materials.

This broadening of the empirical focus has prompted the inclusion of a wide range of theoretical frameworks. I draw on the areas of sociolinguistics, pragmatics, discourse and conversation analysis, performance theory, and phenomenology. My goals in presenting this mode of analysis are twofold. First, I hope to construct a framework that will enable us to grasp the fundamental processes that underlie per-