

## **Taking the Long Way Around**

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### **Thank you**

To all who have been my teachers: six generations of Juchitecos who never lost patience with me and who helped me find my voice; the dancers, musicians, singers, and mimes who model that combination of the practical and poetic in studios and on stages; the poets and writers who taught me to look beyond the words to the story that floats above them; to students of all ages and dreams who have been courageous enough to be part of those communities and conversations that make real learning possible; to my colleagues here, in Mexico and in Ireland, who have sustained me with their passion for what they do as scholars and as teachers; to staff whose support makes it possible to have the luxury of my work; to this university that values, supports, and recognizes what we do; to my colleagues and students at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance who exemplify courageous hearts of discovery; to Herman B Wells who named this award; to Elizabeth Colson, extraordinary mentor and anthropologist, who took on an unlikely doctoral student all those years ago; and to Ronald R. Royce, brilliant anthropologist and linguist, husband and partner, who celebrated my achievements, was patient with my taking the long way around even as he kept me from wandering overlong in the woods, and who was my best and kindest critic.

You have inspired me to hold fast to the belief in the thrill of learning and discovery and have kept me from falling into cynicism or taking the easy path.

## **Listening**

A distinguished scholar and teacher came to watch me teach a ballet class at the SMU campus in Taos. Afterward, she said, “you were so quiet; you said hardly anything.” I answered, “I was listening to their bodies.”

Contrary to what one might think, classical ballet is not a one-size-fits-all activity. Its building blocks—steps and combinations of steps, have to drape over the natural contours and inclinations of bodies. Only in that way do the dance and the dancer achieve the singularity that rises above technique.

It is the same when you bring together academic subjects and students. As a Lakota elder reminded us: “children are not empty vessels waiting to be filled; they are candles waiting to be lit.” Learners bring themselves with all their potential, quirks, and histories to the business of learning. We must hear them into speech. We must make them feel seen as having worth. Or they leave us, our classrooms, unchanged except perhaps for a few facts. And we have lost the unique perspectives and histories they might have offered\*

## **The Habit of Taking the long way around**

A colleague of mine observed that, in the Tongan islands, the word for dance, kava ceremonies, and ritual presentation of pigs is the same and can be roughly translated as “taking the long way around.” That way is characterized by a grounding in the craft from which spring elaboration, metaphor, discovery, and story. It describes my journey to becoming an anthropologist, a scholar, and a teacher. And it describes the open-ended path of possibilities that signals learning that brings new knowledge and understanding.

My father put himself through pharmacy school on athletic scholarships and for a time played semi-pro baseball. He felt a duty to foster those athletic accomplishments in his first child. By high school I was lettering in three sports--basketball, track, and volleyball, having given up baseball and my role as pitcher when girls were restricted to softball. My mother, as did most mothers in those days, enrolled me in ballet classes eventually leading to a commute to San Francisco Ballet 5 nights a week, and then to three years dancing in a professional ballet company in New York City.

Those experiences contributed to who I am as an anthropologist and a teacher by fostering the belief that mastery of craft was required, and that showed me through models and experiences that, beyond the craft lay a whole world of discovery that would transform me.

My experience as a scholar, seen in these snapshots, has spanned many topics, locations, and methods: In the arts, I have worked on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century commedia dell-arte in the Italian and French archives; on the Ballets Russes of Diaghilev through interviews and in collections in Paris, Austin, and Berkeley; on mime with Marcel Marceau and the Polish mime troupe *Blik*; on contemporary dance with the Pilobolus Dance Theatre; on artistry and virtuosity in the performing arts, helped and inspired immensely by my colleagues in the Jacobs School of Music.. And since 1967, I have worked with the Isthmus Zapotec community of Juchitán, Oaxaca on everything that matters to Juchitecos as indigenous people in Mexico from identity, language, community, the arts, death, the economy, and the role of political action. More recently, I have examined landscape and pilgrimage, working and walking in Oaxaca and Ireland



Research topics and colleagues



Juchitán ethnography



### Pilgrimage in Ireland and Oaxaca

My teaching has included just about every context in which we share our craft and hold out the promise of discovery: undergraduate classes, graduate seminars, doctoral mentoring, our field school in Oaxaca, 30 years of MINI University lectures, Lifelong Learning seminars, coaching classical ballet variations at the Jacobs school, as an Erasmus visiting scholar in Budapest and Szeged, and as an External examiner and adjunct professor at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance.





In all those contexts of learning, the realm of content (or craft/practice) is important but only when it leads to shaping the ways in which we gather it, analyze it, find its larger meaning, and the ways we let it lead us to more questions. Irish poet Seamus Heaney poses two kinds of knowledge—the practical and the poetic. Ethnography finds the practical in the craft, which enables us to gather information in discrete bits and pieces, and to begin the process of description and analysis. The poetic in ethnography refers to that process of seeing the connections across the data that allow you to see the larger stories. The Zapotec

recognize two kinds of knowledge, remarkably similar to Heaney's: *binni naana*—people with words and *binni guendabianni*—people who create light.

French painter Eugene Delacroix made similar distinctions when he wrote in his Africa journal: that he did not do anything passable on his sketching trip to Africa until he “had sufficiently forgotten small details and so remembered the striking and poetic side of things...Up to that point, [he] was pursued by a love of exactitude which the majority of people mistake for truth.”

### **Journeys of Transformation**

“Taking the long way around” is a journey of transformation. It takes courage to step beyond those arenas of competency that we create by learning our craft, because we must let go of the seduction of familiarity and control and move into unknown territory. To live, learn and create in that place of the in-between requires openness and courage.

Ethnographers who live and learn in “the field” sign on for this kind of journey with all its terrors and joy. My friend Robby Barnett, a founder of the Pilobolus Dance Theater, addressing the audience for an after-school arts program, offered these wise words about why these experiences matter:

“It is opening oneself up to the peril and power of the unknown. And it is our job as teachers to lead those who sign on safely through a world that does present real danger. It will challenge them; at times, it will terrify them, but if we lead them well and bring them home safely, they'll return to do it again and again because it tells them that they have this well of feeling lying within them to which they have access and that they have the skills and the courage and the stamina to look at it over and over in the course of their lifetimes.”

## **In the Field**

Sidney Mintz, one of the great ethnographers, summed up best the field and its importance:

"Fieldwork has always been what we do--and what we have learned to do--best. Our theories acquire their strength, elegance, and conviction in accordance with the quality, honesty, and reliability of our fieldwork "(Mintz 2000: 177).

Who and how are we when doing fieldwork? We are listeners who are immersed and vulnerable, listening as whole persons to the stories of other cultures. We have to attend to the ordinary business of living at the same time that we are trying to understand the culture into which we have inserted ourselves. We are learning substance, but we are also engaged in the hermeneutics of learning. We reflect on how we know and how who we are affects what we see and understand. We have to be simultaneously engaged and analytic. There is something sobering, if bewildering, about that mundane aspect of our research. Working in this kind of space is a risky business because we are not in control. We spend long periods of time with things making no sense (and yet faithfully record them), long periods of time being out of control of all but the simplest tasks, long periods of doubting our ability to understand anything. The field requires us to let go of the need to control, let go of ego, let go of making improbable leaps to satisfy our need to have figured something out. We must remind ourselves to listen to everything without censorship until we know enough to see a through line.

This natural environment, in all the messiness of nature and culture, lets us hear the material we want to understand in its own setting. We take it on its terms, not ours, and see it in all its complexity. We are forced to confront our own vulnerability and humanity

in this interaction. The kinds of inquiry, the nature of the problems we choose to examine and ultimately write about are shaped by those who have invited us into their lives and community.

When Nobel prize-winning corn geneticist Barbara McClintock observed that "ONE MUST HAVE THE TIME TO LOOK, THE PATIENCE TO HEAR WHAT THE MATERIAL HAS TO SAY TO YOU, THE OPENNESS TO LET IT COME TO YOU", it was not just the Nobel Prize-winner who let corn come to her; it was Barbara McClintock the person with all her history, experience, personality, quirks, strengths and weaknesses who understood her material.

That kind of humanity is the fundamental basis of ethnographic research—listening without judging, making a commitment to relationship, giving up the notion of authority and accepting that of responsibility, and in the end holding up people’s stories seeing the ‘sense’ of them in the context of their and other’s histories.

As ethnographers, we are very much in the role of students trying to make sense out of too much data, much of which seems contradictory, at the same time that we are challenged to venture beyond into the unknown.

The Pilobolus Dance Company process of making dances is very much like mine in the field, especially that task of getting from thousands of discrete details to a sense of the whole and the ability to recognize its “rightness” when we see it.

All the dancers assemble in the studio and improvise for several weeks —no holds barred, nothing dismissed. One dancer described it to me as walking into the studio with teeth and souls

bared. But to make a dance, to tell a story, to create an interpretation that has coherence, you must see the through line that links all the improvised bits of movement.

The point is that you cannot get to that stage without documenting all the distractions, all the seemingly irrelevant bits. You have to say yes to everything or the conversation/creation stops. Then the ethnographer or choreographer moves from all the carefully observed and recorded data to the through-lines that make up people's stories—it is a process of discovery, seeing the fundamental connections in the larger story and presenting/representing them. My Zapotec poet friends speak in the same way about writing and translating poetry---the through-line floats above the poem and that is where the meaning lies. That is what you translate, not the individual words.

### **Isthmus Zapotec long-term field research 1967-2018**

I was clear about being an anthropologist for whom field research has been the defining feature since my first experience as an ethnographer. In 1967, I was finishing my junior year at Stanford and went for six weeks to Mexico on a Ford Foundation scholarship to examine how dances change from their local homes to their presentation by the Ballet Folklórico in Mexico City.

The next 2 images try to capture some sense of the Juchitecos and of what it means to be family. When I first encountered the people of Juchitán that summer, to say that I was naïve would be a grave understatement. It may well be the case, however, that this initial naiveté-- the lack of sophistication-- is what allows us to respond as individuals to other individuals, not as intellects to concepts. In that first encounter, everything is interesting because we have not yet closed our hearts and shuttered our minds with the armor of

theoretical paradigms. It was that thrilling moment of having nothing to lose and everything to gain.



It is rare for ethnographers to spend a lifetime with one people. My mentor, Elizabeth Colson, spent 70 years working with the Tonga of Zambia, living her last twelve years among them. In 1967, I had no notion that in 2018, I would still be part of the Zapotec community of Juchitan, still listening and discovering connections, still adding to the 18,000 photos I have taken. The families with whom I am closest are now in their sixth generation since I first met them. I have been witness to deaths and births, marriages, and moving away. My obligations and responsibilities have become those of a Juchiteca, to individuals and to the community as a whole. They were and are my teachers, my friends,

and my family, opening my eyes to a way of living based on community and transformation, on the fundamental importance of relationships, on local commitment and global participation, and of being present for one another. In their responses to the devastating 2017 earthquake, we could see those values in the remarkable efforts of individuals and community to rebuild a new Juchitán—to say *Nabaninu*, we are alive.



Family altar for Day of the Dead 2018

### **Isthmus Zapotec Mentoring**

This last image is a tiny snapshot of post-earthquake mentoring. We can learn about learning and fundamental values from the ways in which Juchitecos teach and mentor children. They rely on listening, engaging curiosity, encouraging the process of discovery, and recognizing the value of what the child can offer. It keeps the community together by

nurturing the next generations. Juchiteco painters, poets, musicians, and scholars work hard at mentoring. Workshops in all genres of the arts are frequent, free, and run by individuals who have national and international reputations in their fields. These include writing, painting, music, dance, as well as pottery, photography, mural painting, and traditional embroidery techniques. Young rap groups have logos and T-shirts designed for them by established graphic artists and collaborate with poets for performances and contests. While the rap genre is new and global, the language is ancient and local. After the September 9th 2017 8.2 earthquake, this kind of mentoring shifted into high gear as artists recognized the need to tend to the children, many of whom had lost their homes and whose regular schools were closed.



Most important is that established artists, indeed Juchiteco adults in general, believe that children and youth have something to contribute, and they recognize that in them. They treat them as

worthy participants in the conversation. In this kind of mentoring, Juchitecos act upon a deeply embedded Zapotec belief—the value of the individual within the safety of community. It implies a sense of common good while recognizing and respecting individual ways of contributing to it. It offers incorporation without demanding the annihilation of unique gifts, yearnings, and culture. As with the Pilobolus dancers and with our own students, each individual has a voice and when we silence it, we lose the next generation of ideas.

The Zapotec of Juchitán are a remarkable people, surviving all attempts to exterminate or change them. They name and claim themselves in a country and a world that often ignores and certainly undervalues its indigenous people. The community takes pride in its identity because it is an identity that is leading the way rather than being frozen in some arcadian dreamscape. The Juchitecos say to the world outside: *Rari' Nuudu*-- We are Alive-- We are a movement-- We are rewriting history.

I have taken the long way around to illustrate the ways in which research and teaching share fundamental elements. For me, learning is the common denominator, the thread that runs through all my early experiences, my research in different places on different topics, and in all the contexts in which I have taught. Being a researcher and a teacher means:

\*listening, hearing people into speech;

\*seeing worth in every person and valuing their particular perspectives and histories;

\*building collaboration and community so that learning takes advantage of unique backgrounds and experiences

\*Working on the principle that both kinds of knowledge—the poetic and the practical, are necessary and reinforce each other

\*Finally, that being comfortable in that middle-ground between what we know and what we might discover is essential to continued learning.

“Confidence, like art, never comes from having all the answers; it comes from being open to all the questions.” (Earl Gray Stevens)