

Unlearning; Rethinking Poetics, Pandemics and the Politics of Knowledge, Charles L. Briggs, Louisville CO: Utah State University Press, 2021. 346 pp. Illus. ISBN 9781646421015

If I wrote a normal kind of review having read this book, I would not have properly read this book. Whilst this is ostensibly a monograph about the practice of folkloristics, it is also a very personal confluence of its messy, complicated, adjacent, and analogous disciplines, and a meditation on ways of making their practices more just, more sensitive, and more transformative. This book's eclectic and ambitious scope is both its exaltation and its limitation: both autobiography and autoethnography, critical theory and call-to-arms, lifetime achievement and rapid response, it has not been an easy book to review.

Let me attempt to corral the divergent strands within **Unlearning** into some kind of synoptic form. Part One explores, explains, and reflects on Briggs's formative years as an ethnographer in Córdoba, Mexico and Delta Amacuro, Venezuela. Here we take a deep dive into the historiography of folkloristics, through the political mobility of cultural 'texts', the overlooked contribution of Américo Paredes, ending up at the treasure chest of 'The Coloniality of Folkloristics', co-written with Sadhana Naithani. Naithani and Briggs' meditation on folkloristics' role as part of the extractive project of colonialism, and its half-life as a post-colonial legacy has real impact and is the chapter that I expect to cite most and return to first.

Part two, 'Rethinking psychoanalysis, poetics and performance' was more challenging: of the six months I spent reading this book, five were spent here. For those not well-versed in poetics or psychoanalysis these chapters may transmute an 'admittedly dense and abstract framework' (155) into impenetrable scaffolding. Briggs' demanding attention to references and expansive frames of reference are at times bewildering. But to hold this against this work as a whole would be churlish: Briggs is trying to do something different and difficult here, so it is not surprising that the reading of it is different and difficult.

Persistence pays off though: the final four chapters of the book pick up the energetic rhythm of the first, presenting a new poetics of health, more-than-human relations and environments. Briggs advocates lucidly for a better engagement with the folklore of illness (and also therefore of wellness), framing medical folkloristics as route to becoming a more relational and progressive discipline in general. Folkloristic discourse around the social life of pandemics is not, of course, a new thing. But Briggs' focus on the cultural production of the H1N1 swine flu pandemic brings into sharp focus the power of connecting the dots between health, social justice and colonial legacies.

If all of this is less than paradigm-shifting, it may be because Briggs writes from a North American perspective. The critical turn in European/Australasian cultural anthropology and geography (if not folkloristics) is already confronting the extractive modalities of colonialism and capitalism and has for many years been pre-occupied with multi-species relations and more-than-human knowledges. Similarly, perhaps Briggs could have recognised the link between traditionalisation, mediatisation and critical discourse analysis: my marginalia in Chapter 8 repeatedly call for some recognition that critical discourse analysis is engaged with much of what Briggs exhorts folklorists to start doing.

Charles Briggs' literary gifts encompass energy, reflexivity, levity, and a self-awareness that all academics should cultivate. His delight in creating a relationship with the reader is clear from the introduction, the painful gestation of which serves as exculpation for the mild criticisms I have: to finish any kind of book over the last two years (never mind one which attempts a disciplinary paradigm shift) is extraordinary but cannot have been an easy task. Clearly much of the book was written well before the advent of COVID-19, but the coronavirus pandemic seems to have provided the trigger that bring Parts One and Three of this volume together. Briggs sets out better ways of doing folkloristics, arguing for them with urgency, compelled by his embodied knowledge - as an ethnographer/medical sociologist/healer in other less well-advertised epidemics - to lay down the challenge to unlearn our disciplinary expectations of 'knowledge'

and its modes of production. Although the path to unlearning may be convoluted, the value of what emerges from 'unlearning [the] ideological and pragmatic infrastructures' (p 290) of our disciplines makes the journey worthwhile. This is a dense, complicated but ultimately brilliant book, to which I shall undoubtedly return over the decades as my own scholarly journey unfolds. I commend it to all those with an interest in the future of folkloristics.