



## Preface

The truth about stories is that that's all we are.

—Thomas King, *The Truth about Stories*

In July 1999, Don Veneto Vera, a *konsaha* (shaman) of the Yshiro people of Paraguay, explained to me the chain of circumstances that had resulted in me being alive and working with his people. In short, it seems that Don Veneto, mobilizing a complex network of human and nonhumans, had saved me from a disease that would have killed me. These events had taken place beyond my awareness, as they had unfolded in a reality/world, the *yrmo*, of which I had only references through Don Veneto and other Yshiro elders and intellectuals.<sup>1</sup> Although I had known of it for years, the *yrmo* had had until that moment little personal relevance for me. What little I did know about it, however, was enough to make me realize that because Don Veneto had acted on my behalf, I had certain obligations toward him and the humans and nonhumans he had mobilized, which would involve commitments that I was not sure I would be able to honor. Among the responses I considered was to leave and never return. While I eventually decided otherwise, this event confronted me with a political and epistemological dilemma which had never before presented itself with such clarity and urgency, pushing me to reconsider my involvement with the Yshiro communities and, ultimately, to write this book in its present form.

I had been working for close to nine years on a variety of topics and projects with Yshiro communities when the incident with Don Veneto took place. At the time, I was engaged in a project commissioned by the leaders of the four communities of the Ebiboso, one of two Yshiro groups (the other being the Tomaraho). I had been asked to contribute to their efforts to create an organization that would federate the Yshiro communities by promoting,

through group discussion and individual conversation, a critical awareness of what caused communities to be fractured along lines of religion, gender, political orientation, and age. In those meetings, people expressed their views about the issue, and I, as a good anthropologist trained within a critical tradition of analysis inherited from the Enlightenment, explained their different “views of the world” as particular events within larger economic and political processes, which, while not immediately accessible to them, were nevertheless the common ground from which their differences spanned and could be worked out. Producing these explanations was not a problem; the problem arose when I tried to share them, for my Yshiro interlocutors consistently refused to have their perspectives reduced to the terms of my analysis. I resolved the immediate, practical problem by working with the participants’ own explanations in trying to bridge their differences (something that eventually happened, but not because of my “method”) and reserved my explanations for an academic audience. However, I was left with a sense that there was something profoundly wrong with this solution. Although this feeling was not new, I could not readily articulate its source until the incident with Don Veneto.

If Don Veneto’s story contained implicit prescriptions about how I should conduct myself regarding a whole series of issues, responding to these prescriptions in all honesty would require me to somehow accept his explanations of how things worked “in reality.” I quickly realized that this dynamic was similar, albeit in reverse, to the one I had introduced in my interactions with other Yshiro interlocutors: for them to act on or think of their differences according to my explanations, they had to embrace my interpretation as their own. As I further pondered this realization, it dawned on me that this similarity was just apparent because there was a central difference between our explanations: the “colonial difference.” In effect, my long-felt discomfort with the division in my anthropological practice, between an academic and an applied stance, stemmed from the significant difference that it signaled between the Yshiro’s way of seeing and explaining the world, and my own. This difference was due not to the substance of these views and explanations, but to the fact that they were situated in unequal positions within a field of power.<sup>2</sup> In short, the division in my practice signaled the coloniality of knowledge that transmutes different knowledge practices into hierarchical differences.

In my applied incarnation I was engaging fully with the Yshiro peoples' views of the world because I was not able or willing, in the immediate moment, to impose my own explanations of the world on them. Thus, I had to argue, negotiate, and modify my stance vis-à-vis theirs. In my academic incarnation, in contrast, I could domesticate those different perspectives to make them fit into explanations that I would later present for discussion among scholars. My encounter with Don Veneto clarified for me that while I had the option of switching between these incarnations, my Yshiro interlocutors did not. In effect, I could have brushed aside Don Veneto's explanations simply by not returning to Paraguay, thus avoiding the uncomfortable situation of having to give a direct response to his interpellation. In a less dramatic fashion, this was what I was doing when I produced my analysis for academic publics; I was brushing aside my Yshiro interlocutors' views of the world without major consequences.<sup>3</sup> In other words, by switching stances I could circumscribe, to my convenience, the space in which I negotiated my views with those of the Yshiro. My Yshiro interlocutors and friends, however, could not seclude themselves from being subject to expert analysis and its repercussions. In the most obvious way, through a chain that links academic production and policymaking, scholarly interpretations have been a constant feature of the terrain in which the Yshiro have had to operate since the Paraguayan nation-state began to claim control over their territory and lives.

Becoming aware of this made exceedingly clear that academic production of knowledge—including my own—was thoroughly entangled with the politics of representation, which shaped, among other things, the divisions within the Yshiro communities. So, if I intended to understand how those divisions were produced in order to counter them, I had to account for the location of, or the significant difference between, both academic and Yshiro accounts of the world.

Yet, I wondered, how should I account for the differences between my explanations and theirs? Should I describe our differences by using the frameworks accepted in academia, or should I let such accounts emerge from the discussions I had with my Yshiro friends? While the latter possibility solved my immediate personal dilemma, it did not engage the problem in its wider significance and impact. In effect, I could refuse my position as expert and negotiate my views with my Yshiro interlocutors,

but this would not erase the structural inequalities between the Yshiro and the experts. Even if I were to embrace Yshiro perspectives as my own, this would not automatically accord them the same standing as academic perspectives; rather, I would be accused of “going native.” On the other hand, if I used accepted academic frameworks to criticize those inequalities with “authority,” I would reinstate at another level the hierarchical relations that the Yshiro hoped to contest through the creation of their federation. I was in a dilemma.

Seeking to address this dilemma has taken me in directions that I could not have imagined at the beginning of this journey. Looking back, I can see that I began with a question (although at the time it was not as clearly formulated as it is here): how could I produce knowledge that would contribute to the Yshiro project, rather than unwittingly erode it? The challenge was how to avoid contributing to a long history, in Paraguay, in which modern experts try to “help” indigenous peoples by claiming ever-increasing accuracy in their depictions of indigenous reality, while in the process reinforcing the hierarchies between indigenous knowledges and their own. To prevent my work from feeding that history, I had to account for the conditions of possibility that would inform such an intellectual project. In other words, brushing aside self-flattering ideas of personal or epochal progress, what made it possible for people like me to ask these kinds of questions at this time? Pursuing this line of inquiry led me to academic analyses that characterize the present moment as one of globalization, and to their debates over what this concept might entail. As I gained familiarity with these debates I came to see them as the tip of the iceberg, intimating struggles over the meaning of globalization that reached beyond the academy. In short, the term *globalization* seemed to indicate the site of a generalized struggle to define or shape an emerging state of being: globality or the global age. Surprisingly, exploring the globalization debates, which in principle seemed to lead away from the immediate concerns that had driven the Yshiro leaders to create their organization, instead brought me right back to them. The Yshiro endeavor to defend and further the *yrmo* (Yshiro reality/world) is in fact an integral part of the ongoing, multiscalar, and increasingly better articulated struggle to define and shape the global age in a way which is profoundly antithetical to the dominant project of defining and shaping globalization as “modernity writ large.”

My tour through the globalization debates and back to the Yshiro project did not leave my original question unscathed. Seen in the context of all-encompassing struggles, which manifest in different ways in different sites but nevertheless help to define and shape the global age, my dilemma acquired a different character. The problem was no longer how to produce applied and academic explanations that corresponded with each other; instead, it was how to perform, in the sites associated with these roles (i.e., the academy and the Paraguayan Chaco, where the Yshiro live), knowledge practices that would resonate with each other in their aim of articulating differences in symmetrical ways, rather than reinforce hierarchies in one site by contesting them in another. My applied experience was key in this regard for it was through this experience, and years of practical involvement with certain Yshiro individuals, that I had encountered a knowledge practice with such potential. At the risk of distorting its wider reach, a risk which I hope to dispel throughout this book, let me tentatively present this knowledge practice simply as storytelling. But, importantly, this book is not about narrative forms or oral literature; the concept of storytelling stands for a way of practicing knowledge.

As for many other indigenous peoples, storytelling has for the Yshiro profound performative qualities, that is, stories are not only or not mainly denotative (referring to something “out there”), but rather they help produce that of which they speak. Being aware of this, Yshiro intellectuals and elders would insist that storytelling always has a purpose (to produce certain realities) even if one is not aware of it, and that knowledge always connotes storytelling. Conceiving this ethnography as storytelling has helped me explore a possible way out of the dilemma. My argument is that storytelling globalization is one of the many grounded ways through which the present moment is being shaped. But stories are told in different ways, and this difference is crucial for the kinds of worlds that are currently taking shape. Thus, this work makes sense in two interconnected registers. On the one hand, the story makes sense as a narrative of the struggle in which the Yshiro, experts, governmental agencies, private interests, and social movements are involved to give shape to the different worlds that will characterize the global age. On the other hand, the story makes sense as a performance whose specific purpose is to help shape the global age in a particular way, that is, as a pluriverse in which the *yrmo* can exist and thrive along with

other worlds. As the two registers of this story unfold, it will become evident that a critical move to achieve the pluriverse involves doing away with modernist ontological commitments deeply ingrained in our knowledge practices; this book is, above anything else, an attempt to do this.

One part of the story I am about to tell emerged from over seventeen years of interaction, friendships, and collaborative work with the Yshiro communities. Since 1991, I have visited the communities at least once a year (except in 1992, 2001, and 2002), for periods ranging from one to three months, and during 1999–2000 I stayed for eighteen months. Through all these years, the patience, affection, and sense of humor of my Yshiro friends have created in me an everlasting debt of gratitude. First and foremost, and in spite of the ups and downs of our relationship, I am thankful to Bruno Barras, who, when I was a young undergraduate student from Argentina, invited me to work with his community and thus changed my life in ways I would have never expected. His children, especially Alejo and “El Coti,” have been my good friends since that time.

Perla Ortiz, the “matriarch of Karcha Bahlut,” has always taken good care of me, making sure I was comfortable and well nourished. Her husband, Benito Romero, and their *boshesho terror* (scary children) Camargo, Tusi, and Lederman; my compadre Modesto Martinez, Sonia Ozuna, and their children; and Babi Ozuna and his many girlfriends have been my family in Karcha Bahlut. Estanislao Baez, Fanny Martinez, and their children, as well as Teresa and Gaspar Paya and their children took me into their families when I was in Diana. “Cachique Oso” Candido Martinez and his wife Maria Romero; and Don Pablo, Victor and Graciela Romero have been very generous hosts every time I have visited Ynishta. Zulma Franco and Julio Baez, in Ylhirta, have been always great hosts and much fun. From all of them I have learned the everydayness of a relational world in which one’s duty toward others is experienced not as an imposition, but rather as an opportunity to express love and respect.

Although I had to get accustomed to his wild sense of humor, which has scared more than one visitor, Don Veneto Vera has turned out to be a great teacher and guide through the complex landscape of the *yrmo*; and so have been Don Gines Rizo and Don Tito Perez. For their kindness and

generosity in sharing a knowledge that has transformed me in many ways, I will be endlessly grateful. My gratitude also goes to the many elders and friends who taught me and who have passed away: Abuelo Sixto (Keiwe), Doña Tama, Abuela Eva, Abuela Elsa Boyani, Abuelo Miranda, Don Vierci, Artigas Rizo, Papito Medina, Ama Ferreira, and Don Bruno Sanchez Vera (Tamusia).

In Asunción, my friend Malu Vazquez Tande helped me to understand the intricacies of the *indigenista* world from the perspective of an insider; that, in addition to providing me housing with *mate a la mañana*. The embryos of many ideas presented in this book emerged from conversations with Ursula Regher, who has been for almost ten years a loyal friend and esteemed colleague. Rodrigo Villagra and Valentina Bonifacio have both been dear friends and colleagues from whom I have learned much about the dynamics of the *indigenista* world. To all of them, a heartfelt thanks.

Another part of the story I am about to tell emerges from the enriching relations I have sustained through the years with colleagues and friends in North America. Early on Harvey Feit helped me to come to terms with the idea that there was much more going on with my Yshiro friends than what a political-economy approach could encompass. But Harvey's influence on my intellectual growth goes beyond this; his combination of sharp political analysis with a real commitment to dialogue is a beacon for me of what an engaged intellectual should be like in a relational world.

In those beginnings I also counted on the invaluable intellectual and emotional support of Amanda White, for which I will forever be grateful, and perhaps forever indebted.

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In the last couple of years my friends and colleagues Marisol de la Cadena, Justin Kenrick, and Brian Noble have pushed me to take the work presented here in new and unexpected directions. To avoid the risk of delaying an already overdue publication, I have included only hints of these possibilities in the manuscript, but the ground to build on is here.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Elena Yehia, who provided insightful critiques of earlier versions of the manuscript; this, as a bonus to having made my life much more interesting and relational than it ever was.